

**Reflections on the intercultural politics of food, diet, and nutrition research in Canadian Inuit communities**  
**Réflexions sur la politique interculturelle de la recherche sur les aliments, l'alimentation et la nutrition dans les communautés inuit du Canada**

Christopher Fletcher

Volume 40, numéro 1, 2016

La santé des Inuit  
Inuit health

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1040150ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1040150ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Association Inuqsiutiit Katimajit Inc.  
Centre interuniversitaire d'études et de recherches autochtones (CIÉRA)

ISSN

0701-1008 (imprimé)  
1708-5268 (numérique)

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Citer ce document

Fletcher, C. (2016). Reflections on the intercultural politics of food, diet, and nutrition research in Canadian Inuit communities. *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 40(1), 171–188. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1040150ar>

Résumé de l'article

Cet essai décrit des exemples de la dynamique interculturelle de la recherche sur l'alimentation et la santé dans les communautés inuit à travers le temps. Plusieurs sources d'information sont utilisées pour explorer la subjectivité inuit dans la recherche à travers différentes façons de conceptualiser les pratiques et les connaissances liées à l'alimentation et d'agir sur celles-ci. Ce que les gens ressentent lorsqu'ils sont l'objet de la recherche, la façon dont cette recherche mobilise savoir et ressources, et la façon dont tout cela affecte en retour le champ social au sens large, constitue une partie importante de la dynamique culturelle de l'Inuit Nunangat. L'intérêt scientifique pour l'alimentation des Inuit fait partie des préoccupations les plus anciennes dans le domaine de la santé et remonte aux premières rencontres entre Européens et Inuit. Aujourd'hui, les questions de santé liées à l'alimentation demeurent un domaine majeur d'investigation scientifique et d'intervention en santé publique. En matière de recherche en sciences de la santé, une meilleure prise en compte de la culture de la nourriture et de l'alimentation, tant celle des chercheurs que celle des Inuit, conduira à une plus grande valorisation des actions sanitaires dans les communautés inuit.

# Reflections on the intercultural politics of food, diet, and nutrition research in Canadian Inuit communities

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## RÉSUMÉ

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Cet essai décrit des exemples de la dynamique interculturelle de la recherche sur l'alimentation et la santé dans les communautés inuit à travers le temps. Plusieurs sources d'information sont utilisées pour explorer la subjectivité inuit dans la recherche à travers différentes façons de conceptualiser les pratiques et les connaissances liées à l'alimentation et d'agir sur celles-ci. Ce que les gens ressentent lorsqu'ils sont l'objet de la recherche, la façon dont cette recherche mobilise savoir et ressources, et la façon dont tout cela affecte en retour le champ social au sens large, constitue une partie importante de la dynamique culturelle de l'Inuit Nunangat. L'intérêt scientifique pour l'alimentation des Inuit fait partie des préoccupations les plus anciennes dans le domaine de la santé et remonte aux premières rencontres entre Européens et Inuit. Aujourd'hui, les questions de santé liées à l'alimentation demeurent un domaine majeur d'investigation scientifique et d'intervention en santé publique. En matière de recherche en sciences de la santé, une meilleure prise en compte de la culture de la nourriture et de l'alimentation, tant celle des chercheurs que celle des Inuit, conduira à une plus grande valorisation des actions sanitaires dans les communautés inuit.

## ABSTRACT

Reflections on the intercultural politics of food, diet, and nutrition research in Canadian Inuit communities

This essay explores the intercultural dynamics of food and health research in Inuit communities over time. Multiple sources of information are used to explore Inuit subjectivity in research through different ways of conceptualizing and acting on food-related practice and knowledge. How people experience being the subject of research, how that research mobilizes knowledge and resources, and how these in turn feed back

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\* Axe Santé des populations et pratiques optimales en santé, Centre de recherche du CHU de Québec. Mailing address: Département de médecine sociale et préventive, Faculté de médecine, Université Laval, Pavillon Ferdinand-Vandry, bureau 2433, 1050, avenue de la Médecine, Quebec City, Quebec G1V 0A6, Canada. christopher.fletcher@fmed.ulaval.ca

into the larger social field is an important part of an intercultural dynamic in the Inuit Nunangat. Scientific interest in the Inuit diet is among the oldest of preoccupations in the health field, stretching back to the earliest encounters of Europeans with Inuit. Today, diet-related health issues are still a major area of scientific investigation and public health intervention. A deeper consideration of both Inuit and researcher cultures in food and diet-related health research will lead to more effective health promotion activities in Inuit communities.

