Country Cookin’ and Cross-Dressin’
Television, Southern White Masculinities, and Hierarchies of Cultural Taste

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This article investigates Cookin’ Cheap, a regionally produced, nationally available cooking show that mixes Southern humor with overtly cheap recipe preparation. “Cheapness” (of food and cooking technique) is positioned as both nostalgia for simpler “country” values and as differentiation from slick television programming. By showing the hosts engaging in time-consuming, often clumsy food preparation, the show pokes fun at the flabby professionalism of television cooks, reemphasizing the chaos of the domestic kitchen. Based on viewer letters, textual analysis, and ethnographic participant/observation, this article discusses the way Cookin’ Cheap makes a place for the viewer in the text, reappropriating strategies of earlier television. When the show’s hosts impersonate their aunts in unconvincing drag, they also emphasize the passing of tradition from matriarchal figures to an underexamined form of masculinity: the feminized Southern working-class man.

Keywords: South; Southern; masculinity; regional television; cooking show; “country”; reception; drag; nostalgia; social class; working class; whiteness; gender; media studies; television history

For decades, chefs have offered television viewers the spectacle of preparing haute cuisine flawlessly and flamboyantly, making dishes with exotic ingredients, and demonstrating a range of specialized equipment and techniques. More recently, a new wave of cooking shows has taken over the airwaves with campy, energetic hosts dishing out gourmet international fare in a spectacle of performative showmanship. In a very different style, and

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a class of its own, has been Cookin’ Cheap, a Virginia-based public television show that billed itself as the longest continuously running national cooking show in America. Originally hosted by down-home local comedians Larry Bly and Laban Johnson, Cookin’ Cheap (produced from 1981 to 202) was a parodic pastiche of a vaudevillian male comedy team—with tongue-in-cheek Southern humor and occasional cross-dressing—in a ‘ugal-to-the-point-of-excess cooking show produced with broken appliances, low-brow tastes, and a pointed lack of attention to the fine details of food preparation.

Cooking shows have long been an undervalued genre in both academic and popular television criticism, although they have been a staple of local television for most of its history. Coming of age in the 1950s, such programming reflected and reinforced the period’s efforts to make the domestic sphere “scientific.” Local television stations produced most such programming, often under the aegis of publicly funded rural home extension services. Aimed primarily at middle-class housewives (as well as those aspiring to be middle class) and frequently sponsored by appliance manufacturers, the goal of such programs was to introduce new technologies, to advertise new products, and to disseminate standardized “scientific” cooking methods. The presentational formats usually involved a professional cook at a pseudo–kitchen counter in a studio, surrounded by tiny new appliances, using direct address to demonstrate cooking techniques to both the studio and home audiences, and preparing a number of egant dishes for display (see Stole 2000; Williams 1999).

Throughout the sixties and seventies, a few chef-oriented shows rede ned the genre as an exhibition of skills of haute European cuisine by celebrity gourmet experts such as Julia Child (whose The French Chef debuted in 1963 [see Lehrman 1997]) and James Beard. In contrast to both the didactic tones of the 1950s and the elite cultural aura of the chef shows arising in the 1960s and 1970s, the 1981 inception of Cookin’ Cheap placed it as an innovator of a new kind of cooking genre at a time when cooking for the masses and TV wasn’t cool. However, as Cookin’ Cheap was gaining a strong local and regional following in the South in the next few years, the programming explosion accompanying changes in the broadcasting and cable industry during the 1980s reinvigorated the cooking genre, making a wide range of new cooking shows available at the national level through public broadcasting stations and cable networks such as the Discovery Channel and the Learning Channel. By the early 1990s, these cooking shows ranged from high culture (The Great Chefs of Europe) to health-conscious but upscale (Jeff Smith’s The Frugal Gourmet) to international/ethnic cuisine (Yan Can Cook and World Cuisine) and even saw the birth in 1993 of an entire cable network, the Food Network, dedicated to food and cooking. Today, cooking shows have never been more popular or more diverse (see Smillie 1997; Slatata 2000).

The distinctive Cookin’ Cheap, produced by Blue Ridge Public Television and at one time distributed nationally through the PBS system before being syndicated to the Good Life Cable Network for a daily weekday time slot, provides an interesting study through which to examine regionally produced television discourses about the cooking genre itself as well as insights about gender roles, social class, and regional culture. A live-on-tape, seemingly unscripted and improvisational half-hour that has always seemed on the verge of being out of control, the self-mocking Cookin’ Cheap lacks the earnestness of most earlier cooking shows. It tries to balance the entertainment and informational aspects of its hybrid form as it attempts to provide its viewers with “recipes that would be easy to put together,” while framing such culinary practices in a comedic frame. Stylistically, Cookin’ Cheap is also notable for the degree to which it has inscribed its viewers in the text, aspiring to an interactive and open-ended relationship with its audience both on-screen and offscreen.

Our methodological approach to this study has been an interpretive, empirical one drawing on a combination of textual analysis, historical reception study, and ethnographic participant/observation. In addition to being regular viewers of the program during several seasons, we had the opportunity to spend time in the WBRA studio in Virginia with the principals and crew in 1994 and were also fortunate to be able to access the show’s archives of viewer letters. We have been particularly interested in the show’s negotiations of textual production and its inscribed ideological commentary on gender, domesticity, class, region, and race. We have also examined the negotiations of meanings produced by the show’s viewers, who participate actively in the show’s production through viewer-submitted recipes and viewer mail segments.

