# Slow Reading, Slow Eating: A Postcritical Approach to First-Year Writing Pedagogy

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I am a person with many tendencies toward routinization. Nearly every night for ten or fifteen years, I have eaten the same dessert, which comprises various combinations of a holy trinity: yogurt, fruit, nuts.

I am a FAGE loyalist, if I may be allowed brand loyalties to fermented milk products, though I have had phases with other yogurt varieties. My last year of college, pushed out of communal dining halls into an off-campus apartment because I couldn't stomach the sanitized institutional feeding practices necessitated by Covid-19, I shopped exclusively at the reasonably-priced South Asian markets, and ate through five-pound tubs of unstrained Dahi every week. One summer in Houston, Texas, to fight boredom and feel located in a city that was almost home but not quite, I dropped considerable cash on raw milk yogurt from nearby farms. Every couple of months, I crave the thin Bulgarian-style yogurt of my youth, and hoard the thick glass jars for fermenting vegetables. But the texture of FAGE, strained of nearly all its whey and the fermentation by-product bubbles visible underneath the foil seal, invites an experience of indulgence incommensurate with the cultural understanding of how "indulgent" a food yogurt is — basically not indulgent at all.

The milk fat content of the yogurt in my dessert varies, depending on the day's craving, but I typically have two tubs of differing fat content in my fridge. The five-percent milk fat yogurt is best in savory settings, plopped over steamy rice or roasted broccoli with lots of cumin and garlic, preserved lemon and fresh parsley if I'm prepared, which I am often not. The nonfat yogurt, with its sharp tang and acidity, cuts through sweetness, balances the richness of cashew butter or frozen bananas or melted chocolate.

The two-percent, these days, I only grab when I'm too lazy to mix the full fat and nonfat

until the acid balance reaches my liking. It is a form of freedom, these days, to determine the fat content of yogurt by taste. Two-percent used to be a concession: a regulated amount of richness, connected to a caloric content I felt comfortable with. This was, and is, all arbitrary, of course. Caloric labelling is imprecise, an individual's momentary needs are difficult to measure, and the narratives I write around my nutritional choices are just stories (Nestle, Nesheim). "Dieting" is an investment in a sense of control as much as it is an investment in bodily aesthetics.

When I began graduate school and began to realize that my scholarly project involved prioritizing pleasurable encounters with "taste," tapping into bodily affects as a source of intellect, and considering the rhetorical production of physical bodies, I performed a weekly dance between classrooms and doctors offices. I was nearly osteoporotic at twenty-two years old. "Bioavailable calcium" and "probiotics" to help soothe my gastrointestinal tract during the uncomfortable food-reintegration process became the keywords of my diet program. I ate yogurt for breakfast, snacks, and still, dessert. I put yogurt on beans, sourdough, charred eggplant, and berries; dipped crudités in yogurt doused in olive oil and sumac; ate it straight out of the tub with smoked flaky salt and crispy honeycomb. I satisfied my tendencies toward routinization, my desire for control over my daily investments in pleasurable survival, while also satisfying 300% of the daily recommended intake of calcium.

**Slow Reading, Slow Eating**

The previous passage is an extended example of a discussion-post style writing exercise I assign my first-year writing students on the first week of our critical analysis unit. The prompt: Write about a food you return to often. I ask them to write about their immediate associations

with the food, to begin understanding their attachment to it. The food they choose becomes the topic of their next essay: a critical analysis of taste. In the essay, they apply the tools of critical or "literary" analysis to a food item. By replacing a literary object with a food object, I try to locate the source of knowledge closer to their own bodies, and help students expand the category of the aesthetic. In this essay, I detail my justifications for re-teaching critical analysis in this way, and detail the results of this assignment in my own ENWR 1510 classroom.

In what follows, I will cover my pedagogical rationale for assigning a "critical analysis of taste" to my first-year composition students. I share my writing, above, because I share my writing in the classroom. For a group of students who wish to please, and become uncomfortable without strict rubrics, seeing me experiment alongside them enables creative thinking. Collective participation and vulnerability are central to my pedagogical philosophy. This is not to say that I ask vulnerability of my students, or even argue that vulnerability is necessary for compassionate instruction. My position comes from bell hooks's *Teaching to Transgress*:

> Empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks. Professors who expect students to share confessional narratives but who are themselves unwilling to share are exercising power in a manner that could be coercive. In my classrooms, I do not expect students to take any risks that I would not take, to share in any way that I would not share. (21)

I only model vulnerability in the classroom because, frankly, it is easy for me. As a scholar who produces theory from the personal mode, whose knowledge is affectual before it is linguistic, it would be a disservice to my students to model an epistemology I do not inhabit. The approach to I take to scholarship and writing is also more legible in Sarah Ahmed's *Queer*

*Phenomenologies.* Ahmed justifies the creative, illocutionary prose style of a work that participates in a philosophical tradition marked by a particular stylistic logic:

> My writing moves between conceptual analysis and personal digression. But why call the personal a digression? Why is it that the personal so often enters writing as if we are being led astray from a proper course?…Perhaps my preference for such queer turnings is because I don't have a disciplinary line to follow — I was "brought up" between disciplines and I have never quite felt comfortable in the homes they provide. The lines of disciplines are certainly a form of inheritance. (22)

I still don't consider myself much of an "inheritor." I am a writer more than a scholar, a reader more than a critic. I dip in and out of methods and traditions. Otherwise, I fit snugly in academic spaces. I am white, visibly able-bodied, ambiguously gendered, privy to projection. My moments of vulnerability and apparent ambivalence about the "form" knowledge takes are my moments of refusal; they hopefully become invitations for my students to refuse in their own ways, reorient toward messier epistemologies.

The ENWR 1510 I teach, called "You Are What You Eat: Writing About Food" is a writing-as-inquiry style course. I do not believe the diet-culture maxim, of course. I use the maxim in the course title to introduce an association between text and food: two aesthetic objects, if you will, that nourish thought. We read to write, write to think, we eat to read and write and think. I reclaim oft-suspect eating language to establish new, more nuanced relationships between what we take in and what we feel prepared to imagine. For example, on the first day of class, I show my students my intake journal, which sometimes includes photos of

meals I've plated extravagantly in an attempt to make beautiful a mundane investment in staying alive, but is mostly a list of what I read on any given day, and sometimes, reactions to what I loved the most.[1] It is not that investments in different aesthetic encounters are all the same and should be regarded as such, but that we build people as well as bodies, and we can take pleasure in experiences that often look and feel like work or maintenance. Writing, eating. They are practices.

The first unit of the course, called "The Container," teaches a formalist approach to composition. I assign food writing across "forms" or genres — cookbooks, blog posts, reviews, and fictional engagements with these "nonfictional" forms, such as Nora Ephron's novel *Heartburn* and the film *Julie and Julia*. Students are asked to consider the affordances of particular forms, or how ideas are shaped or enabled by particular packages. Upon entering college, many students are daunted by the necessity to express their ideas in forms other than the five-paragraph essay (Levine). Their fear comes not from incapability but lack of imagination. Without essentializing a connection between literary forms and ideas that inhabit those forms, I teach students that their ideas can expand or contract or mold to fit a given form if they allow those ideas to move and breathe, if they become students of form as well as content. The first essay, "A Recipe for Something," divorces a form from its typical content, and asks students to think critically about what the recipe form affords and prevents. I prioritize not a devotion to

[1] In a silly attempt to further divorce the "intake journal" from its restrictive associations, I play the song "Mouth Log" by Sidney Gish. The first verse is as follows: "On my phone, I've got a list/ Of food I ate and people I kissed/ And because of this, I'm losing weight/ I'm batting my eyes like siren bait/ Just like a hate-watched series/ I catalog life dearly/ Dreary how-tos on half assed self abuse". The discomfort of Gish's humor makes evident the link between intention and effect: the "mouth" log can be a tool of self abuse, but even this abuse can be a function of general ennui or malaise and not a moral imperative. It also gives us a good laugh.

formal convention, but critical engagement with a historical means of structuring ideas. I refrain from providing examples of the assignment, as not to limit the potential for creative interpretations. Foregoing the five-paragraph essay in the first assignment allows students to break their own assumption about what I "expect" from their writing for the rest of the semester.

