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# Without Restriction? Inuit Tattooing and the Dr. Wyn Rhys-Jones Photograph Collection at the NWT Archives

*Jamie Jelinski*

This article considers the implications of research conducted on cross-cultural representations of Inuit tattooing at the Northwest Territories Archives in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, Canada. The results however were fraught from the outset due to my interest in a group of eleven photographs from the Dr. Wyn Rhys-Jones collection, nine of which depict partially nude, tattooed Inuit women. Here I reflect on and analyze my research experience with regard to these photos, and contextualize the images alongside similar post-contact Western representations of tattooed Inuit women. In doing so I analyze archival policies, practices and responses, focusing on issues of accessibility.

## INTRODUCTION: TATTOOED INUIT WOMEN IN THE ARCHIVE

In an oral history told by the graphic artist Helen Kalvak (1901–1984) there were once three Inuit women—two who were young and with facial tattooing, while the third, an older woman, had no tattoos. Curious as to why she was without any, one of the younger women, according to Kalvak, “wanted to make tatoo on her because she wanted her to know about the ways of the old people [*sic*].” The problem was that the woman was raised elsewhere and, as she told the two younger women, “That is why I live like my people and not your people ways [*sic*].” The younger woman still tried to tattoo her, albeit unsuccessfully because the woman’s skin was too hard and thick, while inquiring, “From which land did you come? Are you a girl from the rocks?” [Northwest Territories Archives (hereafter NWT Archives), Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (hereafter DIAND), N-1992-091, Kalvak Interview, Box 1, Folder 5, Drawing 143].

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Color versions of one or more of the figures in the article can be found online at [www.tandfonline.com/gvan](http://www.tandfonline.com/gvan).

At first the woman was reluctant to respond, but eventually answered, "I'm from another land. That's why they don't have any tattoos. If my people that know me when I was small. If they see me with all the tattoos, they will know me by the way I smile or talk. If they see me with tattoos they will not let me live. They will think I am not one of them and they will kill me [*sic*]." So the woman tattooed the other younger woman's face and hands instead. Both the woman doing the tattooing and the older, non-tattooed one were surprised at the ease with which this woman's skin was punctured. According to Kalvak, the woman doing the tattooing then said to the older one, "I will not try to make tattoos on you again ... you have children now. Children that you and your husband have here ... You will live long [*sic*]." Kalvak indicates that the woman indeed lived to be very old—so old that she was barely able to move. Regardless of her immobility that woman continued to have high spirits, always singing and reminiscing on aspects of her youth, including sewing, traveling by dogsled, and skipping. The story then ends suddenly, and as Kalvak states, "Sometimes as she was talking because she was so old she could not move by herself any more" [NWT Archives, DIAND, N-1992-091, Kalvak Interview, Box 1, Folder 6, Drawing 143, contd.].

While this narrative supplements a drawing that has since been lost,<sup>1</sup> within the context of this article Kalvak's story is significant for several reasons that will become central themes within my larger investigation: first, the younger woman's concern with tattooing the older one so that she could "know about the ways of the old people" points to an Inuit emphasis on retaining pre-contact belief systems and cultural practices like tattooing. That this story was represented visually in the form of a drawing, and later recorded as part of an oral history project, testifies to continuities within Inuit culture that are often expressed and preserved in, with or alongside media, mechanisms and practices that have been introduced to the Inuit through sustained cross-cultural contact.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, Kalvak's story describes a clash of ideologies concerning the meaning and importance ascribed by different Inuit groups to tattooing. By leaving questions pertaining to diverse Inuit understandings of tattooing unanswered, the story demonstrates that the reading and interpreting of historical representations and sources (be they textual, pictorial or oral) of Inuit tattooing remain open and constantly in flux. Thirdly, although recounted verbally by Kalvak, this story now exists in the form of a tangible, transcribed, archival document. As part of an archival collection this oral history resides permanently at the Northwest Territories Archives in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories—the location this article focuses on. Lastly, and similar to the lost collection of Kalvak drawings, this article focuses on absent images in two intersecting ways: the photographs of interest here were unavailable to me except under specific constraints, and they continue to be inaccessible on the NWT Archives' online image database.

I have begun with Kalvak's story in order to underscore the importance of Inuit perspectives on tattooing, while simultaneously demonstrating how knowledge of Inuit tattooing is often held in and filtered through the processes of archives and museums—from the point of production, through accessioning, and onwards via use and interpretation. Unlike Kalvak's narrative, Inuit in fact did not produce the majority of historical information and imagery pertaining to

Inuit tattooing that is currently held in the collections of Canadian institutions. Instead, the historical and “official” record of Inuit tattooing is largely a testament to how those of European ancestry understood and recorded tattooing. Non-Inuit individuals have consequently left a substantial, although in many instances biased and colonially transformed, quantity of representations of Inuit tattooing and more particularly, tattooed Inuit women. This article will investigate a small fragment of these representations through a case study of photos depicting tattooed Inuit women produced by Dr. Wyn Rhys-Jones and now in the collection of the NWT Archives. I argue that archives, like the tattoos that adorned Inuit women’s bodies, provide—and often stipulate, whether officially or otherwise—layers of access and visibility that determine what can or cannot be seen, handled or researched, specifically in an intercultural and institutional context.

#### INUIT TATTOOING AND THE ARCHIVE

I located Kalvak’s story while doing research at the NWT Archives, as part of a larger project investigating cross-cultural visual representations of Inuit tattooing from the first known depiction of an Inuit woman drawn from life onwards.<sup>3</sup> Prior to arrival my intended research was concerned with roughly fifty photographs showing tattooed Inuit women forming part of various collections in the NWT Archives. Through this line of inquiry I came to be aware of, and consequently interested in, eleven photos that are part of a larger group of 419 color slides, which form the Dr. Wyn Rhys-Jones collection. Created between 1961 and 1963, these eleven images [Table 1] show four heavily tattooed Inuit women from the Canadian Arctic communities of Gjoa Haven, Talurjuaq (Spence Bay), Cambridge Bay and Ulukhaktok (Holman). Here my main concern is the circumstances surrounding my encounter with these eleven images—a situation that I became fully cognizant of only after completing the research in Yellowknife.

