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The Servant and the Served: Ellen Douglas's *Can't Quit You, Baby*

by *Ann M. Bomberger*

Amiri Baraka, in *The Music: Reflections on Jazz and Blues*, criticizes white musicians, production companies, and critics for taking blues, jazz, and other types of music based in African American culture and either co-opting them, commercializing them, decontextualizing them, or doing all three simultaneously. Baraka argues that the music industry regularly translates African American music into more acceptable white forms: “Traditional jazz had its *Dixieland*; Big-band jazz its *Swing*; BeBop its *Cool*; R&B its *Rock*; and Contemporary black music its *Fusion*, all of which, in the main, were corporate creations aimed at a white middle-class audience with mainly white performers. What this does is help keep black players and artists and the black nation itself at the bottom of society, unable even to fully benefit from the creations of their own culture” (264). Without the proper context of African American music, which he argues is based in class struggle, blues and jazz are stripped of some of their essential ingredients.¹

His critique raises interesting questions for a novel written by Ellen Douglas, a white southerner, called *Can't Quit You, Baby* (1988), which pulls its title and major symbol from a Willie Dixon blues song of the same name. Certainly the novel does not adapt the rhythms of blues or jazz into its structure in any extended way, as do the writings of Baraka himself or poet/essayist Al Young, for instance. Rather, Douglas uses Dixon's song much as authors often use quotations from other works as epigraphs or include the occasional quote from a literary source as a unifying thread throughout the novel: that is, while her use of the song

plays an important role in the thematics, its application is largely utilitarian.

Now the use of a blues song, even fairly briefly, in itself is not necessarily that problematic. What is more problematic, however, is Douglas's decision to use the character of an African American housekeeper to emotionally "save" the white protagonist named Cornelia. Much as the Dixon text "serves" to illuminate conflicts of the book and much as jazz is co-opted by some white artists for material gain, the housekeeper, named Tweet (or Julia, as Cornelia tellingly prefers to call her), serves Cornelia not only as her domestic servant but also as her spiritual guide. Drawing on "folk" wisdom at key points in the novel, Tweet becomes Douglas's way to use African American culture in order to suggest new ways for white women to relate to others around them. At the end of this essay, I connect Cornelia and Douglas's use of Tweet to the difficult issues that arise from whites writing about race in academia.

By exploring the relationship between a white employer and her African American housekeeper, Douglas is clearly tapping into an image with much historical and literary resonance. "In most American novels," as Elizabeth Shultz states, "the relationship between white women and women of color follows this paradigm of mistress and servant, victimizer and victim, with only an occasional reversal which converts the historical victim to victimizer, the historical victimizer to victim" (69). Douglas attempts to rework the traditional dichotomy by exploring the women's relationship in more depth, examining conflict while suggesting a bond. Tweet and Cornelia's relationship is in transition in the novel. It moves from a relationship based upon the willful ignorance of Cornelia to one in which there is a more honest attempt at actual understanding on the part of both women.

Since domestic service is one of the few long-standing occupations where both employer and employee are often women and one in which the women are often of different races, studying these kinds of relationships tells us much about the way women interact in hierarchical situations (Rollins 6). In describing a specific relationship between an actual African American housekeeper and a white female employer, Judith Rollins says, "Love, economic exploitation, respect and disrespect, mutual dependency, intense self-interest, intimacy without genuine communication, mutual protection—all of these elements were contained in this extraordinarily complex relationship" (178). The combination of close, fairly intimate, contact and economic control—which Rollins studies in actual cases of domestic employment—creates an odd bond

composed of many contradictory elements; we find a similar situation in the fictional relationship of Cornelia and Tweet.

Depictions of relationships between African American housekeepers and white employers or, more specifically, “mammies” and “mistresses,” gained popularity in southern literature in the 1920s and 1930s. The mammy image developed decades after the Civil War as a way to glorify or nostalgically recall a lost antebellum past (Roberts 1). Cheryl Thurber points out that the “glorification of mammy was a way of praising some blacks while criticizing others who did not live up to the ideal” (102). By reaching back toward the imagined historical mammy (who, as Thurber points out, rarely existed in reality) these authors could attempt to shape racial and class politics of their day without appearing to do so.

