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# Food Sovereignty as Decolonization: Some Contributions from Indigenous Movements to Food System and Development Politics

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# Food sovereignty as decolonization: some contributions from Indigenous movements to food system and development politics

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**Abstract** The popularity of ‘food sovereignty’ to cover a range of positions, interventions, and struggles within the food system is testament, above all, to the term’s adaptability. Food sovereignty is centrally, though not exclusively, about groups of people making their own decisions about the food system—it is a way of talking about a theoretically-informed food systems practice. Since people are different, we should expect decisions about food sovereignty to be different in different contexts, albeit consonant with a core set of principles (including women’s rights, a shared opposition to genetically modified crops, and a demand for agriculture to be removed from current international trade agreements). In this paper we look at the analytical points of friction in applying ideas of food sovereignty within the context of Indigenous struggles in North America. This, we argue, helps to clarify one of the central themes in food sovereignty: that it is a continuation of anti-colonial struggles, even in post-colonial contexts. Such an examination has dividends both for scholars of food sovereignty and for those of Indigenous politics: by helping to problematize notions of food sovereignty and postcoloniality, but also by posing pointed questions around gender for Indigenous struggles.

**Keywords** Food sovereignty · Indigenous self-determination · Decolonization · Food systems politics · Development

## Introduction

There has been something of a boomlet in the discussion of food sovereignty of late (Agarwal 2014; Bernstein 2014; Burnett and Murphy 2014; Desmarais and Wittman 2014; Edelman 2014; Kloppenburg 2014; Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2014; McMichael 2014; van der Ploeg 2014). This is welcome. The term has become a central point not only of analysis, but also political change within food movements. It is a term, as we shall argue, that invites contestation. Through this contestation, food movements’ politics become more explicit and, we suggest, their strategies and tactics more consonant with those politics.

In the recent paroxysm of study, food sovereignty is a term that has attracted no small amount of academic critique. Some commentators have criticized the term—and those who use it—on grounds of vagueness, or of being insufficiently critical of its political agnosticism or origins. In an important etymological exercise, Marc Edelman (2014) uses the Google Ngram Viewer<sup>1</sup> to show that the Spanish term ‘soberanía alimentaria’ predates the English ‘food sovereignty’ by several years, and was initially coined by the Mexican government in documents related to the National Food Program (Programa Nacional de Alimentación, PRONAL). Edelman suggests that these origins

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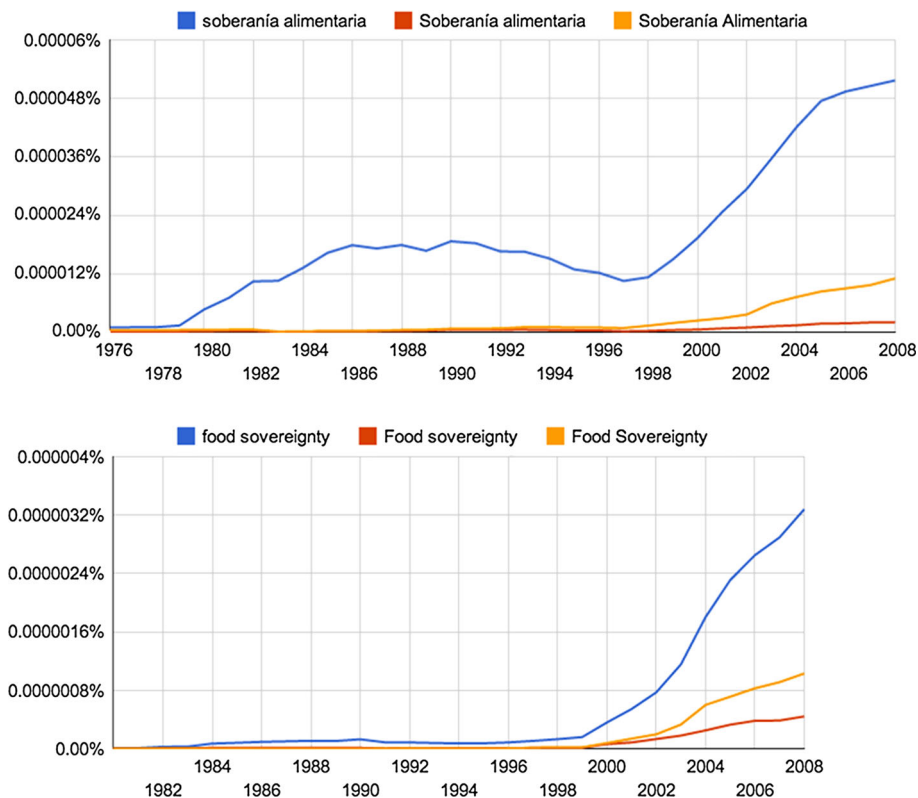
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<sup>1</sup> The viewer is an online phrase-usage graphing tool attached the Google Books word search database. It charts the annual instances of letter combinations (“ngrams”) or words and phrases, selected by the user, as found in 5.2 million digitized books spanning the publication years 1500–2008.

**Fig. 1** A comparison of the frequency of use of ‘food sovereignty’ and ‘soberanía alimentaria’, capitalized and lower case, in Google’s scanned repository of printed texts.

Source: Google Ngram



“from PRONAL and Mexican President Miguel de la Madrid [are] surely not the most inspiring political-intellectual ancestors” (2014, p. 6).

Language is, however, never fixed (de Saussure 1966), and new language is never made as we please, but with the deadweight of semantic history upon it. The term ‘food sovereignty’ has taken on new meanings, as we discuss below, and it has been used more consciously as a term of art across a range of literatures. Although it may have begun as an expression in a governmental program, it has become an ever-expanding series of ideas and principles, such that it can now be found as a capitalized phrase. Figure 1 shows the case-sensitive Google Ngram Viewer results, in both Spanish and English, charting the rise of the younger term and revealing a basis for ‘Food Sovereignty’ discrete from its governmental uses. In other words: while lower-case ‘food sovereignty’ certainly has origins in the Mexican state, its capitalized variant signifies something of a break with those origins.

