



Safe Food, Dangerous Lands? Traditional Foods and Indigenous Peoples in Canada

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There is a deep and troubling history on Turtle Island of settler authorities asserting control over traditional foods, market-based and other introduced foods for Indigenous peoples. Efforts to control Indigenous diets and bodies have resulted in direct impacts to the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual well-being of Indigenous peoples. Food insecurity is not only a symptom of settler colonialism, but part of its very architecture. The bricks and mortar of this architecture are seen through the rules and regulations that exist around the sharing and selling of traditional or land-based foods. Risk discourses concerning traditional foods work to the advantage of the settler state, overlooking the essential connections between land and food for Indigenous peoples. This article explores the ways in which the Canadian settler state undermined and continues to undermine Indigenous food sovereignty through the imposition of food safety rules and regulations across federal, provincial, and territorial jurisdictions.

Keywords: Indigenous, traditional foods, food security, policy, settler colonialism

INTRODUCTION

Over the last 20 years, Indigenous foods and food systems have received increasing scholarly attention [Ray et al., 2018; Burnett et al., 2015; Kelm, 1999; Lux, 2001; McCallum, 2017; McLachlan, 2014; Shewell, 2004; Cidro and Martens, 2014; Settee and Shukla, 2020; Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), 2015]. Much of this work seeks to understand past, contemporary, and ongoing food insecurity. In Canada¹, Indigenous peoples experience rates of food insecurity that are disproportionately higher than non-Indigenous peoples (Skinner and Levi, 2018; Tarasuk, Mitchell, & Dachner, 2016).² Food insecurity, for Indigenous peoples, has been linked to higher rates of poverty as well as a lack of access to traditional food³ sources, to name but a few factors (Power, 2008). Tarasuk et al. (2013) have noted how Indigenous heritage is a “household

¹Turtle Island represents ancestral understandings of the origins and significance of the land now known as North America and will be used moving forward. However, the policies presented in this paper are unique to so-called Canada, the northern portion of Turtle Island.

²According to Health Canada (2007), food insecurity is defined as occurrences of hunger due to a lack of access and availability of healthy, fresh, and safe foods.

³We use various terms (traditional food, country food, wild food, cultural food) to describe food that has been harvested from the land, air, and water. The term used depends on the context. For example, in provincial acts and legislation in Canada, they are referred to as wild foods or wild game. Traditional food is the term often preferred by First Nations peoples and country food is the term often preferred by Inuit. These terms may be used interchangeably throughout.

characteristic associated with a higher likelihood of food insecurity” (p.3). However, this picture is far more complicated. This article explores the ways in which the Canadian settler state undermined and continues to undermine Indigenous food sovereignty through the imposition of food safety rules and regulations across federal, provincial, and territorial jurisdictions.⁴ What we seek to illustrate here are patterns of federal and provincial policies across time that erode Indigenous food sovereignty.

For Indigenous peoples, food insecurity is rooted in settler colonialism⁵ and any move towards decolonization must be grounded in practices and support of Indigenous food sovereignties and land back movements (Daigle, 2017). Indigenous food systems on Turtle Island have undergone dramatic changes over the last 500 years because of settler colonialism which has sought to control and eliminate Indigenous people’s food knowledges and practices through the destruction of animals, lands, waters, and Indigenous bodies. It has forced changes to Indigenous diets through food availability, the residential school system⁶, the creation of the reserve system, and the introduction of poor-quality market-based foods at exorbitant prices (Rowse, 1998; Shewell, 2004; Monchalin, 2016).

As social determinants of health, food insecurity and settler colonialism have direct impacts on the spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental well-being of Indigenous peoples (Loppie Reading and Wein, 2009; Greenwood et al, 2018). Within this framework, comes the understanding that food insecurity and the impacts of colonial food systems, inhibits Indigeneity and reproduces trauma. Indeed, the inability to self-determine one’s food system, and thus health and culture, can result in feelings of isolation, a lack of belonging and in some cases *dis-ease* (Morrison, 2011; Cidro and Martens, 2014; Monchalin, 2016).

