

TRANSNATIONALISM AS A DECOLONIZING STRATEGY?
'TRANS-INDIGENISM' AND NATIVE AMERICAN FOOD
SOVEREIGNTY

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to analyze how Indigenous communities in the United States have been engaging in trans-Indigenous cooperation in their struggle for food sovereignty. I will look at inter-tribal conferences regarding food sovereignty and farming, and specifically at the discourse of the Indigenous Farming Conference held in Maplelag at the White Earth Reservation in northern Minnesota. I will show how it: (1) creates a space for Indigenous knowledge production and validation, using Indigenous methods (e.g., storytelling), without the need to adhere to Western scientific paradigms; (2) recovers pre-colonial maps and routes distorted by the formation of nation states; and (3) fosters novel sites for trans-indigenous cooperation and approaches to law, helping create a common front in the fight with neoliberal agribusiness and government. In my analysis, I will use Chadwick Allen's (2014) concept of 'trans-indigenism' to demonstrate how decolonizing strategies are used by the Native American food sovereignty movement to achieve their goals.

Keywords: Native American food sovereignty; Indigenous farming; trans-indigenism; transnationalism; cultural resistance.

1. Introduction

The first time I heard the term 'Indigenous food sovereignty' was when I was working on a research project at Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence, Kansas in the Fall of 2011. Although my project was unrelated, I attended as many events organized at the campus as I could, including the

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Haskell Indigenous Food Festival. The Festival hosted a number of speakers from different tribes (as well as non-Indigenous activists) involved in the movement. It is where I first learned about the complexity of the problem of food insecurity in Native American reservations, the ways in which it was being combated, as well as how the solutions were not focused solely on the access to food, but were underpinned by a holistic view of health and wellness and intertwined with other elements of cultural revival. I learned about the importance of recovering traditional tribal foodways and using new ideas and technologies that are in line with a holistic Native American approach to health, food, and the environment.

Food sovereignty can be defined as “the right of people to define their own policies and strategies for sustainable food production, distribution, and consumption of food, with respect for their own cultures and their own systems of managing natural resources and rural areas, and is considered to be a precondition for food security” (Declaration of Atitlán 2002).

Like many food producers and consumers worldwide, Native Americans have suffered from the effects of neoliberal agriculture. Because large-scale agriculture is able to produce food in large amounts cheaply, for decades it has been considered to be the solution to feeding the growing world population and solving the increasing problem of food insecurity, especially in Third-World countries, both by state governments and international organizations. The concern with food security after World War II has led the United Nations General Assembly to declare access to food a human right by incorporating it into the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights (Article 25), at the same time making the provision of food to people the responsibility of the state (Renzaho & Mellor 2010). The definition of food security itself was only introduced in 1974 at the first World Food Conference as the “availability at all times of adequate world food supplies of basic foodstuffs to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption and to offset fluctuations in production and prices” (Renzaho & Mellor 2010: 3). However, large-scale neoliberal agriculture has proven to have a negative effect on many agricultural workers, and populations and the economies of whole countries, as well as on the environment. In the case of Native Americans (and in the case of other Indigenous communities worldwide), the process is often seen as yet another instance of colonization and part of the larger political and economic oppression. Native Americans are statistically the unhealthiest ethnic group living in the United States with obesity, diabetes, and heart disease having reached alarming numbers among indigenous communities. This situation is caused by widespread food insecurity, which may affect as many as 40 per cent of Native Americans (Blue Bird Jernigan et al. 2013: 1), and the group’s genetic propensity toward these diseases when exposed to an American diet (Milburn 2004). These statistics can be attributed to the colonial history of the US and decades of hegemonic policy toward Native Americans – removal from their traditional

lands, relocation to reservations, forced assimilation, intense agricultural production, the resulting inability to practice subsistence farming and cultivate traditional foodways, reliance on nutrient-poor governmental food subsidies, and the continuing pollution of reservation lands and waters by oil and mining companies (Bye 2009). Poverty, which is widespread among Native communities, is at the same time an effect of the misguided policies and a major cause of many of their health problems. Moreover, the majority of Native American reservations fall under the category of food deserts which means that access to healthful food is limited.¹ Another consequence of these processes is the loss of traditional tribal knowledge and ceremonies related to food production and disconnection from traditional food and foodways.

