

# Graduate School



## RYAN STILLWAGON

Queer Rights to the City: Exploring Mechanisms of Urban Food Security in Vancouver and the Underlying Imperil LGBTQIA2S+ Survival

Each year the rates of food insecurity in Canada surpasses the ever recorded before with one in six households with children insecure. Like most others, this insecurity impacts more marginalized, such as people identifying as queer. Ryan plans to bring together and working with community members to illustrate solutions and improvements to food security challenges, and better policy making and sustainable urban development.

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

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PUBLIC SCHOLARS INITIATIVE >

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### Faculty

Faculty of Arts

### Program

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology (PhD)

**Research supervisor(s)**

Thomas Kemple

**Home town**

Doylestown, PA

**Country**

United States of America

**Selected Award(s)**

Four Year Doctoral Fellowship (4YF)

International Tuition Award

President's Academic Excellence Initiative PhD Award

UBC Public Scholars Award

**RESEARCH DESCRIPTION**

Honouring the legacy and years of graduate support from one of my intellectual mentors and friends, the late [redacted], I am continuing a new line of sociological inquiry we started together but got cut short—identifying mechanisms and barriers associated with food insecurity and food sovereignty. I bring the training I have as a sociologist who studies queer social spaces and the politics of food. I am learning that our food choices deeply depend on the social forces that enable us to provide for our families and ourselves. I am curious about food's ability to congregate people, as well as how it enables community formation and sustenance. Food preferences communicate so much—our cultural, regional, and racial upbringings, our social status, class position, and experiences of colonization and intergenerational trauma. Food stories can reveal the social supports we have, or have not, in our neighbourhoods we live in. In short, the food we consume is fastened to a buffet of social factors beyond our individual choices. Those privileged enough to be food secure might rarely think about these larger social forces that sustain their food security, while those who are food insecure, that is having unreliable and insufficient access to food to satisfy their eating preferences, worry about where their next meal is coming from. Dr. Elliott asked one food-insecure child what she does when she is hungry and she replied, "I go to bed and think about eating."

Each year the rates of food insecurity in Canada surpass the highest rates ever recorded. In 2020, data from Statistics Canada showed that one in six households with children reported being food insecure. The Covid-19 pandemic has dramatically worsened food insecurity and provisioning. Food insecurity is one form of poverty tightly tied to the health and development of adults and children, and how these effects influence queer, trans, non-binary, and gender-expansive individuals and their families, who are often cisgender heterosexuals in North America (Waite, Pajovic, Denier 2020; Badgett, Choi, Wilson 2019). The limited literature suggests that food insecurity impacts queer families at higher rates than heterosexual ones and that there are different barriers to food security for queer-identified individuals. Through mixed-method analyses, my work investigates how institutionalized urban food systems and community-making contribute to the food security and wellbeing of diversely situated queers. I plan to analyze the 2019 Canadian Health Survey to estimate how chronic health conditions, employment stability, and community connectedness influence food security. Inspired by intersectional feminist practices of local capacity building and aided by the generous support of the UBC Public Scholars Award, I plan to work with community partners to develop workshops around food access among queer-identified community members. I promise to open a dialogue on queer rights to food in Vancouver's increasingly unaffordable and isolating urban environment. Through this scholarship approaches of learning from and within communities, my project seeks to understand how community-based food systems can support the health and wellbeing of all.

capacity-building respond to issues of food, housing, and job insecurity in Vancouver. Drawing on my ongoing combined with innovative quantitative analyses of nationally representative data, my research will re-frame cor with the goal of informing public policy, community advocacy, and sustainable urban development.

## WHAT DOES BEING A PUBLIC SCHOLAR MEAN TO YOU?

A public scholar breaks through the siloed specialty knowledges created through the disciplined boundaries of work in the service of strengthening civil society. To me that means engaging with organizations that advocate learning from them, working with and within them—to co-construct ways of understanding the issues they face them to amplify their grassroots initiatives. My goal is to promote collaboratively generated knowledge to a ran academic audiences. The work of a public scholar first starts with the relationships forged with people who dec alleviating pernicious and enduring social inequalities like food insecurity. I feel privileged and honoured to gain members, and to work alongside them.

## IN WHAT WAYS DO YOU THINK THE PHD EXPERIENCE CAN BE RE-IMAGINED WITH THE PSI INITIATIVE?

The ways we represent social issues in scholarship change when we are in community with others—the Public this genesis. PhD students engaged in this professionalization cluster can better align themselves with pressing ongoing climate catastrophe, myriad reconciliation projects, and settler commitments with Indigenous communities. Forceful calls for racial justice amid ongoing acts of police brutality, settler violence, and displacement. I believe those engaged in social protests for rent strikes, equitable and affordable healthcare, or those creating more inclusive appreciate that PhD students are determined to represent these issues using diverse knowledge-production for journals, and public talks. Through the support of the PSI, I am able to partner and work with organizations seeking food justice, security, and sovereignty among 2SLGBTQ+ low-income individuals, which I would be unable to do otherwise.