## Introduction

The adjustments that people make when communicating and sharing space with others are referred to intercultural politics. These can be micro-scale effects involving subtle shifts in body posture, ways of looking at others, and speech practices, for example. Insofar as all meaning is negotiated between people, all interaction has a political dimension (see Jackson 1998, 2002) that is embodied, being consciously and subconsciously organized. Historical inequity and differences in power relations are enacted in these micro-adjustments. Intercultural politics can also be at the collective macro-level, where groups are required to make their case for the continuance of traditional practice and live with continuous and ubiquitous pressure to adapt to contexts imposed from outside. This is certainly the case with Inuit food procurement practices in the current era, which have been subject to environmental contamination, activist disruption, and economic transformation. Since the earliest encounters of Inuit with scientists, the diet of northern peoples has been of utmost interest.

This longstanding interest will be explored here with a view to providing some context to food-related research and how it is carried out in Inuit communities. I will take a broad-ranging view, using historical records, popular accounts, participant observation, and interview data to situate research on food and eating as cultural acts with phenomenological foundations. I will offer a series of historically and ethnographically grounded observations on the intercultural politics of food as they intersect with public health studies of Inuit diet.

I hope to encourage reflection on the cultures of food in the North and research in the South within public health research, prevention, and promotion efforts related to nutrition and diet. These are important issues, as innovative ways to work with Indigenous communities in Canada and around the world on health disparities are sought out. Inuit in Canada are often experiencing the results of phenomena that impact people around the world in different ways but through similar processes (Kuhnlein et al. 2004). These phenomena include market influences on food availability, the changing value and effectiveness of traditional economies in producing healthy foods, the impacts of industrial pollutants on food sources and their desirability, and the impacts of climate change on food crops and animal species. Global sources of change are brought into relief within local, social, and cultural contexts where what people eat, how

they prepare it, how they enjoy it, and what it means to them are immensely variable. In Inuit Nunangat,<sup>1</sup> food is undoubtedly a central objective and culturally celebratory facet of life that motivates continued occupation of traditional territories and pursuit of traditional activities. These activities are filled with cultural and social significance, personal empowerment, and symbolic coherence (Laugrand and Oosten 2014), thereby connecting self-provisioning in the current moment with the historical depth of Inuit occupation of the North (Brody 2001).

As a subject of human and research interest, eating involves everyone. Food is fundamental to life; we must have it to persist. Most of us have the luxury of eating several times a day, and we do so with much intentionality in the sense of enacting different cultural scripts every time we sit down to a meal, grab a bag of chips, take some carrots, or feed our children. Some of these scripts have more symbolic resonance than do others (e.g., holiday meals) but most of the time we simply eat in a way that satisfies us here and now. Being satisfied is a subjective state that varies considerably between peoples and over time. This is important because, in the history of science, we too little appreciate how we take for granted the way we eat. So, while much of this paper concerns issues of Inuit food and foodways, I am mindful that the science of food and nutrition is deeply influenced by the cultures from which this science has emerged.

## Contemporary nutritional health issues

Canadians are comparatively wealthy, have access to a vast variety and quantity of foods, and are well educated—all of which lead to healthy lives. Our country is in the top ranks of global health and well-being indices.<sup>2</sup> Less clear and less encouraging is the health of its Indigenous peoples. Particularly worrisome is the situation with respect to food security, food quality, and emerging nutrition-related diseases, such as type 2 diabetes (Jørgensen and Young 2008).

These health disparities emerge from entrenched social, economic, and material differences between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Canadians (Adelson 2005). A recent report (Council of Canadian Academies 2014) shows clearly that food insecurity<sup>3</sup> is a national problem of considerable concern

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1. Inuit Nunangat is the homeland of the Inuit of Canada. From east to west, it includes Nunatsiavut (northern coastal Labrador), Nunavik (northern Quebec), the territory of Nunavut, and the Inuvialuit region of the Northwest Territories.

2. In 2015, Canada came 9th in the global Human Development Index ranking (UNDP 2015: 47, table A1.1).

3. The concept of “food security” has most recently been defined by the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) as follows: “Food and nutrition security exists when all people at all times have physical, social and economic access to food, which is safe and consumed in

for Indigenous Canadians. Throughout the North there are high rates of food insecure households, yet, paradoxically, obesity rates are also high and rising. Such a situation has repercussions for rates of diabetes and cardiovascular diseases, and implications for mental health and social stress (Kuhnlein et al. 2004).

