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More than Just the “Big Piece of Chicken”. The Power of Race, Class, and Food in American Consciousness

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In 1999 HBO premiered Chris Rock’s stand-up comedy routine Bigger and Blacker. One of the jokes deals with what Rock humorously calls the “big piece of chicken.” Using wit, Chris Rock delivers a semi-serious treatise on parenting and marriage. First, he admonishes the audience for not recognizing that “a real daddy” receives little praise for “making the world a better place...” A man, or “daddy”, according to Rock, pays bills, provides food, and all of a family’s other necessities. Despite his efforts, he rarely receives any praise for his “accomplishments.” Although these tasks are clearly part and parcel of adult responsibilities, Rock ignores this truism in an effort to set up his commentary on the intersection of race, class, gender, and food. Continuing, he argues, “Nobody appreciates daddy...”

By way of illustrating why a father needs and deserves much concern Rock points out that fathers work hard all day fighting against the stresses of life. Then a father—particularly an African American father—comes home to more stress:

And what does daddy get for all his work? The big piece of chicken. That’s all daddy get is the big piece of chicken. That’s right. And some women don’t want to give up the big piece of chicken. Who the fuck is you to keep the big piece of chicken? How dare you keep the big piece of chicken! A man can’t work for 12 hours and come home to a wing! When I was a kid, my momma [would] lose her mind if one of us ate the big piece of chicken by accident. “What the fuck? You ate the big piece of chicken. Oh Lawd, no, no, no! Now I got to take some chicken and sew it up. Shit! Give me two wings and a poke chop. Daddy’ll never know the difference.”

Chris Rock’s kind of humor has an extensive history as a form of black expressive culture. Physically, he walks back and forth on stage, bobbing and weaving as he shares different versions of his comic narrations, turning out stories from “everyday conversational talk.” Rock uses this form of performance or narrativizing to wage social commentary on a variety of issues including stereotypes of black people and chicken. When an artist uses stereotypes there are a number of factors that have to be considered including the purposes to which such oversimplifications are put. Stated more plainly, the humor of Chris Rock makes us wonder about the subversive ways in which objects like food can be used to contest hegemonic representations of blackness and the ways in which performances of blackness reveal complicated aspects of identity.
Investigating Intersections

As more or less correctly stated, there are roughly two methodological schools of thought when talking about African American foodways. There are those that focus on the food itself and its connections to the African Diaspora. Among them are historians of the American South (e.g., Karen Hess, Joe Gray Taylor and Sam Hilliard) and African American studies (e.g., Tracy Poe and Robert Hall), archeologists (e.g., Theresa Singleton and Anne Yentsch), geographer Judith Carney, anthropologist Tony Whitehead, and independent foodways scholars (e.g., Jessica Harris, Howard Paige, Joyce White, and Diane Spivey). Those who focus generally on the intersections of food and identity, representation, and/or contestation are literary scholars Anne Bower, Kyla Wazana Tompkins, Doris Witt, and Rafia Zafar, sociologist William Whit, anthropologist Charles Joyner, and folklorist Patricia Turner; media specialist Marilyn Kern-Foxworth, and historians Kenneth Goings and M. M. Manring. My research into the realm of African American foods is not only about locating, identifying, and understanding the connections between foods but also the people who consume them. This approach goes beyond the theories that argue we are what we eat and the ways our foods reflect our cultural identity. Rather, the method I employ asks us to consider what we learn about African American life and culture by studying the intersections of food, gender, race, class, and power. How do African American historical, socioeconomic, and political spaces influence the foods that are consumed? How is this consumption part of the performance of blackness? Furthermore, what do we learn about African Americans when black people willingly engage in perpetuating the oversimplified images or ideas that are sometimes held by the larger American society?

Black people have long been engaged in ideological warfare involving food, race, and identity. Most commonly known are the stereotypes concerning black people's consumption of fried chicken and watermelon. Though these stereotypes have been around for centuries they are still pervasive in the contemporary American psyche. Consider, for instance, the numerous postcards, invitations, and other ephemera that illustrate African American men, women, and children with watermelon.

Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins suggests the need to be attuned to the ways in which processes of power underlie social interactions and are involved in the process of external definition. These definitions can be challenged, however, through the process of “self-definition.” The acts of “challenging the political knowledge-validation process that result[s] in externally defined stereotypical images . . . can be unconscious or conscious acts of resistance.” One engages in the process of self-definition by identifying, utilizing, and more importantly, redefining symbols—like chicken or watermelon—that are commonly affiliated with African Americans. By doing this, black people refuse to allow the wider American culture to dictate what represents their expressive culture and thereby what represents blackness. But this process of defining one's self is fraught with complications and complexities particularly if the group fails to understand or acknowledge that there is a power structure at work behind the creation of common affiliations, labels, or stereotypes.
Collins explains these complications further in her delineation of self-valuation or the replacement of negative images with positive ones. This process of replacement can be equally as problematic as the original external definition if we fail to understand and to recognize the stereotype as a controlling image. This concept is perhaps best illustrated by the example of Chris Rock’s comedy that opens this essay. Though I will return to Rock’s funny side later, Collins’ caution is registered here. The exchange of one set of controlling images for another does little to eradicate the defining image itself. Consequently, black people need to be clear about the ways in which historical, social, political, and economic contexts have established reductionist narratives and how these accounts are embedded in food.

One way that blacks can both deal with these narratives and gain independence from them is to begin by taking a close look at the historical basis of various food stereotypes. These stereotypes tend to be distorted portrayals of those cultural behaviors that are and have been used in order to diminish black personal and collective power.

Stereotypes Abound

Stereotypes involving black people have been around for years. Indeed, they continue to exist. Elsewhere I argue extensively for the partial evolution of some of these stereotypes as ideologies shaped from laws and ordinances passed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It was and continues to be my contention that these depictions partly emerged as a way to control the economic gains of enslaved and free men and women who bartered and traded in the marketplace. Historians often cite newspaper articles, court documents, and travelers’ accounts among other critical sources detailing information on early African and African American entrepreneurs of food. Nineteenth-century travelers’ diaries, for example, indicate “flocks of poultry [were] numerous” and, “there are very few [slaves] indeed who are denied the privilege of keeping dunghill fowls, ducks, geese, and turkeys.” Moreover, some black people would often sit by the wharf for days on end waiting to buy foods like chicken and then sell them for exorbitant prices. Historian Philip Morgan notes a similar practice whereby some travelers would instruct their stewards to hold in reserve various foods like bacon so they would have bartering power with “the Negroes who are the general Chicken Merchants [sic].”

As with any encroachment, the bartering and trading by African Americans ushered in a slew of regulations that sought to limit items being sold door-to-door and in the market. To be sure the ambiguous ownership of goods prior to sale was one of the many reasons for stalling and halting the sale of goods. Foods were not supposed to be sold prior to passing through the town gates, and in particular customers were not supposed to purchase goods whose ownership might be difficult to trace. This included items such as chickens, which were often sold outside the market. Archeologist Anne Yentsch maintains that foods such as oysters, salted fish in large barrels or casks, cattle, sheep, and hogs that were alive could easily be traced because they were by-and-large produced by small farmers.

Chickens, on the other hand, were more difficult to obtain. Sometimes these birds were free to roam and lend support to a more generalized system of ascription. Americans were most common for turkeys, pheasants, and small fry. These birds tended to be generally subordinated to the legible price of their produce.

These claims were not without their critics. One writer complained that the Lower Market was always pleased to obtain prices for fresh goods. It was known that white people would pay high prices for such goods.

Many whites who were part of the capitalist enterprises of the era were to subordinate their economic interests to those of the market. Consequently, any attempt to explain the behavior of black sellers with the label of “black capitalist” would be too simplistic and too naïve to be considered.”

Money and a sense of security during slavery that allowed for black entrepreneurs to obtain goods for their own use was a critical component of their existence. It was much better for them to own these goods than to simply be dependent on the largesse of the plantation owners.”
Chickens, on the other hand were far harder to pinpoint. Even though several blacks had chickens their masters and neighboring farms had them as well. Sometimes these birds roamed freely and thus were traded or sold in an effort to obtain more favorable goods. Often times, especially during the colonial era, it was difficult to ascertain the exact origins of a bird. Except among the wealthy, most chickens during that time were not kept in hen houses. Chicken and fowl were free to roam finding food and shelter wherever possible, an issue that easily lends support to the charge of theft. Additionally, there was no widespread formalized system of breeding in early America when many Africans and Native Americans were engaged in bartering. Consequently, it was difficult to distinguish common fowl from one another with the exception of certain kinds of partridges, pheasant, and hens. This reality, however, did little to hinder the accusations of theft, which were not only levied against slaves but also free blacks and fugitives.

