Healing Through Ancestral Skin Marking:

Traditional Tattooing as Healing and (Re)connection for Indigenous People, with a Focus on Indigenous 2SLGBTQIA+ and Indigenous Women

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Healing Through Ancestral Skin Marking:
Traditional Tattooing as Healing and (Re)connection for Indigenous People,
with a Focus on Indigenous 2SLGBTQIA+ and Indigenous Women

Mel Lefebvre, Ph.D.
Concordia University, 2024

This dissertation, grounded in Michif and Nehiyaw Plains Indigenous worldviews, explores ancestral skin marking or traditional tattooing as a mode of healing and (re)connection for contemporary Indigenous people with a particular focus on 2SLGBTQIA+ and Indigenous women. Traditional tattooing by Indigenous cultures in so-called Canada was deemed savage by explorers, missionaries, and government, with many communities concealing the practice for fear of reprisals by the church and state. This dissertation discusses a new generation of Indigenous traditional tattoo practitioners that is reawakening this practice. It draws on research-creation conducted while traveling through so-called Canada from 2019 to 2024 and engaging with community members through tattoo practice to describe the development of a new Michif and Nehiyaw tattooing methodology. This methodology is born out of the transformative connections made during those travels and grounded in and guided by Michif and Nehiyaw ways of being. These include the relational methodologies of kiyôkêwin (visiting), wâhkôhtowin (kinship), kitimahkinawow (pity and compassion), and tâpwêwin (truth telling) guiding the development of the new Michif and Nehiyaw methodology: O and Δ. These shapes carry and enact meanings related to gender, identity, belonging, transformation, healing, and connecting to ancestral frequencies. Engaging with these methodologies helps us understand, embody, and practice traditional tattooing as ancestral medicine in support of Indigenous people as we imagine and cultivate bold Indigenous futures.

Dedication

This labor of love is dedicated to my parents, Linda Stephanie Doyle and Jacques Oscar Lefebvre, my sister Lisa Lefebvre, my grandmother Lilianne St-Laurent, and my daughters Anne Beatrice Tobin and Claudine Tobin, the next generation, and all those who are making their way home.

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I acknowledge the love and support of my ancestors, parents, sister, daughters, and friends who have encouraged me in a myriad of ways to be brave, laugh, persevere, and rest.

I acknowledge my Elders who have guided me through this process and in my life: Kawennotas Sedalia Fazio, Dr. Mary Wilson, Blu Waters, and Joseph Naytowhow. Joseph gifted me my spirit name *kâkwa okwêmêsiw*: porcupine's twin in honor of this practice, the work I do, and the quills that we used ancestrally to tattoo. *Kâkwa* has a lot to teach me and I follow in *kâkwa's* footsteps, amongst some of my other guides: buffalo, wasp, owl, and fox, maarsii/hay hay/thank you for your guidance.

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I acknowledge and am grateful beyond words to my mentors: My first mentor and friend, tattoo practitioner Milo Lefort, who introduced me to hand poke tattooing, shared knowledge around 2SLGBTQ+ and those in need of specific modes of care, and who forever puts health and safety protocols first. And to my friend and current mentor, Dion Kazsas, Hungarian, Métis, and Nlaka'pamux cultural tattoo practitioner, painter, teacher, independent scholar, and podcaster who has taught me so much on so many levels from health and safety protocols to bone tool making and skin stitching, from how to pack my tattoo gear when traveling to how to accept myself and have the confidence to be who my ancestors meant for me to be, fiercely and unapologetically.

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I acknowledge the unwavering support, brilliance, and laughter of the Montreal Métis crew.

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I acknowledge friend and Métis performance artist Moe Clark who has generously shared with me over the years the many teachings she has received from her Elders.

I acknowledge all the Michif and Nehiyaw folks doing good work, in educational settings and beyond, serving our communities, furthering our teachings, and creating. You inspire me.

I acknowledge my Tattoo Family who continue to teach me so much, who are so generous in sharing their perspectives and skills, and who come together every time in good spirit and laughter. I look forward to our future gatherings.

I acknowledge my daughter Anne who has held this space for me, been patient with me, written me notes of love and encouragement throughout this process, and learned to make me coffee. I hope that this good work encourages you to go as far as you can in this world and support others with kindness and humility. I acknowledge her father, Frederick Tobin and his family, who have supported and encouraged me as long as I have known them.

Lastly, I acknowledge the transcendental, the universe, the Creator, that speaks to us in ways we don't always expect or understand, that perceives us, that gives us what we need at just the right moment, and will always reply when we ask. So just ask.

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Definitions

The following are definitions for various terms in the context of this research:

Ancestral skin marking: Used interchangeably with traditional tattooing. Traditional tattooing is a more accessible term, however, after conversations with my mentor Dion Kaszas, it has become clear that the term ancestral skin marking makes a clearer distinction between Western tattooing and the Indigenous cultural practice.

Frequency: This describes the act of tuning into various teachings or ancestors or beings that I connect with at any given time, like a radio, tuning into a certain "channel" (Hill, 2008).

Heteropatriarchy: "Heteropatriarchy [is] social systems in which heterosexuality and patriarchy are perceived as normal and natural, and in which other configurations are perceived as abnormal, aberrant, and abhorrent" (Arvin et al., 2013, p. 13).

Indigenous: Refers to the First Peoples of a territory. If a source speaks to the exact nation or tribe, I also specify. I use this term in some instances as one that encompasses all First Peoples if I need to speak in a general context.

Métis: In this text, the term Métis refers to the Red River Métis Nation.

Michif: One of the words we use to refer to ourselves as Red River Métis people is Michif (Campbell, 2022), directly reflecting our language and territories in the west, specifically the Red River Settlement. The word Michif speaks to who I am and where my ancestors are from.

Nehiyaw vs Cree vs Plains Cree: Nehiyaw is how I identify. In this text, I switch between these words depending on the context and/or the source. Authors of the sources are cited are identified according to their bios and using the words they choose for their Nations, tribes, clans, and territories.

Portal: In my practice, the portal is what I have come to understand as a gateway to our ancestors—human and more-than-human—to ancestral frequencies and vibrations, through which we are able to access what we need in any given moment. Utilizing this gateway during medicinal tattooing is central to my practice and is reflected in the symbols I offer to tattoo and the story I share with recipients.

Queering: Actions of disruption that are "active, interconnected, critical, and everyday practices that take place within and across diverse spaces and times" (Hunt & Holmes, 2015, p. 156)

Settler colonialism: "Settler colonialism is a persistent social and political formation in which newcomers/colonizers/settlers come to a place, claim it as their own, and do whatever it takes to disappear the Indigenous peoples that are there" (Arvin et al., 2013, p. 12).

Tastawayihk-iyiniw: Nêhiyawêwin (Plains Cree) term translating to *in-between person* referring to gender and/or sexual fluidity told to me by Elder Joseph Naytowhow and Métis performance artist Moe Clark (personal communication, 2019)

Tattoo family: This refers to the community of traditional tattoo practitioners that come together at various times of the year to offer tattooing at gatherings, as well as virtually coming together, nationally and internationally, to share knowledge and offer tattoo medicine to communities.

Tattoo medicine: This term refers to the ancestral practice of tattoo as a type of healing, a medicinal practice, and that is how I use the term in this research.

Traditional tattoo: A mark made on the body made by cutting, sewing, or poking the skin and applying ink to the opening using ancestral or contemporary tools, the process and practice for which are grounded in Indigenous ways of being and knowing. I use "traditional tattoo" and "tattoo" interchangeably. Unless otherwise stated as Western tattooing, "tattoo" here refers only to traditional Indigenous tattoo practices.

Two-Spirit (2S): Originally coined by Elder Myra Laramee in 1990, this term is used to express gender and sexuality in some Indigenous contexts (Sylliboy, 2019, p. 96). It is broadly used here to mean anyone who lives, feels, identifies as beyond or different than the colonial binary construct of male and female.

Vibration: A texture, speed, and/or sound of a specific energy emanating from a frequency.

Visioning: A process in my practice whereby images present themselves in visions and dreams.

"*Every stitch is a prayer."* Dr. Mary Wilson

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Positionality

My birth name is Melanie Ann Lefebvre. I am known and introduce myself as Mel Lefebvre or simply Mel. I am a Two-Spirit (2S), Michif, Nehiyaw, French, and Irish mother and traditional tattoo practitioner. I am also a community worker, artist, writer, and scholar. I am a member of the Manitoba Métis Federation and a descendant of many Red River Michif, Nehiyaw, Nakoda, Saulteaux, and French families on my father's side including Desjardins, Delorme, and Guiboche. I am the great great great grandchild of Madeleine Vivier and Urbain Delorme, leaders of the bison hunt. Side by side with Louis Riel, my ancestors fought for Red River free trade, in the 1885 Resistance at Duck Lake with Gabriel Dumont, and were members of the Cypress Hills Métis hunting brigade (Barkwell, 2016, p. 33-34). I am sharing my family names because that is how we understand our kinship relations and how other Indigenous people can identify us, through our communities and the lands we belong to.

I grew up in small towns in Ontario, Prince Edward Island, and Quebec. My father Jack, a drywaller, moved us around to where there was work for him. My mother Linda, who always had a hunger for learning, continued her studies throughout her adult life when she was able and worked as a kindergarten teacher, bank teller, and eventually, a medical secretary. My father is Red River Métis, Cree, and French, and my mother is Irish. I was raised Irish Catholic. My father has always identified as Native, like his mother and her siblings, but has never connected to his communities. My father's mother is Lilianne St-Laurent (Red River Métis, Cree, French). She was the youngest of seven siblings and the only one born in Quebec. Her family had moved to Quebec from Fisher Branch, Manitoba in the early 1900s to work at a textile factory. Lilianne's mother was Marie Desjardins (Red River Métis, Cree, French). Marie's mother was Elise Delorme (Red River Métis, Nakoda, French) and her father was Albert Desjardins (Red River Métis, Cree, Saulteaux, French).

Through my reconnecting with our communities over the past 20 years, I have been able to gift my father, my sister, and myself a sense of peace, belonging, self-awareness, and the story of our family. My ancestors are proud.

My practice is focused on traditional tattooing as a mode of healing and reconnection for urban Indigenous people, with a special focus on 2SLGBTQ+ and Indigenous women, as well as uncovering, (re)claiming, and creating traditional tattoos in contemporary and future contexts. I have worked closely with the Native Women's Shelter of Montreal for many years now where those who use our services are Indigenous women, Two-Spirit people, and children. We advocate for Indigenous safety, culturally appropriate services, and child welfare reform in Quebec. My experience in grassroots activism and my life as an artist have led me to traditional tattooing as a mode of healing that I can offer to the community.

With the care, guidance, and knowledge of everyone mentioned here, and so many others, I have been able to move along this journey with humility, awareness, skill, and love.

The portal is open ⭕

1.2 Research Question

The research question this dissertation seeks to answer is: How does traditional tattooing provide healing and (re)connection for Indigenous people? As it explores that question, the dissertation considers traditional Plains Indigenous tattoo practices, seeks to understand the representation and inclusion of 2SLGBTQIA+ and Indigenous women in this practice, and describes the creation of a new Michif and Nehiyaw tattooing methodology.

Traditional Indigenous tattooing was deemed savage by explorers, missionaries, and government, with many communities concealing the practice for fear of reprisals by the church and state (Johnston, A. H., 2017; Kaszas, 2018; Light, D. W., 1972). Despite colonization, the traditional tattoo revival is growing, with a new generation of Indigenous traditional tattoo practitioners reawakening our tattoo practices (Kaszas, 2018; Kaszas, 2023). These markings are a reminder of our roles in and responsibilities to our communities; they help us to celebrate our achievements as well as mark our most challenging moments; they are holistic medicine and methodology that encompasses culture, belonging, identity, (re)connection, decolonization, sovereignty, empowerment, gender, transformation, and healing (Johnston, A. H., 2017; Kaszas, 2018; Kaszas, 2023). This ancestral practice is a relationship to our ancestors, marks filled with intention that we wear as expressions of who we were, are, and will be as Indigenous peoples (Jones, Trimble, Kaszas, Angulalik, Williams in CBC, 2019; Lefebvre & Kaszas, 2019-2024; Kaszas, 2018). There is power in these markings.

This research explores Plains Indigenous body modification practices of the past, how Plains nations used traditional tattooing in their daily lives, and the protocols surrounding the practice and relationships that upheld it. This research delves into the logistical and spiritual process of designing a cultural marking, what kinds of designs were tattooed, the tools used, and how we can take this bundle of knowledge and bring it into contemporary practice to empower Indigenous people today. Through community stories and colonial archives, it also considers gendered tattoos and how colonial influence sought to erase the multitude of gender variance and acceptance in Indigenous communities (Pyle, 2018; Simpson, L., 2017).

1.3 Research Objectives

The objectives of this research-creation are:

1.2.1. To present a brief history of Plains Indigenous tattooing as a mode of cultural healing and connection that has been practiced for thousands of years using bones, porcupine quills, and rocks to sew, poke, and cut the skin, then using inks made from soot and plants sewn, poked, or rubbed into those holes and cuts to create designs (Deter-Wolf & Diaz-Granados, 2014; Light, 1972). These designs had many meanings: coming of age, different stages of life, status,

lineage, responsibilities and roles, connection to land, medicine, protection, celebration, mourning, warfare, peace, dreams, visions, and stories (Bonspille-Boileau, S., 2018; Kaszas, 2018; Krutak, 2014; Light, 1972). It will be demonstrated that the intentions and stories behind these markings, the ceremonies and protocols that surround and support them and call them in, and the responsibilities that come with carrying those markings, are what defines a traditional tattoo.

1.2.2. To demonstrate traditional tattooing as a contemporary culturally-specific way to honor the many expressions of gender and sexuality that have existed in our communities for millennia (Simpson, L., 2017; Pyle, 2018) and to provide healing, relief, and empowerment as we struggle in these contemporary times somewhere in the middle of "what is and what is possible" (Wildcat & De Leon, 2020, p. 2). The National Inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit, and Trans people revealed that "persistent and deliberate human and Indigenous rights violations and abuses are the root cause behind Canada's staggering rates of violence against Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA people" (Reclaiming Power and Place, 2019). Many queer Indigenous youth (gender queer, sexually queer, or both) have voiced that they are confused, scared, and depressed, finding it difficult to see themselves in this society that is aggressive and violent towards them; they need safety and connection (Fast et al., 2021). Stories from Elders and other community members as well as research into the colonial archive indicate that gender diverse people wore the markings that pertained to the medicine they needed, milestones celebrated, or distinct roles and responsibilities (Pyle, 2018; Kaszas, 2018; Skinner, 1914; Lang, 1998). As demonstrated in my travels across the country tattooing community members, gender diverse markings are desired, sought out, and needed.

1.2.3. To show how it is crucial to engage with community members and listen to their perspectives on tattooing, past and present, so that they contribute to Indigenous research because so much has been written and recorded about us without our consent (Simpson, L., 2017). Guidance from my Elders, listening to Knowledge Holders, engagement with all of those who I have tattooed, and my mentorship with Nlaka'pamux, Métis, Hungarian traditional tattoo practitioner and independent scholar Dion Kaszas has been crucial to my becoming a carrier of this practice. Since 2019, Kaszas and I have shared knowledge and ideas around ancestral skin marking practices, protocols, and visual culture and how we can offer these to support our communities. Kaszas reminds me that these are our languages, and we can share them with whomever we choose (personal communication, 2021). That being said, the knowledge base on our tattooing practices is minimal and much of it was documented by non-Indigenous anthropologists, explorers, and missionaries. With the revival that is happening on Turtle Island (North America), Indigenous tattoo practitioners are weaving our stories and experiences back together and creating new ones with the help of our communities.

1.2.4. To demonstrate the significance of engaging with the past such as our material cultures kept within museum archives in order to produce contemporary tattoo designs. When creating new tattoo designs for contemporary Indigenous realities, we can look beyond documentation by settlers on traditional tattooing practices and engage with our own visual and material cultures (Kaszas, 2018). The objects held by museums have provided inspiration and knowledge around Plains Indigenous peoples' creative expression for merging the past and the present in new designs for community members. These designs are part of the medicine we as Indigenous peoples need to live and thrive. In viewing this material culture, conversations around repatriation have begun with curators who are willing to engage. The Royal BC Museum has published the *Indigenous Repatriation Handbook* which expertly lays out methods of engaging with museums and holding accountable those institutions that benefit from colonial legacy, bringing together reconciliation and repatriation, relationships between museums and Indigenous peoples, created by us, for us, and is a living, evolving document (Collison et al., 2019).

1.4 Preview of contents

This research creation dissertation is organized into the following chapters:

1.4.1. Chapter 1 Introduction

Presented in this chapter is my positionality (where I grew up, my community connections, family history, service to community, relationship to this research), research question, research objectives, and preview of the contents.

1.4.2. Chapter 2 Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical frameworks used in this research are expanded upon in this chapter, including: decolonization; visual, creative, and body sovereignty; and queer Indigenous, Two-Spirit, and Indigenous feminist theories.

1.4.3. Chapter 3 Methodologies

The research is grounded in and guided by the Michif and Nehiyaw methodologies of kiyôkêwin, wâhkôhtowin, kitimahkinawow, and tâpwêwin. These are discussed at length in this chapter as well as interpreted through accompanying tattoo designs.

1.4.4. Chapter 4 Literature Review

This chapter includes review and discussion of traditional tattooing of the past and the present revival with a focus on so-called Canada; tattooing tools and methods through the work and practice of Indigenous and non-Indigenous sources; body and creative sovereignty; and Indigenous gender and sexuality, past and present.

1.4.5. Chapter 5 Research-creation Field Work

Over the last five years (2019-2024) I have been traveling so-called Canada offering traditional tattoos at gatherings, in private residences, and at events. In October 2023, I held a gathering at Concordia University as part of this research creation. This chapter describes the context, description, setting, attendees, collaborators (receivers of tattoo), ethics, tattoo process, follow-up, and outcomes of both one-on-one tattooing sessions and gatherings.

1.4.6. Chapter 6 Outcomes and Reflections

This chapter discusses at length the insight gained over the past five years of traditional tattoo research and practice (2019-2024), the experience of bringing traditional tattoo into the academy, the importance of mentorship, tattoo bundles, markings to honor gender and sexuality, traditional tools, contemporary designs, the new Michif and Nehiyaw traditional tattooing methodology ○ and △,and the challenges experienced during this process.

1.4.7. Chapter 7 Conclusion

A summary of the research and future research plans and possibilities are presented in this chapter.

Chapter 2 Theoretical Frameworks

The frameworks used to understand and interpret this research creation are inherent to traditional tattooing as an ancestral practice being revived today. Decolonization, sovereignty, and Indigenous non-binary and feminist theoretical approaches demonstrate the knowledge and actions within traditional tattoo practice that oppose and overcome the dominance of colonialism.

2.1. Decolonizing Framework

2.1.1. Description

Decolonization is made up of the actions of refusal, recognition, resistance, and liberation (Coulthard, 2017; Simpson, A., 2017; Smith, 2012). Traditional tattooing is a refusal to conform to colonial assimilation tactics, recognition of ourselves, and an expression of our self-determination. As Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson states, *if Indigeneity then the settler state is false*: Simply by existing, Indigenous people are a constant challenge to the state that employs legislation and direction action to erase us (Simpson, A., 2017, p. 2).

Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith describes decolonizing research and the academy as centering Indigenous “concerns and worldviews and then coming to know and understand theory and research from our own [Indigenous] perspectives and for our own purposes" (Smith, 2012, p. 41). While not turning our backs to Western knowledge, decolonization situates Indigenous people as experts and leaders in research to benefit our own communities. Such research needs to be about Indigenous peoples and by Indigenous peoples, wherein we are not subjects to be studied, assimilated or worse (Smith, 2012). In this research creation, I bring an ancestral

Indigenous practice into the Western academic space and while the research process or structure has been informed by a Western system, the methodologies and methods are Indigenous. The Western academic institution requires Indigenous people to adhere to its ways of doing (Smith, 2012), yet it has shown some of the potential opportunities available such as: the time, space, and funding to explore research interests; supportive and collaborative Indigenous faculty and staff as well as non-Indigenous allies who want Indigenous students to succeed and are interested in their pursuits; and the opportunity to shine a light on Indigenous brilliance at events around the world. With the support of a strong Indigenous cohort, it is possible to generate good work and add to the Indigenous knowledge base.

Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar, writer, and artist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson states in her book *As We Have Always Done* (2017) that decolonization is a personal and collective process of "returning to ourselves, a reengagement with the things we have left behind, a re-emergence, an unfolding from the inside out" (Simpson, 2017, p. 17-18). That re-engagement with our ancestral tattoo practices fuels the decolonial shift in research and academia, Indigenous peoples as seen and treated as experts of their own knowledge and experience, demonstrates and inspires other Indigenous learners and teachers to pursue their dreams.

2.1.2. Traditional Tattoo as Decolonial Practice

Figure 1 demonstrates a decolonial practice of taking the fine art images of European Renaissance painters—in this instance Raphael—visioning, and then designing traditional tattoos on the nude figures. Several elements are at play: There is a reversal of roles where European art is being co-opted by an Indigenous artist, echoing the theft of Indigenous bodies and land by Europeans through terra nullius (empty land) and the Doctrine of Discovery (the papal order employed by Europeans as reasoning behind the land theft which began with settler colonialism) (Rickard, 2023; NCTR, 2023); Second, cultural appropriation is an ongoing struggle for Indigenous artists around the world (Elliot, 2017; Ontario Arts, 2016) and this is a deliberate exercise in the appropriation of art by European master painters and hence, an intentional practice of theft and the Indigenization (the weaving of Indigenous ways of knowing and being into a Western system) of European bodies; Third, as Indigenous people we are often faced with multiple layers of struggle including financial (Palmater, 2011), and as our cultural practices are creative, we find ourselves searching for economical ways to support our cultural and artistic pursuits (Establishing, 2013). In this sense, utilizing these images that are in the public domain and no longer under copyright law provides access to high quality, well-known art at no expense and for my own purposes.

