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Field Report

Between community and contempt: Narratives of carceral food provisioning

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Abstract

This narrative piece presents eight vignettes from formerly incarcerated individuals, reflecting on their experiences of food and food provisioning within federal prisons in Canada. The stories and insights shed light on the negotiation and dynamic interplay between the imposition of unjust policies and the everyday creativity and persistence of those subject to its harmful carceral logic. In reading these vignettes we can also see how one might create greater moments of freedom and autonomy for incarcerated individuals, as part of a broader project of dismantling and re-imagining responses to harm and trauma.

Keywords: Canadian prisons; carceral food systems; prison food

Résumé

Cet article narratif présente huit portraits d'anciens détenus, qui témoignent de leur expérience de l'alimentation et de l'approvisionnement alimentaire dans des prisons fédérales canadiennes. Leurs récits et leurs réflexions mettent en lumière la négociation et l'interaction dynamique entre l'imposition de politiques injustes et la créativité et la ténacité quotidiennes de ceux qui sont soumis à la logique carcérale toxique. En lisant ces portraits, nous pouvons aussi voir comment il est possible de créer de plus importants moments de liberté et d'autonomie pour les personnes incarcérées, dans le cadre d'un projet plus vaste de démantèlement et de reconception des réponses aux fautes et aux traumatismes.

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Introduction

It should come as no surprise that food in Canadian prisons is horrible. Over the past ten years, numerous media exposés on prison food have noted the small portions as well as the unappetizing dishes of bland, carbohydrate-rich, high sodium foods served to those in prison (CBC News, 2016; Clancy, 2015; Harris, 2017, 2019; Mintz, 2016; National Post, 2017). Several academic articles have also pointed to the unhealthy, often unpalatable food in prison as yet another illustration of the unjust and dehumanizing conditions in Canadian prisons (Brazeau, 2020; Johnson et al., 2018; Struthers Monford, 2022; Wilson, 2022, 2023). As noted by the Office of the Correctional Investigator (2018), food-related grievances are common in federal prisons, and, in one case at Saskatchewan Penitentiary, those grievances boiled over into a 2014 riot in which one person died. At the same time, food also holds immense importance and significance within the carceral context as a source of community, identity, resistance, and solidarity (De Graaf & Kilty, 2016; Evans & House, 2024; Godderis, 2006; Smoyer 2014, 2015; Stearns, 2019).

Against this backdrop, this field report presents eight vignettes from formerly incarcerated people, discussing their experiences of food and food systems in federal prisons in Canada. It is part of a larger project exploring carceral food systems in Canada, seeking to surface areas of tension, possibility, and leverage. What was of particular interest in this research was understanding the mechanics, techniques, and modalities through which food is used as a tool of control, contestation, and transformation within federal prisons in Canada. These vignettes highlight the complex and, at times, contradictory meanings of food within prisons. As is clear from the literature on food in prison, alongside the violence and oppression enacted through food there are also moments of joy, solidarity, and possibility (Brisman, 2008; Einat & Davidian, 2018; Smith, 2002; Wilson, 2023). In these vignettes, participants speak to different models of food service: cafeteria or line food, which are typical of medium- and maximum-security prisons, and grocery (officially called Small Group Meal Preparation) in minimum-security institutions, where incarcerated individuals purchase food items to prepare in shared kitchen facilities. They also reference different elements of carceral food systems, including the food service, the canteen, working in food services, and gardening, as well as food-based socials and educational programming.

The stories and insights of formerly incarcerated people shed light on the negotiations and dynamic interplay between the imposition of unjust policies and the everyday creativity and persistence of those subject to the prison's carceral logic. Rather than a standard research article that foregrounds the analysis and perspective of the researcher, I utilize the technique of composite narratives to directly centre and foreground the perspectives and words of participants. Following the presentation of the vignettes, I share some of my own reflections on how I have come to understand carceral food systems, mirroring the narrative style of the vignettes. As a scholar committed to prison abolition, I find these vignettes offer insight into how one might create greater moments of freedom and autonomy for incarcerated individuals as part of a broader project of dismantling and re-imagining responses to harm and trauma.

