1-1-1994

What (N)ever Happened to Aunt Jemima: Eating Disorders, Fetal Rights, and Black Female Appetite in Contemporary American Culture

Doris Witt

University of Iowa


Comments

Hosted by Iowa Research Online. For more information please contact: lib-ir@uiowa.edu.
What (N)ever Happened to Aunt Jemima: Eating Disorders, Fetal Rights, and Black Female Appetite in Contemporary American Culture

Doris Witt

It occurred to me that the black woman is herself a symbol of nourishment...

— Alice Walker, “Giving the Party”

On 27 April 1989, the Chicago-based Quaker Oats Company announced plans to “update” its Aunt Jemima trademark for the 1990s. The two-page news release begins:

Aunt Jemima, one of America’s oldest packaged food trademarks and a symbol of quality breakfast products for 100 years, will be given a new look this year. The facial appearance is unchanged. Noticeably different, however, is a new, stylish, grey-streaked hairdo, and her headband has been removed. Other changes include cosmetic touches such as a different style of collar and the addition of earrings.

“We wanted to present Aunt Jemima in a more contemporary light, while preserving the important attributes of warmth, quality, good taste, heritage and reliability,” said Barbara R. Allen, Vice President of Marketing for Quaker Oats Company’s Convenience Foods Division, makers of Aunt

Winter 1994-1995

Jemima products. “Based on the results of consumer research over a five-month period, we think the new design does that.” (“Aunt Jemima” 1)

This preemptive strike was intended to fortify the corporate line on the trademark’s symbolic meaning several weeks before the altered image was itself actually “released” into the American marketplace — or into an ideological battleground, to be more precise, where efforts to “preserve” and valorize the iconography of slavery are fiercely contested. Given the context, the public relations staff at Quaker Oats was obviously not about to comment on why the company “wanted” to update the trademark image in the first place.1

What are we to make of the longevity of the Aunt Jemima trademark and of the ambiguity of the symbolic attributes which Quaker Oats wants to preserve by keeping it? After all, “warmth” is surely a characteristic of Aunt Jemima as cook; “good taste,” of Aunt Jemima food products. “Quality,” “heritage,” and “reliability” could refer to either. One might infer from this symbolic slippage that the trademark is intended to signify both cook and food. Like her precursors, the big-breasted mammyes of post-Civil War lore, Aunt Jemima prepares and is food; she-it is the ever-smiling source of sustenance for infants and adults.2 Yet one obstacle faced by Quaker Oats in trying to maintain this dual symbolic meaning, while presenting the visual image of Aunt Jemima in a more “contemporary” light, is that the new picture could be said to represent not so much a servant producer as a middle-class consumer. Ex cathedra pronouncements of Barbara Allen notwithstanding, the 1990s’ Jemima looks more like a “Mrs.” than an “Aunt.” And viewed from this perspective, “good taste” should be her attribute as a discriminating shopper, not as a stack of pancakes.3

Of course, one assumption I am begging here is that a middle-class black matron has a “look” which we all readily recognize. This is a problem that Jean-Christophe Agnew neatly skirts. Near the end of a December 1989 Village Voice review of Susan Strasser’s *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market*, Agnew pauses momentarily in an attempt to resolve the contradictions posed by the upscale Aunt Jemima:

For instance, what are we now to make of a figure like Aunt Jemima, whose 100-year old kerchief was finally removed from her head during her most recent makeover last July? Now she is said to look like Oprah Winfrey. But then again, Oprah’s face and body have themselves been inducted into the Wiz’s vast warehouse of interchangeable cultural signifiers. (Emphasis added) (30)4
By invoking the instability of Winfrey as a referent, Agnew dismisses the possibility of making meaning of Aunt Jemima at all ("looks like" ad infinitum). In particular he would appear to be alluding to the highly publicized sixty-seven pound weight loss in 1988 of the popular talk show hostess and television producer, and perhaps also to tabloid allegations that an August 1989 TV Guide cover picture of the newly slim Winfrey depicted her face atop Ann-Margret’s body.

What, then, ever happened to Aunt Jemima? Nothing and everything. On the one hand, the trademark is where it has been for the last century, on grocery store shelves, and the same (conflicted) fears and desires which gave rise to it in 1889 surely underwrite its retention today. Yet without going so far as to label Aunt Jemima and Oprah Winfrey interchangeable, one might well conclude, on the other hand, that the updated trademark needs also to be interpreted in new ways. Neither the cultural work performed by African-American women nor the manner in which they are interpellated as subjects is today precisely what it was a century ago. For if Aunt Jemima foregrounds one axis of American desire for black women to be the ever-smiling producers of food, to be nurturers who themselves have no appetite and make no demands, then Oprah Winfrey surely also foregrounds another, complementary axis, one which has been latent in popular fascination with the Aunt Jemima trademark from its inception: that is, American fear of what black women consume, or perhaps more precisely American obsession with black female appetites. This concern has played itself out on numerous levels, from gastronomic to sexual to economic. The (foreclosed) question, What does Aunt Jemima eat?, quickly mutates to encompass other aspects of black female consumption, including access to the wealth and power that can satisfy desire. One surely suspects, after all, that popular interest in Winfrey’s eating habits is in no small part a function of her enormous wealth. She earned 98 million dollars in 1992 and 1993 alone, making her the top-earning entertainer in America (see Newcomb and Gubernick 97).

