Lived territories: A tale of Inuit women’s contemporary subsistence and belonging

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Abstract
Inuit subsistence systems and territorial experiences are the subject of much academic interest; however, women’s contributions to territorial occupancy and land-based practices tend to be dismissed. This paper documents aspects of the picking and use of berries by Inuit women in Inukjuak, Nunavik, and the meanings of such practices within contemporary systems of subsistence. By following the berries’ trajectories along social networks of sharing, I explore the social nature of berry picking and use, and highlight the meanings of women’s practices within social systems of subsistence. Through this exploration, I challenge binary assumptions that limit the recognition of women’s territorial experiences within Inuit studies literature.

Key words
Inuit women; gender; subsistence; territoriality; berries.

Résumé
Les systèmes de subsistance et les expériences territoriales des Inuit font l’objet d’une grande attention chez les chercheurs. Toutefois, les contributions des femmes à l’occupation et aux pratiques territoriales sont souvent ignorées. Cet article documente certains aspects de la cueillette et de l’utilisation des baies par les femmes inuit d’Inukjuak, au Nunavik, de même que la signification de ces pratiques dans le système de subsistance contemporain. En suivant la trajectoire de ces baies à travers les réseaux de partage, j’explore la nature sociale de la cueillette et de l’utilisation des baies, et souligne le sens des pratiques des femmes à l’intérieur du système social de subsistance. À travers cette exploration, je remets en question les structures analytiques binaire véhiculées dans la littérature qui limitent la reconnaissance des expériences territoriales des femmes inuit.

Mots-clés
Femmes inuit; genre; subsistance; territorialité; baies.

Resumen
Los sistemas de subsistencia y las experiencias territoriales de los Inuit son objeto de mucha atención entre los investigadores. Sin embargo, la contribución de las mujeres a la ocupación territorial y a las prácticas ligadas a la tierra es a menudo ignorada. Este artículo documenta los aspectos de la recolección y el uso de las bayas por las mujeres inuit de Inukjuak, Nunavik, así como su importancia en el sistema contemporáneo de subsistencia. Siguiendo la trayectoria de estas bayas a través de las redes de intercambio, exploro la naturaleza social de la recolección y el uso de las bayas y pongo de relieve la importancia de las prácticas de las mujeres dentro del sistema social de subsistencia. A través de esta exploración, cuestiono los supuestos de la literatura que limitan el reconocimiento de las experiencias territoriales de las mujeres inuit.

Palabras claves
Mujeres Inuit; género; subsistencia; territorialidad; bayas.
INTRODUCTION

In Inuit studies, gender has always been a troublesome topic. Inuit studies are shaped by an understanding of—and a fascination for—Inuit peoples as representing the (last) archetype of hunter-gatherer models of subsistence (Wenzel 2000, Saladin d’Anglure 2001). This understanding is evident in academic researchers’ overwhelming interest in the hunting practices of Inuit men (Shannon 2006, Desbiens 2007 and 2010). Unsurprisingly, the experiences, practices and territories of Inuit women tend however to remain under-documented (Nuttall 1998, Desbiens 2007).

This phenomenon is of course not limited to Inuit studies. Kay (1991), for example, exposes androcentric assumptions in the historical geography literature of North America that limit the interest in, and understanding of, women’s contributions to the economy and territoriality of groups and families. In Inuit and Aboriginal studies, the failure to recognize women’s lived stories and territories is enhanced by colonial practices of the de-territorialization of Aboriginal peoples, and the erasing and rewriting of history (Desbiens 2007).

Representations of Inuit women’s contributions are also complicated by some of the characteristics of hunter-gatherer models: namely, the sharp division of labour and social roles along gender lines (LeMoine 2003). Discussions of gender in Inuit studies are based on this conceptual division, which has in turn been supported by and documented in a number of rigorous ethnographic studies (Guédon 1967, Briggs 1974, Guemple 1986, Bodenhorn 1990 and 1993, Brumbach and Jarvenpa 1997, Hovelsrud-Broda 2000, Collignon 2001, Saladin d’Anglure 2000 and 2001, Rodrigue and Ouellette 2007).

