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THE WHISTLE STOP CAFÉ AS A CHALLENGE
TO THE JIM CROW BIPARTITION OF SOCIETY
IN FANNIE FLAGG'S *FRIED GREEN TOMATOES*
AT THE WHISTLE STOP CAFÉ

Abstract. The American South's social order, based as it was on white supremacy and subordination of women, is reflected in the space of the café in Fannie Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*. The titular café run by two white women, Idgie Threadgoode and Ruth Jamison, becomes a site of contestation of that very social order. In the early 1930s Idgie and Ruth, the main heroines in Flagg's novel, move out of their respective homes into the back of the café, which will offer its services till 1969. Their decision to run a café together has a twofold significance: they reject/transcend domesticity, a socially prescribed space for women, and they act on their increased sensitivity to help the disempowered and oppressed—the black and the poor—during the Jim Crow period. The ownership and management of the café allows Idgie and Ruth to negotiate and redefine their identities in the context of racial oppression and subordination of white women.

Key words: Fannie Flagg; *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*; the American South; racial relations; Ku Klux Klan (KKK); domesticity; restaurant business; eating establishments; food consumption; the third place; BBQ.

The American South's social order, based as it was on white supremacy and subordination of women, is reflected in the space of the café in Fannie Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*.¹ The titular café run

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by two white women, Idgie Threadgoode and Ruth Jamison, becomes a site of contestation of that very social order. In the early 1930s Idgie and Ruth, the main heroines in Flagg's novel, move out of their respective homes into the back of the café, which will offer its services till 1969. Their decision to run a café together has a twofold significance: they reject/transcend domesticity, a socially prescribed space for women, and they act on their increased sensitivity to help the disempowered and oppressed—the black and the poor—during the Jim Crow period.² The ownership and management of the café allows Idgie and Ruth to negotiate and redefine their identities in the context of racial oppression and subordination of white women.

Patricia Neal, known professionally as Fannie Flagg, is a fiction writer and an actress. Flagg's writing style is heavily defined by the place of her birth and by her early exposure to the daytime television game shows of the 1970s. A native of Birmingham, Alabama, Flagg tends to locate her fiction in the places that she knows best—in the American South. As one of the best twentieth-century southern women humorists, Flagg employs humor and wit in depicting her eccentric characters' ordinary southern lives. Prior to being a Broadway performer and celebrity guest on TV shows, Flagg began her lifelong love affair with writing. *The Whoopee Girls*, which Flagg wrote, directed, and starred in the fifth grade, marks the beginning of her writing career. Before the publication of her first novel, *Coming Attractions: A Wonderful Novel* (1981), Flagg wrote and produced television specials as well as wrote for and appeared on *Candid Camera*. In an interview with Valerie Leusse Flagg reveals that as a teenager she began writing sketches when she started out in Junior Miss Alabama, hoping to win one of money scholarships offered to the pageant winners. However, while studying at the Pittsburgh Playhouse Theater Acting School (sponsored by the said scholarship in the Miss Alabama Pageant), Flagg was kindly advised to go home: "you've got that Southern accent so you'll never get work." She took that advice. That Southern accent along with sensitivity, kindness, humor and wit, produced eight novels, some of which became the *New York Times* bestsellers. In 2012 she won the Harper Lee Distinguished Alabama Author award, which Harper Lee gave her in person. *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* is vintage Fannie Flagg, whose fiction concerns "the touching, terrifying, heartbreaking, hysterical, extraordinary, everyday things

² Natalie Ring explains that "[t]he term 'Jim Crow' refers to the system of racial segregation and oppression that existed primarily in the South from 1877 to the mid-1960s" (416).

that make us human, the things that make us seek friendship and love and compassion and community” (Leusse). The novel was adapted into the 1991 movie *Fried Green Tomatoes*; Flagg’s script for the movie won Academy Award and the Writers Guild of America Award nominations.³

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In *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth Century Fiction* Rosemary George remarks that “the word ‘home’ immediately connotes the private sphere of patriarchal hierarchy, gendered self-identity, shelter, comfort, nurture and protection” (1). As a contact zone between different genders, homes are ideologically charged, they are sites that

manifest on geographical, psychological and material levels. They are places that are recognized as such by those within and those without. They are places of violence and nurturing. A place that is flexible, that manifests itself in various forms and yet whose every reinvention seems to follow the basic pattern of inclusions/exclusions . . . Its importance lies in the fact that it is not equally available to, all home is the desired place that is fought for and established as the exclusive domain of a few. It is not a neutral place. (George 9)

