Yet most of the critics discussed in the scholarship to date have been based in the North. No one has discussed the film’s reception in the South, black or white. Industry reviewers repeatedly declined to say whether Imitation of Life would play well there, or even be allowed to be shown. As Susan Sontag has argued, Peola’s light skin and ability to pass as white threatened to demolish the entire concept of race as a readily visible physical trait, the very basis for discrimination against blacks. Beyond that fundamental challenge to Jim Crow practices, the film’s intimate relationship between Delilah and her white employer Bea (Claudette Colbert) — and the two mothers’ parallel heartbreak at the hands of their daughters — bordered on a positive representation of social equality between the races, something unacceptable and absurd, if not subversive, in the South of the 1930s. Moreover, Peola’s impassioned and compelling protest against racial inequality — a crucial element of the film’s appeal to some black audiences — would likely give offense as a critique of Jim Crow customs and blacks’ second-class citizenship across the country.

This essay begins to fill out the picture of southern reception of this landmark film by examining Imitation of Life’s initial rollout in Atlanta, where it was shown first in a white movie palace with black segregated seating at the very top of its balcony, and then in black-only theaters. While segregated exhibition is not news, we use Imitation of Life’s white and black Atlanta premieres as a way of understanding how Jim Crow segregation worked in the film industry’s distribution practices within a southern city. Moreover, in comparing white and black press coverage of the film, we find that different critics at the black Atlanta Daily World, as elsewhere, would praise and critique different aspects of the film. But we argue that the comments in black Atlanta’s daily newspapers arose from a distinctive southern black sensibility that was heavily influenced by the existence of a well-educated, solid black middle-class in the city.

The segregated plots and their integration

In narrative terms, one could — and newspaper advertising and critics in Atlanta often did — segregate the two plot lines of Imitation of Life into those concerning its white and black characters. The white plot follows a Horatio Alger trajectory of an impoverished white widow and single parent Bea Pullman (Colbert), who as we see in the film’s opening scene is overwhelmed by her business and maternal responsibilities — bathing daughter Jessie before nursery school, cooking breakfast, and handling business calls about the maple syrup she sells. As Jessie (Rochelle Hudson) grows, Bea is utterly devoted to her and spoils her. Only when Bea becomes wealthy through the mass production of pancake batter mix does she allow herself to fall in love with ichthyologist (marine scientist) Stephen Archer (Warren William). Ironically, while home from boarding school for a visit, Jessie spends a great deal of time with Stephen and, since Stephen and Bea keep their romance a secret from her, falls in love with him. In a grand gesture typical of maternal melodrama, an anguished Bea ultimately cancels her engagement with Stephen, anticipating that Jessie would always resent their union. She surrenders her romantic happiness — a sacrifice magnified by the loveless nature of her previous marriage to Jessie’s father — so that nothing comes between her and her daughter.

In the film’s extended opening sequence, Bea takes in an African-American single mother Delilah (Louise Beavers), whose story constitutes the film’s black plot (the fate of Delilah’s husband is not specified). Delilah arrives at Bea’s back door by accident and finds her unable to juggle all her responsibilities. She insists on joining Bea’s household as a live-in domestic in return for room and board for herself and daughter Peola (played as an adult by Fredi Washington). Parallel to Bea’s anguish with Jessie, the