Where Ghosts and Tourists Dine:

The Pure and the Hybrid in Louisiana Creole Cultures and Cuisines

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In his discussion of Southern Louisiana cuisine, food writer John Thorne describes New Orleans as a site "where only ghosts and tourists come to dine" (Thorne 1996). Thorne's juxtaposition of "ghosts" and "tourists" provides a point of departure for considering the intersecting histories of food, colonization and creolized identities that constitute the discourse of New Orleans Creole cuisine. If the haunt of "ghosts" suggests that the discourse is troubled by indomitable histories it tries to repress, the arrival of "tourists" from elsewhere provides no relief. In fact, the tourist industry has a myriad of methods to celebrate the pageantry of a region's cuisine while obfuscating the haunting violence marking its past. An investigation of the foodways, both material and discursive, that constitute New Orleans Creole cuisine, however, makes possible the articulation of not only the European colonization of the Americas and its relation to the history of food, but also the everyday agency of the otherwise dispossessed peoples of the New World. That is, these foodways make evident the necessarily creolized diasporas of the Americas and the Motherland Gumbo of its history, while undermining hegemonic narratives of race and nation that would otherwise structure the eating of things in the Americas.

Sophie Coe, like so many other food writers who address the post-Columbian genesis of foodways in the Americas, describes the violent intersections of food and history as an ultimately beneficial series of exchanges:

> That earliest infancy of the hybrid cuisine of the modern world, with its attendant loss and tragedy as well as victory and profit, will stand for the mixture of good and evil that the discovery of the New World brought to the world. (Coe 1994, 2)

Coe's position throughout *America's First Cuisines* consciously purports to weigh the "the good" and "the evil" of New World colonization and settlement, while constructing "America's cuisine" as a symbol of both "New World discovery" [sic] and the equilibrium that, presumably, we clearly have now achieved.

Significantly, Coe's position is characteristic of both popular and more academic food writing. As Coe suggests, the violence and oppression that were instrumental in the creation of new colonial populations in the Americas are ever-present in the cultural histories of Creole cuisines. The desire to neutralize or erase this aspect of food history in her writing, however, marks two characteristics of contemporary food culture in North America: first, the depoliticizing of reminders of colonial beginnings rooted in slavery and genocide; and secondly, the depth of the overall cultural disengagement from food and cuisine that distinguishes mainstream North Americans from other consumers (Mintz 1996; Hess and Hess 2000).

This essay offers an alternative history of North American eating and habits of consumption—focusing on one of the most celebrated American cuisines, New Orleans Creole cuisine. The attempt to alter the discourse of New Orleans Creole cuisine is necessarily a political act. The intertwined foodways that structure the ways we eat are always constituted by their internal dialectics, but also by their haunted relations with the various publics that live on in the present. We never eat alone; we always eat with others, even if these others and their multilayered histories are not always immediately discernible.

The colonial population of Louisiana was made up of three principal clusters, which were each extremely heterogeneous. Multiple indigenous groups inhabiting the Mississippi delta and the coast of the Gulf of Mexico constituted the first cluster. These groups included the Natchez, the Chickasaw, the Creek, the Muskhogean tribes, and later the Choctaw and the Biloxi. The second cluster was comprised of colonizers and settlers of direct or indirect European extraction, primarily of French, French-Canadian and other New World French, Spanish, and Anglo-American ancestry. Enslaved West Africans formed the third cluster, often referred to as the "Bambara," a catch-all ethnicity that collapsed an otherwise culturally heterogeneous mix (Caron 1997; Ingersoll 1996). These clusters of diverse populations came together during a period in which French and Spanish imperial fantasies each, in their turn, struggled to reimagine and refashion the territory of Louisiana against the harsh realities of a settler/slave colonial settlement. What emerged as an overall pattern of New World creolization, however, was the continuous presence of resistance and marronage on the part of the enslaved populations on the one hand, and the persistently haunted construction of a self-identified slave-owning creole elite on the other.

