IMITATION OF LIFE

FANNIE HURST

Edited and with an introduction by **Daniel Itzkovitz**

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INTRODUCTION

Daniel Itzkovitz

It happens every two years . . . the new novel by Fannie Hurst. . . . Book critics moan. The public buys it like mad. — "Books," *Newsweek*, January 17, 1944

"A hundred years from now," journalist Kathleen Norris mused in 1918, "when the children of a democratic world are patiently memorizing the dates of the Great War, it might be interesting to see what place Fannie Hurst will hold in American literature."[1] She leaves the matter unsettled, of course, but it's doubtful that Norris, in her *Cosmopolitan* profile proclaiming Hurst "A Genius of the Short Story," would have predicted the near-complete obscurity into which her subject has fallen by the twenty-first century. Brilliant, charismatic, and remarkably prolific, Hurst was a major celebrity in the first half of the twentieth century. By the time she published *Imitation of Life* in 1933 she had written numerous best-selling melodramatic novels and stories so popular they earned her the rumored place as the "world's highest paid short story writer" (she denied it).[2] And Hurst's celebrity reached far beyond the literary: she was regularly interviewed, profiled, and exposed in newspapers and magazines, and she periodically starred in her own very public real-life melodramas, most explosively in 1920, when front-page headlines across the United States revealed the scandalously unconventional nature of her secret marriage. The critics who embraced heroic male modernists like Ernest Hemingway and Sherwood Anderson for their distinctly unsentimental literary experiments were uniformly horrified by Hurst's unapologetic and sentimental appeal to women readers — and by her popularity.[3] But her masterful storytelling and unrelenting attention to the underdog helped win her multitudes of adoring readers.

Accustomed to extreme responses, she nevertheless was stunned when

she found her best-selling novel *Imitation of Life* the subject of fierce debate and parody. Little prepared Hurst for the response to her tale of Bea Pullman and Delilah Johnston, white and black single mothers who together raise their daughters and build an international restaurant empire using Bea's business savvy and the Aunt Jemima–like Delilah's servile demeanor and irresistible southern recipes. Her massive audience was familiar with her extraliterary, outspoken commitment to progressive political causes, especially women's and antiracist issues. With *Imitation of Life*, however, Hurst's investment in the politics of race suddenly became a rather unsettling matter of public interest. The nurturing and self-effacing mammy Delilah and her tempestuous light-skinned daughter, Peola, added a new dimension to the sentimental formula Hurst had perfected, but they also became the subjects of vigorous debate across the United States. Hurst had created black characters with depth and humanity, many argued, something to celebrate in the era of Amos 'n' Andy and Stepin Fetchit. But *Imitation of Life* soon came under attack by those who understood it to be perpetuating the kind of literary stereotypes that, ever since Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), had seemed to justify a condescending kindness toward the black community that was worse (as Langston Hughes pointed out in his 1934 story collection *The Ways of White Folks*) than outright hatred. In the immediate aftermath of the novel's publication, a wildly popular movie version was released featuring Hollywood starlet Claudette Colbert and Louise Beavers, the most celebrated black actress of her day, and *Limitations of Life*, a one-act parody by Hurst's friend Hughes, played to a raucous Harlem audience appreciative of the simple but deadly switch that left a white woman in the role of the obsequious, dialect-speaking domestic servant who, "like a faithful dog," yearns to rub the feet of her wealthy black mistress, a woman who speaks "perfect English with Oxford accent."[4] Each retelling helped to fuel the ongoing debate and solidified the significance of *Imitation of Life* in the complex cultural scene of the 1930s.

The seventy years that followed have done little to blunt the force of Hurst's tale. Her novel's concerns, in particular the confusions of racial identity and the tensions between sacred ideals of motherhood and the culture of success and consumption, remain recurring tropes of Hollywood and mass-market publishing alike. The two Hollywood adaptations that followed the novel, in 1934 and in 1959, each of which utilizes the con-

nections among gender, race, and consumption that characterize Hurst's unique vision, have both met with great success. The second film, directed by Douglas Sirk, quickly became the most profitable in the history of Universal Studios, a distinction it held for decades; in 1995 it still numbered, according to a *New York Daily News* poll, among America's ten favorite films.[5] And there have been other successful retellings as well, including a classic Mexican version, *Angelitos Negros* (1948), and more recently, a stage parody, *Imitation of Imitation of Life*, featuring drag divas Lypsinka and Flotilla DeBarge, which performed to sold-out crowds in Manhattan in 2000. An unnamed Hurst even shows up simply as "a poet" in the 2001 REM song "Imitation of Life," which muses, like the novel, on the emptiness of fame and success. Hurst's anonymity here is telling: despite *Imitation of Life*'s hold on American audiences, the novel and its author have for decades virtually disappeared.[6] Long out of print, *Imitation of Life* and Fannie Hurst are both ready for a reexamination.

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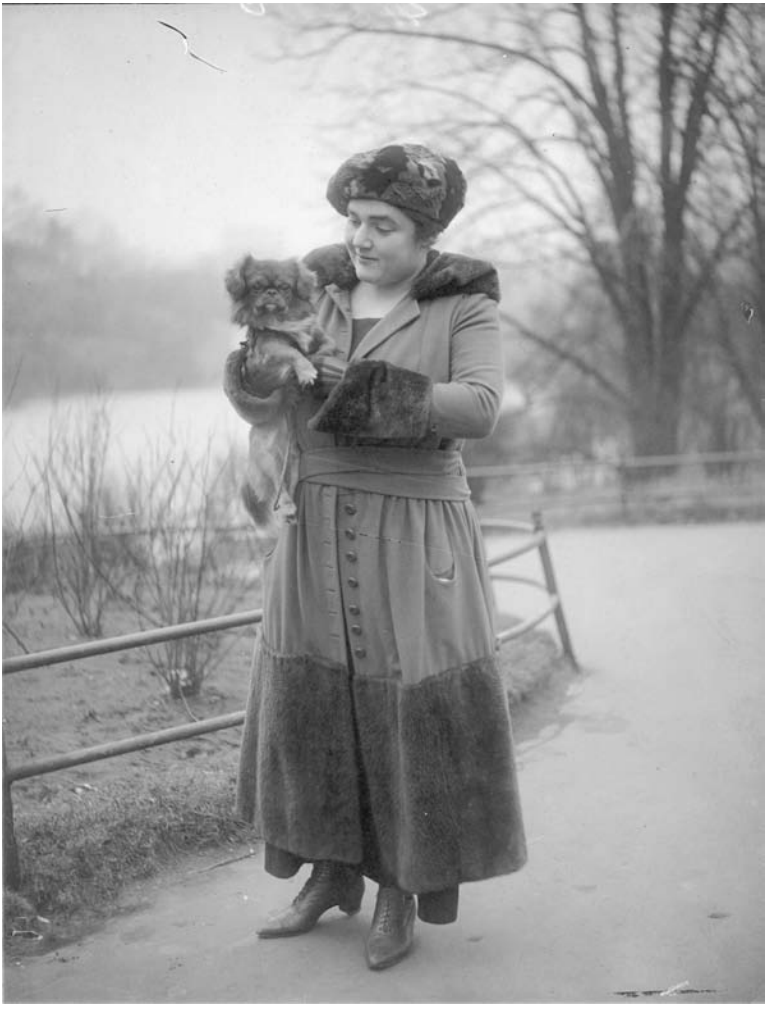
Hurst's audience was not always so sharply divided between the adoring American masses and the critics who despised her; the story of her critical reception reveals a great deal about not only the complicated cultural politics behind *Imitation of Life*, but also the shifting face of the twentieth-century American literary tradition. Hurst was still a young woman in the early 1910s when her popularity began to soar, thanks to her intuitive brilliance and the growing influence of commercial magazine culture. She was initially hailed by critics who saw — in her passion for the unseemly realities of city life and her attention to the world of newly arrived immigrants — a writer whose interests and style matched the increasingly urban sensibilities of the literary marketplace. The influential editor Edward O'Brien suggested in 1917 that Hurst's stories "may prove to be the most essential literary documents of our city life to the inquiring literary historian of another century."[7]

Born in St. Louis, Hurst moved to New York after graduating from Washington University in 1909, and after a brief period of searching for success, she found it. Her early fiction chronicled the trials of lowly, and mostly Jewish, city dwellers. It followed shopgirls, immigrants, mistresses, and romantic and aspiring dreamers, living lives in New York City boardinghouses and the ghettos of the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Though



The young Fannie Hurst in New York. Fannie Hurst Collection, Robert D. Farber University Archives and Special Collections Department, Brandeis University Libraries.

