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JOHN T. EDGE
DECONSTRUCTS DIXIE VODKA
EVERYTHING WENT WILD:
SARAH VIREN
ON FLORIDA'S MOMENT
FICTION BY
CAROLINE BEIMFORD
& **BECKY HAGENSTON**

SOUTHERN / SOUTHERN / SOUTHERN / SOUTHERN / SOUTHERN
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Dixie Vodka

BY JOHN T. EDGE

Driving north out of Oxford a couple of years back, I passed the Snow White Tavern on the outskirts of Medon, just south of Jackson, Tennessee. In the rearview, I glimpsed a bright red-and-white-and-blue Confederate flag. Tethered high on a pole, it lolled in the breeze. I occasionally see stars and bars on that stretch, nailed to barn broadsides or flapping beneath porch eaves. This was different.

That flag wasn't a tattered cotton vestige of the past. It was new. An old and divisive symbol, rendered in weather-resistant nylon, it had been recently deployed by a bar that seemed to signal, in at least two ways, that retrograde whiteness was the proper default. That bold flag bothered me. In ways that were quickly evident. And in ways that I began to better understand when, in March of this year, I traveled to South Carolina for the annual Charleston Wine + Food Festival.

In addition to screening a new barbecue documentary produced by a colleague, I was booked for a few speaking gigs. On Friday afternoon, I spoke to a book club that drew members from Grace Cathedral, Mount Zion AME, and Mother Emanuel AME churches. They had been reading and discussing my book *The Potlikker Papers* for the past couple of months. On the day I joined them, we ate okra soup with saltines and shared stories.

One black woman stood to talk of the shoebox lunches that her forebears carried when they traveled the Jim Crow South. A black man stood to tell me that he liked the way I wrote about a civil rights movement-era cook and activist. As we adjourned, a white woman took me aside to talk about the chapter that focuses on restaurant desegregation struggles of the early 1960s and on the sometimes violent white resistance to black requests for apple pie,

coffee, and a seat at a lunch counter. "No one told me about this growing up," she said, her slow unangling of words tinged with regret. "I just didn't know this was happening."

I was buoyant. Here was my book—which in its last movement entwines and indicts Charleston terrorist Dylann Roof and Savannah television personality Paula Deen—brought to life. Here was my audience, brought to reckoning. I was full of myself, and full of that moment, when I returned to the hotel and unpacked a crate of gifts that festival organizers had kindly left in my room. A chocolate bar, flavored popcorn, a tin of spices, and a bottle of cocktail mix: typical swag.

Also tucked amid the environmentally correct packing shred was something atypical: an airplane bottle of Beaugard Dixie Vodka, tagged with Old South iconography. Stars that look like they were borrowed from a Confederate flag embossed the label. Positioned at the top was a maidenhead cameo of a whiskered man I assumed to be General P. G. T. Beauregard, who directed the Confederate attack at Fort Sumter in 1861, returned in 1863 to defend the city from Union attack, and popularized the Confederate flag that we generally refer to today as the stars and bars.

I would soon learn that though Dixie Vodka, like the flag I saw on the roadside, trafficked in old ideas, the brand itself was new, introduced by a Charleston company in 2013 as General Beaugard Dixie Vodka. Over the next few months, in conversation with friends and colleagues, I would try to make sense of why that newness annoyed me so much. And I would try to reckon whether the bother I felt mattered.

On the evening after my church supper, I delivered a Pecha Kucha talk on word

choice. (Pecha Kucha is a Japanese-inspired presentation mode in which twenty slides flash before your audience and you speak twenty seconds per image to make your point and win the crowd.) I opened with a Rebecca Solnit quote: "The revolt against brutality begins with a revolt against the language that hides that brutality." The words we use shape our realities, I told the crowd. And then, as a magazine advertisement for Monticello projected on the screen, I laid it on them.

The ad text I read encouraged visitors to explore the hallowed spaces where Jefferson designed the University of Virginia, met with the leaders of his age, and "managed his plantation." When I spoke, I emphasized the word plantation. Instead of using that term, I suggested a more honest phrase—slave labor camp. The crowd went quiet; if I had won them, they were not letting anyone know.

I figured that challenge might rankle in Charleston, where Lowcountry developers have long marketed and sold plantation allure as if it were a finial or balustrade. Typical is Heritage Plantation, established circa 1997, a gated community of nearly five hundred homes and a golf course, developed at Pawleys Island from antebellum Midway Plantation and True Blue Plantation. Enslaved people worked those lands under threat of harm or death to plant and harvest the rice that made white, landholding Charleston wealthy.