This lack of ideological neutrality is reflected in the fact that white patriarchy domesticated Southern women through the Cult of True Womanhood with its separate spheres ideology that placed women on domestic pedestals: various cookbooks advocated the kitchen as “women’s sacred domain” (Levenstein 31), and claimed that “the view of woman’s place is very traditional, and her happiness is seen in preparing food and enjoying domesticity” (Grubb 166–7). Some women envisioned more for themselves beyond their patriarchally prescribed enclosure in domesticity and decided to contest patriarchal control of the feminine, similarly to Iddie and Ruth who used “their access to food to challenge political and economic hierarchies” (Lindenfeld 227).

When women emerge from their domestic seclusion and still perform quintessentially feminine tasks, they violate the established order and enjoy a degree of agency in doing so. Volition seems to be a key factor determining one’s satisfaction and fulfillment in any endeavor or enterprise. Iddie and Ruth, like their historical counterparts “in the restaurant business,”

³ This short biographical sketch of Fannie Flagg’s life is based on information obtained from <http://fannieflagbooks.com/> and Valerie Fraser Luesse’s interview with the novelist.

“[r]emaining true to home values . . . often decried the profit motive. Although they sought financial success, many said they found their gratification in terms of self-expression” (Whitaker 99). With a profit margin as a non-relevant incentive for managing a business, running a restaurant or café becomes a way of expressing one’s values. Idgie and Ruth’s café becomes a symbol of the ability of human empathy and affection to create the possibility of co-existence of different races and classes, even if pragmatically based on concessions and compromises.

Charity to all regardless of skin color runs in the Threadgoode family: Poppa Threadgoode “owned the only store in town . . . Poppa couldn’t say no to anybody, white or colored. Whatever people wanted or needed, he just put in a sack and let them have it on credit. Cleo said Poppa’s fortune had walked right out the door on him in paper bags. But then, none of the Threadgoodes could ever say no to anybody” (Flagg 26). Idgie herself has been a Robin Hood of sorts from Alabama. Under cover of the night, Idgie, with the help of Grady Kilgore, the local sheriff and part-time railroad detective, redistributes government supplies to the disempowered: “during the Depression, and somehow, this person called Railroad Bill would sneak on the government supply trains and throw stuff off for the colored people. Then he’d jump off before they could catch him. This went on for years, and pretty soon the colored started telling stories about him . . . Sipsey said, every Sunday in church, they’d pray for Railroad Bill, to keep him safe” (Flagg 331–332). However, only the ownership of the café affords Idgie and Ruth a possibility to feed the hungry, make a social statement and a decent living at the same time. The women find a way to turn their café into a social mission. “The Last Supper,” the picture Ruth hangs in the café (Flagg 50), best captures their perception of their business as self-expression and a genuine calling. Their business model seems to resemble business models of restaurants operated by middle class women in America of the 1930s, who by “providing valuable social services” claimed “to make the whole world homelike. . . . Some women spoke of the restaurant business as a way of recovering an ancient female vocation [of feeding humanity] that had been wrongfully usurped by men” (Whitaker 91). Running a café for Idgie and Ruth is not based on a single individual act of kindness; rather, the entire enterprise revolves around altruism and empathy. Hence, in just two years from its opening, “the name of the café was written on the walls of hundreds of boxcars, from Seattle to Florida” (Flagg 30) and as such it became a signpost for all those in need.

Ownership of a restaurant, café or other eateries does not necessarily mean rejection of domesticity; it does, however, the domestication of females and simultaneously promotes the creative use of women's culinary talents and moral values. The seventeenfold increase in women's ownership of restaurants between 1890 and 1930 (Whitaker 90) testifies to the strong demand for creative use of women's familiarity with culinary activities and social sensitivities. At the same time, one cannot deny the importance of "[s]ocial and economic changes in the early twentieth century [which] enlarged women's opportunities to carry home-based skills and values into the sphere of business" (Whitaker 89). Because "there persists within the middle-class American psyche a longing for an idealized home" restaurants and cafes offering home style fare, or "home cooking," "have lured middle-class Americans by promising to restore the very traditions" of domesticity (Barbas 52). Thus the image of traditional domesticity, which centers around the private space of the family table, is brought to public eating establishments. Angela Cooley similarly remarks that "[r]estaurants that were established outside of the home used wholesome advertising to tie themselves to familial settings. . . . Many public eating places tried to create similarities between dining in and eating out" (*To Live and Dine in Dixie* 81). By alluding to the ideal of the American home, café proprietors and restaurateurs bring the values of patriarchal homes into the public sphere; indeed: "[e]ating establishments were supposed to uphold the same moral standards expected of the southern home" (Cooley, *To Live and Dine in Dixie* 133).

