

# Food Sovereignty as Freedom

A work in progress

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My thesis research is entitled “**Following the body: the role of the visceral in expanding freedoms in an oppressive food system**”. It is a research topic that has emerged for me to appease a craving stemming from two decades of activism in food movements and the active participation in what is ever-emerging as the African Food Sovereignty Movement. The movement is inherently visceral and relational – rooted in grassroots natural food production and connected across the globe around advocacy, learning and solidarity (La Via Campesina 2019; Nyeleni 2007). Despite this, it has been subjected to a levelling process (often deemed “necessary”) of being institutionally mainstreamed: due to a hegemonic ontology that is painfully rational and ill-equipped to accommodate the visceral, the very soul of the movement faces the risk of being smothered in its cradle.

The Food Sovereignty Movement is a dynamic movement that revels in relationships with family and community and the living territory in which we are embedded. It embraces complexity and open-ended learning. It is also guided by aesthetics - for example, images and narratives featuring the colours, textures and varieties of seed are a common mobilising motif, conjuring deep seated pride, knowledge and a sense of belonging, the favourite foods, people and celebrations which the seeds are connected to and much more. The Rural Woman’s Assembly (RWA), a coalition of Southern African rural women, goes so far as to declare themselves “the Guardians of Land, Life, Seed and Love”. Yet, I ask myself, what place does love have in Southern African Development Community (SADC) policy negotiations on Plant Breeders’ Rights or Plant Improvement, for example? The outcomes of such negotiations dictate regional laws, budgets, infrastructure, extension and national programmes. They create a societal blueprint for our relationship with seed, playing a crucial role in the kind of wider food systems that are made possible by that

blueprint. Having engaged in those policy developments, I am certain that love is not a credible topic of discussion for our lawmakers<sup>1</sup>.

My personal experience in the African and global food movement over the past two decades has been unbelievably rich. I have been privileged and humbled to learn from men and women who think out of the box, with juicy brains and deep humanity; learnt from farmers and scientists about ecology and how humans partner with an incredible variety of human and non-human actants in the production of food; had the privilege of staying in the homes of farming families in many African countries while tasting the fruits of their labour; learnt about the multitude of ways that people operate within the politics of their communities and about the rituals and taboos that maintain pristine islands of biodiversity in landscapes destroyed by extractivism. My friends have taken me to the source of the Nile, to see the little red foxes of the Ethiopian Bali mountains and treated me to home cooked cuisine in their homes. I know what people need when they travel from home by train, plane and various automobiles, to participate in activist environments, learning and policy spaces. I have also been exposed to many new environments, cultures, knowledges and worldviews that push me to perpetually examine my own history and beliefs, and my social positioning as a white South African woman on a continent where locations on the basis of gender, race, nationality, class and sexuality are incredibly complex.

The rhizomatic nature of the Food Sovereignty Movement at grass roots level is dynamic and emergent, but usually succumbs to the aggregating or molar forces of international development agencies that channel their national policies through their funding programmes and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that use dreaded 'logframes' to report to their donors – chopping up territories, people and unfolding new worlds into measurable indicators and outcomes. Farmers and activists must engage with domestic, regional and international law in a language made unintelligible to all but the legal profession, in intimidating spaces where those who are formally educated are in supreme control. Hence, we have spent countless hours in village meetings, national, regional and international gatherings poring over legal texts and debating their interpretations, struggling together to translate unimaginably

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa: Small Gains in SADC Seed Policy

foreign concepts into vernacular and translating the range of responses back into policy and legalese. Despite all our preparations, engaging in policy spaces can be brutal and bruising experiences, pitting our pidgin legalese against the belittling smooth-talk of vastly resourced corporations with their spin doctors and legal teams.

