

Language and territorialization: Food consumption and the creation of urban Indigenous space

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Abstract: *In this paper we analyze two March 2010 events in Ottawa, Canada involving the preparation and consumption of seal-meat: one an Inuit seal feast, held at a Inuit community center, in which raw seal was carved and eaten in accordance with traditional Inuit practices; the other a “seal lunch”, held in the Parliamentary Dining Room for Members of Parliament, in support of the Canadian seal-hunt. Methodologically, we make use of both participatory action research and detailed textual analysis of media reports, and frame our analysis in terms of moral geographies, social and cultural values associated with food, and meaning-making systems embedded in discourses, which serve to construct and constitute particular power relations. Doing so leads us to claim that the two seal-meal events drew on and conveyed radically different meanings. The Inuit meal, though not overtly political, represented an act of food sovereignty and a claim to Inuit territoriality in the city. The Parliamentary seal lunch, by contrast, had a clear political aim, as a form of protest against the European Union decision to ban seal meat and other products. Yet, while purporting to support Inuit seal-hunting, the Parliamentary meal effectively communicated the utter foreignness of seal meat and Inuit foodways with respect to Western tastes and discourses about food and environmentalism—a fact that emerges through our ethnographic and media analysis of the two seal lunch events.*

Keywords: Inuit, seal meat, foodways, food sovereignty, Inuit urbanization, seal ban

1. Introduction

One June afternoon in 1993, two beluga whales were being butchered on a grassy bank of the Great Whale River in Kuujuaapik, Nunavik. As Patrick (2003, 197) describes, a moment of cultural and ideological conflict arose as this activity unfolded¹. The activity drew together a small group of people, mostly Inuit speaking Inuktitut. A Francophone man, known to the researcher only by sight, addressed her in French. He observed with some disgust, “*Il y a beaucoup de gras*” (‘there is a lot of fat’), then remarked

on how beautiful these animals were and how they should have been left alone in the water, since in a short time few of them would remain. I told him that there were quotas and that I thought that the whales were protected. He was not convinced that the quotas were effective, and expressed his belief that these endangered animals should be left alone. From his perspective the [butchered] animals provided nothing of importance—the meat had too much “fat” on it to be of any value—and the [cultural] symbolic and material value for the Inuit of the hunt and of the butchering of these animals was of no consequence. In expressing these views, which were completely at odds with the values that lay behind Inuit hunting practices, he seemed oblivious to the presence of the twenty or so Inuit gathered there. (Patrick 2003, 197)

Relevant to us here is that this man’s interjection—largely concealed from the Inuit present by his strategic use of French, which none of them were likely to understand—reflected two significant Western discourses. One was the widespread health-related discourse of fat as “unhealthy” and “bad,” embedded in Western ideologies of food over the past century (Kulick and Meneley 2005). The other, also common, was the biological and environmental discourse of certain species as requiring protection through regulation, including bans on hunting. These two discourses stand in clear opposition to Inuit “foodways,” the practices and beliefs associated with Inuit food, which continue to be more aligned with concerns about food security and with the desire of many Inuit to continue centuries-old subsistence practices related to hunting, butchering, sharing, and consuming marine and other animals. Inuit foodways are related, too, to cosmologies associated with the land, sea, and air and the animals and spirits that live in these realms. These Western discourses also stand in opposition to Inuit conceptions of health and animal welfare—and provide some context for the deep distrust that many Inuit have of those biologists who “come for too short a time, which means that weather conditions and other environmental factors are not taken into account ... go to the wrong places or sample in too limited an area,” and whose boats make noise that “frightens the animals away” (Gombay 2010a, 73), as well as of the state regulators who rely on these biologists.

Although the events just described occurred over twenty years ago, the two more recent events to be described in this article—two lunches involving the consumption of seal meat that took place in Ottawa in March 2010—suggest that such conflicts between Western and Inuit ideologies and discourses around food, health, and the harvesting of animals are not only very much alive but also play out in urban settings as much as in Northern ones. The approach that we will be using to analyze these conflicts appeals to the notion of “moral geographies” (Gombay 2010b) and to the social and cultural values associated with the procuring and sharing of food. From this theoretical perspective, the two meals can be seen to represent distinct types of meaning-making that organize (and interpret) human and natural worlds in particular ways. Such meaning-making systems are embedded in larger discourses in the Foucauldian sense, where language and ideologies construct particular relations of power that limit the ways in which food is conceptualized and discussed, with particular material and social effects. By analyzing these discourses, we can in turn focus on the seal and the practices related to its distribution and consumption, and explore a specific semiotic resource—one that, though central to both events, provides profoundly different meanings for Inuit communities, on the one hand, and non-Inuit ones, on the other.

The two Ottawa “seal lunches” just referred to were indeed rather different in nature. One was held in the Parliamentary Dining Room for Members of Parliament in support of the Canadian seal-hunt,

following a 2009 European Union (EU) ban on trade in seal products. The other was held on the grounds of the Ottawa Inuit Children's Centre (OICC), an Inuit educational community center, a few kilometers away and organized by and for Inuit living in the city. What is of most interest to us about these lunches is how the seal becomes part of different meaning-making practices, related to distinct cultural constructions of food consumption and occupying different discursive spaces. What we will see, in other words, is how the consumption of the same food in the same city, but by different groups of people and under dramatically different circumstances, has very different meanings for the respective groups involved. Comparing these two events allows us to reflect on the construction of difference and different forms of territorialization, also showing how the food and its consumption tie in with different economic and other transnational webs. These conclusions echo Barthes's (1961) observation that "[s]ubstances, techniques of preparation, habits, all become part of a system of differences in signification; and as soon as this happens, we have communication by way of food" (Counihan and Van Esterik 2008, 30).