Cane Bay Plantation, which promises homebuyers a "comfortable sense of belonging" and a "feeling that things are taken care of, and in their proper place," traffics in similar lore. Taking care of land and people: It's a tragic point of fact. That is what people of color did under duress and on behalf of so-called planters while living and working in slave labor camps.



I was pleased with my brickbat toss. But unsettled, too. By slide twelve I had fallen three seconds behind on my script. That may not sound like a lot. But in the Pecha Kucha world, it's an eternity. I was so laggard that, as the final slides projected, all I could really do was blurt out my closing lines before the screen went black. A replay of the video shows me rushing through my talk, galloping toward a conclusion, making leaps of logic to land my points.

When I began reading and thinking about Dixie Vodka, I didn't want to gallop toward a conclusion. I aimed to plod, to listen, to map the paper trail of the brand since its 2013 inception. That proved tough, for the affronts came quickly. "General Beaugard Dixie Vodka Set to March Across South" announced a September 25, 2013, press release. One hundred and fifty years prior, when P. G. T. Beauregard marched toward Charleston, he fought to preserve the economic system that

shackled black Southerners and made possible extraordinary white Lowcountry wealth. This press release raised the question: Why march now?

It might be about gender. Sold in a faceted bottle with a cork stopper, the first Dixie bottles, which hit the market during the Civil War sesquicentennial, featured a caricature of a general clad in a hat and a high-button dress coat, typical of Confederate officers. Text on the side panel explained the ethos: "Feared on the battlefield, admired in the ballroom & loved in the bedroom, General Beaugard Dixie. Man amongst boys. Stand with the General."

At a moment when righteous social critics are stripping white men of their gendered privilege and birthright power, Dixie Vodka plays like a dose of virility. White men were once bourbon, the Dixie script suggests. They were once brave and bold, like the frontier spirit they drank. Now they are flavorless and odorless and anemic. Accepting that, Grain & Barrel Spirits of Charleston, South Carolina,

seems to say, *Here's a vodka that will, should you march in lockstep, restore your masculinity*

When I talked to Matti Anttila, the founder of Grain & Barrel, he patiently tracked the evolution of the brand from General Beaugard Dixie Vodka to Beaugard Dixie Vodka. "We wanted to soften the name," he said, explaining why his team had removed the military dress and hat and remade the Beaugard caricature into a late-nineteenth-century dandy. (They also changed "Feared on the battlefield" to "Praised in the field," a comparatively inscrutable phrase.)

Consumers had responded too literally to the brand, he said. His Beaugard was not a specific general who served the white slaveholding South, but a mythic figure, a man of gallantry and chivalry. Going forward, Anttila told me, they may sample Captain Morgan, the rum mascot, and the current Dos Equis television advertisements, rendering Beaugard a Deep South cartoon version of *The Most Interesting Man in the World*.

Anttila's talk of what happens when you soften and obscure a core message reminded me of the time I returned home from a reporting trip to Charleston with a fleece vest. I had traveled to South Carolina to write for this magazine about Nu South Apparel, a black-owned boutique selling clothes embroidered with a new sort of Confederate battle flag, rendered in the colors of the African Liberation Movement. Their intent was to co-opt and subvert. And I bought in. But when I arrived home, wearing a vest with a Nu South flag on the left breast, my wife, Blair, squinted and said, "That's a little subtle." If you toy with Confederate symbols, she implied, you have to clearly declare your intents.

The word Dixie is not necessarily malign. Black-power activist Robert Williams called his 1960s radio broadcast from Havana "Radio Free Dixie." More recently, the University of North Carolina Press published *Dixie Dharma*, a book about Buddhism in the region. (A vegan restaurant in Orlando uses the same name.) Julie Weiss, who wrote an expansive book about the influence and impact of Mexican migrations on the American South, chose the title *Corazón de Dixie*. Those Dixie usages subvert the Old South narrative. But if Beaugard Dixie Vodka is a purposefully inclusive brand, its makers telegraph that intent in ways that are too subtle. Syntax and context, that's the rub.

A couple of years back, Kathleen Purvis, a longtime friend and colleague, wrote an essay about the state of food writing in which she criticized the organization I direct for male bias. Her concept was bold and righteous. The critique was well intentioned. But I kept puzzling through her lexicon, scratching my head. To make a contemporary argument about gender and power, she referred to male food writers like me, whom she said were crowding out female food writers, as carpetbaggers. (The term refers to Northerners who traveled south after the Civil War to profit off a distressed region.) To further her point, she quoted *Gone with the Wind*.

