better results if the question was framed with environmental benefits.)

Rodney Scott, proprietor and pitmaster at his eponymous restaurant in Charleston, South Carolina, is known for his slow-cooked, whole-hog barbecue, and for sourcing and splitting his own wood. His motto, “cut, chop, cook,” speaks to a work ethic that accepts no shortcuts.

When I call him and pose the question of cooking with lab-grown meat, he’s at a loss for words at first.

“Wow,” he replies. Then a long silence.

“In my honest opinion, I wouldn’t,” he says. “I don’t think my customers would understand it, either.”

Scott admits part of this reaction comes from being set in his ways. “For us old-school country boys,” he says, “that whole hog sums it all up.” Hearing him describe the way the juices from the back bone, along with the different flavors from the ribs, hams, and belly, all come together over the course of twelve hours above smoldering wood coals, it’s hard to imagine anyone choosing a cultured meat product over *that*.

Vaughn is less skeptical. Once a few high-profile chefs put it on their menus and their Instagram feeds, he reasons, the public will follow suit. “I think all these people who say they wouldn’t eat it, they just haven’t seen anyone else eat it,” he says. But, he adds: “Any of the barbecue hardcore folks out there, you’re never going to win them over.” Anyone who would decry prime grade brisket, he reasons, will reject lab-grown anything.

There’s also the question of whether lab-grown meat can ever really serve more than a niche market. As Vaughn puts it: “If we were having this discussion about kobe beef—all this meat is going to be expensive for a good long while, I imagine—if we’re talking about it in those terms, nobody’s saying, ‘Yeah, but what about that guy in the shack who’s cooking barbecue?’”

The whole idea of Southern barbecue, he says, is “taking these cheaper cuts, and through long, low cooking times, you can transform them into something entirely different. If you’re designing a cut of meat, why would you ever design it to be that difficult to cook?”

But this is about more than marbling. With global population heading toward 9 billion and beyond, and demand for meat expected to double in coming decades, the math says that eventually even the pitmaster will feel the effects, one way or another. So it’s easy to agree, at least in principle, with Memphis Meats’ basic position that “we need a better way to feed a hungry world.”

There are as many questions as answers. Could this new generation of companies one day supply racks of lab-grown ribs? Or does it defeat the conservationist purpose to create waste material like bone? What about growing the never-alive body of an entire pig? It’s at least theoretically possible—but is the idea of brewing entire carcasses from stem cells just too freaky?

“Very freaky,” Scott offers. Another long silence.

But the longer we talk, the more he comes around to the idea. “If that ever came about, I would love to try it,” he finally says. And if Scott’s manning the pits that day, he’ll draw a crowd.

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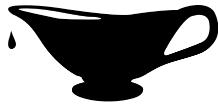
NATIVE STRANGERS OF THE SOUTH

Illustrations by Ginnie Hsu

CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY ON THE PAGE AND THE PLATE

BY NABEN RUTHNUM



I'VE OFTEN FELT LIKE BOTH TOURIST AND TOUR GUIDE

in the particular cultural segment I occupy, which I can loosely term "diasporic South Asian person in the West." As much of a mouthful as that is, it's still a vague, huge category, one that doesn't describe where many of the people who supposedly fit into it actually come from, let alone who they individually are.

My parents are from Mauritius, neither of them speak any Indian languages, and as a writer, I've always felt like the stories and novels I've produced were not what editors and audiences expected from me. The kind of stories they wanted, it seemed, were the ones that delivered a familiar brown tale to audiences who liked that Indo-Western culture clash story.

Being crowded by the assumptions around your supposed category isn't something that diasporic people in the West have a corner on. In fact, assumptions about who you are and the place you live is something that American Southerners are certainly familiar with. For every visitor who comes to Tennessee or Louisiana with an open mind, notebook, or camera, there's one who is looking for the reflection of whatever image of the South they had in mind from *Treme*, Dolly Parton, or *Deliverance*. And maybe there's nothing wrong with seeking familiar touchstones when you come to a new place. But there is a problem with ignoring what's in front of you.

There's a great scene toward the end of the Trinidadian-British writer V.S. Naipaul's 1989 travel book, *A Turn in the South*, his chronicle of traveling across this part of the world and the strange and unexpected resonances he found between the American South and his long-ago Caribbean childhood. In this scene, Naipaul is talking to James Applewhite, the North Carolina writer and tobacco-farm owner who admits to him that he's "always conscious of the fact that (he's) not truly of the world he's showing" to Naipaul.