Hurst herself was a product of assimilated and rather antisemitic German Jews of middle America, her early reputation developed, in the words of the great novelist and editor William Dean Howells, as both a potential New York "genius" and one of the foremost writers of "the Hebraic school."[8] Howells was impressed with the way Hurst gave her Jewish stories broad American appeal, her ability to find in her "Hebraic comedy . . . the depths of true and beautiful feeling."[9]

By the time she composed *Imitation of Life* her attention had shifted from Jewish immigrants to race relations, but readers of her early stories will recognize in *Imitation of Life*'s mammy Delilah Hurst's numerous portrayals of all-loving Yiddishe Mamas. These stories — she published well over a hundred — were sentimental tales marked by Hurst's desire to capture, with photographic accuracy and a hint of romance, the everyday reality of ordinary women. Her frequent research excursions to the sweatshops and dark tenements of the Lower East Side were widely known and admired and lent an authentic stamp to her work. Informed by these trips, and more generally by the vast changes taking place on the American cultural landscape, her catchy, emotionally devastating plots found their profundity in the everyday disparities of modern city life. A typical Hurst story might detail the fraught romance between a wealthy American man and a poor immigrant woman, or the spurning of a supportive mother, not long removed from the old country, by the new wife of her Americanized son. She seemed to speak directly and intimately to her vast audience, imagining characters who struggled to live the American dream and who often failed to find happiness even when they succeeded in finding "success." A Hurst story meant massive sales. Only a few years after she arrived from St. Louis, still in her twenties, such magazines as *Cosmopolitan*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, and *Harper's Bazar* were competing fiercely to publish them.

Hurst's most discussed story of this period, "Sob Sister" (1916), follows the downward-spiraling life of Mae Monroe, a "kept woman" who dwells "outside the barbed-wire fence of respectability," along with "a great army of street-walking women."[10] She gains weight and grows increasingly isolated until Max, her boyfriend of six years, finally abandons her. Their final exchange comes in an explosion of sadistic cruelty and raw emotion, his freedom to walk away revealing a painful double standard between the sexes. Readers were stunned by her frank attention to a subject usually

ignored by polite society (a *New York Times* review specifically describes the story in terms of its unblinking realism: "brutal, but . . . also strong, a bit of realism that grips in every line of its tense dialogue, in its impassive objectivity")[11] and by her sympathies for Mae. Despite these sympathies, however, the story also ultimately punishes its suffering female protagonist, who has pushed the boundaries of societal norms, a pattern in Hurst's work that emerges even in *Imitation of Life.*

With her flamboyant style and her natural inclination for the spotlight, Hurst's celebrity quickly moved beyond her many stories, novels, and films, and her name, like those of her *Imitation of Life* heroines Bea and Delilah, became "a national commodity."[12] While other writers of her era cultivated the ideal of the lone suffering artist, Hurst developed into a glamorous and sometimes scandalous personality so generally recognized that the magazine *Metropolitan* put her portrait on every streetcar in Manhattan after closing a multistory deal with her in 1916.[13] Even when not writing, Hurst was in the papers, often for her unconventional acts and opinions. Her pronouncements were regularly sought on matters ranging from communism to America's racial situation to the state of fiction writing. The revelation in 1920 of her secret marriage and unusual matrimonial living arrangements (she and her husband, pianist Jacques Danielson, shared neither a home nor a name) made the front page of newspapers across the nation, including the *New York Times*, where it appeared above the fold:

FANNIE HURST WED;
HID SECRET 5 YEARS
Sailed Into Matrimony with
Pianist "in a Bark of Their
Own Designing."
LIVE APART, THEIR OWN WAY
Meet By Appointment—It's a
New Method Which Rejects
"Antediluvian Custom."[14]

But because of the peculiar politics of early-twentieth-century literary culture, her great success inevitably led to questions about the "greatness" of her work. If in the 1910s she was widely accepted as a brilliant up-and-coming ethnic writer by such significant luminaries as Howells and

O'Brien, by the 1920s the elite literary world was coming increasingly under the sway of the modernist movement, which defined itself specifically against the sentimental style in which Hurst felt at home. Writers who wanted to be taken seriously rejected sentimentalism as crude and tawdry, overly popular and overly feminine. By the mid-1920s, her prolific outpouring of stories and her massive celebrity led to the dismissive notion shared by many highbrow critics that Hurst pandered to the buying public at the expense of "beauty and truth."[15] Such was the accusation of critic and novelist Waldo Frank, who, in a 1925 *New Republic* manifesto against "Pseudo-Literature," used her as a central example of how not to write, cautioning would-be writers not to push for mass-market Hurstian rewards over artistic integrity. In the evolving intellectual world of the 1920s and 1930s, to be a commercial success came increasingly to mean one's work was both apolitical and without artistic merit—and despite her feminist and antiracist politics and her professed desire to be thought a true artist, Hurst's work was generally felt by the new generation of critics influenced by the modernist movement to be lacking on both the political and the aesthetic fronts. Though she continued to publish for a popular audience and found some recognition among middlebrow critics who cared less about the purity of modernist aesthetics, she was terrorized by the implications: "Fears and doubts smote me," she writes in her memoirs. "Did my mass appeal prove lack of stature? Why the implication that one could not simultaneously be a popular and an important author?"[16] Insisting that she "had not the skill to tailor [her writing] to fashion," she later seemed more reconciled to her situation. "Please make no mistake," she announced in a 1942 *New York Times* interview, "I am very clearly aware that I am not a darling of the critics. I have a vast popular audience—it warms me; it's a furnace."[17]

She may have longed for highbrow approval, but Hurst's strident and unsubdued work pleased her massive audience by being unapologetically melodramatic and unapologetically plot-driven. *Imitation of Life* is no exception, and though the novel itself stages a struggle between "success" and "meaning," it did not dissuade Hurst's critics from the notion that her main literary interest, and fault, was in writing "sentimental hokum," as one review of *Imitation of Life* put it.[18] "Sentimental" here is a charged term, one that calls on a history of extremely popular, yet degraded and critically dismissed nineteenth-century American women's writing which

focused on home, relationships, and the intricacies of human emotion — "women's interests" — at the expense of the "serious" political and aesthetic concerns of the public sphere. This charge was nothing new for Hurst: by the early 1920s reviews of her work regularly pointed out and degraded her sentimentalism. (It was "her worst vice," a *New York Times* reviewer sniffed in 1922, and the *New York Evening Post* sighingly agreed: "Her ever-gushing sentiment" did not "show any signs of drought").[19] Such writing was understood to fail the test of true literature by the consensus of mostly male critics and authors of Hurst's era, whose work came to constitute for decades the heart of the twentieth-century American literary canon. The response of these critics tells us as much about attitudes toward women and the popular as it does about the reception of Hurst's fiction; that her work is for the most part completely out of print is strong testimony to the power of this elite in shaping lasting literary tastes.

