

American menus still largely look like this.

In the mid-2000s, even Galatoire's in New Orleans dropped its longstanding menu format—a terse list of named dishes in the French manner—in favor of the more American descriptive format. The change was subtle but significant in the way the reader-eater entered into a dialogue with this text. Before, you could just remember that Crabmeat Yvonne was delicious; after, it was that dish with artichokes and mushrooms, which isn't a great match for wine, and excuse me, waiter, but are the artichoke hearts fresh?

In this decade, forward-thinking chefs have bucked against the syntax of menu writing in creative ways. In a 2010 menu from Alinea, where Grant Achatz is executive chef, circles of varying sizes were placed within the descriptions of each dish on that evening's tasting menu. The larger the circle, the more substantial the course; and the farther right it appeared, the sweeter the course. A year later, Daniel Humm at Eleven Madison Park in New York introduced a short-lived grid menu that listed only the primary ingredient for the four choices for each of the four courses. The idea was to encourage dialogue with the servers while telegraphing the various pathways through this menu to bliss.

In recent years, a new menu syntax has emerged—the oft-dreaded list of ingredients, many of which even smarty-pants food people like us don't know. Such a menu sounds the death knell for the plate set: The ingredients must work together as a unified whole. As a byproduct, this language creates a spiky poetry that today's chefs use to express themselves. Chef Daniela Soto-Innes of Cosme in New York writes her modern Mexican menu in this manner, combining indigenous

culinary words like “ha'sikil p'ak” with such terse descriptors as “Abalone tostada, salsa macha, peanuts.” She tips her hand to an obvious frustration with customers asking for guacamole. While she can't *not* offer this crowd pleaser, she places the word far away from her listing of all other dishes, past a sea of white space, in the bottom corner of the page. Not only does guac mess with the tone of the menu, it messes with the meter.

Chefs write menus, but it is up to us as readers and eaters to order off them and to explore and elucidate the layers of meaning within them. We might regard menus as literature inasmuch as they are stories told in prose. The menu at JuneBaby in Seattle, where Edouardo Jordan is executive chef, begins with a preamble, which itself begins with this powerful sentence: “Southern food's humble beginnings embarked when West Africans were taken from their home and were forced across the middle passage to North America.” It defines the narrative from the perspective of the people of African descent, and then lets the dishes tell the story of America's greatest regional cuisine.

Even without such explicit explanatory text, menus do present actual drama. Think of the chef as protagonist: their ego so evident as to be a kind of hubris, their quest one for creative expression, and their journey, at its best, a voyage from the past of their ancestral people, to the present of the multivalent culture they embrace, to the future of what they will bring to the American table. That's character. As for conflict, look no further than the dishes themselves. Remember the Sichuan peppercorns on the chocolate dessert at Gunshow? That's conflict, and that tells a story. 🍴

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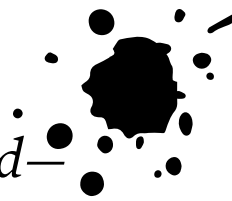


We Eat, Therefore We Yam

Parsing the Southern Cogito

by ZANDRIA F. ROBINSON

Oriana Koren



I find this year's theme of reading food— or reading, *being*, and food—to be apt for this moment. Because if the 2018 UN Climate Change report is to be believed (and I know there are a couple of non-believers), then reading and thinking about food is about all we'll be doing in a decade without some significant action. As we say here, there are many Souths. South Memphis and the South Side of Chicago. And here in these southernmost of the southern United States, we say the Deep South. There are the southern portions of other countries and the so-called southern portion of the world, the Global South. Let us refuse to *look away, look away*, from any of these Souths. Instead, let us hold them together and look forwards and backwards, through the Southern, American, and global histories and presents explored at the Fall Symposium, and the near-futures, or future-presents, they gesture towards.

This year the Symposium brought together two of staples of Southern Studies—food as subject and literature/text as the content holder—to achieve two aims. The first aim was to highlight those multiple Souths and their differences and to continually expand our understanding of every bit of this region. White Southerners have, mostly for the sake of survival, gradually allowed an understanding of difference in the region, which means more hands on deck to defend our borders, including Oklahoma and west Texas and southern Florida, through a focus on what brings us together. “Other” Southerners, from indigenous Americans to enslaved Africans and their black American descendants, to the range of immigrant groups that have transformed the South for the better—the Vietnamese, the Chinese, Indian Americans, Mexican Americans,

Nigerian Americans, and Caribbean Americans—sometimes known as “Southerners, too,” have been doing the work of making the region capacious enough for a future that can hold and keep both our both humanity and our planet. Some of that work is now being “discovered” and “assimilated” into that great Southern pot.

