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Transformative Skin: The Ongoing Legacy of Inuit and Yupik Women's Tattoos

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Transformative Skin: The Ongoing Legacy of Inuit and Yupik Women's Tattoos

BY

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B.A., Visual Arts

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

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Dedication

For Lydia. When I was seven years old and begging heaven for a sister, even I had no idea you would be so cool.

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by

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B.A., Visual Arts, George Fox University, 2011

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ABSTRACT

Feminine indigenous tattoo traditions of the American Arctic have often been overlooked in scholarly literature due to colonial pre-conceptions regarding native gender roles and the nature of adornment. Modern Euro-American conceptions of skin and self often rely on rigid, essentialized categories, such as race and gender, to mark identity onto the individual body. However, the Inuit and Yupik peoples of Alaska and Canada regarded personal essence as fluid and transformative, a belief made visible in the networks of sewn lines that declared a woman's status and agency.

This text examines both written ethnological records and a diverse range of material artifacts, emphasizing visual analysis and critical theory, in order to uncover the trajectory of Arctic tattoo forms and meanings from past to present. By analyzing indigenous feminine tattoos from an art historical perspective, I will argue that this ancient technique was both vitally embedded in historic northern aesthetic and conceptual systems, and that it continues to provide a useful tool for the creation and transformation of contemporary American conceptions of identity.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

As new generations of indigenous artists, scholars, and leaders come of age in North America, systems of European colonization that have long sought to erase native cultures are being negotiated and circumvented in favor of diverse practices grounded in aboriginal agency and experience. One form currently undergoing a resurgence of interest among indigenous Arctic groups is the process of tattooing that was for centuries prevalent among indigenous polar¹ women. After falling out of use in the mid-twentieth century due to cultural shifts and colonial attempts to assimilate Arctic peoples into settler society, aboriginal tattoo forms, techniques, and systems of meaning are being rediscovered and renewed by young native women in Canada and the U.S. who desire a tangible connection to their heritage.

The art of tattoo is a venerable practice that, prior to the mid-nineteenth century, was widespread among indigenous peoples of the far North. Archaeological evidence attests to the extreme age and widespread similarities of tattoo techniques and forms among various Arctic cultures.² Tattoo was used for many purposes, including hunting, healing, magic, and beautification.³ Among Inuit and Yupik women, tattoos served a transformative purpose, creating from the biological reality of the female body the gendered identity of womanhood. The incursion of European colonists beginning in the sixteenth century reconfigured cultural matrices in such a way that, over the ensuing four centuries, indigenous tattoo traditions became less

¹ A brief word about language is necessary; within this text I will use terms such as arctic, polar, and far north interchangeably to refer generally to the regions and cultures of the North American Arctic to which my research refers. However, I will use the terms Yupik and Inuit when discussing information directly related to these specific indigenous cultures.

² Lars Krutak, *The Tattooing Arts of Tribal Women* (London : Bennett & Bloom/Desert Heart, 2007) 146.

³ Ibid, 152-174.

prevalent and, by the mid-twentieth century, were almost extinct. In recent years, however, several young Native artists have re-awakened interest in these historic techniques and forms.

The following text examines the history and legacy of Yupik and Inuit women's tattoos, while also uncovering the way these tattoos have intersected with both colonial and indigenous webs of meaning. There are a number of indigenous Arctic groups that have practiced tattooing, including the Aleut of the west Alaskan peninsula and the Aleutian Islands (who will, due to significant historic differences from the Yupik and Inuit, not be significantly discussed in this text); the Yupik of the Bering Strait and northwest Alaskan coast; and the Inuit, including the Inupiat of the Alaskan far north, as well as the various Inuit groups of Canada (Fig. 1). Although a great deal of anthropological work has been done about native polar cultures, scholarship examining tattoos specifically is relatively rare, especially concerning contemporary practices, and often must be referenced across multiple groups. There are a number of overarching ideologies and structures underlying tattoo traditions across the American Arctic, although with regional and cultural variations. Thus, I will explore the separate colonial and anthropological material dealing with various Yupik and Inuit groups' historical tattoo traditions, while also discussing the similarities and confluences of aesthetics and ideology that are manifested.

While this work will necessarily rely on previous anthropological and ethnological analyses to provide an understanding of past practices, the focus will be on both Arctic tattoos and indigenous cultures as vital and ongoing.

Contemporary scholarship on native peoples of the U.S. and Canada often creates a false boundary between “traditional,” historic lifeways and practices carried out in an elegiac pre-colonial or pre-reservation past, and a “contemporary” native identity built on modernism, inevitably portrayed as a cultural product of Euro-American origins. Instead, I will examine the way cultural practices and ideas are embedded in the ever-changing connective tissue of daily experience, shifting with changing circumstances, but eternally tying the present to the past in a web of ongoing negotiation.

Analyzing tattoos of the far North from an art historical perspective will necessarily differ from past anthropological projects through an emphasis on visuality and cultural praxis. To make my argument, I will rely not only on historical written sources and contemporary anthropological scholarship but also on a varied range of visual artifacts. In order to gain a fuller understanding of Arctic women's tattoos in relation to both the historic Inuit and Yupik cultures from which they originated, as well as the ever-changing nature of tattoo practices during periods of colonial contact, I will examine such diverse artistic forms as ancient Bering Sea ivory sculptures, early modern European prints, nineteenth and twentieth-century anthropological photography, and contemporary documentary film. These seemingly distinct techniques and traditions all contribute to a richer understanding of the forms, history, and transformations of Inuit and Yupik women's tattoos.

I will also apply critical theory to texts and objects in order to examine the function of tattoos in Arctic conceptions of gender and aesthetics, and to consider the effects of colonization on northern cultures. However, although I consider a

critical perspective essential to this project given the troubling colonial past underlying indigenous and settler relationships, my intention is to use theory as a tool to uncover bias masquerading as objective scholarship, and to cast old information in newer, more productive perspectives—not to force diverse cultural artifacts and ideologies into an overarching theoretical framework.

As citizens of Euro-American nations in the twenty-first century, it is essential to consider the past legacies of imperialism that continue to affect indigenous peoples throughout the world. Historical scholarship can further this process by avoiding the trap of locating aboriginal knowledge and practice in a contained and static past, pushing instead to trace the ongoing webs of meaning and experience that connect generations of native peoples throughout history to the present. As a long-lived and widespread cultural system, Arctic tattoos are tied to an expansive and rich indigenous heritage and are now lending their connective powers to native women currently finding their voices in the discourses and negotiations of contemporary America.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

The journey towards a new understanding and application of indigenous Arctic tattoos is made difficult by the dearth of scholarly studies of the subject. While there is a substantial amount of early colonial and ethnographic material dealing with the particulars of native Arctic tattoo, very little contemporary scholarship deals with this topic in any depth. Although a few academic works have been published in the last thirty years examining various native northern peoples' historic tattoo legacies, this material is focused largely on the symbolism, ritual use, and origin of Arctic tattoo traditions. Very little research has been done on the indigenous aesthetic contexts surrounding this fascinating aspect of Arctic cultural production, and almost no scholarship deals with contemporary negotiations with this practice. As a related concern, feminine tattoo traditions are underrepresented in current research, with more attention given to masculine (and possibly dual-gendered) hunting and shamanistic tattoos.

The first accounts of circumpolar tattooing in European literature originate from early explorers such as Sir Martin Frobisher, whose short anecdote, recorded in 1576, describes the appearance of tattooed Inuit women in what is now northeastern Canada. This is most likely the earliest colonial reference to the subject. In the centuries following Frobisher's first account, Arctic peoples came under intense scrutiny from outside ethnologists and government researchers in the U.S. and Canada, who were enamored with the exoticism they projected onto polar hunting and gathering societies adapted to an extremely harsh natural climate. This text relies heavily on early descriptions and interpretations of polar tattoo practices

found in the often cursory accounts of various colonial explorers and scholars traversing Arctic land and seas in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including G.H. von Langsdorff, F.W. Beechey, William Edward Nelson, G.B. Gordon, John Murdoch, Diamond Jenness, Knud Rasmussen, Franz Boas, William Gilder, Lucien M. Turner, and A.T. Sinclair. Although none of these writers dealt in much depth with Yupik and Inuit tattoos, their records provide early written data that in combination illuminate certain important aspects of this topic.

There is also a significant body of literature written by explorers and researchers about indigenous polar cultures in Russian Siberia. While these groups often share significant cultural affinities with Arctic peoples of the North American continent, this text will limit itself to material specifically relating to groups falling within the boundaries of the modern U.S. and Canada. This is not to imply that current national divisions or colonial designations have much validity in delineating cultural regions or boundaries. However, as this project is necessarily limited in time, space, and resources, it will somewhat arbitrarily treat “American” polar tattoo traditions as a discrete category.

Following the ethnological inquiries of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, recent scholarship dealing with polar tattoos has been scarce. A few scattered essays have been published, particularly in anthropological journals and edited collections, but no comprehensive monograph on the subject has been authored, either by anthropologists, historians, or scholars of visual and material culture. The following are important contemporary sources I have compiled dealing with Inuit and Yupik tattoos, either past or present.

Shorter discussions of tattooing that occur as part of a larger topic can be found in the work of scholars such as Saladin d'Anglure, Nancy Wachowich, Bernadette Driscoll, and Ann-Marie Victor-Howe. Joy Gritton's 1988 article "Labrets and Tattooing in Native Alaska" provides a brief historic overview of these two types of body modification as they were practiced in Aleut, Inuit, and Yupik cultures. Particularly interested in the correspondence of tattoo and labrets to the rituals and symbolism of hunting, Gritton spends little time dealing with the aesthetic codes embedded in feminine polar tattoos, trying to avoid the conclusion that these were merely "decorative" by mining ethnological and mythological literature for references to deeper ideological meanings. While providing a helpful and concise summary of early accounts and anthropological discussions of native Alaskan methods of body modification, Gritton does little to unravel the complex webs of visual signification inherent in Arctic women's tattoos, and at times subordinates the specific narratives of indigenous women to a reductive vision of patriarchal culture.

Some of the most comprehensive research on circumpolar tattoos has been by anthropologist Lars Krutak, whose body of research explores numerous global tattoo traditions. Krutak's master's thesis, "One Stitch at a Time: Ivalu and Sivuqaq Tattoo," is an early but comprehensive overview of historical Yupik tattoo practices on St. Lawrence Island, Alaska. Later articles, such as "Saint Lawrence Island Joint-Tattooing: Spiritual/Medicinal Functions and Inter-Continental Possibilities," as well as a chapter in Krutak's 2007 monograph, *The Tattooing of Tribal Women*, deal in detail with the traditions of Inuit and Yupik peoples, as well as briefly touch upon

Aleut tattoo practices. This project is heavily indebted to Krutak's meticulous assemblage of older sources, as well as his original field work with Yupik elders on St. Lawrence Island.

Nancy Wachowich's book *Saqiyuq: Stories from the Lives of Three Inuit Women* is invaluable for its reliance upon the voices and oral history of living Inuit women, and contains some interesting first-person accounts of historic tattoos. Perhaps one of the most important sources of contemporary discussion on the topic of Inuit tattoos comes from indigenous filmmaker Alethea Arnaquq-Baril, who produced a documentary in 2010 entitled *Tunnit: Retracing the Lines of Inuit Tattoos*. Although not a written text, this innovative project dealing with Arnaquq-Baril's exploration and eventual implementation of her people's tattoo heritage is an important new source of information and creative negotiation. I have also utilized information from numerous exhibition texts and catalogs in my discussions of contemporary artists Erica Lord and Sonya Kelliher-Combs, with *Hide: Skin as Material and Metaphor* being of particular use.

In addition to these texts dealing directly with polar tattoos, I have also been informed by an extensive body of scholarship dealing with Inuit and Yupik conceptions of gender and femininity, a topic necessary to any exploration of Arctic women's adornment. This includes work by Lee Guemple, Carol Zane Jolles, Lillian Ackerman, and Barbara Bodenhorn. Bodenhorn's essay "I'm Not the Great Hunter, My Wife Is: Inupiat and Anthropological Models of Gender" has been particularly helpful in disentangling discussions of Arctic gender from Euro-American anthropological biases.

In examining colonial relations with native Arctic peoples, as well as Euro-American representations of tattoos and the effects of settler culture on indigenous women and society, I am indebted to a number of excellent texts on a variety of different subjects. Michael Gaudio's book *Engraving the Savage: The New World and Techniques of Civilization* has been essential to my understanding of the way early modern prints functioned in a colonial context. Both Amelia Rauser and Dror Wahrman have written insightful critical examinations of the origins of modern Euro-American definitions of self, explaining in detail the way this conception has contributed heavily to contemporary American understandings of race, gender, and class. Marianne P. Stopp has produced helpful research on the removal of Inuit from Labrador to Europe in the eighteenth century, and provides new information on an important painted depiction of the Inuit woman Mikak. Texts by Gisli Pálsson and Ann Laura Stoler give eye-opening discussions of the intimate and carnal dimensions of colonial exploitation, while J.R. Miller and Miranda Brady have written useful accounts of the dark legacy of the Canadian residential schooling system. Finally, I have relied heavily on the collected essays about polar photography in *Imaging the Arctic*, as well as Christopher Trott's work on missionary photography, to describe the function of the photographic image in American and Canadian colonial efforts.

Chapter 3. Sewing the Skin

This chapter will examine the various techniques used in Arctic tattooing as well as regional variants in forms and processes, concluding with an explanation of the way women's tattoos functioned with Arctic conceptions of gender and self. This section will necessarily draw extensively from early ethnographic and anthropological texts, as these sometimes contain the only known documentation of historic indigenous Arctic practices. However, these texts are often riddled with problematic colonial prejudices and assumptions, and thus I have made use of native voices wherever possible, and striven to address Euro-American blind spots with appropriate critical scholarship.

Tattooing was practiced by both men and women in Arctic societies. However, women's tattoos were generally more common and more ornate. Men's tattoos tended to be either apotropaic devices against supernatural powers or illness, or occasionally markers of particular acts of prowess. D'Anglure writes of the Canadian Inuit that "while for women tattooing was a generic marker which established them as women, as wives and potential procreators, for men it represented an exceptional marking, the marking of an exploit such as killing an enemy or a large whale."⁴ While men's tattoo traditions provide a wealth of information about polar beliefs and power relations, they have to some extent already been dealt with by authors such as Gritton and Krutak, and will not be examined in further detail here.

Two techniques for the application of tattoo existed among the Inuit and

⁴ Bernard Saladin D'Anglure and Jane Philibert, "The Shaman's Share, or Inuit Sexual Communism in the Canadian Central Arctic," *Anthropologica*, 1993, 35 no. 1, 67-68.

Yupik. The first involved the use of a sinew thread, which was soaked in a liquid pigment and drawn through the skin with a bone (or later, steel) needle. Ethnologist John Murdoch, writing at the turn of the nineteenth century, noted that this technique gave “a peculiar pitted appearance to the [tattooed] lines.”⁵ Otto Geist, an archaeologist from the University of Alaska, described the process in detail in 1926, saying:

The pigment is made from the soot of seal oil lamps which is taken from the bottom of tea kettles or similar containers used to boil meat and other food over an open flame. The soot is mixed with urine, often that of an old woman, and is applied with steel needles. One method is to draw a string of sinew or other thread through the eye of the needle. The thread is then soaked thoroughly in the liquid pigment and drawn through the skin as the needle is inserted and pushed just under the skin for a distance of about a thirty-second of an inch when the point is again pierced through the skin. A small space is left without tattooing before the process is again repeated. The other method is to prick the skin with the needle which is dipped in the pigment each time.⁶

As Geist describes, the most common pigment of choice was lampblack collected from the oil lamps used to light Arctic dwellings, but graphite was also bartered from Siberia for this purpose as well, likely due to its significance as a protective substance useful against disease and malignant supernatural entities.⁷

Inuk elder Apphia Agalakti Awa described how color could be manipulated during the formulation of the tattoo pigment suspension, explaining, “Tattoos could be designed the way a woman wanted. If she didn't want such a dark shade, the thread that was placed under the skin would be more wet. Soot would be taken from

⁵ John Murdoch, *Ethnological Results of the Point Barrow Expedition* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), 139.

⁶ Otto Geist, Field Notes, Alaska and Polar Regions Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks, reprinted by Lars Krutak in *The Tattooing Arts of Tribal Women* (London : Bennett & Bloom/Desert Heart, 2007), 150.

⁷ Lars Krutak, *The Tattooing Arts of Tribal Women* (London : Bennett & Bloom/Desert Heart, 2007), 152.

the lamp, and they would run the needle through the skin. As they were pulling the thread, the thread would leave the soot behind.”⁸ The urine used as a liquid suspension for tattoo pigments was important, Krutak suggests, both for its power as a guard against spirits, as well as for its high ammonia content, which would have suppressed infection and aided in healing.⁹ Sinew for thread was obtained from Siberian reindeer and from marine mammals such as the bowhead whale. The choice of sinew material for an individual's tattoos was not random, but corresponded to polar conceptions of gender. The finer fibers present in reindeer sinew were utilized primarily for women's tattoos, allowing delicate detail in the linework compositions covering faces, arms, hands, breasts, and thighs. Thicker whale sinew was considered appropriate to the courser skin of men, or rarely for the protective tattoos applied to pallbearers (male or female). This gendered formal decision makes sense, since masculine tattoo forms were largely functional, providing ritual protection or power, and thus not needing the finer aesthetic qualities made possible by reindeer fibers.¹⁰

Another similar method of tattooing, mentioned briefly by Geist above, was present among the Inuit in what is now Canada, and involved the use of a sharp needle to pierce the skin, after which oily pigment was introduced into the holes. Nineteenth-century researcher William Gilder described the process among the Inuit of Hudson Bay as follows: “The method of tattooing is to pass a needle under the skin, and as soon as it is withdrawn its course is followed by a thin piece of pine

⁸ Nancy Wachowich, *Saqiyuq: stories from the lives of three Inuit women* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999), 122.

