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The Unpopular History of the 'Black Food': African-American Food Stereotypes in Popular Media

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Abstract

The cultivation, consumption, and distribution of food have remained a subject of study within the domain of Cultural Studies. In addition to correlating food and culture, such studies will help us gain a new perspective on the power nexus involved and will provide us an understanding of the biopolitics underlying the scenario. This paper attempts to contextualize the food stereotypes surrounding the African-American population, by analyzing the production of the same in Literature and Arts. In this paper, locating such stereotypes in select songs, cartoons, and films will permit a cultural understanding of the phenomenon. This follows a section on the historical survey of these stereotypes. A study on these stereotypes will enable a broader understanding of the Power quotient operating in the domain of literary and artistic representations. The paper also tries to identify the inherent racism in 'food politics' as the enabler of consequent subordination and marginalization. The extended goal of the paper is to appreciate the history of reversals, re-reversals, and reverse appropriations involved in the production and circulation of these food stereotypes.

Keywords: Stereotype, Food, African-American, Cartoons, Race, Subversion, Coon, Black, Media, Power.

Introduction

African-Americans have been subjected to harsh and explicit racial stereotyping for several decades. Literary and artistic representations too engage in the tradition, by employing forms of stereotyping as a substitute for racial deprecation. Figures of Jump Jim Crow, Mammy, Sambo, Pickaninny, and many other characters in various popular cartoons and movies pose as apparently innocuous artistic representations despite their biased content. The extent to which popular media is rife with such typecasts prove the pervasiveness of the discriminative attitude in

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popular imagination. An artistic practice in this regard is that of the food stereotypes associated with the community. The presumption that they have an unusual and irrepressible appetite for certain food items like the watermelon or fried chicken receives material manifestation in such depictions. This re-summoning of the mockery that began with the Minstrelsy tradition identifies and re-establishes the subject as inferior. These stereotypes not only influence the popular consciousness and construct prejudices against the Other. They are even designed and employed as mechanisms of control over the marginalized. However, it is intriguing to note that chicken and watermelon were originally instrumental in the emancipation of the African-American community. Despite this, the stories are twisted to feed the White appetite for domination. The paper also examines the history of re-reversal, since such stereotypes have recently been borrowed by the 'Blacks' themselves in their attempts to market these images and they make a profit out of the process. The paper will focus on examining how the material agents of Black emancipation are usurped by the Whites to defame the former and how the Blacks still re-employ them to advance their economic goals. To accomplish a critical evaluation of the production of such stereotypes, the literary and artistic depictions will be placed in their respective social, political, and historical contexts.

Labeled Identities: The Origin of the Stereotype

The watermelon stereotype became a full-fledged association since the time of the Civil War that happened in the 1860s. The Black slaves were permitted by their White Masters to cultivate watermelon on their fields and the laborers even took a day off during the summer season to enjoy the first watermelon harvest. The slaves eating the watermelon, was supposedly a feast for the master's to witness. They were excited to see the slaves openly exhibiting their 'wild appetite' and eating the watermelons with the fruit juice dripping all over their faces. Even when these slaves later became free, they cultivated, ate, and sold watermelons. The stereotype thus has its origins in the Age of Slavery and by overlooking the fact that, Blacks were left with minimal options to satisfy their hunger. Such food stereotypes ignore the historical context, and blindly cater to the White prejudice against the Blacks that they are unclean, childish, lazy, and uncivilized. Even the coon caricatures depicted the Black slaves as lazy. Watermelon was

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popular because of the easiness with which they could be grown on the fields. Since they are colorful, sweet and non-nutritional, it had an appeal of a childish taste. The clumsiness makes them hard to eat in public, or to consume with diligence. These factors contributed towards the exaggeration of the 'uncouth style' in consumption. This has to be read in association with the early depictions of Italian or Arab peasants as regularly consuming watermelon. Thus, the general perception that it is the food of the poor aligned with the racial project. The implicit suggestion is also that the African-Americans exhibit heathen manners and hence, are inferior to the White Human. This parallels the association of the African Americans with monkeys and often ridiculing them as apes. Their appetite, including the sexual, is presented similarly as bestial and unrefined. This conception began to feature in the cartoons and the practice is followed till date (See Appendix 1).

