

**Commodity Racism, Cultural Appropriation, and the Perpetuation of Oppressive Food
Discourse**

by

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

CRS	Chinese Restaurant Syndrome
CRT	Critical Race Theory

Abstract

The social, cultural and economic value of food often reflects the value that society places on a particular culture or group of people. Food discourse reflects these values and frequently perpetuates racist, exploitative and oppressive stereotypes. Cultural appropriation occurs when a dominant group seeks to use and profit by the knowledge of a nondominant or marginalized group. In the United States, this occurs, for example, when white chefs act as the discoverers and educators of “ethnic” or non-white cuisines. Racist food discourse also occurs in food marketing as stereotypical images are used to sell food products, thereby perpetuating racist tropes and normalizing racial power structures. The language used to describe racist food discourse is lacking as it focuses on historical understandings of race, namely blatant acts of bigotry and discrimination. In order to understand how and why racism is allowed to be perpetuated through food discourse, it is essential to create or re-define the language used to discuss it.

This research addresses racism and oppression as reproduced through food discourse because I want to learn how representations of food work as tools of oppression so that we can become more aware of the systemic racism inherent within food discourse and learn to both recognize and respond to instances when food is acting as an oppressive and exploitative tool. This thesis introduces critical academic theories on race and appropriation which are then used as a framework to examine both historical and contemporary examples of racist food discourse. These examples provide insight into the ways in which racist discourse is perpetuated and tolerated as well as pathways to potential solutions, which include the creation of new terms to label racism and appropriation as well as the need for a more robust and public discussion of these issues.

Keywords: Racism, appropriation, oppression, exploitation, food discourse.

Chapter One

Introduction

The movement of food across oceans and between cultures reveals the history of human existence. Foods and cooking styles have been traded, adapted, and perfected by cooks across the globe, transforming ingredients into regional cuisines specific to particular cultures, ethnicities, and geographies. And yet the story of the appropriation of food and cuisine is not always one of ingenuity and celebration, but rather one of oppression, exploitation, and theft. In these instances, appropriation can be understood as an exploitative practice rather than one of borrowing. Even the oft-celebrated food “fusions” from around the globe are the result of centuries of white imperialism, such as the French influence in Vietnamese food and Spanish flavors that show up in Filipino cuisine. This confluence of food and colonialism has roots in exploitative and appropriative actions based on both the historic and current oppression of non-white people.

The 19th century invention of race as a biological construct encouraged the manifestation of white supremacy and white privilege. The ascension of a science-based model of white supremacy became both the defense of and incentive for European colonization. As revolutions in France and America coincided with a new slave-based economy in the west, race as a biological construct “arose as a rationalization and justification for human slavery at a time when Western European societies were embracing philosophies promoting individual and human rights, liberty, democracy, justice, brotherhood and equality” (Smedley and Smedley 2005). Along with this new idea of “eminent” (Hume as cited in Garrett 2000, 172) white supremacy came the power to exploit non-white cultures for the benefit of white people. Both food and food production, from agriculture to cooking, were among the first instances of cultural appropriation as white imperialism sought to profit from the exploited labor of non-white cultures. While

slavery and other blatantly exploitative practices have been largely abolished in the United States, the remnants of those racist practices are often apparent in food discourse, from the way food is marketed to the stereotypes associated with certain foods and the people who produce them.

Race and racist representations of food have been used to market, profit by, and exclude from certain types of food for hundreds of years. What began in Europe as racist marketing based on imperialist representations (such as boxes of Huntley and Palmer's Biscuits which featured images of slaves serving tea to colonists in exotic locations) soon became the de facto mode of appropriating marginalized cultures for the benefit and profit of Anglo-European people. Examples of the racism, oppression, and exploitation of both cultures and bodies shows up in way we label food, the amount we are willing to pay for it, and the social and economic status of those who produce and consume it. Current discourse in the United States is rooted in cultural attitudes that have been shaped in a country that has benefitted from the oppression and exploitation of non-white peoples since its inception. This thesis focuses on the ways in which both historic and contemporary food discourse in the United States perpetuate racist stereotypes, which solidify inequitable social and economic power structures inherent in systemic racism.

To understand the link between racism and cultural appropriation in the American food system, it is essential to understand the language of race and appropriation. As Krishnendu Ray (2016) points out, language use is powerful in defining the border between which foods are white and non-white as terms such as "ethnic" and "authentic" seek to create and delineate an exotic or foreign "other." The continued use of such terms perpetuates the differentiation and devaluing of non-white ethnicities and foods. One of the issues with discussing this topic is the disconnect between racism as it is understood in a historical context and racism as it is understood and

perpetuated in a supposedly contemporary, post-racial society. A modern definition of racism has been proposed by Amy Ansell (1997) in her discussion of “new racism” and the effects of a society that pretends not to see race, thereby perpetuating racist structures through erasure and ignorance. With this new understanding of racism comes a more nuanced definition of appropriation, namely one that focuses on the hidden and insidious ways in which the theft and exploitation of non-white knowledge is used for the social and economic benefit of white people. This contemporary form of racism occurs when “(privileged) speakers routinely [engage] in discursive moves that normalized discrimination while at the same time denying individual prejudice” (Martinez Guillem 2017, 360). Indeed, Both historical and contemporary examples can be examined through a number of theoretical and conceptual lenses, from critical race theory and modern conceptions of racist discourse to commodity racism, culinary capital, and cultural appropriation.

This thesis seeks to ask and answer the question of where racist representations of food have occurred historically and where that racist food discourse continues to exist today. This research addresses racism and oppression as reproduced through food discourse because I want to learn how representations of food work as tools of oppression so that we can become more aware of the systemic racism inherent within food discourse and learn to both recognize and respond to instances when food is acting as an oppressive and exploitative tool. To address this research problem, this thesis applies theories of race, appropriation, commodity racism, and economics as conceptual and theoretical framework to a number of historical and contemporary examples of racist food discourse. Specifically, this research asks three research questions, namely: How have racism and cultural appropriation been present and persistent in historical narratives about food and culture? Where do instances and examples of racism and appropriation

occurs in contemporary food discourse and practice? And how can we understand, based on academics and practitioners, how to confront and abolish racist and appropriative discourse and who is doing that work?

The following analysis begins in chapter two with an explanation of critical theories and concepts that will be used to analyze both historic and contemporary examples of racism, oppression, and appropriation. In chapter three, I discuss the methods and methodologies I employed in data collection and analysis, explaining why I chose specific data collection parameters as well as how those data were organized for analysis. Chapter four turns to an examination of both historical and contemporary instances of racist food discourse and an analysis of those examples through the theoretical lenses noted and critical inquiry. Finally, in chapter five, I look at the question of where this discussion is heading and what changes must be made if we are to live in a world that celebrates the food and cultures of marginalized people, rather than merely erasing differences through the appropriation of non-white foods.

Chapter Two

Background and Significance

In this chapter I provide background on the social problem my research addresses, focusing on the harmful effects of racist discourse and cultural appropriation in the food system. Much of the discourse that influences the way we think about, talk about, and consume food is based on histories of racism, oppression, and appropriation; this chapter introduces important concepts and theories related to my thesis research that help navigate this discourse. Especially in the United States, a country built on a framework of systemic racism and exploitation, our food preferences have been shaped not only by the way we learn to value certain tastes, but also by the value we place on certain cultures and peoples.

To provide this background in this chapter, I first explain the social problem that this research addresses, which is racism. I then review critical academic perspectives on critical race theory, language, commodity racism, appropriation, and economics in order to better understand how we can discuss appropriation in a way that sheds light on the harm it inflicts on marginalized and underserved peoples. These theoretical and conceptual perspectives will provide a framework for me to analyze both historical and contemporary examples of racist food discourse. Racist food discourse, from images used in marketing to the language used to describe a restaurant, can be understood through the lens of critical academic theories which provide a framework for understanding how and why such discourse is constructed. After a thorough examination of conceptual and theoretical frameworks, the chapter then introduces my research problem and questions.

Social Problem: Racism

The social problem this research addresses is the relationship between racism and food discourse, both historical and contemporary. Race is embedded in our food system in myriad ways, from labor and the means of production to packaging, marketing, and the value we place on certain types of food, depending on with whom it is associated. A food system that was created to serve white interest and continues to operate through a largely white gaze can only reproduce harmful racial discourse. Racialized marketing, appropriative behaviors, and a disregard for the perspectives and lives of non-white producers and consumers supports, reinforces, and normalizes whiteness as the epicenter of food discourse and the “othering” of everyone else. Instances of racist food discourse are so prevalent and so insidious that the effects and perpetuation of such discourse often goes unacknowledged. A history of colonialism, slavery, segregation, and imprisonment in the United States has created a racial discourse that is both deeply oppressive and yet completely ignored by the majority white population.

