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Bringing a Berry Back from the Land of the Dead

Coast Salish Huckleberry Cultivation and Food Sovereignty

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If you get sick, eat your traditional foods. You have to feed your Indian. Native foods feed your body, but they also feed your spirit.

—Hank Gobin, Tulalip

Swadaʔxali: The Place of Mountain Huckleberry

It is August 2015, and a group of eleven middle school students from the Tulalip Indian reservation are spending five nights in the mountains of the Mount Baker–Snoqualmie National Forest. This time has been set aside so that young people have an opportunity to learn from their elders about camping, gathering, tribal history, treaty rights, costewardship of their traditional territories, and the role these mountains historically played in traditional culture and spirituality. The location of the camp is a special one: it is known in Lushootseed Coast Salish as *Swadaʔxali*, or the Place of Mountain Huckleberries.

The Tulalip Tribes are part of the broader Coast Salish community, which today includes nearly 50,000 enrolled tribal members living in reservation communities and reserves throughout western Washington and southwest British Columbia. The Tulalip Tribes comprise those Coast Salish bands and villages who were successors to the signatories of the 1855 Treaty of Point Elliot, including members of the Snohomish, Snoqualmie, Skykomish, and other allied tribes and bands. The treaty ensured these communities a reservation home and it guaranteed them the rights to fish, hunt, and gather in their usual and accustomed places. But of course the present-day reservation encompasses only a small part of the traditional resource territories inhabited by these central Coast Salish communities, which ranged west from the coast and extended east deep into the Cascade Mountains and beyond. With the signing of treaties and the loss of access to some of the families' ancestral gathering sites, the forests were no longer managed as they once had been.

Despite these major historical shifts in land ownership patterns and access, treaty tribes reserved their gathering rights, and huckleberries remain a staple food for Coast Salish people. With over fourteen different varieties, huckleberries come in red and blue and grow at low and high elevations. They are eaten fresh, dried in cakes, canned, frozen, and some leaves can be made into tea.¹ Black huckleberries (also known as big huckleberry or mountain huckleberry), in particular, were a historically prized trading commodity throughout Puget Sound and along the Columbia River.² They were so valuable, in fact, that much of the summer season was devoted to their harvest, as families spent weeks or even months in the mountains, gathering at their traditional sites.³ As Warren King George explains,

Our beloved Mother Nature provides us Salish Sea Natives with an array of precious traditional food gifts . . . Of all the gifts there is one that can be assured to be covered by all Salish Sea Natives . . . the precious Huckleberry or *s.wedax* in Southern Puget Sound language. Some individuals use specific indicators in the lower elevations of their villages to signify when it is time to make the annual pilgrimage to their favorite harvesting site, or as I like to refer to it, their very own "Huckleberry Heaven" which can be located anywhere between 3,500 to 6,000 feet above sea level. Indicators vary and will depend upon the individual. Some use the call of the Red Winged Flicker or some use the Fireweed plant to

notify them that it is time to pull their baskets out of storage and prepare for approximately three weeks of gathering one of mother nature's most delectable and nutritious treats. The berry to this day is considered by some to be worth its weight in gold. The nutritional value alone places this food gift in a very unique category, the medicinal properties of which can address some extremely serious health issues among Native Communities in the 21st century.⁴

Indeed, the health benefits of huckleberries are highly praised. Ethnobotanists, archaeologists, and contemporary nutritionists agree that huckleberries provide a key component of the healthy Coast Salish diet. As Valerie Segrest (Muckleshoot tribal nutritionist) and ethnobotanist and herbalist Elise Krohn have argued,

Huckleberries are one of the healthiest traditional foods, and quite possibly the reason that many Native elders lived to be over 100 years old. They are considered an anti-aging food . . . Antioxidants within the plant protect body tissue from damage by "free radicals" within the cell wall. They prevent inflammation and increase tissue strength. Additionally, huckleberries are one of the only fruits that does not raise blood sugar. All fruits contain natural sugars, but huckleberries have a compound that actually lowers blood sugar . . . making them a perfect food for diabetics.⁵

Tulalip Forestry Manager Jason Gobin explained the rationale for the proposed 2015 youth camp at *Sweda?xali*: "One of the most important things about Mountain Camp is getting our youth back into their mountain areas, and educating them, so they understand they have treaty rights there."⁶ Working with huckleberries means learning their stories and songs. It means learning how to make the traditional baskets used for harvesting. It means bringing young people and elders out of the relatively urbanized context of the reservation and its surrounding cities. And it means reminding the Tulalip people that they are also people of the mountains.

Huckleberry cultivation also occurs within Coast Salish tribal gardens around the region. While mountain huckleberries can only be grown at high altitudes above three thousand feet, other varieties grow well at lower elevations, and are featured prominently in community gardens such as

those at Tulalip, Muckleshoot, and Nisqually.