Methods

The broader research project involved a total of twenty-two semi-structured interviews, including eleven with formerly incarcerated individuals and eleven with advocates and allies. The focus of this article was on the eleven interviews with formerly incarcerated people. Each interview was between forty-five and ninety minutes long and was conducted over Zoom. They took place during the spring and summer of 2022, when public health restrictions related to the pandemic made in-person interviews challenging. This article focuses on interviews with formerly incarcerated individuals, each of whom had been incarcerated within the previous ten years. Participants were primarily recruited through an earlier online survey, which asked individuals if they would be willing to participate in a subsequent interview. Two additional participants were identified through snowball sampling[1]. Eight participants were men, three were women, and all had been incarcerated at a federal prison. The interviews were organized primarily around broad questions that invited the participant to respond in a variety of ways. Questions included:

- What was your experience of food in prison; how would you describe the state of food in federal prisons today?
- During your time inside, did you notice changes to the quality or quantity of food, or changes in policies in relation to food?
- How would you say food impacted or shaped the overall experience of being in prison?

Participants would then raise specific issues or share a particular story, and the discussion would evolve from there.

A total of eight vignettes were crafted from these interviews, highlighting the experiences and perspectives of participants. While I did not have a predetermined number of vignettes I was seeking, eight transcripts lent themselves well to this method in that their answers to individual questions were quite lengthy, and there were clear connections and common themes across those individual answers. In these vignettes, participants recount not only their experiences with food and food systems within prison, but they also share their reflections on the meaning and role of food behind bars. Overall, the intent is to allow formerly incarcerated individuals to speak for themselves and to centre their own analysis of their lived experience.

In crafting these vignettes, I draw on the practice of composite narratives, where quotes from either multiple interviews or multiple participants are woven together to build a single narrative (Johnston, 2024; Willis, 2019). As Johnston (2024) explains:

> creating the composite narrative involves knitting the participants' words together to create a story, or "narrative," that communicates the research finding that was drawn from the data. The title "composite narratives" refers to the many bits of data that are put together to compose a story. (p. 2)

While this may seem an unconventional method through which to communicate research findings, composite narratives offer an opportunity to "foreground the voice of the participants" (Johnston, 2024, p. 2). Composite narratives can also have the benefit of protecting participant confidentiality and capturing the "essence" of an experience or perspective (Willis, 2019, p. 472). In the context of research into carceral food systems, I see it as an important way to honour and value the perspectives of those with lived

[1] The Saint Paul University Research Ethics Board granted approval for this research.

experience of incarceration. As Piché and Walby (2018) assert, starting from, and centering, the standpoints of incarcerated individuals offer a powerful tool through which to counter and disrupt dominant framings of incarceration and punishment. Compiling the interview responses into a more cohesive narrative allows for a better appreciation and understanding of participants' overall impressions of, and associations with, food rather than just individual snippets on particular topics.

In this case, each vignette draws on direct quotes from the same participant. Some participants wished to have their real names used; others wanted to remain anonymous, and thus a pseudonym was assigned by the researcher. The process of crafting the narratives involved successive readings of each transcript to identify core themes within each, as well as longer passages where participants articulated a clear argument or shared a particularly illustrative example. After direct quotes were identified from the transcripts, they were then copyedited with some additional minor modifications or re-structuring of the text to ensure clarity and narrative flow. Participants were sent a copy of their narrative and given an opportunity to make any edits or clarifications. As both Willis (2019) and Johnston et al. (2023) note, the exclusive use of direct quotes brings an added layer of transparency and rigour to the use of composite narratives. While Willis (2019) reflects that the use of composite narratives requires a certain degree of faith on the part of the reader that the researcher has exercised good judgement in crafting the narratives, they conclude that such faith is required with any form of qualitative analysis.

