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Title: “Fresh seal blood looks like beauty and life”: #sealfies and subsistence in Nunavut¹

Keywords: Inuit, Nunavut, animal rights, media, activism

Abstract: In this paper, I analyze the various functions, meanings and affects associated with seal hunting, eating and sharing seal meat, wearing sealskin clothing and posting #sealfies. Drawing on several decades of research with hunting and gathering families in the eastern Canadian Arctic, and starting with the cultural premise that hunting seals unites the worlds of humans, animals, and spirits, I argue that the seal is a prominent metaphor for the Inuit self. By extension, I examine how Inuit use #sealfies as an extension of other subsistence practices, as a way of making identity (personal and collective), and as a way of countering the negative stereotypes used by animal rights activists to condemn hunting in general. #Sealfies have become an important resource in the subsistence toolkit of contemporary Nunavut Inuit foragers, providing an effective platform for defending their foraging traditions and for creating a meaningful and modern identity.

Introduction

On March 28, 2014, Tanya Tagaq posted a photograph of her infant daughter lying on the beach next to a dead *natsiq* (ringed seal) on her twitter feed (see Figure 1).² It was Tagaq's most famous contribution to the #sealfie movement, a social media-inspired protest initiated by Nunavut resident Lakkaluk Williamson-Bathory.³ Individuals posted #sealfies to counter an (in)famous #selfie that Ellen Degeneres used to raise money for an animal rights organization that vigorously opposes seal hunting of any kind (cf. Hawkins and Silver 2017; Rodgers and Scobie 2015). Tagaq and others began posting #sealfies of themselves and family members hunting seals, eating seal meat, wearing sealskin clothing, and lying next to a dead seal.

Although hailed by supporters as a powerful image, Tagaq received many angry comments, including death threats posted on her site (CBC News 2014). Tagaq herself said that after she uploaded the image, she experienced the worst three months of her life (Tagaq 2016). Tagaq's tweet, the #sealfie movement, and ensuing responses have become important sites for the production of meaning and identity for Inuit and for understanding the complicated culture and politics of the subsistence practices and beliefs of hunter-gatherers in general. Tagaq's use of images, her baby daughter lying next to a dead seal on a blood-stained rocky beach, artfully exposes core values of Inuit culture, values that express the material, psychological, and spiritual ties that connect humans to seals. [insert Figure 1 after this paragraph]

After a peak in 2014, the overall number of #sealfie posts tapered off dramatically in 2015, a trend that has continued into the present.⁴ Although the movement was an innovative, targeted, and short-lived response to a series of anti-sealing events in the early 2010s, its message continues to resonate with current cultural practices, beliefs, and modes of expressing Inuit identity.

In this paper, I expand on Tagaq's #sealfie post by arguing that the seal is a prominent metaphor for Inuit in several ways.⁵ First, in much the same way that Japanese-grown rice is a metaphor for the Japanese self (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993), so is the seal a metaphor for the Inuit self. Hunting seals, sharing and eating seal meat, wearing seal skin clothing, and now posting an image of oneself doing some or all of these things are all powerful modes of expressing one's identity as an Inuit person. Second, the seal continues to be an important, if not iconic, symbol for Nunavut Inuit as a whole; sharing and eating seal meat integrates Inuit into communities of extended family networks as well as communities of recycling souls. Third, as is the case with Japanese history and identity, Inuit have been forced to "redefine their concepts of self as a result of an encounter with the other. This is so because the self, in any culture, is always defined in relation to the other dialogically with other individuals in a given social context or dialectically with other peoples" (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993: 5). Because it is well known that Inuit kill, eat, and wear seals, they are high-profile targets for powerful and influential institutions, organizations (the European Union, the Humane Society of the United States), and individuals (Ellen Degeneres) who use images of Inuit hunters to promote the view that hunting is always and everywhere inhumane, immoral and unethical (Vucetich and Nelson 2017; cf. Rodgers and Scobie 2015). Being labeled as vicious, immoral and "savage" has inspired many Inuit to become more assertive in how they define themselves in response to their critics, and the emergence of #sealfies is just one response (Aylward 2017; Ohnuki-Tierney 1993: 8; see also Niezen 2009; Searles 2008; see also Stewart et al. 2002).

