

Canadian Food Studies

La Revue canadienne des  
études sur l'alimentation

## Editorial

# “Ways of knowing” in food studies

Ellen Desjardins

What do we mean by *food studies*? Is it a distinct field or not, and what might it encompass? This issue starts, poignantly, with a commentary that summarizes some intense deliberations on these questions at CAFS 2014, the annual meeting of the Canadian Association for Food Studies. The authors conclude by suggesting that “food studies scholars and practitioners...traverse not just disciplinary boundaries, but *epistemological* boundaries” (Brady et al., pp. 5–6; emphasis added). This entails more than different methodologies, as they point out, but may open up a broader typological range of research questions, examine how food can serve as a catalyst for exploring new issues, and expand the possibilities of where, or to whom, researchers can turn as a source of learning. Moreover, when disciplines are projected as “ways of knowing, doing and writing” rather than “static territories of knowledge,” such an approach can reveal potential “relationships among the disciplines that are often otherwise obscured” (Carter, 2007, p. 410).

Viewing the articles in this issue through an epistemological lens becomes an intriguing exercise. For example, three original research articles expose injustices in the food system by painstakingly documenting change in national policies and land ownership—thereby demonstrating the resultant deepening hegemonic spheres of influence over food sovereignty. Their multiple ways of knowing draw from raw statistics, language from reports, and voices of residents who are affected by these changes. Desmarais et al. and Smythe reveal different aspects of the fluid, shifting phenomenon of “land grabbing,” both rural and urban. As well, the Desmarais group has expanded ways of knowing in this area by creating a new metric they call CLO4 (Concentration of Land Ownership by the four largest owners). Burnett et al. bring in the discourse of provincial “Norths,” highlighting the diversity of geographic and demographic circumstances that clearly require tailored approaches to food security rather than the inequitable, ineffective, “one size fits all” approach used by current food subsidy programs.

These articles are able to paint detailed pictures with dimensions and trends that would otherwise remain hidden, and can inform those who want to make change.

Another epistemological approach taps into language expressed by individuals to reveal their perceptions of food or spaces for growing food, and links this language with identity or sense of place. In the qualitative research of Beagan et al., the reasons for personal food choices become symbolic of the processes of class boundary marking. Ridgeway and Matthews, also focusing on narrative as their way of knowing, show how many people connect the concept of forest gardens or permaculture with the perceived benefit of building social sustainability on campus. In this way, they evoke Brynne's analogy of the organic orchard (Brady et al., p. 5), that represents an integrated, balanced ecosystem with the potential to enhance participatory action as well as mental health.

Noticing and carefully chronicling small-scale success stories with far-reaching impact is another epistemological approach. Wayne Roberts, for example, wears his reporter's hat when he approaches rancher Bryan Gilvesy with a genuine spirit of curiosity about farming strategies that appear simultaneously radical and practical. What, in turn, were Gilvesy's ways of knowing? As Roberts discovers, it was his sense about what works best in nature, building new ideas and entrepreneurship upon traditional ecosystems rather than trying to replace them. Josie Steeves took on a similar role, documenting the steps undertaken by residents of a low-income food desert in Saskatoon to create a food venue specific to their own needs. Both authors highlight ways of knowing that developed when people took the plunge to transform situations that were environmentally harmful or socially unjust.

Sumner's article engages a theoretical way of knowing by suggesting a re-conceptualization of agri-food standards—not as a dichotomy of public or private interests, but as a form of civil commons, or an alternative form of governance that challenges neoliberalism. Reporting on a game-design process, Lee and Fisher also aim to re-conceptualize our understanding. In the case of *Food Quest*, it is the experience and feelings around food insecurity in various contexts. Their way of knowing is both pedagogical and participatory in nature—it developed as their game developed in a collaborative, iterative way, making the game both informative and interesting.

Finally, our review authors make clear how epistemological frames shape the experience for both author and reader. Regnier-Davies and Scott emphasize two key elements of critical food studies writing—accessibility and tone—that allow readers from diverse backgrounds to quickly grasp the problems, while providing solutions that turn those problems into opportunities for positive change. Schumilas shows how reading case studies of alternative food movements for diversity rather than dominance uncovers similarly reflexive processes in the global north and south, and opens new channels for alliance-building and resistance. However, Clark, Clément, and DiVito Wilson remind us that diversity—evident in case studies of food sovereignty—can be a mixed blessing. It can present opportunities for bridging divergence but, at the same time, gloss over the disparate politics and epistemological incompatibility of food sovereignty proponents. Similarly, Weiler points out that, in discussions of farm labour, neat epistemological frames such

as "good" family farms and "bad" industrial agriculture elide an important nuance that would add depth to our understanding of on-the-ground agricultural realities.

We invite you to read articles that are not directly related to your area of study, and to taste the ways in which food, in its many manifestations, can offer different portals into life experience and can become a medium for challenging and re-creating ways of knowing. That is what *Canadian Food Studies/La Revue canadienne des études sur l'alimentation* purports to do.

Editorial Team:

Ellen Desjardins, Editor

University of Waterloo, [edesjardins@canadianfoodstudies.ca](mailto:edesjardins@canadianfoodstudies.ca)

David Szanto, Associate Editor

University of Gastronomic Sciences, [dszanto@canadianfoodstudies.ca](mailto:dszanto@canadianfoodstudies.ca)

Phil Mount, Associate Editor

Wilfrid Laurier University, [pmount@canadianfoodstudies.ca](mailto:pmount@canadianfoodstudies.ca)

Rod MacRae, Associate Editor, Food System Transitions Stream

York University, [rmacrae@yorku.ca](mailto:rmacrae@yorku.ca)

Wesley Tourangeau, Managing Editor

University of Waterloo, [wtourangeau@canadianfoodstudies.ca](mailto:wtourangeau@canadianfoodstudies.ca)

## Reference

Carter, M. (2007). Ways of knowing, doing, and writing in the disciplines. *College Composition and Communication*, 58(3), 385-418.

We thank the University of Waterloo for providing the OJS (open journal systems) online platform and library staff support.