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From a white woman's kitchen into a black woman's  
living room: a reconfiguration of the servant/served paradigm  
in Ellen Douglas's *Can't Quit You, Baby*<sup>1</sup>

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Z białej kuchni do czarnego salonu: zmiana relacji służba–pani domu  
w powieści Ellen Douglas *Can't Quit You, Baby*

From colonial times, through the Jim Crow era, and up until the Civil Rights movement the domestic kitchen was a battleground in the American South<sup>2</sup>. White women attempted to wield their power over first their black slaves and then domestic servants, while black women reciprocated with covert acts of resistance against white domination in the domestic spaces connected with food production and consumption. Doreen Massey posits that “[a] large component of the identity of that place called home derived precisely from the fact that it had always in one way or another been open, constructed out of movement, communication, social relations which always stretched beyond it”<sup>3</sup>. Hence, the

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<sup>1</sup> The present article offers a much extended and revised analysis of Ellen Douglas's no-vel *Can't Quit You, Baby* (1989) which I have already briefly carried out in “A Culinary Journey Across the Color Line: Foodways and Race in Southern Literature and Motion Pictures”. *Unsteadily Marching On: The US South in Motion*, ed. C. Gonzáles Groba, Valencia 2013, s. 101–110. Due to the scope of my original research (in “A Culinary Journey...” I also analyzed Fannie Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*, Walker Percy's *The Last Gentleman*, John Sayles's movie *Passion Fish* and *Driving Miss Daisy* directed by Bruce Beresford), *Can't Quit You, Baby* received a less in-depth evaluation. While the ‘nucleus’ of the original analysis pertaining to the subject matter at hand is reproduced more or less in verbatim, this paper offers a more thorough explanation and exploration of a recalibration of the servant/served paradigm.

<sup>2</sup> The research leading to the publication of this article was funded by the Clifford and Mary Corbridge Trust of Robinson College, the University of Cambridge. In the summertime of 2013 and 2014 I conducted research about “The semiotics of food in the literature of the American South” at the University of Cambridge.

<sup>3</sup> D. Massey, *A Place Called Home?*, “New Formations” 1992, nr 17, s. 14.

position of black domestics in the privacy of the patriarchal home synecdochally refers to the general plight of African Americans in Southern society, and as such the housekeeper/lady-of-the-house dynamic replicates the relations between the privileged and the disempowered across the color line. Ellen Douglas's *Can't Quit You, Baby* (1989) offers an interesting perspective on the reconfiguration of the servant/served paradigm.

The recalibration of the said relationship takes on a spatial dimension in Douglas's novel – it is visible in the meeting grounds of Cornelia O'Kelly and her black maid, Julia "Tweet" Carrier. The trajectory of Cornelia and Julia's racial reconciliation spans the whole novel, beginning in a white woman's kitchen and ending in a black woman's living room. The story begins in Mississippi during the 1960s, in the only space where these two women could be in each other's company without the feeling of social awkwardness<sup>4</sup> – that is in Cornelia's kitchen:

[t]here would have been no way in that time and place [...] for them to get acquainted, except across the kitchen table from each other, shelling peas, peeling apples, polishing silver. True, other black and white women became friends under other circumstances, but such friendships [...] were rare<sup>5</sup>. In this house the white woman had to choose to sit down to set the tone of their conversation<sup>6</sup>.

Cornelia's casual complicity with *de jure* or *de facto* racial domination<sup>7</sup> complies with and serves to support the segregated laws of subservience that exploit African American women. Complicated entanglement of race relations, added to

<sup>4</sup> While discussing the difference between Northern and Southern domestic relations Katzman reveals that "[t]he thread of woman-to-woman interaction that interwove the pattern of service in the North and West was almost nonexistent in the South". The personal and intimate sphere of the relationship between mistress of the house and her servant was missing in the Southern states. D. M. Katzman, *Seven Days a Week. Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America*, New York 1978, s. 201.

