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*Writing in the Kitchen. Essays on
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Urszula Niewiadomska-Flis

1

Writing in the Kitchen is the crowning achievement of the panel on Food and Southern literature organized for the conference of the Society for the Study of Southern Literature that took place in New Orleans in 2010. The book is a thought-provoking, finely wrought collection of 13 original scholarly essays which takes on a range of topics and concerns, including poetic representations of foodways, microregional and ethnic differences in culinary practices, as well as perspectives on racial relations. The book teases out the critical significance of food in literary texts, demonstrating how it has served to enhance the meaning of the South. It is a valuable addition to the growing study of Southern literature and culture through the culinary lens, which encompasses such seminal works as Psyche Williams-Forsion's *Building Houses Out of chicken Legs* (2007), Laura Patterson's *Stirring the Pot: The Kitchen and Domesticity in the Fiction of Southern Women* (2008), Elizabeth D. Engelhardt's *A Mess of Greens: Southern Gender and Southern Food* (2011), Marcie Cohen Ferris's *The Edible South: The Power of Food and the Making of an American Region* (2013), or *The Larder: Food Studies Methods from the American South*, edited by John Edge, Elizabeth Engelhardt and Ted Ownby (2013).

2

Sometimes the truth is looming right in front of you, but you need somebody to show it to you. This is the case of the semiotics of food in *As I Lay Dying*. It does not take a rocket scientist to see the frustration and ever-present poverty of the Bundren family but not many people notice the symbolical value of Vardaman and Dewey Dell eating bananas once they finally bury their mother in Jefferson. To be honest, I didn't. Davis and Powell's introductory article to the volume offers a fascinating interpretation of bananas, linking

Faulkner's novel to the texts of Latin America. The same epiphany may accompany the reader when Davis and Powell comment on Scarlett O'Hara's devouring of a radish as a symbol of the destitution and privation so prevalent in Southern Reconstruction times, or the Invisible Man's eating of yams on the street as a marker of racial identity during the Great Migration. Articles gathered in *Writing in the Kitchen* contain an abundance of such food epiphanies.

3

In "Reading Southern Food," a well-written introductory essay, spiced with interesting examples, Davis and Powell explain the significance of foodways in the South as a major factor revealing the "complex of microregional and ethnic identities, historical problems and contradictions, and disparities of poverty and plenty" (3). They establish the core concerns and contradictions of Southern foodways. Even though Southern cuisine has "retained its reputation as America's major contribution to global cuisine" (5), the editors reveal common misconceptions concerning it. The legendary atmosphere of hospitality, gracious generosity and abundance permeating representations of Southern foodways are contrasted with accounts of cuisine "based more on ingenuity born of privation and necessity" (4). Davis and Powell contend that, like other great ethnic cuisines of the world, southern foodways are characterized by "locality, simplicity, and necessity" (4).

4

"Reading Southern Food" begins its culinary journey through Dixieland with cornbread,¹ which in itself "signifies the defining characteristics of southern food: a blending of cultures, resourcefulness in the face of poverty, and the persistence of tradition" (4). Far from being "an imaginary construct" (7), Southern cuisine evolved through the blending of the foodways of Native Americans and the European colonists' culinary repertoire with the African slave ingredients and methods of cooking. "The blending of these cultures and methods over several decades produced a recognizable cuisine, and that system of foodways has continued to develop into the twentieth century" (7). The twentieth century fast-food fried chicken, which has become "a commodified version of traditional southern food" (7), is an export product which connotes Southernness. And herein lies "the fried chicken paradox" (6). Referring to the performative function of food consumption, Davis and Powell explain that "[t]he self-conscious act of preparing or eating traditional southern food, therefore, is a deliberate act of performing southern identity" (7). With this in mind, it is no wonder that "a version of southern foodways based on marketing hokum ... worries traditionalists who lament the inauthenticity of culinary exports" (7). As much as the imagined authenticity of Indian chicken tikka masala and Chinese chop suey is a locally constructed invention (respectively in Great Britain and the USA), fast-food fried chicken has developed its own culinary identity to suit American palates.

