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L. SASHA GORA

Muktuk and Culinary Borders in the North American Arctic Since 1867

ABSTRACT Often accompanied by the word "delicacy", muktuk – whale skin and its blubber – is a culinary staple in the North American Arctic, as well as a polarizing food that colonists and settlers have largely rejected. It, therefore, introduces themes pertinent to the history of dietary cultural encounters in northern colonial settings – from the politics of "delicacies" to how foods make and unmake borders. This article follows muktuk's textual traces to analyse how they represent culinary relationships between peoples, cultures and northern lands. Focusing on the period post-1867, it asks: what is a culinary border and how does the word "delicacy" materialize, manage, and maintain cultural distance? To conclude it turns its attention to more recent examples of "muktuk politics" to consider texture, temperature and fat alongside issues of Indigenous (food) sovereignty.

RÉSUMÉ Souvent qualifié de "friandise" (*delicacy*), le *muktuk*, la peau de baleine et sa graisse, est un aliment de base dans l'Arctique nord-américain, ainsi qu'un aliment polarisant que les colons ont rejeté. Son étude introduit des thèmes pertinents pour l'histoire des rencontres culturelles alimentaires dans les milieux coloniaux nordiques, de la politique des "friandises" à la façon dont les aliments font et défont les frontières. Cet essai suit les traces textuelles du *muktuk* pour analyser comment elles révèlent les relations culinaires entre les peuples, les cultures et les terres. En se concentrant sur la période postérieure à 1867, il pose la question : qu'est-ce qu'une frontière culinaire et comment le mot *delicacy* matérialise-t-il, gère-t-il et maintient-il la distance culturelle ? Pour conclure, je me penche sur des exemples plus récents de "politique du *muktuk*" afin d'examiner la texture, la température et la graisse ainsi que les questions de souveraineté (alimentaire) autochtone.

KEYWORDS whale, meat, borders, colonialism, Alaska, Canada, The Arctic, delicacy, fat, cuisine

MOTS-CLÉS baleine, viande, frontières, colonialisme, Alaska, Canada, Arctique, friandises, graisse, cuisine

The word "delicacy" often accompanies the introduction of muktuk, which is whale skin and blubber. Borrowed from Inuktitut and Inupiaq, its English spelling shifts and sways but no matter which vowels and consonants it contains, muktuk represents a polarizing Arctic food that colonists largely rejected and settlers continue to reject – a so-called acquired taste. As this expression suggests, taste is something you cultivate. The opposite of innate taste, which is to like something upon first bite, an acquired taste is when you warm to a flavour over time. In this article I follow traces of muktuk to sieve through textual accounts and analyse how muktuk represents culinary relationships between peoples and northern lands, between cultures and territories, between tastes and bodies. This is not a study of muktuk *per se* and its role in Arctic cuisines; instead, it is a study of culinary representations and cultural imaginations of muktuk and how a "delicacy" enacts culinary boundaries. Muktuk, thus, introduces themes that are pertinent to the history of dietary cultural encounters in northern colonial settings – from what I call the politics of "delicacies" to how foods make and unmake bodies, boundaries and borders.

Focusing on the period post-1867, I look at muktuk as a moment of colonial contact, conflict and negotiation between northern Indigenous nations and American and Canadian settlers and ask: what is a culinary border and how does the word "delicacy" materialize, manage and maintain cultural distance?[1] I argue that so-called delicacies, such as muktuk, symbolize cultural boundaries and that the linguistic framing of culturally-specific foods, in this case whale, also erects culinary hierarchies, as exemplified by what I call the cuisine-diet binary. This article, therefore, seeks to contribute to the study of food and colonialism from a comparative and trans-imperial perspective that wends beyond the framework of the nation state, which, in this case, means crossing and, thereby, challenging the border between the United States and Canada. It takes a food studies approach, meaning it looks at cultures of accepting – or rejecting – muktuk.[2] I begin by grabbing a pair of binoculars to consider whales, at large, and how to watch them. The first section situates my study of representations and imaginations of muktuk while introducing the sources I draw

1 Predating the American colonization of Alaska, future research should consider muktuk's history in the Russian Empire and in Greenland.

2 I overlook the history of commercial whaling and its grave environmental consequences. For an overview, see Ryan Tucker JONES, *Red Leviathan: The Secret History of Soviet Whaling* (Chicago/London, 2022), p. xv.

from and with which methods. Turning its attention to how foods materialize boundaries, the next section outlines culinary borders. Tailgating this discussion, the third section – the main act – unfolds over three parts to spotlight muktuk and what I call the politics of delicacies. Leading toward the conclusion, the final section considers temperature, texture and fat alongside issues related to transnational, Indigenous (food) sovereignty.

Whale watching

Although whales are famously colossal in size, like all marine life, they can be challenging to spot. The meeting point between air and water, between what is above the surface and what is below, is a slippery threshold upholding a boundary that separates those who need land to live from those who need water. And then there are those who need both. Aided by the likes of boats and binoculars, whale watching is an attempt to edge closer, to soften this boundary. Equipment aside, whale watchers are always at the mercy of the weather – of the temperature of the air and the temperament of the water – as well as the moods of waves alongside the migratory routes of the whales themselves. The same is true of muktuk. Because there has yet to be a comprehensive study of this food and the Arctic cuisines it stars in, the portrait I essay in this article is, by default, a patchwork. I assemble references and recipes, attempting to follow muktuk's textual, culinary and cultural traces across newspaper accounts, memoirs, cookbooks and scholarly studies.

The singular "whale" unites over ninety species, encompassing both baleen and toothed whales, which edges toward the danger of what novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls "the single story".[3] This connects to what anthropologist Arne Kalland calls "the creation of a superwhale". The anthropomorphized concept of a "superwhale" lumps "together traits found in a number of different species" and is the result of "the circulation of carefully selected representations of cetaceans".[4] Kalland's *Unveiling the Whale: Discourses on Whales and Whaling*, which focuses on his native Norway in tandem with Japan, however, "is not about whales and whaling per se but about their representations".[5] The same holds true for this article. It charts the representation of muktuk across different genres, attempting to share stories rather than penning a single one.

Arctic cuisines are underrepresented in food studies and most literature focuses on "traditional diets", "country foods" and "subsistence" through the lenses of health and nutrition.[6] One exception is anthropologist Edmund Searles's article "Food and

3 Chimamanda Ngozi ADICHIE, "The Danger of a Single Story", *TED* (7 October, 2009), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs241zeg.

4 Arne KALLAND, *Unveiling the Whale: Discourses on Whales and Whaling* (New York/Oxford, 2012), p. 41.

5 Ibid., p. 13.

6 For example, only one chapter in *Indigenous Food Sovereignty in the United States: Restoring Cultural Knowledge, Protecting Environments, and Regaining Health* looks to the Arctic, focusing on nourishment rather than cuisine with no mention of whale. Likewise *Native Foodways: Indigenous North American*

the Making of Modern Inuit Identities"; however, it mentions muktuk only once and, instead, pays more attention to seal.[7] Zona Spray Starks, however, moves toward profiling Arctic culinary cultures, and I engage with her work in the article's third section. In *Faith, Food, and Family in a Yupik Whaling Community*, anthropologist Carol Zane Jolles mentions muktuk but does not stray past a definition of it as "edible whale skin with a small fat layer attached".[8] (The word edible does the work of reassuring readers of its palatability.) A member of the Tseshaht First Nation, which is part of the Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council, Charlotte Coté turns to the Arctic in the conclusion of *Spirits of Our Whaling Ancestors: Revitalizing Makah and Nuu-chah-nulth Traditions*. Here muktuk comes up. "Not only are the oil of mattak/muktuk and meat consumed for their nutritional benefits", she writes, "but they also satisfy emotional and psychological needs".[9] Expanding on this, I respond to this gap by profiling muktuk and, to do so, I braid together scholarship from history and Indigenous studies, anthropology and food studies.