Literature, Douglas maintains, “is a kind of fulcrum between the past and the future that seizes upon the past and attempts to capture it in the present to give it to the future, not in the literal sense, but in the sense that Susanne Langer speaks of as a ‘virtual’ past or an ‘as if’ kind of history” (Speir 233). Tweet may not have raised Cornelia from childhood, but she carries many of the characteristics associated with the mammy. While more multilayered than the mammy of *Gone with the Wind*, Tweet in her cantankerous, yet endearing, way will lead Cornelia across the River Jordan to emotional salvation. Although nearly every white fictional character who has a mammy claims undying devotion, few treat her as an equal. The mammy figure both nurtures and chides but remains on the periphery, as the white protagonist goes on to greater things, because of the support given to her by her mammy.

Can't Quit You, Baby explores the often difficult relationships between white and African American women—relationships made more difficult by past and current class exploitation. Because Cornelia excels in denial of her own or anyone else's wrongdoing, the two women have little potential for developing a genuine friendship unless Cornelia undergoes some kind of conversion. This conversion requires not just changing her racial attitudes (which are more paternalistically racist than virulently racist), but changing her approach to the world.

At the beginning of the novel, Cornelia shuts out the world by turning off her hearing aid: with a click of a button she can disregard all that is disturbing and she does so quite regularly. Douglas often compares Cornelia with a water-skier who happily skims along the surface of a beautiful lake until suddenly she is bitten by water moccasins and dragged under (130–131). The narrator says of Cornelia, “For twenty-five years now she's managed to fly across the steely water under the bright sky—

although sometimes, fleetingly, rising early from a forgotten nightmare she may have thought (but only for a moment) that the flight was an escape" (127). Until disaster strikes, Cornelia enjoys living in a world of surfaces. She refuses to see anything which would upset her and subtly, but imperiously, demands that her family hide all disturbing facts from her: "With her expectations she tempts them to be perfect (yes, they will be perfect. She will brook no flaw in her kingdom.) and then, together, she and they create the characters she requires. How can anyone resist the temptation to perfection? So it is that everyone gives back her shining, soft-edged vision of him" (129).

Part of Cornelia's rather incessant regulation of the images of those around her is derived from gender roles of white, southern women.² Ideologies of southern white womanhood privilege acceptance over controversy, pretended ignorance over disharmony, and a pleasant appearance over a bleak reality. Civil War chronicler Mary Chesnut bemoaned the pretense that gender roles prescribed in the face of marital infidelity: "His wife and daughters in the might of their purity and innocence are supposed never to dream of what is as plain before their eyes as the sunlight, and they play their parts of unsuspecting angels to the letter" (1926).

Cornelia works diligently to make the home a pristine refuge from the outside world, as is expected of a woman in her social class; her children have "straight teeth and straight backs and straight A's" and the house reflects her efforts as well: "Gleaming silver, polished mahogany and walnut surfaces; towels and sheets in ribbon-tied stacks on the shelves; books in their places, old bindings mended, new ones dusted . . . she has not asked a question, has only said occasionally, reading in the morning paper of some new catastrophe: My God we're fortunate" (11). The orderliness of the house maintains the outward appearance of domestic bliss, even though we later learn that, unbeknownst to Cornelia, her daughter once had a drug problem and her son has been living with a woman.

Cornelia's attention to domestic order is not a result of individual choices, but rather has been carefully cultivated by her mother for years. Cornelia's mother, raised in the same socioeconomic status as Cornelia, has set her on such a path since birth. The narrator gives an extended description of the path Cornelia and many other women took, being guided first by mammies, then governesses, then chaperones, and then husbands, explicitly connecting such a childhood with class and racial exploitation in the South:

This way of enjoying life was possible in smallish cities and towns in the South even for people of “moderate means” (as we used to say) until a few years ago, because black servants could be hired for sweatshop wages and because public schools were almost as exclusive as private schools. Blacks went to their own schools—and not for long. Country boys—poor whites—dropped out by the time the girls were old enough to look at them with desire. The Jews were “just like us”—might as well have been Presbyterians. After all, as enlightened people often said, Jesus was a Jew. (12)

Class separates Tweet and Cornelia just as much as race does. It is Tweet who brings gifts of stories and emotional vulnerability to the kitchen each morning, while Cornelia either simply takes or ignores the gifts of Tweet. Like Toni Morrison’s Sethe, who brings in bits of flowers or herbs to work each morning in an attempt to make her conditions as a slave more habitable (*Beloved* 22), Tweet works to shape a comfortable workplace by bringing in a gift every day, whether it be tomatoes, flowers, or a story (6). Through Tweet’s stories (stories primarily about her grandfather, a farmer), which Cornelia initially listens to with “a distant courtesy—condescension even” (7), Cornelia learns how to forgive her husband and herself and learns how to listen to others around her.

