

Indigenous Food Sovereignty, Food Relations, and Diabetes: Embodying reciprocity through lessons and stories from a Nuu-chah-nulth gathering

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Abstract

For Indigenous Peoples, culturally informed beliefs, values, and practices that safeguard health are embedded in deep-time relationships with traditional territories and food systems. While Western industrialized societies have a long documented history with chronic diseases, Elders speak of lived memories of Indigenous Peoples being free of chronic disease, including type 2 diabetes, when in relationship with pre-contact food systems. Today, Indigenous Peoples of all ages experience higher rates of type 2 diabetes due to a history of colonialism. This paper uses the method of storytelling, centering two Indigenous Peoples' lived experiences of diabetes and food relations presented at a Nuu-chah-nulth gathering, shared with, and reflected upon by two Indigenous scholars working in Indigenous food sovereignty. By looking to ancestral stories of strength and survival, Indigenous practices of reciprocity, gifting, and sharing, alongside contemporary lived experiences, this paper reflects on how Indigenous food sovereignty and diabetes care are inextricably linked.

Indigenization Statement

The following paper centres stories shared at a Nuu-chah-nulth community engagement gathering. The first author and primary researcher, Rachel Greening (Ts'msyen, from Lax Kw'alaams, PhD candidate), is a Registered Dietitian and Certified Diabetes Educator working for the Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council, the community setting for this research. Nitanis Desjarlais (Cree) and ᓃᓐᓐᓐᓐᓐ (John Rampanen) (Nuu-chah-nulth, from Ahousaht) are food educators, activists, and storytellers. ᓃᓐᓐᓐᓐᓐ also sits as Chief Councillor for the Nation of Ahousaht. Nitanis and ᓃᓐᓐᓐᓐᓐ are raising their children immersed in a land-based lifestyle, in

traditional Ahousaht territory. Tabitha Robin (Cree/Métis) is a gardener, seed keeper, and food studies scholar who has been working in Indigenous food sovereignty for 20 years.

Introduction

For Indigenous Peoples¹, culturally informed beliefs, values, and practices that safeguard health are embedded in deep-time relationships with traditional territories and food systems (Coté, 2016; Daigle, 2019; Ray et al., 2019; Robin (Martens), 2021; Stelkia et al., 2021). While industrialized Western societies have a long documented history of chronic diseases (Weisz, 2014), Elders speak of living memories of Indigenous Peoples being free of chronic disease, including type 2 diabetes, when in relationship with pre-contact food systems. Yet globally today, Indigenous populations of all ages experience higher rates of diabetes, particularly type 2 diabetes²³ and gestational diabetes. While dominant biomedical narratives in health professions continue to focus on individual lifestyle choices and poor genetics⁴, current literature on Indigenous Peoples and diabetes takes a more nuanced approach, articulating drivers of diabetes as the result of cultural destruction and colonization of food systems (Coté, 2016; Ferreira & Lang, 2006).

In Canada, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC; 2015) articulates the systemic changes required to restore Indigenous⁵ Nations' self-determination, including Call to Action #18: "to acknowledge that the current state of Aboriginal health in Canada is a direct result of previous Canadian government policies, including residential schools" (p. 322). By

¹ Globally, Indigenous Peoples share many worldviews, especially as they relate to relationships to land.

² Diabetes does not affect all Indigenous Peoples equally; First Nations carry a considerably larger burden of the disease compared to Inuit and Métis populations (Halseth, 2019).

³ Hereafter, the term diabetes will be used to refer to type 2 diabetes.

⁴ See for example, 2013 Diabetes Canada Clinical Practice Guidelines.

⁵ Unless otherwise specified, hereafter, *Indigenous* will be used to speak to the experience of Indigenous Peoples and lands in what is now known as Canada. Following a distinctions-based approach, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit will be acknowledged where appropriate, and names of Nations and/or Tribes will be used in place of First Nations.

naming the intersectional and intergenerational effects of privileging Western knowledge while subjugating Indigenous Peoples, we can begin to address the root causes of the diabetes burden. This paper features four Indigenous food sovereignty practitioners who have been in a working relationship for many years. Through storytelling, the lived experiences of diabetes and food relations of Nitanis Desjarlais and *ñaasʔaʔuk* (John) Rampanen, presented at a Nuu-chah-nulth gathering, are centered; these experiences have been reflected upon by the additional authors.

The stories presented detail experiences of diabetes as a symptom of colonialism, nested in the destruction of Indigenous knowledge systems and capacities for traditional food procurement. This paper looks to Indigenous practices of food gifting and sharing to create a conversation on how Indigenous food sovereignty and diabetes care are inextricably linked, with the caveat that one must *live* the knowledge in order to know it (Simpson, 2011). To bring the discussion full circle, we conclude by bridging the conversation of diabetes with the original food-sharing institution of the Nuu-chah-nulth peoples—the potlatch, a complex political institution, ceremony, and expression of wealth distribution integral to coastal First Nations life.

