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Midterm Paper

### **The Raven Symone Controversy: Watermelondrea**

Raven Symone is an African American actress who has starred on many predominantly “African American” television shows. People may remember her as “Olivia Kendall” from “The Cosby Show,” or “Nicole Lee” from “Hanging with The Coopers”. Raven also had her own television show on the Disney Channel called “That’s So Raven.” Throughout my childhood I watched Raven Symone thrive as an actress and as a young lady of African descent; I was very proud of her. I was proud of the accomplishments that she made and the barriers that she broke by having her own successful show on Disney channel. I also admired how Raven managed to stay out of trouble and keep her private affairs out of the media. However, recently Raven has caused quite an uproar in the African American community. She made a few offensive comments on television, which made me question exactly where her allegiance to her race lies. Raven’s most controversial statement has put a bad taste in my mouth. On October 8<sup>th</sup> 2015, Whoopi Goldberg mentioned on “The View” an article she read in “The Journal of Evolution and Behavior” co-written by Colin Holbrook and 4 of his colleagues from UCLA. Whoopi introduced the topic by saying, “A new study in ‘The Journal of Evolution and Human Behavior’ says that Americans make racial assumptions based on people’s names.” After Whoopi’s statement a brief video titled “60 most Ghetto names.” After the clip is shown, Raven weighs in on how she feels about ghetto names. Raven says “Just to bring it back, can we take back racist and say discriminatory? Because I think that's a better word.” Raven continues to say “I’m not about to hire you if your name is Watermelondrea. It’s just not going

to happen. I'm not going to hire you". As a young African American woman, I was stunned by this statement. I was amazed at how someone I looked up to as a child could say something so negative about her own race. I then thought to myself, why am I surprised about Raven's ignorant comment? African American people are the most attacked, put down, and discriminated against race. Raven's comment proved to me that not only do African American people face discrimination from other ethnic groups, but we discriminate amongst ourselves as well. If a person can make negative comments about their own race, then what does that say about them as an individual? Does this person really love themselves? Does this person truly embrace their own kind? Does this person know the history of the watermelon stereotype and how it applies to the name Watermelondrea? The question that stands out the most to me is, why is it okay to discriminate against a person because of the creative aspect of their name?

The history of African American names has roots that start from the Motherland (Africa). While some "unconventional" names such as Watermelondrea aren't deemed as acceptable, they do in some way represent African culture/ history. I would like to break down the name Watermelondrea and see how it relates to people of African descent. Many people do not know the true history of the watermelon and how it pertains to people of color. In most cases there is a negative connotation that other races imply when they relate watermelons to African descendants. In reality the watermelon actually plays a positive role in the history of African culture. According to an article called "How Watermelons Became a Racist Trope" by William Black, "Free black people grew, ate, and sold watermelons, and in doing so made the fruit a symbol of their freedom. Southern whites, threatened by blacks' newfound freedom, responded by making the fruit a symbol of black people's perceived uncleanness, laziness, childishness, and unwanted public presence." The article goes on to explain how the whites backed up their

association of watermelons with Free Africans. The quote goes on to say “There, the fruit symbolized many of the same qualities as it would in post-emancipation America: uncleanness, because eating watermelon is so messy. Laziness, because growing watermelons is so easy, and it’s hard to eat watermelon and keep working—it’s a fruit you have to sit down and eat. Childishness, because watermelons are sweet, colorful, and devoid of much nutritional value.” I personally completely disagree with this quote. Watermelons played a large role in the emancipation of slaves in the early 1800s. After slavery, the only thing slaves had was their freedom. Most slaves who left their plantations had little to no money and were lucky if they knew where their family members were. These people had to completely start over in order to provide for themselves and their family. African people had to find shelter and a way to support themselves in an environment which their hard work was never compensated for. Free African people sought out ways to build their collateral. Whether it was working in general stores or finding land to cultivate their own crops. These people worked hard to start a new life for themselves and in the process provided for the generations to come. Watermelon was one of the few crops that Free Africans used to bring income into their homes. Unfortunately, the watermelon is always used as a negative stereotype in order to diminish the African people’s hard work and effort to better themselves.

