

LEARNING TO LOVE THE STRIP-MALL SOUTH

I FELL HARD FOR BUFORD HIGHWAY

by John T. Edge

I GREW UP IN THE COUNTRY. On fourteen acres of red Georgia clay, cut by gullies and skirted by cedars. I grew up fishtailing down gravel roads in pick-ups. And running barefoot through honeysuckle patches. Out in those boonies, I developed an urban crush. After a fitful college run through Athens, I hightailed it for Atlanta and made a life in a neighborhood near the city core.

I could walk to two Indian restaurants, a bookstore, and a co-op grocery. I pinch-hit on the softball team of my neighborhood bar. I became the worst sort of city snob: an arriviste. I was quick to dismiss my country birth and even quicker to declaim life in the white-flight suburbs, which I considered a homogeneous wasteland, absent of sentient folk and sidewalks.

But then I fell hard for Buford Highway, the multicultural corridor that spirals north out of the city, from the strip-mall suburbs to the megamall exurbs. A five-lane gauntlet of nail salons, taquerias, foot massage parlors, dim sum houses, squat apartment complexes, and pupusa drive-thrus, Buford Highway, like much of suburban Atlanta, was built for whites escaping blacks. Now colonized by new immigrants, it's a salad bowl suburb, in the parlance of Charlotte historian Tom Hanchett, a kind of culinary Pangaea where Korea abuts Mexico and Vietnam snuggles up to Bosnia.

You have to look with fresh eyes to see the beauty in the strip-mall South. But it's there. In double-decker shopping centers, once anchored by Circuit City and Toys R Us, now home to big-box international groceries that sell fresh mullet for a buck-fifty a pound. At two-story barbecue temples, fronted by mirrored planes of glass, where Korean women cook beef short ribs over charcoal braziers. At Chinese cafés where Guatemalan cooks work back-of-the-stove pots and fryer baskets, boiling star anise-perfumed peanuts and turning out gingered catfish. In the suburbs of Atlanta and Charlotte, in Houston and Little Rock, in Jacksonville and Richmond, the newest of New Souths awaits. 🍷

PHOTO by Kate Medley.

