

Apr 1st, 1:00 AM - 2:00 AM

# Indigenous Women in the Food Justice and Sovereignty Movement: Lessons from the South Central Farm

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*South Central Farmers*

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Rufina Juarez, "Indigenous Women in the Food Justice and Sovereignty Movement: Lessons from the South Central Farm" (April 1, 2010). *NACCS Annual Conference Proceedings*. Paper 1.  
<http://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/naccs/2010/Proceedings/1>

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# **Indigenous Women in the Food Justice and Sovereignty Movement: Lessons from the South Central Farm**

NACCS Conference Plenary Address  
Rufina Juárez<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction**

I would like to start first by thanking the organizers who have coordinated this conference for us. I especially want to acknowledge the hard work—intellectual, physical and spiritual—of Professor Devon Peña who has ardently advocated for decades, even before the Green Movement was popular, for the protection of our Mother Earth—the land and her waters. Also, I want to thank the Creator for this time in our Chicana history—I am honored, as a Xicana-Indígena woman, to speak before you about the importance of our right and place within the global food sovereignty movement.

## **South Central Farmers Feeding Families: History and Political Ecology**

First, I want to share a bit of history about the South Central Farmers. We, the South Central Farmers Feeding Families (SCFs), began our struggle in September of 2003 when a single page notice, written in English and addressed mostly to the Spanish-speaking community and some monolingual indigenous language speakers, that was posted to the entrance gates of the South Central Farm (SCF). This letter stated that the LA Regional Food Bank thanked us, the “gardeners”, for our ongoing participation in their gardening program, but they were sad to inform us that this program had ended. Consequently, 350 farming families were being ordered to leave the farm.

We were not only being asked to leave the farm land, but were being told we must discontinue growing and distributing healthy traditional and culturally specific foods to extremely poor local families. Furthermore, the implications of this notice threatened a historic social movement that was underway—simply put, this notice put our Chicano/Indigenous food justice and sovereignty movement directly under attack.

The notice was problematic on multiple fronts. We were concerned about the threat to our movement, but also the immediate effects on the local poor and, most of all, the complete disregard for the original conditions that drew farmers to this land base to begin with. This story is starting to sound all too familiar, right? Everyone here understands how the historical push-pull factor works with regards to the treatment of Mexicans and Latinos and immigration policy in this country, right? You pull in the workers when you need them, then you toss them right out when you don't. Well, this is exactly what happened to the SCFs. We were lured by the city government to garden, and our efforts resulted in the creation of an ancient traditional and sophisticated farming system; but then we were pushed off (literally—at gunpoint) by the city government and told we had no rights or legal recourse to remain on the land, despite the many years of labor.

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<sup>1</sup> Rufina Juarez is an organizer with the South Central Farmers and La Red Xicana Indígena. This plenary address was presented at the annual conference of the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies, Seattle, Washington (April 8, 2010).

This forced us to raise several important questions regarding the mission of the LA Regional Food Bank. Was it no longer the primary mission of this Food Bank to feed the local poor? Had poverty and hunger ended in South Central LA? If the farmers were effectively and efficiently helping fulfill the primary mission of the food bank, why would they want to end this “so-called gardening program”?

Take note that we have always exercised self-determination to define and name ourselves as *campesinos* (farmers), yet the Food Bank continuously called us *jardineros* (gardeners). Now, if you ask any Mexican or Latino that ever stepped foot on the SCF they would tell you, based on their common sense, that what was happening there was not gardening—it was too huge of a project to be a garden. This is important to note and I will explain this point further later in my talk.

This notice also forced us to ask a key question of the Los Angeles City Council: Was it no longer a fact that the land had been given to the community as a form of mitigation due to the inner-city conditions of extreme poverty, racism, lack of educational and employment opportunities, unsafe parks, and widespread police abuse, which were exposed worldwide during the 1992 Uprising in LA?<sup>2</sup> For the next 12 years, 350 families, the majority historically displaced indigenous people from Mexico and Central America, worked the land and created a 14-acre farm in an urban setting in the middle of the most contaminated and polluted eastern section of South Central Los Angeles, at 41<sup>st</sup> and Alameda Avenue. People had been growing food for over 12 years at the farm when it was suddenly placed under the threat of destruction.

