Contemporary Alaska Native Identities: Creation and Curation by Sonya Kelliher-Combs

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Contemporary Alaska Native Identities: 
Creation and Curation by Sonya Kelliher-Combs

by

Tess McCoy
Bachelor of Arts, Art History, University of North Texas, 2018

THESIS

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I focus on contemporary Alaska Native artist, Sonya Kelliher-Combs (Iñupiaq, Athbaskan, Irish, German), her works of art, the exhibiting of her works, and her curatorial practices in order to explain the history of presentation of Native American people and how this affects present-day exhibitions as well. Through the work of Kelliher-Combs, I explore the importance of agency of Native American people in terms of their identity and depictions of themselves and their people in museum spaces. I examine the history of museum culture as the way in which indigenous agency is removed and reconstructed to fit the needs of various interest groups. In contrast, Kelliher-Combs and other advocates actively attempt to intervene and interrogate the persistence of archaic language, exhibition practices, and seek to reveal the effects on Native people today.

The history of exhibiting Native American people and indigenous material culture works from the assumption that the objects are the final outcome and do not have context; their materials and surroundings were not considered. Therefore, to counter this trend, the methodology that I employ is ecological textility. This is the reading from material to object with the understanding that both material and object are related to other living things, objects, and its physical surroundings. I use this theory to explain the way
in which I look at Kelliher-Combs’s works of art and her curatorial practice. Because of this past, Kelliher-Combs using ecological textility, and my studying her art and curated exhibitions using this method, allow for a better explanation of works of art and Native American objects, as well as attempts to remove the stigma and stereotypes of Native people that history has prolonged through the long reach of museum language and displays.
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INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

Sonya Kelliher-Combs was born in 1969 in Bethel, Alaska, and grew up in the smaller town of Nome. Her tribal affiliations include Inupiaq and Athabaskan; however, she also identifies with Irish and German heritage as well. In Kelliher-Combs’s artist statement, she explains that during the time she spent in Nome, she learned to gather food and supplies for the winter, as well “time honored traditions” liked “skin sewing, beading, and food preparation.”¹ These traditional life skills that she learned in Alaska when she was young would eventually become an important part of her material choice and her process. Kelliher-Combs stated that it was through this women’s work, in fact, that she was able to “examine the connections between Western and Indigenous cultures” in her art and question the idea and construction of identities.² She continued to explore these ideas through her Bachelors of Fine Arts education at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks and later at the University of Arizona at Tempe for her Masters of Fine Arts. Kelliher-Combs began her art practice in more a figurative, representational fashion, which she later abandoned for the more contemporary and experimental, abstract works.³ Growing up in a Native community surrounded by art, learning skills from her elders, and going on to gain a formal education in art allowed her to utilize her experiences and knowledge to express ideas regarding her identity and the identity of her community through the interpretations of her works of art.

After finishing her MFA degree in Arizona in 1998, Kelliher-Combs returned back to Alaska and became a member of a number of art organizations in the state and later became a member of national organizations for the arts. In 1999, she became a member of the Doyon Ltd. Arts Advisory Board until 2002; one of the twelve regional
corporations of Alaska created after the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act was passed in 1971. Other organizations of which she was a part of were the Alaska State Council on the Arts Visual Arts Advisory Committee from 2000-2010, the Bering Straits Culture Center Advisory Committee from 2006-2007, as well as being the Founding Board of Director to the Alaska Native Arts Foundation (2002-2009) and a Board of Director to the Nome Native Arts Center from 2006-2009. In addition to these state level organizations, Kelliher-Combs was also given a United States Presidential Appointment to the Institute of American Indian Arts Board (Alaska Native Culture and Arts Development). Kelliher-Combs participated and continues to participate in these different organizations in her state and across the country in an attempt to advocate for her fellow Alaska Natives and American Indian, as well as be an ally for Native arts across the United States. It is important to know of her past and present as an advocate, as it directly relates to the messages she creates in her art and curated exhibitions.

In addition to the curating positions, solo, and group exhibitions that will be discussed later in this paper, it is also important to understand some of the awards and fellowships she has held in order to understand Sonya Kelliher-Combs as an overall Native arts force around the world today. Some of her awards include the Anchorage Alaska Mayors Individual Arts Award (2005) and the Alaska Governors Individual Arts Award (2011). Fellowships she has held include Eiteljorg Museum Fellowship, Indianapolis, IN (2007), Rasmuson Fellowship, Anchorage, AK in both 2008 and 2012, Dartmouth Artist in Residence, Hanover, NH (2014), and most recently she became a United States Artist Fellow in 2018.
TERMINOLOGY
Understanding Kelliher-Combs’s accomplishments is important, but it is also necessary to explain the terms and context in which she and other Native American people are discussed in. In this section, I will be discussing the definitions of different terms that I have used and will continue to use throughout the remainder of this paper. These terms have been misused as they have been ‘redefined’ throughout society in order for those who use the terms to better suit their needs, instead of upholding the correct definitions.

The term ‘other’ will be looked at as a verb throughout this paper. To ‘other’ someone or some group of people is the process by which people are categorized by the group that has power over the other. I say this rather than stating that the minority group is the ‘other’ because this is not always the case. ‘Othering’ has to do with the power dynamic, rather than the amount of people that identify as or are identified as part of this group. Kirsten Pai Buick explains the term ‘other’ as a process in terms of the Black experience in her article “Monu*ment*ality: Edmonia Lewis, Meta Fuller, Augusta Savage and Re-Envisioning Public Space:”

“…that the “Other” does not rest in the embodied experiences of Black people but instead is a process—a pervasive form of toxic racial and heteronormative formation that is performative, relational, and participatory in the creation, recreation, and maintenance of White supremacy, to the detriment of Black people everywhere.”

I have adopted Kirsten Pai Buick’s definition of the term ‘other’ to also be utilized as a term explaining the process for Native American people, as she does with Black people. I use this term to explain how Native American people across the country
have been ‘othered’ by Euro Americans since they first came to this land. The White Euro Americans have to create their own identity as White and therefore as better than. To do this, they ‘othered’ (and continue ‘to other’) Native American people as racial and lesser. No matter what the population of White people across the United States is in comparison to ‘othered’ groups of people, like Native Americans or Black people, the power continues to be held by the group of White people and therefore they are able to perform and use their White power over the ‘others.’

I use the word ‘primitive’ throughout this paper as it is the word that others have used when discussing Native American people for hundreds of years. The term is applied to both Native people and their art throughout this paper and throughout the time that Euro-American people have been in contact with Native Americans. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, ‘primitive’ is defined as “of or typical of an early stage of development; not advanced or complicated in structure.” If this was true, however, then why does this field exist? And why is the art of Native Americans a specialized field within art history? The answer is because Native American art and the cultures of each tribe (and each subtribe) are difficult to understand and are complicated. Therefore, based on this definition, it does not make sense to call Native American people primitive. They are not of an early developmental stage—they were and are clearly living during the same time of Euro-Americans and the current United States. In addition, the tribes and villages of Native American people have complicated ways of life and political/social structures.

I suggest that ‘primitive’ was and is used by people that were and are trying to ‘other’ people who are different than themselves. This is especially clear in the definition of ‘primitive’ as it relates directly to art—Native American and other cultures as well.
‘Primitive’ as it is regarded to art, was used as a generalized term meaning “all art forms outside the canon of Western ‘classical’ art.” In this way, the term is used to show that art of non-Western people is different, however because of the definition of ‘primitive’ I explained before, it makes reference that the non-Western art is not as ‘good’ as the classical, Western art. Who decides which art is good or bad? In this case, the Western, Euro-American people felt that they understood what was good and bad, and the ‘primitive,’ Native American art was and is, not. Because the term ‘primitive’ has been used in this derogatory fashion for so long in regard to Native American people, it is imperative to explain how it has been used, and still is, and how this is incorrect and detrimental to Native American well-being.

Terms like ‘traditional,’ ‘cultural,’ and ‘authentic’ used in the art market and art history function to place people into racialized groups that they have to continuously convey in their works of art in the way that the people in power feel is appropriate. Jami Porter Lara is a working artist who often works with the pottery style called Mata Ortiz. Because this style of pottery was created in a village in Mexico, for which it is named, she is often misidentified as ‘Mexican’ as she is working in this ‘traditional’ style of pottery. However, she explains that she avoids the word traditional and that she does not identify as Mexican and because this style of pottery was created in the 1970s, and therefore is modern, not ‘traditional’ as it is suggested by others.

“I meticulously avoid use of the word "tradition" in reference to any of my work. There are many reasons for this. In part, it is because of how it is used to mark racialized people and locate us in the past. "Traditional" people are not viewed as contemporary people, just as artists marked as "traditional" are not regarded as
contemporary artists. Also, behind "traditional" is the idea that it is possible for human practices and material culture to be static, or frozen in time.”\(^{10}\)

In this paragraph to *American Craft*, Jami Porter Lara explains that the term ‘traditional’ is used as another term that creates a sort of power dynamic. By using the word ‘traditional,’ those in power can keep situating people they apply the term to in the past and keep them from becoming people of the now.

‘Cultural’ is another term that is often used in conjunction with the context of Jami Porter Lara’s works. She explains that the term ‘cultural’ is really used to racialize others and place them into a category of race.

“But I would argue that in order to succeed, artists of color are expected to present personae and to make works that are “culturally” (i.e. racially) - specific. Which in the end props up the whole cultural project of white supremacy, which boils down to the idea that some people have specific bodies that make them different from — and inferior to — white people.”\(^{11}\)

In association with both ‘traditional’ and ‘cultural’ is the term ‘authentic.’ This term is used to somehow show the “truth” as it is determined by an authority.\(^{12}\) But who gets to be this authority over what is ‘authentic’? Is it someone from the heritage in question? No, rather it is those who are immune from the term authentic; white people. Jami Porter Lara explains:

“‘Culture’, “tradition” and “authentic” appear to be terms of respect, but very often they are used to mark people as racialized others. If you have doubts about whether these words have racial implications, consider how often a white person is asked to explain how their work is influenced by their culture. How often are
white people described as “traditional” if they are not poor rural whites? And do you ever hear the work of white person described as authentic?”

Understanding the racial ideas behind these terms and the motive of the white authoritative presences, allows recognition that these terms are in fact, used to push the ‘othered’ people further away from the center to the periphery. In addition, using Jami Porter Lara’s explanation of these terms in regard to her art, explains that these terms and the severe issues that they present, are not a past problem that have gone away, but rather it is a contemporary problem that will not get better until people understand the implications of the terms they are using and the histories behind them.

