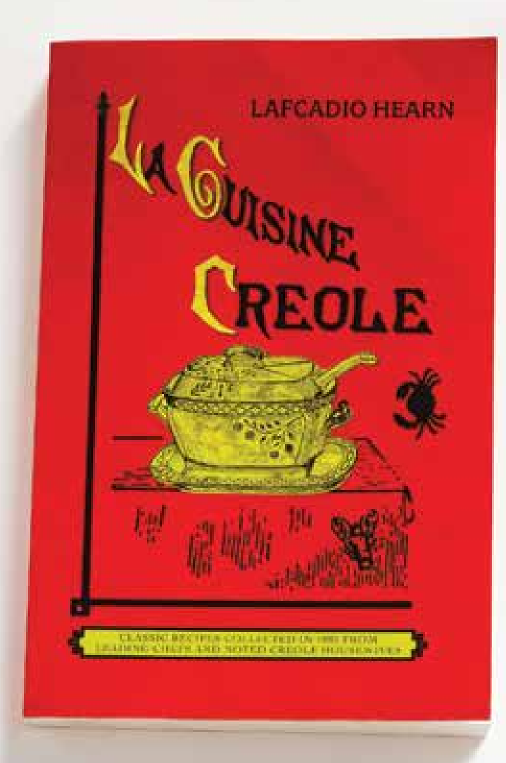

WINTER 2018 • NO. 70

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

◀ JANUARY 21, 2019
POP-UP OXFORD SFA FILM FESTIVAL
Burns Belfry Museum, *Oxford, MS*

FEBRUARY 9, 2019 ▶
WINTER SYMPOSIUM
Birmingham, AL

FEBRUARY 21, 2019
Gravy Podcast Launch
Your Smartphone

JUNE 14-15, 2019 ▶
SUMMER FIELD TRIP
Bentonville, AR

For more information, visit
southernfoodways.org

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COVER: Photograph by Oriana Koren. THIS PAGE: Art installation by Ghost of a Dream; photo by Brandall Laughlin

WHAT HAPPENS AT SYMPOSIUM

...shouldn't stay at Symposium

BY SARA CAMP MILAM

Photos by Brandall Laughlin

THIS PAST OCTOBER MARKED MY tenth Southern Foodways Fall Symposium. In 2009, the year SFA explored connections between food and music, I arrived as a volunteer with little idea of what to expect. Within hours, I was listening—and then joining in—as Alice Randall led the audience in "Will the Circle Be Unbroken." Later, I helped serve a lunch cooked by David Chang. (Afterwards, star-struck, I thanked him. I'm sure he remembers.)

I returned as a Fall Symposium volunteer in 2010 and 2011. Two thousand twelve was my first symposium as a full-time member of the SFA staff. That year, I realized how little I'd understood, even as a volunteer, about the months of planning and preparation needed to pull off the talks and meals of Symposium weekend. All hands on deck is a cliché, but it's one that perfectly describes SFAWHQ in the months leading up to the the big event.

Yet the Fall Symposium serves only about 350 guests. That's barely 15 percent of our membership, and an even smaller fraction of our audience. We asked ourselves: If some of our best work came to life each year at our flagship Symposium, why weren't we sharing it with as many readers as possible? Insert collective staff forehead smack.

In this issue, we close out our year of Reading Food with five features from our twenty-first Fall Symposium. In 2019, we dig into a vital, yet underexplored truth: Food Is Work. Planning is underway for our Winter Symposium in Birmingham, Summer Field Trip in Bentonville, and of course Fall Symposium here in Oxford. If you can join us for any (or all!) of our three 2019 Symposia, we look forward to welcoming you. And even if you can't, you can pull up a seat via the pages of *Gravy*.

Happy New Year, and happy reading.

RAVI HOWARD

Ravi Howard lives in Tallahassee, where he teaches creative writing at Florida State University. To date, he is the only *Gravy* contributor who has won both the Ernest J. Gaines Award for Literary Excellence *and* a Sports Emmy. SFA director John T. Edge developed a crush on Howard's writing three years ago and eventually convinced him to speak at the 2018 Fall Symposium. We hope it's the first of many Ravi Howard symposium presentations.

RANDALL KENAN

Randall Kenan is the author of six books of fiction and nonfiction and the editor, most recently, of *The Carolina Table: North Carolina Writers on Food*. SFA managing editor Sara Camp Milam fell in love with his fiction when she was in graduate school because it reminded her of the Latin American literature she studied as an undergrad. She once wrote a term paper on Kenan's fictional community of Tims Creek, North Carolina. Nearly a decade later, she would be very embarrassed to show it to him.

JOHN KESSLER

John Kessler spent almost two decades at the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* and now writes a dining column for *Chicago Magazine*, but we like his byline best when it appears in *Gravy*. John T. Edge, who used to pore over Kessler's *AJC* reviews when plotting Atlanta trips, once ate galbi and drank canned beer with him in the back parking lot of a Buford Highway Korean Restaurant while staring down a soaring tangle of kudzu vines.

Photos by Brandall Laughlin

ORIANA KOREN

Oriana Koren is a Los Angeles–based photographer and writer whose work is anchored in food, culture, and identity. When not traveling to document stories on location, Oriana works out of a daylight studio in downtown Los Angeles' Fashion District. For this issue of *Gravy*, Oriana drew inspiration from the *I Spy* children's book series. "As an artist, I love the idea that photographs can be read as riddles to be solved—there's always more information in an image than we realize," Oriana says.

ZANDRIA F. ROBINSON

Zandria F. Robinson is a former SFA neighbor and colleague—she taught sociology and Southern Studies at the University of Mississippi from 2009–2012. She now teaches at Rhodes College in her native Memphis. A scholar of pop culture, she seamlessly weaves academic and popular references in her writing. You'll get a taste in her feature essay, which is adapted from her remarks as Symposium Coach at the 2018 Fall Symposium. Robinson is at work on her third book, which is about the Memphis soul sound and the Soulsville, USA community.

MONIQUE TRUONG

Monique Truong finished manuscript edits to her third novel, *The Sweetest Fruits*, two weeks before this issue of *Gravy* went to press. Look for it in your local bookstore in fall 2019. Meanwhile, if you're new to Truong's work, SFA managing director Melissa Hall (who, like Truong, is a recovering lawyer) recommends her second novel, *Bitter in the Mouth*. It involves barbecue, synesthesia, and canned peaches, among other delights.

TOP: Oriana Koren; MIDDLE and BOTTOM: Brandall Laughlin

THE POWER TO FEED

A Delta epiphany

BY JOHN T. EDGE

LEFT: Cornfields outside Greenville, MS; BELOW: David White in November 2018

Photos by Timothy Ivy

DAVID WHITE WAS TWENTY MONTHS old when the crowd of politicians and reporters came to his Cleveland, Mississippi, home on a spring day in 1967. As the man with the fop of brown hair stooped to the floor, David hungrily scratched for crumbs of cornbread and grains of rice. Annie White raised six children in that house with one faucet, no hot water, and no electricity. The family toilet was a hole in the floor. Come winter, she heated their home with a woodstove.

Dressed in a tattered and soiled t-shirt and diaper, David was small for his age. Open sores pocked his young body. David's eyes were flat and his belly was distended. Robert F. Kennedy stroked David's cheek and touched his belly, but he could he not capture David's attention.

Kennedy was helpless in the face of the poverty that David endured every day. Dressed in a suit and tie, his shoes glossy with wax, the junior U.S. Senator from New York emerged from David's family home on a dirt alley chastened, embarrassed, and angry.

"We could be doing more for those who are poor," Kennedy said that day. "And particularly for our children, who had nothing to do with asking to be born into this world...This is a reflection on our society, on all of us."

> On his visit to the Mississippi Delta in 1967, Senator Robert F. Kennedy was helpless and chastened in the face of the poverty that David White endured every day.

I wrote about this moment in my book *The Potlikker Papers.* In my telling, young David White's hunger taught a lesson about America's failure to care for its most vulnerable citizens. But his life, as I depicted it, was without dimension. Then I read *Delta Epiphany,* a new book by my friend and University of Mississippi colleague Ellen Meacham.

From Ellen, I learned that, at the time Kennedy toured the Mississippi Delta on a poverty fact-finding mission, David's mother, Annie White, was fighting heroically to feed her family. She fished. She planted a garden and canned and preserved the harvest. Her brothers shared the blackbirds, raccoons, squirrels, deer, and possums they hunted. When Annie White still came up short, she walked the dirt streets of her neighborhood, trading and borrowing food to feed her children.

I also learned more about David. At age fifteen, Ellen reported, he began

Sunset outside Greenville, MS

mowing grass for the Western Sizzlin' steakhouse in Cleveland, where he worked his way up from dishwasher to head cook to assistant manager. After following his older brother Lorenzo to Dallas, Texas, David raised his own beautiful family, sometimes working two jobs to feed his five sons. And then, Mississippi called him home. In 2017, David moved back to the Delta, settling in Greenville, where his sister lives.

Fifty-plus years after Kennedy's visit, Mississippi's second congressional district, which includes David's old hometown of Cleveland and his new home of Greenville, now registers the highest rate of food insecurity of any district in the nation. The Mississippi to which he returned is, by some measures, much the same. But David's role in the state has changed. And so has his relationship to food.

On the suggestion of Ellen, I visited David in Greenville this past October. We met at the Q Mart on Highway 82, where he now works seven days a week, flat-top-frying hamburgers and tossing salads with cheddar and bacon. As we talked, one of his colleagues showered a burger with seasoned salt. And a cloud of grilled onion vapors floated toward the ceiling.

When David spoke of the dishes he likes to cook, here and at home, his face brightened and his eyes shone. I couldn't help but notice how strong and confident he looked, standing in front of the kitchen he now leads. And I couldn't help but think: Such is the power we humans gain when we step into a kitchen to feed our people, like Annie White did back then, and David White does now.

John T. Edge is the founding director of the SFA and the host of TrueSouth *on the SEC Network/ESPN.*

Photos by Celestia Morgan

WINTER SYMPOSIUM

TOPIC

FOOD IS WORK

LOCATION
HAVEN
Birmingham, AL

DATE
SATURDAY
February 9, 2019

TICKETS
$150 PER PERSON
(includes food & drink)

THANKS TO BIRMINGHAM CVB AND ALABAMA TOURISM FOR THEIR SUPPORT.

Tickets on sale now at *southernfoodways.org*

SUPPER SANCTUARY IN THE SOUTH

A lesson from *Las Posadas*

BY GUSTAVO ARELLANO

I'VE YET TO SPEND A WINTER IN the South, so I've never had the chance to partake in holiday traditions y'all celebrate—no country ham, or brandy milk punch, or stockings stuffed with oranges. But I do know of a relative newcomer that has migrated across the region over the past thirty years, one that is both historical yet of the moment, and perfect for all Southerners to adopt: *Las Posadas*.

It's a Catholic celebration that translates as "The Inns." Held across Latin America, it is most identified with Mexico. *Las Posadas* takes place over nine days, from December 16 to 24, and commemorates the search for lodging that Joseph and Mary endured in Bethlehem before the birth of Jesus Christ. Every night, neighbors dress up their children as shepherds and angels, and pick two people to take on the roles of Joseph and Mary. The group then goes from home to home and asks for shelter, offering carols and prayers.

All the houses refuse the pilgrims shelter save for the last one, which welcomes them in with food and songs.

I fondly remember the *Posadas* of my childhood. I always liked to play one of the Three Wise Men, because we got to wear fake beards and flowing robes. I'd skip lunch each day of the *Posadas* so that I could gorge on my aunts' tamales, buñuelos (fried flour tortillas dusted in brown sugar and cinnamon), and champurrado (a masa-based hot chocolate drink). For me, the value of *Posadas* was mostly about grub and family. I gave little thought to its ostensible religious purpose.

Posadas left my life years ago, as the children of my neighborhood grew up, cousins moved far away, and I drifted from the Catholic Church. As an adult, though, the Christmastime performance

Illustrations by Delphine Lee

In today's South, *Las Posadas* has transcended its Catholic roots. In a secular context, it offers the promise of sanctuary. Through food. To welcome strangers.

has taken on a deeper meaning—due in part to what I see happening in the South.

As millions of Latinos have made *el Sur* their home over the past three decades, *Las Posadas* is becoming part of the Southern holiday fabric. YouTube videos feature reenactments from Carrboro, North Carolina, to Hoover, Alabama. Pontotoc, Mississippi, to Charlottesville, Virginia.

In today's South, *Las Posadas* has transcended its Catholic roots. For the past two years, the Children's Museum of Atlanta has offered its own afternoon interpretation complete with *baile folklorico*, storytime, and a make-your-own-lantern workshop.

Five years ago, Hugo Olaiz of Forward Movement, a nonprofit publishing ministry of the Episcopal Church, wrote a guide for Episcopalians on "How to Celebrate a Mexican *Posada*."

Argentinean by birth, Olaiz arrived tino North Carolina to spread the Good News and was wowed by the *Posadas* of his Mexican neighbors. He saw an opportunity to connect longtime residents to newcomers with a holiday where neighborly love is central.

"We learn from the *Posadas*," he wrote, "that by welcoming the poor and the needy, we are welcoming Jesus in our midst."

In a region that has seen the largest percentage increase of Latinos of any region of the United States over the past generation, the South now witnesses the incorporation of a holiday that speaks to its core: sanctuary. Through food. To welcome strangers.

WHEN I TRAVEL through the South, I'm always on the lookout for Mexican restaurants. More than keepers of stories, or even places of nourishment, Mexican restaurants interest me as inns of sorts. When I take a seat, I'm back at home in Southern California, in a place where the fajitas are familiar and the accents remind me of my parents.

