

Decolonising Food Systems and Sowing Seeds of Resistance: Disentangling knowledges about seed

Donna Andrews and Desiree Lewis

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The [Food Politics and Cultures Project](#) is a Research Capacity Building Project Funded by the Mellon Foundation through the DST-NRF Centre of Excellence in Food Security. Scholarship and policy research on food is often pursued in silos. This colloquium therefore provides a forum for exploring, sharing and debating interdisciplinary work, especially work-in-progress and exploratory work, with the aim of mapping out possibilities for humanities – related research on food and food systems.

Women and Gender Studies Dept. [University of the Western Cape, Robert Sobukwe Road, Bellville, 7535, Republic of South Africa](#)
[\(+27\) 21 959 2234](#)

On 7 April 2015 the African Centre for Biosafety officially changed its name to the African Centre for Biodiversity (ACB). This name change was agreed by consultation within the ACB to reflect the expanded scope of our work over the past few years. All ACB publications prior to this date will remain under our old name of African Centre for Biosafety and should continue to be referenced as such.

We remain committed to dismantling inequalities in the food and agriculture systems in Africa and our belief in people's right to healthy and culturally appropriate food, produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agricultural systems.

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www.acbio.org.za

PO box 29170, Melville 2109, Johannesburg, South Africa. Tel: +27 (0)114861156

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Introduction

It is often observed that neo-liberal capitalism revolves around the knowledge economy, with information and its control now being pivotal to big businesses' capital expansion. Information, technological expertise and data management currently further enable corporate capture of resources, expertise and markets, so that the efforts of progressives and socially marginalised groups to develop equitable, liberating and healthy ways of producing, obtaining and eating food are ruthlessly outmanoeuvred. At the same time that corporations use knowledge and scientific expertise ruthlessly, they function behind the veneer of being benign, logical and efficient drivers of efforts to address the world's food crisis. Their logic is that, given the Malthusian crisis of expanding populations in an environment of limited resources, only large-scale, technology-driven and corporate-controlled methods can guarantee steady and reliable supplies of food across the world. Central to this myth are corporate monopolies over the knowledge and prescription of what seeds to grow, how to grow them and where to grow them.

Knowledge management around seed and global capitalism

The power of the knowledge economy that now dominates food production became very evident at a recent seminar, co-organised by the African Centre for Biodiversity (ACB), the Alternative Information and Development Centre (AIDC) and the Rural Women's Assembly (RWA). The seminar focused on campaigning against proposed mergers among six of the world's greatest seed- and food-producing companies. During the keynote speaker, Patrick Mooney's address on how big data management is used to control food, the ramifications of the surveillance and regimentation of food production through seed became increasingly and horrifically clear. "Data management" ranges from laws that license genetic modification and privilege producers' monopolies (through countless legal mechanisms, such as patents and plant breeders' rights) through the actual growth of food (for example, the use of robotic and electronic technology to plant and grow) to the discursive representation and mass marketing of certain food stuffs for consumers. The corporate food industry's data management and information production, therefore, shape hegemonic meanings about food, and increasingly are determining how we come to encounter, value and discredit certain foods.

This means that even seemingly objective and disinterested public health discourses, for example, are instruments of a larger food securitisation and modernising paradigm. Many discourses defend the big food industry's products, while limiting our abilities to explore alternative and bottom-up understandings of food, health and well-being. The ultimate goal of the corporate food industry's data management is, therefore, to service – with increasing effectiveness and rigour – a system that promotes the uniformity and homogeneity of food, as underpinned by the myths of the Green Revolution: mobilising harmful science in the interest of achieving massive economic growth for an elite. What drives corporations to ignore all warnings about the destruction of the environment and the poisoning of food and

consumers is that they benefit economically from pursuing the paths that they do. They are, thus, acting with monstrous self-interest.

The endless machinations of big data management are too comprehensive to disentangle here. This reflection sets out to plot how seed, especially in South Africa, has been appropriated and manipulated in ways that directly affect all consumers. In plotting these processes, we explore the role of corporations in controlling seed, and reflect on the need to think and act radically about seed in our lives.