It could be remarked that while capitalization might signify the attempt to move the term beyond its origins, it will never help the term transcend those origins. If the objection is that the term ought to have chosen better ancestors, it is hardly a fatal one. What this suggests (and what we argue at greater length, below) is that the term ‘food sovereignty’ has become more popular, and that it means something rather different now to the welfarist goals

of its roots in PRONAL. Indeed, the more recent interpretations of food sovereignty associated with La Via Campesina have become so dominant, that it took work to find its etymological heritage. This is why we choose not to capitalize the term—‘Food Sovereignty’ is now just ‘food sovereignty’.

A more interesting strand of recent critique is that the ‘sovereignty’ in ‘food sovereignty’ is under-theorized. We agree, but suggest that there are areas in which the complexities of sovereignty have been explored in some depth—namely, in the relationship between food sovereignty and Indigenous movements. The literature most directly relevant from the perspective of food sovereignty has pointed to the overlap between movements engaged in food sovereignty and the advancement of Indigenous rights in Canada (Desmarais and Wittman 2014; Morrison 2011; Shaw 2008). We take this analysis further by examining the strand of food sovereignty interpretations that point toward autonomy, showing how this is an area that has long been explored by Indigenous rights groups.

In this paper, we argue that the central ideas of food sovereignty map imperfectly onto Indigenous struggles in North America, but that the frictions and the consonances are enlightening. To begin with, the ‘sovereignties’ here are not synonymous. While ‘sovereignty’ always entails jurisdiction, we illustrate how some Indigenous movements deploy a unique understanding of the term. The usage we

are most interested in involves the relationship between a physical territoriality and a kincentric universe that both challenges and enriches the broad ideas that coalesce under the mantle of ‘food sovereignty.’ Further, this rootedness consciously operates as part of a much longer history of resistance to the colonization of Indigenous space and place. To address Indigenous concerns, then, we assert that the politics of the wider food sovereignty movement is obliged to expand beyond the familiar bundle of rights that attach to production and consumption, since the resurrection of Indigenous traditional foods and food systems is inextricable from a more general Indigenous cultural, social, and political resurgence. An examination of food sovereignty alongside Indigenous struggles thus reveals a key theme: that food sovereignty is the continuation of anti-colonial struggles in ostensibly postcolonial contexts.

The dialogue between food sovereignty and Indigenous politics is not a one-way street. We find that food sovereignty raises questions of gender politics within Indigenous struggles, while probing lingering issues of solidarity in food politics across Indigenous-Settler divides. Collectively, these insights highlight an overlap between the projects and processes of settler colonialism and those of neoliberal development. We find that decolonization is not a static end-goal that orders strategies and tactics, but rather a daily mode of resistance—a form of food systems practice informed, in equal measure, by a vision of democratic engagement and historical experiences of resistance. By the end of this article, our engagement with Indigenous politics will have revealed how, both theoretically and practically, food sovereignty is (and should be) a far more radical anti-colonial project than is compatible with its origins in the Mexican state.

### Food and other sovereignties

There has always been a systematic plasticity in the definition of food sovereignty. Consider, for example, this early iteration of what food sovereignty might mean, produced by the international peasant movement La Via Campesina. It was penned to coincide with the 1996 World Food Summit in Rome (a fact borne out by the rise in the term’s use in Fig. 1).

Food sovereignty is the *peoples’, Countries’ or State Unions’* RIGHT to define their agricultural and food policy, without any dumping vis-à-vis third countries. Food sovereignty includes:

- prioritizing local agricultural production in order to feed the people, access of peasants and landless people to land, water, seeds, and credit. Hence the need for land reforms, for fighting against GMOs (Genetically

Modified Organisms), for free access to seeds, and for safeguarding water as a public good to be sustainably distributed.

- The right of farmers, peasants to produce food and the right of consumers to be able to decide what they consume, and how and by whom it is produced.
- The right of Countries to protect themselves from too low priced agricultural and food imports.
- Agricultural prices linked to production costs: they can be achieved if the Countries or Unions of States are entitled to impose taxes on excessively cheap imports, if they commit themselves in favour of a sustainable farm production, and if they control production on the inner market so as to avoid structural surpluses.
- The populations taking part in the agricultural policy choices.
- *The recognition of women farmers’ rights*, who play a major role in agricultural production and in food. (Via Campesina 2006, emphasis added)

As has been noted elsewhere, the history of La Via Campesina is sedimented into the definition (Patel 2009). A coalition of landless, small and middle peasants, the definition needed to be loose enough for every member of La Via Campesina to agree on, yet flexible enough to be moulded to fit the context of each member’s local politics. In Latin America, La Via Campesina’s initial members had included coalitions involving Indigenous Peoples, though this was not the case in North America (Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010) or Asia. Beyond a few central ideas such as women’s rights, the cessation of European and American agricultural dumping, and a stand against GMOs, the definition is almost systematically vague. The definition is vague, in part, because the politics behind the movement are so diverse. There is no shared cosmology, indeed no identifiable shared political programme—for instance, this peasant movement is largely (with a few Asian exceptions) undecided about Maoism. Indeed, the varied politics and class positions of the constituent movements mean that there are a few obfuscations. Although comprehensive agrarian reform is a central tenet of Via Campesina, some of its constituents are equivocal about revolutionary land reform (Bernstein 2014). It is in the idea of autonomy that critics have found reason to question the coherence of the concept of ‘food sovereignty’ itself.

The call for autonomy immediately invites the question over who ought to be autonomous, and from what. Again, we find systematic ambiguity around precisely who has the right to define their agriculture and food policy (Patel 2006). One of the most straightforward ways of demonstrating the overlapping sovereignties here is to understand that, particularly in colonized societies, *peoples’* and *countries’* rights are not the same, especially if those

peoples are Indigenous. Self-determination is at the core of the legal recognition fought for—and won—by Indigenous Peoples in diverse jurisdictions, including the international. This is not, however, the kind of sovereignty that can automatically be plugged into understandings of food sovereignty because, while Indigenous claims share with food sovereignty the idea of autonomy (GRAIN 2005), autonomy as a political condition is agnostic about where that autonomy takes place. As Rodolfo Stavenhagen has observed in Brazil,

For example, the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) of Brazil demands and occupies land all over the country, and the members of their land reform settlements sometimes come from states far away from the land they occupy. In contrast, Indigenous peoples' movements do not demand just *any* land, but rather *their* land, and they want control over their land and territories. Thus, closely linked to the concept of territory, are the demands by organizations and movements of Indigenous people for autonomy and self-determination. (2006, p. 208)

In more conventional readings of 'sovereignty', the concept is meaningless without a specific physically delineated jurisdiction in which that sovereignty applies to the exclusion of all others. Although the term was chosen in opposition to 'security' in the context of food (Rosset 2003), it is a *strong* version of sovereignty that Indigenous movements invoke when engaging in food sovereignty. With the strong version of sovereignty comes not only a politics moored in both space and place (Massey 1994), but a politics developed as part of longer struggles against exploitation and colonization of that place.