Paternalism runs rampant under such a system. Cornelia regularly resists the interpretations Tweet makes of her own stories and instead draws more simplistic conclusions. Douglas clearly points to the ways Cornelia assumes she knows what is best for Tweet and for all those around her. For instance, when Tweet is trying to understand when and why her father decided to take her land away from her, Cornelia responds, “Stealing is stealing, Julia. . . . You can’t steal by accident” (25).³ In another section we hear that the only people Cornelia asks to repeat themselves when she can’t hear them are “Tweet and people like her who are—yes, say it—purveyors of services of one kind or another, that is, who in Cornelia’s view must be heard, who depend, at the least, upon her direction, but often, too, on her advice, her justice, or her generosity” (15). Clearly, Cornelia thinks that she knows precisely what is right for Tweet, while the text, with the exception of the ending, suggests otherwise. She, in that way, is a milder version of the white protagonist of Douglas’s short story, “I Just Love Carrie Lee,” who clearly does not even know the woman she claims to love (her housekeeper, Carrie Lee), yet who feels she always knows what is best for her.⁴ In both portraits Douglas points to her white protagonists’ flaws, but suggests that there can be

some kind of true connection, however imperfect, even in the face of painful ignorance.

As the narrator points out, by exploring the relationship between (African American) servant and (white) employer, racial and class issues cannot be avoided, although the narrator, herself a white woman (as she makes a point to tell us early in the novel [38]), swings between pointing out social injustices and running away from the implications of those injustices. Ignorance (on the part of both Cornelia and the narrator), and with it safety, are difficult to preserve given the changes taking place as the novel progresses. I will quote an extended passage here, because it reflects the inner turmoil of the narrator over the role of racial politics in the narrative, which we also find in Cornelia:

But—servant? Mistress? They would be uneasy with these words, and so am I. . . .

So, let's settle for housekeeper and employer. Yes, that's better. And try for now to be absentminded about race and class, place and time, even about poverty and wealth, security and deprivation. Here, for example, are some situations that will not be explored:

The white woman—Cornelia—is driving Julia home from work. The latter is sitting on the backseat of the car (or the front seat. For the purpose of dramatizing a point either will do).

Cornelia is taking Julia to register to vote (or declining to take her, or Julia is declining to go) under the perilous circumstances of black registration in Mississippi in nineteen sixty-four.

Or they are listening together to the news of the assassination of John F. Kennedy. It is just past noon and Julia has been serving the white family's dinner. Now she is bent over the kitchen table, clutching her belly, moaning.

Try to be absentminded about all these neglected possibilities. You can't? You point out that by listing them I've included them? Ah, well, I didn't say it was possible. I said, *Try*. They have other, perhaps even more complex business with each other. And don't misunderstand. *They* weren't absentminded about these ludicrous and dreadful matters. To them race sounded the endlessly repeated ground bass above and entwined with which they danced the pas-sacaglia (or, as it may sometimes appear, the boogie) of their lives.
(5)

The kinds of issues of racial relations that made the headlines—segregation and voter registration—make it only onto the narrator's list

of things not to address. She shows obvious discomfort with those issues, as her uneasiness with the terms “servant” and “mistress” and her calling of the political events “ludicrous and dreadful matters” suggests. Yet obviously they hold some significance for the narrator because she does bring them up, and they are certainly in her mind as she shapes the text.

This novel is not concerned with *History* of “facts” and figures as much as it is with the *history* found in oral tradition: the history found in relationships rather than that found in traditional history books.⁵ The white female narrator flirts with larger political issues time and time again, only to back away just as regularly; she brings up the existence of politically and racially charged events, only to coyly suggest that we forget that she does so.⁶ Like the narrator of another of Douglas’s novels, *A Lifetime Burning*, who repeatedly writes a section about her life only to tell us a few pages later that she made it up and will now tell us the *real* truth, this narrator inches closer and closer to political and social critique and then distances herself from those observations. Overtly, she tells us to ignore race and class, while much of the novel explores the impact that race and class has on these women’s relationship.⁷

Public events that make the headlines and are found in mainstream history books are used in *Can’t Quit You, Baby* to bring about change in the domestic relationships Douglas describes. For instance, Douglas begins to foreshadow Tweet and Cornelia’s ultimate controversy (Tweet’s theft of Cornelia’s barrette) on the day after the assassination of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Cornelia sees the stolen barrette at Tweet’s house for the first time on this visit and yet it evokes no response: Cornelia “stares at the barrette on the coffee table gleaming like a round gold target, like the bauble a hypnotist uses to subdue his subject’s will, under the light from the standing lamp at the end of the sofa” (99). Cornelia says nothing about the barrette at this time and perhaps is not even aware of its significance, yet the gleaming object draws her attention during a moment of discomfort. The barrette theft will later cause the two women to begin to talk in earnest about their relationship and the exploitation that permeates it.