Much fine work has been done on this Mammy/Jezebel dichotomy by scholars ranging from Angela Davis, Barbara Christian, bell hooks, and Deborah Gray White to Hortense Spillers, Deborah McDowell, Patricia Hill Collins, K. Sue Jewell, and many others. My own contribution differs, however, in its literalization of “consumption.” I take dietary practices to be fundamental to the ways we come to understand ourselves as embodied, sexed, gendered, raced, classed, religious, local, regional, and national subjects. I take the dietary practices of African-American women, moreover, to be fundamental to the making of American
subjectivities. To appropriate for my working hypothesis one of the more famous dicta of French gastrophile Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, tell me what African-American women are said to eat, and I shall tell you what Americans fear they are.9

In the remainder of this essay I will attempt to unpack this overarching claim by looking more specifically at the relationship between 1) the construction of black female appetite in contemporary American culture, and 2) debates over the boundaries and ontological status of the “embodied” subject. In particular, I will focus on the interlocking domains of “eating disorders” and “fetal rights.” African-American women have, by and large, been perceived as absences in both discourses of eating disorders and in the specularization of the anorexic and bulimic body; African-American women have been very much a presence both in the discourses of fetal rights and in the specularization of fetal and neonate bodies — especially the purported epidemics of “fetal alcohol syndrome” and “crack babies” in the 1980s. Each of these topics has generated a tremendous amount of discussion in both popular and academic circles, but for the most part not in the same breath. What follows, then, is a conjectural cross-mapping.

I. “Fat Is a Black Woman’s Issue”

I begin with the former. Anorexia nervosa refers to self-imposed starvation; bulimia is also called the binge-purge cycle. Since the late 1960s and early 1970s — the period of Black Power, second-wave feminism, Stonewall, and other liberatory social movements — both have been widely construed in popular and academic discourses as symptoms displayed by young, presumptively heterosexual white women from middle- and upper-class nuclear families. In addition to the multitude of articles on dieting and body image in popular young women’s magazines, I have in mind here mainly the work of white feminist scholars such as Kim Chernin, Joan Jacobs Brumberg, and, to a lesser extent, Susan Bordo. Less well known among humanists would be the clinical research of psychiatrists and other medical professionals who publish their findings in the International Journal of Eating Disorders, founded in 1981. Here, too, with a very few exceptions the object of their gaze has been young, bourgeois, female, and white.10 As readers who are familiar with this subject will realize, there are significant differences in the models proposed for interpreting eating disorders: Chernin and Bordo basically view disorderly eating as normative female behavior, Chernin from a feminist psychoanalytic perspective and Bordo from a feminist Foucauldian per-
perspective. Brumberg sets forth an explanatory model in which biology, psychology, and culture interact, and she is more receptive to biomedical analyses of eating disorders as a “pathology” which can be treated with a combination of drugs and therapy than are Chernin and Bordo.

My initial question in approaching this topic was “Why are African-American women absent from these discourses about eating disorders?” Diverse students, friends, and colleagues with whom I discussed the topic concluded that black women do not “get” eating disorders. Two of my African-American women students reached this conclusion even in the context of telling me about their experiences with Slim-Fast and Dexatrim.11 My early inquiries having thus lead me to believe that this was a topic worth pursuing, I reframed the question. Rather than assuming that African-American women were absent from discourses about eating disorders, I began asking, “Where are African-American women?” “How are they present?” One answer was in the index and footnotes — literally, in Brumberg’s otherwise meticulously researched history of anorexia, Fasting Girls. The sole entry in her index on African-American women reads: “Blacks, as anorectics, 284n14” (361). Needless to say, there is no comparable entry reading “Whites, as anorectics, everything but 284n14.”

What intrigued me was why someone who interrogates the cultural construction of white female appetite with such brilliance would relegate women of color to a footnote. There Brumberg repeats the claim of medical researcher George Hsu that “the rarity among blacks of anorexia nervosa and bulimia is the result of cultural differences that protect young black women from the negative self-image and intense pressure for slimness that are part of the white middle-class experience” (see note 10). Brumberg then comments: “These data, if correct, are telling evidence of the separateness of black culture and white culture and their differential strengths” (284). Black women protected from a negative self-image? Is The Bluest Eye’s Pecola Breedlove then solely a product of Toni Morrison’s vivid imagination, created out of whole cloth? The proviso “if correct” surely indicates that Brumberg recognized the inadequacy of such an analysis, particularly in its conflation of “negative self-image” with “intense pressure for slimness.” One reason for her reluctance to pursue this issue, I would speculate, is that to ask about the appetites, dietary practices, and bodies of African-American women is tantamount to making the domain of eating disorders — as she and many others have constructed it — collapse. Black women are not just a footnote but a constitutive footnote; they are not just an absence in eating disorders but a constitutive absence, and this is an important distinction.
For whereas the creation of mammy/cook figures such as Aunt Jemima entailed a naturalization and/or biologization of black female cooking skills, these discourses of eating disorders have also relied upon a naturalization of black female appetite. This is particularly true of the work of Kim Chernin. In her book *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness*, Chernin argues that “women” have not been allowed to have a “natural” relationship to “our” appetites and bodies. She claims that Western culture fears fully developed womanhood and that the emergence of anorexia nervosa and bulimia in conjunction with the rise of second-wave feminism is a sign of women’s conflicted feelings about “our” mothers and about inhabiting adult women’s bodies. In effect, the anorectic attempts to resolve these conflicts by retaining the body of a child. Chernin argues that “large size, maturity, voluptuousness, massiveness, strength, and power are not permitted if we wish to conform to our culture’s ideal. Our bodies, which have knowledge of life, must undo this fullness of knowing and make themselves look like the body of a precocious child if we wish to win the approval of our culture” (94). For Chernin, “large size, maturity, voluptuousness, massiveness, strength, and power” are valorized terms, ideals to which “we” have not been “permitted” to aspire. But given that traits such as “strength” and “power” have historically been attributed to African-American women in the context of an indictment of black matriarchy — as exemplified most notoriously by Daniel Moynihan’s 1965 report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* — one might well question what relationship black women have had to Chernin’s “we.”

