



Mediating Food Sovereign Voices in Documentary Media

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The aims of food sovereignty need to be underscored to counteract the prevalence of food insecurity media discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic. La Via Campesina's inclusion of interacting with others in their definition of food sovereignty helps sustain food autonomy through shared food practices among populations deemed to be at risk. Key to sustaining autonomy is a revision of how food sovereign voices are mediated in documentary media. Documentary media often claim to amplify the voices of the powerless, a move that rings of the same type of paternalism that often marks food insecurity discourse. Drawing from currents in rhetorical studies, film studies, and studies in food communication, as well as my own documentary work, I argue that voice inheres in that which grates against a neoliberal understanding of food systems and the representational modes that operate within that sphere. Developing a documentary approach that navigates the modalities of mainstream food systems discourse while underscoring long-standing interactions of marginalized people around food is key to mediating food sovereign voices across cultures, generations, and palates.

Keywords: food sovereignty, food media, food politics, voice, documentary media, neoliberalism, story, memory

Recently dubbed the “Hunger Virus” by Oxfam International, COVID-19 has laid bare pre-existing inequities in the social fabric as regards to food and other essential forms of sustenance (Oxfam International, 2020). Oxfam's appellation, however urgent, falls short of advancing long-term, socially sustainable solutions, which necessarily entail not just sufficient calories of food, but also political agency, as promoted by proponents of food sovereignty (Patel, 2009, p. 668). Given the urgency about questions of food during this pandemic, it is worth revisiting an early and definitive understanding of food sovereignty developed by La Via Campesina, the peasants' right group that in 1996 proposed an alternative to the food security model being promoted at the Food and Agricultural Organization's World Food Summit. According to La Via Campesina, food sovereignty entails:

human beings having direct, democratic control over the most important elements of their society—how we feed and nourish ourselves, how we use and maintain the land, water and other resources around us for the benefit of current and future generations, and how we interact with other groups, peoples and cultures.

(European Coordination Via Campesina, 2018, p. 7)

La Via Campesina's model of food sovereignty is helpful for delineating not only the material but the social necessities underlying the political stance of food sovereignty. The importance La Via Campesina gives to “interact[ing] with other groups, peoples, and cultures” is significant at a time

OPEN ACCESS

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Specialty section:

This article was submitted to
Science and Environmental
Communication,
a section of the journal
Frontiers in Communication

Received: 18 April 2020

Accepted: 07 December 2020

Published: 23 December 2020

Citation:

Khan SA (2020) Mediating Food
Sovereign Voices in Documentary
Media. *Front. Commun.* 5:553466.
doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2020.553466

when markets and supply chains are failing in the wake of pandemic-related lockdowns; and at a time when food aid is becoming more prevalent, impromptu acts of mutual aid are also on the rise. Mirzoeff has called such a “politics of eating” as the necessary first step in imagining and visualizing alternative social and political worlds (Mirzoeff, 2011, p. 485). That the “politics of eating” is often subverted to perpetuate oppressive conditions gained global recognition with the awarding of the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize to the World Food Programme (WFP) for its “efforts to prevent the use of hunger as a weapon of war and conflict” (Nobelprize.org., 2020) While the food aid of the WFP may provide assistance in dire situations of food insecurity, it does not address the root of that insecurity, thereby leading to a kind of “politics of eating” by proxy that promotes resilience within neoliberal economic systems rather than questioning that system (O’Connor et al., 2017, p. 3). In what follows, I sketch out an approach for communities to visualize food sovereignty ahead of its materialization through La Via Campesina’s recommendation that food sovereign peoples be able to interact freely with other groups and cultures.

Food sovereignty goes far beyond caloric fulfillment or even food system reformation to ensuring that people can maintain some sense of agency in the face of an increasing lack of access to political power. Commenting on La Via Campesina’s articulation of food sovereignty, Gordon and Hunt note that “food sovereignty, even more than food justice, emphasizes autonomy and control” (Gordon and Hunt, 2019, p. 16). That sense of autonomy, argues Fladvad, is not merely aspirational, but the basis of a form of environmental citizenship that emerges through “the emancipatory power of certain acts, deeds and events through which citizens disclose themselves as political subjects” (Fladvad, 2019, p. 8). Those acts include a myriad of practices of “acting otherwise” (Fladvad, 2019, p. 13), practices such as seed saving and agroecology that unite rural practitioners who collectively oppose the industrial food system (Fladvad, 2019, p. 13). In the COVID-19 pandemic, analogous practices of “acting otherwise” have become magnified in urban and suburban environments as well, though control over food sources there is more fraught.