Amy Ansell (1997) suggests that we are dealing with a “new racism” in which the term “racism” itself is no longer effective in describing the issue. She asks if what we are seeing is a “new racism without race, or simply new forms of racialized political language that are not racist in form and content but nevertheless carry the potential of tapping into a latent popular and even state racism” (Ansell 1997, 67). This new racism is present throughout contemporary food discourse as those who are perpetuating racial stereotypes and systemic power structures are not people who fit the stereotype of “racist” as it is understood today. The confusion between racist terminology and visibility is what makes this topic so difficult to discuss as clear and contemporary language is lacking. A lack of effective contemporary language regarding racism has perpetuated the myth of a post-racial society by hiding rather than abolishing racist

discourse. The people using racist discourse no longer fit the stereotype of a racist. Labeling someone a racist is a powerful accusation due to the historical connotations associated with the word, and yet there is no word for the type of racism being perpetuated through food discourse today.

Ansell's description of "new racism" describes much of what is happening when we see examples of appropriation. The people performing the appropriation do not fall under the traditional label of racist and certainly most would resist any such labeling (as, likely, would the public) and yet, their actions produce and perpetuate a racist discourse. This "new racist" discourse is so normalized as to be invisible, at least to those least affected by it. In the paradigm of whiteness, racism might conjure ideas of Jim Crow laws, slavery, prejudice, and obvious oppression. In the paradigm of new racism, and from the view point of those being oppressed and exploited by racist discourse, racism is anything that signifies any non-white person as having less value simply based on the color of their skin, regardless of whether or not that oppression is explicit.

Appropriation and the gentrification of food succeed in a system that rewards whiteness and perpetuates white privilege. Food discourse becomes a tool of racism and oppression when historical food tropes and stereotypes remain unexamined. Racist and oppressive food discourse is a remnant of the past as well as a symbol of the systemic racism that still exists in the United States today. Foodie culture, popular media, and marketing campaigns foster a discourse around food that appropriates and misrepresents marginalized cultures in a way that perpetuates oppressive stereotypes and thrives on economic exploitation. This misrepresentation, and subsequent oppressive racism and exploitation, often goes unrecognized or completely ignored and consequently perpetuates those issues.

Critical Theories and Academic Perspectives on Race and Appropriation

The subsections that follow further explain racism, which is the social problem this research addresses, through the lens of language, Critical Race Theory, appropriation, acculturation, and commodity racism. These explanations are rooted in academic literature and provide analytical tools with which to navigate contemporary discourse and address my research questions. In the next subsection, I discuss the role of language in perpetuating racism and explain the academic theories that help us navigate it.

Language as Reproduction of Racist Discourse

Everywhere we turn, people are talking about food. There are cooking shows, magazines, blogs, books, social media feeds, and podcasts all dedicated to food. However, very few of those outlets operate without an awareness of the ways in which language, photography, and other representations of food can perpetuate systemic racism. This lack of reflexivity is largely due to the fact that, based on a review of editors and staff of popular food publications, much of the popular food media is managed and staffed by white employees, including photographers, writers, and marketing directors. Even those publications that seek to be inclusive and diverse often fall short, simply because they not only cater to a white audience but are producing content without critical examination of their own ideas about food and culture.

Much of the language used to talk about food is racialized in and of itself. Terms such as “ethnic” and “authentic” immediately invoke racial differences and delineate between the white and the non-white “other.” Ethnicity is a white construct as it safely marks out those who are different from the majority and keeps them separate through repeated use of othering language. As Ray (2016) points out, this labeling signifies that “the ethnic is the inferior outsider, inside the nation, who can become the locus of our longings, in spite of his inferiority, if touched by some

measure of modernity, developments and Americanization” (2016, 11). This language is also a historical remnant of a not-so-post-colonial world which allows Western and Anglo-European cuisine to reach a higher status and price point as compared to “foreign” food; colonized, non-white cuisines are “ethnic” and therefore continue to be exploited. This longing for the ethnic is a form of fetishization that reduces cultures to the sum of their products and practices while ignoring any human element.

Language and food discourse also serve as subtle forms of racial and ethnic differentiation in a society where it is no longer culturally acceptable to blatantly express prejudice. The language of “ethnic” foods is a facet of what Martinez Guillem describes as “a new crop of apparently inclusive keywords, such as multiculturalism, diversity, or integration, that are constantly (re)articulated to deviate direct attention from skin color as a relevant marker of different, even though they tend to indirectly reinforce it” (2017, 361). Food is an excellent example of the ways in which racial discourse becomes so normalized as to be used by those with no intention of perpetuating racial structures and with no recognition of the harm induced even when attempting to validate the other. This racialized language exists not as a product of racism but as an instigator of the social construct of race and the creation of racial stereotypes as “race is a product of racism and not vice versa” (Solomos 1998, 49). In the next section I will look at Critical Race Theory, which focuses on fairly recent understandings of race as both a social and biological construct.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory was introduced in the 1980s as a conception of race as a social construct. Critical Race Theory (CRT) “posits that racism, White privilege, and historical context dominate and permeate institutions and systems, social norms, and daily practice” (Provenzo and

Renaud, 2010, 199). The perspective of CRT was in direct contrast with the prevailing belief – beginning the 1700s – that race was biological. CRT asserts that from a scientific basis, race does not exist. Historically, with the invention of race as a biological concept came the ability to wield power over one another. The concept of race as a biological construct was occurring – incidentally around the same time that the modern restaurants were invented – after the French revolution in the mid-to-late 18th century. At this time, Carl Linnaeus had just published *Systema Naturae* (1735) which was the first time that people had been classified based on skin color. In 1748, David Hume wrote that he was “apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all the other species of men...to be natural inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation” (Garrett 2000, 171). Not only was Hume’s racist assertion completely false and wrongheaded, it was also one of the first instances in which anyone had written about differences in inherent human value based on skin color. In the 19th century, Darwin’s theory of evolution and survival was tailored to fit the needs of those who sought to subjugate those other “species” of men and, hence, Social Darwinism became a scientific excuse for the success of white people and nations, and the destruction of anyone who did not fit such criteria (Dennis 1995). Keeping this perspective in mind allows one to understand that all engagements with race, are socially negotiated and take active engagement around asking about the work that this invented concept of racial inferiority is doing in the world, relative to food and any other social or political practices. One of the ways in which racism is most apparent in food discourse is in food marketing, the history of which is based on colonial marketing tactics which employed racial stereotypes and images to appeal to a white audience. Examples such as the Huntley and Palmer’s Biscuit label and others such as Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben, which I address in

Chapter 4, are illustrative of the marketing of racist images. Beyond the use of race as an advertising tool, the appropriation by dominant groups of the foods of oppressed races and ethnicities remains the most harmful and yet most ambiguous occurrence of racist food discourse. Appropriation itself is often misconstrued with theories of acculturation which differs in that the former involves a power imbalance while the latter speaks to a form of assimilation and survival as a result of that imbalance.

Appropriation vs. Acculturation

Appropriation in its truest sense describes a borrowing of property –physical, intellectual or otherwise – and using it without the owner’s consent. In essence, this is the definition of cultural appropriation and yet the borrowing, if not outright theft, of another peoples’ cultural inheritance comes with a much higher cost because of the power imbalance inherent in its practice. Appropriation in its most harmful form allows those in power to both remain in power and to profit from the theft or borrowing of a marginalized group’s culture. This is not to say that a marginalized group cannot appropriate the culture of the dominant group, however in this sense it is often more appropriate to describe that theft or borrowing as acculturation rather than appropriation. This differentiation is necessary to understand if these two terms are to be used in a meaningful way.

Acculturation, as opposed to appropriation, is a form of assimilation; a means of survival for those not a part of the dominant culture. In this sense, power is central to “questions of whether a particular cultural transmission should be read as appropriation or assimilation (Ziff and Rao 1997, 7). This assimilation is prevalent in the food system as many immigrants to the United States, in order to make a living or in response to a lack of traditional ingredients, learn to adapt their food to American taste. For example, Chinese food in America is unique to America;

it is not the same as Chinese food in China. The important distinction here is that of power and cultural domination. And yet it is this misunderstanding of the language of appropriation and the necessity of acculturation that can simultaneously strip food of its meaning and devalue the work that immigrants and minorities do to fit into a culture that often seeks to both profit from and erase them.

For the purpose of this thesis, my use of the term cultural appropriation is based on a definition that focuses on the borrowing or outright theft of a marginalized culture's property or knowledge and its use for profit by the dominant culture. This definition encompasses the power structure inherent in appropriation and applies it to a specific context in which power is "implicated differentially depending on whether the subjectivity of the receiver of culture is identified as being from a dominant or subordinate group" (Ziff and Rao, 1997, 5). In the context of the United States, this could be defined as white people profiting from the stolen knowledge of historically marginalized cultures, namely non-white ethnicities. Appropriation, along with the exploitation of marginalized cultures, can lead to a gentrification of food as well as the erasure, exploitation, and oppression of the people and cultures that created it.