Chicken was popular among slaves before the Civil War, as chickens were generally the only animals slaves were allowed to raise on their own. It was a source of fund-raising for women who were waiter carriers, who sold them to the churches, benevolent associations, and other communities. Women raised, cooked, and sold chickens. The Black women, consequently, became the agents of social transformation through the process. Accordingly, the production and propagation of these stereotypes form a disavowal of the Historical Consciousness and simultaneously invalidate their efforts towards creating a self-definition (Forson 1-19). These food items played a role that surpasses the one of nourishment and they became a symbol of Black freedom, of Black women's independence and economic autonomy.

Understanding the socio-historical context behind the production of such stereotypes is crucial since it facilitates the comprehension of the "cultural and historical perspective[s] that [were] organic to the wider condition of black womanhood" (Collins 35). Hence, it is established that something that has been deployed for cultural negation was originally an instrument of progress, community building, and growth, both individual and communal. By denigrating the role of these provisions, one is mocking their limited access to power, resistance, and progress. Owing to the potential for female liberation, Black Food acquires a status equivalent to that of quilt-weaving. The Black Women are creating "narratives and stories that involve chicken," similar to

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those being woven on the colorful patches of cloth in a quilt. Food stereotypes place the Black identity as low and reductive to the status of a chicken or a water melon. This must have been carefully designed to relegate the existence of the slaves to mere material terms. As can be discerned from the examination of these stereotypes, the paradoxical phenomenon in which market economies liberate the subalterns while simultaneously posing the threat of objectification is crucial, especially in the case of a Capitalist superpower like America.

Food, as has been illustrated, played a strategic role in the Black survival. African-American folktales and slave narratives abound in such references; one reason being the struggle they faced in feeding themselves. Booker T. Washington also narrates an account wherein his mother had to walk for miles with a stolen chicken so that she could feed her children (Forson 3). Besides offering such narratives of struggle behind the racism, cooking holds the potential to become cultural sites where folk-knowledge is transmitted through food and is handed over generations. A medium for economic self-sufficiency of the marginalized is corrupted in this case to create a malignant depiction in the popular imagination. Creating the image of a greedy Black also justifies the notion of the Black thirst for violence and partially matches the 'Whiteman's burden' to civilize them. They become effective tools for the perpetuation of racism and oppression.

Media and Stereotype

The racial stereotypes on African-American dietary preferences that began in the nineteenth century persist even today. The laziness associated with the production of watermelons stirred off the creation of the typical stereotyped lazy Black, who supposedly required an extra 'push' from the Master. Thus, these depictions legitimize the violence inflicted on the Black labourers. The first caricature on Blacks and the watermelon stereotype appeared around 1869 in Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper. The watermelon stereotype was ubiquitous by the early twentieth century. They were circulated through potholders, sheet music, paperweights, and salt-and-pepper shakers. The film, The Watermelon Patch (1905) co-directed by Edwin S. Porter, appropriated the stereotype. At the end of the twentieth century, there evolved a short-term genre

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called the "watermelon pictures," which were films with cinematic caricatures of African American life. These included: The Watermelon Contest (1896), Dancing Darkies (1896), Watermelon Feast (1896), and Who Said Watermelon? (1900). These films featured "darkies" sneaking into a watermelon patch (sometimes, men dressed as skeletons chasing away the watermelon thieves), or other scenes like a watermelon eating contest, cakewalking, and stealing chickens (Massood 90). The White fanaticism for violence and the inclination to laugh at the uncivilized were instantaneously catered to. One scene that incorporates the stereotype in the film The Birth of a Nation (1915) is the watermelon feast that happens on screen, while the film depicts the emancipation of the slaves from the Northern Whites. Similarly, a goon of African-American origin is shown as eating fried chicken in a legislative hall in another scene of the film (See Appendix 2). These scenes generated discriminatory impressions that altered the structuring of the popular psyche. Such depictions were popular in the minstrel shows during the nineteenth century as well. The latter promoted the stereotype through the African American minstrels who sang "The Watermelon Song" and "Oh, Dat Watermelon" in their shows, and they were set down to print in the 1870s (Black). The song "Keep a- watchin' dis coon" (1897) by Raymond A. Browne (Appendix 4) brings together the Chicken and Watermelon stereotypes and he associates them with the apparently untrustworthy Coon. The chorus portion is reiterated, with slight alterations that however carry the common principal theme:

He fergot ter keep a-watchin' dis coon, dis coon.

He fergot ter keep a watchin' dis coon;

Well, dere ain't no use in tellin' who eloped with Mister Mellin.

But it's safe ter keep a-watchin' dis coon.