Anthropologists have long documented the importance of human-animal relations to the expression of Native American spirituality and morality (Morrison 2000) and more recently to the expression of indigenous identity (Feinup-Riordan et al. 2000). According to traditional Inuit cosmology, seals and other mammals hunted on a regular basis (e.g. whales, walrus, caribou, wolves) are non-human persons who possess agency, power, and morality; Inuit and animal persons live in a symbiotic relationship whereby each group needs the other to exist (Laugrand and Oosten 2014). Although "[t]he death of the seal means life to the village" (Feinup-Riordan 1990: 47), it is the hunters and their families who are responsible for giving life

to the seals by recycling their souls through various rituals and ceremonies.⁶ The spiritual and moral link uniting humans and animals paves the way to representing the Inuit self and the seal as not just interdependent, symbiotic species but as individual pieces of a larger whole that includes Inuit and all the animals they hunt, fish, and trap. Hence the significance of #sealfies, which highlight the idea that seals (as well as the other animals that Inuit hunt and fish) and people belong to each other, and that neither can exist without the other.

Although Inuit have long used photography and film to record themselves, “their clothes, houses, and family groups” as well as “hunting methods” and “local legends” (Graburn 2006: 144; Graburn 1998; see also Nungak and Hendrie 1998), #sealfies demonstrate that Inuit and seals belong to the same community, even to the same family. #Sealfies bring together the concepts of “I” and “Me” (or “self-concept”) as social behaviorist George Herbert Mead theorized. #Sealfies unite the “I” that is spontaneous, inner, creative, and subjective, and the “Me” that is the self-concept imagined through the eyes of others (Scott 2014: 677). Only in this case, the “#sealfie” subverts the image of Inuit hunters as constructed by animal rights activists—as people who are inhumane and immoral—and replaces it with a concept of “Me” mediated by a community that includes humans and seals.

The #sealfie movement also highlights how Inuit identity has become more portable and inclusive as opposed to bounded to places and exclusive. As a young graduate student researching Inuit identity in the Canadian Arctic in the mid-1990s, I learned that a major concern of many Inuit was their ability to maintain their identity as Inuit given recent social and economic changes (Searles 1998a; 2010). Echoing Kennedy’s (1982) model of interethnic relations in southern Labrador, I witnessed Inuit routinely identify common, everyday practices—such as hunting, fishing, eating, dressing, and sharing—as exemplar activities that made them categorically different from Qallunaat (an Inuktitut term meaning “non-Inuit”).

These practices became key resources that enabled Inuit to “hold the line” between Inuit and Qallunaat in towns and villages thought to be dominated by Qallunaat values, practices, and traditions. #Sealfies, by contrast, are less about holding the line than dissolving it altogether; they provide opportunities for Inuit and Qallunaat to celebrate and promote Inuit culture. Anyone with a Facebook or Twitter account can post a #sealfie or support for a #sealfie; it does not matter where one lives or who one is. The one stipulation of a #sealfie is that it shows a connection to seals—as living or dead creatures, as sources of food and clothing, or as the inspiration for artwork. #Sealfies unite groups of Inuit and non-Inuit into virtual communities joined by shared sentiments of outrage towards animal rights activists and a collective desire for justice.

Subsistence, Selves, and Seals

Studies of the beliefs and practices of hunter-gatherers in North America frequently underscore the importance of subsistence practices to the sustainability of indigenous communities and their cultures. Subsistence practices and beliefs contribute to the expression of both individual and collective identity and to the organization of families into interdependent groups. Natcher argues that subsistence in northern Canada is “as much an economic pursuit as it is an expression and perpetuation of cultural values. For the Innu of Labrador, the value of hunting extends well beyond personal sustenance” (2009: 87). According to Aaju Peter, a longtime resident of Nunavut, “The seal. . . provides us with more than just food and clothes. It provides us with our identity. It is through sharing and having a seal communion that we regain our strength, physically and mentally” (quoted in Laugrand and Oosten 2014: 305).⁷ In the context of Canadian Inuit, the exchange of seal meat and other types of country food (i.e. food foraged locally) among Inuit households and even between different communities forms the basis of *ningiqtuq*, a system of sharing that is the foundation of Inuit social economy, cultural continuity, and sense of community (Wenzel 1995; Nuttall 1998; Nuttall 2000). Pufall et al. (2011) argues that the consumption and sharing of country foods are critical to the physical, mental, and spiritual health of Labrador Inuit.

A number of scholars have also noted the psychological benefits of subsistence practices for indigenous populations. Stairs argues that subsistence practices and values foster an “ecocentric” identity in which Inuit experience “a life that unifies land, the animals, and the community past and present. . . the Inuk hunter acquires, reconstructs, and lives out a world-image that provides security in his own identity and direction in his behavior” (1992: 120).⁸ Although Stairs focuses on hunting and sharing country food as the building blocks of an ecocentric identity, activities such as wearing skin clothing and posting a #sealfie are also expressions of this identity.⁹ They enable Inuit to make public a personal, intimate connection to the land and animals.

