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“YOU ARE GONNA HAVE TO LEARN HOW TO COOK”
– THE ROLE OF FOODWAYS IN REVISING HIERARCHICAL
PATIENT-CAREGIVER RELATIONSHIP IN JOHN SAYLES’S
*PASSION FISH*¹

In the American South colors used to define people.² The whiteness of a mistress of the house was implied in her hierarchical position, so was her servant’s blackness. In the post-Civil Rights South the binary colors assigning people’s place in social hierarchy died hard. When women wished to bond across the color line they had to confront their inner, often unnamed, prejudices as well as social ostracism waiting for those who dared to engage in transgressive relations. Even if the relationship between May-Alice Culhane and Chantelle, two main heroines in *Passion Fish*, cannot be unambiguously called friendship, these two women move towards a companionship based on empathy, understanding and fondness. Such a transformation of hierarchical patient-caregiver relationship between May-Alice and Chantelle, complicated by racism inscribed in the relationship between a white mistress and

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¹ The present article offers a much extended and revised analysis of John Sayles’s movie *Passion Fish* (1992) 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. Constante Gonzáles Groba (Valencia: Publicacions de la Universitat de València, 2013. 101-110). Due to the scope of my original research (in “A Culinary Journey ...” I also analyzed Fannie Flag’s *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*, Walker Percy’s *The Last Gentleman*, Ellen Douglas’s *Can’t Quit You, Baby*, and *Driving Miss Daisy* directed by Bruce Beresford), *Passion Fish* received a rather cursory 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 modern revision of “mistress/slave paradigm”.

² 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.

a black helper, is negotiated through the use of food – its preparation, serving, and daily as well as festive meals.

By moving to New York and becoming a daytime television star, May-Alice Culhane has rejected her white, privileged upbringing in Louisiana. Now, paralyzed in an accident, she has to retreat in a wheelchair to her Southern hometown, where she has to swallow her pride and accept help from a caregiver. During her hospitalization, May-Alice refuses to accept her new, uncomfortable circumstances (the loss of control over her body symbolically representing the loss of control over her life). While watching her own TV show she comments, “That was supposed to be my close-up!”³ The state of the family home to which she retreats (it is unprepared for the new situation, it is old and there is no ramp) mirrors the movie star’s unpreparedness for a life-changing situation. The procession of nurses hired and fired attests to the fact that May-Alice rejects the physical sustenance of the served food and emotional nurturance offered by the companionship of successive caregivers. Her unofficial nickname in the agency that supplies her caregivers – “bitch on wheels” – justly reflects the state of affairs.

Chantelle is the only caregiver who does not burden May-Alice with her own (love) life, order her around in a Nazi-like fashion, or pity her. Being secretive and private about her life was a way of managing her relationship in the work place, especially during the early stages of her employment. Such a tactic “was often a deliberate ploy on the part of the employee to keep her life separate from her employers.”⁴ According to Elżbieta Oleksy, Chantelle is not “the stereotypical servant from dozens of scripts and novels, but an intelligent, self-confident, qualified nurse, equal in sharpness of the tongue with May-Alice, who does not waste time to subdue the impertinent patient.”⁵ Through very professional, yet caring, measures Chantelle makes May-Alice confront her own demons – making her charge realize she is spoiled, self-pitying, and bitter. Yet, spending quality time with Miss Culhane also teaches the nurse something about herself. Michael Newman perceptively concludes that as “the film progresses, we come to see that Chantelle is also undergoing a process of recovery and that May-Alice is helping her, giving her an opportunity to grow into herself.”⁶

³ All the quotations from the movie are taken from dialogue lines from *Passion Fish*, dir. John Sayles (Perf. Mary McDonnell, Alfre Woodard, David Strathairn. Miramax Films, 1992).

⁴ Sharpless, Rebecca. *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens: Domestic Workers in the South, 1865-1960*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. p. 146. One has to expect less privacy in live-in service than part-time job. In live-in service the nurse will be on call, with no clear division between work and free time.

⁵ Oleksy, Elżbieta. *Kobieta w Krainie Dixie*. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 1998. p.163. Author’s translation from *Kobieta w Krainie Dixie*.

⁶ Newman, Michael Z. “Character and Complexity in American Independent Cinema: *21 Grams* and *Passion Fish*.” *Film Criticism* 31: 1-2 (2006): 89-106.