Relatively less scholarship has explored the connections between Indigenous food and social dimensions such as identity, belonging, and healing in Canada, thus the objective of this paper is to examine the ways in which access to traditional foods are restricted through federal and provincial and territorial food safety rules and regulations. These regulations are so prohibitive they prevent

Indigenous peoples and communities from pursuing moderate livelihoods (as guaranteed under the treaties), and impede the practice of cultural practices and values such as generosity, reciprocity, sharing, and kindness. It is important to illuminate the ways in which federal and provincial rules and regulations prohibit and limit access to land-based foods especially in urban and public spaces, highlight the contradictions that exist within those policies, and the ways in which these policies operate to sever the connections between food and identity for Indigenous peoples (Carter, 1990; McNabb, 1993; Jasen, 1995; Tough, 1995; Gulig, 2003; Sider, 2014). In this paper, we historically contextualize the efforts of the Canadian state to wrest control over food systems from Indigenous peoples and provide examples of how these practices persist into the present. Under the guise of food safety and risk, the settler state continues to exert unnecessary and assimilatory control over Indigenous people’s food systems. It is in these ways that food operates as a technology of power that simultaneously acts out and reinforces settler control over Indigenous peoples. Food insecurity is not only a symptom of settler colonialism, but part of its very architecture. Indeed, we see the bricks and mortar of this architecture through the rules and regulations that exist around the sharing and selling of traditional or land-based foods and how it impacts Indigenous cultures and communities.

METHODOLOGY

This historical and legal analysis explores food policies and legislation in the context of the ongoing colonial food system that has been imposed on Indigenous communities. We draw from various literatures including Indigenous studies, food history, and socio-cultural understandings of risk. Our focus is on so-called Canada, and while we discuss food overall, we emphasize through the policy discussion wild animals from the land, sea, and sky. Importantly, while we discuss the larger Indigenous food system in so-called Canada, it must be noted that Indigenous communities’ traditional and pre-colonial diets vary considerably; meat and fish feature prominently in nearly all Indigenous diets while plants as food vary from nation to nation.

Positioning Ourselves

We are a diverse group of scholars in food and settler colonial studies located in the geographic areas that came to be known as present-day Manitoba and Ontario (Treaty One, the Robinson Superior Treaty of 1850, and the Haldimand Tract). The first author is mixed ancestry Swampy Cree, and the other authors are non-Indigenous settler allies with a long history of working with Indigenous communities. Together, we research Indigenous food systems and illuminate the histories of government and corporate oppression of Indigenous peoples’ bodies, lands, and foodways.

DISCUSSION

Traditional Food

Traditional foods are considered those foods that extend back in time to represent a more historical diet; these are the foods that

⁴We draw attention to the continual violence, both physical and epistemological, of the lands of so-called Canada through the title of this paper.

⁵Settler colonialism is a system of domination, exploitation, and land/resource theft that differs from more conventional understandings of colonialism in that settlers come with the intention of permanent occupation. Settler colonialism is not a single event but a system that is established over a long period of time and involves a knowledge making process that seeks to construct settlers as the original inhabitants of the continent and the violence and genocide (physical and epistemological) that is necessary to secure the land is made to appear as normal, neutral, and inevitable. In other words, settler colonialism seeks to destroy to replace. We see settler colonialism historically and ongoing in countries like Canada, United States, Australia, and New Zealand (Wolfe, 2007; Tuck and Yang, 2012).