Figure 1: Raphael, The Three Graces, 1503. Tattoo designs, Mel Lefebvre, 2024.

2.2. Visual and Creative Sovereignty Framework

2.2.1. Description

Indigenous sovereignty is the inherent right of Indigenous peoples to self-determination, to govern ourselves according to our cultural practices and laws, informed by the territories on which we have lived for millennia (Barker, 2005, p. 19-20)). The revival of traditional tattoo ceremonies by Indigenous people is a journey of reclamation and a renewal of sovereignty as we center ourselves in this practice (Kaszas, 2018; Arnaquq-Baril, 2011; Bill Reid, 2018; Bonspille-Boileau; 2018; CBC, 2019).

The story of traditional tattooing as an ancestral practice has often been told by European anthropologists and academics who have no experience in the ceremonial practice or living as Indigenous people and yet they have so far been held up as the experts in this field (Kaszas, 2018, p7-8)). Tuscarora scholar, artist, curator, and visual historian Jolene Rickard states that sovereignty is far from an abstract notion. In *Art, Visual Sovereignty and Pushing Perceptions*, Rickard describes the political and legal roots of Indigenous sovereignty through the Haudenosaunee history of opposing the Canadian and US nation states and asserting the "right to move freely" on Haudenosaunee territory. Far from an abstract notion, sovereignty was enacted through a variety of political activities (Rickard, 2023, p. 23-24). Citing Wildcat and De Leon's identification of sovereignty "descriptors", Rickard points to her own "breakthrough moment" in the 80s when visual sovereignty came into being through photography (Wildcat & De Leon, 2020, p. 4-5; Rickard, 2023, p. 22-25).

Historically, photography has been used by settlers to uphold the idea of Indigenous land as empty, for the taking, and freezing us in a stereotype of a vanished people (Rickard, 2023). Through photography and other art forms, we can turn the colonial gaze on its head by offering our own perspective. Rickard identifies "visual" sovereignty as having many branches, as multitudinous as there are Indigenous nations and cultures, with practices used to interpret and communicate sovereignty beyond the legal definition. Expressions of sovereignty come in all forms (Rickard, 2023).

Rickard's Haudenosaunee context can be compared to that of Red River Métis and other Plains Indigenous peoples and the 1885 Resistance, amongst other battles, where Métis and First Nations fought the Canadian state to protect their lifeways (Barkwell, 2011). Métis visual and creative sovereignty is evident in the methods used today that tell the story of Métis history and culture such as traditional tattooing, beadwork, embroidery, hide tanning, dance, photography, and sculpture (Racette et al., 2022; Racette & Mattes, 2022; Peterson, 2021).

2.2.2. Traditional Tattoo as Sovereignty

Sovereignty is enacted through a variety of political activities (Rickard, 2023, p. 23-24). Indigenous people in Canada were and are legislated by the state (Indian Act, 1985; Scrip, 2024) and forced assimilation strategies such as Residential Schools, the 60s Scoop, and the child welfare system became the reality and continue today in various forms (Truth, 2015). By

reviving our ancestral practices, and engaging with visual, creative, and body sovereignty, we make a political statement against these colonial tactics (Rickard, 2023; Simpson, A., 2017).

These actions of sovereignty are a return to the self (Simpson, L., 2017), a practice of our ancestral and contemporary ways of being that lay the foundation for successful futures. Through traditional tattoo as an act of sovereignty, we tell our stories, share our visual culture, make meaning, nurture relational accountability, and take up space. We decolonize our bodies through the sovereignty embedded in these symbols and those who see these symbols are then impacted and reminded that we are contemporary peoples.

In Figure 2, I explore visual and creative sovereignty as tattoo. Again, taking a fine art image painted by a European Renaissance artist (Lavinia Fontana) and designing traditional tattoos on the nude figure. These designs are inspired by the archival Plains Indigenous material culture I visited during this research creation (2019-2024) at the Canadian Museum of History (archival sample Figure 3).

Figure 2: Lavinia Fontana, Minerva Dressing, 1613. Tattoo Designs, Mel Lefebvre, 2024.

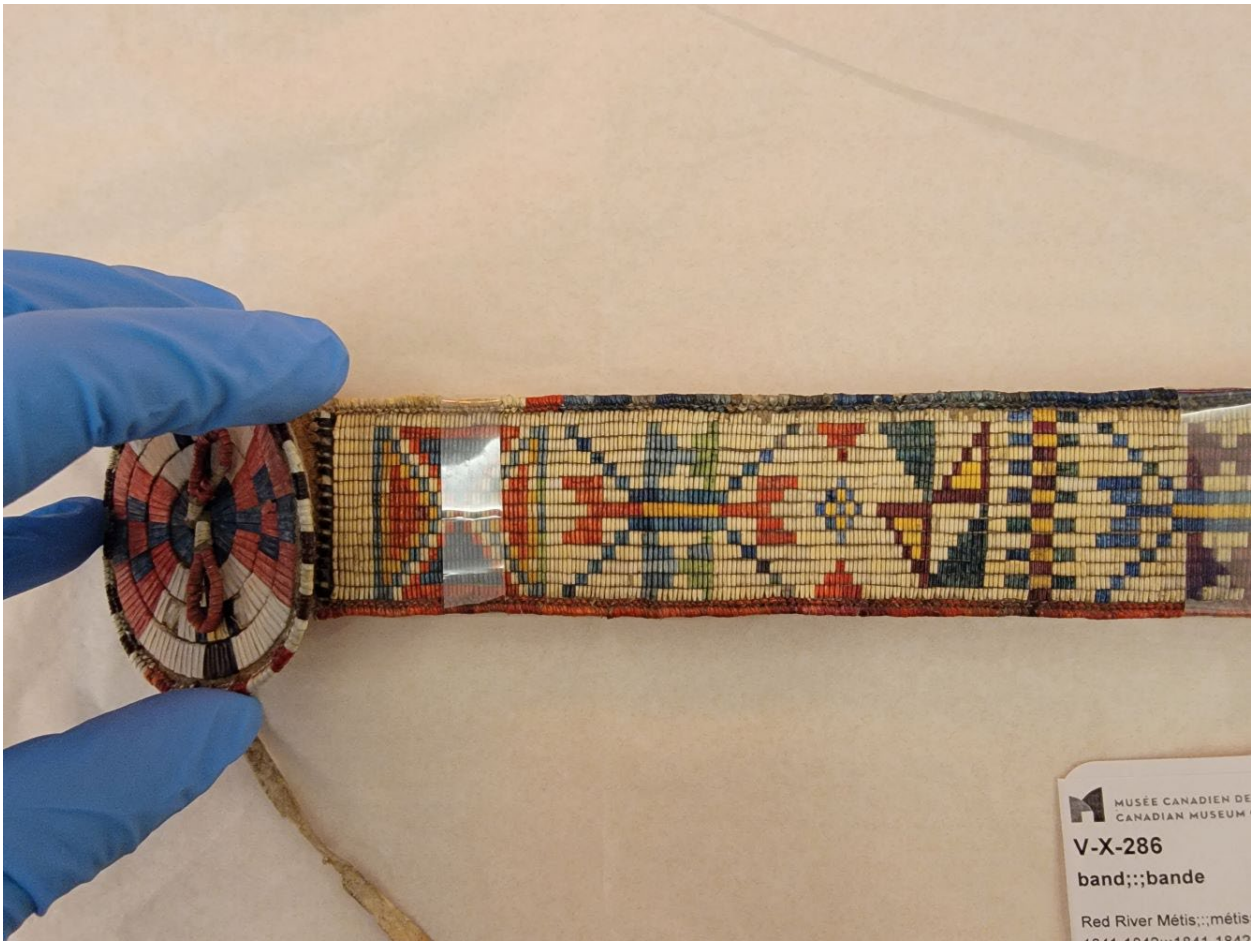

Figure 3: Artist Unknown, Red River Métis, band, 1841, V-X-286. Collection Canadian Museum of History.

Spending time with and relating to the archival work, I am inspired to design and offer this collection of symbols to the community as tattoos. In Figure 2, from the wrist of the figure to the shoulder, the tattoos are earth lines for grounding and protecting; triangles that represent mountains, rocks, direction, and purpose; circles as relationships and portals to our ancestors; lightning to represent sky and thunder beings; rows of lines which can represent children, years lived, and challenges; rectangles as bodies of water; and a sun, moon, and star shape on the shoulder representing our relationship to the skyworld. We use these shapes and symbols to mark our milestones, celebrate our power and resilience, and honor our relationships to all that is (Kaszas, 2018).

2.3 Queer Indigenous, Two-Spirit, and Indigenous Feminist Theories

2.3.1. Description

Queer Indigenous, Two-Spirit, and Indigenous feminist theories offer inclusive ways of being in and relating to the world in antithesis to heteropatriarchy (Arvin et al., 2013, p. 16; 24-25). Born from settler colonial social systems, heteropatriarchy champions the binary of male and

female within a structure that normalizes Christian ideals of the nuclear family with men as rulers (Arvin et al., 2013). Within this system, genders, sexualities, and non-white people whose realities fall outside of this binary, are seen and treated as unequal; these systems extend outside the model family and out into societal structures and processes (Arvin et al., 2013, p. 13).

With queer and feminist realities in opposition to settler colonialism, these theoretical frameworks enable to analysis and deconstruction of colonial heteropatriarchy, and instead offer community, care, and varied ways of experiencing the world (Hooks, 2018; Arvin et al., 2013). Queering then, as outside the colonial binary of male/female, is an action of disruption and essentially allows anyone to do "active, interconnected, critical, and everyday practices that take place within and across diverse spaces and times" (Hunt, S., & Holmes, C., 2015, p. 156).

Similarly, Cree educator and scholar Dr. Alex Wilson identifies queering as actions that disrupt established “knowledges, identities, behaviors, and spaces thereby unsettling power relations and taken for-granted assumptions. Queerness…offers the potential for radical social critique” (Wilson, 2021, p. 156). Queering, living as a Two-Spirit person, and working closely with and for the gender-diverse Indigenous community, is how I experience the world and the model through which I offer up traditional tattooing.

In A Recognition of Being: Restructuring Native Womanhood, Cree/Métis writer and educator Kim Anderson offers:

> “It was not long before [Europeans] realized that, in order to dominate the land and the people that were occupying it, they needed to disempower the women. Indigenous systems that allocated power to women were incompatible with the kind of colonial power dynamics that would be necessary to maintain colonial power” (Anderson, 2016, p. 58).

This domination continues as shown by the MMIWG2ST inquiry and recognition by the larger body politic. Violence against Indigenous women, girls, Trans, and Two-Spirit people is a reality the state does little to stop and rectify (Reclaiming, 2019).

While Indigenous people continue to demand effective investigations, justice, and reparations of MMIWG2ST from the Canadian government we also need to contend with the colonial ideals that have seeped into our communities that seek to oppress and silence Indigenous women and gender diverse people. With the Indian Act, for example, heterosexual marriage became the only way to pass down your status and rights as an Indigenous person (Indian Act, 1985). The homophobia that now exists in our communities is understandable when analyzing the legacy of colonialism (Anderson, 2016). When I engage in traditional tattoo research and practice it is through this lens of understanding the violence we have been subjected to, the ongoing ways in which the state and its agents oppress Indigenous people, the various methods of contemporary and ancestral practices of care and empowerment we can tap into such as tattoo, and how tattoos remind us of and bring us back to our power and inclusivity.

2.3.2. Traditional Tattoo as Gender Inclusivity and Empowerment

Outside constructs of colonialism like legislative methods of disappearance (Indian Act, 1985), we can revisit our own modes of Indigenous being including varied gender and sexual identities (Pyle, 2018). Betasamosake Simpson's *kwe* as resurgent method exemplifies the possibilities that Indigenous queer and feminist frameworks offer and how they are beyond the definition of woman and colonial thought; *kwe* is an ancestral genderless or gender inclusive embodiment, which "comes from the spiritual world and flows to humans through intimate relationships with human and nonhuman entities" (Betasamosake Simpson, 2017, p. 28). This act of transcending colonialism through our own reflections of gender and sexual identity is a celebration, and traditional tattoo supports this celebration by offering gender fluid tattoos and a chance to process some of the grief caused by the colonial interruption of our relationships to ourselves, families, communities, and spirit worlds.

Indigenous languages often reflect the varied genders and sexualities represented in our communities (Pyle, 2018). Like Betasamosake Simpson's *kwe*, a Nêhiyawêwin term for diverse gender and sexuality is *tastawâyihk-iyiniw,* which translates into English as *in-between person.* This was told to me in conversation with Métis performance artist Moe Clark, who learned from Elder Joseph Naytowhow (personal communication, 2019). When I first heard this term, I thought it was limiting and restricted me to exist between the binary of male and female, yet Clark confirmed that how I identified as a being that exists between worlds, not simply between genders, is very much what *tastawâyihk-iyiniw* encompasses: We, as in-between people, exist between worlds and realms where everything is possible (personal communication, 2019). This kind of expansive boundless thought embedded within the Nêhiyawêwin language reflects our relationship to the universe and our ancestors, and offers so many possibilities, unrestricted by settler colonialism's mentality and method of oppression.

Inspired by the term *tastawâyihk-iyiniw* and its meaning, I envisioned the tattoo design below which reflects our lives beyond the binary as non-binary people. We exist between sky and earth, and we come out of the sacred tipi fire, up through the opening where the tipi poles converge, up through the star cluster Pakone Kisik/Pleiades (Buck, 2021), and into the ancestral realms to access all that is meant for us. This design is about feeling the eternal frequencies and the love vibrations from our ancestors. It is an affirmation of who we are as gender and sexually diverse Indigenous peoples, existing beyond binaries, beyond the here, and into the future now.

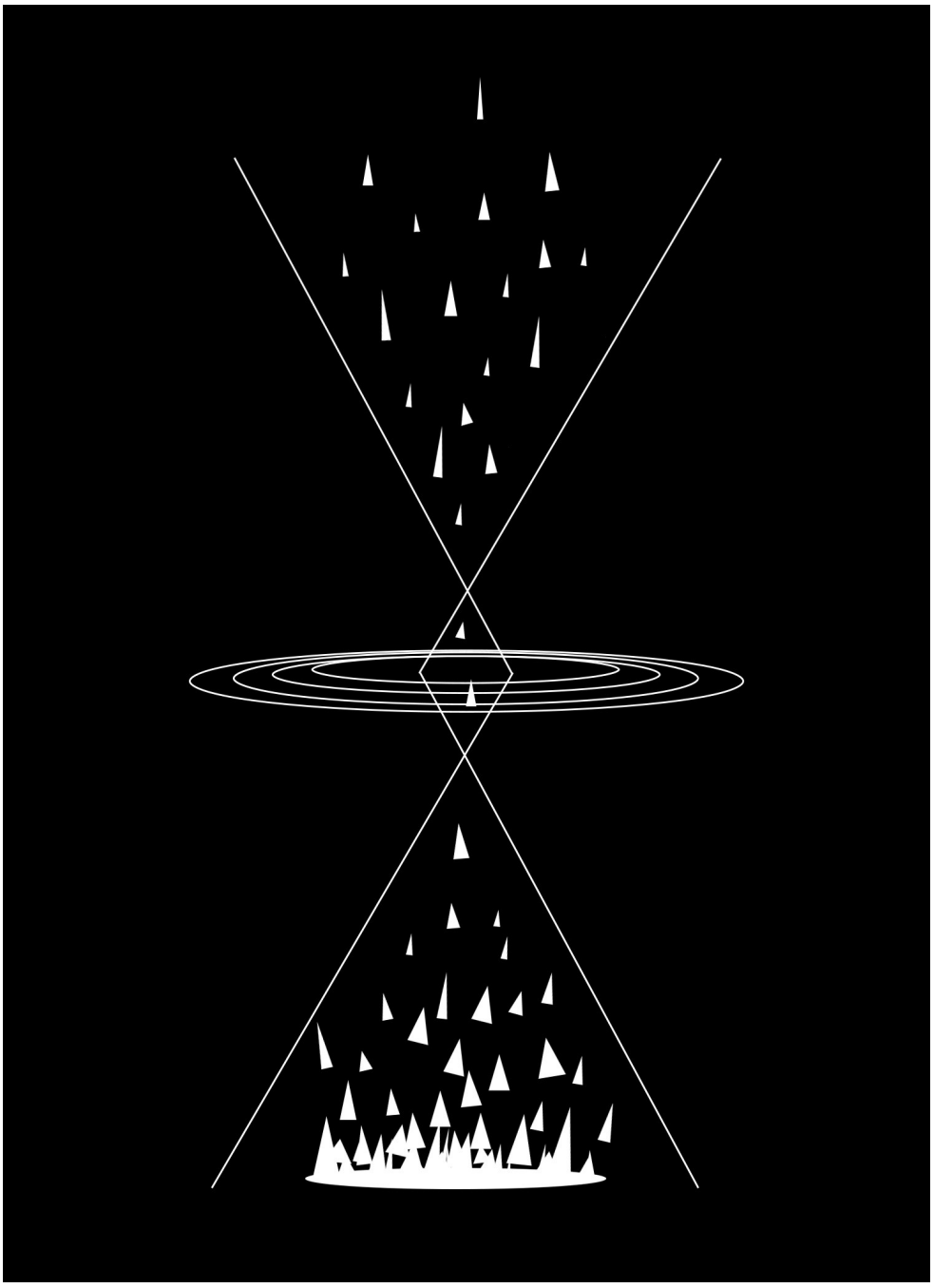

Figure 4: Tattoo design, Mel Lefebvre, 2023.

Chapter 3 Methodologies

This research creation journey is guided by and grounded in four Michif and Nehiyaw relational methodologies, which capture our roles and responsibilities as Plains Indigenous people. In response to and after experiencing these methodologies within my traditional tattoo practice, I have developed a new Michif and Nehiyaw tattooing methodology of O and Δ that is explained in chapter 8.

3.1. Kiyôkêwin (Visiting)

3.1.1. Description

The Métis and Cree relational methodology of kiyôkêwin or *visiting* is described by Métis researcher and educator Dr. Janice Cindy Gaudet as "Métis and Cree ways of being [present] a practical and meaningful methodology that fosters…living and being well in relation" and involves governing our communities to inform our present and future (Fiola, 2021, p. 56). Gaudet shares that kiyôkêwin is visiting, gathering, sharing stories, and making decisions for households and communities. Kiyôkêwin is an "unscripted" flow of connecting, it is unpredictable and inclusive of all beings, and often taught by women who run the household (Fiola, 2021, p. 56). Traditional tattooing combines these ways of being in relation and sees community members coming together to discuss our present, sharing meaningful practices of the past, and making decisions together about our future as Indigenous peoples.

Similarly, Gaudet along with Métis researchers Dr. Anna Corrigal Flaminio and Leah Marie Dorion speak to how Métis women gather, visit together, and practice kiyôkêwin as wellness and care:

> "Connected to the transferring of Métis knowledge through Métis women's voices is the importance of knowing your Métis kinship roles and responsibilities, whether as a younger Métis person or as a Métis elder. When you know your role, "you feel such a sense of accomplishment and responsibility" and this cultural knowing "brings you back to that sense of belonging" (Flaminio et al., 2020, p. 60).

Kiyôkêwin is a relational methodology that guides the process of traditional tattooing and includes the conversations and ceremonies with Elders and Knowledge Holders. Community members guide me, offer advice, share knowledge with me, help me to have confidence in myself as a carrier of this practice, support me as I encounter various challenges, and encourage me to learn new things as well as stay in touch with the old. I speak to them about the research that I do, in the academic institution, in the museums, and with other community members as well as non-Indigenous people so that they are able to hold me accountable to the process, and to the teachings of my communities, and to ensure that I am navigating this practice in a good way, with respect, reciprocity, and care.

Kiyôkêwin is a reminder of the important work of Cree scholar Margaret Kovach who has identified the conversation as a way of gathering knowledge that is inherently Indigenous as it is based on Nehiyaw relational ethics that value oral storytelling through dialogue, to pass on our collective memory and knowledge (Kovach, 2010, p. 40). The values inherent in the circle and conversational methods (Kovach, 2010) of kiyôkêwin have been used throughout my tattoo practice as a way to respect the participant's thoughts, stories, boundaries, and time. There are no time limits set for tattooing and participants are encouraged to share as much as they need in the moment.

Kiyôkêwin as a relational methodology and mode of connection also plays a role in the archival research I have done at the Canadian Museum of History. To create new tattoo designs for contemporary contexts, I spent time with ancestral patterns by visiting with Plains Indigenous material culture. I consider these visits with "objects" or preferably called "kin" as visits with family because they were created for specific purposes with particular duties for the community. Blackfoot elder and educator Leroy Little Bear has pointed to similar ways humans act as conduits (Hill, 2008) to communicate with various non-human beings. When I visit these kin in the archives, I try to be in respectful relation, to listen and be with them, and communicate with them, and not simply "look" at their designs and "take" what I need. I am a witness and I interact with their present circumstance and remind them that we remember them, and that they are still part of us and part of our communities. These kin are being held against the collective will of our communities. I understand and relate to these kin as beings, tuning in to their energies, and connecting to their frequencies and energy waves.

