

Introduction

An Invitation

*Down in Georgia there are peaches
Waiting for you, yes, and each is
Sweet as any peach
that you could reach for on a tree.
Southern beauties they are famous
Georgia's where they grow.
My folks write me, they invite me,
Don't you want to go?*¹

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Would you care for a Georgia peach?

Plucked off the tree only hours ago, it perfumes the air with a delicate sweetness, gives slightly to your touch, sits heavily in your hand: unblemished golden skin, streaked with crimson, pulled taut over a perfect orb of luscious flesh. Your mouth waters.

On the other hand, it *is* fuzzy. Argentines say, *Si te gusta el durazno, bancate la pelusa*. “If you like the peach, put up with the fuzz.” But as one visitor put it to Luther Burbank, the most famous American plant breeder, “a good many of us would about as willingly bite into a spiny cactus as a fuzzy peach.”² There is also the pit, or stone, the enamel-shattering shell at the center of the fruit. Perhaps thinking of the teeth of his older self, T.S. Eliot’s J. Alfred Prufrock fretted. “Do I dare to eat a peach?”³

And even if you can get past the fuzz and avoid the pit, there are other considerations. For example: What are you wearing? Do you have access to a water faucet? Are you carrying a knife? How much time do you have? Other fruits do not generate the same sort of quandary. Seedless

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grapes can be eaten in an office, at a computer, in a car. Pink Lady™ apples can be cut in the morning and still look and taste “fresh” hours later for your drive-thru lunch from McDonald’s.⁴ You can buy bananas at gas stations, confident in the sanitary and uniform quality of the eating experience. But a tree-ripened peach demands commitment. You have to stop, get to a sink, walk outside, lean over. The poet Wallace Stevens wrote: “With my whole body I taste these peaches.”⁵ A French gardener insisted that the fruit must be eaten “quarter by quarter.” Joy, he said, “comes with the first nectarous sap trickling down the throat, followed by the caress of rich texture to tongue and palate; the essence of summer sun and almondy bitterness reaches the nostrils and eventually ascends to the spirit.”⁶ For California peach grower David Mas Masumoto, proper peach consumption is sensory ecstasy: “I caress the skin ... stroking the suture... I close my eyes... take a deep breath, carry the bouquet deep into my lungs... I feel my teeth sink into the succulent flesh, and juice breaks into my mouth as I seal my lips on the skin and suck the meat... My taste buds pucker slightly.” Masumoto describes his first orchard peach as the loss of his “peach virginity.”⁷

II

Would you care to read *The Georgia Peach*?

I’m afraid this book will make a poor comparison to a ripe Georgia peach. Nevertheless, if you accept my invitation, you will learn a great deal about *Prunus persica* here, especially its “life” since the mid-nineteenth century. But this is not a commodity study, or a consideration of the social life of a thing, or an exercise in “thing-following.”⁸ A global study of peaches is possible: the fruit grows on nearly every continent and has cultural resonance in many parts of the world, especially in east Asia. But with all due respect to those who have followed organisms and things across geographical and temporal boundaries, I am pursuing a different quarry. I have followed the story, and the story has taken me to Georgia. More specifically, to a few places in that irregular polygon between the Atlantic and the Caribbean, named for a long dead British monarch and immortalized in a hymn to a more recently deceased woman.⁹ There, in Georgia, *Prunus persica* is at the center of a myth, an imaginative pattern, a belief-embodying, meaning-shaping story.¹⁰

The myth has appeared in many forms. It was in the words of the Belgian baron Louis Berckmans, who in 1859 foresaw a time when the South would be considered “the fruit garden of America,” a time when

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“thousands of acres, unfit for cultivation of cotton and corn, will be converted into remunerating orchards.”¹¹ It was in the prose poem of newspaperman John T. Boifeuillet, who declared in 1896:

Peach is now queen in Georgia. Her velvet cheeked highness rules in the state ... She comes delighting the eye of the beholder and pouring upon the altar of the air and upon the wandering zephyr her reviving perfume. She comes garlanded with summer's sweetest flowers, and on her cheeks trembles something like the first blush of the morning. With her coming, burdens of adversity vanish like mists before the rising sun. She reanimates the world... She is the emblem of prosperity.¹²

