

Callaloo as a culturally responsive dish

- a thought experiment exploring what a culturally responsive menu might be, in the form of a lesson plan and community conversation starter using postage stamps to facilitate discussion of culturally responsive menus

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Preamble

I wrote this reflection on culturally responsive menus in 2018, with the approval of my then supervisor at the New York City Department of Education's Office of Student Support Services. This document was ready to be posted on the Garden To Café web page as a resource for teachers and community stakeholders. Before it could be posted, circumstances in the office changed. Because of administrative hurdles at the time, I decided to hold publication of this document. I can discuss these hurdles separately.

Circumstances in my former office have now changed for the better, so I have decided today is a good day to share this document.

Speaking of change, as it happened, the Food Education Summit, which partly inspired this exploration into culturally responsive menus, featured a speech by then Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams. He talked about how a change in his diet changed his life. Now that Mr. Adams is Mayor Adams, I think that these conversations on culturally responsive menus are all the more relevant.

In some ways, these conversations are more relevant now than they were in 2018. For instance, in February 2021, the Mayor's Office of Food Policy released a food policy plan called "Food Forward NYC" that included discussion of culturally appropriate foods. Between these and other efforts, we can take the background of students into account, while not taking any assumed understanding of their background for granted as the only factor that matters. We can help students expand their palates – a kindergarten version of this encouragement is "You don't have to like it, but you do have to try it." Then we can prepare meals that taste as delicious as this sounds, on a tight budget. According to my sources, even with the difficulties during the pandemic, the NYC DOE's Office of Food and Nutrition Services has been creating menus that are improving, are exciting, meet USDA nutrition standards and are moving in a positive direction to meet food education goals. One example of this innovation is Vegan Fridays, which started in February 2022.

I humbly offer this framework document (as written in 2018) for creating conversations on culturally responsive menus, for anyone who wishes to use it. I invite you to create and share your own culturally responsive menus.

If you would like to be in conversation with me, I can be reached at Robert@AbramsData.com and rha2121@tc.columbia.edu.

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11/20/2018

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Introduction

After a presentation on the development of taste testing methodology for the Garden to Café program I gave at the NYC Department of Education's Analytics Club, colleagues at DOE Headquarters asked me to help them better understand school food programs. During an informal conversation, they said they were working on a diversity project in a Brooklyn district that included culturally responsive menus, among other topics.

Some weeks later, a participant at the Food Education Summit at Brooklyn Borough Hall mentioned to me that she wanted to see culturally responsive menus in the schools. (She may have used the term "culturally appropriate" – for the purposes of this exploration, culturally responsive and culturally appropriate will be used interchangeably.)

In our conversation, she mentioned that she is from Trinidad, and that Callaloo, a dish consisting of greens, okra and pumpkins (and possibly other ingredients, since my notes from the meeting may be incomplete), would be one example of a culturally responsive dish she would like to see on a school lunch menu.

The Garden To Café program (GTC), for which I serve as program evaluator, often tries to understand what foods or dishes are common in the neighborhoods of the schools in which GTC presents harvest tasting events. While this is not necessarily culturally responsive menus, per se, it fits well with the general concept.

A few days later, I was talking to a colleague from Jamaica, who said that Callaloo is also prepared in Jamaica. In her view, Trinidad and Tobago Callaloo and Jamaican Callaloo are essentially the same dish, but prepared in styles that are distinct to each country. Further, she said that, within each country, both some of the ingredients and especially the seasoning used can vary. (She also said that Callaloo in Jamaica also refers to a specific green plant used in the dish by the same name, and that the Callaloo plant is roughly equivalent to collard greens in the US.)

My general impression so far is that at least some people who are interested in culturally responsive menus haven't yet been able to define exactly what a culturally responsive menu might be, and that those definitions of culturally responsive menus aren't necessarily consistent across all of the people who would like to have them in schools. Even with just Callaloo, given the number of options for traditional Callaloo, let alone what a Jamaican or Trinidadian or Tobagoan chef might create as a contemporary expression of Callaloo, Callaloo is a good dish to use in a thought experiment exploring what a culturally responsive menu might mean.

