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EXPLORING CARCERAL FOOD SYSTEMS

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IN THIS ISSUE

She had brought the meat home that she should have eaten herself, and was already warming it on a gridiron over the fire for her father, clad in an old grey gown and a black cap, awaiting his supper at the table. A clean cloth was spread before him, with knife, fork, and spoon, salt-cellar, pepper-box, glass, and pewter ale-pot. Such zests as his particular little phial of cayenne pepper and his pennyworth of pickles in a saucer, were not wanting.

—Little Dorrit, Charles Dickens, 1857

The "she" in this passage is Amy Dorrit. The table around which Amy, her father William Dorrit, and guest Arthur Clennam gather is perfectly ordinary. That it sits within the confines of the Marshalsea debtors' prison makes it less so.

Readers might wonder how it all works. Who pays for the food that William and others eat? And who makes it? What is a typical meal? Are there restrictions in terms of the kinds of foods that can be brought in? What happens if no one from the outside is available or willing to provide food for the incarcerated individuals? How do they acquire all the accoutrements on the table? Dorrit's table appears to have certain luxuries but does he, as the "Father of the Marshalsea," have certain privileges that others don't?

The editors and authors of this themed section turn their attention to food and carceral systems within a contemporary Canadian context. The four articles within unpack the complex realities of incarcerated individuals, for whom food can represent violence and punishment, as well as community building, empowerment, and dignity.

Not within the themed section, but certainly adjacent to it are Michnik et al., who turn their attention toother institutional kitchens as they investigate paths toward sustainable school food program development in Saskatchewan.

Next, a ghost story. Or more precisely, Charlotte Gagnon-Lewis's examination of the Wolastoqiyik Wahsipekuk's green sea urchin fishery. We'll leave it to Gagnon-Lewis to tell you who the ghosts are and how we might best interact with them. On a related note, Lowitt et al. share their key insights for building resilience across agriculture and fisheries.

In the intriguingly titled, "You want my money? dance!," Bryan Dale considers the role of consumers in "contributing to (or inhibiting) [a just] transition in the food system" (p.114). In their commentary, Wilkes et al. provide lessons from the Canadian Food Policy Advisory Council on how to strengthen democratic governance in times of crisis. In her found-object collage series, *Milk & Bread*, Susan Goldberg documents just such a time of crisis from the perspective of women and mothers "who bore the brunt of increased domestic duties and childcare during [COVID-related] lockdowns and school closures" (p.163).

For those of you with free space on your bookshelves—if not, try double stacking them or piling them artfully on the floor—Johanna Wilkes and Penelope Volinia review the following: Robin Wall Kimmerer's *The Serviceberry: Abundance and Reciprocity in the Natural World* and Taras Grescoe's *The Lost Supper: Searching for the Future of Food in the Flavors of the Past.*

We conclude this issue with our Choux Questionnaire—within which chef, activist, speaker, and author of *Take Back the Tray: Revolutionizing Food in Hospitals, Schools, and Other Institutions*, Joshna Maharaj, tells us about her greatest edible achievement. Some of us are hoping to wrangle an invitation to dinner at Joshna's on the strength of this description alone: "I once made this roasted masala pork belly that I still think about in a quiet moment."

We too wish you a quiet moment to think about pork belly and milk and green sea urchins and the myriad questions, challenges, and solutions offered up by our authors. Bonne degustation.

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Editorial

Exploring carceral food systems: Tensions, experiences and possibilities

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In Toronto during the summer of 2023, several scholars came together to present research on food within the context of carceral systems at the annual assembly of the Canadian Association for Food Studies. While there is growing recognition and discussion of carceral food systems, it remains an underexplored topic within food studies scholarship. Particularly within the Canadian context, there were few existing avenues through which to explore these topics. The enthusiasm and critical discussion encouraged by our two panels convinced us that a themed issue was warranted, in order to continue and deepen the conversation.

The collection of related articles in this themed section points to the inextricable relationship between food and punishment, a relationship buttressed by hyper-capitalism, colonialism, racism, and other harmful approaches to social control. There is violence inherent in prison food as well, a "slow violence" (Nixon, 2011) that delivers destruction to the body and mind through expired and undercooked food, surveilled and timed meals, and fat-laden canteen items (Stearns, 2024). There is violence in the practice of sending imprisoned people of colour to the fields to labour for little to no pay (Fitzgerald et al., 2021; Jou 2024), and there is violence in prohibiting the sharing and gifting of food amongst those in prison (De Graaf & Kilty, 2016). At the same time, it is undeniable that food is a tool of contestation and a means through which to build connection and commonality, in the face of structural violence and the ongoing harms of carceral institutions (Godderis 2006, Wilson 2023). A critical examination of prison food is uniquely positioned to lay bare the failings of the prison system, feeding into broader conversations on abolition, social justice, racism, colonialism, and capitalism. Each of the contributions to this themed section helps us to better

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understand the relationship between food and carceral systems and underscores the importance of examining, and hopefully transforming, these complex realities.

Kelsey Timler's reflective piece on the radical act of community-building through food examines her relationship with her co-researchers—justice-involved women—at a collaborative meal. It is through making and then sharing food together, Timler argues, that relationships slowly form strong bonds, like the process of kneading dough. Through Timler's visceral snapshot of a particular day and time, we see how an evening of pizza-making among these women is a form of protest against the prison industrial complex. She writes, "This protest, 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." The article is a strong call for academics to join co-researchers in the "beautiful and messy process" required to dismantle and disrupt carceral logic.

The far reach of prison food as a tool of carceral violence extends to the families and loved ones of incarcerated individuals, as described in Else Knudsen's critical take on the Private Family Visit (PFV). Knudsen speaks with the partners and children who participate in PFVs and suggests that, while this arrangement is intended to mimic domestic life, including bringing back the normalcy of mealtimes, the cost of food during the visit is exorbitant and burdensome for families. Knudsen's treatise points to the necessity of understanding the full power of prison food as punishment and control over not only the imprisoned, but their partners and children.

Amanda Wilson's Field Report brings the voices of formerly incarcerated individuals to the fore as they discuss their perspectives on the food served and sold in correctional facilities. The vignettes present a collective voice of anguish and frustration over being served food that is undercooked, unrecognizable, and unhealthy. In these dehumanizing spaces, Wilson's featured narrators recognize the message embedded within what they are given to eat, a message that implies they are not deserving of basic rights or dignity. Yet, in these stories, food is also a tool for resistance, as told in vignettes about Thanksgiving meals and cell-made birthday cakes that lead to community building and empowerment.

As we have seen, food is a potent tool not only harnessed by the Prison Industrial Complex, but also by the individuals imprisoned inside those systems. Julie Courchesne and Amanda Wilson's article highlights the importance of hunger strikes in gaining the public's attention and, sometimes, in enacting change at administrative levels. The authors' examination of 48 hunger strikes between 2016–2022 demonstrates that the most pressing reason for the strike concerns issues of health and hygiene related to the COVID pandemic, followed closely by food-related accusations regarding low protein, no fresh produce, and low-quality meals. Courchesne and Wilson point to carceral food as "sites of contestation," where carceral power inhabits physical bodies but where, also, powerless people can embody their own power by refusing to eat. In a hunger strike, agency, collective action, community, and mobilization are realized by seemingly powerless and voiceless individuals.

Taken together, these articles offer multiple entry points through which to begin untangling the complex web of relationships between food and carceral systems. Each of these four articles highlights the role and meaning of food, not just for those currently incarcerated, but their family and loved ones, those eventually freed from incarceration, as well as groups and movements concerned with prisoner justice and abolition. They push us to reconsider and expand our

understandings of food justice and call on us to include the lives, perspectives, and experiences of incarcerated individuals in our visions of food system transformations and imaginaries.

Acknowledgements: We are very grateful to the authors featured in this themed section, as well as those with lived experience of incarceration and their families. They have graciously shared their insights and experiences, so that we may, collectively, gain a greater understanding of carceral food systems and potential pathways of transformation.

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Amanda Wilson is a white settler living and working on Algonquin Anishinaabe territory in Ottawa. She is an Associate Professor in the School of Social Innovation at Saint Paul University where she is engaged in research on food movement and alternative food networks, carceral food systems, collective organizing, and questions related to prefiguration and enacting a politics of possibility.

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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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Research Article

Contesting through food: Tracking hunger strikes in carceral food systems

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Abstract

In highly regulated environments such as prisons, food-related practices seem to be one of the only activities that can be controlled by incarcerated people, although this control is very limited. Drawing on a media review conducted as part of the research project, we explore collective hunger strikes in Canadian prisons, highlighting the demands made by incarcerated individuals between 2016 and 2022, as well as the institutions' response. Since these hunger strikes have been used to challenge various inhuman conditions of detention, we will reflect on them, and food more broadly, as a tool to resist authority, its ability to foster a sense of autonomy and identity for incarcerated folks as well as to forge a bond of solidarity through collective mobilization, both inside and outside prison walls. This paper shows how food is a space of contestation where incarcerated folks and Canadian carceral institutions fight with disproportionate means to gain power.

Keywords: Canadian prisons; carceral food systems; collective actions; hunger strikes; prison food; prisoner solidarity; punishment; resistance

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Résumé

Dans des environnements très réglementés comme les prisons, les pratiques alimentaires semblent être l'une des seules activités pouvant être contrôlées – quoique de manière très limitée – par les personnes incarcérées. Sur la base d'une revue de presse réalisée dans le cadre de notre projet de recherche, nous explorons les grèves de la faim collectives dans les prisons canadiennes, en mettant en lumière les revendications des personnes incarcérées, entre 2016 et 2022, ainsi que la réponse des institutions. Puisque ces grèves de la faim ont servi à contester diverses conditions inhumaines de détention, nous réfléchirons à ces grèves, et de manière plus générale, à la nourriture, en tant qu'outil de résistance à l'autorité, susceptible de renforcer un sentiment d'autonomie et d'identité chez les personnes incarcérées ainsi que de forger un lien de solidarité à travers une mobilisation collective, tant à l'intérieur qu'à l'extérieur des murs de la prison. Cet article montre comment l'alimentation peut être un espace de contestation où les personnes incarcérées se battent contre les institutions carcérales, avec des moyens inégaux, pour obtenir du pouvoir.

Introduction

> "A group of women and I got together and wrote down the things that were lacking. I said these issues would be a good reason to go on strike - we would demand a change to these conditions and hope our voices would be heard by the public. On April 1, 2021, I started a hunger strike. At one point it was only me on the hunger strike. Then five women in Unit 3 joined, and some other women joined from Unit 4. The first five days the staff called it a "refusal." Then, a woman was hospitalized for low potassium levels. It took five days for them to take us seriously. Nurses finally started checking in on us daily. More people began to join the strike during my second week, because more staff actually wanted to listen to our demands." (Deborah McKenzie, 2021).

Incarcerated individuals have long used hunger strikes as a pressure tactic to push prison management to address their grievances and garner public attention. This quote from Deborah McKenzie, incarcerated at Pine Grove Correctional Centre, exemplifies the potential power and significance of hunger strikes in prison. They often spread from unit to unit, and, despite what prison management may have the public believe, they can and do result in meaningful change. In general, it is very difficult to access clear information on what is happening inside prisons. During hunger strikes, prison management is typically loath to share details or acknowledge the full extent of these collective actions. It's often only when hunger strikers can relay details about their situation and their demands to external allies or the media that some information becomes available to the public.

In the summer of 2022, we started tracking collective hunger strikes that occurred in Canadian prisons over the past seven years. We did so by searching media and websites, generating a timeline of over forty collective hunger strikes at prisons across so-called Canada. Our objective was to generate a visual timeline (from 2016–2022), to gain a more comprehensive understanding of carceral hunger strikes in Canadian provincial and federal prisons.

This media review and timeline was a first step in trying to understand emerging patterns in contemporary carceral collective hunger strikes. As Evans and House (2024) note, prison protest is difficult to study, and it is

very likely that many collective hunger strikes, as well as carceral protests in general, are never reported outside the prison walls. This means that their occurrence is no doubt higher than what we were able to identify. More than anything, we intend to make visible the scale and scope of hunger strikes organized by incarcerated individuals, to value those actions, and to highlight one way in which food is used as an important tool of contestation within prison.

Our investigation into collective prison hunger strikes stems from a broader project exploring carceral food systems in Canada as sites of contestation, seeking to understand the complex and varied meaning and role of food within prisons in Canada (Wilson, 2022, Wilson et al. 2023, Wilson, 2023). There is a small but growing literature outlining the important connections between food systems and prison systems and how injustices within the carceral context shape and are shaped by injustices within the food system (Hazelett, 2023; Kathuria, 2022; McKeithen, 2022; Reese & Sbicca, 2022). Going beyond a simple accounting of these injustices, what Reese and Sbicca (2022) label the "critical food and carceral studies" is premised on an abolitionist politic that recognizes the impossibility of true food justice within prison systems. We share this orientation and understand hunger strikes as a tool of political action in a highly controlled and punitive environment. Despite efforts to dismiss and diminish the collective capacity of incarcerated folks,[1] they continue to find ways to push back against their poor living conditions, to challenge the systemic discrimination inhered in our prison system, and to articulate a future beyond carceral logics.

While individual hunger strikes are more common, and no doubt also significant, we chose to focus on collective hunger strikes as they more often receive mention in the media and because they are one of the few collective actions incarcerated folks have at their disposal to advocate for change. We find these acts especially meaningful, as they are an illustration of incarcerated individuals joining together in solidarity within a context designed to separate and individualize—both incarcerated individuals from one another and from the rest of society.

In the following sections, we present both quantitative and qualitative findings of the media scan, as well as observations and reflections emerging from the process. We highlight the most frequent demands, the institutions' responses, and document how incarcerated individuals still mobilize, coordinate, and act in solidarity. In combing through media articles and statements from incarcerated folks and their allies, we found a familiar dynamic: incarcerated individuals seek to bring attention to their poor living conditions and systemic discrimination while prison staff and government officials try to dismiss and diminish their efforts as much as possible, creating a push-and-pull with a highly disproportionate power imbalance.

[1] As is common in prisoner-support and abolition movements, we refer to incarcerated and non-incarcerated individuals alike as "folks". Further, to emphasize the humanity and complex identities of incarcerated people, which go far beyond their involvement in the carceral institution, we use the terms "incarcerated folks" and "incarcerated individuals."

Literature review

In general, two approaches seem to drive research on carceral food systems. The first one studies food and foodways, focussing on nutrition: dietary and caloric intake, food (in)security, nutritiousness, legal nutritional compliance of menus, as well as nutritional knowledge and educational programs about healthy food (Agyapong et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2022; Örs, 2018). This approach focusses on the potential of food to increase (or undermine) the health and wellbeing of incarcerated folks.

The second approach is largely ethnographic and revolves around the "lived experience of incarceration" (Smoyer & Blankenship, 2014, p. 563), where "perception and experiences of food, meals and eating in prison" are discussed (Woods-Brown et al., 2023, p. 2). As Woods-Brown and colleagues (2023) state, these perceptions and experiences revolve around the material aspects of carceral food systems, the quality and quantity of meals, the environment and the context in which food is served (De Graaf & Kilty, 2016; Gibson-Light, 2018; Jones, 2017; Parson, 2020; Smith, 2002; Smoyer & Lopes, 2017; Vanhouche, 2015; Watkins, 2013), and the symbolic aspect of foodways.

The symbolic aspect has been addressed in four main ways: 1) carceral foodways as forms of discipline and punishment (Einat & Davidian, 2018; Jones, 2017; Smoyer & Lopes, 2017); 2) the role of food and foodways in identity and a sense of self (Cate, 2008; Earle & Philipps, 2012; Smoyer, 2014, 2015b); 3) their role in negotiating relationships, forging bonds of solidarity and community (Cate, 2008; Earle & Philipps, 2012; Timler, 2017; Wilson, 2023) but also furthering coercive and hierarchical relationships (Earle & Philipps, 2012; Einat & Davidian, 2018; Smoyer, 2015a; Valentine & Longstaff, 1998); and finally 4) food and foodways as practices of contestation and resistance by incarcerated folks (De Graaf & Kilty, 2016; Einat & Davidian, 2018; Evans & House, 2024; Norman, 2022). This research is situated within the scholarship on the lived experience of carceral food systems and speaks to these four main symbolic aspects.

There is also a rich literature highlighting the history and significance of hunger strikes as tools of social change and collective action, as well as a particular lineage within this scholarship focussed on prison hunger strikes. As Nayan Shah (2022a) writes, "the power of the hunger strike lies in its utter simplicity" (par.6); nearly any incarcerated individual can make use of the tactic, even in highly restrictive conditions. Similarly, Vanhouche (2015) notes that in a highly controlled environment such as a prison, "food and food-related activities appear to be among the few activities people can try to control" (p.48; Gibson-Light, 2018; McGregor, 2011). Despite this, little is known about food and food-related practices of repression and resistance in prisons in Canada, as most studies are based in the United States and Europe.[2]

Incarcerated individuals use food and foodways in several ways to resist and contest the authority of the prison institution. Resistance is best conceptualized as a continuum of practices that challenge existing power relationships; these practices may be hidden or overt, individual or collective (Godderis, 2006b; Smoyer, 2016; Ugelvik, 2011; Vanhouche, 2015). Godderis (2006b) has categorized food-related resistance practices into four types—individual adjustments, individual displays of opposition, legitimate group activities, and illegitimate ones—to which Brisman (2008) adds hunger strikes as a fifth category.

[2] Godderis (2006a,b) and De Graaf & Kilty (2016) are notable exceptions.

Individual adjustments are conscious decisions to soothe the pain and trauma of imprisonment (Godderis, 2006b), such as indulging in comfort food in response to the pain and stress of imprisonment and to regain some control over one's body (De Graff & Kilty, 2016; Smith, 2002; Smoyer & Minke, 2019). An individual display of opposition includes a verbal or physical confrontation with a prison officer (Godderis, 2006b), refusing to return trays, throwing food waste at prison staff in an attempt to humiliate them (Brisman, 2008; Jones, 2017), attacking them, or other incarcerated individuals with food or food-related items, starting a rumour about contaminated food, etc. (Jones, 2017). Legitimate group displays of opposition are institutionally accepted practices, like buying groups to gain access to culturally relevant foods (Godderis, 2006b), oral and written complaints, and lawsuits to highlight the poor food conditions of imprisonment (Vanhouche, 2015) or as an attempt to rebuff the institution's authority (Brisman, 2008; Jones, 2017; Smith, 2002).

Illegitimate group practices of resistance are those that directly confront and challenge the authority of the prison (Godderis, 2006b). They include unauthorized movement of food, such as bringing leftovers from the cafeteria back to one's cell (Smoyer, 2016; Smoyer & Blankenship, 2014), stealing (Gibson-Light, 2018; Godderis, 2006b; Smoyer, 2015a; 2016), foraging (Watkins, 2013), securing additional food at the cafeteria (Smoyer, 2016), hoarding (De Graaf & Kilty, 2016), and sharing food and food-related items for preparing food (De Graaf & Kilty, 2016; Smoyer, 2014, 2015a; Watkins, 2013). Incarcerated individuals employed in food services can also engage in resistance by serving more food than is allowed (Smoyer, 2016). These practices are often done to perform another so-called illegal activity: cooking, where formally or informally collected ingredients are transformed into foods that are more meaningful and that can be eaten on incarcerated folks' terms (Cate, 2008; De Graaf & Kilty, 2016; Gibson-Light, 2018; Smoyer, 2016; Smoyer & Blankenship, 2014; Stearns, 2019; Ugelvik, 2011). Finally, illegitimate group displays of opposition also include identifying with a religion or a specific diet to gain access to food that is considered to be of a higher quality (Jones, 2017; Siporin, 2015).

Looking specifically at hunger strikes, they serve as examples of both individual and group illegitimate displays of opposition (Brisman, 2008). At a personal level, it means rejecting one's bodily needs while exhibiting autonomy and emancipation from the institution that exerts such control over the bodies of incarcerated individuals (Earle & Philips, 2012; Smith, 2002). Hunger striking can be understood as a performative act enabling incarcerated individuals to claim rights they sometimes "d[o] not (yet) have" (Desta, 2019, p. 1515), to "exercise a political voice" (Montange, 2017, p. 516), and to affirm their identity as dignity-deserving human beings (Chalit Hernandez, 2022; Desta, 2019), as well as political subjects (Montange, 2017). It is a process of reclaiming agency while shedding light on the inhumane treatment they receive (Desta, 2019). However, this process can, and has, also brought "desperation, distress and divisions" amongst strikers, as McGregor (2011, p. 608) reports. This is why Chalit Hernandez (2022) speaks of hunger strikes as a "dynamic and contradictory form of resistance", one that is, amongst other things, both "weakening and empowering" (p. 118).

At a group level, it is also a means to get attention from the outside, to transmit one's beliefs and political messages, and to protest over the conditions of detention to bring about change (Brisman, 2008; Wee, 2004). To Chalit Hernandez (2022), hunger strikes are a strategy to involve the public and make demands impossible to be ignored by the institution. Literature

highlights the catalyst effect of solidarity networks and media coverage on hunger strikes, heightening strikers' claims and political speech and granting them legitimacy (Chalit Hernandez, 2022; Desta, 2019; Evans & House, 2023; Montange, 2017). These "observers" are key to the success of hunger strikes, as they bring external pressure to the power-imbalanced and vulnerable-to-repression dynamic of resistance between incarcerated individuals and the institution (Norman, 2022; Evans & House, 2023). As a group display of opposition, hunger strikes are performed as a means to access political bodies and advocate for policy reforms (Desta, 2019) but also to challenge "the symbolic and material structures of carcerality" (Chalit Hernandez, 2022, p. 104; Montange, 2017).

For Chalit Hernandez (2022), the distinctive feature of hunger strikes compared with other forms of resistance is their ability to both "challeng[e] the legitimacy and violence of carceral institutions" and express the humanity of incarcerated individuals and their political visions in a strategic way (p. 104). While hunger strikes vary in format, Shah (2022b) suggests they all hold three primary elements: individual and collective defiance from incarcerated individuals against the state; communication to fellow incarcerated people, prison authorities, and the wider public; and third, "it makes the prisoner and his or her self-starvation matter to whoever hears of it." (p. 3).

Carceral food systems is a relatively young field of study, and some areas of scholarship have been further developed than others. Practices centred around cooking and consuming food have received greater attention than other areas, such as prison agriculture (Chennault & Sbicca, 2023; Innes, 2019; Jewkes & Moran, 2015; Struthers Montford, 2019; Timler, 2017), gardening (Sbicca, 2016; Moore et al., 2015), and hunger strikes. Discussions of carceral hunger strikes often focus on the legal, ethical, and legitimacy aspects of these struggles (Alempijevic et al., 2011; Brisman, 2008; Desta, 2019; Emmerich, 2015; Howland, 2013) and their performative acts of political resistance (Brisman, 2008; Chalit Hernandez, 2022; Montange, 2017; Norman, 2022; Wee, 2007). Building on the latter, we aim to deepen research on the resistance aspect of carceral hunger striking while also discussing their impact on relationships, community building and identity work, as well as the disciplinary responses of the institution. In other words, we focus on the push-and-pull dynamic, a framing less apparent in the existing scholarship. We situate our research within the discussions of carceral food systems and the tradition of hunger strikes and prison resistance to both contribute to the surfacing and mapping of prison resistance and deepen our understanding of the role and significance of food within the carceral context.

Definition and methods

A collective hunger strike refers to the refusal of food as an act of protest involving two or more people. In the carceral setting, the refusal of food is generally the refusal of all food, including food from the canteen, the prison's convenience store. Alternatively, it can involve only refusing the food provided by the institution, such as from the cafeteria. The latter is also called "tray refusal," a term often used by prison management to avoid labeling it a hunger strike.

To track collective hunger strikes, we conducted a media scan and document analysis of the articles identified. The primary media scan took place in the

summer of 2022 and was updated in 2023. The search included Canada's major daily newspapers via ProQuest's Canadian Major Dailies. Search words included "hunger strike," "prison," "Canada," "tray refusal," "strike," and the prison's name and a specific year. Articles discussing individual hunger strikes or hunger strikes outside of Canada were discarded. In addition, a review was conducted of several key websites: Perilous Chronicle's list of North American hunger strikes (n.d.), Mike Gouldhawke's timeline of prisoner resistance across the prairies (2021), the websites of Barton Prisoner Solidarity Project (n.d.) and Toronto Prisoners' Rights Project (2020), and a public Facebook group entitled SUPPORT for REGINA CORRECTIONAL INMATES (n.d.), as well as additional Google searches. Articles or posts that referenced a collective hunger strike between 2016 and 2022 in a Canadian prison (federal or provincial) or immigration detention centre[3] were all included. Once the articles were collected, they were categorized and coded for both emerging and a priori themes. When analyzing the data, we gave specific attention to the location and duration of the hunger strikes, how many incarcerated individuals were involved, their demands, and the outcomes of the strikes.

A total of 88 articles were included in the review; fifteen were national, forty-five were local, and twenty-eight were what we categorized as community or independent reporting (including website posts and social media posts). In some instances, multiple articles covered the same hunger strike, or a single article addressed multiple strikes (e.g., the coordinated hunger strikes across seven institutions on July 1, 2021). While the media coverage served as the data source, it was not the focus of our analysis; we did not examine the framing or nature of that coverage.

It is important to acknowledge some of the limitations posed by our choice of methods. As we noted above, one of the findings of our review is that prison management actively seeks to downplay and undermine the scope and significance of collective hunger strikes. This means that there are undoubtedly collective hunger strikes that took place that were not included in this review because they did not receive media attention. We sought to counter this, in part, through a review of additional websites, particularly those that engage in direct support and solidarity with incarcerated individuals. In addition, as we intended to make visible a range of hunger strikes across time and geography, a media review and document analysis, despite its limitations, presented as the most suitable method. Additional research drawing on a mixed-method approach to gain a more comprehensive and detailed understanding of these strikes is most certainly warranted.

Findings

We identified forty-eight collective hunger strikes between 2016 and 2022. Thirty-five of them took place in provincial prisons, with the remaining thirteen in federal-level institutions. Ten collective hunger strikes took place in immigration detention centres, seven of which were in provincial jails, and the remaining three

[3] In Canada, there are three federal immigration holding centres (here referred to as immigration detention centres), one in Laval (Québec), one in Toronto (Ontario), and one in Surrey (British Columbia). Immigrants who are detained in other regions are detained in a provincial prison (Canada Border Service Agency [CBSA], 2023).

at the Laval Immigration Holding Centre, a federal detention centre (Adams, 2021; Peterborough Examiner, 2016; The Canadian Press, 2016). Many institutions had recurring hunger strikes; Regina Correctional Centre had the most, with six identified collective hunger strikes. All of the institutions with three or more collective hunger strikes are provincial, except for the Laval Immigration Holding Centre.

Table 1: Hunger strikes in Canadian prisons 2016-2022

Institution	Location	Federal or Provincial	# Hunger Strikes
Atlantic Institution	Renous, NB	Federal	1
Bordeaux Prison	Montréal, QC	Provincial	2
Laval Immigration Holding Centre	Laval, QC	Federal	3
Central East Correctional Centre (Lindsay Jail)	Lindsay, ON	Provincial	5
Hamilton Wentworth Detention Centre (Barton Jail)	Hamilton, ON	Provincial	2
Maplehurst Correctional Complex	Milton, ON	Provincial	2
Millhaven Institution	Bath, ON	Federal	2
Niagara Detention Centre	Thorold, ON	Provincial	1
Ottawa-Carleton Detention Centre	Ottawa, ON	Provincial	2
Toronto East Detention Centre	Scarborough, ON	Provincial	3
Toronto South Detention Centre	Toronto, ON	Provincial	1
Pine Grove Correctional Centre	Prince Albert, SK	Provincial	4
Saskatchewan Penitentiary	Prince Albert, SK	Federal	2
Regina Correctional Centre	Regina, SK	Provincial	6
Saskatoon Provincial Correctional Centre	Saskatoon, SK	Provincial	5
Drumheller Institution	Drumheller, AB	Federal	1
Edmonton Institution	Edmonton, AB	Federal	2
Edmonton Remand Centre	Edmonton, AB	Provincial	2
Fraser Valley Institution for Women	Abbotsford, BC	Federal	1

Spotlight on demands

Across the forty-eight hunger strikes, the most frequent demands were about the COVID-19 pandemic. Between the end of March 2020 and the end of April 2021, we identified twenty-two collective hunger strikes[4] protesting how prisons were handling the pandemic, in particular decrying the lack of access to personal protective equipment, inadequate health and safety protocols, and the frequent imposition of lockdowns.[5] As one group of individuals held in an immigration detention centre in Laval wrote in their public declaration in March of 2021: "This is a call for help. We want to be treated with dignity and above all

[4] Evans and House (2024) counted thirty-six of them, with data collected from media articles and prisoners' justice groups as well as interviews and government reports and communications.
[5] See Agence QMI (2020), Butler-Hassan (2020), Hasham (2020a,b) and Seawood & Fatica (2020) for examples.

we want to be protected in this time of pandemic like every Canadian citizen." (Solidarity Across Borders, 2021).

Food-related issues were another frequent concern, stated in thirteen hunger strikes, and spread out more evenly over the seven years as compared to COVID-related grievances. Common food-specific claims included insufficient portions of protein (Quan, 2019; The Canadian Press, 2020), not enough fruits and vegetables (Criminalization and Punishment Education Project [CPEP], 2020a; Radio-Canada, 2020), declining quality of food (Pacholik, 2017; Rankin, 2020), and difficulties accessing the canteen because of its high cost of food and low purchasing power of incarcerated individuals (largely related to their incredibly low wages) (CBC News, 2016a; Quan, 2019). One case, in 2016, saw over 100 incarcerated individuals launch a one-day hunger strike to protest the privatization of food services at the Regina Correctional Centre (Jackson, 2016).

Generally, the list of grievances encompasses a multitude of demands related to different aspects of life in prison. They range from specific claims to flagging poor and deteriorating conditions to making broader statements about systemic discrimination and oppression. During a hunger strike at the Ottawa-Carleton Detention Centre (OCDC) in June 2020, incarcerated individuals called for better quality food and an end to "food discrimination" (CPEP, 2020a) against those eating Kosher and Halal diets. A second hunger strike followed the next month. Erica Brazeau (2020), one of the hunger strikers, writes that they demanded: "an end to strip searches, increased access to hygiene products, and food that meets the Canada Food Guide requirements, which the jail is supposed to provide" (p. 127). Evans and House (2024) also reported demands from Indigenous people for culturally appropriate diets and stated that many of the grievances made during these two strikes were framed by the protesters as systemic racism. From these examples, we can see that hunger strikes are both a tool to raise grievances about specific conditions of incarceration and seek an immediate remedy and also a strategy to shine a light on the overall injustices within carceral systems and society as a whole, at a more systemic level.

Prison management response: Deflect and deny

There is a rhetorical pattern emerging from prison management's public responses to hunger strikes, as they are trying to control public opinion. In their statements, government public relations officers or prison superintendents consistently seek to minimize their scope: they will provide vague information on the strike, saying that "some" or "several" people are participating, or "a group," making it seem like only a few people care about these demands, even where it is a large number. Trying to discredit the action and the power of incarcerated folks, management or government officials will speak of "tray refusals" or "refusing meals" rather than a hunger strike (Kliem, 2022; Rankin, 2020). In response to a July 2018 hunger strike at the Edmonton Remand Centre, the Alberta Justice spokesperson was quick to note that "those individuals [on hunger strike] still have access to food from other sources like canteen purchases" (Mertz, 2018). Prison management responds to hunger strikes by deflecting the subject or denying these actions. They do this because public attention is very important for hunger strikes to succeed, and using rhetorical tactics

helps to restrain the protest and diminish its power outside the walls.

In contrast to this public discourse, inside prison walls, staff have responded in ways that appear quite punitive. For instance, there were reports of guards forcing immigration detainees to have food in their cells while they were on hunger strike at Central East Correctional Centre in Lindsay, ON, in 2016 (Cain, 2016). On the flip side, in 2021, Niagara Correctional Centre's guards raided cells, taking snacks away from individuals protesting the new phone system under the guise of ensuring nothing is consumed while on hunger strike (Green, 2021). During a hunger strike at Edmonton Remand Centre in February 2018, Timothy Crowe recounted that prison guards removed food from the canteen during their strike: "They organized a group of guards and they took every available piece of food that we had." (Wakefield, 2018).

Guards have also used threats and intimidation tactics to end the hunger strike and discourage further striking. Maya Mendes from No One Is Illegal, a grassroots migrant justice group, reported that some participants in a hunger strike at Central East Correctional Centre in October 2018 were put in segregation as punishment for striking, a claim the prison, of course, denies (Davis, 2018). Following a hunger strike at Regina Correctional, Forrest Pelletier, one of the hunger strike leaders, was moved to another prison altogether (Pacholik, 2017). Incarcerated individuals at OCDC allege strikers were put on twenty-four hour lockdown and guards threatened to withhold access to medication during a hunger strike in 2020 (CPEP, 2020b), and there were reports of an intentional two-day power outage during another at Millhaven Institution in 2020 (Butler-Hassan, 2020). These tactics are not unusual, as they also have been reported in collective hunger strikes held in other countries (McGregor, 2011; Montange, 2017; Norman, 2022). While hunger strikes are often not officially acknowledged by prison management, these actions by management send a clear message to incarcerated folks that engaging in collective action to demand change will have consequences. The prison management response is contradictory. On the one hand, the public discourse labels these actions as insignificant and unworthy of attention, while internally, their response suggests these actions are indeed important and pose threats to the established order within prisons.

Articles and posts from solidarity organizations and independent reporting were crucial in countering the lack of transparency from prison management. Groups such as the CPEP, the Barton Prisoner Solidarity Project, and the Toronto Prisoners' Rights Project provided key details, often directly from currently incarcerated individuals, on the existence of hunger strikes, their specific demands, and prison management responses. This also exemplifies what Evans and House (2024) frame as "porous prison protest" (p. 170), where the actions, culture, and politics within prisons shape and are shaped by the broader community, rather than conceptualizing prisons as isolated institutions of complete domination. Indeed, as the next section makes clear, incarcerated individuals continue to organize despite threats or reprisals from prison staff.

Mobilization, solidarity, and coordination

On the side of incarcerated folks, the media scan documented a pattern of mobilization, coordination, and solidarity that shows that they resist and contest prison management's aim to shut them down.

While the majority of hunger strikes identified were quite evenly spread out across different institutions, certain institutions had clusters of hunger strikes, such as Regina Correctional Centre (six), Saskatoon Provincial Correctional Centre (five), and Central East Correctional Centre (five). This could be because the conditions are particularly harsh at these institutions, there is a stronger culture of resistance amongst those incarcerated, and/or they are well supported by local allies and support groups.

In tracking the chronology of hunger strikes, we found that when one hunger strike takes place, there's a greater likelihood that another one will follow shortly thereafter. For instance, there were two hunger strikes at Regina Correctional Centre between January and March 2016 (CBC News, 2016a; Jackson, 2016) and two in March 2021 at Laval Migrant Centre (Kamgang, 2021; Marois, 2021). This is perhaps related to a pattern of prison management promising certain concessions to end a strike but failing to fully implement them, pushing incarcerated folks to mobilize another hunger strike reiterating those same demands. Indeed, we often see the same demands repeated in subsequent hunger strikes.

This is what happened at OCDC in the summer of 2020: an initial hunger strike in June achieved partial concessions from prison management (The Canadian Press, 2020), but incarcerated folks were back on strike in July after conditions once again deteriorated (Radio-Canada, 2020). Similarly, the two hunger strikes organized by incarcerated individuals at Saskatoon Provincial Correctional Centre one month apart in 2020 both echoed demands related to access to the jail's handling of the pandemic. In the case of incarcerated individuals at Pine Grove Correctional Centre in Saskatchewan, who organized hunger strikes (two in 2021, one in 2022, and one in 2023), all pertained to the general topic of poor living conditions, while each articulated specific grievances about that central theme. While acknowledging the inherent injustice within the carceral institution, this pattern suggests particular sustained problems with the treatment and living conditions at Pine Grove.

Another observation regarding mobilization emerging from this work is the important role Indigenous leaders play in prisoners' justice and advocacy work. Cory Charles Cardinal at the Saskatoon Correctional Centre; Forrest Pelletier at Regina Correctional Centre and Prince Albert Correctional Centre; Deborah Mckenzie, and most recently Faith Eagle, in Pine Grove Correctional Centre all led strikes, mobilized other incarcerated individuals, and coordinated with folks at other institutions to have joint collective hunger strikes. This is not a surprise since there is a long tradition of Indigenous resistance within carceral systems. Mike Gouldhawke,[6] a Metis and Cree organizer, links it to the spiritual component of fasting present in his culture. Hunger striking is a way to express and connect to Indigenous identity culturally and to fight for it politically (Adams, 2021). In addition, there has long been a devastating overrepresentation of Indigenous people within Canadian prisons, nearly nine times higher than the non-Indigenous population. At the federal level,

[6] Mike Gouldhawke is doing important work in researching the history of Indigenous hunger strikes in prison (2020) as well as tracking Indigenous prisoners' resistance across the prairies (2021).