In what follows, we will be offering a detailed description and analysis of these two events of seal preparation and consumption and the distinct meaning-making associated with each of them. Before doing so, however, we will be taking a closer look at Inuit foodways, in order to bring into sharper relief the kinds of semiotic differences that shaped these two Ottawa meals—which, though they featured the same seal-meat, drew on and conveyed radically different meanings.

2. Inuit foodways, healthways, and sharing: Understanding the OICC seal meal

If we consider the nature of Inuit foodways, we can see these as revolving around the harvesting and sharing of "country food"²—that is, harvested food, including fish, sea mammals, caribou, plants, and berries — and as reflecting an Inuit "moral geography," which includes the beliefs and actions that are "judged appropriate or inappropriate, and the ways in which assumptions about the relationship between people and their environments may both reflect and produce moral judgements" (Matless 2000, 522; cited in Gombay 2010b, 238).

Arguably, traditional³ Inuit foodways and means of procuring food are still basic both to the economy and way of life of Inuit regions in Canada and to Inuit conceptualizations and constructions of their place in the world⁴. This point is highlighted in the following remarks by Gombay (2010a, 10):

the production, distribution, exchange, and consumption of food is inexorably linked to how [Inuit] conceive of and construct the world around them. These conceptions reflect not simply the mechanical processes involved in procuring food, but are linked to larger cosmological notions about the nature of existence and the place of humans in the world. These, in turn, are linked to a host of other processes: ideas about the role of the individual in relation to society, the experience of being in the elements rather than being removed from them, notions of temporality [including seasonal variation, living in the present, and the unpredictability of the future] and understandings of history grounded in place.

In other words, traditional Inuit economic and cultural practices, tightly linked to an Inuit "worldview" as defined by ontologies, cosmologies, and conceptions of the environment, have supported (and to a large extent, continue to support) Inuit communities in the Canadian Arctic. Through these

practices, knowledge related to the procuring, distribution, and preparation of land-based resources for individual and communal consumption is produced and reproduced—passed on through observation and participation and thus learned through practice from childhood through to adulthood.

As regards food practices, in particular, “Inuit learn a great deal about what they eat” by observing the behavior of animals and by harvesting and butchering them—in the latter case, “learn[ing] whether [the animal] is healthy, what [it] has eaten, how old it is ... what to eat and what to leave aside” (Gombay 2010a, 66). Through such interactions with animals, knowledge-making practices contribute to a communal ethos and forms of collective identity, involving social relations that commonly span many generations. Such relations have contributed to the formation of an ethics of food-sharing (and thus notions of “good” and “bad” food-sharing behavior), which have sustained communities over time (Gombay 2010b).

These remarks echo Sahlin’s observation that “there is always a moral purpose” in the exchange of food (1972, cited in Coleman 2011, 7); and Coleman’s (2011, 7) observation that “[f]ood is a ‘concrete’ sensory vehicle of social relations,” so that “personal and collective ties are made and remade” when food is shared and eaten. Moral judgments are thus linked to people’s conceptions and understandings of their environment and form part of a “moral geography,” as described above. In other words, there is a link between conceptions of one’s surrounding environment, including the land and the life-forms dwelling there, and moral frameworks that are produced from human interaction with that environment.

The belief-systems, or worldviews, noted above underlay the importance of the Ottawa Inuit feast mentioned in the Introduction, which involved a whole semi-frozen seal that was laid on the tarp, then carefully butchered by an Inuk man affiliated with the OICC, and distributed in the playground area the OICC day-care and preschool, in front of an animated crowd of Inuit of all ages. This feast featured ulus (women’s crescent-shaped knives), a carving knife and knife sharpener, and a pot for making broth from the rib bones—the only part of the seal that would be cooked. In other words, it was an experience involving millennia-old practices and tools (albeit ones adapted to the contemporary world, which made use of steel, fuel, canvas, and other materials, such as those that went into the tarp and into the bag used to hold the sealskin left over from the butchering). And there were no dishes or utensils other than the hand-fashioned ulus used to cut the meat and a spoon, a ladle, and cups for the broth.

It is significant that the seal that figured in this feast had arrived in Ottawa whole: only a whole seal could provide a semiotic resource appropriate for the symbolic as well as material dimensions of the feast, which connected Inuit participants with their traditional Northern homelands and with traditional Inuit practices of learning and living. The seal had measured about four feet from head to flipper and been harvested by a hunter from Nunavut and then shipped frozen on a flight from Iqaluit to Ottawa. From the airport, it had then been transported to a freezer purchased by the OICC for the occasion. The entire cost of bringing the seal to Ottawa had been assumed by the OICC, which considered it part of its mandate to host such an event, which served to bring the community together and to educate Inuit children about Inuit food and the Inuit way of life. The preparation and consumption of the seal thereby affirmed Inuit values related to food harvesting and sharing, knowledge production, social bonding, and social and cultural continuity.

