



Silke Hackenesch

# CHOCOLATE AND BLACKNESS

*A Cultural History*

**campus**



## Chocolate and Blackness

# North American Studies

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Slavery was represented [at “The Great Sanitary Fair at Olympus”]  
by a colossal image in the form of a very black man, made in  
chocolate with white peppermint drops for his eyes, lying in the  
dust, which was brown sugar.

*The Christian Recorder* (1865)

The explosive growth of a mass market for chocolate from the  
1880s transformed world consumption more radically than at any  
other time in history. Chocolate progressed more rapidly than  
either coffee or tea in the West.

*William Gervase Clarence-Smith* (2000)

The taste of chocolate is a sensual pleasure in itself, existing in the  
same world as sex [...] For myself, I can enjoy the wicked pleasure  
of chocolate [...] entirely by myself.

*Linda K. Fuller* (1994)





# Contents

- 1. Exploring the Entanglements of Chocolate and Blackness .....9
  - 1.1 Why Chocolate? .....14
  - 1.2 Chocolate as a Myth and as a Floating Signifier .....18
- 2. Producing a Taste for Chocolate .....25
  - 2.1 “The sweet may be obtained without the bitter”:  
Cocoa and Colonialism .....30
  - 2.2 Critical Accounts of Neoslavery .....38
- 3. Advertising Chocolate .....45
  - 3.1 The Emergence of Mass Advertising .....50
  - 3.2 From Scientific to Commodity Racism .....54
  - 3.3 Exoticism, Primitivism, and Blackness .....59
  - 3.4 The Lactification of Chocolate; or, how Chocolate  
Became White .....70
  - 3.5 “Robust Men like Baker’s Cocoa”: White Men’s Appetite  
for Chocolate .....75
- 4. Chocolate and Desire .....85
  - 4.1 The Sexualization of Chocolate .....86
  - 4.2 Chocolate as an “Afrodiziac”? .....93
  - 4.3 Desire and Black Popular Culture ..... 105

5. The Racialization of Chocolate.....	113
5.1 Chocolate Colorism .....	115
5.2 “That Chocolate Colored Gal of Mine”: Sheet Music and Blackface .....	123
5.3 Resignifying Chocolate on Broadway .....	134
5.4 Chocolate Kiddies in “Kaiserland” .....	139
5.5 “Chocolate City, are you with me out there?” .....	146
6. Conclusion .....	155
Acknowledgments.....	158
List of Illustrations.....	160
Archives and Collections .....	162
Bibliography.....	164
Index .....	181

# 1. Exploring the Entanglements of Chocolate and Blackness

In January 2006, Ray Nagin, then mayor of New Orleans, caused quite a furor with a statement he made at a meeting to commemorate Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Participants in the meeting were intending to discuss the reconstruction of the city, which hurricane Katrina had devastated on August 29 the year before. Nagin expressed his wish for New Orleans to remain a “Chocolate City,” that is with a majority of African-American residents:

“We ask black people: it’s time. It’s time for us to come together. It’s time for us to rebuild a New Orleans, the one that should be a chocolate New Orleans. And I don’t care what people are saying Uptown or wherever they are. This city will be chocolate at the end of the day. This city will be a majority African-American city. It’s the way God wants it to be. You can’t have New Orleans no other way; it wouldn’t be New Orleans.”<sup>1</sup>

According to Nagin’s statement, New Orleans before Katrina was a “Chocolate City,” that is, a city largely made up of African-American residents. The white minority of New Orleans, which—for a brief moment—had become a majority after the hurricane, protested heavily. Understanding Nagin’s use of “people from Uptown” as a coded reference for well-to-do Euro-American residents (although the area is in fact very diverse), they felt unwelcomed and accused the mayor of racism. Interestingly, Nagin’s reference to God in his speech (“It’s the way God wants it to be.”) was less cause for irritation or protest. Instead, the white, mostly middle-class residents, as well as members of the black community, and even the national mainstream media chose to focus their criticism and attention to Nagin’s wish for a “Chocolate City.”