The Nuu-chah-nulth

Formally known as Nootka, the Nuu-chah-nulth⁶ Nations “as we know them today”⁷ are Ahousaht, Ditidaht, Ehattesaht, Hesquiaht, Hupacasath, Huu-ay-aht, Kyuquot/Cheklesah, Mowachaht/Muchalaht, Nuchahtaht, Pacheedaht, Tla-o-qui-aht, Toquaht, Tseshaht, Uchucklesaht, and Ucluelet, and the Makah relatives in Washington state (Atleo, 2010, p. 76).

⁶ Loosely translated to “people who dwell along the mountains” ([Umeek] Atleo, 2004, p. 1).

⁷ “I say, ‘as we know them today’ because many Nuu-chah-nulth nations are amalgamations of older tribes.” (Atleo, 2010, p. 76).

The Nuu-chah-nulth-aht⁸ are bound as a unique peoples through several cultural factors, including shared dialects of the Wakashan language group, spiritual practices, governance systems, and the practice of whaling (Coté, 2010; George, 2003). Interconnecting these cultural factors is the potlatch ceremony, which, despite federal outlawing from 1885 to 1951, has consistently formed the framework for Nuu-chah-nulth food systems and lifeways (Clutesi, 1969).

The colonial disruption of food systems is a shared experience amongst all Indigenous Peoples (Burnett & Hay, 2023; Coté, 2010, 2016, 2022; Robin et al., 2021). The Canadian colonial process sought to eliminate and indoctrinate Indigenous Peoples and their knowledges (Government of Canada, 1996; Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). Legislated policies denied access to traditional foods through displacement and the outlawing of harvesting, sharing, and gifting traditional foods. Ceremonial life, such as the potlatch on the Pacific Northwest Coast, was criminalized to dismantle complex governance systems upheld by hereditary chiefs with sovereign rights and stewardship responsibilities to traditional territories and harvesting areas ([Umeek] Atleo, 2004; Coté, 2010; Davidson et al., 2018).

Further, whale overharvesting by settler commercial outfits and the subsequent outlawing of the hunt severely obstructed Nuu-chah-nulth ocean-based ways of life (Coté, 2010). Interference to foodways continued through exploitative commercial fishing methods (Atleo, 2010; Chief Louie, as cited in Bridge & Neary, 2013, p. 121), the destruction of traditional salmon weirs (Coté, 2022, p. 64-65), the enactment of licensing and allocation systems to favor settler commercial fishing vessels (Titian, 2021), and extractive clear-cut logging resulting in

⁸ The suffix -aht refers to ‘people of’ or ‘people’ or is “added to the end of the nation to indicate that we are from that place” (Atleo, 2010, p. 31). Nuu-chah-nulth-aht translates to Nuu-chah-nulth Peoples (see Cote, 2016, p. 11); Nuu-chah-nulth, by contrast, is the collective term for the Nations.

hillside erosion and loss of salmon bearing streams (Bridge & Neary, 2013). Additionally, three residential schools operated in Nuuchah-nulth territory between 1892 and 1983, disconnecting youth from their traditional knowledge systems, inclusive of the Alberni Residential School, infamous for its widespread abuse and nutrition experiments on unknowing children (Mosby, 2013; Nuuchah-nulth Tribal Council, 1996; Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). In congruence with displacement onto small, inadequate reserves, absent of seasonal harvesting grounds, the Nuuchah-nulth could no longer live a subsistence lifestyle.

Today, reclamation of food sovereignty is very real for the Nuuchah-nulth-aht. Contemporary measures shared by Nuuchah-nulth scholars Cliff Atleo (2010) and Charlotte Coté (2016) include: the securing of a rights-based fisheries after decades-long court battles, as well as community gardens, food-based ceremonies⁹, and land-based living (Coté, 2022). Additionally, work has been done on the restoration of traditional root (Pukonen, 2008) and clam gardens (Nuuchah-Nulth Youth Warrior Family, n.d.) - all part of a larger anticolonial movement to rebuild and strengthen sacred relationships to food and food systems, and the interconnectedness to health and well-being.

Food Sovereignty, Indigenous Ways of Knowing, and Health

This paper's theoretical framework builds on two bodies of literature. First, we conceptualize the strength and resiliency of Indigenous Peoples and knowledge systems in the face of colonialism, foundational to the food sovereignty movement. We also review framings of diabetes in Indigenous communities, addressing the gap in linking discussions of diabetes prevalence to Indigenous ways and applications of health and well-being.

⁹ Such as the first salmon ceremony.

Indigenous food sovereignty's potential to reduce diet-related disparities has not been well represented in the health literature to date (Blue Bird Jernigan et al., 2021). However, the intimate connections between food systems, land, well-being and culture is strong and well established (Coté, 2016, 2022; Dennis & Robin, 2020; Ray et al., 2019; Stelkia et al., 2021), these encompass: physical nourishment (Coté, 2022), relationships (Robin (Martens), 2021), spiritual connectedness ([La'goot] Greening, 2024), and the social-cultural values shaping one's responsibility to land, self, and community (Coté, 2016). As a health and well-being framework, Indigenous food sovereignty moves beyond offsetting food insecurity, and instead takes a wholistic approach, one that is rooted in ancestral teachings, values, and traditions (Coté, 2022).