Indigenous people account for 32 percent of the incarcerated population, a figure that increases to 50 percent in the case of women (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2023). In Saskatchewan, a province that saw 35 percent of hunger strikes included in our study, between 75 to 80 percent of the prison population is Indigenous (Clark, 2019; Ghania, 2022).

We also found several examples where incarcerated individuals coordinated hunger strikes with folks at other institutions. For instance, incarcerated folks at Toronto East Detention Centre and Central East Correctional Centre organized a joint hunger strike in 2016 to protest the indefinite detention of immigrant detainees and their incarceration in maximum security prisons (CBC News, 2016b). Others have started a hunger strike as an act in solidarity with incarcerated individuals at another prison, like in November 2022, as folks from Regina Correctional Centre struck in support of Faith Eagle and women at Pine Grove protesting over living conditions (Neil, 2022). We have also seen hunger strikes in solidarity with people affected by certain situations happening outside the carceral institutions, the most striking of which is when folks from seven prisons across the country[7] coordinated a hunger strike on July 1, 2021, to decry the confirmation of unmarked graves at former residential school sites (Stadnyk, 2021). Speaking specifically of incarcerated individuals in Saskatchewan, Sherri Maier, founder of Beyond Prison Walls Canada, said that they wanted to "stand up and do something." (James, 2021) This serves as a reminder that incarcerated individuals are not disconnected or separated from society; they remain members of communities and families and continue to engage in the world around them.

Concluding thoughts: Impacts of striking

This collection of observations and emerging thoughts shows how food is a space of contestation where incarcerated folks and Canadian carceral institutions fight with disproportionate means to gain power. While incarcerated individuals strike to shed light on and challenge their treatment and poor living conditions, the institution's public responses are meant to discredit those actions in the media while, internally, punishing them for speaking out. Despite this, we continue to see mobilization, coordination, and solidarity amongst incarcerated folks seeking to better their conditions and have their human rights met. Future research gaining a more in-depth understanding of the aspirations and lived experiences of incarcerated individuals involved in these hunger strikes would deepen the insights gained in this research and further extend our understanding of food as a tool of contestation in carceral contexts.

From a practical sense, the results of these collective hunger strikes can be disappointing: promises are made, or small changes arrive to keep the peace while the harsher problems stay, for example, accessing more sports equipment and yard time but no negotiations on dehumanizing body examinations (Toronto Prisoners' Rights Project, 2020). Sometimes, though, strikers have

[7] Saskatchewan Penitentiary, Edmonton Institution, Saskatoon Provincial Correctional Centre, Regina Provincial Correctional Centre, Pine Grove Correctional Centre, Fraser Valley Institution for Women, and the Toronto South Detention Centre.

their demands met, as happened in Laval in 2020, when 4 immigration detainees were released to reduce the risk of contracting COVID-19 (Adams, 2021). As Desta's (2019) history of prison strikes argues, strikes rarely "br[ing] about immediate changes", but they "help initiate long-term prison reforms and have periodically been successful in drawing attention to the otherwise unnoticed plight of those behind bars" (p. 1493; Norman, 2022).

In a more symbolic sense, collective hunger strikes are important for incarcerated individuals, because it is one of a few ways folks have access to regain and exercise their power in such a highly controlled environment (Desta, 2019; McGregor, 2011). They are an attempt to regain power over their environment, showing a sense of autonomy and engaging in political acts that are meaningful to them (Earle & Philips, 2012; Smith, 2002). As for other forms of food resistance in carceral settings, this can enable incarcerated individuals to reject the institution's control over their body, the "inmate identity" that it imposes on them, and to regain a sense of their own identity (Cate, 2008; De Graaf & Kilty, 2016; Godderis, 2006b; Smoyer, 2014). Ultimately, collective hunger strikes are a way to contest authority, create alternative ways to see oneself, and engage in meaningful collective struggle with other incarcerated individuals. Our findings are a reminder that despite a highly controlled and punitive environment, incarcerated individuals still find ways to advocate for their rights and engage in solidarity actions to support others. As incarcerated people continue to organize on the front lines, we hope this timeline encourages more people on the outside to support and amplify strikes behind bars and join the fight for prison abolition.

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Hungry for Justice

A timeline of collective hunger strikes in Canadian prisons

Hunger strikes are one of the few collective actions available to incarcerated people and they've long used hunger strikes to protest prison conditions, garner public attention, and pressure prison management to address their grievances. Between 2016 and 2022, incarcerated people organized at least 48 strikes. As incarcerated people continue to organize on the front lines, we hope this timeline encourages more people on the outside to support and amplify strikes behind bars and join the fight for prison abolition.

2016

Regina Correctional Centre
Regina, Saskatchewan
Fifteen incarcerated people participate in a five-day hunger strike to demand less time spent in cells and more access to the exercise yard.

March 3

Toronto East Detention Centre
Toronto, Ontario
Sixty-eight incarcerated people join those at Central East in their protest for time limits to immigration detention, now also demanding a meeting with then Minister of Public Safety Ralph Goodale.

July 11

January 7
Regina Correctional Centre
Regina, Saskatchewan
One hundred people participate in a one day hunger strike to protest the privatization of food services.

April 21
Central East Correctional Centre
Kawartha Lakes, Ontario
A group of migrants in immigration detention initiate a hunger strike demanding a 90-day limit to immigration detentions and the end of the use of maximum security prisons to detain migrants. The group meets with officials from Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA), however CBSA does not meet their demands.

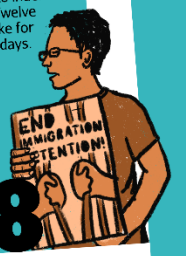
October 17
Central East Correctional Centre and Toronto East Detention Centre
Ontario
Seventeen people in immigration detention go back on hunger strike, once again demanding an end to indefinite detention of migrants. Twelve strikers remain on hunger strike for 17 days.

Central East Correctional Centre
Kawartha Lakes, Ontario
Fifteen incarcerated migrants go on a hunger strike for four days, demanding a meeting with CBSA to discuss their recently published national immigration detention framework. There were reports that the prison put some of the strikers in segregation as punishment.

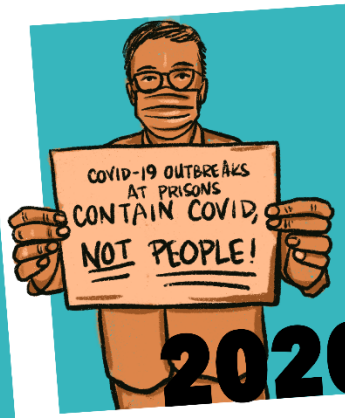
October 8

Regina Correctional Centre,
Regina, Saskatchewan
Twelve incarcerated people go on a hunger strike to protest changes to mail delivery and the lack of access to canteen, hygiene products and medical care. The Ministry of Justice refuses to negotiate with the strikers.

March 12



2018



2020

July 23
Edmonton Remand Centre
Edmonton, Alberta
Approximately 200 people go on a hunger strike for at least three days in protest of a prolonged lockdown.

Bordeaux Prison
Montréal, Québec
Approximately 150 incarcerated people go on a hunger strike for seven days to protest the prison's poor sanitary conditions. They call for their release because they are unable to practice physical distancing, putting them at risk of infection. The strikers succeed in getting access to PPE.

May 5

January 7
Edmonton Remand Centre
Edmonton, Alberta
Fifty-five people go on a hunger strike to protest the amount of time the prison forces them to stay in their cells, and the prison's transfer of an individual to a high-security unit.

March 23
Laval Immigration Detention Centre
Laval, Québec
Thirty incarcerated people go on hunger strike demanding their release and improved medical care, to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Four people continue to strike for eight days and most of the hunger strikers are released in the following months.

June 3
Ottawa-Carleton Detention Centre
Ottawa, Ontario
Fourteen people in maximum security go on a hunger strike to demand better quality food and increased access to kosher and halal food, as well as to protest the prison's lack of COVID precautions. Their demands are not met, but the prison commits to providing peanut butter packets with kosher meals and increasing access to health and hygiene products.

June 15
Centre East Correctional Centre
Lindsay, Ontario
One-hundred people go on a five-day hunger strike to protest prison conditions, including increased access to books and clean clothing, higher quality food, and potable tap water.

Ottawa-Carleton
Detention Centre
Ottawa, Ontario
Over 70 people go on hunger strike to once again demand better conditions.

July 22

Maplehurst Correctional Complex
Milton, Ontario
A group of people go on a hunger strike due to arbitrary lockdowns, inadequate hygiene and food, and access to cleaning supplies and phones. The prison doesn't meet their demands and denies them access to the canteen.

July 6

Hamilton-Wentworth Detention Centre
Hamilton, Ontario
Between 20 and 50 people go on hunger strike to protest the poor-quality food the prison serves them. The prison stops serving certain "disgusting" meals.

June 20

Millhaven Institution
Bath, Ontario

A group go on a five-day hunger strike to demand four hours per day outside of their cell, two more hours than they currently have, as well as to protest prison staff's failure to practice social distancing and to wear PPE. Strikers win more time outside, but the prison refuses to improve COVID-19 safety measures.

October 8

Saskatoon Provincial Correctional Centre
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

Incarcerated people stage a hunger strike to call for a plan to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 including physical distancing, PPE, and the release of incarcerated people to ease overcrowding.

November 27

Saskatchewan Penitentiary
Prince Alberta, Saskatchewan

Incarcerated people go on a hunger strike to protest the prison's COVID-19 response. The prison puts incarcerated people on lockdown for seven days and fails to remove COVID-19 positive people from the units.

December 19

October 7

Toronto East Detention Centre
Toronto, Ontario

A group go on a three-day hunger strike to demand daily outdoor recreation and exercise time, affordable phone calls, rehabilitative and educational programming, better access to TV and radio, more canteen products, and an end to strip searches and the use of full body scanners. Prison management agrees to some of the strikers' demands regarding yard time, sport equipment access, and better accommodation of their religious needs, but refuses to negotiate strip searches.

December 17

Toronto South Detention Centre
Toronto, Ontario

Thirty-three people start a hunger strike to protest the prison's inadequate health and safety measures.

December 24

Saskatoon Provincial Correctional Centre
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

After the prison forces incarcerated people into quarantine for 31 days to curb the spread of COVID-19, 21 people begin a hunger strike in protest.

Drumheller Institution
Drumheller, Alberta

Over 30 people go on a week-long hunger strike to protest punitive COVID-19 safety measures. For three weeks during the lockdown, incarcerated people have no access to soap, but after two days of striking, the prison provides some.

January 9

2021

Laval Immigration Detention Centre
Laval, Québec

A week long hunger strike to protest the prison's lack of COVID-19 protections and to demand their release.

March 1

January 4

Saskatoon Provincial Correctional Centre
Pine Grove Correctional Centre
Saskatchewan

Ninety people go on hunger strike for a third time to protest poor COVID-19 safety measures, this time joined by 14 women incarcerated at Pine Grove Correctional Centre.

March 10

Hamilton-Wentworth Detention Centre
Hamilton, Ontario

Fifty people go on a hunger strike to demand better conditions, including access to cleaning supplies, hand soap, clean bedding, regular access to yard time, and for visits and calls with lawyers to be restored.

February 15

Maplehurst Correctional Complex
Milton, Ontario

After lockdown due to a COVID-19 outbreak, incarcerated people go on hunger strike demanding access to video calls since in-person visits are no longer permitted due to COVID-19, access to personal hygiene and hair products, consistent laundry service, improved kosher food options, better TV access and more channels, increased phone card funds, and more access to books and basketball nets.

Bordeaux Prison, Montréal, Québec

Thirty people go on a one-day hunger strike after the prison goes on lockdown following a COVID-19 outbreak. For two weeks, they aren't able to leave their cells despite no positive tests.

Saskatchewan Penitentiary, Edmonton Institution, Saskatoon Provincial Correctional Centre, Pine Grove Correctional Centre, Fraser Valley Institution for Women and the Toronto South Detention Centre

Incarcerated people from across Canada go on a 24-hour hunger strike after the discovery of thousands of unmarked graves at former residential schools.

July 1

Pine Grove Correctional Centre
Prince Albert, Saskatchewan

Eight women go on a week-long hunger strike to protest inadequate access to health care and hygiene products, mistreatment from staff, a lack of accountability when they submit complaints to the prison, a lack of programming and support, and ongoing concerns related to the prison's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

April 8

April 30

Niagara Correctional Centre
Thorold, Ontario

After prison management install a new faulty phone system, 20 people begin a five-day hunger strike. Guards took the opportunity to raid strikers' cells and steal their snacks to make sure strikers weren't consuming anything. Strikers also protested their inability to add funds to their accounts remotely, the prison canceling visits due to the pandemic, reduced yard and TV time, and the prison's so-called "relationship tax" where they charge an additional fee when an incarcerated person calls the same number more than 60 times per month.

July 9

Regina Provincial and Saskatoon Provincial Correctional Centres
Saskatchewan

After someone was stabbed, a group start a hunger strike to advocate for proper medical care for the wounded person.

Pine Grove Correctional Centre
Prince Albert, Saskatchewan

"We won't stop," Faith Eagle, an Indigenous woman from Saskatoon, went on hunger strike protesting incarcerated people's lack of access to clean water, healthy food, and time outside, inadequate medical care, racist treatment from guards, and the over-representation of Indigenous women in Canada's prison system. Five weeks into Eagle's strike, two others joined her. Weeks later, people incarcerated at the Regina Correctional Centre, Atlantic Institution, and Edmonton Institution went on a three-day hunger strike in solidarity with the trio.

September

Millhaven Institution
Bath, Ontario

When staff threatened to move certain individuals to a different ward, a group launches a hunger strike in protest and succeed in preventing the move.

January 3

2022

Writing and Research: Julie Courchesne and Amanda Wilson
Design and Illustrations: Kara Sievewright

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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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Research Article

Punishment and waste: Family meals in Correctional Services of Canada's private family visits

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Abstract

While families of prisoners in Canada are often allowed to visit their loved one inside, they can face significant challenges in accessing and navigating the conditions of these visits. One such challenge is the food available to them as they seek to take part in a key aspect of family life and relationship, the family meal. Families' experiences of the limited options, poor quality, and high costs of food echo those of the prisoners living in the institution. The prized Private Family Visit (PFV), during which family members spend a weekend with a prisoner in a small house on the grounds of a CSC institutions, do present a rare opportunity for a true family meal. However, institutional policies render the costs and waste of the food so high that partners in this study (primarily women living in poverty) experience this as yet another 'painful' penal power. While these policies are minor in scope, impact, and importance to all but a few hundred Canadian families a year, I argue that families' experiences of carceral food systems contribute insights into the way food is used as a tool of penal power and as one of the mechanism through which families of prisoners become carceral subjects

Keywords: Carceral food systems; children of incarcerated parents; families of prisoners; prison food; punishment and society

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Résumé

Alors que la plupart des familles de détenus au Canada sont autorisées, en principe, à maintenir une relation avec leur proche détenu et à lui rendre visite à l'intérieur des murs de la prison, elles peuvent se heurter à une myriade de défis pour accéder aux visites et s'y retrouver dans les conditions exigées. L'alimentation est l'un des défis auxquels les partenaires et les enfants sont confrontés lorsqu'ils cherchent à prendre part à un aspect essentiel de la vie et des relations familiales, à savoir le repas en famille. Cet article explore les expériences des visiteurs familiaux en ce qui a trait aux politiques alimentaires liées aux visites, en s'appuyant sur des entretiens avec des partenaires et des enfants de détenus, ainsi que sur les politiques du Service correctionnel du Canada relatives aux visites et à l'approvisionnement en nourriture. Les opinions négatives des familles sur les choix limités, la mauvaise qualité et les coûts élevés de la nourriture font écho à celles des prisonniers vivant dans l'institution, tout comme leurs expériences des systèmes alimentaires carcéraux comme étant punitifs, imprévisibles et injustes. La très prisée visite familiale privée, pendant laquelle les membres de la famille passent une fin de semaine avec leur proche détenu, constitue un rare sursis, et la possibilité d'un véritable repas familial est au cœur de cet avantage. Cependant, les politiques institutionnelles rendent les coûts et le gaspillage de la nourriture si élevés que les partenaires (avant tout des femmes vivant dans la pauvreté) vivent cette visite comme une autre manifestation « douloureuse » du pouvoir pénal. Bien que ces politiques aient une portée, une importance et des effets dans la vie de seulement quelques centaines de familles canadiennes chaque année, je soutiens que les expériences des familles en matière de systèmes alimentaires carcéraux permettent de mieux comprendre la manière dont l'alimentation est utilisée comme un outil du pouvoir pénal et comme l'un des mécanismes par lesquels les familles de prisonniers deviennent des sujets carcéraux.

Introduction

A key standard of international human rights related to incarceration, and the Supreme Court's interpretation of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms,* is that prisoners "retain all rights other than those necessarily limited by lawfully imposed restrictions or sanctions" (Sapers, 2017, p.1). An adage from the prisoners' rights movement puts this another way: prisoners are sent to prison "as punishment, not for punishment." However, this is difficult to reconcile with the experience of eating a meal in prison, which prisoners and researchers (including in this special edition) often describe as a tool or mechanism of punishment and penal power (de Graaf & Kilty, 2016; Earl & Phillips, 2012; Hatch, 2019; Ugelvik, 2011; Wilson, 2023).

This literature naturally focuses on the interests of and data from prisoners; however, there are others who eat prison meals and experience institutional policies and practices regarding food. This article seeks to contribute to the discussion of carceral food systems by exploring the food experiences of visitors to prisons, in particular children and partners of prisoners. These family visitors spend time in day visiting rooms and private family

visiting (PFV) "trailers" and bring valuable perspectives on these food systems. Their experiences provide further insights into the costs, quality, accessibility, and control over food inside prisons and how prison service policies are enacted.

Examining family visitors' experiences can also add insight into the meanings of food "inside." As they try to have a family meal, which sociologists see as a constitutive and sustaining practice of families (Ochs & Shohet, 2006; Punch & McIntosh, 2014), they are faced with barriers in the form of rigid institutional policies and rules, as well as frustrations at practices felt to be inconsistent, arbitrary, and unfair. I argue that this constitutes experience of a "tight" penal power (Crewe, 2011; Crewe & Ievins, 2021) and aligns with critical scholarship into the nature, use, and implications of penal power.

The experiences of food by visitors also provide insights into the processes by which families become subjects of penal regulation and harms. While there is no legal justification to punish children and families of prisoners, scholars in the emerging area of familial incarceration argue that they are nonetheless subjected to a sort of adjunct sentence and live "in the shadow" of the prison (Codd, 2013; Comfort, 2009; Condry & Minson, 2021). This concept has been variously theorized, but Comfort's (2009, 2019) notion of families experiencing a "secondary prisonization" provides a particularly useful lens through which to understand the experiences of Canadian children and partners who visit their relative inside, with its focus on the disciplining power of the institution on families. I argue below that engagement with carceral food systems during visits is one of the mechanisms through which families become *subjects* of the prison.

This article briefly reviews the literature on prison food in Canada, including the "modernized" food system used in many institutions and the limited research into prisoners' experiences of food inside. Evidence from a broader qualitative study of Canadian families of prisoners is then presented, focusing on evidence regarding their experiences of food and family meals in day visiting rooms and PFVs. While real family meals are possible and a prized element of the PFV for children and partners, their experiences nonetheless support the argument that carceral food policy is both subjectifying and punitive.

Prison food quality and neoliberal "central feeding"

The UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (known as the *Mandela Rules*) state that "every prisoner shall be provided by the prison administration at the usual hours with food of nutritional value adequate for health and strength, of wholesome quality and well prepared and served" (*United Nations General Assembly,* 2015, Rule 22.1). Despite this, there is extensive research literature about poor quality, spoilage, inadequacy, and other faults with much prison food (McKeithen, 2022; Smoyer & Minke, 2015; Ugelvik, 2011). Examples of this inadequacy abound, including requiring some prisoners to eat meals beside or seated on the open toilets in their cells if they are incarcerated in some remand settings, institutions on lock-down due to illness, violence, or staffing shortages, or in solitary confinement, (Evans et al., 2022; Pratt & Hosoi, 2024). One study of elderly prisoners found that the second most common

aspiration for post-release life was "eating what they wanted" (Pratt & Hosoi, 2024, p.148).

The quality and quantity of food in Canadian prisons has been specifically decried as inadequate in terms of quality and quantity, particularly since the shift to centralized, industrial food preparation after 2014 (OCI, 2019; Senate Committee, 2021; Wilson, 2013b). Under the narrative of "modernization," industrial cook-chill systems replaced "from scratch" cooking in many federal and some provincial prisons. These systems involve large vats of food being cooked and flash chilled at centralized sites and then shipped to individual prisons for "finishing" in the form of reheating large bags of stews and soups (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2019; Wilson, 2023). Costs per meal have been further reduced through a lower diversity of food, fewer grains and whole foods, and the use of powdered milk. This system is deeply tied to a neoliberal ideology, in its austerity and "reductionary nutrition" as well as its focus on technical and financial efficiency and standardization (McKeithen, 2022). Within these logics, the idea of prisoners eating freshly cooked food, made with ingredients that have a relationship with season, climate, or culture and that respond to the eater's choices and desires, is irrational. Indeed, the food is experienced as disgusting and inedible by prisoners (Wilson, 2023).

Further, the appearance of efficiency in this centralized system does not appear to be reflected in institutional practice. An internal audit by CSC identified significant concerns and inconsistencies with food spoilage and waste in visited institutions (CSC, 2019). Findings included that all institutions prepared far more meals than required for each sitting (though simultaneously not allowing prisoners to store or retain food), that some institutions simply did not record food waste, that a third of institutions had spoiled or expired food in their freezers, and that one institution simply threw away all excess food after a meal and kept none for "leftover" meals (a full third of what was prepared) (CSC, 2019). Further, the repurposing of prison kitchens from sites of cooking meals to re-heating bags of food meant the closure of programs that trained prisoners for work in the food service industry (Wilson, 2023).

The inadequacy and lack of palatability of the prison food provided leads prisoners to purchase more palatable food through the canteen or underground economies. Prisoners rely on snack foods purchased from the prison canteen using the limited funds they have earned or had sent in by family, such as instant noodles, to supplement the meagre and poor quality food they receive through the official food service, and "with no way to shop for better prices, federally-sentenced persons are forced to pay exorbitant prices for these items" (Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights, 2021, p.86). Nearly all respondents to Wilson's (2023b) survey described conflicts between prisoners over traded, stolen, purchased, or extra food.

Food as a tool of penal power

The provision of nutritious food to prisoners is the responsibility of the state that incarcerates them, and prisoners have this right enshrined within international human rights instruments, including the Mandela Rules which outline a clear prohibition on using prison diets as a sanction (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). However, prisoners and researchers have long argued that food choice, quality, quantity, and access are used as a less formal form of power by institutions

and their staff to discipline and punish prisoners (Ugelvik, 2011; Wilson, 2023).

Certainly, prisons across Canada use prized foods such as snacks or higher quality items as incentives for prisoner compliance. Evidence for this can be found in such mundane texts as a Public Works and Government Services Canada (2013) request for private bids to supply food and food services at a CSC institution, which notes that "tea, coffee, milk, juice, pop, dessert items, canned fruit etc. provided for behavior modification shall be provided in bulk separate from any other food on a weekly basis" (p. 25). Combined with the inadequacy and poor quality of prison-issued meals, it is unsurprising that using food as a tool of penal power is replicated within the informal economies of the "society of captives" for currency and status (Gooch, 2022; Wilson, 2023). An ex-prisoner I interviewed for the study described below explained to me his method for procuring a nightly phone call with his children while he was on remand: he collected the sugar packets that arrived with meal trays and sold these to the range cleaner, a prisoner who had earned this position of relative power which included the power to tell the officers which cells should be "cracked" first when prisoners were let out onto the range. The sugar packets bought him the service of being let onto the range first and thereby being first in line for the range telephone, another contested resource (Knudsen,2016).

Like food, family visits are used by prisons as a tool of behaviour modification, despite the right to family life for prisoners being guaranteed in the Mandela Rules (United Nations General Assembly, 2015), upheld as a Charter right in *Hunter v Canada* ([1997] 3 F.C. 936), and, for children, outlined in the UN Convention on the Right of the Child (Lagoutte, 2011; Parkes & Donson, 2018). The Mandela Rules state explicitly that "disciplinary sanctions or restrictive measures shall not include the prohibition of family contact. The means of family contact may only be restricted for a limited time period and as strictly required for the maintenance of security and order" (Rule 43, United Nations General Assembly, 2015). Nonetheless, access to visits and other key elements of prisoner life are routinely used as incentives to discipline prisoners by modifying behaviour and gaining compliance, as shown in this description of open or "contact" visiting rooms for prisoners to meet with their children or other family members at an Ontario remand centre: "Open visits at the institution are primarily used as a good behaviour incentive, and are available to men and women who are on a direct supervision unit who staff have judged as consistently demonstrating good behaviour" (Sapers, 2017, p. 57). Gooch (2022) points to the neoliberal austerity approach to prison management, which values compliance and order over any rehabilitative aims, as the cause of this prioritization.

In parallel to prisoners' experiences of institutional food, limited research into the experiences of family visitors to prisons indicates that food in prison visiting rooms is experienced as poor quality and limited in choice (Christian, 2005; Evans et al., 2022; Knudsen,2023). The only food options in day visit rooms are provided by vending machines run by private for-profit companies that CSC contracts to install and stock them. CSC does not pay the vendor, rather the vendor sets the price of the items (on which CSC sets no upper limit in the Tender process) and receives the profit of the items sold after paying a share to the prison's "Inmate Welfare Fund" ((CSC, 2017)These costs are paid by visitors who, like prisoners, are disproportionately likely to be living in poverty (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). I have argued elsewhere that Canadian prisons systemically neglect any responsibility to identify, understand, or meet the needs and rights of prisoners' families (Knudsen, 2016).

Private family visits in Canadian prisons

Most visits between prisoners and their family members in Canada are short sessions during which people speak through glass or a video camera with little privacy, as most prisoners in Canada are incarcerated on remand and are therefore held in maximum security settings by default (Knudsen, 2016; Sapers, 2017). Visits are issues of primary concern and frustration to prisoners and their visitors. Indeed, the category of "visits" is regularly in the top ten categories of complaint to the Office of the Correctional Investigator (OCI), which hears complaints only related to the federal prison system (Public Safety Canada, 2024).

One opportunity does exist for some prisoners to have visits with their family members that resemble or constitute a home-like environment: the Private Family Visit (PFVs or "trailer visits"). These visits are highly prized and are used by the institution as a powerful incentive, like higher quality food. Yet PFVs are scarce: they are only open to prisoners incarcerated in federal CSC institutions, who constitute around one third of Canadian prisoners, while 44% are people being held on remand in provincial institutions and 18% are provincially sentenced (Public Safety Canada, 2024).

PFVs involve three days spent in a small bungalow located inside the grounds of the institution and are private aside from daily visits by correctional officers. Visits may occur every two months once approved. CSC (2024) describes the goal of PFVs as follows:

> Private family visits (PFVs) allow inmates and their families to spend time together. These visits help inmates keep and strengthen family and community ties. As well as:
>
> - enhance daily living skills
> - maintain positive community and family relationships and responsibilities, such as parenting skills
> - decrease the negative impact of incarceration on family relationships

Families often spend trailer visits engaging in normal home-life activities like watching television, playing games, talking, having sex, cooking, eating family meals, and washing dishes. Vacheret (2005) notes the intimacy that can be cultivated through mundane activities in the PFV, allowing prisoners to recover, recreate, or reinforce their parenting roles, even if only superficially or temporarily. In analyzing women's experiences of similar visits in a California penitentiary, Comfort (2002) described them as "domestic satellites" created by women visitors within the prison. In a global context, the availability of this type of "conjugal" or overnight visit is uncommon, and Canada's PFVs are commended internationally (Moran, 2013; Raikes & Lockwood, 2019).

However, even within the population of federal prisoners, only selected prisoners and families are eligible. Prisoners are formally eligible if they are not in a Special Handling Unit and can pass risk assessments related to family violence and other threats (CSC, 2016). The potential visitor must similarly have their "suitability" reviewed through an application, photographs, a criminal record check, written responses to questions about their relationship with the prisoner and desire for the visit, an interview with a correctional officer, and a search for contraband upon entry (CSC, 2022, 2023). Finally, prisoners must buy the food for the PFV using their inmate account, choosing from a list of items provided by the institution (CSC, 2024).

Prisoners and potential visitors can also be informally ineligible for PFVs for a range of reasons,

many associated with living in poverty. These include lacking funds to travel to CSC institutions (often situated in rural areas away from public transit) or to stay in hotels the night before a visit, inability to take three days away from work or caregiving, not having identification cards, being homeless, having a criminal record, substance use (as trace amounts will be detected by the ion scanners at the institution), lacking funds to send to the prisoners' accounts to contribute to the cost of PFV food, inability to complete the application process due to lower literacy, or sexual abuse histories that make the risk of being frisk-searched untenable (Knudsen, 2016*).* While services for visiting families, such as advice, lower-cost transportation, or Welcome Houses to receive long-distance visitors, are sporadically and sparsely offered to families by local charities, neither prisons nor the governments that run them offer any support to reduce these barriers to maintaining family life.

Given these many limitations, it is unsurprising that, of the 33,000 prisoners in Canadian prisons, the number receiving PFVs on any given weekend across the country is at most around 150 (Vacheret, 2005). For this small, privileged percentage of prisoners and visitors, the experience appears to be widely valued. This paper seeks to examine how families' experiences of being able to choose, cook, and share family meals during the PFVs may contribute to scholarly and policy discussions of the nature of both penal power and familial incarceration.

Methodology

This paper draws on qualitative interviews collected during a broader study of the self-reported experiences of Canadian children of incarcerated parents, for which I interviewed twenty-two children and youth, aged six to seventeen years, who currently had a parent in prison (Knudsen, 2016). Participant recruitment was extremely challenging for this study and took almost two years. Initial recruitment efforts were extensive yet yielded an extremely low response rate. These efforts included passive recruitment strategies through various routes: information across social media; hundreds of "pull tab" flyers posted on agency bulletin boards and phone poles throughout several cities; a website; packages of flyers sent for posting and distribution to every parole office and CSC institution, every Ontario halfway house, and hundreds of social service organizations and community health centres; emails to every Ontario child protection office; a recruitment letter sent to 200 families who matched my eligibility from the Angel Tree funding program; and inclusion of my flyer in every CFCN Family Orientation package (n = seventy-five to 100) sent to families of all new CSC prisoners who provided the institution their family's address over six months in 2012. I initially approached the CSC, but efforts to recruit participants at or through the institutions themselves, or even to post recruitment flyers, were denied.

I was eventually able to successfully recruit participants by volunteering for two charitable prison transportation services, both of which offered low-cost travel from the Greater Toronto area to CSC men's institutions on weekends and are primarily used by partners and children. I drove the van for one service, and for the other service I rode on a larger bus and sought to assist by keeping kids busy and chatting with parents. I distributed my recruitment flyers and answered questions about my research near the end of each ride.

Rigorous attention was paid to maintaining a non-coercive and otherwise ethical research protocol, given the heightened vulnerability of these children, the importance of confidentiality in relation to criminal legal systems, and the risks of distress associated with the topic.[1] Measures taken included using a strict "opt-in" approach to recruitment such that caregivers' failure to proactively contact me would prevent their child's inclusion in the research, an approach that may reduce coercive effects but also leads to much lower participation rates and risks "non-participation" for reasons other than refusal to participate (such as inertia, confusion, or lack of contemplation) (Berry et al., 2012). This opt-in recruitment method is a natural element of passive recruitment strategies like posting a flyer; however, I used this within active recruitment efforts as well. When I met or built relationships with potential participants or their caregivers on transportation services, I ended our interactions by giving (or re-giving) them my flyer and asking them to call, email, or text me if they were interested in participating, or to spontaneously offer to book a time for me to visit their home. I note concerns that this opt-in protocol raises other ethical risks, such as encouraging higher participation by people with university education and higher socioeconomic status (Berry et al., 2012).

I conducted a single, semi-structured interview with each child, lasting around forty-five minutes in length. These interviews were conducted privately, aside from a few children who indicated that they preferred their caregiver to be present. They were conducted in the spaces in which I was invited by the caregiver to meet the children, which was primarily their homes but also included a restaurant booth, a backyard, and a park. Interviews occurred in different locations across southern Ontario between 2011 and 2013. Children were eligible if they were aged between six and seventeen years and had a parent currently in prison. I defined "parent" as anyone whom the child and their caregiver regarded or identified as the child's parent (regardless of biological or legal ties). "Prison" was defined as a carceral institution, including provincial jails and facilities for remand and sentenced prisoners and federal penitentiaries, but not including community corrections (e.g., halfway houses), immigration detention, or secure psychiatric settings.

I attended to rapport and trust building with care and other resources, in part because of the extreme wariness I perceived from caregivers. These efforts included spending time with the family upon arriving at the visit rather than rushing to begin the interview, taking up any offers of food or drink, meeting family pets and admiring favourite toys, touring the home, going for a walk, and, in one case, visiting a school fun fair together. I offered to purchase lunch or dinner for the family during the visit; this was usually accepted, and I would bring, arrange delivery of, or purchase pizza or other fast food based on the family's preference. Sharing a meal thus became a backdrop to building relationship and constructing the data.

One interesting exclusion criterion emerged in the course of the research related to a child's knowledge of their parent's incarceration. Caregivers who kept the parent's incarceration a secret from the child (e.g., telling them that their parent is away at work or school) were unlikely to respond to my recruitment efforts for interviews about this topic. However I did actually have several caregivers on the bus service who let me know that they would be willing to have their child

[1] Research ethics board approval was obtained. My social work education, as well as training and experience as a child protection worker, afford me particular skills in interviewing children and families around potentially distressing topics. Further discussion of this process can be found in Knudsen (2016).

participate on the condition that I not ask their child anything about prisons or their parent's incarceration; despite bringing their children to visits at the prison, they told the child (and felt confident that their child believed) that they were visiting their father at "work." I declined to interview these children as this would not have been useful, aside from one child. In this case, the mother asked me to call the prison "daddy's work," and I agreed to go ahead because I had met the child several times on the visiting bus and heard him mention that his father was in prison. However, this was the one child who did not assent to be interviewed (described above), and so they were not included. There is some evidence to suggest that this strategy of not telling children about the parent's incarceration may be widespread (Boswell, 2002; Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008).

The demographics and experiences of my sample of child participants was likely reasonably representative of what can be inferred (but which we do not have research to show) are representative of Canadian children of prisoners on some demographic indicators. They were disproportionately living in poverty, with eight of the families' (eighteen of the children) primary incomes being derived from various government income support programs, and another three families whose income came primarily from employment. All reported or showed indicators of low income, including living in subsidized housing or temporarily with a family member. While there are no Canadian data on the previous incomes of Canadian prisoners, there is substantial research literature showing that criminal legal systems disproportionately capture people living in poverty (Wacquant, 2009). Fourteen of the twenty-two children were white (similar to 62% of the Canadian prison population), three were Black (versus 9% of prisoners), one was Indigenous (versus 19 % of prisoners), one was Latino (versus 1% of prisoners), one identified as half Indigenous and half Black, and three identified as half white and half black (Public Safety, 2024). In certain other ways, these children do not represent the population of Canadian or even Ontario children of prisoners as they all lived in southern Ontario and most had parents in the federal correctional system. This bias was due to recruitment through transportation programs from the Toronto area to CSC institutions, and it may lead to underreporting of additional costs faced by families of prisoners who travel from rural areas to these institutions.

The twenty-two children lived in twelve unrelated households; I conducted interviews with these children's primary caregivers on the "outside," with interviews occurring privately and during the same visit. These twelve caregivers were all the child's mother and their sole caregiver, aside from one child who was cared for by his mother's sister and brother (I interviewed the maternal aunt) and two children were cared for by both their mother and maternal grandmother. These interviews were also semi-structured and lasted sixty to ninety minutes in length, and I found that most caregivers had a great deal to say and communicated an interest in keeping the interview going. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis was used to develop a coding scheme, and the data were coded using NVivo software.

Finally, the broader study included visits to a variety of services for families of prisoners in southern Ontario and maritime province Welcome Houses, interviews with twenty key informants, and a review of grey literature on this topic, including prison service documentation and service provider materials. The key informants had a range of professional expertise with the prison system or prisoners' families, mainly as the executive directors or program managers of social services or policy analysts, but none had any specific

focus or expertise in food systems. Finally, the methodology from design through to analysis was informed by key concepts from critical childhood studies, particularly the framing of children as competent, political social actors and authors of knowledge. As such, the broader study centers the voices and views of children about their own lives, connects discussions of childhood to sociopolitical systems, and resists the tendency to focus on children's outcomes or their utility (Burman, 2023).

Findings

While this broader study was not designed with any goals around exploring food or family meals, these topics arose spontaneously, immediately, and consistently in the interviews. As I asked about their experiences of having a loved one in prison, families, and children in particular, so frequently brought up the topic of food, and particularly the quality, options, cost, accessibility, and value of their meals in the prison, that the importance of food to the experience of familial incarceration emerged as a key finding.