⁹ Lars Krutak, *The Tattooing Arts of Tribal Women* (London : Bennett & Bloom/Desert Heart, 2007), 152

¹⁰ Ibid.

stick dipped in oil and rubbed in soot from the bottom of a kettle.”¹¹

While both men and women were tattooed among the Inuit and Yupik, it seems from historical accounts that women, especially elders, were the preferred practitioners of this art form. As Krutak enumerates, “[Elderly women's] extensive training as skin seamstresses... facilitated the need for precision when 'stitching the human skin.’”¹² Yupik educator Yaari Kingeekuk agrees, stating “Tattoo artists were only women because they took the precise time and they were very graceful with their hands. That's why they didn't allow men to do tattoos.”¹³ Anthropologist Ann Marie Victor-Howe describes the practices of women tattoo artists on Saint Lawrence Island, as follows:

Tattooing was generally performed by an older woman who began by marking small dots on the skin surface to trace the design she wanted. She then lifted the skin, usually with her left hand, and with her right hand passed a small needle and thread through it... When she was done, the tattooer massaged the tattoo with more soot and urine.¹⁴

Carolyn Weldon supplements this description with information from Inuk filmmaker Alethea Arnaquq-Baril, who specifies that, as the tattoo artist pulled her thread through the skin of the recipient, she pressed her finger “along the thread's trajectory, ensuring the skin didn't break and that the soot stained the flesh

¹¹ William H. Gilder, *Schwatka's Search: Sledging in the Arctic in Quest of the Franklin Records* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1881).

¹² Lars Krutak, *The Tattooing Arts of Tribal Women* (London : Bennett & Bloom/Desert Heart, 2007), 149.

¹³ Mike Dunham, “Savoonga Artist to Explore Traditional Native Tattoos,” *Anchorage Daily News*, last modified April 2, 2011, <http://www.adn.com/2011/04/02/1788951/savoonga-artist-to-explore-traditional.html>.

¹⁴ Anne-Marie Victor Howe, “Songs and Dances of the St. Lawrence Island Eskimos,” *Etudes Inuit/Inuit Studies* 18 (1994): 179.

underneath.”¹⁵

Although tattooing was carried out by knowledgeable and skilled individuals, the process was still quite painful, and produced unpleasant short-term symptoms including extreme swelling and inflammation. Apphia Agalakti Awa described how “right after tattooing was done the woman's eyes wouldn't open because they would be swollen and sore and hardened.”¹⁶ Murdoch concurred with this observation, saying “[Tattooing] is rather a painful operation, producing considerable inflammation and swelling, which lasts several days.”¹⁷ Although the aforementioned ammonia content in urine would have sped the healing process, pain was considered an integral part of the tattoo experience. Netsilik Inuit considered ornate, beautiful tattoos a necessary qualification for women to enter into afterlife, as they spoke to a woman's ability to endure suffering in the pursuit of beauty.¹⁸ In some groups, the pain was also believed to be preparation for childbirth and motherhood.¹⁹ In both Inuit and Yupik cultures, a girl's stoicism in the face of the needle spoke for her strength of will and character. In a culture focused on the importance of communal and individual survival in a difficult and unpredictable environment, the ability to endure, as well as a deep commitment to beauty and harmony, were essential feminine traits.

¹⁵ Carolyne Weldon, “Tracing the Lines of Identity: An Impromptu Conversation about Inuit Face Tattoos,” *NFB Blog*, last modified November 8, 2011, <http://blog.nfb.ca/2011/11/08/inuit-face-tattoos/>.

¹⁶ Nancy Wachowich, *Saqiyuq: stories from the lives of three Inuit women* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999), 122.

¹⁷ John Murdoch, *Ethnological Results of the Point Barrow Expedition* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), 139.

¹⁸ Knud Rasmussen and W. E. Calvert. 1931, *The Netsilik Eskimos, social life and spiritual culture* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1931), opp. 312.

¹⁹ Carolyne Weldon, “Tracing the Lines of Identity: An Impromptu Conversation about Inuit Face Tattoos,” *NFB Blog*, last modified November 8, 2011, <http://blog.nfb.ca/2011/11/08/inuit-face-tattoos/>.

European records of polar tattoo practices begin with the account of English Captain Martin Frobisher, who wrote a brief description of Inuit women he encountered around Nova Scotia in 1576.²⁰ However, archaeological findings confirm the presence of this art form for centuries preceding colonial contact. A large number of small, carved ivory artifacts have been discovered in Alaska and adjacent islands across the Bering Strait that bear ancient evidence of face and body tattoos among indigenous Arctic peoples. Lars Krutak notes the presence of tattoo marks across several small walrus tusk figures uncovered by archaeologists from both Okvik (200 B.C.-A.D. 600) (Fig. 2) and Punuk (A.D. 600-1300) periods in this region.²¹ One small two-faced carved pendant has shallow grooves extending from both corners of the mouth outward across the cheeks, two single horizontal lines radiating from the outer corners of the eyes, and a wedge-like line extending upwards from the bottom of the chin. Krutak links these small marked figures with historic indigenous traditions of shamanism and anthropomorphic supernatural spirits, and notes the similarities between the designs inscribed on these objects and recorded tattoo patterns noted by researchers in more recent times.

Other authors, such as Jorgen Meldgaard, have noted carved tattoo marks on Punuk sculptures, like a miniature soapstone mask from Igloolik Canada carved with numerous deep lines across the cheeks, which Meldgaard argues identifies this mask as a depiction of a woman.²² James VanStone also provides an extensive analysis of a single small carved pendant made from antler, which bears many facial

²⁰ Richard Hakluyt and Richard David, *Hakluyt's Voyages* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 276.

²¹ Lars Krutak, "Of Human Skin and Ivory Spirits: Tattooing and Carving in Bering Strait," in *Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of the Bering Strait* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 190-203.

²² Jørgen Meldgaard, *Eskimo sculpture* (London: Methuen, 1960), 26.

markings clearly denoting tattoos.²³ Discovered in southern Kotzebue Sound, this piece was originally dated to around A.D. 1000, although VanStone states that later carbon 14 dating provides evidence for an older origin, perhaps as early as A.D. 340.²⁴ The piece is covered with multiple parallel incised lines surrounding the eyes, covering the bridge of the nose, and extending from the nose to the upper lip. Vanstone notes that “a characteristic feature of facial tattoo patterns of the Dorset culture (800 B.C.-A.D 1300) is parallel incised lines, particularly in a horizontal position.”²⁵ He also notes the presence of a large hole at the corner of the figure’s mouth that indicates the original presence of a labret, another ancient form of body ornamentation.²⁶

There are a number of ethnological writings from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries detailing various explorers’ and anthropologists’ interpretations of Arctic tattoos. Extensive research in the Bering Sea region and the west coast of Alaska provides a variety of outsiders’ perspectives on Yupik and Aleut cultures at the beginning of American settler emergence in this region. There are also detailed accounts concerning Canadian Inuit groups gathered by such early anthropologists as Franz Boas, William Gilder, and Lucien Turner, who all observed and wrote of the indigenous peoples in different Arctic regions across North America.

Russian explorer G.H. von Langsdorff offered a very brief description of Yupik women’s tattoos when he visited the northwest coast of Alaska in the first

²³ VanStone, James W., and Charles V. Lucier. 1974. "An Early Archaeological Example of Tattooing from Northwestern Alaska." *Fieldiana. Anthropology*. 66 (1): 1-9.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

decade of the nineteenth century, noting the presence of labrets and chin stripes, and voicing his discomfort at these unusual (to him) methods of adornment.²⁷

English Captain F.W. Beechey noted the universality of three chin lines among Yupik women along the Alaskan coast and Bering Strait Islands in the mid-nineteenth century, recording more extensive marks along the cheeks, jaw, temple, and eyebrows of an older woman close to St. Lawrence Island.²⁸

U.S. researcher Edward William Nelson spent five years from 1877 to 1881 in Saint Michael on the west Alaskan coast, and affirmed the common practice among different indigenous groups of women of tattooing chin stripes of varying numbers. Nelson noted that, depending on region, these lines could be single or paired; when paired, chin stripes ranged in number from a single pair of lines descending from the corners of the mouth to up to eight pairs of lines evenly spread across the chin. He also commented on the particularly extensive development of women's tattoos on Saint Lawrence Island, where, as on the "Siberian coast women have the sides of their faces and their arms and breasts covered with finely designed patterns of circles and scrollwork, sometimes crossed with fine lines."²⁹

At the turn of the century, ethnologist G.R. Gordon distinguished between the tattoos of mainland Alaskan women "where the only face marks seen... were the vertical marks on the chin," and the more elaborate cheek tattoos of St. Lawrence

²⁷ G. H. von Langsdorff, *Voyages and travels in various parts of the world during the years 1803, 1804, 1805, 1806 and 1807* (London: H. Colburn, 1817), 338-339.

²⁸ F. W. Beechey, *Narrative of a Voyage to the Pacific and Beering's Strait, to Co-operate with the Polar Expeditions Performed in His Majesty's Ship Blossom, under the Command of Captain F.W. Beechey, R. N., F.R.S. &c. in the Years 1825, 26, 27, 28* (Philadelphia: Carey & Lea, 1832), 332.

²⁹ Edward William Nelson, *The Eskimo about Bering Strait* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1983), 50-52.

women, and the arm tattoos seen on women from King Island.³⁰ He also remarked that, at this date, “most of the younger men and women have no tattooing and the practice is apparently dying out.”³¹ At this point indigenous tattoo practices were being reconfigured in the face of cultural change, so Gordon’s extinctionist pronouncement was premature.

John Murdoch’s ethnological research during a polar expedition to Point Barrow, Alaska in 1881-1883 provides a more detailed account of tattooing on the northern coast. He notes that in this region:

The custom of tattooing is almost universal among the women, but the marks are confined almost exclusively to the chin and form a very simple pattern. This consists of one, three, five, or perhaps as many as seven vertical lines from the under lip to the tip of the chin, slightly radiating when there are more than one. When there is a single line, which is rather rare, it is generally broad, and the middle line is sometimes broader than the others.³²

Murdoch also makes the connection between tattooing and marriageability, claiming that, with few exceptions, facial tattoos were limited to sexually mature women, and that only one married woman he had met in the area went without these marks. Murdoch makes special note in his writing of one woman, “Niaksara, the wife of Anorn,” who had small tattoos at the corners of her mouth to indicate her husband’s prowess as a whaler.³³ This form of tattooing corresponds more closely to men’s tattoos in polar regions, which most often were marks of individual accomplishments.

³⁰ G. Gordon, “Notes on the Western Eskimo.” *Transactions of the Department of Archaeology, Free Museum of Science and Art* 2, no. 1 (1906): 81-82.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 83.

³² John Murdoch, *Ethnological Results of the Point Barrow Expedition* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), 138-139.

³³ *Ibid.*

Diamond Jenness' *Material Culture of the Copper Eskimo*, which details the findings of the Canadian Arctic expedition of 1913-18, gives an overview of tattooing practices among the Inuit of the northwestern Canadian coast. Jenness noted beautifying tattoos primarily on the faces, hands, and arms of Inuit women, with very occasional occurrences of small marks most likely made for healing on legs or breasts.³⁴ Jenness reiterated the decorative function of women's tattoos, saying "Tattooing on women had no religious significance; it was merely a time-honored method of adornment to which every member of the sex submitted willingly."³⁵ He noted that the most common facial markings included "double V's in the middle of the forehead, two or three connected 'spurs' running from the corner of each eye, two parallel lines across each cheek, and five lines radiating from the lower lip to the chin."³⁶ Jenness' illustrations of various arm and hand tattoos indicate that these marks generally took the form of parallel lines and what he referred to as "spur" forms (Fig. 3).

Famed arctic ethnographer Knud Rasmussen spent a period of seven months living with the Netsilik Inuit in 1923, and included a brief description of women's tattoo practices, as well as four drawings of typical markings in his monograph *The Netsilik Eskimos: Social Life and Spiritual Culture*. Unlike Jenness' observations about the Copper Inuit, Rasmussen argued that, among the Netsilik, "tattooing has a religious significance, as they believe a woman who is not handsomely tattooed cannot get to 'the land of the blessed.' Women without tattooing go to Noqumiut i.e.

³⁴ Diamond Jenness, *Material Culture of the Copper Eskimo* (Ottawa: E. Cloutier, 1946), 51-54.

³⁵ Ibid, 52.

³⁶ Ibid, 54.

the ‘Land of the Crestfallen.’”³⁷ Rasmussen’s illustrations, which are noted as having been drawn by an individual named Arnarulunguaq, depict heavy tattooing on the face, arms, and thighs. Facial markings appear similar to Jenness’ descriptions, with parallel V lines curving down the forehead, spurs emanating from the outer corners of the eyes, angled lines on cheeks, and parallel sets of lines coming down from the lower lip (Fig. 4).³⁸

Farther east in the Hudson Bay region of Arctic Canada, English anthropologist William H. Gilder made more extensive documentation of Inuit women’s regional tattoo traditions, noting in this area a profusion of forms and locations for decoration:

The forehead is decorated with a letter V in double lines, the angle very acute, passing down between the eyes almost to the bridge of the nose, and sloping gracefully to the right and left before reaching the roots of the hair. Each cheek is adorned with an egg-shaped pattern, commencing near the wing of the nose and sloping upward toward the corner of the eye; these lines are also double. The most ornamented part, however, is the chin, which receives a gridiron pattern; the lines double from the edge of the lower lip, and reaching to the throat towards the corners of the mouth, sloping outward to the angle of the lower jaw. This is all that is required by custom, but some of the belles do not stop here. Their hands, arms, legs, feet, and in fact their whole bodies are covered with blue tracery that would throw Captain Constantinus completely in the shade.³⁹

The latter, more incredulous rambling that Gilder gave way to here should be regarded with some skepticism, as it seems unlikely that he would have been privy to any close inspections of Inuit women’s “whole bodies.” In more useful terms, Gilder did note a tendency towards what he perceived as abstraction in women’s

³⁷ Knud Rasmussen and W. E. Calvert. 1931, *The Netsilik Eskimos, Social Life and Spiritual Culture* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1931), opp. 312.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ William H. Gilder, *Schwatka’s Search: Sledging in the Arctic in Quest of the Franklin Records* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1881), 83. .

tattoo forms, a variation of facial marks across different groups, and a lack of tattoos on the Inuit men of this region.⁴⁰

Franz Boas' 1888 anthropological text *The Central Eskimo* documents the scholar's two years of research among the Inuit of the Hudson Bay region, and provides a brief description of women's tattoos. Boas noted that the face was the most popular area for this method of adornment, although hands, arms, thighs, and breasts were also tattooed.⁴¹ He placed the time period for the receipt of these marks as beginning around the age of twelve (most likely corresponding to the onset of puberty).⁴² Boas' description of the tattoo process differs from other authors' writings concerning Arctic tattoos, in that he notes the preparation of tattoo ink from the sap of the *Fucus* plant, as well as the occasional use of gunpowder as a pigment.⁴³

American ethnologist Lucien M. Turner carried out similar research to that of Boas regarding the Inuit of the Ungava Bay area, where he noted the earlier presence of "curved lines and rows of dots on the face, neck, and arms, and on the legs up to mid-thighs."⁴⁴ He related that at the time of his writing, however, this custom had largely disappeared due to a local shaman's warning that this extensive adornment was the cause of an unspecified "prevailing misfortune."⁴⁵ Turner did make the link between the commencement of a woman's tattoos and the start of

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Franz Boas, *The Central Eskimo* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), 153.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Lucien M. Turner, *Ethnology of the Ungava District, Hudson Bay Territory* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 207.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 208.

menstruation, saying:

When a girl arrives at puberty she is taken to a secluded locality by some old woman versed in the art and stripped of her clothing. A small quantity of half-charred lamp wick of moss is mixed with oil from the lamp. A needle is used to prick the skin, and the pasty substance is smeared over the wound. The blood mixes with it, and in a day or two a dark-bluish spot alone is left. The operation continues four days. When the girl returns to the tent it is known that she has begun to menstruate.⁴⁶

Presumably, this remaining presence of feminine tattoo included chin stripes, which were the most common motifs across the various Arctic regions.

While the specific significance of feminine tattoos varied geographically across Arctic America, certain methods, forms, and patterns of use can be discerned from these writings. First, it seems that girls were generally tattooed beginning at the onset of puberty, although Saint Lawrence islander Paul Silook and a few others have noted earlier tattooing beginning around age six.⁴⁷ Chin stripes of varying pattern and number seem to have been the most common form of women's marks across various regions, and these marks most likely spoke to the transformation from childhood to womanhood and reproductive maturity. Depending on the popularity of tattooed adornment within a particular group, women added to their collection of tattoos over a lifetime, and additional marks often corresponded to significant life events: marriage, the birth of a child, or even a male relative's exceptional hunting exploit. In this context, feminine tattoos recorded in permanent form on the body the memories of a lifetime.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Paul Silook, "Tattooing of a Woman," reprinted from the Paul Silook Manuscripts, Neuman Collection, Alaska State Archives, by Lars Krutak in "Of human skin and ivory spirits: tattooing and carving in Bering Strait," in *Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of the Bering Strait* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 197.

Various explanations for Inuit and Yupik women's tattoos have been advanced over two centuries by several Euro-American anthropologists based on diverse regional information gathered from a number of indigenous individuals. Anderson and Eells hypothesize that chin tattoos distinguished women from men in early times when surprise raids and hand-to-hand combat in igloos were common, or that these tattoos stem from a myth that women who died without them would be turned by malevolent spirits into drip-containers for oil lamps.⁴⁸

Saladin d'Anglure states that the Central Canadian Inuit considered tattoos essential to distinguish women from men after the onset of menopause.⁴⁹ D'Anglure also finds supernatural demands for tattoos, claiming that the mythical female figures *Siginiq* (Sister Sun) and *Kannaaluk* (primordial mother of sea animals) required women to be pleasingly tattooed in order to successfully navigate the afterlife.⁵⁰ Rasmussen recounted similar accounts from the Netsilik Inuit, where an individual named Nalungiaq told him that "women who do not care to suffer a little in order that they may be pretty" are punished in the afterlife for wasting their earthly lives in "idleness and sluggish apathy."⁵¹

While this diverse variety of explanations for the importance of feminine tattooing is useful in clarifying specific regional beliefs surrounding this practice, this information still does not address the fundamental ideologies that made

⁴⁸ Hobson Dewey Anderson and Walter Crosby Eells, *Alaska Natives: A Survey of Their Sociological and Educational Status* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1935).

