Chapter 17. Confronting the Uncomfortable: Food and First-Year Composition

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> "Don't get your fuel from the same place your car does."
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> — *Michael Pollan, Food Rules (57)*

With the popularity of food-related documentaries such as *Super-Size Me* and *Food Inc.*, in conjunction with pivotal texts like Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* and Michael Pollan's *Omnivore's Dilemma,* food rhetoric has never been more in the public eye. Television has followed suit with popular programs like *Top Chef, Chopped, No Reservations*, and a variety of influential shows on Food Network. In her editorial "What Does It Mean to Write about Food Today?" Evan Kleiman argues that "Writing (and reading) about food has the ability to connect the corporeal, the intellectual and the spiritual worlds we inhabit. That's why food writing is so important now" (465). The mainstream awareness of local, organic, and vegetarian/vegan food movements, primarily as a response to fast food and factory farming, provides an interesting context for college freshmen. Kleiman writes that "How we feed ourselves, in the 21st century in the first world is a choice that has huge moral consequences. For many, the idea that it's a choice may be news" (465). Janet Cramer and Lynn Walters echo this sentiment in the introduction to their book *Food as Communication, Communication as Food*: "Over the last few decades, we have witnessed a rise in food-focused consumption, media, and culture. . . . It seems as if food and the discourses surrounding it, are all over the place, from Jamie Oliver's ventures in American school lunchrooms to news stories about urban gardening or buying organic products at the local farmer's market" (ix).

In recent years, food has become a prevalent topic in college writing courses across the United States. A session at the 2011 College Composition and Communication Conference, *Food for Thought and Action*, proclaimed food issues a part of larger economic, cultural, political and environmental trends, and urged attendees to incorporate food discourse into composition classrooms. Individual presenters shared instructional techniques for food and rhetoric, food blogging inside and outside of the classroom, food and service learning, and food and identity formation (CCCC, 2011). Furthermore, a recent themed issue of *College English* also offers philosophical and pedagogical perspectives on food writing and literature. Lynn Bloom, in addressing the "delectable rhetoric of food writing," describes the

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genre as "offer[ing] control over at least a small slice of an otherwise refractory world [because it] is most often upbeat and nurturing, providing successes and triumphs—modest and major—for readers to feast on, with occasional glimpses of utopia" (346). Because food stresses abundance, Bloom notes, "Scarcity is not an option," but is instead relegated to the social sciences in fields like politics, history, and sociology. Barbara Waxman extends the discussion to the food memoir which she sees as a "bonding of love and emotion," an expression of cultural identity to people outside a cultural community (363). Waxman situates food memoir in autobiographical theory and the construction of identity which serves to anchor one's self and life. Such a process is a "neurological construction rather than a retrieval operation" (366). Jennifer Cognard-Black and Melissa Goldwaithe also stress the fundamental humanity inherent in food and food writing, asserting that "To teach food as a written art form, is to teach a part of what it means to be human," and they counter negative comments by colleagues who are incredulous that food writing and literature create serious classroom discourse. For Cognard-Black and Goldwaithe, food texts help transmit traditions and history through "Practices of sharing, preparing, and eating recipes [that] help students connect writing and learning to the multiplicities of their own personal food literacies" (422). While most of the writers mentioned above stress the communal aspects of food and how those can be used to engage students in first-year composition courses, I find it useful to push in the opposite direction.

Discomfort Food

One or two young contrarians bravely raise their hands when I ask who in class would try the recipe for stewed dog presented in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Eating Animals*. I even motion toward the door and explain that I have a Crock-Pot of it back in my office. When students begin to shift uncomfortably in their seats, when they begin turning to one another and murmuring things like, "Is he serious?" and one invariably exclaims, "But that's not right!"—then we can begin to delve into the moral and cultural taboos that are broken when we consider eating dogs. Ten or fifteen minutes later, nearly half the class is ready to admit that, in the right situation, they would eat the dog.