These claims were fueled by black people's use of trading practices like forestalling, which legal ordinances did little to reduce. According to the *South Carolina Gazette*, one writer complained that almost on a daily basis, black women could be found huckstering and forestalling "poultry, fruit, eggs," and other goods "in and near the Lower Market . . . from morn till night," buying and selling what and how they pleased to obtain money for both their masters and themselves. Often times their prices were exorbitant and they would use all kinds of marketing strategies to choose which white people to sell to and for how much. Robert Olwell captures this point when he explains: "as slaveholders, Carolina whites felt that slaves should be generally subordinate, but as property holders and capitalists they also had to recognize the legitimacy of the market in which sellers had the right to seek the highest price for their goods."

Many whites viewed blacks with "great prejudice" when they sought to engage in capitalist enterprises. Under slavery's oppression, blacks, regardless of their status, were to be subordinate at all times. Any deviation from this norm was a threat to the social order that had been systematically and institutionally constructed over time. Consequently, any element of freedom recognized and enjoyed by black people, and particularly women, was an affront to white social power. Lawrence McDonnell explains it this way: "The marketplace . . . is a neutral zone, a threshold between buyer and seller. . . . Master and slave confronted each other at the moment of exchange as bearers of commodities, stripped of social dimensions . . . [this] linked black sellers with White buyers, and hence with White society, not only by assertion of black humanity but through White objectification. Slaves appeared here equally purposeful as Whites."

Money and a small measure of market power assaulted the charade played out during slavery that sought to convince black people that freedom would never come. Attributing black economic gain to theft helped to perpetuate the travesty. By attributing stealing by slaves to an inherent nature rather than a condition of their circumstances (or even to a performance of sorts), slave owners were able to deflect attention from their own participation in this aspect of slave victimization. Morally, it was much better to believe that slaves were natural thieves than to believe that the institution of enslavement contributed to their larceny. Clearly there is some truth
to the claim that slaves engaged in thievery; the extent to which this was the case, however, is rooted in white patriarchal ideology.14

Though devoid of a disposition toward theft, some slaves did engage in pilfering and stealing. Some scholars however, have referred to these acts as skill and cunning. Eugene Genovese’s study of African American life and culture, suggests this when he writes, “for many slaves, stealing from their own or other masters became a science and an art, employed as much for the satisfaction of outwitting Ole’ Massa as anything else.”15 In Weevils in the Wheat, for example, ex-slave Charles Grandy tells that hunger was a motivating factor for stealing food. He says, “I got so hungry I stealed chickens off de roos’. . . . We would cook de chicken at night, eat him an’ bu’n de feathers. . . . We always had a trap in de floor fo’ de do’ to hide dese chickens in.”16 This is just one example of African American trickster heroism that not only reflects a kinship to African traditions but also views this type of behavior as both morally acceptable and necessary for survival. At the same time, it is a subversive cultural form that uses humor in its expression.

John Roberts’ point about early African Americans should be registered here: “Given the desperate and oppressive circumstances under which they lived, enslaved Africans could not be overly concerned with the masters’ definition of ‘morality’ of behaviors that enhanced their prospects for physical survival and material well-being. The task that they confronted, however, was how to make such individually devised solutions to a collective problem function as a behavior strategy for the group without endangering their adaptability or the physical well-being of members of their community.”17 Although the oppressive circumstances of today are nowhere near those of enslavement, the delicate balance of performing individual behavior and yet not suffering collective consequences is still applicable. Teasing out this sense of balance and its complications might become more apparent as I discuss African American performances of stereotypes during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

