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Integrating the Narrative: Ellen Douglas's *Can't Quit You Baby* and the Sub-Genre of the Kitchen Drama

Jacques Pothier

Ellen Douglas's 1988 novel *Can't Quit You, Baby* could be seen as part of a series of classic narratives of the South foregrounding the most common form of employment for black women in the South after emancipation and through the 1960s: housekeeping.¹ Before Douglas, Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1926), *Go Down, Moses* (1941), Carson McCuller's *The Member of the Wedding* (1946), Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mocking Bird* (1960) and of course most recently fellow Mississippian Kathryn Stockett's record-breaking best-seller *The Help* (2009) --to take only the most famous examples-- have staged the figure of the selfless black housekeeper. While she ignores the demands of her own family, the black servant is faultlessly patient, enduring, devoted to a white family riddled with tensions, grief and misery, to the point of invisibility. As Sharon Monteith has pointed out,

Ironically, segregation in Southern society had prevented blacks from being able to share the space allotted to whites under Jim Crow, yet all the time black women continued to share that most intimate of white spaces, the home. The domestic was deemed to safely occupy this space, since she was objectified as having no context outside of the family's requirements. (Monteith 107)

In these novels, the kitchen is seemingly a sanctuary of human warmth and good sense, but the housekeeper is definitely the "supporting cast", the other scene to the main scene of life.

This "kitchen-plot" is less secondary in Fannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life*, a novel (1933) and film (1934) that focuses on Bea Pullman, a white widow, and her black housekeeper, Delilah Johnson. Bea's financial situation brings her very close to Delilah and her daughter Peola, who become like family to her. Bea comes up with the idea of using Delilah's delicious pancake recipe to open a restaurant, in which she makes the black woman a (very) minor partner. The business is so profitable that she sets up a successful pancake formula corporation, using the image of Delilah as an Aunt-Jemima-like figure. Today the figure of meek Delilah devoting herself completely to Bea Pullman who basically stole her patent is difficult to bear, but in the 1930s just picturing the closeness between black and white women could be considered by many as boldly progressive.

In the first page of her 1988 novel *Can't Quit You Baby*, Ellen Douglas offers the image of two women, Cornelia and Tweet, a Southern lady and her black house-keeper, busy at work in the kitchen of a house. They are making preserves: departing from the image of Jim Crowism and deep racism which is attached to the South in the 1960s the reader is presented with an image of friendship and equality at work—admittedly, it is not the public sphere, but the private sphere of the kitchen to which women have been affected, pointing to a more globally widespread segregation. The separation of genders is so general that it is in most cases taken for granted: in most of the world, the kitchen is the women's realm.

¹ For a more detailed overview of these narratives, see Sharon Monteith's chapter "Across the Kitchen Table: Establishing the Dynamics of Interracial Friendship" in her *Advancing Sisterhood? Interracial Frindhps in Contemporary Southern* (Athens, Ga: University of Georgia Press, 2000); and Rebecca Sharpless, "Servants and Housekeepers," *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, 13: Gender* (UNC Press, 2009), 246-251

Don't these *kitchen* plots suggest that the segregation of gender roles has replaced the segregation of races? Incidentally, where are the men?

Douglas's novel is not played entirely among women, as is, for instance, Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*. Jan Shoemaker has noted that "Tweet's whole life is a series of threats to her selfhood by patriarchs, both black and white" (92). The novel presents women of all races as insecure, barred from agency, under the constant threat of male predators. With the exception of Julia/ Tweet's grandfather, all males turn out weak, absent, treacherous, unaccountable, shiftless. Both Cornelia and Tweet's fathers left their wives and children to fend for themselves—not a rare pattern in Southern fiction, when one thinks of Scarlet O'Hara's destiny. The innocuous female complicity might be viewed as an index of an at last peaceful and decent relationship, breaking the legacy of silence that have prevailed across color lines.