<sup>5</sup> Sharpless observes that "bonds of mutual affection did exist, particularly in situations where the employer and employee knew each other for many years. As sociologist Mary Romero observed, 'In general, the longer the period of employment, the more informal the employer-employee relationship tends to be, as well as the more likely it is that a personal relationship will emerge'". M. Romero, *Sisterhood and Domestic Service*, s. 327–28; quoted in R. Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens: Domestic Workers in the South, 1865–1960*, Chapel Hill 2010, s. 162-163.

<sup>6</sup> E. Douglas, *Can't Quit You, Baby*, Londyn 1989, s. 4–5; next Douglas and pages' number.

<sup>7</sup> Glenn observes that "[p]ower and domination, conflict and struggle all occur in people's lives. In an association such as that between a housewife and a domestic worker, everyday actions both control and oppose" (*Unequal Freedom*, 16; quoted in R. Sharpless, *op. cit.*, s. 129). It is not amiss to mention the fact that in the Southern context it was the mistress of the house who gave orders to the domestics, and hence she participated in the racist system designed to subdue blacks. "In most accounts of domestic service written by servants, the male figures were generally distant, shadowy figures. They seemed to intrude into the household rather than to be part of it. Or they seemed to be relatively powerless in the household" (D. Katzman, *op. cit.*, s. 215). Removing her husband from the oppressor-oppressed equation in the household, a white woman reveals her complicity in upholding laws and customs that exploit other women.

an already uneven employer-employee dependence, does not render Mrs. O'Kelly and Julia's relationship any easier. In the O'Kelly household a relationship between the employer and her domestic has retained the traditional racial asymmetry. In a relationship of the putatively superior to the supposedly inferior, Julia has to attune herself to the feelings and moods of the mistress of the house. An employer-housekeeper relationship is clearly complicated by the mixture of "power, dependence, deference, care, gift-giving [...] love and hate"<sup>8</sup>, and as such the kitchen space in segregated homes in the South hindered the formation of sisterhood across the color line<sup>9</sup>.

Cornelia and Julia's seating arrangement is highly symbolic: "[t]he two women are sitting at right angles to each other at the kitchen table" (Douglas 3). The proper physical distance reflects both the emotional and ideological distance that yawns between their lives. The kitchen is Cornelia's haven of peace and order. As such, it is the space where everything and everybody is in the right place, the space where "she can be sure that order prevails" (Douglas 146). There is no room for misinterpretation. Nothing is ambiguous. Everything is either black or white. Even though over the years African American women have "developed the determination to transform a master-servant relationship into an employer-employee relationship"<sup>10</sup>, theirs harks back to a complex servant/served paradigm<sup>11</sup>. Theoretically, the aura of servant-keeping as a feudal institution is gone<sup>12</sup> and the women share their domestic duties – housework is Tweet's domain, while cooking is Cornelia's *forte*. Yet, when Julia, like many of her real-life counterparts, "enters the white woman's kitchen, she moves into a culture which is at least apart from

<sup>8</sup> Davidoff et al, *Family Story*, s. 182; quoted in R. Sharpless, *op. cit.*, s. 129.

<sup>9</sup> For more information about women's difficulty in bonding across the color line in the kitchen space, see Anne E. Goldman. A. E. Goldman, 'I Yam What I Yam': *Cooking, Culture, and Colonialism*, [in:] *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*, ed. S. Smith, J. Watson, Minneapolis 1992, s. 171–173.

<sup>10</sup> Clark-Lewis 5, quoted in R. Sharpless, *op. cit.*, s. 71.