This article focuses on what Chadwick Allen (2014) has termed ‘trans-indigenism’, or inter-tribal cooperation at Indigenous food and farming conferences, seen as spaces for Indigenous knowledge production and validation that help create a common front in achieving food sovereignty in Native American communities.

2. Theoretical frameworks

The transnational turn in American Studies, marked by Shelley Fisher Fishkin’s famous presidential address at the 2004 annual American Studies Association’s conference, shifted “the focus of critical and political attention” from “national and international power to permeable boundaries, political solidarity across borders and identities, and social connections that transcend geography” (Warrior 2007: 807). However, like many other perspectives developed within American Studies (e.g., postcolonial theory), transnationalism has often been contested by some Indigenous scholars – they feel that it fails to incorporate Indigenous points of view, thus leaving Native American Studies marginalized within the discipline (Warrior 2009: 124) and rendering the Native an “absent other” (Huang & Chang 2014: 2). Moreover, nationalism remains an important discursive tool in the hands of Native American scholars in which the struggle for sovereignty is waged. Warrior also argues that the type of comparative perspective that transnationalism highlights is already present in much of Native American scholarship, although it does not necessarily use the same language. Still, many Native American scholars have engaged with transnationalism in a useful and creative way (Warrior 2009: 127). Examples of such work include Shari Huhndorf’s *Mapping the Americas: The Transnational Politics of Contemporary Native Culture* (2009), Maximilian C. Forte’s *Indigenous Cosmopolitans:*

¹ According to the definition of a food desert there is no source of healthy food, such as a grocery store, within 10 miles.

Transnational and Transcultural Indigeneity in the Twenty-First Century (2010), or a volume edited by Taiwanese scholars Hsinya Huang and Clara Shu-chuan Chang, *Aspects of Transnational and Indigenous Cultures* (2014), with contributions from Philip Deloria, Chadwick Allen, and Joni Adamson, among others.

One of the Indigenous scholars who sees Transnational American Studies to be rather useless for Indigenous studies is Chadwick Allen, who instead proposes the concept of ‘trans-indigenism’, or ‘comparative indigenism’, as accurately dubbed by Krupat (2013: 12). The author compares the works of Indigenous art and literature and encourages creating alternative indigenous paradigms instead of trying to adhere to those in American studies. He fears that by entering into a relationship with transnationalism, Native American studies might become subordinate:

We ought to ask whether the scholarly construct of the ‘transnational,’ in its orthodox conceptions and in its typical attachments to dominant formations, such as the (U.S.-based) discipline of American Studies, necessarily implies both a binary opposition and a vertical hierarchy of the Indigenous (always) tethered to (and positioned below) the settler-invader. If the ‘transnational’ does imply this vertical binary, this relationship of asymmetrical power, then we ought to ask whether its deployment as an organizing rubric can result in anything other than a scholarly deracination of the Indigenous, or, equally problematic, and engulfment of the Indigenous within and beneath systems of meaning-making dominated by the desires, obsessions, and contingencies of non-Indigenous settlers, their non-Indigenous nation-states, their non-Indigenous institutions, their non-Indigenous critical methodologies and discourses.

(Allen 2014: 93–94)

He also advocates for comparing Indigenous works of art and literature as “centre to centre” rather than “margin to margin” (Allen 2014: 96). He asks whether a Transnational Native American Studies approach can “facilitate lateral Indigenous connections rather than impose vertical Indigenous-settler (nation-state) relations” and whether “[we] should leave American Studies to its own objectives (including those objectives that involve the Indigenous on predominantly settler terms) and create alternative venues for studies that are trans-Indigenous” (Allen 2014: 103–104).

