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**"You can't say you're sovereign if you can't feed yourself:"
Defining and Enacting Food Sovereignty in American Indian
Community Gardening**

ELIZABETH HOOVER

A sign at the entrance to the long narrow driveway proclaimed that this space was home to Tsyunhehkwa, "Life Sustenance," a Certified Organic Farm and Program of the Oneida Nation. The shuttle turned down the driveway, past the small yellow farmhouse that comprises the farm's office, and pulled up in front of the large red barn. Representatives from tribal projects in California, Saskatchewan, Cherokee Nation, Navajo Nation and various Ojibway communities from across the Great Lakes region climbed down the steps, to be promptly greeted by Don, one of the farm's employees, who along with Ted and Jeff would take them through the barn filled with braids of white corn hanging from the rafters, past the pastures filled with chickens and grass fed cows, through acres of Iroquois white corn, and lastly through the green house and chicken processing facility, before everyone was loaded back into the shuttle for a tour of the tribal cannery. These representatives, each from their own corner of Indian Country, had traveled to the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin for the Food Sovereignty Summit, hosted by Oneida as well as the First Nations Development Institute and the Intertribal Agriculture Council, and attended by hundreds of other Indigenous gardeners, farmers, ranchers, seed savers, fishermen, foragers, hunters, community organizers, educators, and chefs, all seeking to better connect with others in the movement, and to envision what food sovereignty could look like in their communities.

But what do we mean by the term “food sovereignty,” a term that has been taken up by activists and academics alike, and which has become a rallying cry for both grassroots and established tribal programs across Indian Country? Within the context of the broader food sovereignty literature, as well as with a specific focus on notions of America Indian sovereignty, this essay will explore how food sovereignty as a concept and method is being described and defined by Native American community farmers and gardeners, and how these definitions are being operationalized in the broader goals of promoting community health and the reclamation and maintenance of tribal culture.

Global Food Sovereignty

The term “food sovereignty” was first defined in 1996 by La Via Campesina, an international group of peasant and small-scale farmers who sought to articulate a common response to neoliberalism and the dominant market economy, and defend their rights to land and seeds. The term was refined and brought to the world stage at the Forum for Food Sovereignty in Selingue, Mali in 2007, in which 500 delegates from over 80 countries adopted the Declaration of Nyeleni. According to the Declaration, “Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems” (Nyeleni 2007). The Declaration goes on to highlight the importance of putting food producers and consumers, rather than corporations, at the heart of food systems policies; the need to include the next generation in food production, as well as empowering food producers and artisans; the importance of environmental, social and economic sustainability; and the need for transparent trade, as well as equality between genders, racial groups and social classes. Everyone in

the food chain is positioned as a potentially powerful actor (Agarwal 2014).

The food sovereignty movement has grown out of, and pushed back against, efforts towards and definitions of food security, which activists and scholars have criticized as simply addressing an adequacy of food supply without specifying the means of food acquisition. According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), food security describes “a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO 2001, cited in Wittman et al. 2010:3). This definition does not specify how, where, and by whom the food that all people should have access to is being produced, contributing to a focus on food related policies that emphasize maximizing food production and giving inadequate attention to who will benefit from where and how that food is produced. Accordingly, efforts towards developing global food security have promoted increased agricultural trade liberalization and the concentration of food production, both of which have benefitted multinational agribusiness corporations. This lack of specification as to the source of food promotes below-market-price dumping of agricultural commodities, and the use of genetically modified seeds and other expensive agricultural inputs. This has devastated domestic agricultural systems—undermining the economic position of small farmers and reinforcing power differentials by promoting multinational corporations, rather than putting resources back into the hands of those who would produce food for themselves (Menser 2014; Wittman et al. 2010.) Specifically in a North American context, Indigenous scholars argue that by focusing just on the supply end of food procurement, food security studies, while intending to document and address hunger in individual households, do not adequately address the food conditions, histories and relationships of Indigenous peoples (Martens et al. 2016).

The food sovereignty movement on the other hand seeks to address issues of hunger, environmentally unsustainable production, economic inequality, and issues of social justice on a political level. Food sovereignty seeks to democratize food production, distribution, and consumption, shifting “the focus from the right to access food to the right to produce it” (Menser 2014:59). This is seen as an alternative to neoliberal economic development and industrial agriculture, which have devastated the livelihoods of peasant and small-scale farmers (Claeys 2015), and contributed to economic and environmental crises (Wittman et al. 2010). But, as Menser (2014:53) points out, food sovereignty is not just a reaction against neoliberalism, but also “a project for the democratization of the food system that also aims to restructure the state and remake the global economy.” He goes on to describe that food sovereignty “is not just about ‘farmers and food’ but the nature of work, the scope of politics, and the meaning of social and ecological sustainability; it is about participatory democracy, dignity, solidarity, and social inclusion” (Menser 2014:53).

By using consumer purchasing power (through things like boycotts and certification schemes) as their primary tool, i.e. “green capitalism,” local food activism may inadvertently legitimize the power of corporations in the food system. On the other hand, Fairborn (2010) asserts, food sovereignty advocates target political bodies, focusing on the power relations that led to the formation of the food regime. In this way, “the intensely political language used by food sovereignty advocates makes it very difficult for their demands to be assimilated by corporations and therefore increase the strength of their challenge to the status quo” (Fairborn 2010:31).

Through the support of more environmentally sustainable production and the support of smaller producers, food sovereignty also seeks to address what McMichael (2010) has labeled the triple crisis:

displaced local food production for almost 50% of humanity, deepening fossil fuel dependency in an age of 'peak oil,' and the fact that industrial agriculture generates roughly a quarter of the greenhouse gas emissions that are contributing to global climate change. But the imperative of food sovereignty is not to simply add social justice components to an environmental sustainable food system. Rather, social justice is the foundation from which a food system must be built, working to correct historical and structural injustices (Patel 2009; Figueroa 2015). The production, consumption and distribution of culturally appropriate food should be accomplished while strengthening community, livelihoods and environmental sustainability (Desmarais & Wittman 2014:1155). The food sovereignty movement highlights the social connections inherent in the production and consumption of food, demanding that we not treat it as just a commodity (Wittman et al. 2010; Figueroa 2015; Fairborn 2010).

To achieve this social justice, food sovereignty has been described as a "rights based political framework" (Kamal et al. 2015:564), built on a language of rights to tangible things like land and seeds, and to ideological things like the ability to define one's own culturally appropriate food systems. Claeys (2015:453) sees the possibility that food sovereignty itself "as a collective right could become, in the future, a new human right." But conversely, while the concept of a universal human right is generally considered beneficial to all, Kamal et al. (2015) describe that it could be used to undermine cultural distinctions prized by some groups, and those rights that have been established to protect those distinctions. Corntassle (2008) has been critical that the framing of rights as legal entitlements has deemphasized the cultural responsibilities that Indigenous people have with their families and with the natural world. He argues that the rights-based discourse has "resulted in the compartmentalization of indigenous powers of self-determination by separating questions of homelands and natural resources from those of political/legal recognition of a limited indigenous

autonomy within the existing framework of the host state(s)” (Corntassle 2008:107).

While the term sovereignty conventionally refers to the sovereignty of the state over its territory and its right to impart policies without external interference, the food sovereignty movement focuses on food sovereignty as a “right of the peoples,” adopting a pluralistic concept that attributes sovereignty to both state and non-state actors, such as cultural and ethnic communities (Ehlert & Voßemer 2015: 9). For communities who experience nested layers of sovereignty, this can be complicated--the nation state might seek to be sovereign over food production and distribution without the interference of multinational entities, making a particular reading of food sovereignty, “attractive to national governments advocating for strong state regulation of food chains” (Ehlert & Voßemer 2015:9). Therefore, the focus on “peoples” is “not just a semantic move to make food sovereignty feel inclusive; it indicates a focus on collective action to assert and maintain political autonomy at multiple scales,” (Trauger 2015:5) since, particularly in colonized societies, peoples’ and countries’ rights are not necessarily the same thing (Gray and Patel 2014). In many Indigenous communities, food sovereignty is a continuation of anti-colonial struggles; the politics employed by Indigenous people engaged in the food sovereignty movement are “not only a politics moored in both space and place, but a politics developed as part of longer struggles against exploitation and colonization of that place” (Gray and Patel 2014).

For Indigenous communities, who experience nested layers of sovereignty, food sovereignty as a term and concept can take on different layers of meaning from the broader peasant struggle or for urban communities (see Figueroa 2015). In the Native American context, as sovereign nations (or “domestic dependents” as described by Chief Justice John Marshall in the precedent setting *Cherokee Nation v. State of*

George 1831 case), tribes have been working the struggle for food sovereignty into broader efforts of self-determination.

LOSS OF FOOD SOVEREIGNTY IN INDIAN COUNTRY

In considering how to apply the concept of food sovereignty to the efforts of Native American communities to regain control over and rebuild their food systems, it is important to consider the series of factors that have worked to disrupt Indigenous food systems over the past four centuries, namely as a function of colonization. In many cases, this interruption was intentional. Potawatomi philosopher Kyle Powys Whyte (2017:5) argues that while “many settler actions are tacit or involve ignorant moralizing narratives, when it comes to food sovereignty, U.S. settlers deliberately endorsed actions of erasure to undermine Indigenous collective self-determination.” This was done as a function of “erasing the capacities that the societies that were already there—Indigenous societies—rely on for the sake of exercising their own collective self-determination over their cultures, economies, health, and political order” (Whyte 2017:4). In examining American history, this includes actions ranging from deliberately destroying food in acts of war, to interfering with the transfer of food related knowledge from one generation to the next.

Scorched earth battle tactics utilized against Native people in the 18th century (for example see Mt. Pleasant 2011 description of Sullivan’s Campaign against the Haudenosaunee), and the 19th century (Dine of the Eastern Region of the Navajo Reservation 1990), sought to destroy food supplies and the land from which it came in order to make Native people reliant on the American government. Indigenous communities have been pushed to marginalized territories (Reo and Parker 2013), and in many cases the treaty-making system alienated tribes from their land. Land bases were further diminished through the allotment system that allocated communal land to individuals and families. During the late 19th and 20th centuries, on many reservations-- despite tribes’ successful

histories of fishing and gathering-- federal policies encouraged Native people to farm on marginal lands. While some tribal communities were traditionally farmers, for others—like Plains and communities across North America-- farming projects were introduced by the US and Canadian governments in order to disrupt hunting cultures and expand the agricultural frontier while assimilating Indigenous livelihoods (Rudolph and McLachlan 2013:1082), even as the best farmland was often usurped by non-Indians. During this era many Native youth were also sent to boarding schools, where they were often undernourished (Cote 2016). In these schools, youth were encouraged to forget their tribal connections, and were instead forced to take on staples of a standard diet that embodied Anglo ideals of food ways and nutrition centered around starches and dairy—a shift for students previously used to diets based on fresh and dried meats, fruits, and vegetables (Bess 2013). Following this era, urban relocation programs in the 1950's brought Native people from rural reservations to urban centers for employment opportunities, but this move often left families food insecure (Jernigan 2012).