According to 2004 data from the Nunavik region of Quebec, roughly a quarter of all households were occasionally food insecure (Rochette and Blanchet 2007). Healthy commercial food items are often very expensive in northern Quebec (Duhaime 2015), and these high prices, when combined with high levels of unemployment, result in a limited and often poor-quality food environment. This is offset to some extent by the presence of community freezers, where residents can get country foods as needed.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, people tend to eat better if they hunt and have extensive sharing networks. Traditional foods are seen in the research community as a means to improve the local diet (Jeppesen and Bjerregaard 2012; Kuhnlein and Receveur 2007) but it is proving difficult to bring about policies for food self-sufficiency, and Nunavik communities are divided over the cultural legitimacy of incorporating country foods into the market economy (Gombay 2010).

Although traditional foods are today recognized as being nutritious, cost-effective, and culturally valued, this contemporary perspective stands in contrast to historical views of Inuit foods as inherently unhealthy and dangerous because they are often uncooked, messy, and, frankly, “primitive” in the eyes of most non-Inuit both then and now. Legitimate health concerns should not shield us from the reality that scientific inquiry is culturally situated and politically contingent regardless of its methodological rigour and professional legitimacy. Here we have an example of the intercultural politics of food that operates on different levels, the most immediate one being the intersubjective and interpersonal acts of eating with people—sharing, preparing, controlling, and structuring relations through food. At a slightly more removed level are the choices people make when purchasing. These choices are made according to taste preferences, personal experience, and socialization, with other factors being social desirability, class, and marketing. At the regional, provincial, and national levels are policies that encourage or discourage people from consuming particular kind of foods for different reasons. Different scales of cultural politics coalesce around the process of creating knowledge and action through research.

Given the unique food practices in Inuit communities, health interventions need to be equipped to engage with the peculiarities of target communities.

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sufficient quantity and quality to meet their dietary needs and food preferences, and is supported by an environment of adequate sanitation, health services and care, allowing for a healthy and active life” (CFS 2012: 2).

4. “Country food” is the common term for food hunted, gathered, and fished by people on their traditional territories. In Nunavik, municipal and regional government programs support hunters who contribute food to the community freezers.

Public health and population-level studies have pointed to the disempowerment that state-sponsored assessments may engender (O’Neil et al. 1998). Such practices encode moral messaging (Massé 1999), which diverts attention from the ideological character of State statistics (Walter and Anderson 2013). In this light, public health is a moral practice with often unacknowledged cultural biases, and it may be unaware of its own role in fostering particular forms of control over Indigenous people and dependency among them. It is important, therefore, to consider ways to redress the ideological biases of research in cross-cultural contexts. To this end, the distinctive social and cultural aspects of populations under study need to be understood in terms of local practice, ideology, and ontology (ITK 2014; Power 2008).

### Sources and approaches

When I began fieldwork in Nunavik I was shown the importance of food in society by the way I was welcomed and integrated into the family I was staying with. I had been invited by the family’s daughter, who, when I told her I was thinking about staying with another family, said, “You don’t want to stay there, there’s too many people in that house and no room. You should stay with my parents. My mother is a good cook and my father is a fat man.” I had been introduced to the local meanings that revolved around eating. In this instance, “fat” signifies a welcoming place, provides insight into gender roles and relations, foregrounds the kind of sensory environment I could expect, draws from social expectations of hospitality, and, as I soon discovered, leads to culturally resonant forms of enjoyment in a social setting. This was the first of many experiences that lent themselves to ethnographically informed understanding of the significance of food in Inuit culture. Qallunaat<sup>5</sup> interest in Inuit food production, eating habits, and diet was also frequently and spontaneously discussed during fieldwork. These areas of interest are and have long been important points of intercultural contact.

In formulating the argument and themes of this paper, I have drawn on over 15 years of research in Inuit communities and three additional sources of information: a critical reading of literature on food-related health issues; participant observation in Inuit families and communities; and discussions during a food terminology workshop. Finally, I have also been inspired by such elements of popular culture as film, popular writing, and statements in the public record for insights into food and its political entanglements.

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5. Qallunaat (sing. Qallunaaq) is an Inuktitut term for non-Inuit.