Food as a defining element of familial incarceration

When asked about various aspects of having a parent in prison, children consistently and spontaneously identified their experiences of food during visits, and used food to evaluate, illustrate, and organize their experiences. For example, seven-year-old Grace answered my questions this way:

> *Anything you like about the day visits?*
> Uhm that we get to have food and we get to play and I get to talk to my daddy and get to talk to my mommy.
> *[...]*
> *Okay is there anything good about having dad in jail?*
> Uhm that he gives me candies.

Similarly, Rob, also seven, reported on the salience of food in his visits with his father:

> *What do you like about your visits [to the prison]?*
> I gets lots of treats from my daddy.
> *You get lots of what from your daddy?*
> I get lots of treats from my daddy.
> *You get lots of treats from your daddy! What kind of treats?*
> Um I got, I get pop, [//*you get pop*] chips, and popcorns.
> *Okay. And what do you like best about visits with daddy?*
> The stuff he gives me.

Ten-year-old Darcy used the visiting room food options to assess the difference between the two different prisons she had visited her father in:

> *And is there one [of the prisons] you liked better or were they about the same?*
> Uhm...the one that he's in now, there's like TV and stuff. [*Okay*] And the vending machines, they have better stuff.
> *Oh. What was it like in the first place?*
> They had like chips and sandwiches and drinks that I don't really like...
> *Okay gotcha. But how is the food in this one he is in now?*
> They taste good.

So consistent was the spontaneous mention of food experiences that I concluded that food was a defining

element of children's experiences of having a loved one in prison. The significance of food to visits with a parent for these children exemplifies the way that meals are "central to defining and sustaining the family as a social unit" (Ochs & Shohet, 2006, p. 37) and a medium for socializing and constituting family identity (Punch & McIntosh, 2014).

However, poor quality and meagre options of food to share during visits appear to be just as defining. For example, when discussing her frustrations with the institution, partner Bree described the way that poor food in the day visiting rooms negatively impacted visits

There should have [been] somewhere you can get actual food, not these, just vending machines....[The food in the prison visiting areas is] chips and chocolate and pop. People are going to be in there with kids from 9:30 to 3:30, no food? No kind of food? Just rubbish? Garbage?

Caregiver Casey similarly raised the issue of food when discussing how families could be better supported, suggesting:

> If [families] could even bring a picnic lunch or something. Okay, no utensils or whatever [which might raise a safety concern]. Sandwiches or whatever, and even if it means we get the pop from [the prison staff] so it's not glasses coming out, you know. Whatever the issues. So you're there for that length of time, the person can enjoy eating a cooked meal just for that one time that they see you. So they know what they're looking forward to. Instead of same old, same old; the only difference, I'm seeing my family.

Casey argued that the processed snack foods on offer in vending machines affected the quality and nature of visits with her son-in-law, but suggested moreover that such food could not constitute a family meal, which she framed as key to making the visit special.

Food as defining: Food quality and family meals in the PFV

Nowhere was this defining nature of family meals for the prison visit more evocative than with six-year-old Will, whose experience of visiting his stepfather for a PFV visit (which he calls his stepfather's "house") centered on the food:

> *Can you tell me, how do you feel about having visits with [stepdad in the PFV]?*
> Happy
> *Yeah? What makes you happy about it?*
> 'Cause I get to see him 'cause I don't really see him a lot. And uhm 'cause his house is very fun
> *His house is very fun? [*Mm hm] *What do you do in his house?*
> Play toys and the lunch is better than our lunch
> *Yeah? What do you get to have for lunch, when you go to [his] house?*
> Usually for breakfast we have pancakes. Not the pancakes that you buy it and you make it and you put it in the toaster. The pancakes you just make by yourself
> *Oh wow.*
> And we sometimes we have fries and uhm fries and chicken for dessert
> *Oh wow you get all good foods, huh?*
> Mm-hm and for dinner we had rice and shrimps
> *Oh rice and shrimps, fancy!*
> And then the other thing, we had dumplings and chicken.
> *Okay. can you tell me some other feelings you have about going to [stepdad's] house?*
> Happy...excited.

Unlike visitors' experiences with vending machine food in the day visit room, the PFV offers the possibility for families to eat freshly cooked food from primary ingredients, and to cook for each other together as a family activity. For Will, the meals and therefore the

visit itself was special, exciting, and enjoyable due to the food being freshly prepared and high quality.

Food costs and waste

The enjoyment and quality of family meals available in PFVs, and the visits themselves, were tempered by concerns over the high cost of PFV food for visitors. Prisoners order the food for their PFV visit through CSC staff, and normally a correctional officer takes their list to a local grocery store to purchase the items. The cost is taken from the prisoner's inmate account, although in practice this is heavily subsidized by contributions from the prisoner's families, who often send significant amounts of money into the prisoner's account (Knudsen, 2016). The correctional officer purchasing the food will choose the grocery store to buy from, which at times means that prices are higher than using lower-cost stores, bulk options, coupons, and other mechanisms that people living in poverty use to keep food costs manageable.

Further, the PFV trailers contain kitchens with items for cooking and eating but are emptied of all food from previous visitors, including basics like salt, spices, and condiments. Therefore, when ordering and paying for the food they will need for the weekend, through the limited options provided, families must also purchase these basics. Many of these items are available only in quantities much larger than are needed for a seventy-two-hour visit. In the context of the disproportionate poverty faced by prisoners' families and the other high costs of attending visits described above, the requirement that families purchase full containers of spices is not insignificant. Sue provided an example of this, noting that she spent $300 on food for a PFV visit while her income from benefits that month was under $2,000:

> Sometimes you can spend $40 on condiments going in on the [PFV] trailer. So sometimes we're guessing it's gonna be like a $300 bill because you need to make sure you get enough milk, to make the food. 'Cause you can't go out again once they have cereal or whatever, you're done. So, that's cause, we're spending almost $200 when me and [daughter] and [prisoner husband] were there. And just me and him last time and we did $124 and we made it just by the skin of our teeth.

Another partner, Katie, explained:

> So, it's just, some days it's really, really hard for financials, but when it comes closer to a trailer, trailer visits [PFVs], you at least have to have the minimum of $100 for groceries.
> *So if you have trailers, you're sending in money to supplement for his canteen? So he can buy food for—*
> Yes. The guys will go and they have a list of food for the groceries and they will go through it. Our groceries for the week—for a seventy-two-hour visit, will be an amount that I would pay for a week or two. It's like, the last one we had, I think we paid $150, close to $160 for three days. For a family of four....But you know, a CO, a CSC officer will go and they will do the grocery shopping for them. So it's like a hit and miss if they have a good sale, then fine. If they don't have a good sale, everything is like, it could be a little bit more. And it all depends on where they go grocery shopping too.

In the context of these high costs faced by PFV visitors, families were particularly frustrated by the pervasive waste of food during these visits. The CSC policy and practice is that visitors may not take any food items out with them after the PFV visit, nor can the prisoner take the food back to their cell, as these are considered security risks. Therefore, all of the food items remaining at the end of the visit are disposed of by

correctional officers. Prisoners are similarly not allowed to bring food from their cells, purchased from the prison canteen, out to the day visiting room.

This was widely decried as unfair, arbitrary, and even punitive by the caregivers in this study. Sue noted:

> There is nothing no more, now they don't even provide you with the condiments like before you used at least get the Wing Wong soy [sauce] pockets or whatever, or the peanut butter//
> *//for the PFVs, we're talking about?*
> Yep for the PFVs and stuff. Now they don't even supply that. Or, and they throw it everything, like when you buy it, it doesn't stay in the fridge. Before you used to be able to go in and there'd be extra jars of ketchup from other people and then he would just get the cleaners to come in once and they'd recycle it out so you weren't always missing stuff, like. And now the cupboards are completely empty. You won't have, and then when you buy it, you're throwing it all. There's so much food going to waste and they do not donate it and we're not allowed to take it out.
> *You're not allowed to take it out?*
> Because it's that's a security risk. Which I think is insane because if you wanted to smuggle it, you would've smuggled it out.

Partner Cathy described her frustration with seemingly arbitrary food waste:

> [Husband] tried to bring down an open thing of cookies [from his cell, to a day visit], all there was, was like three cookies out of the package, but because it was opened, they threw the whole container in the garbage. He was just bringing them down for the kids, this was his treat to give for the kids and they threw it in the trash.

These concerns echoed the views of women interviewed in another of the few studies on Canadian prison visits, who mentioned the high cost of food for PFV visits, which some participants saw as inflated, and expressed anger at this high-cost food being wasted due to a seemingly arbitrary policy.

Visit food as a mechanism of penal power

Like concerns about arbitrariness and unfairness of PFV food rules, families complained more broadly about the precarity of the visits themselves. Families noted the unpredictability of visits, which can be unexpectedly cancelled or denied due to lockdowns, administrative errors, inconsistently applied policies, behaviour that is deemed disruptive, or positive findings from unreliable security scanning technology (Knudsen, 2016; Ontario Ministry of the Solicitor General, 2021; Toepell & Greaves, 2001). Although visits with family are one of the rights that prisoners are ostensibly guaranteed by international human rights instruments to which Canada is a signatory, neither families, prisoners, nor prisons perceived them as rights; indeed, visits are described as "privileges" in public information provided to prisoners and their families (CSC, 2024; Ontario Ministry of the Solicitor General, 2021).

The unpredictability and constant threat of denial of visits left families in this study deeply insecure, focused on the minutiae of every explicit rule, and dependent on the inclinations of the individual correctional officers on shift, including around visit food. Even when family members spoke positively of prison staff, it was often in the context of individual officers *choosing* to be helpful or kind, with the awareness that they could also be unhelpful or unkind. For example, partner Sue deemed correctional staff helpful in shopping for her PFV food, given the context that staff have the option of choosing a more expensive, less accommodating, or less helpful approach to meeting her needs:

> *Will they go to somewhere cost-efficient, like do they go to the No Frills [less expensive], or do they like go to the Sobeys [more expensive]?*
>
> They will go, um, I've known people to go to Food Basics, I've known officers to go to Freshco [both less expensive]. But some days they will accommodate for you, if you want something extra, you'll have to write it down on the list, soya milk, or like if you have a family occasion, like a birthday or something, they will add it to your grocery list so that they can celebrate together. We've done that.

Sue shows that access to affordable, higher-quality, or special food is a precarious type of benevolence or privilege, as is the potential to turn this food into a real family meal such as a birthday celebration.

Ten-year-old Phoebe illustrates all the above elements here, framing food and its accessibility, cost, and rules as one of the ways that prison "works" and as central to "everything I know" about the prison. Asked what advice she would give a hypothetical peer whose parent was about to be incarcerated, like her dad, Phoebe says:

> If I were to give advice to another child of a prisoner, I'd tell them] Everything I know. How much the bus costs to go there, how much dadadadada. How things work, and the dog might sit on you if you have drugs....That there is, that you have to pay for your food and drinks, but the toppings are free....Like ketchup, relish, mustard, mayonnaise. They're just little packages.

Discussions and conclusions

The stories, opinions, and advice shared by children and caregivers in this study provide evocative insights into the nature and mechanisms of penal power as well as the experiences of familial incarceration. For families, and for children in particular, food and shared meals were defining and structuring elements of their visits to the prison. They used their food experiences to tell the stories of their relationships with their incarcerated relatives, identify key events and issues of their visits, and construct complaints about the institution. Although I had not set out with any view to asking about food, the topic emerged inductively and became an issue or mechanism through which families could communicate their experiences to me, and we could construct the research data together. This aligns with the rich literature showing the importance of the family meal as a central site of caregiving, learning, and regulation (Ochs & Shohet, 2006).

Given complaints about food quality, access, cost, and regulation raised by families, can food in prisons be accurately defined as a "family meal?" Helpfully, a meta-analysis of research into benefits of the family meal by Dallacker and colleagues (2019) identifies six essential elements: parent modelling of healthy eating behaviour, high food quality, a positive atmosphere, involvement of children in meal preparation, not having the TV on, and longer meal duration. Similarly, food provided during prison day visits cannot meet most recommendations for healthy eating from the federal government's own food guide, including advice to plan and prepare meals together, make healthier food choices, eat less processed food, reduce food waste, create a positive eating environment, and enjoy food that reflects one's culture (Health Canada, 2019).

On this basis, food shared during day visits is neither healthy nor a "family meal." In fact, these guidelines

indicate that Canadian prisons, through their food policies, act to *prohibit* families from engaging in this essential function of family life. This is an example, I would argue, of the broader neglect by prisons (all of which are public institutions in Canada) of their responsibilities to children and other family members who come through their doors. Although the specific legal and moral responsibilities that states and their institutions have to prisoners' families are not well studied, the notion that prisons have some basic level of accountability to these individuals is clear. Moral philosopher Bülow (2014) argues that, when they harm children and families by incarcerating a relative, states become obligated to these families, and they are specifically obligated to communicate with them, respect them, and mitigate the financial costs they bear as a result. An international human rights perspective is more forceful: the UN Convention on the Right of the Child, to which Canada is a signatory, protects the rights of children of prisoners, amongst others, to be heard in decisions that affect them, to have their best interests prioritized, to not suffer discrimination, and to maintain contact with parents (Codd, 2019; Parkes & Donson, 2018). In this context, the decision of Canadian prisons to structure visits in such a way that children are unable to share a family meal during day visits, and that the cost of PFV food is set unnecessarily high, are obvious failures of responsibility.

Indeed, the stories shared by families of prisoners suggest not only that their interests and rights are neglected, but that they are subjected to some of the same penal powers as prisoners when they interact with the institution. In particular, the unpredictability and precarity that families reported, such as never being sure whether prison staff could bring the birthday treats they would need for a family celebration in the PFV or whether the milk in the vending machine would be fresh, align with the prisoner experience of *uncertainty*. This concept has been well-studied in prison scholarship, including in theorizing around the "pains of imprisonment," where uncertainty and indeterminacy are framed by Crewe (2011) as one form of "tight" penal power (Crewe & Ievins, 2021). Another form of this "tight" pain resonates with the findings above: the *self-governance* that families engage in by monitoring and regulating themselves to meet the (often capricious) needs of the institution. The feelings of frustration, tension, and insecurity that are said to follow from these forms of penal power in prisoners (Crewe, 2011) are also well illustrated by the present data, and these experiences are a common finding in qualitative research with prisoners' families.

The apparent consistency between the impacts, experiences, and responses to penal power between prisoners and their families supports Comfort's (2009, 2019) concept of "secondary prisonization." She argues that the carceral regulation of prisoners' wives and girlfriends is the same as that faced by prisoners themselves, albeit in a diluted form, and that women learn, adapt to, and are transformed by this socialization and discipline when they engage with the institution (Comfort, 2009, 2019). Aiello & McCorkel (2018) argue that children experience secondary prisonization as well, including transformation through the discipline of their bodies and regulation of their emotions. This use of disciplining power by the institution can be seen in the present study, particularly in the exhaustive demands, high costs, and narrow eligibility of the PFVs, including the provision of food, and the authority the institution communicates in its policies. This is consistent with Moran's (2013) argument that prison visiting areas, such as the day visit rooms and the PFVs, are "liminal" carceral spaces where visitors from the outside become temporarily imprisoned and subject to carceral control and surveillance.

Taken all together, the present study supports the framing of prisoners' families as becoming *subjects* of the prison, temporarily and secondarily, when they visit and seek to engage in the process of family. I propose that carceral food systems are a key mechanism through which this subjectification occurs: the unpredictability of food quality, availability, and cost during visits transmit "tight" penal power, and the process of families learning and adapting to rules and policies around food (such as waste) is a mode of secondary prisonization.

If prisoners' families are subjects of the Canadian prison system, this raises concerns about the compliance of Canadian prisons with international human rights instruments and Charter protections in relation to their obligations to the children and family members of prisoners. The use of food as a mechanism of control and discipline, given the vital and defining nature of the family meal to family life, suggests institutional neglect of the needs, rights, and relationships of prisoners' families.

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Research Article

Partnerships and knowledge sharing for sustainable school food systems in Saskatchewan

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Abstract

Introduction: School food program (SFP) delivery that uses a sustainable food systems approach has the potential to provide comprehensive health and nutrition benefits for students and communities. SFPs may be best supported through engagement with multiple sectors and partners, including agriculture, health, and education. This study aims to understand the readiness and priorities of partner organizations from across the food system to work towards sustainable SFP development in Saskatchewan (SK).

Methods: A cross-sectional outreach and engagement survey was conducted across food system sectors and partners in February 2024 to inform the development of a SFP knowledge mobilization and partnership plan in SK. The survey was distributed to 321 pre-identified organizational partners across 10 food system sectors currently involved in, or with the potential to support, SFPs.

Results: The survey had a 31% response rate (n=97/311). Overall, organizations prioritized improving

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childhood/youth nutrition, health and wellness and providing nutrition and food-related education for students and staff. Support for sustainable food systems more broadly, including environmental sustainability and supporting local jobs, food production, cultures, and traditions, were the least selected answers. Funding was also a gap with more than half of organizations (59%) currently supporting SFPs in SK citing lack of funding as a challenge. Moving forward, 60% of organizations want to be informed about SFPs in SK, and 45% want to collaborate and lead towards improvement.

Conclusion: The survey highlights the state of partnership support, priorities, and contributions to SK SFPs and helps build a case for increased SFP knowledge sharing, collaboration, funding, and advocacy. Improving the economic, social, and environmental sustainability of SFPs in SK requires additional funding, political leadership, continued engagement with food system organizations for multi-sector collaboration, and strengthening and harmonizing food systems policies and practices. A province-wide, universal, and sustainable SFP that respects local cultures, geographies, and concerns, and leaves the specific operations of each program within the control of adequately resourced local governing structures, is a desirable step forward.

Keywords: Food system change; partnerships; school food programs; school food system

Résumé

Introduction : La mise en œuvre de programmes alimentaires scolaires (PAS) fondés sur une approche des systèmes alimentaires durables peut avoir des effets bénéfiques d'ensemble sur la santé et la nutrition des élèves et des communautés. Les PAS peuvent être mieux soutenus par un engagement avec de multiples secteurs et partenaires, y compris l'agriculture, la santé et l'éducation. L'objectif de ce projet est de servir d'appui à une approche partenariale pour le développement des PAS en Saskatchewan en évaluant l'état de préparation et les priorités des organisations.

Méthodes : Une enquête transversale de sensibilisation et d'engagement a été menée auprès de divers secteurs et partenaires en février 2024 afin d'élaborer un plan de mobilisation des connaissances et de développement de partenariats en matière de PAS en Saskatchewan. L'enquête a été menée auprès de 321 parties prenantes organisationnelles, identifiées au préalable, issues de 10 secteurs différents.

Résultats : Le taux de réponse à l'enquête a été de 29 % (n=97/321). Dans l'ensemble, les organisations ont accordé la priorité à l'amélioration de la santé et du bien-être des enfants et des jeunes, à l'éducation des élèves et du personnel en matière de nutrition et d'alimentation, et à la mise en valeur des aliments traditionnels et culturels dans les écoles. Parmi les répondants qui soutiennent activement les PAS, 61 % estiment que leur effet dans les écoles est de moyen à très faible. Plus de la moitié des répondants (59 %) ont désigné le manque de financement comme un défi. Pour l'avenir, 60 % des personnes interrogées souhaitent être informées sur les PAS en Saskatchewan, et 45 %

veulent collaborer et contribuer à l'amélioration de la situation.

Conclusion : L'enquête met en évidence l'état du soutien et des contributions des partenariats aux PAS de la Saskatchewan, et aide à établir un argumentaire en faveur du partage des connaissances, de la collaboration, du financement et d'une promotion accrus. Les PAS sont à l'intersection de multiples disciplines et secteurs ; une compréhension multidimensionnelle et un programme commun sont nécessaires pour travailler efficacement à leur développement.

Background

School food programs (SFPs) include, but are not limited to, lunch, breakfast, and/or snacks provided in schools, with or without integration into curriculum, and they have the potential to contribute to child, family, community, and environmental health and well-being (Hernandez et al., 2018). Canada has recently announced a national SFP, which includes a one-billion-dollar investment to work with provinces, territories, and Indigenous partners and Nations towards a long term SFP vision. This vision includes accessible, health-promoting, inclusive, flexible, sustainable, and accountable SFPs and invites "collaborative and complementary action by all levels of government and all sectors to advance work on school food in Canada" (Government of Canada, 2024, para 9). The policy further recognizes the role for SFPs in developing food literacy, providing opportunities for local farmers and economies, promoting environmentally sustainable practices, and encouraging a high return on health, social, and economic investments.

A food system encompasses all activities that bring food from the land to the consumer's plate, including production, processing, packaging, transport, distribution, education, and disposal of food (FAO, 2018). Sustainable food systems offer high-quality and culturally appropriate diets that meet human nutrient requirements while balancing the preservation and regeneration of natural resources such as soil, water, and land to produce food for future generations (Willet et al., 2019). Sustainable food systems are also fiscally viable, improve labour conditions and animal welfare, and ensure social and economic benefits are equitably distributed among food system activities, such as ensuring fair worker wages (FAO, 2018). Overall, sustainable food systems consider and monitor the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of food activities and how they intersect and balance (Purvis et al., 2019; Fanzo et al., 2022).

Sustainable school food programs

SFPs are intertwined with food systems and can address sustainability through school curriculum, gardens, plant-based menus, "farm-to-school" approaches, waste reduction systems like recycling and composting (Black et al., 2015; Gardner et al., 2023; Rojas et al., 2011; Roque et al., 2022), local economic opportunities (Pastorino et al., 2023), valuing local food producers and providers (Gaddis, 2014; Gaddis & Coplen, 2018), and addressing the social determinants of health (Everitt et al., 2020). These strategies contribute towards sustainable food systems while also supporting student food- and nutrition-related learning to enhance personal, as well as community, health and well-being

(Cullen et al., 2015). The Coalition for Healthy School Food, a national advocacy organization and the largest SFP network in Canada, imagines SFP development under eight guiding principles, including universality, health promotion, cost-shared, locally adapted and flexible, Indigenous control, driver of community economic development, promoting food literacy, and supported by guidance and accountability measures, all of which contribute toward sustainable SFPs (Coalition for Healthy School Food, 2024). As SFPs are developing in each province and territory under a new Canadian SFP policy, this study aims to understand the readiness and priorities of partner organizations from across the food system (agriculture, education, health, nutrition, etc.) to work towards sustainable SFP development in the Saskatchewan context.

SFPs in Saskatchewan

Saskatchewan (SK) is a western Canadian province with a population of just over one million. It has one of the lowest population densities in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2021a). Saskatoon is the largest city with a population around 337,000 (Statistics Canada, 2023). SK is a culturally diverse place, with Indigenous Peoples, primarily First Nations peoples (65.5%), comprising 16.3% of the total population. About half of the Indigenous population lives off-reserve (Government of Canada, 2021). The newcomer population in SK represents about 13% of the total population (Statistics Canada, 2021b). In recent years, immigration from the Philippines, Pakistan, India, China, and Bangladesh has been substantial, with most immigrants coming as skilled workers (Hoessler & Herman, 2018). SK has one of the highest overall rates of food insecurity among the provinces. Recently released data show a record increase in food insecurity in SK (from 20% in 2022 to 28% in 2023), leaving over one in four people and one in three children food insecure (PROOF, 2024).

In Canada, food systems are largely profit-driven structures led by "big-ag" that view agriculture in isolation from health or sustainability (Kevany et al., 2024; Lang, 2009; McMicheal, 2009). The operations of this system have altered and diminished community-based, local, and Indigenous food systems in Canada, which tend to focus more on local livelihoods and economies, diverse food cultures, social and community structures, and environmental reciprocity (Wiebe & Wipf, 2011). European settlers to SK in the late 1800s established the central and southern regions of SK into an export-oriented agricultural economy focusing on wheat production (LaForge & McLachlan, 2018). The province now possesses more than 40% of Canada's cultivated farmland and wheat is a primary export (Government of Saskatchewan, n.d.) and cultural symbol (LaForge & McLachlan, 2018). The advances of industrial agriculture in the province have greatly impacted the prairie ecosystem; it is estimated that only 12% to 21% of the original native prairie, one of the most endangered ecosystems in the world, remains intact in SK (Government of Saskatchewan, 2023). The continued loss of prairie habitat negatively affects biodiversity, carbon sequestration, livelihoods, and Indigenous cultures in the province (Saskatchewan Prairie Conservation Action Plan, 2025).

Research examining SFPs in SK is limited. Existing research demonstrates some of the lowest per student funding (Keyes, 2024; Michnik & Engler-Stringer, 2024) and school and student participation rates in the country. Research shows that about half of SK schools offer a SFP, reaching a quarter of students (Ruetz Consulting, 2024; Saskatchewan School Boards Association, 2024). Like other provinces in Canada, programs are largely delivered based on "need" and are made possible by volunteer time, including school staff

members contributing time outside of their regular roles, as well as local donations and grants. Schools struggle to meet food and nutrition provincial policy recommendations and have limited curriculum integration, where meals would be combined with cooking and gardening and food and nutrition would be taught across school subjects (McKenna, Michnik, Ruetz et al., in press). Further, SK government funding cuts, increased enrollment, and higher costs due to inflation have forced school boards to make tough financial decisions (Langager, 2024) affecting food programming. For example, the elimination of grade eight home economics in one of SK's largest school divisions (Young, 2019) and the implementation of lunchtime supervision fees for students who eat lunch at school (Salloum, 2023).

Sustainable school food systems change

At a societal level, sustainable SFP development has been depicted as occurring over three phases, mimicking wider trends (Oostindjer, et al., 2017). The first phase began in the 1850s with the establishment of food welfare programs for the most vulnerable children. SFPs were used as an outlet for surplus food from industrial agriculture production, with little attention to food and nutritional quality. The 1970s saw a shift to higher food and nutrition quality as science emerged demonstrating connections between diet and chronic disease. In the third phase, which is only just emerging, SFPs are increasingly used to address multiple food systems and societal challenges, including sustainability. Bringing diverse partners together towards food system change is a multi-layered process. Drawing from Community Coalition Action Theory, food system change first occurs through engagement, recruitment, and mobilization of food system partners (Butterfoss & Kegler, 2002). Willingness to participate in change efforts generally relates to organizational climate and size, current awareness of the issue and knowledge, degree to which the issue and need for change align with current organizational values and efforts, and the capacity of the organization to implement change, including expertise, connectedness, leadership, funding, and staffing (Castañeda et al., 2012; Rogers, 2003). As food systems are complex, with multiple actors and interacting factors, approaches from a single area, sector, or discipline generally have little lasting effect in sustainable food system development (Juri et al., 2024). Awareness, education, and relationship building among food system partners can play a supportive role (Buchan et al., 2019). Given this complexity, alongside the new national SFP and funding, research to bring together food system partners and examine organizational readiness to support SFP sustainable development in SK is timely.

Methods

Survey design

As part of a University of Saskatchewan internship project for fourth year dietetic students, a cross-sectional survey was designed to assess organizational readiness to participate in sustainable SFP development in SK. The survey drew from organizational change (Castañeda et al., 2012; Rogers, 2003) and partner engagement frameworks (Goodman & Thompson, 2017; Tamarack Institute, 2017). The survey had two streams to gather information from: 1) organizations

who are not involved in SFPs but were identified as having a potential interest based on their organizational mandate; and 2) organizations already involved in SFPs and assessing the challenges and impacts of this work. The survey consisted of fourteen questions and included six questions regarding organizational characteristics, three questions about organizational knowledge/support of SFPs, three questions concerning organizational satisfaction, impact, and challenges with SFPs, and one question regarding future involvement. The survey included multiple-choice and Likert scale questions. With each question, respondents had the ability to choose "other" and provide an open-ended response.
A letter with the definition of SFPs and their impacts was provided to partners in advance of the survey:

> School Food Programs (SFPs) are free or subsidized breakfasts, snacks, or lunches offered during the school day to kindergarten to grade twelve (K-12) students. SFPs can also include land-based learning and teaching students about food and nutrition through activities like cooking and growing and harvesting food. SFPs impact children, youth, and communities in many ways, including improving access to healthy food, improving student wellness, teaching children food skills, providing local employment including supporting local producers, and supporting food cultures and traditions.

Survey pilot

The pilot survey was completed with fourteen professionals from diverse sectors and backgrounds (i.e., agriculture, health, nutrition, education, economics) and four individuals with expertise in SFP research for comprehension, content, design, and cultural appropriateness.

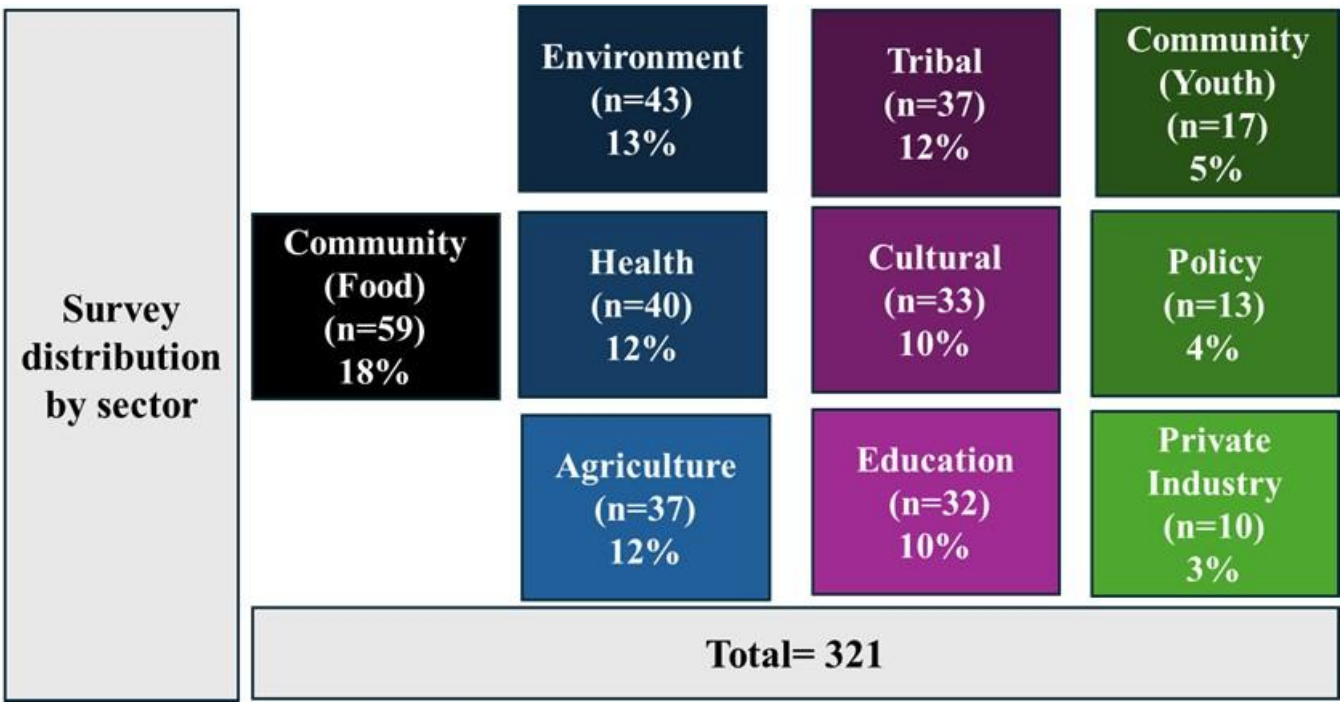
Participant recruitment

Partners were pre-identified by the research team through pre-existing relationships, partnership lists, word of mouth, and by searching organizational listings on 211 (a database of over 6,000 community, social, non-clinical health, and government services in SK) using the search terms "youth," "children/families," and "basic needs/food."
To participate, organizations needed to provide services in SK. Organizations with a mandate that addressed a food system service (i.e., food production, education, waste, policy, and nutrition, etc.) and/or addressed at least one of the eight SFP guiding principles (Coalition for Healthy School Food, 2024; Hernandez et al., 2018) were included. Restaurants, given their sheer number, were excluded. The assessment of organizational alignment was completed by two of the research team members and compared for reliability. Any disagreements were discussed with another member of the research team.

Survey distribution

The survey was distributed via Survey Monkey in February 2024 to 321 pre-identified organizational partners from ten sectors: community-based (youth), community-based (food), education, health, agriculture, private industry, cultural, tribal, environmental, and public administration/policy (Figure 1). Organizations were assigned into sectors based on their primary societal applications, according to the vision/goals of their organization or department as listed on their website or social media platform.

Figure 1: Number of surveys distributed by organizational sector



Surveys were sent to general organizational emails and, when known, to specific individuals. The survey invitation requested an individual in a supervisory, management, or leadership role, and/or someone who supports food- and nutrition-related work at the organization, to fill out the survey. One survey was to be completed per department or organization. The survey was anonymous; however, at the end of the survey, participants could leave their information on a separate page for further follow up toward SFP partnership.

Data analysis

Results of the survey were exported to Microsoft Excel 2021©. Descriptive statistics were used in data analysis (Ali & Bhaskar, 2016). Responses' mean, median, and mode are described where applicable. Data trends and outliers were analyzed. For questions where respondents had the ability to choose "other" and type an open-ended response, responses were categorized into the prescribed survey options. If the respondent's "other" response did not fit in with one of the answers to a question, data were kept separate.

Ethical approval

This research project was approved by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BEH- 4396), and operational approval was received from the Saskatchewan Health Authority (SHA).

Results

Response rate

Ten email addresses were unreceivable, leaving a total sample of 311 surveys distributed. There were ninety-seven responses to the survey, providing a response rate of 97/311 (31%). However, seven responses had data missing and were therefore excluded (Kang, 2013), leaving a total number of ninety surveys. The estimated length of survey completion was five to ten minutes.

Organizational type

When asked about what type of organization the respondent worked for, answers included community-based organizations/non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (41%; n=37/90), health care (17%; n=15/90), primary or secondary schools or organizations (14%; n=13/90), tribal or Indigenous organizations (10%; n=9/90), government organizations (8%; n=8/90), university or other post-secondary educational institutions (4%; n=4/90), self-employed or consultants (3%; n=3/90), private business (1%; n=1/90), and "other" (1%; n=1/90).

Organizational position

Regarding the positions of respondents within their organizations, respondents were service providers or staff members (27%; n=24/90), supervisors or managers (24%; n=22/90), directors/presidents/CEOs (24%; n=22/90), senior leaders or superintendents (19%; n=17/90), and board members, analysts, or other (3%; n=3/90).

Organizational size

Regarding the size of the organization, respondents worked in small organizations (five to ninety-nine employees; 43%; n=39/90); large organizations (over 500 employees; 30%; n=27/90); very small organizations (one to four employees; 15%; n=13/90), and medium organizations (100 to 499 employees; 12%; n=11/90).

Organizational work

When asked about what type of work the organization does, 27% (n=24/90) of respondents selected health/wellness, 21% (n=19/90) food/nutrition, 17% (n=15/90) primary and/or secondary education, 10% (n=9/90) environment, 7% (n=6/90) cultural/social development, 7% (n=6/90) public or tribal administration/policy, 3% (n=3/90) post-secondary education, and 3% (n=3/90) agriculture.

Geography

Twenty-nine percent (n=26/90) of respondents' organizations provided their services province-wide. Saskatoon made up the next highest proportion (16%; n=14/90), followed by Regina (13%; n=12/90), with representation from every part of the province except the far north. Full results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: The geographical distribution of survey respondents in SK

SK Geographical Location		**Organizational Service Area**
Urban	Saskatoon(n=14)	29% (n=26/90)
	Regina (n=12)	
Far North	Central (n=0)	13% (n=12/90)
	Northwest (n=6)	
	Northeast (n=6)	
North	Central (n=9)	34% (n=31/90)
	West (n=11)	
	East (n=11)	
Central	West (n=6)	16% (n=14/90)
	East (n=8)	
South	Central (n=6)	21% (n=19/90)
	West (n=4)	
	East (n=9)	
Province Wide		29% (n=26/90)
Total Responses=128		

Knowledge of SFPs

Regarding respondents' level of knowledge of SFPs and their impacts, 41% (n=35/86) had a medium level of knowledge, 26% (n=22/86) a high level of knowledge, 16% (n=14/86) a low level of knowledge, and 10% (n=9/86) a very high level of knowledge. No one indicated having no knowledge of SFP impacts.

Organizational SFP alignment

Organizations were asked: "what impacts of school food programs are best supported by the work, or potential work, of your organization?" Seventy-three percent of respondents (n=63/86) selected "improving access to nutritious foods for children and youth," 72% (n=62/86) selected "increasing knowledge and opportunities for children and youth to learn about food, nutrition, and food systems," and 71% (n=61/86) selected "improving health and wellbeing of children and youth." The least selected answer was "supporting local jobs and community economic development," with 20% (n=17/86) of responses. The full results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Organizational alignment with SFP impacts

SFP Impact	Organizational Agreement
Improving access to nutritious foods for children and youth	73% (n=63/86)
Increasing knowledge and opportunities for children and youth to learn about food, nutrition and food systems	72% (n=62/86)
Improving health & wellbeing of children and youth	71% (n=61/86)
Improving educational attendance and achievement of children and youth	42% (n=36/86)
Supporting environmental sustainability	42% (n=36/86)
Supporting local cultures and traditions	37% (n=32/86)
Supporting local producers and local food supply	34% (n=29/86)
Supporting local jobs and community economic development	20% (n=17/86)
Other	5% (n=4/86)
Total Responses= 340	

Current support for SFPs

When asked, "in what ways, if any, does your organization currently support food and nutrition for children and youth in schools in Saskatchewan?," the top responses were "supporting food and nutrition-related education for students and/or school staff" (43%; n=37/86), "supporting access to traditional and cultural foods and learning" (35%; n=30/86), "supporting or providing food/meals to students" (35%; n=30/86), and "supporting advocacy for SFP improvements" (33%; n=28/86). The least selected answers were "supporting school landscaping/gardening" (30%; n=26/86), "supporting access to local foods in schools" (22%; n=19/86), "providing funding" (21%; n=18/86), "supporting school composting and food waste reduction" (15%; n= 13/86), and "supporting evaluation of school food programs" (13%; n=11/86).

