

# No Woke-Washing, Please: Race, Food Studies, and Design

by Fabio Parasecoli | Aug 3, 2020



It is impossible to ignore the topic of race and structural racism when talking about food systems and food culture. And we should not shy from those conversations, least of all in our classrooms. The worst thing that could happen is for schools and institutions of higher education to adopt the same woke-washing that we are seeing in the food business.

The Black Lives Matter movement may not be as visible in public discourse as it was a few weeks ago, but its influence is still very much felt. As it is to be expected, in a widely broadcast display of corporate social responsibility, many food companies have been examining their products, packaging, and

marketing to get rid of racist wording, logos, and images. Good bye, Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Mrs. Butterworth's. Also the Native American woman will disappear from Land' O Lakes products, although painted by a Native American artist who wanted to avoid [stereotypes](#).

A growing number of individuals and corporations have flooded their social media with declarations of solidarity and support to BLM and promises to create more inclusive business cultures. I may be a skeptic, but much of it sounds like what could be called woke-washing, meant to steer clear of accusations of insensitivity or worse. And by woke-washing, I refer to mostly performative efforts at creating a PR veneer of racial awareness and social consciousness without actually dealing with long-term systemic problems regarding production processes, diversity in the workforce and in the boardroom, wages, job security, and, I would argue, even design.

It is unclear whether and how companies will change their corporate structures, their employment procedures, and their labor policies. While all the window-dressing was taking place, meat-processing and meat-packing workers (with many persons of color among them) were declared „essential,” meaning they cannot stay at home to keep supply chains going, while [their unions are under attack](#). Also farmworkers have become essential; [as I discussed in my last blog post](#), many of them are immigrants, and the visa policies regulating their presence in the US, as well their wages, are under threat.

It is impossible to ignore the topic of race and structural racism when talking about food systems and food culture. And we should not shy from those conversations, least of all in our classrooms. The worst thing that could happen is for schools and institutions of higher education to adopt the same woke-washing that we are seeing in the food business. Overall, food studies is a field populated by very well-meaning people who care about social justice, cultural appropriateness, and the politics of food production, distribution, acquisition, and consumption. Both faculty and students are mostly women and, despite growing diversification, the majority of those involved are still white.

Considering this context, when teaching food studies classes we often end up reflecting for instance about cultural appropriation, opportunities for ethnic entrepreneurs and street vendors, and connections between race and access to food, nutrition, and health. These are just a few of the conversations in which I found myself when teaching my course on Food and Culture. In its most recent iteration, I dealt with the issue of *otherness* head-on, as an introduction to race, ethnicity, gender, and class. [bell hook's](#)

“Eating the Other” sparked an intense and often uncomfortable dialogue, both in class and privately.

White students may feel indirectly accused of problems for which they are not personally responsible. I don't have definitive answers about how to help navigate these tensions, just my own experiences and attempts. My take is that privilege is structural; as white persons we need to learn to see it in order to acknowledge it and, possibly, to contribute to its demise. Nobody says we are bad persons, but simply because of who we are we have opportunities others don't have. However, entitlement is purposely leveraging such privilege to one's advantage. We can't do anything about the origin of our privilege, as we are born into it, but we can check it, to control how and if we use it.

I am now working on the syllabus of a new course on food and design, and I have been asking myself how to put race, gender, class, and other forms of discrimination front and center. I am trying to include readings by non-white authors and cases that go beyond the Global North. For instance, students will look at short videos about different approaches to coffee, from Ethiopia to Turkey, all the way to Global Brooklyn-style third-wave coffee houses. How do objects reflect culture, social structures, and economic dynamics? What do the movements and uses those objects afford tell us about the world of which they are part?

The beauty, feel, and functions of certain objects from other cultures makes them ripe for appropriation or, to the least, adaptation. Designers and design studios with access to finance, infrastructures, and publicity may be able to create and sell merchandise inspired by other cultures or blatantly ripped off from them, profiting in ways that do not benefit the communities from which they took their ideas in the first place. Designers could adopt forms of woke-washing by giving lip service to the cultures they make reference to or by dedicating a fraction of the products' revenue to some social cause. Nothing wrong with that, and some money is better than nothing, but such actions should not distract from larger issues. It is the nature of the beast, one may say, as design, production, and consumerism are tightly linked.

