

Episode 77: Steven Alvarez

Transcript

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In this episode, I talk with Steven Alvarez about taco literacy, food studies and composition, autobiographical writing and ethnography, and culturally and community-engaged practices.

Steven Alvarez is Associate Professor of English at St. John's University in Queens. He's the author of *Brokering Tareas: Mexican Immigrant Families Translanguaging Homework Literacies* and *Community Literacies en Confianza: Learning From Bilingual After School Programs*. Both were published in 2017. Dr. Alvarez's current research studies Mexican migration in New York City through the prism of food, specifically taco literacy. This research project examines how foodways, narratives, demonstrate a literacy of care for Mexican communities across the five boroughs through stories of bilingual learning, literacy practices, and community resiliency.

Steven, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: I want to start by talking about taco literacy. What is taco literacy, and how do you introduce this concept to students? How do you see it interconnected with teaching writing?

SA: That's a great question. I guess maybe it's one of the questions I get the most. People are like, "Hold on, what is taco and literacy? I know I like tacos, I guess I like literacy, too." It depends who you ask. I think most folks are generally fans of literacy in some ways, but I guess, to begin with, my research starts in literacy studies, specifically about Mexican people. I have a body of work that I produced before I started getting into the Mexican food stuff, and really, the literacy studies that I ground my work in is from the new literacy studies. When you think of literacy as a practice, always contextual, always imbued with power relations, and always dynamic. Socially understood as practices to make meaning, to sometimes negotiate meaning. And sometimes, of course, it can test meaning, built on more of a kind of a Freirean tradition of critical pedagogy as well.

Ira Shor was my advisor when I was in grad school, so he definitely left a lasting impression for how I think about literacy, but also how I think of literacy in communities and also forms of community empowerment and problematizing inequalities. All this goes to say, my research initially was with Mexican immigrants in New York City, bilingual afterschool programs, and also in Kentucky. While I was doing this research I was teaching was mostly ethnographic

methods, but also in addition to this, asking students to go in their communities. I was trying to teach classes to really think about humanizing Mexican people. This was during the Obama presidency. I had my first job at the University of Kentucky and then left right around the time that the next guy came in. So the rhetoric was already amping up in terms of dehumanizing immigrants.

One of the classes I taught in Lexington, it was a class called “Mexington.” On the west side of town, there's a barrio. Guess who lives there? Mexington. That was an important place for me and also a time in my research because so much of what I was trying to do was introduce students at a primarily white institution to think about their neighbors and why the demographics of Kentucky are changing, how they are changing, mostly Mexican migration wave. The course involved things like bilingualism, aspects of immigration, ways of thinking about internal and external migration, economy, and so on. At the very end, I took these students, we went out for a little drive around the barrio and went to a few places. One of the places I wanted to go was a local taqueria, one of my favorite places.

So I just got to eat some tacos and they...well, it was like a religious awakening, I guess. The students, for me, they were so excited. I should preface this by saying sometimes the discussions about immigration were contested in class in ways that mirrored what was going on outside of the class. So when they had these tacos, which I think the students were sort of perplexed to see something beyond chicken and beef...they saw things like tripas. This particular place has sesos, brains, and all the really good cuts or awful. Whatever. Anyway, so students, this was also the first time they had tried tortillas that were just made right there from Kentucky corn, actually. Some of the same corn used for grits. So this was a pretty cool involvement because students were asking me about this food, how it got here, how they make this.

I'm like, “Everything I was trying to do is right here in this taco. Talking about Mexican people, humanizing Mexican people to understand the stories, bilingualism, race, aspects of gender, class, and history, and why folks are here because that corn has to come from somewhere.” Corn is, of course, the basis of the Mexican diet. All of this, sort of my ideas, got my head thinking I can do a critical pedagogy style of class by problematizing what students can think of as Mexican food but also reconfigure it and always bring it back to people because the class is always about people. The taco was a kind of a placeholder, but it's the first text that we read to critically examine it, to think of it as a text, but also understanding that it's a linkage, first and foremost, to Mexican people, history, and power.

