“Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her, Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams And our desires.”

—Wallace Stevens

By Elyse Zucker
Associate Professor of English

The above quote from Wallace Stevens’ poem, “Sunday Morning,” resonates with the quote Prof. Flor Henderson chose to open the June 2021 Volume 7 Food Studies Newsletter volume with: “Necessity is the Mother of Invention.” Both quotes consider that necessity, or death (loss) propels people to change and grow, thus becoming creators — as mothers are.

These quotes certainly have relevance for how COVID 19 has affected the Hostos community. Since the pandemic persisted, spring 2021, in ravaging and confining life around the world, Hostos — as did so many colleges — continued to function in a remote capacity. Yet in spite of the Hostos family not having the freedom to experience college life on campus — perhaps even because of that limitation — it discovered new and creative ways to learn, teach, grow and collaborate.

The August 2021 Volume 7 Food Studies Newsletter bears testimony to this resourcefulness. It showcases a range of food studies works brought to fruition by Hostos students, faculty and staff during the college’s first exclusively online semester. Many of these works are themselves concerned with just this topic — how teaching and learning in the Food Studies Program transpired at Hostos in spite of what restraints the pandemic heaped on us. Others explore food studies topics ranging from local community gardens to the industrialization of food and not unrelated, the global warming crisis to which it significantly contributes.

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Although Covid-19 has placed us into a pandemic mode, our work to ensure that our students will continue receiving academic support and training was uninterrupted. We adapted our courses to virtual modalities, offered courses with low enrollment as Independent Studies sections; had students conduct their internships virtually—adapting their individual experiences, strengths and skills to apply their knowledge and gain new professional perspectives—, activated our aeroponic lab in the spring of 2021 to conduct research to produce both teaching materials and leafy greens for members of the college community, and also purchased a Mobile Kitchen.

This latest addition will enhance some of our courses by providing practical food preparation skills when we return to campus. The mobile kitchen includes a standard fridge, a pull-out portable cooktop, a stainless-steel sink, a 36” kitchen top, a fold-up faucet, a water pump, water tanks, drawers, two counter tops, folding table legs, color-coded chopping boards, and a stand for a camera recorder and flat screen (these last two items will be added later). We are very excited about this new teaching tool, and look forward to designing lessons that will enrich our students’ academic training in the near future.
The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted every aspect of our personal and professional lives. Traditional teaching and learning have been modified and transitioned to online styles. Although most of the teaching was successfully adapted, many hands-on and practical experiences have been limited, especially in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields. Research experiences for students in these fields modified their wet-lab research projects into literary research modalities, or, whenever possible, were conducted as computational research. The research project that we designed for students participating in the CUNY College Research Scholars Program (CRSP) is a collaborative project between the Physical Sciences and Biology Units of Natural Sciences Department at Hostos Community College. The project includes chemical and biological elements and was designed to be conducted by two students, at their homes and under our remote guidance.

The purpose of the research project is to use herbaceous plants to purify water contaminated with heavy metals. The students were given a model device of Aeroponic Systems, the AeroGardens to grow three herbs, Cilantro, Basil and Parsley (Fig. 1). They also received Verify Water Test Kits to test water samples for the presence of various heavy metals (Fig. 2). Under laboratory conditions contamination of water samples is done by using chemical solutions containing specific heavy metals, but since we could not use chemicals at home, contamination was achieved by using household items. For this purpose, monetary coins known to contain heavy metals, such as copper and zinc were chosen to contaminate water samples for the experiments. These previsions were taken to adapt chemical and biological methodologies to home conditions. Participating students designated spaces at their homes to serve as their mini labs. Typical chemistry lab tools such as beakers, pipettes, and graduated cylinders were substituted with kitchen tools, such as mason jars, measuring cups and spoons (Fig. 3). The project has allowed instructors and students to figure out creative solutions to ensure a wholesome and real scientific research experience (Fig. 4).

