Ann Petry's Cakewalk: Domestic Workers and *The New Yorker* at Mid-Century

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> My mother didn't mind whatever I did so long as it wasn't domestic work.
>
> --Ida Forsyne (23)

In the early 1940s, according to Lawrence P. Jackson, Ann Petry tried to interest the big-time magazines in her short stories, "but she only took rejection slips from *Atlantic Monthly, New Yorker, Harper's Bazaar, American Mercury*, and *Story Magazine*" (144). As late as 1946, Petry was submitting stories to *The New Yorker*. On 8 November of that year, fiction editor William Maxwell wrote to Petry's agent, Henry Volkening, rejecting "The Necessary Knocking on the Door" for being "a rather too melodramatic treatment of the negro problem" (Maxwell). (The story was eventually published in *The Magazine of the Year* in 1947.) Indeed, in an essay for the 1950 anthology, *The Writer's Book*, Petry claimed to have "collected enough rejection slips for [her] short stories to paper four or five good sized rooms" (39). Her early stories appeared in African American periodicals, such as the *Baltimore Afro-American, The Crisis, Phylon, Negro Digest* and *Opportunity.* It was not until 1958, having published three well-received and best-selling novels—particularly *The Street* (1946), the writing of which had been supported by a prestigious Houghton Mifflin literary fellowship—that Petry finally had her *New Yorker* breakthrough. On 25 October, "Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean?" her story about an African American butler who committed suicide thirty-three years prior, was published in the magazine.[1]

This article considers this story in the context of *The New Yorker*'s preoccupation with domestic workers at mid-century. With attention to the proliferation of servant-themed stories, cartoons, and anecdotes in the magazine in the postwar period, I argue that Petry's

story—with its several allusions to cakewalking (most particularly in the title)— enacts what Soyica Diggs Colbert terms "the insurgent playfulness at the heart of the cakewalk" (107). As Eric Sundquist, among others, contends, the cakewalk "occupied a liminal territory with a significant potential for resistance, a psychological and cultural space in which the racist appropriation of black life in offensive mannerisms gave way to an African American reversal of the stereotype" (277). By mimicking and reproducing the tone of typical *New Yorker* "help" stories, which were, up to that point, composed exclusively by white writers, Petry subtly comments on the world of white privilege depicted in the pages of the magazine and *The New Yorker*'s often problematic assumptions regarding race and class difference. When read carefully, "Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean?" exhibits "the full range of parodic or rebellious nuance" that Sundquist argues is characteristic of both the plantation cakewalk and subsequent cultural and literary renditions of the dance form (279). Moreover, reading the story in its original publishing context confirms Petry's mastery of a range of generic and literary vocabularies. While critics have acknowledged her fluency in the vernaculars of the gothic, tabloid news, film noir, and pulp fiction, "Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean?" reveals that Petry was equally adept at assuming and parodying the tone of a so-called "smart" magazine.[2]

Recounted by a first-person narrator, the story charts an African American woman's interconnected memories from both the recent (a few months prior) and distant (thirty years prior) past. When she is invited to pay a visit to an elderly dying woman, Sarah Forbes, whom she remembers from her childhood, the narrator is prompted to reflect on the woman's late husband, John, who was not known to the narrator but whose suicide, when the narrator was nine years old, was much discussed among her family in ensuing years. The story, and Petry's stories more generally, has not featured prominently in the scholarship paying careful and long overdue attention to Petry's work that has appeared over the past decade and a half.[3]

However, perhaps because her short stories were collected, with just one previously unpublished story, in *Miss Muriel and Other Stories* in 1971, the significance of the original publication contexts of the earlier stories have been obscured and are yet to be explored.[4] Notwithstanding the lack of critical focus on the original publication contexts of the stories, "Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean?" has benefited from sensitive critical readings. Keith Clark, situating the story within Petry's larger oeuvre, positions it alongside James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) and Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), fictions that dramatize "sexual passing as prominently as racial indeterminacy" (62). Drawing out queer echoes in the text, Clark argues that Forbes "'married' his role as butler because it allowed him to toggle between the hetero-normative, socially sanctioned role of 'husband' and the more preferable feminized though potentially racially demeaning one of male mammy" (66). For Clark, Forbes's position as butler represents "something of a safe space where he could experientially forge an alternative to hypermasculine orthodoxy while sublimating his socially abhorrent (possible) same-sex desire" (68).

Meanwhile, Barbara Lewis reads the story in relation to the history of the cakewalk. Noting Petry's involvement in the American Negro Theatre in the 1940s, Lewis sees Petry's focus on the cakewalk as "a further testament to her dramatic leanings" (126). However, neither of these studies takes into account the original appearance of the story in *The New Yorker* or the possibility that cakewalking might be seen as an aesthetic strategy as well as a plot element. Rachel Peterson scrutinizes the representation of domestic servants in Petry's novels, arguing that while they "do not perform the traditional Marxist version of class consciousness through externalizing their individual oppression through collective efforts," they "witness, record and editorialize on their employers' vices" and thus "perform a sort of reportage through which they acquire agency" (76-77). Peterson's essay, while expansive and informative, does not refer to Petry's short stories at all. Before turning to the story itself, I

want to sketch out the framework and contexts for reading it. Building on Eric Sundquist's analysis of the cakewalk and elucidating Petry's sensitivity to the style and content of slick magazines, this essay reads the set of formal and aesthetic strategies that Petry employs in "Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean?" Petry's "help" story adopts the conventions, and contains an embedded critique, of an entire subgenre of writing devoted to domestic workers that *The New Yorker* published in the decade after World War II.

