Despite the widespread belief that humans are evolving beyond primitive hunter-gathering toward modern settled agriculture, wild foods remain “integral” to the diets and “livelihoods of agricultural peoples” (Guijt, Hinchcliffe, and Melnyk 1995, 5). In Canada, for instance, families forage for roadside berries to make jam and wine; anglers catch trout to sauté for dinner; trappers eat and share cuts of the lynx and beaver they snare for fur; and hunters trek into the backcountry to shoot and pack out moose to grind, slice, freeze, and dry for winter. Although wild foods cannot always be (easily) commodified and sold in Canada, the sale of select wild foods, wild food experiences (such as guided hunts), and wild food byproducts (such as tanned hides) support the livelihoods of countless Canadian families as well as the bottom line of several large-scale industries (tourism and outfitting, for example).

Yet wild foods remain a largely “hidden harvest” in Canada—often overlooked by outsiders and variously marginalized or exoticized by food writers, entrepreneurs, activists, and scholars. The chapters in this volume illustrate this point nicely: they centre around foods and ingredients produced within agricultural food systems—pasteurized milk, frosted cupcakes,
packaged beef—and if they mention wild foods at all, it is in reference to Canada’s distant past (chapters 6 and 10) or to culinary adventures (chapter 5). This pattern, however, extends well beyond the current volume. Canadian food writing and scholarship, in general, focuses on agricultural foods and either overlooks wild foods or relegates them to the margins. To put this claim to the test, scan three burgeoning areas of Canadian food research and activism—alternative food networks, food security and sovereignty, and ethnic foodways. You’ll find few mentions of foraging, hunting, or fishing, and when you do, you’ll find they appear in reference to the more remote edges of Canadian history, geography, economy, or culture. While wild foods have been identified as key players in the construction of Canadian cuisine and culinary tourism destinations (see, for example, Everett 2007; Jacobs 2009; Spray 2001; Spray Starks 2007), even this corner of the scholarship associates wild foods more with Canada’s remote, rural, northern, and coastal regions than with its relatively “central” cities and locales.

Wild food provisioning figures most prominently in Canadian scholarship on food security. Even there, however, it is relegated to the margins—discussed as a topic of concern primarily in studies of northern, remote, mostly Aboriginal communities. This pattern is visible in a report prepared by Statistics Canada (2009) on human activity and the environment. Acknowledging that “gardening, hunting, fishing and harvesting wild foods such as mushrooms, nuts, and berries are activities carried out by many Canadians,” the report notes that these activities “contribute food to our food system that is typically not captured by our statistical measures” and concedes that “recent surveys” focus on “the use of country food by the Inuit,” described as “the Indigenous peoples of the Artic who live mostly in coast communities in the North” (15). Although scholars have made great strides in recognizing, valuing, and monitoring wild food provisioning in northern communities (see Duhaime 2002, for example), their work represents the bulk of wild food research in the country, leaving readers with the impression that wild food provisioning is consequential only (or mostly) in those cultures and landscapes farthest flung from the nation’s geographical and cultural centres. This misrepresentation—while unintended—does the field a disservice. Wild foods, after all, are integral to the diets and livelihoods of a range of Canadians—be they urban, rural, or peri-urban; Aboriginal, settler-descendant, or new Canadian; northern, central, or southern; lower-, middle-, or upper-class.
In this chapter, I examine one particular kind of wild food provisioning—hunting—to begin broadening the current view of wild food provisioning in Canada. While studies of hunting as a wildlife management tool abound, we know little about hunting as a contemporary mode of food provisioning, except as it is practiced in northern, remote, or rural communities. What we do know, based on statistics collected by federal and provincial ministries, is that many Canadians probably consider hunting an ordinary mode of food provisioning. In 2012, roughly 5 percent of Canadians (1.74 million people) were active hunters. In 2014, licensed Canadian hunters harvested an estimated 1,717,025 wild fowl nationally and—in Alberta alone—an estimated 45,143 mule and white-tailed deer, plus 7,846 elk and 7,748 moose. Most harvested animals are eaten or donated (to food banks or directly to families), since leaving edible meat in the field is a punishable offence, according to provincial “wastage” regulations. This means that a significant amount of hunted game meat (as opposed to ranched or farmed game meat) is making its way into the homes and kitchens of Canadians.

Rather than settle for a partial view of wild food provisioning, I examine below recent calls to renew hunting as a mode of food provisioning and compare the discursive fields within which these calls conceptualize and rationalize hunting as a way to put food on the table—or on the floor, as is the custom in the North (Gombay 2010, 30).

**DISCOURSES OF FOOD HUNTING IN CANADA**

In this chapter, I take a discursive approach that draws on the work of Michel Foucault. According to Foucault, a discourse is more than just talk and text; rather, it is a set of symbolic practices that demonstrates some regularity in how it renders reality—that is, it structures and delimits how people conceptualize reality and conduct themselves within it. In Foucault’s view, rather than merely representing reality, a discourse constitutes reality, forming the objects and subjects of which people speak, defining legitimate ways of knowing, and setting norms for proper conduct (Foucault 1972). Insofar as it shapes what can be thought, said, and done, a discourse is perhaps best thought of as “a technology of thought” (Miller and Rose 2008, 30) or an instrument of power. However, the power of any given discourse is never totalizing, since multiple discourses are always in
circulation, some competing, others reinforcing each other. This opens up room for resistance—for alternative and unintended patterns of thought and behaviour to emerge at the seams and cracks where discourses meet, part, and overlap (Foucault 1972, [1997] 2003).

