

Stories of Sustenance, Nourishment, and Feasting: A Case Study of Mutual Aid and Community-Building Efforts

G. A. Ribeiro¹

grace_ribeiro@ymail.com

Abstract

This article describes community formed within the grassroots mutual aid organization Community Food Support (CFS) located on ləkʷəŋən territory (“Victoria, B.C.”) and explores how components of mutual aid frameworks are employed within CFS Delivery Program’s sorting space to support the building of this community. An experiential study was constructed using a feminist activist ethnographic approach to outline the crucial role of storytelling in the CFS community. Through a thematic analysis of the data, stories of place and care addressed the research questions and pointed to the importance of connection, relationships, education, sharing, and play in establishing a collective identity and sustaining the organizing space. These findings were connected to civic muscle and creative placemaking, which highlight the capacity for mutual aid efforts to promote change and actively shape social, political, and geographic space through creative and relational means.

Keywords: mutual aid; community; feminist ethnography; storytelling; civic engagement

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Introduction

In the face of ongoing global crises, such as climate disasters and rising wealth inequalities, many communities in Canada (and beyond) struggle to meet their needs. One way that community members have supported each other is engaging in mutual aid (MA). According to American activist and lawyer Dean Spade, MA is the “radical act” of caring for each other to meet one another’s survival needs through community action and care (2020a, p. 8). In contrast to charity models that dictate who is worthy of support, MA provides an alternative, non-hierarchical model of care to those who participate in the practice (Spade, 2020a, 2020b). MA incorporates action, collaboration, and care practices, as well as an ethical or philosophical orientation to these practices (Gammage, 2021; Kropotkin, 1902).

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent state of socioeconomic insecurity, many MA networks and organizations emerged to address community needs for food, shelter, health care, and support. One such group is Community Food Support (CFS)—an initiative based on ləkʷəŋən territory (“Victoria, B.C.”) that seeks to “make food free and accessible to those who need it” (Community Food Support, n.d.). Utilizing a qualitative, community-based research approach, this project endeavored to address questions of central importance to this community organization in order to generate a deeper understanding of the role that CFS plays in the lives of its volunteers. This research builds on the foundational knowledge that MA is a key component of resistance and change-making work.² Through conducting an ethnographic case study, this article generates a detailed description of CFS volunteer experiences and the role of community-building, connection, and storytelling within the organizing space.

Scholarly and Historical Context of Mutual Aid

Drawing on academic articles and open-access, popular resources that highlight the importance of both scholarly and activist on-the-ground knowledge on the topic, I found that MA, as a praxis, is rooted in three themes: solidarity, resistance, and community. Sociologist John G. Bruhn (2005) described community as consisting of experiential, interpersonal relationships rooted in mutual responsibility and shared goals or values that facilitate a sense of belonging. Further, Bruhn tied this belonging to individual feelings of responsibility to respond in times of crisis by arguing that “a sense of community involves reciprocity in caring, sometimes at great personal risk” (p. 15). Solidarity and resistance also necessitate personal decision-making around responsibility and risk, which captures some of the strategies communities use to create change and support each other in the face of unjust conditions (Tseng, 2021). The themes of community, solidarity, and resistance overlap and present such subthemes as social movements and change (or the work of social justice), community and coalition building, as well as survival and dreaming. Together, these (sub)themes create the foundation that undergirds MA praxis.

The coining of the term MA is often credited to philosopher, historian, and activist Peter Kropotkin (1902), whose work challenged the assumption of a society driven by hostility and competition to draw attention to the pervasiveness of MA as a survival practice that evidences the sustainability of living ethically in solidarity as a society. Though Kropotkin’s work was published

² For scholarship and popular media resources devoted to the role of MA in social change and resistance work, see Akbar (2020), Davis and Fayter (2021), Gammage (2021), Johnson (2021), Kropotkin (1902), Rodríguez Soto (2020), Spade (2020a, 2020b), and Stiffman (2021).

in the early twentieth century, MA is a long-standing practice: the history of MA documented in both academic and popular media sources has noted that the practice extends beyond a survival strategy to a cultural way of life that recognizes the value of reciprocity as well as the interconnectivity of all living and non-living beings (Johnson, 2021; Soto, 2020). Namely, there is a well-documented history of MA ensuring the survival of marginalized individuals and communities, such as refugee, immigrant, and displaced populations, Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC), and disabled, incarcerated, or detained individuals, as well as queer and trans communities (Davis & Fayter, 2021; Littman et al., 2022; Spade, 2020a). As noted by activists Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha and Ejeris Dixon in daytime talk show interviews (The Laura Flanders Show, 2020), and as echoed in the scholarship of Davis and Fayter (2021) and Spade (2020a, 2020b), these populations often face hostile conditions and utilize MA to ensure the safety, nourishment, and connectedness of their communities through collectivizing often limited resources. Activist, lawyer, and organizer Dean Spade (2020a) noted how MA operates “from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet [our needs]” and how “the conditions in which we are made to live are unjust” (p. 7).

