

Honoring My Scallions

The day I found out our high school composting program failed, I was writing a group paper for my environmental racism and injustice class. The bag of food scraps in my college dorm mini fridge was loud in my mind. Banana peels, apple cores, potato skins. Whenever the bag grew bloated, I crammed them in my backpack, dumping them in one of the many Zero Waste Committee compost bins on campus.

Interviewing, video producing, and researching about compost filled our paper with wealth, but contemplating my experience starting a compost program in my high school gave me the means to remember how this food waste problem does not consider people like me—the children of people without land to garden.

Growing up in Lincoln Heights, a Los Angeles neighborhood abundant with first generation and low income Asians and Latinos, like most families here, my family of six struggled to stretch our monthly food stamps. We've been signed up for free lunch meals since we started preschool. Our immigrant parents were not embarrassed to take extra servings of party food home.

That was convention. Just like most people in America, I was born into a culture of honoring consumption. I took more than I needed. Not because I was stingy, but because our parents taught us their unspoken fear of starvation, of having nothing after escaping the Vietnam War, its abuse and deprivation.

After binging lifestyling vlogs on Youtube, I found numerous Youtubers like Ellen Fisher and Matt D'Avella criticizing the waste in American culture. Because of their stories, my eyes lingered on the

food waste bulged like inflamed pimples around me. Fresh fruit and pristine packages of veggies piled up in our high school trash bins. The schools seemed to be mocking us. The cafeteria forced the lunch ladies to force us to take one of everything. Our individual allergies and dietary needs were trivial to the system. Instead of offering resources for food insecurities, they poured money into the same milk cartons students cannot save and bring home.

I was overwhelmed with anger. So much food was being thrown away, while families like mine struggle to put food on the table. I looked for superpowers to teleport the food to somewhere wanted: soup kitchen, homeless shelter, food bank, but signing up for Advanced Placement classes and clubs stole my time and energy.

Being in the Associated Student Body (ASB) in a Abraham Lincoln Senior High School, a Title One school¹, I proposed a composting committee, placing lidded² bins with composting instructions around campus. Students had the option to throw their food waste into the collectors, which we transported to the compost bins by the school garden. Some teachers supporting this mass composting program were surprised to discover that our school had compost bins. We also wrote scripts to encourage participation for morning announcements, but none of us were trained in marketing. Our persuasion was bland with information. During leadership class, occurring every other day from block schedule, we brought these compost collectors to the compost bins in our school garden.

¹ Title One Schools are elementary or secondary schools with a high low income student population receiving federal funding to help students reach academic standards. These findings

have loose guidelines for how they may be used, which is how the mass composting system may have been funded.

²Our faculty members were worried that the compost collectors would attract stray animals, have pungent odors, or be an eyesore

Before I graduated, I wrote a set of instructions for the future recycling committee, encouraging them to challenge their creativity to improve our school's trash system. But it was not enough.

“You graduated and the gardening teacher left. Nobody wanted to be on the composting committee,” the leadership advisor texted me when she broke the news.

I was speechless. My only legacy at the school—gone. I wanted to go back in time, researching more, giving stronger presentations, providing better incentives.

[Only 76% of our high school students graduate.](#) If they don't seem to care about school, how was it possible to get them to care about reducing food waste?

The high school was not the only place where I tried to reform the waste system. My Chinese-Vietnamese family of six had a balcony garden but even with this small space, I encouraged them to compost. I was a beginner myself, but learning by experience was the only option. We never even had the money for piano lessons or Chinese school, so where could I find the money to learn how to start a food waste system?

I filled a giant pot on the side of our balcony garden with soil and worms—gifted from my biology teacher, who was excited for my food waste journey—and placed a bowl in the kitchen for food scraps. Every time the bowl was full, I dumped them into the pot and used a hand trowel to bury the food scraps.

However, a few months after I left for college, my family's version of reducing food waste devolved into throwing kitchen scraps into a pitcher of water. They dumped the food water on their dragon fruit's topsoil. I wondered if my family turned the soil often, to give more oxygen to the decomposers, basking in the earthiness that fragrant the air, after I left.