Working from within this perspective means taking seriously the discourses that structure thought and action in the domain of food hunting—for instance, the discourses commonly foregrounded in historical and critical studies of hunting in the West, whether patriarchal (Kalof, Fitzgerald, and Baralt 2007; Kheel 1996), anthropocentric/animistic (Gupta 2006; Jepson 2008), scientific (Cartmill 1993; Dizard 1994; Harker and Bates 2007; Knezevic 2009), or religious (Cartmill 1993). However, much of this research focuses on sport hunting and consequently overlooks the discursive tensions and contestations specific to food hunting. Studies that focus more narrowly on modern-day food hunting in Canada depict a discursive field characterized not just by conflicting views of how hunting makes us human, connects us with animals, or marks us as differently gendered but, more specifically, by long-standing antagonisms between Aboriginal peoples and the state regarding the “proper” definition, value, and governance of hunting knowledge and practice.

State Discourses of Hunting: Conservation, Preservation, Colonialism

On one side of this divide lies the state: a loose collection of government agents and government-sanctioned agencies all vying for control of Canada’s wildlife populations, wilderness areas, and the people living off (or on) them. For much of the twentieth century, state and state-sanctioned actors have exercised near-complete control over the Canadian “wild,” rationalized and legitimized by a powerful combination of conservation, preservation, and colonial discourses. While Jan Dizard’s (1994) study of hunting in the United States highlights discourses of conservation and preservation in competition with each other, Canadian scholarship emphasizes the exceptional power of these discourses when used together to rationalize centralized state control over wildlife and wildlands and to denigrate and exclude mostly Aboriginal and lower-class meat-hunters from rich hunting grounds and relevant policy arenas (see, for example, Colpitts 2002; Kulchyski and Tester 2007; Sandlos 2007). Similarly, in a study of the evolution of hunting policy in Alberta, Brian Louis Calliou (2000) offers an interesting legal perspective on the use of conservationism to exclude Aboriginal peoples from their hunting grounds.
The Canadian state’s autocratic approach to wildlife (and hunter) management emerged, in large part, from its adoption of a conservationist rendering of reality, one in which nature is an object—a natural “resource”—to be counted and controlled by humans using rational principles so that “surplus” populations can be commoditized. A healthy bison herd, for instance, can be commoditized as a tourist attraction and “surplus” elk as quarry for paying (that is, licensed) hunters. While North American conservationism denies economic value to dead wildlife (in other words, to wild meat)—since more money can be made from living wildlife than from dead (Geist 1988)—conservationist principles underlie the commoditization of access to wildlife and of the opportunity to hunt, with the latter allocated by law, through the distribution of licences and tags. A conservationist rendering of reality, however, has also provided the rationale for denying certain people access to wildlife and hunting, namely, those who refuse to submit to the scientific wildlife management principles espoused by the state. Labelled “wanton” or “unruly” destroyers of wildlife, these hunters—mostly Aboriginal, lower-class, utilitarian “meat” hunters—have historically been banned from hunting grounds, punished for harvesting wildlife using the logic of their own local knowledge(s), and marginalized in policy discussions (Sandlos 2007; Kulchyski and Tester 2007).

Coupled with this discourse of conservation, however, is a discourse of preservation: one that romanticizes the intrinsic worth of nature—of “wilderness” areas untainted by human intervention—and that seeks to preserve the last bastions of untamed nature from the taint of human development, greed, and industry (Sandlos 2007). In a preservationist rendering of reality, humans need to be excised from sacrosanct wilderness areas—or, at least, their visitation needs to be strictly circumscribed—so that what few pockets of Edenic nature remain can thrive without human meddling (Sandlos 2007, 11–12, 35; Colpitts 2002, 5–9). Within this logic, Aboriginals are typically stereotyped as “primitive” peoples once able to live in a close harmony with nature yet lamented as a “fallen” race, “tainted” by their contact with European “guns, whisky, and unscrupulous traders” and rendered “incongruous in a wilderness landscape” (Sandlos 2007, 12). Add to this the conservationist condemnation of Aboriginal hunters as wanton, unruly, and wasteful destroyers of wildlife, and Aboriginal peoples are twice condemned—ruled “inimical” (12) to the “right” management, consumption, and preservation of Canada’s wildlife because of their...
reliance on local (rather than Western scientific) knowledge to guide harvesting practices and their degenerate “fall” from grace following exposure to European settlers.