Food gentrification can be broadly characterized as the process through which "previously affordable and staple ingredients can suddenly become 'cool,' costly, and ultimately out of reach for poorer communities that once depended on them" (WNYC 2018). In the case of restaurants, such gentrification is a white-washing of food that delegitimizes non-white businesses while increasing the price that is paid to white businesses. When non-white foods are "discovered" by white chefs or celebrities, they become trendy and are only legitimized because they are endorsed or created by white people. The same thing could be said of gentrified neighborhoods which, once discovered by a white population, see home prices increase and

minority populations forced out. This is related to what Ray (2016) describes in his theory on cultural proximity in that “the intimate Other is always disdained, while the distant Other can be safely eulogized” (2016, 86). When traditionally ethnic or non-white foods are produced and sold by white people, they retain their exoticism while maintaining a physical and cultural barrier between the known and the “Other”. There may also be a perceived sense of safety for white consumers who, consciously or not, find it easier to trust the quality of food being made by someone who looks like them, as evidenced by language that differentiates between “clean” and “dirty” food. The price increase of these newly popular foods harms both the marginalized consumers of traditional foods or products as well as the bottom line of restaurants run by those whose food has become gentrified.

One of the discursive issues with appropriation is the fact that white people do not grasp the reality that while they may be able to step into and out of different races and cultures, non-white people are not able to do that, but the language used to describe this “racial tourism” (Vats 2014) is not defined in the working definition of appropriation. The issue is that white people can try on language, food, clothing, and hairstyles from any number of ethnicities and yet when they grow tired of it, they can step back into their white lives, facing none of the punishments that non-white people face for simply inhabiting the world in a body deemed different and therefore subsequently less deserving. In essence, white people “can retain the privilege of being unmarked while experiencing, and ultimately domesticating, the exhilaration of the exotic” (Ziff and Rao 1997, 6) while maintaining and ultimately profiting from their whiteness. Non-white people do not have the luxury to simply decide not to be black or Mexican or Chinese anymore. They must live with the consequences of being “other” in a society dominated by whiteness.

Appropriation in this sense is not just about the borrowing of another culture's symbols or traditions but an actively exploitative practice that seeks to profit from stolen ideas with no recognition of where those ideas or traditions came from. Acculturation, on the other hand, can either be thought of as assimilation or, in the parlance of foodie culture, "fusion." It is often a means of survival for immigrants as they seek to adapt traditional cuisines to American palates. However, acculturation brings up questions of authenticity, which can be harmful in their own right. What is authentic? Who patrols authenticity? The language of both "authenticity" and "ethnicity" is a perpetuation of white privilege as the language seeks to differentiate any non-dominant culture and to reduce marginalized cultures to a perceived set of often harmful and misinformed stereotypes. The language of "authenticity" is also used as a form of control as it polices or patrols the boundaries of what is acceptable to a white audience and whether a food or culture is *enough* to qualify itself. The theories explained in the next subsections also add insights into the commodification of race as a means of creating and selling food while differentiating between cultural and racial power structures. The following theories also explain how appropriation becomes harmful when, in a capitalist society, exploitative practices solidify racial power structures through economic means.

Economics of Appropriation

The oppressive and exploitative aspects of appropriation occur because of a power imbalance. In terms of economics, this leads to observable consequences as capital is gained by those in power at the expense of those being appropriated. Beyond social and financial capital, "culinary capital," as defined by Naccarato and Lebesco (2012), serves as a determinant of particular power relations both within and between classes. Culinary capital goes beyond the food we eat to describe the food choices people are capable of making based on their economic

and social situations. There is an elitism inherent in current food trends, derived from the ability to make these food choices. Economic constraints may hold people back from either being able to afford certain foods or being able to take a chance spending money on food that one may not enjoy, therefore losing both money and a meal. Local, fresh and healthy food are all suggested by popular media as the “right” way to eat and live, and yet they are rules that cater to a public that presumably has the freedom to choose exactly what, how and where they eat. As Naccarato and Lebesco (2012) point out, “such freedom of choice is always influenced by a set of cultural norms and values that have been internalized by those consumers” (2012, 4). The issue with these internalized norms is that they immediately vilify those who are unable or unwilling to adapt to them.

With a change in the means of gaining culinary capital, a gentrification of food occurs, in which “ethnic” or “exotic” restaurants are either fetishized or replaced with a whiter, more elite version, fitting with contemporary norms. Currently, for example, a willingness and ability to try new foods is both a signifier of culinary capital and a means of acquiring more. While in the past much food discourse revolved around expensive foods and elite dining institutions, contemporary discourse as it relates to an interest in gaining culinary capital is now focused on “omnivorousness” (Ray 2016) and a willingness to try new foods. This new interest in seeking out new cuisines speaks to both a fetishization of the “foreign” or “ethnic” as well as a necessary economic capital. As Tannahill (1937), points out, “a nearness of hunger breeds conservatism. Only the well-fed can afford to try something new, because only they can afford to leave it on the plate if they dislike it” (393). This ability to afford food that may or may not be eaten speaks to the privilege inherent in omnivorousness and, in turn, to the inherent whiteness of the pursuit. In *Culinary Capital*, Naccarato and Lebesco (2012) summarize bell hooks by stating that “such

adventurism serves to Other non-white cultures by making their food, and thus them, exotic and something to be consumed or mastered by the foodie” (11). Both the appropriation of non-white cuisines by white chefs as well as the expensive habit of frequenting such establishments means that the popularity of a particular cuisine does not ensure any flow of capital back to those who originally created it.

It is also interesting to note the disconnect between scholarly research and appropriative practices in terms of the economic lives of both immigrants and minority communities in the United States. As Ray (2016) states, “it would be perverse to be interested in immigrant lives yet uninterested in food, as a matter either of the political economy of micro-entrepreneurship or the cultural politics of the transactions in taste” (14). Ray points to the ways in which research regarding immigrants focuses on food and politics separately when related to issues of immigration, rather than exploring the connections between taste, culture, and economics. This lack of research or acknowledgement of the impact of appropriation and “transactions in taste” only further speaks to the white gaze of much academic research as well as the subtle nature of the economic effects of appropriation. Beyond the glossing over of the economics of appropriation, Ray also points out the ways in which academic research assumes minority groups to exist only as statistical figures and as if “immigrants are creatures only of political economy who never think about taste, beauty, and how such things might intersect with their practical-moral universe” (2016, 16). This one-dimensional view of minority groups only allows research to speak to one very small aspect of their lives. From discussions of taste values – whose is important, whose is valued, whose is ignored – we can surmise other types of valuations about which bodies are valued and which can be exploited. In this way, it is not surprising that those undervalued groups are often exploited by racist forms of marketing. The continued exploitation

of the food and bodies of non-white people is apparent today as those marginalized groups are oppressed while their cultural knowledge is fetishized and appropriated. Based on historical instances that continue to influence contemporary marketing techniques, race as a means of commoditizing and selling certain foods is a product of a system based on capitalism and systemic racism.

Commodity Racism

Commodity racism is the marketing of racial stereotypes on a mass scale in a way that not only perpetuates those stereotypes but also further normalizes them for a profit. The concept of commodity racism was introduced by Anne McClintock (1995) and describes the use of race and racist representations in product creation and marketing in order to sell commodities, specifically in a neoliberal economy in which the value of commodities overshadow the value of human life and human labor. What began in Victorian England as a conversion of “the narrative of imperial progress into mass produced *consumer spectacles*” (King 2009, 100) transformed in the United States into something more specific. In the United States, commodity racism focused on its own special brand of colonialism as “blackness, the legacies of slavery, and racial rule, proved equally important in the exhibition, marketing and circulation of commodities” (King 2009, 100). Slavery became, in essence, a marketing technique as producers and advertisers tapped into a burgeoning fetishization of the unknown in order to sell new and “exotic” products to white consumers. Elizabeth Chin suggests that slavery itself is a form of commodity racism because “it was racism itself that justified turning people into commodities” (Chin 2015). Then, from the commodification of one marginalized people came the mass commodification of any non-white culture or ethnicity. In turning entire groups of people into commodities and marketing tactics, a power structure emerged. This use of race as a marketing ploy appealed to

white customers who sought (and continue to seek) products that reified white supremacist images and attitudes.

Those who become commoditized lose their sovereignty and instead become a thing to be bought, sold or discarded, and their value is determined by those in power. As bell hooks states, “when race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other” (hooks 1992). These affirmations of power occur so frequently that most of us are immune to their presence and, if we are a part of the dominant culture, we are immune to the harm that they inflict upon those being commoditized. Commodity racism also allows a certain form of racial or cultural tourism in which “commodification contributes to a reworking of race that proposes it is little more than “a matter of style, something that can be put on or taken off at will” (King 2009, 101). As with appropriation, white consumers are able to sample and consume another race or culture while still maintaining white privilege and avoiding the repercussions of actually belonging to those races, cultures, or ethnicities being marketed and consumed. Any grocery store shelf is an exercise in commodity racism, from Aunt Jemima syrup and Uncle Ben’s rice to Land-O-Lakes butter and the (now defunct) Frito Bandito. Yet most consumers pass over those products without a second thought as to their racist, oppressive, and exploitative connotations.