5

Although summaries of edited volumes seldom are satisfactory, I will try to give a flavor of the wide-ranging scholarship gathered in this volume. In the opening article "Book Farming: Thomas Jefferson and the Necessity of Reading in the Agrarian South," David Shields remarks that it was the agrarian anxiety over sustenance that propelled agricultural literacy, not the scientific enlightenment of early America. Faced with problems of demography (migration to other regions) and horticulture (soil replenishment and erosion damage), agricultural reformers kept personal farm journals,

established personal libraries, and promoted and encouraged agricultural improvements and experimentation. Shields examines Thomas Jefferson, an agricultural reformer and pomologist, who, among many other things, educated farmers about geonics, the belief that “understanding local conditions of soil, climate, and environment determine success or failure of farming” (18).

6

Marcie Cohen Ferris’s “Culinary Conversation of the Plantation South” is another essay which should be of particular use to early Americanists. The author outlines the reality of plantation South from both sides of the racial and regional divide. She examines the accounts of Yankee outsiders, the correspondence of northern-born governesses as well as that of northern visitors and travelers. The latter read mostly like promotional literature from the colonial times; while the former revealed “the region’s pathologies and pleasures.” Ferris illustrates the southern side of the story, quoting from letters and diaries of white plantation owners and autobiographies of former enslaved African-Americans. Not surprisingly, the life-writings of the slaveholding elite upheld white supremacy through, for instance, dining rituals. Former slaves revealed the other side of the plantocracy – they perceived food as a means of social control, and presented the slaveholders’ gluttony, that was hiding behind southern hospitality. Even though the African-American perspective is somewhat underrepresented in Ferris’s discussion,² the kaleidoscopic image of Southern antebellum foodways in this article contests the genteel upper class’s self-image in antebellum and postbellum white literature.

7

Sarah Walden’s article “Marketing the Mammy: Revisions of Labor and Middle-Class Identity in Southern Cookbooks, 1880-1930” probes the relationship between access to middle-class identity and modes of domesticity. Walden claims that mammy cookbooks, written by white women adopting the voice of domestic servants, and cookbooks written by actual former slaves, offered competing definitions of middle-class domesticity. Supplemented by domestic literature of the Reconstruction, mammy cookbooks presented African-American women as “natural born cooks” and instinctual domestic servants. Harking back to the racial relations of the antebellum South, these cookbooks aimed at the preservation of the racial ideologies of the Lost Cause. Writing as a response to their exclusion from the middle-class modes of domesticity, African-American women “used the cookbook as a rebuttal to their traditional representation as domestic laborers” (52).³ Walden points out that through reclaiming their voice and culinary expertise, African-American women challenged white women’s domestic authority, and, as such, they destabilized race and class boundaries.

8

The next article, Elizabeth Engelhardt’s “The Cookbook Story: Transitional Narratives in Southern Foodways” is a fascinating examination of Landonia Randolph Dashiell’s short story “Aunt Sanna Terry” (1921) within the genre of narrative cookbooks. Engelhardt begins with a succinct history of the cookbook-as-novel, or cookbook-as-short-story in this case, as a transitional narrative, mentioning Catherine Owen’s classic cookbook narratives, as well as juvenile literature teaching children how to cook. Engelhardt also draws a portrait of Dashiell, a clubwoman and an activist in Richmond, who depicted black entrepreneurs, interracial cooking lessons and the meaning of coffee during the Jim Crow era. Juxtaposing cookbook narratives with cookbooks, Engelhardt comments on the popularity of the former genre, explaining that readers were

“comfortable with more narrative, conversational lessons that the short lists that became standard cookbook convention” (83).

9

In her essay “The Double Bind of Southern Food in Willa Cather’s *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*” Ann Romines probes Willa Cather’s only Southern novel to see how racial relations are negotiated through food in a post-Emancipation southern family kitchen. Acknowledging food as a thematic thread in Cather’s oeuvre, Romines exhaustively discusses the domestic space as a site of gender and racial conflict: its kitchen space, the symbolism of the slave’s funeral food, the importance of ice-cream, and the complicated mutual dependence and resentment between the white mistress and the black cook. Romines demonstrates that in contradistinction to women’s power struggle in the domestic space, collaboration and cooperation define the relations between white and black men.