Challenges

The top challenges faced by organizations in supporting SFPs were "requiring additional funding" (59%; n=47/80), "lack of political support/funding from governments" (39%; n=31/80), "lack of alignment with organizational mandate/goals" (28%; n=22/80), and "staff requiring additional training and/or knowledge" (28%; n=22/80). Other challenges included "lack of knowledge related to school food programs in your organization" (18%; n=14/80), "lack of leadership/priority within your organization" (16%; n=13/80), and "requiring same amount of funding, but more stable/sustained over time" (10%; n=8/80). Only 4% (n=3/80) responded with, "we are doing this work but have no challenges." Twenty- three percent (n=19/80) responded with "other," related to cost of food, lack of food infrastructure, staffing, time, community buy in and competing priorities.

Satisfaction and impact

Seventy-four percent (n=67/90) of organizations indicated they were currently supporting SFPs. Of these organizations doing the work, 7% (n=5/67) of respondents were very satisfied, 51% (n=34/67) were satisfied, 40% (n=27/67) were unsatisfied, and 2% (n=1/67) were very unsatisfied with their organization's ability to effectively carry out food- and nutrition-related activities with schools. When asked, "what level of impact do you believe your organization's food and nutrition activities have in positively supporting children and youth in schools?," 12% (n=8/66) reported a very high impact, 27% (n=18/66) a high impact, 33% (n=22/66) a medium impact, 21% (n=14/66) a low impact, and 6% (n=4/66) a very low impact.

Moving forward

Regarding how respondents would like their organization/department to be further engaged in supporting SFPs in Saskatchewan, 60% (n=48/80) responded with "be informed," 46% (n=37/80) responded with "be involved," and 45% (n=36/80) responded with "collaborate and lead." The full results are shown in Figure 4.

Table 3: How organizations would like to be further engaged in supporting SFPs

Area of Engagement	Organizational Agreement
Be informed (i.e. receive school food webinar invitations, e-newsletters, and evidence briefs)	60% (n=48/80)
Be involved (i.e. attend school food meetings and conferences/gatherings)	46% (n=37/80)
Collaborate and lead (i.e. join a multi-partner school food network/working group)	45% (n=36/80)
Be consulted (i.e. provide feedback on school food projects and research)	44% (n=35/80)
None- my organization is interested but does not have the capacity	10% (n=8/80)
Be a funder (i.e. provide money for school food operations or planning)	9% (n=7/80)
None- my organization is not interested	5% (n=4/80)
Other	5% (n=4/80)
Total Responses= 179	

Discussion

The results of the survey provide insight into the overall SFP landscape in SK. Findings from this survey are consistent with Oostindjer et al.'s (2017) three phase framework for sustainable SFP development which situates most countries, including the province of SK, in the second phase of sustainable SFP development. Improving the economic, social, and environmental sustainability of SFPs in SK requires additional funding and political leadership, continued engagement with food system organizations for multi-sector collaboration and strengthening and harmonizing food systems policies and practices.

Financial viability is one key indicator of sustainable SFPs (Coalition for Healthy School Food, 2024; Everitt et al., 2020; Hernandez et al, 2018). In the survey, insufficient funding was selected by more than half of organizations currently doing the work as the largest issue in supporting SFPs. Many organizations were unsatisfied with their ability to effectively carry out food- and nutrition-related activities with schools, and over half cited their perceived impacts in schools to be medium to very low. Operating on shoe-string budgets and without paid staff, SFPs in Canada are generally not able to fully integrate a sustainable SFP approach (McKenna et al., in press). Additional funding through a national SFP will help alleviate SFP funding pressures, but to make up for funding shortfalls, additional investments from other governments and partners are needed (Coalition for Healthy School Food, 2024). With some of the highest rates of food insecurity among the provinces (PROOF, 2024) and lowest funding for SFPs in the country (Michnik & Engler-Stringer, 2024), limited funding has meant only those most "vulnerable" have access to SFPs in SK, and the demand for SFPs continues to outstrip their availability. Even among those who have access, program stigma may prevent uptake (Cohen et al., 2023). However, until household food insecurity is dealt with through economic policy and structural changes (PROOF, 2024) and comprehensive and universal investments into SFPs are made, organizational dissatisfaction and delayed efforts toward sustainable SFPs will continue.

Communication between food system partners is required for balanced change (Fanzo et al., 2022). Overall, organizational agreement with SFPs centered around improving access to nutritious foods and food- and nutrition-related education for school-aged children and youth. This was consistent between those currently active in supporting SFPs as well as for organizations identified as future partners. Support for sustainable food systems more broadly, including environmental sustainability and supporting local jobs, food production, cultures, and traditions, were the least selected answers. This may be unsurprising given that almost half of respondents (48%) came from either health/wellness or food/nutrition organizations, which traditionally have focused on personal responsibility and education through food and nutrition for better health, with limited focus on environmental, social, and economic factors in the food system (Coveney, 2006; Fanzo et al, 2021).

Given the predominance of resources already invested in food- and nutrition-related education, working with food and nutrition educators in the province to incorporate and strengthen a sustainable food systems perspective in their current educational work may be a first and practical step forward (Buchan, 2019; O'Brien, 2018). For example, a food systems pedagogical approach paired with experiential learning opportunities, such as working in a garden or participating in cultural food experiences, has potential for transformative learning as students and educators

examine their own subjective beliefs, values, and worldviews that shape how they understand, interact with, and address food systems (Davila & Dyball, 2015; Rojas et al., 2011; Sumner, 2016).

In general, SFPs have largely been viewed as programs for preventing hunger and poor nutrition, and not for their holistic or food systems potential (Oostindjer et al., 2017). To counter this, part of engagement in this project was to provide a letter of information on SFPs to organizations, including a comprehensive definition of SFPs, to expand the notion of "school food" to a food systems perspective to include organizations who typically may not have seen themselves as connected to the food system, such as those related to environmental conservation. Still, almost a quarter of organizations surveyed did not see the relevance of SFPs to their organizational mandate, and, as the survey showed, this was not due to a lack of "knowledge" about SFPs and their impacts. Preconceived notions of SFPs as responses to hunger and poor nutrition are likely to have limited the depth of responses. Further work in framing and communicating SFPs as a sustainable food systems intervention, followed up with political action and policy harmonization, is needed in SK to move toward programs that are socially, environmentally, and financially sustainable while ensuring health.

The provision of culturally appropriate and Indigenous foods in schools is closely related to health, well-being, and environment (Coalition for Healthy School Food, 2024; Hernandez et al, 2018). SK is a province rich in cultural diversity, including Indigenous and newcomer populations. Importantly, 35% of organizations reported supporting access to traditional and cultural foods and learning through SFPs. Integrating diverse and culturally appropriate foods in SFPs promotes cultural awareness and learning, increases familiarity with and consumption of a wider variety of vegetables, and reduces stigma associated with traditional food consumption (Chen et al., 2014; Zhao et al., 2013). Nutrition and food education based in diverse worldviews, such as storytelling, involvement of family, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers, and land-based learning, have also been shown to increase the acceptability of food served and to improve cultural understanding and sense of identity for Indigenous and ethnic minority students (Gillies et al., 2020; Obeng-Gyasi et al., 2019). Public institutions in SK, such as government, health, and education organizations, have joined calls for equitable, diverse, and inclusive programs, and are working to respond to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Calls to Actions (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Continuing to build on this emphasis will require additional funding and commitment to SFPs, as well as education, policy, and action, to strengthen SK's ecosystems, Indigenous knowledge systems, Indigenous food sovereignty, Treaty Rights, biodiversity, and more (Prairie Food Systems Vision Network, n.d.).

Sustainable SFPs can promote economic development and procurement of local and sustainably produced food (FAO et al., 2021). Schools can procure food items in bulk and join with other public institutions to offer stable markets for small- and medium-sized producers, thereby reducing producer risk and providing opportunities for new producers (Mishra et al., 2022; Motta & Sharma, 2016). SK is known as the "breadbasket of Canada;" however, there was a limited response in the survey from agricultural organizations, potentially stemming from limitations of the cold email tactic used or lack of structures to serve local areas. Agriculture in SK has a long history of export that is inextricably linked with the SK economy, with $20.2 billion worth of agricultural exports in 2023 (Government of Saskatchewan, n.d.; Qualman, 2025). Local and sustainable food systems are of interest to

both large and small farm operators in SK (Beingessner & Fletcher, 2019; Bowness et al., 2024; Campbell et al., 2019), but they are challenged by geographical and climatic factors as well as by cost, access to direct markets, lack of local processing facilities, and limited education and mentorship (Campbell et al., 2019). As has been done in other provinces like British Columbia, working across public institutions to drive local food procurement may be a helpful step forward (Government of British Columbia, 2024). Further engagement and research with SFP partners like school boards, local producers and government is needed.

Multi-sector partnerships are common in sustainable SFP development (Ashe & Sonnino, 2013; Atkey et al., 2016; Burkhart et al., 2022; UN Food Systems Coordination Hub, n.d). The survey demonstrated a high desire for active involvement toward building sustainable SFPs. Almost half of respondents (45%) indicated interest in collaborating and leading sustainable SFP development in SK, including joining a multi-partner network or working group. However almost half of respondents were from the health, wellness, and nutrition sectors, possibly given the precedence of a Health Promoting Schools Approach which emphasizes health and education partnerships in schools (Joint Consortium for School Health, 2025). Under a new Canadian SFP policy that supports environmental and financial sustainability, local farmers and economies, food literacy, and more, engaging additional food system partners is needed. However, like the wider food system, there are multiple contested ideas and agendas for how SFPs should operate, for what purpose, and who they should serve (Ashe & Sonnino, 2013; Poppendieck, 2010). Partnership engagement, coordination, and aligning values towards sustainable SFPs in SK will be ongoing work.

In a province as geographically dispersed and culturally diverse as SK, coordinating sustainable SFP development will require working through geographical isolation, cultural differences, diverse infrastructural and economic inequities, and a changing climate. Universal programs have been situated as safety nets for families and through economies of scale, as an economically viable way to operate SFPs (Cohen et al., 2023). Looking to other provinces and territories, regional and provincial organizations commonly share best practices, distribute funding, perform evaluations, train staff, and support food procurement and production (Ruetz, Michnik & Engler-Stringer et al, 2024). A province-wide, universal, and sustainable SFPthat respects local cultures, geographies, and concerns, and leaves the specific operations of each program within the control of adequately resourced local governing structures like school boards, is a desirable step forward. As SFPs grow, evaluation and monitoring are needed to understand SFP impacts and carve new paths towards sustainability (Fanzo, et al., 2022; Hartmann & Linn, 2008; Oostindjer et al., 2017).

Strengths and limitations

It was critical to involve various sectors in the survey, both for resource availability and to support a food systems approach. However, the distribution of the survey was weighted toward food-related, community-based organizations, given their greater involvement in food security work in Canada in general (Martin & Andrée, 2014). This allowed the survey to provide a good picture of current SFP support and challenges in SK, but also likely shaped the dynamics of partnership and engagement more favourably. Smaller organizations, which also made up most of the survey participants, tend to be community-based and more adaptable towards change efforts compared to large,

centralized, and hierarchy-based organizations (Nordin et al., 2022; Rogers, 2003). Positively, survey respondents were primarily in leadership and management positions, a significant finding for potential willingness to commit to SFP development (Rogers, 2003).

Limitations of the study included a limited response from the SK education sector, in part due to teacher job action at the time of the survey. This means that a highly impacted and influential partner was not well-represented in the results. Further, although parents, families, and students are at the center of programming, they were not included in this survey given other ongoing research in the province to understand their perspectives (e.g., Engler-Stringer et al., 2021; Foster et al., 2024; Michnik, et al., 2025). Tribal or Indigenous organizations were included and represented 10% of survey respondents. However, this study did not distinguish whether organizations were operating on or off -reserve. Given the differences in funding, administration, and partnership, understanding SFP challenges, opportunities, and funding specifically for on-reserve communities is an area of needed future research.

Conclusion

The results of this survey provide insight into the state of sustainable SFP development in SK. With the federal government's initiation of a National SFP and policy in Canada, and a one-billion-dollar funding commitment, provinces and territories are working with the federal government to move forward on SFP growth and development. However, achieving the core principles of the National SFP policy will require significant and meaningful partnership along with food systems change. Developing sustainable SFPs in the era of a National SFP policy will require political leadership as well as bringing food system partners together to increase funding, discuss commonalities and multiple possibilities, and center and support the needs of communities and families, particularly those most affected by longstanding food system inequities. Developing sustainable SFPs also involves creating programming that respects local cultures, geographies, and concerns and leaves the specific operations of programming within the control of adequately resourced local governing structures. Overall, the outreach and survey methods of this study may be of interest to other provinces, territories, and Indigenous partners and Nations looking to assess and coordinate sustainable SFP development.

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Research Article

Fishing amongst industrial ghosts: The challenges of green sea urchin diversification in Eastern Canada

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Abstract

This article examines the Wolastoqiyik Wahsipekuk's green sea urchin fishery to explore the long-term implications of diversification strategies in response to ecological and economic precarities in the Canadian fishing industry. Framing diversification as a creative practice developed by commercial fishermen to navigate these vulnerabilities, it highlights how institutional frameworks shape and constrain such efforts. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Eastern Quebec during the summer of 2021, the article focuses on the specific regulatory context in which this initiative unfolds. Unlike some other First Nations in Canada, the Wolastoqiyik fishery remains closely tied to the models and oversight of Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO). An ethnographic analysis of the fishery's sociomaterial entanglements reveals both the promise and the limitations of diversification. Grounded in political ecology, the article argues that while expanding into emerging species may offer short-term relief, it cannot constitute a viable long-term response to the structural dimensions of the current ecological crisis. This calls for more transformative approaches to fisheries governance—approaches that challenge inherited management systems and engage with an era increasingly defined by socio-ecological unpredictability.

Keywords: Capitalocene; fisheries diversification; fisheries management; Indigenous fisheries; political ecology

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Résumé

Cet article se penche sur la pêche à l'oursin vert par les Wolastoqiyik Wahsipekuk pour étudier les implications à long terme des stratégies de diversification en réaction à la précarité écologique et économique de l'industrie de la pêche au Canada. En présentant la diversification comme une pratique créative adoptée par les pêcheurs commerciaux pour faire face à ces vulnérabilités, l'article met en évidence la manière dont les cadres institutionnels façonnent et limitent ces efforts. S'appuyant sur un travail de terrain ethnographique mené dans l'Est du Québec au cours de l'été 2021, il se concentre sur le contexte réglementaire particulier dans lequel ce projet se déroule. Contrairement à d'autres Premières Nations au Canada, chez les Wolastoqiyik, la pêche reste étroitement liée aux modèles et à la surveillance du ministère canadien des Pêches et des Océans. Une analyse ethnographique des enchevêtrements sociomatériels liés à la pêche révèle à la fois les promesses et les limites de la diversification. Fondé sur l'écologie politique, l'article soutient que si l'expansion de la pêche aux espèces émergentes peut apporter un soulagement à court terme, elle ne peut constituer une réponse viable à long terme aux dimensions structurelles de la crise écologique actuelle. Il est donc nécessaire d'adopter des approches plus transformatrices en matière de gouvernance des pêches, des approches qui remettent en question les systèmes de gestion hérités et qui s'engagent dans une ère de plus en plus définie par l'imprévisibilité socio-écologique.

Introduction

This article explores the long-term sustainability of fisheries diversification targeting emergent fisheries, with a focus on green sea urchin fishing in Québec, to assess whether this practice offers a viable solution to the ecological and economic precarity facing Canadian fisheries. Green sea urchin fishing is one of a few emerging fisheries in the St. Lawrence Estuary, fisheries that target "unfished or underutilized marine species" (Department of Fisheries and Oceans [DFO], 2008, para. 1). The only owner of a commercial green sea urchin license, the Wolastoqiyik Wahsipekuk First Nation, adopted this practice in the mid-2000s to diversify their exploited species portfolio in response to the combined pressures of climate change and market volatility (Michaux, 2012). This came with significant challenges. Fishermen who choose to exploit new and exploratory fisheries must navigate species-specific characteristics, emerging markets, and commercial networks while demonstrating the sustainability of their practices to regulatory authorities**.** Despite those factors, diversification appears to be an interesting strategy for fishermen seeking to adapt to shifting ecological and economic contingencies.

Accordingly, several authors have identified diversifying fishermen's species portfolios as a promising strategy to mitigate the risks associated with the unpredictability of the contemporary fishing industry, in which the livelihoods of participants are constantly challenged by commercial and ecological volatility (Kasperski & Holland, 2013; Cline et al., 2017; Epstein et al., 2018; Galappathi et al., 2019; Schowoerer et al., 2023). Although seemingly promising, recent articles also highlight the difficulties of access linked to this practice; diversifying, while theoretically appealing, often

requires large and risky investments that may be difficult to achieve for smaller fisheries (Anderson et al., 2017; Cline et al., 2017; Bennett et al., 2021). Furthermore, the profitability of these new fisheries—especially emergent fisheries—remains variable, complicating the guarantee of a return on investment (Anderson, 2017).

Nevertheless, without undermining these important challenges, it is crucial to go beyond purely economic rationales when considering the effects of fisheries diversification on fishermen's social well-being. These actors being too often represented, in economic analysis, as "disembedded and self-interested rational actors" (Pinkerton & Davis 2015, p. 303). Indeed, fisheries diversification can also serve as a way for fishermen to ensure the long-term stability of their practices. This idea is particularly important for Indigenous peoples in Canada, for whom diversifying can be a means of preserving an ancestral livelihood—fishing (Galappathi et al., 2021; Ouchi, 2022)—from which they have often been unfairly and violently excluded under colonial and imperial rationales, the effects of which remain active today (Charest, 2012; Ross-Tremblay, 2019; Todd, 2018). In this article, I will understand diversification through the exploitation of emergent fisheries as a creative measure through which fishermen negotiate the socio-ecological contingencies of the fishing industry. In the Wolastoqiyik Wahsipekuk case, although labour-intensive and sometimes financially complex, the development of this strategy demonstrates an awareness of the industry's vulnerable position and a willingness to move forward with innovative, albeit sometimes economically unfruitful, strategies.

While existing research has examined diversification within Indigenous-managed fisheries (Galappathi et al., 2021; Ouchi, 2022), the Wolastoqiyik Wahsipekuk case offers a distinct perspective on how regulatory constraints shape diversification strategies. Indeed, those do not occur in isolation; they are enmeshed in institutional and political structures. In Canada, the diversification of fisheries is regulated by strict conservation rules, including the New Emerging Fisheries Policy (DFO, 2008). Unlike some other First Nations in Canada, the Wolastoqiyik Commercial Fisheries remain tied to the regulatory framework of Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) and its models. Given the significant social, political, and ecological dimensions at stake, this article, drawing on political ecology literature, will explore how these specific frameworks shape the long-term outcomes of diversification.

This specific case highlights the limitations of species diversification as a sustainability strategy within this contemporary framework. This contributes to the broader discussion on the sustainability of diversification strategies within institutional structures (Beaudreau et al., 2019; Abbott et al., 2023). In the Canadian context, Goetting (2008) demonstrated the failure of such strategies in the redfish industry of Nova Scotia, where insufficient consideration of ecological complexity led to poor outcomes. This raises important questions about the sustainability of diversification in other emerging fisheries, including green sea urchin fishing. Indeed, despite their potential for resilience (Folke et al., 2001), cases like the redfish fishery force us to consider the limitations associated with diversification under current models. Can a long-term strategy be implemented, or will emerging fisheries merely serve as short-term buffers, absorbing the unpredictability of the market? Here, I will argue that while diversification through emerging species may offer temporary relief, it cannot be seen as a long-term solution to the ongoing ecological crisis. This calls for innovative approaches to fisheries management—ones that rethink the foundations of current models and embrace the unpredictable conditions of our time.

To address these questions, the present article is structured as follows. The third section, following the methods, will focus on Canadian commercial fishing models. In view of the embeddedness of the Wolastoqey diversification strategy in this institutional framework, special attention must be given to it. I will conceptualize this model through the lens of political ecology, highlighting both its crucial role in protecting biological and socioeconomic resources and its limitations, particularly in forms of the countless unpredictable realities that escape conservation formulas. Recognizing the inherent precarity of conservation models, despite their importance, section four will examine how the Wolastoqiyik Wahsipekuk First Nation Commercial Fishery has responded to the insecurity surrounding their fishing livelihood by targeting emergent species to diversify their fisheries. In this part, I will focus on the development of the Québec only commercial sea urchin license, granted to the Nation in 2008, which has helped shield the business from economic and biological uncertainties in its primary fisheries—Nordic Shrimp and Snow Crab.

The final section will raise concerns about the long-term viability of such strategies. Emerging fisheries, like the Green Sea Urchin, are subject to the same uncertainties as traditional ones. Though less exploited, their conservation and commercial potential are still critical issues. Field data, collected through interviews and participant observation, reveal challenges such as unpredictable ecological shifts, knowledge gaps on emerging species, and limited resources. Without undermining conservation efforts, it is crucial to recognize the constraints of managing a model where accountability is key. Diversification through emergent species can help fishermen mitigate industry volatility in the short term, but within the current management model, it is not enough to ensure long-term sustainability. More structural and institutional changes are needed at the core of the model itself.

Methods

This article relies on data collected during a research project aimed at understanding the value of sea urchin fishing in Eastern Canada. Data were collected through ethnographic fieldwork in Eastern Québec between April and August 2021, focusing on the activities of the commercial fishing business of the Wolastoqiyik Wahsipekuk First Nation. During this fieldwork, I participated in sea urchin fishing activities and observed the business's infrastructure. The fieldwork observation sites included the fishing destinations themselves (see Figure 1), as well as public markets, related museums, fishmonger shops, and restaurants in the Bas-Saint-Laurent region.

Throughout this participant observation period, informal discussions with the fishing boat crew, market sellers, and other participants working closely with sea urchin marketing or fishing helped to nuance my understanding of the fisheries. These observations were supplemented by formal semi-structured interviews with eleven participants, including chefs, biologists, provincial and federal government administrators, fisheries managers, and individuals promoting regional fisheries. After transcription, these interviews were analyzed together with the data collected during participant observation through thematic analysis.

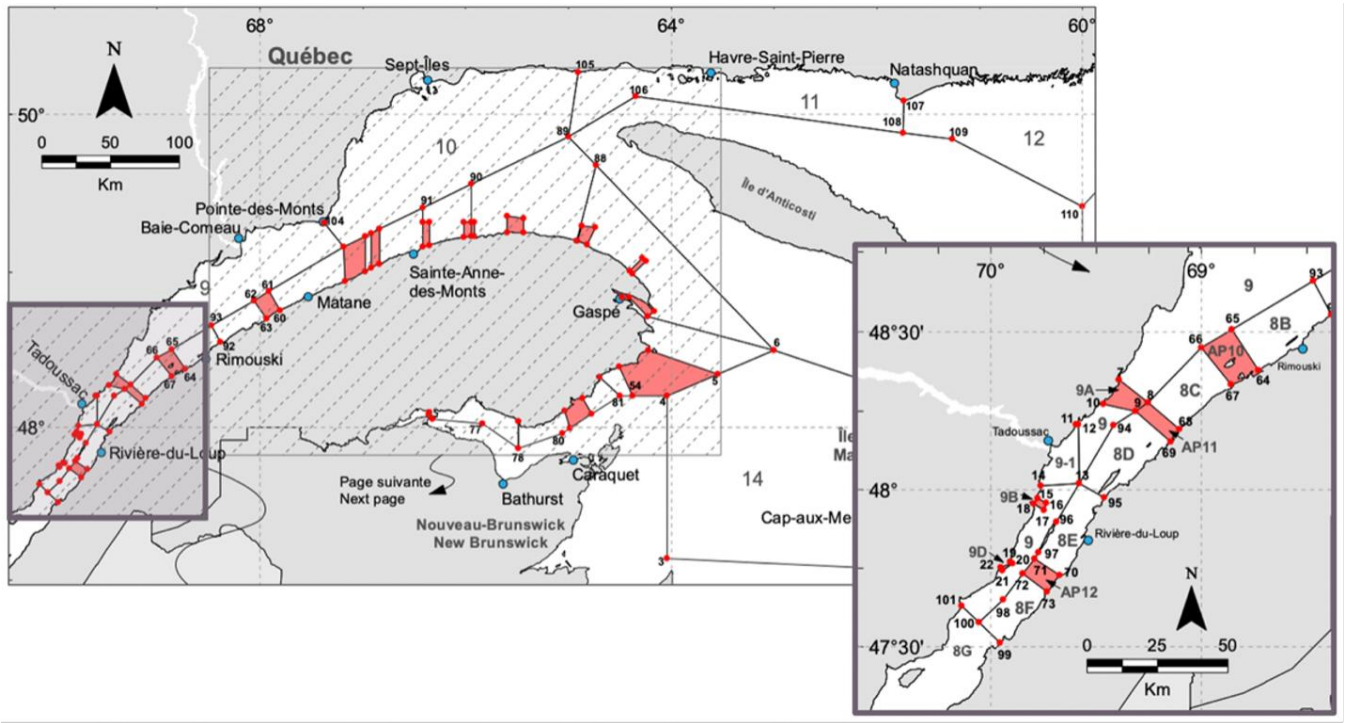
This ethnographic approach focused on the socio-ecological day-to-day operations of sea urchin fisheries.

While mindful of management models, observation and qualitative interviews allowed me to examine the material constraints of these models in practice—such as a lack of resources for planned evaluation and uncertainty among assessors regarding the viability of variables. Additionally, through the interviews, the pervasive uncertainty surrounding the future of these practices became evident among participants. Despite a strong belief in the necessity of management models, participants frequently highlighted the unpredictability of variables that these models could not account for (e.g., diseases, new predation, or climatic disasters).

The work of Jason Moore's (2017, 2018), which will be mobilized in this article, helps to further critique these models, revealing how capitalist approaches to natural resource management often ignore the precarious conditions of our current climatic era. These models, focused on quantifiable resource extraction, fail to account for the socio-ecological uncertainties in which food procurement systems are embedded. While emerging species may offer temporary relief, they cannot be seen as a long-term solution to the ongoing ecological crisis. This calls for innovative approaches to fisheries management—ones that rethink the foundations of current models and embrace the unpredictable conditions of our time. This article draws on political ecology to offer more than just critique; by focusing on the interdependence of social and environmental justice (Tsing, 2015; Larrère, 2018), political ecology provides pathways for creative solutions, allowing us to envision how fishermen's livelihoods can be balanced with pressing ecological concerns, fostering sustainable socio-ecological justice.

The present article emerges from the culmination of this data. What does it mean, in an era characterized by ecological precarity, to be entrenched in a model that requires stability? How can fishermen's willingness to follow models they know to be precarious help us rethink the foundational assumptions of these models? What can we do, in the current era, to help preserve livelihoods and ways of being? This research was conducted in accordance with the ethical norms of the three councils and with the approval of the ethics board of the University of Ottawa.

Figure 1 : Fisheries and Oceans Canada. (2013). *Carte des zones de pêche pour oursin / Fishing areas for urchin: Région du Québec / Quebec Region* [Map]. Government of Canada. https://www.qc.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/infoceans/sites/infoceans/files/OursinQuebec.pdf



Nature as numbers: Commercial management model in the scope of the Capitalocene

Canadian fisheries, whether emerging or established, are regulated by a complex system of conservation rules that seek to balance the biological limits of marine ecosystems with the socioeconomic needs of fishermen who rely on these resources for their livelihoods. These guidelines are primarily codified through the Fisheries Act (Government of Canada, 2019), but the foundations for these measures were laid much earlier. In the 1970s, in response to the growing concerns about the declining biomass of key species, like groundfish in Eastern Canada (Environment Canada, 1976) and aligned with international efforts to curb overfishing (Emery, 1993), the Canadian government moved to impose limited access to fishing stocks. This represented a pivotal shift from the previous "free-for-all" system (Environment Canada, 1976, p. 39) where unrestricted access had led to the depletion of vital marine resources.

The introduction of fishing licenses in 1975 (Department of the Environment, 1976), followed by the implementation of Total Allowable Catch (TAC) quotas in 1982, aimed to curb overfishing and introduce a system based on resource sustainability (Emery, 1993). The Fisheries Act of 1985 enshrined these licensing and quota systems into law (Government of Canada, 2019), marking a critical point in recognizing the finite nature of marine resources and the need for careful management. These measures, while far from perfect, introduced the concept of sustainability into the conversation surrounding Canadian fisheries. The key objective, as

noted by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) (1985, p. 8), was to "match the fishing effort to the available resource," balancing economic opportunities with biological constraints to prevent overfishing and ensure the long-term viability of fish stocks.

However, these systems were built on the assumption of relative ecological stability—an assumption that is increasingly challenged by the realities of the current ecological crisis. As climate change, species migration, and market fluctuations disrupt once stable systems, these traditional management models are proving insufficient. A deeper examination of how quotas and licenses are determined through the *Fisheries Act* (Government of Canada, 2019) illustrates the growing mismatch between static regulatory models and dynamic ecological realities.

The *Fisheries Act* (Government of Canada, 2019) grants the DFO the authority to "implement measures to maintain major fish stocks at or above the level necessary to promote the sustainability of the stock, taking into account the biology of the fish and the environmental conditions affecting the stock" (Government of Canada 2019, art. 6.1). This effectively mean that major fish stocks must be maintained "at or above the levels necessary to promote their sustainability" (Government of Canada, 2024, p. 3097). To calculate those level, DFO authorities rely on a Limit Reference Point (LRP). The LRP is defined as "the stock level below which productivity is sufficiently impaired to cause serious harm" (Government of Canada, 2024, p. 3097). If fish stocks fall below this threshold, conservation measures must be implemented.

Accurately calculating the LRP is therefore crucial for fisheries management. This value is determined by marine scientists working with the DFO's Science Branch. While the exact formula for calculating the LRP varies by fishery, it is primarily based on population models, surveys, and environmental data (DFO, 2009). As seen later in the case of the urchin fishery, scientific assessments are conducted periodically to estimate fish biomass, but annual adjustments to the LRP can be made based on continuous scientific monitoring and feedback from fishermen. This process ensures that quotas remain adaptable to shifting ecological conditions.

Once the LRP is established, DFO scientists and regulators determine the optimal exploitation rate—a percentage of the overall biomass that can be safely harvested without jeopardizing the species' long-term viability. The closer a stock is to the LRP, the more precautionary the recommended exploitation rate will be. If a stock falls below the LRP, strict conservation measures must be enforced. While the methodology for determining this precautionary threshold evolves with scientific advancements, the current guiding principles are outlined in the *Guidelines for Implementing the Fish Stocks Provisions in the Fisheries Act* (DFO, 2022a).

After the optimal exploitation rate is determined, the DFO can set the Total Allowable Catch (TAC), which represents the total quantity of fish that can be harvested from a specific stock. Individual Quotas (IQ) are then allocated within this overall limit, specifying the portion of the TAC assigned to individual license holders. An IQ is defined as "an amount of fish from a specific stock that is allocated to a particular licence holder through a condition of the licence" (DFO, 2024a, chap. 2, art. 9.19). While IQs serve as a key conservation policy, additional measures—such as restrictions on season, timing, effort, or fishing methods—can also be implemented to help preserve stocks (DFO, 2022a). These quotas regulate access rights for commercial license holders.

Licensing policies serve as another important management tool, helping regulators balance ecological

sustainability with the livelihoods of fishermen. By controlling access to fishing licenses, the DFO can address both conservation concerns and economic stability within the fishing industry. As a result, commercial fishing licenses are strictly regulated. Their allocation within the fisheries management framework remains flexible and subject to regional variations, with guiding principles outlined in the DFO database (DFO, 2024a). Generally, to qualify for a fishing license, an individual must meet the DFO's definition of a "core fisherman." This status requires fulfilling specific criteria for inshore vessel-based fishing licenses, including being the head of an enterprise or fishing unit, holding key licenses, maintaining a strong connection to the fishery, and depending on it for their livelihood (DFO, 2024b). While licensing policies may vary regionally, they are all tied to national principles advising precautions (DFO, 2009).

In Eastern Canada fisheries, at the time of my fieldwork, no new core enterprises were created, as explained to me by Marie-Ève, who was working in the licensing division of the DFO at the time: "We don't create new cores. A newcomer—say, a young person wanting to become a fisher—can only enter by taking over an existing business.... The DFO doesn't issue new licenses unless one is surrendered" (Interview, Marie-Ève, 2021 [originally in French; translation from the author]). This was due to what I can best translate as a "living wage principle," as explained by André, also working for the DFO: "You don't issue twenty licenses if fishers will barely make $1,000 a year. You issue just one so they can earn a living" (Interview, André, 2021 [originally in French; translation from the author]).

To summarize, licenses are only issued if the total fishable biomass can support a number of fishermen earning a livable wage. This ensures that over-exploitation is avoided and that each licensed fisherman holds a sustainable share of the TAC. In the current era, where precaution is identified as key (DFO, 2022b), no new licenses for major exploited species are attributed, protecting fishermen's socioeconomic interests in case of ecological fluctuations. Once issued, however, these licenses become permanent assets for the holders and cannot easily be revoked. This can complicate profitability when the biomass of a species fluctuates or market conditions change, as licenses remain fixed even as ecological and economic conditions shift.

This regulatory system, while essential in controlling overfishing, operates under the assumption of stability and predictability—assumptions increasingly at odds with the unpredictable dynamics of the natural world. This tension is highlighted by the growing precarity of long-established fisheries, such as Québec's mackerel and northern shrimp fisheries (DFO 2023a, ; DFO, 2023b), where quotas fluctuate due to environmental changes, and fishermen find themselves struggling to adapt.

As this system shows, fisheries management in Canada is deeply intertwined with the idea of nature as a calculable resource, bound by quotas and fixed licenses. While this system aims to prevent overfishing, it fails to account for the increasing ecological and economic instabilities fishermen face today. Viewed through the lens of political ecology, these models reflect the inherent limitations of trying to manage a dynamic and often unpredictable environment with static, rigid frameworks. This issue is further compounded when examining how these models apply to emerging fisheries like those explored by the Wolastoqey Fisheries, where the challenges of balancing socioeconomic and ecological needs become even more apparent.

In this section, before delving into the specific case study of the Wolastoqiyik's diversification initiative, I will explore how Jason Moore's Capitalocene framework can help us better understand the precarity

inherent in our established fisheries model. Moore's critique provides a theoretical lens for examining how capitalist-driven management systems, though well-intentioned in their conservation goals, often exacerbate ecological instability by treating natural resources as quantifiable and ownable. This approach, while helpful in creating short-term protections, can fall short when faced with the complexity and unpredictability of real-world ecological systems.

The term Capitalocene is a play on the more widely used idea of the Anthropocene. In 2000, geologists Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer (2000) proposed the term Anthropocene—"the epoch of human imprint upon all earth systems from the geologic to the biotic, from the chemospheric to the hydrological, and from the cryospheric to the atmospheric" (Howe, 2019, p. 2)—to mark the most recent geological era, dating back to the Industrial Revolution. This concept has gained widespread traction in both academic discourse (Chakrabarty, 2009; Larrère, 2015; Haraway et al., 2016; Moore, 2017; Howe, 2019) and popular literature (Moore, 2017, 2018). The term's popularity stems largely from its ability to highlight the role of human activities in driving the current climate crisis. By emphasizing the extensive impact of anthropic pursuit on planetary systems, the Anthropocene forces a reckoning with the undeniable relationship between human action and ecological change (Oreskes, 2007; The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2022).

In this sense, the Anthropocene prompts a reassessment of the long-standing scientific foundations of ecological thought, where nature was seen as quantifiable, static, and separate from human society (Larrère, 2015). The concept allows us to question the static and linear sense of modern history (Chakrabarty, 2009; Larrère, 2015). Indeed, modern Western ethical projects were grounded in a rigid separation between nature and society (Latour, 2017; Charbonnier, 2020), with the assumption that scientific and technological growth would ultimately lead to the emancipation and social justice of humankind (Audier, 2017; Latour, 2017; Charbonnier, 2020).

Although such development projects have faced critique from their inception (Audier, 2022), theoretical frameworks helped sustain the modern belief in "temporary" exploitation of nature (Vivien, 2001; Rosa, 2010), assuming that humans could transcend natural limits through progress. However, the Anthropocene violently exposes the impossibility of separating human progress from the natural world's limitations. It shows that human actions have permanent consequences on all of the Earth's systems, with the current climate crisis serving as a striking example. By emphasizing the interdependence of nature and culture, the Anthropocene opens new questions (Rademacher, 2015; Knox, 2020), including how our food procurement systems are organized (Tsing, 2015).

