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Eating in Class: Notes on Nourishment and Decolonial Pedagogy

(<http://somatosphere.net/2020/nourishment-decolonial-pedagogy.html/>)

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This article is part of the series: Decentering Metabolism: Peripheral and Southern Diffractions (<http://somatosphere.net/series/decentering-metabolism/>)

It's a common adage, following Lévi-Strauss, that “food is good to think with.” A class assignment that includes food-centred ethnographic presentations expands the scope of such thinking into embodied and institutional memory. Below I describe such a class feast prepared by second-year social anthropology students at Sol Plaatje University in 2019 (one of two post-Apartheid South African Universities). The idea for the course assignment was inspired by an emerging trend in the social sciences toward thinking more expansively about “metabolic living” (Solomon 2016). Whilst food alone remains “good to think with” as a social fact, the concept of metabolic living recognizes biological plasticity (both neuro and genomic). This recognition and the socio-political repercussions of this burgeoning postgenomic field (Meloni, 2016) together offer novel pedagogic approaches that recognise biosocial entanglements (Youdell and Lindley, 2018:7). As pedagogic practice, eating in class both demonstrates and enacts the absorption that scholars across disciplines recognise as metabolic living: the potential “for bodies, substances, and environments to mingle, draw attention to each other and even shift definitional parameters” (Solomon, 2016:5).

The experimental social anthropology course at Sol Plaatje University evolved over three years, from the inception of the school of Humanities in 2016. I was appointed to design and teach this course early in 2016, shortly after the #feesmustfall movement of 2015 and the 2014 #Rhodesmustfall movement. These mass protests called for free tertiary education and a process of decolonising elite institutions that perpetuate racist, colonial and Apartheid oppression through their demographics and practices, aesthetics, exclusionary fee structures, and ideologies. For part of their grade, students were asked to use meals and prepared food to teach themes from particular ethnographies they we read as a class. I contextualise the assessment project briefly, describe the feasts the students prepared, and then reflect on a few themes and questions that potentially advance decolonial teaching tactics via the gut.

The first iteration of the course, taught in 2016, was influenced by the political atmosphere after #feesmustfall. Named ‘Borders, Boundaries and Belonging’, the course compared South American and Southern African experiences of slavery, spirituality and embodiment, with group projects

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exploring student-led protests in South America. In 2018, the course was more health/body focused, with students learning about embodiment primarily through dance, and alongside study of critical medical anthropology texts. The students read one medical ethnography (Yates-Doerr, 2015) and visited an *isangoma* (traditional healer) and private hospital for a field trip (see Morreira, Truyts and Taru forthcoming). Both iterations of the course had the hallmarks of a useful undergraduate medical anthropology curriculum/pedagogy – that is, each gradually deconstructed concepts of health and the body across the so-called divide between biomedicine and “traditional” or “alternative” medicine, and explored the social aspects of medicine and knowledge production. In South Africa, deterministic ideas of biology were used to justify racism and segregation during Apartheid and colonialism. In the context of student-led protests to decolonise higher education in terms of access, aesthetics, ideology and pedagogy scholars are called upon to reflect how exclusionary practices are perpetuated in terms of the everyday experience of students. It is precisely in the renewed attention to the entanglement of biological and social, as Youdell and Lindley (2018:2) suggest, that we have the opportunity to foreground students’ experiences and institutional processes in our pedagogic practice.

The third time the course was taught, in 2019, the first lecture required students to walk around the class, assessing objects that had been placed haphazardly on desks – lipstick, a measuring cup, a condom. Students walked together in groups, and spoke about objects they were or were not drawn to. They were asked: how does gender, race, kinship, and your social life inform your relation to the world? We then moved through readings that situated debates around the politics of knowledge in a South African context, (notably Levine’s 2013 *Testing Knowledge: Legitimacy, Healing and Medicine in South Africa*) and explored concepts like biopower, habitus and embodiment, before moving to food and the body. In groups, students read chapters of Nir Avieli’s *Food and Power: A Culinary Ethnography of Israel* (2017); Emily Yates-Doerr *The Weight of Obesity: Hunger and Global Health in Postwar Guatemala* (2015) and Harris Solomon’s (2016) *Metabolic Living: Food, Fat, and the Absorption of Illness in India*.

Each group gave presentations on selected chapters that dealt with food, power and the body. They groups received a budget of R 400 (about 40 US dollars) to purchase food to share with the class as part of their presentations, which included a summary of the key ideas offered in the text.^[1][\(#_ftn1\)](#) The use of food to ‘think with’ was thus framed in terms of a concept or method of nourishment (see Truyts 2016 and Truyts 2018). Nourishment does similar work to Solomon’s concept of metabolic living; both call attention to the social aspects of porosity (via Landecker 2011) and the forms of memory, work and power imbricated in metabolism. This assignment was given after a close reading of Levine’s (2014) paper that situates a politics of knowledge around HIV/AIDS debates in South Africa within a political economy of lack, where specific modalities of healing are mobilised in the face of inequality. Students were thus prepared to question socio-political processes of life and death through attention to absorption and ingestion.