One distinctive aspect of Cookin’ Cheap is that its two male hosts do not ally themselves at all with either the high-brow masculine tradition of professional European chefs or the samurai showmanship of the most recent wave of male television chefs such as Emeril Lagasse or Martin Yan.

thors’ Note: The authors would like to thank the producers of Cookin’ Cheap and, in particular, hosts Larry Bly and the late Laban Johnson, for their cooperation and good-natured assistance in researching for this article. Special thanks as well are extended to Linda Wilson, who reduced us to Cookin’ Cheap as an aficionado of the show, without realizing that she was using the seed for our decade-long relationship with the program. We also thank many of our television studies colleagues whose feedback after the presentation of an earlier version of a related paper was presented at the Public Service Broadcasting conference in Banff, Canada in 2000.
Instead, Larry Bly and Laban Johnson have traced their culinary pedigrees back to a feminine, working-class, regional tradition—the everyday cooking practices of rural white Southern women. Taking pride in the amateurishness and simplicity of both their food and their production values, the male comedy duo removes the discourse of credentialed professionalism that usually frames gender and class issues in cooking. Instead, they offer us an archetype of masculinity feminized by tradition more than by modern postfeminist male sensitivity. The show presents an archetype of gentle Southern masculinity far removed from the rough-hewn Bubba or “good- ole-boy” stereotype. *Cookin’ Cheap* offers the spectacle of countrified home cooking to a microwave society, invoking a nostalgia for the values of a traditional agrarian or small-town community (in the rural white South) while it pokes fun at bourgeois attempts to modernize and discipline the chaotic realm of domestic taste, the kitchen.

Inception

*Cookin’ Cheap* originated when Laban Johnson, a high school drama coach and occasional host of local public television shows, proposed a cooking show to the local public broadcasting affiliate (WBRA) in Roanoke, Virginia, a small industrial city of 100,000 people nestled in a broad agrarian valley between ranges of the Blue Ridge mountains. A comedic screen actor and a self-taught cook with no professional culinary credentials, Johnson had for several years performed on-screen cooking demonstrations for a local daytime women’s show called *Panorama* on the PBS affiliate. Johnson said he admired Julia Child’s work but became frustrated because her recipes called for ingredients that were unavailable locally. As a result, he developed the idea for a cooking show “where you could find stuff at the grocery store, actually do it, in places other than New York and Boston.”

Johnson then recruited Larry Bly, a local radio personality and advertising executive, to join him on the air. Neither man was a professional chef, and both have acknowledged that they acquired their practical and traditional cooking skills under the tutelage of older Southern women in their families. Both have discussed the need they faced, as bachelors in a generation of men “out on their own” in the 1970s, to learn the skills traditionally passed down among the women in their working-class or rural Southern families: “I’d watched my mother, my grandmother, my father’s sisters—a region of aunts—cook, but I had never cooked [until I taught myself as an adult],” Johnson declared. Bly credited his Aunt Tootsie (a “salt of the earth ype lady”), who raised him on her Virginia farm, with teaching him “not to be afraid of food” and “how to resurrect leftovers”—skills he put to good use when he began single life on his own in the city.

After a well-received pilot episode, Johnson and Bly sought and acquired regional grocery store chains and meat processors as corporate underwriters, obtained battered cooking equipment from a local flea market, and designed a format that featured the on-air preparation of simple viewer-submitted recipes. To accentuate the “cheap” in their title, they originally kept a running tally of food costs for each recipe on a kitchen blackboard on the set, thereby foregrounding the economic aspects of their dishes. A truly local show in its first seasons, *Cookin’ Cheap* was also able to incorporate local humor and to promote local and regional events and community activities. Rural Southern baby boomers Johnson and Bly soon proved to be a popular comedy duo as they quickly adapted their fledgling comedy/cooking act to the rhythms and constraints of live television. The two performers, who shared generational and cultural sensibilities as well as self-described “wicked” senses of humor, began to play off each other without establishing the traditional “straight man/funny man” dichotomy of many comedy duos. Their humor on the set was primarily verbal reprise since their physical movements were limited by the kitchen set (although there were times when they seem on the verge of breaking into song-and-dance numbers).

By the second season, the show had been picked up by regional public television stations and went national over the next few seasons. The shift from a local to a national audience (and the accompanying constraints of PBS distribution) significantly changed the character of the show, eliminating the local and temporally specific features such as local humor and food prices, and adding a pressure to professionalize the show to some degree: “PBS wanted less comedy and more education,” Johnson commented, although he added that they never sacrificed comedy even while adding new elements to “keep the show fresh.”

One of those elements added in the mid-1980s was the recurring “Cook Sisters” routine: taped segments in which the two would dress in drag as their elderly aunts “Tootsie” and “Sister” Cook and dispense addled cooking tips. The Cook sister personas provided ways for Bly and Johnson to personify and literally embody the sources of the feminine knowledge and traditions that they bore in their gender-bending roles as guardians and purveyors of down-home simplicity and tradition in cooking and other cultural tastes. However solemnly they may have taken this cultural role, they never took themselves too seriously; they injected humor and playful banter in all their interactions and preparations. PBS mandates notwithstanding, they still considered themselves to be more of a comedy show than a cooking show: “It’s a real show. It’s an honest show. . . . People like that. It is what it is.”
Cheapness and Other Values

Dear Boys, Please do not get too efficient, too free of a flop now and then and too many new utensils. Lick a finger now and then. Your charm is that you cook like people actually cook in their homes... I measure like you do, I lick a spoon occasionally and I use often-washed fingers a lot. I also have made do with some innovative methods due to a lack of time and sophisticated utensils. I also have some flops but in general get the food on the table for the family... Thanks a lot. Don’t change the fun you have and try to get technical.
(viewer letter, 1986)

Interestingly, given the elite reputation of public broadcasting’s audience in the era of Masterpiece Theater, the cultural habitus reflected by and constructed by, the cultural tastes that Cookin’ Cheap purveys is decidedly proletarian and lower to middle class, although cloaked in discourses of rural traditionalism. Rather than trying to shape or upgrade America’s cooking and eating habits, the Cookin’ Cheap team has claimed that the show serves as a cultural mirror, merely reflecting what Americans eat, for better or for worse. It is the cuisine of the everyday—simple, basic, inexpensive, convenient (and not necessarily all that healthy, for those who count calories and fat grams).