Viewed from this perspective, Chernin’s complaint seems to be that the hegemonic subject positions available to bourgeois white women have not been constituted in the same way as the positions available to black women, particularly those of the lower classes. Yet she never explicitly addresses the fact that her model for the anorectic is an adolescent white female. Indeed, Chernin even includes a chapter in *The Obsession* called “The Matriarch” which invokes a mythic past of female power and has no reference to race. Intriguingly, however, at the very start of the book she quotes from a poem collected in *Passion*, by black feminist essayist and poet June Jordan. After acknowledging that “Nothing fills me up at night,” the poem’s speaker proceeds to detail her sleep-interrupting desire for food (“cherry pie hot from the oven with Something like Vermont/Cheddar Cheese,” et cetera) as a symptom of other emotional needs (Chernin). She concludes with a self-admonition to be “writing poems, writing poems” rather than rummaging around in her refrigerator “in the middle of the night . . .” (12). In a subsequent annotation of the poem, Chernin refers
to Jordan as a “woman” and never questions her relationship to ideals such as “massiveness, strength, and power.” To have acknowledged Jordan’s race, class, and historical location would have disrupted the models of female development Chernin was setting up. It would have denaturalized them by forcing her to confront the ways in which her conceptions of the “natural” — “natural bodies” and “natural appetites” — are already inscribed by differences of gender, race, class, sexuality, sexual orientation, and historicity.

Of course, as the subject matter of Jordan’s poem would tend to suggest, one is by no means hard-pressed to locate writings by African-American women which foreground their own appetites, dietary practices, and bodies. These topics appear repeatedly in the work of Jordan’s peers — contemporary African-American fiction writers such as Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and Carolyn Ferrell. Furthermore, several contributors to The Black Women’s Health Book incorporate discussion of dietary practices into a more comprehensive agenda to improve the mental and physical health of African-American women, as does black feminist scholar bell hooks in Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery. In these works food is treated in conjunction with drugs and alcohol, as a habit-forming substance which African-American women can and do abuse. Similar themes are sounded in popular culture. To cite one of the more intriguing examples, in 1989 Essence magazine printed an autobiographical essay entitled “Fat is a Black Woman’s Issue.” Author Retha Powers was herself appropriating the title of Susie Orbach’s path-breaking book Fat is a Feminist Issue. Orbach had helped to pioneer second-wave feminism’s exploration of dieting and food obsession as normative female behaviors, but hers was a polemic which largely ignored women of color.

Taking issue with such exclusions, Powers writes about her obsession with the “dirty, sinful act” of eating and details her struggles to stop the (literally) self-destructive cycle of dieting, binging, purging, and laxative abuse (78). She censures, furthermore, persons who told her over the years that her large size was “acceptable in the Black community . . .” (78). Whereas Chernin and Orbach see pressure on middle-class white women to be thin as a form of cultural gynophobia, Powers views the lack of this pressure on her — as an African-American woman — as a sign of racism. In some of the recent essays collected in Unbearable Weight, Susan Bordo has begun to develop a systematic assessment of the racial and class inscriptions of the consuming female body. Extrapolating from her subtle and innovative work on bourgeois white women and eating disorders, Bordo suggests that the hegemony of Western culture and upward class mobility have resulted
in increased pressure on African-American women — such as Powers — to become slender bodies. In other words, they are expected to emulate the controlled bodily boundaries idealized for middle-class white women. While I would not want to downplay the role of the mass media or of class positioning in the demographics of eating disorders, it does, however, seem to me that in the process of linking upward class mobility to compulsory starvation for African-American women, Bordo inadvertently naturalizes lower-class black female appetite.

In this respect, perhaps the most persuasive work being done on African-American women and food is that of sociologist Becky Thompson, who has recently been researching what she calls “eating problems” among women of color. Thompson argues that women across the spectrum of race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation display symptoms of a troubled relationship to food. Many eat to suppress emotions, particularly the posttraumatic stress of incest and sexual assault, as well as the strain of living in a white-supremacist, heterosexist, capitalist patriarchy. Clearly one might critique all this work, Thompson’s included, for its tendency to naturalize male appetites, but my aim here is not to engage in the debate over whether eating disorders are normative or pathological, or to stake out the most purely constructivist position for myself. Rather, I want to stress several different points.

While for the purposes of this essay I have found it useful to assimilate starving, binging, and purging under one rubric, appetite, it is surely even more important for us to make distinctions among the discourses, practices, and spectacles of anorexia, bulimia, and obesity. One reason I particularly mention Powers’s essay is that she not only denaturalizes but also foregrounds the conflation of African-American women’s bodies and fat. For if black women have been absences in the discourses of eating disorders, they most certainly have been highly visible in the specularization of corpulence in American culture. Donald Bogle recounts in *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, for instance, the gastronomic lengths to which actress Louise Beavers was forced in order to replicate the stereotypical bodily boundaries of “mammy.” Perhaps best known currently for her portrayal of Delilah in John Stahl’s film version of *Imitation of Life* (1934), Beavers regularly went on “force-feed diets, compelling herself to eat beyond her normal appetite. Generally, she weighed close to two hundred pounds, but it was a steady battle for her to stay overweight. During filming . . . she often lost weight and then had to be padded to look more like a full-bosomed domestic who was capable of carrying the world on her shoulders” (63). Beavers’s ordeal would tend to suggest, then, that the widespread conflation
of black female bodies and fat is inseparable from the phantasmatic desires (and cultural representations) of the hegemonic white imaginary.\textsuperscript{20}

