

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Land commoning in deagrarianized contexts: Potentials for agroecology?

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Amid socially and ecologically failing food systems, land commoning has been proposed as a pathway to align food systems with agroecology and food sovereignty. This article aims to contribute to nascent understandings of land commoning movements in relatively deagrarianized contexts by presenting two distinct and complementary case studies in England and South Africa. We show how commoning imaginaries in both contexts are informed by racial justice politics. These movements offer some potential to change food provisioning yet are also limited by tensions with other strategies for both racial justice and agroecology that reinforce individualized property relations. We argue that the nuances and potentials of land commoning movements in deagrarianized contexts merit further research.

Keywords: Agroecology, Food sovereignty, Commoning, Agrarian movements, Racial justice, Deagrarianization

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the concept of commoning has developed as an antidote to capitalist approaches to ownership and governance. Commoning can be conceptualized as the collective governance of resources (Ostrom, 2015; Vivero-Pol et al., 2018). It focuses not just on the commons themselves, but the processes by which they are created and recreated through social processes and over time (Bollier, 2020). Food commoning has been proposed as a way to depart from the commodification of food and the social inequities and ecological degradation that accompany it (Vivero-Pol et al., 2018; De Schutter et al., 2019). A focus on *land commoning*, as a pathway to food commoning, has been limited in this body of work (see Maughan and Ferrando, 2018 for an exception). Yet land governance underpins nearly every aspect of food: the ways in which foods are produced, who produces them, what is produced, and who has access to this food. The transnational *food sovereignty* movement, an agrarian “movement of movements,” seeking to achieve more ecological and socially equitable farming and food systems, has advocated a variety of measures for increasing access to and decommodifying of land (Borras et al., 2015). Alongside land commoning and food sovereignty, *agroecology* is a paradigm for food production which combines social and ecological goals, and agroecology advocates have long called for increasing access to land (Altieri, 1988). The ability of private property regimes

to achieve the aims of agroecology and food sovereignty has been called into question (Calo et al., 2021).

Land movements in deagrarianized contexts are often overlooked in agrarian studies, with the exception of Scotland and North America (see Roman-Alcalá, 2015; Williams and Holt-Giménez, 2017; Wittman et al., 2017; Calo et al., 2022; Wittman and James, 2022). Deagrarianization, or the declining centrality of agriculture in people’s livelihoods (Bryceson, 2002), arguably limits the strength and power of producer-based social movements, which tend to drive land reforms. For example, the rights-based framework that food sovereignty movements advocate is based on the right of “peasants and other people working in rural areas,” but when a country has been deagrarianized and urbanized, it is difficult to evoke who precisely holds this right. Neoliberal governance and high concentrations of power within food systems further compound the obstacles to agrarian reform, as they disconnect agriculture from food, both in policy and in people’s consciousness. Perhaps as a result, land commoning research related to food production in the Global North has tended to focus on individualized instances of reclamation, particularly in urban areas, such as community gardens and urban farms (Borras et al., 2015; Roman-Alcalá, 2015; Maughan and Ferrando, 2018; Noterman, 2022) or land trusts (Wittman et al., 2017). There has been a gap, however, in research on more widespread commoning efforts that seek to challenge property hierarchies, land uses and food systems more broadly, in both Global North and Global South deagrarianized contexts.

This article seeks to address this gap by presenting two distinct and complementary case studies of commoning movements in the deagrarianized contexts of England and South Africa, where land movements are embedded

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within wider movements for racial justice. We discuss the potential and limitations of these movements to contribute to the realization of agroecology and food sovereignty principles and their relevance for commoning and other land justice movements. South Africa and England are both characterized by high and rising social, and particularly racialized inequalities, are largely deagrarianized societies, with profoundly neoliberalized land and food governance and high concentrations of power within their food systems. However, as former colonizer and colonized, the trajectories and timelines of these countries' histories, racial dynamics, and land movements differ significantly. For these reasons, analysis across these two contexts provides insights about the diverse development, potentials, and limitations of land commoning movements.

1.1. The deagrarianized contexts of England and South Africa

Deagrarianization is often referred to as a process in which populations shift from agrarian to deagrarian livelihoods through proletarianization, but it also refers to a multidimensional process of change involving livelihood reorientation, spatial realignment of residence, and social reidentification (Bryceson, 2002). Signals of deagrarianization are thus a declining proportion of the population and labor time engaged in land-based activities (agriculture, but also forestry and other land-based sectors), urbanization and declining proportions of the population identifying as farmers, smallholders, peasants, land workers, or similar identities. Deagrarianization is not a linear process, and in many areas of the Global South, the peasantry have not been fully proletarianized but have maintained landholdings (de Janvry, 1981; Tilzey, 2020).

While deagrarianization is evident to some extent on every continent, the degree to which it has occurred varies widely. England is a site of deep deagrarianization, with a long history of land dispossessions, most notably due to the enclosures primarily from the 15th to 18th centuries and accelerating with liberal and neoliberal capitalist agriculture since (Baack, 1979; Tilzey and Potter, 2008). Today, a small fraction of the population in England is engaged in agricultural or land-based activities and identify as having a land-based livelihood, and 83% of the population resides in urban areas (UK Government, 2021). While deagrarianization in much of Africa occurred much later than in other parts of the world (Bryceson, 2018), in South Africa this process started as early as the 17th century in the Cape as a result of conquest and conflict stemming from white settlement, and accelerating through frontier wars in the 19th century, consolidated with the Natives Land Act of 1913 and compounded by industrial mining, migrant labor recruitment, and influx control (Mkhongi and Musakwa, 2022). While the Government in South Africa has sought to reverse deagrarianization through imposing "modernized" agriculture in the former Bantustans or "homelands," where black South Africans were forcibly resettled following the 1913 Natives Land Act and subsequent laws, such initiatives have foundered (Mtero, 2012). Even so, 250,000 black smallholder farmers produce food for their own consumption and for markets,

indicating that deagrarianization refers more to an erosion of farming and self-provisioning of food rather than urbanized and proletarianized livelihoods (Statistics South Africa, 2013).

Deagrarianization has profound implications for land sovereignty or other types of agrarian land reform. With a majority population dispossessed, and particularly when dispossession has occurred centuries ago, social movements are engaged in producing new imaginaries of how land justice might be configured alongside other social, ecological, and political objectives—rather than a return to the past. Land struggles in both contexts focus on social and distributive justice politics, particularly related to addressing structural racism and gender inequalities (Bhattacharyya, 2018), rather than on solely productivist politics (i.e., earning a livelihood via farm-based enterprise). Commoning, as a departure from individualized private property, features in social movement discourses in both contexts, and in practical occupations in South Africa. We argue that a focus on commoning within the social movements in these contexts has potential to support more ecologically and socially just farming and food systems in both the Global North and Global South, yet also face internal and external contradictions and contestations and that these and other movements in deagrarianized contexts merit further research and inquiry.

We present two case studies we know well—England and South Africa—and analyze their similarities, differences, and implications. These are based on an analysis of discourse from social movement events and organizations related to land commoning over the past 10 years in England and more than 20 years in South Africa, complemented by ongoing research into land movements in each context. This analysis has been compiled through study of movement documents and media, participant observation, and events and consultations we have co-convened with movements. The social movements we selected for analysis were those that meet these criteria: they pursue joint claims to access and retain access to land; seek to access and hold land collectively rather than as individualized private property; do so at least in part for the production of food; with the intent of consuming, sharing, and selling food locally, rather than seeking integration into corporate markets. England and South Africa are, albeit very differently, deagrarianized societies, with deeply corporatized and unequal food systems and racialized inequalities in land access. The researchers are embedded professionally and personally within these contexts. Wach is a food producer and is active in the food sovereignty movement in England, and Hall is a scholar of agrarian change with longstanding connections with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and movements working toward land justice in South Africa. As white, middle-class scholars we seek to be allies of anti-racist movements for social and ecological justice.