10

The title of Ruth Salvaggio’s article “Eating Poetry in New Orleans” is both intriguing and promising. The editors of the volume whet our appetite for something extraordinary with a promise of “the inherent poetry of southern food” and cultural blending (11)⁴ as the thematic concerns of Salvaggio’s contribution. The author defines a poetics of food as the ingredients of meals and their “alchemical formations,” producing remarkable cuisines (108). Gumbo and stuffed artichoke serve as illustrations of the poetic transformation of food. Salvaggio also discusses gumbo and red beans and rice through the prism of *haute cuisine* versus *bonne femme* cuisine (113-114). Salvaggio concludes with a description of New Orleans as a place “where potatoes carry messages ... , where red beans and rice reveals the poetry of good women, where gumbo sustains civil rights” (121). “Eating Poetry in New Orleans” clearly analyzes food, however certainly it does not do so in the context of Southern literature.

11

Erica Abrams Locklear’s “A Matter of Taste: Reading Food and Class in Appalachian Literature” is an insightful study of the process of ‘othering’ of the Appalachian region, which is achieved through negative depictions of rural food as distasteful, unhygienic, and primitive in travel literature of the nineteenth century. Locklear observes that, in order to counteract the social and cultural marginalization of the Appalachians, indigenous authors, not surprisingly, responded with celebrations of their regional distinctiveness and culinary pride. In her broad analysis of the interconnectedness of food, class and region⁵ in Lee Smith’s *Oral History*, Harriet Arnow’s *The Doormaker*, as well as in lesser known works, such as Jim Wayne Miller’s *Newfound*, Denise Giarsina’s *Storming Heaven*, Jeff Mann’s memoir/food poetry *Loving Mountains, Loving Men*, Locklear demonstrates how the assertions of culinary pride replaced the earlier shaming of regional food. Locklear perceptively observes that this trajectory of interest converges with a recent healthy-local food craze, a trend which Barbara Kingsolver depicted in *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*.

12

In his article “Invisible in the Kitchen: Racial Intimacy, Domestic Labor, and Civil Rights,” David A. Davis returns to the often-discussed topic of intimate interracial domestic relations of the 1960s. Davis demonstrates that Ellen Douglas’s *Can’t Quit You, Baby*, Minrose Gwin’s *The Queen of Palmyra*, and Kathryn Stockett’s *The Help* not only make “black domestic workers visible during a period of racial tension” (144), but also “hinge

on the white protagonist's realization of inequality in the kitchen" (147). Even though I do not share Davis's interpretation of the similarities between the subversive nature of those friendships and that between Huck Finn and Jim (152), I am inclined to embrace his opinion that "[t]he transgressive friendships based on asymmetrical intimacy within the southern social hierarchy are too fraught to lead to happy endings because release from hegemony does not mean freedom" (153).⁶

13

Psyche Williams-Forsen, the author of the seminal *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power*, contributes an article to this volume about *Loving Her*. "Eating in Another Woman's Kitchen: Reading Food and Class in the Woman-Loving Fiction of Ann Allen Shockley" draws a complex picture of an interracial, interclass lesbian relationship that is negotiated through foodways. Meticulously paying attention to the tiniest elements of the main heroines' dietary habits and culinary choices, such as lamb, canned foods, pears, chitterlings and hamburgers, and analyzing them against a plethora of sociological and anthropological theories about the relationship between food and sex, hunger, shopping, the black pride movement, and black nationalism, Williams-Forsen presents the act of feeding and the commensality of eating as performative and transgressive.