The Nisqually community garden was purchased by the tribe over fifteen years ago as part of a restoration project for salmon habitat on the Nisqually River. In addition to growing food and medicine for those living on the reservation, the garden also serves as an educational facility, offering instruction in harvesting and preparing traditional foods. It is adjacent to a ceremonial longhouse, where community members gather for meals and events. The garden currently grows three-quarters of an acre of vegetables, with an additional one-half acre of traditional medicines, as well as a grove of berries and fruit trees.⁷ During a visit, the Nisqually Community Garden program supervisor was asked about her favorite plant. She gestured toward the huckleberries. "The berries," she said. "Because [unlike the annuals] they're here year after year, growing and changing. I love seeing people coming up here every season, every year, working with the plants and seeing how they change. And besides, everyone loves berries."⁸

The past decade has seen a virtual explosion in tribal community gardening projects throughout Puget Sound, inspired in part by Northwest Indian College's remarkable Traditional Plants and Foods Program, which supports food sovereignty initiatives around Coast Salish territory. These initiatives include community gardens, kitchen gardens, classes, workshops, and symposia.⁹ The Native Berry Garden at the Northwest Indian Drug and Alcohol Treatment Center is one such project, where patients have the opportunity to grow, harvest, and prepare huckleberries. As Traditional Foods Educator Elise Krohn, argues, "If you want people to heal, you have to treat them within their own culture, and a part of that culture is the use of native plants. If people can remember where they come from and what traditions are a part of their culture, that is where the healing begins."¹⁰

Huckleberries in Coast Salish Religious Traditions

In addition to their obvious health benefits, huckleberries also play an important role within Coast Salish religion and culture. The berries themselves have traditionally been honored in a Huckleberry Feast every summer. Culture bearer and ceremonial leader *Subiyay* (Gerald Bruce Miller) described four ceremonies necessary to maintain the balance of the Coast Salish world: the Huckleberry Feast, First Salmon Feast, Elk

Ceremony, and Cedar Ceremony. These ceremonies ensured that the people cultivated a spirit of humility and gratitude, and helped people maintain a harmonious relationship with the plant and animal people.¹¹ These first foods ceremonies were given after a time of great conflict, when human beings were nearly wiped out by their greed, violence, and jealousy. In the midst of a time of great famine, the human people and the animal people played a gambling game (in Coast Salish, *shahad*), to determine who would live. With help from spirit songs of the more charitable plant and animal people, the human beings won. Thereafter, the plant and animal people would consent to become food. Monica Charles, Lower Elwha Klallam, explains the significance of the story this way: "Every day something gives up life so you might live. They all do it knowingly . . . We must give them thanks. This is why we do the traditional first foods ceremony."¹² In 1953, eighty-year-old Chehalis elder Silas Heck described a huckleberry ceremony, in which prayers of gratitude were offered to the Creator "for making these hills, for planting these berries." Only after offering the prayer were the people permitted to begin harvesting berries.¹³

Huckleberries also play an important role within one of the most sacred Coast Salish rites: the Soul Retrieval Ceremony, or *speth'idaq*. Within traditional Coast Salish worldviews, each individual is comprised of multiple aspects of the self: mind, spirit, shadow, soul, and guardian spirit power. Prompted by shock, grief, trauma, or loss, any one of these might depart from an individual and begin its journey to the land of the dead, threatening the life of the individual in question. If this were determined to be the case, a *speth'idaq* might be held.¹⁴ Within the ceremony, a spiritual leader and his assistants would travel to the land of the dead, battle against dangerous obstacles, and return with the patient's lost soul. The rite could take several days, and was one of the most complex and dangerous ceremonies in the Coast Salish tradition. While the ceremony does not appear to have been held for nearly a century, it remains a powerful presence in Coast Salish memory, art, and story, and some spiritual leaders are working to bring it back.¹⁵ Huckleberries were an important part of this soul retrieval ceremony: they were the only food carried by the practitioners on their journey. Sprigs of huckleberries adorned the carvings of the spirit helpers that would accompany the medicine men. And, should one of the healers manage to bring back a berry from the land of the dead, it ensured both well-being for the patient and the promise of a good berry harvest for the coming year.¹⁶ Huckleberries thus take on a powerful symbolic resonance as plants that ensure health, long

life, and spiritual rebirth and renewal. The Coast Salish are not alone in ascribing particular value and wisdom to Huckleberry. The Yakima, their neighbors to the east, explain that huckleberries, "have great power in the high country. They are the same as good words from the other world. They know everything. They do nothing wrong. They are very wise."¹⁷

"Listening to the Plant People":
Relationships with Plants in Coast Salish Cultures

In order to better understand the significance of huckleberries within Coast Salish traditional cultures, it is necessary to remember that plants are not merely resources, but relatives and ancestors. The Tulaalp are not simply picking berries. They are maintaining millennia-old *relationships with plant people*. In mythic times, plants were people, to whom Transformer (*Dukwibat*) assigned a task: to hold the earth together, to provide food, and to store up wisdom. The plant people were the people's first teachers, *Subiyay* explains, containers of wisdom and memory.