⁴⁹ Bernard Saladin D'Anglure and Jane Philibert, "The Shaman's Share, or Inuit Sexual Communism in the Canadian Central Arctic," *Anthropologica*, 1993, 35 no. 1, 67.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Knud Rasmussen and W. E. Calvert. 1931, *The Netsilik Eskimos, Social Life and Spiritual Culture* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1931), 316-317.

women's tattoos so important to their spiritual and physical well-being. For example, no mention is made by Rasmussen of why exactly being "pretty" was such an essential and supernaturally mandated part of Inuit femininity. Many writers dealing with this subject fall back on what appears to be the only regionally widespread explanation for Arctic women's tattoos--that they served a beautifying and feminizing function--and leave the discussion there. And, reduced in the academic literature to simple feminine ornamentation, albeit with spiritual overtones, women's tattoos languish beside more readily understandable polar tattoos corresponding to healing practices, protective rituals, and hunting magic.

Although Inuit and Yupik women's tattoos are at times neglected as "ornamental" by anthropological perspectives that desire one-to-one symbolic correlations or ritual functions, a scholarly methodology that examines the gendered and aesthetic components of culture can help to illuminate the complex cultural systems which indigenous tattoos marked indelibly onto women's bodies. It seems unlikely that this painful, arduous process would carry such ideological importance to untold generations of Arctic women if tattoos did not have a significant, overarching system of values and meanings surrounding their use and display. Arctic women's tattoos were an essential part of Inuit and Yupik visual culture, which promoted the production of beauty to an issue of spiritual proportions. In a culture that is often portrayed by Euro-American scholars as purely survivalistic, prone to extreme measures such as infanticide and senilicide, feminine tattoo practices speak to the often overlooked importance of beauty and order.

Paul Silook noted the differentiating beauty of indigenous tattoos on Saint Lawrence Island, saying “When a girl is six years old, she must have tattooing on her face and cheeks and on her chin. This tattooing means that when she grows up to be a woman, she should have a different face than that of a man or people thought it must look nicer if she had this tattooing.”⁵² Anne-Marie Victor-Howe reiterated the social and personal importance of tattoos for feminine beauty, gathering from interviews with Lilly Apangalook, Estel Oosevaseuk, and Linda Womkon Badthen, also from Saint Lawrence Island, that “most young girls did not mind the pain of being tattooed, as it was part of the excitement of growing up. Tattoos were desirable decorations, they said, and it was embarrassing for a woman not to wear them. Without tattoos, a woman looked like a man.”⁵³ These narratives underscore the importance of tattoo as a way of differentiating a female person as a woman through the beauty of permanent adornment.

Apphia Agalakti Awa has argued that, in the past, facial tattooing was a common and socially normative feminine practice akin to mainstream contemporary American use of makeup. She states:

[Tattooing] was done to make a woman beautiful. She looked good when it was all healed. A woman would look very beautiful. It was like she always had makeup on. She wouldn't have to put on makeup everyday and then remove it--tattoos were permanent. They would be added to and changed sometimes, but that was all. That is how make-up was applied for women.⁵⁴

⁵² Paul Silook, “Tattooing of a Woman,” reprinted from the Paul Silook Manuscripts, Neuman Collection, Alaska State Archives, by Lars Krutak in “Of human skin and ivory spirits: tattooing and carving in Bering Strait,” in *Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of the Bering Strait* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 197.

⁵³ Anne-Marie Victor Howe, “Songs and Dances of the St. Lawrence Island Eskimos,” *Etudes Inuit/Inuit Studies* 18 (1994): 179.

⁵⁴ Nancy Wachowich, *Saqiyuq: stories from the lives of three Inuit women* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999), 122.

Unlike contemporary Euro-American make-up, which tends toward illusionism--lengthening eyelashes, contouring cheekbones, and plumping lips--Inuit tattoo practices were more distinctly additive, creating forms of beauty separate from but complementary to a woman's individual features.

Apphia described a past where women were passionate about the necessity of feminine beauty, saying, "Women back then, they were always trying to look beautiful. They put marks on their faces and they dressed like women. If a woman didn't try to look good, there would be talk about the woman's face looking like a swollen gland. She would look like a swollen gland if she had nothing on her face."⁵⁵ Although the pejorative of being compared to a swollen gland does not translate neatly into current dialogues surrounding feminine beauty, Apphia's claim that, without tattoos, a woman had "nothing on her face" indicates a different cultural standard. Instead of striving for a seamless illusion of beauty based on a naturalized but impossible normative standard, as in modern Euro-American cultures, Arctic beauty seems to have focused more on the concept of beauty as mindful decoration, regardless of a woman's "natural" appearance. The dedication to and social enforcement of feminine endurance through adornment that Apphia described indicates strong aesthetic and ideological conceptions of tattoo as an essential part of feminine beauty and womanhood among Arctic peoples.

To properly discuss Inuit and Yupik tattoos in relation to womanhood and femininity necessarily requires an analysis of indigenous Arctic conceptions of gender. Much early scholarship on indigenous polar groups advanced the either

⁵⁵ Ibid, 121.

implicit or explicit idea that Inuit and Yupik cultures were male-dominated and even misogynistic. Early explorers in the first centuries of contact were almost incapable of understanding interpersonal relations, gendered or otherwise, without transferring early modern notions of power and personhood onto the cultures with which they came in contact. As European and American ethnologists entered the Arctic in the nineteenth century, early stereotypes about indigenous peoples were reinforced and normalized through scholarly discourses often sponsored by colonial governmental agencies.

As a result, primary research texts often address gender through reductive explorations of controversial topics, such as female infanticide and menstrual taboos. Unexamined biases in anthropological methodologies that continue to presuppose concepts such as kinship, public and private divisions of labor, and hierarchical power structures skew contemporary perceptions of the Yupik and Inuit. As Lee Guemple succinctly states,

One may speculate that the portrayal of Arctic women as under the relatively total domination of their male relatives was early generated by explorers, missionaries, and others--the overwhelming majority of them men--whose general attitude toward "the primitive" was dominated by a more or less Hobbesian view. That is, they saw Arctic life as little more than an interminable struggle to survive. Consequently, social life was necessarily simple and brutish, with men totally dominant because of their "naturally" superior strength and ferocity. That popular impression has faded only slightly, and few have bothered to address the issue of gender status in measured terms.⁵⁶

While feminist scholarship in the eighties and nineties sought to address the patriarchal underpinnings of academic disciplines such as anthropology, the work

⁵⁶ Lee Guemple, "Gender in Inuit Society," in *Women and Power in Native North America*, edited by Laura Klein and Lillian Ackerman (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 17-18.

that came of this ideological shift was often highly politicized, and at times continued to rely on Euro-American understandings of what economic, political, and domestic equality must look like.

While it would be impossible to attempt to provide a comprehensive examination of indigenous beliefs and practices regarding gender, I will briefly outline important Inuit and Yupik ideas regarding gender, and, by extension, femininity. In attempting to untangle indigenous notions of gender developed independently from Western traditions, scholar Marla Powers' warning to avoid the "common misconception... that values placed on certain behaviors in Western society can be equated with values placed on those behaviors in non-Western society," as well as the mistake of "equating women's productive and reproductive roles with subordination," becomes especially pertinent.⁵⁷

Gender in both Yupik and Inuit cultures has been in historic times, and continues to be in some contemporary Arctic communities, fundamentally structured upon female and male divisions of labor. Men were expected to support the community through hunting, which provided at least half and up to ninety percent of the Arctic subsistence diet depending on location and season, and to construct essential objects such as lamps and hunting gear. Women managed the domestic sphere, caring for children, sewing and maintaining the skin clothing that would protect the family from polar weather, distributing and preparing food for community members, and tending the oil lamps that provided light and warmth to

⁵⁷ Marla Powers, "New Perspectives on American Indian Women." *Revue Francais de Etudes Americaines* 38 (1988): 351.

dwellings.⁵⁸ It was in the exemplary performance of these sex-specific activities that both men and women accrued social status and approval.

However, though male and female duties were clearly separated in northern societies, the actions of women and men were intrinsically tied to the success of each other. Barbara Bodenhorn writes about the entwined nature of masculine and feminine roles in the fundamental task of hunting, which has often been imagined by Arctic ethnographers as purely the domain of men. Bodenhorn states that “animals give themselves up to men whose wives are generous and skillful.”⁵⁹ Wives greeted returning hunters and formally received the animals who had “given themselves.” Depending on the animal, a wife had to follow the correct protocol to welcome and mollify the animal’s spirit, offering fresh water to a marine mammal such as a seal, and cutting off the head of a land animal so that its soul can be free to return to a new creature.⁶⁰ Women butchered a hunter’s catch, and shared the meat communally, ensuring the continued success of the hunter.

Bogoras wrote in the beginning of the twentieth century that a native elder in Indian Point, Alaska told him “it is a mistake to think that women are weaker than men in hunting-pursuits. The home incantations are stronger than those pronounced in the wilderness. In vain man walks around, searching; but those that sit by the lamp are really strong, for they know how to call the game to shore.”⁶¹

Carol Jane Zolles describes the belief held by the Yupik on Saint Lawrence Island

⁵⁸ Lee Guemple, “Gender in Inuit Society,” in *Women and Power in Native North America*, edited by Laura Klein and Lillian Ackerman (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 19.

⁵⁹ Barbara Bodenhorn, “I’m Not the Great Hunter, My Wife Is: Inupiat and Anthropological Models of Gender,” *Etudes/Inuit/Studies* 14, no. 1-2 (1990): 61.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁶¹ Waldemar Bogoras, *The Chukchee* (New York: Johnson Reprint Corp, 1966), 359.

that:

Men, and particularly boat captains, depended on their wives' behavior at home during the hunt. If the captain's wife (or the striker's mother--usually one and the same person) moved slowly and stayed quietly indoors, whales would be drawn to a man's boat. If, with her body, she ignored this important relationship, the whale would know and take itself far away, offended by her disregard.⁶²

Within a married couple, a spouse's work relied on the complementary support of the other. While women needed men to make their tools, work implements, and oil lamps, men received from their wives and mothers the parkas that would protect them from the elements and draw game to them, since animals were believed to admire beautiful clothing. Lee Guemple argues that among the *Qikiqtamiut* Inuit, "to be a husband or wife is to be more fundamentally a man or woman."⁶³ Ideal social relations rested on the male and female pair working in harmony for the good of the whole community, and concepts of gender necessarily flowed from this ideological structure.

There was also an acknowledged permeability between male and female productive spheres in Arctic cultures. Jean Briggs argues that "there is nothing holy to [the Inuit] about the sexual division of labor; neither is there, in their view, anything inherent in the nature of either sex that makes it incapable of doing some of the jobs that the other sex ordinarily does."⁶⁴ Women at times hunt small game, and gather seafood and plant foods when available. Men are capable of mending

⁶² Carol Zane Jolles and Kaningok. 1991. "Qayuutat and Angyapiget: Gender Relations and Subsistence Activities in Sivuqaq (Gambell, St. Lawrence Island, Alaska)," *Etudes Inuit/ Inuit Studies* 15, no. 2 (1991): 36-37.

⁶³ Lee Guemple, "Husbands and Wives: The Role of Gender in Traditional Inuit Society." *Etudes Inuit/Inuit Studies* 10, no. 102 (1986): 11.

⁶⁴ Jean L. Briggs, "Eskimo Women: Makers of Men," in *Many Sisters: Women in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (London: The Free Press, 1974), 270.

clothing and maintaining a dwelling when cut off from feminine support, as on long hunting expeditions, although Guemple states from his time among the Inuit on Belcher Islands that men would become embarrassed when acknowledged in the competent performance of female-gendered work.⁶⁵ There is also evidence that, if female or male children are lacking in a family unit, the parents will educate a child to perform opposite-gender tasks in order to help with necessary subsistence activities.⁶⁶ Briggs writes that orphaned children tend to be adept in both male and female-gendered work, because they are required to assist the general community in any matter requested by its members.⁶⁷ Betty Issenman also notes that some Inuit communities historically believed in a phenomenon called *sipiniq*,

which means the act of changing sex, and signifies the process at the moment of birth whereby some male infants - and, very rarely, female infants - decide to change their sex. The word, which in the plural is *sipiniit*, also denotes such a child, who during gestation was one sex and changed to the opposite at the time of exiting from the mother's body.⁶⁸

This belief in an infant's ability to change between sexes implies that, within northern ideology, gender was functional rather than innate.

This functional view of gender was perhaps made possible by the Arctic belief that "for humans, an essential aspect of the person was reborn in the next generation. The newborn child regularly received both the name and with it the soul

⁶⁵ Lee Guemple, "Husbands and Wives: The Role of Gender in Traditional Inuit Society," *Etudes Inuit/Inuit Studies* 10, no. 102 (1986): 14.

⁶⁶ Jean L. Briggs, "Eskimo Women: Makers of Men," in *Many Sisters: Women in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (London: The Free Press, 1974), 271.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Betty Issenman, *Sinews of Survival: The Living Legacy of Inuit Clothing* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), 214.

of a recently deceased relative in the ascending generation.”⁶⁹ Names, and the spiritual legacy connected to them were not gender-specific. A female child could receive the name of a deceased male relative, and vice versa. This conception of a continuous flow of spiritual essence, undifferentiated by gender, indicates that femininity and masculinity were most likely understood as functional categories based on social divisions of labor, not as permanent and irrevocable dualities.

Gender fluidity is also an acknowledged aspect of historic Arctic shamanism. Both women and men were allowed to become shamans, and the role itself was believed to embody both male and female dualities within its spiritual nature. On a performative level, D’Anglure notes the use of transvestitism by shamans performing during *Tivajuut* (a communal winter festival), where male shamans wore women’s clothing and masks marked with stripes denoting facial tattoos.⁷⁰ D’Anglure argues that, within Inuit religious systems, shamans assumed a “third” gender that placed them in an interstitial position from which to mediate both social systems and natural/supernatural divisions of reality.⁷¹

It is perhaps because of the functional, selectively permeable nature of gender in Inuit and Yupik belief systems that tattoos were considered essential for their differentiating function, forming culturally constructed women from physically female bodies.⁷² In this way, tattoos functioned similarly to but distinctly from the

⁶⁹ Ann Fienup-Riordan, “Eye of the Dance: Spiritual Life of the Bering Sea Eskimo,” in *Crossroads of Continents: Cultures of Siberia and Alaska* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), 257.

⁷⁰ Bernard Saladin D’Anglure and Jane Philibert, “The Shaman’s Share, or Inuit Sexual Communism in the Canadian Central Arctic,” *Anthropologica*, 1993, 35 no. 1, 74-80.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 79.

⁷² In fact, Lars Krutak has briefly written about historic traditions among trans-gender Aleut men (the Aleut are another indigenous Arctic culture that has historically been located on the Aleutian Islands and the Western tip of Alaska), who would take women’s tattoos, along with feminine roles and duties within

gendered garments worn by men and women in the Arctic. Driscoll notes that, in the Inuit women's parka, maternal and reproductive aspects of femininity were enhanced and re-created through specific design elements that, like tattoos, embodied specific polar conceptions of womanhood.

In her analysis of the Inuit parka, Driscoll notes not only the function and symbolism of the *amaut* as a second womb for small children, but also that of *kiniq*, an elongated flap of skin on the front of the *amautik*, or woman's parka. In various groups the *kiniq* took either triangular, oblong, or elliptical forms, and Driscoll argues that this feature was always referential to reproductive organs and potential.⁷³ This variously womb-like, vulvic, or phallic element also provided a warm, clean surface upon which a woman could lay her infant. Through the *amaut* and *kiniq*, the Inuit parka created and recreated the woman's body as a specific reproductive and maternal reality. As with tattoos, the carefully crafted parka, with its tight stitching, elaborate insets of variegated fur and skin, and symbolic design elements provided a system of meaning sewn onto the changeable, vulnerable body. While sewn skin clothing provided functional features and made visible women's productive and reproductive roles, stitched tattoos inscribed womanhood permanently on the skin beneath, so that even when clothing was removed, feminine identity remained.

Not merely a reproduction or signifier of the body, Inuit parkas were also created to effect transformative changes on the being beneath. Driscoll notes that,

their communities. Lars Krutak, *The Tattooing Arts of Tribal Women* (London : Bennett & Bloom/Desert Heart, 2007).

⁷³ Bernadette Driscoll, "The Inuit Parka as an Artistic Tradition," in *The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples*, ed. D.F. Cameron (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 198), 182-183.

especially in men's parkas, implicit and explicit references to important animals such as seal, caribou, and walrus were retained and incorporated to allow the hunter to both visually and spiritually identify with the animals that gave themselves to him.⁷⁴ Valerie Chaussonnet writes:

Animal skin, transformed into a second skin for humans by the work of the seamstresses, still maintained its animal identity. From the killing of an animal through the tanning, cutting, and sewing of its skin into a piece of clothing, the qualities and characteristics attributed to it in life were maintained and passed on to the wearer of the finished garment.⁷⁵

However, a hunter's clothing had to be beautiful and finely made--uneven stitches or a wife's neglect of various taboos regarding the creation and handling of hunting apparel would result in quarry eluding or even harming the hunter.⁷⁶ Like tattoos, the parka functioned as a layer of substance and meaning, literally changing the corporal body it covered. In the case of the hunter's parka, respectful and pleasingly sewn clothing allowed a man to embody the best traits of his prey, both attracting and identifying with the animals he pursued. Likewise, the act of sewing the skin in beautiful tattooed marks transformed female bodies into culturally embodied women, who advertised their endurance and beauty in lines running like well-placed seams over living flesh.

In an American society built on modern and Enlightenment philosophies that conceive of gender, race, and even class as somehow essential to individual personhood, it may seem strange that among Arctic peoples facial tattoos were

⁷⁴ Ibid, 182.

⁷⁵ Valerie Chaussonnet, "Needles and Animals: Women's Magic," in *Crossroads of Continents: Cultures of Siberia and Alaska* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), 212.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

considered necessary for distinguishing between men and women.⁷⁷ Euro-American society continues to rely on what Amelia Rauser calls the “modern conception of self,” which developed during the eighteenth century, and in which “many categories of identity--in particular race, class, and gender--became rigid and essentialized, and the internal core of a person was considered the truest, most unchanging location of selfhood.”⁷⁸ However, in societies like those of the Inuit and Yupik, gender was a functional distinction, based specifically on the acquisition of appropriate knowledge and skills, and the competent performance of different types of work. Since human essence or “soul” was fluid and constantly cycling between generations past and present, gender was neither eternal nor immutable.

Within this culture framework, “woman” was not an essence, but a role, and tattoos marked those individuals who embraced their expected roles through ritualized adornment. Tattooed ornament sewed permanently onto the physical body a female person’s womanhood through her strength, endurance, and commitment to beauty. In other words, women were made, not born, and tattoos, as indelible markings of meaning, participated directly in this gendered act of transformation.

