

Composition Forum 34, Summer 2016

Taco Literacies: Ethnography, Foodways, and Emotions through Mexican Food Writing



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Abstract: Foodways literacies offer composition courses a rich opportunity to enact a “sensual pedagogy” that explores affect through cross-cultural culinary encounters. In this assignment description, I present a class I developed at the University of Kentucky, Taco Literacy, as an example of such pedagogy. The class explores the languages and literacies of Mexican migration through the lens of emotionally resonant foodways.

Assignment Theoretical Rationale

In “Bitter After Taste: Affect, Food, and Social Aesthetics,” Ben Highmore explores the deep emotional registers linked to culinary preferences through cross-class and cross-cultural encounters as a form of “sensual pedagogy.” In what could be read as learning about culture through flavor and intensity, Highmore describes a “sensual pedagogy” in which students undergo a “sensual realignment” (134). For Highmore, the socially-situated, visceral experiences of food include feelings that range, for example, from disdain to respect. Affect and teaching here connect learning through the senses with aesthetic and critical orchestration of taste as a locus of meaning. The food that powers the body is a central network of meaning, but food is also a visceral teaching tool. It’s involving, embodied, and consuming. Highmore’s sensual pedagogy presents a fresh and practical theoretical frame encompassing affect, foodways, literacy, and race, positing that “every flavour has an emotional resonance (sweetness, sourness, bitterness)” (120). The bio-cultural arena linked to food invokes forms of sensual perception and affective registers of visceral experience, suggesting that affect is central in pedagogies engaging the ethical tastes and habits of students. No doubt, students relate to taste preferences, but, like most of us, are hard-pressed to explain why we have such reactions.

Highmore describes how a sensual pedagogy extends into affective politics and further expands the aesthetic and critical realms of communities. The transformative potential of a sensual pedagogy through food defamiliarizes habitual interactions as moments for learning. Highmore’s sensual pedagogy can be extended into writing assignments crafted around politicizing foodways with respect to the links in the production and consumption chains. Sensual pedagogies exploring foodways bring already entangled communities into direct engagement through the uses of literacies as materialities.

This sensual pedagogy Highmore describes in the U.S. context finds resonance in Mexican food, also often associated with a “nuclear burning of spices” and a long history of emotional resonances that invoke affective registers both welcoming and exclusive. In recent years, both journalists and academics in the humanities have shown increasing interest in connecting the migrations of Mexican food in the United States to multilingual, transnational, and cross-cultural issues (Arellano, Morton, Pilcher). Even as they have added to the immense number of cookbooks out there and to restaurant reviews appearing in periodicals, the humanities and journalism have also collaborated in producing texts addressing important social justice issues related to foodways. These issues include migrant labor, digital activism, and the translation of indigenous Mexican cuisine as a challenge to imperialized diets (Calvo and Esquibel).

Indeed, the influence of Mexican food in the United States is deeply connected to local intercultural experiences that extend beyond disciplines, genres, and national borders; food is also very much an *emotional* element of immigrants’

experiences. Food can sustain affective connections and build publics across borders and languages. These important, emotional networks should not be overlooked. Rather, composition classes can access them by engaging students in a sensorial literacy that includes embodied, emotional experiences—like eating and thinking about eating—experiences that activate students' imaginations and fire their will to act.

The restaurant review assignment I present here is from the 400-level course I teach titled “Taco Literacy: Public Advocacy and Mexican Food in the U.S. South.” The single assignment complements the larger course goals, which focus on students as ethnographers exploring the affective foodways of Mexican immigrants in the U.S. South—the region of the nation experiencing the fastest growth of Mexican migration. Students in the course are ethnographers in training, studying the local voices of foodways that intersect with public emotion. This student-centered, foodways-focused, sensual pedagogy requires students to conduct fieldwork among communities and to learn by listening to, and recording, the stories of local lived experiences around food.

Assignment Pedagogical Goals

The food literacy assignment asks students to (1) write about their sensory experiences with Mexican food, their preferences and their personal tastes with regards to Mexican food as part of American and global cuisines; (2) engage an oral history project connected to a review of a restaurant using photography and text, and (3) explore emotion, language, and narrative foodways in the South and transnationally. Though tacos are explicitly named in the course and assignment title, they need not be the focus for this assignment. Students composed reviews about quesadillas, tamales, tortas, and churros.

The Assignment

This photo-essay review assignment complements the five projects students in Taco Literacy conduct about Mexican foodways and literacies in the South. In this assignment, students create multimodal narratives that combine interpretations, critical reflections, and artistic choices that capture emotion in images and participant observations. I also encourage a multilingual element for students to further understand Spanish etymologies. The prompt for the photo-essay review assignment reads,

For this assignment, you are to compose a photo-essay reviewing a local Mexican restaurant, following the particular dish you have been researching. Using the models of reviews we have read in class, you must also engage the global perspective of Pilcher's *Planet Taco* with the national context of Arellano's *Taco USA* tied to local responses and varieties of Mexican food. Your piece must tell a story and capture aspects of taste and emotion connected to food literacies and the location. The foodways narratives of the Southern Foodways Alliance archive are demonstrative in this respect and models to emulate. Your photos should also tell a story that gives voice to flavors.

