THINKING ABOUT FOOD AND RACISM IN “POST-APARTHEID” SOUTH AFRICA written by Thembi Bongwana (PhD Candidate)

“Until the philosophy which holds one race superior and another inferior is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned— everywhere is war” __Bob Marley.

As a young South African feminist scholar whose interest is vested in race, gender, ethnicity and class and who now works on food studies, inevitably I am forced to think critically about the silent or subtle meanings that are often attached to food items, especially what we as consumers in global capitalist food chains often buy or eat without much thought. Increasingly, I have become particularly aware of symbolic meanings that are often less easy to detect. Symbolic meanings around social interactions within food spaces are often complex and embedded in multi-layered dynamics that can be hard to pin down. It is crucial, then, not only to look critically at power relations in human interactions with food, but also to expand one’s critical gaze on the layers and sites in which food acquires meaning, the spaces that consumers are encouraged to inhabit in eating, the coded meanings and life-styles that are linked to food items and food outlets, especially when we consider that enormous amounts of food are now eaten by South Africans outside the home – for example, in restaurants and fast-food outlets.

I was made sharply aware of this in relation to a controversy around the well-known fast food franchise, the Spur. The Herald Live reported that on Human Rights Day, the food chain was involved in an altercation between two parents who accused each other’s children of bullying inside the restaurant. The confrontation turned heated, reaching a point where one parent, an angry white man threatened to beat up the other parent, a black woman, whilst simultaneously flipping the table over, and scaring surrounding children around as they watched their food fly in all directions. Though Spur has publicly apologised for the violent incident, and subsequently barred the man from its premises, the failure of management intervention during the confrontation has left a bitter-sweet taste and received much criticism from many, including myself (www.heraldlive.co.za/.../man-threatens-beat-mother-spur-restaurant-sparking-outrage).
Initially, Spur denied the incident was racial. They have been quoted as saying: “Spur says the recent aggressive confrontation between a white man and a black woman at one of its restaurants in the south of Johannesburg was not a racist incident but rather an act of anger” (see www.ewn.co.za/2017/03/22/spur-altercation-not-a-racist-incident). Recently, however, Spur has appointed a law professor despite its initial hesitation (www.citizen.co.za/news/news-national/1498495) to investigate the matter further, and that is to investigate the racist allegations further. It is clear to me that the incident was racially motivated.

Overt racism involving black and white in public spaces is by far means not unusual in “post-apartheid” South Africa. However, the controversy at the Spur also made me think about the peculiarly silenced racism that many South Africans, both black and white, come to see as normal or harmless. This racism is often embedded in the symbolism I commented on at the start, and its presence in well-known public spaces that include restaurants can slip through the cracks. It is therefore crucial to extend a consideration of the racist incident at the Spur by noting that the Spur routinely reinforces racist stereotyping through its romanticized, caricatured or demonized portrayals of American Indians. All Spur branches promote a clichéd version of authentic steakhouse food by using globalized stereotypes for its advertising and décor. Its promotion of “authenticity” includes clichéd cultural artefacts, the logo of a Native American chef, and Native American tribe names to uphold its culture and to identify as a distinct restaurant as we see below.

Figure 1: Spur Logo (Source: Google spur images, 2017)
University of Johannesburg’s student, Suzette Britz did a presentation on the racist imagery of Spur outlets at an International Symposium on Food Studies at the University of Pretoria, in July 2016. Britz’s presentation touched on various aspects that are vitally important to my critical reflection on the depth and complexity of racism and forms of exclusion at many fast-food outlets in contemporary South Africa.

Because South Africa, known as the Rainbow Nation comprises of a plurality of cultures, ethnicities, races and languages, the issue of national identity is a complex one. The advertising of commodities - including food - often promote the idea of homogenous “national identity” to encourage consumers from different groups and to increase their popularity. This is especially true in the case of fast-food outlets such as Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC), Nandos, Panarottis, Debonairs and the Spur, restaurant chains that are clearly cheaper and more accessible than high-end restaurants.

