



Commentary

Deconstructing “Canadian cuisine”: Towards decolonial food futurities on Turtle Island

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Abstract

As scholars and community activists, to secure a just food system, we must first acknowledge our complicity in hierarchal power structures that shape structural inequities by questioning the underlying socio-political currents and interrogating the dominant relationships within our food system. In this commentary, the authors reflect upon their intersectional lived experiences interacting with food systems in the settler nation of Canada. They explore the complex interplay of systemic racism, settler colonialism and neoliberalism within the Canadian food system by deconstructing the

indefinable essence of “Canadian cuisine” and mapping these situated insights onto the process of gastronomic multiculturalism. The authors provide their perspective that an entry point along the ongoing process of securing decolonial food futurities on Turtle Island requires a conscious commitment to building interrelational solidarity across differences, reckoning with colonial land politics and supporting food sovereignty for both racialized communities and Indigenous Peoples.

Keywords: settler colonialism; neoliberalism; food sovereignty; decolonization

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Résumé

Comme personnes intellectuelles et militantes communautaires, pour assurer un système alimentaire juste, nous devons d’abord reconnaître notre complicité dans les structures de pouvoir hiérarchique qui forment des iniquités structurelles. Il s’agit pour cela de questionner les courants sociopolitiques et les relations dominantes dans notre système alimentaire. Dans cette analyse, les auteures réfléchissent à leurs expériences multidimensionnelles impliquant une interaction avec les systèmes alimentaires de la nation colonisatrice au Canada. Elles explorent le jeu complexe entre racisme systémique, colonialisme et néolibéralisme au sein du

système alimentaire canadien en déconstruisant l’essence indéfinissable de la « cuisine canadienne » et en situant les perceptions qui y sont liées dans le processus de multiculturalisme gastronomique. Selon les auteures, un point d’entrée sur la décolonisation de l’avenir alimentaire sur Turtle Island requiert un engagement conscient à construire une solidarité interrelationnelle au-delà des différences, faisant les comptes par rapport aux politiques foncières coloniales et appuyant la souveraineté alimentaire à la fois pour les communautés racialisées et les peuples autochtones.

[SM] With kinship ties from Zimbabwe to the United Kingdom, I will describe myself as a guest (Koleszar-Green, 2019) on the territory of Turtle Island that I now call “home”. When I ask myself what “Canadian cuisine” is—the images conjured are those of the international fast-food chains or pseudo foods I see everywhere in my neighbourhood. This is purposeful, and the intended imagery, a deliberate construction and manifestation of spatial colonization, a feature of capital’s control of the food environment (Koç et al., 2012). The question persists—does Canada have specific culturally embedded food traditions that I can pinpoint as specific to “Canadians?” Now, this query begs the question of identity and nationhood affiliation—who wields the power to bequeath such an identity? And who then is considered under the dominion of “Canada” and can be nourished on these lands?

[HM] As a Trinbagonian transplant with roots in the Caribbean, to an uninvited settler on dispossessed lands of Turtle Island navigating a double diaspora, I’m often

struck with a haunting cultural absence of how to articulate “Canadian cuisine” to peers and family members within the Caribbean “homeland.” I’ve realized that this tension is illuminating, helping us to unpack and problematize settler place-making fantasies on Turtle Island (K. Rizarrì, personal communication, July 2021). This elusive absence forces one to confront how settler colonial societies are constructed around erasure and assimilation, resulting in systems that reflect these values and at its core the imaginary ethos of land belonging to no one, “terra nullius” (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Rotz, 2017). Strengthening and defending the legitimacy of the settler nation functions on the ongoing disruption of Indigenous food systems, dismantling and erasing non-Eurocentric relational food practices and the marginalization of communities of colour along with their associated culinary traditions. This colonization of food is just as much spiritual as it is physical, ensuring the all-encompassing dominion of the settler nation and by extension the global corporate food regime.

Since first contact with Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island, settler nation-building myths have sought to maintain white supremacy and its colonizing efforts, resulting in today's manifestations of anti-Black, anti-Indigenous, and anti-Asian racism in food systems in "Canada." From the politics of environmental dispossession to the exploitation of Black and Asian seasonal migrant bodies, "Canada's" food system is perpetually entangled with settler colonial logics of dominion and in its current form, bolstered by the neoliberal market economy (Koç et al., 2021).

The presence of foodscapes in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), hubs of cultural food expressions for an ethnically diverse multiplicity (e.g., Little India, Chinatown, Little Italy, Little Jamaica, Little Ethiopia, etc.) exemplify the precarious position of navigating these tensions (Ferrero, 2002).

Through the interplay of market forces, these cultural foodscapes highlight the exploitative relationship associated with the profitability of ethnicity (Grey & Newman, 2018). These communities are celebrated by the settler nation, seemingly embodying a "privileged" status on a landscape that has been stripped of any Indigenous identity. Their privilege extends as they simultaneously do not threaten the settler nation's legitimacy and engage with its neoliberal market economy.

Cultural foodscapes in the GTA are thus intertwined with different configurations of power, demonstrating the fragility of settler place-making on occupied territory (Koç et al., 2021). It is an intentional erasure that one can traverse the culinary diversity of the world within the bounds of the GTA, but the diversity of culturally rooted Indigenous cuisine like bannock, three sisters stew, and traditional Indigenous wild foods are either absent or gentrified and reoriented toward the palate that originally sought their eradication (Grey & Newman, 2018).

