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## Exoticizing Poverty in *Bizarre Foods America*

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DRAFT

# The Political Language of Food

Edited by Samuel Boerboom

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**DRAFT**

## FOUR

# Exoticizing Poverty in *Bizarre Foods America*

Casey Ryan Kelly

**[4.0]**

The expression “culinary slumming” refers to the unreflective enjoyment of adventurous cuisine that is by-and-large the product of poverty and marginalization.<sup>1</sup> In the US, taco trucks, gas station delis, cafeterias, juke joints, barbecue shacks, open-air markets, and country cook-offs all provide affluent culinary tourists with an exhilarating opportunity to sample the cuisine of the Other, or in bell hooks’ words, season “the dull dish that is mainstream white culture.”<sup>2</sup> Slummers, repelled yet fascinated, venture into the country or the ghetto seeking out exotic dishes that challenge the most intrepid of foodies: neck bones, ears, skin, snouts, tails, brains, intestines, organ meat, foraged vegetable greens, insects, garbage fish, rodents, invasive species, birds, and other scraps and lesser cuts that reflect histories of economic subjugation. The rhetorical construction of these dishes as chic food trends ultimately masks the legacies of exclusion and exploitation that force communities living in poverty to “make do” with society’s leftovers. For their temporary disavowal of privilege, however, slummers are putatively availed of the authentic experience of America’s dispossessed.<sup>3</sup> Such adventurous eating fortifies this progressive cosmopolitan subject through joyful displays of tolerance and multicultural consumption.<sup>4</sup> While sojourners invest money into struggling local economies, they implore the inhabitants of modern-day hush harbors and hidden vernacular spaces to confess their secret recipes and make their food and culture part of the next culinary trend.<sup>5</sup> The slummer, therefore, forgoes their luxury cuts to appreciate what society once discarded; yet, their reverent, touristic gaze elides the economic

force of capitalism, slavery, and colonialism that produced cuisines of poverty and necessity.

In the past decade, the lived practice of culinary slumming has been supplemented by the popular ascendance of the food television industry. In dozens of programs across a variety of networks including *The Travel Channel*, *The Food Network*, and *The Cooking Channel*, celebrity chefs, travel writers, and television food personalities offer fellow slummers the opportunity to vicariously participate in culinary excursions to exotic regions across the globe without leaving the comfort of their living room.<sup>6</sup> Hosts engage in embodied performances of slumming, acting as a tour guide who shapes and guides audiences experience with the foodways of foreign cultures. In one sense, the slummer is invited to move outside of their comfort zone and face their fear of otherness. In another sense, slummers are disciplined to experience foreign cultures through a framework of exoticism that keeps otherness at arms length. As I have argued elsewhere, programming that depicts culinary tourism is part of a larger shift in documentary television that employs ethnographic filmmaking to represent people, places, and cultural traditions as they exist.<sup>7</sup> Driven by the imperative to both educate and entertain cosmopolitan viewers, “ethnotainment” employs the gaze of a hobby anthropologist or tourist, exoticizing the foodways and cultural practices of subaltern communities.<sup>8</sup>

In food and travel television, hosts and their team of producers and camerapersons frequently travel to remote corners of the globe to document food cultures that deviate from the mundane, everyday cuisine of their middle class viewers. They infiltrate the open-air market, the bazaar, the back alley restaurant, and even the home kitchens to illuminate exotic cuisines to be conquered by the intrepid food adventurer. While the universality of cuisine renders distant cultures familiar for spectators, many scholars have argued that the consumption of Otherness—both through eating and viewing—is a veiled colonial endeavor that erases the power lines of inequity that divide the globe and commodify the cultural experience of difference in support the Western globalization.<sup>9</sup> I have argued that representations of bizarre and exotic foods mediates the putative crisis of contemporary whiteness by representing difference as “useful, pleasurable, even titillating to white onlookers besieged by a complicated world of fragmented and hybrid identities.”<sup>10</sup> By useful, I mean that the consumption of difference confirms the ongoing salience of white identity in a transnational global culture. Indeed, the opaque politics of the Western food adventure are tainted by histories of colonialism in which the primitive mysteries of “the Orient” are consumed to season the life and palate of the Western subject.<sup>11</sup>

Drawing from existing postcolonial scholarship on food discourse, this chapter seeks to explain how celebratory depictions of culinary adventurism addresses the structural dynamics of poverty under late capitalism. With a slight change in emphasis from my previous work on food

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exoticism, in this chapter I argue that televisual discourses on culinary slumming assimilate food cultures of poverty into the pantheon of contemporary haute cuisine. I contend that food television represents “making do” as a set of proud choices, tied to deep investments in cultural heritage, that symbolizes the happy contentment of poor and dispossessed communities who seemingly prefer their humble traditions to the private accumulation wealth. For an audience of predominantly middle class and affluent consumers, images of vibrant food cultures in the rural countryside and zones of suburban triage are made to attest to the sustainability of the growing wealth gap and an economic system premised on a politics of disposability.<sup>12</sup> Culinary slumming not only overlooks the economic and cultural factors that have shaped cuisines of necessity, but glorify those cuisines as the proud and exotic traditions of simple but ingenious people who live off the land without pretense.

