INDIGENOUS FOOD SOVEREIGNTY, RENEWAL, AND US SETTLER COLONIALISM

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Introduction

Indigenous peoples often embrace different concepts of food sovereignty to frame their ongoing efforts to achieve self-determination and justice. Yet concepts of food sovereignty can come across as so many impossible ideals of community food self-sufficiency and cultural autonomy. I will suggest in this essay that for some North American Indigenous peoples, food sovereignty movements are not really based on such ideals, even through they invoke concepts of cultural revitalization and political sovereignty in relation to food. Instead, food sovereignty should be seen as at least in part as a strategic process of Indigenous resurgence that negotiates structures of settler colonialism that erase what I will call the ecological value of certain foods for Indigenous peoples.

The strategic process involves prioritizing certain foods for renewal. These foods can motivate Indigenous collective capacities to address multiple health, cultural, educational, and political issues associated with settler-colonial erasure. To understand this concept of food sovereignty, it is critical to be able to connect settler colonialism with the ecological value of food. I will begin by discussing criticisms of food sovereignty based on concerns that it represents impractical ideals, before moving on to cover the ideas of the ecological value of food, settler colonialism, and food sovereignty as a strategic process.

Food sovereignty and food self-sufficiency

There are many concepts of food sovereignty that express diverse themes about the relationship between communities and food systems. Often, concepts of food sovereignty emphasize food-production systems characterized by community food self-sufficiency or cultural autonomy in relation to food. These concepts refer to community-based control over the major dimensions of food production, distribution, and consumption, and the recycling or disposal of food refuse, from cultural customs to political institutions. The Detroit Food Justice Task Force, for example, describes food sovereignty as "liberating land...for the production of food for communities," "hosting collective meals in our communities as a way of connecting people across generations and cultural backgrounds," and "forging new models of collective control of land and waterways" (Detroit Food Justice Task Force 2014). The Indigenous Circle of the People's Food Policy Project in Canada describes food sovereignty as embodying the idea of "food as sacred, part of the web of relationships with the natural world that define culture and community" (People's Food Policy Project 2014). The International Institute for Developmental claims that realizing food sovereignty involves "reclaiming autonomous food systems" (Pinheiro 2009).

Ideas of food self-sufficiency and cultural autonomy appear across the variety of sovereign ideas that are referenced through the several origins of concepts of food sovereignty cited by scholars. Some scholars argue the origin of food sovereignty in the World Food Summit. LVG defined food sovereignty as the "right of each nation to maintain and develop their own capacity to produce foods that are crucial to national and community food security, respecting cultural diversity and diversity of production methods" (cit in Hopes 2014: 12). Other scholars suggest that food sovereignty originated in earlier instances, such as the food sovereignty movement in Mexico's 1983 National Food Program that used the concept as a form of national control, as opposed to the control of local communities, over the food system (Edelman 2014).

Some scholars are concerned that food sovereignty suggests so many unreasonable or impossible ideals of a community's complete control over its own food system. Bernstein (2014), for example, argues that food sovereignty discourses invoke emblematic instances of the virtues of peasant/small-scale/family farming as capital's other. The two are often connected, so that the individual peasant farm (and community) exemplifies the way forward to save the planet, to feed its population in socially more equitable and ecologically more sustainable ways.

The challenge posed by Bernstein, as I read the essay, is that the viability of some concepts of food sovereignty rests on whether we can claim that communities can live up to this ideal. But this ideal is of course rather problematic. Many communities cannot extricate themselves from dependency on trade or aid stemming from globalized food systems. Nor is it clear whether farming based on peasant "virtues" can provide sufficient food quality and quantity for either feeding local communities or trading with other local communities.

Thompson (2015) discusses how if food sovereignty refers to the idea of a nation feeding its entire population, there will be "some degree of skepticism about food sovereignty among the policy specialists that have focused on getting nutritionally adequate diets to poor people for the last fifty years" (75). Though Thompson also suggests that:

the idea points to the way entire rural communities, local cultures, and longstanding social relations are brought together through the production, preparation, and consumption of food...the continuance of community depends upon people to care for one another...The survival and maintenance of these food practices is critical to the sustainability of these communities in every sense of the word.