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1 [http://www.nola.com/news/t-p/frontpage/index.ssf?/news/t-p/stories/011706\\_nagin\\_transcript.html](http://www.nola.com/news/t-p/frontpage/index.ssf?/news/t-p/stories/011706_nagin_transcript.html) (accessed September 13, 2006).

A couple of months after Nagin's controversial speech, during the soccer World Cup in Germany in the summer of 2006, the Ivorian Bourse du Café et du Cacao (BCC) introduced the chocolate bar *Le Chocolat du Planteur* to the British, French, and German markets. The TV commercial as well as the print advertisement featured Didier Drogba, a star player on the national soccer team of Ivory Coast, where the chocolate is manufactured from Ivorian cocoa beans. In the TV spot, Drogba is apparently nude, and the viewer only sees naked body parts. His dark skin is glistening, as if he had been dipped in chocolate, or as if he was made from chocolate. Drogba dribbles a ball that, upon contact with his body, turns into chocolate. When he aims to score, the football splinters into hundreds of chocolate pieces and a shot of Drogba's face reveals that instead of drops of sweat, chocolate drops are running down his temples.

How are these seemingly unrelated examples connected to each other? What do they share? Both examples establish a direct link between chocolate and blackness, albeit in very different ways and in different cultural registers. Both raise the question of why it seems to be utterly logical and "natural" for people to equate chocolate with blackness. What does chocolate have to do with the United States, specifically with African-American culture? Why is chocolate such a popular metaphor in the construction of blackness in various spheres of (popular) culture? Why are metaphors for edibility, such as chocolate, honey, and cinnamon, metaphors that also work as sexual allusions, used in reference to blackness? Why has the advertising industry chosen to portray black bodies in order to promote this sweet treat, and what does this have to do with cocoa as a historically colonial commodity? The answers to these questions form the contents of this book.

In the analysis that follows, I want to explore why the mythical connection between blackness and chocolate is so powerful, why it seems so "natural" and convincing to use chocolate as a coded reference to gendered blacknesses, whether in advertisements, in literature, in music, or in scientific racism, colorism, and popular discourses on race. The fact that there have not yet been any studies that explore this cultural phenomenon or dedicate extensive analyses to the functions of signifiers such as chocolate—or ebony, coffee, etc.—further confirms the convincing power and the seeming "naturalness" of the myth. It is so pervasive and plausible, and produces such a high degree of "truth," that it is difficult to literally see through. Yet this common cultural practice is worthy of analysis for it

reveals how blackness is constructed, performed, and perceived. Moreover, I argue that one cannot understand the history of chocolate without understanding its relationship to Western representations of blackness. Indeed, tracing the complex transnational and imperial movements of chocolate as a commodity offers new insights into the modern racial formations of blackness. It also sheds light on the differences in black cultural and political expressions across the African Diaspora. Whereas black Europeans decry white Europeans' fetishization of blackness through food items,<sup>2</sup> African Americans often embrace the same logic of naming by referring to their own color differences through food metaphors. The first case is an example of Othering through racial naming, whereas the second example serves as a (potentially affirmative) self-reference.

This work is a cultural history of the entanglements of chocolate and blackness. It follows the material traces, routes, semantics, and discourses of cocoa and chocolate through various times, places, cultural spaces, and genres. It looks at chocolate and blackness from different angles: a material analysis that takes the production process of cocoa into account and that pays special attention to slavery and colonialism; an exploration of the semantics of chocolate and its visual representations in European and US advertisements; as well as a discursive analysis of the connections between cocoa and race in various (African) American spheres of cultural production. Furthermore, this book explores not only the cultural associations of chocolate and its imaginative potential, but also link these to the heavily sexualized discourses on black corporeality. I am arguing that a sensualized discourse on chocolate as an aphrodisiac merged at certain points with a sexualized discourse on racialized black bodies, producing a complicated web of desire, appropriation, and coercion in which cocoa, chocolate, and blackness are key elements. In order to map the variety and versatility of this signification, the chapters maintain a dynamic perspective and delve into different spaces and contexts in which blackness and chocolate interlock.