This article is also in dialogue with my research about Indigenous restaurants in the lands now called Canada.[10] These lands call themselves north, sometimes even "the North".[11] My scholarship largely looks to snow and ice and slush, but it also questions where the north melts into the south and what imaginations of "the" north as singular reveal about cultural perceptions of place and human relationships to land. This is to say that to write this history I must locate myself in relation to it. Here I follow Cree-Métis scholar Deanna Reder's lead that knowledge is always

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Religious Traditions and Foods only mentions whale in the Epilogue. Melanie M. LINDHOLM, "Alaska Native Perceptions of Food, Health, and Community Well-Being: Challenging Nutritional Colonialism", in Devon E. MIHESUAH, Elizabeth HOOVER (eds), *Indigenous Food Sovereignty in the United States: Restoring Cultural Knowledge, Protecting Environments, and Regaining Health* (Norman, 2019), pp. 155-72; Michelene E. PESANTUBBEE, "Epilogue", in Michelene E. PESANTUBBEE, Michael J. ZOGRY (eds), *Native Foodways: Indigenous North American Religious Traditions and Foods* (Albany, 2021), p. 212. Human nutrition scholar Harriet V. Kuhnlein lists "mattak" as a traditional food and discusses its nutritional properties. Harriet V. KUHNLEIN, "The Joys and Pains of Sampling and Analysis of Traditional Food of Indigenous Peoples", *Journal of Food Composition and Analysis*, vol. 13 (2000), pp. 656-57. See also Karen FEDIUK, Nick HIDIROUGLOU, René MADÈRE et al., "Vitamin C in Inuit Traditional Food and Women's Diets", *Journal of Food Composition and Analysis*, vol. 15 (2002), pp. 221-35.

7 Edmund SEARLES, "Food and the Making of Modern Inuit Identities", *Food and Foodways*, vol. 10, no. 1-2 (2002), p. 73. For seal in Inuit culinary cultures see Kristen BORRÉ, "Seal Blood, Inuit Blood, and Diet: A Biocultural Model of Physiology and Cultural Identity", *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, vol. 5, no. 1 (1991), pp. 48-62; Kristen BORRÉ, "The Healing Power of the Seal: The Meaning of Inuit Health Practice and Belief", *Arctic Anthropology*, vol. 31, no. 1 (1994), pp. 1-15.

8 Carol Zane JOLLES, *Faith, Food, and Family in a Yupik Whaling Community* (Seattle/London, 2002), p. 73.

9 Charlotte COTÉ, *Spirits of Our Whaling Ancestors: Revitalizing Makah and Nuu-chah-nulth Traditions* (Seattle/London, 2010), p. 201.

10 See L. Sasha GORA, "The Muckamuck: Restaurants, Labour, and the Power of Representation", in Mark McWILLIAMS (ed.), *Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food & Cookery 2019: Food & Power* (London, 2020), pp. 104-14; L. Sasha GORA, "'Sad ol' mush': The Poetics and Politics of Porridge in Residential Schools in Canada", *Childhood in the Past*, vol. 15, no. 2 (2022), pp. 86-95; L. Sasha GORA, *Culinary Claims: Indigenous Restaurant Politics in Canada* (Toronto, 2025).

11 "We the North", chanted Canadians as the country's one NBA team – the Toronto Raptors – flew through the finals to win the 2019 NBA championship.

generated from particular positions.[12] All knowledge, in other words, is situated.[13] I am a fourth-generation settler from Tkaronto (Toronto) – the lands of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca and the Mississaugas of the Credit. Moving beyond the north I know and to the Arctic, I am a foreigner to the territories this article spotlights and, following environmental historian Bathsheba Demuth's example, I write as one.[14] When researching *Spirits of Our Whaling Ancestors*, Coté realized that "All but one of the newspaper articles, journal articles, and book chapters, and the sole book that was published on the topic of Makah and Nuu-chah-nulth whaling were written by *mamalhn'i* (non-Native) scholars".[15] There is, as Coté points out, a need for Indigenous histories written by Indigenous peoples; however, she also advises against ignoring material penned by non-Indigenous authors.[16]

I also recognize, as Cherokee author Thomas King asserts, that the border between Canada and the United States "doesn't exist" for most Indigenous people.[17] I aim to cross and challenge this border by employing a transnational perspective. I employ narrative analysis to chart how Canadian and American colonial accounts have represented muktuk. The three genres I analyse consist of newspaper accounts, memoirs and cookbooks. This range reflects the diverse literary contexts in which food stories surface alongside the necessity to assemble eclectic sources in the absence of any significant studies of muktuk. I read these texts through a postcolonial lens to understand how tastes in foods articulate colonial dynamics as well as express resistance. Many of these accounts privilege the perspective of outsiders, a point that warrants critical consideration.[18] English, after all, is a colonial language, and a relatively recent arrival to the lands I write about. A "language barrier" refers to the challenge to communicate when people do not share a common tongue. Food acts in a similar way, drawing culinary barriers, manifesting boundaries and erecting borders.

Culinary borders

The nineteenth century was a period of rapid expansion and unification, in which both Canada and the United States dramatically redrew the contours of their territories. Passed in 1840 and proclaimed in 1841, the Union Act united Upper and Lower Canada, creating the Province of Canada. On 1 July 1867, the Province of Canada joined the colonies of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick to form the Dominion of

12 Deanna REDER, "Introduction: *Position*", in Deanna REDER, Linda M. MORRA (eds), *Approaching Indigenous Literatures* (Waterloo, 2016), p. 7.

13 See Donna HARAWAY, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1998), pp. 575-99.

14 Bathsheba DEMUTH, *Floating Coast: An Environmental History of the Bering Strait* (New York, 2019), p. 7.

15 Charlotte COTÉ, *Spirits of Our Whaling Ancestors...*, pp. 21-22.

16 Ibid., p. 22.

17 Thomas KING, *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America* (Toronto, 2013), pp. xv-xvi.

18 See Mark Cronlund ANDERSON, Carmen L. ROBERTSON, *Seeing Red: A History of Natives in Canadian Newspapers* (Winnipeg, 2011).

Canada. Manitoba and the Northwest Territories joined in 1870, British Columbia in 1871, Prince Edward Island in 1873 and the Yukon (then the Yukon Territory) in 1898.

Nineteenth-century American history is a lengthy list of territorial acquisitions: from the 1803 Louisiana Purchase and the 1845 Texas Annexation to the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, to name a few. Between these two countries, Great Britain and the United States established the US-Canadian border – the 49th parallel – in 1846. The same year as Canadian Confederation, in 1867, the United States purchased Alaska from Tsar Alexander II of Russia. The Indigenous peoples of Alaska – including the Iñupiat, Yup'ik (which historic colonial literature calls "Eskimos"), Aleut, Eyak, Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian and Dené nations – and their lands were part of this purchase. So, in 1867, the 141st meridian west became a border between Alaska, the United States and Yukon, Canada.[19] In Yukon there are fourteen First Nations in addition to Inuit and Métis communities, and the territory swallows the lands of British Columbia and Northwest Territories Indigenous nations.[20] A 1,210 kilometre border snakes from the Arctic Ocean to the Alaska panhandle, claiming some nations as Canadian and others as American. Additionally, the border slices across Indigenous territories, splitting them into two. For example, David Johnny, the former Chief of the White River First Nation, describes the Canada-U.S. border as "a boundary that cut us off from our own people".[21] Borders, by default, both exclude and include, sever and gather.