What, however, was arguably even more basic to this traditional seal meal than the affirmation of such values was enjoying the seal meat itself. This is certainly suggested by the caption accompanying a photograph in *Nunatsiaq News*, a Nunavut online newspaper, which shows 11

Inuit woman crouching around the seal as they cut it and eat it. This caption — which explicitly contrasts this meal with the Parliamentary seal meal—reads as follows⁵:

Real food: While politicians and government officials ate cooked seal meat at the parliamentary office in Ottawa March 9, Inuit in Ottawa enjoyed a real seal feast March 10, thanks to hunter Sandy Akavak. Ina Zakal of the Ottawa Inuit Children's Centre organized the event, saying "I was hungry for our food. What a blessing."

In other words, for the Inuit partaking in this feast it was this food—what the Inuit in attendance would consider "real" food—that was at the heart of the feast, including the preparation and consumption of this food and what these served to express.

Concerning this latter point, the feast indeed served more purposes beyond the mere consumption of "real" food. In particular, it clearly served an educational purpose for the dozen or so children present. And it was equally, or perhaps even more, a community activity, with many Inuit adults also there, some of whom we had never seen at the center before. As such, it responded to the challenges that Inuit face in urban settings in bridging their Southern and Northern identities. These challenges included maintaining cultural, political, and economic ties to their traditional homelands; engaging in culturally significant activities that strengthen and maintain their identity as Inuit; sharing and generating traditional Inuit knowledge and learning and speaking Inuktitut; and (as already noted) being able to obtain and enjoy traditional "country food" which, if available at all in the city, could only be bought at considerable expense from specialty shops and would in any case not be available in whole form.

In sum, the seal that figured in the OICC feast was part of the education of the Inuit children who participated in the feast but also an expression of the ethos of the Ottawa Inuit community, reconstituting the traditional Inuit moral geography as related to the butchering and distribution of food and providing a means for those Ottawa Inuit present to connect discursively, materially, and metaphysically to their traditional Northern homelands, from where the seal itself had travelled. And the event became an Inuit event by virtue of the entire sequence of activities performed there, which indexed Inuitness and linked Inuit across time and space. The event also served to construct Inuit place, turning the grounds of the OICC into Inuit territory, where Inuit had a "safe space" to practice their foodways, using their language and tools for cutting and preparing the meal—a point we will be returning to in what follows. Moreover, while this seal feast was not intended to make any overt political statement—no media had been invited and the participants (aside from the two researchers invited to document the event) were all Inuit—the mere fact of eating Inuit food, butchered and distributed in Inuit urban space in culturally appropriate ways, nevertheless represented an act of food sovereignty and a claim to Inuit territoriality in the city.

What is also worth noting about this Inuit "seal lunch" is that the practices and beliefs embedded in it differ rather dramatically from those familiar to non-Aboriginal people—a point we will be returning to in the next section. To the (limited) extent that these practices and beliefs are known beyond Inuit communities, they seem to be associated with a lack of culinary or other sophistication. This can be seen, for example, in the following observations about Alaskan Inuit foodways, from Hensel (1996, 142): "Non-natives have typically written about Inuit as being survival-focused ... [and] food-focused only insofar as food is the prerequisite for survival. The image of Inuit eating raw flesh and fat is centuries old. ... In short, little that is sympathetic has been written about Inuit foods."

Hensel's statement alludes to Lévi-Strauss's culinary triangle of "raw," "cooked" and "rotted" food ([1968] 2008) and his "attempt at a universal culinary syntax" (Paxson 2008, 27). Hensel's accounts also evoke a notion of hierarchical cultural ordering. In other words, if we peer beyond Lévi-Strauss's universal binary classification and analysis of food preparation and consumption, we can observe a cultural hierarchy according to which boiling, roasting, and controlled rotting are deemed to be more sophisticated "elaborations" of raw foods. As Paxson (2008, 27) notes, the controlled rotting in contemporary cheese-making represents "a cultural elaboration of the raw by natural means." Accordingly, the cultural "primitivism" seen by some to be associated with raw meat and fat consumption can be contrasted with the sophistication attributed to the "elaborations" of these raw forms in the culinary practices of other cultures. Such views, it is worth emphasizing, have been reflected in comments about Inuit foodways over the centuries, by missionaries, anthropologists, and others—including the comments quoted in Patrick (2003) with which this article began, which highlighted how such practices do not always sit well with Western gastronomic norms.

Another aspect of Inuit foodways that transgress European and Euro-American foodways, also described by Hensel (1996, 144), is the practice of rotting, fermenting, or "curing" meat for later consumption. Such practices, as Lévi-Strauss notes, are "only allowed to take place in certain specific ways" ([1968] 2008: 37); moreover, while such practices exist across cultures, specific practices may be highly localized. This is true even of those that exist in Western cultures, as underscored by Lévi-Strauss's example from 1944, when American soldiers in Normandy mistook the odor of the "Norman cheese dairies [for] ... the smell of corpses" ([1968] 2008, 37). Non-Inuit often seem not to acknowledge the existence of such practices in the Western context when they opine on Inuit practices involving the consumption of rotting meat. In Hensel's recollection, the rotting or fermenting meat that Inuit occasionally enjoy is scorned by some as too "smelly"—even though, of course, the same people would likely savor the pungent smell of such delicacies as aged cheeses, made from "rotten" (that is, fermented) milk. Western disdain for these Inuit practices has at times been justified through discourses that see them as unsafe from a Western medical (Pasteurian) perspective, in that they create a risk of food poisoning. The latter concern, as Paxson (2008, 17) argues, is part of a larger microbiopolitics involved in the categorization of "microscopic biological agents; the evaluation of such agents; and the elaboration of appropriate human behaviours vis-à-vis microorganisms engaged in infection, inoculation, and digestion." Yet, just as in such cases as cheeses made from unpasteurized "raw" milk or Western raw meat dishes, proper preparation of such foods, including "curing" meat in Arctic rock caches for later consumption⁶ turns out to be the key to the prevention of (the rare cases of) food poisoning (Paxson 2008).