Environmental change—both through intentionally reshaping the landscape as well as through climate change-- has also impacted access to traditional foods. For example, the damming of the Missouri River in the 1940's and 50's resulted in Native people losing most of their arable land on the Standing Rock, Cheyenne River, Crow Creek, and Fort Berthold reservations in the Dakotas (White and Cronon 1988). Similar dams built across the Northeast (Hoover 2013; Abler and Tooker 1978) and the Northwest (Norgaard 2011) have disrupted fisheries and flooded Indigenous homelands. In addition, industrial contamination has impacted fishing in places like the Akwesasne Mohawk community on the New York/Canadian border (Hoover 2017), and for the Coast Salish Swinomish community in Washington State (Donatuto et al. 2011). In the polar regions, persistent organic pollutants have made consuming the

usual amounts of traditional foods hazardous to community health (Miller et al. 2013). Climate change has led to declining sea ice and forced community relocations in the Arctic, shifts in plant and animal populations around North America, changes in river flow impacting water availability for crops, and a broadening of the range of disease organisms (Weinhold 2010; Lynn et al. 2013). All of these changes have impacted Indigenous food systems over the past century.

To stave off starvation and malnutrition that would have resulted from disrupted food systems, during the 19th century food rations were distributed on many Indian reservations, as agreed upon in many treaties to make up for the loss of hunting, fishing, and agricultural lands. These rations consisted of foods that would have been foreign to Indian people: beef, bacon, flour, coffee, salt and sugar (Wiedman 2012). The practice of the U.S. federal government providing food to American Indian communities continues to the present, through the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR). This federal program provides United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) surplus foods to low-income households living on Indian reservations, or in designated areas in the State of Oklahoma. While the USDA has been working to improve the quality of foods available to communities through this program, including making more fresh foods available, these programs have historically done little to reinforce the relational aspects that traditional food systems relied on. This changed recently with efforts to include buffalo meat, blue corn meal, wild rice, and frozen wild sockeye salmon in the FDPIR food package offerings. To be included in the federal food distribution program, a food must be available in quantities for all eligible participants in the US, and this has slowed the inclusion of regionally relevant foods, but the FDPIR Food Package Working Group is currently working to resolve this (personal communication Joe VanAlstine, January 2, 2017).

The disruption of traditional food systems has led to a number of

health and social problems in Indigenous communities. American Indians have higher levels of food insecurity when compared to the US Average (Gurney et al. 2015). In 2008, nearly one in four American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) households were food insecure (versus 15% of all US households). AI/AN children have approximately twice the levels of food insecurity, obesity, and Type II diabetes relative to the average for all US children of similar ages (USDA Food and Nutrition Service 2012).

Historically, Indigenous societies sometimes contended with seasonal and weather-related fluctuations of food sources and availability. But while hunger is still a problem in some households, it is the increased consumption of processed foods that have contributed to an elevation in diet-related health issues among Native peoples. Diabetes was first documented among Native Americans around the mid 20th century (Wiedman 2012); currently, American Indian/Alaska Native adults (16.1%) are more likely than black adults (12.6%), Hispanic adults (11.8%), Asian adults (8.4%), or white adults (7.1%) to have ever been told they had diabetes. These rates vary by region, from 5.5% among Alaska Native adults to 33.5% among American Indian adults in southern Arizona (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2011).

In addition to physical health problems that resulted from the disruption of traditional food systems, as the availability of foods declined, so too have stories, language, cultural practices, interpersonal relationships, and outdoor activities around those food systems. A tribal community's capacity for "collective continuance" and "comprehensive aims at robust living" (Whyte 2013:518) are hindered when the relationships that are part of traditional food cultures and economies are disrupted. Reader and Johnson (2016:329), who worked together to form the community organization Tohono O'odham Community Action (TOCA), describe how "the endangerment of Tohono O'odham symbolic culture followed directly the decline in material culture. People did not stop planting the fields because the ceremonies were dying out; the

ceremonies began to die out when people stopped planting their fields. After all, if you never plant crops, the importance of rain is diminished.”

TRIBAL SOVEREIGNTY

Each of the disruptions and abuses described above was an attack on the sovereignty of Indigenous communities. But defining what exactly we mean by “sovereignty” for Native communities has proven challenging. When I asked Anishnaabe (Ojibway) scholar/activist/community organizer/economist Winona LaDuke to give me her definition of food sovereignty, her response highlighted part of the debate for many Indigenous people around the term “sovereignty.” LaDuke replied, “What is food sovereignty? You know I'm going to be honest with you, I actually have problems with the word sovereignty, because sovereignty is a definition that comes from a European governance system based on monarchy and empire. And I'm really not interested in monarchy and empire. They have no resilience, they have really nothing to do with who we are” (personal contact August 2014).

Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred (2002) has noted that the concept of sovereignty originated in Europe, and denoted a single divine ruler. Alfred describes, “Sovereignty is an exclusionary concept rooted in an adversarial and coercive Western notion of power,” and wonders why more people have not questioned how a European idea and term became so central to the political agenda of native peoples. But Joanne Barker (2005) has argued that there is no fixed meaning for what sovereignty is, as it is embedded within the specific social relations in which the term is invoked and given meaning, determined by political agendas and cultural perspectives. She argues that in its links to concepts of self-determination and self-government, sovereignty insists on the recognition of rights to

political institutions that are historically and culturally located. Contemporary understandings of sovereignty have included understandings that nations are autonomous and independent, self-governing, and generally free of external interference (Stark 2013; Cobb 2005). Tribal sovereignty has come to include the authority of tribal governments to engage in a range of activities, including determining citizenship, regulating on-reservation commercial activities, varying levels of criminal jurisdiction, natural resource management, child welfare and social services provision, and more, and serves as the legal framework for most American Indian rights claims (Cattelino 2010).

Even with this general understanding of what we mean by “sovereignty,” other scholars have critiqued the term, as there is not a clear consensus on its precise meaning, or how to achieve it, and it has been applied to a multitude of uses and issues. Jace Weaver (2000:232) has stated that sovereignty has perhaps become a retronym, a word that has lost its original meaning through so many different usages that it can no longer be employed without an adjectival modifier. It may now be necessary to refer to “multiple sovereignties” and to distinguish among them— political, cultural, territorial, economic, intellectual, etc. Some might argue that the term food sovereignty could be added to this category. Lakota philosopher Vine Deloria (1998:27) has similarly criticized the use of the term sovereignty, arguing “Today the definition of *sovereignty* covers multitude of sins, having lost its political moorings, and now is adrift on the currents of individual fancy.”

Chickasaw scholar Amanda Cobb takes up Deloria’s criticisms, explaining the importance of the term; “The terms or definitions of tribal sovereignty have real, tangible consequences in the everyday experiences of Native Americans. It is through these terms and definitions that Native nations experience limitation on their abilities to

exercise sovereignty and live as they choose” (Cobb 2005:121). She feels that we should not reject the term in favor of more user-friendly terms (she gives the example of “self-determination” or “cultural autonomy”), but instead, because the term sovereignty has such powerful and legal consequences in American courtrooms as well as in the international community, “we must use the term sovereignty and the discourse surrounding it as a critical tool to strengthen tribal cultural, political, and economic autonomy” (Cobb 2005:122).

INDIGENOUS FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

In the context of the very specific meanings of the term sovereignty for many Indigenous, and specifically Native American and First Nations communities, as well as due to the very specific cultural connections to land, and political relationships to settler colonial governments, scholars and activists¹ have worked to specifically define an Indigenous food sovereignty. These definitions are constructed within a framework that recognizes the social, cultural and economic relationships that underlie community food sharing, and seek to stress the importance of communal culture, decolonization, and self-determination, as well as the inclusion of fishing, hunting, and gathering (rather than just agriculture) as key elements of a food sovereignty approach (Desmarais & Wittman 2014:1154-5). Put simply, Indigenous food sovereignty “refers to a re-connection to land-based food and political systems” (Martens et al. 2016:21), and seeks to uphold “sacred responsibilities to nurture relationships with our land, culture, spirituality, and future generations” (Morrison 2011:111).

Whyte (2015:7) describes that the “indigenous food systems” at the center of these definitions, “refer to specific collective capacities of particular Indigenous peoples to cultivate and tend, produce, distribute, and consume their own foods, recirculate refuse, and acquire trusted foods and ingredients from other populations.” He

specifies that the concept of “collective capacities” describes an “an ecological system, of interacting humans, nonhuman beings (animals, plants, etc) and entities (spiritual, inanimate, etc) and landscapes (climate regions, boreal zones, etc) that are conceptualized and operate purposefully to facilitate a collective’s (such as an Indigenous people’s) adaptation to metascale forces.” As described above, Indigenous communities’ abilities to adapt to these forces was intentionally and unintentionally disrupted through the establishment of settler colonial nations. As Rudolph and McLachlan (2013:1081) describe, “An indigenous food sovereignty framework explicitly connects the health of food with the health of the land and identifies a history of social injustice as having radically reduced Indigenous food sovereignty in colonized nations.”

The concept of Indigenous food sovereignty is not just focused on *rights to* land and food and the ability to control a production system, but also *responsibilities to* and culturally, ecologically and spiritually appropriate *relationships with* elements of those systems. This entails emphasizing reciprocal relationships with aspects of, and entities on the landscape, “rather than asserting rights over particular resources as a means of controlling production and access” (Raster and Hill 2017:268). Secwepemc scholar Dawn Morrison (2011:106) describes Indigenous food sovereignty as a framework for exploring the right conditions for “reclaiming the social, political, and personal health we once experienced prior to colonization. But the framework itself does not resolve where the responsibility for it lies.” The responsibility lies with Indigenous people to participate in traditional food related activities on a daily basis, to build coalitions with friends and allies, and to assert and insist on the utilization of Indigenous values, ethics and principles in making decisions that impact “forest and rangeland, fisheries, environment, agriculture, community development and health” (Morrison 2011:106). Because of this focus on cultural relevancy and specific

relationships to food systems, cultural restoration is imperative for Indigenous food sovereignty, “generally more so than to non-indigenous food sovereignty (Kamal et al. 2015:565).