For Thompson, concepts of food sovereignty are useful for cultural continuity and identity, but they are too idealistic for dealing with the challenges of food security in the context of globalization.

Other scholars emphasize that many local communities do not embody enough of the values and tastes associated with the food self-sufficiency and cultural autonomy aspects of food sovereignty. For example, some communities have developed tastes for and dependencies on nonlocal foods, so that today it is incorrect to suggest that there is a resounding disdain for foreign foods.
by some communities that embrace food sovereignty (Steckley 2015). Moreover, food sovereignty and local agrarian reform movements often rely on problematic, whether ethnocentric or "traditional" class and gender categorizations that are oppressive for some community members (Bernstein 2010; Minkoff-Zern 2013; Park et al. 2015). There are also concerns raised that certain ideals of local food fail to consider the responsibilities that different sovereigns and groups have to aid and trade equitably with one another (Navin 2014).

Much of the literature just described addresses the uses of food sovereignty by groups outside of Northern American/US-sphere Indigenous contexts. Though the exact term "food sovereignty" in English was rarely used in this region until recently, we should consider that North American Indigenous peoples, going back several hundred years, were using English-language concepts and frames associated with concepts of inherent sovereignty, self-determination, cultural integrity, subsistence harvesting, and treaty rights as ways of justifying their own control over foods that matter culturally, economically, and nutritionally. For example, in the process of treaty-making in the 19th century, many Indigenous peoples ensured their retention of rights to continue harvesting foods in the territories they ceded to the US. Well over a century after signing these treaties, the same Indigenous groups continue to protect and exercise these rights, often working within the US court system and co-management arrangements with the US federal and state governments (Brown 1994; Nepos 2002; Weaver 1996; Wilkinson 2005).

As a Potawatomi scholar-activist, I began to wonder whether Indigenous North American food sovereignties were just so many ideals with little practical value for true change and transformation of our food systems. Upon further reflection, I realized that these concerns were not taking into account how Indigenous peoples often understand the value of food that uses of food sovereignty seek to invoke. Moreover, the concerns did not seem to address a particular form of oppression that many Indigenous peoples face in North America, namely settler colonialism. In the rest of this essay, I will connect these missing pieces in order to suggest that concepts of food sovereignty need not always be ideals, but may be strategic processes for negotiating structures of settler colonialism that promote Indigenous resurgence.

The hub-like or ecological value of food

North American Indigenous peoples living in the US settler sphere are visible actors addressing the impacts of colonialism on the food systems that affect them. Food systems are complex chains of food production, distribution, consumption, and the recirculation of refuse. Indigenous organizations, such as the Indigenous Environmental Network and Honor the Earth, are at the forefront of many food debates, such as the debate over the ethics of genetically modified organisms. Through organizations such as the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission (GLIFWC) and the Northwest Indian Fish Commission (NWIFC), Tribes and First Nations in North America have resisted US and Canadian attempts to deny Indigenous persons their rights to harvest in treaty areas. Various Indigenous peoples in North America have formed large networks and cooperative organizations, such as the Intertribal Agriculture Council, to protect native seeds, to cultivate supply chains separate from capture by powerful corporations, and to protect subsistence and sacred foods from pollution and other forms of ecological degradation. Indigenous peoples have sought to redefine the connections among nutrition, colonialism, and conditions such as diabetes and hypertension that affect Indigenous peoples disproportionately (Annette et al. 2002; Walters and Simoni 2002). In many of these anti-colonial food movements, Indigenous peoples claim that the issues they face are concerns associated with food that are not reducible to the taste, quantity, or nutrient content of food. Consider the following examples.

Renewing relatives

Speaking on the relation between treaty rights and mining, genetic modification, and other threats to wild rice agriculture, Norman Deschampe, former Minnesota Chippewa Tribal President, said:

"We are of the opinion that the wild rice rights assured by treaty acrere not only to individual grains of rice, but to the very essence of the resource. We were not promised just any wild rice; that promise could be kept by delivering sacks of grain to our members each year. We were promised the rice that grew in the waters of our people, and all the value that rice holds."

(Andrew et al. 2009: 3)

Here, Deschampe references the value of the rice connected to a particular kind of habitat, with intrinsic value to Ojibwe people that cannot be replaced by importing rice from somewhere else.

