

The Starving Process

Mrs. Mattie Grinnell traveled from the Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota to Washington, DC, with the 1968 Poor People's March. "Gentlemen," she told the Senate Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty, "I came over here to Washington, DC. I am old enough to stay home and rest. But the councilmen over there at home don't try to do anything for us." She testified:

In my young days, we had a good time. We got lots of game going on, buffaloes and deer and antelopes and prairie chicken and fish and everything else which comes handy. So, we never starved or anything. . . . Now the white people came on our reservation and killed off all our buffalo and all these game here so we have nothing to eat and we are starving half the time. The white people killed all our buffaloes out and they gave us commodities, which was just cornmeal, oats, and rice and all that; that is not really our food. But we have to eat that. Most of it is all wormy. . . . That is what I was trying to explain to President Johnson, and I came. (*Hunger and Malnutrition in US* 1968, 113–114)

She was 101 years old at the time. "I am the only full Mandan left," said Mrs. Grinnell.

Mattie Grinnell's story of hunger and dispossession bridges the nineteenth century and the late twentieth-century Poor People's campaign for economic and political rights. Hunger, in her account, was a tool of white power. Grinnell chose a transitive verb—to starve—to emphasize that her hunger was made, produced, by white settlers and their political and military administration. She connected the history of slaughtered bison to poor government commodity rations and punitive local administrators. Starvation came from the mass slaughter of traditional game; starvation also came from the impoverished commodities on which

the government forced her to live. Once her food relations “came handy”; later, food was “given” by the US government, sparingly and neglectfully. Cornmeal, oats, and rice themselves caused hunger. They were “not really our food,” rather spoiled and wormy substitutes for varied, local, seasonal food sources. Grinnell experienced government provisioning as an act of violence, making her eat what she defined as nonfood. Mrs. Lucille Knight, also from Fort Berthold, accused the US government of killing her with commodities: “They are slowly driving me to my grave, pushing me along with that starchy food” (*Hunger and Malnutrition in US* 116).

In 1968, Grinnell and her community at the Fort Berthold Reservation were still struggling for control over their own subsistence. This outcome was neither accidental nor unintended. US agents produced hunger on purpose. Indian agent P. B. Hunt called it “the starving process”: “It is necessary you should keep the Indian hungry if you wish him to do anything” (Hunt 1881, 80).¹ Hunger was a technology used to coerce social, political, economic, and cultural changes in the direction of private property, wage work, as well as land and capital accumulation. The starving process was designed to make its targets “do” things, change their behavior, their labor and subsistence strategies, and give up their land and political autonomy. Almost always this meant moving off their ancestral lands, making way for privatization and white ownership, and working for wages on farms and rural industries.

The starving process involved several strategies. Indian agents and military operatives tried to force Native people to give up hunting and gathering for European-style agriculture, even on lands not appropriate for farming. Hunting grounds were enclosed, lands privatized, plowed and fenced, and wild game killed off. The US Army cut off access to hunting supplies, horses, guns, and ammunition. The army facilitated a genocidal slaughter of bison on the Plains in the 1870s through the 1890s. Once sources of autonomous subsistence grew short, Indian agents used commodity rations to force other changes in foodways, labor, and culture. Rations were withheld or made conditional on agreeing to cede territories, move, plow up horse pastures for planting, or work on agency initiatives. US forces programmatically sought to destroy autonomous Native people and lifeways. They used commodity rations as instruments of political violence.

Even as US agents methodically employed hunger as a tool of coercion, they obfuscated their violence in a language of nature and history. Recursively hunger was made to appear natural and inevitable. It appeared as a side effect of the flow of history toward “progress and civilization,” privatized land and agrarian cultivation. Hunger was explained by poverty rather than violent dispossession. By the twentieth century, anthropologists and scientists portrayed Native hunger as ahistorical. Some explained hunger as a character defect, the consequence of an indolent culture and an inability to work hard. Others posited that periodic starvation was an evolutionary inheritance, part of the hunting-and-gathering lifestyle. Hunger appeared as a natural consequence and a maladaptation to modernity.

But that hunger was made. American authorities imposed hunger as a cost or punishment to Native people who refused to concede power and land, as a tool of elimination. As the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* opined in 1889, “if the individual Indian cannot hold his farm and make a living . . . he can not by virtue of ‘nationalization’ of his land bar out someone who will make good use of it. He must work, sell or starve.”

