The Ancient Future: Diasporic Residency and Food-based Knowledges in the Work of American Indigenous and Pacific Austronesian Writers

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For over a decade, I have been traveling to Taiwan to work with the Native American Literature study group of Taiwan (NALT), a circle of scholars from all across the island dedicated to the study of contemporary Native North American literature and to the emerging contemporary literature of the poets and novelists born into Taiwan's Austronesian tribal groups. Although origin theories are not settled, Austronesian speaking groups are thought to have migrated to Taiwan either from the mainland of China or from the Malay Archipelago beginning approximately 6,000 years ago, then later, migrating from Taiwan across Southeast Asia and throughout the Pacific region known as Oceania. According to the Council of Indigenous Peoples, a Taiwanese ministry-level organization charged with carrying out coordination and planning of indigenous affairs, there are currently fourteen nationally-recognized Austronesian tribes on the island. Hsinya Huang, a leading literary critic with expertise on both Native American Literatures and the contemporary literatures of the indigenous peoples of Taiwan, has noted that national recognition of these tribes "marked a milestone in Taiwanese history" and provided "consistent and progressive formulation and execution of indigenous policies and coordinated planning for...the wellness of aboriginal peoples;" however, much remains to be done and indigenous groups continue to work "for self-reliance and self-affirmation" (165).

Much of the work I have presented in lectures and study group discussions in Taiwan has appeared in three recent essays, "Todos Somos Indios," "Medicine Food,"

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and "Seeking the Corn Mothers." These essays detail the history of a half-century of social justice and environmental alliance-formation among indigenous peoples in the Americas and explicate the reasons why indigenous peoples around the world are advocating for a rights- and culturally-based approach to food. Each essay builds on earlier work found in *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism: The Middle Place*, in which I explore how literature set within Native North American communities enhances understanding of the social and environmental injustices that followed the colonization, conquest, slavery, and exploitation of indigenous peoples and lands. I discuss how Native North American indigenous writers represent environmental injustices in their communities in ways that direct readers away from romanticized environmentalist concepts such as "wilderness" and towards more sophisticated understandings of the relations of humans to nonhumans (Adamson, *American Indian* 112). My recent work examines why Native North American literature is depicting characters that work to protect "first foods" and make international debates surrounding the notion of access to culturally meaningful foods as a human right more understandable and persuasive to audiences around the world.

While in Taiwan, it has been my honor to travel extensively with Hsinya Huang, a professor at National Sun-yat Sen University in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, to visit many Austronesian villages, and to talk to the farmers and families who still prepare traditional first foods which are foraged in the high volcanic mountains, grown in terraced gardens, or collected from the rivers and ocean. Huang is a recognized expert on the cultures and foodways of Taiwan's indigenous peoples and personally knows many emerging Austronesian writers who are publishing novels, poetry and creative nonfiction in their original languages, in Chinese, and in Taiwanese. Notably, Huang has written many scholarly articles examining these literary works and translated some of them into English to make them more accessible to a wider audience (Huang 172, n. 17).

In this essay, I will explore the ways in which a growing number of indigenous women writers around the world are depicting the links between their ancient cultures and foodways, human rights and environmental justice. Like their North American counterparts, indigenous Austronesian women are drawing attention to a growing movement that is alternatively being called the "local foods," "food justice," or "food sovereignty movement." In what follows, I will examine how these women are illustrating what is at stake when the relationship between people and the "first foods" they gather and cultivate is put at risk or interrupted. Focusing on Navajo and Tohono O'odham women writers who live in the American Southwest, I will examine how traditional place-based people retain their cultural and food-based knowledges and are practicing what environmental educator Mitchell Thomashow has called forms of "diasporic residency" that offers contemporary peoples models for how to live in a rapidly globalizing and environmentally-changing world. Turning to Taiwan, I will examine how the Austronesian/Atayal people of the high central mountains, who

have been scattered by multiple waves of colonization, are also engaging in "diasporic residency" by recuperating traditional food-based knowledges as a strategy for protecting their cultures and environments. Finally, I will examine how these literary works are contributing to the creation of an "ancient future" built on the relationship between people and the plants they cultivate for food and medicine.