The final term that I wish to explain is ‘extermination.’ I utilize this term to explain what Sonya Kelliher-Combs is referencing regarding Alaska Native and Native American communities, and what has and is continuing to happen to them. I have based my definition of the term ‘extermination’ on the work of Karl Jacoby and his writings on the topic. Jacoby explains that the term ‘extermination’ came from “Latin word exterminatus, meaning beyond (ex) a boundary (terminatus),” but that during the 1800s, Anglo-Americans utilized the term to mean something much harsher, more violent. The term ‘extermination’ has changed definitions in order to fit the need for those in power. Jacoby explains:

“…Charles John Smith, “[e]tymologically, the word [exterminate] might mean expulsion, but, as a fact, is never so used.” Rather, extermination had become to mean “[t]o utterly destroy, and so take away from the place of occupation.” As such, extermination was, according the Smith, synonymous with “eradication” and the opposite of “colonization.””
In using Jacoby’s explanation of the term ‘extermination’ throughout this paper, I am using it in all its definitions, from exile to murder. This allows me to explain through one word, its historical and contemporary meanings as they pertain to Native American people. Throughout her works of art, her curatorial vision, and even through her representation in galleries and museums (and lack of representation), Kelliher-Combs visually represents this idea of ‘extermination.’ Authoritative power (the government) has utilized this term and others, which all meant the same thing, in an attempt to remove Native American people from the lands they occupied in order for the Euro-Americans to colonize it. This is not a term that is stuck in the past, extermination is still happening. From killing Native people, to forcing them to move to designated reservation lands, to assimilating Native American people in boarding schools, to now being the ‘giver’ or ‘denier’ of their identities, the government still attempts extermination of Native American people across the country.

FEDERAL POLICIES

In addition to defining terms in the introduction, it would be beneficial to my argument to explain the history of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, the context that Sonya Kelliher-Combs is reacting to as well as the theory of ecological textility, which I argue that she is also engaging with in her art and her curatorial practices. Kelliher-Combs’s works of art and exhibitions that she has curated all engage with questions of identity: Who gets to create identity? How is one identified and by whom? Specifically, she is engaging with the creation of Alaska Native identity, as it is determined differently than it is in the lower 48 states. The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act informs the way in which Alaska Natives have been and are identified from the act’s creation through today. In 1971 the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act
was passed in an attempt for the United States government to ‘support’ the Alaska Native people.\textsuperscript{15} After the US government took lands from Native Alaskan people, this act then “granted” some of these lands (those not taken by the United States for supposed defense purposes) to the Native people as well as $1 billion for them relinquish claims to all other areas of land in the state. It is important to note that this was land that was already stolen from Alaska Native people by the United States government. Discussions of this act often describe the US government ‘giving’ land to Alaska Natives as a good deed by them, however because they had already taken this land from the historical inhabitants, they actually only released back to Alaska Natives lands they want to and kept lands that have been culturally significant, important hunting grounds, etc. The US government at this time (and today) were attempting to exterminate Native people in this area by taking and withholding resources from them and profiting themselves from it. At the time, this act was very controversial, but some Alaska Natives did support this act as they thought it would keep their subsistence economy used throughout their history safe for future generations.\textsuperscript{16}

Through the ANCSA, two tiers of corporations were created that were to hold the land and monetary benefits and distribute them correctly. The two tiers were the 12 regions the ANCSA divided Alaska into and the Native villages that were eligible in accordance to the act. The 12 regions that the ANCSA divided Alaska into did not correspond to tribal affiliations or their historical lands. This means that some tribes were split between two regions or the lands they had ties to were no longer theirs to be a part of, either because the United States government stole the lands and kept them for themselves or because the regional divides did not match their lands. Native people had
to register with the government, from which they received 100 shares of stock to their region and became an Alaskan Native in the eyes of the government. Native Alaskan people were no longer tribal members, but rather shareholders for the corporations that were forced onto them by the United States government. The regional corporations distributed funds to villages based on the number of shareholders that were registered with each corporation. Because of the need by the US government to create categories, many Alaska Natives and American Indians across the United States, are not federally recognized as a part of their tribe either because the federal government does not recognize their tribe, or because many Native people are a part of two tribes, which the ‘Certified Degree of Indian Blood’ card does not allow for.\(^\text{17}\)

Despite the act by the US government ‘giving’ the new regional corporations and the now village corporations 20 years to adjust to these new capitalistic ideas, the 20 year adjustment ended in 1991 with the $1 billion gone, many villages bankrupt, and several regional corporations on the edge of insolvency.\(^\text{18}\) The United States government did not think (or more likely, did not care)\(^s\) that forcing Native people to follow a capitalistic economy they had never been a part of would require much more than 20 years to ‘adequately’ adjust to.\(^\text{19}\) Original shareholders started questioning what happens when their shares of the corporations go to their children. Who is considered Native then? What about those who never became shareholders? How do they become recognized as Native? The United States government imposed their capitalistic economy onto Native Alaskan people. The creation of these corporations has been theorized as a way to make the acquisition of oil from Alaska easier. These issues of the capitalistic economy placed on top of and above the Native Alaskan forms of economy and government can still be seen
today, as well as the struggle of identity of Alaskan people as Native if they were never registered and obtained the shareholdings that the government dispersed.

The final part of this introductory discussion is going to briefly regard repatriation. Because Native American objects, remains, and living people have been taken from their homes without regard to the communities from which they were being extracted, the federal government attempted to right the wrongs they had been participating in for so long, to offer apologies in a way to the Native American people. In 1990 when the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act was passed, the act stated that those federal agencies and museums receiving federal funding had to give inventory and sufficient written summaries of their collections, and work with Native tribes and organizations to discuss repatriation efforts. However, the language of NAGPRA is where the issues begin with this act of repatriation. Native communities have to establish cultural affiliations and present a lineage of the object to themselves; however once they do that, the NAGPRA language specifically says that “normally” these tribes and organizations determine the final stages of how repatriation will take place. Choosing the word ‘normally’ is no accident by way of the NAGPRA writers. This means that the federal agencies and institutions or federal government get to make the decision ultimately if they determine in some way that the cultural affiliations or lineage statements are not strong enough.  

In addition to the purposely ambiguous wording in NAGPRA, there have also been discussions Alaska Native communities that are not on the list of those who NAGPRA includes. Again, with the ambiguity of the language, the act states that “Native American lineal descendants, Indian tribes, and Native Hawaiian organizations” are those
who are a part of the repatriation efforts. The National Park Service, US Department of Interior, defines Indian tribes as “Any tribe, band, nation, or other organized group or community of Indians, including any Alaska Native village (as defined in, or established pursuant to, the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act).” This means that only federally recognized Alaska Native villages in the ANCSA count as a part of those who gain rights from NAGPRA; this means that Alaska Native regional corporations and those not recognized by ANCSA do not have rights in accordance to NAGPRA. This is again a question of who gets to create Native identities and how Native people have to function under the power and identification practices of the federal government. The repatriation act was anticipated as one that would promote healing of the Native communities that have been torn about and strewn across the globe. However, with the purposely obscure language of the act and the leaving out of certain communities, the act cannot fully do what was expected of it. Although full repatriation will be difficult and will depopulate museums, it is the morally right step to take to return these objects back to their homes.

METHODOLOGY

The final section of this introduction will be an explanation of the theory ‘ecological textility.’ Ecological textility is a theory that I have developed using the article “The Textility of Making,” written by Tim Ingold, British social anthropologist at the University of Aberdeen. Following my reading of Ingold’s article, I created a working definition of his more philosophical concept in order to use it as a methodological frame work to study Sonya Kelliher-Comb’s body of work. When thinking even more deeply about the word textility, I made connections to several different terms: text, textile, and tactile. These three terms suggest knowledge and touch which lead to the creation of the definition as the reading (text) of an art object from
material to object (both material and object suggesting the idea of touching), looking towards the object rather than from the object. Because of the idea of looking towards an object, rather than from it, it suggests the need to look around the object, and therefore, the materials as well. This brought about the term ‘ecological textility.’ Ecological incorporates ecology, ecosystems, and nature into the theory. Therefore the definition of the theory that I am applying to Kelliher-Combs’s works is reading from material to object with the understanding that both material and object are related to other living things, objects, and its physical surroundings. This theory allows for the use of context when studying art objects. Context gives much needed information in order to understand an object.

It is important to note that the materials that Kelliher-Combs uses in her works of art are not a danger to the Native community of which she is a part. The natural materials that she is using are not used in ritual functions as a part of Alaska Native practices; rather these natural materials are evocative without potentially causing harm to the community. In addition, her choice of synthetic materials also imitate in some way natural materials used by Native communities or from the communities, but by choosing to create them, she is distancing herself and these materials and art objects from causing harm to the community.
CHAPTER 1-
A MATTER OF IDENTITY
The works of Native Alaskan artist Sonya Kelliher-Combs, directly relates to identity and the struggles of people of Native heritage. To create her art pieces, she learns the nuances of the materials and the way that they have been used in the past and works through the most effective means to communicate this information in order for the audience to understand the messages. Her symbolic and metaphorical use of material and word give necessary context to her piece’s meanings. She uses ecological textility, abstract forms, and symbolic and metaphorical titles, in an attempt to explain extermination of Native people throughout history and today.

Theories pertinent to understanding her works include culturally inherent symbolic meaning of material and ecological textility. Materials have symbolic meanings as defined by a specific culture. Artists choose to either engage with these meanings by acknowledging or challenging the meaning of the material. I define ecological textility as the reading of art from material to object, rather than object to material with the understanding that material is related to other living things and physical surroundings. This theory keeps intact the idea that material has emblematic meanings that need to be considered in one way or another when creating a work of art.

Material is arguably the most important aspect in creating meaning in Kelliher-Combs’s works. Whether the media is natural or synthetic, traditional or nontraditional, she invests in the symbolic meanings given to material and histories behind what she is using in order to create her works of art. Using a mixture of material makes reference to her identity, as she is both of Native Alaskan and European descent. In addition to her own identity, she questions the idea of identity as a whole for Native American people.
She uses both traditional and nontraditional materials to reference the realities of Native people living in a contemporary world, how this impacts identity creation, and the life and death consequences that coincide with these realities.

