

MORE THAN DIVERSITY: INTENT AND REAL INCLUSION

In this issue, a cornucopia of writers and artists of color represent a re-upped commitment to writing the South as it is—and food writing as it should be.

BY CYNTHIA R. GREENLEE



I'D LIKE TO THINK I DON'T NEED to explain why this issue—amplifying the work of writers, illustrators, photographers, and editors of color—needs to exist.

After all, what a stellar lineup within these pages. Among the offerings, we have a tour of Savannah, led by three gifted cultural observers. Anthony Ocampo, a leading Asian American studies scholar and a second-generation Filipino American, visits Savannah's only Filipino restaurant. Princeton professor and Birmingham native Imani Perry is the author of many books, including *More Beautiful and More Terrible: The Embrace and Transcendence of Racial Inequality in the United States*. In this issue, she muses about the city's sense of morality and its sweet tooth. Travel and food writer Nneka Okona heard that the historic Bryan Slave Mart building once housed an enslaved butcher's shop, and we all benefit from her curiosity. Please read more about who's who in this issue on our Featured Contributors page.

I have no illusions about the ways of our world: that racism thrives; that people of color are shamefully underrepresented in food media and especially in its leadership; and that we at the SFA have work to do.

I began curating a contributors of color issue after last year's Fall Symposium in Oxford. That event explored food and labor, such as how food festivals undercompensate the culinary "talent" and how immigration raids affected one Mississippi community. The speakers raised issues, some hackles, and discomfort that one participant framed as a seeming duel of "old-timers versus Wakanda." Not all discussions were comfortable. Nor were all of them intergenerationally fraught. SFA needs more thinkers of color and

Illustration by Rachelle Baker

younger people like the speakers who voiced concerns about labor rights, xenophobia, and economic justice. That said, change shouldn't be the burden of a single person, group, or event.

I can't control what *Gravy* readers or SFA Symposia attendees think or feel. But I have a say in what we publish in *Gravy*. And while I wasn't around in the early days, I know that there've always been members who don't shy away from the reality that food is inherently political. Indeed, in 2006, SFA cofounders Lolis Eric Elie and the late John Egerton pushed SFA to codify racial reconciliation as an essential part of its mission.

During the production of the last issue, conceived in partnership with an MFA program at the University of Georgia (founded by writer Valerie Boyd) and guest edited by Rosalind Bentley, we realized late in the game that, of ten full-length articles, only two were written by authors of color. That was due to many factors: number of students and mentors interested in food writing; the writers we followed up with; our editorial choices; and the natural attrition that happens when stories don't pan out.

Should SFA cast a wider, more frequent, and public net for submissions? Yes. Do contributors of color whom I've talked to consider *Gravy* artist-friendly and culturally competent enough to place their stories here? Not so easy an answer: Sometimes yes, and sometimes no. Do the stories here reflect the multilayered South they—and you—know?

For the spring issue of *Gravy*, most of our compelling pieces about marginalized communities and people of color were written by people outside those communities. (One great exception was Martin Padgett's story about the queer restaurant scene in Atlanta).

In this publishing economy, authors

of color are often tokenized and relegated to writing personal essays or stories of collective trauma. They are simultaneously squeezed out of reportage about their own communities. Reporting is literally valued more than commentary: Publications pay more for it, assuming that it takes more rigor and work than documenting the self or one's community. That's not necessarily the case. In this issue, we assigned first-person essays, hybrid pieces that blend history and the present, and reported pieces. Even so, we lagged on reported pieces by writers of color. Going forward, we aim to assign more.

All of SFA's full-time staff are white. Our editorial team consists of four people: a white woman, a white man, and two black women—myself and this issue's visual editor, Nicole Crowder. Last issue was guest-edited by *Gravy* contributor Rosalind Bentley, with visual editing by Bitá Honarvar, both women of color.

Now a look at who is in this issue: We improved on the contributor numbers from the last issue. At my request, we cut SFA director John T. Edge's column. Nine of this issue's authors are people of color—the overwhelming majority. Similarly, about half of photographers and illustrators were also people of color: black, Latinx, Asian American (notably, there was no Native American or indigenous writer in this issue, a gap we will remedy in issues to come).

Numbers can signal there's a problem. They can't tell us why editorial disparities exist in food media, though it's not hard to figure out the big reasons why. Just like it's not hard to commission contributors of color—when you actually try. Racism troubles the workforce, and it's not necessarily the hood-wearing,

epithet-blazing racism Americans pretend is a relic of the past. Racism rears its head before people even land jobs: Research shows that job applicants with names like Jamal or Lakisha are far less likely to get interviews than the Emilys or Matthews of this world. It would be willfully ignorant to think literary circles are immune to this bias.

In publishing, seemingly innocuous processes exclude. To be an editor is to be a gatekeeper. Even the best-intentioned editor may repeatedly tap the same small pool because we know those freelancers. You'll notice that many of the writers and visual artists in this issue have never been in *Gravy* before. Accomplished in their fields, they aren't exactly new voices, just new to this publication.

Providing a platform for writers and artists of color—particularly emerging ones and those from the South—should be a top priority for *Gravy*. Southerners seem to specialize in fantastic, place-based yarns. Here, stories supposedly erupt from Southern ground like hot springs. But that narrative abundance will only arc toward inclusion and justice if we work hard and tirelessly to make it so.

We who bring you *Gravy* must keep in mind what Elie and Egerton wrote about racial equity and SFA in a open letter fourteen years ago. And then we must apply its call broadly, consistently, and intentionally to these pages: "Our fear is that ... the organization might be tempted to assume that such reconciliation will take place naturally, without premeditation, among people of good will, and that silence is an indication that all is well. We disagree. It is too easy to slip into the comfortable assumption that if no one is talking about racial inequities, they no longer exist." 🍷

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