This presentation advances the argument of the importance of performance studies to food studies (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett), and demonstrates the effectiveness of the intersection of these perspectives in the classroom. Bodies are central to the processes of food production and consumption—animal bodies, human bodies, plant bodies, as well as the social body (U.S. political, economic, military, educational, and medical institutions). Because of this centrality, performance studies scholars are uniquely positioned to explore historical and contemporary relationships between people and the food they produce and consume. As a work of praxis, this presentation documents the design and implementation of an experientially-based, upper-level undergraduate food studies course titled Ethics of Food Production. The course is anchored in performance theories and uses performance as a method of inquiry to explore the distancing and detachment inherent in the 20th-Century Agro-Industrial complex.

Foundational to this work are questions regarding how to engage students in critically analyzing their disconnections from their food systems in productive ways, and how to help students reestablish those connections as active agents who must navigate their positionalities within family and community. This presentation discusses the pedagogical strategies employed to engage students in this reconnection and sociocultural navigation, and posits the applicability of these performance-based strategies to broader communities outside of academia. Students in this course grapple with historical and contemporary constructions of “food” in the United States through embodied activities, including meal preparations and vegetable gardening at the USF Botanical Gardens. Reading and debating performance theories help students better understand the discourses surrounding food production/consumption. The cultivation of empathy helps students develop a more acute awareness of the processes and implications of consuming, producing, and consumed bodies. Ultimately, students create performances that embody the knowledge we collaboratively construct in the classroom. By examining “food” as a performative construction and our relationships to food as performances of identity, students are able to identify themselves as active agents who can affect change in their worlds.