Literary Cakewalk

In 1951, a *New Yorker* "Talk of the Town" story was concerned with Ida Forsyne, an African American cakewalker who was then assisting the white ballerina, Ruthanna Boris, with the choreography for a New York City Ballet production called *Cakewalk*. When questioned about the origins of the dance, Forsyne responds with circumspection: "[I]t's just about what you might expect from the name. Some colored folk get to jumping around and the best one wins the cake" (23). The black woman's guardedness regarding the origins of the cakewalk is deeply suggestive, for the cakewalk is a lot more than "some colored folk . . . jumping around" with "the best one win[ning] the cake." In its earliest forms, the cakewalk incorporated aspects of African tribal celebrations alongside a burlesque of the white master's clothing, pretensions and mannerisms. As Colbert summarizes: "The enslaved Africans mimicked the enslaver to demonstrate the contradictory identity of the elegant, southern gentlemen who facilitated slavery. The dancer magnified his difference by mimicking the slave owner and revealed the hypocrisy embedded in American democracy" (106). By the late nineteenth century, the cakewalk had been coopted by white and black blackface minstrels, its dissident aspects now overlaid with forms of racist caricature. Still, according to Sundquist, for the African American performer, "the cakewalk always had within it the potential subversion and rearrangement of white models, a subtle reflection upon

the role of black labor within the American economy, and thus an index of the unique tensions of African American culture" (282). Sundquist undertakes an extensive and enabling analysis of the cakewalk in order to explicate the "principles of subversion and indirection" he sees as common to both the dance form and to the work of Charles W. Chesnutt, who was writing during the post-Reconstruction era. Sundquist's exploration of Chesnutt's "curious literary cakewalk" is very suggestive in the context of Petry's story, which also provides "a resonant instance of the subversion from within that defines the place of much African American cultural work with respect to the prevailing mainstream and typically exclusive norms of white culture" (276, 280).

In this particular instance, the "exclusive norms of white culture" pertain to *The New Yorker* and the "subversion from within" is the appearance of Petry's story in the magazine in October 1958. Of course, Petry's story converses not only with the "help" stories appearing in *The New Yorker* in the 1950s but also with a long-established tradition of African American leftist writing—poetry, fiction, and nonfiction—in which the domestic worker embodied the intersections of capitalist, racist, and gendered forms of exploitation.[5] In 1935, Ella Baker and Marvel Cooke published an exposé in *The Crisis* of the Bronx "Slave Market," in which "Negro women, old and young—sometimes bedraggled, sometimes neatly dressed—but with the invariable paper bundle, [wait] expectantly for Bronx housewives to buy their strength and energy for an hour, two hours, or even for a day at the munificent rate of fifteen, twenty, twenty-five, or, if luck be with them, thirty cents an hour" (330).[6] The day worker Min in Petry's *The Street* does not trade her labor at the Bronx Slave Market but is nonetheless reminiscent of the black women alluded to in Baker and Cooke's article. Ground down by "Years and years" of "work, work, work" for a succession of "madams" who are "openly contemptuous" of her and treat her "as though she were a deaf, dumb, blind thing completely devoid of understanding" (126-27), Min leaves home every morning, much like

the Bronx Slave Market women, "with a brown-paper bag" containing "her work clothes—a faded house dress and a pair of old shoes" (351).

Moreover, a number of African American creative writers concerned themselves with the gap between the rebellious interior consciousness of domestic workers and the outward servility they were compelled to perform for their employers. In a discussion of Gwendolyn Brooks's Hattie Scott poems from *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), Stacy I. Morgan invokes James Scott's term "hidden transcript" to describe "the necessarily internalized complaint of Hattie Scott regarding her employer's sensitivity to her life beyond the job--a sentiment that her protagonist presumably is not at liberty to vocalize" (211). By contrast, such "internalized complaint[s]" could be articulated boldly and with wry humor in African American or interracial publications. Two years prior to the publication of Brooks's collection, Langston Hughes's Madam Alberta K. Johnson made her first appearance in four poems published in *Common Ground*, the organ of the Common Council for American Unity founded to "create among the American people unity and mutual understanding," to "overcome intolerance and discrimination," and to assist immigrants and their descendants with the "special problems of adjustment" (Jackson 123). In the first of the poems, "Madam's Past History," Hughes describes how Alberta became a domestic worker after losing her business during the Depression. In "Madam and her Madam," Alberta recounts her response to her mistress's claim to love her:

> I said, Madam,
> That may be true—
> But I'll be dogged
> If I love you! (90, lines 21-24)

A similar strategy—punchlines reported as having been delivered by the domestic worker to her employer—is in evidence in Alice Childress's "Conversation from Life" columns, which foreground the experiences of a live-out domestic called Mildred. These were published from 1951 to 1955 in Paul Robeson's monthly newspaper, *Freedom*. After the demise of the paper and the collection of its columns in book form in 1956, the entire series was republished, with additional columns, in the *Baltimore Afro-American* from 1956 to 1960. In reality, it is perhaps unlikely that an African American domestic worker would feel emboldened to address a white employer with such irreverence. However, it is clear from the many letters that Childress received that the columns facilitated a kind of symbolic wish fulfillment on the part of any reader who was a domestic worker, prompting thoughts of "what I would have said if I could" or "what I thought but could not say."[7]

While the readers of *Common Ground*, *Freedom*, and the *Baltimore Afro-American* no doubt admired and laughed at the audacity of Hughes's and Childress's fictional domestic workers, the readership of *The New Yorker*—white, middle-class, and much more likely to be employers rather than domestic workers themselves—necessitated the deployment of a different, but equally effective, set of rhetorical strategies compared with those seen in the work of Hughes, Childress, and others. For instance, instead of revealing the interior consciousness of the domestic worker to a sympathetic African American readership, Petry's story makes the internal life of the butler, John Forbes, entirely inscrutable to its (black) first-person narrator and, by extension, to its predominantly white readership. Moreover, by assuming and parodying the tone, style and affectations of a typical *New Yorker* "help" story, Petry enacts her own literary version of the cakewalk in "Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean?" One important issue to consider is whether *New Yorker* readers would have missed the subtlety of Petry's critique, a question also raised about the slavery-era cakewalk. According to some former slaves' accounts of the dance form, the white masters were

entirely unaware that they were being mocked. Indeed, as late as 1969, Ralph Ellison described white folks looking on their cakewalking slaves and thinking "they were being flattered by imitation . . . while missing completely the fact that before their eyes a European cultural form was becoming Americanized, undergoing a metamorphosis through the mocking activity of people partly sprung from Africa" (685). For Sundquist, however, "it seems unlikely that many masters missed the satire on their own manners" (278). By the same token, by burlesquing the style of *New Yorker* "help" fiction, Petry invites the (predominantly white) readers of the magazine—which, after all, encouraged a form of readerly engagement attuned and receptive to irony and self-satire—to identify and acknowledge the powerful assumptions around race and class that define their own real and fictional engagements with domestic workers.