Biomedical concepts that dominate conventional approaches to diabetes prevention and support illustrate a siloed way of conceptualizing health, viewing diabetes in isolation of other conditions, and absent of wholistic worldviews embodying body, mind, and spirit (Dennis & Robin, 2020). The unresponsiveness to traditional healing or medicines and traditional knowledges in diabetes care has been acknowledged by Diabetes Canada, though tangible strategies to overcome the deeply embedded biomedical ideology remain absent (Crowshoe et al., 2018).

Through storytelling, modern and ancestral conversations are woven together to define how Indigenous food sovereignty and diabetes care are inextricably linked. With both practical and theoretical applications in Western arenas and academic conversations, this paper will detail how Indigenous practices of sharing and gifting food - deeply embedded in mechanisms of governance, ceremony, and land stewardship, such as the potlatch¹⁰ - can be called upon to restore Indigenous health and well-being.

¹⁰ While the potlatch is specific to the West, in the East the giveaway is an important Indigenous practice.

Methodology and Methods

Research Design

The guiding framework of this paper prioritizes Indigenous knowledges and the value of story, experiential, and lived knowledge (Kovach, 2021; Simpson, 2011). In May 2022, a tiicacił (Tee Cha Chitl) ‘Getting Well Again’ Strengthening Gathering was hosted in Nuuchahnulth territory, on the traditional territory of the čišaaʔaṭh (Tseshahṭ) and hupačasath (Hupacasath). Participants were invited through existing contacts from the first author’s working relations. Traditional foods were centered and celebrated, with catering provided by a čišaaʔaṭh (Tseshahṭ) family. Ceremonial offerings of Uut Uuštukyuu Traditional Healers ensured proper protocol and prayers; Nuuchahnulth teachings, traditional medicine, brushings, and meal songs were woven throughout the event.

The family of náasʔaḷuk and Nitanis Desjarlais joined the event, their children hosting an interactive traditional food table. náasʔaḷuk opened the event with a keynote presentation, which was video recorded and shared with participants more widely post-event (NuuchahnulthWellness, 2022). Nitanis shared her personal experiences with diabetes and food relations.

Institutional ethics approval from the University of British Columbia was granted prior to the commencement of community engagement (H22-00895-A006). Gathering participants were informed of the research prior to participating in research activities, including a signed consent form and verbal disclosure by the primary researcher. Additionally, the Protocols and Principles for Conducting Research in a Nuuchahnulth Context were embedded throughout the entirety of the research process (Nuuchahnulth Tribal Council Research Ethics Committee, 2008).

Methods

Gathering

They take you on their lap, start teaching you on the table with food in your mouth, that you're going to swallow those teachings through you. That's what their teachings were. They do it when they're feeding you so that you're going to swallow it, then it's going to get into you. They did this to me every meal almost. (Stanley Sam, Ahousaht – as quoted in Keitlah, 1995, p. 194)

For the Nuu-chah-nulth, offering teachings, or *haaḥuupa*, over mealtime assures the simultaneous digestion of teachings and food (Keitlah, 1995). Participants gathered around food to hear teachings and share their diabetes experiences (Greening (Dickens) et al., 2023).

Centering gathering as methodology prioritized the *process* of the event, which highly influences the outcome of Indigenous engagements (Kovach, 2021).

Storytelling

For Indigenous Peoples, the method of storytelling is deeply embedded in oral tradition and is the primary way that history, knowledge, and teachings are carried through families and communities. In the context of sharing lived experiences of diabetes and food relations, storytelling functions as a method of meaning-making, enabling participants, as the listeners, to filter the story through their own experience and adapt relevant information into their own life. In this way, story is also inherently relational; the listener and the sharer are both equal participants in a dynamic connection and responsibility is imbued onto all those active in the process (Kovach, 2021; Simpson, 2011).

During the Gathering, *ñaasʔaḥuk* used story in his keynote address to share his personal experiences and teachings from Elders, and Nitanis contributed and shared her family's lived experience with diabetes. Both *ñaasʔaḥuk* and Nitanis are notable leaders within the Indigenous food sovereignty movement (see Coté, 2022), and their stories were purposefully highlighted for

the depth, influence, and relationality they carry. As a story can never be decontextualized from the teller (Kovach, 2021), their contributions grounded the research in relationship and accountability, core principles of Indigenous methodologies.

Data Analysis

No notes were taken during the event, as appropriate with ceremonial protocols. Reflective journaling after the event captured the primary author's observations, guiding the analysis. Recordings from Nitanis's and náasʔaʔuk's contributions were transcribed by research assistants, and thematic development was completed by the primary and fourth author, interpreting patterns of meaning. Nuu-chah-nulth language, as spoken by náasʔaʔuk and used in the results, was transcribed into the Nuu-chah-nulth orthography by náasʔaʔuk. Transcriptions and meaning making were validated with Nitanis and náasʔaʔuk after analysis. These results, along with additional event data, were compiled in a community report and distributed to participants using online and hard copy formats (Greening (Dickens) et al., 2023).

Results

The Gathering highlighted the social dimensions of food for Nuu-chah-nulth-aht. By reclaiming identity, land, and place, participants shared their own lived experience of healing through connection with traditional foods. Nitanis, náasʔaʔuk, and their family are engaging daily in Indigenous food sovereignty; the following themes emerged from their shared stories: If the land is hurt, the people are hurt; resilience; food as wealth; and, looking forward.