The borderland turn in history moves the discipline from a focus on frontiers – the stage for master narratives told in the singular voice of the nation state – to borderlands, liminal spaces where these narratives unspool and voices are many.[22] "By opening the continental aperture", summarize historians Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett, "borderlands history has also offered new center points for American history. It has challenged tales of settler colonization and expansion – the making of

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19 For how the Yukon-Alaska border became a boundary, see Norman Alexander EASTON, "King George Got Diarrhea: The Yukon-Alaska Boundary Survey, Bill Rupe, and the Scottie Creek Dineh", *Alaska Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2007), pp. 95-118. For the various meanings that Canadian and US American historians have assigned to their common border, see Elizabeth JAMESON, Jeremy MOUAT, "Telling Differences: The Forty-Ninth Parallel and Historiographies of the West and Nation", *Pacific Historical Review*, vol. 75, no. 2 (2006), pp. 183-230.

20 The Canadian Constitution recognizes "3 groups of Aboriginal peoples". "Indigenous peoples" is the term for all three. The government defines these groups as "Indians (more commonly referred to as First Nations), Inuit, and Métis". Government of Canada, "Indigenous peoples and communities", https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1100100013785/1529102490303 (accessed 13 February 2025). See also: Zach PARROTT, "Indigenous Peoples in Canada", *The Canadian Encyclopedia* (13 March 2007, last edited 11 January 2023), https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/aboriginal-people.

21 Philippe MORIN, "White River First Nation united despite being split by Yukon-Alaska border", *CBC News* (20 June 2015), https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/white-river-first-nation-united-despite-being-split-by-yukon-alaska-border-1.3120897.

22 For a historical outline of this shift see Jeremy ADELMAN, Stephen ARON, "From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in between in North American History", *The American Historical Review*, vol. 104, no. 3 (June 1999), pp. 814-41.

a new people in a new world – with narratives of cultural convergence".[23] Looking at muktuk, which decentres the nation state since its relevance spills across borders, contributes to such narratives. Furthermore, as the geographer Scott R. Stephenson outlines, the Arctic's distinct materiality in tandem with histories "in which border-making is understood as a multi-scalar arena of subnational and transnational actors, rather than the exclusive domain of the state" make Arctic borderlands unique.[24] These distinct Arctic borderlands set the scene for this study of muktuk as a culinary and cultural border.

But what relevance do borders and borderlands have for cuisines? A cuisine, in many ways, is a cluster of boundaries based on geography, culture, religion, seasons, social norms and more. For example, in her study of reindeer and cod in Arctic Norway, anthropologist Marianne Elisabeth Lien writes: "Acts of eating nourish relations, materialize social differences, and maintain cultural norms, as foods are effective vehicles for negotiating the boundaries of what is acceptable."[25] Boundaries separate the edible from the unimaginable. Lien continues: "The concept of *thresholds* is mobilized to discern the various practices that are involved in stabilizing and negotiating boundaries, such as that between edible and inedible."[26] My discussion of muktuk and the politics of delicacies is thus in dialogue with Lien's "culinary thresholds".[27] Foods not only construct boundaries, but also maintain and even police them. It is for this reason that taste, as anthropologist David Sutton details, "is a boundary object", both as a phenomenon and as a practice.[28]

A cuisine is often a national project.[29] Nations cast food as a medium with which to establish and perform patriotism within political borders, a means with which to wave their flags. Boundaries and borders signify limits. They actively divide, separate and define. But plants and animals, of course, do not adhere to human-made borders, and yet "The borderlands were a multispecies creation", asserts Demuth.[30] Considering these tensions, I analyse culinary borders and barriers in tandem with muktuk cultures, as well as the politics of delicacies and imaginations of Arctic cuisines.

Despite government wishes for borders to stand still and rule, they bend and break. Borders are mobile and porous. Today North America's most publicized and

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23 Pekka HÄMÄLÄINEN, Samuel TRUETT, "On Borderlands", *The Journal of American History* (September 2011), pp. 338-61.

24 Scott R. STEPHENSON, "Confronting Borders in the Arctic", *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, vol. 33, no. 2 (2018), p. 183.

25 Marianne Elisabeth LIEN, "Becoming Food: Edibility as Threshold in Arctic Norway", in Heather PAXSON (ed.), *Eating Besides Ourselves: Thresholds of Food and Bodies* (Durham, 2023), p. 114.

26 Ibid., p. 115.

27 Ibid., p. 127.

28 David SUTTON, "Foreword", in Carole COUNIHAN, Susanne HØJLUND (eds), *Making Taste Public: Ethnographies of Food and the Senses* (London/New York, 2018), p. xiv.

29 See, for example, Fabio PARASECOLI, *Gastronativism: Food, Identity, Politics* (New York, 2022) and Anya VON BREMZEN, *National Dish: Around the World in Search of Food, History, and the Meaning of Food* (New York, 2023).

30 See Bathsheba DEMUTH, "Labors of Love: People, Dogs, and Affect in North American Arctic Borderlands, 1700-1900", *The Journal of American History* (September 2021), p. 271.

politically-charged border is the one that separates the United States from Mexico. The relationship between these two countries has gone from one of "distant neighbors" to "intimate strangers" and the border between them has moved: it's now everywhere.[31] What role does food play in this? This article takes a literal approach to the word "intimate". I take into consideration this dematerialization of "the" border while asking: How is muktuk a culinary border? And how does cuisine materialize borders? As the next section addresses, culturally specific tastes erect fences and maintain difference. Here I advance what historian Rebecca Earle terms "culinary frontiers" to consider what I call "culinary borders".[32]

Muktuk: the politics of "delicacies"

Whales have been turned into light and soap, fertilizer and an ingredient in perfume. They have been commodities and kin and they have been – and continue to be – food. Along Arctic coasts, the ocean is thick with calories. For instance, a bowhead whale's body by volume is forty percent fat.[33] The spelling of muktuk differs – from *maktaaq* to *maktak* and from *mangtak* to *mattak* and more – but both the word, which English has borrowed from Inuktitut and Inupiaq, and its definition stay the same.[34] Muktuk is whale skin with its fat – its blubber. English has adapted its multiple spellings, but has kept the original term, sans translation. In the late nineteenth century, newspaper articles, which doubled as travel accounts, introduced settlers outside of the Arctic to muktuk.

News of the North: muktuk in newspapers

In the depths of winter on 7 January 1884, the *Wisconsin State Journal* published the letter "An Arctic Spring" penned by John Murdoch. The paper introduces the account with: "Here U.S. Signal Service Men Enjoy Themselves at Point Barrow—Whale fishing, Duckshooting, etc.—First Signs of Spring—Traits and Habits of the Eskimos

31 Alan RIDING, *Distant Neighbors: A Portrait of the Mexicans* (New York, 2000); Andrew Selee, *Vanishing Frontier: The Forces Driving Mexico and the United States Together* (New York, 2018).

32 Rebecca EARLE, *The Body of the Conquistador: Food, Race and the Colonial Experience in Spanish America* (Cambridge, 2012), p. 126.

