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Writing Southern Race Relations:  
Stories Ellen Douglas Was Brave Enough to Tell

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Suzanne W. Jones

When Houghton Mifflin awarded Josephine Haxton a fellowship for her first novel, *A Family's Affairs* (1962), she assumed the pseudonym Ellen Douglas to protect the identity of her maternal aunts, who lived nearby in Natchez, Mississippi, and whose lives had inspired her plot. Her aunts told her that it was all right to publish the novel as long as they did not have to read it. Many others, never knowing they were reading biographical fiction, did read this well-reviewed first novel, which traces the family history of the Andersons of Homochitto from Charlotte Anderson and Ralph McGovern's courtship in 1917 to the family matriarch's death in 1948. However, Josephine Haxton's cover as Ellen Douglas was blown, at least among the Mississippi literati, when her penetrating story about southern race relations, "On the Lake," appeared in the August 26, 1961 issue of the *New Yorker*. Her Greenville friends Betty and Hodding Carter recognized the boating accident on which the story turns as a fictionalized version of an incident that had occurred when Jo was fishing with her sons.<sup>1</sup> Today, many books later, more people know her as Ellen Douglas than as Josephine Haxton.

When Ellen Douglas started writing, she drew inspiration from the way William Faulkner and other southern writers whom she admired, like Eudora Welty, depicted southern places. Douglas planted all of her fiction firmly in the region of Mississippi that she knew best; her Homochitto is modeled on Natchez, where she was born, and her Philippi on Greenville, where she lived with her husband and their children. But Douglas reacted against the gothic and mythic elements in Faulkner's work and used as her first literary models the great nineteenth-century realists: Dostoevsky, Flaubert, James, and Tolstoy. She admired Eudora Welty, but found her "too idiosyncratic a writer" to serve as a direct influence; instead she turned to Katherine Anne Porter to validate her own preoccupation with complex family relationships.<sup>2</sup> However, in the intensity of her focus on race, Ellen Douglas pushed beyond both Welty and Porter and rivaled Faulkner in her ability to craft revealing stories about southern race relations.

Relationships between blacks and whites became a central subject for Douglas, as early as her second book, *Black Cloud, White Cloud* (1963). As Carol Manning has pointed out, the stories in this collection

offer “stunning insight into the lingering, subtle effects of racial discrimination in the South”: “Few works of fiction before *Black Cloud, White Cloud* have suggested how complicated the South’s past has made personal relationships between blacks and whites in the South.”<sup>3</sup> During the volatile 1960s when Douglas’s husband, the composer and musician Kenneth Haxton, publicly encouraged the peaceful integration of schools, she hosted in their home in Greenville a historic meeting of black and white women, who advised the welfare department about setting up a daycare center.<sup>4</sup> In the 2008 documentary film, *Three Women Writers*, produced by Mississippi Public Broadcasting, Douglas explains how racial issues preoccupied the South during the time she began writing, and she admits, “I couldn’t have written about anything else.” She goes on to say that there were so many strong black women in her life, and they all had complicated relationships with the white women they worked for, or with, or took care of. These relationships she states interested her “enormously.”<sup>5</sup>

The novella “Hold On,” one of the stories in *Black Cloud, White Cloud*, depicts just such a relationship. In this longer version of her prize-winning *New Yorker* story, “On the Lake,” Anna, a white woman who is fishing with her sons, sees Estella, a black woman who used to work for her, on shore. Anna asks Estella to join them, even though their boat is too small and there are not enough life preservers. When the boat capsizes, Anna is forced to examine her relationship with Estella. Thinking she has overcome white guilt about past southern racial prejudice, Anna realizes that her irresponsible invitation may actually reveal such guilt – that she has perhaps invited Estella into the boat because she is black, thereby putting Estella’s life at risk, in order to buy her friendship and prove her own broadmindedness. The near drowning that follows with Estella clinging to Anna and Anna kicking her away, suggests the difficulty of overcoming the burdens of southern racial history even for those white people who think they have moved on.<sup>6</sup> Putting liberal white guilt and naiveté under such an intense microscope was new territory for southern writers.