## Historical approaches to Inuit diet

The Inuit diet has been perhaps the most consistent and common subject of health research in Arctic Canada since at least the late 19th century, and even earlier in Greenland (Krogh and Krogh 1915). To say that science and the public have been fascinated with the Inuit and their diet would be an understatement. When compared to European farming societies which rely on plant products, or even other hunter-gatherers, the Inuit stand out with their meat-centred diet. There is consequently a voluminous literature on Inuit diet. In the early 20th century, articles in biology, medicine, and anthropology explored diverse issues: diet and jaw morphology (Waugh 1933); metabolism; and protein-rich diets. An article in *Nature* (Høygaard and Rasmussen 1939) attempted to settle the longstanding “why don’t Inuit get scurvy” question, which had economic relevance to Arctic mariners and whalers and which had been studied since the late 1700s (Carpenter 1986). Other scientists were assessing population health and living conditions for the first time (Hutton 1925; Jenness 1970[1922]).

There was some interest in the evolutionary implications of Inuit diet, and some of the early regional health surveys were being conducted for government censuses, including one in Labrador (Cuthbertson 1947). Popular reports, books, and films all played up the raw and meat-centered diet of the Inuit in the early 20th century. Popular interest reached its peak with Vilhjalmur Stefansson’s self-experimentation with an entirely meat diet over several years, including an extended period in Bellevue Hospital under the observation of a scientific team (see Lieb 1926 for an early paper on this experiment). Stefansson wrote research papers, journal articles, and books and gave interviews on this subject for decades.<sup>6</sup> His book *The Fat of the Land* (Stefansson et al. 1956)—an expanded edition of *Not by Bread Alone* (Stefansson 1946)—includes commentary by a physical anthropologist, a nutritionist, and two physicians, one of whom, Eugene F. Du Bois, supervised the Bellevue Hospital regime, which began in 1928. Throughout these experiments, Stefansson positioned himself as a proxy Inuk subject by eating as an Inuk in the South. As Stefansson’s example makes clear, since the early 20th century scientific research and popular interest have always been intertwined.

This mingling of scientific and popular cultures is key to my argument here about the intercultural politics of nutritional health research. Cultural distinction and difference are important dimensions not only of what and how people eat but also of how problems about food and diet are framed in science. While we taste in ways that are biologically conditioned, with some relatively slight variability between and amongst people, there is enormous variety in the social and cultural constructs of what is good to eat. How different groups of people

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6. E.g., articles by Stefansson (1935, 1936, 1939) in journals as widely different as *Science* and *Harper’s* along with several mass-market books (e.g., Stefansson 1946).

engage with food reflects deeper and naturalized ways of how they imagine themselves, how they taste, and how they express a complex culturally formed relationship between what is available to eat and what goes into their mouths. When this logic is extended to the historical dynamic of the Arctic scientist and the Inuit subject, we begin to see why ideas about food differ so much between peoples and how research juxtaposes itself in this political framework. Food is central to individual and collective identities and as such carries a great deal of meaning for all of us. Inuit attach multiple dimensions of significance to the capture and consumption of traditional foods, including spiritual, social, and mental health (Harder and Wenzel 2012; O'Neil et al. 1997; Pufall et al. 2011). Of course this is true for non-Inuit as well.

## **The intercultural encounter in food research**

In contemporary food and nutrition research it is increasingly recognized that an ethnographic, real-world perspective is needed to address the weaknesses of many standardized ways of measuring diet (Archer et al. 2013). Similarly, by focusing on individual, household, and community influences on food security, we may ignore the central place of cultural practice in food production and distribution in Indigenous communities (Power 2008). Qualitative methods, ethnography in particular, can be used to explore poorly understood social contexts as a step in developing other study instruments. Given the focus on the intercultural politics of food, and the scarcity of this kind of research generally, ethnography is an effective means to assess the boundaries of the subject and the intersections within it.

A brief ethnographic example illustrates this dynamic. I was speaking with an elderly Inuk woman in Nunavik some years ago when she mentioned that she and her husband had offered accommodation in their home to an anthropologist and his wife who were working in the same community. The discussion turned to the anthropologist's wife who, it seems, was doing some sort of nutrition research. The elder said she woke one morning to find that the food she had left out the night before was being weighed or otherwise measured by this woman. In her sleepy state she reacted without thinking by yelling at the woman, which was uncharacteristic of her and indeed uncharacteristic of Inuit–Qallunaat relations at that time. Regardless, this was the first time she had ever gotten angry at a Qallunaaq, and she was now sharing her memory of that emotional experience. At that time, such a response towards a Qallunaat was largely unthinkable because, in a very real way, the outsiders controlled access to the goods that were by that point critical to everyday life. Inuit were in effect not empowered to question Qallunaat, a common sentiment at the time, and only in the past two generations have Inuit taken back the right and responsibility to make decisions on their own, thus freeing themselves from this uncomfortable constraint. Keep in mind that this conversation was about an event 25 years earlier, yet the memory still resonated for this woman.