3.1.2. Kiyôkêwin as Tattoo

Kiyôkêwin guides me in bringing together my perspective with that of the person receiving tattoos. This allows us both to be open to the teachings Creator and our ancestors are sharing with us, informing our discussion and design, to create a powerful, meaningful tattoo.
Over two tattoo sessions in 2023 with Emma Cardinal, Michif Nehiyawak ishkwew matriarch and artist, we designed these markings for her, to celebrate her family's lineage and creative practices:

> “Those stitches have come to mean so much to me, more than I thought they would. But I use a needle and thread daily. Mariah Lightning, Gertrude Cardinal/Whitford, Flora Quintal/Cardinal/Desjarlais, Aagje Verdoorn-Verheij, Marcia Stehouwer. Directly as the matriarchal influences whose blood memory runs through my veins. Weaving and stitching their livelihoods. Weaving and mending nets, sewing and knitting clothes. I have my kokum’s wool carding tools. The fact that a needle and thread are at home in my hands comes from my ancestors. My mom's grandmother taught her how to knit, and she taught me how to knit. Aagje sailed a boat with little kids and then she turned that boat into a gas station for other boats. Her husband was a fisherman. And our people as you know also fished and caught whitefish in nets and boats and water are two things my ancestry combines. I've learned a lot in the last year. And the stitches themselves mean so much to me. I get a strange feeling seeing photos of me without them. Almost more than when I got them. Which wasn't the original design plan, I know you last minute suggested it and I just went along and trusted you and I'm so glad I did. With every stitch that brings beauty to my life and sustains my family and our journey of reclaiming that which was taken from us. All represented in one line across my chest in a flowing energy that reminds me of the ever flowing portal of energy directing my life” (personal communication, Cardinal, 2023)

The tattoo design illustrated in Figure 5 and the tattoo in Figure 6 is in honor of Cardinal’s family and some of their traditional practices including sewing, weaving, fishing, and wool carding. I have been given permission to share some of the tattoo’s meaning and process such as: The large five-sided shape on the chest is a portal and similar to a honeycomb (Cardinal is a beekeeper) with lines extending outward to invoke ideas of stars and the expansion of energies; the dashed lines are skin stitches tattooed with needle and thread; another line is of blue jay tracks, a bird carrying special meaning for Cardinal; and the solid lines tattooed across the chest as seen in Figure 6 were tattooed using the hand poke method.

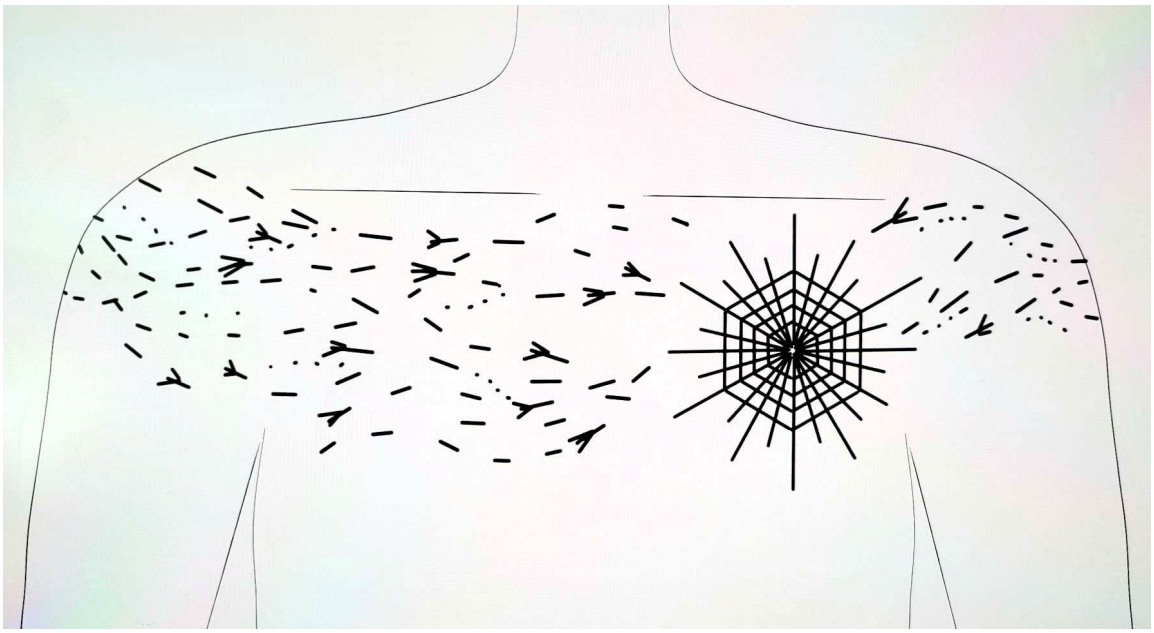

Figure 5: Tattoo sketch for Emma Cardinal, Mel Lefebvre, 2023.

Figure 6: Traditional tattoo on Emma Cardinal, hand poke and skin stich, Mel Lefebvre, 2023.

Kiyôkêwin supports me in offering tattoos in a good way, to listen deeply to shared stories, communicate clearly what is expected, and to manage the expectations of those receiving tattoos or those needing information about traditional tattooing. Kiyôkêwin reminds me that I am a leader in this practice and it is my role and responsibility to provide guidance as best I can around all aspects including health and safety as well as the responsibilities we have to the markings once we carry them.

3.2. Wâhkôhtowin (Relational Ethics)

3.2.1. Description

The Nehiyaw relational methodology of wâhkôhtowin translates to kinship or relational ethics. The principles of wâhkôhtowin methodology reflect how we are meant to conduct ourselves when in relation to any being, whether animate or inanimate. Wâhkôhtowin grounds and guides my research and practice, and informs my responsibilities to those I encounter now, to the generations that came before, and those of the future.

Through this methodology, I explore the many relationships we have to "all that is" (Kaszas, 2018), the human and other-than-human, and the easy relationships and those that are more challenging, as they all have something to teach. Cree scholar Matthew Wildcat explores wâhkôhtowin as an action in which everything has spirit and the "proper ways to conduct and uphold your relationships with your relatives and other aspects of existence. Thus, wâhkôhtowin also includes the obligations and responsibilities people have to maintain good relationships" (Wildcat, 2018, p. 14).

Michif and Cree Elder Maria Campbell says that wâhkôhtowin is:

> "about me, it's about me and my family and it's about my community and it's about my territory. If I want to know who I am I have to know that, I have to know my land, I have to know my family, I have to know my community, and I have to know my obligations and my responsibilities to that place" (Campbell, 2022).

Knowing our language, land, and community enables us to *live* wâhkôhtowin to its fullest, to live in the way of Michif and Nehiyaw peoples. It is important for me as a practitioner to stay in touch with my territory, the territory of my grandmother's family, to visit and connect as much as I can, and to learn from my community on that territory as this deepens the teachings I learn and the relationships I nurture and cultivate. This teaching of relational ethics comes from our relationship and responsibility to the land (Campbell, 2022).

3.2.2. Wâhkôhtowin as Tattoo

One of the most important relationships Plains Indigenous peoples have is with the buffalo, an integral part of how we live as Plains peoples. In D.W. Light's *Tattooing Practices of the Cree Indians* (1972), he presents the insights of Cree informant Solomon Bluehorn:

> "Long ago, in the buffalo days, a man had a dream. A buffalo spirit came to him and said, "My Grandson, I am the most powerful spirit of the Plains Cree. If you follow my instructions, I will give you a great gift; it is a tattooing bundle. This spirit was called the "Buffalo that Walks like a Man" and under his instructions the man made the bundle. When the spirit gave this gift, he also taught the first owner the proper tattooing procedures, songs and prayers. Because of this gift, the man was considered to be one of the most influential medicine men of the Cree" (Light, 1972, p. 13).

Bluehorn speaks about that spirit and connection in Figure 7:

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Figure 7: Buffalo that Walks Like a Man, Tattooing Practices of the Cree Indians, D.W. Light, 1972, p12.

In this spirit, I think about how Plains Indigenous peoples can continue to think about and live our critical relationship with the buffalo, what it represents for us, and create new markings for these contemporary times. We can look to not only all that the buffalo was to us, but also at what it is for us now.

At one time we were semi-nomadic, following the buffalo as it roamed from the Arctic to the Gulf of Mexico, using the entirety of the animal in all our lifeways, from utilitarian tools to ceremonies. Cree filmmaker and educator Tasha Hubbard writes about the many expressions of our relationship to the buffalo in our stories, artwork, and writing. She considers how we can embrace the buffalo as a methodology, including how the buffalo teaches us to ethically engage with the world and reminds us of our duties to all of creation (Hubbard, 2016, p. 13).

We can understand the buffalo as engineers of the Plains landscape as they roamed from the Arctic down to the Gulf of Mexico (Bison, 2017). Their size, numbers, movements, and habits dictated the grassy arid region, 80 million buffalo of up to 2000 pounds each, up to 160,000,000,000 pounds, and traveling up to 35 miles per hour for four to five hours at a time (Bison, 2017).

Without interaction from Plains animals like the buffalo

> "excess growth [of grasses] soon chokes the soil and prevents healthy plant growth. Bison moving across pastures not only remove that choking cover, the animals convert the cellulose in the plant into protein. As the bison graze, their manure and urine supply important nutrients for the plant cover, and their hooves stir the soil, helping to bury seeds and to create small pockets in the earth to capture precious moisture. Even many prairies potholes (small ponds) today began as buffalo wallows. Other grassland species rode along on the coattails of bison in establishing a strong place in the grassland ecosystem. Nearly 100 species of grassland birds, for example, evolved in some part to adapt to the nature of the environment created by the hoof print of bison upon the land" (Bison, 2017).

Hubbard reminds us that the buffalo are a matriarchal society, a strong community led by the oldest female, and their genocide was our genocide (Hubbard, 2016). This is a critical quality of the buffalo that informs the way I design tattoos to represent this symbiotic relationship between Plains Indigenous peoples and the buffalo as kin. Our relationship to the buffalo as non-human kin is the antithesis of the exploitative, hierarchical nature of settler colonialism, which saw to the extermination of the buffalo as a means to control the land and Indigenous peoples (Daschuk, 2019). The continuity and revival of our cultural practices includes the repopulation of buffalo on our territories.

In the museum archives I see buffalo eyes and ears carved, embroidered, sewn, beaded, and quilled onto Plains Indigenous fabrics and tools as well as the symbol of the buffalo pound we would construct to corral them:

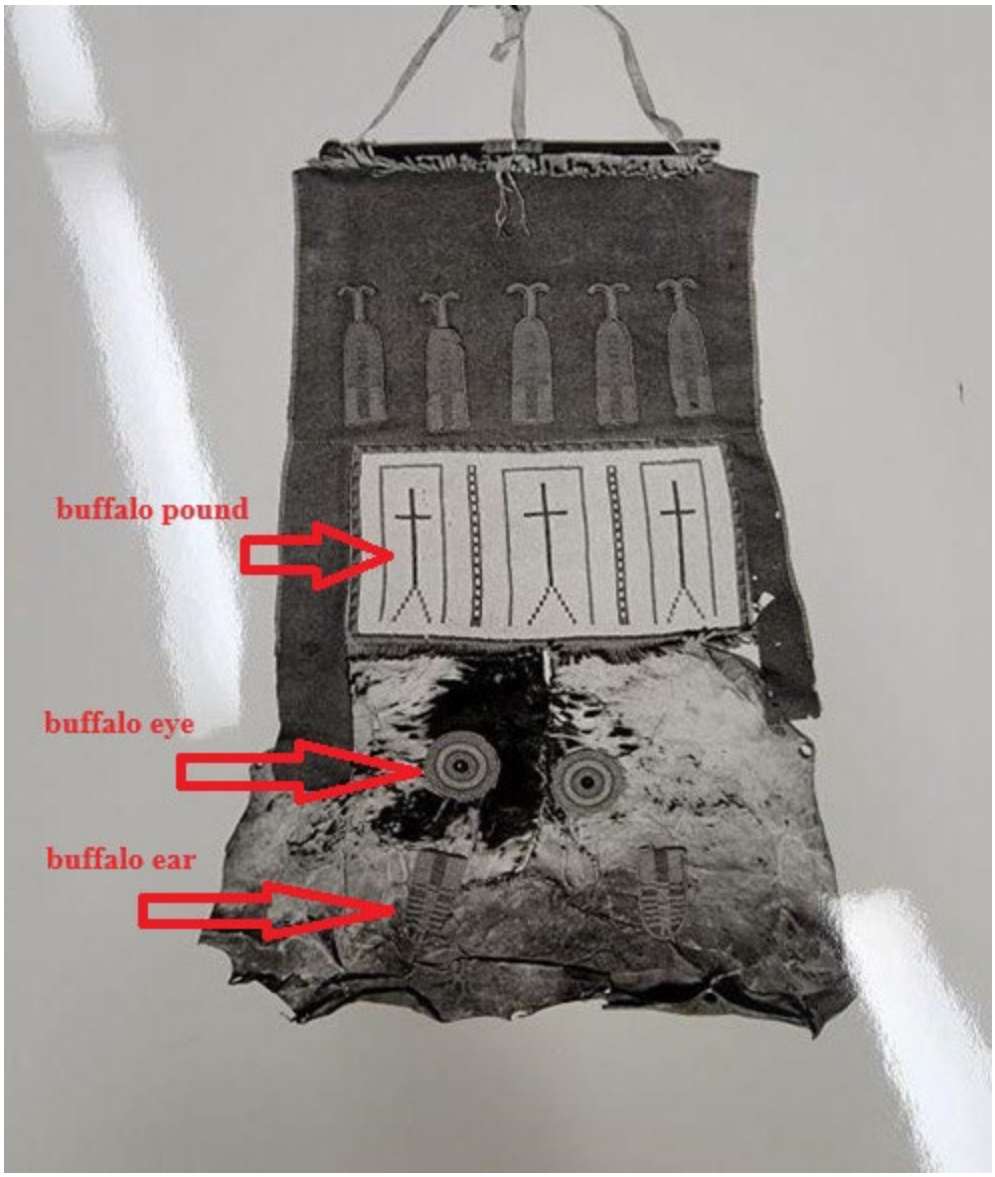

Figure 8: Photo of backrest banner, Plains Cree, in document archives of Canadian Museum of History.

Figure 9: Close up of photo of backrest banner, Plains Cree, in document archives of Canadian Museum of History.

Figure 10: Metis, Sioux outerwear, V-E-294a. Canadian Museum of History, 1845.

Figure 11: Close up of Metis, Sioux outerwear, V-E-294a. Canadian Museum of History, 1845.

Gathering all of these details, we can then represent wâhkôhtowin as a tattoo: Buffalo medicine is revival, endurance, agility, cultivation, community, gentleness, protection, a recognition and processing of grief, and the ability to carry heavy burdens many times that of ourselves. I often tattoo buffalo medicine on the shoulders to support the burdens we carry, and to welcome in all the energies our buffalo kin embody. These markings can be as simple as lines, hand poked and/or skin stitched, along the shoulders up to and including the sides of the neck and across the back.

An intricate illustration such as Figure 13 that depicts the honoring of this relationship, extending far beyond the now, across time and space, bringing together the past and the future. This design is about transcending this realm, to connect with our human and other-than-human ancestors, and to engage with the vibrations and tune into the frequencies that the buffalo has always offered us. A literal image of a buffalo is not required; it is about the intention of the line that is brought by the practitioner, the medicine, healing, knowledge, and ceremony contained within it, and the responsibility the receiver has to that medicine once they leave.

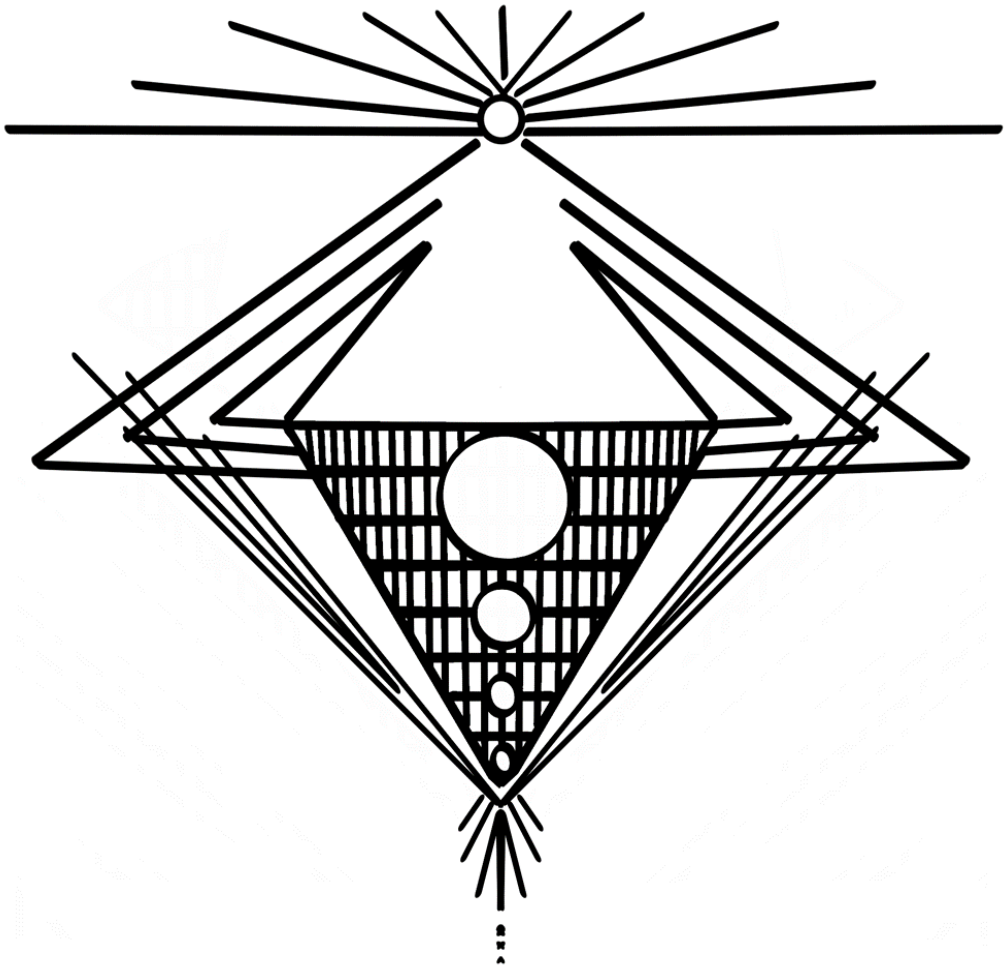

Figure 12: Tattoo Design, Buffalo Frequency, Mel Lefebvre, 2022.

At the top of the design is the circle with lines emanating outward, which carries the medicines and healing properties of the sun and moon that govern our daily lives with warmth and rest, and call in these celestial bodies that echo the nourishing relationships of our grandparents. There is a gravitational pull of the moon, an ebb and flow that our bodies are governed by. These nourishing, grounding energies are directed outwards through the rays towards the rest of our bodies and beyond towards those we come into contact with. The buffalo head is represented below this as the horns angle up towards the sun/moon and the buffalo face is designed with geometric quillwork hatching. The four vertical circles within the head represent the four directions, seasons, elements, and aspects of the person (mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual), opening up the channels to all the areas of ourselves for healing and connection. On the sides and bottom of the head are more rays extending outward with the rays at the bottom echoing the beard of the buffalo, the hair, that we used in our daily lives, leaving nothing to go to waste (Hubbard, 2016; Bushnell, 1915).

As a Michif and Nehiyaw tattoo practitioner, I learn from the relationship we have with the buffalo and I honor that through protocols and process. The relational laws of my Nations as well as the Nations of the person receiving the tattoo are respected throughout the process. Community counsel and meeting with Elders and Knowledge Holders is part of accountability. We have a relationship and responsibility to the tattoo marking itself before, during, and after the tattoo session.

3.3. Kitimahkinawow (Pity and Compassion)

3.3.1. Description

Kitimahkinawow in Nêhiyawêwin (Plains Cree language) means to 'take pity on someone' and as relational methodology, kitimahkinawow is kindness and compassion towards others (Baker-Grenier, 2021). Cree, Gitxsan, and European lawyer Nigel Baker-Grenier states that kitimahkinawow includes "a duty to care for the elderly, poor, homeless, and sick… The purpose of kitimahkinawow is to mitigate suffering, especially the struggles experienced by marginalized people" (Baker-Grenier, 2021, p. 2). A cultural practice of healing, medicine, and care, traditional tattooing is kitimahkinawow in action. This methodology was first shared with me in conversation with Nehiyaw Elder Joseph Naytowhow (personal communication, 2021) and Métis scholar and artist Dr. Michelle McGeough (personal communication, 2023).

I enact this methodology in my community work for the urban Indigenous people in Tiohtià:ke (Montreal), which informs my tattoo practice. Together with the Native Women's Shelter of Montreal, we advocate for Indigenous safety, justice, and culturally appropriate services in line with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action (2015), the Viens Commission (2019), and the Laurent Commission (2020). This volunteer work allows me to provide what I can for others, humbles me, keeps me connected to community, provides an example of care to those who need it, inspires others to care and offer kindness, and adds momentum to continued acts of collective care. As care, as medicine and healing, and as enabling others to shift their lives in meaningful, lasting ways, traditional tattooing is community work. I understand through the stories they share with me that such shifts often resonate for them into all areas of their lives and out into the world (personal communication, 2019-2024).

I bring kitimahkinawow as methodology to each tattoo session, caring for the person receiving the tattoo, physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, to the best of my ability and carrying their stories with respect and compassion.

3.3.2. Kitimahkinawow as Tattoo

The phrase *service through tattoo* translates in Nêhiyawêwin as *opamîstakêwew ohci osâsôwewin*, which was first shared with me in conversation with Elder Joseph Naytowhow (personal communication, 2021). I understand *opamîstakêwew ohci osâsôwewin* as embedded within kitimahkinawow as this relational methodology is about the experience of kindness and compassion towards all that is, human and more-than-human:

> "Kitimahkinawow describes the quality of a person's actions… to mitigate suffering… Kitimahkisin recognizes that we are dependent upon pakwataskamik (the land), Kisemanito (our Creator), and each other for sustenance. Each person has a gift, and we have a responsibility to use these gifts to benefit society, for we are all kitimahkisin" (Baker-Grenier, 2021, p. 2)

Baker-Grenier reminds me of the importance of service and the many Indigenous people who come to me for traditional tattoos who are also serving their communities. This important work is celebrated and channeled through the tattoo below. This shows part of the new Michif and Nehiyaw tattooing methodology of O and Δ that is explained further in chapter 7. Here you see circles on the palms which I associate with the role of service as the offering of kindness and compassion to those in need. The circle on the palm becomes a reminder to those who serve the community of their responsibilities and the ancestors who we can call on when in need. This circle is a portal to that ancestral support and wisdom.