Learning from people about their intricate labour patterns and relations to the environment in the Food Sovereignty movement has taught me that the global food and nutrition crisis is most definitely not only about food production, poverty, access to nutritional food and basic services, trade and inequity. This is the way the problem is typically framed (for example, see FAO State of Nutrition in the World 2019 report). When engaging in policy and other institutional spaces, the complex assemblages and articulations of the food sovereignty movement and its aspirations are purposefully stripped away, to be replaced by the blanket of the universal. These are the normative spaces of the “unmarked bodies” (Haraway, 1988) of white capitalist patriarchy, who set the parameters of discussion and negotiation. In these spaces our friends, mothers and brothers must be reduced to their sex and percentages on a poverty index. Territory becomes hectares of land per family, living soil becomes carbon credits, food becomes a commodity or list of calories and nutrients, while the “pleasuring body, the body that experiences visceral and sensory satisfaction, or the body that is not fulfilling or preparing for a social purpose, is not a recognisable body” (Lewis, 2016). We are required to leave our humanity at the door and “suck numbers” (Harding 2008) out of our visceral lived experiences and supply corresponding quantitative, measurable solutions. This we do, because this is the data that the current system will accept.

After two decades in these dehumanising policy spaces I began to crave the possibility of novelty, a Deleuzian line of flight to escape the sedimented assemblages of the Green Revolution that are held in place by powerful vested interests. I also felt the powerful domesticating force that is exerted by the lobbying and advocacy process on alternative visions for our food systems. I, therefore, want to explore what embodied food sovereignty looks like – how the body, its biology, effects and sensations can expand or unsettle notions of food sovereignty embedded in collective and organised struggles. I am interested in the “affect economies” (Clough 2004:15) of lived food sovereignty assemblages. I want to move away from

my historical path of critiquing dominant forms of agriculture. I want to move away from developing demands based on these critiques, which, I believe, tends to entrench the identified problems rather than create space for novel and emancipatory ideas.

My craving, therefore, is to be able to speak about love, pleasure, emotions relationality and the body, in our struggles for better food systems, alongside the other crucial issues of social and environmental justice. For this to be possible, we need an ontological shift so that we may experience the world as alive and intrinsically relational and acknowledge the agency of matter. New materialist feminist work by scholars such as Fausto-Sterling, Elizabeth Grosz and Karen Barad show that biology and matter are shaped by multiple forces, but at the same time also have agency in forging social and political realities (Frost 2011). In her assessment of the food crisis in South Africa, Jackie Cock (2016) has insisted that transformation must necessarily be grounded in the experience of working class South African women who bear the brunt of the provision of food and nutrition within a patriarchal, capitalist system. Haraway makes a strong case for “trusting the vantage point of the subjugated” (1988:584) by tapping into situated and embodied knowledges. These vantage points and knowledges may be less blind to the denials of the dominant perspective and therefore hold a greater transformative capacity. Jessica and Allison Hayes-Conroy, whose work has critiqued the Slow Food Movement, have found that placing the body at the centre of inquiry can give access to both, lived real-world experience, and the structures and networks that are shaped and shape subjective experience. They point out that “individual visceral feelings are never detached from wider economic structures and systems of meaning making” (Hayes-Conroy & Hayes-Conroy 2015:659).

## FOOD SOVEREIGNTY AND FREEDOM

According to Holt-Giménez and Shattuck (2011), ‘Food sovereignty’ critiques ‘food security’, the mainstream approach to global hunger. Food security is a developmental neoliberal approach that seeks to address hunger through increased production, thus bringing smallholders into the capitalist circuit by providing welfare measures where food is lacking (Holt Giménez and Shattuck 2011). Measures of success are quantitative, such as increased yield and profits, which are spurred on

by technological progress. In contrast, Food Sovereignty is concerned with power and control in the food system while calling for structural and redistributive reforms around land, water, and agricultural resources such as seed and markets (Holt Giménez and Shattuck 2011). Food Sovereignty can be defined as the right of people to democratically control or determine the shape of their food system, and to produce sufficient and healthy food in culturally appropriate and ecologically sustainable ways in or near their territory (Edelman *et al* 2016). According to Nyeleni (2007), the six pillars that commonly define Food Sovereignty are;

- food for people (as opposed to commerce),
- placing producers at the centre,
- localisation of food systems,
- localisation of decision-making,
- building skill and knowledge (in contrast to industrial agriculture which tends to de-skill) and
- working with nature

Over the past three decades, Food Sovereignty and its favoured production method, agroecology, have gained traction at national and international levels, challenging the corporate owned and extractive form of industrial agriculture (La Via Campesina 2019). It is championed by the Latin American peasant movement, La Via Campesina, representing at least 2 million smallholders and family farmers around the world.