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2 See, for instance, the following publications by Afro-German women that critically comment on the use of the chocolate metaphor: Noah Sow, *Deutschland Schwarz Weiß: Der alltägliche Rassismus* (München: Bertelsmann, 2008), p. 222; May Ayim, *Grenzenlos und unverschämt* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer-Taschenbuch-Verlag, 2002), p. 49; ManuEla Ritz, *Die Farbe meiner Haut: Die Anti-Rassismus-Trainerin erzählt* (Freiburg: Herder Freiburg, 2009), pp. 41ff. The anthology *Showing our Colors* also abounds with critical interventions; see Katharina Oguntoye et. al., eds., *Showing our Colors: Afro-German Women Speak Out* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992).

The book has five different focal points: this introduction explores the semantics of chocolate and its many associations. Chocolate's origins in Mesoamerican culture fueled a variety of positive meanings attached to chocolate, which in turn enforced the phenomenal success of this sweet food in many industrialized nations. Had chocolate not evolved into such a popular food in the consuming countries, it could not have gained relevance as a classed, gendered, and racialized signifier. Subsequently, this chapter conceptualizes chocolate as a myth and as a racial signifier for blackness. Chapter 2 explores the modes of production of cocoa, highlighting how these are entangled in unequal (post)colonial power relations, which were critically discussed in the early twentieth century, as soon as chocolate began to turn into a mass commodity. These labor conditions in the harvesting of cocoa found their way, albeit in a distorted way, into the visual representations in chocolate advertisements that will be analyzed in Chapter 3. This iconography often enforces chocolate's connection to plantation labor, brown-skinned peoples, as well as the pleasure of consuming it. Chapter 4 looks at the sexualization of chocolate, its historical context, and how these fantasies of sensual indulgence in chocolate are not only promoted in the realm of advertising, but in popular culture as well. Chapter 5 deals with the use of chocolate as a racial signifier, one that is both forcefully ascribed to, as well as appropriated in affirmative self-reference by, People of Color. Taken together, the chapters invite the reader to look at chocolate as a commodity that has shaped cultures and is also a culture in itself. The book begins with its popularization, then moves to its modes of production, the way chocolate has been advertised, and finally to how it has been sexualized as well as racialized. Throughout, this book maintains a dynamic global perspective, shifting its frame of reference from Western Europe to the United States to West Africa in order to follow the various ideas, peoples, and images this commodity has produced. Though focusing on the United States, the chapters pay attention to global complexities. Imperialism and global capitalism were constituted in part through the (global) movements of peoples and commodities like cocoa, through production, consumption, and exchange, as well as ideas, discourses, and modes of representation. Looking at the Atlantic world can highlight the various meanings attached to chocolate.<sup>3</sup>

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3 Alison Games, "Atlantic History: Definitions, Challenges, and Opportunities," *The American Historical Review* Vol. 111, No. 3 (2006): 741–75.

The present study hence adopts a transcultural and transnational perspective, investigating where and when the chocolate signifier operates within “the rhizomorphic, fractal structure of the transcultural, international formation [Paul Gilroy calls] the black Atlantic.”<sup>4</sup> Building on Gilroy’s seminal work, Joseph Roach proposes an expansion of the transnational and transatlantic perspectives by introducing what he calls the circum-Atlantic world, a world in which tropical products like sugar and cocoa play a key role:

“As it emerged from the revolutionized economies of the late seventeenth century, this world resembled a vortex in which commodities and cultural practices changed hands many times. The most revolutionary commodity in this economy was human flesh, and not only because slave labor produced huge quantities of the addictive substances (sugar, coffee, tobacco, *and—most insidiously—sugar and chocolate in combination*) that transformed the world economy and financed the industrial revolution (Mintz). The concept of a circum-Atlantic world (as opposed to a transatlantic one) insists on the centrality of the diasporic and genocidal histories of Africa and the Americas, North and South, in the creation of the culture of modernity.”<sup>5</sup>

Roach’s concept of the circum-Atlantic bounded by Europe, Africa, and the Americas is quite useful for this analysis because of its emphasis on diaspora and circulation. It stresses the entanglements of modernity with the European transatlantic slave trade, slavery and colonialism. Roach analyzes how circum-Atlantic cultures have invented themselves and have performed cultural self-definitions in opposition to others. In this regard, chocolate—as a component of intentionally chosen cultural identities—can also be understood as a way of performing cultural self-definition in an environment that has historically attempted to be the defining authority.