By harnessing collective power, MA projects can mobilize quickly to offer relief during times of disaster, such as in response to floods, fires, and earthquakes. MA can also provide support to those living through crises relating to poverty, criminalization, systemic and gendered violence, racism, and the realities of living under harmful systems, such as colonialism and capitalism (Spade, 2020a, 2020b). As such, MA is deeply connected to ongoing advocacy for transformative change and the furthering of successful social justice movements, such as the civil rights, gay liberation, feminist, and modern abolitionist movements (Akbar, 2020; Davis & Fayter, 2021; Spade, 2020a, 2020b). MA projects thus promote social change by addressing the safety and survival needs of individuals while connecting people to community.

Moreover, MA projects facilitate formal and informal opportunities to educate and destigmatize experiences of poverty and food insecurity, as well as support coalition-building within organizing spaces (Spade, 2020a). Further, MA is “inherently anti-authoritarian,” anti-hierarchical, and well-suited to building skills related to collective decision-making, collaboration, and participation in communities. As such, MA highlights diverse skillsets that individuals can utilize to address social issues within their community rather than rely on the interventions of outside “experts” (p. 59). In the past, successful MA projects have responded to injustice by building the capacity of communities to prepare for potential disasters to ensure a more survivable future (Davis & Fayter, 2021; Spade 2020a).

Despite the aforementioned benefits and successes of MA, Spade (2020a, 2020b) noted that MA efforts often run the risk of co-optation due to their radical and generative nature. More specifically, government-funded social service providers may attempt to control how acts of community care are delivered to neoliberalize social supports. Within this context, neoliberalization may force community organizations to compete for limited financial resources while divorcing the provision of services from their political roots to appeal to funders (Shepard & Burghardt, 2015). The governmental bodies that provide grants may also control community organizations through restrictive funding requirements that bureaucratize aid programs and disconnect grassroots organizations from community needs.

While some MA efforts may become subdued through incremental forms of co-optation over time, other projects may be directly threatened and targeted by state authorities. For example, the Black Panther Party (BPP) launched a series of survival programs in the United States during the 1960s. These programs gained traction through simple yet radical approaches that educated

communities about systemic racism and injustice, thereby bolstering community support and solidarity through acts of care. In 1969, the FBI flagged and then disbanded these programs through fear-mongering and intimidation (Blakemore, 2021; Spade, 2020a). This example demonstrates the potential for state bodies to see MA as a threat if deemed too political, visible, or far-reaching. Despite concerted efforts to control and suppress grassroots programs, MA empowers citizens and connects them to community needs and values by creating opportunities to challenge the dominant structures that maintain and reinforce social inequity (Spade, 2020a, 2020b).

Within a neoliberal societal context that promotes individualism, competition, and normative ways of being, Steager (2013) noted how engaging in community-building is an act of resistance. By exposing the failures of neoliberal systems, MA creates opportunities for communities to envision and carry out supportive alternatives that spur optimism and faith in the face of growing hopelessness and apathy (Spade, 2020b). Above all, MA can help connect individuals and build community relationships as well as foster safe and vibrant futures by prioritizing solidarity and interconnectedness (Davis & Fayter 2021; Johnson, 2021; Spade, 2020a; The Laura Flanders Show, 2020). Moreover, as Gamage (2021) stated, by working together to take collective action, individuals can discover the joy, power, and pleasure of MA and can practise new ways of being that may potentiate more connected futures. Beyond making the “neoliberal landscape more palatable,” Gamage suggested that MA “opens new terrain for solidarity and action” by drawing people together and building collective confidence and skills for “caring for one another” (para. 18). In this way, MA calls attention to the unique capabilities of and knowledge held within communities, often highlighting the power of self-determination. Furthermore, MA encourages individuals to imagine possibilities in which communities not only survive but *thrive* (Tuck, 2009). Most importantly, MA pushes people to build networks of care that support holistic approaches to well-being, which includes physiological, environmental, emotional, social, and spiritual wellness. Akin to a dandelion poking through a sidewalk crack, MA reminds us that even the smallest of fissures within an imperfect system can present an opening for growth, resistance, and change (Wilson, 2013).

Community Partner Background and Researcher Positionality

Community Food Support (CFS) is a grassroots, volunteer-led, community run, food-based MA initiative that has since April 2020 provided free food to people living on ləkʷəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ territories. At that time, a small group of friends noticed that food banks had closed in response to provincially mandated COVID-19 lockdowns despite unprecedented levels of unemployment, precarity, and local need. This group correctly intuited that food waste would increase due to business closures—a trend they had experiential knowledge of through “dumpster-diving” to recover and redistribute consumable items within their circle. Knowing that social support organizations could not meet the city-wide deficit, this group reached out to food banks and food security organizations (e.g., The Mustard Seed and Salvation Army) to determine how best to offer their help. They were advised to engage in small-scale, community-based efforts to fill gaps in local social services. The group engaged in the MA project that would become CFS by prioritizing low-barrier and bureaucracy-free aid to combat waste while distributing food to those in need. Despite initial instability due to CFS’s fluctuating volunteer base, lack of coalition-building with similar organizations, and experiences of emotional and physical burnout in key members, CFS continued to grow and further its reach. CFS now supports hundreds of people each

month through its Fridge and Delivery Programs, which are run by 40 to 70 volunteers in an ongoing effort to mitigate food insecurity across ləkʷəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ territories (“Victoria and Saanich, B.C.”).

