

# Mangled Coding: Class in the Poems of Santee Frazier

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## Abstract

Santee Frazier's 2009 collection, *Dark Thirty* reveals a text that can be largely read in the genre context of Native American poetry, around signifiers of poverty. Though Frazier passionately denies that his poems are constructed on a thematic basis, his curation of them in this collection does nevertheless add up to a coherent argument for interpreting his characters' lives as specifically *working-class* lives, subject to interlocking and international forces of capital, displacement and documentation in a surveillance state.

## Keywords

Cherokee poetry, Native American literature, signifiers of poverty in poetry, working-class poetry, food sovereignty, Indigenous studies

That memory of my old man and our time together is something I never got to tell him about, or how I lost that memory because after I went to college I found out there were people called Native Americans, and I didn't realize I was one, or knew any, or would become one, and that he was one too, because where we came from, folks were just Indians back then.

- (van Alst, Jr., 2018, p. 32)

## Native American signifiers in Frazier's poetry

Settler colonialism is a process whereby an Indigenous population is not merely conquered and placed within an imperium, but also therein actively replaced as the principal population of their traditional lands. As Patrick Wolfe (2006) has observed in one of the most frequently referenced articles in settler colonial studies, this process has multiple strands which may or may not include acts of deliberately planned state-sponsored genocide. But in present-day America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, mass killings are not the principal manifestation of settler society's

desire to legitimate its claim to the land. Rather, what Wolfe calls a ‘logic of elimination’ (387) persists, manifesting both as a desire to deny the validity of tribal nations as independent entities in a government-to-government relationship with settler society, and also as a desire to claim the cultures, and by implication the legitimacy, of Indigenous societies. When the administration of President Trump makes moves to derecognize tribal sovereignty as a principle of US law (LeTourneau 2018), it is manifesting this eliminationist logic. When his principal challenger, Elizabeth Warren, defends her decision as a law professor to have laid claim to American Indian identity (thus accruing benefits as a faculty of color), then doubles down by using a shoddy DNA test as though Native identity was simply a matter of genetic ancestry (Hayes and Keeler 2018), that, too, is eliminationist logic in action. The resource appropriative right wing and the culturally appropriative liberal/left wing of American society, however polarized they may appear within their self-defined political context, therefore both operate to continue the settler project of eliminating American Indian legal standing and identity, with the ultimate societal and unconscious goal of total replacement of the Indigenous with settler populations, summed up by Carlisle Indian Industrial School leader (and self-proclaimed ‘Friend of the Indian’) Richard Henry Pratt in the phrase ‘Kill the Indian and save the man.’ (Fear-Segal and Rose 2016, p. 18).

Existing as both citizens of such a settler state and also as citizens or descendants of Indigenous nations creates a specific pressure on Native American writers. Writers of the original ‘Native American Renaissance’ of the late 1960s and 1970s, who had to work largely with settler editors and publishers interested primarily in a settler readership, were rewarded with critical praise, and in some cases sales, if their work took a modernist approach whereby tribal cultures and mythologies were seen as the underpinnings for contemporary stories (Lee and Lockard 2014). Increasing Native representation among gatekeepers, including Indigenous publishers and Native American faculty within the university, has led in more recent decades to writers being praised for including elements from more contemporary tribal, often urban, cultures and histories. N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* (1968), with its structure built on Jemez Pueblo traditions, is an emblematic text of the earlier period, while Sherman Alexie’s *Indian Killer* (1996), with its structure built on the pantribal Ghost Dance and its images of enforced out-adoption, is an emblem of the latter. A primary mode that unites the two groups, however, is a concern with cultural *performance*. Native words and concepts are explained for the reader, how to live as a Native person in modernity becomes a central concern of many of the characters, and kitschy settler imagery of Native Americans is directly attacked or deconstructed. In her survey of the ‘waves’ of Native American literature, critic Erika Wurth (2015) identifies these as the Second and Third Waves respectively,<sup>1</sup> united by concerns of individual and communal identity and history.