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4 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London, New York: Verso, 1993), p. 4. For a critique of the Black Atlantic introduced by Gilroy see Michelle M. Wright, “In a Nation or a Diaspora? Gender, Sexuality and Afro-German Subject Formation,” in *From Black to Schwarz: Cultural crossovers between African America and Germany*, eds. Maria Diedrich, Jürgen Heinrichs (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2011), 265–86, pp. 270–71.

5 Joseph R. Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 4 (my emphasis).

## 1.1 Why Chocolate?

Chocolate is many things at the same time. It is a non-essential yet very popular food. Most people in the Western world have tasted chocolate at some point in their life and many indulge in it on a regular basis. There are cheap chocolate bars and less inexpensive fair-trade, organic chocolate products. There is chocolate especially marketed to children, to women, and to men. Yet, cocoa—the fruit from which chocolate is made—was and still is harvested in many parts of the world under conditions akin to slavery, and is often produced by People of Color for the pleasurable consumption of chocolate products. Even though many advertisements strongly suggest otherwise, the histories of cocoa and chocolate are solidly anchored in the histories of colonialism and imperialism. It is exactly this tension between the production and consumption, between actual labor conditions and colonial fantasies, between the cruelty and the glamour associated with chocolate that this book focuses on. As the following chapters show, traces of this ambiguous relationship can be found in such diverse and seemingly unrelated fields as the history of food, advertising, mass production and consumption, health and sexuality, and the construction of racialized identities. As a concept and as an idea, chocolate is fluid, contingent on its historical context, on motivations behind its usage, and on the cultural setting in which it appears, yet still connected to the materiality of its production. That is what makes the analysis of chocolate so intriguing. By weaving these histories together, this book transcends the conventional boundaries of commodity histories.<sup>6</sup> Historical trade cards featuring cocoa plantation scenes, affirmative expressions like “Chocolate City,” eroticized chocolate ice cream ads, as well as racist minstrel shows are all parts of the same meaningful story.

Chocolate’s variability and its at times contrasting meanings are what I refer to when I define chocolate as a floating signifier. It was introduced into different cultural contexts where it gained and was endowed with various meanings, as for instance a reference to imperialist exploitation and unequal trading systems, but also as an affirmative naming practice. Chocolate indeed floats—not only the commodity of raw cocoa beans throughout the Atlantic world, but ideas, tastes, smells, and concepts attached to chocolate. Both aspects are connected and form the scope of this

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<sup>6</sup> See footnote 9.



book. It thus follows chocolate from colonial to postmodern times, though there is a focus on the early twentieth century, a period that witnessed the first chocolate boom (1880–1914).<sup>7</sup> It looks at a wide array of historical sources such as postcards, illustrated sheet music, racist memorabilia, print advertisements and trade cards, newspaper articles, personal records of African-American artists, and song lyrics, as well as other ephemera. The book proposes a new framework for commodity histories and food studies, which does not only look at the commodity, its production and consumption, but adds a discursive level to the material one. Doing so reveals the shifting meanings of chocolate in seemingly unrelated fields. It not only highlights the centrality of gender and class in chocolate's development from a luxury item to a mass popular food, but also sheds light on chocolate as a social and cultural practice, one that negotiates racialized and gendered differences, sexual desires as well as arguments over recognition and appropriation. Chocolate's myths help us to understand why this food became such a popular treat, a romantic gift, a sweet indulgence despite our knowledge of child labor and other questionable labor systems; why it has been so profoundly sexualized; and how it became such a volatile metaphor in the construction of black identities.