[The plant people] were the first created in our oral tradition, before the animals, before the fish, before the birds, and their duty was to hold the earth together and live their life as a teaching for those who would be created in the future. The plants left many things to us as human beings. They left the ones who would be our food, they left the ones that would be our medicine, they left the ones that would be our building material, they left the ones that would be our basketry material, they left the ones that would be the scent and fragrance of the sacred in this universe, they left beauty and they dressed the earth. The earth was bare before the plant people were created.¹⁸

Coast Salish foodscapes reflect an edible and simultaneously relational landscape, populated with different peoples—plants, animals, and natural features that themselves have spirits and agency in the world. Plant and animal peoples are integral in the origin stories of many Coast Salish groups, where various bands and tribes are descended from particular plant and animal people.¹⁹ "The tree people," describes Upper Skagit elder *Taq'šablu* (Vi Hilbert), "are our elders."²⁰

For all of these reasons, plant medicine has as much to do with the

prayerful process of gathering as it does with biochemistry. An herbalist at a south Puget Sound Native women and girls' gathering had this to say about working with medicinal plants: "Medicines are prayed for, and they reveal themselves to a person's spirit. It's their spirit that makes them effective. It's the relationship with the plant that makes them work . . . I thought that was just an old bush, a shrub, that that plant over there was just a weed. But no, I learned, Creator put spirit in everything, and it's the spirit that heals."²¹

Another way to explain this sense of kinship with huckleberries and other plant people is to consider the idea of *shxweli*. The Coast Salish of the Fraser River Valley use the term *shxweli* to explain their kinship relationship with the plant and animal people. In the era of the mythic Transformer, all persons were assigned tasks: some to be plants, some to be animals, some to be mountains or powerful rock formations. All things that were originally "persons" share in this spirit or life force or *shxweli*. From this perspective, plants and animals are not "simply regarded as food and a resource," but instead "like an ancestor." Sto:lo elder Rosaleen George puts it this way.

Shxweli is inside us . . . it is in your parents . . . then your grandparents, your great grandparents, it's in your great-grandparents. It's in the rocks, it's in the trees, it's in the grass, it's in the ground. *Shxweli* is everywhere. What ties us? . . . It's the *shxweli*. . . . So our resources are more than just resources, they are our extended family. They are our ancestors, our *shxweli*. . . . Our Elders tell us everyone has a spirit. So when we use a resource . . . we have to thank our ancestors who were transformed into those things.²²

Within the Coast Salish worldview such notions of relationship and responsibility do not end with the human community. The idea of *shxweli* requires that all spirits be treated with utmost respect, and encompasses the reciprocal relationship that exists between human people and plant people. The plant people who give themselves up so that the Coast Salish may eat do so out of compassion for the needs of the human people. "Such a view demands that one show reverence, care and respect when harvesting food and disposing of waste, taking care so that the plant or animal in question will be able to renew its life, providing food for future generations."²³ This sense of interconnection with all things raises the obligation to interact

respectfully with food resources so as to properly honor the lives they have given up. The act of eating for Coast Salish people thus evokes and makes visceral those relationships that define one's life.

At the Nisqually community garden, one Nisqually tribal member shared her views on the spiritual practices associated with gathering food, which included praying, giving offerings, and properly preparing before gathering. They emphasized that the Nisqually are "people of the grasslands, people of the river"—that is, quite literally, descended from the grasslands and the river—and as such, have a responsibility to tend to their relations on the prairies and in the waters.²⁴ This individual explained that while many of the plants she harvests are for eating, such as wild strawberry, salmonberry, licorice roots, camas bulbs, and nettles, many are for making baskets or for medicines, such as cedar bark, cherry bark, black moss, and devil's club—and that all are sacred. To such participants, the act of gathering and cultivating traditional plants is a religious activity, explaining their relationship to resources in the following way:

When you go gathering, you want to be in a good way—never angry, never upset—but it's hard to stay upset with plants, you know, because they sure have a way of taking it—that—out of you. They give you oxygen, they make you feel good, they bring you life . . . So you give an offering, whether it's water, tobacco, food. Sometimes if you don't give an offering, you know, you can get, you can a little bit get hurt, and that's just their way of taking the offering. Just a little scratch . . . When I gathered cedar, I went in a good way, and I gathered and I found a deer antler in the woods. And just this last week, I was gathering nettles in a patch, and I found another deer antler . . . You go gather these things, gifts are given.²⁵

Here, gathering food at the farm is as much a spiritual experience as gathering in the woods; the plants she interacts with in both settings are sentient beings that must be treated with respect so that the gatherer may receive sustenance in turn. When one forgets the proper behavior for interacting with plant people, the result is physical injury; the plants' own way of "taking the offering." However, when the reciprocal nature of *shxwél* is observed, "gifts are given." The Nisqually community garden is thus not only providing culturally appropriate foods that the tribe does not have access to or that are in diminishing supply, but it is also providing a spiritual outlet through the foods it grows and the opportunities for

harvesting those foods.

Traditional Coast Salish elders still educate young people by encouraging them to spend time with the plant people, to seek spiritual growth "in the vast expanse of old-growth forest, gathering plants and preparing medicine."²⁶ And this is one reason why protecting and restoring habitats such as *Swedax'áli* is so important. As *Subiyay* goes on to say, "Protecting the environment is essential, because the Skokomish spiritual philosophy focuses not on events but on relationships with entities like the earth, water, air, animals, and plant people. Maintaining this symbolic connection is important to the survival of our traditional culture, because a spiritual relationship with other life forms pervades all aspects of our life."²⁷

