Southern USer Liberation (draft)

by Barbara Love

WHAT AND WHERE IS "THE SOUTH?"

"The South" is both a place and an idea. The South is a geographical region of the United States. It is also a state of mind and a relationship to that geographical region. It is a history, a culture, a collection of memories, and a way people understand themselves and one another. Being Southern can mean being born in the South, living there, having family roots there, or carrying with you a sense of belonging to Southern places and traditions.

Geographically, the South occupies the southeastern United States. The Mason-Dixon Line, an imaginary line that begins with the border between Maryland and Pennsylvania and stretches west to Kansas, marks the geographic boundaries of the South. It includes the states that seceded from the United States during the U.S. Civil War (1861-65). Though located in the Southern land base of the United States, New Mexico, Arizona, and Southern California are not conceptually included in the South. Texas is included, though its Western, cowboy, and more recently oil-based culture is different from the plantation-based culture of other parts of the South. For statistical purposes, the U.S. Census Bureau defines the South as including Delaware, Maryland, the District of Columbia, Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas. There are regional differences as well. Appalachia, the Gulf Coast, the Mississippi Delta, the Carolina Lowcountry, Louisiana, and other areas of the South have developed distinct cultural identities that differ from one another.

The idea of 'The South' has had different meanings and has been used for different purposes. The political notion of a Southern Strategy provides one mental construct of the South. Its focus is to use racism against African Americans to increase electoral support among white voters. Other activists, writers, artists, organizers, and community leaders have invoked Southern identity in very different ways—as a source of solidarity, cultural pride, resistance, and hopes for social change. The same words, South and Southern, carry different meanings depending upon who is using it and for what purpose.

The South is not a place with perfectly fixed borders, but a region where geography, history, culture, and identity overlap. It includes both similarities and differences regarding politics, history, language, food, music, ancestry, as well as personal belonging. The South is mountains and coastlines, cities and farms, bayous, swamps and river valleys. It is Indigenous, African American, Latino, Asian, European, Creole, Cajun, Appalachian, and much more. It is both land and memory, geography and imagination. It is a place

people inhabit, a history they inherit, and an identity they may embrace, question, reshape, or carry with them long after they have left. Like the people who make it home, the South has never been only one thing.

WHO ARE SOUTHERNERS

Southern US'ers are people who were born and raised in the South, currently live in the South, lived part of their lives in the South, or have ancestors who were born, raised, or lived in the South. Some know the South through parents, grandparents, and ancestors whose lives were rooted in the region. Southern identity can come through birthplace, residence, ancestry, memory, culture, or a lasting sense of belonging.

Intersectionality and Diversity of Southerners

Southerners are not one people with one story. We are people connected to the South in many different ways. Indigenous nations, such as the Cherokee**,** Muscogee (Creek)**,** Choctaw**,** Chickasaw, and Seminole, the Houma and Chitimacha have lived in the South for thousands of years. Spanish-speaking Europeans have lived there since the early 1500s. English-speaking Europeans have lived there since the mid 1600s. African heritage people came both as explorers during the 1500s and later as kidnapped enslaved laborers from areas in what are now the contemporary nation-states of Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, Angola, and others.

Southerners include Asian, Quebecois, Cajun-Acadian and Creole people. Louisiana was colonized by French, along with French Acadian survivors of *a genocide perpetrated by the British in Northeast Canada and US.* They imposed the French language and the Catholic religion on enslaved Africans, African-heritage Creoles, and Native peoples of the area. This combination of Native, African, French, Spanish, Caribbean, and Acadian cultures developed in ways that are distinct from the English-speaking, Protestant South. Cajun and Creole communities created distinctive languages, foods, music, religious traditions, and ways of life. Too often these cultures have been treated as tourist attractions while the people themselves, their histories, and their struggles have been made invisible.

While the roots of some Southerners stretch back thousands of years, others are recent immigrants to the United States or recent migrants from other parts of the country. All are part of the continuing story of the South.
Southerners differ by race, ethnicity, religion, language, class, profession, gender, ability, generation, and geography. We live in mountain towns, farming communities, suburbs, coastal settlements, and major cities. We are teachers, farmers, artists, workers, ministers, scientists, caregivers, business owners, students, and much more. We have

different beliefs, interests, perspectives, abilities, and passions. Together, we make up the rich diversity of the people of the South.

