



Perspective

Reimagining recipes for food studies: Enriching—not spoiling—the broth

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Abstract

This perspective is a continuation of a conversation started during “Reimagining Food, Food Systems, and Food Studies,” a plenary session in which we, the authors, participated at the eighteenth annual assembly of the Canadian Association for Food Studies (CAFS). Assessing current opportunities and limitations for food studies in Canada from our perspectives as emerging scholars, the CAFS panel presented our individual and collective proposals for evolving the field. This article builds on the resonances and dissonances from our discussion to craft a provisional “recipe” for reimagining

food studies. Recognizing the shortcomings of the format in terms of its prescriptive connotations, we position *recipes* not as rigid guidelines for achieving predefined outcomes, but as creative models for generating improvisations. We begin with an overview of the ingredients that have come together to create food studies in Canada. Next, we offer some revisions in the margins of this recipe based on the work in which we are engaged as food scholars and practitioners. Finally, we consider next steps for the work of evolving the field, and we invite readers to share in this exchange. Overall, we

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observe and participate in an unfinished trajectory that extends from previous questions on *why* food studies

should exist and *what* food studies is, to consider more deeply *how* food studies could be done.

Keywords: Food studies; collaborative scholarship; knowledge diversity; research methodologies; food systems

Résumé

Cet article de perspective s’inscrit dans la continuité d’une conversation entamée lors de la session plénière « Réimaginer l’alimentation, les systèmes alimentaires et les études sur l’alimentation », à laquelle nous, les auteurs et auteures, avons participé lors de la dix-huitième assemblée annuelle de l’Association canadienne des études sur l’alimentation (ACEA). Après avoir évalué les possibilités et les limites actuelles pour les études sur l’alimentation au Canada de nos points de vue de chercheuses et chercheurs émergents, le panel de l’ACEA a permis de présenter nos propositions individuelles et collectives pour faire évoluer le domaine. Cet article s’appuie sur les résonances et les dissonances de notre discussion pour élaborer une « recette » provisoire pour réimaginer les études sur l’alimentation. Reconnaisant les lacunes de ce format étant donné ses connotations prescriptives, nous considérons ici les *recettes* non pas comme des lignes

directrices rigides pour atteindre des résultats prédéfinis, mais comme des modèles créatifs pour générer de l’improvisation. Nous commençons par un survol des ingrédients réunis pour créer les études sur l’alimentation au Canada. Ensuite, nous proposons une petite révision dans les marges de cette recette, en fonction du travail dans lequel nous nous engageons en tant que chercheurs, chercheuses et praticiens, praticiennes de l’alimentation. Enfin, nous envisageons les prochaines étapes de l’évolution du domaine et nous invitons les lecteurs et lectrices à participer à cet échange. Dans l’ensemble, ce que nous observons et à quoi nous participons est une trajectoire inachevée qui s’étend des questions antérieures sur la raison d’être et la nature des études sur l’alimentation à une réflexion plus approfondie sur la manière dont les études sur l’alimentation pourraient être réalisées.

Introduction

“Too many cooks spoil the broth.” “Trop de cuisiniers gâtent la sauce.” Across several cultures and languages,¹ variations on this expression are widely used outside of food-specific contexts to offer notes of caution about the poor or diluted results that may be produced from processes that incorporate the competing perspectives of

multiple people. From our positions as food scholars, we question this advice. Food reminds us of our interdependence as eaters and academics. Just as we can never be alone when we eat, since we are in intimate exchange with other organisms (Derrida, 1991), we are necessarily in a community when we make scholarship,

¹ For a selection of similar expressions, see, for instance, BBC Learning English’s (2017) “We say—you say: Too many cooks spoil the broth”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eoW1DZTQhHA>.

building with the work of other knowledge-sharers. While some dishes may benefit from the discerning hand of a singular chef, we argue that the field of food studies is a broth best cooked by many participants bringing diverse ingredients.

