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Diving into Food Justice: Food Waste in the Anthropocene

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Overview

The Anthropocene calls for greater attention to the various and complicated ways by which humans interact with the environment and compels critical dialogue to identify and implement alternative solutions. With few exceptions, organisms (including human and more-than-human) require food as a biological need for survival. The global agrifood system has broad environmental consequences. For example, “getting food from the farm to our fork eats up 10 percent of the total U.S. energy budget, uses 50 percent of U.S. land, and swallows 80 percent of all freshwater consumed in the United States” (Gunders, 2012). Food ranks among the top five energy-consuming industries, including all sectors from farm to table, that together account for 60% of total energy consumption worldwide (US Department of State, 2010). Food uniquely illustrates humans’ impact on natural systems and the environment.

We each enact our participation in the global agrifood system every time we eat. One bite of food has travelled an estimated 1500 miles (Barrett, 2013). Nearly 60% of American consumers dine out, in restaurants or fast food, at least once per week (Rasmussen Reports, 2013); the American consumer spends approximately \$4,000 per year on groceries (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). The average U.S. household wastes nearly 25% of all food and beverage purchased (Bloom, 2010). By 2050, global food demand is expected to triple (Schade & Pimentel, 2010). The mundane nature of food consumption (and waste) renders these conditions invisible; most consumers have little knowledge of where their food comes from, the labor conditions under which it was produced, and where it goes when the trashcan is picked up. Indeed, waste is built into the very functioning of the food system in the Anthropocene—evidenced, for example, by corporate donations of surplus production to food banks and pantries (Seifert, 2009). Food waste thus represents a practice of inequitable agrifood politics in which (human) consumers embody a position from which they *can* waste precious resources and pollute our natural environment, particularly as rates of global hunger and poverty continue to rise.

This classroom assignment uses documentary film and social media to engage students in considering the tensions between food and environment in the age of the Anthropocene. Becoming aware of what we eat, and how much gets wasted, can be empowering. Examining food-related practices and reducing food waste engages food justice while offering opportunities to contribute to progressive change every day. Food waste is thus one accessible avenue for teaching about the environment, implications of individual actions, and the need for agrifood system change in the Anthropocene. After watching the documentary film *Dive*, students complete a reflective activity in which they visually record and post to social media their personal food waste. This is followed by a critical analysis of personal consumption and food waste habits, students’ experience with the social media posts, and the connections between individual consumption and agrifood system change.

Rationale

Increased attention to agrifood politics and food justice has raised awareness of issues like food security, food system labor, and food waste. Books including Marion Nestle's (2007) *Food Politics*, Raj Patel's (2007) *Stuffed and Starved*, and Michael Pollan's (2006) *The Omnivore's Dilemma* have been popular bestsellers in the public sphere. Food is increasingly being taken up from a variety of academic perspectives, including media and pop culture (Shugart, 2008), environmental communication (Lindenfeld, 2011; Click & Ridberg, 2010; Singer, 2011), gender and feminist studies (Adams, 1990; Avakian & Haber, 2005; Munoz, 2008), and cultural studies (Counihan & Van Esterik, 2008).

It is important to situate a lesson on food waste within the context of **agrifood politics**. Denoting the range of food and agriculture sectors and industries- from growing and harvesting, to distributing and transporting, to shelving and selling, as well as marketing and consuming- agrifood politics represents the power relations embedded in the global food system (Fairbairn, 2012; Hunt, 2016). Although there is widespread contestation of terms in the literature, we find that agrifood politics articulates the supply chain through which food travels, connecting food to agricultural practice while grounding all aspects of the food system in the environment.

Broadly, **food justice** “ensur[es] that the benefits and risks of where, what, and how food is grown and produced, transported and distributed, and accessed and eaten are shared fairly” (Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010, p. 6). As a lens for the global agrifood system, food justice challenges us to consider the impact of individual actions and collective, infrastructural changes that can prompt change and environmental progress. With House (2014), we share the ethical imperative of food justice. Indeed, as Burke (2013) states, “as we enter an age of escalating ecological turmoil, we must teach environmental values...equipping our students to navigate a world that will pit them against others in the ferocious fight over diminishing natural resources” (p. 53). Thus, we see studying food justice as an intervention in the Anthropocene, offering students an opportunity to interrogate inequitable systems that degrade the environment, marginalize vulnerable populations, and contribute to surplus production and inequitable distribution of resources.

Like the name suggests, **dumpster diving** is a method of food procurement by salvaging edible waste from commercial garbage sites, primarily grocery and food retail outlets' dumpsters (Eikenberry & Smith, 2005). Since nearly 10% of the total retail food supply is thrown away each year (Gunders, 2012), dumpster diving is a reaction to corporate food waste, surplus production, and overconsumption. As an alternative means of food acquisition, dumpster diving interrogates what counts as “good” food, while also exposing the limits of industrial food production, distribution, and consumption in the exigency of resource scarcity in the Anthropocene.