2. Agroecology, food sovereignty, and land commoning

In response to mounting ecological degradation from agriculture and increasing awareness of the structural

injustices in the majority of food systems, social movements have been emerging to alter food and farming systems. While movements have been many over the decades, the agroecology and food sovereignty movements stand out in their global take-up and interrelatedness. Agroecology has been supported by mainstream institutions such as the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and incorporated into the food sovereignty movement (La Via Campesina [LVC], 2015; FAO, 2018). Food sovereignty, as represented through the transnational movement of LVC, is considered the largest agrarian social movement globally, with 182 member organizations in 81 countries comprising approximately 200 million peasants, farmers, and activists (Martínez-Torres and Rosset, 2010; LVC, 2021). While agroecology and food sovereignty are widely interpreted and have also been subject to co-optation (Patel, 2009; Levidow, 2015), the broad principles of these overlapping movements can be considered to include ecologically sustainable production which provides adequate and culturally appropriate food for the human population on an equitable basis and dignified livelihoods for producers (Desmarais and Wittman, 2014; Alonso-Fradejas et al., 2015; Desmarais, 2015; Wach, 2021). Increasing access to land has featured in both the agroecology and food sovereignty movements for distinct and overlapping reasons.

While the *agroecology* movement initially began in backlash to industrial agriculture and the Green Revolution (Wezel et al., 2009; Méndez et al., 2013), the role of land access and governance has been increasingly recognized as underpinning the unsustainability of farming. Many of the practices which degrade agroecosystems and run counter to agroecology (e.g., large-scale mechanization, monocultures, pesticide and inorganic fertilizer use, etc.) stem from the downward pressures in capitalist competitive markets which drive a reduction of labor, in addition to its exploitation (Goodman et al., 1987; Araghi, 2009). Agroecological production, in contrast, requires more people on the land as ecological farming practices tend to be more labor- and knowledge-intensive (Rosset and Altieri, 2017; Carlisle et al., 2019; Akram-Lodhi, 2021). Agroecological scholars (Altieri, 1988), civil society groups at the FAO's Second International Symposium of Agroecology (Gliessman, 2018), the former Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food (see De Schutter, 2010), and the IPES-Food's Common Food Policy for the EU (IPES-Food, 2019) have all advocated access to land to maintain rural populations (in more agrarian societies) and/or repeople the countryside (in deagrarianized societies). But beyond ensuring availability of land, more recent literature indicates that supporting agroecology requires transforming the governance of land, which led to labor shedding and destructive agricultural practices in the first place (Calo et al., 2021; Akram-Lodhi, 2021; Wittman and James, 2022).

Control over and access to land has been central to *food sovereignty* struggles since the beginning of the movement, as peasants and land workers pushed back against their marginalization and dispossession within food systems (Rosset, 2013; McMichael, 2014; Borras et al., 2015).

Within the food sovereignty movement, land access features in discourse as essential to people's right to dignified land-based livelihoods and to have determination over food systems, including via self-provisioning. As the movement(s) have evolved to encompass other concerns and framings, so too have the priorities related to access to and control over land. Countering land grabs, protecting customary tenure and redistributing land have featured in the movements over time. Yet, LVC has also focused on democratic control and "collective rights" over land, territories, and other natural resources more broadly (LVC, 2007; Borras et al., 2015). Indeed, focusing primarily on redistributive land reform has been problematized by scholar-activists in the food sovereignty movement (Rosset, 2013). Borras et al. (2015) have drawn attention to the limitations of focusing on tenure security and redistribution as these reinforce Western-style private land property systems to facilitate capital accumulation. Instead, they point to the need to emphasize the democratic control over land, at local, national, and international levels, in addition to land-based wealth and power redistribution (p. 610). Borras and Franco (2012) and Borras et al. (2015) have proposed the concept of "land sovereignty," or democratic control of land and territories for the realization of food sovereignty. While not coined as land commoning per se, the emphasis on democratic and collective governance largely aligns with commoning, as we discuss below.

Commons and *commoning* have been framed, by both activists and academics, as an antidote to dispossession and as a basis for postcapitalist societies (Bollier and Helfrich, 2015; De Angelis, 2019), in part stemming from the idea that capitalism and neoliberalism have developed and deepened as a result of the enclosure of commons (Harvey, 2003; Araghi, 2009; Wood, 2009). Land commoning has been advocated as a vehicle for racial and gender justice, given that individual property ownership is entwined with racial, gender, and class oppressions and has been an important instrument of racialized colonialism historically and today (Mamdani, 1996; Faithful, 2017; Bhandar, 2018; Hall, 2019; Özkan and Büyüksaraç, 2020). Treating food as a commons, rather than a commodity, has been advocated as a basis for ensuring more equitable and ecologically sound food systems (De Schutter et al., 2019; Vivero-Pol, 2019; Kuljay et al., 2021), with commoning of land framed as a basis for the commoning of food (Maughan and Ferrando, 2018; Tornaghi and Dehaene, 2020; Ferrando et al., 2021).

Ostrom (2010, 2015) theorized commons as having distinctive systems of governance (rather than a free for all), determining entitlements, obligations, inclusions and exclusions, and demonstrated that commons have historically underpinned human societies and continue to constitute the essential basis for livelihoods across much of the world. The notion of "commoning" specifically seeks to bring the emphasis of governance to the fore, shifting the focus from the resources themselves to the acts of creating and recreating commons (Linebaugh, 2008; Euler, 2018). Commoning varies in scale, ranging from local, national, and international commons (McCarthy, 2005; Harvey, 2011). In relation to

land, commoning can refer to land occupations, which range from individual instances such as Grow Heathrow in London (Maughan and Ferrando, 2018) to more systematic approaches such as those employed by the Landless Workers Movements in Brazil and Bolivia as a method to secure formal rights based on “land to the tiller” principles (Vergara-Camus, 2014; Tilzey, 2018). Land commoning can also refer to shifts in national-level governance, which leads to legal and/or normative frameworks for land to be governed as a common good. Arguably, the latter can be seen in Scotland with the Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement, the Community Right to Buy (which is guided by the principle of the public interest) and a newly tabled public interest test for large transfers (Scottish Land Commission, 2019; Wach, 2019; Calo et al., 2022).

Yet the resurgent attention to the commons, and spaces in which old commons have been restored or revived, or new commons created, do not necessarily constitute a rolling back of primitive accumulation or of colonial legacies. Caffentzis (2010) argues that commons provide sites of social reproduction that exist alongside, and are consistent with, wider dynamics of exploitation in capitalist and neo-colonial relations, and this can be seen clearly in food and farming. In agrarian contexts where a large proportion of the population relies on farming-based activities for their livelihoods and for subsistence, commons provide a type of “subsidy” which enables small-scale and peasant producers to keep their livelihood costs low and therefore sell their products more cheaply. While this helps them to compete with large-scale, more ecologically destructive agribusiness, it also can lead to overexploitation of ecological resources within commons when governance prioritizes market-based production over subsistence uses (Holt Giménez and van Lammeren, 2019). Even when a commoning initiative is explicitly organized around noncapitalist principles (reciprocity, redistribution, self-sufficiency, etc.) as in the case of MST settlements in Bolivia, collective governance cannot always prevent individuals from integrating into capitalist markets, as debts have led some individuals producing soya in monocultures for concentrated agri-food chains (Fabricant, 2012). Further, commons inevitably create and maintain social and ecological exclusions, in addition to inclusions, as identified by scholars in both critical property studies (Sikor and Lund, 2009; Lund, 2023) and feminist political ecology (Nightingale, 2019) and in relation to overlapping claims based on immaterial land relations (Kepkiewicz and Dale, 2019; Wittman and James, 2022). This section has sought to briefly discuss the concept of commoning in relation to agroecology and food sovereignty movements. The following sections discuss how social movements working toward both agroecology and food sovereignty mobilize concepts of commoning in their discourse and strategies in England and South Africa, respectively, and how these are embedded in struggles for racial justice. The subsequent section discusses the potentials and limitations of these movements.

3. Case study 1 — England

While England has an extensive history of capitalist land governance, here we briefly outline the recent context in relation to farming and food before discussing commoning governance and subsequently social movement discourse and strategies.

3.1. England's land governance and agro-food system

Land governance in England is predominantly based on private individualized ownership, with private owners afforded strong rights and few responsibilities. England does not have a comprehensive land registry, but available data show gross inequalities in land distribution. At least 65% of land is owned by the aristocracy and gentry, corporations and ultra-rich, but with another 17% of land ownership unaccounted for, the amount of land owned by elites and corporations could be as high as 77% (Shrubsole, 2019). Individualized private ownership has a long history in England, with exclusive property rights developing from the 15th century and almost completely replacing communal property rights via the enclosures by the middle of the 19th century (Baack, 1979). Today, 3% of the land in England and Wales is considered to be commons and most of this is grazing land (Short, 2008).