I offer this brief precis of Native American conditions and literary history as a way of explaining an unsettling (pun intended) effect Santee Frazier’s debut collection of poetry, *Dark Thirty* (2009), provoked in me when I first read it. Wurth proposes a ‘Fourth Wave’ of Native poets, largely emergent from the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA), who share both an experimental aesthetic and an ‘aching desire to be allowed to write without the traditional burdens of Native

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<sup>1</sup> The First Wave is defined by Wurth as being everything written prior to 1969 by American Indians, extending all the way back to ‘Eleazar,’ a Harvard student, whose Latin composition ‘In obitum Viri veré Reverendi D. Thomae Thacheri, Qui Ad Dom. ex hâc Vitâ migravit, 18.8.1678’ was published in 1678 (Parker, 2011).

American literary politics' (para. 8), a group that for Wurth includes Sherwin Bitsui, Jennifer Foerster, Layli Longsoldier and M.L. Smoker, and which I would see as an entirely appropriate label for several recent First Nations experimental poets such as Joshua Whitehead and Jordan Abel. But however much we can see an attention to aesthetics and rejection of identity politics as unifying this group, there is also no mistaking the referents to tribal cultures and Indigenous languages that are taken up by virtually all of these new writers. In the samples of their work offered in the recent collection *New Poets of Native Nations* (Erdrich 2018), for example, Foerster explains to the reader that her grandmother was 'covered in a quilt, the Creek way' (2013, p. 9), begins another poem in Mvskoke Creek ('*hokte hokte honvnwv*' (p.13)) carefully translated in a footnote for the non-Mvskoke speaking reader, and sets other poems in a landscape that is instantly recognisable as Native land: Smoker, similarly, 'heard the ruin in each Assiniboine voice' (2005, p. 34) and explains '*Mikushi, Mitugash*' as Assinibone for 'grandmother, grandfather' (2016).

While Frazier certainly belongs among this group – when I interviewed him for this article, he placed himself among them, referring to 'my contemporaries, such as Sherwin Bitsui, Layli Longsoldier, Orlando White or dg okpik' – his poems, by contrast, contain no such evident references to language or spiritual touchstones.<sup>2</sup> As a reader who is, being British, a cultural outsider, I quite possibly would never (reading these poems blind) have guessed that the author was Native American if it were not for the confirming imprimatur of the University of Arizona 'Sun Tracks' series and the single sentence in the author's biography at the end of the book, 'Santee Frazier is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma.' The lacuna is made all the more evident because there are references to race and culture in the book, but these references are Asian ('Eating Against a Wall' (78)), non-US Indigenous ('An Aerosoled Representation of the Maya and Moché' (79)), African American (from the blues-inflected language of the poems to the opening quotation, taken from W.E.B. DuBois). Even the cover artist, Micah Wesley, is acknowledged without his dual Creek/Kiowa citizenship being mentioned. Such consistent omissions cannot be considered as anything other than deliberate choice, particularly in the context of a collection for which the author states he selected only 'a very small percentage' (2018 pers. comm., September 28) of available poems to create a book which, though each poem is individual, has an unusual thematic coherence.

It is not unprecedented for Indigenous authors to choose not to use or to deliberately downplay cultural signifiers of their ethnicity. Martin Cruz Smith, for instance, despite having both Pueblo and Yaqui roots, gained fame and financial success from the *Gorky Park* (1981) series of novels set around the adventures of Russian detective Arkady Renko, while the Blackfeet tribal citizen Stephen Graham Jones has written a great deal of horror fiction without overt Native American references. But this refusal of ethnic signification does not necessarily denote acculturation or any form of 'passing' for commercial appeal. The Hoopa citizen scholar Cutcha Risling Baldy (2013) has written persuasively about the appeal of zombie narratives such as *The Walking Dead* for Native American audiences, where the experience of survivors in a post-apocalyptic landscape is

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<sup>2</sup> The interview was conducted on 28<sup>th</sup> September 2018 via teleconference. An edited transcript is published elsewhere in this issue.