Troubles emerge from this model of sharply divided genders through a variety of conceptual cracks. Guérin (1982), for one, read this model as a projection of western patriarchy. This reading has been staunchly rebuked in the academic literature (see Saladin d’Anglure 1986), and is at odds with many Inuit women’s understandings of their own lives and experiences (Desbiens 2010). Guérin’s critique, however, does echo a certain discomfort with apparent discrepancies in the model, embodied for example when women undertake activities that are understood as unequivocally belonging to the male domain (Saladin d’Anglure 1986, Desbiens 2007), or when women and men work together doing the same things (Shannon 2006). Such discrepancies are often laughed away as incidental anecdotes, but they evoke levels of complexity that are often overlooked in analyses of Inuit territoriality and social organization.

Nearly forty years ago, Briggs noted that:

[…] one should be careful not to evaluate Eskimo behavior that looks similar to our male-female behavior in terms of Western values. The same behavior in two cultures may be differently rationalized and may form parts of different behavioral complexes, so that it has different meanings in each culture. (Briggs 1974: 262)

I would argue with her that “gender troubles” in Inuit literature stem from uncritical assumptions that associate the gendered division of activities and social roles with divisions in terms of the contribution to group territoriality and subsistence. In this paper, I document practices of berry picking and use by Inuit women in Inukjuak, Nunavik. I highlight the significance of these practices in contemporary subsistence systems, and, through this, I challenge the limits of women’s space and contributions as presented in Inuit studies literature.

1. INUIT SUBSISTENCE: EMOTIONAL TERRITORIES OF SHARING

Subsistence is the focus of much of the Inuit studies literature, particularly as related to the pre-settlement period (Lévesque et al. 2002). Because of food scarcity, subsistence has long...
been a constant source of worry for Inuit families (Lévesque et al. 2004), and food production activities have traditionally dominated and determined group territoriality (Saladin d’Anglure 2001).

Country food has remained for the Inuit a strong symbol in which cultural identity and sense of belonging on the land are embedded. Country food is a projection of the territory itself, as the passing seasons are reflected in the availability and non-availability of different animal and plant species (Lévesque et al. 2004). In that sense, feelings of anticipation and cravings for certain food products are entangled with memories of seasons past and longing for seasons to come (Lévesque et al. 2004). As for the territory, the Inuit’s attachment to their country food remains very strong (Saladin d’Anglure 2001, Searles 2002, Lévesque et al. 2004). Consumption of country food is considered a central part of maintaining one’s physical and cultural integrity. Meat from the land particularly is recognized as more nutritious and sustaining than anything that is store bought (Searles 2001; 2002, Lévesque et al. 2004), and eating country food is seen and performed as an act of cultural affirmation. In Bodenhorn’s words: “Access to cash is necessary for survival; access to niqipiaq, real food, is necessary for social identity” (Bodenhorn 1993: 184). When deprived of country or “real” food, Inuit individuals express a sense of nostalgia, akin to what is expressed in French as mal du pays, a combination of homesickness and longing for one’s landscape or territory (see, for example, Searles 2002).

Emotions attached to food go beyond an individual sense of culture and belonging on the land. In her ethnographic account of Inuit women’s daily stories and practices, Briggs mentioned that: “Food has tremendous emotional significance for Eskimos, so what is being shared within the intimate circle of husband, wife, and children is not just meat or rice or raisins—it is love” (Briggs 1974: 277). Food, and the emotions it evokes and mobilizes, is a key medium within which relationships between Inuit individuals are established and maintained.

It is no surprise then that the social trajectories of food within Inuit families and groups represent a dominant research interest for academics in the North. This interest is expressed and has crystallized around discussions of the institution of sharing, which is considered the most characteristic element of Inuit subsistence systems (Lévesque et al. 2002).

Since Mauss, anthropologists have documented and debated the implications of sharing in Inuit cosmology. Within concepts of generalized reciprocity (after Mauss 2007 [1903]), the sharing of meat between humans is constructed as a projection of the initial gift—the meat—from the animal to the hunter (Descola 2007). The relationship between Inuit and animals is thus based on benevolence, and this benevolence must be maintained by humans through a mirroring of the animals’ generosity (Nuttall 1991, Wenzel 1995, Bodenhorn 2000, Descola 2007, Fienup-Riordan 2007).