An ecocentric personality is informed by indigenous ideas about spirituality and morality (Fienup-Riordan 1994; Laugrand and Oosten 2014). For Inuit artists and activists like Tanya Tagaq, hunting seals and sharing seal meat are vital to the ongoing material existence of family and community. But these practices are also vital to the moral and spiritual development of Inuit individuals. In remarks following a live soundtrack performance accompanying the silent film *Nanook of the North*, Tagaq asserts that her vocals were inspired by assuming the identity of the walrus that was harpooned and dragged to shore by Nanook and several other hunters in the film (Tagaq, personal communication, September 30, 2016). The interplay of life and death, the idea that hunting causes death and suffering for prey but life, strength and renewal for predators, are all part of the complicated emotions and beliefs that inform how Inuit relate to seals as sources of food, meaning and being.

Contrary to animal rights activists, who claim that hunting is immoral and inhumane, Inuit believe that the act of hunting makes humanity moral and humane. As Laugrand and Oosten (2014: 242) state: “Hunting is not a matter of choice, but a moral obligation one cannot escape. Only by hunting can Inuit as well as animals prosper. The hardships and the risks involved in killing the animals must all be accepted. Human society itself is made possible by consuming and sharing game animals” (see also Blaser 2016). The symbiotic/interdependent relationship

that unites the fate of Inuit and animals is maintained only if Inuit act respectfully and appropriately to each other and to the animals who offer themselves as prey (see also Nadasdy 2007; Johnson 2012).¹⁰

An important aspect of the #sealfie movement is that, like the act of hunting seals, it brings together the spheres of humans, animals, and spirits. More specifically, #sealfies, like hunting, capture and memorialize those emotionally powerful and poignant moments when the fate of predator and prey become united physically, emotionally, and spiritually. As such, like the #sealfie, the seal is a prominent metaphor for the Inuit self, which finds deep personal meaning (and collective identity) in hunting seals, sharing and eating meat, wearing sealskin and posting #sealfies, activities that Stevenson identifies as technologies of the self (2006: 181).

Research Setting

Although virtual in one sense, the #sealfie movement is also about the representation of non-virtual, embodied activities such as hunting, eating seal meat, and wearing sealskin clothing. Tagaq's #sealfie captures the outcome of a successful hunt: a dead ringed seal lying on a rocky beach next to Tagaq's infant daughter. The blood adjacent to the seal's face suggests that the seal was shot in the head, the spot of choice for Inuit when they hunt seals in open water during the summer (the *natsiq* raises its head out of the water, thus exposing itself to the hunter). Although #sealfies are not just about belonging to a particular place, Tagaq's #sealfie demonstrates how hunting generates intimate attachments to specific places in Nunavut.

As a territory, Nunavut is home to approximately 39,000 people, 85% of whom identify as Inuit. Iqaluit (population 6000) continues to grow rapidly as the cosmopolitan capital of Nunavut. It is cosmopolitan for a number of reasons, including its strikingly international population, which includes college-educated, middle-class immigrants from other parts of Canada as well as nations in the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia.¹¹ As a political capital, Iqaluit is home to Nunavut's Inuit-dominated legislature and territorial offices. As a cultural capital, Iqaluit hosts a number of festivals annually that celebrate the region's unique and vibrant heritage. These festivals attract large gatherings of artists, musicians and tourists from around the world, including celebrities and heads of state. These festivals are frequently accompanied by feasts of country food that are free and open to the public, and the country food often includes generous portions of seal meat. The festivals also often include fur fashion shows, in which Inuit model seal skin clothing, some of it costing thousands of dollars (insert Figure 2 here—caption: "High end sealskin clothing sold at a fur boutique in St. John's, Newfoundland; the author is partially visible in the mirror."). Inuit and non-Inuit alike use these venues to promote the idea that subsistence foods like seal meat are an important part of the local diet and culture, and that wearing seal skin clothing is a way to honor and celebrate that culture.

Methods

In this essay, I rely on ethnographic data I collected while participating with Nunavut Inuit in seal hunts, in meals of seal meat, and in conversations about the meaning of hunting and eating

country food. I supplement these observations with analyses of images posted by Inuit to their social media accounts.