The French, the Spanish, the British, the American (signifying of the United States), and the Haitian nations and empires all contributed in physical and ideological ways to the conquest and occupation of what is today southern

Louisiana. Needless to say, both the territorial borders of colonizers and the make-up of colonial populations were continuously undergoing transformations as a result of these conflicting and competing interests. The time-span that best exemplifies this period of busy colonial intervention begins with the initial French "discovery" of the mouth of the Mississippi by Jolliett and Marquette (1673), and the subsequent founding of Louisiana by La Salle (1698–99). The period concludes with the influx of exiles from the Haitian Revolution (1791–1802) that began arriving in New Orleans in 1809, six years after the Louisiana Purchase turned the territory into the eighteenth state of the United States of America.

Louisiana is conceptualized here as an "imagined community"—the product of many different geographic imaginations that struggled for dominance and for an enduring presence during these years (Anderson 1991). More specifically, as a French and then Spanish colonial territory, Louisiana was a spectacularly unsuccessful economic project. The physical difficulty and continued lack of economic incentive for pursuing the colonizing endeavour thus required enormous imaginative work to continually invest the new space with political value that, necessarily, had more to do with the colonial will to power than any immediate economic benefit. It is precisely in the complex inter-relations between these various social configurations of space that the discourse of New Orleans cuisine inserts itself, both as materializing from the land and as testimony to transformative cultural presence. That is, Louisiana increasingly came to be imagined as a creole space, in part, through the discourse of its cuisine.

As the colonial identity of Louisiana was being formulated, a series of core historical events destabilized the meaning of "Frenchness" and "whiteness," contributing to the creation of the Creole subject, that shadowy figure behind creole cuisines. The first of these events was the repressive founding and naming of Louisiana *on already inhabited land* by the French-Canadian LeMoyne brothers, and its settlement by the unlucky residents of Parisian prisons. The second central event was the establishment of a trans-Atlantic trade in West African slaves, and its challenge to competing interests and their construction of "whiteness." During the eighteenth century, New Orleans was the largest slaving centre on the Gulf coast. It served as a crossroads for the entire Caribbean basin, receiving shipments of slaves and other trade goods from the "Old Worlds" of Europe and Africa, and then sending them onwards to the "New World" outposts of the Spanish, French and British empires. The proportion of slaves in Louisiana itself steadily rose, challenging essentialist and nationalist colonial identities, and introducing persistent ambivalence to

the popular understanding of the term "Creole."

The third and fourth transformative events which shaped the creation of a creole colonial population were two major influxes of refugees, the first of Acadians from Port Royal, Canada following the Grand Dérangement of 1755, and the second of St. Dominguans from Cuba in 1809, subsequent to the Haitian revolution. Both migratory streams introduced creolized, New World, French-identified populations to Louisiana that confronted and destabilized the existing one. The slave-owning St. Dominguans in particular represented a volatile and contradictory *doppelgänger* of the colonial population of Louisiana, containing within them both the potentially liberatory spirit of the French and Haitian Revolutions, and the violent reactionary conservatism of the slave-owning elites. Although less important here, the French loss of the territory to the Spanish as a consequence of the Treaty of Paris in 1763, and its subsequent return to Napoleon and sale to the United States in 1803, also contributed to ongoing challenges to French cultural hegemony. However, a decidedly French aspect of this creolized space was maintained through the establishment of colonial trade routes connecting the French metropolis with its various peripheries. These routes permitted the albeit destabilized construction of French-identified transnational spaces and subjects, guaranteeing at the same time the movement of foodstuffs throughout the global system and their selective absorption into specific cuisines (see Eccles 1972; Hirsch and Logsdon 1992; Usner 1979; Wall 1990).