Nevertheless, Western discourses on health and risk and the general lack of "sympathy" for Inuit foods tend to dominate non-Inuit settler views on the consumption of meat, sea mammals, and fish that are raw (and often frozen or semi-frozen), rotten (cured), or layered with fat. Again, we need only refer to the quoted passage at the beginning of this article to gain a sense of common non-Inuit perceptions and conceptions surrounding the consumption of the meat of whales, seals, and other animals that figure in Inuit foodways.

After persisting for centuries (as already noted), these highly negative ideologies of Inuit foodways, embedded in discursive representations and written texts, have now entered twenty first-century discourse, where they are coupled with twentieth-century notions about fat and health—in particular, the general view that "fat is bad," with some fats like olive oil possibly being "good" (Meneley 2005, 35). Despite these Western ideologies, Inuit have still managed to maintain their own "*espace social alimentaire*" ('dietary social space') (Poulain 2002), an ensemble of geographic and social structures regulating what is "edible," with proper food preparation and food choices.

These are regulated not only through biological, ecological, and economic constraints, but also through the socio-cultural practices, institutions, and ideologies whereby food becomes “legible” or “eatable” to members of the group (Poulain 2002, cited in Riley 2013; our translation⁷).

This “espace social alimentaire” includes the use of oil (or “fat”) from sea mammals such as seals not only as a foodstuff but also for cooking; for lighting lamps, both for light and for warmth during the Arctic winter; and for medicines to heal wounds, relieve pain, or treat dry skin (Therrien and Laugrand 2001). The importance of such oil in the Arctic context can be seen, for example, in Hensel’s (1996, 31) description of a lunch in an Alaskan Yup’ik fishing camp, which involved “[eating] dried seal with seal oil, rich and oceanic, and herring that had been dried and then preserved in seal oil” and “cook[ing] marsh marigold greens, vaguely like bean sprouts, also dipped in seal oil.”

Of course, the OICC seal lunch also clearly reflected an Inuit “espace social alimentaire”, where seal could be carved and eaten raw in a semi-frozen state, and other practices were supported. In this case, these included the recounting in Inuktitut by an older Inuit woman of how seal meat was traditionally distributed in her Arctic community, with some parts eaten by men and some by women, followed by the careful cutting-up of the seal’s liver and its distribution to those lucky recipients gathered around the “carving tarp”, then the boiling of the seal’s ribs inside the white canvas tent in the OICC’s playground area, producing a tasty broth passed around after the rest of the meat has been eaten.

All of these practices surrounding the consumption of the seal meat—including the use of the Inuit language and the meat itself and its “fat”—can be seen to have had tremendous value and resonance among the Inuit in attendance. This value has also been noted by other researchers. For example, the value of seal fat emerges very clearly in the conversations about traditional Inuit medicines documented in Therrien and Laugrand (2001), such as this account (translated from the original Inuktitut) by Ilisapi, an elder from Nunavut’s North Baffin region:

When we caught a seal, we did not just think of cuts and wounds. What we thought of first was oil for the *quilliq*, the lamp, as that was our only source of heat. The thin layer beneath the blubber would be saved for the dogs. The blubber around the flippers was saved entirely for the lamp. Oil would also be used as ear drops for children with earaches to help them feel better. If a wound was too dry, oil would be applied to keep it moist. (Therrien and Laugrand 2001, 11)

Such accounts also reveal Inuit recognition of the different diets of such seal species as ringed seals, or *natsiq*, and bearded seals, or *ugjuk*, which thus produce different types of fat and oil. As the elder, Ilisapi, also notes, bearded seal oil is still the preferred oil for treating infected wounds, even though it may be hard to find, whereas whale oil is never used for wounds.

What was also significant about this OICC Inuit seal lunch beyond its highlighting of Inuit foodways was how these foodways, given their connection to health, knowledge production, and moral geographies, indicated a much greater richness of communicative interaction and meaning-making than would tend to meet the non-Inuit observer’s eye. As already noted, this seal lunch included “lessons” about food distribution presented by a community member. It also included animated “talk around food” in different Inuit language varieties, with adult participants engaging with children and

describing their homelands and food practices in those Arctic regions. Of particular note about these interactions is that those participating in them clearly valued the “safe” physical, material, and social Inuit space that the event created—that is, an Inuit “espace social alimentaire,” as just described—where Inuit foodways could be practiced without hindrance. This space included the canvas tent housing a camp stove for making broth, the cardboard mats on which the seal was carved by a male OICC employee, the ulus (women’s knives) for cutting the meat, and the pot for the bones. It also included the local Inuit language and cultural practices surrounding food carving, sharing, and consumption. The talk unfolding around the seal object thus created a link not only between the people who participated in this local event, but also between the diverse cultural and linguistic Inuit communities to which these participants belonged. These practices, as we will see in the next section, contrasted markedly in both form and purpose from those associated with the consumption of the same sea mammal in the Parliamentary Dining Room “seal lunch.”

