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“She Said She’d Never Even Had Fried Chicken!”

Fried Chicken, Humor and Race in *Bob Roberts*

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Fried chicken carries a great deal of cultural baggage in the United States. As such, it often serves as a vehicle in American popular media to talk about race (and sometimes class). From D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which features white actors in blackface eating fried chicken and throwing the bones in the US House of Representatives, to Lee Daniels’ *Precious* (2009), which shows the eponymous teenager stealing and eating a bucket of fried chicken, fried chicken has been a folk (and film) motif with a host of meanings, many of which are racially charged. The 1992 film *Bob Roberts* (starring, written and directed by Tim Robbins) makes use of the motif of fried chicken in a racist joke. Tim Robbins’s reasons for employing this particular joke may be complex; this paper outlines some possible meanings. First I will discuss the function of fried chicken jokes in American popular culture, and the way this joke functions as an instance of conversational humor. Next, I will discuss the motif of fried chicken in the context of the different cultures at work in the film. Finally, I will suggest some possible reasons for Robbins’s choice of the fried chicken motif in the film. Ultimately, I contend that through unlaughter at this joke, Robbins is claiming that for black people, race is more important to identity than political ideals, and that the Republican party of the late 20th-century has no room for social change or resistance.

Before I begin, it is necessary to give a brief synopsis of the film. *Bob Roberts* is a fictional documentary and dark comedy about a Pennsylvania US Senatorial race run by charismatic conservative candidate and folksinger Bob Roberts. Roberts (played by Robbins) is a charming, clean cut Republican who writes and performs folk songs in the style of early Bob Dylan. The songs attack drug users, welfare mothers, the separation of church and state, and call for the ever nebulous “American family values.” His campaign is financed by shady corporate dealings but has cultish popular appeal among conservative voters. The film follows the campaign through the election and uses the plot to make points about American politics, as well as the paradoxes of American conservatism, race, class, and the justice system.

Midway through the film, a group of Bob Roberts supporters are gathered in the campaign tour bus after the “Miss Broken Dove” beauty pageant, judged by candidate Bob Roberts. (Broken Dove is a Bob Roberts-run charity for children born drug addicted, but is also suspected to be a cover for illegal financial crimes and drug running.) In a political move for the campaign, the beauty pageant has been won by a black woman. However, it is a white woman, the runner-up, who is invited back to the tour bus to meet the campaign staff and the candidate himself, to the obvious exclusion of the nominal winner. When asked about her opponent, the runner-up responds by saying of the woman who won the contest (Miss Philadelphia), “She said she’d never even had fried chicken!” The white characters all laugh uproariously at this joke. At this moment, the sole black man on the campaign, Franklin Dockett

(Harry Lennix) a young, conservative financier, turns away from his white colleagues. He does not laugh. It is the second time in the film that the race of this character has been highlighted. ¹ Clearly, the folk motif of fried chicken is being employed to negotiate race and group boundaries in the film.

Fried Chicken & Humor

The comment about fried chicken is intended to be received as humorous, and is what linguist and humor scholar Neal Norrick describes as “conversational joking.” That is to say, although the comment doesn’t employ the formal and structural elements of the joke, it functions in similar ways to a joke. As noted by Elliot Oring and Alan Dundes, jokes can fulfill multiple social functions simultaneously because they are inherently complex, ambivalent and ambiguous. The laughter produced by jokes helps both the joke teller and her hearers to navigate complicated social situations through humor. In this case, the joke is funny to the group of white people because it proposes an apparent incongruity (a black woman who has never eaten fried chicken) that is recognizable to most of the listeners (according to white imagination in the film, black people are linked to fried chicken). If the incongruity were not recognizable, the joke would not be funny to the white characters. ²

The joke works for the white audience in part because it allows for the expression of racial hostility couched in joking terms. As Freud (in his relief theory), Gershon Legman, Alan Dundes and others argue, humor can often be a mechanism for expressing aggression in a socially acceptable way. The white campaign workers have indicated their distaste for black people throughout the movie but until this scene have carefully couched their racism in relatively socially acceptable language. The joke seems to act as a release of tension for the characters, as, for political reasons, a black woman (Miss Philadelphia) has been chosen to win the beauty pageant in order to court the urban vote. The strain of publicly respecting this black woman has put psychological pressure on the white campaign workers and laughing at the white woman’s joke about the black woman may function to “blow off steam” accumulated during the evening of feigned tolerance. For these white characters, the pressure of conforming to socially acceptable speech and behavior finds release in a joke. This is exactly the sort of release that Bascom describes in his “Four Functions of Folklore” (1954).