Applewhite has a tenant who is the actual farmer, and he himself has never worked in tobacco before—being bedridden and otherwise removed from his peers by sickness during his childhood, Applewhite felt set apart, and says that this combined with what he thinks of as his writerly traits made him what he calls "an observing stranger" in his native land.

Expanding on this idea of the observing stranger, Applewhite even compares himself to Tarzan. Reading the Edgar Rice Burroughs books as a child, he was fascinated with "a person from another culture being deposited from the sky in a tropical environment." As an adult, that's just how Applewhite feels about himself and his home—and Naipaul completely relates, as he'd had the very same feelings as a child and teenager growing up in Trinidad.

The native stranger, observing: This is what it feels like to be a product of diasporic movement across the world. I think this idea of the native stranger resonates with Southerners who are neither black nor white. It's particularly apt for individual members of diasporic communities who feel a little out of step with their own minority communities, the ones that are supposed to be their enclaves, as well as feeling lost in the larger, mixed communities around them.

LAST YEAR, I WROTE A SHORT BOOK called *Curry: Eating, Reading and Race*, where I used a ubiquitous, beloved food as a tricky way of complaining about my writing career. This dish, which is actually thousands of different dishes, is a useful metaphor for talking about how the culture of people from the Global South, and particularly South Asia, is delivered out here in the West. I coined my own term for the type of book that I felt pressured to write by the cultural-identity-focused publishing industry: *currybooks*.

Sounds a little insulting, I know, but I did make it up when I was a bratty teenager, mocking the books that my parents gravitated towards: novels and memoirs that were often about a brown person adrift in the West, who comes to understand that there is a solution to their unhappiness back in the motherland, be that India, Pakistan, Mauritius, or Guyana. Currybooks almost always feature a struggle between generations, and quite often that struggle is navigated through food, with recipes being passed down by somber, disapproving grandmothers, who gradually find a sense of connection to their errant grandchildren at the dinner table.

Part of the supposed value of these books, some of which are good and many of which are bad, is that they provide readers with a quick tourist's scan of an immigrant household, and sometimes of life in a different country.

But part of my problem with currybooks, and with the pressure to write one of them, is that more often than not, readers come to these texts hoping to find a version of the exotic that is already familiar to them: a predictable trip that they can take again by purchasing another book with a long black braid and a sari on the cover, whether it's a commercial novel like Amulya Malladi's *The Mango Season* or an earnest collection of short stories like Daniyal Mueenuddin's *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*.

Why the name "currybooks"? Well, curry is one of those baggy food terms that refers to everything from certain ingredients—curry leaves, or that mysterious and hotly debated mixture called curry powder in the supermarkets—to a mass of dishes that contain one or both of those ingredients, and often neither. From the United Kingdom's favorite, chicken tikka masala, to distinctively regional dishes like the toddy shop fish curries you get in Kerala—coconut oil–slicked, deep red from an ungodly amount of chili powder, and with a nasal note of fenugreek—curry has a complex, divided history that tells us about how we essentialize culture right now, and how much rich history there can be in every bite of a dish, once we let go of our preoccupation with supposed authenticity.

THE INDIA THAT PEOPLE WHO LOOK LIKE ME are assumed to be nostalgic for DOESN'T PROPERLY EXIST. The reality is a much more interesting country, with a complex present and past.

I'll clarify what I mean by complicating our idea of "authentic." That chili powder in the Keralan curry? It's there because the Portuguese set up shop in India in the sixteenth century to establish a spice-trading route. They planted chilies from the Caribbean and forever changed the national cuisine of India. Atlanta-based chef Asha Gomez is a proponent of Keralan regional food that explodes the ubiquitous North Indian-by-way-of-UK curries we're used to eating in North America. She is able to bring the food of her southwestern Indian state into

LIKE NOVELS AND TRAVELOGUES, MENUS TELL STORIES.

conversation with Southern food in part due to the particular meatiness of Keralan cuisine. Her pork vindaloo, cardamom cornbread, and green bean open-faced sandwich is a marriage made possible by historic movements of international trade, diaspora, and, crucially, the innovation of a singular chef.