Food Sovereignty

"Food sovereignty," a concept that entered international policy debates when it was put forward at the 1996 World Food Summit, means "the ability of countries and communities to control their own food supplies" (McAfee 10). The notion that people have a sovereign "right to food" is affirmed in an array of international instruments including the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). For over thirty years, indigenous peoples throughout the Americas have been formally organizing around this now globally recognized concept. The food sovereignty movement is growing as indigenous peoples from North America and around the world become more concerned about the dramatic reduction of the world's biodiverse food crops. At one time, over 3000 plant species were used by humans for food, but today only 150 are cultivated, and of these, only a few, including corn, rice and soy, are cultivated to produce half the world's food (Mushita and Thompson 14). As farmers around the world are telling us, the threat posed by cultivation of too narrow a selection of food crops and seed varieties was demonstrated by the Irish potato blight which caused a famine in the 1850s (the Irish had to rely on only one crop for food because the English required them to export all their other agricultural products, including corn. When the blight hit, the English did not suspend the requirement). To counter the risk of over-reliance on only one food, indigenous groups are organizing to protect biodiverse first foods and cultivate local and indigenous varieties of plants that have been domesticated, freely sown and shared for millennia.

Collective Memory and Diasporic Residency

Much has been made of the particular mobile quality of life under the shadow of globalization. This mobility, which goes hand in hand with political uprootedness and habitat degradation, writes Mitchell Thomashow in *Bringing the Biosphere Home*, renders traditional notions of "place" and "place-attachment" anachronistic (Thomashow 164). In the global age, it is estimated that there are over 100 million migrants and 20 million refugees, many of them displaced indigenous peoples, and that "10 million people have left homes because they can no longer make a living from their land" (Thomashow 169). Such staggering transience, concludes Thomashow,

calls on writers, teachers, students, and literary critics to put traditional concepts of place and place-attachment, which often simplistically examine one writer or one culture's ties to a particular place, into a much broader perspective (Thomashow 182).

Thomashow reminds his readers that migration of humans and non-human species has always been a biospheric process and that understanding of seasonal migrations or historic diasporas should be brought to bear on understandings of place and sense of place. One has only to look to the creation myths and contemporary literatures of indigenous writers in North America and throughout the Pacific region to see that Thomashow is making an important point. For thousands of years, indigenous peoples have traveled extensively in order to trade goods and first foods. From shells, feathers and turquoise to the "sacred trinity" of crops—corn, beans and squash in the Americas, to wild foods collected in the high central mountains of Taiwan, many of these products continue to be traded and eaten today. Ancient trails, throughout the Americas, and threading their way to the tops of the highest peaks in Taiwan, have been paved with asphalt and transformed into the highways along which cars and trucks continue to transport people and goods.

The work of Navajo poets Laura Tohe and Luci Tapahonso illustrate how Navajo women writers who were born in what today is called the "Four Corners region" of North America weave stories of ancient migrations in search of shelter, food and trade into contemporary stories of the historical experiences of people under colonization. The Navajo, or *Diné*, as they call themselves, a term meaning "The People," have lived in the red rock deserts and deep canyons spanning Utah, Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona since at least 1400 CE, when they entered the region already peopled by the Puebloans (Hopi, Tewa, etc.) of North America. They were hunter-gatherers speaking a Na-Dene Southern Athabaskan language known as *Diné bizaad* (lit. 'People's language'). Similarly, the work of Rumi Aki (Austronesian/Atayal) also illustrates how collective memory concerning pre-colonial migrations and food traditions, preserved in oral narratives, helps contemporary post-colonial place-based communities retain their cultural, ethnobotanical and agroecological knowledges even when, by necessity or choice, they live far from the places their people recognize as "home." Each of these writers illustrates how people in *diaspora*, to use the words of Gerard Chaliand and Jean-Pierre Rageau, maintain a "collective memory" that "transmits both the historical facts that precipitated the dispersion and a cultural heritage" and also provides ways to think about resilience and survival in modern times (Chaliand and Rageau xiv-xv).