The “cheap” in the title originally referred to monetary issues of frugality, but over the life of the show, cheapness came to represent more an ethos of simplicity, of nonpretentious “back to basics” involved in performing cooking as pleasurable domestic work rather than as an elite presentation. Art. Cheap, then, became a signifier not only for frugality of economic capital but also as a celebratory marker for a cultural habitus (following Pierre Bourdieu’s [1984] use of this term) carved out with regard to specific types of cultural tastes and practices of consumption. This self-conscious distancing from the dominant or bourgeois class values is frequently overtly expressed in a pride about one’s frequently derided, antiaristocratic lower- to middle-class habitus. As Bourdieu (1984) described a similar sensibility in French society:

There is, of course, everything which belongs in the art of living, a wisdom taught by necessity, suffering and humiliation and deposited in an inherited language, dense even in its stereotypes, a sense of revelry and festivity, of self-expression and practical solidarity with others (evoked by the adjective bon vivant with which the working classes identify), in short, everything that is engendered by the realistic (but not resigned) hedonism and skeptical (but not cynical) materialism which constitute both a form of adaptation to the conditions of existence and a defense against them. (Pp. 394-95)

In a similar vein, Cookin’ Cheap advocates an unabashed pleasure to be gained from food as well as from sociable interaction. Johnson and Bly expressed a sensual pleasure through their cooking and eating, as well as their talk—exuberant talk about indulgences in food and about other forms of cultural expression. They frequently have made reference to bodily issues such as weight and health concerns, and viewers over the years have witnessed (and frequently commented on) the performers’ physical transformations. Although both were well-educated men, they chose to speak a dialect on the air that reflected regional and class distinctions and further represented them as festive, Southern, down-home bons vivants with a decidedly feminized twist.

Bly and Johnson have repeatedly characterized their audience and the patterns of cultural consumption reflected in their show as down-home: replacing distinctions based on socioeconomic class with a social category defined in opposition to urbanism and the pretentiousness of an elite cosmopolitan culture. Although Johnson and Bly themselves were Southerners and have admitted that their own sensibilities certainly reflected the culture of the white, rural, working-class South in which they grew up, they have perceived their national appeal and the shared culture of their dispersed national audience as more broadly based on and connected by values of the local, the traditional, the postagrarian land-based ethos of middle America. Bly commented,

Oh, I think there’s a lot that’s Southern about the show. In fact, I think that’s one of the things people like about the show—they find it Southern and charming. We hear a lot from people up North and out West. I mean, we don’t work real hard to do that—but we are Southern!

Johnson concurred, “I think there’s a sensibility to the lifestyle of the people of the South that lends itself to cooking. To a degree it is rural, but that’s not a valid term anymore—more traditional.” Bly continued, “I don’t think we’re the Mayberry RFD of cooking shows. We’re quaint, but in a little different manner.” One might consider that while their appeal is to an audience with an attraction to country sensibilities, most of their viewers live in urban, modern lifestyles, and the show has a contemporary appeal as well.

Cookin’ Cheap can be placed in the constellation of forms of cultural expression that both invoke and extend the culture of the contemporary South. The last quarter of the twentieth century has witnessed a sociohistorical process that John Egerton (1974) has called the “Southernization of America”—the movement of what was formerly a distinct and marginal regional culture into the center of what has come to define a generic down-home mainstream American culture. This transformation has been characterized by an appropriation of regional products and forms—most notably country music, Southern politicians, and country food and crafts—by an increasingly conservative national consciousness seeking to find authentic
models for its ideological turn toward tradition and family values. As Theresa Goddu (1995) has pointed out, “Country, long-characterized as hillbilly music, is now selling the nation an idealized image of America by mass marketing more wholesome images of the South: rural nostalgia, conservative politics, and traditional values,” thus broadening its appeal (p. 59). During the 1980s, an entire industry blossomed to capitalize on this new marketing constituency that identifies itself as “Country America” (the title of a popular magazine publication). The demographics of this group are national and varied, united by shared values rather than socioeconomic categories or regional coresidency. It is a community that shuns urbanism and romanticizes the past, the rural, and the simple life. And it is a community of people who consider themselves interpellated by the style, tone, and self-deprecating humor of *Cookin’ Cheap*.

Some viewers characterize the show’s ethos as country; simple (i.e., unsophisticated, in a low-brow kind of way); or reflecting average, everyday, and normal conditions of cooking; such viewers also positively contrast *Cookin’ Cheap* to “those other cooking shows.” A Florida couple said, “You put all the other Pre-measured Cooking shows to shame. It’s nice to see a TV show with people acting normal and in real every day situations” (viewer letter, 1992). A Philadelphia viewer wrote, “Through recipes good, bad and indifferent, your culinary efforts are an inspiration to all us non-Cordon Bleu bumbler” (viewer letter, 1994).

The cheapness not only of the food preparation, but also of the television production values on the show, has been a strategic decision by the producers to evoke the style and mood of early live radio and 1950s television productions—reflecting the same aversion to highly processed media texts that they express toward highly processed cooking techniques. This ethic of cheap simplicity, connected to a nostalgia for certain rural traditions, pervades not only the philosophy of cooking that is espoused on the show but also the philosophy of television production as well.