Could it be so, though, in the nineteen-sixties, in which the conspicuous persona of the author insists that we should never ignore that the story is set? The kitchen has a special history in the South, and Douglas reminds us right away that this anthropological and political significance lives on:

There is no getting around in these stories of two lives that the black woman is the white woman's servant. There would have been no way in that time and place--the nineteen-sixties and seventies in Mississippi--for them to get acquainted, except across the kitchen table from each other, shelling peas, peeling apples, polishing silver. (Douglas 3-4)

This is possible because the South's class system, i.e. segregation, has maintained a huge gap between white incomes and black incomes. The kitchen in the house is an avatar of the plantation kitchen, formerly separate from the big house and therefore segregated from it, where the black cook held her authority, and close to where Uncle Remus could run his house of fiction, holding authority over the little boy in the surrogate realm of the imagination.

In his "memoir", Henry Louis Gates devotes a chapter to the kitchen (chapter 4: "In the Kitchen"), emphasizing that this room is the black women's privileged area, the locus of their identity as women. But, Douglas shows, even this is no longer true. *Integrating*—if one may use the term lightly in the context of the 1960s South--the kitchen in the house does not mean that the black maid becomes "part of the family", but that now even the black woman's authority on the marginal space of the kitchen was challenged. Douglas signals this invasion in ironic exaggeration, emphasizing that Cornelia has taken over like a usurping queen: "Every weekday morning at nine-thirty Julia appears at the door of the room where Cornelia prefers to hold court. Cornelia is an accomplished cook and the kitchen is her throne room." Cornelia wears her cloak of indifference like a queen, with a constant "distant, faintly embarrassed smile." (70) Cooking has always been for her a strategy of limited agency to pretend control and to ignore the serious issues with her family and the world: a son's affair with a married woman; his kids, wild as stray cats; Vietnam and its atrocities, reaching into the Southern backwaters. Mastery is denied to the black woman whenever her boss decides to treat her as a friend and not an employer. By joining her housekeeper in the kitchen and taking over, Cornelia, the southern lady, has incidentally invaded the Mammy's place (or Aunt Jemima's?) to meet her in her area of excellence, but in doing so she is also depriving her of the limited sanctuary of agency that Southern tradition secured—or, to echo the first scene, "preserved" for her.

In an essay based on Ellen Douglas's novel as well as on Alice Childress's *Like One in the Family: Conversations from a Domestic's Life*, Sonya Lancaster argues that

[t]hese two literary representations of cross-racial relationships show white women profiting from the oppressive circumstances of the black women they employ--often forcing a one-sided intimacy on them--and black women expressing their discomfort at the indignity of their positions. (Lancaster 113)

This is translated by Cornelia's tactical deafness--being deaf, she hears through a hearing-aid that she can turn up or down, and even off, so that she can consider herself a good listener even when she chooses not to hear. In *Imitation of Life* Delilah Johnson delighted Bea Pullman with her gifts of pancakes; in *Can't Quit You Baby* Tweet usually arrives "bearing a gift" (6)--flowers, fruit, tomatoes, stories in the winter, which Cornelia accepts as decorations, not testimonies--aesthetic supplements that do not displace her self-delusion about the way the world works, not pieces of social knowledge. Among the stories that Tweet brings, on the day when the story begins, she brings one on Wayne Jones, a white man who has just died.

Wayne Jones looks like a stereotypical Southern white male--putting up his wife on a sexless pedestal of purity, while he is openly promiscuous with his female black helps. Tweet used to work as a cook in Wayne Jones' restaurant, and she tells Cornelia how he used to chase her around the kitchen, so much that she at last complained to Mrs. Jones, who had always been friendly to her. But Mrs Jones was no help: she told her to "make allowances for him". Cornelia cannot believe it, but right in this first conversation in the novel, Tweet has obliquely made her point to her: in the kitchen world, in dire straits, Cornelia's reaction would probably not have been very different from powerless Mrs Wayne's, and so clearly the gendered solidarity between women, black and white, cannot trump race. The "peculiar sisterhood" of Minrose Gwin's book on *Black and White Women in the Old South* (1985) lives on: "for the most part... color lines blinded white women to the humanity of their black sisters and built in black women massive layers of hatred for those fair ladies who would not, or could not, see their suffering." (109; quoted by Jacobsen 28)

As Sharon Monteith has noted, Douglas's narrator is intensely aware that she may fall victim to "clichéd characterizations" (Monteith 114) Blurring the distinction between narrator and author, Douglas inserts frequent metafictional notes in which she confronts the tensions between narrative conventions and historical accuracy, echoing in the reader's response the kind of exposure to uncertainty that is the white woman's experience in the diegesis. Whereas, as we have seen, the first paragraphs of the novel could work as the "establishing shot" for a familiar kitchen-drama movie, the narrator's comments and, more interestingly, her style simultaneously diffract the reader's response:

A safe, secure fictional world is never created in *Can't Quit You Baby*. The opening paragraphs, written in the continuous present tense, immediately crack the reader's frame of reference that expects a storytelling past. The two women are staged dramatically, posited as an idea, as subjects for fictional exploration: "The two women are sitting at right angles to each other at the kitchen table on a sunny July morning in the nineteen-sixties" (3). The narrator goes on to examine her subjects, both politically and linguistically: "Servant? Mistress? They would be uneasy with these words, and so am I" (Monteith 118).

Douglas thus suggests that the issues of class, gender and race in the South are not contained within a framework of social and legal injustice in a given place and time--

the segregated South—but also dwells in the language in which the people involved figured out their relationships, or we look back on them nowadays.

The whole novel is full of moments of fake stillness, which the author symbolizes by the allegory of the young white water-skier gliding on the surface of an ox-bow lake, as she is suddenly caught in the grip of a tangle of water moccasins. For the Southern lady, shielded from unpleasant realities by a deafness which is not just physical, life is fair. Before her husband died, she lived in his shadow, here “to love, honor, obey and occasionally amuse her husband, to bring up his children and manage his household.” She thinks of herself as beyond common bigotry, and she cannot even see the unpleasant secrets of her own family. All is quiet on the surface, but the old monsters still lurk below, and they are hungry². Patricia Yaeger has noticed how southern women writers tend to picture white anxieties about the changing South as catastrophic. The title of her book, *Dirt and Desire*, suggests that they seem to think of them in terms which are also related to gender roles: change is something which is untidy, not neat. In *Can't Quit You, Baby*, Ellen Douglas revisits the relationship between races, but only thanks to a change in their situation which forces them to interact in a way for which life has not provided them with a template. For Cornelia, the white woman, the art of turning up or down her hearing aid to monitor her awareness of the world, a strategy to ignore the tangled moccasins of contemporary chaos, stops working. A process begins which results in a new form of interaction, if not necessarily cooperation.

Tweet tells various stories to illustrate what segregation means—how she was deprived of a plot of land she had inherited from her grandfather which was crucially situated as an enclave in a white man's estate³. Naturally the white landlord, whose name was ironically Mr Lord, was a friend of an attorney, also the vice president of the bank he did his business with. The attorney supported the sensible decision: “the land would be more economical to work and the Negroes could move to Chicago” (112)—and so the will was broken. “Nigras,” Douglas explains, “like children and women, simply have to be managed for their own good.” The courthouse is where white male adult power is enforced—where property taxes are paid for careless landowners who do not realize that they owe taxes, and so ownership of land is transferred to those who pay the taxes... Tweet learnt resilience and has a shrewd sense of how the white world works, and the book confirms that black domestics know in more detail the world of their employers than the white women they work for do theirs.

One day in spring 1968, Cornelia goes over to Tweet's place to let her know how much she sympathizes with what she just knows is her grief over Martin Luther King's assassination. Note that: she just *knows*. This advantage warrants her dominant status. This could be seen as another predatory invasion of the black woman's private space, and Tweet's immediate coldness in response suggests that at first it is just that—once more, empowerment comes with knowledge, even if it is the knowledge of someone else's grief. The narrative makes it obvious that the white woman is performing her number with more narcissism than genuine sympathy,

² Patricia Yaeger thinks this scene is emblematic of southern women's writing, as she takes this scene as emblematic in the first chapter of her book *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990* (University of Chicago Press, 2000).