While the language of 'sovereignty' is decreasingly employed by Indigenous Peoples, having been strongly challenged for its imperial roots and statist notions of coercive power (Anaya 2000; Deloria 1979; Deloria and Lytle 1984; Morris 1992), successor terms retain the core idea of political self-direction and national legitimacy that lent the original concept its normative appeal. Although sovereignty is still found in academic and activist discourse (particularly in the United States), its conceptual successors have proliferated; dominant today, and the preferred term in transnational advocacy, is 'self-determination.' As an aspirational project Indigenous self-determination contains both ideological and practical elements; it can in theory, and does in practice, take on a number of forms. A variety of proposed paths assemble under this rubric, and while each plots a unique destination, all such end-points are fundamentally related. Even restricted to an outcome, self-determination presents a continuum of expressions, stretching from the most substantive to the most procedural. At the shallowest end we find *self-administration*, or

minimally devolved (and largely bureaucratic) federal power; further up lies *self-government*, of which various contemporary arrangements (such as the Canadian province of Nunavut) sketch some parameters in the absence of a single, agreed-upon definition. Despite these important permutations, though, Canada's Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples wasted no words in identifying the core idea: "[s]elf-determination refers to the collective power of choice" (1996, p. 175). In other words, self-determination and sovereignty occupy a contiguous space in a continuing conversation about the autonomy and agency of stateless nations and non-state collectivities.

Of course, neither autonomy nor agency exists in a vacuum, while powerful historical forces inflect current choices and actions. In Canada, for example, the political project articulated by federally recognized 'Indian' governments is problematic for its very foundation: it is highly implausible that empowering governance structures forged in the crucible of colonialism will produce the decolonized nations that animate normative visions of substantive Indigenous self-determination. Indigenous women, in particular, have recognized and articulated the dangers they face at the hands of such governments, which typically press for greater autonomy vis-à-vis the state instead of pursuing alternative visions of governance altogether.<sup>2</sup> As Andrea Smith (2007) reminds us, then, there is a need to consider how the effects of colonization affect the decisions Indigenous polities make in a way that, ironically, undermines the very decision-making freedom that they pursue.

### Indigeneity, contemporary colonialism, and decolonization

There is, of course, lively debate over what 'Indigenous' means. We need not rehearse these debates here (though see Kapoor and Shizha 2010; Cadena and Starn 2007). Conventional notions of indigeneity tend to focus on not the conflicts and struggles over space and place, but rather on the simple and brute criterion of temporal precedence. As Mary Louise Pratt notes,

<sup>2</sup> These political-discursive visions of Indigenous self-determination differ from normative-theoretical accounts in a number of ways, yet a key commonality is their thoroughgoing refusal of gendered analyses of contemporary colonialism or the persistent, essentialist divisions and oppressions induced by colonization. Even the most popular accounts are conspicuously un-gendered (see for example, Alfred 1999; Alfred 2005; Alfred and Corntassel 2005; Corntassel 2008). Thus colonial governments and anticolonial theorists may unwittingly work in tandem to "normalize and perpetuate an irrelevance of gender and the disenfranchisement of Indian women in Native sovereignty struggles" (Barker 2006, p. 128).



In English, the cluster of generic descriptors used to refer to Indigenous peoples – Indigenous, native, aboriginal, first nations – all refer etymologically to prior-ity in time and place. They denote those who were here (or there) first, that is, before someone else who came ‘after.’ (2007, p. 389)

We appreciate, following Kaushik Ghosh (2010), that such temporal and geographical fixity may neither be supported by history, nor indeed need be at all in order to meet the criterion of indigeneity. The standard of primordial residency, in fact, has most often been used to deny the claims of Indigenous Peoples whose histories include nomadism or migration. Similarly, appeals to an essential ‘before’ have been deployed to freeze nations in time, obfuscating the role of innovation in tradition, and denying legal protection to a wide array of emergent and novel practices. Because boundaries in both time and space are directly relevant to the issue for Indigenous food sovereignty, our discussion requires that we push the problem of definition further.

Despite fluidity in some contexts, there are certain commonalities between Indigenous groups worldwide. Two key relationships typically characterise and shape their experiences, providing a similar, though not identical ground of identity and aspiration: those with the natural environment (such as land, oceans, lakes, and so forth); and those with institutions of capitalist modernity across the state, society, and market. It is a unique, specific affiliation with place, lived in contention with the state, society and market, that marks the greater part of Indigenous struggles today. Some of the existing, formal definitions recognize parts of this relational dynamic. The Indian government’s classification of adivasi communities, for instance, comes to rest on specific histories of struggle between groups and “relations of exploitation by moneylenders, landlords, the state and corporations” (Ghosh 2010, p. 41).

It should hardly be surprising that, since the category of ‘Indigenous’ was itself forged through various forms of resistance, Indigenous resistances to neoliberalism have been interpreted as moments in longer histories of colonialism, anti-colonialism, and decolonization. This understanding of resistance has been a consciously constructed process. Aziz Choudry (2010) offers evidence of this history being written by activists ranged, in this case, against the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, the body that was to become the World Trade Organization:

if we are to combat the transnationals, if we are to combat globalization as we must, then we will only do so successfully if we keep it in the context of that centuries-long culture of colonization. (Jackson 1999, cited in Choudry 2010, p. 48)

Framing the context of struggle as a colonial one helps to advance the analysis of sovereignty. Recall that in many, though not all, cases the first contact between Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups were mutually beneficial exchanges rather than colonial encounters. By identifying colonialism as a subsequent set of institutions and operations of power, we are able to trace both the *de jure* and the *de facto* erosion of Indigenous self-sufficiency and self-determination. And, like development (McMichael 1992), colonialism is both goal and ongoing process—not merely in terms of the neo-colonial economic policies that shape the world, but also in the more traditional sense of the active consolidation and legitimation of Settler control. At its core lies a rather straightforward scenario: despite centuries of predictions about their imminent demise, the colonized continue to resist, and that refusal to swap indigeneity for citizenship has consequences.