However, in the early twentieth century a widening spectrum of public eating facilities, from restaurants catering primarily to white elite patrons, lunch rooms, to lower-class establishments such as cafés,

represented a potential threat to cherished white middle-class ideals related to the home and family. They [white southerners] worried about a variety of alleged public immorality that might threaten the white family, and public restaurants represented particular points of entry for vice . . . [P]ublic eating places represented public venues where a primarily domestic activity took place. Home continued to be the primary site of dining for southerners which meant that any potential new food culture developing in public places represented an active threat to the private concerns. (Cooley, *To Live and Dine in Dixie* 62)

The very existence of a large variety of public eating establishments, which allow for "socializing, eating, drinking, and intermingling of all sorts"

(Cooley, *To Live and Dine in Dixie* 106), poses a threat to white supremacy. The diversity of customers could as well challenge the homogeneity of white domination: “urban lunchrooms and cafés saw a more diverse dining population with a motley assortment of various ethnicities, classes, occupations, genders, and races, meeting and intermingling in one form or another” (Cooley, *To Live and Dine in Dixie* 114). Hence, the relationship between public eating places and the private dining rooms, much like their correlative activities of eating out and dining in, is not simply based on exteriority.

The white patriarchal values connected with domesticity and veneration of white womanhood are metaphorically inscribed on the table; indeed, the private space of the table at the heart of the house becomes the very embodiment of white supremacy. Thus, the simple act of dining out carries significant ideological implications: the private space of the table is transposed onto the public space of any dining area—from restaurants, through cafés to lunch counters—hence, such public eating establishments

are sites at which social boundaries are negotiated, . . . sites of incorporation and exclusion, serve the more immediate aim of negotiating the imaginary and permeable contours of the nation. When those boundaries are felt to be in jeopardy, the rules of commensality are carefully patrolled. At commercial eating places, which open up the matrix of the family home, the walls that defend and stand for the sanctity of the private house and of the female body at the heart and hearth will be reproduced in the meanings ascribed to restaurant walls (Abel 161).

Allowing two races to eat together in the same dining space would violate white patrons’ sense of proper racial mores. Thus, as Hale explains that “[b]ecause they made public the decidedly home-centered rituals of eating, cafes, restaurants and diners usually served only one race” (187).

In *Consuming Geographies* Bell and Valentine endow “these loci of food consumption” with the ability to facilitate “community building and cohesion”; these public eating facilities become cornerstones of community where “food retains its ‘communicative’ role” (106). In doing so, a neighborhood restaurant or a café becomes a signifier for local community. Public patronage of such an eating establishment may therefore provide means and opportunity for redefinition and negotiation of one’s identity, both individual and collective. In his *The Great Good Place*, Ray Oldenburg claims that these venues, in terms of their importance in people’s lives, are third only to home and workplace. Such “third places” are “people’s own remedy for

stress, loneliness, and alienation” (Oldenburg 20); they offer not only “the escape or time out from life’s duties and drudgeries” (21) but also “experiences and relationships afforded there and nowhere else” (21). Mainly because the “*raison d’être* of the third place rests upon its differences from the other settings of daily life and can best be understood by comparison with them” (22). If third places are “places where community is most alive and people are most themselves” (20), then clearly The Whistle Stop Café is the third place in the fictitious town of Whistle Stop. In her bulletin, *The Weems Weekly*, Dot Weems confesses “it seems to me that after the café closed, the heart of the town just stopped beating. Funny how a little knockabout place like that brought so many people together” (Flagg 385–386). The reference to the aesthetics of the Whistle Stop Café (“a little knockabout place”) also endows it with another characteristic feature of third places, namely with the fact that third places are “taken for granted and most have a low profile” (Oldenburg 42).