When I edited a collection of stories a few years ago entitled *Crossing the Color Line: Readings in Black and White* (2000), I asked Ellen Douglas if I could anthologize one of her stories, and I chose a lesser-known story from *Black Cloud, White Cloud*, “I Just Love Carrie Lee.” I could tell that she really wanted me to choose “Hold On,” fearing from what her son Ayers Haxton told me that some readers would miss the intended irony in “I Just Love Carrie Lee,” as some of her neighbors

had.<sup>7</sup> But I wanted this story **because** of the brilliant, ironic narrative voice she had employed – to my mind, easily as distinctive as Eudora Welty’s much more famous narrator in “Why I Live at the PO.” The white female narrator, through her own storytelling, reveals not only a patronizing attitude toward her family’s black maid Carrie Lee but also her own ignorance and bigotry. While Carrie Lee, through long years of service to the white woman, has come to know the latter’s family as well as she knows her own, the reverse is not true. The narrator seldom even thinks to ask Carrie about her family, although she believes that she just “loves Carrie Lee.” In this story, much like in “Hold On,” the white protagonist is not as broadminded as she thinks she is, but in “I Just Love Carrie Lee,” the reader must reappraise the black-white relationship without the prompting of a chastened protagonist. As the *New York Times* reviewer said 40 years ago, “The method works splendidly, as the narrator, a vain, foolish trivial woman . . . is given all of the rope she needs to hang herself.”<sup>8</sup> Both stories took courage for a white woman living in the Deep South to write; in the one Ellen Douglas found her subject, in the other a distinctive way to tell it.

No doubt because of her subject matter, interviewers, including me, always seem to press Ellen Douglas about how her life relates to her art. And while willing to talk about personal influences in her fiction, she politely but firmly reminds those who ask that where readers see people and places, writers see an artistic “problem”: conflicting stories and messy emotions that have to be shaped with the conventions of fiction and worked out within or against a literary tradition.<sup>9</sup> Douglas became more and more experimental in the last half of her writing career, taking up different postmodern forms in *The Rock Cried Out* (1979), *A Lifetime Burning* (1982), and *Can’t Quit You, Baby* (1988). Interest in her work increased because of the narrative versatility evident in these experimental novels in which form so perfectly matches content. In *The Rock Cried Out* and *Can’t Quit You, Baby*, Douglas once again trained her unflinching eye on southern race relations, especially white ignorance.<sup>10</sup>

*The Rock Cried Out* is a pastiche of embedded narratives that reveal the naiveté of a young white man, Alan McLaurin, about his family, his community, and race relations in Mississippi during the 1960s and 1970s. The rural setting of the novel outside Douglas’s fictional Homochitto roughly corresponds to her own family farm near Natchez, property that she and her siblings own jointly, just as the McLaurin siblings own Chickasaw farm in *The Rock Cried Out*.<sup>11</sup> I find this novel fascinating in its treatment of race relations because Douglas seeks both

to reveal stories about southern race relations that white southerners had suppressed and to intervene in outsiders' stereotypical definitions of the South and southerners, both black and white. Thus Douglas's implied readers are both native southerners, particularly white southerners, and outsiders to the South. To address this dual audience, she chooses a first-person male narrator Alan McLaurin in his late twenties, a liberal white insider who has lived outside the South. We read the novel that Alan McLaurin is writing in 1978 about his experiences in Mississippi in 1971, when he left college in Boston to move home for an extended vacation, only to decide to stay. Douglas gives Alan her own criticisms of Faulkner, and she rewrites Ike McCaslin's story – in both form and content. But Alan's account is also punctuated with comments addressed to naïve outsiders: "Winter in Homochitto County might sound to a man from Boston as if it would be pleasant; but south Mississippi is not Florida."<sup>12</sup> When his college girlfriend from Ohio visits him, Alan has many opportunities to comment on the stereotypical stories that outsiders tell about the South and to expose the generic lens through which they see all southerners, both black and white. At the same time, this retrospective narrative technique allows Douglas to address insiders – by underlining how much Alan needs to learn about himself, his family, and his community.