This example shows how the act of observing can structure power relations—being empowered to look at another’s actions is to bestow on individuals and communities particular forms of subjectivity. These may, in turn, return to influence and shape the very lives first described. While in an ideal world such observation would be helpful and welcomed, in reality the cultural and other differences between observing researchers and observed research subjects in the North have historically not produced a lot of resonance. Thus, various efforts to fix problems identified by external observers tended to be misdirected or to create new problems. While treating someone as a subject of research without prior consent is simply not possible anymore because of the now well-codified ethical responsibilities of all university-based researchers, this has come about only in the last 15 to 20 years. The sense of being told what to do by researchers, for often vague or unexplained reasons, is fresh in many people’s minds and often the subject of stories about intercultural interactions. Being researched has been a common experience for Inuit, and it is one that through repetition has demonstrated who is in charge and who is the subject. This example also shows us how an implicit moral code permeates relations with food. As I understand it, the anger was incurred partly because the food was not being treated as food but as something else. Food is serious business, and the proper relationship between people and the things they eat is important to the continuance of daily life.

The culture of food and nutrition research is centred on introducing precision into models of food consumption. Different kinds of appreciation and cultural capital accrue to innovative and elegant ways of studying food consumption, for example. At times the models themselves take on a life in social contexts that researchers take for granted yet do not translate back into the field of study. This is shown by another ethnographic example.

In the late 1990s, I was working on the social impacts of a planned hydroelectric development in northern Quebec. As part of this work, I was required to ask people a range of questions about the animals they consumed; the possible impacts on hunting from the development; the ways that their children might, as a result, change their dietary habits; and so on. This was a very fraught time in the community, and a great deal of resources were being devoted to the impact assessment process with many different kinds of research being undertaken simultaneously. One older Inuk man with whom I was speaking mentioned that the frequency of studies was getting burdensome. He, like everyone else, was quite concerned about the possible changes forthcoming and felt obliged to take part in the studies. Nevertheless, he could not see how some of them would make for better understanding. Eventually, the discussion turned to food studies, and he mentioned that someone else had asked him about whether he had been eating certain kinds of foods recently. As I understand it, he was shown a plastic replica of caribou meat on a plate, and the researcher asked him when he had last eaten an equivalent amount — presumably

a dietary recall study. His answer, dutifully noted, was “never.” It was simply impossible that an adult Inuk living in that community had never eaten caribou meat. Indeed, the caribou herds were at the peak of their population cycle that year and were so numerous that they were walking through town in large numbers. Yet he was answering quite truthfully. As it turned out, he was saying that he had never eaten a piece of plastic, which was what he saw when shown the meat replica. “Perhaps,” he said, “White people eat plastic, I would not know.”

In other words, he did not extend the analogy of the meat replica to the world around him. That is what researchers do and, as this example suggests, it is assumed everyone will do the same. There is no inherent reason why a caribou meat replica will be received as such. We create knowledge about reality in ways that may seem self-evident, but which are in fact cultural constructs. In the first example, the nature of food includes unspoken and unthought realities that intervened in the research relationship and which likely undermined the quality of the research. The dynamics of communication here did not fail simply because the explanatory process went wrong or because a better translation was needed. They failed because both parties took for granted the natures of their respective cultural worlds.

## **The secondary political dimensions of food**

The seemingly innocuous interactions between food researchers and Inuit point to qualities of relations that are present in other political dimensions and to differing degrees. In May 2012, the United Nations’ Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier De Schutter, visited Canada with the objective of learning about food scarcity. His visit was politically charged, given the potential for embarrassment it might bring to a developed country like Canada. Normally, he would be visiting countries and regions where famine and hunger were widespread. His findings were extremely critical of Canada’s complacency on this issue. In addition, the national print, radio, and television media made known his overt condemnation of the situation he had found. Rates of food insecurity were distressingly high in Indigenous communities, and he specifically referred to the situation in Nunavut. His report was to go to the UN Human Rights Council and, given the tenor of his comments, there was clearly concern that Canada’s international reputation would be tarnished.