The second, perhaps more implicit, aim was to demonstrate what makes events like the Southern Foodways Symposium continually necessary. That weekend's talks and meals and conversations achieved this by revealing how the sometimes-unwieldy interdisciplinary field of Southern Studies, a field seemingly bounded only by geography, coheres. Southern difference—across race, gender, power, topography, and geography—is an intellectual and disciplinary strength, and there is room under the tent.

The Seed, the Spirit, and the Southern Cogito

RANDALL KENAN OPENED THE SYMPOSIUM with “I Yam,” an analysis of chapter thirteen of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, in which the protagonist has a Southern existential revolution. On a Harlem street in winter, he buys a wondrously sweet, hot, syrupy, steaming yam from a street vendor, who completes the yam with a bit of butter. The protagonist eats the yam walking down the street, and the first taste, as well as the freedom of eating it in the street, makes him homesick for the South. At this joy, this transformation, his internal critic steps in, declaring as much to his antagonist Bledsoe as to himself, “You're a shameless chitterling eater!” But the yam, its goodness, its taste of home, emboldens the protagonist and simultaneously makes him realize that he has denied himself the fruits and practices of the South—home, identity, and being—out of fear of upsetting racist and classist social decorum. He responds to that internal critic in the most unapologetically Southern Black way: “They're my birthmark. *I yam what I am!*” He *am*. He *yam*. We yam, too.

Let's take this notion of being, or *yamming*, back to the French philosopher René Descartes¹ and call it the *Southern Cogito*: We think, therefore we yam. We eat, therefore we yam. We read, therefore, we yam. At the risk of further centering the self (sorry not sorry, postmodernists), we then might ask the fundamental questions that prefigure our Southern being: *wherefore*, which is

a question of the spirit, and an important one in the context of impending climate doom; and *whence*, which is a question of origins. We think, therefore we yam. We read, therefore we yam. We eat, therefore we yam. We want to do some spirit science and to investigate wherefore and whence we yam. This is how we begin to know who we yam in relation to others.

If thinking is being, then we yam because we must eat. And sometimes, when we are privileged to eat, we want to do so beautifully, at whatever human and natural cost, until the earth says, “no more,” or the food or people cargo that comes here says, “no more.” If eating is being, then we yam because we are Southerners. This is an identity that marks us and holds us, that some before us died for, that many others before us—drug out of jails and murdered, lynched by mobs or plowed down by white supremacists in Charlottesville—have been murdered for. As bell hooks instructs, we “eat the other,” and a lot of times *each other*, therefore we yam.

If reading is being, then we yam because we imagine that there is more, that there can be more, for everyone. We imagine that there is a future that is better than the one we've written for ourselves. Reading is, in fact, the great democratizer. By “reading,” I mean a wide range of consumption practices for a wide range of texts, practices for which every participant need not be literate in the traditional sense. Reading is the thing that allows us as Southerners to be beyond ourselves, to be-with-others, to be in community and conversation with

¹We will recall one of Descartes' most widely cited philosophical contributions, “Cogito, ergo sum,” typically translated to “I think, therefore I am.” The concept is often called “the Cogito” for short. Although his conception of thinking as a determining factor for existence or being has been roundly and rightly challenged, it nevertheless serves as a common starting point for thinking about being in the West.

one another, to bridge gaps in the facile ways of diversity and inclusion as well as to break power structures in the more back-breaking ways of resistance, protest, and revolution. To borrow more from continental philosophy, rather than Martin Heidegger's notion of being and time (where an individual's being cannot be understood without attention to temporality and history), we Southerners, through attentive reading, might think of being and food—where we cannot understand our being as Southerners without attention to food as a fundamental structural principle of Southern identity and being. Or further to a more contemporary note of existential declaration through Southern food, we might go to that Memphis philosopher Project Pat: “You can call me gold mouth, that’s what I said/hey baby, you gone eat your cornbread?”

Then there are the questions of whence and wherefore we yam. The Southern Cogito is flanked on the one side by seeds and on the other by spirits. First, we are the seeds. We arrive, we are born; we spend our life, our being, figuring out who we yam; and then we go on to, or back to, spirit, our personal eternity. In short, being is both about the generation of the material of life, the sustaining and nurturing of it, and the nurturing of the spirits beyond us. Our being is only a thin

line between seed and spirit.