General Timeline

This assignment has four parts: (a) agrifood politics and food justice readings; (b) documentary film and discussion; (c) social media reflection activity; (d) debriefing and discussion of food waste solutions. The lesson plan detailed in the next section can be adapted to a variety of courses including those covering environmental studies and sustainability, communication and

media studies, and social justice. As outlined, this lesson can be divided among class sessions to last as long as two weeks.

Detailed Lesson Plan

Prior to viewing the film: Students are assigned to watch Will Steffen’s 2011 TEDX talk, “The Anthropocene,” as well as read Lars Eighner’s (1992) personal essay “On Dumpster Diving” and Dana Gunders’s (2012) Natural Resources Defense Council issue paper, “Wasted: How America Is Losing Up to 40 Percent of Its Food from Farm to Fork to Landfill.” For an advanced or graduate-level course, instructors could also assign Steffen’s most recent co-authored article, “The Trajectory of the Anthropocene: The Great Acceleration,” as well as Eikenberry and Smith’s (2005), “Attitudes, Beliefs, and Prevalence of Dumpster Diving as a Means to Obtain Food by Midwestern, Low-income, Urban Dwellers.”

A discussion can be used to guide students’ comprehension of the above and frame the lesson. Potential questions that may be posed include, (a) How do the authors frame the topics of the Anthropocene, food waste, and dumpster diving?; (b) How does the mediated form of each text (speech/video, personal essay, or report) influence how these topics are presented?; (c) How are issues of humans’ environmental impact and food waste related to food justice?

Part 1 (80 minutes)

Introduce and view the documentary film, *Dive*. The film is 40 minutes long, lending itself to classroom viewing and discussion, in both shorter and longer class sessions. During the film students take notes, considering elements of the film’s presentation of dumpster diving and food waste. Discussion questions and a viewing guide are included in the Teaching Materials section. Instructors should lead a class discussion after viewing the film, guiding students to articulate responses to agrifood politics and food justice.

Part 2 (80 minutes, or spread over several class periods)

With knowledge of the issues gained from the readings, and their notes on *Dive*, students are equipped to consider the food justice implications of their own food waste practices through social media. By photographing and documenting their personal experiences of food procurement, consumption, and waste, students can consider their participation in the agrifood system, reflect on their implication in food justice, and will be ready to offer solutions (Part 3 below) for improving food and environmental practices.

A. Instructors should gather one or more sample social media feeds (examples are listed in the Teaching Materials section), or alternatively have students identify one as homework. Through a class discussion, students can analyze the ways in which mediated platforms and so-called social media “feeds” invite users to fetishize food and consumption and forget about waste. Instructors should guide students to consider the ways in which food media representations are related to the material realities of the food system, including food waste. Students will likely readily recognize the ubiquity of “food porn” or “camera cuisine” (Garber, 2016) but should also think deeply about what gets included and excluded in food posts and pictures. Sample observation prompts are included in the Teaching Materials section.

After students have developed a robust list of observations related to mediated representations of food and waste, findings can be shared in class discussion. Analysis of food feeds should be framed to consider the food justice implications of re-presenting food waste practices via the mediated platforms chosen. For example, editing photos for aesthetics contributes to ideologies of beautiful and bountiful food, memorializing the moment of consumption while obscuring agrifood politics embedded in the supply chain (such as environmental and other impacts) and neglecting post-consumption practices such as waste.

B. After studying the sample feeds, students are instructed to photograph and share images of their own wasted food. The class should be divided so that a number of mediated platforms are represented, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat; a hashtag could be used to collect the groups' images so comparisons can be made later on. Instructors may choose how long to have students complete this activity; we suggest two days to one week.

Because asking students to use personal social media accounts comes with ethical complications regarding privacy, instructors may choose to create course accounts specific for this assignment. Instructors should also consider how exposing and examining students' eating habits might trigger those who struggle with eating disorders, food hardship or food insecurity, as well as private dietary restrictions or preferences. As an alternative, instructors could address these challenges by engaging with public accounts that address the topic of food waste. Sample hashtags, accounts, and apps are included in the Teaching Materials section.

C. Students should analyze the photos, as well as the comments and reactions they elicited, comparing them to the sample social media displays of food discussed previously. If students have a week to complete this project, they can create a presentation of screen captures in order to show their classmates what feedback their waste photos elicited and compare their findings to others' results.