Valerie Segrest, Muckleshoot Food Sovereignty project coordinator, explains that one of her primary goals is to help the community gain access to "the cultural teachings of our most revered traditional foods."²⁸ It is important to note that she does not say teachings *about* the foods, but the teachings *of* the foods. The foods *themselves* have wisdom to convey. As she writes elsewhere, learning these lessons can change lives. "Every plant and animal is thought to carry its own spiritual gifts, and the methods to honor these with prayers, songs and ceremonies are passed down through the generations. When young people become the caretakers of this knowledge, it gives them an important role and purpose in society."²⁹

Not Your Hipster's Huckleberry:

Food Sovereignty and the Alternative Food Movement

Having discussed the importance of huckleberries and other plants within the revitalization of Coast Salish foodways, we would like to pause a moment to consider how this case study sheds light on broader ethical issues within the predominately Euro-American alternative food movement (AFM). In their article "Environmental and Food Justice: Toward Local, Slow, and Deep Food Systems," Teresa Mares and Devon Peña begin by discussing a recent conversation between Peña and a friend. The friend, a vegan activist committed to "slow food," explained her personal food philosophy as a series of intimate connections between her plate, local farmers, and the land. She ate only local, organic, plant-based foods like grains, vegetables, fruits, and nuts from farmers or gatherers she knew personally, and every meal she ate was cooked from scratch. She prided herself on avoiding not only the animal suffering prevalent in the industrial food system, but also much of the human suffering caused by both animal food production and

low-quality farmworker conditions in the United States. However, when asked about local Native American foodways, she drew a blank.

Mares and Peña argue that the way their vegan friend constructs ethical food consumption is shallow, overestimating and simplifying the impact she has had on her own ecological "footprint" and ignoring her very privileged position to make such consumption choices. Her narrative omits the fact that she, and the mostly white farmers in the Skagit Valley that she takes pride in buying from, are benefiting from a long history of colonial and structural violence against Native peoples. Her idealization of an agricultural past of slow meals and local foods in the United States is not accessible to everyone, and in fact for many may signify histories of displacement, indentured servitude, and slavery. "Should we not also," Mares and Peña question, "consider how a call to eat locally invokes spaces that have been settled, colonized, ruptured, and remade through complex processes of human movement and environmental history making?"³⁰

The (predominantly Euro-American) alternative food movement is represented by such diverse organizations as farmers markets, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), food co-ops, urban garden projects, and organic farms and farmers, and can be characterized by three values. One of the core values of the movement is a "back-to-the-land" rhetoric that celebrates a simpler style of living. This involves preparing meals from whole food ingredients and having either a physical or interpersonal relationship with local foodways. Second, the AFM employs a universal rhetoric, which maintains that the values it supports, specifically with regards to consuming local, organic, and natural foods, will benefit the health, social well-being, and environmental safety of everyone.³¹

Such an approach, however, with its emphasis on individualism and individual choice, can serve to occlude collective responsibility and the need for systemic change. Indeed, a third value the AFM emphasizes is personal change in consumption habits in order to live out the values it advocates. Advocates of alternative food argue that by buying socially and environmentally responsible food, this food is made more accessible to others; as Michael Pollan says in his book *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto*, "Not everyone can afford to eat high-quality food in America and that is shameful; however, those of us who can, should."³² By contrast, the Indigenous food sovereignty movement supports a broader definition of the human "right to food," one that is informed by the history of colonialism, demands tribal sovereignty, and recognizes the importance of food in cultural, spiritual, and community revitalization.

Back to Whose Land?

Cultural Geographer Julie Guthman has argued that the alternative food movement, especially farmers markets and CSAs, are fueled by what she calls "whitened cultural histories" that place an emphasis on individual ethical food choices as a mechanism for change. Such an approach not only assumes a universalization of these "whitened" values and ideals, but ignores the larger structural and historical biases that have prevented Indigenous people from having control over their food choices. One of the most salient discourses in the alternative food movement is the idea of going "back to the land," expressing a desire to reconnect to an agrarian past, and idealizing those who have managed to do so (i.e., small-scale, local farmers). In her article "Unsettling Ecocriticism: Rethinking Agrarianism, Place, and Citizenship," Janet Fiskio discusses the tenets of what she terms the "agrarian myth," an idea that upholds the cultivation of an intimate relationship with the land and a sense of place through long-term habitation and physical labor.³³ Fiskio argues that the agrarian myth and the desire to have a connection with land have a long cultural history in the United States. For example, many of the European immigrants to the Americas came because of restrictive land-holding practices in Europe. For them, owning one's own land held a mythic power that bespoke individualism, frontierism, and the American Dream. Thomas Jefferson himself believed that farmers make the best citizens, an idea later echoed by sustainable farming advocate Wendell Berry in the 1970s, who emphasized working the land not only as a form of environmental political statement, but also as a resistance to what he saw as the loss of a "sense of place" among U.S. citizens.³⁴

Barbara Kingsolver's best-selling book, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*, provides an example of this back to the land ideal. Kingsolver chronicles her and her family's decision to eschew industrial foodways for one year in favor of eating only what they can grow, gather, or buy from local sources within a 100-mile radius of their rural farm. "We wanted to live in a place that could feed us," she says, "where rain falls, crops grow, and drinking water bubbles right up out of the ground."³⁵ Kingsolver is a success story of the agrarian myth, someone who forged her own relationship with food by returning to a simpler style of living and a more aesthetic understanding of what good food is.