**[4.4]**

To provide a companion class-based analysis to the program *Bizarre Foods With Andrew Zimmern*, this chapter analyzes the Travel Channel’s spinoff *Bizarre Foods America*, attending to exotic representations of poor rural communities. While I have argued that *Bizarre Foods* consumes Otherness to secure Western cultural hegemony, I contend that *Bizarre Foods America* exoticizes America’s rural poor by celebrating food traditions that actually bespeak persistent economic inequalities. With forty-six million Americans living in poverty at the time of the program’s premier, I read the show as a post-recessionary acquiescence to historic rates of income inequality.<sup>13</sup> Representing cuisines of necessity as evidence of the nobility of poverty, *Bizarre Foods America*’s fixation with the exotic delights of the rural poor obscures the growing pervasiveness of rural hunger as well as the dwindling economic opportunities among America’s permanent underclasses. The program’s emphasis on food as an embodiment of heritage, tradition, and authenticity reduces rural poverty to nativist lifestyle politics. In other words, poverty cuisine becomes the representative anecdote for a culture adopted by choice in resistance to the excesses of capitalism.<sup>14</sup> The selective visibility and vicarious consumption of folksy communities from the Ozarks to the Mississippi Delta—happily stuck in time but willing to share their secrets with the chic culinary world—disguises the taste of economic exploitation. The program confirms that the table scraps, the nasty bits, the waste products relegated to America’s rural poor are a source of enjoyment, something converted by the dispossessed into a hot commodity that adds diversity and deliciousness to the bourgeois American palate. In my analysis, I focus on the episodes that sojourn into some of the poorest regions of the American South, paying attention to how discourses of heritage belie the structural exploitation of America’s permanent underclass that traces its roots to the colonization of North America.

EXOTICIZING POVERTY IN AN AGE OF AUSTERITY

[4.5]

In 2012, the income gap in America reached an all time.<sup>15</sup> One in seven American now lives below the poverty line. Rural poverty is particular acute. According to the Southern Rural Development Center at Mississippi State University, the poverty rate in rural America is 16.6 percent and the poverty rate for rural children is approximately 27 percent.<sup>16</sup> The National Poverty Center found that 400 rural counties have rates over 20 percent and nearly 60 percent of those living in poverty are racial minorities.<sup>17</sup> As Congress considers four billion dollars in cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), children living in rural communities continue to be the most likely to experience food insecurity.<sup>18</sup> Despite the persistence of rural poverty, the public is woefully under-educated on the subject and overwhelmingly lacks empathy toward those living in such conditions. For instance, the Salvation Army found that nearly half of Americans believed that those living in poverty could find a job or improve their circumstances if they were properly motivated.<sup>19</sup>

[4.6]

Kenneth L. Deavers and Robert A. Hoppe surmise that “the current gap between reality and public beliefs is about the incidence of poverty results largely from the close contact between city people and the urban poor and from the prominence given to the urban poor by national broadcast media. In contrast, the rural poor, who live in many small scattered settlements in apparently ‘picturesque’ country surroundings, are relatively invisible.”<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the lack of attention to rural poverty is a byproduct of not only invisibility, but also the perception that rural living is bucolic, rustic, simple, and romantic. As Michael Harrington observed, “seeing in them a romantic image of mountain life as independent, self-reliant, and athletic, a tourist could pass through these valleys and observe only quaintness.”<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately those living in poverty outside of urban and suburban landscapes “suffer terribly at the hands of beauty.”<sup>22</sup> That is to say that while the sight of urban poverty might inspire reflection on the harsh realities of life in a postindustrial society, rural poverty is often misread as a rustic country lifestyle that embraces simplicity and even offers a hopeful escapism from urban blight.

[4.7]

To the extent that it is made visible, representations of rural poverty can take a variety of stereotypical forms, including imagery of “red-necks” and “White trash,” backwater racists who remain willfully (and sometimes comically) ignorant and downtrodden.<sup>23</sup> For instance, a variety of reality television programs such as *Duck Dynasty*, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, *Hillbilly Handfishing*, *Moonshiners*, *Redneck Island*, *Redneck Weddings*, *Rocket City Rednecks*, and *Swamp People* position audiences to laugh at redneck’s contentment with impoverishment or total lack of cultural refinement. Elsewhere in media culture, rednecks are portrayed dangerous and primitive (i.e. *Deliverance* (1972)).<sup>24</sup> At the same time, rep-

[4.8]

representations of rural Black poverty frequently accentuate the wisdom derived from “making do,” or the mythical freedom of living outside of civilization (i.e. *The Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012)).<sup>25</sup> This chapter, however, is concerned with how efforts to counter misconceptions of rural culture with authentic portrayals of simple rustic lifestyles romanticize what are by-and-large difficult living conditions.<sup>26</sup> To their credit, programs like *Bizarre Foods America* use the long-standing food traditions of rural Southern communities to demonstrate that the aforementioned cultural stereotypes are in many ways misleading. The program offers a vicarious experience of culinary slumming through exotic and misunderstood cuisines as evidence that rural communities adapt and preserve traditions in response to economic challenges.

## [4.9]

Yet, *Bizarre Foods America*'s vision of rural life leaves audiences with the underdeveloped perception of a tourist interloper who is invited to accept the “staged authenticity” of proud food traditions as an “illusion of familiarity with that culture.”<sup>27</sup> The façade of country folk who are happy to share their fascinating yet challenging cuisine presents an image of rural life as humble, traditional, frozen in time, and free from the confines of modern civilization. The audience is invited to consume the rural South's proud heritage, to better understand rural life through a soulful, reverent valiance toward foods and lifestyles born of necessity. In this way, *Bizarre Foods* engages in “poverty tourism,” a practice Biana Freire-Medeiros argues “is a by-product of Western fascination with the exotic ‘Other,’ of a middle-class romanticism of the poor.”<sup>28</sup> Poverty tourism and culinary slumming are the providence of the heritage industry, which converts the authentic cultural experience of marginalized communities into an opportunity to educate and profit from middle-class consumer's desire for authentic otherness.<sup>29</sup> Poverty tourism is an experience in navel gazing, that Stefan Palmie characterizes as “catering consumers economic capacitated to engage in a sumptuary politics of self-authentication [sic].”<sup>30</sup> The experience of communities living in poverty is commodified into a celebratory image that satisfies the consumers' desires to affirm their cosmopolitan, multicultural ethos. The spectacle of proud and delighted eaters—seemingly unburden by the histories of their cuisine—replaces old stereotypes with a pleasing image of happy concordance.

