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The Sweet Brown Narrative: Modern Internet Folklore

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Mackenzie is a junior at the University of Missouri, studying Journalism with an emphasis in Strategic Communication and minoring in Sociology. Specifically, Mackenzie enjoys studying race and ethnic relations in her course work. She looks forward to writing more about what modern folklore reveals about American society in the future. Outside of schoolwork Mackenzie enjoys singing in her all female a cappella group the Naturelles, playing Quidditch for the university, and finding a cozy spot

outside to read a good book.

Miranda Sings, GloZell Simon, Charlie the Unicorn, Antoine Dotson, and Rebecca Black are living viral, Internet sensations that prove celebrity can be created online. The digital age has created a new venue for storytelling, legend, myth, jokes and other forms of folklore. Although they are not traditional, new venues for folklore such as YouTube videos and Memes create platforms for communication among individuals on large and small scales across the United States. As a result, they facilitate the rise of ordinary individuals to stardom. As a part of our modern day folklore, these stars are evidence of our culture, communicating messages and revealing truths about American culture.

Black Oklahoma resident Kimberly Wilkins rose to fame over the Internet when her local news station interviewed her after she survived a neighborhood fire in 2012. (See Wilkins Original Interview Video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=udS-OcNtSWo>). More commonly known as Sweet Brown, Wilkins has become a humorous, yet problematic figure in modern folklore. Dressed in a rainbow tie-dye tank top, and an orange and brown patterned headscarf for her interview, Brown told the following narrative:

Well I woke up to get me a cold pop.
And then I thought somebody was
barbakooiin' [barbquing] I said oh lord
Jesus it's a farr [fire]. Then I ran out, I
didn't grab no shoes or nothin' Jesus! I
ran for my life! And then the smoke
got meh [me]. I got bronchitis. Ain't
nobody got time fuh [for] that!

Shortly after this original statement was aired, Wilkins narrative gained vast recognition, and a plethora of Sweet Brown folklore was born. Jokes in the form of

Memes, online music videos, twitter accounts, and impersonations began to circulate online and are still being created today. The phrase “Ain’t nobody got time fuh that!” became particularly popular and is now a well-known colloquial phrase. Wilkins herself has become a popular culture icon. In addition to television interviews, she has served as a spokeswoman for several businesses, and guest starred on comedy shows like Tosh. O. Although Wilkins goes by Sweet Brown both publically and privately, for the purposes of this discussion I will refer to her as both Kimberly Wilkins and Sweet Brown to separate folklore from Wilkins actions herself.

The title Sweet Brown will apply to any character representation resulting from folklore. It will also refer to any Internet media or conversation created by the public and not Brown herself. Kimberly Wilkins will refer to any media that she personally was apart of creating such interviews, promotions, and guest appearances. Although Wilkins’ appearances and Sweet Brown folklore present themselves in different forms, the public sees both as one unified image and persona. Together the humorous dialects have come to represent embodiments of black stereotypes. As a result, Wilkins and Sweet Brown folklore generate opportunities for discourse on how race functions in modern American society. Sweet Brown has many other functions. However, I will constrain the discussion of this paper to “Ain’t nobody got time fuh that!”

In Sweet Brown folklore, the phrase “Ain’t nobody got time fuh that!” has become a humorous punch line. When connected with certain topics, “Ain’t nobody got time fuh that!” jokes reveal and reinforce stereotypical beliefs about black culture. One popular venue for these jokes is in the

form of online Memes. These Memes feature pictures of Wilkins from her original interview accompanied by two lines of text. The top line of text is a topic. The bottom line is a variation on “Ain’t nobody got time fuh that!” Several examples of Internet Memes following this formula include: Top: Correct Grammar? Bottom: Ain’t nobody got time for that; Top: Drake, Bottom: Got a lil time fo dat.

Instead of a line of text sometimes the topic is presented as an image (Top: Picture of a bucket of KFC fried chicken and Kool-Aid, Bottom: I got a little time). The attachment of the character of Sweet Brown to prominent stereotypes of black culture, such as the idea that all black people love fried chicken and kool-aid, asserts that for those who create these Memes and those who find them humorous, Sweet Brown is a representation of black culture as a whole. This association sets a definition and implied meaning to other less obviously stereotyped Sweet Brown jokes. For example, the Drake Meme reinforces the idea that most black people love rap music. The grammar Meme reinforces the idea that black people do not speak English correctly. On the surface these, Memes are entertaining because of Sweet Brown’s dialect.