In addition to foreshadowing the later controversy over the barrette, the scene in Tweet’s living room after King’s assassination also offers insights into their relationship. When Tweet does not show up for work on the day after King’s assassination, Cornelia goes to Tweet’s house in order to pay “a bereavement call” (98). While her motivations are certainly kind, Cornelia assumes that Tweet would want to be visited by Cornelia on this painful day (even though Tweet has implicitly suggested

she doesn't want to see Cornelia by not showing up for work). The description of the scene at the threshold to Tweet's home accents Cornelia's intrusion:

Cornelia doesn't think: She's not going to ask me in. She speaks. It's awful, Julia, she says. Awful. I came to tell you. . . . She puts her hand on the doorknob, moves the door gently back against the pressure of Tweet's presence, steps in. I'm sorry, she says. On the wall over the mantel, King looks down at them. Tweet cannot nod. She turns away and shakes her head, as if to say, What do *you* know about it? I'm sorry, Cornelia says again. But she dares not reach out, dares not cross the two paces that separate them. (98–99)

King's assassination spurs a white woman to try to reach out to an African American woman she spends hours with daily, and yet the ignorance she has kept herself in doesn't allow her to see the impropriety of the gesture at that moment.

Other public historical events provide occasions to alter relationships in the domestic sphere. The disillusionment felt by many as events in the Vietnam war unfolded parallels Cornelia's own disillusionment with her children, her husband, and herself, and so references to the war speckle these sections. Her son Andrew—of draftable age—in particular feels torn by Vietnam and brings up the war when he decides to tell his mother that he has been living with a woman for several years and that it is time Cornelia look at the world more closely:

Cornelia has not the least idea what he is getting ready to say, but a huge NO floats up into her throat and bursts out before she can stop it. And she lays her hand gently on her breast, covering the receiver of the tiny hearing aid that is clipped to the brassiere strap under her loose shirt.

Things are a mess, Andrew says. Everywhere in the world things are a fucking mess. Did you hear me? Turn up your hearing aid. Move your hand, so you can hear.

Andrew! she says. What's got into you?

My God, you even got to fight in the right war, didn't you? Daddy got to be a hero. But look at us. *Look* at us. (134)

Despite Cornelia's attempts to regulate all aspects of her life in order to delude herself into thinking that the world is a perfect place, she cannot stop the chaos of Vietnam from entering her home. Andrew then tells Cornelia about his live-in girlfriend, Willie Belle, whom he plans to marry,

and her two children. After a while the conversation suddenly returns to Vietnam when he takes out a postcard from a friend in the war:

Cornelia stares down. The postcard is a color photograph of a woman holding a dead child in her arms, mutilated leg dangling, face bloody. The woman's mouth is open in a scream of anguish, her cheek smeared with blood. In the blank space below the picture a heavy black scrawl reads: Greetings to you, Andrew, from Vietnam. Your pal, Winston. She turns it over. The message side is empty except for the address.

My God, Andrew! Cornelia covers the card with her hand.

What does he mean? Andrew says. Does he want me to come help him kill slopes? Or is he telling me to take *off* for Canada? He sits down, buries his head in his hands. Then, Oh, God, Mama, he says, this doesn't have anything to do with me and Willie Belle. What the hell am I talking about? (137)

Yet Vietnam and Willie Belle are connected in that they both pose a dramatic challenge for Cornelia. They both bring about a change in that it is no longer tenable to turn off hearing aids and ignore reality. Andrew's disclosures, while disturbing to Cornelia, do not push her to face the hand that life has dealt her.