**TABLE 1** List of Photographs Depicting Tattooing in the Dr. Wyn Rhys-Jones Collection at the Northwest Territories Archives

Accession Number	Handwritten Caption on Slide	Date of Creation According to Slide
N-2013-003: 0038	Gjoa Haven.	1963
N-2013-003: 0124	Gjoa Haven.	1963
N-2013-003: 0131	Gjoa Haven.	1963
N-2013-003: 0138	Spence Bay.	1962
N-2013-003: 0140	Spence Bay.	1963
N-2013-003: 0145	Spence Bay. Tattoos.	April 1963
N-2013-003: 0152	Spence Bay.	n/a
N-2013-003: 0214	Witch doctor’s widow, tattooed, Holman.	September 1961
N-2013-003: 0228	Cambridge Bay.	n/a
N-2013-003: 0239	Cambridge Bay.	n/a
N-2013-003: 0241	Cambridge Bay.	1963

My attention to these images stems from how my interest in them affected my research at the Archives, most notably in my interactions with staff who had differing views as to how, why, when and by whom these photographs should be accessed. This article's focus is therefore twofold: with the fraught status of these photographs in the Archives and, self-reflexively as a scholar, my archival research experience with them. I investigate the Rhys-Jones tattoo photos by contextualizing them within my experience, their archival existence (including institutional policies and practices), and a historical lineage of Western representations of tattooed Inuit women. Consequently I aim to show that despite their imagery and the indeterminate circumstances of production, Rhys-Jones's photos are valuable historical documents that can be useful to Inuit and other scholars for the purposes of Inuit cultural reclamation, revitalization and decolonization. First however these photos need to be made accessible, and thus an ambiguous line between personal and professional standards of an individual archivist should not dictate their availability. As I demonstrate, such criteria, despite one's intentions, often govern access to archival fonds, thereby intersecting legal, ethical and conservationist concerns while simultaneously being subjected to significant variations in interpretation from an individual to institutional level. I will articulate more thoroughly below how archivists often struggle to resolve the tensions between the aforementioned categories, one's morals, institutional policies, and the benefits and (potential or assumed) pitfalls of access.

Although this article takes Inuit tattooing as a frame for its analysis, I am chiefly concerned with non-Inuit, or *Qallunaat*, representations of Inuit tattooing and their position in archives, rather than with tattooing as a practice. Accordingly questions regarding the varied cultural meanings ascribed by Inuit to tattooing, from the pre-contact era to the contemporary period, are admittedly and intentionally absent here.<sup>4</sup> I do so strategically as a *Qallunaat* researcher in a manner that conflicts with that of Alfred Gell who, in his oft-cited study of Polynesian tattooing, asks "Is it possible for a European-based anthropologist ... to arrive at a correct understanding of dead-and-gone Polynesians who unfortunately left few revealing or explicit statements as to the meaning they attached to them [tattoos]?" [1993: 10]. For him it is possible through a "purificatory process" that analyzes historic Western sources in order to extract Indigenous meaning from them [*idem*]. My approach investigates how historical Western images of Inuit tattooing have been produced, archived and accessed, and I diverge from Gell in that I do not seek to give definitive answers about the meaning of Inuit tattooing. Nevertheless tattooed bodies (and their representations) have the ability to generate a range of ardent responses. For example, the remains of a tattooed Pazyryk woman excavated by archaeologists in 1993 generated much ethical debate [Broz 2011: 267] that, as I will show, photographs are similarly susceptible to.

With the above considered, to speak about the Inuit practice of tattooing in and of itself without doing so through the purview of an Inuit perspective such as Kalvak's would effectively continue the long history of non-Inuit individuals representing Inuit tattooing and speaking on behalf of Inuit women and culture—precisely what this work aims to criticize. In the midst of an ongoing decolonizing process, contemporary Inuit women are reinvigorating tattooing

and reclaiming it from the clutches of colonialism that aided in eroding the practice over much of the 20th century. As part of this rapidly growing movement, revisiting and reinterpreting images of tattooing will inevitably play a crucial part in this process. First however these images need to be available for Inuit and allied scholars to use, and I aim to show that despite controversial imagery, arbitrarily inhibiting access to images is not a solution to this problematic, but a way of accentuating and amplifying it.

Having communicated Kalvak's story and outlined the trajectory, argument and methodology of this article, I turn now to my own story, its predominant focus. At the outset I never intended to recount a personal narrative nor did I envision this research taking the shape that you are now reading. But the archival research process has become, for myself as a scholar, inseparable from the eleven Rhys-Jones photos and therefore needs to be analyzed. In other words, this article is an example of archival ethnography and follows in Antoinette Burton's assertion that an archive's (and by extension, an archivist's) claims to objectivity need to be counteracted with "archive stories" that address issues of provenance, institutional history, effects on users, and an archive's power to determine narratives "found" inside it [2005: 6]. Within this article my archive story is thus even more an "object" of study than the photos that contributed to the grounding of this narrative.

Well-known photographic collections—including Richard Harrington's work at Library and Archives Canada (LAC), photographs by Diamond Jenness, Albert Peter Low and George Hubert Wilkins in the Canadian Museum of History (CMH)'s archives, and George Comer's photographs in the collection of *Mystic Seaport: The Museum of America and the Sea*, to cite just three prominent examples—contain numerous images of tattooed Inuit women taken during a period of increasing Western presence in the Canadian Arctic. Photos from these collections have been widely disseminated in a variety of fields, including most recently as supporting images for Lars Krutak's work on Inuit tattooing [2014: 19–63]. Regardless of this previous circulation, a significant body of literature surrounding Western photography of Inuit [Geller 2004; King and Lidchi 1998; Condon 1989], and a growing interest in Inuit tattooing in both academic and mainstream discourses, scholars have yet to investigate photos of tattooed Inuit women. This research dearth is surprising considering that nearly three decades ago W. Gillies Ross called attention to the value photographs could have for the study of Inuit tattooing [1990: 104–106]. But Ross was primarily concerned with potential ethnographic information contained in photos, namely with formal and stylistic variances in women's tattooing across different Arctic regions. Here I am less interested in the anthropological "truth" of Rhys-Jones's photos, or with the visual qualities of specific tattoos depicted in them, than I am with these photos as I encountered them—as archival material. Admittedly then this article does not answer Ross's call. I hope nevertheless for it to prompt greater awareness and sensitivity to the importance of photos within the study of Inuit tattoo practices, aesthetics, representations and contemporary revitalization, given the growing academic emphasis on North American Indigenous tattooing—as highlighted by recent texts such as *Drawing with Great Needles: Ancient Tattoo Traditions of North America* [Deter-Wolf and Diaz-Granados 2013].