It was in the 1918 song of a New York City songwriting trio who, when they wanted to capture the spirit of the South (one of them had sojourned there as a soldier during the Great War), wrote: “Ev’ry thing is peaches down in Georgia ... Believe me, paradise is waiting there for you!” It was a song of the seductive, alluring, and above all, *available* South, embodied in a fruit, embodied in a woman’s body:

All of Georgia’s full of peaches,
 They’re all gorgeous, each one reaches
 Right into your heart
 and makes you part of Georgia too.
 Clingstone peaches cling right to you
 Peaches haunt your dream,
 Think of getting, always getting
 Peaches in your cream.¹³

And the myth persists in the casual statements of industry representatives today. “I’ll go to my grave swearing that Georgia peaches taste better than any other peaches,” fourth-generation grower Al Pearson drawled to a CBS Early Show reporter. “I’m just fortunate to be in the right place.”¹⁴

At the level of imagery, these myth purveyors seem to be exactly right. Imprinted on license plates, plastered on billboards, stamped on the state quarter, inscribed on the state map, dropped from a tower in downtown Atlanta on New Year’s Eve, the peach is easily Georgia’s most visible crop. When Ben and Jerry’s made a peach ice cream in 1986, they packed it with “Fresh Georgia Peaches.” In 1996, when the Summer Olympics came to Atlanta, the organizers dug up four peach trees from Al Pearson’s Big Six Farms near Fort Valley and transplanted them in Centennial Olympic Park.¹⁵ In 2011, when American Idol star and Rossville, Georgia native Lauren Alaina released her debut album, “Georgia Peaches” was the first single. Lynyrd Skynyrd sang about a “funny talkin’, honky-tonkin’ Georgia peach” in 1977; the Allman Brothers Band released their “Eat a

Peach for Peace” album in 1972; Jimmie Rodgers declared in 1932 that “Peach pickin’ time in Georgia” was “gal pickin’ time” for him; and just a few years before, black gospel singer Clara Hudman began her career in New York as “the Georgia Peach.”¹⁶ Perhaps the most famous “Georgia Peach” was Ty Cobb, raised in Royston, Georgia, and making his name playing for the Detroit Tigers from 1905–1926 – though his playing style was anything but sweet.¹⁷ Everything *does* seem to be peaches down in Georgia.

And yet Georgia ranks only third nationally in peach production, with South Carolina second and California producing the vast majority. Nor is peach production terribly important *inside* the state, at least by the numbers. *Prunus persica* covered 11,816 Georgia acres in 2014 and produced 35,000 tons of fresh fruit – a total worth about \$53.5 million. But this made up less than two-fifths of a percent of Georgia’s \$14 billion agricultural production in 2014, ranking well below broiler chickens (\$4.5 billion), pecans (\$313 million), blueberries (\$335 million), and even turfgrass, silage, cucumbers, pine straw and deer hunting leases. Spatially, peaches are similarly inconsequential: *Prunus persica*’s 11,816 acres pale beside the 1.38 million acres of cotton, 607,272 acres of peanuts, and 28,643 acres of blueberries.¹⁸ If the state was known by its most significant agricultural contributions, it would be the broiler state, the peanut state, or the quail state – it was number one in all of these commodities in 2014. Even cotton has a solid claim to the state’s identity: in 2012, Georgia’s cotton industry was, at 1.3 million acres, worth more than \$900 million, second only to Texas.¹⁹ Peaches have made a few people wealthy, but if growers destroyed their trees tomorrow, the state’s agricultural economy as a whole would experience the loss as a small bump in the road. Why, then, is “Georgia peach” a household name? Why have southerners – and Georgians in particular – clung to the fruit?

