

Final Written Report  
Professional Development Grant

“The New Southern Apologists: Southern Local Foodways, Racial Reconciliation, and  
Animal Welfare”

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## Restatement of Problem

The paper I presented at the biennial ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment) conference in Lawrence, KS (May 28-June 1, 2013) focused on the cultural arenas of contemporary southern literature, southern documentary film, and southern food writing in order to ask the following question: how do the narrative strategies of late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Southern apologists become re-articulated in current representations of food and animals that ostensibly focus on bridging the divide between social justice and environmental justice concerns in the American South? Despite drawing productive lines of connection between “mindful” farming, the radical reassessment of eating practices, and efforts to produce racial reconciliation, these texts exhibit a snarled logic of localism and racial harmony that occludes contemporary ethical questions about human-animal relations, questions that would appear to be consistent with those asked elsewhere in the profound reconsideration of farming, food, and race. This paper, then, explores significant contemporary frontiers of justice as they are expressed in a specific material and regional context.

My aim was to disentangle the logic of racial reconciliation as it overlaps various forms of localism to understand how the critique leveled at contemporary modes of industrial agricultural production, processing, and distribution/consumption frequently and surprisingly elides thorny questions of animal relations, questions that would appear to be consistent not only with those asked elsewhere in the reconsideration of farming and food, but with the established body of racial analysis that seeks reconciliation stemming from the historical violence of slavery and Jim Crow politics. This ethical bypass or inconsistency is especially remarkable in the context of contemporary critical racial projects attending to the manifold forms of discriminatory and exclusionary ideology as well as the often stated principles professed by the local farm-to-table advocates, most notably regarding expanded notions of community, issues of justice, reformulations of health and well-being, and re-evaluations of anthropocentrism (of human excesses of power in relation to the non-human world), but also in the context of such affects as care and intimacy.

Narratives of racial reconciliation and environmental recuperation and their attendant models of reform assert very serious ethical programs, and this research seeks to investigate these foundational claims as they proliferate and create very real consequences beyond the social realm and the usual environmental considerations. These narratives, in other words, create the ethical conditions for human-animal relations that require careful examination as they work to reinforce and establish ethical practices related to the treatment of animals. The stability of these ethical programs is also at stake as a means of ensuring continued diligence in repealing the ideologies of racial discrimination. In order to make sense of the development of this discourse of ethical considerations I examined a representative sample of the southern texts related to food and race including *Food, Inc.* and a number of documentary films produced by the Southern Foodways Alliance. I also examined cultural documents like *Gum and Garden* magazine and academic writing like Marcie Cohen Ferris’ essay on southern food, “The Edible South.”

## Review of Research Opportunity

The ASLE conference is a biennial event that brings together leading experts in the field of environmental criticism. The theme for the conference was “Changing Nature: Migrations, Energies, Limits.” This conference is the lifeblood of my professional development as it allows me to continue established relationships, meet new scholars in the field, and remain current in the most exciting research in ecocriticism.

## Summary of Findings

I found that the rhetoric of southern apologists in many ways mapped directly onto the discourse of humane animal treatment in texts that addressed racial reconciliation, repudiated outmoded forms of human ethical reasoning (associated with southern racial apology), and made ostensible claims for re-invigorated forms of ethical relations with animals. This surprising simultaneous rejection and deployment of apologist rhetoric creates an ethical friction that is assumed to be consistent, yet the very claims of progressivism are undermined with this radical contradiction.

I examined how texts that are otherwise so sensitive to issues of oppression, violence, and discrimination in the context of a racist southern history can be so blind to other forms of injustice. Sharing a table that is more racially inclusive and filled with locally sourced food has defined the political and ethical limit of social and environmental justice in the growing body of southern food writing and film as well as contemporary literary representations of food issues.

This narrative contradiction regarding animals has real implications for the success of racial reconciliation, I believe, since the underlying hierarchies and forms of discrimination remain as the bedrock of ethical behavior and threaten to undermine southern advancements in racial politics. As my research seems to show with the larger “slow food”/“locavore” movement, these narratives are cloaked in a pseudo-ethics rife with internal inconsistencies that further enables not a radical re-thinking of where our food comes from, but rather a continuation of human exceptionalism under the guise of mindful consideration of those who have been historically marginalized (excluded from the human community) and the non-human world. In other words, southern locavores interested in racial reform promote a critique of anthropocentrism, a leveling of need and obligation where humans are not at the center of concern or the top of hierarchies, but their explanations and actions betray their continued human-centeredness. This takes on special importance when certain human groups are at risk of being excluded from the realm of the “human,” as African Americans were in the American South. The archive of films and texts I examined repeatedly showed that the apparent comforts of racial healing mask potentially dangerous ethical risks for continued forms of human and animal justice.

## Conclusions

Attending the biennial ASLE conference in Lawrence, KS afforded me the opportunity to meet with important professional colleagues who share my research interest, to make a fairly exhaustive review of contemporary films and food writing directly related to my research

problem, and to develop the paper into manuscript form. I have plans to finish revising the manuscript as a chapter in a larger study of southern environmental film and literature that I intend to submit to the University of Virginia Press and/or the University of Georgia Press (both of which have significant titles in environmental literature). This grant was valuable in helping me continue my research interests in environmentally related textual studies, especially from an American Studies perspective. This research additionally informs my teaching of environmental literature and film. I was able to present an abbreviated form of my research in the seminar in environmental literature and film that I am currently teaching (English 4383/5383).

I sincerely appreciate the support of the university in helping me develop this project.

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