I seek a sanctuary. I'm not the only one. The idea of restaurants as safe spaces is becoming increasingly popular nationwide, owing to our political climate and to the continued battle against the racism and sexism that has too long plagued the restaurant industry. Toward that end, the Restaurant Opportunities Centers United—a nonprofit that advocates for low-wage restaurant workers and has a chapter in New Orleans—launched a sanctuary restaurant movement in 2016.

Those who sign up agree to publicly declare that their businesses welcome LGBT folks, undocumented immigrants, people of color, and other afflicted groups. The restaurants affix a decal on their windows that declare they're "A Place at the Table for Everyone."

It's a noble gesture, even if only about forty businesses have signed up in the South. Many restaurateurs understandably don't want to involve themselves with controversy, especially if it might affect their bottom line.

To those folks, I present *Las Posadas*.

Posada is both a place and an action. To offer *posada* is to envelop sojourners with love, food and shelter.

Posadas are easy to stage and offer rich cross-cultural possibilities. Although the story is Christian at its root, its underlying message—the welcome of travelers—is universal.

It's something the South should take to heart, because *ustedes* are *Las Posadas* manifest.

The region was not a common landing point for Mexican immigrants until the 1990s. The South became their *posada*. It offered a chance to realize their dreams where other places didn't. They found work, established lives, forged community.

And many of them did so by opening restaurants.

Those restaurants, in turn, give *posada* to all Southerners. In many small towns, Mexican restaurants have taken the place of diners or biscuit joints to become a de facto community center. Where retirees share tales over margaritas. Where families celebrate birthdays with sombreros and candle-topped scoops of fried ice cream.

Where Southerners can learn about their new neighbors. And where strangers from afar find refuge in a meal.

So for this Christmas, I offer restaurateurs and home cooks alike a challenge: Hold a *Posada*. You don't have to adopt the Christian aspect of it if it doesn't mesh with your beliefs. Pay attention to the lesson of welcoming those rejected by others.

Before each evening of the *Posada* culminates in a feast, the participants join in song: "Enter, enter, holy pilgrims, holy pilgrims/Welcome to my humble home/Though 'tis little I can offer/All I have please call your own."

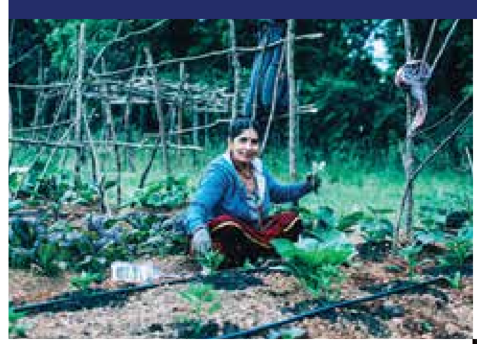
Sounds like Southern hospitality.

Gustavo Arellano is a columnist for Gravy *and a features writer for the* LA Times.

Peruse the *Gravy* print and podcast archives, including all of Gustavo Arellano's "Good Ol' Chico" columns, at the newly redesigned **southernfoodways.org**

SFA Announces 2019 Programming:

FOOD IS WORK



WINTER SYMPOSIUM

FEBRUARY 9

Birmingham, AL
Tickets, priced at $150,
are on sale now

SUMMER FIELD TRIP

JUNE 14–15

Bentonville, AR
Tickets go on sale April 1

FALL SYMPOSIUM

OCTOBER 24–26

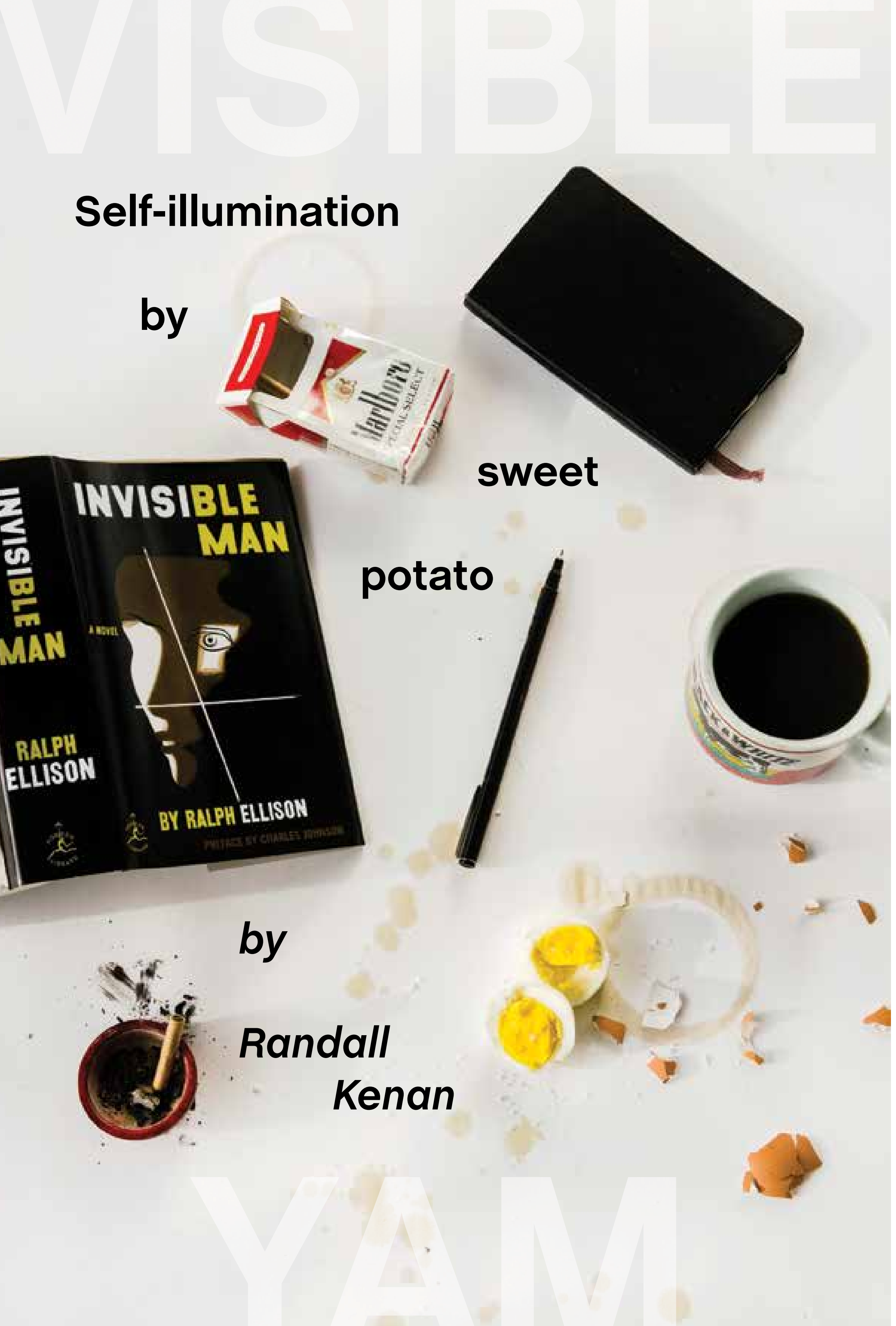
Oxford, MS
Tickets go on sale August 1

Five Ways of Reading Food

SFA ASKED OUR 2018 FALL SYMPOSIUM speakers to read food—through a variety of lenses, and from all angles. From menus to novels to soap operas, they delivered.

What do we mean when we talk about reading food? We mean to regard cooking, serving, dining, and the myriad practices associated with food as texts that offer the pleasures, challenges, truths, and possibilities of great literature.

The five pieces that follow are adapted from Fall Symposium presentations. Allow them to surprise, provoke, educate, and delight you.



VISIBLE

Self-illumination by sweet potato

by Randall Kenan

YAM

Photos by Oriana Koren

SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE
SFA
2018 SYMPOSIUM

I OFTEN LIKE TO ASK MY STUDENTS, "WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT SENTENCE IN THE BIBLE?"

The answers tend to be obvious, like "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son." Or, "In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth." Or, "No more water but fire next time," which is not in the Bible. Or any number of other famous and meaningful verses. But I like to point to the moment in the third chapter of Exodus when Moses stands before the burning bush and has a conversation with the Almighty. Moses asks whom he should tell Pharaoh sent him to court to demand the release of the Hebrew slaves. The flaming bush replies, "I am that I am." Powerful stuff, don't you think? "I am that I am."

Once upon a time, Americans spoke with great seriousness about the Great American Novel. There could only be one. And the people who took this seriously assumed the author would be a man, probably a white man.

Over the years, those tenants—even the underlying question—seem to have fallen out of favor, for better or for worse. When is the last time you heard someone take seriously the idea of the Great American Novel?

But, being a gentleman of a certain age, the concept swims to the surface of my mind from time to time to time. Personally, I am obsessed with *Moby-Dick* and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, and, on given days, Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*. However, if I were a betting man and you made me put money down on it, I could make a powerful argument for Ralph Ellison's 1952, award-winning novel, *Invisible Man*. It might could be the Great American novel. It might could be.

IF YOU ARE UNFAMILIAR WITH THE book, please allow me to give a brief description.

Many critics like to call *Invisible Man* a *bildungsroman*, a coming-of-age novel, which it is. But I like to think of it as more of a picaresque in the mode of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, where our main character is on the road, traveling, or wandering, with purpose, and, like the man from La Mancha, the protagonist lacks self-awareness but comes to see his own delusion by and by. Our hero begins in the South, at a school very much like Tuskegee Institute, where Ellison studied music, in the shadow of the recently dead founder, Booker T. Washington; our hero who moves North, as did Ellison, first to Chicago, and then to Harlem, New York.

With a huge nod to Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, Ellison gives us an unnamed narrator who tells his story of essentially being on the lam, holed up in a basement or subway tunnel in Manhattan, illuminated by "1,369 lights." This fantastical element is another source of Ellison's genius: The book takes on many tones throughout its 581 pages—surrealism, expressionism, social realism, oral history.

On top of all that, Ellison's language is nothing short of virtuosic, a nearly impossible feat to maintain over such a long distance. He gives us the English of Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration; he gives us Ralph Waldo Emerson's high essay style; he gives us African American English flavored with salt pork and collard greens; he gives us the language of American mass media and business.

That Southern black folk away in cold New York would be catered to with piping-hot yams makes bold good sense, and reflects the reality of the time. And sweet potatoes are wonderfully mobile.

FOR OUR PURPOSES, I'LL FOCUS ON chapter thirteen. By now we have gotten well into the meat of the story, and, like Don Quixote, our hero is coming to some self-illumination. Where 1,369 light bulbs could not help him, a particular edible root would come to the rescue.

"'Get yo' hot, baked Car'lina yam,'" calls out a street vendor:

> At the corner the old man, wrapped in an army overcoat, his feet covered with gunny sacks, his head in a knitted cap, was puttering with a stack of paper bags. I saw a crude sign on the side of the wagon proclaiming YAMS, as I walked flush into the warmth thrown by the coals that glowed in a grate underneath.

We are in Harlem, USA, probably sometime between the two Great Wars.

Here are two facts that people often conveniently forget about Harlem, if they know them at all. First: Harlem, as we have come to know it, is essentially a Southern City at the north of Manhattan Island. Harlem became largely populated by black Southerners fleeing North & South Carolina and Virginia and Georgia and Alabama and Florida from the years just before World War I to the middle of the Great Depression. A great many arrived from the South on a locomotive train line known affectionately as the Chicken Bone Special. The second thing is that Harlem is essentially a twentieth-century phenomenon. In the nineteenth century, black folk lived all over the island, and even had a village, Seneca, within the city where now Central Park is located. It existed from 1825 to 1857, when it was torn down in the name of civic renewal. It was a foretaste of what would happen to so many black communities across North America in the twentieth century.

So what we think of today as Harlem

was not only largely African American, but it was also sweetly Southern. We could think of it as a Negro colony of the South taken root in the North. Southern culture—language, arts, religion, and of course, foodways—predominated north of 125th Street all the way up to Edgecombe Avenue.

Nowadays we think of food trucks as a culinary trend. We have television shows and movies about them. But in truth, they are as old as cities. Thebes, Athens, Ur, Edo: All had food carts of some fashion. Bringing the food to the people always made good business sense, and we have had the wheel for a good long time.

That Southern black folk away in cold New York would be catered to with piping-hot yams makes bold good sense, and reflects the reality of the time. The sweet potato was a standard, especially in the Carolinas (My native North Carolina now produces 60 percent of the nation's sweet potatoes, I'm proud to say.) And a wise entrepreneur would be providing what was most familiar to his clientele at a bargain price. Moreover, sweet potatoes are wonderfully mobile.

I did say "sweet potato" and not "yam." The yam is a product of Africa and Asia. The sweet potato is a New World Root. Sweet potatoes are dense and orange, rich in beta-carotene; yams are drier, starchier, and lighter in color. Linguists can't agree on when or exactly why it happened, but English speakers have been confusing the two foods for centuries, using sweet potato and yam interchangeably—which is a rather fitting metaphor for America. At Thanksgiving when my aunts put out the candied yams, I don't correct them. I know they know they are feeding me sweet potatoes, but

"candied yams" just sounds so darn festive.

Surely that is how the protagonist in *Invisible Man* feels when he encounters the Carolina Yams on the streets of Harlem:

> "How much are your yams?" I said, suddenly hungry.
>
> "They ten cents and they sweet," he said, his voice quavering with age. "These ain't none of them binding ones neither. These here is real, sweet, yaller yams. How many?"
>
> "One," I said, "If they're that good, one should be enough."
>
> ...I knew that it was sweet before I broke it; bubbles of brown syrup had burst the skin...
>
> "Break it and I'll give you some butter since you gon' eat it right here. Lots of folks takes 'em home. They got their own butter at home."
>
> I broke it, seeing the sugary pulp steaming in the cold...I held it, watching him pour a spoonful of melted butter over the yam and the butter seeping in.

