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**SEPARATE AND NOT EQUAL**  
The Domestic Sphere and Mechanisms of  
White Hegemony in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*

# TIIVISTELMÄ

Aino Rahja: Separate and not Equal: The Domestic Sphere and Mechanisms of White Hegemony in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*

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Tarkastelen tässä tutkimuksessa kirjallisuuteen heijastuvia yhteiskunnassa vallitsevia valkoisen hegemonian mekanismeja. Tutkimusaineistonani on amerikkalaisen kirjailijan Kathryn Stockettin vuonna 2009 ilmestynyt historiallinen romaani *The Help*, joka käsittelee mustien piikojen elämää ja työtä valkoisissa kotitalouksissa 1960-luvun Mississippissä. Romaanin käsittelemät systemaattiseen rasismiin ja valkoiseen ylivaltaan liittyvät teemat ovat ajankohtaisia maailmassa, jossa aktivistit yhä taistelevat vähemmistöjen oikeuksista kuten vuonna 2020 mediaan nousut George Floydin kuolema ja sitä seurannut Black Lives Matter -liikehdintä osoittavat. Tutkimuksen tavoitteena oli selvittää, millaisia valkoisen hegemonian mekanismeja hyödynnetään ja ylläpidetään Stockettin luomassa kuvitteellisen yhteiskunnan valkoisissa kotitalouksissa.

Tutkimuksen teoriassa keskeisiä käsitteitä ovat ideologia, valkoinen hegemonia ja systemaattinen rasismi. Valkoinen hegemonia nähdään toimintana, jossa valkoista ideologiaa välitetään kansalle yhteiskunnassa operoivien instituutioiden ja käytänteiden kautta. Valkoisessa ideologiassa keskeinen ajatus on valkoisen rodun näkeminen ylempiarvoisena muihin rotuihin verrattuna.

Tutkimustulokset osoittavat valkoisen hegemonian mekanismien ilmenevän kolmella tavalla. Ensiksi mustia piikoja riistetään työmarkkinoilla, jossa heille maksetaan alle minimipalkan ja pakotetaan työskentelemään kohtuuttomia tuntimääriä. Toiseksi valkoinen hegemonia ilmenee kielen ja toimijuuden tasolla, mikä tarkoittaa valkoisten työnantajien levittämiä valheita heidän afroamerikkalaisista alaisistaan, mutta samalla mustien piikojen ja heidän oikeuksiaan tukevien äänien vaijentamista. Viimeisenä valkoisen hegemonian keinona toimii valkoisissa kotitalouksissa ilmenevä segregatio, joka mahdollistaa mustien piikojen erottamisen valkoisesta isäntäperheestä esimerkiksi erillisten vessojen tai ruokatilojen avulla. Tutkimusaineistossa on lisäksi havaittavissa valkoista ideologiaa vastustavia vastahegemonisia narratiiveja, jotka puolustavat mustien oikeuksia.

Avainsanat: ideologia, valkoinen hegemonia, valkoinen etuoikeus, systemaattinen rasismi, Kathryn Stockett

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# ABSTRACT

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In this thesis, I examine mechanisms of white hegemony as reflected in literature. Kathryn Stockett's historical novel *The Help* (2009) serves as the research material for this thesis because it discusses the life and work of black domestic servants within the white households in the 1960s Mississippi. The novel's themes relating to white privilege and systematic racism are contemporary in a world where activists fight for the rights of different minorities as became apparent through, for example, the Black Lives Matter –movement. The objective of this research is to examine how historical fiction participates in discussion about racial issues in the United States. This objective is addressed through exploring how the white society, operating in Stockett's fictional universe, practices and maintains its hegemonic position in the domestic sphere.

The key theoretical concepts of this thesis are ideology, white hegemony, and systematic racism. White hegemony is seen as any activity where white ideology is distributed to citizens through different ISA (Ideological State Apparatus) institutions and social norms operating within a society. White ideology, then, sees representatives of the white race as superior to other races.

The research results show that the mechanisms of white hegemony materialize in three ways. First, black maids are exploited in the white households through paying them below the minimal wage, while they are simultaneously expected to work unreasonable hours. Second, white hegemony manifests at the level of language and agency: white employers spread damaging lies about the black maids while silencing them and anyone that is willing to defend the rights of the African American population. The final mechanism of white hegemony is segregation that enables separating the black maids from the white households, for example, through the use of separate dining spaces or bathrooms. The novel also contains counter-hegemonic narratives that oppose the dominant white ideology and defend the rights of the black people.

Key words: ideology, white hegemony, white privilege, systematic racism, Kathryn Stockett

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## 1 Introduction

Racial injustice has been a major problem in North America since the late sixteenth century when Europe launched extensive colonization programs in the continent. The desire for power and wealth led to acquiring slaves of both American and African origin and colonizing the land of the Native Americans. With the passing of centuries, historical, religious, philosophical, socioeconomical, cultural, and political forces leading to slavery continued to reinforce each other. According to Kenneth Addison, the forces manifested “themselves in an increasingly Eurocentric metaphysic that gave rise to supremacist worldview, a view that ultimately became articulated in the concept of race and racial hierarchy” (Addison 1–6, 158).

Throughout the U.S. history the rights of ethnic minorities, especially Afro-Americans, have been driven by American figures namely Mary Elizabeth Graham (1861–1965), Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968), and Rosa Parks (1913–2002). These are the names we study at school as the figures who improved the rights of racial minorities in the United States. Even though the development in the rights of different ethnic groups in the United States is apparent, the anti-racist movement seen in the media in 2020 – following the death of George Floyd at the hands of police officers – indicate that racial equality is yet to be achieved. Moreover, Joshua Inwood views the rise of Donald Trump to president in 2016 as an expression of white anxieties about the threat posed to white privilege when the colored minority keeps fighting against systematic racism (582). In Inwood’s view, the election of the first black President, Barack Obama, “threatened the psychological benefits that come from whites’ dominant position in the U.S. society” (586). Hence, even today, tensions between the white and black populations exist both in the socioeconomical and political fields.

Consequently, the interest in this thesis lies in analyzing the mechanisms through which white hegemony is maintained within a society. This thesis will approach these mechanisms from the point of view of the domestic sphere – the homes of white middle- and upper-class families – which is the focus of Kathryn Stockett’s historical novel *The Help* (2009) that describes the relationship between black maids and their female employers in Mississippi in the 1960s. The domestic sphere is worth analyzing since it contains mechanisms of white hegemony often hidden from the public eye and, therefore, provides a different place of exploitation. Moreover, the domestic sphere – the place where white housewives are primarily responsible for practicing white hegemony – is an extension of

the patriarchal public sphere where white middle-class men are responsible for maintaining white ideology, for example, through creating laws that separate white and black people. The thesis examines how African American maids are exploited through unfair working conditions, disgraced through the white employer's agency and use of abusive language, and kept separate from the white families within the households. Some discussion on the role of counter-hegemonic narratives in resisting white ideology will be included to offer different perspective.

*The Help* has been widely studied, especially from the angles of racial or gender inequality and because of its white-authored narratives of black life (see Garcia et al.). Moreover, research has focused on the novel's use of non-standard English varieties (see Sládková), and the characters of Stockett's novel (see Iban et al.). Most of the research on the novel has been conducted by university students in their bachelor or master's theses. However, there has been no research on the mechanisms through which white hegemony is practiced within the novel's domestic sphere. Therefore, the aim of this study is to fill the gap in research and produce further insight into the novel's positioning in regard to questions about racial injustice.