The feast

The group whose presentation was inspired by Avieli (2016) was late to arrive in class. Their tardiness was explained when they staggered into class with enormous platters and an eclectic combination of foods. The group focused on hummus – explaining how this so-called “national Israeli” dish represents fraught notions of belonging. The students served take-aways that exemplified ‘McDonaldisation,’ –the ‘globalisation or Americanisation’ of food according to principles of efficiency and standardisation (Ritzer 19983 in Avieli 2018:113) along with a meat dish. The meat prompted discussion of

how eating practices can enact power reversals, as in Avielis' description of how Israeli soldiers claim victimisation because they receive smaller meat portions than Palestinian prisoners (2016:146). The strength of the group's presentation lay in their enormous 'mishmash' dish (that was pointedly not devoured by their classmates), which demonstrates what Avieli (2018) describes as taste for high volumes of diverse flavours of diverse foods. This allowed the class to reflect on the subjectivity of taste in relation to geopolitical wars where nationhood and personhood draw on global histories of violence. By cooking based on Avieli's descriptions of context-specific and storied tastes, they could more easily imagine how subjectivities come to be crafted in the context of overlapping culinary and geographical territories.

The group who read Yates-Doerr (2015) transformed desks into a table with a bright green tablecloth, and invited us to sit down. They poured Coca-Cola into cups, reminding us of the questions raised by non-communicable diseases with regard to body shaming, health risks, and biopower. They explained their failed attempts to make tortillas, serving shop-purchased flatbreads and playing a short video about how to make tortillas. The video slowly and artfully helped us consider how rich in memory, art and family food can be—a richness that is not valued in the same way as low calorie counts. With mouth-puckering salsa, the group served a lesson in neo-liberal politics, as global public health agendas come to rest in discourse and in the body.

Drawing on Solomon's (2016) account of "mango-madness" in Mumbai, India, the third group served mango tart, a South African dessert, as well as delicious home-made samosas. Solomon does not discuss samosas, but the students chose to prepare them because one member of their group was an expert at making what is seen as a traditionally/stereotypically Indian food. We were surprised to learn that the student who had made the samosas (who was White, and Afrikaans-speaking) had been taught by her grandmother. Her grandmother, in turn, had learned from her husband's family—she had married an Indian man during Apartheid, when race was strictly categorised and intimacy across those boundaries both forbidden and taboo. In reflecting on our surprise, we were powerfully reminded of how quickly we move to associate food with racial, gender, class and national identity as in Herzfeld's description of "gastro-essentialism" where stereotypes of eating practices rely on static, singular iterations of eating practices that are in actuality dynamic and diverse (2016:31).

Decolonising, political economy and diverse logics

Davis (2012) prompts us to interrogate the conditions under which we might pursue diverse logics for their own sake. In this pursuit, what possibilities for good, or opportunities to imagine worlds otherwise, might we pass by? As students linked cruddy, ordinary experiences of diabetes, to a state of poverty where taking anti-retroviral medications hurts on empty stomachs, we reflected on the political and philosophical significance of food in relation to life. This experience of taste, the desire to consume the colourful dishes that filled the class with a mishmash of scents, the way these tastes, scents, and desires evidenced memories of community and family in flavour, highlighted the inadequacies of a calorific focus on food, bringing pressing questions of lack and inequity closer to the table.

This very intimate act of eating, of accrument, is metabolic living—it is interested in staying alive (Garrido, 2007). Food is a vital and social mediator of life and death. Yet, scholars have tended to underestimate the power of nourishing food to help us understand how death is arranged socially and spatially, and how the political and social are knit together in the gut. The three feasts called into question, to quote Solomon (2016:5), "how and to

what extent the self and the world mix.” The lessons learnt in the classroom demand we recognize that bodies, environment and knowledge are each ‘porous’, and their interface is simultaneously political and visceral (ibid.:9), particularly when we think about the beginning and end of the body and the ingestion of environment.

As students quickly learn, it is much more difficult than it may appear to theorise from experiences of the everyday. Eating in class makes the flow from lived reality to theory iterative, creating more opportunities for students’ experiences (Youdell and Lindley 2018). With an opportunity to create experience and defamiliarise their own taste from theory, as it were, the conventional flows of learning were upturned, re-positioning students as makers, teachers, feeders, eaters, guests at the table.

As we wiped off the tables and stretched in our now-tightened clothing, the students and I laughed about the perverse, belly-bulging discomfort of ‘Saveah’ (from Israel/Avieli)—perhaps too much *rica* (‘richness’, ‘recipes’, a word hard to translate from the Spanish/ Guatemalan context, as Yates-Doerr shows), and a clear display of ‘mango madness’ (connecting our South African classroom with Solomon’s Banda). Desks were desks again, but there was a spirit of glee and delight in the classroom. Taking a meal together—touching, serving, swallowing, tasting, talking—had altered us, and helped us pay attention to the ordinary ways in which we taste, gather, condemn, and constitute ourselves as social, political and moral beings. As anthropologists and academics we would do well to attend to the ethical, political and even decolonial possibilities that emerge when we break bread at our desks. This consubstantiation is powerful if literal. It is shared in the spirit of provoking how we experience, how we *know*, how we define life, and more specifically, evaluate the ‘good life’.

Notes

[1](#_ftnref1) The funding came from an IDRC funded research project for which I am the Kimberley partner. The Nourishing Spaces project explores the links between Non-Communicable Diseases and food environments in six African cities. Traversing disciplines, nations, and sectors, it attempts to draw in stakeholders from communities, government, formal and informal retail and beyond.

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