

# South african rap and food systems: a discussion of africanist geographer jane ba...

[Nutrition](#), [Healthy Food](#)



Jane Battersby is an urban geographer from England who lives and works in South Africa. She is a researcher at the African Center for Cities (ACC) at the University of Cape Town, where her work is centered around urban food systems in topics such as urban food security and policies, and urban health and governance. Battersby's work has a primary focus in South Africa because she spent most of her childhood growing up in Cape Town, and spent a gap year working at a home for street kids in Cape Town during the end of the Apartheid.

When asked why she became interested in geography, Battersby says it stemmed from having a great set of high school geography teachers. "What is really great about geography is you get to ask really great why questions," she says, "the answers are not always bounded." (Battersby, personal conv, 2018) Battersby received a Bachelor of Science degree in Geography from King's College at the University of London but returned to South Africa to do any type of undergraduate research project. She got her Masters degree in International Cultural Change at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne and tied her thesis project back to the home for street kids in Cape Town where she spent her gap year, studying how South African rap music could be used as a lens to look at what post-apartheid life could look like. (Battersby, personal conv, 2018) Receiving her Ph. D. in geography from Mansfield College and the University of Oxford, Battersby titled her thesis: "A Question of Marginalisation: Coloured identities and education in the Western Cape, South Africa." In this project, Battersby studied the claim made by the colored population of the Western Cape that they were just as marginalized under their government at the time—socially and economically—as they

were under apartheid. Her research was done in four main high schools in colored communities in the Western Cape Province, and she analyzed how the students' reaction to their perceived marginalization affected their perception of education and their relationships with their classmates, as well as how the school and community responded to their students' marginalization claim. In her conclusion, Battersby writes, " This research was an attempt to understand their situations and to provide opportunities for community development. It is my hope that in some way the act of fieldwork and the feedback I provided to the schools and their communities have achieved this. " (Battersby, 2002) Battersby's Masters and Ph. D. theses, as well as much of her published work was related to social and cultural geography, until around 2009, when she starts to do more studies about urban food systems and security. When I asked about this shift, Battersby said her social and cultural work came out of an academic fascination with education and youth culture in post-apartheid life, but by the end of her Ph. D. she figured that wasn't the best way to get employment. (Battersby, personal conv, 2018) After her Ph. D. , Battersby began doing work on urban land issues, until a project on food security came along. " I realized this is the abiding passion," she says, " I can pull on the cultural stuff, I can pull on the economics and the geography. " (Battersby, personal conv, 2018)

Most people in the food or nutrition world have come from a honed disciplinary training nutrition training or an agricultural training, and therefore don't try to connect social and cultural issues to issues in food

systems and security. However, since Battersby has the training as a geographer, she has an interest in wider social contexts. She says she is constantly surprised by where her work is being read and cited, and the kinds of policy conversations she becomes a part of, “ Suddenly I’m on the global nutrition course. ” (Battersby, personal conv, 2018) Because geography is so broad, Battersby is able to look past specifics and be more impactful by pulling disparate themes together. Much of the research done by Battersby at the ACC in Cape Town is related to the impact of food systems and food security. In her recent article, “ Addressing food security in African cities” Battersby describes the food system’s impact on poverty, underdevelopment, and poor health, and states that food insecurity is generally considered a rural issue, but it has become increasingly prevalent in urban areas in the context of global and national policies. (Battersby, 2018) In Battersby’s talk, titled: “ African food systems in transition and the triple burden of malnutrition,” she discussed “ informal” food traders and their importance to poor urban households. “ Poor households use a range of available food-supply opportunities, but their ability to access affordable and healthy food is shaped by the rapidly changing food system. ” (Battersby, 2018) The introduction of supermarkets and malls in urban areas are attempting to formalize food retail, but Battersby says this doesn’t benefit poor urban households, and argues that the current policies that are trying to eliminate informal food outlets should instead focus on “ plans and policies that recognize the importance of the entire food system in all its complexity and the symbiosis among its various parts. ” (Battersby, 2018) In the area of urban food systems and insecurity, Battersby’s methodology is “

constantly emerging. ” (Battersby, personal conv, 2018) When describing her research process she says, “ Every time we do something, it raises more questions. ” (Battersby, personal conv, 2018)

Battersby’s methodology involves a multistep process that will hone in on a specific area—starting with big picture large-scale inferences made from quantitative data, and filtering down from there into what she calls ‘ deep-dive’ research, which would be more qualitative. When starting with food security work, Battersby will begin with a large scale one thousand household survey in order to create a starting point that will facilitate further in-depth research. These large-scale surveys do not imply causation, they might suggest why something happens, but they don’t provide enough information to make a conclusion. In order to further investigate these speculations, Battersby will start to do more detail but still quantitative research such as food system mapping, until she reaches the qualitative, ‘ deep-dive’ stage in her research. In this stage she is typically working in one neighborhood with a small number of people, “ really trying to understand why they consume what they do, and how it connects to the food system. ” (Battersby, personal conv, 2018) Battersby’s main goal when generating data is to make it communicable and usable for policymakers. “