However, they are problematic because they all portray stereotypes about blacks. They answer the question: What does Sweet Brown have time for? Regardless of the intentions of the creator, these Memes promote the message that Sweet Brown represents black preferences. Thus, in these contexts, “Ain’t nobody got time fuh that!” comes to mean “Ain’t nobody” black, “got time fuh that!” The Meme’s address stereotypes in a humorous manner, creating a social context in which race can be discussed freely under the pretense

of jokes.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

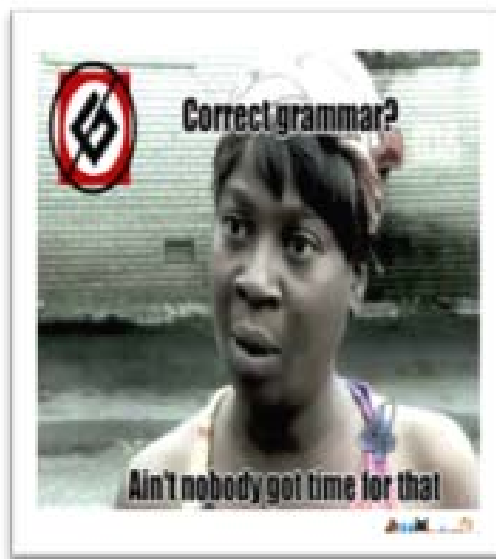


Fig. 3

Another venue for the discussion of race has been in the comments sections of YouTube where Sweet Brown imitation videos have been posted. (Search YouTube for “baby Sweet Browns” or “Sweet Brown imitations” and you will find countless children, mostly black females, dressed up as Sweet Brown). Viewers find this mimic funny and entertaining. “Baby Sweet Browns” repeats Wilkins’ narrative as best it can with the same vocal inflection. To complete the effect, it is almost always captured, wearing their hair wrapped in a scarfs or bandanas. The repetition and acknowledgement of these small nuances reinforce stereotypes of black women because of Sweet Brown’s association with black culture.

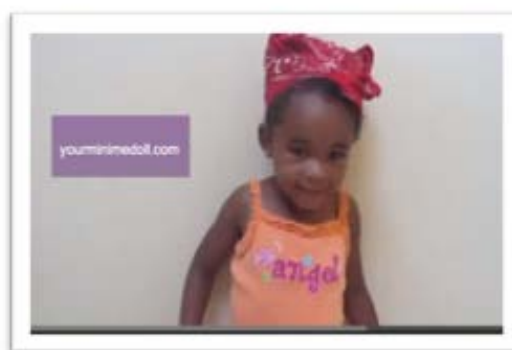


Fig. 4 Sweet Baby



Fig. 5 Sweet Brown's Cold Pop Escape

These videos don't simply provide comedic relief as an extension of an already humorous narrative, but they also create a venue for conversations on race, specifically concerning who is allowed to mimic Wilkins and who is not. Essentially, who can imitate and replicate a black individual. Comments on these videos clearly express the idea that black girls may imitate Wilkins, and white girls may not. Black imitators get mostly complementary comments on how cute they are and how accurate their portrayal was. Viewers even comment on specific parts of phrases in the narrative that accurately reflect Wilkins tone. Judgment is so low that even when the girls slur their words or speak quietly, it is acceptable. The outfit and persona are recognizable enough that it's still funny. (This further reinforces the idea that the girls are playing into a stereotype. Clearly it's the way in which the narrative is spoken in addition to the outfit that is essential to creating the Sweet Brown character).

There are few examples of white imitators. However one white girl, who – like the black imitators – was wearing a bandana and spoke like Wilkins, was heavily criticized for her imitation. One comment said directly, “bitch you gotta be black to imitate Sweet Brown!!” (likemyrandomness). Another agreed, “black girls do it better no offense” (beyblademaster200019). Although both

racers gave similar performances, only the black girls were given credit for being talented and cute. Thus, the Sweet Brown video copycats function as conversation starters for blacks and whites on how races interact. These conversations explain that although it is culturally acceptable for blacks to imitate and mimic the behavior of other blacks, it is not acceptable for other whites to imitate the behavior of blacks. The narrative facilitates these conversations about race.

Not only does the conversation produced define what races can portray black stereotypes, but rather at what age this behavior is acceptable. Nearly all of imitations of Wilkins on YouTube are of children, not adults. The lack of adult presence in front of the camera makes the comment that it is not acceptable for adults to poke fun at black stereotypes. In the article *On Elephantasy and Elephanticide*, Alan Dundes and Roger Abrahams discuss how jokes allow people to discuss controversial topics because they are in the regressive tone of a child. Although Dundes' and Roger's arguments focus on jokes that are more explicitly attacking, they make a good point.

The use of children as copycat storytellers of the Sweet Brown narrative indicates that perhaps the message they convey is in fact problematic and not at all innocent. Many adults, regardless of color, would not feel comfortable repeating the narrative themselves; however, they spend time helping their young children to memorize the narrative and dress up as Sweet Brown. The fact that adults have taken the time to complete this process with their children, videotape it, and upload it to YouTube signifies relevance as a folklore message though the intent of these videos is not to perpetuate stereotypes about blacks.

On the surface, these imitations are a way for parents to show off their children. However, they serve a greater function for some blacks specifically to use amusing racial stereotypes as a vehicle for celebrity. Evidence of this can be seen in parents' comments on the Sweet Brown imitation videos. One mother commented, "Thank you all for your kind comments. Alyssa gets excited each time I tell her people commented on her video ... She is working on new material! We'll keep you posted" (AlyssaSings718).

By marketing their children as actors and performers, they play into the social stereotype reinforced by Wilkins that blacks, who fit into stereotypes, achieve fame more easily than those who do not. Anand Prahlad discusses the same issue in his paper "Funny or Not: The Successful Negro/Black Man Meme." In his paper, Prahlad explains how the use of "The Successful Negro/Black Man Meme" is an indication of white anxiety over the entrance of the black man into the upper class workforce. In contrast for some parents, the act of dressing up their daughters like Sweet Brown in hopes of fame plays on accepted methods by whites of upward mobility such as fitting into traditional stereotypes. The Sweet Brown narrative creates a means for some parents of black children to have a conversation together about the possibility of fame for their children, which eases their anxiety about upward mobility.

For Wilkins, replications of baby Sweet Browns and Sweet Brown Memes further her image as an iconic figure. However, it simultaneously reinforces her as a stereotype for blacks. Beth Snyder, and Ann Marie Kerwin define Meme's as "being driven by popularity and consensus" in "Media Morph: Internet Memes." The same principle can be applied to other forms of

Internet folklore like the Sweet Brown imitators. The more her image is reproduced, the more iconic and representative she is.

Wilkins ability to achieve fame has become such an inspirational and heroic accomplishment that she is even depicted as a superhero of the urban ghetto for some. This depiction took the form of a short video that was aired on the Comedy Central show Tosh.O. The video (See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n1KmAPGcwOo>) presents images of Sweet Brown in a superhero costume in the black ghetto stopping any dangerous incidents from occurring. Wilkins provides a way to recognize the fears Americans have about safety in the ghetto and ease these through her heroics. Wilkins and The Sweet Brown narrative function as a heroic celebrated story of personal success in some sectors of the black community. However, in others it is just another reminder of the belief that media outlets only choose lower class, uneducated black citizens to speak in interviews. One woman black woman wrote,

Why do they [news media] ALWAYS have to find this type of Black person to interview? Why can't they find the ones that actually create a proper sentence and talk like they have some type of formal education? This is how the majority of other races see blacks. I don't think its funny or cute (Donna Luscioucdc Sayles-Corbin).

Sayles-Corbin was just one of many comments on Wilkins' interview. Even the original media itself as a popular YouTube video created a racial discourse for black to express concern and anxiety over what images are presented in the digital world. No matter the format, Wilkins and her character of Sweet Brown represent

statements about black culture.

Wilkins' stardom and the perpetuation of the Sweet Brown Narrative are evidence of the relevance of Internet media as a form of modern day folklore. Perhaps greater study of popular Internet media today can uncover underlying thoughts and feelings about our society that seem otherwise buried. What is a better way to understand American culture than to look at the content created and spread online by the masses?

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