

When is it Really Dead? Ethnographic Reflections on Animals as Food and (Food) Waste

Nafsika Papacharalampous

Researcher, NTUA

Abstract

In this paper I present some ethnographic observations on the cultural processes by which an ingredient can be food or waste. More specifically, I wonder how the senses, values and cultural perceptions of edibility transmute food into waste and waste into food. I ask: how do people perceive food waste? What renders foods inedible? Is it just the expiration dates or is it a more complex process? What is the role of the senses, values and culture in the shaping of behaviours and attitudes around food waste, especially when it comes to animal foods? How are food waste practices and attitudes shaped? But also, how do they become tropes for the negotiation of grander ideas around planetary sustainability? My regional focus is Athens, Greece. Methodologically, I will be conducting digital ethnography, following conversations related to food waste on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, as well as specialised food waste forums. I will also be conducting ethnographic research (participant observation) in selected Athenian middle-class households, engaging with the dynamics, behaviours and motivations around food waste. Theoretically, I approach food waste as an assemblage of organic, social and symbolic elements which result in interesting multi-species entanglements with significant impact on human lives, and reflect on how waste and humans cultivate one another in the wake of climate change and biodiversity loss. These enquiries and reflections seek to illuminate several cultural aspects around food waste attitudes which may be useful in generating future-oriented solutions when it comes to managing food waste.

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