This written piece is a continuation of a conversation started during “Reimagining Food, Food Systems, and Food Studies,” a plenary session in which we, the authors, participated as part of the eighteenth annual assembly of the Canadian Association for Food Studies (CAFS) on May 31, 2023, at York University in Toronto. As the organizer and moderator of the session, David Szanto animated the discussion with four main questions: (1) What word/concept would you use to describe reimagined food systems? (2) What word/concept would you like to introduce into food studies discourse to prompt reimagined ways of doing academic food work? (3) How do you personally put that word/concept into practice in your work? (4) Concretely, what would need to happen for others to do the same? Consciously foregrounding the work of emerging scholars as new voices in the field, the plenary intended to move analytical attention “from what *is* to what *could be*” (Ryan & Szanto, 2023, p. 10).

After the conference, we were inspired to continue this collaborative speculation on the future of food studies. While we draw from our work in the territories of so-called Canada, we situate our studies of local, particular food practices in relation to global entanglements, including those related to climatic, political, and migratory upheavals. We also acknowledge that some of us participate in Indigenous/non-Indigenous collaboration, while others examine transnational movements of people and food. The notion of “Canadian” food studies should therefore be construed less as a set of currents or practices bounded by political definitions of nationhood, and more as emergent from the perspectives we collectively comprise,

and which are influenced by our diverse experiences within Canadian geographies. Here, we put forward a collective, polyvocal vision for how our field might contribute to a broader project of addressing the intertwined elements of contemporary “polycrisis” (Morin & Kern, 1999; Tooze, 2022), including climate emergencies, economic collapses, interpersonal violence, and other mutually influential issues. We do so with the recognition that these intersecting challenges require pluralistic responses if nourishing and locally meaningful relationships are to be rewoven in their place (James et al., 2021). Even as our overarching hope for reimagined food systems has brought us into dialogue, our ideas on the ways in which food studies ought to tackle ongoing challenges are not uniform. Nevertheless, we welcome both the alignments and the misalignments in our viewpoints, considering them to be a necessary part of making change (Rosol et al., 2022).

Working with a familiar, food-related format, we write our article as a recipe. At the same time, we recognise that recipes can embody colonial order and “naturalize ideologies of capitalist progress” through their “step-by-step,” prescriptive form (Yusupov et al., 2023, p. 75). Cognizant of this limitation, we include in our definition of *recipe* a variety of knowledge-sharing activities (e.g., community cookbooks, familial traditions, performance scripts, place-based teachings, philosophical explorations, speculative narratives, etc.) in addition to published, written instructions (Heldke, 1988; La communauté anicinabe de Lac Simon, 2023; Marinetti, 1932/2014; Martin, 2005; Tait Neufeld & Finnis, 2022). As such, we position recipes not as rigid guidelines for achieving predefined outcomes, but as creative models for generating improvisations.

We locate this perspective piece as a continuation of an evolving body of work in food studies in Canada, which has been shared in this journal, the annual meetings of CAFS, and elsewhere (Anderson et al., 2016;

Koç et al., 2022; Power & Koç, 2008). We begin with a brief overview of the ingredients that have come together to create food studies in Canada. Next, we propose some revisions in the margins of this recipe based on the work in which we are engaged as food scholars and practitioners. Finally, we consider next steps for reimagining food studies, and we invite readers to share

The existing recipe

Food studies explores foods and their pathways from lands and waters to mouths and bodies, and back again. Is it thus an exploration of relationships and systems, of material-discursive transformations and movements. In Canada, food studies emerged from academic and non-academic examinations in the mid-1970s that considered food's intersections with politics, economics, activism, folklore, and history (Koç et al., 2012). From there, it became an innovative and transdisciplinary field, growing to include multiple areas of knowledge and ways of knowing (Friedmann, 2012), as well as gradually increasing attention to the physical-sensorial matter of food and the visceral-affective-emotional responses that it therefore engenders in eaters (including those who study it) (Durocher & Knezevic, 2023). The Canadian Association for Food Studies (CAFS) was created in 2005 to bring into conversation scholars and practitioners from various academic and social backgrounds. Today, CAFS represents a vibrant group of knowledge-sharers across Canada and beyond (CAFS, n.d.). Acknowledging that the following list is not exhaustive, we outline key steps that come together to create a recipe for food studies in its current form.

in this exchange. Overall, we observe and participate in an unfinished trajectory that extends from previous questions on *why* food studies should exist (Power & Koç, 2008) and *what* food studies is (Brady et al., 2015) to consider more deeply *how* food studies could be done.