As an organization, CFS seeks to “support folks in accessing food while making the process as barrier free as possible” with the goal of providing food that is “free and accessible to those who need it” (Community Food Support, n.d., para. 2). This mandate aligns with the principles of a “food sovereignty” approach to food security. The food sovereignty movement, as described by human geographer Rhyall Gordon (2018), addresses both sustainable agriculture and the politics of food. Further, the movement is rooted in non-capitalist, grassroots organizing that advocates for small-scale farming and the recognition of the “fundamental interdependence of environmental, social and economic practices” in food systems (p. 210). While food security initiatives are concerned with protecting existing food systems, food sovereignty seeks to democratize and forge new local food systems through the principles of capacity-building, social justice, solidarity, and environmental sustainability (Gordon, 2018; La Via Campesina, 2023). Further, food sovereignty initiatives, such as the international movement La Via Campesina (2023), aim to actualize the human right for accessible, healthy, and culturally appropriate foods (Gordon, 2018). Though CFS does not directly work with local farmers or agricultural producers, these core values align with the organizing principles and sustainable approaches valued by the group.

CFS hosts two mutual aid programs: the Community Fridge Program, located in the Rock Bay neighbourhood and available to donors and recipients 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and the Delivery Program. The latter combines food donations, recovered produce, dairy, and proteins (cured meats, tofu, meat alternatives), as well as pantry items donated by local grocery stores and supplemental goods³ purchased with donated funds. The Delivery Program constructs and delivers roughly 80 hamper bags each week (see Figures 1 and 2). Recipients of hampers sign up through a Google form each month on a “first-come, first-served” basis and can request items according to their allergies and dietary requirements.⁴ Hampers are delivered to the front doors of recipients by volunteer drivers, which makes the Delivery Program more accessible than most food banks. The hampers are created through an assembly-line process: volunteers organize donations into like-food groups and remove any spoiled or inedible items, while 1–2 individuals write out the names of recipients and their dietary

Figure 1

Some Community Food Support Delivery food hampers on their way to recipients.



Note: Community Food Support. (2022). [Digital photograph]. Instagram.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/ChDcsrbPGtJ/>

³ Supplemental goods usually include high-demand items like proteins (such as tofu and eggs) or pantry staples (such as onions, potatoes, carrots, and canned goods).

⁴ CFS is able to accommodate a wide variety of diets, such as vegan, vegetarian, gluten-free, and dairy-free, because donations often include plant-based yogurt and milk as well as rice products and meat alternatives (such as tofu).

restrictions on the paper bags that will hold the food (see Figure 2). After the items have been sorted and the paper hampers lined up in rows organized by delivery route, volunteers fill the bags with the heaviest items (e.g., canned goods and produce), followed by pantry and dairy items, then finally bread. Once the hampers are filled, volunteers circulate around the gym to check the bags for mistakes regarding dietary needs and redistribute items between the hampers if some are more full or diverse than others. Finally, volunteers load six hampers per route onto delivery vehicles for transport, with the entire sorting process taking roughly two-and-a-half hours (from donation drop-off to delivery send-off).

Both the Community Fridge and Delivery Programs require teamwork by numerous volunteers, whose duties range from backend organizing and administrative tasks (such as the social media, meeting, financial, volunteer, and recipient coordinators) to on-the-ground duties, including donation sorters, delivery drivers, fridge cleaners, waste and recycling removers, market-day tablers, and food shoppers. Though volunteer demographic data was not collected for this study due to the casual and participant-driven nature of the interviewing process, my perception was that the group’s consistent volunteer base was largely composed of white-presenting, queer, university-educated women, femmes, and trans+ folks in their 20s and early 30s. The Delivery Program’s monthly volunteer registration scheduling meant that group demographics shifted depending on volunteer availability in a given month.

Despite operating within a MA framework comprised of informal, interpersonal networks, CFS does not operate independently: the organization relies on external supports to maintain its programs. For example, the Delivery Program’s sorting space is the Quadra Village Community Gym (see Figure 3 on page 73)—a space maintained by the Quadra Village Community Centre at no cost to CFS. In addition, weekly hampers and the Community Fridge are supplemented with goods from The Mustard Seed, which fills gaps in the donations received from local grocery stores and citizens. CFS is a community-run organization in the truest sense since it relies not only on volunteers to maintain its programs but also on coordinated support from local businesses and existing aid systems.

My involvement with CFS started in 2020 as a donor and recipient of goods accessed through the Community Fridge Program. In September 2022, I began sorting with the Delivery Program after building a close relationship with a key-holding volunteer who had been involved with CFS Delivery for a couple years. As we got to know each other, we discussed MA, community organizing, and the role of queer women, femmes, and trans+ folks in propelling local care work in the greater “Victoria” region. As a (gender)queer, trans person passionate about social justice

Figure 2

A closer look at items donated by local grocers distributed in weekly hampers.



Note: Ribeiro, G. A. (2023). [Photograph of CFS donations]. Photo by author.

issues, such as abolition, harm reduction, and anti-capitalism, I recognize the key role that women and trans+ folk play in fighting for liberation—a phenomenon affirmed by revolutionaries such as Angela Davis (2021) who, in a live-streamed panel discussion on abolition hosted by Haymarket Books, placed women and non-binary individuals at the forefront of change. As my relationships to CFS volunteers and the queer community deepened, my curiosity about the volunteers undertaking this resistance work grew, and I pondered what shared characteristics, understandings, motivations, and principles prompted their engagement. These personal conversations and experiences drove my research forward, making this project not only personal but also relational.