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In 1872, Oglala Sioux chief Maḥpíya Lúta (Red Cloud) came to a council with military officers, commissioners, and agents who insisted that the Sioux give up their sovereign land in the Black Hills and move to a new agency in Indian Territory. A clerk recorded their conversation:

General Smith: I want all to know that I expect, before next moon, to have orders to give no more rations here, and but little time is left in which to put up your buildings [on a new Indian agency site]. . . .

Red Cloud: If you are going to stop the rations say so, and tell the truth.

General Smith: I do tell the truth. I expect the order. There is plenty on the way to go to the place you select, but the Great Father will not send it here.

Red Cloud: Before the houses are built the provisions will be spoiled.

General Smith: We want you to decide now, and the houses will be built at once. . . .

Red Cloud: This is the last time I will come here. I am going to leave now. . . .

General Smith: Very well. I want you to remember that what I say is the truth, and after next moon no more rations will be given here to anybody; and for this reason we want you to decide now where you will have your agency. If you don’t and your women and children are hungry, it is your own fault. (*Report of the Commissioner* 1872, 25)

Just four years earlier, the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty had established the boundaries of sovereign Sioux territory. Gold was discovered in the Black Hills soon after, however, and prospectors illegally poured in. The United States set out to extract the Black Hills from the Sioux for white exploitation and settlement, by convincing the Sioux to sell their sacred treaty land and to move to Indian Territory. These proposals met with a wall of refusal. Commissioners finagled agreement from only 10 percent of tribal men, far fewer than the three-quarters vote required by treaty to pass a deal (Cook-Lynn and Gonzales 1999, 240). In response the US government chose a strategy of starvation.

US agents wielded hunger as a technology of antiwill, to take up Patricia Williams’s term (Williams 1988; Nichols 2020, 131). General John Smith demanded that Maḥpíya Lúta and the Sioux give legal consent to alienate their sacred land. Consent had to be willful, in the form of a “decision” to sell and move elsewhere, to fulfill the formal requirements of treaty and contract. When Maḥpíya Lúta exercised his will and refused, Smith blamed this antidecision for the resulting violence (“if . . . your women and children are hungry, it is your own fault”). US agents

used hunger to turn will into antiwill, refusal into violence, destruction into self-destruction. And yet, Maḥpíya Lúta and his people refused. Sioux people continue to refuse to this day (Estes 2019; Robertson 2022).²

Because of commissioners' failure to produce concession, and the strength of Sioux refusal, the Black Hills case left a clear archival record of the starving process. Commissioners did not manage to bring back to Washington, DC, a valid agreement to cede the land. In response, and in the wake of the US defeat at the Battle of Little Big Horn, Congress contravened the 1868 treaty and enacted a patently unconstitutional law seizing the Black Hills. The act of August 15, 1876, became known as the "Sell or Starve Act." The 1876 act explicitly made survival conditional on acquiescence and set starvation as the price of refusal: "hereafter there shall be no appropriation made for the subsistence of the Sioux, unless they first relinquished their rights to the hunting grounds outside the [1868 treaty] reservation, ceded the Black Hills to the United States, and reached some accommodation with the Government that would be calculated to enable them to become self-supporting" (Cook-Lynn and Gonzales 1999, 239). A follow-up act in February 1877, when the government still could not prevail, stipulated the rations that Sioux would receive if they did concede: beef or bacon, flour, corn, and a little coffee, sugar, and beans. "Such rations, or so much thereof as may be necessary, shall be continued until the Indians are able to support themselves" (Cook-Lynn and Gonzales 1999, 240). "Self-supporting" in this context referred to permanent settlement, agricultural cultivation, and integration into markets for goods and labor.

Three further conditions in the act reflected standard policies on many Indian agencies: First, rations would be issued to the "head of each separate family," thus reinforcing individualism and patriarchy at the expense of tribal identity. Second, no rations would be issued for children between the ages of six and fourteen, unless they enrolled in Indian schools designed to assimilate children to Euro-American culture and wage work. Third, "whenever the said Indians shall be located upon lands which are suitable for cultivation, rations shall be issued only to the persons and families of those persons who labor" (Cook-Lynn and Gonzales 1999, 240). "Patriarchy or starve," "assimilate or starve," and "work or starve" were logical extensions of "sell or starve." Each proposed a nonchoice between self-negation and extinction.