That's really where the class comes from. But then when it comes down to it, it's also starting out with what students know about Mexican food. Even students who came from the “holler” in Kentucky, from Appalachia, there is always a Mexican restaurant. It may be the place where you ordered by the number and you get like that crappy little iceberg salad with sliced tomatoes that nobody ever eats covered in cheese, but there's always a place. Sometimes that's the inroads with students. To complicate this further, they start to see things that they recognize as regional foods in the U.S. There are regional foods in Mexico, and how those regional foods in Mexico migrate

to the United States and form new regional varieties...it's interesting, to say the least, but also it ties them into questions about food, which are ubiquitous and oftentimes things we don't really think about but have humongous consequences for how we live and also how we see the world.

SW: So for those interested in taco literacy, I would encourage you to read Steven's article in Composition Forum called "Taco Literacies: Ethnography, Foodways, and Emotions through Mexican Food Writing." He offers a food literacy assignment. Steven, is food rhetoric and food literacies the future of composition studies? Has there been an increased attention to food literacies in our field and in writing classes since that 2016 article?

SA: That's a great question. I think as I came into this, I came in through sort of a side door. Sort of a funny story, but really, I got a fellowship for the Southern Foodways Alliance. And if you're not familiar with it, as somebody from Kentucky, you definitely got to check this out cause you would love it because so many stories are about Kentucky and all the really, kind of like I said, stories of food, but they're really about people. Food is sort of the secondary character that really gets people to think about the relationships we have with folks.

I was involved in this organization, not really knowing what to expect to be quite honest. I went to this conference...by the way, the conference is amazing cause they had like such great food. But it was also bringing people together in food studies. I guess, writ large, I'm talking like farmers, journalists, food critics, people who were in the food industry, people who owned restaurants, food scholars, and by scholars, I mean historians, anthropologists, public health, people who were creative writers, poets, novelists, and really just focusing on the different ways of what people brought to food studies because it's so interdisciplinary, and that field itself has been growing substantially.

I think of it like comp/rhet, as a field that emerged from another field. We see fields that emerge from conglomerations of other fields with critical knowledge that's coming from different avenues. That's what we did, and I can see that happening with food studies. Composition-rhetoric has been around quite a bit now. We have journals and professional conferences and things. Food studies is sort of an emerging field but also one where you can see intersections where composition-rhetoric can have such a tremendous impact, especially on the way we think about teaching and our pedagogy and our pedagogy related to writing, and studying writing and assessing writing and really designing projects that can really get students to do really important work...to dive into their own lives, to look at their lived experience, and to do those kinds of research methods where students can go into their own communities, using food as a lens to understand aspects of race, gender, class, so on.

I feel like people in composition-rhetoric were already cognizant of this, and they were bringing in stuff. But it wasn't necessarily from food studies. It was mostly from maybe public health. Some folks who might be looking at some stuff that was coming out of communications, particularly in the rhetoric side. So there had been some folks doing really cool things like that. And the community writing field, there's been folks who were doing stuff in community gardens

and that kind of cool stuff. But I could see, for example, in the future, having more collaborations where, when people in composition-rhetoric and literacy studies, especially, go to food studies conferences and bring our critical lens to add to the discussion and open it up to a wider audience, and reverse, when food studies people would feel confident to come to our side and talk about what they've done as well.

I'd say that one of the greatest things is when I became this fellow for the Southern Foodways Alliance, it got me to actually turn to food and to really start seeing ways I could imagine doing this kind of work. So that was really exciting for me, but also having these opportunities to present my research that was really grounded in Mexican communities, bilingualism, literacy, and power, speaking on those issues to audiences of farmers, to food critics, and other folks who weren't necessarily thinking of literacy, has been really important for me for a different kind of audience, a more general audience. Conversely, bringing in some of the stuff that I was gaining from those conversations into literacy studies has opened me up even further. Sometimes, we sort of get stuck within folks who were, more or less, maybe not in the same areas that we're studying, but in ways that align.

This has been really important for me to start thinking about how I articulate my research to people outside my field, but then also bring in what's going on from some of these other folks and invite them in too. I'd say the biggest thing, though, that I noticed from composition-rhetoric that we bring is our ways of thinking about teaching and our pedagogy. This is something where, to really help some of the folks, like for online teaching and really thinking of ways to do really cool writing assignments that involve food, this is where we can really do some inroads.

