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## Poetic Commodities: Exploration of the Familial Impacts and History of Indigenous Food Insecurity in “Why I Hate Raisins”

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Poetic Commodities: Exploration of the Familial Impacts and History of  
Indigenous Food Insecurity in “Why I Hate Raisins”

In 2018, there were 276 Native American tribes receiving government benefits through the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) (Food and Nutrition Service). Although the FDPIR is intended to be a supplemental source of food for Native American peoples, 38% of reservation households reported the FDPIR as their primary food source (Pindus et al.). Despite the numerous injustices during the colonization of North America that led to the establishment of government food programs for Native American tribes, Indigenous peoples have come to rely on government commodities and some have even established a strong connection between commodity foods and their American Indian identity (Murphy). The pervasive presence of government food programs on Native American reservations is invaluable to many communities and, while the available commodities are not always fresh or of high nutritional quality, they reduce some of the hunger present on reservations. Poet Natalie Diaz, a member of the Gila River Indian community, is an American Indian who grew up with government commodities in her household. She identifies with Mojave, Pima, Spanish, and queer identities and is currently the Director of the Center for Imagination in the Borderlands at Arizona State University as well as a Mojave language activist (Poets). Her poetry collection, *When My Brother Was an Aztec*, was published in 2012 and won the 2013 American Book

Award for poetry. The book contains her poem “Why I Hate Raisins” which Diaz described as her “ode to government food” during her reading of the poem at the 2014 Dodge Poetry Festival. In her poem “Why I Hate Raisins,” Diaz draws attention to the food insecurity facing many Native communities. Through her use of dialogic structure, extended metaphors, and similes, Diaz explores the connections between food distribution programs in Native communities and systemic racism in a post-colonial world, as well as the emotional and physical strain food insecurity can put on Indigenous families.

Diaz chooses to start off the poem with a two line epigraph that inspires initial conversation concerning the mental and emotional impacts of food insecurity. The epigraph is framed as a rhetorical question and prompts critical thought from the reader before beginning the narrative portion of the poem. The words “And is it only the mouth and belly which are / injured by hunger and thirst?” are credited to Mencius, a Confucian philosopher, and act as an extension of the poem’s dialogic structure as the epigraph is put in conversation with the rest of the poem. Diaz ties the epigraph into direct conversation with the body of the poem when she finds herself “holding my mouth and stomach” (line 23) after being slapped by her mother; a physical embodiment of the pain felt by “the mouth and belly” referenced in the first line of the epigraph. By including this epigraph, Diaz also indirectly emphasizes the non-physical consequences of hunger without explicitly stating them; it is up to the reader to answer the question of the mental and emotional impacts of hunger and imagine what that might look like. This can create a more powerful image for the reader since most people will be able to think of various ways in which the fear and uncertainty of not knowing when you are going to eat next can impact mental health. While the wider spectrum of effects caused by hunger might not be common knowledge, many people are aware of how food drives our daily mental and physical activities. Some specific

implications of food insecurity include higher risks of depression and stress, according to a study done at Cambridge University (Pourmotabbed et al.). These images and broader implications of food insecurity are critical to understanding the story of government food that Diaz lays out in her poem. By starting out with the epigraph, Diaz jumpstarts a conversation between the reader and the poem about food insecurity and its effects.

Diaz focuses the poem on her personal experiences with government food and the familial tension it can cause through her use of dialogic structure. The poem is divided into three stanzas; the second of which is entirely dedicated to a conversation between a young Diaz and her mother. There are no quotations used to denote dialogue, but instead italics are used for each line of the scene taking place in the past. This structural distinction makes it easier to distinguish between thoughts and actions from young Diaz in the past and her current reflections as she is writing the poem. The scene provides a backdrop for Diaz to not only reflect on her past actions, but paints an image for the reader of the dynamic between Diaz and her mother. The relationship between a young Diaz and her mother is obviously strained due to the lack of fresh food with Diaz complaining “I hate raisins / I just wanted a sandwich like other kids” (lines 12-13). This tension escalates when Diaz admits to wanting to be a white kid since “At least the white kids get a sandwich” (line 20) - an admission that earns her a slap to the face. The emotional burden both a young Diaz and her mother are carrying as a result of food insecurity leads to them having a tense conversation that ends in both of them feeling upset and unsatisfied. Since Diaz provides a replication of the words being directly exchanged in that past moment through the use of dialogic structure, the reader is able to have a greater understanding of and empathy for the tension between mother and daughter triggered by a lack of food variety.

Diaz uses the image of raisins as an extended metaphor for familial love, and consequently familial tension, throughout her poem. The first line of the poem transparently establishes this metaphor of “Love is a pound of sticky raisins” (line 1); the imagery of which continues throughout the entirety of the poem. This love is mainly expressed in terms of a mother and daughter connection, in both past and present moments for Diaz. The love Diaz’s mother has for her daughter becomes tangible in the raisins she gives her when she is hungry, despite them having access to no groceries. While this action of giving a child food when they are hungry is somewhat expected, it is transformed into a more powerful gesture once an older Diaz is able to reflect back on the experience and realize “my mom was hungry that day, too, / and I ate all the raisins” (lines 32-34). The raisins become a symbol of a mother’s sacrifice for her daughter’s wellbeing; an act that is not truly appreciated by Diaz when she is young. These raisins also become a topic of debate for a young Diaz and her mother as the raisins are unsatisfying for Diaz, but the only food her mother can give her at the moment. This conversation and relationship with the raisins later becomes a source of shame for Diaz in the poem once she is older and becomes aware of how much her mother’s gift of raisins was an act of love and sacrifice in a time of hardship.