And later:

> I took a bite, finding it as sweet and hot as any I'd ever had, and was overcome with such a surge of homesickness that I turned away to keep my control. I walked along, munching the yam, just as suddenly overcome by an intense feeling of freedom—simply because I was eating while walking along the street. It was exhilarating. I no longer had to worry about who saw me or about what was proper. To hell with all that, and as sweet as the yam actually was, it became like nectar with the thought.

I should point out here two things: One, that Ellison and his good buddy, the novelist Richard Wright, were both deeply influenced by the European novel of ideas, philosophy masquerading as fiction. Think Albert Camus, think Jean-Paul Sartre. Ellison floats weighty philosophical ideas throughout the novel, but buoyantly, concretely, this yam episode in chapter thirteen being one of his most successful forays. The other point is that chapter thirteen in particular is packed full of food imagery. Not long after the aforementioned breaking of the yam, the narrator invokes: "You're a shameless chitterling eater!" He talks about mustard greens, pig ears, pork chops and black-eyed peas, "with dull accusing eyes."

Our hero goes on such a Camus-style reverie that he comes to confront his own conflicted notions and emotions about blackness, which leads him to declare of the yam: "They're my birthmark," I said. *"I yam what I am!"*

And to ultimately think:

> What and how much had I lost by trying to do only what was expected of me instead of what I myself had wished to do? What a waste, what a senseless waste! But what of those things which you actually didn't like, not because you were not supposed to like them, not because to dislike them was considered a mark of refinement and education—but because you actually found them distasteful? ...How could you know? It involved a problem of choice. I would have to weigh many things carefully before deciding and there would be some things that would cause quite a bit of trouble, simply because I had never formed a personal attitude toward so much. I had accepted the accepted attitudes and it had made life seem simple...

"I yam what I am!"

The hallmark of food in literature, raised to the level of art, is food interacting with character, food as character, food doing stuff, food being stuff. The best writers know that food is identity, food is alive, food is us.

A

AS A BOY, I LOVED ME SOME POPEYE. When I first read this book, back in my late teens, the idea that Ralph Ellison was playing with a cartoon character, a cartoon character who got his super powers from spinach—*canned spinach*—and the idea that a fancy-pants intellectual, National Book Award–winning novelist would play around with pop culture, seemed well beyond the veil, but Popeye had been around for decades by 1952, and Ellison was clearly and intentionally messing with us like that. "I yam what I am!"

As a sometime literary critic and as a writer of fiction, I militate against the term "symbol." Symbols are the stuff of literary garden parties and seventh-grade English classes. They are weak beer, and we are looking for the strong stuff. What Ellison is doing here is much more akin to moonshine. It can make a dead man holler.

The yam/sweet potato in *Invisible Man* is not simply a symbol. It has a function. It is a character. In many ways, it is alive. (In fact it was, once!)

For me, the hallmark of food in literature, raised to the level of art, is food interacting with character, food as character, food doing stuff, food being stuff, just as it happens with our flesh and blood, our mouths and our bellies and our memories. The best writers, the better writers, know that food is identity, food is alive, food is us.

Gertrude Stein once observed, it is rude to have your characters sit down to dine and not tell the reader what they are eating. This notion always made profound sense to me. I always tell you what my people eat, what they love, what they hate to put in their mouths.

I yam what I am!

"I am that I am" is of course the King James translation of the Old Testament Pentateuch. Other translations from the original Hebrew have it as, "I am who I am," "I am he who is," and "I am because I am," among many other permutations. Language can do that.

Language bends. Language reflects and refracts. Language resonates. Language multiplies and has multiple meanings. Language confounds. Language comforts. Language is how we take hold of the world. "I will be what I will be." "I create what I create." I am what I yam.

Randall Kenan is the author of six books of fiction and nonfiction. He delivered a version of this piece on the porch of William Faulkner's Rowan Oak at the 2018 Southern Foodways Symposium.

Black Food on White Pages

Reading the Lupton Collection

BY RAVI HOWARD

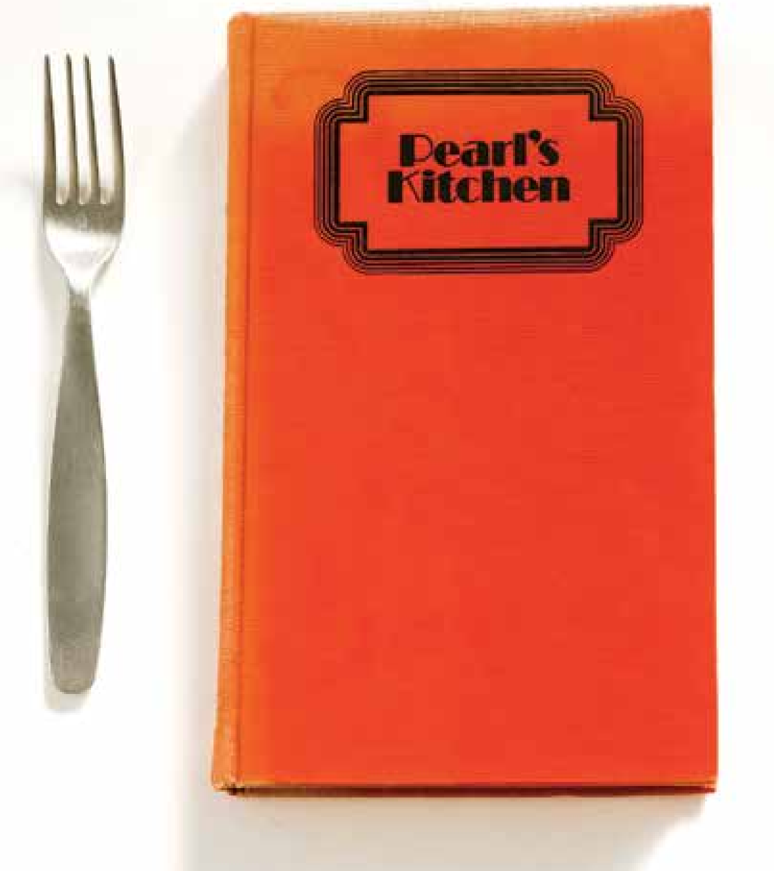
In a 2012 interview with *The Guardian*, Toni Morrison recounted the time her white employer complained about her cleaning skills, and Morrison asked her father for advice. "'Go to work, get your money, and come home. You don't live there.'" He told her that she was not obliged to live as they saw her in their imagination.

I thought about that idea—go to work, get your money, and come home—as I traced the history of black writing about food in the David Walker Lupton African American Cookbook Collection at the University of Alabama, one of the largest collections of African American food books under one roof.

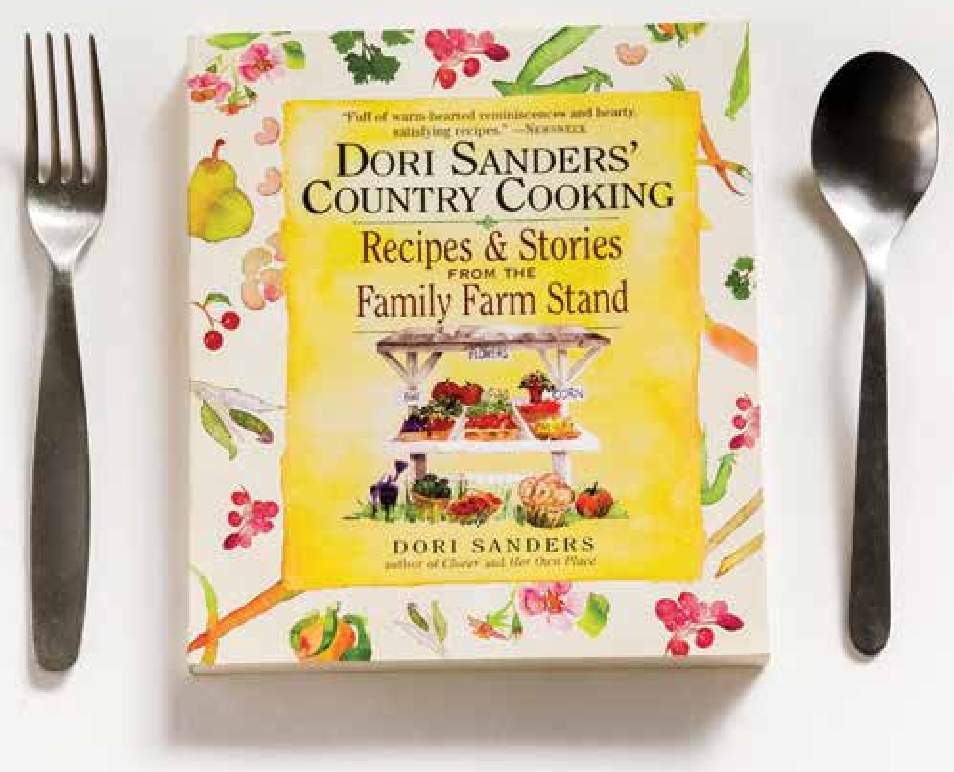
Reading through the archive, I followed an arc from the service-based narratives of the early nineteenth century to mid-twentieth-century books that described homecomings for the cooks and leisure time their predecessors rarely enjoyed. Thinking about those more recent books, I was guided by Toni Tipton-Martin and her description, in *The Jemima Code*, of the work of Edna Lewis as a first-hand narrative. Those personal stories, I realized, revealed a closeness between the cook and the audience, a relationship that was hard-won and much different than kitchen work focused on service to white families.

I wanted to start at the beginning to see what the chronology told about this collection. Robert Roberts' 1827 book, *The House Servant's Directory*, became a popular reference book for black workers, written to help them satisfy their employers. The servants' main concerns were the tastes of the employers and their guests. Roberts structured the book as a collection of letters to two men, Joseph and David, described as his young friends who were just entering the service profession.

> Now, my young friends, you must consider that to live in a gentleman's family as a house servant is a station that will seem wholly different… this station of life comprises comforts, privileges, and pleasures, which are to be found in but few other stations



Photos by Oriana Koren



> in which you may enter; and on the other hand many difficulties, trials of temper, &c. more perhaps than in any other station in which you might enter.... Therefore, my young friends, when you hire yourself to a lady or gentleman, your time or your ability is no longer your own, ... and my sincere advice to you is, always to study to give general satisfaction to your employers, and by doing so you are sure to gain credit for yourself.

I was drawn to these lines: *Many difficulties. Trials of temper. More perhaps than in any other station. Your time and ability are not your own.*

Understanding how Roberts' early life shaped that advice necessitated a look outside those pages to consider his biography. He was born in South Carolina between 1777 and 1780. We do not know whether he was once enslaved. He arrived in Boston as a young man in 1805. Later, he married a woman named Dorothy Hall. Three of Dorothy's brothers, James, Aaron, and William, were abducted and sold into slavery. James was sold to New Orleans. William escaped his captors in the West Indies and fled to England. He sent word home twenty years later. Aaron was never heard from again.

The man addressing the letters to Joseph and David was also grieving the loss of his brothers-in-law James, William, and Aaron. What was on the menu at his employer's home the day after the first of the three was kidnapped? How did the trip to the market or the fishmonger feel as Roberts carried this news? Roberts did not warn his young charges of this kind of terror. The price of candor at that time was too high.

Beyond the choreography of service and expert direction on cooking, another set of instructions lived in his book. Servants learned how to enjoy success and sidestep danger. Roberts included pages on troubleshooting during dinner parties. He prescribed the following in the section entitled, "To Cure Those Who Are Given to Drink."

> Put, in sufficient quantity of rum, brandy, gin, or whatever liquor the person is in the habit of drinking, three large live eels, which leave until quite dead, give this liquor unawares to those you wish to reform, and they will get so disgusted against it, that... they will have quite an aversion to it afterwards; this I have seen tried and have the good effect on the person who drank it.

"This I have seen tried." There was something upbeat and even humorous in the way he made everything plain. Roberts knew that he could not refuse service to an inebriated guest of his employers. So he follows the roundabout paths of black culture, through the eels that wriggle in the glass of a whiskey bottle.

This is the black countermelody: a duet, in which one voice is public and another private.

This job will diminish you if you let it. Even if you push back, that may not be enough. Still, here is a path.

JUST AS ROBERTS OUTlined the perils of Boston in the early 1800s, Liza Ashley's *Thirty Years at the Mansion* described the challenges of entertaining and cooking for Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus in the 1950s.

> Since the state did not appropriate the funds to hire enough help, the Faubuses brought in prisoners from

Cummins to help in the kitchen and the yard.....Since Mrs. Faubus did not have very much experience in cooking and running a household, I did most of the planning of the meals...We worked six days a week and never had Sundays off....We also worked all the holidays because the Faubuses always had lots of company.

Liza Ashley was serving Faubus when black teenagers integrated Little Rock's Central High School in 1957. She was there when the federal troops arrived. Ashley's daily routine in the midst of upheaval added a new layer to a familiar history.