It should be noted that the demographic profile of the interview participants is not reflective of the broader demographic profile of the incarcerated population. While 32% percent of the federally incarcerated population is Indigenous (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2023) and 9.2% is Black (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2022), nine out of the eleven interview participants were white, and none were Indigenous. This may be explained in one of two ways. One is that some statistics indicate the demographics of federally incarcerated individuals is not equally distributed across the country. Additional recruitment efforts for the original survey (which generated many of the interview participants) focused on halfway houses in Ottawa. Ontario has a higher percentage of Black incarcerated individuals, and a lower percentage of Indigenous incarcerated individuals (Wanamaker & Chadwick, 2023; Zinger, 2017). This may explain the relative overrepresentation of racialized participants and the underrepresentation of Indigenous participants (compared to the national statistics). The second possible explanation may be that white individuals, even those who are incarcerated, experience a level of privilege compared to their racialized and Indigenous counterparts, and thus may have felt more comfortable agreeing to participate in research about their experiences of incarceration. Their individual circumstances may also have been more stable, giving them the option of taking the time to participate in this research.

The vignettes

Randy: "The whole building doesn't give a damn if you die from it"

There is a canteen in federal prisons where you can buy grocery-type foods. You can buy basmati rice, chicken balls, not anything with bones, but they have chicken strips, chicken burgers, etc. But the ironic thing is, it's raw food. They pay fifteen bucks or so for a box of popcorn chicken and then, on the unit, to cook it, the only thing you have is an industrial microwave and a toaster. You have to put the chicken in the microwave for two minutes to thaw it out and then flip it over and over again in the toaster for about an hour, just to cook it. When it's eaten it is probably not even fully cooked. How does this even make sense, how does this make the canteen list? A lot of stuff seems to be just blatant disregard. It's disregard when they have these things on the list. It's just a smack in the face like, yeah, you guys will figure it out.

How are they even allowed to put that on the list? The nutritionist, even the kitchen staff, should be saying, hey, you can't sell them raw food. The whole building doesn't give a damn if you die from it. It's not okay. Yeah, there's chips and pop and bars in there, but people are actually living off of the canteen.

I remember times where I would be writing repeated proposals, every three months or so, saying, here I am, again, requesting an air fryer for the unit, so that we can cook the raw chicken that you guys are serving us on the canteen. And then, you get into the inmate committee meetings with the upper management. They say, you guys can make a list of things you want to discuss and then we'll send you back the list before we go to the meeting. So, the day before the meeting they send us a list: this is what we're discussing, we're not discussing anything else, and none of the things we want to discuss are on that list. So, there's kind of no point to us even being here.

Alison: "It was almost like the food was poison"

The real problem I saw is that the food is not structured in a way that's conducive to healthy environments. I just couldn't believe how toxic food in the penal system was. For some girls, there's so much trauma. A part of being so traumatized is that you crave sugars and carbohydrates. Some of the women live on that, it was almost like the food was poison. When you're having that type of diet, there's a lot of inflammation going on in your system, certain areas of the brain, and I think that's where a lot of the violence came out. I had never seen in my life someone getting stabbed for a piece of cake. Any relationship, whether it's with food or humans, isn't going to be healthy unless you get at either the trauma or chronic inflammation going on in their systems. For a little over a year, I put in daily requests to speak to a counselor, for trauma, and I never got to. I'm not criticizing the one psychologist, because I think she probably had 200 requests a day.

In prison, there's a constant reminder that you're not worthy of anything. Yes, some of the deeds they did to get in there are bad, but we're not bad people, not everyone. There's just no dignity or decency afforded to people. They used to have barbecues at the houses, and everyone loved it. But they took them away because a citizen complained that inmates shouldn't have access to that. I couldn't believe it. Why would Corrections bow down to someone who complained, like surely there's not 100,000 people complaining about barbecues? Who cares!