The next unit, "Eating Out," ends with a research essay on a food-related topic. The unit teaches basic research methods — it is an opportunity to acquaint students with university resources — but is focused around an ethical engagement with the ideas of others. Weeks are structured thematically, from an "eating animals" week focused on writing research questions, to a "bodies" week that asks students to contend with the assumptions they, and their sources, bring to a research topic. In the last two weeks, on Korean food and Black food in the American South, teach students to take history, culture, and personal experience seriously in their research endeavors. The point is not always to feed our desires for empirical knowledge and straight edges, but to ask interesting questions of the world around us and achieve a nuanced understanding of a phenomenon through attention and care. This ethic or approach to asking questions feeds directly into the following critical analysis unit, where students exercise these research muscles alongside their aesthetically-attuned ones; where the questions they have about the world come out of slow engagement with a smaller object.

In the final unit, the primary focus of this essay, I seek to reclaim the diet-bastardized

maxim: "slow eating."[2] In diet rhetoric, eating slowly is a mechanism for eating less. This has been a maxim of American diet talk since at least the nineteenth century, when Horace Fletcher, "a retired businessman with no scientific background" advocated for Fletcherizing, or the thorough mastication of all food to aid the digestive system and exhaust eaters (Kamp). The argument goes: if a person takes small bites, chews a bunch, and pauses for a while after swallowing, they will notice their satiety cues sooner. Or, they just get bored. Chewing is tedious work. This advice appeals to two contradictory justifications. On one hand, "slowness" suggests that, with ample time, one can become more in touch with their bodily cues. By pausing to pay attention, instead of engage unthinkingly, one becomes attuned to bodily affect. Slowness allows one to note the way a taste experience actually makes them feel. But the fact that this attempt to attune is in service of an attempt to lose weight actually ends up fostering skepticism in response to the bodily cues they believed they were following; namely, hunger. You don't actually need the food you want, it says. Hedonic impulses are tricksters; distrust your brain and the food it seeks. Slow eating thus serves paranoia more than pleasure.

I note the irony here: pointing out that "slow eating" rhetoric *actually* invites some skeptical relationship between food and a person's bodily cues is itself a skeptical reading. I do

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[2] In an even-more-oblique attempt to do the same, Lauren Berlant defines "slow food" as: "a concept and a movement that recognizes in a practice of ordinary inefficiency a way to counter the speeds with which capitalist activity destroys its environments while at the same time it makes living possible and produces contexts for thriving, merely living, and wearing out for the people making life within them" (*Cruel Optimism* 115). Berlant attempts to divorce the phenomenology of eating, a restorative practice that interrupts capitalist agency over a body's functioning, from the "biopolitical event of obesity." Though I feel discomfort with the ways in which Berlant's prose and use of statistics about the apparent dangers of overeating threaten to reproduce the dominant association between obesity and what Berlant calls "slow death," a symptom of late capitalist work structure and insufficient health care as opposed to a value-neutral bodily aesthetic, there is obvious value in the announced attempt to divorce bodily aesthetics from an investment in pleasure and nourishment. Much of my impetus to reclaim "slow eating" in my daily life comes from an attempt to extend the moment of "lateral agency" eating provides.

not know how to resolve this, other than to note that skepticism is sometimes warranted![3] I use the language of skepticism, though, to nod toward one theoretical pillar of my pedagogical approach, and point out that there is something to the "surface interpretation" of slow eating, or, what the practice purports to achieve. Extricated from the ends of weight loss, engaging in any set of actions a bit more slowly, with a bit more attention, can be beneficial. Attuning oneself to an aesthetic experience is good. To notice the way one's body feels, especially in reaction to an external object, to notice the links between oneself and something outside of oneself and how those links tug and contract, is hard. In my ENWR classroom, I seek to reposition "slow" or "close" engagement with an aesthetic object (a meal, a poem) within a post-critical sensibility — "slowness" as a way of prioritizing and noticing affective response to an object as opposed to tricking oneself into asceticism.[4]

**Repairing "Rhetorical" Analysis**

In a Collab discussion post I titled "Rhetorical Therapy," I asked students to describe their history with rhetorical analysis: what they think it is, whether they like it, why or why not. "I have never felt very comfortable with rhetorical analysis and at this stage of my life I don't feel particularly motivated or inspired to learn how to do it adequately," one student wrote.

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[3] "The "something" that is wrong with critique, I believe, is not its desire to criticize social injustice, but its disposition, the attitude with which critique is approached. It may not be "critique" that has outlived its usefulness, in other words, but the dispositions that have become customary, even mandatory, to carry it out" (Castiglia 212)

[4] There is much more to say about the links between asceticism and the notion that "rigorous" intellectual engagements with objects necessitate a distanced objectivity that denies pleasurable attachments between critics and things. I do not have the space to explore this association, but I will overburden my point: we deny our bodies and brains in so many ways.

The general spirit of the posts can be captured by one, titled "English is my second language":

> I absolutely hate analyzing writing. My teachers in junior and senior year were always overthinking and overanalyzing every single sentence. Maybe 'the spaghetti sauce was red' is just an observation of the color of smushed tomatoes, not the blood the writer sees every time he looks at a limp body…I do think that there can be a deeper meaning, but typically we try to overanalyze works in order to seem like we have an educated opinion or are just good at English — which is really just subjective…Everything is just one interpretation from many, which makes me hate English classes. (But I have enjoyed this one.) And that's my thoughts on rhetorical analysis.

Key terms across the discussion board: tedious, boring. Many noted that the interpretive process, as they learned it in high school AP and IB courses, detracted from an activity they would otherwise enjoy: reading for pleasure, and talking about it with other people. Others were dissatisfied with the interpretations they felt able to produce. The extractive approach yielded nothing but sediment under their fingernails.

The most surprising theme in the posts, though, was the repetition of the depth metaphor. Nearly every post featured a mention of "hidden" or "deeper" meaning. One student wrote that she hated close reading in high school because she "seemed to always choose the wrong details to write about, or choose the right details but explain them superficially." Another noted that he is not a fan of close reading because he feels "the best way to read a text is in the way an average reader would, which, unless it is very very dense, is usually just to get a basic understanding."

A moment of confession: up until contending with my students' opinions, I had no idea how I was going to approach this unit. For a graduate student in an English department, my literary theory knowledge is rife with lacunae, like a slice of Swiss cheese. Yet I knew a few things.

I knew I wanted to appeal to diverse forms of knowledge, render the critical analysis process accessible to students with various backgrounds, predispositions, and talents. Much of this goal arose from bodily pedagogy (Wilcox, Hawhee), which attends to bodies as agents of intellectual production and participates in a postmodern critique of Western intellectual hierarchies, and Black feminist writing about the pedagogical necessity of diverse epistemologies. In "A View From a Bridge: Afrafeminist Ideologies and Rhetorical Studies," Jacqueline Jones Royster writes:

> Producers of knowledge are not formless and invisible. They are embodied and in effect have passionate attachments by means of their embodiments. They are vested with vision, values, and habits; with ways of being and ways of doing. These ways of being and doing shape the question of what counts as knowledge, what knowing and doing mean, and what the consequences of knowledge and action entail. (228)

There are many consequences of ascribing "formlessness" and "invisibility" to forms of knowledge prioritized in Western academic institutions — or, considering "invisible" the kind of knowledge associated with the so-called "raceless" race — but one consequence is the impetus for bell hooks's *Teaching to Transgress*. In this collection of essays on pedagogy, bell hooks describes the isolating effect of her educational history, and considers how to build pedagogical

philosophies that transgress structures of domination and yield capacious social imaginaries. "The call for a recognition of cultural diversity, a rethinking of ways of knowing, a deconstruction of old epistemologies, and the concomitant demand that there be a transformation in our classrooms, in how we teach and what we teach, has been a necessary revolution—one that seeks to restore life to a corrupt and dying academy" (30). Thus, a transgressive classroom that attends to all students, restores immanence and relevance to humanistic practice, and allows students both a sense of their own agency as well as makes evident the ways that collective agency, and the agency of others, must be sought and protected, must expand boundaries of epistemological acceptability.