Only recently, since the introduction of women's and popular culture studies into English departments, has the academic establishment begun to take more seriously the work of sentimental writers. Feminist critics have argued not simply for the inclusion of these writers, most of whom were women, into the traditional canon, but, more significant, that the evaluative criteria that have largely been in place since the advent of literary modernism need to be rethought. Moving beyond the widely held position that equates popular literature with the mindless regurgitation of empty and repetitive formulae, these critics argue that many of the sentimentalists were able to be politically powerful precisely because they reached vast audiences and because, in taking their female readers seriously, they were able to speak to ordinary women about everyday issues of real concern. Following the success of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which famously worked to convince northern white women with its fiery righteousness that abolitionism was a women's issue, sentimental fiction became an important forum in which women writers could discuss grander political issues as well, such as women's independence and racial justice — themes that become central to Hurst's work and, soon thereafter, to the tradition of melodramatic film.

But by the time Hurst wrote *Imitation of Life*, the politics of both race and gender had changed tremendously from the days of Stowe. The dominance of the nineteenth century's feminine ideal, the True Woman, who was expected to maintain her exclusive domain over the private world of the

home, was challenged by the suddenly more visible New Woman — the working girls, flappers, and suffragettes — who found to a limited but significant degree new jobs in the workplace, new educational and social possibilities, and, by 1920, voting rights. The years leading to the novel's publication also saw radical demographic shifts, due to ethnic whites flooding the United States from Eastern Europe (and who had been the subjects of Hurst's early writing) and due also to the "Great Migration," in which tens of thousands of African Americans abandoned the rural Jim Crow South in search of higher wages, better homes, and political rights in northern urban centers. Hurst and many of her contemporaries — Harlem Renaissance writers Nella Larsen and (Hurst's protégées) Dorothy West and Zora Neale Hurston, and others such as Anita Loos and Anzia Yezierska — grew up in the midst of these historical developments, which inevitably helped to alter the subject of women's writing.

But unlike many of her contemporaries whose work has been revived by the recent interest in women's and African American studies, and unlike her nineteenth-century predecessors, popular women authors such as Stowe, Louisa May Alcott, and Susan Warner, whose writing has recently been recuperated by feminist scholars, Fannie Hurst remains largely forgotten. When she has been noticed in recent years, it is usually either as a footnote to discussions of Zora Neale Hurston, the great folklorist and novelist of the Harlem Renaissance with whom she had an intimate friendship, or, following the lead of critics from Hurst's era, in dismissive nods to her image as a one-note literary hack whose bad work has been converted into a few influential melodramatic films. One more recent critic writes, for instance, that the novel *Imitation of Life* is little more than a "tawdry bestseller . . . celebrating the American success ethic, romantic love, and the nuclear family."[20]

As with all caricature, there is some truth to such readings: the plot does begin something like a classic American success story, in the tradition of Ben Franklin's *Autobiography* and Horatio Alger's archetypal "American dream" novels of the post–Civil War era. In these texts, the young hero journeys to the cold city and, through "pluck and luck," rises from impoverishment to success. But Hurst is not complacent in following this traditional formula. As readers will discover relatively early in the narrative, this is hardly a novel that simply and unambiguously celebrates family, romance, and American success. Indeed, the novel is fueled by its lack

of faith in, and its challenges to, these familiar institutions, though it is equally apprehensive about any alternatives. Balanced between its significant stake in the power of traditional sentimental ideals and its very modern aspirations for women's success in the marketplace, the novel might instead be read as a meditation on the emotional and ideological confusions behind the emergence of the New Woman. And crucially, in *Imitation of Life* the New Woman is as much a racial as a gender category. Herein lies its singular, engaging power.

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"What happened to girls thrown on their own resources?" the narrator asks a few pages into *Imitation of Life*. For a 1933 American public still reeling from the stock market crash and trying to understand the massive waves of young women who left home to enter the workforce in the decades that opened the twentieth century, the question had broad resonance. The novel responds with both excitement and trepidation. At a moment when increasing numbers of women were leaving their traditional roles behind, *Imitation of Life* holds tightly to certain sentimental ideals, even as it seems clearly aware that these ideals no longer provide such solid ground for a young woman to stand on.

Bea Pullman's initiation into the repressive and confusing world of middle-class America occurs in the novel's early chapters, before Delilah enters her life, against a background of devastation in her formerly stable home. Here the novel explores classic sentimental distinctions between public and private, men and women. Bea's father and her husband, Mr. Pullman, typically sit and talk politics while she serves them; Bea's husband lectures on U.S. commercial and political history (his specialties: "the life history of the tomato from the vine to the ketchup bottle" and Abraham Lincoln), while Bea develops an anxious secret self and frets about her bland sex life. But there are early intimations that these realms are far from stable. For instance, although Bea's romantic and feminine obliviousness to the public sphere is underscored by the narrator, who juxtaposes her attention to the "frivolous details" of their courtship and marriage with references to the more serious male domain of the presidential election of 1912, one such passage also reveals an early-twentieth-century uncertainty about American masculinity (as embodied by presidential candidate Woodrow Wilson): "Thus in the year when men were debating whether a college

professor was of sufficient stamina for Presidency of the United States, Bea lifted her face, which intimated yes, for the betrothal kiss of Mr. Pullman." When Bea finally begins crossing lines after Mr. Pullman's sudden death, posing as her dead husband to earn a living, her mother's ominous warning, that work "made a girl mannish," stands in for a more general anxiety that the clarity of sentimental distinctions has begun to crumble.

The novel was first published in serial form in the women's magazine *Pictorial Review* (1932) under a title, *Sugar House*, that itself captures a sense of fleeting domesticity. But the early advertisement campaign describes the novel's subject in terms seemingly calculated to reaffirm the safe clarity of separate gendered spheres in the face of new possibilities for women. Curiously, there is no mention of race: "Beginning Next Month: SUGAR HOUSE. A novel of human emotions . . . told in the story of Bea Pullman as a girl, a bride, a mother, and, finally, as herself. . . . [A] revealing study of the eternal feminine."[21] Bea does of course finally move beyond the suffocating limitations inherent in all of her specifically feminine roles: as daughter, wife, and mother. She moves so far beyond these traditional roles, in fact, that when her own alienated daughter addresses letters to Bea as "Dear household word," the household word she has in mind is not "mother" but "B. Pullman," the name of her business. But it's less clear that this mobility leads her any closer to her femininity. Rather than highlight her femininity, such moments indicate how Bea's success in the public sphere has ironically and impersonally infiltrated the no longer private world of the "household." Ultimately, Bea is far more comfortable, if sexually repressed, in "the uncharted seas of big business for women." And although she confesses to being a "home wench," the place to find "home" in this novel is in the homey atmosphere of the B. Pullman restaurants. Bea's house, on the other hand, is merely "a halfway house in which to steam up for the new day." Bea spends most of her time at work, and any fleeting yearnings or regrets she has about childrearing are postponed to a later date.