As the product of the love between Idgie and Ruth, the flourishing café becomes the heart of the community, catering in various ways to the sundry needs of diverse clientele across color and class lines. The Whistle Stop Café on few accounts seems to be dissimilar to the “new” public eating places Angela Cooley studies. In contradistinction to the real-life establishments, such as “stands, lunchrooms, cafés, and cookshops . . . [which] often represented ephemeral establishments that did not stay open for longer than a year or two” (“Food, Race, and Contested Eating Space” 250), the Whistle Stop Café stayed in business for forty years (June 1929–June 1969). Cooley’s research reveals that that “[m]enus specialized in ‘quick order’ foods, such as sandwiches, that could be prepared quickly and cheaply”, while Ruth and Idgie’s café offers a wide repertoire of Southern specialties, all prepared by Sipse: buttermilk biscuits, skillet cornbread, coconut cream pie, pecan pie, Sipse’s Southern-fried chicken, grits, candied yams, and fried green tomatoes. However, both the “new” public eating places and their fictitious representative do “not cater to an elite clientele,” neither do they “bother with expensive décor,” nor “not provide separate facilities for the accommodation of women (Cooley, “Food, Race, and Contested Eating Space” 250).

Third places seem to be perfect spaces for social performance, in which “action, reflection, and intent are not marked as they are in cultural performances. Social performances are the ordinary, day-by-day interactions of individuals and the consequences of these interactions as we move through social life” (Madison 155). Oldenburg’s explanation inscribes social perfor-

mance into the functions of third places, which “are an ordinary part of a daily routine. The best attitude toward the third place is that it merely be an expected part of life. The contributions that third places make in the lives of people depend upon their incorporation into the everyday stream of existence” (37). Social performances, which constitute such everyday interactions among individuals, are reenacted exactly in the places like the Whistle Stop Café. What draws regular visitors to a third place is the fellow customers, “the right people are there to make it come alive, and they are the regulars” (Oldenburg 33). Similarly to a home, a third place offers “the psychological comfort and support that it [a home] extends” (42). Individuals “feel at home and comfortable” (22) in a third place, mainly because its “character . . . is determined most of all by its regular clientele and is marked by a playful mood, which contrasts with people’s more serious involvement in other spheres” (42).

The regulars who frequent the Whistle Stop Café comprise its inner circle, negotiating and enacting cultural scripts while there, upon which, according to Madison, all social performances are built (155). However, Jim Crow’s bipartition of society precludes the possibility of the café becoming a neutral ground which theoretically is supposed to serve “to level their guests to a condition of social equality” (Oldenburg 42). Oldenburg explains the function of a leveler, which “by its nature, [is] an inclusive place. It is accessible to the general public and does not set formal criteria of membership and exclusion . . . Third places counter the tendency to be restrictive in the enjoyment of others by being open to all and by laying emphasis on qualities not confined to status distinctions current in the society” (24). Because segregation received significant public support under Jim Crow, the inclusiveness of a third place, or rather lack thereof, in such a “separate but equal” social context confirms that “[s]ocial performances become examples of a culture’s or sub-culture’s particular symbolic practices” (Madison 155). One such symbolic practice is designating “colored” and “white” ordering and sitting sections in public eating facilities, or simply the refusal to serve African American clientele, as a reaction to “the increasing tendency for white women to dine and work in public eating places, a constantly changing and growing New South population, and an atmosphere already concerned with the notion of racial purity” (Cooley, *To Live and Dine in Dixie* 100). While not infected by racist ideology, however aware of the consequences of breaching segregation barriers, Idgie and Ruth run the Whistle Stop Café, in which “all the railroad people ate . . . , colored and white alike. . . [Idgie]’d

serve the colored out the back door. Of course, a lot of people didn't like the idea of her selling food to the coloreds, and she got into some trouble doing it, but she said that nobody was gonna tell her what she could and could not do" (Flagg 51). The voiced and staged objections (Ku Klux Klan performances) to the service of black patrons are based either on the taboo of commensality or revulsion regarding a white female serving food to black men. After conducting a sociological research in a selected group of Southern counties, Johnson draws a list of rigid taboos, which are not to be breached under any circumstances, the first three include: "Negroes may never marry whites . . . never dance with whites . . . never eat with whites" (277–278). Notably, the source of both objections indirectly implied violation of Southern cultural norms via oblique but well understood references to the sexual nature of white female service.