Douglas understands the power of fiction to shape perceptions of place and region,<sup>13</sup> and she uses Alan's college girlfriend Miriam to demonstrate this power. Although Miriam has never been in the Deep South until she visits Alan, she has seen plenty of moss-draped live oaks in the movies. Because movie images have etched long hot southern summers in her brain, Miriam cannot see what Alan sees – the stark beauty of the Mississippi countryside in winter. At times, Miriam knows that she is using clichés. But when interacting with the new people she meets, Miriam relies on clichés of "southernness" and stereotypes of southerners to make her way in a place she only knows from the movies. She liberally peppers her speech with "y'all," unaware that the colloquialism is not used to refer to one person. She relates to southern women by talking about cooking and crocheting, never imagining, as Alan points out, that "most of the ones I know, like men, talk about sex and money and politics and movies and television and books and vice and crime and drugs and the vagaries of human nature and tragedies of human fate" (106). Through Miriam, Douglas critiques the very "obsession with idiom and idiosyncrasy" that historian James Cobb believes "threatens to turn the South of popular perception into caricature."<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps most significantly, Miriam predictably simplifies the unhappy outcome of the 1960s love affair between Alan's Aunt Lelia and their black farm laborer Sam by reducing the causes of their breakup to race alone, missing the very human emotions of Lelia's jealousy and Sam's love of Chickasaw Farm. As readers get to know Sam, we see that Sam's motivations in refusing to leave Mississippi so that he and Lelia could live their love openly up North are neither as simple as Miriam thinks (white racism) nor as simple as Aunt Lelia thinks (male fickleness) nor as simple as Alan thinks (love of Chickasaw Farm). Rather, the Sam that Douglas slowly reveals is a complex man, motivated by many strong feelings. Paradoxically, he is emotionally tied to the rural landscape of a region that has discriminated against him; ironically, he is a tenant farmer on the very land that his white lover's family owns.

To Miriam the South is the Klan, George Wallace, the Citizens' Council, *Brown v. Board of Education*; but to Alan McLaurin the South is Chickasaw Farm, his relatives, and the black farm laborers Sam and Noah with whom he hunts and fishes. But if Miriam is ignorant about the South, Alan is too. Although he is not unaware of the Civil Rights struggle in Mississippi, he remembers the Sixties as a time of bad news on television, a period during his adolescence when he was obsessed with his beautiful cousin Phoebe. Although *The Rock Cried Out* begins as a novel of education about the South for outsiders and people detached from the land, like Miriam, it ends as a novel of education for insiders like Alan, who thinks he knows his family and Chickasaw Farm like the back of his hand. The novel opens with broad hints of what Douglas sees is Alan's problem in thinking about place – the idea that he can divorce geographical location from “moral climate.”<sup>15</sup> Fleeing Boston, factory work, and his girlfriend Miriam to romance nature and create poetry in solitude at Chickasaw, he runs smack into the disconcerting effects of southern race relations when black college students and their graduate instructor pick him up as he is hitchhiking the last leg home. Much like earlier southern white writers, Alan looks to nature for redemptive recovery and to rural solitude for creative inspiration. Alan's attempt to interpret the rural landscape fails him as surely as Miriam's because both perceive the place through a biased interpretive lens. Neither knows all of the local stories, or even the whole truth of the stories they have been told.