The cosmological obligations of generalized sharing are traditionally fulfilled through episodes of commensalism, when food is shared widely and openly (Bodenhorn 1990, 2000, Wenzel 1995 and 2000), or through specific gifts to destitute households, particularly those of widows (Bodenhorn 2000). Since the James Bay and Northern Québec Agreement (1975), practices of generalized sharing in Nunavik have been partially integrated into the Inuit Hunting, Fishing and Trapping Support Program. The program provides funding and equipment for hunters in exchange for shares of the hunt, which are subsequently distributed within the community (Kishigami 2000, Martin 2003).

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1 I use the term “country food” to refer to food products that have been harvested locally on the land.
On a daily basis, however, sharing occurs mostly within households, or within networks of closely related households (Bodenhorn 2000, Hovelsrud-Broda 2000, Wenzel 2000). In this case, “sharing” is part of the continuous act of reaffirming relationships between individuals and/or families, and in that sense it necessitates some form of reciprocity from the receiver (Bodenhorn 2000).

2. WOMEN’S CONTRIBUTIONS—A WALK INTO QUICKSAND

Looking at Inuit subsistence systems and social trajectories of food from a feminist perspective is a complicated affair. For one thing, such an endeavour is confronted from the start with the naturalized logic that because men are the ones that hunt, men share the food, and therefore subsistence systems fall within the domain of men.

Of course, there have been critiques of this logic. Feminist geographers such as Rose (1993), McDowell (1999), and Domosh and Seager (2001) have long discussed the gendered construction of space. Such authors have explored Marxist analyses of segregation between public and private domains, within which women’s and men’s activities are confined respectively to the spheres of reproduction and production (Rose 1993, McDowell 1999, Domosh and Seager 2001). Rose (1993) describes the construction of these dichotomies as part of the processes through which masculinist hegemony is established and maintained. According to Rose (1993), these processes result in the confinement of the “Other”—the non-masculine—within conceptual spaces that stand in opposition to the (masculine) “Self.” Thus, Rose explains:

One of the most fundamental implications of that separation [between the masculine Self and its Others] which feminists examining masculinist philosophical discourse have emphasized is a tendency towards thinking in terms of binary oppositions which are structured through the association of one of the terms with the Same and one with the Other. (Rose 1993: 66)

The conceptual chains attached to the male versus the female (or Self versus Other) as opposite poles are highly hierarchical. Thus, a term or concept associated with the masculine pole will, by virtue of this association, be valorized over its opposite, associated with the feminine (Rose 1993).

This contribution by feminist geographers is most precious and pertinent to the study of Inuit women’s practices and territorial agency, due to the prevalence of dichotomies in understandings of gender in Inuit agency. The following comment illustrates this:

Hunting generates intense interest in others because, unlike the preparation of meat, it always produces stories. It takes place in an environment that both gives meaning to and derives meaning from hunting. Furthermore there is a sense of uncertainty about the outcome of each hunt. In complete opposition, women’s work belongs to the known domestic sphere within the community. (Nuttall 1991: 219)

The assumptions underpinning this comment are that the segregation of work and social roles between men and women is necessarily associated with the segregation of space. This segregation in turn actively bars women’s access to the “uncertain environment” where stories and meanings are constructed, and limits their activities and experiences to the “known domestic sphere within the community.” This assumption has been challenged in Inuit studies by Bodenhorn (1990; 1993), who argues that the conceptual leap from segregated work to segregated space does not apply to Alaskan Inuit territoriality.

Twenty years later, however, our ability as Inuit studies scholars to perceive women’s territorial contributions and agency is still limited by uncritical binary conceptual chains. Particularly because of the division between women’s and men’s labour and social roles,
we continue to assume that women’s activities and practices are inconsequential to the unfolding of social and cultural systems of subsistence. Recent work on social and environmental changes in the Arctic and their impacts on Inuit subsistence systems has continued to portray women as peripheral to those systems, or as involved mainly as the recipients of the products of men’s activities (see, for example, Martin 2003, Beaumier and Ford 2010, Dowsley et al. 2010).