South Central LA had slipped into being a dormant place—an environment where poor people did not speak out politically out of fear of police brutality or *migra* raids. However, this movement forced us to take a stand and move toward saving the farm because we felt it was the correct thing to do. This action forced us to begin to organize and mobilize around the question of land, food, and the environment. The central concerns of our struggle depended on believing that we had a right to this land. If we had the right to land, we believed that we then had the right to continue to grow our own crops there; and that we had the right to continue to feed our families and ourselves fresh and inexpensive organic foods, while at the same time affording a safe place for children to play.

Three hundred and fifty families, representing the harsh reality that exists today in many of our poorest urban neighborhoods, comprised the heart of our movement. The men, women, and families that joined the SCFs had been forced to leave their places of origin and live in marginalized neighborhoods and urban cities throughout the U.S., many without legal recognition or political representation. For many of the *campesinos*, forced migration from Mexico and Central America resulted as mega-corporations stole their natural resources, enclosed their farmlands, and destroyed their local economies. The 14-acre space at South Central represented the only connection these formerly and historically land-based peoples had to the land, Mother Earth, and so we felt that the right to grow food was culturally appropriate, and indeed required for spiritual and cultural survival. Within this space, we created a safe place

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<sup>2</sup> *Editor's note:* This refers to the aftermath of the beating of Rodney King by LAPD troopers. The video that captured that incident of wanton police brutality was among the very first ever to document such an event on a handheld device. The beating of Mr. King ushered a week of resistance on the streets between April 29-May 4. Of course, the mainstream media and politicians characterized these struggles as rioting, looting, and ‘race’ riots. For discussion, see Henry A. Giroux, “The politics of insurgent multiculturalism in the era of the Los Angeles Uprising,” In: *Critical Multiculturalism*, Eds. Barry Kanpol and Peter McLaren (Westport: Greenwood, 1995).

for our children and relatives to play, pray, and heal. Our elders had a place where they felt wanted and productive. This reminds me of Don Juan who, with only one leg after his amputation, had one of the most beautiful parcels on the farm. This was his only access to good nutritious food. To this day South Central LA, like many people of color neighborhoods that are not yet gentrified, lack a single grocery store that offers pesticide-free fruits and vegetables or free-range organic meats.

### **What is Food Sovereignty?**

The term Food Sovereignty was introduced in an international platform, at the World Food Summit in 1996. Mind you, this was only two years after the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, Mexico, after the world became aware of the criticism of neoliberal policies and their effects on land ownership, and in particular unjust corporate use and exploitation. According to La Via Campesina, an international movement that coordinates farmer organizations worldwide, food sovereignty is the right of every nation and all peoples to define their agricultural and food policies. At a national level, this implies that each country freely determines how to organize its own food production by emphasizing local self-sufficiency, defining the nature of imports and exports, and equitable distribution to prevent hunger or malnutrition. At a community or individual level, this implies that the community can determine its food production, as well as consumption and distribution. The theory and practice of food sovereignty is an alternative to neoliberal policies regarding globalized food systems. Food sovereignty goes beyond the more common concept of food security.

Food security is limited to ensuring that a sufficient amount of safe food is produced without taking into account the kind of food produced, how, where and on what scale it is produced. Most food travels many miles and it requires fossil fuels, chemicals, pesticides and hormones to keep it fresh long enough to reach globally dispersed destinations. Most regional food banks across California fall into this globalized food system: One of the many lessons from our struggle was realizing how the food banks are captive to and dependent on the mega-corporations for food donations, purchasing, and distribution. The problem with our food system in the United States, according to Anuradha Mittal is

...that food, instead of being about communities, is now about commodities. It is controlled, not by the family farm growing food for families and communities, while maintaining biodiversity, but rather it has come to mean large corporate industrial agriculture farms, where machines have replaced farmers, where corporate agribusiness has replaced family farms. What we see is the result of a disconnection between us and food, where we have been reduced to consumers.<sup>3</sup>