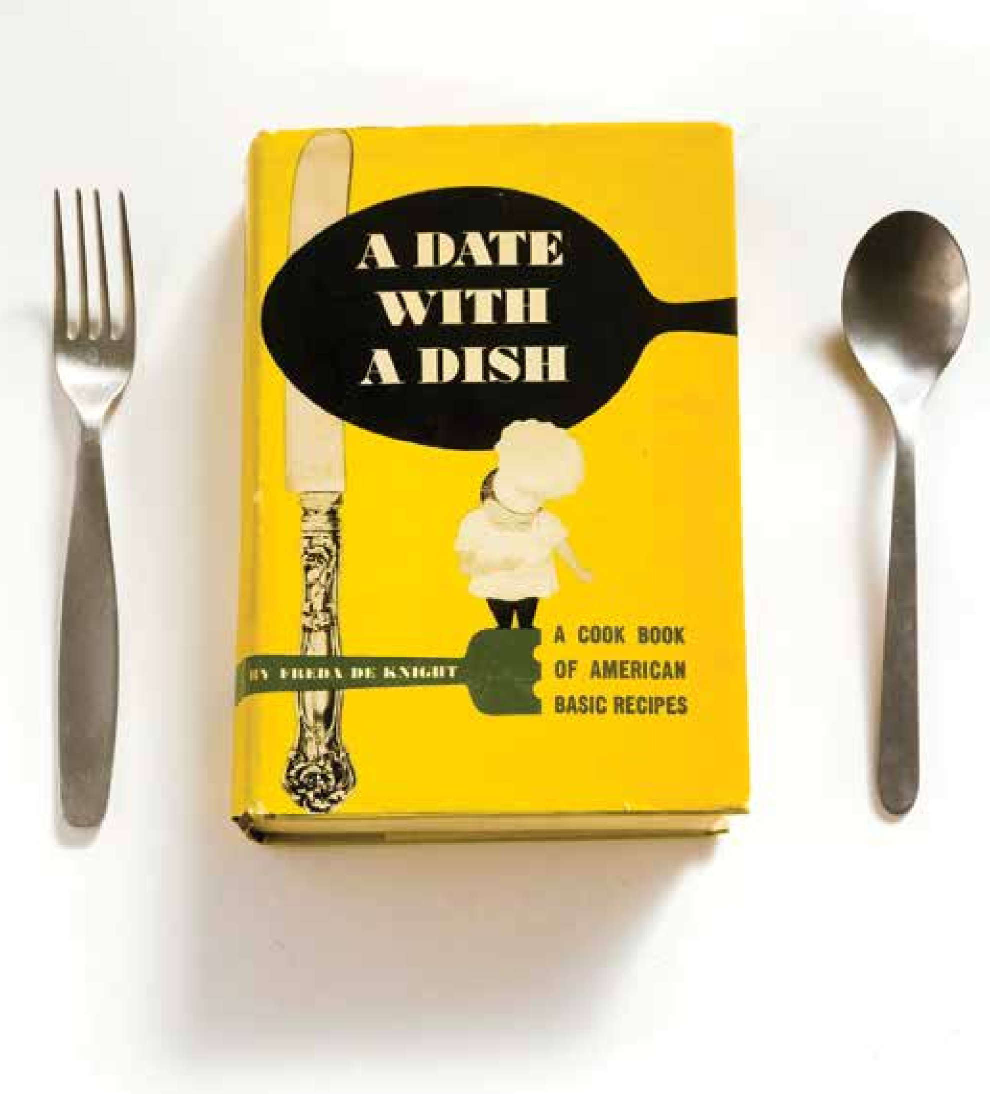
She described President Eisenhower sending troops "to shield" nine black students. The word choice was subtle, but Ashley seemed to show a kinship with the students. Although a friendship developed between Ashley and the Faubuses, who named a granddaughter Elizabeth in her honor, such bonds did little to weaken the hold of segregation, a system that Governor Faubus defended. In his book *South to An Old Place*, Albert Murray challenged William Faulkner's loving memory of the black woman who helped to raise him. Murray asked whether that love transferred to her children, the sorts of kids who integrated high schools in the 1950s and became activists in the 1960s.

I wonder how Liza Ashley negotiated the affection of the Faubuses. I wonder what she heard around their table. I wonder how she felt when she saw and heard all that anger directed toward the students of Central High. She described the Governor as a quiet man who liked to sit in the kitchen and eat the pound cake that she baked. Ashley's recipe offers the simplicity of a beloved staple—a pound of butter, half a dozen eggs, three cups of sugar—measured against the complexities of her role. I imagine Governor Faubus eating a slice of pound cake in silence. I imagine Ashley's silence, too, and all the questions that were never asked.

MAKING YOUR MONEY and coming home was central to the story in *Dori Sanders' Country Cooking: Recipes and Stories from the Family Farm Stand*. Born in 1935, Sanders recounted the homecoming of her Great Aunt Vestula, who spent much of her adult life as the live-in help on plantations around Charleston, South Carolina.

By the time Aunt Vestula moved in with us, she was too feeble to cook, but she was always in the kitchen when my mama was cooking.... While my mama cooked, Aunt Vestula tried to instruct her....Aunt Vestula often reminded her to pick a few shallots or leeks to sauté along with the fresh wild mushrooms, or to be sure to add just a little mild sherry.... But sometimes my mama *would* cut up an onion or a clove of garlic that she hadn't planned on using.

Sanders' descriptions of rationing and scarcity made her writing vivid. She wrote about Seed-Ordering Day and described the family gathered around the catalog. Her prose presented a Southern lushness, but not the kind that glossed over the toil of the black cook or farmer or laborer. By isolating what was precious, Sanders revealed the family's limited resources. Abundance, in the form of crops like okra and squash, was seasonal, and often uneven. Aunt Vestula savored the sherry that came from the employer, but the bottle was only so big. Her taste for that ingredient



was unsustainable.

Speaking to frugality, Sanders told the origin story of her grandmother's molasses bread. One day while cooking, her grandmother filled the oven, leaving only two spaces that were too narrow for a common baking pan. She found a solution. Coffee cans.

Consider the landscape within this oven, the space so precious that all of it should be used. There was plenty of room in Dori Sanders' own oven, but the coffee can was as much a part of the recipe as molasses, raisins, and dried apples. The continued use of that coffee can brought to mind a time when space was limited.

Dori Sanders' resourcefulness allowed her to see beauty in things that would be killed and rooted out. Her recipes for the poke and dandelion, a kind of flower offal, were given the same kind of attention as the sweetbreads, gizzards, and innards in other books in the Lupton collection. There was a respect for what may be unworthy elsewhere. There was a place for it on her table.

Like Roberts, Sanders' family had to use conceits to move toward freedom. She shared the stories of enslaved laborers who took that step in the garden.

> Some plantation owners wouldn't allow slaves even to have a garden. They didn't want slaves wasting time or valuable land on private gardens. The wanted them working in those cotton fields. According to our handed-down tradition, many slave women would say to the plantation overseer, "Oh, I just want me a few buckets of hollyhocks, a few little rows of flowers." Well, the overseer couldn't find an excuse to deny a woman her little flowers, which required almost no care, so he'd give her permission. The slave women would plant their flowers – and behind the tall hollyhocks, they would hide a kitchen garden.

Again, that countermelody. The voice of service used trickery to gain a bit of land and time. Sanders' writing conveyed this kind of leverage and the creativity required for survival. Many recipes in the Lupton Collection served as structured reenactments of leaner times. Making the recipes—or simply reading them as literature—can be an act of an imagined or performed remembrance.

Black domestic servants were required to play a role, and so many of the Lupton holdings outlined domestic stage direction. However, cookbooks written by black entertainers provided insight into their lives away from the expectations, away from the life that Toni Morrison's father referenced—a limited space in the white imagination. I read with the countermelody idea in mind, considering the Hollywood character versus the off-duty individual. In many cases, wealth and success gave them more freedom and candor.

For *Pearl's Kitchen: An Extraordinary Cookbook (1973),* the Tony Award–winning actress and singer Pearl Bailey began alone at her kitchen table, the place she called "the center of my silence."

> It is almost two in the morning and I am sitting at my kitchen table alone.... Sitting here thinking of yesterday and cooking for tomorrow, I have written this book. It is a cookbook, but not a typical one. I'll tell you how to make some wonderful dishes all right, but I don't want to do just that and nothing more. While I am telling you *what* I cook and approximately *how* I do it, I want to try to communicate *why* I cook. Practically speaking I don't have to cook at all. I could make arrangements to have all of that done for us. I cook because emotionally it is necessary for me to cook, and I want to explore this mystical satisfaction, this meaning and joy that comes from my activities in the kitchen.

I was taken with that passage. And I was also taken with what you won't find in her book. She was less concerned with the precise measures of the standard cookbooks. Her precision came in her prose. So often, a recipe was wrapped in a story. The absence of details invited creativity. She named one of her recipes Baked Sole Spontaneous. "Just about the time I closed the oven door, I had this weird idea." So she added a little something: Accent seasoning salt and Parmesan cheese. Reading the collection, I peered through the open door of spontaneity. I glimpsed a freedom to take recipes and do what you would with them. If you didn't have fresh, use put-up or store-bought.

The invitation was clear. Substitute as needed. Season to taste. Come as you are.

Another moment of silence and solitude gave a notable contrast to the crooning stage presence of Johnny Mathis, a star I imagine in filled venues. Mathis created a much different performance space in his 1982 cookbook, *Cooking for You Alone*. Mathis' cookbook had a plastic cover embossed with music notes, and it could be folded like a music stand and set on a piano. The recipes were designed to mimic sheet music, composed in the key of solitude.

It was a love song to the self. A meal at home, alone, is a worthy occasion for ground beef benendict or sherried chicken thighs. He wrote, "While the recipe is for another dinner-for-one, it easily multiplies by two or four since this may well become one of your favorite company entrees." If you're having company over, that is fine, but it's a choice and not an obligation. The inner voice controls the story and the setting.

Pearl Bailey and Johnny Mathis told us that these books were the story of a journey away from their audiences or customary direction. We, the readers, could direct, perform, and alter as we needed, or better yet, as we chose. Maybe that ingredient, choice, was what the earlier volumes didn't allow, at least not openly.

In those service narratives, there was only one way, and missing the mark was disastrous. But by the 1970s, there was room for improvisation. There was freedom. As the great American songbook delivered standards interpreted by the likes of Bailey and Mathis—"Sweet Georgia Brown" and "Chances Are"—these books gave the same opportunities to a generation of home cooks.

This is what is beautiful about the Lupton Collection. We get this sense of black ownership and the power of recognition. A powerful part of this is the feeling of the freedom, the autonomy, to improvise. A silent musing, time to think, to create, and to get the mental rest that makes that possible.

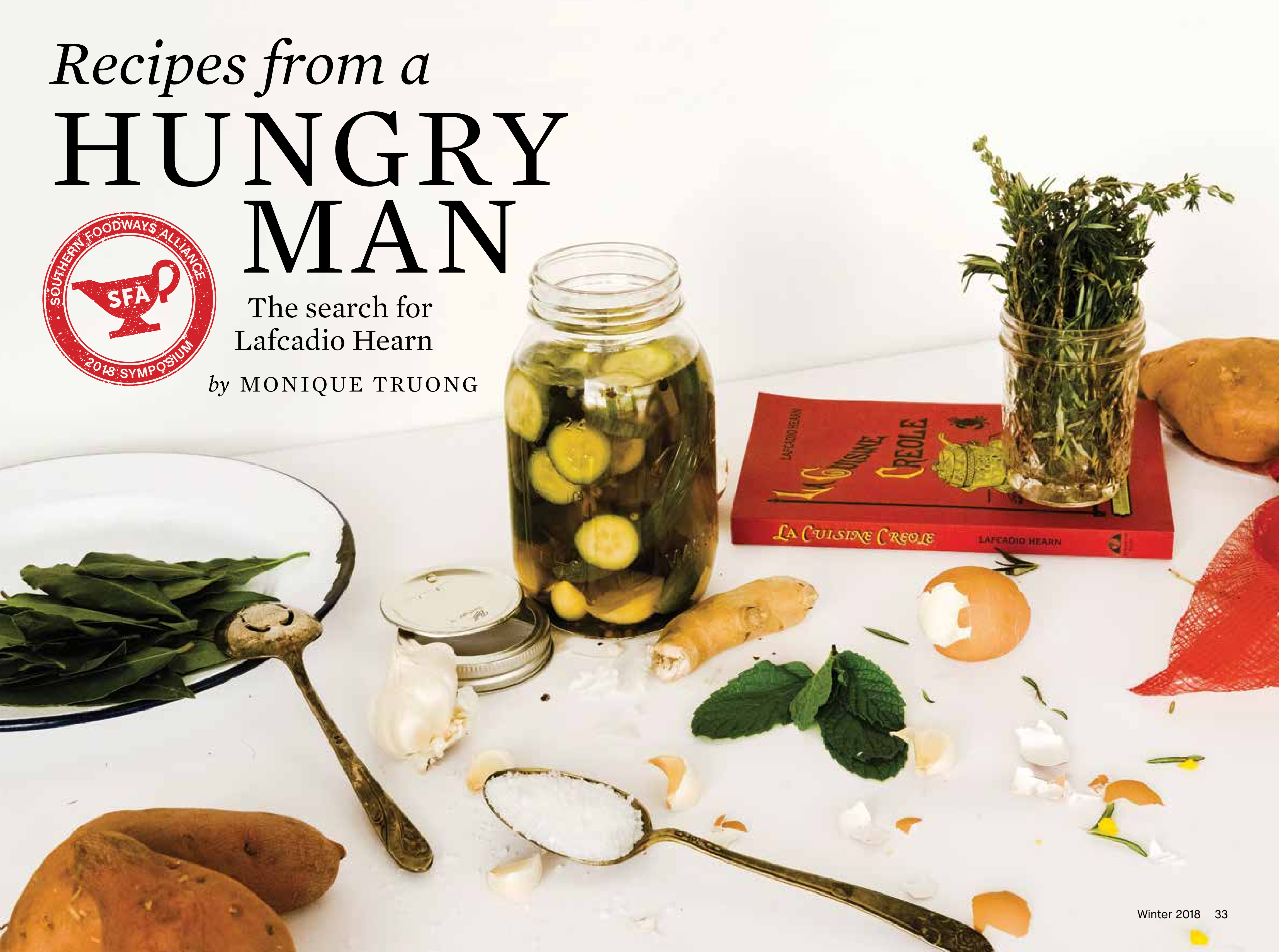
Toni Morrison learned the importance of the sojourn, to make your money and return to a place that is yours. The writers of the Lupton narratives followed that same journey, a long slow arc from the required work of service to the creative labor that let them define the tastes and feeling of home.