Food, if it was done right, would build a healthy community. Food is one thing that everyone was into. Everyone loved when we would get that box of juice or a bag of chips from the religious groups, it's huge. When you're in there, you're just constantly told by the staff that you are kind of subhuman. I used to argue with some of the staff because, what we did, it's not the essence of who we are. And then, you find these ladies that treat you with dignity and respect, plus give you food, like treats. You felt cared for, and that built community.

In minimum, we started to have potlucks, and every pod would get together and bring food and we'd all sit together and eat. It's so hard to be away from your family, it was just so hard and depressing. But I remember those two or three times where I was able to tuck that to the back of my mind, were events around food, like this potluck. There could be so much healing around food events, it could be extremely cathartic.

Daniel: "It's fucking degrading what they're serving people; it's not okay"

Food is central to how people live their lives. It's probably one of the most important things; it drives conflict, it drives friendships, it drives transactions, it's a community builder. They need to care; it feels like they don't care. I feel like they're almost like inviting diabetes and malnutrition. They should make whoever's approving these things eat that menu for two months. Have a panel of regular people that need to eat that for two months. Or tell the guards they're not allowed to bring in outside food, that they have to eat it. It's fucking degrading what they're serving people; it's not okay. Some people don't even eat the institution-provided food, they buy from the canteen, or they purchase food from people that work in the kitchen, or they steal it through some means.

I had a garden; it was lot of fun. The setup wasn't great because you can't start seeds indoors, so everything comes late in the season. They give you a plot of land where the quality of the earth is crap, and they convince you to buy an expensive fertilizer. And then, they send the guy to drive the tractor to till it, but he has no idea what he's doing, and then they don't even provide appropriate water. Was it fun? Yeah. Did it provide me a lot of nutrition? No, it's more a hobby than something reliable.

It's super important to get training and work experience, but at the end of the day, it's a job. A lot of these guys that are in there, they're going to need a job that allows them to provide for themselves, what with housing costs and stuff. Is kitchen work the right kind of training? I don't think so. If you want to keep people away from crime, you have to look at the social determinants and that's poverty, being one. I bartended, I worked in kitchens, and you make close to poverty wages in the kitchen. So, it's probably not the primary job for people upon release.

Sandra: "We're all kind of the same, but we have different access to resources and what we can provide for ourselves"

Food was pretty important. People loved to cook their own ethnic dishes, their favorite recipes from home, or people would make birthday cakes. What I saw, food actually did a lot of good, it brought people together in a positive way.

When you're just hanging out with people in the house all the time, or outside, food was the one thing that brought everyone together. People would talk about their insecurities about leaving or their anxieties. It just kind of made everyone the same; it didn't matter how long you were in for and where you were from. It just brought harmony.

In prison, I would melt different things that I had and put it on popcorn, like peanut butter and jam or peanut butter and honey. I would buy mac and cheese from the canteen and then put the cheese sauce on the popcorn. It actually helped me kind of get through it, by creating and finding purpose from inside.

Some of the changes that I want to see are motivated by what I went through. The costs, not just of people's time, but the financial cost, it's an immense waste. When I was in prison, it cost $230,000 to keep a woman in prison per year. What does that rehabilitate? Does that enhance her life in any way? No. You can still make someone learn a lesson or even if it's not about someone learning a lesson, because a lot of people commit crimes just to survive or mental illness or whatever, right? There so are so many alternatives. I also want to see changes in sentencing and different alternatives than sentencing, and also removing the time that it takes to get a pardon after your sentence is done.

John: "Just feed us properly and let us see our family"

Currently, the food is atrocious. They use the chill and serve method where everything is made in a different institution, put into a bag and frozen, sent to various institutions, and then thawed by putting the bag in a pot of boiling water, and then served on to the trays. So, it's basically slop. Every meal is pretty much different kinds of slop, different colors of slop.