Before Alan can write successfully about his home place, Douglas shows that he must open himself up to the repressed stories that reside there. These are the stories that Douglas has always been brave enough to tell. First, Alan learns of interracial sexual relations in his own family

– Sam’s love affair with his Aunt Lelia. Their story was once the South’s most repressed story and most tabooed relationship – the mutual desire between a white woman and a black man. Alan also discovers that the car accident in which his beloved cousin Phoebe died was actually caused by local Klan members. She was riding in the car with the black farm laborer, Sam, when they were ambushed because of their boldness. And Alan learns that his own family may be implicated in the racism that produced inequitable land distribution between blacks and whites in the South. From Noah, Sam’s father, Alan discovers that his own great uncle Dennison never gave Noah the oil well that Dennison promised him as payment for Noah’s advice about where to drill. Alan also learns that this betrayal was one in a string that stretched back to Alan’s great-grandfather, who never deeded Noah’s father the promised sixty acres of Chickasaw land that he had allowed him to build a house on and to farm rent free. This breach of trust is reminiscent of the black freedmen’s expectations during southern Reconstruction that they would receive forty acres and a mule.<sup>16</sup> Thus Alan learns that his family, which he takes such pride in thinking has a close relationship with the Daniels family, has violated their trust repeatedly.

Finally Alan learns from a biracial neighbor, Calhoun Levitt, that both Calhoun’s grandparents and his parents had to live a lie of white employer and black housekeeper because they were denied the right to marry. These laws against interracial marriage in southern states remained on the books until the 1967 Supreme Court case, *Loving v. Commonwealth of Virginia*. But the law against miscegenation did not prevent Calhoun’s white grandfather from willing Calhoun’s mother three hundred acres of land, which Calhoun farms. The fact that Calhoun owns land gives him more choices than other black characters in southern literature or life because land ownership allowed Calhoun to leave the cold northern city to which he had fled, but which he hated, and to return home to make ends meet during the Depression. But the bulk of Calhoun’s story concerns yet another buried southern tale, this one about a white union organizer who learned his activism and his racial tolerance at Vanderbilt Divinity School. By including this story, Douglas rescues from oblivion the small but not insignificant southern labor movement of the 1930s.<sup>17</sup>

Alan’s assessment is Douglas’s own: “none of these stories lent themselves to the needs of *The New York Times* – or *The Speckled Bird*. I doubt they would have borne out anybody’s theories – economic, political, moral – or mythological” (145).<sup>18</sup> But their very failure to meet outsiders’ expectations about Mississippi is precisely Douglas’s point for including

them in her novel. If audience expectations determine publication, how will the repressed southern stories get told? Who will publish then? How to get a truthful story and how to hear it accurately are issues embedded in the way Douglas sets up the chapters on storytellers and listeners. Alan's friend Lee attempts to elicit answers from the storytellers by asking leading questions, but both Noah and Calhoun resist the pattern that Lee tries to impose on their narratives. As Calhoun says, "The problem is, my answers may not be the answers to your questions ... But that's their problem, I said to myself. Maybe they can think up some questions to fit my answers" (198). Unlike Lee, Alan opens himself up to the possibility that Noah's and Calhoun's stories are true.

With the knowledge of all of these buried stories, Alan's understanding of both family and local history changes. Douglas suggests that these new stories make his sense of place more complex because the history of southern people, black and white, and their relationship to the land is more integrated than southerners themselves know, particularly white southerners. Douglas moves her characters beyond the South's ignoble past to what she terms "its misunderstood past." As a result, for her characters she creates the possibility that the future can grow out of the past, rather than be overshadowed by it.<sup>19</sup> However, at the end of the novel, readers do not know whether Alan will ever give Sam and Noah the promised oil wells or talk with his relatives about deeding them the sixty acres they worked so hard to cultivate and preserve. Douglas does not resolve the thorny issue of making restitution for inequitable land distribution in the South, but at least she was brave enough to explore the problem.

Ten years later, Douglas published *Can't Quit You, Baby*, another novel about southern race relations that both garnered rave reviews and broadened her readership well beyond the South. Much like the early stories in *Black Cloud, White Cloud*, the novel *Can't Quit You, Baby* explores in painful but brilliant detail the self-deception of a white woman, Cornelia, in her relationship with her African American maid, Tweet.<sup>20</sup> By choosing postmodern fiction as her vehicle and selecting as her narrator the author who is writing the novel we are reading, Douglas courageously invites readers to contemplate deception in the writer/reader relationship as well.