I first began researching Inuit hunter-gatherer families in the eastern Canadian Arctic (now southern Nunavut) in the early 1990s. As a pre-doctoral student in 1990 and 1991, I spent two summers as a junior member of a large scientific team whose mission was to survey and excavate historic Inuit archaeological sites in southern Baffin (Searles 2017). These excavation teams included Inuit, several of whom lived at nearby outpost camps and whom I befriended and returned to visit for fieldwork in the mid-1990s.

As a doctoral student in sociocultural anthropology, I spent nine months conducting ethnographic research on hunting and identity in southern Baffin Island in 1994, and I returned for a two-month trip in 1996 and again for shorter visits in 2000, 2001, and 2014. During my 1994 research trip, my fiancée (now wife) and I lived with one of six remaining outpost camp families based in Frobisher Bay, southern Baffin Island (Searles 1998a). We joined various members of the family on dozens of seal hunts, and we sampled nearly every part of the seal that Inuit consider edible, which is practically everything. In addition to consuming the major muscle groups and organs (ribs, thighs, brains, kidneys, heart, lungs, intestines), we also drank the fresh blood of young seals.

I have maintained contact with many of the Inuit and *Qallunaat* (an Inuktitut word meaning “white people” or “non-Inuit”) I first met in the early 1990s, and they continue to share their

insights with me about hunting and identity. In 2014, I returned to Iqaluit to interview Inuit hunters and government employees, and I organized a focus group with a prominent Inuit hunting family that formed the basis of an article on Inuit attitudes towards the sale of Inuit country food (Searles 2016). I continue to conduct research on the culture and beliefs of contemporary Inuit hunter-gatherers by reading and commenting on the Facebook pages and Twitter feeds of Inuit hunters and hunting-advocacy organizations based in Nunavut and other parts of Canada and by regularly reading *Nunatsiaq News* and other regional newspapers.

Hunting as art, work, and religion

Although hunting seals is a routine activity for many experienced Inuit hunters, for the novice hunter it is exhausting, exciting and dangerous. My fiancée and I accompanied two Inuit brothers, Pauloosie, and Ooleetoa, as they searched for game on trips around the ice-covered bays and inlets adjacent to their home in southern Baffin Island, a family-run outpost camp located 240 kilometers southeast of Iqaluit. While hunting, each brother had access to a snowmobile, one of which towed a *qamutiik* (hand-crafted wooden sledge) loaded with hunting equipment, spare fuel and two anthropologists.¹²

We often traveled to the edge of a large polynya (expanse of ocean in the arctic that never freezes) approximately fifteen kilometers from Pauloosie's outpost camp. Within minutes of

reaching the polynya in February 1994, we spotted *natsiit* (ringed seals), an *aviik* (walrus), and a large, adult *nanuk* (polar bear).

Pauloosie and his brother searched for game every day except Sunday in all kinds of conditions. They began hunting before sunrise and did not stop until the sunset, a length of time that lasted six hours a day in midwinter. The hunters' daily excursions often followed familiar paths, including a series of *agluit*, or breathing holes, maintained by ringed seals through the thick ocean ice that forms in early winter and remains until late spring. On one such journey, Pauloosie noticed water percolating through one of the *agluit* (breathing holes).

The bubbles disappeared shortly before Pauloosie reached the breathing hole, at which point he motioned his brother to travel to a breathing hole located 30 meters away. He hoped the seal would swim to the other *aglu* where his brother would either shoot it or scare it back to the hole he was watching. Pauloosie then gestured to me to drive his snowmobile in a concentric circle around both holes in order to scare the seal towards him and his brother. Bubbles soon appeared at the place where Ooleetoa was waiting. After Ooleetoa shot the seal at close range at his hole, the seal dove and surfaced near Pauloosie who then shot the seal a second time and harpooned it through the narrow breathing hole.

The two brothers took turns chiseling the sea ice to make a hole large to pull the 800- pound *ujjuq* ("bearded seal") out of the ocean. After pulling the seal onto solid ice, they butchered it into pieces small enough to load onto the qamutiik.

As they butchered, Pauloosie told me that it is important to get the blood of the seal on one's hands and clothes. One must accept this blood as a sign of respect to the animal and to ensure successful hunts in the future. He claimed that seals (or any other animal) will not come to a hunter who refuses to get blood on himself, as was the case with his elder brother who had not caught anything in over three years.