I knew I wanted to appeal to the everyday, imbue simple pleasures in this kind of thought oft-associated with inaccessibility and pedantry, allow students to elevate their passing engagements with the aesthetic by giving them language for "the aesthetic" (Dewey). Lofty goals for a mandatory intro writing course? Maybe. But one of my core teaching objectives is to give my students a sense of agency. Many of them identify as "bad writers" and distrust their ability to produce an original idea. Convincing them that even their affinity for oatmeal can constitute an aesthetic experience helps them take seriously even ideas they perceive to be silly.

I knew I wanted to repair students' relationship to the critical analysis process by defamiliarizing it a bit, by replacing text with food. I knew what I wanted to *do*, I just wasn't sure why I believed it would *work*. I had not anticipated how the language of skepticism, the metaphors so often deployed in academic critique, would shape even their initial engagements with rhetorical analysis. Once I noticed how depth metaphors pervaded their lexicons, my

theoretical approach took shape. My objective to help my students trust themselves needed to extend; I had to help them trust texts as well.

Christopher Castiglia writes that the term postcritique signals what may be the most important dispositional change in literary studies in four decades (211). “Critique” as a genre is defined by its diagnostic qualities, the allegorical mode, and self-reflexivity (Anker & Felski 3). Scholars suggest that the genre arose from the skeptical position of Freud, Marx, and Foucault; a position marked by its distrust of a text’s self-identification, its penchant for finding symptoms of ideology in a text that can only be cured through a critic’s diagnosis. Postcritique, suggested by the prefix, is an anti-opposition oppositional position. Where critique delves into depths, postcritique attends to surfaces; where critique pushes against perceived currents, critique surfs. But even this is a reductive synopsis. The questioning of critique is not a complete disavowal of skepticism, or a decision to ignore tensions where they exist, it instead “extends from growing doubts both about such claims of political efficacy and about the role of the critic as heroic dissident,” and “a dissatisfaction with critique’s frequent rendering of the thoughts and actions of ordinary social actors as insufficiently self aware or uncritical” (Anker & Felski 8, 14). Postcritique does not argue for a mirrored method, but a methodological pluralism: “Displacing the impasse of surface and depth, abstract and concrete, form and content, the play on words itself offers a rejoinder to a range of interpretative projects, including the panoply of historicisms, surface reading and the descriptive turn, and evolutionary or cognitive reading models” (Rooney 136).

Postcritique thus presents a more capacious view of the political that is not determined by a particular rhetorical move. It relocates the capacity for criticism in every reader — "critics" have some training, sure, and support livelihoods with their writing, but "critic" is a profession more than a capacity. The desire to justify one's profession is natural. But, frankly, it's a boring reason to apotheosize oneself, or construct an epistemological system that differentiates oneself from the derogatorily "ordinary."[5]

Anker and Felski write that postcritique attends to this position of self-defense, and offers ordinariness as a palliative:

> At a time when higher education is under siege, it seems urgent to articulate more compelling accounts of why the humanities matter and to clarify to larger audiences why anyone should care about literature, art, or philosophy. Accustomed to a rhetoric of dismantling and demystification, critique lacks a vocabulary and set of established rationales for mounting such defenses. Meanwhile, it has often encouraged an antagonistic and combative attitude toward the public world; in the wake of poststructuralism, especially, critique has often been synonymous with a pronounced aversion toward norms and an automatic distrust of instrumentality and institutions. One result of this spirit of marginality is to keep serious thought sequestered in the ivory tower, thereby working to ensure its lack of impact or influence on the public sphere. Rethinking critique can thus forge stronger links between intellectual life and the

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[5] This is not even to mention how distracting methodological debates can be, especially for graduate students, who feel they must defend their work to their academy and their families by demonstrating its political efficacy. One could direct their energy toward appealing the universities that undervalue their labor, or work they actually care about, or really, anything other than spiraling in self-justification.

> nonacademic world. Such links are not simply a matter of capitulation or collusion, but can offer a vital means of influencing larger conversations and intervening in institutional policies and structures. (19)

These methodological quibblings appear to have little to do with first-year composition courses. (Here I go, again, reaching for a stereotypically critique-y syntactical move.) But postcritique helped me understand why substituting the taste object might actually be an effective means of reconnecting students with a "critical" cognitive process. There is no direct pipeline from the prevalence of a critical mood in the academy, the "hidden meaning" excavations taking place in high school AP courses and the many permutations of "I don't want to be in an English class, this all seems pretty useless to me" I received in my students' initial writing diagnostic assignments. But there is an association that can be troubled, challenged. For first-year undergraduates — at least, the ones I have interacted with thus far — a meal doesn't conceal its content from them as they believe a work of literature, or a poem, might. Some of this can be explained by an anxiety about fictionality — one of the most surprising themes in my undergraduate class is my students' repeated assumption that any piece of writing they enjoyed must be nonfictional — and some can be explained by a skeptical mood that pervaded their initial encounters with rhetorical analysis. Food isn't hiding anything. Its ingredients are perceptible, or researchable; there's no inclination to be wary of the aesthetic. Students trust their taste responses and only must worry about giving language to those responses — still, a surprisingly difficult component of the

analytical process.[6]

Switching the object of analysis from text to food is a mechanism for becoming unwary. Beauty is where it is, and students trust that it is there, regardless of whether other students, or I, agree on a specific case — whereas, if I hand them a poem, they distrust their instincts and talk themselves into meager appreciation by the end of a discussion section, because they regard me as an authority who determines a work of writing's aesthetic value. (I am not.) I also believe that, because a student's affective response to a food-related taste experience tends to remain at the core of their critical engagement, a food object invites critical engagement while resisting "critique"-y engagement. The affective relation cannot be explained away by one phenomenon. Even if, say, a student uses psychoanalytic theories to understand where the food might rest in their subconscious, the taste would not live in any corner of the student's brain without some prior physical imprint; without the student's memory of a bodily response to the taste experience. Each interpretive possibility becomes one component of a larger network that always comes back to the student's initial attachment.

What I am getting at here, is a kind of reparation from two directions: the reparation of critical analysis for the undergraduate, who associates it with the AP exam's three-step extrication of "real" meaning using the Aristotelian rhetorical triangle by replacing text with food, and the reparation of an eating experience rendered onerous by the notion that one must

[6] This is not to argue that skeptical food or diet rhetoric does not exist; "slow eating" rhetoric traffics in producing skeptical responses to pleasure. If one eats slowly, or is distrustful of hunger cues, one will eat less. By suggesting that one should distrust their reaction to an aesthetic experience, or suggesting that one's bodily cues are tricking them into submission to a demonic pleasure, diet culture breaks the link between a body and what feeds it. Thus, a skeptical mood defamiliarizes a critic from the affective pleasure of a reading experience as it defamiliarizes a person from the pleasure of eating.

distrust their own bodies by replacing the ethos of "slow reading" with the ethos of "slow reading." To achieve either goal, one must divorce from skepticism and prioritize bodily knowledge for the sake of it.

**Reparation in Practice: Eating ANTs**

Postcritical approaches to literary and cultural studies offer a few interpretive methods. Actor-network theory (ANT), a methodology developed in the 1980s by science studies scholars Bruno Latour, Alfred North Whitehead, John Law and Michael Callon, inspired the approach I presented undergraduates. Latour theorized ANT — "a name that is so awkward, so confusing, so meaningless that it deserves to be kept" — as an approach to sociology that does not understand "the social" as a given, but as constituted by other connections between other entities (*Reassembling* 9). In other words: "the social" does not explain what economics, linguists, law, etc. are unable to explain; it is not the elusive remainder. The social is what can be understood by the associations between the economic, linguistic, juridical, etc. The "theory" defines actors as any entity, human or nonhuman, that influences the activity of a system — regardless of whether the entity intentionally exerts influence. Nonhuman entities — sometimes referred to as "objects" or "things," taking heed from object-oriented ontology — are experienced, and thus, take on more meanings than their uses.

These things are also locations from which moments or movements can be traced. "Networks" are groups of actors working or moving together. Most of the work of ANT is done by tracing the links between actors, observing how they affect one another in a series of relationships, and noting how the critic/reader/observer participates in those relationships. Latour

explains the process of tracing social links in a few steps: localizing the global, redistributing the local, and connecting sites. The cartographic metaphor helps a critic envision a "flat" social world, in which all actors exist on the same plane, occupying non-hierarchical ontologies. Notably, "The tracing does not reveal a larger critique or cultural phenomenon or even intervention" (Rice 249). ANT is not about exhumation. It is not concerned with depths, or "real" meanings. I take Latour to be uninterested with determining "reality." Reality just is. To abandon the search for scare quote "reality" or "truth" is to approach a more compassionate, accommodating, and specific kind of empiricism.