Such a point of view, dismantling conventional notions of instinctive motherhood, is consistent with what we know of Hurst's own beliefs about motherhood, which were hardly cut from sentimental cloth. Rather, her thoughts on the matter seem more suitably expressed in the business jargon of modern efficiency experts: "If a woman can sell insurance or run a paying beauty parlor or write a book," the childless Hurst argued elsewhere, "the chances are ten to one that she can hire vastly more efficient

service to train her children than she could give them. . . . Motherhood does not automatically bring with it the knowledge of child training. The maternal instinct is not infallible. It can kill the thing she loves."[22] There will perhaps be little surprise, then, that by novel's end "the eternal feminine" noted by the advertisement remains difficult to locate. Indeed, if "eternal feminine" and the sentimental focus on "human emotions" imply a removal from historical influences, we are instead presented with characters whose lives are profoundly influenced by the ineluctable pressures of history and the sweeping social changes of the early twentieth century.

The advertisement is telling, however. The novel's great power and tension emerge in large part from its troubled relationship with these changes: its insistent awareness, even celebration, of them, and its simultaneous anxiety about what has been lost. Even her career choice reveals Bea's uncertain place in the conflict between New Woman and True Woman. Feeding legions of America's young men in B. Pullman restaurants across the nation, she clearly has not entirely forgone the traditional maternal role. But importantly, her contribution to the burgeoning restaurant industry is fueled primarily by a desire for profit, not the warmth of her heart.

Accordingly, the novel seems to view twentieth-century motherhood specifically through the lens of an alienating and omnipresent consumer society. Setting the novel's early chapters in an emerging consumer Mecca, an Atlantic City populated by the hustling salesmen, concession workers, and storefront dentists working the newly constructed boardwalk, Hurst creates an atmosphere defined by ephemeral consumption. The novel puts great emphasis on the tawdry minutiae and consumer goods of this world: the shoes worn by Mr. Pullman (congress gaiters); the best-selling historical romances Bea borrows from the public library (*When Knighthood Was in Flower*); "the great pickle-and-relish firm" whose interests Bea's father represents in Atlantic City. The characters here are delimited and identified by what they consume, and by the time Bea and Delilah reach Manhattan we see realized the potentially alienating and devastating effects of this consumer-oriented urban world. Bea's restaurants emerge into a world populated by "lonely city souls" who seek "respite from the duress of that strife and stone and steel out there." The solution offered by Bea's restaurants is rather circular: more consumption, with Delilah standing in as a surrogate mother (as one character puts it, a "kind substitution for his old mother") for the masses of lonely urbanites.

Given the mixed messages here, it is hardly a surprise that the novel, which at first cheers Bea on as she struggles to survive, finally sours on her success. Bea is not a perfect mother, but she nevertheless yearns to be, and the novel's grim finale might easily be read as a punishment for Bea's ultimate choice of ambition over motherhood. This punishment — the perverse collapse of her momentarily promising love life — seems to suggest a failure of imagination, but Hurst was not alone during this period in doling out poetic retribution to her successful New Woman. The sentimental logic developed here, by which female protagonists move into traditionally male roles with tragic consequences, has its literary and Hollywood corollaries: disasters such as Bea's quickly became a commonplace in the melodramatic novels and films of the 1920s, 1930s, and beyond.[23] Certainly this logic operates powerfully in Olive Higgins Prouty's enormously popular novel *Stella Dallas* (1923), a clear forerunner to *Imitation of Life*, which was itself made into a play and three films and also depicts a working woman whose economic aspirations and desire to be a good mother ultimately reveal themselves to be disastrously incompatible. A similar sensibility informs James M. Cain's novel *Mildred Pierce* (1941), made into an Academy Award–winning film (1945), whose plot, like that of Hurst's novel, involves a single mother who becomes wealthy in the restaurant business and who is caught in a sexual competition with her daughter.

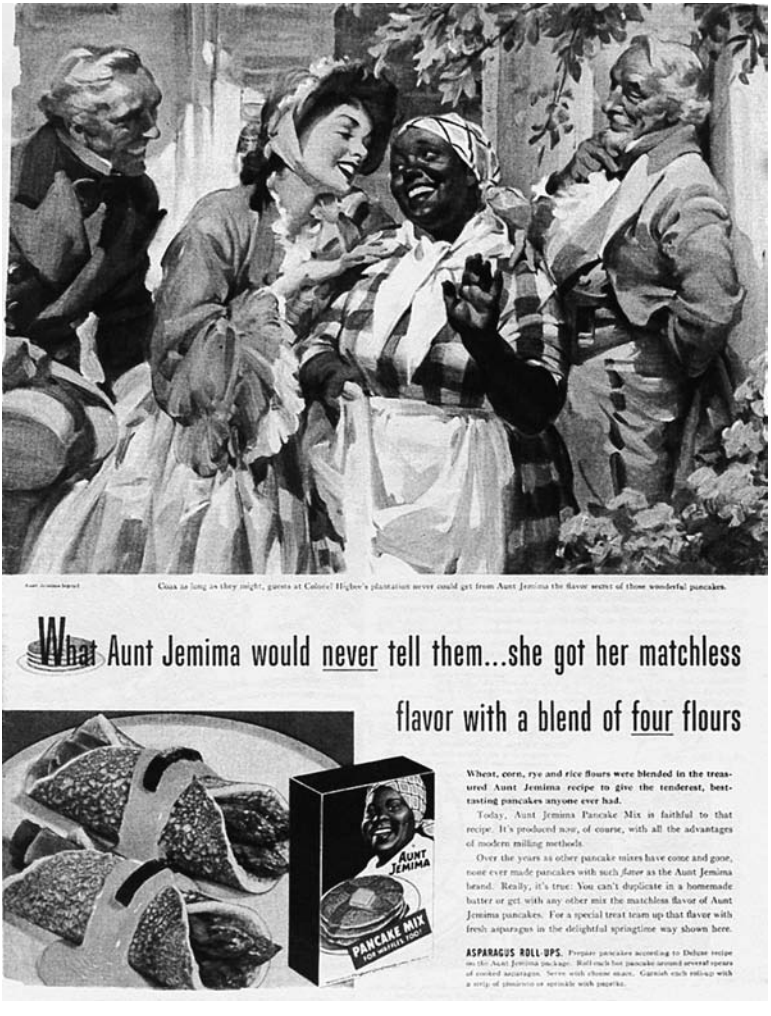
Unlike *Stella Dallas* or *Mildred Pierce*, however, *Imitation of Life*'s interest in the maternal failures of the New Woman is inextricably linked to U.S. racial politics. Hurst codes her novel's New Woman as necessarily white; as Bea's traditional feminine identity becomes less stable and certain, Delilah fills the void left behind in the home, taking on a powerful symbolic presence. The situation grows even more complex when Delilah acts not only as mammy to Bea's daughter, but as "mammy to the world," her face the very public trademark image of Bea's business. Certainly her dual role as both homely support and commercial spokeswoman signals the novel's awareness of the profound intermingling of racial, gender, and economic meanings in early twentieth-century American culture.[24] In its insistence that these matters are fully bound up with one another, Hurst's tale is thoroughly unique.

Readers of *Imitation of Life* will no doubt see in "Aunt Delilah," whose "chocolate and cream" face first adorns the maple sugar candy boxes and then the B. Pullman restaurant logo, an echo of Aunt Jemima, the instant

pancake icon who rose to great prominence in the 1920s. Delilah's uncomfortable similarity to Aunt Jemima, the stereotypical mammy who became a consumer symbol of domestic salvation for middle-class white women, was clearly a self-conscious choice for Hurst. Thanks to Aunt Jemima, as well as other similar mammy figures hawking home economics goods during the early decades of the twentieth century, U.S. advertising had for years been steeped in images of black women that called on precisely the set of responses inspired by Delilah, responses that reveal the thorough interweaving of racial and gender ideologies in an ever-expanding culture of consumption.