The watermelon, although a very influential part of Free Africans path of self-assertion, has also been used to denigrate the African people in every form and fashion. In slavery days it was said that slaves were given the left over scraps to share amongst themselves. Foods such as pig intestines or cornmeal would be given to the slaves. Among the scraps there were sometimes leftover, watermelons. Although the watermelon crop was actually quite beneficial to Free Africans, the watermelon stereotype continued to grow. In the early 1900s, March 14,

1916 to be exact, Columbia Records released a song called “Nigger Love a Watermelon HA! HA! HA!” by Harry C Browne. The lyrics are as follows, “Nigger love a watermelon ha ha, ha ha! Nigger love a watermelon ha ha, ha ha! For here, they’re made with a half a pound of co’l. There’s nothing like a watermelon for a hungry coon.” Although the lyrics of this song are completely racist and offensive to say the least, the denigration of African descendants did not stop there.

In 1941 a cartoon by the name “Scrub me Mamma with a Boogie Beat” was released. I found this cartoon to be very unsettling because it depicted African people as lazy, unclean (attracting flies), unintelligent, extremely dark, and toothless, with bright red lips. The cartoon characters also had unkempt hair, bald heads, and scratchy/animal like voices. The setting of the cartoon was in a place called Lazy Town. All of the people in this town were the darkest shade of black and wore shabby clothing. Everyone was lounging around either sleeping or lazily performing their jobs. As the cartoon progressed, a lighter skin woman of African descent came onto the scene and started to tell the other people the proper way to do their jobs. Apparently the lighter skin woman, who looked almost white, changed the whole dynamic of Lazy town. As the cartoon came to an end one of the characters slurped down a piece of Watermelon. This piece of Watermelon was larger than their head, and it only took him a few bites to eat completely. This cartoon also made a reference to the love, or should I say “infatuation” that people of African descent are said to have with watermelon, amongst other stereotypes. One of the most racist movies that was developed in the early 1900s was by Disney. (Disney is actually the same company that aired Raven Symone’s Hit show “That’s So Raven”). The name of the movie is called “Song of the South” which was released on November 12, 1946 and produced by Walt Disney himself. This movie used various

stereotypes, such as making the main character Uncle Remus seem like an Uncle Tom. Although the main character isn't blatantly called a slave, it's implied by his clothing that he's lower in rank than his other counterparts. Uncle Remus also in my opinion has the mentality and mannerisms of a former slave. There's a specific scene in the movie where a rabbit is gathering his belongings to leave the area. Uncle Remus disagrees with the rabbit's need to leave the area because he says that the problems that they face in that area aren't that bad (related to slavery, and racism). It seems to me that the message the movie was trying to convey, is that slavery or the unequal treatment of people of color "wasn't that bad". It made me feel like Disney was trying to say that people of color should accept the unfair treatment they received. Although this movie didn't directly make reference to the watermelon stereotype, this movie shined some light on how people of African descent were portrayed in the early 1900s. All of these different shows are examples of how African people were subjected to various stereotypes, which all are generally related to how they are perceived by other races.

I believe that Raven Symone's comment was seen as extremely offensive not only because of the history of the watermelon stereotype, but also the present day views of watermelon and African American people. There have been various pictures online where African American people are seen clutching watermelons for their lives. According to Theodore Johnson's article "African Americans and The Watermelon Stereotype", "when Jackie Robinson broke the race barrier in Major League Baseball, opposing fans often taunted him by throwing watermelon rinds. After Barack Obama became the first black man to be elected president of the United States, manipulated pictures of the White House, showing rows of watermelon crop in the place of its pristine lawns, popped up around the Internet." There were also pictures circulating the internet that showed Obama with an Afro holding a plate of Fried Chicken and

watermelon. The caption was “Lawdy, I Sho’ loves Campanin”. The picture had been edited to make Obama’s skin complexion look darker, with an oversized smile on his face. The picture made President Barack Obama look like a Black Face actor who is performing in a minstrel show, formerly known as Minstrelsy. Minstrel shows were a form of entertainment where white actors would put black paint on their faces, and pretend to be people of color. These plays became popular in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, until people of African descent decided they would also take part in the Black Face epidemic. I decided to do my own research to see the present day views of African American people. There are pictures of young children eating Watermelon, also known as Pickaninny caricatures (child coons). I have also found pictures of people of color who are slowly evolving into watermelons, similarly to the way that men evolved from Homo-sapiens and Homo-erectus. The watermelon cliché is one of many stereotypes still used today to dehumanize African American people. Some people are so afraid of living up to the watermelon stereotype that they refuse to eat this particular fruit in public.

