

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Introduction

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6r2402df>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 41(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

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Publication Date

2017-06-01

DOI

10.17953/aicrj.41.3.zappia

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Introduction

Natale Zappia

Perhaps more than any other aspect of indigeneity, or, for that matter, of any society, food clearly and directly reflects myriad historical and contemporary issues. This special edition of the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal (AICRJ)* explores matters both past and present shaping indigenous nations and communities across North America through the lens of *indigenous food sovereignty*—a term quite promising in its ability to unite disparate theoretical foundations and disciplines, but also problematic in its application and questions around the issue of sovereignty. In the most literal interpretation, indigenous food sovereignty refers to securing and maintaining some form of Native independence (economic, cultural, political) through food. But as the authors in this issue point out, “indigenous food sovereignty” takes on many meanings stemming from a variety of contexts.

In recent decades, thanks to the tireless work of food activists, food studies scholars, policy makers, scientists, nutritionists, food justice organizations, farmers, journalists, and many other groups, a vast body of prescriptive literature pertaining to food issues now shapes almost every discussion related to health, energy consumption, infrastructure, trade, diplomacy, and climate change. Many fields of study and their practitioners—including food history, justice, systems, science, and law—have further explored the ways in which marginalized communities of color have rallied around food justice issues as a way to reclaim public space, transform industrialized and polluted neighborhoods, shape more equitable city and regional policies, and fight for

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access to healthy, fresh foods. Much of this work focuses on urban areas where these issues intersect closely with infrastructure, transportation, and housing. At the same time, they ultimately aim to address historical injustices perpetrated against communities of color.¹

For Native communities in North America and across the globe, these food systems also capture the economic, cultural, and historic indigenous processes—food systems archives—encoded in day-to-day processes that shape, preserve, and defend nation-to-nation sovereignty. Yet this global food system now infiltrates nearly every indigenous space in every corner of the planet today. Modern industrial food permeates almost every facet of North American agriculture, water and energy use, infrastructure, urban and rural development, and perhaps most deleteriously, diet. The industrial food system negatively impacting Western culture is amplified across Indian country, where diet-related ailments like diabetes and heart disease are perhaps the most far-reaching legacy of colonialism.

But it is also at this intersection where some of the most important and effective forms of resistance have occurred. Indigenous initiatives to advance food security have overlapped with preserving sovereignty. Across Native America and First Nations communities, indeed across the indigenous Americas, food justice efforts have coalesced around other equity and sovereignty issues, ranging from education and health care to treaty water rights and energy and economic development. Hidden in plain sight, these particular indigenous archives of food systems have much to teach those engaged in food justice issues as well as those attempting to rethink local, regional, and global environments. Indeed, as the contributors to this issue argue, an indigenous *longue durée* continues to shape the modern world.²

These articles explore a wide range of issues related to indigenous food sovereignty—including ecocultural resiliency, repatriation, narrative, process, method, and language—yet all strongly invoke an indigenous foodscape that encompasses Native histories, economies, and environments. Indeed, accessing this foodscape of technology, land-use practices, political economy, and culture is a vital task that will guide humanity through current ecological crises, including making a smooth energy transition, overcoming food scarcity, and diverting irrigation away from fossil water and towards indigenous models of smart growth. An indigenous foodscape, then, provides a comprehensive and far-reaching set of archives that situates indigeneity at the heart of US and world history while simultaneously empowering Native America.³ Traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) practitioners have already begun meeting these challenges, working with state and national agencies, non-governmental organizations, and policy makers to maintain more sustainable environments. At the same time, tribal governments have employed TEK to address inadequate access to healthy and culturally resonant food systems. In parallel ways, both on and off the reservation, indigenous communities on Turtle Island or North America are currently wrestling with similar food justice issues.

As the fight for food sovereignty reflects the unique nation-to-nation relationship with the United States, Canadian, and Mexican governments, scholars interested in indigeneity as well as those active in food justice can benefit from exploring the

multidimensional aspects of indigenous health, history, policy, law, and sovereignty through the lens of food. This *AICRJ* issue focuses on four overlapping areas between indigenous and food studies: political sovereignty, health, economic revitalization, and culinary foodways. Each essay further points to potential food justice tools to overcome historic trauma, strengthen sovereignty, and sustain community health.