⁷⁷ See Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* for an extensive discussion of the development of modern conceptions of identity in Europe.

⁷⁸ Amelia Rauser, *Caricature Unmasked: Irony, Authenticity, and Individualism in Eighteenth-Century English Prints* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008), 20.

Chapter 4. Marking the “Other”

Although women’s tattoos denoted strength and agency within indigenous Arctic conceptions, European colonists moving into the American north brought with them a number of assumptions and perceptions that posited native tattoos as markers of difference and inferiority. Visual documents from the early colonial era and later anthropological photographs often utilized the imagery of tattoos and skin to indicate the “primitive” nature of Arctic peoples, while Euro-American imagery and descriptions of Inuit and Yupik women also indicate the ambivalent desire often read onto the female indigenous body by white men. While native women conceived of tattoos as transformative performances of feminine identity, settler society has often appropriated the imagery of tattoo and skin to transform indigenous bodies into racialized others.

This chapter will examine a selection of colonial prints, paintings, and photographs to both describe the ideological frameworks brought to bear on indigenous Arctic women through their representation in visual mediums, as well as elucidate the cultural forces that made Inuit and Yupik practices such as tattoo untenable in the new climate of U.S. and Canadian expansion.⁷⁹ As foreign governments attempted to isolate, assimilate, and erase native culture in the polar regions, the intertwined mechanisms of Christian mission work, residential schools, forced relocation, and continuing paternalistic interference substantially disrupted

⁷⁹ I will not attempt to offer here anything resembling a complete or authoritative text on either colonial practices in the polar regions, or on the representation of native people by outsiders. This chapter will survey only a few relevant examples of visual artifacts in order to discuss some of the major factors in Euro-American relations with indigenous northern groups, especially as these factors impacted the lives and practices of Inuit and Yupik women.

the lives of aboriginal northerners, at times with catastrophic results. In my discussion of colonial perspectives and practices, I will rely strongly on visual artifacts to reveal the underlying motives and techniques that Euro-American colonists brought to their encounters with native peoples. As Martin Berger describes, even images that purport to be neutral or un-raced are fundamentally reliant upon the societal frameworks that gave rise to their production.⁸⁰ Though at times pictorial representations of the Arctic and its native inhabitants may seem unrelated to the subjects of ethnic assimilation and colonial exploitation, by critically regarding the cultural matrices surrounding these images we may begin to uncover the ways visual media were of deep importance to the project of Western imperialism.

Since the first kidnappings of Inuit men, women, and children as exotic souvenirs by French and English explorers in the sixteenth century, colonial European (and later white American) encounters with indigenous Arctic peoples have often been tainted by violence and unabashed self-interest. Frequently memorialized in seemingly innocuous visual artifacts, this violence is inherently tied to the European tradition of ethnographic illustration and printmaking. As the European imagination began to construct ideas of America and its indigenous populations, depictions of native peoples were disseminated in prints, drawings, and paintings that labored to make legible the indigenous body within colonial structures of meaning. Michael Gaudio explains that the early modern “economy of writing” created subjects “ambivalently both through suffering, since they are

⁸⁰ Martin A. Berger, *Sight Unseen: Whiteness and American Visual Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 44.

written *upon*... and through pleasure, for it is through inscription on bodies and in books... that selves become recognized and legible within society.”⁸¹ Like tattoos, European-American visual representations and written accounts served to transform the body, but unlike tattoos, which functioned as positive forms of self-creation, colonial records created the illusion of racial otherness and strove to make this illusion legible on both the represented and real indigenous body.

The first known European depiction of indigenous peoples of the American Arctic is a 1567 German woodcut of an Inuit mother and child, who were captured by French sailors and brought back to Europe for public exhibition (Fig. 5).⁸² Perhaps to entice viewers with the exotic appearance of these prisoners, referred to as a “Wild woman and her daughter” in the text of the handbill, the artist clearly delineated the forehead, cheek, and chin tattoos running across the face of the mother. This fascination with and attention to Inuit women’s tattoos can also be seen in a 1577 watercolor by British painter John White. Similar in style to the earlier German print, this painting was produced upon the return of English explorer and profiteer Martin Frobisher from an exploratory voyage to Baffin Island.⁸³ While in the American north, Frobisher kidnapped an Inuit man, woman, and child and returned with them to England. There, he displayed his prisoners to

⁸¹ Michael Gaudio, *Engraving the Savage: The New World and Techniques of Civilization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 27-8.

⁸² Richard G. Condon, “The History and Development of Arctic Photography,” *Arctic Anthropology* 26 no. 1 (1989): 47.

⁸³ Michael Gaudio, *Engraving the Savage: The New World and Techniques of Civilization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 184.

Queen Elizabeth I and the royal court as living curiosities until their deaths a few months after arrival in Europe.⁸⁴

This physical removal of Inuit people from their homes in the Arctic to the colonial metropole parallels the function of sixteenth and seventeenth-century ethnographic illustrations. As Gaudio has described, early modern colonial images rested upon their status as visual systems separate from the aesthetically constructed province of fine art, representing instead pure description set down as the eye had seen.⁸⁵ The function of illustrative paintings and prints was to capture a visible reality taken truthfully from nature--a transparent window to things distant in time or space. It was "by means of such images, and through actual physical objects collected for the cabinet of curiosities, that the Americas were brought back to Europe in raw, visible fragments."⁸⁶ Thus, the line between an illustration of the Inuit and the real body of the Inuit person was blurred through their identical function as "fragments." Brought from the Americas as supposedly objective records of a new world, both were engraved with meanings deeply dependent on colonial perception.

These early encounters and visual records betray the ambivalent reactions of most European forces towards the Arctic peoples they encountered. Although Europeans showed a certain fascination with what they imagined to be uncivilized savages, this interest gave way quickly to self-interest. It is clear that, from these

⁸⁴ Richard G. Condon, "The History and Development of Arctic Photography," *Arctic Anthropology* 26 no. 1 (1989): 47.

⁸⁵ Michael Gaudio, *Engraving the Savage: The New World and Techniques of Civilization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), ix-xi.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, xi.

first colonial contacts, the overwhelming ideological structure underpinning early polar colonization was that of indigenous subjugation, assimilation, and extinction. British explorer John Ross reduced these beliefs to their most brutal, succinct form in 1835, saying:

[The Inuit] have yet... to acquire the taste [for alcohol] which has, in ruining the morals, hastened the extermination of their American neighbors to the southward. If, however, these tribes must finally disappear, as seems their fate, it is at least better, that they should die gradually by the force of rum, than that they should be exterminated in masses by the fire and the sword of Spanish conquest; since there is at least some pleasure, such as it is, in the mean time, while there is also a voluntary, if slow suicide, in exchange for murder and misery. Is it not the fate of the savage and the uncivilized on this earth to give way to the more cunning and the better informed, to knowledge and society? It is the order of the world, and the right one: nor will all lamentations of mawkish philanthropy, with its more absurd or censurable efforts avail one jot against an order of things as wise as it is, assuredly established. All which it is our duty to provide for, is, that this event be not hastened by oppression and wrong, that it may not be attended by the suffering of individuals.⁸⁷

As horrifying as Ross' unapologetic rationale for genocide and cultural eradication may be to contemporary ears, this same ideology was the underlying structure for almost all European political, religious, and economic policy in the Arctic from the sixteenth century onward.

While all members of native communities suffered from the greed and imperialism of modern colonialism, it was perhaps indigenous women, whose skin designated them as other while their bodies simultaneously marked them as sexually attractive, who experienced some of the most intimate and secret forms of exploitation and violence. In encounters between European settlers, who were usually men, and native women, external signals, including tattoo and skin

⁸⁷ John Ross, *Narrative of a Second Voyage in Search of a North-West Passage and of a Residence in the Arctic Regions during the years 1829, 1830, 1831, 1832, 1833* (London: A.W. Webster, 1835), 25.

pigmentation, were used to delineate the realms of inclusion and exclusion, power and passivity. Inevitably tainted by the politics of early modern imperialism, European perspectives on native Arctic women coded physical characteristics as the basis of both racialized disdain and sexual desire.

In Alaska, Russian fur traders were the first major foreign colonizers, while in Canada, English, French, and Dutch factions competed for economic and political dominance. Explorers often focused special attention in their writings on the conflicting sense of desire and repulsion they experienced upon contact with native women.⁸⁸ Russian explorer G.H. von Langsdorff displays this tendency towards simultaneous sexual objectification and disgust in his report of voyages in the Bering Strait, saying “the physiognomy of some of the girls was really not unpleasing, though very much deformed by the lip-ornaments and by the tattooing of the chin.”⁸⁹ This ambivalence towards indigenous women and tattoos can also be observed in the writings of other European explorers and researchers. American ethnographer William Gilder observed that among the East Canadian Inuit “the women are somewhat more elaborately tattooed, despite which they are quite comely.”⁹⁰ Indeed, it was the aesthetic and ideological system of women’s tattoos that often came to stand in the minds of Russian and western European men as the ultimate signifiers of Yupik and Inuit women’s primitivism and foreignness.

⁸⁸ Gwenn A. Miller, *She Was Handsome but Tattooed: Communities of Empire in Early Russian Alaska, 1784-1820* (Thesis (Ph. D.)--Duke University, 2004), 2.

⁸⁹ G. H. von. Langsdorff, *Voyages and travels in various parts of the world during the years* (Amsterdam: N. Israel, 1968), 236.

⁹⁰ William H. Gilder, *Schwatka’s Search: Sledging in the Arctic in Quest of the Franklin Records* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1881), 80.

A portrait by John Russell of a Labrador Inuk woman named Mikak demonstrates clearly the conflicting notions of race and gender read onto the female indigenous body and signified by the motifs of skin and tattoo (Fig. 6). Originally captured by British soldiers in 1767, Mikak was taught some English and brought to Britain in 1768 “in hopes of establishing better communication with the Inuit and increasing the trade in oil and whale bone.”⁹¹ There, she became a small sensation among curious members of the British upper class due to her personality as “a charismatic and intelligent woman, aware of her impression on people, and sensitive to its impact.”⁹²

While in England, Mikak sat for a portrait by John Russell in 1769. Commissioned by zoologist Joseph Banks, the painting depicts Mikak with her son Tutuak.⁹³ Mikak is shown wearing traditional Inuit clothing and jewelry, as well as a bracelet, which she received as a gift from the Duke of Gloucester. She also holds a coronation pin of King George III in her right hand.⁹⁴ Russell carefully depicted Mikak’s facial tattoos in the portrait, including chin stripes, and lines across her cheeks and forehead. This detail is unsurprising considering that this portrait would have served its patron as an ethnographic study. Under the scientific eye of John Banks, Russell’s painstakingly rendered illustration of Mikak’s tattoos and Inuit dress were necessary to “objectively” map the degree of her difference from the civilized British subject.

⁹¹ Marianne P. Stopp, “Eighteenth Century Labrador Inuit in England,” *Arctic* 62 no.1 (2009): 48

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

To Joseph Banks and countless other European observers in the eighteenth century, Mikak's skin and the marks placed upon it served as the visual basis upon which to "engrave" her identity as exotic other. Although she was feted as a minor celebrity during her stay in England and presented with numerous ornaments and gifts, these emblems of civil society appear only to have made Mikak's own Inuit clothing and accessories appear that much more curious to European eyes. In fact, after Mikak's return to Labrador, where she lobbied among her people for the support of Moravian missionaries, church leader James Hutton noted with something approaching satisfaction that "[Mikak's] presents are now spoild & good for nothing; & she Herself is far from being happier by what She received in England. She is prouder, more wretched and miserable than she was before, less contented with the Station she must however submit to."⁹⁵ From Hutton's perspective, nothing Mikak achieved or received could place her within the realm of the civilized subject. Despite learning English, traveling to Europe, and supporting Christian missions in the Arctic, Mikak's difference, and by extension, inferiority, were marked as indelibly on her person as the blue lines of tattoo pierced into her skin.

Whereas printmaking and painting were the primary colonial visual practices until the mid-nineteenth century, the advent of photography brought European and American explorers unparalleled opportunities to examine, categorize, and record indigenous peoples. Photography in the style that is often called anthropological, that is, intended as a scientific illustration of physical and

⁹⁵ Marianne P. Stopp, "Eighteenth Century Labrador Inuit in England," *Arctic* 62 no.1 (2009): 52.

cultural information for reference and study, has been an inextricable element of the colonial venture since the late nineteenth century. Christopher Pinney notes that

For early anthropologists, external forms offered stability and reassurance through what E.B. Tylor would later call 'object lessons'... Anthropologists were suspicious of verbal data and 'personal observation' lacked the methodological rigour that it would later acquire. There was a twofold problem with 'native testimony': anthropologists lacked the necessary linguistic competence, but they were also skeptical of the transparency of 'natives,' assuming that irrelevance, deviation and untruth were likely to predominate...Photography was quickly recognized as a vital tool in the transmission of data, and what was thought to be reliable data at that. Photography's chemical connection to what it depicted, the fact that, as Benjamin wrote, it was 'seared with reality,' suggested that it might be capable of capturing and conveying 'facts about which there are no question.'⁹⁶

This concept of the photographic image as a transparent window into far-off lands and unknown cultures is belied by the often carefully constructed nature of even the earliest ethnographic photography. Unsurprisingly, women's tattoos were popular subjects of Arctic photography, as they represented in the minds of European explorers with almost grotesque clarity the vast gulf between settler and native culture that colonial agents came north expecting to find. Tattoos were a convenient, visible marker of the difference that Western society needed to prove in order to support its own claims of superiority.⁹⁷

Christopher Trott reminds us that, in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, photography in the field, especially in such an arduous environment as

⁹⁶ Christopher Pinney, *Photography and Anthropology* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2011), 14-15.

⁹⁷ At times, Euro-American photographers even instructed native northern women to darken their facial tattoos with ink prior to having their pictures taken, as the original tattooed patterns did not show up with sufficient contrast in early images. In order to fully illustrate the otherness of indigenous bodies, direct experience or written description were insufficient; difference had to be made legible, recognizable, and inescapable in visual forms so that it could be seen as self-evident in the rhetoric of scientific objectivity. Jim Burant, "Using Photography to Assert Canadian Sovereignty in the Arctic: The A.P. Low Expedition of 1903-4 Aboard the CGS Neptune," in *Imaging the Arctic*, ed. J.C.H. King and Henrietta Lidchi (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), 84.

the Arctic, was a laborious, difficult project.⁹⁸ “Bulky cameras and heavy glass plates” made polar photography a serious project, even after dry plate technology made wet collodion plates and their attendant processual requirements unnecessary in the 1880s.⁹⁹ In order to capture images appropriate to the interests of researchers and explorers, individuals, situations, and settings were often carefully posed and constructed for maximum effectiveness.¹⁰⁰ Our contemporary concept of the candid, unstudied snapshot was years removed from the men who traversed the ice and snow of the American Arctic with so many different agendas for political control, economic advancement, and scientific research. Although photography was utilized for its apparent veracity and objectivity, the visual documents created by colonial cameras and in darkrooms were constructed to tell a story largely dependent on the needs and desires of its creators.

Even today, the perception many Americans and European have of indigenous Arctic peoples is largely indebted to the rhetorical strategies presented through photographic images in the early age of polar exploration and anthropology. Many disparate forces participated in the colonization of the American Arctic, and what was considered scientific research at the time was often

⁹⁸ Christopher G. Trott, “The Dialectics of ‘Us’ and ‘Other’: Anglican Missionary Photographs of The Inuit,” *The American Review of Canadian Studies* (2001): 176.

⁹⁹ Perhaps the first Arctic photographs were produced by Amos Bonsall on a 1853 American expedition, when Bonsall created what are most likely the only daguerreotypes created in the Arctic, which were later lost. The wet plate collodion process invented in 1851 was technically more convenient than the expensive, time-consuming, and un-duplicatable process used to make daguerreotypes. However, the new process still required a photographer to travel with his chemicals so as to prepare his glass plate immediately before taking an image, and to develop the plate within an hour afterwards. The advent of dry plate technology allowed photographers to travel with prepared glass plates that did not need to be immediately developed, and significantly opened the possibilities of integrating photography into Arctic expeditions and research. Richard G. Condon, “The History and Development of Arctic Photography,” *Arctic Anthropology* 26 no. 1 (1989): 51-54.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 59.

carried out by individuals with widely varying backgrounds and purposes. Pinney writes that, when it came to Arctic anthropology,

there was no single methodology. Much of what was called ‘anthropology’ was the product of a division of labor between ‘men on the spot’ and theorists and synthesizers based in the colonial metropole (Oxford, Paris, Berlin, and elsewhere). The men on the spot might be missionaries, traders, or colonial administrators. And some of those did their own work of theorizing and publishing without a Tylor or a Frazer to mediate their observations.¹⁰¹

This decentralized network of agents concerned with a number of separate objectives, often only tangentially related to any kind of “objective” scientific research or study, makes the history of Arctic photography a complicated web of half-truths and mixed motives.

Scholar Lisa Bloom examines the role of fetishization and exploitation in American exploration of the Arctic, focusing specifically on explorer Robert Peary’s relationships with and writings regarding Inuit women. While attempting to reach the North Pole, Peary took a young Inuit girl named Allakasingwah as a mistress. As Gisli Palsson relates, European explorers, traders, and administrators often formed relationships with native women, who were referred to as “seamstresses,” and expected to combine the services of concubine and domestic staff.¹⁰² Although Euro-American explorers would often form functional families with native women, fathering children and setting up temporary households, few acknowledged or continued contact with their native wives and children when they returned to “civilization.” However, some artifacts of these intimate colonial ventures remain, often in the form of anthropological and scientific photography.

¹⁰¹ Christopher Pinney, *Photography and Anthropology* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2011), 15.

¹⁰² Gisli Palsson, “Race and the Intimate in Arctic Exploration,” *Ethnos* 69 no. 3 (2004), 369.

Allakasingwah eventually gave birth to Peary's son, who was not recognized by Peary after he returned from exploration.¹⁰³ Peary wrote frankly of his relationship with Allakasingwah, and cited the relative sexual openness of the Inuit as justification for his colonial dalliances. He declared Inuit women "a race of naive children of nature, who are hampered by no feelings of false modesty or bashfulness in expressing their tender feelings."¹⁰⁴ Although Peary appears to have felt little if any responsibility to or lasting interest in his Inuit family, he could not resist co-opting the photographer's lens to provide himself and his readers with a permanent trophy of his Arctic conquests.