In her book of poetry and prose, *Tséyi: Deep in the Rock: Reflections on Canyon de Chelly*, Laura Tohe, who is a professor at Arizona State University in Phoenix, Arizona, draws deeply on the Navajo oral tradition to create lyrical writings that are rooted in the Navajo "place of emergence." The Diné tell stories of "emergence" from the earth into the beautiful, deep red rock canyon, called "Tséyi," or as the European Americans have come to call it, "Canyon de Chelly." The word "Tséyi'" means "place deep within the rock," and is intimately connected to stories the Diné tell about the

ancient people who came to the canyons they now call home before 1400 CE. There they found towering, abandoned cities already built into the sides of the red cliffs very near to the edges of the river running through Canyon de Chelly. Navajo traditional storytellers explain that the cliff-dwellings were built by the "Ancient Ones," or "Swallow People." The swallow, a small bird that builds nests with mud on the side of cliffs, is credited with teaching the "Ancient Ones" (the ancestors of the Puebloan peoples) to build cities and plant gardens of corn, beans and squash. Today, the Diné, following the practices of the "Ancient Ones," continue to plant gardens on the valley floor beneath the ancient, now deserted cities that still loom impressively in the high cliff walls of Canyon de Chelly.

Tohe's poem "What Made this Earth Red?" is brief but within its few lines it links the emergence story of the Diné to migration stories from the oral tradition which recount Diné travels throughout the red rock region they call home. These stories also explain how they came to master the collection of wild foods and the planting of gardens; the stories also name the mountains, rivers, and landmarks the people encountered after they emerged from Canyon de Chelly and tell how the people were introduced to the materials for their clothing, baskets, and rugs. Tohe writes, "What made this earth red?" (3). She links the "red" to Diné "births" in more peaceful times and, simultaneously, to "our blood trails to Hwéél̨di" (3). The "blood" associated with "trails" refers both to the emergence story of the Navajo into Tséyi and to "Hwéél̨di," the place associated with the Diné blood spilled by U.S. soldiers in the nineteenth century over the course of a journey that became known as one of the most devastating events in Diné history (Tohe 3). "The Long Walk" began in 1864 when Kit Carson, who is remembered in mainstream American history as a "hero," but by the Diné as a murderous villain, rounded up 8,000 Navajos who were living in the region surrounding Canyon de Chelly. After Carson's troops killed the Diné's beloved sheep and burned their gardens, the people were forced to walk more than 300 miles from their homes to a military fort that had been built in a desolate place in southern New Mexico. Many Diné died along the way and many were murdered, including pregnant women who were too slow to keep up with the pace of the march. The fort, called "Hwéél̨di" by the Diné, had been built as a detention camp where the soldiers intended "to tame the savages." The ill-planned site was called "Bosque Redondo" by the soldiers, a Spanish phrase meaning "grove of cottonwood trees growing by the river." The brackish river water running by this prison camp caused severe intestinal problems, and diseases were rampant. With little good water, the gardens that the Diné planted to provide food for their families failed. The Diné endured the wretched camp for four years, before the United States government finally allowed them to return to Navajoland, or *Dinétah* (Tapahonso 7).

Tohe's poetry, with its references to the Long Walk and to the Navajo's struggle to grow traditional foods in a strange place, asks readers to consider one of the largely unexamined consequences of conquest and colonization, which is the threat to a people's food sovereignty. At Hwéél̨di, despite the inconceivably cruel conditions of

imprisonment, marauding insects and filthy water, the Diné continued to plant gardens in traditional patterns. As anthropologist and food sovereignty activist Devon Peña explains, when displaced indigenous peoples plant gardens with the "familiar sacred trinity of Corn, Beans and Squash" in their new places of residence, they are, in a sense, rooting themselves to both their cultural places of origin and, at the same time, their new places of habitation as both a material and spiritual survival strategy (7).