Developing new ways to mediate such accounts of food sovereignty, including ones that articulate subjects’ political agency, remains important to the study of food in environmental communication. One of these ways, as I’ll explore, is through revisiting how stories of foodways and food sovereignty are told through documentary media. Food media such as documentary remain a prominent means of communicating about foodways, food systems, and more specifically, food sovereignty. However, the genre is fraught with assumptions about its ability, or duty, to “give voice” to racialized and gendered subjects. One common and problematic documentary mode is the character-driven story, which Juhasz and Lebow argue mimics “neoliberal logics labor, self, and capital” through its focus on individual successes and failures rather than systemic ones (Juhasz and Lebow, 2018, p. 2). Observed through what film studies scholar Rangan has called the “medial frames of emergency” (Rangan, 2017b, p. 10), many documentaries, particularly those of a humanitarian bent, often are conceived as a means to effect

policy change by putting a face on an otherwise abstracted social problem all the while erasing the cultural specificity of those “faces.”

As a maker of documentary media, rather than using documentary media to “give” voices to others, I am interested in developing a form of audiovisual representation that mediates the “quotidian practices of social life” (Fladvad, 2019, p. 11) comprising food sovereignty. As Sarlin has argued, the status of “story” as an engine of capitalism depends on the prior structure of the “project,” which is where the material, monetary, and ideological linkages between future form and content often are cemented for documentary mediamakers, infusing even the most humanitarian of endeavors with market logics (Sarlin, 2019). Narratives about food sovereign subjects therefore need to focus on such practices in a way that does not draw upon existing narrative modes that further marginalize people on the fringes of the neoliberal food system. I begin by showing ways in which “acting otherwise” in suburban and urban food environments depends on relationships, then review the literature on voice and why it matters for food movements, and finally draw upon my documentary media work to illustrate alternative ways to mediate food sovereign voices.

“ACTING OTHERWISE”

In many ways, COVID-19 has exposed that “acting otherwise” is a largely common state of affairs for communities of color living in designated food deserts. As anthropologist Reese recently has shown, socioeconomic statistics often belie the reach of food practices such as home gardening and seed saving that are communal and understated, what she calls “quiet food refusals” (Reese, 2019, p. 3). Psyche Williams-Forsen similarly has analyzed the process of urban communities of color often “making do” within the “alternative-alternative food networks” of discount and dollar stores, and now more frequently, food banks, whose patrons are forced to transform industrial comestibles into culturally relevant, palatable dishes with some semblance of home (Williams-Forsen, 2011, p. 4:03). While a far cry from a position of complete food sovereignty, this sense of “making do” is distinct from the type of resilience promoted by agencies such as the WFP. I would argue that “making do” is less about a resourceful bricolage of materials on hand and more about drawing upon deeper human resources such as knowledge of familial and ancestral food practices and communal sharing among extended family and neighbors.

The ability of communities to engage in such food practices that depart from the norm is exacerbated by climate change, particularly for Arctic Indigenous communities, as Million (2018) contends, who can no longer rely on traditional foods that are ice-dependent. As climate patterns change, more reliance on imported, flown-in, more expensive food has created nutritional deficits for Indigenous communities, all of which underscores that food is not just edible matter, but a representation of culture, place, land, and ecosystem (Million, 2018). Million’s work demonstrates the way in which one’s claim to food

sovereignty is deeply imbricated with one's environmental milieu. Anthropogenic climate change therefore forces Indigenous communities in the Arctic to "make do" due to conditions that are beyond their control, much as denizens of designated urban food deserts engage in "quiet food refusals."

The prevalence of food banks in the news tends to crowd out stories of such food sovereign actions. Focusing on the paradoxes of food banks in their reliance on neoliberal values of individual achievement and consumption-based models of the food system, De Souza shows the ways in which "voices, experiences and realities of those who enter the food system through the backdoor" (De Souza, 2019, p. 20) don't always compute to the people in charge. In one striking account, De Souza describes the reactions of a panel to a client of the food bank who pointed out the contradictions in the food bank model:

The panelists were caught off-guard by this woman who, like Trinity, in one brief moment had hit the nail on the head: she'd identified a commodified food system that makes those who hunt, grow, and produce food starve, while those who have never produced food thrive.