In Alaska, extraction industries, especially oil and gas, pose threats to many foods that Indigenous communities depend on. In an article on the threat of oil drilling to the whaling traditions of a particular Alaska Native village, Edward Itta, former mayor of that village, describes whaling as not merely important for distribution of nutrition:

"No one person can catch a whale. It takes a whole community. Because of the whale, we share, we are very close, we come together. Without it, our way of life — what we pass on to our kids and grandkids — would be diminished."

(Birger 2012)

Again, we see reference to a value of food that extends beyond its taste and nutrient content. For communities with comprehensive practices associated with particular foods, immediate threats to these foods are also threats to the fabric of the communities.

In another case, involving threats from the oil industry to Indigenous peoples in the Yukon Territory, Norma Kassi says of her Gwich'in community:

"We cannot, however, simply change our diet. If we were to change suddenly and start eating store-bought foods more, then disease would increase and our rate of death would be higher, because it would be too rapid a change, too much of a shock to our systems."

(Kassi 1996: 30)

For Kassi, while adaptation is always possible, food nonetheless has a special value that makes certain rapid adaptations harmful for communities.

Winona LaDuke, writing on the restoration of sturgeon, which figures importantly as part of her Ojibwe community's culture and subsistence, writes about the words of a fellow tribal member: "As Holkham surmises... 'We are lucky that [sturgeon] are coming back to White Earth. The fish themselves never knew that invisible border of the US, Canada, or any of the counties' (or any other jurisdictions)." LaDuke writes, "Maybe the fish will help a diverse set of people work together to make something right. "The fish help us remember all of those relations, and in their own way help us recover ourselves" (LaDuke 1999: 41–42). Sturgeon has the type of value that can serve the collective renewal of Ojibwe people — a complex form of remembering that is suitable for today's challenges.
Elizabeth Hoover’s work, describing issues with pollution and fish, quotes Haudenosaunee community leader Henry Luckers on the language and culture of tying knots, the continuation of which is being challenged as the fishery is affected by pollution:

People forget, in their own culture, what you call the knot that you tie in a net. And so, a whole section of your language and culture is lost because no one is tying those nets anymore. The interrelation between men and women, when they tied nets, the relationship between adults or elders and young people, as they tied nets together, the stories ... that whole social infrastructure that was around the fabrication of that net disappeared.

(Hoover 2013:5)

Luckers focuses heavily on the value of fish in relation to the intergenerational connections that keep communities vibrant and self-supporting.

The Dine Policy Institute recently put out a report on food sovereignty in the Navajo Nation. The report states:

In relation to cultivated plants, it is said that the Holy People shared with the Dine people the teachings of how to plant, nurture, prepare, eat and store our sacred cultivated crops, such as corn. The importance of these teachings to our well-being was made clear in that the Holy People shared that we would be safe and healthy until the day that we forgot our seeds, our farms, and our agriculture. It was said that when we forgot these things, we would be afflicted by disease and hardship again, which is what some elders point to as the onset of diabetes, obesity and other ills facing Dine people today.

(Dine Policy Institute 2014:38)

The value of sacred crops serves as an indicator of people’s collective health and well-being today according to the report.

In these examples, Indigenous persons are articulating a distinct value for food that is not reducible to scientifically assessable nutritional qualities or the quantities of food produced by or administered to particular populations. For the voices just featured, food production, labor, preparation, consumption, and disposal are woven tightly with land tenure, a community’s way of life, reciprocal gift giving and life sustenance, connecting people in a community, and respect for nonhuman life. In these cases, food’s value is that it serves as a type of hub. For food can somehow bring together, or convene, many of the relationships required for people to live well and make plans for the future. The hub-like value of certain foods, such as whale or sturgeon, allows them to convene biological, environmental, cultural, social, economic, political, and spiritual aspects of communities. While social institutions such as harvesting groups, ceremonies, and treaty organizations help to distribute goods associated with many of the foods described above, from nutrition to cultural preference fulfillment, the Indigenous persons quoted earlier believe that these social institutions would not be able to thrive if another food were substituted too quickly.