<sup>11</sup> Minrose Gwin explores "the volatile, often violent *connection* between black and white women of the Old South" in the texts of the American South. Having analyzed many interracial relationships between women, the critic points out their conflicted nature: "in its paradox and conflict, in its connective tissue of race, gender, and power, the relationship between black and white women in the nineteenth-century South may be seen as paradigmatic of the central ambiguity of southern racial experience: its antipathy, bitterness, and guilt on the one hand, its very real bonding through common suffering on the other". M. C. Gwin, *Black and White Women of the Old South: The Peculiar Sisterhood in American Literature*, Knoxville 1985, s. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Only theoretically is the aura of servant-keeping as a feudal institution gone. In Southern households "[t]hroughout much of the twentieth century, patterns of 'domination and deference prevailed even as they had in the late nineteenth century". Ritterhouse, "Etiquette" 21, 25, quoted in R. Sharpless, *op. cit.*, s. 135.

her own, if not alien or openly hostile”<sup>13</sup>. Because there is no doubt that “the ultimate ownership of the space [of the kitchen] and authority remained with the housewife/employer”<sup>14</sup>, Cornelia presides in hers as though it was her “throne room” (Douglas 6).

Even though no open and intense antagonism seems to exist between the lady of the house and her employee, Cornelia’s less than enthusiastic response to Julia’s sharing her songs and stories reveals her superior social status. Julia’s gifts, be they flowers or stories, are supposed to render their relationship more personal and any awkward silence more tolerable. Mrs. O’Kelly listens to Tweet’s stories “with a distant courtesy – condescension, even” sometimes with revulsion and reluctance (Douglas 7, 47):

Cornelia over the years has considered herself a listener. Another woman might not have time for Tweet’s gifts – for the tales of childhood, the snatches of song, the handful of ragged robins. But from the beginning Cornelia, kneading dough, fluting a piecrust, cutting carrot curls or radish rosettes, has never by a word or gesture betrayed the boredom, the condescension she sometimes feels, her rejection of the moral code that Tweet’s stories sometimes imply, her doubts about the verity of some outlandish set of events. She accepts the tales like the flowers that she sticks in a jelly glass and sets in the window by the kitchen sink and forgets (Douglas 13–14).

Cornelia’s disregard and lack of sympathy for Julia is visible in her abandoning “both listening and appearing to listen” (Douglas 15). Her deceptive self-image as a listener points to her fundamental lack of self-criticism and self-analysis. The fact of maintaining emotional distance – “[e]xpressionless, absentminded, Cornelia listened and did not listen” (Douglas 36) – is a sign of presumed moral superiority, white domination, and lack of interest. If it were not for Cornelia’s lack of empathy, Julia’s stories might have precipitated their bonding. “Cornelia’s personality delays the development of the relationship that”, according to James, “might result from years of their close proximity and her intimate knowledge of Tweet’s life”<sup>15</sup>.

Through the process of imposing her stories upon an ungrateful Cornelia, Julia is the only person in the household who “raises her voice and tells Cornelia what is really going on” (Douglas 129), and in doing so she attempts to push the emotional and physical boundaries (represented both literally and symbolically by Cornelia’s hearing impairment) erected by the mistress of the house. For various reasons, Cornelia, like many “sheltered women” of the upper-class South (Douglas

<sup>13</sup> H. Trudier, *From Mammies to Militants. Domesticity in Black American Literature*, Philadelphia 1982, s. 14.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, s. 15.

<sup>15</sup> T. James, *Race in the Kitchen: Domesticity and the Growth of Racial Harmony in Ellen Douglas’s “Can’t Quit You, Baby” and Christine Wiltz’s “Glass House”*, “South Atlantic Review” 2000, nr 65.1, s. 81–82.

11), prefers evasion to truth. Tweet's situation bears similarity to that of legions of real-life domestic workers who "were uniquely positioned to see human nature at its worst, and they were exposed up close to their employers' unhappiness"<sup>16</sup>. Aware of her employer's strained relations with her own family (Cornelia's love for her family seems conditional), Tweet can speak up because their relationship is fueled not by her need of acceptance or love, but by Julia's antagonism.