Despite its utility, the concept of the Anthropocene has faced substantial criticism (Haraway et al., 2016; Moore, 2017, 2018; Ghosh, 2021). Jason Moore (2017, 2018), in his development of the Capitalocene framework, presents some of these critiques. He argues that the Anthropocene, in many ways, remains too anthropocentric. Moore emphasizes that the root cause of the current climate crisis is not all of humanity but specific actors: capitalist, Western, and imperial powers. Indeed, in documenting the transformation of the relationship between power, capital, and nature during the long sixteenth-century (1451–1648), Moore (2015) demonstrates how the extraction of natural resources—justified as part of a liberal emancipation project—was central to the rise of modern imperial powers. Facing the erosion of feudal power due to social, climatic, and demographic shifts linked to the Little Ice Age, imperial nations needed to reaffirm their hegemony. With

limited land available in Europe, these powers sought new ways to generate value by developing tools and techniques to turn human and extra-human labor into productive resources. These tools—such as surveying, mapping, and accounting—focused on increasing labor productivity and expanding territorial control. By exploiting "cheap nature"—namely labor, energy, food, and raw materials—imperial nations stabilized their internal power through colonial and imperial projects, starting in the late fifteenth-century (Moore, 2017, 2018). This era gave birth to modern capitalism. Moore argues that this view of nature—as something quantifiable, controllable, and exploitable—forms the foundation of the current climate crisis.[1]

This legacy continues today in space such our food procurement systems. Tsing's (2018) conceptualization of the plantation is particularly useful for understanding this process. The plantation model—an ancestor of contemporary industrial monocropping—offers a clear example of how complex natural ecologies are reduced to accountable and controllable entities in service of capitalist and imperial interests. As Tsing demonstrates, monocrop farming achieves productivity by simplifying diverse ecosystems into a single species through violent processes that alienate both labor and ecology. This not only exemplifies the violence inherent in industrial agriculture but also exposes the hidden, pernicious impacts on those working within these systems. For example, Tsing highlights the outbreak of coffee rust (Tsing et al., 2019) to illustrate the impossibility of fully erasing socio-natural dynamics from plantation environments. Despite efforts to suppress or ignore these ecological forces, they frequently re-emerge in the form of fungi, diseases, or parasites. These elements, excluded from management models that seek to erase their existence, often wreak havoc on the systems dependent on plantation economies, leading to disastrous outcomes for both workers and communities, who rely on these models for stability.

Through her work, Tsing does not place blame on producers or consumers who seek to improve their living conditions. Instead, she critiques the taken-for-granted stability of the models that underpin industrial agriculture. In a co-authored article with Neil Bubandt and Andrew Matthews (2019), she stresses the importance of ecological models in managing the complexity of our world but warns against the tendency to treat these models as infallible. Models, as the authors remind us, are essential for making sense of the complexities of our contemporary world. After all, it was scientific models that helped define the Anthropocene, consolidating vast amounts of data into a clear picture of the current era's environmental challenges. However, model thinking has its dangers, as "both model thinking through simplification and thinking by example have their place. But Viveiros de Castro reminds us of the dangers when 'models of' become normative 'models for' that inspire authoritative simplifications—sponsored by states and corporations—that destroy landscapes and silence other visions of the world [Law 2015]" (Tsing et al., 2019, S191).

It is precisely this dangerous simplification of models—promoted by capitalist and imperial interests—that Moore's Capitalocene warns against. The term Capitalocene articulates the forces driving ecological devastation through the reduction and control of nature. In the next section, I will demonstrate how the current Canadian fishing model, while beneficial in managing the socioecological impacts of fisheries, remains itself deeply rooted in the

[1] See also Charbonnier, 2020.

same conception of natural resources as quantifiable and ownable. Understanding these limitations is crucial not only for critiquing existing models but for fostering innovative and sustainable approaches to fisheries management that move beyond the capitalist frameworks of exploitation.

Green sea urchin fishing: Creativity in the face of unknown conditions

The launch of green sea urchin fisheries by the Wolastoqiyik Wahsipekuk First Nation in 2008 highlights the shortcomings of Canadian management models for fishermen while also showcasing the creative actions, such as fisheries diversification, that Indigenous actors have taken to maximize the durability of their practices. The commercial fishing activities of the First Nation began operations in 2000, shortly after the Marshall Decision (R. v. Marshall 1999). This landmark ruling, resulting from the legal battle of Donald Marshall Junior, a member of the Mi'kmaq First Nation, recognized the constitutional right to commercial fishing granted by the 1760 Halifax Treaty of Peace and Friendship between British colonial authorities and First Nations in Eastern Canada. Prior to this decision, the Wolastoqiyik Wahsipekuk First Nation, one of the treaty's signatories, was excluded from commercial fishing. The ruling allowed them to establish Les Pêcheries Malécites, which initially focused on Snow Crab and Nordic Shrimp.

As explained by Joël, who at the time of my fieldwork was working in the management of First Nation Fishing Activities, as newcomers to commercial fishing entering the industry during a period of unprecedented moratoriums, the Wolastoqiyik faced significant challenges: "After the Marshall judgment, First Nations in Eastern Canada, like the Mi'kmaq and Wolastoqiyik, received commercial fishing licenses. The first ones given to us were for snow crab and Nordic shrimp. It was all new for First Nations, who had no experience in commercial fishing. Honestly, in the beginning, we were maybe the laughingstock of the industry. There was a lot of outsourcing, and many of the workers had no idea what they were doing" (Interview, Joël, 2021 [originally in French; translation by the author]).

Tensions within the industry remained high, as the allocation of new licenses affected quotas and wages. Conflicts were frequent in the early 2000s, with notable riots in 2003, which resulted in the burning of several fishing boats. Beyond these tensions, the Wolastoqiyik were confronted with the high cost of commercial fishing equipment and the need for extensive training to establish themselves in the industry. To ease their entry, they signed agreements with the DFO in 2000 and 2001, receiving financial and technical assistance. In return, they had to comply with DFO regulations, including the Fisheries Act of 1985 (Michaux, 2012). This is significant because, while Indigenous fisheries collaborate on conservation measures with the DFO, they are not always subject to the same legal frameworks as Canadian commercial fishermen.

With time and experience, the business grew and developed their expertise. Joel reflected on this progression, noting the significant strides made by First Nations fisheries: "Slowly but surely, First Nations gained experience and became more involved. They started controlling costs and quality, increasing their presence in the workforce. Over time, Indigenous fisheries, not just Les Pêcheries Malécites, became real forces in Eastern Canada" (Interview, Joël, 2021 [originally in French; translation by the author]). This

progress was not just about gaining experience; it was also about embracing flexibility and creativity in their practices. Through targeted training, strategic collaborations, and resource management improvements, the fishery began to control costs and improve product quality, securing a stronger presence in the market.

At its start, the Wolastoqiyik received fishing licenses for two species: Nordic Shrimp and Snow Crab. This meant their catches were limited to these species, with quotas (Total Allowable Catch) set annually by the DFO. Both shrimp and crab have been key components of fisheries in the St. Lawrence Estuary since the second half of the twentieth-century (Morse, 2014). Today, these species, along with American Lobster for fisheries with Atlantic access, account for most of the volume and profits of Eastern Canadian fisheries. Nordic Shrimp and Snow Crab are particularly valuable species (DFO, 2021), yet their reliance on these species left the fisheries vulnerable to market fluctuations and environmental changes, underscoring the need for diversification.

In the mid-2000s, the management of the business grew particularly concerned. On one hand, a still recent cod moratorium had raised general doubts about the reliability of DFO models. While relationships between scientists and fishermen had somewhat improved, tensions still simmered. Michel, a former member of the Fishing Resource Conservation Council, reflected on the difficult period in the early 2000s: "Before the moratorium, the scientific work.... Biologists worked in the secrecy of their laboratories, within Fisheries and Oceans.... After the moratorium, the fishers started to speak up, right after the moratorium in ninety-two, ninety-three, saying, 'This doesn't make sense, we don't know what's happening, we don't know what the biologists are doing'.... And so, this famous Fisheries Resource Conservation Council (FRCC) was created to present scientific opinions to the public, gather industry input, and then make public recommendations to the minister.... But it was always very tense. The relationship between research and fishers are extremely ambiguous" (Interview, Michel, 2021 [originally in French; translation by the author]).

The efforts of the FRCC did help bridge some of the gap between scientists and fishermen. Nevertheless, some tensions persisted, fueled by ongoing concerns about quota size and management. The Wolastoqiyik were particularly worried, not just about past mismanagement but also about current fluctuations in crab and shrimp populations and market prices. Although the shrimp population in the St. Lawrence was stable, the influx of farmed shrimp from Asia was driving down the market value of Canadian shrimp, putting further pressure on local fishermen (Michaux, 2012; Gouvernement du Québec, 2018). The situation for Snow Crab was even more serious. Along with market pressures from Russian and Alaskan crabs, biologists noted a decline in snow crab populations in the mid-2000s, potentially signaling overexploitation. The combination of decreasing quotas and declining populations raised urgent concerns about the sustainability of the fishery.[2]

[2] The shrimp and crab case, while not my focus, are interesting in the context of this article. For snow crabs, a better understanding of their reproductive cycles, which naturally fluctuate over long periods, has calmed initial fears about biomass variation. On the market side, shrimp prices have significantly improved after a low in 2010, with prices steadily increasing since (Gouvernement du Québec, 2018). However, northern shrimp faces growing concerns due to its vulnerability to climate change, the formation of a hypoxic zone in St. Lawrence, and the return of Atlantic cod, its primary predator (DFO, 2023b). While not the core focus of this article, these examples emphasize the rapid changes in resource availability driven by evolving market conditions and environmental factors, creating instability in an industry that relies on a calculated exploitation of ecological and economic resources.

As the Wolastoqiyik faced growing uncertainty about their reliance on shrimp and crab, they began seeking solutions to secure their future. One of the few available options was fisheries diversification through the exploitation of new and emerging species. While this article focuses specifically on the Wolastoqey's cases, they were not alone in adopting such measures. Linda, who promotes the consumption of emerging fish products in Québec, recalls a significant moment when diversification efforts began to resonate with even the most traditional cod fishermen in the region. During a 2008 presentation of a sustainable fishing initiative linked with fisheries diversification, Linda noticed an unexpected reaction from a Gaspé fisherman, representing the traditional fishing community. This moment captured the shift in the mindset of fishermen who had long relied on more established fisheries: "It was a cod fisherman who saw the possibility of saying, 'We're going to diversify our fishing, and we're going to diversify our income.' And just like that, this man said, 'My son will be able to take over the boat and continue fishing.' There was a vision for the future, planning like we had never heard before or never allowed the fishermen to express [originally in French; translation by the author]." (Interview, Linda, 2021)

It is in this context that in 2006, the Wolastoqiyik began requesting new fishing licenses from the Canadian government to diversify their activities. Under the New Emerging Fisheries Policy, Indigenous fisheries were granted privileged access to licenses for emerging species. This policy aimed to mitigate the profound impacts of colonial policies that had historically excluded Indigenous communities from commercial fishing. As part of this initiative, the fishery received a commercial green sea urchin fishing license in 2008—unique in the Québec region—along with 10 other fishing licenses.

It should be noted, however, that this step toward diversification did not immediately translate into significant financial gains for the Wolastoqiyik. While financial stability was a concern for the Nation—given that fishing revenue was their primary economic driver at the time—the Wolastoqiyik began investing in forestry, aquaculture, and tourism to achieve broader economic stability (Michaux, 2012). Diversification, though expected to be profitable, was aimed more at ensuring the survival of their commercial fishing activities, which hold inherent value as ancestral livelihoods (Charest, 2012; Michaux, 2012). Profits from emerging fisheries, however, have proven difficult to attain. As the administrator of the business describes: "Outside of the holy trinity of crustaceans: Nordic shrimp, lobster and snow crab, there is very little or nothing. Well, now, you have Atlantic Halibut which, in the fish categories, is the best of the best. But, outside of the halibut, there are very few fisheries that are" (Interview, Joël, 2023 [originally in French; translation by the author]).

While Atlantic halibut has proven more profitable, the commercialization of other new species has faced challenges. The case of green sea urchins is a particularly illustrative example of these difficulties.

The interest in green sea urchins from Canadian waters emerged in the aftermath of the collapse of the Japanese green sea urchin population due to overfishing in the 1990s (Sun & Chiang, 2015). As urchins are considered a luxury item in Japanese markets, the collapse of their local stocks forced Japan to seek new sources, thereby boosting international demand for the species (Sonu, 2017). Inspired by the success of Maine's fisheries (Johnson et al., 2012), entrepreneurs began green sea urchin fishing in the St. Lawrence Estuary during the 1970s. However, the expected economic triumph never materialized in Eastern Canada. Despite the increasing global demand and the high market

prices for Canadian sea urchins (Sonu, 2017)—especially after the collapse of Maine's fisheries due to overfishing (Johnson et al., 2012)—several factors limited the potential for substantial profit.

The biology of the green sea urchin plays a significant role in its commercial value, as the edible parts are the reproductive glands, or gonads. Larger gonads increase the urchin's market value. In the St. Lawrence Estuary, gonads reach their peak size in the spring. However, after spawning in April, the gonads shrink, leaving a short window between the thawing of river ice and the spawning period for fishermen to harvest urchins, all while adhering to daily and annual quotas. During this period, prices are higher, as urchins from other North American regions, such as New Brunswick, have not yet entered the market. By fall, gonad sizes recover, allowing for renewed harvesting, but market prices decline due to increased competition.

Moreover, the focus on gonads complicates the fishing process. Gonad quality is primarily evaluated based on size and color. However, Canadian fishermen cannot assess the color of the gonads without opening the urchins, which kills them and renders them unsuitable for export. Although divers can estimate urchin quality based on seafloor conditions, this method is time-consuming, prone to error, and challenging given the short fishing season. Other fishing methods, such as using a small dredge or traps, have been tried in the past but were ineffective at sorting urchins by quality. As a result, manual harvesting by divers remains the most commonly used method, despite being labour-intensive and costly.

Additionally, the limited volume of local urchin harvests complicates processing, making it unfeasible to establish a dedicated transformation plant. As a result, Canadian fishermen must rely on American intermediaries to access Asian markets. Increasing the volume of harvested sea urchins is also difficult, as while green sea urchins are abundant in the St. Lawrence Estuary and Gulf of St. Lawrence, few have access to the green laminaria diet necessary for developing commercial value.

Finally, despite efforts to promote sea urchins in Québec, they are still rarely consumed locally. In 2021, during my fieldwork, 100 percent of commercially fished sea urchins from Québec were exported, primarily to Japan, according to the Wolastoqiyik. The export process further complicates profit margins, as Japanese consumers—who account for over 90 percent of global sea urchin demand—have highly specific aesthetic preferences (Bestor, 2004). In addition to gonad size, external factors such as the size and color of the urchin's body are critical, though not necessarily linked to taste. This increases the challenge for fishermen, who must consider these standards during harvesting. Moreover, the cost of shipping live urchins, which are heavy and require careful temperature control, is prohibitive for many fishermen, making post-harvest transformation essential.

Due to the limited number of licenses issued for sea urchin fishing, commercialization statistics are protected by the DFO, making it difficult to assess exact figures. Nevertheless, several factors, including the fact that all commercial sea urchin fisheries in Québec—except Indigenous fisheries—have ceased their activities since the 1970s, suggest that the fishery remains economically insignificant compared to other activities such as shrimp and crab fishing. Les pêcheries Malécite has argued that sea urchin fishing is a negligible source of profit. Although not as profitable as shrimp or crab, green sea urchin fishing offers a form of security by diversifying the portfolio of species being harvested, helping the Wolastoqiyik to remain resilient against environmental or economic fluctuations. Other studies in different contexts have also shown how diversification can help fishermen gain social security

and protect fisheries against ecosystemic instabilities (Anderson et al., 2017; Cline, 2017; Teh et al., 2017).

In this case, the motivations of these individuals are not in question; diversification is understood as a creative measure through which fishermen negotiate the socio-ecological contingencies of the fishing industry. What I want to discuss, however, is the sustainability of this strategy, which requires significant effort from those who pursue it. If diversification is, for some, despite the complications associated with developing new techniques and markets, used to ensure sustainability (as argued in Charles, 2001; Morgan et al., 2014; Roscher et al., 2022), it is essential to examine the sustainability of these activities themselves.

Fisheries diversification: Ensuring precarity or precarious insurance

Fisheries diversification has been presented as a strategic response to the uncertainties facing the fishing industry, which is continually disrupted by ecological changes and volatile international markets. However, I argue in this section that diversification alone is insufficient to secure sustainable futures for those who depend on it. Using the green sea urchin as a case study, I will demonstrate that not only is sea urchin fishing itself inherently precarious but that the expansion into new and exploratory fisheries, under current fisheries management models, may exacerbate instability within the sector. The framework through which exploratory fisheries are regulated—while differing in some respects from conventional fisheries—is still grounded in the same assumption: that the resources of the natural world can be precisely quantified and transformed into manageable variables. In practice, I will argue that this ideal is difficult to attain in fisheries management, where limited resources and incomplete data must contend with the ecological unpredictability of our changing times.

Before delving further into the discussion, it's important to clarify the two primary types of commercial fisheries operating in Eastern Canada: limited access fisheries and emergent fisheries. Limited access fisheries, such as those targeting snow crab and shrimp, involve well-established commercial licenses owned by either individual fishermen or larger enterprises. Each species fished requires its own specific license, making these licenses crucial assets for fishing operations. For many fishermen, they represent not only a source of livelihood but also their main retirement fund. As DFO administrator Marie-Ève explains: “We no longer create new core enterprises. A young person who wants to enter the fishing industry today can only do so through the transfer of an existing business. In these cases, a core enterprise must retire for a new one to take its place. We call these limited access fisheries” (Interview, Marie-Ève, 2021 [originally in French; translation by the author])

These licenses, often passed down through generations, have become highly valuable commodities. However, as discussed earlier, the increasing uncertainties brought on by climate change, fluctuating market prices, and declining biomass threaten their long-term viability. While the DFO discourages the concentration of licenses in a few hands, its New Emerging Fisheries Policy (DFO, 2008) encourages fishermen to diversify their catch to navigate these shifting environmental and market conditions.

Emergent fisheries, targeting underexploited species, are governed by a distinct regulatory framework, though they follow a conservation rationale similar to that of established fisheries. The New Emerging

Fisheries Policy (DFO, 2008) is designed to regulate these budding fisheries by balancing economic opportunity with the need for resource protection. This policy mandates a phased approach for establishing a new fishery, allowing for careful monitoring at each stage:

1. *Experimental stage*: This step focuses primarily on assessing the ecological integrity of the resource. It requires preliminary data on the species: whether there are areas with commercially viable quantities and whether populations are large enough to support long-term exploitation. The costs of this phase fall on the industry, which is not yet permitted to commercialize the resource.
2. *Exploratory stage*: This more extended phase assesses the socioeconomic potential of the fishery. Is the resource marketable? Can fishing activities generate sustainable profits? At this stage, fishermen are allowed to sell their catch, but they must frequently renew their temporary licenses.
3. *Commercial stage*: Once it is demonstrated that the fishery is both ecologically viable and commercially profitable, an exploratory license may be converted into a permanent commercial license, which can then be owned and resold by the core enterprise.

It is important to note that not everyone can access these emergent fisheries. Indigenous fisheries are given priority, partly as a response to the historical exclusion of Indigenous communities from commercial fishing opportunities. The re-establishment of their commercial fishing rights grants them privileged access to these licenses. For other fisheries, however, access is often restricted to existing core enterprises. As explained by Marie-Ève, in charge of managing emerging licenses in Québec: "To obtain an exploratory sea urchin license, you need to be a core enterprise. A core enterprise generally holds licenses for several key species and is expected to operate profitably. Diversification is often necessary, but it requires an established base fisheries" (Interview, Marie-Ève, 2021, [originally in French; translation by the author]).

Thus, emergent fisheries licenses are not designed to create new businesses but to allow existing core enterprises to diversify. This process requires significant investment, and not all exploratory fisheries transition into successful commercial ventures. Additionally, participation clauses ensure that speculative fishing is minimized, as fishermen must continually invest and maintain their exploratory licenses.

While the New Emerging Fisheries Policy offers flexibility and encourages innovation, the considerable costs and risks associated with experimental and exploratory phases limit the accessibility and popularity of these fisheries. Several interviewees expressed that these fisheries remain marginal within the broader industry. Despite the heavy financial and operational burdens of exploring and developing new fisheries, the policy does provide an important pathway toward diversification and necessary conservation measures. However, as the following example illustrates, the application of these measures in practice presents significant challenges.

First, the human and financial resources required to conduct proper scientific evaluations of biomass are substantial. As mentioned in the second section, the quotas for Canadian fisheries are typically determined through the calculation of an Optimal Exploitation Rate, which is based on the species' biomass. Although exploratory licenses differ in stability from those of established fisheries, the process of quota calculation for species like the sea urchin still relies on the Optimal Exploitation Rate. To illustrate the practical challenges of this approach, consider the example of the sea urchin. Researchers from the Maurice-Lamontagne Institute (IML), affiliated with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO), are tasked with assessing the exploited sea urchin populations in the St.

Lawrence River. During these surveys, researchers either dive personally or use underwater cameras to count the sea urchins in specific sub-zones. This allows them to estimate the number of sea urchins per square meter and, by extension, calculate the total population in the region. Although the method seems straightforward, these surveys are time consuming and expensive. André, an IML biologist who conducted these evaluations for several years, noted the difficulty: "These surveys are very laborious, very costly. We don't conduct them annually, but we do them from time to time" (Interview, André, 2021 [originally in French; translation by the author]). Despite the significant investment, the importance of these assessments is clear, as ecosystems are dynamic and require regular monitoring. The DFO recommends stock assessments every three years, but the practicalities often complicate this schedule. Given that sea urchin fishing is not widespread in the estuary, it is a low priority for management. Marie-Ève points out the consequences of limited resources: "It's been almost ten years since we've had a stock assessment, but this is a species that should ideally be evaluated every three years." (Interview, Marie-Ève, 2021 [originally in French; translation by the author]). While this process is sound in theory, it raises crucial questions about whether the DFO has sufficient financial and material resources to fully support diversification. As new species are introduced into the fisheries, more human and financial resources will need to be mobilized to conduct frequent evaluations, raising concerns about the sustainability of this practice.

The material challenge behind evaluation is not the only doubt lingering about the efficiency of emergent species management. Indeed, lack of scientific data also represents an lingering concern. Let's continue with the sea urchin example. When a scientific survey is conducted, researchers from the IML calculate the total biomass of sea urchins in the Saint Lawrence River. This biomass serves as the baseline for setting the TAC. However, to determine the exact size of the quota, DFO scientists must also establish an Optimal Exploitation Rate, a ratio typically set between 5 percent and 10 percent of the total biomass, informed by scientific literature. Adjustments to the TAC are made annually based on a combination of data provided by fishermen and ongoing scientific assessments.

Despite this structured process, interviews with DFO scientists in charge of conducting those evaluations reveal significant uncertainty in defining the Optimal Exploitation Rate for sea urchins, largely due to gaps in knowledge about the species' resilience to exploitation. André, a biologist involved in these assessments, noted: " Well, I'd say we're still trying to find the right exploitation rate, the optimal one. It's a very dynamic process. And, like I was saying earlier, it's expensive to run the surveys that really give us an accurate picture of the stock's condition." (Interview, André, 2021 [originally in French; translation by the author]). Benjamin, another scientist, echoed this concern: "We calculate a range, but we don't know if it's sustainable" (Interview, Benjamin, 2021 [originally in French; translation by the author]). Sea urchin fisheries in Eastern Canada are relatively new, and the models used to manage them have yet to fully account for the ecological complexities that influence these populations. With shifting environmental conditions, the exploitation of emergent species will require more robust scientific knowledge, supported by adequate resources and time, to ensure sustainable management.

As the environment continues to evolve, the ecological variables influencing emergent fisheries are constantly shifting. While scientific models provide some structure for management, they cannot fully account for the rapid and unpredictable changes driven by climate change. A tragic example comes from Nova

Scotia, where Green Sea Urchin fisheries in the early 2000s were devastated by an epidemic of paramoeba, a disease linked to warming waters (Johnson et al., 2012). This effectively ended the practice in that region. Although the colder waters of the St. Lawrence Estuary currently protect sea urchins from this disease, the water is expected to warm in the coming years (Savenkoff et al., 2017). Other risk factors—such as ocean acidification, changes in salinity, and shifting predator populations—are also beyond the control of biologists, further complicating efforts to predict and manage these fisheries.

These concerns are palpable among fishermen, who are alarmed by the changing conditions. As one fisherman, Joël, expressed: "There is much talk about ocean acidification. How resilient is Green Sea Urchin to that?.... There is also talk of surface current getting warmer. Will larval survival be as good? Will a new disease appear? Will a new predator, known or unknown, appear? There are tens of questions, but I think there are very few answers currently" (Interview, Joël, 2021 [originally in French; translation by the author]).

This underscores the critical point: while diversification into new species is becoming more common, the scientific understanding of these species is still developing, and time is limited. In the age of the Capitalocene, ecological trajectories and fishermen's livelihoods are increasingly disrupted by market instabilities, climate change, and evolving scientific recommendations. DFO biologists, like André, acknowledge the difficulty of ensuring long-term sustainability under these conditions: "It is one thing when the main source of mortality is human, and you can control that source by managing the fisheries. But, when we add over more sources of mortality that are not set, that evolve through times.... Because climate change is that. Conditions will go everywhere, and there are no more balance points. Now, we are always... Conditions are always changing. If you add new mortality, we are important, such as disease, predations, physiochemical stress, salinity levels, and water temperature, which all directly impact... We need to be way more careful in how we are managing" (Interview, André, 2021 [originally in French; translation by the author]). Thus, while emergent fisheries may offer short-term insurance against the precariousness of established species, they introduce new layers of unpredictability into the ecosystem. The interconnections between species mean that the decline of one can lead to unforeseen shifts in biodiversity. The collapse of sea urchin populations in Maine in the 1990s (Ovitz & Johnson, 2019) serves as a cautionary tale, showing how the disappearance of one species can have cascading effects throughout the ecosystem (Steneck, 2013). As this example suggests, the more ecological change happens, the more it creates further instability, leaving fisheries management—based on static models—struggling to keep up with a dynamic and shifting environment.

Conclusion

Emergent fishing, I argue, is a creative way in which Canadian fishermen manage to respond to the precarity of a fishing industry whose stability is undermined by the current climate crisis and the volatility of international markets. However, the stability of these strategies, being governed by the same logics as the industry, remains vulnerable to the very problems they seek to address. As I have demonstrated with the green sea urchin case, despite significant efforts from all sides to manage the conservation of these species, doubts persist regarding their future as exploitable resources, both among fishermen and legislators. As emergent fisheries become more exploited and stabilize into permanent licenses, they become susceptible to the same specter of instability that haunts the existing industry. In this sense, one must ask whether the shift towards new and exploratory fisheries simply postpones an existing problem to the near future. It is also worth asking whom this strategy truly benefits. Do small-scale fisheries have the extensive resources necessary to pursue exploratory licenses?

That being said, the shared realization among all industry actors regarding the current state of instability, and the collective will to create sustainable fishing practices, is encouraging. The efforts of both fishermen and governmental actors in species conservation must be acknowledged. However, to secure that future, we must recognize the imperfections of existing models. Models are important; they offer tools to help manage complex datasets, but to be effective, models must simplify a reality that, in the current era, is becoming increasingly complex.

Ethnography and anthropology, as Anna Tsing, Neil Bubandt, and Andrew Matthews (2019) argue, allow us to complexify these models by highlighting the impact of their interaction with the socio-ecological environments in which they operate. By pointing out the complications of their material application, we can enrich their datasets by including the material realities of a world where data are precarious due to material resources or gaps in scientific knowledge. It also allows us to highlight the temporal limitations of these datasets in a world undergoing constant change. Without discarding models altogether, these insights allow us to complexify them, rethink their importance, and handle their data with extreme care. It is also crucial to consider how we can integrate flexibility into conservation measures, enabling fishermen to be more cautious without jeopardizing their livelihoods.

In doing so, it is also essential to rethink the very foundations of these models. While the conservation of species and the livelihood of fishermen are paramount, are the two truly dependent on one another? Is it responsible to tie fishermen's livelihoods to the number of fish dictated by a license, especially given the risks this poses to their future? Are we not perpetuating an imperial system that sees only profit in the extraction of natural resources—a critique formulated by Innis in 1929 and still relevant today? In the precariousness of the Capitalocene, can we envision a fishing industry that does not rely solely on the precise extraction of limited resources?

Ethnography also allows us to observe how industry actors have already disrupted the logic of these models and devised creative solutions to secure their futures. The Wolastoqiyik have creatively worked with local chefs and grocers to slowly foster a local market for green sea urchin, allowing them to maximize profits without increasing catch numbers. Mariculture has also been identified as a potential solution. Other research and development initiatives aim to utilize byproducts as well. These projects are promising but require resources

and time. Rethinking, alongside local fishermen, how we allocate resources seems like a solid start in establishing new variables that could help extricate us from management models that too simplistically equate profit potential with resource extraction.

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Research Article

"You want my money? Dance!": Consumers, the state, and a just transition in the food system

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Abstract

An understanding of the role of consumers will be essential to academic and practical efforts to contribute to a just transition in the food system. In this article, I argue for the importance of examining consumers' role, not only in terms of individual or household behavioural change, but also with respect to broader potential political-economic developments. By providing a schema for possible consumption-related approaches that would feature varying degrees of state involvement, I encourage reflection on the extent to which justice may be realized as climate change is addressed through food system interventions. I emphasize that hybridized approaches may be possible, and that initiatives that may be constrained within a capitalist political-economic framework nevertheless hold the potential to showcase trajectories toward longer-term post-capitalist food futures. On balance, some restraints on individual freedoms regarding food consumption habits may be inevitable if structural transformations are to be achieved that will adequately support climate-change mitigation, yet justice-oriented considerations will need to be weighed in terms of how such restraints would be pursued. I base these observations on research that included interviewing farmers and representatives of alternative food organizations in Ontario and Québec. Themes covered include public and government views on local food and ecological agriculture, challenges related to initiatives such as Community Supported Agriculture, the complexity of dietary transitions, and various possibilities for the state to help reshape producer-consumer relations.

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Résumé

Comprendre le rôle des consommateurs sera essentiel dans les efforts académiques et pratiques déployés en vue d'une transition juste dans le système alimentaire. Dans cet article, j'invoque l'importance d'examiner le rôle des consommateurs, non seulement sur le plan des changements de comportements des individus ou des ménages, mais aussi par rapport à de plus vastes évolutions politico-économiques potentielles. En proposant un schéma d'approches possibles de la consommation qui comporteraient différents degrés d'implication de l'État, j'encourage à réfléchir sur la mesure dans laquelle la justice peut être assurée lorsque les changements climatiques sont traités à travers des interventions sur le système alimentaire. J'insiste sur le fait que des approches hybrides sont possibles et que les initiatives qui peuvent s'avérer limitées dans un cadre politico-économique capitaliste ont néanmoins le potentiel d'exposer des voies vers l'avenir alimentaire post-capitaliste à plus long terme. Tout bien considéré, certaines restrictions des libertés individuelles concernant les habitudes de consommation alimentaire pourraient être inévitables si l'on veut parvenir à des transformations structurelles qui soutiendront de manière adéquate l'atténuation des changements climatiques, mais les considérations de justice devront être prises en compte dans la manière dont ces restrictions seront mises en œuvre. Je fonde ces observations sur une recherche qui comprend des entrevues avec des agriculteurs et des représentants d'organisations d'alimentation alternative en Ontario et au Québec. Les thèmes abordés comprennent les points de vue du public et du gouvernement sur l'alimentation locale et l'agriculture écologique, les défis liés à des initiatives telles que l'agriculture soutenue par la communauté, la complexité des transitions alimentaires et les diverses possibilités pour l'État d'aider à remodeler les relations entre les producteurs et les consommateurs.

Introduction

Increasingly, countries of the global North are witnessing evidence of the climate chaos that has been experienced for decades by countries of the global South, the majority world. With agricultural production being variously impacted by unpredictable weather, heat waves, droughts, floods, and forest fires, a range of actors—from researchers to philanthropic foundations and governments—are paying attention to both agricultural producers' collective ability to adapt to the climate crisis, as well as help mitigate greenhouse gas emissions. Given the scientifically documented need for profound changes within the food system to contribute to climate change targets, including those established through the Paris Accord (Clark et al., 2020; Wollenberg et al., 2016; Zurek et al., 2022), it is not surprising that awareness of food-climate links seems to be increasing. This includes government efforts to financially support initiatives that will help reduce overall emissions linked with agricultural production (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2022).

Relatedly, discourses that incorporate the concept of a "just transition" in the food system are also on the rise, both in terms of academic literature (Kaljonen et al.,

2023) and public engagements (Anderson, 2019; Chemins de Transitions, n.d.). With the historical focus of this concept being associated with principles of fairness in supporting workers move out of polluting industries (particularly the fossil-fuel sector) and toward more environmentally benign employment opportunities (Eaton, 2021; Heffron & McCauley, 2018; Newell & Mulvaney, 2013), it is not surprising that related food-system analyses very often focus on the role of agricultural producers. The role of consumers in contributing to sustainability-related goals has also been discussed extensively in the literature (Baumann et al., 2017; Bentsen & Pedersen, 2021; Giampietri et al., 2016), however there is room to further explore their specific role in contributing to a just transition in the food system, particularly in light of increasing concerns about climate change impacts.

This article highlights the importance of considering the role of consumers in contributing to (or inhibiting) such a transition in the food system. I argue that their role must be analyzed not only in terms of individual or household behavioural change, but also with respect to broader potential political economic developments. In the Discussion section, I offer a schema for considering possible consumption-related approaches that may contribute to greater or lesser degrees to just outcomes in terms of a just transition, and that would feature more or less involvement of the state. On balance, varying restraints on individual freedoms regarding consumption habits will need to be considered if structural transformations are to be achieved that will adequately support climate change mitigation. Furthermore, initiatives and approaches that may be constrained within a capitalist political-economic framework nevertheless hold the potential to showcase trajectories toward longer-term post-capitalist food futures.

In developing this analysis, I draw primarily on interviews conducted with ecological farmers (and some representatives of alternative food distribution organizations), all of them based in either Ontario or Québec, Canada. My methods, which are described further below, were focussed on understanding the potential for practical approaches and state intervention to expand alternative food marketing and distribution as a means to increase ecological food consumption and production. As such, whereas there are many scholarly articles that capture consumer opinions on "ethical" or "responsible" food habits (Abid et al., 2020; Aprile et al., 2016; Baumann et al., 2017), the approach here is to analyze the perspectives of farmers and those involved with alternative food distribution on producer-consumer relations. The quote incorporated into the title of this article, which I elaborate on below, is suggestive of the difficulty many producers experience in trying to meet the expectations of their clientele through alternative food marketing approaches. More broadly, farmers' perspectives on varying possibilities for achieving structural food-system change through modified producer-consumer relations contributed to inspiring the analysis presented in this article.

In the next two sections, I review the relevant literature that informs the discussion that follows, covering just transition works related to food studies, and literature on producer-consumer relations. I then present the methods used to gather and analyze the data that informs my argument. I relay key results that inform my perspective on these matters across the following three sections, covering: recent trends regarding local food consumption; challenges that are continuing to render alternative food distribution marginal; and dietary considerations as well as potential approaches for transforming production-consumption dynamics. I then offer a discussion of diverse political-economic approaches that relate to just transition strategies involving consumers and varying state-level interventions.

A just transition in the food system

Although the just transition concept dates back to the 1970s, when organized labour groups began expressing concern over strategies to support workers whose livelihoods would likely be negatively affected by increased environmental legislation, it is in recent years that the concept has gained attention in both academic and policy circles (Kaljonen et al., 2023; Stevis & Felli, 2015). The latter includes at the level of the United Nations climate negotiations. Specific analyses of the necessity for a just transition in the food system have notably increased in the last several years, with Blattner (2020), for example, drawing attention to the potential impact of climate change policies on livestock producers, and Dale (2020) linking the concept with the potential for strategic alliances in society to advance agroecology. Additionally, James et al. (2021) highlighted the potential for just transition approaches to contribute to a post-pandemic recovery with regard to the food system. A recent special issue on a just food system transition continued this trend, with contributors covering both conceptual insights and case studies from various geographic contexts (see Kaljonen et al., 2023).

As a framework for proposing and evaluating just food system transitions, scholars have drawn connections to environmental justice literature (Kaljonen et al., 2021; Tschersich & Kok, 2022). To summarize, and somewhat simplify, some of these framings, including by Tribaldos and Kortetmäki (2022), *Table 1* captures key dimensions and considerations worth noting.

Table 1: Key dimensions and considerations related to a just transition in food systems, summarizing key literature (Blattner, 2020; Kaljonen et al., 2021, 2023; Kuhmonen & Siltaoja, 2022; Tribaldos & Kortetmäki, 2022; Tschersich & Kok, 2022).