In *Northward over the "Great Ice,"* Peary displays a large photo of Allakasingwah, who he posed nude in an awkward re-imagining of the classic European odalisque (Fig. 7).¹⁰⁵ Here, Allakasingwah is forced to assume a position of sexualized availability; her body twists across a background of large boulders, bare

¹⁰³ Lisa Bloom, *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 104-105. The odalisque is a category of the female nude developed from eighteenth-century stereotypes produced by European colonists in Muslim territories, and popularized in the nineteenth century by romantic painters. This figure was based on orientalized imagery of the beautiful Islamic harem girl, who is depicted in an attitude of decadence, passivity, and continuous sexual availability. The motif of the odalisque had little basis in the reality of Islamic life, and was instead a receptacle for both European male fantasy and Victorian assertions of the superior sexual and gender relations of white society. It is fascinating that Peary chose the by then antique figure of the odalisque to superimpose on Allakasingwah, as in its original iterations, the odalisque always signified not only sexual availability, but also forced servitude. One is left to conclude that Peary was either unaware of the connotations of slavery bound up in the odalisque, or that he was knowingly advertising his masculine conquest of both the Arctic landscape and its surrogate body in the form of the Inuit woman. Either way, this strange photograph is a telling commentary on the intent of European settlers, not only to conquer the Arctic and its inhabitants, but also to bend them to colonial service. For more information on European ideas and depictions of Islamic women, see Mohja Kahf, *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Teragant to Odalisque* (Austin, Tex: University of Texas Press, 1999).

¹⁰⁴ Robert Peary, *Northward over the "Great Ice": A Narrative Life and Work along the Shores and upon the Interior Ice-Cap of Northern Greenland in the Years 1886 and 1891-9*, vol. 2 (London: Methuen, 1898), 404.

¹⁰⁵ Lisa Bloom, *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 104.

breasts pushed forward against the picture plane while one knee is raised to slightly obscure her genitals. One arm rests on a fur strewn over the rocks, while the other is placed provocatively on her hip. The photo is titled “Mother of Seals (An Eskimo Legend),” continuing the European justification of the sexualized female nude through the imposition of a mythological context.

This photo is unlike any other image in *Northward over the “Great Ice;”* although Peary took a number of other pictures of Inuit men and women in various states of dress and undress, these images were taken in the ethnographic mode. What Peary’s odalisque demonstrates is that, even under the guise of objective research, acquisitive desire was an important element of the colonial venture. While Allakasingwah’s skin and indigenous identity were represented through photography as primitive, making her unworthy of the respect and commitment due to a white woman of Peary’s class, her female body still marked her as a sexual object, available for the explorer’s service and the viewer’s gaze.

Not all Euro-American men were as comfortable with cross-cultural relations as Peary. While Peary’s relationship with Allakasingwah represents a particularly intimate form of exploitation, colonial racism was a two-sided coin. Many Euro-American men looked down on those who “fraternized” with native women. Russian and European men had been working in the Arctic as trappers, whalers, and fishermen since at least the seventeenth century, and some of these men chose to take Inuit, Yupik, and Aleut wives, with whom they made permanent homes and families. As Ann Laura Stoler has demonstrated so effectively in her discussions of colonial sexuality, relations between European men and native women were

thought to be necessary for the efficacy and wellbeing of white men, but were conversely sites of dangerous permeability and insecurity.¹⁰⁶ Often, the Europeans who took Arctic wives were working men, considered to belong to a lower class in their countries of origin, and their unions with native women were seen as signs of their innate coarseness and immorality.¹⁰⁷ During the 1903-4 Canadian expedition on board the CGS *Neptune*, tension arose between whaling captain George Comer and Major John Moodie, an officer of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police, due to Comer's relationship with an Inuk woman, Niviatsilaq, and the couple's son.¹⁰⁸

Two photographs remain from this expedition as records of Comer and Niviatsilaq's relationship. The first is a group shot of Comer's whaling crew taken in 1904. In the back center of the picture, Comer sits comfortably holding his Inuit son, proudly including his child in this permanent record. Apparently Major Moodie disapproved, both of Comer's relationship and of his public recognition of this relationship, and Comer noted angrily in his journal his distaste for Moodie's treatment of the Inuit people.¹⁰⁹ Expedition photographer A.P. Low also captured an image of Niviatsilaq, referred to as "Shoofly Comer," in an ornately beaded fringed parka, tailored trousers, and beaded hair wraps, with her tattoos accentuated by ink lines drawn on her skin in order to show the patterns clearly in the photo (Fig. 8).¹¹⁰ Finely dressed and tattooed, with a firm, unwavering gaze, Niviatsilaq seems

¹⁰⁶ Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

¹⁰⁷ Gwenn A. Miller, *She Was Handsome but Tattooed: Communities of Empire in Early Russian Alaska, 1784-1820* [Thesis (Ph. D.)--Duke University, 2004].

¹⁰⁸ Jim Burant, "Using Photography to Assert Canadian Sovereignty in the Arctic: The A.P. Low Expedition of 1903-4 Aboard the CGS *Neptune*," in *Imaging the Arctic*, ed. J.C.H. King and Henrietta Lidchi (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), 85

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 87.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 84.

confident, unconcerned by the perceptions of outsiders. This photo demonstrates the opposing significations of the indigenous female body in native and colonial societies. While Niviatsilaq presented herself as an exemplary Inuk woman, well dressed and extensively tattooed for beauty and status, to a Euro-American observer such as Moodie, these same signifiers (clothing, tattoos, etc.) could only be read as self-evident indicators of Niviatsilaq's difference and subsequent inferiority.

While unrelated to sexual relations between colonizers and native populations, photos produced by Christian missionaries in the Arctic were equally invested in presenting native peoples as primitive and inferior. At times, this agenda included representations of women and indigenous tattoos, but even missionary photos that avoided these subjects were taken with the purpose of devaluing and diminishing all aspects of indigenous culture, including tattoos. As Alethea Arnaquq-Baril has mentioned, tattoos were often believed by Christian missionaries to be problematic symbols of shamanistic traditions,¹¹¹ and were thus some of the first cultural practices to be eradicated during religious conversion and residential schooling. Ashleigh Gaul noted this push to curtail indigenous religious activity among the Inuit on Baffin Island, writing that:

the early missionary Edmund Peck... did an efficient job converting shamans to Christians and wiping out cultural practices along with religious ones. Drum dancing and throat singing disappeared from every day life, not necessarily because they were shamanistic, but because they were traditional, and when they were unable to tell the difference, the missionaries often erred on the conservative side.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Alethea Arnaquq-Baril, "Tunniit: Retracing the Lines of Inuit Tattoos," *Unikkaat Studios, Inc.*, accessed June 13, 2014, <http://www.unikkaat.com/projects/tunniit-retracing-the-lines-of-inuit-tattoos/>.

¹¹² Ashleigh Gaul, "Between the Lines: Tracing the Controversial History and Recent Revival of Inuit Facial Tattoos," *Up Here* (September 2014): 30.

As a “factual” visual medium, photography allowed missionaries to construct a convincing and uneven dichotomy between indigenous religions and Christianity.

Trott has examined the function of photography collected under the oversight of Archibald Lang Fleming, an Anglican missionary in the early part of the twentieth century, who eventually became the first Bishop of the Arctic.¹¹³ Far from unstudied, these images created a particular vision of the Inuit that fit most readily with the goals and needs of the Anglican mission. Since the Inuit had had contact with Europeans, and by extension one form or another of Christianity since the sixteenth century, many indigenous northern communities had already converted or formed syncretic belief systems mixing previous spiritual practices with relevant Christian principles.¹¹⁴ Thus, Anglican and Catholic missions were forced “to demonstrate that there were still heathen to convert in order to continue receiving support for their work.”¹¹⁵

In order to create a perceived need for evangelical work in the Arctic, Fleming produced a number of publications that juxtaposed the noble, civilizing work of the Christian missionary with the squalid primitivism of the “savage” Inuit. Fleming perceived the Inuit in evolutionary terms, describing them as children half in darkness who could still be potentially led out into the light of faith and Western civilization. Photography functioned as an essential tool for Fleming to create a legible dichotomy between the saved and civilized convert and the intractable wild native stubbornly clinging to shamanistic religion and nomadic habits. An example

¹¹³ Christopher G. Trott, “The Dialectics of ‘Us’ and ‘Other’: Anglican Missionary Photographs of The Inuit,” *The American Review of Canadian Studies* (2001): 175.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 174-177.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 177.

of this kind of visual contrast can be seen in the first issue of *Fellowship of the Arctic*, the Diocese of the Arctic's yearly newsletter to the Christian community back home. In this 1929 publication, two images of the Inuit are placed side by side: a picture of an Inuit mother and child from the Perry River region and a school photograph of two Inuit brothers in uniform jackets from Lakefield Preparatory school.¹¹⁶

In the first photo, the Inuit mother and her toddler are not named, merely captioned with their geographical origin and the emphatic explanation "These are pagans."¹¹⁷ In this image, the mother appears disheveled, her hair coming down around her forehead and ears, her eyes squinting at the camera, mouth half open with guarded skepticism. Her child sucks his finger, staring out of the image's frame, unaware of the pictorial strategy of which he has become a part. Both sitters wear skin clothing, and are placed against a stark, unadorned white background. In the image on the left, two Inuit boys are designated by English names, Sam and Ben, and appear to engage knowingly with the camera, gazing directly at the viewer and smiling. Both are impeccably neat, with close cropped hair, pressed white dress shirts, and dark ties. Set against what appears to be a dark professional backdrop, these two boys represent the triumph of Western schooling. It is not difficult to perceive the imaginary progression that Fleming created here for his religious readers and financial backers.

In looking from the "pagan" child set on his mother's lap in a rumpled skin garment to the polished, bourgeois self-presentation of the two young boys, the

¹¹⁶ Peter Geller, "Pictures of the Arctic Night: Archibald Lang Fleming and the Representation of the Canadian Inuit," in *Imaging the Arctic*, ed. J.C.H. King and Henrietta Lidchi (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), 64.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

viewer was meant to imagine the possibilities that could be achieved if all Inuit children could be wrested from their ignorant parents and placed in the care of missionaries. Here we see the transition that John Tagg speaks of, where photography turned at the end of the nineteenth century from a marker of middle-class affluence and success into a means of surveillance and control.¹¹⁸ In a visual system such as this, where external markers signified internal assimilation, the visible cultural markers of indigenous tattoos were especially unwelcome. Although Fleming's portrait of Sam and Ben gave an illusion of the possibility for Inuit children to rise and join the ranks of the American bourgeois through education, in reality, photography in the hands of administrators and churchmen like Fleming became a tool for colonial control over indigenous peoples.

Photography gave Euro-American religious and governmental agents the power to capture and examine individuals from a safe distance, and from there to judge their relative inferiority or progress. Based on this assessment, colonial forces could then determine the most efficient methods of re-molding indigenous identity into the familiar and useful form of the civilized modern subject. As signifiers of older ways such as amulets and tattoos disappeared and were replaced with Euro-American clothing, carefully cleaned skin, and styled hair, Christian missionaries strove to ape God in generative capacity--to re-make the savage in their own image. Fleming wrote to the director of the Canadian Northwest Territories and the Yukon Branch, declaring "the idea is not to educate these boys and send them back to the

¹¹⁸ John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 58-59.

simple primitive Eskimo life, but to send them back for all practical purposes as white men.”¹¹⁹

In the two photos discussed above, Fleming used photography to create a powerful visual illusion of progress, where under the ministrations of Christian charity the ignorant savage moved from the darkness of his ethnicity and unbelief to the light of faith, prosperity, and whiteness.¹²⁰ Although this photographic record of “conversion” dealt specifically with young boys, who would not have been tattooed, it is reasonable to assume that this heavy-handed colonial agenda of assimilation was also largely responsible for the erasure of tattooing as a social practice in subsequent generations of young native women. Yupik educator Christopher Koonooka observed that,

It seems like those folks who were born after 1915 stopped getting tattoos. Some were actually feeling fortunate for not being tattooed, and some were feeling ashamed for being tattooed, saying they didn’t like them. Perhaps some were embarrassed about their tattoos, as some may have been influenced by the Christianity of those times.¹²¹

This religiously-inflected shame surrounding indigenous tattoos, coupled with secular U.S. and Canadian governmental pressures on native arctic peoples to dissolve their distinct cultures and merge with dominant colonial structures, strongly discouraged arctic tattoos as clear visual evidence of indigenous beliefs and identity.

¹¹⁹ (Fleming) Peter Geller, “Pictures of the Arctic Night: Archibald Lang Fleming and the Representation of the Canadian Inuit,” in *Imaging the Arctic*, ed. J.C.H. King and Henrietta Lidchi (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), 65.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 64.

¹²¹ Lars Krutak, *Tattoo Traditions of Native North America: Ancient and Contemporary Expressions of Identity* (Arnhem: Stichting LM Publishers, 2014), 19.

Fleming's photographic project was predicated on the assumption, influenced by early modern theories of physiognomy and the innate self, that a person's inner being was reflected in some tangible way by their outward appearance. As Geller states when discussing the educational slide shows Fleming assembled for congregations in Britain and America, "images of the people themselves (presumably portraits) were thrown on the screen as Fleming provided detailed information on physiognomy, situating the Eskimo as an object of study and highlighting their physical 'otherness' as a race apart."¹²² As some of the most clearly visible indicators of difference and otherness, tattoos became, in the eyes of colonial agents, symbols of indigenous ignorance and error. Here again is the modern assumption of the innate, externally legible self; in Fleming's mind, the physical appearance of the Inuit displayed not only their inward spiritual state, but also their essential, distinct racial nature.

By imagining Arctic society as occupying a lower rung on the ladder of cultural and biological evolution, individuals like Fleming argued that to become fully human, native people must evolve to the pinnacle of human development and civilization--white culture. One of the primary ways this goal could be achieved was to remove children--the future generation--from the influence of their native parents, and to place them in church-run residential schools. In Fleming's images, we see a troubling precursor of the cultural erasure and violent exploitation that was to become a painful legacy of the system of residential and boarding schools set up across the U.S. and Canada for the re-education and assimilation of native

¹²² Ibid, 63.

children. These residential schools played an enormous part in the whole-sale decimation of indigenous culture, and practices such as tattooing, that occurred in North America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Although European, church-administered schooling for native children in what would later become the nation of Canada began as early as 1620 under a French Franciscan order,¹²³ intensive attempts to institute a system of residential schools did not begin until the mid-nineteenth century, when, to quote J.R. Miller, “Indians were no longer essential to the realization of the goals that non-Natives were pursuing in North America.”¹²⁴ Miller explains that “relations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had promoted interracial cooperation because newcomers in the northern part of the continent were dependent on the indigenous population for the conditions that would allow them to harvest fish, furs, and souls.”¹²⁵ However, after the end of the War of 1812, when native populations became unimportant as military allies, and the 1821 consolidation of the North West Company and the Hudson’s Bay Company, which moved the fur trade out of Montreal, “Natives in eastern North America [became] as superfluous commercially as they were now perceived to be diplomatically and militarily.”¹²⁶

These political and economic realities, coupled with an influx of British settlers into the region, set the stage for a concerted attempt by the British government to use the inexpensive option of church-funded schools as a tool to

¹²³ J. R. Miller, *Shingwauk’s Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 39.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 62.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 61-62.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 62.

create complacent, productive citizens out of what were now inconvenient native populations.¹²⁷ Indigenous peoples in the Arctic were originally shielded from much government interference by the harsh polar climate and their continued usefulness as guides, seamstresses, and interpreters for Euro-American expeditions. However, by the twentieth century, the Canadian government was attempting to establish sovereignty over its Arctic territories, and the Inuit came more and more under settler scrutiny.¹²⁸

It is difficult to overstate the effect the residential school system has had on indigenous communities, both in Canada generally, and in the Arctic specifically.

Alethea Arnaquq-Baril, a native Canadian filmmaker who will be discussed in greater detail in chapter three, relates:

It has been said that Inuit underwent the most intense and rapid cultural changes of any *surviving* culture. While the First Nations and Metis... suffered as much or more than their arctic counterparts, their cultural changes took place over hundreds of years, whereas Canadian Inuit were colonized much later, and went “from the ice age to the space age” in one generation. As a society, we are still reeling from the transition... Today, evangelical Christianity is a shockingly strong force in arctic Inuit communities, causing tension around discussing anything that remotely touches on the old spiritual beliefs. The Inuit that attended residential schools, the generation that had their culture beaten out of them, and had their mouths washed out with soap when they spoke their native language – these people are hurting and confused. In some cases, the mere mention of traditional tattoos is enough to send a person into a spitting rage.¹²⁹

Unsurprisingly, an educational enterprise steeped as it was in the rhetoric of cultural eradication and European supremacy produced incalculable damage in

¹²⁷ Ibid, 63.

¹²⁸ Jim Burant, “Using Photography to Assert Canadian Sovereignty in the Arctic: The A.P. Low Expedition of 1903-4 Aboard the CGS Neptune,” in *Imaging the Arctic*, ed. J.C.H. King and Henrietta Lidchi (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), 77.

¹²⁹ Alethea Arnaquq-Baril, “Tunniit: Retracing the Lines of Inuit Tattoos,” *Unikkaat Studios, Inc.*, accessed June 13, 2014, <http://www.unikkaat.com/projects/tunniit-retracing-the-lines-of-inuit-tattoos/>.

families torn apart, children abused and alienated from their spiritual, societal, and ecological heritage, and countless productive indigenous lifeways and epistemologies weakened or obliterated.

One of the few scholars to specifically research the history of the residential school system in Arctic territories, Anthony di Mascio states emphatically:

The process of acculturation in the Canadian north was about more than just transferring the social values of Euro-Canadians into Aboriginal minds and communities. It was a means of making Aboriginal culture impure in the eyes of Aboriginal children themselves in an effort to strip their identities bare and assure that any attempt at reintegration with kin and community would fail. In other words, residential schooling was not a process of socio-cultural and economic knowledge transmission, but of diminution.¹³⁰

Although residential schooling purported to prepare native children to take their place in a larger Canadian society, it instead only estranged them from their families, and sent them back into their communities without the skills necessary to successfully negotiate their culture and environment. The reality was that Inuit and Yupik cultures had engaged with the realities of a polar lifestyle for centuries before European explorers ever set foot above the treeline, and most religious and governmental attempts to modify or replace elements of traditional lifestyles created far-reaching rifts in the lives and memories of native peoples. In this era of cultural erasure and societal upheaval, ancient practices such as women's tattoos were largely uprooted and discontinued.