While preservationism is, in some ways, at odds with conservationism—given their different views of the value of nature, as either intrinsic or economic, and their characterizations of humans, as either tainted and less worthy than nature or rational and uniquely positioned to “manage” nature—no clear dichotomy divides these two discourses. In fact, Sandlos (2007, 11) argues that “the bureaucratic movement to protect wildlife in Canada was flexible enough to accommodate both the antimodernist desire to preserve wildlife as the most visible remnant of an authentic but fading wilderness and the modern faith in bureaucratic management as a means to cultivate and manage wildlife populations for recreational and commercial purposes.” Together, these two discourses helped usurp local “sovereignty over the wildlife commons” (64) and consolidate state control over wildlife (and human hunters).

To make matters worse, both preservationist and conservationist discourses in North America are—to this day—underwritten by colonial discourses of class and racial superiority. In the domain of food hunting, this means that hunters, already denigrated and condemned for their “unscientific” practices and unsuitability as protectors of the “wild,” are also weighed, measured, and found wanting by colonial discourses that assert the inherent superiority of genteel European traditions over those of Natives and working-class settlers and immigrants. From this colonial mentality springs the North American celebration of “sportsmanlike” hunting (wherein animals are given “fair chase,” harvested with a single shot, etc.) and the denigration of utilitarian subsistence hunting (wherein animals are slaughtered “unfairly” using nets, boats, lights, etc.) in popular culture and policy (Colpitts 2002, 62-103; Sandlos 2007, 9). Even though the principles of sportsmanlike hunting are hardly scientific—for example, “fair chase” in no way contributes to the “scientific” management of wildlife—they suffuse wildlife management discourse in Canada and are enshrined in wildlife acts and hunting regulations, thanks to the influence of upper-class sportsmen on policy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Sandlos 2007, 143; Colpitts 2002, 63–102).

While sportsmen often do eat what they hunt, their talk and thinking foregrounds the dynamics and intrinsic value of the hunt itself—the
physical and intellectual challenge, the moral edification, the rejuvenat-
ing exposure to nature—and downplays the notion of the provisioning
of food. According to this mindset, hunting for food is assumed to be of
interest only to those going hungry, scraping by, or living hand-to-mouth:
in other words, it is base, shameful, and vile—a marker of one’s lower
standing in social (and quasi-evolutionary) hierarchies and something to
be “bred out” of local hunters by the state through a shift away from sub-
sistence and toward sport hunting (Sandlos 2007, 143–44, 166–92). While it
might be tempting to claim that modern-day food hunting in Canada is no
longer shaped by such discourses, one has only to examine popular opin-
ion about “subsistence” hunting to see evidence of lingering prejudice. As
Gombay (2010) points out, the term subsistence is so laden with unkind
value judgments—about Aboriginal groups presumed to be “eking out a
bare existence” (11)—that the term has become burdensome to contempo-
rary research.

Aboriginal Discourses of Hunting: Tradition and Rights
On the other side of this discursive divide are Aboriginal hunters who
conceive of and practice food hunting in very different terms. While often
accustomed (or resigned) to working within Western discourses of wildlife
management and preservation, many Aboriginal peoples insist that trad-
tional discourses better reflect and render the reality of food hunting as
they understand it. In such renderings, both hunters and their prey are
active participants in the hunt. Rather than existing as objects to be “man-
age” by humans, animals listen and watch human hunters, deciding who
will succeed and who will fail in the field. Hunters who properly honour
their quarry (for example, by killing only animals who present themselves
during the hunt) and who show compassion for other humans by shar-
ing meat with those in need are honoured, in turn, by animals who give
their lives so that “good” hunters may eat and live on (Nadasdy 2003, 80;
Gombay 2006; Schmidt and Dowsley 2010). Traditional discourses frame
hunting as both a food-provisioning and a community-building activ-
ity—not as a management tool or sport. Moreover, since food procured
through traditional hunting can only ever be earned through good rela-
tions between humans, animals, and the land, only hunted food counts
as “real” food, and it is always consumed with an awareness of the place,
people, and animals from which it came (Gombay 2010, 29).
Such traditional renderings of the domain of hunting—tied to notions of traditional ecological knowledge (or “TEK”) within Aboriginal culture—were, until recently, ruled out by state actors as illegitimate and irrational. Yet they remain integral to sense making and food provisioning in Aboriginal communities (Nadasdy 2003; Schmidt and Dowsley 2010), and they provide these communities with a means to resist and reverse the discursive logics mobilized and championed by government actors to govern human hunters, hunted wildlife, and those who consume wild meat (O’Neill, Elias, and Yassi 1997; Searles 2010).

A similarly subversive function is played by Indigenous rights discourses, which Aboriginal peoples increasingly use to (re)assert their sovereignty and counteract state discourses that have historically declared them unfit for participation in wildlife policy. Indigenous rights discourses constitute Aboriginal peoples not as colonized peoples, backwards savages, or wards of the state but as sovereign nations with special rights set out in treaties signed with the federal government (Kulchyski and Tester 2007, 165). Such a rendering of reality has, historically, allowed Aboriginal peoples to claim (or be “granted”) hunting privileges based on their status as the “original occupants” of the land and on the promise of such privileges under treaties (Kulchyski and Tester 2007, 176; Sandlos 2007, 48).  