You must also include five translations of words from Spanish, and describe the roots of words, making note of indigenous loanwords. The text should include 6-8 photographs embedded within the body of the blog post, as well as captions. The text must be 1,200 words.

Students publish these texts on digital platforms, which are linked to a class site that archives the original ethnographic research into the foodways as well as the hashtag #tacoliteracy across social media platforms. These digital archives record the growing Latino communities of the South and the issues these communities face, told through the stories about food. From this assignment, students turn to researching reviews for the restaurants they visit on platforms such as Yelp and Facebook. Students offer their own reviews and evaluations in these spaces, as well as images they collect. To finish the term, students return to local communities to conduct oral histories from individuals in the community, exploring larger issues of affect and community literacy practices.

The Assignment in Class

The assignment has proved to be more successful than I anticipated. Several students used the prism of food to uncover “affective, sensorial tuning and retuning of the social body” (Highmore 136) connected to Mexican foodways, a tuning that I had overlooked. One student focused on the emotion of “disgust” with what he deemed a misappropriation of Mexican food at the local ballpark. The student's photo-essay review examined the ballpark's “extreme churro” (a churro stuffed inside a donut topped with ice cream and chocolate sauce, intended to resemble a hotdog). The extreme churro, according to the student's research, first emerged at ballparks in Arizona but had

migrated to the South. The student was quick to point out that the extreme churro was a U.S. take on Mexican food, but he turned to some of the emotional contradictions of the treat. He wrote, “This ‘extreme churro’ came from Arizona, home to the strictest immigration laws in the United States. The churro in the ‘extreme churro’ hardly becomes recognizable, perhaps attempting to disguise the contributions of immigrants Arizona is trying so hard to keep out.” The student continued to write about how the “extreme churro” provoked in him an emotion of disgust, not only because of the extremity of its flavors but also because of the way it imposed a nativist American food (the hotdog) on a classic Mexican dessert: “The ‘extreme churro’ is definitely not an example of Mexican food, or even Mexican culture. It’s a disgusting American food that tries to make this dish ‘extreme,’ which means less Mexican and more American.”

This student’s approach of examining disgust has become another way for me to think about food literacies and affective, sensorial tuning, as well as the political erasure of Mexican food in certain contexts. But what is disgust? Inasmuch as disgust is a feeling or desire to expel an object from ourselves, in identity terms, disgust also signals dis-identification. For this student, the extreme churro was a disgust framed as a dis-identification located to a cultural contradiction that celebrates Mexican food on the one hand and enforces laws for racially policing Mexican immigrants on the other. The bodily register of disgust links flavors and feelings, for in this student’s analysis, discourses surrounding identity, immigration politics, and American consumerism ethnically season U.S. cuisine. Indeed, even the extreme churro can teach us that foodways are woven from entangled feelings and experiences that are affective sources for writing about culture and identity.

If we wish to extend sensory experiences of Mexican food migration beyond individual students or even solitary classrooms, one resource is the Southern Foodways Alliance (SFA) at the University of Mississippi (southernfoodways.org). SFA has done an excellent job of collecting and archiving narratives that highlight emotions around Southern cuisine, including Mexican food in the South. The SFA oral histories narrate positive affective relationships of nostalgia, pride, and love for Southern cuisine and people of the region. The archive also openly addresses historical changes and inequalities connected to Southern cuisine and its evolving nature. The South over the last twenty years has seen the largest growth of Latin American and Latino populations in the United States, and a recent turn toward Latino foodways by SFA has increasingly become an important focal point for understanding the changing culinary traditions of this dynamic region. As a classroom resource, the SFA oral history archives present the richly diverse U.S. South in all its complexity through the lens of foodways, helping students to better understand the cultural and affective significance of food, language, literacy, and identity for the South in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion: Toward a Foodways Sensual Pedagogy

In different contexts, the shape of this sensual pedagogy can adapt to more political issues that affect food production in the United States, including farm labor. Indeed, the agricultural wealth of the entire nation has transnational importance that depends upon immigrant labor. For instance, Gabriela Raquel Ríos’s “Cultivating Land-Based Literacies and Rhetorics” points to how food literacies can turn to deeper political forms of persuasion from activists close to the means of production. The wealth of immigrant agricultural labor in the South and in so many parts of the United States is a potential fund of visceral knowledge to study local literacy practices. This aspect of food production moves away from culinary tastes and toward agricultural workers and economics of production. The potential to explore workers’ sufferings and hopes raises affective questions about student writers’ empathetic relationships to this labor. Such a move opens a sensual pedagogy to questions of social justice and the political economy of food production.

The intersections of foodways, literacy, emotion, photography, social justice, and emergent bilingualism are rich material for writing projects at all levels. I encourage all instructors to learn more about food literacies, looking deeper into how food relates to activism and local communities through student-led qualitative research investigating local contexts, such as school lunches or ethnic food options in campus cafeterias. As Highmore writes, this “politics of the gut” (136) is as much a politics of the mind, and added to that, of the sensual literacy practices and lived experiences of communities.

Appendix

The Appendix is available in two formats:

1. [Foodways Literacies Assignment: Photo-Essay Review](#) (modifiable Word-compatible .doc)
2. [Foodways Literacies Assignment: Photo-Essay Review](#) (.pdf)

Works Cited

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