The joke also allows the group of white people to collectively affirm their own white identities while expressing their feelings of superiority (proposed by Hobbes [1640] in part 1 of *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic*) and other humor theorists as a major motivation for joking and laughter). 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. The shared laughter after the joke confirms that all laughing parties know something of intrinsic truth about black people—that they like fried chicken. The shared laughter also demonstrates group superiority: even though Miss Philadelphia says she’s never eaten fried chicken, the group of white people on the campaign bus accept this statement as absurd. She is black, so denying that she eats fried chicken is interpreted as just another sign that she wants to be white, but never can be.

Clearly, on this campaign bus, being white is superior to being black. These shared beliefs expressed through laughter at a conversational joke reinforce white, upper class, conservative group identity (to the exclusion of the single black man on the bus, which I discuss below) through stereotype about the other. According to Freud in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, mutual laughter indicates a “far-reaching psychical conformity” (1905:203), which in turn demonstrates an unbreachable psychological divide between the white and black characters in the film.

The genre of the joke also allows the white characters to deploy a hostile stereotype without revealing undue racial hostility that would break the social norms of their group. According to John McLeod,

Stereotypes are deployed as a means to arrest the ambivalence of the colonized subject by describing him or her in static terms. But this fixing of the colonized subject position always fails to secure the colonized subject into place. Hence, stereotypes must be frequently repeated in an anxious, imperfect attempt to secure the colonized subject in the discourse of colonialism (2000:53).

By awarding Miss Philadelphia the title of “Miss Broken Dove” in the beauty pageant, Roberts has had to see the woman, the colonized subject, in ambivalent terms. He has had to manage his own internal fear, hostility and hate of black people, while simultaneously publicly stating through the competition’s outcome that a black woman is more beautiful and intelligent than a group of white women. The beauty pageant has put racial categories, as they are understood by Roberts’s campaign staff, into uncertain, ambivalent terms. Laughing at the joke about fried chicken removes the ambivalence from the black beauty queen and defines her in static, racialized terms: black=loves fried chicken. By employing the stereotype of fried chicken, the white audience is able to temporarily allay their anxiety and to reify the black woman within the discourse of colonialism. The joke removes the problematic ambivalence and fixes racial categories in the psyche of the white campaign staff.

While Bob Roberts is situated firmly in the category of white, liberal, low-budget and high-brow films, the motif of fried chicken in humor dealing with race in America is certainly not unique to Bob Roberts. Many black comics have used the motif of fried chicken in humor to talk critically about race and culture. Consider, for example, Dick Gregory’s routine about segregation in southern restaurants, fried chicken, and masculine violence of the KKK:

Last time I was down South I walked into this restaurant and this white waitress came up to me and said, “We don’t serve colored people here.” I said, “That’s all right. I don’t eat colored people. Bring me a whole fried chicken.”

Then these three white boys came up to me and said, “Boy, we’re givin’ you fair warnin’. Anything you do to that chicken, we’re gonna do to you.” So I put down my knife and fork, I picked up that chicken and I kissed it. Then I said, “Line up, boys!”³

This particular fried chicken joke from January 1961 (published by documentarian Robert B. Weide in 2012 and referenced on www.dickgregory.com, Dick Gregory’s official website) and its success before a

southern, white audience is widely agreed to have facilitated Gregory's rise to national cross-cultural popularity, beginning with his long-term booking at Hugh Hefner's Playboy Club in Chicago in 1961. White audiences appear to respond to jokes about fried chicken, even those made at the expense of white figures. This may indicate that the fried chicken motif functions as a tool for negotiation of ideas about race in different cultures. It is interesting that Gregory's interest in foodways and politics extends well beyond the stage and into his ongoing food activism and businesses. Much more recently, Tyler Perry's *House of Payne* features a fried chicken prayer (see Broussard 2008 and Perry 2011) that draws on elements of traditional black preaching in order to critique certain elements of classed black public behavior. In his stand-up film, *For What It's Worth* (2004), comedian Dave Chappelle discusses the taboo on watermelon and fried chicken among some African Americans. While Chappelle dismisses this refusal to eat fried chicken, he dwells on the differences between mainstream white and mainstream black foodways:

“People only see the surface. They see the division in our foods. Just cause I eat chicken and watermelon, they think that that's something wrong with me. Let me tell you something, if you don't like chicken or watermelon, something is wrong with you, motherfucker, there's something wrong with you. Where are all these people who don't like chicken and watermelon? ...The only reason these things are even an issue is because nobody knows what white people eat. You've been very good at keeping that shit a secret amongst yourselves. I study white people! You don't know that. I'm writing a paper on you...not even for school, just to do it, for independent research...spending my money, that's why I'm working so hard. I follow you around grocery stores! They freak out! I'm just try to peek in their cart, they always say “Get away from my cart, nigger, what are you looking at? Chicken and giblets are over there. You must be lost. These are vegetables.”