Cheapness, then, reflects aesthetic and cultural values as much or more than it does economic ones. *Cookin’ Cheap* advocates a set of values that are simple, down-home, and pleasurable—for both the producer and the consumer. Significantly, it advocates a perspective in which distinctions between the makers and users of culture—between professionals and amateurs, between performer and audience, between those who cook and those who eat, between traditional men’s and women’s roles—are blurred or de-emphasized. What becomes important in the culture of “cheap cookin’” is the participatory pleasure of cultural production and consumption rolled together into a single process.

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**Professional Amateurs**

Another darned fan letter! Let me tell you how much I enjoy your program—particularly your simplified recipes. With some of the “cooking shows” I see, one is required to have a chef’s kitchen in a large hotel, plus a dozen clean-up people to help you. (viewer letter, 1983)

*_Cookin’ Cheap*_ has overtly positioned itself in opposition to those other cooking shows, frequently referring to chefs such as Julia Child and Graham Kerr by name. Such other shows construct cooking as a professionalized activity with specialized equipment and virtuosic techniques. In those worlds, preparing food is an activity performed by chefs (highly skilled and highly schooled experts), as opposed to cooks (practitioners without official training). Larry Bly and Laban Johnson are clearly cooks, in the everyday and domestic sense of the word.

Given a state-of-the-art kitchen stocked with highly specialized equipment, the “other” television chef efficiently models how food “should” be prepared under ideal laboratory conditions. One distinction between the professional and the amateur is access to these specialized tools. In contrast to the high-tech kitchens on display on such programs, most everyday domestic cooks must make-do with general-purpose tools not specifically designed for unique purposes, as well as with aging, dented, and worn equipment. Following suit, during most of its tenure, *Cookin’ Cheap* has operated in a conspicuously low-tech kitchen. When the show first went on the air, Bly and Johnson equipped their television kitchen with $20 spent at a flea market. They used a frying pan that had been hanging on the wall in another television set, despite the fact that the pan had a “hot spot” that frequently burned food. The result was a hodgepodge of visibly cheap but usable equipment (e.g., pots with uneven bottoms or mismatched lids with broken handles). The hosts would emphasize their equipment’s inadequacies by discussing the dullness of their knives and the lack of reliability of their blenders (a factor that also contributed to the drama of food preparation on a live-on-tape television show, leading to some memorable comedic moments when equipment failed).

Long after *Cookin’ Cheap* gained a measure of national success, the hosts continued to use equipment that clearly differentiated them from professional chefs. In fact, this often became a source of concern to viewers, who ironically failed to realize that the show’s cheapness was a strategic choice. For example, a letter from sympathetic New Jersey viewers expressed concern about the equipment:

My wife and I enjoy watching your show, but we’re appalled at the utensils that you’re forced to use! Get that network brass to open up their wallets and
buy you some decent mixing bowls and wooden spoons. No chefs of your caliber should be reduced to using Tupperware! Your talents are obviously not appreciated. (viewer letter, 1994)

Another viewer letter chided the producers in an attempt to advocate for a higher budget for Johnson and Bly: “Incidentally, cookin’ cheap ain’t no excuse for not having proper utensils. After all, they’ve been on the air over ten years. They’ve made enough money to buy ‘Sears Roebuck by now’” (viewer letter, 1994).

Bly and Johnson also distinguished themselves from professional chefs in their lack of a flashy cooking technique. Much of the spectacle of watching a television chef like Emeril Lagasse lies in marveling at the mastery and spectacle of their craft: their samurai-like skills with knives or the ability to separate eggs flawlessly at breakneck speed. However, when one watches Bly and Johnson chop vegetables, there is absolutely nothing flashy or particularly speedy about the process. On Cookin’ Cheap, food is not rapidly and efficiently assembled into a dish that looks both perfect and effortless. To the contrary, the show has emphasized the mundane labor of everyday life that is frequently elided on television cooking shows. Ingredients are not premeasured and prepared in discrete little bowls but rather need to be prepared from scratch, even if this preparation is exceptionally tedious, boring, and slow. If a recipe calls for a grated head of cabbage, we will generally see Bly or Johnson inelegantly grating on-screen, often for a lengthy period of time, and hear them talk about the tediousness of such tasks.

Cookin’ Cheap is not only unedited in the sense that it is shot live on tape, but it also does not edit out much of the domestic cook’s tedious work, including such tasks as chopping and peeling that, in a professional setting, would be done by a preparatory chef offscreen and beforehand. Cookin’ Cheap does not emphasize the moment when the ingredients are combined in a beautiful consummation of colors, tastes, and textures (as in many other cooking shows): rather, the on-screen emphasis is on the time-consuming domestic labor of everyday cooking.

Prior to the 1980s, most cooking shows took place in a rational, controllable universe where there was little mundane effort or chaos. Cookin’ Cheap's combination of live-on-tape shooting with dependable cooking equipment and arduous on-camera food preparation exists in an entirely different universe, one where the possibility of chaos is never far away. Perhaps the mixer will fall apart and have to be fixed during the show, maybe one of the hosts will forget to put the top on the blender before starting it, or perhaps one of the hosts will absentmindedly put an ingredient in the wrong bowl and have to fish it out. One viewer commented,

You fellas are real, which is great. Your show, too, with the flour a-flyin’, the liquids a-drippin’, the mixer not always a-mixin’, the eggs a-shrin’ the bowl with the egg shells, etc., is just like what goes on in the average (below average?) kitchen. (viewer letter, 1994)

Although these cooking disasters are not central to the comedy of Cookin’ Cheap, the possibility that such events might happen is crucial to the humor, which shares much of the tradition of theatrical farce. Farce is a genre based on the sheer recalcitrance of physical objects despite human exertion. The humor of much farce depends on the occasional inability of sophisticated humankind to make inanimate objects do what the humans want them to do. Such farces of objects are great levelers of pretension, recognizing that humans are not so highly developed that they are beyond mundane matters of the physical world. When a recipe does not go smoothly on Cookin’ Cheap, part of the humor is that we aren’t supposed to see such moments on television. Such moments acknowledge that the practice of domestic cooking is itself a balancing act, a real site of potential disorder fraught with the possibility of error, and that the domestic cook is often like a lion tamer, on guard to control the eruptions of chaos as they occur.

