

The Southern Quarterly

Volume 56
Number 1 *Foodways in the South*

Article 2

March 2019

Guest Editor's Introduction

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Recommended Citation

Cooley, Angela Jill (2019) "Guest Editor's Introduction," *The Southern Quarterly*: Vol. 56 : No. 1 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://aquila.usm.edu/soq/vol56/iss1/2>

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Guest Editor's Introduction

ANGELA JILL COOLEY

In October 2015, I attended the Southern Book Festival in Nashville, Tennessee. The University of Georgia Press had just released my book, *To Live and Dine in Dixie: The Evolution of Urban Food Culture in the Jim Crow South*, and it was my first book festival as a published author. I participated on a panel with other authors who had written books about Southern food or Southern music. During the question and answer period, an older white gentleman raised his hand and asked about the distinctive nature of Southern food. You never hear about Northern food, he proclaimed. I don't think my answer satisfied him. Most Americans outside of the South identify with a region or a sub-region, I responded. And their foodways are often just as important to them.

In hindsight, this answer reflected my own struggle to reconcile how I think about Southern food as a scholar and how I experience it as a Southerner. As a historian of the American South who examines the significance of food practices to understand the region's racial politics, I research what I believe to be distinctive about Southern food and foodways. That is, the way we cultivate, prepare, and consume food reflects the social, economic, and political history of the region. But we need to be cautious not to overly romanticize the South's history with food. As a native Southerner now living in the Midwest, however, I understand this inclination. On any given Saturday morning in August, you can find me at the farmers' market in Mankato, Minnesota, buying up all of the infuriatingly miniscule portions of okra that local farmers can grow. One day, a farmer asked me how to cook it. He grew okra, but he didn't eat it. I hope you have an iron skillet, I told him. The rest of my long-winded reply was more story than recipe.



Figure 1: My fried okra in a cast-iron skillet. Photograph by author.

The authors in this issue grapple with this basic conundrum: the desire to understand the South using food as a lens while avoiding idealized nostalgia that obscures hard truths about the region's conflicted past. This issue of *The Southern Quarterly* is divided into two sections that examine the various ways that Southerners think about and experience food. The first section, "Food and the Southern Mind," opens with Catarina Passidomo in "Southern Foodways in the Classroom and Beyond" writing about her use of Southern food scholarship in a graduate classroom at the University of Mississippi. She argues that using food practices to study the region helps students to make connections between everyday acts of sustenance and deeply rooted social issues. Passidomo's article is timely: She speaks to a food studies community primed to introduce more Southern scholarship into their syllabi. At the same time, she responds to critiques from the New Southern Studies that question the use of food to perform Southern-ness.

The rest of this section delves into how individual Southern writers use food. In "A Good Mayonnaise is Hard to Find: Flannery O'Connor and Culinary Codependence," David A. Davis examines Flannery O'Connor's perpetual love of mayonnaise, her codependent relationship with her mother, and the role of food in her stories as a way to animate often unhealthy mother-daughter relationships. Davis relies on a trove of letters O'Connor

wrote to her mother while a student at the University of Iowa to demonstrate her desperate search for a good mayonnaise, and does a careful analysis of a few of her later short stories to identify a common trope involving mother, daughter, male interloper, and food. The food in these stories signals the complicated relationships between mother and daughter, mimicked by Flannery's reliance on her own mother, Regina.

Laura Torres-Zúñiga writes "Of (Un)Satisfactory Dinners: The Discourse of Food in Tennessee Williams's Work" to examine the connection between food, gender, and power in several works by Tennessee Williams including the well-known plays *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, as well as less familiar stories like "Gift of an Apple" and "Man Bring This Up Road," and the film *Baby Doll*. She argues that Williams's use of food signifies the social relations within these works. In so doing, Torres-Zúñiga goes beyond the more typical narrative of cannibalism as homosexual subtext in Williams's "Desire and the Black Masseur" and *Suddenly Last Summer*, instead arguing that the female characters' withholding of food represents their sexual power.

In "'Survival is Triumph Enough'—or Is It? Hunger and the Paradox of Plenty in the Modern South of Harry Crews," Elise S. Lake emphasizes the theme of unusual consumption patterns in the works of Harry Crews. His characters' curious diets—sometimes avoiding food, surviving on supplements, or eating inedible substances—serve as a statement on modern life in the South, according to Lake. She argues that Crews's Depression-era childhood of deprivation contributed to his use of consumption to satirize an affluent society in which his characters have the privilege to distort what constitutes sustenance. Because his characters often fail in their ambitions, Lake concludes, Crews uses ingestion habits to communicate his cynical view of the contemporary South.