Now, we are not arguing that cultural foodscapes are problematic, but the notion of land access and use is. Unlike ethnicity, Indigeneity has an inextricable territorial dimension which asserts an inherent right to specific lands and self-determination on those lands. Yet the settler nation purposely constructs powerful narrative erasures and operates on the false equivalence of Indigenous and minority groups to maintain its policies of dominion (Grey & Newman, 2018). We must recognize that land access is entangled with the politics of environmental dispossession reinforced by settler control, which in the GTA began with a difference in worldviews involving inequitable and coerced treaties between the British Crown and various Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island (Freeman, 2010; Mintz, 2019).

The settler nation has thus deliberately spatially configured the lands of "Canada" by enacting colonial boundaries, conferring access to those who fit its white settler narrative, and designating Indigenous Peoples as another minority group vying for equal incorporation (Fortier, 2022). These structural assimilatory practices align with market control mechanisms limiting how one can procure food off the land and make a living by it. This contrasts with honouring the land as sacred and establishing ongoing obligations to share the land through responsibility and reciprocity for the mutual benefit of all (Mohawk, 2008; Kimmerer, 2013). Even today, ongoing settler occupation of the landscape continues with the encroachment on Indigenous Peoples' traditional territories, restrictions on sovereign land-based food practices, and efforts to extinguish Indigenous title to the land (Freeman, 2010; Fortier, 2022; Rotz, 2017; Bégin & Sharma, 2017).

In an attempt to conceal this controversial dispossession of traditional Indigenous lands, the GTA proudly identifies itself in terms of its contemporary ethnic diversity through cultural foodscapes rather than its history of displacement (Freeman, 2010). Grey and

Neman (2018) describe this process as *gastronomic multiculturalism*, whereby the settler nation systemically produces a national multiethnic culinary identity which recognizes the value of ethnic ingredients and techniques. Yet, SM highlighted that the multicultural narrative painted by the settler nation as a haven for transplanted diverse communities is a façade on occupied territory (Freeman, 2010). “Canada” with its multicultural ideology cannot recognize food sovereign practices of the different immigrant communities who come to these lands as settlers/guests because it will undermine its structural denial of Indigenous land dispossession and Indigenous food sovereignty to their traditional territories and cultural food practices. Thus, the settler nation uses this guise of gastronomic multiculturalism to cement its dominion and justify its “culinary colonialism” which Grey and Newman (2018) articulate as “a historical transit from destruction and denigration of ingredients and cuisines, to forced assimilation to a Settler gastronomic norm, to cultural appropriation of Indigenous foods and dishes” (p. 726).

It’s unsettling that with few exceptions, wild game (which is a livelihood food source for non-urban Indigenous and Northern communities) cannot be sold in restaurants, butcher shops, or grocery stores in Canada. Yet there are restaurants in the GTA that have prospered by co-opting traditional Indigenous cuisine under the guise of “wild culinary delights of Canada” utilizing the colonial government’s licensed farm sources, as this aligns with settler control of resources and livelihoods (Mintz, 2019; Koç et al., 2021).

As a result, the politics of colonial land dispossession cements “Canada’s” food system to the global corporate food regime as neoliberal capitalist and agro-industrial practices disarticulate traditional land-based practices and non-capitalist ways of food consumption. This reality is further complicated by modes of neoliberal capitalist individualism and competition which have permeated

all levels of existence, rupturing the symbiotic relationships with the land, living beings, and sources of sustenance (Kimmerer, 2013).

Thus, when the question is asked what “Canadian cuisine” is, the response corresponds to a fast-food landscape dominated by market forces. This nutrition transition characterized by the replacement of traditional foods from the land and sea with foods that can be purchased through the market economy structurally reinforces nationalistic ideals of the “Canadian” settler identity disrupting traditional ways of food procurement and processing (Raschke & Cheema, 2006; Koç et al., 2012). The ongoing industrialization, colonization, and racialization within food systems in “Canada”, forces communities to accept these mechanized and unnatural constructions of food access. HM noted the frenzied anticipation accompanying the opening of global food chain outposts, where people would wait for hours to purchase these pseudo-foods like Jollibee or Chick-fil-A.

Food is an edible dynamic, not just for nourishment or sustenance of self but of community, culture, and kinship to the land and one another. Repairing disconnected relationships as a result of the industrialization and colonization of all aspects of life will determine our collective futures on this landscape. Thus, navigating systems which seek dominion over what we eat, how we eat and our relationships to our sources of nourishment is an act of radical political resistance (Fortier, 2022). To ensure a just food system, we must problematize the dominant meanings and question the legitimacy of power within our food system. As scholars/activists we need to interrogate: Who was the system constructed for? Who does it exclude? We must endeavor to repair the disconnected relationships as a result of the industrialization of all aspects of human lives. By reclaiming sovereignty over our bodies, the land, and our cultural food practices we engage in a process of

decolonization situating food futurities away from the dominance of the global corporate food regime.

As an entry point along the journey to decolonize sovereign food futurities on Turtle Island we must first reconcile with colonial land politics and return dispossessed lands and territories to Indigenous Peoples (Nelson, 2008; Tuck & Yang, 2012). The first step is to acknowledge our complicity in hierarchal power structures that shape food injustices and create a

deliberate rupture in settler place-making by upholding treaty obligations and centering the worldviews and food sovereign practices of Indigenous Peoples. Only then can we begin establishing interrelational solidarity founded on nation-to-nation relationships towards an incommensurable future of co-existence for both settler and Indigenous Peoples securing the protection of our shared food systems (Fortier, 2022; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

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