Commodity racism is not a new phenomenon but is one that is so steeped in historical narratives and social norms that its presence is rejected by those who would prefer to believe that racism disappeared with slavery and colonialism. Perhaps it should not be shocking that in a country built on racism, exploitation and oppression, “instances of racist advertising are anything

but exceptional and many discriminatory slogans and images continue to enjoy legal protection” (Hinrichsen et al. 2015). The fact that Major League Baseball fans can root for the Atlanta Braves and National Football League fans regularly don headdresses at Washington Redskins games is a perfect example of the ways in which commodity racism not only exists in plain sight but also its use for massive profits while continuing to subject marginalized peoples to oppressive, exploitative and racist practices. Commodity racism is an historical example of racist food discourse that has crept into contemporary food marketing and which continues to highlight the ways in which racist depictions of minorities has become normalized and internalized. Commodity racism is a clear case of externalized racist food discourse and this concept helpful for understanding both the historical roots of this discourse and how to navigate and change its course today. The next section explains the research problem and questions to which I apply the theories explained in this section.

Research Problem

My research addresses racist and oppressive food discourse because I want to learn how representations of food act as a tool of oppression in order to become more aware and critical of the systemic racism within food discourse and learn to apply new thinking to the issue of food as an oppressive and exploitative tool. This critical inquiry applies the theoretical tools explained in Chapter Two to illuminate those discrepancies as they exist both historically and in contemporary examples. My research focuses on historical examples that give great insight into the beliefs and mindsets of particular points in time. My research also points to examples that hint at ways in which racist beliefs and mindsets persist today in the way we talk about and consume food.

The overall research question this thesis asks is, how are racism and oppression perpetuated through representations of food and culture in the food system? I address this question by asking three constitutive research questions. The first question asks, how and where have racism and cultural appropriation been present and persistent in historical narratives about food and culture? The research for this question involves applying critical theories and concepts to historical instances of racist presentations of food and racist or oppressive food discourse in order to explain why this discourse continues to exist. My second question focuses on contemporary examples of racist and exploitative food discourse; it asks, where do instances and examples of racism and of racism and appropriation occur in contemporary food discourse and practice? This question is addressed with data generated from popular food magazines, television shows, and restaurant websites and reviews and aims to illuminate racism in its current, often unexamined iteration. For my third question I ask, how might we understand, based on the work of academics and practitioners, how to confront and abolish racist and appropriative discourse? The data collected and analyzed to answer these questions consist of both academic and popular sources that focus on anti-racism and activism and aims to provide new ways of thinking about racialized discourse and potentially offer solutions based on this new understanding. The next chapter will explain in depth the methods and methodologies I employed in obtaining and analyzing the data to answer these research three research questions.

Chapter Three

Methodology and Methods

This chapter explains the methodology and methods used in this research, which focus on the ways in which contemporary food discourse creates and perpetuates racist and appropriative food discourse, specifically in the United States. In the next section, I explain the methodologies I use to address my research problem; these are discourse analysis, literature review, and critical inquiry. I also explain my positionality relative to my research problem. In the section that follows, I detail the methods I used to answer each question.

Methodology

In this section I explain my methodologies which include discourse analysis, literature review, and critical inquiry. I used critical inquiry, which allowed me to examine “existing social and political reality...for the purpose of gaining enlightenment about and emancipation from dominating and oppressive forms of control found in our societal, institutional, or personal life” (Plihal 1989, 37). The purpose of critical inquiry is to focus research with the intent of freeing people from oppression. For the purpose of this thesis, critical analysis of food discourse sought to do just that as my research focused on the ways in which marginalized people continue to be oppressed based on manifest, socially accepted forms of racism.

I also used discourse analysis as this thesis’ research problem focused on current discourse and, consequently, my methodologies revolved around discourse analysis, both within academic literature and popular media sources. Discourse, in this instance, can be defined as “socio-cultural resources used by people in the construction of meaning about their world and their activities” (Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992, 192). Discourse analysis, then, “considers how language, both spoken and written, enact social and cultural perspective and identities” (Gee

1970). Discourse analysis was an appropriate methodology for answering the first question, which focuses on historical instances of racist food discourse. because it allowed me to analyze not only the language, but the “rules by which verbal speech and written statements are made meaningful,” (Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992, 193), all of which is used to label, represent and discuss food. It also allowed me to analyze ways in which that language relates to oppression and exploitation.

I used literature review to engage academic literatures on concepts and theories related to race, appropriation, economics, and language and literature review methodologies. A scoping literature review allowed me to “address broader topics where many different study designs might be applicable” (Arksey and O’Malley, 2005, 20). Rather than a systematic literature review, a scoping review also allowed me to “describe in more detail the findings and range of research in particular areas of study” as well as “identify[ing] gaps in the evidence base where no research has been conducted” (2005, 21). This last point was important for this research topic as I quickly discovered that my research questions were not ones which had been asked or researched to a great extent. The scoping literature review gave me a sense of where research was missing and allowed me to fill those gaps with related data from seemingly completely unrelated questions and research.

My positionality as a white, upper-class female has led me to this thesis topic because it is one that I have overlooked for most of my life for the simple reason that it never affected me. After nearly ten years of working in both restaurants and in marketing, I began to question the language and representations of the food I was making and selling. Now that I am aware of the pervasive nature of racism and oppression in food discourse, I notice it everywhere and my hope

is that others in my position will begin to notice it as well. The next section will give a description of the methods used in this research.

Methods

The methods I used to address my thesis' constitutive research questions involved seeking out relevant literature and gathering data from both academic and popular sources. I used discourse analysis and literature review. This section describes the methods I employed in gathering, organizing and analyzing data for my three research questions.

Research Question 1 Methods

My first research question asks: How have racism and cultural appropriation been present and persistent in historical narratives about food and culture? For this question, my unit of analysis was historical narratives and my unit of observation was historical instances of racist food discourse with a defined scope of those instances occurring in the United States between 1800 and present day. Data sources included historical texts and images as well as academic sources that focus on food and history. I chose data that focused on the intersection of food and race. I gathered data from academic sources, particularly those focused on food, history, and race by performing keyword searches and focusing on journals addressing histories of race and food. I also focused on academic sources that look at critical race theory, economics of appropriation, commodity racism and language use.

The data, academic literature, were organized based on theories and representations of race, appropriation, economics, and historical marketing. Because I am focusing on race, economics and language, data were organized into subsets within those categories. Corresponding, representative historical examples were organized according to the same

categories: race, economy, and language. I analyzed the data to connect concepts and theories to practical representations of the intersections between race and food.

Research Question 2 Methods

My second research question asked, how do instances and examples of racism and appropriation emerge in contemporary food discourse and practice? My unit of analysis was contemporary discourse and my sources focused on instances of racist or appropriative food discourse. The unit of observation for this question was contemporary instances of racist food discourse. As this question focused on more current examples, I scaled my scope down to instances occurring in the United States between 1980 and present day. Data included articles, interviews, images, videos, and audio. I used popular sources such as social media, food media websites, magazines, and news outlets. I focused on data representing either direct examples of racism and oppression or that highlight those examples. I used popular sources – rather than academic – as I am focusing on contemporary examples within popular culture. These sources include magazines, online videos, news outlets, food media websites, and social media.

I gathered data mainly through online searches of popular food media sources. I organized my data based on the relevance of each example to my topics of race, economics and language. Through this organization, I found that the focus of this discourse was on chefs, restaurants, food magazines and cookbooks. Data analysis focused on what others in popular food discourse have said about each example as they relate to instances of racist or appropriative practice. I wanted to know how media outlets as well as the public are responding (or if they are responding at all) to these examples. After choosing examples that had generated the highest response rates from both media outlets and the public, I then analyzed those instances through the lens of the theories and concepts explained in Chapter Two. Because these examples centered

so heavily on restaurants and food television, I chose to separate these two categories and analyze them separately through frameworks appropriate to the constituent contents of the data.

Research Question 3 Methods

Research question three asks, how might we understand, based on the work of academics and practitioners, how to confront and abolish racist and appropriative discourse? My unit of analysis was popular media sources and my units of observation were those sources that perpetuated or challenged racist and appropriative food discourse. I looked at episodic sources rather than static sources, such as a television series instead of a documentary, or a collection of magazines rather than a book, because I wanted these sources to be as plastic and current as possible. I selected sources that were malleable in their content and to potentially reference each other in order to gain a more nuanced perspective of the conversation occurring within and around these sources. I used sources that were both perpetuating as well as challenging the status quo for the simple purpose that those sources are often one and the same. Those sources also had to be within my contemporary scope which ranged from 1980 to today. I used media studies methods to analyze episodic sources because they allowed me to ask questions regarding who was speaking, what was being said, through which channel, to whom, and to what effect. These media sources included podcasts, food television shows and food magazines and publications. I organized my data in categories based first on the type of media and secondly on how they challenged or reproduced oppressive discourse. I then organized these sources into examples related to the theories outlined in Chapter Two. Discourse analysis was an appropriate methodology for answering the third question because it allowed me to analyze food discourse as it happened in real time.