Shortly after Andrew tells Cornelia about Willie Belle, Cornelia's husband dies nearly immediately after she pours out her resentments to him; Cornelia sinks into a deep depression. She decides to go to New York, alone, either to sort out her difficulties or to kill herself. This trip North, away from the southern small town that dominates so much of Douglas's fiction, signals a stepping into a colder place, both literally and metaphorically, away from community and roots for Cornelia. Clearly fearing New York—a place she sometimes had visited under the guidance of her husband—she wanders the snow-covered streets of the city for hours alone, hearing the voice of Tweet echoing in her ears.

The isolation found in crowds of strangers seems to her to provide the perfect atmosphere for suicide and seems also to be a type of self-destructive penance and yet the voice of Tweet beckons her back to the world of the living. Those stories over the kitchen table, which she thought vanished the instant she heard them, now come back to guide her and to save her.⁸ Significantly, it is through narration of her family's stories and oral history that Tweet provides sustenance to Cornelia. By listening to the past that Cornelia has shoved to the periphery of her consciousness her entire life, Cornelia can become whole.⁹

At one point, while thinking about her anger toward her mother, Cornelia wants to shut out these difficult thoughts as she has done all of her life. The disembodied voice of Tweet says, "I'm afraid. . . . Nevertheless I go. I go to the turnrow and listen. I make myself strong to listen. I have to be strong to give way. Like this, she says. My grandpa might be singing this: What set Paul and Silas free is good enough for you and me. Keep your hand on the plow, hold on" (190). Not only is the African American woman being looked to as a source of strength, but the words of a Negro spiritual rise to give Cornelia guidance. African American culture, first in the form of the Dixon song with which I opened, and now in a combination reference to Negro spirituals, the wisdom of the share-cropping folk, and the wise mammy, all come to the aid of the white woman. African American culture is looked to as a source of authentic wisdom grounded in strength and community which is seen as lacking in white cultures.

Although Cornelia has taken from Tweet all of her adult life without giving in return, Douglas conveniently gives Tweet an aneurysm near the end of the novel so that Cornelia may successfully nurse her back to health by refusing to give up on her when all of Tweet's family has written her off as a vegetable who will never be able to speak again. Literally and metaphorically without a "voice," Tweet is trapped in her body by Douglas, so that a white knight, Cornelia, can come and save her. This ending is quite problematic, because it is through Tweet's complete physical deterioration that Douglas chooses to prove how truly converted Cornelia is. The melodrama of the situation provides an obvious way to demonstrate Cornelia's newfound compassion and skirts more difficult issues that would have arisen had Cornelia decided to change her ways and deal with Tweet on a more equal footing. For instance, without Tweet's being suddenly bedridden we might ask: How can Cornelia make up for all of the years of pain she caused Tweet? How can there ever truly be equality in an employer/employee relationship? What racial blinders remain? How genuine is Cornelia's conversion? Although Douglas does not suggest that the two women will never have difficulties again (and, in fact, goes out of her way to suggest that there will be some problems), Cornelia's nursing of Tweet back to health helps the scales of compassion come far more closely to balancing than they would have otherwise.

However, Tweet is not presented as a complacent dupe, nor as completely selfless. This moral guide is no saint; rather she is quite human and has both flaws and resentments. Her character has a depth not often

found in African American characters created by whites, either male or female. Near the end of the novel we learn that an oft alluded to barrette is a barrette that Tweet stole from Cornelia. Cornelia originally finds it among other seemingly meaningless knickknacks. Later, however, we discover that each of the knickknacks means something to Tweet. The recovering Tweet explains the significance of each item to Cornelia:

Andrew and Sarah [Cornelia's now grown children] give me them beads when they come back from—stops, pounds the chair arm. . . .

Mardi Gras? Cornelia says.

Yeah. Them fake dollars, too. Don't know why I kept them. Luck? She laughs. The other stuff—dime-store beads my daddy and—and—*Claree* brought me. I keep them to remind me of—evil. And that—she points to a pair of earrings. Nig [her husband] give me those to distract me when he was going out with Miss Puddin. (252)

All of these items, including the Mardi Gras souvenirs from Cornelia's children, Tweet uses as reminders to herself of the treachery of human beings. While Tweet very politically doesn't directly draw the comparison between her cheating husband and Cornelia's children to Cornelia's face, their inclusion in such a list makes their complicity clear.