With these grim realities in mind, it is important to remember that indigenous Arctic people have never been passive in their relations with colonial forces. Although Euro-American expansion has been cause for a great deal of pain

¹³⁰ Anthony Di Mascio and Leigh Hortop-Di Mascio, "Residential Schooling in the Arctic: A Historical Case Study and Perspective," *Native Studies Review* 20 no. 2 (2012): 34.

and change, from the beginning the Inuit and Yupik have actively engaged with foreign elements to develop appropriate tools and practices for the ongoing survival and development of their culture and communities. One final image of an Arctic woman demonstrates both the strength and dignity of indigenous femininity in the face of colonial pressures--a woman whose tattoos speak of her resiliency, pride, and beauty.

This photo was taken by Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen during his 1903-1906 expedition to sail through the Northwest passage. During his time in the American Arctic, Amundsen formed a relationship with the Netsilik Inuit and took a number of photographs of the people and their culture.¹³¹ One of these photos is a striking portrait of Onaller, a Netsilik woman and her infant son (Fig. 9). In this photo, we can see Onaller's numerous fine chin stripes, representing her maturity as a woman and mother. Amundsen has caught her in the moment before speech, and Onaller's eyes gaze back at the photographer with familiarity. Seeming comfortable in front of the camera, Onaller breaks through the paradigm of the ethnographic subject, smiling knowingly at us over more than a century of passing time. She stands confidently, clad in a thick fur parka, with her son gazing curiously over her shoulder. The pale lines of pigment on Onaller's chin function, not as an exotic symbol in the mind of the colonist, but as an agreement, a sign of agency in her embodiment of Inuit womanhood. These marks were meant to literally transform Onaller's physical female body into the culturally gendered body of a woman, one who engaged appropriately with her family, community, and environment. Despite

¹³¹ Ann Christine Eek, "The Roald Amundsen Photographs of the Netsilik People, 1903-5," in *Imaging the Arctic*, ed. J.C.H. King and Henrietta Lidchi (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), 121-122.

the ominous encroachment of colonial powers, this image stands as a reminder of the power and resilience of indigenous northern women.

This enduring power of indigenous femininity gives ongoing relevance and importance to Inuit and Yupik tattoos for the current generation of native women and artists. Like Arctic culture, tattoos have proven tenacious against the efforts of colonial society and today are seeing a rebirth on skin, canvases, and film through the work of indigenous northern artists. These artists utilize the transformative aspects of Arctic tattoos as tools to question contemporary America's obsession with skin and self, as well as the means to create and re-create a sense of identity through agency and never-ending negotiation.

Chapter 5. Creating New Possibilities

Today, indigenous artists examine and negotiate centuries of changing history. As Arctic women create new ways of making meaning in the contemporary moment, the ancient imagery of skin, stitching, and tattoo continues to provide a productive metaphor for a variety of transformative processes. Kathleen Ash-Milby argues that “for Native people, skin encompasses an entire universe of meaning. Our own skin functions as a canvas that we can inscribe with messages about our identity, or use as a shield, protecting and hiding our secrets.”¹³² After more than a century of religious and governmental re-education and forced assimilation, the forms and practices of indigenous tattoos are being re-discovered and implemented by native women who are seeking to engage with elements of their heritage that were almost lost.

Alethea Arnaquq-Baril, a young Inuit filmmaker from Canada, has done documentary work to uncover the fraught history of tattoo among her own community, and chose to apply traditional face and hand tattoos during this project. Other indigenous women, such as Yupik educator Yaari Kingeekuk, have also made the decision to receive these permanent marks of agency and identity. In a different vein, artists such as mixed-media painter Sonya Kelliher-Combs and photographer/performance artist Erica Lord examine the legacy and continued relevance of tattoos and skin, both as subject and medium. Although each of these women utilizes the forms and meanings of tattoos in different ways, they all speak to the creative agency inherent in this embodied artistic practice.

¹³² Kathleen Ash-Milby, “Hide,” in *Hide: Skin as Material and Metaphor*, ed. Kathleen Ash-Milby (New York: National Museum of the American Indian, 2010), 15.

Filmmaker Alethea Arnaquq-Baril engages directly with the subject of Arctic tattooing. Born and brought up in Iqaluit, Nunavit, Arnaquq-Baril strives to provide a voice to the members of her native community, communicating their history and culture to a larger global audience.¹³³ Similarly, Yaari Kingeekuk's work as a cultural educator at the Alaska Native Heritage Center focuses on preserving and teaching Yupik practices such as music, dance, and traditional subsistence techniques.¹³⁴ Both women have made the choice to apply hand and face tattoos in the historic manner of their ancestors, and to use these contested signifiers as tools of communication, education, and self-creation. Although European explorers prophesied the end of Arctic tattooing during the nineteenth century, when it was assumed that both native people and their cultures were on the verge of extinction, Arnaquq-Baril and Kingeekuk prove the enduring relevance and potential for this art form in their own lives and work.

Alethea Arnaquq-Baril is an award-winning young documentary filmmaker who graduated from Sheridan College Institute of Technology, and has also studied animation and illustration techniques at Advanced Learning and Banff Center.¹³⁵ She has created a number of video projects through her production company, Unikkaat Studios Inc., that address concerns ranging from colonial stereotypes, to Canadian residential schools, to subsistence hunting rights. Arnaquq-Baril's 2010

¹³³ Alethea Arnaquq-Baril, "About," *Unikkaat Studios, Inc.*, accessed June 13, 2014, <http://www.unikkaat.com/about/>.

¹³⁴ Mike Dunham, "Savoonga Artist to Explore Traditional Native Tattoos," *Anchorage Daily News*, last modified April 2, 2011, <http://www.adn.com/2011/04/02/1788951/savoonga-artist-to-explore-traditional.html>.

¹³⁵ "Alethea Arnaquq-Baril," *NMAI Film Catalog*, accessed June 13, 2014, <http://filmcatalog.nmai.si.edu/person/4510/>.

documentary, *Tunniit: Retracing the Lines of Inuit Tattoos*, charts the artist's personal journey to discover the history of tattoos in her native community after years of Christian mission work and governmental schooling had striven to erase the traces of this practice.

Arnaquq-Baril calls this film "an intensely personal project" that chronicles her own journey towards understanding and acquiring Inuit women's tattoos.¹³⁶ She speaks of the spiritual hunger she experiences as an indigenous woman who has been forcibly disconnected from many aspects of her heritage, saying:

I am not a residential school survivor. I am not an alcoholic, nor are my parents alcoholics. I never suffered any kind of abuse as a child. I am not illiterate or living in poverty. Though many, many of my fellow Inuit have suffered some or all of these harsh realities, I have been extraordinarily lucky and blessed to have healthy parents, a good education in both English and Inuktitut, and a good job. Yet, I have still felt a deep, inexplicable sense of loss in my soul that I have spent my life trying to address.¹³⁷

It is this loss and disconnection that inspired Arnaquq-Baril to examine historical Arctic tattoos--a deeply contentious subject in her community, where evangelical Christianity has made many elders uncomfortable or even angry about discussing a practice that is still often linked in converts' minds with older, shamanic religious traditions.¹³⁸ Arnaquq-Baril was also challenged about her right to wear these tattoos, with some individuals arguing that, since her father is white, she is not "native enough" to use Inuit designs.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ Alethea Arnaquq-Baril, "Tunniit: Retracing the Lines of Inuit Tattoos," *Unikkaat Studios, Inc.*, accessed June 13, 2014, <http://www.unikkaat.com/projects/tunniit-retracing-the-lines-of-inuit-tattoos/>.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Carolyne Weldon, "Tracing the Lines of Identity: An Impromptu Conversation about Inuit Face Tattoos," *NFB Blog*, last modified November 8, 2011, <http://blog.nfb.ca/2011/11/08/inuit-face-tattoos/>.

Erica Lord has commented on the troubling rhetoric behind these kinds of demands for “authenticity” in the lives and work of native people. She says of her own experiences, “[In Alaska] I was considered a white baby by my relatives. In Michigan, I was an Indian... It's much more complicated to talk about now. We used to be 'half-breeds.' Now we're 'mixed ethnicity.' People say, 'You don't look Native.' What does that mean?”¹⁴⁰ The ideologies behind American conceptions of racial difference posit the belief that race consists of externally legible categories into which all individuals can be comfortably organized, but reality is a great deal more complicated, and, to women like Lord and Arnaquq-Baril, identity is often a painful topic, obfuscated by society’s demands for clear, binary formulations.

Despite the tension that surrounds the subject of native tattoos, Arnaquq-Baril found several elders who were willing to talk with her, and her documentary project has been a noteworthy success. The artist states that she has received positive responses from members of her community, saying “I have felt touched and reassured to hear back from my fellow Inuit about what this film has meant to them. And though the process certainly upset and challenged my family at times, in the end we’ve come out stronger and closer for it.”¹⁴¹ *Tunniit* has been featured at several venues, including the 2011 imagineNative festival, the American Museum of Natural History, and the Indigenous World Film Festival.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Mike Dunham, “Nenana Artist Grapples with Ethnic Identity,” *Anchorage Daily News*, last modified July 31, 2009, <http://www.adn.com/2009/07/31/884688/nenana-artist-grapples-with-ethnic.html>.

¹⁴¹ Alethea Arnaquq-Baril, “Tunniit: Retracing the Lines of Inuit Tattoos,” *Unikkaat Studios, Inc.*, accessed June 13, 2014, <http://www.unikkaat.com/projects/tunniit-retracing-the-lines-of-inuit-tattoos/>.

¹⁴² While this thesis project was designed in large part with Arnaquq-Baril’s documentary in mind, I have so far been unable to view the film. Although produced in 2010, *Tunniit* is currently not available for distribution, and I have been unsuccessful in contacting Arnaquq-Baril to procure a copy for research.

Deploying tattoos for reasons similar to Arnaquq-Baril, Yupik cultural educator Yaari Kingeekuk was born in 1968 in Savoonga, St. Lawrence Island, and was brought up by her grandparents. Being raised by an older generation in her native community allowed Kingeekuk the benefit of access to a wide body of traditional knowledge and skills, where she said “my professors were my elders.”¹⁴³ As an adult, Kingeekuk moved to Anchorage, Alaska, where she works in numerous capacities to share and apply her knowledge in the native community. Although there are no living practitioners of Yupik women’s tattooing, Kingeekuk went to a mainstream parlor to have chin stripes, whale flukes, and clan symbols marked onto her hands and face. These designs were chosen as a visual record of her life and family history; the chin stripes signify, as they have for centuries, Kingeekuk’s feminine role, in her words, “They mean I’m a mature woman. I have children.”¹⁴⁴ Kingeekuk says that the designs on her wrists and hands carry a wealth of information: “My hands tell you my clan, elders, meetings, storytellers, dancers, Native games, how the houses were arranged. They’re almost like a village lifestyle story.”¹⁴⁵ The fluke motifs running down Kingeekuk’s arms refer to her father’s prowess as a whaler--the seven symbols represent his lifetime tally of whales caught.¹⁴⁶

purposes. Thus, I have gone ahead with the larger project, and hope to include more information about the documentary when it becomes available for distribution.

¹⁴³ Mike Dunham, “Savoonga Artist to Explore Traditional Native Tattoos,” *Anchorage Daily News*, last modified April 2, 2011, <http://www.adn.com/2011/04/02/1788951/savoonga-artist-to-explore-traditional.html>.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

Although instances of individuals using contemporary Arctic tattoos like Kingeekuk and Arnaquq-Baril are rare, their examples testify to the importance of recovering historic indigenous practices as tools to negotiate a complex neo-colonial world. They challenge the power of Euro-American imperialism to define and erase indigenous knowledge, and to appropriate indigenous bodies as passive signifiers. As Ash-Milby observes, “skin is a deeply symbolic reminder of historical misrepresentation, exploitation, and racial politics.”¹⁴⁷ However, in the hands of native women, skin is also a powerful potential for self-representation and change. Few young Inuit or Yupik women currently have the opportunity to engage with indigenous tattoo traditions, but as educators like Kingeekuk and artists like Arnaquq-Baril reveal both the past legacy of these forms as well as their own experiences, another generation may grow up with greater knowledge of the future possibilities for self-creation and transformation.

In less literal ways than Arnaquq-Baril and Kingeekuk, artists Sonya Kelliher-Combs and Erica Lord both engage with the transformative potential of skin--sewn, marked, and altered--in ways that reference and negotiate native epistemologies and colonial histories of exploitation and erasure. Although these artists work in very different media and styles--Kelliher-Combs through abstracted painterly collages of organic detritus and acrylic, and Lord through spare photo and performance pieces--both invoke the imagery and material of skin, and the processes of Arctic sewing and tattoo, as well as the power that these practices have and continue to represent.

¹⁴⁷ Kathleen Ash-Milby, “Hide,” in *Hide: Skin as Material and Metaphor*, ed. Kathleen Ash-Milby (New York: National Museum of the American Indian, 2010), 15.

Sonya Kelliher-Combs was born in Bethel, Alaska in 1969 into a family of multiple cultures, including Iñupiaq, Athabascan, Irish, and German. Raised in Nome, Kelliher-Combs learned indigenous practices of gathering food and natural materials from the northern Alaskan environment during her childhood. The artist studied at the University of Alaska, where she received her BFA in 1992, and at Arizona State University, where she earned her MFA in 1998.¹⁴⁸ Producing work in a variety of media, including acrylic and polymer paintings, wax-dipped graphite drawings, shaped hide sculptures, and mixed media installations, Kelliher-Combs nevertheless creates a continuity between these disparate techniques and materials through her repeated references to native sewing traditions, and her haunting evocations of secrets and loss.

Although Kelliher-Combs achieves success in many forms and materials, perhaps some of her most visually engaging and best known works are her flat paintings, either formed from stretched layers of acrylic, polymer, and animal skin, or assembled on panels. In *Pink Unraveled Secret* (Fig. 10), this format is shown to striking effect, with semi-transparent, fleshy layers of acrylic simultaneously revealing and obscuring embedded particles and threads that wind like stitches or tattooed marks through the painting's matrix. Vivid pink, orange, and purple shapes cloud the clear acrylic skin, rendering Kelliher-Combs' eccentric biomorphic forms surprisingly synthetic in appearance. Within the work's semi-shrouded interior, the organic qualities of walrus stomach blend seamlessly with artificially constructed acrylic fragments in a surface that seems at once viscerally alive and patently unreal.

¹⁴⁸ Heather Iglooliorte, "Sonya Kelliher-Combs," in *Manifestations: New Native Art Criticism*, ed. Nancy Marie Mithlo (Santa Fe: Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, 2011), 119.

One of the unique aspects of Kelliher-Combs' artistic practice is the artist's repetitive use of animal skin and viscera. Aleta Ringlero writes that "[Kelliher-Combs] often purchases hides and gut from friends on remote St. Lawrence Island...who rely on seasonal subsistence hunting. Typical materials in her mixed media pieces... can include polar bear fur and hide, walrus and spotted seal intestine, whale pericardium, porcupine quill, moose hide, and human hair."¹⁴⁹ Often, the artist stitches and embeds these organic materials into translucent, pigmented acrylic and polymer "skins," emphasizing the connection with skin and the body. An untitled poem by Kelliher-Combs lyrically illustrates the conceptual links between skin, tattoo, and identity in the artist's works: "Wearing trim/ a crest, a clan, an identifier/ who you are/ a pore/ sifting, shifting/ catching, releasing/ pouring/ secrets/ hiding, guarding/ gathering/ scraps/ the stuff one does not talk about/ the three that got away/ cords of regret/ a tie that can not be cut/ idiot strings/ tattoo/ marking, seaming/ wearing, waiting/ passage."¹⁵⁰ Kelliher-Combs' works, with their stretching, stitching, and marking, reference the historic Arctic practices of traditional sewing and tattoos, embedding the meanings of these ancient forms deep in the matrix of the artist's evocative "skins."

The historic use of animal imagery in Inuit skin garments is paralleled by Kelliher-Combs repetitive use of the walrus tusk motif in her work, as in *Salmon Walrus Family Portrait*. These works reference photos of the artist's family members in parkas adorned with white walrus tusk insets at the neck (Fig. 11). Kelliher-

¹⁴⁹ Aleta Ringlero, "Sonya Kelliher-Combs: Secret Skin," in *Hide: Skin as Material and Metaphor*, ed. Kathleen Ash-Milby (New York: National Museum of the American Indian, 2010), 49.

¹⁵⁰ Sonya Kelliher-Combs, "Untitled," in *Unraveled Secrets*, exhibition brochure (Santa Fe: IAIA Museum, 2006).

Combs engages with the transformative practice of skin sewing, evoking through her work the body and its permeable boundary, upon which identity is inscribed. Asia Freeman writes, “Through the introduction of pigments, thread, beads and hair, Kelliher-Combs produces a fleshy body, resembling epidermis or organs, a tattooed or scarred body, or a wound.”¹⁵¹ And indeed, in many of the artist’s paintings in her *Secrets* series, thin, dark threads wind through layers of acrylic, appearing and reappearing like the dark line of traditional tattoo. While historically, skin-sewing was used to transform animal skin into human clothing, and to lend to hunters an animal’s gifts, Kelliher-Combs uses these techniques to remark upon the way skin is transformed in the American imagination by its co-optation as a symbol of race and identity.

This understanding of skin and tattoos as tools of personal agency and identity creation goes contrary to the modern Euro-American ideologies that conceive of gender, race, and even class as natural and essential aspects of the fixed individual self.¹⁵² Often, this essentialist ideology constructs skin as a visible sign of difference, supposing that skin makes legible the “natural” qualities of the embodied self beneath. It is this very notion of skin as transparent signifier of identity that Kelliher-Combs seeks to disrupt. Lisa Ann Favoro makes this connection clear, stating, “Nearly all of the panels and stretched secrets exist in environments suggestive of skin, a biological organ that identity and ethnicity is regrettably often projected upon. Kelliher-Combs’ two-dimensional works resist simplistic

¹⁵¹ Asia Freeman, “Sonya Kelliher-Combs,” in *Unraveled Secrets*, exhibition brochure (Santa Fe: IAIA Museum, 2006).

