

Eating (with) the Other: Race in American Food Television

Abstract: This article aims to describe and theorize the role of food television in cultivating popular understandings of the relationship between food and race. Although there is burgeoning research on representations of food and identity, scholars have devoted much less attention to representations of race in food-related television programming. This article highlights the necessity of doing so through a comparative examination of shows that aim to expose viewers to racial and ethnic communities through their foodways. We ask to what extent these shows deliver contact across racial difference in hierarchical and egalitarian ways. We found that these shows convey manifestations of

“eating with the Other” by providing viewers with a warm and respectful entrée into the everyday realities of racial, ethnic, and immigrant communities. Simultaneously, the shows embody bell hooks’s notion of “eating the Other,” as they commodify the experiences of marginalized communities for the vicarious pleasures of their viewers, and gloss over larger social, political, and economic inequalities. This article offers insights into the ways in which contemporary food television is dealing with issues of ethno-racial differences and inequalities, and discusses the potential of this medium to act as a form of critical intervention.

Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture.

— bell hooks, “Eating the Other”

Walk in someone else’s shoes or at least eat their food. It’s a plus for everybody.

— Anthony Bourdain, quoted in tribute at the end of Marcus Samuelsson’s first episode of *No Passport Required*

SINCE THE ADVENT OF cooking shows in the 1940s, food television has become increasingly popular and complex.¹ Pauline Adema (2000) traces the roots of the genre from low-budget, kitchen-focused serials, through the 1990s when food programming was brought out of the studio kitchen and into the wider world. Over the last two decades, viewers began to follow celebrity chefs as they traversed varied landscapes in pursuit of ingredients, restaurants, colorful characters, and adventures (Rousseau 2012; Leer and Kjær 2015). Scholars in the academic field of food studies have devoted a growing interest in the televised representations of food, paying close attention to the intersection of food and identities. They have offered sophisticated analyses of gender (Leer 2018; Contois 2018; Swenson 2009), class (Naccarato and LeBesco 2012, 41–66), nationality (Leer 2017), and the construction of the Self (Grosplik and Lerner 2020), but have devoted much less attention to representations of race, or to articulations and intersections between race and class.

Understanding the ways in which food and race are portrayed in media is particularly important in the context of popular and scholarly conversations about food and race more broadly, including attention to food justice and activism (Alkon and Agyeman 2011; White 2018; Reese 2019), the roles of communities of color in shaping American foodways (Ray 2016; Wallach 2015), and debates about cultural appropriation and the reclaiming of precolonial foods (Twitz 2017; Peña et al. 2017). To be sure, there are a variety of investigations of food and race in the general popular media, but, surprisingly enough, very few examine food and race in television broadcasts.² This is a significant omission, as much of food television has played an important role in the proliferation of food media and has enjoyed unparalleled growth and expansion in recent years (Naccarato and LeBesco 2012, 41; Leer 2018). Food television, which can be realistic and documentary in nature, can inform the ways viewers experience and understand various racial and ethnic communities. Considering the important role of television as a “dominant social storyteller” (Gerbner and Gross 1976), this article aims to explore the ways in which race is represented in food programming and how media cultivates popular understandings of food and race.

Two important recent works that do investigate race in food television—both chapters in Jennifer Jensen Wallach’s excellent *Dethroning the Deceitful Pork Chop* (2015)—warrant further mention. Kimberly Nettles-Barcelón explores how the mammy archetype shapes and constrains the identity

performance of Chef Carla Hall, one of the few Black women celebrity chefs, and Jessica Kenyatta Taylor examines how food and cooking become constitutive of Black motherhood in the short-lived competition show *My Momma Throws Down*.

In order to extend this fledgling research area, we investigate how race is represented in television shows that attempt to depict food and culinary practices in their social contexts, entangled with the history, culture, and politics of particular places. Much of the food studies scholarship investigating cross-cultural dining focuses on how members of dominant groups consume the cuisines of marginalized ones (Ray 2016; Berris and Sutton 2007; Cappeliez and Johnston 2013; Narayan 1995), especially through tourism (Heldke 2003; Molz 2007), and argues that these encounters are “not necessarily about knowing or experiencing another culture but about performing a sense of adventure, adaptability, and openness to any other culture” (Molz 2007, 77). But the programs we address here go beyond culinary tourism to depict the act of eating *with* the Other.

For that reason, it is here—in food-related programs that pay attention to broader social contexts—if anywhere in the world of food media, that we would expect to find spelled-out expressions of what bell hooks (1992, 21) calls “contact with the Other, [meaning] connection rooted in the longing for pleasure [that can] act as a critical intervention challenging and subverting racist domination, inviting and enabling critical resistance.” Our expectations stem from watching the introductory clip to *No Passport Required*—a television series hosted by Chef Marcus Samuelsson, who states: “[The show] is a path to culture, identity, and history. [The show demonstrates] how food connects us all across the United States.” Furthermore, IMBD (an online database of information related to films, television programs, and the like) describes *Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown* using terminology of contact with Otherness: “A show in which Bourdain eats and drinks with people without fear and prejudice, visits countries [and communities], delving into their political issues as well as indigenous food and culture.”³ Through these descriptions, these shows claim the possibility that eating together can be a way to enact what Ien Ang (2003) calls “together-in-difference.”

Drawing on hooks (1992), we expected to find in these shows manifestations of contact with the Other mediated by food and eating culture, openness and cultural appreciations (rather than cultural appropriation). For hooks—who explored earlier representations of race in popular culture and the ways in which race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure by members of dominating groups—this form of contact remains “an unrealized

political possibility” (hooks 1992, 22). In this article, we ask whether and how contemporary food television, and especially television shows similar to those we discuss below, might deliver on the “potentially revolutionary longings” hooks described.

