



## **Local Stagings, Global Productions: The Theatricality of Food Rituals in the Landless Peasant Movement (MST-Bolivia)**

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### **Abstract**

While most scholarly work in the 1990s focused on the use of ethnic identity and indigeneity as a critical tool for movement building in Latin America, this article turns toward new performative strategies in the 2000s. Through food performances—from showing and boasting about small-scale production to collective practices of cooking and feeding activists from a common pot—MST-Bolivia teaches *campesinos* about the importance of reclaiming land, territory, and food systems for indigenous peoples. The discourse of food sovereignty respatializes agriculture from global and corporate arenas to the local, as MST activists demand that food should be first and foremost a right and secondarily an item of trade. Yet there is no purity to their politics: daily contradictions exist between public declarations of sovereignty and collectivity and individualistic needs and desires. Despite such tensions, MST transports food traditions from regional to international arenas where they reassemble highly flexible organizational strategies capable of providing food for thousands of activists.

### **Ocupar, Resistir, Producir: *Performance and Practice***

After traveling through the night on a chartered bus from Sao Paulo to Brasilia, the Bolivian Landless Peasant (MST-Bolivia) representatives and I finally arrived at the Fifth International MST Congress, a gathering of 17,500

men and women. We assembled in the Nilson Nelson Gymnasium, a soccer stadium in the heart of the capital city. The international guests and Brazilian landless were organized in bleacher seats looking down at the small figures performing the opening *mística* [mystique or performance]—developed from Latin American liberation theology and generally interpreted as love for a cause, solidarity, collectivity, and belief in change—which set the tone for the conference (Issa 2007: 124).

[2] *Místicas* are an important part of international and national meetings, serving a pedagogical and cultural function (Issa 129). That day, through music and dance, the artists enacted the localized effects of broad-based economic policies that had commodified and then privatized their lands for the sake of agro-industrial development and private profit. A group of MST families, making use of props such as hoes and shovels, illustrated the loss of community provisioning, ecological degradation, and their subsequent migrations to urban centers in search of employment. They began to twist and turn their bodies, moving slowly to drum beats. Surrounding the performance space were two large monitors that projected images of the 9/11 World Trade Center bombings, followed by the subsequent destruction in Iraq and Afghanistan. The performers continued to dance; their movement shifted into a kind of pantomime as the monitors switched from images of Iraq and Afghanistan to pictures of rural poverty in South

America. Finally, a room-sized puppet shaped like an eagle was slowly lowered from the ceiling, and MST organizers proceeded to stomp on it as they shouted, "*Ocupar, Resistir, Producir!*" [Occupy, Resist, and Produce!], the motto of the movement.



**Picture 1:** US eagle destroyed at MST International Congress. Courtesy of Rick Gerharter

[3] This was just one of the many spectacular performances that I witnessed during my 16-month ethnographic fieldwork with the Landless Peasant Movement in Santa Cruz, Bolivia, and over several short trips to Brazil. MST-Bolivia is a 50,000-member national-level indigenous *campesino* organization comprised of displaced peasants, former servants, small-scale

vendors, and indigenous intellectuals with a strong-hold in the eastern region of Santa Cruz, which is the center of agro-industrial development and highly unequal land relations: 90% of the productive land is owned by 7% of the population. The Bolivian movement borrows its name and organizational structure from the well-known Brazilian Landless Movement, which, with an estimated 1.5 million members, is the largest social movement in Latin America. Like its Brazilian counterpart, MST-Bolivia occupies unused land in order to bring national attention to the problem of landed inequality. As members seize *latifundio* property, MST establishes collective farms, healthcare clinics, and schools. The ultimate goal of the movement is to claim land rights for poor and displaced farmers, revive small-scale farming, and experiment with organic and healthier alternatives.

[4] In the course of my fieldwork, I became fascinated by the importance of cultural performance as a powerful mechanism for transmitting information, teaching, and building collective identity. Many performance studies theorists have looked at the relationship between cultural performances and resistance (Conquergood 1985; 1988; Taylor 1997, 2003; Peña 2010; Madison 2010). Such scholars have theorized about everyday acts and practices of resistance to more spectacular staged performances and theatric renditions of myths as building momentum and shaping political ideology. For instance, Soyini Madison (2010) analyzes the ways in which

cultural performances—the use of street theater and oral histories—enhances local activism in South Saharan African movements fighting for the reclamation of public goods like water. Dwight Conquergood (1998), a performance studies scholar and activist, described performance as:

“... the need to move beyond idea and ideology of the text and of textuality as a mode of communicative practice... [O]ppressed people everywhere must watch their backs, cover their tracks, and suck up their feelings... [This] demands that we pay attention to messages that are coded and encrypted, to indirect, nonverbal and extralinguistic modes of communication.” (2002: 148)

[5] While my broader project with MST focused on the importance of staged dances and shows, the historic reenactment of classic myths of Incan figures and heroes, and fairs and festivals in building movement identity,<sup>i</sup> this article turns toward performance in everyday interactions and political practices—the discourses and conversations about food sovereignty, or the right of poor people to obtain healthy food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods. Food sovereignty puts those who produce, distribute, and consume food—not the demands of markets and corporations—at the heart of food systems and policies. According to MST:

“[Food sovereignty] defends the interests and inclusion of the next generation. It offers a strategy to resist and dismantle the current corporate trade and food regime, and directions for food, farming, pastoral and fisheries systems determined by local producers... Food sovereignty promotes transparent trade that guarantees just income to all peoples and the rights of consumers to control their food and nutrition. It ensures that the rights to use and manage our lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those of us who produce food. Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social classes and generations.”

(<http://www.mstbrazil.org>)

[6] Beyond discussions of food sovereignty at the community level, MST’s food practices of collective cooking and eating, which travel from settlements to improvisational roadsides as MST marches for agrarian reform, also inform its politics. In this article, I distinguish between *performance*, which is a more conscious and heightened awareness of public presentation, and *practice*, here mundane actions of cooking and eating<sup>ii</sup>. While these daily practices might not be the bold and spectacularly staged shows illustrated at the beginning of the article, they, like the *místicas*, are part of the creative

ways in which movement intellectuals transmit ideas through action about agro-industries and new forms of producing and working the land. Hidden within their daily actions are ideas about living and eating better, or as movements have now coined it, *vivir bien* [to live well]. This has become a well-known term, written into the constitution, in order to protect and preserve land rights, particular cultural traditions, and indigenous forms of autonomy. While many scholars have looked at these food practices in the Andes as grounded in a particular rural community life,<sup>iii</sup> I argue that such rituals have become mobile and transportable, easily assembled and reassembled to serve a particular political and economic purpose in the contemporary period. Although employed differently, both performance and practice play key roles in the work of social movements.

[7] Further, the tensions and contradictions between performance and movement actions at community, regional, and national level often lead to creative new ways of addressing land inequality. Oftentimes, there are blatant contradictions between movement members' boasting or *frontstage* performance—which includes the importance of food sovereignty, ecologically sound farming techniques, collective work and labor, and gender equality—and their *backstage* actions<sup>iv</sup>. Instead of merely dismissing or dwelling on these contradictions, I assert that such frictions often keep Leftist movements alive in Bolivia and force social organizations to work

through the conflict and reach some kind of collective resolution. These and other tensions serve as a source of energy for reinventing MST politics in relationship to dynamic economic, political, and regional contexts.