Even though the housekeeper and her employer never talk about the race issue, "[t]hey weren't absentminded about these [racial] ludicrous and dreadful matters. To them race sounded the endlessly repeated ground bass above and entwined with which they danced the passacaglia... of their lives" (Douglas 5)<sup>17</sup>. This code of silence suggests that both "have other, more complex business with each other" (Douglas 240). Still, the racial component of their relationship is like a big elephant in the living room, and mask-wearing and avoiding the topic makes it even bigger. The end result of this silence is that Cornelia, who has perfectly internalized the conventions of behavior befitting a white matron, adopts a patronizing attitude towards Julia. She subconsciously reveals her condescension through turning off her hearing aid once Julia starts sharing her stories. James perceptively remarks that Cornelia "does not want to hear any part of the story that will offend her or make her think about unpleasantness"<sup>18</sup>. She may be "alone in a cocoon of dead silence" (Douglas 127)<sup>19</sup>, but she never seems to be interested in being more than a white matron<sup>20</sup>.

The act of turning off her hearing aid clearly refers to the racial imbalance in the employer's kitchen and in doing so it is an evocative symbol of the code of silence. Such a working-place asymmetry, complicated by the race issue in the kitchen, may delay, if not prevent, women from forming sisterhood across the color line. The white mistress attempts to cross that line when she visits Tweet in her house after the assassination of Martin Luther King<sup>21</sup>. Because her servant

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<sup>16</sup> "Blacks acquired encyclopedic knowledge of white communities and knew the intimate details of white lives, while whites remained ignorant of black lives". R. Sharpless, *op. cit.*, s. 159; D. M. Katzman, *op. cit.*, s. 200–201.

<sup>17</sup> Sharpless comments that the "[c]onnections between employees and employers, intrinsically vexed, became even more tangled when old expectations clashed with current realities and race remained an overriding consideration". R. Sharpless, *op. cit.*, s. 129.

<sup>18</sup> T. James, *op. cit.*, s. 81.

<sup>19</sup> Cornelia has been avoiding reality for a long time, to the point that Andrew, her son, accusingly asks her "Where do you *live*? [...] Where *are* you?" (Douglas 137; original emphasis).

<sup>20</sup> Being a white housewife defines Cornelia's identity: she "became mistress of her household, purveyor of g enoises, fig preserves, and homemade pasta" (Douglas 40).

<sup>21</sup> "Few whites knew much about their black servants except for the stereotyped [sic] views which they held about the nature of all blacks. Many black servants spent most of their lives in white homes, while mistresses never entered their servants' homes". In such a social context, Cornelia's visit in Tweet's home, regardless of her interior motives, proves to be highly unconventional. D. M. Katzman, *op. cit.*, s. 200.

does not come to work, Cornelia pays Julia “a bereavement call” (Douglas 98), which the narrator retrospectively misidentifies as “a gesture of sympathy” giving “substance to her courage and generosity of spirit” (Douglas 240). However, her gesture might as well be motivated by fear (of losing her help) or perhaps it reflects a patronizing pity. Her naiveté and lack of sense of perspective – Cornelia “puts her hand on the doorknob, moves the door gently back against the pressure of Tweet’s presence, steps in” (Douglas 98–99) – might imply that her patronizing feeling of moral obligation and inherent generosity of spirit are fighting over predominance in her personality<sup>22</sup>. The physical distance between the women is a metaphor of the separate two worlds they inhabit over the white/black dividing line. Cornelia’s inability to empathetically reach out to Tweet is evident in the polite phrase “I am sorry,” which does not correspond to her gestures: “she dares not reach out, dares not cross the two paces that separate them” (Douglas 99). Yet, the incongruity of Cornelia’s words and gestures suggests that Mrs. O’Kelly might have good intentions, however ineffective at this point, of “breaking the mistress/servant paradigm and treating Tweet as another human being instead of as her servant”<sup>23</sup>.

