

Spring 2022

The Hidden Roles of Props

Alexandria Kledzik

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.unf.edu/enc_wasa



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kledzik, Alexandria, "The Hidden Roles of Props" (2022). *Touring Lincolnvilleville: A Celebration of Historic Black Business*. 6.

https://digitalcommons.unf.edu/enc_wasa/6

This Text is brought to you for free and open access by the Professional and Public Writing at UNF Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Touring Lincolnvilleville: A Celebration of Historic Black Business* by an authorized administrator of UNF Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [Digital Projects](#).

© Spring 2022 All Rights Reserved

The Hidden Roles of Props

By Alexandria Kledzik

Foreword:

St. Augustine was the site of numerous Civil Rights demonstrations during the early 1960s. Martin Luther King Jr. even found himself in the ancient city during the year of 1964. During the movement, local African-American teenagers would participate in non-violent protests against segregation across the St. Augustine; these would often end in arrests by the city. The following story is an imagining of the role of props in the scenes of segregated restaurants of St. Augustine:

As the front door slowly closes, the buzzing of the air conditioner commences. It sits in the window in its own corner, high above the territory of the customers. Normally, it spends the days listening to the buzzing of their voices as conversations fill the space, so full that it forgets it has its own sound; its own voice and presence here. Today, however, its buzzing is loud amongst the nearly-empty restaurant.

Despite its effort, ice cubes of abandoned Coca-Cola's and iced teas scattered amongst the tables melt quickly. Droplets of water gather on the sides of cups, accompanying the humid air that surrounds the deserted lunches: sandwiches, with just one, small bite left; and apple pies, barely touched. A vegetable soup slowly loses the steam emerging from its bowl, in part due to the AC's best efforts. Two ice cream sodas overflow, changing in color similar to the coffee-with-creams customers seek in the mornings. The last slice of cake, layered yellow with chocolate icing, in the covered plate is the only food protected from the flies that make their way in every now and then.

The bustling of Washington Street outside the windows could barely be heard by the crowd inside. Even though the Frigidaire room cooler was running in the corner, it was reaching

the end of its life; the room was already almost too hot to be comfortable, despite the early time of day. Mugs were scattered amongst the tables; some were empty and patiently waiting for fresh, warm refills, while the others were full, hot, and tightly hugged by hands of all ages and sizes. Chatter was only interrupted when mugs were carefully sipped from and forks full of food demanded the busy mouth's full attention.

A disregarded copy of *The St. Augustine Record* lounges in the middle of a cluttered table. Crumb-covered plates stacked into three separate piles and empty coffee mugs are scattered around the large surface. The group of lively teenagers surround the table, all talking over each other, but respectfully so. As time passed and more customers joined the space, their conversations grew louder in sound and spirit. The bright yellows, purples, blues, and oranges in the fashionable, patterned dresses of the young women enlivened the young men's neutral toned button-up and pant sets; when together, the atmosphere of the space was exhilarating.

The AC quiets, and the heat of the grill has increased the temperature inside; nevertheless, goosebumps cover the arms of the remaining customers and employees. The only clock in the room ticks along, tracking the rise of tension in the room. No one moves, except the grill cook and one of the boys at the bar, who taps his wet shoe on the tile floor in a rhythmic beat. Iced tea drips down his clothes, pooling under the chair beneath him and takes its time to dry into the sticky, brown stain it will become; the menu in front of him, however, has already recovered from the large splash.

Banging on the window behind the bar interrupts the ticking clock and tapping shoe's duet. Inaudible yelling from outside follows, and the grill cook turns around briefly, before continuing to prepare the last table inside's order. The smell of bacon and toasted bread makes its way through the restaurant as the grill cook finishes up two triple decker tomato and bacon

sandwiches, with a vegetable soup on the side. The customers at the bar have no food, no drinks, and no upcoming orders. As the sandwiches are plated, a server emerges from the back. “They’re still here,” he whispers to himself, glancing at the occupied cherry red bar seats, “not for long.”

By the late morning, the old age of the Frigidaire was more apparent than ever. The bodies in the crowd grew by the hour and the kitchen sweltered as the cooks worked their magic; nobody seemed to mind the heat. The coffee mugs returned to their shelf, washed and shined, patiently waiting for the next morning. The atmosphere was vivacious; tables regularly erupted with the laughter of customers and servers alike: “Jim! Do that again ‘nd I’ll send ya to the ‘Berg!” “Don’t flip yer wig, Jane!” Replacing the coffee mugs were tall glasses filled with brown, white, and pink milkshakes, the finest treat for a Florida summer day and revered by customers of all ages.

In the corner of the room, doleful eyes stared at *The St. Augustine Record*, held tightly by two young, slightly-trembling hands. The stacked plates disappeared and the table was now spotless; the remaining teenagers had yet to order anything after their breakfast. Next to them, the Frigidaire shuddered, breaking their concentration that the black ink before them immured. A droplet of sweat fell onto *The Iceberg*, a competing local restaurant just down the block on Bridge Street, advertisement in the corner of the newspaper as it returned to the tabletop. “Hushpuppies? Got extras,” Jane offered as she passed by, “No? Bummer. See you kids tomorrow!” It was nearly lunch time, and the empty chairs from the teenager’s table quickly filled as they left.

The server passes the bar, without uttering a word, as he returns his now empty tray to the kitchen. A crowd has gathered outside, watching closely through the windows; a mix of curious

spectators and restless customers waiting for the scene to unfold. Not even the vigor of the mid-afternoon sun could persuade them to return to the air conditioned interior of the restaurant. A posse of polished 1960 Ford Fairlanes cruise through the makeshift path from the crowd's separation to the front of the restaurant. The passengers of each Fairlane exit first, shortly followed by the drivers.

A cool blast of air, courtesy of the bored AC, meets the men as they enter the building. The driver of the first car bends over to pick an empty cup off the floor, and places it on the bar in front of the first occupied seat. "I see why this is empty," he says to his company and their light laughter follows. As he rests his arm next to the boy at the end of the bar, the posse circles the remaining persons at the bar. The boy puts his menu down; "sir, we are only lookin' for lunch. No trouble." The clock continues to tick, but the rhythmic tapping of the shoe has gone as the driver reaches for the glistening handcuffs that hang from his belt.

The teenagers were not as familiar with this end of King Street, but the scent of sizzling bacon in the air assured them the destination was not far. The sun was now at its peak of the day, and the roads were full of hungry families driving to their summer lunch spots. Locals and tourists alike bustled through St. Augustine square, across the street from the strip mall. One of the teenagers, a younger girl, still held onto *The St. Augustine Record*, and she gripped it tightly as they all walked into Woolworth's.

It was loud inside; the level of noise the AC was accustomed to. Its hums were not heard by the eager customers below, a familiar experience for the ticking of the clock on the wall as well. When the group of teenagers walked in and sat at the bar, something in the air of the restaurant changed, chilling the temperature in a way the AC has never accomplished. "Can't you read," a server venomously asked as he pointed to the sign on the wall. Adjacent to the

window AC unit, painted in black, and designed with the trendiest typography of the time was the utmost important policy of the restaurant: *We Serve Whites Only*.