Kelliher-Combs uses a variety of materials and their significance to aid in the construction of and meanings of her works of art. Skin or the idea of skin is the most utilized material. Whether natural or man-made, the skin material offers context that helps with the understanding and interpretation of these pieces. Skin is the organ by which we as humans are culturally mediated and how we are identified by others. By creating synthetic skins with wounds, tattoos, scars, and pores, Kelliher-Combs references internal experiences on an outward plane. She often embeds the skin with other materials to further deepen the meanings. She may add hair, cloth, etc. that relates to who or what she is attempting to represent in her pieces. Because skin is an important part of the process of cultural mediation Kelliher-Combs chooses to have experiences shown on the skin that one would willingly, or more likely, unwillingly show to others. People identify themselves based on their entire life and history, yet skin normally does not show this and therefore this is not how others create the identifications they impose on others. In an attempt to represent the true identity of someone or the idea of someone, Kelliher-Combs uses the skin that she creates as a kind of performance of the life and identity of a person or people. Color is another important part of materiality in Kelliher-Combs’s works. The colors that she uses are ‘unnatural’ for what one thinks of in terms of an outwardly appearance of a person or animal. Therefore the use of pinks, reds, oranges, and blues are not about external looks, but rather are representational of the internal: psychological ideas, feelings, and revelations. The third most utilized material
in her works is thread. Thread in her works, is a line that shows lineage and represents kinship. Her use of thread establishes a heritage and gives a sense of identity created by the experiences of the self, friends, family, and culture.

Skin as a material not only is Kelliher-Combs’s way of attempting to define identity of Native people, but also to explain the experiences that create these identities. One of the dangers that Native communities deal with is environmental degradation due to climate change and the depletion of animal species integral to their ways of life. Kelliher-Combs often uses artificial skins in these pieces as not only is a nod to environmental issues, but also engages the contemporary world with connection to the traditional Native world. Orange Curl and Unraveled Pink Secrets are two of her pieces that exhibit the impact of environmental degradation in an abstract manner through materiality. Orange Curl (see fig. 1) is made of painted acrylic polymer created in a shape that resembles the technique of drying salmon in her Native Alaskan community. Utilizing ecological textility as a theoretical framework for this piece means that viewers first look at what the materials are and where they came from in order to discern their meaning in a particular culture and its relation to the final works meaning. Unraveled Pink Secrets (see fig. 2) is a piece created of walrus stomach dipped in acrylic polymer. Similar to Orange Curl, this piece is dealing with harm to animals essential to Native communities. Using this theory, the interpretation of the final works engage with the endangerment of Native American food sources by way of pollution and production of items, like plastics, that cause destruction to their environment resulting in life threatening issues.
Unlike many of her other pieces, *Guarded Secrets* (see figs. 3-5) does use real animal skins and quills, in addition to some non-traditional materials. This piece uses natural materials like walrus stomachs that are sewed together using synthetic nylon thread to create ellipse shapes that are gouged with porcupine quills. The traditional materials that are used in this work and others are purchased from friends that live on St. Lawrence Island.\(^{28}\) She not only engages with the issue of environmental degradation, but also participates in the economy on the small island that tends to rely only on subsistence hunting.\(^{29}\) Kelliher-Combs understands the historical uses and meanings of her materials, as well as participates in the tradition of using practices and materials that can be found in one’s own region. Historically, skins have been used as clothing to protect oneself from the elements and to tell histories on them through paintings, tattoos, or scars. Quills have been used as decorative elements on garments through patterning and color specific to regions, tribes, or certain styles. Sewing is a skill the artist learned from her mother that has been used to create clothes and shelters from skins, and attach embellishments made from items like quills.\(^{30}\) In order to reinforce the meaning of her final works of art, she utilizes the theory of ecological textility in order to read the materials’ flows and insert herself into the pathways of the material while also bearing in mind its relation to its place of origin.

*Guarded Secrets* contains metaphors and symbols through material and forms used by the artist. She used walrus stomachs sewn into pouch forms with quills puncturing the skin to create a spiny, dangerous looking abstract object. The walrus stomachs are vulnerable, semi-translucent skins that suggests a kind of intimacy. As previously mentioned, Kelliher-Combs’s use of skin is important in her works as an
attempt to understand identity, but also as a cultural and historical tool to learn about oneself, experiences, and heritage. In this work, skin signifies protection from external forces. The artist engages with this idea as the skin (as clothing, shelter, or a person’s own skin) tells a story of vulnerability and intimacy, but also a strength in that it can shield the interior from the exterior. The quills within this piece symbolize danger or pain. Quills penetrate the stomachs, which in turn express a threatening look. When quills are released from a porcupine, it means that the porcupine has been in danger. The quills that puncture the walrus stomach show both an internal and an external kind of pain, discomfort, and threat, as if the quills are both still attached to the porcupine extended in a threatening manner, seen through the natural orientation of the quills with the black tip on the exterior, but also as if they have already perforated another’s skin. This work tells a story regarding an idea or experience of someone or a group of people as it pertains to the understanding of an identity.

The artist refers to the pouch-like forms of *Guarded Secrets* created from the stomachs as ‘secrets.’ Along with the specific media used in this piece, giving the name secrets to the pouches gives more insight into the meaning of the piece. The pouches being displayed in different dimensions and groupings show the irregularity of secrets and represent the differences in impact of these secrets on Native Americans and non-Native people. Pouches conceal and contain the struggles of Native Americans that cause both vulnerability viewed by way of the skin and protection by way of the quills. Similar to *Guarded Secrets* is *Small Secrets* (see fig. 6), a piece made of animal skins, animal and human hair, and glass beads. This piece not only uses the word ‘secret’ in the name, but also uses similar materials and forms to *Guarded Secrets* in order to create
another work of art that depicts ideas regarding communal Native American identities. Each of these materials has a culturally specific and historical meaning essential to the understanding of the final work of art. Animal skin and hair have served as clothing, shelter, decoration, and informational elements. Beads have signified Native artistic practices, but the cultural origin of glass beads, like those used in Small Secrets, is contact. Native Americans have traded and bought beads for as long as there has been contact with Europeans. Trading and selling these beads, especially as trading posts were erected on Native American lands, established European imperialism in North America. Imperialistic thoughts and actions from this time and beyond have had a pervasive impact on the quality of life of Native Americans. Small Secrets and Guarded Secrets use natural, traditional Native American materials in conjunction with synthetic material in order to show the experiences of suffering of Native Americans in the present day, which are part of what creates Native identity.

The idea of secrets is important to Kelliher-Combs’s body of works. Both presentation and materials aid in the creation and representation of secrets. The pouch forms contain negative space inside which is carried with the individual. The negative space represents the spot to keep the secret hidden. The pouch shapes that she chooses to utilize are small and portable, like secrets, and are reminiscent of medicine pouches. Medicine pouches contain tools similar to the way in which these pouches contain secrets, a tool, to understand the histories, experiences, and identities of Native people. As the secrets become more opaque in color or in their representation, they become more emphasized. In addition to the opacity, quills, like those used in Guarded Secrets, are also about bringing secrets to the surface, making them visible. This does not mean that
they are actually present, however. Secrets are meant to extend beyond the lifespan of the identity of a single person, meaning that secrets are kept for generations. The extension beyond one lifetime is represented in Kelliher-Combs’s works through her use of thread. Thread is, as mentioned, the lineage, kinship, and heritage of Native people. Kelliher-Combs choosing thread to weave together skin is significant to creating meaning, as it tells the viewer that identity is created throughout time and can be passed through these secrets that people hold. The longer secrets are hidden, the more likely that this information will be lost, however if secrets become fully visible to all, then it could collapse the entirety of an identity. This question of how identity is created that Kelliher-Combs is trying to answer, leads to other questions like who gets to create identity, who knows this identity, and how does imposed identification on someone else affect people.

Some of the secrets that Kelliher-Combs is referencing in her works are the hidden life and death situations Native people are put in that impact identity creation. The culturally inherited meanings of media lend themselves to her choice of abstraction and how the media is chosen to be used. The walrus stomach ‘containers’ that hold the secret adversity of those of Native heritage are shown visually through quills that dissect the inside of the pouch form. The containers that hold these secrets can be metaphorically interpreted as the Native people themselves, holding their secrets internally, the United States’ governmental authority over the Native population, and even the closed mindedness or unawareness of non-Native people to Native distress. Not only do these pouches contain these secrets, but they also conceal them. The use of semi-translucent
walrus stomachs, some of which are completely sewn closed and others that have openings, represent the idea of concealing their extermination.

The name **Guarded Secrets** itself is metaphorical and symbolic as well. Quills guard the porcupine by scaring away predators or releasing into the flesh of a predator. Skin also guards. A person’s skin guards their internal organs, skin used for clothing guards the body from harsh elements, and skin used to create shelter protects those inside. Both skin and quills are protective elements of an otherwise vulnerable interior. The artist has named the pouch-like forms secrets; however, the pouches are not to be viewed as the literal hardships but rather as *representations* of secrets that were forced into hiding. Because of the abstract form of the walrus stomachs, they seem to have covered something that has since vanished, leaving behind a ghostly shell, a container for ideas, the secrets of those once there.\(^{38}\)

The works of art mentioned are not the only pieces in which Kelliher-Combs has utilized ecological textility or symbolic and metaphorical meanings to strengthen her works interpretation. The term ‘secret’ comes up often in her titles. *Buried Secrets*, *Rachelle’s Secret Portrait* (see fig. 7), *Large Secrets*, and others contain this term as they represent in some way the identity of an individual or of a community through experiences.\(^ {39}\) In addition, the materials that she uses engage with the theory of ecological textility in that the materials have culturally inherent meanings that the artist utilizes to bolster the meaning of the final work of art. In many of these works, she continues to use skin, artificial or natural, as well as hair specifically for her works that are titled ‘secret portraits’. The human hair that she uses directly represents the person from whom it came from. It is important that she is using hair in the portrait works but
also that she is continuing to use the same free form pouch design in two dimensions. Although in two dimensions rather than three, the forms still look pouch-like and represent the remnants of what or who was once there.

The secrets that Kelliher-Combs is explaining in her works of art are the “harshest facets” of the lives of Native people. Throughout history, Native people have been the target of extermination. Allowed to occupy less and less lands (that they had lived on for generations), granted access to less and less resources, and promised rights that were never given to them, which in turn has led to poor health, poor education, and poor distribution of wealth and rights. The United States government has contained those of Native heritage on reservation lands or lands ‘granted’ to them which has more easily concealed the current fragile nature of Native peoples’ lives. This is not to say that the Native American communities that I am discussing are victims, but rather I am stating the realities of the mass violence against Native people by the US government in many ways, and the impacts that Kelliher-Combs is exhibiting in her works of art.