Ilgie is aware that commensality would violate the racially pure personal space demanded by white regulars of her café, which in turn might not only boil their blood but trigger violent performances of authority under the cover of white sheets. Ilgie straightforwardly explains this concern to Ocie Smith, an African American rail yard worker: "You know that if it was up to me, I'd have you come on in the front door and sit at a table, but you know I can't do that . . . There's a bunch in town that would burn me down in a minute, and I've got to make a living" (Flagg 53). "The bunch in town" that Ilgie mentions is an allusion to a thriving KKK chapter, whose vigilante-like activities attempt to "restore morality in both the private and public sectors" (Piacentino 411). Ku Klux Klan, "also popularly known as the Invisible Empire," was originally founded in 1866 in Tennessee. One historian of the Klan, David A. Horowitz, has explained that "[r]eacting harshly to post-Civil War threats to white supremacy and Democratic rule, Klansmen defied the law with acts of terrorism and intimidation against newly freed African-American slaves, Union army occupiers of the southern states, and white Republicans" (2) until it ceased its operation in 1869. The Invisible Empire rose from the ashes in 1915, coincidentally in the year of the release of *Birth of the Nation*, which helped with the Klan membership recruitment (Piacentino 410). The hooded movement "advocated white supremacy, intending through their influence and their secret and subversive activities to resurrect a social order in which blacks would be restored to their former permanent subservient status to a white, male-dominated society" (Piacentino 410). With the membership soaring to several million in the 1920s, the Klan "flourished at the grassroots level, reflecting a sense of American iden-

tity and civic engagement that was shared by many white Protestant Americans in the aftermath of World War I” (Pegram x).

Aware of KKK’s racism and religious bigotry, yet armed with strong moral views on segregation and business acumen, Idgie refrains from openly transgressing racial etiquette, in which “[t]he separation of blacks and whites at mealtime, however minimal or artificial, was among the most strictly enforced rules” (Ritterhouse 24). If she wants to stay in business, Idgie cannot openly defy the racist status quo; she has to make concessions. Idgie chooses one of the most common accommodations in such a social context. Continuing to justify her actions to Ocie Smith, Idgie instructs him: “I want you to go back over to the yard and tell your friends, anytime they want anything, just to come on around to the kitchen door” (Flagg 53). Such a decision bespeaks the café’s social mission to feed humanity but at the same time prevents cross-racial fraternizing, it is illustrative of

[a] more common compromise [which] was a rear door or side window carry-out option that preserved the front door/back door structure of plantation culture and avoided the symbolic implications of sitting down together; the hierarchy was further maintained by requiring African Americans to bring their own paper bags for sandwiches and buckets for ice cream and Coke (Abel 179).

The act of selling food to the disempowered, both African Americans and poor whites, through the kitchen door can be construed as one of the social performances which are “formed, understood, and reiterated through cultural scripting” (Madison 155).

Proper racial conduct is expressed in everyday interactions between white and black customers of the Whistle Stop Café through cultural scripts, which are expressed and negotiated through, for example, denying African Americans access to the dining section of the café through the front door. However, even that concession is viewed as a transgression of racial segregation. Idgie is confronted by Grady, the town sheriff, who is both her admirer and a KKK member, about the Klan’s objections to her business policy: “Idgie, you ought not to be selling those niggers food, you know better than that. And there’s some boys in this town that’s no happy about it. Nobody wants to eat in the same place that niggers come, it’s not right and you just ought not be doin’ it” (Flagg 53). Acknowledging the fact that “Klan membership in many communities was . . . an open secret and included public officials, Protestant ministers, and ordinary and prominent citizens alike” (Pegram 6),

Idgie downplays, if not downright emasculates, the hooded Klansman: “Well, Grady, tell you what. The next time those ‘some people’ come in here, like Jack Butts and Wilbur Weems and Pete Tidwell, I’ll ask ‘em if they don’t want anybody to know who they are when they go marching around in one of those stupid parades you boys have, why don’t they have enough sense to change their shoes?” (Flagg 54)

This “bunch of grown men getting liquored up and putting sheets on their heads” (Flagg 54), as Idgie succinctly describes them, violently denies any kinship or equality with African Americans. The Klansman “fused purity reform and community activism with a controversial heritage of racism and nativism” (Horowitz 1). With “a reformist zeal” the hooded members object to anything which is “deemed morally scandalous or dangerous to the preservation of a socially conservative American value system” (Piacentino 411). They see themselves as “the guarantor of traditional social morality” (Horowitz 3). They rule out biracial dining because “[f]ood sharing, or commensality . . . is a great signifier of community, and anthropologists have emphasized its role in kinship and reciprocity ties in countless cultural settings” (Bell and Valentine 106). Social boundaries are demarcated and the bonds formed within them cemented while sharing a meal as “not only . . . the proprieties of food [are] seen as being incorporated into the eater, but, by a symmetrical process, the very absorption of given foods is seen as incorporating the eater into a culinary system and into the group which practices it” (Beardsworth 54).