### ***The Political Economy of Food, New Food Regimes, and Resistance***

In order to understand MST performances of food sovereignty, we must first turn toward broader shifts in the global economy toward export-oriented crops and food for international, not national, consumption. These shifts have affected the kinds of foods produced in places like Bolivia, but have also created increased competition for small-scale producers who often cannot keep pace with regionalist elites. Therefore, international discourses and ideas about growing and producing food for national consumption have gained much traction locally. Agrarian movements like MST see the possibilities of creating alternative agro-ecological communities and experimenting with rotating crops and green manure to enhance the fertility of soil. They have also reforested some areas, as trees help prevent soil erosion.

#### *International Currents*

Neoliberal reforms<sup>v</sup> reshifted the balance of agriculture and power worldwide: progression from multinational markets to transnational complexes grew out of geo-economic arrangements as global capitalism



shifted gears in the 1970s and 1980s. The stable organization of nationally regulated economies, with fixed exchange rates pegged to the dollar, gave way to an increasingly unstable organization of transnational economic relations governed by floating exchange rates, offshore money markets, and financial speculation. As national controls on capital movements eased, transnational corporate activity expanded and identified exporting to the global market as the preferred strategy for states and firms (McMichael 2000). By the 1980s, the U.S. moved to regulate world agricultural commodity markets via a program of liberalization in the Uruguay Round, culminating in the WTO-centered food regime. Politicians and bureaucrats then replaced the GATT with the WTO, which is not a treaty, but more like a framework in which negotiations can continue indefinitely (Ellwood 2007:35). Ellwood (2007) describes the WTO as “[a] potential goldmine for large global corporate heads who see it as a rich man’s club dominated by western industrial nations-thinking about food gone global” (36).

[10] The current restructuring of world agriculture reinforces market divisions between high-value and low-value products, supports the expansion of export-oriented forms of production, and consolidates wealth and power in the hands of a few. The growth of such agro-export platforms is a highly unstable strategy. It signals a widespread subordination of producing regions to global production and consumption relations, organized

by transnational food companies or huge conglomerates that have been able to consolidate interests and dominate the market. The consequence of such agricultural and structural adjustments has been the loss of subsistence farming, destruction of the soil and subsoil, and subsequent forms of displacement to city centers. These global trends have had very specific national and local consequences. The film *Life and Debt* (2001) by Stephanie Black powerfully narrates the devastating consequences of liberalizing Jamaica's market in a post-colonial context: the destruction of small-scale farming took the shape of onion growers and pickers who could no longer survive and migrated to city centers, and of dairy farmers who were forced to spill hundreds of gallons of milk because U.S.-subsidized milk was cheaper than what organic farmers could produce. Walden Bellow (2008), a journalist, scholar, and activist, has written about the specific cases of the rice crisis in the Philippines and the Mexican tortilla crisis, all a result of these broad-based global alliances, which have punished poor farmers through high interest rates on loans and literally pushed them out of fair market options.

### *Regional Dynamics and the Growth of Agricultural Aristocracy*

The eastern region of Bolivia has historically been ripe for such agricultural expansion and international investment, which has created a highly uneven landscape of wealth and land in the hands of few elite

families. Well before the adoption of neoliberal reforms and the National Revolution—which introduced universal adult suffrage, carried out a sweeping land reform, promoted rural education, and, in 1952, nationalized the country’s largest tin mines—the government decided to open up the Oriente through the Plan Bohan in early 1942. This was the result of an economic mission sent by the U.S. government to study the long-term development possibilities for the Bolivian lowlands. The proposal had three components: first and foremost, stimulate tropical crops such as sugar, cotton, cattle, and lumber; second, construct a highway linking production centers to consumption centers; and finally, develop proven oil and natural gas reserves (Gill 1987). The U.S. funneled millions of dollars in aid to stimulate large-scale agro-industrial development in the 1950s, and the new highway provided critical links between sugar mills and important sugarcane-producing regional centers. This expansion of sugarcane brought new labor regimes, as Andean migrants were lured with the promise of food, land, and resources to work on plantations in the lowlands. Lesley Gill (1987) notes that this era of sugarcane production created great inequalities between distinct groups as competition for land, labor, and technical/financial assistance became ever more pronounced. Much of this had to do with government-subsidized credit given to large-scale sugarcane producers—small-scale farmers were forced to take out loans with high interest rates.

[12] During this critical era, a small group of elites consolidated their wealth through ownership and monopoly of land, productive resources, and sugarcane production. Many of these elite families who began to acquire land in the 1950s and early 1960s gained access to greater possibilities for land speculation in the 1970s as military dictator Hugo Banzer gifted large extensions as political patronage. The Santa Cruz environment was ripe for the expansion of soy as a key export-oriented crop for regional development in the 1980s. Several latifundio families, such as Branko Marinkovic, Ivo Kuljis, and Ernesto Monasterios, took full advantage of the neoliberal policies that liberalized markets and opened up borders. They had both political clout through their work on civic committees and ready-made capital to invest in what was being referred to as “green gold.” Increased demand for soy on a global field—linked to a growing need for biofuels for energy—has led to increased production and exportation in Bolivia, which has created a reliance on large-scale monoculture. As Miguel Urioste declared:

“This mono export model...is a lamentable demonstration of how those who decide public policies in the Third world do not take into account the enormous social, economic, and environmental effects produced by this model.” (Burbahc 2008: 3)

The use of land for soy production in the east has not provided food to the majority of Bolivians, but rather has produced export-oriented crops.

Further, the model, as mentioned above, has had serious environmental consequences through its reliance on packages of herbicides like Roundup Ready. Therefore, much of the land once used for soy production cannot be used for other kinds of agriculture.

[13] The corporate dominated ago-industrial complex in Santa Cruz is centered on the processing and export of soybean oil. Two of the world's largest agribusiness multinationals, ADM and Cargill, have outlets in the city. While Cargill is primarily an exporter of Bolivian soybeans and sunflower seeds, ADM co-owns the largest vegetable oil processing plant in the world, Sociedad Aceitera del Oriente (IOL S.A.), with the well-known Bolivian civic leader Branko Marinkovic. According to Bret Gustafson (2008), these companies "built wealth the Cruceño way. They hold large tracts of productive and non-productive lands (through many titles, acquired during military regimes, are of questionable legality). They run a business that grew under state credits, protection, and subsidies (through IOL S.A. is now under investigation for tax fraud)" (21).

[14] The borders between industry and regional politics are ill-defined in Santa Cruz. For example, IOL S.A.'s partner, Branko Marinkovic, is a former President of the Pro Santa Cruz Civic Committee and served as a central player in the regional autonomy movement, which was comprised of a group

of Cruceño elites. These Committee members formed critical alliances across the east in order to promote a form of decentralization that would provide full control over natural resources within their territorial bounds. By forging political and economic ties, they were able to create a powerful oppositional countermovement against President Evo Morales who was elected as the first indigenous President in the history of the Americas and his administration's social democratic proposals. Marinkovic has also been linked to violent groups such as the Union Juvenil Cruceñista, a young men's paramilitary organization in Santa Cruz that has attacked leftist groups, laid siege to indigenous communities, looted NGO buildings, stolen critical documents, and destroyed files on land reform. More recently, he was tied to an alleged plot to kill Morales, offering a Hungarian hit man \$200,000 (£135,000) to buy weapons and, in his words, "to finish the job we started" (Stapff 2009). On the run from the Bolivian government, Marinkovic's whereabouts are unknown, with activists speculating he may have fled to Brazil, is in hiding in the jungles of eastern Bolivia, or that he is in the United States, where he is imagined to be living in Chevy Chase, Maryland, with another once powerful Bolivian elite, the former President Gonzalo "Goni" Sanchez de Lozada.

