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CONTESTING A CHANGING COMMUNITY WITH TRADITIONAL FOODS

Race, Class, and Hot Chicken in Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Abstract

This paper focuses on how white middle-class Nashvillians adapt hot chicken as a local symbol and explores how 'white trash' hot chicken parties make it possible to use food to reclaim public space and to play with stigma in a way that is empowering for some, while simultaneously contributing to a wider culture of 'hegemonic whiteness'.

For many moderately-sized U.S. cities,[1] such as Nashville, culinary tourism has become a major source of revenue.[2] Developing or capitalising on an already existing cuisine, or on a regionally unique dish, is especially helpful for cities looking to profit from current gourmet-food trends that emphasise authenticity and regional variety.[3]

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1 Reference to this study: Sarah Shultz: Contesting a Changing Community with Traditional Foods: Race, Class, and Hot Chicken in Nashville, Tennessee, USA. In Anikó Báti and Patricia Lysaght (eds): *Living Eating Habits, Revitalized Foodways and the Concepts of Tradition and Food Heritage*. Budapest: ELTE RCH Institute of Ethnology – Museum of Ethnography, 2025. pp. 243–252. DOI: https://doi.org/10.61380/978-963-567-084-0-14

2 This paper is adapted from a chapter of my dissertation, which explored the connections between consumption of piquant foods in a culinary tourist context and expressions of racial identity in two case studies: East London and Nashville (Shultz, Sarah, 'Spice, Culinary Tourism, and Expressions of Whiteness in London, England, and Nashville, Tennessee', Ph.D. Dissertation. Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2023). This work is based on 12 months of on-site fieldwork in Nashville visiting hot chicken restaurants, along with seventeen interviews recorded with nineteen locals. The interviews I am referencing here were with a group of 30-and-40-something middle- to upper middle-class white locals, who mostly know one another and work in local media, non-profits and other organisations that are connected with city government.

3 Johnston, Josée and Baumann, Shyon: *Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

Nashville is one such city in the American South. It has seen significant growth in outside interest from tourists in recent years, and has developed a signature dish, hot chicken, for touristic consumption. The population of the Nashville metropolitan area has increased by 49% over the past 20 years.[4]

This growth is the calculated result of the work of various development organisations, among them large restaurant groups like Strategic Hospitality, whose founders

> envisioned a network of concept-driven 'social destinations' throughout the city that not only would elevate Nashville's food and bar scene for locals, but also would create an innovative hospitality culture that could boost the city's street cred far beyond the I-40 loop – particularly among mobile Millennials and young professionals who have the choice to live anywhere,[5]

as one Forbes article puts it. A main draw for people visiting Nashville is the opportunity to try Nashville Hot Chicken, an extra spicy fried chicken served on a slice of white bread with pickle slices on top, that was invented by members of Nashville's Black community in the 1950s, and sold almost exclusively in historically Black neighbourhoods, like North and East Nashville, until the mid-aughts.[6]

Nashville's transformation has meant a significant change in Nashville's built landscape, foodways, and in local identity.[7] While the city has long prided itself on having more in common with a small town than with a major metropolis, developers were concerned that its reputation was a little too old-fashioned. An article in *The New York Times*, dating from 2013, for example,[8] described Nashville as 'a city once embarrassed by its Grand Ole Opry roots'.[9] This old-fashioned, rural image of the city, and its subsequent transformation into a cooler, more sophisticated tourist

4 FRED, 'Resident Population in Nashville-Davidson – Murfreesboro – Franklin, TN (MSA)' (25 March 2022).

5 Taylor, Peter Lane: 'Nashville is One of America's Hottest Cities Right Now and It's Not Just the Hockey', *Forbes Magazine*.

6 Phillips, Betsy: 'Race, Credit and Hot Chicken', *Nashville Scene* (29 August 2016); Martin, Rachel L., *Hot, Hot Chicken: A Nashville Story* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2021).

7 Taylor: 'Nashville is One of America's Hottest Cities Right Now and It's Not Just the Hockey'; Petersen, Anne Helen, 'How Nashville Became One Big Bachelorette Party', *BuzzFeed News* (29 March 2018); Lastoe, Stacey, 'There's a New Bachelorette Capital, and It's Not Vegas, *Cable News Network* (1 May 2019); Salviati, Chris, '2010s in Review: Which Metros Changed the Most?' Apartment List – More than 5 Million Apartments for Rent. *Apartment List* (20 September 2019).

8 The Editors of GQ. 'Nowville: The GQ Guide to Nashville, Tennessee'. *GQ* (2 July 2012); Kollar, Leena: '10 Reasons Why You Should Visit Nashville', *Culture Trip. The Culture Trip* (2 May 2017).