The strange career of Aunt Jemima is instructive: the fictional brainchild of two white Reconstruction-era pancake mix manufacturers, Chris L. Rutt and Charles G. Underwood, Aunt Jemima had become omnipresent by the 1920s, when white American nostalgia for an idyllic southern rural past reached its peak. In the face of a cosmopolitan present growing increasingly anxious and alienated, in which the popular understanding of a white woman's role as natural caregiver was less certain than in previous generations, Aunt Jemima's cheerful and nurturing echo of the minstrel show mammy provided welcome guidance and support. Rutt came up with the marketing ploy to jump-start his struggling instant pancake business after hearing a song called "Aunt Jemima" at a blackface performance, and the idea quickly caught on with consumers. Through the years the brand (sold in 1926 to Quaker Oats) hired a succession of black models to pose as the smiling Aunt Jemima, for whom the company had created a fictional biography rooted in a fantasy South of warm kitchens and benevolent whites. The fictional Higbee Plantation was her home, Colonel Higbee and his endless stream of guests Aunt Jemima's hungry and appreciative audience (similarly, in the novel we learn that Delilah formerly worked for "Cunnel Glasgow"). Nancy Green, the first model who posed as Aunt Jemima, from 1893 to her death in 1923, was herself an ex-slave. By the time of Green's death, Aunt Jemima had become one of the most successful and recognizable brands in U.S. history.[25] Aunt Jemima products were advertised regularly in *Pictorial Review*, the women's magazine where *Imitation of Life* first appeared. In advertisements there Aunt Jemima was marketed to northern middle-class white women who, like Bea, increasingly found themselves spending more time in the workplace than in the kitchen.

Acutely aware of the economic and emotional power behind Aunt Je-



Aunt Jemima charming the plantation guests of the fictional Colonel Higbee with her secret pancake recipe.

mima, Hurst's novel both reflects and satisfies white fantasies and desires for a mammy, with all the maternal and racial connotations of this term fully intact. Accordingly, white reviewers, even those who disliked the novel, reserved their strongest praise for Hurst's Delilah.[26] The "black, bulging Delilah," according to the *New York Herald Tribune*, "abounds in the warm vigor which is Fannie Hurst at her best. I can think of no character of [Hurst's] since *Lummox* who is as actual a creation as the mammy whose face and skill were the foundation of Bea's fortune."[27] Others agreed: Delilah was, according to the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, "one of the most magnificently drawn characters in all the great store of literature depicting Negro life." The *Christian Science Monitor* exclaimed that "it is Delilah's story really," and while admitting that Hurst "overcolored her portrait a little," proclaimed that "most of us have at some time known a servant who partook in some measure of the nature of Delilah."[28] It is an "us" that speaks volumes.

In Bea Pullman, Hurst created a protagonist whose genius in large part lay in her understanding of the power of race in U.S. consumer culture: her knowledge of Delilah's potential as "a walking trademark" and her ability to create an atmosphere of "food that seemed flavored of romance." The food in Bea's restaurants was flavored with the romance of race. Delilah, like Aunt Jemima, develops as a character antithetical to, and supportive of, the New Woman, and Bea's imperfect embodiment of traditional femininity is brought to a finer point with the advent of her housemate and business partner, "the enormously buxom figure of a woman with a round black face that shone above an Alps of bosom." Bea needs to pretend to be a man to commence her economic rise, but her real success, and her distance from her earlier life as a housewife and mother, is solidified by Delilah's inescapably black and maternal body. Delilah's monumental bosom, which requires two mentions in this sentence just to capture "the limitless reaches of its warmth," is immediately set against Bea's work-ravaged and "constantly perspiring" body, certainly not maternal, let alone traditionally feminine.

Together, Bea and Delilah build what is in some ways an extraordinarily unconventional household. The novel even signals Bea's remove from a traditional gender economy when she begins to inspire spontaneous crushes among her female employees. They "adored her . . . with a dangerous kind of intensity" until Frank Flake, Bea's business manager and,

eventually, her love interest, "ridiculed . . . out of practice" the anonymous gifts and letters they send to Bea. The "dangerous" desires of Bea's female employees seem a natural extension of Bea and Delilah's Boston marriage; perhaps this is why they need to be so sharply disciplined out of existence. But between Bea and Delilah there are no unruly desires that need ridiculing: the racially determined hierarchy that divides the characters deflects potential readings of these companions as romantically, as well as domestically, connected.

Despite its objectification of Delilah, the novel does briefly foreshadow potential interpretive tensions concerning the character in the voice of Delilah herself, in her protests over her own representation. When Bea first decides to market Delilah's cooking, using Delilah's face as her trademark, the cook grumbles about the photograph of herself that is to adorn the boxes of her maple syrup candies. "This heah ain't no rig for to have your picture taken in," she protests, requesting instead a photograph that demonstrates her true "style," and one "to keep a record for mah chile of how her mammy looked." Instead, Bea succeeds in imposing her vision of Delilah on the box: "the chocolate-and-cream effulgence that was Delilah. The heavy cheeks, shellacked eyes, bright, round and crammed with vitality, huge upholstery of lips that caught you like a pair of divans into the luxury of laughter." Delilah wants her uniqueness, her "style," to come across for future generations to know her; Bea imagines Delilah to be an exemplary mammy, lovable and self-sacrificing, whose very body is converted in Bea's observations here into food and furniture — objects of consumption and comfort. Bea's assumptions about Delilah enable the possibility of hiring many substitute "imitation Delilahs," all with "round black faces . . . shining over the waffle irons of the cities of a nation." The luxury Bea is ostensibly afforded in the *Pictorial Review* advertisement, to move beyond predetermined social identities ultimately to become "herself," is apparently not available to Delilah. Bea laughs off Delilah's protests and ignores her occasional insights about race politics (Delilah is, after all, the only character to describe with sober awareness the prejudices of white people, "broad minded as mah thumbnail"). Bea knows her audience. The candy boxes appear to great financial reward with the photo chosen by "Miss Bea." And Delilah, driven to embody and to teach to her daughter Peola acceptance of a meager lot in life, ultimately voices a politics of complacency to her noncompliant daughter.

Delilah's largely unquestioning acceptance of the traditional racial power dynamic helps undergird changes in the American gender landscape; her light-skinned daughter, on the other hand, continually disrupts the seeming certainties of race. The novel holds tightly to its fantasy of Delilah's authentic blackness, but just as its understanding of the New Woman is steeped in ambivalence, so too is its investment in racial authenticity, as its response to Peola's "cheatin' on color" makes quite clear. Peola is one of many mixed-race characters in literature of this period who, fitting definitively in neither racial camp, attempts to pass for white. Early-twentieth-century novels and stories about passing repeatedly rehearsed American anxieties about the color line, ultimately demonstrating both the incoherence of racial distinction and its steadfastness. The lives of these "tragic mulattos" generally end in sadness or death (*The House Behind the Cedars, Passing, Plum Bun, Flight*), and if a character does successfully pass, it is usually to his or her detriment — and that of the character's abandoned black community.[29] Such is the case with Peola, who hardly deviates from the standard trajectory of these characters. Like Angela Murray, the light-skinned protagonist of Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Plum Bun* (1929), Peola chooses a white husband, frets over the color of her children (she ultimately abandons the possibility of having children to assure that her child's skin color won't give her away), and moves far away (Angela to New York, Peola to Bolivia). And like Clare in Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) and the unnamed protagonist of James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), she learns that going to such measures is, first and foremost, a form of self-alienation. Nevertheless, Peola's very presence here, and her ultimate escape/banishment, provide a counterpoint to Delilah's solid embodiment of authentic blackness, itself so ideologically powerful in a world marked by familial and political turmoil.[30]