As the incredibly dynamic and varied food sovereignty movement matures, there is growing debate on the significance of food sovereignty as a mobilising frame, policy objective and plan of action (Edelman 2014). In 2013, Yale brought together farmers, activists and scholars to interrogate the history, trajectory and challenges of Food Sovereignty, the result of which is published in *Critical Perspectives on Food Sovereignty* (Edelman 2014). A particular line of inquiry was raised in this forum that piqued my interest. They are formulated in the following two questions:

- Who is the sovereign in food sovereignty?
- How much pluralism is acceptable in a food-sovereign society?

The notion of Food sovereignty popularised in the 1990's by La Via Campesina originally applied to the sovereignty of the state to determine its own food policy and food system in light of new global trade regimes that threatened to disrupt local food systems under the growing might and concentration of multi-national agricultural companies. Over time 'sovereignty' shifted from a demand for national sovereignty over food systems to people's sovereignty over their food systems and back again to apply to the State (Argarwal 2014). The location of sovereignty – in the state, the people, communities or individuals – continues to be a site of intense and crucial debate. There is also a question of the role of the state in decentralised, locally controlled food systems (Trauger 2014). Moreover, contradictions come to the fore in that while food sovereignty calls for greater autonomy in the food system, there are at the same time, prescriptive guidelines such as those laid out in the six pillars of Food Sovereignty. For example, agroecology is taken as the normative food production method and there is a strong focus on local production and consumption. According to Edelman, the degree of tolerance for pluralism is one of the biggest and most challenging questions confronting food sovereignty practitioners and researchers (Edelman 2014).

Trauger has responded to Edelman's challenge that the notion of 'sovereignty' is rarely examined in the food sovereignty movement. In this regard, she engages deeply with literature on liberal sovereignty and finds that the modern state, with its right to govern trade, often in the interest of capital, ultimately privileges the sovereignty of the free market. She contends that Food Sovereignty has the capacity to re-territorialise power, however, this is fragile and temporary. She contends that:

*“Food sovereignty action, often civilly disobedient, constitutes a re-territorialization of power that the state may or may not have the political will to resist. The partiality of sovereignty in the liberal state presents possibilities to subvert its power, and challenges the ‘social movement of statism’ that (re)creates its existence. While the state may look the other way at the re-territorializing of power for a time, the interventions of food sovereignty are almost always threatened and temporary. The sovereign state retains the power to determine the exception, and thus food sovereignty activities are always vulnerable to state power unless food sovereignty’s economic and territorial alternatives are also written into the national state constitution.”* (Trauger 2014:1137)

While this provides dynamic and exciting prospects for a nomadic force such as Food Sovereignty to engage in the ongoing process of dismantling and refashioning our food systems, the ultimate return to 'rights' and the power of the state to root and grow alternative food systems through Constitutional mandate, takes me back full circle to feeling trapped in the hegemony. There are already instances where food sovereignty has been incorporated into the national laws and even into the constitutions of countries, only to suffer under regime change – as it has in Brazil and Ecuador, for example (Whitman 2015).