Chappelle's dismissive attitude toward those who avoid eating chicken and watermelon is paired with a self-motivated academic inquiry about white foodways. Chappelle draws attention to the public and political scrutiny aimed at black foodways, and points out that white foodways are not political in the same way that black foodways are. Chappelle also undermines the position of the white academic by inverting the gaze of scientific inquiry. Positioning himself as an impartial observer, Chappelle appropriates academic language and stance, highlighting the frequently inappropriate white obsession with black culture and foodways, while calling attention to the economic disparity played out in the traditional foodways of white and black folk groups. His discussion of foodways turns to the difference between “grape drink” and “grape juice” and claims that white culture has kept juice a secret from black people because of its superior nutritional content. By publicly embracing fried chicken and watermelon in a humorous performance context, Chappelle is able to discuss the taboo and to point out institutionalized racism. While it is questionable whether entertainment like this can result in real political change, it is apparent that comedy can be a vehicle for negotiating and discussing food politics in a “safe” but public way.

Origins of the Fried Chicken Motif

There is a difference between the practice of eating a piece of chicken that has been fried, and the folk motif of fried chicken with all of its racialized baggage. The motif has its origins in real practice, but it is important to make the distinction between the motif and the practice. A quintessentially American dish - most commonly associated with southern cooking, Sunday family dinners and summer social events - fried chicken is eaten by vast numbers of Americans from widely diverse backgrounds and in every state of the union. The ubiquity of Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurants in America and the burgeoning popularity of KFC abroad, particularly in China and Africa, attests to the popularity of the dish among different ethnic groups. However, in the film *Bob Roberts*, the motif of fried chicken is clearly most strongly associated with black American culture. I would argue, then, that the fried chicken alluded to in *Bob Roberts* is a type of soul food, and that the fried chicken motif has its roots in slavery.

Just because fried chicken has been stereotypically associated with black foodways does not mean that it is a simple, uncomplicated motif. Food is deeply important as a component of culture and meaning-making. As Turner notes, “food choice is part of the ordering process by which humans endow the environment with meaning and feeling” (1993:143). As an important category of soul food, fried chicken can be a symbol of ambivalence in black food culture. Soul food as a culinary genre is not uncomplicated either; in fact, it is a site of tension in the negotiation of blackness between widely disparate black folk groups. Doris Witt interrogates the “multiplicity of competing discourses about...‘soul food’” in her article “Soul Food: Where the Chitterling Hits the (Primal) Pan” (1998:259). Witt argues that “[t]he intraracial debate over soul food was so fraught...neither because it was about blackness and filth, nor about black poverty and filth. The debate was fraught, I want to claim, because it was about black femaleness and filth” (1998:261). I will return to this point shortly. Witt’s article focuses on chitterlings as the quintessential fetishized soul food “encoded as a site of dietary dissension among African Americans” (1998:262) (as so powerfully explored in Ellison’s *The Invisible Man*) but some of her discussion of soul food can be extended to include a discussion of fried chicken. As Witt notes, soul food lies at the heart of the “ongoing debate among African Americans over the appropriate food practices of blackness” (1998:259). If soul food constitutes the appropriate food practices of blackness, then the conflicting messages about whether or not fried chicken is taboo for African American people indicate that there is no consensus on this matter, and that humor is one way of publicly debating what constitutes appropriate food practices of blackness.

Fried chicken has been a fulcrum for anxiety in black American groups, as Turner explores in *I Heard it Through the Grape Vine* (1993) and “Church’s Fried Chicken and the Klan” (1987). According to Turner, there is a persistent rumor in black communities that the KKK owns the Church’s Chicken franchise, and that it puts chemicals in the chicken to sterilize black men. This rumor has endured, in part, because fried chicken functions simultaneously as, on the one hand, a reminder of home, family and community, and on the other hand, a reminder of slavery, racism, and stereotype. To reject fried chicken can be to reject culture, but to embrace fried chicken can be to embrace stereotype and white hostility. Describing the context of the rumor, Turner explains that “Church’s created a new, public context for the sharing of what had thus far been considered communal foods—and foods, moreover

that carried with them strong symbolic associations. Nor are these associations necessarily positive” (1993:143).