The answer to that question is a story. Peaches were everywhere in the South from the seventeenth century on, growing along fencerows and roadsides, in haphazard seedling orchards used for foraging hogs, feeding slaves, and making brandy (Ch. 1). In the mid-nineteenth century, the fruit became part of an earnest and sophisticated rural development campaign, the leaders of which were horticulturists, an eclectic collaborative of fruit growers, plant breeders, landscape architects, truck farmers, and arborists. Prominent horticulturists such as Stephen Elliott, Prosper Berckmans, and Samuel Rumph articulated a vision of a renovated southern landscape and engaged in both environmental and economic experimentation: breeding new fruit varieties and shipping

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commercially to northern cities (Ch. 2–3). In the 1890s and early 1900s, northern investors such as John Howard Hale of Connecticut expanded the reputation and the commercial reach of the Georgia peach industry (Ch. 4); overproduction and misdistribution led to the contraction of the industry in the 1930s, despite the best efforts of groups such as the Georgia Fruit Exchange (Ch. 5). Meanwhile, a critical mass of white self-described “progressives” such as Mabel Swartz Withoft gathered in Fort Valley and launched a campaign to create a new political unit, a “wonder county” named in honor of the fruit. Simultaneously, African Americans such as Henry Hunt, with the support of some of those white progressives, waged their own slow campaign for education, better living conditions, and economic parity (Ch. 6). In the aftermath of World War II, as black southerners left the countryside for the city and demanded equality, growers found themselves scrambling for workers willing to accept the low pay and status of field work. Meanwhile, the landscape itself seemed to rebel against growers, especially in the form of a new affliction called “Peach Tree Short Life.” Georgia’s peach growers sought the support of the federal government. By the 1970s, they had a new federal research lab; by the 1990s, they had a legal supply of federally sponsored Mexican guest workers, who make up most of the labor force today (Ch. 7). The fruit’s cultural presence has been more lasting and just as important as its physical presence, because it emerged as a viable commodity at a moment when the South was desperate for an improved reputation – a new face. And this cultural triumph has in turn helped to keep the physical trees in place, despite the increasing difficulties of growing the crop, as peach growers used this cultural capital to call upon local, state, and federal aid in the waning decades of the twentieth century.

III

For historians of agriculture, the environment, and the American South, many parts of this story will sound familiar. For the last four decades, environmental historians have been demonstrating the ways in which the non-human world *matters*, in all its messy detail. It matters, for instance, that the Great Plains is a place of periodic drought: when farmers and financiers ignored this characteristic in the early twentieth century, plowing up grassland and betting on continual high yields, the mass migrations of the Dust Bowl resulted.²⁰ It matters that the Mississippi River ebbs and flows and shifts course every so often: the levees engineered to keep it in place have instead set the stage for

less frequent but more catastrophic floods.²¹ In the story at hand, the “Georgia Peach” would not have existed without the particularities of climate and human geography that made the fruit so prolific, its production in Georgia so early, and its reception in the big population centers of the northeast so notable. Collectively, by chronicling not just human relationships and activity but the *world* in which we live and breathe and move – the “world with us,” as Paul Sutter recently put it – environmental historians have filled in the historical picture. American history is less frequently written as if it took place on the head of a pin, hermetically sealed in some vacuum tube while characters send mind waves back and forth.²²

While explorations of the human-nonhuman relationship abound, writing about that relationship has often been a vexed enterprise. To say that nature matters is one thing; to describe with precision what nature *is*, quite another. The commonsense notion of nature as something “out there” that needed to be protected by humans in parks and wilderness areas had, by the late 1990s, come under withering critique. “The flight from history that is very nearly the core of wilderness,” William Cronon wrote in a defining essay, “represents the false hope of an escape from responsibility, the illusion that we can somehow wipe clean the slate of our past and return to the tabula rasa that supposedly existed before we began to leave our marks on the world.”²³ For stories that complicate this troublesome human-nature, city-wilderness binary, environmental historians have looked to agriculture, which is, by definition, a human and environmental enterprise that takes shape in hybrid landscapes. These cultural and environmental approaches have in the last twenty years reinvigorated agricultural history, one of the more venerable fields in American history.²⁴ At the same time, not coincidentally, environmental history has looked South, mostly because, as Mart Stewart has succinctly observed, “in the South, man and nature were never unhitched.”²⁵ Unlike the supposed wildernesses of the American West, the South was a place with no “untouched” landscapes, a place where environmental history *was* agrarian history.²⁶