In this context, my research was designed to challenge uncritical assumptions about women’s territorialities in Inuit studies. I documented practices of berry picking and use by Inuit women in Inukjuak, Nunavik, and explored the scope and meanings of such practices within contemporary social systems of subsistence. The findings presented here ensue from participant observations and interviews conducted in the summer and fall of 2011 with women between the ages of 30 and 50 who self-identified as berry pickers.

3. The Social Life of Berries

Berries, in Inuit studies literature, are very much described—when they are described at all—as a non-social product. Falling within the category of women’s (private) labour, berries are thought to be harvested individually and consumed almost immediately—and thus to not constitute a significant contribution to social systems of sharing (Saladin d’Anglure 2001, Labrèche 2006).

In sharp contrast, my work with women in Inukjuak suggested that berry picking and consumption are very much social affairs. Berries ripen from late summer to mid-fall, and are perceived as symbols of joyful periods of abundance, warmth, and freedom on the land. Children of both genders are introduced to berry picking through the special moments of family outings. Children’s dislike of berry picking is a common source of jest—mothers joke about their children’s constant complaining while out picking, and adults reminisce with good humour about how long and tedious it felt as a child to fill a big pail with berries.

For adult women, the act of berry picking is invested with these childhood memories, and as such becomes a symbolic enactment of one’s ties to family and the land. In that sense, berry picking is somewhat ritualized: every woman picker has her regular picking companions—usually kin—and the berry picking is an occasion to enjoy and strengthen relationships between co-pickers. These relationships are often celebrated by partaking in a communal picnic while out on the land. Picnicking is a particularly potent and enjoyable way of reaffirming family and territorial belonging:

I love to go berry picking, ’cause you get to have a lunch or supper. It’s the most wonderful thing. You set fire, and you burn wiener’s or pork chops, or country food with vegetables, and have a tea. Yeah, it’s the best. (Participant)

For Inuit women in contemporary communities, berry picking outings are particularly precious because they represent a break from daily worries and responsibilities, such as those associated with holding wage employment and/or caring for children. Some women just cannot go picking at all—or at least not as much as they would want to—because of the aforementioned constraints, or because of their lack of access to a vehicle, gas, or other equipment.

There is a general sense that, similarly to meat, berries should be made available through generalized sharing with those who cannot obtain them in other ways. During the fall, one will often hear individuals on the radio asking for berries. Women will frequently share their berries with family members or friends that cannot go out on the land themselves, or that live north of Puvirnituq, where berries are scarce. Money has however come to mediate part of the trajectory of country food within contemporary communities. I was frequently
told that if one could not access berries (or meat) through family or friends, one would nowadays need to pay for them.

Within the regular sharing group—usually the extended family—berries are made available in following similar trajectories to those documented for meat (by, for example, Nuttall 1991, Wenzel 1995 and 2000, Bodenhorn 2000, Hovelsrud-Broda 2000, Lévesque et al. 2002, Searles 2002). The trajectories of berries cast an interesting light on interpretations of the social meanings of sharing, which are themselves a source of debate in Inuit studies literature. On that topic, the models of sharing proposed by Wenzel (1995; 2000) and Bodenhorn (2000) present a fertile ground for analysis, because they impart quite different meanings to similar sharing structures. Both Bodenhorn (2000) and Wenzel (1995; 2000) describe the bulk of the sharing as happening between members and/or households of an extended family group. Wenzel (1995; 2000) describes this system of sharing between close kin as being dominated by a patriarch figure—usually the oldest consanguine man—to whom subordinate group members feel an obligation to give part of their resources—meat, cash, equipment, etc. The group leader subsequently redistributes such resources within the family. In contrast, Bodenhorn (2000) presents a similar system of sharing within extended families that is based on the concept of “shares,” which she describes as contributions—cash, labour, equipment, etc.—through which family members acquire a right to a part of the end food products.

In Bodenhorn’s and Wenzel’s models, similar phenomena, such as elders receiving large parts of the meat harvested by their younger relatives, take on different meanings. According to Wenzel (2000), this is a sign of the elders’ dominant position in the group’s hierarchy, while Bodenhorn (2000) argues that the elders can contribute by preparing and serving the food back to their family members.