Seeds contain origins and origin stories. What are we doing here? Our beginnings as Southerners, our seeds and their specificity, seem to matter very much to us, so much so that we hurt each other over our identities, which reference our respective power levels in the social hierarchy. The seeds of plants feed us so we can make seeds of people who will be hospitable to us not just when we are at our most dire but always, so that we may always know care and never hunger for it.

On the other side of our being, opposite of origins, are endings. At any given time, as we await and face our inevitable ends in these bodies, we are comprised of all of the endings that came before us and made us. These are the whispers we hear that warn us to go left instead of right, the ones that come to us in dreams and remind us of who we are, and the ones that help us cross the river when our time here is done. Some call these things coincidence or intuition. Others call them the Holy Ghost or the Holy Spirit. We might just call it spirit, that amalgamation of ancestors passed on that fill us from when we are seeds to when we die ourselves.

We think, therefore we yam. We read, therefore we yam. We eat, therefore we yam. Whence and wherefore we yam?

If reading is being, then we yam because we imagine that there is more, that there can be more, for everyone. We imagine that there is a future better than the one we’ve written for ourselves.

Hospitality and Hunger; or Reading Food on the A and B Sides

“WELCOME!”

“Come on in, y’all!”

“Here’s a bite or three or four.”

“You thirsty? Here’s some water.”

“HEEEEEEY, how you doing?”

Hospitality is central to our identities as Southerners, and we especially like to demonstrate this with food. That was evident in our considerations of reading Southern food at the Fall Symposium. There were welcome tables from Zora Neale Hurston to Alice Walker, Harlem to Georgia, all the way to Yunnan province in China’s south, and back again. In her conversation with John Simpkins, the writer and travel guide Mei Zhang noted that an afternoon greeting in her hometown of Dali might be, “have you eaten?” For Zhang’s family and community kin, like for Hurston and Walker, and for the mothers, and farmers, and caretakers, the question functions as a greeting and an invitation. This might be a universal hospitality greeting for Southerners across the many Souths. If my children, fifteen and five, wake before me, I come to know their state of being by asking first if and what they’ve had to eat. Feeding people can be lovely when labor given freely is labor appreciated. We feed, therefore we yam. And we help do the dishes afterwards. Hospitality. There is a giving here: literary kinship, generosity of spirit, and of intimacies that make us feel seen. It is one thing to be welcomed. It is another thing to be seen, and still another to be rigorously cared for and fed. We yam.

Perhaps the most famous use of that greeting in Black American popular culture, albeit with a twist, comes from The Persuaders’ 1971 soul hit, “Thin Line Between Love and Hate.” In it, the

narrator has come home, perhaps for the umpteenth time, at 5 o’clock in the morning. The woman, his lover, greets him not with a query about where he has been, but, “Are you hungry? Did you eat?” She takes his coat and hat and smiles, her desire to care and to feed, in his patriarchal delirium, greater than her anger at his perpetual betrayal. But the narrator tells us in the chorus, “It’s a thin line between love and hate.” It is a signal that something other than hospitality, something more sinister, might be afoot. In the second verse, the narrator reveals he’s telling us this story from the hospital bed, bandaged from feet to head, and suggests that this smiling, feeding, hospitable woman has done this to him. He says he didn’t think she had the nerve, and he warns others about repeatedly hurting their partners, saying, “She gone fool you one day.” (For what it is worth, the B side to “Thin Line Between Love and Hate” is a song called “Thigh Spy.” That might indicate what caused some of the A side narrator’s troubles.)

On the Symposium’s “lower frequencies,” to borrow again from Ellison’s protagonist, there is the B side to hospitality, the white-toothed smile of something murderous. Talking about the experiences of “other” Southerners, and especially immigrants, novelist Monique Truong noted that we often find ourselves “ravenous in a land of plenty.” This is about hunger. Truong’s work asks, who can narrate the Southern Cogito, the “we think, therefore we yam,” in the context of the South’s persistent fear and skepticism of “outsiders,” in spite of the wonders these folks have given the region, and our being, sometimes at great cost? There is a slippage between hospitality and hunger.

What makes hospitality possible? Hard, inhospitable labor. On farms, as environmental justice scholar and



advocate Monica White's work shows. At James Hannaham's *Delicious Foods*, or Boots Riley's *Worry Free*, or the new factory in Appalachia or the Delta that has taken the place of the family farm. At Fred Smith's FedEx hubs, where the package handlers are called pickers. Exploitation is the other side of hospitality. Exploitation enables hospitality.