Step 1: Melt a cup of *transdisciplinarity*

As a *transdisciplinary* field, food studies crosses boundaries between different academic departments, and joins academic and non-academic spaces including civil society, government, and industry (Anderson et al., 2016; Levkoe, 2014; MacRae, 2023). In recent years, food studies has expanded beyond its initial leanings toward the social sciences to be enriched by greater participation from people working in scholarly, professional, and community-based roles in the arts, humanities, and natural sciences (Szanto et al., 2022). This cross-fertilization is reflected in the systems approach that is central to the field; rather than examining issues in isolation, researchers situate foods and food practices in relation to broader cultural and material contexts (Andrée et al., 2019). As Tompkins (2012) notes, “a shift to a framework we might call *critical eating studies*” (p. 2) may help to underscore the *foodness* of food studies, rather than a commodified or abstracted notion of food.

The plurality of food studies is not without its challenges. As scholarly institutions and journals are generally organized around disciplines, the pursuit of inter- and transdisciplinary work can bring risks for emerging scholars who are seeking to share research and to find intellectual homes (Johnston, 2008).

Nevertheless, CAFS continues to facilitate collaborations (including this very article), which demonstrate the value of cultivating community across divides.

Step 2: Stir in a tablespoon of *critique*

A common trope in the food studies literature positions food as a *critical* “lens” that researchers use to reveal the ecological, political, economic, and sociocultural dynamics that make up the world, particularly those arrangements that are informed by power. This perspective follows from traditions of critical theory in that it seeks to understand the histories and relationships that give rise to certain structures, rather than accepting current circumstances as given and unchangeable (Ruder et al., 2022; Speakman et al., 2022). Food studies is thus inherently a politicized field.

Accordingly, these “lenses” have also been turned back on research and researchers, as the field has become increasingly reflexive over the past two decades (Levkoe et al., 2020). Notably, food studies grapples with its participation in ongoing patterns of research extraction wherein colonial institutions benefit from the knowledge of Black, Indigenous, and racialized communities, particularly in settler colonial contexts like Canada. While the work of decolonization is unfinished, researchers and institutions are learning to make space for multiple ways of seeing through food (Deawuo & Classens, 2023; Mustapha & Masanganise, 2023; Settee & Shukla, 2020).

The reimaginings

The recipe above has resulted in a rich broth of food studies, even as the field continues to change. As emerging scholars, we see ourselves as part of this

Step 3: Heat to a simmering *transformation*

The critical perspective assesses the strengths and weaknesses of food systems not only for the sake of descriptive reflection, but also in the interest of identifying potential *transformations* (James et al., 2021). Paying attention to inequities in relation to ability, age, body size, citizenship, class, gender, race, sexuality, and other categories of distinction, researchers work to empower actors who have been historically marginalized by the dominant, global “food regime” (Friedmann & McMichael, 1989). More than an academic conversation, food studies intends to inspire and to put into action meaningful change on the ground (Andrée et al., 2018; Knezevic et al., 2017).

Much remains to be done. As became clear during the heart of the COVID pandemic alongside the ongoing killings of Black and Indigenous people, globally integrated supply chains are a fragile network on which to depend. Disruptions can shut down entire channels of food provisioning without recourse, affecting marginalized communities disproportionately (Lowitt et al., 2022; Weiler & Encalada Grez, 2022). Even as such routes have reopened, food systems remain poised to contribute to future emergencies as environmentally intensive practices erode the intertwined cultures and ecologies that nourish planetary resilience. Food studies’ commitment to innovative and transformative work is more urgent than ever (Dale et al., 2021; Taylor & Power, 2023).

simmering mixture, and we are indebted to the work that has come before us. Much like the organic substances of which food is made, the ingredients to

address problems in food systems have long been in existence. As opposed to writing new recipes for food studies on a blank page, our reimagining involves filling the margins of existing recipes with notes, sketches, and stains. In this process, we are inspired by decolonial practices of nurturing the vitality that exists within the margins of power (Escobar, 2020). To this end, we brought the following key concepts to the CAFS 2023 plenary table to inform our discussion: *infrastructure* (Hunt), *haunting* (Speakman), *messiness* (nasser), *facilitation* (Chartrand), *reciprocity* (Hamel-Charest), and *humility* (Hassen).