From "Fat Sleek Magazines" to *The New Yorker*

Petry's work prior to "Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean?" evinces a keen interest in the relationship between domestic work and glossy magazines. In her third novel, *The Narrows* (1953), the leisure time enjoyed by a white woman named Lola Bullock, time she spends reading *Vogue,* is facilitated by the maid and the laundress and the "three-times-a-week heavy cleaning woman" (48-49) whom she and her husband employ—and whose Social Security her husband resentfully pays—in their home (370).[8] Indeed, while Lola admires "the most marvelous photograph" of an "Old colored washerwoman" in *Vogue*, she demonstrates little or no awareness that her freedom to read the magazine and to appreciate aesthetically the photograph are facilitated by the actual labor of the laundress (and the other domestic workers) whom she and her husband employ (47). Magazine culture and domestic work are also juxtaposed in *The Street*. Lutie Johnson works for two years as a live-in domestic in the home of the white Chandler family of Lyme, Connecticut, leaving her unemployed husband

to take care of their son back in New York. (Lutie returns to New York after the breakdown of her marriage, which she attributes partly to her long absences from their home.) While working for the Chandlers, Lutie "had learned all about Country Living. She learned about it from the pages of the fat sleek magazines Mrs. Chandler subscribed for and never read. *Vogue, Town and Country, Harper's Bazaar, House and Garden, House Beautiful*. Mrs. Chandler didn't even bother taking them out of their wrappings when they came in the mail." Mrs. Chandler gives Lutie not only the unopened magazines but also her hand-me-down clothes. While elsewhere in the novel Lutie's susceptibility to the seductive power of advertisements is apparent, she performs a small act of rebellion in accepting her mistress's "Designed for Country Living" clothes that were likely advertised in *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*: she passes them on to her father's girlfriend, deriving "ironic pleasure" from knowing the "beautiful clothes "would be showing up nightly in the gin mill at the corner of Seventh Avenue and 110th Street" (50).

Juxtaposing a white employer (in *The Narrows*) with an African American domestic worker (in *The Street*) highlights the gulf between the consumers (if not readers) of "the fat sleek magazines" and their employees. Stylistically, too, magazines are important to *The Street.* In his (for the most part laudatory) 1946 review of Petry's first novel, Bucklin Moon, literary editor at Doubleday, writes: "It seemed almost as though two people had collaborated on the book, one of them a sincere and honest writer, the other a slick-magazine technician with a completely mechanical heart and mind." The subplot constructed around Lutie's aspirations to be a nightclub singer is, according to Moon, "as banal and contrived as anything that ever appeared in the slicks." It is worth noting that the term *slick* is employed simply to distinguish particular kinds of magazines from others based on the paper on which they were printed. In other words, while hierarchies existed within the category "slick magazines," they were emphatically *not* pulp magazines. Moreover, despite the negative

inflection Moon gives to these assertions, the claim that Petry has it within her power "to be a vital force within [the] protest movement" or to become "a popular writer who, within the taboos of marketability, will find success almost too easy" (194) acknowledges the sheer breadth and flexibility of her literary style, a flexibility that is realized as her literary cakewalk in "Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean?"[9]

In *The Writer's Book*, a 1950 anthology to which Petry herself contributed an essay, Paul Gallico wrote a piece titled "How to Write for the Slicks." He advised the following: "The episode, the anecdote, the quasi-dramatic moment buttered up with psychiatric schmaltz and presented between buns of sophisticated and almost unintelligible prose will get you by no editorial portal but *The New Yorker*" (126). For Gallico,

> *The New Yorker* is unique in that it specializes in literary fragments masquerading under the guise of short stories which they are not, while the big, high-paying well-known slicks demand complete and finished tales that come fully equipped with beginning, middle and end, a theme, conflict, development and conclusion which leaves the reader, if not wholly satisfied according to his nature and temperament, at least in possession of all the facts. (126-27)

Perhaps Petry took note of Gallico's comments given that, eight years later, she published a story that perfectly replicated the conventions of *The New Yorker* story at that historical moment. Ben Yagoda, author of a comprehensive history of *The New Yorker*, summarizes the preoccupations of the magazine's fiction from 1952 to 1962, claiming that it evinces a "gentility bordering on blandness, with not infrequent excursions into the out-and-out dull." "The genre that predominated," he continues, "was reminiscence, the locale Irish (followed by English, and then American southern), the authorial gender female" (282). The gendered nature of Yagoda's critique—the implication that women writers were often "out-and-out

dull"—should not go unchallenged. However, the slippage between "reminiscence" and "fiction" is also very telling, for it is precisely this elision that the magazine both exploited and disavowed in the period Yagoda discusses. On 7 June 1954, Katharine White rejected a story by Mary Nash—whose published *New Yorker* stories are discussed in greater detail below—on the basis that "the reader cannot be sure at first whether this is an actual reminiscence or a piece of fiction." Where the first-person mode of narration is used, according to White, "it is necessary, especially in a magazine like The New Yorker, that uses so much reminiscence, to establish the 'I' right near the start as having another name than that of the author. This is of course not at all hard to do." The fact that Petry's first-person narrator in "Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean?" is unnamed appears, therefore, to be a deliberate attempt to blur the boundary between reminiscence and fiction, a strategy that facilitates Petry's interrogation of both forms.