In the introduction to her collection of poems, *Sáanii Dahataal: The Women Are Singing*, writer Luci Topahonso also refers to "The Long Walk" and the ways this historical event has shaped the collective memories of contemporary Diné. Tapahonso frames her book of poems and essays with an introductory essay recounting a 1300-mile drive with her daughters from the place she lives and works in Kansas back to her birthplace on the Navajo Nation. At the time she published these poems, she was an English professor working at the University of Kansas, in Lawrence, Kansas. Each
10 of the short pieces in the collection is to be read like the stories that Tapahono typically tells her daughters on long drives home. "In 1864," a short essay included in the collection, Tapahonso tells her daughters stories about how their great-grandmother and her family were starving during the time preceding the Long Walk because "Kit Carson and his army had burned all the fields, / and they killed our sheep right before our eyes" (Tapahonso 8). Threatened with starvation, the grandmother and her family decide to go to Bosque Redondo, a fort where the soldiers tell them they will be safe. Despite these promises, over the next four years, the Diné lost 2,500 people to treachery, starvation and disease before they were allowed to return home and begin re-planting their cornfields and rebuilding their flocks of sheep.

In her essay, Tapahonso recounts the horror of the Long Walk but she also wants her daughters to know that the Diné are strong and that they survived because of their resilience. She tells her daughters that during their time at Bosque Redondo, the Diné were forced to eat the foods of their colonizers and jailers. However, they took these strange foods and transformed them into the means of their survival. She emphasizes this point in "Hills Brother's Coffee," a poem in which her uncle walks from his house to her mother's house for a visit. While he waits for her mother to return, Tapahonso offers him a cup of coffee and he spoons in sugar and cream "until it looks almost like a chocolate shake" (Tapahonso 27). Because coffee was first introduced to the Diné during their imprisonment at Hwéél̨di, it is a food that recalls a time of hardship and deprivation. However, when Diné crops failed to thrive at Bosque Redondo and the people were starving, the U.S. government supplied them with coffee, white flour, canned tomatoes and peaches. Over the course of their four-year imprisonment, these foods became welcome new elements in the Diné diet. Canned tomatoes were sprinkled with sugar, and even today, are eaten as a dessert. Coffee was savored and became one of the most valued, modern, and yet "traditional" of Diné foods. Today, there are few Diné households that start the day without coffee.

Sitting at her mother's table, the coffee brings a twinkle to Tapahonso's uncle's

eye. Looking at the can in which the coffee is packaged, he observes, "Oh, that's the coffee with the man in a dress" like a "church man" (Tapahonso 27). This comment dates the coffee can to the 1960s, when America's most popular brand of coffee, Hills Brothers, was still using the image of a man dressed in traditional Muslim clothing in their packaging and marketing. Reference to coffee illustrates that the Diné have been dealing with the forces of what has recently been termed "globalization" since—at least—the days of the Long Walk. Reference to a man in Muslim-style dress represents the ways in which the world has been globalizing since imperial nations began colonizing in the sixteenth century. Coffee, which was originally grown in Africa, and later encountered by Europeans in the sixteenth century during their travels in the Ottoman Empire (today known as Turkey), was introduced to Europe and America through Italy (Norton 260). In the 1960s, coffee was still being associated by Hills Brothers Coffee marketing with the Islamic empire where the beans were first roasted and made into a drink valued today not only by the Diné but by people all over the world. Tapahonso's representation of the Diné's relationship to coffee illustrates how local places are constantly changing in the face of global economic and ecological forces. This is the reason Mitchell Thomashow and other environmental educators have argued that we must rethink conventional notions about place and place-attachment in terms of globalizing forces and movement.

Like the Navajo, the Austronesian/Atayal of Taiwan are also organizing around human health and environmental issues. The Atayal inhabit the remote north central region to Taiwan. Because they live in mountains that rise as high as 2,000-2,500 meters, they have lived in near isolation. For this reason, their language and culture has been relatively well preserved. Like Luci Tapahonso, Atayal writer Rimuy Aki focuses on the importance of "first foods" to the continued individual and collective health of her people. In her 2010 novella, *The Homeland of the Mountain*, she represents the consequences for Austronesian peoples of successive waves of colonization in Taiwan that have displaced many from their homes and interrupted their access to the first foods from which they have derived sustenance for thousands of years. Like the work of Tohe and Tapahonso, Aki's novella maintains a "collective memory" that "transmits both the historical facts that precipitated the dispersion and a cultural heritage" that provides ways to think about resilience and survival in modern times (Chaliand and Rageau xiv-xv).

