

Resource: 10 Things Everyone Should Know about Race/Racism & the Food System

We offer these ten stories in the spirit of making the “invisible” visible. The dominant narratives of how our food systems work often leave some things out in favor of including stories that fit better with the bigger story of who and what “we are” (or would like to see ourselves to be) as nations or communities. We hope these ten stories inspire you to keep asking “What don’t we know?” and “Who are we not hearing from?”

1. The history of the food system in the United States is rooted in theft of land and the suppression of cultures. Military force opened the door for white settlers across the North American continent (and many other places). Before being dispossessed of their territories, Native Americans were disenfranchised of their human right to life. The disenfranchisement and loss of land for farmers of Mexican/indigenous origin following the Mexican-American wars, and the taking of Japanese-American land through mass internment during WWII are further examples of coerced land grabs. (see foodfirst.org)
2. Contrary to popular myth, it was not the small farmers of the New England countryside who built and bolstered the United States’ economic position. It was the backbreaking labor of unpaid American slaves in places like South Carolina, Mississippi, and Alabama. After the Civil War, a new kind of capitalism arose in the United States and elsewhere. That new capitalism—characterized first and foremost by states with unprecedented bureaucratic, infrastructural, and military capacities, and by wage labor—had been enabled by the profits, institutions, networks, technologies, and innovations that emerged from slavery, colonialism, and land expropriation.
3. Slavery had a tremendous influence on food and labor systems around the world and was the central pillar of capitalism’s racial caste system until it was widely abolished in the late 19th century in many places (though it continues to exist in other forms). That said, the racial caste system has continued to shape the food system, especially during labor shortages. During WWII for example, when much of the US’s labor force was fighting in Europe and the Pacific, the Mexican Farm Labor Program

Agreement of 1942 imported Mexican peasants to keep the US food system running. Without them, the US could not have fought the war. After WWII the Bracero Program brought in over 4 million Mexican farmworkers. Mexican labor was cheap and legally exploitable. The "immigrant labor subsidy" transferred billions of dollars in value to the sector, turned WWII into a decades-long agricultural boon and transformed labor relations in agriculture.

4. African-Americans once owned 16 million acres of farmland in the US. But by 1997, after many decades of Jim Crow, several national farm busts and a generally inattentive (or obstructionist) Department of Agriculture (USDA), fewer than 20,000 Black farmers owned just 2 million acres of land. According to the USDA 2012 Census of Agriculture, of the country's 2.1 million farmers, only 8% are farmers of color and only half of those are owners of land. Though their farm share is growing (particularly among Latinos, who now number over 67,000 farmers), people of color tend to earn less than \$10,000 in annual sales, produce only 3% of agricultural value, and farm just 2.8% of farm acreage.
5. While white farmers dominate as operator-owners, farmworkers and food workers—from field to fork—are overwhelmingly people of color. Most are paid poverty wages, have inordinately high levels of food insecurity and experience nearly twice the level of wage theft than white workers. While white food workers' average incomes are \$25,024 a year, workers of color make only \$19,349 a year. White workers hold nearly 75% of the managerial positions in the food system. Latinos hold 13% and Black and Asian workers 6.5%.
6. Poverty results in high levels of food insecurity for people of color. Of the 50 million food insecure people in the US 10.6% are white, 26.1% are Black, 23.7% are Latino and 23% are Native American. Restaurant workers—an occupation dominated by people of color—are twice as food insecure as the national average.
7. Race, poverty and food insecurity correlate closely with obesity and diet-related disease; nearly half of African-Americans and over 42% of Latinos suffer from obesity. While less than 8% of non-Hispanic whites suffer from diabetes, 9% of Asian -Americans, 12.8% of Hispanics, 13.2 % of non-Hispanic African Americans and 15.9 % of Indigenous people have diabetes.
8. The Farm Bill—a long-standing pillar of agrarian capitalism—now functions as tool of "neoliberalism." The long-term shift from domestic

safety net programs for farmers that protected producers during lean years, to the subsidization of agribusiness itself through commodity support and crop insurance, has structurally positioned low-income farmers and communities of color on the losing side because they have been given few options for resources. (See foodfirst.org)

9. We must not forget that fishing is, and always has been, a central component of human food systems, and that fisheries have also been marred by racism. For example, the southeastern Atlantic coast of Georgia was once abundant with fish and shellfish. When Europeans arrived in the area in the mid-18th century, they did seem to take interest in these resources. However, Africans, who were forcibly enslaved and brought to Georgia beginning in the 1750s, were very reliant upon fish for both subsistence and then small scale commerce as were their descendants. Those practices continued for two hundred years, until large scale commercialization, led by white fishers who migrated from other states, forcibly pushed African-Americans to the margins. This happened in the oyster, shrimp and blue crab fisheries. In 1999 African-Americans held only 12 of 159 licenses in the blue crab fishery. In the shrimp fishery, only 5 of 400 boats were owned and operated by African-Americans. A way of life and livelihood has slowly been taken away and in some places is on the brink of collapse." Who has access to fishing and fisheries - for both subsistence and for economic livelihood - is still very much tied to issues of power, wealth and race. (See *"Life on the Water: A Historical-Cultural Model of African American Fishermen on the Georgia Coast,"* National Association for the Practice of Anthropology Bulletin, January 2007)
10. The history of the US food system has many examples of fights for resistance and liberation: from the early struggles of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union to the Black Panther's food programs and the boycotts and strikes by the United Farm Workers. More recently, the Food Chain Workers Alliance have fought for better wages and decent working conditions. Oppressed communities have developed ways of healing historical trauma and there are peer counseling groups with skills for working through the immobilizing feelings of internalized oppression, fear, hopelessness and guilt. All of these resources and historical lessons can be brought into the food movement.