SOUTHERNERS AND SOUTHERN CULTURE

Southern culture is rich, complex, and deeply rooted in people, place, history, creativity, and community. Like people everywhere, Southerners share common human qualities of goodness, beauty, intelligence, strength, love, humor, resilience, and a desire for connection. Southern culture lives in memory, in landscape, in language, and in the ways people care for one another. It is carried in stories told across kitchen tables, in songs rising from churches and front porches, in recipes handed down by memory instead of written instruction, and in the familiar sound of a voice that tells us that we are home. To be Southern is not to be one kind of person or to share one single history. The South has always been many peoples, many traditions, many struggles, and many ways of living. Beneath that variety is a powerful sense of connection—to place, to family, to community, to history, and to the ordinary beauty of life.

Connection to Land and Nature: We are people shaped by the land. We know the feel of summer heat settling over a field, the sudden darkness before a thunderstorm, the coolness of a creek, the mist that gathers over low ground, the red clay that stains your shoes, and the smell of earth after rain. We know mountains and marshes, farmland and pine woods, river bottoms and coastlines. Even as the South changes, this bond with the natural world remains. It appears in gardens, fishing holes, hunting camps, farms, yards, and porches. It is there in the habit of sitting outside at the end of the day, not because there is nothing to do, but because there are things worth noticing—the breeze, the birds, a neighbor passing by, a story that has not yet finished being told. There is wisdom in knowing that a good life cannot be measured only by speed.

Rich Heritage of Music and art. Our culture has always made beauty out of what was close at hand. A storytelling quilt stitched from scraps. A basket woven by hand from straw or ‘found’ materials. A song made from sorrow. A meal made from humble ingredients and turned into something unforgettable. Southern creativity belongs to ordinary people, and there it finds its power. Blues, jazz, gospel, country, bluegrass, rhythm and blues, rock and roll, Cajun music, zydeco, folk music, and old-time mountain music grew from Southern lives and Southern places before traveling across the US and the world. Our stories have traveled too. They live in novels, poems, sermons, jokes, family tales, and the particular rhythms of our speech. Our accents and dialects carry ancestry and geography. They remind us that language itself can be a kind of home.

Family and community are woven through much of Southern life. We remember our people. We know our kinfolk, our old neighbors, the church family, the friend who has

been around so long that nobody remembers when they first became family. We gather around food because food is one of the oldest ways we know to say, “You belong here.” We bring casseroles when someone is grieving. We cook too much on purpose. We offer a plate to whoever walks in. We meet at reunions, fish fries, church socials, cookouts, and Sunday dinners. Southern hospitality, at its best, is not performance. It is the simple belief that another person should be received with warmth and treated with care. It is making room at the table.

Food and Culinary Traditions tell our history. Southern cooking carries the knowledge and creativity of African and African American cooks, Native peoples, European settlers, Cajun and Creole communities, and generations of families who learned how to create abundance from scarcity. Greens, cornbread, beans, barbecue, seafood, biscuits, gumbo, soul food, garden vegetables, sweet tea, and countless local dishes are more than recipes. They are memory. They are adaptation. They are love made visible. A family recipe can carry the presence of someone who has been gone for years. A familiar smell from the kitchen can return us to a place we thought we had left behind.

Sense of History: We are people who live close to history. The past in the South is never very far away. It is present in buildings, fields, family stories, cemeteries, songs, and silences. That history contains generosity and cruelty, beauty and injustice, courage and suffering. It includes slavery, segregation, displacement, poverty, and violence. It also includes resistance, faith, endurance, organizing, creativity, and the long struggle for freedom and justice. The Civil Rights Movement did not rise from nowhere. It grew from Southern churches, homes, schools, communities, and ordinary people who refused to accept that injustice was permanent. It includes the Trail of Tears and the People who made a home and community in forced locations. Southerners love of the South is large enough to tell the truth about all of it.

Southern culture insists on connection. We are connected to land and weather, to family and memory, to music and food, to laughter and sorrow, to the people who came before us and the people who will come after. We know the value of sitting awhile. Of listening. Of telling a story one more time. Of growing something. Of feeding somebody. Of making something beautiful with our own hands.

