

# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## ACDC Agency: Food Politics with Community College Students at Vassar

by Robert Cowan



VASSAR COLLEGE (PHOTO COURTESY OF AUTHOR)

## Gastronomically Slumming It

The food at ACDC, Vassar's All-College Dining Commons, stinks. At least it does during the summer. Not that it literally smells foul; it just doesn't taste very good and lacks nutritional value. The students in the Exploring Transfer (ET) program eat breakfast and dinner at ACDC during their stay on campus, and lunch in another dining area called "The Retreat," which has fewer options. ET is a sort of academic boot camp for high-achieving community college students who hope to transfer to an elite liberal arts college or a Research I university. The oldest program of its kind—serving over 1,000 students in its thirty-one-year history, over 80% of whom have gone on to four-year colleges, including many Ivies—ET is a full-scholarship program in which about 35 students take two three-credit courses over five weeks, each co-designed and co-taught by one community college professor and one from Vassar (Kosmacher).

The course I had the privilege to co-teach in Exploring Transfer during the summers of 2012 and 2013 was entitled *Feast or Famine: Food, Society, Environment*. I had taught an *Orientalism/Occidentalism* course in ET in 2010, but my Vassar partner hadn't continued in the program, so I was asked whether I would be interested in teaching a course on food politics with Pinar Batur, professor of sociology and chair of Environmental Studies. Though a literature professor, I had taught a lot of texts on food issues in composition classes and jumped at the chance to explore such a pressing constellation of issues with such a rarified group of students. So Pinar and I began working on a middle ground between sociology and literary study. This course became a survey of issues concerning food systems, such as industrial farming, the role of agricultural lobbyists, food sovereignty in developing countries, food stamps, food deserts, overfishing, the roles of the USDA, FDA, WTO, IMF. We explored writers who occupy those overlapping genre spaces of environmental literature—journalism, personal essay, poetry, fiction—such as George Perkins Marsh, Rachel Carson, Wendell Berry, and Rebecca Solnit; purely nonfiction writers like Marion Nestle and Michael Pollan; as well as some not generally thought of as environmental writers but who hit on relevant issues like exploitation and imperialism, such as Joseph Mitchell and Ray Bradbury. And yet, with all of the insights the students were gleaning from these authors, they had to eat the crappy food at ACDC, prepared by a large corporation. We wondered what we could do about this ironic discrepancy.

In the two sections of this course Pinar and I taught over those two summers, we had students from Argentina, Bosnia, Bourkina Faso, China, El Salvador, Ghana, Guyana, Haiti, Italy, Mexico, Pakistan, Poland, the Philippines, Sweden, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. They came from community colleges mostly in the New York area, but also from as far away as Boston, Maine, Los Angeles, and Diné Community College, which is on a Navajo reservation in Northern Arizona. Quite apart from anything having to do with food, "AC/DC" seemed an apt metaphor for the ET

program, not for its pop-metal music connotations or sexual innuendo, but in its original electrical meaning, for ET demands that students who are accustomed to operating in one current suddenly adjust to quite another. That is to say, these primarily low-income, urban, first-generation college students are suddenly studying on a bucolic campus with huge old trees of many exotic species and beautiful nineteenth-century buildings outfitted with all the latest high-tech gear. Community college students are used to code-switching when it comes to language and culture, but when placed in the context of Vassar—recently listed as the second most expensive college in the country at almost \$48,000 a year for tuition and fees (Sheehy)—these students are class-switching. But for all the hallowed splendor of the campus, the regular students at Vassar<sup>1</sup> are not able to escape the reach of industrial food giants on their campus either. Food inequality has generally been thought of as a class issue—for many very good and logical reasons, such as the fact that the least healthy foods are often the least expensive; however, as our globalized economic system has expanded, such forms of inequality now affect all classes. We are all subject to the dictates of larger and larger companies that benefit from the contradictory roles of government agencies like the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which as both nutrition-policy maker and agribusiness advocate helps corporations use high volume and cheaper ingredients to undersell smaller competitors and thus increase market share. Acknowledging such inequalities can make us all feel like we are gastronomically slumming it.

## Critiques from Minamata to Mars

The course description on the syllabus asked two questions: "How do environmental thinkers approach the construction of the future?" and "How has this construction informed present debates on the impact of industrialization, urbanization, state-building, and collective movements on food production and distribution, societal challenges, and the environment?" These guiding questions were followed by our plan of attack: "We will examine how environmental thought informs different articulations of policy, the limits of praxis, and its contemporary construction of alternative futures," for "the class will work to define and practice civic responsibility and engagement as a way to combine knowledge, skills, values, and motivations to make a difference." Among the various ways that we addressed the constellation of issues around food was with Twinkies. The lesson with which we opened the course unfolds like this:

1. We read the madeleine excerpt from Proust's *Du côté de chez Swann*, in which eating a small cake dipped in tea prompts the narrator's flood of childhood memories; watch a clip of a similar Proustian moment from the animated Pixar film *Ratatouille*<sup>2</sup>; and discuss relationships between food and memory.
2. Students free-write about a significant food memory and share what they have written. Barb, from Diné, wrote about her grandmother making *Nitsidigo'i'*,

"kneeldownbread" or "Navajo tamales," in which a mush made by grinding corn in a kneeling position and wrapped in layers of cornhusks is steamed in the ashes of a wood fire. Issouf explained his nostalgia for eating *foufou* when he returns to West Africa—small balls of cassava and green plantain flour dipped in groundnut soup. And Lauren, a baker from Boston, wrote of the personal importance of various kinds of pie.<sup>3</sup>

3. I then pass out Twinkies, we eat them, and we discuss what that experience was like as compared to our food memories. Those from other countries have usually never eaten Twinkies and are often enthralled and/or appalled by their texture. Similarly, the U.S.-born students who are familiar with them either decline to partake or greedily ask for seconds.

6. Students then free-write again about why they think Twinkies have become so complicated and what they think about the shift to a more industrialized food system. Some advocate a "back to basics" approach, but aren't sure how we would feed seven billion people with smaller-scale farming. Others feel that technology can still solve the problems we've created if only "politicians did their jobs."

This lesson brings up several different issues for students—about our senses, our memories, history, progress, convenience. But they are often struck by the fact that Hostess proselytizes the Twinkie, which it calls "The Snack Cake Golden Child" that has been "enchanted the masses for generations" ("Products"), almost as a Christian civilizing mission. Those students who are from countries that were once part of colonial empires, in particular, are struck by the apparent imperialist tone of



TWINKIE COURTESY OF AUTHOR

4. We read the ad copy on the website for Hostess, the company that makes Twinkies; write on the board the ingredients we think Twinkies were probably originally made with (eggs, milk, flour...); and discuss developments in food science that made foods safer, but also presented other difficulties, such as flour being bleached and then having to be enriched with nutrients.
5. Then we read aloud the 41 ingredients on the Twinkies label along with the introduction to *Twinkie, Deconstructed*, in which author Steve Ettlinger tracks those ingredients, from Idaho phosphate mines and Chinese oil fields, to their primarily industrial uses, such as cellulose gum, which is "perfect for lending viscosity to the filling in snack cakes—or rocket fuel" (Ettlinger 115).

this message. Students love the unfolding of the Twinkie assignment and begin to see broadly the connections between the conquering attitudes that drove imperialism and colonialism and the marketing practices that drive expansion of food product markets. This issue of the civilizing mission resurfaces later in the course when we discuss a piece by South Asian scholar and climate activist Vandana Shiva on the donation of non-renewable Monsanto and Syngenta seeds to Haitian farmers after the earthquake of 2010 (Greenhalgh). Or the fact that American pork producer Smithfield has brought its products to Eastern Europe and, with its government subsidies, has been able to undersell and thus put out of business 40-60% of the small and medium-sized pig farmers in Poland and Romania (Magdoff and Tokar 22). Such examples throw into high relief the magnitude and interconnectedness of industrial food systems and underscore the difficulty in attempting to change them.

Our class was pitched at a high level for undergraduates, since part of the idea of the Exploring Transfer program is to see if students can actually cut it at a school like Vassar. But since it only met over five weeks, we assigned just four projects beyond daily homework. (The first year, we assigned five projects—one per week—but we found that these A students were mortified when they inevitably got a C on their first project because they misunderstood where the bar was. And so we made revision of the first project mandatory the second time we taught the course, which raised both their grades and the standard of acceptable work.) Our first project asked “What’s America’s Corniest Food?,” in which students choose either tortillas, steak, Smucker’s jam, or Coca Cola and explained how their food product came to be in their present form(s) and what the health and environmental implications of this transformation might be. The second assignment, “Bloomberg’s Big Gulp,” was an argument paper on the then-current decision by New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg to limit soda sizes. And the third was, “No money? Oh, SNAP!,” a quantitative reasoning assignment in which students had to invent a family and determine how they would shop for that family for a week using only food stamps, providing a financial breakdown and justifying their decisions. Each of these assignments had to draw on specific course materials, the final project requiring outside research, although most students brought in outside sources for all assignments.

Just as the Twinkie lesson blends fiction (Proust) with nonfiction (Ettlinger), evidence from nonfiction sources—like Nestle’s *Food Politics*, Pollan’s *Omnivore’s Dilemma*, and Tracie McMillan’s *The American Way of Eating*—are blended throughout the course with works of literature that help us think about the larger contexts of ethical responsibility and agency—from Marsh’s mid-nineteenth-century *Man and Nature* to Berry’s *Bringing It to the Table*. In the section on food sovereignty, essays by Eric Hold-Giménez, Miguel A. Altieri, and Jules Pretty, from Fred Magdoff and Brian Tokar’s excellent anthology *Agriculture and Food in Crisis* (2010), are given a gripping colonialist backdrop by “June 2001—And the Moon Be Still as Bright,” a short story from Ray Bradbury’s 1950 collection *The Martian Chronicles*. This story, the focal point in a collection of connected speculative fiction pieces, addresses the problem of American corporate imperialism. The fourth human expedition to Mars lands on the planet only to find that the beautiful, culturally rich, and by all appearances peaceful Martian civilization has been wiped out by chicken pox, introduced by a previous human expedition. The archeologist in the group, Jeff Spender, imagines humans renaming geographical features after companies like DuPont and snaps. He disappears for several days, then returns, having “gone native” by learning to read ancient Martian texts, and then starts killing off the other astronauts so that no more harm can be done to the indigenous population. Giacomo from Italy and Lucija from Bosnia began a passionate debate about what forms of agency are useful, appropriate, or necessary in combating invasion by outside forces, connecting Spender’s actions to Holt-Giménez’s survey of the impact that social movements have had on food politics.

We juxtaposed Spender’s violent form of protest with a quieter form of critique in veteran *New Yorker* writer Joseph Mitchell’s 1959 investigative journalism piece “Bottom of the Harbor” from a collection of the same name. Mitchell was contextualized by presentations by author Robert Sullivan on Mitchell’s influence on naturalist writers like himself, and by Vassar chemistry professor Stuart Belli on mercury and the bio-magnification of pollutants in seafood. “Bottom of the Harbor” addresses the health of New York harbor in the late 1950s, at a time when pollution and over-catch of its marine species had destroyed its health. Mitchell chronicles some of what has been lost in the three hundred years since the Dutch first arrived and took over the land from the Lenni- Lenape Indians—primarily the enormous oyster beds that stretched from Sandy Hook, NJ, all the way up the Hudson as far as Ossining, NY. Students are amazed to learn that Ellis Island was once called Oyster Island and that “Prince’s Bay Oysters” from Staten Island were sold at one time in the fanciest restaurants in London (Mitchell 469-470). Mitchell documents the ways in which mismanagement, corruption, and outright criminal activity on the part of Europeans, early Americans, and his own contemporaries decimated the marine resources of the harbor that the Indians had enjoyed for centuries.



PHOTO COURTESY OF AUTHOR

We then built on Mitchell’s observations and Belli’s presentation by turning to the advent of “Minamata Disease” in 1950s Japan, in which another bay was polluted by mercury dumping and produced extreme poisoning of thousands of local inhabitants, resulting in neurological disorders, horrible disfigurement, and death. In looking at instances such as the Minamata Bay disaster, students begin to see the ties among disrespect, exploitation, and lack of foresight and are able to connect them to contemporary issues like overfishing. Among these issues is the conflict of interest in our present American food system, as has been highlighted by Nestle, and by journalists such as Michael Moss in his Pulitzer-prize-winning exposé *Salt Sugar Fat*. Moss and Nestle explain the “revolving door” by which American regulatory agencies are routinely run by executives from the very companies that these agencies are meant to regulate. But this observation, combined with Nestle’s compelling statistical history of the growing power of agribusiness lobbies in Washington, causes these students to fear that the problems in our food system—rooted as they are in the

power of Western financial oligarchies—may be too big for individuals to combat (Nestle 95-110 and Moss 73, 212-235, 314).

## Acting with Our Minds Full

These issues, along with discussions about who was smart enough to bring a fan to cool off their dorm room in the hot months of June and July, were much of what we discussed over our mediocre meals in the All-College Dining Commons. Like most colleges, Vassar's food service is supplied by a big corporation: Aramark, not only one of the largest food service companies in the nation, but operating in twenty-one countries worldwide. Nestle, in *Food Politics*, provided students with a sense of scale: Aramark Global's 2001 earnings were \$4.1 billion, she writes, more than twice that of Marriott and Hilton combined and not far behind international fast-food giant Kentucky Fried Chicken's \$4.4 billion for that same year (Nestle 15). Since 2001, the company has expanded over two hundred percent, with 2015 earnings posted at \$14.3 billion (PR Newswire). Aramark also provides Yale University's food, which like many large institutions, eventually switched from a smaller service provider who used primarily local producers to a larger one, presumably to save money. A *Yale Daily News* article noted, however, that Aramark has spent less and less on food in the last fifteen years because the company is hamstrung by expensive agreements with giant agricultural producers like Sysco, so even the giant companies can become trapped in this food system (Sorel). The net import of this development is that consumers at places like ACDC are offered less nutritious food that has a larger negative environmental impact because it is produced in ways that are primarily inorganic and unsustainable.

When we discussed the ACDC food in class, some ET students felt like the small number of students in summer programs at Vassar were being discriminated against. They assumed that, since Vassar students don't take classes in the summer, the college would spend less money on students who "weren't really theirs." Others, though, did not feel they were being singled out, for they were pretty sure that Aramark was exploiting everyone. When I asked them to reflect on their experiences with ACDC after the course was over, there were a variety of responses. Geraldine felt slighted: "Even students from Vassar agreed that there were more choices during the [school] year than during the summer—why not provide the same? That to me is food Inequality; limiting our food choices by providing us with essentially fast food options." Sarfinoz was thankful: "There are people out there who struggle with necessities, with no luxuries whatsoever. If we take that into consideration, we have no reason to complain. Other top tier institutions, including the IVY, have similar food options." Sean was concerned about the beverages available: "They did away with bottled water because of the associated environmental problems (which I think is perfectly valid), but if that pushes people to just buy sugary drinks rather than use their own bottles/filters then that's creating a whole other issue." Cindy, the oldest in the group and the mother of grown children, wrote:

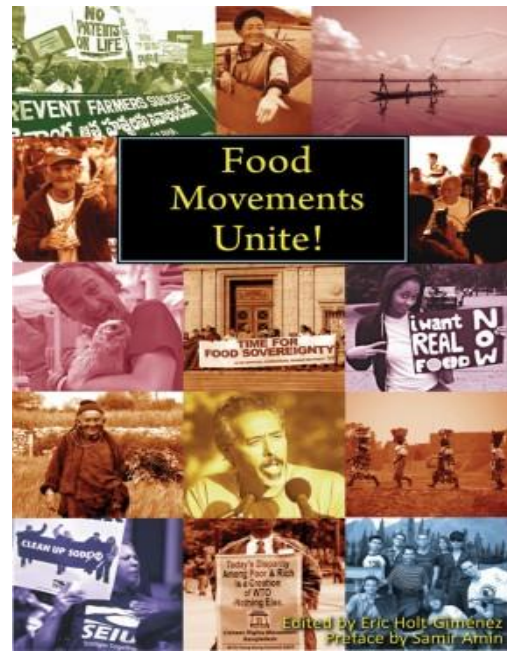
*The food at the ACDC was . . . not fresh . . . . Most of the vegetables were canned. I was especially put off by the fresh fruit because they refrigerated it. . . . Truthfully, the food made me sick—not enough fresh, nutritious, fiber full food was served. . . . It seemed a shame that although they are located in farm country that the food was pre-packaged/boil in a bag type food. The food served was in complete opposition to what we learned in class—the detriments of HFCS [high fructose corn syrup], cattle feedlots, and big agribusiness sucking all the nutrients from food so that it can be mass-produced. Vassar obviously pays some outside company for their dining facilities, and it is surprising that students, faculty and staff haven't risen in protest!*

Indeed, the fact that the students, faculty, and staff of Vassar haven't risen in protest is indicative of the extent to which even people with certain privileges feel that changing our food system presents insurmountable challenges. This is why our course ended by looking at movements that are trying to confront these challenges, in Eric Holt-Giménez's anthology *Food Movements Unite!: Strategies to Transform Our Food System*, focusing primarily on the 2008 food riots that swept the global South and the relationship between food sovereignty and climate justice.

For our final assignment, "Dear Mr. President," each student wrote a letter to President Obama with a policy proposal related to a pressing food issue, and some of the students actually chose to mail their letters to him. As agency was a central theme of the course, students were excited about taking ideas and information to which they were being exposed—much of it disturbing in its environmental and socio-political implications—and putting them into practice. One student called for the breaking up of the USDA into separate agencies in an effort to eliminate conflict of interest in that quarter. Another proposed a system of limitations on how far food can be distributed, centering her seasonality argument around the idea that being able to eat bananas in New York all year round is unreasonable and unsustainable. Still another argued for the donation of U.S. surplus corn to developing nations, the costs of transportation and distribution defrayed by the Corn Refiners Association. Some proposals were more realistic than others, but this culminating project encouraged students to not just diagnose and lament, but actually try to ameliorate.

To be fair, Vassar has a strong sustainability culture on campus, as is evinced by their biodegradable flatware and solar-powered garbage cans that begin to break down organic matter. The college has a farm, but, paradoxically, none of that food is available at ACDC, supposedly because, at least at that time, the college wasn't willing to take on the potential liability issues. In the end, though, everyone eating at ACDC was subject to the food that was lacking in nutritional value and had a large carbon footprint. Thus, this situation begs the question, "What is to be done?" My partner, Pinar, had a mantra throughout the course: "Agency, agency, agency!" That is to say, she

felt that it was very important for these bright and promising community college students to not only see that they could cut it at a school like Vassar, but that they could be agents of change in the world. The adaptability of these students, their ability to switch currents, would serve them well once they realized that they did have choices and could work toward positive change, even if issues around class, race, gender, or country of origin put obstacles in their ways. That is participatory democracy; that is civic engagement. Whether they will chronicle what has been lost, like Joseph Mitchell did, or take more active steps like the Haitian farmers who rejected Monsanto's donated seeds (Greenhalgh), my hope is that analyzing what they were eating in the cafeteria took them a step closer to developing their own agency. So thank you, ACDC, for providing such a neatly packaged example of the problems raised in our reading right outside our classroom.



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## Notes

1. Vassar has worked hard to become more diverse than other similar colleges. Its incoming class includes students from thirty countries, 13% of whom are first-generation college students; however, it remains over two-thirds white  
<https://admissions.vassar.edu/about/statistics/> 14 Sept. 2016.
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YG4h5GbTqU/> 6 Sept. 2014.
3. Note that, although I do not use student surnames, I've still changed their first names for privacy's sake.



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