More recently, the reality rendered through Indigenous rights discourses has prompted calls for improved food sovereignty in Aboriginal communities through a network of policies designed to protect the ability of these communities “to define their own models of production, food distribution, and consumption patterns” (Pimbert 2008, 3)—in other words, their right to hunt, fish, and forage for traditional wild foods. How these calls for food sovereignty will play out—especially in a discursive field already dominated by Western scientific wildlife management and centralized bureaucratic control—remains to be seen.

So far, the future for Aboriginal subsistence hunters looks both promising and foreboding. Traditional ecological knowledge is increasingly acknowledged and respected by Western scientists, and Indigenous rights claims have encouraged the state to shift away from its autocratic tendencies toward comanagement of natural resources. Despite these changes, though, wildlife policy in Canada remains dominated by Western discourses (Sandlos 2007, 107). Negotiations and partnerships between state
and Aboriginal actors remain framed by the “language games” of the state and biased in favour of scientific managers (Nadasdy 2003, 119). Some researchers have argued that “TEK” itself has been subsumed by scientific-bureaucratic discourses and now refers less to traditional ways of life than to compartmentalized knowledges valued for their use to wildlife managers (Nadasdy 2003, 122; Forbes and Stammler 2009).

The discursive antagonism between Aboriginal and state actors, it seems, still lingers—shaping and delimiting public opinion, policy, and practice about “pantry” hunting in Canada. Understandably, then, Canadian scholarship continues to focus on this antagonism. However, the question remains: Is this antagonism a fair representation of the discourses shaping contemporary food-hunting practices in Canada, or does it overlook other ways of conceptualizing, valuing, and practicing hunting “for the table”?

Calls for a Renewal of Food Hunting in Canada

I contend that there are indeed other ways to conceive and conduct food hunting in Canada and that these are currently overlooked in the literature. One alternative, in particular, has recently made newspaper headlines, yet it remains unacknowledged in studies of wild food provisioning in Canada. This newsworthy hunting alternative—hipster hunting—represents a new beast afield, with advocates conceptualizing hunting in terms very different from those of both Aboriginal hunters and state-sanctioned (sportsmanlike) conservation hunters. In fact, celebrations of hipster hunting invoke a discourse about food quality that rarely figures in discussions of contemporary hunting—although it does feature prominently in studies of trendy food alternatives. So the questions I ask are these: To what extent and how does hipster hunting represent a new way of thinking about and doing food hunting in Canada? And how does it figure relative to the discursive field of food hunting already well documented by scholars?

To answer these questions, I examine hipster hunting alongside other recent calls to renew food hunting in Canada. Currently, only two groups are making such calls: urban hipsters celebrating hunting as a way to provision “quality food” and Aboriginal communities celebrating traditional food systems as a way to improve and reclaim their food sovereignty and food-related health.
Postcolonial and postsettlement dietary changes in Aboriginal communities have been drastic and destructive (Kuhnlein 1996). In northern Manitoba, for instance, Aboriginal families have, over the span of just three generations,transitioned from eating only traditional foods to eating none (Fieldhouse and Thompson 2012). Such rapid dietary change is blamed for widespread health problems (diabetes, obesity, heart disease, anemia, tooth loss) and for shortened lifespan. Indeed, “people living in Inuit Nunangat [the four Inuit regions of Canada] can expect to live a decade less than people living elsewhere in Canada,” in part because of diet-related chronic disease (Owens et al. 2013).

While researchers are beginning to highlight the importance of traditional foods in urban, off-reserve populations (see, for example, Elliott and Jayatilaka 2011; Chan, Receveur, and Sharp 2011), campaigns currently focus on the challenges faced by Aboriginal communities that are more acute in Canada’s North. Many, if not all, Aboriginal communities in Canada still suffer from the impact of forced settlement, restricted access to land and equipment, a loss of traditional knowledge, dwindling provisioning and consumption of traditional foods, the high cost and low quality of store-bought foods, increasing dependence on store-bought foods, and widespread food insecurity and poor nutrition (Fieldhouse and Thompson 2012; Ford, Lardeau, and Vanderbilt 2012; Kuhnlein and Receveur 1996; Skinner et al. 2013; Thompson et al. 2012; Turner and Turner 2008; Wesche and Chan 2010). But these are all felt more acutely in the North, where food prices are twice as high, store food selection more restricted, store foods more processed, the growing season shorter, unemployment higher, and incomes lower than in the south (Ford, Lardeau, and Vanderbilt 2012). In addition, the difficulties that northern Aboriginal peoples encounter in accessing land and wildlife are exacerbated by the rapid growth of mining, hydro-electric development, and oil and gas exploration in the Canadian Arctic and by the impacts of climate change (Parlee and Furgal 2012).