There is a subtext that holds in such passing novels as Johnson's and Larsen's, as it does in Hurst's. Each of these ultimately relates the theme of racial authenticity and alienation to an anxiety about a more pervasive cultural inauthenticity. Written with an eye not only to the tragic mulatto but also to the emerging New Woman, for instance, *Imitation of Life*'s interest in the broad implications of American "self-making," heretofore generally a male domain, is extensive. The novel juxtaposes racial and gender passing, along with a more general social chameleonism rooted in class, with provocative results. Beginning with Bea's assumption of her

husband's identity, most of the women here find mobility through self-transformation. Bea's friend Virginia Eden, for instance, has made millions in "beauty culture" and was "born Sadie Kress in Jersey City."[31] Juxtaposed with Bea and Virginia, Peola comes to embody a distinctly American dilemma, in which idealized narratives of self-making bump up against the rigidity of U.S. racial categories. The novel's central figure of rebellion against an oppressive social order, Peola attempts to find a way, like Bea, to transcend the identity into which she is born. But according to her devastated mother, passing is akin to "sinning," and her escape from blackness is ultimately presented as perverse — a fact that hits home when she performs two acts unforgivable in a sentimental economy: she abandons her mother and has herself sterilized.

It should be clear, however, that *Imitation of Life* does not rely on a simple double standard to divide the possibilities presented to Bea and Peola. Indeed, if Peola's woes highlight the real possibilities that exist for white New Women, Hurst also uses the literary stereotype of the mulatto to underscore the New Woman's limitations. The novel's more general uncertainty is implicit in the analogy that connects tragic mulatto and New Woman. Peola finds herself in the irresolvable position of being "neither black nor white yet both," but Bea too lands in an impossible place. Torn between career, romance, and motherhood, Bea finds her success in the marketplace accompanied by devastating and irreparable loss. Hurst's surprising conclusion, that a woman *can't* "have it all," arrives as one of the novel's most unsettling implications. Given her own success as a writer and entrepreneur driven to challenge the status quo and experiment with romantic and domestic arrangements, it is curious that Hurst did not come up with more alternatives for her heroine.

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The complex personal and historical pressures of race and gender were certainly alive for Hurst, whose Jewish parents felt it to be an utmost goal that their daughter not marry a "kike" (as they called Jewish men).[32] She defied them in her marriage to a Jew, but nevertheless seems to have absorbed their discomfort. She spent much of her life bumping uncomfortably against her Jewish identity, describing in her memoirs an intense childhood shame strikingly similar to Peola's relationship to blackness. "I would have given anything," she says, not to have had her mother tell people they were

Jewish.[33] But her interest in the culture of American race was enlivened in new ways when she became a friend and patron of some of the most prominent Harlem Renaissance writers in the mid-1920s. And if *Imitation of Life* depicts a rather clumsy understanding of cross-racial companionships, the story of Hurst's African American friends' relationship to the novel provides a more nuanced portrait of cross-racial friendship in the 1930s. These were relationships clearly complicated by the difficult interplay between patronage and racial and class power, complications that played a substantial role in the unfolding history of *Imitation of Life.* When *Imitation of Life* came under fire, Hurst turned for support and justification to her black friends, some of whom clearly experienced the novel as troubling. The year before his parody *Limitations of Life* skewered *Imitation of Life* on the Harlem stage, for instance, Langston Hughes, who relied at times on Hurst's benevolence as a literary supporter and political comrade, wrote her a letter thanking her "as a Negro" for being responsible for the 1934 film *Imitation of Life*, Hollywood's "first serious treatment of the Negro problem in America."[34]

Even more suggestive is her relationship with Zora Neale Hurston, the great Harlem Renaissance novelist and folklorist. Their companionship seems to have directly influenced the novel's composition. In 1926 Hurst judged a writing contest in Harlem and was immediately taken with Hurston, the second-prize winner. Hurst hired her as secretary and then driver, and the two became close friends and regular companions in the years prior to the composition of *Imitation of Life.* As Hurst biographer Brooke Kroeger recently discovered, in the months before Hurst began writing her novel, the pair took a road trip together to Canada. It is easy to imagine the basic image of her novel developing in Hurst's mind out of this trip, not least because it mirrors the central image of so many classic American novels, which bring together a white person with a person of color (usually both of whom are men) in an unlikely, spiritually fulfilling, and at times homoerotic companionship (*Huckleberry Finn, Moby-Dick, The Last of the Mohicans,* etc.). By extension, it is tempting to try to read Zora and Fannie into Delilah and Bea, though Delilah is of course no Zora Neale Hurston, and Fannie and Bea share little in common beyond their unusual success. However, even if the parallel can be taken only so far, Hurst was clearly inspired by their companionship, especially Hurston's interest in the everyday lives and folklore of African Americans. When the novel came under

attack, Hurston, herself a target for some (most notoriously, novelist Richard Wright) who felt her work was full of racist caricatures and not sufficiently political, became one of its staunchest supporters. Years after the novel's publication, Hurston lived in Durham, North Carolina, the same southern town as Sterling Brown, one of *Imitation of Life*'s fiercest critics. He confronted Hurston about the book, accusing her of being the source of the material Hurst ultimately turned into the novel's troublesome racial imagery. The accusation proved, Hurston noted in a letter to Hurst, "the truth of [*Imitation of Life*]. What he and his kind resent is just that. It is too accurate to be comfortable. . . . You have," Hurston reassured Hurst, "a grand set of admirers in this part of the world because of *Imitation of Life*."[35]

But although Hurston attests to the accuracy of Hurst's racial representations, there are intimations elsewhere that Hurston was not quite comfortable with the racial dimensions of their relationship. Hurston's biographer Robert Hemenway, for instance, reports her observation to a friend that Hurst liked being seen in public with Hurston because her blackness highlighted Hurst's own white complexion.[36] This rings true, especially given Hurst's anxiety about appearing Jewish and her desire to be considered simply a white American. Such objectifying, of course, goes hand in hand with Hurst's investment, shared by many of her era, in a notion of blacks as fundamentally different from whites. As late as 1961, in Hurst's memorial essay on Hurston, she writes with touching intimacy and with a clear condemnation of racism (she even gently chastises Hurston for her lack of sensitivity to racism), but also with a firm hold on what seems a profound fantasy about blackness. "Uninhibited as a child," Hurst writes of her old friend. "She sang with the plangency and tears of her people and then on with equal lustiness to hip-shuddering and finger-snapping jazz."[37] No wonder, then, that blackness, with all of its imagined "plangency and tears," lends such powerful symbolic force to a novel so consumed with its sense of an otherwise impossible authenticity.[38]

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Moviegoers in the 1930s were well familiar with the degrading images of African Americans prevalent in Hollywood films of that era. Black comic actors such as Stepin Fetchit, for example, were rarely at a loss for work in the 1930s: Fetchit appeared in some forty films between 1927 and 1939,

delighting whites and outraging many African Americans with his lazy, language-slurring characters. In 1934 alone, Louise Beavers, the most prominent and well-respected African American actress of her day, appeared in eighteen films, nearly always as an inarticulate servant, as comic relief, or simply as part of the scenery. That year, she appeared as a "Reno Hotel Maid," for instance, in *Merry Wives of Reno*, "Suzy the Cook" in *Gambling Lady*, and "Crystal, Mayme's Housekeeper" in *Palooka*; she also played "Mary's Maid," "Hattie's Maid," "Sadie's Maid," "Azais' Maid," and so on, that year, in a frenzy of typecasting. Beavers got only fifth billing as Delilah in John Stahl's Oscar-nominated film version of Hurst's novel, also produced in 1934, but *Imitation of Life* provided her with something different: the chance to play a dignified woman with a degree of depth and with aspirations for her family. Compare this role to, say, the superficially similar character named "Aunt Jemima" in the 1934 Shirley Temple musical *Stand Up and Cheer*, played in blackface as cheerful, plump, and depthless by the white Italian American actress Tess Gardella, and we get a sense of how far Stahl's film reaches for a psychological complexity not available to black characters in other films of the era.