I use "theory" in scare quotes, as well, because Latour himself is dismissive of the term and describes ANT as a methodology more than an explanation. Felski writes that ANT is "less a theory of how to study things than of 'how not to study them — or rather, how to let the actors have some room to express themselves.' It is not a matter of feeding a topic—whether paintings or presidential assassinations — into a whirring machinery of concepts or theories in order to spit out the desired result. We need to follow the actors, scrape our knees on the rough rocks of reality, expect to be disconcerted or perplexed" (*Hooked* 23). ANT is a theory of association that asks a critic to question their assumption that a "theory" will provide the means to reach a satisfactory answer. It does not "explain" so much as ask whether the desire for singular explanations are misguided.

It may be a tad unclear what this shift from sociology to social associations has to do with a first-year writing credit. First, I find Latour's work useful for helping me render critical analysis applicable to young people entering a variety of disciplines, mostly STEM-centric. (In

an ENWR section of 18, all but three of my students were pre-med on the neuroscience track.) Even in Latour's writing pedagogy, he compared essays to laboratories; the essay is an attempt at composing knowledge through trials and experiments. Composition itself required attunement, experience, and iterative efforts that required the participation of many human and nonhuman actors (Reassembling the Social 149). In *Politics of Nature*, Latour defines an experiment as such:

> An experiment, as etymology attests rather well, consists in 'passing though' a trial and coming out of it in order to draw its lessons. It thus offers an intermediary between knowledge and ignorance. It defines itself not by the knowledge that is available at the start, but by the quality of the learning curve that has made it possible to pass through a trial and to know a little more about it." (195–196)

This "experimentation," page-as-laboratory, feels integral to the "writing as inquiry" approach of UVA's ENWR courses, and a meaningful metaphorical frame for STEM students disillusioned with distributional degree requirements. It also carries an ethic of approach that contradicts the "deep meaning" dig students are trained to perform, and intuitively reject. One no longer seeks to know what a text or object really means — a discouraging goal, since students tend to distrust their own comprehension capacities as much as the text they encounter — but gaining insight into an essentially contingent experience.

This brings us to the second reason why Latour's ANT perspective is applicable for early close-readers: it offers an alternative to the "deep" reading approach. The work of bringing ANT perspectives to other academic disciplines has been done, but I am most interested in an

endeavor to bring ANT to literary and cultural studies, led by Antoine Hennion, Rita Felski, and others. Felski rejects the notion that artworks are self-contained and autonomous. She rejects that the task of the critic is to respect this autonomy, disavow their attachments to aesthetic objects and experiences, and determine whether an object is transgressive from a position of distanced objectivity. ANT allows Felski to attend to the links between an object and the world that do not undermine its distinctiveness, but enable it. She writes,

> By analogy, then, an ANT perspective does not endorse a view of aesthetic experience as transcendent and timeless; but neither does it seek to demystify it by translating it into the categories of another domain—economics, politics, psychoanalysis—that is held to be more fundamental or more real. Instead, it slows down judgment in order to describe more carefully what aesthetic experiences are like and how they are made. Rather than seeking distance from such experiences, it strives to edge closer. (*Hooked* xi)

Just as Latour's cartographic metaphor explains the process of tracing social connections in terms of scalar movements, Felski's ANT-ish critical practice begins with attachment and moves to questions of scale; she invites critics to note the networks within a work, and then note the works within networks. In literature, this suggests a close reading practice that traces relationships between characters or patterns of metaphors, and an attention to a work's production, consumption, reception, and other associations.

Attending to multiple scales allows a critic to imagine the world of a work, and how the work is of the world. This midlevel perspective which "[draws] from the resources of aesthetics, phenomenology and sociology without pledging one's allegiance to any of these fields" also

requires a critic to situate themselves within the work's network (*Hooked* 145). A critic must note their stance, how they become oriented toward or around a work, and how their reception of the work constitutes the work itself.

Compressing an ANT-ish approach to critical analysis into a four-week intro to writing unit requires a few concessions. The pace essential to the process is not slow enough. Toggling among multiple scales becomes moving through three or four. I find myself, in seminar, repeating the same maxims and cliches in response to my student's concerns with whether they are *getting it*: "It's supposed to be hard," "trust your gut," "It means something to me if it means something to you." My goal across the unit is only to provide a taste of what is possible. To achieve this, I establish one key term or objective for each week in the unit: attachment, description, connection, and relation.

**ANT-ish in Practice**

Not only is an attachment one link to be traced in a network — prioritizing attachment as a critical approach links postcritique with Black feminist pedagogy. Both of these theoretical camps note that attachment does not undermine politics but informs it.[7] My language for

[7] "To be attached is to be affected or moved and also to be linked or tied," Felski writes. "It denotes passion and compassion—but also an array of ethical, political, intellectual, or other bonds…To focus on attachment is to trace out relations without presuming foundations. To look closely at acts of connecting as well as what one is connected to; the transpersonal as well as the personal; things in the world as well as things in works of art" (*Hooked* 1).

attachment comes from Felski, Royster, Eve Sedgwick, and Tamika L. Carey.[8] Berlant, in *Cruel Optimism*, described Sedgwick's influence like this:

> For me, though, the luck of encountering her grandiosity, her belief that it is a good to disseminate the intelligent force of an attachment to a thing, a thought, a sensation, is of unsurpassable consequence. In the pleasure/knowledge economy of her work, the force of attachment has more righteousness than anything intelligibly or objectively "true": she enables the refusal of cramped necessity by way of a poetics of misrecognition (122).

While I avoid differentiating critical approaches due to their supposed righteousness, and do not go so far as to argue that fantasy and projection are unavoidable risks of the critical process — a large proportion of my students would not explain their attachments as fantasmic, or are uninterested in a process that begins from a place of misrecognition — I share Berlant's affinity with the notion that attachment contains an intellectual force that may be released during a critical process. Beginning an analysis unit with attachment foregrounds embodiment in the pedagogical approach. It is not only that affect leads us to the objects we eventually must explore "empirically," but that empiricism and intuition engage one another, or exist on the same plane. Describing and defining, as well as feeling and fantasizing, contribute to understanding.

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[8] The first classroom in which I was told to pay attention to passionate attachments, and allow scholarship to arise from them, was Tamika L. Carey's graduate seminar on Black Women's Rhetorics. Carey employed the language of Black women intellectuals and pedagogues like Royster who were searching for methods that could support their thriving in institutions built to confine the shapes of their thoughts and bodies. To foster an intellectually diverse classroom environment, I believe I must teach methods that allow students to thrive within, among, and against the classroom itself. And, regardless of how I came to these ideas, it is impossible to ethically engage with body studies without informing my approach by trans studies and Black feminist studies. To prioritize passionate attachments is both a means to link my Black femme students in particular to an intellectual lineage they may not access in all classrooms at UVA, and a means of allowing each student some agency over their approach; an attachment is an orientation toward an object or interpretive practice that is intuitive for some, but requires pursuit by all. A teacher cannot feel the directions in which their students are being pulled, they can only enable attention to those tugs.

The unit begins with the initial discussion post assignment, modeled at the beginning of this essay. I ask students to write about a food they are attached to and return to often. It doesn't have to be a food they love, I say, or one they always find relief or nourishment or pleasure from. Though "craving" implies a different relationship to an object than "attachment," the mindlessness of craving, its apparent lack of logic, foregrounds the ways in which bodies participate in and reproduce attachments. "Craving" becomes a way into an argument in favor of critical thought: though what is mindless can remain mindless, it mustn't be — especially if the charge of "mindlessness" becomes a means of denying the intellectual purchase of intuition. It helps students elevate, or at least take seriously, a reaction that may produce shame. This is one way that pulling the body into a critical process both repairs the student's relationship to the act of criticism and the pleasurable response to a taste experience.