Designing this research project while facing an unexpected global challenge, gave us the opportunity to provide our students with an experiential learning experience that included the necessary scientific hands-on elements. The students had a chance to develop their problem-solving skills, enhance their scientific reasoning abilities, and practice basic technical skills while conducting the project. We believe that this approach of adapting and transforming a research project from “lab bench” to “home lab” is a creative way of ensuring that students are motivated to learn new skills and to seek ways to adapt to challenging circumstances, and for faculty, to find ways to provide instruction and practical research experiences to students in STEM careers.
Water is important because without it we and other living organisms could not survive. Due to its importance, having access to pure and safe drinking water is significant. In our research, we aimed to study water purification by the action of herbaceous aromatic plants. Using herbaceous plants’ physiology to purify water represents a natural way to clean water of impurities like heavy metals. Herbs such as cilantro (Coriander sativum, Apiaceae) and basil (Ocimum basilicum, Lamiaceae), are known for their water purifying effects, and were tested for their potential to purify water from the presence of some heavy metals. This process represents a low-cost method of purifying water in comparison to other known techniques. Due to its effectiveness, this method can be used in rural areas to purify water for human consumption.

Because of pandemic related restrictions, we did not have access to the aeroponic towers located in the lab. Instead we used AeroGardens - indoor hydroponic units (Figure 1) to grow the plants for the experiment in our homes. AeroGardens have the capability to grow plants in water without the use of soil.

During the first stage of the research, we read literature about the plants under study, water purification methods, and ethics of conducting research. We also learned to handle the AeroGardens. We started the experimental portion of the research project by setting up the AeroGarden to grow the herbs. We observed and recorded the changes that occurred in the development of the herbs. Once the herbs developed, we started the second stage of the experiment, which consisted of contaminating water samples and treating contaminated water samples with the herbs. For the purpose of contaminating water samples, we used monetary coins such as pennies, dimes, nickels, and quarters (Figure 2). These coins are known to contain heavy metals such as zinc, copper and nickel, which are heavy metals that can be found in contaminated water. For the treatments we used leaves and stems of basil, leaves and stems of cilantro in order to identify which part of the plant has a better water purification power (Figure 3). Two different types of basil were used: Thai basil and Genovese Basil. To test the presence of heavy metals in contaminated water samples as well as in the samples treated with herbs, we used the Verify Complete Water Test Kit (Figure 4).

The preliminary results are promising. We plan to conduct more experiments and observations to finalize the project. While working on this research project, we learned a lot, particularly from the chemistry aspect. We also learned that goals could be achieved by working hard on one’s dreams. A hypothesis in the past could become a real thing in one’s life if one has the courage to do what is right by them.

Although the lockdown presented an obstacle for our research, we were able to adapt the experimental procedures to be conducted at home. Even though it was not easy at first, with the guidance of our mentors we were able to do it. This research allowed us to discover skills that we did not know we had. It broadened our knowledge of plants, it taught us about the importance of drinking pure water and it helped us with our commitment skills. The research project also taught us to take advantage of online tools, which would help us in our fields of interest. Additionally, the research project helped us develop important life skills such as time management, professionalism, and communication skills.

We would like to thank CUNY Research Scholars Program (CRSP) for providing us with this research opportunity. We offer our sincere appreciation to Professor Yoel Rodriguez for his endless support and continued encouragement. The contributions of Professor Anna Ivanova and Professor Flor Henderson are sincerely appreciated and gratefully acknowledged. We thank Ms. Karin Contreras for helping with the AeroGarden at Hostos and Mr. Emilio Pena for his valuable contribution to the chemistry portion of this research project.
The 2020 spring semester started off like any other semester but no one was prepared for the COVID 19 outbreak. All classes were immediately moved to an online modality and the campus was closed. The Food Studies aeroponic lab had to drop everything at a moment’s notice. We all began working from home. With no access to the labs, all the plants in the aeroponic towers had to be abandoned.

In the spring of 2020 some people were allowed back on campus. Mandatory check-ins were implemented to make sure we were safe to return. The aeroponic lab, however, remained closed. Fortunately, in the spring of 2021 we were able to activate the lab. We planted several species of seeds. Some seeds were the traditional plants: cilantro, basil, swiss chard, and lettuce, which were part of a project conducted by Professor Flor Henderson. At the same time, I was put in charge of activating an additional tower as a more experimental tower, to pilot new seeds including: pak choi, oregano, parsley, arugula, rocoto, and dill varieties. With some of these new species, we had little experience; others were completely new to us. The goal was to observe patterns of growth to select plants with short life spans, which would be ideal to plant during a 15 week semester.