In \emph{Feminism Without Women}, cultural theorist Tania Modleski has explicated these desires by analyzing in detail contemporary culture’s “horror of the body” and the “special role played by the woman of color as receptacle” of these fears (130). She argues, for example, that in the film \emph{Crossing Delancey} (1988) the “function of the fat, sexually voracious black woman . . . is to enable the white Jewish subculture, through its heterosexual love story, to represent itself in a highly sentimentalized, romanticized, and sublimated light, while disavowing the desires and discontents underlying the civilization it is promoting” (130). It is imperative, Modleski continues, that we “consider the ways in which ethnic and racial groups are played off against — and play themselves off against — one another” (130). In light of her comments it is surely significant that both Orbach and Chernin explicitly refer to how their identities as Jewish women have shaped their attitudes toward food and body size. “I was a Jewish beatnik,” Orbach recalls, “and I would be zafitig” (xv).\textsuperscript{21}

Even while acknowledging that fat has functioned as a site of (and psychic resolution for) interracial and interethnic conflict, we should not overlook the fact that many African-American women have appropriated the spectacle of the large black female body as a form of political protest. Here one thinks of a tradition stretching from actresses such as Hattie McDaniel to contemporary rappers such as Queen Latifah and Salt ‘N’ Pepa.\textsuperscript{22} In her “Ladies First” video, for example, Queen Latifah flaunts her refusal to conform to American culture’s pervasive imagery of female slimness while also positioning herself, according to historian Tricia Rose, “as part of a rich legacy of black women’s activism, racial commitment, and cultural pride” (164). The members of Salt ‘N’ Pepa, by contrast, often foreground butts in their videos; Rose claims that in so doing they appropriate “a complex history of white scrutiny of black female bodies, from the repulsion and fascination with and naked exhibition of Sara Bartmann as ‘The Hottentot Venus’ in the early 1800s to the perverse and exoticized pleasure many Europeans received from Josephine Baker’s aggressively behind-centered dances” (167-68).\textsuperscript{23}

In short, African-American women have always been “presences” in eating disorders, particularly in specular form as the naturalized fat body. Consequently, it is important to recognize that what a good many African-American women have been appropriating in recent years is not so much the practices of disorderly eating as the discourses themselves. For by appropriating a set of
discourses in which the individual has an “unnatural” relationship to her appetite, African-American women are contesting normative black female subject positions and insisting upon their psychological complexity as human beings. They are refusing to be the constitutive absence, the “natural,” in the binary through which American appetites have historically been constructed.

To talk about eating disorders as a discourse which can be appropriated as a tactic of resistance is surely problematic, however, since it threatens to trivialize the health hazards for African-American women of symptoms such as excess weight, binging and purging, and laxative abuse. As writers in The Black Women’s Health Book point out, women of color have less access to nutritional food and quality health care than do economically privileged whites, and, consequently, they are more prone to preventable health problems such as hypertension and “sugar” diabetes. Supporting their claims, the New York Times reported in January 1994 that “[d]octors appear to be less likely to tell black women to quit smoking and drinking during pregnancy than they are to tell white women . . .” (“Study” A16). Given such demographic inconsistencies in American medical care, one might well greet with pleasure the news that the health of African-American women is both under investigation and of interest to the editors of the newspaper of record. Yet I have an ulterior motive in referring to this particular article from the Times. I repeat: “Doctors appear to be less likely to tell black women to quit smoking and drinking during pregnancy than they are to tell white women . . .” (emphasis added).

It would, after all, surely be inaccurate to say that there have been no discourses in recent years of black female appetite. For if the desires of middle-class adolescent white women have been constructed since the late 1960s largely via eating disorders, so the desires of young black women have been constructed in terms of motherhood and matriarchy. Young white women purportedly want nothing more than to be thin; young black women, nothing more than to be pregnant. The discussions of “crack babies” and “fetal alcohol syndrome” which proliferated during the 1980s were, moreover, far more concerned with black female appetites than with black fetuses. Indeed, while doctors have been careful to warn pregnant white women to quit smoking and drinking, they have reported analogous practices of black women to the police. In the next section of this essay, I hope better to understand not just this conflation of the pregnant black body with the “dangerous” body, but also the reasons underlying this discursive slippage between the appetites of black women and the health of black fetuses.
II. “The Most Perilous Environment”

Midway through a 1990 article on the emergence of “fetal rights,” Nation contributor Katha Pollitt pondered: “How have we come to see women as the major threat to the health of their newborns, and the womb as the most dangerous place a child will ever inhabit?” (410). Pollitt was responding to a trend which has been gaining force in conjunction with the movement to recriminalize abortion, a trend epitomized by Gerald Leach’s comment in his 1970 book The Biocrats: “Quite simply, the womb has become the most perilous environment in which humans have to live” (137). A quarter of a century later, an evolutionary biologist at Harvard, David Haig, has brought Leach’s claim to fruition by using Darwinian theory to interpret human pregnancy. Because sexual reproduction results in a child’s sharing “only half of its genes with the mother,” Haig claims that many “difficulties in pregnancy probably come about because there are genetic conflicts between what is best for the mother’s genes and what is best for fetal genes” (qtd. in Lipsitch C3). But since under most circumstances the fetus cannot survive if the woman carrying it dies, Haig concludes that pregnancy is “a conflict of interest within a basically peaceful society” (qtd. in Lipsitch C3). In The Mother Machine (1985), Gena Corea stresses that such utero-phobia “is not a modern idea” (251). This contemporary flowering of concerns about fetal endangerment is, she and such others as Pollitt contend, at least in part a backlash against second-wave feminism and the Supreme Court’s 1973 decision granting women (limited) rights to abortion.