[15] Another critical figure in the autonomy debates is Ivo Kuljis, who controls both the meat industry and supermarket chains in Santa Cruz.

Supermarkets are the new giants, with even greater power than food processing industries. European-style supermarkets have caused the displacement and disappearance of small *ventas* [small neighborhood stores], which were once a hallmark of family-owned businesses in many Cruceño neighborhoods. Ivo is the son of Mateo Kuljis, who founded powerful elite clubs like Club Social and the Camara de Industria y Comercio in 1947. Kuljis is now the owner of Red Uno de Bolivia, and he, along with other agricultural oligarchs like Ernesto Monasterios—who owns Unitel, the most conservative television channel in the east—control the production of images and political messages about groups like the Landless Peasant Movement. While there are other channels like Canal 7, the state-owned channel, the majority of television stations in the region are controlled by Cruceño elites, which gave them a powerful advantage in the 1990s and 2000s as they built a 500,000-person movement calling for regional autonomy and standing against Morales’s proposals for agrarian reform and food sovereignty.

### *Landless Peasant Movement and the Birth of a Food Movement*

In 2003, within this context of broad-based economic shifts—the consolidation of land, capital, and the means of production—MST emerged in the Gran Chaco region as a powerful new social movement in the east. Historically, in the lowlands, *sindicatos*, or unions, were the only peasant

organizational structure. The sindicatos directed and participated in a wide range of activities, including organizing campesinos, distributing land, initiating infrastructural development, and resolving internal disputes at the village level (Gill 1987). Unions legitimized peasant land claims through an intricate process of petitioning land reform agencies to survey the unproductive land, expropriate plantations, and redistribute the land to the landless. Legal ownership of land was thus often contingent upon residency in a particular community and compliance with communal obligations maintained by syndicate structures. As market forces shifted toward investment in large-scale and export-oriented agriculture, however, peasants found a way to temporarily survive by mercantilizing their land. This process of buying and selling ruptured historic communal ties as peasants migrated into and out of these agricultural zones. Douglas Hertzler (2002), however, witnessed the problems incurred by communities when large landowners offered poor peasants money in exchange for their titles. Peasant unions repeatedly pressured members not to sell to buyers unapproved by the community, but they had little legal recourse to prevent land from being sold away. Communities were often bought out piecemeal by neighboring large farms and the fabric of the community was destroyed. This constant mobility led to the dissolution of unions in the lowlands.



[17] With the peasantry fragmented and leaderless, new social movements like MST gained substantial momentum. The landless workers created a social and political structure that, over time, had a national reach. As mentioned previously, the first land occupation, popularly referred to as Panantí, occurred when two hundred migrants occupied the *hacienda* owned by President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada's sister-in-law. This initial occupation impelled workers to develop a national-level platform for agrarian reform, which included eliminating the latifundio, returning unproductive land to small-scale farmers, and building a sustainable model of agriculture. Each successful occupation led to the establishment of an *asentamiento* [land reform settlement], which provided the springboard for further occupations and new *acampamentos* [encampments], and hence the *territorialization* of the movement. Territorialization not only results in the spatial conquest of land, but also the dissemination of a national-level and global ambition or counter-hegemonic vision. This analysis does not suggest that territorialization is a straightforward process. Rather, occupations often face violent evictions, resulting in injury, arrest, or death, and occupiers may have to live in an encampment for years, facing harsh conditions before obtaining title to the land (Karriem 2008).

[18] This external work of territorializing or claiming land for campesinos is joined to the critical internal praxis of building a movement organization that

gets diffused in an acampamento. Once established, the movement organization becomes a space for building campesino power and solidarity, socializing politically, and forging a national or global ambition. Based on the Ecclesiastical Base Community Model from the Brazilian Landless Movement, an MST-Bolivian acampamento of 100 families would be divided into 10 nucleos of 10 families, with two coordinators, a man and a woman, to encourage greater participation by women. For instance, the newly-titled Pueblos Unidos [United Towns] settlement, the first officially titled communal land under Morales' new agrarian reform law, which sought to undo the INRA law (National Agrarian Reform Law of 1996), a neoliberal land law which supported large-scale land-owners through a self-assessed tax of 1% of the self-assessed value of their land.<sup>vi</sup> The new agrarian law had three critical pillars: 1) to expropriate latifundio land and return it to peasants as collectively titled; 2) to create an agricultural bank to reduce interest rates for small-scale producers from 20% to 6%; and 3) to develop markets for eco-products and long-term sustainability. Under this new law, Pueblos Unidos received collective title to the land in September of 2007. The community is one of three experimental MST settlements in the Santa Cruz department and consists of approximately 300 families, who are further divided into 30 nucleos of 10 families, each with two coordinators. Other members of the nucleo participate in commissions responsible for education, health, communication, security, or political education. Instead of the

hierarchical or vertical structure found in the sindicatos, MST relies on a horizontal form of leadership in which distinct leaders come together from the various commissions in order to make community-based decisions. This decentralized organizational structure and self-organization also maps onto the regional and national-level movement that has been central to the ideological and spatial growth of MST.

### ***Performing Alternative Food Production in MST Encampments***

I spent most of my time in the Obispo Santiesteban region living with organizers in their permanent houses in Mineros, San Pedro, and Harderman and traveling with them to what became known as Pueblos Unidos. Pueblos Unidos was a result of the Yuquises occupation, which occurred in August 2004, when 500 campesinos from the northern region took over the illegally-owned land of Rafael Paz Hurtado (a well-known *soyero* and regionalist elite) in Obispo Santiesteban. After several months, Paz hired a group of paramilitary youth from marginal urban neighborhoods in Santa Cruz to displace the landless squatters. Many MST members lived under bridges, in parks, and in plazas for weeks until they figured out how to find shelter and make a living.<sup>vii</sup> Eventually, however, when the land was titled in 2007, most of the families who survived the occupation returned to the land with all their belongings in order to build their houses and begin their agricultural work for the season.

[20] To reach Pueblos Unidos, we often traveled in the backs of large agricultural trucks, where we piled on top of each other for the 15- to 20-hour ride. The sun beat down on our already burnt faces and the bumps in the road threw people across the metal base of the truck. Some bodies flew like bendable frisbees from one side of the truck to the other, while others were more skilled at carefully holding onto nodes in the truck. I proved to be a mere amateur. The dirt kicked up from the super-sized tires and enveloped everyone in a brown clay-like substance that clung to every orifice. Hair became completely covered, while dirt slid into the short base of the nails and stuck indefinitely to the cuticles. I wrapped myself in a light cotton scarf to prevent the dirt from getting stuck in my throat and making me wheeze, but soon, I realized that the scarf was not thick enough to block the physical effects of the journey. Moreover, we were trapped inside the large metal walls of the truck, and stopped only occasionally for water and a quick bite to eat in the small pueblos.