Tweet does not spare Cornelia through politeness when she comes to the token, the stolen barrette, which she uses to remember Cornelia:

Hated you, Tweet says. . . . You ain't got *sense* enough to know I hated you. I hate you all my life, before I ever know you. When you making them Christmas cookies in Mrs. Lord's kitchen, when you saying to me about Wayne Jones: Oh, Tweet, he's just *like* that; when you sitting at the S. O. B. desk in the bank building; when you fixing them blue hy—hy—hydrangeas in the living room, saying, *That's just right*. Every day, every hour of my entire life from the day I'm born. Hate you when you acting like you the only woman in the world ever got sorrow when her husband die. I hate you, hate you, hate you. And I steal that gold barrette to remind me of it, in case I forget. She laughs. Sometimes I forget, she says. (254)

Tweet feels close enough to Cornelia to describe her anger and Cornelia feels close enough to Tweet to be able to accept it without being crushed by it. Cornelia's response is a little flip in that she retorts, "damn you, then, . . . I hate you, too," and thus ignores the hierarchical inequities

in their relationship, but she doesn't try to argue with Tweet's allegations and the two are soon joking with one another.

As the novel closes Tweet begins to sing the Willie Dixon song that gives the novel its title, singing, "Oh, I love you, baby, but I sure do hate your ways. She's laughing and singing at the same time. I say, I love you, darlin, but I hate your treacherous low down ways" (256). The ending shows hope for the future in that it affirms the possibility of friendship between women of different races without attempting to disregard past (or future) pain and injustices.

Yet the ending shuns the idea of making up for past injustice in its focus on the future. Earlier in the novel, we learn of Tweet's philosophy of retribution when she shoots her husband after he had an affair. Despite his infidelity and her assault, the two get back together. Tweet says, "didn't have to forgive him. I shot him, didn't I? After that, no use talking about forgiving. . . . I shot him. No getting around it. No saying I didn't. And that's the end of that, Now I got to say to myself, let's see what's going to happen next. Let's look around, see where we headed" (210). In the final page of the novel, Cornelia echoes this concept when she laughs and says, "What can we do [. . .] when we've shot somebody? Look around? See where we're headed? That's all I can see to do after you shoot somebody" (256). By ascribing this philosophy first to Tweet under (melo)dramatic circumstances, Douglas legitimizes Cornelia's adoption of this morally troubling philosophy later. My problem with the ending is that first by giving Tweet a stroke and then later by validating Cornelia's philosophy, which makes no aim at restitution for her past treatment of Tweet, Douglas uses the difficulties in the women's relationship to make Cornelia a better person rather than to address more difficult issues that would arise when these women attempt to create a more egalitarian friendship.

THE "HAPPILY EVER AFTER" ending of the novel certainly strains much of its earlier credibility, yet that does not diminish the novel's accomplishments in regards to cross-racial characterization. The relationship between white and African American women has been theorized about extensively in feminist criticism, but contemporary American white women's literature largely still remains segregated. Occasionally a character of another race will make a cameo appearance in a novel in order to be representative of a larger theme, but rarely is that character developed.¹⁰ Novels by white women such as Kaye Gibbons's *A Virtuous Woman*, Josephine Humphreys's *Rich in Love*, Rita Mae Brown's *High*

Hearts, and Rosellen Brown's *Civil Wars* all have only cameo appearances of African Americans (and even they are unique in going that far). Tweet has entire sections of storytelling and that should not be overlooked.

However, as I have suggested, Tweet functions nearly solely in reference to Cornelia. Although we hear from Tweet extensively, particularly in the first half of the novel, we never get inside her head, and we never see her without a white person present. Douglas's self-critiquing narrator points to the inherently limiting nature of such a portrait: "But of course I never heard [Tweet] speak, except to Cornelia. Does that trouble you as it does me? Again and again I have turned aside, shied away from knowing how she spoke at home, in bed at night with Nig, sitting in their crowded little house, the gas heater pulsing, with Robert and Rosa [her mother's husband and her mother] and their friends and neighbors" (239–240). Yet although the narrator points to this limitation, Douglas does little to try to rectify it. Tweet remains relegated to a world where she exists only in reference to Cornelia.

Douglas engages the difficulties of writing across racial boundaries, drawing attention to the presence of a white woman narrator who shapes our understanding of the characters. She acknowledges that while a white author can create a character of any race, to speak the "racial truth" and to hide behind that does not necessarily erase the white author's shaping of the tale. The storyteller

must resist the temptation to satisfy her sense of how Tweet and Cornelia ought to behave; must resist the need to keep herself comfortable.

Perhaps she can find someone more detached, more objective than she to tell us now about Cornelia. I call up faces and voices she might hide behind. A man, perhaps. An author who is a black lawyer with an extra Ph.D. in psychology. Or a soft-voiced, steely-eyed black grandmother. Or an elderly single aunt of Cornelia's who is wise and dispassionate.