Homemade Television

Your recipes are very ‘do-able’ (though not by you most of the time!)—not like some of those high-falutin’ shows! (viewer letter, 1994)

Cookin’ Cheap has defined itself in opposition not only to TV cooking shows dominated by professional chefs but also as an alternative to the increasingly slick production norms of 1980s and 1990s mainstream television in general. As such, it has been part of a movement during this period that has changed the style of television as we see it away from a Hollywood film aesthetic of invisible realism, in which we as viewers are supposed to be unaware of the camera’s presence, toward a new alternative aesthetic that intentionally makes the viewer aware of production mechanisms themselves.

Although the cooking on the show may be unprofessional by television chef standards, the show itself has been shot in an ostensibly straightforward manner according to current television production norms. Cookin’ Cheap is shot in the studio with three cameras on the floor and one above for high-angle shots of the food. The framing and editing do not differ significantly from other similar shows. So Cookin’ Cheap does not distinguish itself from mainstream television in terms of the overt cheapness of its camera strategies in the way that, say, many alternative productions (such as Paper Tiger Television, for example) do.
The show is relatively unusual, however, in that it does not maintain a strict hierarchical separation between on-screen cast and offscreen crew. Bly and Johnson have frequently asked questions of crew members, discussed events in the lives of crew members, and have even been known to distribute food to the crew during the show. This is not a radical rethinking of the hierarchies of television production since the crew's comments remain offscreen for virtually all of the show, leaving Bly and Johnson both visually and verbally dominant in the text. However, the interaction between the hosts and the crew gives the crew a significant presence in the show, unlike most mainstream television in which stars perform in front of a nameless crew who cannot intrude into the diegetic world. A regular watcher of Cookin' Cheap begins to piece together "characters" named Harold and Doris and Carol who spend most of their time off-camera but who indeed are an integral part of the show.

Bly and Johnson have positioned this strategy as a throwback to the pleasures of radio and early television. Johnson said,

The thing about the show is that it is an ensemble effort, and it's not just us, it's with the crew... But that comes strangely enough from my background and Larry's background... in radio going all the way back to Arthur Godfrey and Jack Benny and some of those people that had a whole host of people that you never saw but you knew who they were and what they looked like. We're creating in some respects, from that philosophical viewpoint, a kind of a radio theater of the air. You don't see the crew but we talk about them all the time. That's very much a part of the show.

Bly has called Cookin' Cheap

old-time television updated... It's what TV used to be; it's the fascinating things that people used to love about television that's missing today. It's not highly edited... It's beginning-to-end "whatever happens, happens, baby"—it's live on tape, it's unexpected.

Although Bly and Johnson positioned the liveness of their show in opposition to a generalized entity called "slickly produced television," there are several mainstream examples that use similar strategies. For example, on live-on-tape talk shows such as Late Night with David Letterman and Live with Regis and Kelly, the hosts also interact with the camera operators and floor managers, yielding a similar sense of "liveness" and self-reflexivity. Unlike those shows, however, Cookin' Cheap does not emphasize the celebrity nature of its principals or an overtly plush set—and therefore allows the show to position itself and its hosts as less glamorous, more approachable, less "slickly produced."

Just as Bly and Johnson link their cooking to a mythic tradition of simple home cooking, Cookin' Cheap links its production style to a tradition of live radio and television whose humor resides in its spontaneity, its lack of formal hierarchy, and its potential for disaster. Just as the show implicitly criticizes modern culinary tendencies toward the convenient or the pretentious, it also contains a limited challenge to prevailing 1980s and 1990s norms of slick television, a challenge that is based on techniques so old that they seem innovative. Thus, the show attempts to differentiate itself through its "old-fashionedness," although it is fashioned in a way that presents what could be called (to adapt a phrase) the "shock of the old."

The Viewer in the Text

Dear Boys, Just recently I discovered your program... We enjoy it so much, it's so refreshing. We get cooking programs on TV but they're all so sophisticated. But us mothers, we prepare food like you do. (viewer letter, 1994)

In addition to the centrality of the two hosts, one member of the crew gained significant on-camera status in the mid-1990s: production assistant Doris Ford. The motherly Ford was a Cookin' Cheap fan who bid for an appearance on the show as part of a public television fund-raising auction. She and her husband Harold have remained as volunteer fixtures of the show ever since, with Doris handling the show's correspondence with viewers and helping with physical setup for the weekly tapings (including bringing home-baked goodies for the station employees). If Bly or Johnson needed a particular piece of equipment that was not close at hand, they shouted to Doris standing just offscreen, and she retrieved the item. She also regularly made comments from her position offscreen that were heard by the viewers, as if she were a mysterious, faceless (but familiar) voice to the viewers. During the 1994 season, however, Ford began to appear onscreen regularly in addition to maintaining her offscreen presence. She would sometimes cook a recipe at home, present the results on-camera, and then read the recipe on the air to the audience.

