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## Time Travelling in Dixie:

### Race, Music, and The Weight of the Past in the British 'Televisual' South

#### Abstract

This article examines the representation of the South in a series of British travel documentaries made since 2008 by presenters such as Stephen Fry, Sir Trevor McDonald, celebrity chefs Rick Stein and Jamie Oliver, and the actor turned musician Hugh Laurie. These travelogues are not only indicative of the appeal of the South in modern British popular culture, but are representative of the way in which ideas of Southern distinctiveness are maintained and reproduced through television within a transatlantic context. Rather than focusing on the inaccuracies or inconsistencies of the television format, the article interprets television as a key agent in shaping popular perceptions of the American South. The British 'televisual' South works to reinforce ideas of Southern life, history and culture that persist despite the attempts of scholars to challenge notions of Southern exceptionalism. The article examines how the travelogues represent historic racial struggles, Southern food, and music – particularly the blues - and suggests that these representations frame the South as a distinctly historical space, where either significant historical moments dominate the representation of the region and obscure the contemporary South, or where cultural continuity and resistance to change and modernity are celebrated. These shows are also indicative of the specifically British engagement with the South through popular culture, mass media and consumer culture throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The presenters indulge in the romanticism of the blues revival, celebrating rudimentary and uncommercial qualities of the blues and Southern food, and focus heavily on the Mississippi region as most representative of Southern culture and identity. Importantly, the article discusses the similarities between the travelogues and the Southern tourist industry, and how transatlantic 'televisual tourism' maintains popular assumptions that work against the wider scholarly challenge to Southern exceptionalism.

Since 2008, television audiences in the UK have been treated to a number of travelogues on the American South. These have featured well-known television personalities travelling through the region to find out “what makes Dixie so distinctive.” The most popular of these were presented by two national treasures, the comedian and actor Stephen Fry, and journalist Sir Trevor McDonald. In the six episodes of *Stephen Fry in America* (BBC, 2008), Fry visited every state in the US in a black London cab, dedicating two episodes to the South. McDonald presented the three-part series *The Mighty Mississippi* (ITV, 2012) which explored the connection between the river and the culture of its surrounding lands. These also were a number of shows that centred on Southern food and music. Two episodes of the six-part series *Jamie’s American Road Trip* (Channel 4, 2009) by celebrity chef Jamie Oliver were on Georgia and Louisiana; *Rick Stein Tastes the Blues* (BBC, 2011) explored the culinary culture of the ‘home of the blues’ in the Mississippi Delta; and the actor and comedian Hugh Laurie also focused on the music of the region in ‘Down by the River’ (ITV, 2011), which marked the release of his first album *Let them Talk*. There were shows by American presenters too. In 2010, the Southern comedian Rich Hall - now a UK resident - offered a witty deconstruction of Hollywood’s representations of the South. More recently Reginald D. Hunter, another transplanted comedian, returned to his native region for the three-part mini-series *Reginald D. Hunter’s Songs of the South* (BBC, 2015). “When you think of American music,” declared Hunter, “what you’re really thinking about is the South.” On his *Great American Railroad Journeys*, which followed the recommendations of the postbellum publication *Appleton’s General Guide to the United States and Canada* (1879), former Conservative MP Michael Portillo ventured into the upper South, exploring Maryland and Virginia.<sup>1</sup> While on the surface it may seem that these shows are merely forms of popular entertainment exploiting banal images and superficial understandings of the South for passive audiences, I argue that they are actually forms of transatlantic “televisual tourism.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, they do not merely represent aspects of the South that audiences find interesting, but they

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<sup>1</sup> “what makes Dixie” in *Stephen Fry in America*, dir. by John Paul Davidson and Michael Waldman, first broadcast 2008 [BBC] (WestPark Pictures, BBC DVD, 2008) *The Mighty Mississippi: with Trevor McDonald*, first broadcast 2012 [ITV] (Channel 4 DVD, 2012); *Jamie’s American Road Trip*, dir. by Kirsty Cunningham and Tom Coveney, first broadcast 2009 [Channel 4] (Channel 4 DVD, 2009); ‘Rick Stein Tastes the Blues,’ dir. by David Pritchard, (BBC Four 2011) [Accessed 27 May 2014]; ‘Hugh Laurie: Down by the River,’ *ITV Perspectives*, dir. by John-Paul Davidson (ITV, 2011) [Accessed 15 May 2011] ‘Rich Hall’s The Dirty South,’ dir. by Chris Cottam, first broadcast on BBC Four 2010, (BBC, 2010) [Accessed BBC iPlayer Oct 2011]; *Reginald D. Hunter’s Songs of the South*, dir. by Ben Whalley, first broadcast February-March 2015 [BBC 2]; *Great American Railroad Journeys*, BBC2 (2016), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07mdvbd>

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘televisual’ is borrowed from Lynnell L. Thomas, “‘People Want to See What Happened:’ *Treme*, Televisual Tourism, and the Racial Remapping of Post-Katrina New Orleans,” *Television & New Media*, Vol. 13, Issue 12, (May 2012), 213-24

are indicative of the way in which British television helps to maintain many historical and cultural assumptions about the American South.

The travelogues focus on various aspects of the region's past and culture, and in so doing, represent the South as a historical space, where either significant historical moments dominate the representation of the region and obscure the contemporary South, or where cultural continuity and resistance to change and modernity are celebrated. As this article will argue, this historic televisual South is created in a number of ways. Firstly, all the travelogues discuss issues of race and racism in the context of the "Age of Obama."<sup>3</sup> The election of the nation's first black President in 2008 permitted a wider contemplation of a post-racial society, meaning that the complex issues of race relations in the South are often and problematically presented as historical and finally overcome. While this seems suggestive of great social and political progress, the focus on Southern food and music celebrates the region's seeming unwillingness to change. The emphasis on Southern music, primarily blues but also gospel, and bluegrass, means that these middle-aged male British presenters are fixated by the aesthetics of the blues and folk revivals of the 1950s and 1960s that saw the music's authenticity defined in terms of the esoteric and uncommercial. These ideas of rugged simplicity and links to the experience of the Southern past are replicated in the representation of the region's culinary culture, particularly in terms of 'soul food' and barbecue, which also point toward the gendered way in which this televisual South is predominantly masculine as well as historical. The reception of both racial struggle and Southern culture, particularly music, has an intertwined history in Britain. At the same time that the Southern Civil Rights struggle was becoming more visible to people around the world, young British audiences were becoming increasingly attracted to the music of the American South, a trend which eventually gave rise to the British 'blues boom' of the 1960s. British audiences, like others around the world, have also consumed various aspects of the South through mass media, entertainment, and global capitalism. The combination of all these factors means that the presenters struggle to break away from stereotypical tropes, myths, and memories that are the identifiers of Southern distinctiveness. The travelogues focus the attention of viewers on various imagined and sometimes conflated and contradictory Southern pasts, highlighting what Tara McPherson calls the "cultural schizophrenia" that

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Gilroy, "Race and Racism in "The Age of Obama,"" The Tenth Annual Eccles Centre for American Studies Plenary Lecture given at the British Association of American Studies Annual Conference (2013), <http://www.bl.uk/eccles/pdf/baas2013.pdf> Accessed 14/02/16 11:23, 2

characterizes attitudes toward the American South.<sup>4</sup> Overall, these programmes demonstrate how ideas of Southern distinctiveness continue to be maintained in a transatlantic context by British television, and importantly, highlight the way transatlantic cultural flows can work against the efforts of scholars to “exorcize the ghost of Southern exceptionalism.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Re-defining the South: Television and the Transatlantic**

As a recent forum in the *Journal of American Studies* highlighted, challenging ideas of exceptionalism has been the objective of numerous interdisciplinary studies since the turn of the new century.<sup>6</sup> Focusing on the manner in which ideas of Southern distinctiveness, history, and identity have been shaped and constructed, scholars have examined the diverse forces that produce and reproduce characteristics of a markedly unique ‘Southernness.’<sup>7</sup> Taking tourism as her focus, Karen Cox suggests the region has most typically been regarded as a “repository of America’s rural values” from the late nineteenth century onwards. Tourism has functioned as a “reconciliatory” activity that on the one hand, has allowed Southerners to come to terms with the “burden of history” by having the freedom to preserve, and sometimes re-create, distinctive qualities of their cultural heritage. On the other hand, tourism has brought in many outsiders, allowing other Americans to offset the anxieties of modernity, and cope with the effects of rapid socio-economic change by going to back to the imagined simplicity of the agrarian South.<sup>8</sup> Understandably, the focus has been on explaining how Southerners and other Americans have invented the South. However, there is little here to explain the eagerness of British television audiences to see this part of the United States up close, or to understand how these transatlantic televisual