Of course the goal here is not to promote the consumption of household pets, but this discussion, which I hold on the first day of my freshman composition course *The Rhetoric of Food* is intended to introduce students to the many unspoken assumptions and decisions that undergird our interaction with food. I strive in my class to make my students more proficient writers, readers, thinkers, and eaters, asking them to consider the various cultural, moral, and political ramifications of the choices that we make regarding food. To do this, I challenge students to embrace the difficult truths and uncomfortable realities that conscious, conscientious eaters face in today's world. In their essay "The Novice as Expert: Writing

the Freshman Year," Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz discuss the importance of challenging students in freshman writing classes to "build authority not by writing *from* a position of expertise but by writing *into* expertise" (134). They discuss the importance of using the course as a threshold: "Thresholds, of course, are dangerous places. Students are asked as freshmen to leave something behind and to locate themselves in the realms of uncertainty and ambiguity. It doesn't take long for most first-year students to become aware of the different expectations between high school and college writing, that something more is being offered to them and, at the same time, asked of them" (125). Rather than shying away from the uncertainty and discomfort associated with this approach, I embrace it in my choice of discussion topics, writing assignments, and course texts.

What's at Steak? (groan)

For most college students, eating is a perilous activity. Traditional college students have either just left home and moved into a dorm—left to fend for themselves with choices limited to fast food, not-much-better-cafeteria food, or whatever they can cook on their probably-illegal hotplate—or are still living at home and eating whatever their parents serve them. Non-traditional college students have more freedom but less time, and, for most of the students I have taught, there is a willful neglect of eating healthily or ethically in favor of food handed to them through a window and finished before they arrive home. For my students, the economic realities of eating are perhaps the least comfortable, as eating ethically and organically is something that most people cannot afford to do.

In teaching multiple iterations of this course over the past few years, I have been continually surprised by the wide range of experiences and perspectives that arise during class discussion. When I asked one student, who had decided to try vegetarianism for a ten-week class project, how she planned to accomplish this potentially difficult goal, she replied, "I'll just eat a lot of chicken." However, for every response like this one, I encounter another student who is well aware of the problems posed by factory farming and fast food industries. I have taught students who grew up on small farms and eat only animals raised in those environments, hunters who have thought a great deal about the ethical implications of eating meat, and fast food workers who bring incredible anecdotal evidence supporting claims made in course readings.

Keeping the course objectives of the freshman composition sequence in mind is an important part in conceptualizing the course. I am conscious of not proselytizing for local and organic food to my students, though it is often tempting to do so. Teaching students to eat right, as important as it is, unfortunately is not an outcome of first-year communication courses. The struggle is to balance this ethical dimension of the class with the more relevant outcomes of teaching the principles of logical argument, critical reading, and effective writing.

Critical Reading

For the course texts, I choose readings that are confrontational about how and why we make decisions about what we eat. For example, Michael Pollan's "Out of the Kitchen, Onto the Couch" discusses the inverse correlation between the time we spend cooking and the time we spend watching people cook on television. I have also used Safran Foer's *Eating Animals*, Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation*, and Pollan's *Omnivore's Dilemma* to demonstrate how to create larger arguments that approach the similar topics from drastically different perspectives.

David Foster Wallace's essay "Consider the Lobster" is perhaps the quintessential text for a course on discomfort food. Originally written for *Gourmet* magazine, the piece begins as a narrative of Foster Wallace's experience at the Maine Lobster Festival. In these pages, Foster Wallace describes the bacchanalian experience of attending the massive festival. However, midway through the lengthy essay, he addresses his growing concern—"So then here is a question that's all but unavoidable at the World's Largest Lobster Cooker, and may arise in kitchens across the U.S.: Is it all right to boil a sentient creature alive just for our gustatory pleasure?" (243). From this point onward, the essay turns into a discussion of complex questions that we often eschew:

> The more important point here, though, is that the whole animal-cruelty-and-eating issue is not just complex, it's also uncomfortable. It is, at any rate, uncomfortable for me, and for just about everyone I know who enjoys a variety of foods and yet does not want to see herself as cruel or unfeeling. As far as I can tell, my own main way of dealing with this conflict has been to avoid thinking about the whole unpleasant thing. (Wallace 246)

The publication of this controversial piece in *Gourmet* provides an opportunity for students to think about audience; furthermore, Foster Wallace's structurally elegant rendering of this moral dilemma provides a model for developing writers of how to weave narrative and analytical discourse together in a satisfying way.