## [4.10]

Mediating the rural South through the lens of the bizarre and exotic also keeps the program's subjects at arms length from the tourist/spectator. The production and consumption of Otherness requires that the show's producers find the most extreme version of “making do,” including the most unpalatable dishes found in poor communities. The rhetoric of exoticism is marked by ambivalent desires, the coexistence of fascination, curiosity, and revulsion toward difference.<sup>31</sup> Julia Kristeva's contends that food taboos are the first source of childhood encounter with the abject, a site at which we learn through bodily expulsion to separate



the self from Other.<sup>32</sup> This observation frames the significance of food traditions in demarcating the Western civilized self from the unclean and disgusting food habits of people living in poverty. Focusing on the most challenging cuisine helps audiences mark their separation from the program's subjects and confirms the authenticity of their otherness.

This chapter adopts a postcolonial approach to interrogating representations of poverty cuisine and culinary slumming. Postcolonial scholarship attends to how Western discourses and systems of representation construct regimes of knowledge that legitimize the ongoing practice of colonialism in its present form, including but not limited to the expansion of neoliberal globalization.<sup>33</sup> Raka Shome suggests that a postcolonial perspective places "the texts we critique or the theories that we produce against the larger backdrop of neocolonialism and racism, and interrogate to what extent these discourses and our own perspective on them reflect the contemporary global politics of (neo)imperialism."<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the poverty cuisines celebrated in *Bizarre Foods America* are byproducts of slavery and segregation, the colonization of American Indians, and the impoverishment of poor white laborers. They are also reflections of the invisible structural inequalities that continue to impinge rural upward mobility.<sup>35</sup> From this approach, poverty tourism is a neocolonial practice, driven by the same "colonial desire to fix the identity of the other in order that it remains . . . distinct from tourist identity."<sup>36</sup> The exoticization of poverty draws from hidden colonialist assumptions about the primitive and nostalgic beauty of life outside the metropole, the mastery of knowledge of unconquered frontiers, and superiority of Western civilization, the universal desirability of capital and consumerism. In this case, the glorification of poverty cuisine is an extension of economic colonialism that lends authority to the discourses of self-reliance and private initiative that uphold the myth of unlimited upward mobility for all regardless of race and class.

Rhetorical scholars such as Kent Ono, Jason Edward Black, Rae Lynn Schwartz-Dupre, and Darrel Wanzer among others argue that neocolonialism continues to structure the contours of both public and popular culture.<sup>37</sup> While colonialism as a formal practice has waned, neocolonialism continues to operate inferentially in discourse and media representations about race and multiculturalism, geopolitical alignments, global governance, and economic globalization. This chapter shows how neocolonialism is the latent ideology imbedded in discursive efforts to make those living in poverty knowable subjects whose lives are enlisted as testimony to the desirability of Western cultural and economic hegemony. This project contributes to the expansion of neocolonial analysis to discourses that share a likeness in structure to colonial thought to document the pervasiveness of neocolonialism as an organizing principle of contemporary public life.<sup>38</sup> The glorification of poverty cuisine narrates a history of rural life where the predations of colonialism and capitalism

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play no fundamental part. Representations of ingenuity, self-reliance, and proud heritage invite audiences to take delight in humble traditions without reflection on the historic forces that created and sustain a permanent underclass in the US.

**[4.13]**

*BIZARRE FOODS AMERICA AND EXOTIC AT HOME*

**[4.14]**

*Bizarre Foods America* is a one-hour documentary style program that chronicles the culinary tours of host Andrew Zimmern. Following the same format as the original *Bizarre Foods* (2006–2011), the program is shot on location in different destinations throughout the United States. Each episode showcases different local and regional cuisine that deviates from what the producers assume to be a standard American diet, including wild fish and game, lesser cuts and organ meats, foraged greens, and other foods that might be considered challenging to unfamiliar audiences. All episodes typically involve trips to scouted locations such as local bars and restaurants, butchers, farmer’s markets, food festivals, food-processing facilities, and other purveyors of exotic ingredients. Zimmern also typically shares a meal with local residents, prepared in a family’s home or community center. In episodes shot in rural locations, Zimmern is often invited to participate in a hunt or fishing expedition, followed by a sampling of local traditional meal preparations. Through voice over narration, Zimmern provides background information about the people and places he visits, attending to the relationship between the food and local culture. On camera, Zimmern samples and displays foods while he describes the experience for the audience. Each episode concludes with Zimmern providing a short reflective summary of his experience and his tagline slogan, “if it looks good eat it!” The episodes are celebratory and lighthearted in tone, a feeling accentuated not only by the use of a playful score but also Zimmern’s whimsical affect. To his credit, Zimmern is always cordial, respectful, and willing to try any cuisine.