3. The “Taming of the Chew”

In the previous section, we described an Inuit seal feast held at the OICC, which featured the carving and eating of raw seal meat in accordance with centuries-old Inuit practices. On the very day before, another “seal lunch” had been held in Ottawa, this one in the Parliamentary Dining Room, as reported in (among other places) an article published in the *Ottawa Citizen* newspaper, entitled “The Taming of the Chew: Not-so-scrumptious Scrum? Seal Meat Spices up the Hill” (Eade 2010)⁸. This article was accompanied by a photo of about half-a-dozen canapés, small squares of bread and pastry rounds adorned with seal meat pâté, with the caption “March 10 – Appetizers featuring seal meat are displayed during an event to mark the first time seal meat is served in the parliamentary restaurant on Parliament Hill in Ottawa.”

Various aspects of this meal are significant for our discussion, in particular, those related to the decision—a very political one, we will be arguing—to put seal meat on the menu in the first place; decisions about how to prepare the seal meat for patrons of the Parliamentary Dining Room; and, finally, the manner in which the meal came to be interpreted and reported in the media. What these aspects of the meal most clearly reveal are differences in the semiotic, or meaning-making, processes respectively associated with the seal meat in these two meals. The seal meat in the Inuit feast was the product of Inuit-seal relationships and practices, which have developed over centuries, as Inuit have adopted new harvesting practices, including those involving guns, skidoos, and (most recently) GPS devices. Despite such developments, these practices still tap traditional knowledge about where to find the seal; how to kill and treat it appropriately; how to transport it; how to store it in its frozen state; how to carve it; and finally how to properly distribute, consume, and use the meat, bones, and skin. Crucially, each of these steps involves meaningful relationships between social actors. It is no coincidence, then, that the Inuit at the OICC lunch knew exactly where the seal had been harvested and how it had travelled across vast spaces and social contexts, or that some even knew the hunter involved.

These meaning-making processes could hardly have been more different from those associated with Parliament’s seal-meat meal. Western hegemonic discourses about food, including those encompassing the ideologies and practices related to the seal’s procurement (through a local butcher shop), preparation (according to bourgeois tastes and in a regulated kitchen facility that ensured appropriate management of micro-organisms), and distribution and consumption (following Western protocols of “fine dining”), defined the culinary experiences of the diners as much as the experiences of those involved in the seal meat’s preparation. Not surprisingly, the relationships between hunter, animal, and place were obscured in the Parliamentary dining room. Yet, this luncheon brought new meanings to the seal meat, given the luncheon’s highlighting of its role in an international commodity market—an aspect of meaning-making that we take up later in this section.

Another difference in the meaning-making processes respectively associated with the two seal-meat events was the exoticism associated with this meat in the Parliamentary meal's Western context, but not in the OICC meal's Inuit context. In other words, seal meat is truly an exotic rarity as a food in Ottawa (and presumably other southern Canadian cities), where it sells, when available at all, for about \$50 per kilogram at specialty meat shops. In addition to the rarity of the seal meat itself was the rarefied nature of the Parliamentary event, given not only the \$33.50 price for a plate of seal canapés and a main course, but also the fact that only parliamentarians and a few others were able to partake of it—facts about the meal that clearly indexed socioeconomic advantage. A number of reporters were also present, but only to report and to sample whatever appetizers they could get their hands on.

How had this “exotic” meal come to be chosen for the Parliamentary Dining Room menu? As it turns out, the decision to place it on the menu had been an explicitly political one—which also points to another key difference between it and the OICC meal. As noted in the *Ottawa Citizen* article just referred to, the seal-meat luncheon had been organized by a member of the Senate of Canada “to show solidarity with Canadian seal hunters staring down an imminent ban on seal products by the European Union”. Although the *Citizen* article did not focus on this political point, it did figure prominently in mainstream Canadian news reports of the lunch, including those by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), Canadian Television Network (CTV), and various Canadian newspapers⁹. And it was the only point made about the lunch in a report in the UK's *Guardian*¹⁰. Given the importance to our discussion of this political dimension of the Parliamentary meal, it is worth examining the *Guardian* report in some detail.

This report began by linking the parliamentarians' seal meat meal directly to the EU ban: “Canadian MPs will be served seal meat this week in support of hunters fighting an EU ban on products from the animals.” Canadian seal hunting had been severely impacted by this ban, which had come into effect in October 2009, after the European Parliament had voted 550 to 49 in favor of it on May 5, 2009, with associated regulations to come into effect on August 20, 2010¹¹. Accordingly, the parliamentarians' eating of seal was a declaration of Canada's sovereignty and its willingness to protect its own seal industry (Gombay 2010a, 86). While the *Guardian* report noted that, in principle, the ban exempted seal products derived from traditional Inuit hunts, it also noted that in reality the ban deprived Inuit hunters of a European market for their seal products, including sealskins. Indeed, the 2009 EU ban on seal products had affected Inuit particularly (Gombay 2011, 73) before regulations changed in 2014, gradually allowing Inuit products back into the EU¹². The *Guardian* report then elaborated on the 2010 ban by highlighting the communicative role in global politics that the seal had played a month earlier, when “an offer of seal meat caught by indigenous [Inuit] hunters to the world's leading economic ministers at a G7 meeting in Iqaluit, 200 miles south of the Arctic circle, sparked outrage” among some, including at least one British Member of the European Parliament¹³. In this way, the seal itself became a semiotic resource for explicitly indexing the political phenomenon of the EU ban.