The South suffered a devastating loss of free labor with the end of the Civil War and migrations of newly freed blacks; it found itself in a precarious situation. Its infrastructure was suffering economically, politically, socially, culturally, and physically. Suddenly, the millions of freed blacks became an overwhelming problem. What about their rights? Would they be given rights? How and to what end? How would white Southerners keep their subordinates in line? Was this even possible anymore? These and many other questions played themselves out on the political landscapes of the day. But they were also played out on cultural playing fields as well. According to historian Kenneth Goings, the loss of control over black people registered such a blow among white Southerners that they began using emerging technology as one means of reasserting control and reclaiming power.18

Advancing technology, namely the camera, was useful for depicting African Americans—men, women, boys, and girls—as visually conciliatory. As Grant McCracken intimates, such illustrations were useful for alleviating some of the “nervous prostration” brought on by the rapid changes of the time. Goods and commodities were used in an effort to alleviate some of the distress caused by the social, political, economic, and cultural transformations.19 Goods were particularly useful for helping to define a social circle. These illustrations, enabled their owners to covet the pastoral interpretation is clearly seen in these kinds of photos spreading the networ

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What quickly emerged through this visual communication was an ideology of black inferiority, which assisted in the formulation of racist stereotypes. These stereotypes were perpetuated by advertisements, trading cards, sheet music and stereoviews like that which illustrates an African American baby in a buggy, caption reading: “When I Dit Big, ‘Oo’ll Have to Roost Hiah.” This, and countless other images are clearly staged as if to appear natural. More than likely it was the case of African Americans performing to stay alive. From the thieving child, to the salacious lover of white hens, African Americans—particularly men and boys—were constantly ridiculed; more often than not it was centered on the stereotypical image of the coon.

Kenneth Goings, whose study Mammy and Uncle Mose historicizes the cultural and political economy of black collectibles, maintains that the coon image was one of the most offensive stereotypes, M. L. Graham used this coon motif as the mascot for his little-known “Coon Chicken Inn” restaurants. The emblem, a black-faced man with large, extended red lips, was typically symbolic of how whites would stereotype black people with food to endorse various products like fried chicken. Considered a most effective advertising technique, images like these reinforced the stereotypical Old South/New South myth of the loyal, happy servant just waiting to be used by the master—and now the consumer.

The restaurant with all of its accoutrements became a metaphor for whites using and discarding black service. When the meal is complete, the napkins, plates and utensils bearing the black-faced logo are discarded and along with it any remnant of the serviceable “darker” that is no longer needed or desired. This act of symbolic and physical disposal provided whites with what Goings describes in a similar discussion as a sense of “racial superiority” and a “therapeutic sense of comfort.” Manipulating these objects of material culture enabled white Americans not only to forge an alliance across class lines, but also to more collectively subjugate and vilify black people. The ideology of black inferiority provided a safeguard for white America during a time when their racial, economic, and political balance was perceived as unstable and threatened.

Unfolding against this backdrop, are the numerous ways that food becomes interlaced with discourses of power, race, class, and gender in American consciousness. Chicken, for example, which was once championed as a celebrated food of the South prepared by some of the best culinary talent turns into an object of ridicule and defacement. Chicken—both the bird and the food—is fraught then, with paradoxes in the contexts of the historical and economic circumstances of the South. On the one hand, black consumption of chicken was seen as normative; on the other hand, this consumption was also perceived as negative. The issue is made more complex when we read chicken—the food—as a cultural text.
Fried chicken, a largely southern food that emerged out of social institutions shaped by racial complexities, is one of many foods that blurs the lines between the “symbolic separations [of] those who prepare the food and those who consume it.”22 Black women were widely credited with lining “Southern groaning boards.” This was their rightful place as loyal cooks—a cultural demarcation that became necessary for symbolically separating the domestic rituals of the South. Black women prepared and cooked fried chicken for white families but they did not consume it; and, thereby they maintained the purity of southern cuisine. Mentally, this belief was important for reinforcing the necessary symbolic distance between cook and consumer. This configuration is made problematic and complicated, however, by the insistence that black people are zealous about their consumption of fried chicken.

