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Paper #1: Personal Response

ENGL 103-06

### Naiveté and the Pain of Hindsight

Natalie Diaz's poem, "Why I Hate Raisins," resonated immediately with me. "Why I Hate Raisins" is part of Diaz's book, *When My Brother Was an Aztec*, a 2012 poetry collection debut centering around Diaz's reckoning with her upbringing and her brother's drug addiction. The speaker of "Why I Hate Raisins" seems to be Diaz herself, with its deeply personal and introspective narration. This poem connects a childhood naiveté around race and socio-economic status with an acknowledgement of a deeper understanding of love and sacrifice.

In "Why I Hate Raisins", Natalie Diaz looks back at collecting commodities with her mother; she describes eating a pack of raisins that she deeply disliked, as they "set like black / clay at the bottom of my belly" (Diaz 12, 13). The poem focuses on a conversation between Diaz and her mother. A younger Diaz complains about wanting a sandwich "like the other kids" (Diaz 16); her mom suggests that she means the "white kids" (Diaz 20), and slaps Diaz when she complains about getting "the shits" (Diaz 24). Diaz gives her childhood hatred of raisins a double meaning, connecting it with a mature understanding of her and her mother's racial and socio-economic status (Diaz is Mojave and was born in in the Fort Mojave Indian Village in Needles, California).

Diaz utilizes an attention to imagery, focusing on her hatred for raisins. She uses her childhood description of raisins to accentuate the emotional impact of her poem's deeper themes of love and sacrifice; the raisins are symbolic of what Diaz understands as she writes this poem.

In hindsight, Diaz understands the context of her (and her mother's) racial and socio-economic status; her hatred of raisins shifts to a hatred of her naiveté around her situation. Diaz metaphorically emphasizes that "Love is a pound of sticky raisins" (Diaz 4), humorously describing raisins and love as they "set like black / clay at the bottom of my belly" (Diaz 12, 13). At the end of the poem, Diaz dismisses the imagery that she previously associated with raisins; raisins were "crooked commodity lines" (Diaz 29), "awkward cardboard boxes" (Diaz 32), and meant "the shits" (Diaz 33). Instead, Diaz is "devoured by shame" (Diaz 27). Diaz's shame around her inability to see her mother's own hunger and struggles is personified.

The aspect of this poem that affects me most deeply is the relationship between Natalie Diaz and her mother; the inability of a younger Diaz to recognize her mother's effort and struggle to raise her, the hurtful implication of her anger towards her mother (how her race places her in a challenging societal position), and the shame Diaz feels when looking back. The idea of not recognizing a parent's hurt, especially around the criticism of a parent's care, resonates deeply with me. Being a child of an angry divorce, I often felt responsible for my mother's emotional well-being. From the age of 8, I was put into the position of seeing my mother single, trying her best to raise us. My parents separated after my mother, my brother, and I moved back from Malaysia to Canada (with my father staying behind). I was deeply affected by my mother's emotional and financial effort to give my brother and I the best upbringing she could, as well as the lasting pressure on my brother and I to choose the "right" side in my parent's divorce (my father moved back to Canada five years later). The idea of my parent giving everything to me, hiding their own suffering for my own best well-being, and dealing with a demanding child, was an emotional struggle for me. I want to recognize that I grew up in Canada, as a white, middle-class male, and I have not ever experienced the perception (let alone

reality) of being in any financial risk, let alone discriminated against. Even still, the parent-child dynamic, and guilt that comes with looking back at naïve arguments or ideas, is extremely close to my own experience.

“Why I Hate Raisins” is a poem about a pack of raisins. However, its initially whimsical narration makes way to make space for Natalie Diaz to express her guilt, pain, appreciation, and love. Natalie Diaz openly contends with her childhood; she seemingly charges her words, and her memory, with seemingly equal parts spite and gratitude. Growing up Mojave may not be universal, and yet Diaz captures a sensitivity that is universal; the intensity that can come with hindsight, and the loss of a raw childhood naiveté.

## Works Cited

Diaz, Natalie. "Why I Hate Raisins." *When My Brother Was an Aztec*, by Natalie Diaz, Copper Canyon Press, 2012, pp. 9–10.