Whether or not we're prisoners, we still have a right to have quality food, a standard of living, and I don't think that's being met. It was the same government who made the same changes to the veterans' hospitals and the veteran centers, who were being forced to eat the same food. They protested so venomously that they changed back to the old system. But because we're prisoners, we don't hold those same rights or favor with the community, so we're maintained on this slop system.

There used to be jobs in the prison system that were transferable to the community, whether it be food prep, line cook jobs, food management jobs. All of those jobs are gone. There's nothing left. Those jobs are no longer transferred into the community when a guy is released. I think it puts them at a disadvantage and a greater possibility to be brought back to the prison system.

The canteen is extremely important to people, especially now because of the quality of the food, they need to have an outlet where they can go and get something. When they can't eat what they have been served, or don't even want to look at what they have been served, they have the option to go to the canteen. But the problem with the canteen is the options are usually pop and chips, chocolate bars, and those quick grab junk food things that are unhealthy. You've often got guys who are spending their entire pay on junk food, just so they have something to eat, rather than the line food. What's the solution? Certainly, it would be better if there were healthier things at the canteen, but then we'd need permission from the institution to have a way to cook it or reheat it.

I've been on the inmate committee where we've protested. There were food protests, where people wouldn't eat, or they'd throw their food away in disgust. There were many, many incidents of that. We would continuously address the kitchen staff and try to work with them, to have them go to the higher ups. The person that I was working with within the maximum at the time, she was trying her hardest. She was a chef herself, she understood about the food, about the meal portions. She was trying very hard, to try to make the changes that she could, but there was such a resistance with the higher ups. There was just not a lot that she could do.

One of my proudest moments of doing my time was probably some thirty odd years ago where I had the opportunity to cook for a social group that had come into the institution. I was given thanks by the people when they were leaving, that they appreciated the quality of the food that they were getting. And for me, as a young man, the fact that I was able to cook on a level that is appreciated by people in the community, it rests with me for my entire life. I don't think it's any different with anybody else, if they're able to do something and do something well, they're able to carry that through to not only their families, but their communities, and make life better for everybody, not just themselves.

Jose: "We don't even know what we are eating"

When you look at the menu, it's normally well written. Okay, a beef stew with vegetables, after we'll have mashed potatoes, a glass of juice, the condiments, etc. It's certainly all well-detailed, but it's not representative of my actual experience. The food was not edible. Food was a way for them to wash their hands of us, to keep us in survival mode. It's as if they were saying, we have a necessary evil, which is to feed you, so here it is, figure it out between yourselves, like cattle. That's kind of how I see it. How they serve us, how the food gets there, how they don't care, etc.... But you're hungry, so you're going to eat it anyway.

Yes, we can use food to bring change. It's probably a big source of frustration that would go away. When I go to my aunt's or grandma's or I eat well somewhere, you come out of a good restaurant, you're happy. If I ate well today, it's reflected in my mood. So, the mood of prisoners, and of this whole community, I imagine we could bring more smiles, and a slightly fuller belly. You think better, you work better on your correctional plan, you're more open to hearing your correctional officer give you avenues of research to work on, you're more capable, etc. A child who goes to school on an empty stomach, who hasn't had time to eat, versus someone who has a full stomach, it's so different. So, it's going to have an impact.

In prison, it's not like you sit down and think "I eat well here, like in a restaurant, I'm going to stay longer." Everyone wants to be free. But some people, if you show them more misery, they don't see an end. They can't see the end of it, they say, "I don't have hope for the future, I don't trust the government, I don't trust society, I don't trust anything."

Keven: "I just couldn't do it"

When it comes to safety, they [CSC] are number one. They're very adamant about people wearing safety gear, dressing up in the white outfits. But the food is horrible, you can't make it any better. You put the ingredients in, you turn the machine on, the machine boils it up to a certain temperature, then it shuts down and you empty it out and you put in into bags and then the bags are destined to other jails. It looks like baby food, it was terrible. Everything in me as a cook, I got my Red Seal through the prison system, and everything in me as a chef, I just didn't feel right as a person working there, knowing that food was going out to hundreds of people who are eating it.