The South has always been many stories. It is a collection of voices, histories, cultures, and contradictions. At its best, Southern culture remembers what makes us human: belonging, hospitality, creativity, resilience, justice, beauty, and love. Southern culture includes the little things. Honoring our roots without being imprisoned by them. Telling the truth about where we have been. And carrying forward what is generous, life-giving, and good.

ELEMENTS OF SOUTHERN OPPRESSION

What is Southern Oppression?

Southern oppression is the intertwined history of oppression within the South—especially racial, economic, political, social, and cultural domination—and the use of that history to justify and invisibilize the oppression of Southerners through regional economic, political, social, and cultural domination, as well as stereotyping, scapegoating, and marginalization. It is the use of Southern injustices to obscure and absolve similar oppression throughout the United States. Understanding Southern oppression means holding these two truths at the same time.

Distinctive Elements of Southern Oppression

This discussion of Southern oppression refers not to injustices carried out within the region, but to the ways Southern people and Southern culture have been stereotyped, blamed, diminished, exploited, or treated as inferior by institutions and people outside the South. The distinctive pattern tying these elements together is the conversion of criticism of specific oppressive institutions in Southern history into generalized judgments about Southern people themselves. That transformation—from criticizing oppression to mistreatment and assigning inferiority, guilt, or backwardness to an entire region and its people, is the essence of southern oppression.

Some distinctive elements of Southern oppression include:

1. **Scapegoating for national oppression.** The South is often made the symbolic location of racism, intolerance, poverty, violence, and other US social problems, allowing the rest of the country to distance itself from comparable histories and practices in its own regions. In this way, the South can be made to carry a disproportionate share of the nation's moral conscience and consciousness.
2. **Regional demonization.** Southerners may be portrayed not simply as people shaped by a particular history and culture, but as inherently backward, prejudiced, violent, irrational, or morally deficient. This turns criticism of particular institutions or historical actions into condemnation of an entire regional population.
3. **Presumption of intellectual and cultural inferiority.** Southern accents, rural backgrounds, educational differences, and regional customs are often treated as evidence of low intelligence, ignorance, lack of sophistication, or cultural backwardness. Such judgments confuse differences in language, class, geography, and culture with differences in human ability or worth.
4. **Stereotyping and caricature.** Southerners are frequently reduced to a narrow set of images—the ignorant “hillbilly,” the racist white Southerner, the poor rural family, the

religious fanatic, or the quaint country character. These caricatures erase the tremendous racial, ethnic, religious, economic, political, and cultural diversity of Southern people.

5. **Assumption of collective guilt.** Collective guilt is assigned to the South and Southerners rather than historical accountability without inherited blame. Collective guilt fails to distinguish between responsibility for the past and responsibility in relation to the past. White Southerners living today cannot undo events of the past. They can take responsibility *in relation to* those events. This might include learning the history accurately, acknowledging its effects, refusing to reproduce injustice, preserving truthful memory, and deciding what obligations existing institutions, communities, as well as individuals have toward continuing consequences. Collective guilt presumes inherited shame, holding individual Southerners as personally responsible for historical events or institutions simply because they are Southern, as opposed to accountability for maintaining and supporting the continuing consequences of that history.
6. **Erasure of oppressed Southerners from the category of "Southerner."** When "Southern" becomes shorthand for white oppression, African American, Native, Latino, poor, working-class, immigrant, and other marginalized Southerners are disappeared and made invisible. This effectively erases the Southern identity of descendants of people who were themselves the subject of oppression within the South,
7. **Intersectionality**. Southern oppression creates the paradox of using injustices committed against Southern people as a justification for contempt toward Southerners as a whole. Southern oppression intersects with other identities and affects different groups of Southerners differently.
8. **Invisibility of Southern diversity and resistance.** Southern oppression represents the South primarily through its most oppressive institutions, while its traditions of resistance, interracial organizing, civil-rights activism, labor organizing, cultural creativity, and struggles for justice receive less recognition. The result is a flattened history in which Southerners appear only as perpetrators rather than also as victims, resisters, reformers, and agents of change.
9. **Cultural devaluation and cultural imperialism.** Southern languages, accents, music, folkways, religious practices, foodways, rural traditions, and community customs are sometimes judged according to cultural standards established elsewhere. Cultural domination results in treating Southern ways of speaking and living as things that need to be corrected, abandoned, modernized, escaped, or treated as eccentricities rather than understood on their own terms.
10. **Exoticization.** Southerners can be treated as curiosities—as though they belong to a strange, antiquated, or fundamentally different time or culture rather than being