What becomes necessary then are carefully coded words and messages. Namely, the word Southern becomes coded for white, while “soul food” is decoded as black. Diane Spivey has labeled this coding phenomenon, “Whites Only Cuisine.” She says:

The end of the [Civil] war also signaled the beginning of the redefining of southern White heritage. Food was a factor in the efforts of southern White elites to hold on to their old way of life. Cooking and cuisine were remade to look uniquely southern. . . Asserting that the recipes were “southern” made [their] cookbooks exculsionary, and therefore racist, because the cookbooks and recipes contained therein were heralded as the creations of the elite southern White women. In an attempt to promote southern White culture, therefore, the concept of “southern cooking” started out as Whites Only Cuisine.23

Given the mass exchange of foods and food habits that occurred between early Africans, Europeans, and Native Americans it is almost impossible for one group or another to claim any recipe as original or native to their culture. With the ebb and flow of people across continents, regions, and lands come vast amounts of mutual exchange resulting in multi-amalgamations between and among cultures and foods changing and evolving over time.

The intersections of food with power and other variables enable a reading of the ways in which the idea of blackness as performance boldly emerges. As I have discussed thus far, since their arrival in this country, Africans and Africans born in America have been performing race in myriad ways. Long after the auction block performance African Americans engaged in other racial acts like participating in staged photographs and witnessing their recipes being usurped. A good many of these performances of racial roles for survival involved food. Part of understanding the food and foodways of African Americans asks that we also question what all of these performances had to do with blackness and issues of identity? And how has agency been a part of the performance of this blackness? Turning back to Chris Rock’s comedic discussion of the “big piece of chicken” helps us to think a bit more about these questions.

In the vignette that opens this essay Chris Rock is explaining how the children of an African American family have eaten the “big piece of chicken” even though they are aware that this piece of meat belongs to their father. In the comedy, Rock makes manhood and fatherhood synonymous with the right to have the largest piece of chicken not simply as a reward but as a right. Rock argues that this is the father’s just portion because “daddy can’t work all day and come home to a wing.” Implied, of course, is the fact number of anxieties including culinar.

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course, is the fact that because the father leaves the home to work and engages in a
number of anxieties outside the home, he therefore deserves all of the praise—including culinary recompense.

On the surface one could argue that this routine is simply another of Rock’s
treatises on the ills of society. Every race of people can identify with this scenario—one of the many aspects of Rock’s performances that endear him to diverse audience
members. However, my contention is that this scene is multifaceted. Rock is, in effect,
performing blackness in ways that can be described as both subversive as well as
oppressive, rendering this piece to be about more than “the big piece of chicken.”
Rock is dissident in that, more or less, he follows the basic formula of delivering an
African American trickster folktale. Consider, for example, Jacob Stoyer’s slave narra-
tive, Sketches of My Life in the South, wherein he tells a story of man named Joe and
how he outsmarted the master’s wife, Mrs. King. According to the story, Joe killed
and dressed a turkey that belonged to the King family. In his haste to get the bird into
a pot without being caught, he neglected to cut it leaving its knees to stick out of
the pot. To hide his thievery, Joe threw one of his shirts over the pot. When Joe failed
to respond to the calling of Mr. King, Mrs. King came into the kitchen to inquire of
his whereabouts. Discovering the theft, which Joe declined to know anything about,
she saw to it that Joe was punished for “allowing the turkey to get into the pot.”

The point here is the way in which Joe was able to dupe, if only briefly, the King
family. The larger issue is the momentary reversal of power executed by Joe in his
performance as a “dumb slave.”

Similarly, Rock manages to dupe both white and black audience-goers who
usually have paid a somewhat hefty price to enjoy a laugh. By performing racist,
sexist, and otherwise problematic comedies Rock proffers the illusion that he buys
into these notions as truims. In doing so, he is a relative trickster, perpetuating
the racist perception of black people as chicken lovers.25 But as E. Patrick Johnson
argues, “blackness does not only reside in the theatrical fantasy of the White imagin-
ary that is then projected onto black bodies. Nor is blackness always consciously
acted out. It is also the inexpressible yet undeniable racist experience of black
people—the ways in which the ‘living of blackness’ becomes a material way of
knowing.”26 Among black audiences then, it is not surprising that Rock’s perform-
ances are laudatory and celebratory. Many watch the performances of him and other
comedians and laugh uproariously knowing that much of what is being performed
has all kinds of negative implications. Yet, there is something to be said for these
dramatic interludes, which often make audiences momentarily forget about their
troubles. The very fact of the matter is that these comedians are enjoyed precisely
because they engage in the slipperiness of black cultural politics.