While the course readings provide examples of how to perform analyses and introduce students to an ethic of approach, in-class exercises offer an opportunity to practice the process together. To reduce the amount of out-of-class reading, in-class critical analysis exercises feature poetry — much to my students' disdain. Each seminar creates a different micro-culture, but the particular group of students who reject critical analysis for its tendency to argue for the inherent opacity of literary objects unsurprisingly consider poetry a peak offender. The poems become negotiations of difference. I teach analysis on objects I am attached to and they are detached from to foreground the extractability of the process and establish a classroom ethic of respect; we may not experience the same kinds of attachments to the same degree, but we can apply the same treatment to attachments we do not share. These in-class readings proceed accordingly: we read

the poem multiple times, and note our initial reactions. Students mark the empirical features of the poem to establish a common language for its effects. By foregrounding "description" as a form of empiricism, I hope to shrink the barrier to entry analytical language creates in students' brains.[9]

Postcritical literary studies reemphasizes "description" over "demystification." This is evident in Best and Marcus's attention to surfaces, as well as Heather Love's discussion of a reading practice that is close, but not deep; inspired by Latour, critics are more privy to stress that the reality as-presented by a work is variable and complex and worthy of attention, that it is just as rigorous of an intellectual project to understand an object on its own terms as it is to apply the terms of a critic's training. Description is also essential to Latour's composition pedagogy: "A good text should trigger in a good reader this reaction: 'Please, more details, I want more details" (*Reassembing* 137).

Inadequate description is not only "another way of making the aesthetic object do the theoretical or critical work one already wants it to do," producing less interesting and at times unethical criticism, but deemphasizing description in favor of demystification or "interpretation" more broadly confirms students' assumptions about the inaccessibility of critical analysis. By asking students to describe an object on its own terms within a form already accessible to them allows students to focus on the engagement (Nishikiwa 4). It moves critique out of the ivory

[9] At the unit's outset, I pass along links to both the Oxford Handbook of Literary Terms and Oxford Handbook of Food Terminology. One component of literature's apparent opacity is the language with which instructors talk about it. Placing these two reference books beside one another, one with apostrophe and one with acids, helps quell students' anxieties about the extents of their literary lexicons. We find the terms we need for what we notice, I tell them, only to communicate with one another.

tower and into their breakfast bowls, thus moving toward the postcritical goal of establishing stronger links between intellectual life and the nonacademic world.

Then, I provide examples of links between the poem and non-poem actors — connection. Students reflect on these links, in groups and as a class, and how those links inform their interpretations. After each step, though, I invite students to share their basic reactions, observations, and questions. To emphasize a midlevel approach to critical analysis that does not establish hierarchies between forms of knowledge, I avoid creating a "narrative" of interpretation that suggests some interpretive modes are more accessible than others. This becomes clear in class discussions, where students contend with brains other than their own. Some students are more attuned to affect, privy to contribute their initial reactions or responses. Other students have greater facility with empirics, or extensions. With some, tuning into the affectual link between themselves and the poem becomes easier as they move back and forth, in and out, between and among various modes of interpretation.

The first poem we read together is William Carlos Williams's "This is Just to Say." The poem is short enough to be reproduced here:

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably

saving

for breakfast

Forgive me

they were delicious

so sweet

and so cold

Asking a room of eighteen-year-olds to read this poem out loud yields little but giggles. The laughter opens up the room — why would "delicious/ so sweet/ and so cold", a rather innocuous phrase, evoke such a response? Why is it *so weird* to say that in front of me? The sensual silliness of alliteration, I propose, and we progress with empirics — to a discussion about why this poem is so evocative, so silly, and yet so unsatisfactory. I show students examples of lengthy early modern poems in which each poetic line is a single noun phrase, juxtaposed with a series of tweets/memes satirizing the poem. There are historical referents and antecedents for Williams' lines. And yet, none of these referents make the poem more satisfactory to the individual — the poem continues to, somehow, mean both more and less than the students expect — only invite more comprehensive discussions about the poem's cognitive and phenomenological effect. At the end of the exercise, to complete the body's participation in the analytical process, I pass out cold plums. As the students snack, and the stone fruit juices drip onto stolen paper towels, I ask them if they'd take their roommate's plums and leave an apology note. Most say yes.

“Relation” is, maybe, an under-thought term to apply to the final stage of this process. One could reach for a number of synonyms with similar scholarly import: rhizome, association, network, nexus. Matrix? Grapevine? Choose one from the hat of trendy ecological or technological metaphors! Watches watch us! The rising sea swallows! Regardless — this week of the unit lacks a theme that distinguishes it from previous weeks. Students are asked to synthesize the previous weeks’ lessons and produce a 1500-word critical analysis essay. Due to the length, I ask students not to integrate every approach — the goal of interpretation is not to “check all possible boxes,” but to explore the possibilities each approach offers, and attend to those that stretch the strongest links. There is no heuristically-pluralistic postcritical landscape without encouraging pluralistic approaches in small assignments. There is no bodily pedagogy if affect is bracketed off at the beginning of an interpretive process.

The purpose of this final week is to produce an essay, but it is also to reconnect with the assignment’s initial purpose. I give them selections from Laurie Colwin’s *Home Cooking*, a collection of essays about food I am attached to. It is the text I turn to when I need to reconnect to the pleasure of everyday eating. Colwin’s flippant prose and occasional impatience reminds me that even the crispy edge of a stir-fried eggplant can be a gift, and if it doesn’t feel that way today, it’s not that serious. She writes about attachment, too; her attachment to particular foods or rituals, the way those attachments are shaped by communities and surroundings. In one essay I assign, titled “The Same Old Thing,” she admits that most of her closest friends are sick of her baked chicken, and “even when I point out that I know a million variations on this theme, they rightly point out that they have had them all, and more than once. But when the chips are down,

the spirit is exhausted and the body hungry, the same old thing is a great consolation" (Colwin 83). I am guilty of subjecting my department friends to a million variations on baked chicken — schmaltzy with lots of smoked paprika and red onions, smothered in aji panca and pineapple to shred over tacos, doused in chili oil and blood orange slices. I like to think they are not exhausted — of the food, at least.

My digression is illustrative: this final week, in which we consider the many relations we have established between the aesthetic object and ourselves, asks students to reconnect to the initial attachment. To quote Toril Moi, "why this?" We have practiced many approaches. What stands out? Why do we still care? What brings us closer to the object, to the networks of actors we experience it with?

**Trusting One's Gut**

The final week of the unit is also the most pedagogically onerous. Office hours fill up; I replace one day of discussion with in-class writing, so students may ask questions as they arise. Though students enjoy trying out various heuristics and attending closely to their foods, they freeze in the blue light of a blank document. Many come to me with an extensive list of valuable ideas, or half-fleshed outlines, eyes wide in fear. Am I doing this right? They ask. Do you have an outline I can use? I tell them to trust themselves. This is the most fun and most challenging part of critical analysis, I say: there are many links you can establish, there are many ways in which your aesthetic assessment links up to the world outside of your object, but only you can explain what link feels strongest to you, and why. This is how you find your critical voice. To give myself a pep talk, and remind myself of the ethic I must model, I return to Felski:

> Our task is not only to teach them to interpret but also—if we want to see them again in our classes—to make them care about what they interpret, to become affected and invested. Of course, such an impetus may come from students themselves, who sense the potential value of something they do not yet know how to value…As philosopher Agnes Callard shows in an illuminating study, it is not about getting what one wants but about learning what one wants: coming to imagine oneself as a different kind of person. And here, forces beyond our control—an inspiring teacher, a charismatic friend, a fortuitous event, getting older—play their part, but so do our own efforts. We need to work our way into having different values, learn to care about new things. (*Hooked* 128)

Caring and composing are fatiguing activities. I am not sure how to teach eighteen-year-olds that they are allowed to be earnest. But I believe a component of this involves modeling excitement.[10] I do not disavow seriousness or "rigorousness" entirely, but attempt to show that the most rigorous and interesting writing arises from careful attention to an experience or idea we are excited about.

