

University of Utah
Marisa Januzzi, English Department, 3624 LNCO English 303: Literature of Social
Reflection: Hunger, Food,
Writing [a.k.a. Literary Genres]
Spring 1997

This class will explore constructions of hunger and its appeasement in a variety of generic discourses (literary, historical, political, anthropological, autobiographical, cinematic, and commercial). What is the social, political, and psychological situation of the hungry person, and of the person who serves? What hungers are our institutions (from soup kitchens to family kitchens, restaurants, and other food delivery systems, including the medical, the penal, and the political) designed to accommodate, and what interests do representations of hunger and food serve? Students will fulfill their service requirement by working in their choice of a variety of elective venues, including soup kitchens, food pantries, social service agencies, and community gardens; they will have practical as well as academic opportunities to engage these questions and perhaps to confront their own default assumptions about hunger.

This course would meet the Bennion Center's (*Bennion Center is University of Utah's office dealing with public service and service-learning*) criteria for service-learning classes in all eight ways:

1. I have made contact with a number of volunteer coordinators in a variety of organizations, including Utahns Against Hunger, the Utah AIDS Foundation, the Good Samaritan program at the Cathedral of the Madeleine, Wasatch Community Gardens, and Meals on Wheels. All were enthusiastic at the prospect of a one quarter volunteer pool from the University of Utah, and some (notably, UAF) have even devised ways of streamlining service options in order to bring the period of required preliminary training to a manageable length of time. All the organizations happily agreed to send someone into the class during the first week, in order to teach about their particular causes, and to provide students with the information they need to choose a project for the quarter. Their willingness to work with me strongly suggests that the students would be filling real organizational and community needs. (I could easily supply more detailed information about contacts and placements upon request.)

2. The readings have been chosen to dovetail with students' service experiences in any number of foreseeable and unforeseeable ways. I hope they begin to ask questions about American hunger and diet, the politics as well as the rituals and aesthetics of sustenance questions which the literary works (esp. Orwell, Yeziarska) and non-fiction readings (esp. Harrington, Lapp6, and the New York Times Magazine issue *How We Eat: An America Divided*) were designed to pose, complicate, and address. I also hope that they begin to question their own desires, habits, and biases in light of the reading. If they have never considered the hungers that drive volunteers, for instance, Dorothy Day reconstructs the soup-line transactions which are central to her autobiography in such a way as to render the social distinction between giver and recipient all but meaningless.

3.& 4. I anticipate spending a portion of each class, or perhaps one class a week, reflecting on volunteer experiences as they might or might not relate to the reading. The reflection will be carried out in a variety of ways, including through the use of some in class activities which I am picking up from the service learning listserv. I will also be setting up an electronic mailing list for the class to use (in directed and also informal ways) for this very purpose. In the past I have found journals somewhat restrictive as a pedagogical tool, because conventionally, the student and the instructor are the only ones who ever read it. This quarter, I am testing the use of an e-list with my Lib. Ed. course, to determine whether it facilitates a broader and more collegial engagement with the course material. In English 303, students would be graded on their ability to generate questions engaging both the academic and extramural aspects of the course, and on their mutual forthright responsiveness. Specifically, students will be expected to evaluate written as well as organizational and personal modes of response to the problem of hunger. What assumptions (nutritional, political, psychological, religious, cultural) about hunger and food are encoded in these responses? What hungers motivate service, on the organizational or personal level? How effective, finally, is the response?

5. The more pragmatic evaluative mechanisms for the service component will have to be flexible; in some cases it will not be possible for the service recipients (which is to say, the experts) to evaluate student performance, and I will have to devise a way for the organization to do so on their behalf. In some cases perhaps peers within a placement group could be called upon to evaluate each other. Of course I will also try to be present to the greatest degree possible to these students as they work on site and evaluate their own performance; for this reason I have requested (successfully) that the course be scheduled during the quarter in which I need only teach one class. I need to hear more about what other teachers of SERVICE-LEARNING classes do to meet this requirement efficiently and meaningfully.

6. Though the vocations which might arise in the welter of reading and doing are actually legion, I would hope that students will also find themselves embarking on a lifetime of enhanced civic awareness and activity. Writing about the social invisibility of poverty, Michael Harrington famously observed: "The other America, the America of poverty, is hidden today in a way that it never was before." Though written in 1962, the claim holds true today. The first and most important goal of the course will be to acquaint students with the very literal phenomenon of hunger as it is experienced in Utah today. (Hungry people are particularly socially invisible here, because they often live outside or at the margins of religious organizations intended to combat hunger, and because they are not prominently marked, geographically or ethnically, as an 'underclass.')

As Utah experiences its economic boom, it is crucial that students perceive and consider the hidden or unmet costs of prosperity. At the end of the twentieth century, habits of consumption probably constitute the most profound way in which 'we' can be construed as 'American.' Students should understand that such objective phenomena as food markets, recipes, meals, restaurants, and table manners can all be read as social texts in which American desires, ignorance, and ingenuity are all inscribed. If consumption and citizenship are inextricable, and if the American economy retains its prominent place at the world's table and as the manufacturer of global dreams, myths, and

delusions of sustenance, then it behooves us to begin examining the ways our personal habits do or do not reflect values commonly associated with being American (democratic egalitarianism, globally-oriented altruism, and respect for the environment all come to mind).