Ford is a representative of the audience included in the text itself, a viewer whose laughter and comments have been heard on the set as well as in her living room. She has been promoted from viewer to crew to a position somewhere between cast and crew. Not only does Cookin' Cheap allow the crew to cross the boundary between them and the cast, but it also creates a place for the viewer in the text. Viewer contributions are built into the structure of the show, foregrounding the viewer's importance to the ongoing production of the text. Ford's role is only the most conspicuous of several strategies to create a sense of the viewer in the text.

The entire premise of the show depends on viewers to send in recipes for the show. Bly and Johnson explicitly acknowledge the viewers, by name, who have sent in particular recipes. Often the hosts will question the contributing viewer's wisdom in choosing certain ingredients, opening up a
kind of one-sided dialogue with the recipe writer. At the end of each episode, Bly and Johnson would sit down at a table to sample the finished recipe (often for the first time). If the finished product should be somewhat lacking in taste or texture, the hosts would feel equally free to criticize each other’s cooking or the submitted recipe itself. The good-natured bantering and kidding that the hosts exchanged between themselves was also extended to the viewer who sent in the recipe.

In each episode, Bly and Johnson would read a viewer letter on the air. These letters were frequently written in a style approximating the hosts’ style of humor, as if the viewers were auditioning for a place on the show. These letters usually asked Bly and Johnson to foreground a particular theme for one episode, and so they served the purpose of introducing the subject of next week’s episode. At the same time, they allowed us to believe that viewers serve as the true programmers for the show—that viewer suggestions initiate the individual episode’s subject matter as well as provide the actual recipes to be prepared.

In addition to receiving letters (most of them requests for recipes), the hosts and crew of *Cookin’ Cheap* also received gifts from viewers. Some of these were folk art pieces handmade by viewers, including numerous pieces with a pig motif that have been highly visible on the set. Viewers have also contributed hardware to remedy the kitchen’s obvious inadequacies (e.g., complaints about dull knives resulted in several viewers sending them replacements), as if the show’s overt cheapness were a product of necessity, not choice. If a gift were particularly noteworthy, Bly and Johnson would display it on the air and thank the viewer publicly.

The show foregrounds the viewer’s contributions, encouraging acts of physical participation such as writing letters or creating handmade crafts. *Cookin’ Cheap* constructs a place for the viewer within the text itself, a position where the viewer (via the mail) can contribute humorous remarks or recipes to be criticized or complimented. This makes the viewer appear to be a silent partner in the banter, a winking contributor to the hosts’ humor. Just as the crew members can exert their presence from their position behind the cameras, selected viewers can interject their input within the bounds of the show’s format. The reading of viewer letters on the air encourages audience members to write creative and humorous letters in hopes of having them read. The foregrounded importance of the viewer in the text further flattens the hierarchy of star-crew-viewer, reiterating the program’s populist message that professional distance and demeanor is a power move, whether in a chef or a television host. In its format as well as its culinary strategies, *Cookin’ Cheap* punctures the pretensions of professionalism by demonstrating a do-it-yourselfer’s approach to cooking and to television.

Momma and Southern White Masculinity

I really do enjoy your show. I was raised on Baptist church lady cooking and am the only adult I know who will admit to still liking Jell-O. (viewer letter, 1994)

We cannot critically analyze *Cookin’ Cheap* without addressing some of the complex aspects of the intersecting issues of region, race, class, and gender that the show embodies. One of the most noticeable aspects of *Cookin’ Cheap* revolves around a constellation of gender issues: the men of *Cookin’ Cheap* represent an archetype of a particular type of Southern masculinity that has been undertheorized in academic and popular literature. In a body of popular culture images in which white Southern men are stereotypically painted most often as violent “rednecks” or blubbering and beer-guzzling “good old boys,” Johnson and Bly have portrayed a very different, though not deviant, type of Southern male: gentle, thoughtful, feminized men who relate well to the world of women. Most often stereotyped as “Momma’s boys,” if at all, this archetype of Southern masculinity occupies a liminal gender position between the extremes of masculinity and femininity in the South’s repertoire of gender roles. Gentle and feminized Southern men are everywhere (and have even occupied the office of presidency of the United States), yet they are rarely recognized as an archetype in the pantheon of Southern characters in American popular culture.

In 1994, Johnson and Bly discussed with us their views about being Southern men of a certain kind: “Being Southern like this is fun when nobody’s being real self-conscious about it. I mean, you ain’t gonna see Deliverance on this set,” Johnson proclaimed, to which Bly asserted with a twinkle in his eye,

I think we’re kind, gentle men of the South; there’s not too much of a mean streak about us, and if it is, it’s against each other on the air. I don’t think there’s too much machismo about us!

Johnson agreed,

In a way, we’re like everybody’s Southern uncle. I had an uncle about whom my mother would explain . . . we should speak to Uncle Will, but shouldn’t spend too much time with him! Turned out he was an old bachelor, a very dapper looking old man, silver-haired. Turned out years later it was because Uncle Will was a notorious alcoholic who carried around booze in a hair tonic bottle. Just like W. C. Fields.