Although Allen’s considerations concern the position of Native American Studies in relation to American Studies, and the field of Cultural Studies more generally, I suggest that the concept can be used productively with regard to the strategies of the Indigenous food sovereignty movement. In my analysis, I will show how the Indigenous Farming Conference held in Maplelag creates a trans-

Indigenous platform for sharing methods and discourses that put Indigenous goals and epistemologies in the foreground of the struggle for food sovereignty, thereby facilitating ‘lateral Indigenous connections’. As such, it allows to “unsettle the epistemological assumptions that underlie Western socio-political hegemonies” (Krupat 2013: 22) and, at the same time, to assert a global Indigenous identity.² However, I understand trans-indigeneity not just in the sense of connections between Indigenous communities from different countries, but also between Indigenous nations within a country, the United States in this particular case. I believe that such an understanding further undermines the concept of nation-state borders, and thus, the political hegemony of the United States and Canada, in this particular case.

3. Native American food sovereignty movement

In response to food insecurity and health epidemics widespread among Native communities, many grassroots Native American organizations and tribally-run initiatives have been created in the past several decades. They see tribal food sovereignty as the solution to food insecurity and poor health, although their work focuses on different aspects of the problem, such as economic development, cultural sovereignty, or environmental sovereignty. The decolonizing strategies of the movement range from focusing on the execution of treaty rights and recovering of tribal knowledge to educational programs and cooperation with indigenous communities and non-indigenous food sovereignty organizations, both nationally and internationally. The organizations involved in the movement in the US include tribally focused organizations, such as Native Harvest and the White Earth Land Recovery Project on the White Earth Reservation in Minnesota, or the Iroquois White Corn Project of the Iroquois tribes in the North-East of the US and South-East of Canada. When it comes to inter-tribal initiatives, they include, among others, the Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance (which forms part of the larger First Nations Development Institute that focuses on development in all areas, not just food), or Native Seeds, which focuses on the preservation and exchange of seeds between farmers. Furthermore, the organizations and individuals engaged in the movement meet during numerous intertribal events that serve as a platform for exchanging knowledge, networking, and creating new organizations and strategies for seed saving, fighting biopiracy, recovering crops and foodways, and achieving

² Arnold Krupat, himself an important critical voice in the ongoing debate in Native American literary studies, offers a chronological and critical overview of the scholarly discussion on nationalism, transnationalism, trans-indigenism, and cosmopolitanism in his 2013 article in the *Journal of Ethnic American Literature*, excerpts from which I have quoted above (Krupat 2013).

food security. The conferences are attended not just by Native American farmers, but also by farmers from all of Turtle Island (North America), as well as non-Indigenous advocates of food sovereignty. The conferences are, for example, the Great Lakes Intertribal Food Summit organized by the Jijak Foundation, as well as the Annual Indigenous Farming Conference held in White Earth, which, again, will be the subject of analysis in this paper.

In the beginning of March 2016, I participated in the 13th Annual Indigenous Farming Conference in Maplelag, Minnesota. Many people, events, and images from that trip have stuck in my memory – the beauty of the snow-covered wild rice lakes, the delicious local food served, the communal atmosphere throughout the conference, and the many inspiring talks given. Conferences like the one in Maplelag may be considered a trans-national decolonizing strategy of the Native American food sovereignty movement for several reasons: a) they allow for tribal knowledges to be shared, developed, and validated, without having to adhere to Western scientific paradigms b) they strengthen the pre-colonial connections between tribes now divided by national boundaries and allow for the formation of alliances between members of different tribes; and c) they create a space for creating novel ways in the fight against neoliberal agriculture and government.

To exemplify the first argument, I will refer to one of the talks given at the conference. It was given by Terrylynn Brant, a Mohawk seedkeeper, and was titled “Ceremony in agriculture”. The speaker had everyone sit in a circle around her and told many stories from her life and talked about the use of ceremony in her family and community. She focused on blue corn and its importance – its ability to absorb bad energy, which is why people hang it in the doorways of their houses, how they put it on a baby’s lips, and how the first ceremony is understanding how to feed yourself. She also talked about how people have earned the responsibility to be seed stewards and mentioned the importance of protocol in growing corn and swapping seeds. She emphasized that when in doubt, one should ask the community’s Elders to decide and that regardless of how many ancestors are gone, corn is here and ‘our ceremony is here’. Moreover, she talked about creating song in the (Native) language and singing it to the corn in the fields, which is common among many Native American tribes. Last, she said that if you do not know ceremony, you should make it up – ask the Creator, and he will show it to you (Brant 2016).