7. Students will be able to mobilize the skills taught in a basic reading course in new ways. They will be reading texts of all kinds, including first-person accounts, films and such supposedly nonliterary materials as editorials and informational texts, with an eye toward written analysis of the overarching questions of the course. They will also become more sensitive to the various signs someone in a direct service situation must learn to read, whichever end of the counter they are on. Performance and spectacle, two theoretical concerns in literary studies, will take on new diagnostic potential.

Through the service component of the course, students should be able to identify local social problems which cause hunger, and also to identify, if not also to identify with, those afflicted. They should be able to interrogate the volunteer transaction and the literary representations of hunger from the point of view of the donor and the recipient, the observer and the observed. Careful reading of the literary works in particular should facilitate this development. The strong literary and visual components of the course will introduce students to the problematics of observation and representation which drive aesthetic exploration but plague more 'objectively' grounded fields as well. What are the most effective means of representing hunger, particularly in writing? How do the observer/writer's ideas about hunger, food, and writing color what they are able to perceive and to communicate?

The students should begin to consider the extent to which the seemingly personal experiences of "hunger," "food," and "taste" are socially constituted. For this reason, the course will move well beyond hunger as biological, and food as an ecological phenomenon; hunger and its satiation are functions of the body-- but, remarkably, they are functions of consciousness as well. How are our desires constituted and regulated through socially acceptable means of expression or repression? How may we alter the social by desiring better things?

8. I expect that the use of the electronic mailing list, and the exchange and evaluation of spontaneously-written responses to in-class questions, will enable the students to learn from each other. A potluck party wouldn't hurt, either!

Tentative syllabus for a ten-week quarter

1. Hunger, Food, & Power (Anglo-American focus)

Harrington, *THE OTHER AMERICA* ch. 1 &2 (on poverty & its social invisibility); discussion of Utah-specific informational material from UAW and the Utah government food stamps program.

Orwell, DOWN & OUT IN PARIS AND LONDON; Le Sueur, "Sequel to Love" and "Women on the Breadlines" (to underscore the invisibility of women to Orwell, and to flesh out the afflictions of hunger for a population classically construed AS food)

Fisher (on hunger as a spiritual phenomenon) vs. Yeziarska's "Hunger" (ethnicity, food, assimilation). Possible assignment: compile a multigenerational family cookbook which is self-conscious about its motives. Students may be asked to read and discuss my own effort to this end as an example.

Hughes, "Coffee Break" (in RETURN OF SIMPLE); King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (and images of lunch counter segregation); Barnes, "How it Feels to be Forcibly Fed" (with images from the suffrage movement). The power of food and feeding in the metaphorical register.

11. The Social Life of Food

Lappe', DIET FOR A SMALL PLANET; promotional material from National Beef Council etc. [have students gather promotional material they find provocative]; Berry, "The Pleasures of Eating"; definition of 'whole food' from the WHOLE FOODS BIBLE

NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE issue HOW WE EAT: AN AMERICA DIVIDED (esp. on supermarket design); Finkelstein, DINING OUT (excerpts), Brillat-Savarin on the birth of the restaurant, Alice Waters on Chez Panisse; Levenstein, THE PARADOX OF PLENTY: A SOCIAL HISTORY OF EATING IN MODERN AMERICA (excerpts)

[question for listserv-- what was eaten, when, how & why. evaluate own diet/dietary expectations and pleasures in nutritional, ecological, and textual terms]

III. Bringing Hunger to the Table: Articulations, Rituals, Taboos

Homeric HYMN TO DEMETER, GOSPELS OF JOHN and LUKE (excerpts)

Day: LOAVES AND FISHES or THE LONG LONELINESS

Visser, RITUALS OF DINNER; Douglas, PURITY AND DANGER; Prose, "On the Persistence of Taboo"

IV. Domesticating Hunger: Food and Dining as Cultural Text

Visual arts: Oppenheim "Gouventante" & "Dejeuner en Fourrure," Chicago "Dinner-Party"; Barthes "Ornamental Cookery" (on class, recipes in women's magazines), "Chopsticks," "The Interstice." Reinventing American domesticity: DiPrima DINNERS & NIGHTMARES, REVOLUTIONARY LETTERS (excerpts)

I hope to screen at least one of the following films, perhaps at a final party: Buiiuel's "Discrete Charm of the Bourgeoisie," Greenaway's "The Cook, The Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover" (with misgivings), "Eating Raoul," or (if we're really tired) "Tampopo."

The English Department is committed to facilitating the creation of a new course at the 300 level, to be called "Literature of Social Reflection" (on the model of a class offered by Robert Coles at Harvard). At present the designation which appears in the Bulletin (English 303: Literary Genres) is frankly somewhat pretextual. I plan to advertise the course in the winter to compensate for the lack of explicit descriptive information in the Bulletin.