But in addition to this emphasis on traditional foods in the North, a loose coalition of actors is currently trying to renew traditional foodways (including hunting) in Aboriginal communities across Canada. Researchers, for instance, are calling for a renewal of traditional food provisioning and consumption as a way to combat the poor nutrition, sedentary lifestyle, high rates of diet-related disease, and food insecurity in Aboriginal communities.
from northern Ontario, to Manitoba, to coastal British Columbia: traditional foods, researchers argue, are more nutritious and prevent chronic disease (Fieldhouse and Thompson 2012; Ford, Lardeau, and Vanderbilt 2012; Skinner et al. 2013; Thompson et al. 2012; Turner and Turner 2008; Wesche and Chan 2010). Aboriginal peoples echo some of these views, especially the idea that traditional foods are more nutritious than store-bought foods, but they add that a return to traditional foodways would improve their food sovereignty and counteract the slow cultural and spiritual death—not just the physical ailments—that Aboriginal peoples are currently suffering (Food Secure Canada 2011; Gombay 2010; Pufall et al. 2011). In response, community leaders and state officials have implemented programs to encourage hunting, such as harvester support programs that offer financial support for hunters who provide meat for the community (Aarluk Consulting Inc. 2008) and country food programs that supply facilities and equipment for dressing, cleaning, and storing wild meat.

This push for food hunting in Aboriginal communities can be understood as both an attempt to recover from the fallout of years of state intervention into Aboriginal ways of life—rationalized and mobilized by state-adopted discourses of conservation, preservation, and colonialism—and to reclaim some of the traditional discourses (ways of life) and sovereignty lost in the process. As such, these campaigns can be understood as emerging from the established discursive field of food hunting in Canada—the historical and discursive antagonism between Aboriginal hunters and state actors—which has already been so well documented by scholars.

These campaigns, however, do not consist of simple opposition to or rejection of state-sanctioned discourses, nor do they celebrate an idealized return to precontact Aboriginal traditions and rights. Rather, voices within these campaigns speak from tangled positions somewhere “in between” the two poles. Researchers, for instance, simultaneously decry the destructive influence of Western scientific discourses on Aboriginal communities, champion a return to traditional food systems, and invoke Western scientific discourses (nutritionism, for example) to explain the need for a return to tradition (see Turner and Turner 2008, for example). Likewise, Aboriginal peoples reportedly feel conflicted about the scientific discourses that, for so long, have framed discussions about traditional foods: on the one hand, they prefer to use local knowledges, rather than scientific assessments, to
judge when foods are safe to eat; on the other hand, they invoke nutrition science to assert that traditional foods are good to eat (Pufall et al. 2011). Studies by Nicole Gombay (2006, 2010) suggest that similar ambiguities and tensions regarding traditional foods and traditional food provisioning can be detected in relations between Western profit-seeking market economies and indigenous sharing-based vernacular economies in the North.

Such tensions and contradictions highlight the complexity of calling for a renewal of traditional hunting in the North from within a discursive field long dominated by Western scientific and bureaucratic discourses. Scientific discourses continue to be invoked, for example, even in the context of efforts to counteract their devastating effects on Aboriginal traditions and health. Such tangled ways of talking reveal that there is no absolute or perfect discursive ground to stand on or speak from in efforts to renew food-hunting traditions—only hybrid positions emerging from a confluence of different, often competing discourses.

Campaigns to Popularize Hipster Hunting

In stark contrast, efforts to popularize hipster hunting express confidence that “quality” food can be had by those with who hunt the “right” way. As promoted in popular media by food bloggers and journalists, hipster hunting—food hunting for young urbanites—is increasingly celebrated as the ideal way for trendsetters and conscientious eaters to provision natural, organic, hormone-free, ethical, sustainable meat, all under their own steam. Food bloggers such as Kristeva Dowling (www.howlingduckranch.com/blog), Melanie Epp (www.onehundredmilemel.blogspot.ca), and Kevin Kossowan (www.kevinkossowan.com) promote hipster hunting using stories of hands-on hunting and culinary adventure, while food journalists pick up these stories and (re)package them for wider audiences (see, for example, Shore 2013; Moss 2011).

Perhaps not surprisingly, efforts to reignite interest in food hunting among urbanites stand apart from those addressed to remote northern Aboriginal communities. Drawing on notions of food quality, advocates of hipster hunting seem far removed from the discursive antagonisms between the state and Aboriginal peoples. However, the discursive dimensions of hipster hunting aren’t entirely new: they draw on conservationist, preservationist, and colonial views of hunting, but they reframe these views in terms of food quality.
Food quality is, quite simply, central to the way hipster hunters conceive of and conduct “good” food hunting, both afield and in the kitchen. As the Alberta-based food blogger Kevin Kossowan puts it, hunting for food is all “about quality”: “I was looking for really good, quality product and I thought I should go down the road of killing the animal I was eating and thought there was some value in that” (quoted in Lau 2008). What counts as “quality product” for hipster hunters, though, is drawn neither from state-sanctioned hunting discourses (which downplay or denigrate the role of food in hunting) nor from Aboriginal hunting discourses (which conceive of hunted food—when the hunting is properly conducted—as “real” food given by animals to deserving hunters who live well upon the land). Rather, hipsters draw notions of “quality” from a different discursive field altogether—that of “alternative” food networks, where quality products are foods explicitly linked to a place of origin and embedded within a local territory or are connected with “environmental, social, and distributional processes” that embody a shift away from industrialized and standardized food production (Ilbery et al. 2005, 120; see also Ilbery and Kneafsey 1998; Murdoch, Marsden, and Banks 2000). According to this logic, global-industrial foods are placeless, artificial, and risky, whereas nonindustrial, locally embedded foods—here, hunted foods—are inherently “good” or “better.” Within hipster hunting advocacy, wild meat is thus considered high-quality food more for its association with non-industrial processes than with local places: wild meat is “raised” naturally, selected for harvest sustainably, killed ethically, and cooked using highly refined, hands-on food craft.