Research Intentions

Within the context of the reviewed literature and positionalities outlined above, I sought to address questions of central importance to the local food-based MA actors and volunteers involved with the sorting activities at CFS’s Delivery Program. This research aimed to understand commonalities among CFS volunteers and the salience of relationship-building, friendship, and MA praxes within the organization. By focusing on the formation of community within the Delivery Program and, more specifically, the sorting space in which hampers are filled, this research strove to examine how MA promotes the development of cooperative, sustainable, and interconnected communities that resist the status quo by imagining more just, supportive, and vibrant futures. Utilizing a community-engaged approach (Johnson, 2017), my research questions were established in collaboration with CFS Delivery volunteers through organizing meeting discussions, online communication channels (i.e., Slack), and informal conversations with volunteers during sorting shifts. My community partners offered the following avenues for exploration:

- What role does education on MA and collective action play within the organization?
- How can volunteer skillsets and relationships be utilized to further educational efforts?
- How can CFS become a more accessible and inviting space?
- What draws people to participate in CFS efforts? What do they seek to gain from participation? What motivates participants to stay involved over time?
- How does community-building take place within this space? How can this initiative facilitate the building of community beyond this space?

With these inquiries in mind, the following research questions were proposed to and approved by the CFS volunteer community:

- What can the CFS sorting space (and beyond) tell us about community?
(For example, who makes up this space, what keeps volunteers engaged, what roles do relationships play, and what does community mean to those who are a part of CFS?)
- What role does the CFS MA framework play in creating and maintaining this community? (For example, what is the role of education, solidarity, and collective decision-making?)

Methods

It was essential for this research to follow a methodology that aligned with MA frameworks and the values of reciprocity, flexibility, and openness. Furthermore, it was crucial that the chosen methodology generate a rich understanding of the community that had formed around the CFS Delivery sorting space and centre the volunteers at every stage of the research process (Johnson, 2017). For this reason, I chose to apply a qualitative feminist activist ethnographic approach (FAEA) to this research (Craven & Davis, 2013; O'Reilly, 2009). This approach permits a model that is focused on the pursuit of contextual and experiential knowledge of particular communities. As such, a FAEA locates particular understandings within broader structures of power and social relations to conduct socially and politically relevant research for the chosen research group (Craven & Davis, 2013). Therefore, FAEA is rooted in reciprocity, community involvement, and reflexivity. Further, feminist research methods, including a FAEA, utilize and mobilize community visions and voices in a manner that acknowledges how researchers cannot be separated from their research (Johnson, 2017). In order to address possible biases and the potential to cause harm through extractive knowledge collection or power imbalances, a feminist ethnographic researcher must become immersed in community, prioritize trust and relationship-building, and incorporate reflexivity into every stage of the research process (Johnson, 2017). By doing so, the impact of the research on the researcher can be acknowledged and vice versa. Further, a FAEA intertwines academic and social justice work to bolster institutional support and action for justice-seeking movements while simultaneously building relationships and understanding within community. Lastly, this research approach recognizes that the personal *is* political by acknowledging the complex nature of individual and collective lived experiences and by challenging the political neutrality of positivist research and dominant, neoliberal social structures.

In designing my research project, a FAEA was chosen for three reasons. First, the nature of food-based MA hinges on care work—a form of labour disproportionately carried out by women, non-binary people, and people of colour. By applying a feminist activist lens, MA can be located within historical and present-day social contexts that recognize the intersectional nature of race, ability, gender, sexuality, class, and other social factors. Moreover, such a lens can acknowledge the role of MA in ensuring the survival, resiliency, and well-being of marginalized communities. Second, a FAEA can describe and recognize how the multitudinous experiences and perspectives present within communities are often propelled by a passion for social justice and community involvement that precedes the development of research questions. By integrating academic and community-based goals, this approach presents a model for actively engaging with social justice movements and the academy to facilitate social change at both community and institutional levels. Third, a FAEA was applied to the case-study example of CFS to discern the tacit and experience-based knowledge of individuals while locating this knowledge within larger patterns of behaviour and expressions of beliefs (Armstrong et al., 2019). Rather than moving towards the goal of transferability, this project undertook an ethnographic case study to forge a richer understanding of the culture of a particular group within a bounded time and space (Fusch et al., 2017).

Data collection methods utilized a FAEA and experiential framework to address the aforementioned research questions in order to construct a case study of the holistic experiences of CFS volunteers. Data was collected over a 2-month period using ethnographic methods, including immersive participant observation, informal interviews, and intermittent auto-ethnographic self-reflection, to capture the nuanced experiences of CFS's sorting volunteers. Approval (Ethics

Protocol #22-0713) to conduct this research as part of my honours thesis was obtained from the University of Victoria’s Human Research Ethics Board (HREB). Participant observations took place over 6 data collection sessions between January 17 and February 28, 2023, at the Quadra Village Community Gym during the sorting shifts for the CFS Delivery Program (every Tuesday from noon to 2:30 p.m.). On average, the sorting shifts saw 12 to 14 volunteers, including 8 study participants for each session. During the introductory circles held at the beginning of each shift, I shared information about the project and established consent by asking volunteers to opt-in to the research by utilizing “consent badges,” which were added to the nametag of each participant.