Terrylynn Brant’s talk honors storytelling as a form of sharing knowledge among Indigenous communities. Margaret Kovach, First Nations scholar of Plains Cree and Saulteaux ancestry notes that “the act of sharing through personal narrative, teaching story, and general conversation is a method by which each generation is accountable to the next in transmitting knowledge” (Kovach 2009: 22). The perspective of Indigenous knowledges may thus be described as relational, meaning it ‘honors the primacy of direct experience, inter-

connectedness, relationship, holism, quality, and value” (Cajete 2004: 66, quoted in Kovach 2009: 22). Second, the story positioned corn as a relation, for which humans are responsible. Furthermore, the responsibility has been earned by humans, which necessitates protocol in their treatment. Indeed, Indigenous relationality has a broader and more inclusive meaning within tribal understanding and does not only concern relationships between humans, but assumes relationships between all life forms that exist within the natural world (Kovach 2009: 34, after Deloria, Jr. 1999). For example, singing songs to the corn in the field is meant to let them know that they are being taken care of and emphasizing creativity in making up new songs encourages keeping the tradition alive despite the fact that many of the traditional songs themselves might have been forgotten. It is also important to note that the relationality of the environment both informs tribal knowledges and is used as a method. As stated by Vine Deloria, Jr. “We gather knowledge by observing the relationships within the natural world” (Kovach 2009: 34, after Deloria, Jr. 1999: 34).

It was not just Terrylynn Brant’s talk that was based in Indigenous knowledge, spirituality, and method. Many of the talks avoided adherence to Western ways of knowing and used tribal knowledges and methods, as did the workshops and cultural events held during the conference. Moreover, the time slots given to the speakers were either 30 minutes, or a whole hour, which allowed for long stories to be told. Story-telling was also one of the evening activities during the conference. Moreover, unlike at American academic conferences, whole families were present in Maplelag, including a large number of children, which also speaks to the importance of community and teaching young generations in Native American cultures.

Next, the conference allowed for the rekindling of pre-colonial connections between tribes now divided by state and national boundaries. For example, members of the Ojibwe tribes, which live on both sides of the American-Canadian border, were able to share food sovereignty strategies on their reservations and discuss ways of bringing large amounts of corn seeds over the border, without having them confiscated by border police. The conference serves as one of the many occasions for the tribal members to meet and strengthen their relations. Histories of how corn was carried all the way up north to what is today Canada and successfully grown there were also shared, and Winona LaDuke, renowned Anishinaabe activist (and co-organizer of the conference), during her talk mentioned how her tribe used to have a dedicated group of people whose only task was to walk down South every year to what is today the Southwest and bring new corn seeds to the tribe (LaDuke 2016). The event was also an opportunity for members of different tribes to create new alliances and networks. Thus, the conference put Native tribes and routes at the center, rather than at the margin of a transnational perspective. As Chadwick Allen states, “Trans-, yes, in

the sense of across, beyond, and through; but not limited to national borders, and certainly not limited to the national borders of contemporary (settler) nation-states” (2014: 92).

My last point, that inter-tribal food conferences create a space for creating novel ways in the fight against neoliberal agriculture and government, can be illustrated by one of the keynote addresses given at the conference by Carolyn Raffensperger, a lawyer and director of the Science and Environmental Health Network (SEHN), a consortium of North American environmental organizations, who has been working with Bob Schimek (the president of Native Harvest and organizer of the conference) for a number of years.