I began taking notes of growth and changes in leaf shape and coloration. The observations were done during four weeks. The results show that not all had the same growth even though they were all given the same nutrients. Basil, cilantro, lettuce, and swiss chard would be good additions to the current plants used in the lab, whereas arugula, dill, watercress, pak choi, parsley, oregano, and rocoto did not grow enough to produce products for consumption (see table below). This class of experimentation permitted us to figure out which plants were best suited to use in the classes to benefit the students.

It has been a blessing to not only return to work on location, but to be back and work with the aeroponic towers physically and learn about new seeds to grow. This was also a very rewarding experience because I was able to collaborate on Professor Henderson’s projects and conduct my own observations. It was doubly rewarding because at the end of the semester, we shared the harvest with staff...
Capstone Summaries

By Kathleen Delgado

Below are the summaries for the two Food Studies Program capstone reports issued for the spring semester, 2021

1. What determines the prices of Beef in New York City?
   By Eric Costoso

Within New York City, grocery stores’ prices differ throughout the city areas and neighborhoods. This can be due to many reasons such as the logistics of transporting foods, the quality of the food being sold, and the income of the surrounding area of the grocery stores. In this report, the focus will be on the beef and certain cuts of it that can be found all over the city. Beef is a staple in U.S. cuisine, as well as specific sub-cultures around the country, it is important to assess the ease of access that people have to buy the meat. The goal of the field research is to look at the prices of beef in supermarkets of two neighborhoods in New York City by documenting the price of certain cuts of beef at the time of March/April 2021. By looking at the beef across supermarkets, it was noticed that the price of unmarked, conventional beef being so low, it allowed me to reflect on the CAFO model of farming which has taken over beef production in the United States, how value-added beef has a place in the market even with their much higher prices, and the social issues that can arise from the existence of beef and what its alternatives are as a result.

2. Cooking for Special Populations: Reflections of a Chef
   By Joanne Wendell

This report refers to the experience of working as a cook at Cluster House for Urban Pathways in the Upper West Side of Manhattan. In this environment I worked with mentally disabled adults as a chef where I followed the industry’s rules and regulations to create tasty meals for in-house residents at this facility. Rules and regulations are necessary to ensure the quality of food, to ensure food safety, and to support the nutrition of the residents. Working with mentally disabled adults can be challenging, and my capstone report indicates the ways that I was able to communicate, get feedback, and tailor the food to serve the needs of the participants. The goal of my field work was to gain experience in food-related settings, while reflecting on academic themes like culture, nutrition and food safety. By analyzing these themes, I learned about the unique experience my customers had while coming to Cluster House.
Justice is a commodity in short supply in the South Bronx. As a lawyer and student of the criminal justice system, I am rarely surprised when I read or hear about a South Bronx policing incident mired in allegations of unjust treatment. Yet, no matter how often these types of incidents occur and garner media attention, the incidents almost pale compared to the day-to-day, hour-by-hour injustice suffered by the people of the South Bronx when it comes to food insecurity and environmental discrimination.

Daily the people of the South Bronx, as well as in similar neighborhoods throughout the city face the baseline challenge of securing sufficient food to feed their families. Food insecurity in the South Bronx is widespread. A recent NYC Health Department survey found the Bronx to have the highest food insecurity rate in the nation. Food insecurity in the Bronx is exacerbated by a lack of information concerning healthy food choices, compounded by commercial, profit-driven advertising for food goods, and is complicated by the unavailability of nutritious food choices at local bodegas and delis. And all of this is transpiring under generally poor environmental conditions.

To counter the nature and scope of the issue, the people of the South Bronx have organized on various fronts across which spans a critical component: the local community garden. Often harking back to their rural roots in America Latina or the US South, South Bronx residents have created green oases and urban farms in the midst of their concrete food desert.