We explore this question through an analysis of the content of food-related programs hosted by two different culinary personas. We investigated *No Passport Required*—an educational and travelogue show hosted by Marcus Samuelsson. Samuelsson is a chef, author, and restaurateur, a Black man born in Ethiopia and raised in Sweden. In this show, he explores the foodways and social worlds of immigrant communities across the United States. While this show is quite new, Samuelsson is an important figure. He is a Black host in the overwhelmingly white realm of Anglo-American food television (Johnston and Goodman 2015) and in the broader field of media, which is characterized by underrepresentation of Other minorities (Kellner 2011; Bourdieu 1999). We compared Samuelsson’s program to shows hosted by Anthony Bourdain. Bourdain’s shows are often described as “programs focusing on the exploration of international culture, cuisine and the human condition.”⁴ Although he was white, class and gender privileged, Bourdain was among the first to give screen time to a diverse array of restaurateurs, street vendors, and home cooks from around the world. While he was perhaps best known for his forays throughout the so-called Global South, he also profiled many cities and towns within the United States.

For each of Samuelsson and Bourdain’s programs, we ask whether and to what extent these hosts “eat with the Other.” We define this term as treating foods and cooks with respect, sharing food as equals, and giving voice to marginalized experiences, especially those that illuminate marginalization and struggle rather than sugar-coat lived experiences. Simultaneously, we examine the extent to which the programs in question “eat the Other,” to borrow hooks’s parlance (1992). In the realm of food television, we define this term as commodifying the experiences of communities of color for the host’s (and viewers’) pleasure. Considering the assumption that television programming can operate as “both a site of and a resource of Black (and other minorities) cultural politics and social transformation” (Gray 2004, 5), we ask whether and how contemporary food television offers critical perspectives on power and inequalities, and visions for social change. Do recent food-related programs—those that are being produced in the contemporary era of convergence television and often described as “post-racial” in nature (Griffin 2011)—offer visions of social justice and critical representations of food, race, and Otherness?⁵

Research Approach

Our study draws on comparative content analysis. Using an interpretive perspective, we first studied manifestations of racial differences, identities, and disparities in the six episodes of the first season of Marcus Samuelsson's *No Passport Required*. This series is broadcast on PBS—a public television broadcaster that was founded with the goal of “turning television viewers into active citizens” (Ouellette 1999). In each episode of this show, Samuelsson visits a different city (Detroit, New Orleans, Chicago, New York, Miami, and Washington, DC) and profiles a particular community in that city, focusing on its foodways and everyday life. The synopsis of the show reads: “This six-episode series . . . offers viewers a culinary and anthropological exploration of the people, rituals and food of multicultural America.”⁶

A similar method was applied to analyze the nine episodes of Bourdain's programs that feature these same cities (*No Reservations*, *The Layover*, and *Parts Unknown*). This research approach allowed us to explore similarities and differences ascribed to the people and the foods profiled by the two hosts. We interpreted the spoken monologues and dialogues, searching for the explicit and implicit messages embedded in the linguistic structure of the show (Van Dijk 1993). For that purpose, we transcribed in detail the content of each episode as well as closely read the language used by the hosts and the people they profiled in the shows. Next, we conducted a thematic analysis in which all elements in the episodes—televised techniques, soundtrack, cooking procedures and eating practices, narratives, contextual data, biographical information of the participants of the show—were coded and analyzed (Strauss and Corbin 1997). We paid special attention to expressions of respect and commensality, on the one hand, and reinforcements of social hierarchy, on the other hand. With this corpus in hand, we then interrogated our categorized notes and brought them to bear on our argument as to how race is represented in contemporary food-related programming.

It should be noted that our analysis considers these shows as cultural artifacts and suggests reading them as a cultural text. Therefore, the analysis presented here is related to the hosts' persona, as well as the persona of the people they profile (rather than their “real” personalities). Drawing on the assumption that these shows are scripted to a greater or lesser extent (although realistic in nature) and that all participants in the show are playing some level of a scripted role, we traced the social meanings embedded in these televised texts.

Who Is Doing the Eating? Hosts, Guides, and Food Purveyors

“I'm Anthony Bourdain. I write. I eat. I travel and I'm hungry for more.” So opens the title sequence to the host's long-running series, *No Reservations*. From this prologue, Bourdain sets himself up as a Western neocolonial explorer, a white man exploring *parts unknown* (as the title of his latter show reads) and “translating” them for his audience.⁷ Bourdain's whiteness is never explicitly recognized, as is common of depictions of whiteness in popular culture and everyday life alike, but it is an essential component of the persona he creates through these shows.⁸ Indeed, Bourdain's lack of attention to his own cultural background is telling, especially when contrasted with his explicit focus on his own personality, personal biography, and taste. He eats various foods alongside locals, performing the role of a cultural and gastronomic omnivore (Johnston and Baumann 2009), enjoying everything from street food to fine dining, and depicting food purveyors of all strata with respect and esteem.

Bourdain performs a sort of countercultural, rebellious, and “bad boy” persona as he aligns himself with the “explorer” figure of “a white man who travels the world to eat” (Burdick 2018, 43).⁹ He does this through his omnivorous tastes, his narration style, and the way he walks through the world. For example, Bourdain is explicit about his love of a good time, including copious drinking and multiple paeans to cocaine in the Miami episode. A person of color, even a celebrity, would likely be far more careful publicly espousing such fondness for illicit drugs. Additionally, in his international work, Bourdain often invokes literature by white explorer-expatriates rather than native-born writers, such as William Burroughs in Morocco, Graham Greene in Haiti, and Joseph Conrad in the Congo. Bourdain clearly identifies with these men and is moved by their writing. These literary allusions support Bourdain's depiction of himself as wry and educated, with a fluid knowledge of (white) counterculture in its many forms, and a traveler who enjoys the privileges of being a white Westerner while moving through nonwhite and non-Western parts of the world.