While some of the previous arguments about the use of terms like sovereignty could apply to the struggle of defining and enacting Indigenous food sovereignty, Indigenous people are, similar to Cobb’s (2005) opinion above, defining the term to their advantage. In their work with the O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation, Kamal et al. (2015) describe how the way in which this community uses the term food sovereignty, neither “food” nor “sovereignty” retains their classical meanings. Food, which is often framed as “consumable commodities,” is instead framed under its cultural meaning as the bond between people, health and land. Sovereignty, rather than being perceived as control over land, water, or wildlife was instead framed by this community as a relationship with these entities that allows for the mutual benefit of all parties.

To summarize, Morrison (2011) and the Working Group on Indigenous Food Sovereignty developed four principles of Indigenous food sovereignty: 1) the recognition that the right to food is *sacred*, and food sovereignty is achieved by upholding sacred responsibilities to nurture relationships with the land, plants, and animals that provide food; 2) day to day *participation* in Indigenous food-related action at all of the individual, family, community and regional level is fundamental to maintaining Indigenous food sovereignty 3) *self determination*, or the ability for communities and families to respond to the needs for culturally relevant foods, and the freedom to make decisions over the amount and quality of food hunted, fish, gathered, grown and eaten; and 4) *legislation and policy support* to reconcile Indigenous food and cultural values with colonial laws, policies and mainstream economic activities.

As the debate about how to define food sovereignty generally, and Indigenous food sovereignty specifically, developed in the literature, this research project sought to learn more about how practitioners on the

ground in Indigenous community-based food projects were defining and operationalizing food sovereignty. I also sought to understand how concepts of food sovereignty informed and motivated their ongoing work to maintain and restore traditional food systems and promote better health in their communities.

METHODS

I first became involved in conversations around food sovereignty through volunteering with the Akwesasne Mohawk community-based organization Kanenhi:io lonkwaienthon:hakie (We Are Planting Good Seeds), with whom I have been involved since 2007. The goal of Kanenhi:io is to help Mohawk people, in a community that has been contending with environmental contamination and an overall diminishment of farming and gardening, to have access to land, equipment, funds, and a community of fellow gardeners in an effort to boost local food production (Hoover 2017). Conversations with fellow project participants around how to increase community involvement and access to funds led me to take part in twenty five different food sovereignty summits and Indigenous Farming Conferences, hosted by tribal nations like the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin, community groups like the White Earth Land Recovery Project, and organizations like the First Nations Development Institute, the Intertribal Agriculture Council, and the Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance (see Figure 2). In an effort to learn more about the Indigenous community based farming and gardening projects I was hearing about during these conferences, during the summer of 2014 I took to the road, driving twenty thousand miles around the United States to visit thirty-nine of these projects in person (see Figure 1).² In the process, I conducted fifty-two formal interviews, and recorded thirty-four conversations and farm tours.³ Of the fifty-two formal interviews conducted, forty-six were with individuals who identify as Native American, and six were with project staff who do not identify as Native,

but have been working closely for a number of years with the Native communities who hired them to run these projects. Interviews were transcribed, and then coded in NVivo 8,⁴ based on themes presented in the interview questions, and those that arose organically through the interviews. I also wrote a blog post about each of the communities I visited (gardenwarriorsgoodseeds.com), which featured the story of each project and accompanying photographs. Project participants were asked to approve each post, to ensure that they were being portrayed in a manner they felt was appropriate. The blog served two purposes: it gave these projects a web presence, which was then later helpful for some in acquiring additional funding and recognition, but it also helped each of these community organizations to learn more about each other.

Among the questions that I asked during these interviews (including asking participants to describe the history of their projects, some of their successes and challenges, advice they would give to new Indigenous food projects, etc), I asked each interviewee to define food sovereignty, and to describe how this term or concept fit into their own work, or was utilized in their own communities. Below I have broken down elements of the definitions they provided to me, putting them in conversation with each other and highlighting where aspects of these definitions converge and diverge with other food sovereignty definitions.

RESULTS

When asked to define food sovereignty, the answers provided by participants coalesced into a number of themes raised by the authors above—namely the importance of food to cultural identity; relationships to the environment, food sources, and other people; and the need for independence to make choices around how to define food systems and what exactly to eat—at a tribal level, a community level and an individual level. The importance of access—to food, land, and information—was also raised, as well as the role of the Tribe to provide these things.

Participants also focused on the issue of control—over what they put in

their mouths, what seeds are planted, and how their tribes should take back control of their land and food systems from outside influence. In addition, participants raised the importance of education, improving health, and focusing on the youth and future generations. Heritage seeds—most passed down through generations of Indigenous gardeners, some reacquired from seed banks or ally seed savers—were often discussed as the foundation of the movement, living relatives to protect from patent or modification, but also tools for education and reclaiming health. In conclusion, I will discuss the assertion made by many of the participants that in order for tribes to properly assert that they are fully sovereign, they need to work towards achieving food sovereignty first. With that in mind, food sovereignty was seen by many not as a final state that could be achieved, but rather characterized as a process, as a method, and as a movement.

Health

A major concern described by participants, and the driver for much of their work, was an anxiety about the grave health statistics described previously; food sovereignty was described as a necessary tool to solve existing health problems, as well as to promote future better health. Traditional foods in many communities have become less available, and commodity foods and processed packaged foods have become more available, contributing to poor health. Julie Garreau (Lakota), director of the Cheyenne River Youth Project described that “for so long we ate those foods that weren’t good for us, and we didn’t know... We struggle with diabetes, it’s just rampant in our communities so we just need to change our diet... Because in the end, if you don’t have a healthy population, you don’t have anything. They’re not going to get to school, they’re not going to have long, healthy lives, they’re not going to be able to raise their children. You need healthy people. And who doesn’t want a healthy nation? We want that for us. As parents and grandparents, we

want our kids to have long, productive lives. So food is a part of it.” These concerns motivated Julie to incorporate a garden and kitchen into her youth program. Similarly, Dan Powless (Ojibway) described that the purpose of the Bad River Gitiganing project is “to regain the health that we need. We’ve got a lot of health problems, nutrition problems on reservations and things like that, so I think that’s the first thing we’re looking at is health of the people... the main focus that we kind of think of is the health first.” One of the main motivators that participants described for taking part in community based projects working on issues related to food sovereignty, was a concern about poor health in their community, and a desire to try to rectify this situation

George Toya (Jemez Pueblo), who runs the garden for Nambe Pueblo, also connected diet change to health problems, and saw it as part of his mission to work towards gradually reversing that. “Our diet has changed so much and the evidence is in the health of the people. They’re not as healthy as they used to be even a few generations ago. It’s really changed. If it took that long to change us, it might take that long for us to get back to that point where we’re healthy people again and this is kind of our attempt to do that. Being sovereign is not just about being a totally isolated nation, it’s about being able to really feed--make your people well, and feed them again.” This, he recognized, was not going to happen quickly, but is an important goal to work towards.

For Kenny Perkins (Mohawk) from Kanenhi:io, good health, for himself as well as future generations, will result from working towards food sovereignty “I believe that food sovereignty means that we’re able to feed ourselves and by feeding ourselves we know what’s going into our body. And when we know what’s going into our body and we’re healthy, we are able to make better decisions, especially for those future generations that’s coming up. And if we can show them the right way the first time, they won’t know any other way. And so in turn they’ll become healthy.”

Speaking to an audience full of Native gardeners, foragers, chefs and others interested in food at the 2013 Native American Culinary Association Conference, Valerie Segrest (Muckleshoot) described that, “when we follow our traditional diets we’re healthier people. Our immune systems can stand up to the seasons. One hundred years ago diabetes and heart disease were non-existent in our communities. We know what we need to do to be able to solve our health crisis. Telling people what to eat is not the root cause of our problem; it’s access to our traditional foods. Preventable diseases rise when we don’t have access to traditional foods.” She carried this thought into our interview in July 2014, continuing, “from my perspective the reason why we have a lot of diabetes and heart disease in our community is because we’ve been taken away from our traditional food system and have experienced the effects of a super-imposed diet on people. When I talk to my leaders they know and they preach about how if we ate our traditional foods we wouldn’t be sick.” For these reasons, Valerie and others working on similar projects are promoting a shift in diet specifically to culturally important health foods.

Culturally Appropriate Foods

Grim public health statistics reflect the impacts to physical health that are caused by disrupted food sources. But it is also important to note the impacts of these disruptions to cultural and spiritual health, which are reliant on important cultural connections to food. It is notable that many of the projects I visited are not just trying to grow just any nutritious food—they are in many cases seeking to restore culturally relevant food. Guaranteed access to “culturally appropriate foods” is a central tenant of the most basic definition of food sovereignty. This phrase was reflected in many of the definitions provided by participants—for example, Diane Wilson (Dakota), director of the Dream of Wild Health program, defines food sovereignty as “having access to healthy, affordable, culturally

appropriate food.” She later went on to describe that “part of this cultural recovery process” that many tribes as well as urban Indian communities are undertaking, “is the idea that you have control over your own food.” Dream of Wild Health seeks to provide that access and control to urban Native youth and their families through internships at their farm as well as cooking classes. Similarly, Scott Shoemaker (Miami) defines food sovereignty as “the ability to seed your own community with cultural appropriate foods.” As a curator of an Indigenous seed collection at the Minnesota Museum of Science, he worked to do that through collaborations with nearly a dozen Indigenous community projects who partnered to form the Indigenous Seed Keepers Network, who are now growing out seeds from that collection and sharing them with other community members. Even if these foods are already available, Tom Cook (Mohawk) who directed the Slim Buttes Agricultural Project on Pine Ridge for over two decades, described “food sovereignty is the expansion of local, culturally produced food stuffs.”

These culturally appropriate foods are seen as serving as more than just nourishment for the physical body. Roberto Nutlouis (Navajo) who runs food and farming projects through the Black Mesa Water Coalition, describes that “corn isn’t just corn for our people, it has so much spiritual significance. It’s a biological and spiritual nourishment to our people.” Roberto works with youth to maintain fields of Navajo heritage corn, using traditional dry land farming methods, and then uses that corn to feed youth and elders.

