

Why the Popeyes Chicken Sandwich Craze Quickly Morphed into Black Shaming

 [gq.com/story/popeyes-chicken-sandwich-black-communities](https://www.gq.com/story/popeyes-chicken-sandwich-black-communities)

At some basic level, there is nothing about wanting to eat Popeyes new chicken sandwich that's different from wanting to sip a Starbucks pumpkin spice latte or dig into a Sweetgreen winter squash salad. The sandwich is the flavor of the month. It is a crunchy, fried, juicy, savory food trend that smells like a family reunion and tastes like homecoming. But while the sandwich's hype has mouths watering from Orange County to Downtown Brooklyn, there is something unique about its popularity in black communities.

For many customers who live in predominantly white areas, the trip to Popeyes is a voyeuristic detour from Whole Foods and Au Bon Pain. It's a different situation entirely for far too many black folks, who live in neighborhoods where Popeye's deep-fried, heavily salted meat is one of the few options around. Studies have found that black communities are disproportionately "food swamps"—areas where healthy options like grocery stores are few and far between, and fast food restaurants like Wendy's, McDonald's, and Burger King dot every corner. This constricted, unhealthy food market is a direct result of racial segregation. And this racial segregation is what undergirds the sensational media hoopla around black folks and the Popeyes chicken sandwich.

Like so many Internet phenomenons, hype for Popeye's chicken sandwich first sparked on Black Twitter. Sales swelled as people posted tweets proclaiming it "a chicken sandwich fit for a God"; declaring it "a damn revelation"; playing the "Popeyes or Chick-Fil-A" music video in which rapper @Gmaccash spat: "I ain't knocking Chick-fil-A, Chick-fil-A good/But it ain't a Chick-fil-A in the hood/And I ain't driving 30 minutes just to get some chicken."

Even in joy and jest, the tweets captured the contradictions of living in a redlined retail economy. Many healthier, higher-prestige chains, like Fresh & Co and Chopt, typically eschew black neighborhoods. Meanwhile, Popeyes charges into them. For decades, Popeyes, which is owned by Restaurant Brands International, has cooked "cajun" food inspired by black culture, presented racially representative marketing, and offered practical rungs to entrepreneurship. In her book, Supersizing Urban America historian Chin Jou recounts how the restaurant has made overtures towards black communities for over 30 years. In the 80s, more than a fifth of the restaurant's franchises were owned by black entrepreneurs. In the 90s, Popeyes took out prominent ads in magazines like *Black Enterprise*. In recent decades, the company has continued to rely on black neighborhoods for consumers, employees, and franchisees.

Yet despite the long relationship, the bond between black people and the restaurant is complicated. Its parent company annually admits to its investors that it is under constant threat from "health campaigns against products we offer in favor of foods that are

perceived as healthier [that] may affect consumer perception of our product offerings and impact the value of our brands.” More pointedly, Popeyes has lobbied against local legislation designed to improve the health of minority communities like New York City’s 2015 sodium warning regulation.

Many of Popeyes’ most popular combos have more sodium than the 2,300 mg total daily recommended amount. At 1,443 mg, the new chicken sandwich contains well over half the limit. This could spell danger for many customers, but particularly for African Americans who have acute sensitivity to high blood pressure and live in areas oversaturated with Popeyes. In *the Atlantic*, Olga Khazan reported that Popeyes and similar restaurants drain minority communities: “predominantly black neighborhoods tend to become what researchers call ‘food swamps,’ or areas where fast-food joints outnumber healthier options.” She noted that the concentration of these restaurants contributes to “a life-expectancy gap between African Americans and whites [that] is as much as 20 years” in segregated cities. The two-decade gap in cities like Baltimore is notable, given that there is only a 3.5 year difference between black and white life expectancy nationally.

Yet while corporations have invested heavily in pumping segregated areas with pork, chicken, potato starch, and grease, these restaurants rarely incorporate many of the healthier items popular in African-American cuisine. The renowned black chef Edna Lewis regularly centered greens in her recipes and noted that historically, “greens were one of the most important vegetables in the South” and “considered to have great nutritional value.” In *Supersizing Urban America*, Chin Jou recounted how 20th century “dietary surveys of African Americans in the South found that staple foods included highly nutritious foods such as fresh sweet potatoes, turnips, and greens.” Many of these items remain popular dishes in black homes today. Yet despite the communal popularity of staples like collard greens and black-eyed peas and racial justice activists’ demands for healthy retail options, the plant-based recipes central to African-American cooking rarely function as a focal for the food companies that dominate black neighborhoods.