If we can define what a culturally responsive menu can be, either as specific dishes or as a set of conceptual guidelines, we would be a step closer to being able to offer culturally responsive menus in schools whose communities would like to see them offered.

Callaloo in a hypothetical school

Let us imagine a hypothetical school in a diverse neighborhood in Brooklyn, since the conversation started in Brooklyn (but the school could really be anywhere in NYC). In this school, there are a sizable number of students who are from or trace their ancestry to Trinidad and Tobago. There are a sizable number of students from or who trace their ancestry to Jamaica. There are also sizable numbers of students from at least one or two other backgrounds. We will also assume that if a culturally responsive dish were put on the lunch menu, the students from that culture would eat it.

Since Callaloo is a traditional dish from both Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, including Callaloo on the lunch menu would count as a culturally responsive dish. But which version of Callaloo should we put on the menu? Even assuming only two Callaloo variants per home country, and assuming the numbers of students who prefer any given variant are evenly distributed, any Callaloo variant we choose will only be eaten by 25% of the students for whom the dish is culturally responsive. Further, if our theory of culturally responsive menus is that people will only eat food from their home cultures, the other two groups at the school won't eat the Callaloo at all, meaning that the Callaloo will only be eaten by 12.5% of the students.

A suggestion for a curricular approach to culturally responsive menus that could lead to high meal participation among all groups of students

Some colleagues suggested that their objective for discussions of culturally responsive menus was "to keep the yelling in the room." I would go further and find facilitation techniques that keep the yelling to a bare minimum. To do this, I recommend finding ways to place the subject of the discussion on the table, so that participants are talking to a common object of consideration, rather than talking at each other. And since the subject matter is food, serve food: it is much more difficult to yell at other people if one's mouth is full and no one feels hungry.

There are multiple ways to put the subject matter on the table, including concept mapping. Here, I will suggest using postage stamps. (All of the stamps shown are from my personal collection.)

I will also broaden the scope of culturally responsive menus by including the ambient environment in which the meal takes place, here represented by music and room decor, and the topic of discussion during the meal, here represented by sports.

Culturally responsive Callaloo curriculum kit through stamps

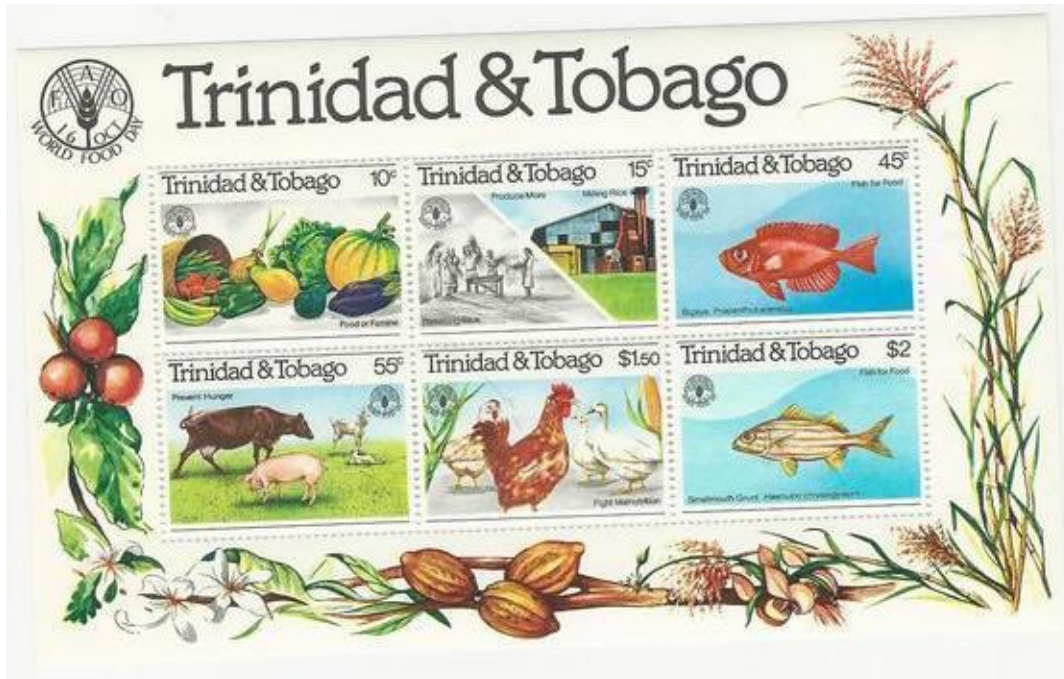
Note that this curriculum kit intentionally doesn't specify every possible step. Teachers, chefs, students, parents and other participants should feel free to add, subtract, modify and season to taste the suggested framework that follows.