What follows includes an exploration into this nexus of history, policy, and action by identifying and exploring the indigenous food systems, stories, process, “sovereignization,” and action. Our contributors tend to different “gardens” across Indian country and herald from multiple disciplines, including history, anthropology, literature, ethnoecology, sociology, and cultural studies. All of these scholars place their work within the community and are action-oriented. They get their hands dirty, and the results are insightful, powerful, even revelatory.

Their work involves some of the more typical projects such as protecting seeds and other agricultural products generated by Native communities, but they also identify overlooked archives including technology, land-use practices, “story banks,” and exchange networks inscribed in the cultures and landscapes of Native North America. Many of their sources are difficult to locate and somewhat translucent—hidden in plain sight—like much of the food systems that sustain us. Yet revealing this indigenous foodscape (which is itself a reflection of Native concepts of land and place) affords many opportunities to arrive at a more accurate and equitable historical narrative.⁴

Before taking the journey through this space, it might be useful to define “food system.” In recent decades, the term captured numerous relationships shared among producers, consumers, political entities, infrastructure, transportation, and environments. Activists and food studies scholars employed the phrase to identify inequities in urban landscapes (e.g., food deserts) and map out economic and racial segregation. But food systems are also intensely local and thus lend themselves to effective comparative analysis. Different regions evince divergent or overlapping methods of land use, trade, environmental degradation, and preservation. Particular food products (like domestic animals or crops) may act as bundles of information revealing historical patterns of human and environmental interactions.⁵

Perhaps the most important and far-reaching commodity in world history, maize provides a fitting entry point into this conversation. Maize will surface at many points in the following essays, and for good reason. Within twenty years, this indigenous commodity will surpass wheat as the most widely produced and consumed commodity in world history. This feat is even more remarkable when thinking about the spatial and temporal history of maize. In less than five centuries it has jumped from the Americas to almost every corner of the planet, completely redesigning the foodways of cultures throughout Europe, Asia, and Africa. As much or even more than its starchy grass cousins (wheat, rice, rye), maize fueled other global networks, powering human and animal energy (and more recently cars via ethanol) that produced other valuable commodities like sugar, rice, and cotton. In the North American diet today, maize is so ubiquitous that most of our bodies can be traced to this pervasive grass. The spread of a genetic variation of maize (known as dent corn) has come under fire in recent years as local indigenous and other organic maize cultivators have attempted to preserve

heirloom varieties, as Christina Hill discusses in detail in “Seeds as Ancestors, Seeds as Archives: Seed Sovereignty and the Politics of Repatriation.” The battle over seeds and sovereignty, then, has become the frontline for those hoping to overcome the monopoly over maize culture.⁶

So ubiquitous is maize’s role in the global food system that unless one is familiar with the battle over genetically modified seeds, its deeper ecological and indigenous history has been divorced from the actual product. Unlike any other staple commodity, maize completely relies upon human intervention to fertilize and disseminate its seeds. The very design of its husk—large, heavy, and bulging with seeds that are enormous compared to other grasses—would seem to undermine its chances at seed dispersal. This is how its distant ancestor teosinte was grown thousands of years ago. Direct indigenous manipulations dramatically transformed maize into a crop serving human needs. And these needs varied somewhat from region to region and among Native cultures, revealing a kaleidoscope of indigenous maize stories that overlap but also contain unique ontologies. Contrast this with wheat—which looks relatively the same as it did ten thousand years ago when it became domesticated—and the human influence is even more vivid.

Within the very shape and design of the seed, then, lay the historical agency of indigenous maize cultures. In a tangible way, a seed stores a set of genetic instructions that are released only when the ideal ecological conditions are met. But after germination, the survival and success of maize also relies on a set of complementary conditions that also require human interventions. Indigenous maize cultures emerged in places where draft animals never played a role in agriculture. Yet, as a “heavy feeder,” maize required a great deal of nitrogen. In Afro-Eurasia, animals provided nitrogen in the waste they produced, which farmers worked back into the soil. In the Americas, complementary planting provided the solution. Legumes (pole beans, for example) drew nitrogen from the air and soil to their roots, nourishing maize growth. Maize in turn supported legume vines. Other crops, such as squash, further protected soil exposure and erosion around maize. This triumvirate-planting regime (known as the “three sisters”) spread throughout the Americas, experiencing a true revolutionary expansion in North America after the eighth century.⁷