14

As the title of the article – "Consuming Memories: The Embodied Politics of Remembering in Vietnamese American Literature of the U.S. South" – suggests, food's mnemonic and cultural function constitutes the topic of Lisa Hinrichsen's contribution. The author deconstructs the multicultural tastescapes of "historical trauma, diasporic identity, national and regional identity, cultural assimilation, and neocolonialism" (179) in Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* and Monique Truong's *Bitter in the Mouth*. In her evocative investigation of bodily memory, mimetic repetition, quotidian life, hybridity, A&P, barbecues and bland American food, Hinrichsen offers an interesting observation that from a transnational perspective the South loses its exceptional regional cultural heritage, "Vietnamese American literature suggests revised connections between the local and the national and the local and the international, reconfiguring historical and ideological narratives" (181).⁷

15

A different kind of invisibility to that of black domestics in the Segregated South is the theoretical premise of Melanie Benson Taylor's article, "The Economics of Eating: Native Recipes for Survival in Contemporary Southern Literature." It is a stimulating article that draws our attention to the omission of the Native American voice "in the South's academic and cultural landscapes" (198). Taylor investigates the aspects of the Native presence in the context of localism, against the biracial politics of Jim Crow as well as the acknowledgement of, or rather lack of, white guilt over the Removal. Taylor perceptively captures the similarities between the post-Reconstruction South and the Native ideologies – namely an "anti-industrial, anticommercial orientation" (201). The author bases her observations on two texts – she considers the issue of survival, hybridity and authenticity in Marilou Awiakta's *Selu: Seeking the Corn-Mother's Wisdom* and comprehensively contextualizes the Native presence within the context of the discourse of authenticity and capitalist practices in Dawn Karima Pettigrew's *The Way We Make Sense*.

16

In the volume's final article, "Gnaw that Bone Clean': Foodways in Contemporary Southern Poetry," Tara Powell widens her lens of the analysis of poetry to include the fluctuation of interest in Southern cuisine against a backdrop of historical events and academic interests. In broad sweeps, Powell demonstrates the intersections of food, (regional) identity, and history of place in the South, and particularly in Southern poetry. According to Powell, the South's distinctive culinary tradition, as well as its recent disappearing distinctiveness, highlights the connection between food, history, memory and identity (216). With expertise and competence, Powell perceptively demonstrates how regional pride in, and the healing force of southern food, in Roy Blount Jr.'s poems, the connection between food, memory and class in Michael McFee's poetry, the tastes and spaces of childhood in James Applewhite's verse, the reinscriptions of racial memory in Honoree Jeffers's poems, the sense of loss in Kevin Young's poetry, and the stories of suffering and struggle in Nikky Finney's verse "share the representation of food as a way of confronting and gnawing at the bone of southern identity" (226).

17

It is difficult to discern a pattern emerging from the composition of the book by looking at the table of contents. Were the articles arranged with coherence and continuity regarding themes and the book subdivided into thematic sections, each preceded by an introductory note, the book would seem more welded together. Further confusion may be caused by the fact that the order of chapters does not correspond to their brief introduction by Davis and Powell in "Reading Southern Food." Interestingly enough, the reshuffled sequence in which the chapters are introduced by the editors reveals that they saw research areas overlapping in various contributions. The first four contributions to the volume by Shields, Cohen Ferris, Walden and Engelhardt, which are logically grouped together, share a particular affinity for innovative approaches that bring to life the voices and concerns of those texts not traditionally chronicled in mainstream research. Realizing a thread among those articles, the editors explain that they "expand our notions of texts about food by offering interpretations of food as a signifier in works that are outside literary mainstream" (Davis and Powell 9-10).

18

The space of interracial domesticity is the second easily discernable leitmotif of contributions to *Writing in the Kitchen*, be it in a lesser known text (*Loving Her*) or more established one (eg. *Can't Quit You Baby*). The articles by Romines, Williams-Forson and Davis complicate, as the editors rightly claim, "the imaginative representation of domestic spaces" (9). These Southernists present analyses which extend from and beyond the groundwork laid down by literary critics of the American South.