The magazines that arrive at the Chandler home in *The Street*—*Vogue, Town and Country*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *House and Garden*, and *House Beautiful*—are not equivalent to one another, nor to *The New Yorker*, in terms of either their target readership or typical content. *The New Yorker*, grouped with *The Smart Set*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Esquire* (and, often, *American Mercury* and *Life,* in its pre-1936 iteration), is usually categorised as a "smart" or "quality" magazine. According to Faye Hammill and Karen Leick, such magazines "combined—in varying proportions—literary material with reviews, current affairs, humour, and (in some of the magazines) fashion stories, visual art, and photography" (176). One way of discerning *The New Yorker*'s distinctiveness from some of the other slick magazines—smart or otherwise—cited above is to consider its representation of domestic workers at mid-century. In the decade following World War II, according to Mary F. Corey, "a significant portion" of *The New Yorker*'s fiction, poetry, and cartoons was "devoted to the consolations and complications of living with help" (124-25). However, neither mass-market magazines

(such as the *Saturday Evening Post, Look, Life*, or *Reader's Digest*) nor elite publications (such as *Vogue* or *Town and Country*) revealed a preoccupation with "the help" equivalent to that evident in *The New Yorker* in the postwar years. In the first instance, this was because the magazines' readers were not affluent enough to employ domestic workers; in the second, readers were so accustomed to having servants that their presence did not elicit comment: they moved "silently through that world, fluffing pillows, serving tea, sporting livery, and opening limousine doors" (Corey 128).

The difference between the attitudes of *Vogue* and *The New Yorker* to "the help," for instance, is exemplified by a *New Yorker* "Notes and Comment" piece of 5 October 1946. Here, *The New Yorker* mocks a recent feature in *Vogue* in which a woman whose maid has failed to show up to work is enjoined to wrap herself up in a wool throw priced at $15.98. The throw "won't do the housework for you, but it will keep you warm, calm, and relaxed on the couch." Noting that if the woman decided to try her hand at housework herself, she might "toppl[e] over into the bathtub in mid-scrub" because she would be "already exhausted by carrying around her 328-page copy of *Vogue*," *The New Yorker* writers assert a subtle, but nonetheless clear, distinction between their own and *Vogue*'s readers: a *New Yorker* reader is not so economically privileged that she would purchase an expensive throw rather than do her own housework in her maid's absence. A *Vogue* reader was securely prosperous while *New Yorker* readers managed "*precariously* upper-middle-class households" (Corey 136; emphasis added). This difference accounts for the sheer number of what Corey calls "Maids Say the Darndest things" pieces in *The New Yorker* at midcentury (126). Servants who "broke things, committed malapropisms, and attempted to emulate their bosses" bespeak an anxiety on the part of *New Yorker* readers "to protect its symbols from being borrowed or understood by its servants" (128). If the gulf between employer and servant were not relatively narrow, the relationship between the two would have been treated with greater nonchalance.

The particularity of *The New Yorker*'s attitude toward domestic workers also is due to competing aspects of the magazine's self-conception. On the one hand, as Corey observes, "having servants demonstrated one aspect of sophistication," a key aspiration of the magazine; *The New Yorker* was also, however, committed to "upholding egalitarian principle" (125). The impossibility of reconciling these two divergent attitudes accounts for the anxieties, paradoxes, and inconsistencies that underwrite *The New Yorker*'s representation of domestic workers in the decade after World War II. One prevalent type of "help" piece in this period is the humorous story or anecdote, in which "the fact of having help was dispatched with jaunty irony, as if the act of laughing at privilege somehow democratized it." However, because the "delicate etiquette of postwar relations had the effect of suppressing virtually any comedic writing about black servants and their white employers," in most *New Yorker* pieces concerning domestic help in the North, "the servants were white" (126).[10] (Indeed, the works I discuss below featuring white employers and African American servants are all set in the South; Petry's story must be one of very few stories published by the magazine that features a black domestic worker employed by a Northern white family.) African American domestic workers do feature prominently in a variation on one subgenre of "help" pieces that Corey identifies in *The New Yorker*: stories that focus specifically on "the pain of awakening to class differences" in narratives of "nanny love" or "nanny love lost." These "coming-of-age stories" are concerned with "the servants who had ruled over [the author's/narrator's] seamless childhood worlds" and feature a "tragic dénouement" in which the child or adolescent is "forced to confront the fact of a family retainer's humanity, and concurrently the existence of social class" (134). Another iteration of this scenario positioned African American servants as vehicles for the *bildung* of the white child or adolescent at the center of the story. These stories, many of which featured retrospective first-person narrators, typically foreground an older white self reminiscing about a younger self's transformative

encounter with an African American domestic worker, an encounter that both laments and affirms the necessity of a growing estrangement between the servant and the child who is transitioning into adulthood in a society that deems African Americans socially and racially inferior. In other words, learning that African American servants are not your friends is an essential rite-of-passage in these works.

Nash's "Jocelyn" (1955) provides one paradigmatic example of the steep learning curve to which white children or adolescents are subjected in these stories. Narrated by Lydia, looking back on her nine-year-old self, the story describes her relationship with the eponymous "young colored maid" (106). Lydia, whose parents died in a plane crash, lives with her Aunt Ginevra who was widowed young due to her husband contracting fatal septicaemia from a pin in a new shirt and has an irrational fear of germs and contagion that she passes on to her niece. Jocelyn, without seeking permission from her mistress, takes Lydia to a birthday celebration at her boarding house in the "colored section" of town (108) and, with Lydia's encouragement, borrows her mistress's brooch for the occasion. Afterwards, Lydia, fearing the health implications of having consumed cherry soda at the party and worried about the germs transmitted to the brooch through its unauthorized appropriation by Jocelyn, unburdens herself to her aunt and Jocelyn is summarily dismissed. (Lydia does, however, stop short of explaining to Aunt Ginevra why her brooch is missing.) The events precipitate Lydia's more grown-up approach to relations with "the help." With Jocelyn, she had observed a particular ritual in which she would "throw [herself] on [her] bed and wail every time [her aunt] got ready to leave the house" (106). With the new maid her aunt will hire, however, she vows to be "a real young lady. I would not love her, and I would not ask her to love me" (117).