Farmland in particular is highly concentrated, with average farm holding sizes expanding every year, while the number of farms, and farmers, declines—a trend which began in the transition to capitalism and has accelerated since the mid-20th century. The number of farm holdings dropped dramatically between 1950 and 2015¹ and, as of 2022, just 0.32% of the population were involved in farming (Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs [DEFRA], 2012; Willis, 2017), though this statistic omits people engaged in farming on land less than five hectares, which excludes many agroecological farms in England (Laughton, 2017).

While European-level agricultural policies after the productivist era included some provisions to maintain smaller and medium-scale farms, this support has been framed in terms of the social and environmental benefits of doing so (what was called “multifunctionality”) and has neglected to support the integration of food production with ecological aims as in agroecology. In England, such support was primarily designed to prevent overgrowth and abandonment on large tracts of grazing land and had a lower limit of five hectares, again excluding many who practice agroecology. Support has been “broad and shallow” and has only marginally slowed deagrarianization rather than halting or reversing it (Buller, 2000; Potter and Burney, 2002). The majority of support has focused on more capital-intensive (and ecologically damaging) farm businesses, which can better integrate into globalized processing and retail chains (Potter and Tilzey, 2005). This has resulted in a countryside which has been bifurcated between ecologically damaging but productive

1. There is some unreliability of this statistic as Defra changed its methodology during this time (DEFRA, 2012).

agriculture, which is disembodied from regional contexts, and relatively unproductive farming intended to “conserve” agricultural landscapes (much of it on the commons mentioned above, and with products targeted to “niche” markets), with both types of land use minimizing labor inputs. Agroecological production, with greater labor but also greater biodiversity has continued on the fringes but with little government support (Tilzey and Potter, 2008). Much of the agroecological farming that does take place also targets niche markets at the expense of the social equity aims of food sovereignty and entails a reliance on self-exploitation, volunteer labor, and in some cases underpaid migrants (Galt, 2013; Ekers et al., 2016; Weiler et al., 2016; Wach, 2021).

The lack of integration of ecological and social aims with food production can be attributed to England’s strongly liberalized food policies. With the exception of the war and postwar productivist period, during which England focused on national self-sufficiency, food provision in England has been strongly liberalized since industrialization and colonialism, with the country initially depending on imports from colonized and enslaved peoples and territories, and in more recent times depending on England’s strong purchasing power in global markets (Tilzey, 2019; Lang, 2020). This has afforded England the privilege to dedicate large areas of land to environmental aims without integrating food production into ecological land use. In effect, this externalizes the environmental cost of food production to other localities, often in neocolonial extractivist relationships, while simultaneously precluding the development of agroecological food systems within its borders (Lang, 2020; Ajl, 2023). Yet despite ample food being available, 17% of households were food insecure across the United Kingdom in January 2023 (Food Foundation, 2023), though this figure is as much as double for households in which the head was black (DEFRA, 2021). Meanwhile, dietary-related disease is the leading cause of morbidity and mortality (Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, 2019) and the average household obtains more than 50% of its calorie intake from ultra-processed foods (Monteiro et al., 2017).

Despite the lack of policy support and in contrast to popular notions of what farming entails, there is evidence of rapidly growing demand for agroecological livelihoods (Laughton, 2022). As in South Africa, counter to the notion that young people do not want to farm, half of the members of the Land Workers’ Alliance (a member of LVC) are under the age of 40, starkly contrasting the national statistics of only 3% of the farming population being under the age of 35 (Laughton, 2022). This mounting interest and engagement in agroecology includes Black People and People of Color (BPOC),² despite the challenges of structural racism and other barriers (Calliste et al., 2021; Terry, 2023). While not all BPOC seeking to farm want to do so in agroecological ways, a number of movements and initiatives, such as Land In

Our Names (LION), Go Grow With Love, Ubele Initiative and Black Rootz, express a desire for ecological land-based practices as a way of healing and reparation from the legacies of colonialism and slavery (LION, 2024). While some are explicitly associated with agroecology, others such as the Ubele Initiative, emphasize “traditional” knowledge and practices from ancestors of formerly colonized countries (Welch, 2021; Taylor, 2022), and many of these practices align with, or indeed have formed the basis for, agroecological principles and practices (Altieri, 1995; Rosset and Altieri, 2017; Suárez-Torres et al., 2017). There is evidence that some BPOC engage in (non-commodified) farming as a way of increasing food security and food sovereignty (Calliste et al., 2021).

Lack of access to land is one of the top barriers to new entrants wishing to farm ecologically (Taherzadeh, 2019; Styles et al., 2022). Land access is constrained due to high land prices but also large parcel sizes, which are often inappropriate for new entrants and people wishing to farm agroecologically (Wach and Ripoll, 2021). Further, a separation between land for “development” and for “agriculture” is a major impediment to land access. The separation, enshrined in the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act was ostensibly to prevent urban sprawl and the loss of agricultural land in the productivist era following the Second World War. This sharpened class inequalities in access by making it very difficult for new entrants and farm laborers to live on farmland, with the effect of making rural England “the near exclusive preserve of the more affluent sections of society” (Cabinet Office, 1999). In order to obtain permission to live on site, the Act requires applicants to demonstrate their economic viability as a farm business, and/or demonstrate an “essential need” to live on the farm. These subjective measures have led to many agroecological farmers being denied planning permission, even when they are commercially oriented, and particularly precluded land-based livelihoods which are not commercially oriented, but which are still agriculturally productive (Wach and Ripoll, 2021). The dichotomy between town and country as reified in planning law has entrenched a romantic and exclusionary ideal of the countryside as one with very few people in it: a vision initially held by upper classes and reproduced throughout society through paintings and other media (Darby, 2000). By limiting urban to rural migration, planning policy also limits the integration of BPOC into the countryside, as the majority of Black British and British Asian people currently live in urban centers (Office for National Statistics, 2021).

Farming and other land-based work are the least racially diverse professions in the United Kingdom, and BPOC face additional barriers in accessing farmland and indeed the countryside itself (Calliste et al., 2021). Recent research reports highlight the racialized aspects of land concentration and inequality of access, stimulating debate and controversy in mainstream media (Fowler, 2021). Many of the large properties and estates in England, including those now under the ownership of the National Trust, were acquired and developed from the profits of enslavement and colonialism (Dresser and Hann, 2013; Huxtable et al., 2020). These recent “discoveries” (which have been known

2. BPOC is the way in which movements self-identify at the time of writing.

for some time) and debates have infused the land justice movement and amplified a desire not only for reparations and repair but also for commoning of land as a project of decolonization *within* the colonial state.

3.2. Commoning in England's land governance

Collective management of land in alignment with commoning is currently quite rare in England and occurs primarily through asset transfers to community groups (donations of land to land trusts or transfer from public bodies); on lands which are rented from landlords (including private and public); through private acquisition by individuals or groups; and through informal arrangements (squatting). Advocates of agroecology and food sovereignty in England have championed land trusts (like the Ecological Land Cooperative, Biodynamic Land Trust, and Soil Association Land Trust) as a way to increase access to land for aspiring new entrants. While some of these land trusts embody the principles of commoning, this pathway is extremely constrained. As Wittman et al. (2017) discuss in relation to similar trusts in Canada, while land trusts can protect land from financial speculation and can help redistribute land, many farms operating on land trusts operate according to private property-based and market-driven mechanisms (Wittman et al., 2017). In England, while land trusts can offer a non-marketized way for new entrants to gain access to land, as discussed, the planning requirement that landholders run “economically viable businesses” is a constraint (Ferguson et al., 2017; Wach and Ripoll, 2021). Thus, while some aspects of managing land are done “in common,” food production has to be organized into private, commercial units in order to receive planning permission for dwellings on trust farms.

One of the most prevalent, yet still exceptional, ways in which land is collectively managed is through intentional communities or cohousing sites, of which there are about 400 across the United Kingdom. While many are in the countryside, new rural initiatives are limited by planning policy and property law which make land unaffordable and restrict the ability to build, though some restrictions may ease following a 2023 revision to the National Planning Policy Framework. Those that exist in rural areas tend to have a focus on noncommercial, ecologically based self-provisioning, not only in vegetables and fruits (which is most common) but also in dairy, meat, eggs, honey, and other products (Coates et al., 2021). Given the planning context, the most viable pathway for communities to establish in rural areas is to acquire what were previously grand estates, the prices of which are often out of reach for many groups today (but had been more affordable in previous decades). Despite exceptions (such as Tinkers Bubble), generally access to these initiatives tends to be a middle-class privilege, to the exclusion of the working class. With the presence of racism in the countryside (Garland and Chakraborti, 2004; Terry, 2023), BPOC may potentially experience additional barriers to living in such communities.

