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Editorial

Extending food studies' reach across the table and aisle: Reflections from a "square peg" on contemporary silos hindering food system transformation

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I have always been a little “outside of the box”, a natural and well-groomed empath that received consistent messaging from a young age that my brain was “different”. I was a seeker and a drifter and made meaningful connections with people from all walks of life. As a White settler coming from a working-class family that naturally excelled in school, I had enough privilege to leverage opportunity, and buffer against the simultaneous instances of oppression that I experienced in relation to my gender, sex, and sexuality. While this fostered in me an ability to relate to people from a diverse range of lived experiences, I also found it difficult to “fit in”.

My drifter nature morphed into experimenting with various inter and trans disciplinary approaches to academic inquiry. I found “fit” through weaving together insights from isolated silos that each provide partial insight into how inequities and injustices are

produced, sustained, and resisted (e.g., health geography, immigration studies, political science, environmental management, etc.). Integrating silos enabled a more fulsome understanding. I also learned through ongoing collaboration with communities operating at the margins, as they are typically not concerned about adhering to straight-jacketed boundaries, mandates, or epistemologies, but rather reach and bridge across tables and aisles to facilitate collective action amongst actors of diverse walks of life in response to the pressing consequences of today's inequalities. My collaborative work has included a focus on the effects of poverty, toxic exposures, inadequate access to housing or greenspace, or how to plan and develop communities that foster healthy settlement, wellbeing, and flourishing amongst Canada's diverse populations. These seemingly distinct areas of concentration kept compelling me to pay greater

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attention to food insecurity, and how it interrelates with and compounds intersecting forms of inequality.

With encouragement from pioneering food scholar Mustafa Koç, I overcame imposter syndrome and fears of not having the track-record to “fit in” or provide a leading voice within the food scholarship community. I found myself serving as the Associate Director of the Centre for Studies in Food Security at Toronto Metropolitan University, and now currently hold the Arrell Chair in Food, Policy & Society at the Arrell Food Institute at the University of Guelph. Both experiences gave me the privilege to work alongside Canada’s most influential food system thought leaders. I am now a member of Canadian Food Studies’ editorial collective. In being asked to write this editorial, I have reflected upon what insights this self-proclaimed “square peg” might offer to the “food table”.

Food studies is both a unifying discipline and post-discipline, in that it brings together and transforms perspectives with origins in sociology, geography, planning, dietetics, public health, environmental management, immigration studies and community development, etc. Food is a platform for bridging worldviews, lived experiences, disciplinary and sectoral silos, and scalar jurisdictional perspectives. Food is a platform for relational understanding and common ground amongst diverse interests. Nonetheless, key silos persist and provide a challenge for food scholars, practitioners, and activists to overcome. Below, I reflect on examples where we need to make ongoing efforts to reach across the table and aisle to build novel relationships and thus elicit transformative change.

1. We must continue to foster more equitable inclusion in food scholarship, governance, and policy to better reflect the increasingly diverse demographics of Canada’s contemporary society. Silos remain between knowledge on agri-food innovation, community food security

interventions, and the needs, experiences, or capacities of migrants settling in Canada. Canada depends on migrants to grow the economy and fill labour shortages, yet this reality exists alongside rising anti-immigrant sentiments. Changing settlement patterns from large gateway cities into outlying suburban and rural communities brings new systemic challenges as many lack adequate housing, transit, walkability, social services and access to nutritional, cultural food sources. Discrimination on multiple fronts, along with unfamiliarity with local foodscapes all undermine immigrant food access and participation in food economies. Consequently, newcomers have more than double the rate of food insecurity than households overall. A growing number of immigrant-led organizations, not historically food-focussed (e.g., settlement agencies, cultural or religious organizations, etc.), have become crucial players in strengthening food security, yet their recognition remains limited, resulting in exclusion and hegemonic policy discussions around food system change. Immigrants constitute a large consumer market, make up a large share of the agri-food labour force, and possess untapped skills in farming, processing, retail, and service that could enhance immigrant livelihoods and bolster Canada’s food economies. We require collaboration across the fields of immigration, food security, food entrepreneurship, planning and development to ensure that future policies and interventions are reflective of Canada’s current and changing population.

2. Overcome the tendency to pit necessary social policy reforms against innovation happening across the community-based non-profit and charitable sector. I fully agree that we must address insecure incomes as a primary driver and commend leading scholars and practitioners for tirelessly advocating for necessary social policy changes (e.g., living wage, social assistance in line

with the cost of living, affordable housing, basic income guarantee, greater employee benefits, low-income tax relief, etc.). However, I disagree that investment of precious public funds in necessary policy reforms should come at the expense of continued investment in charitable and alternative community food programs. There are limits to focussing on household income alone. Those who are unhoused or struggling with mental health or addiction may not be able to provide proof of address to receive such benefits. Such interventions would not necessarily help migrant workers, international students, those with precarious immigration or legal status, or other populations who many not qualify or fear retribution. Further, many households experiencing food insecurity are above the poverty line. Finally, many community food-based interventions are challenging status quo global-industrial food systems that are unsustainable, inequitable, and driven by corporate greed and concentration. We do not want income supplementation measures alone to subsidize business as usual. Many charitable or non-profit initiatives are in pursuit of food sovereignty or supporting those who are powerless in a system dominated by a few powerful actors. We must continue to strive for equitable access to public and private land and infrastructure to support localized and regionalized agriculture, processing, distribution and retail. We must question modes of production, zoning and regulation, who we do business with, how we distribute food, foster inclusive leadership, and uphold ecological integrity. We need a united front to strengthen food security at multiple scales beyond the household if we are to move towards more just, sustainable, alternatives.

3. We must continue to address silos between those focussed on agri-food tech innovation in food

production, with those focussed on food access, distribution, justice, and equity. This requires boldly bringing corporate investors, business leaders, influential lobbyists, innovators and policymakers focussed on regenerative ag and production efficiencies, together with actors focussed on distribution, mutual aid, sovereignty, social enterprise, and community development. The idealist in me certainly recognizes that historical efforts to bridge these siloes have often not gone well (e.g. COP gatherings, UN Food Summits) with many being rightfully weary of being bulldozed or tokenized due to unequal power dynamics. Transformation requires difficult, disorienting, and uncomfortable conversations. This is essential to ensuring that tech innovations do not make inequalities worse, or to confront patterns of record food waste and profit at a time when food insecurity continues to skyrocket. Recent efforts at the [Arrell Food Summit](#) and by the [Common Ground Network](#) provide inspiring examples of navigating these tensions.

While these are but a few persistent and important silos, I am enthusiastic about building upon food studies' history of providing a place-setting for square pegs, and more recent efforts to reach across the table and aisle to bring together diverse interests, ways of knowing, and lived experience together. As this journal issue explores through various contexts, how might we all think about our own roles and perspectives differently? Who may we not be in conversation with that perhaps we should be in an attempt to do things differently? How can we continue to break down silos and barriers for transformative change?

Sara Edge is the Arrell Chair in Food, Policy & Society at the University of Guelph. Sara works with community groups and other stakeholders to strengthen equity, justice and resiliency in food systems, with particular focus on the experiences of racialized peoples, immigrants and newcomers. Sara also examines the role of novel examples of community self-determination, entrepreneurialism and collaboration in strengthening food security, sovereignty and alternative access pathways. She is interested in how related challenges and opportunities differ across rural, suburban and metropolitan geographies. This includes examining how decision-makers are planning for increasing diversity in small to large cities.