⁶The residential school system forcibly removed Indigenous children from their homes and into church and government-run boarding schools where children were beaten, sexually abused, and starved in order to kill the Indian in the child, a government policy that sought to assimilate children (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

Indigenous peoples in the geographic area currently known as Canada have been eating for thousands of years. While there is debate over whether or not the term traditional food is appropriate because it implies that such foods are static and unchanging (Luppens and Power, 2018), we know this not to be the case. Thus, we employ an expansive definition that includes “the sociocultural meanings, acquisition/processing techniques, use, composition, and nutritional consequences” of traditional foods (Kuhnlein and Receveur, 1996, p. 418). Traditional food signifies more than just the physical food itself, but serves as an act of culture and within the structures of settler colonialism, a political act of resistance and resurgence. In Canada, traditional foods are those harvested from the land and water and include wild game, water mammals, fish, seafood, berries, and other wild growing fruits, vegetables, and medicines. Such foods are more nutritious than conventional, market-based foods produced within the industrial food system (Nakano et al, 2005; Kuhnlein and Receveur, 2007; Elliott et al, 2012).

Traditional foods are critical to Indigenous cultures. Through the practice of hunting, gathering, fishing, and foraging, Indigenous peoples have the opportunity to not only practice their culture, but also invoke spirit. Indigenous relationships to the land see plants and animals as gifts, part of an interconnected system of all living things. Through ancestral responsibilities to the land, Indigenous peoples are upholding long-standing agreements with all of creation to live in harmony. Animals are not only food, but living forms of spirit in an Indigenous food system. Indigenous peoples maintain their responsibilities to animals through harvesting following Natural Law. Indigenous scholar Waziyatawin (2005) describes their responsibilities:

“We believe that part of our spiritual responsibility as human beings is to maintain respectful relationships with all of creation. For some of us this might mean singing to the corn, offering prayers to plant and animal beings, or harvesting in a sacred manner. These culturally and spiritually significant actions nurtured us as well as the spiritual beings we encountered.” (p. 75)

Many of the rituals surrounding traditional food harvests are ceremonial. These include offerings to the land and feasting. For some Indigenous cultures, there are ceremonies dating back hundreds of years that celebrate seasons and giving thanks to the plants and animals of each season (Johnston, 1990). Many of these ceremonies continue today and they are integral to Indigenous food sovereignty (Robin, 2019). It is for these reasons and more that settler colonial states have used and continue to use traditional foods and food systems as means to control Indigenous populations and gain access to their territories and resources.

The Control of Traditional Food

There is a deep and troubling history, both in Canada and the United States, of state authorities asserting control over

traditional foods, market-based, and other introduced foods for Indigenous peoples. Over time access to traditional foods has been undermined through forced migration, land dispossession, climate change, and environmental contamination (Bussidor and Bilgen-Reinart, 2000; Coté, 2016; Daigle, 2017; Tester and Kulchyski, 1994; Tobias and Richmond, 2014). For instance, on the prairie regions of Turtle Island, control over access to food was exerted through the confinement of Indigenous peoples to reserves and the introduction of the pass system⁷ in 1885, the imposition of provincial hunting and game regulations that were in direct violation of the treaties, and the elimination of the bison. All of which served as key tactics in the government’s plan to break ancestral connection to lands by preventing access to sacred food sources in order to free up land for western agricultural expansion (Carter, 1990; Isenberg, 2000; Waziyatawin, 2012).

There is a history of Indigenous agriculture of crop plants that have been domesticated, such as corn, beans, squash (the “three sisters”), and sunflowers (Robson, 2020). While the imposition of western style agricultural practices on Indigenous peoples was part of the federal government’s assimilatory project, many Indigenous communities in the Prairie West successfully adopted these practices and competed with non-Indigenous farmers (Carter, 1990). However, these initial successes were quickly undermined by the federal government through a series of policies and regulations intended to reduce and eliminate agricultural production on reserve to prevent competition with non-Indigenous farmers (Carter, 1990; Ladner, 2009). We see similar tactics employed with the issuance of fishing licenses that impose catch limits and when First Nations were allotted one fishing license to feed their entire community. In contrast, non-Indigenous fishers received individual fishing licenses for commercial purposes (Piper, 2010). The story of the prairies is only one example of how the government asserted control over Indigenous peoples and their lands; the loss of fisheries through overharvesting and the introduction of fish farms in oceans and inland lakes is another. These examples offer insight into the government’s agenda to push industry onto Indigenous territories, and commercialize land and water-based food harvesting activities.

