

# Jade Abounassar

Sami  
Human Service Diploma

*“To me Indigenous research is...a way to travel from the head to the heart and echo that into the world.”*

## FOOD. IS. EVERYTHING.

### Dedication

*I say gutii to all of the Elders. Your wisdom and grace shines through your eyes and I appreciate and have so much gratitude for the knowledge and kindness that you keep. Gutii to my friends, and to my family at Cplul'kw'ten for your love and friendship. Gutii to the Olmai for giving me life and helping me through all of the challenges and bathing me in thanks and light. For my friends who have passed in the past year, you are not forgotten. You showed me what grace and hard work looks like. I send prayers to you in the spirit world.*

I scoff at the idea of what modern-day industrialization has done to the beautiful simplicity of what food used to be. No matter ethnicity, age, race, sexuality, or gender, food is needed survive. Why is it that the importance of something that is so crucial to overall human development has been cast aside, only to be replaced with what modern-day folks call convenience?

In this paper, I look at what food sovereignty means to me. By tying research and my own story together, my hope is to pave the way for people who have struggled with the same things that I have. By looking at relationships to food and the land and the impact of colonization, I will be able to look at what personal sovereignty is and how that can manifest on a community level. Sharing and vulnerability will be threaded throughout

this writing. I share in hopes of being a voice for those who have been silenced for so long; I give a voice to my ancestors as their *joiking* sings through me every day.

### What is food sovereignty?

“Food sovereignty is a way to truly practice culture. This is about the right of a community to define its own diet and food system (TEDX Talks, 2014, 1:17). Food sovereignty is about better care of ourselves and our land.

The fight for food sovereignty takes place on multiple fronts: community gardens, growing our groceries, teaching people to eat a traditional meal once a week (TEDX Talks, 2014). Getting away from the corporate food system and eating non-processed healthy foods is key. It is about reclaiming the land and being able to give back to the communities in which we live. This is a way to reclaim power in making decisions around the way our peoples have eaten for thousands of years. We may not need to change.

In different communities today, there are people fighting back against Eurocentric views of what food looks like and how it should be eaten. An example of this is the Nishnawbe Aski Nation in Northern Ontario. They have created a food sovereignty committee that focuses on “traditional practices, local food productions, and imported foods” (Robidoux & Mason, 2018, p.151). With

these areas of focus they seek to bring people together in connection to the way that they prepare, grow, and gather their food. NAN is a great example of what food sovereignty can look like when it is done effectively. They have multiple programs in place, such as the Get Growing Project, which provides knowledge-sharing on how to grow foods, which seeds to use, and the right tools to use (Robidioux & Mason, 2018, p.152).

Food begins with community. Food begins with relationship. Food begins with having the courage to say that enough is enough. Food nourishes our souls, our minds, our spirits. Food teaches us about ourselves and where we come from. Food does not have to be bought in a box and put into a microwave. It can be prepared with the people you love, showing you how to cook in a good way.

### Food Is Respect.

The Elders in my community at university have taught me more than what I have learned from books. It is because of them that I had the courage to write this paper; and it is because of them that my heart is beginning to heal from the impacts of colonization and growing up without any understanding of my culture. To them, I am forever grateful.

One day, when I was at one of the houses for Indigenous students on campus, doing my practicum, I sat down with Elder Mike Arnouse. He told me that when he was growing up, he could go down to the Thompson River and drink. Now, there is nowhere to drink fresh water unless you travel far (personal communication, October, 2019). On another occasion Elder Mike told me that the animals are the ones really suffering from the big industries. They are not migrating properly because of land development, they are unable to eat what they used to, and if they do, they sometimes become sick because it has been polluted (personal communication, October, 2019). What this tells me is that there is a huge issue with our food system. We have fallen away from eating in a good way. There is no emotional preparation before the Olmai in order to have

gratitude to eat. There is no aspect of challenge in seeking out and eating food. There is now convenience that spreads its wings across the globe.