Legislation to enable communities to collectively acquire and manage land is severely limited, particularly for agricultural land. The Localism Act of 2011 provided for a “Community Right to Bid.” Under this scheme,

community groups can nominate land as being “assets of community value.” If approved by the Local Authority, the community group then has the right to bid (but not buy) for the asset when it goes on the market and is provided up to six months to put a bid together. The Act also includes a “Community Right to Reclaim Land,” which allows for community groups to call into question the ownership of land by public bodies if the land is deemed to be vacant and/or underused. This second right does not cover privately held land, and again, does not afford a right to bid or buy, and may be more of a sign of the neoliberal rolling back of the state than community empowerment (Sharma et al., 2023).

Uptake and successful application have been low with this Act, particularly for agricultural land. Four years after implementation, only 11 community bids have been successful, and only 1% of assets nominated as being of community value were “land” (the main assets were pubs, community centers, playing fields) (House of Commons, 2015). For both schemes, the owner has the right to refuse to sell (or transfer) the asset to the community group, even if the land in question has been deemed a community asset and even if the community group offers a competitive bid. And unlike in Scotland, the Act does not provide any financial support for going through the process itself nor for the actual purchase, again limiting the benefits of this Act to those with financial privileges. Further, the Act is based on subjective standards of what it means to be an “asset” in the first instance, and “underused,” in the second, particularly in the case of agricultural land. Mainstream conceptions of the landscape, mono-cropped fields of grain for animal feed, or even an empty grassy field with no livestock are considered as “normal” in agriculture and not necessarily underused. Finally, the right for owners to exclude access limits people’s ability to identify land as being underused or vacant.

3.3. Land commoning discourse and strategies among agroecology and food sovereignty movements

In response to land consolidation, exclusion from access, and mounting critique of the land regime being underpinned by colonialism and racialized capitalism, land movements have been rapidly growing in the past decade. These movements seek access to farmland to enable more people to have land-based livelihoods based on agroecology and food sovereignty principles. In the past five years, initiatives by both BPOC- and white-led organizations have particularly sought to identify and address racialized inequities in land and farming systems. The land-related social movements for agroecology and food sovereignty are part of a wider intersectional “land justice” movement which includes dozens of organizations working toward an array of issues such as racial justice, environmental justice, abolition, decolonization, fair housing, increased access to nature, health sovereignty, and participatory democracy, along with a small number of academic institutions (Land for What [LFW], 2016; Shared Assets, 2023). Here, we focus primarily on the land commoning discourses and strategies which are related to farming and food.

While decolonization is distinct from racial justice, there are obvious overlaps, particularly in the context of England, given that many BPOC (most notably Black British, British Asian and British Arabs but also residents without citizenship) in England are descendants of enslaved and colonized Africans and Caribbeans, and colonized South Asian and Middle Eastern people, some of whom were brought over to England as enslaved workers by plantation owners, and some of whom came following the end of colonialism. While there are no statistics indicating the proportion of BPOC in England descended from enslaved and/or colonized people, nearly 600,000 people from colonized (Commonwealth) countries resettled in Britain between 1948 and 1971 as a result of the British Nationality Act which gave people from colonies the right to live and work in Britain (The Migration Observatory, 2017) and thousands came before this time to work on industrial and colonial projects (Ewald, 2000; Searle, 2009). It is important to specify, however, that contrary to an idea of Britain being completely “white” before colonization and the so-called Windrush generation, BPOC have lived in Britain, including in the countryside, since the Roman invasion (Fryer, 2010).

In the 2023 Land Justice Spring Gathering (LJSG, 2023), an annual three-day gathering of individuals and organizations involved in the U.K. land justice movement, participants expressed the need to ensure that the aims and ways of working toward “land justice” serve as holistic repair to colonial legacies and trauma. Movement members expressed that it was essential to incorporate and embody values of racial justice, respond to intersecting forms of oppression along the lines of race, class, gender, (dis)ability, sexuality, and actively counter colonial and capitalist norms related to the relationships between humans and humans and between humans and nonhumans. Participants referred to “being in the belly of the beast” as a driver and challenge for this work: the birthplace of capitalism, a country which has invaded the majority of countries, and one in which racialized violence continues to be embedded in the state (LJSG, 2023). While the movement is not entirely unified in its visions and aims, there has been consensus that working toward land justice in England necessarily entails decoloniality and racial justice.

Reparations have been discussed as a way to respond to the racialized injustices of the current and historical property regime in England (People’s Food Summit [PFS], 2022; Land Skills Fair, 2023). Yet a typical redistribution approach has not been predominant and movements have challenged the notion of private individual ownership. Instead, advocates discuss the need to be in “right relation” to the land, borrowing from indigenous concepts (LJSG, 2023). For example, in a discussion about unequal land ownership at the Oxford Real Farming Conference in 2023, one person stated, “It’s about collective *stewardship*. [the word] ‘ownership’ is still problematic . . . controlling nature comes from white man’s imagination. We need to relearn to be part of nature, and understand the soil and give it what it needs.” Four episodes of a U.K. podcast on agroecology discussed the family farm as a “colonial concept” (Revell and Gordon, 2021). And Audre Lorde’s quote, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s

house” was evoked in the Land Justice Spring Gathering 2023 to stimulate thinking of land justice beyond private, individualized property.

Many of the activities aiming to achieve these aims of decoloniality have yet to directly challenge property rights in the form of legal changes, but rather aim to foster a sense of connection with the land, and more widespread understandings of the land system, as a necessary prerequisite to more radical land reforms. This “slow pace” of the movement was expressed as necessary to avoid replicating the inequalities of colonialism and capitalism and to increase the inclusivity and participatory nature of the movement (Shared Assets, 2021). Fostering a sense of belonging stems from a recognition that the vast majority of England’s population are structurally excluded and so do not sense that they “belong” in the rural landscape, and that this is even more stark for BPOC, who have, on average, less access to the countryside than their white counterparts (Terry, 2023).³ Numerous organizations (LION, Miknaf Ha’aretz, Seeding the Commons, etc.) run retreats and events with marginalized groups, including BPOC and Jewish diaspora to “repair and heal” through land-based activities, to reconnect with the land and reclaim their sense of belonging. Here, ecological stewardship and food production has been seen as a two-way relational process with land, in that the act of restoring the ecological health of land in itself fosters a sense of embeddedness and healing, and this has been discursively connected to land tenure (Ratinon and Solnick, 2023). For some diaspora, this involves reviving “traditional” ways of cultivating to reconnect with ancestry (Ratinon, 2022).

Decoloniality and racial justice have underpinned thinking about England’s role in global food systems and the implications for land governance, from the UK Food Sovereignty Gathering (FSG) in 2015 through the PFS in 2022 (FSG, 2015; PFS, 2022). The food sovereignty movement has advocated for land in England to be used for more production of food for local consumption and for this food to be decommmodified. Simultaneously, the movement has recognized the need to support food sovereignty and related movements in the Global South, particularly in places which have been affected by colonization. The production of niche foods within the agroecology movement has also been problematized, including from a racial justice perspective. One organizing member of LION, a grassroots movement working to increase access to land for BPOC to engage in ecological farming as a way of repairing the colonial harm to humans and ecologies, framed the focus on niche foods as follows:

There’s such a responsibility for . . . the agroecological . . . movement to not just see this as like, okay I grow organic and I don’t really care about all these other social justice things, because they’re not that important. It’s like, what are you

3. Though many BPOC do feel belonging in the countryside and have sought to represent the complexity of this in the British colonial landscape through the arts, such as Ingrid Pollard in *Pastoral Interlude* (Ghadiali, 2022).

looking toward? Just like a green, capitalist movement that doesn't really change anything? Do you just want everyone to buy organic food and then that's not realistic . . . how do we actually grow food that people want, how do we engage people who are working class, who are people of colour, who are otherwise marginalized from accessing these products? (Siva, 2022)

The policy proposals which have emerged from the wider land justice movement related to land and agroecology include proposals to expand on the 2011 Localism Act to institute a right to buy (and not just a right to bid) and allocation of public funds for land acquisitions, following in Scotland's footsteps with this and making community ownership more accessible to communities with less purchasing power. This could facilitate an easier legal pathway for groups to engage in land commoning for agroecology. Organizations have also sought to modify national planning policy to enable more people to live on farmland. While not directly challenging the system of individualized property rights per se, this could indirectly facilitate more agrarian commoning. It could also indirectly benefit BPOC by making it easier to move from urban to rural areas but is likely to be constrained without addressing more systemic rural racism.