If the Land is Hurt, the People are Hurt

The colonial exploitation and commodification of the Nuu-chah-nulth food environment has altered the Nuu-chah-nulth-aht's ability to be self-sustaining. For náasʔaʔuk, returning home to reconnect to land and culture revealed the land itself needed healing:

I kind of had this misconception in my mind that you just go out onto the land and somehow the land is going to heal you... But what really kind of caught me by surprise... was that the land was just as damaged and just as traumatized as we are. And when we'd look up at the mountain behind us, it was clear-cut. And there were stumps sticking out. And it wasn't the only one; there was mountain, nučii after nučii [mountain after mountain], just bald. All the areas where our salmon would go to migrate, just destroyed, just littered with leftovers, the remains that they couldn't take with them. Landslides that had just eroded, you know, these beautiful mountains, destroying habitats and homes of how many, there are countless other lifeforms that are out there.

Understanding the land as no longer able to sustain a lifeway that once kept land-based cultures strong, náasʔaʔuk rejects the notion of chronic disease as the result of ethnicity or inferior genetics.

You know, there are all these negative statistics that are all constantly available to us, to remind us of just how weak or inferior we are, it seems. And we have to question that. We have to determine for ourselves, is that true? And yes, we are impacted, but is it because of our ethnicity? Is it because of being quuʔas¹¹ like we're often told that we're genetically predisposed to certain diseases because of the ancestry that we have. Or is it more related to this way of life that was forced upon us and the way of life that we were forcibly removed from? Which I think is more the truth.

Using the metaphor of a wave, náasʔaʔuk expressed the ongoing colonial assault on Indigenous lives, their multiple phases all stemming from the same root.

Over the last few generations, it's been like a series of waves that just keep coming, over and over, and washing over our lands each time. muuʔšiʔ, that concept of a flood. And when the flood comes up and the water has receded and the land is transformed, we often find ourselves confused trying to pick up the pieces, trying to figure out where we're at, where we're going to go, and all those things. And we haven't not been here before. We have been here many times. And I find hopefulness in that fact.

¹¹ quuʔas is translated as people. Today it is used to refer to native people. For more context on what being quuʔas means for the Nuu-chah-nulth see Keitlah (1995, p. 20-30).

Like our ancestors' experiences, Indigenous Peoples continue to be confronted with unique and unfamiliar challenges in the face of a new existence. This new reality, as shared by náasʔaʔuk, has drastically changed our way of life; the diabetes burden is one part of this new reality.

So, when we're taking on these challenges, if it's diabetes like we're acknowledging today and labelling it for what it is... and how it impacts each of us on a personal level, on a family level, on a community level. That is the same way as our ancestors, qʷaaʔapitqinʔaaʔ 'the way we used to be', kʷisapʔatmitqin 'the changes that happened to us' when the mamal̓ni¹² arrived and our whole world was changed', kʷiishinčičiʔukqin maatmaas 'the world became very different', now qʷaaʔapʔaʔqin ʔah 'the way we are today', this is a whole different reality that we're living in.

Resilience

náasʔaʔuk encouraged listeners to reframe our understanding of diabetes - not as inevitable, but as imposed by colonial forces and better supported by renewed ways of understanding the root cause.

So when we're looking forward and bringing back to, more directly, this issue that we're here to really focus on, to hyperfocus on: diabetes. It's preventable. In almost all parts, it's something that we can avoid if we can elevate our way of thinking and being around these things. And quite often, and I know in my own life and with my own health, it's usually only too late when we start to really kind of understand those pieces.

Indigenous Peoples have always found strength in stories. By wrapping lessons and stories of survival and resilience in context, we gain hold of a new reality. náasʔaʔuk brought listeners back to a time when earthquakes and tidal waves shook the earth, drawing strength from Nuuchahnulth survival stories.

We have stories that go way back in our history, we have stories of survival. tiicswiitniš ʔiimuut tuumaqʔ 'we survived an extended time of darkness' that occurred a long time ago when the world went dark for many, many days if not weeks or months'. tiicswiimitniš ʔaaqiiʔ ʔuhʔiis muuʔsiʔ 'we survived earthquakes and tidal waves'. Our people have been very resilient, and we've taken on many different challenges, and when we start to look back at those stories and that history and the teachings and the legacy, the resilience that has been built by our people has pushed forward.

¹² mamal̓ni translates to people with floating houses, or people who came off the sea, and is used to refer to people of European decent.

Just as we look to our ancestral stories for strength, personal narratives and life experiences also offer resilience. náasʔaʔuk encouraged listeners to share vulnerable experiences, especially with children, helping them to understand the colonial past and move forward with strength.

And so, the hopes are that for our children and the next following generations, it doesn't have to be too late for them to have that understanding. That they can be raised and groomed and nurtured in a way where they are going to be more predisposed to be healthy. Where they're genetically predisposed to be strong. Where they're going to live long lives and have a long-life expectancy. haahtuuʔ we call that 'when you live well over the age of 100', which used to be common. We want to see that become common again. And how do we do that? Well, we share our stories. We share our experiences; whether they're hard stories and challenging stories of perseverance and resilience and hardship; or if they're stories of success, like going out onto the land and some of the other things that we have as families to share... We need to be able to hear them, the young ones, and see and have that transparency and that honesty and that approach to life so that they're not confused by things that they encounter later on in their life as adults.