*The Help* is a historical novel telling the story of the women of Jackson, Mississippi, and narrated from the perspectives of two African American maids, Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson, and an aspiring white writer, Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan. The novel describes the black maids' work in the white household and the characters' fight against racial injustice. The objective of this thesis is to examine how historical fiction participates in the discussion on racial issues and racial injustice in the United States. This objective is reached by analyzing the novel through the following research question:

*How does the white society practice and maintain its hegemonic position in the domestic sphere?*

In the thesis, language is approached as a tool that has the power and role to partake in ideological discussion. The thesis is interested in questions of race and ideology; hence, the theoretical approach focuses on the concepts of ideology, white hegemony, and questions of white supremacy and systematic racism that rise from the field of critical race theory. The following chapter will introduce these theoretical concepts with a brief discussion about the United States' history with slavery and racial inequality to further emphasize the historical basis of these issues.

## 2 Theoretical framework

The theory section begins by defining the concept of ideology primarily from a cultural idealist perspective theorized by Louis Althusser. The second subchapter will first provide an overview of the concept of hegemony presented by Antonio Gramsci and then apply Richard Dyer's ideas about whiteness to develop an understanding of how white hegemony is approached in the thesis. The third subchapter presents a brief overview of the history of racial injustice in the United States: beginning with the country's colonial history and ending with a discussion about the period of structural racism. The theory section will end with further insight into the concepts used to describe racial inequality in the field of critical race theory. The theoretical concepts applied in this thesis are helpful for analyzing the novel because they provide an understanding of the ideologies driving white hegemony, the behavior that can be regarded as white hegemony, and the history of racial issues in the United States.

### 2.1 Ideology as the production of sense and meaning

Louis Althusser constructs his arguments about the essence of ideology around Karl Marx's (1818–1883) concept of production of the means of production. Production requires the fulfilment of material conditions, i.e., raw materials and instruments of production, and labor power that the firm ensures by wages and the society by institutions, such as the educational institution that teaches the diverse skills and sets of knowledge an individual requires to enter the labor market. In order for labor-power to be reproduced, individuals must submit to the society's ruling ideology. (Althusser 1–7.)

According to Althusser, the class struggle concerning the ruling ideology revolves around the concept of the State. In Marxist thinking, the State is a Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) consisting of forces such as the government, the army, the police, the prisons etc. RSA is an organized whole whose different parts are assembled under one commanding unity, the ruling classes in possession of State power. In addition to the RSA, the definition of the State should include the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). ISA contains religious, educational, cultural and political institutions, but also social formations, of which most important is that of family. ISAs often connect to the private domain and hence are relatively autonomous and capable of providing "objective" support to the rul-

ing ideology. According to Althusser, the RSA secures, by repression, the political conditions for the actions of ISA. (Althusser 14–18, 23–24.) The tight connection between RSA and ISA is also present in *The Help* where the white police force and the court of justice serve the needs of the white people. Furthermore, the novel describes the separateness of different ISA institutions – the church, education system and media – and indicates that the society’s funds are primarily allocated to white institutions.

Marx believed that ideology was the effect of imaginary representations deriving from economic mechanisms (conditions of RSA) (see Kang). According to Jürgen Habermas, the basic assumptions of historical materialism, the model of the forces of production and relations of production is an outdated one. Through the rise of global capitalism states have had to secure social order through an increase in state intervention. As the ideology of just exchange has disintegrated, politics has ceased to belong only to the superstructure. Today, state regulation and political control are indirectly exercised over the exchange process and therefore, the unpolitical order of relations of production is no longer necessary in guiding the production of ideology. (Habermas 191–92, 200.)

Althusser’s theory of ideology provides an alternative to Marx’s materialist view. For Althusser, ideology is a cultural product, a system of representations directing individuals to the tasks fixed by the entire society (conditions of ISA). Ideology exists to keep individuals in the place determined by class domination, and therefore maintains the class structures in a society. Althusser argues that societies need unifying ideologies to stay functional. In fact, Althusser’s view of ideology sees the subject as having more constraints than simply the economic and material ones; these constraints can be ones caused by such matters as language or ethnicity. (Althusser 16–17, 22–24.) Terry Eagleton summarises the above discussion by providing a definition for the concept of ideology:

Ideologies are commonly felt to be both *naturalising* and *universalising*. By a set of complex discursive devices, they project what are in fact partisan, controversial, historically specific values as true of all times and all places, and so as natural, inevitable and unchangeable . . . Ideology very often presents itself as obvious – as an ‘Of course!’ or ‘That goes without saying.’ (9–10)

Nicos Poulantzas’ ideas, on the other hand, lead us towards a discussion about how these ideologies are distributed by the ruling classes to the social consciousness. The



goal of the dominant class is to present their ideology as a threshold for unity within a society. The dominant ideology should become an indistinguishable part of every individual's lived experience; existing at an imaginary level in the minds of individuals to guide their activities. The goal is not to provide individuals with true knowledge, but to slide ideology into every level of the social structure to ensure cohesion between the different classes within the society. (Poulantzas 132, 136–37.) Poulantzas ends his article by revealing the relation between dominant ideology and the dominant class in stating that

The correspondence between the dominant ideology and the politically dominant class is not due . . . to some kind of historico-generic relation. It is due to the fact that the ideological (i.e. a given ideology) is constituted as regional instance within the unity of the structure; and this structure has the domination of a given class as its effect in the field of the class struggle. The dominant ideology, by assuring the practical insertion of agents in the social structure, aims at the maintenance (the cohesion) of this structure, and this means *above all* class domination and exploitation. (138)

In brief, the thesis views ideology as a cultural product that is forced by the dominant class to the entire society to ensure cohesion through ISA institutions. If ISAs fail to deliver, physical force is practiced through RSAs. The underlying assumption here is that the white population in Stockett's historical novel is able to distribute its racist views because it represents the dominant class within the society. Since the white population consists of employers and the black people of employees, the white population is the one defining the values of the society, defining the social norms, and deciding the direction of education and politics. Moreover, the white population has control of the RSA forces and funds, which places them in a powerful position in contrast to the black population. In light of these points, white people are the ones holding power primarily through different mechanisms of hegemony but also through their influence over the RSA institutions. In the novel, white men have primary responsibility over the RSAs while white women are in charge of practicing white hegemony through the ISAs: the domestic sphere. Hence, the novel also raises questions of gender inequality and women's place in a society. Since the thesis focuses on mechanisms of white hegemony, the concept will be defined next.

## 2.2 Ideological hegemony versus white hegemony

George Hoare and Nathan Sperber state that the word *hegemony* derives from the Ancient Greek word *eghestai*, meaning to direct or to lead. In the 1880s, Marxist Russian revolutionaries modified the meaning of the word to suit their pursuit of power where the peasants, together with the revolutionaries consisting of the working class, would overthrow the bourgeoisie. When doing so, the revolutionaries would practice hegemony. (Hoare and Sperber 118.) For this thesis, the understanding of the concept of hegemony comes from the work of Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) who developed the theory of cultural hegemony through examining Vladimir Lenin's (1870–1924) ruling practices.

In Gramsci's view, hegemony is constructed through the power of attraction of the political society and the compromises aimed at the regrouping of the civil society, which refers to the social, cultural, and political institutions within a society. Hegemony acts in a societal context where intellectuals, those holding the reigns of political power, gather various separate social groups to support their cause. Hegemony is exercised by the ruling class holding political power over the whole of society by the interaction of consent (ISA institutions) and coercion (RSA institutions). (Gramsci 42, 183–85.) For example, modern governments prefer to socialize citizens using democratic ideologies yet sometimes result to the police force to restore order within the society.