The continued existence of distinct, pre-existing societies within (ostensibly) former colonies snarls the smooth flow of capitalist development by calling into question the exclusivity of Settler jurisdiction. The irony is this: the unresolved tension between capitalism and indigeneity both signals the failure of the project but also serves to propel it forward, as Settler states seek to finish what they started. James Tully points out that,

[t]he means to this end are twofold: the ongoing usurpation, dispossession, incorporation and infringement of the rights of Indigenous peoples coupled with various long-term strategies of extinguishment and accommodation that would eventually capture their rights, dissolve the contradiction and legitimize the settlement. (2000, p. 41)

Repeatedly in Indigenous accounts, colonialism is described as a ‘lie’ or ‘myth’ (see for example, Forbes 2008; Waziyatawin 2008). This refers not to its non-existence—since it is undeniably, unrelentingly real—but to the stories it tells and the promises it makes. Examining the covenant of Western ‘development,’ both Jack Forbes (2008) and Basil Johnston (1995) find it yields not progress, but something like what traditional stories describe as cannibal psychosis—*wendigo* or *windigo*—a condition that self-generates out of greed and a fatal failure of empathy. Some of the organizing myths that helped imperialism (such as *terra nullius* or ‘land belonging to no-one,’ and the spiritual, political, and economic status of ‘heathens’) were obvious enough to have been seen as problematic from the start (de las Casas 1967; de Vittoria 1977 (1532); Pope Paul III 1537). Over time, and with the relative normalization of colonial relationships, newer fictions were more subtly troubling. For example, the relative uniformity of Indigenous views of subsistence via the

market economy has changed considerably since it was described, by the British Columbia Chiefs in 1910, as an invitation “to beggary or to continuous wage slavery.” Like Forbes and Johnston, legal scholar James (Sákéj) Youngblood Henderson draws on traditional stories to help parse the problem:

Among some Indigenous peoples, [the cognitive legacy of colonization] is known as the twin of the trickster or imitator, or the ‘anti-trickster.’ Similar to the trickster who embodies Aboriginal thought and dramatizes human behaviour in a world of flux, the ‘anti-trickster’ appears in many guises and is the essence of paradoxical transformation. (2000, p. 58)

This points to a foundational part of the decolonization project: spotting the lie. Part of the process of colonialism was identified by activists such as Steve Biko and Frantz Fanon in African national liberation struggles—the most powerful weapon in the hands of the colonizer is the mind of the colonized. Indeed, it is for this reason that Fanon is an astute observer of post-colonialism and the long reach of colonial violence into the present (Fanon 1965; Gibson 2011; Pithouse 2003). Accordingly, part of the process of resisting colonialism involves ‘truth-telling,’ both as a state-sanctioned activity (in, for example, the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission) and a consciously oppositional one (evidenced by, among many other initiatives, the ‘Take Down the Fort’ campaign in Minnesota). Internally, the effort to understand the length and breadth of falsehood requires that Indigenous Peoples find the elements of tradition overwritten by the inscription of colonialism, like reading a palimpsest. In this case, the underwriting is what many Indigenous authors and activists refer to as their peoples’ ‘original’ teachings or instructions (LaDuke 2006; Wilson 2005; Woody 1998), traditional ontologies and epistemologies orbiting a ‘right relationship’ between the different aspects of creation. It is important, however, not to mirror the failures in the construction of indigeneity by imagining these relations as static, or as romantic expressions of a kinder, simpler, bygone era. Indeed, as we shall argue below, thinking about food sovereignty as a form of decolonization helps to problematize these relations.

### A clash of cosmologies

Capitalism brings with it its own cosmology, its own vision of the order of things (Foucault 1973) which systematically reorders a range of other social relations. Because Indigenous Peoples extend their social relations to include the living cosmos—what Enrique Salmon (2000) refers to as a ‘kincentric’ view—capitalist reordering contorts an

inordinate array of relationships, both human and non-human. The initial state before the great transformation, in which English land was unalienated and unreconstructed into a fictitious commodity, was a world far different from many Indigenous systems. When Karl Polanyi describes the violence of enclosure in *The Great Transformation* (1944), for instance, his description understates the cosmological import of the designation of land as commodity to Indigenous Peoples. Given the kin-like relationship to land, it is more accurate to understand its commodification not as a deepening reification, but as enslavement.

This difference highlights one way in which Indigenous food sovereignty diverges from the current discourse. Absent from the land/homeland refinement to which Stevenhagen points is the Indigenous claim of reciprocal affinity between people and place. Although early Via Campesina documents (like the 1996 *Tlaxcala Declaration*) state that “We are determined to create a rural economy which is based on respect for ourselves and the earth” (La Via Campesina 1996), Indigenous forms of food sovereignty go much further. Put in its simplest terms (and insofar as one is inclined to use the language of rights):<sup>3</sup> just as people have a right to their land, the land has a right to its people. This is the logical terminus of a line of thinking that begins with the idea of the cosmos as a living entity, as Susan Miller explains:

Environmentalism based on this assumption holds that a living, conscious being enjoys health or suffers illness. Ethics demands respect for the needs of such a being. Legal theory following this logic views any human practices that degrade the environment as assaults on a par with physical assaults on humans. Political discourse within this paradigm assumes that the invasions and occupations of Indigenous lands have oppressed not only Indigenous peoples but also an untold number of spirits and the conscious land herself. (2008, pp. 10–11)

Within many Indigenous cosmologies, landscapes (and consequently foodscapes) occupy a simultaneously physical,

<sup>3</sup> This is a live debate in the field of Indigenous Studies and in Indigenous politics generally. The language used earlier in this paper—that of ‘right relationships’—is preferable to a discourse that implies a morally autonomous, modernist self (and further, of a conceptualization of the individual that itself ‘performs’ imperialism). This being said, the vocabulary of rights is well-suited to framing wrongdoing and justifying forward-looking change and/or backward-looking redress, while having the added benefit of being widely recognized and ‘spoken’ as such. Accordingly, the utility of rights in stemming the further colonialist erosion of Indigenous nations and territories has been noted by many Indigenous (and in particular, feminist Indigenous) scholars, while globally human rights have become the *lingua franca* of international Indigenous advocacy. See for example, Gabriel 2011; Kuokkanen 2012. .

spiritual, and social geography. Just as kinship is not restricted to consanguine human beings, sacredness does not merely congeal in particular spaces, but is a quality of the totality of the natural world—including all of the life-forms that provide sustenance and frame trade networks. Thus food can be seen as the most direct manifestation of the relationships between Indigenous Peoples and homelands, and it consequently occupies a central place in traditional thought. As Vincent LaDuke used to state, “I don’t want to hear your philosophy if it doesn’t grow corn” (Silva and Nelson 2005, p. 104).