A JUST TRANSITION IN THE FOOD SYSTEM	
DIMENSION	**CONCERNS AND RELATED PRINCIPLES**
Distributive justice	• Farmers' livelihoods are maintained or improved through the process of decarbonizing food production • Food security and resilient supply chains are assured at a global level (cosmopolitan justice) • The needs and well-being of future generations are not compromised (intergenerational justice)
Procedural justice	• Food-system governance related to transition processes are transparent and inclusive • Decision-making activities address existing power imbalances in the food system • Reliable information is made available to those involved in climate-related decision making, including regarding dietary transitions

Recognition-based justice	• Indigenous and other traditional knowledge systems contribute to guiding the transition (epistemological justice), and diverse foodways are respected in the process • Equity is prioritized (e.g. based on gender, age, and ethnic diversity) in terms of the needs of actors across the food system • Ecological concerns extend to non-human nature (e.g. considering the rights of non-human animals, and the need to preserve biodiversity, healthy soils, and clean water)

As indicated, such justice-oriented framings can draw attention to both spatial and temporal elements that would be essential to a fair climate-oriented transition in the food system. It is also clear that the diverse needs and positionalities of agricultural producers are at the forefront (e.g., Kuhmonen & Siltaoja, 2022), however some scholars are also giving consideration to matters of food security and dietary transitions for consumers (Kaljonen et al., 2021; Schübel & Wallimann-Helmer, 2021).

The political economic realities associated with trying to achieve a just transition in a global food system that is dominated by capitalist tendencies and the motivations of corporate actors is an understated current that runs through much of this literature. Just as earlier, more general scholarship on just transitions have emphasized the need to assess the political economy of moving away from fossil-fuel economies (Newell & Mulvaney, 2013), so too have scholars underscored the need for a political analysis (and politicized responses) in relation to food system transformation (Klassen et al., 2022; Rosol et al., 2022; Wilson & Levkoe, 2022). Examples include critical assessments of Climate Smart Agriculture and similar techno-managerial or market-based responses that may serve to co-opt efforts to render food systems more ecological (Clapp et al., 2018), and works that have evaluated the potential for the philosophies and actions associated with food sovereignty and agroecology to steer societies in a post-capitalist direction (Dale, 2023; Edelman et al., 2014; Rosset & Altieri, 2017).

Producer-consumer relations

Food studies literature on producer-consumer relations is also highly relevant to the discussion that follows. Scholarly debates dating back over twenty years helped to critique the often-simplistic lenses through which food scholarship can view consumers, with the political economy of production often garnering a priority standpoint (Goodman & Dupuis, 2002). These discussions challenged the assumption that consumers should be solely considered from the perspective associated with some Marxist analyses that sees them as powerless to affect political economic change, limited by commodity fetishism and/or the confines of bourgeois purchasing of niche products (Goodman & Dupuis, 2002; Guthman, 2002). While consumer activism may not overthrow capitalism, it could be argued, it does have the potential to influence socio-economic trends, and, following Actor Network Theory, consumption can be viewed in relation to an assemblage of, e.g., cultural practices, institutional processes, and technological developments that

emphasize the contingency and complexity of production-consumption relations (Fine, 2004; Lockie, 2002, 2009).

More recently, scholars have demonstrated how these forms of analysis remain relevant today (Carolan, 2022; Evans, 2022). Beacham and Evans (2023), for example, caution about trying to "reconcile" production and consumption, yet encourage continued research and theorizing that will develop the integrative agenda that was established approximately twenty years ago. They assess the various factors that may determine to what extent alternative proteins are embraced in production-consumption processes, raising conversations about the geographies of edibility (such as with insect proteins), the socio-economic qualification processes that influence which foods (including novel foods) are valued, and the visceral politics of consumption (i.e. with regard to the embodied relations of eating that are intertwined with broader political economic processes) (Beacham & Evans, 2023). Such an analysis of alternative proteins is particularly relevant to just transition literature regarding food system change given the heightened attention scholars are paying to the scientific and political discourses suggesting meat consumption and industrial livestock production will need to be substantially curtailed in order to achieve greenhouse-gas reduction targets (Katz-Rosene, 2020; Tobler et al., 2011; Topcu et al., 2022; Veeramani et al., 2017).

Related scholarly works on the topic of sustainable consumption practices draw attention to the efforts made to "responsibilize" consumers, bringing in questions of governance and the role of both the state and corporations in production-consumption relations (Bowness et al., 2020; Evans et al., 2017). After more than four decades of neoliberal capitalist trends in many countries, much has been written about food system governance in an era of restrained state intervention (Bernstein, 2014; Desmarais et al., 2017; MacRae & Winfield, 2016). Yet governments continue to intervene in agri-food policy development, even if this is often focussed on promoting productivist agriculture as an economic strategy (MacRae, 2022). With food sustainability concerns largely being relegated to the marketplace and consumer-corporation interactions, less governance space is available for movements organizing for more structural change (Dale, 2021). This challenge is augmented by the fact that many agrarian/food movements are confronted with increasingly authoritarian and populist socio-political conditions in which to operate (Scoones et al., 2023). What is key is to consider the potential for structural, political-economic shifts that will enable or constrain new producer-consumer relations, just as some scholars have undertaken such high-level analysis with regard to climate change governance (Wainwright & Mann, 2013, 2015).

As will be discussed below, the free-market capitalist framework contributes to an array of difficulties regarding the establishment of producer-consumer relations that will support a more sustainable food system. In addition to neoliberal approaches that centre the individualized consumer as holding responsibility for ethical eating (Guthman, 2008), the elitism that can often be associated with alternative food initiatives must be considered (Wilson & Levkoe, 2022), as well as ongoing questions about the price of foods that have been more ecologically grown and distributed (Donaher & Lynes, 2017; Headey & Martin, 2016). In short, whether through mainstream supply chains, alternative grocers, or direct marketing, there is an ongoing tension between fair livelihoods for farmers and accessible prices for consumers of ecologically grown foods.

Furthermore, while a wide variety of consumers, producers, and intermediaries are making efforts to

contribute to short food supply chains, at times overcoming existing challenges (Aprile et al., 2016; Baumann et al., 2017; Bentsen & Pedersen, 2021; Enthoven & Van den Broeck, 2021), proponents that emphasize local food continue to risk falling into the "local trap" (Born & Purcell, 2006). This "trap" is evident when geographic proximity is unreflexively associated with superior ethical and/or ecological qualities, whereas local production and consumption patterns clearly do not inherently address social injustices, inequalities, or the proliferation of unsustainable agricultural practices (Born & Purcell, 2006; Enthoven & Van den Broeck, 2021).

As Woods (2021) demonstrates though, it must also be remembered that producer-consumer roles do not necessarily fall along binaries in general terms, nor do they implicitly need to through a just transition in the food system. Developing rural-urban links can include the increased participation of city dwellers in urban agriculture initiatives, just as some urbanites are choosing to relocate to the countryside, where they will engage to varying degrees in subsistence or commercial food production (Woods, 2021). As indicated below, many of these issues and themes were raised over the course of my research.

Methods

The data that contributed to this article was gathered over more than three years, within the framework of a larger research project on pandemic-related food-system changes and cooperative efforts in farming and food distribution. The data collection included, in 2020 and 2021, interviews completed with participants in Ontario (two farmers market managers and twenty farmers, including two farmers who were engaged in mid-sized food distribution initiatives). In 2022, interviews focussed on participants in Québec: nine farmers and seven representatives of organizations involved with a variety of food initiatives (focussed on, e.g., distribution, food security, or rural economic development). In 2023, interviews were extended to twelve producers regarding an initiative of the Québec government to incentivize production using season-extension infrastructures (such as greenhouses). Participants were recruited through the support of existing networks that were established through previous projects, and through "cold" contacts identified through research into seemingly innovative alternative food distribution initiatives. As suggested above, the goal was to develop an understanding as to how strategies to expand such initiatives may lead to an increase in ecological food production and consumption. Generally, farmers interviewed were involved in small-scale operations, focussed on ecological production (with some being certified organic) and direct-marketing approaches (typically selling through, e.g., farmers markets, Community Supported Agriculture programs, and farm kiosks). Interviews were semi-structured, with questions centering on challenges and opportunities that arose as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, effective approaches to marketing and distribution that hold the potential to expand ecological food production and consumption, and key elements of the food system that may need to change in order to increase long-term resiliency.

Interviews were almost entirely completed remotely over video calls, with audio recordings being transcribed so that they could be analyzed through the use of *NVivo*. While thirteen key themes were identified (as "codes," through manual coding), those most

relevant to this article were *consumption*, *just transition*, *systemic change*, and *affordability*. As the other codes dealt more with specific pandemic-related experiences, and with farm and marketing infrastructure, those themes have been delineated as out-of-scope for this article. While almost all of the codes were established based on the framework of the research and interview questions (as etic codes), it is worth noting that an unexpectedly high number of references emerged under the theme of *consumption*, hence the focus of this article. Interviewees are identified by name in the text below for those who provided permission to do so, whereas anonymity has been respected for those participants who preferred that quotations not be attributed to them by name (or be attributed by first name only).

In addition to the fifty interviews that contributed to the analysis that follows, media and document analysis was also completed as a means of capturing the essence of popular and government discourses, related trends, and analyses developed by non-profit and grassroots organizations. It is important to acknowledge that the geographic focus of this research means that the results, and subsequent discussion to follow, are most likely to be of relevance to similar global North contexts, where industrial agribusiness and corporate retail have established a stronghold over the last several decades (Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011; McMichael, 2009). At the same time, the scope of the data collection allowed for diverse perspectives to be captured over a temporal period that spanned from the early months of the pandemic (summer of 2020) to the time when it was officially declared over by the World Health Organization in the spring of 2023 (United Nations, 2023).

Food "autonomy": Where is the just transition?

Research participants were consistent in remarking on the striking increase in interest in local food in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was particularly noticeable in terms of increased subscriptions to Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs, which in Québec jumped from approximately 20,000 subscriptions pre-pandemic to 28,000 in 2020 (Proulx, 2024). For individual farmers with whom I spoke, this often entailed increasing their [1] (Interview, June 16, 2022). Yet, while farmers from both Ontario and Québec described an increase in revenues as a result of this shift in purchasing habits, for many it also came with significant stress, as they had to rapidly modify their production and marketing plans that had been developed over the course of the winter. CSA subscription by 50 to 100 percent. Gabriel Leblanc, a vegetable farmer in Québec's Bas-Saint-Laurent region, indicated that in the summer of 2020 there was a dramatic difference in the number of people frequenting their farm kiosk, with his team struggling to keep up with the demand. "I felt like I was flipping burgers at McDonald's" he said, noting that he did not have time to speak to customers at the counter because there were so many people there; "It was intense!" For some, this meant cutting out farmers market engagements in order to dedicate harvests to CSA programs. "We went from being a 200-person CSA to a 400-member CSA...basically completely replacing all the dollar value we would have had seen from our [farmers] markets," explained Ontario farmer

[1] Quotes from interviews conducted in French have been translated to English by the author.

Stephanie, who noted that they also faced a major drought and the late arrival of their two migrant workers that spring (Interview, March 26, 2021). For those who had had a significant portion of their sales channels dedicated to contracts with restaurants, the stress and demand for improvisation were even more significant.

It is clear, however, based on various media reports and government documents, that consumers were not operating in a vacuum as they took up local consumption in larger numbers. Government pandemic-related initiatives and discourses both in Ontario and Québec had a role to play. The Province of Ontario, for example, helped to financially support farmers as they shifted toward online marketing and distribution channels, while also promoting local food (Government of Ontario, 2021). The Québec government, for its part, was even more pronounced in its response. It adopted a *Stratégie nationale d'achats d'aliments québécois* (a strategy for local food procurement within public institutions) in September 2020, while in October 2021, the minister responsible for agriculture, fisheries and food launched "*le Défi 12 $*", which challenged consumers to spend 12 dollars per week on local food that would have otherwise been spent on imported foods (Gouvernement du Québec, 2020b, 2021). Québec also increased its support for *Aliments du Québec* (the organization responsible for branding food produced/harvested/processed within the province) and introduced an online portal in April 2020 called *Le Panier Bleu* (the Blue Basket), which, while not limited to food products, was geared at facilitating purchasing that would support Québec producers (Gouvernement du Québec, 2020c, 2020d; Morissette, 2024).

What is important to note about both Ontario and Québec is that their governments' behaviour concerning local food consumption during the pandemic did not depart from their traditions of treating the subjects of local agriculture and food in an economistic, capitalist-oriented manner. In Québec, there is an added nationalistic tone that can be associated with the government's promotion of the concept *autonomie alimentaire* (food autonomy), and related terms like food self-sufficiency, which clearly resonated with the public in the wake of pandemic-related concerns over supply chain disruptions (Mundler, 2021). While interviewees (Interviews, June 7, 2022 and July 21, 2022) and organizations in the province both use the term food autonomy (Équiterre, 2023), some farmers are also clear about the need to distinguish between food autonomy and food sovereignty. On this topic, one farmer suggested that the entrepreneurial mentality has to change so that "we stop seeing food as a source of profit, but rather as a source of nourishment" (Interview, June 16, 2022), whereas a homesteader based in the Mauricie region named Catherine Gingras also expressed that she did not see the government of Québec as taking real action to become food sovereign. "If it were the case," she stated, "the government would be doing a lot more to encourage the development of small farms" whereas agricultural rules and policy and finance frameworks are geared toward large, industrial-scale farms (Interview, July 8, 2022). She added that food sovereignty is not aligned with "continuing to compact soils with large machinery, eroding the very thin layer of arable soil [which] is deplorable."

This last quote raises questions related to governance and a just transition in the food system. While food sovereignty is strongly interconnected with agroecological production methods (Edelman et al., 2014; Mundler, 2021; Rosset & Altieri, 2017), the discourses identified here that emphasize local food and food autonomy are representative of the "local trap" (Born & Purcell, 2006). The governments of Ontario

and Québec do not demonstrate signs of supporting a just transition in the food system. Discussions of energy transitions are limited to other sectors, such as supporting electrification in the automobile industry, whereas support for more ecological farming methods are meagre (Gouvernement du Québec, n.d., 2020a; Government of Ontario, 2020, 2022). The latter is evidenced by Québec supporting the organic sector and pesticide reduction initiatives in ways that do not substantially challenge the industrial agricultural models that are perpetuating, e.g., the heavy use of fertilizers in crop production, or the unsustainable livestock management practices, both of which are problematic across the country (Gouvernement du Québec, 2020a).

Consumers also appear to not be prioritizing climate-change concerns in making decisions about purchasing local and/or ecologically grown food. Farmers and organizational representatives with whom I spoke in both Ontario and Québec suggested to me that health-related concerns seem to be one of the most significant reasons for participating in CSA programs or otherwise buying from ecological producers. As Owen Goltz, a vegetable farmer in Ontario's Peel Region, stated,

> I've always said, forget about climate change.... Pushing climate change...as a topic on its own is a complete waste of time, because no one's going to buy it. The consumer isn't going to buy it. But what consumers will do [is] make changes that [are] directly related to their health (Interview, July 27, 2020).

He suggested a communications strategy of making links between human health and the inherent need for ecological growing conditions, so that indirectly "climate change will be a secondary winner that doesn't even have to be brought up conversation." Another farmer in the same geographic area raised a related point when she said, "We've been too [focussed on] fear tactics instead of talking about what could be and giving people a clear picture of what we could move towards," emphasizing the need to prioritize hopeful messaging whereas climate change discourses can be psychologically overwhelming (Interview, July 29, 2020). These quotes are reflective of studies that have indicated that consumers tend not to prioritize environmental concerns as a sole or key factor when making food purchasing decisions (Abid et al., 2020; Aprile et al., 2016; Baumann et al., 2017; Tobler et al., 2011), just as people generally tend to focus on more immediate concerns, shutting out climate change as an issue (Marshall, 2014), which is consistent with recent surveys of Canadians (Ipsos, 2022; Parisien, 2023).

Alternative food distribution in the margins

Similarly, solidarity with farmers does not seem to be a central motivation for consumers of local/ecologically grown food. As Judith Bonnard of Estrie, Québec's Marché de solidarité régionale (Regional Solidarity Market) indicated, "Solidarity with producers, it's unappreciated; it's poorly understood," despite the efforts that they make as an organization to promote this as a topic (Interview, June 20, 2022). This point was perhaps the most clearly reflected in the precipitous decline in local food purchasing that occurred in 2022, as pandemic-related restrictions eased. Leslie Carbonneau, in her role as agri-food service coordinator for Brome Mississquoi, Québec, described how this was not just a "return to normal," given that small-scale farmers in the region were seeing sales *below* pre-pandemic levels: "This year [2022], most farmers are at

75 percent of their normal customer base. With the fact that people can start to travel again, plus inflation, the infatuation with buying local has fallen off" (Interview, July 21, 2022). This trend was reported across Québec (Coopérative pour l'Agriculture de Proximité Écologique [CAPÉ], 2022; CBC News, 2022; Léouzon, 2022), which was alarming for producers who had planned for an abnormally high demand based on consumer habits in the first two years of the pandemic, and who were now facing surpluses that would perhaps be sold at a loss or not harvested at all. "It's as if people felt that they had done their duty, which was to support local producers for a year or two, and now they have moved on to other things," remarked Sylviane Tardif, a farmer who runs a CSA program in the Estrie region (Interview, June 2, 2022). Another producer, Nathalie Martin who farms southeast of Montreal, emphasized that a similar shift happened politically, "During the pandemic, the government said, 'Oh my god, we need to feed people locally'...and they loudly proclaimed that it was absolutely necessary to buy local; and then a year later you didn't hear anything more about it" (Interview, April 10, 2023).

Unfortunately, although other factors are also at play, this sudden increase and then drop in local food demand has had drastic economic repercussions for farms. Media reports have highlighted both the financial difficulties that farmers are experiencing, with many facing bankruptcy, as well as the concomitant psychological distress that has been mounting in recent years (Luft, 2019; Pamou, 2020). One interviewee, Christian Duchesne, expressed that he is concerned that two farmers he knows may not just go out of business in the near future, but rather die by suicide (Interview, July 8, 2022). Yet, while a farm income crisis was evident across Canada before the pandemic (Qualman, 2019), participants varyingly emphasized the severity of the problems at hand, describing, for example, an "agricultural system that is on intensive care" (Interview, June 2, 2022).

Neoliberal economists may suggest that such fluctuations are natural occurrences as free markets respond to variables and adjust themselves. However, climate-friendly farming is often associated with direct marketing techniques and alternative food initiatives, and many of these, such as CSA programs, have been described as incorporating non-capitalist logics (Bücheler & Bosch, 2023; Feola et al., 2023; Si et al., 2020).

A key benefit of CSA programs, for example, is that they offer farmers increased financial security, given that members paying up-front at the start of the season allows them to focus on meeting demand, with planning and marketing becoming less of an ongoing concern. Multiple research participants acknowledged that such alternative food initiatives require more commitment, planning, effort, and adaptability on the part of customers. Yet the more flexible CSA programs become in order to face the challenges of attracting and retaining customers (Si et al., 2020)—such as by offering the ability to "pause" their CSA box distribution, customize box contents, receive home delivery, or pay in instalments over several months—in turn makes these initiatives more difficult for producers. Hilary Moore, a pork and vegetable farmer near Ottawa, Ontario, lamented this shift in the functioning of CSA programs, arguing that these trends represent a "co-option" and "a dilution [of] the power of the CSA movement in some ways" (Interview, March 5, 2021). She described how traditional CSA models offered an opportunity to educate customers (e.g., on the realities of crop failures), and to "train" them (such as by having them take on the responsibility to find someone else to pick up their box and use the vegetables if they were on vacation). Moore discussed the competition that has come with the growth of the

CSA movement, including with the emergence of home delivery meal kits with pre-packaged recipe ingredients. "I don't know if [the traditional CSA model] stands out quite as much anymore," she said; "I just find people shop around a lot and...you know, they make you dance for it. 'You want my money? Dance!'" (Interview, March 5, 2021). In short, CSA programs are potentially being rendered less "alternative" (and less based on non-capitalist economic principles), as consumers increasingly adopt a neoliberal mentality that associates power with purchasing decisions.

Other interviewees emphasized the marketing efforts required to attract and retain customers. Nathalie Martin, whose family runs a CSA program and an on-farm store that is open year-round, described how they have to work "very, very, very hard in order to not be forgotten by [their] clientele." She specified that she needs to do this through newsletters, Facebook, and Instagram engagements, being physically present such as through public talks, and generally being socially involved (Interview, April 10, 2023). While such trends may be connected to a growing supply of local and ecologically grown food through various initiatives, or to affordability concerns consumers have in the face of inflation, research participants provided various examples of other contextual factors that must be considered. For example, Colin Sober-Williams, who operates a CSA program in Kawartha Lakes, Ontario, noted that "the market [for these programs] is one percent of the population.... It is very niche right now" (Interview, August 13, 2020), and this approximate market share is supported by data from Québec (Proulx, 2024). Benjamin Chabot who farms near Bromont, Québec, similarly noted that the market for local food seems to be somewhat flooded, reducing the prices that farmers can get for their products (Interview, April 25, 2023), however a substantial increase in consumer demand would evidently resolve this matter and move alternative food initiatives out of the margins of the food system.

In terms of the affordability of climate-friendly food as an issue, interviewees raised inequality and related topics that arguably must also be taken as important contextual considerations. As Sarah Bakker, a livestock farmer near Bobcaygeon, Ontario remarked, "Is it housing costs [that are making food unaffordable]? Is it debt load from student loans? If you focus solely on food, then it becomes a farmer problem as opposed to a big picture piece, and it's complicated" (Interview, September 2, 2020). She also paralleled sentiments of other research participants who challenged the apparent societal assumption that food—including ecologically grown, local food—should be cheap: "I don't want to talk about making food affordable. I want to talk about making people able to afford food," Bakker stated concisely. Some research participants pointed to the possibility for a Basic Income Guarantee to help in this regard, mirroring studies that have been increasing in recent years on this topic in relation to the food system (Lowitt et al., 2024; Power et al., 2021; Power & McBay, 2022). Others questioned the priorities of consumers, with some interviewees remarking that people do not seem to have trouble spending on their pets or on wide-screen televisions, while cheap food remains an expectation (Interview, April 21, 2023). Brenda Hsueh, who raises pastured sheep in Grey County, Ontario, indicated that she was sympathetic about the troubles people have covering inflated housing prices, but also noted:

> I've seen...middle-class families paying like $500 a month for everybody to have a freaking cell phone and data and stuff like that.... And, you know, it'll be a complaint that they have to spend like $200 a week to feed all those people as well. Right?.... It's just, our society in general has messed up their priorities (Interview, September 2, 2020).

Hsueh added that she did not feel farmers should "take the hit" to maintain cheap food prices when banks and speculative investors are profiting enormously from high housing prices and related trends. As an important complement to these remarks, Mélina Plante and François D'Aoust, who farm in Québec's Montérégie region, noted that many people prioritize purchasing organic food even if they are not very affluent, whereas, as Plante observed,

> Then there are those who are rich who are always looking for the cheapest foods possible, even though they wouldn't have any worries about buying good quality food. It doesn't seem fair. And I have the impression that it wouldn't be enough for us to lower our prices. It seems that a popular education is really what's necessary for people to change their priorities (Interview, June 7, 2022).

In sum, just as the drop in consumer interest in local food seems to have happened in parallel with a decline in related government discourses after the first two years of the pandemic, producer-consumer links and state initiatives are relational more generally. A free-market approach leaves CSA and other alternative food initiatives at the margins, whereas broader concerns about affordability, inequality, and cultural priorities raise questions about the kind of interventions that could contribute to a just transition in the food system.

Dietary transitions and production-consumption relations

For those people who do have an awareness of the environmental reasons to prioritize ecological food consumption, translating that awareness into action becomes a complicated affair. Antonio Gomes, who operates a mixed farm in York Region, Ontario, described how he is "only one generation removed from people who had a pretty healthy ecosystem and basically have watched the ecosystem collapse in many senses" (Interview, July 27, 2020). Yet he adds that:

> I find [that] a lot of different people, [from] different walks of life…think the food system is very important and are distressed about what's at the [grocery] store or see that we're going the wrong way…. It's just [that] they don't know what to do with [their interest in food], or what action they can do to participate in it (Interview, July 27, 2020).

Dominic Lamontagne, a homesteader and activist based in the Laurentides region of Québec, echoed these sentiments. As an author and person who engages in public debates on the food system (Lamontagne, 2015; Lamontagne & Dubé, 2022), he indicated that he feels climate chaos is central to many people's interest in ecological agriculture, yet that there is a connected mental-health component to consider as well:

> Anti-anxiety medications are selling well because people are hungry for meaning…. Taking concrete actions like feeding yourself, that provides a lot of meaning for people, and that gives them a sort of fallback plan…. You feel less dependent on a system over which you have no control. And there's nothing so stressful as being dependent on a system over which you have no control (Interview, June 2, 2022).

Growing one's own food is a theme to which I will return below, but an important point raised by Lamontagne is that most people do not feel they have control over their food system, which relates to Gomes' observation that people often do not know what to do in the face of climate change and related challenges.

As Lamontagne articulated during our interview, many consumers are choosing vegetarian or vegan diets

given that personal eating habits are within their control, and as there are both scientific and popular discourses about the links between animal agriculture and greenhouse gas emissions (Blattner, 2020; Willett et al., 2019; Zurek et al., 2022). He finds though these trends can be "very, very dangerous" as they can involve simplified perspectives that, for example, "demonize red meat" while corporations "like Nestlé and Conagra have jumped on the opportunity to remove animals from the food system, which are clearly much more complicated to manage than a field of industrial corn or soy" (Interview, June 2, 2022). Lamontagne adds that "animals play an integral part in agriculture" and that an agroecology without animals would be completely unbalanced, whereas alternatives like Beyond Meat and non-dairy cheeses and milks can often be promoted in ways that are very colonial. Evidently, finding ways to reduce unsustainable livestock practices, while maintaining or expanding on those that are sustainable, is incredibly complex in terms of consumption patterns.

On the topic of dietary transitions, research participants commented that eating seasonally and locally is often simplified or overlooked as an issue. While eating according to seasonal variations may not be the most important component of a climate-friendly diet (Macdiarmid, 2014), many consider this to be a key aspect of localizing food consumption, which is a priority when considering that some estimates suggest global food miles account for nearly 20 percent of food-system-related greenhouse gas emissions (Li et al., 2022). Judith Bonnard explained that building awareness about seasonal eating is a key part of their work at the Marché de solidarité régionale in Estrie, noting that "seasonal eating is part of changing our habits" along with the kind of weekly planning that can be involved with accessing an alternative food initiative such as theirs (Interview, June 20, 2022).

Yet, while Bonnard finds these kind of behavioural changes "very achievable," they are not necessarily consistent in local food initiatives. Farmer Sylviane Tardif, for example, commented that she agrees with the Québec government's efforts to subsidize season-extension infrastructure such as greenhouses, yet she feels there should be limits to what should be grown and how:

> As for growing tomatoes or peppers in the middle of winter in Québec, I don't think it's taxpayer money that should [pay for that]. I think people are going to have to realize that they can enjoy tomatoes in the summer, but that they may have to go without in the winter.... It can be done...but the thing is, people are so used to having everything, all the time. That's the trouble (Interview, April 21, 2023).

Nathalie Boisclair, a vegetable farmer near Bromont, Québec, raised a similar point, stating that:

> If you want to have spinach, kale, or the like growing in a non-heated greenhouse, then yes, absolutely [we should encourage season extension. But... is it smart to produce year-round heating with propane?... I'm not in favour of growing strawberries in greenhouses in January, for example. Environmentally speaking, it doesn't make sense (Interview, March 17, 2023).

These quotes exemplify how discourses and initiatives on local food or food autonomy can vary greatly in terms of ecological assumptions and impacts, and with regard to what is expected of consumers.

Regarding the extent to which the state is ready to intervene in encouraging more localized and seasonal eating, it is interesting that some producers mused about what forms this could take. Nathalie Martin, for example, suggested that there should be a "rule" that when foods such as strawberries are being grown in Québec, companies should not be allowed to import them into the province: "The government has us follow

production standards.... We have to do water tests; we have to prove that we're [following certain guidelines]. Why is it that what we import doesn't have the same kind of rules?" (Interview, April 10, 2023). Sarah Bakker expressed a similar idea, although expressing skepticism about the political feasibility of such an approach:

> Can we make it so that if Canadian food is in season, like carrots and tomatoes, [then] Sobey's and Loblaws can't sell U.S. tomatoes or [other] non-Canadian food [being grown here]? The government would never go for it [though].... This is all daydreaming and not something that I think will actually happen (Interview, September 2, 2020).

Apart from dietary transitions and trade rules, there were two other consumption-related themes raised by participants in terms of areas in which governments could be much more involved: restructuring production-consumption relations, and food-system education.

On the theme of restructuring production-consumption relations, multiple interviewees discussed getting involved with homesteading as a way to both grow food and reduce their environmental footprint. Catherine Gingras, for example, lamented that government subsidies and other supports only exist for commercial farmers, even if one works at growing their own food on a full-time basis: "It's pretty strange because, in the end, I think we're also contributing to combatting climate change by growing our own food. But all that, it's not recognized" (Interview, July 8, 2022). Apart from non-commercial production, Antonio Gomes mentioned that you could incentivize more people to get involved with farming by paying people a salary to cover their basic needs as "that might give them enough of a runway to actually start farms" (Interview, July 27, 2020); whereas Stéphanie Wang, a producer near Frelighsburg, Québec, similarly suggested that the government could at least subsidize farmers' salaries rather than subsidizing agri-food business and export-oriented production (Interview, April 3, 2023). Yan Gordon, who farms near Sutton, Québec, also in the Estrie region, took the idea of government intervention even further, suggesting that food should not be a consumer product. "The government should provide food stamps, so that everyone would be equal," he argued. "That way, someone earning $10,000 [per year] would have the same purchasing power, when it comes to food, as someone making $300,000" (Interview, March 23, 2023).

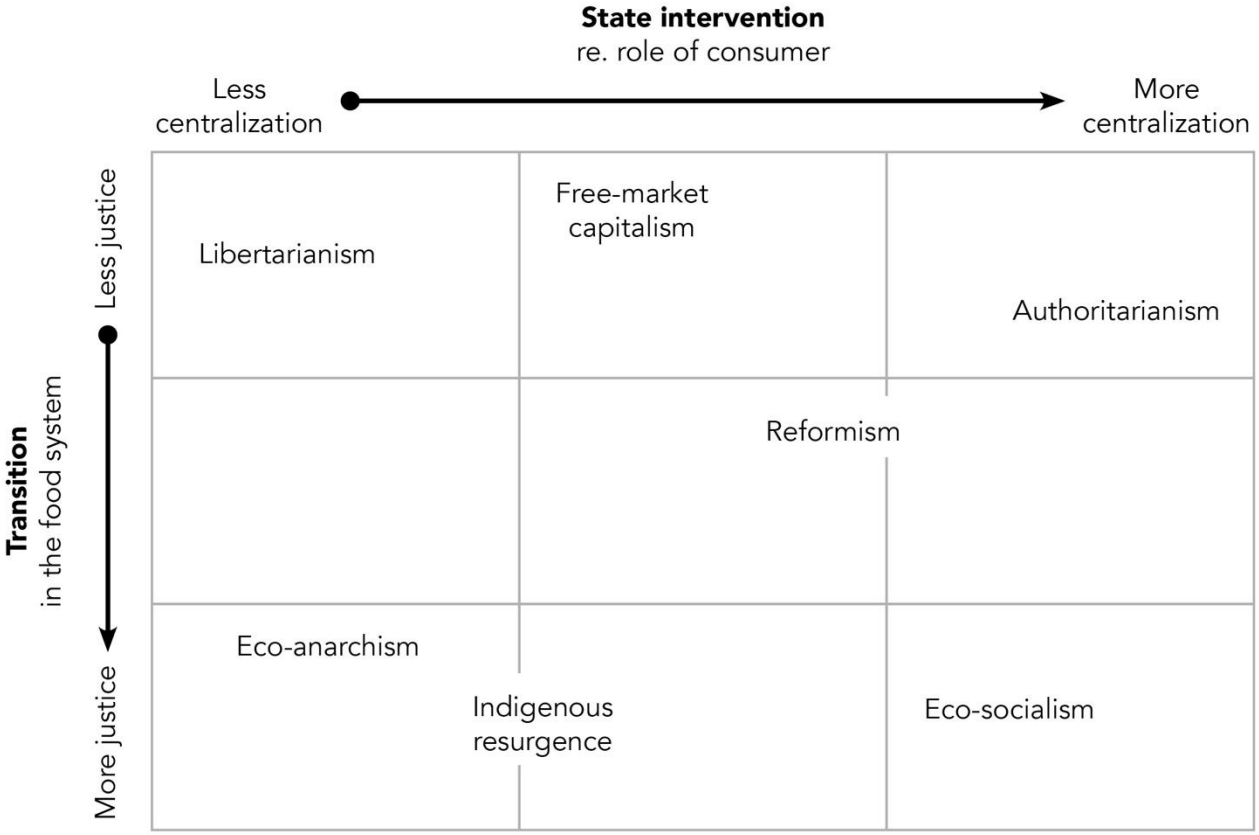
To complement these provocative ideas raised by interviewees, increased government intervention was evoked on the topic of food-system education. Gabriel Leblanc was one producer who discussed the fact that school groups will visit their farm, "from the viewpoint of increasing awareness about local agriculture" (Interview, June 16, 2022). Yet while this can involve children and youth of various ages, as well as workshops on important topics like food sovereignty, he indicated that these engagements are typically either organized by individual teachers or by partnering non-profit organizations. A vegetable farmer who runs a CSA program northwest of Toronto articulated how governments could potentially be not just supporting or leading these kinds of initiatives, but rather mandating that young people learn more about food and agriculture: "I believe every single high school student in this country, who is a Canadian citizen, should work in the [sector] for [perhaps] six months on a farm, six months in the [food] service industry" (Interview, March 18, 2021). She added that this would help with both developing a general understanding around food systems as well as "valuing the people who work in food [and] valuing the land that grows the food."

Discussion

To frame the discussion of the research results presented here, *Figure 1* offers a schema for considering possible state engagement (or lack thereof) in consumer-producer relations regarding a just transition in the food system. It is clear based on the interview data and other information summarized above that there are a wide range of existing and potential approaches to bringing about a more climate-friendly food system. There is a good deal of frustration evident in terms of ecological farming and alternative food initiatives being marginalized in the Canadian context. Interviewees often seem to respond to this frustration with ideas about how government interventions could improve the situation—from introducing income supports and educational initiatives, to disciplining markets based on the seasonal availability of local foods. In parallel, there are those undertaking approaches such as homesteading that may represent a desire to increase control over one's food system without depending on state-level involvement. Considering the political-economic frameworks that would allow for various kinds of interventions into a food system transition is a helpful exercise given the range of ideas research participants expressed about structural changes that could influence producer-consumer relations.

I will briefly describe the political-economic categorizations captured in the following figure's grid before reflecting on how these relate to the relevant literature, including conceptualizations of justice. As indicated in the literature review above, other scholars have considered such high-level questions related to governance in speculating on the political economy of diverse efforts to address climate change (Wainwright & Mann, 2013, 2015). Similarly assessing the potential for a just transition in the food system is also essential.

Figure 1: Possible interventions in regard to consumer behaviour that would have varied influence on a just transition in the food system.



Free-market capitalism here generally encapsulates the status quo, as the majority of food-system-related responses are operating within this framework. This includes the individualized, market-oriented approaches of both consumers and governments to pursue localized consumption and support ecological agriculture simply through shopping at farmers markets and membership in CSA programs. While the latter are not necessarily strictly operating based on capitalist logics (Bücheler & Bosch, 2023; Feola et al., 2023; Si et al., 2020), as described above they are increasingly competing with food distribution initiatives based less on solidarity and more on consumer convenience and business-oriented co-optation. We can also include under this free-market rubric the efforts of corporate grocery stores to capture consumer dollars for those who are motivated to purchase more purportedly environmentally friendly food (local, organic, vegan, etc.), whether that is due to health-related, climate-related, or other motivations. There is arguably the least amount of justice oriented with these approaches, as consumption habits are not making an impact on markets and production regimes in a manner that will adequately address the urgent need to rein in greenhouse gas emissions.

Libertarianism could entail an increased capture of governance processes by corporations competing to successfully pursue a green growth agenda, with reduced political oversight. Under this category we can also include, however, individualized responses such as homesteading and similar "back-to-the-land" initiatives, even if these are taken up in urban environments. These responses could potentially contribute to increased justice in the food system in terms of the resulting contributions to more ecological food production.

Reformism, in contrast, would likely include taxation or other financial changes that would incentivize the consumption and production of climate-friendly food. Increased administrative, practical, and monetary support for alternative food initiatives, such as public markets and CSA programs, could also be part of such reforms, just as governments could contribute more to guiding consumers as to how to effectively "vote with their dollar" in the spirit of a just transition (Seed & Rocha, 2018).