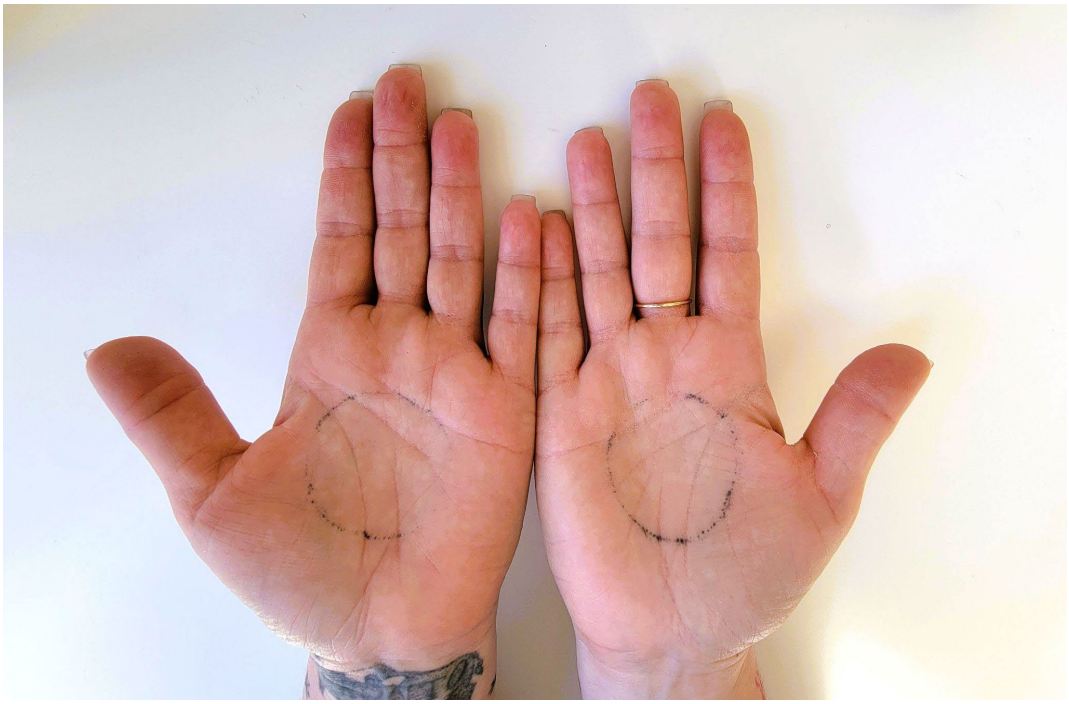

Figure 13: Circles tattooed on my palms, Mel Lefebvre, 2024.

These are my hands. I have tattooed the circles on the palms at least five times. The skin of the palms is in constant contact with so much throughout the day and hand washing is done so often that these tattoos have faded. Also, the palms are notoriously painful to tattoo. As I tattoo myself, I am experiencing the pain while remaining focused as the practitioner, and I imagine that I subconsciously avoid going as deep into the skin as is needed on the palms.

I have tattooed many palms and speak often about this symbol on the palms and encourage those in service to receive this particular tattoo medicine. Despite their faded quality, they are perpetual reminders of the joy and humility I experience being in relation with people, serving the community in this way, and the responsibility I have to be kind and compassionate, listen deeply to stories that are shared, and offer what I can in this role. Their faded quality and continued renewal are a testament to all that I have given and continue to receive.

3.4. Tâpwêwin (Truth Telling)

3.4.1. Description

Foundational to my life and practice, tâpwewin or truth telling is a core methodology of Michif and Nehiyaw life in which we are required to be as precise as we can when speaking on important issues and to bring forward challenging topics when necessary (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2013). Tâpwêwin is being "honest and transparent", holding oneself to a "high standard of integrity" and "the importance of listening attentively and respectfully to others when they speak, thus allowing the listener to recognize whether the words being spoken are truthful teachings in accordance with the principle of ᑖᐯ·ᐞᓐ tapwewin" (Johnson, 2021, p. 1-2).

Putting this methodology into action has meant speaking about inclusion and representation of Indigenous 2SLGBTQ+ and Indigenous women, which is often lacking in western tattoo spaces dominated by cisgender heterosexual men (Santibañez, 2020), as well as being honest with myself about my personal boundaries and mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual capacities.

When I gather with the people in my community, we clean ourselves with sage, burning it and wafting the smoke over our bodies. It is customary to bring the smoke up to your throat, to ask for good words, and to clearly speak the truth about what you know. Tâpwêwin guides me as a Michif and Nehiyaw person to foster inclusivity, to welcome those who are often relegated to the margins, and to have the courage to broach topics that may be challenging to myself and others like inclusivity, harm prevention, and restorative justice.

3.4.2. Tâpwêwin as Tattoo

In the book *Treaty Elders of Saskatchewan*, we can see an example of tâpwewin in action. Introduced as "speaking the truth" or "speaking with precision and accuracy", tâpwewin is particularly enacted when addressing topics that have been considered "through the spiritual traditions and ceremonies of the nation" (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2013, p. 48). Treaties, for example, are commonly known as promises made between the British government and Indigenous Peoples in so-called Canada starting in the 17th century that guide and govern relationships (McIvor, 2022). According to the Saskatchewan treaty Elders, treaties are significant and must be spoken about with care using tâpwêwin.

Treaties also existed on the Plains between Nations before Europeans arrived. An example is the "Cree and Blackfoot-speaking nations" agreeing to live together in peace (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2013). The commitment to live side by side in a good way through tâpwewin, whether as individuals or entire nations, is represented as "Elders utilize the knowledge, teachings, laws, doctrines, and values as symbolically represented in part by the following: sun, grass, river, rock, sweetgrass, and pipe stem" (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2013, p. 54). Thinking about these words as symbols of tâpwewin and as tattoos, they become reminders of our responsibilities and the embodiment of our commitment to Creator and all that is (Kaszas, 2018).

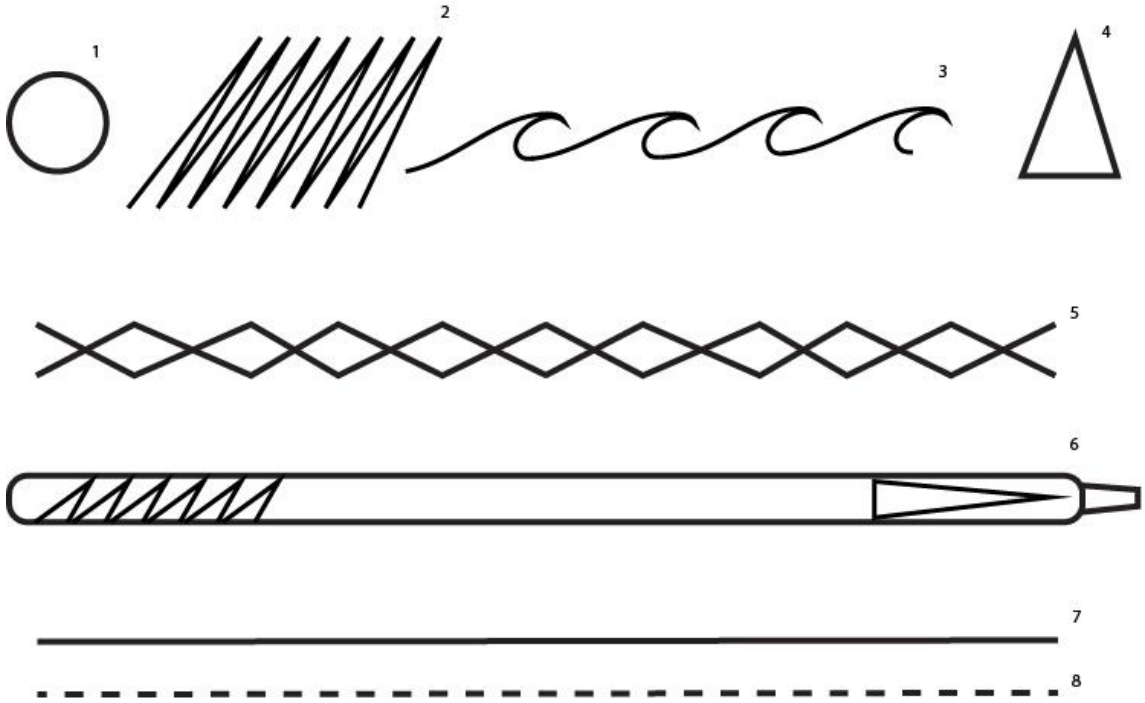

Figure 14: Tattoo designs as interpretations of the teachings of the Treaty Elders of Saskatchewan (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2013) 1. sun, 2. grass, 3. river, 4. rock, 5. sweetgrass, 6. pipe stem with grass and rock symbols. Symbols 7 and 8 are earth lines: 7 is hand poke and 8 is skin stitch.

These tattoo designs encompass everything that exists and is in relation: land, water, sky, all the human and non-human beings, and the ancestors who receive our prayers through the pipe smoke. Each tattoo is an embodiment of tâpwewin methodology as outlined by the treaty Elders and including my new Michif and Nehiyaw tattooing methodology discussed further in Chapter 7.

Each of these symbols carries extensive meaning that I have learned through discussions with my Elders, this research, and my dreams and visions, including: the sun (1) is also the moon and the circular drum, dance, tipi doorway, and portal to our ancestors; the grass (2) is the land, food for animals, continuity, prosperity, and in this design is reminiscent of the arrow (purpose) and lightening (thunderbirds, sky beings, protection); the river (3) is life as it nourishes us and provides us with food. The river is also water in all its forms—ocean, lake, sea—perpetually in motion as it ebbs and flows, reflecting the gravitational pull of the moon and its cycles; the rock (4) is one of our oldest relatives and is also a triangle, mountain, arrow, and purpose; the sweetgrass (5) is a braid of relationships that is one of Michif and Nehiyaw peoples' four sacred medicines that when offered or burned provides healing and protection; the pipe (6) in my personal experience during ceremony and as written about by Cree scholar Dr. Winona Wheeler, is symbolic of truth and a commitment is made when the pipe is smoked to bring the truth forward in the presence of the Creator and ancestors (Wheeler, 2010). In this design, I have incorporated on the pipe the prosperity of the grass and the purpose of the arrow; the hand poke line (7) and skin stitch line (8) are both earth lines that represent our relationships to all that is (Kaszas, 2018; Lefebvre & Kaszas, 2019-2024). In the context of treaty, the Saskatchewan Elders use these symbols to indicate the importance of our relationships and the protocols we invoke to uphold them.

Chapter 4 Literature Review

The following literature review discusses several pertinent domains to this research: Indigenous traditional tattooing practices and revival; tools and methods; symbols, meanings, and Indigenous creative expressions; and embodied sovereignty.

4.1. Indigenous Traditional Tattoo Practices and Revival

Literature by Indigenous people on traditional tattooing practices and the revival is sparse yet slowly growing. Most of the existing documentation has been produced by Europeans studying Indigenous peoples for research purposes (Kaszas, 2018). Traditional tattooing is an ancestral practice of First Peoples used for reasons such as marking life achievements, communing with ancestors and spirits, honoring dreams, and more. The analysis used in this dissertation is grounded in Michif and Nehiyaw teachings and worldviews and does not presume to speak from perspectives of any other Indigenous peoples.

Michif and Nehiyaw traditional tattooing is an expression of our relationships and intentions that we wear as expressions of who we were, are, and will be. Syilx Okanagan author, artist, and educator Dr. Jeanette Armstrong shared with her mentee (and my mentor) Dion Kaszas an ancestral Syilx story of the Creator asking the animal people: "what will you do for the people to be?" (Kou-skelowh, 2017). For Kaszas, tattooing is a way to support his community, to perpetuate their lifeways, and strengthen relationships. His traditional tattooing practice has been a poignant anchor for youth who experience challenges due to colonization; tattooing can keep Indigenous youth grounded in this contemporary, challenging world (Kaszas, 2018).

Red River Métis traditional tattoo practitioners continue to deepen and expand this ancestral tattoo practice and generously share their knowledge. In addition to Kaszas, this includes Amy Malbeuf, Stacey Fayant, Sheri Osden Nault, Audie Murray, Nolan Malbeuf, Holly Aubichon, Geanna Dunbar, and Jayda Delorme (Benjoe, 2022; Bonspille-Boileau, 2018; Brennan, 2018; Montour, 2020; CBC, 2019; Kaszas, 2021; Kaszas, 2024). Through their tattoo practices, artwork, writing, performance, panels, and presentations, they continue to add to the foundations of the revival knowledge base and increase the practice's viability.

Looking to other Indigenous traditional tattoo practices outside Plains Indigenous communities such as those of Inuit and Samoan peoples proves valuable in demonstrating the links between cultural healing practices and community and individual well-being.

For Inuk traditional tattoo practitioner Angela Hovak Johnston, Inuit tattoos tell the story of tradition, meaning, revival, culture, identity, and persistence. Wanting to receive her own facial tattoos yet unable to find an Inuk tattoo practitioner, Johnston took up the challenge to learn about her culture's tattoo traditions and pass that on to her people within this contemporary context (Johnston, 2018). Through the stories of those who have received Inuit tattoo medicine, we can see how this traditional practice is one of transformation, connection, and empowerment.

Similarly, in Lisa Taouma's documentary Marks of Mana, the Samoan tattoo experience is one of language, cultural symbols and meanings, and legacy passed down through generations on bodies rather than in books (Taouma, 2018). These embedded and embodied stories and history mark responsibilities and roles in community.

This brief survey of contemporary traditional tattooing creates new channels for healing, inclusion, relationality, ceremony, protocol, reciprocity, and sovereignty. For us as Indigenous peoples to thrive, we must live our ways, unapologetically. This means coming forward and standing in our authenticity, with our traditional markings on our bodies so that people know who we are, and take up our rightful places/spaces on the land. There is power in these markings.

4.2. Tools and Methods

The literature on tools and methods used in traditional Indigenous tattooing has mostly been created by non-Indigenous people and as such, is naturally detached from the methodologies that ground this Indigenous mode of healing and connection. This creates a kind of tension as Indigenous scholars and practitioners struggle with using the colonial records as sources to inform our ancestral practices (Kaszas, 2018; Pyle, 2018; Lefebvre & Kaszas, 2019-2024).

In "Redefining the Age of Tattooing in Western North America: A 2000-year-old Artifact from Utah," Gillreath-Brown et al. present the oldest tattoo tool known to Western researchers from Western North America (2019): "The Turkey Pen tattoo implement consists of a wooden skunkbush sumac stem, yucca split leaf wrapping, and two prickly pear cacti spines." It pre-dates contact by 1400 years, which importantly, demonstrates that tattoo was a part of our culture before European influence. The researchers see tattooing as an indication of a shift to a more sedentary, agricultural lifestyle by the Indigenous people of the Southwestern United States, and posit that tattoos may have helped in the identification of social groups and relationships.

In "A Preliminary Typology of Perpendicularly Hafted Bone Tipped Tattooing Instruments: Toward a Technological History of Oceanic Tattooing" (2007), Robitaille discusses tattooing technologies from Austronesia, and bone and non-bone-tipped Perpendicularly Hafted Tattooing Instruments (PHTI). PHTI were crafted with singular or numerous sharp tattooing points carved from a central shaft (combs) as well as groupings of singular needles to create a comb form. Availability of the raw materials in various geographic locations would dictate the type of tools made: bone, thorn, fish teeth, bird beak, tusk, and shell. These comb tools in the areas they originated were/are generally made as tapping tools in which the comb is attached to a handle that is held by the practitioner. The handle, at the comb end, is tapped by the practitioner with a stick thus forcing the comb points to enter the skin.

Similarly, anthropologist Lars Krutak has been studying Indigenous tattooing and tools, and provides a multitude of details in *The Art of Enchantment: Corporeal Marking and Tattooing Bundles of the Great Plains (2014)* like visual symbols of various Plains nations, how they were tattooed, and on whom and for what reasons. He gathers information from other early explorers, linguists, and anthropologists to provide further insight. Of particular interest to my research practice is the relationship Krutak records on Plains tattoos and the spirit world, "supernatural power" and sacred transference (Krutak, 2014, p. 134). The information here is significant as it is one of the only contemporary sources that highlights Plains tattooing.

I was particularly intrigued by the details Krutak provides regarding an Iowa tattoo bundle containing "bone cylinders used as stencils for a woman's dot-like honor mark" (Krutak, 2014, p. 141). As part of the preparation for tattooing, practitioners will often draw designs directly on the skin or create a carbon stencil that is used to transfer the design onto the body. This can be a time-consuming process. I have been experimenting with stamp-like sterile tools with which to transfer various sizes of circles and triangles onto the skin, elements that I use often in my designs. Using stamp-like stencils is efficient and effective and this information in Krutak's work validates my own innovations and encourages exploring new ways to offer this medicine.

From a broader view of Plains tattoo practices in Krutak, we can look to an in-depth source on Plains Cree tattooing designs, protocols, tools, and methodologies is D.W. Light's *Tattooing Practices of the Cree Indians (1972)*. The former curator of ethnology at the Glenbow Museum in the 1970s, Light's books show his extensive field work with Cree and Ojibwa communities as well as specific relationships with Cree informants. One of these was Solomon Bluehorn, a keeper of the last Plains Cree tattoo bundle, the Four Sky Thunder Bundle. The illustrations in the book's margins (see examples below) illustrate the ways in which Plains people were connected to animals, spirits, and territory.

Figure 15: Hand, Sam Swimmer; Rattlesnake and Buffalo Spirit, Solomon Bluehorn, in Tattooing Practices of the Cree Indians, D.W. Light, 1972, p17-19.

Also included in Light's book is information on tattooing ceremonies that lasted days at a time, as well as process, health, and safety aspects like applying a poultice after the procedure to protect against infection, evidence of our ancestral care and responsibility for community (Light, 1972).

The introduction of the last Plains tattoo bundle in the book is significant. It allows us to understand some of the processes and protocols around tattoo and to begin a conversation around repatriation as it relates to tattoo and tattoo-related tools. Light even identifies what is inside the bundle, which is interesting albeit problematic in terms of Indigenous protocol. My Elders as well as other community members have told me that bundles of any kind should not be opened by anyone other than the person to whom the bundle belongs.

Understanding and centering the work of Indigenous practitioners is of paramount importance in traditional tattoo research as we are the momentum behind the tattoo revival and the experts of our cultural practices. We are able to situate the research within robust perspectives and Indigenous ways of being.

Indigenous Spotlight: Traditional Tattooing with Stacey Fayant (Saskatoon Public Library, 2021) is a rare example of a look at tattoo practices from a Michif, Nehiyaw perspective. Fayant expresses many important elements of Indigenous tattooing, narrating her own story while we watch her tattoo herself and speak about the process, and how that relates directly to her journey. As she stitches her skin she weaves a tale about her family, community, colonialism, trauma, reconnection, healing, and love. As an Indigenous practitioner herself, Fayant also speaks to the importance of health and safety, and ensuring proper processes and protocols are in place to keep herself and her community safe while offering tattoo medicine (Saskatoon Public Library, 2021).

Similarly, Kaszas writes in his Master's thesis, *Embodying the past in the present for the future: practicing, supporting, and highlighting Indigenous tattoo revivals through Indigenous and creative research methodologies* (2018), about the experience and importance of the traditional tattooing revival. Kaszas presents some of the methods his people used on the Canadian Pacific Coast, the designs depicted in his nation's visual and material culture, and the lessons inherent in these ancestral methods of creating. His work demonstrates the benefits of the traditional tattoo revival: connection to ancestral ways; understanding of plants, bones, and medicines for tool and ink making; and preserving and transmitting knowledge related to Indigenous diet and food harvesting. The overall message in Kaszas' work is that wellness and prosperity in our communities depends on our reclamation of our cultural practices (Kaszas, 2018).

A key theme running throughout the Indigenous tattooing revival is resistance. Navajo, Hualapai scholar Martina Michelle Dawley's work *Indian Boarding School Tattooing Experiences: Resistance, Power, and Control through Personal Narratives* (2020) highlights this in the stories of female Indian boarding school survivors and their families. Dawley offers insight into the DIY methods used to tattoo at boarding schools. These demonstrate the resourcefulness, power, rebelliousness, control, and taking up rightful place and space of those being kept in these colonial institutions meant to assimilate Indigenous children. Dawley describes how the storytellers used writing ink or eyeliner for tattoo ink which they then poked into the skin with sewing needles, late into the night, by candlelight, knowing the physical and mental punishment that could come at any time as well as the health risk from infections.

This DIY tattooing under the threat of violence echoes that of other Indigenous actions that seek to uphold culture under oppression: In the 1850s, West Coast Indigenous nations were forced to stop important cultural practices like tattooing as it displayed their familial and generational ties to the land that Europeans were colonizing. Instead of marking their bodies, they carved their designs into jewelry so as to keep their cultures alive (Bill Reid, 2018).

The revival of the embodied artistic practice of traditional tattooing in Canada has been growing exponentially since it started in 2012 with the work of a few leaders including Kaszas. We have been exploring methods and methodologies, and questions and ideas around traditional tool making while also creating new visual symbols for specific communities, and protocols around traditional tattooing (Lefebvre & Kaszas, 2021- 2024). One of the challenges Kaszas often speaks about is the demand for traditional tattooing and yet there are very limited numbers of practitioners. This has increased our awareness around the importance of practitioners sharing knowledge and mentoring others (Lefebvre & Kaszas, 2019-2024).

As Indigenous communities experience ongoing colonialism and its impacts, such as forcibly hidden or disappeared aspects of our cultures, any information about our practices is important as we weave the pieces of our cultures back together.