Here, we add these ideas to the recipe of food studies in Canada, offering examples from our previous and ongoing research practices that gesture toward the ways in which such work might take shape. Replacing the sequence of linear “steps” above, we revise the terminology to nonlinear “rounds”—invoking both cycles of iteration as well as the musical practice of multiple voices singing staggered, repeatable melodies. We also use mathematical symbols (i.e., x , y , z) in place of numerical values (i.e., 1, 2, 3) to indicate space for variability and substitution.

Step 1 Round x . Melt a cup of transdisciplinarity + a cup of *onto-epistemologies*

Commenting on the 2014 CAFS plenary, which provided inspiration for our 2023 panel, Brady, Levkoe, and Szanto (2015) call on food studies to incorporate approaches that are both “interdisciplinary” and “*inter-epistemological*” (p. 7). In other words, the flavour of the food studies broth can be deepened not only by adding various ingredients (disciplines), but also by adjusting the apparatuses and processes that are used for cooking (ontologies and epistemologies). Reflective of the increasing inclusion in food studies of the embodied

practices of artists, food provisioners, and natural scientists (Szanto et al., 2022), we advocate for an *onto-epistem-ological* approach (Barad, 2007, p. 185) that values material and nonhuman agency as components of research, and which recognizes the holistic and mutually constructive relationship among the processes of making knowledge (epistemology) and the outcomes of those processes (ontology) (Wilson, 2008).

Hunt and Speakman draw on theories of mediation to bring attention to the vital processes that animate the “middle spaces” of food systems. Informed by his experience in restaurant kitchens as a cook and researcher, Hunt notices how the frequently hostile social hierarchies that define these environments manifest in both the critical reviews that circulate around restaurants—such as the Michelin Guide—and the very material-sensorial *infrastructures* that constitute restaurant spaces—such as heat and cold, chemical cleaning agents, burns, and cuts (Pilcher, 2016). Conceiving of supermarkets as *haunted* spaces, Speakman observes that meat departments carefully manage the liminal forms of life that they sell (Radin & Kowal, 2017), mitigating the liveliness of their juices and flesh within plastic and styrofoam sarcophagi. She tunes into these material traces by learning from ethologists, botanists, and other practitioners who translate between human and more-than-human forms of communication (Despret, 2013; Gordon, 1997/2008; Marder, 2013).

As a collective, we suggest that the microbes in the air, chemicals in the water, and other aspects of surrounding environments contribute just as much to the broth’s taste as the ingredients and implements listed in the recipe. Importantly, diverse Indigenous food scholars and practitioners have long recognized the inseparability of epistemology and ontology as well as the animacy of place (Todd, 2016). When culturally appropriate, food studies can learn from these

approaches, which listen to and derive direction from the wisdom embedded in the material world (Morrison, 2011)

Step 2 Round y. Stir in a tablespoon of (*collaborative*) critique

Challenging the academic imperative to make unique contributions to scholarship as individuals, we are adamant that our insights are neither novel nor solely our own. We find that we cannot view food systems objectively from a detached lens because we are embedded within food networks as researchers and eaters (Haraway, 1988). The aromas of the food studies broth surround us and seep into our pores, and our perspectives emerge from these places.

nasser and Chartrand conduct research through embodied encounters with food spaces and the visceral activities therein. By meeting collaborators “where they were at” in literal and figurative senses, nasser (2022) supported the *messiness* of participant centred research in her work on the performance of diverse food cultures in Little Burgundy (a predominantly Black neighbourhood of Montréal). As opposed to following a prefabricated plan, she co-created a research process alongside racialized residents, which listened to the agency that plants expressed in garden plots of culturally and racially appropriate foods. Likewise, Chartrand considers herself to be a *facilitator* of knowledge in their academic work; she cultivates spaces for knowledge sharing, using food as a tool for lifelong learning. While exploring questions in their writing like the divisions between “urban” and “traditional” expressions of Métis identity (Coulthard, 2014), she expands on such themes by learning Indigenous culinary practices to enact extensions of harvesting practices in kitchens.

