# *Água no feijão: Food for Sovereignty*

At the table in the small kitchen of my grandma's house I am peeling garlic and chopping vegetables for Sunday's lunch with family. The pressure cooker is sizzling, filling up the room with its characteristic sound and the comforting smell that indicates the beans are now cooking. Food will be ready soon. Next to me by the stove is my grandma stirring some of the freshly cut onions and minced garlic in a pan, building up flavours as she uniquely does and adding to the symphony of smells that now transcend to the whole house. As we catch up on each other's lives while cooking, a yell is heard from the living room 'Aunt Rita is also joining us for lunch". My grandma smiles and yells back 'So let's add water to the beans!'.

There is never so little that it cannot be shared. When unexpected guests arrive, we add an extra chair and put more *água no feijão* (water in the beans), as we say in Brazil and my grandma made sure I learned early on. In that same kitchen, she also told me stories about the harshness of growing up with hunger as a palpable reality. About the nights when she went to bed with an empty stomach. But also about the times for which she thanked Heaven, when her mom was able to feed her with the beans they had grown themselves. Beans cooked in a tiny iron pot with nothing but salted water. This was the recipe that sustained my grandma then, and it now shapes the way I think about the economy. Beside it, the simple habit of adding water to beans taught me how to see the world and wealth. Through this economic lens there is abundance that invites sharing rather than an artificial scarcity that breeds greed and competition. It helped me understand that hunger is a matter of unjust power and distribution, not of a lack of food. As I came to realise, the same logic often applies to other resources too.

I grew up seeing food as a blessing. In my family, cooking is an act of love; eating together is a gift; and having a piece of land on which to grow our own food is an intergenerational dream. One that goes back to when our ancestors started believing freedom was possible on this side of the Atlantic. But, coincidentally or not, the very year that marked the legal beginning of slavery's gradual abolition in Brazil was also the year the 1850 Land Law barred newly freed Black people and poor workers, restricting land access to those who could buy or inherit it as the country transitioned to wage labour. Freedom without land or means kept my ancestors captive. The urgency of their growling stomachs left them little choice but to join the newly manufactured pool of cheap labour for the same old elites.

My grandma had no knowledge about that law; but growing up in the 1960s, she saw that a wage was still a distant reality for her mom. My great-grandma depended on harvest-measure pay from seasonal work on large estates, or relied on the generosity of known smallholders who would temporarily lend her a plot for subsistence. There she grew those beans. My people – and, for that matter, the majority of Brazilians – did not then, and do not now, own the farmland. Today, despite ongoing struggles for redistribution, half of all cultivated land in Brazil is controlled by just 1% of rural landowners.

Meanwhile, almost four decades before slavery's final abolition, the same Land Law also promoted European immigration for paid agricultural work as part of a broader ideology of racial whitening. It is not surprising then that over 170 years later white workers in agriculture were still more valued. White men's salaries were nearly double those of their Black[1] counterparts, and women's wages were also far higher, even though Black workers made up almost two-thirds of the entire sector. The inequality also shows up on the plate. In 2022, a fifth of Black-led households in Brazil faced hunger and 65% experienced some form of food insecurity.

Importantly, however, land access inequality, extractive working relations, and undernutrition linked to racialisation are not unique to Brazil. Other geographies offer some telling examples too, like the United States and South Africa. In the US, 94% of farmland is owned or rented by white people, who also receive 98% of all federal agricultural support. In such a landscape, it is hardly striking that 95% of those making key agricultural decisions – from land use to production and marketing – are white. Food insecurity also follows a coloured line: between 2016 and 2021, racialised[2] households experienced it on average at twice the rate of white households.

In South Africa, land and agricultural policies under colonialism and apartheid systematically advanced white farmers while suppressing Black farmers. The Land Acts of 1913 and 1936 entrenched segregation by confining Black people to designated areas with little control over land or livelihood, forcing many into cheap labour on white-owned farms, mines, and factories. Despite post-apartheid constitutional commitments to land restitution and redistribution, progress has fallen far short of justice, with programmes often maintaining a logic of concentration. In 2023, 23.2 million South Africans were forced to choose between food and other essentials. Of this total, 99.7% were Black[3], and nearly half of these people were living in absolute deprivation.