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<sup>4</sup> Tara McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (London: Duke University Press), 3

<sup>5</sup> Brian Ward *et al*, ‘What’s New in Southern Studies – And Why Should We Care?’ *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 48, Issue 3 (August 2014), 691-733, 691

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 691-733

<sup>7</sup> For instance, W. Fitzhugh Brundage’s edited collection *Where the Memories Grow: History, Memory and Southern Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000) focuses on how people from the South think about their past, and the way the reproductions of collective memories work to produce Southern identities. Exploring this from a racial perspective, James C. Cobb sought to deconstruct ideas of Southern identity by demonstrating the problematic nature of essentialist discourses that group together diverse cultural and geographical heritages. In *Away Down South* (Oxford and New York; Oxford University Press, 2015), Cobb examines variations in racial constructed notions of ‘Southernness,’ and how these point to fractures in common ideas of a shared history and identity. See also Helen Taylor & Richard H. King, *Dixie Debates: notes on Southern Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 1996)

<sup>8</sup> Karen L. Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie: how the South was created in American Popular Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 2-4 - Cox also accounts for the fact that, paradoxically, tourism represents one of the main ways the region has modernized, entering the consumer driven system of American capitalism while maintaining seemingly ‘authentic’ characteristics of its history and identity.

experiences work to prop up ideas of Southern exceptionalism in similar ways to the Southern tourist industry.

Transnational approaches have generally been regarded as the means by which regional essentialisms can be deconstructed, and the disciplinary boundaries between Southern and American (or global) studies can be increasingly blurred.<sup>9</sup> However, as I hope to argue, these approaches can be just as indicative of the processes which maintain and recreate those same boundaries. The travel documentaries discussed here are representative of British interpretations of the American South, but also exemplary of the way global capitalist forces – mainly through tourism, entertainment and cultural consumption – help to reinforce definitions of difference and distinctiveness. Importantly, the travelogues are firmly grounded on Southern soil, maintaining that essential attachment to “the world of real bodies” and have the dual characteristic of being produced in the South while being experienced by viewers remotely.<sup>10</sup> The British presenters encourage viewers to travel alongside them, inviting empathy through the shared cultural perception created by the familiar personas of the presenters, and being British in the US. This also applies to the American presenters, Rich Hall and Reginald D. Hunter, given that they are now established comedians in Britain who have the authority to represent both cultures. The effect of this format is to create a shared sense of experience for the audience, the sense that viewers are being transported alongside the presenters and are participating. An indication of the popularity of these shows is also given by the viewing figures. The two episodes in *Stephen Fry in America*, ‘Deep South’ and ‘Mississippi,’ were watched by 5.43 and 6.34 million viewers respectively in October and November of 2008, about two-thirds of the ratings figures for the most popular shows on television in those weeks.<sup>11</sup> While it is another matter to gauge the way these programmes were

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<sup>9</sup> Helen Taylor, *Circling Dixie: contemporary Southern Culture through a Transatlantic Lens* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 24 - Influenced by discourses of hybridity in Paul Gilroy’s ‘Black Atlantic’ and Joseph Roach’s ‘circum-Atlantic world,’ where cultures transcend physical borders, approaches to the deconstruction of Southern exceptionalism have been underpinned by the belief that placing the region within a more hemispheric context could act as a ‘template’ for new interpretations; see also James L. Peacock, *Grounded Globalism: how the U.S. South Embraces the World* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2007)

<sup>10</sup> Ward, 728 – Ward argues that in the desire to examine the regions within a more global context, it is important for studies to remain based in the physical South.

<sup>11</sup> Viewing figures provided by the Broadcasters’ Audience Research Board, [www.barb.co.uk](http://www.barb.co.uk) [Accessed 9/3/2016 11:15], and do not take into account viewings through ‘catch-up’ or ‘on demand’ services; in the same week that Stephen Fry’s first episode on the South was shown, the highest BBC ratings were on the Saturday evening reaching 9.95 million for *Strictly Come Dancing*; *The Mighty Mississippi* and *Jamie’s American Road Trip* were also relatively successful attracting audiences of just under 3 and 2.6 million respectively; viewing figures for the one-episode programs by Stein and Laurie were not in the top 30 for the weeks they aired, and probably under one million viewers; both *Stephen Fry in America* and *Jamie’s American Road Trip* were both accompanied by books by the same name and became available on DVD; *The Mighty Mississippi* was followed a DVD and also aired in the US

interpreted by audiences, their popularity, production in rapid succession and shared characteristics are indicative of the way contemporary British television represents and reproduces the American South for mass audiences.

Despite their popularity with mainstream audiences, these programmes are not without problems or contradictions, especially given the limited way complex issues are covered and vast geographical areas are explored. For instance, Stephen Fry begins by asking, “where does the South actually start?” With careful editing, he is shown struggling to find the physical mark outlining the Mason-Dixon line, requiring the help of a local resident to find the unassuming stone buried somewhere along a country road on the Pennsylvania-Maryland border. This scene visualizes at once the dichotomous way the boundary between North and South is both real and tangible, as well as artificial and imagined. It also emphasizes the contradictory nature of attempting to define the South by establishing its geographical boundaries. The selective nature of the documentary format makes it difficult for viewers to have more than mere snapshots of certain areas. Fry visits Kentucky, Tennessee and allocates only a few minutes to the Carolinas, but strangely names the episode ‘Deep South,’ a term normally associated with the states of Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and Louisiana. His next episode is loosely titled ‘Mississippi,’ and explores the more traditional Deep South starting from New Orleans, then traveling north along the river. Trevor McDonald takes the same trajectory, and while his main focus is to explore the life and culture surrounding the Mississippi river rather than identifying the South, the perceived differences between the troubled South and modern North are softly implied in the opening sequences: “to follow the river like this is to move through time and history, from the birth of America and the most painful chapters of life in the Deep South, to the preoccupations of cities further North.”<sup>12</sup> McDonald’s description highlights the manner in which the South is characterized as a historical space, and a journey through the region almost a form of time travel. It is this connection to the past which makes the South distinctive in the travelogues.

Unlike historical documentaries that make more claims to historical accuracy or authenticity, the shows discussed here were largely aimed at primetime audiences, and were not necessarily produced to educate viewers on the history of the American South. As their popularity would imply, audiences are not as interested in how the South may have changed over time, whether in terms of the widespread economic growth since the 1970s, or demographic growth, such as that caused by the rapid increase in

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on KPBS in 2013, <http://www.kpbs.org/news/2013/jul/15/mighty-mississippi-trevor-mcdonald/> [Accessed 10/3/2016 17:33]

<sup>12</sup> ‘Deep South’, episode 2 *Stephen Fry in America*; ‘New Orleans,’ episode 1, *The Mighty Mississippi*

the Hispanic population or inward African American migration.<sup>13</sup> Instead, these programmes uphold the long-standing transatlantic appetite for the South. As Helen Taylor notes, “[f]or Europeans, it seems to share a troubled and profound burden of history... ethnic and racial conflicts that have lasted centuries... and a most un-Puritan delight in sensual pleasures such as good food, music, and porch-sitting.”<sup>14</sup> However, it would be dismissive to suggest that the content and/or format of these programmes render them inconsequential to academic debates purely on the assumption that they are not rigorous enough in their handling of complex historical forces or conducive to critical reflection. Such a suggestion would maintain the somewhat outdated view that *real* history or critical analysis remains the practice of professionals devoted to empiricism, and that mass media serve only to simplify the practice of professionals for entertainment. In addition - and to echo Simon Schama - it would reinforce the assumption that images are “weak carriers of meaning and debate” compared to more traditional means of communicating knowledge.<sup>15</sup> Instead, I am in agreement with Steve Anderson who argues that television “has modelled highly stylized and creative modes of interaction with the past. Although these ... are subversive of many of the implicit goals of academic history, they play a significant role in cultural memory and the popular negotiation with the past.”<sup>16</sup> Schama, in defending the enterprise of meaningful collaboration between scholars and the media following his BBC series *A History of Britain* (2000-2), stated that “[i]magery, still or moving, does not just tell stories. It argues, but it argues in a different way.”<sup>17</sup> In appreciating the *difference* of images and popular media, as opposed to assuming their inferior empirical value, Schama was referring to the genre of historical documentary, but the idea applies in equal measure to other forms of television. Indeed, Anderson’s work demonstrates how science-fiction like *Quantum Leap* and *Star Trek* are entangled in wider processes of producing cultural memories of the American past. While historians might shudder at the thought of audiences basing their knowledge of history on cinema or television, it is undeniable that in some form or another mass media and entertainment help to shape popular perceptions of the past.

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<sup>13</sup> John Beck, Wendy Franzen, and Aaron Randall, *Southern Culture: An Introduction, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2012), 177; between 2000-2008, Hispanics were the fastest growing population in every Southern state.