An intimate, long-term relationship with traditional territories also gives rise to Indigenous systems of governance, social organization, and science. Philosopher Gregory Cajete refers to this as ‘Native science,’ the practice and product of a “lived and storied participation” with the totality of creation, entailing “a wide range of tribal processes of perceiving, thinking, acting, and ‘coming to know’” (2004, p. 46). Examples of ‘Native science’ at work in food systems are among the best documented, having commanded the attention of natural and social scientists for at least the past century and a half.

The process is both simple and complex. Engaging with the land—or rather, with the enspirited and sensate *gestalt* of plants, animals, weather, and geography that is ‘the land’—yields a formidable pool of knowledge. This initial pool is augmented by inspiration, enriched via communication with outsiders, refined through continual trial-and-error, and passed down by cultural transmission (see among others, Berkes 2008). Even traditional Indigenous food storage techniques can be traced to a discourse between humans, spirits, plants, and animals, as Shuswap Elder Mary Thomas points out:

See these scattered pine cone pieces? [...] If you look carefully, you will find a pile of pieces nearby. Underneath the pile will be a cache of pine cones belonging to a squirrel. The little cones will be arranged in rows with the tops pointed downward. This is what my Grandmother taught me. When I was a little girl, I asked my Grandmother why the cones were all pointed downward. “Because,” she told me, “when the winter snows begin to melt, and water drips into the cache, it will run downward off the cones and not wreck the nutmeats inside them.” I asked, “How do the little squirrels know to do that?” Granny said, “They learn like we do, and then they pass their knowledge on to us.” (Greenwood and de Leew 2007, p. 49)

There is, as one might expect, a linguistic component to this scientific endeavour. Okanagan Elders understand that language is place-specific because it is given to the people by the land. Since the knowledge housed in each territory is

unique, a shift in location catalyzes new vocabularies to voice new understandings (Armstrong 1998). Socio-political formations are similarly rooted, as in general, the Indigenous perception of clan and kinship systems amongst other actors in the natural world correlates with human political organization along these same lines (Deloria 2000). Because of this conceptualization of ‘land’ and ‘place,’ removal from, commodification of, or destruction in traditional territories is a simultaneously physical, economic, social, and metaphysical rupture, as well as an emotional and intellectual blow.

### State, food sovereignty, and Indigenous food systems

The violence of this interface is particularly stark in the interaction between capitalist and Indigenous food systems, and it is to these that we now turn, so as better to identify the spaces where food sovereignty struggles might be seen. As Mike Davis (2001) has masterfully demonstrated, capitalism’s search for cheap food was a principle animus for imperialism—indeed, the modern food system’s genealogy can be traced to the needs of the urban hungry in Europe and North America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In that moment of global reconfiguration (McMichael 2004), a hierarchy of food production, processing, and consumption was created for those in the colonial metropole, even as those at the bottom of the global food system suffered. Not for nothing is Davis’ book sub-titled, ‘The Making of the Third World.’

The development project was one that involved violence not only in the Global South, but also within the Global North, against Indigenous Peoples. After the initial waves of extermination, more subtle technologies of governance served to break Indigenous food systems. Forced dependence first on government rations or treaty annuities, then on state-funded commodities programmes and the provisions stocked at the corner store, sickened Indigenous Peoples, their homelands, and the critical link between the two. State technologies of order were designed to smash the Indigenous systems of food production, consumption, celebration, and identity, and to replace them with the civilizing forces of modernity.

In settling the land, colonialism remade history so that newcomer became native, resetting the national clock to achieve a kind of ‘indigeneity without Indians.’ Here, the supplanting of herd animals on the American frontier, swapping colonial for native, is paradigmatic. Plains bison were hunted almost to extinction because, in addition to the fortunes made in buffalo hides, their demise would starve various Indian nations onto reservations while simultaneously making way for a preferred (and now iconic) food system: the American cattle ranch (Henninger-Voss 2002;



Wooster 1988). (Ironically, today bison is back on the mainstream menu, as a healthier—and much pricier—alternative to beef.) A similar logic held for food plants. In the case of plants, though, colonial techniques and crops rapidly erased thousands of years of prior cultivation because Indigenous subsistence activity was barely recognized, rather than actively targeted. Forests, coastlines, steppes, and deserts were cultivated systems, even if governments could not see the human activity therein as ‘agriculture’ (Scott 1998).

Colonial interference manifests itself not only in the production of food, but also in its preparation and consumption, and represents a concerted effort at de-skilling in both realms. Because knowledge of food is taught, just as relationships with food are socialized, the decline of conduits for the transmission of traditional knowledge (augmented by the brutal instruction of residential schools) helped to secure a place for the colonial at the Indigenous dinner table. Through adoption of a Westernized diet, the colonial supplants the traditional in the most literal sense, with non-nutrient-dense, industrial foods deculturating people from the inside out. This displacement is so pervasive that many foods now seen as traditional—including the near-ubiquitous bannock or frybread—are actually creative reactions to the imposition of colonial provisions. Fried bannock has become a staple as far north as Baffin Island (a landmass that has certainly never sported fields of wheat), where it has picked up the rather appropriate Anglo name, ‘Eskimo donuts.’<sup>4</sup> Since these kinds of foods promote neither the health of the people nor that of the land, and additionally fail to reinforce the relationship between the two, they cannot qualify as ‘traditional foods’ in the sense asserted by Indigenous groups pursuing food sovereignty. Their incorporation into “local systems of meaning and value” is dangerous, in fact, since it is in this cultured setting that they most thoroughly displace traditional foods and food practices (Searles 2002, p. 56).