One of the more forceful insights emerging from this literature is, on the face of it, a pair of truisms: culture is agriculture, and agriculture is culture. Culture is *more* material than we sometimes make it out to be, awash as we are in a world of symbols.²⁷ At the same time, agriculture is *less* material than we sometimes acknowledge, comprising not just soil, plants, and animals but visions, values and narratives as well.²⁸ As agricultural historians have been pointing out for quite some time now, it is

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only in the last century or so that it has become possible to talk about the culture of a place or people *without* considering their agriculture. The observation that prior to the late nineteenth century, most people spent most of their waking hours outside, and that understanding those people might require some attention to their agricultural context, may be “blindingly obvious,” but is nevertheless crucial.²⁹ And the American South, with its long agrarian history and its fierce debates over the meaning of that history – over slavery and states’ rights and the “southern way of life” – has been particularly fertile soil for the examination of this agriculture-culture interplay.³⁰

I owe much to those histories of environment and humans, agriculture and culture, but *The Georgia Peach* is at heart a story about the power of environmental beauty. For scholars, beauty talk is usually a cover for something worse: a smokescreen for oppression, a lie told in service of some will to power, a mere marketing campaign.³¹ And indeed, in some ways, the easiest story to tell about peaches would be an exposé, calling out the Georgia peach myth as a simple lie. For although those who planted and promoted peaches made constant appeals to the beauty of the fruit and the orchard landscape, and often praised the peach as a thing apart, unbleared with greed, unstained with oppression, the fruit could not really be disentangled from the wretchedness and shame of the southern story. Much of what follows confirms this truth. I have no desire to hide the oppressions and transgressions committed on behalf of the Georgia Peach.

But this dominant mode of interpretation can have a corrosive effect, implying as it does that beauty does not really matter at all. “The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it,” C. S. Lewis once observed. “To ‘see through’ all things is the same as not to see.”³² Or as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick retorted to those who scorned what she called “reparative reading” as *merely* aesthetic or ameliorative: “What makes pleasure and amelioration so ‘mere’?” Life and scholarship alike, Sedgwick maintained, are not only about “exposing and problematizing hidden violences” but also about repairing the “murderous” pieces into “something like a whole.”³³ Beauty matters, and not just as an elegant garment for scholars to rend away, exposing the naked ugliness of power. Beauty matters, full stop. A peach tree in full bloom is a fine sight; a fresh plucked fruit is lovely and delicious. That something so fine could emerge from the land of cotton was not just remarkable, it was also good. Americans would be poorer without it.³⁴ We have many stories of the South’s ugliness; here is one about beauty.

In tandem with a reappraisal of beauty in the southern past, then, I am also arguing for academic modesty.³⁵ We make our careers out of argumentative engagement, so debunking is, in some respects, the name of the game. To cultivate academic modesty would mean to cast doubts on the virtues of exposure, to acknowledge how little we know, to admit that the scholar's perspective offers only a partial vista. Historians might know this somewhat better than other scholars, working as we do with faint traces of the past: we make "mythic constellations" out of a few stars; we pull a few droplets out of a "roaring cataract" and call it history.³⁶ Environmental and agricultural historians should be triply humble, for we draw from ecology and plant pathology and other disciplines, and frequently write about *know-how*, the kind of knowledge that cannot be fully described at all, but only experienced through years or generations of practice.³⁷

More to the point of the story at hand, cultivating the virtue of academic modesty might also restore our ability to perceive and articulate the ends to which we dedicate our critiques. The British philosopher R. G. Collingwood once described the historian as a woodsman guiding an "ignorant traveller" through the forest. "'Nothing here but trees and grass', thinks the traveller, and marches on. 'Look', says the woodsman, 'there is a tiger in that grass'."³⁸ As Collingwood's tiger suggests, historians tend to be serious folk, unveiling oppression, analyzing power, chronicling the great causal forces of the human past – all good gifts that we offer to each other and to the broader public. But the scholar should also be pointing out moments, however rare, of beauty, delight, wonder. We ought also be able to say, "Look, there is an orchid in that grass." Or, "Hang on! That there is a lazuli bunting!"