A third key way in which the Parliamentary meal contrasted with the OICC meal already described in its meaning-making was in the kinds of ideologically embedded discourses about food that it reflected and reinforced. This can be seen, in particular, in the text of the *Ottawa Citizen* article mentioned earlier, where the nature of such discourses is clearly on display. If we take a closer look at this article, we can see how its language reinforces its (and the Parliamentary chef's!) positioning of the seal within an “espace social alimentaire” of bourgeois food practices and tastes. Such a space, as in the Inuit (OICC) space mentioned above, speaks directly to Bourdieu's (1984) notion of “distinction,” where the consumption, knowledge, and talk about food constitute forms of

cultural capital and serve to differentiate and (re)produce social boundaries delineating particular social groups (see Pratt 2007, 293). This Parliamentary space was indeed at a great remove socially and culturally from Inuit seal harvesting, carving, sharing, and eating practices traditionally associated with seal meat, particularly given the Parliamentary meal's very exclusive nature and association with perhaps as much pomp and privilege as a mid-day meal in Canada could be. This space was thus also far removed from the OICC event's Inuit foodways and Inuit seal consumption—but far closer, and arguably even overlapping with a non-Inuit world that rejected Inuit foodways.

Thus, if we take a closer look at the language of this newspaper article, we can see that it not only reflects but also reinforces the manner in which the Parliamentary meal has been prepared, eaten, and represented. The discourse that is its reference point is, of course, that of culinary “art” and bourgeois “fine dining”—which the article's language very obviously (if somewhat mockingly) reflects, with its “food critic”-style descriptions of food, in its use of erudite expressions and fairly obscure culinary terminology.

We see this language, for example, in the article's description of the “hors d'oeuvres of dainty seal terrine and rillettes,” the “seal pâté on a tiny pastry cup and topped with fruit compote,” the “double smoked bacon wrapped seal loin” in “a port reduction” with a “medley of organic beets, carrots and turnips,” and the “Yukon gold potato pavé”—and even in its wry “translation” of official dining-room terminology, such as “smoked bacon wrapped around seal loin; served with root vegetables and what amounted to scalloped potatoes in the shape of a brick (hence the French name, pavé, as in paving stone).” In fact, it is easy to find many examples of this language in the article, as the following ones suggest (with relevant expressions underlined):

The terrine was quite tasty as the tangy citrus cut through the gamy inclination of the shredded meat. Less successful was another pâté, where a more restrained garnish was more savoury than sweet, and thus unable to upstage the meat.

The chef did an admirable job of taming the chew — an incredibly dark meat of chestnut colour, if not anthracite — into complete tenderness.

The seal was trimmed of all fat, which I understand is not too palatable. To keep the meat moist and tender, it was tightly wrapped in bacon ... and steamed ... to an internal temperature of 119° F before being crispened in a 350°F oven.

The sauce was made with shallots sautéed in butter, red wine — I'm told lots of Port — and reduced veal stock for richness before finishing with lingonberries, which tend to be tart.

The seal was utterly tender, its flavour balanced by a sauce that was rich, yet slightly acidic. The taste of the meat itself reminded me of caribou or, less so, venison, but later (after the mitigating richness of the sauce had dissipated) I detected a more gamy character vaguely reminiscent of fish.

Worth highlighting is that these word choices do not merely underline the gastronomic experience that this meal is intended to be but in fact construct it as such. That is, this indexical discourse both

represents and constitutes the seal as something “exotic”—as “gamy” and wild, and in need of “taming” with fruity and savory sauces and “reductions,” with the fat removed and with a culinary transformation from “raw” to “cooked” and into something more recognizable, and more palatable both culturally and gastronomically. In this sense, then, the experience offered to Parliamentary diners has been much like that offered by many museum restaurants, as Mihalache (2014, 69) describes, whereby “food is a relatively ‘safe’ space where visitors can be introduced to the cultures of the ‘other.’” Another sign of the article’s efforts to exoticize the seal meat can be seen in its use of rare colors—“chestnut” and “anthracite”, both describing hard substances—to describe the meat’s color but apparently also to convey how tough it is in its “untamed” state.

To be sure, the language used in the *Ottawa Citizen* article is hardly unusual in gastronomic circles and culinary discourse. Nor was the chef’s preparation of the seal unusual in the context of the “haute cuisine” to which the seal luncheon was clearly intended to aspire. But, of course, neither the meal itself nor the way it was described had much to do with traditional Inuit seal meat consumption or culinary practices; and it is hard to imagine a greater distance between two culinary treatments of the same food. Both the preparation and the discourse around these two meals emphasized the distinction, in the Bourdieuan sense, between them. Also obvious from the descriptions of the culinary transformation carried out on the seal—by means of “tangy citrus” and “savory” garnishes, sauces made with red wine and shallots, the “trimming” of the seal fat that would be so disturbing to health-conscious Western eaters, and its re-wrapping in bacon (still fat, of course, but more familiar and less disturbing), the “steaming” and the “crispening”—is that all of this work represents efforts to “balance” the seal’s acid and “gamy inclination”, to mask the look and taste of the seal in all of its oily, fishy, gamy glory. (The lingonberries, though, seem to be vaguely reminiscent of Inuit foodways and were perhaps chosen for this reason.) Thus, while there seemed nothing overtly political in the way that the seal had been prepared, this preparation clearly reflected an eagerness to create tastes that are pleasant, and not unfamiliar, to the refined parliamentary palate. Thus, even if this reads simply as culinary description, it is actually an enactment of a very particular type of bourgeois food politics.