Both women are new to their roles: one has to learn how to be dependant upon others, the other has to accept responsibility for somebody else. The house becomes a site of give-and-take struggles for control of oneself, one's body and the future after unforeseen circumstances. Soon after one of the verbal confrontations between the women, which left May-Alice by the lake to wheel herself back to the house, Chantelle begins to supervise her patient's daily routine. When the movie star's school friends, Ti-Marie and Precious Robichaux, pay her a courtesy visit, Chantelle, in a tug-of-war fashion, intentionally misreads May-Alice's signals and invites her old friends for lunch. Their conversation during lunch reminds the host that she has always been an outsider in her home town: she did not fit in when she was young, neither does she fit right now on a wheelchair. However, it is not only May-Alice who has to face inconvenient truth about herself, the lunch was a bitter pill for Chantelle to swallow as well. A wall of racist presuppositions is torn by May-Alice's comments about Chantelle's culinary abilities, or rather her lack thereof. This is illustrated by the conversation about a can of Campbell soup with which the nurse decided to entertain the guests. Chantelle's culinary repertoire is limited – at best – by her lack of basic knowledge of the South's culinary culture (she is Chicagoan) and the supply of bland processed foods stowed away in the kitchen cupboards. The contrast between the meal they were offered and the culinary expectations of the guests underscores their pretentiousness, hypocrisy and intrusiveness. The cognitive dissonance resulting from being served warmed-up Campbell soup makes the guests' putting on airs and graces even more noticeable.⁷

May-Alice misrecognizes Chantelle's decision to serve canned soup as the nurse's shrewd tactic to expose the guests' pretentiousness and help her get rid of the pesky intruders. The follow-up conversation in the kitchen reveals the true reason behind Chantelle serving canned soup (her inability to cook) and more:

May-Alice: I feel like I've been picked clean by buzzards I thought that soup bit was brilliant.

Chantelle: You just open a can and heat it up. What's so brilliant about that?

May-Alice: Well, I thought, you know ... that you were tryin' to help me get rid of 'em.

Chantelle: I can't cook.

May-Alice: Sure you can.

Chantelle: Is there some rule all black people gotta know how to cook?

May-Alice: Darlin', down here there's a rule that everybody got to know how to cook.

⁷ The conversation during lunch also reveals a great deal about the guests, Ti-Marie and Precious Robichaux. Their comments that Chantelle is a jewel and their assumption that Chantelle's "people" have worked for May-Alice's family betray their myopic attitude to racial relations, no matter how open-minded one of them tries to be. It is not amiss to mention at this point that the other female guests May-Alice is to entertain, the fellow stars from the daytime show, will also display the same racial insensitivity and assume that Chantelle is a family retainer or a servant.

Chantelle misunderstands her employer's response for a racist perception of black women as natural born cooks. From the time of the ante- and post-bellum South some African American women learned to cook by feel rather than by formal measurements, which was mostly a consequence of and a means of working around their illiteracy. Black cooking was coded as improvisational.⁸ Because Southern cookbooks offered a vision of "African American cook as exotic and other ... [and] African American women's cooking skill ... [as] magical and innate," "the stereotype of the innately talented African American cook" was born.⁹ However, as Sharpless elucidates, "[c]ooks were made, not born, contrary to white southern stereotype, and they arrived in their profession through a variety of means."¹⁰ Thus, accusing May-Alice of racial prejudice, she herself becomes guilty of the same. Food preparation in this context says more about one's geographic origin (whether one is a Southerner or the Other) than racial genetic makeup. Ms. Culhane plays with their racial identities through her references to cooking abilities inherent in all Southerners regardless of race. The reference to cooking by taste, and not by books, thus reflects regional rhetoric regarding the conventions of traditional Southern culinary culture, rather than any racist assumption, and as such it allows May-Alice to reach out to Chantelle across the color line.

Defining a relationship requires more than mere words; it is an ongoing process that includes the verbal but is also manifested in gestures and actions. May-Alice's reference to Chantelle wearing a uniform all the time alludes to the class and racial divide between them. Sharpless's findings about uniforms in the context of a domestic/employer dependence can as well be applied to a nurse/patient relationship: "[c]lothing labels people by status and rank, and employers who required their cooks to wear uniforms attempted to set apart the women visually."¹¹ Wearing a uniform was "a method of control" as it "negated a woman's individuality. When she removed her own clothing and donned a uniform, a domestic worker became someone whose primary function was to serve the family that had stripped her of her identity."¹² In this context, Chantelle's response "I thought you wanted it on" reminds her employer that professionalism and keeping a distance are part of the

⁸ Witt, Doris. *Black Hunger: Food and the Politics of U.S. Identity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. p. 13

⁹ Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens* p. xxiii, and Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens* p. 19.

¹⁰ Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens* p.11

Much in the same vein, John Egerton cautions against generalizing: "Not all blacks have been great cooks, of course, and not all great cooks have been black." Egerton, John. *Southern Food: At Home, on the Road, in History*. 1987. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993. p. 16.

¹¹ Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens* p. 144.

¹² Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens* p. 144.

job description.¹³ An ensuing search for a proper name to call their relationship reveals the inherent relational and status asymmetry between them:

Chantelle: I am a nurse ... not an assistant.

