

The Raven Symoné Controversy: Watermelondrea

Cherishe Cumma

Raven Symoné is an African American actress who has starred in 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 Symoné 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, 2015, Whoopi Goldberg mentioned on *The View* that “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” is shown, and 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 her as an individual? Does this person really love herself? Does this person truly embrace her 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 acceptable, they do in some way represent African

culture and history. I would like to break down the name Watermelon 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 watermelon, although a very influential part of freed Africans path of self-assertion, has also been used to denigrate the African people. In slavery days, it was said that slaves were given the left over scraps to share amongst themselves. Among the scraps there were sometimes leftover watermelons. Although the watermelon crop was actually quite beneficial to freed Africans, the watermelon stereotype continued to grow. On March 14, 1916, 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.

The lyrics of this song are completely racist and offensive to say the least, and the denigration of African descendants does not stop there. In 1941, a cartoon by the name "Scrub me Mamma with a Boogie Beat" was released (ProperGanderSaul). I find this cartoon to be very unsettling because it depicts African people as lazy, unclean (attracting flies), unintelligent, extremely dark, and toothless, with bright red lips. As the cartoon comes to an end, one of the characters slurps down a piece of watermelon that is larger than his head, and it only takes him a few bites to eat it 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.

Raven Symoné'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. 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 crops in the place of its pristine lawns, popped up around the Internet.

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 Symoné's "Watermelondrea" comment, she received a lot of negative responses from the African American community, and I began to question if her comment had something to do with how African American people perceive themselves. In the book *Negrophobia* by Darius James, the "Maid" makes a very interesting statement: "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!" The maid is 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. The Maid also says we are "misplaced in time," meaning 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 adopted a culture that was forced upon us by our captors, which makes us a lost 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 whitewashed, 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 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, 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 that she did. On the other hand, I feel that she should have thought through her comments. She is an African American woman—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 groups 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 more power when we come together. In *Negrophobia*, Darius James 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... 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...you are *judging us by the state of your own mind*, and that is not necessarily the mind of black people.

People of African descent do not realize how powerful we can be if we stand together. We, as a 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 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.

References

- Black, William. "How Watermelons Became a Racist Trope." *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, 08 Dec. 2014. Web. 25 Oct. 2015.
- "Harry C. Browne—Nigger Love a Watermelon—Racist 'Coon Song.'" YouTube. Web. 6 March. 2016
- Hewit, Alison. "Names Influence Racial Bias among Study Participants." "Names Influence Racial Bias among Study Participants. *Medical Xpress*, 7 Oct. 2015. Web. 25 Oct. 2015.
- "I'm not About to Hire You if Your Name is Watermelondrea" F: Raven-Symoné Shocks on 'The View.'" *Cincinnati's Wife*, 9 Oct. 2015. Web. 25 Oct. 2015.
- James, Darius, Gilles Vaugeois, and Michel Vézina. *Negrophobia: Parabole Urbaine: Roman*. Paris: L'Incertain, 1994. Print
- John, Arit. "Making Fried Chicken and Watermelon Racist." *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, 06 Feb. 2014. Web. 25 Oct. 2015.
- Johnson, Theodore. "African Americans and the Watermelon Stereotype." *The Huffington Post*, 12 April. 2013. Web. 3 March. 2016.
- News, J. "The View's Raven-Symoné: I Discriminate Against 'Ghetto' Names Like 'Watermelondrea'" YouTube. YouTube, 9 Oct. 2015. Web. 25 Oct. 2015.
- ProperGanderSaul. "The Most Racist Cartoon Ever!" YouTube. YouTube, 11 Aug. 2013. Web. 25 Oct. 2015.
- Ramisetti, Kirthana. "Raven-Symoné apologizes for controversial comments on 'The View,' says she has 'never discriminated against a name'" *New York Daily News*. 12 Oct. 2015 Web. 3 March. 2016

Nominating Faculty: Professor Anwar D. Uhuru, African American Studies
2612, Department of African American Studies, School of Arts & Sciences, New
York City College of Technology, CUNY.

Cite as: Cumma, C. (2016). The Raven Symone controversy: Watermelondrea.
City Tech Writer, 11, 50-53. Online at <https://openlab.citytech.cuny.edu/city-tech-writer-sampler/>