Democratic oversight over the management of land, including via community assemblies, has been tabled as a way of curbing individual rights and ushering in more accountability in how land is managed, again inspired by policy measures proposed in Scotland (LFW, 2016; LJSG, 2022; LJSG, 2023). Such oversight could expand the notion of land "rights" beyond landowners and enable nonowners to have a say in land use in a way that moves land governance toward the domains of commons. This may support agroecology in enabling residents to contest harmful farming practices or orient production more toward healthy food for local consumption. To effect change, however, such endeavors would require simultaneous efforts to address the competitive pressures on farmers to diverge from agroecological principles in the first place.

In parallel with commoning discourse and advocacy is discourse which points to the ability for agroecological farms to be economically profitable. Some of this is arguably tied to seeking legitimacy, and therefore government support for agroecology within the agricultural policy context. It also relates to navigating planning constraints, for example in distinguishing agroecological farmers seeking to build a dwelling on farms and market gardens from wealthy elites repurposing farmland for leisure (Ferguson et al., 2017). Additionally, the focus on agroecological business viability can be in backlash to public and often intergenerational biases against smaller scale and/or ecological farming as not being a valid livelihood pathway (Ferguson et al., 2017; Styles et al., 2022). This discourse has also been documented among BPOC farmers. For example, one farmer states that food growing is a "really viable way of making a solid income . . . actually, as small

farmers, there is a model there that, not only can create, sustain, our families but can actually generate generational wealth" (Calliste et al., 2021, p. 31). Yet this contrast between advocating the economic viability of farms and highlighting the difficulties of making a livelihood from farming may point to the class divisions within the movement, between more capitalized, landed agroecological farms and members of the movement that are either landless or wish to focus on non-commodified self-provisioning.

4. Case study 2—South Africa

South Africa is perhaps the emblematic case of racialized land politics globally, with the systematic engineering of a racial hierarchy being anchored not only in colonial dispossession but also a hierarchical system of race-based land regimes that were distinct in geography, land use, and governance. Limited progress with unravelling this over the past 30 years since the end of formal apartheid has prompted land movements to broaden their agendas beyond redistribution of land, to transforming landholding, land uses, and food systems—through land commoning, agroecology, and food commoning. We show how land commoning has emerged in the contemporary period as a form of resistance to privileged private property, and how agroecology has been embraced by some as an extension of the decolonial project and the basis for sovereignty over land and food.

4.1. South African land governance and agro-food system

South Africa combines deagrarianization and deindustrialization with the world's highest Gini coefficient at 0.63 and staggering levels of youth unemployment which peaked at an all-time high of 66.5% in 2021. On the back of land seizure cemented by the Natives Land Act in 1913, a program of massive affirmative action for whites from the early 20th century set out to solve the "poor white problem" via the provision of farmland, subsidies, and machinery to drive the production of surpluses for export and to feed growing cities. By 1950, the number of white capitalist farms, all reliant on black labor, numbered 120,000, after which consolidation reduced the total number of farms while increasing their average size—a trend which has accelerated with the number of farms dropping from about 60,000 in the mid-90s to 40,000 by 2020 (Statistics South Africa, 2023). The new democratic government's deregulation policies opened up global market competition, financialization, and transnationalization—a pattern also reflected in mounting concentration in ownership and control of the food system (Greenberg, 2017).

Concomitant with this land consolidation has been the centralization of capital, with a decline in family owned commercial farms as corporate actors pursue vertical integration, made possible by state privatization policies but not (as in England) by direct subsidies. By 2021, 6.5% of farm enterprises accounted for 67% or two-thirds of gross farm incomes, while an estimated 250,000 black smallholder farmers' produce for their own consumption and for markets, though income from the latter is considered

so marginal that it is unaccounted for in national statistics (Cousins, 2021). Among smallholders, farming is only an adjunct to bought food, in one of the world's most "supermarketized" societies (das Nair, 2018). Deagrarianization, then, does not imply urbanized or proletarianized livelihoods, but rather an erosion of farming and self-provisioning of food. One study in the Flagstaff district of the Eastern Cape found that cultivation of fields had dropped from 57% in 2008 to 15% in 2019 (Shackleton et al., 2019).

From about 2000 onward, government policy has reframed racial justice from a question of redistributing land through subdividing large farms, to a nationalist ideological framing which centers on the transfer of land and shares in agribusiness to black entrepreneurs and aspiring capitalists. Such nationalist concerns underpin what has been termed "representative redistribution." The result has been only marginal redistribution, and extensive "fronting" by white farmers and agribusinesses, to bring in black partners under the country's Agri-BEBEE (Agricultural Broad-based Black Economic Empowerment) policies, which also provide avenues for access to state tenders and preferential access to finance (Hall and Kepe, 2017; Mtero et al., 2023). In South Africa, racialized and gendered ideologies tend to equate men with individualized landholdings and women in particular with collective forms of landholding, with the presumption that black women in particular are expected to collaborate and not embark on individual land uses or business enterprises. This precept underpins state and NGO discourses and is a point of contention among movements themselves (Rural Women's Assembly [RWA], 2021).

The Constitution's preamble that "South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity" is a claim of common citizenship that sits unsteadily astride the vast divide in who actually owns the land and the wealth. Nobody knows precisely how much land white and black people own in South Africa—though the general pattern is sufficient evidence of the continued racial schism regardless of the end of formal apartheid law. The former "white commercial farming" areas that are privately titled account for around 67% of land (Walker, 2004), and only about 10% of this has been transferred to black South Africans through land reforms over the past 30 years (Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development [DALRRD], 2022). Successive attempts at a "land audit" have foundered; while race is central to political discourse, since the end of formal apartheid race is not recorded in the deeds registry. Attempts to define race retrospectively suggest that 72% of the farmland is owned by whites, 15% by the so-called "coloureds" (mixed race and/or of slave descent), 5% by "Indians" (denoting Asian), and 4% by "Africans" (black South Africans) (Department of Rural Development and Land Reform [DRDLR], 2017). But these figures are profoundly misleading, as this includes only that land owned by individuals, which amounts to less than a quarter of the country's territory. Far more is under effective control by white South Africans *and* transnational capital in the forms of corporate ownership (Hall and Cousins,

2017). And more land is owned through customary tenure by black South Africans under customary ownership in the communal areas of the former Bantustans. With all the same caveats, the audit found that 72% of the titled farms that are individually owned are owned by men (DRDLR, 2017).

Despite the deagrarianized context, there is a significant demand for land—though not all of it is for farming and, to the degree to which people do want to farm, it is mostly not for commercial farming or farming at scale. Surveys on land demand suggest that 45% of black South Africans (meaning black African) want land, and only a small minority aim for commercial farming and three-quarters want land to produce food, largely for their own consumption (Hall and Dubb, 2013). These widespread yet modest demands are primarily for small well-located plots, with half wanting one hectare or less, and another quarter saying they would want one to five hectares. Contrary to the narrative advanced both by businesses and government that "young people don't want to farm," nearly half of those saying they want land are under 35 years of age (Hall and Dubb, 2013).

The loss of land itself, and its consequences for the trajectory of economic development, lies at the heart of the "land question" as it is articulated in public discourse. While conflict and even wars over land long predate it, the commonly denoted moment of racial rupture is the Natives Land Act (now "Black Land Act") No. 27 of 1913, which consolidated white control over the territory, by defining native reserves and prohibiting ownership, renting, sharecropping, or labor tenancy by "Africans" outside of these. When petitioning the British Parliament to intervene, the South African National Natives' Congress (SANNC; forerunner to the African National Congress) explained the purpose and consequences of the Act at the time as being "To deprive the Natives as a people of their freedom to acquire more land in their own right; to restrict or limit their right to bargain mutually on even terms for the occupation of or settlement on land; [and] to reduce by gradual process and by artificial means the Bantu people as a race to a status of permanent labourers or subordinates for all purposes and for all times with little or no freedom to sell their labour by bargaining on even terms with employers in the open markets of labour either in the agricultural or industrial centres" (SANNC, 1916). The British Parliament declined to intervene.