Knowledge about food was also undermined by the state. Interned in Residential Schools where the connection Indigenous children had to their culture and communities was severed, Indigenous children were starved and punished using food. Traditional foods, regarded by church and state authorities as symbolic of Indigenous culture, were denigrated by school authorities and banned from schools despite the failure of schools to replace it with either adequate or

⁷The Pass System was a government policy that policed and forbade Indigenous peoples’ movement within and outside their communities without travel approval from government appointed Indian Agents. It was part of a larger strategy of assimilation.

nutritious food (Coté, 2010). More importantly, in losing their culture through assimilation and abuse, Indigenous children lost food preparation and harvesting skills, including the language, songs, ceremonies, and celebrations of their ancestors. Indigenous children were disconnected from the land and for many the cycle of intergenerational learning was broken. Children were taught, and punished to believe that traditional food and the supporting of traditional practices and culture was inferior (Milloy, 1999; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

Today, access to hunting, fishing, and trapping continues to be hindered by government restrictions that limit the amount of food harvested, sets game specific seasonal hunting, firearms licensing, and even controls the routes used for traditional harvesting (Socha et al., 2012; Gardner and Tsuji, 2014). The high costs of hunting, fishing, and trapping are additional barriers Indigenous peoples face in an effort to practice their culture (Lambden et al., 2006; Pal et al., 2013; Leibovitch Randazzo and Robidoux, 2018).

Many Indigenous peoples argue that separating food from the land furthers the destruction of both Indigenous cultures and lands (Tobias and Richmond, 2014; Monchalain, 2016; Richmond, 2018). Indeed, for more than 200 years the Canadian government has used assimilation as a tool to gain control of lands and to disconnect Indigenous peoples from their food sources (Shewell, 2004). Control over food access has also occurred in the realm of non-Indigenous market-based foods. Participation in the fur trade and rations provided through treaty negotiations introduced foods such as pork and white flour to Indigenous peoples that have been linked to poor health (Lux, 2001). Today, nutrient poor foods are the most affordable option for many Indigenous peoples with the costs of fresh and nutritious foods becoming increasingly prohibitive, particularly in fly-in and northern rural First Nations (Galloway, 2014; Burnett et al., 2015; Food Secure Canada, 2016; Galloway, 2017; Hammond, 2017). These examples provide a snapshot of the interconnections between food, land, and Indigenous culture and demonstrate how government policies, actions, and inactions have contributed to a loss of self-determination and well-being. Understanding these elements is critical to understanding contemporary food insecurity and its cultural consequences. Next, we turn to the rules and regulations regarding traditional—and sacred—food imposed by federal, provincial and local health authorities that restrict Indigenous people's access to food.

Current Traditional Food Policies

The rights of Indigenous people to access food from the land has been documented, articulated, and upheld through a number of jurisdictions and governments. Internationally, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (United Nations, 2007) acknowledges that “Indigenous peoples have the right to their traditional medicines and to maintain their health practices, including the conservation of their vital medicinal plants, animals, and minerals” (Article 24,

Section 1). Nationally, the Natural Resources Transfer Agreement (NRTA) recognizes access and consumption of traditional foods as a basic right for Indigenous peoples, and that “treaty and aboriginal rights relating to hunting, fishing and trapping are also recognized and affirmed as part of the Constitution of Canada by **Section 35** of the Constitution Act, 1982” (Manitoba Conservation and Water Stewardship, 2017, p. 1). Not included in the framing of these agreements is the health and safety of traditional foods themselves, as well as protection for the land from which these foods are harvested.