9 Severson, Kim: 'Nashville's Latest Big Hit Could Be the City Itself', *The New York Times* (8 January 2013).

oasis, are two topics about which locals feel ambivalence.[10] One person who grew up in the city described it like this:

> You're in Nashville now. You know that we have a very complicated relationship with tourism. I'm not sure what started out as a real excitement because of what it did for the economy and what it did for the restaurants, if you want to get specific about it, has turned, over the past couple of years, to, I won't say revulsion. But certainly, you know, a resentment where locals don't, they're not necessarily pleased to see these four-storey restaurants getting all the business downtown.[11]

For locals, the city's rapid physical and cultural growth are experienced as extreme, and at times disorienting, as housing costs rise and neighbourhoods are razed and rebuilt.

Hot chicken symbolises both Nashville's past and its present. It has been a part of the local cuisine since at least the 1950s, and was largely unknown outside of the local Black community until the then Mayor, Bill Purcell, organised the first 'Music City Hot Chicken Festival', in 2007.[12] Since then, hot chicken has become an iconic, must-try culinary attraction, which has been made ultra popular by one specific franchise: 'Hattie B's Hot Chicken'.[13] Hattie B's has been successful because its owners have the capital to open locations in the trendiest and most accessible parts of the city.

Starting in 2015, locals began to debate whether the outsize success of white-owned hot chicken restaurants like Hattie B's selling a dish invented by Black Nashvillians, counted as cultural appropriation.[14] This debate received a lot of attention in the media, and there was pushback from some locals, which I explore in my dissertation.[15] Here, the focus is instead on how understandings and expressions of white identity play a part in the engagement with hot chicken as a symbol of Nashville from the perspective of white locals. For this group, hot chicken is still closely associated with

10 Shultz: 'Spice, Culinary Tourism, and Expressions of Whiteness in London, England, and Nashville, Tennessee'.

11 Fieldwork Interview with author, May 2020.

12 Martin, Rachel L.: 'How Hot Chicken Really Happened', *The Bitter Southerner* (1 April 2015).

13 Embiricos, George: 'Meet the Man Who Launched the Nashville Hot Chicken Craze', *Food Republic* (25 August 2016).

14 Martin: 'How Hot Chicken Really Happened'; Phillips, Betsy: 'Race, Credit and Hot Chicken', *Nashville Scene* (29 August 2016); Chamberlain, Chris: 'Race, Credit and Hot Chicken, Part 2', *Nashville Scene* (4 May 2021); Davison, Devita: 'Black Food Matters: Race and Equity in the Good Food Movement'. Lecture presented at 'Change Food Fest', New York City, 11th–13th November 2016.

15 Shultz: 'Spice, Culinary Tourism, and Expressions of Whiteness in London, England, and Nashville, Tennessee'.

the historically Black neighbourhoods where it was originally sold, and memories of eating at restaurants in these neighbourhoods are presented as adventures involving a lot of inherent risk. This emphasis on the distance travelled to eat hot chicken, as well as the perceived risk associated with neighbourhoods like East and North Nashville, reflects the city's history of segregation into Black and white neighbourhoods – another topic I discuss in greater detail elsewhere.[16]

Questions about how the city is laid out, and which people belong in which parts, are of special interest at the present time, as the influx of newcomers gentrify its neighborhoods and radically alter its demographics. As mentioned, Nashville previously had a sort of hokey, old-fashioned image that developers have tried to shed over the past two decades. As a region, the American South itself is highly stereotyped by the rest of the country, and Southern foods are often portrayed as being unhealthy and cheap.[17] Within this context, the experience of going out for hot chicken provides an opportunity for these white Nashvillians to see themselves from the perspective of people from other parts of the country, and the world, as these restaurants are often packed with curious tourists.

Class comes into play in these situations. While doing fieldwork, I was surprised at how often white locals described eating hot chicken as something they do with colleagues, often during the working day. This was unexpected, considering hot chicken's reputation for imparting both short and long-term extreme physical side effects. But I think that there is the potential for pleasure in the visibility that accompanies these temporary displays of extreme discomfort; in letting loose in such a way that physicality overrides middle-class professionalism:

> I had a white dress shirt on, I had an undershirt underneath, and by the end of the meal the white dress shirt was off. I was crying, I was; snot was coming out of my mouth. The only sensation of pleasure I had was when my friend would exhale, and the exhale from him would cool down the spice on my face. The woman, there was a woman in line, as our chicken came out, she walked past us and just said, 'Boy, you're gonna get the mud butt [diarrhoea]' [...]. But it was a spectacle, like people were just watching us.[18]

16 Shultz: 'Spice, Culinary Tourism, and Expressions of Whiteness in London, England, and Nashville, Tennessee'; see also Martin: 'How Hot Chicken Really Happened.'

