

Commentary

Reflections on the roles and responsibilities of food studies in Canada, Indigenous Territories, and beyond – 2020-21

The 2020-21 CAFS Board of Directors (Amanda Wilson^a, Meredith Bessey^b, Jennifer Brady^{c*}, Michael Classens^d, Kirsten Lee^e, Charles Z. Levkoe^f, Jennifer Marshman^g, Tabitha Martens^h, Sarah-Louise Ruder^h, Phoebe Stephens^e, Tammara Somaⁱ)

^a Saint Paul University

^b Guelph University

^c Mount Saint Vincent University

^d University of Toronto

^e University of Waterloo

^f Lakehead University

^g Wilfrid Laurier University

^h University of British Columbia

ⁱ Simon Fraser University

The Canadian Association for Food Studies (CAFS) was founded in 2005 when a group of academics, community-based researchers, and practitioners came together to develop a proposal for a national research program on food security and food systems. Out of that initial discussion, CAFS was created to further critical, interdisciplinary scholarship in the broad area of food systems, including policy, production, distribution, and consumption, as well as the social and environmental conditions that shape those systems.

Sixteen years later, we find ourselves within scholarly, environmental, ecological, political-economic, and cultural contexts that are both similar to and very different from those of our founders. Thanks to critical food systems scholars and activists, our analytical tools are more varied and calibrated—but the challenges continue to mount. Today, our work is intended to inform policy makers, engage the public, assess the outcomes of community-based work, broaden the scope and plurality of food knowledge, and demonstrate the impacts of local and global change that affect food systems.

*Corresponding author: awilson@ustpaul.ca

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Though in the roil of ongoing social inequity, climate chaos, a global pandemic, and a gathering storm of both austerity and populism, we are faced with increasingly urgent questions not only about *what* we do, but *how* we do our work. We find ourselves at a stage of profound reflexivity as we reckon with the past, grapple with our collective futures, and collaboratively strategize about how to seize the ever-present here and now.

In this commentary, we collectively reflect on the past year and propose three areas of emphasis for the years ahead: racial justice and decolonization; (anti)austerity; and knowledge production and accessibility. While it is evident that these themes have become relevant for us as food studies practitioners, we see them as equally meaningful across academia more broadly, and for all those who care about moving forward with equity and empathy. In what follows, we address the significance of these areas of emphasis in guiding CAFS' journey as an organization.

Racial justice and decolonialism

The 2020–21 CAFS Board began our term on the heels of widespread mobilizations for racial justice, spearheaded by Black Lives Matter in both Canada and the U.S. After reflection and conversation, [the Board released a statement in support of these movements](#). Beyond rhetoric, the purpose of the statement was to acknowledge ongoing structural racism and racialized police violence, connections to food and food systems, and CAFS' commitment to action. We particularly wanted to draw attention to the presence of systemic racism in the Canadian context, including the disproportionate killing and incarceration of Black and Indigenous people by Canadian police forces.

The commitments we outlined in our statement included developing [a publicly available resource](#) on the intersection of food systems, racialized violence, and oppression within the Canadian context. We also committed to working with the editorial collective of our journal, *Canadian Food Studies/La Revue canadienne des études sur l'alimentation* (CFS/RCÉA), to develop a themed issue confronting anti-Indigenous, anti-Black, and anti-Asian racism in Canadian food systems. [The call for commentaries for this issue](#) was circulated at the beginning of May 2021, with a September 15, 2021 deadline. We also organized an online discussion with three Indigenous scholars and practitioners to share their reflections on the place of "Canada" in food studies and food systems, which contributed to a broader conversation within CAFS and CFS/RCÉA about the use of *Canadian/canadienne* in our respective names and the framing of our work.

The discovery of thousands of unmarked graves at several residential schools is a condemning reminder of the horrific consequences of an ongoing genocide in this territory. We know, from oral histories and research by food studies scholars, that food was used as a weapon within residential schools. Indigenous children were barred from participating in cultural food practices and were subject to nutrition experiments in which they were intentionally starved and malnourished (Food Secure Canada, n.d.; Tennant, 2021).