Chapter Four

Results, Analysis, and Contribution

Instances of racist food discourse have occurred in various forms in the last few centuries. What was once culturally acceptable now appears as outright racism. Yet that does not mean that current social standards have necessarily evolved. Those socially and culturally accepted forms of racism merely shapeshift into something less obvious yet no less oppressive and harmful. In this chapter, I examine changing instances of racist food discourse through the conceptual and theoretical lenses outlined in Chapter Two. This theoretical framework will allow me to analyze the origins of individual instances of racist discourse, as well as the ability of this racist discourse to persist in a supposedly post-racial and post-colonial world.

My overall research question focuses on the ways in which racism and oppression are perpetuated through representations of food and culture in the food system. This research addresses racism and oppression as reproduced through food discourse because I want to learn how representations of food work as tools of oppression so that we can become more aware of the systemic racism inherent within food discourse and learn to both recognize and respond to instances when food is acting as an oppressive and exploitative tool. The questions that I address in my results, analysis and conclusion are: How have racism and cultural appropriation been present and persistent in historical narratives about food and culture? Where do instances and examples of racism and appropriation exist in contemporary food discourse and practice? And, how can we understand, based on academics and practitioners, how to confront and abolish racist and appropriative discourse?

The first two questions will be the focus of my results and analysis section. I first look at historical examples of racist and appropriative discourse and analyze them through the lens of critical theories and conceptual approaches. I then move on to contemporary examples and use that same system of analysis, tying together the historical narrative with current practices. Finally, in my contribution section, which addresses research question three, I look at ways in which this discourse is being challenged as well as potential paths forward and expand upon the question of potential avenues for change by looking at instances of anti-racist work being done by chefs, writers, and popular media outlets.

Results and Analysis for Research Question 1

In this section, I present results and analysis for my first research question which asks, how have racism and cultural appropriation been present and persistent in historical narratives about food and culture? I do this by using historical examples of racist and appropriative discourse as data which I then analyze through the lens of critical academic theories. The historical narratives included are instances of racist discourse that have been discussed at length in the literature focused on critical inquiry regarding racism and food in the United States. Each example speaks to a phenomenon that occurs frequently with “ethnic” or non-white foods in the United States in that those foods are transmuted from a means of survival to a means of extinction. The food is weaponized in a way that seeks to remove all cultural and historical power from the people who created them and to transfer that power to the hands of the oppressor. Beyond the explicit use of food as a tool of oppression, racialized food also becomes an object of fetishization which places the value of the object over the value of the people associated with it. Each of the examples below encompasses both the oppression associated with racist food discourse as well as the commodification and fetishization of race.

Case Study: Slavery, Critical Race Theory, and the Appropriation of Fried Chicken

In the United States, one of the most ubiquitous examples of food as a tool of racism, oppression, and exploitation is fried chicken. The specific tradition of fried chicken in America is directly linked to slavery and continues to exist as a representation not only of black culture but of the systemic oppression of black people in the United States. The creation of fried chicken has roots in the West African cooking traditions of slaves brought to America during the 19th century (Edge, 2017). Slaves were often forced to make fried chicken for slave owners and ate it themselves as chickens were often the only animals they were allowed to raise for food. After the Emancipation Proclamation, freed slaves sold fried chicken at train stations as a means of generating income when most jobs were still not available to black people (Williams-Forsen 2006). Beyond slavery, segregation in the United States necessitated the creation of black-owned restaurants where black people could work and where they could safely eat. Many of these restaurants cooked and served traditionally black food and, again, fried chicken became a means of survival in a hostile country. It is this link between slavery and fried chicken that gives insight into the ways in which racism appears in food.

Slavery itself was a direct result of the invention of race as both a biological and social construct. As white Europeans continued their quest for expansion and domination of the planet, black people became a means of acquiring free (slave) labor; the exploitation of non-white people built the western world as we know it today. The appropriation and co-option of black foods, particularly fried chicken, has led to a racialization that seeks to suppress the power that this food holds in black communities and to use that power as a means of further white interests. Racist representations of fried chicken persist today and are fueled by unexamined historical stereotypes (Endolyn 2018). The stereotypical connection between black people and fried

chicken could arguably be said to have been created by D.W. Griffith's 1915 film *Birth of a Nation* in which a black man (one of the few actors not in black face) is seen ravenously eating a piece of fried chicken. The assumption that black people are preordained to enjoy fried chicken is a stereotype that produces an atmosphere of shame around a once culturally powerful food.

The effects of these racist representations are further exacerbated as the appropriation of fried chicken by white chefs and restaurateurs has become a lucrative business at the expense of both black-owned restaurants and of the cultural understanding of the roots and history of fried chicken. Similarly, barbecue has incurred a whitewashing of sorts as the tradition of black barbecue has been replaced by white pit masters who have claimed the history of a food that also dates back to slavery. As black people found opportunities outside of the service industry, white cooks took their place and the cooking and selling of these foods became a white hobby rather than a black necessity. The fact that the most famous fried chicken restaurant in the world – Kentucky Fried Chicken – is represented by Colonel Sanders, a white confederate general, speaks volumes as to how white America has changed fried chicken from a symbol of black survival and empowerment into a commodity associated with the exact people who sought to oppress and enslave black people.

These instances of racist marketing, racialized representations of food, and the white-washing of certain foods and commodities are concrete examples of appropriation as it relates to critical race theory. In the case of fried chicken, it was the creation of race as a social and biological construct that instigated the movement of black slaves to America. Slavery in the United States was the impetus for many now-familiar southern cooking traditions which have been appropriated by white producers and consumers. This appropriation occurs as black cooks and black culture are stolen and used by white people for profit. Beyond the theft and

appropriation of black food and culture, there is the issue of commodity racism which uses racial stereotypes specifically to market certain foods, which I will discuss in the next section.

Commodity Racism and the Economics of Racial Stereotypes

In an example quite opposite from that of KFC, commodity racism in the form of stereotyping and minstrelsy is an historical device that clings to contemporary food marketing. The use of minstrelsy to reinforce racial food stereotypes has historically been one of the most common and pernicious forms of commodity racism. According to Michael Pickering (2013), “marketing minstrelsy was itself a form of commodity racism deeply involved in selling what is produced and in that process increasing the circulation and perpetuation of racial stereotypes and racist notions” (2013, 1). This form of commodity racism has transformed into the use of stereotypical racist representations that remain harmful as they seek to dehumanize an entire race of people and “encompasses racist modes of the commodification of people – most importantly, slavery – as well as commodities in which racism is embedded” (McKlintock 1994). While Colonel Sanders is the flip-side of marketing minstrelsy, it is the embeddedness of race in these marketing techniques that qualifies them as forms of commodity racism. Commodity racism seeks to market white ideals of power and domination through images that idealize the oppression of non-white people.

One such instance is that of Popeyes Chicken. Commercials for the fast-food restaurant feature “Annie the Chicken Queen,” a middle-aged black woman with a sing-song voice whose role is to placate and entertain her audience and potential customers. Annie personifies the stereotypical “mammy,” the docile servant who embodies “the creation of white people’s imaginations, awash in longing for a golden age that never existed” (Sharpless 2013, xiv). The “golden age” here would include slavery. The use of the black mammy stereotype is effective in

quelling the fears of those who may feel threatened by the existence of a humanized and fully-formed black person. Other examples of commodity racism that are still employed to market food include the marketing of products such as Aunt Jemima's syrup and Cream of Wheat's Rastus character.. Aunt Jemima began as a character in minstrelsy shows and was popularized during the World's Fair in Chicago (King 2009, 100) where the use of a subdued black woman in the kitchen was used to pacify white consumers who wished to believe in the racial hierarchy that this representation implies. Quaker Oats then trademarked the Aunt Jemima character in 1937; the same woman whose image exists today exactly as she did a century ago. Along a similar vein, Cream of Wheat employed the use of Rastus, another minstrelsy character who still adorns boxes on grocery store shelves, although the image is now supposed to represent Frank L. White, a legendary Chicago chef (Pilgrim 2000). Both Rastus (still a derogatory term for a black man) and Uncle Ben of Uncle Ben's Rice, are "the affable and unthreatening black man, now in a suit, a token of corporate diversity programming and a tribute to the hollowness of hyperinclusivity in an era of retrenched racial hierarchies" (King, 100). Annie the Chicken Queen, Aunt Jemima, and Uncle Ben all serve as non-threatening reminders of the exploitation of black labor. These examples illustrate the creation of a racialized food discourse based on social and cultural understandings of race. The acceptance of racialized images and the inability to discuss their oppressive underpinnings is indicative of "new racism" as it works to conceal racist and exploitative discourse through an erasure of history and an absence of the language necessary to describe what is happening.