Recently, scholars and foodies alike have observed a renaissance of chocolate culture that dovetails with a growing interest in a number of commodities.<sup>8</sup> Monographs on the histories of products like salt, sugar, and tea, cocoa, coffee, and gold, have come to constitute a discrete genre within the last two decades and are widely read by the populace. Sidney Mintz reasons that this might be due to the “rediscovery of the role indi-

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7 William G. Clarence-Smith, “Chocolate Consumption from the Sixteenth Century to the Great Chocolate Boom,” in *The Economics of Chocolate*, eds. Mara P. Squicciarini, Johan Swinnen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 43–70, pp. 58–61.

8 See Sidney Wilfred Mintz, “The Bromides of God, the Passions of Humans: Review of Histoire Du Chocolat (Harwich) and The Chocolate Tree (Young),” *New West Indian Guide* Vol. 70, No. 1 & 2 (1996): 107–112. On other commodities, see Sidney Wilfred Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking, 1985); Mark Pendergrast, *Uncommon Grounds: The History of Coffee and How it Transformed Our World* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); John Soluri, *Banana Cultures: Agriculture, Consumption, and Environmental Change in Honduras and the United States* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2005); Mark Kurlansky, *Salt: A World History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003); and Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Knopf, 2014). See also Darra Goldstein, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Sugar and Sweets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

vidual commodities came to play in the rise of capitalism.”<sup>9</sup> With regard to chocolate, the literature consists not just of scholarly works, but also of popular books on the history of the foodstuff, cookbooks with chocolate recipes, exhibitions on chocolate with accompanying catalogs, richly illustrated children’s and coffee table books, restaurants specializing in chocolate desserts, and chocolate boutiques selling expensive gourmet chocolate.<sup>10</sup> This surge in interest might also be a consequence of innovative experimentation with chocolate varieties that was initiated by French *chocolatiers* in the 1980s, which resulted in the renaissance of darker, less sugary and milky, but usually much more expensive, chocolate. These new varieties are mostly made of dark chocolate mixed with spices or fruits—the more eccentric the mixture, the better. They have a distinctive character and identify the consumer as a gourmet and as a connoisseur. They also speak to the motivation to (re)turn chocolate into a luxury product. The books on chocolate, as well as the chocolate varieties and chocolate shops now to be found in many Western cities, all speak to a lively chocolate culture.

However, some books on cocoa and chocolate focus only on the consumption and the cultural impact of the products in North America and Western Europe. They are either silent on the growing and harvesting conditions of cocoa, or they tend to mediate a “sanitized” version and paint a rather romantic picture of cocoa farmers enjoying their work.<sup>11</sup> Exhibits as well as popular books often participate in the creation of a fantasy of pleasurable consumption that ignores production, one that neglects the history of the raw commodity, namely the cocoa bean, and thus solidifies the mythologies of chocolate.<sup>12</sup> The exhibition at Hershey’s

9 Mintz, “The Bromides of God, the Passions of Humans,” pp. 107–08.

10 Sandra Boynton, *Chocolate: The Consuming Passion* (New York: Workman Publishing, 1982); David P. Butts, Addison E. Lee, *The Story of Chocolate* (Austin, TX: Steck-Vaughn Company, 1967); Mark Kurlansky, ed., *Choice Cuts: A Savory Selection of Food Writing from Around the World and Throughout History* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002), pp. 330–44. Hermann Heidrich, ed., *Süsse Verlockung: Von Zucker, Schokolade und anderen Genüssen* (Molfsee: Schleswig-Holsteinisches Freilichtmuseum, 2007).

11 Susan Jane Terrio, *Crafting the Culture and History of French Chocolate* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Nikita Harwich Vallenilla, *Histoire Du Chocolat* (Paris: Ed. Desjonquères, 1992); Annerose Menninger, *Genuss im kulturellen Wandel: Tabak, Kaffee, Tee und Schokolade in Europa (16. – 19. Jahrhundert)* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2004).