In another Nash story, "Mrs. Cleaver, Exorcised" (1957), a first-person retrospective narrator named Martha recalls the afternoons of "tea and gossip" she used to enjoy as a

twelve-year-old in the company of her family's African American handyman, Unc, and cook, Annie (109). Her father having recently passed away, and estranged from her rather distant mother, Martha derives comfort and enjoyment from the threesome's speculations about her large country house being haunted by a former occupant, Mrs. Cleaver. The story suggests that Martha's willingness to believe in the ghost—who, not coincidentally, is a threatening maternal figure—is a consequence of her feeling unloved by her "imperturbable" mother (109), whose "stringent rule" over her daughter and the household manifests itself as a lack of warmth and affection (110). When her mother falls seriously ill from pneumonia, however, Martha's alliances shift. Instead of indulging in afternoon sessions of tea, gossip, and superstition, she commits to practicing piano out of a sense of duty to her mother. In her absence, Annie and Unc resume their conversations—which were halted during the mistress's period of hospitalisation—without her. Martha realizes that "they didn't miss [her] in the least" (125) and nor does she have any wish "to go back and join them." By the end of the story, Martha is confident in her mother's ability to admonish "any dark and tempting spirit" and that Mrs. Cleaver has been exorcised "from [her] dreams for good." Proper order has been restored: white mother and child are reconciled, and the African American domestic workers are—appropriately, the story implies—dismissed from their roles as surrogate parents to Martha. As the narrator reflects, "Already the hours I had spent with them seemed wasted" (126).

Another story, although not recounted by a first-person retrospective narrator, also bears mentioning here. In Elizabeth Spencer's "The Little Brown Girl," (1957), a white child is confronted with the cruel impossibility of friendship between white employer and black servant. Maybeth likes to spend time with the African American hired man, Jim, on her family's farm. In one of their conversations, he tells her he has an eight-year-old daughter—the title's "little brown girl"—with whom Maybeth imagines playing. Although her parents

tell her that Jim does not have a daughter, Maybeth persists in indulging her fantasies that "she and the little brown girl played together" (27). On her seventh birthday, she gives two silver dollars, a birthday gift from her father, to Jim to facilitate his purchase of a dress for his daughter so that she might be suitably attired for a meeting with Maybeth. She realizes that "She and Jim were playing that Jim had a little girl." However, "when the playing was over, Jim did not give the money back, and, of course, she did not really know that she had expected him to, so she never asked" (28). When Maybeth notices that the yellow dress Jim anticipated buying for his daughter has disappeared from the shop window, she has renewed faith that his tall tale might be true. However, back at the farm, after a wild goose chase for a "little brown girl" supposedly hiding in the bushes, Maybeth gives up her search and returns home, deeply upset, to be cradled and comforted by her mother.

Cakewalking *The New Yorker:* "Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean?"

By the time Petry's "Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean?" appeared in the magazine, then, *The New Yorker* fiction had long been attentive to "the servant problem," so much so, that the predominance of "help" stories in the magazine's pages was sometimes cited by its editors as a reason for declining a particular story. On 13 February 1950, White rejected Frances Gray Patton's factual piece, "Geneva Morning," on the basis that it was too similar to Peter Taylor's servant-preoccupied "A Wife of Nashville" (1949) and that it "falls into the category of a kind of thing we've done too often—the casual essay on servants—and we don't think the racial relationship overtones raise it out of that category." On 12 November 1956, Robert Henderson passed on Bernard Malamud's "Your Dirty Foot," writing to Malamud's agent that "Servant troubles of Americans abroad (and servant troubles of Americans at home, for that matter) are such familiar material, for us, that we feel we would want to take only stories of that sort that are particularly fresh or pointed." At first glance, we can see that Petry's story

is indeed a "fresh or pointed" take on the genre: it revises the premises of Nash's and Spencer's narratives by centralizing the experiences and memories of a black woman. Moreover, what the first-person narrator recalls is explicitly based on a non-encounter, rather than a transformative encounter, with an African American domestic worker. Formally, though, it appears to emulate the conventions of these stories, particularly in its deployment of a retrospective first-person narrator. In Nash's two stories, the retrospective first-person narrator is a reassuring presence for the (implied white) reader: she closes the gap between the insecurities of childhood or adolescence and the certainty that comes with (white) adulthood. In "Jocelyn," this transition is explicitly marked through the narration: "The truth is, as I realize now" (108). In "Mrs. Cleaver, Exorcised," it is established through the retrospective first-person narrator's shift in identification with the knowledge of childhood (superstition, which is coded as African American) and the knowledge of adulthood (logic, which is coded as white). At the beginning of the story, "I knew, and Unc knew, and Annie knew" of the existence of supernatural phenomena (109); by the end, the narrator professes faith in her mother's ability to admonish "any dark and tempting spirit to creep up the stairs no farther than her landing" (126). Mrs. Cleaver has been thoroughly exorcised. In "Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean?" the black narrator's adoption of a retrospective first-person narrative voice—her cakewalk—exposes the racialised assumptions at its heart and functions, as Richard Dyer argues about "seeing the racing of whites," to "undercu[t] the authority with which [white subjects] speak and act in and on the world" (2).