In celebrations about fast food, folks frequently focus on black people’s perceived relationship with fried chicken over analysis of systemic segregation—a recent *New York Times* article “Popeyes Sandwich Strikes a Chord for African-Americans” cited statistics on how much fried chicken black people buy and remarked that Popeye’s “celebrated sandwich tastes like something that could have come from a black home kitchen.” But this heavy emphasis on African Americans’ connection to fried chicken easily winds itself to offensive clichés. On Tuesday, Ja Rule berated black people for “acting like some niggas” over a “wack-ass chicken sandwich.” The rapper said that “ANYBODY that thinks we as a ppl are not EMBARRASSING ourselves over this wack ass chicken sandwich YOU ARE THE PROBLEM” and also ripped that Popeyes would soon be servng “a free piece of watermelon and a 32-ounce cup of Kool-aid” as a complimentary side.

The typecast of black people holding a preternatural affection for watermelon stretches back to the Civil War era, when freed slaves farmed the fruit to support their new found freedom. Yes, Ja Rule nakedly invoked tropes about black people's eating habits. And whatever the intention of critics like Ja Rule, when amateur pundits connect deviant social behavior, black people, and fried chicken, they compound and amplify deep-seated racial stereotypes. Whether John McWhorter stigmatizing Zora Neale Hurston's chicken dinners as part and parcel to a legacy of black people preferring not to eat healthy foods, or Barack Obama chastising black fathers for feeding their children a "cold Popeyes" breakfast, the habit of fetishizing and pathologizing what black people put in their mouth is American tradition—and it is most certainly at work in the racialized Popeyes media frenzy.

The discomfiting news narratives abounded even before coverage amounted to gawking at black people chewing chicken. When the sandwich initially dropped last summer, the imagery of long lines of black folks congregated in public spaces pushed celebrities like Janelle Monáe and Cynthia Erivo to tweet that voting booths should be retrofitted with Popeye's chicken sandwiches to increase black electoral participation. However serious or silly, the comments reinforce negative myths about black laziness and citizenship. Despite the perceived lack of enthusiasm for democratic institutions, black people have shown up at the polls—and fought unthinkable horrors for the right to do so. According to the US Census report, last year 55% of eligible black women voted in the midterm elections. That is 2 percentage points above the national turnout. And while 47% of black men voted, *the Atlantic's Adam Serwer* notes this lower suffrage rate can be attributed to the demographic's mass incarceration. There's been a long, violent, and powerful movement to prevent black people from voting. In just the past few years, Georgia levied racially targeted voter purges and Florida has resurrected a modern poll tax. With voter suppression just as with health disparities, segregation and racism, not black deficiency, are the real culprits. Remember when cronut lines surged, there was some snickering backlash, but no one suggested that voting registration booths be set up for the line-waiters, among them Asians (with 40.2 percent voter turnout in 2018) and many young people (18-29 year olds had a 35.6 percent voter turnout in 2018).

Beyond voting rights, the most troubling racialized Popeyes story broke just a few days ago. Earlier this week the *New York Times* reported, a young black man lost his life after he was stabbed to death in Maryland. The story made national news. This was not due to the homicide. Young black men are murdered at a shocking rate in Maryland yearly; few of them are mentioned in *the New York Times*.

The crime drove headlines because it happened at a Popeyes, and according to the restaurant's spokesperson, it was "related to the release of the sandwich." The news of black on black crime initiated by Popeyes' new fried chicken sandwich bolted across the internet. Much of the reporting's sensational nature echoed the tone from the well-worn 1990s accounts of young black men killing each other over Jordans and Starter jackets. But like these sneaker stories, the hyper-focus on pathologized details of a crime can obscure the more substantial injustice. In so many cases like this, it is not some uncontrollable craze

for shoes, or jackets, or chicken that precipitates black violence, but rather broader structural desperation created by racism and segregation which animate crimes. The stabbing took place at a franchise in Oxon Hill, Maryland, where more than 70 percent of the neighborhood's residents are black, and the unemployment rate is 10 percent (more than twice the national rate). Yet the morbid fascination fueling this story is not concerned with consequences of communal divestment—many find theories of chicken-induced murder more interesting.

Since it has debuted, the Popeyes' chicken sandwich served as an avatar and lightning rod for stereotypes about black communities. But for all that attention, very little regard has been paid to why these fast food restaurants wield such power. If people really want to know what's really unique about Popeyes and black neighborhoods, they should focus less on the specific properties of fried chicken sandwiches and more on the specific policies that have segregated the areas where they are so aggressively sold.

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