Greenspaces like Rainbow Community Garden, located at 157 St and Melrose Ave, directly address the issue of food insecurity by providing community residents with fresh vegetables and fruits. However, through its emphasis on collective work and its celebration of the community and its cultures, the garden educates and empowers residents to understand the multi-faceted issue they confront, and more importantly, how to best handle it as a community. Rainbow’s coordinator, Maxi Rivera, a Vietnam vet and long-time South Bronx community activist understands that what he really plants is hope, and that what he expects to reap in addition to the garden’s tomatoes, kale, eggplants and other healthy products is informed and directed community activism.

Justice remains a limited commodity in the South Bronx. However, promoting and achieving justice is not limited nor defined by the work that occurs in precincts, courtrooms or jails. Indeed, the seeds for transformative, justice-based community change in the South Bronx are being planted and nurtured everyday by the people most impacted by the problems of food insecurity and environmental discrimination. Justice is growing all over the South Bronx.
As the COVID 19 pandemic wrapped its insidious tentacles around every corner of the world, threatening and thwarting lives and institutions in ways previously unimaginable, Hostos — as most colleges — moved to online teaching in an effort to protect its community.

As a result, I did not, spring 2021, offer my hands-on Expository Writing Service Learning class, a class in which the local community became as enriched by Food Studies content as did the students who served and shared knowledge with it. Yet even without the service learning aspect of the class—one which traditionally included having students operate and cook organic soups for a “souper” market open to the Hostos and local communities—students studied, in my synchronous English expository writing course, Food Studies content in the context of learning about the environment from which food is grown. They learned about how even inner-city residents can be part of agricultural processes, and how working in agriculture rehabilitated prisoners and helped them discover themselves. Students then learned about factory farming and single crop cultivation and the price living creatures and our environment pay for these methods of growing food.*The interrelated learning students engaged in culminated in their attending relevant, online Hostos and CUNY presentations, all centered on the environment in celebration of Earth Day. Included in these timely offerings was a keynote speech by the CUNY Environmental Conference speaker, Bill McKibben, a renowned expert on global warming whose work students were concurrently studying. Additionally, students attended, in addition to a presentation given by the Factory Farming Awareness Coalition (FFAC) by Claudia Lifton, the “Blessing Mother Earth” event Hostos offered, in which Native American leaders paid homage to their ancestors and our mother earth.

Attending these presentations in conjunction with reading related selections opened students’ eyes about the interconnectedness of food, the environment, culture and identity, as well as what value a grass roots approach to the environment can hold for our food and our future —more shaped by food production than many people realize. Mr. McKibben made clear that everyone must be proactive for global warming to be curtailed. Students additionally came to understand that food and the earth which births the food both have a spiritual dimension, a notion they saw (and enjoyed) celebrated at the Blessing Mother Earth event.

At the close of the semester, many students, in a reflective writing exercise, wrote about how they never before thought about food or the earth as something spiritual, and that they now think of food in a much broader, more complex vein than they did before the course. Although students did not do official community service that semester, hopefully with their sharpened writing skills and illuminated understanding of the necessity for proactivity to protect the earth, they will be propelled to engage in community efforts to help reverse havoc to our planet and respect it more fully for all that it gives us. Some of the students, inspired by all they learned, are already traveling that path.

* see excerpts following this article from Professor Zucker’s expository writing students’ work reflecting the above food studies topics.

Excerpts from an essay assignment in which students put themselves in the shoes of either Cathrine Sneed, author of “These Green Things” or Wendell Berry, author of “The Pleasures of Eating,” commenting on the other’s essay yet making reference and connections to his or her essay as well.

This excerpt is written by Reyna Compres.

Cathrine Sneed,

My name is Wendell Berry and I am writing to you because after reading the article you wrote, “These Green Things,” I’ve realized we share the sentiment that agriculture produces a connection that liberates people, although we both apply it differently. In “The Pleasures of Eating” I discuss the importance of understanding the connection between the agricultural act of eating and the land that produced the food. This connection is vital because it allows us to really extract all of the pleasure eating can bring by letting people really understand the processes that produce real food, and produce...