My work in Inukjuak indicated that elements of both models are being mobilized through the social trajectories of berries. I found that these trajectories express a hierarchy between older and younger relatives. Similarly to Wenzel’s (1995; 2000) description of meat trajectories, several women explained that they or their sisters would give their berries to their mother, or another older female relative, and that they would subsequently access berries through that person. Unlike Wenzel, however, I found that this hierarchy was not necessarily based on economic considerations of resource distribution. The women participating in my project tended in fact to emphasize the role of older female relatives in maintaining family ties and cultural continuity. One woman thus told me:

I didn’t go picking akpiks (cloudberries). My mom [picked a few], especially for my kids. Kids really love them. So they had them. During winter time, when we have birthday parties, when the kids see the akpiks, the blackberries, they really want it. It’s kind of a special treat. Well, that’s my kids, [they] really like it, when they see the berries, during winter time on the birthday parties. (Participant)

Life in contemporary Inuit communities is characterized by the rapid social and cultural changes occurring in the Arctic. For young women, these changes have brought both opportunities, particularly in terms of well-paid employment (McElroy 1975, Dahl 1989, Hovelsrud-Broda 2000, Wenzel 2000, Dowsley et al. 2010), and challenges. Older female relatives are important in providing family and cultural continuity, as expressed in the testimony above. In that sense, the sharing of berries by an older female relative is not so much an act of resource redistribution as one of nurturing.

Bodenhorn’s idea of “shares” (Bodenhorn 2000) was also echoed in my conversations...
with women in Inukjuak, as women discussed ways of preparing and eating berries. It quickly became apparent that knowledge of specific recipes was considered an important contribution in the social trajectory of berries. In some instances, it was the woman who knew how to prepare a recipe that was particularly appreciated, and who would be given the bulk of the berries for redistribution later, as people would drop in to eat what had been prepared. With the advent of the Internet and experimentation with Qallunaat (non-Inuit) food, cooking skills and knowledge are increasingly being acquired by younger women, and in these instances the centre of the berries' trajectories is being displaced from older relatives to these younger women.

4. BERRIES AND INUIT GENDER

This last section briefly highlights certain aspects of Inuit women’s practices of berry picking and use, and offers glimpses of the complex networks of social relationships through which the berries travel. Although the scope of my research was too limited to provide a comprehensive portrait of such networks, the glimpses offered here already undermine the commonly accepted idea that berries—like all products of female activities—are non-social. In that sense, unless one can argue that extended kin networks between women are somehow more private than those existing between men, the naturalized logic linking the segregation of activities and the segregation of space cannot be sustained.

This leads me to some considerations regarding Inuit gender that do not tend to be discussed much, as they are not easily accounted for in existing models. In Inuit studies, the idea of a systematic division of social roles and labour between genders is amended by the argument advanced by some authors that men’s and women’s activities are complementary to one another. In following this logic, Inuit men and women stand not only as opposite, but also as interdependent, and their gender identity is based on their ability to accomplish their gender-specific labour for one another (Briggs 1974, Guemple 1986, Bodenhorn 1990 and 1993, Hovelsrud-Broda 2000). Advocates of this “opposite and complementary” model insist on the role of wife-husband teams as pillars of the subsistence system, and subsistence is in turn perceived as depending on the synergy between a woman and a man (Guemple 1986, Bodenhorn 1990; 1993; 2000, Hovelsrud-Broda 2000, Trott 2006).

In that sense, the division between men’s and women’s activities and labour is not constructed as a limiting segregation based on the inability—inate or enforced—of one gender to do the other’s work (Briggs 1974, Bodenhorn 1993). In fact, although generally dividing labour and social roles between genders may provide for a more desirable and comfortable life, there are multiple circumstances that oblige individuals to perform tasks attributed to the other gender (Desbiens 2007). One woman in Inukjuak told me:

This summer, early summer, we went fishing; there were five Hondas, and maybe seven ladies. It was lots of fun. Yeah … My Honda got stuck and I thought I was going to lose it to the ground and I was terrified and… these girls knew what to do. They got my Honda out. We put rocks under the tires. We just pulled it out. I said, “Super women!” Yeah! Even if we were just only women. Even if we don’t have men around, we can do things. (Participant)

This testimony illustrates the idea that knowledge and skill to do all types of work are considered beneficial to all, and that being proficient in the other gender’s expertise is viewed as a sign of competence (see Briggs 1974).