Ravi Howard is the author of Like Trees, Walking, *and* Driving the King. *He teaches creative writing at Florida State University.*

Recipes from a HUNGRY MAN

The search for Lafcadio Hearn

by MONIQUE TRUONG



In 2009, SUGAR *and* CORNBREAD *led me to* LAFCADIO HEARN.

My second novel, *Bitter in the Mouth*, set in the small North Carolina town where I grew up, was coming out the following year, and it would include this passage:

> My great-grandfather Graven Hammerick, upon his return from New Haven, [Connecticut,] was said to have refused the cornbreads served to him by his mother because they weren't sweet enough for his northern-influenced palate. Because she couldn't stand the sight of him not eating, his mother always had a batch made just for him with heaping spoonfuls of sugar added to the batter, but she also made it a point to wrap...[them in] a black cloth before bringing them to the table. She wanted to remind her son that something inside of him had died.

As the author of a previous food-centric novel—*The Book of Salt*, about a young Vietnamese man who worked as a live-in cook in the Paris home of the American authors Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas—as well as articles for *Gourmet*, *Food & Wine*, and the *New York Times*, I knew that a surprising number of my readers would have deep historical knowledge of regional cornbread recipes. They would agitate and foment if my assertion, vis-à-vis the sugar distinction, were made in error. I also knew that, to some readers, I, oddly, wouldn't appear to be a credible font of Southern food lore. I needed to have a published citation from a trusted source. I needed cornbread corroboration.

In my small but well-stocked kitchen in Brooklyn, I had culinary reference books of all kinds. Among them was *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, Volume 7: Foodways*, edited by John T. Edge. As I flipped through its pages, tucked between the entries for "hash, South Carolina," and "Hill, Annabella Powell," an unusual, geographically difficult-to-pinpoint name caught my eye: "Hearn, Lafcadio (1850–1904)," identified as a "journalist, author, and illustrator."

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Oriana Koren

The entry, written by Scott R. Simmons, began with Lafcadio Hearn's birth on the Greek island of Lefkada; went on to describe a lonely childhood in Dublin, Ireland; followed by an emigration to Cincinnati, Ohio, as a young man; and a subsequent migration to New Orleans, where the entry revealed this Greek-Irishman's contribution to the history of Southern food:

[Lafcadio Hearn]...opened the short-lived 5-Cent Restaurant and collected recipes of local dishes. Hearn published these recipes in 1885 as La Cuisine Créole, *which became the earliest published collection of New Orleans and Louisiana recipes...[, which] continues to serve as an invaluable record of the history of Creole food, New Orleans, and Louisiana.*

The entry then served up Hearn's second act, or second course as it were, which was entirely unexpected:

Hearn moved to Japan, taught English, changed his name to Koizumi Yakumo, married a Japanese woman who was the daughter of a samurai...and continued his voluminous writing.... Hearn secured a place in history after publishing numerous volumes...particularly Japanese fairy tales.

The entry concluded with the barest facts of this man's passing: Japan, September 26, 1904.

I reread the apocryphal-seeming nub of a biography. Little of it made sense to me, the sentences harboring a random collection of facts and locales. Also, I sensed that all the good bits—the crackling in the cornbread, if you will—were missing.

What I had before me was an outline of a man—described in the entry as "romantic" and "imaginative"—seated in front of a very full plate. Greek, Irish, Creole, and Japanese? That was an overly ambitious buffet, a quarrel of flavors.

On the second reading, slower this time and considering the magnitude of his travels, I recognized Lafcadio Hearn as a writer who had made the reverse migration that I'd made in my own life. Hearn went from West to East. More significantly, he *chose* East.

When I came to the United States with my family as refugees from the Vietnam War, I was six years old, and the decision to leave all that we knew behind—our extended family, our first language, all of the physical and emotional assemblage of home—wasn't mine to make. It was a journey that changed the course of our lives and, as my father would have told you, a journey that allowed us to continue living. For him, it was a clear-cut decision. Because of my father's position in an international oil company and because the U.S. government wanted to ensure that the South Vietnamese forces would have no disruptions in their fuel supply, he was able to bargain his safety and life for that of his young family's. In exchange for my mother's and my departure in the safety of a U.S. military cargo plane, he stayed behind until the day Saigon fell. He then left by boat, joining the flotilla that would be known as "the Boat people."

The Vietnamese word for "country" is "nuoc." "Nuoc" also means water, and the open water of the South China Sea became the only country my father and so many others had left. As an adult, I've asked myself many times if I would have made the same choice. Would I have been so clear-headed, mentally tough, optimistic, and brave? To me, these are the necessary traits that all immigrants must posses.

I wanted to know what had propelled Lafcadio Hearn, and whether he, after circumnavigating the globe, had found what he was looking for. My gut told me that Hearn was hungry: for love, family, for a sense of belonging, for a daily meal that fed body and soul. A cookbook author, same as a food writer, was always hungry; an immigrant one was even more so, I knew.

We, who make it our business to know the minutiae of the kitchen and the table, often carry within us an obsession: the keen desire not for the next filling meal but for the next fulfilling meal. The difference, we know, is not dependent upon the recipes but upon the cooks. We, who have immigrated to other shores, find that the pivotal ingredients—caring, empathy, affinity, communion, and love—can be scarce and difficult to source in our new home. We often find ourselves ravenous in a land of plenty.

Because I understand the world best through the language of food, I began my engagement with Hearn by reading his cookbook. From *La Cuisine Créole*, I learned why he was enamored with New Orleans. In his brief introduction, he enthused that the city was "cosmopolitan in its nature, blending the characteristics of the American, French, Spanish, Italian, West Indian and Mexican."

I learned that his recipes were sourced from "leading chefs and noted Creole housewives," though none of these chefs were indentified by name. As for the housewives, I found the names of six women identified with their recipes—a Miss Beecher, Miss Shattuck, Miss Lester, Jenny, Haly, and Little Jessie—but there wasn't a "Mrs." in sight.

I learned that Hearn clearly shared the same worldview as these otherwise unidentified housewives, as the only time he included the word "servant" in the cookbook, it was followed by criticism. Hearn wrote about the "extravagant" servant who threw away foods that the "Creole housewife" would save and transform into delicious morsels. I learned that he professed to value "economy and simplicity," and yet a couple of pages later he included a recipe for soup that began, "Take 100 oysters with their juice, and one large onion…" I'm assuming that the one onion here was his nod to economy and simplicity.

I learned that the intended readers were young housewives who could ensure "domestic contentment" by learning the "art of cooking" from his book. I learned that, if these young housewives failed to do so, then the fault was theirs and by no means his. This, for instance, was how Hearn ended the recipe for Mississippi Cornbread: "If it is not nice, it will be because you have put in too much meal, and made the batter too thick. But try again, and you will succeed."

I also learned what Hearn thought of women in general:

> [T]he ingredients of certain dishes should be carefully weighed and tested as though emanating from a laboratory. Few female cooks think of this, but men with their superior instinctive reasoning power are more governed by law and abide more closely to rule; therefore are better cooks and command higher prices for services.

On the pages of *La Cuisine Créole*, I got to know a Lafcadio Hearn who was an exceptional man for his time, who reveled in the heady, exuberant admixture of peoples and flavors that greeted him in his city of choice, New Orleans. I also met a Lafcadio Hearn who was a man *of* his time, limited by late-nineteenth-century biases and blinders, a

Arnold Genthe/Library of Congress

The courtyard of Lafcadio Hearn's former home on St. Louis Street in New Orleans

man who—two decades after the end of the Civil War—did not include one word about slavery nor the labor of the enslaved people who had made it possible for a household recipe to begin with a directive such as "take 100 oysters." I found a man who had no qualms about profiting from the work products and creativity of others with little or no attribution; a man who appreciated the company of women, in particular the single ones or the servant ones. In other words, I found a man who was a complicated piece of work, whom I wanted to grab by his starched white collar and shake some sense into.

Some cookbooks make me want to cook. Lafcadio Hearn's made me want to get into a fight. Do you know how novelists fight? We write a novel about you.

NINE YEARS LATER, MY Lafcadio Hearn novel is done. My argument with him took a while; arguments worth having often do. I've entitled it *The Sweetest Fruits*, and now you know where this motif of sweetness originated. The novel is told from the points of view of three women in Hearn's life: his Greek mother, Rosa Cassimati; his African American wife, Alethea Foley, who was born into slavery in Kentucky and who, after the Civil War, was employed as a cook at his boarding house in Cincinnati, Ohio; and his Japanese wife, Koizumi Setsu. She was, as the foodways encyclopedia entry noted, the daughter of a former samurai, but was destitute when she came to work for Hearn as a housemaid. In my novel, I also include excerpts written by Hearn's first biographer, Elizabeth Bisland, a young woman whom he met in New Orleans and who went on to become a renowned journalist, editor, and writer in New York City.

Here's what Alethea Foley thought of the twenty-two-year-old Lafcadio Hearn when she first set eyes on him in 1872. In *The Sweetest Fruits*, we find her still in Cincinnati, but it's 1905, thirty-three years after the fact. She's giving an interview to a newspaper reporter about the now-deceased author, whom she referred to as "Pat."

> Pat wasn't from here.
>
> That was my first thought when I saw him at Mrs. Haslam's boarding house. I didn't know his name right then, but that hunch would prove to be more than true.
>
> While I was in the kitchen, Mrs. Haslam's was always full. If you were the kind who were only passing through, you might not give much thought to the supper table, but if you were a stayer—the spinsters and the widowers—then a fruit pie every other night and a roast on Sundays were sought-after fare.
>
> Faces like Pat's were the ones that I'd learned not to get attached to. I didn't even bother with their names. Same as horses on a farm, the color of their hair was enough to identify them. Chestnut, bay, blond, or black as coal in Pat's case. If they were male and young, they were soon headed elsewhere. Out West, down South, back East, wherever the trains and steamboats could take them.
>
> Before the war, when we heard "Cincinnati," we thought of the Promised Land, the Ohio our River Jordan. Who knew that the Promised Land would be full of young white men itching to go elsewhere?
>
> Mr. Bean, the printing house man with the gray hair and gray fingernails, was introducing Pat to the other boarders seated at the table, and I was placing a tureen down on the sideboard. It was the middle of summer, but Mrs. Haslam always had me prepare a soup because she said it filled people up, and they would eat less of the pies and the roasts, which were more costly for her to provide. Mr. Bean liked a nip of gin before and after supper, so I thought that he was already slurring his words when he said, "This young fellow is named Laf-ca-di-o Hearn."
>
> My ears couldn't recognize "Lafcadio" as a man's name back then. I'd never met another.

According to newspaper accounts, after Hearn's passing Foley had to file a suit against his estate in order to claim that she was his first and only lawful wife. She lost and would be written out of his official biography for decades thereafter.

In my version of Hearn's life, I imagine the possibilities, impulses, and desires that kept this man in motion. His answers, awash in wanderlust and transformations, are not the same as my own, but I have felt an insatiable pull and even an affection toward this literary wanderer as I've traveled with him for nearly a decade, getting lost in locales and languages, and finding for my Lafcadio a home, not again, but for the very first time.

Some cookbooks make me want to cook. Lafcadio Hearn's made me want to fight. Do you know how novelists fight? We write a novel about you.

If I were to add to the encyclopedia entry for Hearn, it would read as follows:

An immigrant thrice over, Lafcadio Hearn was known by different names wherever he landed. Whether he was Patricio (on Lefkada), Patrick (in Ireland), Lafcadio (in the United States) or Yakumo (in Japan), he remained a consummate outsider, an awkward introvert, short, and blind in one eye. Hearn's prolific body of work was animated by his travels, self-inventions and reinventions, obdurate search for belonging, attraction to the "exotic" and "the Other," and a belief in the transformative power of a good meal. His life and his writing stand as testament to the unexpected and the life changing that necessarily occur, when disparate peoples, cultures, and appetites meet.