ordinary contemporary people. A Southern accent or birthplace may suddenly make someone an object of fascination, amusement, or scrutiny.

11. **Media misrepresentation.** Film, television, literature, journalism, and popular culture have often relied on simplified Southern stereotypes, repeatedly associating Southern identity with ignorance, bigotry, backwardness, or dysfunction. Repetition can make these portrayals appear to describe ordinary Southern people rather than as recognizable cultural stereotypes.
12. **Social and cultural isolation.** Southerners may learn that acceptance in institutions dominated by people from other regions requires distancing themselves from their accents, hometowns, families, religious backgrounds, class origins, or regional identity. Some therefore attempt to conceal or minimize their Southern identity to avoid negative assumptions about intelligence, politics, education, or prejudice.
13. **Economic marginalization and extraction.** Southern oppression includes extractive relationships between Southern poverty and outside economic power. Southern communities may supply inexpensive labor, land, resources, or markets while decision-making authority and a disproportionate share of economic benefits are located elsewhere. Frequently, outside ownership or control of parts of Southern industry resulted in uneven distribution of the benefits of economic development.
14. **The use of regional difference as evidence of deficiency.** Features that reflect different histories—speech patterns, religious traditions, rural lifestyles, relationships to family and land, manners, foodways, or pace of life— are often interpreted through a hierarchy in which the cultural norms of other regions are assumed to be more educated, enlightened, modern, or legitimate.
15. **Internalized Southern oppression.** Repeated exposure to negative messages about the South, sometimes leads Southerners themselves to accept those judgments. People may become ashamed of their accents, communities, families, class backgrounds, or regional identity; assume that Southern culture is inherently defective; or direct contempt toward other Southerners in an effort to distance themselves from stereotypes and other mistreatment.

LIBERATION AND HEALING FOR SOUTHERNERS AND THE SOUTH

Healing Southern oppression requires more than correcting stereotypes about the South. It requires recovering the full humanity of Southern people, telling the truth about Southern history, repairing divisions that have been deliberately cultivated among us, and reclaiming the possibility of loving the South without denying the injustices that have taken place here.

This work matters not only to Southerners but to everyone in the United States. When the South is made to carry the symbolic burden for racism, poverty, violence, intolerance, and

other forms of oppression that have existed throughout the nation, the rest of the country is relieved of the responsibility to examine its own history. At the same time, when Southern people are reduced to stereotypes, the diversity of the South disappears—including the African American, Native, Latino, Asian, immigrant, working-class, poor, queer, disabled, Jewish, Catholic, Muslim, and other Southern people who have themselves experienced oppression.

Healing Southern oppression therefore asks us to hold two truths together. We must tell the truth about oppression within the South, and we must refuse the oppression of Southern people by people outside the South. We do not have to choose between accountability and belonging. We can face history without accepting inherited shame. We can oppose injustice without believing that Southern culture or Southern people are defective. And we can love where we come from while working to make it more just.

The Work for All Southerners

A central task for all Southerners is to rebuild connection with one another and to reclaim pride in the South and being Southern.

For generations, racial hierarchy was used to divide Southern people whose interests often overlapped. One of the most important commitments we can make is to never again allow ourselves to be divided against one another on the basis of race. The positive values within Southern culture—hospitality, generosity, family connection, mutual aid, storytelling, creativity, respect for the land, community responsibility, and taking time for one another—can become resources for building unity among Southerners of every race, class, region, and experience.

We can remember that our humanness and goodness remain fully intact. Oppression does not erase the intelligence, beauty, creativity, courage, or capacity for love of the people who experience it. Nor does the existence of oppressive institutions make an entire population inherently oppressive.