19

The third section consists of the articles authored by Locklear, Hinrichsen and Taylor which represent the richness of the microregional and ethnic South in novels which are rarely canon favorites. The Appalachian, Native and Vietnamese side of the Southern story demonstrates that "[t]he paradigms of southern culture ... become much less stable beyond the black-white binary that has historically dominated mainstream social relations" (Davis and Powell 11).⁸ Finally, the theoretical scope of Tara Powell's article brings the volume to its logical conclusion. Her sophisticated and absorbing interpretation encapsulates all the thematic threads of the volume: (micro)regional culinary distinctiveness, racial concerns and domestic spaces.

20

Writing in the Kitchen is a valuable addition to scholarship on the evolving interrelations between Southern literary studies and food studies. The book will help readers examine the South's culinary and literary heterogeneity. Individually and taken together, the articles demonstrate that the cross-pollination of food studies and literary studies has the potential to enrich our understanding of the region. The fact that some of the authors of the collected articles are leading scholars in Southern literary studies guarantees high quality research and interpretations that show new paths of inquiry.

21

The collection, with its informative and disparate reflections on the interconnectedness of food, race, class and ethnicity, leaves the reader admiring the wide range of approaches taken by the contributors. *Writing in the Kitchen* stretches the theoretical frontier of Southern literary studies and thus this book will be of value to literary scholars interested in new and theoretically sophisticated interpretations of works, both outside and inside the canon of Southern literature.

NOTES

1. Realizing the synecdochal relationship between cornbread and southern cuisine, the editors of *Cornbread Nation: The Best of Southern Food Writing*, so far a seven volume set, have chosen this food item to evoke the centrality of food in the South.
2. Clearly, the culinary resistance of slaves and servants was more diverse than simply food defilement. While Ferris mentions in passing Mary Titus's essay "The Dining Room Door Swings Both Ways: Food, Race, and Domestic Space in the Nineteenth-Century South," two other texts also seem to be particularly pertaining to the research area: Theresa Singleton's "The archaeology of slavery in North America" (*Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 119-140), as well as Herbert Covey's and Dwight Eissach's *What the Slaves Ate. Recollections of African American Foods and Foodways from the Slave Narratives* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2009).
3. Another perspective on racial tensions in Southern cookbooks is presented in Rien T. Fetel's "Everybody Seemed Willing to Help': *The Picayune Creole Cook Book as Battleground, 1900-2008*," *The Larder: Food Studies Methods from the American South*, ed. John Edge, Elizabeth Engelhardt, and Ted Ownby. Athens: the University of Georgia Press, 2013.
4. Davis and Powell observe that in New Orleans "food infuses language, history, music, and geography;" this is the city "where centuries of settlement by dozens of immigrant populations have both demonstrated the development of southern food as a process of cultural blending and created a unique cuisine that amplifies the mixture of cosmopolitan cultures" (11).
5. In her *Stirring the Pot. The Kitchen and Domesticity in the Fiction of Southern Women* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2008), Laura Sloan Patterson also undertakes research of Appalachian literature. However, Patterson's scope was limited to the impact of railroads and technology on Appalachian domesticity, as depicted in Lee Smith's fiction.
6. Davis's comment that "[t]he transgressive friendship ... releases the white protagonists from the racist, masculinity hierarchy that marginalizes them" (152) could just as well be made regarding the movie *The Long Walk Home* (1990), which, also set against the historical context of

the Civil Rights movement, dramatizes the (in)visibility of black domestics and a white woman's coming to racial and gender awareness.

7. Leslie Bow's *Partly Colored: Asian Americans and Racial Anomaly in the Segregated South* (New York: New York UP, 2010) and *Asian Americans in Dixie: Race and Migration in the South*, edited by Jigna Desai and Khyati Y. Joshi (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), reconfigure the American South within the context of transnationalism, hybridity, immigration and cultural assimilation, using the Asian American communities under the Mason-Dixon line as case studies.

8. Even though Salvaggio's contribution about the poetics of food is so much thematically unlike other in this volume, it bears some affinity with the articles about the microregional and ethnic South contributed by Locklear, Hinrichsen, and Taylor. Weaving personal reminiscences with anthropological insights, Salvaggio does after all discuss the distinctiveness of New Orleans food.

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