The chef’s presumed eagerness to create particular forms of bourgeois taste seems fitting given the nature of this Parliamentary lunch—which, as we have already noted, was clearly no ordinary meal, with little in common with the Inuit seal feast that took place in Ottawa on the very next day, March 11, 2010. As already noted, the political, social, and cultural messages that Inuit at that event communicated by preparing and consuming the seal as they did involved an understanding of the seal as “real food”; and the act of carving, distributing, and eating it in the city declared not only an Inuit right to this food and their “food sovereignty” more generally, but also a right to be Inuit and an Inuit “right to the city” (Lefebvre 1996; Harvey 2008).

Although the Parliamentary luncheon, in serving to protest the imminent EU seal ban, made a very different point about (food) sovereignty, this difference in the two meals’ political purposes should not be taken to suggest that many of the Inuit gathered at the OICC would not have supported such a protest. This is particularly true given the potentially devastating effects of a renewed seal ban, especially since a previous ban in the 1980s had destroyed the income of Inuit from the seal trade, reducing their earnings from sealskin sales from \$320,000 in 1978 to \$47,000 in 1991, eight years after the EU ban was imposed (Gombay 2010). Moreover, there is no particular reason to think that some Inuit might not have wanted to try seal “hors d’oeuvres” or “bacon-wrapped medallions” (as Eade, the *Ottawa Citizen* writer, mentions he did). Some Inuit may even have found all the offerings at the Parliamentary table quite delectable.

Yet, the converse situation of non-Inuit sitting down to enjoy an Inuit seal feast is an unlikely one. Indeed, even when non-Inuit Canadian public figures, such as Michaëlle Jean, the former Governor General, ate seal in the traditional way in an Arctic setting—in Jean’s case, in Rankin Inlet, a small community in Nunavut—the gesture was not well received among non-Inuit commentators, who expressed disbelief, disapproval, or disgust, using language like “bizarre,” “Neanderthal”, and “blood lust” in doing so (see, e.g., Potter 2009)¹⁴. This is similar to the reaction elicited by the seal feast offered to finance ministers during the 2010 G7 meeting held in Iqaluit, the capital of Nunavut — which, as reported in the *Guardian* article described earlier, “sparked outrage” among some European politicians.

What we can see, then, in the Parliamentary meal itself as well as in the linguistic efforts to construct it as a particular kind of gastronomic phenomenon — by drawing on the seal’s colours, forms, textures, and perceived exoticism, as reflected in an exoticizing diction—is a particular social semiotic world, as translated through food experience, that is drawn on and reproduced. In other words, we can see how the Parliamentary seal-meat meal, including the choice of the meat itself, the way that it is prepared, presented, and represented, and its radical contrast with the traditional seal-meat meal held at the OICC, highlights food generally as a key locus in the creation of social meanings. This is because its procurement, preparation, and consumption are situated in time and space, embedded in particular cultural practices and participant frameworks, and shaped by particular discursive formations.

4. Conclusions

In this study, we have investigated two “seal lunch” events—which, though both taking place in Ottawa and only one day apart, reflected two radically different processes of meaning-making. One lunch, held at the Ottawa Inuit Children’s Centre, required, and unfolded around, a whole seal and its preparation and consumption. In treating the whole animal as a semiotic resource, the meal reflected not only traditional (customary) Inuit foodways but also traditional Inuit seal butchering, sharing, and eating. As such, it constituted an important educational activity for the Inuit children in attendance.

The other lunch, held in the Parliamentary Dining Room, involved no real recognition of the seal as a once-living creature. That is, this fact about the animal was not considered an important semiotic resource; what was, instead, was the preparation and serving of seal meat, which reflected strenuous efforts to make the meat palatable to non-Inuit bourgeois patrons. Arguably, this reinforced the utter “otherness” of traditional Inuit foodways among southern Canadians. What, as we noted, also served to contrast these two events was their respective political meanings and claims for (food) sovereignty: while the Inuit event signaled and (re)claimed an Inuit right to their own “real food” and a “right to the city” to pursue distinctly Inuit practices, the Parliamentary event had more conventional political meanings, which were related to international trade and Western moral norms of animal protection, and which arguably aligned the Canadian government with Inuit communities on the global economic stage, as allied in their support of Inuit seal hunters and rejecting the EU ban that put the livelihoods of these hunters in jeopardy.

What we also highlighted about the two events was their embedding in two different dietary social spaces, governed by particular discourses around and about food—including its procurement, preparation, and consumption—and distinct moral geographies and ethics of food-sharing. The language used in the social interaction during both lunch events, including written language in the form of menus at the Parliamentary lunch and media representations following the events, effectively constructed particular forms of “distinction” in the Bourdieuan sense. The seal meat itself served as a productive and semantically rich semiotic resource. Not only was it used to

convey different kinds of meaning in different culinary and dietary social spaces, but its preparation and consumption was an enactment constituting particular types of food politics.