Southerners can learn again to celebrate our brilliance and beauty, our creativity, our connection with one another, and our connection with all humanity.

Part of this work involves regaining accurate information about Southern history and culture. We need histories large enough to include slavery and resistance to slavery, Jim Crow and struggles against Jim Crow, racial violence and interracial organizing, dispossession and Indigenous survival, poverty and labor movements, oppression and liberation.

Southern history contains continual waves of resistance. Black Southerners organized for freedom before, during, and after slavery. Black and white workers sometimes organized together despite enormous pressure intended to keep them apart. Southern women, students, farmers, workers, religious communities, and ordinary families repeatedly confronted injustice. Some of the most significant struggles for liberation in United States history occurred on Southern soil.

We can remember and proudly teach Southern traditions of civil-rights organizing, anti-lynching activism, labor organizing, anti-racist struggle, and resistance to racial hatred. These histories belong to Southern identity.

Healing also means working through the fear, grief, hopelessness, powerlessness, and despair accumulated through generations of oppression, poverty, violence, and humiliation. We can discharge these feelings rather than allowing them to determine what we believe about ourselves or one another.

We can examine any impulse to hide where we come from—to soften an accent, avoid mentioning a hometown, distance ourselves from our families, conceal our class origins, apologize for our religious backgrounds, or minimize our Southern identity because we fear negative assumptions about our intelligence, education, politics, or character.

We can examine and discharge contempt we may have learned toward other Southerners. Sometimes internalized oppression encourages us to separate ourselves from people who seem “too Southern” so that outsiders will not associate us with negative stereotypes. Liberation asks us instead to challenge the stereotype and avoid the urge to separation.

This does not mean defending everything associated with Southern history. It means refusing to confuse criticism of injustice with contempt for people.

We can challenge ridicule and dehumanizing stereotypes of Southern people when we encounter them. This does not require defensiveness or hostility. It can be as simple as saying that an accent is not evidence of ignorance, rural people are not inherently backward, and Southern identity does not tell us everything about a person's politics, beliefs, intelligence, or character.

At the same time, Southerners can connect with allies outside the region. Working people in different parts of the United States have far more in common than regional stereotypes suggest. Building relationships across regions can weaken the old habit of setting the South against other parts of the US, urban against rural, or one working population against another.

Healing for Black African-Heritage Southerners

For Black Southerners, healing must begin with full acknowledgment of how severe the oppression was.

There is no need to minimize slavery, racial terror, economic exploitation, segregation, disfranchisement, humiliation, or the many ways Black families were attacked and constrained. There must be room to grieve, rage, remember, and discharge the accumulated effects of that history.

But there is another truth to notice: Black Southerners survived, resisted, organized, created, loved, raised families, built institutions, transformed the culture, and won enormous victories.

Oppression was powerful, but it was never powerful enough to destroy Black humanity.

Black Southern history is not simply the history of what was done to Black people. It is the history of what Black people created and accomplished despite what was done to them.

Healing includes remembering that Black Southern brilliance, beauty, dignity, creativity, courage, and goodness remained intact throughout oppression and remain intact now.

Black Southerners need not surrender Southern identity to white supremacy. The South belongs to Black Southerners too.

Healing for White Southerners

White Southerners have particular work to do because learning the truth about slavery, Native dispossession, Jim Crow, lynching, racial terror, and segregation can evoke grief, horror, guilt, shame, defensiveness, anger, or fear.

Those feelings deserve attention, and the space to discharge them.

White Southerners can also recognize that inherited guilt is not the same thing as historical accountability. People living today are not personally guilty for acts they did not commit. White Southerners do not need to hate themselves, their families, their accents, or their Southern identity in order to understand history honestly.

The useful task is not to establish personal innocence through denial, nor personal goodness through shame. It is to learn the history accurately, understand its continuing consequences, reject racism in the present, and choose how to act now to mitigate the ongoing consequences of that history.

White Southerners can discharge guilt and shame about atrocities committed before their lifetimes without becoming indifferent to those atrocities. They can also discharge anger toward people who appear to blame all white Southerners collectively.

Neither shame nor defensiveness is liberation.