The story opens as though it is reminiscence: "One afternoon last winter, when the telephone rang in my house in Wheeling, New York, I started not to answer it." Noting that "neither that name [Forbes] nor any other is the actual one" (Petry, "Has" 41), the unnamed narrator reinforces the reader's impression that this is reminiscence.[11] As we read on, this appears to be a story about a butler, John Forbes, who was known to the narrator's family and

who, when she was nine years old, committed suicide. She vividly remembers her mother receiving a long-distance call from the man's widow, Sarah, and she "can still repeat what [her mother] said, word for word, even imitating the intonation, the inflection of her voice" (41). The story bears a passing resemblance to Richard H. Rovere's reminiscence piece, "Josephine" (1957), which appeared in *The New Yorker* the previous year. In that work, the author-narrator describes his family's sojourn in Cannes in 1953 and their hiring, notwithstanding their feeling "a certain guilt about having any domestic help," of a French maid called Josephine (48). When Josephine forges her employers' signatures in order to cash their traveller's checks, her elaborate attempts to cover her tracks eventually fail and, dismayed, she commits suicide by putting her head in the oven. However, unlike "Josephine," the tragic ending of which appears to warn liberal readers of *The New Yorker* that they should heed their instincts against hiring servants, "Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean?" positions Forbes as a kind of narrative red herring. Petry's story displaces the typical worries of both writers and readers of *New Yorker* "help" stories—the impossibility of reconciling the hiring of a domestic worker with one's liberal credentials and the proximity in class positions between employer and servant (or, alternatively, sorrow that class and racial distinctions make friendship between employer and domestic worker impossible)—in order to highlight some of these stories' most problematic assumptions. Primary among these is that the servant's life is only meaningful in so far as it relates to the white employer's (or that of his or her child). Nash's and Spencer's stories derive their dramatic poignancy by resting on this assumption. Consider, also, the powerful erasure performed by an employer's oft-repeated phrase, apparently a compliment, that a servant is "just like one of the family." Such a claim negates the domestic worker's *actual* family.[12] Ultimately, Petry's story is much less interested in Forbes's relationship with Mrs. Wingate (which is where the emphasis would fall in a typical *New Yorker* "help" story) than it is in his wife, Sarah, and the hardships she

endured as a consequence of his years of committed service. When he died, Sarah tells the narrator many years later, she "cried for three days afterward," not because of what happened to him but "because of what had happened to me. To my whole life. My whole life" (48).

The articulation, however understated, of the disappointments of Sarah's life contrasts conspicuously with the invisibility of the spouses and families of domestic workers in the pages of *The New Yorker* "help" stories, unless the spouse literally or metaphorically trespasses on the white employer's home. In Peter Taylor's "A Wife of Nashville" (1949), for example, the estranged husband of Helen Ruth's African American maid, Sarah, disturbs the tranquillity of the Lovell household when he turns up in "a drunken rage," insisting that his wife come away with him (56). While Helen Ruth succeeds in ejecting Morse from her property by threatening to call the police, the incident is a prelude to Sarah's definitive departure from the Lovells' employment just four months later. Meanwhile, John Cheever's "The Cure" (1952) describes the malaise that haunts a suburban husband after his wife leaves him, taking their three children with her. Initially nonchalant about her absence, the narrator alludes nonetheless to "a few minor symptoms of domestic disorder," one of which is returning home one night to find Maureen, the (white) maid, dead drunk: "She told me that her husband, when he was with the Army of Occupation in Germany, had fallen in love with another woman. She wept. She got down on her knees." Perturbed by the "grotesqueness" of the coincidence—his own marital troubles concurring with those of a subordinate—the narrator's resolve to maintain his separation from his wife almost weakens (18). The problem is dispatched with characteristic ease, however: Maureen is given two weeks' wages and driven home by her employer.

Several pages of "Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean?" are devoted to the narrator's visit to a dying Sarah, confirming Petry's interest in the unremarked lives of domestic workers' spouses and families. However, it is the title of the story that most provocatively

draws attention to this elision in the pages of *The New Yorker*. The significance of the title, within the fictional universe of the story, relates to one of the narrator's father's memories of Forbes: he recalls the butler cycling in Wheeling, whistling "Dora Dean," an old minstrel show tune by Bert Williams and George Walker. When Forbes marries Sarah at the age of forty, his bride is so "reasonable [a] facsimile of Dora Dean" at twenty years old that "She might well have been one of those beautiful girls in 'The Creole Show'" (43). Given this explicit connection between the title's "Dora Dean" and Sarah herself, the question "Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean?" acquires greater consequence. By posing the question "has anybody *seen* [Sarah Forbes]?"—"seen" in the sense of being aware of or acknowledging—Petry encodes a challenge to *New Yorker* readers to confront their own blindness in respect of their employees' spouses and families. Furthermore, Petry overturns the dominant form of seeing emphasised in *New Yorker* "help" stories: the white protagonist's desire to be seen—for his/her white privilege to be acknowledged—by the domestic worker. In Nash's "Jocelyn," for example, Lydia recalls attempting to elicit a reaction from Jocelyn to disrupt the inscrutability that Jocelyn has, presumably, carefully stage-managed in her role as domestic worker. Lydia notes that the maid's "brown satin face" is "serene and smooth and as resistant to impression as a rubber cushion" (106); it is "a purposeful mask" (106). She remembers with pleasure the moment she manages to disrupt the mask by catching Jocelyn look at her as the two co-conspirators make their way to Jocelyn's birthday party: "[N]ow that she had seen me—really seen me—and I had caught her at it, she could never slip away from me again behind her cloudy smile" (110).

As this example indicates, there is a suggestive connection between the visual recognition Lydia extracts from Jocelyn and other forms of control, especially narrative control. In addition to shifting the narrative focus away from Forbes and towards Sarah, "Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean?" features self-reflexively complex narrative layering that

exposes *New Yorker* stories' narratorial invasions into the lives of domestic workers and those stories' obsessive investment in establishing narrative control over their servant characters. Indeed, a precedent for this kind of intricate narrative structure was set in Petry's "white life" novel, *Country Place* (1947). Focalized through the perspective of a white pharmacist, George "Doc" Fraser, who describes events at which he was not present and relates information to which he could not have been privy, the novel draws attention, narratologically, to the extent to which white subjects attempt to dominate, control, and consolidate narrative power. As Stephanie Li argues, the novel "parodies the very construction of omniscience and the ways in which white narrative authority betrays its biases even when such biases are fully admitted" (106). Although she does not use the term "cakewalk" in her discussion of *Country Place*, Li's identification of "the novel's deft critique of the false entitlements of whiteness" (96) is suggestive of the combination of parody and critique that underwrites the literary cakewalk we see in "Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean?"

