

White Gloves and Collard Greens: One Southerner's Contradictory I

(Delivered at a conference of the CUNY Women's Coalition held at Barnard College in 1982)

by Dure Jo Gillikin

*White gloves are who they want you to be.
Collard greens are who you are.*

Wear white gloves and you become socially correct.

Wear white gloves and you show that you know (or your mother knows) what is proper and right—not only what is right, but who is right.

Wear white gloves and you are Miss Right with the other Miss Rights, sipping tea and not rattling the 'cup against the saucer; speaking proper English, forgetting about "ain't I" and being uncomfortable with "aren't I."

Wear white gloves and you are a lady, the top of the ladder, the essence of femininity.

Being invited to a place where other females wear white gloves means your family has money or connections; that you've got a bloodline, though poor; that you live in a nice place and take dance and piano lessons—or that some day you will have or be all of these things.

Wear white gloves when you're young and one evening you'll meet Mr. Right, not at the tea party but at the country club dance on Saturday night, and then you'll be Cinderella with her prince.

Wearing white gloves, then, meant that you had accepted society's standards for your role as female, as human being; it meant that you had agreed to go along with society's version of who you should be.

In the world of the spirit; white gloves helped you make it with God. To make it with God or Mammon, you had to dress for it. White gloves meant that you were chaste, were pure, were innocent. Just as no decent male would come calling for the improperly dressed female, so God didn't deign to drop in on—much less eternally save—females not wearing their Sunday best, females not sitting rigid on the hard wooden pews on Sunday morning and Sunday night. In that time and place, the only perfect girl was a girl who knew nothing, said nothing, did

nothing—especially about sex until the wedding night. The Southern belle, then, was as good as dead, as well-dressed as a corpse.

But those white gloves also meant something else and what it meant was this: there is a best you, and that best you wears clothes that show you off on Sundays and on social occasions. It showed that there was something inherently wrong with the way you were during the week, that there was something inappropriate about the girl who was active, who wore jeans and a plaid shirt, who had mean thoughts sometimes, who ate collard greens, who drank Pepsi-Cola as if it were water, who dared to think on her own. Growing up Southern meant that there was always this sharp, almost irreconcilable tension between who you were supposed to be, to God and to others, and who you really were.

The world of collard greens is the real world, the world of everyday, the world in which food has a bad smell, the world in which people go to the bathroom, blow their noses, have body odor, and occasionally curse like sailors. The world of collard greens is the natural world, the world in which you plant strawberries in the rain, smell wisteria outside your window when you wake up on a spring morning see your reflection in a magnolia leaf, hike ten miles to the beach with your girlfriends and then jump in the ocean with all your clothes on.

In the world of collard greens, you wear the clothes of your choice when and where you want to be they evening gowns or bikinis, jeans or jogging shoes, in this world you love women as well as men use your brain as well as your body, achieve yourself rather than waiting for your husband to do so. In the world of collard greens, you feel integrated, at one with yourself and with others. It feels good to be you

Yet collard greens are looked down on or not known about. Collard greens are traditionally the vegetable of the lower class in the South, yet there is no vegetable healthier for you. They don't look delicious, they don't smell good cooling and they don't smell good leaving your body. All Southerners, rich or poor, if you punch them in the belly button in the middle of the night and ask them if they love collard greens, will smack their lips before opening their eyes and say, "Why, yes, of course. What makes you ask? Better than chatcubriand or turkey or steak is a opt o collard greens, touched by frost, cooked with fatback streak of lean or ham, and doused with hot pepper vinegar. And don't forget the cornbread And, oh, the juice left in the pot, the pot liquor! Ambrosia may

have been the food of the classical Greek gods, but to southerners, your True Southerner, that is, the pot liquor from collard greens, well, now, that beat ambrosia all to hell and gone. But, then, we don't mention that when we have our white gloves on.

In the world of collard greens, sex and violence are almost one. In the world of white gloves, body was ethereal. There, they dewed the world of collard greens just as they denied sex, but it always burst through. Sex didn't exist for the white-gloved. Mothers never came right out and said the word sex. How could they? No such word existed. But silently mothers zinged these words out to their daughters on The Righteous, Fearful Mothers Network--first of all, you don't have a body. And if you do find out one day that you do have a body, don't ever let anyone else know it. And, furthermore, don't come to me on the day you do discover that you've got another body growing in yours and tell that the boy who put it there has fled. Well, the mothers never let on that they knew what sex was, not officially, that is. But as we sat in our pretty little dresses on Sunday morning listening to the beautifully coifed and clothed Sunday school teacher, we remembered the whispers of our mother and fathers about her part in the divorce of her next-door neighbors. We also knew the woman across the road from the church who shot herself one summer night because she had too many children and one more was on the way across the highway, aimed his rifle and shot her in the back; he shot her in the back at high noon because she had dared to reject him for someone else.