Several cultural programs in Native communities focus on food as an important component, as a vehicle for delivering cultural information. Kenny Perkins (Mohawk), formerly an instructor with the Asi Tsi Tewaton Akwesasne Cultural Restoration Program described how a major focus of the program was the restoration of traditional food ways disrupted by environmental contamination. On the opposite coast in Washington, Romajeane Thomas (Muckleshoot) described a “cultural sovereignty” class

they held at Muckleshoot Tribal College that focuses on food culture. “Food sovereignty is really at the root of cultural sovereignty. Its what our treaties are for and what our ancestors fought for.” Similarly, in the Ojibway community of White Earth in Minnesota, Bob Shimek (Ojibway), the current director of the White Earth Land Recovery Project, is focused on

using Ojibway food systems as the vehicle for cultural restoration and revitalization. Those little creation stories that come with each one of our relatives, whether they be the fish or the birds or the plants or the insects or the frogs or turtles or whatever, so many of those have a little story about how they got here. Inside those words that tell that story, that’s where the true meaning and value of our culture is stored in, our languages that tell those stories. So that’s the effort I’m making right now—it’s to not only keep building on our physical health, improving our physical health by teaching people not only about gardening and small scale farming but also all the wild plants, the wild foods that are out there, and packaging those up in the historical, cultural, and spiritual context which is part of the original understanding in terms of our role here on this turtle island.... Food sovereignty means that we’re taking care of that cultural and spiritual relationship with our food.

In this way, food sovereignty is not just a goal in and of itself, but a tool to achieve other aspects of cultural restoration, connected to health and language. The Mvskoke Food Sovereignty Initiative in Oklahoma partners with the Euchee language immersion program every summer, helping the students to plant a garden at the school. Stephanie Berryhill (Mvskoke Creek), who was a staff person with MFSI, described, “Language is the most critical marker of the health, and the cultural health of the community. It’s an important mark of the sovereignty of each of our Indigenous nations.” While we stood and watched half a dozen girls from the summer program tuck corn seeds into freshly tilled soil, the director of the Euchee language program, Richard Grounds (Yuchi/Seminole), described the garden as the perfect place to learn and practice language, “because you’re physically doing what’s being said,

that helps you to remember and learn and associate the meaning with the activity and that has all that repetition built in. So we can view the language in a natural way,” and in addition have food to show for it.

Food was also described as a core and necessary component of culture. Cassius Spears Sr. (Narragansett), who is heading up the Narragansett Food Sovereignty Initiative, described that food “is to me what identifies your culture, your traditions, basically who you are. And it brings people together, it’s like the kitchen of the house,” playing on the image of the kitchen as not just the place where food is prepared, but also the central gathering place in many homes, the place where people often receive wisdom from elder women culture bearers. Food for Cassius is the central hearth, the foundation, of culture and overall tribal sovereignty, the same way a kitchen is to a home.

Without this core component of food, Indigenous cultures are compromised. Valerie Segrest (Muckleshoot) from the Muckleshoot Food Sovereignty Project explains, “When our foods cease to exist so do we as a people. They’re there to remind us who we are and where we come from.” She goes on to describe how tribal “creation stories tell us that we are to commit ourselves to ceremonies around food. Food is our greatest teacher—without a spoken word.” On the other hand, she describes that “culture repression” impedes her community’s ability to access teachings from fish, cedar trees, and other elements from their environment in the Pacific Northwest. Access to traditional foods and the practice of ceremony around those foods is necessary for the continued survival, and growth, of Coast Salish tribal culture.

Alan Bacock (Paiute) from the Big Pine Paiute permaculture project in California described what happened when Indigenous people were denied access to traditional foods: “we saw through our history that when we lacked the ability to provide food for our people is when our culture started to decline... if we were able to maintain our local food control, we would still have a strong cultural identity, strong cultural heritage.” For

these reasons, the reconstruction of traditional food systems is seen as imperative to cultural restoration and health.

Relationships

These cultural practices are in many ways centered on relationships—with food and with other tribal members around food-- as opposed to considering food simply as a commodity. Jeremy McClain (Ojibway), formerly with the Bad River Gitiganing project, described “that symbiotic relationship with your environment. To me that’s food sovereignty, if you take care of your environment it will take care of you.” Within that context he also mentioned the importance of the different Anishnaabe nations maintaining relationships with each other, and different programs and departments within the tribal government establishing relationships in order to foster the success of food sovereignty projects. Similarly, Lannesse Baker (Ojibway) with the Mashkiiki Gitigan project in Minneapolis, described food sovereignty as being “about that relationship we have with food and our ability to feed ourselves and sustain ourselves.” Because she works with urban Indigenous populations, she described the importance of projects like Mashkiiki Gitigan in “facilitating that relationship to the earth and the environment and food, the healthy foods, the original foods”

Some foods were described literally as relatives, with whom positive relationships needed to be maintained. After we returned from a four day bahidaj (saguaro cactus fruit) picking camp hosted by Tohono O’odham Community Action (TOCA), Terrol Dew Johnson (Tohono O’odham) described how “the raw food that was harvested this weekend, in our traditional songs is referred to as being a little girl, a person, a woman.” He went on to tell the story about a little girl who was neglected by her mother and despite the help of different birds and animals, became so sad she sunk into the ground and grew into a cactus bud (see also Reader and Johnson 2016). As will be described in greater detail

below, seed keepers I interviewed repeatedly highlighted the importance of “relationships” to seeds, as opposed to ownership of them. Clayton Brascoupe (Mohawk), director of the Traditional Native American Farming Association (TNAFA) repeatedly described seeds as “our living relatives,” who need to be cared for and protected from people who would treat them as commodities.

These relationships between human communities and the other communities that make up a tribal nation’s food system are reflected in what Huambachano (2015) describes as Indigenous “good living” philosophies through which food sovereignty and food security should be framed, because these philosophies do “not solely focus on economic growth but rather place an emphasis on Indigenous peoples’ tenets of duality, equilibrium and reciprocity in order to enjoy and preserve the bounties of Pachamama to safeguard food security” (Huambacahno 2015:40) She goes on to argue that these philosophies “offer models for promoting biodiversity, social equity and economic growth without agrochemicals, and preserving Mother Earth” (Huambacahno 2015:42). Maintaining these philosophies, specifically the Anishnaabe concept of Mino Bimadiziiwin, was described as the key to a healthy productive community. Winona LaDuke describes,

The Creator gave us instructions. Mino Bimadiziiwin about how to lead a good life. And the Creator gave us this land Oma akiing here upon which to live. Our instructions were to take care of each other, take care of all of our relatives, whether they had wings or fins or roots or paws. To be respectful, and to live that life. That's what I want to do. In that life, we feed ourselves-- our food does not come from Walmart, our food does not come from fast food, we are not engaged in an industrial era. We are people that live from the gifts here.

Food sovereignty is the process of nurturing the proper relationships with food elements. As Bob Shimek, current director of the White Earth Land Recovery Project described,

Food sovereignty also means that we're taking care of that cultural and spiritual relationship with our food. This is not by any means a one-way thing. I mean it's not like we can just go out there and keep taking and taking from all that which was put here for us without properly taking care of that land and those relatives of ours that were put here for our use, benefit, and enjoyment. So I think the true measure of food sovereignty is when you have that reciprocal relationship where Anishinaabeg is thriving as are all our plant, animal, bird, fish relatives, etc. That's food sovereignty when it's all lock-stepping together in what we call *Mino Bimadiziiwin*, the good life.

This good life philosophy encapsulates the harmony that is established when, as participants have described above, symbiosis has been maintained through respectful relationships between humans and the other communities that contribute to their food systems.

Independence

Many of the participants equated food sovereignty with a level of independence from outside forces when it came to sourcing food—on an individual level, as a community, and as a sovereignty tribal nation. The notion of being able to feed yourself was at the root of an individual's responsibility towards broader food sovereignty; as Milo Yellowhair (Lakota) from the Slim Buttes Agricultural Project reflected “sovereignty is an issue that's rooted in the ability to feed one's self.” Woodrow White (Ho-Chunk) from the Whirling Thunder garden project described food sovereignty as: “You can grow lock, stock, and barrel all of your own food... if you can feed yourself that's a giant step. No dependency out there. That's the sovereignty you're talking about and there's not that many of us to take care of our own.” Looking around at the collection of individual garden boxes that comprised the community garden he had helped establish, Woodrow went on to describe how once individuals become independent, they could then contribute to feeding an entire community.

For others, it was the ability to rely on their fellow community members rather than outside companies for inputs in running the local food system that constituted the necessary independence for food sovereignty. Angelo McHorse (Taos Pueblo), who ran the Red Willow farm at Taos Pueblo, defined food sovereignty as, “you don’t have to depend on any companies for your seed or your fertilizer, even big tractors or oil much less. We have all our own ditches, we have all our own seed. We have all our own energy-- your own hands.” Similarly, Jayson Romero (Cochiti Pueblo) who apprentices young farmers through the Cochiti Youth Experience defines food sovereignty as “not having to go outside of ourselves to get the things that we need and use.” Looking out over his field of knee-high corn plants sprouting up out of the sand, he described all of the special occasions that require traditional Pueblo corn. Food sovereignty, he decided, would be accomplished when “the ladies here do not have to go anywhere else to find the stuff that they need,” because farmers were able to provide all of the corn necessary for these occasions. Sitting in his adobe home in his wife’s community of Tesuque Pueblo, Clayton Brascoupe (Mohawk) also showed me pictures of his cornfields, maintained by his entire family. He described that their community will have achieved food sovereignty when “we have the ability to provide for ourselves, our children, our neighbors, within our community.”

Part of defining food sovereignty entailed not only having individual members of the community rely on each other rather than multinational corporations, but also specifically the ability of the tribal community to provide for its members. Grace Ann Byrd (Nisqually) who works for the Nisqually Community Garden, defines food sovereignty as “being able to provide for your own people, to work the land, to have that garden stand.... So being able to provide for our own... we like to provide for our own people because that’s what I believe is sovereignty, is providing for

the tribal members, the community members that reside here, and our elders in the diabetes program.”