The narrator of the story concedes that she has no access to the interior life of the servant in question nor does she have any memory of him since they never met, but this does not stop her from dramatizing his life, nonetheless. The narrator admits fairly early on in the story that she "never saw Forbes." His employers, the Wingates, "stopped coming to Wheeling before [she] was born," However, based on her parents' descriptions of him, she is confident that she knows "exactly what he looked like, how he sounded when he talked, what kind of clothes he wore" (42). Indeed, the certainty of the narrator is evident in her constant affirmations of a privileged form of knowledge: "Knowing Sarah as well as I did"; "I knew a great deal about Sarah Forbes" (41); "it became common knowledge" (42); "that's how I know what Sarah was wearing" (44). Deploying a puppet analogy, the narrator speculates that Forbes "would always move exactly as he was supposed to when someone pulled the

proper strings" (42). In a subsequent description, she pictures him being "as ageless as a highly stylized figure in a marionette show—black, erect, elegantly dressed, effeminate, temperamental as a cat." If Forbes is a puppet, the narrator implies that his employer, Mrs. Wingate, pulls the strings. When Forbes marries Sarah, the ceremony takes place in an Episcopal church, the denomination observed by his employer rather than by his wife, who is Baptist. "If this had been a prizefight," the narrator observes, "I would say that Mrs. Wingate won the first round on points" (44).

Of course, more provocatively, we might conclude that it is the narrator who controls the Forbes marionette, whose life and death become a drama both scripted and observed by the narrator's younger self. For her, Forbes's death has "a kind of reality of its own--a theatrical reality" (44). At age ten, she entertained herself by pretending to watch a play based on Forbes's demise: "As narrator for an imaginary audience, I used to say 'What is he doing in this part of town in his neat black suit and his starched black shirt?'" The make-believe play ends with the curtain coming down "as a telephone rings in a drugstore miles away" (45). By yoking together the demands of Mrs. Wingate and the narrator's controlling consciousness, Petry suggests that the process of narrating a domestic worker's life effectuates a kind of subjugation comparable to the indignities often inflicted on that subject by domestic labor itself. Just as *Country Place* reveals Doc Fraser's "totalizing approach to narrative power" (Li, "Presumptions" 97), the narrator of "Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean," by mimicking the controlling consciousness of "help" stories' narrators, reveals that *New Yorker* stories are underpinned by a profoundly racialized conception of narrative authority. One of the most evocative secondhand descriptions of the butler relayed by the narrator is that, as Mrs. Wingate grew increasingly overweight, Forbes was forced to "have that white woman practically on his back" when conveying her into a car or carriage. While the narrator pictures "a lean wiry, black man carrying an enormously fat pink-and-white

woman piggyback" (43), Petry's complex narrative structure points to the colossal ideological load borne by African American domestic workers in *New Yorker* stories, casuals, and reminiscences in the years after World War II. Indeed, a section deleted from the typescript of the story, apparently by a *New Yorker* editor with the initials A. McK, is even more suggestive in this respect: "I pictured him as Atlas, a lean black Atlas, carrying on his back and [sic] enormously fat pink-and-white world who was Mrs. Wingate."

If the narrator's younger self conscripts Forbes to her own fantasy performance of his life and death, it is significant that the couple is brought together by a performance intimately bound up with the long history of black servitude. (Indeed, the continuity between the history of slavery and Forbes's current role as butler to a white family is suggested by the narrator's identification of the Wingates' summer house in Wheeling as "an exact replica of an old Southern mansion" [42].) Forbes and Sarah meet in New Haven, compete in a cakewalking competition, and are declared the winners. The narrator depicts the dance as follows:

> About fourteen couples took part, and they walked in time to music—not in a circle but in a square, with the men on the inside. The participants were always beautifully dressed, and they walked with grace and style. It was a strutting kind of walk. The test of their skill lay in the way they pivoted when they turned the corners. The judges stopped the music at intervals and eliminated possibly three couples at a time. The most graceful couple was awarded a beautifully decorated cake, so that they had literally walked to win a cake. (44)

Despite Forbes's and Sarah's expert performance of the cakewalk, however, they ultimately cannot escape the ongoing impact of white authority on their everyday lives, a situation that compels them into damaging kinds of performances that ultimately lead to their estrangement from one another. Forbes "play[s] the role of male nurse" to Mrs. Wingate when she is ill

(42). Moreover, he can cook, sew, and "act as coachman if necessary" (42). For Keith Clark, Forbes's feminine performance in service liberates him from the straitjacket of heteronormativity, but it is also reduces him to the "potentially racially demeaning [role] of male mammy" (66). When, after three weeks of marriage, Forbes abandons his marital home and returns to live with Mrs. Wingate at his employer's request, Sarah, perhaps in an attempt to challenge the white woman's hold over her husband, engages in a (failed) performance of Mrs. Wingate. She begins to call her husband Forbes, rather than John, "as though she was talking to Mrs. Wingate's butler" rather than her spouse (Petry, "DD" 46). She even puts on a lot of weight, almost as though to emulate her husband's employer: "She would have been extremely attractive," the narrator notes, "if she hadn't grown so fat" (41). After Forbes's suicide and encumbered with the mortgages on six tenement buildings he bought with his inheritance from Mrs. Wingate, Sarah is forced into another kind of destructive performance. To extract rents from her impoverished tenants during the Depression, Sarah begins "to develop a whining voice" (47).