Food continues to be a key tool of control and violence in the broader processes of colonization. As the academic association for the study of food in this territory, we cannot turn away from the reality that food is a vector for oppression and inequity. We hope that CAFS' recent activities to engage with these tensions have created space for reflection and learning, and that they will set the stage for future engagement, understanding, and knowledge generation on these important issues.

Austerity

With respect to our individual and collective academic work, the experience of the pandemic has made many enduring issues more acute. Despite celebrities' and governments' ad nauseum repetition that we are "all in this together," it became clear that deep disparities in food and labour are all too common. Many people lost their jobs and their homes, took on additional labour to support friends and family, and wrestled with maintaining physical and mental wellness. As some people disproportionately continued to reap profit and benefit from the profound state of inequity, many people in the academy struggled to balance care and reproductive responsibilities with teaching, research, and service commitments. At the same time, some responded to this new context by building collaborations to help better understand the impacts of the pandemic on our food systems, and to support the efforts of those on the front lines in re-imagining and actualizing what comes next.

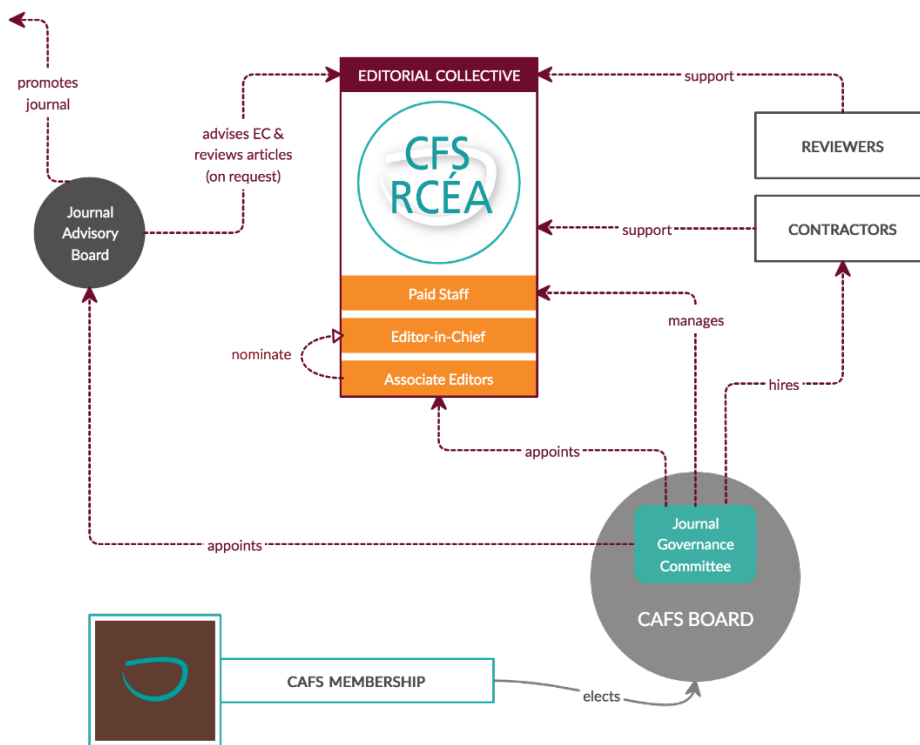
Many of our partner communities have also struggled over the course of the pandemic. Rates of food insecurity have increased dramatically, myriad food workers have lost their jobs and/or been subject to unsafe working environments, conditions for migrant farm workers have deteriorated precipitously, and food access for vulnerabilized people has become more limited. The increased demand for food charity has in part resulted in a further destabilization of the food-focused non-profit sector, which already bore the twin burden of chronic underfunding and governments that are ill-prepared (or unwilling) to support populations in need. We all need to remain attentive to maintaining an anti-austerity ethos in our work and rhetoric over the months and years ahead.

