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Cooking Up Hashtag Activism: #PaulasBestDishes and Counternarratives of Southern Food

Anjali Vats

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In the summer of 2013, celebrity chef Paula Deen found herself embroiled in a scandal. Named as a co-defendant with her brother Earl “Bubba” Hiers, Deen faced accusations that the restaurant she and Hiers co-owned, Uncle Bubba’s Seafood and Oyster House, had racially discriminated against its employees.¹ Soon after the scandal broke, media outlets leaked Deen’s deposition in which she admitted to using the “n-word,” though “not in a mean way,” and saying that she wished for a “plantation-style wedding” with all black male servers dressed to the nines for her brother.² Deen quickly released a series of seemingly overwhelmed and panicked apology videos in which she asserted her colorblindness and claimed that she and her brother are not racists. Within a week, the Food Network canceled Deen’s two Southern cooking shows, and the celebrity chef lost multiple product endorsements.³

Simultaneously, outraged members of the public turned to Twitter⁴ to voice their opinions, hastening the demise of Deen’s food and endorsement empire. One parodic hashtag, #PaulasBestDishes, grew quickly, scathingly critiquing the celebrity chef through darkly humorous recipes. Even after Deen’s employment discrimination suit was dismissed, #PaulasBestDishes continued to expand, with tweets being added even today. Remixed recipes like “Massa-roni and cheese,” “40 Acres and a Moscow Mule,” “Back of the Bus Biscuits,” “Paula [D]een shops at Slave Trader Joe’s,” “Lynchables,” and “When You Hear White Folk Talkin’ You Better Hushpuppies” advanced incisive indictments of Southern food culture and Deen’s invocations of postracial society.⁵ #PaulasBestDishes was quickly credited to Black Twitter, an assemblage describing “the relative magnitude of Black (especially African American) activity, and in particular the creation of certain kinds of ‘hashtags.’”⁶ Black Twitter

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does not reference a monolithic black voice; rather, it refers to racialized content and practices, often marked by “ambiguous racialized humour,”⁷ which works to resist dominant narratives of race and disrupt Twitter’s usual whiteness.⁸ It is also emblematic of a relatively new mode of activism through which politics and identity are negotiated via hashtag. “Hashtag activism” gained mainstream appeal in 2011, when Occupy Wall Street began using #OWS. Since 2012, hashtag activism has become an important element of protest culture, though one with disputed efficacy. Nonetheless, hashtags such as #StandWithPP, #Kony2012, #CancelColbert, and #BlackLivesMatter belie claims of ineffectiveness, demonstrating instead hashtag activism’s productiveness, flexibility, and mass appeal.⁹

#PaulasBestDishes, then, is notable not only because of its critique of Deen but also because of its relationship to a growing culture of digital protest. Here, I am interested in it as an exemplar of the intersections of hashtag activism and food culture. Specifically, #PaulasBestDishes, which draws upon performative practices such as signifyin(g) and detournement, highlights the resistive possibilities of rhetorics of food and operates as an entry point into broader critiques of Southern culture’s practices around regional identity, race, and labor. Tweeted recipes mock Deen’s imaginings of the South, highlighting racialized practices of cooking, serving, and eating. Further, through the juxtaposition of food and historical time in a medium which itself facilitates rapid digital rhetorical accumulation, the tweets demonstrate the continuing realities of racism and equalize the often unequal politics of time across race. #PaulasBestDishes thus illuminates Twitter’s role in circulating counternarratives of food in ways that confront embedded forms of inequality.

Deen’s shows *Paula’s Home Cooking* and *Paula’s Best Dishes* illustrate that Southern food is about “more than just eating.”¹⁰ Indeed, her cooking is also about a uniquely regional brand of hospitality, inviting family and friends into the home, and rich butter and mayonnaise laden cuisine. Yet, where Deen’s shows invite the audience to uncritically consume representations of Southern cooking through the eyes of a raunchy middle aged white woman, the foods and practices depicted are unavoidably associated with “social and economic influences, changing women’s roles, culinary history, health concerns, race, and class issues.”¹¹ Merely invoking the phrase “Southern food” alludes to the region’s identity and cultural practices, which are deeply intertwined with cooking, serving, and eating. Moreover, appeals to “Southern hospitality” through the naming and performance of a Southern “home” call upon “a meaning making story continually told and re-told about the South.”¹² Deen’s telling of the story of Southern hospitality erases the raced and classed nature of food production and consumption in the South, privileging a romanticized view of the region. Her sanitized portrayals of Southernness, while characteristic of the Food Network,¹³ ignore Southern hospitality’s antebellum roots, when house slaves cooked and served while their masters and masters’ guests enjoyed leisurely eating.¹⁴ Indeed, Deen’s representations “elide a host of complex historical contexts and circumstances and instead trumpet southern hospitality as a natural and essential cultural attribute.”¹⁵ Deen’s scandal, however, makes clear that the “pastness” of racism in the South is a myth that she cannot escape, especially in this digital era.

#PaulasBestDishes indicts Deen's romanticism through rhetorics that reflect practices of signifyin(g) and detournement. Tweeted parodic recipes highlight Deen's real life racism, exemplified by her use of the n-word and desire for a return to a plantation-style food service culture. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. defines signifyin(g) as a performative "black double voicedness"¹⁶ through which denotative and connotative meanings are mismatched, whether via trickery, troping, irony, parody, or some other mechanism. The practice, emblematically employed by slaves in the South, uses coded communication to navigate racially hostile spaces. Signifyin(g) is also an important marker of black cultural critique on Twitter, frequently identifying those tweets that constitute Black Twitter.¹⁷ In contrast, detournement originated with the anti-consumer culture group, the Situationist International, in the 1950s, eventually informing the strategies of groups such as Adbusters. Christine Harold explains, "[d]etournement can be translated as 'detour' or 'diversion,' but other, more subtle meanings in the French include 'hijacking,' 'embezzlement,' 'corruption,' and 'misappropriation.'"¹⁸ At its core, detournement is concerned with "playfully antagonistic rhetoric"¹⁹ that focuses primarily on anticapitalist goals.