May-Alice: I didn't know what else to call you. You're not my servant You're not my baby-sitter, or my housekeeper.

Chantelle: I'm not your friend.

Leaving that remark unanswered, May-Alice is forced to confront the complexity of their relationship. Contrary to bell hooks' claim that sisterhood across white/black dividing line is impossible,¹⁴ May-Alice and Chantelle's relationship is characterized by a kind of solidarity, which is achieved by reversing what bell hooks calls the "mistress/slave paradigm."¹⁵

Both women challenge the standard hierarchical patient-caregiver relationship by subverting the paradigm of racial relations in which "the role of black females was to be that of servant and of white females that of the served."¹⁶ May-Alice needs help not only with physical therapy exercises but also with quitting her self-destructive drinking (the two being actually interconnected). Chantelle's opinion that her charge drinks too much is a response to May-Alice's request for honesty. Taught by the experience of her own detoxing from cocaine abuse, Chantelle lends a helping hand and gives advice, which interestingly enough, also refers to May-Alice's drinking problem and handicap: "It's back in the world that is hard." In an attempt to help May-Alice detox, Chantelle pours out all liquor kept in the home, an act which results in violent name-calling and accusations that recalibrate/upset the power structure in the house:

May-Alice: Don't hand me that condescending bullshit! Just go and get me some f*cking wine! ... I hired you! I want you to do what I tell you! ...

Chantelle: Who made you queen of the whole damn world? You sit around, feeling sorry for yourself, you miserable, TV-watching, dried-up old witch! You can't go more than a day without a drink, and you're not even a drunk yet. You're just f*cking spoiled. Most mornings I wake up, I wanna get high so bad I can't breathe.

May-Alice: Where are you going?

Chantelle: I am going away from you. I don't want to be around your shit anymore, understand? Away from you!

Such a clash of characters and interests can be as equally destructive as it can be purging. A direct confrontation turns out to be an eye-opening experience for

¹³ Chantelle's response alludes to the fact that "[c]ooks and servants in the South often regarded uniforms as pretentious and ostentatious, evidence of their employer's skewed values" (Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens* p. 145).

¹⁴ hooks, bell. "Where is the Love: Political Bonding Between Black and White Women." *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*. New York: Henry Holt, 1995. 215-225. p. 296.

¹⁵ hooks, "Where is the Love" p. 218.

¹⁶ hooks, "Where is the Love" p. 218.

May-Alice who, threatened with Chantelle's resignation, wants to make amends by cooking dinner for both of them. Preparing a meal and serving it for the first time ever since Chantelle started working for her symbolizes the fact that May-Alice reaches out to her companion. The main course consists of okra gumbo. This menu choice has racial associations (gumbo's roots go back to Africa),¹⁷ and as such okra gumbo is semiotically deployed to code May-Alice's reaching out across the color line. In such moments the hierarchical patient-caregiver relationship is inverted. May-Alice's confession to a physiotherapist that "If I ask her for a drink now, she won't give it to me, like she's the boss" points to Chantelle's transcending the traditional conventions of the employer/employee relationship, with the requisite subservience of the latter to the former. Her honest admittance to herself and to her physiotherapist that she could not handle her alcohol addiction without Chantelle inscribes mutual dependence, but not without affection, into their relationship: "I almost feel like we could be friends. Only there's so much garbage in between us." Racial asymmetry clearly constitutes the garbage May-Alice identifies as a stumbling block to their friendship.

Sharing another significant meal solidifies these women's solidarity as well. May-Alice organizes a special meal for Chantelle, Dr. Blades, her estranged father, and Denita, Chantelle's daughter. During that ceremonial dinner a thread of understanding is established between the ex-soap opera star and her nurse/companion. Chantelle's father, a very stern, religious and conservative patriarch, is clearly disappointed with her life choices (e.g., drug addiction leading to his custody of Chantelle's daughter). By seeking legal custody over Denita, his granddaughter, he declared his daughter a dishonest woman unfit to be a mother. May-Alice's comments, such as "Chantelle is such a wonder in the kitchen," through their preposterous nature as known only to both women, reduce Chantelle's anxiety about her father's rejection. But more importantly, those comments are clearly aimed at the father. By belittling her own culinary prowess (after all she had prepared the feast): "I wasn't much of a cook to begin with, and then with my misfortune, well --", May-Alice brings to light Chantelle's potential as a woman. The father voices his displeasure at Chantelle's social descent from the Chicagoan elite to Louisianan kitchen-help, "We've never had someone in the family work as a cook." In a response to the father's indignation, the mistress of the house makes a reference to Chantelle's cooking abilities – "But we do share the cooking. Mine just doesn't taste like much." May-Alice makes use of gender stereotypes to connect Chantelle's culinary competence with her recovered general competence in life. Referring to her nurse's culinary accomplishments, May-Alice implies that attainment of high

¹⁷ Kolb and Gutierrez claim that "Gumbo is sometimes called 'national dish of Louisiana.'" It "is a hybrid product of varied cultures. Its name, which comes from Africa," means okra. Kolb, Carolyn and C. Paige Gutierrez. "Gumbo." *Foodways*. Volume 7 of *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. John Edge. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2007. 177–179. p. 177.

levels of culinary proficiency mirrors Chantelle’s regained control, if not mastery, of her private life.