Because Idgie trivializes the warnings, Grady turns to Ruth in order to appeal to her better sense of propriety. Ruth counters Grady by referencing the visual politics of Jim Crow: “Oh Grady, what harm can it be to sell a few sandwiches out the back door? It’s not like they’re coming in and sitting down . . . They are not hurting anybody, Grady” (Flagg 54). Ruth’s retort reflects the fact that “sharing a meal, or even an eating space, performs a . . . charged symbolic function” (Abel 164). Ruth manages to defuse the crisis by removing African Americans from the dining section of the café to the rear entrance, where they are less visible to the white clientele. Unable to deny the logic of Ruth’s arguments, Grady has to concede “Well . . . okay for now, I guess,” only to remind her that he represents the voice of authority: “But you make sure you keep them at the back door, you hear me?” (Flagg 55). However, Ruth’s solution also exposes the hypocrisy of the visual politics of Jim Crow: African Americans cannot consume food in the company of white people, even the very food they themselves have been preparing. After averting the threat of open conflict looming over the café, even if they

seemingly accept Jim Crow's bipartition of society and feed blacks and the homeless through the kitchen back door, Ruth and Idgie act in accord with their strong sense of justice: "the only thing that changed was on the menu that hung on the back door; everything was a nickel or a dime cheaper. They figured fair was fair . . ." (Flagg 55). Such a strategy shows a combination of Idgie and Ruth's strong moral views on segregation and their basic sense of decency and Christian morality.

Quite interestingly, the café becomes the site of bonding across both color and gender lines against white chauvinist domination and abuse. The two-fold oppression converges in the person of Frank Bennett, a man who repeatedly abused his wife Ruth, and who as a KKK enthusiast, brutally abused blacks, among them Sipse, the cook at the café. As a result of unified efforts on the part of his victims, the abuser ends up on the café's menu. This justice is administered as a measure to prevent the kidnapping of Ruth's baby, and is meted out with a deadly frying pan by Sipse and Smokey Lonesome. In order to get rid of the incriminating evidence (Bennett's corpse), Idgie uses one particular Southern festivity as a cover-up. Idgie has Big George, Sipse's son, start the hog boiling season earlier than usually, "It was another ice-cold Alabama afternoon, and the hogs were boiling in the big iron pot out in back of the cafe. The pot was bubbling over the top, full of long-gone hogs that would soon be smothered with Big George's [the café's cook] special barbecue sauce" (Flagg 207). What's left of Frank is then served the unwitting patrons of the café, including detectives investigating his disappearance. Big George's new secret flavor in the sauce becomes a signifier of culinary resistance to the oppression of the weak: both women and African Americans. The sexist pig Bennett becomes a "barbecued pig," a "secret" that gets "hidden in the sauce" (Lindenfeld 239).

BBQ is not simply quintessential, iconic Southern food.⁴ The celebration of pork during BBQ fests is a public spectacle of community, "the communal eating festivals . . . [seek] to reinforce the bonds of family and community by preserving their rich culinary traditions" (Levenstein 41). John Shelton Reed, Tennessean sociologist, claims that barbecue transgresses all the social boundaries in the South: a "good barbecue joint may be the one place you'll find Southerners of all descriptions—yuppies, hippies, and cowboys, Christians and sinners, black and white together" (47). In a similar fashion,

⁴ As a Southern specialty, BBQ is pervasive and present everywhere; South Carolina is even divided into four distinctive 'barbecue regions' with varying distinctive sauces (Kovacik and Winberry 208-9).

in her autobiography Zora Neale Hurston endows barbecue with significance in the utopian, post-racist future: “Maybe all of us who do not have the good fortune to meet or meet again, in his world, will meet at a barbeque” (*Dust Tracks* 286).