I further argue that we have all become dependent on someone else for food and as Chicanos, who still have the traditional knowledge of farming among many of our family members, should be very, very troubled by this trend. Such food systems and policies continue to control, even monopolize, the distribution of food, undermining our right to food sovereignty. This is similar to the current state of immigration, as evident with the wave of displacement of peoples and massive migration due to the destruction of the land and other resources that these peoples

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<sup>3</sup> *Editor's Note:* Excerpt is from an interview with Mittal appearing in *Building the Green Economy: Success Stories from the Grassroots*, Eds. Kevin Danaher, Shannon Biggs, and Jason Mark (PoliPointPress, 2007). URL at: <http://theuncommoncanadian.com/?cat=46&paged=5> (accessed March 19, 2013).

depend on, the US government gives priority to international trade over peoples' subsistence. Some of these policies have done nothing to eliminate world hunger. On the contrary, they have increased peoples' dependence on agricultural imports and intensified the industrialization of agriculture, thus endangering our mother earth, our cultural and environmental heritage, and putting the health of the world's population at risk. These policies have driven millions of women and men farmers to abandon their traditional agricultural practices, forcing them into rural exodus or migration.

## **SCF and Food Sovereignty**

The families living and working on the farm in South Central LA represented what is going on in many parts of the world today—our traditional farming was brutally interrupted and the people were de-rooted off the land. You cannot see it now, but our traditional agricultural practices helped us harvest the massive amounts of food that we had on 14 acres in an urban setting. This model challenged the institutional definition of how urban land is supposed to be used and, more important, how we are supposed to be organized to work.

The traditional knowledge we have been given across the generations, heirloom seeds we have saved and planted, and lush crops we have harvested are the means we have used to create our food sovereignty. At the peak of our movement, we supplemented food for more than 3,000 families on one day. The community defined its own agricultural methods for growing and taking care of the top soil, which created a microclimate that reduced the temperature by at least 20 degrees at the farm compared to the surrounding hot concrete jungle. We were redefining the structure of the food system grounded in socially, economically and culturally appropriate foods that met the needs of our unique circumstances. South Central lacked natural food stores, so the farmers grew their own *serious* foods and medicinal plants, which meant that all people (350 families) assertively exercised their right to safe nutritious and culturally appropriate food and the food-producing resources that sustained our surrounding communities and us. At times, these medicinal products were so highly sought that we had people travelling from Nevada to look for some of the healing plants we were harvesting. This is one of the ways we practiced food sovereignty.

Our message has been consistent and it is simple: Chicanos/Latinos should have the right to affordable quality and nutritious food. It should be appropriate to our decolonized indigenous diet and traditional foodways. When we walk into the grocery store, we believe that we have the power to purchase what we want; however, before one arrives at the store, someone else has already made the choice of food for us. In poor barrios, that choice is usually non-nutritious and culturally inappropriate foodstuffs. Under the dominant food system, there is no true democratic process in the selection of your food—you have given that responsibility over to someone else because you no longer control the process of production and really have limited choices. Your only choice is to commute across cities to find a Whole Foods or Trader Joes that give your “better food” choices, but they are expensive choices. The way food distribution works in our society, “the existing system” has determined what you will buy and eat by deciding the products that are shelved in distinct communities. Someone else chooses for you. Further, your money does not pay the worker who had to pick your food, since they are not paid prevailing or living wages. Workers up and down the food chain are exploited and underpaid.

Consider the alarm over “Conflict diamonds”. There is a system that has, for years, allowed diamonds that are mined through slave labor to enter the global jewelry market. This is clearly a significant issue, yet most people only buy diamonds once or twice in their lives. Contrarily, people eat three times a day and we really do not think of how our food gets to the market or

who will actually benefit from our consumption. We never speak about what I call 'Conflict Food.' This is the nature of food sovereignty.