The novella pivots around the life of Yawai, an Atayal woman, and her sons, who are searching for the recovery of the tribe's values and beliefs. Aki maps the route of Yawai's family's migration from the village of Skalu in the central mountains of Taiwan to the southern village of Namaisa in the 1960s and later, their return to the mountains to reestablish their ties to their tribe's culture and foodways. Hsinya Huang, who has written extensively about Austronesian cultural production, has translated large passages of Aki's novella into English so that larger audiences can become aware of her work. Huang argues that the importance of Aki's novella lies in the book's representation of a conscious effort to draw attention to links between his-

torical colonization and development and neocolonial globalizing forces today. The Han Chinese ethnic group began migrating to Taiwan in the seventeenth century, and in the early 1900s, the Japanese began a next wave of occupation of the island that lasted 40 years. Following the civil war in China, new waves of immigrants began arriving in Taiwan from the mainland in 1949, further displacing indigenous groups. Today, Austronesian groups constitute only 2% of the population in Taiwan (Huang 171, n 2). This means that indigenous groups are a minority and must constantly struggle against dispossession, although today, there is a growing national appreciation of indigenous cultures in Taiwan. Aki's novella illustrates how the Atayal are engaging in modern artforms, including fiction, that are supporting this growing cultural movement to redefine the place of indigenous peoples in Taiwanese society. The novel also illustrates how the Atayal are recuperating women's cooking and food preservation as a traditional art form that is helping the Atayal to preserve both their first foods and culture even as they are dispersed widely across Taiwan in order to secure jobs and education (Huang 168).

Aki's novella is written in Chinese. However, her discussions of traditional foodways are anchored in her tribal language. Atayal words for specifically valued wild foods collected in the high mountain forests are inserted into the narrative. Atayal women still gather *qarauw* (bamboo pieces) and *ziluk* (wild cherries) to prepare traditional dishes; *tgwil tayal* (mountain cucumber) is especially appealing for migrant aborigines as it is "big, juicy and handy" (Aki 68; Huang 169). Aki also illustrates how care for mountain forests is intimately connected to foodways upon which aboriginal people depend for their collective health. Aki weaves discussion of the danger of "state-owned forestry" practices that destroy ecosystems and encroach "on [Atayal] ancestral *gyunam* (hunting grounds)" (Aki 82–83). Huang explains that in passages dealing with traditional foods, Aki is showing that women's gatherings and cooking in contemporary times provide a material basis and ceremonial occasions to teach young people about the Atayal concept of "*gaga*" which is defined as the "natural order of things in the universe" and a belief system passed "down from one generation to the next" (Huang 167).

Huang argues that sections of the novella focused on first foods demonstrate that Aki prizes ecologically sustainable management of indigenous foods and resources in accordance with *gaga* and is urging her readers to see the connections between traditional food gathering practices that teach people to understand high mountain ecosystems that are now threatened by deforestation and by global planetary processes linked to climate change, including the increasing scale and violence of typhoons. When corporations are allowed to bring huge machines to the forest to cut down the trees and plows that destroy root systems and denude communal lands of natural vegetation, the result can be massive landslides that follow typhoons. Storms have always been a part of Taiwan's island ecologies and fierce weather has been a common experience for mountainous indigenous people in Taiwan. Yet, in the twenty-first century, deforestation and increasingly violent storms have resulted in massive land-