Bourdain is often accompanied on his travels by local guides—cultural insiders with intimate knowledge of the places he visits. While there is certainly some racial diversity among them, Bourdain's guides remain disproportionately white. For example, in the three shows in which Bourdain visits New Orleans, he spends time with chefs John Besh, Donald Link (twice), and Emeril Lagasse, musician Davis Rogan, and journalist Chris Rose. Of all of his guides, only writer and filmmaker Lolis Elie and actor Wendell Pierce are

Black.¹⁰ The food purveyors he visits occupy a variety of places within the food system and social system: upscale and more casual restaurants, street vendors, and home cooks. Here, there is definitely an attempt at racial diversity. For example, Bourdain's visit to Detroit profiles an illegal "Pupusa House" serving out of the home of a Salvadoran immigrant; D-Town Farms, an urban organic farm run by the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network; and the white-owned, upscale *Guns + Butter* restaurant. Indeed, what is most compelling about Bourdain's performance as a host is his seeming comfort across all of these varied social worlds. Wherever he is, his goal is to use food as a means to take viewers inside the lives of those he depicts. And yet viewers often hear much more from these predominantly white informants than from the more diverse food purveyors themselves. For example, John Besh takes Bourdain to breakfast at Pho Tau Bay in New Orleans, but viewers do not meet any of the restaurant's staff or cooks. Therefore, Bourdain's answer to Gayatri Spivak's classic question of whether the subaltern can speak (1988) seems to be that they can, but they are far more often spoken for.

Marcus Samuelsson, unlike Bourdain, begins his series with an introduction of his own personal narrative, claiming his own hybridized identity as a form of social capital that both informs and valorizes his storytelling (Ang 2003). The opening credits begin:

I'm Chef Marcus Samuelsson. And as an immigrant born in Ethiopia and raised in Sweden, food to me has always told a deeper, more personal story. It's a path to culture, identity, and history. I'm going across the country to learn more about America's immigrant communities and culinary traditions to see how food connects us all across the United States.

While Bourdain is seen as traversing *parts unknown*, Samuelsson is looking for stories that are very similar to his performed persona, and seems to want to discover a "part of himself" within this process. Rather than an explorer searching for himself among so-called exotic Others, Samuelsson is depicted as someone searching for companionship among others undertaking similar journeys. Samuelsson and those he encounters constantly discuss their shifting cultural identities, identities that embody both their home countries and their American-ness. These sorts of stories implicitly ask American-born viewers to widen their take on what American-ness is and can be. This theme of hybridized identity comes up in nearly every episode. For example, when profiling the Vietnamese community in New Orleans, Samuelsson accompanies a young chef named Tung Nguyen to his home for Tết, the lunar new year. In an aside to the

camera, Samuelsson reveals more about his own immigrant experience:

I think this question of who we are, in terms of identity and when we become something else, it's a lifelong journey and question that I ask myself very often. Am I Ethiopian? Am I Swedish? Am I American? Or a New Yorker? Can I be all four of those things?

This exploration of his own identity demonstrates Samuelsson's stake in the socio-political issues the show explores and offers the viewer a vicarious sense of personal connection to the various communities he visits.

But Samuelsson foregrounds his identity as an immigrant in a way that seems to de-emphasize his Blackness. The first three episodes in the series profile cities and neighborhoods that are or have until recently been predominantly Black, but Black people are generally absent or do not speak about Blackness. For example, in the New Orleans episode, Samuelsson speaks with eminent Black chef Leah Chase, but asks her only for a brief description of the Vietnamese community he profiles. While this is no doubt a function of the show's focus on immigrant foodways, the subject of how these immigrant communities came to be in, and navigate, historically Black communities would have been a welcome addition, and seems especially lacking given the host's racial identity. In other episodes, he references his Blackness sartorially, through one baseball hat emblazoned with an outline of the African continent and another that reads Wakanda, but even when talking to immigrant communities from Ethiopia and Haiti, Blackness is never discussed. We are left to wonder about these communities' experiences with anti-Black racism or their sense of solidarity (or lack thereof) with African Americans. Indeed, the above quote in which Samuelsson ponders his own identity focuses on place (Ethiopia, Sweden, the United States) but does not explicitly mention race.

Like Bourdain, Samuelsson employs guides to provide context on the places and communities he visits, including chefs, journalists, photographers, and authors. But nearly all of Samuelsson's guides are immigrants or their descendants, who are largely people of color, and share knowledge not only of the food but of the community. There are far fewer acclaimed chefs and celebrities, and more everyday people living, working, and eating together. Even when he does profile chefs, they include up-and-comers steeped in immigrant culture as well as established authorities. When focusing on Chicago's Mexican community, for example, Samuelsson speaks with Diana Dávila and Carlos Gaytan (the first Mexican American chef to win a Michelin star),

who are explicitly attempting to create upscale versions of Mexican cuisine. Both of them discuss with Samuelsson issues related to ethnicity, class, and status; the question of why the foods of some ethnic groups are presumed to be cheap while others can be expensive is a theme that runs throughout this episode. This televised discussion seems reminiscent of Krishnendu Ray's *The Ethnic Restaurateur* (2016), which argues that prices mirror the general social standing of the group.

In contrast to Bourdain, who mostly engages with various social worlds as a white outsider, Samuelsson performs a more intimate sense of connection, playing the role of a person who shares the immigrant experience with those he profiles. By foregrounding his own personal story, he is able to offer a richly detailed account of these experiences. This intimacy is bolstered by Samuelsson's participation in food preparation, the insider nature of his guides, and the somewhat more detailed portraits of the chefs and cooks he dines with. However, focusing on his immigrant story and hybrid identity sometimes comes at the expense of performing his Black identity, and Blackness itself is rarely discussed during this show.

Eating with the Other

While there are certainly differences in the two hosts' approaches, one similarity is the overarching respect and enthusiasm the hosts show for everyone they meet and for every dish they are served. In Miami, for example, Bourdain visits the same "Little Haiti" neighborhood where Samuelsson's show is based, and eats at a four-seat café tucked in the back of B&M Market—a small shop and bodega. While this visit is brief, Bourdain declares: "They serve some of the dishes that make me happiest. Jerk chicken—who doesn't love that? Curry goat, rotti and this, cow-foot soup. The real deal, too, flavors and textures, some next-level stuff." There is no attempt to point out or justify a dish like cow's foot soup, which is commonly eaten throughout the Caribbean. Bourdain and his producers depict it as merely another delicious food that the host enjoys. Similarly, in Detroit, Bourdain's first dish is a Coney Dog, a hot dog topped with chili, raw onion, and mustard on a steamed bun, a dish that he describes as emblematic of white, working-class fare. After pronouncing the "delicate interplay between ingredients [as] symphonic," he orders a second while classical music plays in the background, positing this working-class food as a sublime experience. Later in the episode, he visits "Greedy Greg's," a Black-owned barbecue pop-up, and describes

a dish of barbecued greens as "luxurious," a compliment that belies the casual front-yard pop-up stand.