Although I never witnessed other Nunavut Inuit express the importance this practice, it resonates with the beliefs and practices of hunter-gatherers in other parts of the Arctic who perform rituals on the animals they kill. Yup'ik hunters in Southwest Alaska, for example, give the seals they kill a drink to quench their thirst (Fienup-Riordan 1990). Hunters also save seal bladders for a ceremony that is held later in the year in which the souls of the seals return to the sea. Such traditions are informed by a cosmology in which seals are non-human persons with *tarniit* ("souls") that cycle through different bodies with the help of hunters. A seal's *tarniq* (singular of *tarniit*) decides when and how the seal presents itself to a hunter. If the seal's body is treated properly after death, its *tarniq* returns to the spirit world to be reborn in another seal which then offers itself to the same hunter if that hunter is deserving.¹³

Although I never heard Pauloosie indicate that the purpose of getting blood on himself was to ensure the rebirth of the seal, he believed that his actions connected him physically and spiritually to the seal.¹⁴ Taking a #sealfie enacts a similar set of connections. In much the same way that Pauloosie shares his clothes and hands with the blood of the seal, so do Inuit share

portraits of themselves blended with seals, seal parts, and seal skins. Bridging the physical boundary separating seals and humans also bridges them metaphysically; Inuit and seals share the same cosmology and belong to a single community.

Although the #sealfie movement attracted both Inuit and non-Inuit supporters, thereby creating a multiethnic, multicultural space for celebrating the interconnectedness of humans and seals, it also highlighted the moral and spiritual significance of killing and consuming dead animals as key features of Inuit identity, images that animal rights activists find offensive and disturbing. In that sense, #sealfies establish a sharp line between those who support hunting seals and those who do not through the use of abject images (e.g. dead seals, seal meat, blood, skin, fur). *The Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory* defines “abject” as “that which disturbs the self, by provoking either disgust, fear, loathing, or repulsion. Belonging to the realm of the psychic, the abject is the excessive dimension of either a subject or an object that cannot be assimilated” (Buchanan 2010: 1). To those opposed to seal hunting, the image is abject; to Inuit, by contrast, the image symbolizes the sacred and beautiful. For non-Inuit anti-hunting activists, a dead seal is a tragedy regardless of context. For Inuit, the seal’s death is what makes Tagaq’s baby’s life possible and what ensures the future birth of seals.

The image of a human infant next to a dead seal is particularly abject because it juxtaposes birth and death. People from non-hunting, non-agricultural environments in the West are socialized to see life and death as mutually opposed states. Death is always and everywhere the opposite of life, a state of non-being as opposed to being to be hidden or removed from daily

life, especially new life (i.e., infants and young children). Because it indexes violence and death, blood is particularly abject when it is seen alongside of infants. For Inuit hunters like Pauloosie and Tagaq, however, blood and death are not abject at all, nor are they considered mutually opposed to life, young or old; they are rather sources of spiritual power and moral agency. While animal rights activists view the image of seal blood next to an infant with repulsion and loathing, Inuit look at this same image with awe and gratitude. Tanya Tagaq refers to her #sealfie as “beauty and life” (2016).

In traditional Inuit cosmology, the seal’s breathing hole is a contact zone between different realms of reality (Laugrand and Oosten 2014: 287). Hunters are midwives to the seal’s transition from one reality to another; allowing the seal’s blood to touch the hunter’s clothing and taking a #sealfie reveal the spiritual dimensions of hunting and the metaphysical ties that unite humans and seals.

Hunting and Isuma

Another important feature of seal hunting is the role it plays in the development of intelligence and emotional maturity. Hunting seals in their habitats under the sea ice in winter and in open water in the summer creates challenges and opportunities that many Inuit believe produce *isuma*, an Inuktitut word that “refers to consciousness, thought, reason, memory, will—to cerebral processes in general” that Briggs argues is “a major criterion of maturity” (Briggs 1991:

267; see also Stern 1999). Pauloosie and his siblings (including a sister) spent many years learning how to hunt and navigate a wide range of challenging environmental conditions (e.g. sudden shifts in sea ice, blizzards, extreme fluctuations in temperature), first under the tutelage of more experienced hunters like parents and elder siblings, and then on their own or in small groups of two or three when their elders considered them mature enough.

Although I never heard anyone say that Pauloosie had *isuma*, I assumed that those who knew him believed he possessed it. His skills and achievements as a hunter had been instrumental in transforming his identity from a juvenile offender to a mature and responsible adult. Although he was arrested in Iqaluit for minor criminal offences as a youth, an outpost camp father adopted him as a young adult. His adoptive father and older siblings generously shared their knowledge of hunting, trapping, and traveling with him, and he learned quickly. He earned the respect of other Inuit elders in the community and was chosen to supervise young Inuit offenders at an outpost camp near Kuyait (Searles 1998b). His job was to teach them what he had learned about traveling and hunting on the land and sea ice, and to make sure they did not get into any more trouble. It is clear by their actions that the elders who hired Pauloosie to be a mentor and teacher to young offenders were confident that he possessed *isuma*.