Seed and corporate control in South Africa

Seeds are the progenitors in our food chains and the source of much of the abundance on which human and other species rely for sustenance. They also trace a geographical lineage of origin and hold a social history of how communities use, bank, sow and harvest seed. Apart from farmers, political ecologists, eco-activists and the big companies producing and selling agricultural and chemical resources, few of us pay attention to what the genetic engineering, commodification and regulation of seeds means.

Currently, there are six big role players in the seed, agro-chemical and genetic engineering industry: ChemChina, Syngenta, Dow, Dupont, Monsanto and Bayer. All six are involved in the production of harmful chemicals and agricultural products, and many have demonstrated their potential to dominate food growth and seed regulation in the southern African region. For example, ChemChina (China National Chemical Corporation), a Chinese state-owned chemical company, is poised to merge with Syngenta. And because of China's economic activity in Africa, the merger was favourably received by the South African government. Indeed, South Africa's Competition Commission has approved all three mergers during the course of 2017.

Another company worth special attention is the German company, Bayer, well known for its production of aspirin. Bayer's scope of operations is vast: its business interests include pharmaceuticals and healthcare products for humans and animals, as well as agricultural chemicals and genetically modified seed. This is cause for alarm: when a company that is known to prioritise profits above human wellbeing creates products meant for human sustenance and health, it is tempting to speculate about helpless consumers who are trapped in a sinister cycle of buying food for sustenance and consequently having to buy medicines to treat their diseased bodies. The proposed mergers will intensify the steady consolidation and sectoral linkages driven by Bayer's past activities.

Du Pont Pioneer and Monsanto dominate the maize and soya seed markets in SA (around 80% of maize and 90% of maize and soya being grown in SA is genetically modified). These same companies also dominate SA wheat seed sector.

Each of the six massive companies has grown out of previous mergers and acquisitions, and is a result of global capitalism's unrelenting drive to establish

greater control at each level of the food chain. The resulting expansionism (from controlling the manufacture and sale of seeds through to farm machinery and, further down the chain, the supply and sale of food from supermarkets), concentrates food production in a single source: the all-powerful corporations that own the information, knowledge and everything necessary for the development and sale of food. This form of control not only squeezes out independent or small-scale farmers and producers, but creates dependent consumers who have little choice beyond what the corporation produces.

The capitalist story of seed

It would be naïve to say that humankind should never “tamper with” nature. Since the advent of agricultural activity, humans have manipulated aspects of the natural environment by, for example, selecting certain seeds with a view to the improvement of crops. The case against corporate capture cannot therefore be made in the name of “liberating seed” from human manipulation. What is important, however, is that earlier forms of seed selection and modification have occurred in ways that respect fundamental principles: enhancing and experimenting with seed in tandem with nature, freedom to cultivate seeds independently; replant farm saved seed, share and exchange seeds across borders and societies without fear of legal reprisals or technical limitations¹; and the autonomy of seed from the market economy. In other words, the idea that “owning” seed is as impossible as claiming ownership over a shell found on a beach.

A new momentum around plant breeding and monopoly rights over seed through patents and plant breeders rights has been generated by capitalist expansionism and commodity food production on one hand, and reductionist western-centric scientific and technological advancements on the other. The confluence of these two trajectories has led to the current frenzy in the consolidation of food production through, for example, monocrop production, the tightening of markets, clampdowns on small-scale producers, genetic modification of seeds to ensure the effective commercialisation of food growth and sale (such as fruits or vegetables that are less prone to damaging or rotting during packaging and transportation). Increasingly, seeds are manufactured through specialised technology that is patented by one or more of the ‘Big Six’. . And the production of specialised seed goes hand in hand with high-cost and high-tech industrial agriculture associated with farm machinery, fertilisers, chemical pesticides and the use of massive amounts of water to guarantee high production.