Diaz expands this metaphor even further by using the comparison of raisins to a sandwich to look at the post-colonial legacy in the United States and how systemic racism has impacted the methods in which Indigenous people access their food. A “bright box” of raisins is given to a young Diaz by her mother in the first stanza of the poem and is used as a direct example of a commodity food accessible to Diaz’s family; it is cheap, dried, and distinctly average in quality. It is also used as an indicator of poverty for a young Diaz when she complains to her mother about wanting a sandwich and only receiving raisins:

*“I just wanted a sandwich like other kids.*

*Well that’s all we’ve got, my mom sighed.*

*And what other kids?*

*Everyone but me, I told her*

*She said, You mean the white kids.*

*You want to be a white kid?*

*Well too bad ‘cause you’re my kid” (lines 13-19).*

The sandwich, or fresh food, is associated with white kids who stereotypically live in families with higher incomes, have better access to grocery stores, and greater societal privilege as a result of white privilege in post-colonial America. Diaz’s comparison of Native kids to white kids stems not only from a sense of inferiority that is likely perpetuated by popular media, but is backed by data as well. The median income for white, non-Hispanic US citizens in 2015 was \$68,785. Comparatively, the average income on US Indian reservations is \$17,000 or 68% below the US average (Asante-Muhammad et al.). These drastic differences in income and food accessibility are a direct result of the post-colonial legacy in the United States. These inequalities are perpetuated by systemic white supremacy or societal systems that intentionally or unintentionally benefit white people over marginalized groups (Bonilla-Silva). Living within the confines of a 21st century capitalist society also limits Indigenous peoples’ ability to completely survive on their subsistence traditions. Forced relocation, boarding schools, and negative anthropogenic effects on the environment have reduced Native American peoples’ ability to

sustainably support themselves on reservation land, forcing them to lean on prepackaged government assistance.

Diaz's use of similes continues her exploration of the impact of US colonial legacy on Native Americans. When she first receives the raisins from her mother in the poem, Diaz notices "USDA stamped like a fist on the side" (line 6) of the box. By choosing the word "fist," which has conventionally violent connotations, Diaz directly associates the food being delivered to Native communities through the United States Department of Agriculture as an act rife with violence. The force behind the words "stamped" and "fist" mirror the force used by the United States government to remove Indigenous people from their lands and contain them on reservations (Library of Congress). Diaz indirectly draws attention to the violent history leading up to the government food commodity system in Native communities. During the 18th and 19th centuries, the United States government had the single-minded goal of European expansion and "was really, really good at what they did, and it all starts with taking our food away from us," according to Chef Sean Sherman of Oglala Lakota from the Pine Ridge reservation. Through the burning of their crops, being forcibly relocated to reservations, and having their children sent to boarding schools, among other atrocities, Indigenous peoples underwent numerous traumas that effectively severed them from parts of their cultures, including their subsistence food systems (Sherman). This violent history is emulated by Diaz through her use of language associated with the arrival of government commodities on her reservation. The food they receive is rarely fresh and comes in boxes marked with obvious reminders that the United States government is both the reason Native American were forced to reservations exist and now have access to processed food at all.

This theme of government commodity food being an extension of colonialism and having a physical toll on Indigenous peoples continues with another of Diaz's similes. After receiving the raisins from her mother, a young Diaz ate "too many too fast ... Those old grapes set like black / clay at the bottom of my belly" (lines 8-10) and she began to feel sick from the raisins. Diaz compares the common commodity of raisins to an inedible, dense clay that causes her both physical and emotional discomfort. Eating the food was intended to alleviate her hunger, but instead caused her more pain. This pattern of events is similar to the offerings colonial forces gave to Indigenous peoples, claiming to help solve problems and ultimately creating more long-term suffering. Native families now have to stand in "crooked commodity lines ... winding / around and in the tribal gymnasium" (lines 26-28) to receive their food and may have lost touch with some of their more traditional practices. Diaz briefly explores this connection through her reference of black clay, a commonly used artistic medium for the Pima people (*NPS Publications*), and her negative experience with boxed raisins. She uses language to both ground her story in her Pima and Mojave culture while highlighting the more complicated parts of contemporary Indigenous experience.

Through her use of structure and figurative language, Diaz manages to paint a picture of a widespread Indigenous experience - reliance on government commodity foods - through a personal lens. Her narrative account of her own struggles with food insecurity in "Why I Hate Raisins" is situated within the wider context of Indigenous cultures shifting from a historically subsistence based food system to a reliance on government commodities and food insecurity. She highlights this common experience with a personal anecdote that brings dimension and emotion to a topic that is normally characterized by statistics. Despite being published 10 years ago, "Why I Hate Raisins" is still relevant today and is easily connected to the rising movement of



Indigenous food sovereignty and reclamation of Indigenous foods in many places throughout the United States (*Food Sovereignty*). This movement to reclaim Indigenous foods and have Indigenous people in control of their own food systems is critical to culture revitalization and American Indian health. By acknowledging the complicated relationship between Native American people and government commodity foods, Diaz is able to indirectly provide support for Indigenous food sovereignty while recognizing the more recent benefits Indigenous people have gained from government support. Her lighthearted poem draws on complex themes of contemporary Indigenous identity that ultimately provides a more honest insight of both her older and younger selves' perspectives on food insecurity.

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