17 Pucciarelli, Deanna: 'The Southern Diet: A Historical View on Food Consumption and how the Region's Foodways gets a Bad Rap', *Nutrition Today* 55/4 (2020), 157–162.

18 Fieldwork interview with author, June 2020.

This man's description of eating extra hot chicken with a co-worker during a lunch break is graphic. When I asked him if this experience made him less likely to eat hot chicken again, he said: 'No, we enjoyed it. One, for the spectacle. Two, for the endorphin rush you get when you eat spicy food.'[19] Here, being visibly incongruous is a central part of the pleasure connected with eating hot chicken. Perhaps the physical discomfort associated with the experience is somehow associated with this pleasure: standing out, being seen, is uncomfortable, but, like an endorphin rush, it can be addictive.

This emphasis on the physical side-effects of eating hot chicken is connected in interesting ways with the tendency to do so during the working day, or in the company of co-workers. Food is highly symbolic, and deep-fried foods, or foods high in fat more generally, are coded in ways that associate them with class. In interviewing middle-class parents from the United Kingdom, for example, sociologists Louise MacAllister and Suzanne Hocknell found that interviewees engaged in performances of distaste towards fatty foods that are associated with people of a lower socio-economic class; thus, in performing their horror at the idea of feeding their children things like crisps, the parents demonstrated that they were aware that there is a 'correct' way to parent that 'falls into line with traditionally white, middle-class practices and knowledge'.[20]

By going on these work-outings to eat a deep-fried, traditionally-Southern food that can cause an extreme physical reaction, these white Nashville locals can be seen to be flaunting white middle-class practices and ways of knowing. In speaking with locals, I came to understand that milder heat-levels of chicken, like those served at Hattie B's, are considered to be 'for tourists', while one can tell who is a local Nashvillian by observing how much heat a person can tolerate. In revelling in this experience, where they are highly visible as Southern or as locals, to tourists and transplants, they are playing with, and even embracing, the stigmas associated with Nashville's former reputation, with being Southern, and even with being seen as 'white trash'.

'White trash' is a symbolically-charged label. The belief in white superiority has been used to justify the enslavement of non-whites, and to account for disparities in

19 Fieldwork interview with author, June 2020.

20 MacAllister, Louise and Hocknell, Suzanne: 'A Sticky Situation? Fatty Distaste and the Embodied Performance of Class', in Falconer, Emily ed.: *Space, Taste and Affect: Atmospheres that Shape the Way We Eat* (Abingdon-on-Thames, UK: Routledge, 2020), 38.

health and quality of life in a way that does not admit to systemic inequality. But despite this supposed inherent superiority, not all people who appear to be white are equally successful. Whiteness is both a social position, and a kind of practice, and this practice can be performed correctly or incorrectly. Sociologist Matt Wray, details several different explanations offered to account for this 'poor white paradox' over the course of American history.[21] He notes that the explanations share an emphasis on the body: reflecting either some essential difference from other white people passed down through the blood, or a sickness, like hookworm disease or pellagra, that caused physical symptoms and a marked change in appearance. This physical difference, often portrayed as especially abject or grotesque, was crucial to the maintenance of white supremacy, because it provided an explanation for the fact that, although white people are not all equally successful, that fact did not threaten the baseline belief in the inherent superiority of 'whiteness.'

In listening to white locals describe their experiences when eating hot chicken, often surrounded by colleagues and by tourists, there is a sense of spectacle that is explicitly physical: one where locals suffer, sweat, and burn, by choice, in the process of consuming a meal that has become representatively-symbolic of their city, and that has helped to offer it a new image to present to the rest of the country. Making spectacles of themselves, eating chicken so hot it turns their faces red, shucking their dress shirts and sweating with their co-workers, is an opportunity to play with, and to perform, the identity of being 'poor white trash' that is both critically nostalgic[22] and defiant, as it occurs in front of an audience of outsiders.

Many white locals whom I interviewed mentioned attending 'white trash bashes' where hot chicken was served. One of these events was a fundraiser for a local charity held at one of the bars on Broadway, Nashville's main attraction for tourists looking to dance and drink in 'honky tonks' – country music bars.[23] This bar, which has since closed, was described to me as a kind of spoof on the other establishments on the street. This 'white trash bash' included contests to see who could eat the hottest chicken. Attendees were also encouraged to dress up in denim cut-offs and

21 Wray, Matt: *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

22 Cashman, Ray: 'Critical Nostalgia and Material Culture in Northern Ireland'. *Journal of American Folklore* 119/472 (2006), 137–160.