Part 3 (80 minutes, or a single class period)

As an ethical imperative, food justice entreats reconsideration of individual action in relation to its societal and environmental impacts (Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010). The final component of this activity connects food waste and food justice through an active vision for social and environmental change in the age of the Anthropocene. The social media activity in Part 2 should be used to prompt reflection of possible solutions for preventing food waste and, thereby, practicing food justice.

Students can work in teams to brainstorm food waste solutions based on observations from the social media feeds in Part 2. Students should use these mediated representations to identify food waste practices that can be manageably reduced or eliminated. For example, some students might identify sources of food waste on their campus, such as the dining hall buffet or catered events that yield leftover food. Photos of personal food waste may illuminate the absence of a community (or, perhaps dorm) compost program, prompting students to consider ways of mobilizing their neighbors to begin composting food waste and donating it to a local (or campus) garden.

Depending on the course in which this documentary and lesson plan is used, instructors may also have students craft written proposals that offer plans for food waste prevention. For example, students who completed this lesson at Iowa State University took action on campus food waste by writing a proposal for harvesting fruit from campus fruit trees and including it in the dining hall offerings. Alternatively, students could craft recipes that utilize parts of food that they typically waste (such as turning beet greens into a salad), as in the James Beard Foundation's No Food Waste campaign (JFB Editors, 2016).

The social media activity could be expanded into a semester-long project. Beyond analyzing their own food waste, students can use social media to make campus food waste more public and visible. Students could search their own campus for the trends Eighner describes. For example, attending to the academic calendar for transition periods (such as between terms) that prompt additional food waste: “[college students] tend to throw everything out when they move at the end of a semester, before and after breaks, and around midterm when many of them despair of college...Some students, and others, approach defrosting a freezer by chucking out the whole lot. Not only do the circumstances of such a find tell the story, but also the mass of frozen goods stays cold for a long time and items may be found still frozen or freshly thawed” (Eighner, 1992, 89).

Teaching Materials

Film: Obtain a copy of *Dive* (2009), directed by Jeremy Seifert.

Documentary Discussion Questions: These questions should be prepared as a viewing guide worksheet, on which students may take notes during the film:

As you watch the film, think about how Jeremy Seifert (the filmmaker) presents the issue of food waste. Use the questions below to make connections with Steffen's TEDx talk and the other assigned readings.

- a. How does the film use food waste to make a statement about agrifood politics?
- b. What evidence does the film use to present dumpster diving as a food justice issue?
- c. Discuss the relationship between consumers' purchasing habits and retailers' food waste as presented in the film. Draw on details from the film to support your response.
- d. Why is dumpster diving presented as a viable food procurement strategy in the Anthropocene? (Refer to Steffen's TEDx talk)
- e. What are the implications of continued overconsumption in the age of the Anthropocene?
- f. What are other solutions to food waste you can think of that not presented in this film?

Depending on the length of the class, no time may be available to discuss students' responses immediately after watching the film, in which case the first part of the worksheet becomes a bridge to the next class session.

Social Media Activity and Reflection: For Part 2 of this lesson, students can identify food-, food justice-, and food policy-related social media feeds, such as authors or public figures who cover food politics, Food Network celebrity chefs, popular restaurants, or specific cuisines or dietary choices. Sample Twitter and Instagram accounts include: @beardfoundation, @food52, @foodintheair, @spoonuniversity, @ohsheglows, @grubstreet, @luckypeach, @biggayicecream, @soulfoodscholar, @AGreeAgPolicy, @alicewaters, @foodfirstorg, @bittman, @AmpleHarvest. Further, students could monitor food waste-related hashtags: #lickitclean, #foodwaste, #fightfoodwaste, #ivaluefood, #jbnofoodwaste. Finally, students could research the affordances of apps like Food Cowboy and LeanPath that harness social media to prevent food waste.

Students' observations of mediated representations of food waste can be guided by the following prompts:

1. What trends do you notice in the way that food is re-presented in the social media feeds?
2. What is included and excluded in the posted photos? What does food, and food waste, look like in the photos and how it is described in any text included in the posts?
3. What kinds of feedback do the posts elicit? What is the general tenor of responses or reactions to food posts?

These questions invite students to think through the productivity (including what gets re-presented as well as erased) of food media feeds and critically consider the connections between food waste and food justice.

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Biographies

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Abby M. Dubisar teaches about and researches the intersections of identity and power. Some of her most recent presentations and publications analyze students' remix videos, the persuasive strategies of Iowa women farmers, cookbooks published by women peace activists, and food politics' reliance on sexist tropes. As an Assistant Professor of English and affiliate faculty member in women's and gender studies at Iowa State University, Dr. Dubisar teaches classes on rhetoric, gender, and popular culture analysis.