To be clear, Canada did not invite the Special Rapporteur to undertake this mission. Like many other countries, Canada had extended an open invitation to the United Nations Special Procedures, including the Human Rights Council, to visit at will. De Schutter’s mission coincided with growing public reaction to policy changes initiated in 2010 to the federally administered Food Mail Program, which had for years subsidized the cost of transporting store-bought foods to the North. Those changes were substantial and included giving the subsidy to the commercial outlets rather than to the consumer directly, as had been the case,

and reducing the range of products that qualified. The result was a substantive shift in how consumers shopped and how the companies organized their inventory and sold their products. Alarming rates of food insecurity were found in Inuit communities during the International Polar Year surveys (Huet et al. 2012) and were becoming widely known. To many in the North, the policy change seemed to reflect governmental indifference towards an emerging health and social crisis in the Arctic. De Shutter sent a political message that Canada was not meeting the human right of access to food both in policy and in practice, and that message was political anathema to the then Conservative government, which simply did not share that view.

The federal Minister of Health at the time, Leona Aglukkaq was an Inuk woman from Gjoa Haven, Nunavut. A very visible member of the Prime Minister's cabinet and a frequent spokesperson for Indigenous issues in the government, Aglukkaq and her advisors were challenged to develop a coherent response to De Shutter's visit and the media attention it was garnering. Ultimately, the subject came up in the House of Commons. What the minister said directly supports my argument about the culturally imbued politics of research. When pressed, she said,

Mr. Speaker, I met with the individual [De Schutter] this morning and I found him to be an ill-informed, patronizing academic studying aboriginal people, the Inuit and Canada's Arctic from afar. [...] I took the opportunity to educate him about Canada's north and the aboriginal people who depend on the wildlife that they hunt every day for food security (Aglukkaq 2012).

Notably, she chose to emphasize that he was an academic studying Aboriginal people, rather than a human rights lawyer working under the aegis of the United Nations. In fact, she was trying to shift attention from the message to the messenger by invoking the often-heard complaint that Inuit and other Indigenous peoples are heavily studied to the benefit of the researcher only<sup>7</sup>. It seemed she was also trying to suggest that research in general was wrong, having missed the main point about food insecurity. Thus, research itself became the subject of critical response and served as a foil for the government's difficult position.

During debate Carolyn Bennett, a well-known Liberal M.P. knowledgeable about northern health issues, pressed her about the government's response to De Shutter's statements. Aglukkaq again emphasized the academic nature of the work and avoided any substantive response:

Mr. Speaker, again I met with the UN representative today. The member is very ill-informed and patronizing. Again it is an academic studying aboriginal people in Canada's Arctic without ever setting foot on the ground and walking in our

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7. The *Annual Report on the State of Inuit Culture and Society 2011-13* from Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. (NTI 2013) provides an in-depth critique along these lines.

kamik for a day to get a good understanding of the limitations and opportunities we have as aboriginal people in this country. Again, another academic comes to our region, studies us from afar and draws a conclusion as though he has the answer to everything (Aglukkaq 2012).

“Ill-informed and patronizing” is a remarkably undiplomatic way of describing a UN representative, and to add “academic” as a pejorative term to undermine the UN report speaks to the low esteem of researchers and science in Ottawa at that time. These remarks are also telling about the experience of being a research subject amongst Aglukkaq’s constituents in Nunavut. This is a complicated position for a minister of health, and it raises cultural issues, which flow in part from the historical power relations that accompany the research subject’s role. First, researchers can become a political foil as a result of the intercultural micro-politics of the research encounter. Second, Inuit may assign any instance of people reporting about food to the somewhat dubious category of ‘researcher.’ Third, when Inuit are talked about publicly in any light, they feel deeply discomforted, and politicians can exploit this discomfort, be they Inuit or not.<sup>8</sup>

## **The language of food and the phenomenology of eating**

In this final section of my paper, I wish to return to the experience of being “researched.” Here the experience of eating and how it is expressed is contextualized within a changing food ecology, which is situated in turn within broader social relations that speak to micro-scale events in interpersonal politics. Let me relate an experience that first made me curious about the bodily effects and tastes of food. Since the early 1990s I have had the good fortune of hunting and camping with people from Kangiqsujuaq and sharing in the great pleasures that this lifestyle brings. There was an abundance of food from fish, caribou, seals, and whales. Whenever we stopped to eat while camping at Tupikvikalak, a long-occupied site, I would regularly be told that I was about to experience particular bodily sensations that come from consuming certain parts and species of animals. While on a boat for a couple of days, we stopped at the camp on our way back to Kangiqsujuaq. A large pot of boiled seal ribs was brought on board for everyone to eat. The meal was hearty and warm and indeed, as I was told would happen, my body became hot a few minutes after eating, and I began sweating despite the chill coming off the water. As I was culturally primed for the experience, I found the sensation to be an embodied demonstration of local knowledge that struck me as deeply important to people and a dimension of food experience unexplored in the literature.