an analogy for the survivors of policies of extermination and assimilation (2013). The same argument, one imagines, could easily be applied to the *Star Trek* villains The Borg and any number of other cultural icons, in what Scott Andrews (2018) calls ‘a red reading . . . an interpretation of a non-native text from a native perspective’ (i). Jones himself has, not least in his werewolf novel *Mongrels* (2016), pointed up many of the parallels between horror and Native American experiences, and it is not too hard a stretch to imagine that for Smith, whose first novel *The Indians Won* (1970) was about an alternative history in which the US conquest of Native territories was beaten back, there might be historical resonances in the idea of seeking justice in a corrupt and unjust state.

However, while such a metaphorical lens might be useful in understanding the significance of WWE wrestlers and soccer moms in Jones’s *Zombie Bake-Off* (2012), Frazier’s poetry is not, in the main, narrative driven. Moreover, there are some indications that the protagonists of the poems are intended to be read as Cherokee, albeit only by readers very familiar with Cherokee contexts. Speaking about his poetry with Sherwin Bitsui in 2010, Frazier stated that ‘The first four sections of *Dark Thirty* were inspired by language and memory,’ and that they were written in ‘a dialect of English that is specific to Cherokee speakers’ (40). This must refer to a set of character portrayals in *Dark Thirty*, namely ‘Chauncey’ (8-9), ‘Joe Bunch’ (12-13), ‘Nick Cheater’ (14), ‘Nauxcey Moss’ (27), the first of which begins ‘There ain’t no since staring intah that eye / dead as can be, stabbed with a fork or sumthin.’ Specific locations scattered through the poems give a definite sense of place (e.g. ‘Adair County’ (29), named for the first Cherokee family to arrive in the area, or ‘Barren Fork’ (8), referring to the fork in the Illinois River that leads into Cherokee County), as do the specific brand names of cheap beers and whiskies the characters consume. Even when the anthology takes a turn for the fantastical in the various adventures of circus performer Mangled Creekbed, the description of ‘the creekbed boy’ (20) who is ‘bean juice-colored’ with an ‘ancestry and tongue’ which filtered through the ‘circus blurb . . . / squawk of his primitive origins’ (17), should when combined with the previously mentioned elements lead a Cherokee reader to see the character as himself Cherokee. Unlike Cruz Smith and Jones, then, this is neither metaphor nor deracination.

### **Class consciousness and poverty**

The question becomes, why avoid the cultural signifiers which find such a natural home in other Native poets’ work? Or rather, and more importantly, what is the effect of this avoidance? I argue that *Dark Thirty*, and its successor, *Aurum* should be read as texts that has been structured, by a poet entirely conscious that his poetry will be received and largely read in the genre context of Native American poetry, around signifiers of poverty. Though Frazier passionately denies that his poems are constructed on a thematic basis (‘I think every single poem I’ve ever written started with one specific sound’, 2018 pers. comm., September 28), his curation of them in this collection does nevertheless add up to a coherent argument for interpreting his characters’ lives as specifically *working class* lives, subject to interlocking and international forces of capital, displacement and documentation in a surveillance state. Given his reluctance to be considered through the lens of ethnicity, it is in this respect significant that when I asked him if he considered himself a working-

class poet, his response was an immediate ‘Very much so’ (2018 pers. comm., September 28). Talking with Bitsui (Frazier and Bitsui 2010), he similarly notes that he himself ‘grew up in abject poverty’ (40) and that ‘I think it’s necessary to expose—or poeticize— those realities to a privileged public’ (45).