## HOW DO YOU ENVISION CONNECTING YOUR PHD WORK WITH BROADER CAREER OPPORTUNITIES?

I see my community-based work on queer food security leading to larger, grant-funded projects co-managed by community partners and academics. Going forward, I anticipate exploring mechanisms of poverty and its imbrication in several intersectional social cleavages in a variety of geographic regions, and with a variety of community-based stakeholders. As a doctoral fellow, and eventually a professor, I seek to deepen my theoretical commitments to queer, feminist, and sociological perspectives. Along my path, I hope to train the next generation of academic-activists committed to policy implementation.

## HOW DOES YOUR RESEARCH ENGAGE WITH THE LARGER COMMUNITY AND SOCIETY?

By design this research is collaborative and co-produced with community partners. I have the privilege of working in Vancouver addressing food security among queer and low-income folks—the Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood Community Food Bank. I plan to put the PSI funds toward event-based activities or “pop-ups” that we will jointly host for recipients. Additionally, I will be able to provide an honorarium for interview participants who take time to talk with me about food provisioning, housing, and work in Vancouver.

## HOW DO YOU HOPE YOUR WORK CAN MAKE A CONTRIBUTION TO THE “PUBLIC SCHOLARSHIP INITIATIVE”?

I aim to be a 'public sociologist' in the sense that I can use my institutional credentials and capacity to engage with community-based initiatives while publishing in forums that reach non-academic audiences—academic and community alike. The PSI is my first experience being able to provide these types of monetary funds to organizations that address the problem of food insecurity. My hope is that this research sparks more timely, relevant work among friends and friendships. This work may also call attention to unique barriers faced among Two-Spirit, queer, and trans people, compared to heterosexuals when they visit sites of food charity, thus calling for policy makers to ensure that aid is free of racism, homophobia, and transphobia.

## WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO PURSUE A GRADUATE DEGREE?

Long ago I decided that instead of pursuing law school I wanted to become a professor. I was an undergraduate at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, PA (USA) where I met an all-star cast of academics—Drs Vera Fennell, Janet Liable, Brian Pinaire, David Weissler, Khurram Hussain, Richard Matthews, Edward Morgan, my advisor Nandini Deo and others. These people had a major impact on me at a young age and got me excited to learn. Most crucially, they supported me when I began to realize my situation because my younger brother, at the time, was a marine stationed there and his return was uncertain (thankfully he returned). Through Dr. Deo's support, and a video camera she lent me, I travelled to three cities in India—Mumbai, Delhi and Varanasi—the first and only all women-led think-tank in India, Gateway House: Indian Council on Global Relations. Here, I was able to learn about Afghanistan from interview-based stories shared by Afghan students and refugees I met while publishing a series of articles on my travels. Those experiences were transformative and humbling. I often credit that solo trip with giving me the confidence to come out as gay while fortifying me with the knowledge that I could survive graduate school. That was an optimistic perspective at the time, given the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, is especially hard. I took time off from higher education to come out, came out as a gay man in Philadelphia. While working for an online company remotely, I spent two years in the Pacific Northwest on a 'gap year' excursion. I joined a gay men's chorus, became flush with musical queer friends, and quickly learned about the disproportionate and unfair impact our community. Returning to graduate school took a new direction—I wanted to study STIs and HIV prevention. At the University of Chicago, I spent my master's degree studying pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) use and knowledge among men who have sex with men, and providers about this new and revolutionary sexual health intervention that promised to drastically reduce new HIV infections among vulnerable populations. I then worked at NORC at the University of Chicago with Stuart Michaels on a series of studies on community-based HIV prevention studies conducted on the South Side of Chicago while participating in a sex education campaign run by Jim Pickett of the AIDS Foundation of Chicago. I took the leap, after being offered a promotion to a research assistant with NORC, to enrol in a PhD program in Sociology at UBC in the sub-field of queer and sexual health. Though the journey has been perilous and unmooring, I find myself now surrounded by incredibly supportive mentors and positioned to continue my work on food security.

## WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO COME TO BRITISH COLUMBIA AND STUDY AT UBC?

Meeting Kaitlyn Jaffe at the University of Chicago during my master's program drew me to apply to UBC. I knew during my master's degree that I wanted to continue working in the fields of medical sociology and queer sexual health. Since then, at UBC, in the Department of Sociology, I chose ten that had strong medical sociologists and sexualities scholars. I also needed to be in a program that was in a city with robust queer communities. After a winding journey, I am incredibly grateful to have a 'dream-team' dissertation committee—Drs Becki Ross, Thomas Kemple, and Elizabeth Hirsh. Dr. Sinikka Elliott was also on the committee, and her death in May 2021 has been devastating for all of us. I was Dr. Elliott's first TA at UBC in 2017.

the year after on her pilot project on food insecurity in Vancouver. We volunteered weekly together at a food bank. Our research and community-based work honours our friendship and commitment to the work we started and that committee will see accomplished.

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## OTHER PUBLIC SCHOLARS



JENNIFER MURRAY



GOPAL KHANAL



ZEINA WAHEED