The control of land and labor, as a basis for capitalist development and accumulation in the "core" of the mining and manufacturing sectors, then, has shaped South Africa. Yet increasingly, labor is not needed, producing "surplus populations," whose claims are nowhere accommodated, save in limited programs of social protection (Cousins et al., 2018). Unlike more agrarian societies in Africa, South Africa's path of industrialization was led by mining, which enabled the successful establishment of large-scale capitalist agriculture. As agriculture has declined as a contributor to the national economy, labor is increasingly superfluous. Jobless deagrarianization now means that while people's livelihoods are largely disconnected from farming, they have not been incorporated

into wage labor. As a result, abundant food supplies coexist with chronic hunger and malnutrition. As in England, working class people in South Africa are faced with an “obesogenic” food environment, in which nutritious food is unaffordable—in this case, for the majority. Malnutrition and obesity rates are rising simultaneously in South Africa, with over 30% of people living with hunger, 54% experiencing hunger intermittently, obesity levels highest among women at 68%, and stunting among children under five years at 27% (Igumbor et al., 2012; Kroll et al., 2019). Like England, social grants serve a pivotal role but on quite a different scale—with 47% of households relying on at least one state grant, but these typically provide less than half of household food needs.

The connection between property relations and food systems is nowhere more evident than in the wealthy farmlands of the Western Cape, which was “point zero” for colonial conquest in this region of the continent. The first European estates in the 17th century were built on slavery and, in the contemporary period of liberalized trade, the current estates are strongly connected into global markets. Here, at the center of the fruit and wine industries, the largest concentration of farm workers in the country are increasingly in precarious, seasonal, and outsourced forms of employment—and over the past decades have faced continued waves of evictions into informal settlements which, surrounding the agro-estates, provide a ready supply of labor while externalizing the costs to neighboring municipalities (Visser and Ferrer, 2015).

4.2. *Commoning in South Africa's land governance*

The status of inherited private property rights—in land, and also in minerals and other centers of capital—formed a centerpiece of constitutional negotiation during the 1990s. And, while mandating land reforms, the compromise entailed continued private ownership alongside redistribution through a “market-based programme.” Claims against the state were for entry into the “edifice” (Hornby et al., 2017) of private property rather than for its dismantling. The idea of an “edifice” refers to the elaborate architecture of laws, institutions, and resources, which shore up systems of privately titled property with public resources. Against this edifice, other tenures, institutions, and populations are recognized nominally in law yet have no traction in practical contestation (Kingwill et al., 2017). The bulk, an estimated 60%, of the population lives in forms of informal and customary landholding systems that are poorly recognized in law yet are often fairly robustly governed locally and sustain occupation over time (Hornby et al., 2017). It is in this space that commoning discourses and food sovereignty movements seek to leverage change in both the property system and the food system, “from below” (de Schutter and Rajagopal, 2020). The largest form of the commons is the 13% of the land territory, previously set aside as native reserves (later Bantustans) and the so-called “Coloured” rural areas.

To dismantle racialized and gendered property hierarchies based on exclusive private ownership, people have created new forms of property-holding. When embarking in the 1990s on land reform to expand access for black

South Africans, the idea of providing for secure tenure to these new commons prompted the development of a new type of landholding legal entity, under “communal property associations” (CPAs) as a mechanism through which people can hold and manage land jointly, and democratically in terms of a written constitution—outside of the control of traditional authorities or state officialdom (Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, 2005; Hall, 2015). CPAs were explicitly conceived as a way to create and manage commons as an alternative to commodified property relations. Currently, 1,780 CPAs are registered nationally as private owners of community property. DALRRD has statutory obligation to support these CPAs organizationally (not financially). By its own admission, though, it has failed to provide such support, and reports that two-thirds of the CPAs are not compliant with their obligations (regular annual general meetings, audited bank accounts, elections of representatives) and a further 10% have never complied (DALRRD, 2023). In total, over three quarters of all the community landholdings established through land reform, on an estimated 10 million hectares of land, have lapsed into new forms of commons that are often highly unequal and contested (DALRRD, 2023), in an example of how commons have the potential to reinforce social inequalities (Sikor and Lund, 2009; Nightingale, 2019). These large new commons under state jurisdiction, established through land reform, have defied state attempts to control and manage them, with diverse and often problematic outcomes (Hall and Kepe, 2017).

Not only are land commons growing in rural areas, through state-planned processes, but urban and peri-urban commoning is on the rise, in more organic ways and often outside the realms of legality. Whereas apartheid “influx control” laws aimed to police black people's access to cities, and to retain the “rural” as a site of social reproduction for the next generation of workers, now we see in some spaces the “ruralization” of the urban. On vacant land amid (still largely white) suburbs, urban land movements—organizing under the banner of “Reclaim the City” (in Cape Town), the Inner City Federation (in Johannesburg), and *Abahlali baseMjondolo* (“the People of the Shacks,” in Durban)—are building communes aiming for autonomous self-government and niftily deploying Lefebvre's (1996) “right to the city” in their political discourses (Turok and Scheba, 2019). The greatest state repression, combining litigation, intimidation by law enforcement authorities, and vigilante violence and assassinations of three occupation leaders within one year, has been focused on eKhenana, a land occupation within Durban, in which people embarked on communal farming (Abahlali baseMjondolo [AbM], 2022). More generally, land occupations challenge not only property systems but also the racialized character of spaces and landscapes. Urban working class areas confront gentrification with an influx of trendy upmarket “yuppie” developments, where black people who were able to retain a foothold in or close to the city through apartheid now face new threats of expulsion onto the periphery—this time through the operation of “the market,” as land values rise. In Cape Town, this has prompted not just legal action but

the focus of movements on occupying open space and growing food, as a way to demonstrate publicly the function of urban land as a source of livelihood. One initiative by the NGO Ndifuna Ukwazi, in collaboration with Reclaim the City, has been the production of an online interactive “People’s Land Map” identifying well-located and unused or under-utilized public land in the city, for potential occupation and food production (People’s Land Map, 2023).

Land commons continue to expand and change form on the urban periphery. Amid rising food prices and with pandemic-era temporary protection against evictions, landless people and out-of-work “backyard” dwellers (those who live in makeshift structures in others’ backyards) organized significant occupations of vacant public land in and around the major townships of Khayelitsha, Philippi, and Gugulethu. While the occupation is organized collectively, families hold the houses they build individually, but within a form of self-governance, with a local committee which maintains a written land register. Joining forces with other land occupation movements in and around the city, they have formed *Inlungu yaseMatyotyombeni Movement* (Pain of the Slums) to resist eviction and mobilize to claim other sites for occupation—while also defending the right to keep livestock amid the shack settlements. Amid crises of social reproduction, then, in which people lack the means to survive through wage employment or self-employment, “fragmented” livelihoods proliferate. Livestock—both goats and cattle—graze the verge of the main highway from the airport into the city center, a phenomenon which Jacobs (2018) terms “an urban proletariat with peasant characteristics.” These struggles for survival and social reproduction challenge the exclusivity of property but also the rural/urban dichotomy.

4.3. Land commoning discourse and strategies among agroecology and food sovereignty movements

The most salient public discourse concerning change to land governance in recent years has been the calls for constitutional amendment in South Africa to nationalize land, or allow for “expropriation without compensation,” which animated Parliament and public debate in the 2018–2019 period (Hall and Cousins, 2019). These calls were driven not primarily by the land movements themselves, which remain skeptical of state authority over land, but rather by political parties, notably the Economic Freedom Fighters, espousing decolonization and a race-based reclaiming of land as the central form of redress for the land theft that underpinned and continues to shape racial inequality (Hall and Cousins, 2019). These claims to land as a territorial right are cast wide, to the country as a whole, as an entitlement based on indigeneity—variously (and contentiously) understood as first occupation or pre-colonial occupation—and have found fertile ground among the wider population due to pressing material needs as well as symbolic claims to citizenship (Du Toit, 2023). Rather than nationalization, activists aimed to contest state control over land, and critique the limited racial redistribution of private property. Rather, they sought to

build the case for land as a common heritage, to be reclaimed by black South Africans in the present, for the future (Presidential Advisory Panel, 2019). Yet such challenges to the sanctity of private ownership have provoked reactions from the farming, banking, and business establishment, mirroring discourses in England that equate private land ownership with food security and responsible land stewardship.