Hunting and Sharing Seal Meat

Seal meat (*natsiminiq* in Inuktitut) is a highly valued food resource, and Inuit hunters are constantly reminded of the moral and cultural importance of providing seal meat for others. By giving his aunt in Iqaluit fifty pounds of seal meat from a seal he caught near his family's outpost camp, Pauloosie reproduces a tradition of sharing that stretches back thousands of years and which contemporary Inuit feel is vital to the survival of their communities. Gifts of seal meat bring Inuit conceptions of personhood and society into sharp relief, for they make manifest a cosmology in which the fate of animals and humans, predators and prey, are intertwined morally and spiritually. By sharing country food with others, hunters honor their prey, who reciprocate by offering themselves to be killed and consumed again and again (cf. Bodenhorn 1990; Fienup-Riordan 1983). Generosity leads to hunting success which in turn leads to enhanced social capital and, eventually, to greater community cohesion.

Just as seal hunting provides a moral and spiritual resource for hunters to develop their capacities as real persons, so does the consumption of seal meat allow Inuit to express the superiority of country food over Qallunaat foods, i.e. foods produced, processed and packaged in southern Canada, like chicken wings, cheesecake and chicken noodle soup. Many Inuit told me that eating seal meat makes one strong and keeps one warm (Searles 2002). Oleetoo claimed he felt healthier and more energetic when he ate seal meat and other types of country food. Prior to coming to camp in February 1994, he complained that he had grown weak and lazy on a diet of Qallunaat foods like pork chops and potatoes. Within a few days of eating

country food at his family's outpost camp, he felt refreshed and rejuvenated. Ooleetoo's cousin Natsiq claimed that the reason why Qallunaat are so weak and pale is because they do not eat foods rich in blood like seal meat. After a meal of raw seal meat and seal blood, Ooleetoo told us to look carefully at the veins in our forearms, which in his view had become noticeably darker and larger following the meal. In short, just as Inuit believe that the sharing of seal meat builds strongly integrated family networks, so does the consumption of seal meat build strong and healthy bodies, minds, and spirits (Borré 1994).

#Sealfies and Inuit Identity

Although hunting continues to have high cultural value among Inuit in many parts of Nunavut, it has become increasingly expensive (prohibitively so for many), a situation that intensified following the collapse of the international market for seal pelts in the early 1980s (Rodgers and Scobie 2015). Hunting requires a boat, an outboard motor, a snowmobile, gasoline and spare parts, just to mention a few essential items, and this amounts to a great deal of money (cf. Wenzel 2013; Harder and Wenzel 2012). Many Inuit live in households with income levels below the poverty line defined by conventional economic measures.¹⁵ Even as each new generation of Inuit produces fewer and fewer Inuit who have the skills, resources, and/or opportunities to hunt seals, the cultural value of eating and sharing seal meat remains as strong as ever. The practice of seal hunting itself is no longer simply about procuring food for one's family; it is a cultural act that renders meaningful and visible the practices and values that make

Inuit Inuit, and #Sealfies provide an opportunity for those Inuit who cannot hunt to express their identity as Inuit (Searles 2002; see also Niezen 2009).

In January 2017, a 17-year old Inuk boy named Braden Johnston put on a sealskin parka made by his mother and “posted a picture of himself wearing the parka with the hashtag, #FuckPETA,” (Rohner 2017: 1) (PETA stands for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals). Johnston, who lives in Yellowknife and whose mother grew up at an outpost camp in the western Canadian Arctic, told a *Nunatsiaq News* reporter that, “It was kinda like a personal coming of age for me, finally getting a sense of affirmation with Inuit, the Inuk I have in me. This overwhelming sense of confidence and pride. It was surreal. I can’t compare it to anything” (Rohner 2017: 1). Although Johnston wasn’t surprised by the “hateful comments” and “negative backlash” he received from animal rights activists, he was delighted by the “love and support that his simple post inspired” (Rohner 2017: 1). By wearing a sealskin parka and posting an image of himself in it, Braden Johnston expressed his Inuitness in way that was as much about modernity and change as it was tradition. Taking and posting a #sealfie is a new way of performing Inuit identity for those like Johnston who do not have a frequent, tangible connection to seals and to country foods more generally.