I just couldn't do it, I had to quit working there. I was penalized for it too, but I just couldn't do it. When I explained to the board about my passion for food and nutrition and that I couldn't work there, based on the fact that you're making slop to give people, everybody seemed to know what I was talking about and seemed to agree with me. But nobody's willing to do anything or make any changes. I know that they changed it to the cold kitchen, so they can certainly change it back.

Before, it was a CORCAN-run business where everybody could get their first-year Red Seal. After your first year of Red Seal, then you go out into the community, and then you could apply to go to college. It was a really good system. All the skills that you had from the street, you could put them into something very creative and constructive in the kitchen. You're ordering food, you're placing stuff, you have a commitment to make, you have deadlines, etc. It's not completely the same, but when you do something systematically for fifteen years and you're able to put that into something constructive, it was very helpful for me, it got me through. I was in prison when Harper took the system out, and I had to pay for a chef to come in and finish off my Red Seal.

The culinary arts program was allocated a certain amount of funds to buy foods that they teach people to make. So, you're not just making prison food, you're actually in the classroom learning how to make real food. Most people from culinary arts will start working in the kitchen and they would do the socials. They would make these nice extravagant dishes and the families would be all wowed. Then, once a month, say we're on the eggs Benedict module in culinary arts, we'd say okay, well we're just going make it for the whole jail. So, the whole class would get up early in the morning and everybody would come in and be like, this is great! It was a good experience and good thing.

I was in a class with nine other people and out of nine people, four people are in the restaurant industry now. They didn't get the Red Seal, but they did get the first part, and they maintained it and went to work in the restaurant industry.

Rachel: "There just shouldn't be so many rules around food, they're just arbitrary"

I worked in food services for most of the time I was there. Mostly, I was working with dry goods, so there'd be trucks coming every other day for all the deliveries of different items. We'd help do inventory every month, and we'd distribute the groceries once a week. We weighed the food and I learned how to butcher and slice meat, stock everything, keep everything clean, etc.

In general, the food services staff were good; they cared about the prisoners, and they wanted to make sure that we had as much as we could, on the small budget. At Christmas they would go and buy a bunch of turkeys for everyone and make it as low as possible so that we could afford them. They would listen to recommendations from prisoners to put different items, so there was something for different cultural backgrounds and food preferences, and making sure there was gluten free options, vegetarian options, halal, that kind of thing.

I really enjoyed working there during my time in prison. We could play music, and it wasn't very often that security staff came through that building. The cooks and the outside staff were really friendly and easy-going. They let us snack on things and take items that were going to go bad, or they would give us things in advance. CSC wasn't happy about that, and we had to hide that from the warden and administrative staff. Sometimes we were accused of stealing things, even though that wasn't the case.

For all humans, around the world and throughout history, food and drink is a way of connecting and socializing and celebrating, building relationships. All of that continues in prison. I was in a great house, and we would throw together special meals, we cooked dinners together, we shared our food. We would celebrate people's birthdays, any special event. If somebody was getting a transfer or they were getting parole, or it was stat release, we'd have a goodbye dinner.

Within a living unit it's okay to share food and eat together, but there was a rule about not sharing outside of your unit. So, many times, my friends and I would get charges just for having a meal together or giving somebody who had just arrived a little care package. Sometimes the guards would break up those kinds of dinners, they'll come in and seize all the food. I was harassed once on Thanksgiving. We were eating outside at a table and everyone brought their food, which is supposed to be allowed. But often, if you're enjoying yourself the guards don't like it, they just want you to be miserable, so they'll come and harass us to break it up.