Together, we argue that we must re-envision our identities as researchers if we are to *collaborate* with diverse knowledge. In short, we support an expansion of “critical” research that decentres Western modes of critical theory even as these sources of scholarship are not displaced entirely (Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006). At times, this extension of the field may include reciprocal exchanges with expertise on the edges of academic traditions, like a recipe blog that incorporates user feedback; at other times, it may involve allowing these teachings to flourish outside of the academy, like a recipe collection passed through generations of people who learn modifications by cooking together.

Step 3 Round z. Heat to a simmering \wedge *mutual* transformation

When we work from the middle of the times and places in which we are situated, rather than imagining that we can critique food systems from the outside, we also surrender control over the findings and implications of our research. Just as we shape ingredients when we cook with them, ingredients *mutually* shape us when we spoon them as broth into our mouths. While food studies remains committed to building better food systems, and the urgency of this task mounts, our discussions mirror a growing embrace of uncertainty in the field. Instead of setting out a singular pathway based on a unified vision of a food system pre- and post-transformation, we see multiple versions of “better food systems” as moving targets that may not be agreed upon (Hammelman et al., 2020; Rosol et al., 2022).

Hamel-Charest and Hassen take direction on the composition of nourishing food systems from the expertise of the communities with which they interact. Hamel-Charest practiced knowledge *reciprocity* with the Anicinabe community of Lac Simon (Québec), co-creating a participatory book on the culinary heritage of

the community. The process respected the community’s modalities of knowledge transmission via the presentation of narrative, family memories, and an emphasis on experiences, rather than specific parameters (e.g., ingredient quantities, cooking times, etc.) (La communauté anicinabe de Lac Simon, 2023). Also favouring *humility* over rigid guidelines as an approach to understanding “healthy eating” in context, Hassen (2023) used in-depth interviews to unveil the under-acknowledged care work that teachers perform to address students’ food needs in British Columbia.

In contrast to the experiences that are regrettably common in academia as an industry (especially for emerging scholars) (Burch et al., 2023), we appreciated the plenary as a space that modelled generous exchange without a sense of competition, as in the cases of a dinner party conversation or a recipe exchange. Our interactions as panelists inspired our collaboration on this article, as we wanted to continue to learn about food systems from one another. In this way, we have

intended, through our work here, to enact together the durational relationships of trust that we see as foundational to reimagined food studies.

Round xyz...: Taste for seasoning and *adjust*

This recipe is not a finished product. As we have articulated, the task of reimagining food studies cannot be reduced to a set of prescriptive instructions. Rather than encouraging readers to follow our recipe directly, we invite you to sample, to *adjust*, to iterate, and to improve. Your improvisations might take form as a research or methods article, a video post to a CAFS social media page, a panel discussion at a future food studies conference, or they may spill into other media that express experiences beyond words (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).

Figure 1: Graphic interpretation of our reimagined recipe (by Raihan Hassen)