As the piles of waste grew, my Baba grew irritated and put on a rubber back brace to dedicate a rare afternoon off to drive the recyclables to a center. He also volunteered to prune the dragon fruit whenever we received a letter from the apartment manager that they were coming to inspect the balcony. Residents could not have anything hanging off the balcony in case of fire. Sometimes, my Baba slammed the balcony door behind him, complaining, "Tài máfan³!"

When I visited during the holidays, I noticed the roaches, fruit flies, and spiderwebs settled in the balcony garden. Every dragon fruit cactus was buried in food scraps. My Mami learned on WeChat to fill a pitcher with water and throw in her food scraps. The water became fertilizer, but she threw the wet food scraps too. It was no surprise that the increased surface area attracted the bugs. I told Mami this, but she was adamant.

"Look at my huǒlóng guǒ bǎobèi⁴," She said, "So big. So happy."

When I came home for the holidays, wanting to reform their food waste system, I could not convince her. I was desperate, spending an afternoon trimming the cacti and scooping. At least she was trying, so I contributed scraps to the pitcher.

Mami wore the same proud expression as the Quail Springs Permaculture Farm folk, whom I met when I visited them on an environmental club field trip the winter quarter before everything shut

down from the pandemic. The farm greeted us, after a two hour drive from UCSB, with peppermint tea and lemon scones.

³Too much trouble

⁴Dragon fruit babies

“It’s like a three-legged stool,” Brenton Kelly, the Advocacy Director of this farm—a tall man in a straw hat—said about the ethics of permaculture, “two of those legs are common in our lexicon: care for mother [nature] and care for people—which is social justice. The third one is ‘fair share’ or ‘enough is enough.’ Going to live on a land and leaving a horrible scar is not fair share.”

The Farm’s waste systems were curated to match their usage. Most food scraps go to the goats or become compost. Even their used toilet water goes back into the ground. I wished my high school—and schools worldwide—had o waste systems like the Farm’s installed on campuses. Instead, when our unused food was tossed in trash bins, we were contributing to the horrible scar of landfills.

Sitting in an amphitheater made of polished orange earth, I could not help notice the faces around me. Wisdom was etched in the Farm folk’s gentle tans and wrinkles, but something about them felt too good to be true.

“Everything feels so perfect. Like we are watching a twisted utopian novel come to life.” I said to my clubmates during lunch of rotini salad, butternut soup, and wild rice.

This unsettling feeling intensified when I noticed the Farm folk didn’t like us. When I workshopped an earlier draft of this essay, my classmates—who are mostly White—wondered what was the primary conflict and it made me wonder about the gap between our experiences. I did not want to think about race. I was scared to enter territory I did not understand well. Nevertheless, race is real and race

changes how food and environmentalism are experienced and perceived.

The other students and I had diverse backgrounds: we were Chinese, Vietnamese, Filipino, and Latino. Nobody on the Farm had our cultural backgrounds and experiences. I kept opening their website and scrolling, but nobody there looked like us.

People like us— minorities from low-income backgrounds—were taught to care about the environment, according to my environmental studies classes, because our concerns were surviving from paycheck to paycheck.

However, that is often untrue. [Lower income and minority communities tend to rise up to defend their right of their environment being clean and safe.](#) Our communities disproportionately suffer more from events of environmental racism and injustice. Our communities tend to not have the privilege of resources to choose fight or flight. Our communities that do tend to join the environmental justice movement to fight for others too.

I wanted to fight too. There wasn't any natural disaster, Superfund sites, or state laws that disproportionately affected me or Lincoln Heights directly, but the wasted milk cartons from high school made me want to stand up for myself and my community. This place was my home and the cartons filling up the trash cans at Abraham Lincoln High School felt like environmental injustice. Determined to do something, I joined the lower waste movement.

Be the change you want to see in others, my environmental studies teachers had said. So I started with myself. My new mission was finding homes for my food scraps. In dorms and apartments, I made composting systems where we piled potato peels, tomato stems, and grape seeds in a food scraps bin.

When it grew full, we walked to a church garden and dumped the contents in the compost.

One of my housemates refused to join me on this journey.

“It’s gross,” she said. “I don’t like the smell.”
She was adamant about not adding compost onto our monthly chores chart. Due to the pandemic, she returned to her Asian home and their lovely garden of tomatoes, dragon fruit, and guava. My Mami would sing and dance everyday if she had a plot of land like my housemate’s family.