¹⁵² Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 274-8.

projections and they act out the instability inherent to the process of identity formation.”¹⁵³ In Kelliher-Combs’ vibrantly colored, constructed, altered, and assembled paintings, skin is shown to be far more malleable and transformative than is often imagined.

Intrinsically connected to Kelliher-Combs treatment of skin and self is her fascination with the enclosed, elongated, pouch-like forms she refers to as “secrets.” These secrets appear in both the artist’s two-dimensional works, as well as in her sculptural and installation pieces. In *Secret Portraits*, a series of graphite and ink drawings on beeswax-dipped paper, these small ovoid shapes enclose, overlap, and even unfurl slightly to provide a guarded look within. Favero notes that often Kelliher-Combs’ secrets are “shrouded and bound, implying that the secret is degraded and abject.”¹⁵⁴ She continues: “Preserved and inaccessible, the secret as submerged artifact is capable of outlasting an individual, a generation, or even an entire culture.”¹⁵⁵

Although the definition of a secret demands that the content of such remain unknown, the translucent skin and incomplete enclosure of Kelliher-Combs’ secrets provoke an undeniable curiosity. The artist is well known for her engagement with familial, communal, and societal crises in works such as *Idiot Strings*, a series of installations in memory of relatives lost to suicide, and *She Was Only Ten*, which

¹⁵³ Lisa Ann Favero, “Stepping beyond Identity: The Secret’s Destination in the Work of Sonya Kelliher-Combs” (Anchorage: Anchorage Museum of Art, 2005), 5.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

testifies to histories and ongoing realities of child abuse.¹⁵⁶ Ringlero succinctly encapsulates the sense of loss and longing that permeates so many of the artist's works, stating:

An artist whose voice transcends the political dogma that reduces many discussions of Native art to rhetoric, Kelliher-Combs asks for consideration of subjects that are neither humorous nor convenient. She questions the real social dysfunction in small Native communities usually comprised of extended families; the demise of subsistence economies; the persistent presence of religious personnel in Native villages; related stories of child abuse; and suicide and its aftermath.¹⁵⁷

Kelliher-Combs' insistence on uncovering and memorializing intimate trauma and confronting societal injustice has at times created tension in her home community. However, her continued deployment and dismantling of the secret, both formally and metaphorically, acts as a powerful response to long-standing cultural problems that are often the direct result of the largely untold history of colonial violence and exploitation.

The toxic history of cultural erasure, abuse, and genocide in the American Arctic has undoubtedly contributed to the legacy of loss and shame embodied in Kelliher-Combs' many *Secrets*. As abuse and dysfunction are at times hidden within families and communities, so is the true history of Euro-American imperialism erased in official records, governmental policies, and cultural memory. Miranda Brady has noted the continuing elision of problematic colonial histories in official

¹⁵⁶ Heather Igloliorte, "Sonya Kelliher-Combs," in *Manifestations: New Native Art Criticism*, ed. Nancy Marie Mithlo (Santa Fe: Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, 2011), 119.

¹⁵⁷ Aleta Ringlero, "Sonya Kelliher-Combs: Secret Skin," in *Hide: Skin as Material and Metaphor*, ed. Kathleen Ash-Milby (New York: National Museum of the American Indian, 2010), 46.

institutions, such as the Canadian Museum of Civilization.¹⁵⁸ Often, past injustices such as residential schools, government-sponsored violence, and forced relocation are elided in official narratives, swept aside in triumphant accounts of Euro-American expansion and nationhood.¹⁵⁹ However, like a solitary fiber winding through history and memory, the enduring legacy of indigenous women sews together both the pain of loss and the strength of Arctic culture. With its layers of skin and thread, Kelliher-Combs' work both stands witness to injustice and trauma, and offers hope through a transformative vision of new possibilities for self-creation.

Like Kelliher-Combs, Erica Lord deals with issues of identity and transformation through a resolutely personal lens. However, Lord's spare films and photo work differ in both approach and effect, favoring confrontational clarity where Kelliher-Combs implements guarded complexity. Born in Fairbanks, Alaska in 1978, Lord comes from a family of similarly diverse origins.¹⁶⁰ With Inupiaq, Athabaskan, Finnish, Swedish, English, and Japanese ancestors, Lord is fascinated by American society's curiosity about her ethnicity, as well as its desire to categorize her into a neatly defined identity. It is this engagement with issues of identity and expectation that drives most of Lord's pieces, which range from live performance, to

¹⁵⁸ Miranda J. Brady, "The Flexible Heterotopia: Indian Residential Schools and the Canadian Museum of Civilization," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 19 no. 4 (2013), 412.

¹⁵⁹ Throughout the early twentieth century, the Canadian government made several attempts to resettle Inuit families for various reasons, including cultural and economic "rehabilitation," forced schooling, and colonization experiments. The most famous of these incidents is perhaps the High Arctic relocation experiment undertaken in the 1950's. More information on this subject can be found in Alan R. Marcus' text, *Out in the Cold: The Legacy of Canada's Inuit Relocation Experiment in the High Arctic* (Copenhagen: IWGIA, 1992).

¹⁶⁰ "Erica Lord: Artist Biography," in *Off the Map: Landscape in the Native Imagination* (New York: National Museum of the American Indian, 2007), 80.

video installations, to photo projects. Often engaged with the function of skin as a visible signifier, Lord's work questions the assumed passivity of the gendered and raced self, and strives to uncover the agency inherent to all acts of being and doing.

One of Lord's most provocative works is her series of digital photos that make up *The Tanning Project*. To produce these images, Lord applied tape letter decals to her body and then tanned her skin, so that when the tape was removed, white imprints of the letters were left behind. One photo from the series, entitled *I Tan to Look More Native*, presents Lord, back to the camera in a conventional pinup pose, with the words of the title burned into her skin (Fig. 12). French-tipped nails entwined in her hair, Lord presents her profile to the viewer in an ambivalent echo of standard glamor photography. Disrupting the Euro-American aesthetic paradigm of the decorative nude female body, Lord uses her own skin as the canvas upon which to question the veracity of flesh as ethnic marker. When discussing this series, Lord has said "I figured that since skin is the issue, I might as well make it the medium."¹⁶¹ By demonstrating her own ability to substantially alter others' perceptions through an act of transformation (in this case, sun tanning), Lord throws in doubt the notion of a fixed, racial identity.¹⁶²

Another photo in *The Tanning Project*, entitled *Colonize Me*, depicts a cropped side view of Lord's torso and legs, as she kneels, back arched suggestively. Here, Lord goes further than the previous work to explicitly connect modern concepts of race and gender with the violence and injustice perpetrated by Western colonialism.

¹⁶¹ Mike Dunham, "Nenana Artist Grapples with Ethnic Identity," *Anchorage Daily News*, last modified July 31, 2009, <http://www.adn.com/2009/07/31/884688/nenana-artist-grapples-with-ethnic.html>.

¹⁶² Haworth, John, "Under my Skin, Deep in the Heart of Me," in *Hide: Skin as Material and Metaphor*, ed. Kathleen Ash-Milby (New York: National Museum of the American Indian, 2010), 9.

Ash-Milby notes, “Since the earliest contact with Native people of the Americas, the Native body has been a source of fascination. Artists, anthropologists, explorers, and curious readers have all been enraptured, titillated, and obsessed with the sight of Native Americans with and without clothing.”¹⁶³ As discussed earlier in chapter two, colonial relations in Arctic regions often situated a sexual exoticism in the indigenous female body. In encounters between European settlers, who were usually men, and native women, external markers, including both tattoo and skin pigmentation, were used to delineate the realms of inclusion and exclusion, power and passivity.

In a similar but subtler vein, Lord’s *Un/Defined Self Portrait Series* (Fig. 13) also demonstrates the function of physical characteristics in making legible categories of race, gender, and class. Each photo portrays Lord as a different persona, with wigs, hats, jewelry, glasses, makeup, and other accessories changing the artist’s appearance to present a different possible identity. Silhouetting Lord’s face in each case against a blank white background, the photos read as banal, almost stock-quality images, similar to the bland photography used in countless advertisements, where visual stereotypes make mass-communication legible. The artist poses in a variety of guises, darkening and lightening her skin, and adding or removing accessories to conform to a range of imaginary types: the beauty queen, freckled ingénue, working class butch, and exotic native, among others.

Throughout this series, Lord examines two primary themes. First, she critiques the modern Euro-American concept of the natural self, and, like Kelliher-

¹⁶³ Kathleen Ash-Milby, “Hide,” in *Hide: Skin as Material and Metaphor*, ed. Kathleen Ash-Milby (New York: National Museum of the American Indian, 2010), 15.

Combs, demonstrates the impossibility of reading “innate” identity through the body and skin. By upending the fiction that race is a distinct, self-evident category, Lord uncovers the truth that Toller so concisely summarizes: “Racisms have riveted on ambiguous identities--racial, sexual, and otherwise--on anxieties produced precisely because such crafted differences were not clear at all... Racisms gain their strategic force, not from the fixity of their essentialisms, but from the internal malleability assigned to the changing features of racial essence.”¹⁶⁴

In *Un/Defined Self Portraits*, Lord reveals the insecurity that permeates all American conceptions and discussions of race--that the categories of racial identity are, in fact, imaginary rather than real. Secondly, Lord demonstrates the agency available through the co-optation and recreation of skin and self. By demonstrating her ability to transform into an endless array of performative presentations, Lord deploys the transformative nature of skin. Calling to mind the ancient forms of both Inuit skin-sewing and tattooing, Lord’s marks, transformations, and re-creations remind the viewer of the malleability of the body, and of its potential for mindful negotiation.

In keeping with her interest in skin and self-creation, Lord integrates the imagery of traditional Inuit tattoos into her video art, such as her short film *Imaginary Friends*. In this two minute video, Lord juxtaposes binary images of her face on a black screen. On one side, Lord wears mainstream contemporary American clothing, while on the other she has applied makeup to depict tattooed chin stripes, and wears long shell and bead earrings. In this work, the two versions of Lord

¹⁶⁴ Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 144.

engage in throat singing, a traditional Inuit technique, usually performed by two women facing each other.¹⁶⁵ Here, the artist utilizes the imagery of Arctic tattoo, not only for its recognizable symbolism as a marker of indigenous femininity, but also as a way of examining the function tattoos have played as indicators of otherness in colonial Arctic relations. By emphasizing her native identity with accessories and false tattoos, Lord references the history of conquest and the exploitation of indigenous Inuit women, whose skin was made to represent exotic inferiority in the colonial imagination. In contrast, the “contemporary” image of Lord lacks tattoos, makeup, or other cultural identifiers, forcing the viewer to examine the role skin itself still plays as a primary signifier of difference in American society.

Like Kelliher-Combs, Lord negotiates the substance and significance of skin, both as a symbol of otherness within colonial culture, and conversely as a potential for agency and transformation. Utilizing the ancient imagery of Arctic tattoo and sewing in the various media of painting, photography, and film, these artists engage with skin as a multivalent symbol. By examining problematic interpretations of the indigenous female body, both Kelliher-Combs and Lord question the reliance of American society on the fantasy of biological racial difference, while demonstrating creative and revolutionary possibilities for skin as medium and metaphor.

All of the women discussed above are working to negotiate both the conceptions of Arctic femininity and tattoo, as well as the problematic racial ideologies still present in American and Canadian societies. Whether by choosing to acquire tattoos in a manner similar to historical practices, or by re-using the

¹⁶⁵ Kathleen Ash-Milby, “The Imaginary Landscape,” in *Off the Map: Landscape in the Native Imagination* (New York: National Museum of the American Indian, 2007), 45.

imagery of skin, stitches, and tattooed lines in separate art works, these women are inventing new and relevant strategies for social resistance and self-creation. As in the practice of tattoo, this process can be painful, and works by artists such as Arnaquq-Baril, Kelliher-Combs, and Lord are honest about the difficulties endemic to native populations in a neo-colonial world. However, like their fore-mothers, these women move onward with courage, strength, and endurance, and through their continuing efforts, offer transformative new possibilities for both their communities and the larger world.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

Throughout centuries of change, Arctic women's tattoos have functioned as loaded visual signifiers within both native and colonial cultures. Indigenous feminine tattoos have long mystified Euro-American scholars due to their lack of one-to-one correlations with clear symbolic, religious, or social functions. Often simplified in anthropological literature as purely decorative forms or arbitrary adolescent rites of passage, women's tattoos have been largely overlooked because, to fully understand their importance and function, they must be examined within a multidisciplinary context that values the aesthetic as well as the primacy of native epistemologies. Perhaps because Euro-American researchers have historically considered native cultures, subconsciously or otherwise, too simplistic to have developed complex and independent aesthetic systems, anthropological analysis has too often relegated indigenous visual practices to the unstudied realm of ornament. What scholars have thus failed to consider is that a cultural practice with the geographical and temporal span and continuity of Arctic tattoos doubtless fulfilled an essential function to the people that employed it.

In fact, Inuit and Yupik women's tattoos were conceived within these cultures as powerful devices that transformed and beautified the female body, indicating an individual's choice to embrace her role as a woman within the systems of Arctic gender. Since indigenous polar groups believed that spiritual essence was sexless, constantly cycling from deceased ancestors to new infants (who in some groups were believed to have the ability to change sex at the moment of birth), gender was considered a functional distinction instead of an innate aspect of the

self. Tattoos not only made a woman's body more beautiful, but differentiated it as feminine. In an understanding of self far different from modern Euro-American definitions, claiming one's role as a woman was a distinct choice. Tattoos signified an Inuit or Yupik woman's strength, endurance, beauty, and, perhaps most of all, her agency as an individual.

When colonial forces began to make significant incursions into the American Arctic in the sixteenth century, European and Russian men observing native peoples for the first time projected a new and foreign set of significations onto the visual system of women's tattoos. Because the colonial self was created in opposition to an imagined other that existed in the Western mind prior to actual contact, Europeans quickly appropriated the imagery of tattoos to engrave onto the indigenous body the imaginary difference that they came to the new world expecting to find. While tattoos had for centuries worked to display indigenous women's status and abilities within their communities, these sewn marks were re-presented in colonial media as self-evident symbols of the barbarism and inferiority of aboriginal peoples. Prints, paintings, and photographs have all used tattoos and the female indigenous body over the ensuing centuries to rationalize, encourage, and memorialize the ongoing foreign domination of the Arctic and its peoples. However, despite the numerous strategies of exclusion and destruction leveled against Arctic natives by colonial agents, tattoos and many other aspects of northern culture have proved resilient against erasure.

Today, Inuit and Yupik artists continue to use the visual system of tattoos in ways both historic and new. A few native women like Yaari Kingeekuk have made

the choice to apply hand and face tattoos that were used in their communities prior to the cultural eradication that took place in church-administered boarding schools. Contemporary native filmmaker Alethea Arnaquq-Baril recently produced the documentary *Tunniit: Tracing the Lines of Inuit Tattoo* to document the history of this practice in her community, as well as to follow her own journey to reclaim tattoos as part of her personal performance of Inuit femininity. Painter Sonya Kelliher-Combs and photo/performance artist Erica Lord also use the imagery of skin, sewing, and tattoos in their various media to re-affirm the transformative power of these ancient practices, while also commenting on American and Canadian legacies of racism and essentialism.

While this project has labored to uncover some of the history and ongoing negotiations connected to Inuit and Yupik women's tattoos, it would be a mistake to attempt to create a complete or final statement on the subject. Like all aspects of native culture, Arctic tattoos and conceptions of femininity have been and continue to be navigated and re-negotiated within indigenous northern communities. As a new wave of native artists and educators engage with the issues of beauty, identity, gender, and cultural resilience, tattoos will continue to offer powerful visions of agency and meaning to many generations yet to come.

Figures

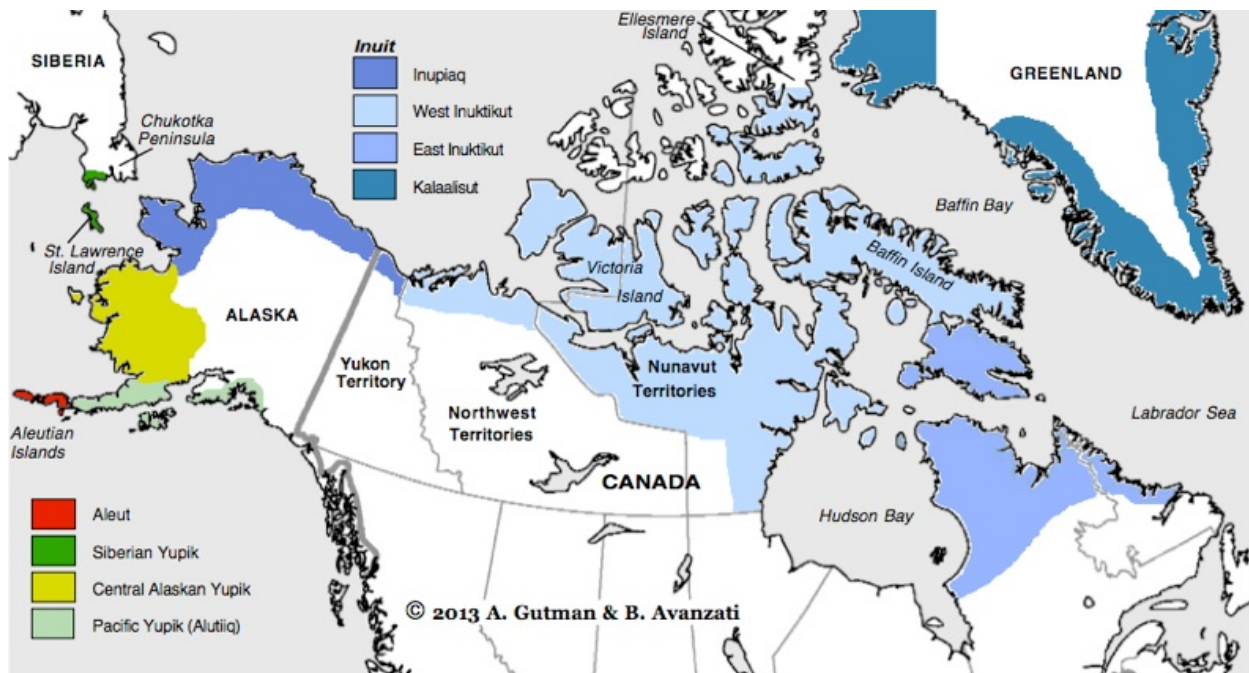


Figure 1. Map of the indigenous Arctic peoples of North America.