Authoritarianism would involve little procedural justice, with the state directing a centrally planned economy and agri-food system with little to no input from producers and consumers. However, interventions could potentially generate significant dietary shifts among populations, e.g., if governments were to dictate to what extent (if at all) people are able to consume foods deemed to have high carbon footprints. This could include, for example, severely restricting or prohibiting the consumption of industrially raised livestock products, or of highly processed and other foods made using chemical fertilizers and other energy-intensive inputs and processes (Springmann et al., 2018; Willett et al., 2019).

Eco-anarchism, on the other hand, could entail more just approaches, yet that involve minimal government intervention. Examples include producer-consumer collectives based on mutual aid, where food security, farmer livelihoods, and cultural preferences are prioritized alongside climate-related concerns. Degrowth frameworks and initiatives could make up part of such organized responses (Abraham, 2019; Couture, 2021; Guerrero Lara et al., 2023; Singh, 2019).

Indigenous resurgence is worth noting as a category separate from colonial political economic frameworks, particularly regarding the pursuit of justice and decolonization in food systems (Grey & Patel, 2015; Kepkiewicz & Rotz, 2018; Whyte, 2015). This could involve approaches to self-governance (perhaps negotiated through interactions with a colonial state) that enable the flourishing of Indigenous foodways and

the restriction of industrial processes that would inhibit those foodways. Although Indigenous resurgence was not the focus of the research findings discussed above, it is certainly a key theme to considering just transitions in a context of ongoing settler colonialism.

Eco-socialism would involve an engaged and redistributive state that would centre climate change and other environmental concerns in its governance frameworks. This could include food system (and broader) initiatives that may be relatively reformist if pursued in isolation, but that would arguably be transformative if taken up as a suite of policies. Examples include ideas mentioned by interviewees: government-led programs on critical food literacy, and "agricultural service" or similar approaches aimed at exposing students to food-related work; salaries, salary subsidies, or other financial supports for food producers (including non-commercial growers); a basic income guarantee that would support both farmer livelihoods and increased financial accessibility of climate-friendly foods for consumers; and, alternatively, decommodified approaches to food where money plays little or no role in producer-consumer exchanges, and where governments issue food stamps based on people's needs. Other possibilities include pro-poor agrarian reforms to redistribute land in a way that revitalizes rural areas and increases the number of ecological farmers by bringing non-farmers into the profession. Similarly, state support could oversee "territorial food systems" (Boulianne et al., 2021) that include organized food distribution initiatives that are not based on prioritizing profit, and that reduce or eliminate corporate control in the retail sector.

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Just as the dominant capitalist framework does not exist as a totality that prevents the development of political economic alternatives (Gibson-Graham, 2006), it is important to note that some combination of responses presented in *Figure 1* may be possible, for better or for worse. Hybrid approaches to food system reforms may shift progressive initiatives away from capitalist motivations and tendencies, toward more just outcomes, particularly if political education and longer-term strategies are implemented (Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011; Meek & Tarlau, 2016). Decentralized approaches like back-to-the-land strategies, for example, may be combined with more coordinated forms of re-agrarianization, led by localized communities and/or the state (Borras, 2016; Borras et al., 2015; Hebinck, 2018). As Wilson & Levkoe (2022) discuss, there are a multiplicity of ways through which to combine "good food" and "good politics." In short, producer-consumer relations are, and will no doubt continue to be, relational, contingent, and caught up in complex assemblages that include various cultural influences, institutional arrangements, and power dynamics (Beacham & Evans, 2023; Evans, 2022). With this in mind, we can turn to additional considerations regarding the potential for justice to be established within a transition toward a climate-friendly food system.

Regarding *Distributive justice*, I have implied above that possible frameworks and scenarios that would focus on more egalitarian access to food system resources (from land to food distribution networks) are likely to contribute to more just outcomes. This could benefit consumers from the standpoint of increased food security and access to food that is both ecological and culturally appropriate, as well as farmers, Indigenous communities, and fishers (the latter whose experiences were not within the scope of this research project, but who will nevertheless be central to a just transition) (Asche et al., 2018; Cooke et al., 2023; Stephenson et al., 2019). Higher levels of government

intervention will likely be more impactful in terms of coordinating food system responses that will contribute to climate change mitigation, particularly if cosmopolitan justice is to be considered. As this entails organizing fair trading relations with other countries, and coordinating solidaristic responses to ensure food security internationally, state involvement is likely essential. This is not to say that grassroots, perhaps eco-anarchist initiatives cannot contribute to international solidarity in the food system, however some level of centralization is typical of high-level strategies and actions of this nature (Burnett & Murphy, 2014). Global-scale views on "luxury emissions" versus "subsistence emissions" would also need to be taken into account in coordinating just responses (Cappelli & Di Bucchianico, 2022; Shue, 1993), which could involve the state restricting dietary choices in the aim of contributing to climate progress and food security in distant countries (Schübel & Wallimann-Helmer, 2021; Tribaldos & Kortetmäki, 2022). Finally, the stakes of distributive justice are particularly high if actors are to coordinate a just food system transition that considers the consumption needs of future generations, a central component of intergenerational justice.

Regarding *Procedural justice*, as suggested, authoritarian approaches could hypothetically have a positive impact in terms of climate-change mitigation related to food consumption, and a relatively just distribution of food-system resources, however such approaches would fall short with regard to fair governance processes. Similarly, an eco-socialist framework could also fall short if centralization were pursued undemocratically. In order for procedural justice to be realized, food sovereignty principles regarding governance would need to be prioritized (Edelman et al., 2014). This could involve, for example, the engagement of localized food policy councils across the country leading decision-making processes at various geographic scales. Importantly, the voices of those currently marginalized in food-system governance (from food insecure populations and ecological farmers to fishers and Indigenous harvesters) would need increased agency to affect policy change, rather than simply being added to processes dominated by elites. That being the case, it is important to reflect on *how* such forms of procedural justice could be actualized in order to rectify power imbalances in the food system. As farmers are a small percentage of the population, with limited political capital, consumers would arguably need to play a key role in not only participating in new just-transition-related processes but also pushing for those opportunities to be possible. Clearly, for consumers this would entail moving beyond a role involving individualized ethical eating, toward politicized community organizing (Rosol et al., 2022). Beyond state-oriented aspirations though, consumers could also help demonstrate procedural justice, e.g., by being involved in community building and initiatives that lean in the eco-anarchist direction, which often focus on egalitarian forms of participation and decision making.

Regarding *Recognition-based justice*, a just transition would clearly involve recognizing and acting on the diverse needs of those facing food-related injustices. This includes those groups, such as racialized and Indigenous communities, facing disproportionate levels of food insecurity in global North countries such as Canada (Li et al., 2023), as well as those facing gender-based and other intersecting forms of oppression. A recognition is therefore required of the realities of workers throughout the food chain and socio-economically disadvantaged populations, both of whom were not the focus of the alternative food initiatives that were discussed throughout this article. Similarly, a shift in dietary regimes that would involve more local and seasonal consumption, if it were to be

justice-oriented, would need to balance climate mitigation goals with different groups' desires for culturally appropriate foods that may be imported from afar (Burnett & Murphy, 2014). To complicate matters, recognizing the rights of nature itself, and the responsibilities of humans toward non-human nature, as emphasized by diverse Indigenous communities globally (Temper, 2019), draws attention to the urgency of addressing climate change. This is particularly relevant given climate change's concomitant consequences associated with biodiversity loss on a planetary scale (Richardson et al., 2023). It can be argued then that epistemological justice would necessitate incorporating Indigenous traditional knowledge into governance processes associated with a just transition in the food system, including with regard to diets and consumption.

To summarize, it is unlikely that a single political-economic framework will guarantee a just transition in the food system. Some approaches hold more promise than others, yet a hybrid or multifaceted strategy will likely be required in order to successfully address the justice-oriented complications associated with shifting food production and consumption in an era of climate crises. The results of the research related here suggest that producer-consumer relations must be analyzed in light of the role of the state, and the fact that climate justice will likely require interventions that are much more innovative, and perhaps challenging, than those enabled by free-market capitalism.

Conclusion

While it is positive that scholars and others are paying increasing attention to the concept of a just transition in the food system, it will be essential to consider the role of consumers in such a transition, and the extent to which the state does or does not intervene. As I have argued in this article, these factors must be analyzed in relation to not only food production and distribution systems, but also broader political economic changes that may be possible. Trends over the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated a remarkable increase in local food consumption and associated public and governmental discourses, however this interest evidently dropped of precipitously beginning in 2022. The research findings presented suggest that solidarity with producers is not a significant concern among consumers, just as climate change itself does not seem to be on the agenda for many. The governments of Ontario and Québec, for example, continue to approach local food as an economic or self-sufficiency strategy, whereas climate-related initiatives are scarce and/or of little impact.

In terms of alternative food initiatives such as CSA programs, these are increasingly becoming more convenient and flexible for consumers, while simultaneously becoming more difficult for producers. Such initiatives are important in that they hold the potential to contribute to a climate-friendly food system, yet they remain very niche. One of the reasons for this has to do with affordability concerns among consumers, however, as some interviewees implied, it is important to examine how food expenses are relational, connected to not only rising costs of housing and other expenses, but also broader inequality and related political economic factors. At the same time, while some wealthier consumers do not prioritize ecological food consumption, many of those who do orient their diets based on climate-change concerns are not sure how to make specific food choices. They may pursue vegan diets, overlooking the important role of animals

in agroecological farming, just as they may focus on local consumption without considering the environmental costs associated with, e.g., season extension strategies or other potentially energy-intensive production methods.

Multiple research participants evoked the potential for increased government intervention that would restructure production-consumption relations and substantially contribute to, for example, food-system education. Ideas evidently abound as to how a just transition could be actualized in the food system. The discussion of the broad political-economic schema captured in *Figure 1* offers ideas about how different kinds of interventions, and different levels of state involvement, may have greater or lesser impacts in terms of a climate justice-oriented food system transition.

Rather than presenting a normative argument in favour of one hypothetical path forward, I have offered this schema as a way to encourage reflection on the various, potentially hybridized approaches, that could be taken up as a just transition is pursued. It is clear that food-related initiatives associated with a given form of political economy could potentially contribute to the just transition, particularly if they are taken up as a suite of approaches. This includes strategies that could be seen as reformist in isolation (e.g., government-led initiatives on food-system education, or programs in which financial incentives support climate-friendly food consumption), yet such strategies could certainly be pulled in a more post-capitalist (and ultimately more effective and more just) direction. While cosmopolitan and intergenerational justice concerns may compel some restraints on individual freedoms in terms of food consumption habits, ultimately careful consideration of distributive, procedural, and recognition-based dimensions will be required if a just transition is to be achieved in the food system.

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Commentary

Strengthening democratic governance in times of crisis: Lessons from the Canadian Food Policy Advisory Council

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Abstract

Democracy, including processes that govern food systems, are under threat of erosion. Contextualizing and articulating governance challenges is an essential first step. However, it is valuable to look to practices that provide more meaningful ways of engaging non-state actors in government processes. In this commentary, we look at the establishment and activities of the Canadian Food Policy Advisory Council (the Council) which has been "learning-by-doing" participatory governance. The Council offers insights into both the strengths and challenges that face participatory governance as well as highlights ways these processes can be strengthened. In such a critical time, it is important to strengthen mechanisms of engagement that both bolster meaningful engagement and accountability between the government and rights holders.

Keywords: Civil society; food system governance; participatory governance

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Résumé

La démocratie, incluant les processus qui régissent les systèmes alimentaires, est menacée d'érosion. Contextualiser et articuler les défis de la gouvernance est une première étape essentielle. Toutefois, il est utile de se pencher sur les pratiques qui offrent des moyens plus significatifs d'impliquer les acteurs non étatiques dans les processus gouvernementaux. Dans ce commentaire, nous examinons la création et les activités du Conseil consultatif de la politique alimentaire du Canada qui a « appris par la pratique » la gouvernance participative. Le conseil offre un aperçu des forces de la gouvernance participative et des défis auxquels elle est confrontée, et met en lumière les moyens de renforcer ces processus. Dans une période aussi critique, il est important de renforcer les mécanismes d'engagement qui favorisent à la fois un engagement significatif et la responsabilité entre le gouvernement et les détenteurs de droits.

Introduction

As we write this commentary in early 2025, democratic institutions across the globe are under increasing threat of erosion, from both authoritarian rule and corporate capture. While these realities have been growing over the past several decades, at this moment, there is a convergence of both phenomena happening at the same time and across scales. This was evident in the shift of global food governance at the United Nations during the 2021 Food Systems Summit that gave preference to corporate actors and eroded trust among civil society movements (Anderl & Hißen, 2024; Canfield et al., 2021) as well as the dismantling of democratic institutions and accountability watchdogs across the United States (Binkley & Megerian, 2025; Honderich, 2025). While these strategies to consolidate power are not new, this moment of convergence presents a real and present threat to current ways of life and collective well-being. In particular, these shifts undermine accountability measures between states and rights holders.

Contextualizing and articulating these challenges are an essential first step towards identifying alternative arrangements. However, it is possibly even more valuable to establish and enhance practices that provide meaningful ways of engaging non-state actors in government processes, especially those most impacted and often marginalized by decisions. This includes opportunities for participatory governance, that is, relational approaches, grounded in principles of deliberative democracy and collaboration that involve diverse voices and perspectives in decision making processes. Our research on civil society and social movement engagement in food systems governance across Canada and Indigenous territories has explored opportunities and cautions related to these efforts (for example, Levkoe et al., 2023, 2025; Littlefield et al., 2024; Guinto et al., 2024; Wilson & Tasala, 2024). In this commentary, we look at the establishment and activities of the Canadian Food Policy Advisory Council[1] which has been "learning-by-doing" participatory governance.[2]

[1] Hereafter referred to as "the Council."
[2] For a review of our research findings see Wilkes et al., 2025.

Identifying approaches to food systems governance that involve a broader range of engagement can help to develop solutions to persistent and emerging issues. Drawing on diverse experiences and perspectives within food systems can contribute to more informed decision-making. Likewise, participatory mechanisms for governance can ensure greater accountability to the public (and specifically for food producers, harvesters, workers across the food chain, and Indigenous people). Food policy groups are key examples of participatory food governance efforts, established with the explicit goal of engaging a wide range of sectors and people in decision making across food systems (Schiff et al., 2022; Bassarab et al., 2019). With the growth in food policy groups,[3] in tandem with food systems scholarship and civil society advocacy, more integrated approaches to food policy have received greater attention.

Building on efforts like the People's Food Commission (1980) and the People's Food Policy (Food Secure Canada [FSC], 2011), the Food Policy for Canada was established by the federal government in 2019. It was informed by the work of researchers, civil society, and industry advocacy from across Canada and Indigenous territories (ad hoc Working Group on Food Policy Governance, 2017). As participatory governance that involves active civil society engagement gained traction (Martorell & Andrée, 2018), consultation on the Food Policy for Canada built expectations around the possibilities of more inclusive food systems governance processes (Levkoe & Wilson, 2019). In 2021, the federal government announced the Council tasked with supporting and helping to guide the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) on issues relevant to the Food Policy, including its direction and implementation. Functioning as a national food policy group, the Council was launched "as a framework to align and coordinate federal food-related initiatives and address critical challenges facing Canada's food systems to improve social, health, environmental and economic outcomes" (Government of Canada, 2025, para 1). Members were selected to represent a wide range of regions, communities, industries, and interests.

The Council's establishment was a significant step towards more participatory food systems governance in Canada. Our research findings showed it has provided a space for civil society actors to engage with the government and offers key recommendations on issues such as food waste, agricultural sustainability, food insecurity, and the design of a national school food program. The Council fostered relationships with AAFC staff and enabled collaborative efforts among its members. Our findings also revealed that Council members were deeply committed to the process and brought significant expertise and experience to the table. However, the structure and function of the Council were not flawless. We found challenges of representation, such as members being unevenly resourced, a lack of transparency in agenda setting and evaluation mechanisms, and barriers for members to engage or consult with wider audiences. Unfortunately, it is unclear how or if the Council will move forward. At the time of writing, the Council has not met since 2023, and no new appointments have been announced. Despite its challenges, the Council offers a useful mechanism for more participatory food governance in Canada, one that should be further strengthened by the government and supported by civil society organizations (albeit critically and carefully).

In these uncertain times, rather than a global governance deficit, as the Secretary of the United Nations has stated, (United Nations, 2024) we see a

[3] The Food Communities Network (n.d.) and the John Hopkins Centre for a Livable Future (n.d.) have documented the evolution and different iterations (e.g. structure, scope, relation to government, scale) of food policy groups over time.

deficit of democracy. Lessons learned from the inaugural Council provide a window into how to strengthen participatory governance and democratic engagement. Amid a shift towards more authoritarian rule and corporate capture, we hope the Council (and our research) offers lessons on how to meaningfully engage with knowledgeable and experienced actors while remaining accountable to producers, harvesters, Indigenous people, workers, and eaters across food systems.

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Jill Clark is a professor at the John Glenn College of Public Affairs, Ohio State University. Clark's research focus is agrifood system policy and planning, centering on community and state governance of food systems and public engagement. Clark provides statewide leadership as a steering committee member of the Ohio Food Policy Network, international leadership as the past-president of the Agriculture, Food, and Human Values Society, and local leadership as an appointment member of the city and county local food board. Clark recently was awarded the 2022 Excellence in Engaged Scholarship from the Engaged Scholarship Consortium.

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Field Report

Exploring the inter-connections between alternative agrifood and seafood networks for building food systems resilience

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Abstract

In the context of intensifying threats to food systems and a growing need for resilience, Alternative Agrifood Networks (AANs) and Alternative Seafood Networks (ASNs) have emerged as notable bright spots across North America. Collectively, AANs and ASNs comprise Alternative Food Networks (AFNs)—the micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises which are important, but often overlooked, actors in food systems. A critical limitation for food system resilience is that agriculture and fisheries remain chronically siloed in research, legislation, regulation, and advocacy. In this field report, we explore the opportunities and challenges of linking ASNs and AANs to build more resilient food systems. To do so, we draw on our experiences as an

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interdisciplinary group of food systems researchers and practitioners that came together in 2022 through the Agrifish Resilience project. Based on a series of reflective collaborative conversations that we held as a team, we share our key insights for building resilience across agriculture and fisheries focussing on three main themes: the role of ASNs and AANs in food system resilience; our perspectives on what resilience in food systems means; and prospects for collaboratively building resilience. We conclude by identifying productive tensions that emerged from our conversations and suggest that boundary objects may bring ASNs and AANs together, with some examples of what this looks like in practice, and the role for interdisciplinary teams like ours.

Keywords: Agriculture; alternative food networks; fisheries; food system; sustainability

Résumé

Alors que les menaces pesant sur les systèmes alimentaires s'intensifient et que croît la nécessité de la résilience, les réseaux agroalimentaires alternatifs (RAGA) et les réseaux de produits de la mer alternatifs (RPMA) ont émergé comme de remarquables points lumineux dans toute l'Amérique du Nord. Collectivement, les RAGA et les RPMA constituent les réseaux alimentaires alternatifs (RAA) : ce sont les micro, petites et moyennes entreprises, qui sont des acteurs importants, mais souvent négligés, des systèmes alimentaires. L'agriculture et la pêche sont traitées séparément par la recherche, la législation, la réglementation et la promotion, ce qui constitue une limitation critique pour la résilience des systèmes alimentaires. Dans ce rapport de terrain, nous explorons les opportunités et les défis liés à la mise en relation des RAGA et des RPMA afin de construire des systèmes alimentaires plus résilients. Pour ce faire, nous nous appuyons sur notre expérience en tant que groupe interdisciplinaire de chercheurs et de praticiens des systèmes alimentaires qui se sont réunis en 2022 dans le cadre du projet Agrifish Resilience. Sur la base d'une série de conversations réflexives menées en équipe, nous partageons nos idées clés pour renforcer la résilience dans l'agriculture et la pêche en nous concentrant sur trois thèmes principaux : le rôle des RAGA et des RPMA dans la résilience des systèmes alimentaires, nos points de vue sur ce que signifie la résilience dans les systèmes alimentaires et les perspectives de renforcement de la résilience par la collaboration. Nous concluons en faisant ressortir les tensions constructives qui ont émergé de nos conversations et en suggérant que les objets frontières peuvent rapprocher les RAGA et les RPMA, avec quelques exemples de ce à quoi cela ressemble dans la pratique, et en abordant le rôle des équipes interdisciplinaires comme la nôtre.

Introduction

In this field report, we explore the opportunities and challenges of linking Alternative Agrifood Networks (AANs) and Alternative Seafood Networks (ASNs) to build more resilient food systems through our experiences as an interdisciplinary group of food systems researchers and practitioners. We engaged in a series of reflective conversations focussed on the opportunities and challenges of ASNs and AANs working together to build more resilient food systems. We begin by situating our reflections within the broader context of food systems resilience and then describe our approach to co-creating this field report. We then outline our key insights for building resilience that emerged from this process and bridge the agriculture and seafood sectors focussing on three themes: the role of ASNs and AANs in food system resilience; perspectives and tensions on what resilience means; and harnessing collaboration to build resilience. We conclude with a discussion framed by the concept of boundary objects as a way to think about bringing ASNs and AANs together, with some examples of what this looks like in practice, and the role of interdisciplinary research teams. We also address the productive tensions that emerged from our discussions.

Context: Threats to resilient food systems

Food systems are increasingly embedded within capitalist and globalized logics, leading to significant negative implications, including increased vulnerability for many populations and decreasing resilience across multiple scales (Davis et al., 2021; Serdarasan, 2013). Today, seafood and agricultural products are the most globally traded commodities worldwide (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations [FAO], 2018; Kummu et al., 2020). While international trade can confer diversity and access to remote markets, capitalist-driven globalization and power differentials have created conditions that suppress the viability of local food systems (Paolisso, 2008). In addition, it has also driven large-scale extraction of resources and erosion of rights and capital from rural and remote communities, especially Indigenous communities (Hickel et al., 2021). For many communities across the globe, the connection to terrestrial and aquatic food systems is central to their identities and ways of life (Dennis & Robin, 2020; Loring & Gerlach, 2009; Nyiawung et al., 2023). However, access to food is extremely vulnerable to climate change-driven events like fire and floods (Loucks, 2021), as well as economic and social disruptions like the COVID-19 pandemic (Cottrell et al., 2019; Gephart et al., 2016; Love et al., 2021).

Amidst the tensions and challenges facing food systems, it is a priority to identify strategies that can increase food system resilience to shocks like climate change, war, pandemics, and other global emergencies. In the context of food systems, resilience can be understood as the capacity of a food system over time and at multiple levels to provide sufficient, appropriate, and accessible food, while sustaining the livelihoods of those who produce it, even in the face of unforeseen disturbances (Loring & Whitely, 2019; Green et al., 2023; Tendall et al., 2015). The idea of resilience has roots in ecology, where it is often defined as the

capacity of a system to maintain functionality in spite of disturbances, by returning to a stable state (Holling, 1986). As resilience has been integrated into social-ecological systems thinking by social science scholars (Coulthard, 2012; Davidson, 2010; Kirmayer et al., 2011), the focus has shifted toward the potential for people to adapt and achieve positive transformations for their communities (Loring 2021; Manyena et al., 2011), and expanded to include attention to power and the equitable distribution of adaptation benefits (Cote & Nightingale, 2012).

In the context of intensifying threats to food systems and a growing need for resilience, AANs and ASNs have emerged as notable bright spots across North America. Collectively, AANs and ASNs comprise Alternative Food Networks (AFNs)—a heterogeneous category of initiatives that aim to create shorter, relationship-oriented supply chains that link small-scale farmers, fishers, harvesters, and value-added processors directly to consumers, communities, and institutional buyers (e.g., schools, hospitals) (Demmler, 2020; Nordhagen et al., 2021; Renting et al., 2003; Tregear, 2011). AANs such as farmers' markets, food hubs, cooperatives, and community supported agriculture (CSAs), are quite established in the North American context, if not yet ubiquitous (Goodman et al., 2012; Jarosz, 2008; Levkoe & Wakefield, 2014). ASNs, such as community supported fisheries (CSFs) are, by comparison, a nascent feature of the seafood system, having emerged in the last decade or so (Campbell et al., 2013). As global supply chains struggled during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, some AANs and ASNs successfully adapted to surges in demand in North America and worldwide (Love et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2020; Stoll et al., 2021). For example, when small-scale fishers in the US and Canada were faced with market loss because of international trade stoppages and restaurant closures, they found success retooling their businesses for direct marketing (Stoll et al., 2021). A similar trend was observed for small-scale agricultural producers in the U.S. (Thilmany et al., 2021). The pandemic, as Stoll and colleagues show (2021), was only the most recent example of several over the last century where local and food production have been important during global disruptions and crises.

However, a critical limitation for food system resilience is that fisheries and agriculture remain chronically siloed—whether in food systems research, legislation, regulation, management, or civil society advocacy and activism (Olson et al., 2014; Stetkiewicz et al., 2022; Oyikeke et al., 2024). In both the U.S. and Canada, agriculture and fisheries are governed by separate agencies and ministries, jurisdictions, and trade agreements. Despite facing similar global trends and structural challenges, such as the climate crisis, industrialization and corporate consolidation, most research, funding, and policy continues to treat fisheries and agriculture in general, and ASNs and AANs specifically, in isolation. Indeed, despite the flurry of research that was published in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Elton et al., 2023; Hilchey, 2021; Weinkauf & Everitt, 2023), to our knowledge there are few scholarly articles that explicitly bridge these sectors.

The separation of fisheries and agriculture is reproduced in scholarly accounts of the global food sovereignty movement that asserts the "right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems" (Declaration of Nyéléni, 2007). While fisher people have consistently played an active role in movements (Mills, 2023), food sovereignty literature tends to focus almost exclusively on agricultural and farmer-led movements. Levkoe et al. (2017) argue, "deeper engagement between fisheries and food

sovereignty is long overdue, particularly as a growing body of research on small-scale fisheries seeks to address social-ecological relationships and issues of power that are also at the core of a food sovereignty approach" (p. 66).

By conceptualizing seafood as a natural resource rather than as part of food systems, fisheries are ensnared in the logics of resource development and sustained yield, while ignoring attention to critical food systems-related issues such as quality, access, identity, culture, and power (Olson et al., 2014). Conversely, agricultural food production has increasingly been approached as an enterprise separated and extracted from natural systems, whether through the creation of controlled growing environments, chemical amendments, or fully contained, lab-based systems (Fraser et al., 2023). A second issue is that separating agrifood and seafood creates regulatory confusion for producers and harvesters who must navigate multiple sets of policies, standards, and funding sources to bring their products to local markets (Lowitt et al., 2020a; Lowitt et al., 2020b; Advani et al., 2024). Furthermore, this ongoing siloing of seafood and agriculture limits attempts to use strategic, cross-sector policy to enhance food system resilience, which derives from the diversity in a food system, the availability of alternatives when specific foods become unavailable, and cross-sector and cross-scale interactions (Carlisle, 2014; Leslie & McCabe, 2013).

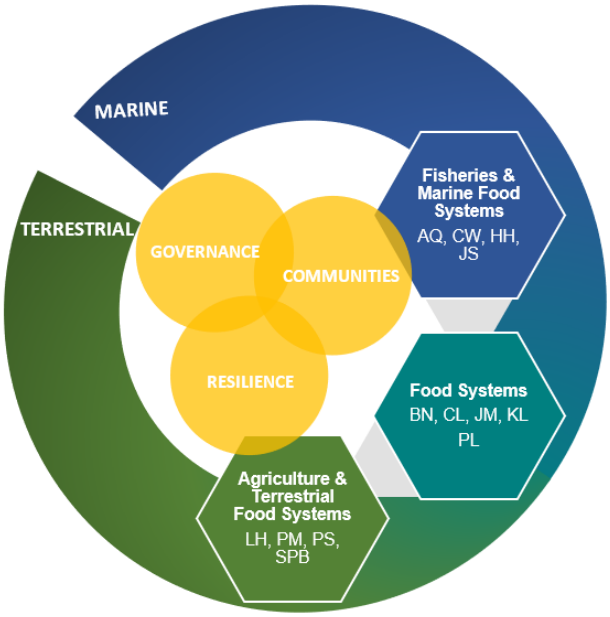
Methods

The Agrifish Resilience project was established in 2022, based on a recognition that there was substantial opportunity for collaborative learning and collective problem-solving across the agriculture and fisheries sectors to build theory and practice for food system resilience. Agrifish brings together scholars and practitioners from industry organizations, food policy councils, non-profit organizations, and post-secondary institutions across multiple locales in Canada and the US. The background, expertise, and focus of team members is diverse, spanning research, policy, and practice related to agriculture and fisheries.

This field report is the outcome of a structured collaborative writing project to explore points of engagement in the research and practice surrounding resilience in agrifood and seafood systems. Our aim was to bring together our diverse experiences and perspectives and share initial observations on the challenges, strategies, and opportunities for enhancing food systems resilience. We began by developing and each responding to a brief survey, which included writing our own individual narratives about why we chose to participate in this project. These narratives included a summary of our work, achievements we saw within ASNs and AANs, and perceived benefits of creating more networks between agriculture and fisheries. Despite the variation in our background, expertise, and areas of focus within food systems, we found considerable alignment among the team in terms of an interdisciplinary approach connected by several common themes. Image 1 provides a visualization of the Agrifish Resilience project team. Team members' positionalities across marine and terrestrial work are represented by the three hexagons with key overlapping foci depicted by the three circles. Our full affiliations

span eight universities, one industry association, and two non-profits across Canada and the U.S.

Image 1: Overview of the Agrifish Resilience Project Team



After the individual narratives were completed, we each read the responses provided by the other team members and held four virtual meetings to discuss and synthesize emerging themes. We then recruited a graduate student to facilitate a series of reflective collaborative conversations to ask follow-up and clarifying questions. We arranged these discussions such that the student interviewed two people at a time, in most cases, one with agrifood and one with seafood experiences. The student transcribed the discussions and conducted thematic coding. Co-authors then had an opportunity to confirm, adjust, or elaborate on their contributions. As a team, we agreed on the emerging themes and an approach to co-writing this field report. In the following sections, we present three key themes that emerged from our reflective collaborative conversations.

Prospects for building resilient food systems: The role of alternative seafood networks and alternative agriculture networks

Each participant began by reflecting on the role of ASNs and AANs in contributing to (or detracting from) food system resilience. The responses were similar in recognizing that both were a source of flexibility and innovation and could contribute to resilience to some extent. However, there is also a general understanding that AFNs are not a panacea and have nuanced relationships with the dominant food system. For example, food systems scholarship has established that greater equity—such as fair compensation for labour or access to local food—should not be a taken for granted outcome of AFNs (Agyeman & McEntee, 2014; Erwin et al., 2024). As well, AFNs exist in interaction with larger food system structures, as our following responses elaborate.

Working in isolation and silos was a key theme expressed across all participants and emerged as the core challenge spanning agriculture and fisheries. Loring attributed the problem to capitalist structures and industrial logics and approaches to organizing, explaining: "Capitalism and industrial thinking have succeeded in fracturing our communities and relationships, making us more dependent on a market that is 'out there' than on our neighbours, friends, and families. This is evident in how different aspects of our food systems and indeed household economies are parceled into different aspects of governance and the economy."

In other words, prior to the industrialization of food systems, fisheries and agriculture were much more practically intertwined, whether materially—through the use of fish waste as fertilizer—or culturally in terms of their complementary placement in seasonal food systems activities for traditional and Indigenous communities. The isolation and disconnection that capitalism has achieved for individuals, neighborhoods, and communities, both reflects and is arguably part of the same continuity as the siloing of fisheries and agriculture in modern commerce and policy systems.

Specific examples of these fractured relationships across sectors, disciplines, and geographies were elaborated by team members. For example, Lowitt explained: "Research is taking place in both the areas of small-scale farming and fisheries but it is not connected. I also believe food policy, like the Food Policy for Canada, would benefit from stronger networks between agriculture and fisheries, especially as fisheries are often not seen as 'food' and thus largely absent in food-related decision making."

Levkoe expressed a similar perspective, suggesting that there are many lessons that could be learned from each sector, while working together would also be more impactful in terms of resilience building and food systems change.

Questions about what constitutes "alternative" also emerged from the conversations. Some participants expressed caution that by constituting certain activities as alternatives we may inadvertently reinforce their more marginal position in relation to mainstream structures. As Loring noted, being defined by difference is not, on its own, an identity but an anti-identity. This was also raised by Lowitt in the context of Indigenous food practices which are often cast as alternatives in comparison to settler colonial systems but in reality, are the foundational practices and ways of being that have constituted food systems in North America since time immemorial.

Participants recognized that interrogating notions of alterity (i.e., how we frame "alternative" food movements and in so doing recreate oppressions), is of central importance to understanding existing power structures and the hegemonic resilience of the globalized food regime. This includes not only the challenges that may face alternative practices vis-à-vis industrial food systems but, equally as important, how alternative arrangements are being practiced and thus are already imbued with power and which our collective work might reinforce. Loring expressed this in terms of the presence of subaltern practices that are reclaiming power, giving examples from the re-commoning of wild foods to so called "guerilla" grafting, where people are surreptitiously grafting fruit bearing branches onto ornamental trees in public spaces, to grey markets for food trade, whether harvested wildlife, fish, or raw milk.

The place-based changes and effects of these alternative systems, despite being often subtle and on a small scale, can be critical to promoting other ways of thinking and re-establishing relationships around food. Some participants spoke to the potential of ASNs and AANs to create a space to imagine something different from the dominant system through prefigurative power. This term, whose roots are in the political sciences, refers to the inherent ability people have through their agency and imagination to change power dynamics and initiate systemic, bottom-up change through the visioning of alternative and more desirable futures (Törnberg, 2021). An example that emerged among participants is the efforts of the community-supported fishery, Fishadelphia, to bolster culturally important food pathways for Black residents in Philadelphia in the context of broader patterns and disruptions from migration, climate change, and globalization of food sources (Erwin et al., 2024). As Levkoe reinforced, the capacity of ASNs and AANs to address place-based issues, while working with small communities and then connecting and spreading the change to others, is what makes these alternative networks a powerful tool for change.

Ultimately, the insights gleaned from the discussions shed light on the role of ASNs and AANs and their capacity for flexibility, innovation, and localized impact in shaping food systems' resilience, while also underscoring the nuanced relationship these alternative networks maintain with the dominant food system. Responses showed that, according to participants, these networks emerge not only as interrelated components but also as catalysts for reimagining and restructuring food systems towards resilience, sustainability, and social justice (Gibson-Graham & Roelvink, 2010; Trauger & Passidomo, 2012). While there was some consensus from participants that the term alternative needed to be revisited, they also agreed that it was a valuable label to connect with the scholarly literature and practitioners in the short term. These insights resonate with broader debates in the literature about what constitutes alternative and how to reconcile divides across "alternative" and "conventional" food networks (Goodman et al., 2012; Misleh, 2022).

Perspectives of resilient food systems

Participants were asked to consider their work with ASNs and AANs in respect to what it means for a food system to be resilient. While those interviewed presented common perspectives, in some instances, their answers also touched on the conceptual ambiguity found in the academic literature (van Wassenaer et al., 2021). Interest in food system resilience has grown in recent years with events like the COVID-19 pandemic forcing many scholars and practitioners to reflect on the structural challenges driving vulnerability and fragility of food systems. It is notable that in some cases, ASNs and AANs have demonstrated greater resilience than export-oriented, industrialized systems (Stoll et al., 2021; Thilmany et al., 2021).

Several participants touched on an overarching understanding of resiliency: the ability to absorb, respond, and recover from shocks (Walker & Salt, 2012). In doing so, they emphasized the importance of adaptability. For instance, Warne stated that a resilient food system is one where the different parts "adapt to those factors to affect them and overcome that problem." In a similar vein, Stoll described resilience as the "capacity for a system to respond to some type of disturbance without fundamentally changing" and Breen saw resilience from a community-based perspective as the "ability to withstand shocks and to adapt to deal with new situations."

Others identified the components that support adaptability, with Stephens and Loring both highlighting diversity and redundancy as cornerstones of resilience. Systems that are characterized by the opposite—uniformity and efficiency—have been shown to be vulnerable to external shocks. For instance, monocultures, which lack ecological diversity tend to heighten the risk of disease and pest outbreaks. Similarly, the long, efficiency-driven, and highly concentrated supply chains associated with the industrialized food system, demonstrated their vulnerability during the pandemic (Clapp, 2020). Loring elaborated by reasoning that different components of the food system must be linked through responsive relationships. Without these relationships, characteristics like diversity and redundancy become irrelevant. Harrison raised the issues of accessibility and appropriateness in upholding food system resilience. Appropriateness supports accessibility in the sense that foods must align with the cultures and culinary and knowledge traditions of a place so that people can engage in a way that is life enhancing. In her view, these are critical for supporting people's ability to respond and adapt to shocks.

Several participants cautioned against viewing resilience as inherently positive and emphasized the need for an equity dimension. Lowitt brought up the questions of resilience to what, and for whom. Stoll pointed out that he pairs his thinking about resilience with social and environmental change in the sense that he considers how a system can be transformed to become more equitable rather than just one that can withstand disturbances. Without this focus on equity, he explained that resilient systems run the risk of enforcing deep structural inequalities. Levkoe similarly highlighted the risk of uncritically relying on the concept of resilience asking "ultimately, what are we bouncing back to?" For him, resilience can mask issues like unjust exploitation of labour and land, white supremacy, and settler colonialism. Levkoe argued that rather than bouncing back to a problematic food system, growers and harvesters should continue to organize, resist, and work to collectively change things. This is in line with Stoll's discussion of resilience as transformation. These perspectives elicited among our

team are useful to critically interrogating and building resilient food systems, especially when navigating the different perspectives and needs that emerge in linking agriculture and fisheries.