Unlike wheat, maize required a sophisticated knowledge of soil ecology, companion planting, and hoe technology, which disturbed less soil and preserved the microbiology of the soil. These skills moved from village to village, region to region, through instruction, narrative, and visual culture. This core set of ecological principals further complemented food systems that similarly required close attention and management of the soil. As a result of these carefully constructed agro-cultural landscapes, as the Haudenosaunee agronomist Janet Mt. Pleasant has decisively shown, maize outperforms wheat and rice in almost every category—bushel per acre, nutrient density, moisture retention, and soil-erosion reduction. Similar metrics can be found within the potato—also an indigenous agro-cultural system exported globally.⁸

Although much of the scholarship by early Americanists points to the displacement of maize by wheat production as a result of European colonization, a closer look at the typical European farm proves otherwise. Maize continued to dominate,

its role shifting to forage for domestic animals or for making whiskey. The very ubiquity of whiskey in the early United States points to the paradox of plentiful maize.⁹ During the earliest encounters between Natives and non-Natives, maize played a crucial role in keeping colonists alive, and maize diplomacy colored all of the earliest political-economic exchanges (Coronado's expedition is but one clear example). As with many other now-ubiquitous indigenous products (e.g., tobacco, cocoa, tomatoes, potatoes, pemmican, chiles), TEK proved vital in disseminating instructions in order to consume, produce, transport, and store maize. These knowledge systems were protected intellectual material containing encoded gendered paradigms, labor systems, and histories. Local decisions determined whether or not non-Natives could receive this privileged information. When layering this process into the traditional archival explorations into early American encounters, a fresh interpretation emerges, one that accounts for the power of indigenous communities despite the waves of demographic destabilization.¹⁰

Even more powerfully, the indigenous techno-cultural histories bound up in maize provide direct access to strategies maintaining genetic diversity in the global food system. During the Green Revolution after World War II, corporate agronomists instructed indigenous farmers in North America and across the global south to ignore or even eradicate this archive in order to rapidly produce genetically modified strains, utilize petro-chemicals, and rely primarily on patented seeds. While multinational corporations (the most notorious being Monsanto) continue to vigorously pursue this practice, indigenous seed savers have increasingly challenged this approach by working directly with seed banks and agencies interested in accessing and preserving this threatened indigenous archive.¹¹

But the seed is only one angle, one entry point into understanding indigenous food sovereignty. In the second essay, "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 takes a multifaceted approach. Hoover speaks from her experiences on the ground with local indigenous practitioners in her twenty-thousand-mile journey across the indigenous foodscapes of the United States. While she argues that food security and sovereignty can be found in seeking a process rather than a final goal, Hoover ultimately sees self-determination as reciprocal with food sovereignty. Without the ability to feed oneself, she argues, there is no sovereignty. Although situated within the context of Native America, this essay equally admonishes first-world consumers who are disconnected in varying degrees from their own food systems.

Christina Hill's analysis of the powerful role of seeds, "Seed Sovereignty and the Politics of Repatriation to Native Peoples," links concepts of seed sovereignty with issues of repatriation. Reasoning that repatriation continues to shape the relationship between tribal and non-Native governments, Hill sees seeds as a necessary link in the continuum towards indigenous sovereignty. In her view, repatriation involves fostering the correct relationship between people, seeds, and seed keepers.

While not as widely dispersed as maize, *manoomin* (wild rice) has played a pivotal role in much of Native North America, particularly centered around the Great Lakes region. Amelia Katanski's "Stories That Nourish: Anishinaabe Wild Rice Narratives"

explores the history of *manoomin* and the role that it plays in the contemporary indigenous foodscape. But it also addresses another way that food sovereignty links with indigenous sovereignty: through stories. As she argues, stories and seeds provide healthy food and spiritual sustenance, so that *manoomin* is a food that sustains both life and culture. Katanki locates the intimate connections between histories cultivated more than five hundred years ago and *manoomin* practitioners today.