(De Souza, 2019, p. 29).

As the subject in De Souza's study asserts, those with the knowledge to hunt and grow their own food cannot survive in a neoliberal system. By pointing out this contradiction in the food bank model—where the autonomy and control lauded by groups such as La Via Campesina are less important than reinstating the status of food aid recipients as consumers—the food bank client voices her experience while revealing the limits of the food system in which she is forced to operate. This lack of fit between her food experiences of "acting otherwise" and the larger food system is symptomatic of the way in which the food sovereign voices of racial and gendered others often fail to register in mainstream accounts of the food system.

TOWARD A DOCUMENTARY MEDIATION OF FOOD SOVEREIGN VOICES

Given the fraught status of others' voices within a neoliberal food system, it is worth considering different ways of mediating those food sovereign voices in terms of the "acts, deeds, and events" that comprise their political autonomy (Fladvad, 2019, p. 8). Documentary film and media, for example, historically have understood their mandates as "giving voice" to racial and gendered others. Documentary film scholar Rangan has called for problematizing this paternalistic imperative to give voice to the voiceless. Instead, Rangan proposes a model of voice that "operates in ways that are both less literal than spoken words and more concrete than mere metaphor in documentary" (Rangan, 2017a, p. 282). Such a view of "voice" resonates with Watts' foundational view of what "voice" can offer rhetorical studies. Watts sees "voice" as not limited to the amplification of the marginalized on the terms of those in power, but inclusive of the "sound of specific experiential encounters in civic life" (Watts, 2001, p. 185). Ultimately, voice for Watts is "a happening invigorated by a public awareness of the ethical and emotional

concerns of discourse" (Watts, 2001, p. 185). An extreme version of such a "happening" is the case of the South Korean farmer Lee Kyung Hae, whose suicide at the 5th WTO Conference in Cancun in 2003 signaled his "lack of a consequential voice that was taken seriously" (Frye, 2012, p. 142). Much like "acting otherwise," such "happenings" create ripples in the societal and environmental fabric, which in turn form the basis of political agency.

In line with Rangan's call to problematize documentary film's imperative to "give voice" to or tell stories about racial and gendered others, I seek to develop a documentary method for mediating food sovereign voices that is alert to "happenings" of "acting otherwise" in various publics. One radio story I reported about a multicultural food space in Los Angeles alerted me to the importance of doing so. The story was about a halal, live chicken abattoir, or *pollería*, in East Los Angeles, owned by Egyptian Muslims with a Central American clientele in which nearly all interviewees spoke in languages other than English while articulating their shared food practice of preferring freshly slaughtered chicken to its factory counterparts (Khan, 2010). The Central American customers, many of whom identified as Catholic, did not find their consumption of halal meat to conflict with their religious beliefs, but instead were happy to be able to approximate their food practices from back home. The multilingual soundscape of the radio story must have grated the nerves of some of the show's listeners, as some had posted comments on the show's website complaining that the interviewees should have learned to speak English. Largely missing the point of the way in which the clients of the shop exercised their food sovereignty through the shared cultural practice of "acting otherwise" by purchasing freshly hand-slaughtered rather than factory-processed chicken, these disgruntled listeners illustrate the ways in which those perceived to exist at the margins can begin to create "happenings" in the social fabric. Yet this example still falls short since the commenters appear to have had the last word.

In the quest to mediate food sovereign voices without resorting to "giving voice" or privileging one voice over another, I have found food memories to be a useful narrative unit. Anthropologist Nazarea writes of "sensuous recollection" as essential to the sustenance of the food sovereignty movement (Nazarea, 2006, p. 325). According to Nazarea, intensely sensory food memories are key for ensuring the survival of particular foods as cultural knowledge even in the absence of those literal foods. This view toward food memories can be extended to those "making do" with less than ideal food circumstances as well. As part of some test footage for an earlier project, I interviewed a number of youth in the El Paso area who were part of a youth farming workshop and seemed to have an emotional attachment to the plants due to their association with family. One woman, Rubí, upon speaking in the course of our interview about her now-deceased grandmother's love of gardening and fresh produce, spontaneously kissed an imaginary tomato in her hand (Khan, 2016, p. 108). This virtual revivification of her grandmother and the fresh produce she loved in that one loving gesture is an example of Nazarea's "sensuous recollection" of food sovereign acts that defies the linearity of a character-driven narrative. Rubí's spontaneous gesture of kissing an imaginary

tomato underscores the importance of perpetuating the plants of yore not only through practices of “acting otherwise” like seed saving, but by connecting to the people connected to those plants through memory. Culturally-based food narrative here becomes a means of sowing seeds for food sovereign generations down the line who may have more opportunity to put that knowledge to work on land that they steward.