SW: Your priority as a teacher is to foster agency and encourage students to really reflect and draw on their communities, their languages, literacies, and food. And you do some of this by centering autobiographical writing and ethnography in your classes. Can you talk more about how you do this work?

SA: Absolutely. I mean, I should say that my research, when I was writing my dissertation, I went from starting off with studying literature. I wanted to study like avant-garde, literally like James Joyce and Sam Beckett and Ezra Pound. And then at some point, I turned into an ethnographer, which was very different. Doing qualitative research wasn't stuff I had ever really done besides textual analysis or close reading really. It was cool. I had to learn a lot about methodology, which was sort of retraining myself. But then, of course, you can do close reading. That's a really great skill to have, to be able to also think about how you read situations, but also accumulating texts for analysis and things. So that was really important for me. When I wanted to position myself as a writing teacher, I was always thinking about alternatives to data that students could research, study, and then come to make different conclusions.

Having students do things that are sometimes the beginning of doing interviews with people they know, people in the community, was really important, especially if it was members of their family or elders or role models or people they may look up to as mentors. Sometimes they hear

those stories. And more importantly, with sharing those stories and the students getting together to share the stories that they had collected and do some group analysis. Also going through family photo albums, doing photo essays, going to communities, do observations. I mean, the kind of writing that they were doing were field notes and then using the field notes as a text for analysis to draw larger conclusions, in addition to doing research in ethnographic journals or journals that use ethnography. I guess the larger picture was developing methodologies of composition using ethnography in classrooms with students, understanding their own lived experience, and how they define community, doesn't necessarily need to be family.

Some students who might identify as queer might find another kind of affiliation that they feel that might, I don't know, sublimate instead what they had, rather for a family, but find something closer. Alternative families, for example. So this was a really important for students to think about how they make meaning and make meaning socially, and I think that was really the big part.

Fast forward to this semester. Right now, I'm teaching the first graduate version of a foodways literacy class at St. John's. My idea for this is, I've been also diving more into autoethnography, so autobiographical genre but using the same methods by one which would accumulate data, let's say of a community, but also turning it inward and understanding oneself, one's positionality, aspects of race, class, gender, history, or family history on that level. Autoethnography has been a really cool genre, or excuse me, a methodology, because it can also involve creative elements. People who are novelists do autoethnographic research.

The classes began with autoethnographic methods and having students really start thinking about how they identify with various aspects of their identity related to food as expressed. Not necessarily through Mexican food, but whatever their background is. One student, pretty cool, his father drinks...it's called soylent. I think it's that powder drink. You don't have to eat. It's just like this powder drink. So he's been studying that a little bit and getting to know a little bit about his family. Also, his mother, I believe, owned a small restaurant with the farmer's market. So he's actually diving back into some of those memories he kind of repressed, to be quite honest. He really started asking a lot of questions. We extended it so that it started off with the methodology of autoethnography and then start thinking about ways to collect data.

And that's been emerging over the course of the semester. Some of the different texts we've read, they've come from food studies from aspects of agribusiness to history, anthropology, sociology, public health, trying to bring in as many different lenses. Composition-rhetoric, of course, as well. The idea was giving students some of the methods, that they would use those methods to probe aspects of themselves and their identity and their social formation. Or reading these examples over the course of the semester to develop a project that, over the course of the semester, will be developing. They're really kind of right now thinking about data, what they want to study, but it's really a way for them to consider their lived experience, their relationships to food but also the relationships to people as expressed through food and understand what are the deeper linguistic and literacy aspects that are formative in this as well.

So it's been a really cool, you know? I mean, if we really think about our own lived experiences and how we read the world, read our lives, that is a Freirean principle. But also reading how social inequalities are inherently part of our lives and sometimes need to be uncovered and problematized. A lot of this stuff the students were really looking at were some of the things about monocultures and agribusiness and pesticides and Monsanto, things they knew they heard were bad, but when they started getting into it, I mean, it is really another form of colonization, with “colon” emphasized there. But certainly another way of thinking about geopolitics through food.

SW: So you're asking students to do this deep, reflective, investigative, critical thinking, culturally-engaged work. You ask students to explore their own lived experiences. And I know you mentor teachers. How would you go about mentoring a teacher who is interested in connecting with communities and doing this kind of community-engaged, culturally-centered work? What practices or resources would you recommend?