Currently, a significant barrier that restricts access to traditional foods are those policies imposed under federal, provincial, and territorial food safety rules and regulations. In many cases these regulations are so prohibitive that they pose significant challenges to Indigenous livelihoods, and impede cultural practices and values such as generosity, reciprocity, sharing, and kindness (Adelson, 2000; Hart, 2002; Anderson, 2011). These regulations are predicated on a western system of domesticated animals. Since pre-colonial Indigenous diets did not include the domestication of animals (Kuhnlein and Humphries, 2017), these policies are based on an entirely different colonial system that disregards Indigenous harvesting practices of wild animals and undermines Indigenous wellbeing (Dennis and Robin, 2020). Indeed, the safety rules and regulations imposed by provincial and territorial health districts and the federal food inspection agency around traditional foods directly impacts Indigenous people's right to practice their culture. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (2013) has mandated that all meat farmed and fish harvested for commercial purposes are subject to regulations and inspections by provincial, territorial, and federal governments prior to any sale of food and before public consumption to reduce risk of food borne illnesses. In this context, risk is defined by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency and within these regulations, wild foods/game are considered high risk because they have not been produced, inspected, or processed in a federally inspected abattoir. Provincially, similar definitions and regulations are applied to wild game. Under Ontario's current Food Safety and Quality Act, wild foods such as moose or beaver, are also considered to be risky because they cannot be monitored, inspected, and processed in the same manner as those foods produced within the industrial food system. It is through these regulations, that the state defines risk in relation to food (Petersen and Lupton, 1996; Lupton, 1999), which is then used as a tool of settler colonialism to further demarcate traditional and wild caught or harvested foods as risky/dangerous and therefore in need of careful surveillance, and in doing so prevents these foods from being distributed or shared beyond immediate family.

Traditional foods obtained through recreational or subsistence practices are regulated through a different policy, the Safe Food for Canadians Act (Minister of Justice, 2012). Under the Safe Food for Canadians Act, a hunter with a hunting license may hunt and share food with his family, but not community. With the exception of

Nunavut, wild game that is not inspected cannot be legally shared or served in public spaces (Howell, 2012; Aurora Research Institute, 2018). Under the Nunavut Land Claim Settlement Act, Inuit have the right to sell, barter, exchange, and trade lawfully harvested game (Aurora Research Institute, 2018). Despite the opportunity to sell country food in Nunavut, there are a range of perspectives from Inuit as to whether selling country food, instead of sharing, has an impact on Inuit culture and identity (Searles, 2016). In most regions of the other provinces and territories, it is unlawful to sell wild game, in any form, even if it has been dried, frozen, salted, or smoked. Howell (2012) also notes that even the offer to share, without the exchange of goods, is illegal. Ostensibly these regulations are designed to protect both people (from potential illness) and the wildlife stock itself. In operation however, these regulations treat Indigenous practices around harvesting and relationship to land the same as the production and processing of foods within the industrial food system. Requiring Indigenous peoples to conform to such regulations is an effort to divorce the social, spiritual, and cultural elements of harvesting wild game that comprise a larger Natural Law for Indigenous peoples. It is in this manner that regulations meant to manage risk and supposedly ensure food safety, operate to prohibit access to wild foods and sever Indigenous peoples from their culture and community, and function as an important technology of settler colonialism. Howell (2012) shares a conversation with a Fish and Wildlife Officer in Alberta:

“We hope that people can appreciate that if we allowed people to sell the meat they hunted, it could be devastating on wildlife populations . . . Settlers came here and hunted the buffalo, and other wildlife, to near extinction for its meat and hides. It’s a very real possibility.” (n.p.)

Within the formulation of these policies, there is no value given to traditional forms of sustainable hunting, harvesting, gathering, and fishing practices or to the sacred agreements contained within the Royal Proclamation, and later through the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, **Section 25** which support Aboriginal title and “treaty rights” (Monchalin, 2016). Indigenous peoples have long been environmental stewards of their lands and resources, including wildlife. While the hunting practices of Indigenous peoples have often been erroneously blamed for the decline of specific animal populations, such as caribou, recent research has shown that mineral resource development is the cause of declining caribou herds. Indeed, “there is no evidence that Indigenous harvest practices have had any influence on caribou population dynamics” (Parlee et al., 2018, p. 11).