A third level of independence described by participants was on a tribal level—the tribe as both a community and a government becoming less dependent on outside entities to provide food for their constituents. As Jeremy McClain (Ojibway) described, food sovereignty is “reducing our tribe’s dependence on the mainstream food production system and distribution.” Chuck Hoskins, the Cherokee Nation Secretary of State, described food sovereignty as “Cherokees producing for themselves, producing food for our families and for our people. Not being dependent on outside state influences.” Amos Hinton (Ponca) who started an agriculture program for his tribe, described,

Food sovereignty is the ability to take care of your self without input from outside forces. If I as a department head can produce all of the food for my tribe that they need, then not only are we food sovereign, we are indeed sovereign. You look at a tribe who says; “we are a sovereign nation.” Where do you get your food from? Do you buy it from an outside source? If you buy it from somebody else, then you are not a sovereign nation, because you’re dependent on somebody else for your food. To me, if you’re growing all of your own food, then you are a sovereign nation. At one time all Native American tribes were sovereign nations. They are not now.

Within these levels of independence, participants recognized that in many cases the support of tribal government in working towards food sovereignty went a long way towards supporting food sovereignty for individuals and for the community as a whole.

Economics

The focus on more equitable economic systems, which comprises so much of the focus of global food sovereignty definitions, surfaced in these participants’ definitions in the context of keeping food dollars within the community to support tribal food producers, but also in efforts to make these non-profit organizations sustainable.

Winona LaDuke (Ojibway) described a survey of the White Earth reservation, conducted by the White Earth Land Recovery Project that found that their community was spending one quarter of its economy on food-- a majority of which was being spent off reservation. She has since expressed her determination to direct more of those food dollars to support food producers on their reservation. Stephanie Berryhill (Mvskoke Creek) from MFSI reflected on the quantity of food being served out of the tribe's casino, all of which is "purchased from outside vendors when we should be producing it ourselves. We should be providing jobs and keeping this money in our communities."

To remedy situations like this, some of the participants are developing payment systems or buying practices that seek to keep food dollars within Native communities. Julie Garreau (Lakota) made arrangements so the Cheyenne River Youth Project now accepts EBT cards at their little store and farmers market, as a way of directing federal government dollars provided to community members towards supporting local food producers. Lilian Hill (Hopi) described her efforts to help create markets for farmers and local producers, in order to support them as well as promote the sale of healthy food. Hopi Tutswa Permaculture, which Lilian runs, partnered with the Hopi Food Co-op, Natwani Coalition and the Hopi Special Diabetes Program to create the Hopi Farmers Market on Second Mesa, which provides a venue for food producers and consumers to connect directly. The market "provides a venue for local farmers and gardeners to sell or exchange their fresh, seasonal produce directly with the Hopi community," and in a feature unusual to most farmers markets but in line with a traditional Hopi economy, encourages "community members to bring fresh produce, vegetables, crafts, home prepared foods, and crafts to trade/barter/exchange with farmers market vendors."⁵

Native chefs and restaurant owners have also become involved in promoting Native food producers. Sean Sherman (Lakota), the chef

behind The Sioux Chef enterprise, described his efforts to “really try to use as many Native producers as possible—so keeping a lot of these food dollars within the Native communities will be a thing in making these food systems sustainable for everyone—the famers, the wild rice harvesters, the people foraging and just gathering stuff that can be sold, or people raising animals.” Similarly, in a conversation in his Denver based restaurant Tocabe, Osage chef Ben Jacobs described his buying practices as “Native first,” purchasing first from Indigenous food producers even if they are outside of Colorado, and then purchasing from local non-Native food producers second.

Because the majority of the participants I spoke with worked for non-profit organizations centered on food, they described the struggle to make their projects more economically self-sufficient. Dianne Wilson’s goal is to make the Dream of Wild Health “farm ultimately become economically independent” through their farmers market and other programs, rather than relying solely on grants and gifts. Romajeau Thomas (Muckleshoot) similarly reflected on the struggle to find the necessary funds to keep their community-based programs running. “It’s a sustainability question. How do we keep funds coming in?” Many other projects expressed similar concerns about how to keep the necessary staff to run these projects promoting food sovereignty, without negatively impacting the livelihoods of those staff (for example, at the time of their interview two project co-directors had not been paid in several months, but continued coming to work).

But in addition to conventional monetary exchanges, and beyond the notion that projects and communities should be economically independent and supplying all of their own food to be considered truly food sovereign, participants also highlighted the important role of trade, historically and in the present. For example, in their research with Indigenous communities in what is now called British Columbia, Turner and Loewen (1998) described how archaeologists have documented

extensive trade networks that specifically brought plant products to the Pacific Northwest, in order to obtain plants not available or difficult to access locally, and to access to products that required specialized skills. They argue that few if any environments provide all of the resources a group needs at any given time, and so trade has long been used to counter instabilities in resource supply, and to provide variety. With this in mind, they note that rather than building a strictly localized food system as an alternative to the global industrial system (the language of the local food movement), Indigenous communities are in many ways seeking to protect traditional food practices and networks. Along these lines, Scott Shoemaker (Miami) stated that he prefers the term “interdependence” to “independence,” arguing that tribal communities have always relied on trade and reciprocity.

Josh Sargent (Mohawk) with the group Kanenhi:io worked to unpack what his fellow group members mean by “food sovereignty” and “what we mean when we say ‘independence,’” positing that “I know we’re not going to go 100% because honestly no one ever has. Trade has always been a trait that humans do, they don’t live in bubbles.” He describes the need for people to “at least make your own basic needs, you have to be able to do that,” to be considered sovereign, but beyond that he sees trade as having always been important. This sentiment was also embodied in a call to reconnect or reestablish trade routes between Native communities as a form of economic and cultural support and revitalization. Mohawk seed keeper Rowen White, in referring to seed keeping and seed exchanges, described “I think also in times of global climate change, we will be reestablishing trade routes, we will be connecting with other tribes and other people because I think that was always happening in the first place, corn went from this tribe to this other tribe and we mixed it with ours and made something new.” Similarly, Pati Martinson (Lakota), in describing what constituents are asking for from the still developing

Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance (NAFSA), mentioned that “people have said they’re really interested in bringing back those trade routes. And part of that could be a big economic development, community development, piece as well.” Dan Cornelius and the Intertribal Agriculture Council worked to enact this, beginning the Mobile Farmers Market “Reconnecting the Tribal Trade Routes Roadtrip” in 2014 that collected, purchased and exchanged food stuffs from tribal communities across the U.S.⁶ The market continues, with a brick and mortar store recently opened in Madison WI, stocked with food products (and other non-food items that were traded for food) from across Indian Country.

Access

Many of the food sovereignty definitions centered around terms of access — to food, land and knowledge. Darlene Fairbanks from the Little Earth housing project in Minneapolis defined it simply as “Just having access to healthy food,” a description that was echoed by several others. Melissa Nelson (Turtle Mountain Chippewa), director of the Cultural Conservancy, framed her definition of food sovereignty around terms of access at the individual, community, and political levels. On an individual level, she notes, “we don’t always have control over what we have access to,” limited by factors like affordability and availability of foods, “but what we put in our mouths we really do.” Jeff Metoxen from Tsyunhehkwa similarly pointed out that their project can grow and package white corn and other traditional foods, but it is up to individuals “whether you decide to access it.” Melissa then went on to describe, “on a community level, it’s a community’s ability to determine the foods that they have access to, and that they can utilize for the health and well-being of the whole, so it’s really about access and sharing.” And then on a political level, “Indian nations really have a legal obligation to their citizenship about what foods they grown and make accessible for their larger nations.”

Barriers to accessing healthy culturally appropriate food included the cost of these foods for those who had to purchase them, and access to land for those trying to grow their own. As Lannesse Baker (Ojibway) at the Mashkiikii Gitigan garden in Minneapolis described, “people talk within the urban community about a lot of challenges related to access to healthy food, whether there are barriers to access because of affordability issues or challenges with transportation.” Similarly, Keith Glidewell (Paiute) from the Bishop Paiute Tribe described the challenges to food sovereignty “is having food availability. Is there food within the reservation that can be accessed?... Can you afford to buy it?,” even with “access to food funds.” Especially in a resort town like Bishop, CA, “they gouge us for everything here. So that’s my main thing, it is available, is it affordable?” Similar Amos Hinton from the Ponca tribe in Oklahoma described, “Our average household income is \$7000 a year. You can tell them all day long to eat healthy, but they can’t afford it.”

Access to land was cited as another challenge in achieving food sovereignty, either for farmland, or for harvesting and hunting wild foods-- something for example that the Muckleshoot tribe is looking to address through the buy back of 96,000 acres of land from a timber company. Stephanie Berryhill from the Mvskoke Food Sovereignty Initiative described how some tribal members moved to urban areas “because of access to jobs,” but their families lost land in the process. Stephanie cites lack of “access to land” as a major factor in limiting the Nation’s ability to be food sovereign. To address this “means that we promote policy, and ultimately tribal laws that will enable citizens to have access to land to grow food.” Otherwise, as Lori Watso from the Shakopee Mdewaketon Sioux described, “if there comes a time where we don’t have access to clean food, or any food, what difference does everything else that you’ve built—it doesn’t matter... if we’re able to develop or reach a point of food sovereignty, we’ll be ok.” Access to land

was seen as imperative in many cases to accessing sufficient culturally relevant food.

Decisions and Choices

Both having the freedom to make decisions about food, and then making good choices were cited as an integral part of what it meant to have food sovereignty. Julie Garreau (Lakota) described food sovereignty as “being able to decide what we eat, grow what we want.” Similarly Zach Paige, who works with the White Earth Land Recovery Project described food sovereignty as a “form of freedom because you are able to grow what you like to grow and eat what you like to eat.” But once that level of choice has been made available, others highlighted the need they felt to help people to want to choose healthy options. Stephanie Berryhill (Mvskoke Creek) described her line of work with the MFSI, “you’re talking about on the most basic level, advocating for people to choose healthier foods to eat.” Similarly Valerie Segrest (Muckleshoot) described food sovereignty as a tool she used as a nutritionist as a “great way of helping people to understand that food choices are their responsibility and it’s their inherent right to choose what they want to eat...food sovereignty is a method of making food choices...it’s about helping people, empowering people to make that choice for themselves.”

At the same time that some interviewees described food sovereignty as providing choices, Don Charnon (Oneida) at Tsyunhehkwa described food sovereignty supported as being supported by the choices people make: “If you really want to exercise food sovereignty, you need to make decisions toward it. You need to make decisions toward it, and by making those decisions you support those entities that grow or make or produce the kind of food that you believe and want in your system, for your family, for your community. So unless you choose to invest in those food places where you consider worthy or acceptable or good places to get food, then they’ll disappear.” The ability to chose to eat healthy foods

needs to be made available to community members, and then they in turn need to take it upon themselves to make those choices to continue to support these types of initiatives.