From the second half of the twentieth century, agricultural shifts throughout the Third World saw the rapid growth of the commercial maize, corn, soya, wheat and rice sectors and the steady displacement of crops that, for years, had ensured ecological balance, as well as choice and variety in what people ate. Until recently, the reduction in the diversity of crops being produced was

¹ Such as that found with hybrid seed. **Fresh hybrid seed needs to be bought every planting season** farmers cannot farm saved seed without major reductions in yield, 30 % or more.

not as pronounced in Africa as it was in Asia,. However, the current dominant narrative of “Africa’s food crisis”, the centrality of discourses of food security, and the ferocious greed of big corporations (especially the private seed industry) who has made dramatic gains in capturing both markets and governments in Africa, trapping food production into uniformity, extractivism and exploitation. This will, of course, entrench inequalities, with many middle beneficiaries (such as governments and global and local elites being handmaidens of global capitalism. Certainly, these beneficiaries will experience the squeeze of corporate control from above. The hardest hit, however, are those who have absolutely nothing to gain from the overarching capitalist system, whether in its neoliberal and globalised form or in its nationalist form.

Reclaiming our connection to seed, food and each other

The latest mega-mergers’ market concentration in the agricultural inputs, financial-techno, seed and agrochemical sectors imposes new sets of questions on the politics of seed and food². We offer some initial thoughts that may help us to revitalise our understanding of the centrality of food to our struggles and to re-imagine our food movements more broadly.

Ramabonela Maine’s powerful words, “[t]he seed is mine. The ploughshares are mine. The span of oxen is mine. Everything is mine. Only the land is theirs,” resonates with history as well as with the principle of free, saved and shared seed³. Charles van Onselen’s *The Seed is Mine* traces a deep connection between seed, land and community, with reference to dispossession, dislocation, alienation, resistance, defiance and memory. Yet the book also raises an absence (“where were the invisible hands that made the sharecropping possible?”) and requires that we explore the postcolonial feminist archive of knowledge, practice and memory through *HerStory*, traced in, for example, the works of Merchant, Shiva, Salleh and Mies⁴, who expose and examine capitalist patriarchy and challenge hierarchies of knowledge and labour.

In recent years, *HerSeedStory* and *HerLandStory* have surfaced strongly in the Southern African Rural Women’s Assembly (RWA). Their powerful slogan – women are “the guardians of seeds, land, life and love,” – reignites the relationship between women small-scale farmers and land, seed, water and food, beyond and across borders⁶. The RWA’s daily individual and collective acts challenge corporate power and patriarchy through resisting and undermining corporate seed and land rights by occupying land, defying monocropping, developing their own recipes, carrying and sharing local seeds

2 See African Centre for Biosafety (ACB)’s extensive critique and reports with regards to the mergers as well as small-scale farmers’ submissions to the public hearings on the mergers, 26–27 May 2017.

3 Charles van Onselen, *The seed is mine: The life of Kas Maine, a South African sharecropper 1894–1985* (Cape Town: Jonathan Ball, 1996).

4 Federici, S. 2013. *The Caliban and the Witch*. Delhi: Phoneme, 12.

6 I first saw the RWA slogan “we are the guardians of land, seed, life and love,” in Durban 2011 at COP17. In 2009, their launch slogan read “we are the guardians of land and life,” then it expanded to “we are the guardians of land, seed and life.”

across borders, planting trees in their fields, developing organic mixtures to prevent pest infestation, learning from each other and charting their own resistance in their homes, fields, communities and countries⁷. At the heart of the RWA praxis are resistance, ecofeminism, celebration, alternatives and reclaiming seed, land, body and agency, bringing to the fore how “[neoliberal] capitalism, as a socio-economic system, is necessarily committed to racism and sexism [which] must justify and mystify the contradictions built into social relations – the promise of freedom vs. the reality of widespread coercion, and the promise of prosperity vs. the reality of widespread penury.”⁸

The illusions and promises, sold by the third wave of mega-mergers, of increased yields, freedom from pests, drought tolerance and an array of new and improved seed are contested by small-scale farmers whose past experiences and daily realities and practices have shown them that the first and second waves of corporate consolidation have not benefitted them. Instead, it continues to skew food production to large-scale farming and undermine food sovereignty. Radical support organisations, food scholars and farmers engaged in radical agroecology inspire us with different expressions of living with and from nature.

A central concern for those who fight seed privatisation and biopiracy is the act of caring for seed – which in turn is integral to defending and sustaining cultural and bio-diversity. This act of resistance offers alternative meaning-making and counters the information management regulated by the status quo. There are many such spaces of resistance in the region, especially where women small-scale and subsistence farmers and fishers operate outside of the formal economy. In these “peripheral” spaces, the struggle to free seed, land and labour are not conceived of as separate but as an integral part of food sovereignty and women’s autonomy. This organic yet structural interconnection offers the radical urban food movements a way of moving beyond “silos” and single issue campaigns.