While often said to be “north” by southern Canadians, Yellowknife, the home of the NWT Archives, is considered regionally as subarctic rather than arctic. As a liminal site located between southern Canada and the Arctic, the city of Yellowknife acts as an overarching metaphor for this work: I found (and continue to find) myself in-between physical geographies, cultures, ways of knowing and representing, ideologies, and institutional policies and practices—all of which are highly charged, often alongside subtle nuance, and with vested interest from a number of personal, cultural, institutional and academic perspectives. In his provocative history of lines, Tim Ingold builds upon Rudy Wiebe’s cross-cultural comparison of Inuit movement in relation to the Royal Navy’s search for the North-West Passage, suggesting that Inuit move *along* paths of travel, whereas the British sailed *across* what they believed to be the globe’s surface [Ingold 2007: 75]. For Ingold the movement by both groups can be understood as constituting lines, but the fundamental difference is the modalities that the two types represent: lines that move “along” are a type of *wayfaring*, whereas those that go “across” are indicative of *transport* [*ibid.*]. This article then reflects upon my own wayfaring through an archive, posing questions such as *how* did I do such research on Inuit tattooing while at the NWT Archives and what are the subsequent implications for myself as a researcher, the institution and its staff, interested readers, fellow scholars and, most importantly, Inuit citizens? Archival wayfaring and archival storytelling—in other words, the act of doing research and the act of discussing that research—are intimately connected, for as Ingold states, “in storytelling as in wayfaring, it is in the movement from place to place—or from topic to topic—that knowledge is integrated” [*ibid.*: 91]. By problematizing the above questions this article aims to integrate and interrogate knowledge, in the process perhaps posing more questions than it answers—but such is the essence of the lines wayfarers travel, for they can always be continued.

#### A “PROBLEM” IN THE ARCHIVE

I arrived in Yellowknife during a crisp May evening along with a colleague also doing research at the NWT Archives for an unrelated project. We opted to travel and research concurrently so as to keep accommodation costs down in a city unfriendly to strained research budgets due to its northern geography. Prior to my visit I forwarded my retrieval list to the NWT Archives (their holdings are listed digitally on their online database), so as to expedite the process upon arrival and maximize my research time there. Immediately upon arriving and signing in at the Archives—before I had even found a place in the reading room to do my research—the Archival Technician on duty told me that there was a “problem” with a number of items I had requested. This initial hindrance established the tone for the duration of my visit, and in retrospect is strikingly similar to Sheila Fitzpatrick’s navigation of Russian archives as a graduate student during the Cold War, who notes the “*automatic* Soviet habit of restricting access to information in every possible context” [2013: 171; my emphasis]. I was given the opportunity to view censored or uncensored versions of the *problematic* images: printed sheets containing the eleven Rhys-Jones images, with the censored versions having been

digitally obscured in an attempt to remove the depicted women's breasts. I am no stranger to nor I am I put off by the female form, given my art historical training, and subsequently chose to view the uncensored versions.

What I saw were eleven images each depicting a single Inuit woman—most of whom appear in more than one photo—with intricate tattooing on their faces, arms and hands. In nine of these photos the women's breasts are exposed either partly or completely. I was allowed to retain three pages (containing a total of five images) of these printed copies, albeit only those without nudity, and the top of each page was noted with handwriting boldly declaring they were for "REF ONLY" [*sic*]. My immediate interest in these images stemmed from the fact that they differed significantly from other archival photos of tattooed Inuit women that I had previously found in collections elsewhere because they were color images, produced well into the 20th century, and they revealed tattooing to an extent rarely visible in other photographers' work. The Archival Technician told me that should I be interested in these photos I would have to speak to "The Archivist"—Ian Moir, Territorial Archivist, or in lay terms, the most senior archivist at the institution. I did, and from this point onwards the NWT Archive's reading room became a space of research and tension for the duration of my three days there.

While archives act as a storage house for the safekeeping of documents and photographs, one does not however conceive of them as hiding places. Succinctly put, the operation of an archive is contingent upon access to the items held therein. Archival materials can, I acknowledge, have harmful potential, but it is the researcher's responsibility to conduct their work in an ethical manner, or what Allan Sekula refers to as reading the archive from "a position of solidarity" [2003: 451]. To take this position, though, one first needs to be given access so as to have the ability to read (and here, view) archival material, in order to interpret it in a holistic, culturally sensitive manner that may, in many instances, conflict with the ideologies and circumstances that had surrounded its production. While the Rhys-Jones collection, including the tattoo photos, did not have any *official* access restrictions, I will demonstrate that there were nevertheless numerous restrictions. Since the NWT Archives is a publicly funded institution its "[c]lients represent scholarly and general interest" [PWNHC 2016]. I am concerned here with how these photos have been shielded from scholars and the general public alike. Architecturally speaking, and regardless of their ornate and often panoptic features, archives, as buildings, are only a shell. Archives thus become "An Archive" when documents and other material such as photographs, policies and people—both staff *and* users—set its institutional mechanisms in motion to give it this status. Archivists then are but a cog in the archival machine, and their primary purpose is to facilitate one's access to the holdings. In Canada a public archive's collections, and one's use of them, are typically mandated by institutional policies—what the NWT Archives call Operational Guidelines [PWNHC 2016]. But the archivists' personal interests and ethical concerns, well-intentioned as they may be, often dictate conditions of access even if this conflicts with the institution's official policy.

In the opening pages of his influential text *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Jacques Derrida discusses the Greek *archons*, that is, the overseers of the *arkheion*

and, more importantly here, of the documents housed within it [1995: 2]. But the *archons*, or archivists, not only saw to the physical safekeeping of the *akheion's* holdings. These *archons* had, as Derrida states, “the hermeneutic right and competence ... [and] the power to interpret the archives” [*ibid.*]. The contemporary manifestation of the Greek *arkheion*—a state archival apparatus and institution—within a Canadian context can be found in the form of civic, provincial, territorial and federal archives spread across the country whose archivists, like the Greek *archons*, continue to wield similar power over their holdings. Indeed, I was not permitted to tangibly handle or view the slides on which the photographs taken by Rhys-Jones of tattooed Inuit women are permanently suspended. Nor was I allowed, during the entire length of my visit, to view the photos digitally without an archivist present. It is clear that the reason for this was precisely because of the images depicting nude Inuit women, as my access to photos other than those in the Rhys-Jones collection was unrestrained. I use the term *nude* following John Berger, who argues that naked bodies become nude only once they are seen as objects [1972: 54]. Berger’s statement, I would argue, is equally if not more true here, as it is the unclothed body, and more specifically the women’s exposed breasts, that *become* objects here through an attempt to conceal them. These attempts at concealment, which I will elaborate on below, are what renders the female, and more particularly, Inuit body an abject, perverse and sexualized object—a decision that becomes even more disputable when it is made by a non-Inuit, male archivist with the institutional ability (although, I suggest, not necessarily the authority) to act as a gatekeeper of Inuit women’s bodies, or more specifically, of their representation.

After indicating my wish to retain copies of the Rhys-Jones photos, I found myself having to justify this interest verbally to the Territorial Archivist. He voiced his discomfort in my having copies of the photographs—apparently for the sake of the families of those women depicted in them—and stated that we would have to find a solution that would “work for both of us.” Despite what I believe to have been good intentions, the implications of this nevertheless bring into question my competence to conduct research in an ethical manner, the power of the archivist and his presumed capability to speak on behalf of now deceased Inuit women and their families, and the strength of institutional policies enacted to provide a framework for an archive’s operation.