33 Bathsheba DEMUTH, *Floating Coast...*, p. 11.

34 For the culinary history of whale in the United States, see Nancy SHOEMAKER, "Whale Meat in American History", *Environmental History*, vol. 10 (April 2005), pp. 269-94. Previously there were "two novel attempts to normalize whale meat" in the twentieth century. The first was a reaction to food shortages during World War I and the second the promotion of "Capt. Seth's Frozen Tenderloin Norwegian Whale Steak", among other products, in the 1950s. The spelling she uses is maktak: Ibid., pp. 280-82 and p. 287. For the history of whale meat in the Soviet Union, attempts to popularize it, and its export to Japan, see Ryan Tucker JONES, *Red Leviathan...*, pp. 27, 46, 155-56, 161.

—Interesting Letter from Mr. John Murdoch, Naturalist of the Expedition."[35] After documenting a whaling expedition at Point Barrow – the northernmost point of Alaska and, thus, the United States – Murdoch mentions muktuk in a section titled "The Coup de Grace".

> After the whale is killed, they haul up to the edge of an ice floe and proceed with their clumsy appliances to remove the whalebone, which is a great source of revenue to them in trade, and the blubber and "black-skin" or epidermis.

Murdoch continues that "The last, which they call muktuk, is a great delicacy to them, and when fried is by no means unwelcome to a white man's palate as we learned by experience".[36] The "them" is vague. Early in his letter, he mentions "natives" and later "Eskimos".[37] Murdoch's description of muktuk distinguishes between "their" taste and "a white man's palate". Here race is responsible for taste. Murdoch does express openness, albeit conservatively, by writing that muktuk is "by no means unwelcome". However, this comes with a condition: the cooking technique differs and Murdoch suggests a preference for fried muktuk. Although they were more interested in the commercial value of a whale's blubber than in its nutrients, New England whalers also snacked on deep-fried whale skin.[38] Some American whalers even made muktuk into a "pickle and spice" stew, which they sold in San Francisco with little success.[39] But what Murdoch thinks about raw muktuk, he does not say.

Six years later, on 19 October 1890, the *Daily Nebraska State Journal* published a similar letter, titled "Whaling on the Ice: How the Eskimo Chase and Capture a Monster". Its anonymous author describes "an entertaining account" of hunting in the Northwest but supplies no coordinates for where.[40] Similar to Murdoch's letter, this author employs the word delicacy, writing: "Muk-tuk is an equal amount of blubber and blackskin cut from the whale, and is eaten raw. It is considered a delicacy by the natives. Fins and flukes furnish their choice pieces."[41] Although there is not mention of frying, the author also describes culinary borders:

> I've tasted whale, you know, before coming out here, but this native style of preparing the article doesn't suit my digestion. Possibly before another long winter

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35 "An Arctic Spring", *Wisconsin State Journal* (7 January 1884), p. 2. To counter this account, for a description of how the Iñupiat transition "the whale's soul to land", see Zona SPRAY STARKS, "Drying and Fermenting in the Arctic: Dictating Women's Roles in Alaska's Inupiat Culture", in Helen SABERI (ed.), *Cured, Fermented and Smoked Foods: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 2010* (London, 2011), p. 305.

36 "An Arctic Spring…", p. 2.

37 "The very word Eskimo, an Algonquian word coined by the Canadian Abenaki Indian tribe", explains Spray Starks, means "raw-meat eaters": Zona SPRAY STARKS, "Arctic Foodways and Contemporary Cuisine", *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture*, vol. 7, no. 1 (Winter 2007), p. 46.

38 Bathsheba DEMUTH, *Floating Coast*… p. 31.

39 Nancy SHOEMAKER, "Whale Meat in American History…", p. 280.

40 "Whaling on Ice: How the Eskimo Chase and Capture a Monster", *Daily Nebraska State Journal* (19 October 1890), p. 10. This was later republished in "Whaling on the Ice: How the Esquimaux Chase and Capture a Monster", *The Brooklyn Citizen* (7 November 1890), p. 7.

41 "Whaling on Ice…", p. 10.

> passes I will be less fastidious in my tastes. The Eskimo damsel from the village but turned up her pug nose with an awful shrug when tasting some of our canned food luxuries – no good, no good – but would swallow a whole plug of tobacco and ravenously eat a can full of Boston baked beans.[42]

This passage demonstrates that the author does not turn their nose up to whale *per se* but prefers a different preparation technique than what Natives in the Northwest employ. And so, the same ingredient can divide tastes based on how it is prepared. Moreover, the description makes clear that culinary conflicts are mutual. A woman wrinkles her nose in response to what the author considers "canned food luxuries". One person's muktuk is another's baked beans.

Similar travel accounts made the news in Canada, representing settler doubts about muktuk. On 1 October 1907, *The Winnipeg Tribune* printed "News from the Arctics" with the subtitle: "Rev. G. M. Fraser Tells Tribune Readers About the Eskimos—Thermometer Touched 94 Above on Herschell Island."[43] It is not clear if this pluralization was intentional or merely a typo, and yet the possibilities of the plural rather than the tyranny of the singular are interesting to note. A lengthy account, "News from the Arctics", opens with a portrait of Winnipeg, Manitoba:

> There are few cities in the world with the population of Winnipeg, which at any given time contains much a variety of men who have travelled in so many different climes and among so many different classes of people. Still it is rare, even here, to meet a visitor who has spent the last two years within the Arctic circle, and among that peculiar snow-bound people, the Eskimo. Such, however, is Rev. G. M. Fraser, who is now in the city for a few days.[44]

Reverend Fraser was an Anglican missionary from Scotland who worked at Peel River and on Herschel Island, north of the Arctic Circle. The inhabitants of the former are "Tukudh Indians" (Gwich'in) and "Eskimos" in the latter, a settlement of around 20 in winter and 200 in summer. The Reverend peddles in colonial stereotypes. "On the Indians of Peele River, Mr Fraser had little to say", it reports. "They are lazy, lying and consumptive, and both in morals and physical health far inferior to the Eskimos."[45] Slightly more complimentary, in the subsection "Live on Flesh Diet", *The Winnipeg Tribune* states: "Their diet consists almost entirely of flesh – rabbits, seal flesh, whale skin (which they call muk-tuk, and which is too much for a white man)."[46] This culinary border is, once again, racialized – here taste separates one race from another, limning a border between appetites, bodies and peoples.[47] "Too much" is another way

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42 Ibid., p. 10.
43 "News from the Arctics", *The Winnipeg Tribune*, vol. 234 (1 October 1907), p. 1.
44 Ibid., p. 1.
45 Ibid., p, 1.
46 Ibid., p. 1.
47 This connects to Rebecca Earle's study of food, race, and bodies in Spanish America: Rebecca EARLE, *The Body of the Conquistador...*

to say unpalatable, a typical settler reaction. It draws muktuk as a line – a border – not to cross.