Stories can regenerate and provide a motivating force, not unlike food which can also reawaken a strength from within. Reconnecting and sharing traditional foods with Elders brought considerations of the healing spirit of traditional foods.

The Elders that came into those spaces were reminded and triggered. We hear that term and we use that term so often with negative connotation, which is rightfully so, because we have so many negative triggers around us as quuʔas people, and yet there are positive triggers. And I remember seeing it, and feeling it, when the children sing and dance, that's part of the solution or the remedy towards the trauma that we feel as a people. When we taste foods for the first time again and we remind our palates, our traditional palate, of those foods, it's feeding our spirit as well as our body. And so, you know there's so many different layers to the importance and the significance that our food has to offer.

The healing properties of traditional foods are understood holistically. náasʔaʔuk speaks to the relationality and sacredness of land and traditional foods, and how embodying the reciprocal nature is integral for upholding Nuuchahnulth worldviews.

And so, the medicines of our ancestors, the practices that we have, all of the ways that our ancestors formed a way of life that was interconnected with this environment. You know, we often hear the term hišukʔiš cawaak or hišukʔniš cawaak, 'we are all one and interconnected', or cawaackʷiniš, that 'we all come from one source or one root'.

Food as Wealth

When Indigenous Peoples were denied access to traditional foods (Dennis & Robin, 2020), innovativeness turned commodity foods into survival foods, as seen in the transformation of flour, lard, baking soda and salt into bannock or ‘fry bread’. Nitanis shares how her grandmother (Ts’msyen) also used commodity foods to express conceptions of relationality, gifting and sharing, and a way to show love.

...when they took away the access to our foods, we were given these big things of flour, big things of sugar, big things of salt and lard in replacement. So, what the grandmothers did is they took that, and they turned it into something that became their love that they put into their food... And one of the things [my grandmother] did was that she loved to provide food to all her family and all her kids. So, she would get us grandkids to help her make bread.

Commodity foods were never meant to allow Indigenous Peoples to thrive. For Nitanis’s grandmother, using commodity foods to replace traditional foods and practices around gifting, sharing, and expressing love contributed to diabetes and its complications.

And my grandmother, with her diabetes and with her one leg, would be sitting at the table and kneading the bread and kneading all her love into this bread. And then she would make the loaves that would fill up the table, I don’t know how many loaves. And then she would take them and we would divvy them up to each of the family. And every week she would gift a whole bunch of bread to each of the family. And my dad grew up having that bread. And we all knew it didn’t matter what, we always had that bread from my grandmother until she passed. And she passed from diabetes. We didn’t know at that time that it was diet-related. We didn’t know that the love she was putting into the bread was the very bread that was killing us... But my dad grew up with this love and this bread, and then he got diabetes.

Just as traditional foods trigger positive memories in Elders, foods from childhood can trigger feelings of love and connection. Despite Nitanis’ attempts to heal her father with traditional foods, he would seek out the foods from his childhood, the foods that deeply connected him to his mother.

[W]hen his diabetes started getting worse and the complications reached his internal organs... He was in Vancouver, he would hide the foods... I found scones in his cupboards. I was bringing him oolichan grease and fish because I was like “Our foods are our medicine. Our foods are our medicine.” And I would give it to him. But I would keep finding these hidden foods. And it hit me, that’s when I understood. That was his love. That

was his mom. That's the connection that's so deeply embedded that if you take that away, it's like you're taking away something that fills me up with the sense of love. You can say it's like addiction or food addiction. But this part was deeper than that. So, my dad, he didn't make it after the complications he had with heart disease.

Later, Nitanis's father made the connection between food, relationships to food, and diabetes.

...he really wanted to stress to us "I don't want to go. I understand now. I understand what this disease is. And it's our food and our relationship to food." And he said "I'm really proud of you Nitanis. What you are doing with your kids and going out and harvesting." And I took that message, and when my dad passed away on October 23rd, 2010, I sat at the table and I said to my children "We have to change the way that we see our food."

For Nitanis and her family, this experience initiated their journey of unraveling unhealthy relationships with food, while building new ones with foods from their lands. They rarely celebrate with commodity foods, or foods that have led to her family's suffering, and her children experience their parents' love through the gifting and sharing of traditional foods.

I want my children to see the love that I give to them is with the traditional foods. When they see that I went out and I harvested these berries and I picked these berries, that that love is going into the berries when I give it to them. So that the relationship they have with food, they see "Oh my dad went out and got clams." That's love. And the bread, and those pieces, and the čamas [sweet foods] are not what we celebrate. We celebrate the maayi [salmonberry shoots] or the different foods that come within the seasons. And I would take them out and I want them to know that's love. Because for me, I would never want them to lose me in that way because of food and our diet and our way of life.

Looking Forward

By connecting diabetes with the removal of Indigenous Peoples from land and culture, náas?aľuk shares how he and his wife fully embrace the theory of going back to the land to heal, to "*connect with that piece of who we are*".