For Gramsci, the most solid hegemonic systems are those where force is not visible because of the domination of the logic of consent, which replaces the coercive strategies of the state. This does not mean that the forces would not exist at the background in case consent fails to deliver. Hegemony is trying to find a perfect balance between the forces of coercion and consent that aim to form a concrete national reality. Hegemony is built on *ideology* and therefore operates at the level of the ISA. The agents of hegemony are the intellectuals, who are responsible for making sure that hegemony coincides with common sense. According to this view, hegemony corresponds with the restructuring of culture. When an ideology has been successfully distributed to the civil society, it ceases to exist because it has become part of the society's other intellectual enterprises. (Gramsci 45, 49, 51; see also Hoare and Sperber 124–26.)

Hegemony is most effective when its ideologies are passed as cultural norms. Since hegemony cannot be separated from ideologies, from this point on, I will speak of ideological hegemony to emphasize that hegemony is, in fact, always driven by ideologies. The ideology driving the hegemony practiced in Stockett's *The Help* will be referred

to as white hegemony where whiteness provides an ideological basis for hegemonical practices. Whiteness and consequently white hegemony will be defined using Richard Dyer's ideas about the concept. In his book *White*, Dyer's interest is in the cultural construction of white people by white people within the Western cultural sphere (4). Stockett's novel is placed in Mississippi and therefore falls under the Western cultural sphere dominated by white culture. Dyer states that

Racial imagery is central to the organization of the modern world. At what cost regions and countries export their goods, whose voices are listened to at international gatherings, who bombs and who is bombed, who gets what jobs, housing, access to health care and education, what cultural activities are subsidized and sold, in what terms they are validated – these are all largely inextricable from racial imagery. (1)

Dyer's statement is central in the sense that those holding the reigns of ideological power, and thus the ones distributing racial imagery through hegemony, are the ones providing the dominant narratives that organize the world. As will later become apparent in the chapter titled "Language and agency", the white population's narratives are given more emphasis to in Stockett's fictional society. However, black maids produce counter-hegemonic narratives to resist white ideology, which make the reader question the dominant white narrative in the novel.

The issue Dyer specifically addresses in his book is that while other people are identified through their race, white people are seen as merely people and this position allows them to speak for all of humanity, whereas "raced people" can only speak for their race. White people's position is the product of white culture emphasized by different means of cultural production for instance books, movies, advertising, etc. (Dyer 1–4.) Dyer also distinguishes between three senses of whiteness as color: 1) white as a hue, 2) white as a skin color, and 3) white as a symbol. According to the white as a hue perspective, many people find it difficult to accept white as a hue because white is the color of light and because we constantly see light, we do not see its color. White is somehow distinct from all the other colors in the world with its own special position. (Dyer 45–46.)

The sense of white as a skin color connects to the Western history of beauty, which was based on whitening one's face using make-up. In contrast, the modern trend among white people is to tan oneself to look darker. Dyer argues that changing skin tones

is a white privilege: black people's use of skin lighteners is often considered ridiculous. White people may be able to pass as darker versions of themselves, whereas black people can never pass as white. Since multiple forms of whiteness exist, the color is more about social categories and what white means than about actual skin color. The instability of white as a skin color enables including or excluding to the category through deciding who counts as white and who does not. (Dyer 48–51, 57.) Dyer's idea about color distinctions within whiteness being understood in relation to labor (57) is central for the analysis of *The Help*. Manual labor, often done outside, exposes one to natural elements, for example, sun light, which results in a darker skin tone, while doing mental labor, intellectual work, indoors results in a lighter skin tone. Even though Dyer specifically refers to the different tones of whiteness, the same issue is seen in Stockett's novel where manual labor is for those with dark skin and mental labor is for the white "intellectuals" working indoors.

The third and final sense is white as a symbol, where white is the symbol of good and black is the symbol of bad. The final category is firm even at the level of language: Dyer exemplifies it through sayings "everything has its darker side" and "it's just a little white lie". The binary oppositions come across in popular culture where the protagonists are often dressed in lighter colors, while villains wear black. The color white also carries a symbolic sense of moral and aesthetic superiority through being associated with purity, cleanliness, and even virtue. Non-white people, then, are associated with dirt as will also become apparent in the thesis' analysis section. (Dyer 58, 60, 66.)

For the purpose of this thesis, white hegemony is seen as a form of hegemony governed by white ideology: whiteness offers moral and aesthetic superiority over blackness. Hence, in view of white hegemony, being black means that one has to accept an inferior rank in the society while white people are responsible for defining culture since they operate in the superstructures of society. This distinction is present in *The Help* where black people represent the lower class and are responsible for doing "dirty work" for their middle-class white employers whether through manual labor in farms, factories, or white households. The discussion will now proceed into discussing the United States' history with racial injustice, which will illuminate how the forms of racial discrimination have changed from slavery into white hegemony throughout the country's history.

### 2.3 The history of racial injustice in the United States

Thus far I have established that white hegemony is a form of ideological hegemony where white people are constructed as superior to black people. Because the white population holds the cultural capital, it has the power to make the rules by which the society functions. Nonetheless, cultural capital alone cannot explain why white hegemony was widely practiced in the 1960s and even today. In order to understand the difficulties faced by certain racial minorities, the foundational and structural racial oppression rooted in the U.S. history must be understood (Feagin 5).

The first evidence of African enslavement in America is traced back to the plantation system from 1640 onwards. Throughout the eighteenth century, millions of Africans were imported to North America, and most of the slaves worked on white farms or plantations doing manual labor. Slaves were often prohibited from any academic activity to ensure complete dependability of their owners. (Winthrop et al. 44.) Slave rebellions began in the early nineteenth century and continued to encourage the abolitionist movement between the late 1820s and 1860s. With Abraham Lincoln's rise to presidency and the beginning of the Civil War, abolition became a goal due to the growing anti-slavery sentiment in the North of the U.S. and the self-emancipation of many slaves in the South. In 1863, Lincoln issued the emancipation proclamation: that the slaves in the U.S. should be emancipated, which marked the end of slavery. (Guyatt 328–31.)

Racial discrimination did not end with the emancipation proclamation; instead, its appearance marked the beginning of structural racism through the so-called black codes. Harold B. Baron argues that the development of advanced capitalism as the dominant aspect of the American social formation was a contributing factor (18). Black people were supposedly given the same rights as the white population, but this was not the case since black codes ensured that African Americans remained a cheap labor force; for example, in Virginia between 1856 and 1866,

Not only did the new code replace the old slave laws, it also replaced many of the provision that had long denied even free black Virginians a broad range of rights that white Virginians enjoyed. The new provisions permitted black Virginians to testify in some court proceedings . . . and legalized their marriages. But the postwar Virginia black code also increased the penalties for a number of crimes popularly associated with blacks; introduced a new

vagrancy act under which freedmen could be put to work without pay on plantations; prevented blacks from testifying in court proceedings that involved only whites; and perpetuated the ancient bans on black voting and officeholding. (Wallenstein 4–5.)