[21] Finally, we arrived late on an unusually warm night in mid-August to find a makeshift sign reading, "Welcome to Pueblos Unidos." We packed all of our belongings into small, wooden, makeshift canoes, which took us from one side of the brown, dirt-filled water to the other. The boats shook lightly with the weight of sleeping bags, books, and other goods, but the Pueblos

Unidos representative assured us our belongings would safely arrive on the other side.



**Photo 2:** Welcome to Pueblos Unidos. Courtesy of the author

[22] We were greeted by many community residents, who ran to the river to show us where we would stay. They took us to one of the many homes they had constructed from *motacú* branches, where we would live with a family.



**Photo 3:** Self-Constructed Houses of Motacú. Courtesy of the author

[23] As we arrived and dropped our *pilcha* [things], residents immediately took us on a journey through their *chacos*, or small fields. They were very proud of what they were producing and how they were producing it. As we walked together down winding agricultural roads, we were attacked by swarms of mosquitoes. Not only was there no repellent, but not even the most powerful Deet spray from the United States could keep these vicious bugs under control. Yet many of the organizers seemed unaffected by the *picasones* [little mosquito bites], as they called them, merely brushing the

insects aside as they talked to us about what they were growing and the community they wished to build. One organizer stated:

“This Pueblos Unidos will be filled with production; no one will go hungry. Everyone will be able to live off of this land. Then, we will create roads, so that we can get our products easily out to market.”

He continued to imagine this community as an eco-friendly tourist zone, where foreigners could come and experience the natural beauty of Pueblos Unidos—where residents could show visitors how to organically farm and the Gringos could then take this knowledge back to their communities. It was important for many of the residents to perform food sovereignty, the idea that economic and social human rights begin with the right to food: to sit in the middle of their products, to show us their production, to pick a tomato or a head of lettuce, and to tell me their stories.





**Photo 4:** Community resident showing her lettuce. Courtesy of the author

[24] As they sat in their chacos, many recalled their struggle over land, how they had been displaced many times by *sicarios* [contracted thugs referred to in Bolivia as “hired killers”] and forced to live under bridges or in parks without food. As one woman said:

“This here represents not only our home and community, but independence. It’s so beautiful that we can grow our own food and eat it. It represents us not having to rely upon others for our food, we can live the way we want to live.”



The performance of food sovereignty as independently growing organic crops proved to be a critical theme underlying movement politics. Food, like other cultural forms, serves as sign and symbol of the struggle for land rights and a new politics of redemption and reclamation. The idea of feeding oneself and one's family through small-scale production represented the first step in building autonomous landless settlements.

[25] One Pueblos Unidos resident, in particular, wanted us to taste his juicy watermelon that was suddenly ripe and ready to be eaten. This act of sharing food, one I will return to later in the essay, is a powerful illustration of co-performance, which Dwight Conqergood described as, "dismantling the problematic observer-observed binary and replacing it with a relationship based on 'dialogue' not 'monologues'" (Conquergood 2002: 149). These rituals of food sharing opened up a space for dialogue and exchange, political conversations about the struggle to reclaim land and space for indigenous peoples. MST members wanted foreigners to participate in their production, to understand and taste their food, made with their hands and their labor.

[26] Sometimes, these organizers had ulterior motives as well, such as linking these food rituals and community performances to requests for international money, or support for a new school or healthcare clinic. This is

quite common in all parts of Bolivia, as NGOs have become so prevalent in providing funding for projects (see Lesley Gill 2000) during the neoliberal period with the absence of a strong state. MST organizers, like other community groups, have become incredibly astute at performing a particular identity in order to lure foreigners into providing support. Any Gringo, then, represented possibilities for economic security. At other times, however, these daily performances were simply about experiencing, acting, and tasting the fruits of their labor.

[27] Together, on that unusually warm day in August, we sat under the cool shade of a tree and ate the watermelon. It was perfectly ripe and the juice dribbled down our lips and cheeks, and stuck to our fingers. In the morning, we would help load the watermelon onto the truck for local market exchange.

[28] Inside Pueblos Unidos, everyone owns the land collectively (which means that the land cannot be parceled off and bought and sold), but residents work individual plots of land for their own families. There are, however, a few designated plots called communal spaces of production, and the revenue from collective farms should be redistributed as “surplus capital” to the community to provide infrastructural support. Despite MST’s overarching frame and public performances of Andean forms of collectivity,

what they refer to as *our ayllu*<sup>viii</sup> in Santa Cruz (the *ayllu* standing in for new forms of collectively working the land), daily battles within settlements like Pueblos Unidos regarding individual versus collective production define communal life. This woman, while she has a family, her son and daughter-and-law live quite far from the MST settlement and rarely visit. The younger generation often prefers to live closer to city centers and work in informal jobs, as opposed to agriculture. She stated:

“In theory, they say they will take care of the elderly and the sick through those communal plots. But I haven’t seen any benefits of this yet. I have arthritis and it’s hard for me to tend to the needs of my individual plot of land. But no one has really come to my aid. I don’t have any family in the settlement and I need the help of a larger community.”

[29] While the discourse and performance of collectivity prove particularly strong within the movement, the actual practice of providing for others, rotating members into and out of plots to assist the elderly, proves particularly challenging. This daily tug-of-war between individual desires and larger collective needs occurs regularly inside MST settlements. More recently, many members in Pueblos Unidos articulated that they would rather be able to work the land individually and have the right to sell their parcels. Often such kinds of tensions must be resolved in community

meetings which can last as long as ten to twelve hours. There are often intense debates with varying opinions, however, at the end of these discussions, some kind of consensus must be made through a democratic or union-style vote.

[30] Other kinds of tensions emerge around uneven access to material and tools, which set community residents up against one another and create counter-performances of hunger. Some people come into a land reform settlement with more resources than others; they have the capital necessary to invest in seeds, chemicals, plows, and trucks, while others barely have the resources to meet subsistence needs. This became apparent one day as I walked to the hut of Don Chino to borrow some ingredients for a meal we were collectively cooking with a group of women from Pueblos Unidos. As I looked around, he had absolutely nothing in his garden and only a few ingredients to supplement a minimal diet. Other households bought cooking oil, potatoes, quinoa, rice, *ají*, and other ingredients necessary for full Bolivian cuisine. He, however, had absolutely nothing. His frail son answered me and said, "We aren't doing so well. We really do not have anything here to offer you. I am sorry." I asked some residents why people had not pooled resources to help this poor family. They suggested that, in some cases, they gave him their left-over food, but that many did not have the resources to provide *all* the critical elements. This creates much friction within

settlements: those who do not have start-up capital suffer the most inside these encampments and permanent settlements. While residents might have the best of intentions to help other families meet basic subsistence needs, many of the poor struggle to survive.

[31] The idea is that with time and effort, these communities will become self-sufficient and autonomous.<sup>ix</sup> They will be able to produce enough food not only to feed their families, but also to supply local markets and sustain a community. The profits from their communal plots will funnel back into community life, providing basic services and building schools and hospitals. But right now, Pueblos Unidos does not represent an Andean utopia, but rather a daily battle against natural forces, such as the excessive rains and flooding that have destroyed crops, and political ones, such as limited resources, increasing poverty, little infrastructure, and absolutely no services for their children, who roam the settlement looking for things to keep them occupied.