Food

I couldn't find a Trinidad and Tobago stamp depicting Callaloo. The closest I could find was this stamp showing vegetables that could be used in Callaloo.



The "Food or Famine" stamp was issued as part of this full sheet.



I searched for a stamp from Jamaica showing Callaloo. I didn't find any from Jamaica either. I did find these food themed stamps, though.

This is a first day cover commemorating World Food Day 1981, where the Jamaican post office reissued older stamps with new denominations.



Could a chef make something edible using nothing but Ackee fruit, cassava, bananas and sugar? I have no idea.

Since we are striving for authenticity, I found some of the original stamps on which the 1981 stamps were based. (If you look closely, you will see that the design of the 1981 stamps are "stamps within stamps".)



I also found stamps with breadfruit, another depiction of Ackee fruit, and Mahoe, the Jamaican national tree (it doesn't produce an edible fruit, as far as I know, but it can be used to make furniture, so that could be useful in a culturally responsive cafeteria).



This stamp is the same Ackee fruit stamp as above, but issued for independence (or it might be a cancellation mark).

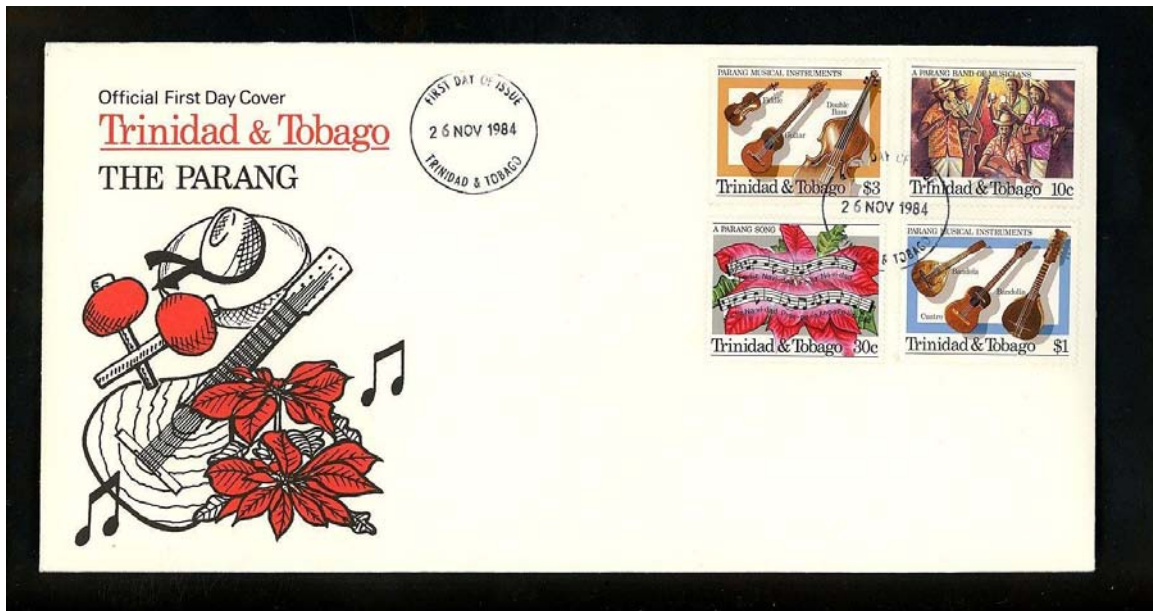


Task: The students, teachers and other stakeholders should find or create recipes for Callaloo from Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago. They should source ingredients, purchase them, prepare dishes, taste test the dishes and discuss which versions of Callaloo they would put on a menu, and why.