Mississippi – where *The Help* is set – was one of the first states to enact black codes. Peter Wallenstein’s quote exemplifies how black codes limited the freedom of the black population, assuring that they remained with the low-paying jobs, restricted housing opportunities, and worse opportunities for education. The period of structural racism, “separate but equal”, is where *The Help* is situated. According to Baron, the 1960s was a period of redefinition in the totality of American life, especially in regard to its racial ideology (11). The 1960s was the time of civil rights movements carried out by Martin Luther King, as also described in the novel. Even though the novel and history books describe the 1960s as a period of social change, modern movements related to the Black Lives Matter would indicate that the period of structural racism is not over. Either way, understanding America’s long history of slavery is central to understanding how mechanisms of white hegemony are so strongly present in the novel. The following chapter will approach issues of racial injustice through critical race theory’s concepts of white supremacy and systematic racism.

## 2.4 Critical race theory

Richard Delgado states that “the critical race theory (CRT) movement is a collection of activists and scholars engaged in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power” (3). The CRT’s critical attitude towards the foundations of liberal order separates the movement from traditional civil rights discourse. The basic principles of CRT are as follows. First, CRT believes that racism is ordinary, but it is not acknowledged. Second, racism is not acknowledged because the society functions on the rules of both white elites and working-class whites who represent the majority of the society. Last, race and races are the product of social thought and relations. (Delgado et al. 4, 8–9.) Two central theoretical concepts used for understanding white hegemony from the perspective of CRT are white supremacy and systematic racism.

In his discussion regarding Charles W. Mill’s conception of white supremacy, Kevin M. Graham argues that the phenomenon of white supremacy is not new; instead,

white people's domination of people of color dates to the beginning of the age of European exploration. In fact, the Western states have been founded on hierarchical relations between the dominant white race and the disadvantaged non-white population. Even though white supremacy is no longer governed by the system of law and political forces no longer advocate global white supremacy, the phenomenon still exists. Today, white supremacy becomes visible in the way race shapes our sense of who counts as a full-fledged person while it simultaneously acts as a source of entitlement to property. (Graham 20–21.) Hence, it seems that white supremacy relies on white ideology.

Joe Feagin discusses the vitality of perceiving the foundational and systematic aspects of racism. Systematic racism is more than a matter of racial prejudice; it is rather a “material, social, and ideological reality that is well-imbedded in major U.S. institutions” (2). In this thesis, systematic racism is seen as the byproduct of centuries of white ideology and white hegemony that have rooted racism into the structures of U.S. society. Systematic racism's long history is an issue since, for example, the enhanced wealth gathered by white Americans in one generation has been transmitted to later generations ensuring that wealth stays with the white population (Feagin 4). The phenomenon of generational poverty is also visible in the lives of the black maids in *The Help* and will be addressed in the chapter titled “Race and labor within the white home”.

The impact of systematic racism includes a number of dimensions that are addressed here to help understand how racism and systematic racism, a sister term for white hegemony, impact racial minorities. The first dimension is that of economic domination, which comes down to economic exploitation: white Americans rely on African American labor. This exploitation began during the time of colonization when Africans were exploited as enslaved laborers. America's colored population has paid a high price for racial oppression in many areas of their lives: dramatic loss of time and energy resulting from emotional trauma, damage of health, and the harm to communities. Even today, the median income of African American families is 60 percent of that of white American families and their life expectancy is six years less. (Feagin 16–18, 20.) The economical aspect of systematic racism will also be examined in the research results.

Another important dimension is that of the racial hierarchy where the white population is placed at the top whereas the colored population is placed at the bottom. This hierarchical structuring enables the white population to create the rules and laws governing the society, to take use of the common land and exploit the colored population through their influence over RSA and ISA institutions. (Feagin 21, 23.) Other dimensions include

education, politics, housing, health care, policing, and public accommodations, all of which are also present in *The Help*. During the period of slavery, the colored population were excluded from schools and decent housing, they endured violence by police forces and their white owners, and they also had to give up the right for their bodies and autonomy. Today, antiblack discrimination is illegal, yet “informal discrimination in employment, housing, public accommodations, and other major areas is still widespread and is either perpetrated or tolerated by most whites” and governmental structures. (Feagin 24.)

Systematic racism also surfaces in the white racial frame, which refers to racist ideas, stereotypes, and emotions that “justify” discrimination and support the idea of racism. This white ideology has altered the views of black population from slaves to representatives of lowbrow culture. (Feagin 26, 28.) Yet again, in the discussion on the dimensions of systematic racism, we come back to ideologies and the role of cultural idealism in accepting and distributing the view that being white is superior to being black; white ideology enables systematic racism. The analysis conducted in the following chapter aim at identifying the mechanisms of white hegemony present in *The Help*.



### 3 Separate and not equal

When reading *The Help*, it becomes evident that the novel's focus regarding issues of ideological hegemony takes place in the domestic sphere, the homes of the white middle class. Examining the domestic sphere is central because it provides insight into the more hidden mechanisms of white hegemony that are practiced behind closed doors primarily by women. Althusser includes the family sphere into the wide network of ISA institutions. Even so, questions of hegemony tend to circle around governmental institutions such as the educational institution or the media. Examining how the domestic sphere practices white hegemony will provide a fresh perspective into the discussion of hegemonical practices. The analysis identified three categories of white hegemony that will be discussed in this chapter: 1) race and labor within the white home, 2) language and agency, and 3) the segregation of private space.

#### 3.1 Race and labor within the white home

*The Help* describes how black girls are raised to become maids. Working in a white household is their destiny, a part of their historical heritage and tradition, as an interview between Skeeter and Aibileen shows:

“Did you know when you were a girl, growing up, that one day you’d be a maid?”

“Yes ma’am. Yes, I did.”

(. . .) “And you knew that...because...?”

“Mama was a maid. My granmama was a house slave.”

(. . .) “Did you...ever dream of being something else?”

“No,” she says. “No, ma’am, I didn’t.” (144)

Aibileen’s reference to her grandmother, who was a house slave, is also a reference to the country’s colonial past. As noted earlier, the United States’ history of slavery dates back to the seventeenth century and also that during the eighteenth century, slaves were prohibited of any academic activity. In a world of constant class struggle where the intellectuals – representatives of the white upper class – dictate the skills and sets of knowledge

required for employment, the black population had to settle for the roles that the white upper class provided them. For decades, this role was either the role of a house slave or a plantation worker. Aibileen's mother, then, probably worked after Lincoln's emancipation proclamation in 1863, and consequently held the work title of a maid that Aibileen, living under the existence of black codes, also possesses. Aibileen has been raised knowing that one day she, too, will work as a maid. No other possibilities had been discussed or even imagined by the maid as a child. This fact appeals to the reader's emotions since children are typically considered to have broad imaginations and colossal dreams. Instead, it seems that dreams are the privilege of white middle-class children for whom opportunities are endless.

Minnie's storyline provides additional reasoning for why black women become maids. Before discussing Minnie, it is worth noting that Aibileen is her senior, probably closer to the age of Minnie's mother, who had to become a maid to provide for their family. Minnie, too, had to leave school at the age of fourteen to provide for the family since her drunk father was unable to do so. Hence, the maids' storylines expose the cycle of generational poverty discussed by Feagin; lack of money and education often forced black women to work for the white population. Because the white elite dictates the terms of employment, paying below the minimum wage, a person of African American origin is unable to save money since the little they earn barely covers the most basic expenses.