One night some sleepy pullets sat a-roostin' on a perch,

Jest you keep a-watchin' dis coon (Browne, "Keep a-Watchin' Dis Coon")

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In 1997, when Tiger Woods won his first Masters Golf tournament, Fuzzy Zoeller, another golf player, remarked that he should be told not to serve chicken the next year, after commending the former on his performance. The same year, a restaurant in Texas, Azle Café, offered fried chicken and watermelon as special in menu on Martin Luther King Day. Azle Cafe owner Sabrina Pyle even put a post regarding the special on Facebook. However, she had to take it down after being accused by the public and media for catering to some of the worst racial stereotypes of black people. In 1999, the KFC revived their ads by portraying Colonel Sanders advertising their bucket of chicken, in a hip-hop fashion and with the background of basketball. Thus, the ad featured covert suggestions of associating the Blacks with chicken-eating, because of the inclusion of the hip-hop and Basketball in the background. Jerry Holbert's cartoon published in the Boston Herald on October 1, 2014 featured an intruder in the White House taking a bath in President Obama's bathtub and asking him if he has tried the "watermelon flavoured toothpaste" ("The Coon Obsession with Chicken and Watermelon"). The racist undertone in the above mentioned cartoon stimulated instant reactions across the internet, following which the cartoonist issued an apology for the depiction.

Stereotypes and the Power Politics in Play

Racial stereotypes form yet another manifestation of the power-dynamics involved in the creation and sustenance of social hierarchies. They render distorted and oppressive representations of the subaltern identity. When corrupted with the tendencies of grading and categorization, art is bereaved of its honour and credibility. Here, food becomes a tool for identity generation. The identity of the consumer is implied by his/her direct relation with 'the object' (the food) on his plate, or even hands. In postcolonial terms, stereotyping not only homogenizes the identity of a heterogeneous section of the population, but also negates the entire history of Black Emancipation. When existence is degraded and the identity is imposed upon the powerless, the oppression assumes a form that is difficult to overpower. However, when the object of imposition is appropriated by the subjects themselves towards their own emancipation, the postcolonial reading takes an interesting turn.

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Patricia Collins, in Black Feminist Thought, argues that objectification is crucial to the creation of an oppositional and hierarchical dichotomy. "[O]ne element is objectified as the other and is viewed as an object to be manipulated and controlled." She relates it with the Western inclination to objectify and materialize selves, thus depriving them of a spiritual essence. Such labels prescribe their existence and are instrumental in denying people their rights to define and assert their own identities. They deny the vitality of individual histories and idiosyncratic cultures. Through objectification, one's reality and past gets defined by the dominant others (69). This process of homogenization keeps them inferior and by infantilizing them, prevents any attempt of liberation.

The African-Americans have been objectified previously as well, and they were stereotyped under several other homogenous portrayals. Attributing a sexually aggressive nature to Black Women is a feature common to the stereotypical portrayal of the sexually aggressive Jezebel. Mary Margaret Fonow in Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research (1991) states that "[s]elf-definition involves challenging the political knowledge-validation process that result[s] in externally defined stereotypical images of African-American womanhood. In contrast, self-valuation lays stress on the content of Black women's self-definitions – "namely, replacing externally derived images with authentic Black female images" (38). These stereotypes, as Fonow argues, have increasingly replaced the authentic portrayals of the women of the community.

Appropriation and Subversion of Stereotypes

The Blacks initiated a subversive trend in representation, when they began to embrace these stereotypes, and constructed identities that transcend the assigned labels. Instead of rejecting the stereotypes entirely, they appropriated them in their struggle for livelihood. Paul Laurence Dunbar, the late American poet, novelist and playwright composed the song "Who Dat Say Chicken in Dis Crowd" in 1898 (See Appendix 5) as a defiance towards relegating Black identity to mere material terms. Through the song in which a Black invoked the denigrating image, he succeeded in turning it to the favour of the whole black community. It should be read as a social

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and cultural weapon, an instance of inspiration within the Coon Song or Negro Song tradition. The Coon Chicken Inn epitomizes such a subversive model of resistance, but more on economic terms. The racial slur used against the community has been utilized to their own benefit by the African-Americans. Functional from the late 1920s to 1950s, The Coon Chicken Inn was a highly successful restaurant chain. The restaurant's entryway was formed by a grinning, grotesque head of a bald Black man with a porter's cap and winking eye, with his mouth as the door. They sold southern style Chicken dishes and mostly appointed Blacks as waiters, waitresses, and cooks. Here is an instance of appropriating the original stereotype, to subvert them and ensure the consequential opportunity for entrepreneurship.