On 15 September 1908, the *Victoria Daily Times* published "Whale Hunting in Canadian Arctic" by Sandon Perkins. He is surprised how little people in both Canada and England know about "the great far north of our American possessions".[48] He wishes to change this and encourages readers "to consider that those unknown lands and seas may in time become a source of further wealth to the Dominion".[49] This article endorses further economic expansion and champions "the far north" for its speculative potential. Perkins clarifies his intention: "to deal with the possibilities which the extreme north of Canada offers to the speculator for investment and to the sportsman".[50] He penned his endorsement after spending seven months on the shores of Baffin Bay, which was not his first time in the Arctic Circle. Perkins travelled to Baffin Bay from Dundee and although the "voyage was far from remunerative", it convinced him "that these northern lands and seas may at some time form a valuable part of the Dominion".[51]

Perkins compares whaling in the Atlantic to the Pacific. At the time a whalebone was worth over £2,500 per ton. High earnings aside, he is critical of the waste whaling ships produce: "They merely cut out the bone, strip the blubber, and throw the 'Krany' overboard."[52] But he also names a counterexample: "the very successful fisheries which have recently been established on the coast of Vancouver Island, attempt to utilise any of the by-products".[53] He provides further details:

> The British Columbia company… has only been operating for a very short time but has achieved some wonderful results. They hunt the "commoner" whales (finback, grampus, humpback, etc.), which usually frequent the waters south of the home of the "bones" whales, and are not thought worthy of capture by the Scottish whalers. This branch of whaling is, I think, well worth considering on the Atlantic side and should, if worked on modern lines, as is the case on the Pacific coast, open a new and profitable field for speculation. "No waste" is the keynote of the Pacific coast method. Every part of the whale is utilized, even the tail – which is known amongst the whalers as "muktuk" – is salted in barrels and sold to the Chinese and Japanese, who consider it a real delicacy.[54]

Perkins overlooks Indigenous influences. He credits the term muktuk to whalers, erasing its other histories. Instead of recognizing local Indigenous appetites for muktuk and methods for preparing it, he describes Chinese and Japanese tastes and techniques. Nonetheless, this passage suggests that Scottish whalers and non-Indigenous Americans are not interested in muktuk and, yet, he still points out its economic

48 Sandon PERKINS, "Whale Hunting in Canadian Arctic", *Victoria Daily Times* (15 September 1908), p. 2.
49 Ibid., p. 2.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.

potential. A no-waste perspective recasts muktuk from discard to commodity. This concern, however, has less to do with the waste of food and more with the loss of profit. By ascribing the culinary appreciation of muktuk to specific cultures, he identifies a potential market rather than a belief in its potential for widespread edibility.

These newspaper accounts also reveal that more than taste was at stake in edible encounters. As historian Coll Thrush identifies in his study of the Northwest Coast, "the constellations of food acceptance and food refusal in these early encounters suggest that some form of boundarymaking was taking place in the culinary exchanges of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries".[55] To not eat something is as important as eating it, and so taste is a means of constructing distance – of crafting a border between Indigenous appetites and settler hunger.

A taste to train, a taste of home: muktuk in memoirs

Muktuk as a culinary border continued into the twentieth century. Penelope Easton trained as a dietician in Vermont and moved to the Territory of Alaska to work as a dietary consultant "in the forgotten period between World War II and statehood in 1959".[56] She recounts this in her 2014 memoir *Learning to Like Muktuk: An Unlikely Explorer in Territorial Alaska*. As its title previews, muktuk guides her narrative. Whale, after all, is a textbook example of food prejudices and Easton's learning to like it represents her reckoning with the dietary assimilation she practised in her profession. Illustrating this prejudice, she recounts Americans asking her about "blubber" in Alaska: "Then I explain that a better word for blubber is *muktuk*, strips of whale flesh attached to black shiny skin, a delicacy whether eaten hot or cold."[57] By learning to like muktuk she learned to love Alaska and to respect Indigenous knowledge about cuisine, about bodies and health, about land.

When Easton arrived at the Anchorage Health Department its director, Dr O'Malley, announced her visit on the radio and in the local paper. As she details:

> The prevailing opinion about Native foods was summed up in a cartoon in the *Anchorage Daily Times*, October 23, 1948, with the caption: "Dietary Expert to Open Courses Here—Don't Know What All the Fuss Is About—No Matter How You Slice It—It Still Tastes Like Blubber,"[58]

A typical settler stereotype. When she visited a whaling camp the following year, she confronted her own culinary biases, writing:

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55 Coll THRUSH, "Vancouver the Cannibal: Cuisine, Encounter, and the Dilemma of Difference on the Northwest Coast, 1774-1804", *Ethnohistory*, vol. 58, no. 1 (2011), p. 3.

56 Penelope EASTON, *Learning to Like Muktuk: An Unlikely Explorer in Territorial Alaska* (Corvallis, 2014), p. 9.

57 Ibid., p. 9.

58 Ibid., p. 47.

> I had tasted muktuk by now and knew I could like it, although once I had described it as lard on rubber tires. Since I had never tasted rubber tires, I don't know that my description was apt.[59]

Now prepared to eat anything she was offered, she retired her biased description of muktuk, thus revealing a willingness to confront her own prejudices.

As Easton travelled across Alaska she came to question the cultural assumptions behind her education as a dietician. More and more she recognized food's cultural significance, in addition to the health benefits of Arctic staples such as raw meat and whale skin, both rich in vitamin C.[60] She also came to see the role food played in assimilating Native Alaskans – an example of culinary colonialism that seeks to deculture communities from the inside out. Easton expressed these views on her assignments at hospitals and schools, and on 11 October 1949, the *Rocky Mountain News* published an article with the title "Alaskan Natives' Diet Fits Needs" and the subtitle "The main trouble with the Alaskan diet, a woman who ought to know declared here yesterday, is that every restaurant there insists on serving steaks instead of blubber."[61] The word blubber is meant to shock, to unsettle, to speak to settler stereotypes. The article quotes her as complaining that "white people", which at the time made up half of Alaska's population, arrive "with their American prejudices about food, and generally won't consider relaxing them". It continues:

> The natives, according to Miss Easton, had a satisfactory diet before white men appeared. Now they're getting into the sugar and white flour habit, and generally aping American eating habits – and anaemia and malnutrition are often the result. White people, Miss Easton complained, don't have enough intellectual curiosity to sample the native diet.[62]

To challenge American biases, Easton recommends "native foods", consisting of sheefish, smoked salmon strips, Labrador tea and "Eskimo ice cream – fat beaten into a froth and mixed with water".[63] Not only did Easton come to celebrate Native foods for Native bodies, but she also recommended them to everyone in Alaska.

Like earlier accounts, Easton describes muktuk ("maktak") as a delicacy – a favourite of northern Alaska.[64] Her memoir ends with a glossary, which details that muktuk is secured from large, white and beluga whales, and eaten raw or boiled. "With the white man's influence, it is sometimes boiled with spices and pickled", Easton indexes. "Usually, however, it is eaten without any condiments. The black part or skin tastes a little like chicken giblets and requires much chewing."[65] This demonstrates muktuk's range, but also the role texture plays. Some culinary cultures

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59 Ibid., p. 123.
60 Ibid., p. 26.
61 Ibid., p. 137.
62 Ibid., p. 137.
63 Ibid., p. 137.
64 Ibid., p. 161.
65 Ibid., p. 161.

celebrate textures that challenge the teeth; whereas, others dare not venture beyond anything crispy or crunchy. And then there is the matter of fat – a subject to which I return.

To call a food a delicacy suggests it is rare or luxurious, expensive or special. The word grew from the Latin *delicatus*, meaning that which gives pleasure – something that is delightful, dainty, or delicate. Beyond the edible, the Romans used it to describe erotic appetites.[66] From Latin the term travelled to medieval French, where it absorbed the meaning of "fine" and, as Jewish studies scholar Ted Merwin explains, "by the Renaissance morphed into *delicatesse*, signifying a fine food or delicacy. It was picked up as *delicatezza* in Italian and *Delikatesse* in German, both denoting an unusual and highly prized food. It entered English in the late 1880s, with the influx of Germans into the US, and only in the plural form, *delicatessen*."[67] It shares origins with the words delicious and delight, but also delicate.