In Minrose Gwin's study of nineteenth-century women's writing, she found that "color lines blinded white women to the humanity" of black women and built in black women hatred for those white women who would not, or could not, see black women's suffering.<sup>21</sup> In *Can't Quit You, Baby* Douglas uses a first person white writer-narrator who periodically



breaks the spell of her fictional world to comment not only on the story, but on its construction. This strategy forces white readers in particular to reconsider their easy indulgence in illusions about interracial female friendships and race relations of mutual respect. By self-consciously exposing the way her novel is constructed, Douglas exposes the way interracial relationships are constructed. From the opening of the novel to its conclusion, the self-conscious writer-narrator raises questions about her own biases, about the story's very structure, and about the way to end the novel, as she highlights how southern etiquette with its emphasis on polite social interactions, helped disguise true feelings on both sides of the color line.

However, at the same time that southern racial etiquette created a script that allowed for a certain artificial ease in interracial relationships, it also allowed for white self-deception about the nature of black-white relationships. This deception is revealed in oral histories and southern fictions in which white people call beloved black servants members of their families and praise the "mutual respect" between the races during the Jim Crow era.<sup>22</sup> Douglas has pointed out that "this pervasive self-deception among white people about what their own behavior was and what its significance was, and the elaborate structure of beliefs about what black people were like – a structure meant to serve our own self-deception – created a sort of ghost world, a wholly unreal vision of the lives of the very black people we lived so intimately with."<sup>23</sup> From the beginning of *Can't Quit You, Baby*, Douglas's writer-narrator self-consciously insists on a more honest representation of the southern black-white relationships that blacks remember differently from whites.

Cornelia, whom Douglas marks physically as hard of hearing, politely listens to Tweet's stories about white injustice and black hardship, marital infidelity and familial competition over land. But Cornelia does not hear in these stories the evidence of institutionalized racism in the town's law offices and banks that Ellen Douglas makes sure her readers discern. Philosopher Jane Flax has pointed out that in America white people had the "'privilege' of 'forgetting' or not noticing the operations of race and many socially sanctioned opportunities for doing so" because of their own relation to the privileges of racism, their own complicity in its maintenance, and/or their own guilt.<sup>24</sup> Certainly Cornelia falls into the first two categories, however unwittingly. Instead in Tweet's stories Cornelia hears confirmation of her own unexamined stereotypes about black people as superstitious and immoral because she attends to the details in Tweet's stories that fulfill her expectations about black people. Almost uncon-

sciously Cornelia uses Tweet's stories to affirm herself as intellectually and morally superior to Tweet and as socially and ethically superior to the various white people who emerge as villains in Tweet's stories. But at the same time Cornelia consciously focuses on the special bond she thinks she has with Tweet. However, Cornelia confuses the companionable hours that she and Tweet spend working together in her home with the personal expressions of intimacy and vulnerability that characterize true friendship and emerge in a relationship between equals. Unlike Tweet, who tells Cornelia about her husband's infidelities and her brother's deviousness regarding her grandfather's estate, Cornelia does not share her personal life with Tweet. If Cornelia admitted the strains in her own marriage or family relationships, to herself or to Tweet, she could not feel superior. Because of the racial hierarchy in their relationship, Tweet does not tell Cornelia exactly what she thinks of her, although Tweet's stories reveal how unjust and untrustworthy she thinks many white people are. *Can't Quit You, Baby* shows how the inequality in their relationship makes it extremely difficult for Cornelia to hear the truth of Tweet's stories or for Tweet to express her true feelings.

The novel takes up the work of determining when a white woman will be able to understand a black woman's point of view and when a black woman will be able to tell the truth with impunity. For Douglas, it seems understanding can come only through experience because it is when Cornelia leaves her sheltered life as a lady after her husband's death and travels to New York alone that she realizes her common humanity with Tweet, whose life has been filled with hardship. Although Cornelia has lectured Tweet about the futility of hating those who have been unjust to her and has self-righteously proclaimed that she has herself never hated anyone, Cornelia realizes in New York that she has always hated her mother for attempting to control her life. In a big city without her family to protect her, Cornelia is forced to stop "skimming over the surface of her life."<sup>25</sup> That is when she hears Tweet's voice, ignores her mother's, and mines Tweet's stories for advice about how to negotiate a difficult, indifferent, and sometimes hostile world. Tweet expresses her true feelings about Cornelia only late in the novel when Tweet is no longer employed by her and has nothing to lose. Only when the white woman is put in a vulnerable position does she let go her racial pride; only when the black woman is no longer dependent on the white woman for a job does she fully express her anger.