The white population holding the reigns of cultural power did not think minimum wage concerned the black population; this becomes apparent when Minnie applies for a job in another white household and tells Celia Foote that she earns a dollar an hour, "five years and not even minimum wage" (37). The general rule in the world of white labor markets in the twentieth century and even today is that work experience should correspond with one's wage. Nevertheless, the society described by Stockett has its own rules, and these rules are clearly drafted by the white population for their benefit. Aibileen's description of her financial situation provides an understanding of how little black maids were actually paid:

I get paid forty-three dollars ever Friday, which come to \$172 a month. That means after I pay the light bill, the water bill, the gas bill, and the telephone bill, I got thirteen dollars and fifty cents a week left for groceries, my clothes, getting my hair done, and tithing to the church. Not to mention the

cost to mail these bills done gone up to a nickel. And my work shoes is so thin, they look like they starving to death. (16)

It is clear from the passage that black maid's housing situation is nowhere near the splendors of white households and that they cannot splurge on luxury products. After paying for basic necessities, Aibileen has "thirteen dollars and fifty cents a week" left for groceries, clothes, getting her hair done, and giving to the church. A central observation from Aibileen's account is that the maid has to keep close track of her expenses – counting cents is vital because there is no money to spare. Even so, Aibileen, who barely affords the necessities of life, mentions that she spares money from her weekly earnings to give to the church. This fact makes the reader see the maid as an unselfish human being, who puts others above herself. Additionally, Aibileen is also seen as a respectable woman as she finds getting her hair done an expense that must be covered once the mandatory bills are paid. Furthermore, the personification regarding her work shoes tells the reader that even though she cannot even afford new work shoes, she manages to maintain a light attitude about her financial situation.

It seems that black maids have little if any rights in the face of their white employers. The lack of acceptable pay also signals the lack of appreciation that the maids receive for their efforts of working long hours, six days a week. In addition to poor pay, they do not have the luxury of holidays. For example, Aibileen says: "Today be Labor Day, though, a holiday for the rest of the world, so no class today" (389). Even on the holidays dedicated to laborers, the black maids must be at work, and they work even harder when the white children they look after are on holiday.

The fact that *The Help* contains detailed accounts of the struggles faced by Aibileen and Minny, told from their perspective, invites the reader to side with them. Minny has a husband and five children to care for, and this situation makes her desperate for a job. In contrast, Aibileen is older and still working since she has not been able to save for retirement. Despite their lives being simple, even portrayed as lacking some basic necessities, the characters are not prone to complain. They hold a hard work ethic and a passion for their jobs – Aibileen being passionate about raising children and Minny about food. These characteristics of the two black maids make the reader sympathize with them and their situation. Seeing the simple lifestyles of the maids juxtaposed closely with the luxurious lives of their white employers highlights the gap between these two ethnic groups and even provokes feelings of anger for the injustice the black protagonists must endure;

despite working hard, they cannot even afford new work shoes while white women have the time to shop for the latest designs. The situation regarding the maids' wages is ironic since paying below the minimum wage also allows their white employers a life of relative luxury.

White women have time since black maids are responsible for doing the job that their white female employers would typically be doing in a patriarchal society, taking care of the household. The job covers everything from going to the store to cooking, cleaning, and even taking primary responsibility of raising white children. Having a maid enables a white middle-class woman to do their hair, plan charity benefits, and maintain a social profile. Having a maid in a white household is so common that white women forget that it is their expected jobs that the maids are doing, which provokes negative feelings in the reader regarding the positioning of all women within the society. The novel portrays the average white middle-class woman's societal position as a housewife. According to the governing social norms, women belong to the private sphere while men belong to the public sphere. From the perspective of the spread of white ideology, this means that men spread the ideology through RSA institutions, for example through law, while women practice white hegemony through ISA institutions, the domestic sphere.

The character of Celia Foote, a naïve white woman and the employer of Minny, reminds the reader of the maids' importance when she asks Minny to work for her in secret. Celia's role, in regard to questions of racial injustice, is to remind the reader of the vitality of the work of black maids; the white households would be lost without them. For example, Celia is incapable of cooking and cleaning, and she does not have the motivation or the skills. Even though Minny acknowledges that Celia is in a desperate need for her help, she simultaneously fears for her life as she fears the consequences of Celia's husband discovering a black woman in his home. This paradox can only be explained through white ideology. The job of the maids is crucial as they keep the white households running, yet black maids are exploited in various ways; paid below the minimum wage and forced to work unreasonable hours. Black maids are more skilled to do the job of the white women, even that of motherhood as Skeeter's constant longing for the maid who raised her, Constantine, suggests: "I miss Constantine more than anything I've ever missed in my life" (60). Skeeter's yearning for Constantine is ironic in the sense that Constantine, too, is described as missing her own daughter whom she had to leave in order to work for Skeeter's family.

The skills of black maids and their importance to the white children is of no importance to most of their white employers. Skills do not count in the 1960s Mississippi governed by the idea that skin color determines human value. This ideology is so deeply ingrained in the minds of the white population that the mechanisms of white hegemony discussed in this chapter stay grounded. Being white justifies paying skilled maids below the minimum wage, making them work through the holidays, and even taking credit for their work. Black maids, then, suffer in several aspects of their lives due to their economic exploitation. Feagin, too, argues that economic exploitation affects several aspects of life leading to loss of time and energy, education, politics, housing, health care, and public accommodations, which will be discussed in subchapter titled “The segregation of private space”. The following chapter will discuss the mechanisms of white hegemony taking place at the level of language.

### **3.2 Language and agency**

The previous subchapter established that generational poverty and a lack of education force black women to take low-paid jobs as maids. For white people, one’s position in the labor market is a question about what one wants to do in their life. White middle-class women often stay at home, but for them it is a question of choice – even though this choice was also dictated by strict patriarchal norms – as becomes apparent when Skeeter starts to pursue a career in writing and manages to acquire an editing job in New York at the end of the novel. For black women, the question of career path comes down to survival, the need for money for the most basic necessities in life. Therefore, black people, especially black women, are easy to exploit in the labor market.

The black maids have internalized their identity as maids so deeply that their way of addressing white people carries from their places of work into their homes. After Aibileen addresses Skeeter as “ma’am” in her home, Skeeter thinks: “On my drive home, I want to kick myself. For thinking I could just waltz in and demand answers. For thinking she’d stop feeling like the maid just because we were at her house, because she wasn’t wearing a uniform” (146). Through Skeeter’s thoughts, the reader gets a glimpse into a white narrative distinct from the general white narrative. Skeeter’s narrative is unique for two reasons 1) it does not portray white people as superior to black people and 2) it shows the readers the social difficulties faced by white middle-class women who were expected to wed and start families. Generally white people do “just waltz in and demand” black

people a multitude of things. Conversely, Skeeter wishes for Aibileen to see her as an equal. The passage also exemplifies how rare it is for white people to visit the houses of black people. The situation is foreign to both Skeeter and Aibileen who are used to interacting with the other race in white households.

The general narratives promoting whiteness, however, have been so impactful that Aibileen cannot relinquish her maid-identity at her own home. Being a black maid is not like being in some other field of work where the working hours are clear. Maids work whenever it is convenient to their white employers and have no autonomy regarding their rights as workers. Being a maid requires one to be ready whenever one is needed, and this makes it difficult to draw a line between being a maid and merely being oneself. Also, Aibileen realizes the fact that for white people being a maid and being Aibileen are the same thing; black people are simply the help as the title of the novel also implies.

Hence, in Stockett's society being a black woman is automatically connected with being a maid, at least in the encounters between white and black people. In addition to the use of "ma'am" to refer to white women, Aibileen restrains information from Skeeter in the fear of losing her job. The novel is about Skeeter gathering the stories of black maids working in white households and writing a book about them. Black maids tell their stories anonymously because if their identities were revealed, they might lose their jobs. After all, as Elaine Stein, a publishing house editor working with Skeeter, states "what maid in her right mind would ever tell the truth" (106). Black maids are supposed to be shadows in the white households, no one cares what they think and how they feel about how they are being treated; what matters is how white people feel. Black characters are obligated to practice immense restraint in order to keep their opinions to themselves: for example, Minny – who has the tendency of backtalking – knows that backtalking at work, will lead to unemployment: "Truth is, I'm so nervous right now, I'd never backtalk again if it meant I'd get this job" (30).