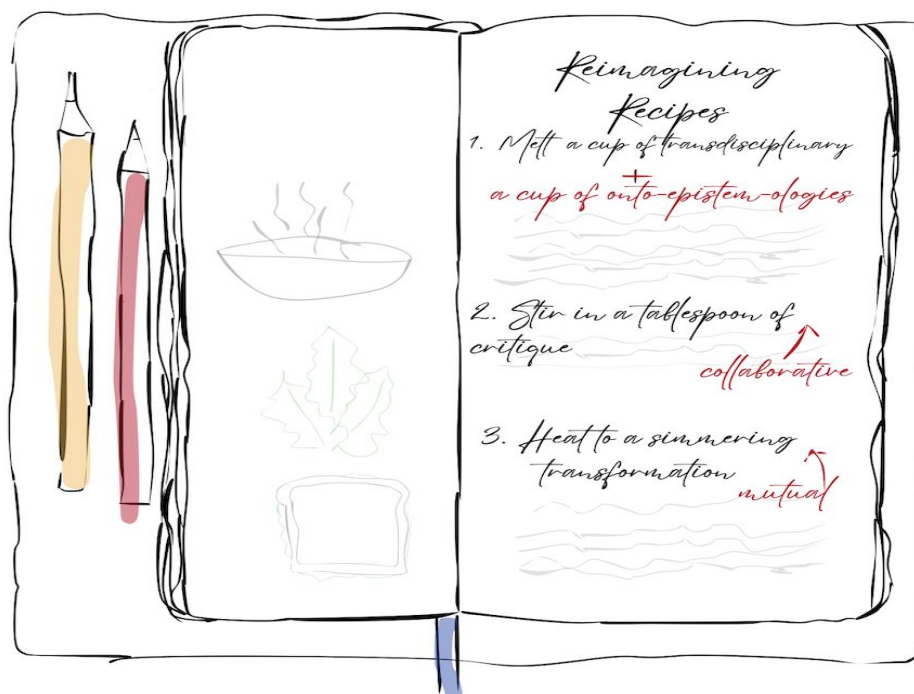
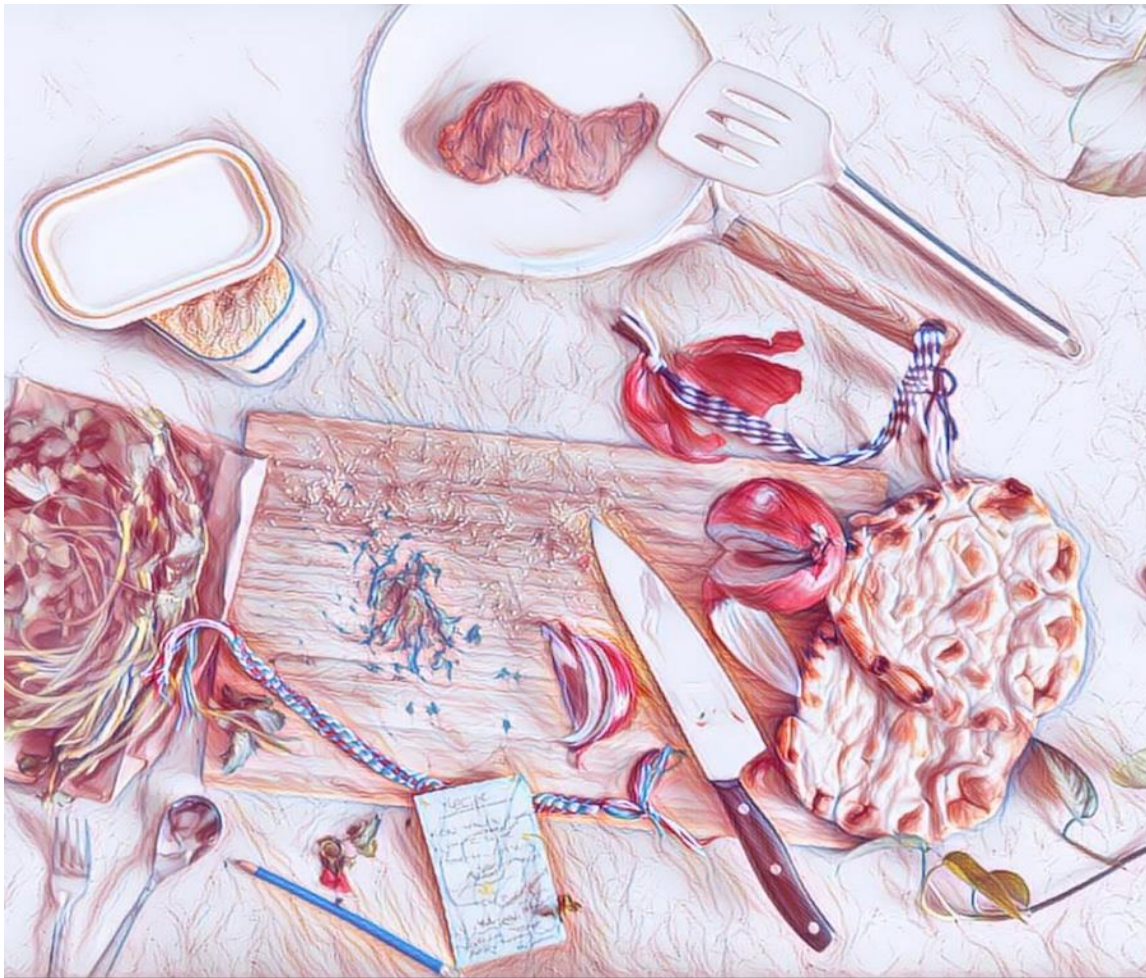