Hipster hunters set wild meat apart from industrially processed meat in no uncertain terms. Hunted meat is “organic” food from “a natural source” (Remington 2008) and is “filled with vitamins, antioxidants and omega-3 fat” (Schatzker 2010), as opposed to “flabby,” “grey,” “toxic” feedlot beef (Kesia Nagata, quoted in Shore 2013) that is “smothered with antibiotics and injected with growth hormones” (Schatzker 2010). Wild animals are “good” to eat because they spend their lives “in meadows and forests nibbling tender shoots and leaves” close to “Mother Nature,” while “factory-raised” animals are imprisoned and shot full of chemicals (Schatzker 2010). Interestingly, this view is reminiscent of Aboriginal peoples’ praise for traditional foods as more “real” and nutritious than store-bought foods, yet it is not predicated upon the nuanced world view espoused by Aboriginal
peoples, in whose terms “real” food means food accepted and honoured as a gift from an animal, in recognition of the hunter’s moral and intellectual development while living on the land. If anything, this emphasis on food quality is a new spin on a distinctly preservationist world view, wherein wild foods are valued for their intrinsic purity, a function of their time spent beyond the influence of industrial society.

According to Matt Cartmill (1993), the link between “ecological consciousness” (232) and hunting is relatively new—unheard of until the second half of the twentieth century. The discourse of food quality underwriting hipster hunting is characterized by just such a link. These food hunters position wild game as superior because of its connection to “sustainable” harvesting techniques (Shore 2013), that is, to environmentally attuned methods for selecting animals for harvest that “ensure the land . . . is in good shape for successive generations” (“Hunting Your Own Dinner” 2012). Hunting means being “involved in the eco system on a very different level” (Lily Raff McCaulou, quoted in “Hunting Your Own Dinner” 2012), developing an “intimate knowledge of the terrain, the movements of animals . . . their feeding habits” (Schatzker 2013) and an ability to assess which animals can be safely shot. Again, this logic is evocative of Aboriginal peoples’ insistence that traditional hunting involves knowing how to harvest animals so that more (or as many) animals offer themselves in future. However, rather than being predicated on the same traditional knowledge or cosmologies as Aboriginal hunting, hipster hunting is tinged with a conservationist view: that wildlife populations need careful, paternalistic, and scientific “management” so that surplus animals will be available for “cropping” in future. Assessments about which animals can be safely shot are left to state officials, who decree which animals are legal to hunt in a given season. This conservationist tinge comes to the fore, in particular, when hipsters rationalize hunting as a way not just to procure “quality” food but to target “surplus” populations and keep wildlife numbers in check. “Goose and duck populations are at an all-time high,” writes blogger Melanie Epp (2010b), “so if you’re worried about their numbers, you shouldn’t be. They are, in fact, considered vermin in some places. . . . Ducks Unlimited supports these hunts because they help control numbers, educate people about conservationism, and promote a healthy respect for wildlife.” This way of thinking about and doing hunting is perhaps best characterized as the hybrid offspring of food quality and conservation.
discourses: hunting born of the simultaneous beliefs that wildlife populations need humans to “manage” them and that careful “management” ensures the “production” of wild animals by ecologically sound food processes, making wild meat a “quality” product.

Interestingly, such references to conservationism in hipster hunting are also accompanied by references to colonial discourses of class superiority—albeit reframed (as above) in terms of food quality. Hipsters claim to be “ethical” hunters who provision only ethically harvested wild meat: they take personal responsibility for how “animals are treated” (Shore 2013), ensure that animals don’t “suffer” (Epp 2010b), and kill animals quickly with a “well-aimed shot to the chest” (Schatzker 2010) to avoid the cruelty experienced by animals in factory farming (Epp 2010a). In so doing, they constitute wild game as a “quality” product because it is produced in ways that avoid the horrors of industrial agriculture. All of the “ethical” steps they list, though—such as pursuing animals fairly and ensuring a quick clean kill—reference colonial ideals of (aristocratic) sport hunting—long ago imported from Europe, transformed by North American attitudes (see Warren 1997), and enshrined in North American wildlife law. Insofar as it echoes elements of the sportsman’s code (fair chase, a clean kill), hipster hunting is a kind of sportsmanlike hunting—but for food, not for sport. In this sense, hipster hunting is the hybrid offspring of twenty-first-century notions of postindustrial food quality and colonial, aristocratic ideals of genteel sport hunting.

This intersection of discourses, though, gives the hipster hunter some ground from which to recast utilitarian meat hunting as civilized and noble rather than as the vile activity of a “plebeian ‘pot hunter’” (Cartmill 1993, 232). By (re)casting game meat as “quality food” and hipster hunting as sportsmanlike, hipsters help reorient the discursive field somewhat, so that meat hunting can be valued as a kind of right living through food rather than condemned as inferior and ignoble. This reorientation of the discursive field is reinforced through references to a new paragon of low-class hunting: “hillbillies who kill” (Epp 2010a) and “gun-toting rednecks” (Hayley 2008)—those who hunt for the thrill of the kill—mark the line between upstanding food hunters and “knuckle-dragging” degenerates (Remington 2008).