But as much as #sealfies are about asserting key aspects of Inuit cultural identity, they are also about challenging an image of Inuit enshrined in the rhetoric of animal rights activists like Ellen

Degeneres that sees Inuit hunters as inhumane and immoral. Because they emphasize the moral and spiritual dimensions of hunting, #sealfies assert the idea that Inuit hunt, eat, and wear seals because they care deeply about the animals with whom they share their world. Inuit do not kill seals and other animals to demonstrate their superiority over them; they kill them out of a moral obligation to do so. In this model, humans and animals have equal agency and are morally bound to one another.

The #sealfie movement was successful in inspiring advocates across ethnic boundaries, in transforming Inuit identity into something more inclusive. But the movement signaled a shift in the demarcation of intraethnic boundaries as well. Two of the movement's most famous contributors, Tanya Tagaq and Laakuluk Williamson-Bathory, grew up bicultural with Inuit and non-Inuit parents. As a researcher studying the formation of Inuit ethnic identity in Iqaluit in the mid-1990s, I was told that many Inuit from the northern towns of Baffin Island believed that no Inuit lived in Iqaluit (Searles 2008). Although there were many persons living in Iqaluit who self-identified as Inuit, many Inuit living in towns in northern Baffin Island were convinced that they no longer acted like Inuit and therefore did not deserve to be called Inuit. The only real Inuit lived in communities where Inuit values and practices were dominant, places with significantly smaller populations of non-Inuit.

Many of the so-called non-Inuit Inuit in Iqaluit were raised in bicultural households, a situation that inspired other Inuit to question their identity as Inuit even more. Tagaq and Williamson-

Bathory's presence as the informal leaders of the #sealfie movement challenges the stigma of biculturalism in Inuit society. It provided a new space for bicultural Inuit to display their Inuitness alongside of other Inuit.¹⁶ Without the talents and contributions of Tagaq and Williamson-Bathory, it is doubtful the movement would have attracted so much support from non-Inuit and so much media attention regionally and internationally.

Conclusion

I have argued that the #sealfie movement draws on the cultural, social, and spiritual significance of seals in Nunavut Inuit society. Hunting seals, eating seal meat, wearing sealskin clothing, and posting #sealfies are key expressions of contemporary Inuit identity. #Sealfies both capture and extend the many kinds of relations, sacred and secular, that connect humans and seals and enable Inuit to challenge popular media images of hunters and hunting via social media. #Sealfies provide yet another creative space for Inuit to express their identity as Inuit and affirm their connections to the land, its resources, as well as the traditions and beliefs of their elders and ancestors.

In terms of subsistence, #sealfies highlight the expressive, affective, and activist dimensions of foraging. Hunter-gatherers no longer hunt (if they ever did) in a social or political vacuum; they have long been in contact with outsiders who have commented on and attempted to control their hunting practices. #Sealfies contribute to the forager's toolkit; they provide hunter-

gatherers a new means of expressing a traditional identity and are an innovative response to those who strive to ban hunting altogether.

#Sealfies also signal important shifts in the experience and expression of Inuit identity. Instead of expressing a set of practices and beliefs that must be defended from a colonial legacy of acculturation and assimilation, #sealfies enable Inuit and non-Inuit to participate jointly in a community of those who celebrate and honor the physical and metaphysical connections that unite humans and seals (and other animals) in the Canadian Arctic. #sealfies challenge the boundaries separating Inuit from non-Inuit, bicultural Inuit from Inuit, and those who hunt regularly from those who do not.

#Sealfies are also striking examples of what ethnomusicologist Tom Artiss calls “visible protrusions of a much deeper and broader substrate of affective communities” (2014: 47). In his study of Inuitized versions of western music in Nain, Labrador, he discovered that, “Powerful feelings, values, dispositions, beliefs, attitudes and general ways of being in the world are continually percolating beneath the surface and constitute Inuitness as much as the musical forms that mediate them” (Artiss 2014: 47). #Sealfies provide an immediate and powerful outlet for such affective communities, enabling members to find form and purpose in a global arena in which Inuit hunters are portrayed as either villains or heroes.

¹ Tagaq uttered these words during her keynote address at the 2016 Inuit Studies Conference (see Tagaq 2016).

² The Inuktitut words included in this article belong to the South Baffin dialect.

³ The original founder of the #sealfie movement, Laakuluk Williamson-Bathory, was born in Saskatchewan and raised in southern Canada but now lives in Nunavut. Both Tanya Tagaq and Williamson-Bathory were raised by British fathers and Inuit mothers, providing them cultural insights and social connections to the worlds of Inuit and non-Inuit. By extension, the #sealfie movement transcends regional ethnic boundaries and is global in its scope.