The “General Policy” section of the NWT Archives’ Operational Guidelines indicates that the institution “offers client-focused public access to archival holdings” and “believes in the importance of access” [PWNHC 2016]—conditions that, as I found, were porous *guidelines* rather than *policy*. Moreover the same section states that the NWT Archives follow the International Congress of Archives’ Code of Ethics, and cites the following principles as standards for institutional practice: “Principle 6: Archivists should promote the widest possible access to archival materials and provide an impartial service to all users,” and “Principle 7: Archivists should respect both access and privacy, and act within the boundaries of relevant legislation” [*ibid.*]. In my experience at the NWT Archives, the latter Principle precludes the former at the archivist’s discretion, specifically when it pertains to potentially sensitive images and regardless of a researcher’s interest or objectives. Furthermore, that my access to these photographs was

restricted not only contradicts the institution's own Operational Guidelines and coinciding ethical principles, but also the Rhys-Jones collection's official deed of gift—or in other words, the formal donation agreement—and an associated letter sent to the donor of the Rhys-Jones collection. Dated February 10, 2012, the NWT Archives did not make these documents available to me and I was only able to access them, in redacted versions obscuring the donor's name (the individual managing Rhys-Jones's estate), after filing a request through the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (ATIPP Act).<sup>5</sup> Even more critically, Ian Moir, the same Territorial Archivist who sought to inhibit my access to the photos, is ironically the NWT Archives' representative signatory on both documents. As the second condition of the official gift agreement states, the NWT Archives "agrees to accept the archival materials described below and will make those documents available to the public without restriction" [NWT Archives, Accession file for N-2013-003, Dr. Wyn Rhys-Jones Collection, "Gift to the Northwest Territories Archives," February 10, 2012], which is similarly echoed in Moir's letter to the collection's donor that reiterates "[t]he material will be ... made available to the public without restriction" [NWT Archives, Accession file for N-2013-003, Dr. Wyn Rhys-Jones Collection, Letter to donor from Ian Moir, February 10, 2012].

Perhaps to assuage the glaringly obvious restrictions on my access to these photos, the initial compromise offered to me was cropped versions of the images. In other words, the women's tattooed body parts—namely arms, hands, and faces—removed and decontextualized from the photographs altogether. Effectively a digital dismemberment, such a gesture would have removed any personal agency of the women depicted in the images, rendering them as passive, non-consenting victims of Rhys-Jones and his camera's gaze. Although never carried out, the act of cropping these images would have operated as an updated photographic version of earlier illustrated representations of Inuit women's detached tattooed body parts seen in ethnographic texts that include Franz Boas's *The Central Eskimo* [1888], Knud Rasmussen's *Intellectual Culture of the Iglulik Eskimos* [1929], and Diamond Jenness's *Material Culture of the Copper Eskimo* [1946], to cite just three of many possible examples. Much to the Territorial Archivist's chagrin, I—and I believe justifiably—refuted this suggestion. The next proposition came later that afternoon in the form of another potential option. Whereas the cropped body parts were a suggestion, now I was presented with an example: a digital photograph of a tattooed woman from the Rhys-Jones collection that had literally removed the identity of the sitter by way of digitally blurring her face and breasts *entirely*. As readers likely will predict by this point, this sloppily obfuscated image was not acceptable to me from the perspective of a researcher and, in hindsight, reveals how my motivations and capabilities as a scholar were perceived and, more importantly, what the archivist's own sense of authority was.

Christopher Wright's investigation of a photo taken by the English Captain Francis R. Barton depicting a nude, tattooed Hula girl named Luikama from Papua New Guinea's southeast coast [2003: 146–169] provides an example against which to compare Rhys-Jones's photos and the Territorial Archivist's real and suggested manipulation of them. Barton's photograph, likely dating between

1904 and 1907, shows Luikama from the waist up, with her breasts exposed and arms raised above her head so as to reveal the geometric tattooing adorning her upper left arm, armpit, ribs and breast. What sets Barton's photograph apart from the abundance of available images showing the nude female "Other," from the colonial period to the contemporary, and perhaps most prominently in North American popular culture through *National Geographic* magazine [Lutz and Collins: 144–216], is that in this instance Barton's gaze is made explicit by a box drawn directly on the photograph for the purposes of cropping, and thus highlighting, Luikama's breast *and* tattoos. As Wright states, "The photograph's sexual content, and intent, is seemingly obvious. Luikama's pose, the decontextualization of her body, her display and circulation as an object—both within the photograph and as a photograph—are all the products of a colonial desire" [2003: 147]. The difference between Barton's cropping and the Territorial Archivist's proposed and enacted modifications to Rhys-Jones's photos is that the former sought to *accentuate* Luikama's exposed breast by separating it from its bodily context; whereas the latter sought to *obscure* the exposed breasts and mask the women's faces. Barton's act was therefore intended as revelation whereas the Territorial Archivist's was a concealing—yet both have the same implication: Western males exercising a presumed authority to control the representation and reception of non-Western women's bodies.

According to Eric Ketelaar, even archivists operating with noble interests largely do so through rationalizations of appropriation and power that are rarely discussed by scholars verbally, let alone in writing [2002: 236]. Challenging notions of archival authority by writing about a similar experience researching at an archive, albeit a privately operated one, Karen Engle states that this type of "paternalistic and protective gesture can only refer to an implicit sense of property and possession" [2015: 95]. While Engle's experience differs from my own, due to the fact that private archives are not obliged to provide service and access in the same way that public ones are, the parallel between her account and my own is that while archives and their holdings are non-objective, so too are their archivists. By voicing my discontent with regard to censored images and reiterating that for my research purposes they would not suffice, I came to challenge the Territorial Archivist's authority—a disagreement that consequently subjected myself, and even my colleague, due to her association with me, to the surveillance and disciplinary regimes of the archive and its staff for the following two days. This watchful eye was manifested outwardly in snide remarks from the Archival Technician, including that "someone" thought we were not handling documents gently, to a banally close monitoring of our photocopying privileges.