While commodity racism operates as a relatively silent and unexamined form of racialized food discourse, other representations of food exist for the sole purpose of solidifying racial stereotypes. Watermelon, as with fried chicken, are foods that have become weaponized

against black people in order to both remove their cultural power within black communities and act as racist language. The way that fried chicken and watermelon are eaten – with the hands – works to create the stereotype that black people were dirty and uncivilized. Through the lens of Critical Race Theory, these animalistic images work to proliferate social and cultural beliefs about race, namely the supposed civilization inherent in whiteness and therefore the “eminent” supremacy of white people. Watermelon was brought to the United States on slave ships from west Africa and it sustained black populations in the south. Now, the use of racist representations of black people and watermelon or fried chicken have become so ubiquitous and so powerful that some black people refuse to eat those foods in public. These examples of racial stereotypes are employed in a way that solidifies racial power structures by creating entertainment out of degradation which Claire Schmidt (2010) describes in the following way: “Reinforcing the stereotype of black people loving fried chicken helps the white characters to reaffirm their group status as not black. By laughing at the joke together, the group reinforces three ideas: 1) White people know what black people are like better than black people themselves do; 2) black people are all the same even though they attempt to disguise this fact; and 3) black people want to be white, but never can.” Such representations are still apparent in current discourse. Recently, The Boston Herald was criticized after publishing a cartoon which featured a white man asking then-President Barack Obama if he had “tried the new watermelon flavored toothpaste” (Boston Herald, 2016). The power of racist food stereotypes continues to be powerful, long after the history and creation of those stereotypes has been forgotten.

As far as weaponized food, black cooking in general has come to represent a threat to the people who consume it, taking the blame for deaths that might, in fact, have more insidious and systemic causes. For instance, when NPR (Singh 2018) published a study suggesting that the

consumption of “soul food” may be what is killing black people in the United States, that study suggested that black people are to blame for their own unique status in this country. The study disregarded any other outside factors that may affect the health of black people in the United States, all of which stem from centuries of systemic racism and none of which include cornbread or collard greens. The racialization of soul food and its shift from a form of survival to a tool of oppression and death is essentially a form of victim blaming (Twitty 2017). Soul food, as it exists in the American south, is a celebration of black peoples’ survival in the United States and is a living remnant of the ingenuity that was borne of necessity. In all of these cases, the language and representation of culturally significant foods has been warped in order to serve a white population that thrives on the oppression of expression and celebration of black America as described by the tenants of Critical Race Theory. A social construction of race that is embedded within a capitalist system built on ideas of individualism and meritocracy works to blame the oppressed and perpetuate racist and exploitative ideologies.

The Power of Language: Chinese Restaurant Syndrome

Another example of racist food discourse that is rooted in historical racial stereotypes is that of Chinese Restaurant Syndrome or CRS, a condition that has been traced back to a single letter published in a medical journal which first labeled CRS and questioned the safety of Chinese food. Chinese Restaurant Syndrome is said to be related to the consumption of MSG (monosodium glutamate) in Chinese food and causes a number of unpleasant symptoms such as headaches and nausea. The syndrome and any negative physical reactions to the consumption of MSG have been largely debunked yet there remains this idea that eating at Chinese restaurants poses an inherent risk due to the people cooking the food and the stereotypically dubious ingredients they might use. This idea that Chinese people make unclean food or that they

mysterious ingredients in their cooking stems from a history of discrimination against Chinese people in the United States that is interwoven with the history of social and political race relations beginning in the 19th century. After the Chinese exclusion act of 1882, Chinese people were barred from entering the country and this act was the first time that race was used to justify immigration policy; it was essentially the beginning of the idea of illegal immigration. Chinese people already in the US were not allowed to work and were forced to start their own businesses so many of them opened restaurants. Chinese associations in major cities helped Chinese people find new places to live – particularly in the Midwest – where they could open restaurants and not have to compete with other Chinese people (Mason 1995). The food that was created in those restaurants was not “authentic” Chinese food because it had to be adapted to American palates. Not only would Americans not eat traditional Chinese food, but cooks were unable to find many traditional ingredients. Instead it became a hybrid cuisine and Chinese-American food is now a genre unto itself.

Despite the Americanization of Chinese food, Chinese people and their businesses were unwanted and sometimes violently rejected. For instance, in 1912, newly-opened Chinese restaurant in Minnesota was vandalized and bombed, the first of many violent attacks on Chinese restaurants (Mason 1995). Yet, despite Chinese people being unwanted, Chinese commodities became fetishized and deemed exotic, especially after Richard Nixon’s 1972 visit to China. This exoticism associated with Chinese commodities speaks to the idea of orientalism in which “the object of fear also becomes the object of desire” (Jackson 2006, 201). Orientalism, according to Edward Said, is “a Western style for dominating restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said 1962, 11), in which the “Orient” is simply anything not associated with the Western, Anglo-European world. This, along with a fetishization of the exotic, are harmful in

that they reduce entire cultures down to the products associated with them by valuing commodities over people and assumes that all non-Western cultures are essentially the same and not only unknowable but not worth knowing. It seeks to glorify foreign objects while disregarding foreign bodies.

This fetishization of foreign foods and subsequent denial of the people associated with them occurs with nearly every non-white ethnicity and is especially harmful when attitudes toward those foods are completely disconnected from attitudes about the people and cultures that produce them. The concurrent fetishization and continued racism or xenophobia is related to what Mino Moallem calls a “scopic economy” which is “mediated through regimes of curiosity as well as modes of surveillance that produce both attachment to and detachment from commodities” (2018). On one hand, there is the issue of celebrating a particular cuisine, such as Mexican food, while at the same time debating whether or not Mexican people should be allowed into the United States. For example, on May 5th 2016, President Trump circulated a photo of himself eating a “taco bowl” with the caption “Happy Cinco De Mayo! The best taco bowls are made in Trump Tower Grill. I love Hispanics!” (Trump, 2016). First of all, “taco bowls” may be one of the best examples of Americanized Mexican food, as evidenced by the fact that Trump’s own “Traditional American lunch restaurant” serves them. Secondly, this photo and caption appeared as Trump was promising to build a border wall with Mexico to keep out the “bad hombres” and only months before his administration began detaining immigrants and placing them in detention centers along the border. A love of Mexican(ish) cuisine does not a love of Mexicans make.

On the other side of the issue is the appropriation of foods which, in the example of Mexican cuisine, means that the food is sought after and fetishized but only when it is created by

white cooks or chefs. People want “authenticity,” but they do not want to have to be reminded of what makes a cuisine authentic, which is of course the history and culture of the people who invented it. Case in point, Trump Tower Grill: the simultaneous fetishization of food that is also being used as a tool of oppression is what makes this racist food discourse so harmful; it is the reproduction of social and economic power structures that make appropriation abhorrent. Harmful food discourse as it relates to representation and language use perhaps occurs most often and yet most surreptitiously in the intersection of popular media and restaurants. The advent of foodie culture and the need for every celebrity, chef, and president to have their own restaurants has led to an explosion of appropriative and misguided establishments; unfortunately, their prominence and status in popular media does little to address any of the underlying issues.

Results and Analysis for Research Question 2

In this section, I address my second research question, which asks how instances and examples of racism and appropriation emerge in contemporary food discourse and practice. I draw on contemporary examples from restaurants and food television to illustrate instances of harmful appropriation as well as examples of racialized food discourse in popular media. I analyze each example using the conceptual and theoretical frameworks outline in Chapter Two.

New Racism and Appropriation in Restaurants

Appropriation of non-white cuisines by white chefs has become a topic of much debate in recent years. One side argues that anyone should be allowed to cook and sell whatever they want while the other side insists that because a racial power imbalance still exists in this country, it is inappropriate for white people to continue to profit off of the ideas and labor of marginalized people. This is where a clear definition of appropriation becomes absolutely necessary if the conversation is to be productive. In this case, and for this thesis, I have used a definition of

appropriation that focuses on its harmful effects as it exploits power imbalances and solidifies social and economic power structures (Rogers 2006). That is, appropriation of food occurs when a dominant group seeks to use and profit by the knowledge of a nondominant or marginalized group.

Appropriation of food most often occurs in a restaurant setting where diners may choose a particular establishment and cuisine based on who owns it and who cooks the food. Minh-Ha T. Pham posits that entirely new language is needed to describe blatant racial exploitation of appropriation and suggests that the term “racial plagiarism” (2017). This term would encompass the “racial capitalist processes of value extraction in which racialized groups’ resources of knowledge, labor, and cultural heritage are exploited for the benefit of the dominant groups and in ways that maintain dominant socioeconomic relationships” and in which “the authorial power and capital derived from the copying are not only *not* shared with the source community, they are denied to them” (2017, 68). The rise of celebrity chefs has exacerbated this issue as it is often white male chefs who use their celebrity status to make a profit and it is that powerful social and cultural status that blinds them to the harm being done by their business ventures.