The discourses of Creole and Cajun cuisines effectively maintain these wide-ranging and disparate histories of Louisiana. That is to say, the otherwise precarious identity of the territory has become consolidated around foodstuffs and styles of eating. As a result, the territory's identity is not understood exclusively through the lens of colonial fantasy, but also as grounded in the everyday styles of its heterogeneous people, a style that came to be known as "Creole." Indeed, the histories of the movement and exchange of individual foodstuffs such as corn, sassafras, rice, peppers, okra, and beans—and of the techniques by which they were combined, transformed into cuisines and consumed—testify to the movement of humans along and across the triangular Atlantic colonial trade routes. Additionally, they testify to the appearance of what Ira Berlin calls "Atlantic Creoles," that were inextricably linked through relations of power, domination and resistance to each other and to the new social landscapes that accompanied emerging colonial economies (Berlin 1998). A style of eating became the region's "Motherland."

There is one dish in particular that is invoked over and over again as a

metaphor for the historical mixing of colonized and colonial populations of Louisiana: gumbo. Significantly, gumbo is often described in the same cozy way that "melting pot" is used as a metaphor to describe the U.S. population as a whole.[1] The Louisiana State Museum provides a telling example of this kind of vague, domesticated and completely inaccurate description of colonial history:

> The promise of prosperity brought people to Louisiana, voluntarily or by force. Among the many ethnic groups in colonial Louisiana were people of French, Canadian, Spanish, Latin American, Anglo, German, and African descent. No one of these cultures dominated in the eighteenth century, and along with Native Americans, they provided the initial ingredients for Louisiana's famous "gumbo" of cultures. (Louisiana State Museum 2003)

That the Louisiana State Museum can assert so confidently that "no one [culture] dominated in the eighteenth century" contributes a strategic historical specificity to American fantasies about the values of liberty and opportunity that continue to underpin the foundation myths of this country. And it is no accident that, once again, cuisine is used discursively as the symbol of the happy balance achieved between differentiated subjects through the colonial adventure.

Much more subtly, the recipe itself performs similar discursive acrobatics. Indeed, the form of any written recipe, as the textual representation of a largely ephemeral cultural practice, cannot be read transparently. That is, the words on the page describing ingredients, methods and objects are as embedded in culture as the foodways themselves, and not necessarily—some might say, not even probably—in the same culture as the foodways they are describing. At the very least, it is in the nature of text to fix in place, to ossify, which is why written recipes can resemble nothing more than the skeletal remains of a living practice.

The recipe for okra gumbo reproduced here comes from an unusual collection of food essays and recipes treating, and relevant to, the global migration of African food culture in the last 1000 years. This collection is unusual because of the Afro-centric position of the author, Diane Spivey, who explicitly and actively engages with the histories of colonization and slavery that accompanied and prompted some of these migrations. Her position is clear from the name she gives to the dish:

Motherland Gumbo

Shells from 1 pound of medium shrimp
3 cups water
5 2/3 Tbs. butter
1/3 cup flour
1 large green pepper, chopped
1/2 of a *large* red onion, chopped
2 white onions, chopped and divided
1/2 of a medium carrot, sliced into thin rounds, then halved
8 EACH allspice berries and whole cloves, finely crushed
1/4 tsp. thyme
3/4 tsp. cayenne, or malagueta or jalapeno chili peppers, divided
1 tsp. garlic salt with parsley
1/2 tsp. crushed basil leaves
2 bay leaves
Freshly ground black pepper to taste
2 large tomatoes, chopped
1/2 tsp. dried shrimp
4 chicken bouillon cubes
1 to 2 tsp. molasses
salt to taste
1 1/2 cups sliced okra (sliced in rounds)
1/4 to 1/3 pound lump crabmeat
1 pound shelled medium shrimp
Cooked rice

Bring shrimp shells to boil in water. Lower heat and simmer for 15 minutes. Strain and discard shells. Set aside, covered.

In a pot over medium heat, melt butter. Gradually add flour and cook and stir constantly until mixture becomes a deep medium brown colour. Add next 4 ingredients minus 1 onion [so the green pepper, red and white onions, and carrot]. Cook and stir for a few minutes. Add all spices, minus 1/4 tsp. cayenne. Cook and stir for another few minutes. Stir in the tomatoes and dried shrimp. Add enough water to shrimp shell broth to make 3 cups.