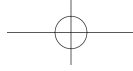
**[4.15]**

The *Bizarre Foods* franchise has been integral to the development of the *Travel Channel*’s brand. The show is part of a slate of food and travel programming on a network that reaches 94 million households.<sup>39</sup> Scripps Network Interactive—the parent company of The Travel Channel, The Food Network, and The Cooking Channel—boasts that *Bizarre Foods America* is part of television trends that are “injecting new life into the channel and introducing media consumers around the world to the quality and engaging nature of our travel content.”<sup>40</sup> Above all, Scripps sells the discretionary spending power of their affluent audience to shareholders and advertisers.<sup>41</sup> As Scripps internal documents confirm, *Bizarre Foods America* is a central component of the Travel Channel’s brand image as providing quality entertainment for a sophisticated, well educated, and relatively affluent audience of predominantly Western consumers.

The network produced *Bizarre Foods with Andrew Zimmern* for six seasons and just completed the seventh season on *Bizarre Foods America* in 2014. The channel has also committed to an additional original series with Zimmern titled *Bizarre Foods: Delicious Destinations*, scheduled to air in 2015.<sup>42</sup> The success of the *Bizarre Food* franchise attests to both widespread public interest in culinary adventurism as well as the cultural influence of food television.

This chapter analyzes episodes of *Bizarre Foods America* across seven seasons that showcase the cuisine of the rural American South. This includes episodes shot in Appalachia, the Ozarks, the Mississippi Delta, Central Florida, Alabama, West Virginia, and the Gulf Coast. I selected these episodes because they are locations that currently experience some of the most disproportionately high rates of poverty and food insecurity in the US. They are also places still affected by the legacy of slavery, segregation, Jim Crow, as well as the economic subjugation of poor white laborers.<sup>43</sup> Despite Zimmern's demonstrable commitment to philanthropy and cultural education through food, the program's potential positive contributions are eclipsed by the demands of the ethnotainment format. Zimmern candidly attests to the fact that the program deviates from what he originally proposed to the network.<sup>44</sup> Recalling a conversation with a Travel Channel executive, Zimmern explains, "He said, 'If you do the show for us, you need to invert that model, and it has to be 80 percent entertainment and 20 percent intellectual gravitas.' I remember looking at him and saying, 'As long as I get to keep the 20 percent intellectual gravitas, you got a deal.'"<sup>45</sup> Dispensing with deeper intellectual engagements with culture and geopolitics adopted in a program like CNN's *Parts Unknown* with Anthony Bourdain, Zimmern is often reduced to feel good tropes and folksy witticisms that provide shallow insights into the economic and historical conditions that shape rural communities relationship with food traditions. Thus, it is important to note that this chapter is not a criticism of Andrew Zimmern the private individual but the program as a cultural text subject to techniques of mediation and the commercial forces exerted on cable programming. In this analysis I attend to three specific moves that emerge throughout these episodes. First, I examine how the program ties exotic rural food traditions to a simple, rustic way of life that elides the conditions under which the food continues to be produced and consumed. Second, I explore how the program cultivates faux intimacy with its subjects, inviting the audience not to see themselves as interlopers but instead welcome guests who are entitled to only positive and self-affirming encounters with happy natives. Finally, I analyze how the program assimilates poverty cuisine into the establishment of haute cuisine and bourgeois food culture, a commodity of the new south unburdened by economic disparities.

[4.16]



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**[4.17]**

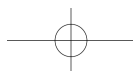
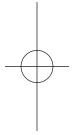
## SIMPLE COUNTRY FOLKS

**[4.18]**

Each of the episodes examined in this chapter assert that food traditions are a cultural medium, a type of heuristic that can be used to evaluate and understand why specific rural communities organize around particular rituals, modes of work, and ways of life. For instance, when visiting the Gulf Coast (Season 4, Episode 3) Zimmern declares “my greatest joys in traveling is actually getting to taste a culture.”<sup>46</sup> While foodways clearly reflect specific cultural histories and traditions, the practice of consuming a culture through a medium requires reduction and condensation. How food is produced and consumed becomes the representative anecdote for all elements of culture represented on and off screen. Throughout the program, the ingenuity, hard work, and survival skills that go into some aspects of rural food production represent the proud traditions of living off the land. Terms like “heritage” and “tradition” are frequently associated with the difficult labor of hunting, growing, or foraging a meal not available in grocery stores. In the process, the difficult labor of “making do” becomes tied to a romantic ideal of living simply and without pretense. Heritage and tradition are reflections of lifestyle choices and contentment, rather than structural economic conditions. Indeed, for every happy hunter and self-reliant mountain person depicted on screen there are countless others living with persistent food insecurity.

**[4.19]**

First, the program uses the ingenuity of Southern food cultures as testaments to the benefits and freedom of self-help. For instance, in the Ozark of Arkansas (Season 3, Episode 8), with happy hunters and anglers dressed in camouflage and navigating rural swamps portrayed on screen, Zimmern explains in voice over “People here treasure their freedom, their family, and the timeless heritage of living off the land.”<sup>47</sup> He notes that while modernity is a part of Arkansas’s landscape, there is “pluck and self-reliance . . . everywhere you look.”<sup>48</sup> Through meals of Bear cracklings, bacon-wrapped crow, rabbit legs, and suckerfish, the difficulty of attaining these hard to find proteins is framed as a purposeful and joyful enactment of personal agency. The episode also emphasizes the festive and communal elements of hunting and cooking exotic cuisines. Zimmern is invited to participate in a suckerfish fish fry and squirrel cook off with diverse home preparations. The reason that these communities can make “the unpalatable, palatable” is because they put “a high value on preserving the skills and the wisdom handed down from generations of mountain living.”<sup>49</sup> While the festive atmosphere depicted on-screen is undeniable, the framing of these events as representations of “folksy Arkansas” transform temporary moments of community enjoyment into summations of the joyful freedom experienced by living only on what the land provides.<sup>50</sup> Without denying the pride of those who hunt and fish as a way of life, the repetition of “freedom” and “self-reliance” assimilates cuisines of necessity into the grand narratives of late



