



## First Helpings

# WE ARE EL SUR LATINO

**I**N 2017, SFA EXPLORED EL Sur Latino. At our Fall Symposium, founding SFA member Lolis Eric Elie took stock of divisions in our region and our country and traced their historical, social, and psychological roots. (I should mention, he accomplished this in a probing, challenging, charming thirty minutes. Head to our website and watch the video if you don't believe me.) He asked, in conclusion, "why don't we plan on a destiny that's big enough for every one of us—all and each?"

Destiny is a hefty concept. How did a conversation about food get us here? The truth, of course, is that our work

both is and isn't about food. We share transformative narratives, lead complex conversations, and, through those narratives and those conversations, work toward a more equitable and inclusive future for everyone in our region. And it's been that way for almost twenty years now. Since our team was smaller, younger, greener, and no less dedicated to our mission. Since I was in high school.

This year, we focused our gaze on Latino Southerners—their contributions, their struggles, and perhaps most importantly, their quotidian presence as a growing and vibrant part of the fabric of our region and our nation. The features in this issue of *Gravy* are adapted from Fall Symposium presentations. These stories are not exotic. They are everyday, and that's a beautiful thing. In his Symposium talk, Elie challenged the audience, "Why don't we reexamine what we mean by 'us' and 'we,' and see if we might be able to spell larger words with the same letters?" As you read this issue, we encourage you to do the same. —Sara Camp Milam



## FEATURED CONTRIBUTOR

# PAUL REYES

**Writing this piece for Fall Symposium seemed to unearth memories and feelings you hadn't addressed in a while. What was that process like?**

It took a long time for me to take a more honest look at my role as a light-skinned Hispanic American. Ultimately, the forces that brought this piece to fruition were both personal and external—becoming a father, and the death of my grandmother, who was the most profound connection I had to the culture. But also the larger, more anxious conversation that's erupted over race in America and the fact that I live in Charlottesville, Virginia, which in a single weekend became a kind of shorthand for the threat of white nationalism. So the truth is that I've always been asking myself these kinds of questions, but tepidly. And it was the confluence of these other factors, which I could never have anticipated, that pushed it to the surface.

**How would you describe the editorial sensibility you bring to VQR Quarterly?**

I cut my teeth in general interest magazines in the late 90s and early 2000s. *Harper's*, for the most part, with freelance gigging among such publications as *Lingua Franca*, *The New York Times Magazine*, and *GQ*. That led to several



years at *The Oxford American*. So magazines are my most profound education, that mix of literary curiosity, political engagement, and the need to entertain each particular audience. Entertainment isn't beneath a literary magazine, fun isn't beneath it—if you apply those elements the right way. VQR had already blown apart its own category of publication with the extraordinary journalism and imaginative packaging during Ted Genoways' tenure as editor. My mission is to take that and bring it with me toward an experience that moves beyond the magazine, to occasional content and social media experiments and other brand extensions. I want it to reflect a passionate engagement with the world not just through emboldened journalism, but through a curiosity for the ephemeral, an attraction to seeking out

these little accidental discoveries of the sublime.

**What are your aspirations for your tenure?**

I want to build an infrastructure that allows us to be more competitive in a digital age. We're a full-time staff of three, so we're spread pretty thin. But with fundraising and new revenue streams, it's possible to hit that sweet spot in terms of staff—a good sized team that keeps VQR active on all fronts. As for the editorial side, I want to make this a home for as diverse a population of writers as you'll find anywhere. I've picked up on this perception of international magazines as being somewhat alienating to American readers. But VQR is very much an international magazine—as engaging to non-American readers as it is engaged with issues outside our borders. I would love for every issue to be a reflection of a sensibility that is both committed to the American experience—in all its crazy, glorious variety—while being truly invested in voices and cultures radically different than even the mix we'd find here. The lighter, shorter answer is that I want to create a magazine that is full of surprises, that is unique in its embrace of that effect, and nails it every time.