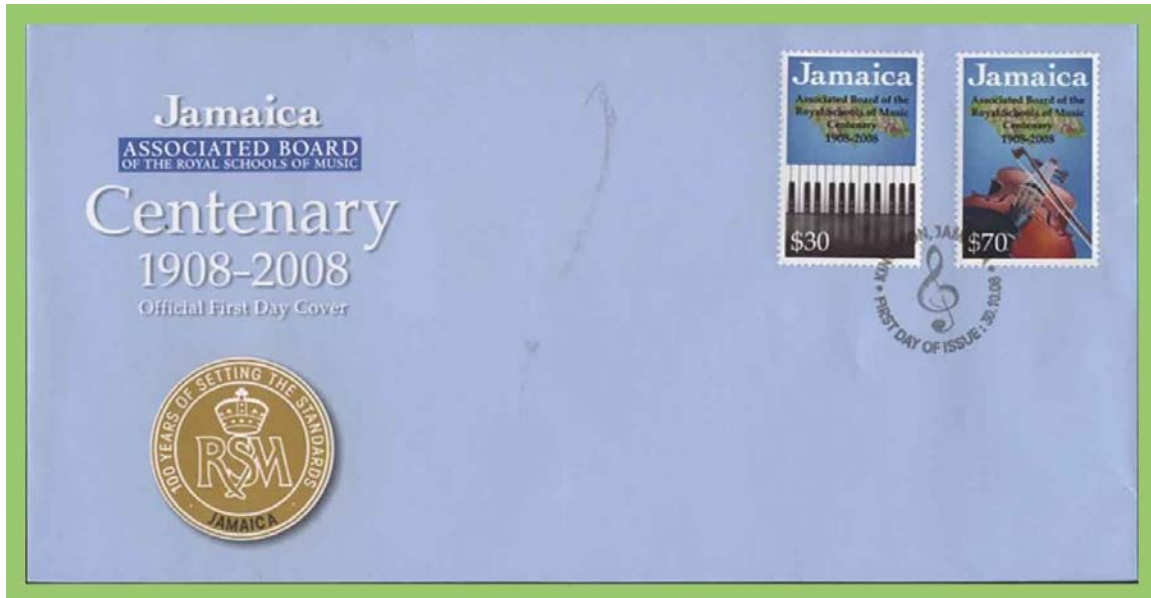
Music

If we are going to have a civilized discussion of culturally responsive menus, there should be music.

I found these stamps to represent music from Trinidad and Tobago.



Representing Jamaica in music, I found these stamps.



The Jamaican Doctor Bird is a hummingbird, so I don't know if it sings, but songs have been written about it.

Task: Participants should choose music to be played during lunch. How would it be played, and why? Should recorded music be used or live music?