While stories do certainly shape and even nourish food systems, on-the-ground action and tribal economic policies are necessary to expand indigenous food sovereignty. And this is why our issue begins with Devon Mihesuah's "Searching for *Haknip Achukma* (Good Health): Challenges to Food Sovereignty Initiatives in Oklahoma." Mihesuah tackles many of these thorny issues while focusing on Oklahoma's thirty-eight tribal governments. Representing every corner of Indian country and thus a diverse array of culinary traditions, land use and food production patterns, and ecologies, Oklahoma and federal policy have enforced a dietary colonialism disproportionately affecting Native communities. At the same time, though, intertribal dialogue across the state has led to innovative food security and sustainability initiatives with some notable success. Mihesuah traces these efforts, testing the strengths and weaknesses of this movement across Indian country. Perhaps most importantly, Mihesuah tests the assumptions behind "food sovereignty" in order to challenge and encourage tribal leaders to really "get dirty" and maintain the long but necessary journey towards growing food and connecting to traditional foodways.

Morgan Ruelle attempts to define indigenous food sovereignty while framing it within another timely ecological moment on the Standing Rock Reservation. As Ruelle explores in "Ecological Relations and Indigenous Food Sovereignty in Standing Rock," food sovereignty is directly connected to the self-determination of food systems. His paper particularly explores the impacts of the colonial food systems on four Standing Rock elders, but also the ways that tribal agencies, extension services, academic institutions, and nonprofit organizations are working to restore relations with plants and animals used in traditional foods.

Finally, this issue concludes with a deep reflection from the ethnecologist Enrique Salmón. In his piece, "Resilience and Rebellious Memory Loops: Further Musings of an American Indian Ethnecologist," Salmón writes how he has struggled over revealing the layers of knowledge encoded in American Indian thought for a non-Native audience. Salmón points to resiliency theory as a suitable bridge between "long-term memory" and "short-term memory"—linking TEK with ecocultural change. Like the role of story in Katanski's piece, Native communities must protect, innovate, and employ language in order to shore up indigenous food sovereignty. These strategies lead to the "build-up" of cultural capital, which Salmón defines "as either the old ways, traditions, or ancestral knowledge" (128). It also includes "some Native communities and tribes [that] have learned how they were able to immediately adapt to and survive external forces, which has newly organized cultural knowledge innovations" (130).

In Salmón's reflections and all of the other essays, the authors share a commitment not only to fostering indigenous food sovereignty, but engaging in a larger conversation proving that "sacred indigenous knowledge is really just practical knowledge" (132).

During the early waves of the environmental movement in the United States and abroad, non-Native activists misused and mischaracterized various aspects of TEK in order to channel outrage and action against pollution.¹² Indigenous food sovereignty provides a new framework for action that starts from the ground up to let indigenous voices, concepts, and objectives speak directly and clearly to each other and to their non-Native partners.

NOTES

1. For a recent overview of food justice literature, see Garrett Broad, *More Than Just Food: Food Justice and Community Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

2. Fernand Braudel coined the term “*longue durée*” to describe deeper historical relationships between human communities and their environments over millennia. See *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* [two vols.] (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) [rpt. of 1966 ed.]. For the *longue durée* in Native America, see Juliana Barr, “There’s No Such Thing as ‘Prehistory’: What the *Longue Durée* of Caddo and Pueblo History Tells Us about Colonial America,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 74, no. 2 (2017): 203–40; and James Brooks, “Women, Men, and Cycles of Evangelism in the Southwest Borderlands, AD 750 to 1750,” *American Historical Review* 118, no. 3 (2013): 738–64.

3. For recent work on TEK, see Charles Menzie, *Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Natural Resource Management* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006); Laurelyn Whitt, *Science, Colonialism, and Indigenous Peoples: The Cultural Politics of Law and Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Nancy Turner, *Ancient Pathways, Ancestral Knowledge: Ethnobotany and Ecological Wisdom of Indigenous Peoples of Northwestern North America* (Toronto: McGill University Press, 2014); and Beth Rose Middleton, *Trust in the Land: New Directions in Tribal Conservation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