Part of this slipperiness derives from another suggestion offered by Johnson: “The
interanimation of blackness and performance and the tension between blackness as
‘play’ and material reality further complicates the notion of what... ‘playing black’
is and what ‘playing black’ ain’t.” Rock engages this question of “black is/black ain’t”
with his audiences. With white audiences he leads them into thinking that he is
performing what “black is” as he mocks, mimics, and ridicules black people. With
black audiences, he relies upon a number of “in-group” techniques to offer black
audiences comic relief while simultaneously playing to a number of ‘truth claims.”27
Later, using a similar coded performance as the trickster hero in African American folktales, Rock turns the tables on this segment of the audience using the rhetoric of race, class, and gender.

The art of verbal play has always been a vehicle of self-expression for black men and women, although women have only recently been recognized as engaging in such. Rock understands the role of signifying in the black community and employs it well in his routines. From Rock’s references to the fact that daddy experiences stress all day from working in a “white world,” we can assume that daddy feels little or no economic power. Consequently, in order to establish his manhood, he needs to assert his authority at home. One of the ways he is able to affirm his household status is by eating the “big piece of chicken.” Here the chicken functions metaphorically and literally as a source and a reflection of masculine power. Rock’s subtle explication of this power enables him to dupe his black audience-goers—particularly the women.

Using children as the catalyst, Rock creates the scenario of mama as a culinary artist. After her children consume the forbidden big piece of chicken, she is able to flawlessly recreate it by expertly sewing together two wings and a pork chop. In addition to all of the other work mama has done during the day—caring for children, running a household, cooking and other chores—she now has to make up for the fact that one of her children has eaten the wrong piece of chicken: “Oh Lawd, no, no, no! Now I got to take some chicken and sew it up. Shit! Give me two wings and a poke chop. Daddy’ll never know the difference.” The challenge posed by this situation is perhaps the cause for Rock acknowledging, “Now mama got the roughest job, I’m not gonna front.” Denying daddy his rightful portion is a measure of disrespect that will surely bring wrath upon the children. To avoid this mama tries to make amends. Mama then has not only procured, prepared, and presented the food, she now has to alter and re-prepare the meal while simultaneously protecting her children. After all of this, mama will undoubtedly have to “do a jig” so that daddy does not recognize her necessary handiwork. She then will have to placate him if he discovers the ruse.

The discussion of mama’s incredible talents is double-edged because while plentiful, her culinary and household ingenuity must not be celebrated because to do so would reveal that daddy is eating something less than the “big piece of chicken.” Equally problematic is that it has gone unnoticed that while mama is not in the paid work force, she is nonetheless very much involved in a system of work. Her work, unfortunately, is largely domestic, economically undervalued, and from the standpoint of this example, aesthetically unappreciated. Because even though mama has created another large portion for daddy she cannot speak of it because it will only make daddy feel that he gets little for all his “hard work.” Unspoken are the stories of mama’s day of work, her troubles, and her battles—many of which are represented symbolically by the chicken.

It is not surprising that Rock would gender his discussion to include some kind of praise of a mother’s culinary abilities. As Pamela Quaggio notes, “the mother determines when, what, and how much family members will eat. . . . She controls the symbolic language of food, determining what her dishes and meals will say about herself, her family, and the world.” And yet his depictions of “mama” are both enlightening and baffling for what they seem to reveal/hide about Rock’s gender and racial agenda. Clearly the parody and humor of this situation are evident. Though the audience knows i praised or ridicu waged some sor chicken. For exar chicken is fried o. amount of a pric black people me bring to bear the and thus know dramatization.

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audience knows it is a joke, there is uncertainty over whether mama’s work is being praised or ridiculed. Moreover, there are the questions of whether or not Rock is waging some sort of commentary on racial stereotypes involving black people and chicken. For example, it is significant to note that Rock never specifies whether the chicken is fried or baked. In fact, he does not have to because he relies upon a certain amount of a priori knowledge that assumes that chicken eating in the company of black people means “fried.” Comforted by the fact that black audience members bring to bear their own life experiences and cultural memories surrounding food and thus know what “black is” and “black ain’t” he is able to launch into his dramatization.