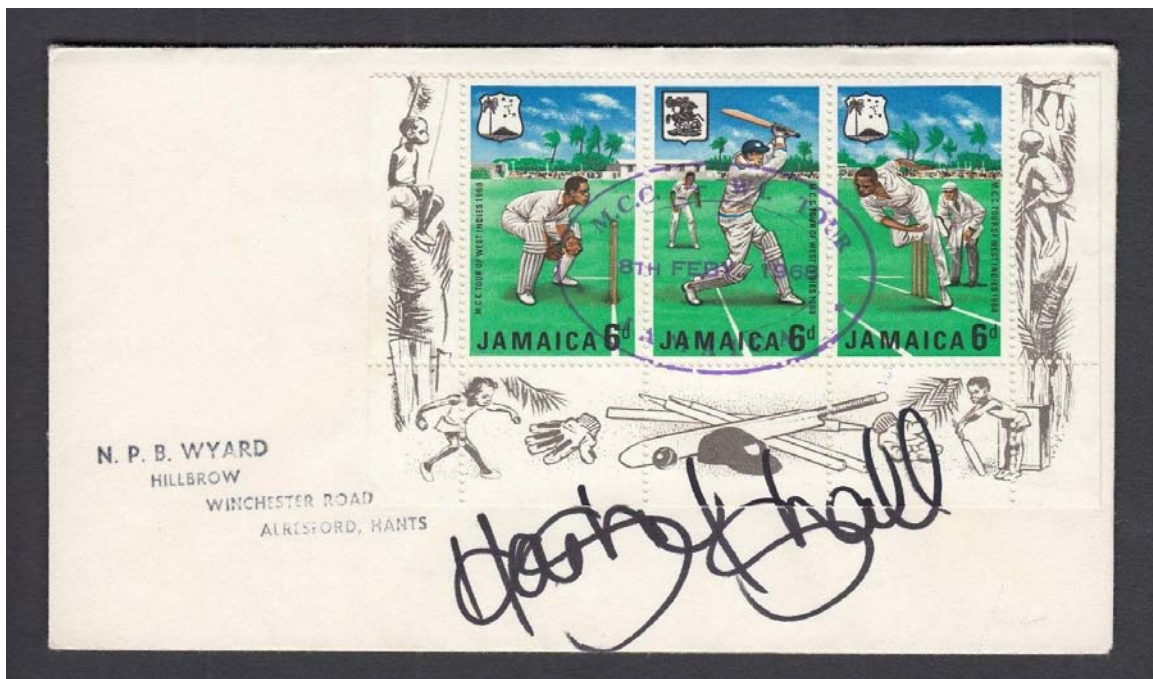
Room decor

You don't necessarily have to decorate the room for your culturally responsive menu event, but it could help set the mood. Print out images of the stamps, the food and photos of participants cooking Callaloo. Have students make drawings. Get some Mahoe wood and make furniture, centerpieces for the tables, or ceremonial conversation wands. Be creative!

What should we talk about during lunch?

In order to complete our understanding of culturally responsive menus, we need something to talk about while we share our lunch. It needs to be something that is of interest to many people, and is common to both Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica. I am going to nominate sports as the topic of conversation. Since we want the topic to be culturally responsive to Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica, we need something that is of great interest to people in both countries, but would require some explaining to many New Yorkers. I decided to go with Cricket, since personally I know next to nothing about it, except that the Cricket bat is flat-ish (and made from several pieces of wood, I think, not just one like the round baseball bat), the usual version of Cricket can take days to complete a match, there is a shorter version called Twenty20, and I would be happy to learn about the sport over a plate of Callaloo.

The other thing I discovered about Cricket when I started thinking about culturally responsive menus is that there are a lot of really beautiful stamps depicting the sport. Here are the ones I found, before the game was called because of rain.







Task: Participants should decide what they would like to talk about during lunch, and why. It could be a formal conversation, with or without facilitation. It could be an informal conversation. Some people will be comfortable announcing to a room of people, "Today we will be talking about Cricket." Others will think this is the oddest thing they have ever encountered. There are conversations for decision-making, for brainstorming and idea generation, for getting to know people, Each purpose is best served by a different conversation structure. (For example, Robert's Rules of Order is effective for decision-making, but is not a good way to run a brainstorming meeting. I served for four years on the GreenStar Council {board of directors} of the GreenStar Cooperative Market in Ithaca, NY, where we ran decision-making meetings with Robert's Rules of Order, so I am speaking from my own experience.)

Another factor to keep in mind when designing conversations is that some people make friends without thinking about it, while others prefer formal introductions, or just generally struggle with friend-making.

Choose a type of conversation and topic(s). Not choosing is also a choice. Since lunch happens every day, you can choose new topics and conversation styles for each day. If you want to be really avant-garde, and channel artists such as Merce Cunningham who used chance in their art making processes, get some story dice and choose a conversation topic randomly (or you can assign topics to numbers and then use regular dice). Or use a spreadsheet on your phone to generate random numbers linked to a list of topics. But, then put your phone down, turn it off, and talk to the people around you until the meal is done.

The guests

No meal is complete without some guests. The students from Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica have decided how to prepare the Callaloo, have created a music playlist for the school cafeteria DJ, and have put together their all-time fantasy Cricket teams. They then sent letters to their friends in Finland inviting them to have lunch at their school (inspired by the envelopes shown below).

(Teachers could have their students practice writing a lunch invitation letter, or design a lunch invitation postcard, maybe with a photo of something interesting from the school or neighborhood and the menu for the lunch.)