Tweets such as "Uncle Ben's Whites Only Rice" and "Wade in the [W]atermelon" invoke elements of signifyin(g) and detournement in an intersectional critique of race and class, transforming common brands into emblems of black domestic servitude by juxtaposing them with racist practices and mocking nostalgic yearning for the "good old days" via coded references to black cultural texts. Similarly, "40 Acres and a Moscow Mule" points to the often unexamined intersections between property ownership, black labor, and Mad Men style cocktail culture. One might imagine that Uncle Ben is the kind of man that Deen, without regard for the racial implications of her request, wants to serve Hiers and his wife gin and ginger beer in copper mugs at their wedding. In #PaulasBestDishes, then, food emerges as the discursive vehicle for interrogating America's racial and economic politics, foregrounding the South's embedded cultural inequalities. The hashtag plays on signifyin(g)'s double voicedness and detournement's critique of consumerism, interrogating regional food practices and trademarked edibles using a comedic repertoire that is at least partially intelligible to white audiences. Indeed, the tweet "When You Hear White Folks Talkin' You Better Hushpuppies" points to the need for signifyin(g) through the reference to "hushin'" around white folks while contradictorily speaking openly about racism in the South by way of reference to commodified regional cuisine.

Rhetorics of time and food also come together in #PaulasBestDishes to confront Southern racism. While Southern hospitality perpetuated temporal inequality by relying on slave labor to create leisure time for wealthy whites, #PaulasBestDishes resists that inequality through the rhetorical content of tweets and the digital speed at which Twitter operates. Tweets such as "Lynchables" and "Slave Trader Joe's" juxtapose histories of slavery and contemporary food brands, highlighting the consistent and timeless reliance of American capitalism on racial exploitation. The Tweets discursively link modern companies like Oscar Mayer and Trader Joe's with antebellum racial ideologies, thereby forcing the audience to question the myth of post-raciality. In essence, #PaulasBestDishes' rhetorical mixing of historical events,

contemporary brands, and regional food practices narrates racism as a continuing phenomenon, not one which America has moved beyond. Moreover, Twitter's physical speed nullifies the effects of Deen's food production derived race and class privilege. As Michael Warner points out, "the punctual time of circulation is crucial to the sense that discussion is currently unfolding in a sphere of activity."²⁰ Twitter technologically levels the temporal playing field in the context of Deen's scandal, offering black publics an instantaneous means of voicing their opposition. Part of Twitter's resistive power, then, is related to the speed and accessibility of the digital medium and its taking back of the time lost through the South's racial and economic hierarchies. Tweeting deals with "the politics of *uneven time*"²¹ by counteracting the celebrity chef's temporal power and digitally archiving the anti-Deen protest.

#PaulasBestDishes thus illustrates some ways in which metanarratives about food evolve and circulate in digital mediums and showcases culinary rhetorics through which users of Twitter resist racism and classism. It further demonstrates the continued influence of practices of signifyin(g) and detournement in resistive discourses as well as the importance of rhetorical and physical time in generating productive and effective responses by publics and counterpublics to issues of concern.

Notes

- [1] Roxane Gay, "Paula Deen's Racism Isn't Shocking at All," *Salon.com* June 20, 2013, http://www.salon.com/2013/06/20/paula_deens_racism_isnt_shocking_at_all/
- [2] "Document: Paula Deen's Testimony," *CNN.com* accessed February 10, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/interactive/2013/06/entertainment/deen-deposition/index.html>
- [3] Daniel Gross, "Racism Is a Tough Sell: The Real Reason Everyone Dumped Paula Deen," *The Daily Beast*, June 28, 2013, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/06/28/racism-is-a-tough-sell-the-real-reason-everyone-dumped-paula-deen.html>
- [4] Twitter is a social media website that allows individuals to create topic-based "hashtags" signified by a preceding # and circulate messages of 140 characters or less, called "tweets."
- [5] The term "postracial" suggests that the nation has moved beyond race, into an era in which racial categories are no longer meaningful markers of inequality. Ralina Joseph, "'Tyra Banks Is Fat': Reading (Post-) Racism and (Post-) Feminism in the New Millennium," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 26, issue 3 (August 2009): 237–54.
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- [7] Ibid.
- [8] Sarah Florini, "Tweets, Tweeps, and Signifyin': Communication and Cultural Performance on 'Black Twitter'," *Television & New Media* 15, issue 3 (March 2014): 223–37.
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- [11] Ibid.
- [12] Anthony Szczesiul, "Re-Mapping Southern Hospitality: Discourse, Ethics, Politics," *European Journal of American Culture* 26, issue 2 (June 2007): 128.

- [13] Ariane Cruz, "Gettin' 'Down Home With the Neelys': Gastro-Porn and Televisual Performances of Gender, Race, and Sexuality," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 23, issue 3 (2013): 323–49.
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- [15] Szczesiul, "Re-Mapping Southern Hospitality."
- [16] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1989), 51.
- [17] Florini, "Tweets, Tweeps, and Signifyin'."
- [18] Christine Harold, *OurSpace: Resisting the Corporate Control of Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 7.
- [19] *Ibid.*, 5.
- [20] Michael Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics (Abbreviated Version)," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88, issue 4 (November 2002): 421.
- [21] Sarah Sharma, "Critical Time," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 10, issue 2–3 (2013): 314.