### Food is political.

How is it that there are so many people in the world going without basic human resources? Why do we have so much waste that could be utilized, but due to our sloth-like behaviour, nothing is being done to combat it?

The north of Canada and the world seem to be the place that is most neglected in the world. It is as if everyone has forgotten about their existence. As Morton and Blanchard (2007) note, "People in rural areas generally have less money to spend on food and they live further from markets where local food producers sell their products". If there was a water shortage in, for instance, Vancouver, everything would be in disarray. But people who want to change something for a community that is not well-known are seen as being rash. I do not agree with that. I love music, and a song I always think about when it comes to this subject is the Clash's "Know Your Rights." The song lyrics describe how, according to the government, all citizens have three rights: the right not to be killed, the right to free speech, and the right to food and money (Jones & Strummer, 1982, track 1). However, if you look back on history, this certainly has not always been the case.

In Canada, there is clearly a systemic issue, as 30% of Indigenous households are experiencing food insecurity (Davie, 2017). Why is that? There are a variety of reasons why this issue is worsening in Canada. When folks are living on reserves, they do not have access to the same resources as people in more urban communities. The higher north a community is located, the worse conditions get. People are not able to drink the water, which is our truest life-giver. There is less access to traditional foods. The animals are moving away because of infrastructure, and the seasons are changing due to global warming. This affects everything. Because of lost knowledge, there are more people growing up in urban settings, disconnected from their culture and how things used to be accessed in the traditional way.

The traditional way of eating is different depending on tradition, community, and where people live. In places where the Sami have lived for thousands of years, there is more of a reliance on berries, roots, and, of course, the beloved reindeer. In Secwépculuw, there are more berries, deer, moose, and different types of birds to eat. Never was there a time, before colonization, when people did not have enough to eat. The community took care of each other. You see, food was so much more than filling up the stomach. It was the prayers said before you went out to hunt, it was the preparation of the mind and soul before going out, it was looking at how you could help your community. The entire animal was used; nothing went to waste. The animal represented survival, provided unique teachings, and showed everyone how to walk in a better way.

### Food is medicine.

In a world that sees McDonald's and processed foods as the normal way we are supposed to eat, it is hard to imagine that we ever ate any differently. Before the industrial revolution in the 19th century, we ate traditional diets. We lived off the land in a respectful and nurturing way. We took only what we needed. We did not rely on convenience; rather, we had to rely on the Creator to provide what we needed.

I see how young people today shy away from vegetables and gravitate towards sugar and carbohydrates. This is where the future is heading if we do not try to stop it. When I was younger I was brought up on a standard Western diet, filled with mostly processed foods, heavy on sugars and carbs. The things I have read and witnessed about the food industry are startling. The problem with the industrialization of the foods we eat is that the more they are processed, the more they lose the nutrients that are so important for our bodies.

The food that we put into our bodies is the way of the ancestors before us. We pray with the food in thanks for giving its life so that we can be nourished. Each food teaches us something new about ourselves and the way that we live our lives on this planet. Everything is connected to the root of our earth mother. Every community has different traditional foods to eat and to be nourished by. We need to

connect back, with our toes rooted into the earth, and feel the pulsing of our ancestors speaking through us.

The way that my people eat is different from how people eat in other territories. Being Arctic people, there are more limitations on what foods can be enjoyed. Traditional Sami food is referred to as "blodgomba, kvitgomba, klappekak" (Berg, 2014, p.37). Some of the traditional foods include: reindeer, grouse, fish, root vegetables, potatoes, and berries (Berg, 2014). Sami are reindeer herders, and when it is herding season, there is plentiful reindeer meat. The whole animal is used, and certain parts are used in private for ceremonies. The simplicity of their diet is impactful in how the Sami live. The difficulty of living in the Arctic

and relying on a small menu does not limit the resilience and beauty of my people.