For generations, Native American people have had their hunting regulated or prohibited by governmental policies causing dire situations. This is a less outwardly violent way that the United States government has tried to exterminate the Native population. By not allowing Native Americans access to hunted resources, the government knows that this will lead to either their physical deaths or their complete assimilation; ‘Kill the Indian, save the man.’ But now in the media age, Native people are also harassed for continuing practices that are allowed by the government and are a part of their livelihood. Tanya Tagaq (Inuit) is an artist who got backlash for a photo of her daughter (see fig. 8) next to a dead seal that had been brought to the community to be
eaten and other parts of the seal used. Comments on the photo discussed animal rights and how the dead seal made Tagaq an unfit mother but did not mention hunting being a part of Native tradition or that through their comments animal rights were being favored over Native rights. Tagaq came back and explained in interviews that everyone in the community was happy about the hunt as it fed their people. Unfair treatment of Native Americans by the government and stereotyping Native people as savages cause many conflicts in contemporary society. The materials that Kelliher-Combs uses link directly to these ideas, especially as they represent deadly consequences and the newer, obscure forms of imperialism that are still in place today. The pouch forms are the containers that hold the secrets, just as the reservation lands are the containers that hold the Native people. The pouches conceal the critical dangers of Natives similar to the way that the United States government conceals from the general public the true harsh conditions that Native people are living in. Akin to the way that many people think of the Native heritage, the pouches act like ghostly remnants of some forgotten past people or idea due to their containment and concealment.

Within her works of art, Kelliher-Combs is attempting to depict the suffering caused by these modes of extermination of those of Native heritage, especially those living in the contemporary world. She represents these adversities through the discomfort, danger, and vulnerability both internally and externally by use of material and their symbolic meanings to create abstract representations. She has chosen to display her works of art so that those who view them must view from certain angles. She does this in order to demonstrate the ability to reveal these secrets, but only if people can change their perspectives. These works of art and the way that they are viewed create a
connection between Native and non-Native people in order to show that everyone is linked through the struggles of humanity. These pieces are also created with specific materials, use specific formal elements, and the artist manipulates these objects in order to show the strength, the power, and the control that Native people have over their will to survive. The pieces both entice and repel audiences because of the beauty but also the discomfort that they suggest visually. She does this so that the pieces can explain aspects of Native identity and life experiences that Native people endure in order to survive and live today.

Sonya Kelliher-Combs utilizes ecological textility as a way to bolster the significance and meanings of her pieces. The choice of material is conscious and integral to the overall meaning of the pieces. In Guarded Secrets she uses synthetic and natural materials to explain the unseen struggles of Native people incorporating traditional aspects into the contemporary world. By employing the theory of ecological textility and culturally emblematic meanings of material, as well as symbolic and metaphorical ideas, Kelliher-Combs abstractly illustrates the hidden critical nature of Native people’s lives and creation of their identities and calls to action those who view her works.

Because Native Americans have been viewed as ‘savages’ or ‘primitive’ people since Euro-American contact, it is important that Kelliher-Combs is using her art to explain Native identities in accordance to a Native person. Her contemporary works of art allow for her identity to be the focal point rather than the identity that other people place on her. The context that Kelliher-Combs is reacting to is important to understand. The historical beginnings and current perpetuation of Native identities by non-Native people
need to be understood as to how ‘The Native American’ was created and continues to be what is shown.
CHAPTER 2-
STAGING THE INDIAN

Sonya Kelliher-Combs breaks the stereotype of primitive and traditional ideas of Native American art. Her contemporary, abstract works of art show that Native people are innovative (see fig. 2.1). However, because there have not been widespread changes in preconceived notions of Native people and artists, Kelliher-Combs has not had work shown in mainstream museum spaces as a contemporary artist. Rather, she tends to be shown in cultural institutions, smaller galleries, and mainstream museums filling their quotas with Native American art exhibitions. By showing her and other contemporary Indigenous artists in only Native American exhibitions, they are still removed from the category of contemporary artist and are simplified by those in power to the singular identity of ‘traditional and primitive’ Native American. Kelliher-Combs’s has had a number of solo exhibitions as well as group exhibitions; however, each of these shows only allows her the single identity of Native. Many of these solo and group exhibitions were held in Alaska and Canada. She has also attended craft and folk invitational shows, both nationally and internationally. The words ‘craft’ and ‘folk’ place her art as lesser than fine art. Despite being invited to show her works, giving the appearance of understanding her, her art, and her identities, these words and shows instead superimpose simplified meanings of her and her works.46

The imposed ideas onto Kelliher-Combs’s works are not without their histories. Native Americans have been ‘othered’ by Euro-Americans since they came into contact with one another. Native people have been taken from their homes for a variety of reasons, including to be placed in ‘human zoos’ for the purpose of allowing white people from around the world to view them. Many human zoos took place at World’s Fairs and
had the purpose of being educational. However, in addition to education, it was also entertainment and a place for governments to push stereotypes onto the public to control their perceptions of these people to continue the process of othering. The curiosity of the public of different countries to the exoticized ‘other’ that was being shown at these World’s Fairs also lead to the creation of other, more entertainment driven, displays of Native people, such as Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show. Although the purpose of this travelling show was to entertain people, it is likely that viewers would have believed these reconstructed battles to have been true and real events thus the show also continuing these stereotypes. At both the World’s Fairs and at the Wild West Show, Native people sold their wares in order to supplement the money that was given to them, or to make money because they were not given any support.

The curiosity of people attending these fairs and shows lead them to buying pieces made by ‘authentic’ Native American people and displaying them in what were called “cabinets of curiosities” (see fig. 1). These items in the cabinets were meant to show the owner’s travels or their intelligence for obtaining items from the mysterious, uncivilized, and dying out ‘other.’ Eventually the collections within their cabinets would become the beginning of museums and the items would be displayed similarly to the way they were in the cabinets in rich, white people’s homes. No matter if Native people were being displayed as ‘authentic and traditional,’ were performing theatrical events, or if artifacts were being shown, stereotypes of primitiveness,savages, and uncivilized people were what was actually being presented to the public, as well as the power of the United States as dominators of these ‘other’ people. Some museum spaces or World’s Fairs exhibitions were regarded as an attempt to remove the barbaric, savage ideas of
indigenous peoples from the minds of the public, however each of these spaces still perpetuated these stereotypes which constructed the ‘other’ and continues today.  

Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show was started in 1883 by Buffalo Bill Cody (see fig. 2). He gave dramatized performances of what people thought was constantly happening in America’s Wild West. Native American people, other actors, and Cody travelled around the United States and Europe putting on performances to audiences as entertainment. At these shows, some of the employed Native American people took agency over their position and gained money by selling items of theirs to the public. Many of them understood that because of the Euro-Americans curiosities for authentic and traditional Native objects, that they would be able to sell them throughout their time on the tour to receive additional money to supplement the pay and housing they were obtaining from Bill Cody. Although some of the events displayed in the shows well known and real were events, they often were dramatic reenactments of the events with parts added or taken away, as well as costumes, for entertainment purposes. However, because these displays showed Native American people as brutal, murdering savages, the Wild West Show educated the public into believing these stereotypes to be true.  

While Buffalo Bill and his show were on tour around America and Europe, the scientist Robert Peary was exploring Greenland with intentions of bringing artifacts, bones, and a large meteorite back the New York for the American Museum of Natural History. In addition to these objects, Peary was also secretly asked by the Department of Anthropology to bring back living Polar Eskimos for them to study. Peary brought back six Eskimo people, three adults: Nuktaq and his wife, Atangana and, Quisk, and three children: Nuktaq and Atangana’s daughters, Eqariusaq and Aviaq (adopted), and Quisk’s
son, Minik (see fig. 3). After arriving back in New York with the Eskimo people, bones and bodies from those whose graves he drug up, and the meteorite, a mass of people gathered to see the meteor, but also to see the mysterious people from far away. From the moment that they arrived, the Eskimo people were treated as specimens, like the artifacts that journeyed with them from Greenland. They were placed in the basement of the American Museum of Natural History to live for the first month, where people were allowed admittance to view them. The six Eskimos caught pneumonia, had to be transferred to the hospital, and most of them passed away from their sicknesses. Minik’s father, Quisk, was one of those who died. Minik, who became known as the New York Eskimo, demanded a funeral ceremony for his father, which the museum obliged, but unknowingly to Minik, it was fake and his father was not buried at all. Instead, the museum chose to keep Quisk’s body for study. The Eskimo people were treated as ‘others,’ as specimens in life, and they were not released from this even in death.  

Several years later for the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in 1904, anthropologist William John McGee set out to create the ‘Races of Mankind’ exhibit, in which he hoped to have aboriginals from around the world be shown in their traditional clothing and homes. McGee obtained over 500 people from 29 different societies with the purpose of these ‘Native encampments’ to show visitors the progress of mankind (see fig. 4). McGee wanted to show viewers the uncivilized nature of the Native people to explain the steps that their ancestors had already taken. The exhibit attempted to show the need of the white man to aid the Natives in their progress towards civilization and that this civilizing process has begun. This exhibition, therefore, was advertised as the last time the ‘noble savages’ could be viewed in the ‘authentic,’ ‘uncivilized’ state. Prior to the exhibition
beginning, the Native people who had been brought to St. Louis were selling their wares to those who came to view the Native village exhibition spaces being put together. These pieces would likely end up in curio cabinets around the world to represent their travels to this exposition and the ‘noble savages’ they encountered. Like the story of Minik, these Indigenous people were watched as ‘Others’ through an anthropological and educational lens. However educational Minik, the other Polar Eskimo people, and those at the 1904 Exposition were framed as, there was still an entertainment quality to these spectacles, like those in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Shows.52

The final example that I will be using is Edward Curtis’s “The North American Indian.” Curtis published a 40 volume edition of photos and writings of the ‘dying race’ to show the primitive condition of the Native American people (see fig. 5). In the first decade (1900-1910), Curtis’s project gained recognition from important people in the United States, like President Roosevelt. Roosevelt believed in the project because it showed Native people in conditions that “our own race” surpassed. Roosevelt’s use of terms like ‘our own race’ further othered Native people from the highest governmental authority and explained how they were beneath ‘his race’ and his ancestors did what the Native people could not yet get beyond. The photos of this decade were characterized by the ‘vanishing race,’ in that they advocated for the assimilation of Native American people. In these photos, Curtis was able to move beyond the ‘Indian problem’ and show them as an ahistorical and fixed in time body of people that viewers found easier to understand because it moved them away from being a current problem. As the project moved into the second decade (1910-1920), governmental funding and like for the project declined. The government needed a reason as to why they were drafting the
‘savages’ for World War I. Curtis’s photos showed them as assimilating and more modern people in this decade, but the government needed the public to believe in the Native American people as ‘natural fighters.’ The focal point of the photos became Native American design overlapping with more modern aesthetics. Unlike the first decade of Curtis’s photos viewing Native people as no longer a problem or worry of their barbaric past, the government near WWI needed to have the public understand why they were drafting these ‘natural fighters.’ The last decade (1920-1930) of Curtis’s project shifted to looking at Native people as ‘quasimodern.’ Curtis helped begin the Indian Welfare League in 1922 that fought for the Indian Citizenship Act to be passed, more land and water rights for Native people, for their freedom from government interference and fought for Native American religious freedoms during this time. After two decades of viewing Native people as fixed in time, he saw them as modern people. Although he began somewhat advocating for Native American people, he still was advocating for their assimilation into American society and was utilizing their art and aesthetics to create photographs to show an American identity.53