Through her descendant’s memory, Rubí’s grandmother enacts a “happening” that is registered on camera, by me, the documentary filmmaker. Taking seriously Watts’ description of voice as an “experiential encounter,” I approach my documentary production in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands as a “diasporic ally” (Khan, 2016, p. 92) whose own subject position as a second generation Pakistani-American has some bearing on the way in which that encounter is mediated.

In the case of this food-related footage, our acknowledgment of culturally common ingredients between Mexican and Pakistani cuisines—ingredients such as cumin, coriander, tamarind, and mango—formed the beginnings of a mutual understanding. Moreover, Rubí’s food memories of her grandmother sparked memories of my own grandmother’s instances of “acting otherwise” by continuing to use plant-based home remedies despite her otherwise cosmopolitan existence (Khan, 2016, p. 92). These memories in turn helped direct our conversation into mutually enriching territory. In this way, the process of filmmaking stages “happenings” of food sovereignty between filmmaker and subject, across cultures, and through the process of relating over shared food practices.

Invigorated by these types of intercultural food “happenings,” I am working toward developing an interactive documentary platform for archiving food practices of community elders for the benefit of younger generations in the U.S.-Mexico border (Khan et al., 2017). The platform proposes a conversational model of cataloging and retrieving food memories of “acting otherwise” that are specific to the region. Currently, the prototype is focused on recipes, but ultimately, the project would include a variety of food sovereign practices. The user would interact with digitized embodied conversational agents who would be scripted according to interviews gathered through fieldwork. Those interviews would be modeled on what Abarca has dubbed the “*charla culinaria*” (Abarca, 2007), or the culinary chat. Taking place in the kitchen, these often intergenerational conversations among women are verbal exchanges but also something more. Abarca writes, “We, women, do speak with our *sazón*,” or seasoning, referring to the particular inflections of self-expression that pepper dishes made by a particular home cook (Abarca, 2006, p. 135). While the interviews on the platform would not be limited to cooking, *sazón*, more appropriately translated as seasoning-as-voice, resonates with Watts’ definition of voice as the “sound of specific experiential encounters in civic life” (Watts, 2001, p. 185). Here, the “experiential encounter” of an individual’s “*sazón*” is a virtual chat in the kitchen, arguably a civic space, according to Abarca, for many Mexican and Mexican-American women who manage food preparation for

their households, extended families, and neighbors. That chat occurs with someone whose food knowledge has a point of view unique to her, but that also depends on others’ sensory recognition of that point of view through taste, sight, smell, and sound. “*Sazón*” therefore underscores the need for a multisensory mediation of the everyday acts that comprise food sovereign voices. An interactive documentary that builds a corpus of such multisensory “happenings,” in turn, potentially could serve as a future memory aid for future generations to engage in “sensuous recollection” (Nazarea) of their forebears’ food sovereign practices. By circumventing the documentary discourse of “giving voice” in favor of conversation, this database of food memories creates an opportunity for those aspiring to full food sovereignty to connect with others through food practices of “acting otherwise.”

CONCLUSION

In the various documentary media examples of foodways and food sovereignty narratives I have recounted, mediating food sovereign voices requires attention to shared experiences of “acting otherwise” to the norms of the neoliberal food system. Those shared experiences can occur between filmmaker and interviewee, among neighbors, between a child and her elder, and even among customers who frequent the same butcher. These alternative food experiences—related and recounted and reenacted for, with, and by others—are central to refining what political agency can look like and mean for people marginalized in a neoliberal food system. A key element to visualizing such a “politics of eating” (Mirzoeff) is reworking the language of “voice” and “story,” both of which often are coopted by humanitarian discourse informed by neoliberal logics. Even in the absence of material supports, shared food practices and memories hopefully could sustain a sense of food sovereignty in the spirit of interacting with others also “making do” until conditions improve in a food climate such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which has created a newfound sense of urgency in a food system that often has failed those on its margins.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to thank Dr. Stacey Sowards (The University of Texas at El Paso) and the reviewers of this essay for their insightful feedback.

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Conflict of Interest: The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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