I write for the ones who are afraid to eat too much or too little. I write for the little girls who see images of models and want to be like them, but whose skin colors or body shapes are not represented. I write for all the people who think that they are not good enough. All these stories say: you are enough. I write for everyone to wake and see that the way we are eating is not sustainable, that it is killing us and our planet. I write to give myself a voice and to heal my relationship with food, Gutii.

### Food is Destiny

It is important to tell our own stories of the journey to food sovereignty. We know how many have been impacted by the industrialization of food. Our stories show that there is hope to change and to have a better relationship with food and land.

My own past is one of trauma and of love. I grew up with loving parents, but the outside world was filled with a lot of hurt that I could not process. One of the ways that I coped with

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these feelings was through food. I remember as a kid sneaking treats, and then always being focused on when I would eat next. I come from a line of people who have struggled with weight. My family members' weights tend to go up and down, much like life itself.

I always have had an issue with my weight. I was bullied for it at school, and the more that I was bullied, the more I would eat. Food was my comfort when things were scary. It was a friend that I could always count on when I was overwhelmed with my own personal hauntings that came up at night. This journey became worse when I was a teenager. Yes, I was always a chubby kid. I hated the fat on my body. I would fantasize for hours about being skinny. Fat was not beautiful. That is what every one told me, and slowly, I started to believe it myself. I was so mean to myself then. I hated looking at myself in the mirror. I wanted a new life. When I became a teenager, I started becoming serious about losing weight.

I started seriously dieting at the age of nine. I went through a growth spurt. I followed a weight loss program, exercised, and for the first time in my life I actually felt very beautiful. All of the little girls I went to school with no longer bullied me about being bigger than them, jabbing me with jealousy daggers.

By the time I hit my teens, I had developed body dysmorphia. I struggled with my own body image, dieting and bingeing extremely. I did not feel like a normal kid. I felt like I had to work twice as hard to get where my peers did and I was still made fun of for my weight. Nothing could change it.

I developed anorexia. I would eat only a tiny amount of food each day. My eating disorder then shifted to the opposite end of the spectrum. I could not stop eating for years after that. I thought about food all the time, finding ways to sneak and hide what I was eating.

When I started blooming into adulthood I was leaning on other things that were not good for me. My addiction to food became more and more unmanageable. I began to binge and purge. I was not happy with the way that I was living and felt so gross in my skin. I did not feel healthy; I felt like there was something seriously wrong with me. I was so tired of either bingeing or restricting, and loving

and hating food at the same time. I wanted to have a better relationship with food. But it had developed into a toxic dynamic that I could not escape.

I started trying to do something different. Rather than restricting what I ate, I simply began to eat whatever I wanted. This did not make me feel better either. Rather, I stopped exercising altogether, and rarely even ate a vegetable. I began to sneak food again, eat out way too much, and was only truly happy plopped in front of the TV watching *The Office*, and bingeing on whatever I could get my hands on.

I gained 50 pounds in one year, which I actually do not think is that bad considering how much I ate and how little activity I did. I started to become more involved with body positivity. Body positivity is essentially taking the standards of beauty pushed by big companies and turning them on their heads. It is about finding the beauty in yourself no matter your size. This concept worked for a while. I was certainly less miserable than I was before, but I could not unsee what I saw in the mirror.

I started to seek out help in little ways. I came to the stunning realization that my binge eating was completely out of control; I was not able to go a day without doing it. I ate way past being full, and then I would mentally beat myself up for it afterwards. I started to access some resources online, ones that are very dear to me. Brain over Binge, in particular, changed my life.

I write this as a call out-to industry and how it is impacting so many lives and the planet in a negative way. Where I am right now is not perfect, but it has been months since I had a bad binge. I have made changes in my life that are helping me to be more comfortable with myself. One of these changes is that I have started exercising again. I started out just going for small walks, and now I go to the gym nearly every day. I still allow myself to eat a bit of junk food, but I now see it as junk that I am putting into my body. I am slowly changing the way that I think about food. That is part of the reason I am writing this paper: to build a loving relationship with the food that I consume, and to get back to where my ancestors want me to be, on the earth, taking only what I need, and giving thanks for everything that is gifted to me.