But I would still be here, wouldn't I?

I encourage myself that, although it is difficult, it's perhaps not impossible for the tale-teller to rise above her limitations, escape the straightjacket of her own life. (38–39)

By questioning her motivations for creating certain characters, and pushing herself to not take the easy way out, Douglas succeeds, at least

partially, in creating an independent, developed African American character. However, while the occasional intrusion of this narrator's self-referential explanations into the main text does draw attention to the limits of the writing process and warns readers not to uncritically accept all that they read, it also in some ways camouflages the fact that Douglas has found a "steely-eyed black grandmother," or more accurately, a steely-eyed middle-aged African American housekeeper, to shape the outcome of the narrative. It is Tweet who becomes the person to speak the "racial truth" in *Can't Quit You, Baby*.

Toni Morrison suggests in *Playing in the Dark* that white authors frequently use African American characters as a way to philosophize about a number of issues, and her statements certainly could apply to Cornelia and/or Douglas as well: "The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity" (17).¹¹

This text has caused me to think quite a lot about my own position as a white woman writing about race in academia. Henry Louis Gates and Michael Awkward, among others, have long pointed out the danger of suggesting that critics should be limited to analyzing literature from their own culture and I do think that whites have very much to contribute to studies of race.¹² However, I also think that Douglas's depiction of Cornelia does point to the dangers of some of the narcissistic tendencies of literary criticism in general. Just as Cornelia uses Tweet to gain insight and understanding into herself, am I, and others like me, using African American theorists to validate agendas that ultimately may or may not be helpful to African Americans?

Hazel Carby, in a discussion of white academics and multiculturalism, suggests that this theorizing on the "other" can at times maintain the status quo by assuaging white guilt:

Proponents of multiculturalism and feminist theorists have to interrogate some of their basic and unspoken assumptions: to what extent are fantasized black female and male subjects invented, primarily, to make the white middle class feel better about itself? And at what point do theories of "difference," as they inform academic practices, become totally compatible with, rather than a threat to, the rigid frameworks of segregation and ghettoization at work in our society? (193)

How much is writing about race a way for white academics to believe that they have undergone a Cornelia-esque conversion without changing fundamental principles? These are all difficult questions to ask and yet it is important both to ask them and to remember that they are complex questions rather than questions with pat answers. Asking them should not suggest a policing that seeks to exclude whites from the dialogue, but one that encourages us to continue to explore these complex issues.

Clifford Staples is one such white critic entering the debate on race. He describes his feelings as he read (African American) cultural critic bell hooks's work:

From one paragraph to the next, I never know how I'm going to feel reading hooks. One moment I'll feel angry and frustrated and the next happy and empowered. Sometimes I'm also afraid; there's always the chance that she's going to name one more prejudice I'm carrying around with me. Confronting and sorting out these conflicting feelings about race is hard work. (Staples n.p.)

His clear discomfort with the process, he rightfully points out, is not something to be avoided, but rather something to be embraced. Self-critique helps to contain, although certainly does not eliminate, some of our Cornelia-esque tendencies to assume that we always know what's best.

In that spirit, I ask myself of my own use of African American sources in this work. My impulse would be to end this section with another reference to Amiri Baraka, the critic with whom I began. He is, after all, the critic I use to discuss the economics and power dynamics of citation. Yet if I do so, am I not treating him in much the same way as Douglas treats Dixon and as Cornelia treats Tweet? Even if I resist the easy closure that another allusion to him would provide, am I not treating him, as well as other people of color I have cited, in the same rather colonialist manner that I have just spent the last fifteen pages arguing against? Whatever my decision, my choice is questionable . . . and rightly so. That point, I believe, is one of the strongest aspects of Douglas's work. *Can't Quit You Baby's* self-reflexive narrator resists closure and complacency through her constant questioning of her own role in the writing of the text. She engages with difficult issues not expecting to come up with definitive answers, yet entering and engaging the debate over racial politics nonetheless.

NOTES

1. See Baraka's essay, "Class Struggles in Music," in *The Music: Reflections on Jazz and Blues*.

2. See Cherry Good's unpublished dissertation from the University of Essex, "The Southern Lady: Myth or Reality? An Examination of the Idea of the White Southern Lady of the United States", for a more extended placement of Douglas's work in the context of ideologies of White Southern Womanhood.