There are many more instances throughout the past and present where Native American art, objects, and bodies are put on display in a way that perpetuates the stereotypes long created. However I am going to shift to what is being done now in contemporary institutions in order to try to move away from the stereotypical ways of showing and viewing Native American people and objects. The National Museum of the American Indian opened in 1989 and continues to have a responsibility to Native communities and to uphold their histories. NMAI as a museum was not created based on anthropological or art museum practices, instead chose not to focus on the aesthetic value
of Native American objects, nor on what is considered authentic, and instead it chose to shift the focus of Native American objects to consider the cross cultural exchange between Native and non-Native people. NMAI has focused on upholding the histories and culture of Native people, as well as reacquainting them with objects from their pasts. In order to do this, NMAI incorporates consultants from Native communities, along with their non-Native and Native museum staff members in order to foster these goals.54

“Listening to Our Ancestors: The Art of Native Life along the Pacific North Coast,” was one of NMAI’s exhibitions from 2006-2007 in Washington DC, which represents the purposes and processes the museum used to attempt to achieve these goals (see fig. 6). This exhibition focused on advancing relationships between the museum and the Native communities to which these Northwest Coast objects came from. The process by which NMAI chose who would be the consultants from the communities consisted of choosing Native groups from which there was a large group of objects in the collection. The next step was for the museum to gain endorsements from tribal museums, tribal councils, people in charge of repatriation within these communities, cultural communities and other authorities. The museum used this process in order to ensure that as many perspectives from the coast’s communities could be included. After choosing the community groups and the individual that would be the spokesperson for the group, the museum gave each person photographs of the collection of pieces and were asked to choose the pieces that they felt best represented their group. The exhibition objects were then divided amongst 11 sections, each focusing on a single group and on specific themes, such as ceremony, family, obligation and rights, whaling, song and dance, and cultural and individual heritage.55
The way in which museums’ create exhibitions about Native American people shape the public’s perception of these people. The Native American consultants on NMAI’s exhibition knew this to be the case as well. Several of the collaborators chose pieces according to a specific message they wanted to convey about their community, rather than necessarily what they thought would best define them. In addition, some objects from the exhibition would be loaned back to the Native communities after the show, so some consultants chose objects that the group wanted to come home, rather than again choosing what would best define them. Although it is important to have community consultants aiding in the selection and presentation of Native objects from these communities, it can pose juxtapositions between what the NMAI curators want the exhibition to show viewers and what the Native communities want to tell about themselves.56

The majority of Sonya Kelliher-Combs’s works that are in permanent collections are in Alaska. This is not surprising given this is where she is from and that many of her pieces are about the struggles of Alaska Natives. Other spaces that hold permanent works of hers are the Museum of Contemporary Native Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico, the National Museum of the American Indian, Nordamerika Native Museum in Switzerland, as well as the Eiteljorg Museum in Indiana where she held a fellowship and the Hood Museum at Dartmouth College where she was a visiting artist.57 The majority of the pieces of hers that are in permanent collections are two dimensional pieces, rather than three dimensional. Her two dimensional drawings, paintings, and murals, contain more representational elements than her very abstract three dimensional works. These pieces were chosen for permanent collections as the more representational works give a closer
appearance to traditional Native art and thus present Kelliher-Combs as more ‘authentic.’ By perpetuating the ‘authentic’ and ‘traditional’ stereotype of Native artists, Kelliher-Combs and other contemporary Indigenous artists are frozen in time. Limiting what is collected by institutions from Native artists to ‘authentic’ works keeps these artists from being seen as contemporary or innovative, unlike white artists who are praised for these same actions.

Another way in which museums are attempting to remedy the placing of Native American people at the periphery as ‘Other’ is to instead place Native American art at the center of the American art category. Rather than incorporating Native American art into exhibitions or creating exhibitions focused on Native art, museums like the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Fine Art in Boston, and the Saint Louis Art Museum, are instead placing Native American art at the center of their American art exhibitions. Curators are decidedly doing this because Indigenous people and culture are of such importance to the creation of the national identity of the United States. However, by placing Native American art as the center of American art, it is attempting to show America and the creation of an American identity as one that does not have “nationalist baggage.” Having Native American art as part of American art exhibitions is taking away the contextual information of the Native American pieces. The Native American objects are being placed in exhibitions behind glass, on walls, etc., however, this is not the way that many, if not most, of these objects were supposed to be viewed. This takes away the original context of these objects and instead silences these works and their meanings. The displays in these museums are perpetuating stereotypes by displaying Native objects in ethnographic displays, focusing only on the aesthetics of the pieces. Some curators and
Native people feel that this is a step back, rather than a step forward as “inclusion alone is not decolonization.” Without reframing the methodologies and display practices of this new American art category including Native American art, it is continuing colonization by creating a new understanding of what American art will contain.\textsuperscript{58}

There have been attempts to move museums from spaces that perpetuate the stereotyping of Native people, however, without more change, these attempts will simply re-colonize the Native American communities in a new way under the guise that they are helping change the longstanding public perception of Native people. In order for museums to break from colonization of Native American people, their art, and their cultures, they must use Native American voices to aid in this change. Exhibitions that have used Native consultants, have provided video of Native people in interviews, have quotes on the wall text and display, and other incorporations of Native voices have been stronger at pulling Native people away from the category of ‘Other,’ ahistorical and primitive, to the contemporary people that they are. However, in addition to incorporating Native voices into exhibitions, museums must address the issues of audience. No matter what museums do in terms of using Native histories, voices, consultants, etc., there is still a need to shift the mindset of the audiences so that viewers can understand the work that the museums have done. The need to address audiences is minimally discussed in academia, yet is needed in order to create a large scale change of the stereotypes that have long been created and perpetuated by not only museums, but their audiences.

There are few contemporary Native American artists that have been shown in mainstream museums as part of exhibitions not focused on Native identities. Because few are shown in these well-known spaces, there are not contemporary Native artists who are
commonly known names, like there are well-known white, contemporary artists. Because Native American artists are seen as ‘traditional’ and ‘cultural,’ they are racialized into an ‘Other’ group and are held in the past. Many mainstream museum spaces may be ‘attempting’ to change this stereotype, but they are still allowing their museums to function as a controlling space that only allows for Native people to be shown if they fit into their construction of what a contemporary Native artist is meant to be. There are two contemporary Native American artists that have been able to make it into several mainstream museums in New York City. Edgar Heap of Birds (Cheyenne and Arapaho) and James Luna (Luiseño, Ipai, and Mexican descent) are two contemporary Native artists who were able to gain enough recognition and convince people of their authenticity in order to be shown in these spaces.

Edgar Heap of Birds is a contemporary artist whose art is used to discuss Native American plight that is hidden from public view by governmental authority. In March through September of 2019, Edgar Heap of Birds was shown at the Museum of Modern Art PS1 space in New York City in his own exhibition titled Surviving Active Shooter Custer (see fig. 8). Heap of Birds used the term ‘active shooter’ to discuss the history of violence and massacres of Native people, using the present language to “reanimate the past” and to show that “the power of the dominant culture to erase, forget, or otherwise obscure its own acts of oppression.” By using the contemporary term ‘active shooter,’ Heap of Birds is reminding the public of what violence has taken pace is the past that the colonizing power of the United States has been able to hide, but no more.59

James Luna was a contemporary Indigenous artist who was shown at several mainstream institutions before and even after his death in 2018. Luna had work in the
Museum of Modern Art’s photography exhibition in 2009 titled *Into the Sunset: Photography’s Image of the American West.*\(^6^0\) This exhibition featured a collection of photographs from 1850 to the present to show the “collective imagination of the West” through photography.\(^6^1\) Luna’s photograph in this exhibition was titled *Half Indian/Half Mexican* (see fig. 9). This piece shows three side by side photographs of him. The photo on the left is his profile with long hair, no facial hair and an earring, indicative of his Indian side; the photo on the right is his profile with short hair and a mustache, indicative of his Mexican side. The center photo shows him in frontal view where he showcases the fact that both of these sides are halves in creating him as a whole.

In order for Luna and Heap of Birds’s works to be understood as Native American, their works must reaffirm their authenticity as Native American. Kirsten Pai Buick explains this phenomenon as “the artwork is a recapitulation of the artist’s racialized identity.”\(^6^2\) To be shown in mainstream museums, these artists, and artists that are not white, must perform their identities in their works of art to affirm that they are of that race, which in turn reaffirms whiteness and the creation of races.\(^6^3\)

Both James Luna’s work and Edgar Heap of Birds’s work preform their ‘Indianness’ in some way. Throughout his career, James Luna often used his own body for his works of art. Whether it be through photographs, like *Half Indian/Half Mexican*, or his body used as the work of art in person, like his 1987 *The Artifact Piece*, where he displayed his own body like an ethnographic/anthropological specimen at the San Diego Museum of Man (see fig. 10).\(^6^4\) Although Luna was using his body in his works to show the problems of stereotypes and showing his body as a specimen rather than a person, this has made him an ‘authentic’ Native American and therefore he has been shown in more
mainstream museums. Edgar Heap of Birds preforms his ‘Indianness’ through the words that he uses in his works of art. He is an advocate for Native American people and through his use of words, he is able to show audiences the hardships that he and his communities have gone through. Both Luna and Heap of Birds works of art authenticate them according museums because of the use of their body, their history, and their ‘Indianness’ in representational works of art that are easy for museums’ public to understand. Because museum spaces see these artists’ works as what authenticates them as Native American, these artists are shown in more mainstream spaces than Sonya Kelliher-Combs has been because her works do not easily show her Native authenticity.

In an attempt to take control of her own agency, Kelliher-Combs curates exhibitions of Native American art as well. Because mainstream museum spaces are controlled by a power unwilling to show her works or others like hers, she turns to institutions that allow her the freedom of curation to try to show these messages to a wider audience. Her understanding of artists, audiences, identities, and Native histories make for exhibitions that make viewers think about what is the ‘Truth’ and their mindsets.
CHAPTER 3-
REINTRODUCING NATIVE AMERICANS FROM A NATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Exhibitions about Native American cultures tend to be most insightful and informative when curated by or in conjunction with people of the Native community. Throughout this chapter, I will be focusing on three exhibitions that Sonya Kelliher-Combs has curated that engage with issues of Native American identity and other socio-political hardships by using historic and contemporary pieces made by indigenous people. Kelliher-Combs’s curating practices, the artists, and pieces she chose to exhibit in conjunction with the overall purposes of the exhibitions show the struggles Native communities face that are concealed from the non-Native population.