A new politics of food

In order to navigate where and how to wage resistance and build a new food activism it is crucial to understand the shifting terrain, : the new wave of mega-mergers, the advent of the second generation of GM seed (such as gene editing and silencing) shrinking state-funded research and development for breeding in the public interest, and stripping of public institutions aimed at assisting local farmers to maintain seed autonomy. This new terrain requires that we extend and deepen our understanding of the new ways in which western modernity, so-called progress and capitalist development “others” our bodies and ecosystems, and remains inextricably dependent on exploitation and destruction.

⁷ See, for instance, RWA declaration and march at the World Social Forum in Tunisia, March 2012; “African Women and Agriculture” June 2013; Mercia Andrews, “Introduction” in *Herbs that heal*, RWA Recipe Book Series: 2; RWA Annual Reports 2009–2016; and numerous articles by Mercia Andrews in *Amandla!* magazine reflecting on RWA resistance at SADC heads of states; COP processes, etc.

⁸ Silvia Federici, *The Caliban and the Witch* (Dehli: Phoneme, 2013), 17.

If we take as a given that a holistic food politics needs to be located within its broader African political economy, and ecological, social and radical feminist frames, then the challenge we face is ensuring that it resonates as radical and emancipatory, not only for those who till the soil and harvest, but also for those who are distant from daily preoccupations of farming. For a new food politics to materialise, we need to raise a series of new critical questions and considerations in the context of the recent political, economic and technological frontiers. The answers are to be found in the making of new meaning, resistance and organisation.

Currently the radical food movement (which broadly includes those working on seed and food sovereignty, agroecology, land, fish, forests, agrarian questions, social reproduction, commoners, etc.) tracks, exposes, critiques and challenges the discourse of food security. This is necessary work and is a key component of resistance and alternative meaning making. But are our calls for the de-commodification, de-objectification and de-privatisation of seed, land and food sufficient, given the ecological crisis and patriarchal capitalist onslaught? Undoubtedly they are critical in exposing the depths of market-related relations, but to what extent do they begin to point us in the direction of what it would mean to flourish, to be whole and not fragmented?

When we make these important political calls, how do we ensure that we bring alive the full connection between what is seeded and served on a plate: how it gets there, who prepares it, how it nourishes the body and soul? How do we connect this to the systems and institutions that regulate and define our autonomy? And how do we simultaneously make visible state authoritarianism and reach through draconian seed laws, which facilitate and extend corporate control to what we put out the table and into our bodies?

How do we deepen and extend the current articulation about food sovereignty? Do the seven food sovereignty principles crafted in 2005 still suffice? They are politically important and reflective of an historic moment, a manifestation of converged global resistance, but do they ensure the making of a food activism that is fully emancipatory in this new political phase? Emancipatory, by definition, demands notions beyond food as being nutritional and livelihood rights. It requires the breaking down of binaries and hierarchies and asks us to reimagine food as part of the collective, community, solidarity or nature, and central to the many alternative systems we are constructing.

There is no social movement and political space that does not include food. By unearthing the ways and assumptions around food in these spaces, we create a lens to see which food is produced, who cooks and feeds us, who organises the food and who pays for it, etc. This could provide an opportunity to make food and the politics of food visible; not in a normative way but as a way to tackle directly issues of patriarchy, capitalism, the ecological crisis, power and agency in our own spaces, and to truly decolonise food.

Could we imagine a food movement that begins to co-create a microcosm for the type of ecosystems we want to commune in? Could we build a radical politics of food within every social movement, thus making it an integral component? Through this we could embed and generate ideas of food rooted in sufficiency, pleasure, wellbeing, memory, local knowledge, culture and celebration, taste, texture, smell – our entire being.

Radical food politics has the power to reconnect us with nature, whilst simultaneously remaking our social relations. We are actively embarking on this radicalisation of food and body in the Feminist Table, Rural Women's Assembly, iNyanda National Land Movement, Rita Edwards Collective and Food Politics and Cultures Project.

Together and separately “we need [and are creating] a language and politics that enables living with, not living *against* nature and women.”