When the SCFs talk about food sovereignty, we mean having control over the system of the types of foods that are available and meant for our community to eat! It matters to us that the food we eat does not exploit people who grow, pick, and distribute it. So, as we begin to articulate the significance of food sovereignty for our people we begin to make connections across different actors and institutions: We begin to understand why the LA Food Bank, a food security-based program, was threatened by our existence. Food sovereignty is a threat because it is more than securing food in the bellies of poor. It disrupts the norms of securing food contracts from mega-corporations in the food industry. We realized the true threat that the SCF was to the establishment—we were a threat to the pocket books of the local McDonalds, Dominos Pizzas, La Superior, and Food for Less. Can you imagine what would our communities look like if we had a South Central Farm in every barrio throughout the US? Can you imagine what that would do to the commodity-driven global food system? So: How can we achieve radical redistribution of productive resources that are fundamental to real change for an improved quality of life? Food Sovereignty is therefore, *the right of peoples, communities, and countries to define their own agricultural, labor, fishing, food and land policies*, which are ecologically, socially, economically, and culturally appropriate to their unique circumstances. It includes the true right to safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food and to food-producing resources, as well as the ability for nations to sustain themselves and their societies. Food Sovereignty values the rights of people and communities to food and food production over trade interests and industrial concerns. This entails supporting and promoting local markets and producers over production for export and food imports. Later in the conference will talk about our efforts providing access to good food via the *tianguis* (open-air farmers' market) and the challenges inherent in re-educating communities about how to eat healthy by purchasing locally and how we have tried to strengthen the production of the farmers themselves for local markets.

### **Life as an Indigenous Woman**

For us, the struggle to save the farm was for our ancestral and historical right to the land. It was a small 14-acre farm; the only place that we could use to teach and transfer our traditional knowledge of growing food and to regain our relationship with the land, our Earth. To me, as a woman—and I believe I carry the message for all the women in our struggle—the movement is to reclaim our fire; our food justice as indigenous people. This is the crucial aspect of the struggle for environmental justice, without which we cannot attain food sovereignty and autonomy for survival of our communities.

My vision as an indigenous woman involved in environmental and food justice starts with the fundamental principle that we cannot separate the environment from Mother Earth, traditional knowledge from technological advances, the right to eat from the right to grow your own traditional food, and autonomy from community self-governance of land and water. Here, I am including our four-legged and our crawling, sliding, swimming, and flying brother and sisters as well. Furthermore, this can only be accomplished when you have a relationship with, and responsibility for, our Mother Earth and her resources. Ultimately, the only right that matters is truly the right to fulfill the sacred obligation of caring for our Mother.

For us, the indigenous women of the world, land, territories, and natural resources are the fundamental basis of our existence, given that we develop a spiritual and sacred relationship that entails a holistic connection between 'being' and nature. We reaffirm that it is a collective good, which is not negotiable, specifically the earth, water, sun and the air...

## La Red Indigena Xicana and the UN Forum

In 2007 Josefina Medina and I participated at the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues with La Red Xicana Indigena, an indigenous women's network, where we presented the following to the Special Rapporteur on Migration Issues:

The corporate production of food, such as hybrid corn, soy, and wheat, has taken over the production of local high quality ancestral food (i.e., corn, squash, and beans) through the displacement of traditional agricultural communities who produce food for their own use and for trade. Corporate takeover of agricultural lands forces families to flee to local and international urban areas, where they transform from a self-reliant, highly skilled agricultural society, into poor and politically vulnerable substrata of urban society. Economically dependent on low wages for unskilled labor, men, women and children lose their relationships, roles, ancestral knowledge and practices of self-sufficiency. Their lack of economic resources makes them dependent on cheap poor-quality food produced by the corporations, which displaced them in the first place. Coupled with the lack of health education and basic health care they are highly defenseless to long term diseases like obesity, diabetes, cancer, and asthma, which make them life-time consumers of pharmaceuticals. The rise of childhood illnesses produces long-term profit for corporations. Indigenous peoples in diaspora are in fact paying for their own oppression.