Courtesy of modern technologies such as sonograms, the fetus has indeed emerged as a miniature “person” in its own right.26 It is granted a status theoretically equal to and in practice above that of the woman who carries it by doctors who now officially specialize in the field of Maternal-Fetal Medicine rather than Ob-Gyn. The fetus is even the subject of advertisements by the General Motors Corporation, whose researchers have been developing “the first ‘pregnant’ crash dummy” because, in their words, “Not all passengers can be seen. But they all need protection” (General Motors A16). “Protection from whom?” one might well ask. In her provocative 1992 essay, “The Abortion Question and the Death of Man,” Mary Poovey explains how feminist use of both privacy and equality arguments in advocating for abortion has inadvertently contributed to this sacralization of the fetus as a justification for curtailing women’s rights. Certainly feminist arguments for abortion have, she points out, been readily appropriated by persons who oppose that right. Thus the slogan “equal rights for women”
becomes the bumper sticker, “Equal Rights for Unborn Women.” In the rhetoric of antiabortionists, Poovey writes, terms such as “‘choice,’ ‘privacy,’ and ‘rights’ invert effortlessly into their opposites, precisely because, regardless of who uses them, these terms belong to a single set of metaphysical assumptions” (249).

Such appropriations are enabled, in other words, by the fact that the “rights” discourses invoked by many feminists rely on the prior figuration of a body — what Poovey calls a “metaphysics of substance” — which is normatively rational, bourgeois, white, heterosexual, and male (241). In this metaphysics the mark of female difference is the womb, which means that, unlike the male body, the female body is always presumptively pregnable.27 Poovey’s response to this dilemma is to insist that advocates for women’s reproductive rights not downplay differences among women, differences such as class, race, sexuality, ethnicity, and nationality which determine any given woman’s access to “rights.” She insists, moreover, that we need to develop a politics which foregrounds the contingency of the “body” and which recognizes that rights are only constituted in a matrix of relationships. It would be difficult to find fault with Poovey’s efforts to formulate an approach to reproductive freedom which is less easily appropriated by opponents of feminism and which does not privilege heterosexual middle-class white women as the norm. Yet her analysis (like that of Pollitt) falls short in one important respect. Neither fully takes into account the fact that fetal rights have not emerged solely as a backlash against white feminists, a backlash which is simply played out on the bodies of lower-class women of color because they are more vulnerable to social control than are wealthy whites. Rather, women of color have been a primary target of fetal rights activists because fear of the black womb — and by extension, I would argue, fear of the black female appetite — has provided a primary model from which contemporary fears of white wombs have been derived.

Such fears often operate in fascistically friendly ways. Hence my initially optimistic response to the New York Times article about the failure of doctors to warn pregnant African-American women about the dangers of smoking and drinking during pregnancy. Yet the punitive underpinnings of such concern for black women’s health is amply illustrated by another article which the New York Times published the following day, coincidentally, under the heading “Hospital Is Accused of Illegal Experiments.” It seems that the Medical University of South Carolina had instituted a drug-testing program “intended to force drug-addicted women who are pregnant to stop using drugs by threatening them with jail if they fail to cooperate with the hospital’s regimen of prenatal visits and to
attend a drug-treatment program” (Hilts A12). Virtually all the women targeted by this program were African Americans. Nationwide, as legal scholar Dorothy Roberts has demonstrated in “Punishing Drug Addicts Who Have Babies: Women of Color, Equality, and the Right of Privacy,” virtually all the women jailed for taking drugs while pregnant, forced to undergo unwanted cesareans, or otherwise subjected to forms of maternal “prior restraint” have been lower-class women of color.

This obsession with “perilous” black wombs has precedent in the late 1960s and 1970s — precisely the period when the discourses of eating disorders began taking on their current configurations. In addition to the obvious example of the Moynihan report, much Black Power and Black Arts rhetoric shared the era’s fascination with black matriarchy, racial genocide, the pill, and abortion. Such African-American political activists as Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad and comic-turned-nutritionist Dick Gregory not only developed extended critiques of black dietary practices (namely of soul food, which they viewed as “filthy” and “unhealthy”), but they also focused their critiques particularly on pregnant and nursing black women.

In the second volume of his dietary manual How to Eat to Live, for example, Muhammad advised African-American women to

EAT GOOD FOOD so that you will be able to give your baby good, pure milk.

You can drink cows’ milk; your own milk glands will put it into the right stage for your child. Be careful as to what kind of drugs you take while nursing your baby. And do not take fasts while you are breast-feeding an infant or even while you are pregnant. If you like, you may eat once a day while pregnant or breast-feeding your baby, but you are not forced to do so. You should not go for two or three days without eating. (90)

The fact that from a contemporary vantage point these strictures seem quite mild surely suggests the extent to which we have increasingly become accustomed to treating the bodies of pregnant women as having value only in relation, and in subordination, to the body of the zygote, embryo, or fetus they carry. Muhammad’s directive to “eat good food so that you will be able to give your baby good, pure milk” calls to mind a telling question legal theorist Patricia Williams has posed about a Washington, DC, case in which a judge imprisoned a pregnant African-American woman, “ostensibly in order to protect her fetus” (184). “Why,” Williams muses, “is there no state interest in not simply providing for but improving the circumstances of the woman, whether pregnant or not?” (184).
Winter 1994-1995

Why, I ask, did the study cited in the New York Times not ask whether doctors advised black women to quit smoking and drinking, whether pregnant or not?

Indeed, Muhammad’s strictures presage the contemporary resurgence of efforts to place the blame for so-called social “pathology” on the behavior of pregnant women — particularly impoverished, unmarried women of color — rather than on structural forces of discrimination such as regressive tax policies, declining wages and benefits, cuts in social spending, and concentration of toxic waste dumps in areas with large minority and poor populations. In the first volume of How to Eat to Live, Muhammad begins by chastising black women for their failure to breast-feed but rapidly escalates his rhetoric:

The baby eats poisonous animals, fowls and vegetables and drinks milk that is not his milk — it belongs to the cow’s baby, goat’s baby and horse’s baby. Here the child is reared on animals’ and cattle’s food.

