

Notes and Queries

Food as Experiential and Reflective Learning

By: Cora Mardin and Michael A. Lange

In this hybrid essay and response, third-year undergraduate student Cora Mardin presents some impressions and reactions to a participant-observation-driven documentary project she completed. Afterward, Michael Lange, one of Cora's former professors, comments on her essay. This format, reminiscent of a conference paper and a discussant, attempts to evoke the conversational nature of academic discourse. It is in the back-and-forth exchanges where learning and teaching happen, whether that is at a conference, between a journal article and a reader, or a teacher and a student. While this special issue's main focus is on traditional pedagogy – classroom teaching and learning – we would do well to remember that all academia is conversation, both in the moment and across generations. We start with Cora's essay:

Much goes into our understanding of what we consume even if we don't always fully realize it. Our individual epistemologies and our sense of cultural habitus play a very important role in our preconceived notions of what is a delicacy and what is not (in many cases the two not being far from each other). That is where I started – where we all start, really. With a humble and minuscule understanding of any topic often emerging from our own cultures and the common mindsets, we often do not change unless we make an active choice to do so. I sort of found myself involuntarily making such a choice about food and foodways my first semester of my 3rd year at college, and I slowly began to understand the power of food and food cultures as much more than sustenance, but also as an educational tool.

My name is Cora Mardin, a third year student in the Digital Filmmaking major at Champlain College, specializing in video editing and motion graphics with a minor in digital marketing. In my junior year, I took a course titled "Food Cultures" as part of my general education curriculum. For this class, we were asked to complete a semester-long project about a food or food culture of our choosing. This project involved asking a question, researching that question, and finally coming to some sort of conclusion, which would then be presented to the class. I decided to research chili con carne, perhaps because of my taste for spicy food, or maybe because of a very conveniently scheduled chili competition at my school. The Andy Burkhardt Memorial Chili Cook-off is an annual event held at the library at Champlain College, where I work, and it was coincidentally happening the following month.

In addition to studying the event itself, the deeper question I had in mind for my project was related to chili's origins and how the original recipe differed from the varieties of chili to be found at the cook-off. I was keenly aware that the chilis at this cook-off were not a

definitive Burlington style, but more a sampling of the types of chili made by the faculty, staff, and students at Champlain. However, I found – and do find – that concept to be just as interesting. In order to engage with the process more fully, I contemplated what I would be doing at the cook-off. Eventually, I settled on two ideas to learn about the origins of chili con carne and see how that recipe relates to the chilis entered into the Andy Burkhardt Memorial Chili Cook-off: 1) I would make my own chili con carne – one not too dissimilar to the way it was originally prepared in the 1850s – and enter the cook-off myself, and 2) being a film student, I would develop a documentary film to catalog the cook-off in the most efficient and entertaining way possible. To give the whole thing a better sense of structure, I separated it into three parts: background, execution, and examination.

With the essential *mise en scene* of my project covered, I'd like to talk about my initial understanding of chili con carne and how I was able to transform that understanding into a 20-minute documentary. Before this project, I had never made chili before. I had a general idea of how chili was made, but I had never been involved in making it myself, so I was aware from the beginning that this would be an educational experience for me, even beyond the initial assignment's prompt. Furthermore, I started out with almost no knowledge of chili's greater cultural relevance, I merely knew the chili that existed in my experiences growing up in New Hampshire. The chili I knew there was a fairly standard regional version of chili con carne, with beans, beef, and peppers. This was the pattern I expected original chili would be like.

At the cook-off at Champlain College, however, the types of chili that I saw varied quite a lot, to the point that several stretched the definition of 'chili'. Perhaps owing to Champlain being in Burlington, Vermont, an area with a reputation for being open and alternative, many of the chilis in the cook-off included a wide range of ingredients not often associated with the dish (e.g., chickpeas, sauerkraut, Kahlua, etc.). I found the amount of variation between the chili I had grown up with and the range of chilis at the cook-off to be deeply fascinating, and it was an important catalyst to my understanding of my research.