The example illustrates the discomfort that men of liminal gender positioning have generated in mainstream Southern culture over the years.
The men of *Cookin’ Cheap* impersonate the mothers both literally and figuratively—by inhabiting her realm in the kitchen as well as in their *Cook Sisters* drag act. The only part of *Cookin’ Cheap* that is not recorded live on tape in the studio has been the remarkable, regularly featured segment in which Bly and Johnson, dressed in (not very convincing) drag, portrayed the Cook Sisters: two silly elderly women who give a brief household tip to the viewers. There are several obvious theoretical foundations that could ground a reading of gender in this text. One could point to Joan Riviere’s and Mary Ann Doane’s understanding of femininity as a masquerade or to recent considerations of the cultural signification of drag (Paglia 1991; Ferris 1993; Garber 1997). The entire text of *Cookin’ Cheap* is obviously open to a queer reading since it contains many features that have historically and stereotypically been associated with queer imagery (two nonauthoritarian men in the feminized setting of the kitchen who occasionally dress up in women’s clothing and who sometimes burst into impromptu renditions of show tunes, pop standards, and 60s’ rock and roll). However fruitful these avenues might be, the text is more complex and deserves a strategy that takes into account the historical and regional specificity of the masculinity on display in *Cookin’ Cheap*.

The mythic white Southern women who taught Bly and Johnson to cook as children figure strongly in both the verbal and the visual signification of the show. In many traditions of white Southern culture, the woman is the primary bearer of tradition, the person entrusted with propagating the old values to the new generation (see Wilson 1984). Nina Silber (1993) detailed how Northerners portrayed the Southern woman in antebellum and postbellum popular culture as a dangerous enemy principally because her efforts to perpetuate cultural traditions (including slavery) bolstered the foundations of what they perceived as the decadent Southern system.

Several modern American films (*Fried Green Tomatoes, Steel Magnolias, Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*) have explored this Southern matriarchal legacy as a passing of cultural values from woman to woman, emphasizing a construction of the feminine sphere as quite distinct from the world of men. This focus ignores the passing of Southern tradition from female to male, particularly to boys. *Cookin’ Cheap*’s hosts embody an image of the feminized Southern man, a man who has been shaped primarily by matriarchal figures and who continues to exhibit traditionally feminine values in his adult life. Bly and Johnson have rarely discussed their male forebears on the program, although their aunts’ cooking practices have frequently come up in their on-screen conversations. They do not draw connections between themselves and overtly masculine Southern traditions. Instead, their reminiscences are of time spent in the kitchen, watching and helping their aunts with the cooking.

The appearance of nonauthoritarian men in the universe of modern Southern popular culture, which is still dominated by macho figures such as the “good old boy,” is significant. The omnipresence of testosterone-driven characters in Southern imagery encourages one to construct a South populated primarily by such stereotypes. There are less domineering Southern white male types in popular imagery, but as John Shelton Reed (1986) pointed out, they are relatively few in number and are usually depicted as unsympathetic (such as the indolent hillbilly, or the aristocratic Ashley Wilkes in *Gone with the Wind*). *Cookin’ Cheap* shows an alternative view of Southern masculinity: one that is both sympathetic and nonauthoritarian, one that acknowledges matriarchal traditions as primary influences, one with the “gentlemanly” charm of the old South but rooted in a more working-class and less aristocratic class habitus.

Both academic and popular discussions of social roles have tended to be based on several key political dichotomies: black/white, male/female, homosexual/heterosexual, North/South, upper/lower class. More recent work has complicated these polarities, and we have begun to examine imagery as a nexus of several intersecting tensions. We now more explicitly acknowledge that the combined identity cluster of Southern/white/heterosexual/working-class masculinity, for example, is a distinct phenomenon with a particular set of images. And yet this new scholarly sensitivity to the intricacies of identity still gravitates toward polar extremes. Cultural and literary studies have recently examined “white trash” (Hartigan 1997; Bledsoe 2000) as a cultural category distinct from both the white plantation owner and the African American slave imagery that has dominated discourses about the South. However, while such work is valuable in the way it pays simultaneous attention to race, class, and region, it still simplifies the range of imagery in popular circulation.

Not all Southern white working-class masculine images signify white trash or redneck. The distinctions here are sometimes slippery since the very meanings of the terms change in everyday identity politics. For instance, Patrick Huber (1995) has traced how the term redneck has changed from an exclusively pejorative label in the nineteenth century to a semipositive affirmation of empowering values in the late twentieth century. In this article, we have discussed how the concept of country values has gone from a primarily regional notion rooted in the South to an international marketing tool. Claiming that one is”country” or a “redneck” has meant different things in different eras, and each discourse needs to be considered in its historical context.

In the slippery universe of Southern rhetoric (as well as rhetoric about Southerners), we should not reduce our attention to the more extreme categories of roles. Instead, we should note how patterns of regional/
gendered/ethnic upbringings can provide a range of experiences rather than a single unitary experience. Scholars have noted the strong emphasis on family and on the strong separation between women's work (raising children, household tasks) and men's work (physical and public labor) in the traditional Southern home (both fictional and nonfictional) (Beck et al.). This can, of course, result in well-known stereotypical roles: the Southern belle, the redneck, and so on. But these forces can also produce other results, such as the gentle feminized Southern man. Because the traditional Southern matriarch is charged with simultaneously raising children and cooking, the young boy may spend significant time at his mother's apron in the kitchen. Although the boy is supposed to grow out of the kitchen into a harder, less domesticated man, it is easy to see why many do not. The gentle working-class Southern man with strong attachment to "Momma" is a distinct category from both the ineffective aristocratic dandy and the roughhewn redneck. Examples of this Southern "Momma's boy" have grown up to be important producers of Southern humor with a national following. Also, it is this Southern figure who has appealed enough to the political center to take the White House in the last decades of the twentieth century, rather than the tight-fisted local political bosses such as Bull Connor and George Wallace. It is this gentle Southern man who, early in the 21st century, appears once again as presidential aspirant John Edwards, portrayed as a warm but effective leader who has risen from the bottom in his working-class Carolina home. And it is this appealing Southerner who promotes country values and slapdash cooking in the figures of Larry Bly and Laban Johnson.