Food’s value is hub-like, in the sense of a centrifugal force pulling certain people, nonhumans, and ecosystems together in ways that promote collective action. More generally, food serves as a particular kind of motivator of the collective capacities of particular Indigenous peoples to cultivate and tend, produce, distribute, and consume their own foods, to re-circulate refuse, and to acquire trusted foods and ingredients from other populations. The concept of collective capacities aims to describe an ecology, i.e., an ecological system, of interacting humans, nonhuman beings (animals, plants, etc.), entities (spiritual, inanimate, etc.), and landscapes (climate regions, boreal

zones, etc.) that are conceptualized and operate purposefully to facilitate a collective’s range of adaptation options to metascale forces. Metascale forces refer to disruptions and perturbations to systems that require those systems to adapt and adjust. They may be associated with changes in rainfall patterns (i.e., climate change) or with invasions by other populations brought about through global forces (e.g., the gold rushes and the fur trade). So, they can be either anthropogenic or based on complex earth systems over which humans exercise little influence. Like most conceptions of ecology (including agroecology), today, I use the term ecology not to designate a system always seeking to return to a particular equilibrium. Rather, ecology refers to systems that are organized in ways that reflect perspectives on more or less suitable ranges of adaptations to various metascale forces that have acted over time (Whyte 2015).

We can understand an ecology as another way of describing a people’s homeland. For food to express its role as a hub-like value; then, the entire ecology of the place where human communities live, work, worship, and play has to have certain aquatic, terrestrial, and climatic conditions in which humans are actively engaged socially, culturally, economically, and politically. In this sense, I will refer to the hub-like value of food as an ecological value. The ecological value of certain foods involves the ways in which those foods are irreplaceable elements of a community’s range of collective capacities to adapt to change. That is, in many cases food systems have evolved so that they are resilient to many of the challenges they have faced over time. But newer challenges that fall outside that range, especially intervention of other human groups, may interfere with, perturb, or degrade the ability of a system to provide valued aspects of a collective’s quality of life, such as cultural integrity, freedom, food security, or public health, among others. A people’s homeland is a place where they can participate in an ecology that is conducive to a range of options for adaptation.

Food injustice and settler colonialism

To understand some of the senses of Indigenous food sovereignty with which I am concerned here, we first have to understand how a particular form of colonialism in North America specifically targets the ecological, or homeland, value of food. The ecological value of food is connected to the range of adaptation options to local and metascale forces that groups have. Settler colonialism is a structure of oppression that wrongfully interferes with Indigenous capacities to maintain an adaptive capacity in their homelands. I will discuss how the structure of interference is a settlement-driven homeland-inscription process that motivates settler populations to erase Indigenous homelands, replacing them with their own homelands and futurity. In this sense, settler colonialization is a structured process of erasing another population’s range of adaptation options. My brief description in this section only touches on some of the themes from the diverse literature on settler colonialism (Lefevre 2015). My own interpretations of settler colonialism draw from literatures in Indigenous studies, feminism, environmental and climate justice, and education, some of which have developed concepts of settler colonialism as a structure of oppression before.

“settler colonialism” became coined academically in more recent times (Calhoun et al. 2007; Goeman and Denetdale 2009; Grinde and Johansen 1995; LaDuke 1993; Tuck and Garsambide-Fernández 2013; Walker et al. 2013; Whyte 2015).

Settlers come to permanently inscribe— that is, inscribe or physically engrav— a homeland for themselves into Indigenous ecologies or homelands. While part of the motivation for settlement involves capitalist extraction of resources to the place settlers originate from and labor exploitation of Indigenous populations, the ultimate desire is to create a homeland in the “new” territory so that the settlers will never have to return permanently. Making a homeland is a process of inscription, that is, it is an ecological endeavor in the sense in which I have been using the
concept of ecology. A territory will only emerge as a settler homeland if the origin, religious and cultural narratives, social ways of life, and political and economic systems (e.g., property) are physically incised and engraved into the waters, soils, air, and other environmental dimensions of the landscape. Settler ecologies are inscribed so that settlers can activate their own cultural, economic, and political aspirations and collective capacities. In this sense, waves of settlement seek to embed ecologies required for their own collective capacities to flourish in the landscapes they seek to occupy permanently.