It will not be until Cornelia’s mental breakdown and Julia’s stroke<sup>24</sup> that the former, while visiting her servant who is now confined to a wheelchair, sets “the volume of her hearing aid higher than she used to” (Douglas 231)<sup>25</sup>. It is Cornelia who takes care of Tweet “slumped in the wheelchair, her right hand and right leg swathed in bandages, her left arm in her lap, fingers trembling against her thigh” (Douglas 232). It is Cornelia who “nurse[s] her back to health by refusing to give

<sup>22</sup> Davis opines that Cornelia’s decision to visit Julia proves their uneven relationship: “[t]he fact that she came there to console Tweet over the death of Dr. King, the symbolic end of the civil rights movement, yet still asserts authority over Tweet’s home indicates the rigid nature of asymmetrical intimacy”. D. A. Davis, *Invisible in the Kitchen: Racial Intimacy, Domestic Labor, and Civil Rights*, [in:] *Writing in the Kitchen. Essays on Southern Literature and Foodways*, ed. D. A. Davis, T. Powell, foreword by J. B. Harris, Jackson 2014, s. 151.

<sup>23</sup> K. J. Jacobsen, *Disrupting the Legacy of Silence: Ellen Douglas’s “Can’t Quit You, Baby”*, “Southern Literary Journal” 2000, nr 32, s. 15–27, [in:] <http://search.ebscohost.com> [dostęp: 10.08.2011].

<sup>24</sup> The lives of those two women get complicated within a relatively short period of time. After her husband’s death, Cornelia suffers an emotional paralysis. First, she stays at her son’s for six months, then sojourns in New York. Cynthia, Tweet’s stepdaughter, calls Cornelia in the metropolis to inform her that Julia has suffered from “a seizure of some sort [...] passed out standing over the stove stirring a pot of greens [...] she must have fallen forward onto the stove and [...] got scalded pretty badly on her arm and leg” (Douglas 221).

<sup>25</sup> This scene marks Cornelia’s recognition of the end of her sheltered life and the beginning of truthful and receptive existence: “Acutely aware of sound, unable to assign every vibration its proper place in an aural order, she is like a woman long blind and suddenly seeing again” (Douglas 232).



up on her when all of Tweet's family has written her off as a vegetable who will never be able to speak again"<sup>26</sup>. At this point Cornelia subverts the servant/served dichotomy by recognizing Julia as a sovereign equal and treating her as such, by "touching with loving hands, asking permission to visit Tweet in her living room, serving Tweet by bringing in the groceries"<sup>27</sup>. Companionship and truthfulness are what finally binds those two women together. Cornelia reciprocates Julia's earlier gifts by bringing flowers, a dress, and guests – the visit of her own step grandchildren (Douglas 243). More importantly though, Cornelia is ready to talk while Julia "as usual appeared not to be listening" (Douglas 241). The tables have clearly turned – Cornelia's initial revulsion and reluctance toward establishing a genuine relationship with her servant resonates in Tweet's lack of receptiveness (she just sits, hums to herself, can't talk; only gospel music and blues calm her down (Douglas 233 and 235)). This fact does not discourage Cornelia's efforts to share stories with Tweet and formulate her own openly expressed opinions<sup>28</sup>. Revealing her inner secrets and thoughts is supposed to have therapeutic value in Tweet's recovery rather than simply function as an act of unburdening herself and thus requiring Julia to provide "emotional labor"<sup>29</sup>.

Historian Rebecca Sharpless claims that "[t]he relationship 'inherently asymmetrical' can never be made equal"<sup>30</sup>, that is, unless one changes the circumstances and location, one feels compelled to add. One can balance asymmetry by adding new elements to the equation. Cornelia's visits in Tweet's living room demonstrate that their recognition of "a mutual need for each other's company and

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<sup>26</sup> A. M. Bomberger, *The Servant and the Served: Ellen Douglas's "Can't Quit You, Baby"*, "Southern Literary Journal" 1998, nr 31, s. 17–34, [in:] <http://search.ebscohost.com> [dostęp: 10.08.2011].

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>28</sup> In her own kitchen Cornelia did not wish to share her intimate stories with Tweet because "[t]o her it is almost unthinkable to speak to anyone, even herself, of her feelings, her childhood, her intimate life with her husband, even her children's lives. Such confidences are not simply trashy, dishonorable [...] for her they are scarcely formulable" (Douglas 66). Although the discussion of the narrative voice in the novel falls outside the purview of this article, it is not amiss to mention at this point that Tweet speaks for herself while Cornelia's thoughts and life story are presented through the perspective of an omnipresent narrator, who probes the white-black relations with great intensity.