Knowledge production and accessibility

Over the past decades, we have watched publicly funded academic research be subsumed by corporate-owned journals and sold back to us as proprietary knowledge. As an open access, collaboratively managed, scholarly journal, CFS/RCÉA was developed and has adapted to counter this. [A new governance structure](#) was put in place, founded on relationality among journal staff, the editorial collective, and the journal governance committee (see Figure 1).

In addition to engaging with broader debates about knowledge construction, we have also taken on a responsibility to keep the pages of CFS/RCÉA accessible to both authors and readers. With a new schedule of publishing fees, the journal has reinvigorated its commitment to open access, non-profit, non-commercial, independent, and high-quality publishing, all while maintaining financial sustainability. In a publishing environment increasingly crowded by for-profit, predatory corporations, we remain resolute in our commitment to open access, flexible publishing fees, fair pay for our staff, and creating new ways of mobilizing knowledge.

Figure 1: The CFS/RCÉA organigram



Many of the conversations and activities initiated in 2020–21, including those of [our new webinar series](#), will continue in the years to come. Looking forward, the possibilities abound to use food studies to understand both food and ourselves, while also transforming the world around us. We are also cognizant of the extensive work to be done to ensure food studies is a welcoming and nurturing space for all. CAFS has raised critical questions about our role as an academic association this year, particularly in the context of calls for social justice, as well as public scholarship and community-centered research and output practices.

One of the priorities over the past year was to increase communications and outreach capacity, so that those who have not previously felt a part of food studies might feel more encouraged to participate in CAFS and CFS/RCÉA. This has created space for important moments of learning and conversation.

A further effort related to knowledge production is to challenge the entrenched epistemologies and ontologies that continue to create hegemonies of knowing, often prioritizing so-called scientific and objective data over embodied and traditional knowledge. Food is too often treated as object to be studied in isolation from its complex web of relations. For instance, many approaches to food and health mobilize narrow understandings of “obesity” as a problem to be solved, which perpetuates weight stigma and anti-fat bias (Brady, Gingras & LeBesco, 2019). Agricultural productivism continues to be driven by neo-Malthusian and technocratic configurations, which reproduce global inequity and marginalize Indigenous, agroecological, and folk farming practices (Rosset & Altieri, 2017). Narratives proclaiming that food insecurity is simply an absence of food—one that can be solved through corporatized charity—remain intransigent, despite decades of evidence to the contrary (Swift & Power, 2021). In order to avoid re-entrenching damaging narratives and practices, we encourage our membership to embrace epistemological diversity and to continue pursuing the horizons of inter/trans/anti-disciplinary modes of knowledge production.

On a final note, we keep front of mind our colleagues and comrades within CAFS and other food communities who were lost this past year. COVID-19 took the lives of migrant farm workers, meat-packing workers, food service workers, and others. One particularly wide-felt loss was Dr. Wayne Roberts, who passed away on January 20, 2021. Wayne was the recipient of the 2019 CAFS Lifetime Achievement Award and the author of numerous articles and books (including *The No-Nonsense Guide to World Food*). He worked tirelessly to encourage city authorities, policymakers, and scholars to integrate food systems thinking into their work, and to promote food security and urban resilience. During his fruitful 76 years, he mentored myriad activists and scholars, many of whom have gone on to become leaders in their respective communities. He brought people of diverse—and at times opposing—perspectives together, playing the role of weaver and cross-pollinator. Many of us have been grateful recipients of his ideas, service, commentaries, and publications. While we will all miss him deeply, his spirit will live on, perpetually positive, perpetually hopeful, and perpetually grounded in humility.

Food studies is a space of evolution, reflection, tension, and learning, presenting numerous opportunities for remaking what we think of as normal. As the pandemic evolves at different paces around the world, we will not—and should not—aim at a return to ‘normal’. There is far too much at stake. Instead, let us each reenergize our efforts to play a positive role in transforming our norms, questioning our assumptions, and re-imagining our food systems, foodscapes, and food cultures.

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