“I’d learned how food waste occupies the most space in landfills in my environmental justice classes,” I wanted to tell her. It is a small number but composting is somewhere we can start. One night, after looking up recipes, I discovered [Max La Manna](#), one of the first chefs practicing low waste. On his Instagram, he taught tips to reduce food waste such as making food from food waste (like banana peel “pulled pork”) and regrowing grocery produce on his windowsill. Now, wherever I moved, water-rooting plants took over window sills, balconies, patios. The scallions⁵—two inches snipped from last week’s grocery haul—grew slower, and when I emptied the water into the sink, there was a particular smell. Savory with a subtle water rot. The roots were bloated; a translucent slime coated the tips. The leaves were wrinkled and hoarse. I imagined them praying for autumn rain, so I spritzed them and my dragon fruit, my tomato plant, and my Food Bank sprouts.

Sometimes the scallions have clumps of dark green clinging where the roots snake out the white bottom. Mold. My heart stings when this happens. The mold reeked of failure. *Was the effort to save the planet worth this use of my time and energy*, I wonder. *Was my time and energy not enough to resonate with my scallions?*

Refilling the cups with water every other day prevented mold from killing the plants, but mold was a finicky beast. I buried these scallions in my food scraps bin.

⁵ Also known as green onions or spring onions

Scallions deserved to stretch their roots in the ground as they outgrow soil pots. However, I did not have space for them. They tended to grow faster than I could find money and a friend to drive me to buy bigger pots, dying of root binding.

I chose to honor my scallions this way because as an Asian American, scallions are my salt and pepper. My mom taught me how to fold them into her scallion pancakes (resembling mo banh xeo with creamy coconut milk), beat them in eggs for flavor, sprinkle them in fried rice for an exciting crunch. Scallions always have a home in our supermarket shopping carts.

Whenever she surprised me with a visit from Los Angeles, the four for a dollar scallions and other Asian staples found a way into my fridge as well. I am thankful. Even with CalFresh food benefits, I am hesitant to purchase scallions at the grocery stores in expensive Santa Barbara: one for a dollar. There is not enough demand or interest from the affluent, White community here, and not a lot of Asian communities like in LA. It is cheaper to wait for my mom's visits or to regrow them with water.

One of my favorite scallion dishes is scallion pancakes. If I did not go to university to study writing and literature and environmental studies, I would go to school to be a plant-based chef. Richard, another housemate and a physics student from China made scallion pancakes on our kitchen island the length of a skee-ball machine. His recipe smacked of umami. He seared his scallions in oil before brushing the oil on the dough to form more flavorful flaky layers. When our good friends

Rei and Hak came over and took hearty bites, I asked them, “How much clothing will you take off for it?”

A Food Wars inside joke. Food Wars is an anime about a teenage chef training in the world of professional cooking. Their descriptions of food are godly—one including exaggerated stripping to demonstrate how delicious the food is.

Hak placed his glasses on the table and took off his shirt. Then, he started tugging on his pants. He laughed, “Just kidding—this is a rated R house.”

Rei laughed—mouth full, “I’ll always take off all my clothes for your food.”

We dipped them in Hoisin sauce, a vegan sauce made for seafood. They dipped them in oyster sauce. Richard produced a sauce with minced garlic, soy sauce, and black vinegar. Although scallions were not endangered by the changing environment from climate change, I knew one day, if we continue practicing our materialistic, wasteful, and capitalistic lifestyles, they eventually will be. I wondered if my housemate, the one who did not want to add compost onto our chores chart, tried these pancakes, if she would realize how a little step is better for the planet than no step.

These moments I shared with my friends reminded me why I regrew my scallions and buried them in my food scraps bin, why I became an environmentalist. I am still trying to figure out what direction I want to take to help better our human relationship with the planet. I joined the Environmental Justice

Alliance, Environmental Affairs Board, and Making Adventures Possible For All Students. I felt wealthy meeting an abundance of like-minded people who looked like me. At UC Santa Barbara, there are resources I can use to find a career as a writer and as an environmentalist. At the environmental

program 50th anniversary celebration, the successful environmentalists I met have faith in me, that my passions gave me a unique position in environmentalism, and chasing this career will make the world a better place. I believe them. I apply for more internships so one day I can go back to my high school and give them the food waste system they deserve.