slides and loss of life in mountain villages. The mudslides and flooding represented in Aki's novella anticipate the disastrous outcome of Typhoon Moraka in 2009, which occurred the year before the novel was published. This storm destroyed Namasia, the village where Aki did her fieldwork collecting traditional stories for the novella (Aki 7). Before Japanese occupation in the early twentieth century, Austronesian elders could predict when the people should migrate ahead of a typhoon to save lives. However, after the social disruption and diaspora caused by colonization and occupation, much of this knowledge was lost as young people left the villages. Even more devastating, the tops of mountains can no longer hold the water and soil because forestry has removed the trees and their root systems. Thus Aki's novella, writes Huang, "represents a conscious effort to confront climate change" and social breakdown through representation of the value not only of women's cooking and food collection and preservation practices" but ethnobotanical and ecological knowledges that are literally interwoven into these forms of indigenous scientific literacies (168). Huang adds that foodways maintain and transmit "values and beliefs" that are a kind of "ancient pact with nature," the understanding of which is needed today more than ever as humans face dramatic changes to planetary processes that are putting all life, at both local and global scales, at risk (168).

Like many Diné, many Atayal are living "in diaspora" because of continuing lack of economic opportunity and many leave their mountain homes for jobs and educations they find in the cities. This is the reason why Aki frames her novella as a story of migration and Tapahonso frames the poems in *Sáanii Dahataal* with a long drive with her daughters back to her home in Navajoland. Tapahonso recounts stories that help them understand the experiences of their people. These stories are told to help her daughters deal with the challenges they will face as modern Diné women. Also, as Traci Brynn Voyles explains, stories about the experiences at Hwéél̨di, combined with later horrific experiences the Navajo would suffer at the hands of the US government in the 1930s and 1940s (when sheep herds were again brutally slaughtered after the Diné were unjustly accused of ecologically degrading their lands through overgrazing), have led to a strengthening of Diné culture and shaped the course of a growing cultural, economic and environmental self-determination today among members of the tribe living on the reservation (50-63).

In the twenty-first century, Mitchell Thomashow argues, we are living with widespread cultural and ecological diaspora and much can be learned from the experiences of those, such as Tohe, Tapahonso and Aki, who are depicting forms of what might be called "diasporic residency" in their poetry and fiction. Thomashow defines this term as "awareness of how one might live with a deep sense of care" for local places even while living in diaspora (Thomashow 174). In their creative works, each of these writers offers lyrical illustration of how contemporary aboriginal peoples engage in forms of "diasporic residency" in the cities where they live and work and, back home, in the villages where they travel to visit relatives. The characters in their books are practicing an everyday awareness of the ways knowledge of local landscapes and foodways

associated with "home" heighten awareness of urban landscapes where over 50% of the world's people find themselves living today.

The work of Navajo and Atayal women writers also brilliantly illustrates what Adamson and Ruffin describe as a growing transnational movement for social, ecological and food justice in which artists, community members and indigenous groups are contributing to dialogue and action that expands notions of how we might better support individuals and groups who are "creating and enacting policies, laws, and community practices that [are having] positive ecological consequences around the globe" (16). Thus, this literary work is offering models of how each of us, as modern individuals, might also practice an everyday "diasporic residency." Tohe, Tapahonso, and Aki illustrate how cognitive flexibility allows modern people to move between multiple perceptual worlds, from rural towns and villages to urban metroscapes. They are offering readers "strongly regional and community-oriented" narratives that "prioritize local place allegiance and ecological distinctiveness" while constantly drawing connections to "global contexts" (Adamson and Ruffin 16).

Food as Medicine

Rumi Aki's writing represents the ways modern people might develop allegiances to the local while cultivating deep concerns about broader global processes such as deforestation and climate change that are increasing the risks to "rights to food" for all people on the planet. Tohono O'odham poet and linguist Ofelia Zepeda, who is a professor of linguistics living in Tucson, Arizona, also connects stories about the traditional migration routes with colonial histories and modern global processes. Zepeda's ancestors once traveled extensively through the Sonoran desert to collect wild foods and to the Pacific Ocean to collect salt. Zepeda's poetry collection, *Ocean Power*, represents both the traditional and contemporary activities of the people who live in what is now southern Arizona and northern Sonora, Mexico. The Tohono O'odham, which means "Desert People," lived sustainably for hundreds of years by gathering wild desert foods, including fruit from the towering saguaro cactus found only in the Sonoran Desert. In the poem "Pulling Down the Clouds," Zepeda writes about this food gathering activity, in which women use long sticks to pull the fruit down from the tops of the cactus. A man lying on his bed smells rain, and is comforted in the knowledge that there is a storm "somewhere out in the desert." Falling into a deep sleep, he "dreams of women with harvesting sticks / raised towards the sky" (Zepeda 9-10). The man knows that the rain will sustain the cactus and other wild plants the people depend on for food. The saguaro fruit and the wine made from it are part of a sacred, annual ceremony associated with water, the element that sustains all living things in a desert. Thus, the people say in their language that with their long, harvesting sticks, they will "pull down the clouds" (Zepeda 9).