Government rations themselves were designed to force assimilation at the cost of hunger. As Mattie Grinnell testified, wheat flour, sugar, and coffee did not constitute nourishing food for her. Rations on Indian agencies were often spoiled, insufficient, or entirely lacking (Ostler 2001, 118). At first, Indian agents distributed beef rations to the Sioux "on the hoof"; herds of cattle were released every two weeks at different locations on the reservation, and men were able to hunt cattle in a way similar to how they once hunted bison. Some Indian Bureau officials objected to this arrangement as "barbaric" and sought to replace it with pre-slaughtered cuts of meat (Ostler 2001, 118). Thus commodity rations were designed

intentionally to negate long-standing relations with specific seeds, plants, and animals (Hubbard 2014, 301).

Archival traces suggest that this pattern, the starving process, repeated across the nineteenth century and beyond. In 1866, General William Tecumseh Sherman tried to convince Ute leaders to move onto a reservation. Utes refused to give up their seasonal subsistence rounds of hunting-and-gathering; they argued that immobility represented death (Lewis 1994, 40). Sherman “tried to explain and reason with them in various ways, but at last broke up the council in disgust, and blurted out in his peculiar way, as he strode back to his quarters, “They will have to freeze and starve a little more, I reckon, before they will listen to common sense!” (Lewis 1994, 42). Similarly, Canadian authorities withheld rations in 1882 to force Cree dissident Big Bear and his band to surrender, making way for railroad construction and white settlement. As James Daschuk (2014, 123) has written, “once the Indians were settled on reserves (and dependent on rations), the government could counter protests by withholding food.”

In 1887 the US Congress mandated the enclosure of unincorporated Native American territories into private allotments, annexed to the United States. With the Dawes Act, Congress sought to complete the task of assimilating Native people into an individualist, agrarian mode of existence, while appropriating “extra” lands for white settler occupation (Adams 1988, 5). Four years later, in 1891, Congress mandated schoolhouse education of Native American children. If a family refused to send children to Indian schools, often boarding schools miles from home, Congress authorized the Indian Bureau to withhold that family’s rations (Adams 1988, 3). An Indian agent at the New Mexico reservation of the Mescalero Apaches wrote in 1897 that “the deprivation of supplies . . . worked a change” in families unwilling to let their children go. “Willing or unwilling every child five years of age was forced into school” (Jacob 2006, 215). The Dawes Act required the president to certify that a tribe was ready to adopt a sedentary agrarian life, before the Indian Bureau could convert their territory to allotments and sell the remaining land to white settlers. Hunger was a tool to open those lands quickly to dispossession (Adams 1988, 19).

The “starving process” led to mass extermination of Native people’s nonhuman relations. On the West Coast, dams and industrial fisheries eliminated Chinook salmon (Norgaard 2019, 150). On the Plains, US government agents and private citizens empowered (and often supplied) by the military carried out extermination at an unprecedented scale. Tasha Hubbard (2014) has argued convincingly that the slaughter of millions of bison should be characterized as a genocide of the Plains “first people.” The *United States Army and Navy Journal* reported in 1868 on a remark by Sherman “that the quickest way to compel the Indians to settle down to civilized life was to send ten regiments of soldiers to the Plains, with orders to shoot buffaloes until they became too scarce to support the r*****s” (“Buffalo Campaign” 1869, cited in Smits 1994, 317). Although Sherman did not call up these

regiments, he and other army officials facilitated and encouraged bison slaughter across the Plains. General Philip Sheridan called for “destroying the Indians’ commissary” (Smits 1994, 330) and advised Sherman to “make [Indians] poor by the destruction of their stock, and then settle them on the lands allotted to them” (Smits 1994, 323).

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The presence of Generals Sherman and Sheridan, architects of scorched-earth tactics during the Civil War, alerts us to connections between the American South and West. During the Civil War, Southerners called the Union blockade of their ports “the starvation policy” (Smith 2011, 13). Sherman (1875, 211) demanded that Confederates at Savannah surrender or suffer starvation. Sheridan destroyed the fields and railroads that provided subsistence to residents and enemy troops in the Shenandoah Valley (Sherman 1875, 210–211). Union policies toward formerly enslaved refugees, housing them in “contraband camps” and requiring labor in exchange for food, echoed and prefigured later Indian policy; like Sherman and Sheridan, many officers served consecutively in the South and West (Downs 2012, 171). Officials in the Freedmen’s Bureau and Indian agents were excessively concerned about their charges’ indolence and their dependency on government rations and believed that hunger was a stimulus to work (Downs 2012, 55).