While sorting, I observed the social and physical environment of the space, noted any (in)formal activities taking place, and participated in the sorting process as a volunteer. This role involved wearing many “hats” as a researcher, volunteer, friend, peer, and community member. Holding these simultaneous positions while prioritizing trust-building and reciprocity was essential for moving within the sorting space in ways that might have been inaccessible to an “outside” researcher (Naples, 2003; O’Reilly, 2009). To deepen the contextual and personal volunteer narratives, observations were supplemented with informal interviews that aligned with the casual atmosphere of the CFS sorting space. Each interview was participant-driven, and those who took part often began by recounting how they heard about CFS, how long they had been volunteering, and what the space meant to them. During each interview, I remained responsive to the topics, experiences, and issues most salient to each volunteer, jotting down brief notes that were later supplemented by my field notes.

In addition to observing participants and conducting interviews, I wrote auto-ethnographic self-reflections, both in my field notes and as larger, intermittent reflective pieces before and after data collection. Field note self-reflections prompted me to explore any feelings, thoughts, or concerns that arose during an observational session, whereas the larger reflection pieces took an autobiographical approach that expanded on field note reflections to explore how the research related to my personal experiences throughout the project.⁵ Further, reflections were used to locate myself within the CFS community from multiple perspectives to ensure that community-based, feminist research practices were maintained (Craven & Davis, 2013; Johnson, 2017). In addition, self-reflections allowed me to challenge dominant positivist approaches to research by undertaking self-critical actions that acknowledged the communal nature of knowledge formation (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012). This practice mediated my interconnectivity with the group as I navigated the “insider/outsider” binary present when building community relationships as a researcher (Naples, 2003; O’Reilly, 2009).

Data collected from participant interviews were anonymized and documented through shorthand notes, which were expanded upon and recorded as field notes within 24 hours of each sorting shift. These field notes were analyzed for key words relating to the research questions using an inductive thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), and coded manually after the completion of the data collection to provide insights into participants’ experiences, values, and perceptions of the organization, including CFS’s impact, reach, and purpose. For example, I coded key words related to community- and relationship-building (“community,” “friends,” “socializing”), knowledge and skill development (“capacity,” “learning,” “perspectives”),

⁵ For example, in one self-reflection piece written on January 9, 2023, I discussed an experience I had at a family Christmas dinner that deepened my understanding of the stigma and isolation related to food insecurity: my family had assumed I was purely a provider rather than a receiver of food aid. This reflection allowed me to integrate personal observations and academic knowledge, think critically, and recognize how my experience shaped my approach to this research.

personal feelings (“joy,” “nostalgia,” “guilt”), and organizing/MA principles (“giving back,” “community care,” “food security”).

Uncovering the Role of Storytelling at CFS

After becoming immersed in the data through multiple readings, the coding of my field notes, and self-reflections, a key theme that stood out was storytelling, which was further divided into the following subthemes: stories of place and stories of care.

Stories of Place

Over the course of the research project, it became clear that the CFS volunteer community strives to make a positive impact locally by co-creating a caring, responsive, and supportive “place” to support the city’s most vulnerable populations. Seventy-one percent of interviewees reported joining the MA efforts of CFS to become more connected to community and to other local residents. Shared values and interests (such as civic engagement, a call to better our local community, a desire to inhabit accepting queer spaces, and an orientation towards addressing social justice issues) were the common threads that united volunteers within the organizing space, which aligned with the initial foundations of CFS.

In addition to its shared values, CFS maintains a sense of community and place by establishing a casual and “fun” volunteering environment where members “feel good” coming together to “get things done,” “meet cool people,” and “give back” to the local community in a positive way (interview participants, February 2023). These positive feelings were reinforced when volunteers discussed the many roles they played within the initiative, often moving fluidly between duties or mobilizing quickly to fill areas of need as they arose. Volunteers utilized their resources (such as available time, expendable income, access to vehicles, and relevant knowledge and skills) to support the organization in reciprocal ways. For example, some volunteers expressed how valuable the sorting space was for forming connections with others: sorting on Tuesday as a regular activity offered a break from their work-from-home routines, which helped more “introvert[ed]” volunteers forge new friendships (interview participant, January 2023).

Some volunteer delivery drivers and shoppers shared that bringing their family or friends along on their shifts was beneficial; working together made their tasks easier to accomplish, facilitated quality time, and created opportunities for volunteers to “support others in giving back in the ways they can” (interview participant, January 2023). Volunteers also noted that the lack of bureaucratic protocols at CFS provided “flexibility” in volunteering shifts, which made it easier to bring people into the space and empower them to “take action” (interview participants, Jan–Feb 2023). This ease was important since some volunteers expressed their reluctance to assume roles with lengthy orientation processes or extensive paperwork. This sentiment was echoed by others who felt the “paternalistic, rigid structures” commonly found in other volunteer-run organizations got “in the way of action” by prioritizing bureaucratic processes over shifting needs and resources (interview participants, Jan–Feb 2023). Ultimately, I observed that, by maintaining a casual and flexible space, CFS volunteers had opportunities to become civically engaged in the ways that felt right to them.