Maybe it is a similar comfort and ease that Rock attends to when at the end of the routine he admonishes women to remember their “proper” place in dealing with men. Undoubtedly many in the audience see mamas work as a labor of love that is taken for granted, not needing any particular recognition. In fact, Rock halfheartedly suggests this when he implies that daddy has the primary responsibilities in the household. As if rethinking this assertion, Rock soon after backtracks by supplying his one line of praise for mama. Despite all of this backpedaling, by the end of his show Rock is clear about his direction as he definitively reinstates his masculinist stance. He closes his performance with: “Women talk too much. They always want you to be listenin’.” Let a man get situated! Let me get my other foot in the door! Let me get somethin’ to eat. Let me get somethin’ to drink! Let me take a shit! Go in the fuckin’ kitchen and get me my big piece of chicken!” Having said this, Rock drops the mike and struts off the stage amid the cheers and shouts of approval from men—and women.

Food objects are useful for elucidating the type of obscurities revealed by this kind of close reading. Additionally, they are politicized by the meanings inscribed in their uses and associations historically and contemporarily. This is particularly salient to an article like chicken that is perceived to be generic in its uses among all races and ethnicities of people. The meanings that chicken holds for black people are as diverse as its members. But when chicken is placed in various contexts alongside performances of power and race then it is plentiful for what it reveals beyond being a portion of food.

This essay has attempted to illustrate the importance of moving beyond studying merely the foods of various cultures to include the behaviors, actions, contexts, and histories that involve them. As this article has also suggested foods like chicken, that have been used to stereotype African American people, are often actually undergirded by intersecting variables of race, gender, class, and power. This fact, perhaps more than any other, lends credence to the notion that food is always about more than what it seems.

Notes

2. Chris Rock, Bigger and Blacker.

4. Though in no way this dichotomous, most of these scholars can be roughly divided into these categories, as Krishnendu Ray observes. See book review by Ray, *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs*, in *Food & Foodways*, 15:1–6, 2007. Also see *African American Foodways: Explorations of History & Culture*, Ed. Anne Bower (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).


6. African Americans have long been caricatured as brand mascots for various food and household products. For example, a grinning black chef named Rastus was used to represent Cream of Wheat hot cereal and a pair of black children who were known as the Gold Dust Twins, were used to advertise soap powder. In addition to the now infamous Aunt Jemima, who sold pancake mix, there have been numerous other grinning black women who were "Jemima-like" that were used to sell fried chicken, shortening, and cookware. It also should be noted that other races and ethnicities have also been stereotyped where food is concerned. First there was Frito Bandito, who spoke in an exaggerated Mexican accent and then there was the Chihuahua who muttered ¡Yo Quiero Taco Bell! In March 2007 Masterfoods USA, a unit of Mars Foods attempted to hoist the stereotypical depiction of "Uncle Ben" from servant to chairman of the board. The attempt was met with mixed success. See Stuart Elliott, "Uncle Ben, Board Chairman." *The New York Times* 30 March 2007, C1.


10. Yentsch, 245.


19. Grant McCracken's discussion is a good one on the ways in which consumer goods helped to preserve hopes and ideals during the Victorian era. See "The Evocative Power of Things," *Culture and Consumption* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 104.

20. McCracken, 110.

21. Ibid., 47.


27. Patricia Turner and Gary Alan Fine suggest that when rumors and/or stereotypes are based on information that could be correct it is considered a truth-claim. Truth claims contain a certain amount of "cultural logic" because they make "cultural sense" (i.e. all black people eat fried chicken) even though no systemic, definitive evidence exists in which to substantiate them. Patricia Turner and Gary Alan Fine, *Whispers on the Color Line: Rumor and Race in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 18.


30. It is quite easy to become overcome with laughter by Rock's prose and delivery. The immediacy and dramatic nature of the moment invites this response. It is only later, once you have had a chance to relive the scene that one might realize the sexism inherent in both the rhetoric and the performance as Rock leaves the stage seemingly in command, having said all that he has had to say.

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