Trade and colonial exploitation are historical bedfellows, so it would be beyond naive to look at those Portuguese chilies as a gift, or to see the complex rice dishes from Persia that Indian cooks reshaped into biryani for the Mughal courts as an example of purely positive cultural mixing. Still, these one-time interlopers are embedded in dishes that define present-day cuisines in the subcontinent and across the diaspora. Part of what we taste are these stories of exploitation and exchange.

So yes, biryani and Keralan fish curry are authentically Indian, precisely because these dishes are the result of a country and a cuisine that has long been in conversation with the world. At times, that conversation was colonially imposed, and at other times it was the result of willing migrations and trade. The India that people who look like me are assumed to be nostalgic for doesn't properly exist. The reality is a much more interesting country, with a complex present and past.

CULINARY ADAPTATION BECAME A PART of the diasporic movement of South Asian people to the West. Tikka masala was, depending on who you listen to, invented in England or Glasgow in the 1970s, by Bangladeshi cooks trying to create a sauced and not-too-hot dish that would appeal to the post-football-match crowds they wanted to draw in—just as in the previous century, Indian cooks preparing dishes for the Raj compensated for that missing soup course that British occupiers pined for by adding gravies and sauces to dishes that previously had been served dry.

Those tikka-masala-innovators, and the cooks and restauranteurs who came after them, weren't just pandering to white palates. Some of their own children would come to prefer hybridized dishes like tikka masala to the home-cooked curries their parents had grown up with. These hybrid dishes are still authentically representative of a certain culture, a certain place, and the diasporic hand that works the stove.

My family ended up in Canada after perhaps three or four generations in Mauritius, a tiny dot on the atlas near Madagascar that needed a new pool of labor when the British Empire abolished slavery. Indian coolies came over by the boatload, and among them were my ancestors. By the mid-twentieth century, Mauritius was densely populated with the Indians, Africans, Chinese, French, and British citizens who contribute to the island's creolized identity. As young adults, both of my parents knew they wanted to emigrate. And when they came to the West, they brought their stories and their food.

THE AMERICAN SOUTH AND ITS FOODways have a complex, often ugly history. And like all histories, it's a past that changes as the present changes. The history of Koreans, South Asians, and Vietnamese peoples in the South, for example, has a more recent starting point than white or African American history here. But these people are present now, living, cooking, and bringing their own pasts with them. Their stories extend our notions—and even the geographic bounds—of Southern history.

With a term as overarching as "The South," which takes in (depending on whom you ask) about ten to twelve states, hundreds of years of fraught history, and a changing racial population, you begin to wonder: if the South contains and means so many different things, does it mean anything specific? Anything directly explicable? Anyone who's lived, or even traveled, throughout the American South comes to be aware of the sharp regional differences, the millions of individual lives, stories, and varieties of cuisine that exist not just from state to state, but from subregion to subregion. Just as curry is a metaphor for the way brown lives are lived, delivered, and perceived in the West, "the South" is a metaphor for the incredible range of regions and people who make up the modern South. Introduce an increasingly diverse population that doesn't fit into most outsiders' conception of the South (or many insiders', for that matter), and those tastes-per-square mile densify.

MARGARET EBY, THE AUTHOR OF THE literary history-travel book *South Toward Home*, writes that "what makes a Southern writer a Southern writer is not just the circumstances of his or her birth, but a fierce attachment to a particular place, and a commitment to exploring its limits in his or her work." This seems just as applicable to a description of what makes

a great Southern chef, especially when paired with what Eby thinks the best Southern novels do—"counter the sweeping generalizations about the South by being unrelentingly specific about one place." Good writers don't tend to write about vast regions without being precisely specific about the towns, the homes, the characters inside them—just as great cooks know that when they represent themselves in their cuisine, the self doing the cooking is comprised of a very specific set of geographical, historical, social, and personal circumstances—a collection of traits much too particular to be summed up precisely under categories like Southern Food, or Indian Food.

As Michael Twitty writes in *The Cooking Gene*, "there are multiple Souths, not just one, just as the there are multiple ways of being Southern." My constant guides to the places I haven't yet been are books and meals—the kind of vicarious travel you settle for when you can't properly afford to be a tourist.