It is tempting to call this figure a "New Southern Man," an inhabitant of the post-1960s modern industrial South. The concept of the modern South, exemplified by urban and urbane Atlanta, is marketed as a kinder gentler South, a region freshly sanitized of its earlier disruptive forces. Populated by Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, and Forrest Gump and set to a soundtrack by Shania Twain and Alan Jackson, the modern South attempts to maintain links to its traditional past while creating a business and social climate conducive to a global consumer society. And yet, we the authors do not want to accept on face value the marketer's rhetoric of the "newness" of this region and its gentler inhabitants. The matriarchal forces that shaped Bly and Johnson have been in force for a long time. What, if anything, is new about this feminized Southern man is his broader acceptance on the national stage. To counter the negative popular imagery of the redneck, the boosters of the modern South accentuate this kinder face of white working-class Southern tradition as more acceptable to national norms.

*Cookin' Cheap* presents a forgotten future for the South, one that is compliant with modern life but also rooted in older values. It evokes a land where simplicity reigns over pretension, where roughhewn-ness is preferable to slickness, and where Southern masculinity acknowledges its feminine heritage. It depicts itself as not new but so tied to old working-class and feminine tradition that it represents a distinctive alternative to modern dominant cultural practices. This show emphasizes the ties that cheapness has to a wide range of traditions: rural/working-class values of simplicity, live radio/television, and feminized domesticity. The careful construction and maintenance of this show's cheapness activates old sentiments of community and values in a land overrun by commodities. In an era where Starbucks threatens the roadside diner and where "reality" television becomes overproduced dramatization of artificially created situations, *Cookin' Cheap* reactivates the pleasures of simple comfort food repackaged for the microwave society.

**Notes**

1. When Laban Johnson died in March 1999, he was replaced on the show in its final years by his friend and fellow stage actor Doug Patterson, Johnson's handpicked successor. Since the primary research for this article was done prior to Johnson's death, all references will refer to the original cast members, unless otherwise noted. For a retrospective on the show, see Larry Bly's (2002) farewell column, "After 21 Seasons, Cookin' Cheap is Toast."

2. Also see Niki Strange (1998) for an interesting typology of British cooking shows.

3. We use the term *habitus* following Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) usage in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* as a positioning that is at once cultural, social, and economic, involving socioeconomic class (as defined by such things as economic level, educational level, and occupational profession) as well as the cultural tastes and values associated with such a positioning. In American culture, in which class is a shifting and malleable marker of identity, Bourdieu's concept of habitus is especially useful as a way to understand how an individual may choose to ally himself or herself with a certain constellation of values and tastes.

4. Teresa Goddu's (1995) essay articulates this process nicely, and Goddu makes reference to a number of other sources.

5. This also brings up class distinctions in an economy of labor differentiation in which chefs are the prima donnas who do not do menial preparatory labor, while domestic household cooks do not have the luxury of hiring assistants for food prep/ing tasks.

6. For an interesting historical comparison with another television cook with limited culinary skills (in the early 1950s), see Mark Williams's (1999) article on Monty Margetts' *Cook's Corner*.

7. Interestingly, Mark Williams's interviews with Monty Margets, the female host of a 1950s cooking show, emphasize her strong relationship to her father, whom...
she credits for instilling strength in her to deal with the male-dominated world of early television. This father figure does not figure so literally in Margetts’s *Cook’s Corner* as do the mother/aunt figures in Bly’s and Johnson’s *Cooking Cheap*. See Williams (1999, 46-47, 49).

8. For more on images of Southern feminine communities (and *Steel Magnolias* in particular), see McPherson (2003, 149-68).

9. Huber (1995) clearly demonstrated that the term *redneck* has throughout its history been used to draw lines between black and white, although the meaning of the term flip-flops. In the nineteenth century, the term carried connotations of being “shiftless” to distinguish white work from the nonstop forced labor of slavery. Ironically, in the late twentieth century, redneck has become a marker of hardworking honest labor in opposition to images of the shiftless African American. Part of the reason academic and popular discussions of roles have tended toward binary discussions of black and white, for example, is because political forces keep blurring subtler differences in service of more dramatic polarities.

10. Although some of them (including Jimmy Carter, for instance) may occasionally use the term redneck to identify themselves.

11. For instance, the first section of Roy Blount’s *Book of Southern Humor* (1994) is entitled “My People, My People (How’s Your Mama ‘n’ Them?).”

References


Wilson, Smith / Southern White Masculinities


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Visualizing Madness

Mental Illness and Public Representation

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This article explores continuities between traditional iconographies of madness and images of mental illness mobilized by contemporary television program makers. In particular, it investigates how contrasting forms of British TV documentary visualize "dangerous" mental patients abroad in the community. In constructing the argument, particular attention is given to the role of documentary television in making visible the lives of schizophrenics vis-à-vis changing notions of psychiatric care in the community. By doing so, the article adopts an approach to public representations of madness/mental illness that takes account of documentary television as a cultural form with social responsibility. The article concludes by emphasizing television's cultural importance as a visual medium capable of promoting or undermining mentally ill people's symbolic presence within a community of citizens.

Keywords: television documentary; madness/mental illness; "care in the community"; public representation; visual image

The old adage that "madness is as madness looks" suggests a deep-rooted concern with knowing who the mad are. It also indicates a complex relationship between madness and culture that has deep historical roots:

Ever since Antiquity, the theories of physiognomy, humours and complexes developed by Greek medicine fed the assumption that madness was as madness looked. Melancholics would be passive, listless, withdrawn, broadcasting the "black looks" produced by black bile or the melancholic humour. Manics would resemble the brutes to whose bestial condition their inordinate vices had reduced them. (Porter 1991, 92)

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