The restaurant industry in the United States is rife with examples of exactly this type of appropriation or “racial plagiarism.” Some of the most famous restaurants in the country are the creations of wealthy white men who, genuinely or not, have taken an interest in the cuisines of historically oppressed and marginalized cultures. For example, in 2018, chef and television personality Andrew Zimmern opened a Chinese restaurant which he suggested would save diners from the “horseshit Chinese food” in the Midwest, specifically diners who had never had “authentic” Chinese food (Ho 2018). In a subsequent review, the restaurant was said to be decorated in tiki torches, posters of Hawaii, and a “Kung Food Room,” but perhaps it shouldn’t

be surprising that a chef whose travel show capitalized on the gross-out factor of eating “startling native delights” would go on to have no qualms about appropriating, insulting, infantilizing and franchising the cuisine of an entire group of people. Other instances include Rick Bayless, a white chef who has become the face of Mexican food in America, so much so that when the president of Mexico visited the White House in 2016, it was Bayless who was chosen to cook the Mexican themed dinner. Chefs such as Andy Ricker of Pok Pok and Thomas Keller of La Calenda have been questioned for their appropriation of Thai and Mexican food, respectively, although both chefs have vehemently opposed any such accusations citing their love of the cultures they are profiting from.

In light of Ansell’s definition of “new racism,” many of these instances of appropriation could be described as racist. In the weeks following Zimmern’s announcement and interview, popular food media was almost completely silent on the issue. Few were willing to call Zimmern out on his racist behavior because in the current understanding of the word, Zimmern had not been explicitly racist. However, in looking at Ansell’s understanding of the current form of racism in America, one that is colorblind and therefore can’t exist, it is in this colorblindness and this willingness to ignore or blatantly disregard the experience of a non-white person in this country that we find racist words and actions. Ansell states that “defining racism as a set of prejudiced attitudes on the psychological level was commonplace within the social scientific literature only a few decades ago and continues to be the reigning assumption of those...who deny the existence of a modern racism” (1997, 71). In the context of new or modern racism, however, Zimmern does not have to hold or express explicitly racist attitudes or beliefs in order to exhibit racist behavior or language. This new definition of racism expands the reach of the word itself and encompasses any discourse that “establishes, justifies, and/or sustains practices

that maintain systematically asymmetrical relations of racial domination” (1997, 70). This definition then speaks to any unexamined, latent practices that reproduce racial power structures.

The language of “authenticity,” especially as it relates to any restaurant or food labeled as “ethnic” is itself the language of racism and of “othering” in that anything authentic is automatically not white. Food writer Sara Kay (2019) suggests that the ways in which white people determine the authenticity of a particular restaurant “can be determined by looking at how American culture has viewed immigrant population foods in the past.” Kay references research that has been done on language use in Yelp reviews, stating that “expectations of authenticity aligned with characteristics that they associate with foreign-born poor” (Kay, 2019). So, what does that mean if a restaurant created by a white chef claims to be authentic to the appropriated cuisine? In these instances, not only are cultures and cuisines being appropriated by wealthy white men, but they are turned into garish caricatures in order to please a white clientele. These restaurants are appropriation at its worst, as they are not only run by chefs who have no awareness of their privilege, but also exploit racist stereotypes and make no effort to respect those cultures or their food.

Just months before Zimmern’s mis-guided venture, a restaurant called Yellow Fever opened inside of a Whole Foods grocery store in California. Yellow Fever immediately faced backlash not only for its racist name but for merchandise emblazoned with racial slogans and menu items named after different Asian countries, such as the “Seoul bowl” with steak, “Asian slaw,” mushrooms, kale, fried egg and gochu sauce. The restaurant is run by a Korean-American woman who admitted that having been adopted by and raised in a white family, she had little understanding of Korean culture. The term “yellow fever” is most commonly used to describe the fetishization of Asian women and yet, when questioned, the owner stated that because she, as

an Asian woman, was not offended by the term that it therefore should not be offensive to other Asian women. This is a complex example of racist food discourse as it occurred within and was perpetuated by a member of a marginalized community. The oppressive and racist language is harmful to Asian women as it normalizes the fetishization and sexualization of Asian women's bodies. This term has caused harm in the past and should not be used in any form. The harm is then reiterated by the suggestion that because a member of the Asian-American community is not offended that it somehow lessens the effect of the term. There is also the issue of the food served at this restaurant, as it too perpetuates racial stereotypes and makes no attempt at acknowledging its Asian influences. Krishnendu Ray discusses the idea of "ethnic as exotic" (2016, 76) and the mutual curiosity and disdain that western diners have for both ethnic foods, cultures and bodies. In this sense, the term Yellow Fever normalizes the fetishization of Asian women as well as a generic and vaguely racist version of Asian cuisine.

These examples illustrate ways in which racialized language is embedded food and how appropriated misrepresentations of marginalized cultures only works to solidify those stereotypes and to dehumanize those experiencing oppression. Beyond brick and mortar restaurants, this same racist discourse occurs across food media, not only in the way media outlets discuss the aforementioned chefs and restaurants but in the way food is portrayed, especially as it relates to a white audience. Both food magazines and food television are guilty of such discourse as they exist in culture that views the world through a white gaze and instantly exoticizes all non-white ethnicities through a type of cultural tourism. This tourist mindset is apparent in food television and food magazines, discussed in the next subsection, as they seek out the foreign and repackage it in a way that is palatable to white viewers.

Fetishism, Othering, and the Construction of Race in Food Television and Magazines

The rapid rise in popularity of food and travel-based television has become both a portal to the outside world as well as a reification of the whiteness of western media and the assumption that anything that has not been discovered or popularized by white people is still unknown and potentially unknowable. Popular media outlets across the United States have been quick to pick up on the hunger for cultural tourism that is apparent in the public's desire to seek out foreign and ethnic foods. The division between the "exotic foreign" and the "cheap ethnic" are no clearer than in the differentiations established by those media outlets. Language and visual representation speak to current cultural attitudes as a sort of colonial fusion occurs in the hands of white people seeking to consume the knowledge of the ethnic, exotic, and foreign "other." Without attempting to single out Andrew Zimmern, it is difficult to ignore the language used in many popular food television programs, perhaps the most problematic of which was Zimmern's *Bizarre Foods* series. The show assumes Zimmern's viewpoint as a white tourist sampling the different and of course, *bizarre*, foods of far-flung regions. While shows like these have become de rigueur for food media productions, it is the language employed in Zimmern's venture and others that succeeds in "mediat[ing] the crisis of white identity by constructing and then assimilating the exotic into the abundance of white privilege" (Kelly 2014, 3). This mediation acts as a device which solidifies and withholds the "other" while allowing white audiences to participate in a sort of cultural tourism that both alleviates fears of the foreign while keeping the exotic at arm's length. Food writer and restaurant critic Soleil Ho suggests that "we do to food what we want people to do here: to be white, remove the bones, remove the weird stuff" (Ho 2019). The language itself is problematic in the labeling of presumably any non-white foods as

“bizarre” and the voyeurism of daring to sample those strange, dangerous cuisines which much of the rest of the world considers normal and relies on for subsistence.

A similar whitewashing of non-white foods occurs in other forms, particularly in print media. In many of the most popular food magazines, it is often white people being photographed making bread, pasta, or sauerkraut, while the signaling of foreign foods occurs through the use of stereotypical props such as chopsticks and miniature Japanese flags near a bowl of ramen. Rarely are such props used to signify white foods; an Italian flag, for example, is not necessary in a recipe for lasagna. The continued white gaze of popular food media is the product of and response to the assumption that consumers approach publications through that same white perspective, an assumption that has never proven true and which as only reified racial power structures through representations of food, regardless of how innocuous the intent behind those representations.

Contribution (Research Question 3)

This thesis aims to facilitate social change in the food system by engaging topics that are often ignored because the conversations surrounding them are uncomfortable and often incendiary. I am also working to think through the underlying dynamics at work in racist food discourse through the lens of critical theories and concepts so that these issues may be named and discussed in a coherent way. I have looked at illustrative examples as a means of relating this research to daily practice. My third research question asks how and where changes can be made by understanding – based on academics and practitioners – how to confront and abolish racist and appropriative discourse. Language, particularly concerning definitions of racism and appropriation, make it difficult to discuss instances of those exact issues. How do we discuss racism and appropriation if we can't define them in a meaningful way? An understanding of

racism, both globally and more specifically as it relates to the United States, is paramount in understanding why racial food stereotypes and appropriative discourse exists and how they are harmful to marginalized peoples. Because food is a powerful vehicle of both oppression and liberation, my hope is that this thesis topic spurs people to question their own eating habits and assumptions about food in general. Once people are comfortable dealing with these questions on a personal level, they will may be more willing and able to ask those questions on a larger scale and to openly challenge oppressive discourse when arises. Thus, my third research question, addressed here, looks to contemporary discourse for positive, illustrative examples of people confronting the history of racist discourse and practice around food and culture. Specifically, in what follows I discuss examples related to the use of parody, the work some chefs are doing to challenge racist discourse and representations, television programming, and podcasts. Collectively, these examples illustrate how a new wave of chefs, food writers, and popular figures are using their platforms to address racist food discourse.