One direction for White southerners might be: *I did not create this history. I can learn it. I can grieve it. I can refuse to repeat it. I can stand against injustice now. I do not have to hate myself or my people in order to do so. I can honor and appreciate us instead.*

White Southerners can reclaim Southern identity while rejecting white supremacy.

Healing for Native Southern Peoples

Native people have lived upon and cared for Southern lands for thousands of years. Their communities, nations, governments, economies, languages, spiritual traditions, and relationships with the land have existed from antiquity.

Native peoples are alive and well and not merely remnants of Southern history. Their cultures, communities, relationships, and futures continue.
For Native Southerners, healing includes discharging about the attempted genocide of our people, the many losses due to European colonization (land, language, spiritual practices etc), broken treaties, warfare, removal, dispossession, the continued genocidal policies targeted at our communites, and the ongoing invisibility of our existence and struggles. Healing includes discharging and celebrating our survival, resilience, humor, generosity, and our long history and connection to this land.

Healing for Latino, Immigrant, and Other Global-Majority Southerners

For Latino Southerners and other Southerners whose families came from outside the traditional Black-white Southern narrative, a central liberation issue may be belonging.

Southern identity is not limited to one ancestry.

Spanish-speaking people have lived in parts of what is now the South for centuries. Contemporary Latino Southerners, Asian Southerners, African immigrants, Caribbean Southerners, Middle Eastern Southerners, and other communities are not outsiders to Southern culture simply because their families arrived by different routes or at different times.

Recent arrival does not make belonging conditional. A person does not need generations of ancestors in the region before being allowed to love it, shape it, and claim a place within it.

The healing direction is: I belong.

A Latino Southerner can say, “This is my country. This is my community. This is my South.”

A recent immigrant can boldly claim: this is my South. I belong!

Healing Social and Cultural Isolation

Southern oppression encourages isolation.

Some Southerners learn that moving into institutions dominated by people from elsewhere requires leaving parts of themselves behind. They may change the way they speak, hide where they grew up, make jokes about their hometown, distance themselves from relatives, or reassure people that they are “not like those Southerners.”

Healing requires noticing that pattern.

We can ask ourselves:

1. What have I been taught to be embarrassed about?
2. When have I tried to prove that I was different from other Southerners?
3. When did I laugh at a Southern accent because I feared being associated with it?
4. Have I assumed that people from my hometown were less intelligent or sophisticated than people elsewhere?
5. How have I hidden my class background, rural background, religion, family, or region?

These are not questions for blame. They are directions for discharge and liberation.

The goal is not to romanticize everything Southern. It is to become free enough to decide for ourselves what we value rather than allowing contempt to make that decision for us.

The Work of Counselors and Allies

Counselors and allies outside the South have an important role.

First, learn the history. Question everything you have heard, said, or believed about Southern people while remembering that stereotypes seem familiar.

Learn about Southern cultural diversity. Learn about Black Southern resistance, Indigenous Southern history, Southern labor struggles, immigrant communities, Appalachian history, Cajun and Creole cultures, and the long histories of movements for justice within the region.

Encourage Southerners of all backgrounds to take pride in their Southern heritage.

Remind Southerners that their humanity and goodness remain intact.

Stand beside Southern people rather than treating them as objects to be studied, corrected, mocked, or rescued.

Interrupt jokes and stereotypes that present Southern accents as evidence of stupidity, rural people as backward, or all Southerners as bigoted.

Your own discharge work can include:

1. Examine any feelings of superiority toward Southern people. Notice what you have been taught about Southern intelligence, education, religion, politics, poverty, manners, sexuality, or culture.

2. Ask what comes up when you encounter a strong Southern accent.
3. Ask what comes up when someone says they are proud to be Southern.
4. Ask what you assume when you hear the words *rural*, *Appalachian*, *country*, or *Southern white*.

These reactions can reveal learned regional prejudice.

Allies can also experiment with some of the values Southern culture has historically protected. Notice what happens when:

1. You slow down.
2. Sit on a porch.
3. Watch the weather.
4. Talk with somebody without accomplishing anything.
5. Share food.
6. Listen to a long story without rushing the teller.
7. Listen to the same story, again.