Delicacy has become tethered to food, and yet this association with the term delicate is telling. Food, after all, is fragile – both literally and figuratively. Food spoils and rots. It goes bad and off. Preservation techniques try to make it last forever, or at least longer than its original makeup allows. Food is vulnerable to time and air, to temperature and the appetites of other animals, like moths and dogs. And yet to have an appetite for some foods and not others is a delicate matter. This is what I call the politics of delicacies. Moreover, I argue that the term delicacy suggests cultural distance. It erects a border between the culinary cultures your nose and mouth appreciate and those it does not, between delight and disgust. The word delicacy can also, of course, invoke flattery. It has a range of meanings but, as the examples in this article chronicle, it erects distance and relays power and positionality. This demonstrates how foods materialize, manage and maintain cultural borders.

But more than a delicacy, muktuk's nutritional profile is high. Muktuk cleans blood vessels with omega-3 fatty acids and supplies vitamins A and C in addition to niacin, riboflavin and thiamine.[68] Because high temperatures destroy vitamin C, unheated foods have great nutritional value in Arctic cuisines and are its primary source.[69] This explains the historical absence of scurvy – caused by a vitamin C deficiency – which was first reported "among white explorers and trappers who persistently ate 'southern' foods".[70] To understand "first encounters in the eighteenth century", opines Thrush, "requires an understanding of scurvy".[71] He argues that scurvy – known among the British as "the disease of London" – limited European

66 Ted MERWIN, *Pastrami on Rye: An Overstuffed History of the Jewish Deli* (New York/London, 2015), p. 17.

67 Ibid., pp. 17-18.

68 Chie SAKAKIBARA, "Climate Change and Cultural Survival in the Arctic: People of the Whales and Muktuk Politics", *Weather, Climate and Society*, vol. 3 (2011), p. 77.

69 Karen HARRY, Liam FRINK, "The Arctic Cooking Pot: Why Was it Adopted?", *American Anthropologist*, vol. 111, no. 3 (2009), p. 334.

70 Joseph R. GERACI, Thomas G. SMITH, "Vitamin C in the Diet of Inuit Hunters from Holman, Northwest Territories", *Arctic*, vol. 32, no. 2 (1979), p. 135.

71 Coll THRUSH, "Vancouver the Cannibal...", p. 3.

expansion as much as "weather, lack of funds, or international conflict".[72] Adapting the expression "the proof is in the pudding", here the cure is in the whale – muktuk is one of the richest sources of vitamin C.[73]

Published one year after Easton's book, Inuk activist and former chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Council Sheila Watt-Cloutier's memoir *The Right to Be Cold* also shares a story of a visitor to the Arctic who learned to like muktuk. When she hosted a California filmmaker who was shooting a documentary about toxins in marine life, he arrived as Watt-Cloutier was eating "beluga *muttaq* for lunch". As she narrates: "I offered him a piece, but seeing how his body leaned away from the bowl, I knew it wouldn't be an easy sell."[74] But she promised him that she would have him eating muktuk before he left. She continues:

> He quickly responded, "Oh no, I can't do that. I have too much of an affinity for dolphins and whales to eat them." Without a second thought, I responded, "Ah, but we too have an affinity for whales, which is why we eat them." The filmmaker paused, and in that pause was a palpable moment of reflection and insight – a true "aha" moment – that I had been hoping he would get before his departure. A day or so before the filmmaker's flight home, we were filming a young mother, Lucy Qavavaug, who was nursing her newborn. Beside her on the coffee table were small slices of *muttaq*. [...] Lucy offered him some. Before he could think his way out of it, he spontaneously popped a piece in his mouth and started to chew. I immediately felt the energy of the room shift.[75]

The filmmaker's cultural associations with whale, beliefs from the south he brought to the north, had prevented him from seeing muktuk as food – something that his exposure to Inuit culture shifted.

"From an early age, I loved my country food", writes Watt-Cloutier, listing "*muttaq*" as one of her favourites.[76] "Country food is the fuel we need to thrive in the Arctic", she explains. "Full of omega-3, fat, vitamins, and minerals, foods like seal meat actually keep a person warm – even if the meat is frozen [...] eating much of this food frozen or raw is one of the ways we get the maximum benefits from it."[77] But it is not always easy for settlers to try muktuk. For example, when historians Kimberley Moore and Janis Thiessen travelled to Churchill to challenge a southern-centric approach to Manitoba foodways, on the train Inuit tour guides from Arviat "joked" with them that they

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72 Ibid., pp. 3-4.

73 Joseph R. GERACI, Thomas G. SMITH, "Vitamin C in the Diet of Inuit Hunters from Holman, Northwest Territories...", p. 138.

74 Sheila WATT-CLOUTIER, *The Right to Be Cold...*, p. 247.

75 Ibid., p. 248. Coté makes a similar point: "Anti-whalers argued that whales should not be eaten because they are intelligent and conscious beings. But the fact that whales are conscious beings is exactly why we revere them, and why we show the utmost respect for all life that gives itself to us": Charlotte COTÉ, *Spirits of Our Whaling Ancestors...*, p. 207

76 Sheila WATT-CLOUTIER, *The Right to Be Cold...*, p. 17.

77 Ibid., p. 17.

> should try muktaaq, the frozen raw whale skin and blubber that is a traditional Inuit food high in vitamins C and D. But muktaaq [...] is not readily available commercially; you have to harvest it yourself or know someone who is willing to share with you.[78]

Never mind that Churchill once hosted a whale processing industry, where oil was rendered into margarine and shortening and meat grounded for poultry and mink and sold as steaks.[79] Watt-Cloutier's asserts muktuk's culinary significance for her Inuit community, which recipes further support.

To boil, to dice: muktuk in cookery books

Recipes further map settler and Indigenous attitudes toward muktuk. Frances MacIlquham, who was born in Ophir, Ontario, in 1915, and grew up hunting grouse, published *Canadian Game Cookery* in 1966. It features a muktuk recipe, credited to Rose Peelootook, in the section "In the Territories of the North and Hudson Bay". Writing about the "Eskimo", she details: "The whale supplied food... Whale oil preserved his *muktuk* (the meat between skin and fat of a whale) and served as winter fuel."[80] Before sharing the recipe, she explains: "Eskimos often ate meat raw – and still do. (Muktuk, and thin polar bear steaks partially frozen, are reported most palatable with a little salt and Arctic blueberries.)"[81] The recipe reads as follows:

> *Muktuk* (Meat between skin and fat of whale): After taken from whale, leave 2 days hanging up to dry. Cut into pieces 6" x 6". Have water ready to boil. Cook until tender with a fork. Keep in oil in 45-gal. drum after cooked, in a cool place in order to have muktuk all year.[82]

The book also includes: "*Fried Whale Meat – Cut up freshly caught whale. Fry in grease with onions.* Inuvik Ladies' Auxiliary Recipes".[83] It informs readers that:

> As Northern Affairs suggest, whales present no problem if you can just talk somebody into carving them up for you. Muktuk (a thin layer of meat between the hide and blubber of a whale) has a rubbery texture and tastes like fried eggs – delicious fried. Whale meat may best be served as steaks, trimming off fat.[84]

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78 Kimberley MOORE, Janis THIESSEN, *mmm... Manitoba* (Winnipeg, 2024), p. 140.