While black maids have to be careful about speaking the truth about their own experiences and the injustice that constantly surrounds them, white women can speak their minds without consequence. In fact, degrading remarks and abusive names are common from the mouths of the white employers. The novel also presents a form of us versus them binary that manifests in the speech of white women. For example, comments like the one uttered by Skeeter's mother are quite common among the white employers: "She [Constantine] went to live with *her people* up in Chicago" (69). The society is divided between the white and black populations, who are expected to use different services on

their spare time. This dividedness also exists at the level of language, where rather than viewing black people as people, they are depicted as an entirely different species, even animals, as the constant use of the n-word implies. Dyer states that when white people see themselves as merely people and others as just their race, they hold a powerful position that enables them to speak for all of humanity while other races can only speak for their race (Dyer 1–4).

Other insulting remarks uttered by white employers are those of “dirty” and “diseased”. These insults are not just uttered straight to the faces of the black maids but also in front of the white children the black maids are paid to raise: “I see her [Elizabeth’s daughter] listening to Miss Leefolt call me [Aibileen] dirty, diseased” (96). According to Dyer, the idea of black skin being juxtaposed with dirt and disease is not a new one; traditionally white has been seen to carry a sense of moral and aesthetic superiority and non-white people have been associated with dirt (Dyer 75–76). This belief among the white population seems to “justify” their insults.

What horrifies both the maids – and probably the readers – is when white children, who the black maids have raised and loved, adopt the hateful remarks used by their parents and also taught in school. The role of black maids in the lives of white children is brought up by Aibileen in the first paragraph of the book. She tells the reader that she has raised seventeen white kids in her life and knows them better than their mothers. The relationship between white children and black maids resembles a mother-child relationship, at least until these children become socialized into the dominant white ideology. For example, Elizabeth’s daughter Mae Mobley starts school at the age of four. Aibileen has tried hard to teach the child kindness, compassion and equality, but she experiences first-hand how school distributes white hegemony: “Point is, we [black maids] got to watch what get up in these kids’ heads. Ever week, she still get her Aibileen lesson, her secret story” (392). The girl loves her secret stories, which are quite touching since they teach about racism in a way that a toddler can understand. The underlying message of these stories is that, regardless of their skin color, all human beings are important and valuable. Thus, both readers and Aibileen feel heartbroken when Mae Mobley returns from school and tells her caretaker how “kids that are colored can’t go to my school cause they’re not smart enough” (392) and that being black means that you are “dirty” and “bad faced” (408). Even though children do not understand that they are passing insults onto their caretakers, the maids are forced to experience the teachers’ racist attitudes in the domestic

sphere through their discussions with white children. As the theory section regarding ideological hegemony discussed, ideologies are distributed through ISAs; educational institutions and the family circle (Althusser 17). Family and school are the most powerful influences in the lives of children and their effect materializes in the socialization of white children.

The impact of the family circle is intriguing since Mae Mobley considers Aibileen her “real mother”, and since the girl spends the majority of her time with the maid, Aibileen’s influence is stronger than that of the girl’s parents. Nevertheless, the power of parental influence becomes apparent when the girl’s father grows outraged after hearing his four-year-old talking about Aibileen’s stories. Convinced by Mae Mobley’s lie that it was her teacher telling her the stories, the parents decide to change their daughter’s class. The parents’ wish for their children to attend a class where no pro-black views are distributed indicates that silencing is not restricted to the black population but is rather extended to anyone who speaks for the rights of the black community. White children are raised to believe that being black is bad while being white is good. If parents notice their children receiving differing information, they will silence these sources. Thus, Aibileen takes an immense risk when she tells the girl ‘counter-hegemonic’ narratives.

Gramsci argues that any form of hegemony is most efficient when no force is needed, since hegemony corresponds with the re-composition of culture (45). Culture does not only exist in actions but also manifests at the level of speech. Therefore, if no views of racial justice exist in ISAs – the educational institution or the family sphere – children will have no other option than to grow into believing that the principles of systematic racism are moral. The mechanisms of white hegemony taking place at the level of speech are two-fold: black voices are silenced in both the domestic and public sphere, while white voices are presented as the only truth. This truth is developed by the rules of the white population, quite literally, as they tend to formulate their own truth. Hilly, the main antagonist of the novel, is constantly spreading lies about black maids, who pay the price for this. In fact, Minny faces immense difficulties in finding a job after Hilly lies about her stealing:

She says she knows about the Childs and the Rawleys and all them others who turn me down. Said it was cause she’d made sure everybody knew I was a thief. I’ve never stole a thing in my life but she told everybody I did



and wasn't nobody in town gone hire a sass-mouthing thieving nigra for a maid and I might as well go head and work for her for free. (338)

When considering the above passage, it can be argued that Hilly's lies are not only damaging because they have the power to take away Minny's income, but they also attack her character. Minny prides herself for being a conscientious worker, but Hilly's lies tarnish this truthful image. One lie from a white person is more powerful than years of diligent service by black maids. Additionally, lies are not enough for Hilly as she includes the n-word and other hateful remarks into her speech to make sure that the maid "knows her place". As mentioned in the previous subchapter, the pay Minny has received is already unjust, and Hilly even suggests that the maid should work for her for free, discrediting all the work Minny has done over the years. The passage is an example of how white hegemony can produce extreme hostility and even racial hatred. The way black people are spoken to in the novel is inhumane. Hilly only perceives Minny through her skin color, which explains her use of the n-word.

Hilly reaches the peak of her evilness when she uses her influence to send her maid Yule to four years in the state penitentiary for stealing an unvaluable piece of jewelry in a desperate attempt to send her son to college. Hilly's lies about the worth of the jewelry show how the white population can manipulate the legal system and inflict violence on the black population at a social and a juridical level. Hence, white people are not only in control of the ISA institutions but also control the RSA institutions, which they can use in case white hegemony fails to deliver. However, in Hilly's case, she lies to the juridical system due to her vindictiveness and hatred of the black race.

The great injustice brought about by the hate-speech, silencing, and lies performed by white people is fought through counter-hegemonic voices and narratives in the novel. In *The Help*, Skeeter gathers the stories of black maids into a book so that their perspectives regarding domestic work in white households would be brought into public conversation. At the end of the novel, Skeeter's book attracts a wide readership and has the white women of Mississippi speculating over the employers described in the stories. The novel's narrative structure also produces counter-hegemonic voices as Aibileen and Minny are given their own narratives.

The novel's first-person narratives bring the characters closer to the readers by providing a glimpse into the characters' daily conversations and even inner thoughts through their diary entries. The readers receive the truth of the maid's unpolished lives;

and hearing their voices makes them seem human beings rather than just numbers or statistics of people who have experienced wrongdoings. Aibileen is a widow who has lost her only son due to exploitation in the labor market, dreams of writing and finally achieving this goal through her new job as a columnist, and who loves the Leefolt children. Her tragic life contrasted with her gratuitous attitude concerning her work – both as a maid and writer – make the reader sympathize with her. Minny, on the other hand, is a passionate culinarian, the mother of five, and the wife to an abusive husband. Despite the difficulties in her life, she inspires the readers through her wits and humorous attitude that she maintains in all circumstances. Giving these women their own voices brings them close to the readers and strengthens the counter-hegemonic views needed in a world where white narratives have the power to imprison innocent black people.