Sometimes liberation requires learning that urgency itself is not always a virtue.

Liberation Without Denial

The liberation of Southerners cannot be built upon denial of history. Nor can it be built upon inherited shame. It requires something more courageous: truth without humiliation, accountability without inherited guilt, pride without domination, and belonging without exclusion.

We can acknowledge oppression within the South while refusing to make the South synonymous with oppression. We can remember slavery without imagining Black Southerners only as victims. We can remember white supremacy without believing that every white Southerner carries personal guilt for history. We can remember Native dispossession while recognizing Native peoples as living Southerners rather than people who disappeared into the past. We can welcome immigrants without imagining that Southern identity is something whose membership was closed generations ago. And we can challenge injustice while loving the people and places from which we come.

Perhaps the deepest direction for Southern liberation is therefore very simple:

Remember who we are.

We are not the stereotypes.

We are not reducible to the worst moments in our history.

We are not required to hide our voices, our families, our hometowns, our land, or our culture in order to belong in the larger world.

We can remember our brilliance and beauty.

We can remember the struggles for justice that have always existed among Southern people.

We can refuse to be divided again.

We can build relationships with people throughout the country without accepting contempt for ourselves.

We can carry forward what is most life-giving in Southern culture—connection, generosity, creativity, hospitality, courage, love of place, resistance to injustice, and the conviction that there is always room for one more person at the table. We can demand/create a bigger table.

Healing Southern oppression and Southern liberation does not ask us to forget the past. It asks us to become free enough to remember all of it—and still choose one another.

Contradictions, Directions, and Commitments
for Healing and Liberation from Southern Oppression

For all Southerners

1. Reclaim pride in being Southern without denying or minimizing oppression within Southern history.
2. Remember that Southern people are not reducible to stereotypes, historical atrocities, or the actions of elites.
3. Learn accurate, inclusive Southern history, including histories of resistance, interracial organizing, labor struggle, civil-rights activism, Indigenous survival, and cultural creativity.
4. Use the positive values of Southern culture—hospitality, mutual aid, family connection, storytelling, creativity, love of place, and community responsibility—to build unity.
5. Commit to never again allowing Southerners to be divided against one another on the basis of race.
6. Challenge ridicule, contempt, and stereotypes directed at Southern people, accents, traditions, class backgrounds, religions, or communities.
7. Examine and work through shame, guilt, hopelessness, despair, and powerlessness associated with Southern identity.
8. Notice any urge to hide, minimize, or disown Southern roots, accents, hometowns, families, class origins, religious backgrounds, or regional identity.
9. Examine any contempt toward other Southerners, especially efforts to distance oneself from people perceived as “too Southern.”
10. Celebrate Southern brilliance, beauty, creativity, resilience, and connection to other human beings.
11. Remember that the South has a long history of protest against oppression and that some of the most important liberation struggles in U.S. history took place there.
12. Build alliances with working people and other natural allies throughout the United States.
13. Replace inherited shame with historical understanding and present-day responsibility.
14. Distinguish accountability for present actions from personal blame for historical events one did not commit.
15. Practice forms of life that resist dehumanizing urgency: slow down, sit, visit, listen, share food, spend time outdoors, and value relationships.

For Black and African-heritage Southerners

1. Fully acknowledge how severe racial oppression was without minimizing its violence or consequences.
2. Make room for grief, anger, fear, and other feelings connected to that history.
3. Remember that Black Southerners survived, resisted, organized, created, built institutions, and won major victories.
4. Claim Black Southern history as a history of power and resistance, not only victimization.
5. Remember that Black humanity, goodness, intelligence, beauty, creativity, and dignity were never destroyed by oppression.
6. Claim Southern identity without surrendering it to white supremacy.
7. Celebrate the central role Black Southerners played in transforming both the South and the United States.

For White Southerners

1. Learn accurately about slavery, Jim Crow, Native dispossession, lynching, segregation, and racial terror.
2. Work through guilt and shame without denying the history that produced those feelings.
3. Distinguish inherited guilt from present-day responsibility.
4. Reject the idea that self-hatred is necessary for historical honesty.
5. Examine defensiveness or anger when the South or white Southerners are blamed collectively.
6. Take responsibility for present-day choices, behavior, and participation in institutions.
7. Reject racism now without assuming personal culpability for acts committed before one was born.
8. Reclaim Southern identity without reclaiming white supremacy.
9. Allow grief, accountability, and pride in Southern belonging to coexist.