Similar dynamics, not without its regional specificities, can be observed wherever racism shaped or enabled key patterns of capitalist development. In other words, wherever racial capitalism takes root. The invention of race becomes a tool for sorting people into rigid, unbridgeable categories, ranking some as fully human and others as less so, until dehumanisation becomes inevitable. But when no human life is treated as 'cheap' or 'expendable', life-giving systems of provisioning can prevail instead. Access to healthy and nutritious food that makes our bodies flourish becomes universal. And the choices made in fields, industries, kitchens, markets, and communities start to carry a loving promise that future generations will experience the same abundance. Food is no longer used as a control weapon and instead returns to what it does best: nourishing and bringing people together.

*Do you recognise that feeling of when you enjoy a nice conversation over a shared meal and for a moment you think: LIFE IS GOOD? :)*

Well, for that and other reasons I do believe it is. But I am sure it can be better once the food taking centre stage in my heartwarming memories comes from a provisioning system that strives for socio-ecological justice and regeneration – of people, relationships, and the planet. A system where land distribution, and therefore, access, production decisions, food availability, nutrition, and health are not determined by racial hierarchies and exclusions. A system where the starvation of more than 730 million people worldwide does not coexist with the loss of 13% of all food before it even reaches retail shelves. A system where such contradictions are unthinkable and feel as repulsive as they truly are.

Reaching that world requires other forms of sovereignty, that is, new ways of exercising political authority, sharing power and decision-making that move us beyond. Beyond the destruction of people and nature produced by a profit-centred economic order. One built upon, and still operating through, a logic of white supremacy. And the much needed emancipation from it comes through the mouth; through the food that sustains us and through the naming of what has taken it.

We can – and many of us already do – reimagine sovereignty through food. The lessons of care, abundance, and sharing from my grandma's small kitchen actually speak directly to that world-to-be. Agrifood systems can become tools for re-anchoring people to their territories and regenerating ecosystems, easing working-class dependency on capital, and reducing racial inequalities while strengthening long-term sustainability and resilience. Grounded in different understandings of ownership and of the sovereign itself, the food sovereignty framework treats agricultural knowledge, technologies, and seeds as collective wealth built by peoples across regions and centuries. It rests on social relations free from oppression and on democratic control by those who grow, distribute and consume food over their own food systems. Giving people the power to shape their food environments, rather than bending to the interests of markets and corporations. After all, if we have no real say over the food that enters our own bodies, what kind of political voice do we truly possess?

Aligned with the principles of food sovereignty, agroecology adds an extra measure of hope to the recipe. It shows that when society and nature work in symbiosis, what emerges is far more than food alone. Health improves when crops grown in living soil contain more nutrients after replacing depleting agrochemicals with ecologically-based materials and processes, like organic composts and green fertilisers. Agricultural and climate resilience also strengthen when biodiverse agroecological systems take the place of the monocultures typical of industrial farming. Farmers also gain independence from transnational agribusiness monopolies by cultivating biodiversity and reducing their reliance on external inputs. And, crucially, agroecological approaches offer global agrifood systems a chance to redeem themselves from being responsible for roughly one-third of human-caused greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and being the primary driver of biodiversity loss, turning them part of the solution instead.

For the Brazilian popular alliance Web of the Peoples, agroecology is a central path in the struggle for collective emancipation. The alliance brings together, in solidarity, a network of traditional and Indigenous communities, political organisations, and social groups from both rural and urban areas. For them, agroecology is more than an alternative to agribusiness: it is a return to ancestral knowledge and principles that guide the fight for freedom, autonomy, and continuity. They reject colonial hierarchies and instead build alliances to confront violence – from ruralists, the state, and multinational corporate lobbies. Agroecological practices, shaped by many hands in their territories, have given them food, regeneration, connection, and hope.

Speaking of hope, the embracing smell of my grandma's beans now takes over the air, warming my heart and filling my mouth with water. As my body experiences the eminence of lunch, I start thinking about how great of a symbol beans are for the needed transformation of agrifood systems in Brazil. They give some valuable lessons as we observe their capacity to feed the body, the soul, and the soil.

1. **The bean plant teaches us about interconnection.** Through a symbiotic relationship with bacteria in its roots, beans make nitrogen available in the soil for itself, other plants and later for the animals that eat them – us included. Without partnerships like this, we would miss the very basis of what makes us who we are: our DNA!

2. **Beans are a sustainable protein source.** They have lower GHG emissions and less extensive land use than beef, for example. Besides being rich in fibers, vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants that prevent and treat chronic diseases. Reminding us that food systems can care for bodies and nature simultaneously.