The seeming clash between Bourdain's elevated language and working-class dishes encapsulates Bourdain's approach toward food. All foods, he attempts to convince his viewers, are worthy of respect, as are all of the communities in which they are embedded and the workers who prepare them. Even in his travels throughout the globe, Bourdain never describes a dish as strange; he attempts to engage with the food and those who prepare it on their own terms. It is this approach that, according to many food writers of color, separates Bourdain from the "bunch of white men who freely travel the world to sample authentic ethnic dishes" (Inthenova 2017). Indeed, upon his suicide in 2018, many food writers of color mourned his passing, characterizing him as someone who "engaged without fetishizing" (Rao 2018). In a tweet that was liked over 178,000 times, comedian Jenny Yang wrote that Bourdain "never treated our food like he discovered it. He kicked it with grandma because he knew that he was the one that needed to catch up on our brilliance" (quoted in Khatib 2018). Journalist Rania Abouzeid added: "His wasn't the Orientalist gaze. He saw humanity (& food) everywhere, and connected with it" (ibid.).

In the United States, Bourdain's focus is on stories of urban resilience. He calls his episode on Detroit a "love letter" to "one of the most beautiful cities in America—still" and describes its residents as "funny, tough—and supreme improvisers... [living] in a city that is so relentlessly fucked." In addition, he profiles community-based organizations such as Detroit's D-Town Farm and New Orleans's Café Reconcile, describing the structural conditions they attempt to address while offering a bit of positive press. In this sense, he depicts everyday people as doing their best to cope with circumstances beyond their making.

Samuelsson, too, seems to enjoy everyone he interacts with and everything he eats. For example, when in New Orleans, he visits Ba Mien, located in a strip mall on the east side of town, with City Councilwoman Cyndi Nguyen. Over several dishes, Samuelsson expresses an enthusiasm for the cuisine as a whole, which he describes as "super complex," full of "umami" and "bright and light and just delicious." With words like these, Samuelsson performs his own chef bona fides while expressing a culinary regard for a cuisine that rarely commands this kind of upscale regard. And even when Nguyen orders *Tiêt canh* (duck pate) and describes in detail the process of killing, draining, and preparing the duck until it "sits like a Jell-O" in its own blood, Samuelsson declares, "I love it... I've never had a dish like that." Later, he compares *Tiêt canh* to blood pudding and boudin,

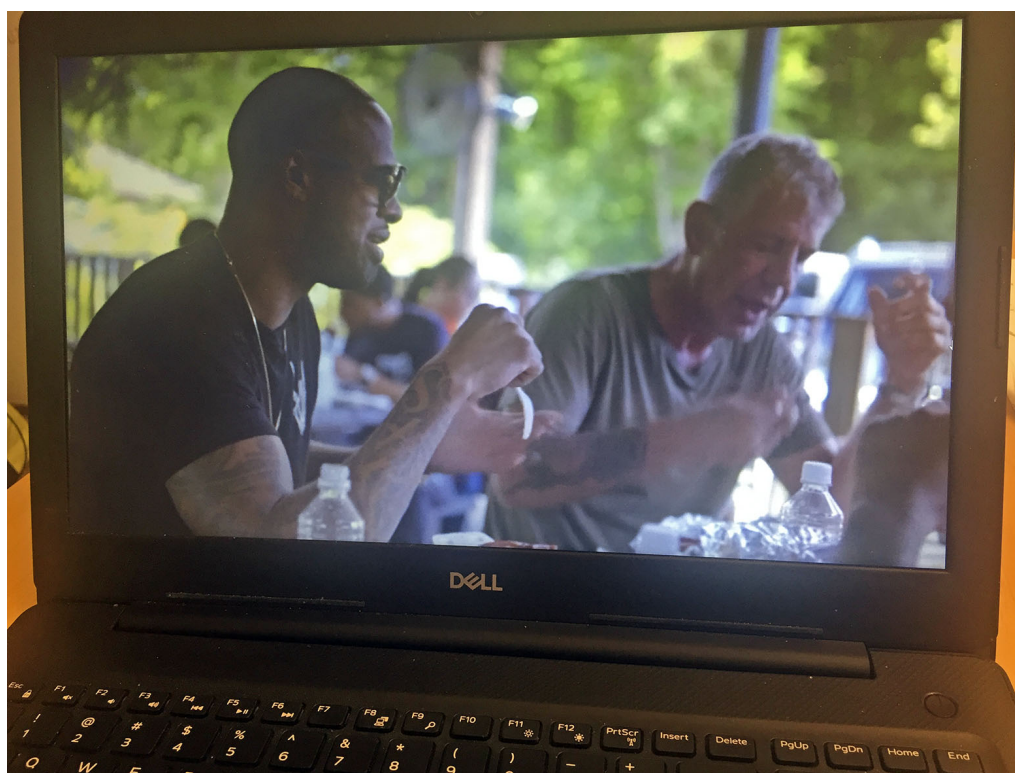


FIGURE 1: *Conducting content analysis: “Eating with the Other” in Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY RAFI GROSLIK © 2021

normalizing the dish for viewers who may be more accustomed to and accepting of similar techniques in European cuisines.