Her argument rendered the South a place where Yankee-Rebel schisms still fester. Extend her argument and you get the white South as sleeper cell, listening for the next Confederate dog whistle, forever on guard to defend Dixie from privateers. Pitting the South against the North distracts from the real struggles of today. I'm not looking at you, *Scalawag* magazine. I see your tongue planted

in your cheek. But I can't look away from you, Beaugard.

Grain & Barrel founder Anttila, who says his mother's family first settled in Charleston around 1680, just after South Carolina was founded, believes that those old terms are benign. Dixie, he says, is merely a synonym for the South. "We wanted a super-regional brand that everyone in the South could identify with," he told me. "We can tell a very positive story around the term Dixie."

There are a range of ways to parse the word Dixie and the song to which it's closely related. A white man born in Ohio who performed in blackface wrote the song "Dixie." Not a fire-breathing Southern secessionist. By some reckonings the word Dixie has partial roots in Diddie Wah Diddy, a mythical place of bounty and leisure in black folklore, a land of milk and honey where, as the song "Big Rock Candy Mountain" would have it, the hens lay soft-boiled eggs. In some tellings, a South Carolina island was the locus of that black Dixie.

My issue here was Anttila's contemporary reference to "everyone." I didn't take issue on behalf of black Southerners, who can speak for themselves. My plaint came on behalf of thinking Southerners of all hues who reject contemporary normalization of the Old South and what it represents. Especially when we still reel from the horrors of what obeisance to that belief system inspired in Charleston in 2015 and Charlottesville in 2017.

When I climbed off my high horse, I recognized that his promise of redemption for old ideas spoke, too, of the gospel I often preach. During our short conversation, Anttila made three references to the rise of Southern craft brands, and his want to tap that same narrative. He talked about the ways that new interest in Southern food and drink culture has buoyed the region, and about how brands that leverage that rekindled pride will, in the years to come, succeed with consumers.

I had made comparable arguments about what this renaissance portends. My message was intended for liberals and progressives. But what if retrograde or unawares folk leverage this same moment? Or was Dixie Vodka doing nothing more malicious than identifying a market segment and satisfying that segment?

In a recent *New Yorker* essay, Helen Rossner wrote about Bill Penzey, the founder of Penzeys Spices who, early in the Trump administration, took to his newsletter to pitch smoked

paprika and declare that our current president is a racist. Old views about marketing said that was bad business. By taking a political side on a social issue, you risk alienating a large portion of your customer base, and, in turn, harm your business. But today, in an age of splintered audiences, selling to a tight segment is arguably the best path to success. New views, like the ones adopted by Penzey, say, *Don't flinch. Tell them who you are. That sells.*

Over breakfast recently, I laid out the Beaugard Dixie Vodka marketing scheme for Darren Grem, who teaches history at the University of Mississippi. When I asked whether the use of the word Dixie is inherently malign, he took a sip of coffee and smiled. "You can say it doesn't mean this or do that. But that's like wanting a hen not to lay an egg. At the end of a day, it's still a hen . . . and it's still going to lay an egg." They could have used any other Southern symbol, one of a thousand, Grem said, with a kind of sadness. "They could have called it Left Hind Tit Vodka," he said, using a slang farm term that dates to the previous century, "but they had to use Dixie."

Ethan Kytte and Blain Roberts, authors of the book *Denmark Vesey's Garden: Slavery and Memory in the Cradle of the Confederacy*, responded similarly via telephone. "Absent some of the other stuff on the label, that argument could be tenable," Kytte said. "If you didn't have the stars, if you didn't have Beaugard, then maybe Dixie could be inclusive." Roberts agreed: "They introduced this product during the sesquicentennial of the Civil War. To continue to market this product after Emanuel, that's hard to imagine." She trailed off, her voice tinged with the same regret I heard from Grem, a tone comparable to what I heard from the woman I met after my church lunch in Charleston.

The week after I talked to Grem, Charles Reagan Wilson, who taught me in graduate school, joined me at an Oxford taqueria for lunch. I brought along a bottle of Dixie the company had shipped my way. I asked him the question I had been asking colleagues, the question I had been asking myself: Is Dixie a malign word? Pulling the bottle from a cloth bag, I gestured toward the logo and asked if the usage could be inclusive. "It's a toxic word now," he said, referencing the terrorist attack on Mother Emanuel and the white nationalist attack in Charlottesville. "It wasn't always. But those current associations are hard to shake."