<sup>14</sup> Taylor, *Circling Dixie*, 11

<sup>15</sup> Simon Schama, ‘Television and the Trouble with History,’ in David Cannadine ed., *History and the Media* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 20-33, 23

<sup>16</sup> Steve Anderson, ‘History TV and Popular Memory,’ in Gary R. Edgerton and Peter C. Rollins eds., *Television Histories: Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 19-36; 20

<sup>17</sup> Schama, 25



Interpreting television as an active agent in the construction of popular interpretations of the past, means that shows like *Stephen Fry in America* and *The Mighty Mississippi* must not be scrutinized for their historical accuracy or adherence to more professional standards. As Stuart Hall would argue, images do not merely *represent* versions of reality, they are *part* of the process of producing meaning.<sup>18</sup> This is not to say they are unproblematic. Given the brevity with which complex subjects are often handled on television documentaries, it is inevitable that oversimplification, omission, and outright invention occur. However, to focus critical analysis on these problems would be to concentrate obsessively on the distance between popular culture and academia. Rather, attention needs to be directed at the way those problems function as part of the narratives that, in turn, help to produce meanings and inform popular perceptions of the past. Seen in this way, these shows on the American South, produced with the aim of appealing to large audiences are not simply representations, but are constitutive agents in the production of modern popular understandings of the American South. While not an exhaustive examination of all televisual representations of the region, the programmes discussed here provide a good indication of British perceptions of the American South in the early twenty-first century, and are also illustrative of the way these representations are constructed within a transatlantic context.

### **Britain, the South and the Travel Documentary**

The shows discussed here follow a rich tradition of British travel documentaries in which viewers experience the unseen, the exotic, and the 'other.' Hugely successful programmes such as *Whicker's World* (1958-1994) and *Around the World in 80 Days with Michael Palin* (1989) are indicative of the long-standing popularity of the genre, which has continued in more recent programmes such as the BBC's *Reggie Yates Extreme* series or *Louis Theroux's Weird Weekends*.<sup>19</sup> In this sense, the American South is one place among many that is experienced and imagined through television. In Britain, as well as the rest of the world, the way audiences have experienced and learned about the region - and in many respects, consumed it - has varied greatly. Just in terms of movies and television series, the region can be nostalgically yearned for in movies such as *Gone with the Wind* (1939), it can feel welcoming and be ridiculed in *The Dukes of Hazzard* (1979-1985), but it can also appear backward or menacing in movies

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<sup>18</sup> See for instance Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans and Sean Nixon, *Representation*, Second Edition (Open University, 2003)

<sup>19</sup> 'Alan Whicker,' *BFI Screenonline: People*, <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/people/id/531470/index.html> [Accessed 03/03/16 11:20]; Michael Palin presented a number of travel documentaries on British television from 1989 onwards, 'Around the World in 80 Days' being the first 6-part series, <http://www.palinstravels.co.uk/> [Accessed 03/03/16 11:30]

such as *Deliverance* (1972) and *Southern Comfort* (1981), as well as series such as the more recent gothic crime thriller *True Detective* (2014). The multitude of media representations of the South and Southern culture, not just in movies and television, but also through literature and popular music are suggestive of the co-existence of many different 'Souths.'

In Britain, however, particularly in the late 1950s and 1960s, the reception of black music from the South and news arriving from the Civil Rights movement, also produced British television responses that sat awkwardly alongside one another. On the one hand, television allowed millions of viewers to witness the realities of American racial struggle through the shocking scenes of white opposition to black school children attempting to take advantage of school desegregation in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957. This was at a time when the 19.5 million British viewers spent around forty percent of their evenings in front of the television.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, British enthusiasts flocked to the American Folk Blues Festivals in London and were bewitched by stories told by visiting singers such as Big Bill Broonzy, who painted romantic images of black sharecroppers in the Mississippi Delta hollering their blues "across the fields at sundown."<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Brian Ward argues that British perception of the South became increasingly contradictory during the 1950s, when the adoption of skiffle, rhythm and blues and rock'n'roll seemed to celebrate the vibrancy of Southern culture, at the same time that British viewers could see the darker elements of that culture in the fierce resistance to Civil Rights activism and legislation.<sup>22</sup> This contrast became even more apparent during the 1960s with the rise of the British 'blues boom' and the so-called 'British invasion,' which is largely regarded (rather simplistically) as the process of British musicians popularizing black Southern music for American audiences. In fact, a few months before the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Granada Television attempted to capitalize on the popularity of blues among young Britons by recreating the imagined Southern blues landscape at Manchester's Wilbraham Road station for the *Blues and Gospel Train* recorded in May 1964.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, *The Black and White Minstrel Show*, a popular entertainment program that featured white

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<sup>20</sup> Historic viewing figures from 'TV in the 1950s,' *BFI Screenonline*, <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/tv/id/1321302/> Accessed 22/7/2016

<sup>21</sup> American Folk Blues Festivals in Christian O'Connell, *Blues, How Do You Do? Paul Oliver and the Transatlantic Story of the Blues* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 98, 138; quote from Big Bill Broonzy, who visited the UK for the first time in 1951, from Bob Riesman, *I Feel So Good: The Life and Times of Big Bill Broonzy* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 165

<sup>22</sup> Brian Ward, 'Images of the American South in 1950s British Popular Music,' in Joseph P. Ward (ed), *Britain and the American South: from Colonialism to Rock and Roll* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 187-214, 189

<sup>23</sup> Chris Long, 'Muddy Waters and Sister Rosetta Tharpe's "mind-blowing" station show,' BBC News, 7 May 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-manchester-27256401>, [Accessed 25/02/2015 14:31]

“men with ‘blacked-up’ faces who sang traditional tunes from the American Deep South accompanied by a dance troupe of leggy showgirls,” aired on primetime television and pointed towards the interests of older British generations. Now widely regarded as an embarrassment, the show was incredibly popular and was broadcast for over twenty years starting in 1958 and serves to illustrate that British audiences were entertained by varied, and often contrasting, representations of race, culture and politics from the American South.<sup>24</sup>

The dialectic between the South’s racial heritage and its music can be traced in some of the earliest television programmes on the United States. In *America: A Personal History of the United States* (1972), the broadcaster and journalist Alistair Cooke put together a thirteen-part historical documentary. Cooke, who had become well-known through his longstanding radio series *Letters from America*, was widely respected for his ability to unravel the hidden tensions that lay buried beneath the veneer of American optimism, and yet, his consideration of the South was inherently superficial and conservative.<sup>25</sup> The series begins with Cooke sitting at a piano in New Orleans where he suggests that the twelve-bar blues is America’s ‘greatest invention,’ thereby embodying the spirit of the post-WWII revivals and British fascination for African American music. This is contrasted by the fact that Cooke’s only episode on the South, ‘A Firebell in the Night,’ concentrates on the history of slavery and the plantation economy of the South in the antebellum era. Closing the episode by stating he was leaving a ‘feudal’ kingdom to return North, Cooke was demonstrating the propensity for observers to see the South as a historical space, one yet to shed its troubled past.<sup>26</sup> At the time of the series, the region was only just beginning to experience the widespread economic growth and the inward migration from other parts of the US that would bring profound social and economic changes, yet for the presenter this was not enough to banish the potent cultural images of the Lost Cause which lead him to comment pessimistically on the prospects of an integrated or post-Civil Rights South.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> ‘Black and White Minstrels creator dies,’ *The Guardian*, 29 Aug. 2002, <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2002/aug/29/broadcasting2> [Accessed 18/02/2015 11:05]; ‘Robert Luff,’ *The Telegraph*, 23 February 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/4788794/Robert-Luff.html> [Accessed 18/02/2015 11:08] – the show was even accompanied by a popular live stage show that toured Australia and New Zealand in the 1960s.

