

## Food Matters (More Than We Think)

In May of 2009, the international press was aflame with stories regarding the Governor General of Canada engaging in the cultural practice of eating the seal heart offered to her at a traditional Inuit meal. Press coverage of the practice ranged from culturally insensitive to downright hateful. One newspaper described the tradition as “hacking out a piece of seal heart and shoveling it in,” (Globe and Mail 2009). Additionally, a representative from PETA called the event “blood lust.”

The tradition of seal hunting lies central to this controversy, and the practice has been subject to many prohibitions lately around the world, with laws not distinguishing between the time-honored subsistence hunting of the Inuit people and the commercialized industry, though environmentalists have drawn a line between the two. Still, widespread misinformation about Inuit culture is commonplace. The act of disparaging others for their food choices, is called food shaming, and it is weaponized especially often against marginalized communities. The responses from the press to this tradition are a prime example. To recognize why food shaming can be so harmful, we must understand that actively commenting on the food choices of others likens to attempting to control that person’s body and cultural practices.

The demonization of Black foods and bodies has roots in colonialism and enslavement. Sabrina Strings explains that as time went on, body size became an indicator for racial status. Larger bodies became associated with societal inferiority and, along with it, the foods that are culturally significant to Black communities.

Today, this control can be seen in the form of unsolicited scrutinizing and commentary on Black people’s food choices. Psyche Williams -Forson expresses this idea in her book, saying “somebody is always watching, waiting to tell Black people what they should and should not, can and cannot, eat.” This surveillance leads to lasting trauma for both the community as a whole and the individuals in it. Thus, misunderstanding of history and food practices, in addition to society’s entitlement to comment on them, damages the communities against which the food shaming is directed.

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Information sourced from: Food symbolism: Why do we give food meaning, BBC.com, January 23, 2012; Conversation with Psyche Williams-Forson and Chef Rahman “Rock” Harper at Politics and Prose, August 2022, youtube.com; October 2005; Michael A. Robidoux and Aida Strauss’ “The Inuit’s Offer to Canada’s Black Governor General: Food, Power, and the Deconstruction of Lévi-Strauss’ “Culinary Triangle” in International Journal of Canadian Studies, March, 2022; Psyche Williams-Forson’s Eating While Black (UNC Press, August 2022); Inuits Defend Their Seal Hunting Traditions, Los Angeles Times, March 23, 2003; Governor-General applauded, denounced for eating raw seal, The Globe and Mail, May 26, 2009; Maddie Sophia, MS (Year range). Sabrina Strings, Shortwave, Fatphobia and its Racist Past and Present. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/893006538>