Despite the overt references to the employer/employee relationship in their conversation in the final scene of the movie, mutual acceptance of their transgression of this type of relationship can be discerned in May-Alice’s mentioning Chantelle’s cooking abilities:

May-Alice: If I’m gonna be here ... I need you workin’ for me.

Chantelle: Bullshit.

May-Alice: If I’m lyin’, I’m dyin’.

Chantelle: Then we’re stuck with each other.

May-Alice: Well, for the time being. Chantelle?

Chantelle: Yeah?

May-Alice: You are gonna have to learn how to cook.

In their final conversation both women redress the balance between them. They are honest, reach out to and support one another: Chantelle by referring to their mutual dependence on each other, and May-Alice by referring to her cooking abilities. Facing reality and acting upon that new-found acceptance offers emotional rebirth to both women.

In the segregated South such a relationship between a white mistress of the house and a black helper based on honesty and affection would be construed as transgressive and thus frowned upon, if not forbidden. The social complications which David Davis diagnosed for such relationships in the segregated South – “[t]he transgressive friendships based on asymmetrical intimacy within the southern social hierarchy are too fraught to lead to happy endings”¹⁸ – are no longer defining factors in case of May-Alice’s and Chantelle’s companionship. Food, rather than re-inscribing asymmetry into their relationship through references to the served and the servant dichotomy, helps these women to build affectionate coexistence and meaningful communication across the color line.

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¹⁸ Davis, David A. “Invisible in the Kitchen: Racial Intimacy, Domestic Labor, and Civil Rights.” *Writing in the Kitchen. Essays on Southern Literature and Foodways*. Ed. David A. Davis and Tara Powell. Foreword by Jessica B. Harris. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2014. 143–158. p. 153.

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Summary

A transformation of hierarchical patient-caregiver relationship between May-Alice and Chantelle, complicated by racism inscribed in the relationship between a white mistress and a black helper, is negotiated through the use of food – its preparation, serving, and daily as well as festive meals. It is my intention to trace and analyze the role of food in the evolution of their relationship. I will demonstrate that food helps these women to build affectionate coexistence and meaningful communication across the color line, rather than re-inscribes racial asymmetry into their relationship through references to the served and the servant dichotomy.

Keywords: *Passion Fish*, the American South, post-Civil Rights South, food and foodways, racial relations, racial asymmetry, patient and caregiver relationship

“BĘDZIESZ MUSIAŁA NAUCZYĆ SIĘ GOTOWAĆ” – ROLA JEDZENIA W MODELOWANIU RELACJI MIĘDZY PACJENTEM A OPIEKUNEM W *WYGRAĆ Z LOSEM* W REŻYSERII JOHNA SAYLESA

Ewolucja hierarchicznej zależności pacjent-opiekun między głównymi bohaterkami filmu *Wygrać z Losem*, May-Alice Culhane and Chantelle, którą dodatkowo komplikują różnice rasowe widoczne w relacjach białej pani domu a jej czarną służącą, w dużej mierze dokonuje się poprzez łączące kobiety czynności związane z jedzeniem – jego przygotowywaniem, podawaniem, z funkcjonowaniem potraw zarówno w życiu codziennym, jak i w momentach uroczystych. Celem artykułu jest prześledzenie i zanalizowanie roli posiłków jako czynnika stymulującego przebieg tego procesu. Szkic przedstawia, w jaki sposób jedzenie pomaga May-Alice i Chantelle zbudować relację interpersonalną opartą na czułości oraz porozumieniu, pozwala im, dzięki odrzuceniu uprzedzeń rasowych, wyjść poza para-

dygmatyczne role białej pani domu i jej czarnej służącej. Definiując swoje relacje między zależną pacjentką i odpowiedzialną opiekunką, dwie kobiety muszą skonfrontować swoje uprzedzenia, stanąć twarzą w twarz ze sobą, przyjąć postawę empatycznego współdziałania.

Słowa klucze: *Wygrać z losem*, Amerykańskie Południe, ruch praw obywatelskich, jedzenie, kwestie rasowe, różnice rasowe, relacja pacjent-opiekun