<sup>25</sup> Frank J. Prial, ‘Alistair Cooke, Elegant Interpreter of America, Dies at 95,’ *The New York Times*, 31 Mar. 2004, [http://www.nytimes.com/2004/03/31/arts/alistair-cooke-elegant-interpreter-of-america-dies-at-95.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2004/03/31/arts/alistair-cooke-elegant-interpreter-of-america-dies-at-95.html?_r=0) [Accessed 25/02/2016 16:33]; ‘Alistair Cooke,’ *The Economist*, 1<sup>st</sup> Apr. 2004, <http://www.economist.com/node/2552913> [Accessed 25/02/2016 16:36]

<sup>26</sup> *Alistair Cooke’s America: A Personal History of the United States* (London: BBC Worldwide Ltd, 2004) [on DVD]

<sup>27</sup> McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie*, 15: McPherson comments on the rise in capital investment in the region and the arrival of large transnational corporations due to tax incentives, and the fact that six of America’s fastest

By contrast, travel writing has provided more nuanced consideration of the region's culture and heritage. One of the most famous in this abundant body of literature on the American South was British Nobel Prize winning author V. S. Naipaul's *A Turn in the South* (1989), which was praised by the historian C. Vann Woodward for its considered attempt to understand rather than condemn distinctive characteristics of Southern society, culture, and history.<sup>28</sup> The journalist Gary Younge's *No Place Like Home: A Black Briton's Journey Through the American South* (1999) followed this line of travel writing on the South by replicating the Freedom Rides led by civil rights activists in 1961. Younge describes how he felt nostalgic for the region despite the obvious physical distance, "I longed for the heartfelt affinity that both blacks and whites in the South seemed to have with their environment. They were Southerners and, whatever that meant to them, they were proud of it."<sup>29</sup> The South and Southerners seemingly possessed a strong connection that acted as an invitation for Younge to experience them first-hand, which resembles the fascination of Northerners with ideas of the 'Old South' as expressed in early twentieth century American tourism and in Hollywood movies.<sup>30</sup> The region and all its 'immortal clichés' had been transmitted through various media, and formed romantic images and comforting narratives that had the power to transcend the prevailing assumptions about Southern racism. As Younge stated, "it was the South that spoke to me urgently about things I instinctively felt I was lacking - a sense of place and history."<sup>31</sup> While providing more examples of the various and sometimes contrasting ways in which the South is interpreted and represented in Britain, travel writing in particular, speaks to the desire of distant observers to immerse themselves in the sensory experience of visiting the region first-hand. It is this kind of experience which the travelogues mirror, and in so doing, maintain ideas of

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growing cities of the 1990s were in the South; Cobb, *Away Down South*: comments on trend of inward migration of African Americans from 1970 onwards, where black population grew by 3.6 million in 1990s, so that by 2000, one in ten African Americans in the regions were newcomers, 263-4

<sup>28</sup> C. Vann Woodward, 'Rednecks, Millionaires, and Catfish Farms,' *The New York Times*, 5<sup>th</sup> Feb. 1989, <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/06/07/specials/naipaul-south.html> [Accessed, 20/3/2017] ; Woodward also comments that by the middle of the twentieth century there were already more than 600 travel writings on the South.

<sup>29</sup> Gary Younge, *No Place Like Home: A Black Briton's Journey through the American South* (London: Picador, 1999), 24

<sup>30</sup> See for instance Karen L. Cox's analysis of tourism during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the representation of the South on film, *Dreaming of Dixie* (2011)

<sup>31</sup> Younge, 19 - while reflecting on a deeply personal affiliation with the region, Younge also notes how "America's icons have a habit of becoming Britain's," highlighting how Alison Landsberg's concept of "prosthetic memory" – the way mass media can function to create meaningful affiliations between individuals and distant histories and cultures – can be useful in helping to explain to the transatlantic interest and cultural investment in the American South. See Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004)

Southern distinctiveness by keeping alive the various imagined historic 'Souths' that are romanticized, longed for, and feared.

### **Race & the South in the 'Age of Obama'**

The shows discussed here were produced and broadcast at a time when much of the world was still in a state of mild euphoria following Barack Obama's historic election win in 2008, which for many marked "a new chapter in the remarkable history of the United States."<sup>32</sup> Paul Gilroy noted that the nation's first African American President seemed to act as a sign of "black America's historic struggles for human and political rights," and the possibility that the nation might have finally lived up to the celebrated ideals of Martin Luther King Jr.<sup>33</sup> However, events in the years following Obama's election - from the repeated acts of police brutality against African Americans, the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, and more recently, the shock election of Donald Trump - have all largely shattered the elusive dreams of a post-racial society. The brutal killing of nine African Americans in a church in Charleston, South Carolina, in June 2015, had particular repercussions for the association between American racism and the South. Numerous images of the killer Dylann Roof enveloped in the Confederate flag revived ideas that the region was once again the aberrant in the great American experiment, and that rather simplistically, racism stubbornly remained a Southern problem. Riding the optimism of Obama's 2008 victory, however, the British travel documentaries depict a South where racial struggles are a thing of the past. Indeed, Stephen Fry relegates the Civil Rights movement to a footnote as he briefly passes through Montgomery, Alabama – site of the famous 1955-56 bus boycott which lasted 381 days - and comments that "a lot has changed since the painful and violent times of enforced segregation." In another scene, Fry talks to the white nongenerian, Mrs Schmoe, after a Thanksgiving dinner with her family in Georgia. Having lived through the Depression and the Civil Rights era, she explains that "there's no animosity here, we get along good with our black people, they get along good with us, and we work together."<sup>34</sup> While this scene softly implies a contemporary post-racial South (while simultaneously hinting at the legacies of segregation with her use of 'our'), McDonald seems to replicate Alistair Cooke by placing the emphasis on the past and indulging in memories of the antebellum South in his journey

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<sup>32</sup> Peter Walker, 'The World Reacts to the new US President,' *The Guardian*, 5 Nov. 2008, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/nov/05/barackobama-uselections2008>, [Accessed 14/02/16 11:16]

<sup>33</sup> Gilroy, 2

<sup>34</sup> 'Deep South', episode 2 *Stephen Fry in America* - Fry also meets Anita Prather in South Carolina, who explains how her Gullah culture is a hybrid of West African, Native American and Europeans cultures. She also explains how she is not offended by the Confederate flag, as it represents part of the region's heritage, once again hinting that racial divides are not as relevant in the present day.

across “plantation country.” He visits the carefully preserved Evergreen plantation in Edgard, Louisiana, to reflect on ‘one of the darkest periods in American history.’ Combining his admiration for the ‘stately opulence’ of the plantation home while attempting to imagine the slave experience on the site’s preserved slave cabins, McDonald focuses attention on the region’s distant past of racial struggle.<sup>35</sup> In the following episode, the journalist visits the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, the site where Martin Luther King Jr was assassinated on 4 April 1968, and now home to the National Civil Rights Museum which has preserved King’s room as it was on that fateful day. McDonald remarks that the city has never fully recovered economically or psychologically and remains almost frozen in time, framing the city as a distinctly historical space, and suggesting that the racial struggles it evokes belong to history, especially after the 2008 election: “[t]he killing of Martin Luther King lit a fuse of deep-seated anger. American ghettos burned, cities rioted. All such a distant memory now from the election now in 2008 of America’s first black President.”<sup>36</sup> What makes this distancing of racial struggle to the past more interesting is that McDonald’s own ethnic background as a Trinidadian Briton never seems to affect the discourse of America’s racial history. Indeed, the journalist maintains a distance from the issues by omitting any personal reflection, unlike Reginald D. Hunter, who displays clearly visible apprehensions about meeting white Southerners in his first episode, especially at a Lynyrd Skynyrd concert where he is surrounded by white Southerners and a sea of Confederate flags.<sup>37</sup> In this sense, McDonald adopts a role that seems no different from that of the other white British presenters and treats American racial issues from a safe distance, which in turn allows simplistic assumptions, such as the existence of a post-racial South to be contemplated.

The idea that the South’s racial troubles have been overcome features again when both Fry and McDonald travel to Clarksdale, Mississippi, to meet the Hollywood actor Morgan Freeman at his *Ground Zero* blues club. Here they discuss the actor’s reasons for returning to his native Mississippi after having “left for good” as a young man. In both documentaries, Freeman explains that he rediscovered the tranquillity and peace he recalled from his childhood. McDonald uses Freeman’s memories of a relatively shielded upbringing to reflect on the rigid segregation of the South in the mid-twentieth

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<sup>35</sup> ‘New Orleans,’ episode 1, *The Mighty Mississippi*

<sup>36</sup> ‘Memphis,’ episode 2, *The Mighty Mississippi*

<sup>37</sup> McDonald’s approach stands in contrast to that of Trinidadian-born author V.S. Naipaul in *A Turn in the South*. Despite his seemingly ‘objective’ approach, Naipaul - who grew up in the Caribbean - comments on his affiliation with the plantation culture and heritage of ‘the old slave states of the American South’ as a fitting reason for undertaking the book, see V.S. Naipaul, *A Turn in the South* (Vintage Books, 1990 c1989), 25; ‘Kentucky & Tennessee,’ episode 1, *Reginald D. Hunter’s Songs of the South*

century that saw whites and blacks live in separate worlds.<sup>38</sup> Morgan is presented as an indication that times have changed for the better. In a conversation between Fry and Freeman, there is also a clear reference to this significant shift in American race relations:

SF: ..we don't have to forget the past but...

MF: ..we have to transcend it.