Following Emancipation, formerly enslaved people entered the “free labor” force in a context of hunger, failed harvests, policing, and vigilante violence. In the chaotic years after the end of the Civil War, Southern plantation owners and formerly enslaved workers engaged in asymmetrical struggles over the meaning and value of labor. The bondage of chattel slavery gave way to “free” contracts, sanctioned by federal authorities, and debt peonage. As a Union army commander put it, “the liberty given [freedpeople] simply means liberty to work, work or starve” (cited in Saville 1994, 3). Plantation landowners restricted freedpeople’s access to food as a means of labor discipline. Formerly enslaved people planted corn, beans, potatoes, and other food crops where they could, and some acquired land for themselves (Wallach 2019, 65; Green, Green, and Kleiner 2014, 52). But plantation landowners leveraged their property rights to block such attempts at independence. Owners locked up harvested seed cotton, including the workers’ shares, and distributed the proceeds only at the end of the harvesting season. Planters who paid cash wages similarly delayed payments until the end of the year. Some planters refused to allow workers to grow their own food at all; many prohibited workers from seeking extra work elsewhere or from selling their share of the cash crop directly on the market. Emancipation overturned customary rights that had allowed enslaved people to grow and manage some of their own food supplies (Saville 1994, 112–136).

Landowners were backed by federal authorities, many of whom believed in the “instructive” power of hunger to get people to work (Emberton 2013, 72).³ The

Freedmen's Bureau, established by Congress to manage the transition from slavery to free labor, provided food rations for many formerly enslaved people in the immediate aftermath of war but refused aid for able-bodied adults; within a year the Bureau cut off almost all rations (Emberton 2013, 58–59; Farmer-Kaiser 2010, 39). A Bureau agent in South Carolina wrote that “only actual suffering, starvation and punishment will drive many [formerly enslaved people] to work” (cited in Emberton 2013, 57). Another Bureau official reported that starving freedpeople in his district were reduced to eating green corn, pond lilies, and alligators (Emberton 2013, 57). In some areas federal officers actively encouraged landowners to lock up the means of subsistence to “keep the freedman true to his [labor contract] agreement” (Saville 1994, 116). Landowners or federal agents stored food supplies in a centralized warehouse and rationed them to workers. As chapters 3 and 6 recount, food advances and debt obligations severely limited plantation workers' autonomy well into the twentieth century.

Political coercion took place through direct violence (lynching) and threats of starvation. In the same year as the passage of the “Sell or Starve” act (1876), newspapers reported that Southern plantation owners were threatening freedmen's voting rights. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* quoted a speech by Colonel Edwards of South Carolina on the eve of the 1876 elections: “We have taken and subscribed to a solemn oath before God . . . to make no advances of food or permit any one to occupy our houses or premises who votes the Radical ticket again. We know what we are talking about. The colored people will starve, but we will not. Now is your last time. Become Democrats or you are ruined” (“Starvation and Death” 1876). Republicans accused Southern politicians of “presenting to the colored man the alternative of starvation or support of the Democratic party” (XLIV Congress 1876). These tactics echo threats against Black voter registration issued by plantation owners and White Citizens' Councils in the twentieth century at the time of the Poor People's March.

By debt and hunger, Emancipation spawned a state of “indebted servitude,” “an anomalous condition betwixt and between freedom and servitude” (Hartman 1997, 126–131).⁴ Frederick Douglass accused the Southern states of reinstituting slavery, in the form of the “power to starve.” Douglass argued that control over the means of subsistence gave former slaveholders “power over life and death, which was the soul of the relation between master and slave.” Plantation owners “could not, of course, sell [freedpeople], but they retained the power to starve them to death, and wherever this power is held there is the power of slavery” (Douglass 1882, 611–612).

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By the late nineteenth century, the use of hunger as technology was widely practiced and publicly known.⁵ Hunger was produced for economic and political ends. Indian agents and the press recast elimination by hunger as poverty. One could reproduce a litany of sources describing Native people as “a lot of paupers”

dependent on public handouts, for whom “only the pinchings of hunger will drive them to work” (“Black Hills” 1875; Forney 1858, 211). But that serves no purpose other than to rehearse the insult. The ideology of pauperism, imported from English political economy, led Indian agents across North America to make rations conditional on farm work or wage labor. Indian agents styled themselves as directors of almshouses, where hunger figured as an “incentive to industry” (*Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs* 1878, 31, 140; Winslow 1882, 10; Daschuk 2014, 116). Hunger and poverty then served to justify the taking of lands that were not cultivated “industriously.”

