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Field Notes

Protest pizzas: Resisting carcerality with storytelling, community building, and an array of toppings

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Abstract

How and when can pizza be a protest? The potentials of food-in-action for cultural resurgence and community building amongst criminalized peoples are significant. That being said, attention to the ways carceral logics divide and isolate us is needed to avoid romanticizing food-based research and programming and perpetuating harmful power structures within and beyond prison walls. In a nutshell, activist research in and against carceral contexts is complicated, and adding food can make it even messier. Thankfully, getting our hands dirty and later cleaning up together after are important processes across food justice contexts. Based around a recent pizza party held as part of my ongoing doctoral Participatory Action Research, these notes from the field (or, in this case, the community kitchen) will trace the complexities of community building through cooking circles. I will share possibilities of sharing food as a radical act and the sticky parts of anti-carceral research and community organizing. Using a day spent with my co-researchers—women on parole—rolling out dough, building our pizzas, and dreaming the next phases of this project, I will share reflections on how the making and sharing of food is an apt site for disruption and resistance, the importance of centering the wisdom of people with lived and living experience and expertise of incarceration (while doing the ongoing work to confront power hierarchies and mitigate the potentials for harm), and how food justice can help harness the privilege of academic research to support resistance against the carceral state.

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Résumé

Comment et quand la pizza peut-elle être une protestation ? La « nourriture en action » a un potentiel significatif pour susciter la résurgence culturelle et la construction de communauté chez les personnes criminalisées. Cela dit, il est nécessaire de prêter attention à la manière dont les logiques carcérales nous divisent et nous isolent afin d'éviter de romancer la recherche et la planification basées sur l'alimentation et de perpétuer des structures de pouvoir néfastes à l'intérieur et au-delà des murs de la prison. En bref, la recherche militante dans et contre les contextes carcéraux est compliquée, et l'ajout de nourriture peut rendre cela encore plus embrouillé. Heureusement, se salir les mains et ensuite nettoyer ensemble sont des processus importants dans tous les contextes de justice alimentaire. Basées sur une récente soirée pizza organisée dans le cadre de ma recherche doctorale en action participative, ces notes de terrain (ou, en l'occurrence, de cuisine communautaire) retraceront les difficultés de la construction de communauté par des groupes de cuisine. Je présenterai les possibilités de partage de nourriture en tant qu'acte radical et les aspects délicats de la recherche anti-carcérale et de l'organisation communautaire. En m'appuyant sur une journée passée avec mes co-chercheuses – des femmes en liberté conditionnelle – à rouler la pâte, à concocter nos pizzas et à rêver aux prochaines phases de ce projet, je partagerai mes réflexions sur la façon dont la préparation et le partage de la nourriture sont propices à la perturbation et à la résistance, sur l'importance de se centrer sur la sagesse des personnes ayant une expérience et une expertise de l'incarcération (tout en travaillant continuellement pour confronter les hiérarchies de pouvoir

Introduction

Looking through a video on my phone, the camera pans over a long counter overflowing with pizza toppings; shredded cheeses reflect the incandescent overhead lights, and a variety of plates and bowls hold banana peppers, cubed ham, pepperoni, pineapple, white onion, fresh basil, diced mushrooms, and a selection of sliced raw peppers. At the far end, a woman in a sundress rolls out dough. Flour from the pizzas that came before sparkle around her like glitter. Plastic containers with their lids peeled back reveal marinated artichoke hearts, feta cheese. At the end of the counter, the camera spins—showcasing a fair amount of flour on the ground before showing the viewer a big empty space. Another woman plays tug-of-war with my dog, holding a stuffed animal destined to become un-stuffed all over the floor; Bob Marley & The Wailers' "Get Up, Stand Up" plays in the background. This video, along with the other digital field notes of that day, remind me of the embodied action of making pizza, taking me back into my before-body, the one with dough under her fingernails and flecks of tomato sauce on her jeans.