SF: that's right – transcend it! We don't have to talk in terms of black and white, in terms of oppressed and oppressor, we have to start thinking about Americans, about state citizens..

MF: ..you sound like Barack Obama!

Both documentaries therefore seem to imply that the Obama era had initiated a post-racial phase, where the South in particular had managed to overcome its “burden of history.”<sup>39</sup> This theme is repeated in Rick Stein's visit to *The Senator's Place*, a soul food restaurant in Cleveland, Mississippi, owned by state Senator Willie Simmons. While there, the Cornish chef talks to Morris F. Lucas, a black Vietnam War veteran who left the area in 1962 swearing never to return due to the harsh conditions of being a farmer in Mississippi.<sup>40</sup> However, rather than being indicative of the large scale inward migration to the South in the last quarter of the twentieth century, where the South has become the number one destination of black migration, the programmes strongly suggest that the Deep South's racial troubles are a distant memory.

Paradoxically, however, Fry and McDonald come face-to-face with contemporary racial issues. McDonald tells of Freeman's contribution to integrate a local high school prom, without commenting on the wider phenomenon of voluntary re-segregation in the South in recent years.<sup>41</sup> Both presenters are also taken through the lower ninth ward of New Orleans to see the damage from hurricane Katrina. Accompanied by local black residents, both documentaries seem to replicate the problematic 'disaster tours' of companies like Gray Line that emerged in the aftermath of 2005, and have sparked controversy for seemingly exploiting the devastation for commercial gains.<sup>42</sup> While engaging in this voyeurism, both

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<sup>38</sup> 'Memphis,' episode 2, *The Mighty Mississippi*

<sup>39</sup> Cox, 288

<sup>40</sup> 'Rick Stein Tastes the Blues', The American chef and celebrity Anthony Bourdain also visits the Senator's Place in season 3, episode 6 of his series *Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown* (CNN 2014), which displays many similar characteristics to the British documentaries that essentialize the Mississippi Delta as a place 'off the beaten track';

<sup>41</sup> 'Black and White students learning together: a dying dream?' *Channel 4 News*, 24 May 2014, <http://www.channel4.com/news/us-schools-desegregation-apartheid-alabama-black-white-students> [Accessed 25/5/2014]

<sup>42</sup> Kenneth A. Goulda and Tammy L. Lewis, "Viewing the Wreckage: Eco-Disaster Tourism in the Wake of Katrina," *Societies without Borders*, Vol. 2, Issue 2 (Jun. 2007), 75-97; a criticism of the tours was also present in HBO's

presenters acknowledge that the result of the storm damage brought racial tensions to the surface, with Fry suggesting “if this was a white middle-class neighbourhood, I cannot believe it would be in this situation.” Such a statement, which echoes public outcries like those of rapper Kanye West (“George Bush doesn’t care about black people!”), sits uncomfortably alongside Fry’s optimistic conversation with Freeman.<sup>43</sup> In addition, both shows focus on the way ordinary people show resilience through local culture, tradition, music and voodoo, rather than on the persistence of racial struggles in America. Even Hugh Laurie praised the city’s resolve when he stated that “this town doesn’t fear death... it’s looked death in the eye.”<sup>44</sup> In the same way that tourists might easily follow a Gray Line tour on the lower ninth ward with a stroll down Bourbon Street, the travelogues ignore more complex issues such as the clashes between residents, officials and developers over the reconstruction of the city. Rather than acknowledging, as Lynell L. Thomas suggests, how “Post-Katrina New Orleans has become a laboratory for market-driven government and neoliberal restructuring,” the impression is given that New Orleans remains the same city it has always been and life defiantly goes on.<sup>45</sup> The British documentaries focus on the long-standing Southern tropes of community spirit, cultural survival and endurance against tremendous odds, involuntarily parodying the lingering “tomorrow is another day” motif of *Gone With the Wind* (1939). The example of post-Katrina New Orleans thus becomes emblematic of the way in which the travelogues distance themselves from the realities of contemporary American political and racial struggle, where the powerful imagery of the city’s past obscures any consideration for the present.<sup>46</sup>

Jamie Oliver’s show also comes face-to-face with contemporary racist attitudes, but uses these experiences to revive the idea of a South that is resistant to progress. Having seen racist bumper stickers and various Confederate flags displayed while in Georgia, Oliver speaks to local whites about their

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*Treme* episode ‘Right Place, Wrong Time,’ (series 1, episode 3, 2010), in which offended local residents angrily tell a ‘Katrina Tour’ bus to move on.

<sup>43</sup> ‘Mississippi’, episode 3, *Stephen Fry in America*; West made the comments live on NBC’s televised A Concert for Hurricane Relief on 2 Sep. 2005, in C. Richard King, “George Bush May Not Like Black People, but No One Gives A Dam About Indigenous Peoples: Visibility and Indianness after the Hurricanes,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (2008), 35-42, 35

<sup>44</sup> ‘Hugh Laurie: Down by the River’

<sup>45</sup> Lynell L. Thomas, “New Orleans Revisited: Notes on a Native Daughter,” in *The Black Scholar*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (2015), 3-9, 3

<sup>46</sup> The Italian intellectual Umberto Eco commented how New Orleans, unlike many other American cities, shapes the experience of visitors with a more authentic ability to convey its history: “New Orleans is not in the grip of a neurosis of a denied past; it passes out memories generously like a great lord; it does not have to pursue ‘the real thing’” in Umberto Eco, ‘Travels in Hyperreality,’ in Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays – Translated from the Italian by William Weaver* (London: Picador, 1986), 30



reactions to the election of Barack Obama, and is left puzzled by responses that are less than enthusiastic. The chef is also surprised when he is reminded by Nikki Bush, owner of *Mom & Nikki's Soul Food* restaurant in Savannah, that "this is still the South." In another more disturbing experience, he discusses similar issues with white residents of a trailer park. One shot focuses on a Confederate flag hanging in a trailer window, and a local reminds the British chef that "you're in the South here." The presenter is then shocked by an outburst which prompts him to quickly leave the gathering: "they got a Queen, we got a nigger."<sup>47</sup> Oliver's direct experience of contemporary racist attitudes in the US, when considered in the backdrop of an America with a black President, plays toward the idea that racism remains an issue with lower-class Southern whites. Indeed, one might wonder whether the producers were actively seeking this kind of response, given their decision to use a trailer park on the outskirts of a large Southern city to talk about Obama. The reality of race relations in the South is explored much more directly and openly in *Reginald D. Hunter's Songs of the South*. Having left Georgia because he openly detested the racial tensions that had not been overcome, even after the Civil Rights movement, Hunter eventually comes towards some form of reconciliation with his Southern roots, acknowledging that it may have changed since his departure. Hunter's series works to highlight the superficial treatment of race in the shows by the British presenters, besides the common preconception of American racism as a Southern issue.

Importantly, Oliver's show demonstrates how the region's culinary culture can be a means of overcoming the South's historic racial divide. In the closing part of his episode on Georgia, the chef brings together the (white) Smith family (presented as "proud to be rednecks"), Barry – a black barbecue pit-master- and Nikki from Savannah's soul food restaurant to compete in the famous Lakeland Pigfest contest in Florida.<sup>48</sup> These people work together blending different forms of traditional black and white Southern cooking. Oliver seems intent on using food as a means of transcending the problems caused by the financial crisis as well as the experiences of racism by creating what he calls a "recipe of hope." In so doing, his efforts echo those of the *Southern Foodways Alliance* (SFA), an organisation of Southern academics which "documents, studies, and explores the diverse food cultures of the changing American South...[in order to] consider our history and our future in a spirit of respect and reconciliation." While

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<sup>47</sup> 'Georgia,' *Jamie's American Road Trip*; it is not unrealistic to suggest that the producers were looking to directly antagonize or get controversial responses for dramatic effect. In an interview on Irish television for RTE's 'Late Late Show,' Reginald D. Hunter told of a scene which was ultimately excluded from his series, where his producers insisted that he attend a Civil War re-enactment dressed as a Confederate general. Hunter and the film-crew were subsequently told to leave the re-enactment very quickly due to the tension created. *The Late Late Show*, 11 Mar. 2016, <http://www.rte.ie/tv/latelate/20160311.html> [Accessed 20/07/2007]

<sup>48</sup> The festival is one of the largest of its kind in the south east of the United States <http://lakelandpigfest.org/>

Southern foodways have become the focus of many studies on the day-to-day performance and re-enforcement of racial and patriarchal social structures in the Jim Crow South, as Beth A. Latshaw argues, tracing commonalities in the experiences of Southern food are being increasingly seen as a means of coming to terms with the region's troubled past as well as forming the basis of a shared and more cohesive future for black, white, and even new Southerners.<sup>49</sup> However, what Oliver's seems to suggest is that external intervention is required to bring different Southerners together, thus the chef acts – somewhat patronizingly – as an emancipated cultural diplomat.