In Fall 2022, due to an instance of gun violence on UVA's campus, these lesson plans were condensed into four class periods. The "slow eating" process was not quite slow; we rushed through readings without sufficient time to chew. Even though students asked to continue with

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[10] "Excitement in higher education was viewed as potentially disruptive of the atmosphere of seriousness assumed to be essential to the learning process. To enter classroom settings in colleges and universities with the will to share the desire to encourage excitement, was to transgress. Not only did it require movement beyond accepted boundaries, but excitement could not be generated without a full recognition of the fact that there could never be an absolute set agenda governing teaching practices. Agendas had to be flexible, had to allow for spontaneous shifts in direction" (hooks 7). I model excitement, not only to propel them toward the page, but to build a transgressive classroom that welcomes many passions and forms of knowledge.

the unit instead of read a novel for the last few classes, I did not feel comfortable asking them to produce a coherent, complete critical analysis essay. I hadn't provided enough instruction. Instead, I asked them to jot down about five-minutes worth of notes and give verbal presentations on the final day of class.

One student ate a pomegranate each night, peeling and deseeding it a different way each time. He traced the routes the box of fruit took from his mother's house to his dorm, and the routes from his family in Pakistan to his current home in Charlottesville. The care he took in preserving the sanctity of each seed was a replication of the care his mother provided when peeling the same fruit during his childhood. I learned the best way to peel a pomegranate.

Another student stopped using her phone during her morning oatmeal. She chewed the chewless food, and instead of scrolling, kept a notebook of her responses. Another called her mother, who packed clementines in every school lunch, and realized that generations of parents in her family peeled the little citrus fruits for their children as a caring gesture. Another provided a detailed presentation about how the introduction of coffee to early modern Europe participated in shifts in labor dynamics and intra-class social relationships. Another, while watching Home Alone on his laptop on a wintry night, paused the movie and ran to a convenience store so he could eat microwaved Mac n' cheese while Macaulay Culkin ate the same meal on screen, replicating a scene from his childhood he'd forgot about until that moment.

All of these presentations modeled the process necessary to perform an ANT-ish analysis. Decreasing students' temporal investments in the process of composition allowed them to focus on investing their energies in the cognitive processes of interpretation. To produce an engaging presentation, students still had to compose outlines of their ideas, and trace how their aesthetic

engagements linked up to their interpretive methods. After each presentation, we discussed how each student may structure their ideas in an essay form. I only hope that they feel compelled to continue approaching interpretation with such care.

In Spring 2023, students completed the essays. Topics ranged from the individualistic nature of build-your-own fast-casual eating culture, to the classist aesthetics of avocado toast, to boba tea as a case study for understanding the history of and variability in second-generation Asian American identity. In the final weeks of the unit, the challenges of teaching an ANT-ish approach to analysis became evident.[11] Though students reveled in the cognitive process, and appeared engaged during in-class discussions, many experienced difficulty structuring their ideas during the composition process. Their primary concern involved how to transition from one idea into the next. I realized that I had failed to emphasize a necessary component of ANT-ish interpretation (trusting one's gut), which happens to link up with one of my pedagogical goals (getting students to trust their own guts). The value of establishing many links, and engaging myriad interpretive methods, is decreased if one does not feel the strength of a specific link, or does not trust their intuition enough to believe the strongest link is the *correct* link.

I addressed their concerns in a brief lesson that focused on two points: 1) how to compose effective transitions, and 2) the necessity of prioritizing one's own attachments over the perceived attachments of one's writing instructor. The compositional and philosophical components of this lesson seeped into one another. I flagged an inability to transition between ideas as an indication that the links between those ideas were not strong enough, yet. The word "furthermore" can not solve what is, ultimately, a content issue. And that content issue can only

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[11] In a supplement to this thesis, I include three student reflections that express the Spring 2023 section's excitement for and concerns about the essay.

be resolved by trusting one's own perceptions and interpretations. Though I led them through many ways in which one *could* establish links between aesthetics and concepts, the best writing would arise from teasing out the links that felt strong to them. Trying to impress me by modeling an ability to engage too many interpretive methods would not yield a thesis, but a mess.

Thus, writing instruction became instruction in interpretation, and vice versa. An analytical process beginning with attachment ended in a lesson on how ideas attach in effective prose — all expressed not in depth metaphors, but alimentary ones.

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Appendix A: Course Syllabus

ENWR 1510:
You Are What You Eat: Writing About Food

Course Description:

In a talk called "Why I Write," the late writer Joan Didion admitted that she had trouble graduating from Berkeley, not because she found ideas difficult to parse, but because she neglected to take a course on Milton. At the time of her talk, well into a succesful writing career, she still couldn't remember the contents of Paradise Lost. "But I can still recall the exact rancidity of the butter in the City of San Francisco's dining car, and the way the tinted windows on the Greyhound bus cast the oil refineries around Carquinex Straits into a grayed and obscurely sinister light," she said.

Food has much to teach us about how to write. It straddles bodily knowledge (the smell of Better Homes and Gardens chocolate chip cookies reminds me of childhood trips to visit my Nana in a nursing home) and more objective forms of knowledge (sodium chloride dissolves protein strands and allows them to retain water, meaning one should always pre-salt their chicken). Food writing spans personal narratives and instructional text, helping us explain both fact and feeling. Experiences with food are both individual and shared. Food is also moralized — the way we talk about it can indicate our opinions about ourselves and other people, our habits and preferences, making food a fruitful site of inquiry for critically considering the language we choose.

In this ENWR section, we will use food as a means of learning how to write effectively. We will consult cookbooks, essays, TikToks, and other forms of media to consider food as a storytelling and informational mechanism. The course is not about learning facts; instead, it is about using something we have an enduring relationship with to help learn how we think, and how we can explain that thinking in writing. We, like Didion, won't rely on canonical texts to teach us how to deal with our own ideas. Instead, we'll ask one another: can you taste the rancid butter?

Writing as Inquiry: This course is aimed at developing your ability to write in academic contexts. While there is no single approach to writing that can prepare you for the variety of courses you will encounter in college, this course can help you begin to cultivate habits of mind and writing practices that are applicable to various disciplines and situations. Primarily, we will be learning how to initiate and sustain a critical inquiry in this course. An inquiry-based approach treats writing as a form of thinking and discovery. Engaging in an inquiry requires posing questions and investigating many possible answers; it involves identifying problems or interesting issues, responding to conversations, wrestling with uncertainty, positioning oneself in relation to others' ideas, and imagining alternative arguments and ways of thinking about a subject, among other things. Throughout this writing-intensive semester, you will have plenty of opportunities to expand your writing capacities and deepen your understanding of our course topic.

Course Objectives:

- Begin to think about your identity as a writer!
- Develop an understanding of writing as a process that is both individual and communal, active and passive
- Consider and explore your own writing process
- Think critically about different forms of writing, and the different ways in which your ideas can take shape
- Learn the ways in which writers combine multiple modes — personal narrative, instruction, explanation, artistic description, etc. — to build engaging and effective prose
- Practice generous and critical reading skills that will help you better respond to peer writing. Build community with one another!

Course Activities:

The primary goal of this course is to understand how writing works, so we can figure out how to do it, ourselves. (Think of this as a taste-refinement process. You taste dishes to figure out what spices and techniques dominate the flavor profile so you can emulate those flavors at home.) To be better writers, we must become better readers. Therefore, class time will be split between discussing assigned reading and exploring the writing skills we uncover in those discussions. This means preparation and participation are necessary. It can be daunting to feel as if you have to have an opinion to bring to class. But the readings are fun — you'll be surprised at how many opinions naturally occur. And if you aren't sure how you feel, don't sweat it! That's what discussions are for.

To refine your tastes, I recommend beginning an Intake Journal. (The specifics of this will be covered in class.) The idea is: just as food enables and nourishes the body for continued existence, reading enables and nourishes writing. Thinking critically about this nourishment process changes both how we think about "intake" (often negatively) and how we think about writing (as a nebulous skill that one cannot attain or build upon, but is essential). You won't have to turn this in, but tracking all that you've read, and noticing how what you read influenced your writing, can be rather satisfying.

Your primary writing for the course will consist of three longer assignments (between 1,250 and 2,000 words) and weekly journal entries, posted on Canvas. Each writing assignment will correspond to the course units: form, content, and style. The assignments will give you an opportunity to flex different writing muscles — creative, reflective, and analytical — to help you figure our your own relationship to those modes of thought. My hope is that we'll all leave the course having figured out something new that we like.