This pizza party, held in September 2023, was an act of community building, a process of collaboration meant to answer my dissertation's research question: what

specific food justice-related processes and practices strengthen opportunities for holistic health, wellbeing, and a sense of belonging? The short answer is that these opportunities arise out of a beautiful and messy process, one that is inherently expansive, unfinished, and always-becoming (Mathiesen, 2015 [1974]). The longer answer is something I am still figuring out in my dissertation. This research is focussed on cooking circles as mechanisms to bring women on parole together to learn about food justice through facilitated discussions, share recipes and stories as a way to build community through storytelling, and build collective wellbeing by making and sharing food. But here, on a warm day in fall in a community kitchen, my co-researchers and I—criminalized women, some of them on parole, with whom I am building this food justice community—make pizza. Roughly half of these women are Indigenous, indicative of the mass incarceration of Indigenous Peoples in Canada; despite making up around three percent of the general population, Indigenous Peoples account for over thirty percent of federally sentenced people in Canada, with Indigenous women accounting for nearly fifty percent of all women in federal prison (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2020, 2021). This community includes Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples, all learning from the wisdom of Indigenous methodologies and food sovereignties (Grey & Patel, 2015; Smith, 1999) while creating spaces for food to bring diverse people together. And through this seemingly simple act of making pizzas, there are key insights from the field (or, in this case, the kitchen) into how the making and sharing of food is an apt site for disruption and resistance, wherein sharing food can be a radical act (Huang, 2020; Powell & Schulte, 2016; Reynolds et al., 2020). There are also, as there always are, the sticky parts that come with cooking, anti-carceral research, and community organizing. And so, this field report will provide a reflection on how food justice as research praxis can support holistic health and wellbeing, and how food can support methodologies of activist research within and against carceral and other community contexts.

Protest recipes are foods that refuse to be subjugated or silenced, foods that connect to histories before colonial violence and carceral scarcity. (2020), In his *Chinese Protest Recipes* (2020), Clarence Kwan unpacks the flavours and textures of Chinese cooking as means of confronting white supremacy. For women on parole in Canada, protest recipes can be foods cooked in secret in a cell, Indigenous foods reclaimed after incarceration, or foods infused with the bold flavours of dignity and respect, foods that are not the leftovers that incarcerated and poor people are so often given (Sbicca, 2018). Throughout my Participatory Action Research, protesting with/through pizza has come up a couple of times, perhaps because everybody loves pizza or because of the accessibility and comfort that it represents. There is a freedom inherent in selecting toppings, an opportunity for each eater to apply their own history and identity to the crust, with different styles evolving as people navigate borderlines and boundaries. Pizza can be fancy, expensive, cheap, or simple. To quote Steve Carell's character, Michael Scott, in the American sitcom "The Office": While all humans eat, "pizza is the great equalizer" (Greene, 2005).

In Canada, as in most other places in the world, our society has settled on criminalizing poverty (Herring et al., 2020; Jeppesen, 2009; Stewart et al., 2018). Women incarcerated in Canada enter into carceral institutions with higher rates of food insecurity and poverty, lower rates of formal education, and disproportionate experiences of trauma and violence (Hayman, 2006; Monture-Angus, 2000; Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2016, 2021; Wesley, 2018). In Canada, our prisons have been called the new Residential Schools (MacDonald, 2016) and the new asylums (Mills,