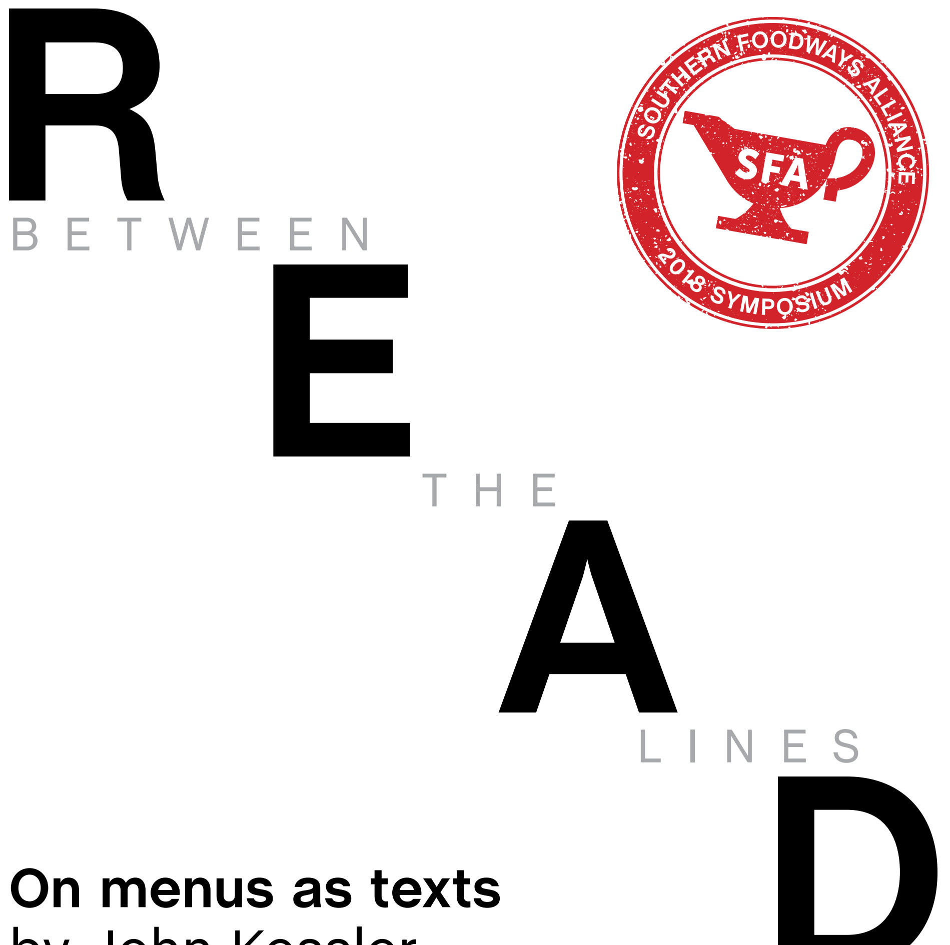
Plus—apologies to the author and the editor—one erratum:

Hearn's 5-Cent Restaurant was so "short-lived" that it, in fact, never opened under that name. Located at 160 Dryades Street, the advertised "cheapest eating house in the South" was renamed The Hard Times, prior to its opening on March 2, 1879. The Hard Times closed on March 22, 1879, leaving Lafcadio Hearn broke and still hungry.

It seems fitting to invite Alethea Foley, a cook by profession, to have the last words. Here's what she, in *The Sweetest Fruits,* has to say about this café.

> I'm not surprised that you hadn't heard...[of it]. I wouldn't have thought that such a place would last long. I don't know who came up with the scheme, but I'm guessing it was Pat, who came to Cincinnati with nothing, who shoveled dirt and dung for his suppers, who never forgot how much he had to pay for so little on his plate.

Monique Truong's third novel, The Sweetest Fruits*, is forthcoming from Viking Books.*



READ BETWEEN THE LINES

On menus as texts

by John Kessler

Photos by Oriana Koren

ONE HALF OF MY LIFETIME AGO, I REVIEWED A RESTAURANT for the first time. I have reviewed many hundreds since. Before everything went online, public relations firms used to send me thick envelopes with press releases to announce the opening of a new restaurant. I usually opened them over the mailroom garbage can, throwing out the glossy pictures of styled food, the chef bios, the statements from the architects, and the keepsake mouse pads. I retained only the menus, which I tucked into a folder on my desk.

I often looked through this folder of menus—augmented with others I filched from restaurants, and later, those I'd downloaded—as if I were reading a collection of short stories. In essence, that's what they were. Each menu told a brief, evocative narrative. Together, they comprised a sprawling story with a plot, conflict, and characters.

Menus begin with the expressed intentions of the people who cook and sell you food, then turn to you to fill in the meaning. They illustrate, as well as any form of literature I can think of, Roland Barthes' distinction between work and text. "While the work is held in the hand," he wrote, "the text is held in language; it exists only as discourse."

I find menus written by chefs to be the most evocative. The words chefs choose echo their professional pasts, reference their culinary heroes, and find voice in their own experiences. Menus produced by restaurant groups—often with the help of marketing professionals known as "menu engineers"—are less appealing to me as a critic and as a diner, but no less interesting as texts. They can't help but reflect contemporary attitudes toward dining and communicate the ways in which appetite and culture collide on the plate.

Some menus so thoroughly reflect current fashion they became fast clichés. When *Eater* published a parody menu in 2014 called "Every Trendy Restaurant Menu," diners throughout the country enjoyed a collective snicker. I particularly liked the "moules frites that spent a semester in Thailand."

SO HOW DO YOU READ THE LANGuage of menus? Stanford University linguist Dan Jurafsky, working with a team from Carnegie Mellon University, entered data from 650,000 menu items and found a strong correlation between language and price. Words like "exotic" and "spices" raise the price of a dish, as does any mention of an ingredient's provenance.

Jurafsky et al found that mid-priced chain restaurants are far more likely to use mushy "linguistic filler" words like savory, delightful, zesty, rich, tangy, fluffy, juicy, colorful, chunky and moist. This language attempts to conceal the fact that these cheaper dishes lack ingredients of actual value. When you move down the food chain from midrange to everyday, inexpensive restaurants, the menus begin to promise *real* bacon bits, *genuine* whipped cream, and *fresh* spinach, displaying what linguists call "status anxiety." Expensive restaurants show no such anxiety: The cream comes from a cow.

If you're a scientist, you look for statistical correlation. But if you're a restaurant critic, you look for textual clues.

Menus begin with the **EXPRESSED INTENTIONS** of the people who **COOK** and **SELL YOU FOOD,** then turn to you, the diner, to **FILL IN THE MEANING.**

Even though I no longer live in Atlanta, I stay current on its best restaurants—old habits die hard. Specifically, if I pull recent menus from three of the city's most lauded chef-driven restaurants and give them a close read, they can, taken together, offer a small universe of insight.

I began with a late-summer menu from Restaurant Eugene, where Linton Hopkins is the chef-proprietor and Chris Edwards is the executive chef. After experimenting with various menu formats over the years—including the once-popular vegetable-fish-meat tripartite—Hopkins has settled on a terse single page of a dozen or so nightly offerings, divided between starters and entrées. Although there is a tasting menu option, it is à la carte, and like most such menus today justified left on the page. You make the choices and judge each dish on its own.

This menu insists on dialogue. What's "the best American beef we can find?" It's a tacit rejection of the U.S.D.A. grading shorthand and an invitation to learn more about the Ancient White Park cattle Restaurant Eugene sources from Virginia. Maybe this $92 steak isn't Prime, but that doesn't matter.

As you read, you wonder about the unusual, non-grammatical use of capitalization. Most proper nouns are lower case, while many seemingly random words—Crumb, Tart, and Clay—appear in upper case. I asked Hopkins. As a Southern chef, he told me, he sees himself in discourse with guests and with history. As he explained it, the weird capitalization came from Thomas Jefferson, who thought upper case letters should mark the most important "words of intent." Here, the capital letters indicate the most flavorful ingredients and transformative textures.

Finally, why is the farro "mounted with duck liver"? Even though it sounds a bit obscene in English, this term comes from the French *monter*, as in *monter au beurre*—a technique of whisking butter into a sauce to make it rich and glossy. It is a subtle reminder of the kitchen's foundation in classical French technique.

A few miles south at Staplehouse, chef Ryan Smith offers a nightly tasting menu. Like most tasting menus, it is center-justified to indicate that the courses all relate to each other. What you won't find is extraneous language. We have "eggplant, shell beans, basil." "Ribeye, cauliflower, hazelnut." Smith is telling us that he can make these flavors play nice together, but isn't tipping his hand to the complex execution or intricate plating for which he is known. That will come as a surprise when the food arrives and the server delivers a verbal script.

There are, however, two exceptions. In one, Smith humanizes this menu's exercise in high culture with a reference to his Grandma Lillian and her potato bread. In the other, the menu uses a single extraneous adjective, noting the "aged duck"—a callout to a technique that is fashionable among the nation's top chefs. Smith's food is based in the lessons of home cooking. It's also in discourse with the most innovative restaurants around the country.

Another tough Atlanta reservation is Gunshow, where Kevin Gillespie is the chef-owner and Joey Ward the executive chef. When you take your seat, the busy page of a menu serves almost as your boarding pass. This menu is neither à la carte nor tasting, but an unusual hybrid.

The chefs in Gunshow's open kitchen prepare several orders of each dish in batches and then personally hawk them table to table, like dim sum. The menu, one per table, serves as a checklist, a cheat sheet, and a conversation starter. You'll pass it back and forth with the chefs and rolling-cart barkeeps, who tick off drinks and dishes. At the end of the evening, it comes back stapled to the bill.

Yet with all the show and tell, the Gunshow menu demands a read. The so-called "sandfire" listed with the clam dish is really samphire—or sea beans, a salty succulent that grows by the ocean. The misspelling is an inside joke that arose in the kitchen; the chef shares it to bring you into the process, beyond the transparency of the open kitchen. I also note the use of quotation marks around the mint jelly served with lamb. Quotes often indicate a modernist technique thumbing its nose at an outdated but still-beloved cliché. Sure enough, this quote-unquote mint jelly is an aerated mint fluid gel.

Though the menu at Gunshow bounces from Brazil to Thailand for inspiration, it speaks the vernacular of modern, seasonal Southern cuisine with a pronounced accent. Ingredients associated with the South—buttermilk, peanuts, muscadines—give it a sense of place as much as the repeated use of the word local. The "warm old-fashioned banana pudding" is like "Grandma Lillian's potato bread" at Staplehouse. Gillespie and Ward employ nostalgic, even somewhat hackneyed language to establish country-cooking bona fides. Without this conceit, upscale Southern cooking loses its bearings and its sense of purpose, becoming a farcical facsimile of itself. ("Fancy" is often a derogatory descriptor in the region.) The use of French words like *macaire* and *jus*, on the other hand, demonstrates grounding in classic French technique, still the root syntax of nearly all ambitious restaurant cooking. Szechuan peppercorns dot the chocolate mousse dessert. More on that later.

WHILE THE STYLE OF SERVICE AND use of the menu at Gunshow may seem a paradigm shifter, it hearkens to the origin of the modern menu. We're not looking that far back: It wasn't until the mid-nineteenth century that formal meals changed from banquets, where various dishes covered tabletops and guests served themselves; to meals served in courses, with dishes plated in the kitchen or on gueridons and served in individual portions to guests.

Just like at Gunshow, guests consulted an abbreviated, printed cheat sheet to see what was coming. The word for these small lists came into English through French from the Latin *minūtus*, the same root word for minute, minute (pronounced *my-NYUT*), minutiae and the short musical composition called a minuet.

These meals, not small by any means, were often as elaborate as the most insufferably long tasting menu you've ever sat through, only with larger portions. The French, in their Cartesian way, developed names and language for the ordering of courses. I noticed an unusual vestige of this practice in a menu reprinted in the book *Menu Design in America*. It detailed a copious feast prepared for Andrew Johnson at the Louisville Hotel soon after he succeeded Lincoln as President. What, I wondered, were "hot relieves"? It was the *relevé*, or "remove," which came to the table after it had been cleared of the fish course. The *relevé* was followed by the entrance to the meal, or the *entrée*, which was then followed by the meal's centerpiece, the roast. (These coursed meals were plotted like a Henry James novel, with the climactic moment halfway through and the denouement quite lengthy.)

At some point, English speakers decided that by the time they reached the entrée it was the de facto main course, while the French kept its intended meaning as a precursor to the main event. This has created linguistic confusion ever since.

By the turn of the twentieth century, an American menu vernacular had begun to develop. While European menus of the period tended to assign proper names

Menus at even the most **FORWARD-THINKING** Southern restaurants still **USE NOSTALGIC LANGUAGE** to establish their country-cooking bona fides.

and preparations to both classic and invented dishes, American menus were plainspoken and unpoetic. I saw both in a robust menu from Portola-Louvre in San Francisco in 1913, which served minced turkey in cream with poached eggs as well as sand dabs meunière. "Fresh California Vegetables" included cauliflower, artichokes, and eggplant. Stewed tomatoes, asparagus, okra, and corn, were listed under "canned vegetables." (It makes me think that with today's obsession with conservas—the Spanish word for tinned seafood—artisanal canned veggies may stage a comeback.) Another bit of prototypical Californian menu language: potatoes got nearby place names—Salinas, Saratoga—to localize the menu.

In the 1940s and 1950s, so-called Southern restaurants enjoyed a wave of popularity across the country. Menus from the period codified many typically American dishes, such as fried chicken and barbecue pork, as Southern. They also engaged in the worst kind of racial stereotyping. Images of mammies and men who bore more than a little resemblance to Uncle Remus appeared on menus as far away as Los Angeles. White diners at these restaurants could feel superior to Southerners yet also enjoy the benefits of the unequal power structure through the nostalgia hiding just beneath the folksy surface. I can't help but wonder if it correlates to the popularity of *Gone with the Wind*, released as a blockbuster film in 1939. It seems that mere mention of the word "Southern" presents an excuse to engage in racial stereotyping. Perhaps the 1954 *Brown vs. the Board of Education* decision also gave fuel to this trend.

As some American menu writers succumed to their worst instincts, others set about elevating the vernacular. The opening of The Four Seasons in New York in 1959 was not only a triumph of urban architecture, it was a game changer for American menu design and language. The Four Seasons discovered a spare, appetizing poetry in the plain language of American restaurant menus. Like the best American menus today, it drew broadly from international influences and puts a primacy on seasonal, local ingredients. It still reads beautifully. Consider these dishes: tiny shrimps in shoyu, french fried; chicken cream soup with new oats; Amish ham steak with apricot dumpling; beefsteak tomatoes carved at table; prosciutto with ripe figs; mint-roasted epaulet of baby lamb, and something called the queen's grouse with blackberry beignets.