After Raven Symone’s “Watermelondrea” comment on The View, she received quite a lot of negative responses from the African American community. Raven also received some negative feedback from her father. According to the article “Raven-Symone’s Dad Says Daughter ‘Says Some Dumb S#%T!’” by the Huffington Post, he says that “Her Mother and I love her very much and will always support her and have her back. Even if sometimes..... she says some dumb S #%T.” It was very clear that even Raven’s Father didn’t agree with the statement that she made. In my opinion, the comment was quite tasteless and not thoroughly thought through. I began to question if Raven’s comment had something to do with how African Americans people perceive themselves. I’ve read a few books (fiction and non-fiction) pertaining to the way people of African descent stereotype themselves. In the book

“Negrophobia” by Darius James a character named the “Maid” makes a very interesting statement. She says: *“Lookie here. Nah dat we is no longa cullid, we is whatchoo calls Neo-African Americans---hostages misplaced in time, captives of a racist hist’ry ’n’ an oppressed peepus dissolvin’ in d’stomach acids of whyte amerika—d’cause o’ so much bad breffs!”* (Darius James. Page 12). Although this quote was difficult for me to read at first, after re-reading it I was able to grasp the author’s message. The maid was simply saying that people of African descent have evolved from being classified as just colored. We are now called African Americans because it’s more politically correct. She also goes on to say that we are “misplaced in time.” This part of the quote explains that some people of African descent feel like our entire race is lost in time. We have assimilated to a culture that is not ours. We adapted a culture that was forced upon us by our captors, which makes us lose people. Our homes were broken, families torn apart, legacies swept under the rug. The history of our people, although slowly being recovered, is mostly lost in time. Our history has been white washed, broken down and scattered into pieces. We are slowly losing our culture completely, and embracing the culture of other races instead of our own. This specific quote made me think that Raven’s statement was influenced by the fact that people of African descent discriminate against each other. We, as a people, have broken down our race into sub categories which are based on wealth, fashion, skin complexion and behavior. We judge our own people by outward appearance and name before we learn their character.

After all the backlash that Raven received for her comments, she did reflect on her comment about discriminating against ethnic names. According to an article posted by The Daily News on October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015, Raven apologized for her comment. She said “I have been denied many jobs because of my skin color, body size, and age. Each time I was rejected, my

self-esteem was negatively affected (sic), so I empathize with those who feel victimized by what I said. I should not be part of the problem, I should be part of the solution.” After reading Raven’s apology I truly don’t think that she meant to cause the amount of turmoil she did in the past few days. I also don’t believe she truly realized that the specific name she choose to refer to has such a deep meaning. I understand that she may not have thought about her comments. On the other hand, I feel that she should have thought through her comments. She is an African American woman, contrary to what she might believe. She represents a whole race of people, especially African American women. As a woman of color, she should know that there are certain statements you don’t make, and there are certain statements you don’t make on prime time television. People of African descent are one of the most discriminated group of people. As a woman of color who can voice her opinion on television, she has an obligation to lift up her people.

In conclusion, I would like to say that people of African descent have to learn how to stick together. We are strong people who have to understand that we have more power when we come together. In a quote from the book “Negrophobia” by Darius James the author says “And isn’t it sad that we, who have been the victims of so much violence—now, whites fear violence from us. We do not have a history of killing white people. White people have a history of killing us.” The quote goes on to say “And what you fear—may I say this, sir? What you fear—and it’s a deep guilt thing that white folks suffer—you are afraid that if we ever come to power, we will do to you and your fathers what you and your people have done to us. And I think you are *judging us by the state of your own mind*, and that is not necessarily the mind of black people.” I feel that this quote speaks volumes. On one hand people of African descent do not realize how powerful we actually can be if we stand together. We are too blinded by: fashion,

money, reality television shows and judging others instead of realizing what really matters. We as people don't realize that other races prefer that we are distracted by minor aspects of life, so that we don't notice our true potential. We are merely a product of our environment. We have adapted the views of other races, and try our hardest not to fit into the stereotypes that they have developed for us. While trying to not be the typical "black person" we put down other people in our race that we see as inferior. When we continue to see ourselves as better than other people based upon their name or how they look, we can make comments about not hiring someone named "Watermelondrea". We as a people have to understand our true value, and stop trying to put down others based upon the standards of our modern day oppressors.

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