capitalism in which private initiative, hard work, and independence are envisioned as replacements for the welfare state. The subjects depicted as happily and even defiantly living off the land, harnessing survival skills developed under conditions of absolute freedom, provides a plausible portrait of alternatives to public assistance. Self-reliance is a rational and empowered choice, not one born of necessity. As Zimmern concludes, food is the Ozarks is “a perfect example of how one culture’s trash becomes another’s culinary treasure.”<sup>51</sup> He makes a similar argument when visiting the Mississippi Delta, noting that the food represents “a very old tradition of making a little go a long way.”<sup>52</sup> In other words, the ingenuity of the rural South is a fitting example of how socioeconomic status need not be a barrier to unlimited upward mobility. This episode in particular imparts the lesson that society’s culinary wastes are a treasure trove of edible delights. Through hard work and self-reliance, table scraps can become as delicious as high-end cuisine.

Second, *Bizarre Foods America* represents poverty cuisines as signs of a fiercely defended way of life. The program’s romantic portrayal of declining food traditions that rely on hunting, fishing, and gathering laments the wane of noble poverty, of cultures content with living off the land. This portrayal is most prominently foregrounded in episodes featuring the cuisine of the Gulf Coast, The Mississippi Delta, and rural Florida. In these episodes, Zimmern continually highlights these are places “you can taste a vanishing way of life.”<sup>53</sup> During a community dinner of various exotic fish and organ meat with Isleno descendants of early immigrants from the Canary Islands, he explains: “only a few families still hold on to this way of life.”<sup>54</sup> For Zimmern, dish after dish represents “another vestige of a lost way of life.”<sup>55</sup> In Clarksville Mississippi (Season 2, Episode 7), Zimmern calls the Delta “a place standing outside of time.”<sup>56</sup> In the rural outskirts of New Orleans (Season 1, Episode 2), Zimmern observes country home cooking with optimism that “grandma’s favorite food hasn’t faded into the sunset quite yet.”<sup>57</sup> In these episodes, romantic attachment to the old South encases these communities behind museum glass, so to speak, rendering them a kind of curated living display of doomed cultures. The food of the rural South is represented as primitive, preserved for its quaint and sentimental attachment to bygone eras. Specifically, the rural South is both spatially and temporally remote from contemporary civilization. For instance, the Gulf Coast is “a corner of the country forgotten by most,”<sup>58</sup> while in the Mississippi Delta “time has more or less stopped.”<sup>59</sup> Nonetheless, rural Southerners cling to their exotic and outdated traditions. In fact, for those who “proudly call themselves crackers,” “living off the land the way their ancestors did is just a practical way of life.”<sup>60</sup>

In these episodes Zimmern explains the pride rural Southerners feel in defending ways of life that are ostensibly pre-modern. Meanwhile the camera cuts between shots of local residents in camouflage outfits, load-

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ing hunting and fishing gear, and preparing to head into forests, swamps, and bayous. The subjects are framed by the program as holding emphatic attachments to tradition in spite of modern conveniences. Thus, the framework of the program sustains a modern/primitive binary in which poverty cuisines exist out of a charming refusal to integrate into the mainstream consumer economy. Again, the rhetoric of heritage and tradition explains access to wealth and resources as phenomena structured by how cultures relate to modernity. Exotic food traditions in the rural South are the product of parochial cultures choosing to live outside of time's passage, deciding instead to live off pig entrails, junk fish, and squirrel meat.

**[4.22]**

Finally, the program represents rural Southern cuisine as the savage and playful spirit of primitive America. On the Gulf Coast, Zimmern employs a lighthearted tone to introduce "a cast of characters [who] fight to preserve their way of life."<sup>61</sup> These "characters" are frequently characterized as "rowdy" "rough" or "wild" and depicted happily touting guns, drinking beer, and smoking mystery meats in makeshift contraptions. For instance, Zimmern describes the residents of Hurricane Alley, AL as "rough and tumble," "armed to the teeth," and "rowdy."<sup>62</sup> And while they work hard, they enjoy "having a damn good time while they're at it."<sup>63</sup> Outside New Orleans, Zimmern praises the "rough and ready country cooking."<sup>64</sup> He also visits what he characterizes as a "rowdy road house" that serves turtle and raccoon. While harvesting bullfrogs in the Everglades he observes the "rugged way of life" of the rural Gladesman.<sup>65</sup> In many ways, this frame provides a positive elaboration on the standard redneck caricature that is ubiquitous in American popular culture. But, the image presented here is also of happy savages unaware and unconcerned about modern refinement, standards of cleanliness, and convenience. The wild and challenging nature of the cuisine symbolizes a culture with seemingly child-like maturity and aspirations. That is to say that in the rural South we see the humble yet unrefined cuisines of the poor and less civilized. The audience is assured, however, that these rowdy individuals are quite content, if not overjoyed by the difficult task of scrounging for a meal. Their culture is proudly primitive and continues to be passed on and adopted by choice. As Zimmern watches a peaceful sunset over the Everglades he tells his backwater hosts, "you've got it pretty good, my friend."<sup>66</sup> Here, the sincere admiration for primitive ways of life overshadows the implicit assumption that, in general, eking out a meager existence on difficult to obtain protein sources is the preference of those who do. Certainly, the subjects with whom Zimmern visits express pride and enjoyment, but audiences are left to positively generalize about rural life in general, saved from having to observe the harsher side of making do.