Even though these counter-hegemonic narratives have an emotional effect on the reader, they remain hidden within the fictional universe where the conversations we read about take place inside the characters' minds or behind closed doors, hidden from the white population. Thus, the narratives present in the fictional universe are mainly white narratives consisting of hurtful words and lies, which are taken as truth due to white agency and supremacy. The mechanisms of language and agency discussed in this subchapter lead to the irony that summons the message of the novel. As Skeeter puts it: “‘They raise a white child and then twenty years later the child becomes the employer. It’s that irony, that we love them, and they love us, yet...’ I swallowed, my voice trembling. ‘We don’t even allow them to use the toilet in our house’” (105–06). Skeeter’s comment about black maids being prohibited to share a toilet with their employers, brings us to the question of the segregation of private space, which will be addressed next.

### **3.3 The segregation of private space**

In the novel, the white society living in Mississippi keeps the white and black population separate; hence, the society follows the principles of racial segregation in structuring their city and its services. Black and white people have separate shops, libraries, schools, buses, newspapers, and even their own parts of town guarded by white police officers. During the 1960s, these principles of segregation were ordered by the law as becomes apparent in several instances in the novel. The theory section regarding U.S. history with racial injustice discussed the enactment of black codes during the nineteenth century, which was a common practice among different states, especially in the South. Black codes were

laws ensuring that black people worked in low-paying jobs, had restricted housing opportunities, and worse opportunities for education.

The principles of segregation are also applied in the domestic sphere. First, segregation becomes visible at the level of speech when white employers display their support for the system of segregation. For example, Hilly asks Aibileen: “‘Now I want you to ask yourself, do you want Mae Mobley sitting next to a colored boy in English class?’ ... ‘Do you want Nigra people living right here in this neighborhood? Touching your bottom when you pass on the street?’” (290) Again, the language used by Hilly is quite demeaning. The last question she proposes implies that black men are rapists or at least participate in a severe form of sexual harassment. This message is different from what the reader receives from Aibileen and Minny’s first-hand experiences and the discussions they have among their black colleagues. Hilly asks her questions in a way that forces Aibileen to agree since she ends her question with a rude remark that in no way reflects the current situation. Hilly implies that white people are being harassed by black people; in reality, as the constant fear of physical violence and the countless references to black beatings signal, black people tiptoe around the white people to make sure that the white population will have no excuse to hurt them.

Usually, black maids choose to not oppose these views of segregation, and thus, let their employers dictate the terms of their brief social encounters. This is why the following passage, where Aibileen challenges these segregation norms, is intriguing and will be examined in more detail:

But Miss Hilly shaking her head, “Aibileen, you wouldn’t want to go to a school full of white people, would you?”

“No ma’am,” I mumble. . .

But then I think: Why? Why I have to stand here and agree with her? . . . “Not a school full a just white people. But where the colored and the white folks is together.”

Hilly and Miss Leefolt both look at me. I look back down at the kids. “But *Aibileen*” – Miss Hilly smile real cold – “colored people and white people are just so...*different*.” She wrinkle her nose. (185–86)

Hilly begins her question with nonverbal communication, shaking her head, signaling Aibileen to provide a negative response to please her. She also adds the tag question “would you” to force the black maid to agree with her since tag questions are often considered rhetoric and posed to receive support for one’s views. Aibileen’s initial response is tailored to suit the wants of the white woman: a brief “no” followed by the title ma’am that places the white woman on an authority position. For the first time in the novel, Aibileen gathers her courage and tells her honest view on the matter. She expresses her dream of a world where people would not be separated due to their skin color and children would be taught the values she secretly teaches Mae Mobley. Hilly’s “cold smile” summarizes the ideological climate, where all is seemingly well, but below the surface deep hatred exists for the black people.

Hilly’s argument for segregation is merely based on the fact that white and black people are “so different”. She takes her time to produce this argument and invent a word that would capture this frivolous reason for segregation. The most apparent thing that separates a white human being biologically from a black human being is skin color, on which the entire system of segregation relies on. This is what the field of CRT criticizes when it discusses the issues of systematic racism where racist ideas, stereotypes, and emotions “justify” discrimination. Before we talked about Dyer’s three senses of whiteness as a color. Black and white form binaries and white people have directed cultural representation so that they represent the binary that stands for everything good and black people the binary that stands for bad. These binaries are based on skin color, which makes the whole notion unjust and illogical. The senses of whiteness are based on representation and social conceptions, in other words, matters that are abstract, products of thinking, and the result of racist ideology.

There is no denying that the society described in the novel is organized in a way that keeps the white and black people separate. This separateness is established at a juridical level through white-governed RSA institutions. In the novel, Skeeter is mesmerized by the number of laws separating the white and black people. Some of these laws dictate how the private lives of the people living in 1960s Mississippi should be arranged, for example, one law prohibits marriage between white and black people. Skeeter also makes this observation in stating that “there’s no difference between these government laws and Hilly building Aibileen a bathroom in the garage, except ten minutes worth of signatures in the state capital” (173–74). Hence, as mentioned before, the domestic sphere is an ex-

tension of the patriarchal public space. In other words, white women practice white hegemony in the private sphere while white men force white ideology onto the society through creating laws to keep the two races separate in the public sphere; women are in control of ISA institutions while men are in control of RSA institutions.

With these points in mind, the domestic sphere is organized in a similar way to the public sphere. Segregation in the domestic sphere is not limited to discussions about segregation held in white homes but is connected to how white families spatially organize their homes so that their black maids are kept separate. In almost all the white homes the standard procedure is that black maids serve the white family in their dining halls and then go eat in the kitchen or “outside, even in the middle a January” (227). The main focus of the novel regarding the segregation of private space is the continuous discussion regarding building black maids their own bathrooms “as a disease-preventive measure” (8). According to Hilly, separate bathrooms would not only protect Elizabeth’s family from diseases but also increase the price of their house once they sell it. It is not enough to build Aibileen her own bathroom, but it must be outside of the house, which makes the matter even more humiliating.

Bathrooms symbolize the down-to-earth approach of the novel since everyone uses the bathroom, but only a few people pay attention to it. Going to the bathroom is generally considered a private matter, but for the maids, it becomes an issue policed by white people. This is humiliating and becomes even more so when separate bathrooms are built to prevent the spread of black diseases. The bathroom discussion relates to Dyer’s analysis of the symbolic meaning of the darker skin tones and, as such, it is closely connected to the previous discussion on abusive language where I made a point about the occurrence of the words “dirty” and “diseased” used to describe black people in the novel. The motivation behind building separate bathrooms comes from the white people’s racist worldview where the black population is dirty. Ironically, as white people are building their black maids their own bathrooms, because black people are regarded as dirty and diseased, black people also cook their food and, even more importantly, raise their children.

What captures the reader’s attention regarding segregation is the ‘Benefit’ held to raise money for the “Poor Starving Children of Africa”. Naturally, African American maids are not allowed to attend the Benefit as guests, but they are responsible for catering the event; yet again, they are kept separate in the kitchen, only allowed to enter the benefit hall to serve white guests. The Benefit highlights the double standards and hypocrisy of

white people who do not regard their African American maids as worthy attendees to an event held to feed Africans living in Africa. The irony of the Benefit is unclear to all its white attendants, everyone except Skeeter:

“Hilly.” I just need to hear her say it. “Just *who* is all that pound cake money being raised for, anyway?”