Poverty is a key fact in most Indigenous communities, but this is something that comes into particularly sharp relief in the United States due to its status as the richest country on Earth. Per capita income level, for example, stood in 2017 at an average of \$32,397 per person in the US population as a whole, but only \$19,824 per American Indian individual, while the percentage of American Indian households receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits (aka food stamps) stood at 23.9%, against a national average of 11.7% (United States Census). These averages may well be an understatement of the situation. The US census works by requiring respondents to self-identify ethnically, rather than by asking for proof of citizenship in a tribal nation. Due to the appropriative mechanics identified above, there are many non-Native people in America who self-identify as Native American either through a nebulous passed-down family legend of an Indian ancestor or through adoption into one of many New Age cults. Cherokees in particular may be victims of this, since the ‘Cherokee princess’ is a particularly hardy trope. Gregory D. Smithers (2015) notes that 819,105 Americans claim Cherokee inheritance in the 2011 Census, a number that sits oddly with the fact that the three Cherokee nations, despite famously having among the least exclusionary laws on citizenship, have fewer than 320,000 enrolled citizens between them. While there is no way to check the income level of people who claim a Native American racial affiliation while having no practical or citizenship ties to a Native nation, neither is there any reason to expect that this would be out of line with national averages (indeed, it could be argued that wannabeism is more prevalent among higher income brackets). Therefore, this group’s statistics may be raising census averages for Native income and other measures of poverty. This is just one of the ways that the romantic myth of pre-contact tribal cultures – those indicators that Frazier is at such pains to eliminate – ends up materially affecting American Indian realities.

Frazier begins the collection with a section of poems titled ‘Dry Creek,’ most of which contain rural signifiers – the son and mother in ‘Hunter’s Moon’ hiding from an abusive grandfather in ‘the brush . . . / among the sprawling / shadows of branches’ (10), the prostitute plying her trade among farm workers in ‘Mama’s Work’ (7), the child driving a passed-out mother ‘through these hills, / ten miles an hour, gravel roads’ (13). These commonalities invite us to read the dialect poems, which mostly contain words and phrases related to cars (‘Nick Cheater’s good with them dodges’ (‘Chauncey,’ 9); ‘Member that time I got stuck / in that pile of tyres?’ (‘Joe Bunch,’ 12)), as being also set in rural areas, something confirmed in the final dialect poem, when the speaker ‘Nick Cheater’ tells his listener ‘Told yah not tah get your car fixed in town’ (14). While the status of Cherokee Nation tribal lands is ambiguous, since tribal authority is recognized in 14 Oklahoma counties but the area is not normally described as a reservation nonetheless the statistics on reservation poverty are particularly germane to ‘Dry Creek.’ The Friends Committee on National Legislation noted in 2012 that ‘More than 1 in 4 [. . . Native Americans] live in poverty. On reservations, the number rises to more than 1 in 3 (38 percent). Pushed off arable lands and isolated from transportation and communications networks, Native Americans on reservations are struggling to make a living in unyielding physical, social and economic climates’ (qtd. in Cheyfitz

2017, p. 216). This situation has not changed significantly across the country since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, despite the monies gained by some tribes from casino gambling and various resource extraction operations.

In their juxtaposition, therefore, the poems of ‘Dry Creek’ and ‘The Carnival’ (sections one and three of the collection), form a coherent reflection on rural poverty in Cherokee nation lands and its effects. Although Frazier is keen to resist simple autobiographical readings of his work, and notes that his poetry remixes and invents as much as it draws directly on personal history, nonetheless he also stated in our interview that ‘it’s probably about 90 to 95 percent autobiographical’ (2018 pers. comm., September 28). It would therefore be fair to assume that these effects are drawn from observation rather than stereotype, and it is notable how strongly gender is made a factor. The male figures of the dialect poems, who are a group as various indicators show us, are angry, violent and aggressive. ‘Chauncey’ is written in two-line stanzas, each a single lengthy sentence broken in the middle, where the predictable end-stop in the second line emphasizes the alcoholic character’s short-circuited, unreflective certainty in the world. As Robert Hass (2017 Kindle location 874) observes of the two-line poem of Catullus, ‘The effect is doubling down. Say it, then say it more intensely. Or make the general statement in A, and then get specific in B,’ and while each of the following dialect poems opens this up a little – ‘Joe Bunch’ into syllogistic three-liners, ‘Nick Cheater’ back into two-line stanzas but with enjambment that makes the character seem more reflective - nonetheless the impression is of minds blunted by alcoholism, disability, or an obsession with engines. These men are placed against poems in which women are bought (‘Mama’s Work’) and beaten, shirts torn, assaulted with fists and pickaxes. As the speaker of ‘Hunter’s Moon’ puts it:

It has been going on  
for years, my mother, her mother,  
sisters, whoever was left born  
into this rage (10)

The destruction of these women is watched by their neglected sons, a consistent voice which in ‘Pickax’ mourns ‘the same woman who held a warm towel / to my earache’ (25) as she is possibly being murdered (‘biscuit dough stuck to her fingers, the dark coming’ (26)). Moreover, we as readers witness the ways that violence is passed down, via the last dialect poem in the voice of a child. ‘Nauxcey Moss’ is deafened, recalling Joe Bunch’s deaf ear, after he shoots his grandmother’s chickens at the prompting of an unidentified male figure that is presumably another violent grandfather.

This focus on the generational effect of neglect and poverty also affect the reading of the ‘Mangled’ pieces that make up sections two and four, ‘Baptism of the Knife’ and ‘Skillet Face.’ There are clear resonances between this protagonist and the boy-speaker of the poems. Both have mothers who are sex workers, and both are neglected: Mangled’s mother ‘locked him out of the house in the summers, so Mangled would not see the musky men’ (‘The Bottle Collector’ 18), leaving him to wander the creeks, while the semi-autobiographical speaker is:

too

small to find my way to the sandbanks  
where she sometimes takes a man,

where sometimes I wander  
skipping stones, while she earns  
in the backseat of a car or under

a gun rack. ('The Carnival' 34)

However, the Mangled poems are set in an earlier time period, one of *Sgt. Rock* comics and 'pinup queens, pop-bottle / legstresses on the soda-pop signs' ('Mangled and Beautiful Girls' 39). Mangled can, then, be seen as a progenitor, as violent as the other men in the boy-speaker's life, a buyer of women. Like many of the grandfather figures, too, he becomes addicted to substances, whether to huffing glue or to drinking 'listo' (Listerine mouthwash, drunk for its cheapness and alcohol content). The cyclical nature of abuse and violence is evident, as is its relationship to economic conditions. Mangled fits the classic Marxist description of the *Lumpenproletariat*, being part of 'a mass strictly differentiated from the industrial proletariat, a recruiting ground for thieves and criminals of all kinds, living on the crumbs of society, people without a definite trade, vagabonds' (qtd in Bovenkerk 1999, p. 523). Perhaps more fitting, though, would be the description in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Marx and Engels 1848) of this class as a 'passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of the old society' (20), assuming we here read the 'old society' as the Cherokee nation, formally dissolved in 1907 and not reconstituted until the mid-1970's (Brown 2011). Mangled himself ends his days in the final poem of the sequence literally rotting ('stroke-face sagging off / his skull' ('Mangled, Memory and the Wheelchair,' 49)), dreaming of glory days in carnivals and circuses that seem to fulfill the class function identified by Bakhtin (1929), of a space in which class relationships are reversed, though temporarily. Those circus performances were attained via a performative ethnicity ('Ringmaster makes freak show of Mangled . . . whose ancestry / and tongue have passed into the void of circus blurb . . . squawk of his primitive origins'), which again dramatizes the choice between performing culture or becoming a forgotten underclass that Frazier seems to see as the only available choices for Cherokees in the mid-century period ('Circus Fire' 17).

Much of the rest of *Dark Thirty*, and several of the poems in Frazier's second book, *Aurum* (2019), consists of urban imagery. Here there are moments of beauty, particularly in the comforting and decidedly feminized space of the laundromat in 'Coin Laundry' (*Dark Thirty* 54) or the delicate haiku-like opening tercets of 'Seasonal Cityscape,' where

kids licking popsicles  
a row of dingy feet  
shine in the sun (67)

But more often we see the grimmest realities of inner city poverty. Again, from 'Seasonal Cityscape':

wet-crotched  
sockless      finger hooked  
around a jug of night train

As Kasey Keeler (2016) has proven in her study of federal housing policy in the mid-twentieth century, the relationship between Indians and inner-city homelessness was anything but accidental. Returning American Indian veterans faced a set of conditions guaranteed to drive them into cities, as Congressional policies designed to lead to termination of treaty obligations made conditions on reservations difficult, while American Indian veterans missed out on GI Bill benefits as it was assumed they were already wards of the state. Redlining policies reserved middle class suburbs for white citizens, which meant that help offered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) to relocate tribal citizens inevitably pushed them into blighted and impoverished inner city areas. Placing the urban poems after the Mangled series reinforces such an historical framing.

Frazier's work needs to be set within a wider phenomenon of an increasingly urban American Indian literature that has grown up since the 1980s, as identified by Laura Furlan (2017). Prior to this point writings of the 'Native American Renaissance' era were mostly reservation-set, as in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1978), or James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* (1974), or in non-urban landscapes described through a Native American mythological lens, as in N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969) or Gerald Vizenor's *Darkness in St Louis Bearheart* (1978). For Furlan, such urban fiction should be read not just as diasporic but also as creating new possibilities for community. Theodore C. van Alst, Jr., a writer whose work in many ways resembles that of Frazier, provides one example of this process in *Sacred Smokes* (2018), where young poor Natives of different tribes enter into and mirror an urban landscape marked by the tags of different gangs. Furlan gives the examples of Janet Campbell Hale, whose *The Jailing of Cecelia Capture* (1985) 'invoke[s] intertribal Indigenous activism' (Furlan 72), and Susan Power and Louise Erdrich, who in different ways configure the cities of their novels as meeting-grounds, reviving older Indigenous associations and traditions in modern forms. In some ways, the shock of Frazier's de-'indianized'<sup>3</sup> poetry echoes the reception Hale received from critics such as Louis Owens, Frederick Hale and Ernst Stromberg, all of whom Furlan records as rejecting the novel: however, *Cecelia Capture* is a lawyer and activist, very different to Frazier's lost souls. Furlan might place Frazier next to Sherman Alexie, whose work most consistently draws attention to homelessness as one of the key Indigenous experiences, whether on reservations or in cities. But in Alexie's stories, as with nearly all the other texts that Furlan surveys, Indigenous markers create commonalities among homeless people, with an emphasis on the formation of new communities. Frazier's decision to remove such markers emphasizes the isolation and violence meted out to women and children in such settings, and again foregrounds the ongoing intergenerational effects of such abuse, lived out in a landscape of 'Night Train bottle in the gutter. Diaper in the gutter. / Flattened mutt in the gutter' ('10<sup>th</sup> Street Anthem,' 69).

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<sup>3</sup> My use of the signifier *indian* in lower case and italicised is intended to follow that of Anishinaabe novelist and critic Gerald Vizenor, who notes that 'The *indian* is a simulation, the absence of natives' (Vizenor, 1998, p. 15)

### Food as signifier of healing and solidarity

It might seem at this point that Frazier's choices, whether in terms of imagery, story or curation, can only create a poetry of misery, isolation and despair. This would reflect one of his avowed inspirations, Larry Levis, whose first book, *Wrecking Crew* (1972), was denigrated by Scott Wilson because 'little of the book suggests solutions to the troubles; the book is more an existentialist's litany of America's cruelty' (Wilson 1992, p.190). In our interview, Frazier addressed this point twice. He first rejected a hopeful vision of progress, stating that:

We do see more Natives . . . doing activist types of things, but I'm not really interested in that kind of work. I'm really interested in how Native people still live within their communities. And, again, I don't think it's that much different than the way that we lived in the thirties and forties (2018 pers. comm., September 28).

He then goes on later to explain that 'I don't address racism in my poems, because if I do then it's still in control of how I operate' (2018 pers. comm., September 28). His work does, however, intervene in specific context to create a sense of class solidarity while still describing a particularized Cherokee historical circumstance. In this last section of analysis, I intend to show how this works in practice by concentrating on Frazier's use of food imagery, contrasting this with the imagery of the contemporary food sovereignty movement.