By Elyse Zucker
Associate Professor of English

Expanding the Classroom with Food Studies Content in Synchronous Expository Writing Classes

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processed food. In my essay I also speak of the uncritical industrial consumers who cease to have this connection and as a result becomes victim to what dictates their eating habits. Through your San Francisco Garden Project you share that the connection between the prisoners and the plant crops that they cared for changed the prisoners for the better. It gives them freedom through empowerment, identity, education, feeling of belonging. I believe change for the better from agriculture can occur in the passive industrial consumers also, who are like the prisoners before they changed in which they were both controlled by society.

In both of our essays we made clear that this society doesn’t always have the best interest of the prisoners or the industrial consumers in mind. We are also inclined to help these inner city people by showing them how agriculture can liberate them from the effect of society’s neglectful attitude. Your use of agricultural metaphors was a form of agricultural education that showed the prisoners the toxic effects that drugs can bring to them. It made them aware of what was going on and therefore liberated them as well. I believe agricultural education can do the same for the uncritical consumer; it can break the dependency they have on beautified unrealistic toxic food and give them freedom. You liberated and empowered your prisoners, showing them they have a choice by giving alternatives; I want to show the uncritical consumers that they can create that choice regardless of where they live by getting themselves involved in the agricultural processes (ex: producing their own agriculture, informing themselves on what is best for them etc).

While reading your essay, I realized we are working to annul the damaging effects that different parts of society has on their inner city people. In my article I discussed how the big food industries in society whose “…overriding concerns are not quality and health, but volume and price…” (Berry) don’t have their best interest of the industrial consumers in mind. The same thing happened with the prisoners. I recall you spoke of how bleak the jail is despite the gardens, you called them “…horrible cages” (248) and reasoned that one cannot expect an individual to assimilate into society after being treated this way (248). Yet, this is what society expects of every prisoner and the treatment doesn’t better when they are outside.

I admire how you liberated and empowered your prisoners, showing them they have a choice by giving them alternatives. When a person has a choice they automatically have freedom to choose what they think is best for them. One of these alternatives stood out to me. When you gave the prisoner the ability to say “I can either do something good today [in the garden], or do something else.” (247) you humanized them and therefore liberated them from the identity they were given as criminals; the one that told them they were bad people. This shows them that agriculture can be liberating because it gives them the opportunity to make a change regardless of their past and can also assure them that although they had a rough past that doesn’t need to define what they do in the present; it isn’t their only option or choice.

Consumers are in a similar situation to the prisoners previous to their work in the garden. They are in symbolic jail because they are victims of the food industry and only take food in without realizing they have can have a more options. These consumers are in “…a walled city surrounded by valves that let merchandise in but no consciousness out.” (Berry) There is, however, a way out; by creating their choices through questions they can gain their freedom. But you can only do this “…voluntarily… by restoring [your] consciousness of what is involved in eating; by reclaiming responsibility for one’s own part in the food economy.” (Berry) You need to be part of the process, even if you live in the city. If you live in the city you can try preparing your own food or even “…learn[ning] the origins of the food you buy…”(Berry). Being more involved in the agricultural processes will help you free yourself from being the victim of the food industry by empowering you through your choices just like the choice of agriculture helped free your prisoners Cathrine.

Sincerely,
Wendell Berry

Excerpts from Accia Harris’ Research Paper, Submitted in Professor Zucker’s Spring 2021 Expository Writing Class, in Response to the Following Research Essay Prompt: Accia Harris Choose one method involved in the industrial growing and processing of food, and describe its most harmful impacts on the environment and on social relationships. Convince your reader why these impacts matter. Your project should also describe one possible way to make things better.

Feedlot Farming is one of the most popular ways of fueling industrial expansion, but it is also amongst one of the major environmental hazards. It is an animal feed operation, which is used in factory farming for finishing livestock, where animals are confined and clustered together and then prepared for slaughter. The detrimental impacts of feedlot farming on the environment cause the production of greenhouse gases which contributes to global warming, the destruction of soil, and biodiversity loss. This method of farming threatens the environment and all living things, and therefore needs to be eradicated. Another alternative methodology that can be utilized in growing food is known as rotational grazing. Rotational Grazing is “…the practice of moving grazing livestock between pastures (often called paddocks) as needed or on a regular basis.” (Smith). It produces food without
undoing our earth’s ecobalance which thwarts these harmful effects, increase soil fertility, food production as well as reduce the risk of global warming.