Sonya Kelliher-Combs has curated at several institutions in Anchorage, Alaska. These have included the Alaska Native Heritage Center, the Anchorage Museum, and a show that travelled to the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The Alaska Native Heritage Center is a space that works to preserve the traditions and culture of Native Alaskan people through education (see fig. 1). Preservation in this case and in the curating practices and art of Kelliher-Combs has more to do with preserving the histories and connections, rather than objects. Kelliher-Combs uses objects as a physical, visual explanations of histories and connections. This space houses ‘The Hall of Cultures’ that holds exhibits and art from Alaskan Natives, ‘The Theatre’ that shows movies and documentaries, as well as ‘The Gathering Place’ where people can get together for demonstrations, storytelling, and other activities. The Anchorage Museum is located in downtown Anchorage, close to other exhibition spaces like theaters, galleries, and other museums (see fig. 2). The museum states that the works that is shows are meant to “awe, illuminate, challenge,
unsettle, confound, and provoke” in addition to foster discussion between its patrons and their perspectives. Because the museum is placed in a highly trafficked area with many tourists, the museum attempts to exhibit works and artists that show multiple perspectives to those who come to the space. The Museum of Contemporary Native Arts in Santa Fe exhibits “progressive work of contemporary Native artists” and attempts to disseminate contemporary scholarship regionally, nationally, and internationally (see fig. 3). Like the Anchorage Museum, the MoCNA is located in a highly trafficked area. The museum’s placement on the square of Santa Fe is nearby to other art museums, history museums, and Native art galleries. Santa Fe is a big tourist attraction for ‘traditional’ Native arts, but the MoCNA and the Institute of American Indian Arts attempt to show museum goers Native arts in a contemporary setting to eliminate the stereotype of what Native art is and is ‘allowed’ to look like.

The three shows that I will be focusing on will be from the Anchorage Museum, one of which travelled to the MoCNA. Kelliher-Combs has curated several times for the Anchorage Museum in the Points of View exhibition series, as well as an interdisciplinary show that travelled from the Anchorage Museum to the MoCNA. The first show she curated was called Points of View: Con-Census on view in 2007 at the Anchorage Museum. The second curated exhibition was titled Without Boundaries: Visual Conversations on view in late 2016 to early 2017 at the Anchorage Museum. This show then travelled to the MoCNA and was on view in Santa Fe, New Mexico in 2018. The third show was titled Points of View: Perseverance on view in the spring of 2018 at the Anchorage Museum. The two shows from the Points of View series were made up of material from the Anchorage Museum’s permanent collection. These pieces consisted of
mostly functional, utilitarian objects. On the other hand *Without Boundaries: Visual Conversations* was a show made up of contemporary art from artists of Native American descent.

The *Points of View* series is one in which a guest curator is asked to use the Anchorage Museum’s permanent collections in order to create an exhibition with a specific message. *Con-Census* and *Perseverance* are two of this series which Sonya Kelliher-Combs was asked to curate. She used *Con-Census* to question Native identity, how it’s determined, and the traumas and social ills faced by Alaska Native people when attempting to understand their historical and contemporary identities. By using objects from the collection, she is able to spark these questions.

The title *Con-Census* can be broken down into the two root words: con and census. ‘Con’ is deceitful, usually being persuaded to believe something. ‘Census’ in the United States is a survey that is meant to be used to record how many people live in the US and its territories. The census in the United States was created in 1787 in Article I of the Constitution and at this time, only looked to the numbers of free persons, excluded “Indians not taxed [and] three fifths of all other Persons.”72 Until 1870, Native American people were rarely counted in the census. Until the early 1900s, Native people who were living on reservations were not counted, and even when they were, until the 1920s and 1930s, there were special “Indian schedules” used to count Native people.73 After the 1930s, Native people counted on the US census were also asked to list their degree of blood quantification.74 This meant that if their tribe was not federally recognized, they could not self-identify as Native American on the census. Because of this and many Native people living in HTC (hard-to-count) tracts, Native people have also been
underrepresented on the census, with Alaska Native people having one of the highest percentages of being underrepresented.75

Kelliher-Combs chose the title Con-Census to explain that to people of Native Alaskan heritage the census is deceiving due to the issues of who is allowed to be identified as an Alaska Native and therefore the problem of who gets counted as a part of the United States census.76 Choosing the title referencing the census is something that is recognizable by almost all who would enter this space, tourist or not. This gives people something they think they understand in an exhibition of items and ideas they likely do not. However, because the ideas that are posed are unfamiliar, it causes people to question all they think they know regarding the presented topics, including the title Con-Census.

*Points of View: Perseverance* is described as a “personal exploration of the transformative power of utilitarian objects.” This exhibition also shows the Anchorage Museum’s permanent collection in order to challenge the typical perspective of Alaska Native objects. On their own, each of these objects speak to the history, culture, life, or family of Alaskan Natives in some way, but together these objects communicate the social injustices that they have faced.77 This show being titled Perseverance is very telling of the way in which Alaska Native people act; 10 years after *Points of View: Con-Census*, Kelliher-Combs tells viewers in this show that Alaska Natives are still persevering and pushing through the hardships they face. Marginalization and commodification are two ills that Kelliher-Combs chose to focus on in this exhibition. Because these objects are largely utilitarian, commodification is important. Museum goers view these object similarly to the way that they view the objects that they have
bought from the galleries and the stores near the Anchorage Museum or the objects that they use at home in their Native villages nearby.

Both Con-Census and Perseverance attempt to not only explain the identity of Native Alaskan people, but also investigate what identity means through the use of functional objects and art pieces to visually show the historical and contemporary social ills that plague Alaskan Natives. Alaska Native identity is ‘legally’ created by the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, even if this is not how the people who identify as Alaska Native people actually qualify their identity as such. As mentioned in the discussion of the ANCSA, in order to be considered Native in Alaska one must hold shares of stock in one of the twelve regional corporations. In order to do this and be allowed to participate as Alaska Native in the eyes of the United States government, one must be 25% Alaska Native the United States by blood quantification\(^78\). Kelliher-Combs explains that this is not how identity is constructed because it isn’t always the way “Nativeness” is quantified. Kelliher-Combs submitted her Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs card that had her blood quantification with her exhibition press release about Con-Census\(^79\). This card and her release tells viewers that she, her identity, is oversimplified into a single card that says one tribal affiliation and her blood degree. The tribal affiliation on her card is ‘Eskimo’ which is problematic in that she identifies as specifically Iñuit, which is one of the two tribes that falls under the Eskimo name. In addition to this, it is a problem because the card does not express her other identities, Athabaskan, German, and Irish. Instead, she is forced into a singular category that she is ‘allowed’ to identify as because of her blood percentage. She questions in her press release “what other groups have a certificate quantifying their ethnic background?” and “who determines what
constitutes an Alaska Native today?" These questions and others are what she attempts to answer or at least call to the attention of people in these exhibitions.

The Points of View series exhibitions that Kelliher-Combs curated utilized the permanent collection of the Anchorage Museum in order to explain these hardships of identity creation and show the social, political, environmental, and economic ills that Alaska Natives have gone through and are still going through. According to Kelliher-Combs’s press release about Con-Census, she chose pieces from the Anchorage Museum’s permanent collection which she then placed together with other items as installations in order for them to be seen as art objects. She put the pieces together and named them as any installation would be which made what some would call ‘artifacts,’ be set up and displayed in a way fine art would be. These installations have political undertones, some more obvious and others more subtle. However, both show viewers the challenges of Alaska Natives through the discussion and presentation of taboo subjects as an attempt to minimize marginalization and minoritization. As a Native person, Kelliher-Combs understands these objects’ underlying meanings, and as a curator, she presents the exhibitions’ objects with this as their primary focus. This show is divided into two sections; one section of installations with garments from different tribes of Alaska and the other installations using bowls and baskets. Two installations she created with garments deal with struggles of identity as they relate to social, political, and economic hardships. Brand is created with Native crafted shoes that hold or do not hold the Silver Hand Certificate that qualifies Native objects as authentic (see fig. 4). This questions how and why people that are not Native get to qualify objects as authentically Native. An installation made of mittens and gloves from a variety of tribes called
Goodbye is a piece that deals with the taboo subject of suicide (see fig. 5). The suicide rate of white people in the United States is 14.2 per every 100,000 people, whereas in Alaska Native communities this number is 65.4 men and 19.3 women per every 100,000 people. Simply based on these rates, many people in these communities are in some way effected by suicide. The mittens and gloves used are from the deceased and show viewers the realities of suicide rates in Alaska Native communities. The second half of the show had to do with Alaskan bowls and baskets. Normally bowls and baskets held food items, but instead Kelliher-Combs replaces the food with objects related to trauma and addiction of Alaska Native people. Examples include Overflow and Offering (see fig. 6). These two installations are baskets filled with corks and gambling cards, respectively. Forgive you father for you have sinned is another basket that is filled with rosaries, referencing the abuse that Native people have undergone from clergy members throughout history. These pieces visually represent the ways that extermination of Native Americans functions today through addictions of alcohol and gambling and through attempted assimilation of Native communities that is so often shielded from outside viewers. Because Perseverance was a part of the same Points of View exhibition series and Kelliher-Combs chose to use utilitarian objects for this show as well, one can assume that she utilized the same curating technique in creating installations of permanent collection pieces the questions of commodification and marginalization.

The audience of the shows that Kelliher-Combs has curated play a huge role in the purpose of the exhibitions. In the case of both Con-Census and Perseverance, the Native Alaskan audience is internal; therefore they would have easily understood the questions of identity as they relate to ANCSA. In addition, they would understand the
subjects dealing with traumas and hardships as the issues touch everyone in the community in one way or another. However, the tourist audience that would view the exhibition at the Anchorage Museum is external and would have a more difficult time understanding the commentary on identity and struggles of Natives. In these shows, Kelliher-Combs understood these two audiences and therefore curated installations with names and added other objects so that the exhibitions could explain to viewers the struggles of identity and consequences of past and present actions still pose threats to Native Alaskan livelihood today.