Advocates for hipster hunting also distinguish it as a source of “quality” food by describing the artisanal techniques used to prepare wild game for
the table. Here, the food focus of hipster hunting comes to the fore. Bloggers drop names of chefs like Hank Shaw (Kossowan 2012, 2013), Anthony Bourdain, and Gordon Ramsey (Kossowan 2007a), while detailing indulgent seven-course wild game dinners featuring dishes like “sautéed calf moose loin in cambozola cream sauce” (Kossowan 2007b). Hipster hunters ramble dreamily about venison rack “Frenched” and prepared with an “herb crust” (Schatzker 2010). They boast of their preference for prime cuts—not burger—(Kossowan 2009), walk readers through the delicate process of making bacon-wrapped wild goose hors d’oeuvres (Epp 2010c), and celebrate recipes found in old Italian cookbooks for sautéed venison with porcini mushrooms tossed “over fresh papardelle” (Schatzker 2010). Cooking for the lower classes this is not! Rather, hipster hunters associate hunting with haute cuisine and artisanal food craft, with food snobs (Kossowan 2006) who take pride in their distinguished palates and knife skills. In ways reminiscent of the Slow Food movement, hipster hunters profess and enact social distinction through food (Schneider 2008, 394–95), invoking quasi-European food aesthetics to mark wild game cuisine as “quality” food and translating ideals of genteel hunting behaviour from the field to the kitchen (Gaytan 2004).

HIPSTER HUNTERS: ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACK

Perhaps the most obvious conclusion that can be drawn from this foray into hunting is that wild food provisioning is clearly valued well beyond Canada’s northern, rural communities. Scholarship tenaciously focuses on wild food provisioning as occurring at the cultural and geographic edges of the country, yet people from elsewhere are clearly engaging in wild food provisioning, too. Research into food hunting and wild food provisioning needs to broaden its scope to encompass food provisioning in a variety of communities and regions, including those that are neither northern nor rural. In addition, researchers need to pay closer attention to wild food provisioning in its wider cultural context. This need is confirmed by Levkoe et al. (2012, 20), whose report on the Canadian “food movement” fails to anticipate that wild foods or food hunting might be among the “issue-areas” in which alternative food networks are involved. While the report’s survey respondents corrected this oversight, by specifically mentioning “traditional/wild food and indigenous rights” and “hunting/game meat” under the “Additional Work” option, the oversight points to
a blind spot in Canadian research—an unwillingness to see hunting as a genuine food issue or as relevant to the Canadian food movement.

Hipster hunting, in particular, represents a new way of conceiving and conducting food hunting in Canada that warrants close attention. It draws heavily on a twenty-first-century (postindustrial) discourse of food quality to extol hunting as an ideal way to provision natural, sustainable, ethical, artisanal food. Its food- and quality-focused approach makes it appear closely linked to other “alternative” forms of provisioning—perhaps even the next logical step in the local, organic, or Slow Food movements (Brummett 2010). However, its invocation of food quality as a way to rationalize and promote food hunting is by no means a fresh start or a new direction in Canadian hunting. Rather, the discourse of hipster hunting mobilizes notions of food quality that are entangled with those discourses that already dominate the domain of hunting in Canada: preservationism, conservationism, and colonialism. At the same time, it reveals little concern for or even awareness of Aboriginal discourses of hunting (tradition, rights)—those discourses struggling to reframe food hunting in Canada. In this sense, hipster hunting is perhaps best understood as a food- and quality-focused (re)incarnation of the conservationist-preservationist-colonial discursive matrix that has dominated hunting in Canada for generations. As Kevin Kossowan (2011) explains, as a food-focused hunter, he is “working within the confines of our [society’s] norm . . . trying to broaden that norm in a healthy way”; however, in many respects he is unable to break from it.

This is not to suggest that hipster hunting is a dead end or a lamentable failure. Its allure among young people is strong enough that it may well reinvigorate hunting in Canada. It shows considerable promise, in particular, in its efforts to get Canadians to rethink old hunting stereotypes—especially those of the thrill-seeking sport hunter versus the rule-bending subsistence hunter. Rather than simply deny or object to these stereotypes, hipster hunting reworks them, marrying notions of sportsmanlike hunting behaviour with notions of quality food and distinguished taste. The result is a new figure on the hunting landscape: a genteel sportsmanlike hunter in search of food, rather than a challenge or trophy.

However, this reworking of stereotypes also brings with it some risks, which, to date, remain unexamined within hipster hunter circles. Perhaps most worrying is the refusal (thus far) among hunting advocates to tackle
the issue of class discrimination in hunting. The new figure of the ethical hipster hunter is, in fact, built on class discrimination. Hipsters emerge as “good” hunters only by co-opting some of the noble features of genteel hunters—by demonstrating their elite (artisanal) food tastes and food-crafting skills and by distinguishing themselves from gun-toting, knuckle-dragging “hillbillies” and “rednecks” whose vaguely unwashed and unruly behaviour relegate them to the bottom of the social (and quasi-evolutionary) ladder, that is, to the very spot that utilitarian meat hunters once occupied. In effect, ethical hipster hunters redeem themselves by climbing up the ladder and forcing others to occupy the rungs beneath them. The class hierarchy remains, but hipsters manage to scrabble up a few rungs.