Observations around the presence of shared values, informal approaches to volunteering, and friendship- and connection-building within the sorting space contributed to my interpretation of a clear sense of “place” within CFS and its volunteer body. Though some members shared that

they were drawn to contribute to CFS due to the involvement of their friends and mutual connections, many viewed their sorting shifts as an opportunity to expand their social circles, connect with and build community, and, for long-time local residents, find fresh perspectives and insights by interacting with geographical and sociopolitical spaces in new ways (interview participants, Jan–Feb 2023). United in achieving common goals and engaging in necessary community care work, volunteers developed meaningful relationships and looked forward to seeing each other on a weekly basis. Volunteers reported feeling energized, supported, safe, and seen in the space, and many experienced “a sense of caring” that reminded them that “people know [they’re] alive...and know that people care about [them]” (interview participant, February 2023). This finding was exemplified when one volunteer shared that feelings of reciprocity within the space fueled her advocacy for CFS, noting the felt impact when others took “the time to see [her] and care” (interview participant, February 2023).

Though friendship and mutual connections continue to propel the CFS volunteer base, my interpretation was that the importance of interpersonal relationships extended beyond the space to assist in the building of greater networks of care within the community. For example, the opportunity to connect with value-aligned individuals to address food insecurity led some volunteers to engage in MA efforts outside of CFS by forming other spaces and care practices, such as workshops, events, and weekly community dinners.⁶ Through the building of relationships and networks of care, CFS was found to positively affect individual and collective understandings of place. Moreover, these networks and relationships were noted to help people imagine and participate in the supportive, caring, and interconnected communities of which they desired to be a part.

Vignette 1: The Myth of Sisyphus

(February 21, 2023)

As James and I stand over a box of green onions and cherry tomatoes, separating them and placing them into plastic bags, we talk about his experience with volunteering in the city. He used to be a teacher (and actually taught another volunteer’s drama class years ago) but is now retired and spends at least one day a week volunteering at a variety of organizations. He plays music for seniors with dementia, has supported unhoused folks at Our Place, and shops, sorts, and delivers food for CFS. When I ask why he volunteers, he shares how his life could have “gone differently” depending on the choices he made as a young person, and that he, too, could be facing economic or food insecurity. James goes on to tell me that, though he helps out in the ways he can, he doesn’t see many efforts in town actually changing the oppressive economic and material conditions that leave so many struggling and has lost faith in the fall of capitalism happening in our lifetimes. When I ask him why he does this work then, even if he feels cynical about the outcomes, he tells me of Albert Camus’s (1942/2013) take on the Myth of Sisyphus: James relates how, in the journey of pushing the metaphoric boulder up the hill and chasing it down as it falls, there is “nothing stopping us from whistling a happy tune” on the way down. Expanding, he adds that we have the opportunity to do things that lift our spirits, make us feel good, without needing to find rationality in it—we can do the work just because we have to try and can have an okay time trying, even if it doesn’t change everything. The struggle can be meaningful enough.

⁶ For example, the MA initiative Plenty Collective was formed by a group of friends who met through Community Food Support. This group centres their community events on shared moments of nourishment and abundance.

Stories of Care

At CFS, stories of place were deeply intertwined with stories of care. Relationship-building and caring, both for and with one another and the broader community, established a tangible understanding of place for volunteers that, in turn, reinforced the importance of and desire to engage in MA organizing. When exploring motivations for staying engaged with CFS, one volunteer found that the presence of caring relationships fostering community solidarity motivated their involvement more than any external rationale (interview participant, February 2023). Another volunteer shared that she was driven to participate in CFS because of a personal “sense of responsibility” to share what excess she had with others—whether time, money, energy, or emotional capacity—to “improve the next generation.” She added that it felt “good ...[to] be relied on for something [she] offer[s] to give” (interview participant, February 2023). Additionally, volunteers expressed a desire to fill gaps in care within their community. Some members, such as “James,” felt the city’s ability to offer support to its residents had decreased over time, which led them to become pessimistic about what they saw as predominantly “reactionary” efforts that failed to change the conditions that produced insecurity and poverty in the first place (February 2023).

For many volunteers, engaging with CFS presented an opportunity to explore the “radicalness of care work” by leaning into “softness and care” with peers (interview participant, January 2023). They felt that engaging in this work had the potential to transform the local community by highlighting our shared humanness and vulnerability to risk and precarity. In the face of pessimism and insecurity, being a part of a community that centred on connection and the responsibility to care for others presented volunteers with an antidote to the “illness” of social despair and isolation (interview participant, February 2023). In summary, the ability to offer community care and to trust that they too are cared for motivated CFS volunteers to participate in the creation of a bureaucracy-free, collectively run space where locals can support their community in meaningful and necessary ways.

One way the CFS volunteer community expressed care was through educating each other in informal ways. Folks often discussed what participating in sustainable organizing looked like over time and facilitated anti-capitalist (un)learning around productivity by honouring each other’s fluctuating capacities (i.e., recognizing that volunteer contributions might differ over time) and reiterating the importance of self-care. For example, volunteers were encouraged to take breaks and help themselves to snacks during their sorting shifts, which kept energy levels up, promoted relationship-building, and ensured the environment remained casual and fun. By encouraging volunteers to move in ways that felt accessible to them, folks were more likely to stay engaged with the program, feel empowered to check in with their energy levels and needs, and assert agency by acting from a place of self-awareness.