IV

What follows, then, is the story of the Georgia Peach and the mythology that has grown up around it. In telling this story, I am attempting to chart a course between the radical cynicism of the exposé and the credulous hunky-doryism of the human interest story. I critique the mythology of the Georgia peach, but not merely to debunk it. I am not just exposing the dirty underbelly of a Southern industry, nor just "looking away" in order to focus on its nobler features.³⁹ I can do neither in part because I grew up here, in the buckle of the peach belt. From the time of my birth, my father was the resident peach breeder

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at the USDA Research Laboratory in Byron, Georgia, and I went with him often to the orchards. I learned to emasculate flowers, removing the petals and the male pollen-bearing stamens of a blossom still in bud and leaving only the naked female pistil (this was a fun bit of knowledge to share with school-age friends); I walked through orchards with a whiffle bat, thinning green peaches and practicing my home run cut at the same time; I made peach leaf puree in search of the dreaded plum pox virus; and of course I ate pounds and pounds of peaches, plums, and apricots, fresh, frozen, and dried. My favorite birthday dish was something called “peach quiche,” which, being indescribable, you will just have to imagine.

The irony here is that, proud as I was to be from the place that produced the world’s best peaches – beware the soul who sought to defend the honor of *California* drupes in my presence – I was also aware that I grew up in a place not much regarded for its beauty or for its contribution to the national narrative. I looked out on my native landscape, and saw housing developments, self-storage units, big box stores, scraggly loblolly pine, sassafras, sumac, and broomsedge. Beauty was elsewhere. State parks in the Appalachian foothills or along the Gulf Coast had a small loveliness, their beauty in turn dwarfed by places even further afield: western North Carolina’s ancient mountains, New England’s rocky shoreline, the West’s dramatic canyons. I grew up at the epicenter, as it were, of American plainness, the environmental equivalent of a yawn, perhaps even a disgusted sneer. The world was less homely the further from home I went.

In the course of this project, I discovered that beauty was right at the heart of peach culture in this ugly region. It was in the making of the Georgia peach myth, and it was also a real experience of the landscape for many of this place’s inhabitants over the last two centuries. I also discovered that the ugliness of my native landscape was even deeper and more tragic than I understood. The peach has been a locus for visions of prosperity and of the good life; it has also been a way of denying the good life to whole classes, ornamenting the maintenance of poverty with paeans to agrarian harmony.

As a child, I took the omnipresence of the peach for granted; as an adult, I have returned to try and understand the place and the people who lived here, generation upon generation. Wallace Stevens’s peaches that he tasted with his “whole body” conjured much more than tangy sweetness: they spoke to him the way an “Angevine” (a native of Anjou)

“absorbs Anjou”; the way “a young lover sees the first buds of spring”;
 the way “the black Spaniard plays his guitar;” the way

The bells of the chapel pullulate sounds at
 Heart. The peaches are large and round,
 Ah! and red; and they have peach fuzz, ah!
 They are full of juice and the skin is soft.
 They are full of the colors of my village
 And of fair weather, summer, dew, peace.⁴⁰

Telling a story, anthropologist Tim Ingold writes, is not always “like weaving a tapestry to cover up the world,” and thus obscuring things as they really are. A story can also lead us “into the world, deeper and deeper, as one proceeds from outward appearances to an ever more intense poetic involvement.”⁴¹ Rather than exposing the lies laid across the landscape in the myth of the Georgia peach, this will book guide you anew into the landscape, whether or not you already know it firsthand.

And so I issue my third invitation. Would you care to see the good, the beautiful, the whimsical, the wicked, the wretched, and the ugly – the “colors of my village?” As you take in this story of the South, look for Collingwood’s tigers, but also the orchids and buntings, the first buds of spring, the bells of the chapel, the Spaniard at his guitar. I hope these stories open up a landscape previously hidden to you, that the next time you eat a Georgia peach, you will do so, as Stevens says, having absorbed something of the place. A century and a half ago, the Georgia peach symbolized modern, progressive agriculture, a New South on the wind; today it harkens back to a lost South of rural loveliness. Let’s follow the peaches – and those who grew, bred, picked, financed, marketed, regulated, ate, and praised them – into the landscape and into the southern past.

Would you care for a Georgia peach?