*Without Boundaries: Visual Conversations* is a curated exhibition in which Kelliher-Combs put together works from Native American people in order to address misconceptions about those of indigenous heritage. Kelliher-Combs’s choice of the title *Without Boundaries* helps in part to explain the purpose of this exhibition. This exhibition shows that there are no boundaries of Alaska, of indigenous people, or of artist, rather by creating an interdisciplinary show with Native people from around the world, Kelliher-Combs is able to extend this show into an international conversation about what it means to be Native. In addition to misconceptions, she also attempts to use these contemporary pieces as a way to address the voices of Native people that have been stifled regarding the hardships they have experienced. These include political, environmental, social, and economic issues that are often overlooked and not addressed when it comes to indigenous people. Kelliher-Combs’s vision of this exhibition is very closely related to the questions she attempts to address within her own works of art. However, many of the pieces in the exhibition have meanings more easily understood as political than her abstract, non-representational works. She was able to bring together a large array of contemporary
Native artists to continue the conversation about identity, stereotypes, and injustices they face.

This show began at the Anchorage Museum and then traveled to the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts. It showed a variety of Native artists, but in this chapter, I will be addressing four Native artists and their respective works in the show. The first is Edgar Heap of Birds (Cheyenne and Arapaho) who exhibited his work titled *Dead Indian Stories* (see fig. 9). The piece consists of prints on red paper with white writing about Native struggles. These include ‘stories’ about poverty, lack of education, suicide rates, lack of political representation, and police injustice. Directly relating to the question of political hardships, one print says “INDIAN STILL TARGET OBAMA BIN LADEN GERONIMO,” referencing president Obama’s statement “Geronimo is dead,” after the receiving news of Osama bin Laden’s death. Geronimo is an Apache name, to which Edgar Heap of Birds questions, ‘are we still targets?’ Many of his prints represent the deaths of Native American people and how they are overlooked or forgotten. “DEATH FROM TOP U.S. FORGET FORGOT.”

*Without Boundaries* also featured a work of art from artist Charlene Teters (Spokane). Teters often works with the idea of misrepresentation, stereotyping, and appropriation of Native American culture especially through pop culture media. She is currently on the board of directors for the National Coalition on Racism in Sports and Media along with other artists and professors specializing in multiple fields in an attempt to rectify the representation of Native people. The piece that Teters showed in this exhibition is called *The Smile* (see fig. 10). She states that the piece has to do with the “disappointing politics” of representation of Native people. The toothy smiles that cover
this work are reminiscent of the toothy smile of the Cleveland Indian’s mascot image (see fig. 11). The piece also includes images of indigenous people with smiles pasted over top their faces to even further represent the incredible disrespect and incorrect visual that something like mascots present. Teters, the NCRSM, and other artists, like Edgar Heap of Birds, have used the image of mascot, demeaningly named Chief Wahoo, many times in their works as an attempt to bring awareness to the racism that surrounds its use.\textsuperscript{89}

\textit{Without Boundaries} also showed artist Barry Pottle (Inuk). His piece was titled the \textit{Awareness Series} (see fig. 12). This series shows in photographs the Eskimo Identification Tag System that Canada used from the 1940s through the 1970s. The message of the series has to do with identity and the social and political consequences seen from the system to today. People who were a part of the system in Canada were forced to wear the tags that identified them as ‘other.’ Although they were intended to begin as something similar to Social Security cards in the United States, the tags quickly turned into a way to demean the Eskimo people of Canada as different and therefore in some way bad. Eventually the tags’ series of numbers became Eskimo people’s names, not only to the government but even in the schools. Photographs of the disks from the Tag System were placed next to the portrait of the person that was once enrolled in the disk system. This series shows the audience that these people were and are more than just the round disks with a series of letters and numbers once used to identify them, but rather are actual living, smiling, real people.\textsuperscript{90}

James Luna (Luiseño, Ipai, and Mexican descent) is also an important artist to briefly mention who was shown in \textit{Without Boundaries}. Because of his notoriety, he would have been a huge draw to this show, especially in Santa Fe. His piece in the
exhibition was called James Pollock (see fig. 13). This piece dealt with the feelings of a commodified heritage that Pollock had stolen.\textsuperscript{91}

Kelliher-Combs’s choices of these artists and their works was thought out with both New Mexican, Alaskan, and tourist audiences in mind (see fig. 14). Without Boundaries: Visual Conversations began at the Anchorage Museum where the audience consists of tourists as well as Native Alaskans. Having a tourist audience is important to this show because it attempts to dispel the misconceptions about the North and Native people, through representation of political, social, economic, and environmental injustices that Native people face. Knowing that tourists would be a large target audience to this exhibition made Kelliher-Combs chose a variety of Native artists and styles of art because in addition to other misconceptions she attempts to dispel, she also chose to challenge the stereotype of ‘traditional’ Native art. This show allows tourist viewers to see different styles of contemporary, authentic Native art. Another audience are the Alaska Natives who came to the museum to view the exhibition. These Alaskan Natives understood the issues presented and have lived under the many misconceptions that non-Native people have about the North. However, it is still important that they are one of the target audiences in that several of these artists explain issues that historically and contemporaneously plague all Native people, which in turn could bring these communities closer together to fight against the repercussions and contemporary consequences of current actions.

Without Boundaries: Visual Conversations then travelled to the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, the museum space of the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Because this museum is in the Southwestern United States, the
audience of this leg of the exhibition had changed which Kelliher-Combs had to consider when choosing which artists would be shown. Santa Fe is an area with a large population of Native Americans and is a tourist destination. The Native American population from this area would visit this show, like many shows at MoCNA, with some artists represented at this exhibition being an even bigger draw than other shows. Charlene Teters, for example, was a student at IAIA as well as a professor and dean at the institute, in addition to being a part of Project Indigene, a group of institutions in Santa Fe who deal with issues of Native authenticity, activism, and appropriation. In addition to Teters, James Luna would have been a big draw to this show at the MoCNA. Luna was given an honorary PhD from the Institute of American Indian Arts and showed many times at this institution. From this show the local indigenous population would be able to easily understand the implications of the meanings of many of the works of art. Although some aspects of these hardships may be different from North to South, the overall understanding of these injustices are easily digestible by the Native population of New Mexico. However, the more nuanced ideas that relate to misconceptions of the North would likely have been new information to many of the viewers. Native life in Alaska and other areas in the North are going to have different stereotypes and some different issues than Native New Mexicans.

Because the MoCNA is located on the square of Santa Fe, it is highly trafficked by tourists on foot, especially those tourists who wish to find Native American art pieces. The square is filled with galleries and outdoor shopping of Native American goods. However, most of the galleries, shops, and museums show and sell ‘traditional’ Native American pieces or ‘quintessentially’ New Mexican art. MoCNA, on the other hand, is a
contemporary Native arts museum. Other museums and galleries like the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture hold more ‘typical’ Native objects like pottery, textiles, or archaeological materials. Because many tourists who enter MoCNA are visiting expecting to see what they consider ‘typical’ Native arts, some may be caught off guard or not understand the contemporary implications on Native American people that the art presented in Without Boundaries portrays. Kelliher-Combs would have consciously made decisions about artists and pieces in an attempt to show viewers authentic Native art in contemporary styles. By having this exhibition in a contemporary space surrounded by ‘traditional’ Native art spaces, the purpose of the show to bring contemporary Native issues into discussion would have been even more impactful.

In addition to the audiences who would immediately view Without Boundaries, there is also the international audience that is extremely important to consider. Several of the artists shown are from other countries or descended from other countries like Canada, Mexico, and Greenland. International artists and internationally recognized artists in the show helped to bring indigenous issues into the global conversations about the life and death situations that Native people are put in. Although this show seems to be about the Northern Native American populations and the issues Native populations throughout the US deal with, the exhibition is really discussing implications that can be seen worldwide.

Each of the three shows that Kelliher-Combs has curated have very similar choices in terms of their missions. Kelliher-Combs chose to utilize ‘traditional,’ utilitarian objects in both Con-Census and Perserverance to juxtapose the contemporary hardships that are embedded in the meanings of the installations. In Without Boundaries, Kelliehr-Combs chose a group of artists that through their contemporary works ask
similar questions to what she asks in her works of art regarding identity, representation, minoritzation, and other hardships. The missions of these three exhibitions and her works are therefore regarding all of the questions and challenges Native people face while living in the contemporary United States.

Kelliher-Combs uses ecological textility in each of these shows similarly to the way she uses it in her own works. As the curator of the exhibition, she is the ‘artist’ of the show, with the works of art and pieces used in the installations as the ‘materials.’ She allows the ‘materials’ and their individual meanings to work together with other materials’ meanings in order to create a larger purpose for the exhibitions. These pieces, like the materials that she uses in her works of art, relate to their environment which aids in the further construction of the overall meaning of a work and therefore to bolster the purpose of each exhibition. The pieces relate to one another in terms of the questions they provoke as well as to the cultures they are from, the space they inhabit, and the area surrounding the museum. All of these ideas work together in order to create a more impactful exhibition that causes the viewers to reconsider their preconceived notions regarding Native American art.

Because Sonya Kelliher-Combs is both a practicing artist and a curator, she has been able to bring attention to Native American struggles with identity as well as social, political, environmental, and economic struggles. Her choice of works of art from Native artists across different regions as well as utilitarian objects from the Anchorage Museum’s collections allowed her to engage with the issues of identity, misconceptions and misrepresentations of Native people, and commodification of Native heritage, people, and objects. Through her work on the exhibitions mentioned in this chapter, the
connection between the purposes of these exhibitions to her own works of art has allowed Kelliher-Combs to continue the conversations between Native and non-Native people internationally in an attempt to advocate for Native American struggles.
CONCLUSION

Within these chapters, I have discussed contemporary artist Sonya Kelliher-Combs, what she has created in terms of art works and curated exhibitions, as well as explained some of the histories and policies as they relate to Native American communities. In addition to these discussions, I have explained the current climate of Native fine art in the art market and community. By explaining each of these different areas, I have been able to demonstrate the ideas that Kelliher-Combs is having to react against and understand how and why identities and the creation and curation of Native identities are so convoluted and important.

Kelliher-Combs as an Alaska Native has been able to create art and curate exhibitions that allow her to look back at the authoritative powers that look at her. These powers have been able to identities, racialize, and categorize people throughout history and into contemporary times. However, Kelliher-Combs is not simply looking back at those looking at her, but she is also pushing back. She is taking back control of the narrative of the histories of which she is a part of. Through the creation of her works of art, she is taking back what it means to be Native American. She shows her identity and Native community identities through these works and allows people from around the United States, around the globe, to see what these identities are and attempts to get them to unlearn what they have been taught and learn her truth. In addition, she has curated exhibitions that show items and ideas as different than what many people have learned. She shatters what people believe they know and understand; rather shows items that reconstruct the Native histories from their perspective so that all angles of these stories can be told and heard. Kelliher-Combs, in exhibitions like Without Boundaries, convey what it means to be a contemporary Native artist. Native people are not stuck in the past.
and are not ‘traditional’ in that this racializes and freezes them into the past. She is able to present viewers of her exhibitions and her works of art what it actually means to identify as Native American. Sonya Kelliher-Combs uses her voice and her abilities as an Alaska Native artist and curator to push Native communities back to the center, away from the periphery and away from being exterminated.