However, the agrarian myth of a common agriculture background that we must return to is in itself highly problematic and exclusionary

of Native people. Wendell Berry, Michael Pollan, Barbara Kingsolver, and others like them, all appear to overlook an important part of United States history. Historically, land ownership was limited to whites, while Native people were excluded from access to arable land. Under the Homestead Act, for instance, non-Native settlers could petition for 160 acres per person. Native people were excluded from the Act, and only eligible for 80 acres under the Dawes Severalty Act. According to Julie Guthman, "Land was virtually given away to whites at the same time that reconstruction failed in the South, Native American lands were appropriated, Chinese and Japanese were precluded from land ownership, and the Spanish-speaking *Californios* were disenfranchised of their ranches."³⁶ At other times reservation communities were coerced into farming, despite its incompatibility with their local ecosystem. Or, when Native people did show signs of success at agriculture, those lands were often lost as legislation, outright theft, or sharing the land among subsequent generations reduced their holdings to parcels too small to support growing families.³⁷ The fact that returning to traditional ways of working the land is lauded in environmental circles is ironic when one considers that many Native American populations are still unable to access their traditional hunting and gathering territories, and that Native populations espoused these goals long before any food activists did.³⁸ Guthman further argues that the assumption that returning to agricultural roots is a goal accessible to all races shows a lack of cultural competency and historical knowledge, which necessarily, if unintentionally, excludes non-Euro-Americans from the alternative food conversation.³⁹

The alternative food movement is also dominated by a second narrative that is likewise tied to the agrarian myth: the nutritional and aesthetic superiority of organic and "natural" foods. "Organic" is held up as an idealized state of being in food discourse, synonymous with environmental responsibility, human health, and purity. It is also, for many, a status symbol—a way someone can "perform" their social class and standing through the food they consume. Because "organic" is often culturally associated with "expensive" and "white," it can have connotations of elitism and privilege along with its environmental and activist roots.⁴⁰ While shifting toward an organic food system is undeniably vital for a sustainable future on our planet, it is also the reality that ideas about organic food are tied up in a history of racism and classism.⁴¹ In the alternative foodscape today, organic food can serve to differentiate those who have "good" taste from those who do not. It can also very easily serve as a recolonizing gesture,

where Native people are "rescued" by well-meaning outsiders who appear to once again be making decisions on behalf of Native people.

But, one might argue, don't the goals of the alternative food movement align with those of tribal community gardens and Indigenous food advocates? In many ways, yes. But the problem is that many of these well-intentioned organizations don't stop at assuming a universally held (and non-Native) narrative will draw Native and other minority consumers. Instead, their discourse can focus with almost missionary zeal on converting perceived "others" to the local and sustainable food movements, disregarding the distinct histories and cultures of the people they are supposedly serving. This is problematic because such an approach ends up emphasizing personal responsibility for good food practices and preparation instead of seeking systematic change.

Guthman supports this claim, noting that because these organizations promote individual improvement and consumer responsibility to change the market, they also support a system of ideas that has historically disenfranchised Native people.⁴² A fundamental tenet of the alternative food movement is that if just enough people make a commitment to "go local" or "go organic," the entire industrial system will be flipped on its head. When writers such as Pollan claim that those of us who can afford to buy high-quality food should, he puts those who can't afford high-quality food (regardless of the social phenomena that cause this) into the category of "other," outside of our moral consideration.⁴³ By emphasizing that individual changes in eating are solely responsible for changes in the food system, the alternative food movement operates within the framework of neoliberal values and goals, supporting a capitalist system that commodifies both food and people, the very issue their discourse seeks to address. A 2004–2005 study by Julie Guthman confirmed the racial disparity among customers of farmer's markets and CSAs. When asked to account for this, CSA and market managers all pointed to issues related to individual choice, claiming that those who chose to frequent these markets showed "more concern about food quality," were "more health conscious," and had "more time."⁴⁴ They resisted her suggestion that there might be a causal relationship between such racial disparity and issues of race or ethnicity, saying that targeting nonwhite or low-income consumers would compromise the color-blindness they were aiming for in their business.⁴⁵ Such strategies of "color-blindness" serve to further alienate those who do not accept the narratives implicit in the movement, and further occlude the structural, rather than personal inequalities that account for such disparities.

And, perhaps most important, it is this emphasis on the individual as the locus of reform that most distinguishes the predominately Euro-American alternative food movement from similar tribally led efforts.

The construct of a back-to-the-land rhetoric, the belief in the universal superiority of natural and organic foods, and the emphasis on individual mechanisms of change in the alternative food discourse serve to mark alternative food spaces such as farmers markets and CSAs as colonial spaces. Although certainly many Euro-American food activists are aware of neocolonial tensions in food discourse, racial and historical environmental injustice are not always prioritized in the discourse of alternative foodscapes, leading to the marginalization of Indigenous people within "sustainable food" conversations.⁴⁶