## Sámi soga lávlla

Guhkkin davvin Dávvgáid vuolde  
sabmá suolggaid Sámiatnan.  
Duottar leabbá duoddar duohkin,  
jávri seabbá jávrii lahka.  
Čohkat čilggiin, čorut čearuin  
allánaddet almmi vuostái.  
Šávvet jogat, šuvvet vuovddit,  
cáhket ceakko stállenjárggat  
máraideaddji mearaide.

Dálvit dáppe buolašbiekkat,  
muhtaborggat meariheamit.  
Sámesohka sieluin mielain  
eahccá datte eatnamiiddis:  
Mátkkálašii mánoheabit,  
giddudeaddji guovssahasat, –  
ruoškcas, ruovggas rođuin gullo,  
juhca jávriin, jalgadasain,  
geresskálla máđiid miel.

Ja go geassebeaivváš gollut  
mehciid, mearaid, mearragáttiid,  
golli siste guollebivdit  
suilot mearain, suilot jávriin.  
Gollin čuvget cáhcelottit,  
silban šovvot sámedeanut,  
šelgot čuoimmit, šledgot áirrut,  
luitet albmát lávllodemiin  
geavngáid, guoikkaid, goatniliid

Sámeeatnan sohkagoddi  
dat leat gierdan doddjokeahtta  
godde čuđiid, garrugávppiid,  
viehkes vearre-vearroválddiid.  
Dearvva dutnje, sitkes sohka!  
Dearvva dutnje, ráfi ruohtas!  
Eai leat doarut dorrojuvvon,  
eai leat vieljain varat vardán  
sámi siivo soga sis.

Máttarádját mis leat dovle  
vuoitán vearedahkkiid badjel.  
Vuostálastot, vieljat, miige  
sitkatvuodain soardiideamet!  
Beaivvi bártniid nana nálli!  
Eai du vuoitte vašálaččat,  
jos fal gáhttet gollegielat,  
muittát máttarmáttuid sáni:  
Sámiatnan sámiide!

Far up North 'neath Ursa Major  
Gently rises Saamiland.  
Mountain upon mountain.  
Lake upon lake.  
Peaks, ridges and plateaus  
Rising up to the skies.  
Gurgling rivers, sighing forests.  
Iron capes pointing sharp  
Out towards the stormy sea

Winter time with storm and cold  
Fierce blizzards.  
Saami kin, with hearts and souls  
Their lands do love.  
Moonlight for the traveller,  
Living Aurora flickering,  
Grunt of reindeer heard in groves of birch,  
Voices over lakes and open grounds,  
Swish of sled on winter road

Summer's sun casts golden hues  
On forests, seas and shores.  
Fishermen in gold, swaying  
With the golden seas, golden lakes.  
Silver Saami rivers gurgling  
'round sparkling poles, shining oars.  
Singing, men float down  
Rapids, great and small,  
And waters calm

With unbending strength  
Defeated killing enemies, bad trades,  
Sly and evil thieves.  
Hail thee, tough Saami kin!  
Hail thee, root of freedom!  
Never was there battle,  
Never brother's blood was spilt  
Amongst the peaceful Saami kin  
Saamiland's people

Our ancestors long ago  
Trouble makers did defeat.  
Let us, brothers, also resist  
Staunchly our oppressors.  
Oh, tough kin of the sun's sons,  
Never shall you be subdued  
If you heed your golden Saami tongue,  
Remember the ancestors' word.  
The Saamiland for the Saami!!

Attributed to I. Saba, 1906. Translation by Ragnar Müller-Wille and Rauna Kuokkanen. Retrieved from <https://beneathnorthernlights.com/sami-soga-lavlla-the-sami-anthem/>.



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