Discussions and Assignments

Early class discussions negotiate the various types of guilt that we feel as eaters—guilt about eating too much food, about eating overly processed foods, about having food while people in other countries do not, about eating other living creatures, about not caring or thinking enough about our food choices. As students become more informed about and engaged in the rhetoric of eating, they begin to gravitate toward the ideas and concepts that are the most important and/or relevant to them. Many of these discussions are deeply uncomfortable for students, as they begin to realize the deeply troubling nature of the industrial farming complex and the near impossibility of removing themselves from it. We talk at length about

what and why they are affected by these readings, which provides a context for discussing ethos, pathos, and logos. Students become adept at recognizing when various appeals are being used, and how they are being used by different authors at different times. For some students, the notion of animal pain and suffering strikes the hardest; for others, fear of becoming sick (we spend an inordinate amount of time discussing what Safran Foer dubs *fecal soup* in industrial chickens) weighs the heaviest. Some find themselves enthralled by stories of midnight trips to factory farms or attempts to track a single cow from birth to burger; others are more convinced by the sheer numbers and vastness of the systems.

Although students respond to these discussions in a variety of ways, it is interesting to see a small number invariably set about trying to poke holes in arguments for vegetarianism or against factory farming: "If everyone stopped eating meat, what would happen to the animals? And the jobs?" or perhaps "That chicken is already dead by the time it gets to the grocery store—there's nothing to do with it at that point." These completely understandable reactions provide amazing opportunities to demonstrate how arguments are structured (more often than not, they point us to a discussion of rhetorical fallacies), and they lead students to identify the areas of food rhetoric that matter to them.

These interests manifest themselves in the central project for the course, an electronic food journal; a few weeks into class, students begin this assignment, which asks them to set specific food-related goals for themselves and then track them over the course of ten weeks. In subsequent weeks, they respond to prompts that are aligned with course readings and other course assignments. One prompt asks them to interview people in their lives; another asks them to keep extensive notes of what they eat throughout the week, identifying what, where, why, and how much they eat; another asks them to prepare a recipe and chronicle the experience for their readers. The larger goal of the project is to allow students to develop ideas and set goals that they strive toward over a period of time, interacting with each other, course texts, and the outside world to arrive at a better understanding of their place in the food system.

I echo these goals in a service-learning project that I try to incorporate into the structure of the course. Given the nature of the course, it is important that students communicate some of what we have discussed in class to the outside world. Although I have handled this differently in various iterations of the course, at some point I always direct students outward. In the past, this has manifested itself in interviews with family members, school administrators, and people in the food service and food production industries. Other projects have asked students to compose and send letters to members of the community in which they solicited information, made recommendations, and proposed solutions to food-related problems. The service-learning aspects of the course provide students the opportunity to communicate what they have learned in the real world, with real consequences and to real people, which pulls together many of the predominant issues recurring throughout the course.

Thanksgiving: The Final Exam

Especially when I teach the course in the fall semester, Thanksgiving looms ominously in the distance for most of my students. In the final chapter of *Eating Animals*, Safran Foer argues that "The Thanksgiving turkey embodies the paradoxes of eating animals: what we do to living turkeys is just about as bad as anything humans have ever done to any animal in the history of the world. Yet what we do with their dead bodies can feel so powerfully good and right" (249). For many of my students, it provides a litmus test as to their feelings moving into the future about eating meat and eating ethically. In the final entry of their food journals, I ask students to consider how the class has changed their view of Thanksgiving.

In the final weeks of the course, I shift the focus and the tone toward things that we can do, steps that we can take to be more comfortable in our interaction with food. The final course reading is Michael Pollan's *Food Rules*, which lays out (in easy-to-read pamphlet form) a set of 64 steps that we *can* take, foods that we *should* eat, and ways that we can survive in today's world. The final assignment is an oral presentation where students explain a few of Pollan's rules and demonstrate them through visual and edible aids. I stress the importance of engaging thoughtfully with any food being served to the class; by making the food demonstrable evidence of the rules in Pollan's book, students are impelled to enact the principles learned throughout the course. While it may not be easy—for students, the logistics of preparing and serving food can be overwhelming—the class ends by eating food, prepared with thought and care by people who, months earlier, may not have even known that chicken was considered meat.

Conclusion

Everybody eats. As a first-year composition theme, food inherently appeals to students across political, socioeconomic, racial, and gender boundaries. However an instructor approaches the course, writing and talking about food in the space of the first-year composition classroom provides students with a safe space and bountiful opportunities to consider the questions and assumptions that underpin our everyday relationship with the foods we eat. In ways that are comfortable, uncomfortable, or both, students learn to read, write, speak, and think critically about how what we eat defines who we are.

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