The claim of hipsters to be “good” hunters reflects a broader phenomenon grounded in the assertion of ethical superiority, one that allows some to proclaim their views to be the “right” way while demeaning or excluding those unable or unwilling to conform to this new standard. DuPuis and Goodman (2005) call this phenomenon a “politics of conversion,” wherein a minority (often elite) group decides that they have found the morally correct way to live—emphasizing its “ideal utopian ‘romantic’” qualities—and then attempts to “convert everyone to adopt their utopian ideal” (361). Such an approach is often the result of a lack of reflexivity: it betrays an unwillingness both to recognize the weaknesses and unintended consequences of one’s own approach and to see or hear other groups. In other words, it refuses to “treat ongoing conflicts and differences between various groups not as polarizing divisions but as grounds for respectful—even productive—disagreement” (361). Rather than fall into an endless politics of conversion, I would prefer to see hunters—including its food-focused boosters—move toward a more open, reflexive politics of respect. In the past, hunting discourses have mobilized patterns of discrimination and enshrined those patterns in policy, to devastating effect for those discriminated against. Rather than repeat history, in only slightly different terms, food researchers, writers, and practitioners would be better off learning from the past and endeavouring to weed out forms of discursive discrimination before they make their way into emergent food and wildlife policy—and into people’s lives.
Notes

1 Regulations governing the sale of wild foods in Canada vary depending on the region and the species. In most provinces, wild game meat cannot legally be bought, sold, traded, or otherwise distributed in exchange for remuneration—which, among other things, prohibits its sale in restaurants and grocery stores. For an example, see Manitoba’s Wildlife Act, 1987 (C.C.S.M. c. W130), sec. 30. In the territories, however, as well as in some provinces, wild game meat can be sold provided one has the proper licence, and, more generally, hunting regulations must acknowledge the existence of large Aboriginal settlement areas established through land claims. See, for example, Yukon’s Wildlife Act, 2002 (R.S.Y. 2002, c. 229), secs. 102(1) and 202(1). Foraging for wild plants and mushrooms in Canada is governed by different regulations entirely, outlined and enforced by various provincial, territorial, and federal ministries. For instance, in Alberta’s provincial parks, “Picking wild fruits and mushrooms may be permitted if you have verbal approval from the district conservation officer,” while in British Columbia mushroom picking, whether for personal or commercial use, is freely permitted on all provincial forest lands. See “Regulations,” Alberta Environment and Parks, AlbertaParks.ca, 2015, http://www.albertaparks.ca/albertaparksca/visit-our-parks/regulations.aspx#Plants; and “Harvesting Edible Wild Mushrooms in BC,” Ministry of Forests and Range, Forest Practices Branch, Publications Repository, n.d., https://www.for.gov.bc.ca/hfp/publications/00028/harvest.htm.


3 Ken Albala, however, is by no means against contemporary foraging for wild foods. See, for instance, his blog entry “Urban Forage,” 1 October 2013, on Ken Albala’s Food Rant (http://kenalbala.blogspot.ca/2013/10/urban-forage.html).


6 Hiroaki Kawamura (2004) argues that hunting research relies too heavily on divisions between sport and food (or subsistence) hunting. However, Canadian history reveals that this dichotomy has shaped how food hunting is currently conceived and conducted, making the dichotomy worthy, in this case, of attention.

7 Siegrid Deutschlander and Leslie Miller (2003) refer to this kind of romanticization of Aboriginal peoples—as “noble savages” embodying the simple and archaic ways of life of a premodern tribal society—in the domain of cultural tourism as informed by primitivist discourse. In the context of wildlife and wildland policy, however, such romanticization is better understood as informed by a preservationist discourse.

8 North American and European notions of “sport” hunting are indeed different: European hunting traditions are better thought of as translated within North American hunting cultures than as merely transported here and imposed upon North American hunting (see, for example, Warren 1997). For further discussion of the racial and class divisions between sportsmen and “pantry” hunters in the United States, see Dizard (1994) and Warren (1997).

9 According to the logic of Indigenous rights discourses, special privileges secured for Aboriginal peoples cannot and should not be extended to other Canadians. Such distinctions—between those with special status and rights, and those without—have caused grief in the past, and likely probably will continue to do so. For instance, in the early twentieth century, the Department of Indian Affairs fought to grant treaty Indians special access to hunting within Wood Buffalo National Park. These same privileges, however, were not extended to “hunters and trappers of other ethnicities” (Sandlos 2007, 48), and “non-Native and Métis hunters” were removed from the park (49), causing them and their families great hardship.


11 When surplus wildlife is harvested prior to commoditization, the process is called “cropping” (Sandlos 2007, 91), a term that, like “harvesting,” draws attention to often overlooked parallels between modern scientific wildlife management and agricultural food production.
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