Indigenous Food Sovereignty: Regaining the Right to Native Foods

While sharing many of the same goals and values as the alternative food movement, the Indigenous food sovereignty movement works toward those goals in very different ways. The Indigenous food sovereignty movement is made up of diverse groups ranging from local tribal food sovereignty projects and community gardens, to multinational peasant rights organizations. It differentiates itself from the alternative food movement by means of differing narratives and goals regarding food and the right to food. First, the Indigenous food sovereignty movement is characterized by a recognition of historic and current inequalities in Indigenous communities as the root cause of environmental and food injustice today, especially with regard to colonization, slavery, and commodification inherent in particular economic systems.⁴⁷ Second, the Indigenous food sovereignty movement embraces a diversity of definitions as to what constitutes "good food." What counts as good food is not necessarily what is organic or local or vegetarian, although it can encompass any of these things; rather, it depends on the stated goals of the community with regard to the food they wish to eat. This movement seeks to restore community sovereignty over their food consumption habits and methods, and emphasizes that "good" food is that which is culturally appropriate to the community.⁴⁸ Finally, the Indigenous food sovereignty movement argues that change is not about individual consumer choices, but requires a fundamental challenge to—even as they sometimes work in cooperation with—existing hegemonic power structures in order to more adequately transform them.⁴⁹

Indigenous food sovereignty advocates emphasize *historical and current racial inequalities* as a main cause of community food insecurity and incorporate a broader definition of the right to food that includes both spiritual foodways and community agency. In contrast to the agrarian myth of the alternative food movement, the Indigenous food sovereignty movement approaches food justice by first acknowledging histories of oppression and racism that have resulted in disparate access to food in Indigenous communities. This puts the environmental concern of food access into a broader, historicized social context that ties it to the lived experiences of marginalized populations.⁵⁰ In their article "Breaking the Food Chains: An Investigation of Food Justice Activism," Alison Alkon and Kari Norgaard conducted an eighteen-month study of the Karuk Tribes efforts to regain access to traditional fishing grounds on the Klamath River in northern California.⁵¹ In opposition to what Julie Guthman encountered studying farmers market and CSA managers in California, Alkon and Norgaard found that tribal activists almost universally spoke of systematic and racial inequalities rather than poor individual food choices when discussing the primary causes of food insecurity and high rates of diet-related diseases. Norgaard asserts: "The Karuk tribe articulates their right to traditional foods not only as an issue of food insecurity but of food justice. They locate their current food needs in the history of genocide, lack of land rights, and forced assimilation that have so devastated this and other Native American communities. These processes have prevented tribal members from carrying out land management techniques necessary to food attainment."⁵² Her interviews with tribal members particularly emphasized assimilation to a Western diet as marking the advent of many food access issues. They also associated health issues within the tribe with environmental degradation and racist practices that disproportionately degraded traditional Karuk fishing areas on the Klamath River. One tribal member explained, "A healthy riverine system has a profound effect on the people of the river . . . all the fishing community is devastated by the unhealthy riverine system."⁵³ This environmental degradation stems not only from Western interventions in the form of dams, deforestation, and development, but from the disruption of traditional Native land management, something that Norgaard admits is hard for non-Indians to appreciate.⁵⁴ "Institutionalized racism," Norgaard argues, "manifests not only as a disproportionate burden of exposure to environmental hazards, but also in denied access to decision-making and control over resources."⁵⁵ For the Karuk Tribe of California, the primary goals of their food sovereignty efforts are not limited to supporting sustainability efforts,

but rather focus on mitigating a history of environmental violence that has resulted in a lack of food access.

The back-to-the-land rhetoric of the predominantly Euro-American alternative food movement implicitly denies another historical reality—that the Indigenous people of this place had a long history of land management and cultivation that looked very different from intensive European agriculture. In their book *Keeping It Living: Traditions of Plant Use and Cultivation on the Northwest Coast of North America*, Douglas Deur and Nancy Turner argue that anthropological scholarship has largely misrepresented Native land management practices, first denying their existence, and where admitting they exist, placing these cultivation practices on the “backward, less-developed side of the imaginary evolutionary scale.”⁵⁶

Turner and Deur point out that Coast Salish peoples used varying management techniques that, while unrecognizable to European settlers, maintained impressively large stores of over 300 plant species for food, materials, and medicine.⁵⁷ As the late Hank Gobin, Tulalip elder and former director of the Tulalip Tribes’ Hilbulb Cultural Center and Natural History Preserve argued, “For thousands of years, tribes nurtured the landscapes they depended upon for their health and survival. . . . That included land-management practices to maintain a diversity of plant and animal populations, like burning for wildlife forage, and pruning or burning for huckleberry.”⁵⁸ Likewise, in contrast to Euro-American assumptions that the land was unclaimed and so free for the taking, Coast Salish communities had extensive and complex notions of ownership. However, unlike the extraction and commodification model favored by Euro-Americans, Coast Salish notions instead emphasized a reciprocal relationship with the place that entailed responsibilities to manage and care for the site, to ensure a respectful harvest, and to share those resources within one’s community.⁵⁹ “Wealth” in Coast Salish cultures had less to do with private property, and far more to do with hereditary rights to knowledge, gathering sites, and the ability to share food with others.⁶⁰

Tribal gardeners, along with Segrest, emphasize that food insecurity is tied to structural inequalities rather than personal choices, and that a legitimate history of land management contradicts colonial settler mythologies. Of particular concern for the Indigenous food sovereignty movement is the historic erasure of Native cultures. At the outset of a tour of the Nisqually Community Garden, the director began by acknowledging its Westernized layout, explaining the necessity for such a design, even

though the Nisqually tribes’ historical practices of prairie management functioned long before European settlement.