She rolls her eyes. “The Poor Starving Children of Africa?”

I wait for her to catch the irony of this, that she’ll send money to colored people overseas, but not across town. (280)

The irony surrounding the Benefit demonstrates just how strong the mechanisms of white hegemony in the society created by Stockett are. The black maids are barely managing to feed their children with their below minimum wage, but their white employers are blind or indifferent to this fact. Organizing a charity fundraiser is more about the excitement of the event than it is about helping those less fortunate. Hilly rolls her eyes at Skeeter to show that, as the chairman of the planning committee, of course she knows who the money is being sent to. In the novel, Hilly always refers to the children of Africa as “The Poor Starving Children of Africa”, which is a punchline created to attract emotion since what could be worse than poor starving children? It seems to the reader, and the protagonists of the novel, that Hilly does not care for the African children in Africa or across town; the Benefit simply has to be advertised so that it attracts attention and becomes the social event of the season.

Even so, being black does not matter as much when one is being black in another continent. When black maids come near the white people to raise their children with unconditional love, this love is ignored, and black maids are despised for their race. The racial hatred emerges from no other explanation than that of white hegemony that has become so ingrained in the novel’s society through the passing of centuries that almost no one stops to question it. No factual arguments against white ideology are needed nor permitted. In the minds of the white population, whiteness is regarded as superior to blackness; this is a fact that no amount of love or conscientious service can overturn. From the analysis chapters it becomes apparent that the forces of coercion practiced in the male-dominant public sphere and the mechanisms of white hegemony practiced by women in the private sphere enabled the white population to keep the two ethnic groups both separate and unequal. As discussed in the theory section, the period of structural

racism and the black code system carried the slogan “separate but equal”, however, the research results argue that equality had not been achieved. Hence, the title of the thesis “Separate and not equal” summarizes the ideological climate of the fictional society and the two goals of white hegemony in *The Help*.

## 4 Conclusion

The thesis acknowledges that Stockett is a white writer living in the postmodern era and writing about racism as experienced by black women in the 1960s. Stockett's ethnic background makes us ask a central question about the stands of white people in regard to white hegemony. For years people have been debating over questions regarding cultural appropriation – whether white people have the right to write about the lives of non-white people or vice versa. I am interested in the possibilities that a clearly anti-racist work, written by a white author and criticizing white hegemony, has on the fight against racism. Might the work be more approachable to the white readership and does it discuss racism in a way that is easier for white readers to grasp? What effects might the stands of white authors against white hegemony have on the problem of racial injustice?

As analyzed in this thesis, Stockett has successfully managed to identify several mechanisms of white hegemony. Now my interest lies in briefly discussing my views about the possible benefits of having white writers introduce their perspectives about minority issues, especially when they include counter-hegemonic narratives in their writing. In *The Help*, the character of Skeeter also offers a white perspective. Even though she does not fully understand the experiences of the black maids, she offers her support. However, it becomes apparent from her storyline that she enjoys white privilege: when Aibileen lost her job in fighting against racial injustice, Skeeter was recruited to work as an editor in New York. The outcome was unfair, since the black maids had to suffer the consequences of the fight for their rights. Nevertheless, Skeeter too, suffered loss in her private life when her lover could not accept her cooperation with the black maids. Aibileen lost her job, but simultaneously achieved emancipation when she was fired from the Leefolt household. She also received a writing job from Skeeter, writing a Miss Myrna column for a white magazine, which was exceptionally rare in the 1960s Mississippi. Both Skeeter and Stockett use counter-hegemonic narratives to share the stories of an oppressed race.

This thesis regards texts as powerful tools that partake in discussion about ideological matters. Literary authors have often commented on contemporary matters and, in case of Stockett's novel, the discussion on such matters rotates around white ideology and hegemony. Considering Stockett's novel and the counter-hegemonic narratives appearing in it through the first-person narrators of Aibileen and Minny, it can be argued



that the novel lets the reader hear the voices of the oppressed African American population, gives insight into their struggles caused by white hegemony, and provides understanding of the mechanisms used to practice white hegemony. Therefore, I hope that the readers of this thesis will learn from both the mechanisms of white hegemony and the counter-hegemonic narratives to make this world a more equal place.

Towards the end of the year 2020, a number of American newspapers reported that President Trump attacked CRT. Time magazine reported Trump denouncing the movement's "toxic propaganda that will destroy our country" (see Lang). As the theory section regarding CRT mentioned, the movement's aim is to reject the idea that racial inequality no longer exists. The goal of CRT is to provide research that proves that the racist structures carried from the colonial past are also present in today's society. These structures have changed with time and become less visible (e.g. when compared to the era of slavery), but work remains to be done since white supremacy is also a modern phenomenon as Trump's attack against the movement indicates.

Therefore, the thesis will conclude in an overview of the mechanisms of white hegemony identified in the research results and provide a very brief look at how these mechanisms exist today. First, the subchapter titled "Race and labor within the white home" addressed the mechanism of exploitation of black maids as racialized labor force within the white household. Maids were exploited through paying them below the minimum wage, making them work unreasonable hours, and showing no appreciation for the maids' diligent work ethics. Today racial discrimination in the job markets continues to exist as racial biases easily affect the decisions of employers (see Ziegert and Hanges). This means that even today minority races are more often the employees than the employers when contrasted with the white population. Due to generational poverty, many black people still cluster in lower-paying jobs such as home health aides or bus drivers. Furthermore, even though black women work more often than white women, their wages are significantly smaller (see Thompson).

In the subchapter titled "Language and agency", I discussed how mechanisms of white hegemony manifest at the level of speech and agency. Black maids or anyone speaking for the rights of the black population were silenced while white people were exploiting their freedom of speech. They insulted their maids and spread lies about them, even in the court of law. Hate speech and racial commentary remain in our modern society, although debates about cultural appropriation have made people more aware of these matters. For example, companies all around the world have taken the issues seriously and

made changes into the branding of products, changing names or logos that could cause criticism (see Valinsky).

In the final subchapter called “The segregation of private space”, I examined the mechanism of segregation taking place in the white households. Maids were kept separate, for example, through having them dine alone and use a different bathroom. This form of hegemony is not as apparent in the world today where schools, newspapers, and other forms of ISAs have become more integrated. Nonetheless, the issue is still present, for example, through residential segregation where racial minorities such as Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians, more typically inhabit areas of lower economic capital, especially in metropolitan areas where living expenses are higher (see Logan). Moreover, generational poverty combined with the low-paying jobs of black people also restricts their opportunities for housing, for example, just 41 percent of black households own their own home, compared with over 71 percent of white households (see Solomon et al.).

One of the most salient ways to fight racial injustice is to make room for the voices of racial minorities. Stockett does this by the use of counter-hegemonic narratives produced by the first-person narratives of Minny and Aibileen, and the stories of the other maids. These narratives serve as a powerful literary tool that appeals to the readers’ emotions, thus, receiving their support for the black cause. Since the cultural idealist view of ideology is based on the assumption that the governing ideologies existing within a society change together with the culture, culture has to change in order to change the dominant ideology. The problem is that power positions usually stay intact as the white middle class continues to hold the reins of power in many Western societies. Thanks to the work done by theoretical movements like CRT, the civil rights movement, and other general activism distributing counter-hegemonic narratives, the rights of different minorities have developed. Nevertheless, work remains to be done to reach a point where people of all races are seen as merely people in the United States’ dominant ideology.

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