4.3. Symbols, Meanings, and Indigenous Creative Expressions

Like moccasins, coats, vests, sashes, headstalls, regalia, and jewelry, tattoos carry our cultural symbols that often tell stories important for our communities to recognize us, speak to our roles and responsibilities, the stages of life we embody, the medicine we are seeking or honoring, and the ancestors we are relating with (Kaszas, 2018; Johnston, 2018; Saskatoon, 2021; Peterson, 2021). The act of seeing us and our markings will say much about the manner in which we greet you, the purpose of our meeting, what our expectations might be or the messages we have for you.

The links between traditional tattoo and other traditional Plains art forms are easy to see: hand poking (tattooing with a needle dipped in ink) and skin stitching (sewing the skin with needle and thread dipped in ink) echoes the stories and innovation in our beading, sewing, and weaving. Nehiyaw/Métis artist and educator Jaime Morse shared the story told by Saskatchewan Métis Elders in which Métis women used to bead maps onto the clothing of men before they embarked on months-long seasonal trade far from home: Coats beaded with maps indicating various cache sites and reminders of particular duties could be taken off and consulted by those traveling long distances (personal communication, 2019).

In this same spirit, traditional tattoos can be consulted and act as reminders of our responsibilities to our communities and how we need to carry ourselves in humility and respect for all life. Similar to beaded Métis maps, within these tattooed symbols are meanings of who we are as Indigenous peoples, our relationship to land and the cosmos, and how we are to bring these meanings forward to the next generations.

Kaszas makes the direct link between visual material culture—baskets, clothing, petroglyphs—and tattoo design, which offers ways that we can explore and connect patterns to meaning and use (Brennan, 2018). Inspired to explore the archives in various museums to better understand his people and their teachings, Kaszas notes that taking all this information back to the Elders and community is part of his responsibility and that when we are drawn to different patterns, that is a blood calling, that is the ancestors leading you to that design, even if we do not know why or what the design means (Brennan 2018). This "blood calling" is a process in my own practice that I have come to accept without question.

Like Kaszas, Métis practitioner Amy Malbeuf brings attention to the passing on of knowledge through articulating the connection between various kinds of cultural artwork: Métis floral beadwork, tufting, and skin stitch (Bonspille-Boileau, 2018). In the Indigenous tattooing series *Skindigenous*, Malbeuf shares the story of her mentor Ruby Sweetman and their longtime relationship. Amy celebrates and expresses a multigenerational experience of teaching and learning through the tattoo she gifts to Ruby (Bonspille-Boileau, 2018). Ruby's own mentor, Métis Elder Elsie Quintal, was a beadworker and Amy creates a tattoo design for Ruby based on Elsie's beadwork. We are three generations of art sewn into the skin (Bonspille-Boileau, 2018). The legacy of cultural knowledge and practice is sewn into the skin of Malbeuf's mentor.

The richness of our Plains Indigenous symbols and their meanings is evidenced in our material culture, past and present. We mark our creations with various designs to indicate relationships, honor our families, tell stories and more (Lefebvre, 2021; Peterson, 2021). Some of the most profound symbols of the Nehiyawak are those of the syllabics star chart:

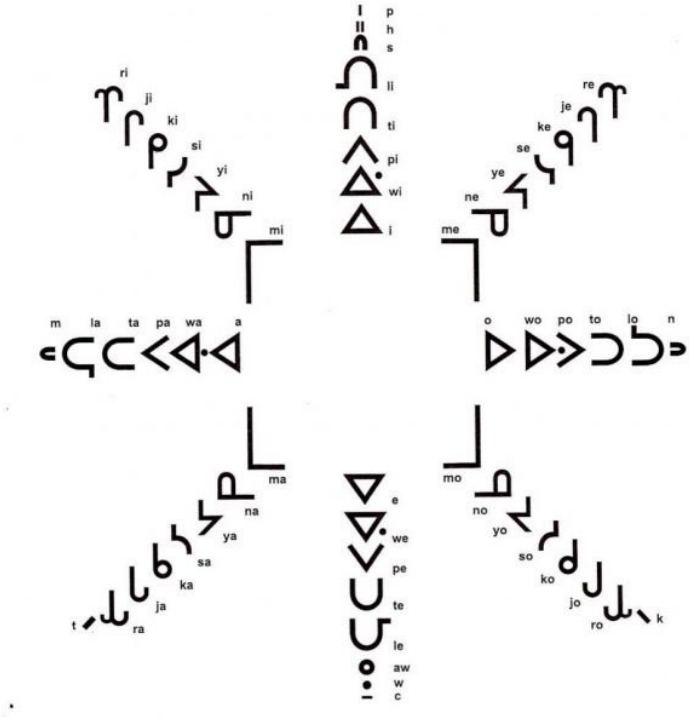

Figure 16: MacLeod, K., Cree Syllabics Project, 2020.

This alphabet is said to have been gifted by the Creator to "a Wood Cree named Badger Call [who] died and returned to life with the gift of writing from the Spirit world" (Stevenson, 1999, p. 20). The syllabics are geometric shapes, similar to many of the Plains designs I have encountered in museum archives, and each represents a syllable that recurs in the four directions (Stevenson, 1999, p. 22). For Nehiyawak, four is a sacred number as we relate it to the seasons, directions, elements, and the four aspects of the person: spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical. Some have called these syllabics Spirit Markers. We can see how the syllabics carry rich meaning, possibility, sound, vibration, and connection to the Creator. I have tattooed these symbols on community members before, sometimes spelling out Cree spirit names in this original language:

Figure 17: Hands of Moe Clark (nikamow piyēsiw), syllabics tattoos, Mel Lefebvre, 2021.

Contained within Cree syllabics is the circle symbol that occurs time and again in Plains Indigenous designs. In *The Treaty Elders of Saskatchewan*, miyo-wîcêhtowin and wâhkôtowin is described as:

> "The doctrine of "good relations"...is perhaps best symbolized by the circle evident in the way many First Nations ceremonies are structured…an affirmation of unity…the oneness of First Nations people with the Creator and the spiritual, social, and political institutions of First Nations…nurture, protect, care for, and heal…a praying circle, talking circle, healing circle, and a circle of reconciliation" (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2013, p. 14-15).

I began having dreams of the circle a few years ago and have incorporated that into my tattoo practice as a way for Indigenous people to find connection through embodiment, to themselves, their communities and territories, and to the Creator and ancestors (see chapter 7, section 7.7). In my communities, the circle is also the sun, moon, tipi, fire, dance, and drum. In my practice, I have identified the circle as a portal to other realms, access to our ancestors, and an opportunity to release and welcome in new energy.

Indigenous aesthetics in art demonstrate the multitude of relationships Indigenous peoples have with the natural and spiritual world as many of our creative expressions are utilitarian with the sacred embedded in the everyday (Robertson & Racette, 2009). Tattoo is no exception as it displays beauty as well as function, supporting us in our day-to-day roles.

4.4. Embodied Sovereignty

Sovereignty in its most understood expression is the inherent right of Indigenous peoples to govern ourselves (Barker, 2005), engaging with sovereignty on the level of Nations versus the settler state. More intimately, as individuals, we embody and assert our sovereignty by living our teachings, ceremonies, creative practices, and relationships. Recognizing ourselves as individual agents of sovereignty, coming before and existing beyond the settler state, can offer a more profound personal experience and an opportunity to engage in a radical deep form of freedom. Accessible and transformative, traditional tattoo allows for personal, embodied sovereignty that transcends colonialism through marking our skin with our own languages to reflect who we have always been, on our lands, through our own ways.

In Nehiyawewin, the word for Michif people is Otipemsiwak or the people who own themselves, and it is in this spirit that we can embrace traditional tattooing as medicine and connection, to reflect the various ways in which Indigenous people are sovereign: The designs tell our stories, they are our ceremony, and they are embedded with teachings, experience, history, and opportunities for our futures. Spanning time and space, across the past and into the future, our tattoos mirror our material culture, the land where we gather what we need, the lives we live, our relationships, creativity, and ways of being and knowing.

Some of the most powerful relationships that I understand and that relate to the vibrational, embodied quality of the experience of tattooing and being tattooed, are those relationships cultivated beyond the verbal, such as those with the cosmos, land, water, and other non-human beings. In *Listening to Stones: Learning in Leroy Little Bear's laboratory: Dialogue in the world outside*, Blackfoot Elder and educator Leroy Little Bear explains the depth of knowledge that nature carries, stones (specifically the hoodoos in southern Alberta), wind, and water, and the ways in which we are able to communicate with them:

> "These hoodoos, all the different crevices, cracks and so on…. you definitely begin to experience the different frequencies. It's almost as if the wind is making music….all these hoodoos are really listening close to us….Think of their age….The stuff they must know!....Like a stranger, they will not sit down and tell you everything immediately….Only when the rocks begin to know you will they tell you their story….The native paradigm consists of several key things.…One of them is constant motion or constant flux. The second part is everything consists of energy waves. In the native world, the energy waves are really the spirit. And it is the energy waves that know….It is not you that knows. You know things because you are made up of energy waves or a combination thereof….it's almost as though you act simply as a conduit, like a radio, picking up these energy waves that are always there and flowing through you and happening at the same time. It just depends where you're tuned" (Hill, 2008).

The notion of the conduit, the listening to the land and all that exists, is very much a part of the practice for myself and other traditional tattoo practitioners I have had discussions with such as Kaszas (personal communication, 2019-2024) and Mohawk traditional tattoo practitioner and War Chief Kanenhariyo Seth Lefort (personal communication, 2021-2024). It is important to be

open to receive the vibrations that come from the animate and inanimate, from the spirit world, and from Creator, to help us design those symbols needed for each individual. And “tuning in” to those frequencies, for me, requires a dedication, deep listening, being still, trust, and my own ceremonial practice that nurtures me, keeps me connected, and prepares me for each tattoo session.

Oftentimes, in this contemporary context, we as Indigenous people struggle to find our footing, having to merge or reconcile our ways with settler society. Wildcat and De Leon explore the “in-between” reality that Indigenous creative sovereignty occupies, somewhere amidst “what is and what is possible” (Wildcat & De Leon, 2020, p. 2). This “in-between” vibrates with possibility and opportunity. For me it is the bringing together of the old and the new. Accessing this opportunity and tapping into the various energies around us is a part of the traditional tattoo process as embodied sovereignty.

Connecting with and offering the possibilities through tattoo has a particular resonance when tattooing other Indigenous 2SLGBTQIA+ and Indigenous women. These are communities I belong to, whose experiences are least recorded in settler historical accounts (Pyle, 2018; Vowel, 2014), who are exposed to the highest rates of violence (Reclaiming Power and Place, 2019), and the majority of people who come to me for traditional tattoo healing and connection. This space of possibility and connection is a respite from the specific challenges we face daily. This connection for me is validating as a 2S person, and other 2S people and Indigenous women have expressed similar experiences. Finding ways to empower ourselves brings joy and belonging.

Similarly, when engaging with the settler archive, Two-Spirit people often seek reflections of themselves (Pyle, 2018). We are often faced with reading non-Indigenous texts written by explorers, priests, missionaries, and anthropologists to find evidence of our existence. But in those settler tellings, our realities and histories get skewed, erased, unrecognized, and we are harmed through that erasure. Two-Spirit Métis and Sault Ste. Marie Nishnaabe scholar Kai Pyle offers hope and belonging when speaking about the term they coined “trans temporal kinship”. This new and engaging expression refers to language, history and oral records of Ojibwe and Plains Cree words as a way to explore Two-Spiritedness in our communities and creating kinship across time and space with historical figures and Two-Spirited ancestors (Pyle, 2018).

Finding our way as 2SLGBTQIA+ and Indigenous women in settler society and in our communities that experience and express colonialism as gendered violence is a challenge. Wilson adds the term ‘coming in’ to the theoretical lexicon:

> “coming in [which does not] centre on the declaration of independence that characterizes ‘coming out’ in mainstream depictions of the lives of LGBTQIA+ people. Rather, coming in is an act of returning, fully present in our selves, to resume our place as a valued part of our families, cultures, communities, and lands, in connection with all our relations" (Wilson, A., 2015, p. 3).

In the spirit of "coming-in", finding ourselves and understanding our value as part of the research process. Approaching settler texts for research purposes often leads me to new imaginings. For example, in *The Plains Cree* by David Mandelbaum (1979), a text often cited by non-Indigenous historians and anthropologists, Plains tattoos are recorded as gendered male/female, lacking representation or acknowledgement of our non-binary relations (Mandelbaum, 1978). With this in mind, we can begin to reflect on how we use our symbols today and how colonial gender norms have affected our communities. We can also combine gendered tattoos on non-binary bodies as a form of reclamation. Of course, combining gendered tattoos does not necessarily equate to non-binary or queerness, but we can imagine and create new ways of experiencing traditional tattoos. We can think beyond the gender binary, re-evaluate and explore what traditional tattoos are, who wears them, and how we can move into an Indigenous future that is inclusive, healing, and brilliant.

The marking of bodies and embodied sovereignty has been and is so important for gender diverse people whose bodies are often sites of contention. Interviewed on the podcast of Mexican American tattoo artist and oral historian Tamara Santibanez, Faith, a Black Trans woman, learned to tattoo while incarcerated. Through Faith's story, we learn how tattoo is a form of safety, connection, healing, identity, creativity, purpose, community, radical activism, and meaning making (Santibañez, accessed 2022). The power of tattoo in Faith's context echoes those of Indigenous people, as a way to assert control over one's body and being, to be connected to others in a space with few ways to connect, and a way to make important meaning out of despair.

We as Indigenous people push back and make ourselves known in numerous ways, to resist and liberate ourselves. Santibañez describes tattooing as liberation work and radical expression. She voices what many have kept quiet for fear of the colonial heteropatriarchal Western tattoo tradition that has embedded itself in modern tattoo shops and in the contemporary tattooist collective psyche (Santibañez, 2020). Bringing tattooing together with ideas and realities of social justice, racialized and LGBTQ+ bodies, incarcerated bodies, and disabled bodies, as well as with the kink and BDSM world opens up the conversation around the practice as intersectional, and as generative and transformational through theory and practice (Santibanez, 2020).

This resonates with my approach and practice as I try to give those I tattoo the freedom to speak and share what they need to in the tattooing space, and more often than not the stories shared are about the experience of colonial heteropatriarchal violence in its vast array of micro and macro harms. These harms are collected and held in the body and mind and they then influence our lives and well-being (Santibañez, 2020, p. 102). Tattooing becomes a way for us to reclaim our bodies, change our narrative to one of empowerment, and exert control over our bodies, minds, and spirits.

Chapter 5 Research-creation Field Work

Since 2019, I have been traveling across so-called Canada to take part in Indigenous tattoo gatherings and to tattoo community members in their homes. Gatherings took place outside on the land, and inside at various venues. Some were open to the public and others held only for Indigenous people. My research demonstrates that whether on the land, in a venue, or in an individual's residence, the experience was transformational for those receiving tattoos as well as for myself. This chapter explores the variety of settings and the process of inviting attendees and collaborators. Ethical implications and ceremonial protocols are described as well as how they informed the process. The health and safety measures taken to create a safe environment and experience before, during, and after the event are outlined. Also discussed are some celebratory moments, challenges that arose, and lessons learned.

5.1. Health and Safety

The very first protocol to be followed in any tattooing experience is health and safety. As traditional tattoo practitioners working with Indigenous communities we find ourselves in a multitude of spaces like individual homes, on-the-land gatherings, at cultural events like powwows, and in public spaces such as museums and galleries. All of these places present unique obstacles and within those we have to stay focused on keeping our communities safe. Every practitioner should have training in bloodborne pathogens (BBP) infection prevention and control as well as personal protective equipment (PPE). My mentorship with Kaszas and sharing knowledge with other traditional tattoo practitioners, and my BBP certification has given me a rigorous health and safety protocol that applies to every situation.

The potential for disease and illness such as contact with bloodborne pathogens requires that single-use sterile surgical-steel needles be used and that the entire area where the tattooing takes place is disinfected. This area is then organized into specific sections for sterile, semi-sterile and non-sterile spaces according to the various stages of accessibility once the tattoo process begins and the skin is no longer intact. These protocols are dictated by strict industry-specific infection prevention and control standards (LaChance & Vidra, 2010; Kaszas, 2018).

As Kaszas clearly states in his master's thesis:

> "To help in the maintenance of your work area set up, the use of a zone system is essential. The zone system consists of three zones: the cold, warm, and hot zone. For this discussion, the tattoo procedure is defined as once the client's skin has been broken. The cold zone is the area that contains all of your sterile equipment and is not to be touched once the tattoo procedure has been started unless you remove contaminated gloves, wash your hands and then put on new gloves. The warm zone is the area that can be touched once the tattoo process has begun but only with clean gloves, meaning gloves that have not touched anything in the hot zone. The hot zone is the area that contains equipment that has touched or had the potential to have come into contact with blood or bodily fluids" (Kaszas, 2018, p. 108).

Bloodborne pathogens are microorganisms such as viruses or bacteria that are carried in blood and can cause disease in people, most notably Hepatitis B (HBV), Hepatitis C (HCV) and

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) (BC Centre for Disease Control, 2023). These pathogens can be transmitted through blood during tattooing or any area of skin that is not intact. Exposure to blood can also occur through contact with “sharps” or contaminated needles and razors used during the tattooing process, and through cross contamination from a person-to-surface-to-person contact. Proper PPE use, handwashing, bandaging of the participant’s tattoo, disposing of sharps, and sterilization of surfaces before, during and after tattooing are all required to keep practitioners and participants safe (Kaszas, 2018).

5.2. Gatherings

I have been invited to traditional Indigenous tattoo gatherings across so-called Canada to take part in vibrant healing celebrations of Indigenous culture, creativity, and community connection. These gatherings serve as sacred spaces where Indigenous peoples from various nations come together to honor their heritage, share stories, and revive ancient tattooing practices. These gatherings have been integral to the evolution of the Indigenous tattooing revival.

Generally speaking, gatherings have been promoted through community connections and social media like Facebook and Instagram. Some gatherings are very nation-specific when taking place on-reserve or in small Indigenous communities. Others are inter-tribal with attendees and collaborators (those being tattooed) visiting from various Nations seeking traditional markings. Every Indigenous practitioner has their own methods, methodologies, and protocols according to their Nations, which makes every traditional tattoo experience unique. Collaborators are often encouraged to reach out to practitioners beforehand to discuss such things as tattooing methods, the intentions of the practitioner and the collaborator, markings, preparatory protocols, health and safety measures, trade and/or monetary payment, and schedule.

Gathering organizers usually invite Elders, Knowledge Holders, drummers, singers, Indigenous artists, and other community members to volunteer during the gatherings, each with various roles and responsibilities. Some gatherings have other types of ceremonies or activities taking place at the same time like sweat lodge, powwow, community discussion, sacred fire and fire teachings, traditional games, and feasting. Some practitioners have their children with them who are taking up tattooing and are able to practice their skills while on-site.

These gatherings preserve Indigenous tattooing traditions and foster a sense of belonging and pride within Indigenous communities.

5.2.1. Case Study: Traditional Tattoo Event

5.2.1.1. Context

On October 20, 2023, a small traditional tattoo gathering was held at Concordia University's Webster Library building in the SHIFT space. Two tattoo practitioners (Dion Kaszas and me) tattooed four invited community members. Other invited guests and contributors included the PhD committee for this research, four Elders, two helpers, and some family and peers. Not all invitees were able to attend due to scheduling, distance, and health matters. Photos were taken by photographer Maurizio Solis and are included in the appendix.

5.2.1.2. Description

The purpose of this research-creation event was to demonstrate the methods, methodologies, and frameworks in this dissertation, to present traditional tattooing as new knowledge in the academic space, and to share the characteristics of healing and connection of traditional tattooing.

5.2.1.2.1. Setting

The SHIFT space at Concordia University focuses on accommodating diverse communities to come together to create and collaborate. The space has a modular design that allows for shifting and reconstructing of the space and its furniture to best suit the audience and event. For this gathering, one side of the space was used for attendees and collaborators to sit together, talk, bead, and rest. The other side of the space was sectioned off and used only by the practitioners for the tattooing. Separate from these areas is the kitchen where there was food and drinks for those in attendance.

5.2.1.2.2. Attendees and Collaborators (those receiving tattoos)

Invitees and attendees, fourteen in total, were all people who have supported this research and practice in various ways and with whom I have formed meaningful, generative relationships. Throughout these relationships, they have indicated their strong interest in my research, and some have received tattoo medicine from me before.

5.2.1.2.3. Ethics

University ethics approvals for Indigenous research can be challenging, due to divergences in assumptions underlying Indigenous and settler academic knowledge practices (Kovach, 2010). I anticipated such challenges when I filed the ethics application for this research, outlining how the research will be conducted, with whom, for what reason, and the level of risk to participants and the precautions to be implemented in order to mitigate these risks.

Overall, the ethics application exchange with the committee was quite reasonable. I shared additional details of how the Indigenous methodologies support the research, clarified some of the language used to describe the traditional tattooing process and how our cultural practices span time as well as clear communication around the health and safety protocols that aim to protect participants and attendees before, during and after the event.

While Concordia is a settler institution and the restrictions and policies in place hinder our practices to varying degrees and require us to shift and perform in order to fit into these spaces, the ethics application proved to be reasonable.

5.2.1.2.4. Process

Unlike a tattoo studio, which ideally is a controlled environment in terms of health and safety, this event was in an academic, public space. To keep everyone safe, we needed to create a space that was only for the tattooing, and to remind attendees and collaborators to remain in the gathering space unless being tattooed to prevent cross contamination. When setting up spaces for this kind of gathering, Kaszas (2018) points out the two key principles to keep in mind to keep our communities safe from blood borne viruses:

1. Assume everyone including the practitioner is living with a blood borne pathogen so that we remember to take every precaution before, during and after tattooing.
2. Our goal is to empower and contribute to the healing of our communities.

As taught to me by Kaszas and during Bloodborne Pathogens Certification (Lefebvre & Kaszas, 2019-2024; Progressive Mentorship, 2023), I have learned to protect myself and those I tattoo from microorganisms (Kaszas, 2018; BC Centre for Disease Control, 2023), and to separate the tattooing area into three different zones where tattoo supplies are kept during the tattooing process (Kaszas, 2018, p. 108-111).