Each essay you write will receive individual feedback from myself in addition to peer review and feedback. There will also be a revision opportunity for one writing assignment of your choice, to be turned in at the end of the semester. I encourage you to meet with me in office hours outside of class to discuss assignments and revisions. For the writing assignments, I will assign small peer writing groups, with which you will trade and review essay drafts. Writing group meetings will occur in place of class — this is not something you are expected to do in addition to attendance.

Course Materials:

All materials will be available on our course Collab page. I personally own many of the course readings, and am happy to share them through electronic scans. Most importantly, I do not want anyone to feel as if access to materials prevents their full participation in this course. Because I am providing all of the reading material electronically, in-class technology use is permitted. If you prefer to read on paper, which I do, I recommend printing course materials in advance. If this is of particular financial concern, please talk to me.

UNIT ONE: THE CONTAINER

Week one: The Cookbook and Recipe
In-class intros, discussion of writing habits and expectations
Main texts: *The Joy of Cooking*, *The Futurist Cookbook*
M.F.K. Fisher, "Anatomy of a Recipe"
Helen Rosner, "Yes, I Use a Hair Dryer to Make Roast Chicken"

Week two: The Blog/Vlog
Alison Roman, "Goodbye Meatballs"
Alison Roman, Goodbye Meatballs Home Video (YouTube)
Excerpts from Nora Ephron, *Heartburn*
*Julie and Julia* (Ephron)

Week three: The Review
Tiktoks (linked on Collab)
Excerpts from Jonathon Gold, *Counter Intelligence*
Pete Wells, "Peter Luger Used to Sizzle. Now it Sputters."
The Daily, "A Restaurant Critic (Ours) On the Year that Changed Him Forever" (podcast)

Week four: Peer Review Workshops

First writing project due: Recipe for Something

In this project, you'll write a recipe for something that isn't food. Those are the only rules. However, the point of this assignment is that you think about what the form of the recipe is doing, what it is asking of writers and readers, and then choose a topic appropriate for that form.

UNIT TWO: EATING OUT

Week five: Animals as food/"Asking all them questions"
M.F.K. Fisher, excerpts from *Consider the Oyster*
David Foster Wallace, "Consider the Lobster"
*Maintenance Phase* (podcast): "The Great Protein Fiasco" (bonus: "Jordan Peterson Part 1: The Carnivore Diet")
*Gastropod* (podcast): "Are Plant and Fungus-Based Fake Meats Really Better than the Real

Thing?"

Week six: Bodies
"A Brief History of Fat in the U.S.," *The Fat Studies Reader*
Melissa Broder, *Milk Fed*, Ch. 1
Excerpt from Roxane Gay, *Hunger*
*Maintenance Phase* (podcast): "Is Being Fat Bad for You?"

Week seven: Korean Food
Michelle Zauner, excerpts from *Crying in H Mart* (memoir)
Japanese Breakfast, *Psychopomp* (music album)
Eric Kim, excerpts from *Korean American* (cookbook)

Week eight: Black Food in the American South
Episodes of *High On the Hog* (Netflix)
Bryant Terry, excerpts from *Black Food* (cookbook)
Nappy Roots, "Watermelon, Chicken and Gritz" (music album)

Week nine: Peer Review Workshops

Second writing project due: research essay

This project involves writing a research essay on a food-related topic. You must engage outside sources, and may also include personal anecdotes or experiences, to build ideas about a food-related topic. This will require considering course examples, and how each author uses food as a way into a set of ideas.

UNIT THREE: CLOSE EATING

Week ten: Snacking on Attachments
Barthes, "Wine and Milk"
Disney, *Ratatouille*
In class: William Carlos Williams, "This is Just to Say"

Week eleven: Methods of Interpretation, Part 1 — Sugar, Sugar (oh, Honey Honey)
Barthes, "Toward A Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption"
Leslie Jamison, "In Defense of Saccharine," from *The Empathy Exams*
Patience Agbabi, "The Doll's House"

Week twelve: Methods of Interpretation, Part 2 — Tasting Experience
Ben Highmore, "Bitter After Taste: Affect, Food, Social Aesthetics" excerpts
Li-Young Lee, "Persimmons"
Claude McKay, "Tropics in New York"

Week thirteen: Making it Into a Meal
Excerpts from *Home Cooking*, Laurie Colwin
Peer Review Workshops

Third writing project due: Close Eating Essay
In this paper, you will perform critical analysis, not on a poem or work of literature, but a food. This will involve re-learning how to write rhetorical/critical analysis papers by attaching to and spending time with a different object, or thinking about a different kind of taste experience.

Resources:
The Writing Center: The Writing Center, located in 314 Bryan Hall, provides experienced tutors who will work with you individually by discussing drafts of your projects in detail. You can set up an appointment or check availability using the scheduler: https://virginia.mywconline.com/.
Women's Center: The Maxine Platzer Lynn Women's Center is located at 1400 University Avenue and provides a number of resources to students of all genders. Inside the center there are study spaces, a library, a meditation room, group workshops, psychological and counseling services, and a staff prepared to discuss any and all issues with you. Learn more at http://womenscenter.virginia.edu/.
LGBTQ Center: "Located in the center of Grounds, in the Lower Level of Newcomb Hall, the LGBTQ Center is both a physical space and a programming center for the university. Whether you're questioning, coming out, LGBTQ-identified, or an ally, the LGBTQ Center has something for you." To learn more, visit http://www.virginia.edu/deanofstudents/lgbtq/.
Office of African-American Affairs (OAAA): Located behind Bryan Hall, OAAA is committed to providing space and programming for black students on grounds. The office provides counseling, one-on-one mentoring, advising, resources for building community, and community outreach opportunities. For more information, visit http://oaaa.virginia.edu/.
Disabilities Assistance: https://sdac.studenthealth.virginia.edu/
If you have special needs requiring accommodation, please present the appropriate paperwork from the Learning Needs & Evaluation Center (LNEC) early in the semester. LNEC is located in the Dept. of Student Health & can be contacted at 434-243-5180.
Counseling and Psychological Services: Commonly known as CAPS, this service is an invaluable one and a great network of which to take advantage if you find it necessary or desirable. CAPS is located at the Student Health Center, 400 Jefferson Park Avenue. More information is available here http://www.virginia.edu/studenthealth/caps.html.

Attendance Policy:
The attendance policy for all ENWR 1510 courses is institutionally mandated. The language provided by the English department can be accessed on the course Collab page.

Grading:
In-class participation — 20%
Weekly discussion posts — 20%

Assignment 1 — 20%
Assignment 2 — 20%
Assignment 3 — 20%

## Appendix B: Unit 3 Lesson Plan Examples

Week One, Day One:
1. Freewrite: How do you define “close reading,” or rhetorical/literary/critical analysis? (You may have heard of the same general process referred to by any of these terms.) What are your experiences with it? What is your relationship to it?
2. Discussion: I ask students to paste their responses, anonymously, onto a Google Doc. This is both so we can come to a collective definition of critical analysis, and so we can visualize the ways in which our experiences with this form of writing converge and diverge. Students offer their own opinions for a while — I call this “rhetorical therapy,” since many recent less-than-satisfactory experiences with this form of writing — before I offer my own definition. I attempt to validate their struggles and respond to their concerns and fears. I hope this builds trust and enables us to build a more positive definition of critical analysis that values it as a cognitive process as well as a form of writing.
3. PPT/lecture: I give a brief lecture about the ANT-ish process and introduce the “close eating” assignment.
4. Practice: We model the process on William Carlos Williams’ “This is Just to Say.”

