

Reflections of a Southern Woman

Curtina Moreland-Young

I am a Southern woman, even though I lived a large and significant part of my life in the Midwest and short periods in the East. I was born, educated, and became a woman in the South. I have even lived, traveled, and worked in several countries, on five continents. But with all of that, I know I am a Southern woman.

But being Southern and growing up Southern are not the same thing. Growing up Southern may be simply a function of place of birth, of location of family, a matter of circumstance. Being Southern is more complicated. It means living in the world with predispositions for understanding, affirming, and delighting in contradictions and complexities. Being Southern is always knowing the usefulness of politeness, family, and faith.

As an African-American female in my mid-forties, my Southern “becoming” was influenced by the fact that my earliest memories are of an insulated, protected, and, I would learn later, oppressed community. My earliest recollections begin at my grandmother’s house on Stark Street, in Columbia, South Carolina, a white house with beautiful French doors between the living and dining rooms. Every morning my grandmother would set the breakfast table with linens and china, and she would serve homemade breads, two types of eggs, cheese, liver pudding or sausage, bacon, grits, fresh fruit, and pasteurized milk. Pasteurized milk was important because of the delicious cream that my mother mixed from it herself. After this morning feast, my cousins and I would hurry outside and play with the children of the neighborhood. We all played on the crepe myrtle-lined streets, or in the back yards of the “nice” houses filled with plum, peach, and fig trees and scoppionog vines. We weren’t afraid of getting shot or abducted, nor were we concerned about issues of class. The only admonitions I remember were not to let dogs or people with purple gums bite us in August (because of blood poisoning). And another thing: we were not to go to nearby Valley Park.



I didn’t worry about the first admonition since I had never seen anyone with purple gums, and I knew enough to stay out of the way of stray dogs. But not going to Valley Park was another matter. I could see children having so much fun on the slides, the swings, and the little train that ran through the park. I wasn’t sure why I couldn’t play there, but my father’s face tightened when we passed the area and I looked longingly at the train. One day, as we passed the park, my father lifted me up and walked over to the train. He said something I couldn’t hear to the conductor and then put me on, and I rode all by myself. When I told my grandmother about this, she cautioned me not to go into Valley Park anymore. The people there were nice, but they had germs. She explained that we didn’t sit near these people on buses, or try on clothes or shoes in the same sections, or drink out of the same water fountains because of these germs.

Later in my childhood, my family moved from Columbia, South Carolina, to Cordele, Georgia. I learned about American slavery and segregation and sang the “Black National Anthem”; later, I celebrated Emancipation Proclamation Day. I came to know that it wasn’t germs that separated us from the Valley

The author’s father was a science teacher and athletic coach at Holsey-Cobb Institute, a Christian Methodist Episcopal day and boarding high school in Cordele, Georgia. The homecoming king and queen pictured represented that school, one of two local, private high schools for African Americans at that time. No public high schools admitted Black students in 1955, when this picture was taken.

Photo courtesy
Moreland Family Archives



The American South

Park people. But in small-town Georgia, I seldom came in contact with anyone outside my safe, African-American universe.

This was a world of “Womanless” and “Tom Thumb” weddings, homecomings, proms, Senior Deb and Esquires, and Silver and Green Teas; a world in which I was Mrs. Hamilton and my boyfriend was Alexander at the annual George and Martha Washington Tea Party. It was a pleasant place where for five cents we could stop by Ms. Ethel’s and get freshly cooked pig skins wrapped in newspaper, which we ate dripping with hot sauce. My Southern “becoming” meant eating Ms. Ethel’s skins and collard greens, learning how to fold linen napkins, and learning that a lady never eats a sandwich cut in fewer than three sections.

My South was a place where family was important. Where people really knew who your mother and daddy were, cared about that, and asked about them often. I lived in a world of Black public schools and private schools with reputations for excellence. In this African-American universe, intellectual and cultural attainment was demanded, expected, and achieved.

Of course, there were Whites present in my town, but they were not really a part of my existence. Oh, there were incidents, such as when the prominent White lady called my mother and told her that I’d said “no” instead of “no ma’am” (my mother explained to her she had instructed me that “yes” and “no” said politely were sufficient when I addressed anyone). And of course we knew that the local newspaper never gave honorifics to Black people except for “Reverend,” no matter how old or illustrious they were. And I knew, too, the reason that we would drive to Atlanta or Macon for a nice meal was because my father refused to be served out of the back door.

Yet there was something clearly honest about this oppression and certainly affirming about these experiences, something I didn’t feel in other places in the country. For me, my experience in the South provided a strength and a sense of place and history from which I could draw, no matter where I traveled or lived.

When I returned to the South in my mid-twenties, I knew I’d come home. The legal manifestations of oppression had been discarded, and I was in a place where I felt empowered as an African American in a way I have never felt in any other region of this country. This feeling is a part of my being Southern. When I’m anywhere else in the world for a while, I feel I must return to be renaissanced. Maybe that’s why I’ll always define myself as a Southern woman.

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Glossary

Liver pudding is a sausage-type meat dish usually served with rice or grits and sauteed onions. It is customarily found in North Carolina, South Carolina, and in a few places in Georgia.

Womanless Wedding is a mock ceremony in which everyone is male.

Tom Thumb is a mock wedding in which young children assume the roles of the wedding party members. It was usually held as a fundraising event and was very popular in some Southern African-American communities.

The *Martha and George Washington Tea Party* was an annual event at A. S. Clark High School in Cordele, Georgia. It was a re-creation of the first tea party or social given by the first President.

Silver and Green Teas were fundraising events sponsored by local churches. The hostess provided the silver service and china for the tea; guests brought silver coins to the Silver Tea and green folding money to the Green Tea.

Senior Deb and Esquires were social clubs organized by parents to provide recreational activities for their children.