### ***MST in Motion: Performance and Practice en Route***

Food performances and practices do not remain grounded in time and space. They do not solely articulate the vision of the movement at a local level, but as people move, these discourses of “food sovereignty” also turn into mobile acts. They can be assembled, reassembled, and reinvented in

urban and rural areas, in the back of moving vehicles, along the sides of roads, and in the heart of national power. Cultural forms (like the imagined ayllu or the tales of anti-colonial ancestors and food rituals) take on new shape, form, and purpose as people extend their networks, mobilize their bases, and move across the country on protest marches, as was the case with the Fifth Indigenous March for Land and Territory.

[33] Over the last twenty years, campesinos have led five national-level marches to draw attention to the issue of land. In 1990, 600 indigenous people from Beni marched 800 kilometers from the lowlands to the highlands to demand recognition of indigenous lands. This dramatic march was covered by media and achieved public awareness for Bolivia's lowland peoples as citizens seeking property rights. In response, the president signed Supreme Decree 22611, which created four multi-ethnic indigenous territories. The second march, in 1991, was a single-issue protest aimed at preserving the environment and protecting natural resources. In 1996, the March for Territory, Land, and Political Rights led to the passing of Ley INRA. Then, in 2001, indigenous peoples of Beni called another march protesting the slow action on TCOs' (Tierra Comunitaria de Origen or Original Indigenous Land and Territory) and the president sent emissaries to assure the community that concessions would be made. The Fifth March, a 28-day protest, was launched in November 2006 by indigenous groups, social

movement, and NGOs that came together to push for the New Agrarian Reform Law, which had been sitting on the senate floor for weeks. MST, along with lowland organizations like CIDOB (*Central Indígena del Oriente Boliviano* or the Lowland Indigenous Federation of Eastern Bolivia), were the main orchestrators and conductors of this protest march. While politically, MST has supported Morales and many members have advised him on land policy, they realized that—due to the majority of conservative senators in the Congress—they could only pressure government officials to pass critical legislation through such spectacular marches and sit-ins.

[34] Here I am interested in how food practices teach people in motion about the ideology of movement politics and forge and mark spaces en route with new meaning. An especially useful frame for exploring (food practices) is “critical performative pedagogy.” Critical pedagogy, according to Paulo Freire (1977), is a teaching approach grounded in [engaged and practice-based theory](#) that challenges students to question [domination](#). In other words, it is about helping students achieve [critical consciousness](#). Augusto Boal (1979) took Freire’s ideas regarding transformative learning and applied them to popular theater, where he described performance as a mirror in which one could change reality and transform a worldview. The act of preparing mobile collective kitchens transmits ideas and sparks conversations about the need to reclaim food. These MST spaces allow

members to share and debate “their ways of knowing” and day-to-day struggles. While tensions exist along the way, these embodied performances serve as a means to inculcate participants about the importance of healthy food and collective/communal ways of life.

[35] These large protest marches are common in Bolivia, in and of themselves; they are bold and spectacular performances, similar to other kinds of folkloric celebrations (see Goldstein 2004; Bigenho 2002; Guss 2000; Mendoza 2000). Participants are organized in a highly spatialized structure called *columnas*, which consist of lines two or three people across, with many rank and file following in step. Columnas organize people in space in order to create an orderly demonstration, but they also serve as human walls protecting the masses from police. Women used their bodies in imaginative and resourceful ways during this protest movement to ward off right-wing groups throwing stones in unwelcoming city centers. This choreographed precision, like dances during Carnival, is described as enforcing a kind of discipline, the importance of maintaining a permanent position in space, and a semi-synchronized step pattern, i.e., not falling too far behind the person in front. The columna moves like a bendable snake, for hours at a time, until organizers designate a spot along the march for rest and recuperation. During these moments, groups of people set up sleeping bags and blankets and turn on their transistor radios to listen to



political commentary as they stop alongside the road. While some rest, others engage in creative cooking practices. During the day, most of the marchers engage in the simple act of eating in motion: they unpeel a piece of fruit or unwrap a box of crackers, all while moving forward on their journey. But when the column stops, they break up into self-organized groups to erect their mobile, collective kitchens.

[36] In settlements, it is important for MST members to illustrate or demonstrate the importance of food sovereignty, but while they march, members reinvent the rituals of collective kitchens. While the idea of food sovereignty respatializes agriculture from the global to the local and recreates social relations through new forms of working the land, the act of preparing *una olla comun* [a communal pot from which everyone is served] is a practice that also reinforces particular values; it extends well beyond the individual bodily sensations and necessities of hunger to fulfill the needs of the larger group. Importantly, it is not the actual food that matters, but the practice and structure of preparing a meal, which has embedded in it a hidden code regarding movement ideology: the importance of gendered equality, collective forms of preparation and labor, and the redistribution of resources. In the words of an MST organizer:

“Whatever we had, we figured out how to put something together to make a meal. It didn’t matter if it was the best meal

that we had; it just had to fill our stomachs so that we could keep walking. I lost ten kilos on the March. There were people who lost twelve kilos. We didn't eat well, but we ate enough to survive the conditions of the March."

Marchers divided into distinct work groups or commissions at these sites or locales. These groups were illustrative of the highly structured and flexible organizational structure (which maps onto the community level) and get put into motion as MST members spend nearly a month on the road. This is one example of how this model reproduces itself in new encampment sites and across national territory. The Food and Sustenance Commission mobilized its forces to travel through the designated rest zones in search of food at small stores and donations from churches and NGOs, such as grains, fruits and vegetables, and sometimes even fish or meat. They went out to the markets and to distinct social and labor organizations, asking for support. According to one marcher:

"In Cochabamba, informal market vendors, small shop owners, social service organizations, and public university students donated staples in solidarity; they gave large quantities to the national-level movement, and then we would divide that up to the regional bases for food preparation."

[37] The plan for food preparation along the march was similar to the official vision of an MST settlement like Pueblos Unidos: work should be divided equally, but remains gendered. While living in Pueblos Unidos, I took part in the same kind of collective kitchens, pooling resources and borrowing from several households in order to cook a more elaborate meal for the foreigners and guests. A well-known MST quotation is "*Sin Participación, Igualdad de las Mujeres, no Hay Socialismo*" [Without participation, equality of women, there is no socialism]. Such a statement, while discursively quite eloquent, did not hold true in practice. MST members joked incessantly about women preparing the pot for the entire community. As one organizer stated:

"Well, it is time for the Gringa [referring to me] to use her *Usos y Costumbres* [indigenous uses and customs]. *Usa tu derecho como mujer* [Use your rights as a woman] and cook a North American meal for the whole family."

[38] This joke provides but one window into a gendered division of labor in which women often prepared the pot of food for the entire movement. Yet, such forms of work were often described as "labors of love," not recognized by leaders and rank-and-file members as "the real political work," but rather extensions of women's household duties along the journey. This behind-the-scenes physical labor performed by women can be thought of as the

backbone of movement politics, however. As women prepared the food, they conveyed ideas about resisting capitalist food systems and structures of inequality.<sup>x</sup> As one female member stated:

“It is as if we transmit our ideas about what a society should look like through food preparation. We each throw our ideas into the pot. If capitalism encourages people to buy from large supermarkets and chain stores, we used food from local markets and vendors. If capitalism separates food production from the labor process by encouraging people to buy frozen foods, we forced people to engage in a collective labor process.”

[39] Just like their predecessor, Domitilia Chungara, the leader of the mining housewives’ committee in Siglo XX, these MST campesinas balanced everyday work in the domestic sphere, “labors of love,” with deep commitment to movement politics.