During the second day of my research, though, the zenith of my time at the archive came in a meeting with the Territorial Archivist and his boss, Barb Cameron, (now former) Director of the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre (hereafter PWNHC). From my perspective, such a meeting created even more avoidable melodrama considering that the images, although "Not Yet Available" in digitized form on the institution's website, were (and still are) plainly and publicly denoted on the online database as having "No access restrictions." To appease both the Territorial Archivist and myself, the Director's solution to the situation was to acquiesce to my request for digital copies of the Rhys-Jones

images under the pretext that I sign a document—created exclusively for this instance and drafted by the Territorial Archivist himself—governing my use of said photographs. Again, I would like to re-emphasize that on the institution’s website, as well as in the official donation agreement and information letter, the *entire* Rhys-Jones collection is supposed to be subject to *unrestricted* access, which is further supported by the NWT Archives’ own Operational Guidelines. I reluctantly signed this document, sensing I would either be granted access under certain conditions or not at all—the consequences of which I only realized in the days, weeks and months following my visit. I quote the document’s terms and conditions in full below, to give readers a sense of its condescending tone with regard to my ethical conduct and to underscore that these photographs came, at least in my case, with numerous conditions of access. Furthermore, I want to highlight that although the document refers to “copies,” it was only once I received said copies—over a month later—that I was able to access these images in a full and (somewhat) uninhibited way. As the document reads:

I understand and will abide by the following terms and conditions:

1. I understand that the provision of the copies of archival photographs listed herein is for personal and/or academic research use only.
2. I understand that the content of the photographs listed herein may be sensitive in nature and that the public exhibition, broadcast or publication of photographs may result in distress for individuals associated with the photographs.
3. In an effort to demonstrate respect for the subjects of the photographs, I understand that I am responsible to contact the NWT Archives, Department of Education, Culture and Employment and other parties deemed to be expedient prior to any publication, broadcast or publication of the images.
4. I understand that this agreement in no way limits the use of these photographs for personal or academic research use.
5. I understand that I am responsible for ensuring complete compliance with these terms and conditions. In the event that I become aware of a breach of any of the conditions in this agreement, I will immediately notify the NWT Archives, Department of Education, Culture and Employment in writing.

[NWT Archives, “Terms of Use: Northwest Territories Archives Department of Education, Culture, and Employment—Agreement Governing Use of Archival Records,” Personal copy of document, May 22, 2014]

Regardless of their contentious content, Rhys-Jones’s photos of tattooed Inuit women are simultaneously historic documents, artifacts, and objects of visual culture within a cross-cultural context and need to be treated respectfully as such by both archivists and researchers. Within the context of research at public Canadian institutions, I have trouble envisioning any competent scholar obliging the proposals I faced. To give but two hypothetical, although analogous, examples that underscore the absurdity of the situation: How often does a historian requesting unrestricted textual material have them made available only after an archivist has edited them according to his or her own ethical standards? Or, is an art historian requiring a reproduction of an artwork told they could have only a portion of the original image or, conversely, the whole thing albeit edited at a curator or collection manager’s will? To edit or censor documents and images, based on a

personal belief, for the purposes of access—or the perception of access—is an intentional obfuscation of history and is equal to continuing a decades-long patriarchal and paternalistic narrative that silences the Inuit voice. History, and here the history of Inuit tattooing within a cross-cultural context, *is* a history that is marred by imbalanced power dynamics resulting from imperialism, and later colonialism, coinciding missionization processes, and Western encroachment upon numerous aspects of Inuit social and cultural life, in which tattooing played an active part. As Carol Payne poignantly states within the context of governmental photographs of First Nations, “to present a ... suppressive view without its alternative would be tantamount to an endorsement of it” [2005: 423]. By assuming that the women in these images were victims of Rhys-Jones and his photographic activity, the Territorial Archivist in essence further perpetuated the same narrative he sought to subjugate. Such a consideration is further accentuated and made all the more problematic when one considers that as Territorial Archivist at the NWT Archives—a public institution—the archivist is ironically a representative of the same Canadian state apparatus that colonized the Canadian Arctic during the 20th century. By assuming authority over such images without consultation from the Inuit community or the families of those women depicted in them, this gesture in fact acts as an extension of that colonial authority, even if in a contemporary, neo-colonial context.

The challenge for non-Indigenous scholars such as myself therefore is not to avoid sensitive sources, but to maintain a perspective and research methodology that is nuanced, objective, self-aware, community-minded and culturally informed while concurrently recognizing how images were, and can continue to be, used in harmful ways, whether intentionally or accidentally. Julia Emberley suggests that one needs to “make visible the mechanisms” of representation through a twofold process that (1) addresses material, including photographs, that have been ignored by the historical record, and (2) declassifying them in a greater, even if discontinuous, context [2007: 179–180]. To follow on Emberley’s assertion, and to aid in decolonizing colonial and neo-colonial representations, researchers need the ability to view these images. At the risk of overgeneralizing, scholars investigating cross-cultural photography often take one of two positions, arguing that images are examples of repressive, exoticizing and racist (neo)colonial representation or, on the contrary, instances of Indigenous self-representation, agency, and resistance to ongoing Western imposition. Methodologically speaking, my position here is more one of strategic ambivalence, particularly given a dearth in primary information to clarify the production circumstances surrounding these eleven images. My aim is not to vilify Rhys-Jones for creating these photos nor to victimize the Inuit women depicted in them but to be mindful of their ongoing and negotiated reception. Like the well-meaning but nevertheless overzealous Territorial Archivist, Rhys-Jones may have similarly meant no harm. However, this does not preclude nor reduce the affecting nature of these photographs, as demonstrated by both the archivist’s response to the images and my own turbulent relationship to them. Scholars frequently remark that the practice of decolonizing archival photos must reconstruct the contexts images were created in. As a traveling medical doctor, Rhys-Jones, it appears, did not make fieldnotes or textual records like those of professional photographers,

anthropologists and explorers who had visited the Arctic before him. Therefore the primary documents often used by researchers to supplement and provide a window into the production of photographs are entirely absent in this case, or at least from the NWT Archives' holdings. Given the lack of primary sources available to reconstruct the conditions of production for these photos, placing them within a lineage of similar imagery becomes all the more important here for establishing broader contexts, narratives and tropes through which Westerners have historically represented tattooed Inuit women.

#### "NOT QUITE CORRECT": EARLY *QALLUNAAT* REPRESENTATIONS OF INUIT WOMEN'S TATTOOING

Because nine out of the eleven tattoo photographs from the Rhys-Jones collection depict Inuit women with their breasts exposed, the images fall within a multi-century pedigree of visual and textual stereotypes that equate Inuit women's tattooing with a heightened sexuality. Homi Bhabha remarks that in order to operate successfully, stereotypes require "a continual and repetitive chain of other stereotypes" [1992: 29]. Within the context of *Qallunaat* representations of tattooed Inuit women, this chain began with the earliest known Western depiction of Inuit drawn from life—a series of nearly identical handbills dating to ca 1567 from the German cities of Augsburg, Nuremberg and Frankfurt [Sturtevant and Quinn 1989: 61–68]. Produced by Matthäus Franck, Hans Wolf Glaser and Anthony Corthoys the Younger respectively, the woodcut prints report, textually and pictorially, on the public display of a captive Inuit mother and child in Antwerp. Although the images do not have a visibly sexualized depiction, their coinciding text nevertheless establishes a precedent for the sexualisation of Inuit women's tattoos, stating that facial tattoos were made by their husbands "when they take them for wife, so they can recognize their wives, for otherwise they run among one another like beasts..." [*ibid.*: 130].