Control

Part of the issue around independence and access mentioned above centered on notions of control—by individuals over what enters their bodies, by tribes over their own food destiny, and the political power associated with controlling a food system. Several participants recognized the power behind who or what controls your food source, both currently and historically. As Amos Hinton (Ponca) described in recounting his tribe’s history of relocations and rations, “If you think about your tribe’s history you have been controlled for a very long time by food....If you don’t raise your own food someone else is controlling your destiny.” Diane Wilson (Dakota) integrates this message into the curriculum of the Dream of Wild Health program; “Part of this cultural recovery process is the idea that you have control over your own food. One of the things we talk about here is if you want to control people, control their food.” Similarly, Christina Elias who runs the Mashkiikii Gitigan garden in Minneapolis leads discussions in the garden about “controlling people through controlling their food source... when you’re that far away from your food source you’re being completely controlled. You have no independence and no power in your life.” She calls attempts at regulating seed libraries “desperate attempts at controlling us.” For Milo Yellowhair (Lakota), it was the realization that “food can be, and is, used as a weapon,” that led him to get involved in the Slim Buttes Agricultural Project, in an effort to create an independent food source for his community.

Indigenous food projects are seeking to shift the locus of control over food towards both individuals as well as tribal communities, and this was reflected in participants’ definitions of food sovereignty. On an

individual level, Melissa Nelson (Turtle Mountain Chippewa), described the need for individuals to take responsibility for the control they do have over what goes into their bodies: “It’s one of the few things as human beings that we actually have absolute control over. We don’t always have control over what we have access to, but what we put in our mouths we really do. So to me, food sovereignty at the individual level is how we treat our bodies and our landscapes and what we put in our bodies, controlling the foods and waters and beverages that we intake.” The sentiments expressed above around being able to “feed one’s self” also speaks to the desire for individual control over food sources.

On a tribal level, participants described food sovereignty as only becoming possible if the Tribe both as a government, and as a community, takes control of their food system. Lilian Hill (Hopi) from the Hopi Tutskwa Permaculture project, described that “what food sovereignty means is for a tribal community to have more local ownership or local control over the food system.” Chuck Hoskins, Cherokee Nation Secretary of State, defined food sovereignty as the tribe taking back control from the corporate agricultural system. It means, “controlling our own food destiny. It doesn’t have to be charted by Monsanto, it doesn’t have to be charted by big agriculture. It can be charted by the same folks that did it generations ago and that’s the Cherokee people.” Similarly, Julie Garreau (Lakota) declared, “Native people have to say ‘We’re going to control this.’ Tribal governments need to create policies and legislation that encourages this sort of thing.”

Part of taking back control of a tribal community’s food system is having jurisdiction over the habitat that supports those food systems. Bob Shimek (Ojibway) explained, “food sovereignty to me is first of all control where your food comes from. Its control of the type of food that’s grown and produced there or grows naturally there. It’s control of that habitat that’s on that particular piece of land.” Grace Ann Byrd (Nisqually) and Romajeane Thomas (Muckleshoot) both described

successes of their respective tribes in getting back land under tribal jurisdiction, which gave them potential to bolster tribal food sovereignty.

In addition to “controlling” land through political jurisdiction, the topic of protecting and sustaining land was seen as integral to food sovereignty. Michael Dahl (Ojibway) from White Earth described how the fight against pipelines that he had been participating in with Honor the Earth was not just about resisting the pipelines themselves, but a fight to maintain a healthy way of living. “Right now our rice and our sugar bushes and our berries, our gathering rights, are the main thing that we still have to our self-sustainability and our healthy living. So we need to protect that with our lives.” Mike Wiggins (Ojibway), who was chairman of the Bad River Tribe at the time of the interview, described food sovereignty as being “rooted in sustainability and the caring for Mother Earth.” Part of this for him was not only supporting sustainable gardening projects for the tribe, but also fighting to protect wild rice beds from a proposed taconite mine. Pati Martinson (Lakota) described that the goal of the Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance (NAFSA) is to help tribes protect everything related to traditional foods. She described that people felt that part of NAFSA’s mission should address “that food needs protection...that is part of sovereignty, a real protection for the seeds, a protection for the land, a protection for the foods, that’s a common goal that should be able to impact those policies.”

Caitlin Krenn who directs the Nisqually Community Garden project described food sovereignty as not just catching and eating traditional foods like fish, “but it means actually trying to sustain the rivers again, the sound, the ocean,” the environment that supports those fish. This philosophy extended to farmland as well. Gayley Morgan (Tesuque Pueblo) at the Tesuque Pueblo farm defined food sovereignty in part as “just making sure your lands are worked on and taken care of. And also the water. And it goes hand-in-hand with the environment too, just the surroundings with the environment, the birds and the bugs and the bees,

everything plays a part in it. Just as long as we have a nice, healthy environment here, is also a piece of sustainable farms.” The importance of sustainable farming and maintaining healthy soil came up in a number of conversations about how to achieve food sovereignty.

Seeds

Working to restore heritage seed varieties to Indigenous garden projects is seen as a primary goal of many of the projects I visited. Woodrow White (Ho-Chunk) described how “We are trying to restore and recover our indigenous seeds now. Everybody’s in a scurry. Well, how much do we have left? Who has them? Let’s get them. Do they still have germinating power? If not, we can share. I mean your tribe lives 100 miles away but hey, it grows good so we will share what we have left. We need to bring these seeds back. It’s saving the seed.”

For Amos Hinton, part of establishing a food sovereignty project for the Ponca tribe was not just planting food, but reclaiming traditional corn varieties, gathering these varieties from seed keepers in other states and “bringing them home.” The foundation of gardening is seeds, and as such for many communities having adequate access to their traditional seed varieties is seen as imperative for food sovereignty. Gardeners felt a connection and obligation to these seeds and the elders and ancestors to whom these seeds connected them. Roberto Nutlouis (Navajo) described that “our work is not because of federal policies or tribal policies, it’s because of our deeper connections to our lands, to the seeds that we have, that our elders passed on to us, that those have to continue.”

The concerns about “control” over aspects of a the food system expressed above also extended to seed sources and a community’s ability to protect heritage seeds from multinational corporations as well as ensure a constant supply of seed for gardens. Regaining “control of our food system” was seen to begin with control over seed sources. Stephanie Berryhill describes how her Mvskoke Creek community has

“definitely lost control of traditional plants,” like the corn to make sofkey, which is now only provided to the community by a non-Native company. She spoke about the importance of “regaining control of our food system, and specifically seed sources,” so they are not reliant on the vagaries of the market for one of their traditional foods. Similarly Angelo McHorse (Taos Pueblo) described that if you can keep your seed from one year to the next “well then, you have a sovereign source. Food sovereignty, you control it.”

Sociologist Jack Kloppenburg (2010:165) has declared, “If there is to be food sovereignty, surely it will be facilitated and enabled by a struggle for seed sovereignty,” a term that arose during several of the interviews I conducted. Indigenous control over seeds comprised an integral part of the definition of seed sovereignty provided by two of the seed keepers I interviewed. Rowen White (Mohawk) directs the Sierra Seeds cooperative, currently serves as the chair of the board for Seed Savers Exchange, and is heading up an initiative to further develop Indigenous seed keeping networks among Haudenosaunee communities, as well as across the Upper Midwest. Seeds are her life. As we sat in the shade by one of her fields in July of 2014, I asked her to define “seed sovereignty,” a word that she used frequently to describe the foundation of her own work, as well as the foundation of food sovereignty more generally. She replied,

Seed sovereignty is to me when you have an understanding of your inherent right to save seed and pass it on to future generations, and that you are exercising it at that same time. It also means that you as a person or as a community are self-informed and dictate your relationship to seed; that says that these are seeds that really do not belong to anyone. They belong to us as a community in the commons but that we can define our relationship to that seed based upon our own values and not the values of anyone else outside of our community. So, that I think is one aspect, sort of an esoteric way of saying it but I really do think seed sovereignty, at the heart, is really just taking back the action of saving seed and keeping it again year after year, generation after generation, so that we can have the

security of knowing that we have seeds that will feed our children and our grandchildren. That we have the means by which to feed our people instead of relying on external sources. So that sovereignty is something that we can take care of ourselves, that we can sort of get back to the way it was before colonization, that we can have some sort of control or say of what foods we are able to put on our table and what foods are available for people to have access to in our communities.

Another Mohawk person who has been active in not only working with heritage seeds but also promoting ideas of seed sovereignty across Indian Country is Clayton Brascoupe, who relocated to his wife's community of Tesuque Pueblo four decades ago, and who has coordinated the Traditional Native American Farmers Association (TNAFA) for over 20 years. As we sat at his kitchen table, surrounded by ears of corn and piles of beans from his gardens, I also asked him to define what seed sovereignty meant to him. His definition also centered on relationships with, and control over, seed:

To me, seed sovereignty means the control of your seeds. So, if you think about it in a different matter, we refer to these as our living relatives. So, we have to have control and ability to protect our living relatives. That's what seed sovereignty means to me. So they can't be molested, contaminated, or imprisoned. When I say imprisoned, I mean perhaps someone will say "this is some interesting stuff," and they grow it up for a few years and all of the sudden they say they own it. That the protection of our living relative, if not, then somebody else may say they own it. They're imprisoned and you can't go visit and plant your relative. Also, if you have the ability to interact with your relatives through these seeds, you also have the ability to feed yourself well.

This was a major concern expressed by participants working with heritage seeds-- how to protect what they saw as both living relatives and community intellectual property, from tampering with or patenting by multinational corporations.

The need to protect seeds from multinational corporations was framed in two ways: as cultural intellectual property that belonged to the entire community and all of the ancestors whose gardens had contributed to the current seed stock, and as living relatives who needed to be treated as such and protected. As Kloppenburg notes, the very nature of property is called into question when Indigenous people reject the very notion of “owning” seeds, which they may see as “antagonistic towards social relations founded on cooperative, collective, multigenerational forms of knowledge production” (Kloppenburg 2010:157). Reflecting on her interviews with both the staff of ex situ seed banks and participants in situ Indigenous seed saving projects, Breen (2015:46-47) describes the difference between the perception of seeds as discrete material objects--“active storage containers of genetic material,” as opposed to viewing “seeds as responsive beings that are inherently embedded within ecological and spiritual webs of kinship,” which highlights an important epistemological difference between the two parties in negotiating the political problems of seeds as property. As seen above in Clayton’s definition, seeds are thought of as “living relatives” rather than property, relatives that shouldn’t be “molested, contaminated or imprisoned.” Seeds were described almost as intergenerational relatives—both as children that need nurturing and protecting, and as grandparents who contain cultural wisdom that needs guarding.