One of the ways in which racist food discourse appears in contemporary popular media is through the use of parody in popular media. The use of humor to identify and discuss racism on a national, if not global, scale is a way of slowly introducing the topic to a larger audience. Humor is much more palatable than a frank discussion of the ways in which white people continue to perpetuate racial stereotypes and some comedians have tapped into this form of discourse. One example of this which relates directly to the discussion of racist food discourse is comedian Dave Chappelle's fried chicken skit. In the skit, Chappelle jokes about his hesitation to order or eat fried chicken in public, as well as an instance in which he felt that his food choices were being racialized. Chappelle uses fried chicken as a tool to examine racist stereotypes in an entertaining and palatable way. However, his comedy also ensures that every laugh is slightly uncomfortable,

as the audience confronts both their own understanding of why the parody exists in the first place and why they are essentially laughing at racism. Calling out the absurdity of racialized food discourse can initiate discussions about why we believe and perpetuate racist stereotypes and why we choose to value certain foods over others, especially as they relate to non-white ethnicities. Krishnendu Ray's (2016) theories on language illuminate the importance of language as a precursor for thought; he argues that in order to discuss racism as it appears in food discourse, we must create or define language that speaks to the true issue at hand. Relating to issues of racism and appropriation, Chapelle's skit in particular speaks to the necessity of a more nuanced conversation about how and why a piece of chicken could become so racially charged and oppressive.

A second example is the work that some chefs are doing to challenge racialized representations and the appropriation of food. While white celebrity chefs are doing their part to exacerbate racist food discourse, there are chefs across the country working to counteract that discourse and to move past racist food stereotypes through a historical understanding of black and Asian cuisine. Chef Eduardo Jordan, who opened his restaurant June Baby in Seattle, uses his establishment to educate diners in a way that speaks to his experience as a black chef in the United States. His website provides an encyclopedia of food words, many of them native to the south, which elaborate on the ingredients he uses and the historical meanings behind those ingredients. Jordan has spoken openly about his own reluctance to serve typical southern food at his restaurant because of implied racial stereotypes. He has chosen to use that discomfort not only to elevate traditional dishes but to educate his diners about the deep racial history of many southern foods. Along with Jordan, chef Jenny Dorsey has created a tasting menu that directly calls out racist food discourse. Not only does Dorsey's tasting menu have a backstory seeped in

racism, oppression and appropriation, but she has also created a weekly dinner series which encourages (if not forces) discussion of uncomfortable topics.

A third set of examples of how current food discourse address instances of racism and oppression is food media and food industry members working to make this issue more visible. This subsection describes television programming that works to start conversations about racist food discourse and the history of oppressive representations of food. While the problem persists in mainstream food media, many lesser known outlets are focusing on creating content that is more reflexive and self-aware. These outlets feature diverse staffs who bring numerous differing viewpoints to the table and who are able to not only avoid perpetuating racist discourse but who also make it a point to call out those who do. David Chang's *Ugly Delicious* on Netflix, for example, challenges racist depictions of food and focuses explicitly on the unexamined stories behind racialized food in America. Traveling around the United States, Chang seeks to learn the history of particular foodways and to challenge commonly held knowledge regarding those foods and cultures which perpetuate stereotypes and normalize racist agendas. Along those same lines, Anthony Bourdain's *Parts Unknown* on CNN used food as a tool to ask questions and learn about other parts of the world. In a 2016 episode in Sichuan, Bourdain voiced his own opinion on CRS, stating: "You know what causes Chinese Restaurant Syndrome? Racism" (*Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown*, 2016). In a third example, author and restaurateur Eddie Huang's television show *Huang's World* used food as a vehicle to investigate social issues and to instigate conversations both with and about those perpetuating racist food discourse and oppressive stereotypes. It should be pointed out, however, that both Bourdain and Huang's shows are no longer in production; the void left by the absence of these voices must be filled by those willing to put themselves in the uncomfortable position of addressing racism in its myriad forms.

Collectively, these examples illustrate the many avenues available in contemporary media for highlighting and discussing racist food discourse. Together, with the analyses for Research Questions 1 and 2, these examples challenge the construction of race and racism in food discourse through an examination of Critical Race Theory, the appropriation of food and food culture, and the use of racialized commodities in marketing strategies. In looking at examples of appropriation in contemporary restaurants, it is clear that more effective and nuanced language is necessary to accurately describe the harmful discourse that these establishments reproduce and perpetuate. Theories such as new racism and the economic impacts of appropriation seek to define the boundaries of appropriation and exploitation. Instances of fetishization of the “foreign” or “ethnic” speak to the larger issue of the production of content by and for a white audience, thereby erasing marginalized groups from the conversation and reinstituting colonialist language.

Contemporary discourse on food, as illustrated by the analyses presented in this chapter should consider, first and foremost, the effect of centering a white perspective of the world. Through a more inclusive, nuanced lens it becomes apparent that our language and representations of non-white food only assist in solidifying often-racist stereotypes and in exploiting those stereotypes to maintain racial power structures. It is necessary to challenge racialized discourse as it occurs in discussions and representations of food to disturb this racialized power structure. Ijeoma Oluo (2019) suggests that we must begin labeling “whiteness” just as we label all other ethnicities, and that in doing so, we can understand ubiquity of the white gaze and the often-latent ways in which it reproduces oppression and exploitation. We must pay attention to our own biases and question ourselves and others when these challenges elicit emotional responses in an effort to move the topic away from personal accusations of racism or

appropriation and toward an understanding of the systemic oppression that we have inherited and our responsibility to change it.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

My overall research question for this thesis asked how racism and oppression are perpetuated through representations of food and culture in the food system. The corresponding research and data pointed to a history of racist food discourse in the United States which was created within a food system built on colonialism, appropriation, and systemic racism. Foods have power in both their symbolism and in their ability to sustain bodies and entire populations. The appropriation and racialization of those foods seeks to strip them of their power and in doing so, strip marginalized peoples of the power they have created for themselves. Contemporary examples tend to be remnants of racial food discourse that has persisted even as the United States has sought to enter into a post-racial period. These examples include instances of commodity racism which shows up on labels such as Aunt Jemima's syrup and Uncle Ben's rice, as well as instances of appropriation in which famous white chefs profit from the knowledge and work of marginalized and oppressed ethnicities. The appropriation and racialization of those foods seeks to strip them of their power and in doing so, strip marginalized peoples of the power they have created for themselves.

While this thesis is based on a framework of critical academic theories and frameworks used to analyze historical and contemporary racist food discourse, this framework was built on a foundation of hope; hope for a deeper understanding of ways in which each of us are complicit in perpetuating oppressive racial discourse and the hope that a reckoning with this complicity will move our society in the direction of equality, appreciation, and a reevaluation of how we talk about food and people. Current food discourse is a reflection and perpetuation of historic racist

stereotypes and, without critical examination, those stereotypes will continue to oppress and exploit marginalized people.

My research addressed the concepts and theories associated with racism and appropriation, which allowed me to analyze contemporary discourse and practice around race and food through a lens of critical inquiry. Each example of appropriation and racist representations of food highlights a different way in which race is embedded in our culture, from the language we use to talk about traditionally non-white foods to the packaging on foods sold in every grocery store across the country. It was my goal with this research to implicate each of us in the variously egregious and subtle forms of racist food discourse that is a product of centuries of systemic racism and, through that implication, to encourage a reassessment of what we consider normal and acceptable.

There are indeed reasons to be hopeful. Many chefs, food writers, photographers, media outlets, and food justice activists are working to dismantle racist food discourse. It is these people who are initiating and furthering the uncomfortable and utterly crucial conversations about food and race. It is their hope, and mine as well, that a continued confrontation of racism and racial stereotypes in food discourse will open a door for people of all races and ethnicities to become more aware of the myriad ways in which our language and assumptions perpetuates oppression and exploitation. The way we think about and talk about food every day is rife with racial implications that have been so normalized as to go completely ignored. And even the most blatant offenses are ignored for fear of having to delve into uncomfortable topics as well as not having the correct language to even discuss the harm that is being reproduced and perpetuated. As food writer Chris Ying suggests, “there is no such thing as a non-ethnic restaurant” (Ying

2018). In the true definition of “ethnic,” Applebee’s, McDonald’s, and the Cracker Barrel are all ethnic restaurants; whiteness is an ethnicity.

It is apparent that we need to pay more attention to the insensitive and at times blatantly racist ways that we talk about food and that we need new language to label and discuss this racist discourse. In understanding and applying new definitions of racism and appropriation, such as Ansell's definition of "new racism" and Pham's definition of "racial plagiarism," we can have more productive conversations about these issues. Perhaps an official change in the language used by the Associated Press could foster a change in the way we use (or avoid) words such as “ethnic,” “exotic,” and “authentic.” White chefs, particularly those with a media presence, must become more self-aware and seek to understand where their privilege and appropriation may be harmful to those cultures and cuisines they are sharing or appreciating through their cooking. A more robust and nuanced conversation about the power of the white gaze in the western world will be difficult, but it is essential if we are to stop fetishizing and oppressing the “other” that gaze both creates and reinforces. Understanding the historical basis of appropriation and racist food discourse, as well as ways in which its perpetuation can be challenged, will hopefully lead to a food system that is based on equity and mutual respect rather than a perpetuation of racist and colonialist behaviors. It is only through the examination of personal and societal beliefs and practices that we will potentially inch forward into a truly post-racial world.

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