Heat, then dissolve bouillon in broth. Add broth and molasses to pot and mix well. Taste for needed salt and pepper. Bring to a boil.

Lower heat and simmer, covered, for 20 minutes.

Stir in okra, crab, shrimp, the 1/4 tsp. cayenne and the 1 onion. Bring to boil again. Lower heat and simmer, covered, for about 9 or 10 minutes. Mound rice under and over servings of gumbo. (Spivey 1999, 265–66)

Spivey's rendition of this recipe, which is so much more than a recipe, reveals divergences from, and commonalities with, other gumbo recipes that abound in popular descriptions of both Louisiana and Southern culture. Aside from a few odd late twentieth-century Americanisms, such as bouillon cubes and garlic salt, Spivey's recipe presents a series of foodstuffs familiar to all gumbo recipes. These foodstuffs materially represent the global networks of trade, colonial activity and social interaction that underpin the formation of a creolized, slave-owning, European colony in the Mississippi delta.

Spivey's "Motherland Gumbo" is typical of the recipe genre in that it bestows an oblique timelessness upon its production. Judging from the coalescence of cooking techniques and ingredients used in the recipe, however, we can assume a generalized time period for its construction: sometime between the founding of New Orleans in 1718 and the loss of Louisiana to the Spanish in 1763, after the Seven Years War. Spivey's recipe also elides the place of its production and the locales in which this particular version of gumbo was initially consumed. In what follows, I will situate the recipe more specifically by analyzing the ingredients in relation to colonial trade routes and the history of diasporic populations in the area.

To begin, the recipe contains ingredients that were indigenous to the area, or were cultivated by indigenous peoples before colonization. The shrimp and crab, for example, were indigenous to the delta swamplands. The tomatoes, onions and green pepper, if not cultivated by the Biloxi, the Muskhogeans and the Choctaw who inhabited the Gulf coast and south-central Louisiana during this time, were cultivated in what is known today as Mexico and brought north through Native or Spanish-controlled trade routes. The combination of flour and butter, cooked together to form a *roux*, is the basis of all French sauces (other than reductions) and forms a vertebra in the backbone of French *haute cuisine*, as well as Louisiana cuisine. Indeed the *roux* is the strongest mark of a French presence in this cuisine, apart from the garden herbs: thyme, parsley, and bay.

West Africa, or the areas now known as Guinea, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Liberia, is indubitably the source of the okra, the rice and the malagueta

peppers. That said, a variety of reddish rice is indigenous to the south-eastern U.S. and over the years debate has raged about the provenance of the rice that, along with corn, constitutes the carbohydrate base of that region to this day (Carney 2001). The allspice, cloves and cayenne represent a more circuitous diasporic presence, coming from the islands of the Caribbean basin and/or the north coast of South America. Most of these areas were colonized well before Louisiana by either the Spanish or French, and, by the eighteenth century, were supporting plantation-based enslaved or slave-owning Creole populations.

Molasses is an interesting and atypical addition to the recipe, and contains within it New World references similar to the spices above. A by-product of the process of refining sugarcane, molasses continues to be ubiquitous in all sugarcane plantation economies. It was, and is, the primary sweetener cheaply and easily available to the massive labour force required to operate plantations. Hence it found its way into all the cuisines of the Caribbean basin. These plantation economies derived the majority of their labour from hemispheric slave trade routes, some of which had been in existence for two hundred years prior to the founding of Louisiana during the mid-eighteenth century (Mintz 1985). The presence of molasses in Spivey's recipe therefore suggests the arrival along the Gulf Coast of already creolized settlers.