Here we highlighted the divesting issue faced in our poor urban and rural communities that have no access to good quality food and are left to only purchase high caloric processed foods like Maruchan or Top Ramon, the high sodium dry noodle soups. Consequently, when we were evicted in 2006 we were denied the right to grow our traditional foods and teach our children their relationship with and responsibility to the land. Therefore, it can be said that at a small scale the SCFs were an example of a dispersed indigenous population that does not have any rights to practice the continuity of our ancestral traditions outside of their homeland. So: How do and/or can we continue to practice the ancestral right of preserving what are our traditional foods and diets? I leave this question for now to the future activists and the allied academic researchers who will present a variety of strategies to the sessions to follow during this conference.

## SCF and Gender Politics

The SCF was physical structured into eight sections and each had individuals responsible for communications and resolution of issues that could arise at such a big farm. However, before we started to organize, many individuals did not care to participate or were not empowered to participate in the administration of the farm. Imagine yourselves trying to identify who was who on this farm. As an elected representative of the farmers at our first General Assembly, I took on this responsibility. It was not difficult for the Josefina, Carmen, Carolina, and other women farmers to step up to these elected positions and exercise their leadership. The SCF women organized, cleaned, marched at protest demonstrations, and patrolled the farm boundaries at night; they changed locks in the middle of the night to deter the theft of *papalo*,<sup>4</sup> which sold like

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<sup>4</sup> *Editor's Note:* This herb is classified as *Porophyllum ruderale* ssp. and is also known by the popular names *papaloquelite* and *yerba del venado* (Deer weed). In English it is known as the Butterfly plant. It is a pungent herb and is usually eaten raw on a sandwich or added to guacamole and salads. It is also used fresh with soups and stews, grilled meats, and beans, much like cilantro. Papalo is not cooked; it is only used raw or added at the last moment. For a detailed inventory of the agrobiodiversity at the South

gangbusters at our monthly farmers' market. It was through the leadership of the women that we could organize the men and families when needed.

Some of the challenges—which I am certain that woman activists in the audience may have experienced—involved physical threats to our persons and bodies. Yes, we were called names and yes we were physically attacked by some of the men in our community who wanted to weaken our leadership and resented our performance of duties to enforce the rules for holding and using the plots. How did we overcome these challenges? In part, by always having groups travel together and making sure we had our own individual, sometimes personal, security guards. And most importantly, by holding our heads high with visions of feeding our families and saving the farm; we had a common goal. That benefited all of us including the men, elders, children and the people off the farm who need the food.

As *mujeres en movimiento* we are faced with subtle and aggressive attacks on our persons, our bodies, and our spirits, not only by external forces outside the struggle but by male members in our own community. In the SCF struggle, I and other women were attacked verbally and physically. There were aggressive taunts and threats by one young African American brother from the community who, feigning some stereotyped gangster-style, sought to use a hostile stance toward Xicana Indigena women by posturing himself so physically close within our personal space, to the point of intimating a imminent attack; he sought to manipulate the situation and weaken our power. He was constantly trying to intimidate us as women, as well as to create and feed into the apparent racial divide between Blacks and Mexicanos. He consistently used denigrating words and phrases like: “You’re a bitch, a whore, you have sold out the community,” in order to make his point. You will get to see some of these actions later in the conference when you view the documentary. What you will also see are other African American men who stood with us; they were farmers and activist supporters and had as much of a stake in the struggle as anyone else.

Another challenge that we faced was ‘machismo’ or male chauvinism among the farmers. At one point, women were not being allowed to grow what they wanted because the husband had control of their family plot. In response to this problem, we created the women’s cooperative section that was only for women who wanted to grow edible and medicinal plants of their choice. Arguably, it can be seen as if women conceded to male chauvinism by leaving the family plot to be run solely by the husband; however, our cooperative section offered so much more in exchange. It gave many women leadership roles and this led to a united front.

