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# Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

## **Conversations about Teaching Food and Culture**

**Review by Andria D. Timmer**

*Teaching Food and Culture*

by Candice Lowe Swift & Richard R Wilk (eds)

Left Coast Press, 2015

With the increase in food studies academic programs and food-centric courses in higher education, *Teaching Food and Culture* is both timely and relevant. This edited volume includes selections from scholar-teachers who have many years of experience in the field, and, as such, is a useful resource for anyone who is teaching food and culture or who wants to incorporate these topics into their pedagogy. As someone who has taught classes in Food and Culture for over a decade, I found many useful ideas in this volume. More generally, this book opens up a necessary and insightful conversation about teaching, one that should perhaps also take place in a format other than a printed text.

Although food studies is inherently interdisciplinary and food related courses are “often taught by the most creative and innovate faculty, who tend to disrespect the traditional boundaries between subjects” (pp. 9-10), it is appropriate that this volume is anthropological. As experts of what it means to be human, anthropologists have long recognized the scholarly significance of food. The contributors have an evident commitment to ethnography and bioculturalism. All anthropological subfields are represented, though the obvious emphasis is on cultural anthropology.

The volume opens with an interview conducted by the editors with Sidney Mintz, one of progenitors of food studies in anthropology. Although presented in a question and answer format, the editors explain that the final piece was the result of an ongoing back and forth, so what appears in the book is a thoughtful exploration of an admired scholar’s approach to a field. Mintz’s ability to systematically

think through complex issues is clearly evident here, and his insight gives a good overview to the field.

Following the introduction and interview, the remainder of the volume is divided into three substantive sections. The first of the three sections presents a biocultural view to the study of food. Alexandra Brewis, Amber Wutich, and Deborah Williams explain how they incorporate the topic of obesity as a learning tool into their classes. Jeanne Sept details how she uses food to introduce students to the concepts of human evolution. Andrea S. Wiley discusses the usefulness of the single-food approach using the example of milk.

The second section, Food Ethics and the Public, highlights how students can connect to the broader food system within which they function. By connecting with something they are familiar with, students can begin to make sense of how the bigger system functions. Peter Benson provides many examples of how he uses food-based assignments to get students to understand the industry standards, big business, and even existentialism. Carole Counihan describes an assignment she has used for many years of sending students to a farmers market which requires students to think critically about the mundane. Finally, Janet Chrzan discusses the benefits and pitfalls to using service learning in food-based classes.

The final section delves into issues of food and identity. David Sutton and David Beriss explain how they use restaurant ethnography assignments to get students to understand how food and identity are connected. The next two chapters, by Brian Stross and Amber O'Connor respectively, are written from the perspective of linguistic anthropology which makes this volume an almost a four field approach. (Sept makes a brief connection to archaeology, but other than that it is unrepresented.) Stross details his syllabus for the course Anthropology of Food with a clear topic by topic overview showing how food anthropology and linguistic anthropology inform each other. O'Connor explains how food can be used to introduce students to language and culture and encourages them to think "of food as a semiotic system" (p. 181).

The book concludes with a contribution by Penny Van Esterik who "describes how I came to define myself as a nutritional anthropologist, to bring food issues into all my anthropology teaching, and eventually to focus most of my attention on food-based courses" (p. 193). Teaching informs research and vice versa and in this chapter Van Esterik explores how her research translated into food-focused teaching.

This volume is a valuable resource for anyone teaching a stand-alone course or wishing to use food as an example to open discussions about topics such as evolution, poverty, inequality, or environmental change. All the chapters are well-cited so the bibliography itself is of great value. Many contributors have included full assignments in appendices and/or examples of successful student work. They reflect candidly on how students responded to each of the assignments. Good teaching is collaborative; the reader can take these pre-tested activities and modify them for a variety of different teaching situations. All of these assignments and activities are complex and well-thought out. Despite the name, this book does not just provide resources and insight from Food and Culture classes; instead, contributors discuss their experiences in a range of different types of classes, and therefore treats the subject of food as a tool for learning instead of a topic of study. Food is a constant way for teachers to connect with students regardless of their background or educational interests even as “educational tides shift” (p. 10).

No one volume containing only ten chapters can do justice to teaching food and culture. Food studies is too vast, and food can easily be used as a vehicle to teach almost any core concept in anthropology. Although the resources are useful and the assignment ideas intriguing, they represent only a very small sample of the current scholarship in food and culture. Further, since this is a teaching resource, shorter chapters with more examples and resources would have been useful.

It is unreasonable to fault a volume that brings together so many respected scholars to share their perspectives on teaching for not doing enough. However, this critique emerges from a larger issue that it is difficult to determine the target audience for this reader. Individuals such as myself, who have been teaching food for years, will find inspiration in this work and will be able to take many of the examples and use them in constructive ways. That being said, there is little here that is new to a seasoned professor. I, and many food studies professors I know, take an evolutionary approach to the study of food (like Jeanne Sept) or use restaurants or farmers markets as advantageous locations for ethnography (like Sutton, Beriss, and Counihan). Through their writings, I have gleaned new insights on how to present these assignments and integrate them in the class, but the contributions are more inspirational than revelatory. Conversely, someone new to teaching food studies courses is not likely to be able to use this resource to help them construct a stand-alone Food and Culture class. Except for the late Brian Stross, none of the authors of this volume give a full picture of a course. Rather they highlight certain assignments or discuss how they use food as an exemplar in non-food related classes.

Due to the current dynamism of food studies this volume can feel out of date even though it was

recently printed. This speaks to the need for this or any other similar attempt to tap into continuing conversations about the teaching of food and culture in the form of future volumes or online forums. These conversations do happen on the Society for the Anthropology of Food and Nutrition (SAFN) blog, and while the book is a useful addition, I have to wonder if this traditionally formatted volume without connections to ongoing dialogues is the best means in this era to present a conversation about teaching.

Despite my concerns about the audience and format of *Teaching Food and Culture*, I am excited to see such a volume available and will return to it often in planning my future courses. I would recommend it for any teacher of food, and I hope to see the conversation about teaching food and culture expand in the coming years.

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