There are several figures inspired by the stereotypes which retained an iconic status in food enterprises. Aunt Jemima is a prominent example that falls into this category. It is a brand of pancake mix, syrup and other breakfast foods whose origin dates back to late 1880s and is owned by the Quaker Oats Company of Chicago. The figure of Aunt Jemima originally came from Billy Kersands' American-style Minstrelsy/ Vaudeville song “Old Aunt Jemima” (1875) and also from the Minstrel Show. The latter featured Aunt Jemima as one of the stereotypical black characters of the show. Originally a derogatory and slang term like ‘Uncle Tom,’ ‘Aunt Jemima’ image finds its place in popular culture as well, including films, songs and radio shows. Similarly, the comic book character Uncle Ben (from Spiderman stories) found his way in becoming a brand name for parboiled rice and other related food products. The brand was originally introduced by Converted Rice Inc., and is based in Houston, Texas. Uncle Ben’s rice, first marketed in 1943, was the top-selling rice in the United States from 1950 until the 1990s. Rastus is a pejorative term that connotes a ‘stereotypically happy Black man’ and was a familiar character in the Minstrel shows. However, the figure of Rastus was appropriated to advertise packages of Cream of Wheat cereal in 1893. An African-American character appeared in the trademark until the 1920s, and was replaced by another Black figure, that of a Chicago chef in chef's hat and jacket, which is used till date (Boyd 90,191).

Current-day entrepreneurs who gained iconicity in food-product advertising include Aunt Minnie and Sylvia Woods (known as the “Queen of Soulfood”). Sylvia Woods is the founding

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owner of the world-famous Sylvia's Restaurant (established in 1962), located in the historic village of Harlem. Aunt Minnie's Southern Style Entrees is based in Toledo, Ohio and at present, covers a vast range of food products under the label (Boyd 191). The stereotyped Black woman figure is inherited, reproduced, and re-contextualized in the process. Attaching the familiar prototype to the present-day brand icons, Sylvia and Aunt Minnie, enables a resemblance with the real-life persona of an African-American woman. Thus, the African-Americans invoked a label of passivity that was forced upon them, and utilized them consciously towards a self-defining moment. Crucial to this reversal is the idea that power relations are born out of unequal resource allocation and that the resistance of the marginalized groups grow out of their social and cultural opposition to this domination.

Conclusion

A postcolonial reading of the process by which stereotypes are produced and circulated against the racial Other becomes crucial. The 'alien other' was originally the site to attribute those aspects and to assign those images that the West did not identify with. Here, the attributes generally forced upon the African-Americans are those of cruelty, decadence, lewdness, laziness, and crudity. The labeling of the subject in material terms bereaves them of a personal identity and individual existence. Rather, it becomes a site of objectification. The uniqueness of the individual is replaced by the homogeneous collective and "anonymous masses;" their actions are depicted as guided by "instinctive emotions" like lust rather than by a "conscious choice or a decision." Further, these stereotypes obfuscate the past and deny a History. The Blacks are represented as the 'immoral other.' This reveals an underlying discriminatory and colonial attitude of the Oppressor. However, the Blacks inaugurated a subversive turn of the process, through a reverse appropriation of the biased labeling and typecasting. They gave an economic dimension to the otherwise socio-cultural practice. At their end, the Blacks 'adopted' the representations that denigrated them, 'adapted' them through their own interventions, and even 'adepted' them to suit their economic interests and marketing strategies. In other words, they have appropriated the portrayals dictated by the White (adopt), used them in direct (adapt) and indirect forms (adept) by employing them in the self-directed entrepreneurial endeavors. Thus, it

becomes a classic case of the 'Empire Writing Back.' Through this process, they even questioned the authority of mere stereotypical portrayals against the authentic histories and subverted the White perceptions in an unprecedented manner (Barry 146-147).

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www.historyonthenet.com/authentichistory/diversity/african/3-coon/5-chickwatermelon/index.html.

The Watermelon Patch. Directed by Edwin S. Porter and Wallace McCutcheon Sr, Edison Studios, 1905.