Companies have long leveraged the Old South to sell goods, Wilson said. They still do. Take that plantation house on the Southern Comfort bottle. That brand uses imagery and language to refer to antebellum plantations, where African Americans worked in bondage. Unlike Dixie Vodka, their marketing message dates back decades. The newness, we concluded, that's the other rub.

Wilson's mention of that plantation linkage got me thinking again about the ways that a word like Dixie signals the plantation South and, if you excise the euphemism, signals slave labor camps. Any brand that steeps itself in Charleston has to address that past. The smartest recognize that Southern history is not a play-pretty. Sampling symbols and slogans associated with this region comes with baggage. Steamer trunks full of it. So does the task of interpreting Southern food and drink.

The work I do for the Southern Foodways Alliance and the writing I do for this magazine benefit from that Old South frame. I intend my work to stand athwart it. Not affirm it. But would my work resonate if I didn't write against that narrative? Does every work that references the South beg suspicion?

I'm reminded of a Twitter exchange a couple of years back. Publicizing a presentation by Wilson, I tweeted the subject of his talk, "The Southern Way of Life." An academic in Canada, who writes about the region, shot back a response that implied we were both cozying up to the "Southern by the Grace of God" set. (For the record, Wilson's forthcoming book addresses how Southerners, broadly and inclusively defined, have expressed their relationship to this place over time.)

This is all to say that I know what it means to be misunderstood. More specifically, I know what it means for a member of the media to look my way with suspicion, based on the fact that I live and work in the South. Back in 1999, I met an NPR reporter on the front steps of Barnard Observatory, where I now work. If memory serves, he was there to report a racial incident on the University of Mississippi campus. When I handed over a brochure for our second Southern Foodways Symposium, he scanned quickly and asked, "What does this White Lily reference mean?"

As I explained that White Lily was a biscuit-flour company that then underwrote our work, I watched him disengage. Two weeks later, after puzzling through the exchange over and over again, I understood what had happened. He initially thought I was peddling Old South

blather, the kind of moonlight and magnolias and white lilies bunk that I was, in truth, trying to subvert. When he realized I wasn't trafficking in those goods, he lost interest. Because his ideas about how Southerners like me express themselves didn't match my own, he dismissed me. I aimed to afford Anttila and his Beaugard Dixie Vodka more. But his professed vision for the brand proved hard to grasp.

Late on Sunday afternoon during my March trip, I wandered the Charleston Wine + Food Festival tents in Marion Square, pitched one block west of Mother Emanuel, thinking I might discover a stall where the Grain & Barrel folk were pouring Beaugard Dixie Vodka. I didn't have to look hard. Alongside booths for Republic Ice Cream and *Edible Charleston*, I found a clutch of boozed-up people, two in early season seersucker, queuing for free Southern Mary cocktails, made with Dixie's black pepper vodka and Natural Blonde Bloody Mary mix.

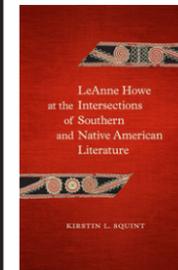
When I approached Donna Reeves, a black woman from nearby Summerville, South Carolina, standing two booths down nursing a rum drink, I asked what she thought of the Dixie name choice. Before I could awkwardly fumble through the rationale for my question, she asked her own: "Have you ever noticed how they keep building new housing developments around here and calling them plantations?" I smiled, not with pleasure, but with recognition and resignation.

"You say we can't let it go," she said, of enslavement and of the ways some white Southerners keep spackling new rouge on that old corpse. "You can't let it go. You're always holding on to slavery. You're always bringing it back up, always reminding everybody else about it, always trying to somehow revive it. If you want to talk about that time, be truthful about your Confederacy. It wasn't cute. It wasn't benign." She was on a roll.

"I love magnolia trees, ACC basketball, SEC football, and okra," Reeves said, her face brightening as she ticked off the litany. "I love the South. But we need to be honest about what the South is and the Confederacy was." We have to be honest about what it means when white Southerners introduce something new, after all this time, and name it Dixie, she said. "It's a new Confederate flag for a new time," I said. "It's a plantation by another name," Reeves said, her smile going flat and hard in the late afternoon sun. 🍷

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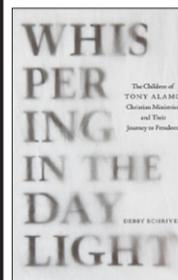
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