In my view, the sense of competence associated with having the skills to do the other’s work is related to a commonly known but commonly forgotten aspect of Inuit territoriality—the fact that men’s and women’s activities are often performed together. Briggs
(1974) notes in her ethnographic work that although men are defined mostly as big game hunters, the amount of time that they spend actually performing that role is limited—and great lengths of time are spent by women and men in the company of one another. This very fact is what makes Shannon (2006) question the validity of the idea of the strict segregation between the genders, as in her view it cannot account for the numerous activities commonly performed together—such as fishing.

Women whom I talked with in Inukjuak told me stories of berry picking that often took place during outings with male relatives. The women would often pick while the men went hunting or fishing. Some women also told me that they would rather fish than pick. From these stories there emerges a clear sense of division between female and male activities, although activities of both genders were performed together and were sometimes intertwined. What does not emerge, however, is a sense that one gender’s activities contribute more significantly to the meanings associated with the outings, in terms of both cultural identity and territorial belonging.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I attempt to demonstrate how elements of Inuit women’s practices associated with berry picking and use challenge common representations and analyses of gender in Inuit studies. I particularly challenge uncritical binary oppositions that limit the scope of our understanding of women’s territorial practices and agencies. In order to accomplish this, one of my main strategies has been to describe how the social trajectories of berries are inserted into sharing networks, and to compare these with sharing networks constructed around the subsistence products of male activities, i.e. meat.

I would like to note that, through this very strategy, I find myself in the unfortunate position of having to deconstruct a masculinist paradigm using masculinist tools. Moreover, by striving to demonstrate how socially significant—how “public”—women’s contributions are, I cannot but validate binary oppositions that inevitably consign women to the margins of “otherness.”

This is significant because, beyond our understandings and analyses of Inuit women’s territorial stories, what is impaired by our rigid conceptual axes and polarizing reflexes is the potential of our research approaches and relationships. To illustrate this, I would like to cite a paper by Guay (1989), a feminist researcher who compared the workplace integration experiences of Inuit women raised as girls to those of Inuit women raised as boys. In regard to her relationship with the women participating in her study, the author indicates:

L’atmosphère qui règne pendant le type d’entrevue réalisée avec [des femmes élevées en filles] n’est pas propice au développement de relations égalitaires entre l’ethnographe et les sujets de son étude. […] Les Inuit considèrent qu’une personne intelligente et mature possède des capacités d’observation qui lui permettent d’apprendre sans poser de question. Pourtant les [femmes élevées en garçons] semblaient très bien comprendre ma manière plutôt indélicate d’imposer une communication inter-culturelle.” (Guay 1989: 20)

This comment is instructive in that it clearly illustrates the author’s reliance upon binary oppositions in order to apprehend the social

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2 Guay (1989) is referring to gender identities associated with eponyms (past or kin identities), which can be of either gender. Thus, a child born of one sex can be assigned the other social gender, at least for part of his or her life. For a detailed discussion of this practice, see Saladin d’Anglure 1986.

3 “The atmosphere during the interviews with [women raised as girls] is not conducive to the development of an egalitarian relationship between the ethnographer and her subjects […] Inuit people consider that a mature and intelligent person is capable of observing and learning without asking questions. However, [women raised as boys] seem to understand very well my way of imposing, somewhat indelicately, a cross-cultural communication” [our translation].
realities of her internees. Aside from the assumption that an interviewee should bear the burden of developing egalitarian relationships with an ethnographer, the very relationship between the author and her internees is heavily tainted by polarized expectations. By associating these internees’ open attitudes and willingness to let go of cultural conventions with masculinility and empowerment, the author inevitably marginalizes the testimonies of the (feminine) Others’ lived experiences and territories.

Desbiens (2010) has noted that “researchers cannot assume that Aboriginal women are comfortable with a gender differentiated approach to knowledge” (Desbiens 2010: 412). It may be that gender-based approaches are inevitably entangled in binary oppositions, even as these approaches strive to transcend these oppositions. It may also be that struggling to justify our research interest in women’s territorialities on masculine terms prevents us from apprehending the scope of these territorialities. Indeed, it may just be that the rigorous and unencumbered study of Inuit women’s territorialities actually makes these territorialities become a valid research interest in themselves.

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