

APPALACHIAN AWAKENINGS

THE RADICAL INCLUSIVENESS OF RONNI LUNDY

by John T. Edge

I CAME TO THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI to study race relations, for the burden of race was always on me. Born in the Georgia home of a Confederate brigadier general, I began college in the same month that Ronald Reagan took the podium at the Neshoba County Fair in Philadelphia, Mississippi, to woo white conservative voters with these words: “I believe in states’ rights...”

Early in my tenure at the University of Mississippi, I recognized that class and race were intertwined. And so were a range of other issues. When Will Campbell, the Yale-educated Baptist preacher from Amite County, Mississippi, delivered a talk about redneck stereotypes at a Center for the Study of Southern Culture conference on Elvis Presley, I listened as he defined rednecks as working class women and men. Campbell rejected the assumption that bigotry was their defining trait, claimed the mantle of redneck for himself, and closed by declaring the same status for his “beautiful, brilliant, lesbian daughter.”

Those words rocked me back on my heels. And they prepared me for the radical inclusiveness of Kentucky native Ronni Lundy, the SFA founding member and lifetime achievement award winner who has long championed the people of Appalachia. Ronni argues that class has riven as deeply as race, especially among Southerners living in the upper reaches of the region.

At the sixth Southern Foodways Symposium back in 2003, Ronni picked up the good reverend’s message when, in a talk entitled “How to



Make it Real Compared to Possum,” she asked attendees, “Before you let the words ‘white trash’ slip from your lips again, which we do constantly in this culture, before you say those words ever again, answer this question for me: At what precise income level, at what level of taste, how many trailers do you need to own before a human being becomes trash?”

Through the years, Ronni has not slowed. “We artists/storytellers/journalists/historians have to wake up every morning and do an inventory of our souls, if we want to do real work,” she wrote me recently, sounding a message that was typically challenging and encouraging. In a year when the SFA marks the fiftieth anniversary of restaurant desegregation and uses that moment to ask wide-ranging questions about contemporary inclusion and exclusion—about who is made welcome at today’s welcome table, and who is made unwelcome because of differences that include class, sexuality, and obesity—Ronni’s Appalachian timbre rings clarion. 🍷

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