The café is certainly not reminiscent of what Warner called a “raceless” pit barbecue joint (102–3); the hog boiling season and resulting BBQ are cultural performances informed by and expressing racial relations and status quo under Jim Crow. Steven Hoelscher’s definition of a cultural performance as “the sorts of nonordinary, framed public events that require participation by a sizable group and that, as planned-for public occasions, invest their participants with meaning” (661) captures the meaning of BBQ in the town of Whistle Stop. The inclusiveness of the festivity seems to subvert, even if temporarily, Jim Crow bipartition of society—openly sharing the same kind of meat not only prepared but, more importantly, also consumed by blacks constitutes a transgression of the savage/civilized polarity imposed by white supremacy (Warner 6, 7). Cultural performances, such as the production and consumption of BBQ, “are reflexive instruments of cultural expression and power in which a group creates its identity by telling a story about itself” (Hoelscher 661). Big George’s barbecue is held in high esteem by the white residents of Whistle Stop. Indeed, Grady even brags to the Georgia detectives investigating Frank Bennett’s disappearance: “That nigger makes the best goddamned barbecue in the state. You’ve gotta get yourselves some of that, then you’ll know what good barbecue is” (Flagg 208). The fame of Big George’s BBQ transcends municipal limits: years later Ninny Threadgoode recalls that “people drove all the way from Birmingham to get it” (Flagg 302). However, the praise for the cook is leveled by rhetoric of cleanliness and purity, which inscribes inferiority onto the other race. Angela Cooley perceptively captures how during hog killing season inferiority is imprinted on blackness: “Requiring African Americans to perform the most distasteful chores in food production—such as cleaning out a pig’s intestines—reinforced the connection that whites tried to create between blackness and filth” (“Eating with Negroes” 79). In many ways, this relegation of distasteful tasks to those deemed socially inferior is reminiscent of India’s caste system.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas observes that “[i]f food is treated as a code, the message it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across boundaries . . . Food cate-

gories therefore encode social events” (61). Hence, the BBQ event, in catering to both white and black patrons of the café alike, indicates the possibility of biracial cooperation and consumption: everyone is included in the celebrations of BBQ. Boiling and consuming human flesh is not simply a vehicle for concealing discriminatory evidence of Frank Bennett’s murder, even though “white masculine dominance literally becomes an object of consumption” (Lindenfeld 239). With Idgie making the decision to barbecue the corpse, the backyard barbecue becomes her statement of power through which she expresses her objection of and resistance against oppression and disfranchisement of African Americans and women of both races.

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KAWIARNIA WHISTLE STOP JAKO SPRZECIW WOBEC RASOWEGO PODZIAŁU
W POWIEŚCI FANNIE FLAGG *SMAŻONE ZIELONE POMIDORY*

Streszczenie

Porządek społeczny Amerykańskiego Południa, oparty na supremacji białych oraz podporządkowaniu kobiet, znajduje odzwierciedlenie w przestrzeni kawiarni w powieści Fannie Flagg *Smażone zielone pomidory*. Tytułowa kawiarnia prowadzona przez dwie białe kobiety, Idgie Threadgoode i Ruth Jamison, staje się miejscem kontestacji właśnie tego porządku społecznego. Na początku lat 30. XX w. Idgie i Ruth, główne bohaterki powieści Flagg, wyprowadzają się ze swoich domów, aby zamieszkać razem na tyłach kawiarni, która będzie działać do 1969 r. Decyzja, aby otworzyć kawiarnię, ma podwójne znaczenie: bohaterki odrzucają / wykraczają poza przynależność do zacisza domowego, społecznie przypisywanego kobietom, ponadto – w czasach gdy prawa „Jim Crow” regulowały zinstytucjonalizowaną segregację rasową – postępują zgodnie z empatyczną wrażliwością społeczną, nakazującą im pomagać zarówno uciskanym czarnoskórom, jak i ubogim białym mieszkańcom miasteczka. Prowadzenie kawiarni pozwala Idgie i Ruth negocjować i na nowo zdefiniować własną tożsamość w kontekście sprzeciwu wobec ucisku rasowego oraz męskiej dominacji nad kobietą.

Streściła Urszula Niewiadomska-Flis

Słowa kluczowe: Fannie Flagg; *Smażone zielone pomidory*; Amerykańskie Południe; relacje rasowe; Ku Klux Klan (KKK); zacisze domowe; branża gastronomiczna; restauracje oraz kawiarnie; spożywanie jedzenia; „trzecie miejsce”; grill.