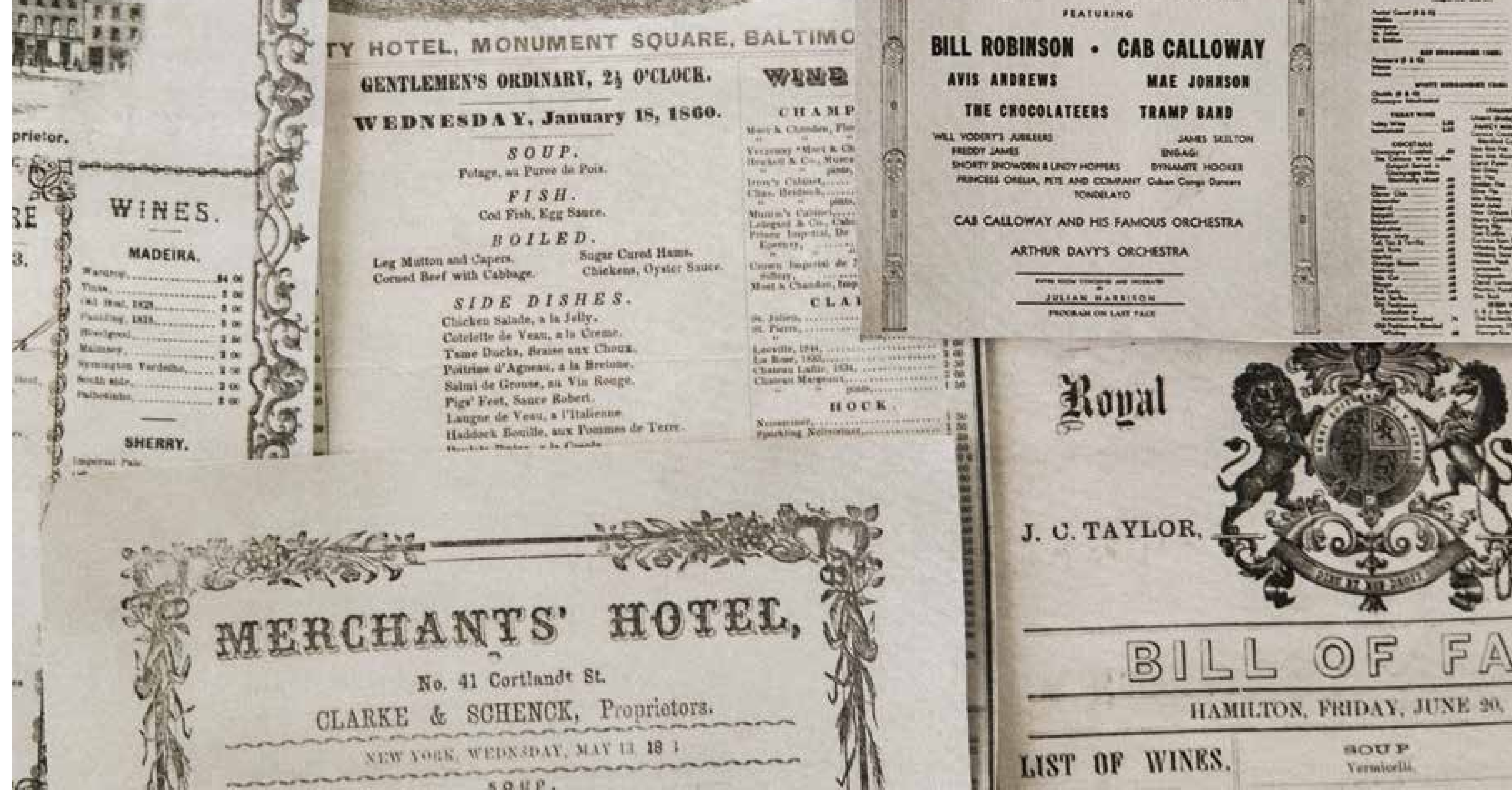
The postwar years saw the influx of the "le" and "la" restaurants as Americans began to appreciate how much better the French ate. Television chef and cookbook author Julia Child, and first lady

Jacqueline Kennedy did much to popularize French cuisine as culturally aspirational and a means to improve quality of life. My parents for years joked about what a little snob I had become when I asked to have my sixth birthday in 1967 at Chez Marcel, the little French restaurant in our suburb of Washington, D.C. (I loved escargot, but I think what I really loved was the fresh garlic and real butter.)

Henri Soulé opened La Côte Basque in New York in the late 1950s. Soon, many restaurants wrote their menus in French. French even began showing up on inexpensive menus as a marker of class. Phrases like *du jour* lasted long past their expiration date. French menus looked classy, and they carried all sorts of encoded information thanks to the the rigidity of French cuisine. Soulé's guests soon learned that sole Véronique came in a sauce of enriched stock and peeled white grapes, and that a blanquette was a creamed veal stew with carrots. Just a few English words appeared on the La Côte Basque menu: striped bass, a North American species; and grapefruit. Perhaps the notion of eating half a grapefruit as an appetizer was so repugnant to the chef's French sensibility that he didn't want to dignify it with a translation.

The French menu situation escalated to the point that the firebrand *New York* magazine restaurant critic Gael Greene took up arms in a 1969 review of La Caravelle. "I cannot imagine any Frenchman walking into a Paris restaurant and wrestling docilely with a menu in untranslated English," she wrote. "But for masochists...what joy! We fake it. Order "le sirloin steak" or anything we happen to recognize. Accept whatever mysterious concoction appears before us." In the 1970s, French began disappearing from menus.

In the 1970s and 1980s, American chefs became less concerned with classic culinary repertoires. They no longer interpreted canonical dishes; they created new gustatory delights. As menu writers, they gave up on the terse, plain-spoken style associated with American food and let their purple prose flags fly. Action-packed descriptions noted the preparation of dishes, bringing the diner into the sybaritic space of the kitchen.



I cooked at Cafe Giovanni in Denver from 1988 to 1990. Our menu offered such dishes as "tender veal sweetbreads simmered in a rich brown sauce with fresh mushrooms" and "an individual rack of spring lamb, marinated and oven roasted with herbs and spices." Even simple dishes got the swoony prose, such as "tender homemade egg pasta tossed in a rich sauce of cream, egg, butter, and imported cheeses, dusted with fresh ground black pepper." It was the kind of menu language that would eventually migrate to a less expensive neighborhood. But in 1980s Denver, we had to reassure guests at the most expensive restaurant in town that we were indeed using imported cheese. (We weren't.)

By the 1990s and 2000s, creative, individualistic fare in restaurants became the norm rather than the exception. Chefs signaled their command of local flavors, creative innovations and values as a cook with what they called the "plate set" and diners called the "garnishes." There might be a grilled pork chop or a pan-roasted fillet of grouper, but all the rest of the stuff on your plate—the "with"—told you where you were and who the chef was.

I kept a menu from Atlanta's South City Kitchen in 2004, when Jay Swift was chef. Today, it reads as a prime "with" text. Crispy fried Carolina trout with horseradish slaw, fries and pickled okra tartar sauce" is a pretty straightforward dish if you think about it, but the "new South" language promises a distinctive personality and an exceptional rather than typical fried fish meal.

I can't remember if I liked that dish or not as a critic. But if I didn't, you can bet I would have complained that all the fancy-sounding seasoning was lipstick on a pig. Perhaps sensing the problems with interchangeable plate sets, chefs began dropping the word "with." I pulled from my collection a 2005 menu from Aria in Atlanta, where Gerry Klaskala was and is chef. The garnishes seemed intrinsic to the primary ingredients. The Aria menu dispatched with most adjectives (other than "feathery" to describe potato cakes) and assumed the diner's familiarity with such ingredients as ponzu.

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?

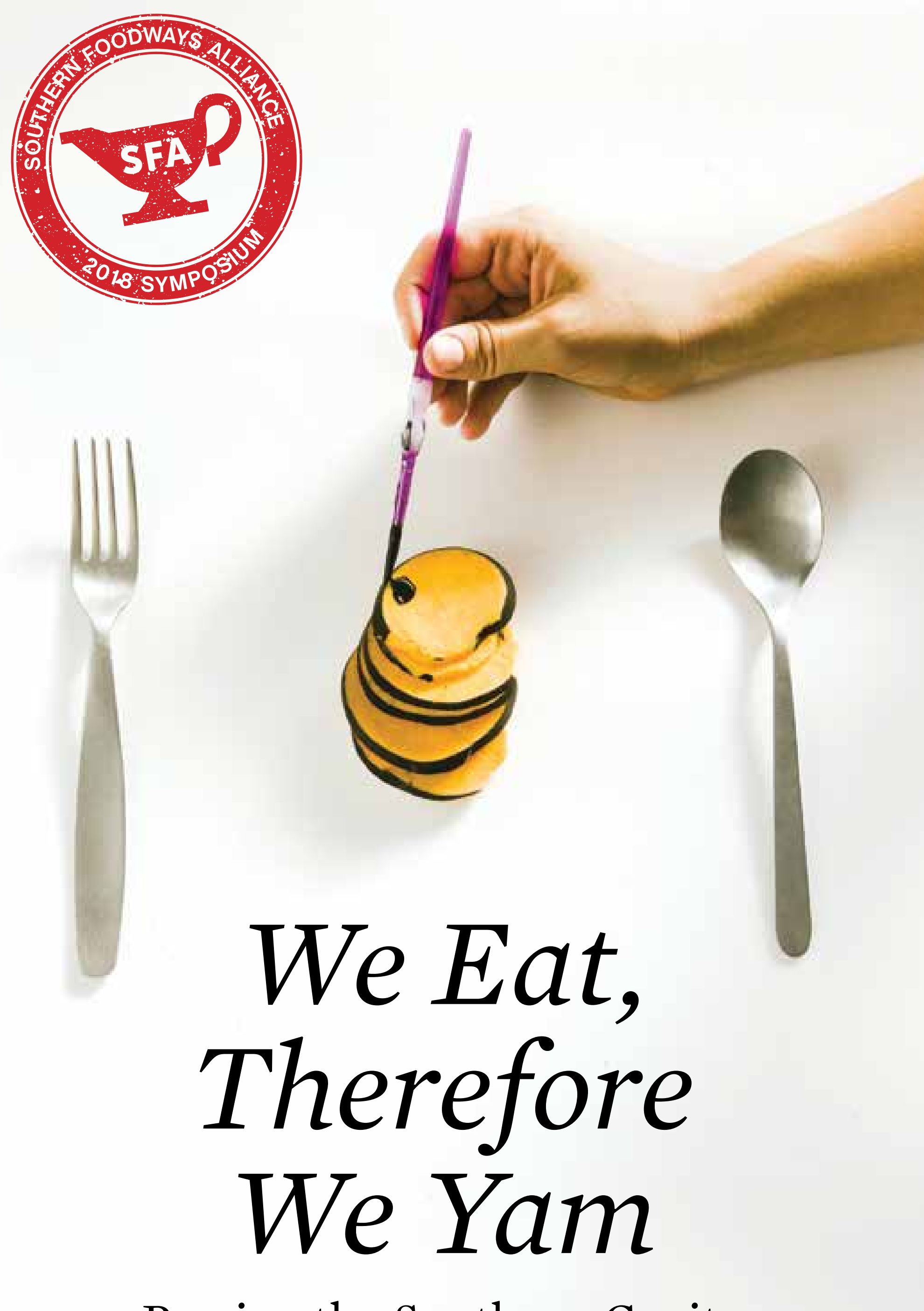
In this decade, forward-thinking chefs have bucked against the syntax of menu writing in creative ways. In a 2010 menu from Alinea, where Grant Achatz is executive chef, circles of varying sizes were placed within the descriptions of each dish on that evening's tasting menu. The larger the circle, the 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.

John Kessler is a dining columnist for Chicago Magazine. *He was a food writer at the* Atlanta Journal-Constitution *for eighteen years.*



Oriana Koren

We Eat, Therefore We Yam

Parsing the Southern Cogito

by ZANDRIA F. ROBINSON

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 Descartes[1] 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

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[1] We 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.

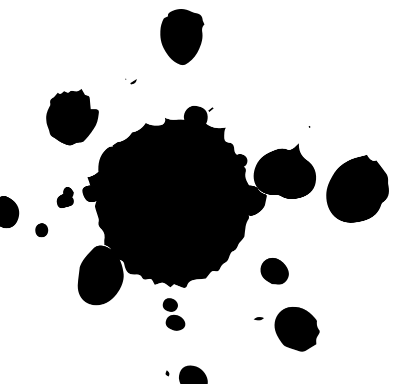
one another, to bridge gaps in the facile ways of diversity and inclusion as well as to break power structures in the more back-breaking ways of resistance, protest, and revolution. To borrow more from continental philosophy, rather than Martin Heidegger's notion of being and time (where an individual's 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."

"HEEEEEY, 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

Adobe Stock

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 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 postbellum 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

It is one thing to be welcomed. It is another thing to be seen, and still another to be rigorously cared for and fed.