Figure 2: Photographic interpretation of our reimagined recipe (by Stephanie Chartrand)



Conclusion

Currently, the institutional contexts in which food studies are situated pose challenges to the reimaginings we have presented in this article. Like restaurant critics who assess the dishes set on the table in front of them, the reviewers and hiring committees of the academic world are often encouraged to limit their evaluations to final products. The success of academic fields therefore tends to focus on measures of growing research *outputs*, including large numbers of dedicated journals, high

student enrolment in academic departments, and increased funding for new scholarly positions (Berg & Seeber, 2016). We have recommended instead that the quality of food studies in Canada should be considered in relation to improving elements of research *practice*. We therefore call for further efforts to increase the accessibility of knowledge mobilization initiatives (Knezevic et al., 2023), to activate greater student engagement in campus food systems (Classens et al.,

2023), and to provide support for partnerships with groups outside of academia—particularly with communities affected disproportionately by the ongoing oppressions of ableism, colonialism, heteropatriarchy, and white supremacy (Kepkiewicz et al., 2023). We believe that, when enacted to address either polycrises or their more granular challenges, such approaches to food studies may offer their practitioners and their beneficiaries increased equity in both process and product.

In its attention to process and product, our recipe for reimagined food studies is akin to folkloric recipes for “stone soup” (Brown, 1947). In the tale’s various versions, a group of residents are initially unwilling to share food with a collection of visitors passing through their town. As the visitors place a purportedly magic stone inside a pot of water and begin to heat the concoction, however, the residents gradually contribute supplemental ingredients until a delicious result is achieved—one that is then shared with everyone. Community groups and scholars have used the story as an analogy for the relational principles of community

organizing, wherein individuals support each other by offering available materials and skills to create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts (Barnett, 2022; Stone Soup Network, n.d.).

To enrich the broth of food studies in Canada, we call on you, our neighbours in and beyond the CAFS network to consider nourishing elements that you might be able to contribute. Do you, for instance, have access to pantries and cellars (e.g., institutional funding), meals-on-wheels vehicles (e.g., communication platforms), and/or inventory tools, cleaning supplies, and kitchen playlists (e.g., administrative/affective labour)? Whether you are working with gallons or litres, pinches or drams, we urge you to share the tools at your disposal to welcome diverse visitors and to create a more open, collective kitchen. Just as this article was inspired by a sort of recipe-exchange plenary session at a food studies conference, so might future iterations be engendered in kitchens, auditoriums, fields, or classrooms. Together, we hope that we can reimagine food studies in Canada as a space where many cooks *don’t* spoil the broth.

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Laurence Hamel-Charest holds a PhD in sociocultural anthropology from the Université de Montréal. She is currently a postdoctoral fellow at the Department of Urban and Tourism Studies at Université du Québec à Montréal. Her recent work has focused on Indigenous food cultures in Canada and Quebec from a variety of perspectives, including Indigenous restaurants, food adaptation strategies, and food colonialism. She employs collaborative and participatory methods and views her approach as part of the decolonization of research.

Raihan Hassen is a dietitian of primarily Ethiopian ancestry born and raised on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territories of the x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səlliwətaʔl (Tsleil-Waututh) nations, colonially known as Vancouver, British Columbia. Raihan has experience working in food security, public health, and research focussed on food access and school food programs in BC.

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