The postmodern form of the novel enacts the very difficulties in representing "the other" that Cornelia experiences in understanding Tweet's

thoughts and feelings. Because readers inhabit Cornelia's consciousness, but not Tweet's, Douglas puts them in the position of sharing Cornelia's ignorance to some extent in order drive home her point. A third person narrator tells Cornelia's story, which enables Douglas to reveal Cornelia's thoughts to readers, even though Cornelia will not tell Tweet her secrets. Tweet tells her own life stories from a first-person perspective. Readers hear her stories just as Cornelia does, but we do not enter Tweet's thoughts, a limitation the narrator readily acknowledges as a product of the "ghost world" that whites created. Douglas refuses to erase the presence of her writer-narrator and therefore the reader's awareness of the biased perspective from which this novel, or any novel, is told.

Douglas chooses to narrate *Can't Quit You, Baby* from the perspectives that replicate how a southern white woman writer would know the stories of a white employer and a black maid, "telling you [the reader] about Cornelia, letting Tweet speak for herself" (38). This is a position Douglas knew well, for she dedicated the novel to the memory of Mathelde Griffin, her long-time housekeeper, who according to Douglas could "assess who she could say what to and how uncomfortable she could make someone before she had to quit,"<sup>26</sup> much like Tweet.

To get outside of the deceptive world of southern race relations, Douglas must give her characters another script, one that is not governed by politeness or guardedness. But first the white writer-narrator must make the imaginative leap into her black character's head and heart, the very leap that some reviewers and critics thought tripped up William Styron when he wrote about Nat Turner.<sup>27</sup> Douglas's writer-narrator must go beyond relaying the stories that Tweet is willing to tell her white employer, to revealing the hidden feelings about Cornelia that Tweet has had to suppress. However, when Cornelia is finally ready to listen carefully to Tweet, Tweet is not talking, having fallen victim to an aneurysm.

Tweet's inability to speak becomes a second controlling metaphor in a novel that points both to the reasons for the impasse between black and white women and to a way out of the dilemma. If white women need to listen more carefully, then black women need to be able to speak their anger. Tweet's illness inverts the women's social positions, placing Cornelia in a position to take care of Tweet, instead of Tweet taking care of her, and for Cornelia to have to ask to visit Tweet in her home, rather than presume she is welcome, as Cornelia does on the day of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. When Cornelia first begins visiting the incapacitated Tweet, she talks incessantly, saying everything she has suppressed or repressed for years, but she still does not listen as

attentively to Tweet as she needs to in order to understand that the noises Tweet makes as she begins to recover actually have meaning. It takes a curious child, Cornelia's grandson, to notice that "Tweet can't talk, but she can sing" (247).

The writer-narrator makes the reader aware of her quandary about how to end the stalemate between the women and thus the novel we are reading: "Can't someone else search for the end of this story? Discover where it is leading us? No. It has to be me" (250). She knows full well that the ending is crucial because her ideology about race relations will reveal itself there. The writer-narrator worries that much like Cornelia she has skimmed over the surface of the narrative because of her limited perspective and wonders "What tangle of snakes have I been skiing over?" (240). She points to two places in the text when Cornelia has been in Tweet's home: to pay a very awkward condolence call when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated and to help nurse Tweet's stepfather on his deathbed. The writer-narrator's self-conscious address to the reader – "Do you remember?" – is an invitation to readers to revisit these scenes and a reminder that we have overlooked clues as well. In each scene there is a gold barrette and a tangle of Mardi Gras beads in a bowl, which the writer-narrator says she included "to give you a sense of the richness and poverty, the clutter and crowdedness and human closeness in Tweet's house" (240). In the final scenes these objects are still there, but Cornelia and the reader see them differently because of the imaginative leap that the writer-narrator makes. Readers find out that the barrette is Cornelia's, but that she has overlooked it because she is preoccupied with how well she and Tweet understand each other.