Over two centuries after the German handbills similar notions would persist, after George Francis Lyon (1795–1833) was given command of *HMS Hecla* under William Edward Parry (1790–1855) of *HMS Fury*. The duo was tasked, like Martin Frobisher (ca 1535 or 1539–1594) long before them, with finding the Northwest Passage. In the spring of 1821 Lyon and his crew set sail from England and reached Repulse Bay by fall, where their ships would spend the next several months stuck in unforgiving Arctic ice. Lyon's journal from this period was published in 1825 upon his return to England, and as it indicates, the Englishmen met with the local Inuit population in February 1822, resulting in a prolonged period of material and cultural exchange between the two groups. Lyon doubled as an artist and explorer, and sometime between 1822 and 1825 produced a drawing that, with the aid of Edward Francis Finden (1791–1857), became an engraving entitled *The Manner in Which the Eskimaux Women are Tattooed [sic]* [Figure 1]. Now in the collection of LAC,<sup>6</sup> this image, in accordance with neoclassical artistic conventions, depicts a fully nude Inuit woman standing in an idealized S-curve position typical of classical Greco-Roman sculpture, strategically revealing extensive tattooing on her face, arms, hands, thighs and one visible breast.



Figure 1 Engraving by Edward Francis Finden after a drawing by George Francis Lyon. (Collection of Library and Archives Canada, R13133-163-2-E; reproduction courtesy of Library and Archives Canada)

Lyon's journal contextualizes the illustration by providing information regarding the work's production, which was originally intended as the frontispiece to his published journal, as confirmed by a second, albeit slightly differing version [Figure 2], that bears the details of the publishing company: "London. Published by John Murray, April 1824." Nevertheless, in his published journal, which lacks the image, Lyon makes reference to its absence, stating:

I should have ventured to give a drawing of a female figure in the frontispiece, and have painted the ornaments [tattoos] en place, had I not thought the introduction of a naked lady not quite correct; besides which, whatever may have been said about the looseness of the manners of the women, I am confident none would have consented to the exhibition of more than one limb at a time. [1824: 121]

Given that his journal was published in book form, ideas concerning the "looseness" of Inuit women in relation to tattooing, like the 16th-century handbills in Germany, would have circulated widely among the English public, in turn contributing to beliefs and Western perceptions about Inuit culture, women and tattooing. Lyon's images however are probably not a representation of an actual event or even a real woman, since Inuit women, as he attests, would probably have not revealed to him more than a single body part at once. Lyon would have likely created his depiction by either inferring what tattoos looked like on certain body parts or combining tattooed parts of one or more women into a single image. Due to the placement and formal accuracy of the tattoos on the unnamed woman's body, it is likely that the latter is the case. Lyon's image thereby functions as a composite in a manner similar to the famous narrative of the Greek painter Zeuxis (born ca 450-445 BCE) who used five different women as models in order to create the ideal image of one [Mansfield 2007]; and later Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), who also believed that the ideal female nude should be constructed using parts of different women [Berger 1972: 62]. The curious act of "constructing" the tattooed nude Inuit woman can therefore be measured alongside the Territorial Archivist's suggestion to *deconstruct* photos from the Rhys-Jones collection in order to view the women's tattooed body parts removed from the original images. Lyon's assembly and the Territorial Archivist's suggested fragmentation of the tattooed woman's body indicate that, at least to some extent, Western male viewers, in their attempts to thwart sexualized tropes, narratives and representations have actually reinforced, sustained and further complicated them.

Less than a decade after Lyon published the account of his time amongst the Inuit at Repulse Bay, John Ross (1777-1856) and his crew departed England on the ship "Victory" during May 1829, similarly in search of the notorious yet still inaccessible Northwest Passage. By fall, the expedition had reached the Gulf of Boothia and, like Lyon's voyage, soon found its ship trapped in the Arctic ice, forcing the group to spend the winter—the first of four in the Arctic—at Felix Harbour on the Boothian Peninsula. Ross and his crew soon encountered a group of Inuit and developed a relationship with them. Accounts indicate that the Inuit provided food and supplies to help the Englishmen survive the first winter. After several more winters, in which they tried in vain to free their ship, the group



Figure 2 Engraving by Edward Francis Finden after a drawing by George Francis Lyon. (Collection of Library and Archives Canada, R13133-172-3-E; reproduction courtesy of Library and Archives Canada)

abandoned the ironically named “Victory” in May 1833, and the following August were rescued by a passing ship, the “Isabella,” which had them back in England by October.

On their return Ross and his surviving crew gained considerable praise for their experience. During 1835, Ross published his journal in book form, entitled *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*. In a separate volume, an appendix to the principal text, Ross gives several portraits—in both pictorial and textual form—of several Netsilik Inuit (whom he refers to as “Boothians”) people with whom he had become acquainted. Among these is an engraving by John Brandard, made after a drawing by Ross of a tattooed woman named Kemig [Figure 3].<sup>7</sup> In this depiction, Kemig is shown sitting inside an igloo, flush-faced and with her parka half removed, leaving her breasts entirely exposed. In a detailed explanation of her tattoos, Ross states:

This young woman, who was the most corpulent of the whole tribe, is represented as sitting on the bed within a snow hut, to have the tattooing delineated; this consisted of three lines horizontally across each cheek, three vertically across the chin, a double line round the neck and breast above the shoulder, another below the shoulder, and a third above the elbow; between each of these lines, which encircled the arms and parallel to each other, there were ornamental devices, but without any meaning; and all the women were tattooed exactly in the same way. [1835a: 41]

Although Ross stops short of making a textual connection between Kemig’s tattoos and a heightened sexuality, by depicting her as partially nude he nevertheless furthers the relationship between Inuit women, tattooing and sexuality—a theme that dated back almost three centuries to the German handbills. Within the context of this article, though, it is worth considering Ross’s depiction of Kemig alongside the nine images of nude tattooed Inuit women from the Rhys-Jones collection. In both instances, the women are shown tattooed and topless and, in Ross’s textual account and Rhys-Jones’s slide captions, the locations in which the women lived are also recorded. Considering that Ross’s work follows the invention of photography by only a few years, within the contemporary context of its production his image is actually an analogous mode of representation in relation to Rhys-Jones’s photographs.