By the women leading by position and example and focusing on the main goal of growing a variety of medicinal plants and food, we overcame some of the barriers faced in a male-dominated community and openly questioned the historical gender roles considered untouchable. Most importantly, by having all members of the SCF become part of a participatory democracy, we were able to create transparency and accountability. Contracts were written not because we did not believe in the traditional oral word, *la palabra*, but as a tool that documented our agreements in public, before the General Assembly. Another more subtle form of machismo occurred when a young Chicano journalist wrote a one-sided piece attacking the leadership of the South Central Farmers. He copied two previous writers who took their lead from Jan Perry, who was the City Council member that facilitated the sale of the land to a former owner at a

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Central Farm, see the report by Devon G. Peña (2005) *Preliminary List of Botanical Species Grown at South Central Community Garden* which is available for download at:  
[www.acequiainstitute.org/images/PRELIMINARY\\_LIST\\_OF\\_BOTANICAL\\_SPECIES\\_GROWN\\_AT\\_SOUTH\\_CENTRAL\\_Final\\_Draft.doc](http://www.acequiainstitute.org/images/PRELIMINARY_LIST_OF_BOTANICAL_SPECIES_GROWN_AT_SOUTH_CENTRAL_Final_Draft.doc).

price far below market value. The tone of these articles was that the SCF leadership prevented democracy and stole money from the membership. They based all of their information on the words of angry groups who broke away from the main body of SCFs either because they were scared away by the threats of police attacks on the farm, were uncomfortable accepting women's leadership, or abandoned the struggle for a measly piece of land underneath high tension electrical transmission lines in an area sixty blocks away from the original farm.<sup>5</sup>

Quotes from these sources included upset male members who physically attacked the two elected leaders of the SCFarmers and we had restraining orders imposed on them. This approach and false accusations against the leadership including one leveled against me for, "embarrassing the humble farmers by implying that they were not men" in a speech I gave, placed him on the side of Perry the politician and Horowitz the beneficiary of her generosity with the peoples money. But it did more than that. His willingness to interview people who had abandoned the struggle put him on one side of the struggle. But given the nature of his profession, he is able to mold public opinion and therefore has a greater responsibility.

If we lived in a vacuum, then we could assume that machismo is a thing of the past--but, we don't. Most of the more crooked members of the old guard leadership at the farm were men and they were not willing to take leadership from women. However, they had no choice but to do so when important decisions had to be made, like, Do you stay with the SCF's and fight or do you accepting the strip of land under the high tension wires - But that did not erase decades and centuries of deeply imbedded machismo and intellectuals used it to hide behind their cowardly support of Perry and her rip off of the residents of LA and destruction of the farm.

In closing.....

We have a tremendous amount of work ahead of us, for the activist and academia in the room I hope that the SCF struggle can be used as an example for our future. I hope that you are in the right place where you should be and doing the work to liberate our communities. Food can be used as a weapon for decolonization of our youth and communities. Why do we eat the foods that we do and who is making that choice for us? An elder gave me this message to give to all of you, "Our mother earth is being raped, violated and criminalized by men. They call this global warming but I say that the earth is mad and all these changes that have been happening to our mother earth are a result of the abuse. In order for the 'us' as 'humans' to survive, we must change how we treat nuestra madre tierra. We all have to be in the right place doing the right work, **building** a movement for the survival of our mother earth.

I did not ask to be in the SCF struggle but, rather, it came calling when I was at "that place back in 2003". We did the work and we still are working, re-learning how to grow food and how we can sustain ourselves with systems that can contribute to erasing years and years of conditioning around our existing food systems and practices that are so dependent on fossil fuels. We all must close the gap that we have created in order to survive on our mother earth, "nuestra madre tierra" and bring life back into balance.

gracias

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<sup>5</sup> *Editor's Note:* According to interviews conducted by the editor of these proceedings (Peña), another reason had to do with two men who were expelled for violating the 'rules of the common' including the acquisition of multiple plots for commercial gain, which was against administrative rules agreed to by the General Assembly through consensus. They proved to be among the disgruntled informants who lied to the journalist about a lack of democracy and theft of monies. This issue is discussed in a forthcoming article co-authored by Juarez and Peña, which provides a test of the principles for enduring common property resources as outlined by Elinor Ostrom.