Through the twentieth century, ideologies of pauperism covered over material theft. Some imagined that both Native Americans and Black Americans would perish “naturally” as a result of underdevelopment (Emberton 2013, 71). Cultural ecologists associated a “bare subsistence” diet with a “meager” culture. As Ned Blackhawk has shown, anthropologist Julian Steward claimed in the 1940s that food scarcity had prevented Nevada Shoshone from developing a coherent tribal identity or culture. As a consequence, Steward argued, Nevada Shoshone should not be recognized as a sovereign tribe (Blackhawk 1997, 62–69). This is just one example of how hunger and starvation were offered as evidence of Indians’ “natural” and inevitable dissipation. Recursively hunger appeared simultaneously a cause, an effect, and a reason for dispossession. But Native people resisted and did not succumb to assimilation, starvation, and destruction. In some cases, tribes turned US strategies to their own advantage, “alternately trading, raiding, accommodating and vanishing” (Heaton 2005, 37). Even after confinement to reservations, some recycled government annuity items into goods for prestige and sale. Sioux people used hides from government-issued cattle to make moccasins for sale to traders (Ostler 2001, 119). Shoshone Bannocks cut agency flannel into trim for horses and fashioned agency blankets into leggings for sale (Heaton 2005, 49). Utah and Colorado Utes collected government rations as part of their subsistence rounds, “incorporating traditional resources with crops and rations.” Uintahs traveling through Colorado passed as White River Utes to receive rations there; in turn, Colorado Utes collected rations as Uintahs while visiting the Utah agency (Lewis 1994, 40). These peoples used rations as a form of resistance.

Native leaders across the nineteenth century named and contested the use of hunger as a tool of white power. To Maḥpíya Lúta, to leave hunger unfed was the greatest breach of his people’s social bond. He warned that white men had deceived the Sioux with “shining things that pleased our eyes.” Possessiveness, he warned, overturned “the wisdom of your fathers.” He sarcastically described how to assimilate to possessive white culture: “you must lay up food, and forget the hungry. . . . Look around for a neighbor whom you can take at a disadvantage, and seize all that he has! Give away only what you do not want; or rather, do not part with any of your possessions unless in exchange for another’s” (Red Cloud 2000 [1866], 130). Rejecting an ethos of dispossession, Maḥpíya Lúta articulated an ideal

of mutual aid. In this, he echoed the words of other Indigenous leaders who associated food giving with solidarity and equated hunger with willful destruction.⁶

This history of the production of hunger, of the starving process, was largely ignored by mainstream culture during most of the twentieth century. Hunger seemed to burst upon the public scene in the late 1960s like a bad surprise. At the 1968 Senate Subcommittee hearing where Mattie Grinnell testified, officials expressed shock at discovering widespread hunger in prosperous postwar America. Senator Joseph Clark lamented: “For far too long, we have buried our heads in the sand like an ostrich, unwilling and, indeed, unprepared to face the truth” (*Hunger and Malnutrition in US* 1968, 1). But for many of the poor people in attendance, such as Grinnell, long histories of hunger as violence remained very much alive and present. The Reverend Ralph Abernathy, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Council and leader of the Poor People’s Campaign, told the Senators that the US government had “let our people starve” (*Hunger and Malnutrition in US* 1968, 68). Andrés de Pineda, of Denver, Colorado, testified: “We speak for the oppressed, for the hungry thousands that exist in this country, to the tortures of many kinds that have been applied to us. . . . We are the ghosts, the sons of chiefs, gods, kings, and revolutionists, here to haunt you for what is rightfully ours, the human right to exist” (*Hunger and Malnutrition in US* 1968, 105).

These stories are well known to Native people and Native scholars alike. They are not mine. These stories belong to James Daschuk (2014), Hi’ilei Julia Hobart (2019), Kyle Powys Whyte (2016), Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017), Nick Estes (2019), Audra Simpson (2014), Ron Reid, Leaf Hillard (Norgaard, Reid, and Van Horn 2011), the Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance (NAFSA 2020), and many others active in the movement for Indigenous food sovereignty as well as to Reconstruction scholars such as Julie Saville (1994) and Saidiya Hartman (1997). I share these stories here because land dispossession, assimilation, and hunger were and are still reproduced in North America every day. Because right now I live and work on stolen land. Because these stories were just the beginning.