As discussed earlier, the ecologies on which Indigenous collective capacities are based have their own origin, religious and cultural narratives, societal ways of life, and political and economic systems. For settlers, Indigenous ecologies can impede settler tactics to establish the legitimacy of their homelands, including settlers’ claims to have tide to land, morally praiseworthy religious missions, and exclusive political and cultural sovereignty. So as to eradicate any markers or physical obstacles challenging their legitimacy, settlers seek to erase the ecologies required for Indigenous capacity to adapt to change.

Settlement, then, actively erases Indigenous peoples’ collective capacities as a means of inscribing settler ecologies into Indigenous homelands. In this way, settlers actually seek to eliminate themselves as settlers. Settlers seek to render the territory their homeland in every dimension – cultural, social, economic, political, and so on. Settlers engage in a process, then, that seeks to make their ecologies permanent and inevitable. They do so in a number of ways, from creating origin stories and myths that seek to justify their arrival and development of the land (e.g., “the pilgrims”) to forming their own politics, from national governments to municipal and subnational governments, that serve to erode the homeland–inscription process through laws, policies, and military and economic force.

In the US and Canada, settler inscription is a process of commodification and reclassification that embeds settler ecologies that can create physical, cultural, and social well-being in our societies. Food sovereignty represents a particular strategy for how to live under this structure of oppression that prioritizes certain foods for renewal.

Consider, for example, Anishinaabek food sovereignty in relation to wild rice in the Great Lakes region in North America. Anishinaabe have a complex heritage of adaptive, seasonal, group activities of tending, cultivating, gathering, harvesting, processing, distributing, storing, and consuming diverse animal and plant foods, reconfiguring the refine and unharnessed materials within the ecosystem. These activities form Anishinaabe ecologies. Foods in this systematic cycle that are still harvested today include walleye, blueberries, deer, hare, maple, sturgeon, and wild rice, among others – for there were many more foods and medicinal plants in this system historically. As an ecology, the activities associated with the seasonal round renew the family, community, cultural, economic, social, and political relationships that connect Anishinaabe persons with one another and with all the plants, animals, and other entities in the environment, even the water itself. As Frances Van Zile, a Sokaagon Chippewa member, puts it, describing a future without wild rice, “My whole way of being as an Indian would be destroyed. I can’t imagine being without it. And there is no substitute for this lake’s rice” (Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission 1995). According to these words, wild rice has ecological value.

In the case of wild rice, Anishinaabe have prioritized its revitalization or renewal, as settler Americans have done quite a bit to threaten wild rice. For example, in Minnesota, wild rice has declined by half in the last 100 years (Andow et al. 2009). Neighboring settler American groups engage in activities such as mining, damming, growing commercial paddy rice for mass distribution, and recreational boating that directly affect wild rice and its settler collective capacity. In addition to these activities, wild rice can modify water levels, water flow, water quality, and the diversity of plants and animals in the lake. Many Anishinaabe are also concerned that settlers Americans who breed and grow varieties of commercial paddy rice for mass harvest are not careful enough to ensure that these strains avoid affecting wild rice. Settler Americans also
began to adopt "wild rice" as their own, and some Anishinaabe people adapted by selling their harvest to others who would process it off reservation. The Anishinaabe rice was sold at a premium price as a hand-harvested product. In the 1960s and 1970s, when settler Americans determined how to domesticate wild rice, the price dropped, shutting Anishinaabe out of the market. Settler Americans further captured the market through accepting the idea that it is appropriate for settler companies to market wild rice as if it were harvested and processed by Anishinaabe (LaDuke 2007; Wallwork 1997).

Declines and threats to wild rice in such a short time period put immense and rapid pressures on the ecological value of food for Anishinaabe — forcing them to adapt at a harmful pace that disrupted the maintenance of a range of adaptation options. Without wild rice, Anishinaabe lose an integral glue holding together biological, family, social, cultural, economic, ecological, political, and spiritual dimensions of group life. Anishinaabe nations today face many challenges, including relatively higher rates of diabetes, food insecurity, and hunger (Cho et al. 2014; Sanchez and Spicer 2008). Culturally, certain ceremonies are becoming less common (Wallwork 1997). Though, according to some, the US has improved the quality and distribution of commodity foods on reservations, Anishinaabe persons in nations such as White Earth see the protection and revitalization of wild rice as integral to fully addressing problems of nutrition, cultural decline, and poverty (Siple 2011).