3. **Beans are affordable, inclusive, and diverse.** From North to South, across social classes and regional traditions, beans remain a constant in Brazilian diets. Adapted to local realities, they have a way of gathering people around a table wherever they appear. This kind of universality, that embraces rather than erases diversity, is exactly what we need when redesigning systems aimed at shared goals of human development and sustainability.

4. **Beans connect our past, present, and future.** They bridge our pre-colonial and colonial heritage to new futures collectively built from there. For millennia, Indigenous peoples across the Americas domesticated and cultivated beans with remarkable skill, growing them in prosperous partnerships with other plants like corn, squashes, and cassava. Beans became a foundation of nourishment for Indigenous communities, and later for enslaved Africans, who added their own knowledge and culinary creativity to bean cultivation and preparation.

For me, beans trace an ancestral pathway far larger than my own life. They remind me that I, too, am invited to help shape the tomorrows of my communities and my country. And their lessons reach beyond Brazil. Speaking about food from one of the world's major producers matters, but it is only the first tug on a thread that reveals how deeply our systems are interconnected. A globalised and hierarchised agrifood system creates dependencies and socio-environmental crises that require the solidary articulation of sovereign peoples to put forward solutions. Thus the invitation carried by those beans stretches further still, towards humanity's shared future. It belongs to all of us.

How many other food traditions can inspire our revolutions? What do our plates tell us? What stories are waiting to be savoured? Which of them can give us hope?

For instance, beans can be a reminder that our real wealth lies in producing nutritious, culturally rooted food while sustaining life, regenerating land, and connecting people. Such wealth is not only possible, but it creates the kind of abundance that carries true power. Power to restore those whose backs racial capitalism has been constantly bending and breaking, and power to open pathways toward the just worlds we long for. Let us not be distracted by current notions of what makes us rich. Status and individual material achievements will never grant us the full dignity we deserve in a racist society, because the systems shaping it were simply not designed for that. And let us not be fooled by the idea that we are self-made individuals. We are interconnected, not only to one another but to all of nature. There is no moving forward thinking of 'me', there is only 'us'. And we are hungry. Not for more, but for different: different alternatives, different visions, different values.

We need other sociocultural and political-economic systems to fight the crises created by the current ones. This is by no means a small task, but it is achievable. Food for sovereignty is a pathway we can pursue across fields and cities, reconnecting them in the process. The more we act together, and with each other in mind, the less limited individual action becomes. While recognising structural dimensions and material constraints, there are steps you and I can take from today.

Instead of ultra-processed items designed to keep us addicted and unhealthy, we can opt for fresh, preferably local, food. We can contribute to ensure food pantries, food banks, and community kitchens have such ingredients too. We can encourage agroecological and organic food production by both supporting the farmers around us and by practising it ourselves – herb gardens are a great start. Join local food co-operatives, cook for someone, tend community gardens, take part in movements for socio-environmental justice. Our votes can back political projects that redistribute land, tackle injustice, and democratise access to healthy food. Let us question and inform ourselves, recognise what is absurd, and remember that it does not have to be this way. We can share our findings and connect with others doing the same.

But above all, I believe this is a task to begin around shared tables. So if you'll excuse me, there is a steaming pot of beans being served, and it smells wonderful.

## Notes

[1] According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), the categories *pretos* (Blacks) and *pardos* (Brown, mixed-race) compose the Brazilian Black population (*população negra)*. For the statistics on agricultural wages an average between the wages of *pretos* and *pardos* was used for the comparison against white workers' wages average.

[2] Except for the category Asian, all other racialised groups considered in Hales & Coleman-Jensen (2024) are included, namely: American Indian or Alaska Native; Black or African American; Hispanic or Latino; Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander; and Multiracial.

[3] The percentage includes the sum of the statistical groups Black Africans, Coloured and Indian Asian, as in Statistics South Africa (2025).

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| **Name** | **Evelyn Santos** |
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| **Format** | **Essay \| 14 - minute read** |
| **Biography** | Evelyn Santos is a Brazilian researcher, writer, and food systems practitioner whose work connects political ecology, racial capitalism, and food sovereignty. Writing from her grandmother's kitchen and her family's inherited history of land hunger and agricultural labour, she traces how racial capitalism in Brazil has dispossessed Black farmers while extracting their labour and knowledge — and how food sovereignty and agroecology offer not just alternatives but a return to what was always known. For Evelyn, the kitchen table is the site of economic theory. And the habit of adding water to the beans when unexpected guests arrive — *água no feijão* — is already the argument against scarcity economics, already the answer to racial capitalism, already the ethics the world needs. |