Profoundly disenchanting with the government, land movements have not all aligned with the nationalization call. Following 10–15 years of state-focused advocacy after the beginning of democratic rule, the past decade or so has seen a turn by movements toward enacting a form of “land reform from below,” and the urban occupation movement *Abahlali* has explicitly annexed the legalistic discourse of political debate to call their practice of “expropriation from below.” Rather than continuing to engage with the state’s market-based approach of buying out individual farm holdings at market price and distributing these to “deserving” applicants, activists have increasingly redefined land reform as a society-driven action that is not dependent on either state or market, but rather a collective form of reclaiming territory. This inevitably pits occupiers directly against private owners and state authorities and involves either incremental quiet land occupations of open space or, at times, explicitly political land occupation movements that contest law and officialdom directly (Huchzermeyer, 2004).

We discuss here, as illustration, commoning movements with distinctive characteristics and discourses as reflected in specific events, campaigns and processes and, for each, we explore some of the rural and urban struggles around land in relation to food sovereignty and agroecology. Land restitution, provided for in national law, excludes most black South Africans, as dispossession was largely complete before the start of formal apartheid (Hall, 2010). Rather than claiming back specific land parcels, rural residents express strong connections to specific land and to territory more broadly (Presidential Advisory Panel, 2019). This discourse demonstrates that land, while a material resource for livelihoods, is intimately linked with claims to citizenship (Lund, 2016; Bhandar, 2018), and claims to the land and to self-determination necessarily involve food sovereignty and agroecological production. Speaking on the centenary of the 1913 Land Act—and over 20 years after its repeal, this small-scale farmer illegally occupying public land on the outskirts of Cape Town declared:

We are all the indigenous people of South Africa It’s time to share! We are the urban farmers and wherever we try to farm, we are pushed off from our farms. It’s our land. It belongs to us. The rural areas were our food gardens, and they’ve been taken. Now we try to farm in the cities and we are kicked off. We are organic farmers, we don’t use pesticides, but our veggies don’t have that certificate Because we don’t have money, our veggies are sold as cheap grade There’s lots of land not being used. We

must take the land. Get away from government. Don't wait for handouts. Catch your own fish. But they want to destroy us. We joined the Food Sovereignty campaign. Why don't you all join? This is our weapon for success. Government says 'Vuk'uzenzela' (get up and do it for yourself), but when you vuk'uzenzela they try to stop us. They just want us to wait. It's time for us all to have chickens. Ignore the bylaws. We need real food. We need chickens in every garden and backyard. (Craig Jonkers of the iThemba Farmers outside Cape Town, at the Land, Race and Nation Conference, 2013)

At this time, a Right to Agrarian Reform and Food Sovereignty Campaign took shape in the province, bringing together small-scale farmers (including those in former “coloured” reserves) and farm workers—therefore spanning both workers/farmers but also, racially, “black”/“coloured” and therefore also Afrikaans and Xhosa speakers (Surplus People’s Project [SPP], 2023). At a national level, and linked with the climate justice movement, a South African Food Sovereignty Campaign was formed, linking grassroots farmer and worker movements with allies among NGOs, academics, and lawyers. One of its activities, a Food Commons Map is a crowdsourced online database of spaces where food is being produced or shared through various mechanisms. The RWA, a regional grassroots movement, has claimed to promote commoning yet its “One Woman, One Hectare” campaign demands that women gain access to land autonomously, rather than through households (RWA, 2021).

Such movements have prioritized building a broad constituency, aligning with others with related land struggles including those living in informal settlements on public and private land—themselves often evicted farm workers. Yet divisions remain, especially between farm workers and small-scale farmers who, despite sharing many similar struggles, have different priorities and organizing approaches. Building movements which transcend such divisions has been top of the agenda for the land and food movements, and a nested network of such movements has now grown, accommodating significant differences: the Inyanda Land Movement, the Mawubuye Land Rights Forum, the Right to Agrarian Reform and Food Sovereignty Campaign, the RWA, and the National Farm Worker Platform (NFWP) being the main such movements. Some of the above have undergone agroecology training schools, and exchanges with agroecology movements from Latin America and elsewhere, and now promote their produce, and their agroecology ideas, through a community market in Cape Town once a month. Across all of these, NGOs play a facilitating role, including by enabling linkages between these movements and global transnational peasant movements, like LVC and its affiliates. Predicated on the ultimate self-organization of the poor, landless and hungry, leaders and activists in the NGO sector explicitly espouse a commitment to working themselves into irrelevance (Andrews, 2020).

Farm workers as the rural “working people” (Shivji, 2017) have organized themselves around claims to land and to food. Such demands are largely not to become “farmers” as full-time livelihoods, nor exclusively to have a house with secure tenure in a site where livelihoods are precarious and income highly seasonal—but rather to claim an entitlement centered on a right to territory and to land to meet basic needs.

One strategy has been to claim an identity not exclusively as “farm workers” and thereby identified in a class position, but more broadly, and territorially, as “people of the land” (as one NGO and the farm workers they supported framed it). Discursively introducing “farm dwellers” as a category alongside “farm workers” has been a conscious strategy to distinguish people’s claim to space and to a rural identity from their position as labor.

Farm workers want land for themselves, as well as jobs. Our families need to do lots of things to survive. Farm workers and dwellers want to benefit from land reform, food production and labour rights. We need land to grow food and to earn extra income. (Land, Race and Nation Conference, 2013)

The Women on Farms Project, an NGO working with farm workers both on-farm and those evicted and living in nearby settlements, has prioritized models of cooperatives through which women access land which they hold and manage in common, and produce on collectively. And, building on campaigns against pesticide use, the NFWP has espoused agroecology as a central pillar of its vision for agrarian reform, demanding that

Large commercial farms should be sub-divided and redistributed to promote small-scale community-driven agro-ecological farming . . . Productive land and water rights for black working-class rural communities, especially women farm workers and dwellers . . . [and government should] Support the rehabilitation of agricultural land for the practice of agro-ecological production. (NFWP, 2022)

Farm workers in a site outside the town of Stellenbosch, whose struggle is for land they and their ancestors have worked over generations, have proposed a form of common property holding which would give them autonomous control over an area to self-manage. However, given lack of trust in any external or public body, their demand is firmly for title deeds—the one form of property that secures consistent protection and defense of the state. Thus, even among those mobilizing to challenge property hierarchies, the claim is for inclusion in the “edifice” rather than to up-end property relations. Those claiming rights and those authorizing them continue to adjust to seek a “mutual contract” of legitimacy, as Lund (2016) and Sikor and Lund (2009) observed.

Rural municipal commonages are also a focus of land struggles for some. South Africa, unlike England, does not have a history of allotments or public provisioning of land

for urban food production.⁴ Yet in colonial times, Crown land around the small towns of the colonial Cape was set aside as commonages and endorsed as being for public purposes, typically the “outspanning” of oxen for travelers (Anderson and Pienaar, 2003). These served as public land for grazing, and in wealthier districts came to be treated as municipal land that was rented out to white commercial farmers on long-term leases, securing rental incomes for municipalities (Anderson and Pienaar, 2003). With the impetus toward redistributing land in the 1990s, commonage land emerged as an alternative resource for broadening access to land in the white hinterland—reviving these properties for public use served as a way that government could meet its land reform obligations, secure the support of black farmers, without threatening the interests of white farmers. Commonage as a form of public land, for the benefit of citizens and ostensibly with priority to the indigent, continues to be a site of struggle (Atkinson, 2013).