This is why we have such a great percentage of delinquency among minors. The child is not fed from his [sic] mother’s breast — she is too proud of her form. . . .

When the baby reaches the age of 10, and if it is a male, most of them begin to indulge in drinking alcoholic beverages and using tobacco in one form or another.

Alcohol and tobacco, with their poisonous effect upon the male, cut his life down, as far as his reproductive organs are concerned. He is unable to produce his own kind. (88-89)

The selfish vanity of the black woman in refusing to breast-feed her son [sic] leads inexorably to his “delinquency,” his alcohol and drug addiction, and then to his impotence or sterility. Yet if such comments are perhaps to be expected from an avowed advocate of black patriarchy, I was somewhat surprised to encounter similar sentiments coming from the more progressive, women’s rights sympathizer Dick Gregory. In his Dick Gregory’s Political Primer, for example, the then-fasting fruitarian claims that “more boy babies die at birth or shortly thereafter than girl babies, because they are unable to survive the mucus in the mother’s system” (260). In Gregory’s dietary schema, mucus is a form of what structural anthropologists refer to as ritual “pollution.” Such pollution results, Gregory contends, from the consumption of an “unhealthy” diet of soul food and dairy products.

Roberts insists that efforts to understand the motivating force behind this fixation on fetal contamination absolutely must begin with reference to the class, race, and sexuality of the women most likely to be punished for violating fetal endangerment laws. The
discussions of crack babies which proliferated during the 1980s stemmed, she suggests, far more from a cultural imperative to control impoverished women of color than to ensure the health and safety of their children:

If prosecutors had instead chosen to prosecute affluent women addicted to alcohol or prescription medication, the policy of criminalizing prenatal conduct very likely would have suffered a hasty demise. Society is much more willing to condone the punishment of poor women of color who fail to meet the middle-class ideal of motherhood. (1436)

Roberts claims, moreover, that the “government’s choice of a punitive response” to prenatal drug use “perpetuates the historical devaluation of Black women as mothers” (1423). Whereas Hortense Spillers has explained the hegemony of American belief in the myth of black matriarchy as a legacy of slavery’s erasure of the Name and Law of the Black Father, Roberts construes the current fixation on lower-class black maternity as, in part, a legacy of black women’s abuse as “breeders” during slavery (see Spillers, “Mama’s”). Thus slaveowners would whip pregnant slaves by forcing them “to lie face down in a depression in the ground while they were whipped. This procedure allowed the masters to protect the fetus while abusing the mother” (Roberts 1438). Such brutality serves, Roberts observes, “as a powerful metaphor for the evils of a fetal protection policy that denies the humanity of the mother” (1438).

In fact, it seems to me that we are witnessing more than a cultural imperative to control women of color; we are witnessing a cultural imperative to control the appetites of women of color so as to control the ontological status of America. Hence my appropriation of Brillat-Savarin as the speculative thesis of this essay. Given the current level of fixation on national purity, it is, consequently, surely a risky undertaking for African-American women to foreground the individual body and appetite as a strategy of empowerment: as Poovey’s analysis of the rhetoric of “rights” would suggest, such discourses can readily be redeployed to legitimate ideologies in which black women are a source of pollution. I envision here the shift from “Fat Is a Feminist Issue” to “Fat Is a Black Woman’s Issue” to “Fat Is a Black Fetal Issue” — and indeed studies on whether a “fatty” maternal diet causes childhood cancer have already been conducted (see Raloff). What I wonder is if in constructing the discourse in this fashion, we reinforce American fears of the black feminine as what Julia Kristeva terms the “abject” — as that which calls into question the boundaries between food and not-food, self and not-self, as that which, because of its
overdetermined historical conflation with food, reminds us that our bodily boundaries are not impermeable.  

Many of the contributors to The Black Women's Health Book acknowledge this double bind. To remain silent about black female health problems and appetites is to be complicit in a larger cultural erasure of the lives and needs of women of color. At the same time, it is a tricky business for African-American women to appropriate discourses which originated via the inscription of their oppression. Can there exist an “anorexic” or “bulimic” black woman? Can there exist a Caucasian crack baby? Or is the former inevitably defined as a wanna-be-white and the latter, an honorary black? In the epilogue to his study of male sexuality and social disease in late nineteenth-century England, Talk on the Wilde Side, Ed Cohen writes that we need to “imagine how we can historically problematize the ways the ‘oppositional’ terms of dominance come to be embedded within the categories of resistance” (213). Cohen is referring here specifically to the widespread use of the term “queer” among activists for lesbian and gay rights, but his general point is surely applicable here as well (5). In order to develop an agenda for bettering black women’s health, scholars and activists must work to develop a vocabulary in which black women are not already inscribed as 1) natural (and therefore never in need of social benefits, such as medical care); or 2) unnatural (and therefore always in need of social regulation).

In a 1987 address entitled Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired: The Politics of Black Women’s Health,” Angela Davis negotiated these contradictory obstacles by insisting on the “urgency of contextualizing Black women’s health in relation to the prevailing political conditions. While our health is undeniably assaulted by natural forces frequently beyond our control, all too often the enemies of our physical and emotional well-being are social and political” (19). Davis proceeded to discuss Department of Defense spending, CIA operations in Angola, Reagan’s nomination of Robert Bork to the Supreme Court, apartheid in South Africa, and continuing Congressional support for the Nicaraguan contras — all of which she construed as integral to the politics of black women’s health. “We must,” she concluded, “learn consistently to place our battle for universally accessible health care in its larger social and political context” (25). In her refusal to distinguish between bodily and social boundaries, in her insistence (along with Audre Lorde) that “[b]attling racism and battling heterosexism and battling apartheid share the same urgency inside me as battling cancer,” Davis offers a template for the sort of political praxis Mary Poovey has in mind (Davis 26). It is a template for a political praxis which, at the very least, attempts to
be less than amenable to reappropriation by the reactionary right. The efficacy of such "politics unbound" is yet to be determined, but it seems to me that Davis's lead is, as ever, a wise one to follow.