All equipment on the tattooing table that comes into contact with blood is disposable and single-use. I only use single-use sterile disposable needles and razors, which are disposed into a medical grade sharps container and transported immediately after the event to a pharmacy where they handle the disposal. All participants and attendees at the event signed consent forms and were informed of the health and safety risks and protocols around avoiding cross-contamination within the space.

During the tattooing, participants were in continuous communication with their practitioner as Kaszas and I monitored their well-being and reminded them that should they need a break or want/need to stop the process, they were free to do so.

After the completion of the tattoo, the area of the tattoo on the participant was cleaned and bandaged to avoid any cross contamination. Participants were provided with information on how to keep the area clean over the course of healing. In general, traditional hand poke and skin stitch tattoos result in far less trauma to the skin and are thus much less painful during and after. Participants were also reminded that they can contact me any time for follow-up questions or concerns.

5.2.1.3. Follow-up

I followed up with participants and attendees one week after the event to debrief, express that I was available for discussion as well as check in with those who received tattoos on how the

healing was going. All those who offered feedback were very happy with their tattoos and the experience overall, expressing their gratitude for the chance to be involved in the experience.

5.2.1.4. Conclusion

In conversation, everyone at the event expressed deep gratitude (see photos of event in Appendix) for being invited. For those who received tattoos, the experience was emotional and joyous. I was grateful to bring everyone together to meet my mentor Kaszas and to share in the cultural experience that I brought into the academic space.

5.3. Individuals

5.3.1. Context

Individual tattooing sessions take place in my Montreal home or at the home of the collaborator. As collaborators are usually more comfortable in their own space, I offer that service as part of the experience and in fact, enjoy being in their space as it helps me understand them more.

Through community connections or social media, individuals reach out and inquire about my process. Generally, they express a desire to engage in the traditional practice and offer information about their Nation, intention, and knowledge of traditional tattoos.

I generally offer some information about the process and then switch to email where I send more information and a series of questions regarding their present context.

Below is from a sample email to collaborators. (Generally my emails are written without capitals as a process of refusal of colonial languages and to bring attention to how we use languages, how languages have been part of colonialism, how Indigenous languages are disrespected and in some cases, disappeared, and what we can do to support Indigenous language revival.)

> "About the Process:
>
> 1. this is a method of caring and providing medicine to community. i mostly work with Indigenous folks. if i work with non-Indigenous folks it's through a pre-established relationship through myself or a community member or a meaningful conversation that establishes an intention that i feel is approachable and acceptable to me and this medicine.
> 2. the rate for tattoo is $50 for set up and then $150 per hour. i am able to offer a lower rate but i usually reserve that for those who have less access to resources. i also offer free tattoo at various times to those who are unable to pay at all and/or can provide an exchange of traditional gifts in return. so if you are able to pay the full rate, it would be appreciated, that way we both contribute to those who have less :) please let me know your capacity around this. a deposit is required to keep your spot.
> 3. traditional gifts are welcome and appreciated. tobacco is expected, always, from Indigenous and non-Indigenous folks. it can be a cigarette if you have no access

to loose tobacco. you can also buy loose tobacco at the store. before you gift it to me, say some words to it, in remembrance of your ancestors, to indicate your intentions, and then that tobacco will be given to me in the spirit of this medicine, this exchange and transformation that we will do together in this space. you can wrap the tobacco in some red cotton cloth if that's available. a small amount is ok or more if that feels right. a Ziplock baggy is often used to hold the tobacco, to give you an idea of how much folks usually give. again, whatever feels appropriate.

4. the tattoo will take place at my home or yours. please have whatever you need to drink/eat. try to have something with sugar like granola bars and juice or candy. sometimes folks find they need sugar, especially if the tattoo is a few hours long. our blood sugars might drop somewhat, so be mindful of this. i will be there to support you of course if you feel lightheaded or need a moment.
5. i will provide smudge if you feel you would like to partake in that. i do my own ceremony beforehand to center myself and connect with my ancestors and helpers.
6. i have a cat and so if we tattoo at my place and that's an issue please let me know and perhaps take some allergy meds beforehand if you need to.
7. i usually play some music, jazz or something else that's mellow. of course you're welcome to play whatever makes you happy. you can even use headphones if you like, you can watch a movie or whatever you like to do to pass the time :) or you can sit quietly. all ways of passing time are open to conversation.
8. i will/can use hand poke and/or skin stitch, depending on what you would like to experience and/or what the medicine calls for. these can be painful; everyone has a different threshold for pain. most people feel that these are less painful than the machine tattoo method. skin stitch is a traditional Plains method of tattooing and other nations as well using a sterile sewing needle. it entails sewing the skin. it's a wonderful experience and we can discuss further if that interests you. hand poke is using various disposable sterile one-use tattoo needles to create the design.
9. we can take as many breaks as you like/need. we can stop at any time if that is your choice. since my time will be reserved for you, payment will be expected for the design, set up and an estimated time for the tattoo process.
10. once i know a bit more about you i can start your design :) i may suggest something different than what you were thinking based on what you tell me and/or a different placement on the body depending on the medicine needed/wanted. we can discuss!

<u>About you:</u>

1. is this your first tattoo?
2. what is the tattoo you are thinking of? are you interested in a design i posted on Instagram? feel free to look through those @theoriginalmel. if you don't have one in mind and want me to develop that for you, great!
3. where on your body are you thinking you would like it to be? you may or may not know this yet. this will become apparent during the process.
4. is there a particular reason you chose me as your tattoo practitioner?

5. where are you from? what is your nation?
6. what do you do in life?
7. what are your passions? what are your dreams?
8. is there anything in particular you are struggling with that seems pertinent to this tattoo medicine, that you are seeking healing around?
9. is there something/anything you would like me to know about you, that you feel might be important to this healing medicine process?
10. do you have any questions for me?

5.3.2. Description

Individual tattoo sessions are much easier than gatherings to navigate in terms of sanitizing the space and keeping the area undisturbed by others. The experience is usually quiet. The collaborator or myself chooses some music. Generally, the experience begins organically with an in-depth conversation about what the collaborator is going through in their life that is connected with the tattoo. This conversation is usually quite moving, emotional, and exploratory. We usually have tea.

Like gatherings, these individual tattoo sessions are sacred spaces cultivated by this very private, ancestral connection. We come together to honor our Indigenous heritage, share stories, and revive ancient tattooing practices. These intimate experiences preserve Indigenous tattooing traditions and contribute to the individual's sense of belonging and pride within Indigenous communities, perpetuating cultural resilience and identity.

5.3.2.1. Setting

These sessions take place in private residences.

5.3.2.2. Ethics

This work is relational by nature. Collaborators contact me based on my community relationships that are well-established and based on trust through shared experience. While many of the collaborators I tattoo are not known to me before the tattoo takes place, the process I use reflects my integrity and the trust I have built with my own communities. I am known to many as a community worker, dedicated to serving the Indigenous community and I have worked with the Native Women's Shelter of Montreal and in collaboration with Native Montreal, the Native Friendship Centre of Montreal, Projets Autochtonne de Montreal, the First Nations Regional Adult Education Centre and others for many years. I am known for this process of care and I know that people are referred to me because of this.

5.3.2.3. Process

I ensure that there is a clear space within the residence where I can set up the various tools I need. No matter what location I am in, all surfaces that will be used for tattooing are cleaned and

disinfected. Generally, in the absence of a massage table, the collaborator will lay on a couch or table if they need to be in a horizontal position, or in a standard kitchen chair if seated.

As a cultural tattoo practitioner, tattooing in a variety of locations and the set up of the work area is essential to the mandate of uplifting the community while keeping everyone safe. The healthy and safety protocols used at gatherings are the same for individual tattoo sessions.

5.3.3. Follow-up

After I tattoo a collaborator, I check in with them a few days later to be sure they are doing well and the healing process is continuing along. So far, collaborators have responded with positive feedback, a general sense of wellbeing, and gratitude. I communicate that I am always here for them should they need to reach out.

5.3.4. Conclusion

I will continue on with this process and with the gatherings, across so-called Canada, wherever the medicine is needed. I have been approached to go back to B.C. as well as Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario so far for various traditional tattooing activities in various cities, for gatherings and in individual residences.

5.4. Archival Research

Engaging with settler archives and documentation about Indigenous people has become an aspect of my practice that has shifted and taken on greater importance over the past few years. Watching Kaszas develop and share his catalog of symbols has shown me how we can look to our material culture for knowledge and inspiration. While engaging with Plains Indigenous materials in the collections, I keep in mind the historical context that our people existed in and what degree of duress they may have been under while these objects shifted into often usurping hands. I explore the archives to connect with the materials and patterns used by my ancestors and find inspiration to create new designs for these contemporary contexts.

Visiting these kin (objects) within the collections has generated various avenues of thought. These kin are my relations and created for specific purposes with particular duties for the community. I wonder what it means for them and for us that they are unable to perform their responsibilities, that their intent and energies have been held against their/our will, and I wonder how that manifests in us and the world. When engaging with these patterns and materials, I am brought into communication with my ancestors, existing in and responding to their vibrations, witnessing their brilliance and purpose, and making new meaning from their enduring stories.

Amongst the archives, I lay down tobacco for these kin to honor the exchange between us, sing to them, let them know they are not forgotten. I have visited 90 kin so far: coats, moccasins, vamps, bags, headdresses, gloves, fleshing tools, headstalls, and more. Each piece speaks to me, tells me stories of its existence. I listen deeply. I have dreamed of some of the patterns before visiting them; dreaming is a way to receive knowledge from Creator (Archibald, 2008).

Kaszas has recognized the importance of visiting the archives in relation to his practice and responsibilities: “One of the drawbacks or limitations of the academic study of our nations is the separation of our visual and material culture into compartments that focus only on a particular area, like, basketry, pictographs, clothing, tattoos, etc. For those of us involved in the revival of our artistic traditions, we need to reconnect our symbolic visual language and use the whole cannon of our visual culture as the inspiration and storehouse for our tattoo traditions” (Kaszas, 2018, p. 102).

Often we are discouraged from reimagining and yet, what we need is reimaginings for these contemporary times. Our ancestors would be proud of our innovations, our repurposing to empower our people, and our continuous respect for their lives and work. This wealth of material culture invokes and inspires new designs and new ways of thinking about our place in the world. During the time spent in collections, I became acutely aware of the legacy of colonial institutions like museums possessing an unknowable breadth of knowledge and materials built on the blood and bones of Indigenous people for profit: a global hostage situation. Hidden away in the vaults, temperature controlled and surveilled in cavernous rooms, are our kin, who are unable to serve their purposes, stuck in time, and waiting. It is incredibly difficult to make sense of or reconcile how this vastness of our culture is held so far out of our reach.

Figure 18: One room of many filled with Indigenous material culture, Collections of the Canadian Museum of History, 2022.

Figure 19: One room of many filled with Indigenous material culture, Collections of the Canadian Museum of History, 2022.

Repatriation efforts have been underway for some time and we now hear about cultural materials coming home to their original communities. In 2022, the Canadian Museum Association's report, *Moved to Action: Activating UNDRIP in Canadian Museums* report called for Canada's review of museum practices and policies regarding Indigenous heritage and the implementation of UNDRIP towards stopping the continued violence perpetrated by settler art institutions. Part of stopping that harm is for these spaces to center Indigeneity and work together with Indigenous leaders and organizations to undo some of the colonial legacy.

The Royal BC Museum published the *Indigenous Repatriation Handbook* which expertly lays out methods of engaging with museums and holding accountable those institutions that benefit from colonial legacy and brings together reconciliation and repatriation, relationships between museums and Indigenous peoples, created by us, for us and is a living, evolving document (Collison et al., 2019). From my experience in the collections, many of the materials are misidentified, miscategorized and often incomplete background information, or none at all.

The process of exploring and discovering what is held in museum archives has been profound, inspiring, and also filled with sorrow. While I view these amazing creations of my ancestors, I am reminded of the colonialism that persists today in the commodification, mislabeling, and displacement of these kin from our communities. While it will take time and care, we can develop a collective commitment to bring our kin home. In the meantime, we can visit and honor our material culture, engage with these pieces, be inspired by them, and reinterpret their beauty and purpose to bring new life to old ways.

Chapter 6 Outcomes and Reflections

This section is a reflection on and analysis of the past five years of practicing traditional tattooing in community as well as that of the case study that took place in October 2023. Included is Traditional Tattoo in the Academy; Tattoo Mentorship; Bundles; Traditional Body Modification and Tools; Contemporary Designs and Relationships; Markings to Honor Gender and Sexuality; New Michif and Nehiyaw Tattooing Methodology O and Δ; and Challenges.

6.1. Traditional Tattoo in the Academy

The decision to pursue traditional tattooing in an academic research context was a contentious one. I was certainly hesitant knowing the history of how research has been and is still done by Europeans in and on our communities, as they fail to consult with us, acknowledge us as collaborators and are oblivious to their harmful intentions and motivations (Kaszas, 2018). As an Indigenous academic and community worker, mother and Two-Spirit person, and a traditional tattoo practitioner, I approach this research with care, humility, and respect.

It has also been contentious for some community members. Some feel this medicine belongs only in on-reserve communities and not in urban spaces like the academy. It is my impression that the roots of this thought are grounded in protocol, protection, and respect for the medicine as ceremony. I take these perspectives into account and bring them forward to Elders and the tattoo family for conversation. What concerns me most about this is that many of our people are in urban centers due to forced diaspora and lack of services in communities, and the number of Indigenous people in the academic space is growing (Palmater, 2011; Andersen, 2013). The urban Indigenous community is a real one and is worthy of access to ancestral medicines like traditional tattoo.

The more I engage with communicating Indigenous lifeways in the academy and beyond, the more signs I am given that this is an important path. While the university is a colonial space where harms occur regularly to Indigenous people (Smith et al., 2021), we are working, studying, and teaching there, and we need to support and empower each other in these places, cultivate joy, and welcome inspiration. Although different from Indigenous ways of learning, academia has its own vibrancy and dynamism, which is certainly more palpable and accessible when we work within Indigenous cohorts, cultivating stronger supports to engage with our education. Taking on the challenge of navigating and existing in these spaces, especially for those of us who have more privilege, opens up possibilities for others.

For Emerance Baker, a Cayuga/Mohawk-Hungarian Indigenous health and youth worker:

> "writing is a place of empowerment and strength. Our ability to imagine solutions that meet the needs of our communities and write them down is in keeping with my worldview and the possibility of making them real. This is why I write; because I've had a vision that writing ourselves into the academy benefits not only us, but the academy as well. Our writing softens the blows when our "jagged worldviews collide". It creates the space of kitsu'lt melkiko'tin ("place of creation", Hendersen Youngblood, 2000, p. 257) that more fully makes visible the still present flaws of character and hidden agendas within the academy so that we can name and describe and change them. It is imperative to note that our location in the academy is not a "reclaimed" space; it is our claimed space. Our location in academia signals to me that we are still here and we have never left." (Baker, 2008, p. 18)

Focused on Indigenous women's health, Baker speaks to the importance of engaging in our teachings in this time of the tokenization of our words/concepts by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (2008). To be presented with the opportunity to truly engage with the teachings within one's own practice in the Academy is to widen that path for other Indigenous people who want to do the same. No matter the setting, we should feel confident in taking up our deserved spaces, roles, and responsibilities.

The more spaces the tattoo family and I bring this medicine to, on the land or in urban places, in or out of an academic context, the more I understand the need for this ancestral medicine. Elder Gordon Oakes emphasizes that colonial mythologies have disrupted and broken the fabric of Indigenous life and healing will only come with empowerment and the continued practice of our Indigenous ways of being on this land (Cardinal, 2013, p. 22). The response from community to traditional tattooing at gatherings and with individual collaborators is excitement, gratitude, and a desire to walk the path with us in support and love.

6.2. Tattoo Mentorship

While mentorship was not an initial focus of my research, its fundamental importance has shifted my perspective. The contribution Kaszas has made to my research and practice, and all that he has taught me over the years has helped to support my own vision and commitment to care and service. His voice echoes in my mind throughout my journey, inspiring me and giving me confidence to be who I am and who my ancestors have always wanted me to be.

As indicated by Kaszas in his master's thesis Embodying the Past in the Present for the Future: Practicing, Supporting, and Highlighting Indigenous Tattoo Revivals Through Indigenous and Creative Research Methodologies, mentorship is being inspired by and learning from others:

> "This series of various artworks seeks to honor the voices of those who have inspired and taught me through their words and actions as previously recorded in my contextual review. I refer to many of these people as my mentors, not because I have spent a significant amount of time with them or because we have a measurable relationship, but because their words, actions, and being have influenced me and my work to revive my ancestral traditions" (Kaszas, 2018).

I now understand that practicing ancestral tattooing, as with many other Indigenous cultural practices, relies heavily on mentorship (Kaszas, 2018; Bonspille-Boileau, 2019; Lefebvre & Kaszas, 2021-2024). Part of our responsibility as community members is to share knowledge as a way to ensure the perpetuity of our cultural ways. We are always dancing between roles of learning and teaching, giving and receiving, and to be humble enough to accept both of these roles takes practice. Mentorship can take on many forms and we can learn within community and from afar. We can be taught face-to-face by mentors in educational places and in ceremonial spaces. We can simply be influenced by them throughout our lives as we follow their journeys, listen to them as they articulate their knowledge, and observe how they relate to others.

6.2.1. Dion Kaszas

As one of the founders of the Indigenous tattoo revival in so-called Canada and as an independent scholar, painter and educator, Kaszas's interdisciplinary practices aligned with my own. After email exchanges, some planning, and careful consideration explored around Kaszas's expectations of protection and respect for his knowledge, we started our journey together. The following are some of the fundamental principles he has shared with me that have impacted my sense of self and practice (personal communication, 2021-2024).

6.2.1.1. Carry the Firewood

Everyone who carries the firewood is part of the circle. The colonial project was designed to disappear us and blood quantum was one of the tools colonial nation states developed "to diminish the recognition of Indigenous claims to land over generations" (Arvin et al., 2013, p. 12). We must not do the work of the colonizer through selective and subjective quantum amounts of Indigenous blood. Our survival is a testament to our strength as communities. When we come together and support each, when we literally and metaphorically carry the wood, we are contributing to the greater good that will enable us to thrive.

In many Indigenous communities, like those of the Michif and Nehiyawak, we have designated helpers—called oskâpêwak in nêhiyawêwin—whose specific role is to support Elders in their ceremonial obligations. I have seen the roles of oskâpêwak extend beyond helping Elders to others in the community and often when a person is a natural helper, they are called an oskâpêwis. We also have animal helpers and spirit helpers that community members receive, recognize, and honor in various ways along our life journeys. In community we have roles—like traditional tattoo practitioners—through which we support each other using our gifts. These various methods of support reflect the complexities of our relationships with each other and our non-human kin. Essentially, this is all about keeping everyone and everything healthy, and recognizing the value of every being, so that we remain strong.

The overall message in this aspect of Kaszas' mentorship, which is so important to me personally and in my service to community, is that if you are contributing to the greater good by carrying the wood, then you are welcome at the fire.

6.2.1.2. Tattoos are Our Language and Medicine

Ancestral markings are our languages and we can share them with whomever we feel is in need. While Kaszas and I agree that traditional facial markings and specific clan markings may be reserved for Indigenous folks from our communities, it is up to us as practitioners and carriers of these medicines to decide who would benefit from these traditional markings. Like those who carry the firewood, this can include non-Indigenous people. It is the responsibility of the community to uphold the gifts of the practitioner.

Like our material culture—moccasins, coats, tools, headstalls, sashes, bags—with spiritual and utilitarian designs sewn and beaded into their structures (Robertson & Racette, 2009), tattoos carry our language and relationships in each design. This language belongs to the people and as I am a member of my communities, it is also my language. Along with language, tattoo is also medicine and traditional tattoo practitioners are healers (Youngman, 2019; Kaszas, 2018; Light, 1972). With these tattoos, I offer collaborators an exploration in their own power and agency. The tattoos tell stories of our past as Indigenous people merged with the present and the future.

6.2.1.3. Trust Yourself

Slow down, you got this. Many times I have found myself feeling pressure and carrying a lot for the community; the gifts the Creator chooses for us will challenge us. Kaszas has reminded me and others that we are worthy, that our voices matter, and that we just need to breathe, and accept that we will make mistakes.

Learning and navigating the traditional tool methods, the protocols, health and safety, overall responsibilities, and engaging with this practice as scholars takes time and patience. The many times I have sat with Kaszas during this ongoing mentorship process and have found myself struggling with finding answers, feeling unworthy, or been frustrated with my progress, he consistently reminds me that things evolve at their own speed and to offer myself the same kindness and compassion I offer to others. Traditional tattooing as a cultural practice and revival takes an entire community to establish and perpetuate (Kaszas, 2018; Lefebvre & Kaszas, 2021-2024).

6.2.1.4. Weaving Our Communities Back Together

Picking up the pieces of our cultures. Kaszas has told the story of Coyote, Eagle and Fox on many occasions, a story he learned from his mentors Jeanette Armstrong, Richard Armstrong, and Bill Cohen, and its impact on me is always the same: a calming. We do not need to know everything. What we need is love, integrity, and perseverance. The story reminds us that by picking up those pieces of our culture, one bit at a time, we can weave our communities back together, and find our way.