Through the cracked smile of powerful, segregating hospitality, on the B side, things sound different:

"Welcome (unless you are colored or undocumented)."

"Come on in, y'all (except y'all)."

"Here's a bite or three or four; I've bitten into this black woman and chewed her into parts."

"You thirsty? Here's some lead water."

"HEEEEEY, how you doing? Don't tell me. I don't want to know if it's been #YouToo."

Sounds like sweet potatoes.

Putting Hospitality and Hunger on the Same Plate

THE HUNGRY ARE OFTEN SAID TO have appetites of excess when what is really happening, of course, is deprivation. Deprived of enough to eat, or of the beauty of eating. Deprived of the rights to own our bodies. To own our labor. Deprived of homes and land and earth. Deprivation. Oppression. A thin line. **This thin line**, the other side of the proverbial game, how the other half lives, is often invisible to the powerful. When they tell stories of the hospitable South, it is as if they cannot hold the images of hospitality and hunger together. Southern Studies scholar Tara McPherson calls this flaw the South's *lenticular logic*, by which she means that while we might see lack on one side and excess on the other, we refuse to acknowledge that, as a power relationship, excess *creates* lack. What happens when

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we consider both hospitality and hunger in the same lens? And how should we begin to do it? If one cannot listen or hear, then perhaps the answer is to read on the lowest frequencies.

Archives of food production and consumption are an important tool for holding hospitality and hunger together in the same lens. On hunger, there is reading about various laboring people and the material effects of exploitation on their bodies and lives. Capitalism, its excesses and brutality and fundamental imbalance, is present in every text, sometimes more directly than not. There is modern-day enslavement and significations upon the peculiar institution, as in James Hannaham's novel *Delicious Foods*, where the physical and psychological bloodiness of food, its rot and its promise, and the labor that brings it to our plates, are on display. There is reading about food in a post-bellum nation, when social relations shifted nominally but power relations hardened, as the University of Alabama's Lupton Collection of African American food books, from which Ravi Howard drew his essay, reveals. At hand is the question of how those conscripted, through forcible enslavement and other persistently inequitable economic conditions, to serve food and drink not only

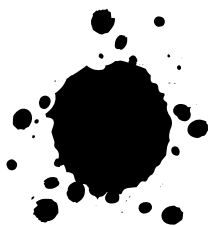
managed preparation but also managed people who could and would end them capriciously. This labor, unseen, is made visible here, and is an archive of what we might call today "managing up."

During the symposium, Ashanté Reese and Monica White talked about the representation of farm labor in Ava DuVernay's television series *Queen Sugar*. They showed us explicit connections between race, land, and capital and the struggle to keep hospitable traditions in an unwelcoming world. The Bordelon family's labor, like most labor, is constricted by white supremacist capitalism, and therefore already fraught. Jessica Wilkerson, who spoke of the *Foxfire* books, offered an archive of an Appalachian archive that echoed how white supremacist capitalism threatens its poorer, rural skinfolk. The rural traditions, those of family farms, wide expanses of land, the cooperative before the co-op, that constitute so much of our Southern Cogito, our memory of who we were, whence we came, our seeds and roots, and even our wherefore and *raison d'être*, are in eminent danger across all of our Souths.

Neoliberal power relationships in late modernism are globally entangled. The transatlantic slave trade and chattel enslavement, for instance, enabled not



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only the astronomical growth of Western wealth but also the growth of other countries' markets and wealth out of Western demand. In tandem, the West continued to exert its capitalistic and homogenizing forces on the people, culture, and art of these rising nations, including India and China. It is why, in his presentation, Naben Ruthnum insisted that understanding the place of curry in the United Kingdom—and its influence on South Asian writing in the 1980s—necessitates an engagement with British colonial legacies, which are inextricable from enslavement in the US South and, in turn, the curries we eat in Indian restaurants across the region. Alternatively, though, what is the broad sweep of global systems without the politics of the quotidian, the near, the kitchen, the local? John Kessler's discussion of restaurant menus across the region brought us uncomfortably close to our regional psyches, to our Southern Cogitos, to our Delta and Appalachian and Piney Woods beings. Kessler pulled back the wizard's curtain of language, inviting us to read closely into what words mean and why—because this, too, is a part of who we yam. We think, and we read menus, therefore we yam. If we read enough about ourselves, might we learn what this all means, beyond identity, food, culture, survival?