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;DR[2]:

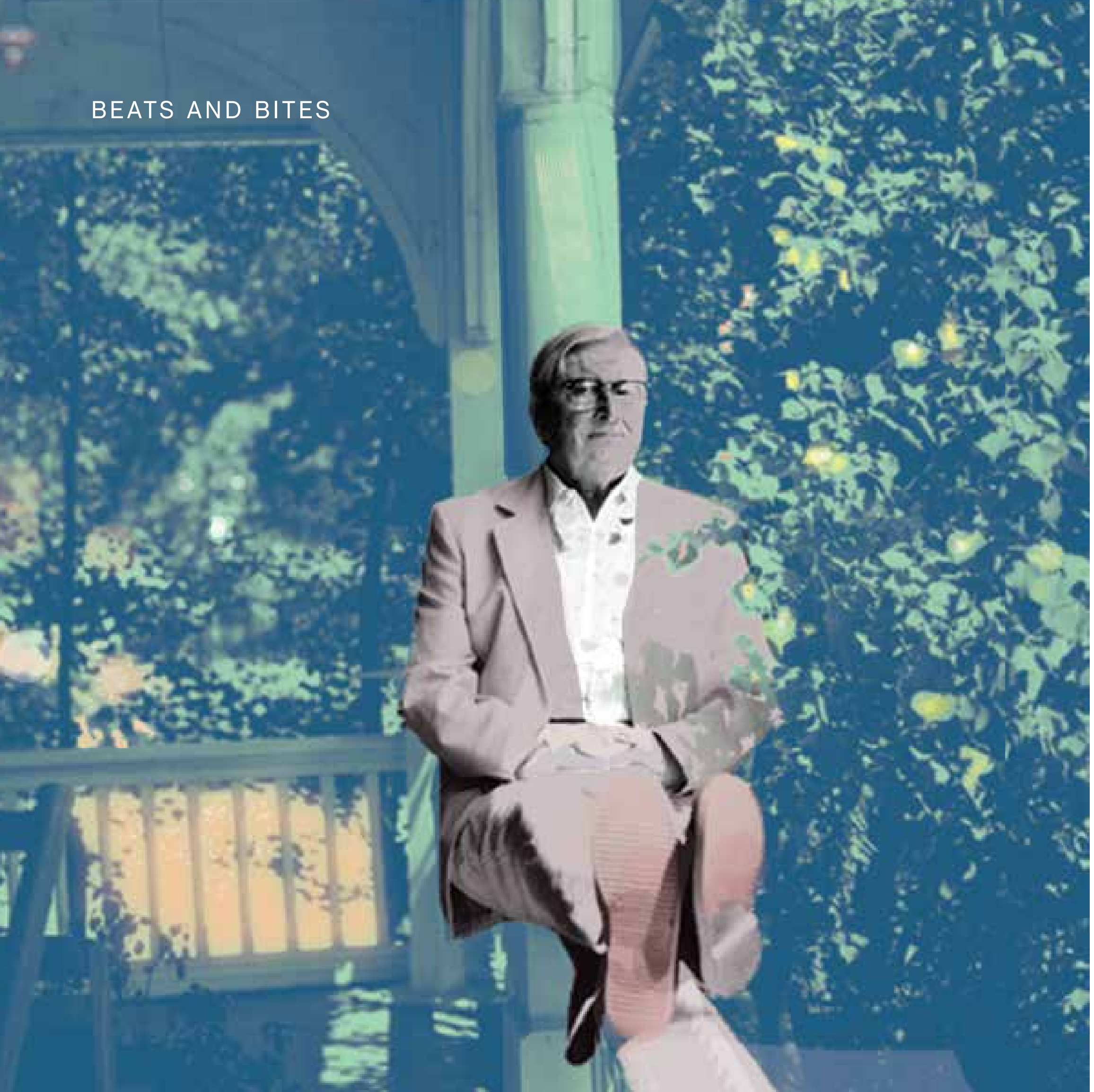
1. There are many Souths, and the one we currently inhabit is no bigger than the Souths of our origin places, of our spirits, and of our being.
2. Power relationships are unequal and unevenly distributed between and within Souths.
3. To address this, we begin might begin with the Southern Cogito—we think, 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.*



Album cover designed by Susan Archie; photo by Joyce Fay

BEHIND THE MUSIC

Putting life to song, and song to life

AS TOLD TO MELISSA HALL BY PAUL BURCH

EACH YEAR, THE FALL SYMPOSIUM CULMINATES IN AN ORIGINAL ARTS performance commissioned by SFA. In 2018, we asked Nashville-based musician Paul Burch to compose a song cycle based on the life of the writer, bon vivant, actor, globetrotter, flaneur, and eater Eugene Walter (1921–1998). The result was *Trovatore: The Lives of Eugene Walter*, which premiered at the Symposium, performed by Burch and members of his band, the WPA Ballclub. SFA managing director Melissa Hall interviewed Burch about his creative process.

When you wrote *Trovatore,* how much of your focus was on Eugene Walter (his life, his story) and how much on the music you were creating?

What comes first: word or music? I haven't a clue. And any songwriter who might tell you otherwise is spinning a tall tale. The most honest writers I know would rather do anything than write a song. John Prine once said he'd rather walk across a crowded highway for a cold hot dog than *try* to write a song.

As for my process, in general, sometimes I write a lyric (occasionally an entire song top to bottom) with only a bare rhythm in mind. Sometimes I can 'hear' the music in my imagination. Other times, even two lines will evoke a scene I've never imagined until that moment.

In some ways, putting Eugene's life to music was easy since Eugene lived in locales that are known for very specific kinds of sounds—at least during the times he lived there. For this album, I first daydreamed about the places I wanted to write about and imagined for each a kind of cliché sonic curtain. For instance, a song about Eugene's days in Paris in the late 1940s and early 50s (during the time Paris was still rationing food and gasoline) I thought ought to have accordion, fast guitar, a loping jazz beat, and perhaps violin.

But the music is only half the trouble. There were challenges to writing about a writer. Eugene was quite detailed and articulate in his recollections. So I had to step far back and try to see what he left out. In his oral biography *Milking the Moon* [as told to Katherine Clark], there is one glaring omission about his life in that Eugene never discusses the most important thing in life itself: loving another human being. To be loved and to love in return—what else is there?

To that end, the only person who dies in *Milking the Moon* is the poet Jean Garrigue. In my mind, the omission of love and the admission of the death of a woman, fellow writer, and colleague, told me Jean was an important person in Eugene's life. Whether they had an actual romance I can't be sure. But I chose to make the song "Jean Garrigue" reflect their closeness, a closeness I've seen and have felt between other writers and musicians. Knowing Eugene to be a sensitive person, it did not seem like coincidence to me that he should omit love and sex in his otherwise detailed story, but include the death of the most divine and mysterious Jean Garrigue.

> The nature of art is that the more vivid the character, and the closer you adhere to the facts, the more people will see themselves in that story.

Another thing that writers will never admit to is that some of the best moments in a recording—moments that seem to "make" a performance—often come from accidents, innocent miscommunication, and the impossible lucky breaks that come from just stepping up to the microphone and hoping for the best. In other words, showing up—the secret, it seems, to success. So what comes first, words or music? The answer is yes.

Does creating a song set about a real person inspire creativity or hamper creativity? Eugene Walter's voice, which is heard on the album, feels both evocative and at times stifling because of its singularity.

The advantage to writing about someone real is that you don't have to make anything up! Real life is always stranger, sexier, more outlandish, and downright perfectly stupid in the best ways than most anyone else's cold imagination.

If you find Eugene's voice stifling, that may be because that *kind* of voice tends to evoke in us the image of a now-gone era of Southern (male) genteel politeness that often disguised a haughty indifference—or downright hostility—toward anything that challenged one's orthodoxy. I think Eugene was an extraordinary person. But one could argue he used his very differentness (as an artist and as a man attracted to men and women) as a cloak with which he smuggled his way through otherwise compromising situations. That kind of self-awareness, a fear of verbal and social traps, does take its toll.

The nature of art, of course, is that the more vivid the individual and the closer you adhere to the facts, the nature of the facts, and how those facts emerged from the goo of experience, more and more people will see themselves in that singular story. Maybe Eugene's voice is a kind of mask. And a mask, after all, often says more about the person interpreting the mask than the person who is wearing it.

"How I Found Paris" is my favorite song on the album. I think it's your playfulness with the word "found" that speaks to me. Do you have a favorite song (or two) on the album? What speaks to you in that song?

Even though none of the songs would have been written without first being asked to consider Eugene's story, for me each song on *Trovatore* is linked to a person I know and for whom I'm thankful.

Since the record was finished, packaged, sealed, and delivered, the album has come to represent something else all together. My experience at SFA, the warm reception the album received, and the opportunities and friendships that came as a result of the recording and the concert, are all tied together now.

Writing the tune is a very private kind of happening, whereas recording a song is something I share with my favorite musicians. My sense of accomplishment primarily comes from writing something good enough that these fine musicians can, with just a small bit of direction and encouragement, make these stories seem real and better than I imagined. I'm grateful. It was made with love, and I hope it is received that way. Even if Eugene wouldn't have liked it, I think he would have thought the effort no less than gallant.

SFA thanks the Cockayne Fund for underwriting the writing, production, recording, and performance of Trovatore. *Type this link into your browser to listen at home: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1NoMALPgeDdpPwy6YUquXhoVf-gZvs9sJ*

Paradise By the Sea
(Mobile Before the War)

(Words by Burch, Music by Burch & Dennis Crouch)

Down in Mobile
We're all crazy
The County Seat of Lunacy
Home to Carnival, Cotton
And the little Fire Ant
A man can be a woman
And a woman can be a man

In Mobile
When I was a boy in Mobile

Down in Mobile
Before the war
Life was quiet and all you heard
French, Dutch, and Portuguese
The air smelled like oysters
And fresh cut steel

Playing in the cool
Under the house
I'd hear porch gossip all around
Who died last night
Who got soused
Who went out a lover
And came home a spouse

Down by the docks
My granddad brought in
Food from around the world
Bananas, mangoes, guava, and plantains
If he caught a deep sea crab for supper
Why he'd call it a day

The bordellos kept the sailors
And the senators cool
To drink their moonshine and play games
of chance
Every neighborhood a little melody
Of colonial days of
Great Britain, Spain, and France

The Mobile I knew
Before the war was a paradise by the sea
Cat and Monkey kind of folks
Free spirits like me
What America might have been
C'est la vie

Mobile
When I was a boy in Mobile

MEET JO ELLEN O'HARA

Even when she was Sue Scattergood, she's always been herself

BY ANNEMARIE ANDERSON AND MELISSA HALL

Annemarie Anderson

JO ELLEN O'HARA WANTED TO study at Vanderbilt, but her high school principal in Birmingham decided it wasn't the right place for her and refused to send in the application. So she went to the University of Alabama instead.

O'Hara didn't want to major in home economics. Home ec was expected of a college woman in the 1950s. Not just in Alabama, not just in the South, but pretty much everywhere women had the audacity to matriculate. Then she found journalism and the university yearbook, *The Corolla*, where she excelled. Ms. O'Hara was elected the first female editor in a nonwar year of *The Corolla*. She was honored as the outstanding graduate of her class in journalism, even though she was not a journalism major.

She began her newspaper career at *The Birmingham News* in 1965 on the federal court beat. The job paid $70 a week. O'Hara loved the job and was thrilled that she never had to work as a cosmetics saleswoman in a downtown department store—the post-college career path for many of her classmates.

Jo Ellen O'Hara was a writer. A good one. And her home economics major was her secret. Until it wasn't.

She recalls, "After a couple of years the editor, who was one of these people you never say no to, he said, 'Miss O'Hara, I understand you have a degree in home economics.' And I said, 'Yes, sir.' He said, 'Well, I think that we need a food editor, and we want a food editor with some credentials.' And I said, 'Well, I think that's really nice but I— I really like what I'm doing.' And he said, "Well, that's fine; you'll take over Monday as food editor.' So that's how much pull I had in the early [19]60s."

> Jo Ellen O'Hara's editors at *The Birmingham News* assigned her the pen name "Sue Scattergood." "You're going to get married in two years and you'll leave," they reasoned. They were wrong.

O'Hara became the food editor of *The Birmingham News* in 1965. Though she initially had no interest in covering food, she grew to love it. The pen name "Sue Scattergood" was chosen for her because her editors said, "Well, you're going to get married in two years and you'll leave and we'll be stuck with a no-name food editor."

O'Hara drew attention to gender equity during her tenure at *The Birmingham News*. In addition to her food coverage, she pitched and wrote a series of breaking news articles about the 1977 murder of Virginia Simpson, a Birmingham philanthropist and socialite.

In the 1980s, after more than fifteen years as food editor, she finally convinced the paper to let her write under her own name. O'Hara spent her entire career—forty-three years—at *The Birmingham News*. She retired in 2008.

Read Jo Ellen O'Hara's oral history at southernfoodways.org. It is one of fourteen interviews that SFA oral historian Annemarie Anderson gathered as part of our Women Food Journalists project.

Every morning, just before the kids come down to eat their breakfast, I pour myself a cup of coffee and set an intention for the day. There is something about the heat radiating from the mug and warming your hands that is grounding. The smell of dark roast awakens the senses. The first cup of coffee is a full-bodied experience.

I settle into the corner of my dining room where the light falls into the corner and take a self-portrait, often obscuring my face with flowers, my hands, or a cleverly placed shadow. As a black woman, it's important for me to exercise agency over my image; to choose how I want to be seen by others in the world. This series is a creative practice turned ritual that is my way of connecting to the present moment, seeing the ordinary in extraordinary ways, and expressing gratitude.

— ALISHA SOMMER, *photographer and writer*

Gravy is a publication of the Southern Foodways Alliance, an institute of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi.

The SFA documents, studies, and explores the diverse food cultures of the changing American South. Our work sets a welcome table where all may consider our history and our future in a spirit of respect and reconciliation.

JOHN T. EDGE Editor-in-Chief
johnt@southernfoodways.org

MARY BETH LASSETER Publisher
marybeth@southernfoodways.org

SARA CAMP MILAM Editor
saracamp@southernfoodways.org

DANIELLE A. SCRUGGS Visuals Editor
danielle@southernfoodways.org

RICHIE SWANN Designer
richieswann@gmail.com

CARLYNN CROSBY AND OLIVIA TERENZIO
Nathalie Dupree Graduate Fellows
and Fact Checkers

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