Douglas's repetition of the word *tangle* makes the tangled beads and the gold barrette function symbolically in the story to represent not just Cornelia's difficulty seeing but the writer-narrator's and the reader's as well. In order to see beneath the surface the writer-narrator moves the action to Tweet's house and positions Cornelia as a character in Tweet's story. The writer-narrator selects the stereotypical situation of a black servant having stolen from her white employer, but she reveals what the white employer and white reader may not understand. For Tweet the gold barrette is not significant because of its monetary value as Cornelia might suspect, but because of its symbolic value – as an object embodying Tweet's hatred of Cornelia's blindness to power and privilege. Cornelia has so many gold barrettes that she has not even noticed this one is missing until her grandchildren bring it home thoughtlessly after playing pirates at Tweet's house. Even after Cornelia realizes Tweet has taken her

barrette, she remains too polite to confront Tweet directly, although she indirectly lets Tweet know that she knows about the theft. Tweet, who sees that Cornelia knows, cannot stand the artificiality of their relationship any longer. She finally breaks the silence caused by southern racial etiquette and symbolized by her illness, and she tells Cornelia that she took the barrette. Tweet punctures Cornelia's illusion of mutual respect, reminding Cornelia that the subordinate positions in which whites have held black people actually produced the very stereotypes whites hold.

The intensity of Tweet's outburst derives from years of suppressing her rage at the many white people who have discriminated against her – from the white neighbor who stole her land to the banker who helped him and the lawyer who failed her grandfather's attempt to protect her. Tweet's inability to continue to suppress her emotions originates from her total frustration with Cornelia's blindness to Tweet's anger, with Cornelia's willful ignorance of white prejudice, and with her inability to see her common humanity with Tweet. The scene degenerates into a barrage of expletives hurled at one another until they are interrupted by the arrival of Tweet's husband. His presence makes for a rather abrupt, and some readers have thought too easy, ending to their angry exchange.

The conclusion of the novel, which quickly follows, holds a hint of promise that the relationship will continue. The novel concludes with Cornelia's departure as Tweet sings the same blues lyrics to Cornelia that Cornelia has sung to her adulterous husband, "I love you, darlin, but I hate your treacherous low down ways" (256). Thus Douglas indicates that although Tweet and Cornelia may not be family, their daily life together has made them "related," and this will not be the last they see of each other. Although they do not become friends, their angry exchange signals that they have finally put down the old script of southern racial etiquette. The novel's final words suggest that they may even create a new one: "Sing it, Tweet. Yeah. Sing it, Cornelia. Sing it" (256).

Ellen Douglas has said that over the years she has become "more and more interested in what's true and what isn't true and how impossible it is to recognize the truth or to tell the truth or to read a book and know it's true."<sup>28</sup> She titled her last book, *Truth: Four Stories I Am Finally Old Enough to Tell* (1998) and divulged some family secrets. But she has been bravely telling hard and painful truths about southern race relations since the 1960s. As the years have gone by, Douglas's early desire to protect her family has given way to an even more compelling need to reveal her community and the South to itself. By finding just the right form for each story she conceived, Ellen Douglas sought to make her preoccupa-