European colonization of North America—or more specifically efforts at pacifying and assimilating the ‘natives’ and nurturing the national economy—attacked Indigenous women’s roles, status, and knowledge vis-à-vis food in quite particular ways. Not without exception, the gendered division of labour in Indigenous societies across North America saw men responsible for hunting and fishing, and women for the complementary task of gathering plant foods (and often eggs, shellfish, seaweed, and other nutritive sources), as well

as the processing of most foods for storage, consumption, or exchange. Accordingly, women held immense and sophisticated knowledge about the harvesting, use, stewardship (for sustainable gathering over lifetimes), and promotion of medicinal and nutritive plants.

Women’s documented land management practices included tending wild and cultivated plots to control competition between species; transplanting cultivars; coppicing and selective harvesting to increase yield; creating micro-environments at various elevations or latitudes/longitudes; promoting advantageous patterns of seed dispersal; cross-breeding to encourage particular characteristics; and manipulating soil quality (Turner 2003). This highly specialized knowledge has led M. Kat Anderson (2005) to describe Indigenous women as the ethnobotanists of their societies. Further, women held and transmitted attitudes, teachings, and strategies around food resources that encouraged conservation of and respect for the botanical elements of creation, preventing resource depletion through over- or careless harvesting.

With colonization an early, compulsory shift from hunting to farming saw men assume the principal role in transformed practices of cultivation and harvesting, displacing women as the colonial patriarchy found its first foothold in the fields and gardens of Indigenous Peoples (see among others, Holly 1990). It is not without cause that ethnobotanist Nancy Turner refers to the plough as, “that sharp-footed instrument of conversion” (2005, p. 34). Further, forced relocation onto marginal reservation lands, laws restricting movement in general, and enclosure of the land base made women’s knowledge of plants impractical, since harvesting areas were rendered inaccessible or destroyed outright. It also, out of simple necessity or the uptake of a commodifying attitude alongside the adoption of European-style agriculture, circumvented women’s teachings around conservation of and respect for food plants. The imposition of European values via church or state policy resulted in a drastic change in women’s activities and roles—particularly their productive or provisioning status relative to men—in order that they conform to ‘proper’ societal norms. Residential schools, alone, did much to break the linguistic and affective bond between grandmothers and granddaughters, fracturing the intergenerational transmission of women’s knowledge. And finally, the rapidly industrializing colonies had a near-insatiable need for female bodies to populate the production line at canneries and in processing plants; to undertake piece work; and to help bring in commercial harvests on private farms. Fordism, needless to say, is incompatible with the maintenance of Indigenous women’s vast and complex traditional knowledge around food.

The forced agrarian or industrial transition in Indigenous economies is worth flagging for another reason: several

<sup>4</sup> Adding insult to injury, governmental publications (such as *Eating Well with Canada’s Food Guide - First Nations, Inuit and Métis*) list bannock as a traditional food, an example of “how [Indigenous] people got, and continue to get, nutrients found in milk products” (and which must now be replaced by milk products as prophylaxis against the premature mortality and morbidity stemming from the colonial dietary shift) (Health Canada 2007, p. 3).

theorists trace the contemporary marginalization of Indigenous women within their own communities and nations to the deliberate erosion of Indigenous men's productive activity on the land—a socially consequential disconnect that contemporary colonial policies exacerbate (Fernandez 2003; Kidwell 1994; Medicine 1991). If nothing else, these claims highlight the centrality of sustenance, autonomy in its apprehension, and the complex of responsibilities and relationships that orbit it, to traditional societies. Indeed, an argument can be made that the result of food systems dependency in North American Indigenous communities has been profound anomie. Yet while food sovereignty has begun to appear on Indigenous anti-colonial agendas, an explicit link to regaining or redeveloping women's traditional knowledge and provisioning role is rare. This lacuna may originate in the fact that many Indigenous activists are reticent to split the struggle for decolonization along gender lines, framing the resistance of cultural hegemony as necessarily national—and united—in character (Trask 1993). This postponement of gender politics, and the circumscription of the geography of sovereignty as necessarily outside relations of gender, has been attempted by other struggles within the US, to their detriment (Matthews 1998; Pulido 2006). But there is nothing necessary about this circumscription. As the Zapatista Subcomandante Esther put it in 2003,

Indigenous and campesino women sisters, we want to tell you to organize to fight against the neoliberalism that humiliates us, that exploits us, and that wants us to disappear as Indigenous women, as peasant women, and as women. ...[also] the rich man tries to humiliate us, but also the man who is not rich, who is poor like our husbands, our brothers, our fathers, our sons, our companions in the struggle, and those who work with us and are organized with us. So we say clearly that when women demand respect, we demand it not only from the neoliberals, but also from those who struggle against neoliberalism and say they are revolutionaries but in the home are like Bush.

### Food sovereignty as decolonization

Indigenous food sovereignty is about much more than agricultural practice. Indigenous Peoples engaged in traditional food systems are not just farmers, they are hunters, gatherers, and fishers; they comb the beach, reap the hive, shepherd the flock, harvest on and in the water, and tend the forest as well as the field. Perhaps more importantly, in a range of civilizations these food-generating practices are also accompanied by environmental maintenance activities deeply embedded in a cultural ecology (Moran and Ostrom

2005). That cultural ecology means that Indigenous food sovereignty is about more than the familiar bundle of rights that attach to production and consumption. Here, a 'right to define agricultural policy' is indistinguishable from a right to *be* Indigenous, in any substantive sense of the term. Upon being told there was no word that translates directly as 'health,' medical anthropologist Naomi Adelson was given the closest Cree equivalent, *miyupimaatisiium*, or 'being alive well.' For the Whapmagoostui Cree, among whom Adelson was working, *miyupimaatisiium* entails the ability to hunt, to have shelter, to eat *iyimiichim* ('bush food,' or "food that was meant for the Cree"), and to engage in other traditional land-based activities (2000, p. 103). This makes 'being alive well' about food sovereignty, and food sovereignty about land, identity, and dissent—and not just for the Cree.

