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Cooking up the past: Food nostalgia in post bellum plantation life writing

David Anderson SL PCS SU

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Late nineteenth and early twentieth century plantation memoirs and reminiscences, authored by former slave-owners, bring a nostalgic sensibility and aesthetic to bear in the making and remaking of the Old South plantation imaginary. Connecting memories of life and lifestyle on the plantation with discourses of compassionate paternalism and benevolent race relations, these autobiographical accounts adopt a range of narrative techniques to imagine, reinforce, and sustain an idealized antebellum past.

One such approach focused on recollections of food, its preparation and presentation, and memories of good eating, as my recent research on childhood and adolescent memories of the Old South plantation community has shown (1). Food, for example, was often assigned a symbolic role in plantation relationships, and was significant to the system of plantation governance that the planter class espoused. Their allusions to a paternalistic ideal, and glorification of master-slave relationships, not only codified nostalgic forms of the Old South on the page, but also allowed former planters to extol the virtues of paternal authority, seen in retrospect, against the racial realities of the post bellum era. Within this individual and collective fantasy about the past, food, I argue, focused attention on the bonds of affection between white and black southerners and gave meaning to memories once rooted in everyday experiences on the plantation.

Indeed, food memories, and the profusion of plenty, frequently cited to demonstrate a planter's wealth, gentility and class, also connected powerfully with place: the plantation. Running through plantation memoirs and reminiscences are memories of great feasts and repasts, often concocted

by talented and accomplished cooks. "The Virginia cook and the Virginia cooking of that time were the full realization of the dreams of epicures for centuries," rhapsodized one planter's son, while a memoirist from Georgia, recalling a "sumptuous" family wedding, insisted that "Everything good to eat was bountifully furnished...all sorts of home collections and concoctions," with loaf sugar and other luxuries brought in "by the wagonload"(2,3). These nostalgic representations of life on the plantation from the perspective of the planter's table have attracted little scholarly interest, despite alertness to the pervasiveness of nostalgia in southern food studies (4).

By critically examining these self-representational accounts of the Old South, we can begin to open up new ways of thinking across disciplinary boundaries about the region's past, exposing the emotional and political uses of nostalgia by recourse to enduring memories of food and eating.

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Swansea University, UK

Correspondence: David Anderson, Senior Lecturer, Political and Cultural Studies, Swansea University, UK. Telephone (01792)604292, e-mail d.j.anderson@swansea.ac.uk
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