tion with truth and moral responsibility, especially as it pertained to race relations, her readers' as well.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Born Josephine Ayers in Natchez, Mississippi, on July 12, 1921, Ellen Douglas grew up in small towns in Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana, as her family moved to follow her father's civil engineering career. Douglas's literary life was nurtured early on by her mother who read to her every night and her paternal grandmother who wrote children's books. Although her parents lived and breathed the southern segregationist view, Douglas's own world view expanded considerably when she encountered a broad-minded sociology professor at the University of Mississippi who directed her honors thesis on tenant farming. Books began widening Douglas's world early on. In high school, she devoured William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, and Thomas Wolfe, and at Ole Miss she read W. J. Cash's *The Mind of the South* (1941), Eudora Welty's *A Curtain of Green* (1941), and Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940). Douglas writes vividly of her reading life in her collection of essays, *Witnessing* (2004). In 1945, fifteen years before her formal writing life began, Ellen Douglas married composer and musician Kenneth Haxton (1919-2002). He took her to his hometown of Greenville, where he managed his family's department store, Nelms and Blum, and collaborated in creating Levee Press, which produced limited editions of works by William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Will Percy. In Greenville they raised three sons, Richard, Ayers, and Brooks, and enjoyed a literary society that included poet Charles Bell, newspaper editor Hodding Carter, historian Shelby Foote, novelist Walker Percy, and literary agent Ben Wasson. See Suzanne W. Jones (2008: 244-245) for the biographical information here and elsewhere in the essay.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Ellen Douglas at Jackson State University in Jackson, Mississippi, June 19, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Carol Manning (1984: 122).

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Ellen Douglas at Jackson State University, June 19, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> *Three Women Writers* (Ellen Douglas, Suzann Hudson, Tayari Jones, with Gene Edwards as host), Mississippi Public Broadcasting, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> See Manning (1984: 122-125) for a detailed analysis of how this story works.

<sup>7</sup> Conversation with Ayers Haxton, Natchez, Mississippi, February 20, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Saul Maloff (1963: 5).

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Ellen Douglas at Jackson State University, June 19, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> I have written at length about these novels. See Jones (2004), and Jones (2002: 121-146).

<sup>11</sup> See John Griffin Jones (1983: 47-73). In writing *The Rock Cried Out*, Douglas has said that she was struggling with how best to present "the sensibility of young people of her children's generation":

When I decided to do that, I then had to decide where to put them, and it occurred to me that the setting in rural south Mississippi would be extraordinarily fruitful in terms of producing the kinds of circumstances that I could use in making that exploration, particularly because that part of the country was violently involved in the civil rights

movement. I also knew the isolated, rural world I wanted to use; I was at home there. I knew the kind of people I would use, both the young white people and the black families. (1994: 68)

<sup>12</sup> Ellen Douglas (1994: 9). Subsequent citations are indicated parenthetically in the text.

<sup>13</sup> Douglas (1975: 23-25).

<sup>14</sup> James Cobb (1999: 142).

<sup>15</sup> Jerry Speir (1984-1987: 236).

<sup>16</sup> This proposal was made by Congressman Thaddeus Stevens (1792-1868) of Pennsylvania. He wanted to seize land owned by slaveholders and redistribute it to former slaves, but Congress never acted on his belief that the vote was not enough to uplift southern blacks. After he died in 1868, the idea was no longer discussed.

<sup>17</sup> One example is Herman C. Nixon (1886-1967), a leader in the Southern Conference on Human Welfare, whose writings emphasized class conflict and pointed to how southern landowners and businessmen exploited both poor whites and poor blacks. See Morton Sosna (1977).

<sup>18</sup> *The Great Speckled Bird* was an underground leftist newspaper published in Atlanta, Georgia, from 1968 to 1976.

<sup>19</sup> Douglas (1981: 298) reiterates Jean-Paul Sartre's point that in Faulkner's metaphysic "the future does not exist."

<sup>20</sup> See Sharon Monteith (2000).

<sup>21</sup> Minrose Gwin (1985: 109).

<sup>22</sup> While such narratives are no longer found in serious literature, they still circulate in privately printed southern memoirs. See Gray Rowell Henry (2001).

<sup>23</sup> Speir (1984-1987: 237).

<sup>24</sup> Jane Flax (1990: 177).

<sup>25</sup> Douglas (1989: 127). Subsequent citations are indicated parenthetically in the text.

<sup>26</sup> Shirley M. Jordon (1993: 55).

<sup>27</sup> Styron (1967).

<sup>28</sup> Betty Tardieu (1995: 25).

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