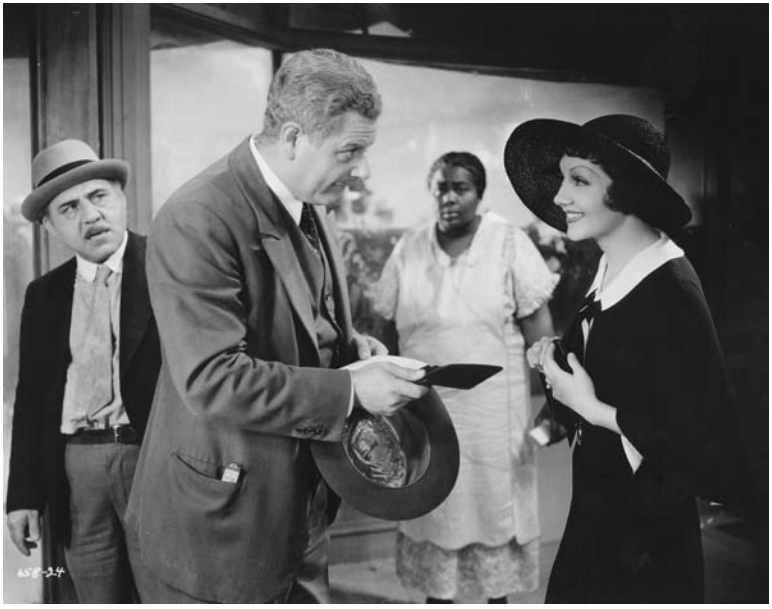
Indeed, film proved to be an especially powerful vehicle for Hurst's tale, particularly insofar as *Imitation of Life*'s concerns are so invested in questions of visibility—from Delilah's physicality, to Peola's desire to hide behind her light skin, to Bea's struggles with her femininity. This breathtaking assortment of concerns electrified audiences, who "seemed to find [the film] gripping and powerful," according to a bemused *New York Times* reviewer. The review archly rehearsed the film's "topics": "the mother love question, the race question, the business woman question, the mother and daughter question and the love renunciation question."[39] The only slightly veiled scorn here is unmistakable, but the film has remained an object of fascination and debate for contemporary scholars precisely because of its unusual appetite for, and nuanced management of, such a broad spectrum of "questions." This is especially the case insofar as it takes on and engages the relationship between the themes of *both* race and gender, which were nearly always "segregated" (to borrow historian Ruth Feldstein's apt term) in Hollywood film.

Although it covered much of the same ground as Hurst's novel, Stahl's film provided significant and meaningful revisions. Responding to the constraints of the newly developed Hollywood production code and the de-

mands of Hollywood storytelling, the film's rather cheerful demeanor stands in stark contrast to Hurst's often dark novel. The film, for instance, has a far smoother understanding of what it means to be a woman in the workforce. As played by actress Claudette Colbert, Bea experiences only sporadic tension between her private life and marketplace success; they are successfully bridged by her persistent and extraordinary feminine allure and a buoyant faith in consumption. So, rather than start her business career by posing as a man (as in the novel), here Bea uses her flirtatious charm to convince a parade of men to invest in her business. The *Hollywood Reporter* is near breathless in its praise of Colbert's look in the film, using language that would never be associated with Hurst's Bea: "Miss Colbert looks like a million, giving the character a superb treatment and wearing gowns that will make the femme fans gurgle and gasp in admiration."[40] With its abiding faith in the marketplace, Bea's uncompromised femininity, and a new ending that provides a version of reconciliation between both sets of mothers and daughters, Stahl's film comes across at once as more optimistic and ultimately much less vexed than Hurst's novel. Bea *is* allotted punishment for attempting to be both a mother and an entrepreneur, but importantly, unlike in the novel, her ultimate punishment is a self-imposed choice.

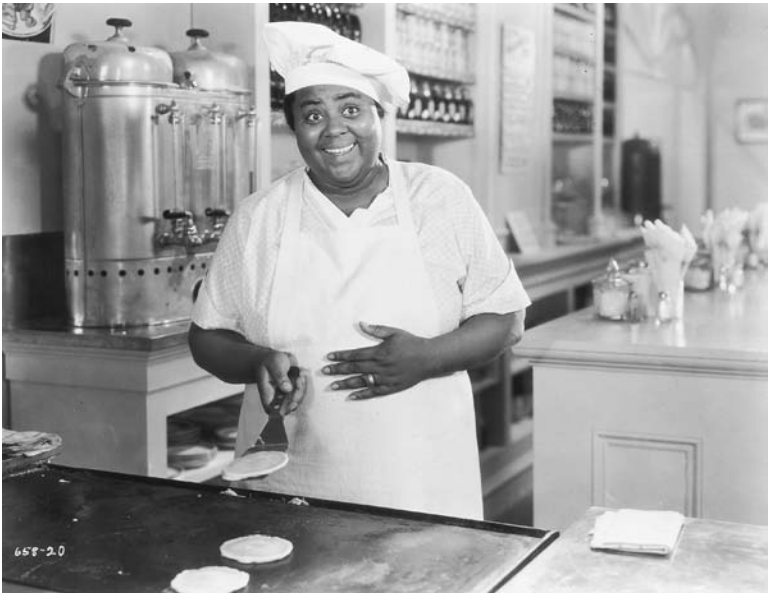
Peola poses the greatest threat to the film's ultimately more ordered vision and proved a more difficult puzzle than Bea's femininity; if the tragic mulatta had become a stock literary character by the time Hurst wrote her novel, she also remained threatening. As Susan Courtney has demonstrated, this becomes remarkably clear in the debate concerning the film among the Production Code Administration (PCA) members, who felt that the film was "definitely dangerous" because it violated the clause forbidding miscegenation on screen "in spirit, if not in fact!" There is no portrayal of miscegenation in the film, but Peola makes "the suggestion [of miscegenation . . .] omnipresent."[41] The unacceptable suggestion is, of course, that somewhere in the past Peola's black ancestors had sexual relations with what can only be Peola's white ancestors. PCA Director Joseph Breen wrote in a letter about the film, "It is our conviction that any picture which raises and elaborates such an inflammable racial question as that raised by this picture is fraught with grave danger to the industry."[42]

As in the novel, Delilah's authentic blackness stands as a counterpoint to the confusions wrought by Peola. Her iconic blackness becomes par-



Bea (Claudette Colbert) uses her flirtatious charm to convince a parade of men to invest in her business in John Stahl's 1934 film, *Imitation of Life*. Fannie Hurst Collection, Robert D. Farber University Archives and Special Collections Department, Brandeis University Libraries.

ticularly forceful because her role as "walking trademark" for the B. Pullman pancake flour recurs as a powerfully visible trope throughout the film. And her refusal of payment for the use of her own recipe is baffling, except insofar as it helps maintain a recognizable economic order that matches the racial power dynamic. After Bea's offer to Delilah of a 20 percent share for the sales of her own recipe (!) and the promise that Delilah will soon be able to purchase a car and house, Delilah's response seems quite a stretch unless one also imagines that she takes great pleasure in her racially driven subservience: "My own house? You gonna send me away, Miss Bea? I can't live with you? Oh, honey chile, please don't send me away. . . . How I gonna take care of you and Miss Jessie if I ain't here? I'se your cook. And I want to stay your cook. I gives it [the pancake recipe] to you, honey. I makes you a present of it."[43]



Louise Beavers, as Delilah, in John Stahl's *Imitation of Life*. © Photofest.