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8. While it is likely that the exchange in the House of Commons was at least in part crafted by aides to the minister the substance is familiar to a northern audience.

Others have noted that Inuit conceptions of health and bodily knowledge are closely linked to cultural models of energy flows associated with the sensations of consuming blood and blood-rich meat (Borré 1991, 1994). After spending a couple of cold days on Hudson Strait, I was experiencing a feeling I had learned to recognize. The term for feeling heat (*aukkanirtuq*, ‘he/she sweats’) from seal is quite specific, and knowing this fact made me curious about the extent to which such terms are tied to bodily sensations of eating, and what role they may have in understanding what it means to be healthy. While the language and knowledge of food sensation preconfigured my experience of seal ribs, the opposite process could also have occurred; this feeling could have made me understand and remember the words I had heard.

This initial experience was ultimately explored at a workshop on the language of food, taste, and satiety held in 2014 with a small group of Inuit culture and language experts. We examined the terminology of different tastes, senses of hunger and satiety, digestion, and elimination of wastes. Preliminary lists of words and concepts were drawn from dictionaries and supplemented with my own observations over the years and with other accounts. This language-based approach has been used in other work on cultural concepts of health and illness among Inuit and has been shown to be culturally relevant (Kirmayer et al. 1994). While the original intent and focus was on the culture-specific terminology of tasting and eating, other terms emerged from the open-ended conversation, and discussion turned to the intercultural politics of food and eating. Some sensations were shown to be historically specific, for example: *Quluaraq* (‘a rumbling sound’), which one workshop participant described as “The sound of being hungry, your brain telling your body to eat. This has shifted because people now snack, the availability of snack food is changing the language. *Quluaraq* is being lost.”

Here, a culturally specific bodily experience is being lost as the ecology of food in Inuit communities changes. The past 50 years have seen a great increase in the availability and diversity of commercial foods, with the result that this form of hunger no longer occurs. Even the elders at the workshop, who had experienced periods of hunger in their youth, struggled to remember the term and to describe the accompanying feeling. The North is shifting towards a market economy, and this shift is embodied in sensations of satiety and their social reproduction.

Coincidentally, shortly before the workshop, the Internet brought widespread attention to the place of country foods in urban life. A 54-second video was uploaded to YouTube, showing a young Inuk woman plucking feathers from a ptarmigan while riding the Montreal subway (Ziomany 2014). In the video some passengers stare and some look away awkwardly. Others gasp and cover their mouths. Generally, people respond with astonishment, as the woman keeps plucking, apparently oblivious to her fellow passengers. The video elicited comments from around the world and was widely covered by English- and French-language media in Montreal. The police were asked to investigate (nothing came

of their investigation), and the young Inuk from Nunavik took ownership of the captured moment (CBC News 2014). While surprised at the attention she had received, she said she had done nothing wrong; she was simply being an Inuk. Excited to have some country food to eat—a relative had sent it to her from the North—she was starting to prepare her dinner while on the subway because she had nothing else to do. She did not eat it right then and there, as suggested in the title and reporting; rather, she cooked it when she got back to her apartment. Her evident enthusiasm is directly relevant to the language and phenomenology of food discussed here, as is the public reaction. As she described it, the desire to eat food from the North, and the remembered pleasure of eating such food, triggered an anticipation to eat and, we can assume, fulfilled a longing for familiar food.

The English term *cravings* comes to mind. Indeed, this concept often came up at the workshop, where we explored the sensory and affective dimensions of the Inuktitut term *pigumiluttuq*. Unlike *quluaraq*, *pigumiluttuq* ('longing badly for something') is today very widely sensed and used for a particular food longing, most often for country food. Etymologically, the word indicates a state of wanting and in this respect is similar to the English *craving*. As a bodily condition, *pigumiluttuq* varies with individual food preferences and experiences, and with age—elders crave differently and probably more intensely than do youths. There are important seasonal dimensions to *pigumiluttuq* as well—people anticipate the taste of certain animals and animal parts as the seasons advance. Seal is very commonly craved, particularly the blood and liver of a freshly killed animal, and so is *maktaa*q—the skin of beluga whales. According to workshop participants, this feeling is a powerful motivator for people, like apparently the woman on the subway. A craving can sometimes be met with a very small amount of food. Thus, Inuit living in Montreal rarely receive *maktaa*q, and will feel satisfied, *niputuq*, with only a few small bites.