SA: I mean, that's a great question. I do get this question a lot. Usually, especially when I'm talking to teachers, or anybody really, you just ask folks like, “Tell me about the food that’s really close to your heart,” and everybody's got this, right? For whatever reason, it might be like a particular food that was made by a family member or has some kind of ethnic affiliation. It might be something that has to do with the person's diet, or it might even have to do with something like a guilty pleasure and so on. But there's so many ways the emotional connections that we have for food are there, for everybody. And then you can ask folks about, for example, “What are some of these special foods from where you're from?” And then all of a sudden, you start to get really interesting questions.

For example, not too far from Cincinnati, they got this... I don't want to say it's weird, but it's a little bit weird to me, chili with spaghetti on the chili or chili on the spaghetti. But hey, to each their own, right? Because everybody needs at least a little bit of spice, although that's mostly ketchup, I ought to say. But anyway. When I moved to Kentucky, I thought, “Well, that's kind of weird, but all right, I need to know more about this.” And there's so much out there on this, about trying to find the origins about where this stuff comes from, how this kind of hybrid food even occurs, where you can get the best one, what's the “authentic,” so-called, which is a fruitless escapade to ever find the authentic of anything. And so really, those questions are there for everybody.

And that's the first place you start to get. For example, somebody from West Virginia, and anyone from West Virginia will recognize these pepperoni rolls, which is basically a piece of bread with pepperoni, either a stick or rolled up pieces of pepperoni. To speak about that and where that comes from has to go back to folks in the coal mines, of Italian immigrants, basically having a hearty food that was just on-the-go. So much of street food is this. It's class-based, but then they also become things that are monikers for like identifications on a larger scale. In the United States, there's so much about enslavement, the agriculture economy there as well. And

then of course, people maintaining their dignity through their foodways. The stories of people keeping okra seeds in their hair that were brought from Africa. There's just so much, and there's so much text out there.

I think probably the best way for students to get into some of this stuff and really to see examples and then maybe start thinking about their own communities, the Southern Foodways Alliance. I really, I always begin with their short documentaries. They have these documentaries that are between seven to eight, maybe 10 minutes long. Done really well. Always focusing on people telling their stories, but then shot really well so you can also savor the flavors and the sounds and the smells. And then of course, the countryside. It's always sort of land-based. There are also so many things on YouTube. I can't even. Sometimes in class, things get a little slow, I just always go to YouTube, or I have a couple of YouTube videos ready to go. And even then, I mean, there are so many food shows that are out there. I don't mean just Bourdain, but I mean like everything. If you want to, you can study Top Chef and sort of like reality TV versions of food shows.

But I have to be honest, when I was teaching a St. John's, one of the last seasons of Bourdain's show, he did a show on Queens and students had not seen it. We watched that in class, and I had never seen them so engaged. This is at St. John's, a really diverse school. I remember one of the students was saying, "Wow, this really shows how diverse we are." He's like, "This school, they try to use that to sell the school, but this is really what it is." I was like, "Yeah, this is your neighborhood. This is your borough. This is us." And this is a really important way for people who maybe, as I grew up, grew up in Arizona, Arizona is a dry heat, but a dry hate. Drier, even. Growing up Mexican-American, first-generation college student, you're taught to hate yourself. Really.

You're taught to like say that the reason why your family is the way it is, is because people didn't work hard enough or we're not smart enough or whatever, or you didn't want to learn English. It's always based on what you don't do or what you lack. Deficit model. And then I realized, as I went to college, that I could be proud of who I am, which I had to go to higher education to get all the other stuff out of me. One of the things I realized that I was really proud of was the food my people made. This was something that kept me going. My mom and dad maybe didn't have a college education, but they always kept me fed with whatever we had. There was always beans. We always had beans and tortillas.

I guess when we talk about food in those ways, about like emotional resonances, that can be very personal. And to put that in writing and to share those with other people, that's the same as breaking bread or tortillas. And in that way, the next stage is then you have students start bringing food to class. Those are always fun moments. I'd say that, once I started realizing how much of a unifier food can be in bringing smiles to people's faces and getting them to think critically, I was like, there's no turning back. So that's kind of where it fell.

SW: Thanks, Steven. And thank you, Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.