Within the fictional universe of the short story, the cakewalk represents the pinnacle of Forbes's and Sarah's performative endeavors. Success in a dance form that parodies and subverts white authority does not, however, translate into an effective challenge to the white employer who dictates the details of their everyday lives. By contrast, Petry's literary cakewalk, smuggling an arch treatment of domestic work into a magazine known for appreciating archness, is a provocative challenge to *New Yorker* readers to interrogate their assumptions regarding race and class privilege. In her history of American dance, Megan Pugh notes the reemergence of the cakewalk in cinema (*Stormy Weather* [1943]; *Meet me in St. Louis* [1944]; *Oklahoma!* [1955]) and ballet from the 1940s onward (12-13). She observes that in Ruthanna Boris's *Cakewalk* (1951), "the ballet's most magical feat may have been making the complicated performances of race, the dark and parodic heart of the cakewalk,

disappear altogether" (28). If *Cakewalk* was the subject of a "Talk" story in 1951, a much more successful iteration of the cakewalk was delivered in the pages of *The New Yorker* seven years later. Profoundly attentive to "the dark and parodic heart of the cakewalk," Petry's "Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean?" mimics and repurposes the conventions of *The New Yorker*'s "help" fiction to encourage white readers of and fellow contributors to the magazine to really *see* their domestic workers and to think carefully about the implications of ventriloquizing their experiences.

Notes

[1] Laura Z. Hobson cites the following sales figures for Ann Petry's first two novels: *The Street* (1946) sold 47,345 in bookstores and 1.1 million in reprints; *Country Place* (1947) "did less spectacularly in its regular edition but in reprint sold 972,500" (6).

[2] Petry's generic flexibility is a particular concern in Alex Lubin's edited collection, *Revising the Blueprint: Ann Petry and the Literary Left* (2007). Lubin himself identifies Petry's "fascination with tabloid news" and "a variety of forms of 'publicity,' including, newspapers, photographs, radio" (Introduction 3); for Rachel Rubin and James Smethurst, *The Street* combines "the conventions of gothic literature and popular journalism" (33). Meanwhile, Paula Rabinowitz argues that Petry's novels "retranslat[e] cinematic trash--already a translation of literary pulp--into narrative form" (64).

[3] See, for example, Hazel Arnett Ervin and Hilary Holladay, Lubin (*Revising*), and Keith Clark.

[4] "Mother Africa" was the only story in the collection that had not previously appeared in print, but not for want of trying. Petry's agent's manuscript files reveal that the story was submitted to, and rejected by, *The New Yorker*, *Redbook*, *The Atlantic*, and *Harper's* in 1970 and 1971. See "Russell."

Bill Mullen writes that *Miss Muriel and Other Stories* was probably only the second collection of short stories published by an African American woman in the postbellum period (201). In their survey of Petry's short fiction, Rubin and Smethurst argue that her stories "form a crucial bridge between the so-called Old Left radicalisms of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s and the new black radicalisms of the 1960s and 1970s" (34). "Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean?" is mentioned as evidence that Petry "drew on the formal resources and generic conventions of popular culture in her work" (33), but the implications of this claim remain unexplored.

[5] No doubt, Petry was also aware of several decades of demeaning representations of African American domestic workers in Hollywood cinema, radio, and, in the newest medium, television. Indeed, as Petry's daughter Elisabeth Petry recalls, Petry was an avid cinemagoer and "went to virtually everything showing at the theater in Old Saybrook until [her] parents bought a television in 1966" (140). Hattie McDaniel's various roles as maids Fidelia in *Since You Went Away* (1944) and Beulah in *The Beulah Show* (1947-52) for CBS Radio, to cite just two examples, reveal the paucity of roles available to black actresses, even one in possession of an Academy Award. Meanwhile, the representation of valet and chauffeur Rochester van Jones (played by Eddie Anderson) on *The Jack Benny Show* (1932-55 on radio; 1950-65 on television) drew both accolades and criticism from black and white audiences, the media, and the NAACP. See Kathryn H. Fuller-Seeley for a discussion of how Anderson endowed his character with complexity and nuance, even if the writers of the show sometimes succumbed to oversimplification and minstrel-show-type excesses.

[6] In January 1950, Marvel Cooke revisited the subject, publishing in the *Sunday Compass* (New York) a series of five articles devoted to "where Negro women wait, in rain or shine, in bitter cold or under broiling sun, to be hired by local housewives looking for bargains in human labor" (14).

[7] In a letter to Trudier Harris, who struck up a correspondence with Alice Childress while she was researching her book, *From Mammies to Militants: Domestics in Black American Literature* (1982), Childress wrote that on publication of the "Mildred" columns, "Floods of beautiful mail came in from domestics (male and female) telling me of their own experiences."

[8] The 1935 Social Security Act excluded domestic and farm workers, who did not become entitled to Social Security until 1950. Domestic servants who worked for multiple employers were brought under coverage in 1954. See Larry DeWitt.

[9] Indeed, Petry's novels were reproduced as mass-market paperbacks under New American Library's Signet imprint: *The Street* in 1949 (abridged) and 1954 (unabridged), *Country Place* in 1950 and 1957, and *The Narrows* in 1955. For a compelling discussion of *Country Place* as pulp fiction, see Rabinowitz.

[10] It is, perhaps, for this reason that "A. McK," assigned to edit the typescript of Petry's story for publication in *The New Yorker,* inserted a racializing marker to "peg" the story for a presumed white reader. According to Ben Yagoda, one editorial dictate at the magazine was "that the circumstantial elements of a piece, fact or fiction, be identified or 'pegged' in the first one or two paragraphs" (152). Accordingly, Petry's original text became in the typescript, "His mother, Sarah Forbes, and my mother had grown up together in [inserted text: the colored section of] Bridgeport."

[11] Elisabeth Petry claims that in the Wheeling short stories, Petry "mined her family and their close friends for the characters" (79). The Forbes were, according to Elisabeth, based on Stella and Barksdale Hicks, the latter of whom did work for a white family and was "killed by a freight train in the town of Berlin" (81-82).

[12] In the titular vignette of Childress's *Like One of the Family: Conversations from a Domestic's Life* (1956), domestic worker Mildred tells her friend, Marge, about her retort to

her mistress who claimed Mildred was "*like* one of the family" (1). Informing her mistress that, after a long day discharging her various duties, she does not feel "like no weekend house guest," Mildred's well-made point that she would prefer adequate remuneration to compliments results in her being given a raise (3).

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