Notes

Portions of this essay are excerpted from my dissertation, "What Ever Happened to Aunt Jemima? Black Women and Food in American Culture" (University of Virginia, 1995). I am indebted to Barbara Green, Tania Modleski, Alice Gambrell, Janet Lyon, and audiences at the Universities of Iowa, Notre Dame, Pittsburgh, and SUNY-Buffalo for their thoughtful responses to an earlier draft. I also thank Deborah McDowell, Eric Lott, Susan Fraiman, and Bluford Adams for their ongoing involvement with the project which gave rise to this essay.

1I received the two-page release ("Aunt Jemima Trademark Design to Be Updated") from Quaker Oats, along with a publicity pamphlet, The Quaker Q and How It Grew, in response to my (repeated) inquiries for information about the trademark.

2For a concise history of the "mammy" stereotype, see Phil Patton's "Mammy: Her Life and Times."

3And, of course, "good taste" would be the attribute of the consumer who chooses to buy Aunt Jemima products. Judith Williamson's discussion of such semantic shifts in Decoding Advertisements has been very helpful to my thinking about the Aunt Jemima trademark. The title of a 1989 Newsweek article by Marcus Mabry, "A Long Way From 'Aunt Jemima'" — which focused on advertisers' efforts to reach an expanding black consumer market in the 1980s — would suggest that the trademark image has been antithetical to the recognition of black consumer appetites.

4Agnew's description is slightly inaccurate. The kerchief was removed during the 1968 makeover and replaced with a headband.

5My analysis here draws on an early essay by Julia Kristeva. In "From Symbol to Sign" — excerpted from her thesis La Révolution du langage poétique — Kristeva argues that the "second half of the Middle Ages (thirteenth to fifteenth centuries) was a period of transition for European culture: thought based on the sign replaced that based on the symbol" (64). The mode of the symbol "is a cosmogenic semiotic practice where the elements (symbols) refer back to one or more unknowable and unrepresentable universal transcendence(s). . . . [W]ithin its vertical function, the sign refers back to entities of lesser dimensions that are more concretized than the symbol. . . . Within their horizontal function, the units of the sign's semiotic practice are articulated as a metonymic chain of deflections [écarts] that signifies a progressive creation of metaphors" (64-70). In other words, Agnew begins neither with the Quaker Oats press release
telling us that the new image preserves the abstract symbolic meaning of the old one, nor with me in treating it as a sign which has “vertical” reference to “entities of lesser dimensions that are more concretized than the symbol” (that is, a middle-class consumer). Instead he interprets the trademark via what Kristeva calls its “horizontal” reference, embarking upon a “metonymic chain of deflections [écarts] that signifies a progressive creation of metaphors” (70).

The TV Guide scandal was fodder for tabloids, comedians, and others during the fall of 1989. Joshua Gamson discusses briefly the significance of the TV Guide misrepresentation in Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America (100). The vicissitudes of Winfrey’s weight and the minutiae of her dietary habits are documented by Nellie Bly in Oprah! Up Close and Down Home. Her most recent weight loss has also provided the occasion for “the fastest-selling cookbook in history,” Rosie Daley’s In the Kitchen with Rosie: Oprah’s Favorite Recipes (Sanz and Fisher 85). Daley is Winfrey’s personal chef.

I discuss the history of the trademark in the prologue to my dissertation.

See, for example, discussions of the ideology and/or portrayal of black womanhood in Davis’s “The Legacy of Slavery: Standards for a New Womanhood”; Christian’s “Images of Black Women in Afro-American Literature: From Stereotype to Character”; hooks’s Ain’t I a Woman; White’s Ar’n’t I a Woman?: Spillers’s “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book”; McDowell’s Introduction to Nella Larsen’s Quicksand and Passing; Collins’s Black Feminist Thought; and Jewell’s From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond. Jewell also has a chapter specifically on Aunt Jemima in her dissertation, “An Analysis of the Visual Development of a Stereotype: The Media’s Portrayal of Mammy and Aunt Jemima as Symbols of Black Womanhood.”

This is the fourth aphorism listed in the preamble to The Physiology of Taste (3).


Their comments, I should mention, were unsolicited on my part. The issue arose when each student was explaining excessive class absences and her failure to turn in work on time. Perhaps I was merely adjudged likely to sympathize with such an excuse, but I have no reason to doubt the sincerity of either student.

See, for example, the Prologue (1-3).

She does so, I stress, just as the neoconservative and new right backlash came to fruition with the ascendency of Ronald Reagan (and his demonization of “Cadillac-driving welfare queens”) to the US Presidency.

One thinks, for example, of Walker’s *Meridian*. Eponymous heroine Meridian Hill displays symptoms of anorexia which might be interpreted using Caroline Bynum’s analysis of medieval women saints in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, as well as Chernin’s psychoanalytic analysis of contemporary anorexia nervosa. In Naylor’s * Linden Hills*, aspiring buppie Roxanne Tilson frequently indulges in late-night binges, and one of the Nedeeed wives from the book’s fictive past has cooked, purged, and starved, until, we are told, she literally “eat[s] herself to death” (190). Honey, the narrator of Ferrell’s “Eating Confessions,” is by contrast an overweight African-American woman who socializes with her friend Rose at the “Monday Night Determination Diet Meeting” (453). Their food-structured relationship is disrupted, however, when Rose meets a man and loses weight, and Honey uses food in an unsuccessful attempt to lure her away from him.