In traditional territories all over the world, cultural, environmental, governance, and health-related initiatives are underway that dovetail with the resurrection of traditional foods. In northern Minnesota, the White Earth Anishnaabeg (Ojibway/Chippewa) are focusing their efforts on 'relocating' or 'relocalizing' the Indigenous economy by achieving sovereignty in both food and energy, seeing improvements in different forms of consumption as collectively relevant to the future of the community. A key food at White Earth is *manoomin* (wild rice, *Zizania palustris*), which is still harvested traditionally by many community members: timed using the lunar calendar, gathered (and simultaneously re-seeded) using non-intrusive implements and canoes, and parched and roasted over wood fires. Wild rice, technically the seed of an aquatic grass, is the only native North American grain, and Minnesota is one 'heart' of its biodiversity.<sup>5</sup> Different varieties grow on individual lakes on the reservation, ripening at different times, and following the harvests many Anishnaabe can earn a season's living from the surplus. This is particularly significant in a community with one of the lowest per capita incomes in the state. Winona LaDuke, a well-known member of the community, writes that White Earth came to a crossroads: "instead of trying to make up some economy that makes no sense to us at all, we decided to develop something that we're good at. And we're good at ricing, maple sugaring, hunting, farming" (Silva and Nelson 2005, p. 103).

Building an economy based around sustainable agriculture has presented challenges. Over the past decades, difficulties have ranged over grounds of intellectual property, commodity prices, land title, real estate swindles,

<sup>5</sup> Manoomin was also a key staple of the traditional food systems and economies of many Anishnaabeg whose communities lie to the north of Minnesota, in Ontario and Manitoba (A. Mills, personal communication, 24 October 2013).

corruption, environmental damage, genetic contamination, and energy dependency. The tactics employed in asserting food sovereignty have been equally broad and frequently innovative, dealing with an array of oppositional forces (including state entities, private corporations, research institutions, non-governmental organizations, special interest groups, and even individual citizens).

Industrial rice producers have attempted to legally redefine the term ‘wild’ for the purposes of domestic labelling, allowing cultivated varieties to qualify. Rice packages have been decked with images of Indians in canoes and given Ojibway brand-names, an obvious attempt to cash in on the consumer’s choice to purchase an Indigenous product—recalling that La Via Campesina’s definition of food sovereignty includes “the right of consumers to be able to decide what they consume, and how and by whom it is produced.” The Anishnaabeg have fought (and won) this battle in the state court and now—in the community at least, and not without a smile—the industrial *Zizania* is referred to as ‘tame rice.’

In order to escape the trap of declining terms of trade, the Indigenous harvesters sell their wild rice to a local, Anishnaabe purchasing company, which is able to pay a fair price because it pools the individual hauls and then processes and sells the product itself. Affordability and access are also safeguarded for non-harvesters. White Earth community members who do not ‘rice’ themselves trade with those who do, and most families will consume between one and two hundred pounds of the grain annually.

A legal battle with USDA-funded university labs yielded another victory: protection from genetic cross-contamination after the *Zizania* genome was mapped in 2001, and the introduction of GM-varieties of rice into local test plots became a possibility (LaDuke 2008). In this case, the struggle both produced and benefitted from new alliances, as Minnesotans fought to protect their official state grain alongside the Anishnaabeg who fought to protect a sacred food (Onawa 2010). White Earth itself has a ban on genetically modified seeds (Robertson 2005). In terms of reclaiming alienated territory, in addition to fighting treaty violations through legal channels, the White Earth Land Recovery Project has adopted a strategy of purchasing real estate outright, as parcels of land go on the market. Because the need to consolidate and protect traditional territories is pressing, these purchases occur despite the fact that the community should not have to buy land that its members often surrendered unfairly, and in some cases even unknowingly (LaDuke 2005).

There is evidence that Indigenous trade in, customary use of, and sustainable harvesting practices around wild rice has maintained or even expanded the geographical distribution of the grain (Jenks 1901), a final assessment being problematic because the planting of wild rice outside

of its natural habitat has rendered ‘historically natural’ and ‘human-seeded’ stands difficult to distinguish (Vennum 1988). The Anishnaabeg themselves, though, show no such ambivalence about their impact. Chief Chieg Nio’pet recounts that particular lakes never housed wild rice until his people began to frequent them; similarly, when tribal access to other lakes was foreclosed by treaty, formerly robust wild rice stands dwindled along those shores (Emma Vizenor, Tribal Chairwoman of White Earth Nation, quoted in MDNR 2008, p. 5).

Tremendous progress has been made across the spectrum of customary foods and the resurrection of traditional food systems. Elsewhere on the reservation, several acres of flint corn are used to produce hominy, another staple starch. Buffalo, fish, and deer provide locally sourced and culturally appropriate proteins. Gardening and foraging yield important fruits and vegetables, while sugarbushing provides maple syrup and other products. Food-related projects target the physical health and cultural connectedness of present generations, and include a lunch programme for elementary school kids, and the scheduled provision of customary foods to community Elders and families with diabetic members (LaDuke 2005). None of the plant foods growing in community gardens, in greenhouses, or in fields on the reservation receive industrial inputs, rely on petroleum, or demand extensive irrigation. They merely require tending and ceremony, which are often indistinguishable. All harvests in White Earth are ‘feasted.’ In fact, anthropologists commented that the Anishnaabeg here would “never become civilized because [they] enjoyed [their] harvest too much” (Van Gelder 2008). Yet it is precisely this refusal to view foods as spiritually inert, or the cultivation of food as a series of impersonal impositions and extractions, that makes the assertion of Indigenous food sovereignty in White Earth decolonizing in process as well as outcome.

Efforts to foster food sovereignty tend to be supported or suppressed in direct relation to the level of discomfort they create for governments, who see in (even limited) Indigenous self-determination a threat to national unity, territorial integrity, economic prosperity, and legitimate jurisdiction. It seems that Indigenous land, treaty, and human rights have always shadowed food. In Canada, Indigenous Peoples’ alimentary resources have been tethered politically to the protection of Canadian sovereignty and economically to the market interests of Canadian producers, consumers, and even hobbyists.<sup>6</sup> The first Supreme Court case to test a newly forged Canadian constitutional recognition of Indigenous self-determination, for example, was *R. v. Sparrow* (1990),

<sup>6</sup> Non-Indigenous fishermen and hunters invariably resist any assertion that boils down to a non-universal right to hunt or fish out-of-season.

in which a member of the Musqueam band asserted his *inherent* right to fish against a charge that he had overstepped the limitations of a ministry-issued license. The Court ruled that while such a right did exist it could be justifiably “infringed upon” by the Canadian government. The upshot of this landmark decision has been an enduring attempt to sharply limit hunting and fishing to the kinds and extents of activities in which Indigenous nations were engaged at the time of contact, and to which they can demonstrate an unbroken (and outsider-comprehensible) commitment across the intervening years.

