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# Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

MATTHEW C. CANFIELD, 2022, *Translating Food Sovereignty: Cultivating Justice in an Age of Transnational Governance*, Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 267 pp., ISBN 978150361344

## Introduction

*Translating Food Sovereignty* is a compelling ethnography of transnational food sovereignty movements, grounded in the Pacific Northwest. At the heart of the book are questions of how food sovereignty activists respond to and transform neoliberal governance through their practices of translation. By “translation” Canfield means not only collaborating across differences of language, culture, ecologies, and governance but also how activists preserve those differences in contrast to the *commensuration* of liberal regimes of value. Rooted in the landscape of western Washington state, the book extends to follow its subjects across transnational spaces, from The World Social forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil to meetings of the World Food Program in Rome. Along the way, Canfield makes the case for why the food sovereignty movement should be of interest to those concerned with the permutations of liberal governance as well as all who eat and desire a livable world.

## Summary

The book begins by exploring the foundations of food sovereignty from the context of western Washington State. Canfield explains his choice to locate his study in the Puget Sound region, noting that it is home to one of the densest networks of food sovereignty organizations in the U.S. while also being the birthplace of the alter-globalization movement, which began in 1999 with anti-WTO protests in Seattle. Observing an initial meeting of coalition members held in a packed church basement, Canfield states, “As the debate unfolded, it was clear that they faced profound strategic questions: what would it mean to claim *sovereignty* rather than rights?” (3).

From the meeting in the church basement, Canfield steps back to trace how liberalization-induced global food and economic crises lead to the formation of the alternative agriculture movement in the 1970s. He details how the most radical demands of this movement were undermined by a focus on markets and organic certification. When food and financial crisis returned in 2008 activists were ready for a new approach. Drawing on social movements begun in Latin America, the food sovereignty movement drew its strength from diverse constituencies while centering the perspectives of those most directly affected.

The heterogenous networks Canfield traces are comprised of groups often pitted against each other including agricultural laborers, small-scale farmers, the urban poor, local food activists, and Indigenous nations. Despite their different relationships to the food system, what unities these activists are their expansive demands for “sovereignty,” or control, over the social economic, and ecological relations involved in food production and provisioning” (6). Central to all of this is the role of La Via Campesina, the International Peasant’s Movement, which first promoted the claim to food sovereignty in the 1990s. Moving past the individualizing frame of consumer-focused localism, the food sovereignty movement articulates a broad-based vision for justice that transforms communities even as it assembles its networks.

I found Chapter 3, Revaluing Agricultural Labor particularly compelling. It documents the struggle of farmworkers on a union-busting berry farm to get their unjustly fired colleague reinstated and for more humane working conditions. While the whole book is clear and persuasive, I found this chapter refreshingly ethnographic. A scene that stands out is Canfield driving around for half an hour along rural roads lined with picturesque farms and painted barns, searching for labor camp #2. When he finally locates this hidden abode of expropriated labor—tucked out of sight behind some shrubs and across a gulch—the ramshackle conditions of the workers’ corrugated metal and cinderblock quarters highlight the deep contradictions at the heart of reified localism. The chapter documents how these farmworkers, in consort with a local labor organization and food activists, fought and secured meaningful wins against their exploitative employer and the berry giant Driscoll. It highlights the possible contours of food justice that stretch beyond ethical consumption to include corporate and legal accountability and the formation of new solidarities.

I also found Chapter 4, Protecting People's Knowledge very instructive. It centers on the development of the so-called super banana and the role of the Gates Foundation in facilitating sweeping enclosures of agricultural intellectual property. Canfield provides an elucidating view into the neocolonial dynamic of the Gates Foundation's funding of research and development for the super banana and the pressure they applied to foreign governments to adopt it. The chapter also offers original insights into how Ugandan food sovereignty activists came to Seattle and formed an unlikely network with U.S. activists to challenge the Gates Foundation on their home turf while also influencing policy in Uganda to successfully oppose pro-GMO laws that would have facilitated the theft of intellectual property.

### **Analysis**

A central contribution of this book is its examination of neoliberalism governance, and how activists adapt to and attempt to reshape these systems in their favor. A resulting question is whether activists are being co-opted in the process. The answer, according to Canfield, is a murky "yes and no." On the one hand, transnational corporations appear largely unhindered by the depoliticized systems of governance structured in their favor. On the other hand, one of Canfield's interlocutors, a peasant farmer participating in global food governance fora, notes that being able to speak directly back to these powerful figures and to look them in the eyes is enough for him.

As someone working with themes of landscape, food, and de-territorialized sovereignty the book's most interesting theoretical contributions for me were the connections it draws between commercial agriculture and the foundations of liberal sovereignty. Canfield states that "English philosophers once premised their theories of private property and liberal state sovereignty on scientific forms of commercial agricultural production" (126). Thus, he suggests that agroecology can foster different forms of sovereignty. In the Conclusion, his exploration of "patchy" sovereignty roughly sketches an innovative framework for understanding landscape-based sovereignty in an interconnected world.

This attempt to rethink sovereignty in a transnational context, rooted in landscapes and ecologies, is particularly significant for scholars interested in post-capitalist, anti-capitalist, and new materialist thought. The idea of sovereignty being rooted in ecologies and transcending nation-state boundaries is timely, given the intensifying climate crisis and the need for new governance models. The insights of this book in general will be especially relevant to the field of global climate governance, including the COP meetings and the IPCC. *Translating Food Sovereignty* is particularly clearly written. On a practical level, it provides an excellent example of how to structure a complex multisided ethnography.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, *Translating Food Sovereignty* is an insightful and well-crafted work that offers valuable contributions to the study of neoliberal governance, social movements, and food sovereignty. It is particularly relevant for scholars and students of food anthropology/geography, socio-legal studies, and global environmental governance. The book's accessible writing makes it suitable for advanced undergraduates as well as graduate students. It is equally relevant for those engaged in food sovereignty activism or those who wish to understand counterhegemonic responses to neoliberal governance. Anyone interested in the intersection of local and global systems of governance and food systems should read this book!

### **Bio**

Terese Gagnon is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with the Bringing Southeast Asia Home Initiative. Her current book project examines Karen food, seed, and political sovereignty across landscapes of home and exile. She is editor of the book [\*Embodying Biodiversity: Sensory Conservation as Refuge and Sovereignty\*](#) and co-editor of [\*Movable Gardens: Itineraries and Sanctuaries of Memory\*](#).



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