Long-standing volunteers expressed excitement when noting the presence of capacity- and skill-building within the volunteer body. In particular, long-term volunteers saw value in practising collaboration and sustainable organizing practices together to facilitate knowledge sharing between experienced and newcomer volunteers. Further, they felt that these exchanges promoted a generative cycle of volunteers in which sorters were available to teach newcomers about CFS processes and MA organizing, which made orientations a communal responsibility. For example, one volunteer acknowledged how much her skills had grown since becoming a part of CFS: she noted that the space demonstrated how “we may not know what we are doing, but we can work together to make [MA] happen” by utilizing the “skills and knowledges we do have” and by

granting each other the “permission and freedom to take action” (interview participant, January 2023).

Moreover, a few volunteers noted how capacity- and skill-building efforts, as well as making room for new volunteers to contribute, alleviated potential stress and guilt for having to step back or shift their responsibilities within the organization. A volunteer connected this notion to “composting knowledges”—a concept she gleaned during a webinar with activist and grassroots organizer Mariame Kaba—which refers to the process of returning knowledges to the “soil” (organizational environment) through knowledge-transference to nourish what we have left behind (interview participant, January 2023). By making space to question and restructure personal understandings of care work that honours the capacity of individuals and their community, CFS facilitates a crucial anti-capitalist (un)learning that potentiates dreams of a future in which participants’ needs and well-being are respected and prioritized. Certainly, the processes of questioning and (un)learning are radical outcomes that create an opening to challenge systems of power and forge local support for new pathways of care.

Another way that CFS volunteers demonstrated care was through the sharing of food, stories, memories, moments of play, and visions for the future. I often witnessed volunteers encouraging each other to take food items, such as by opening a bag of chips or box of muffins to share during sorting, or by discussing how to incorporate their favorite food items into family recipes. In such instances, food acted as a point of connection in the space by creating opportunities for volunteers to explore similarities and differences and share traditions, tips, memories, and stories about themselves while fostering deeper connections to each other in the process.

The presence of food shared freely within and beyond the sorting space facilitated a sense of abundance and safety that helped volunteers lean into their own joy and sense of connection. This presence was evidenced in how, once sorting activities were completed, volunteers would play, jest, or joke with one another, which reinforced the lively nature of the shifts. One volunteer suggested that this jovial environment was supported through the physical organizing space of the Quadra Village Community Gymnasium (see Figure 3), which brought a sense of “nostalgia” that supported youthful playfulness (interview participant, February 2023). In addition, volunteers were keen to spark moments of joy for each other, such as by including Valentine’s cards in the hampers on February 14th, or by bringing their dogs into the space for people to pet and snuggle. These acts of care brought whimsical play to the space in such a way that, I surmised, might dispel feelings of hopeless and nihilistic despair. As I noted in my self-reflections, “these are the people that make life

Figure 3

The weekly sorting set-up in the Quadra Village Community Gym.



Note: Ribeiro, G. A. (2023). [Photograph of the CFS Delivery sorting space]. Photo by author.

survivable” (field notes, February 2023). By harnessing the power of relationships founded on shared routines and values, and by utilizing these relationships to build personal and collective capacities, MA initiatives create small pockets of change that demonstrate the possibility of a more survivable and caring world.

The Power of a Visionary Story

Through the use of storytelling, my research with CFS achieved two outcomes: first, this project demonstrated that the CFS community was formed around a deeply relational connection to place that brought folks together through common values, such as the shared responsibility to offer mutual care and the desire to act in ways that “lift our spirits” and generate visions of a positive future. Secondly, I was shown the diverse ways that care manifests in MA projects and communities. For me, these outcomes drew attention to the capacity of MA projects to build what political philosopher Scott Roulier (2020) described as “civic muscle.” In addition, these outcomes pointed to CFS volunteer engagement manifesting as a form of “creative placemaking” (Liu, 2020; Markusen & Gadwa, 2018; Schupbach, 2020).

As a concept, civic muscle describes how citizens come together as “agents of change” to engage in communal efforts to improve the quality of life for all (Roulier, 2020). Utilizing an array of strategies, the building and mobilizing of civic muscle requires collaboration, coordination, and a collective movement towards community-based goals in service of bettering political, social, and physical environments. However, coordinating communities is complex work that often requires negotiating individual and group interests, acknowledging tensions that may arise when determining collective values and actions, and making space for diverse perspectives, skills, and knowledges within heterogenous communities.

Roulier (2020) described civic muscle as involving two components: civic isotonic and civic isometric. Civic isotonic describe robust actions that create visible and tangible forms of change that bolster social movements (such as organizing, protesting, and strikes). Civic isometric are less visible actions that maintain community stability and flexibility by promoting resiliency through acts of care that sustain social movements (such as neighbours checking in on one another, someone dropping off food to the community fridge, or informal skill-sharing). Together, these components promote change through generative discussions that deepen interconnectivity and, as Roulier (2020) suggested, celebrate the possibility of change.

Following this description of civic muscle, it is clear that both civic isotonic and isometric are present at CFS. Volunteers not only engage in direct action concerning food security, sustainability, and anti-capitalism, but they also carried out the work of supporting one another and the broader community through acts of care and sustenance. The sorting volunteers were far from a homogenous group, yet this base was united in achieving common goals, such as preparing hampers for recipients as well as promoting education, awareness, and action on important social issues. Further, collaboration, discussion, education, and storytelling continue to drive CFS’s organizing efforts, which promote interconnectivity and community relationships within the group. Lastly, moments of play, joy, and sharing within the space were celebratory acts that motivated volunteers to continue engaging in this necessary care work.