2023)—living histories of anti-Indigenous racism, colonial dispossession, and ableism that flourish behind high walls topped with razor wire. And while prison itself is a traumatizing and disabling place, the transition from prison to community continues to tangle people up in carceral logics. Risks of overdose and death after leaving prison are horrifically high when compared to the general population (Keen et al., 2021; Kinner et al., 2021), and what few data there are point to over half of previously incarcerated people being on some form of social assistance (Babchishin et al., 2021). The social and health services that do exist are cracking under the weight of neoliberal divestment and state-sanctioned greed, and returning citizens face barriers to accessing them (Hannah-Moffat & Innocente, 2013; McLeod et al., 2021). In this context, a pizza night might seem like too little. It will not abolish the carceral state; it will not reverse the harms of strip searches and dry cells and segregation (Hutchison, 2020; Luck, 2021). But we know that a sense of belonging, a foundation, and connectedness are needed to weave together what some might call "desistance" (Weaver & McNeil, 2014). The isolation of prison creates immense barriers to holistic success. Here, in our kitchen, women come to the space and do not have to answer any personal questions about how they ended up in prison or about their so-called risk factors for deviance (Hannah-Moffat, 2005, 2009). The questions focus on what they like to eat. Then maybe some of the other women at the table, who have been coming for a while, might decide to share a memory about how cruel prison is, or about the grief that comes from losing so many friends from the violence of carcerality and our war on drugs (Cohen et al., 2022; Lavalley et al., 2018). To quote one co-researcher, we are trying to build "a softer place to land" after the traumatizing falls into prison and then again out in the community, a place where women can pause, rest, and feel okay. Then, slowly, community grows.

Back to the pizza party: the vision was for the few women who had stories of pizza-as-protest to share, to see who else in the room might have another resistance recipe they wanted to bring into the circle. One woman—who saw the making of homemade pizza as a key mechanism for bonding with her daughter, and thus pushing back against carceral state-driven assumptions held about her as a mother—was not able to come. The responsibilities and obligations that come with motherhood, work, and surviving capitalism take precedence, and this is a methodology of flexibility and accepting that people's engagement will ebb and flow. There were also a couple of women, who had been incarcerated together years before and had just reconnected through our food justice group, who shared stories of pizza parties in prison. These were held in blatant disregard for the rules around sharing food and meals; every house would make pizzas and bring them to the yard to share, a sharing framed by the state as dangerous and contraband filled. But, as one woman remembers, "when you had so many people participating, it was hard to charge everyone. So much paperwork and many charges would be dropped anyway.... It was empowering and I loved getting one over on them." Frustrating as it was to live under the shadow of a carceral logic that sees "harmless things like having community and sharing experiences [as] threatening," people continued to cook, eat, share, and nurture a radical sense of community that refused the boundaries of prison gates and houses.

Those who could come to our pizza night came. I made the dough the night before, giving the air bubbles time to gently expand. I was also excited about using a new propane-fueled portable pizza oven that my parents got me as a gift. That—along with most of my home kitchen—was slowly packed into and then out of my car and into our community cooking space. The space was free, it was fairly central and accessible by transit, but it

was also part of a multi-use social and supportive housing [complex?] that came with a series of locked doors, a palpable carceral architecture (D'Aprile, 2021; McConville & Fairweather, 2013):

> I got there early to start setting up and the shelter staff had no record of my renting the space and wouldn't let me in, but after some calling around and sharing of emails, I got in. Last time we were there, folks were using the patio doors to smoke outside, which is why I brought the pizza oven. But when I tried to open the doors, they were locked and I guess triggered some alarm because staff came down and told us we couldn't go outside. Big beautiful empty patio and it was gorgeous outside but we could only look at it from inside. But at least they had an oven. (Anonymized, voice note, September 17, 2023)

My fancy new pizza oven sat unused as we started the oven and got into chopping and shredding and rolling. Someone recommended making a collaborative playlist, where we all offered up songs we wanted to hear. Some of the women had been coming to these circles for over a year and relationships were well-worn in and comfortable, with inside jokes and friendly teasing. Other women were newer, as word got out and people invited others from their halfway houses and wider communities. We each made our own personal pizza, representing an exercise in autonomy and choice, a moment of freedom (Foucault, 1987). In hindsight, we should have shared, not only because sharing food increases a sense of commensality (Parsons, 2018). Sure, eating our own pizzas as a collective was lovely, but I also did not fully think through the fact that a small portable pizza oven takes around four minutes, and a regular kitchen oven takes around half an hour—longer if the pizza is one of those bearing the beautiful burden of a lot of cheese. Regardless, we opened the windows to let in the warm breeze, this a small act of resistance in our locked-ish room (Wade, 1997). We were taking part in long legacies of food as forms of resistance in carceral settings (Peterie, 2022). Next time, as relationships strengthen, we will each make our own pizzas, sharing our individual palettes and being open to jokes about the moral implications of adding pineapple (Kennette et al., 2020).