With all the above considerations, the question then is why do Rhys-Jones’s photographs create such an intense response, whereas as viewers we have less trouble viewing Ross’s work, despite the fact that in their original contexts both performed the same principal function—that is, to serve as visual records of Inuit women’s tattooing. Moreover, why did Lyon feel so apprehensive about publishing an image of a nude Inuit woman that was probably “constructed” by him, whereas Ross openly disseminated one that even named the woman and her community? Bringing such questions into the immediate photographic and archival focus of this article, I offer another example: Why did LAC—which digitizes and makes images publicly available after the reproduction cost is paid by researchers (for example, after I had requested reproductions of Lyon’s images in this article)—not upload Richard Harrington’s photograph of Obeluk, who has

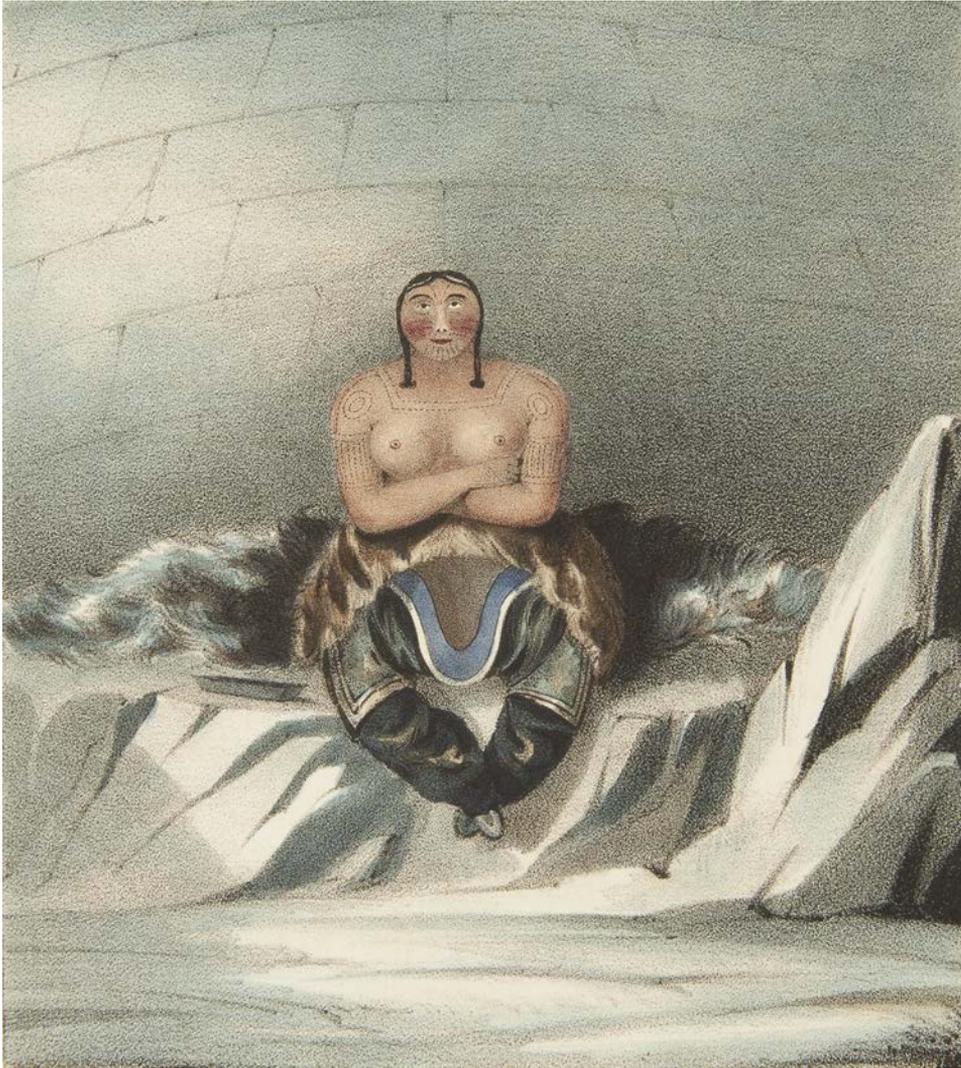


Figure 3 Engraving by John Brandard, from John Ross, "Kemig," ca 1835. (Published in Ross 1835b: 41; reproduction courtesy of the Archives of Manitoba)

tattoos on her face, arms and exposed breasts, to its website after a digital version would have been requested, and subsequently published, by Krutak [2014: 53]? Such a question becomes more acute when one considers that the same image was published during 1952 by Harrington in his book *The Face of the Arctic: A Cameraman's Story in Words and Pictures of Five Journeys into the Far North* [1952: 361]. Furthermore, why has the NWT Archives digitized and made available online the complete Rhys-Jones collection, with the exception of the nine images showing the nude tattooed Inuit women? Circumstances like these point to differing opinions amongst image producers, archivists and scholars as to the

acceptable usage and circulation of potentially sensitive images within varying historical epochs and for fluctuating purposes. Thus far, what I have intended to underscore is that hindering archival access to historical images is not a solution to this conundrum, but a way of intensifying it.

## CONCLUSION

As Iris Marion Young pithily states, “[i]n the total scheme of the objectification of women, breasts are the *primary things*” [2005: 77; my emphasis]. Breasts, as the “primary things” in the Rhys-Jones photographs in question, were, to use the Archival Technician’s previously quoted words, the “problem” with these images. My aim while at the NWT Archives, of course, was not to objectify so much as the Territorial Archivist’s aim was to prevent me from doing so, even if accidentally. But these “primary things” and the varied responses to images of nude, tattooed Inuit women suggest that such images have been, and continue to be, measured in relation to the “pornographic,” which as Lynda Nead argues, is not a unified category “but a struggle between several competing definitions of decency and indecency” [1990: 324]. All this indicates that for many individuals photographs, unlike graphic images, contain a *presumed* veracity that in turn contributes to an image’s ability to arouse a variety of impassioned responses. Perhaps the most important question within the context of this multi-century “struggle,” to use Nead’s words, and one that remains largely unanswered, is how do Inuit feel about such images? This is a question that will likely prove to be important as Inuit women throughout the vast circumpolar region continue to revitalize the practice of tattooing, thus contributing to ongoing cultural reclamation, self-determination and decolonization projects.

Although Rhys-Jones’s photos fall within a lineage of sexualized representations of tattooed Inuit women they do not however need to remain there. Photographs present significant possibilities for Inuit women who are engaged in tattoo revitalization work by offering visual records of the motifs, formal elements and stylistic nuances of Inuit tattooing that can be referenced by contemporary Inuit women interested in acquiring tattoos. In the introduction to their edited collection on Arctic photography, J. C. H. King and Henrietta Lidchi state that while photos are remnants of the past they continue to function in the present, and therefore their investigation must take into consideration “two sets of conditions of interpretation: those operative for the photographs at the time when they were taken, and those which operate today” [1998: 13]. But so long as they remain intentionally concealed, relegated to the depths of the archive, the process of re-inscribing Rhys-Jones’s images with new meanings, narratives and uses—most predominantly from an Inuit-informed perspective—cannot begin.