Cravings are culturally situated, even if they may emerge from a common biological process. In southern Canadian popular culture, food cravings are often constructed as women's experiences linked to menstruation and pregnancy. When explored more generally in the nutrition literature, food cravings are usually associated with binge eating and weight control strategies—and efforts to understand why these strategies fail. Chocolate is the craved food par excellence and has often been a subject of academic study (e.g., Gibson 2011). In other words, the culture of cravings is reflected in the research on cravings. The same logic does not by default, however, explain the Inuit experience of *pigumiluttuq*. To understand emerging weight- and diet-related health problems, we should take into consideration the local meanings and experiences of basic concepts like cravings before we develop public health interventions and encounter these problems in a clinical setting.

The young Inuk woman on the subway took a very public position and showed no contrition or embarrassment. This, too, was important to the workshop participants. In her statements in both northern and southern media, she said she

was simply doing what was normal for her under the circumstances—her excitement about eating ptarmigan. She was craving food from home. Indeed, her experience reminded the participants of a term for the self-consciousness one feels in the gaze of other people, *malurusuttuq* ('he/she doubts the kindness of someone'). *Malurusuttuq* is an uncomfortable feeling that can occur when non-Inuit appear to be observing Inuit during everyday activities like eating. The workshop participants, several of them elderly, had long been aware that their practices and ways of living as Inuit were a source of considerable interest among non-Inuit in the South and globally. The feeling of *malurusuttuq* then is an intense discomfort with being singled out by another person's gaze, a feeling they had experienced first-hand. The workshop participants interpreted the young woman's statements quite positively as evidence that young Inuit were feeling empowered and comfortable with their identity and cultural selves, regardless of how others might look at them, even in a city far from home.

In contrast, one of the elder participants described how it was when she had been young and lived in a single-room house in the North. Occasionally, there would be a knock on the door—a knock generally indicates a non-Inuit person wanting to come in—and if they were eating, she said they would quickly fold up the cardboard on which the food was placed on the floor and hide it under the bed so that they would not be seen eating by a non-Inuk. In this example, a sense of shame is evoked, and the memory shows the extent to which the effects of observing are real and deeply felt. Of course, research is an act of observing the other, and in the dynamic of researcher and researched we can see how the sense of *malurusuttuq* manifests itself among the subjects, thus demonstrating the implicit power relations. While the young woman's moment of Internet notoriety shows that the meaning and sentiment associated with being watched is changing today, it is nonetheless important for us as people concerned about the health of northern populations to be aware that the simple acts of asking and looking are not inconsequential. Positive change may come through closer attention to the lived world of those who are experiencing what we call dietary or epidemiological transition.

## Conclusion

In a recent set of articles in the *Lancet* on rethinking obesity, Kleinert and Horton (2015) and Roberto et al. (2015) suggest that the global fight against obesity and related illnesses is not progressing well. Health prevention and promotion must be rethought if any progress is to be made. In this article, I have brought forward several underappreciated yet fundamental aspects of food experience that may help develop better approaches to these serious problems in Inuit communities. The first is to situate research methods within a broader intercultural dynamic so that the tensions and discomforts of studying and being studied can be acknowledged and mitigated. Second, bodily states of hunger, craving, and satiety are cultural and social experiences, which much of the food

and nutrition research overlooks. Generally speaking, when questions of food preferences and behaviours are addressed, the focus is usually on the individual psychological dimensions and rarely on their broader contextual framing. If we accept that current research and interventions reflect an embodied cultural sense of food, then perhaps we may see eating as a cultural and phenomenological act and understand how the taste for food can be oriented to more healthful and desirable sources. Finally, the research discussed here supports a return to a more traditional Inuit diet as being certainly within the realm of cultural possibilities. By understanding food more deeply in all of its socially complex, historically contingent, culturally resonant, and bodily felt dimensions, we will be better able to frame diet-related health issues in ways that will encourage people to live well.

## Acknowledgments

Portions of the research described in this paper were funded by the Nasivvik Centre for Inuit Health and Changing Environments.

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