Despite the similarities to the SFA, Oliver's two shows on the South use food as a means of highlighting and celebrating the enduring rudimentary characteristics of Southern culture. While Oliver interacts with black and white Southerners, from 'soul food' restaurateur Nikki Bush to high-society ladies in Savannah, he places far more emphasis on the pit-barbecue as representative of Southern culinary traditions. He praises the effort, care and artisanal skills of African American pit-master Barry, which becomes illustrative of a culture rooted in simple practices, as well as an indirect form of resistance against the forces of modern capitalism. Indeed, in Oliver's show the pit-barbecue and the family-owned restaurant are presented as antidotes to the effects of the global financial crisis of 2007. Rick Stein's venture into the food culture of the Mississippi Delta also enjoys the rustic and rugged simplicity of a roadside rib-shack. The emphasis on simple traditions of the pit-barbecue is indicative of the recent growth in popularity of Southern food in Britain. Despite the arrival of Kentucky Fried Chicken in 1965 and its growth into the 1970s, the last few years have seen a huge rise in number of Southern-style barbecue and soul food restaurants across Britain.<sup>50</sup> However, the shows by Oliver and Stein argue

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<sup>49</sup> 'Mission' of the *Southern Foodways Alliance*, <https://www.southernfoodways.org/about-us/> [Accessed 21/4/2017]; see Anthony J. Stanonis, 'Just Like My Mammy Used to Make: Foodways in the Jim Crow South,' in Anthony J. Stanonis ed., *Dixie Emporium: Tourism, Foodways, and Consumer Culture in the American South* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 208-33; on similarity to Southern Foodways Alliance, see Marcy Cohen Ferris, "History, Place, and Power: Studying Southern Food," *Southern Cultures*, Vol. 21, No.1 (Spring 2015), 2-7 – Ferris states "Contrast and contradiction is what the South—and, thus, its food cultures—is all about. Southern food reflects the abundance, beauty, and richness of southern culture, but also the dark underside of slavery and racial disfranchisement;" Beth A. Latshaw, "Food for Thought: Race, Region, Identity, and Foodways in the American South," *Southern Cultures*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (Winter 2009), 106-128

<sup>50</sup> The first KFC opened in Preston in May 1965, and by the mid-1970s there were over 250 restaurants across the UK, in Barry Freeman, 'Britain's first Kentucky Fried Chicken flies the coop after 49 years,' *Lancashire Post*, 4 Dec. 2014, <http://www.lep.co.uk/lifestyle/nostalgia/britain-s-first-kentucky-fried-chicken-flies-the-coop-after-49-years-1-6987614> [Accessed 22/4/2017]; for recent surge in popularity of Southern-style food in UK see Mollie Goodfellow, 'London's Best Southern Soul Food,' *Evening Standard*, 10 Jan. 2014, <http://www.standard.co.uk/goingout/restaurants/londons-best-southern-soul-food-9051583.html> [Accessed 26/4/2017]; Katy Salter, 'Pulled Pork: why we're pigging out on US barbecue food,' *The Guardian*, 6 Nov. 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/nov/06/pulled-pork-us-barbecue-food-has-craze-peaked> [Accessed 26/4/2017]

stress that food is at its most authentic and 'Southern' when it is directly connected to the experience of the Southern past. For instance, Willie Simmons recalls memories of his mother preparing home-cooked meals for his siblings as they migrated north and faced the prospect of being denied service in public restaurants, demonstrating the way Southern food is perceived as a powerful "agent of memory." Stein comments that "the food ... has a real part in history." In another scene, he describes his experience in an old restaurant in Greenville, Mississippi, that has had the same menu for over forty years as "like walking back in time." Therefore, while on the surface it seems the British travelogues share the SFA's belief in the heritage value of Southern food, the difference is that Stein and Oliver are less interested in the application of this heritage in forging a contemporary or future Southern culture.<sup>51</sup> Rather, it is a means of identifying an unchanging South rooted in simple, family-based traditions from an imagined past.

### **Off the Beaten Track Blues**

British perceptions of the Southern past also loom large in the journeys undertaken in relation to music, particularly the blues. The shows demonstrate close links to the British experience of the mid-twentieth century blues revival. At the same time, the routes taken by the presenters often mimic those promoted by the Southern tourist industry, as demonstrated by Trevor McDonald. The journalist travels to Beale Street in Memphis and describes it as a "mecca" for blues musicians. He is informed by local musician Memphis Jones that it is "more than just a tourist trap" and the "home of the blues." Hunter, by contrast, is more critical: Beale Street represents "the destruction of a black cultural centre and the emergence of a tourist theme park. It's what America does best when it's done with portions of its past." Hunter acknowledges the competitive nature of blues tourism, which since the early 1990s has seen substantial investment pouring into various cities battling for the right to be the 'home' of the blues.<sup>52</sup> The British presenters, on the other hand, seem much more willing to buy into the icons and myths of blues tourism, particularly when it comes to the Mississippi Delta. The area's predominance can be seen in the numerous tours organized by companies such as Deep South USA, and lends weight

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<sup>51</sup> 'agent of memory' in Stanonis, 'Just Like Mammy Used to Make,' 209

<sup>52</sup> 'Mississippi and Louisiana,' episode 3, *Reginald D. Hunter's Songs of the South*; Stephen A. King, 'Blues Tourism in the Mississippi Delta: the functions of Blues Festivals,' *Popular Music and Society*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (2004), 455-75

to the idea that, in the popular imagination, the Delta remains “the most Southern place on Earth.”<sup>53</sup> McDonald, Fry, Stein, Laurie and Hunter all travel to Clarksdale, a former centre for cotton production and the birthplace of many famous musicians including Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, and Sam Cooke. As well as being home to the iconic ‘crossroads,’ where blues legend Robert Johnson supposedly sold his soul to the devil, Clarksdale is also home to the *Ground Zero* blues club, which claims to give customers the “authentic blues experience.” While McDonald describes the club as “where it all began,” the venue actually opened in 2001 and is co-owned by Hollywood actor Morgan Freeman.<sup>54</sup> In its intended appearance as a run-down juke joint, the club is reflective of the tourist obsession for the blues aesthetic of the rudimentary and uncommercial, and how Clarksdale in particular has attempted to capitalize on the nostalgia for the blues past by “developing its tourism base through authenticity discourses around the primitive, abjectness, and plantation culture.”<sup>55</sup> While Hunter acknowledges how well the economy has done from the crossroads myth, the British presenters indulge much more directly in what Marybeth Hamilton calls the “cliché-ridden trail” of blues romanticism and fandom. When it comes to the blues, therefore, the documentaries are intimately connected to the British experience of the blues revival, a period in which enthusiasts imagined black musicians from the 1920s and 1930s as folk heroes, and young British musicians infused their music with the sounds of the African American past.<sup>56</sup>

It is no coincidence that we see largely middle-aged British men embarking on these journeys through the Delta. “I knew this was for me” says Hugh Laurie, recalling when he first heard the blues as a young man.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Rick Stein justifies the excursion to Mississippi because of his “love for the blues,” recalling the “naked human howl,” the “balls and earthiness” he heard in Howlin’ Wolf’s ‘Smokestack Lightnin’ in 1963, which was ‘dramatic and exciting compared to the “wimpish” British

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<sup>53</sup> Rick Stein’s documentary is also mentioned directly on the Deep South USA website and referred to as a ‘pilgrimage’, perhaps to be shown as a model for a potential ‘blues tour’ of Mississippi, <http://www.deep-south-usa.com/newsletters/352-rick-stein-tastes-the-blues-the-deep-south-usa-visitor-information> [Accessed 13/03/16 12:34]

<sup>54</sup> Interestingly, Clarksdale is also the home of civil rights activist Aaron Henry, although this is not mentioned in any of the travelogues, even when issues relating the segregation and the Civil Rights movement are discussed; Ground Zero Blues Club, <http://www.groundzerobluesclub.com/> [Accessed 06/03/16 16:31]

<sup>55</sup> Jennifer Ryan, “Beale Street Blues? Tourism, Musical Labor, and the Fetishization of Poverty in Blues Discourse,” *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (Fall 2011), 473-503, 480

<sup>56</sup> Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues*, p. 1 – Hamilton writes of her own experiences of visiting locations revered by blues enthusiasts, and discusses how these spaces are dominated by preconceived ideas gathered through the 1960s blues revival, demonstrating W. Fitzhugh Brundage’s idea that spaces are “colonized” by pre-conceived knowledge, *The Southern Past: a Clash of Race and Memory* (London: Harvard University Press, 2005) 6; the literature on the romanticism of the blues revival is extensive, in addition to Hamilton, see also Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the ‘Invention of the Blues’* (Amistad, 2004)