Even after her death, the camera continually finds Delilah's neon image flashing above the lives of her survivors, as if to remind everyone of the stabilizing power of her authentic, certain, and fully marketable blackness. It is a vision that gets the final word: in Hurst's novel, the passing Peola marries a white man and is forever exiled to South America; the film's final scenes, by contrast, return a contrite and devastated Peola to her mother's somber funeral march, to a "negro college," and consequently back into the fold of blackness.

The film's depiction of race relations and its representation of relatively respectable and complex black characters did not go unnoticed. In the words of one historian, *Imitation of Life* "was the talk of Harlem. It came back every year and played to full houses. Grown men and women sobbed in the theater."[44] Many African Americans expressed pride in the film's depiction of a dignified and religious black woman who diligently saves for her child's education: "Everyone in America should see the motion picture play *Imitation of Life*," gushed a reviewer in the African American news-

paper the *Philadelphia Tribune*, "it is more than a movie, it is a sermon . . . the strongest possible condemnation of racial prejudice."[45] In *The Crisis*, a reviewer suggested that, "as propaganda favoring the American Negro in his struggle for recognition as a human being, no picture has been as effective."[46]

Not everyone agreed. Black audiences became increasingly uncomfortable with the novel's and film's well-intentioned but crude and simplistic depictions of black characters. This discomfort was most clearly formulated in Sterling Brown's searing and influential review of both novel and film in the magazine *Opportunity*, which, to Hurst's great shock, paid less attention to *Imitation of Life*'s honorable antiracism than it did to Delilah and Peola as racist icons. False and degrading, he argued, these characters were little more than remnants of the traditions of racist literature and blackface minstrelsy, nineteenth-century America's most popular form of entertainment. "It requires no searching analysis," Brown observed, "to see in *Imitation of Life* the old stereotype of the contented Mammy, and the tragic mulatto; and the ancient ideas about the mixture of the races. Delilah is straight out of Southern fiction. . . . Her idiom is good only in spots; I have heard dialect all my life, but I have yet to hear such a line as 'She am an angel.' "[47]

Brown's assessment struck a chord, as the sizable response to his article attests: after months of debate, an overwhelmed *Opportunity* editorial staff formally announced that it would no longer publish responses to Brown's piece.[48] Hurst was horrified by the sharp criticism. She called Brown's attitude "ungrateful" and "unintelligent" in her reply to *Opportunity*, her indignation buoyed both by the support of her black friends, such as Hurston and Hughes, who supported her strongly to her face, and by the response of the white reviewers who had especially loved Delilah.[49]

Like Brown's review, Langston Hughes's brief satire *Limitations of Life* (1938), performed in Hughes's Harlem Suitcase Theatre, seems to arrive from a world that Hurst and her white reviewers have no idea exists. In the process, it exposes the earnest blind spots and implausible assumptions about African Americans made by *Imitation of Life.* Setting the action in "Harlem. Right now," even the stage setting reveals what is just barely unspoken in *Imitation of Life*'s racial scenario. Set in a "luxurious living room," the stage comes complete with "electric stove, griddle, pancake turner, [and a] box of pancake flour." However, there is one important change to the box: "Aunt Jemima's picture is white." The largely black

audience clearly appreciated the play for undermining the sober absurdity of Bea and Delilah's relationship. Like Hurst's Delilah, Audette, the play's white servant, refuses to accept reasonable compensation. In fact, she refuses anything having to do with her own comfort, suggesting that a nice funeral is all she needs. "I want to do something for you Audette. Something you'll never forget," her wealthy black mistress pleads. She then suggests Audette's gift: a meager day off. Audette refuses: "Ah wouldn't know what to do with it."

The debate about the status of race in what film historian Donald Bogle has called "the first important 'Black film' of the 1930s" continues among contemporary film critics. Many agree with Brown and Hughes that the film is tainted by Delilah's role as an embarrassing and simplistic mammy figure. But others, most notably Lauren Berlant, read Delilah as a far more subversive and challenging figure, claiming that her most demeaning moments in the film are rendered ironically, "ironizing the tradition of grotesque African American representation in American consumer culture, which includes the distortions of the Hurst novel itself."[50] On this reading, Delilah is not simply a racist icon; rather, she voices and embodies the film's subtle critique of the relation of race to national politics. It is clear that many in the film's audience agreed.

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Two decades after Hughes's parody, film producer Ross Hunter gave director Douglas Sirk a copy of Hurst's *Imitation of Life*. He didn't like it and quickly stopped reading. "After a few pages I had the feeling this kind of American novel would definitely disillusion me," Sirk told an interviewer. "The style, the words, the narrative attitude would be in the way of my getting enthusiastic."[51] Sirk's comments may come as a surprise to those familiar with his work, which was itself disdained for its "narrative attitude" by many 1950s critics who loathed the self-conscious melodrama of his three-hankie "women's weepies." Sirk's ironic directorial stance does seem far from the earnest tones of Hurst's novel, but if the novel's sentimental style, language, and attitude rubbed him the wrong way, Sirk's response in his 1959 remake was not to abandon a style built around highly fraught emotional intensity and narrative excess, but to dive in. And though it deviates greatly from Hurst's novel, in some ways Sirk's film is far more faithful than is Stahl's to the novel's uncertainties.

Sirk hired an astonishing cast, including film diva and former sweater girl Lana Turner, who was at the time embroiled in one of the biggest Hollywood scandals of the 1950s. Months before filming commenced, Turner's fourteen-year-old daughter, Cheryl Crane, murdered Turner's boyfriend, gangster Johnny Stompanato, in their Beverly Hills home. The sensational crime was ruled justifiable homicide; a judge nevertheless took Crane from the custody of her often absent celebrity mother, whose teary testimony at the trial was deemed "the performance of her life." The details of Turner's domestic life, revealed at the trial, played out uncannily in Sirk's film, and the film played up its similarities to the real-life scandal (the junior high school Crane attended, for instance, was featured in the film as the school from which Turner's fictional daughter, played by Sandra Dee, graduates).[52] Both film and trial enacted powerful midcentury anxieties, pitting sacred ideals of motherhood against the culture of success and consumption, in the process agitating the uncertain distinctions between Hollywood imitation and "real life."

With a self-conscious sense of drama and high gloss, the film worked as a skewed mirror of very real issues of public concern. Reviewers in the late 1950s read this distortion with virtual uniformity as a problem and deemed the film a failure. Many focused their central critiques on the film's excesses, from the staging, costuming, and acting to its overwrought stories. Compare the *Hollywood Reporter*'s near paroxysms of excitement about Claudette Colbert's gowns in the 1934 film to the review of Sirk's version in *Cue*, which simply misses the film's self-conscious attention to excess and artificiality in blaming Lana Turner for her wardrobe in the film, calling her a "glossily artificial clotheshorse . . . more concerned with clothes, coiffure and profile than with valid performance."[53] By the 1970s, however, many film historians came to a new appreciation of Sirk's work, reexamining its lush excess as an ironic commentary on the excesses of 1950s consumer society. The critical attention intensified as feminist and race studies gained prominence, and critics recognized in the hugely popular and politically complex film an attempt to explore the social disjunctures of postwar America. As such, *Imitation of Life* serves, too, as a fascinating counterexample to the problem films of the 1950s, which took on such social issues as racism with a straightforward, well-intentioned, and often hamfisted earnestness.

If the Depression-era United States provided an important cultural con-