[40] Through the conscious choice of using organic food, supporting local markets, and cooking together, MST women called into question the spatial logic of capitalism. From the organization of work and labor policies on plantations, to the separation of labor from food production and consumption, to individual choices regarding food preparation, MST women questioned and challenged the existing model. As Margarita Sulca noted:

“We did challenge the existing model by supporting local vendors; MST members went to the little corner stores and shops, to the peripheral *zonas*, to ask for food donations. We refused to support the big business model, steered clear of supermarkets and other large chain stores. And the food we prepared, although it wasn’t by any means a balanced meal, it was mostly organic.”

Gradually, the organization shaped a new reality through food rituals.<sup>xi</sup> By cooking and eating together, they engraved political meaning onto the environment.

[41] The act of preparing food along the march, then, in many ways resembled the practice of eating. The marchers used one huge pot called the *olla comun*. The common pot has a long history—in rural Andean communities, members usually prepared a huge pot during *fiestas* and collective work projects in order to feed large numbers of people (Harris 1982, 1995). More recently, social movements have utilized the common pot as a kind of “moveable feast” in order to support striking workers in mines and factories. Further, family members make use of the communal pot tradition as they accompany their loved ones on *marchas de sacrificio*, like this landless peasant March, in which workers walk for days or even weeks

to pressure government officials to pass legislation to protect the rights of workers.

[42] While Catherine Allen (1998) and Mary Weismantel (1988) argue that food can be used to create and reinforce hierarchy, MST members, despite obvious gendered divisions of labor, used food rituals to create solidarity and emphasize the distinctiveness of the movement with respect to non-movement participants and in relation to the Bolivian state. Allen (1998) asserts that the order in which individuals receive coca offerings has much to do with their social status—high status individuals should receive *k'intus* (coca offerings) before those of lower status<sup>xii</sup> (105). Weismantel (1988) notes a similar phenomenon in the Ecuadorian Andes, as decisions regarding the order of food distribution indicate one's position within the household. MST often spoke about the order of food, but I observed this, not only on the March, but also in community settlements. Weismantel (1988) states that the women not only control the order of serving, but a veritable arsenal of tools for expressing their opinions of those they serve. In practice, the dishes offered yet another scale on which social worth could be measured. But while women in Weismantel's household structures inverted power structures and hierarchies by selecting bowl size and portions of soup, MST women rationed the food in such a way as to reinforce the egalitarian values of the organization. They served the elderly and disabled first, women and

children second, international volunteers shortly thereafter, and then the remainder of the rank and file.<sup>xiii</sup>

[43] This practice of collective cooking and eating along the road sparked particular kinds of conversations. Similar to the performance of Ancient Andean mythical tales, which impelled landless to occupy unused lands, these kinds of rituals in motion also triggered memories about land occupations and distinct struggles in their communities: how do you organize peasants locally, how do you teach them to move beyond individual needs and desires to the collective, how do you inculcate the value of collective work and labor? These questions filled mealtime with political discourse and purpose. MST members and leaders often commented on the individual survival strategies of their *compañeros* and their frustrations associated with organizing poor peasants into MST *nucleos*. Just as cooking a meal is a process, so too is the building and shaping of alternative ideological frames. In this instance, the microscopic process of food preparation, exchange, and consumption aided the movement's larger intention to enforce and reinforce policies of land redistribution and teach people the benefit of collective title, work, and labor in motion.

[44] Food preparation and eating can be thought of as part of the MST *mística*. Like the spectacular performance at the beginning of this article

about reclaiming land and means of production through props, colors, and enactment, these kinds of rituals also strengthened resolve and provided vitality in the struggle for land and a better life. The overlapping of responsibilities and actions eventually culminated in the act of eating a meal together and singing songs about land reform and action. Eating and mealtime provoked not only conversations, but also festive celebrations and songs about agrarian revolution.

[45] Along the roads, *mística* took the form of traditional dances such as the *morenada* and *saya*, theater-like renditions and performances of oral tales, and Andean *charango* music, sometimes with Quechua lyrics. There was always a level of improvisation involved in charango showdowns. Sometimes, people invented lyrics about the March, about their particular communities, or about their situation as campesinos in Bolivia.

[46] One night, with stomachs full and plates still dirty, MST members grabbed a few guitars and began to sing. The dusk turned into a deep, dark night, and a shower of stars rained upon us, creating a natural spotlight. An MST organizer, hidden from the public eye in the backwoods of the Chaparé, began:

"I ask those present if they have thought for just one second  
that the land belongs to us, not to those who already have so



much. I ask those present if they have thought for a second that it is our hands that work the earth, it is our sacrifice and labor that gives life to the earth. We must tear down the fence and show that the land belongs to me, to Pedro, to Maria, to Juan and Jose.”

[47] The music performed during and after a meal was yet another vehicle through which MST animated and inspired its bases while reinforcing a particular Leftist ideology. Simone Molina, the son of a miner from Potosí, spoke to me about how music and song were critical to the spatial dynamics of the movement, as illustrated through both “*tomas de tierra*” [land occupations], respatializing food production from global to local, and infusing old colonial plazas with indigenous customs and traditions—as was the case during protest marches.

“During the land seizure in Santa Cruz, we played music, danced, and drank into the wee hours of the night in Yuquises because we had to be alert and ready for battle—music was a way to keep people entertained, occupied, but also engaged and inspired.”

It served the same purpose in the backwoods during the March for land. MST members engaged with the music by swaying back and forth. Some were even moved to sing. And since the lyrics were unknown to audience

members, they improvised the verses. Often, the lines captured the feelings of individual members of the group at that particular moment. They sang about the long journey, the loss of two compañeros in an accident, and the aches and pains in their bodies, and then they danced. As they moved, campesinos soon became drenched by their intense sweat. It seemed as though they were calling the Agrarian Revolution through their feet, through their rapid movements. They marked this rural space as their own, a kind of politicized territory belonging to MST.

[48] Through food preparation and rituals, accompanied by song and dance, MST provided the tools for campesinos to begin to criticize their life situations and start the process of altering their social reality. The social organization of food practices was a popular method of teaching, learning, and participating. Through this process of performing or acting together, landless workers began more to fully understand and demand both political rights and land entitlement. Mundane practices of walking, talking, and eating illuminated for campesinos the connections among dissolution of community ties, reconstruction of political alliances, and the recuperation of land. These mundane practices, then, set the stage for more spectacular performances of song, dance, and theater, all of which have an explicit political purpose and intention. Daily rituals, however, unlike the boasting and bragging about food sovereignty, seem less intentional, more natural

and improvisational. People are almost unaware of what they are teaching as they build, create, and reassemble these kinds of traditions on the road. As one organizer told me, "We learn through motion and action in Bolivia." He was referring to this March and the spectacular kinds of rituals and traditions as spaces, sites, and places to learn about movement politics.