<sup>57</sup> ‘Hugh Laurie: Down by the River’

alternatives. Unsurprisingly, Stein resembles a child in candy store when he arrives at the *Shack Up Inn* in Clarksdale, an historic plantation and now prime accommodation for “blues lovers making the pilgrimage to the cradle of the blues.”<sup>58</sup> He revels in the “very familiar” rural landscape of the cotton fields, the *Inn’s* “carefully chosen junk” – old tractors, rusty ploughs and decrepit barns - which evoke the imagined sharecropper’s experience. This is essentially a powerful remnant of the blues aesthetic which was dominant in the male-dominated revival, and clearly evidenced in representative works such as Paul Oliver’s photo-documentary book *Conversation with the Blues* (1965). Indeed, when Stein meets harmonica player ‘Cadillac’ John Nolden, and describes the octogenarian as someone who “never saw the bright lights,” he is paying tribute to the practices of revivalist folklorists and collectors such as Alan Lomax and Paul Oliver who uncovered unrecorded - and thus more authentic - blues musicians such as Mississippi Fred McDowell and Mance Lipscomb.<sup>59</sup> Stein meets Nolden via Bill Abel, a white musician who explains the origins of the ‘diddley-bow’ (a single string attached to a vertical wall) to exemplify the folk roots of the blues. With his long beard and rough-edged appearance as part-hobo part-farmer, Abel closely resembles Seasick Steve, the incarnation of the modern bluesman for British audiences in recent years since an appearance on BBC2’s *Later... with Jools Holland* in 2006. In fact, it is no surprise that when Reginald D. Hunter seeks an explanation for the lure of the Delta, he also speaks to Steve in order to connect with his British audience. While fitting the image and idea of the old sharecropping bluesman, Seasick Steve is neither from the Delta nor the South, and it has recently been revealed that the rugged imagery and backstory of an itinerant life have been carefully crafted to increase his blues authenticity.<sup>60</sup>

Another essential characteristic of the blues constructed during the revival was that the music had an intimate connection to the landscape. This is directly reproduced by Laurie, who is playfully filmed singing at a crossroads, and then performs a version of Leadbelly’s ‘Goodnight Irene’ alone on a small riverbank. The connection to the Delta landscape, and the Mississippi in particular, is also explored by both Fry and Stein who take a boat ride with the same local river guide, John Ruskey. While clearly

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<sup>58</sup> *The Shack Up Inn*, <http://www.shackupinn.com/#!ourstory/c161y> [Accessed 16/07/2016]

<sup>59</sup> The blues revival of the late 1950s and 1960s saw the rediscovery of a number of singers and musicians that had recorded during the 1920s and 1930s, but there was also the discovery of a number of previously unrecorded singers. McDowell was found by Alan Lomax on a trip across the South in 1959, whereas British blues scholar Paul Oliver discovered Lipscomb on his first visit to the South in the summer of 1960, and photographs of the singer featured in *Conversation with the Blues* (1965), in O’Connell, 2015, 103 and 138

<sup>60</sup> Christian O’Connell, ‘The Color of the Blues: Considering Revisionist Blues Scholarship,’ *Southern Cultures*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Spring, 2013), 61-81; 61-2; ‘Mississippi and Louisiana,’ episode 3, *Reginald D. Hunter’s Songs of the South*; see Bob Stanley, ‘How Seasick Steve Turned Out to be Session Man Steve,’ *The Guardian*, 29 Sep. 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2016/sep/29/seasick-steve-session-musician-ramblin-man-book> Accessed 28/1/2017

evoking the persistence of another Southern trope - the imagery of rootlessness and adventure from Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* - Ruskey tells Stein that "the [Mississippi] river created the landscape that created the blues," at once pandering to the revivalist ideas that equate the blues primarily with the Mississippi Delta, while also appealing to the imagined, almost spiritual connection between Southern culture and the Southern landscape. Coincidentally, Ruskey was also the first curator of the Delta Blues Museum in Clarksdale, which was established in 1999, marking the commencement of the town becoming a centre for blues tourism. Clarksdale is also used as a marker for another essential Southern trope which is transmitted through the blues: "you don't see the South if you're going on the interstate... if you go 5 or 10 miles off the interstate, and you get the South as it was 50 years ago or 100 years ago."<sup>61</sup> The former centre for cotton production is described by both Fry and McDonald as being in "the middle of nowhere." While Fry calls it a "desolate, dirt-poor place," he also characterizes Clarksdale as "one of those magical and inexplicable places." In another instance, Stein visits the practically deserted town of Leland, Mississippi, home to a number of blues musicians and now the Highway 61 Blues Museum. The town's population has been decimated by migration throughout the twentieth century and Stein asks, "why has everyone left?" The suggestion is that the real South is here, in the desolate and declining areas of the Delta. This theme is applied to other aspects of these Southern journeys. Jamie Oliver's search for the authentic Southern barbecue in Georgia appears to reveal another side of the United States when he declares that "we're really off the beaten track here," a radical contrast to his prevailing idea of "America... like this big commercial factory." The South presented here therefore, is most authentic where it is remote and almost inaccessible, a far cry from the modernizing region with rapidly growing cities and high investment, and seems to be found most often in the Mississippi Delta. These representations of Southern landscapes are also a stark contrast, yet again, to the modern North. Importantly, they highlight the way in which the travelogues interpret and reproduce Southern culture through the imagery and aesthetics of the blues, and how cultural memories of the revival help to 'colonize' the physical experience of the Delta.<sup>62</sup>

The links to the past are also explored in other parts of the musical South. As well as the blues, many of the travelogues focus on the experience of gospel singing in black churches. Despite having seen many different real and fictional representations of black congregations, Laurie states that nothing could prepare him for the 'intoxicating' effect of visiting the sermon at the Cathedral of Faith Baptist

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<sup>61</sup> The musician Jim White presenting the documentary 'Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus,' *Arena*, (BBC Two, 2004) [Accessed 15 October 2015]

<sup>62</sup> Fitzhugh-Brundage, *The Southern Past*, 6

Church in Beaumont, Texas. Importantly, his visit is staged as part of the trip to New Orleans – his final destination – which seems representative of the view that black religious practice and gospel singing are the foundations of black secular music. While this is not historically inaccurate, it is suggestive of the belief that to experience contemporary black religious singing is to get a direct taste of black history. Indeed, when Trevor McDonald visits a black congregation in Natchez, Mississippi, the local pastor explains how the gospel hymns are rooted in the survival mechanisms employed by African Americans to endure the day-to-day hardships of slavery. Michael Portillo has a similar experience when visiting a black Church in Petersburg, Virginia, the oldest African American Baptist church in the United States.<sup>63</sup> In all of these, the focus is firmly on the ancestral roots of the black experience, rather than the contemporary function of religious practice and singing in the twenty-first century South. In another example, Fry visits a bluegrass jam session in the Appalachians of Tennessee, where he is told by a young banjo player - who identifies himself as holding both Scottish and Irish heritage - that the music “runs deep in your blood and you feel the land.”<sup>64</sup> By identifying his ancestry, the young musician is emphasizing the manner in which his music is almost a form of living history. While appearing to delineate a white (Appalachians) and black (Deep) South, the documentaries share a focus on the interdependency of Southern spaces with cultures that are deeply rooted in the past. This connection to imagined and often unidentified Southern pasts, particularly through music, maintains and celebrates resistance to change. The attention is always on the region’s past, and how this can still be experienced first-hand.