Although unusual for its pro-African stance, Spivey's dense (although idiosyncratic) historical commentary tempers any reference to the historical uprooting and violence that mark the creation of Creole subjectivities and cuisine. For example, Spivey specifically leaves out any pork product from the list of ingredients, claiming that "pork was not a part of the traditional African diet." Her objection seems slightly misplaced, as a French flour-and-butter *roux* was also, clearly, not part of the traditional African diet. Furthermore, this recipe gains its renown in part for its mixing and subversion of culinary traditions. Finally, the inclusion of any one of an enormous variety of preserved pork products, such as andouille sausage (although having little in common with the Continental French andouille,) was and continues to be integral to this dish. In fact the prevalence of pork may be a marker of French or Spanish influence. To suggest that a particular gumbo is more "African" puts a pre-colonial nostalgia into play that may obfuscate the cultural and historical dynamics at work in the forging of Creole cuisine.

The most pressing questions, however, deal with the ways the co-presence of these colonial histories and geographies are evacuated of their force in more typical representations of this recipe. Not a single element of this recipe could be present without the colonial history of Louisiana. This history includes the arrival of French-Canadian explorers from their northern colony through the

continent's central river system; the founding of a French colony for precise strategic geo-political goals; the forced settlement of the colony; the attempted enslavement and eventual decimation of the indigenous inhabitants; and the colossal trans-Atlantic slaving apparatus which ultimately permitted the creation of a financially successful colonial economy.

To return to the title of the paper, the ghosts of these histories do indeed haunt the cuisine of Louisiana, while the audience for the popular culinary discourse that surrounds it are tourists from elsewhere. John Thorne's designation of ghosts and tourists as the consumers of Creole and Cajun cuisine, asks how it is possible to consume this cuisine in the presence of the overdetermined systems of signification that surround them? We might ask, whose motherland is referred to by "Motherland Gumbo"?

The relationship between consumption and the textual representation of a recipe is an awkward one. Certainly there are residents of Louisiana—as opposed to ghosts and tourists—who prepare and consume the region's cuisine, and whose families are intimately connected to the colonial processes that created it. Are they the "authentic" consumers of Motherland Gumbo—a dish haunted by violence and forged from so many "elsewheres"? Can the concept of authenticity ever be applied to the ongoing performances of consuming subjects? It is clearly not possible nor even desirable to insist on easy answers to these questions. The more important issue is the way the reading of this recipe contributes to an understanding of how material worlds interact with social worlds through the eating of things, and how, in so doing, history is continually re-enacted in everyday practice. As Daniel Miller argues, "By recognising consumption as the vanguard of history, we acknowledge the massive influence of consumption upon the political economy, while acknowledging the political economy inscribed in the historical projects given to people as consumers" (Miller 1995, 54). I would assert that while histories of slavery, genocide and colonial fantasy are framed as politically neutral and unthreatening backgrounds to contemporary culinary representation and consumption, the structures of power that underpin these histories continue to exert their dominion over North American eating practices—understood here in the broadest sense.

This essay examines a specific, material network of foodways in order to explore a recipe's ability to narrate colonial history. These foodways bring together the cultural history and geography of the region, with the everyday agency of the dispossessed peoples of the New World in the formation of necessarily creolized diasporas. Their daily erasure in much food writing suggests the haunted ethics of how North Americans go about eating things—and the

need for a more radical reconsideration of contemporary foodways. The cultural histories of Louisiana cuisine need to be reinvested with the conflicts and social transformations characterising their Afro-Creole past—and present—in order to interrogate the ways, in Homi Bhabha's jolting words, that "newness enters the world" (Bhabha 1994, 212). In such an event, more than New Orleans Creole cuisine is on the table.

Notes

1. For more traditional discussions of the Creole and Cajun cuisines of southern Louisiana, see Bethany Ewald Bultman, "A True and Delectable History of Creole Cooking," *American Heritage* (Dec 1986): 66–71; Peter S. Fiebleman, *American Cooking: Creole and Acadian* (Alexandra, Va.: Time-Life Books, 1982); Howard Mitcham, *Creole Gumbo and All That Jazz: A New Orleans Seafood Cookbook* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1978); Patricia Perrin, "Louisiana French Foodways: The Perpetuation of Ethnicity in the Lafourche Area," *North American Culture* 2 (1985): 3–9.

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