Discussions with volunteers affirmed that civic engagement within the sorting space (and within the CFS community at large) was connected to acts of “creative placemaking.” Coined by Markusen and Gadwa (2018), creative placemaking describes collaborative efforts to transform and shape the social and physical character of a city, neighbourhood, or region around artistic and

cultural activities. Furthermore, community development expert Jeremy Liu (2020) described creative placemaking as “an essential part of community self-determination” that recognizes the interconnectedness of community survival to geographical and sociopolitical space (p. 47). For Liu, creative placemaking is a survival and world-building strategy that utilizes creative thinking and action to generate change. This notion is reinforced by Jason Schupbach (2020), who connected creative placemaking to humans using “their creative and cultural expressions” to foster the just and equitable communities of which they desire to be a part (p. 12)—a tenet that aligns with the goals of MA.

As outlined earlier, MA asks individuals to creatively dream of and act upon the collective future we desire to see manifested. Striving to create openings that challenge existing state bodies and systems of power, MA projects must be creative in order to be successful; they must reach beyond the limits of what citizens are told is possible. Through creative placemaking, CFS addresses survival needs while inspiring folks to become involved in healing practices that create supportive and connected spaces from which to resist oppressive conditions. These acts (re)shape the cultural landscape of the city by promoting the values of reciprocity, care, collaboration, and connection as key components of personal and place-based identities.

Vignette 2: Sustenance, Nourishment and Feasting

(February 28, 2023)

Camille and I sit on the stage of the Quadra Village Gym, our legs dangling and swaying over the edge as we do our interview. Camille had expressed wanting to chat about mutual aid and community with me since I started exploring community-engaged research with CFS in November 2022, and I was very grateful to have it happen on the very last day of my data collection. Camille’s brain holds many stories, thoughts, and, as she calls it, “ramblings” that fall out of her in a poetic way that inspires awe and close listening. She tells me how she was drawn to CFS in May of 2020, when she started to learn more about the Black Liberation and abolition movements. She desired that the values present in these anti-hierarchical and anti-oppressional movements, and the enactment of the principles of mutual aid, be reflected in the community work in which she takes part. When we talk about how community functions at CFS, she turns and looks at the volunteers bustling around the gym and says, “Sometimes you eat to sustain; sometimes you eat to nourish; and sometimes you feast; and there’s a combination of these happening here.” When I ask her what she means by this, she tells me that sometimes we, as volunteers, are just going through the motions and getting things done to ensure people are fed. But other times, as community members and visionaries, we dare to find joy and nourish ourselves and our visions of the future.

Limitations and Areas of Future Research

Due to a constricted timeline, this project was limited to exploring the role of MA frameworks and how community is formed within the CFS Delivery sorting space, and, as such, this timeframe left room to explore related topics. For example, future research on MA and community-building efforts at CFS might take up the following questions:

- Are the stories of place and care highlighted at CFS Delivery shared across other roles and the Community Fridge Program?
- How are education and relationship-building experienced in other CFS volunteer roles? Are these experiences transferable?
- How do hamper recipients interact with MA frameworks and community at CFS?
- Do experiences of relationship-building, care, and placemaking through CFS extend beyond the volunteer base?
- What are some measures of positive social impact and success that can be utilized by MA organizations for program evaluation?
- How do MA organizations mediate the interplay of operating informally while relying on larger organizations to meet growing need within communities? How does the non-profit industrial complex impact the success of MA projects like CFS?

Lack of demographic data about volunteers posed a limitation, which resulted in an inability to accurately describe how race, gender, sexuality, immigration status, and so on were reflected in the volunteer base (unless self-described by participants). Further research might pursue more diverse perspectives of the space by investigating how ability, race, and age shape belonging within and alignment with the volunteer community. Moreover, this study did not address volunteer questions about how to make the sorting space more accessible or inviting. However, nearly all of the interviewees expressed that they were made aware of CFS through Instagram, which indicates that volunteers were often recruited through social media, if not invited through their personal circles. As such, promoting greater awareness of CFS by employing more diverse marketing strategies could improve access to the space and expand the volunteer base in terms of age, class, and social location. Further investigation on this topic would benefit CFS and their cycle of volunteers greatly.

Final Reflections

To conclude on a personal note, I want to draw attention to three things this project has taught me: first, it has demonstrated to me the power of relationships and the centrality of playfulness not only in making daily life more survivable but also in building social movements and creating change. Second, I was shown how food can act as a conduit for strong, supportive interpersonal connections by facilitating the relationship-building and placemaking that creates a sense of community. Third, I was reminded of the importance of the unique stories and experiences held by each community member, which painted a collective picture of what it feels like and means to be connected, supported, and cared for. At Community Food Support, community care expands beyond survival needs by challenging us to question the world around us, lean on each other for support, admit when we need help, and, most importantly, recognize the power of our collective abilities and dreams. This project affirmed that, indeed, “[m]utual giving strengthens community” and “[t]he love we make in community stays with us wherever we go” (hooks, 2001, p. 143).

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