Without slipping in too many biographical assumptions, it is clear that the food imagery, or rather imagery of the lack of food, springs from lived reality for Frazier. The speaker in 'One Room Apartment' may not literally be the poet's childhood self, but his quiet search for nourishment while his passed-out mother and her lover snore is unmistakably based on experience. In the repetition of 'I search the cabinet / and ice box,' (*Dark Thirty* 33), the reader is brought into the restless, endless attempt to find something to satisfy hunger in stale biscuits, shriveled fruit, and congealed milk. When food does come up, it is unmistakably an American *cucina povera*. For instance, in 'Half Life':

Pinto beans,  
                   salt meat melted into the juice—  
 cornbread,  
                   mustard  
                   yellowing the mash.

Can-shaped meat,  
                   sliced,  
                   fried in bacon grease. (*Aurum* 38)

All of this is accompanied by alcohol, perhaps inevitably given the focus on violence and prostitution as survival mechanisms, whether in the form of cheap beer, cheap whisky or mouthwash. The last makes particularly clear the functional quality of drink for the characters in these poems, which is never described for taste or pleasure.

These images do not appear in a vacuum. As Frazier will undoubtedly be aware, Indigenous food sovereignty has in recent years become a locus of scholarly enquiry, with multiple titles (e.g. Frisbie 2018; Sherman 2017; Salmon 2012; Mihesuah 2005; Swentzell 2016; Dunkel 2017; Robidoux and Mason 2017) exploring methods of reviving seemingly forgotten or erased foodways. It has become a topic of popular discussion among Indigenous activists: one of the most active Facebook pages on any Native American topic, the group *Food Sovereignty is Tribal Sovereignty* (which asks non-Natives to refrain from requesting membership) claims more than 7,000 members and hosts multiple active discussions daily. And food sovereignty has also become big business. Sean Sherman's cookbook *The Sioux Chef's Indigenous Kitchen* (Sherman and Dooley 2017), a landmark reimagining of traditional ingredients using modern cooking methods, has been promoted by the *Today Show*, *NPR*, *The New York Times*, and many other media outlets, while his 2016 Kickstarter for a restaurant project, also to be called *The Sioux Chef*, closed having raised \$148,728, nearly 50% higher than its original stated goal. The publicity for the book gives some idea of the kinds of food being celebrated in this movement, stating that

Sherman dispels outdated notions of Native American fare—no fry bread or Indian tacos here—and no European staples such as wheat flour, dairy products, sugar, and domestic pork and beef. The *Sioux Chef's* healthful plates embrace venison and rabbit, river and lake trout, duck and quail, wild turkey, blueberries, sage, sumac, timsula or wild turnip, plums, purslane, and abundant wildflowers. Contemporary and authentic, his dishes feature cedar braised bison, griddled wild rice cakes, amaranth crackers with smoked white bean paste, three sisters salad, deviled duck eggs, smoked turkey soup, dried meats, roasted corn sorbet, and hazelnut-maple bites (University of Minnesota Press 2017).

Such descriptions may be mouthwatering, but they serve other purposes as well. The reclamation of Indigenous foodways represents the resurgence of cultures that from Independence to the termination policies of the 1950s had been presumed to be on the way to an inevitable oblivion. A growing market for Indigenous ingredients holds obvious potential for tribal governments, potentially replicating the commercial benefits that wild rice harvesting have brought Anishinaabe communities with new ingredients, not to mention enabling new reservation businesses, many of which are run on cooperative or profit-share lines. And the drive to eat healthy has particular resonances in Native American communities, which experience some of the worst rates of diabetes and other diet-related diseases in the Western world, with Native adults being 'twice as likely to die from diabetes as non-Hispanic white women in 2013' (Office of Minority Health 2016). Nonetheless, there is some cognitive dissonance in seeing foods branded as virtuous by means of their Indigenous connotations being served in a five-star restaurant, at a commissioned banquet, or from a high-end catering vans. (The Tatanka food truck, for example, in which Sherman has had some involvement, charges \$12 for a bowl of cedar-braised bison with wild rice and squash, around double the price of a standard fast food meal, and far more expensive than fried beans and canned commodity meat with a little mustard). Journalist Erica Rivera, in an online 2017 profile of Sherman for Minneapolis local paper *City Pages*, brings up the issue by noting that Sherman's eschewing European-origin meats comes at a financial cost: 'Compare prices at Lunds & Byerly's, where duck breast costs \$1.33 an ounce and chicken breast costs 33 cents an ounce. That might

not seem like a big difference until you're feeding a family' (Rivera 2017, para. 58) She also notes, in a pointed aside, that 'a large part of his audience is white' (Rivera 2017, para. 78).

Frazier's deliberate choice to avoid stereotypical Native signifiers means that he avoids both fry bread and the sort of branded-Indigenous healthfoods that are the signifiers of food sovereignty. One subtler use of food imagery, however, comes in the very first poem of *Dark Thirty*, 'Root Juice' (3), the only poem not arranged with others in a section and therefore possibly to be considered as an overarching principle. In this poem, an unnamed 'he' 'walks out of the junkyard,' then drinks from an old plastic jug that contains an unnamed liquid 'pickled in a brine of spit and corn.' Although the root that makes the root juice is not named, it seems likely to be snakeroot – a plant referred to directly in 'Chaac,' a poem from *Aurum* that also portrays a homemade remedy, the 'ropy strands' (14) of which directly echo 'the undulating root' in the 2-liter jug in 'Root Juice.' Snakeroot (*Actaea racemosa*) is a traditional remedy used by Choctaw people for rattlesnake bites (Howe 2014, p.86), hence the name, and by Cherokee traditional doctors 'for general malaise, gynecopathy (diseases peculiar to women), kidney ailments, malaria, rheumatism, and sore throat' (McKenna, Jones *et al* 2001, p. 94), a list of ailments that demonstrates the power ascribed to this plant. The entire book, therefore – indeed, both books – can be seen as a form of medicine, but one mainly available to people already familiar with the medicine. As Frazier says, this is a poetry explicitly designed to be read primarily by a Cherokee, rather than a white audience, and this opening signals that despite the surface of pessimism and despair he intends the books to be a form of healing.<sup>4</sup> Personal healing, to be sure, but grounded in community knowledge.

There is another use of food imagery that recurs in both Frazier's collections that seems to gesture beyond merely personal healing, however. In the poem 'Eating against a Wall' his speaker sees a couple eating noodles outdoors from a bowl, 'slurping them up,' an image that directly follows the 'tortillas, / pinto beans and potatoes' offered to the speaker of 'Stranded' by Spanish speaking laborers (*Dark Thirty* 78, 77). The story of a first introduction to eating with chopsticks is fleshed out considerably in the poem 'Sun Perch' (*Aurum* 12-13), where the narrator, again a neglected child, has been left home starving for three days, and is taken in by a Vietnamese family for supper:

the fish, perhaps lightly steamed, then wok-fried, charred  
along the belly, fins crisped, mouth open from its last breath, fossilized  
in a reduction of fish sauce and honey

The contrast with the moldy food and violence offered by the descriptions of home in Frazier's poetry is telling, and deliberate. The story is part of a meditation on memory inspired by the narrator's baby son, whose gasping mouth at birth metonymically links with the gasping mouth of the fish, both placed against the ironic description of 'what all boys wished for, a way of remembering how air rushes from your body / after being socked in the gut.' In 'Eating against a Wall' the eaters are not explicitly racialized – indeed, in all three poems the racial coding is indirect and done through the naming of languages – but the way that they eat squatting down again seems

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<sup>4</sup> I will take a moment here to acknowledge that as a white British critic I am likely to have missed many Cherokee-specific signifiers in this text. That does not invalidate my analysis, but I hope to soon be reading articles by Cherokee critics that will unpack Frazier's work in all sorts of ways not available to me.



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