79 Ibid., p. 152.

80 Frances MACILQUHAM, *Canadian Game Cookery* (Toronto, 1966), p. 10.

81 Ibid., p. 10.

82 Ibid., p. 10.

83 Ibid., p. 89. Alongside "Fried Whale Meat", muktuk appears in *Favorite Recipes*, which was published by the Anglican Church of the Ascension's women's auxiliary in Inuvik, Northwest Territories, in 1963. Indigenous women, such as Bertha Allen, who was Gwich'in, contributed many of the recipes. See Julia CHRISTENSEN, "Eskimo Ice Cream and Kraft Dinner Goulash: The Cultural Geographies of Food in Three Cookbooks from the Northwest Territories (NWT), Canada", *Cuizine*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2013), https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/cuizine/2013-v4-n1-cuizine0566/1015494ar/ (accessed 5 February 2025).

84 Frances MACILQUHAM, *Canadian Game Cookery...*, p. 89.

Her description suggests a greater settler acceptance of muktuk, as exemplified by her proclamation of "delicious fried".

One year after MacIlquham's *Canadian Game Cookery*, the Ministry of Indian Affairs and Northern Development published the *Northern Cookbook*. Penned by Eleanor A. Ellis, it is a culinary guide for settlers, indexing the flora and fauna of the country's northern lands.[85] The "Arctic Gourmet Recipes" chapter flaunts foods that "reflect the mystique and romance of our north [...] created by some of Canada's most brilliant chefs, using indigenous foods, certainly 'a something that no other nation quite has'".[86] Who these brilliant chefs are is not revealed, but Ellis is "indebted to Mr. Eric Hofmann, Food Specialty Officer with the Industrial Division of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development" for his assistance in selecting recipes.[87] One recipe features whale. "Arctic Muktuk Chowder" calls for one "20-ounce can muktuk chopped", olive oil, bacon, onions, leeks, curry powder, thyme, salt, marjoram, bay leaves, potatoes, green peppers, tomatoes, parsley, chives and Lee & Perrin's sauce. Accompanying it is an illustration by James Simpkins of a larger-than-life can wallpapered with a drawing of a whale. Three dark-haired figures in parkas charge toward it with a giant can opener.[88]

A more recent title celebrates muktuk with two recipes. It also celebrates Indigenous self-representation. Compiled by five women in Igloolik, Nunavut – Micah Arreak, Annie Désilets, Lucy Kappianaq, Glenda Kripanik and Kanadaise Uyarasuk – *Niqiliurniq: A Cookbook from Igloolik* champions Arctic ingredients – "country foods" that are not commodities but instead come from the land and water. This 2019 cookery book mixes grocery store items with foods that are not for sale, including muktuk (the authors spell it *maktaaq*). The second recipe is for a stew of onion and celery, red bell pepper and potatoes, maktaaq and milk, cream of mushroom soup and "seafood of your choice", the likes of shrimp, scallops, and clams, plus dill and lemon juice.[89] But more interesting is the first: Lucy Kappianaq's salad recipe. "This salad is a reflection of our time", she writes, "fusion cuisine that combines foreign ingredients. The very southern lettuce mixes with the very northern maktaaq! For funky salads, you can play with the idea of combining vegetables and maktaaq with your favourite dressing."[90] It calls for maktaaq, "your favourite kind of pickles", lettuce, red bell peppers and mayonnaise. The instructions direct to:

> Finely dice the maktaaq. In a saucepan, bring water to a boil and add the maktaaq. Lower heat and simmer for about 10 minutes. Let cool for 15 minutes. Mix the other ingredients together in a bowl. Add the cooked maktaaq.

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85 Eleanor A. ELLIS, *Northern Cookbook* (Ottawa, 1967). For this book's colonial geography, see Julia CHRISTENSEN, "Eskimo Ice Cream and Kraft Dinner Goulash...".

86 Eleanor A. ELLIS, *Northern Cookbook...*, pp. 273-74.

87 Ibid., p. 274

88 Ibid., p. 291

89 Micah ARREAK, Annie DÉSILETS, Lucy KAPPIANAQ et al., *Niqiliurniq: A Cookbook from Igloolik* (Iqaluit/Toronto, 2019), p. 40.

90 Ibid., p. 38.

It ends with nutritional facts (which not all the recipes include): "Maktaaq and blubber contain vitamin A, vitamin C, vitamin E, and omega-3 fatty acids, which help keep your heart healthy and help your body fight infection."[91] In tandem with its nutrients, this recipe claims a culinary present for muktuk, asserting that it is not a food of the past.

Temperature and texture, fire and ice

Muktuk also relates to Indigenous sovereignty. It is an example of what Demuth calls "caloric sovereignty"[92] and connects to what environmental studies scholar Chie Sakakibara calls "muktuk politics" in her writing about the Iñupiat – the "People of the Whales". Muktuk politics encompass and empower "the circumpolar indigenous perspective on global climate change" and their participation in contemporary debates about whaling and human rights.[93] She argues that "Muktuk has been loaded with newly salient values and has become a boundary marker dividing Euro-Americans and Iñupiat".[94] Today, as in the late nineteenth century, muktuk is a culinary and cultural border that represents power dynamics about sovereignty, about Indigenous control of their lands and foodways and bodies. The long history of undermining muktuk and reducing it to "blubber" exemplifies how Arctic cuisines are misunderstood.

Zona Spray Starks, who was born in Shungnak, Alaska, points out how little is known about Arctic cuisines – a typical take toward so-called subsistence diets.[95] Such blind spots reduce these cuisines to lists of foodstuffs and dietary statistics, overlooking their cultural intricacies. In contrast to outsider assumptions, Spray Starks calls the cuisine above the Arctic Circle in Alaska "the oldest, most stable cuisine in North America" and credits the remoteness of Iñupiat and Yupik cultures for keeping their food histories intact.[96] This brings up which culinary cultures are labelled cuisines and which ones diets. Despite an increasing awareness of both Indigenous foods from the Americas – quinoa, for example – and how many globally-consumed staples – the likes of chili and chocolate and corn – stem from them, the historian Michael D. Wise identifies that "there is far less acknowledgement of Native *cuisine* – the recipes, preparations, and above all, the *tastes* – that has come to constitute so much of global

91 Ibid., p. 38.

92 Bathsheba DEMUTH, "The Walrus and the Bureaucrat: Energy, Ecology, and Making the State in the Russian and American Arctic, 1870-1950", *American Historical Review* (April 2019), p. 495.

93 Chie SAKAKIBARA, "Climate Change and Cultural Survival in the Arctic…", p. 77. Muktuk politics is similar to Amanda S. Green's study of reindeer fat in *Sámi food activism*. Amanda S. GREEN, "Reindeer Fat and the Taste of Place in *Sámi Food Activism*", in Carole COUNIHAN, Susanne HØJLUND (eds), *Making Taste Public: Ethnographies of Food and the Senses* (London/New York, 2018), pp. 169-84.

94 Chie SAKAKIBARA, "Climate Change and Cultural Survival in the Arctic…", pp. 79-80.

95 Zona SPRAY, "Alaska's Vanishing Arctic Cuisine", *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2002), pp. 30-40, p. 31. She has published under both Spray and Spray Starks.

96 Zona SPRAY STARKS, "Arctic Foodways and Contemporary Cuisine…", p. 42.

food".[97] And despite the value of this reflection, he too relies on the singular "cuisine" rather than its plural. But what is more important for my argument is that to cleave culturally-specific eating practices into a diet-cuisine binary taps into culinary borders that celebrate some foodways while downgrading others. Furthermore, it advances the myth that certain cultures "did not dine, but merely ate" – one that Thrush debunks.[98] In short, the diet-cuisine binary erects a distinction between cultures that feed and cultures that feast.