Today, many Tohono O'odham live and work in urban areas far from the saguaro

and creosote forests. From the 1930s forward, tribal members were forced by the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs to become wage laborers in the cotton fields in order to retain their federally-recognized tribal status. The construction of dams on the Colorado and Gila Rivers diverted water away from their traditional fields and into the irrigated cotton fields of non-indigenous farmers who owned the lands surrounding the reservation. Because they no longer had water to irrigate their gardens, the O'odham were forced to leave the reservation and become migrant laborers. Entire families would leave their communities for six to eight months each year and it became impossible for many families to plant, tend and maintain their fields or collect wild foods ("The Tohono O'odham Traditional Food System" n.p.).

Despite the inability of many in the tribe to collect and grow traditional foods, Zepeda's poetry illustrates the collective memory of ethnoecological knowledge passed down to contemporary O'odham by their elders that show how her people are finding their way back to their traditional first foods. Since the 1960s, the Tohono O'odham have experienced dramatically increasing rates of diabetes, a disease that results when the body cannot break down the refined sugars and starches commonly found in processed foods such as white flour and fast foods such as fried foods, snack foods, and soda, etc. Before they were forced to leave the reservation as migrant laborers, diabetes was unknown among the O'odham. Today, over 70% of the Tohono O'odham population suffers from this disease. According to Tristan Reader, co-director of a Kellogg Foundation project to restore the traditional O'odham foods, "The cause for this devastating change is the destruction of the traditional food systems and diet" ("Fighting Diabetes with Native Foods" n.p.). When the Tohono O'odham began leaving the reservation for jobs and began eating the cheap, highly processed foods readily available in American grocery stores and fast food restaurants, they were exposed to risks associated with diabetes that include blindness, declining health and early death. This is one of the urgent reasons why the food sovereignty movement is concerned with maintaining the integrity of traditional indigenous food systems and fighting rising rates of diabetes.

When the connections between traditional foods and human health are made clear, the reasons why the framers of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples claim sovereignty over the wild and traditional foods they have depended on for millennia becomes clear. Like the Navajo and the Austronesian/Atayal, the Tohono O'odham have begun fighting for something that indigenous farmers around the world have termed the "ancient future" (Mushita and Thompson 4). The O'odham are reintroducing traditional and wild foods into their contemporary diets. These foods help regulate blood sugar and significantly reduce the effects of diabetes ("Fighting Diabetes with Native Foods" n.p.). They have also organized Tohono O'odham Community Action (TOCA.org), an organization dedicated to creating a healthy, sustainable and culturally vital community. TOCA brings together elders, doctors, nutritionists, ethnobotanists and scientists to cultivate and distribute traditional foods to community members who are suffering from diabetes.

The Ancient Future

The work of Tohe, Tapahonso, Aki, and Zepeda offers insight into why indigenous peoples around the world are mobilizing to protect their rights to nutritional sovereignty linked to first foods. Each of these writers is contributing meaningfully to debates surrounding food production in broadly appealing ways. As both Hsinya Huang and I have shown through our collaborative research and writing in North America and Taiwan, art, poetry, novels and narrative analysis can help to make the issues surrounding first foods and environmental justice more clear and these understandings will be crucial to effecting public social change on a scale large enough to make a difference for the health of individuals, groups and planetary ecosystems. Both creative works and literary analysis, then, help illustrate how seemingly powerless people are resisting large-scale forces that put a people's food sovereignty and health at risk. This work is showing readers how we might gather wisdom from the past to find solutions to our most pressing social and environmental challenges today.

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