³ Sharon Monteith notes that even though *Can't Quit You Baby* is not “Black literature,” the story of the grandfather appropriates features from this tradition that Toni Morrison has identified in her essay “Rootedness: the Ancestor as Foundation.” (Monteith 121)

going through the motion and the text of the bereavement call as a kind of genre scene, showing off her expertise. She speaks: "I am sorry", but the black woman does not nod, declines to meet her gaze (99)⁴. The white woman's eyes roam over the black family's lounge, all the objects which cram the room so full that in a moment she will have to stumble out in order not to be sick: once more, the discomfort is channelled through gendered obsessions. Cornelia's world is quiet, ordered, muffled by her controlled deafness, the "myopia with each member of her family" (Monteith 117): she "is adept at creating imaginary people and imaginary lives. Her children, her husband, her closest friends, are all imaginary people. With her expectations she tempts them to be perfect" (Douglas 129). To her, Tweet's world, in which she constantly has to struggle with the various agents of her oppression, is a shock: the clutter, the untidiness is unbearable, like a jumble of words failing to make sense as a coherent narrative, a sentence in which subordinate clauses do not find their place in reference to the main clause.

Cornelia looks distractedly around her at overstuffed chairs, a sofa piled with not-yet-folded wash, a glass-topped coffee table littered with ashtrays, old bills, magazines, a Bible, discarded jewelry. There is a barrette, a twisted ropelike circlet in a pin tray, a pair of earrings and matching necklace on top of a stack of magazines. (99)

In these first sentences of the description, the objects appear juxtaposed, piled up, bulky, unnecessarily multiplied. But the gaze learns to digest, to organize, to familiarize, while the sentences become better organized: "In the chimney opening that once housed a coal grate a gas space heater glows and pulses as if even on this April day there must be a fire against the encroaching chill." As the description unfolds, the gas heater is thus reframed within a metaphoric plot, where the rubble in the house becomes the pathetically fallacious projection of its inhabitants' surmised emotions—actually the emotions of the visitor. The emotions are mediated by the visitor's memories—hence the use of the present perfect: "Cornelia has been in Tweet's house many times, has sat and visited in this living room, but now she gasps at the stifling air, feels the wall closing in on her like the walls in 'The Pit and the Pendulum. The metaphoric room finishes its mutation to make sense as a post-modern intertextual plot, drawn from one of the classics of Southern literature. The white Southern discourse (and its clichés) has momentarily overcome the unpleasant rubble of clueless poverty.

But there was a castaway gem of meaning in this rubble, which Cornelia and the reader will ignore for the moment. The barrette--the first object catching Cornelia's eye—should indeed have been arresting to a more attentive eye: at the end of the novel, when Tweet's illness has humbled Cornelia to the point where she can show real compassion, Tweet explains to her that she *had* stolen the barrette out of hatred for her employer: the barrette, formerly a dangling participle wanting its function in a sentence—"There is a barrette, a twisted rope like circlet in a pin tray, a pair of earrings"—suddenly recovers its meaning in the grammar of feelings. So Cornelia's cognitive victory on her visit after King's assassination is a Pyrrhic one.

In order to place this process firmly in the realm of inter-racial relations rather than gender relations, a look at Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust* may be rewarding. This novel provides another example of the trope of the white person's visit to the black person's

⁴ Theresa James estimates that "a connection is still made" on this occasion (James 82)-- but this connection is not documented in the passage; the progress is limited to the shock for Cornelia.

place, except that in this case the white boy has been invited to do so by the black man who rescued him from a frozen river. In the first chapter of Faulkner's 1948 novel, the white boy Chick Mallison is equally confronted to the mind-numbing disorder he found about Lucas Beauchamp's house, and the narrative follows him as he attempts to create the epistemic connections which allow him to escape destabilization--the attempts to connect are italicized by me in this passage from a longer page, but it could be worth noting that the process of healing of the white boy's narcissistic wound is still going on many years later:

the paintless picket fence whose paintless, latchless gate the man kneed open still without stopping or once looking back and [...] strode on into the yard. It *would have been* grassless even in summer; *he could imagine it*, completely bare, no weed no spring or anything, the dust each morning swept by some of Lucas' womenfolks with a broom made of willow switches bound together, into an intricate series of whorls and overlapping loops which as the day advanced *would* be gradually and slowly defaced by the droppings and the *cryptic* three-toed prints of chicken *like (remembering it now at sixteen) a terrain in miniature out of the age of the great lizards ...*

The description runs for a good page, but concludes with a quaint temporary conclusion which neatly situates the black man's shabby quarters in the comfortable certainty of architectural consistency--it is back to the classics, quite literally:

[...] beyond this the house itself, gray and weathered and *not so much paintless as independent of and intractable to paint so that the house was not only the one possible continuation of the stern untended road but was its crown too as the carven ailanthus leaves are the Greek column's capital.*⁵

Chick Mallison first thought he could get away with the puny gesture of charity that whites had always used to dispose of their guilt towards blacks--offering some small change as a propitiatory gift, which his host refuses. He is then drawn into a quest for truth that will eventually prove the black man suspected of murder to be innocent. In this quest, an alliance is concluded between the black man (innocent of murder), a white child and his black playmate, and an old lady—the three victims of the Southern patriarchal order.