Municipalities should not have total control over commonage; we do not trust our municipalities to manage it fairly. We want the national government to regulate and monitor these processes and curb corruption. There must be a standardised approach to municipal commonage, rather than every municipality making up its own approach. We demand that existing leases to commercial farmers be cancelled; the commonage is a public resource that must be used for the benefit of the poor, not for private accumulation by the rich. (Land, Race and Nation, 2013)

Amid all this, it is difficult to perceive a unified or cohesive agroecology or food sovereignty movement. While the term is widely deployed by land movements, different things are meant by it. As Greenberg and Drimie (2021) put it, “Visions and discourses around agroecology can be categorised along a continuum of views, from neoliberal and reformist approaches within the corporate food regime, to progressive and food sovereignty approaches in food movements.” And while NGOs such as Biowatch and SPP offer agroecology training and support, some research indicates that small-scale farmers, even those involved in land movements, accept and adopt extension advice and agrochemicals provided by state extension agents, while simultaneously espousing agroecology principles and pursuing support and resources from NGOs and others in the movement (Yeni, 2014). After a stalled national policy process to support agroecology, government programs mention this approach, without having specific meanings attached. Meanwhile, agroecology movements, often linked with food self-provisioning in urban townships, and among small-scale farmers, emphasize the importance of low-input, sustainable

production methods as key to autonomy for poor producers (Greenberg and Drimie, 2021), feminist agroecology as essential for rural women to free themselves both from corporate and patriarchal control (Andrews, 2020), and localizing food networks to promote food sovereignty (Sattar and Cherry, 2020). The new commoning movements articulate and claim an entitlement to land as home, for livelihoods, and for food self-provisioning and autonomy as people on the land and producers of food.

5. Four dimensions of difference among land commoning movements

Here, we propose four core dimensions of difference that are worth exploring in studies of land commoning and discuss these with reference to the movements for realizing agroecology and food sovereignty in the two countries. These merit deeper exploration and theorization as the land commoning, agroecology, and food sovereignty movements evolve.

First is the question of the centrality of land and food commoning to people’s survival. Reliance on land-based activities for social reproduction is less urgent in England than in South Africa, though some BPOC producers do report food security as a motivator. This in turn makes the movement less urgent. One activist acknowledged this, saying, “we in Britain have too much to lose. Our houses, our ways of life, our TVs” (LJSG, 2023). Yet, food insecurity in England is not negligible, which raises questions of why land occupations are not more widespread. Strenuous enforcement of property law, compounded by general racial discrimination, limit occupations in rural areas: one black farmer has been reported to the police on multiple occasions while harvesting his own crops as it was assumed he was stealing (Terry, 2023). A general disconnect in public perception between land occupation and food security may compound this. By contrast, in South Africa, generations of people disconnected from farming find that their social reproduction cannot be secured either from wage employment or from social grants—and so urgently demand land for farming, albeit only as part of their livelihoods. The urgency and scale of need, then, does not imply a mass push toward “re-peasantization” but rather to the function of commons in society and in social reproduction.

Second is the extent to which land movements challenge private property rights. In both countries, land movements have discursively challenged private individualized property as colonial and capitalist, underpinning racial injustices and ecological degradation. Yet in both contexts, tensions and contradictions are evident. In England, people and organizations wishing to practice agroecological farming in the near term do not overtly challenge property rights but work within existing property law, despite its limitations. This includes supporting farmers and new entrants to navigate a challenging planning policy context and setting up and expanding land trusts as a way to get more small-scale ecological farmers on the land. Movement members often recognize the limitations of these efforts yet feel they are an essential pathway for agroecology given that more significant changes

4. Though in England, demand for allotments greatly outstrips supply, which has dramatically decreased since the 1950s (Dobson et al., 2020).

are likely far off (LJSG, 2023). Yet class divides within the food sovereignty movement may also be a factor, mirroring the alliances and tensions between classes and class fractions across food sovereignty movements (Akram-Lodhi, 2015; Gürcan, 2018; Henderson, 2018). In South Africa, despite active commoning strategies which resist privatization of land, tensions are often delineated between leadership of movements and the members struggling to secure their precarious hold on land. The longstanding racialized hierarchy of rights—with secure titles for whites and permits for blacks—means that what has been denied, and what people want, is security, which is often equated with title. Yet social movements want to hold and use land through collectivities. Finding durable institutional forms that allow for secure rights alongside collective use, solidarity, and collaboration, remains problematic.

Third is the orientation of land movements toward the state and law. Land struggles in South Africa have tended to be highly legalized, frequently fought as much or more through litigation than on the streets or on the farms. A highly state-centric and legalistic form of mobilization has, though, over time given way to more grassroots-focused activism, in part reflecting a political shift away from prioritizing private ownership toward collective entitlements, and strategic reorientation away of engaging with national government on policy change, toward making gains on the ground. In England, however, efforts to change the law have been relatively modest, as the movement is in its nascent stages, and in part due to an intentional effort to slow the pace so as to be more socially inclusive. Legal advocacy has focused on changing planning policy and expanding a community right to buy. More profound measures such as democratic governance of land have been tabled but have yet to be introduced in concrete ways.

Fourth is a range of responses to difficulties in pursuing agroecological and food sovereignty pathways—for material, political, and cultural reasons. In both contexts, the drive toward agroecology is grounded in a critique of agribusiness power and capitalist dynamics in the food system, yet ambiguities and contradictions abound. In England, there remains a current of agroecology and racial justice advocates which seek to claim space and recognition as economically viable farmers. Depending on niche markets, they fail to grapple with the social inequities in access to food which food sovereignty seeks to address (Guthman, 2011), though this contradiction is increasingly discussed within the food sovereignty movement in England. In South Africa, movements seek to secure land for food production which does not feed into corporatized markets, as a strategy for social reproduction, and while the extent to which production is agroecological is variable, movements utilize discourse of food sovereignty and agroecology.

6. Conclusions

This article sheds light on the social movements which are advocating land commoning as a pathway for more ecological and socially just food and farming systems in two

deagrarianized contexts. In England and South Africa, racial redress, albeit in different ways, is inextricable from challenging private individualized property, and the industrial, corporatized and highly unequal food systems that it reproduces. The deagrarianized nature of these settings perhaps reinforces the focus on changing the nature of property regimes themselves in lieu of redistribution of property *within* these regimes but merits more research. Yet in both cases, racial justice discourse also invokes a demand to engage in commercial farming. In England, the agroecology agenda also goes both ways, in both entrenching existing property law and in challenging it.

In England, social movements focused on racial justice have viewed reconnecting to land—including through ecological food production—as a way of repairing the harms done to ancestors and other relatives through enclosure, colonization, and enslavement, while simultaneously repairing the harm done to the land through capitalist agriculture (LION, 2024). The inequalities in land ownership in England are increasingly recognized for their ties to wealth accumulated via slavery and colonialism and have therefore been a driver for movements seeking justice for BPOC, particularly with African, Caribbean, and Asian heritage, who disproportionately lack access to land. While challenging individualized land ownership represents the rejection of colonial relations themselves, agroecology activists also aim to set up commercialized agroecological farming without challenging property relations. At a wider level, the marginalization of agroecological and small-scale farming in England, amid strict planning and zoning policies, has led some agroecological advocates to emphasize the commercial viability of agroecological farms as successful enterprises.

In South Africa, racial justice is central to the “land question.” Yet a “national question” centered on unresolved racial inequality, and a failure to redress this, has taken priority over decolonization in the form of challenging the property system itself. State discourses equate racial justice with black-owned commercial enterprises rather than commoning, and government programs are neutral or even hostile to notions of agroecology and food sovereignty. Land movements, though, constitute a small but growing counterpoint, which define racial redress as inextricable from challenging property, industrial agriculture, and corporatized food systems (Greenberg and Driemé, 2021). They argue that racial justice requires not the redistribution of commodified property but commoning and a shift to feminist agroecology to realize land and food sovereignty (Andrews, 2020).

Contrary to the notion that farming is unattractive to younger generations (Leavy and Hossain, 2014), there is a significant groundswell of young people in both England and South Africa wishing to engage in land-based livelihoods. And while some are indeed seeking land for commercialized farming, the movements studied here indicate that there is increasing demand for land for partial self-provisioning in arrangements which align with commoning. With freedom from competitive pressures to produce certain products in certain ways, this may allow for more

diverse land uses that align with agroecology and food sovereignty.

This article shows that relatively deagrarianized countries are home to social movements seeking to challenge individualized private property regimes to support more ecologically sustainable and socially just food systems. The profound integration of racial justice and decolonial aims within these movements, albeit in distinct ways, may be a significant reason for their emergence within the relatively deagrarianized but highly unequal contexts of South Africa and England. More research is needed on the drivers, constraints, and potentials of these movements seeking to challenge property regimes in deagrarianized contexts.

Data accessibility statement

Due to the nature of the research, supporting data are not available to the public.

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