So I share [this] story because when we went out, I didn't know what I was doing. I had young children and my wife, she was pregnant, and we knew it was important to go out to the land. We knew it was important to connect with that piece of who we are, that that was a huge disconnect. And so, we did it and we brought our children, and they learned alongside us, and it was like we were all babies, we were all naayaqak, we were all just learning these pieces and I remember it being such a jubilant and joyous type of celebratory experience.

Alongside providing the nourishment of harvesting, processing, eating, and sharing traditional foods, he shares how the land also reconnected their young family to Elders, stories, and language.

And so, we would harvest these foods and bring them back into cùumaʔas [Port Alberni] here, and sit with Elders and adopted grandparents... and it wasn't about just picking their brains for information, or "How do you say this?" and "How do you say that?", although those were part of the conversation from time to time. But what it turned out to be was just building a relationship, rebuilding and repairing a relationship with our Elders, that I didn't have in my life but I wanted to ensure that the children had in theirs. That they would have grandparents that they could go to and talk to, that they could hear stories, they could hear the language, they could have these things that as an adult, as a father, I wasn't yet able to provide to them.

náasʔaʔuk and his family went back to teachings from Elders, shifting from wanting to fix the land, to listening to the land.

[A] teaching that Uncle Simon would always share, ʔuuʔuušwaaʔiš maamati, ʔuuʔuušwaaʔiš hitaqlasʔi. naʔaatahi "sometimes the birds have something to say, sometimes the forest has something to say. All you have to do is listen". And in this world that we live in, we often just don't do that.

...So that became a practice in our family too...When we think of hišukʔiš cawaak [everything is interconnected] and to me it means that we're all on one level playing field as living beings in this environment... going out and listening is one that has brought a lot of really valuable lessons for us... not trying to fix it right away or do those things, but just our relationship, our communication with the land. Listening, and just being present.

For náasʔaʔuk, the Elder's teachings placed profound importance on individuals figuring out their own path based on their interpretations of the teachings and stories.

...and it took me a long time to realize that piece, the importance of what was being said in our language and how powerful and how valuable and how important those teachings are. waawaacakukqin ʔiqhmuutʔukqin 'the sayings of our ancient ones' and haahuupačakuk naatnaniiqsu 'the teachings of our elders and ancestors'.

Discussion

Indigenous Peoples and Diabetes

With the confinement of Indigenous Peoples onto reserves, subsistence lifeways were replaced with commodity rations, framed as ‘gifts’ of flour, lard, salt, and sugar (Kelm, 1998). This coincided with the erosion of traditional food systems, through environmental devastation, a by-product of extractive industries, the destruction of foods and abilities to procure, and residential schools’ intentional severance of land-based knowledge systems (Burnett & Hay, 2023; Kelm, 1998; Robin et al., 2021; Tobias & Richmond, 2014). Conjointly, the result was, and is, a breeding ground for poverty, food insecurity, cultural disconnect, and trauma - the foundation for intergenerational Indigenous health disparities such as diabetes (Ferreira & Lang, 2006; Halseth, 2019).

Like many Nuu-chah-nulth-aht, Nitanis and áaasʔaʔuk’s stories exemplify diabetes as a condition imparted on Indigenous Peoples; “*this way of life that was forced upon us and the way of life that we were forcibly removed from,*” inflamed by the provisions of residential school foods “not fit for human consumption”, and completely devoid of love (Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council, 1996). Both shared the sentiment and lived experiences of their ancestors, the transformation from food-resource richness to survival-poverty foods. These transformations exist within fluctuations of complex political systems, which have long institutionalized the sharing of food and wealth, the essence of which continues today. For the Nuu-chah-nulth-aht, like many neighbouring coastal First Nations, the reclamation of these networks and political systems, such as the potlatch ceremony, holds insight into diabetes care through its primary functions in the redistribution and reciprocity of food and wealth.

Potlatch and Reciprocity

The structural poverty imposed through colonialism, now reflected in a disproportionate diabetes burden, stands in sharp contrast to the traditional systems of abundance, reciprocity, and

ecological wealth that once supported robust health. For many Indigenous societies, food is wealth, a concept deeply embedded in the potlatch ceremony. Integral to Pacific Coastal First Nation life, this concept is exemplified in the feast hall, when host chiefs ceremonially distribute food and material goods to invited guests who come to witness community governance, including rights to harvesting areas and responsibilities associated with them ([Umeek] Atleo, 2004; Clutesi, 1969; Coté, 2010; Davidson et al., 2018). The givers' societal status is enabled through the sharing of resources from territorial wealth. As such, a chief's wealth is dependent on their connection to the natural landscape and specific territory.