23 Sayers, William: 'Honky-Tonk: Lexicogenesis and Etymology', *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes, and Reviews* 35/1 (2022), 12, available at https://doi.org/10.1080/089576 9X.2019.1703627.

fake tattoo sleeves. An organiser of the event that I spoke with, described the costumes participants wore as 'truly disgusting in the best way possible.'[24]

One local explained that the idea of having this kind of event originated in potential culture-clashes between lifetime, and new, Nashville residents.

> Like, jean cut-off shorts started becoming a thing? Where people were more, I think, because Nashville got, you know, maybe a little more progressive, we started realising that cut-off jean shorts were maybe not as normal in other parts of the country as they were in the South. So then that kind of became a thing that we would joke about.[25]

In taking these elements of the stereotypes of poor white Southerners and adding in hot chicken as its centerpiece – a symbol of Nashville's past, as well as an important tourist attraction of its present – these locals are using the consumption of hot chicken as a means by which to caricature the physical abjection associated with the term 'white trash' as a form of play that caricatures the stereotypes associated with white Southern culture.

Conclusion

It is possible to view these performances of abject spectacle, particularly in the context of the 'white trash' hot-chicken parties, as a kind of resistance against the negative, old-fashioned reputation Nashville so recently left behind, and against the attendant development that has made the area increasingly difficult for locals to live in. But there is more going on here. White trash-studies scholars like Dina Smith argue that 'white trash' is 'a ***border position*** between white privilege and black disenfranchisement.'[26] Sociologist Matthew Hughey notes, that hegemonic whiteness is formed, in part, 'through marginalizing practices of "being white" that fail to exemplify supposed essential differences between the races.'[27] Poor whites play a crucial part in the construction of white hegemony, because they provide the template for how to perform 'whiteness' incorrectly. The white middle-class effectively uses the concept of 'poor white trash' to construct itself.

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24 Fieldwork interview with author, September 2020.

25 Fieldwork interview with author, May 2020.

26 Smith, Dina: 'Cultural Studies' Misfit: White Trash Studies', *The Mississippi Quarterly* 57/3 (2004), 370.

27 Hughey, Matthew W.: *White Bound: Nationalists, Antiracists, and the Shared Meanings of Race* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 187.

Middle-class white Nashvillians, who use hot chicken as a prop in their play with a stigmatised poor white identity, are processing how outsiders view both the South, and Nashville specifically, but their toying with symbols of stigmatisation are just games: they can take off the cut-offs and put the dress shirts back on whenever they choose. In playing with these caricatures, they prove that they are capable of performing white middle-class identity correctly by modelling its opposite. By temporarily playing at being 'white trash', these white Nashville locals reassert their identities *as* white. This makes it possible for them to evolve along with their city, by demonstrating that they are competent in 'hegemonic whiteness', and aware of the proper behaviours associated with it. Their claiming of hot chicken as heritage – a dish created by the local Black community, with its own symbolic weight for that community – in their performances of being 'white trash', further reinforces racial inequality in the city.

I want to make it clear that I am not attempting to vilify these activities, and, individually, many of these white Nashvillians were committed to anti-racism work in their personal lives. But I think it is important to make space for interpretations of identity-performance that are intersectional: in holding these white trash themed parties, locals are participating in an empowering activity that reasserts their claim on a space that has changed greatly both physically and culturally over the past twenty years. At the same time, these activities reinforce racial inequality in Nashville, through this same assertion of ownership of the city, especially in light of the ways in which visits to hot chicken restaurants in historically Black neighbourhoods were framed as dangerous adventures in the narratives of many white locals, as well as the larger questions of cultural appropriation surrounding hot chicken's status as a culinary tourist attraction. Their ability to temporarily play with the stigma associated with being 'white trash' without suffering lasting social consequences as a result should not be overlooked, especially when their claims to ownership over hot chicken as heritage reinforce structural inequality.

This paper offers a case study of how the use of food in identity construction can fulfill specific goals for small, localised groups, while simultaneously aligning itself with the ideology of white supremacy in U.S. culture, regardless of individual intentions. The ways in which Nashville hot chicken is contested provide examples of vernacular expressions of white identity in one specific local context. These uses of hot chicken also make visible both how white identity is activated in everyday life, and how these everyday activations of white identity are interconnected with larger social systems of structural inequality. This work provides one example of the ways

in which folklore's emphasis on everyday traditional activities and expressions of identity provides a unique perspective on larger social issues, like structural inequality, that can help make sense of the complex relationships between identity, inequality, place, and heritage.

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