Like novels and travelogues, menus tell stories. Dishes—especially those that fall under the broad "ethnic" or "regional" cuisine categorization—often can't be separated from stories that they come with, whether the eater is assuming that story, or the cookbook's introduction has told it to us. We like to know that what we're eating is somehow authentic, especially if it's supposed to represent a place. Sometimes it falls to the chef to present his or her bonafides, to tell us some way or another that, hey—your cook is the real thing, therefore this dish is the real thing.

Chef Cheetie Kumar's unique journey of being born in America, spending her early childhood in Chandigarh, India, with parents who longed to return to the States, and cooking an ocean-crossing stability into mealtimes when the family managed to move back and establish themselves in the Bronx, is an inextricable part of the story around the menu at Garland, her Raleigh, North Carolina, restaurant. It's an authentic backdrop that makes it easier for diners to follow her idiosyncrasies as a chef, when she creates innovative food that is Indian, sure, Southern, sure, but ultimately and most importantly, hers.

AMONG THOSE WHO HAVE THE WALLET to fly anywhere they want to, where there's money, often there isn't time. And even when both money and time allow it, when we get on that plane and travel to other shores, we're still stuck visiting other places as ourselves, as tourists. How long do you have to stick around to get the experience of being an authentic resident of a place, a person who belongs there?

Hospitality can't transform a tourist into a native—hospitality being, after all, what is offered to guests, to travelers, to people passing through. And hospitality is also, of course, one of the signature, stereotypical elements of being a visitor to the South. But being an authentic resident of a place, truly belonging to it and understanding it—it's something we want as travelers, whether we're trudging around on foreign soil, visiting an "ethnic" restaurant, or opening a book that's supposed to transport us elsewhere.

Paul Theroux, who has written excellent travel books and novels and a few bad ones, recently wrote one of his bad ones: a book called *Deep South*, detailing four car journeys through the Southern states. A travel writer you've read many times before is like a film critic you've been reading for years, long enough to know that you'll like a certain kind of goofy comedy that he hates, or be completely bored by a costume drama that he loves. You get to know the writer well enough to see through his criticisms and into what shapes his taste, what he's like,

EVEN THE MOST ADVENTUROUS DINERS reach for points of comparison—FAMILIAR FLAVORS, OR more commonly, familiar stories BEHIND THE WAY A DISH CAME TO BE.

how he sees things. In Theroux's case, he sees through a constant lens of literary references, which I share, and one of distanced elitism, which I happily do not.

Reminding us that even the brightest people can miss their own points, Theroux writes, "A travel book is usually based on a journey on which the traveler confronts places for the first time, describes them vividly, and then never goes back...(The) generalizing—the snap judgment of the traveler—is the reason travel writing can seem so crisp, so insightful to the reader, and so maddening to the person who knows the place well or who inhabits the area, who does not recognize his or her home from the brisk description of the wisecracking wayfarer." This, I would say, is plainly true, the words of a seasoned traveler and reader and writer of travel books. But Theroux goes on to suggest that by visiting the South Carolina Plantation Belt a few different times, in different seasons, he arrives at a fuller representation of what a place like Allendale, for example, is really like.

As reviews of his book by Southerners will tell you, he didn't succeed. Theroux continues to see, and to represent, a world that had already been shaped for him by books, by first impressions, by the accidental wanderings and aloof conversations he'd had. He writes the South that he expected, and even the few flashes of the new—the ubiquity of Indian motel owners, for example—he reduces and makes his own, foregrounding his familiarity with the region these mostly Gujarati families are from, giving scant attention to what their lives, and the lives of their American-born children, might be like in the South. He knows where they're from, and he knows they own motels, and that a lot of them have the last name Patel—and this is enough.

All but the most conscientious of us are guilty of this kind of cultural short-cutting. Salman Rushdie said there's an "India of the mind" in books that is animated by the memories and nostalgia of diasporic writers. In much the same way, there is a South of the mind, and tourists are constantly coming here expecting to find it and forcing themselves to ignore any elements that don't jibe with the South they had in mind. That includes the increasing, unignorable numbers of diasporic people from South and East Asia and elsewhere who live here, who have changed the ways the cities and towns look and taste, and added their own histories to the already rich past of the region.