[49] As there was no purity to MST politics at the local level, food practices in motion created tensions as well. As I have described in other contexts, the daily tug-of-war between the individual and the collective serves as a source of energy and keeps the movement alive. There have been instances in which these tensions have threatened to break up the collective structure, but after hours of democratic meetings, in most cases, members have resolved these tensions. One instance of this along the March involved a regional leader who was accused of hoarding food for individualistic needs rather than the larger collective. Pablo Santana, a regional leader of Obispo Santiesteban and known for his commitment to Pueblos Unidos, decided to search independently for food and hoard those goods solely for his community instead of abiding by the collective rules of the food commission. When MST compañeros found out about his behavior, they strongly opposed, and forced Santana to make a public statement about his actions. His hoarding of food breached the norm of collective kitchens and commissions; fiery conversations followed, various proposals or plans were put on the

floor, and eventually a solution was proposed. Movement “food organizers” decided that he had to either abide by the rules of the March or he and his group would be kicked out of the protest. He decided to abide by the rules, but continued to express his discontent at how the March was structured and organized. Movement organizers constantly complain about these collective structures, how they could do this better and more effectively. Yet instead of being destructive, friction—like the differences expressed in *Tinku*, a ritual battle in the Andes—provides both the fire and momentum necessary to continue organizing. In many ways, these tensions can be thought of as the constant backstage performances of all MST public events and shows. While such backstage performances can alienate particular individuals, these kinds of frictions force the rank and file to come together and rearticulate their “collective” values, ideologies, and practices. This kind of backstage politicking reinforces their commitment to one another and to a broader goal of food sovereignty and agrarian reform.

### ***Building a Global Food Movement***

These food practices and rituals not only move across national divides of Bolivia, but cross international borders as leaders travel to international landless meetings and Via Campesina [International Peasant Alliance] in other countries. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, a group of landless peasants from the Pueblos Unidos settlement and I traveled to

Brazil to participate in the Fifth Annual Landless Peasant Conference, which was an international gathering of landless from 31 countries to discuss the present state of agriculture. If at the beginning I illustrated the power of staged theater and performance in this international arena, here, I am interested in another kind of *mística* that also contributes to the construction of an alternative economic structure of food provisioning, consumption, and exchange. MST members, through the reassembly of their highly organized system of food production and exchange, managed to literally feed 70,000 hungry people daily.

[51] MST-Brazil transported food from local arenas, prepared dishes, and eventually distributed plates to all guests and members of the organization. They pulled off such a spectacular performance of food allocation and distribution through the strength of the local *nucleos*, their highly intricate, mobile, and easily adaptable structure. This same organizational structure, which reassembled itself along the protest march, also can be reconstructed at an international level. A small group of MST representatives had packed yellow school buses with produce and staples directly from their organic gardens. Some of the food had to be frozen in large vats or plastic containers so as to withstand the many days of travel. Upon arriving at their destination, men unloaded the heavy tins and plastic containers and set up shop in a makeshift tent settlement. Women and men carried oversized

cooking pots to their gas grills and began cooking at 6 a.m. every day. They worked in small commissions or groups, somewhat like the decentralized political structures in their settlements, exchanging ideas regarding food styles and preparation techniques. As soon as the political program ended at 12:30 p.m., groups of organizers rushed to specific locations. Long lines of MST rank and file wove into and out of the separate tents. People waited for extended periods of time in line with bowl and utensils in hand. While the wait proved to be a bit inconvenient, it also provided an opportunity for the sharing of conversations, short exchanges about the events at the Congress. As people waited for food, they also talked about their journey to Brasilia, their organization or movement in home country, and commented on the Brazilian organization as a model.



**Picture 5:** Long lines at the MST International Congress. Courtesy of Rick Gerharter

[52] International guests were given food badges, which served as entrées into particular MST settlements. The chefs who had labored over the meal served the guests first and then sat to enjoy the fruits of their labor alongside the delegates. As we ate, we shared ideas. The organic vegetables brought to life the struggles of poor farm workers worldwide. Delegates from Mexico spoke of their struggles over corn. In Mexico, 2.5 million households engage in rain-fed maize production, with a productivity of two to three tons per hectare, compared with seven to eight tons per hectare in the American Midwest. With an estimated 200% rise in corn imports under NAFTA, more than two-thirds of Mexican corn has not survived the competition. One

representative said, “We cannot try to win in a battle against the United States. It’s not worth the trouble to plant. We don’t have the subsidies or the machinery. And the direct result of all of this is hunger. We cannot feed our families.”

[53] Brazilian organizers nodded in agreement and shared some of their creative strategies of resistance against multinational agricultural corporations like Syngenta.<sup>xiv</sup> One spoke of MST-Brazil and Via Campesina’s non-violent occupation of Syngenta Seeds’ experimental test site in Paraná:

“600 members of *Via Campesina* occupied the 123-hectare site in Santa Tereza do Oeste, in the state of Paraná, after it was discovered that Syngenta had illegally planted 12 hectares of genetically modified soybeans at the site. Syngenta’s plantation was located within the protective boundary zone of the Iguacu National Park<sup>xv</sup> [the boundary distance has since been modified].

The occupation has become one the most powerful symbols of civil societies’ resistance to agribusiness, as it continues to paralyze all of Syngenta’s activities at the site, costing the corporation tens of millions of dollars. It also spurred Paraná state governor Roberto Requião to sign a decree on November 9, 2006, to expropriate the site for the public interest. The organizers described this as one of the greatest occupations to date, in large



part due to the support of the international/transnational networks of solidarity. Many of these solidarity groups also engaged in this active battle by protesting at local Syngenta sites across the United States and Europe.

[54] These fragments of conversation and struggle point toward both the globalized model of agriculture and the transnationalized strategies of resistance. Through the sharing of stories of struggle, organizers exchanged e-mail addresses and phone numbers, and built a much broader movement. Many remain in email contact well after such international forums, they exchange ideas, proposals, and funding sources over internet and now some even SKYPE or talk to one another through computer systems. Alongside such conversations, we had the opportunity to eat and experience organic foods from MST gardens spread across the national territory of Brazil.



**Picture 6:** Serving food at the International Congress. Courtesy of Rick Gerharter



**Picture 7:** Serving food at the International Congress. Courtesy of Rick Gerharter

[55] When I asked the head of the food commission how they accomplished the overwhelming task of feeding 17,500 people, he said, “We believe that food is a basic right. If someone can’t afford to buy food, they’re still a citizen and we are still responsible for them.” This notion of communal responsibility lies at the heart of the movement and stands in stark contrast to individualized and temporary solutions to hunger. This model of food provisioning, preparation, and distribution occurs on a daily basis inside MST settlements across Brazil. This week, they transposed localized strategies to the international/global level. Unlike a soup kitchen in the United States, where homeless people receive government handouts from grassroots organizations—a band-aid solution to the larger structural problems of unemployment and joblessness—this was a model that provided good and healthy food, alternative educational systems, healthcare for the poor, and employment in small-scale agribusiness at the community level. Feeding the masses was the culmination of the daily work, the struggles and tensions, and the physical labor of organizers at the grassroots level.

### ***Conclusion***

Performances of food sovereignty range from boasting about organic production to mobile practices of preparing and eating healthy food, to

international forums that manage to feed thousands of guests. MST's highly localized strategies can be transported and reassembled from community to regional to international stages. These ethnographic snapshots of food rituals within the Landless Movement illuminate some of the creative and spectacular ways in which new social movements build an alternative ideology, linking food production to self-sustainability, and teach groups of campesinos in action and motion.