Even when he struggles with a dish, Samuelsson attributes this to his personal background (according to an autobiographical narrative) rather than a weakness of the food. For example, he prepares and shares Haitian independence soup (named as such because Black Haitians were prevented from consuming it during slavery, and claimed it after they overthrew the French) with cultural preservationist Sandy Dorsainvil and her mother, Marie. While cooking, Samuelsson remarks that the addition of spicy scotch bonnet peppers would be from the Africans rather than the slave masters. This becomes significant because even after declaring the soup “beautiful” and “complex” with “beautiful orange notes,” Sandy remarks that Samuelsson is sweating. “Listen,” Samuelsson replies. “I’m African via Sweden so this is where the adoptive kid is struggling. It’s hot! It’s hot! Wooooo!” The three of them laugh, as Samuelsson wipes his brow. Where a food critic may have faulted the dish for its heat, or argued that the heat overwhelmed other flavors, Samuelsson instead categorizes the fault as his own, depicting his background as (in this moment) insufficiently African, which allows him to maintain his respect and affection for his hosts.

While many food travelogues play on our sense of disgust, following their hosts as they consume the greasiest meats and most *bizarre foods* (as one program is named), Samuelsson and Bourdain convey a sense of genuine respect and affection for all the foods they are served, and all the chefs, home cooks, and restaurant workers who serve them.¹¹ They evidence an easy familiarity with food purveyors from many walks of life, and offer viewers a glimpse into the everyday realities of various communities. In this sense, both hosts are eating with the Other as relative equals, sharing food, conversation, and commensality. Samuelsson sums this up nicely in his Detroit episode: “I think it’s super important now more than ever in this super intense moment of time to keep curiosity and dialog and to learn about your neighbor who may come from a different place. And food, music, and art are incredible door-openers to start this conversation.”

Eating the Other

And yet who is it who needs to dialog and learn about their neighbors? It is lines like this that reveal not only the progressive intent of these programs but also the ways they attempt to make the experiences of immigrants and other marginalized

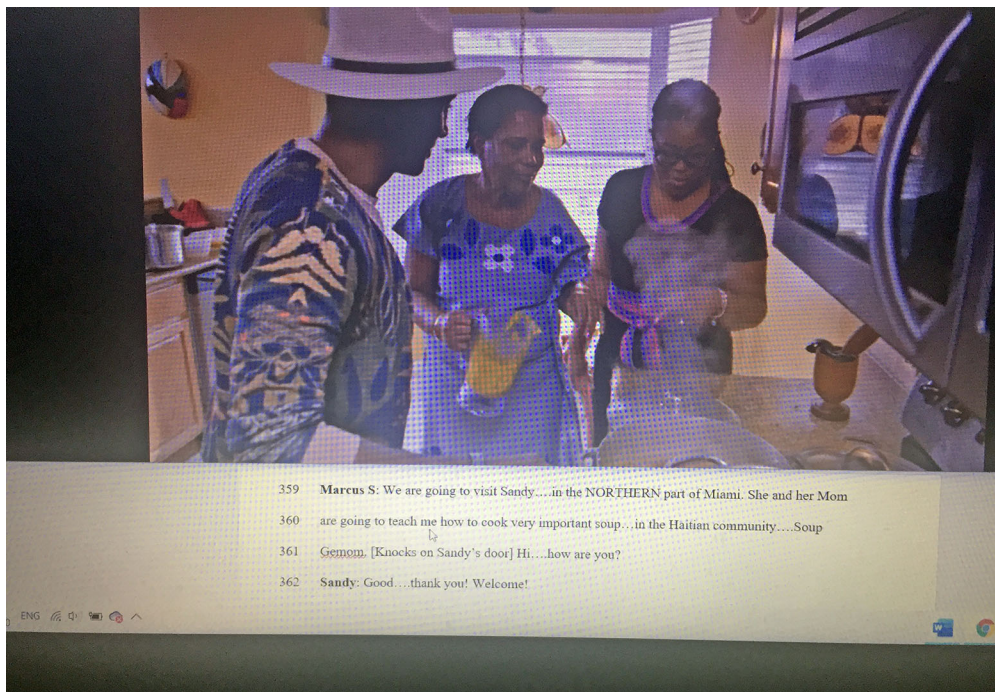


FIGURE 2: Conducting content analysis: “Eating with the Other” in No Passport Required.

PHOTOGRAPH BY RAFI GROSGLIK © 2021

groups palatable to dominant ones. The gaze is clearly that of a white viewer, who is presumed to have had little experience with the communities that are its object.¹²

One way that Samuelsson attempts to tailor his show to these viewers is by foregrounding the story of the so-called American Dream. He commonly depicts recent immigrant communities as attempting to pull themselves up by their bootstraps through food. In New Orleans, for example, he describes how “highly entrepreneurial, sticking together, the Vietnamese in New Orleans have very quickly become an incredible, important part of the fabric of the city and an INCREDIBLE immigrant American story” (emphasis in original). Samuelsson’s enthusiasm for immigrant entrepreneurship and its community benefits extends beyond food purveyors. In Miami, he profiles a group of young men who work in “creative industries” like fashion and entertainment. He describes them as “great examples that you can be creative, and you can also forge your own path. They are also role models to fellow entrepreneurs to say, hey, you can come back to Little Haiti, you can set up shop and set up businesses and make the community thrive.” While the role of entrepreneurs in immigrant class mobility is undeniable (Aldrich and Waldinger 1990), Samuelsson’s narrative provides a more contemporary take on the traditional immigrant story that foregrounds hard work, unity, and

creativity as key to success in a new country. Thus, he presents a story that fits neatly within the dominant American narrative of earned success.