> "Coyote was walking near a cliff at Ashnola he saw Eagle soaring on the up drafts near that cliff. Eagle would soar wayyyyyy up and swoop down. Coyote was mezmerized as Eagle swooped and soared. Finally after a long time, Coyote looking at Eagle started to ascend the mountainside and each step of the way he would say 'those are my ways'. After a long day of hiking up and up he walked to the edge of the cliff, looked over, stretched his arms out and jumped off. As his last toe left the cliff side he says 'these are my ways'. At that very moment gravity took over, despite Coyote frantically flapping his scrawny Coyote arms he began to plummet. He even twirled his tail, all to no avail, all of his efforts didn't even slow his descent one bit. He became so afraid that he screamed and pooped all the way to the bottom, where we was splattered to pieces. Coyote's brother fox arrived to the scene some time later, he began to gather together all of the pieces of Coyote that he could find, A few hairs, a piece of tooth, a piece of bone and so on. Once fox had gathered as many pieces as he could possibly find he breathed on the assembled pile and stepped over it four times, transforming the pile of bits and pieces into Coyote once again." (Bill Reid Gallery, 2018, p. 13)

The sense of relief that I feel when I hear this story from Kaszas is always profound. I do not have to do all the work, nor should I expect myself to, and in fact, I lack humility in thinking that I could even do all the work. My responsibility is simply to gather the pieces I am able to find and bring them back to the community to collectively weave together who we have always been.

6.2.1.5. Care, Compassion, and Courage

Ethics of care for all that is. Kaszas has shared extensively with me on honoring each individual's needs and experiences, which includes collaborators and practitioners. We need to have care and compassion as we navigate and further this revival by ensuring we are grounded in our respective cultural ways of being; that we care for ourselves physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually; and meet collaborators with awareness. We are bringing an ancestral practice back to our people and engaging intimately with collaborators who, like practitioners themselves, are survivors of colonialism.

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art of that care and compassion for myself and my collaborators is being prepared in my processes. Kaszas has given me resources to ensure I have the proper supplies, and sterilize tools and the tattoo space. He has also taught me to be clear when I communicate with collaborators so that I can responsibly manage their expectations about: what traditional tattoos are; how I design a tattoo and its meaning; what methods I use; ceremonial aspects; payment and deposits; the health and safety precautions; levels of pain that may be experienced; how long a tattoo might take to complete; the tattooing space; consent before, during, and after the process; and after care and follow-up.

Consent is an important aspect of care in the traditional tattoo process that Kaszas and I have had long discussions about. He has taught me the ways in which he offers care and comfort to his clients as this practice involves power dynamics and physical contact with various parts of the body. Kaszas suggests comfortable ways to dress for access to the body part being tattooed, and reminders around temperature changes in the body during tattooing (Lefebvre & Kaszas, 2021-2024). Kaszas outlines for collaborators how he might need to be positioned throughout the tattoo process, and may need to rest his arms on their body and/or stretch the skin while tattooing, but that he will ask for consent before he does this. Above all, Kaszas assures collaborators that throughout the tattooing session, he will be in continuous communication (Lefebvre & Kaszas, 2021-2024).

As I have gratefully brought this knowledge forward into my own practice, I let collaborators know that they are in control of their own bodies and they can stop the process at any time, for whatever reason. This is particularly important in my practice as I work with many people who have experienced and continue to experience trauma, abuse, chronic pain, depression, anxiety, and body dysmorphia and gender dysphoria[1], all of these realities within the context of living as an Indigenous person. Collaborators are encouraged to take breaks, have water, tea or juice, go outside for some air, or sit up if they are laying down. Essentially, it is important that collaborators understand this is a process we are doing together, that they have agency, and that we need to respect each other's boundaries and capacities.

[1] "Dr. [Stephanie] Gilbert presented psychiatry's definition of body dysmorphic disorder, 'characterized by persistent and intrusive preoccupations with an imagined or slight defect in one's appearance,' and of gender dysphoria, described as a similar bodily discomfort except with one's gender. Instead, she was interested in how these scientific and Euro-American-based theoretical concepts specifically connect to indigenous people's experiences and trauma. According to Gilbert, body dysmorphia among the Stolen Generation of Australia developed as a result of legislation calling for the removal of indigenous children from their families from the 19th century to the mid-20th century. Through justifications such as 'neglect' as cause to forcibly take children from their indigenous mothers and families, these forms of legislation promoted the erasure of aboriginal and mixed-race children from society. After removal, the abducted children were then systematically denied their identity in numerous ways, such as the government changing the children's names and dates of birth, or being assigned an identifying number

6.2.1.6. Indigenous Material Culture and Archival Research

Our cultures are communicated across mediums. Kaszas's work developing a visual dictionary of his community's cultural symbols titled Nlaka'pamux Visual Dictionary: A Knowledge Basket (2024) exemplifies his commitment to his community and those generations to come. Years of archival work and visiting museum collections has led him to gather, identify, and record symbols and their meanings. With community consultation and consent, he has published the dictionary of cultural symbols.

Inspired by Kaszas's archival journey, I began to work with the Canadian Museum of History and the generous Katie Pollock, Curator of Central Ethnology, to visit with Plains Indigenous cultural materials in their collections, and record and be inspired by their designs for contemporary traditional tattoos. I also explored how to bring these symbols back to my communities, as in a visual dictionary like Kaszas and/or through repatriation efforts, and began to exchange ideas with the curatorial staff.

Along this mentorship journey, Kaszas has trusted me and shared so much of his skills and knowledge. He brought me to his community of the Lower Nicola Indian Band in Merritt, British Columbia and generously introduced me to his family and friends during the Awakening Our DNA traditional tattoo gathering (2022). All of his knowledge has supported and helped the progression of my own, and now I protect and carry this forward to the next generation. This journey of traditional tattooing and mentorship is a daily reflection and practice of humility and gratitude within that dance of learning and teaching, of confidence and vulnerability.

6.3. Traditional Tattoo Bundles

6.3.1. Bundle Teachings

A bundle can refer to physical, intellectual, and spiritual collection of objects, methods, methodologies, and ceremonial practices that Michif and Nehiyaw peoples gather throughout their lives to live in a good way.

Cree scholar Wahpimaskwasis Janice Makokis writes:

instead of being called by a name. Another form of control by the colonial government was the consistent effort to have indigenous children view themselves as white instead of aboriginal. As Australia became an independent nation in 1901, the country promoted the idea that the whiteness of skin was a marker for a real Australian. Indigenous children were told they were white in order to assimilate into white Australian society, affecting their mental perception of themselves and contributing to their body dysmorphia regarding their indigenous identity." *Body Dysmorphia and Inherited Trauma in the Stolen Generation,* Daniela Hernandez, 2018

"First and foremost our actions should be guided by our own epistemological frameworks if we are seeking true vindication from a philosophical colonial construct that has held us to be social, political, cultural, and economic prisoners within the very spaces we seek redress. In doing so, we have to return to our teachings found in the languages we speak, the songs we sing in ceremony, the teachings found in the ceremonial structures that have been passed on to us from our ancestors, and the philosophical bundles of knowledge found in the ways of our ancestors" (Makokis, 2008).

Makokis describes how our Indigenous methodologies combined with all the other elements of our bundles are there to support us and contain all the wisdom necessary to liberate us from the constraints of the colonial project.

Similarly, Dr. Kathy Absolon, Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University and member of Flying Post First Nation states:

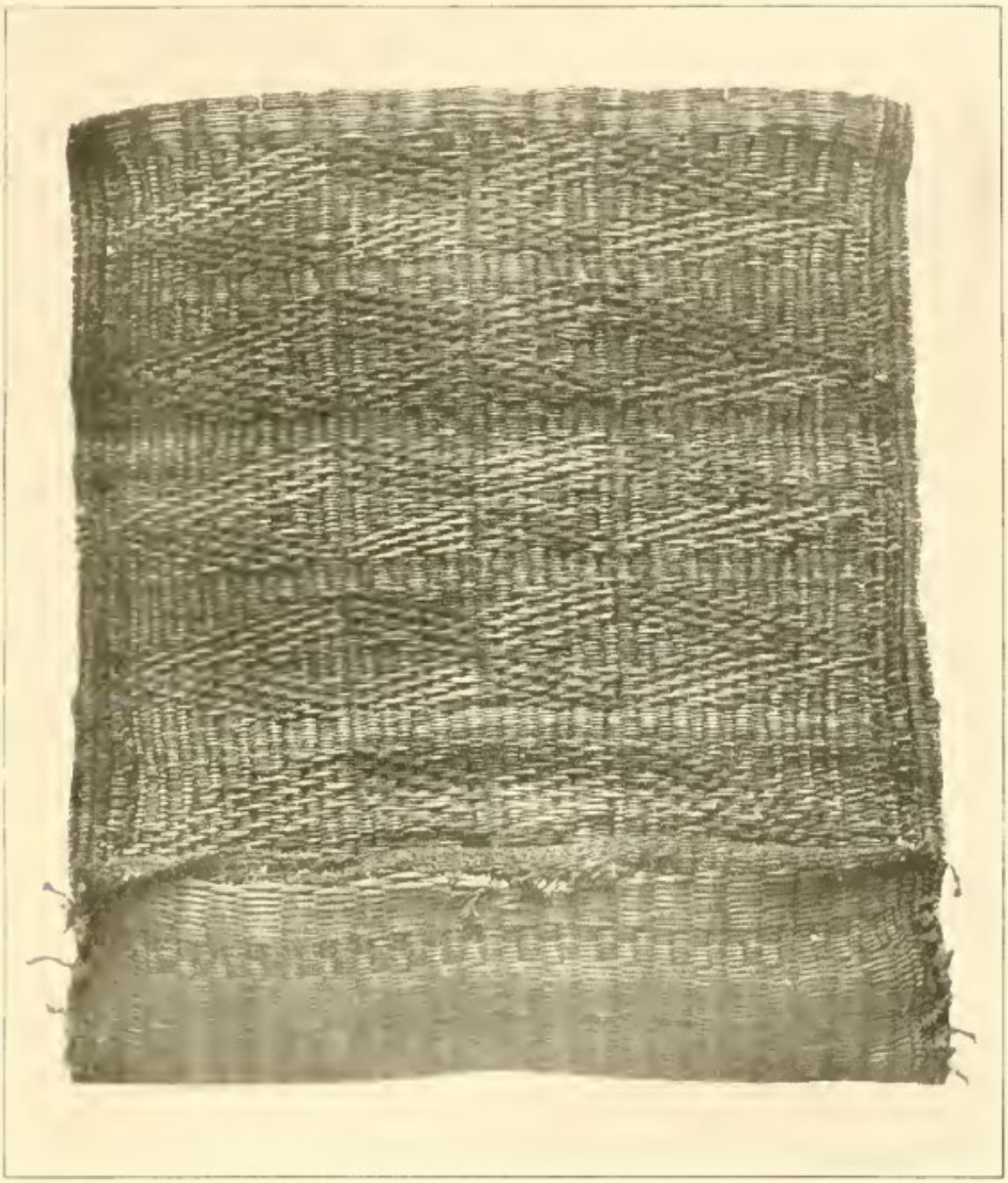
> "Our work as wholistic practitioners is to remember and reconnect with wholistic knowledges, pick up our bundles and activate them again. Picking up our bundles means to relearn, reclaim, pick up and own the teachings and practices that emanate from wholistic theory and knowledge. It means to live and practice minobimaadsiwin (a good life)...Our knowledge bundles develop over time with experience, teachings, and reflections" (Absolon, 2010, p. 75).

I remember Métis Elder Constance Simmonds reminded me in a phone conversation once that the first thing that is ever in our bundles is ourselves; this struck me so deeply because it compelled me to recognize my own self worth (personal communication, 2018). And when I think of all the Indigenous people struggling in profound ways in this colonial project that seeks to erase us, this is a simple yet deep teaching. As individuals, no matter our story, we come into this world with ancestral wisdom that we can call upon even when we are unable to articulate its transcendental aspects. It is a fundamental truth that we are worthy of being the beginning of our bundles and it is then our responsibility to add to our bundles along the way with whatever gifts the Creator offers to us, physically, intellectually, and spiritually.

During the Mawachihitotaak Metis Studies Symposium (2022), Métis Elder Maria Campbell states that the gathering together that we do throughout our lives is part of our bundles and is reflective of our engagement with this world and across realms (Campbell, 2022). There are so many kinds of 'gatherings', for celebration, governance, cultural practice, and healing. Dionne Nolan (Zoogipon Ikwe), an Indigenous cancer care navigator at the Ontario Southeast Regional Cancer Program, refers to her bundle as similar to a "a doctor's satchel, and I have all my tools in there. My spiritual sacred items are in there, my medicines are in there, and I share that with my patients…To go out on the land, and work my land and pick medicines, that's healing in action, that's culture" (Fu, 2022).

Bundles in traditional tattoo practice gather all of the tools, methods, methodologies, and experiences of the practitioner into a physical, intellectual, and spiritual bundle that the practitioner uses in their tattoo work. Omaha and Osage ethnologist and linguist Francis La Flesche documented the contents of an Osage bundle in an anthropological essay:

> "The portable shrine, called Wa-xo'-be To'^{n}-ga held not only the sacred object, the symbol of the older rite, the skin of the cormorant, but in it was placed the sacred object and symbols of the newer rite which was born of the visions of the chief—namely, the skin of the pelican, seven feathers of that bird, a downy feather of the eagle, and a piece of black metal. This composite shrine, called the Wa-xo'-be To'^{n}-ga, when completed was consecrated in the same manner as was the portable shrine of the older rite, by the simultaneous recital by each of the gentes of the tribe of the wi'-gi-e which related certain life symbols called Wa-zho'-i-ga-the, a term which, freely translated, means the object of which they made their bodies.
>
> The tattooing wa-xo'-be, which is the skin of a cormorant, is split down the entire length of the back. Around the base of the tail is wound a string of scalp locks, 10 or 12 in number, that hang down like a shirt. Within the body of the skin are placed eight tattooing instruments, the points toward the head and the tops toward the tail. The shafts of some of the instruments are fat, others round, and about the length of a lead pencil. To the lower ends of the shafts are fastened steel needles, some in straight rows and others in bunches. To the tops of some of the shafts are fastened small rattles made of pelican or eagle quills. The needle parts of the shafts are covered with buffalo hair to protect them against rust. The skin of the cormorant was folded over the tattooing instruments, the neck of the bird doubled over the back and tied down. The skin of a pelican, split down the back, is wrapped around the cormorant and tied around the middle with a band of woven fiber. The bill, head, and neck of the pelican are missing.
>
> Within the woven rush case, placed without any particular order, are seven weasel skins; one tobacco pouch made of a buffalo heartsack; bits of braided sweet-grass; half of the shell of a fresh-water mussel for holding the coloring matter; four tubes, one of bamboo and three of tin, worn by the operator on his fingers as guides for the instruments when he is at work; two bunches of the wing-feathers of small birds used in applying the coloring matter; an old burdenstrap; four wing-bones of a pelican or an eagle, tied together with a twisted cord of wood or nettle fiber; two rabbits' feet, used for brushing the skin of the parts that have been gone over with the instruments when the subject becomes nervous by the irritation of the wounds; and a large brass ring worn by the operator around his neck as a part of his symbolic paraphernalia" (La Flesche, 1921, p. 71-72)



PORTABLE SHRINE, INNER CASE

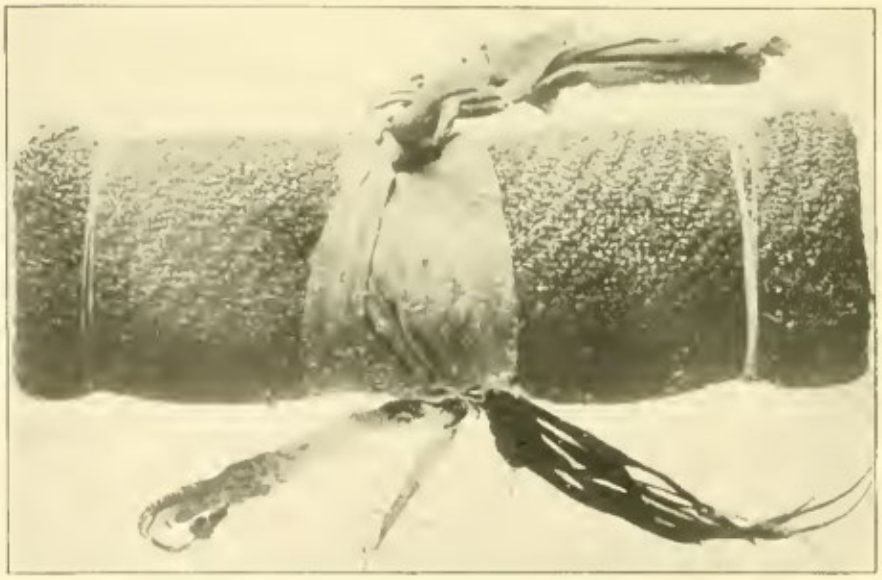
This is the case which forms the shrine for the sacred articles. The white part forming the pocket with dark and red lines running across its width represents the days and nights. The part covered with geometrical designs and which forms the flap symbolizes the sky with its clouds, with its starry figures, such as the Great Bear, Orion, Pleiades, the Galaxy, etc. One end of the pocket has six fastenings and the other seven, each representing one of the two great tribal divisions. The case is made of a slender cylindrical rush (*Eleocharis interstincta*).

Figure 20: Portable Shrine, Inner Case, The Osage Tribe, Rite of the Chiefs; Sayings of the Ancient Men, Francis La Flesche, 1921, Plate 5, p73.

As La Flesche indicates, the contents of the tattoo bundle carry particular meanings with the pelican symbolizing old age according to the chief's vision; the inclusion of metal in the bundle indicates a shift in tattooing materials away from bone and toward the influence of European resources; and the cormorant skin which was also considered sacred and representing the old method of tattooing (La Flesche, 1921). This description demonstrates the influence and importance of the environment, visions, tools, and innovation as the Osage leave behind the old tools for a newer, stronger substance like metal. The layers upon layers of animal and bird skins indicate a care for the tools and sacred relationships with the non-human world. Various feathers and rattles, a large brass ring, and the reconsecration of the bundle at "each initiation or transfer" symbolize the significance of this bundle and the process of tattooing.

a. PORTABLE SHRINE, OUTER CASE

The outer case of the portable shrine of the tattooing rite. The case is made of buffalo hair. Permission for the use of the buffalo hair must be ceremonially obtained from the Tho'-xe gens.



b. COMPLETE PORTABLE SHRINE

The eagle's leg attached to the hanging strap of the portable shrine is a symbol commemorative of the "finding of the foe" and belongs to the Hi'-ca-da (Leg Stretched) subgens of the Hon'-ga A-hin-ton gens of the Hon'-ga great division.

Figure 21: Portable Shrine, Outer Case (top), Complete Portable Shrine (bottom), The Osage Tribe, Rite of the Chiefs; Sayings of the Ancient Men, Francis La Flesche, 1921, Plate 4, p64.

6.3.2. Four Sky Thunder Bundle: A Plains Cree Tattoo Bundle

As a Michif and Nehiyaw person, with Nakoda and Saulteaux ancestry as well, traditional tattooing is a part of who I am as a Plains Indigenous person and I awaken this practice as a form of healing and connection for my communities. Sadly, as indicated, our knowledge around this practice needs nurturing, and looking at a variety of archival documentation is necessary to gather as many details as we can.

One of the best sources that I have encountered on Plains Cree tattoo practices and bundles is Light's book Tattooing Practices of the Cree Indians (1972). In it he describes what is inside the Four Sky Thunder bundle, a Plains Cree tattoo bundle first held by "a nomadic warrior named Kahneeokeesikopanis or Four Sky Thunder. He was said to have stayed with Cree, Saulteaux, and Assiniboine peoples in various places on the Northwestern Plains and served as a Minor Chief with Big Bear (Light, 1972, p. 17). The bundle was then carried by a medicine man and warrior, Muskwa or Bear, of the Battle River Cree. The bundle was eventually carried by its last Indigenous holder Solomon Seepekwaskun or Solomon Bluehorn of Poundmaker reserve (Light, 1972, p. 18). The bundle contents are described by Light:

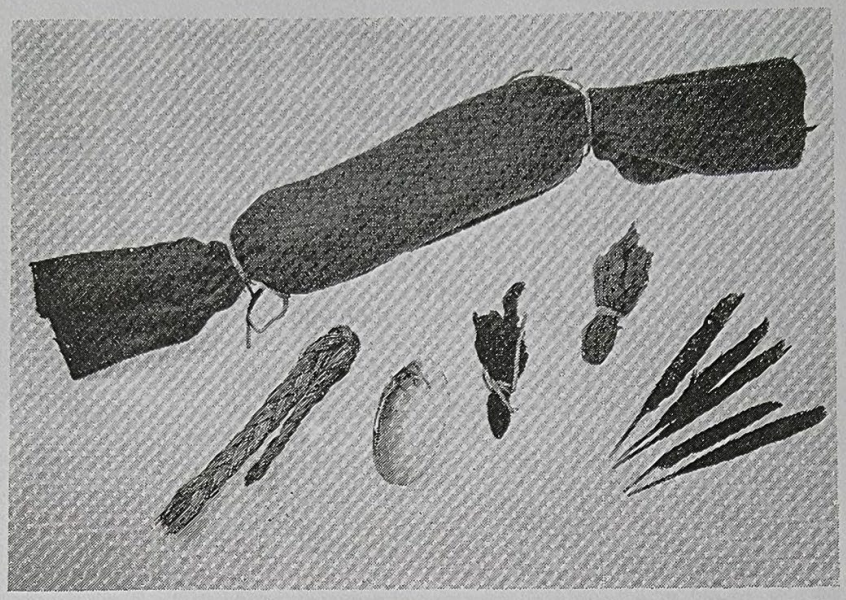
> "As in the case of other religious bundles, the tattooing bundle hung outside on a tripod during the day. At sunset or an approaching storm, it was taken into the tipi or dwelling. It was accorded all the respect of other such sacred belongings.
>
> Like other bundles, it was wrapped in stroud cloth, which the Cree referred to as munto-ee-gun (sacred cloth), the two popular colors being mee-kway-ah-gun (red cloth) and kus-kee-tay-wee-gun (black cloth) or navy blue. Whenever the bundle was opened or actually used, a cloth offering was added to the outer wrappings. Tobacco was left inside the bundle for the use of spirits. Sweet grass was always burned to enable the prayers and songs to be carried aloft to where the spirit would be watching. Over a number of years, when some of the wrappings became tattered, they were "put away" in the bush with tobacco, as an offering to the spirit giver.
>
> Religious items such as this bundle were all referred to by the general Cree term. wus-kwe-pah-toe-gun, or "kept in a clean place".
>
> The bundle, which is in the author's possession, is wrapped in red stroud cloth and measures approximately 24 inches in length and 4 inches in diameter when tied up. When unfolded, the stroud covering measures 24 by 32 inches in size. Inside the outer wrapping are the following items:
>
> (a) A piece of braided sweet grass thirteen inches long which was burned as incense whenever the bundle was opened in order to carry the prayers to the spirits.
> (b) One mussel shell used as a dish in which to mix the charcoal and water paste.
> (c) A cloth ray tied with a thong and containing powdered charcoal of red willow.
> (d) A black cloth rag tied and containing same as above.