Envisioning change towards resilient food systems

Participants were asked to reflect on how the siloing of ASNs and AANs might be addressed to contribute to future prospects for enhanced resilience. Key strategies identified include enhanced social learning, better communication, and connecting around shared issues.

Lowitt spoke to the potential for greater social learning across sectors involving both theory and scholarship as well as on the ground social movement organizing and practice. Breen commented that language, terminology, and communication is key to overcoming silos and realizing the type of social learning that Lowitt emphasized: "[you] have to simultaneously know where you're working, the confines of that, but how it relates to everything outside of the scope that you're working on. And I think that we can do that through even better communication around what we're talking about and what we mean and naming problems and just naming words."

Levkoe similarly elaborated how terminology and naming concepts are important, not only in terms of promoting learning and engagement across ASN and AAN practitioners and scholars, but also in terms of developing a common language for policy change that can then give governments a language to talk about food as interconnected.

Participants also identified issues that may span divides between terrestrial and aquatic systems including livelihoods, climate change, and community well-being. For example, Stoll summarized our team work as ultimately being about healthy communities and wellbeing. Opportunities to work together to catalyze systemic thinking and address issues of shared concern to both ASNs and AANs emerged clearly across our narratives. For example, Warne raised the issue of labour in fisheries: "One issue that the commercial fishing industry suffers with in Ontario is finding enough skilled labour like captains and crew members and processors. These positions require training and there is a great amount of turnover, meaning there is a good deal of lost resources trying to staff processing facilities and boat crews. I know that this is an issue also for the agrifood sector as well, so there is potential to collaborate on solutions to the problem."

Breen and Harris observed that the newly formed British Columbia (BC) Food Hub Community of Practice creates a promising opportunity for enhanced collaboration across agriculture and fisheries. They spoke to the driving role that inter-organizational relationships and trust have played in supporting development of Food Hubs across BC, and the capacity for relationship building to be scaled out to include not only actors across agriculture (e.g., plant based, meat based), but also non-agricultural food providers, such as small-scale fishers and processors, as the structure continues to grow.

The importance of working with those directly affected by and pursuing food system resilience activities on the ground clearly emerged and expresses the scholar and practitioner composition of our

research team. Here, the importance of cross-scalar grassroots action also arose. For example, Levkoe explained how several civil society and Indigenous-led food systems initiatives have been working to build the groundwork for broader scale change and how these have been supported by transnational networks of solidarity and action. Key examples include the People's Food Commission (1980) and Food Secure Canada (2011) which emerged as part of global efforts like food sovereignty (Levkoe & Sheedy, 2017) and global justice movements such as La Via Campesina (Desmarais, 2006), the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP) and the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers (WFF) (Mills, 2023). Similarly, Stoll noted the bipartisan efforts taking place in the United States to establish more diverse seafood and aquaculture supply chains in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Key documents and initiatives that can provide a framework for shortened supply chain initiatives include Executive Order 14017 on Securing America's Supply Chains (2021), the Marine Fisheries Advisory Committee's report "Establishing a National Seafood Council" (2020), the Maine Climate Council's "Climate Action Plan" (2020), and the Alaska Food Systems' "Alaska Food Security and Independence Task Force" report (2022).

Overall, increased political and social capital, distributing knowledge and resources, and more effective policy advocacy and mobilization were identified as potential long-term benefits of overcoming isolation and silos across agriculture and fisheries. Resilience literature likewise indicates that working across boundaries is central to supporting the capacity of communities to learn, adapt, and share knowledge, as we elaborate in the next section on boundary objects.

AFNs as boundary objects for enacting resilience

Discussions among participants revealed deeper insights into how we categorize issues, use vocabulary, and envision changes in food systems. The concept of boundaries helps to further frame our collective thinking of the barriers and opportunities for linking agrifood and seafood within complex food systems. Shared concepts or lenses can be described as boundary objects in terms of mechanisms that can contribute to flows and movement across different spaces (Dumez & Jeunemaître, 2010). A considerable body of scholarship points to boundaries as key sites of innovation and change by enabling disparate communities to come together in a shared space (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Star, 2010). As Hernes (2004) explained, "boundaries are not 'by-products' of organization, but rather organization (defined broadly, ranging from informal groups to formal organizations) evolves through the processes of boundary setting" (p. 10). These may involve combinations of physical (material space/formal rules and regulations), social (group identity, bonding) and mental (ideas/concepts) boundaries with varying degree of "tightness" or permeability (Hernes, 2004).

Consideration of boundary properties is useful for understanding how actors (including practitioners, policy makers, and researchers) are or are not interacting across AANs and ASNs. Increasingly, scholarship points to boundaries as sites of learning, innovation, and knowledge exchange (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). Boundary objects are receiving attention

across many disciplines and areas of practice in terms of concepts, frameworks, or issues that can enable diverse and disparate groups of collaborators to make sense of and act together in a shared space (Star, 2010).

Resilience is well-established as a boundary object (Brand & Jax, 2007; Baggio et al., 2015); it brings a sensible coherence that enables cross-silo or cross-disciplinary engagement, while also being sufficiently malleable to take on robust forms depending on the area of theory or practice taking it up, whether engineering, ecology, sociology, or psychology. This diversity of perspective is reflected in our team narratives.

Our discussions about resilience also highlighted tensions about which system aspects should be resilient: the dominant system addressing structural issues like inequality, the dominant system resisting change, or a new system free of structural inequities. For AFNs, tensions arose from their roles within the dominant food system: as components, as innovators with potential for systemic change, or as entities outside the dominant system. The term "silo" also revealed tensions in our conceptualization of food system resilience. Despite efforts to promote holistic thinking, communication, and networks, siloing persists in policy and practice, often perpetuated by our team's own framing of discussion questions like "what sector do you work in." This analysis underscores the importance of clarity in using terms like resilience and AFNs. Building theory and practice around food system resilience requires ongoing communication and discussions about our visions for the future.

A consideration of boundaries and boundary crossing via concepts like resilience leads us to questions such as: How are AANs and ASNs distinguishing themselves within food systems? What physical/social/mental boundaries exist between AANs and ASNs and how strong are these? If some level of cooperation is desirable and necessary, how do we start working together across these boundaries and what are the implications? Through our reflective collaborative conversations, we have offered insights on some of the boundaries that may be limiting interaction across ASNs and AANs and potential benefits of greater collaboration. With these reflections in mind, we now draw attention to promising boundary objects our team is exploring as mechanisms for collaborating across these sectors of the food system.

Basic income in the food system is one example of a boundary object. While different terms are used, in broad terms a basic income is a cash payment from governments to individuals that ensures everyone, regardless of work status, can meet their basic needs with dignity (Coalition Canada, 2023). A key premise behind a basic income is that numerous societal challenges, from food insecurity to psychological, physical, and community well-being, derive at least in part from poverty and inequality. A guaranteed basic income (GBI) is a systemic intervention that, rather than treating the symptoms of these problems individually, aims to correct the root cause by increasing people's ability and autonomy to build the lives they want (Lade et al., 2017). As a social innovation, a GBI overlaps with many of the economic and social problems in both the seafood (Lowitt et al., 2022) and agrifood sectors (Dale et al., 2023). Some members of our team have written about a GBI as a policy tool for a just transition in the food system (Lowitt et al., 2024) and, through a series of workshops, are exploring ways that a GBI can catalyze transformational change that affects not just individual livelihoods but also that promotes more resilient and sustainable food systems.

Food hubs are another example of a boundary object, bringing diverse actors together around flexible interpretations about what a food hub is and how hubs

can serve communities and regions. The BC Ministry of Agriculture and Food defines food hubs with a narrow focus on shared-use commercial processing facilities for food and agriculture businesses; however, in practice, participation within the BC Food Hub Community of Practice spans small and medium-scale food and beverage processing business, plant/crop agriculture and related value-added production, small scale meat production and processing, and fisheries. Food hubs are inclusive of a wide array of additional strategies and services, such as community food insecurity support, food recovery, skills training, food retailing and marketing, and support for food aggregation and distribution networks. Through participatory action research in Community of Practice gatherings, some members of Agrifish are exploring how food hubs might grow their capacity to create transformative changes in their regions through deepening collaboration across these diverse goals.

Ultimately, boundary objects can be powerful and important in this specific context because they bring a degree of interpretive flexibility to conversations, creating space for people to exert their prefigurative power while allowing diverse actors to feel that they are sharing the same ethical space for food system transformation. In other words, they enable collaboration without requiring consensus—facilitating their application to bridge across typically siloed areas like fisheries and agriculture.

Conclusion

This field report is the first collective output from the Agrifish Resilience research project that explores opportunities for learning and knowledge sharing across the agriculture and fisheries sectors, specifically toward a goal of building theory and practice surrounding food system resilience.

At present, agrifood and seafood operate in separate spheres of policy, research and practice. However, a fundamental goal of both AANs and ASNs is to reorganize our food systems in an effort to reconfigure not just the technologies of food production, but the relationships that bind them. It is precisely for this reason that we see bridging the separation between the two as potentially transformative. Through our work on boundary objects, as well as our own collaborations across disciplines, we hope that the Agrifish Resilience project reveals new opportunities for collaboration, sharing, and learning in service of building resilient food systems.

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Art/Design Works

Milk & Bread: A found-object collage series

Susan Goldberg*

Abstract

The found-object collage series Milk & Bread was inspired in large part by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women and mothers in particular, who bore the brunt of increased domestic duties and childcare during lockdowns and school closures, and who left the workforce in far greater numbers than fathers. The relentless domesticity and unchanging nature of family life under lockdown is mirrored in the repetitive, sometimes obsessive, arrangement of the tags: identical, with only minor variations to mark the time. Milk & Bread was created with milk and bread tags donated by individual households, daycare centres, and community organizations with the mission of providing food to vulnerable populations.

Keywords: Collage; COVID-19 pandemic; found-object collage; impact of COVID-19 pandemic on mothers; impact of COVID-19 pandemic on women; motherhood

Résumé

La série de collages d'objets trouvés *Milk & Bread* a été inspirée en grande partie par les répercussions de la pandémie de COVID-19 sur les femmes, et les mères en particulier, qui ont porté la charge de l'augmentation des tâches domestiques et de la garde des enfants pendant les confinements et les fermetures d'écoles, et qui ont quitté le marché du travail en bien plus grand nombre que les pères. L'inéluctable travail domestique et l'immuabilité de la vie familiale en période de confinement se reflètent dans la disposition répétitive, parfois obsessionnelle, des étiquettes, identiques, avec des variations mineures pour marquer le temps. *Milk & Bread* a été créé à partir d'étiquettes de lait et de pain données par des ménages, des garderies et des organisations communautaires ayant pour mission de fournir de la nourriture aux populations vulnérables.

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Milk & Bread

In a house with young children, an overturned cutlery drawer is an act of hope.

In a house with small children, an overturned cutlery drawer is an act of defiance. It is
audacious, a
double-dog dare, a
promise from you to your future self
of temporary chaos yielding a future dividend of

order.

In a house with children, with
animals,
with
anyone who needs something from you
— and God forbid that the someone who needs something from you is

you —

an overturned cutlery drawer is a flare in the night that says

I'm still here.

In a house filled with needs, an overturned cutlery drawer
is a sign that you have given up
on a vision of a future, sexy, rested, rockstar
version of yourself,
the one where you wear tailored trousers instead of leggings
and arrange fresh flowers on your sculptural tables
and that you aren't the kind of person who, when she can't sleep at night,
consoles herself by
leaving her bed,
padding downstairs, and
gazing into an open drawer.

In a house you can't leave, you turn over the cutlery drawer, spill out

forks, yes,
knives as well and
spoons of course, but also
a thousand glinting twist ties, the plastic tags that seal bags of bread, paper clips, bottle caps, Lego pieces, the clipped corners of milk bags, sippy-cup lids, packets of ketchup and vinegar, soy sauce and mustard,
a world of crumbs.
You wipe away the spilled outlines of milk, wine,
the hardened detritus of honey.
You contemplate a future of only empty drawers.

In a house where you have carried babies, nursed infants, fed toddlers and small children, where you feed the ever-growing versions of themselves, you ask yourself how many plastic forks is too many.

In a house full of food, you still don't know what to make for dinner.

In a house that has become your whole world
you wash and dry the cutlery rack
replace forks, spoons, knives
gather plastic tags into a pile
note their date stamps, cities
marking time and place in a world that has contracted
charting new seasons, measured out milk and bread
toast and milky cups of tea.
a calendar of needs met.

Any need met is met well enough.

Image 1: Milk & Bread, Emergent (detail), 2021

Plastic and glue on paper, 27.5 x 19.75 inches

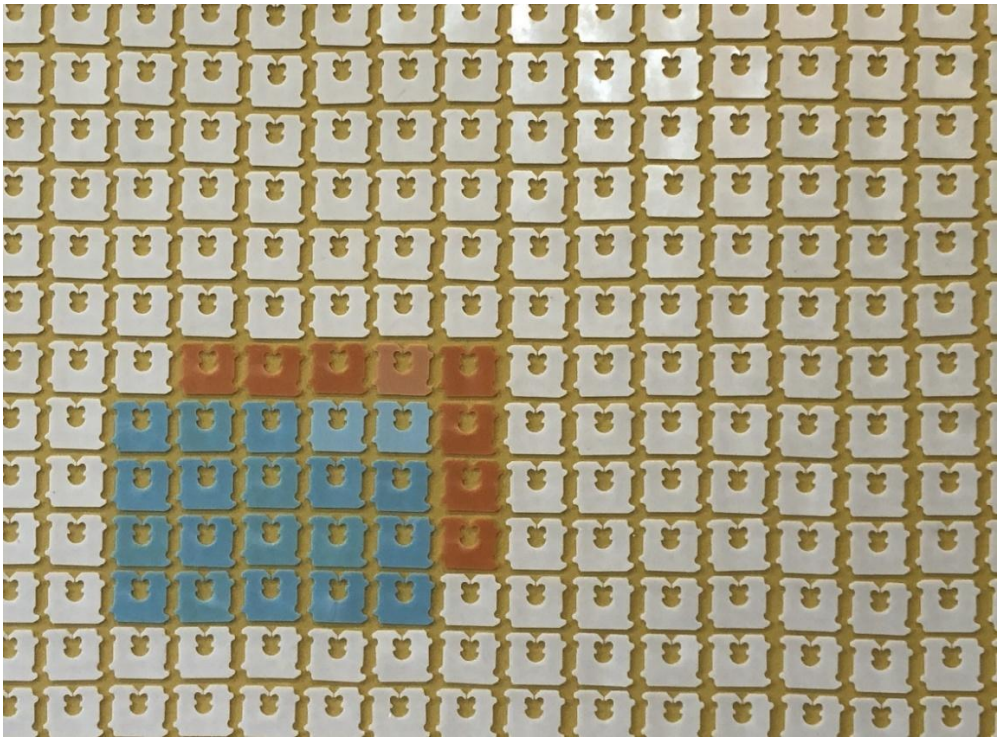

Image 2: White Out, 2022
Plastic and glue on paper, 27.5 x 19.75 inches

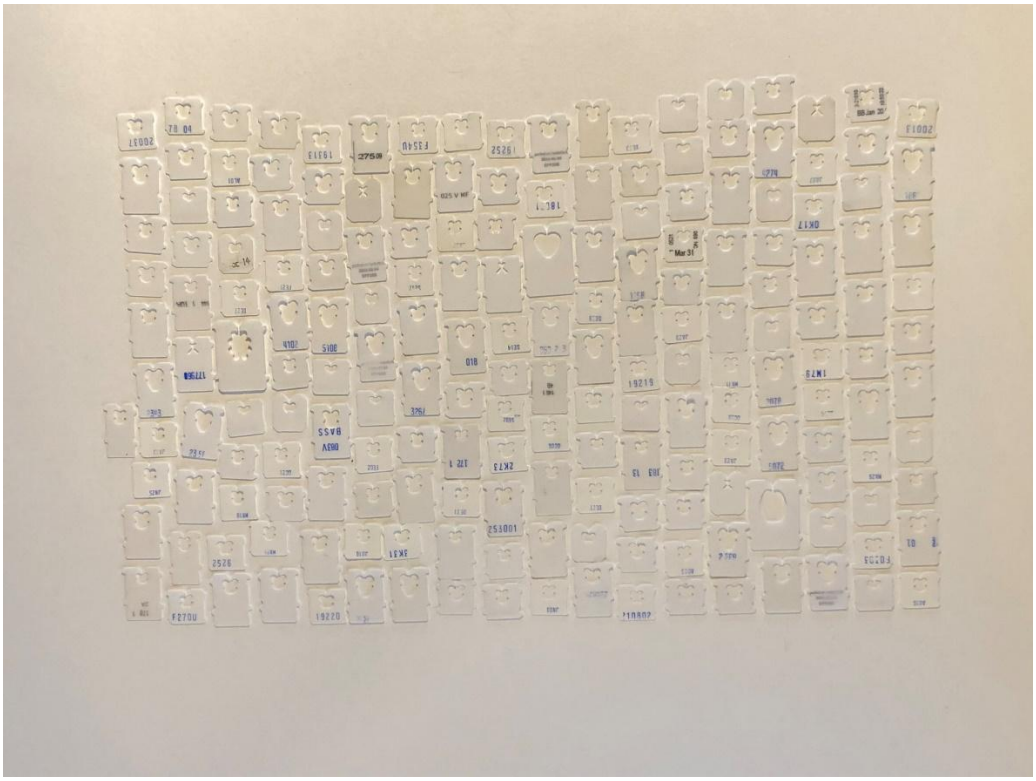

Image 3: Milk & Bread Periodic Table II, 2021
Plastic and glue on paper, 27.5 x 19.75 inches

Image 4: Tank Tops, 2021
Plastic and glue on paper, 11 x 14 inches

Well before the pandemic hit, I had wondered about bread tags: those colourful plastic squares, the size of a postage stamp, used to seal plastic bags of bread, milk, vegetables, fruit. I didn't wonder so much about the tags' function, which was obvious enough — preservation — but rather about my own instinct to preserve *them*: to toss them into the cutlery drawer, pile them on the kitchen windowsill, rather than throw them into the trash. What about these bits of plastic, printed with their cryptic identifiers, compelled me to keep them?

Maybe it was their weird beauty. The colours: so much white, but also red and pink, baby blue and green, yellow and beige. Violet was rare and therefore valuable ("It's on garlic bread!" a friend once texted me from the grocery store). Their rounded edges and curved tabs, nestling into each other like puzzle pieces. I lined them up like elements in a periodic table, squares in a quilt, arranging them in grids according to colour, shape, date, time, city.

Maybe it was their utility, their sturdiness. Like Allen keys or twist ties (or maybe cockroaches), the tags felt too alive, too full of function, to bin after one use. Surely, they were owed a longer existence, the chance to fulfil their mission, their ministry, as guitar picks or organizers of electrical cords. Surely something else would need to be held closed, secured.

Maybe it wasn't just me? In the spring of 2019, I put out a call on social media, asking if other people also held on to bread tags. And, I asked, if they did, would they send them to me? I wasn't sure exactly why, just yet.

Reader, it wasn't just me. Bread tags flowed into my mailbox: in envelopes, in anonymous Ziploc baggies, in jam jars. A local daycare, in the business of feeding young children, provided riches of tags, huge bagsful that I dumped onto the dining room table, organized by colour the way I used to arrange Smarties as a kid. I came across Holotypic Occlupanid Research Group, "a database of synthetic taxonomy" to classify "**Occlupanida** (Occlu = to close, pan = bread)," part of the "Kingdom Microsynthera, of the Phylum Plasticae."

I experimented, briefly, with using a needle and thread to affix bread tags to paper, or to cloth. When that proved untenable, I hit upon the idea of a glue gun: fusing plastic to paper via melted plastic. I futzed, and played, and put aside the project as outside life continued.

And then COVID-19 arrived, and we retreated indoors with our pods and our people and our projects. We lined up at grocery stores, wiped down door handles, light switches, groceries. My hands cracked and bled with constant washing. We fretted about toilet paper, supply chains. We pivoted, pivoted, pivoted: my sons bounced back and forth between my house and that of their other mother, our separated households reunited in an odd safety. We weighed the risks of connection versus isolation, obedience versus despair. Some of us hoarded, and others purged. Our homes turned into schools, offices. My evenings stretched out interminably, the same night every night, each square on the calendar as relentlessly blank as the one before and the one following it: how do you measure time when the world no longer has benchmarks?

I began, again, to glue my tiny propylene squares to paper.

As my kids homeschooled/did not homeschool, tethered to their devices, as my freelance work ebbed and flowed and safety nets tightened, I arranged, glued, collaged, framed. On the days when I didn't have kids, I often forgot to eat. "Food is medicine," a friend reminded me, and I reminded myself, daily, to enter the kitchen, to nourish myself, more than just toast and tea. The news was ceaseless and the same, uncertainty the throughline. Another throughline was domesticity and who bore its brunt: women — mothers — were

shouldering the burden of increased childcare, domestic duties. They were leaving the workforce in far greater numbers than men, earning and saving less. My younger son made pancakes every day. I made scrambled eggs, more toast; I baked bread, scavenged yeast, read stories on my phone and on my computer about all the mothers also trying to keep their children off of screens.

I glued and did online yoga, collaged and went on walks — the same walks — six feet apart. I measured out life in squares: the cracked concrete of the sidewalks, the blocks of my neighbourhood, the screen of my phone, the meat-starch-veg of meals, the calendar, zones of safety. My friends sent me tags, and I arranged them into art — an entire year's worth of milk, encapsulated — sent them back. The seasons changed. The virus mutated. My children grew. And I glued, arranged, colour-coded and marked the time, the relentless domesticity, the uncertain closeness, the creativity of constraint, the plasticity of time: marking the days and details of the moment in a medium, designed to be disposable, that would ultimately survive us all.

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Book Review

The Serviceberry: Abundance and Reciprocity in the Natural World
By Robin Wall Kimmerer
Scribner, 2024: 128 pages

Reviewed by Johanna Wilkes*

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Born from lessons in nature, *The Serviceberry: Abundance and Reciprocity in the Natural World* invites readers to reflect on the way societies organize and govern relations between the self, food systems, community, and the earth. Offering lessons to food studies scholars and practitioners through alternative governance arrangements, Robin Wall Kimmerer presents a compelling case for creating more place-based connections in an increasingly disconnected world. The author does this through the lens of gift economies, also referred to as economies of care.

While gift economies have long been present in cultures and communities around the world, including with respect to food, capitalist norms have become pervasive and influence much of daily life. Yet, *The Serviceberry* shows how gift economies help achieve more prosperous futures. Wall Kimmerer notes, "Gratitude and reciprocity are the currency of a gift economy, and they have the remarkable property of multiplying with every exchange, their energy concentrating as they pass from hand to hand, a truly renewable resource" (p. 14).

Gift economies may seem to be an elusive and unattainable way to govern but Wall Kimmerer meticulously lays out how these alternative economies are already in motion and further, how pervasive capitalist norms are grounded on a flawed foundation. For example, *The Serviceberry* questions the underlying economic assumption of competition and scarcity (specifically human manufactured scarcity, as pointed out on p. 79, rather than natural scarcity). In particular,

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Wall Kimmerer points to the way resources are valued for extraction over regeneration: "It pains me to know that an old-growth forest is 'worth' far more as lumber than as the lungs of the Earth. And yet I am harnessed to this economy, in ways large and small, yoked to pervasive extraction. I'm wondering how we fix that. And I am not alone" (p. *26).*

In response*, The Serviceberry* offers many examples of gift economies in which resources are stored by sharing with each other – or "in the belly of my brother" (p. 32) – treating food as sacred rather than as commodity. Counter to mainstream economic thinking, the principles of gift economies are built on acts of reciprocity as a way of creating cyclical relations that foster community well-being and therefore, the well-being of the individual. As Wall Kimmerer notes, "A gift economy includes a system of social and moral agreements for indirect reciprocity, rather than a direct exchange. So, the hunter who shared the feast with you today could well anticipate that you would share from a full fishnet or offer your labor in repairing a boat in the future. The prosperity of the community grows from the flow of relationships, not the accumulations of goods" (p. 34).

Gift economies are the foundation for celebrations and gatherings such as potlatch. However, colonial governments – both past and present – undermine and even attempt to eradicate these alternative ways of constructing value and connection. As *The Serviceberry* points out, the ideas of reciprocity and collective care were seen as antithetical to principles of modern society (e.g. private property and accumulation).

Yet, these economies of care re-emerge. Tightly knit communities and extraordinary circumstances suspends the rules of capitalism and allows space for gift economies. So, how could care economies be integrated into current western food systems governance systems without crisis as a catalyst? And can they?

In many ways, the work of practitioners and scholars in food studies have tried to show the value of alternative economies and the need for diverse ways of knowing. In addition, scholars (e.g. Elinor Ostrom), Indigenous practices, and community actions have all proven these challenges (e.g. tragedy of the commons) can be overcome with mindful stewardship. Indigenous communities have integrated resource management for common goods into economies of care across generations and centuries. Wall Kimmerer highlights how the Dish with One Spoon governs relations between communities and land in ways that considers each other and future generations. In relation to this sacred relationship, Waller Kimmerer highlights that the guidelines of the Honorable Harvest ensure that if we "Sustain the ones who sustain you and the earth will last forever" (p. 65).

Wall Kimmerer highlights the small and big ways that we can support each other through developing care economies by sharing abundance. On the farm next door to Wall Kimmerer lives a couple who planted Saskatoon berries (a variety of Serviceberries). When the berries were ready for harvest, the couple called neighbours to come and enjoy in the bounty by picking free of charge. As the neighbour later explains to Wall Kimmerer, the act of caring for your neighbours has a ripple effect that tether economies of care and scarcity.

The same neighbours who came to pick berries may come back to buy produce or offer patience if the farmers' sheep get out. In short, an act of care helps to foster community well-being even within a scarcity-based economy. These radical acts of care are both organized by individuals, community, and through public policy. Little libraries, free farm stands, and the maintenance of trails that can be walked on by all.

As a public policy and food studies scholar, *The Serviceberry* elicits important questions for my work about the transformation of governance and

government. Wall Kimmerer's work helps build understandings of place-based governance through Indigenous ways of knowing as well as how (and if) gift economies can live alongside current forms of western capitalism, including its manifestations in food systems. As *The Serviceberry* states "I don't think market capitalism is going to vanish; the faceless institutions that benefit from it are too entrenched. The thieves are very powerful. But I don't think it's pie in the sky to imagine that we can create incentives to nurture a fit economy that runs right alongside the market economy" (p. 92).

However, even after reading *The Serviceberry*, I still grapple with my own understanding of whether systems of scarcity can genuinely exist next to economies of care. As *The Serviceberry* alludes, I feel the answer is more complex than a binary yes or no. In reflection, *the Serviceberry* offers ways to navigate the complex webs of care and relations between the earth, community, food systems, and ourselves.

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Book Review

The Lost Supper: Searching for the Future of Food in the Flavors of the Past
By Taras Grescoe
Greystone Books, 2023: 312 pages

Reviewed by Penelope Volinia*

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Can you find the secrets of the future of humanity in forgotten flavours? *The Lost Supper: Searching for the Future of Food in the Flavors of the Past,* by Canadian journalist Taras Grescoe, talks about diversity as resilience, be it in human cultures, natural ecosystems, bodies' microorganisms, or food systems. He "makes the case that the future of food lies in the past, including lost, forgotten, or nearly vanished foods" (p. 6). The chapters are standalone essays about flavours lost to history, interlinked with the author's exploration of contemporary food systems. With a journalistic eye, he tackles the challenges by dialoguing with experts and biting into lucky findings. "To save it, you've got to eat it" (p. 12) but you also have to know what to eat, and Grescoe's purpose is to share food's cultural, and ecological origins through his engaging and inquisitive writing.

The prologue, first chapter, and the epilogue are set in the author's kitchen, where he and family members give entomophagy, the practice of eating insects, a try. Leaving his kitchen behind, Grescoe sets out on a hunt for other tasty food items. Geographically, we move from Grescoe's home in Montreal to cities (Mexico City, Cádiz, Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu), regions (Puglia, Cappadocia), national parks (Yorkshire Dales), and islands (Ossabaw Island, Mi'Wer'La). The chapter titles provide the location while the subtitles indicate the foodstuff to be examined. From straightforward "Some Pig", "Bread Alone" and "Hard Cheese", to the more evocative "The Quintessential of Putrescence" and "The

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Death of the Immortals", these subtitles make you wonder what you are in for taste wise.

He is generally positive about the future of food, although he admits in the first chapter: "It was hard not to see edible bugs as just another downward step in the industrialization of appetites" (p. 22). We then fly to Mexico for egg entomophagy in Chapter two, between market detours, and histories of colonization. Sometimes the lively, rich, and detailed chronicles build great expectation of the final encounter, leaving the reader with a dry mouth when the taste experience is limited to one short paragraph.

Chapter three is centered on "Some Pig" on "Ossabaw Island". The author navigates between small island farms and the pork industry, highlighting the struggles and strengths of one, and the dark side(s) of the other. Putrescence makes its entrance in Chapter four, where from the port of Cádiz, we sail around the Mediterranean sea from an ancient Roman perspective, looking at the fish preservation practices and flavour enhancer: garum. A different type of spiciness takes over in Chapter five, crumbling "Hard Cheese" in the heart of England. Between dry stone walls, Grescoe reminds himself that "cheese is so changeable that [...] it may be impossible to recreate what it tasted like in the past" (p. 123), reminding us of the book's aim.

With Chapter six we reach the heel of the Italian peninsula, contemplating "The Death of the Immortals", by way of Xylella, a bacteria rotting the roots of century-old trees. Like cheese, olives change every season, every year, and an oil from the past that talks about the future leaves a bitter taste on the tongue. Chapter seven is the strength of the book, the story of a lost plant, and spice, that has many look-alikes but that, thanks to genetic comparison, could be found again. "Silphium [...] represents the first recorded instance of species extinction" caused by humans, writes Grescoe, being "also the first instance of such extinctions induced primarily by climate change of any cause or scale" (p. 197). In Chapter eight grains and bread are protagonists. The hybrid, high-yielding wheat that started the green revolution was developed only thanks to the "[...] access to thousands of different landraces that farmers had preserved in their fields for centuries [...]" (p. 232). The irony is that biodiversity itself became the very first victim of the green revolution.

The closing chapter "Mi'Wer'La - The Cooked and the Raw", introduces international readers to the Kwak'wala name for Vancouver Island. Camas, the mysterious protagonist, was a widely consumed tuber on the Northwest Coast of North America, before European colonisation. To talk about camas, is to talk about Indigenous food staples, and in this piece Grescoe exposes the oppressions Indigenous peoples have lived through, and how forced dislocation of families and communities weigh heavily on the loss of food knowledge and practice.

The target audience seems to be Northern American given the supermarket chains and cities referenced. It is a fitting choice for students seeking an introduction to food history, as they try to piece together the connections between human appetite and its consequences. To satiate curious readers, a selected bibliography organized by chapter, gives further literature suggestions, situating the book somewhere between academic publication and non-fiction. *The Lost Supper* is a rich introduction to the complex world of food stories with its descriptive vocabulary and its appeal to the senses.

This book's missing ingredient, however, is the lack of narrative that threads the chapters together. Indeed, it is a work in progress, since the author explores other stories of forgotten flavour on the ongoing blog by the same name, extending the potential of the limited publication. It is a pandemic-born project, and the travel restrictions reverberate in the areas touched by the quest,

as Grescoe states in the acknowledgements. Nevertheless, the limited geographic selection is made weaker because of the absence of a cohesive project. The reader is left with a longing for lost flavours from other parts of the world.

Penelope Volinia is a culinary environmental humanities PhD researcher at the University of Augsburg, where she is part of the "Off The Menu: Appetites, Culture, and Environment" research group, led by L. Sasha Gora. Penelope's research focuses on how cuisines adopt of reject "invasive" species, and reflects how the shifts in human appetites shape cultural and gastronomic sensibilities. Althought she is currently diving deep into the (culinary) Blue Humanities, she jumps from a background that spans between design (BA in Graphic Design and Communication, IUAV) and enthnobotany (MA in Food Innovation and Management, UNISG).

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Choux Questionnaire: Joshna Maharaj

A riff on the well-riffed Proust Questionnaire, the CFS Choux Questionnaire is meant to elicit a tasty and perhaps surprising experience, framed within a seemingly humble exterior. (And yes, some questions have a bit more *craquelin* than others.) Straightforward on their own, the queries combined start to form a celebratory pyramid of extravagance. How that composite croquembouche is assembled and taken apart, however, is up to the respondents and readers to determine. Respondents are invited to answer as many questions as they choose.

The final question posed—*What question would you add to this questionnaire?*—prompts each respondent to incorporate their own inquisitive biome into the mix, feeding a forever renewed starter culture for future participants.

Our Choux Questionnaire respondent for this issue is Joshna Maharaj. Joshna is a chef, activist, and speaker dedicated to reimagining institutional food systems to prioritize health, sustainability, and dignity. She is a sought-after speaker and author of *Take Back the Tray*, which describes her work building new models for hospital, school, and institutional food procurement, production and service. The book won the World Gourmand Cookbook Award in 2020. She is also an MA student in Gastronomy and Food Studies at TU Dublin.

What is your idea of a perfect food?

For me, a perfect food hits on all notes: It's got big flavour that develops as you eat it, and it has texture that keeps the mouthfuls interesting.

Of what food or food context are you afraid?

Inside bits, eyeballs, things like this.... I haven't been able to fully cross this threshold yet.

What word or concept describes an admirable food system?

A truly admirable food system will actually feed everyone in its community well in a consistent way.

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What word or concept prevents many food systems from becoming admirable?

Capitalist priorities and corporate greed

Which food innovation do you try to ignore?

Lab-grown meat

What is your greatest gastronomic extravagance?

I will spend an extraordinary amount of money on good salt.

What is your current state of hunger?

Nonexistent, just ate a delicious bowl of miso butter chili rice.

What do you consider to be the most overrated food or food context?

The pulled pork sandwich

On what occasion do you feign satiety?

When I don't want to eat the food that I know is on offer.

What do you most dislike about dinner tables?

When there's too much decorative nonsense on them that there's not enough space for the food, and when they're not big enough to hold the dishes that need to go on them.

What is the quality you most like in a fruit?

It's a tie between deep flavour and juiciness.

What is the quality you most like in a cut of meat?

Flavour that develops as you chew it.

Which condiments do you most overuse?

These days, it's brown sauce and chili crisp.

What kinds of gardens make you happiest?

Gardens that are well tended and full of good, organic food.

Which culinary skill would you most like to have?

The ability to expedite a dinner service

If you could change one thing about nutrition, what would it be?

I would like nutrition, REAL, wholesome, honest, soil-based nutrition to get taken more seriously.

What do you consider your greatest edible achievement?

I once made this roasted masala pork belly that I still think about in a quiet moment.

If you were to die and come back as an (edible) animal, vegetable, or mineral, what would you like it to be?

I'd like to come back as salt… helping everything be the best version of itself

Where (and/or when) would you most like to dine?

I would have LOVED to attend one of those lavish Roman banquets where all of the senses of the guests were teased and tickled.

When do you have no appetite?

Never. I think maybe it's happened twice, once when I had strep throat, and in some deep grief after my father's death.

What is your most treasured kitchen implement?

I have this one angled wooden spoon. It gets into the corners of a pan perfectly and is so nice to hold. It feels like an extension of my hand.

What do you consider to be the most processed kind of food?

Food that is created specifically for kids, in a sort of tragic irony.

What is your favourite aroma?

When I could smell, I loved the smell of a bakery in the morning.

What spice, kitchen implement, or cookbook do you use most rarely?

There are only a few times a year when I pull out the brown cardamom.

What do you most value in your friends?

What I most value in my friends is that each of them sees (and values) me in a slightly different way, and they all love to tuck into a great meal.

Who are your favourite food scholars?

Vandana Shiva, Michael Pollan

Who is your hero of food media?

Jamie Oliver

With which cuisine do you most identify?

Indian food…. It's the food of my people, and where the ancestors are for me.

What is your most powerful sense?

Sight

What are your favourite agricultural, culinary, or gastronomic words?

Gusto, caramelization, hospitality

What is it about composting that you most dislike?

It's quite a lot of work to keep it up. Worth it, but still, a LOT.

What would you eat as your last meal?

I want two bites of a list of twenty of my favourite things, including: my mom's chicken curry with roti, a

soft Époisses on a crusty baguette, a chocolate layer cake, flank steak with chimichurri, pepperoni pizza, chicken shawarma, a BLT, the *socarrat* from a paella, tacos *al pastor*, and the first good sip of a pint of Guinness.

What foodish epitaph would you assign to yourself?

She lived the way she ate, with generosity and gusto.

What question would you add to this questionnaire?

What's something that is misunderstood about food and cooking?

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