When wild foods are served and/or shared with people who gather to create community or feast the following requirements must be met: the food handling area used for receiving, processing and containing wild meat must be inspected by a local health inspector; uninspected meat

cannot come in to contact with inspected meat, nor can any kitchen utensils, containers, or surfaces; and food handling certificates although not required, are advised for those involved in country food programs. In Manitoba, the guidelines can be found through the *Guideline for the Design, Construction, and Re-construction of a Food Processing Establishment* and include such requirements as approved wall surfaces, equipment and design installation along with lighting and ventilation (Manitoba, 2013). Access to potable water is also a requirement for these establishments; a challenge for many First Nations. For instance, in 2013, 118 Indigenous communities were under boil water advisories (Monchalin, 2016) and despite Federal commitments to remove all long-term drinking water advisories in First Nations communities by March 2021, 58 advisories remain, with 44 of those in the province of Ontario (Stefanovic and Jones, 2021). Moreover, urban community gatherings often take place in outdoor settings to enable traditional cooking techniques over an open fire (i.e., smoking goose or fish).

Similar prohibitive regulations exist in other provinces. In Ontario, meat must be inspected immediately ante and post mortem; clearly an impossible requirement for wild game. An establishment serving fish or wild game can only use game that was obtained under a valid license and it must record all revenues and expenditures from the event; it must notify the local public health unit of the event; post signage where the meat is served to communicate that it has not been inspected; it must notify each patron individually in writing that the meat they are being served is uninspected; and it must keep a list of all attendees who consumed the wild food⁸. This complex web of rules involves no less than three different ministries: the Ministries of Health (MoH), Natural Resources and Forests (NRF) and Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA). Many organizations have opted not to serve traditional foods rather than attempt to navigate these complicated rules and requirements. One example where an establishment has been able to make some progress with these regulations is the Meno Ya Win Health Centre in Sioux Lookout, northern Ontario. Meno Ya Win is a 60-bed hospital and 20-bed extended care facility and is one of the only provincial establishments that can legally serve wild food to its patients (Ya Win, 2014). Meno Ya Win was explicit about incorporating traditional foods into the Sioux Lookout Meno Ya Win Health Centre Act to establish the Sioux Lookout Meno Ya Win Health Centre (Chapter PR17) when the hospital legislation was initiated (Government of Ontario, 2001). This has enabled the facility to offer their *Miichim* (traditional foods) program of “uninspected” traditional foods to patients twice a week and frozen *Miichim* meals to patients who wish to keep to their traditional diet daily. Despite the allowance in the Sioux Lookout Meno Ya Win Health Centre Act (Government of Ontario, 2001) to legally serve wild foods, there are still challenges and barriers to

⁸<https://www.ontario.ca/page/serve-fish-or-wild-game-charitable-events>.

offering the program. All of the traditional food must be donated and the program is continuously seeking donations (Ya Win, 2014); the uninspected wild meat must not come into contact with any inspected meat necessitating a separate kitchen and kitchen tools; and anyone choosing to eat wild meat at Meno Ya Win must be informed in writing each time before they are served that the meat has not been inspected (Government of Ontario, 2001).

Even programs intended to improve access to traditional foods establish further barriers. At the federal and provincial/territorial levels, efforts have been made to introduce country food programs that are intended to increase the access of Indigenous peoples and communities to traditional foods but many of these programs are narrow in focus and frequently produce more barriers rather than less. For instance, under Nutrition North Canada (NNC) the federal government provides higher subsidies to ship country food between communities. However, in order for wild foods to be eligible for the subsidy under NNC, they must first be processed by an approved (federally licensed) abattoir. Only three of these type of processing facilities exist in northern Canada and all are located in the Far North (Burnett et al., 2015). In order to use these facilities, a hunter would have to ship harvested foods either farther north or south and then back again. Few communities and individuals have the capacity to navigate regulatory requirements regarding food safety or pay the costs.