In the South, violence is up close and personal, the people who love you best kill you first. We knew that sex was deadly, that we females possessed something that males wanted and would kill to keep. But our mothers told us nothing to assuage our fears, how to protect ourselves. A Southern girl of the 30's and 40's walked a ragged, almost impossible, razor's edge and walked it blindfolded because her mother kept her in ignorance. But, not to worry, we found out through trial and error, by exchanging rumors on those long Sunday afternoons, mixing talk of God's wrath and our fear of death and eternal punishment, with talk of menstrual periods. Do you wash your hair when you've got yours? Can I go horseback riding, or swimming? What do you do about cramps? In those days, the answers were all a hazard and guess. When it came to sex itself we experimented in the bus near the schoolyard, kissing one another, not on the lips but on the hand held over

the lips until finally we ventured to meet lips with lips. And there were, of course, those birthday parties, given with full parental approval, where we played spin the bottle and kissed very boy there, in every way there was to kiss. Always, as ever, the contradiction: sex didn't exist, yet they dumped us into this pleasurable, fiery cauldron and left us to cook ourselves into womanhood.

Here is the photograph of the white-gloved world, the attractive, but artificial world that did its best to lock me into the world of the Southern Belle. There I stand, seven years old, wearing:

A lacy, white blouse with puffy, short sleeves
A green, shiny jumper with straps crossing my heart
White sock
Black, patent-leather shoes with straps
Hair in corkscrew curls just below my shoulders
A big, red Kitty Higgins bow ribbon in my hair
My head slightly bowed to the right and resting on my breast
My white gloved hands rigid by my sides
And on my lips a questioning, a somehow protesting smile.

This is what you want me to be, the smile said-pretty and nicely dressed, and that's okay. I like the texture of the clothes, but if they will keep me immobile, silent, mindless, well I'm not sure I want them.

The photograph I prefer of my ideal world of the collard greens, the world of the natural and the free is this:

Children and parents, on a Saturday in spring, in a former collard patch across from my house, playing a pickup game of softball, hitting, running, sliding, laughing, free and easy. I wouldn't say that I necessarily have the skin you love to touch, but it is so white that on the day not only my knees were knotted with dirt and grime, but the dirt was in-between my barefoot toes, in the bends on my elbows and knees. In the ridges under my neck, under my eyes, and in my nostrils and ears, and over my hair and the rest of my skin were several blankets of dirt, All rennelled with rivers of sweat. Fifty years after my death, I may, just may, be as happily at one with nature and with people as I was on that day. As you can see, I have taken a bath since

then, but that world of activity, of communion was the natural world, the world of my choice.

Fortunately for me, the Southern world left little girls, free, except of Sundays and for rare teas and social occasions where everyone was so class-conscious, clothes-conscious, beauty-conscious that the blood froze. By the time I reached adolescence, the time when the South gets deadly serious about your assuming the role of lady, I was already too in love with being independent, with the joy of knocking the hell out of a softball to be physically or mentally paralyzed by my peppermint-striped evening gown.

But in this world of the Southern Belle, no excess, no excelling was allowed. It did not matter that for years I had a .500 batting average and a field expertise to match. It did not matter that the first full set of tennis I ever played I beat the North Carolina Junior Champion. There was nobody to spot the physical talent and push it. Forget about fame and fortune. And as for mind, what was that? At least a body could be seen.

It was not until my junior year in high school, when I made the National Honor Society that my mother saw that I might just possibly have a mind to use. That didn't keep her, however, from making a match with another mother from our church whose son was an alcoholic, who was a brawler, whom I was to save from ruin just as he was to save me from a fate worse than death--the single life, or ever worse than that. The match-making still rankles, still stuns, as I imagine how my mother must have feared for my womanhood. I went along with it even to the point of ruining my reputations with church members and members of the community until one evening I was almost unable to resist his sexual attractiveness. That was an experience so entirely new to me, so powerful that I knew that if I didn't stop this pleasing of the mothers that I would have to give up my plans for my life, my education, my achieving anything on my own. The next time I knew he was coming to call I ran away, ran away into the dark and fell into a ditch full of water rather than tell him to his face that I didn't

want to see him anymore. Such is the extent of Southern courtesy, or shall I call it cowardice? After that baptism in ditch water, I determined a face-to-face confrontation was best. And he didn't die for love of me; he married, had children, died of alcoholism years ago. And I, 1 of 15 North Carolina to do so, received a full, four-year scholarship to college, found there my own true love, came to New York City, and here I am living with reason as well as with love.

To show you the limits of my Southern world, I never saw a painting until I went off to college, never talked about the meaning of a poem or a novel with anyone, never had the experience of sharing thoughts about politics or art. There was, however, the joy of sitting on my father's lap and having him read poetry to me, of listening to the drama of sermons and week-long revivals where my soul was damned one night and saved the next. There were making yourself and the world the best it could be, with love as well as with threats. When I became part of the women's movement, I brought that idealism with me, that we could change things; that same feeling of working and loving with others to accomplice something worthwhile carried over into feminism.

White gloves are not all bad, not if you see them in another light, certainly not the light in which they were once intended to be seen. White gloves can stand for what you aspire to, to a goal you plan to attain. And the communion of the white-gloved female saints and sinners in that gray-shingle, stain-glassed church of my childhood was doing just that--praying and hoping for the best though it was for a better world in the sweet bye and bye, not the painful and pleasurable here and now. Those white gloves which my mother taught me to wear, did instill in me a sense of what is right and the desire to make wrong right. After all, isn't the hoping for and the working for equal rights for women a dream of human responsibility that is based on the world of the collar patch, a world that sees being human as a fallible condition, a condition that can be rectified in this world, the here and now?