You know, [the Nisqually] did practice agriculture—there was all sorts of cultivation—but the thing is that, the way we’re growing here—tilling, growing row-crops—that’s not traditional. There was a natural abundance, but that habitat has been largely destroyed. . . . and even in places where it still exists, it was banned to do things like burning and tending the prairies for a long time, and so access to those most traditional resources is just broken and doesn’t exist anymore.⁶¹

Here, lack of access to traditional management techniques, environmental degradation, and histories of suppressing Native knowledge of the land are situated as key components in the Nisqually’s food sovereignty story. When asked to characterize the causes of food insecurity in a community, the garden director spoke to a lack of financial resources, a lack of food providers (grocery stores, farmers markets, etc.), and in particular a lack of access to traditional foods and knowledge around harvesting and preparing those foods, again rejecting the idea that individual choice dictates who has access to what foods. “I think even if there is money and if there is a grocery store and if you do have access to things, if you don’t have access to [traditional knowledge] . . . it’s a big deal.”⁶² Segrest, director of the Muckleshoot food sovereignty program agrees: “We’re dealing with healing from historical trauma . . . where our communities were told that the knowledge we carry was not important and was not heard.”⁶³

The same sentiment is reiterated at She Nah Nam Seafood, a Native-run seafood processing company that seeks to help tribal fishermen and women earn a living wage. Three men involved with the company shared their perspectives on what food sovereignty means in Puget Sound. Throughout the interview two men, one a Nisqually tribal member and the other from the nearby Quinault tribe, repeatedly attributed food insecurity in Coast Salish communities to fish mismanagement practices, lack of government adherence to treaty fishing rights, and environmental degradation. They explained that one of the main goals of their organization was to preserve the right to traditional fishing locations and techniques, the same rights that Nisqually fishing rights activist and environmentalist Billy Frank Jr. fought for his whole life.⁶⁴ However, while all three men

emphasized the importance of sharing their knowledge and pride of fishing traditions, they recognized that many of the struggles Native communities face in obtaining both knowledge and resources is largely due to an economic and political system that has historically disenfranchised them. "This food and the food we have access to is a lot healthier than going around the corner to the next McDonald's. But they just keep shoving [that food] down these young people's throats." The third man, also a Nisqually tribal member added, "We just don't have as deep pockets as they do."⁶⁵

The view of food sovereignty exemplified by activists of the Karuk tribe, the Nisqually community garden, and She Nah Nam Seafood implicitly rejects the "color-blindness" of the white alternative food movement, asserting the historical realities of genocide, displacement, forced assimilation, and devaluation of Native foodways and food knowledge. Although environmental issues are prioritized, they are seen in a colonial context where the degradation and domination of the land is intimately connected with the oppression faced by its people. Native food activist Alysha Waters makes clear that many contemporary health crises in Native communities are directly tied to this history of colonialism and displacement.

Only a hundred and fifty years ago, the ancestors of this region were the healthiest of any group of peoples living upon the earth. Cancer was very rare and diabetes and heart disease were virtually unknown. For thousands of years Pacific Northwest tribes had food production systems that sustained healthy communities. These foods systems were rich in tradition and ceremony while connecting integrally to trade commerce and sound environmental practices. . . . The health and nutrition of Indian peoples has been greatly affected by the destruction of sustainable Native American food production systems. . . . Recent research and traditional ways and knowledge both indicate that where native peoples live, eating local indigenous foods is better for our bodies, our communities, our economies and the land itself.⁶⁶

Such arguments make clear that narratives regarding food and spiritual foodways in the Indigenous food sovereignty movement inform a different understanding of environmental injustice and the human "right to food" than is found in the alternative food movement. While a growing number of non-Native organizations—such as Seattle Tilt—have grown

sensitive to these concerns, and are working to become allies with Native communities, more work needs to be done. Emphasis on previously devalued knowledge of the land and historical oppression serves to reject the color-blind assertions of many white food activists, redirecting one's focus toward tribal sovereignty and the history of colonialism instead of seeing individual choice as a main player in food insecurity.

Food Sovereignty versus Food Security: Moving toward a Coast Salish Ethos

While NGOs and other food rights organizations emphasize the challenge of *food scarcity*, tribal communities point to a historic degradation of Native land and foodways as a rationale for *food sovereignty*. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Association (FAO) includes three concepts in its definition of food security: physical availability of food; physical and economic ability to access food; and nutritional adequacy of food. The Indigenous food sovereignty movement argues instead for several new rights, including the "right to produce food" and "the right of peoples to food sovereignty," wherein local communities can claim a more active role in food policy.⁶⁷ The European Food Sovereignty Movement and the United Nations define food sovereignty as "the right to sufficient, healthy, and culturally appropriate food for all individuals, peoples and communities," as well as local agency over managing and protecting Indigenous resources.⁶⁸ For Coast Salish communities, local agency over food resources means the formation of both intertribal alliances (like the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission, the South Puget Intertribal Planning Agency, or Northwest Indian College's Traditional Foods Program) and tribally based programs like community gardens, cooking and preserving classes, and first food ceremonies. And, it means working collaboratively with public lands management agencies like the United States Forest Service to develop ways to manage their traditional territories—as the Tulalip are doing at *Swadaʔx̄ ali*.