The concept of sovereignty, with its deep political history, seems to be a territorialising force of its own, locking us into a hierarchical and deeply dependent relationship with the State. Perhaps apprehending sovereignty through another of its synonyms, freedom, could open up another fruitful avenue for inquiry. In his book, *Development as Freedom*, Amartyr Sen (1999) argued that work focused on expanding freedoms that allow people the choice to live the life they value, as opposed to focusing on reducing poverty or ensuring technology transfer, should be the primary objective of economic development. Such an approach is able embrace the multiplicity of subjective individual wishes and needs by removing “unfreedoms” such as tyranny or lack of access to services and resources. Can this be a way to respond to Edelman’s concern regarding the difficulty of embracing multiplicity? Further, the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food (IPES-Food) has identified a set of key “unfreedoms” constraining the systemic transformation of our food systems towards ones that are environmentally and socially just. These are a set of eight intertwined feedback loops or what IPES-Food terms “lock-ins” to the industrial food systems (Frison 2016):

- Path dependency, e.g. policies, subsidies, research agenda’s or market requirements
- Export orientation
- Expectation of cheap food
- Compartmentalised thinking
- Short-term thinking
- ‘Feed the World’ Narratives
- Criteria for measures of success
- Concentration of power

This analysis of the complex web of “unfreedoms” that bind us to our current food system has broken new ground for alternative food movements that may promise a paradigm shift in place of reformist or technical solutions. But still I ask, where is the love?

A new materialist approach to freedom, such as Karen Barad’s (2007), is an illuminating fit for the visceral nature of food sovereignty, this explicit a tangle of human and non-human relationships. Barad does not consider freedom to be a right that can be bestowed on a nation or an individual, but associates freedom with acts. Freedom is therefore located in doing not being (Youngblood Jackson 2013), in acts of freedom mutually formed in intra-action. Sovereignty, or freedom, it seems, disintegrates, or must at least perpetually encounter and engage with a multiplicity of things, including those beyond the category of ‘human’ (Kelley 2014:754).

Grosz, drawing on Bergson, defines free acts as those which express and transform us and express our transformation (Grosz 2010). These free acts are mutually constituted in the intra-action between human and non-human forms, transforming us and incorporated into our becoming in the very process of transforming. There is a mutual process of becoming (Deleuze & Gattari 1987). Hence “freedom becomes possible through choices produced through historical, linguistic and discursive forces (Jackson Youngblood 2013:770). This moves us away from a rights based approach because freedom is not bestowed, but “emerge(s) in the middle of things, the in-between space in which humans and non-humans intra-act. This view of freedom is linked to invention, transformation and innovation and opens up new ways of becoming and doing in the world” (Barad 2007). Furthermore, Grosz asserts that purpose, not intent are behind free acts – and that free acts are characterised by indeterminacy rather than intention (2013). Free acts are catalysed by a deeper sense of purpose, as opposed to a checklist of rights or demands, such as the six pillars of Food Sovereignty, and the outcome of free acts is surprise!

In an attempt to ground these ideas for myself I looked to stories from farmers in my own research. Some years ago Susan (not her real name), who was retired, accompanied her sister to sign up for a diploma. In a strange twist of fate she ended up filling in a form herself and was accepted for a diploma in agriculture. “I had no clue about farming”, she told me. I saw something about landscaping and thought it



sounded interesting. I wasn't even sure exactly what it was." The course awakened an interest in her around food production, however, when she found herself in a field in a hazmat suit learning about crop protection, she realised that her heart's passion was to nurture her local community and producing food with poison was an anathema.

The community that Susan calls home is battling a seemingly insurmountable set of unfreedoms. Her home, Mitchell's Plain, was created in the early 1970's by the apartheid regime that forcibly relocated people of colour from their homes and communities in the vibrant inner-city to the outskirts of Cape Town under the Group Areas Act. Today, transport to the economic hub, about 32km away, can take several hours each way, with many travelling to low-paid and insecure jobs such as domestic and security work (Battersby 2011). The public transport service is notoriously inefficient and dangerous, with commuters contending with high levels of vandalism and crime (Ehrenreich 2018) as well as loss of income and jobs due to arriving at work late or sometimes not at all. Spatial segregation, or spatial injustice, remains a major contributor to a seemingly endless cycle of poverty and hunger (Battersby 2014). About 37% of households are female-headed (statistically earning less than male-headed households) with more than 10% of all households reportedly earning no income at all (StatsSA 2017). These two groups, female-headed households and the unemployed, are most vulnerable to chronic hunger and malnutrition (Battersby 2014). The prevalence of obesity in the Western Cape is the highest in the country for women and this figure is the highest in Africa. Obesity is acknowledged as a form of malnutrition related to poverty, amongst other things, and has contributed toward diabetes, ranking as the number one cause of death for women in South Africa, now surpassing tuberculosis (Shisana 2014). In August of 2019, the problem of gangsterism, drugs, illegal arms and high murder rates in the Cape Flats was finally acknowledged as a crisis, prompting the government to deploy the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) to assist police in bringing some level of safety to beleaguered residents. While some residents welcome the sight of the military roaming their streets, others worry that the SANDF are trained for war not suburbia, and still others point to the legacy and structural underpinnings of poverty and violence on the Cape Flats that cannot be attended to by military might (Pinnock 2019).