[57] While many scholars in the 1990s and 2000s focused on ethnic identity as a powerful vehicle for organizing campesinos, I argue that new concepts like food sovereignty might be more useful concepts for understanding how agrarian social movements are rethinking production, respatializing agriculture, and reformulating international trade agreements. The spectacular performances of ethnic identity has not by any means disappeared in the Bolivian context, as both social movements and President Morales are quite apt at staging elaborate reconstructions of Andean history. For example, Morales's recent re-election in 2010 was held at the famous *Puerta del Sol* in Tiwanaku, where he invoked the body, mind, and spirit of the famous anti-colonial revolutionary Tupac Katari. However, movement intellectuals are becoming more aware of the use and abuse of indigenous history for, as they put it, solely political "shows." Community organizers in El Alto described Morales as constantly performing "*un show politico*" [only a

political show] to illustrate his symbolic alliances with the indigenous-campesino movements of Bolivia, but “until he actually shows us radical change, we won’t buy into this kind of superficial politics!” Movement intellectuals in both the highlands and lowlands are beginning to question the ethnic identity model and interrogate the need for a new economic structure built upon resource redistribution. As one leader told me:

“We now have a president with an indigenous face, but it’s the same old politics. We want a whole new system, not just talk about incorporating indigenous peoples. Bolivia is still rich with natural resources and we are tired of transnational companies stealing our wealth and leaving us poor.”

It is within this context that food performances might create the kind of political and economic substance, lacking at times, from an ethnic or identity politics model. Performance studies scholars have focused on the intersection among broad-based political-economic shifts, cultural enactments of identity, and grassroots forms of resistance (Taylor 2003, Conquergood 2002), but no one has looked at how these intentional (public boasting) and unintentional (daily rituals of food preparation) performances create the possibility for building this alternative system. These public boastings of small-scale production, while filled with contradictions, imagine and project into the future a distinct kind of reality, a reality where campesinos can grow their own food, on their own land, in their own

territory. MST members create, whether consciously or not, a model for food provisioning at the community level, but as they move, their organizational rituals have the capacity to feed not just a community, but hundreds of protestors and thousands of international guests. Perhaps this kind of organizing can serve as a model for practitioners and intellectuals alike. As much intellectual work has turned toward the global food crisis, these movement activists can possibly teach us about preserving natural resources and agro-ecology as a model for providing and distributing healthy food to poor people.

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<sup>i</sup> Most of the work on social movements in the 1990s focused on identity politics as an answer to some of the struggles in the global South (see Escobar and Alvarez 1992). My work turns toward the importance of cultural performances, music and dance, and historical memory to forge collective identity and create structural change. This article looks at food discourses—which often cut across race, ethnic identity, and regional differences—and provides a frame for understanding new social movements for agrarian change and social justice.

<sup>ii</sup> Practices are often repetitive actions and quite recognizable in any given cultural context. In everyday language, practice is often contrasted with theory, ideas, or mental processes. Practices may be discursive (practices that are communicated through language), visual (practices that communicate meaning through images) or embodied (practices accomplished through bodily movement and gesture). For more on practices, see Bourdieu 1977 and for more on the relationship between everyday practices and space, see de Certeau 1984

<sup>iii</sup> See Brush 1978; Bastein 1978; Allen 1998; Weismantel 1988.

<sup>iv</sup> In Goffman's (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, he distinguishes between the frontstage, where the performance takes place and where the audience is present, and the backstage, where the audience is not present, and the performers can step out of character without fear of disrupting the performance.

<sup>v</sup> Neoliberalism is both a theory and a practice that presumes that capitalist trade liberalization—the end of all state regulation on business, and indeed the end of all state-run business—will be the rising tide that lifts all boats out of poverty.

<sup>vi</sup> Much contemporary inequality in landownership is a result of the failure of the Agrarian Reform Act of 1953, "which liberated [a select group] of campesinos in the west but gave them no more than a tiny piece of land...and in the east, opened the valves for the extension of the large estates" (Friedsky, 2005: 1). Between 1952 and 1996, 55 million acres were distributed to a few thousand landowners while hundreds of thousands of campesinos had to split 45 million acres. Inequality grew ever more pronounced in the 1960s and 1970s as members of the agribusiness elite formed alliances with military dictators who subsequently granted large amounts of land as political patronage. In 1990,

the Instituto Nacional de Reforma Agraria (National Institute for Agrarian Reform—INRA) was established to correct the shortcomings of the agrarian reform law by distributing land more equitably and rationalizing land markets and property titles in the east. Many scholars have pointed out the contradictions inherent in this land law, which symbolically gave rights to indigenous peoples but continued to support agrarian elites through an annual tax of 1% of the self-assessed value of their land which allowed them to maintain unproductive land.

<sup>vii</sup> It is important to note that for many of the landless organizers do not have a permanent space of residence; they either rent a small room in a peri-urban area or live in the MAS headquarters in Santa Cruz, where they share beds with other displaced peoples.

<sup>viii</sup> An ayllu was the basic political and social units of ancient Andeans. These were essentially extended family groups, but they could adopt non-related members, giving individual families more variation and security of the land that they farmed. For more on the ayllu, see Allen 1998; Harris 1995; Weismantel 2001.

<sup>ix</sup> As Gustafson (2009) argues, there is no designated autonomous indigenous territory in the country. While the constitution lays out procedures for a longer shift in this direction, it does not dictate the implementation of established forms. NGOs have become particularly vocal in not only defining but controlling what indigenous autonomy should look like in practice.

<sup>x</sup> For more on women and social movements, see Frazier and Cohen 2003.

<sup>xi</sup> Susan Paulson (2006) argues that by looking at the energy invested in ritual meals, we can begin to conceptualize intense corporal experiences and tangible material realities of disenfranchised rural, indigenous communities. She challenges scholarship that focuses solely on multiculturalism and privileges symbols and products of indigenous culture without looking closely at the deep political economic meaning. Paulson relates food rituals to other collective practices gaining prominence in Bolivia, like the call for a constituent assembly, pointing toward possibilities of a new kind of civil society grounded in indigenous rights and material needs.

<sup>xii</sup> While coca is not a food, the ways in which it is shared often resemble other food practices and rituals in the Andes. Interestingly, coca is also linked to movements in the Eastern region fighting for rights to land and sovereignty. As coca-growing regions have come under attack through punitive antinarcotics initiatives which sought to eradicate all coca production as part of the War on Drugs, the *cocaleros* have mobilized an anti-imperialist discourse linked to the symbolism of the coca leaf as a class-based politics (“We are farmers, not criminals”) and ethnic identity (the long history of coca use and production in Bolivia). This symbol has become a transnational sign, as Morales has used it in the United States to talk about the historical, medicinal, ritualistic, and social purposes of coca leaves for Andean communities.

<sup>xiii</sup> MST further enforced and nurtured mutual aid relationships through a ritualized exchange of gifts. For more on gifting in the Andes, see Weismantel 2001; Godelier 1977; Wachtel 1973; and Murra 1975. These scholars have made a conceptual link between Andean pre-capitalist intensive agropastoralism as a mode of production, and reciprocity—the gift economy—as a form of exchange.

<sup>xiv</sup> Syngenta is a multinational agribusiness corporation headquartered in Switzerland. Syngenta has operations in over 90 countries, and employs over 19,500 people. In 2006, its sales totaled US\$8.1 billion, with 80% of its revenue deriving from agrochemicals and 20% from seed production. The corporation ranks third in global seed sales. (See <http://www.mstbrazil.org/?q=syngentaunderfire2007>.)

<sup>xv</sup> This site was declared Patrimony of Humanity by the United Nations in 1986.

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