There are tables for food and communion, near and far, but there is the danger of obliteration. There is Zora Neale Hurston's giving, cooking, and sharing of food, her bringing of meats and watermelon to Kossula and sharing them as he shares his story and being.

And there is also the fact of the theft of Kossula, the protagonist of Zora Neale Hurston's *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo,"* from his homeland and forced enslavement in the United States. With Valerie Boyd as our guide, we conjured Alice Walker's welcome table, her endless selecting of things from her garden to prepare for visitors who have not even yet presented themselves. We also recalled the oppression of the Bordelon family as they try to hold on to their farm in the face of white supremacy. We felt the lush community of hospitality in the Yunnan province; but we also reckoned with the systemic alienation of South Asian writers in the UK. We fretfully sympathized with the protagonists in Hannaham's *Delicious Foods*, enslaved and struggling; and we marveled at the ingenious folks in the Appalachian community that produced *Foxfire*. We must remember that there are others who make our being and eating, our being and food, possible.

Or. We could all just die in a climate disaster. This makes the Southern Foodways Symposium all the more important, because the work herein is an archive. It is, in fact, an archive of an archive. There are instructions in these readings and talks and meals about how to be, and how not to be, about who we yam, and about who we were. And those instructions overwhelmingly are about how to eat, whether canning or pickling or hunting; or how not to be eaten, by thinking quick, sticking, tricking and moving, when the end of the world comes. No matter what happens, if there are folks, and we have left enough of a range of texts for them to read, they will remember us by our being and food, and perhaps they will make a better world from it all.

² Internet parlance for "too long, didn't read," the text after which typically serves as a neat summary of a long-ish Facebook post, Tumblr post, or Twitter thread.

What Do We Eat from Here?

BY WAY OF A LESS PHILOSOPHICAL Symposium redux, or TL;DR²:

1. There are many Souths, and the one we currently inhabit is no bigger than the Souths of our origin places, of our spirits, and of our being.

2. Power relationships are unequal and unevenly distributed between and within Souths.

3. To address this, we begin might begin with the Southern Cogito—we think, we read, we eat, therefore we yam.

4. Whence we yam? From seeds, from the earth.

5. Wherefore we yam? Because we are in conversation and service of the spirit, striving toward a perfect freedom, a universal hospitality. Or, if you prefer, we are in a bloody simulation of flesh operated by twelve-year-old white boys, or one being run by dispassionate but evil scientists who are trying to figure out how to make humans better.

6. None of this matters, because even though we can overcome capitalism and what it tries to do to the spirit, we cannot overcome what capitalism has done to make the earth inhospitable to humanity, at least as we have known it.

I'll stop at 6. You can triple it and think of climate change as the mark of the white supremacist capitalist patriarchal beast.

THERE ARE SPIRITS, WHO PROVIDE us the logics, science, and guideposts of our being. W.E.B. Du Bois's remix of the German field of *geisteswissenschaften*, the spirit sciences, instructs us here. Who

has worshipped freedom more, DuBois asks in his essay "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," than black folks in bondage in a land of plenty, black folks who created plenty with their bodies, seeds of plenty, without compensation and with scorn and murder as the reward? And who has known more about the power of the unseen behind the thin line? Of Yoruba orisha Eleggua who was remembered by the enslaved in the New World as Papa Legba, he who opens the curtain for us; of the Saint Lucian spirits who give and trick and govern; of the ancestors who come to us in blue dreams of fitful sleep; of Aretha Franklin, whose voice was a promise of hospitality? Who has known more of these things than the hungry?

So what are we to do? There is plenty. We should never be hungry for things to do. No space for ennui in the end times. So we might join Papa Legba and walk the line, like tricksters on Janelle Monae's black-and-white tightrope, or in the depths of Nina Compton's food, to make ourselves a revolving door—so that hunger becomes something that is about wanting to care, care, care and give more and not deprivation and exploitation. So that hospitality extends to everyone on all sides, no matter their seeds or origins. So that we might do the right things, so that we might please our spirits and the spirits. So that we might strive for something more than freedom. We think (about ourselves and others), we read (novels and archives and menus), we eat (garden veggies, curries, canes, hams and fried chicken and hot fries). For today, let's eat because, at least for now, we yam. Asé. 🍴

Zandria F. Robinson is the author of *This Ain't Chicago: Race, Class, and Regional Identity in the Post-Soul South* and co-author of *Chocolate Cities: The Black Map of American Life*. A native Memphian, she teaches sociology at Rhodes College. This piece is adapted from her remarks as Symposium Coach at the 2018 SFA Fall Symposium.