Even though genetic modification and patenting were opposed for slightly different reasons, they are traced to the same common enemy-- multinational agriculture corporations, Monsanto specifically. Lilian Hill (Hopi) insisted that tribal governments need to “take up these issues of food sovereignty” and work to “protect our crops against genetically modified organism or other corporations that want to come in and patent our food crops and heirloom types of corn and things like that.” Rowen described how when she does seed workshops in Native communities “it

is the one thing that people want to talk about, ‘well, how are you going to protect our seeds from Monsanto,’ or ‘how are we going to protect our seeds from patenting?’ There’s no clear answer.” In short, protecting seeds from modification and patenting, and ensuring access to them for community members interested in farming were seen as integral to seed sovereignty, and thus food sovereignty.

Education, and Youth

An important component to these programs that has not been highlighted extensively in the broader food sovereignty literature is the importance and role of education in promoting the movement and improving health related statistics. In reflecting on the work of the Cheyenne River Youth Project, Julie Garreau (Lakota) focused on the need to educate the youth as a solution for health issues: “we just need to change our diet. We just do. And we need to teach our kids now.” She went on to detail how part of that will entail teaching people how to garden and preserve food.

In addition to the actual food being produced, education and knowledge is one of the things that people are “hungry for” in this movement. As Valerie Segrest (Muckleshoot) described to an audience at the Native American Culinary Association conference in the fall of 2013, “what this food sovereignty movement is hungry for is to remember the plants, our foods, the teachings. To share those memories with people, to be active in our food systems, to get your hands in the dirt. Get your head out of a book and focus on the lessons and blessings you’re receiving.” She went on to reiterate at a Food Sovereignty Summit hosted by the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin the fall of 2014, “Food is our greatest teacher, without a spoken word.” She highlighted that “loss of land, loss of rights, environmental toxins and cultural repression impede our ability to access millions of fishing teachings,” as well as those from cedar trees and other natural elements.

Education is seen as not just a goal, but also a responsibility. Roberto Nutlouis (Navajo), who directs a farm project through the Blackwater Mesa Coalition, explained that “we have the responsibility to share that information with the community, and that’s part of our community outreach.” Jeff Metoxen (Oneida) from Tsyunhehkwa described how the purpose of food sovereignty is “to share that information with your community It’s to ensure that the generations to come know this and are learning it...I feel I’ve never stopped learning. I don’t know everything there is to do *with* the white corn; I don’t know everything there is to do *for* the white corn, but we’re learning. And we’re trying to make sure we share that knowledge with our community members, especially with the youth, and hopefully you can instill in them some pursuit of the knowledge.”

Kenny Perkins (Mohawk) noted that the apprentices that he’s teaching through the cultural restoration program are now able to go on to teach others. This is how food sovereignty and cultural restoration will be linked for the community, “the apprentices that we have now are able to go out and teach in the [Mohawk] language especially. They can go to the immersion school, the Freedom School, and teach everything there is to know about horticulture traditionally, culturally, and the new techniques and the modern ways of gardening, and be able to do it all in the [Mohawk] language.”

Several of the projects recognized that the purpose of, and main contribution of, their project to the community was not necessarily in the ability to feed everyone, but through their ability to educate people about how to eat well and grow their own food. For example, on a tour of the Nisqually Community Garden project, Grace Ann Byrd (Nisqually) described the farm’s mission as “providing education, providing food, as well as nutrition.” Similarly Don Charnon (Oneida) described one of the purposes of Tsyunhehkwa is “to be an example or a resource for people who want to grow things.”

Cassius Spears Sr, (Narragansett) who is working with his family to establish a community farm for the Narragansett Tribe, lamented that “a lot of the youth don’t even realize where the food comes from anymore, and the elders are getting separated from working in the soil.” His goal is to bring these two groups together so that the elders can “start to teach and work with the youth again and bring out some of them old ways and old reasons.”

As demonstrated above, the youth are the target audience of many of these food sovereignty projects. People often spoke of “the future generations” that would need to benefit from healthy eating and saved seeds, as well as the youth they were working with who were natural audiences for this information, and who were going to be responsible for carrying it forward to those future generations. After hosting a boisterous group of about a dozen students from the tribal summer program, who had grazed their way through the bean patch and the apple trees, as well as through the wild grapes covering the fence row, Woodrow White (Ho-Chunk) from the Whirling Thunder farm project noted that kids seem naturally inclined to want to eat well and work outside. “They naturally would like to do it anyway, they just need the place and the teachers and they will take off.”

Similarly, Romajeane Thomas (Muckleshoot) highlighted the natural inclination of youth to want to be involved, and the importance of including them in food gathering programs. “The youth just pick it up naturally, they’re ready to get out there, they’re not afraid of hard work. And they’re not afraid to eat right out of the environment!...So any way that we can continue to involve the youth and have them teaching the younger generations and get it back in the classroom.”

Education is an important part of the sustainability of these projects. Amos Hinton, former director of the agricultural program for the Ponca Tribe, described to the Food Sovereignty Summit at Oneida in 2013, “If we don’t educate our children we’re not going to have anything.

They'll be no one to carry it on." With this in mind, many of these Indigenous food sovereignty projects have targeted youth as the focus of their work.

Food Sovereignty as a Movement

As well as being seen as a goal for projects and communities-- to *become* food sovereign-- several participants described food sovereignty as a broader movement, one that was both far reaching and gaining traction in their own communities. Melissa Nelson (Turtle Mountain Chippewa) described the "movement-building" aspect of food sovereignty, which has "many dimensions from the very person to the expansive political legislation." On a local level, participants described a gradual readiness for this movement in their communities. In reflecting on how work around different aspects of food and health have coalesced for him recently, Ken Parker (Seneca) asserted, "I think people are ready for this now. It seems like it's always been there, but now it's a bigger movement." Roberto Nutlouis (Navajo) described his observation that "the Native food movement is penetrating into the communities. People are more aware about it now." He went on to describe campaigns that the Black Mesa Water Coalition had sponsored around GMOs and traditional foods, and the way their organization focused on "continued community outreach. And just pushed the knowledge out there into the communities." In contrast to "the food movement" which Valerie Segrest (Muckleshoot) labeled as being "a little bit elitist," she described that for her own community and others she had worked with, "what this food sovereignty movement is hungry for is to remember the plants, our foods, the teachings."

Seed keeper Rowen White (Mohawk) described her experiences "working in the last over-a-decade in the food sovereignty movement within Indian Country," including with the "seed sovereignty movement" that "rose within our communities." This type of work was also

encapsulated in Zach Paige's description of Indigenous seed alliances and a "network of growers" that is currently coming together to share seed and information, and to support each other.

People who promote these projects also find community in the movement, in coming together for food sovereignty conferences and events. Julie Garreau (Lakota) from the Cheyenne River Youth Project proclaimed excitedly, "The movement is growing." She described the interconnected tribal projects, the likeminded people who meet up at food sovereignty summits "the movement nationally...it's a small community but it's all over the nation." In addition to supporting the groundswell in their own communities, many of these participants recognized themselves as a broader Indigenous movement.

Food Sovereignty as a Process and a Method

In addition to it being a movement, many of the participants I spoke with described food sovereignty as a goal with an extensive timeline, a process or a method, rather than a solidly defined destination that they could arrive at. Chuck Hoskins, in reflecting on food issues for the Cherokee Nation proclaimed, "Look, we didn't get here in a generation. It took many. We didn't get her overnight, so it won't be fixed overnight." Similarly, several other projects described food sovereignty as a goal. Alan Bacock from the Big Pine Paiute Tribe in California described food sovereignty as "a goal worth striving for. It's a vision that I would like to see develop, but it's not going to happen overnight, it's not going to happen in a year, in two years. It's going to take a long time to develop."

Jeff Metoxen (Oneida), in describing his work at Tsyunhehkwa, detailed how the process of working towards food sovereignty is a never ending learning process focused on indigenous language, practices and culture in addition to basic knowledge about growing plants. "With food sovereignty pursuits, you're learning more about your own culture... It's to share that information with your community. It's to ensure that the

generations to come know this and are learning it as well. That's a big part. I look at that never-ending process you are going through. I feel I've never stopped learning...we're pursuing our food security. We're always pursuing our food sovereignty."

On the other hand, rather than even describing it as a goal or a process, Valerie Segrest (Muckleshoot) described to an audience at the 2013 Native American Culinary Association conference, "food sovereignty is a method, getting to a place of decolonizing our diets, revitalizing our traditional food culture." In her 2014 interview she pondered further, "what does food sovereignty look like? I don't think it looks like anything. I think it's just a way of living and making food choices." She describes food sovereignty as another tool, another lens through which she can work as an educator, nutritionist, and community member.

CONCLUSION

Limits of this paper

In this paper, I have discussed perceptions of Indigenous food sovereignty as described by participants in community-based farming and gardening projects that serve Native American communities. I want to acknowledge two limitations of this particular sample for application to the broader Indigenous food sovereignty movement: one, that while some of the participants I spoke with also engage in other types of food-procurement-related activities (foraging, hunting, fishing, etc), this project is specifically focused on farming and gardening projects. The Indigenous food sovereignty movement is also very focused on ensuring access to treaty-guaranteed fishing, gathering, and hunting sites and the protection and utilization of traditional knowledge related to these activities, and in some places has been critical of a version of food sovereignty they view as agriculture-centric (Desmarais & Wittman 2014).⁷ This is due in part to the fact that while horticulture is seen as a traditional activity for some tribal communities (for example the Mohawk, Seneca, Navajo, Ponca and Pueblo communities featured here), for other

tribal nations agriculture was an activity introduced as part of colonial oppression, to further remove Native nations from the land and their traditional food procurement activities (see for example Rudolph & McLachlon 2013). And for some of these communities who include horticulture as a means to their traditional foods, culturally-specific horticulture was forcibly replaced by government programs aimed towards encouraging a more Western form of irrigated, mono-cropped agriculture (Reader and Johnson 2016; Cleveland et al 1995). That said, in an effort in some communities to celebrate their horticultural heritage, and in others to most efficiently use available tribal land, farming and gardening are tools that have been employed to work towards food sovereignty.