Casey Ryan Kelly

*Faux Intimacy and Family Meals*

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**[4.23]**

**[4.24]**

In each episode, Zimmern is invited to join a local family for a home cooked meal. During the preparation of the meal, Zimmern interacts with the cook, samples ingredients, and explains cooking processes to the audience. Throughout the preparation and meal, Zimmern asks his hosts questions about their family history, life circumstances, and the significance of particular rituals and ingredients. While the conversations are ostensibly about unique and exotic foods, the dialogue often unfolds the cook's personal and family history, their stature in the local community, and how food relates to their cultural heritage. While many of the festival and hunting scenes turn poverty cuisine into spectacle, the family dinner sequences are profoundly intimate and work to humanize the program's subjects. They offer a glimpse into how model rural families structure their lives around exotic foods. Though these recurring sequences build familiarity and comfort with the food customs of rural families, they also ensure that the presence of the exotic does not fundamentally disturb the audience's privilege. Like Zimmern, the audience is entitled to be welcome guests in the rural Southern kitchen, to have exotic subjects make them feel at ease, comforted, and taken care of as they experience difference. This sense of intimacy is an invitation to engage in culinary slumming. It reminds viewers that for the price of a temporary disavowal of privilege, tasting the South's exotic edibles provides unmediated access to the authentic cultural experience of the Other. The audience is not forced to confront the unpleasant power lines that divide them from the program's subjects. The Other is made present to confirm that the world is open and accessible for the upwardly mobile food aficionado.

In particular, two meal sequences demonstrate how the program cultivates comfort and welcomeness for the adventurous foodie. First, in Bayou La Batre, Alabama, local community organizer David Pham brings Zimmern to lunch in the home of first generation Vietnamese immigrants Min and Ho Tran. Bayou La Batre has a large Vietnamese community that predominantly makes a living in the local seafood industry.<sup>67</sup> As an unofficial ambassador for the Vietnamese community, Pham secures Zimmern and his cameras entrance into Buddhist temples, Vietnamese markets and groceries, and even the homes of local residents. The Ho family provides Zimmern with a tour of their garden of Vietnamese vegetables, their prized roosters, and homespun varieties of dried and fermented fish. A majority of the preparations are unavailable in local restaurants because the Food and Drug Administration prohibits the fermentation processes employed by the Ho family. Zimmern's delight with this fact suggests that the audience is privy to the most challenging and authentic experience with Southern-Vietnamese fusion. They are treated to the most secret and mysterious cuisine that the South has to offer.

**[4.25]**



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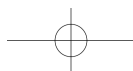
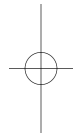
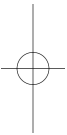
*Exoticizing Poverty in Bizarre Foods America*

**[4.26]**

The dangers of fermented fish are made comforting and delightful by how the program cultivates intimacy between Zimmern and the host family. During home meal sequences, Zimmern provides voice over narration where he explains the family's history and cuisine over old black and white portraits. The experience has the documentary quality of rummaging through old family photo albums. Throughout the meal, Zimmern spends as much time describing the meal as he does expressing reverence for the family's traditions of making the unpalatable, delicious. At the conclusion of the meal, Zimmern embraces the family's matriarch with a high level of familiarity and comfort. He complements David for how well he negotiates being "trapped between two cultures" and complements the Min and Ho for the authenticity of the meal.<sup>68</sup>

**[4.27]**

In a second example, Zimmern visits a family cookout with the Chow family of Clarksdale, Mississippi. He is treated to "a showcase of the wonderful things that can happen when the Far East meets Deep South," including traditional Southern dishes like pigs feet and tails with Chinese spices and cooking techniques.<sup>69</sup> While in the previous example the Tran's were portrayed as a relatively lower income immigrant family making the best of their circumstances, the Chow's are fourth generation immigrants who came from humble roots to become "a family of white collar professionals."<sup>70</sup> This episode contrasts black and white photos of the family's humble beginnings with their present day success, including a vibrant family with the creature comforts of affluence. Zimmern is invited to participate in the kitchen, sample ingredients, and even join the family in prayer before the meal. Again, the family's openness to Zimmern provides a portrait of a welcoming South, eager to share its culinary secrets with the affluent consumers on the other side of the camera. Above all, the program's emphasis on the family's assimilation into American culture and their adherence to the American Dream mythology makes servings of pig feet more palatable. Though the family once relied on poverty cuisine to survive, evidence of their hard work and perseverance makes their festive celebration of pig feet and crawfish safe accessible to those with the privilege to choose how they wish to dine. This intimate portrayal of a successful immigrant family also confirms that the consumption of bizarre foods may have at one point been about necessity, but today they are a part of family heritage and community traditions. The invitation that the audience be part of the family attests to the welcomeness of culinary slummer. Images of happy natives, opening their homes to be observed, give the viewer tacit approval to gawk for their pleasure. In other words, the programs subjects seemingly consent to being to be studied and examined; rendered knowable, and consumed for the edification of viewers at home. The feeling of closeness is, however, staged as a device to ease audience fears of otherness and authorize their pleasurable consumption of poverty cuisines.