It can be harder to see reality, the present world in front of you, and to fold that into your concept of what life in the South is like, if ideas and stories of the past, the metaphorical South, are packaged as the constant reality of the culture. Acknowledging the presence of the past is just how it is in diasporic writing, and in many diasporic families—and down

here in the South, too. Like Theroux, I couldn't help seeing some aspects of the South strictly through a printed-page haze when I first visited. James Lee Burke wrote the New Orleans sky before I saw it, and my eyes weren't sharp enough to distinguish the sunset cloudscapes I saw from the "torn-plum purple streaked" horizons in Burke's books.

Travelers, readers, eaters—most share a conscious or unconscious tendency to seek out the familiar. Even the most adventurous diners reach for points of comparison—familiar flavors, or more commonly, familiar stories behind the way a dish came to be. We're often looking for the taste of someone else's home in cuisine, because homeland, the past, and the longing to recreate these distant concepts on a plate—these are ideas we're familiar with. This, we understand.

When I started writing in Canada, it didn't take me long to realize that a certain past, and the nostalgia I was meant to feel for it, was supposed to be at the root of the books that I wrote. If the introductions to cookbooks are any indication, many of today's diasporic chefs feel that same pressure to present an authentic self that is tied to where they come from. We can go deeper, whether on the page or at the table, by focusing on the individual within the culture. At the same time, we recognize that the individual chef cannot be separated from that culture, as distinct as their style or approach becomes. What you eat is a complicated reprocessing of the chef's own synthesis of their past and culture with the regional realities of their present. That's the marking identifier of "chef-driven Southern cookery," as far as my reading and eating can pin it down.

I chose to talk about curry as the running metaphor in my own book, which was really about how all publishers, editors, and readers seemed to want from me was a story of my identity—as long as it was a story that fit with the ideas of diasporic identity that they'd already seen before. I became so resistant to being forced to write about identity, nostalgia, and the past that I ended up writing a book about what I thought of identity, nostalgia, and the past. I am the product of a complicated mixture of cultural background and my parents, sure, but also the 1980s thrash metal I grew up on, British sitcoms, Jewish-American writers, living at different levels of poverty and comfort in different large cities in Canada—all the elements that go into making an adult person. It's not a special story, but it is a distinctive one: I write who *I* am, no matter whether the product is a book of cultural history or a film-script about werewolves. The same applies to chefs, whether they hail from Italy, India, or the American South. There's no separating the Bolognese sauce, or the masala, or the gravy, from the hand that stirs it, but where we can draw a separation is between the metaphorical arm and the real person doing the stirring, between our idea of what a Bolognese tastes like and what this chef has actually done to

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make the one we're eating now taste the way it does: and why, specifically, they chose to make it that way.

In writing my currybook an idea snuck up on me, the way ideas tend to do when your focus is supposed to be elsewhere. For groups of colonized or diasporic people, expressions of identity emerge to the greater culture in food first, and writing later. I don't want to be categorical here, but it is striking that a great rush of diasporic Indian writing came out of the UK in the 1980s on the heels of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, a decade after the Indian restaurants had begun their unstoppable spread across the Kingdom.

The visibility and adaptability of food, the opportunities for communication, assembly, and financial advancement that food culture provides: These factors all contribute to the establishment of an inner and outer identity for diasporic people in a new country. And building that identity is crucial to the emergence of writing, ideas, and unique stories of individuals from a diasporic community.

I look forward to the diasporic writing that emerges from the South in the coming years, following in the wake of early lights like Monique Truong's *Bitter in the Mouth* and GB Tran's graphic novel *Vietnamerica*. These writers and the chefs who came before, alongside, and will come after them, are native strangers: a perfect fit in the modern South they were born in or emigrated to. They see themselves and the place around them with the constant freshness and reevaluation that living inside an evolving history and place demands.

Part of diasporic movement, of finding yourself in a new place with your family's old skin color and traditions, is establishing a new story of identity. That same process goes into solidifying the conventions of a genre. This may be why food comes before literature in diasporic storytelling, where the culture on the table is eventually reflected in how we tell our stories, and how the conventions of those stories become traps for later writers with different experiences. A diasporic person's bond to the old country is a statement of authenticity, and that's exceptionally important in the South, where bonds to the past and lineage have so much to do with how identity, both cultural and personal, is shaped. The bonafides of a diasporic citizen are in our grandmothers' dishes and stories: a bond not just to the past, but to an old country, an Other-place that we have only come to know through their cooking, which becomes our cooking. At least, that's the story we've been telling so far—and much of the time, at least part of it is true.

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