

HIGH PROFILE: John L.S. Simpkins  
*Director of diversity tackles race head-on*  
ROB YOUNG, The Post and Courier  
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He breaks into a wide, curvy grin; his mouth like a slice of watermelon.

John L.S. Simpkins adores the fruit, the flavor; though he acts less as a food critic than one of culture.

The image lingers, stuck in Southern craws. A black fellow, lips wrapped around watermelon, smacks away as the juices run down his mouth and fingers - nonchalant, no cares.

Simpkins smirks, conscious of the irony.

China tops all other nations in the production of watermelon. The Japanese fetishize it, cultivating the fruit into square portions and selling it for twice the price of a normal watermelon. Europe, America, just name it. African by origin, it's enjoyed by all - more or less.

"Everyone in the world loves watermelon except African-Americans," says Simpkins, an assistant professor and the director of diversity initiatives at the Charleston School of Law.

The stigma tarries, its implications serious enough, Simpkins notes, that blacks joke of eating watermelon out of sight and away from whites, perhaps in their kitchens with curtains pulled, the fruit hidden by silver goblets.

And so it gives Simpkins his hobby: collecting pictures of himself next to watermelons, on vacations to France, South America, Greece. It's his wink at the world even if his real treat comes from chomping on the fruit, spitting out seeds and stereotypes.

### **Overheard**

It stings.

He stands before his classmates, teachers, friends and family in a dark blue

cap and gown, welcoming them to commencement. The address comes off without blemish.

Then later, he learns of a white man whom a friend overhears in the audience, how the man turns to his wife once Simpkins finishes.

"Great speech," he tells her. "I wonder who wrote it?"

No matter that Simpkins graduates as student body president. No matter that his parents are teachers, and that an aunt, a stickler for English, once demanded he rewrite three times a simple letter to a friend. No matter that in a few weeks he becomes the first student from his high school in Lexington to attend Harvard, where the city square might as well be Times Square to Simpkins.

It is a long way from his sleepy hometown, which figured getting a Hardee's meant it had arrived, and a long way, too, from his 16 first cousins, whom he considers brothers and sisters, and his great-uncle the house painter, the man who gave him his name.

And still it seems far from South Africa, whose plight Simpkins learns about at age 11 or 12 from a "60 Minutes" program, and of an imprisoned leader whose name cannot be uttered, whose picture cannot be shown without consequence.

Simpkins himself bears witness.

"I wonder who wrote it?"

Who shaped it is the fair question.

### **Hottentots and bushmen**

So he digs.

Since that moment as a boy, Simpkins reads up on South Africa, apartheid and Nelson Mandela, devouring his finds,

engaged by the struggle. These ideas aren't alien, just times he deems in the past. Even in Lexington, the schools become fully integrated only the year before Simpkins' enrollment.

In high school, he develops a friendship with someone studying in southern Africa. She sends him detailed letters, writing of the area, its conditions and people.

Then from the summer of his junior year at Harvard, Simpkins makes it his assignment to find a job in the country. He seeks out South African visitors and students.

He takes classes in international relations and politics, graduating with a degree in government, and at last he nabs a position in 1993 teaching history and literature at one of South Africa's first integrated schools, where a neighbor once dug a trench to keep blacks from attending.

He begins his classes with a transparently false statement: "South Africa was founded in 1652 by Jan van Riebeeck."

It's a nudge, Simpkins' suggestion to his students that they abandon the apartheid educational system they grew up with, one that taught students only to accept.

"Any questions?" Simpkins asks, then continues. "Before he arrived, it was completely empty except for a scattering of Hottentots and bushmen."

Finally, a hand. "There were actually civilizations here when Jan van Riebeeck got here," a student might say, "so he didn't find the country. And by the way, they're not Hottentots and they're not bushmen. They called themselves the Khoikhoi."

It's Simpkins' first lesson: persuading students to challenge, to create dialogue and to break down vestiges.

"They were people essentially in fear, and they didn't feel comfortable speaking out in class," he says.

Soon in Johannesburg he watches another relic of the old guard tumble. With

the threat of civil war real, countrymen stand in line for miles to vote the day of the first election after apartheid. Then it ends, and ends peacefully with Mandela the victor, and the release follows, the tension ebbs, strangers take to the streets dancing, a sweet celebration, freedom.