Now their friends from Finland arrive.

How can the students make their culturally responsive meal satisfying for everyone at the school, and their guests? (If you want to get very sophisticated about a special meal, including how to greet people, read "The Art of Gathering" by Priya Parker.)

Keep in mind, for when you are inviting guests for a real event, rather than for this pre-set hypothetical event, that guest invitations can be sent to anyone and everyone, or invitations can be selective. There are about 180 school lunches in a regular school year, so there are many opportunities to be welcoming to many guests. Also, if an event is intended to be, for example, a once a year charity benefit, it could be very elaborate. If

the culturally responsive menu event is intended to happen more often, such as once per week, a less elaborate event would be appropriate.

Once participants have completed this process as a thought experiment, document it so the participants, and others, can learn from the experience. Then implement such a culturally responsive meal for real. Document how it went. Repeat.

Bonus challenge

Since I couldn't find any stamps depicting Callaloo, the students could design their own Callaloo stamp.

One option could be to use these pre-independence stamps as a design model.



In design terms, each of these stamps has the name of the country issuing the stamp, a picture of a food, text of the name of the food, an inset with a portrait of a person, a symbol representing the person, and the denomination of the stamp.

For an up to date, culturally responsive version of this stamp design, there might be a picture of Callaloo, a portrait of a chef who is skilled at making Callaloo, an emblem of the chef (a knife and a spoon?), and a denomination. Not that one would have to start with this design, of course, but starting from a classic stamp design would make the task easier than starting from a blank page for students who are beginning designers. In this case, the country name could be the country this Callaloo represents (or both Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago - sometimes two countries jointly issue stamps), or it could be NYC, the borough of the school or the name of the school.

Final thoughts

The motto of Jamaica, as seen on the first day cover below, is "Out of Many, One People". This, it seems to me, is also one good way to think concisely about the challenge of and potential goals for creating culturally responsive menus. It seems to me that the goal should not be simply to serve traditional Jamaican foods to students of Jamaican heritage, and traditional Trinidadian and Tobagoan foods to Trinidadian and Tobagoan students, and bagels and cream cheese to people like myself whose ancestral homeland is Brooklyn, and Rather, if we are approaching the challenge of culturally

responsive menus within each school, the goal ought to be to learn from, and together with, the diverse people within each school community. Out of this learning and conversation will come a cuisine that will help the students eat well to learn well. This cuisine will be dynamic. It will be authentic, traditional, contemporary and cutting edge. It will grow from year to year. We are New Yorkers, so there will be endless arguments, but hopefully a minimum of yelling. If we do our job as educators well, culturally responsive menus will lead to learning that, like New Yorkers, never stops. Except for lunch.



P.S. Write a letter to a chef and let us know what you think of the lunch.

Resources and other ideas

Curriculum extensions

Students could interview family members about a dish. This could be a good way to create engagement, understanding and discussion about culturally responsive foods.

Other potential challenges to keep in mind

How much time do you have for your culturally responsive meal event? How will you stay on schedule? Will what you want to do fit within the time usually allotted for lunch at your school? If you need to, what exceptions to the usual constraints or school day routine do you need to be made, and how will you go about getting those exceptions approved? How will you prepare a budget for your event, and how will the money for food or anything else you need be obtained? Do you need any special cooking equipment that your school doesn't already have?

There are always challenges, but don't let that stop you. Just remember that there will be Callaloo to share at the end of this journey, so you won't be hungry. We hope it is delicious.

Callaloo recipes

- 1) Callaloo recipes found by Chef George Edwards
 - a. Vegan Callaloo Dip (<https://www.jamesbeard.org/recipes/vegan-callaloo-dip>)
 - b. Callaloo Jamaican Style Recipe (<https://www.africanbites.com/callaloo-jamaican-style/>)
- 2) Restaurant serving Callaloo, recommended by a Jamaican colleague of Robert's
 - a. Natural Blend Café in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn (<http://naturalblendcafe.com/>) - Go to Menus, and then scroll to Jamaican Style Patties)

Please note that we haven't tried these recipes or restaurants yet. If you try these, or find other leads and resources that relate to culturally responsive menus, let us know and we can expand this section.