Few Indigenous communities in Canada have been able to develop their own country food programs in order to provide places for local members to process and/or store their meat. One exception is Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation in Manitoba, where a country foods program has been in operation since 1975. The program provides year-round employment for two to three community members to manage the facility. Another four to five community members are hired as year-round hunters, trappers, and fishers. Through the Nelson House Country Foods Program, community freezers are stocked with traditional food and the food is distributed to Elders, single parents, and those facing other hardships such as illness or unemployment (Martens, 2015). In the summer, the program also adds a garden and hires gardeners along with berry and medicine pickers. The funds for this program were provided through the Northern Flood Implementation Agreement.

Although fruitful and important, these types of programs continue to face challenges. In order to meet the food needs of communities, country food programs must be supported by the necessary infrastructure, that includes the training of volunteers and/or staff who can work with federal and provincial guidelines and support staff, as well by as a considerable financial investment to make these programs sustainable. Meeting these regulatory requirements demands considerable effort and financial investment. The infrastructure needed to meet the requirements of all inspecting bodies is costly and not easily available for communities. In all cases, Indigenous communities must work with provincial agencies to understand and meet the requirements to process country foods.

There is an interesting point of tension in the health and safety of traditional foods. On the one hand, northern geographies where many First Nations peoples reside are known for their presence of persistent contaminants, which Kuhnlein and Chan, 2000 have indicated as being present through “atmospheric, marine, and freshwater/terrestrial routes” (p. 600). On the other hand, health and safety inspections for traditional foods are not readily available for Indigenous communities due to access issues. Yet, these inspections are mandatory for traditional foods. This has resulted in some Indigenous communities forgoing traditional foods in their diets. In the communities surrounding the oil industry, where cancer rates have been connected, in part, to the consumption of traditional foods, Indigenous peoples have stopped consuming traditional foods (McLachlan, 2014). Government control over the safety of traditional foods does not extend to the source of the food itself—the land—but rather concerns itself with human exposure to food borne illnesses that result through “improper” harvesting sources, processing, and storage (Jung and Skinner, 2017). This affirms how narrowly defined risk discourses concerning traditional foods work to the advantage of the settler state, overlooking the essential connections between land and food for Indigenous peoples. The larger backdrop of pollution, contamination, and resource extraction, including environmental racism, creates further barriers for Indigenous peoples’ access to land-based foods (see Daigle, 2018; McGregor, 2012; Waldron, 2018 for insight into Indigenous water issues as one example). In the context of Indigenous food sovereignty, the safety of the lands warrants further attention.

Despite these obstacles and the continued exertion of control over Indigenous peoples’ food systems, there are positive stories where communities have been able to meet the requirements for a food processing establishment. Nevertheless, this does not mitigate the need for examining the social, health, cultural implications of oppressive policies.

Traditional Food Policies and Identity

Numerous scholars, Elders and knowledge holders across Turtle Island, have discussed the connections between traditional food and identity (Adelson, 2000; Anderson, 2011; LaDuke, 2004; LaDuke, 2005; Martens and Cidro, 2020, to name but a few). For Indigenous peoples, food and culture are inextricably linked. Food practices including harvesting, hunting, cooking or feasting are an element of culture tied to identity and Indigenous well-being. The state has long used food to eliminate Indigenous peoples through starvation, coercion, and manipulation. In the dominant society wherein market-based food is the norm and land is seen as a product for consumption, control over the food system has been used to further assimilate Indigenous peoples into mainstream society. Viewing food through this lens removes the connection between land and people. Indigenous peoples are of the land (Robin, 2019). Thomas King (2012) describes: “land has always been a

defining element of Aboriginal culture. Land contains the languages, the stories, and the histories of a people. It provides water, air, shelter, and food. Land participates in the ceremonies and the songs. And land is home” (p. 218). If land describes who Indigenous peoples are and have come to be, then food from the land is how culture is *lived*. Too often Indigenous peoples have to view food as sustenance because they are facing conditions that limit their ability to eat at all (Power, 2008).