Food branding often becomes central in promoting ideas about South African identities, and we frequently confront images of cultural and racial diversity in the images that these outlets use in advertising. This myth of unity and diversity through convivial eating is conveyed powerfully in the image/s below.

![Figure 2: Spur through the Years (Source: Google Spur Images, 2017)](image-url)
Examples like these indicate that eating-out is a central pastime in many South African middle-class households. This has obviously become a lifestyle-choice amongst many across racial, class and affordability lines. Yet my opening remarks on the relevance of Britz’s analysis and ‘Spur’s othering of Native Indians are reminders of the conditions under which South Africans are encouraged to eat in public spaces. It is as though the displaced racism of stereotyping Native Americans were continuing to shape the real racial and classed forms of othering that actually occur in fast food outlets.

Fast-food outlets in the present day

It is therefore clear that deeply racialized relations and images continue to shape spaces of eating and food production that we often consider to be “modern”, “cosmopolitan” and free from bias and discrimination. The incident at Spur exposes a plurality of social tensions that encouraged me to ponder on the history of restaurants with reference to the historical paths of slave trade, colonialism, and the exploitation of black labour. Through segregation laws, certain groups were not allowed into “public” spaces, unless for “work” purposes where they were enslaved and were given little to none compensation.

What the “Spur” incident brought to the fore was a very deep form of racism and racial entitlement, and belief about where certain historically marginalized groups (mainly black women) legitimately belong. For a person to have the sense of authority and entitlement to walk up to another’s table and threaten to harm somebody else speaks a thousand silent volumes and tells a story of profound ‘entitlement’. Verbalising the threat of harm goes one step further and conveys how certain racialized and gendered bodies (white men) perceive other racialized and gendered bodies (black women) as being in these public eating spaces only for service. The threat of violence is an insistence that actually affirms that, even in 2016/7 they still do not belong there; they are not entitled to these public eating spaces, and integration at these spaces of serving and being served was a glitch in the way things should be.
It is disheartening to say the least, to see that even throughout the 23 years post-democracy, there are still individuals and some members of certain groups that assume ownership of certain places/spaces whilst simultaneously believing that black bodies are indeed inferior, and can only share in the same spaces they occupy by virtue of being cooks, waiters, waitresses, cleaners and the whole nine yards of low-ranking and looked down upon jobs. The entitlement syndrome is one that traces back to the history of restaurants.

The questions about the underlying prejudices, injustices and hierarchies that continue to influence post-apartheid food outlets, are huge. This is especially true when we consider that they are often advertised through images and messages of joyous South Africans in the rainbow nation socializing and eating together, and enjoying an eating experience that cements their equality. It is also important to note that the sense of class privilege was pronounced not only in the utterances of the racist bully, but also in Spur’s handling of the affair. This made it clear that the ostensibly “people-friendly” and “family” restaurant (which Spur prides itself on being) works to maintain the boundary between insider and outsider, ensuring that only certain individuals with buying power feel comfortable inhabiting it as the image below also puts into clear perspective the markers of boundaries between insider and outsider.

Figure 3: Spur Celebrations (Source: Google Spur Images, 2017)
Personally, I have taken the decision not to frequent a Spur restaurant again. I have been disturbed by its marketing and design, acutely aware of the fact that the racist stereotyping of Native American people is in fact strikingly similar to the stereotypical images of South Africans – close to nature, wild, and prone to aggression and an over-fondness for traditional weapons. My disquiet has obviously been intensified by the more recent incident at the Texamo Spur. It is safe to say that the International Spur brand services the elite, middle-class and a small portion of the working class. Moreover, it serves these formerly marginalized groups interests against the background of the reminder that actually, the divide between bodies who eat and are served and bodies that cook and serve remains racial and gendered in the South Africa imaginary.

REFERENCES:

