Think Global, Eat Local: Teaching Alternative Agrarian Literacy in a

Globalized Age

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The food business is far and away the most important business in the world

Everything else is a luxury. Food is what you need to sustain life every day.

Food is fuel. You can't run a tractor without fuel and you can't run a

human being without it either. Food is the absolute beginning.

--Dwayne Andreas, former CEO of Archer Daniels Midland, qtd in

Cockburn and St. Clair

To solve the world hunger crisis, it’s necessary to do more than send

emergency food aid to countries facing famine. Leaders must address the

globalized system of agricultural production and trade that favors large

 corporate agriculture and export oriented crops while discriminating

against small-scale farmers and agriculture oriented to local needs. As a

result of official inaction, more than thirty million people die of

malnutrition and starvation every year, while large industrial farms export

ever more strawberries and cut flowers to affluent consumers. Excessive

meat production, again largely for the affluent, requires massive amounts

of feed grains that might otherwise sustain poor families. Giant

agribusiness, chemical and restaurant companies like Cargill, Monsanto

and McDonalds dominate the world's food chain, building a global
dependence on unhealthy and genetically dangerous products. These companies are racing to secure patents on every plant and living organism and their intensive advertising seeks to persuade the world's consumers to eat more and more sweets, snacks, burgers, and soft drinks. --The Global Policy Forum “Hunger the Globalized System of Trade and Food Production.”

Globalization, one of the “buzzwords of the decade, as noted by Douglas Kellner in “Globalization and the Postmodern,” has been debated by “[j]ournalists, politicians, business executives, academics, and others [who] are using the word to signify that something profound is happening, that the world is changing, that a new world economic, political, and cultural order is emerging.” As Kellner points out, the term globalization has a range of meanings adapted for different purposes and contexts, which makes it “difficult to ascertain what is at stake in the globalization problematic, what function the term serves, and what effects it has for contemporary theory and politics.” In the mission statements of our colleges and universities we frequently hear proclamations about the need to prepare students to live and work in an information-rich, global economy. Implied in this pro-globalization rhetoric is the idea of students developing the cultural sensitivity and savvy to be successful navigators and consumers of the global market economy. At the same time that such statements appear with increasing frequency and force in our college and university mission statements, the critical consciousness and critical literacy needed to assess and attend to the problematic effects and unequal power relations inherent in globalization are often not addressed. Many of us in higher
education, and I include myself in this number, are suspicious of the heady embrace of “globalization” discourses proffered by our institutions. In the words of Kellner, we may see globalization as potentially “bringing about the devastating destruction of local traditions, the continued subordination of poorer nations and regions by richer ones, environmental destruction, and a homogenization of culture and everyday life.”

Yet “globalization,” as Kellner says, is a “theoretical construct that is itself contested and open for various meanings and inflections;” it can be seen as a multivalent process that “describe[s] highly complex and multidimensional processes in the economy, polity, culture, and everyday life.” In other words, globalization can function rhetorically to describe a range of processes with possibilities and consequences that are dependent on the material, cultural, social, political, and emotional e/affects of globalization.

Trying to define and grapple with the rhetorics of globalization is a challenge that began for me as a scholar in 1999 as I began to connect the scholarly work I had been doing for almost a decade on contingent academic labor issues to the struggles of the November 30, 1999 World Trade Organization Protests in Seattle, popularly known as the “Battle for Seattle.” In three essays I drafted and published on the labor organizing strategies of contingent faculty members, I focused on how contingent faculty and their supporters were building strategic alliances and coalitions across borders in the Americas (U.S., Canada, and Mexico). Through this coalition, advocates organized an international week of solidarity and action—Campus Equity Week-- meant to call attention to the working conditions of contingent faculty. Like the protestors involved in the “Battle for Seattle,” contingent faculty and their supporters were using a variety of strategies to address their working conditions—allying with workers in other sectors of the university
service economy (cafeteria, physical plant, and janitorial staff) and with other contingent workers across national borders, lobbying the legislature, speaking with reporters, writing op-eds for local newspapers, conducting teach-ins, staging street protests, and enacting skits and guerrilla theater in visible places on college campuses.

As I organized events related to Campus Equity Week with colleagues on my local campus in 2001, 2003, and 2005, I became acquainted with undergraduate students from the Student Coalition on Organized Labor (SCOOL) who were organizing to address the ethical and moral challenge posed by sweatshops manufacturing U.S. university sports apparel in Mexico and Asia. Student activists on campus successfully worked over the span of several months to persuade the Syracuse University administration to join the independent labor rights monitoring organization known as the Workers Rights Consortium (WRC). As the student activists persuaded the university to join the WRC, they urged all of us on campus to take action against the unethical and often brutal conditions of globalized sweatshops.

Inspired by the student activists’ courageous work and example, I designed a unit on gender, globalization and sweatshop labor in 2002 as a topic of inquiry in my first-year writing course at Syracuse University; I describe this course in detail in a chapter for the collection *Teaching Rhetorica*. My goal was to present globalization, in Kellner’s terms, as a “problematic” for students to consider and sweatshop labor as a specific site of analysis connected to questions of consumption, development, ethics, economics, human rights, and international trade policies. The work I began with students on sweatshop labor also sparked me to consider the larger debates over labor and public policy being addressed with increasing frequency around the global food industrial
complex. This was an issue I felt strongly about as a member of a third generation family farm from eastern Washington state—a farm family that saw their livelihood and future in farming cease in 2001 after eighty-three years of operation, in part, due to globalization and corporate consolidation in the apple industry.

My interest in taking up food politics as a topic of inquiry in my writing courses also coincided with the growing reach of the local food movement. The local food—or what some have called the “real food”—movement and its public intellectuals Michael Pollan *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, *In Defense of Food*, Marion Nestle *Food Politics*, Barbara Kingsolver *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, and Vandana Shiva *Stolen Harvest* among others have fostered a wide-scale public debate about the consequences of the industrialized and globalized food system. They have called our attention to growth and consolidation of multinational agribusiness corporations, the inequities of so-called “free trade,” the creation of genetically modified organisms or “Frankenfoods,” increasing food insecurity among many nations and communities, and the growing obesity epidemic and diet-related health concerns in the developed and developing world.

The local food movement takes as a central tenet the challenge of “food literacy,” knowing what “real food” is versus manufactured food-like substances and knowing how local food—food grown locally or regionally—can provide environmental, health, and community benefits over the globalized and industrialized food system, which I will describe in more detail in a later section of this essay. The local food movement is gaining purchase on college campuses that have joined in the sustainable or “green” campus movement. Many campuses have signed “green” charters to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and have pledged to become carbon neutral within particular time spans.
In doing so, they have pledged to reduce their carbon footprint in part by purchasing local or regional food for campus dining facilities since food transport accounts for a large portion of greenhouse gas emissions nationally and globally. As the editors of *Sustainability on Campus: Stories and Strategies for Change* argue: “Campuses across the United States alone represent an enormous investment in buildings and land, and therefore how we maintain and build our physical plant, engage in buying practices, dispose of waste, and consumer energy is critically important to the environmental health of the broader society” (Barlett and Chase 5).

Some organizations and groups on college campuses cultivate their own gardens, participate in community gardening and urban farm projects, and sponsor farmer’s markets on campuses. Many college campuses have taken local food efforts a step further and introduced “food literacy” education into their college dining plans, providing students with literature and fact sheets about local and regional food sources and ways to eat locally and seasonally. And, as I will demonstrate in this essay, some academic departments and disciplines have introduced “food literacy” as a major component of their academic curricula and introductory courses.

In our own field of Rhetoric and Composition, attention to addressing global vs. local food and food literacy issues is on the rise in both scholarly and pedagogical venues. With ecocomposition, sustainability, place-based writing, and globalization becoming increasingly strong research and teaching interests among rhetoric and writing professionals, work in this area is on the rise. For instance, *College English* published a special issue on food writing in 2008. An in-progress edited collection on the rhetoric of food writing *Foodsumptions: Fun, Games, and the Politics of What we Eat* is currently
being edited by Risa Gorelick and Lisa DeTora. Jeff and Jenny Rice are editing a special issue of the journal *Pre/Text* of “articles that push the connection between critical theory and food.” Rachel Riedner, co-editor of the Lexington book series in which this collection appears, is researching and writing about the “survival economies” of women growing food in community gardens in Cape Town, South Africa. My own work in the co-authored volume *Rural Literacies* (Donehower and Hogg, 2007) and also a new co-edited volume *Reclaiming Rural Literacies*, currently under review at Southern Illinois University Press, offers three essays addressing agricultural literacies. A focus on food has appeared in popular composition textbooks and readers. For instance, the composition reader *Global Issues, Local Issues* edited by June Johnson contains a cluster of readings on “Feeding Global Populations” that addresses global food issues: the Green Revolution, global food trade and policy-making, and the politics of world hunger (Johnson 404-405).

As this work demonstrates, scholars and teachers of writing have a growing stake in examining “food” and also the global food industrial complex. For one, our courses reach most of the students in our college and universities. In addition, many large writing programs are situated in land-grant institutions where students majoring in agriculture, agricultural economics, environmental science, food science or nutrition, and rural sociology make up a considerable portion of the student population. However, no matter where one teaches, “food” is an important issue to raise as it poses questions of globalization, environmental health, personal and societal health, consumer choices, social justice, and contemporary politics. Second, a focus on the global food industrial complex fits in well with the focus in many introductory composition courses on critical
analysis, critical research, and argument. With the significant public attention given to issues of the global food industrial complex in public essays, editorials, book length studies, and documentaries, there is plenty of written material for students to assess, analyze, and debate (see Berry, Hanson, Kingsolver, Lappe, Nestle, Pollan, Schlosser, Spurlock). Third, a focus on food politics compliments efforts in our field to address the environment and ecocomposition (Dobrin and Weisser), place-based education (Brooke), and sustainability (Owens). Derek Owens argues in *Composition and Sustainability* that “sustainable culture cannot exist unless sustainability features prominently throughout the curriculum” (28). Owens argues that students should have a basic understanding of sustainable agriculture and forestry before graduation. Fourth, a focus on the issue of food provides a space for fostering the critical consciousness and critical literacy needed to assess and attend to the problematic effects and unequal power relations inherent in globalization given the environmental, political, and social consequences of industrialized, globalized food production.

To understand how a focus on food literacy might work in a composition classroom, I offer a brief analysis of the problematic of global food and literacy. Finally, the latter half of the essay will bring conversations about global and local food politics into the writing classroom through a brief discussion the sophomore-level critical research and writing course (WRT 205) that I teach at Syracuse University.

**The Problematic of Global Food and Literacy**

Although food is one of the most highly trafficked global commodities and local food movements are on the rise, as noted earlier, many U.S. citizens are still largely
“agriculturally illiterate,” unaware of how our food supply is grown, harvested, transported, processed, distributed, and sold. Whereas the majority of food in the developed and developing world was once grown on small family-owned farms, since World War II most food in developed nations, especially the U.S., is grown on increasingly large and distant farms in the U.S. or imported from other countries, traveling an average of 1,200 miles or more to our tables (“Global Warming”). Moreover, food is distributed by a handful of global food corporations that exert a sizeable influence over domestic and international agricultural policies. In short, the global food industrial complex has transformed how we consume and relate to food.

In our daily lives in the U.S., we are encouraged by large transnational food corporations, by corporate grocery chains, and by a lack of critical literacy education on food and farming issues to adopt a stance toward food based on neoliberal literacy. Neoliberal literacy, according to Jacqueline Edmondson, is a discourse of neoliberalism that “reads rural life through a language that constitutes mass production, efficiency, and more recently, neoliberal principles. This discourse values agribusiness, market-based logic, and fast capitalism” (15). Neoliberal literacy emphasizes the realization of the principles of the market economy—maximizing profits and efficiency, exploiting resources and labor, expanding operations, and providing consumers with copious choices while increasingly divorcing them from understanding the means of production. A neoliberal literacy teaches those of us in the developed world to believe that food must be cheap, fast, and accessible, and we shouldn’t have to think about how it is produced and at what cost other than choosing what we want in the grocery store or at our favorite restaurants. The actual environmental and human costs of food production—due to
agricultural methods, consolidation and integration, environmental impacts, labor issues, and trade relations--are far removed from most Americans’ imagination and daily thinking, the subject of op-eds, special interest books, or documentaries read or viewed by a small minority of the population. Thus, neoliberal literacy, at its core, keeps the majority of the consuming public “illiterate” about how food is grown and at what environmental and societal costs.

I do not have the space here to devote to a detailed discussion of the transformation of the food system from a local, regional, and national system to a global system—an issue I address at length in a chapter of my co-authored book *Rural Literacies*. What I do wish to indicate though, is that the global food industry has spotlighted the problem of power and control: “Decisions about how our food is grown and by whom are made behind closed doors. Trade and agricultural ministers have allowed multinational corporations to gain unprecedented power and control over our food system. As a result, America’s reliance on imported foods has increased” (“The Global”). Meanwhile, consumers are “largely left in the dark about the negative impacts of cheap imports within the domestic food system” (“The Global”). Furthermore the move toward so-called “free trade” means that the U.S. and many other industrialized nations have become dependent on a global food economy where export crops are featured prominently. The environmental consequences of global food are worth noting, especially in a time of diminishing fossil fuel resources. Helena Norberg-Hodge and Steven Gorelick argue that global food systems are usually monocultures, which “require massive inputs of pesticides, herbicides, and chemical fertilizers.” Furthermore, a global food economy requires that millions of dollars be spent on fuel for food transport, thus
“making food transport a major contributor to fossil fuel use, pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.” In the United States, “transporting food within the nation’s borders accounts for over 20 percent of all commodity transport” and “120 million tonnes of CO2 emissions every year” (Norberg-Hodge and Gorelick). In an age of depleted fossil fuel resources and global warming, the logic of “global food” has reached a critical juncture and has caused many food and farming advocacy organizations and environmental groups to advocate for a return to local and regional systems of food production. According to local food advocates like Norberg-Hodge and Gorelick, local or regional food costs less to transport, requires less preservation or modification, and is not as dependent on pesticides and non-organic fertilizers that are common in monocultural production.

While this brief sketch does not do justice to all of the economic and agricultural trade-related trends and patterns currently in play, it outlines the challenges that national and global trade policy poses to small farmers and those concerned with the food system— in other words, to all of us who eat. The current trend toward consolidation and the attendant movement toward global food trade underscores the need for citizens to engage in democratic movements for the protection and sustenance of local food systems, what Vandana Shiva refers to as “food democracy.” Not only is the future of small family farms at stake, but the health of our citizens, the welfare of farm lands and small farms, and the future of the environment.

One significant way to begin addressing such issues is to engage in critical literacy education that will allow us to enact considered change in our global and national political venues, our local communities, classrooms, and in our personal choices at food-
outlets. Recently, World Trade Organization protests by farmers and food democracy activists have spotlighted how global agribusiness corporations have disenfranchised many small family farmers, farm workers, rural people, and consumers, leading to the situation described by The Global Policy Forum that appears in this chapter’s epigraph. Movements such as local food, slow food, organic farming, community-supported agriculture, community food security, anti-biotechnology, urban gardening, and the revitalization of farmers’ markets are slowly shifting people’s consciousness and eating habits. Many people are “returning to the local” to meet their basic food needs, thus practicing an alternative agrarian literacy, a form of critical literacy that involves an understanding of the environmental, social, and political consequences of the food system and an endorsement of developing sustainable food systems and sustainable ways of living (Frefoygle xviii). This essay will address alternative agrarian literacy as achieved through critical literacy instruction as one significant way to address the politics of globalization and its effects on everyday people. Since we all eat everyday and since industrially produced food is resource-intensive, requiring subsidized water, fertilizer, pesticides, and fossil fuels, it is a particularly interesting and useful concept through which to address global operations of capital, power, environmental resources, labor, consumption, and literacies.

The Global Food Industrial Complex and Critical Literacy Education: Toward an Alternative Agrarian Literacy

A significant component of the work to address global and local food politics is influenced by the idea of “literacy” education, an area in the field with which many of us
are acquainted. Literacy, in Deborah Brandt’s words, serves as a resource—“economic, political, intellectual, spiritual—which like wealth or education, or trade skill or social connections, is pursued for the opportunities and protections that it potentially grants its seekers” (5). Critical literacy marshals the resources of literacy, in the words of Ira Shor, and “challenges the status quo in an effort to discover alternative paths for self and social development.” Critical literacy allows us to analyze and rethink the practices of everyday life and encourages dissenting perspectives that allow people to connect “the political and the personal, the public and the private, the global and the local, the economic and the pedagogical for rethinking our lives and for promoting justice in place of inequity” (Shor). Critical literacy, then, “can be thought of as a social practice in itself and as a tool for the study of other social practices” (Shor). Following the lead of critical literacy scholars like Brandt and Shor, I see the practice of critical literacy and the analytic framework it provides as a way to help our students and communities move toward creating knowledgeable, literate global citizens who are prepared with the “knowledge and skills for social and environmental justice” (Andrezejewski, and Alessio).

Local food activists refer to critical literacy education on food and farming issues as simply “food learning,” and they advocate that food learning be taught at all levels of schooling (see Winne). Community food educators like Mark Winne of the Community Food Security Coalition, a 501c3 nonprofit that promotes community food sovereignty believes that it should be a “matter of national educational policy that every child understands how and where their food is produced, and that they have the requisite skills to critique those systems of production.” Her further argues that students
should have the chance to read the authors that address food production such as
“Jim Hightower as well as Joan Gussow, Frances Moore Lappe, Marion Nestle, Eric
Schlosser, Wendell Berry, WaltWhitman and, God forbid, Marx and Engels.” Although
Winne’s call is largely focused on K-12 educators, he includes public educators in his
manifesto and calls for integrated and wide-reaching models of food and nutrition
education:

I would argue, however, that any attempt to reform our approach to food
and nutrition education must be comprehensive and saturate every fiber of
our public education institutions. We should not succumb to the
temptation to limit our endeavors to isolated and discreet projects, as
worthy as they may be. Unfortunately, it is simply not enough to yank the
soda machines out of the schools, run a school garden for a few weeks,
ban irradiated food, establish a school breakfast program here and there,
install an organic salad bar in the school cafeteria. Yes, we need those
projects and they must be multiplied a thousand fold. But we have to also
worm, no, not worm, and bust our way into the circles of power,
nationally as well as locally. We must make our schools the breeding
ground for millions of food competent, healthy, and happy children who
retain those attributes as adults and become demanding, knowledgeable
food consumers, voters, and, in some cases, farmers, nutritionists, chefs,
policymakers, and members of the local school boards that control the
curricula.

Winne’s manifesto for food learning is a call not only to educate young people, but a call
to provide critical literacy education on food production for all levels of society.

Winne’s extended vision of food learning has been realized, to some degree, by farmers, non-profit agencies, fair trade activists, farmers’ market directors, USDA employees, community gardeners, public school teachers, college and university professors, and college students. At the Community Food Security “Farm to Cafeteria” Conferences, which took place on June 16-18, 2005 at Kenyon College in Ohio, I had the opportunity to see a branch of the national “food democracy” movement in action. At the conference, hundreds gathered to discuss processes and models for bringing local, family farmed food into their local hospitals, K-12 schools, colleges and universities, and prisons. At several sessions, college faculty and K-12 teachers across the disciplines shared syllabi and assignments that address food, farm, and sustainability issues. At several sessions as well, college student activists spoke with great vigor about how they have set-up local food projects on their campuses. In addition, K-12 teachers and farmers addressed how they have used provisions in the federal school lunch program to bring locally farmed food to school cafeterias. The Farm to Cafeteria conference made it clear that there is a nationwide movement to feature local foods and to teach and discuss food and farm issues across the disciplines, to practice an alternative agrarian literacy instead of a neoliberal literacy. The conference also renewed my interest in bringing these issues into my writing and research courses at Syracuse University.

Inspired by this work of student activists, by my own agricultural background, and by an abiding interest in taking up issues of globalization, I began to integrate content and research projects on the global food industrial complex in my Writing 205 Critical Research and Writing course. Over the past three times I have taught the course (Spring
I have designed a second unit that examines the rise of global agribusiness, the shift from a local to global food system, policy and activist debates over international trade agreements, alternative globalization and food democracy movements, farm worker movements, and a host of other issues.

One of the most significant ways to begin to understand the global food industrial complex is to survey with students the public policies and patterns surrounding agricultural production. This is a challenging task as national farm policy and global trade agreements are complex and multi-layered. The main text I have assigned to introduce debates and issues in the food industry is Eric Schlosser’s New York Times bestseller *Fast Food Nation*, a book that persuasively guides students through the history of the rise of fast food as an American institution and systematically unpacks its political, social, environmental, and global consequences. A number of chapters in the book focus on the American agricultural system: on corporate consolidation in agribusiness, on the loss of small cattle ranches and the rise of large confined animal feeding operations (or CAFOs), the exploitation of Mexican and Central American slaughterhouse workers, and other topics, all of which connect back to the burgers and fries that many Americans consume on a daily basis. Schlosser promotes an alternative agrarian literacy by showing what lies behind our consumer choices. For instance, as he narrates the tragic story of the Colorado rancher Hank who committed suicide in the wake of losing his ranch, we also learn of the suburbanization of Colorado ranch lands and the global economic pressures and policies that Hank and other small ranchers face. As Schlosser puts it:

> It would be wrong to say that Hank’s death was caused by the consolidating and homogenizing influence of the fast food chains, by monopoly power in the meatpacking industry, by depressed prices in the
cattle market, by the economic forces bankrupting independent ranches, by the tax laws that favor wealthy ranchers, by the unrelenting push of Colorado’s real estate developers. But it would not be entirely wrong.

(146)

*Fast Food Nation* brings to light the structure of the food industrial complex and balances it against the environmental and human costs it bears, encouraging readers to begin thinking critically about the food system.

To round out the discussion of food and farm issues, I also assign supplemental readings on issues of globalization to open up questions of global trade, labor, and the role of the international community in addressing issues of agriculture and fair trade. Assigned chapters of Naomi Klein’s book *No Logo* introduce students to debates over globalization, multinational corporate branding, and consumerism. Visits to the online archive of The World Trade Organization (WTO) History Project at the University of Washington also provide students with a glimpse into the protests that took place on November 29-December 3, 1999 in Seattle, Washington at the World Trade Organization Third Ministerial Meeting. Students have the opportunity to view and analyze protest announcements, fliers, pamphlets, interviews, and other organizing and informational literature that was distributed before and during the protests. Excerpts from Klein’s more recent book *Fences and Windows* detail her observations about the alternative globalization movements and their fight for fair trade, not just free trade. In *Fences and Windows* Klein models an integrated global analysis that is based on understanding of “global linkages.” Understanding “global linkages,” says Klein, is “about recognizing that every piece of our high-gloss consumer culture comes from somewhere. It’s about following the webs of contracted factories, shell-game subsidiaries, and outsourced labor to find out where all the pieces are manufactured, under what conditions, which lobby groups wrote the rules of the game and which politicians were bought off along the way” (30). While Klein’s comments about
understanding “global linkages” address the manufacture of consumer goods specifically, her comments can be applied to the food industrial complex as well and offer an interesting connective thread with Schlosser’s analytic approach to the food industrial complex.

To round out Schlosser’s book with multimedia texts, I show three films that help students visualize how the food industrial complex impacts workers, consumers, and the environment. The first is *Fast Food Women*, which provides an analysis of the lives and working conditions of Southern women working in three fast food outlets. The second is Morgan Spurlock’s *Super Size Me*, which details Spurlock’s declining health as he subsists on fast food from McDonald’s for thirty days. The final film is *The Meatrix*, a flash film that humorously but compellingly describes the rise of factory farms. Mimicking the plot and characters of the cult-classic *The Matrix*, *The Meatrix* details the hidden truth about our food supply: that the idyllic small family farms of our national unconscious have been replaced by factory farms run by large agribusiness corporations. The film is interesting not only for its content, but also its quick-moving style and its spoof of popular culture. In conjunction with showing this film, I often discuss with my students the potential of new media as a tool for educating and persuading the public about food and farm issues. Together these readings and films—and there are many more produced in recent years that could be used such as *The Future of Food* and *Food, Inc*—combine to help students gain increasing insight into how citizen-activist movements have responded to questions of the global food industrial complex.

The writing assignments that accompany this unit include weekly two- to three page typed responses to the assigned readings as well as a formal writing assignment that involves students in collectively researching and writing a “research anthology” on a particular topic of concern that arose from their reading of *Fast Food Nation*, the other assigned readings, and the films. Although the anthology is a collective assignment, with students collaboratively authoring an introduction and conclusion and composing a cover,
each student contributes a well-researched analytical essay of approximately 8 pages that introduces a specific issue appropriate to their anthology topic and provides informed perspectives on their chosen issue. Students have composed anthologies that investigate a number of agriculturally-related topics, including a comparative analysis of factory farming of beef cattle versus organically raised range-fed beef, the rise of Mad-Cow disease in light of contaminated feed and lapsed food safety inspection standards, French farmer Jose Bove’s nationalistic resistance to McDonald’s and the global celebrity status he has acquired through his protests, Bush’s immigration policies and their impact on Mexican farm workers, and the conditions of banana workers in Costa Rica in light of free trade agreements. One of the chief advantages of this assignment is that students constantly move back and forth from their individual essay writing and research to thinking about the collective project as a whole. This mix of collective and individual research efforts challenges students’ preconceived notions about writing and research as a single-minded enterprise and helps them figure out how to consider a topic from multiple angles. The group also gives a presentation on their anthology at the end of the unit, offering their ideas for discussion and critique. Often few of my students are from rural backgrounds and few are from farming communities, and few coming into the course were initially aware of the issues raised in the Schlosser’s book, Klein’s books, and the films. Most students agree, however, that the writing and reading assignments have made them think about and critically engage with food in a way that they have never thought about it before: in systematic, critical, and interconnected ways and in ways that help them combat the neoliberal literacy framework.

In thinking through the questions of power, access, and the environment posed by a writing-related inquiry into food, I am also inspired by J.K. Gibson Graham’s notion of the connection between feeling, action, and ethical self-making. Gibson-Graham argues that thinking involves structures of feeling and action “Yet the kinds of choices we
continually make about what to do and in particular situations are also required of us as thinkers” (xxix). Gibson-Graham point out that our “stances,” our “affective dispositions,” our “curiosity and openness” to new ideas and positions versus our sense of constraint conditions our responses: “To cultivate new attitudes and practices of thinking is to cultivate a new relation to the world and its always hidden possibilities” (xxix). Food can bring to the fore ”new attitudes and practices of thinking” because of the interconnection of thinking, feeling, and action surrounding it. Food is often intimate and emotional, connected to the body, family, community, culture, and, whether we realize it or not, place. Food elicits strong feelings of like, dislike, need, desire, want, and intimacy. Food, thus, has an affective and place-based dimension that can be complicated and interrogated by a consideration of “food politics”: how eating is a political, social, and material act.

Because of food’s affective dimension, a writing class focused on food politics is a charged space. Course readings, films, and writing assignments “pull the veil” away from the industrialized, globalized food system and ask class members to account for how they are implicated in the system’s benefits as well as its environmental, social, and political costs. As I note in a forthcoming essay on teaching the flash film The Meatrix, an analytic encounter with the industrialized and globalized food system is a disturbing and often dystopian experience for students. Many students are strongly affected by the analyses and images of the factory farms or CAFOs in the course readings and films. Some students are compelled by ethical arguments for animal rights and sustainable farming and are persuaded by the readings and films to consider different choices. In fact, some students have already made those choices individually or with their families earlier in life—choices to not eat meat or processed foods for instance. Other students mightly
resist the materials we read and view in the course, arguing that neoliberal logic of the industrial food system is the best and most efficient way to feed the most people. Many students note that concern about their food choices and the globalized food system is relatively low on their priority list as they confront the realities of economic survival: paying tuition, passing their classes, and getting jobs after graduation. Food is just “there” for them to consume, and they don’t want to think about it much even as they encounter arguments about the costs of not caring or thinking about it. This leads the class into larger discussions of how such sentiments are borne out of privilege given the fact that many across the globe and in our community are worried about if they will eat rather than what or when they will eat. Within a few miles of the university where my classroom sits are several local food pantries that provide basic foodstuffs to families who have to balance paying for rent and heating oil against buying food. Thus, part of the learning in the course is articulating and questioning our assumptions about food—how it is that many students have not thought much about food other than assuming it will be there when they want it? What kind of privilege does that signify, and what kinds of responsibilities do students have within that privilege? For instance, what responsibility do we bear for the fact that hunger is a growing issues both locally, nationally, and globally? What responsibility do we have for the fact that food transport, as mentioned earlier, accounts for a large part of carbon emissions?

Moreover, debates often break out in class over what real food choices and options are provided to college students as they live, study, and eat in an institutionalized setting at dining halls, campus convenience stories, campus fast food locations (of which our campus has in abundance), groceries stores they can reach by foot or bus, and small
apartment kitchens. I encourage students to discuss the class politics of food--the time, money, and access they have to healthy food. I urge them to critique some of the positions taken by local food advocates, some of whom aim their arguments at middle-class and upper-middle class largely white consumers who are raising families or living independently in their own homes with cars they can drive to farmers’ markets or supermarkets like Whole Foods that have expensive organic produce. As a class, we analyze the class and racial privilege that is often present in some local food literature.

Even though my students do not tend to agree about the argumentative stance that they and other class members should take toward the industrialized food system, they tend to agree by the end of the course that public information campaigns are necessary to address the problem and question the industrialized system poses. Some students go on to become active in local food movements, others modify their individual eating habits, and others proceed with their same habits, often noting the significant discomfort and discord they feel in doing so. Students often stop me on campus and confess that they guiltily think of my course every time they eat a fast food meal. It is my hope, along with Schlosser’s claim for his book Fast Food Nation that he hopes readers and, in my case, students “think about where the food came from, about how and where it was made, and about what is set in motion by every fast food purchase” (270).

At the same time, I know that not all students will engage in the alternative agrarian literacies that my course seeks to engage. The rhetoric of neoliberalism is strong, and it is a rhetoric that will win the day for many of our students. My hope is to “jam” up the system and help students encounter perspectives on the food system that allow them to connect and integrate the global and the local. In doing this work, I strive to connect my pedagogy to movements for place-based globalism, which Michal Osterweil
describes as part of the movements around the globe to “reinvent what counts as political as well as what has global reach” (27). Osterweil notes that place-based globalism works “locally, in the everyday, and in the present—connecting in intricate networks—to build new worlds globally” (27). In a future version of the course, I would like to further the connection to place-based globalism by creating opportunities for students to get involved in direct action in the local and regional food initiatives that are ongoing in the local Syracuse community. In recent semesters, other instructors have taught a version of the food politics course at Syracuse that involves work to integrate the classroom learning with a community linking project involving local farmers, representatives from a local Community Supported Agriculture organization (see Winslow), food banking organizations, and other organizations that address food, agriculture, migrant labor, and hunger issues (see Winslow).

While my WRT 205 course has changed from semester-to-semester and is still under development, I have found this work on the food industrial complex provides students with a productive and practical way of understanding the local and global linkages and power relations that currently shape our lives as global citizens. Considering the consequences of the global food system in our writing classrooms also allows the field of composition studies to engage more directly with efforts toward making sustainability and environmental literacy issues more central to our writing classes and to our university and college core curricula. What we eat has a direct and daily impact on the planet, and critical literacy education on the global food industrial complex can become a means toward creating a more just and equitable food system and a more just and equitable society.
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<http://www.globalpolicy.org/socecon/hunger/economy/index.htm>


Notes

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i A handful of dissertations addressing agricultural rhetorics and communicative practices have been written in our field, including Adrienne Lamberti’s published dissertation Talking the Talk: Revolution In Agricultural Communication (Nova, 2007), initially completed at Iowa State University, and Robert Chiaviello’s dissertation “Narrative, Metaphor, and Fantasy Themes in Environmental Rhetoric: Critiquing a Livestock-Grazing Conflict in the American West,” completed at New Mexico University. Dianna Winslow is currently writing a dissertation at Syracuse University that addresses food literacy and pedagogy in a service-learning project that involved a community-supported agricultural association.

ii Food democracy, Shiva argues, is a food justice movement that supports local and regional food systems and fair trade policies that do not penalize two-thirds world countries such as Shiva’s native country of India.

iii My use of the word “jam” is deliberate here and is inspired by the idea of culture jamming—using the terms of the dominant commercial culture against itself in spoofs and critical literacy counter-campaigns. The organization Adbusters and culture jamming
activist Andrew Boyd have popularized the idea of culture jamming as a form of activism. Boyd offers workshops on culture jamming to activists and college students nation-wide. He visited Syracuse University to gave a workshop in Fall 2008.