Much of my understanding of chili and, as I later came to discover, food as a whole, came not from text-based research, though, but from the actual making of my chili. In light of my question, I decided to make an 1850s style chili, in the manner of the Chili Queens. The Chili Queens were women who first crafted chili con carne and served it in San Antonio's Military Plaza in the 19th century (Jennings). I learned a lot about these women during my research, but what I took away from their story/recipes was their resourcefulness and the sense of community they were quickly able to build. As is true of countless dishes across space and time, the Chili Queens made their stews with what they had available to them to feed their families. Selling their meals, made with what they could afford, to the people of Texas was, among other things, another means of providing for family. The Chili Queens'

recipes varied widely because of personal preference, uneven availability of ingredients, and more. Inspired by the straightforwardness of their approach, I decided on a very basic recipe for the chili that I would enter into the cook-off. The core ingredients across the Queens' countless renditions of chili, which I wanted to use as a pattern, consisted of beef, peppers, and whatever spices fit your spiciness preference.

Having never made a chili before, I struggled quite a bit, as might be expected. It's not easy to do something you've never done before, especially when you're filming yourself as a nominal expert and pretending to know exactly what you're doing, as was the conceit of my documentary film. In a strange way, this somewhat tricky situation helped me out a lot in the long run. When you are in front of a camera, as I was, if you're not confident in yourself, people notice. It's not enjoyable to watch, often difficult to understand, and puts up red flags about your knowledge on your subject/execution. I was not at all confident in my ability to make a chili, but having my camera there and knowing that I didn't want to feel the chagrin of watching myself muddle through cooking while editing it forced me to, for lack of a better word, pretend. This aided in my ability to learn and to teach others both during the cooking process and later on at the cook off. Even now, the idea of this chili, delicious or not, makes me feel pretty good about myself. Having a healthy level of confidence about things, even if you're unsure of them, can make you feel a bit better about trying something new, and you might even surprise yourself. I know I did!

The final step in my chili research was to go to the chili cook-off. I did not believe that I could win this event (and I didn't), but that was never the goal. I did, however, benefit by entering because I now had a shared perspective with the other entrants, which allowed me to have a stronger bond and more empathy toward their processes. As I went around the cook off, interviewing people and trying various chili concoctions, I quickly learned that chili meant something different and unique to each person. For some it was a way they connected with their families, for some a means of creativity and personal escape, and for others they just thought chili was delicious. Within all this, I was still able to answer my original question: chili has, in fact, changed a lot over time. Though some people did seem to hold light-hearted prejudices about what should and should not be in chili, everyone at the cook-off was able to agree that these changes are welcomed and appreciated for their uniqueness. That being said, I answered much more than just that. Chili, and in many ways, all food, allows people the opportunity to express themselves and connect with each other. There were people I met at this event that made their own chilis and held a sort of pride and excitement when I gave them the outlet to talk about them in a meaningful way. On the other side of it, there were individuals, much like myself having never made chili, who were instead using the platform to talk about chili in relation to loved ones, holidays, the comfort chili provides them, etc. It was all very beautiful and touched me in ways I cannot explain. I

was slowly developing a much more concrete idea of what food is actually able to teach me and its greater effect on others that I had not considered before.

I think my experience with chili was not always necessarily a good one but more so a meaningful one. I had great difficulty every turn in this process. Nothing ever quite felt like it was enough or right or important, but it was. I struggled constantly, but I always overcame it, and the feeling I had at this experiment's conclusion was a fond one. I never would have expected that it taught me so much to do this project. I learned that what we put into our food experiences is what we get out of them. Throughout this process, I discovered many times that, a lot of people have far deeper connections with food than just its taste. Food holds the ability to help us understand people: ourselves, our communities, and global food cultures. The choice we must make is in our willingness to learn from food, to let food into our lives and not be closed off to those possibilities of what you could potentially learn both in and out of the classroom.

And now, Professor Lange's commentary:

Cora was my student in several general education classes throughout her undergraduate education, although not for the "Food Cultures" course for which the project discussed was assigned. As a side note, I entered one of the chilis into the Andy Burkhardt Memorial Chili Cook-off, losing rather handily in both the judges' eyes and the popular vote. One of the particular joys and fears of being a classroom teacher is that fingers-crossed moment *after* the semester, when you hope that something that you have taught has lodged in a student's thinking for longer than exam week. In the scholarship of teaching and learning, as well as fields that study interdisciplinarity, they talk about transference, the ability to take a bit of knowledge from one intellectual context and apply it in another. For the classroom teacher, one of the most obvious forms of transference is when a student takes something from your class and uses it to make new knowledge in another class.