In addition to redistributing wealth in return for status recognition, the potlatch connects complex expressions of land and social governance systems, asserting the social fabric of community life. Equally important, and potentially overlooked, is how the potlatch ceremony expresses how people obtain and share food (Coté, 2010, 2022). Wet'suwet'en and Gitksan hereditary chiefs Gisday Wa and Delgam Uukw (1992) describe how a potlatch's¹³ food demonstrates the wealth of the chiefs House, and the ability of the House to manage its territories and trade with others. Gitksan Chief Delgam Uukw shares:

My power is carried in my House's histories, songs, dances and crests. It is recreated at the Feast when the histories are told, the songs and dances performed, and the crests displayed. With the wealth that comes from respectful use of the territory, the House feeds the name of the Chief in the Feast Hall. In this way, the law, the chief, the territory, and the Feast become one. The unity of the chief's authority and his House's ownership of its territory are witnessed and thus affirmed by the other chiefs in the Feast. (Gisday Wa & Delgam Uukw, 1992, p. 7-8)

The potlatch institution continues to influence contemporary coastal First Nations peoples' daily lives, revealed in the complexity of harvesting for one's House, and in simple day-to-day relationships of households and families. In both scenarios, the distribution of food wealth

¹³ Often, 'Feast' and potlatch are used interchangeably.

is simultaneously the foundation of one's social connections, and actively acknowledges kinship and coexistence with the natural world. náasʔaʔuk and other Nuu-chah-nulth-aht have expressed these relationships through the philosophy of hišukʔiš cawaak [everything is interconnected] ([Umeek] Atleo, 2004). Just as obtaining and sharing of food is the foundation of potlatching peoples' economies, the gifting and sharing of food binds everyone into interdependent relationships and ongoing cycles of reciprocity. Such is the gift economy, as described by Robin Wall Kimmerer (2024), a Citizen of the Potawatomi Nation, where "wealth is understood as having enough to share, and the practice for dealing with abundance is to give it away" (p. 32-33).

For the Nuu-chah-nulth, one of the most important potlatches¹⁴ a chief could hold, and a prime example of dealing with abundance through the gift economy, was the *tlaqsit*, or whale-oil potlatch, where a chief would distribute whale oil from a successful hunt in return for recognition of social status (Coté, 2010). In a modern-day context, reciprocity is exemplified through Nuu-chah-nulth-aht expressing wealth as the ability to access and gift sea resources (Manson, 2018), and in náasʔaʔuk's sentiment of taking care of, and being in relationship with the land. By defining the intricacies of the potlatching institution, the spirit of reciprocity is defined for the Nuu-chah-nulth and other coastal First Nations through both complex and quotidian food-sharing practices.

Food Sharing and Gifting in the Modern Day

Preserving the inherent values of food gifting and sharing, the core of potlatch events, is especially relevant during a time when Indigenous Peoples in Canada experience a higher

¹⁴ The word potlatch originates from the Nuu-chah-nulth verb *pachitle* (to give). Though, *potlatch* is not a Nuu-chah-nulth word; during precontact times specific ceremonial occasion had very specific names (Atleo, 2004 p. 3).

prevalence of poverty, the result of colonial systems, or as described by náasʔaʔuk, the waves of colonial assault (Halseth, 2019). The gifting and sharing of traditional foods has been targeted by federal and provincial policies (Robin et al., 2021) resulting in: forced dependence on government rations or treaty annuities, then state-funded commodities programs; a reliance on commodity food systems; food insecurity; lack of access to traditional and nutritious foods; forced sedentarization; and a disconnect from traditional food knowledge systems, all driving a higher burden of disease on Indigenous Peoples, on their homelands, and the critical link between the two (Burnett & Hay, 2023; Côté, 2016, 2022; Dennis & Robin, 2020).

Nitanis's story of her grandmother's redistribution of wealth through sharing and gifting of food, and náasʔaʔuk's stories of Nuu-chah-nulth survival guides listeners to draw from their shared ancestors' resilience, teachings, and traditions. Similar stories of great floods, countered with acts of resilience, are shared by many Indigenous Peoples¹⁵. Simultaneously, Indigenous Peoples collectively have many shared worldviews (Little Bear, 2000). These worldviews give rise to values that inform Indigenous Peoples' continued protection of food harvesting grounds, waters, and knowledge systems (see Daigle, 2019), and the concept of relationality and interdependence. Blackfoot scholar Leroy Little Bear (2000) defines the value of sharing within the concept of relationships; "The Aboriginal value of sharing manifests itself in relationships. Relationships result from interactions with the group and with all of creation" (p. 4).

Nuu-chah-nulth scholar Johnny Manson (2018) describes how, in defiance of colonial policies and actions, his peoples' food harvesting practices continue to reflect innovativeness, adapting tradition and governing logics to the current reality. For example, when Nuu-chah-nulth fishermen go harvesting, they simultaneously engage in traditional values and teachings that tend

¹⁵ See McMillan (1996, p. 54, 160) for Tseshaht, Toquaht and Makah reference to, and oral history of, the great floods, and Bridge & Neary (2013, p. 30) for reference to Huu-ay-aht great floods.

to their local foodways, while navigating colonial jurisdiction, economic ideologies, and community obligations. Food harvesting inevitably leads to food sharing and gifting, and though adapted to fit the contemporary context, these practices are embedded in gratitude, embodying the concept of relational reciprocity, attached to community responsibility.