Policymakers love a map,” she says, “ They are less trusting of a story, but as soon as you put a map or graph on it, it becomes real. ” (Battersby, personal conv, 2018) Even though a map or graph may not give the whole story, they are used as an entry point to establish credibility. I did not expect food security work to receive a lot of pushback given that it is for the benefit

of the population, but when I asked Battersby if she had ever received any criticism for the type of research she does, she nodded vigorously, “ a lot of criticism. ” (Battersby, personal conv, 2018)

She described a couple of instances when she received direct political resistance from the city of Cape Town, and among the food world she has received criticism from people far more radical than her for talking to groups such as the World Bank and Global Alliance for Improving Nutrition, because it is seen as “ selling out. ” (Battersby, personal conv, 2018) Battersby’s work is considered influential internationally—in 2017 she was awarded the Premio Daniel Carasso prize for her research in sustainable food systems. She has also participated in consultations such as the Urban Food Metrics pilot project for the World Bank, she did a South African Cities Network Food Security Study in 2015 and 2016, and a Food Security Study for the Provincial Government of the Western Cape. Battersby is on the South African National Vulnerability Assessment Committee that’s trying to develop new food security for the country. When I asked Battersby about her influential work she told me she is in the process of developing food sensitive planning guidelines for her Providence, but made sure to make one thing clear: “ This doesn’t happen just by publishing, you gotta hustle. ” (Battersby, personal conv, 2018)

Clearly, her expertise is widely trusted and respected, since 2009 Battersby has been doing advisory work for all levels of government on food security policy and strategies, and she is on the advisory boards of research projects such as START urban/peri-urban agriculture and climate change. Along with

her work consulting and advising, Battersby has supervised students of all different levels, ranging from honors to post-doctoral. In an interview with the University of Cape Town News following her award of the Premio Daniel Carasso prize, Battersby said she wanted to contribute part of the prize money towards students studying urban food systems. “ This is an emerging field and I’m keen to develop a cohort of researchers who can work across disciplinary boundaries. ” (Swingler, 2017) Battersby has also supervised students through the Macalester-Pomona-Swarthmore Consortium Study Abroad Program at the University of Cape Town. With over forty publications and over forty conference papers and presentations, Battersby has become one of the most influential urban geographers in South Africa. Her work in food security and malnutrition in urban areas is cited in articles such as “ Alimental Food Consumption Among Urban Households: An Empirical Study of Ghana. ” (Meng et al. , 2018) Battersby’s work in South Africa can be applied to different locations such as Ghana and can be used to understand food security issues in all urban areas.

In Google Scholar, articles such as “ Beyond the food desert: Finding ways to speak about urban food security in South Africa” (Battersby, 2012) have been cited over a hundred times. Many of the articles have titles related to urban food security and public health, for example, the article “ Agriculture and food systems in sub-Saharan Africa in a 4°C+ world” (Thornton et al. , 2011) references data from one of Battersby’s co-authored articles. From the articles I read of Battersby’s, I was most impressed by her ability to address and assess all aspects of an issue. For example, regarding the

transformation of food systems, she addresses the issue in terms of the geographical location of supermarkets in her article “ Food system transformation in the absence of food system planning: The case of supermarket and shopping mall retail expansion in Cape Town, South Africa,” arguing that “ developers are attracted to low-income areas in part because these areas are not overly regulated, particularly from a town-planning point of view. ” (Battersby, 2017) Battersby then connects the geographical placement of supermarkets to nutrition and health issues in her article “ The Geography of Supermarkets in Cape Town: Supermarket Expansion and Food Access,” by arguing that the introduction of supermarkets to low-income areas “ may only provide better access to less-nutritious processed foods. ” (Battersby, 2014) Battersby also addresses how the transforming food system impacts informal retailers, stating that the rapid introduction of supermarkets and malls that sell cheap food in low-income areas negatively affects the livelihoods of informal retailers. (Battersby, 2018) As I mentioned before, Battersby’s background in geography allows her to approach an issue from a broader perspective. I admire Battersby’s determined and inclusive mindset towards reforming food security.

The reason why she is going so in-depth in communities is partly to understand what is going on and why, but also partly to create a “ cohort of people” (Battersby, personal conv, 2018) within the community who understand their food system and its interconnections in a way that they wouldn’t have necessarily understood otherwise, and use that to empower



them to make changes in the community together. Battersby says she wants communities to understand what their rights are around food, so they could talk back to the state. (Battersby, personal conv, 2018) While in some ways it is too soon to tell the impact of her work in food systems, much of her work is starting to promote policy changes. Battersby is certainly encouraging awareness of the issues regarding urban food systems, and stimulating problem solving discourses. I believe we could all take a cue from Battersby's hard work and persistence, and follow her advice on making a difference in the world: " The key is being clear on what your position is and why you hold it, and not really giving a damn. " (Battersby, personal conv, 2018)