### **Space and place**

He calls it a parallel life, having returned to the United States in 1995.

Simpkins keeps another set of friends, hangouts and diversions "on the other side of the world" in South Africa. Most recently, he visited the country for two weeks in July, researching constitutional rights for housing. Simpkins, 35, and a Duke University law school graduate, also aids in the constitution-building processes of Kenya and Uganda.

His time in South Africa those years ago impressed upon him the notion of opportunity, lost and gained.

In his position at the Charleston School of Law, he's charged with a daunting chore: lessening racial disparities within the profession, gaps that in no way reflect the state's population. The enrollment for South Carolina law schools isn't made up of 30 percent blacks. In fact, the applicant pool alone numbers less than 10 percent, Simpkins says.

Here's why: Fewer blacks attend college. Fewer blacks take the LSAT. Fewer blacks see law as a career option. It becomes a matter of reaching students in elementary, middle and high schools and colleges, persuading them of the possibility. The payoff itself might come years from now, when that seventh-grader reaches college and decides that, hey, law school isn't such a bad idea. It's a gamble worth upping the odds.

"I think that John has an empathy and an understanding of regular people that many folks forget these days," says Andy Brack, who along with Simpkins and Leo Fishman founded a progressive think-tank called the

Center for a Better South. "It is fundamental to his character to figure out ways that they can be helped."

Also, Simpkins aims to shatter assumptions of students and their potential employers, schools of thought and law.

"Look at his background, how he's been able to bridge gaps and cross cultural backgrounds and actually bring people together," says Margie Pizarro, a third-year law student. "Who else can do that?"

During his first trip to Johannesburg, Simpkins visited a supermarket and made his way through the line. A white South African at the checkout took his money, treating him brusquely, thrusting the change in his direction.

"Thank you very much," he told her, his American accent apparent.

Her demeanor changed. She asked about the States, what it was like. Simpkins managed to be civil, trying to show her that others, those unlike her, just might merit conversation.

"In that way, South Africa is very similar to South Carolina," Simpkins explains. "Space and place matter. If people put you in a certain place, they will treat you a certain way. If they put you in another place ... they'll treat you differently. It's all about the mental and physical space that you occupy."

### **'Ode to the End'**

Simpkins writes on occasion of topics related to race, space and place, his extended family, the forbidden fruit - watermelon - in such publications as *The Oxford American* and *The New Republic*. His profile of "Boondocks" comic strip creator Aaron McGruder appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*.

His next piece will deal with fear, and more pointedly a society based on fear: gated communities, bulky SUVs - manifestations against perceived threats. At the same time, he'll touch on race relations

in the South, the strange dance, he calls it, of blacks and whites.

"(Blacks and whites) know each other and have these relationships that exist on a separate plane," Simpkins says. "These aren't the friends who you have over for dinner. But they're also not the people with whom you just exchange a hello. It's somewhere in between."

He questions its nature.

"What is to fear from someone who works in your office who essentially has the same experiences, but happens to belong to a different racial group?"

His "Ode to the End," written for *The Oxford American*, invokes his great-uncle, John Leland Sligh. He made it through high school but no more, eking out a decent living as a house painter. His wife kept the books, and along the way, they bought a few houses on modest incomes, renting and eventually selling them for retirement money.

At 89, Sligh became ill and weak. Simpkins' family called him home, forcing him to cut short a trip celebrating his first wedding anniversary. He got back in time to visit with his uncle, who died in the same house he lived in nearly his entire life, the same house his mother knew as home. Simpkins saw the dignity in a man who made so much of himself. He lacked only circumstance.

"It was not lost on me," Simpkins says. "Here I was holding the hand of the person who had given me my name. I was the last person that he would touch."

Simpkins' 16-month-old son does not carry his father's name; Jonah has a biracial heritage. His mother, Simpkins' wife, Carolyn, is Chinese. On a trip to Vancouver, an older Asian lady wandered over to Simpkins, standing with his son in his arms outside a store where his wife was shopping.

"He has a very smart head," she said in accented English, peering over the child.

Simpkins found it a wonderful thing, how an Asian woman could approach a black man without uncertainty. She just noticed a guy with a cute kid.

Simpkins looks to the day his job becomes obsolete, all problems licked,

services unwarranted. Though he confides through his smile, "That's not going to happen anytime soon."

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