Appendix

1. Cartoons based on the stereotypes of Black appetite:

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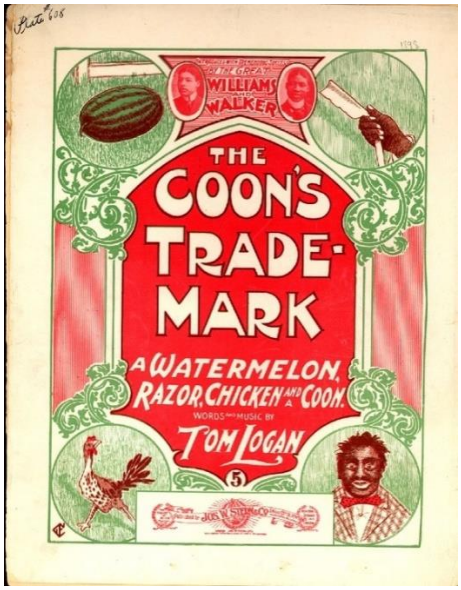
WHITE HOUSE INVADER GOT FARTHER THAN ORIGINALLY THOUGHT



2. Scene from *The Birth of a Nation* (1915)

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3. Posters of products brandishing the Black stereotype

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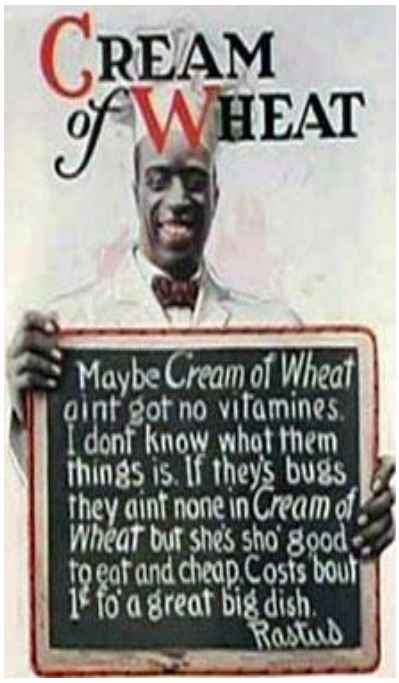

4. KEEP A-WATCHIN' DIS COON

(Copyright, 1897, by Frank Tousey.

Words and music by Raymond A. Browne)

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A juicy watermelon lay a-rip'nin' in de sun,

Jest you keep a-watchin dis coon,

An' day an' night a hired man was handy with a gun,

Jest to keep a-watchin' dis coon!

He watched dat watermelon wid de greatest kind o' care,

But one night he forgot it, an' I solemnly declare

Dat when de mornin came again de mellin wasn't there,

He fergotter keep a-watchin' dis coon.

Chorus: He fergotter keep a-watchin' dis coon, dis coon.

Hefergotter keep a watchin' dis coon;

Well, dereain't no use in tellin' who eloped with Mister Mellin.

But it's safe ter keep a-watchin' dis coon.

One night some sleepy pullets sat a-roostin' on a perch,

Jest you keep a-watchin' dis coon,

De farmer an' his family dey all had gone to church,

Jest you keep a-watchin dis coon:

A cullud individual, jest shortly after dark,

He burglarized the hen-house while de dog fergotter bark,

Dere's twenty-seven missin' now, an' dat's why I remark,

Dat'sit's best ter keep a-watchin' dis coon.

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Chorus: Fer it's best to keep a-watchin' dis coon, dis coon,

Yes, it's best to keep a-watchin' dis coon;

Fo' a fat an' tender chicken makes de bestest kind o' pickin',

An' it's best ter keep a-watchin' dis coon.

A gemman had a smoke-house, an' it stood out in his yard,

Jest you keep a-watchin' dis coon;

Filled up with beef an' bacon, it was doubled locked and barred,

Jest a-tantalizin' dis coon;

He went an' tole de neighborsdatob thieves he had no fear,

But soon dat beef an' bacon dey commenced ter disappear, “

He couldn't tell de reason-dough de reason it was clear,

He fergotter keep a-watchin' dis coon.

Chorus: Hefergotter keep a watchin' dis coon, dis coon,

He fergotter keep a-watchin' dis coon;

Eb'ry day I'm growin' bigger, bacon's fatnin' fo' a nigger,

An' it's best ter keep a-watchin' dis coon.

5. “WHO DAT SAY CHICKEN IN DIS CROWD”

[By Paul Laurence Dunbar (1898)]

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There was once a great assemblage of the cullud population,

all the cullud swells was there,

They had got them-selves together to discuss the situation and rumors in the air.

There were speakers there from Georgia and some from Tennessee,

who were to make feathers fly,

When a roostah in the bahn-ya'd flew up what folks could see,

Then those darkies all did cry.

Chorus: Who dat say chicken in dis crowd?

Speak de word agin' and speak it loud

Blame de lan' let white folks rule it

I'se a lookin' for a pullet

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Who dat say chicken in did crowd?