3. Later, Tweet taunts Cornelia with this line when Cornelia asks Tweet why she stole a barrette from her rather than ask her for it: "Tweet laughs. Evil, she says. I'm evil, she says. Then, Right is right, yeah. Uh huh, And wrong is wrong. People don't do *bad* by accident" (254).

4. See also, Carol Manning's discussion of Douglas's story, "Hold On," which is an exploration of white southern women's attitudes toward African American women: Carol S. Manning, "Ellen Douglas: Moralism and Realism."

5. In *A Lifetime Burning* Douglas's narrator pretends to find a feminist diary of her husband's grandmother, another source used in recent feminist historical scholarship which Douglas adopts.

6. Douglas regularly grapples with the relationship between politics/history and what she would see as larger mythological themes. She wants her characters to be both in History (King's assassination [99]) and outside of it (sitting around a kitchen table making preserves [3–5]). Although she sees the importance of a specific time and place, she wants her work to reach for something transcendent. Tellingly, she wrote a collection of fairy tales for children, entitled *The Magic Carpet*. She notes in the introduction to the collection that she "was struck with the fairy tale's chameleon capacity to change color, even to drop a leg or a tail, so to speak, in order to avoid capture; to vanish and then, somewhere far off, to grow another and reappear" (ix). Fairy tales for Douglas, then, can pass boundaries of time and place, but also change to reflect the time and place in which they are told.

Sometimes subtly, at other times more directly, references to fairy tales speckle nearly all of her work, including *Can't Quit You, Baby*. Cornelia's courtship of John is a recasting of the Rapunzel tale ("I saw you sitting in the tower window, [John] said, brushing your hair like Rapunzel" [77]). Julius's betrayal of Tweet is compared to the father's betrayal of his children in Hansel and Gretel (51) When describing Cornelia's stepgrandson, Purvis, the narrator says "there is a grace at ten, a gatheredness" and then describes various fairy tale ten-year-olds (171). The use of fairy tales in some ways runs counter to her references to actual historical events and more general historical allusions: the fairy tales pull the characters out of time while the historical allusions cement it in time.

7. Wendy Brandmark suggests that Douglas has the narrator undercut herself in order to disrupt readerly expectations: "We're not allowed to take anything for granted, to sink comfortably into the story; the narrator shows us that the very act of reading implicates us, our judgments becoming part of the ethos of the novel. And she reminds us how easy it is if we are white to see in the black characters the qualities we desire and fear, to make of them, 'the other'" (782).

8. Later in the novel, Tweet mocks Cornelia for alleging to hear Tweet while in New York, "Talking all that shit about me being with you in New York. You ain't never seen me, heard me in your entire life and you talking that shit. I wasn't in no New York" (254–255).

9. Not coincidentally, the other people who are involved in Cornelia's "salvation"—her stepgrandson, Purvis, and a working-class man with whom she has a sudden one-night stand—also are "lower" than Cornelia according to social distinctions, the first by age and the second by class. While the references to Purvis and Lewis are far less numerous or significant than the references to Tweet, it is important to notice that Cornelia uses them much in the way she uses Tweet: Purvis becomes a convenient symbol of vulnerability and hope for the future and Lewis, who reminds her of a young man she once dated, rejuvenates her by affirming her sexuality.

10. An obvious exception is Susan Straight's *I Been in Sorrow's Kitchen and Licked Out All the Pots* (1992), which is written entirely from an African American woman's standpoint. While it certainly has its share of stereotypes, it is quite ambitious in its scope. Part of Straight's authority and ability to speak as a white woman about African American characters so extensively may be from her marriage to an African American man and the African American community they live in.

Other white women writers who have developed significant nonwhite characters are Joyce Carol Oates in *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart* (1990), Barbara Kingsolver in *The Bean Trees* (1988), and Nanci Kincaid in *Crossing Blood* (1992).

11. Douglas believes that the ability to transcend subject positions lies more in the skill of the writer than it does in any block caused by identity or experience. She notes, "Faulkner didn't spend forty years sleeping in the bed with a corpse, you know, and neither did he kill himself because of his incestuous love for his sister. So I think that the artist is intrigued by a theme or a character or a story, and it doesn't necessarily have anything specific to do with his personal life" (Speir 233).

12. See, for instance, Awkward's *Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Positionality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) and Gates's "'Authenticity,' or the Lesson of Little Tree" (*The New York Times Book Review* 24 November 1991: 1+).

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