Throughout these my research and writing these chapters, there are a number of ideas and questions that I was not able to discuss in enough depth at this stage. However, moving forward these are things that I would like to continue to study. In regards to Sonya Kelliher-Combs, I did not get to spend as much time researching her use of symbols as was needed to do her work and her community justice. Her works are full of community symbols and personal symbols that I would like to continue to unpack and write about more fully in the future. In particular, her installation works in not just her curated exhibitions but also in her own solo and group shows, seem to hold a great deal of both personal and community-wide symbols. These symbols can include shapes, names, modes of installation, other materials that I did not discuss in my first chapter, and many more.

In addition to identities, Kelliher-Combs explains that through her art she tries to understand her role within the identities that she holds. Although I did not get to explore this idea in this paper, I do hope to research it in the future. She states on her website in her personal statement that she learned many things through women’s work and what it meant to be in the role of woman, daughter, and sister. As these can be identities that she holds as well, I am interested to learn how her art brings her closer to not only these identities, but also potentially helps her fill these roles. I believe that this would couple
well also with diving deeper into her roles as an advocate for Native American people and see how her identities and roles interconnect in regards to work she does across communities.

During this paper I spent some time explaining the history of different federal policies and how they affected Native communities. However, this is something that I feel that I just scratched the surface. There are many more instances of policies that have pushed for the extermination of Native people and this is something so important to discuss when explaining what contemporary Native artists are reacting to and against. For example, I would like to research more policies and acts that were put into place during the 1990s like the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act and the Indian Arts and Crafts Act. What was happening in 1990 that made both of these acts come into being—both in Native communities, across America and across the world? NAGPRA is an act that limits only what is in federal agencies and museums getting federal funding, what about the objects and remains that are in non-federally funded institutions or those that are no longer in the country? These are only much more recent acts that have been passed, but I would like to look further into past policies across the United States that affected Native American people, as well as looking more specifically at policies affecting only Alaska Natives. Alaska became a state in 1959, yet the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act was not passed until over 20 years later. Why did it pass when it did? Also, what amendments have been made or have there been any made since it was passed in 1971?

In relation to the previously mentioned acts, I would like to look further into the blood quantification cards and how these have been used in the past and are now. I was
able to briefly mention the Certified Degree of Indian Blood cards that Native people are
issued when they enroll into a tribe. However, what I did not discuss in the great degree
that is necessary to not only understand them, but what is fair to show even further the
different ways the Unites States government is attempting to exterminate Native
American people, is that there are many tribes that are not recognized by the federal
government. Some tribes are only recognized at the state level and not federally, others
it’s the opposite, and some are not recognized at all. This all affects identity and who gets
to create identity. The governments, both state and federal, are getting to impose an
identity on Native people, whether they agree with this identification or not. The
government does not understand the nuanced details of how tribes of the same name are
different, the differences between villages and tribes, what it means to be Native and
accepted by the community as such, but not hold the ‘proper’ blood percentage. There are
many issues with the blood quantification system and I hope to pursue these ideas further.

Each of these questions that I have put forth are things that I wish to research and
write on in the future. With the sheer amount of history of Native American people and
the history shared between the Native communities and Euro-Americans, it was
impossible to be able to discuss it all in this length of document. However, because there
is so much history and so much that Native communities, Native artists, and the United
States government are reacting to and against, I feel that it is only wise and fair to explain
that even in addition to these further questions, there is much more that needs to be
addressed.
Fig. 1.1. Sonya Kelliher-Combs, *Orange Curl*, 2012, acrylic polymer, hair, archival ink, cotton fabric, steel pins, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art: Bentonville, Arkansas.

Fig. 1.2. Sonya Kelliher-Combs, *Unraveled Pink Secrets*, 2006, stretched walrus stomach dipped in acrylic polymer, mixed media, Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians: Indianapolis, Indiana.
Fig. 1.3. Sonya Kelliher-Combs, installation view of *Guarded Secrets*, 2005-2015, porcupine quills, walrus stomach, nylon thread, Monika Fabijanska: New York, New York.

Fig. 1.4. Sonya Kelliher-Combs, detail view of *Guarded Secrets*, 2005-2015, porcupine quills, walrus stomach, nylon thread.
Fig. 1.5. Sonya Kelliher-Combs, installation view of *Guarded Secrets*, 2005-2015, porcupine quills, walrus stomach, nylon thread, Monika Fabijanska: New York, New York.

Fig. 1.7. Sonya Kelliher-Combs, *Rachelle’s Secret Portrait*, human hair.

Fig. 1.8. Tanya Tagaq, photo of daughter next to dead seal, 2014.
Fig. 2.1. Sonya Kelliher-Combs, *Idiot Strings*, rope, animal skin, nylon thread

Fig. 2.2. Example of a Cabinet of Curiosities

Fig. 2.3. Advertising Poster of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show
Fig. 2.4. 1897 Photo of Polar Eskimo People in New York (Minik, standing child; Quisk, man standing on left)

Fig. 2.5. Spectacle of Native people at 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition

Fig. 2.6. Image from Edward Curtis’s “The North American Indian”
Fig. 2.7. National Museum of the American Indian Brochure for “Listening to Our Ancestors” Exhibition, 2006-2007

Fig. 2.8. Edgar Heap of Birds exhibit at MoMA PS1, *Surviving Active Shooter Custer*
Fig. 2.9. James Luna, *Half Indian/Half Mexican* from MoMA exhibit *Into the Sunset: Photography's Image of the American West*

Fig. 2.10. James Luna, *Artifact Piece*, 1987.
Fig. 3.1. Alaska Native Heritage Center, Anchorage, Alaska.

Fig. 3.2. Anchorage Museum, Anchorage, Alaska.

Fig. 3.3. Museum of Contemporary Native Arts at the Institute of American Indian Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico

Fig. 3.5. Sonya Kelliher-Combs, *Goodbye*, 2007, gloves and mittens of deceased Alaska Native people, *Con-Census: Points of View*, Anchorage Museum.

Fig. 3.6. Sonya Kelliher-Combs, *Overflow*, 2007, corks and basket, *Con-Census: Points of View*, Anchorage Museum.
Fig. 3.7. Map of lands not able to become a part of regional corporations, Land was set aside for village corporations, national parks, or national defense.

Fig. 3.8. 12 Regions of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act beginning in 1971.
Fig. 3.9. Edgar Heap of Birds, *Dead Indian Stories*, Ink on Paper.

Fig. 3.10. Charlene Teters, *Smile*

Fig. 3.11. Chief Wahoo, Cleveland Indians
Fig. 3.12. Barry Pottle, *Awareness Series*, 2009-2010.

Fig. 3.13. James Luna, *James Pollock*, 2016
Fig. 3.14. *Without Boundaries: Visual Conversations*, view of Jesse Kleemann’s *Beadwork Dress* (2012) and view of Emily Johnson’s fish lanterns installation (2012), Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico.
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Porter Lara, Jami. Email correspondence to editor of *American Craft*, Megan Grueber. Feburary 13, 2019, 5:27pm.


NOTES


2 Sonya Kelliher-Combs, “Resume.”


6 Sonya Kelliher-Combs, “Resume.”


10 Jami Porter Lara, email correspondence to editor of American Craft, Megan Grueber, February 13, 2019, 5:27pm.

11 Jami Porter Lara, email correspondence to editor of American Craft, Megan Grueber, April 11, 2019, 1:23pm.


13 Jami Porter Lara, email correspondence to editor of American Craft, Megan Grueber, April 11, 2019, 1:23pm.


15 ‘Support’ is in quotes because this a well as other so-called ‘support’ has hurt the Native American population rather than helped. The United States government took on the role of the paternalistic protector, which Native people did not need, and has caused much more harm than good to their ways of life and communities.

Adequately not meaning good enough for the US government to call these corporations successes, but adequate meaning that Alaska Native people were not only surviving, but mostly thriving on this new system.


Freeman, “Unraveled Secrets,” 3.


*Hide: Skin as Material and Metaphor*, 49.

*Hide: Skin as Material and Metaphor*, 49.


*Hide: Skin as Material and Metaphor*, 22.


*Hide: Skin as Material and Metaphor*, 23.

Tom Collins, “Secrets & Truths- Sonya Kelliher-Combs Uses Her Small Pouchlike Forms to Reveal
What Lurks Just Beneath the Surface,” *Albuquerque Journal (NM)*: S8 (February 9, 2007).


44 *Hide: Skin as Material and Metaphor*, 44.


46 Sonya Kelliher-Combs, “Resume.”

47 Christina Welch, “Savagery on show: The popular visual representation of Native American peoples and their lifeways at the World’s Fairs (1851-1904) and in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West (1884-1904),” *Early Popular Visual Culture* 9, no. 4 (November 2011): 344.


50 I am using the term Polar Eskimo here because that is what the 6 people brought from Greenland were identified as during this time. In addition, Eskimo is still what is used on the federal Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood. However, this is considered a derogatory term to many as well because it was given to Inuit and Yupik people by non-Inuit and Yupik people to mean ‘eater of raw meat.’ Because the 6 people brought to New York are from Greenland, it is likely they would have now referred to themselves as ‘Greenlanders,’ as most Inuit people from Greenland refer to themselves as such today. Although, in Alaska, many people still accept Eskimo as correct because in Alaska ‘Inuit’ only refers to Northern Alaskan people or those of Canada. It is also not a word in the Yupik language, therefore it is not used by those in the Yupik tribe either.

Lawrence Kaplan, “Inuit or Eskimo: Which name to use?” University of Alaska Fairbanks, Alaska Native Language Center, https://www.uaf.edu/anlc/resources/inuit_or_eskimo.php.


57 Sonya Kelliher-Combs, “Resume.”

58 Christopher Green, “Beyond Inclusion,” Art in America 107, no. 2 (February 2019): 72, 75-77.


63 Buick, Child of the Fire, 32.


74 National Archives, “American Indians.”

In 2020, the US Census has the option for Native American people to self-identity as such and will allow up to 6 written in tribal affiliations. There will be no need for proof of a Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood or tribal enrollment card in order to write this in.


Anchorage Museum, “Points of View.”


I am defining minoritization is as the process of making a group a ‘minority’ which is associated with the idea of a group being ‘lesser than’ another.


93 Sonya Kelliher-Combs, “Statement.”