

Melissa Fuster's book wins national award

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Tulane SPHTM

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Dr. Melissa Fuster's book -- [“Caribeños at the Table: How Migration, Health, and Race Intersect in New York City,”](#) from the University of North Carolina Press -- has received the First Book Award from [the Association for the Study of Food in Society](#), a multidisciplinary professional association with international membership.

The [award](#) recognizes books that “employ exemplary research methods, offer novel theoretical insights and constitute a significant contribution to the study of food from a scholarly perspective,” as well as considering writing style, organizational rigor, and thesis strength.

The book, which was [published in 2021](#) and subsequently featured at the [2023 New Orleans Book Festival](#), addresses issues pertinent to public health and nutrition, focusing on Hispanic Caribbean communities in New York City.

Born and raised in Puerto Rico, [Fuster](#) is an associate professor of public health nutrition at the Tulane School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine.

Fuster completed her BA in Sociology and Anthropology at Florida International University and a doctoral degree in Food Policy and Applied Nutrition at Tufts University. After researching healthy eating among poor Salvadoran communities for her doctoral dissertation, Fuster was awarded a postdoctoral fellowship in Food Studies at New York University. This facilitated the work that later became *Caribeños at the Table*. Before joining the faculty at Tulane, she was an Assistant Professor at the City University of New York Brooklyn College.

“Coming to New York City allowed me to engage in research that directly related to my Puerto Rican community. Puerto Ricans, more often than not, show high rates of obesity and related chronic conditions. I really wanted to understand why this was the case, beyond usual explanations that focused on individual factors. So I brought the other fellow caribeños, Dominicans and Cubans, into my research to be better able to examine food practices within contexts that shared a common history, resulting in similar cuisines, yet differed strikingly in political and economic situations, resulting in different communities and outcomes.”

In her book, Fuster thinks expansively about the multiple meanings of comida, food, from something as simple as a meal to something as complex as one’s identity. She listens intently to the voices of New York City residents with Cuban, Dominican, or Puerto Rican backgrounds, as well as to those of the nutritionists and health professionals who serve them.

She also shows how nutritionists and eaters often misrepresent and even racialize a cuisine’s healthfulness by overlooking the economic and racial hardships migrants experience.

Dr. Fuster’s research examines the contextual factors influencing food practices and the policies and interventions implemented to improve them. This work applies a multidisciplinary approach to exploring underlying social determinants of diet-related health inequities, focusing on Latin American and diaspora communities.

The paperback version of Fuster’s book [can be found here](#).