<sup>29</sup> Sharpless remarked that "employers sometimes expected their cooks to provide 'emotional labor', to provide listening ears and sympathetic words whenever their employers were having a rough time [...] [A]dults also turned to their domestic workers as confidantes, regardless of whether the African American women wanted to hear them unburden themselves. Sociologist Mary Romero observes that class differences make domestic workers safe listeners, 'giving the middle-class mistress little fear of rebuttal, retaliation, or disparagement'. Emotional relationships developed, furthermore, because the domestic worker was a regular presence in the employer's life". R. Sharpless, *op. cit.*, s. 158; the quotation within comes from M. Romero, *Sisterhood and Domestic Service*, s. 329–330).

<sup>30</sup> J. Ritterhouse, *Etiquette*, s. 25, quoted in R. Sharpless, *op. cit.*, s. 129.

aid”<sup>31</sup> depends not only on Cornelia finally being able to listen to and hear Tweet but also on Cornelia’s saving herself from emotional misery and estrangement by reaching out and saving her companion. It is in Julia’s living room where Cornelia draws/provokes Tweet’s response and helps the stroke patient regain her voice – the very same voice she was deaf to when they were together in her own kitchen. When Cornelia confesses that Julia was with her in New York<sup>32</sup>, Tweet responds to verbal stimuli for the first time after the accident. The language of her body is quite telling: a look of rage and hatred lights in Tweet’s otherwise blank eyes, she even manages to pull her hand away and turn her head to the side (Douglas 238). As Cornelia keeps on talking, Tweet, to the accompaniment of gospel music, is able to say her first words, and so their verbal exchange begins with chanting and swearing, a merging of the sacred and the vulgar.

Being on her own premises boosts Julia’s confidence and strength to vent accumulating frustration and anger (her enunciation consists of word “SH\*T” (Douglas 247). No longer bound by an asymmetrical employer/housekeeper contract, Julia verbalizes her intense antagonism and resentment towards Cornelia: “You ain’t got *sense* enough to know I hated you. I hate you all my life, before I ever know you” (Douglas 254)<sup>33</sup>. Julia’s deep antipathy toward Cornelia results from her employer’s whiteness (her employer’s collective identity as the racial Other) rather than from her personality flaws, although the latter do not make the situation any easier. Even though in her employer’s kitchen Julia was shielded by Cornelia’s deafness and unwillingness to participate in her maid’s life, Julia employed a tactic developed by many an African American woman as a means of managing her relationships with white employers, referred to by Rebecca Sharpless as “cultivating dissemblance”. This strategy was “a careful concealment of what she [a domestic] actually thought and felt”<sup>34</sup>. The informative charge of what was said and unsaid was neutral, but what a perceptive observer can intuit from gestures, body language or tone of voice, resembles what David Goldfield referred to as a theatre of Southern personal relations<sup>35</sup>. Therefore, Julia’s honest

<sup>31</sup> T. James, *op. cit.*, s. 81.

<sup>32</sup> It is while sojourning in New York that Julia’s words finally reach Cornelia’s consciousness: “[d]espite Cornelia’s efforts to downplay Tweet’s importance, Tweet’s stories have penetrated to such a degree that Cornelia relives them when she is grieving for her husband, alone in New York City” (*Ibidem*, s. 83).

<sup>33</sup> It would be difficult to disagree with Donaldson’s opinion that “*Can’t Quit You, Baby* focuses on the layers of habit, antipathy, resentment, suspicion, attachment, and silence linking white employer and black employee”. S. Donaldson, ‘*A Stake in the Story*’: Kathryn Stockett’s “*The Help*”, Ellen Douglas’s “*Can’t Quit You, Baby*”, and the Politics of Southern Storytelling, “Southern Cultures” 2014, nr 20.1, s. 40.

<sup>34</sup> R. Sharpless, *op. cit.*, s. 145.