For Indigenous Peoples, the value and practice of sharing traditional foods is deeply intertwined in daily life. In a survey of First Nation adults over a 12-month period (First Nations Information Governance Centre [FNIGC], 2018), approximately 90% of respondents reported having traditional foods shared with their household (FNIGC, 2018). Contemporary food sharing is expressed in many forms, existing outside systems of indebtedness, and can be wholly social and spiritual, such as: gifting a visitor the last of one's food (Robin (Martens), 2021); being generous to visitors with food (Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council, 1996)¹⁶; sharing one's harvest abundance (Kimmerer, 2024); burning food, or offering tobacco for one's ancestors (Kuokkanen, 2007); and the downward flow of food to younger kin. Nitanis' gifting of food to her children is an assertion of love, also echoed by scholars, including Genevieve Vaughan, "... the gift economy of mothering – nurturing mothers practice unilateral giving to their children" (see Kuokkanen, 2007, p. 31, and Kimmerer, 2024, p. 18).

Indigenous Peoples' stories of survival are not tales of the past. The inventiveness of our mothers and grandmothers continues today, as they transform rations and commodity foods into survival foods. When Nitanis's grandmother "*took that [flour, sugar, salt and lard]*" and "*turned it into something,*" that became their love that they put into that food, and when náasʔaʔuk and his family gift traditional foods to Elders, triggering their palates and feeding their spirits, these

¹⁶ For the Nuu-chah-nulth, "the first thing that you do when you have visitors is to feed them and then you ask them how they are, what kind of news they are bringing from their own village." (Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council, 1996, p. 131)

acts of love. In the contemporary context, the Indigenous gifting logic continues to be grounded in reciprocity and relational obligations (Kimmerer, 2024; Kuokkanen, 2007). Simultaneously, as Indigenous Peoples adjust to the current colonial reality, including wage economies and commodity food systems, traditions, and values, including those around gifting and sharing traditional food, are a living reality¹⁷.

Conclusion

Our stories of great floods demonstrate a shared resiliency in our people. Our ability to preserve cultural teachings and ceremonies in the face of ongoing colonialism enables the survival of our unique cultures. We draw from the resistance and stories of our ancestors, who, in secret, moved the potlatch ceremony underground, allowing the survival of our culture, traditions, and practices for the next generation (Clutesi, 1969; Davidson et al., 2018). As we work to revive the potlatch ceremony, upholding a sacred responsibility to our ancestors, we are simultaneously engaging in Indigenous worldviews and anticolonial ideologies. This is synchronous with the Indigenous food sovereignty movement, a movement involving Indigenous Peoples globally (Grey & Patel, 2015).

The Indigenous food sovereignty movement is resurrecting practices and teachings that went underground, protected by ancestral determination to preserve knowledges and teachings¹⁸. Nitanis's grandmother, like many Indigenous Peoples, developed a creative response to the imposition of colonial provisions as an act of resistance to a system designed to eliminate her.

¹⁷ In addition to the examples of reclaiming food traditions and values shared throughout this paper, Indigenous communities are also embedding traditional food revitalization throughout language, healing, art programs, land-based learning opportunities. Examples include; on-reserve school curriculums (e.g., Gitga'at spring harvest camp at Kiel (Gitga'at Nation, n.d.) and the seal hunt revitalization with Nuuchahnulth Youth Warrior Family (O'Malley, 2024).

¹⁸ Leanne Simpson and Kiera Ladner write about "the countless acts of hidden resistance and kitchen table resistance, aimed at ensuring children and grandchildren could live as Indigenous Peoples." (Simpson, 2011, p. 101)

Just as colonial interference displaced traditional foods and impacted access, residential schools manipulated how we prepare and consume foods, our relationship with food, and the social framework informing our food choices¹⁹. Nitanis and náasʔaʔuk are working to unravel this colonial harm, while at the same time reviving ancestral teachings around food sovereignty²⁰ and engaging in Indigenous gifting and sharing practices grounded in cultural responsibilities and relationships (Coté, 2022, p. 113-117). These acts reject the colonially informed notions that humans are separate from the land and embody the reciprocal nature of being in relationship with the land. By *listening*, both to the landscapes and to the stories and teachings of Elders, they are recasting the ways in which love is expressed through food, both to their children, where “*they can be raised and groomed and nurtured in a way where they are going to be more predisposed to be healthy,*” and to the land. In this way, the resurgence of Indigenous food sovereignty, deeply enmeshed in reciprocity, is a continuation of resistance against settler colonialism, and not unlike the survival of the potlatch ceremony, a mechanism for achieving Indigenous self-determination (Coté, 2016; Grey & Patel, 2015). The stories presented here mirror the lives of many Indigenous Peoples who are reviving, relearning, and reclaiming their traditional cultures and lifeways in relational, reciprocal, and fluid contexts within which they were originally generated. As we map our way out of colonial perceptions of health and well-being and live our culture by looking to the stories and teachings that our ancestors held, we can begin to regenerate, revitalize, and remember remedies for healing. Type 2 diabetes, a product of

¹⁹ For example, the Nuu-chah-nulth residential school experience reports on a loss of practices around food, including the idea of being generous around food, as well as the significant role food plays in ceremonial and spiritual life (Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council, 1996, p. 131).

²⁰ As described by Cliff Atleo (2010) “The truth is that we will have to re-learn, like we must re-learn a lot of things, including our teachings and our languages” in reference to “re-awakening our fishing spirit” (p. 105).

colonialism and being severed from our traditional food systems, will find its remedy in Indigenous food sovereignty movements.

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