Figure 2. Okvik figure with Tattooed Fluke Tails, ca. 100-400 C.E, ivory, Bering Strait.

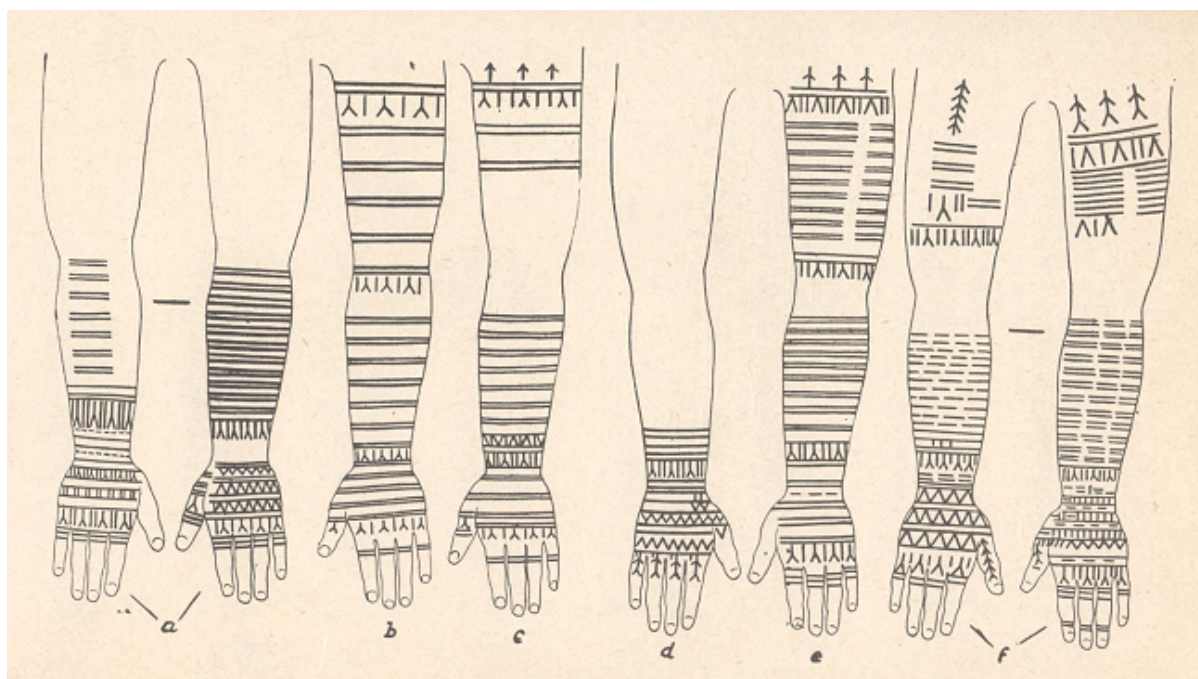


Figure 3. Diamond Jenness, *Arm and Hand Tattooing of the Copper Inuit*, 1946.

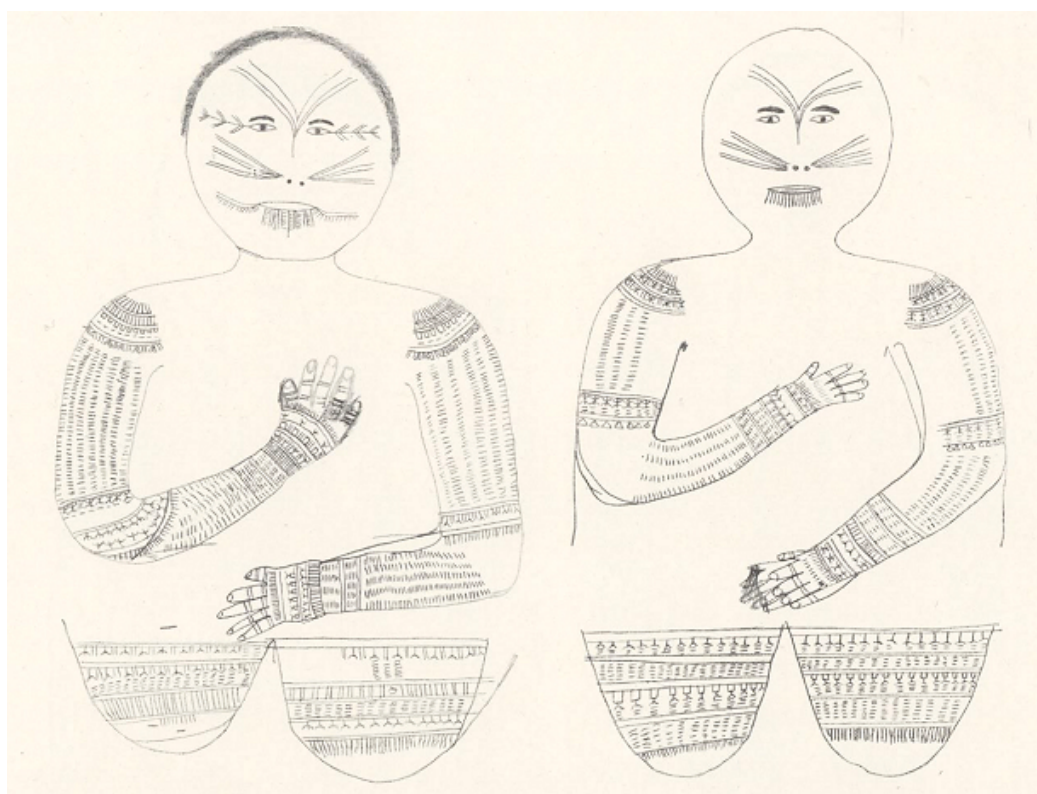


Figure 4. Arnarlunguaq for Knud Rasmussen, *Women's Tattoos of the Netsilik Inuit*, 1931.

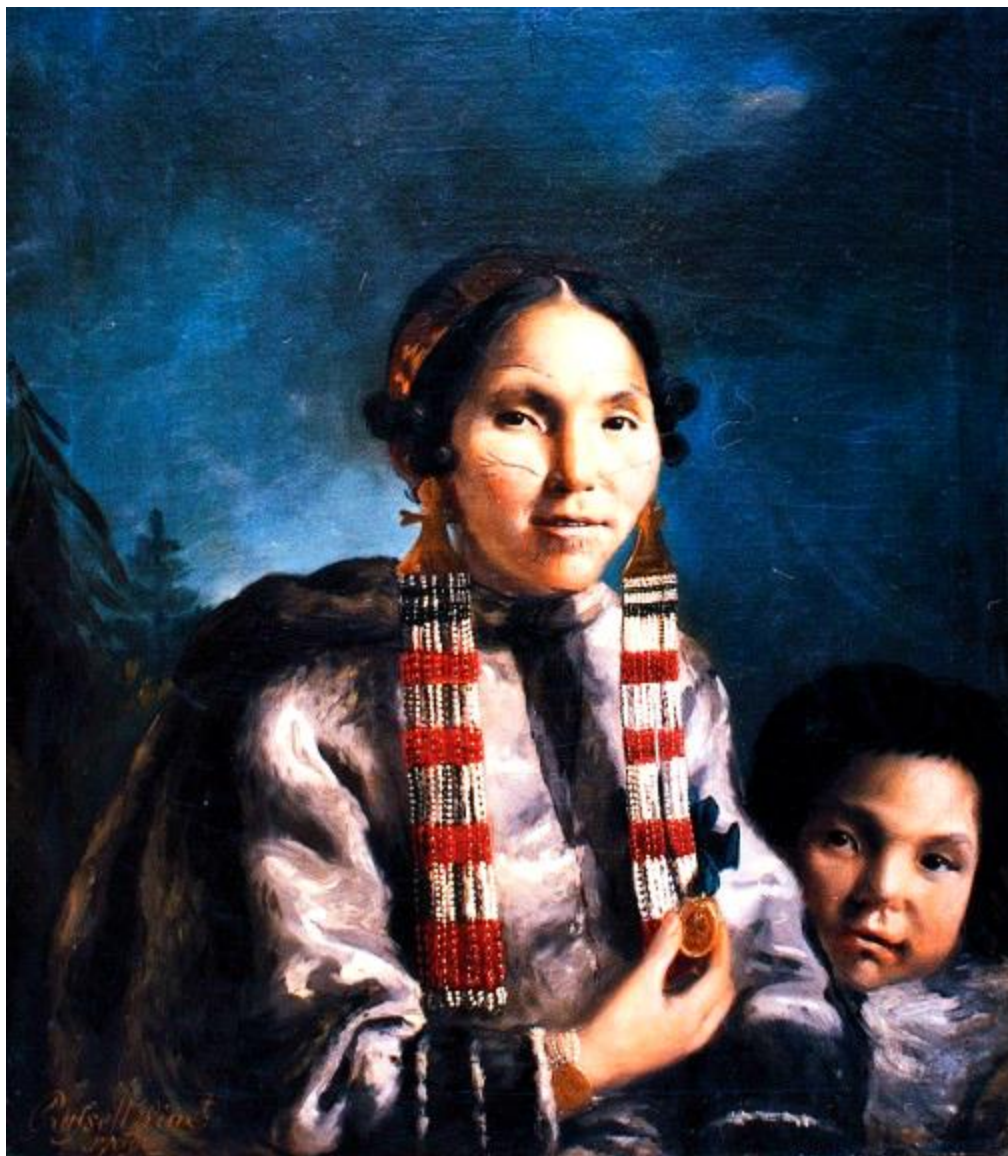


Figure 6. John Russell, *Mikak and her Son Tutauk*, 1769, oils.

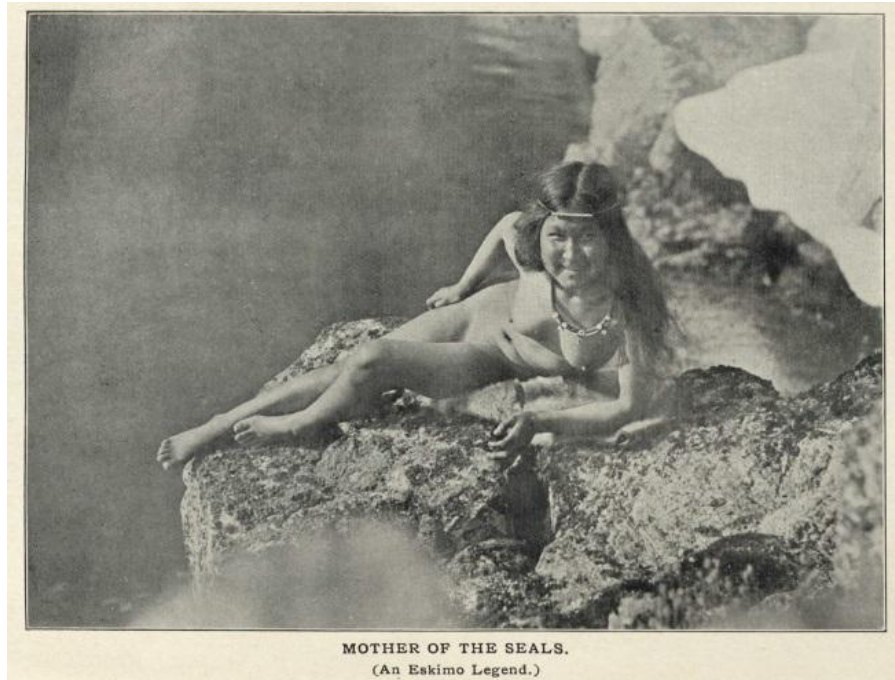


Figure 7. Robert Peary, *Mother of the Seals*, ca. 1891-1897.

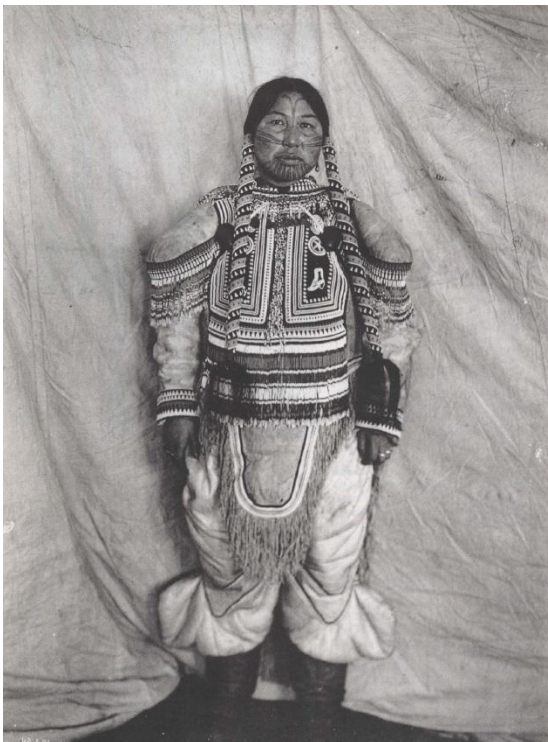


Figure 8. Albert P. Low, Aivillik woman Niviatsinaq Onaller (Shoofly Comer) in gala dress, 1904.



Figure 9. Roald Amundsen, Netsilik woman with her son on her back, ca. 1903.

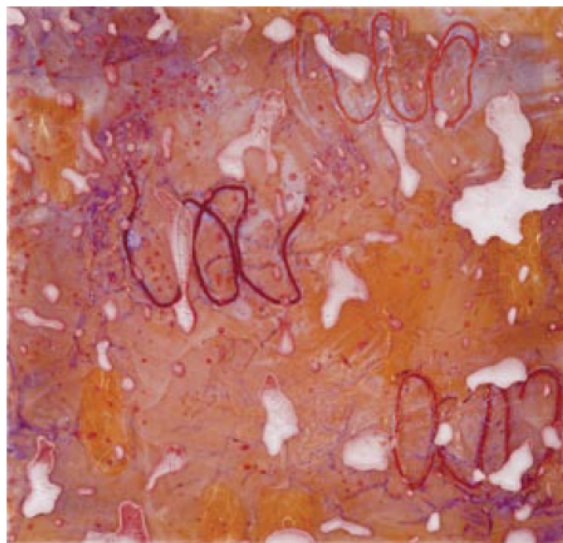


Figure 10. Sonya Kelliher-Combs, *Unraveled Pink Secret*, 2006, Acrylic, walrus stomach, and thread, 2 x 2 feet.



Figure 11. Sonya Kelliher-Combs' grandmother, Mary Stotts Adams, and great uncle, Harry Brower Sr., ca. 1940.

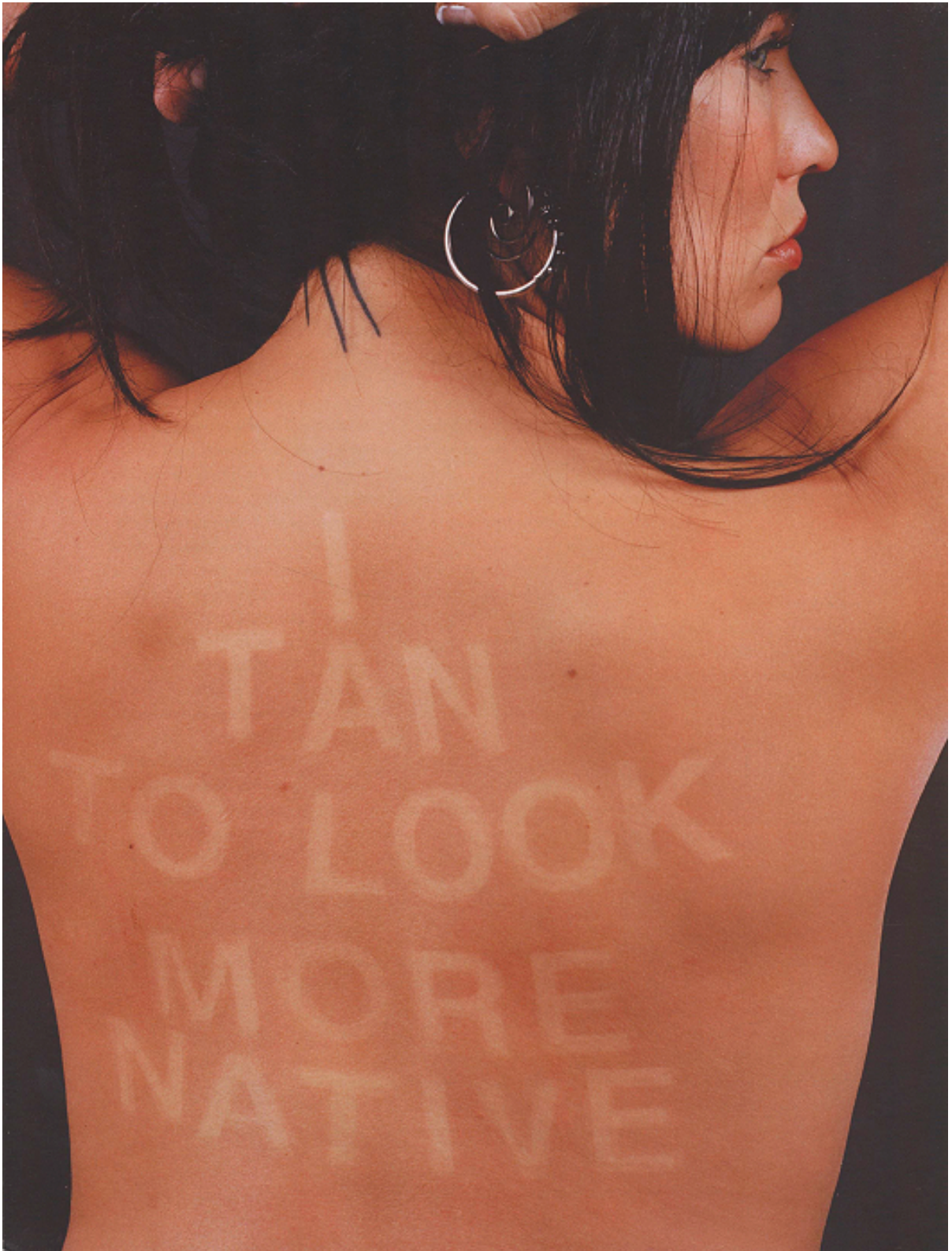


Figure 12. Erica Lord, *I Tan to Look More Native*, 2006, digital print.



Figure 13. Erica Lord, *Un/Defined Self Portrait Series*, 2005, C-prints.

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