While the political agendas reflected in the two events could be seen as partially overlapping (that is, both social groups would favor an opening of EU seal product markets), the social context of this food practice and its social meaning for the participants could not have been more different. Indeed, efforts to educate the public about Inuit culture and ways of life were strikingly absent from the feast on Parliament Hill. Such efforts to educate, instead of simply exoticizing the seal meat that figured in this event, could also have provided an opportunity to introduce seal meat to a larger public, and even extended this introduction to other seal-skin products. This might have represented a real step in reducing the reliance of Canadian seal hunters on the EU market in the first place.

But joining these agendas would have required greater attention by supportive parliamentarians to the seal as a semiotic resource and the different meanings it carries for different communities. While the Inuit event clearly drew attention to the social significance of the whole animal and to the preparation and consumption of the seal as a shared practice, the feast on Parliamentary Hill removed all of these elements from the public eye, reducing the seal to its meat—with even this being largely obscured by the Western culinary “disguise” that the meat was given. In this way, the animal was stripped of any potential to educate the public about Inuit foodways or traditional practices.

Reducing animals to their meat is also a significant aspect of the treatment of food in Western societies more generally. Industrially mass-produced meat has estranged the human from the living animal, to a point where children growing up in cities no longer know what the animal they are eating looks like. As efforts to raise awareness about sustainable consumption grow, interest in the animal as part of a larger ecological system may return, and with it a renewed interest in the cosmological worldview shared by Inuit. According to such a view, a new, more balanced food morality may emerge, which helps Westerners to renew their connection to animals beyond the ones they keep as pets—and which they, of course, would consider it immoral to eat—to also encompass those that they consume.

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Endnotes

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(2) This is the standard translation of the Inuktitut expression. [▶](#)

(3) We use the term "traditional" with the understanding that it refers to a set of flexible yet relatively stable practices—in other words, ones that have changed, yet remained continuous, across time and space. As in other colonial contexts, the traditional economic and cultural practices of Inuit today have been shaped by broader political economic flows and contact with missionaries, traders, and other "agents of modernity." These practices also reflect the adoption of such materials and technologies as metal, firearms and bullets, snowmobiles and gasoline, fishing gear, cloth and sewing implements, various foodstuffs, and such practices as church-based literacies, among other things. Crucially, all of these "modern" practices are nonetheless well integrated into traditional harvesting, cultural, and economic practices. [▶](#)

(4) That being said, consumption of traditional food in urban centres is highly valued but generally rare. When country food is consumed, such as at the OICC or at church-sponsored meals or special events, it is viewed as a culinary and cultural event and a real pleasure. It also makes a strong cultural statement, acknowledging and unifying Inuit in the city. [▶](#)

(5) Which, as it happens, gives the wrong date for the two meals, perhaps because the newspaper received information about the event but did not have a reporter on site. The date of the Inuit feast was March 11; the Parliamentary lunch was the day before, March 10. [▶](#)

(6) Brody (2000, 61-62) offers a first-hand account of relying on such a cache during a trip from Igloolik to Pond Inlet (in what is now Nunavut). The "stone-covered depression on the beach" was the site of much-desired *muttuk*, narwhale skin with a layer of fat, "categorized in Inuktitut as *igunaaq*, meaning meat that has been transformed by slow decomposition." [▶](#)

(7) Riley (2013) in fact offers a parallel example of food linked to complex identity construction in the Marquesas (French Polynesia), where communities use semiotically rich feast foods to signify and construct cultural identity. [▶](#)

(8) Although we accessed this newspaper article online in preparing earlier versions of this study, a link to it was no longer available as of July 23, 2015. However, articles about this event that appeared in other media sources were still available as of that date. [▶](#)

(9) See e.g., Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, "Seal-meat Loin on MPs' lunch menu," March 10, 2010.

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/seal-meat-loin-on-mps-lunch-menu-1.937111> (accessed 25 February 2016); CTV, "Seal Meat Lunch

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(10) James Sturcke, "Canadian MPs Put Seal on Parliament's Menu in Rebuff to EU," *Guardian*, March 8, 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/mar/08/sealmeat-canada-ottawa> (accessed February 26, 2016). 

(11) See, e.g., European Commission (2009). 

(12) Worth noting here is that the EU ban was upheld by the World Trade Organization on May 22, 2014. Subsequently, however, the EU approved an application by the Government of Nunavut to become a Recognized Body under the Indigenous Communities Exemption of the EU Seal Regime. This will allow Nunavut to certify that sealskins have been harvested according to the rules of the exemption, thereby allowing Inuit from Nunavut (although not those from other Inuit regions in Canada) to again sell sealskins and sealskin products in the EU. On these developments, see e.g. "European Union Approves Exemption for Inuit Seal Hunt," Government of Nunavut, July 31, 2015. <http://www.gov.nu.ca/eia/news/european-union-approves-exemption-nunavut-seal-hunt>; and "Federal Money Flowing to Nunavut to Certify, Promote Sealskin," *Nunatsiaq Online*, January 29, 2016. http://www.nunatsiaqonline.ca/stories/article/65674federal_money_flowng_to_nunavut_to_certify_promote_sealskin/ (both accessed February 26, 2016). 

(13) See e.g. the Guardian article cited in n. 10. 

(14) Michaëlle Jean consumed seal in an Inuit community in Nunavut in May 2009. This was reported in a number of Canadian media, including The Globe and Mail, CTV, and CBC, in addition to the Toronto Star article cited above. 

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