Such efforts are giving rise to a distinctly Coast Salish perspective on food sovereignty and what it means for the Native people of this bioregion. Tulalip elder Inez Bill leads the Rediscovery Program based out of the Tulalip tribes Hibulb Cultural Center, and has thought at great length about what it means for her Tulalip people to be in relationship with their ancestral foods. As she explains, "Our [particular] teachings and values for

preparing food and meals are unique to our people . . . To prepare food in our traditional way is to share a part of ourselves with our people . . . I teach the youth workers not to harvest the whole plant, to make it like we were never here, and to thank the plant . . . there's respect in every aspect of our way of life."⁶⁹ Bill proposes several traditional values that should guide those gathering traditional foods like huckleberries. These include taking only what you need; remembering not to waste any traditional foods; sharing what you gather with family, friends, and elders; praying and giving thanks when gathering; and preparing local Native food for gatherings. She also notes that the people should prepare food "with a good heart and mind," because "the feelings of those who prepare the meal are equally important." Doing so, she explains, provides "nourishment for our people and their spirits," and even more, it also nourishes "the spirits of our ancestors."⁷⁰

After a series of workshops and interviews with primarily Coast Salish people around Puget Sound, Segrest and Krohn also compiled a list of what they termed "Traditional Food Principles" that inform and inspire tribal food sovereignty projects in the region:

1. Food is at the center of culture. When people harvest, prepare, and share food together, it changes the way they see their landscape and their community.
2. Honor the food web, "Everything is connected," and all actions should be undertaken with that in mind.
3. Eat with the seasons. The people with whom Segrest and Krohn spoke emphasized "the power of being in the moment, and harvesting what is available," which works both to strengthen relationships with the plant and animal people, and also ensures future biodiversity.
4. Eat a variety of foods.
5. Traditional foods are whole foods.
6. Eat local.
7. Wild and organic are better for health.
8. Cook and eat with good intention. Harvesting, preparing and eating food can and should be a spiritual practice.

one that ties you to your place, your ancestors, and your community. "Cooking is a time to honor the foods we eat. It is a time to pay respect to the life that has been given to nourish our bodies. The food we consume ties us into our place and our purpose in that place . . . thank the plants and animals that gave their lives to sustain yours."⁷¹

Interviews at She Nah Nam Seafood revealed similar ideas about the importance of food and community. The men spoke to a feeling of rightness with the world when they went fishing, and one consistently referred to the act of fishing or hunting as a relationship one has with a specific animal. They emphasized the importance of catching the first salmon of the season and of sharing the first salmon with the larger community, particularly elders. Generosity has always defined ideal Coast Salish kinship relations, where food, considered a gift from a spiritual being, was to be shared freely not only within tribes, but within an extended kinship network. This notion of sharing was emphasized several times in these conversations. "I'm providing for my family, taking care of my elders," one explained. "You're doing something you're supposed to be doing."

"Every Time I Pick a Berry I Remember My Ancestors"

When Tulalip youth head up to the huckleberry fields at *Swada?x ali* for a weeklong camp, they'll be doing more than harvesting these highly valued berries. They'll also be cultivating their cultural memory. As young people gather the huckleberries, gathering them into traditionally made baskets, they'll be learning the stories that go along with that harvest, the songs, and the prayers. They'll be learning who they are, who their ancestors were. They'll be remembering that they are people of the salt water, and also people of the mountains. Segrest emphasizes this connection between food, memory, and identity in her work: "That's what people are craving—more than carbohydrates and protein. They want a connection with food, with the environment, with community. These foods help us remember who we are."⁷² Picking a huckleberry is no simple act. It is a radical gesture that weaves one's identity back into one's culture, reinvigorating relationships with the spirits of the surrounding landscape and the spirits of one's ancestors. Segrest concludes, "I often say that I don't think I'm really teaching anything. I'm helping people remember

what they already know. . . . Put a traditional food on a plate, and people start to remember."⁷³

Harvesting traditional foods thus provides a primary means of connecting Coast Salish individuals with their ancestors, their families, and their communities. Harvesting, preparing, serving, and celebrating traditional foods binds tribal communities together.⁷⁴ It is a collective healing from a history of structural and systemic violence and oppression, a reclaiming of culture and an affirmation of ancient spiritual values. As Segrest and Krohn observe, "There is a sense of vitality and belonging that comes with eating the foods that gave your ancestors health and longevity for thousands of years."⁷⁵ Charlene Krise, director of the Squaxin Island tribes' museum and cultural center provides a final powerful example the place of plants in memory, identity, and community.

Memories of my grandmother, Annie Jackson Krise, and grand-aunt Elvina are easily awakened by the sight, smell, touch, and taste of traditional plants. I remember as a child being taught about the importance of traditional plants, which ones were used for food. The traditional way of gathering as a group has continued through the generations of my grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, siblings, and myself. . . . I remember my uncle and the strong smell of yarrow. . . . My dad gathered wild roses. . . . I still gather food and medicines from the forest. Gathering reminds me of my loved ones who have passed. Every time I pick a berry, I remember my ancestors. Every time I smell yarrow, I remember by grandmother. Every time I drink Indian tea, I remember by uncle. The activity of gathering keeps these memories alive.⁷⁶

Notes

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