For Native Southern peoples

1. Boldly claim and reclaim Southern land, history, identity, and belonging.
2. Remember that Southern history began long before European colonization.
3. Recover accurate knowledge of Native nations, languages, governments, cultures, and relationships to land.
4. Work through grief, rage, terror, and internalized messages connected to dispossession, forced removal, cultural suppression, and genocide.
5. Emphasize survival, continuity, sovereignty, and living Native presence.
6. Refuse narratives that treat Native peoples only as figures from the past.

7. Strengthen connection with other Southerners while preserving distinct Native identities and histories.

For Latino, immigrant, and other Global-Majority Southerners

1. Claim belonging fully and without apology.
2. Reject the idea that Southern identity belongs only to families with centuries of regional ancestry.
3. Remember that Spanish-speaking and other non-Anglo communities have long histories in the South.
4. Affirm: “I belong here.”
5. Claim the right to shape Southern culture in the present.
6. Reject treatment as permanently foreign or outside Southern identity.
7. Celebrate the languages, foods, traditions, and histories that enrich the South.

For healing social and cultural isolation

1. Notice when acceptance seems to require hiding an accent, hometown, family, religion, or class background.
2. Ask what you were taught to be embarrassed about.
3. Notice when you have tried to prove that you are “not like other Southerners.”
4. Examine whether you have associated Southern accents or rural backgrounds with low intelligence or lack of sophistication.
5. Challenge internalized beliefs that Southern culture is defective or inferior.
6. Stop using contempt for other Southerners as a strategy for gaining acceptance.
7. Replace distancing with curiosity, connection, and solidarity.

For counselors and allies

1. Learn Southern history and culture beyond stereotypes.
2. Study the diversity of Southern peoples and traditions.
3. Encourage Southerners to take appropriate pride in their heritage.
4. Remind Southern people that their humanity and goodness remain intact.
5. Stand with Southerners rather than treating them as objects to be corrected, mocked, or rescued.
6. Interrupt stereotypes about Southern intelligence, accents, religion, rural life, education, poverty, and politics.
7. Examine feelings of superiority toward Southern people.
8. Notice what you have absorbed from media, literature, education, and popular culture about the South.
9. Support Southerners in recovering accurate history and cultural knowledge.
10. Encourage Native Southerners to reclaim belonging and historical continuity.

11. Encourage Latino and immigrant Southerners to claim Southern identity fully.
12. Support white Southerners in working through guilt and shame without encouraging denial or inherited self-condemnation.
13. Support Black Southerners in honoring both the reality of oppression and the history of resistance and victory.
14. Challenge regional prejudice when you hear or witness it.
15. Practice slowing down and notice any discomfort with stillness, leisure, porch sitting, visiting, storytelling, or unstructured human connection.

Core principles for Southern liberation

1. Tell the truth without humiliation.
2. Practice accountability without inherited guilt.
3. Claim pride without domination.
4. Build belonging without exclusion.
5. Remember oppression without allowing it to define Southern people.
6. Honor resistance as much as suffering.
7. Refuse both romanticization and demonization of the South.
8. Choose solidarity over racial and regional division.
9. Protect the dignity of every kind of Southerner.
10. Remember that liberation means becoming free enough to know the whole history and still choose connection.

COMMITMENT FOR SOUTHERN USERS

I sincerely promise that from this moment on,
I will never falter in my pride in being a Southerner,
in my love for the beautiful Southern land,
for the thoughtful courtesy and caring of her people,
for their often-obscured but always-persisting resistance to oppression,
for all our proud heritage and our brilliant future.
I shall never lose sight of the fact that *all* people of the South are my sisters and brothers,
nor allow any slight against any Southern person to go uncorrected, not even if voiced by Southerners themselves.
The *real* South will be seen again!

READING ABOUT SOUTHERN LIBERATION

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Love, Barbara. “Southern Liberation.” *Present Time* 147 April 2007:18-23.

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