There's literature about how people build a kind of family in women's prisons, but I'm critical of that idea because it's this heteronormative family where there's different gender roles and that's not my experience. But we do treat each other like family, and our friends are our family in there. We eat together and if things aren't going well, if there's arguments or whatever, we respect each other's space, and we'd take turns in the kitchen and cleaning up.

We just made the most of it. We made cakes for each other and special treats and shared recipes and food items, that kind of thing. I think food was important for relationship building, despite the problems. I see them as acts of resistance, when we're going against the institutional policies that are arbitrary and punitive, where you're not allowed to go into somebody else's living unit and share food.

Reflection

The stories and experiences of the eight participants highlighted in these vignettes are unique; yet, when read together, I see several emerging points of consensus. Multiple participants spoke of the importance of dignity, and how the current structure and policy environment in relation to food run counter to this principle. The examples of using food to build community were often in direct opposition to official prison policy. Participants re-affirmed that incarcerated individuals have the right to dignity and human decency, and that this includes not only access to healthy, sustaining, and nutritious foods, but also the freedom to participate in, or have a say in, the organization of their food provisioning. Something as simple as having the freedom to share food with people outside of your living unit can have a meaningful impact on one's experience of prison. I see this as an important nuance. Investigating carceral food systems is not just about improving the experience of prison. Rather, an analysis of food can lead to questions about the very nature of prisons and the ways in which society perceives incarcerated people.

Several vignettes also offered glimpses into how food can be, or could be, transformative within the carceral context. Whether through proposals for increased training and capacity-building around cooking and food preparation, or expanded opportunities to build relationships and a sense of community through the sharing of food, participants offered tangible insight into how food can break down barriers and empower, both individually and collectively. As Rachel noted, food was a tool of relationship-building, but also a tool of resistance. The examples included in the vignettes speak to transformation at largely the individual or community levels, rather than structural or systemic transformation. Clearly, prisons will not be abolished or transformed through additional culinary training or improved canteen options, but I would argue that any

opportunity to expand the autonomy and liberty of incarcerated individuals moves us toward the possibility for such larger-scale change.

There were also differences in perspective and in the meanings drawn from food and food-related activities. For instance, Keven believed in the importance and value of culinary arts training and work experience in the kitchens, while Daniel questioned whether this was the most appropriate job training for those needing to rebuild their lives upon release from prison. While Alison saw food through the lens of trauma, Rachel discussed it more in terms of community and resistance. This serves as a reminder that food and the activities surrounding it are not universally experienced or understood in the same ways. Given the scope and scale of injustices within carceral systems, it can feel important, perhaps crucial even, to make decisive statements regarding current realities and possible paths moving forward. However, the complexities and nuances remain, and we should not overlook them in our haste to pass judgement.

My own understanding of the meaning of food within prisons has deepened considerably over the course of the broader research project. I had been engaged in food systems and food movement research for some time, and outside of academia I had participated in or supported abolition and prisoner justice causes, but I hadn't really connected the two. As I began to explore the interconnections between food and prisons, it started me down a path of seeking to understanding not only the experience and role of food in prisons, but also how the concept of carceral food systems could help to articulate a shared project of food systems liberation and prison abolition.

I come to this work without any firsthand experience within carceral systems, thus the knowledge shared with me by research participants and collaborators (both those with lived experience and allies engaged in direct support work) has been invaluable. I have deeply benefited from their generosity in sharing stories, explaining the inner workings of prison food service, and correcting me when I had incorrect or incomplete information.

As someone who sees their research as one of many tools through which to work towards collective liberation, a key component of which is prison abolition, these vignettes help me to better understand the pockets of possibility within prisons, where there might be room to maneuver and contest unfair treatment. Presenting the words of participants in longer narratives allowed me to foreground their own analyses and insights, instead of my own. We can build on the insights of current and formerly incarcerated folks to map out a path where both incarcerated individuals, and their allies, can and are using food as a tool to prefigure a world beyond incarceration and to challenge the many existing harms of carceral logics.

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