This goal of making the immigrant experience accessible is also evident in the ways that Samuelsson describes immigrant foods. For example, in Detroit, Arab food is presented as nonthreatening in a way that symbolizes the community. “Their food is not so spicy,” he says. “It is not so threatening as one might expect, it is flavorful and varied, just like the Arab-American community.” Samuelsson concludes this episode by speaking directly to his audience, whom he presumes needs to be convinced of the safeness of Arab immigrants. He says, “I wish that people who don’t know anything about Arab culture could come eat here, stay here for a week. Anyone who has fear of immigrants, they should come to Dearborn [a suburb of Detroit], and you’d see nothing but small businesses and working together. And that’s what I’ve seen this week.” Arabs in Detroit, and all of the communities Samuelsson portrays, appear as both the “exotic ethnic other” and the assimilated model minority.¹³

Similarly, Bourdain interpolates into his narrative an imagined viewer (again, presumably a white viewer) who needs to be brought out of their cultural comfort zone to engage with the world and its diverse people through culinary tourism. His profiles of marginalized people, though certainly

respectful, are less intimate than Samuelsson's and gives them even less opportunity to tell their stories on their own terms. As described by philosopher Lisa Heldke (2003, xvi), his performance weaves together "an effort to play, and to learn about other cultures in ways intended to be respectful, [with] a deep desire to have contact with an Exotic Other as a way of making [him]self more interesting" (see also Molz 2007; Johnston and Baumann 2009).

More often than not, Bourdain's guides and dining companions are white men who share his rebellious, countercultural image. It is these (mostly) men who provide the social context, even when people of color provide the food. Standpoint epistemology (Harding 1995) urges scholars to privilege the positions of marginalized groups more generally, and there are particular moments when it seems like the perspective of a person of color might be substantially different from what Bourdain's informants offer. For example, in an episode of *No Reservations* filmed in New Orleans just after Hurricane Katrina, Emeril Lagasse tells Bourdain curtly, "Bring in a hurricane, wipe out a lot of stuff. Can't change New Orleans," before describing his own work creating a disaster employee relief fund for his own and other restaurant workers. But New Orleans has changed significantly since Katrina. While some of these shifts may not have been obvious at the time the episode was filmed, the racially disparate treatment and media coverage of Katrina victims was already well known. Bourdain returned to the city in 2012, where he dines with chef Donald Link, who describes the city as "alive" and "busy":

I think the hurricane brought a lot of awareness to the city. It made people want to focus on the infrastructure and focus on the school system. Our mayor is great right now. The tourists love coming here. I love that New Orleans is growing in a way that maintains its soul . . . New Orleans has always been a place where different people live together, different cultures and class and race and it all just seems to work.

The city, which was 67 percent Black before the storm in 2000, was only 35 percent Black by 2013. The public school system had transformed into one dominated by charter schools, and the mayor, Mitch Landrieu, was the first white man to hold the position since 1978. These changes have had significant and varied effects on the city's food and restaurant scenes, but the overarching trend is a stronger spotlight on the contributions and desires of white people (Broom and Kato 2020; Beriss and Sutton 2007). A critical read of these episodes necessitates wondering if a Black resident of New Orleans might have had a different perspective, one that would have been less comfortable for many white viewers. But there were no Black people featured in speaking roles in the 2005 program and only one, author and filmmaker Lolis Elie, informs the latter episode. Elie attempts to get into

the city's racialized (and gendered) history, describing how in 1850, 40 percent of it was owned by free women of color, but Bourdain soon changes the topic to proper bar etiquette. Elie does get a chance to expand his perspective on the city during one of the last episodes of *Parts Unknown*, in which Bourdain again returns to New Orleans, but no one ever directly refutes the perspectives offered by Lagasse and Link.

Finally, the shows of Bourdain and Samuelsson fail to discuss many of the obstacles faced by the communities they profile. Samuelsson focuses on the positives embodied by immigrant communities, especially the ways they use food to create a sense of home in their new country. There is a lot of attention paid to individuals' struggles to craft and navigate their own hybridized identities, but there are no conflicts, no crime, and no poverty. There is also no attention to micro-level gastropolitics (DeSoucey 2016), which often have much to say about social and cultural context—including disagreements about the proper way to prepare a dish. These seemingly mundane disputes are often directly related to the ways that communities determine who is accepted as a cultural insider and how, within groups, conflicts and power dynamics play out.

Moreover, there is no explicit mention of, and really only a few oblique references to, racism. When it is invoked, the racism described is explicit white supremacy rather than the color-blind variant that might cause a white viewer to subtly undervalue the food and culture of an immigrant group.¹⁴ For example, in his show on Chicago's Mexican community, Samuelsson spoofs Trump's tag line, declaring that "Mexicans make American taste great again." This show also profiles Ulysses Martinez, the beverage director at Diana Dávila's *Mi Tocaya*, who immigrated to the United States from Mexico when he was four years old and is enrolled in the DACA program. (The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program is a United States immigration policy that grants some rights to undocumented immigrants who arrived as children.) Samuelsson explicitly criticizes plans to rescind the program without a replacement as "playing with families' lives." And yet there is little discussion of how other forms of institutional and everyday racism have impacted the life and life chances of Ulysses and other Mexican immigrants, including the role of food policy in spurring recent waves of immigration in the first place (Gálvez 2018). This omission is particularly glaring as Chicago is home to chef and restaurateur Rick Bayless, whose whiteness has enabled the trend toward upscale Mexican cuisine and who is often cited as a perpetrator of cultural appropriation (Arellano 2016).

Bourdain is in some ways more explicit in his attention to race and racism, though these themes are still rare. Moreover, they tend to occur in his voice-overs rather than through

conversation with his guides, many of whom benefit from white privilege. In one example, he wonders whether the revitalization of New Orleans will be limited to “well-heeled white people moving down here from the north and buying vacation homes.” And he closes the episode on Detroit by declaring: “Someone will live in a smaller, tighter, no doubt hipper, much contracted new Detroit, but who will that be? Will that be the people who stuck it out here, who fought block-by-block to keep their city from burning? Who struggle to defend their home, keep up appearances as all around them their neighborhoods emptied?” These words are narrated amidst a montage of largely Black Detroiters, implying a racialized take on the question of urban change, but race is never explicitly mentioned. This makes it possible for white viewers to avoid the topic in all but the most historicized and distant sense. While both shows depict communities that are unknown to most Americans, they do so in a way that seems designed to keep those with more power culturally comfortable and intrigued, rather than revealing the struggles that these communities continue to face.