Week One, Day Two:
1. Small group discussions: Students talk to each other about the food they proposed for the “close eating” paper.
2. Reading discussion: Roland Barthes, “Wine and Milk.” Discussion questions focus primarily on comprehension. I give a brief definition of “semiotics,” and we discuss what wine and milk represent in the French nationalist mythology of Barthes’ concern. To end the discussion, we imagine foods that perform similar mythological functions in American culture. I offer structuralist analysis as one method for performing analysis.
3. Viewing discussion: Ratatouille.
First, we discuss our initial attachments to the movie, and I stream two short clips. Then, we break into thematic groups, and discuss the following questions:
- Class transgression. Can we think of the rats and humans as representing different social classes, or labor classes? Why are Remy and Linguini at the center of this story? Does their combined “labor” matter? (Follow-up: What is illustrative about representing a prototypical class transgression narrative as a species transgression narrative?)
- Class + Aesthetic Experience. What differentiates the tastes of “rats” and “humans”? What conditions or preconceptions determine those tastes? Does this offer us anything about how aesthetic appreciation is ascribed to certain social classes? (Follow-up: Do you think the movie is proposing that taste can be learned, or that it is inherent? Do we feel like the movie is setting up appreciation and immorality on opposite sides of a binary, or is it more nuanced than that? Do we think aesthetic appreciation can really help us bypass the biological need for sustenance in the face of scarcity or harm?)
- The State of Criticism. How does Anton Ego (note the name) help us understand the critic/artist dichotomy? What does his transition say about the nature of criticism, or the nature of “taste” more broadly? (Follow up: Critics are sometimes considered the barriers to high culture, a la

Bordieu, those who determine what can be appreciated as high culture. What is suggested when the peasant dish, or reminder of a previous social class, punctures this barrier creation? Let's think back to our readings in the review week. Does it remind us of any of the conversations that are currently going on in restaurant criticism?)

Week Two, Day One:
1. Small group discussions: Students are asked to summarize the readings to one another and come up with comprehension questions or moments of confusion.
2. Reading discussion: Roland Barthes, "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption"
Again, discussion tends toward comprehension. Once we reach an understanding of his thesis, and hone in on specific moments of his argument, I direct the discussion toward Barthes' methods. Just as students may think about food as myth, they may consider food as a system.
3. Reading discussion: Leslie Jamison, "In Defense of Saccharine"
Jamison's essay uses the taste of saccharine to sharpen her opinion about sentimentality and sentimental literature, in particular. We try to trace Jamison's journey through these ideas, discuss how her taste experience became conceptual, and compare/contrast Jamison's "method" of interpretation with Barthes'. Offer Jamison as a model for an ANT-ish approach.
4. Writing exercise: "sweetness."
I swipe sugar and sweetener packets from coffee shops, and spread them on my desk in a mosaic when I enter the room. For the writing exercise, we all taste two sweetners and try to describe the flavors without using the word "sweet." This exercise relocates the knowledge accessed through the readings, which are both obsessed with sugar, back into the body. It also forces them to practice multi-sensorial description, or figure out how they can explain a flavor they take for granted using ideas, which nearly inverts Jamison's interpretive method.

Week Two, Day Two:
Individual meetings with students about their papers-in-progress.

Week Three, Day One:
1. Reading discussion: Ben Highmore, "Bitter After Taste: Affect, Food, and Social Aesthetics"
Students split into small groups corresponding to sections of the essay. Each group is assigned a few comprehension-centric questions, accessible on a Google Doc. After their discussions, we summarize each section to one another and I modify the summaries as needed. I close the discussion with a spiel justifying the difficult reading assignment: Highmore provides a term that allows us to think about how our experiences of taste and interpretations of taste are tied together, and asks us to consider sensing not only as something that leads to an expression, but sensing as the formulation of expression. It is also fun for first-years to redefine terms like "ethos" and "aesthetics" — words that are commonly thrown around in lectures without much context, or relegated to ever-changing colloquial meanings. We also have a quick discussion about strategies for reading hard things in college.
3. Writing exercise: Think about a time in which the culture you grew up in determined an appropriate behavior around or response to a particular kind of food. Has the way you've felt

about that food changed as you've grown up?
4. Students share their responses with the class.
5. In-class example: I share an article and display some TikTok videos about "almond moms." We engage an informal discussion of the "almond mom" as a "social aesthetic" in Highmore's terminology.

Week Three, Day Two:
1. Final in-class close reading practice: Claude McKay's "Tropics in New York"
Students read the poem alone, then we read it aloud a few times. We talk about our first impressions. I write the poem on the board, and we list some of its empirical features. As the students notice things like rhyme scheme and polysyndeton, I push them to articulate how those features produce particular sense effects which produce particular meanings. After we attend to each line closely, I break students up into three groups. One group receives a short biography of Claude McKay, and another McKay poem to read together. Another group receives an article about the New Negro Renaissance. Another receives a social science article about the history of the banana trade, and the ways in which colonial agriculture has reduced the number of banana species available for consumption. Each group summarizes their article, and as a class, we link our newfound understandings of authorial position, literary history, and agricultural history to our understandings of the poem. I lead us back to a discussion of the poem's imagery; notably, its absence of taste. The speaker only engages the visual sense, but the sight of fruit evokes a memory of taste that produces profound homesickness. I pass out bananas and clementines — two fruits featured in the poem — and we discuss the significance of finishing the aesthetic experience that the speaker in the poem in unable to. Often, this leads to a discussion of the memories the taste of these foods produce.

Week Four:
In-class peer review sessions

Appendix C: Unit 3 Student Reflections

Student Reflection #1:
I think this essay was fun to write. I enjoyed getting to eat a food a bunch of times and getting to think deeply about it, what it was, how I felt about it, how it related to a more broad concept, etc. I think I got better at this kind of writing, as it had been something that I'd never really worked on before but I really liked "getting to know" a food if that makes sense. I liked the format and the discussion posts - I feel like they were helpful for me and I tended to put a lot of thought in the posts so it translated well when I was working on my essay. While I do think I got better, it was definitely a little challenging at times. I think I was a little confused about how to use a close-eating of a food to make a broader point, and I ended up relying a little bit on research to go with the food as well, but I was happy with the conclusions that I arrived at even if it was a little difficult for me to make it really evident. Since this was the first time I'd done something like this, I think I would need more practice with this over time and maybe be able to read some other people's final products before I became completely comfortable with making one of these. I think it was hard for me to flow between food and research and being able to analyze both, but it was a fun new experience. Thank you!

Student Reflection #2:
I didn't think this past unit or paper was too bad. I feel like all the readings and podcasts helped to understand what a close reading might look like in terms of eating or a specific dish. I will say I wish I was able to comprehend the readings a little bit better because I think it would have helped when writing the paper. I will say though that we discussed in class enough that I should have been able to comprehend them so that's mainly my fault. When writing the paper, I kind of thought that the discussion posts that we had leading up (ideas about the thing, the thing itself, etc.) would help me write the paper a little bit. They might and probably did help people, but I found that I did not use them at all. For the paper itself, it wasn't too difficult to write. I did a lot of research, and I honestly found my topic super interesting. I'm a little bit worried that I didn't talk about the actual characters of my food though, which is totally my fault. I also don't really know to what extent we even had to talk about the characteristics so maybe I did talk about it enough? I'm not sure. I took my paper more on the cultural implications and relating to the real-world route and after I turned it in, I was like, "oh lord I didn't actually really do a close eating." But maybe I did? Some of the readings had a lot to do about the foods the writer was analyzing and then some talked mainly about the cultural implications. I think there was a big gray area in the assignment which is really nice because we get to take it into whatever direction we wanted to (while still actually doing the assignment), but it is kind of stressful to be able to take it into whatever direction we want. Going back, I wish I would have created an outline well before the due date and made an office hours appointment to ask if my paper would be going in the right direction. Knowing that what I was writing was ok for the assignment was the biggest stressor for me. Other than that, I think it was a great assignment and actually fun to write which definitely helps the process.

Student Reflection #3:

The process of composing a "close eating" essay helped me both academically and aesthetically. About one year ago, when I first formally got in touch with the close reading essays in AP Languages and Composition courses, the mechanical format of composing an essay that could get a high score bored me out. I gradually forgot that one of the purposes of doing a close reading is to appreciate the beauty of the works. However, while I was following the steps of writing this close easting essay, my stigma of close reading eventually vanished. From reading the articles, such as Barthes' Wine and Milk, and Leslie Jamison's Defense of Saccharine, I realized that we could take these philosophical routes of enjoying food. This not only led me to take every bite of food I ate more seriously but also inspired me of another way to analyze things that we take for granted. While I was doing research for the food I picked, I learned more background and deeper context behind this everyday food. What's more, when I was trying to figure out the logical flow of my close eating essay, I jumped out from the traditional or stated format of a close reading essay and trained my ability in figuring out ways that make the audience feel comfortable to read my essay.