Even if food initiatives can surmount legal barricades, the usurpation and ecological devastation of Indigenous homelands means that, in many cases, the clock cannot simply be turned back. Those territories that have not been irreversibly settled are still literally contaminated by modern industrial capitalism. The Kanien’kehá:ka (Mohawks) of Akwesasne, though occupying at least a portion of their original homelands, are unable to return to their traditional diet and active, river-based livelihoods because industrial effluents contaminate the waters and fish of the *Kaniatarowanenneh* (St. Lawrence River). Similarly, the Inuit and Dené—who have experienced some of the worst declines in health metrics as a result of the highly processed Western foods flown into their remote communities—are now witnessing a massive shift in their foodscapes as climate change reshapes the Arctic from top to bottom. And like the Kanien’kehá:ka, their traditional foods are increasingly toxic. Scientists have traced the bioaccumulation of heavy metals in the fatty tissue of Arctic food animals to industrial activity along the *Kaniatarowanenneh*. The reintroduction of a traditional Indigenous diet is therefore an environment-mediated and increasingly challenging undertaking, in which no nation can carve out a bounded, sheltered space.

Further, threats to Indigenous food sovereignty fuelled by industrial agricultural expansion and ‘innovation’ create tension between the resurrection and the protection of traditional foods and food systems. In some cases Indigenous Peoples are forced to choose between the two, compromise both, or settle for more modest gains. These threats, fuelled by neoliberal economic globalization, include rigid patent laws and accompanying private claims on traditional knowledge; labelling conventions that favour non-Indigenous varieties of traditional foods; and pollen drift from genetically modified crops. The Yellow Medicine River Dakota, for example, keep a stock of pure ‘Indian’ seed corn dormant, in storage, because they know that putting it in the ground will result in rapid, unpreventable genetic contamination from neighbouring industrial croplands—or what Wicanhpi Iyotan Win refers to as “[the] fake cattle feed right next door and just upwind” (2010, p. 9). The experience of the Maya with Novartis’

StarLink and Monsanto’s *Bacillus thuringiensis* (BT) transgenic maize provides ample justification for such caution.

## Conclusion

The discussion above points to a key insight with respect to food sovereignty: just as development is both project and process (McMichael 2008), food sovereignty is informed by a vision of democratized engagement in the food system but is also a form of theoretically-informed practice. Far from being a static end-point to which tactics need to be oriented—which is hard when the restitution of that goal is rendered impossible by capitalism’s toxins—food sovereignty is also a day-to-day mode of resistance informed by the demands, in this case, of a long history of anticolonial struggle.

One does not need to have an overly romantic view of Indigenous communities’ philosophies to make this argument. It is clear that capitalism has a cosmology, and that its excesses map well onto the basic framework of food sovereignty: it involves land alienation, specific gender roles in which women bear a disproportionate weight, and the commodification of nature and genetic resources. In some Indigenous philosophies gender distinctions persist, and this is an important knot that we are keen to flag. Further, contemporary Indigenous governments can (and do) assert patriarchal perversions of tradition, or what Australian Indigenous women refer to as “bullshit traditional law” (Lucashenko 1996). Indigenous women have voiced their intention to participate in both the interrogation and revitalization of tradition, and to have a just say in the determination of which contemporary activities properly express customary practices and values (Fernandez 2003; LaRocque 1996; Monture-Angus 1995; Udel 2001). Nonetheless, understanding food sovereignty as an anti-colonial struggle—and a struggle not merely for the levers of capitalist food policy but for the space to imagine social relations differently—is in keeping with the deepest spirit of food sovereignty. This is not merely a use of food sovereignty’s plasticity, stretching the definition to breaking point. It opens up many more fronts on which to fight—ones that go to the heart of modern capitalist agriculture. Such usage is fully consonant with the many and diverse efforts that have fundamentally estranged ‘food sovereignty’ from its putative origins in a Mexican governmental programme (as Fig. 1 illustrated, above).

Decolonization is the unfinished business of Indigenous resistance. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith notes,

To acquiesce is to lose ourselves entirely and implicitly agree with all that has been said about us.



To resist is to retrench in the margins, retrieve what we were and remake ourselves. The past, our stories local and global, the present, our communities, cultures, languages, and social practices—all may be spaces of marginalization, but they have also become spaces of resistance and hope. (1999, p. 4)

(Re)asserting Indigenous food sovereignty is thus a part of the long, unbroken historical transit of anti-colonialism in Settler states. This struggle implicates non-Indigenous people, of course, if for no other reason than because it challenges us to make good on our longstanding legal and intellectual concern for freedom and agency. It also calls attention to the tremendous economic and ecological debt owed Indigenous Peoples, which remains unacknowledged (never mind unpaid). Ostensibly progressive solutions are not always a step forward, either. For example, there is an unrecognized conflict in the recent drive toward the local and sustainable, since in many cases, farmers—even small farmers and community gardeners—are sowing Indigenous Peoples' territories. Many (if not most) of these territories have an unceded or contested status. In the case of the 100-mile diet, in North America we are invariably talking about a hundred miles of someone else's homelands. In order to avoid accusations of recolonization, attention to local food systems has to include concern for Indigenous access to traditional foods. Managing this, in fact, could swing the project right around, to become a pointedly decolonizing activity that goes beyond the ambit of Indigenous sovereignty, offering instead a much richer understanding of the possibility of connection to one another, to nature, and to food. It is through Hegelian engagements like these that the definition of food sovereignty is moved forward.

The recognition of the radical potential of food sovereignty as a decolonizing activity points to a deeper vein of future research. Capitalism's mode of political engagement—liberal pluralism—may itself be incompatible with food sovereignty. We have argued that there is a cosmological clash between a deep understanding of what food sovereignty means in practice for Indigenous peoples, and the kinds of practices of modern liberal democratic capitalist states (Agarwal 2014). The clash indicts liberal democracy itself, suggesting that its mechanisms for dealing with incompatible human values is far from neutral, that its resolutions are fixes for the values of capitalism. If our argument is correct, then upcoming research around food sovereignty might profitably engage with modes of political engagement that are democratic *without being liberal*. Such examples do exist (Holt-Giménez 2006; Pithouse 2006), and their articulation with food sovereignty is an area for future practical, and theoretical, exploration.

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