The possibility of appropriating Western-produced photographs of tattooed Inuit women for the purposes of cultural continuity would in fact follow in a long history of Inuit subverting, resisting and negotiating change, Western imposition and representation, albeit on their own terms. To offer one recent example, during the opening sequence of her film *Tunniit: Retracing the Lines of Inuit*

*Tattoos*, the Inuk filmmaker Alethea Arnaquq-Baril states, over a slideshow of archival images depicting tattooed Inuit women, “The first time I saw them [Inuit tattoos] in a photograph, I was in awe ... My search for knowledge about our tattoos hasn’t been easy” [Arnaquq-Baril 2011]. By juxtaposing archival photographs alongside commentary about her own research process, Arnaquq-Baril emphasizes the importance of Western-produced imagery in the revitalization and study of Inuit tattooing and the problems experienced, even by Inuit, in researching their own cultural practice. One of the possible reasons for this difficulty is that historical sources of Inuit tattooing are generally located in the recesses of archives that are often difficult to navigate to the uninitiated. Access, then, by both interested Inuit and researchers, the latter of whom often produce the secondary (and often more easily accessible) sources culled from archival material, is a key part of the tattoo revitalization process. Supporting this, later in her film, Arnaquq-Baril can be seen, alongside the Inuk lawyer and activist Aaju Peter, looking at an image in an ethnographic text that shows a tattooed woman with her breasts exposed. In this scene Arnaquq-Baril and Peter are concerned with the woman’s tattoos and pay less attention to the fact her breasts are exposed or to the dubious circumstances of the image’s production. In doing so the women contribute to the photograph’s ongoing, negotiated meaning rather than let its visual qualities and potentially indeterminate context of production inhibit its contemporary, holistic potential.

While I was writing the first draft of this article I logged on to the NWT Archives’ website to double-check the metadata for a number of the Rhys-Jones tattoo images in question and, to my surprise, the photographs were available online. Upon visiting the website several weeks later the photographs were once again “not yet available.” I hence inquired about this with none other than Ian Moir, from whom I received the following response: “Those images were loaded to the website database in error. They were removed at *my direction* [emphasis added]. Those images are still available to the public in the reading room at the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre.”<sup>8</sup> This answer is noteworthy for two reasons, first due to the Territorial Archivist’s continuing self-imposed ability to determine what images should and should not be accessible digitally; secondly, his answer implies a perceived compromise, that such images *are* readily available to the public should one visit the PWNHC. The problem though is that, given Canada’s vast sub-Arctic and Arctic regions and the exorbitant cost of travel to and within them, the PWNHC and by extension, the NWT Archives, are by no means readily accessible to those living beyond the Yellowknife region. The availability of Rhys-Jones photographs online, then, could provide a way of circumventing the time, cost and geographic barriers one must navigate to conduct in-person research at the NWT Archives. In a recent article on how Inuit have been represented (and misrepresented) online, Erin Yunes argues that Inuit have demonstrated a keen ability to use the Internet to “generate an online space of digital identities on a global scale and to promote inclusion, knowledge, dialogue, and exchange” [2016: 101; also Christensen 2003]. A productive route forward, then, might be the inclusion of Inuit voices and knowledge systems into policies concerning the digitization and dissemination of culturally relevant (and sensitive) images, as Kimberly Christen advocates in the online availability

of Indigenous cultural belongings in Australia and the United States [2011: 185–210; 2015: 1–9].

As I conclude though, many readers will likely ask, “but why are the Rhys-Jones images not included in this article?” While I do admittedly retain research copies of all eleven of Rhys-Jones’s tattoo images, I have intentionally refrained from publishing them here. While some may argue that I am in fact continuing the same censorship and access processes I aim to criticize, to this I have a few brief responses: first, this study is concerned principally with an experience and its coinciding policies, processes and practices, rather than the visual features of the Rhys-Jones images themselves. In other words, this article is less about the images than it is about the circumstances surrounding my encounter with them, and it is therefore possible to read and understand this article without viewing them. Secondly, and more importantly given the quarrelsome qualities of these images, I believe that it is not up to me to make such a decision. In this article I am advocating access at an archival level, not arguing for my ethical and moral right (as there are no copyright restrictions) to reproduce images in a publication. This decision, I would argue, is best left to Inuit stakeholders, who have the ability to give these images new lives, whereas I only have the capacity to give to them a certain level of public and scholarly awareness. More than anything, my intention with this article is to underscore the existence of these sources and their potential value, which is contingent upon ease of access, for both Inuit engaged in tattooing’s cultural revitalization and scholars investigating Inuit tattooing from historical or contemporary perspectives. To those interested in viewing said images, I invite you to contact the NWT Archives, which does, despite not having them publicly available online, retain digital copies of the photographs in question. I would be curious as to the response(s) those making such inquiries would receive and how these in turn can be compared to what I have communicated here. Perhaps once other individuals begin to show interest in and engage with Rhys-Jones’s photographs, the NWT Archives will reconsider its own approach to them.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## NOTES

1. This story, alongside over one hundred more, is part of an interview series with Kalvak that gives the stories to the images in a number of her drawings. However, the Northwest Territories Archives does not hold this collection of drawings nor does the museum, the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre, which it is located in. After a number of inquiries at institutions throughout Canada, I have been unable to locate this collection, and it is therefore an area where further research is warranted.
2. For an example of such continuity in the context of tattooing, see Jelinski [2017].
3. On these early images, see Sturtevant and Quinn [1989]: 61–140.

4. On the practice of Inuit tattooing, see Krutak [2014]: 19–63.
5. As such, future researchers wishing to consult these items will also have to submit an ATIPP request to view them.
6. The Scott Polar Research Institute at University of Cambridge holds another copy of this work, which can be found under accession number Y 72/6/12.
7. After an extensive search I was unable to find any collections that hold the original copy of this engraving and/or Ross's drawing it is based on. Moreover, it is quite possible that the name Kemig may not be completely accurate, perhaps due to language barriers or orthographic difficulties during Ross's contact with her.
8. Personal email communication, January 12, 2016. *Editor's note*: The situation where these photographs are only available in Yellowknife brings to mind the situation in 1959 when Vladimir Nabokov's rather scandalous novel *Lolita* had just been published. The Toronto Public Library was inundated with readers' requests to be put on the waiting-list in order to borrow a copy. Rather than follow more conservative libraries that refused to buy the book, the Toronto one put a single copy on its shelves—when the city's population was 1,744,000.

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