

# The New York Times' obsession with race expands to its food commentary

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9 November 2019

Once again, in a commentary devoted to the purported popularity of fast food chain Popeyes' fried chicken sandwich among African Americans, the *New York Times* has demonstrated its repugnant obsession with race and capacity to embarrass itself.

The piece, headlined "Popeyes Sandwich Strikes a Chord for African-Americans," fixates on the premise that the multinational chain (with 3,100 locations in 25 countries and \$3.7 billion in revenue in 2019) struck this "special chord" with black people because its sandwich "tastes like something that could have come from a black home kitchen." The author, John Eligon, a *Times* national correspondent covering race from Kansas City, claims black people enjoy Popeyes chicken not only for its flavor, but also for "the feelings of home cooking it evoked."

Various remarks are dredged up in an attempt to provide a degree of legitimacy to the claims put forward. Eligon cites a Facebook post, by Nadiyah Ali, comparing the Popeyes sandwich to one from Chick-fil-A, according to which the latter tastes as if it were made "by a white woman named Sarah who grew up around black people." The Popeyes sandwich, however, tastes "like it was cooked by an older black lady named Lucille."

Ali further suggests that white people cook differently than black people by relying on precise measurements. "Black folks don't cook like that," Ali adds. "Our recipes are a little bit of this, a little bit of that. We season until it's right. That's what Popeyes tastes like."

Compounding these foul and preposterous comments, the article favorably recalls an incident in 2006 when Oprah Winfrey—a go-to symbol for "black excellence"—grimaced after tasting a chicken-and-spinach dish made by a white woman who won \$1

million for it in the Pillsbury Bake-Off. Winfrey implied that the dish was poorly seasoned, asking if salt and pepper were added. "I think we needed salt and pepper."

The *Times* quotes Omar Tate, founder of a pop-up diner series that aims to explore "blackness in food and art," who explains that black people were at the root of Southern culinary traditions, which travelled across the country as blacks settled elsewhere. "Black hands were in that pot all the time, and still are," Tate says.

While praising Popeyes, Tate asserts that when he thinks of authenticity, he thinks "of the techniques of someone like Edna Lewis, a pioneering black chef ... 'That's authentic. That's what soul food is to me,' he said. 'It's one of those black magic things that can't be reproduced.'"

The *Times* saw fit to acknowledge that Popeyes' popularity is likely due to aggressive marketing towards black communities. However, it then immediately highlights the claims of Psyche Williams-Forson, who states that the presence of Popeyes restaurants in African-American neighborhoods gives black people "a sense of connection" to the food chain.

"Black communities can say, 'This is our own and it tastes like our own,' she said. 'You've got location. You've got taste. You've got texture. And you've got a food that people enjoy. You have a perfect storm there.'"

The commentary concludes with the demand that Popeyes invest in black communities, the supposed main driver of the company's success.

"We own the fried-chicken narrative," said Nicole Taylor, executive food editor at the website Thrillist. "Black people are turning it into a political moment."

What is one supposed to take from this? It is a rotten conglomeration of tribalism, chauvinism and racialist

drivel. According to the *Times*, not only are black people a homogeneous group of fried-chicken lovers, but also they have a cultural monopoly on Southern cuisine. Furthermore, we're to take seriously a cry for turning high-cholesterol food into a "political movement."

Furthermore, the commentary suggests that Southern culture is predominantly "black" and an isolated body instead of an amalgamation of varying socio-geographic influences. The absurdity was too great for many of the *Times*' readers. The top voted reader comment, by Ethan, is worth quoting at length:

"I had to read this twice to make sure it wasn't parody. Firstly, the stereotypical, monolithic take on black people as fried chicken loving, spice obsessed, fast food nuts is highly offensive. Fried foods, particularly chicken, became part of black culture due to food scarcity in slavery/Jim Crow times. To celebrate a multi-billion dollar corporation's exploitation of poor and black people is absurd.

"Secondly, fried foods are unhealthy. Fried foods will damage your health. It's a well known fact! Promoting this cultural ownership of fried chicken (especially factory farmed chicken) ignores a massive public health crisis that disproportionately affects black people."

Heart disease is the leading cause of death for both men and women in the United States, accounting for about one in every four deaths per year. Research shows that black people have a 30 percent greater chance of dying from heart disease than white people. Many researchers believe this disparity is caused by poor diets high in cholesterol.

Ethan continues, "It's obscene that an author would produce such an uncritical analysis in favor of promoting a chicken sandwich from a corporate chain, let alone the underlying implication that black people all eat the same food, or that white people are clueless when it comes to food spiciness."

A sensitive comment by Sierra Morgan rejects racial attitudes towards food and culture: "Food is not tied to skin color. Popeye's is Louisiana style food. You could [not] find a more mixed... population. I am Creole and lived all over the world. I cook food from all of the places I lived. The recipes and customs are my culture.

"There is no such thing as cultural appropriation. This idea that it is real is hateful and racist. We are all human beings and we are all on the same planet. We all

sink or swim together. Food unites us because we all have to eat and we all love tasty food."

As of the time of this writing, over 600 people have commented on the commentary, the majority being hostile to the promotion of race. The *Times*' race obsession finds little footing among the majority of Americans, who are opposed to the racial division of society.

The chauvinistic promotion of "black excellence" and "black magic," whether intentionally or not, echoes fascistic conceptions. According to the authors of the *Times*' historical falsification, the "1619 Project," nearly everything "great" about America is because of black people. One of the many articles that composed the project brazenly declared "American Wasn't a Democracy, Until Black Americans Made It One."

The reactionary conceptions advanced in Eligon's article are linked to the insistence by the *Times* and other elements surrounding the Democratic Party that forms of identity are the primary divisions in American society.



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