Fried chicken is associated with slavery and poverty, as well as with church picnics and home cooking. According to the Greenwood Encyclopedia of African American Folklore, “Soul food refers to African American foodways, particularly those culinary traditions thought to have been derived from the black Atlantic slave trade and U.S. chattel slavery” (2006:1219). These culinary traditions employed inexpensive food items and fresh produce and cooking methods that trace back to Africa. Fried chicken, falling within the category of soul food, is inexpensive; unlike beef cattle or even hogs, chickens can be raised on minimal resources and they don’t take up much space. Furthermore, according to the Greenwood Encyclopedia of African American Folklore, African American traditions of deep fat frying trace back to African foodways (2006:1219). Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), in his 1962 essay “Soul Food” (originally published in *Home* in 1966) writes, “People kill chickens all over the world, but chasing them through the dark on somebody else’s property would probably insure, once they went in the big bag, that you’d find some really beautiful way of eating them” (1962:102-3). This conflation of beauty and food aesthetic with dire need and theft, reflects the over-burdened nature of fried chicken. The anxiety that led, in part, to the Church’s Chicken rumor, is at work in the film *Bob Roberts*.

In *Bob Roberts*, the joke about fried chicken revolves around the denial of fried chicken by the black woman, and the white listeners’ disbelief and laughter at that denial. What makes the denial necessary (and automatically dismissed by the white characters) is the persistent link between black people and fried chicken in the American popular imagination. As Turner notes, “American popular culture has long perpetuated a stereotype in which blacks are portrayed as inordinately fond of foods that can be eaten without utensils—fried chicken and watermelon. Given these circumstances, it is not surprising that blacks want to approach these foods cautiously” (1993:305). This caution is mocked by the racist campaign staff in *Bob Roberts*.

Gender and food are linked, and it is important to remember that in *Bob Roberts*, the joke about fried chicken depends on the black woman’s denial of fried chicken. Psyche Williams-Forsen has written extensively about the connections between black women and fried chicken (see for example Williams-Forsen 2000 and 2006) and maintains the co-existence of subjugation and affirmation in traditional food. It is significant to point out that Robbins locates soul food, and the denial of soul food, in the body of a black woman, by making it an object of ridicule for a group of white people. Just as Ralph Ellison locates the desire and denial of chitterlings in the black male body,² *Bob Roberts* locates the denial of fried chicken in a woman’s body. Miss Philadelphia’s denial of the dish is gendered, as is her entire (very short) role in the film. Miss Philadelphia’s role is focused on her exposed, sexualized, female body, which is made into a public site for discussion and evaluation by her participation in the beauty pageant. The judges and contest participants, including *Bob Roberts*, are encouraged to pass judgment on her beauty and intelligence. Miss Philadelphia speaks no lines as the pageant audience (as well as the audience watching the film) stares at her swimsuit-clad body; after they gaze upon the

woman herself, she is referred to next only in terms of refusing to “own” fried chicken. Her denial of fried chicken reinforces stereotypes about what beautiful women, regardless of race, eat and do not eat at the same time her denial, made to a white counterpoint, is clearly marked by racial tension.

While the joke depends on the stereotype of fried chicken and blackness, the white characters are demonstrating their own understanding of the motif of fried chicken. The practice of eating fried chicken does not seem important for the fictional white campaign workers in the Pennsylvania senate race. For them, eating fried chicken is probably not associated with strong feelings about family, home or identity, but may simply be a fast food commodity or an old-fashioned picnic dish. For some white folk groups, fried chicken is a link to a nostalgic vision of a national past, imagined or historical. In 1929, southern writer Abbot C. Martin wrote, “It is incredible how our love of fried chicken is bound up with our love of country. To disparage fried chicken is to disparage the thrill which comes when the band plays “Dixie” or the elusive tenderness which comes at the sight of an old Confederate flag” (1929:35). However, Martin’s nostalgia connects fried chicken to a southernness that is dependent on slavery. Throughout his essay on fried chicken, Martin dwells on the abject, returning again and again to grease and other distasteful subjects, while he lauds attachment to southern fried chicken in the face of “better” French cooking. His national and personal identity seems to depend on consuming certain folk foods from his childhood and on the association of those foods with racial relations, specifically the racial hierarchy imposed by slavery. Martin defines himself in opposition to the abject, in the form of fried chicken and other folk foods. In Bob Roberts, the motif of fried chicken operates differently than it might for a group of conservatives born and raised in the south: Roberts’ white campaign workers, apparently residents of Pennsylvania with no regional attachment to the practice of eating fried chicken, view the motif of fried chicken not as an actual regional foodway but as a stereotype.

What does the motif of fried chicken do for Robbins?

