

# The intersection of religion, food and race

## Speaker at Duke Divinity discusses African-American foodways

BY DAWN BAUMGARTNER  
VAUGHAN  
DVAUGHAN@HERALDSUN.COM;  
919-419-6563

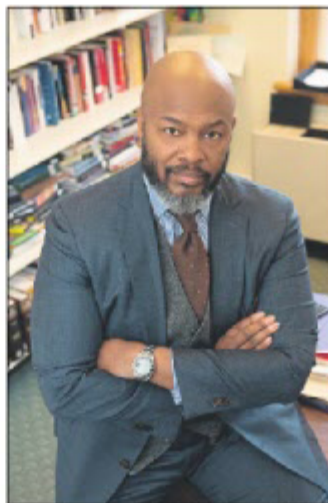
DURHAM — For the latest “Race and Faith Dialogue” at Duke Divinity School, the guest speaker took on African-American foodways. Foodways are the eating habits and culinary traditions of a people, region or historical period. Derek Hicks, assistant professor of religion and culture at Wake Forest Divinity School, spoke Tuesday about religion, food and race in African-American life.

Rev. Eboni Marshall Turman, who leads the Office of Black Church Studies, said the dialogues bring junior and mid-career theologians to give guest lectures at Duke Divinity School. Hicks received his doctorate from

Rice University and teaches and researches African-American religion, North American religion and religion and foodways at Wake Forest Divinity.

He is taking a semester off from Wake Forest to focus on his forthcoming book, “Feeding Flesh and Spirit: Religion, Food, and the Saga of Race in Black America,” which is under review from UNC Press.

Among his book’s topics are foodways, framing food culture in terms of religion, and a conversation about what’s happening as it relates to food culture on the ground. Hicks talked about African-Americans taking solace in culinary culture during the Colonial and Antebellum historical eras of the 1700s and 1800s. He used illustrations



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Derek Hicks, assistant professor at Wake Forest Divinity School, spoke about religion, food and race in African-American life at Duke Divinity School this week.

from advertisements and publications that showed the “degradation of black bodies” by subjugating African-Americans as food themselves. It was done to

show African-Americans as the “other,” with the example today of racist images of watermelons on the lawn of the White House after the election of the first African-American president. Even the leader of the free world is subject to it, Hicks said.

Regarding black foodways, “food is never just food,” he said. “As with religion, it’s a critical way groups orient themselves to the world.”

Hicks talked about the weekly ration day for enslaved people on weekends, and how mealtime could be used to fortify the spirit. However, a kitchen was also the location of violent confrontations between mistress and servant, he said. In his book, Hicks will discuss “Black Religio-Gastronomy and the Identity Quest.” Religio-Gastronomy

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## FOOD

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is about choosing food, preparing food and eating food, he said, and lays the groundwork for the intersection of foodways. Historically for African-Americans, food was a way to be their own agents of change and to maintain cultural ownership of their lives, he said.

Hicks talked about his own family — his grandmother Sadie, 87, and how her front porch was a gathering space both in Louisiana and when she moved to Los Angeles. He joked to her about kale — a green that is getting attention lately as trendy — and she said that she had been growing it in her own garden for years to supplement collard and mustard greens.

Wake Forest Divinity is in

Winston-Salem, which Hicks said has high food insecurity and food deserts. He talked about new grocery stores going up in one neighborhood, when another neighborhood a few miles away, and home to part of Winston-Salem State University, had none. Hicks will take on that topic in his book, too, he said.

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dawnbvaughan.