The second limitation of this project is that I only met with participants involved in community-based projects, most of which either have official nonprofit status, or operate as such. I did not meet with individual farmers and ranchers who are producing food for an individual profit. Dan Cornelius (Oneida) who works for the Intertribal Agriculture Council, works to connect Native farmers and ranchers with USDA government programs, in an effort to bolster overall food production for tribal communities. He asserted, “The individual producer is so overlooked in the current food sovereignty movement. These [community] programs are critical to helping provide support but we need to get more individuals and families back into production. Look at the number of producers (nearly 72,000) and sales (\$3.2 billion) and casino food service ~\$4.5 billion. Sure, a \$40,000 grant can help run a community garden for a year and can make an impact in how communities think about food, but true rebuilding of our food systems requires thinking about supporting individual and family production on landscape levels.”⁸ A more comprehensive examination of food sovereignty among Native American farmers will need to include the voices of individual for-profit farmers as well.

Defining Sovereignty. It's a Process. That Requires Food.

Anishnaabe legal scholar Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark (2013:343) has described that “because sovereignty is ‘intangible’ and an inherent ‘dynamic cultural force,’ it is crucial that Indigenous peoples define for themselves a vision of their own nationhood and sovereignty, as well as the practical implications that come with this term. By looking to their own epistemologies and practices, Native peoples can put forward definitions of sovereignty that are distinct from United States legal and political definitions of Native nations status that have operated to diminish Native sovereignty and self government.” She describes sovereignty as “deeply intertwined with a nation’s sense of self,” and constantly undergoing transformation to meet the needs of the people of these nations. Rather than limiting sovereignty to “its restrictive legal-political context,” she calls on us to see sovereignty “as a process, or a journey,” citing Vine Deloria who proclaimed, “Sovereignty is a useful word to describe the process of growth and awareness that characterizes a group of people working toward and achieving maturity.” She concludes with the thought that throughout this connection to identity and self, “sovereignty becomes a process rather than a stagnant notion” (Stark 2013:352). Chickasaw scholar Amanda Cobb (2005:125) similarly describes the importance of thinking about sovereignty as a process rather than a final achievement; “By casting sovereignty not only in terms of process, but more particularly in narrative terms, sovereignty becomes the ongoing story of ourselves—our own continuance. Sovereignty is both the story or journey itself and what we journey towards, which is our own flourishing as self determining peoples.”

As described above, many of the participants I spoke with recognized food sovereignty as a movement, but also a process, a method, and a goal to strive for. But in addition, for many of them, an important part of becoming truly sovereign nations in a broader sense

was working towards food sovereignty. Winona LaDuke, despite her criticisms of the term reflected earlier, has reiterated at almost every food-related event that I have seen her speak at; “You can’t say you’re sovereign if you can’t feed yourself.” This aphorism (and stipulation for some) was repeated, and sometimes elaborated on, to me by several of the participants. Food sovereignty was seen as either a marker of achieved tribal sovereignty (as Jeremy McClain from the Bad River Gitiganag project described, “an ability to feed yourself is a marker of true sovereignty”), or as a necessary prerequisite that tribes should work towards before they can claim being sovereign. As Alan Bacock (Paiute) explained, “I would say that you can’t be sovereign if you can’t feed yourself...When we begin to use it (traditional food knowledge) again, we begin to then develop sovereignty once more. Because I don’t believe that you can have that sense of sovereignty without that food connection.” And as Clayton Harvey (Apache) from the White Mountain Apache Ndée Bikíyaa project described, food production is central to the identity of Native nations; “I think about sovereignty and I think about being Native American, and being who you are, and that’s growing your own food.” Rowen White (Mohawk) concludes, “when we are able to control our food sources and really able to dictate our seed and our food, we have a greater sense of sovereignty as a whole.”

When asked to define or describe the concept of food sovereignty, participants from Native American community and farming projects across the United States highlighted a number of features included by the broader food sovereignty movement: the importance of access to healthy culturally relevant food, land, and information; independence for individuals to make choices on their own consumption, for communities to define their own food systems; and desires to keep food dollars within the community. There were also aspects of participants’ definitions that grew specifically out of their own history with the land they were on and the colonial entities their communities had been impacted by.

Participants described the importance of Tribes having the independence and control to provide the foods they see appropriate, grown in a manner that is deemed acceptable for their constituents. Relationships—to the environment, to food sources, and to other people were highlighted, including trade relationships. The ability to sustain the land, as well as cultural lifestyles, was emphasized, and the ability to protect seeds as the living relatives necessary for the continuation of the food sovereignty movement. The importance of education, and working with Native youth was also mentioned as a specific anecdote to addressing culture loss and the ensuing health problems that have made Indigenous communities the subjects of so many public health studies. Importantly, food sovereignty was viewed not as an absolute that can be achieved or not-- as “concepts of food sovereignty can come across as so many impossible ideals of community food self-sufficiency and cultural autonomy,” (Whyte 2016)-- but rather a movement that is carrying these projects towards their goals, a process that participants expect to be undertaking for a great deal of time, and a framework through which they are working towards improved physical, cultural, and economic health.

Figure 1: Sites Visited

- Kanenhi:io Ionkwaienthon:hakie, Akwesasne Mohawk (NY)
- Coushatta Tribe Hydroponic Program (LA)
- Mvskoke Food Sovereignty Initiative (OK)
- Ponca Agricultural Program (OK)
- Cherokee Heritage Seed Project (OK)
- Tesuque Pueblo Farm (NM)
- Pueblo of Nambe Community Farm (NM)
- Traditional Native American Farmers Assoc (NM)
- Native Food Sovereignty Alliance, Taos County Economic Development Corp (NM)
- Red Willow Farm, Taos Pueblo (NM)
- Cochiti Youth Experience (NM)
- Zuni Youth Enrichment Project (NM)
- Cultural Conservancy (CA)
- Tohono O'odham Community Action (AZ)
- San Xavier Co-op Farm (AZ)
- People's Farm, N'dee Bikivaa (AZ)
- Hopi Tutska Permaculture Organization (AZ)
- Black Mesa Water Coalition, Pinon (AZ)
- Big Pine Paiute Tribe Sustainable Food System Development Project (CA)
- Bishop Paiute Aquaculture Project (CA)
- Sierra Seeds Cooperative (CA)
- Native American Youth and Family Center (OR)
- Muckleshoot Food Sovereignty Project (WA)
- Nisqually Community Farm (WA)
- Cheyenne River Youth Garden (SD)
- Slim Buttes Agricultural Development Program (SD)
- White Earth Land Recovery Project (MN)
- Wozupi Farm, Shakopee (MN)
- Spirit Lake Native Farm, Fon du Lac (MN)
- Little Earth Urban Farm (MN)
- Mashikiiki Gitigan Medicine Garden (MN)
- Dream of Wild Health (MN)
- Bad River Gitiganing Community Garden (WI)
- Tsyunhekw^, Oneida Reservation (WI)
- Hochunk Nation Gardening Cooperative (WI)
- Minnesota Museum of Science, Scott Shoemaker indigenous seed curator (MN)
- Food is Our Medicine, Seneca Nation (NY)
- Crandall Minacommuck Farm, Narragansett Food Sovereignty Initiative (RI)

Figure 2: Conferences (25) and Events (3) Attended

- First Nations Food Sovereignty Summit, Oneida WI (October 2013, 2014, 2015)
- Indigenous Farming Conference, White Earth MN (March 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2017)
- Native American Culinary Association Conference, Tucson AZ (December 2013, November 2015)
- Intertribal Agriculture Council Conference, Las Vegas NV (December 2013)
- Terra Madre panels with Indigenous seed keepers, Turin Italy, (October 2014, September 2016)
- Slow Food Turtle Island Planning Meeting, Taos NM (February 2016)
- Slow Food Turtle Island Delegate Meeting at Slow Food Nations, Denver CO, (July 2017)
- Mohawk Seed Keepers Meeting, Six Nations Ontario (April 2016)
- Great Lakes Food Sovereignty Summit, Oneida WI (April 2013, 2014 April 2015), Jijak Camp, MI (April 2016, 2017),
- Food Sovereignty Summit, Red Lake Reservation, MN (September 2016)
- Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance Board Meeting, Albuquerque NM (October 2016)
- Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance Storytelling Project Meeting, Tucson AZ, (April 2017).

Events Attended (3)

- Ponca Corn Planting in Nebraska (June 2014)
- Tohono O'odham Community Action Bahidai Camp, AZ (July 2014)
- Honor the Earth pipeline horse ride, MN, (August 2014)

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¹ The terms “scholar” and “activist” (as well as “community member”) are not meant to be mutually exclusive; an actor could ascribe to multiple or all of these designations

² I was accompanied during a majority of this trip by filmmaker Angelo Baca who is in the process of creating a documentary about the Indigenous food movement from footage he collected while on this trip. This project was sponsored by a Salomon Grant from Brown University.

³ I am distinguishing between “interviews” as sessions during which I sat down with a participant and an interview protocol, and asked a set number of questions, although these sessions were often guided by the participants and their interests as well. During “conversations” and “farm tours,” with the participants’ permission, I kept my audio recorder on during walks that we would take around their farms and gardens, during which the conversation was primarily guided by the landscape and the project at hand, and frequently included multiple people. All participants of “interviews” as well as “conversations” signed an informed consent form asking if they wanted to be named or have their information remain confidential.

⁴ NVivo is software that helps analyze qualitative data by providing the framework to organize and sort interview information into different coded categories established by the researcher.

⁵ “Hopi Farmers Market & Exchange” Hopi Tutskwa Permaculture.
<https://www.hopitutskwapermaculture.com/job-announcements>

⁶ Intertribal Agriculture Council. “Mobile Farmers Market, Trade Routes Roadtrip”
<https://nativefoodnetwork.com/trade-routes/> Accessed August 1 2017.

⁷ There are a number of studies coming out of Canada, specifically Manitoba, that focus on Indigenous food sovereignty in the context of wild foods. For example, see Rudolph & Mclachlan 2013; Kamal et al. 2015; Thompson et al. 2011; Marten et al. 2016.

⁸ Personal communication July 9 2017.