### **British ‘Time Travel’ in the Historical South**

At the beginning of his “life-changing journey” to New Orleans, Hugh Laurie gets into his “red open-top time machine,” a 1959 Ford Galaxy 500. Leaving the South, Trevor McDonald remarks that he’ll “be visiting the America of the twenty-first century.” Fry comments that “it is a fact about the South [that] it seems closer in its history down here than it does up in the North,” while Jamie Oliver likens his experiences in Georgia to being in “a time warp.”<sup>65</sup> While these are playful suggestions that a journey through the South is akin to time travel, all the travelogues discussed here suggest that the South is different and unique because it is essentially “a prisoner to its history.”<sup>66</sup> Particularly through the

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<sup>63</sup> ‘Richmond to Jamestown,’ Episode 15, *Great American Railroad Journeys*

<sup>64</sup> ‘Deep South’, episode 2, *Stephen Fry in America*

<sup>65</sup> ‘Hugh Laurie: Down by the River;’ ‘Memphis,’ episode 2, *The Mighty Mississippi*; ‘Deep South,’ episode 2, *Stephen Fry in America*; ‘Georgia,’ episode 5, *Jamie’s American Road Trip*

<sup>66</sup> Peacock, *Grounded Globalism*, 249

blurring lens of blues romanticism, the British televisual South is seen as most ‘Southern’ in the Mississippi Delta for its seeming inability and/or reluctance to modernize, and continues to be imagined and experienced as an echo of the interwar years: the land of black sharecroppers on their front porches watching old freight trains go by and unconcerned by the preoccupations of the modern world. When Stein visits Robert Johnson’s home in Greenwood, Mississippi, he suggests that “it’s pretty run down, it probably hasn’t changed much since [he] lived here and died here.”<sup>67</sup> This idea of a resistance to change and endurance is applied even beyond the borders of the Delta. Laurie overhears the blues beaming from a bar on a sleepy afternoon in Austin, Texas, and enters to find soul-blues artist ‘Miss’ Lavelle White performing a Jimmy Reed song.<sup>68</sup> This serves to support the idea that the musical culture of the South, particularly the blues, can still be experienced in the twenty-first century, which is also indicative of the enduring legacy of the British blues revival and consequent consumption of Southern music since the middle of the twentieth century. The potent memories of the revival era simultaneously marginalize contemporary trends or more modern cultures. For instance, Trevor McDonald talks about the origins and roots of jazz in New Orleans, while ignoring the fact that the musicians he is with are playing the jazz-hip-hop hybrid of New Orleans ‘bounce.’ Instead, and rather ambiguously, the tune of ‘Battle Cry for Freedom’ – a song which became incredibly popular on both sides of the conflict during the Civil War – is used as a soundtrack to moving images of Southern plantations, the Mississippi river, and expanses of railway tracks, further adding to the sense that the viewer is looking back in time.<sup>69</sup>

The powerful presence of the blues in these travelogues also highlights the extent to which these televisual experiences are heavily defined by the male-dominated gaze of the middle-aged presenters. In essence, this mirrors the British blues revival, which was highly masculine in character, as the blues boom of the 1960s reflected the appeal of what Marybeth Hamilton terms the “male flight from commitment.”<sup>70</sup> Importantly however, the masculine aspect of the televisual South is also developed in Stein and Oliver’s focus on Southern food. The emphasis on the pit-barbecue, fried

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<sup>67</sup> ‘Rick Stein Tastes the Blues’

<sup>68</sup> ‘Hugh Laurie: Down by the River’

<sup>69</sup> Another interesting factor is how central the Civil War is to the public perception of the American South, but also how experience of historic sites, such as battle fields, shape and define perceptions of the Southern past. In his brief travels to discover the ‘Southern spirit’ by visiting Virginia and Maryland, Michael Portillo focuses heavily on the Civil War when he visits battle sites such as Manassas, and offers thoughts that are not too dissimilar to the ideas of the Lost Cause: “The American Civil War can be represented as a struggle between good and evil, and there’s truth in that. But as soon as you come to the South and stand here you develop an extra perspective. Those young Americans who fought and died here for the Confederacy deserve to be remembered and honoured.” - ‘Manassas to Richmond,’ Episode 14, *Great American Railroad Journeys*, BBC2 18 Feb. 2016

<sup>70</sup> Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues*, 9-10



chicken, and the rudimentary nature of the roadside rib-shack clearly celebrate what Andrew Warnes describes as this type of Southern food's "mythology of savagery and freedom, of pleasure, masculinity, and strength."<sup>71</sup> This theme extends to other activities that appear throughout these shows – driving across the South, canoeing along the river, experiencing the wildlife of the swamps, enjoying blues and barbecue – and reflects the gendered way in which the South is both imagined and experienced. There are many other examples in these documentaries beyond music and food that have not had as much space here. Fry, for instance, travels to the Woodford Reserve Distillery in Kentucky, which claims to "preserve the style and method of the distant past," despite the fact it is very much a twenty-first century business, with a website, a clearly effective marketing strategy, which includes its own fully-fledged mobile app. Fry's experience is practically replicated by Michael Portillo's visit to A. Smith Bowman, Virginia's oldest family-run distillery.<sup>72</sup> In a similar example, McDonald visits the Atchafalaya Swamp in Louisiana, the largest in the US, where the tour guide tells of his family's long history and relationship with the landscape, once again emphasising how differently Southerners, particularly men, share this long-standing intimate connection to their surroundings. This experience is remarkably similar to that of Fry and Stein with the Mississippi river guide John Ruskey, described by the chef as "a consummate river man, straight out of Daniel Boone."<sup>73</sup> The South presented in these documentaries is therefore very much unchanging, an inherently masculine space, especially when interpreted through the lenses of land, blues, and barbecue.

While much of the life and culture presented in these travelogues maintain ideas of Southern distinctiveness through ties to the past, this article has also discussed how they suggest a remarkable capacity for change through the possibilities of a post-racial South. Although inherently a product of the context created by the election of Barack Obama in 2008, the documentaries also achieve this by placing their attention on the region's history of racial struggle. Viewers are invited to experience various Southern locales and imagine the events played out in the past, whether focussing on antebellum

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<sup>71</sup> In fact, here Oliver seems to reflect a trend in Southern food writing in the US, see Kathleen Purvis, 'The Testosterone Takeover of Southern Food Writing,' *The Bitter Southerner*, 16 Feb. 2015, <http://bittersoutherner.com/the-testosterone-takeover-of-southern-food-writing#.VuXW0vkrLIV> [Accessed 8/3/2016 17:08]; Andrew Warnes, *Savage Barbecue: Race, Culture, and the Invention of America's First Food* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 4/6

<sup>72</sup> 'Manassas to Richmond,' Episode 14, *Great American Railroad Journeys*

<sup>73</sup> 'The Woodford Reserve Distillery, <http://www.woodfordreserve.com/> [Accessed 15/2/2016 14:06]; Sir Trevor McDonald, 'Rolling On A River: Sir Trevor McDonald traverses the Mississippi to discover America's illustrious past,' *The Daily Mail Online*, 23 Mar. 2012, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2118733/Sir-Trevor-McDonald-traverses-Mississippi-River-discover-Americas-illustrious-past.html> [Accessed 05/03/2016 21:28] – McDonald calls the swamp "the most primeval place" he'd ever visited; 'Rick Stein Tastes the Blues;' 'Mississippi,' episode 3, *Stephen Fry in America*

slavery, segregation, or Civil Rights battles. By ignoring the issues that pervade the South today – as in the case of post-Katrina New Orleans – British viewers can engage with the South in much the same way that tourists interact with room 306 at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis – from a safe distance, and as if it were frozen in time. It is in this way that these travelogues confirm McPherson’s view that “television operates much like contemporary tourism.”<sup>74</sup> These travelogues aim to capture the essence of the region in their first-hand explorations of Southern spaces, and in this sense, they are much closer to the direct experiences of the millions of tourists who flock to the region each year, who imagine pockets of the Mississippi Delta as representative of Southern life, history and culture, and believe that racism is a thing of the past, although it might occasionally resurface if one ventures off the beaten track.

Finally, much like contemporary tourism to the region, the British televisual South helps to maintain popular ideas of a South (or Souths) that can be experienced and consumed, and that means recycling stereotypes of a place that “moves at its own pace,” and one of “cotton, courtesy, gospel music, mint juleps, divine accents and sultry southern belles.”<sup>75</sup> The travelogues also indicate how television can uphold and reinforce imagined Southern regionalisms in a transnational context, and act as a key agent in the reproduction of Southern distinctiveness. In addition, the particular emphasis on music and food in these travelogues speaks to the uniquely British experience of the South. The focus on blues and barbecue in particular highlight the ways in which the British presenters, and most probably also the audiences, were incredibly familiar with the places and people they met, precisely because Southern music, food and culture, have had a strong presence in Britain from the middle of the twentieth century onwards. However, rather than acting as a repository of American ideals (as Karen Cox suggests the South does for other Americans), it might also be possible to speculate that the popularity of this imagined South in Britain is indicative a broader identity crisis in the early twenty-first century, where British ties to the land or folk cultures are less tangible, and the past is seen as ever more disconnected from contemporary life (a crisis also made evident in the rise of nationalist sentiment in the wake of ‘Brexit’). The familiarity of Southern culture certainly speaks to the nostalgia that pervades the British televisual South, a characteristic that does not lend itself to criticism, or confronting more complex issues, such as race, in more depth. Nostalgia, like memory, can blur reality and fiction,

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<sup>74</sup> McPherson, 12

<sup>75</sup> ‘Memphis,’ episode 2, *The Mighty Mississippi*; ‘Deep South,’ episode 2, *Stephen Fry in America*

allowing for exaggeration as well as omission, and goes some way to explain why “you gotta wade through a shit load of lies, misrepresentations and ridicule to get a feeling of what the South really is.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> ‘Rich Hall’s The Dirty South’