In this close-knit and challenged community, Susan holds a particular tenderness towards children, especially those with learning difficulties. The indignity and suffering caused by unemployment is another issue that tugs at her heartstrings. Once her purpose became clear to her, a whole new set of experiences and relationships began to emerge. She knew she wanted to farm but not with poison. She found a space in her community at a school to set up a market garden as well as engage the children in the garden for their pleasure, relaxation, skills development and nutrition. She became a node in a wide variety of assemblages where she was co-learning with other farmers about how to farm organically, engaging new markets and regulatory bodies, gifting food and other services in her own community and becoming involved in political movements that saw her travelling to new places. Many academics, like me, and academic institutions engage her in research and send students to her farm. While these outcomes were completely unplanned, these roles and relationships which have emerged give her pleasure and motivation to continue on her path, which, as her interview revealed, is beset with endless challenges (or unfreedoms). In her age of retirement she says, she has finally found contentment and credits her garden as her perennial teacher.

I attended a 'Participatory Guarantee System' event on her farm. This is an alternative to formal third party organic certification, in which farmers peer review each other, certifying their farming practice while they share learning and build supportive relationships. The event included farmers, experts, customers and anyone who was interested. I noted my own visceral experiences of this food sovereignty assemblage and one in particular stood out for me. It's the kind of experience that keeps me anchored in the work and life path that I have chosen. The assessor for the event was an experienced and immensely skilled commercial organic farmer who easily and eagerly shared his knowledge with the group consisting of micro-farmers, consumers and other interested participants such as myself. At one point he saw a particular cherry tomato plant that delighted him. He rushed over and picked up the trailing brace of tomatoes with admiration, "Look at this beautiful plant!" he exclaimed, "how compact it is, the beautiful spacing, the fruit looks excellent. Definitely save seed from this one, a beauty." Susan responded happily that it was a "volunteer", meaning that she didn't plant it. "They just come up

every year on their own” she explained. It’s a happy thing to say in this company; the agency and intelligence of the tomato seed interacting with soil and the other elements, the roulette of genetics that result in a beautiful plant and the sensual appreciation that prompts the farmer to save the seed both for its utility but also for the pleasure that its beauty brings. I see that her garden is her domain, where her purpose is expressed, where she faces constraints and frustrations, innovates and practices acts of freedom.

It excites me to think of studying food systems from a new materialist ontology that allows us to engage with the agency of the human and non-human as well as semiotic relations such as concepts, ideas, values and memories (Haraway, 1997:270). There is a great vitality in the way that it brings a new relationship with micro and macro sociologies, allowing us at last to take political and economic insights from daily activities, to focus on the production of the social world at the everyday event. It gives credence to the agency of the “marked bodies” and the agency of the non-human as they dance in the “endless, minute-by-minute procession of events – comprising the material effects of both nature and culture – [which] alone produces all of the world and all of human history” (Fox 2018:114). Barad contends that “Embodiment brings an ontology of difference, more possibilities than correct and incorrect, opens the way for novelty, allows for ever-greater articulation, new language, new measures, new ways of coming into being” (Barad 2014: 232). That feels like freedom to me.

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