Turning flora and fauna into food entails more than applying heat. Because of this, the term "cooking" is misleading. What matters is not heat but, as Spray Starks explains, "how cell structure is altered", which techniques such as air drying, freezing, and fermentation all achieve.[99] In addition to temperature, texture is essential. Crucial for its preparation, muktuk must be thinly sliced "in order to bring out its special, flowery taste, which resembles a combination of roses and chrysanthemums spiced with almonds".[100] In contrast, slices that are too thick require "endless chewing" and so the *ulu* that cuts it must be razor-sharp (fig. 1).[101]

To talk about fat is to talk about texture. The complexity of fat, as anthropologist Amanda S. Green points out, makes it difficult to define. She references research that considers fat "a sixth taste receptor in addition to salty, sweet, sour, bitter and umami".[102] A taste called oleogustus, which combines the Latin for "oil" and "taste".[103] Nonetheless, fat remains difficult to articulate, which is what Green calls a "fat-vocabulary vacuum".[104] Writing about the role of reindeer fat in Sámi food activism, she describes its taste as "both inherently material and inherently social, its qualities arising in the intersection of the fat's molecular composition and this sociopolitical moment where its particular molecular composition (i.e. taste) comes to matter".[105] This also applies to muktuk: its taste is as material as it is social (fig. 2). Muktuk is seasoned with celebrations of a successful hunt and the kinship networks through which it is shared.

Spray Sparks makes it clear that the Arctic cuisine she writes about has little to do with "Alaskan".[106] The cuisine she describes is a choreography of contrasts:

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97 Michael D. WISE, *Native Foods: Agriculture, Indigeneity, and Settler Colonialism in American History* (Fayetteville, 2023), p. 21. The italics are original.

98 Coll THRUSH, "Vancouver the Cannibal…", p. 11.

99 Zona SPRAY, "Alaska's Vanishing Arctic Cuisine…" p. 30 and p. 34.

100 Ibid., p. 39.

101 The camera has a long and problematic history as a colonial tool, and so I have prioritized photographs that highlight individuals and moments of interaction with muktuk: from cutting to sharing it and from eating to drying it.

102 Amanda S. GREEN, "Reindeer Fat and the Taste of Place in *Sámi Food Activism…*", p. 173.

103 Ibid., p. 174.

104 Ibid., p. 174.

105 Ibid., p. 173.

106 Zona SPRAY, "Alaska's Vanishing Arctic Cuisine…" p. 31. Alaska, however, has a dessert named after it: "Baked Alaska". In 1867 Delmonico's in New York City debuted a dessert its chef Charles Ranhofer called "Alaska, Florida" that encases sponge cake and ice cream in meringue flambéed or baked long enough that it caramelizes but not so long that it melts. This fire-and-ice dessert, the story goes, was named in celebration of the Alaska Purchase from the Russian Empire. However, as food writer Julia O'Malley

"Soft textures play against coarse; hot temperatures against cold. Pungent condiments offset bland tastes. Biting into icy meat creates heady sounds not unlike fireworks."[107] Mouths full of fire and ice. Time also comes into play. Freezing slows time down and drying speeds it up (fig. 3). Textures mix and match and temperatures transform.



Figure 1: View of person cutting muktuk after successful whale hunt at Gambell on Saint Lawrence Island, Alaska. April 20-29, 1966. Ward Wells Collection, Anchorage Museum, B1983.091.S4393.366.

asserts, "Baked Alaska" is not representative of the state's cuisine. This flamboyant and patriotic dessert "was, instead, named for what our state represented in the cultural imagination at that time": Julia O' MALLEY, *The Whale and the Cupcake: Stories of Subsistence, Longing, and Community in Alaska* (Seattle, 2019), p. 48. Like many an iconic dish, however, its origins are obscure and debated. For more about this magic trick of a dessert, which is also known as *omelette norvégienne*, see William GRIMES, "Baked Alaska", in Darra GOLDSTEIN (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Sugar and Sweets* (Oxford/New York, 2015), pp. 176-77.

107 Zona SPRAY STARKS, "Arctic Foodways and Contemporary Cuisine…", p. 41.



Figure 2: Daniel Iyikaton whose boat got the whale gives kids choice muktuk at Gambell. May 1, 1961. Steve McCutcheon Collection, Anchorage Museum, B1990.014.5.AKNative.07.013.



Figure 3: Person stands next to whale meat hanging on line to dry. Small shed or outhouse, corrugated metal building and utility pole visible in background. N.d. Steve McCutcheon Collection, Anchorage Museum, B1990.014.5.AKNative.08.22.

Conclusion

On a warming planet, temperatures absorb new meanings. This connects to cryopolitics in tandem with environmental justice, Indigenous food sovereignty, and what Watt-Cloutier calls "the right to be cold".[108] Environmental changes have culinary consequences, not to mention the health hazards of contaminated foods, including whale. By profiling muktuk, this article has aimed to illustrate how food enacts borders and how culinary borders relay cultural clashes. Territories, textures and temperatures are intimately connected and studying the politics of delicacies and how language spawns distance contributes to historical understandings – as well as contemporary realities – of the relationship between people, places and the foods they delight in and those they dismiss.

Coté underlines what is at stake when foods are imagined as edible or not. In a subsection of her conclusion titled "Cultural and Culinary Imperialism: Challenges to Our Right to Eat Whale", she lists not only stringent quotas as a challenge but also the influence of "wealthy Western states and international NGOS" on the very animals that are accepted as food.[109] Culinary imperialism is not restricted to the past, as attacks on Indigenous whaling demonstrate. Muktuk is both a local food, and a regional one – a food that crosses borders between Indigenous nations and colonial states and represents a clutch of Arctic culinary cultures.

Muktuk makes Watt-Cloutier feel at home. Recounting arriving in Provideniya, Siberia, "a mere hour and a half away from Alaska by plane", she felt as if she had landed in a different world:

> Yet, despite the differences, there was still that connection to family, to fellow Inuit, that was just like coming home. [...] I was fed *muttaq*, and while another type of whale was used, it was nevertheless the same food. Though far from home, in an unfamiliar setting, I was home with our people.[110]

This connects to what Sveta Yamin-Pasternak and Igor Pasternak call the "Bering food bridge": "culturally shared ideas and practices surrounding food".[111] Recognizing the plurality streaming through these foodways, however, the Bering food bridge "is not a linear construction", rather, it is "a conceptual viaduct".[112] Muktuk surveys how tastes map cultures and culinary misunderstandings, which is to say how cuisines materialize borders. A border divides, segregating Indigenous nations from settler colonists, from northern tastes and southern appetites. But, like a bridge, a border can also unite, rallying together diverse muktuk cultures and the right to eat whale.

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108 See Joanna RADIN, Emma KOWAL (eds), *Cryopolitics: Frozen Life in a Melting World* (Cambridge, 2017); Sheila WATT-CLOUTIER, *The Right to Be Cold*.

109 Charlotte COTÉ, *Spirits of Our Whaling Ancestors...*, p. 206.

110 Ibid., p. 125.

111 Sveta YAMIN-PASTERNAK, Igor PASTERNAK, "Cooking and Commensality Along the *Bering Food Bridge*", *Études Inuit Studies*, vol. 45, no. 1-2 (2021), pp. 259-82, esp. p. 261.

112 Ibid., p. 261