With that in mind, several ideas jump out at me as I read Cora's essay. The first is the perpetually tricky cultural concept of authenticity. Popular understandings of food are rife with misguided discussions of authenticity, which fight against or ignore the immense fluidity of culture. All aspects of culture flout the artificial taxonomies people like to impose when assigning exclusive places, groups, or identities to the things people think, feel, believe, have, and do. Academics are not immune from the seductive surety of authenticity, either, even long after the likes of Bendix and Bhabha critiqued the notion and provided us with better ways to think. Cora's engages with chili con carne, which has a traceable origin to the Chili Queens of San Antonio, is nevertheless part of a larger complex category of stewed and spiced meat dishes, the edges of which are at best indeterminate. By recognizing that chili con carne has simultaneously a center to its identity and a wide and

varying boundary around it as a category, Cora is acknowledging the constructed qualities of our cultural taxonomies. As much as we might want a nice, neat, clean category called 'chili', with well-defined edges, what we have are central nodes of identity and ranges of variation expanding out from them and toward other nodes.

The discussion of the documentary side of the project brings up another set of terms that many of us teach in our classrooms, performance and performativity. Anyone who uses performance theory of any kind, from Goffman through Kapchan and beyond, discusses how viewing a culture bearer as a performer can enlighten the communicative and purposeful aspects of engaging in one's identity. In the case of food, so many acts can be understood through the lens of performance: growing, selling, cooking, eating, preserving. A chili cook-off has another obvious layer of performance involved, as different chilis are cooked and then presented for a very public consumption and competition. Cora touches on both the performance of cooking chili as a culinary act and the performativity of making chili for her documentary camera. The self-conscious nature of cooking for a camera is similar to the self-conscious performativity of entering one's chili into a competition, and Cora acknowledges both layers in her essay. When we engage in a cultural act, we perform for ourselves and others.

One of the most heartwarming parts of Cora's essay is what follows her discussion of the performative aspects of her cook-off participation. She touches on meaning, which is at the core of how I teach about culture. Knowledge is information that is made meaningful, that is situated in what Geertz calls our "webs of significance". The sum of, and interactions among, our bits of knowledge help shape who we are, which becomes the foundation of culture when it interacts with the sums of the many others around us. When the edge of one of our epistemologies, our systems of making knowledge and meaning, comes into contact with the edge of someone else's epistemology, culture is enjoined. Tsing calls these moments of friction, and it is through our systems of meaning making and the friction that results in their contact that people live their lives. I decide what kind of chili I want to make by choosing certain meanings for the moment, and rejecting others. The set of meanings that end up in my pot of chili come into friction with others' meaning making systems when they taste it. The productive result is a new meaning, in this case quite probably "yuck" or "yum". On one performative hand, I want people to like my chili. On another, as Cora insightfully recognizes, the fact that people are investing meaning in their chili and chili making, and that they and others are making meanings with the result, is what is most important, as well as most fascinating.

All of these insights and interpretations are made more possible for Cora because she engaged in participant observation, a cornerstone of cultural research for over a century. Food provides enormous opportunities for participant observation, as it is something that

is easily shareable, deeply meaningful, and requires much “doing”. Simply put, there is a lot of available participation to be had in people’s foodways, and much to observe along the way. It is telling that Cora chose to learn about chili con carne through not only the distant, supposedly objective lens of the camera, but also the immediacy of entering the chili cook-off. That kind of emic and etic perspective taking, which is such a common norm in folklore and anthropology as to go unnoticed, is worth pointing out in an undergraduate educational setting. The power of interacting with people in order to learn, to understand their meanings by engaging with them and asking people to share their knowledge and wisdom about those meanings, makes such a project a very valuable pedagogical tool. If equipped with some good theory beforehand, students can learn by doing, not just how to make a pot of chili, but how to be human. The fact that Cora talks about the empathy she gained through the enactment of her project tells us everything we need to know about the value of participant observation.

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