<sup>35</sup> D. Goldfield, *Black, White, and Southern 2*, quoted in R. Sharpless, *op. cit.*, s. 145.



disclosure of the hatred she has felt towards Cornelia could only be voiced in Julia's own living room, and as such it constitutes a breach in the fine art of cultivation of dissemblance.

The cathartic value of revealing the truth in the living room which belongs to a black woman – Cornelia reciprocates with “Damn you, then [...] I hate you, too” (Douglas 254) – encourages the women to openly confront and acknowledge the racial divide that separates them. Tweet's voiced accusations: “talking all that sh\*t about me being with you in New York. You ain't never *seen* me, *heard* me in your entire life and you talking that sh\*t. I wasn't in no New York” (Douglas 254–55) resonate with William Alexander Percy's diagnosis of racial relations offered in his memoir: “It is true in the South that whites and blacks live side by side, exchange affection liberally, and believe they have an innate and miraculous understanding of one another. But the sober fact is we understand one another not at all”<sup>36</sup>. African Americans become merely social types upon which racial ignorance fed. Percy's observation underscores that fact that up until the Civil Rights movement white Southerners tended to see African Americans through the prism of the role the other race had to play (as a collective work-force and a threat to white hegemony: that is, a collective enemy that had been pressed into service).

Here Tweet clearly refers to this blissful racial ignorance via Cornelia's deafness – both literal with respect to her hearing impairment and metaphorical per her emotional inability to see/hear others for who they are. The breach of the code of silence, which leads to confrontation of oneself and the Other within the context of racial relations, is a prerequisite to racial reconciliation. Both of the women concerned have to realize their mutual distrust and simultaneous mutual dependence. Both have to overcome the physical expressions of their disabilities (deafness and speech impairment caused by aneurysm), which echo their emotional state. Cornelia's grief and anger at her own life allows her to search for and make real contact – “Cornelia, lost in her grief and tormented by less friendly voices, opens up to Tweet's story and allows herself to hear Tweet's counsel”<sup>37</sup>. If this charged relationship is to survive the test of time, honesty seems to be the best policy. “The women come to their senses with the realization that they will be together again tomorrow and continue to need each other, probably forever”<sup>38</sup>.

They can build their future on the remnants of the past – in Julia's living room Mrs. O'Kelly finally realizes she can and should reciprocate the kindness that came with the stories: “Cornelia's delayed maturation depends on working

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<sup>36</sup> W. A. Percy, *Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter's Son*, Baton Rouge 1941, s. 299.

<sup>37</sup> T. James, *op. cit.*, s. 83.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, s. 88.

to save Tweet's life – and repaying Tweet debts, which are long overdue<sup>39</sup>. Yet, James's claim that "[a]s both start to recover after catastrophic events, it is the bond of having cooked and cleaned and talked together for years that proves to be the sturdiest support on which to build a future"<sup>40</sup> has a partially faulty premise. In Cornelia's kitchen only one woman talked, and the other barely pretended to care to listen. Now, Julia's inability to speak<sup>41</sup> and unwillingness to listen to Cornelia marks the complete reversal of the axis of power. Before Julia's outburst communication was again one-sided. Only after purging honesty, after dealing with the race issue and finally being able to say what is on their minds, can they truly engage in a meaningful exchange. And there is a foundation for that – Cornelia explains: "You can't help it, no. Not what you've done for me or what I've done for you... You can't take back what you've told me. It's here. It's mine. Mine, mine, mine. Not just yours" (Douglas 255).