12 Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Das Paradies, der Geschmack und die Vernunft: Eine Geschichte der Genussmittel* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2002); even Sophie and Michael Coe, in their “true history of chocolate,” barely mention slavery and slave labor

Chocolate World in Pennsylvania, for example, is a case in point. Visitors learn that the company buys its cocoa beans from West Africa and this part of the exhibition has wall paintings that show brown-skinned workers living in primitive huts and laboring on small cocoa farms. It also features three singing cows, suggesting that Hershey's chocolate is made from West African cocoa and from Pennsylvanian cow milk.<sup>13</sup> The history of chocolate is portrayed in a way that does not leave a bitter taste in visitors' mouths. After having visited the attraction, Mark Weiner was prompted to ask

“what was the historical relation between chocolate and imperialism, between sweets and an industrial working class, between sugar and slavery? These types of questions, suggested by the images themselves (as well as by the work of Sidney Mintz), remain submerged by a careless design that betrays little concern for full historical accuracy – or even an awareness of the slightest historical irony.”<sup>14</sup>

In contrast, following the work of William Gervase Clarence-Smith, Emma Robertson, Catherine Higgs, Lowell Joseph Satre, and others, I hope to expand the common confines of the histories of the global movement of commodities.<sup>15</sup> By broadening the scope of my analysis beyond the practices of consumption and the cultural meanings attached to the desire for a product in Western Europe and North America, I propose a history of chocolate that explores the movement of peoples, goods, and knowledge surrounding its production within the Black Atlantic, as well as the cultural significance of the intersection of knowledge about labor practices, production technologies, consumption, and notions of blackness and black corporeality.

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but focus on chocolate as consumed in Central America and its trajectory in Europe, see Sophie Dobzhansky Coe, Michael D. Coe, *The True History of Chocolate* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007).

13 I visited the exhibition on March 22, 2008.

14 Mark Weiner, “We Are What We Eat: or, Democracy, Community, and the Politics of Corporate Food Displays” *American Quarterly* Vol. 46, No. 2 (1994): 227–250, p. 237.

15 David Ciarlo, *Advertising Empire: Race and Visual Culture in Imperial Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); Emma Robertson, *Chocolate, Women and Empire: A Social and Cultural History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009); Catherine Higgs, *Chocolate Islands: Cocoa, Slavery, and Colonial Africa* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2012); Lowell Joseph Satre, *Chocolate on Trial: Slavery, Politics, and the Ethics of Business* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005); Orla Ryan, *Chocolate Nations: Living and Dying for Cocoa in West Africa* (London: Zed Books, 2012); William Gervase Clarence-Smith, *Cocoa and Chocolate, 1765–1914* (London: Routledge, 2000).

## 1.2 Chocolate as a Myth and as a Floating Signifier

According to Roland Barthes, mythologies participate in the making of our world. Myths help us to make sense of our experiences within a culture. It is precisely their function to naturalize the cultural, and thus to make dominant cultural and historical values, attitudes, and beliefs seem entirely “normal,” “natural,” self-evident, and common sense. They appear to be objective and “true” reflections of “the way things are.”<sup>16</sup> Barthes defines a myth as a second-order semiological system, meaning that it is a system that is constructed from a semiological chain that already existed; the sign in the first system becomes a signifier in the second.<sup>17</sup> Barthes is only interested in this second level of signification. He argues that there is no clear separation between the denotative and the connotative. The connotation produces the illusion that the denotation is “natural.” The signifier of a myth is ambiguous because it is at the same time meaning and form, full on one side and empty on the other.

Applied to chocolate, it is full in the first order of signification, where it has at different times been perceived to be a sweet treat, a mood enhancer, a consumer good, or a luxury food. In the second order of signification, however, it is empty insofar as it does not refer to chocolate as an edible product anymore, but to various notions of blackness.<sup>18</sup> It is not the function of the myth to hide, but to distort.<sup>19</sup> Distortion, according to Barthes, implies that the meaning—in this case of chocolate—in the first order is not suppressed or completely erased, but impoverished and, in fact, distorted in order to fit the meaning of the second order. The distortion is made possible because the form of the myth is already constituted by a linguistic meaning. The concept, however, is inherently open, it has to be filled with a situation, it depends on being appropriated: there is no fixity in mythical concepts; they come into being, change, and may disappear. Because of the possibility of appropriation, Barthes pays close attention to what motivates signification. For him, it is crucial to understand why people are willing to invest in certain myths, why they are appealing and con-

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16 In his essay “Bichon and the Blacks,” Barthes writes about “one of our major servitudes: the oppressive divorce of knowledge and mythology.” See Roland Barthes, “Bichon and the Blacks,” in *Anatomy of Racism*, ed. David Theo Goldberg (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp. 127–29.