Can't Quit You, Baby attempts to show how a full relationship with the past will have to outgrow the compassion for misery. It involves a revisionist process.⁶ The comparatively straightforward, consistent primary narrative breaks, like the smooth surface of the lake in the book's recurrent metaphor:

Do you remember when I wrote, early on, that Cornelia was like a dancer, a skier-skimming over the surface of her life as if it were a polished floor or a calm surface lake? For twenty-five years now she's managed to fly across the steely water under the bright sky--although sometimes, fleetingly, rising early from forgotten nightmare, she may have thought (but only for a moment) that the flight was an escape. (Douglas 127)

At the end of the novel, Cornelia goes through the process of discovery which brings her close to Tweet, who had a stroke and has lost the use of her voice. Eventually Cornelia

⁵ William Faulkner. *Intruder in The Dust*, 1948: *Novels 1942-1954* (New York: Library of America, 1994), 289. Emphasis mine.

⁶ Ellen Douglas foregrounded this process in *Truth: Four Stories I Am Now Old Enough to Tell*, a book in which she revised stories told in previous fiction (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books. 1998).

will have to accept to be destabilized. She connects the visit to Tweet after King's death to another scene, another occasion when she had visited Tweet's home in 1967 to help her take care of her mother's dying husband, and in the confrontation of the two scenes she now sees the "clutter, disorder, pierced through with sorrow and mystery" of Tweet's life that she had for so long been putting away like her preserves (Douglas 202). Only in the working of her memory, when Tweet's stroke has confined her to silence, can she revisit their relationship to discover a bond of friendship that race had kept unconscious. She turns up her hearing aid, notices that Tweet is humming to herself. Singing. Blues or gospel. Now Cornelia is the one who can talk. At this point, the narrator confesses that she too might be skiing over a knot of moccasins--hasn't she been struggling in vain with the issue of race? Anyway Cornelia takes care of the black woman, massaging her as black Delilah did to white Bea in *Imitation of Life*.

It is interesting that Cornelia's awakening comes as she has decided to take a trip to New York in winter after the trauma of her husband's dramatic death. For the first time in her life, she is taking a risk, taking a chance. In this city she finds herself attractively exposed. In an open memory of James Joyce's "The Dead", it is beginning to snow, and this snow, also reminiscent of the white snow-tide hemming in Bigger Thomas's space in Richard Wright's *Native Son*, prompts the recollection of the stories that Julia/Tweet told her, the stories that she was paying merely superficial attention to—she realizes that she needed her: now she is listening. As in Joyce's story, she also remembers now her first lover, that had been erased behind the memory of her husband. She is reviving the narrative, finding a place in it, and so she ceases to be an invisible woman.

The narrator of the novel repeatedly insists on her difficulty to tell the story of Tweet from her own point of view as a white woman-writer. Isn't she led, for instance, to idealize Tweet as an icon of endurance (as Faulkner had done), in compensation for a patriarchal society's double oppression of Tweet's kind, both as woman and as black? To exaggerate the efficiency of her double concession to counter this situation of oppression? The tensions born of race, class and gender do not surface in words easily, as if weighed down by untold reverence for the actors of the past, the forefathers, that Tweet says are still with her beyond their deaths. Only by killing the ghosts of the past is some sense of redemption obtained, so that a more balanced friendship becomes negotiable, in the musical language of the blues song that gives the novel its title: "I love you, baby, but I sure do hate your ways." An outcome to the tangle of race, class and gender which only comes about through the decisive introduction of a fourth paradigm: age—that Douglas foregrounds in other works as an important agent to reach *Truth*. Could this happy ending of sorts be another traditional white woman's classic pattern, integrating the narrative after all?

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