See, for example, Georgiana Arnold’s “Coming Home: One Black Woman’s Journey to Health and Fitness.”

Thus in *Unbearable Weight* Bordo writes:

Arguably, a case could once be made for a contrast between (middle-class, heterosexual) white women’s obsessive relations with food and a more accepting attitude toward women’s appetites within African American communities. But in the nineties, features on diet, exercise, and body image problems have grown increasingly prominent in magazines aimed at African American readers, reflecting the cultural reality that for most women today — whatever their racial or ethnic identity, and increasingly across class and sexual-orientation differences as well — free and easy relations with food are at best a relic of the past. (103)

As she acknowledges, moreover, there have long been regulatory practices of black femininity — hair straightening, skin bleaching, et cetera — and any discussion of black women and eating disorders needs to be situated as part of a whole range of practices through which African-American women have, in Judith Butler’s term, historically “performed” their identities.

I am grateful to Valerie Sayers and Kevin Kopelson for questioning my omission of male appetite, and I hope to offer a more detailed response in the near future.

In *Imitation of Life*, the book on which subsequent movies were based, Fannie Hurst describes Delilah as “a buxom negro woman who, with the best intentions in the world, swelled the food budget so considerably” (100). Shortly thereafter Hurst writes that “[t]here was no suppress-

Winter 1994-1995 117

ing the enormity that was Delilah, nor was there desire to suppress it” (103).

Curiously, however, notwithstanding the attention recently paid to *Imitation of Life* in the academy, to my knowledge no one has pointed out that two years after *Imitation of Life* appeared, Hurst published a brief autobiographical narrative entitled *No Food With My Meals*. There she describes her obsession with the slimming craze, which she says began to overcome her around 1931 — just as she was writing *Imitation of Life*. “Some women are born frail,” Hurst announces, with characteristic aplomb. “Some have frailty thrust upon them. Still others achieve it, and at what price glory!” (2). Hurst concludes *No Food With My Meals* with a list of “acknowledgments” (55), including one “To the books written during this period which abound perhaps unduly in foods coveted by their author” (56). Though Hurst never directly mentions *Imitation of Life*, she might be admitting that her own desire for and fear of food (and fat) resulted in her having projected onto the character Delilah a psychology untouched by the slimming fad. Delilah, in other words, represents a dual mode of novelistic wish fulfillment: she is both the object of Hurst’s derision, that which Hurst loathes in herself, and she is what Hurst wishes she could be — able to experience and satisfy her appetite “naturally.”

21Brumberg points out that she is “not a recovered anorectic nor . . . the mother of an anorexic daughter” but otherwise does not dwell on possible personal investments she might have in her scholarly work on anorexia (1). I would like to thank Gloria-Jean Masciarotte for pointing out to me that one can only talk about anorexic, bulimic, or fat bodies via reference to the ethnicity of the body under consideration. There are, in other words, distinctions to be made among Caucasian, Jewish, Italian, Chinese, Chicana, and other ethnic bodily “norms.” I hope to respond in greater detail to Masciarotte’s comments in future essays.

22When criticized for playing stereotypical “mammy” characters, McDaniel was known to have responded, “Why should I complain about making seven thousand dollars a week playing a maid? If I didn’t, I’d be making seven dollars a week actually being one!” (qtd. in Bogle 82).

23Roxanne Brown’s *Ebony* article, “Full-Figured Women Fight Back,” offers a less explicitly politicized example of how African-American women have appropriated the large female body as a mode of cultural resistance. My thanks to the audience member at the University of Iowa who questioned my failure to mention “black bottoms” in an earlier draft of this essay.

24This despite the fact that from 1970 to 1980, according to Mimi Abramovitz, “the unmarried black birth rate . . . fell by 13 percent, while that of whites rose by 27 percent” (354). In *Regulating the Lives of Women*, Abramovitz further points out that the “dramatic increase in the percentage of births to unmarried black women reflects a drop in the overall fertility and birth rates of married black women relative to unmarried black women, and not an increase in child bearing by the latter” (354).
One reader suggested that I ought perhaps be explicit in stating that because black women are, in the Moynihan view, always pregnant, “the fat body is interchangeable with the pregnant body.” In the process of writing an affirmation of this comment, I realized that I am not at all sure that my analysis actually demonstrates it — at least not in sweeping semiotic terms rather than local historicized ones. In addition, one would need to take into account variations in the representation of the fat body: sometimes breasts are emphasized, sometimes stomachs, sometimes butts. Sometimes the boundaries are (as Susan Bordo would doubtless point out) “wiggly” and at other times, controlled (see 191-92).

Rosalind Petchesky discusses the significance of technologies enabling fetal visualization in her *Abortion and Woman’s Choice* (335-45). See also Robyn Rowland’s discussion of fetal personhood in *Living Laboratories* (118-55).

In *The Female Body and the Law*, feminist political theorist Zillah Eisenstein also explores the ramifications of the legal presumption that the womb is the sign of female difference.

I use quotation marks around “pathology” to emphasize my disagreement with the racist, homophobic, patriarchal assumptions embedded in “culture of pathology” arguments about inner cities, for instance the assumption that male-headed nuclear households should be normative.

Ritual pollution, according to Mary Douglas, stems from a violation of socially constructed boundaries such as those of gender. See her *Purity and Danger*.

Kristeva develops her theory of abjection in *Powers of Horror*.

Davis is quoting here from Audre Lorde’s *A Burst of Light* (116-17).

**Works Cited**


Winter 1994-1995