Figure 1: Preparing the dough. [Source, K. Timler]

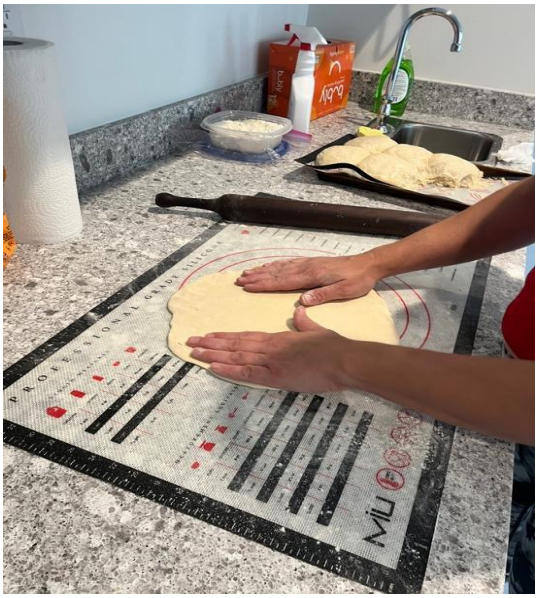
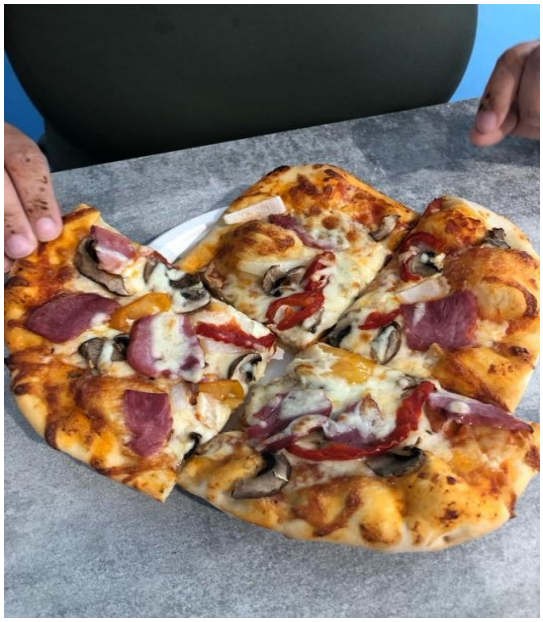


Figure 2: A pizza, a protest. [Source: K. Timler]



Once our bellies were filled, seconds made and put aside for leftovers, we sat and chatted: about work and weather, children and families, concerts we wanted to go to, things we had heard about in the news. Conversations existed in that calm space without a set direction, where non-hierarchical relationality is practiced, and where women act as both leaders and listeners. Here we shared space through the act of storytelling and fed my dog leftover chunks of cheese and ham from our plates. Sure, it is a project focussed on working with and alongside women who have been incarcerated, but I believe in "moving at the speed of trust," a pace so slow that sometimes you go hours without talking about the research at all (Bretherton & Bell, 2020). Food offers an opportunity to support storywork (Archibald, 2008) and to examine power imbalances and engage with community priorities (Quezada, 2022; Sbicca, 2018). Food as method is embodied and visceral. It rejects the idea of Cartesian dualism and neoliberal objectivity (Heldke, 1992; Longhurst et al., 2009). As Sandelowski (2002) notes, "although qualitative researchers have become increasingly used to taking themselves into account in their research, these selves are rarely depicted as embodied selves" (p. 108). Food in general, and, in this instance, pizza, reaches beyond the binary of producer/consumer towards an embodied understanding of collective cooking and food as relationship, between yeast and flour, cheese and tomato, heat and time (Roe, 2006).