Unlaughter (see Smith 2009) is a significant factor in the Bob Roberts scene with the fried chicken joke. Franklin Dockett, the only black character present, does not laugh at the white girl’s joke. His unlaughter sets him apart from the group of white characters. As Norrick notes, “Joking allows participants to recognize their respective affiliations and to align themselves in terms of them or in spite of them” (1993:5). In the joke scene, Dockett does not align himself with his white colleagues; despite his affiliation with the campaign, he does not join their laughter. Dockett clearly recognizes the deployment of the stereotype and seems to be hurt by the words. In the film it is not clear if the joke is explicitly aimed at Dockett. However, as Smith suggests, “The contemporary importance that is placed on the sense of humor...fuels strategic uses of humor performances to provoke humorless responses and, in so doing, to heighten social boundaries” (2009:150). Certainly, given the repeated demonstrations of racism in the Roberts campaign, it is not unlikely that the joke and laughter was intended to provoke a humorless response from Dockett, and thus publicly emphasize the racial boundaries between those who laughed and he that did not. If the joke is not directed at Dockett, then the group of white campaign workers is disregarding his presence, perhaps even removing him from the

colonized landscape. Even if the white characters do not call attention to Dockett's unlaughter, Robbins as filmmaker certainly does.

By emphasizing Dockett's unlaughter at the fried chicken joke, Robbins seems to suggest that race is more important to (or for) black people than political affiliation or belief. Although Dockett dresses just like everyone else on the campaign, although he is depicted as speaking fluent German while managing the campaign's money market accounts, and although he appears deeply devoted to the Republican party, Robbins paints Dockett's allegiance to his political ideals as secondary to his allegiance to his racial categorization. Thus, Robbins argues through the film that for black people, identity is first and foremost tied to race, before political or social ideals.

Additionally, by exploring Dockett's character as I have outlined above, Robbins may be suggesting that the contemporary Republican party, with its emphasis on capitalism, has no room for social resistance. By using the joke with the fried chicken motif and by emphasizing Dockett's subsequent unlaughter, Robbins implies that there is no room for black people to effect change within the Republican party. Dockett's unlaughter is not powerful enough to alter the campaign workers' attitudes - in fact, his unlaughter appears to go entirely unnoticed, leaving him apparently powerless. His resistance to the racist joke has no effect on the prevailing social order. Dockett has chosen to "grin and bear it" in order to be a part of the campaign. Throughout the film Dockett seems to have accepted his role as a token in the campaign.

One must wonder, then, if Robbins is self-conscious enough to recognize that not only is Dockett (like Miss Philadelphia) a token in the campaign, but he is also a token in the film. Through Dockett's character - one of many archetypal characters in the film (the radical journalist, the ditzy political wife, the left-wing comedian) - the audience is shown the experiences of black people in general. Perhaps because of the type of story Robbins has chosen to tell, stereotypes can be a vehicle for meaning.

In the United States, the motif of fried chicken carries enormous social weight and racial implications. When I ask my students about fried chicken stereotypes, only about half of the white students recognize this stereotype and perceive it as negative and harmful. This inevitably comes as a shock to the black students in my class, who tend to be painfully aware of the contested nature of fried chicken in African American life. On April 6, 2012, Rush Limbaugh, while criticizing Mary J. Blige's appearance in a Burger King commercial, asked, "Do black people not eat fried chicken anymore?" The answer to that question is complicated, as comedians like Dave Chapelle continue to point out. Just as we make meaning through practice of cooking and eating, we make meaning in the ways that we depict and talk about food. The over-determined nature of African American people's relationship with fried chicken ensures that the motif will continue to be a fulcrum for racism and consequently for racist jokes while simultaneously providing an opportunity for social critics to interrogate racism through the use of humor.

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Notes

1. Earlier, TV journalist Kelly Noble, (Lynne Thigpen) asks him, "Did you have to check your skin at the door to work for these people, Brother?" The man responds by asking her why black people shouldn't be financially successful.

2. See Oring 2003 for a discussion of incongruity.

3. For a further discussion of Dick Gregory's exploration of race through comedy, see Weide 2012 for his prelude to his in-progress documentary, *Dick Gregory: The Color of Funny*.

4. According to kfc.com, Kentucky Fried Chicken's official website, "more than 12 million customers are served at KFC restaurants in 109 countries and territories around the world. KFC operates more than 5,200 restaurants in the United States and more than 15,000 units around the world."

5. See Witt 1998. Witt explores the abject, filth, chitterlings and queer desire in "Where the Chitterlings Hit the (Primal) Pan."