17 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Vintage, 1993), p. 114.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 117.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 121.

vincing to them, and why these myths “work.” Constructions of race are an “ideal” object for myths, because an incomplete, unstable concept (race) is ready for signification. Depending on the motivation of the signification, it can be affirmative (for instance, in the cases of the Black Power or “Black is Beautiful” movements) or derogatory (scientific racism and white supremacy are but two examples). It is, in particular, Barthes’s insight that a myth fulfills the purpose of giving “natural justification” to a historical intention and making contingencies appear eternal that makes his observations so illuminating for this project. Myth is a depoliticized form of speech and “it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves.”<sup>20</sup> Hence, similar to the semantics of race, chocolate is empty, but endowed with mechanisms of control so that it produces reality—i.e., skin color—instead of innocently reflecting or describing it. Chocolate is transferred into various discursive spaces, networks of ideas, and affiliations, clustering at particular historical moments, where and when it gains—often different—meanings and becomes significant. What these discursive spaces are, and how the myth, the chocolate signifier functions there, will be the scope of my analysis.

It is productive to combine Barthes’s elaborations on mythologies with the work of Argentine political theorist Ernesto Laclau. Laclau’s observations are helpful in understanding why and how groups and collective identities are constructed, either on the basis of shared demands, or due to similar political attitudes or a shared historical experience (e.g., the Middle Passage or the enslavement of one’s ancestors). In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, which Laclau co-authored with Chantal Mouffe, they state that the subject does not have a homogeneous identity, but that one’s identity entails a variety of subject positions, and that a political identity has to be understood as the articulation of “issue politics.” Taking for granted that people have incomplete and fractured identities, resulting in various political possibilities, the question arises of how people can form bonds of solidarity and a collective identity. This becomes possible if one understands identity as a temporary attachment, an ongoing process of articulation. In his book *On Populist Reason*, Laclau concerns himself with the formation of collective identities. He basically uses Barthes’s insight into the ambiguity

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20 Ibid., p. 143.

between the signifier and the signified and applies it to the concept of identity. For Laclau, the unity of a group is the result of the articulation of similar demands, e.g., when a given group of people forms a (temporary) unity, for example as a means to fight for political rights.

According to Laclau, collective identities are formed through difference. “Difference,” though, is never something that is “natural” or evident, but something that has been historically constructed with a specific motivation within a certain historical context. Identities are fabricated against the backdrop of constructed differences. However, in order for an identity to become hegemonic, there has to be one difference that stands out among all the differences, for example one’s gender, or one’s sexual or racial identification. This is not just another difference, but *the* other one, an excluded element, and “vis-à-vis the excluded element, all other differences are equivalent to each other—equivalent in their common rejection of the excluded identity”.<sup>21</sup>

A given group of women, of queer people, or of People of Color might thus form a collective in order to achieve certain political rights, despite their internal differences (sexual orientation, political convictions, social status, education, age, class, etc.), which are temporarily suppressed. But this equivalence “is precisely what subverts difference, so that all identity is constructed within this tension between the differential and the equivalential logics.”<sup>22</sup> The excluded element may be a white racialized identity. Faced with racial discrimination or white supremacy, the various differences among black subjects are temporarily eroded and thus allow for a collective identity under the signifiers “black” or, in the case of this study, “chocolate.” The construction of a collective identity is an attempt to give a name to an “absent fullness,” a series of demands—i.e., political rights, access to economic and social resources, social recognition—not met by those in power. These demands become popular through their articulation. The battle cry “Chocolate City” gained ground in the 1970s as an articulation of the prominent black cultural scene in cities such as Washington, DC, and at the same time, as a critique of deteriorating inner cities and the flight of Euro-Americans to “safe suburbia.”

A racial identity focused around the signifier chocolate can serve as a nodal point, because it establishes a common ground among differing elements and simultaneously creates a community against an antagonistic

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21 Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2007), p. 70.

22 Ibid.