Casey Ryan Kelly

**DRAFT**

*New South Cuisine*

[4.28]

*Bizarre Food America* portrays poverty cuisine as part of the chic new food trends that are revitalizing contemporary Southern cuisine. Here, techniques born of necessity and survival are used to spice up and add exotic qualities to mundane restaurant fare. Assimilating poverty cuisine into the fine dining experience extends the experience of slumming beyond the tour to the everyday life of the adventurous eater. In this way, the audience can capture the experience of Otherness at their local farmer's market, the specialty grocer, or the neighborhood gastro-pub. In these spaces, poverty cuisines can be consumed without a discomforting confrontation with the historical and economic context of the cuisine. With an expert chef at the helm and pleasant likeminded patrons as company, the nasty bits and lesser cuts can be experienced with the comfort of refinement. The program's promise that these exotic elements will be coming to a hip new restaurant near you provides reassurances that an authentic encounter with otherness can be obtained without self-risk or liberal guilt. In another sense, the high price of these exotic new menu items assuages the guilt associated with slumming by bringing them under the canopy of elite taste. Representations of new Southern cuisine offer transcendence from the "old South," a place where lines of race, class, and gender dictate access to food and capital.

[4.29]

In several episodes, Zimmern showcases popular Southern chefs who have turned to rural cuisine to update the menus at their high-end eateries. In the episode eponymously named "The New South," (Season 1, Episode 2) Zimmern spends time with Chef Chris Hastings of the James Beard Award winning Hot and Hot Fish Club in Birmingham, Alabama.<sup>71</sup> The episode follows Zimmern and Hastings adventures through the aisles of local butchers and international markets where they ponder the relative merits of everything from blood cake to dried and fermented fish. Through voice over, Zimmern remarks, "this isn't your grandma's Piggly Wiggly," and declares, "Birmingham food and cultural scene are evolving."<sup>72</sup> Hastings observes that new Southern cuisine is about assimilating and fusing classics with rare and undiscovered ingredients. Observing the influence of local foods and international markets, Hastings explains, "us white guys starting showing up and saying this is the coolest thing ever."<sup>73</sup> Similarly, in Oxford, Mississippi, Zimmern shops with Chef John Currence of the critically acclaimed City Grocery where the two ponder combinations like Japanese Miso and locally sourced pigs ear and testicles. Zimmern remarks that the market "is a monument to changing times."<sup>74</sup> His exotic excursions with local celebrity chefs put the privileged practice of cultural appropriation on display. Here, the hallmark of great Southern chef is their ability to turn the unfamiliar and even distasteful ingredients of first generation immigrants and country rednecks into contemporary haute cuisine. The kitchens of Hot and Hot

[4.30]



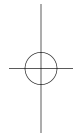
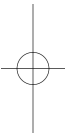
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Fish Club and the City Grocery are portrayed as places where teams of trained professionals make the nasty bits pleasurable to those who have not likely had the need to eat ingredients like testicles out of necessity. Most importantly, the food is made to tell a different story that harkens vaguely to heritage and tradition with no reference to history and context.

**[4.31]**

For those who do not typically dine in James Beard award-winning restaurants, new Southern cuisine is also supposedly the rising-tide that lifts all boats. That is to say that the program suggests that the demands of affluent consumers for new and exotic ingredient might provide economic support to communities who hunt, trap, and raise wild game to survive. These individuals are now poised to use their unique set of skills and traditions to profit from the rise of culinary tourism. The most profound example can be found in Zimmern's discussion of the unique ingredients harvested by the Seminole Indian nation of central Florida. In a tour through the exotic game preserves to the Brighton reservation, Zimmern suggests that Seminole business success in supplying wild game to the region means "hunting for food is not a necessity anymore."<sup>75</sup> Casinos notwithstanding, the demand for Seminole ranching is responsible for "keeping their culture alive."<sup>76</sup> Implicitly, the emergence of an affluent class of exotic eaters is responsible for improving the lives of the marginalized and dispossessed. The purveyors and consumers of rare and bizarre foods are now presented with the kind of upward mobility that affords a more discerning and refined palate. Again, the Seminole are offered as evidence that self-reliance and tradition can be marshaled by underclasses to market their quaint and charming lifestyle to the upper-class consumer. While the Seminole's success is well documented, the program presents self-help, cultural commodification, and entrepreneurialism as the pathway out of poverty and marginalization. In essence, the show suggests that the exotic tastes of affluent consumers can, in part, alleviate centuries of economic dislocation caused by their ancestors.



**[4.32]**

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF DIET

**[4.33]**

Despite Zimmern's best efforts to show rural Southerners as they live, *Bizarre Foods America* provides an inadequate account of the economic realities of food production and consumption. For every self-reliant country family depicted as living happy off the land; every charming food culture poised to compete in the new cosmopolitan marketplace; and every culinary slummer invited into home kitchens where secret recipes are divulged, there are countless individuals living with the legacies of capitalism. This chapter demonstrates that glorification of poverty cuisine masks the discontent of America's rural underclass. Pride, heritage,



and charm obscure the profound lack of choices and the severe limitations on upward mobility that characterize the modern crisis of rural poverty. While those living in poverty are adept, skillful, and resilient, the celebratory exoticization of their foodways overlooks the need for a more equitable distribution of material resources. Attention to the historic legacies of “soul food,” and other cuisines fashioned from the scraps and leftovers of the haves, would do more to contextualize the parallel development of different food classes in America. Perhaps Zimmern’s original formula for the program could have provided the context audiences need to understand the implications of culinary slumming and appropriation. With attention to the relationship between food, capitalism, and American empire, this analysis brings attention to how the televised food adventure dispenses with an analysis of economic colonialism to placate the new cosmopolitan eater.

In this program, the rural South is quite literally domesticated and its food cultures contorted to tell a narrative of humble contentment with existing social and economic structures. Indeed, economic austerity has profoundly impacted the Southern diet. For instance, while high rates of obesity are attributed to high fat protein sources and deep fried treats, the unfortunate reality is that systemic poverty is primarily responsible. The new poverty cuisines of the South are fast food and cheap carbohydrates sold at discount chains such as Walmart.<sup>77</sup> Decades of depressed wages and declining employment opportunities have also changed attitudes toward physical fitness and healthy eating. The self-reliant family living off the land is an idyllic image that obscures the proliferation of low priced processed foods, produced by companies that have taken advantage of economic austerity. While more affluent culinary tourists consume what is presented as the authentic South, many rural Southerners either go hungry or fill up on low nutrition fillers. If anything, these chemically enhanced and artificially sweetened treats more appropriately deserve the label of “bizarre foods.” This chapter shows how reverence and exoticization push aside the economic realities of food for a self-affirming portrait of an exhilarating food adventure, complete with of servile natives, rustic beauty, and challenging tests for the intrepid foodie. In *Bizarre Foods America*, the culinary slummer remains unburdened by the painful histories of the cuisines they vicariously consume. Ultimately, those same foods will be featured at a local fine dining establishment, marketed as new Southern cuisine, to be enjoyed without the disturbing presence of Others.

[4.34]

## NOTES

[4.35]

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[4n1]



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2. bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992), 21.

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3. Biana Freire-Medeiros, *Touring Poverty* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 3.

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4. See Casey Ryan Kelly, "Bizarre Foods: White Privilege and the Neocolonial Palate." In *Race and Hegemonic Struggle in the United States*, edited by Michael G. Lacy and Mary E. Triece, 43-67. Lanham, MD: Farleigh Dickinson Press, 2014.

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6. On the Travel Channel alone there is *Bizarre Foods with Andrew Zimmern, Dangerous Grounds, Man vs. Food, Man vs. Food Nation, No Reservations, Samantha Brown, and The Layover*.

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7. See Casey Ryan Kelly, "Strange/Familiar: Rhetorics of Exoticism in Ethnographic Television." In *Communication Colonialism: Readings on Postcolonial Theory and Communication*, ed. Rae Lynn Schwartz-Dupre. New York: Peter Lang.

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8. Kelly, "Strange/Familiar," 196.

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10. Kelly, "Bizarre Foods," 47.

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11. See Edward Said, *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.

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12. See Henry Giroux, "Beyond the Biopolitics of Disposability: Rethinking Neoliberalism in the New Gilded Age." *Social Identities* 14 (2008): 587-620.

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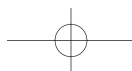
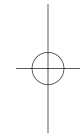
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22. Harrington, *Other America*, 41.

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46. *Bizarre Foods America*, "Third Coast," Travel Channel, July 15, 2013, written by Andrew Zimmern.

[4n47]

47. *Bizarre Foods America*, "The Ozarks," Travel Channel, April 1, 2013, written by Andrew Zimmern.

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48. *Bizarre Foods America*, "The Ozarks."

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49. *Bizarre Foods America*, "The Ozarks."

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50. *Bizarre Foods America*, "The Ozarks."

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51. *Bizarre Foods America*, "The Ozarks."

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52. *Bizarre Foods America*, "The Blues Trail," Travel Channel, August 20, 2012, written by Andrew Zimmern.

[4n53]

53. *Bizarre Foods America*, "Third Coast."

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54. *Bizarre Foods America*, "Third Coast."

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55. *Bizarre Foods America*, "Third Coast."

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56. *Bizarre Foods America*, "The Blues Trail."

[4n57]

57. *Bizarre Foods America*, "New Orleans," Travel Channel, January 30, 2012, written by Andrew Zimmern.

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58. *Bizarre Foods America*, "Third Coast."

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59. *Bizarre Foods America*, "The Blues Trail."

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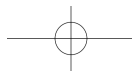
60. *Bizarre Foods America*, "The Other Florida," Travel Channel, August 27, 2012, written by Andrew Zimmern.

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61. *Bizarre Foods America*, "Third Coast."

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62. *Bizarre Foods America*, "Third Coast."



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63. *Bizarre Foods America*, "Third Coast." [4n63]  
64. *Bizarre Foods America*, "New Orleans." [4n64]  
65. *Bizarre Foods America*, "The Other Florida." [4n65]  
66. *Bizarre Foods America*, "The Other Florida." [4n66]  
67. In this episode, Pham's role as political advocate for Southeast Asia immigrants is backgrounded to his role ambassador for the community's cuisine. [4n67]  
68. *Bizarre Foods America*, "Third Coast." [4n68]  
69. *Bizarre Foods America*, "The Blues Trail." [4n69]  
70. *Bizarre Foods America*, "The Blues Trail." [4n70]  
71. *Bizarre Foods America*, "Birmingham (The New South)," Travel Channel, July 29, 2013, written by Andrew Zimmern. [4n71]  
72. *Bizarre Foods America*, "Birmingham." [4n72]  
73. *Bizarre Foods America*, "Birmingham." [4n73]  
74. *Bizarre Foods America*, "The Blues Trail." [4n74]  
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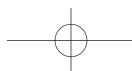
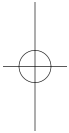
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