With her hearing aid turned on, coupled with a willingness to reach out to Julia and to see in her another sovereign human being,<sup>42</sup> Cornelia is finally able to respond to her housekeeper's continuous failed attempts to communicate in her own kitchen. Tweet "reaches out, touches Cornelia's hand" and then sings the words of a Willie Dixon song, "Oh, I love you, baby, but I sure do hate your ways [...]. I say, I love you, darling, but I hate your treacherous low down ways" (Douglas 255, 256)<sup>43</sup>. My reading of this spatial movement from Cornelia's kitchen to Julia's living room is conversant with Minrose Gwin's analysis of the transformation of the women's relationship "from one of power and dominance to one of painful honesty and mutual love"<sup>44</sup>. By moving towards honesty, understanding, empathy, and affection, their relationship is no longer a simple extension of the servant/served paradigm. Cornelia and Julia's complicated relationship illustrates that only in cases when white Southerners look past pre-conceived racial assumptions and engage in personal contacts with individuals, regardless of their skin color, can they attempt to understand and consequently communicate across the color

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<sup>39</sup> S. Kissel, *Moving On. The Heroines of Shirley Ann Grau, Anne Tyler, and Gail Godwin*, Bowling Green 1996, s. 205.

<sup>40</sup> T. James, *op. cit.*, s. 88.

<sup>41</sup> Tweet's brain aneurysm, which blocks her speech, is a fitting metaphor of her rage about her stories not being acknowledged before.

<sup>42</sup> Cornelia recognizes that people are complicated individuals, they "are not made in ovens and iceboxes" (Douglas 41), yet she initially refuses to see Tweet's sovereignty, complexity, and implicitly humanity.

<sup>43</sup> That struggle between love and hate has been long present in Tweet's life, she frankly confesses to Cornelia and herself: "I steal that gold barrette to remind me of it [hatred], in case I forget [...]. Sometimes I forget" (Douglas 254).

<sup>44</sup> M. C. Gwin, *Sweeping the Kitchen: Revelation and Revolution in Contemporary Southern Women's Writing*, "The Southern Quarterly" 1992, nr 30.2–3, s. 59.

line. Interestingly enough, the spaces of food preparation and consumption seem to have the potential to assist Southerners in their attempts to understand both themselves and the racial Other.

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#### STRESZCZENIE

Od czasów kolonialnych aż po narodziny ruchu praw obywatelskich w latach 1950–1960 przestrzeń kuchni w kulturze amerykańskiego Południa była miejscem konfliktu rasowego. Białe kobiety próbowały sprawować władzę najpierw nad czarnymi niewolnicami pracującymi w ich domach, a następnie nad domową czarnoskórą służbą. Czarne kobiety „odwdzięczały” się zawoal-

wanymi aktami oporu wobec białej dominacji w przestrzeni domowej związanej z przygotowaniem i spożywaniem jedzenia. Powieść *Can't Quit You Baby* autorstwa Ellen Douglas proponuje interesujące spojrzenie na rekonfigurację relacji między panią domu a jej służbą. Autorka nadaje tej wymianie relacji wymiar przestrzenny – co jest widoczne dzięki prezentacji miejsc spotkań Cornellii O'Kelly z jej czarną służącą Julią „Tweet” Carrier. Obejmujący akcję całej powieści proces rasowego pojednania bohaterek zaczyna się w kuchni białej kobiety, a kończy się w pokoju dziennym czarnej służącej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** *Can't Quit You, Baby*, amerykańskie Południe, ruch praw obywatelskich, jedzenie, kwestie rasowe, relacja pani domu-służba

#### SUMMARY

From colonial times, through the Jim Crow era, and up until the Civil Rights movement the domestic kitchen was a battleground in the American South. White women attempted to wield their power over first their black slaves and then domestic servants, while black women reciprocated with covert acts of resistance against white domination in the domestic spaces connected with food production and consumption. Ellen Douglas's *Can't Quit You Baby* (1989) offers an interesting perspective on the reconfiguration of the servant/ served paradigm. The recalibration of the said relationship takes on a spatial dimension in Douglas's novel – it is visible in the meeting grounds of Cornelia O'Kelly and her black maid, Julia “Tweet” Carrier. The trajectory of Cornelia and Julia's racial reconciliation spans the whole novel, beginning in a white woman's kitchen and ending in a black woman's living room.

**Keywords:** *Can't Quit You, Baby*, the American South, Civil Rights South, food and foodways, racial relations, the servant/served paradigm