Yet, Indigenous peoples were and are self-determining (Ladner, 2009; Simpson, 2011). Having the ability to self-determine your diet and make decisions that support well-being is critical to achieving harmony, balance, and health. Indeed, the values of sharing, kindness and respect are foundational to many Indigenous cultures (Hart, 2002). Policies that deter and punish Indigenous peoples from practicing their values through the sharing of food ultimately confuses Indigenous identities. The sharing of traditional food is an act of kindness, respect, and generosity; it allows Indigenous peoples to look after community members and to also share the gifts that nature has provided. State policies and regulations prevent Indigenous peoples from fulfilling their roles and responsibilities as Indigenous peoples. In harvesting from the land, Indigenous peoples act as caretakers and stewards (Martens, 2018). Sharing is part of the gift that Indigenous peoples have been given through their relationships with the land. Further confusion lies around the notion of control; as Indigenous peoples have long understood that land is not something that can be owned. If you cannot own the land or the food that comes from it, how can it be controlled by the government? These are questions that undermine self-determination, culture, and identity. Food is a vehicle in which to carry out settler colonialism.

CONCLUSION

We are witnessing a resurgence of traditional values, protocols, and practices that may leave outsiders/non-Indigenous people wondering what roles they can play in challenging the deeply troubling history of exploitation, subjugation, and oppression that has long informed research on Indigenous peoples (Smith, 2005). Continuing to document the disproportionately high rates of food insecurity among Indigenous peoples and communities is unnecessary; Indigenous peoples have been researched to death, quite literally⁹. Instead, researchers need to engage and work with Indigenous communities, as *co-researchers*, to identify and dismantle the systems of power and oppression

⁹Historically, research on Indigenous peoples has been dangerous, extractive, and exploitive. With issues ranging from deliberate nutrition experiments on Indigenous peoples in the north (Mosby, 2013) to pharmaceutical patents using Indigenous knowledges, Indigenous research, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith, 2005 writes, has been harmful and even fatal.

that continue to disrupt Indigenous people’s well-being. The provincial food safety rules and regulations presented in this paper are just one piece of that system that needs to be better understood. Indigenous food values are not considered in state and industry decisions over food and land, rather colonial ideas of a food system devoid of any spirit are the norm. Of particular importance is the need to examine why Canadian society continues to collectively uphold policies that oppress Indigenous people’s bodies, lives, and livelihoods. Indigenous people are more than capable of defining who they are and their own protocols for determining food safety, but this process is curtailed by shape-shifting colonial governments that alter the lands, waters, and skies, amongst all living things as stated in both Natural Laws and treaties. We call on people to illuminate how the state uses notions of food risk to prevent access to land and cultural resources and as a technology to manage the “Indigenous problem.” Legislation to ensure lands and waters, soils and skies, are safe is desperately needed, and this work must be undertaken cooperatively between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. However, non-Indigenous peoples must be willing to cede authority and listen to Indigenous voices. Moreover, at a time when the bodies of Indigenous children of being unearthed in burial sites across the country, it is time to center, adopt, and facilitate the Truth and Reconciliation’s 94 Calls to Action (calls for Health and Legal Systems, for example), and the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls’ Inquiry Commission’s 231 Calls to Justice (calls for Health, for example). As food scholars, we must make the connection between this unearthing and the continual subjugation of Indigenous peoples through food policies. Hunger has been a terrible problem in Indian Country for far too long.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

TR, KB, BP, and KS conceived the idea and developed the initial concept for the paper. TR drafted most of the main text of the paper, with a few specific sections written by KB, BP, and KS. All authors reviewed and edited the paper, and approved the final version of the article for publication.

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