But what if designers from disadvantaged or peripheral communities had the opportunity to work on their own material culture, creating new interpretations that do not aim to supplant the old ones? Could they offer a different approach to them, still rooted in their traditions and values (if they want to uphold them)? And how could they do it sustainably from the point of view of the materials they use, while respecting the cultural and social priorities of their community and offering ways for its members (themselves included) to make some money? What if objects were designed in collaboration with the communities themselves, allowing their members

to participate in the process so that they can prioritize their needs and experiences? [If everybody designed](#), as designer Enzo Manzini hopes for, design could become a space of possibilities and empowerment for communities whose voices have been silenced or distorted.

One of the class assignments will be to re-imagine street food. It is quite likely that some students will get inspiration from ethnic culinary traditions. Many food trucks, stalls, and carts already offer versions of ethnic food. At times, their looks may [clash with the aesthetics](#) of the surrounding business, revealing race, ethnicity, and class fault lines. I will prompt students to reflect about the environmental, socio-cultural, and economic aspects of sustainability. How can we think of a non-exploitative street food model? Who should be involved and how? Like in the case of objects, how can the ethnic communities the food originate from participate in the process and gain (also financially) from it? Moreover, I will try to have students look at street food as part of the urban experience: in which spaces does it take place? Who has access to it? What infrastructures are necessary, although often invisible, from garages to permits? And what's their cost? Could street food improve the quality of living in cities?

Another goal is to explore how objects, interior decoration, constructed environments, urban design, and infrastructures can be the result of embedded and invisible bias, cultural prejudices, appropriation, and even colonial superiority and exploitation. Moreover, we will reflect to our own positionalities and how they may shape our experiences and our environments. I am a white male born in Europe myself, a naturalized „luxury immigrant.“ What kind of objects and places do I have access to, just because of that? How does my background influences the way I navigate the material aspects of the world? We will also focus on kitchens and domestic appliances, and how they are far from being neutral tools to make chores quicker and easier. By imagining the user as a specific kind of person (usually a woman) with built-in preferences and needs, they can reflect and reinforce values and attitudes about gender and gender roles, which in turns cannot be examined in isolation from the other positions in which each individual finds itself, from race to class.

The examples I mentioned at the beginning about the products being changed as a consequence of Black Lives Matter show how packaging, an important aspect of the design of food, can reflect racial and ethnic prejudices. And it is not the only one. Think about the interior design of an “ethnic” restaurant. As I discussed in a [recent blog post](#) about the Netflix show *Gentefied*, ethnic entrepreneurs may decide to embrace stereotypes when decorating their own eating establishments, instead of recreating the style they (and the members of their own communities) are familiar with



from their place of origin, because they fear it is too basic or too tacky for their patrons from outside the community. They may opt instead for the look they expect their “outsider” clients to prefer, choosing at times recognizable (although pigeonholed) signs and cultural elements, other times streamlined, minimalist looks. How can built environments inventively express different cultures, creating spaces where community insiders feel at home while outsiders are also welcome? These are the tensions ethnic restaurateurs often find themselves navigating, while trying to keep their businesses afloat.

As I discussed in my [re-reading of Heidegger’s Being and Time](#), our first relationship with the world that surrounds us is not through contemplation and reflection, but through the use of things. That’s why design is so important when dealing with the material aspects of food systems, which inevitably also have an impact on cultural and social issues. Also, we find ourselves in a world that’s already there, made of materials, objects, spaces, and infrastructures. A real world, for which we are responsible and into which we can bring change, as design theorist [Victor Papanek pointed out](#). It’s up to us to pick and choose among those elements to build our present, while thinking about what’s coming next, also in terms of racial relations. Design is future-making, and for this reason it is inevitably political: it requires judgment calls on what we think our best possible future should be like, and how we can achieve it. That is also the case for food design. Will it just undergo some perfunctory woke-washing, or will it work toward forms of concrete inclusivity?

## Recent Posts

[Eating Pets and Bomb Threats: How Weaponizing Food Helps Trump Win Votes](#)

[Fascism, food, and women: totalitarianism at the table](#)

[The Makaron Case: Pasta, Poland, and Politics](#)

[Queering the Menu: a Dinner at Davide Scabin’s Table](#)

[Culinary Tourism and Sustainability: Challenges and Opportunities](#)