Beyond the Table (and beyond the Camera)

Having prominent presences in the converged sphere of celebrity chef culture and digital and interactive media (Bush 2019), both hosts can be seen practicing aspects of “eating with” and “eating the” Other beyond the field of food television. Samuelsson, for example, has also been outspoken about inequalities in the food system. As one of the most prominent Black chefs in the world, he has often been quoted in coverage of the dearth of Black chefs and the lack of publicity that Black chefs receive compared to their white counterparts. For example, in a 2016 article in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* exploring racism in the restaurant industry, Samuelsson explains: “We are still in a position where chefs of color have less opportunity . . . Kitchens are not separate from the race distinctions that have been going on for generations in all industries” (quoted in Figueras 2016). He explores these issues more fully in his memoir *Yes, Chef*, where a recurrent theme is the ways that his Blackness, and his Swedish identity, combine to prevent him from being seen as a great chef. As he puts it, “Inevitably when people bring race into the professional arena, it’s never as rich, complicated or tasty as I would like. I was never *the chef at Aquavit*. I was *the black Swedish guy from Aquavit*. What does that mean?” (2013, 210). Samuelsson also works to democratize the industry by sitting on the board of the Careers through Culinary Arts Program in New York City’s public schools, which “works at

getting inner city kids hired in the culinary world” (Figueras 2016). Samuelsson is proud of the program’s successes. “Twenty-six years after its start, we now have great examples of successful small business owners, chefs and sommeliers that have come out of this inspiring system” (quoted in Figueras 2016).

Like many prominent people of color, Samuelsson describes feeling an enhanced pressure to perform, and to represent his race in a setting from which Black people are often excluded. But the enthusiastic cheerfulness that characterizes his persona as host is also evident in his take on race relations. When asked whether the food media ignores Black professionals, he argued that Black chefs should focus on the things they can control. “We can only work really hard and hope it is an even playing field. As a black person, it’s clear that the grid is not made for us, so we need to create our own opportunities. You can still be very relevant and create incredible things in your own community. It gets noticed” (Figueras, 2016). While Black chefs are disproportionately overlooked in the food media more broadly, Samuelsson aims to use his prominence to change this, even while publicly offering an optimistic take that in some ways minimizes racialized structural constraints.

As for Bourdain, until his death in 2018 he spoke out often about the immeasurable contributions of Mexican immigrants to the food and restaurant industry and to American society more generally. In a radio interview he said, “But for the people who’ve been living here, and who are so much a part of our lives, and who have done nothing but try to do their best to achieve the American dream . . . there should be an easy path to legality.”¹⁵ Along these lines, and in front of the camera in one of the last episodes of *Parts Unknown*, he chastised “Americans” (to use his notion) for “loving Mexican food, beverages, drugs, workers and beaches, but failing to care about the 80,000 Mexicans who have died in the past few years due to the US’s so-called War on Drugs.”

In addition, while Bourdain sometimes engaged in a sort of low-grade casual misogyny—for example, the Chicago episode contains the phrase “don’t be a pussy”—Bourdain was also a prominent supporter of the #metoo movement. In an essay on *Medium* he wrote: “In these current circumstances, one must pick a side. I stand unhesitatingly and unwaveringly with the women.” He also argued: “We are clearly at a long overdue moment in history where everyone, good hearted or not, will HAVE to look at themselves, the part they played in the past, the things they’ve seen, ignored, accepted as normal, or simply missed—and consider what side of history they want to be on in the future.” Unwilling to spare himself from such an interrogation, he concludes the essay with an expression of remorse for the way that his book,

Kitchen Confidential, “celebrated or prolonged a culture that allowed [these] kind of grotesque behaviors.”¹⁶

Conclusion

From newspaper reports on migrant supper clubs to *National Geographic*'s recent *The Joy of Food* series, the popular imaginary is increasingly colored by the idea that food connects across differences.¹⁷ Manifested in a televised form of “eating with the Other,” this idea of openness and connectedness prevails in food-related programming. At first glance, Samuelsson and Bourdain's shows seem to be quintessential cases for this sort of connection across differences. Both hosts unflinchingly treat the people they profile, as well as their food and culinary practices, in a warm and respectful way. Communities of color are depicted as proud, resilient, and admirable; they are not exoticized but rather presented as individuals and communities that viewers should want to get to know, and their foods are depicted and discussed in their cultural context. Samuelsson goes even further, highlighting the ways that immigrants, including himself, use food as a means to navigate and negotiate their own identities.

As critical race scholars (including some within food studies) and racial justice activists have made clear for decades, however, connections across difference *require* discomfort if they are to challenge hierarchical social relations. Practices of transgressing racial boundaries can generate critique when privileged people acknowledge the circumstances faced by marginalized groups, and learn how to use their privilege and conduct the encounters in antiracist ways. These sorts of encounters aim to galvanize reflexivity and move beyond the pleasure of consuming the culture of the Other.

Given the fact that food and television are often the realms of pleasure, positive feelings, and comfort (Ray 2007, 2019), this article asks: What would *discomforting connections across difference* look like on food television? Can televised depictions of the food of the Other—as seen in Samuelsson and Bourdain's shows, as well as in similar programs—act as a critical intervention, challenging, disrupting, or subverting the status quo of racist domination (hooks 1992, 22)?

As demonstrated above, even well-intentioned, progressive, and respectful depictions of racialized Others—such as those seen in the shows of Samuelsson and Bourdain—exist alongside more subtle interpolations of whiteness and racial power relations. As the particular cases of Samuelsson and Bourdain's shows indicate, food-related programming that focuses on the food of the Other does not necessarily convey a message of discomforting engagement, as they are


often also embedded with depictions of “eating the Other.” As we have shown above, both hosts often project onto the people they depict and onto their food an othering and white gaze. This can be seen in various ways: Both hosts presume an American-born viewer—as evident, for example, by the very title of Samuelsson's show *No Passport Required* (ironically, many of the immigrant communities depicted in this show, and even Samuelsson himself, at some point likely required a passport). Great care is taken by both hosts to ensure that the presumed (white) viewers will remain comfortable. They provide them with palatable depictions of the food of the Others, predictable forms of Otherness (Fusco 1995, 50), and incorporate only broad, historicized, and faraway notions of racial struggles and ethno-racial tensions. All these are tailored into a televised narrative in which foreignness seems appealing rather than threatening or arousing discomfort. Yet by denying the discomforting element of encounters between racial differences, the potential critical sting of these programs has been removed.