Since the beginning of the United States, the legal relationship between Native American tribes and the US federal government has been defined through treaties. Therefore, treaties, which are part of property law, have been the major avenue through which Indigenous tribes have been negotiating their sovereignty rights with federal government. However, with the increasing cooperation between Indigenous Peoples worldwide and the recognition of Indigenous rights by the international community, e.g., in the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Native American communities in the United States have been turning to international human rights law to fight for their sovereignty. Carolyn Raffensperger’s talk pointed to the large potential in international human rights law to support Native American food justice causes, the inextricability of food sovereignty and environmental rights, and demonstrated the creativity of the activists involved in the movement in seeking novel ways to achieve their goals.

Raffensperger talked about how her organization has come up with a new environmental institution – the Legal Guardian for Future Generations (Raffensperger 2016). The provision was created in collaboration with the Harvard Law School’s Center for International Human Rights over a period of 2.5 years (Raffensperger 2009). The Guardian could implement the rights of future generations to inherit a habitable planet. The ideas underpinning in that new institution are a rights-based approach to environmental law and granting legally enforceable rights to future generations (Raffensperger 2009). The inspiration for the new institution was the Bemidji Statement on Seventh Generation Guardianship, “a statement about taking seriously our sacred right and duty towards future generations” that SEHN crafted together with the Indigenous Environmental Network in 2006 (Raffensperger 2009). It is a development of the precautionary principle, which is also in line with the Haudenosaunee decision-making process that considers the impact of the decision on the seventh generation. The concept of ‘seven generations’ is also present among other North American tribes.³ SEHN has created a model statue

³ Although this understanding is slightly different from its original meaning – the seven

and constitutional provision granting future generations a legal, enforceable right to a healthy and clean environment. The Provision includes “Principles of Perpetual Care” and can be adopted by councils, cities, states, or any other governmental body to shape its environmental policies. It has also produced a document describing mechanisms, like the legal guardian for carrying out the rights of future generations (Raffensperger 2009).

The Institution of the Legal Guardian of Future Generations adds yet another dimension to the trans-national perspective of the Native American food sovereignty movement, where activists are reaching to international human rights law to implement an Indigenous view of environmental stewardship and accountability towards future generations into public policy that can be used by all tiers of government and benefit everyone, not only Indigenous communities. Implementing such a constitutional provision could bring an important element of Indigenous epistemologies into American law, thus shaking the hierarchy of power between Native communities and government, and putting Indigenous knowledge at the center.

4. Conclusion

As pointed out by Philip Deloria, “scholars of transnationalism did not imagine such a thing as an ‘internal transnationalism’, a story that was not concerned with global gaps and movements, but with the ‘nations within’ (Deloria, Jr. and Lytle 1984)” (Deloria 2014: 24). He concludes that these nations or “spaces” have a lot to offer to the discussion, regardless of how one defines the term ‘transnational’. Indeed, Native American communities and activists behind the food sovereignty movement have much to offer to the discussion on food sovereignty in the United States. Conferences like the Indigenous Farming Conference in White Earth allow create spaces for Indigenous knowledge production and validation, foster cooperation across tribal and nation-state borders (often re-kindling precolonial connections), and promote new ways of fighting for food sovereignty and the environment, for instance, by creating new legal institutions based in international human rights law that allow to turn Indigenous perspectives into public policy.

The examples above illustrate how the Indigenous Farming Conference succeeds in creating a transnational discourse that puts Native knowledges, cultures, institutions, goals, and critical methodologies at the center, without having to adhere to Western paradigms of thought and entering into an asymmetrical relationship of power with American scientific and scholarly

generations you should protect and revere are the ones which you are most intimately connected to, including your ancestors (e.g., through honoring their teachings). See, for example, Wilkins 2015.

discourse on food security and sovereignty. It is through this transnational discourse that the conference creates, as well as the trans-Indigenous connections that it encourages, and the novel legal instruments supporting Indigenous epistemologies that it promotes, that the vertical hierarchy of ‘Indigenous beneath settler-colonial’, to which Chadwick Allen (2014) refers to, is disrupted and the symmetry in the power relation between the non-Indigenous and Western nations is restored. Therefore, the Conference may be considered a decolonizing form of transnationalism.

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