⁴ Ove Poulsen continues to administer a Facebook group titled “#Sealfies” and updates it regularly with images and stories of hunting, eating, wearing sealskin clothing and making sealskin art in Nunavut. I am one of 1,235 members in the group to which members post regularly.

⁵ Ohnuki-Tierney (1993: 5) defines a “prominent” metaphor as having two significant features: 1) the metaphor, as it occurs by itself or in different iconic representations, is conspicuous and ubiquitous; and 2) “it serves as a “window,” revealing something important about a culture.”

⁶ Ohnuki-Tierney describes the Ainu bear-sending ceremony as a ritual of re-birth for the bear; if humans treat the bear with “love and respect and send its soul back with gifts and offerings to the bear deities”, then the bear “will be pleased and revisit the Ainu with gifts of meat and fur as reassurance of their goodwill towards humans” (Ohnuki-Tierney 1999: 241).

⁷ The term “communion” is significant here. The seal has long occupied an important place in the ways Inuit publicly acknowledge their commitment to a particular ideal and/or identity. When the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches established their presences in the Canadian Arctic, many Inuit professed their commitment to Christianity through *siqqitiq*, a ceremony that involves publicly eating prohibited parts of the seal (Laugrand and Oosten 2014: 288).

⁸ Others make similar arguments about the role of subsistence in mediating the experience of gender, ethnicity, and locality at various stages of the life course (e.g. Collings 2014; Condon et al. 1995; Bodenhorn 1990; Graburn 2006; Nuttall 2001; see also Searles 2002; Searles 2001a; Searles 2001b).

⁹ Dorais defines identity as “a dynamic and creative process that is best expressed through the strategies developed to relate to one’s physical, social, and spiritual environments” (1997: 5).

¹⁰ A similar belief system is at work in the ties that connect humans and fish in the Inuvialuit settlement region of the Western Canadian Arctic. According to Zoe Todd, Inuit in Paulatuuq believe that their survival depends on the abundance of fish, and fish are abundant because of the reciprocal relations that unite people and fish as non-human persons. She writes: “human-fish relationships represent a whole host of social, cultural, and legal-governance principles that underpin life in Paulatuuq” (2014: 218). “To be a successful fisherman in Paulatuuq,” Todd continues, “one must understand the behavior and agency of fish, and must be cognizant of their ability to “know” when someone acts without respect” (2014: 225).

¹¹ Iqaluit’s Inuit population, (approximately 3,000), is heterogeneous as well. It includes families with ancestral ties to the region as well as families who migrated there from other parts of the Western Arctic for employment and/or educational opportunities.

¹² Despite the fact that we sat on a layer of caribou skins on the sled, our journey that day was neither warm nor comfortable. The constant bouncing over rough sea ice and tundra caused our backs and backsides to ache. At the same time, this experience made us feel in tune with our surroundings, a feeling shared by our Inuit hosts, who could not wait to get out hunting on the sea ice after not being able to do so in Iqaluit.

¹³ In the “The Boy Who Went to Live with Seals,” a popular story in Yup’ik villages in Alaska, a seal tells a boy, “I will go back to my hunter, since he has taken good care of me. . . I’ve gone to him again and again since he is so generous and hospitable” (Paul John quoted in Fienup-Riordan et al. 2000: 71).

¹⁴ Although I did not know it at the time I was conducting research with Pauloosie and Ooleetoo in 1994, Inuit cosmology identifies breathing holes as places that connect different levels of reality. As Oosten and Laugrand (2014: 287) write: “[T]he breathing hole is not only a privileged point of connection between this world and the world below us, but also between this world and the upper world”.

¹⁵ Duhaime and Édouard (2015) argue that approximately half (47.7%) of the Inuit households in Nunavut are low income.

¹⁶ Biculturalism can be seen as an opportunity that exposes one to the knowledge, expertise, and aesthetics of both Inuit and non-Inuit worlds. The social advantages of having kinship ties to both Native and non-Native Americans was first described by Bruner in his ethnographic study of social and cultural change in Lone Hill village (1955).

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List of Figures for “Fresh Seal Blood”

Figure 1: Tanya Tagaq’s famous photo, posted to her twitter site on March 28, 2017.

Figure 2: The author’s semi- #sealfie taken at a fur retailer in St. John’s, Newfoundland, October, 2016.