Motivation to protect wild rice has produced an incredibly diverse set of strategic responses that support the protection of Anishinaabe from numerous problems associated with settler colonialism. The responses seek to establish institutions that renew and restore cultural, social, and political systems associated with wild rice. In this way, wild rice is an invaluable motivator for institutional and community responses to create a range of adaptation options that do not require Anishinaabe to succumb to settler erasure.

Consider some examples. The natural resources and environmental agencies of many Anishinaabe Tribal governments, such as the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe or the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians, devote institutional and staff resources to learning about the biology and ecology of wild rice through connecting with elders and researchers and performing in-house scientific research and habitat restoration (Circle of Flight and Great Lakes Restoration Initiative 2014; Anishinaabe treaty organizations, such as the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission (GLIFWC) and Chippewa Ottawa Resource Authority (CORA) in research and advocate for laws and policy reforms that protect wild rice in ceded territories, where many Anishinaabe communities exercise stewardship and harvesting rights. For example:

GLIFWC focuses on the preservation and enhancement of wild rice in ceded territory lakes. Annual surveys are performed on existing beds to determine density and overall health of bed. Select lakes are also reseeded for the purpose of enhancement or re-establishing old beds. Recently, GLIFWC completed a comprehensive wild rice lake inventory in the ceded territories with documentation necessary to develop and launch a comprehensive wild rice management plan. (Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission 2013; 1995)

This information is often used in law and policy contexts as evidence that environmental threats, such as mining, are harming rice populations.

Anishinaabe-led nongovernmental organizations, such as the White Earth Land Recovery Project (LaDuke and Carlson 2003) or the Native Wild Rice Coalition, are involved in many projects promoting cultural life and economic viability around wild rice. Some of these organizations seek to create markets for wild rice on terms that are financially viable for Anishinaabe and to educate settler populations. The Nibi and Manoomin (water and rice) Symposium, which is held every two years, attempts to bring together different parties that can affect wild rice, from paddies rice growers and representatives of mining companies to Anishinaabe leaders, family members, elders, and representatives of Indigenous organizations. The symposium seeks to create cross-cultural education so that people sharing the Great Lakes can respect each other's ways of life and act ethically toward one another. The symposium is hosted by an Ojibwe Tribe in the region (Audow et al. 2009).

In these examples, wild rice has the power to convene Anishinaabe around a number of strategic responses to settler erasure of their ecologies, or homelands. Other foods, such as the commodity cheese and spam distributed through US food assistance programs, or microwave meals, cannot replace wild rice as comparable contributors to the establishment and maintenance of such an array of institutional responses. Wild rice continues to have an ecological value that, if prioritized, can support the renewal of both the rice itself and of Anishinaabe well-being, even though much of the settler damage to the Indigenous food system is permanent in the sense that Anishinaabe will likely continue to eat mixed diets of different foods, from Indigenous and local foods to industrially produced foods.

Food sovereignty for some North American Indigenous persons, in my view, is not really based on ideals of food self-sufficiency and cultural autonomy. Indeed, food sovereignty is a practical response to a particular structure of oppression that seeks to erase the ecologies that constitute Indigenous homelands. In the case of wild rice, Anishinaabe people prioritize rice as a way of adapting to today's circumstances, planning for the future, finding new terms of trade and exchange, and educating and reconnecting with the settler society. Food sovereignty, then, serves more as a strategic process whereby foods that are renewed serve to engender ranges of adaptive options that are appropriate when confronted with the challenges of Indigenous erasure in settler landscapes.

Notes

1 I wish to note here that IVC has developed a complex and evolving concept of food sovereignty and that the definition quoted here is just an excerpt.
2 I tried to use English spellings of words in Anishinaabemowin (the language of the Anishinaabe) that can be identified by diverse Ojibwe, Potawatomi, and Odawa people and who work in relation to this language. I recognize that there are many accents and spelling systems, and that the one I am using is in some ways the least similar to how members of my Tribe (Potawatomi) engage in English language spelling.

References


Kinedon Whyte


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