In the final piece in this section, Cameron Williams Crawford's "'Where Everything Else Is Starving, Fighting, Struggling': Food and the Politics of Hurricane Katrina in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*" analyzes the use of food in Ward's 2011 novel to emphasize how racial and class inequalities persist in the South. Set within the context of Hurricane Katrina, a catastrophe that revealed for a national audience how deeply rooted racism remained within the structures of Southern society, Crawford argues that Ward's novel uses food for the cross purposes of both resistance and empowerment. Ward's main character Esch makes use of food metaphors to describe her body and her sexuality in ways that contradict more traditional ways of describing poor black women in the South. In this way, according to Crawford, the protagonist reveals her resistance toward the social structures designed to marginalize her.

The second section of this *Foodways in the South* issue, “Food and the Southern Experience,” demonstrates a variety of ways that we experience and have experienced food in the region. It starts with a very personal project from Amy C. Evans, entitled “MY HOUSTON: Documenting My Hometown Through Art and Oral History,” who uses her skills as a painter and interviewer to explore food, place, and memory by documenting specific locations from her childhood that are no longer part of the Houston landscape. Evans’s memories, as interpreted through her art and oral history work, illustrate the food of the Global South as it existed in one neighborhood in Houston, Texas, in the 1980s. We find Evans enjoying Chinese spareribs at Swan Den and anticipating her annual birthday cake from Moller’s Bakery. The sources of this work are unique to Evans—visual art married with oral history to preserve the historical record of places and food experiences that are now gone. In the context of food studies, MY HOUSTON touches on a variety of themes: the Global South, food and memory, restaurant as performative space, community history, and material culture.

Traveling eastward to central Florida, F. Evan Nooe writes an essay entitled “Southern Food in an ‘Imagineered’ World: Constructing Locality in the Hyperreality of Walt Disney World’s Disney Springs” in which he analyzes food available at the shopping, dining, and entertainment complex in Walt Disney World known as “Disney Springs.” In an effort to connect the new spectacle to place, the designers—or “Imagineers”—who created Disney Springs embedded regional food choices into its narrative and spectacle. Dining outlets, such as the Chef Art Smith’s Homecomin’ Florida Kitchen Southern Shine, or Homecomin’, and The Polite Pig, offer traditionally Southern foods as part of the Disney Springs experience. Nooe’s piece speaks to a variety of themes important to Southern foodways including tourism, architecture, race, and the importance of place.

Jennifer A. Venable’s essay, “Cajun Identity Through Food: Between the Exotic ‘Other’ and the White Culinary Imaginary,” also situates place at the forefront of her analysis—in this case her home state of Louisiana. She argues that Cajuns use food culture to help reinforce their racial identity as white in an environment where they have historically been viewed as the exotic “Other.” According to Venable, Cajuns connect themselves to whiteness as part of an intentional performance despite their foodways existing outside of what she terms the “white culinary imaginary.” Like Evans in her Houston neighborhood, Venable’s exploration is a personal one as she tries to reconcile childhood memories of crawfish boils and other Cajun fare with her scholar’s understanding of the problematic assumptions of race and whiteness in the twentieth- and twenty-first-century South.

As a complement to Venable’s piece, Christopher Miles examines the

iconic Cajun food, the crawfish, in a different environment in his article “A Crawfish Odyssey: *Procambarus Clarkii* as an Emerging Food Source in Southern Spain.” Miles expands our understanding of the Global South through this historical and ethnographic study of the introduction of crawfish into the town of Isla Mayor in southern Spain. Crawfish, an invasive species, was exported to Spain from Louisiana in 1973 and since that time has had a profound effect on the region’s culinary culture and ecosystem. Miles’s study demonstrates the effect of glocalization when this well-recognized sub-regional food takes root in a new environment.

The final piece in this special issue is Carrie Helms Tippen’s “‘It’s Southern, but More’: Southern Citizenship in the Global Foodscape of *Garden & Gun*,” which examines food journalism, a modern way that Southerners and non-Southerners alike experience the region. The essay examines a recurring column from the magazine *Garden & Gun* called “Anatomy of a Classic,” which presents an innovative recipe for a canonical Southern dish contributed by popular Southern chefs. Many of these chefs, and many of the readers who consume the articles, are not native to the region, allowing Tippen to analyze the issues of authenticity and globalization that represent problematic themes in Southern foodways scholarship. She argues that the magazine, through its recipes and descriptions of chefs in the South, manufactures a new Southern identity that rings true to its readers whether they are from the region or not.

As guest editor of this *Foodways in the South* issue of *The Southern Quarterly*, it has been a pleasure to help curate these articles that demonstrate the various ways Southerners write about, think about, and experience food in and of the region. The field of food studies is an ever-expanding literature that implicates race, class, gender, memory, globalization, and place. The authors included in this volume situate the South as the nexus where many of these themes intersect and suggest new avenues for teaching, researching, and understanding the culinary significance of region.

RECOMMENDED READING

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