Questions remain as to how these noncritical and simultaneous narratives of eating *with* and eating *the* Other are being forged and why televisuality works so well with discussing cooking, eating, and engagements with culinary practices of Othered people. It is difficult to determine based on content analysis how narratives of social critique are being created on food television, or if it is realistic at all to expect food television, which is inherently commodified and engineered to please viewers, to go in this direction. Still, our study offers insights into the meanings of the artifact itself—a televised text that deals with ethno-racial differences throughout food, as well as what that artifact says about how the intersections of food and race are conveyed to viewers.

Cooking, as explained by Ray (2007), has historically been about the subaltern body doing stuff that is unarticulated and has been unexposed to the public. Nevertheless, television allowed cooking to be borne as a public image and to be captured in distance transmission. Food is a multisensorial artifact, and cooking and eating are, obviously, acts of a multisensory experience (Classen et al. 1994). But the sense that food television emphasizes is “the gaze,” bringing all other senses involved in the practices of cooking and eating into a visual environment. In considering the prioritization of the white and Othering gaze in contemporary food television, one can make the case that television has not really moved beyond the historical Western and colonial actors (travelers, scientists, industrialists, food preparers, consumers) who have worked to create palatable hierarchies and determine what is edible and what is not when encountering unfamiliar foods. In other words, food television is revealed as a sphere within

which sensory interactions — discussing unfamiliar tastes, and gazing at unacquainted foods and culinary practices — are folded into narratives of collective identity and differentiation (Rohel 2017).

Contemporary food television is steeped in broader trends of increasing cultural interconnectedness and the usage of food and culinary discourses to bring people and cultures together (Chapple-Sokol 2013; Long 1998). At best, interconnected culinary encounters help us to understand and sympathize with one another's circumstances. Manifestations of eating *with* the Other, as identified in the shows we studied, resonate with these trends. Nevertheless, these culinary encounters can also operate as a slippery slope toward trends of eating *the* Other, when discourses of engagements with the foods of the othered people are revealed as a means of reinforcing racial and class hegemonies (Passidomo 2017; Watson and Caldwell 2005).

In conclusion, while scholars have and continue to focus on the intersections of food, identity, and power in different realms of society, we believe that turning the attention to the growing number of media artifacts explicitly devoted to food, race, and Otherness can reveal processes of both social change and perpetuations of social hierarchies and racial dominations. We hope this fledgling effort can inspire other scholars to join in this inquiry. 

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NOTES

1. In this article we use the term “food television” to refer to only one part of the broader field of food media (Rousseau 2012; Leer and Kjær 2015): food-related television programming. Within the framework of food television, we include all shows, on all platforms of media-services, within which food and culinary culture are the main subject. These include food programming in general channels such as travelogue cooking shows, documentaries, and educational culinary shows, as well as cooking shows focusing on celebrity chefs, culinary reality-TV shows, and shows broadcast in channels solely dedicated to food and eating (Leer 2018). Aiming to explore the role of food in the public discourse on social inequalities, this article focuses on food programming that combines elements of documentary, travel, and educational aspects with the attention to food.
2. For more about representations of food and race in popular culture, see Williams-Forsen 2006; Parasecoli 2010; Lindenfeld 2007; Lindenfeld and Parasecoli 2016.
3. See www.imdb.com/title/tt2845786/ (accessed May 13, 2020).
4. See www.cnn.com/2018/06/08/us/anthony-bourdain-obit/index.html (accessed May 13, 2020).

5. The term “convergence television,” or “post-network television,” refers to televised programs that are distributed via multiple platforms such as traditional networks, cable, and satellite and digital platforms (Jenner 2017; Lavie and Jamal 2019).
6. See www.imdb.com/title/tt8740534/ (accessed May 13, 2020).
7. For a discussion about similar persona in food-related programming, see Leer and Kjær 2015.
8. For an overview of research on whiteness, see Nayak 2007.
9. Gender is not a category of analysis in this article, although it is clearly important. Gendered issues are evident in various parts of both shows, but definitely come to the fore when Bourdain is depicted according to the explorer trope, deploying the white-gendered gaze.
10. It should be noted that episodes in later seasons of Bourdain's show indicate a move away from the earlier tendency of Bourdain (or the producers of his shows) to focus merely on white chefs, experts, or guides to the city at the expense of the voices of people of color. For example, in comparing Bourdain's New Orleans episode (*No Reservations*, season 4, first broadcast in February 2008) to Bourdain's episode on Houston (*Parts Unknown*, season 8, first broadcast on October 2016), one can see that in the latter episode Bourdain is engaged only with chefs, experts, and guides of color, emphasizing the city's diversity.
11. For more about the social construction of the sensorial feeling of disgust, see Rohel 2017; Bender 2017; Korsmeyer 2002.
12. It should be mentioned that the presumed viewers' demographics for these two shows are young, middle-class, white viewership. Scholar John Burdick, who studied food media, culinary tourism, and the culture of “eating ethnic” among white Americans, argues that “food-travel shows have become the centerpiece of programming on a host of networks (including CNN and The Travel Channel, that produced some of Bourdain's shows) that largely cater to a middle class, highly educated, white audience” (Burdick 2018, 325).
13. For more about food and model minorities, see Mannur 2005.
14. For more about color-blind racism, see Bonilla-Silva 2003.
15. See www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/10/30/anthony-bourdain-defends-immigrants-shreds-trump-and-lazy-culinary-school-kids/ (accessed July 6, 2020).
16. See <https://medium.com/@Bourdain/on-reacting-to-bad-news-28bc2c4b9adc> (accessed May 13, 2020).
17. See www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-supper-club-immigrant-dinner-mirys-list-refugee-migrant-20190531-htmlstory.html (accessed May 13, 2020).

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