In Feedlots, due to the limited space animals may have to roam around, they will then become stressed and tired. Wendell Berry tells us that he “…dislikes the thought that some animals have been made miserable in order to feed him” and he follows saying “if he is going to eat meat, he wants it to be from an animal that has lived a pleasant, uncrowded life outdoors…” (Berry). Since, there are “no standard parameters for the number of animals per acre in a feedlot.” (Environmental Encyclopedia), the lack of movement among animals will force them to become aggressive with one another. Not only does this affect an animal’s state but it also puts human life at risk. As one source states “research shows that stress among livestock affects the quality of meat as regards tenderness, perishability, and color” (Korneliussen). Consuming meat processed from stressed-out animals may cause a negative impact on one’s life, as it may increase the risk of heart disease and stroke. In the process of raising and slaughtering multiple animals for profit, the animals eructate violently due to the genetically modified (GMO) corn that are fed to them. This then releases air pollutants into the air which produces a greenhouse gas, known as methane. (McKibben).

Excerpts from Mario Hernandez’ Research Paper, Submitted in Professor Zucker’s Spring 2021 Expository Writing Class, in Response to Prompt Mentioned Above

Monocultures require a constant and controlled environment, which comes at the expense of surrounding ecosystems and biodiversity. A successful harvest is contingent on how well the specific crop species fares against external environmental factors. For that to happen, various pesticides are utilized to rid of any weed, fungus, or insect outbreaks that would otherwise expunge the crop population (Freedman). Because of the many pesticides utilized to maximize crop yields, an excess of artificial agents is injected into the environment that disrupts the balance of nature. This balance ensures that biodiversity remains intact, so not one organism benefits while others fail in adapting to extreme ecological fluctuations. Yet, monocultures choose to live with consequences of disrupting nature. As Carson highlights, insects are the prime benefactors of single-crop systems as certain species will resist the chemicals in pesticides, and rebuild their populations with immune “super races.”

By homogenizing farms to produce a single type of crop, it is no wonder that without pesticides there would be no monocultures to speak of: insects would reign free decimating farms. The evolutionary advantage of insects, along with the crops they devour, should render pesticides obsolete, for they are not effective in sustainable food production in the long-term. Yet, this does not fit in with the profit-driven mind of industrial farms. Instead, they, along with pesticide manufacturers, double-down and create deadlier pesticides, resulting in humanity engaging in a chemical war that is “never won” (Carson).

Industrial farms, and possibly industries as a whole, do not see past technology as a means of solving problems for them, which results in an unnecessary scaling of conflict with what used to be humanity’s greatest ally: nature. And while industry attempts to subdue nature with pesticides, the average consumer is hurt in the crossfire. As it turns out, the Environmental Working Group, an activist organization, found that the chemical glyphosate from pesticides were in dangerous quantities, at carcinogenic levels, in 26 common food products, including Cheerios and various Quaker Oats oatmeals (EWG). Industrial farms have made agriculture a game of numbers--crop output and profits--rather than focusing on providing a healthy product. When people hear about Cheerios or any Quaker Oats products from advertising, they may assume that they are the healthy alternatives to junk food that may also occupy space in the same store. Yet those name brands may even be worse than junk food, for they fool people into consuming a supposedly nutritious product chalk full of cancer-inducing chemicals. Monocultures, and the pesticides utilized to maintain them, are not a path forward for food and environmental sustainability.
The Associate in Science (A.S.) Degree in Food Studies at Hostos Community College consists of 60 credits, which includes: Common Core courses required by the City University of New York; Food Studies core courses; a career practices course; and a required internship. After the first semester students select a track in one of four areas: Food Policy; Food and Social Issues; Health and Nutrition; or Environment and Sustainability. These tracks prepare graduates to transfer into four-year bachelor’s programs in food studies and related fields such as political sciences, urban studies, nutrition, and environmental studies.

The program is open to freshmen students or current or transfer students with less than 24 credits.

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Thank you!
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