Food is an entryway into relationship, not only as a useful tool to support Participatory Action Research through hosting, but also as a rich methodology in and of itself where food connects us to our bodies, the land on which we stand, the socio-political structures that impact our lives, and our ability to act as agents within that wider context (Hall & Pottinger, 2020). In this context, "cooking as inquiry seeks not simply to establish that foodmaking is implicated in the 'doing' of identity, but to capture, in the moment, how

identity is 'done' through the everyday bodily practices of foodmaking" (Brady, 2011, p. 324). Cooking is performative, a site of political and gendered engagement in which we "(re)produce and (re)member ourselves" (Tye, 2010). Pizza as a protest "takes seriously the notion [of] knowing ourselves as revolutionary agents" (Grande, 2008, p. 3), while also reminding ourselves that rest can also be [a form of] resistance (Hersey, 2022).

We sat and chatted for some time, with the recycling bins soon overflowing with cans of Diet Coke, Fresca, and Bubly Water. Then, as a collective decision made without words, we began to get up and to clean. The space did not have a broom, so a woman who lived in the building went upstairs to get her own. We pointed out cheese and meat on the ground to our official Floor Cleaner—my dog. The playlist continued, weaving together classic Rock, old Blues, and songs I had never heard before. The ingredients that did not make it into a pizza were auctioned off—"who wants some mozzarella? Yellow onions? Will anyone use cornmeal?" Eventually the crates and coolers, the unused pizza oven, and its corresponding propane tank were loaded back into my car. We confirmed the date for the next circle, considered what we would make, and then hugged and said goodbye. I drove home, travelling for about sixty-seven kilometres along a dark highway, thinking, reflecting, and recording voice notes to capture my still-mostly-embodied-knowledge in the (almost) moment.

If your idea of protests is one of fists in the air while marching through the street, the slow movement from pre-pizza through to pizza, then post-pizza, might feel not-very-protest-y. And I do truly believe in the power of taking to the streets, of shouting slogans as your rage weaves with those around you towards building something new and emergent and better, a blatant refusal of silence and complacency. But this protest, that takes the form of criminalized women not having to get groceries, not having to think about what they are eating that evening and knowing that they will have leftovers to take home with them, is the slow and quiet protest that can fill in the spaces between the collective revolts and refusals.

Carceral capitalism divides and oppresses. It forces us into spaces that don't feel good—for some, that is a job making some billionaire richer, while for others it is a literal cage. There are limited places and spaces where criminalized women are welcomed to come, sit, and be themselves, without paying money, without feeling the need to whisper into the phone when calling the halfway house to check in. In this context, a pizza party is a small, gentle protest, a space to build community and the individual and collective wellbeing that comes from the relationships built therein (Von Heimburg & Ness, 2021). In this space one might be playful and creative while building strong social connections and striving toward holistic health (Mosko & Delach, 2021). In a world of concrete walls, and rising food costs, and housing crises, and rising fascism, and increased police budgets, and, and, and...perhaps, for now, having a small and gentle space is enough. Food exists beyond mere biological necessity, as a foundational aspect of our social worlds (Dowler, et al., 2009). So, time together—around food—provides opportunities where the full humanity of women can be brought to the table, and the heavy burdens of stigma and criminalization can be left outside (Parsons, 2018). It is a place to let your armour down, to put your feet up, to get tomato sauce on your face or your pants, to expand social possibilities and support holistic health and wellbeing, and to have a moment of peace in our longer fight for liberation, a moment to relax and dream of a future filled with liberation, collective care, and—of course—pizza.

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