4. For recent work on indigenous food sovereignty and its relationship with indigenous archives, see Enrique Salmón, *Eating the Landscape: American Indian Stories of Food, Identity, and Resilience* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012); Morgan L. Ruelle and Karim-Aly S. Kassam, “Foodways Transmission in the Standing Rock Nation,” *Food and Foodways: Explorations in the History and Culture of Human Nourishment* 21, no. 4 (2013): 315–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07409710.2013.850007>; Elizabeth Hoover, “We’re Not Going to Be Guinea Pigs: Citizen Science and Environmental Health in a Native American Community,” *Journal of Science Communication* 15, no. 1 (2016), https://jcom.sissa.it/archive/15/01/JCOM_1501_2016_A05; Michelle Daigle, “Embodying Self-Determination: Re-placing Food Sovereignty through Everyday Geographies of Indigenous Resurgence,” PhD diss., University of Washington, 2015; Hi‘ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart, “Tropical Necessities: Ice, Territory, and Taste in Settler Colonial Hawai‘i,” PhD diss., New York University, 2016; Charlotte Coté, “Food Sovereignty, Food Hegemony, and the Revitalization of Indigenous Whaling Practices,” *The World of Indigenous North America* (New York: Routledge, 2014); and Devon Mihesuah, “Indigenous Health Initiatives, Frybread, and the Marketing of ‘Non-Traditional’ American Indian Foods,” *Native American and Indigenous Studies* 3, no. 2 (2016): 45–69.

5. For an excellent overview of the food systems historiography, see Jeffrey Pilcher, *Oxford History of Food* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Other notable recent works include Michael Dietler and Brian Hayden, eds., *Feasts: Archaeological and Ethnographic Perspectives on Food, Politics, and Power* (Mobile: University of Alabama Press, 2010); and Brian McWilliams, *A Revolution in Eating: How the Quest for Food Shaped America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). For notable

examples of commodity biographies, see Mark Kurlansky, *Salt: A World History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003); and *Cod: A Biography of the Fish That Changed the World* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998); Judith Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); and Sydney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Penguin Press, 1986). For the modern industrial food system, see Michael Pollan, *Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007).

6. For recent works on maize history, see Anthony J. Ranere, Dolores R. Piperno, Irene Holst, Ruth Dickau, José Iriarte, and Jeremy A. Sabloff, "The Cultural and Chronological Context of early Holocene Maize and Squash Domestication in the Central Balsas River Valley, Mexico," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States* 106, no. 13 (2009): 5014–18, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40455140>; Carolyn Fry, *Seeds: A Natural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); and John E. Staller, Robert H. Tykot, and Bruce F. Benz, *Histories of Maize: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Prehistory, Linguistics, Biogeography, Domestication, and Evolution of Maize* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2009).

7. Michael Blake, *Maize for the Gods: Unearthing the 9,000-Year History of Corn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015). For the maize revolution in North America, see Jane Mt. Pleasant, "A New Paradigm for Pre-Columbian Agriculture in North America," *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 13, no. 2 (2015): 374–412, <https://doi.org/10.1353/eam.2015.0016>.

8. Jane Mt. Pleasant, "The Paradox of Plows and Productivity: An Agronomic Comparison of Cereal Grain Production under Iroquois Hoe Culture and European Plow Culture in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *Agricultural History* 85, no. 4 (2011): 460–92, <https://doi.org/10.3098/ah.2011.85.4.460>.

9. See Reid Mitenbuler, *Bourbon Empire: The Past and Future of America's Whiskey* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016); W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981); and Peter Mancall, *Deadly Medicine: Indians and Alcohol in Early America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

10. For a recent overview of the intersection of evolving food and national narratives, see Jeffrey Pilcher, "The Embodied Imagination in Recent Writings on Food History," *American Historical Review* 121, no. 3 (2016): 861–87.

11. Two recent documentaries—for example, *Seed: The Untold Story*, dir. Jon Betz and Taggart Siegel (Collective Eye Films/Seneca Falls Picture Company, 2016) and *Sunú*, prod. and dir. Teresa Camou Guerrero (2015)—provide powerful accounts by indigenous communities to promote seed sovereignty.

12. Paul C. Rosier, "Modern America Desperately Needs to Listen": The Emerging Indian in an Age of Environmental Crisis, *Journal of American History* 100, no. 3 (2013): 711–35, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jat513>.