(e) A willow stick seven inches long and 3/8 inch diameter, shaved to a flattened surface on the lower end. Most of the stick is covered with split owl and down feathers tied with sinew. Five brass hawk bells are attached to the upper end Bluehorn has stated that this instrument was used to outline the proposed design with the charcoal paste. After the skin was punctured, the flat surface was used to force the coloring agent into the holes made by the needles
(f) The tattooing instrument, consisting of a willow 8 3/8 inches long, slightly elliptical, with the widest section measuring 7/16 of an inch. The top end is covered with split owl feathers and down attached with sinew. Beneath the feathers are two large hollow bird quills with pellets inside which rattle when the instrument is used. Two large and two ordinary brass hawk bells are attached just below the feathers. The base is lead wrapped with eight steel needles projecting half an inch from the wooden stick end. The needles are imbedded in the stick and further reinforced with sinew binding which also secures the lead to the stick.
g) A smaller red stroud bundle tied and wrapped in a manner similar to the whole bundle. The red stroud measures 24 by 15 inches and, when rolled, it is tied near each end with leather thongs.

This inner bundle containes [sic] two items, the first of which is a face mask 17 inches wide and 8 ½ inches high. It is made of tanned buffalo hide and has two holes for the eyes and a large mouth aperture. Each opening is ringed with red ochre and there are two additional smudges near the horns. "This mask represents the face of the Buffalo that Walks like a Man", stated Bluehorn. Two leather laces are attached to each side to tie the mask to the head of the bundle owner when the actual tattooing takes place.

The reverse of the mask has many dark blotches of dried blood. After puncturing the skin, the wearer removes the mask and blots the flowing blood; this adds power to the mask.

The other item is a neck pouch made of two complete summer weasel skins, with a beaded pouch sewn between. The beaded design is a white buffalo head on a blue background, which indicates that this was a gift from the buffalo. The bottom of the pouch has long fringes with two brass French beads attached to each fringe. Inside the pouch are five black feathers approximately six inches long which were worn in the hair of the tattooer when using the bundle" (Light, 1972, p. 15-17).

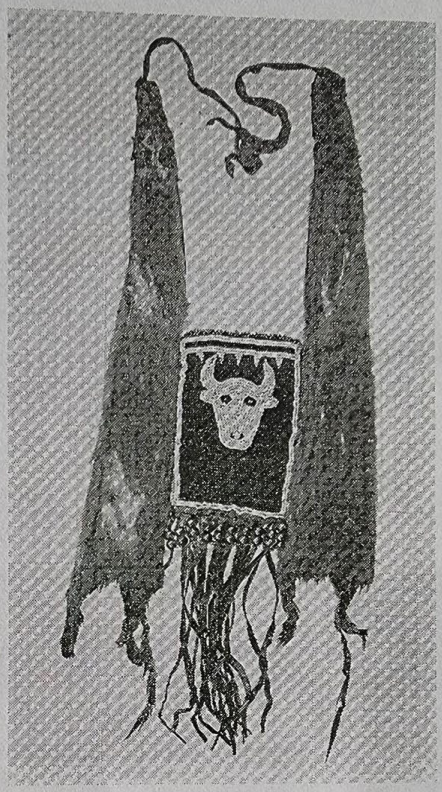


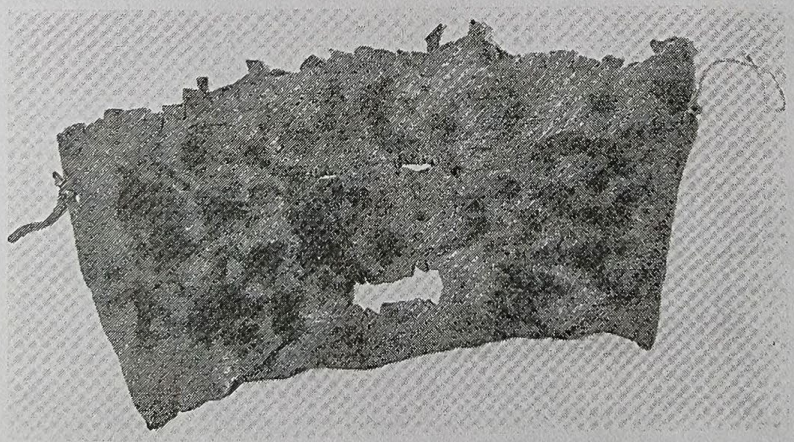
Contents of a Cree tattooing bundle. At top is the inner bundle containing face mask and weasel skin pouch. Below it, left to right, are braided sweetgrass, mussel shell dish, bags of powdered charcoal, and feathers worn by the ceremonialist.

Two important instruments in the tattooing bundle are the decorated stick, above, which was used to outline the proposed design with charcoal paste and to force the color into the holes made by the tattooing needles. The other instrument, below, contains eight steel needles which were used for the tattooing process.

Figure 22: Contents of the Four Sky Thunder Bundle as shown in Tattooing Practices of the Cree Indians, D.W. Light, 1972, p14.

This neck pouch from the tattooing bundle is made of two summer weasel skins and a bag bearing a white buffalo head on a blue background. It contains the black feathers worn by the ceremonialist.





Inside of buffalo hide mask, showing blotches of dried blood. This was worn by the tattooer during the ritual.

Figure 23: Contents of the Four Sky Thunder Bundle as shown in Tattooing Practices of the Cree Indians, D.W. Light, 1972, p15.

As with the Osage tattoo bundle description provided by La Flesche, Light indicates the deep relationship to the land experienced by Cree people; the care that the practitioner takes in caring for the bundle and its contents; the importance of plants as medicines and access to the spirit world; the integration of animals and birds as integral to this ritual; the invocation of spirit with the 'Buffalo that Walks like a Man' mask worn by the bundle holder; and utilizing sound through song, rattles, and bells to carry the prayers to the spirit world. I can identify connections with this tattoo ceremony description and that of our other ceremonies like sweat lodge, Sundance, and traditional naming. These details are essential for us as Plains Indigenous peoples who are working to bring this cultural practice back.

6.3.4. Gathering My Tattoo Bundle

When I consider my bundle in the context of my tattoo practice, I am reminded of the words of encouragement of Elders and other community members who have shared teachings and materials for my bundle, from tangible things like medicines, animal-kin parts, and traditional materials to the intangible like humility, reciprocity, patience, confidence, surrender, and service. When I share my gifts, I am gifted in return.

I bring into my bundle all that I arrived with at the moment I started tattooing. As Elder Simmonds said, we are the first item in our bundle, and our being just as it is, is the seed (personal communication, 2018). With that seed comes my methodologies from my Michif and Nehiyaw communities (see Chapter 5) as well as Kanien'kehá:ka teachings from my Elder Kawennotas Sedalia Fazio who has guided me and the entire Indigenous community of Tio'Tia:ke/Montreal.

Learning from my first mentor Milo Lefort and eventually Kaszas, I added the knowledge of health and safety to my bundle to keep myself and my community safe and also added consent, inclusion, and care (see Chapter 8) that enables collaborators to enter the tattoo space with the appropriate information, awareness, and comfort.

Medicines are included in my tattoo bundle according to the protocols and ceremonies of my communities. These include sage to burn for smudging: a process of cleansing the spirit. I smudge before, during, and after the tattoo process and offer the same to collaborators. At some gatherings there will be helpers who walk around with a burning smudge to calm those being tattooed, give strength to those tattooing, and purify the air of the surroundings. Tobacco is in my bundle to burn during prayer and to open up the portal through which we send and receive vibrations on various frequencies (see Definitions, p. 9), and to ensure the words and intentions of the tattoo reach the Creator and ancestors. Other medicines include cedar and sweetgrass, also burned for cleansing and protection.

Animal parts included in my bundle vary from time to time depending on what medicinal vibration is needed in any given moment, however there are some that stay with me always such as buffalo bone and hair as the buffalo is a close relation of the Michif and Nehiyaw peoples (see Chapter 5, section 5.2) and one of my helpers. Porcupine quills and claw are also in my bundle, which is to honor the porcupine whose quills we used ancestrally for tattooing (Deter-Wolf & Diaz-Granados, 2014; Light, 1972) and after whom I received my spirit name: kakwa okwemesiw (porcupine's twin). I pray to the porcupine spirit in preparation for tattooing as a guide throughout the process, from preparation to aftercare. I also carry a wasp body and nest as the wasp is one of my helpers and after whom I received a spirit name: one who works with bees and wasps. The wasp is also a matriarch and community gatherer, and she begins every nest on her own. She lays some eggs and a few helpers are born who support her nest-building efforts. She lays eggs as she goes along, building the entire community. The nest, as told to me by Elder Joseph Naytowhow, can be burned for energy. This kind of medicine is important for traditional tattoo work as it is very demanding physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. I also carry owl feathers as I am owl clan. Owl feathers were used on tools to trace designs on the body before tattooing (Light, 1972, p. 16). The owl is also a protector, a night hawk, and a snake eater, so I carry this as protection energy and also as a calling for me to protect and care for others. My bundle holds various medicine pouches received from collaborators with medicines inside each and I wear these at different times depending on what medicine is needed and to honor those relations. Lastly, I mention my grandmother's beaded medallion that she gave to my father and my father gifted to me. The design on it is an eight-pointed star, which connects me directly to sky world and my ancestors through the portal, Pakone Kisik (see Chapter 8.7, section 8.7.1) or Pleiades, the hole in the sky (Buck, 2021).

Each practitioner carries their own bundle with their own medicines, teachings, and experiences that reflects their spirit and gifts. Through these we are able to support our communities and offer this ancestral medicine.

6.4. Markings to Honor Gender and Sexuality

6.4.1. Traditional Tattoo as Affirmation of Indigenous Gender and Sexuality

Traditional tattoo is a method of healing and connection, grounding individuals in their culture, a way to interpret one's place in the world, and communicate achievements, motivations, hopes, and dreams. This medicine is transmitted to our ancestors, through the portal and into the spirit realm, affirming our love and respect for them, and showing them we continue to live strong in our ways. This affirming creative spiritual process is important for all Indigenous people including 2SLGBTQIA+ and Indigenous women who experience high degrees of violence (Reclaiming Power and Place, 2019). As a Two-Spirit person and single mother to an 11-year-old girl, I see traditional tattoos as a way to honor, strengthen, and grow the constellations of Indigenous genders and sexualities that exist within our communities.

I see and hear from many queer Indigenous youth (gender queer, sexually queer, or both) who are at times confused, scared, and depressed, who find it difficult to see themselves in this society, and cultivate success. Many urban Indigenous youth are disconnected from their communities due to colonialism and experiences such as displacement, family separation through the child welfare system, and colonial constructions of identity (Fast et al., 2021). Youth look to those of us with more experience to support them with stories of how to overcome and how to be happy. They need representation and connection. They need to see and hear from Indigenous 2SLGBTQIA+ and women with powerful messages of hope and happiness.

Indigenous 2SLGBTQ+ and Indigenous women discuss their experiences of gender and sexuality with me and how they see traditional tattooing as one way of supporting and affirming them in their journeys. They speak about navigating the colonial system as well as the social, economic, and political realities of their communities as 2SLGBTQ+ and women. Many have told me of their challenges, barriers, and successes and that they have come to understand traditional tattooing as a powerful ancestral medicine that provides them with healing and connection.

6.4.2. Finding Ourselves in the Colonial Archive

Looking to the colonial archive, to some of the documentation written by explorers, missionaries, anthropologists, it is no surprise that Indigenous women and 2SLGBTQIA+ are not included, represented or acknowledged in any significant way. Indigenous people in general are studied, judged and denounced for ways of life that have existed for millennia. Settlers came here with a mission to conquer, capitalize, indoctrinate, prosper, and spread their religious, social, ideological, and economic values as far and wide as possible (Daschuk, 2019). Part of that project is to disappear that which is other than the dominant culture and so it makes sense that power of Indigenous women and 2SLGBTQIA+ in our communities would be downplayed or erased altogether (Simpson, L., 2017).

Pyle has done valuable work in this area, identifying, and telling the stories of gender fluid ancestors. Pyle has articulated a new relational ethic–*trans temporal kinship–that illustrates how non-binary Indigenous people can claim those in the past as family, validating who we are and were (Pyle, 2018). In their research, Pyle

> "began to search for linguistic records of language for Two-Spirit people. As a Two-Spirit and transgender person, this was not just an idle curiosity of mine but a vital necessity for my continued participation in Indigenous cultural spheres: What do I call myself in my languages when speaking to others? What history can I draw on to help my community members, especially elders who speak our languages, understand who I am? These questions face nearly every Two-Spirit person who is involved with linguistic and cultural revitalization, a movement that is sweeping Indigenous communities today" (Pyle, 2018, p. 575).

Pyle sees looking to our languages as essential to finding the truth about who we are and how best to communicate our true selves. We can do the same with the language of traditional tattoo: Our markings communicate who we are and we can tattoo ancestral designs and patterns as well as create new designs inspired by the past that when adopted by many, become a powerful indicator of our collective identity and unwavering strength.

Searching for evidence that we as Two-Spirit, Trans and non-binary people existed before contact and finding sparse information can have traumatic effects. Personally, I have found the search for evidence of gender and sexual variance in our communities to be mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and physically draining because when I do not find myself represented in the archive, I wonder if I was ever there at all. Written by people whose intentions are to erase me, I know I need to process their work at arms length and trust in my process, my helpers, guides, mentors, Elders, friends, and family.

I have heard these same sentiments echoed by other Indigenous gender diverse people. When they fail to find themselves reflected in historical texts, it sustains the narrative that if we are not there, we did not exist and we are somehow "wrong". 2S folks, Indigenous Trans and non-binary folks are told stories by Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and other community members of how valued our perspectives were within our traditional societies, as visionaries, as healers, and bridges between genders and Nations, with broad ranging perspectives. We can choose to trust in these affirmations, look to all the opportunities before us and celebrate our beings as we exist now.

Kaszas reminds me that settler explorers and anthropologists who studied us did not understand our material and visual culture, that our designs, patterns and symbology are embedded in everything we create and so traditional tattoo designs are all over everything we imagine and manifest (personal communication, 2023): baskets and vessels, shoes and clothing, knife sheaths and gun cases, pipe bags and medicine bags, moss bags and cradle boards, jewelry and headstalls, drums and rattles… the list goes on and on.

As a professionally trained Two-Spirit cultural tattoo practitioner, my work has had a profound impact on the community with Indigenous 2SLGBTQIA+ seeking me out in order to receive safe tattoo medicine. Traditional tattooing as it relates to gender is a relatively unexplored yet critical area of inquiry. Many Indigenous frontline workers, Elders, Knowledge Holders, land and water protectors, and activists that I know are gender non-conforming. I seek to offer them a safe space with meaningful designs that represent us and our experiences.

6.4.3. Creating Contemporary Designs for Gender and Sexually Diverse Beings

Beyond searching for ourselves in the colonial archives, gender and sexually diverse Indigenous people can imagine and create new ways of being in this world merged with our foundational cultural teachings, ceremonies, and practices.

Some of the questions I ask myself as a traditional tattoo practitioner in this contemporary context are: Who has access to traditional tattoos? In terms of honor markings and battle markings, what does it mean to be a warrior in these times? What constitutes a "battlefield"? Where are the 2S, Trans, and non-binary tattoos representative of the warriors we are today? We are told stories of how valued our 2S perspectives were within some of our ancestral societies, so what markings are appropriate for these roles? What can I offer in terms of a new language and symbology for the Indigenous queer community and Indigenous women, when many of us are warriors fighting for Indigenous rights and justice on the streets of these cities?

In the often cited text by David Mandelbaum The Plains Cree, for example, Plains tattoos are recorded as gendered male/female (Mandelbaum, 1978) lacking representation of our non-binary relations. In this light, one can begin a dialogue around this, reflecting on combining gendered tattoos on non-binary bodies as a form of rebellion against colonial gendered constructs and heteronormativity imposed on Indigenous nations as a form of control. I imagine a new way of seeing traditional tattoos that is beyond a gender binary, and re-evaluate and explore what traditional tattoos are, who carries them, and how we can move into an Indigenous future that is inclusive and healing.

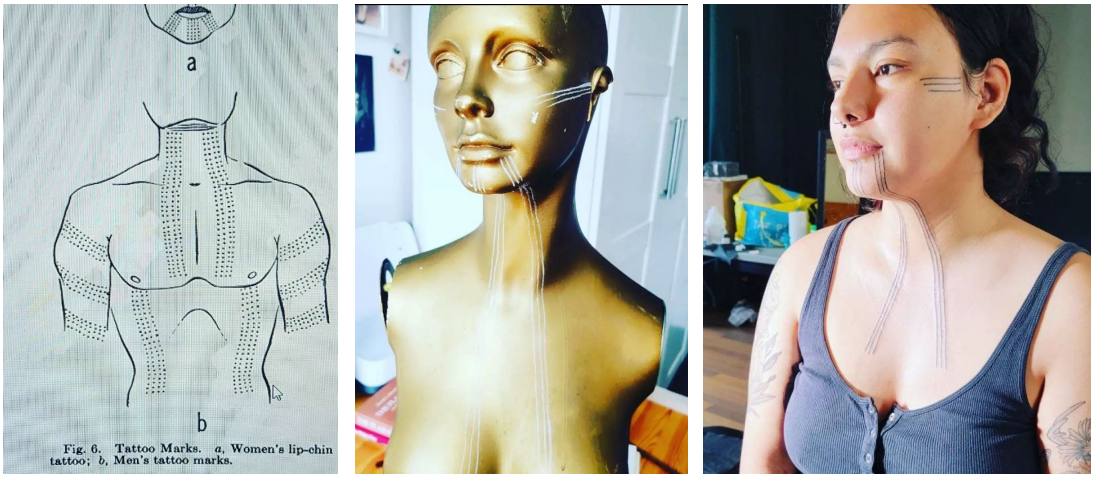


Figure 24: Tattoo illustrations, Alanson Skinner in David Mandelbaum, 1940, p86; Two-Spirit tattoo design on mannequin, Mel Lefebvre, 2021; Natanis, 2S youth, tattoos Mel Lefebvre, 2022.

Moving further with this idea around 2SLGBTQIA+ tattoos, body sovereignty, embodying our cultures, and new non-binary symbols, I explore the merging of traditional Plains men's and women's tattoos, creating non-binary designs on selfies taken by collaborators. Who these community members are and the work they do to support community is integral to the designs they wear.

6.4.3.1. Elder blu waters, Istchii Nikamoon: Earth Song

Wolf clan. Cree, Red River Métis, and Mi'kmaw, blu is actively leading the 2S community through healing and reconnection work. They traveled with the MMIWG2ST national inquiry providing support and guidance. They have created Camp SIS, a bush camp outside Peterborough, Ontario for 2S people to gather and reconnect to the land. Here I have incorporated what is recorded in settler archives as traditional Plains women's facial tattoos that can be an indication of coming of age and ornamentation, and combined that with traditional men's tattoos where body markings like this were for battles and successful hunts. By combining these gendered symbols onto a non-binary being we welcome in old and new frequencies, and indications of life beyond a colonial idea of gender. The circles on the shoulders for protection, balance, and the open portal to ancestral wisdom. The arm markings as earthlines (Lefebvre & Kaszas, 2021-2024; Kaszas, 2018) grounding them to all that is (Kaszas, 2018) and perhaps representing all the people blu has supported and received support from on their journey.

Figure 25: Elder blu waters, Istchii Nikamoon: Earth Song, 2S tattoo designs, Mel Lefebvre, 2020.

6.3.4.2. Dr. Elizabeth Fast

Queer Red River Métis and Mennonite, Dr. Elizabeth Fast is a former Assistant Professor at Concordia University, Elizabeth has worked with the Native Women's Shelter of Montreal as a board member and as a project lead pushing for reform of Quebec's child welfare system. She was also the Canada Research Chair on evaluating public policy for vulnerable youth. In settler archives, pre-contact body markings were for men and indicated battles fought and won. In this image it would be no different although the battle is for the lives of Indigenous families within the contemporary colonial child welfare system with honor markings on the face and temples. Overall, this is a representation of her service to community.

Figure 26: Dr. Elizabeth Fast, 2S tattoo designs, Mel Lefebvre, 2020.

6.3.4.3. Anna

2S Cree community grassroots worker who mobilizes resources and support for Black and Indigenous sex workers, Anna is the founder of The Cedar Tea Project as well as the co-founder of the Black and Indigenous Harm Reduction Alliance. A constant advocate for those whose voices often go unheard, I envisioned Anna with warrior arrows/triangles stretching up and out from the breast, which signifies a mothering, protective energy, radiating out from the heart and into the community. The arrows/triangles are non-binary symbols as well as strength, purpose, and motivation. Under the sternum is the Plains otter, a strong mother/parent energy. On the left arm are the Cree syllabics for strawberry, the ultimate heart medicine.

Figure 27: Anna, 2S tattoo designs, Mel Lefebvre, 2020.

6.3.4.4. Nakuset

An urban Cree warrior, Nakuset has been the executive director of the Native Women's Shelter of Montreal for more than 20 years. The face of Indigenous rights in Montreal, Nakuset is not 2S, but is an example for us all, no matter our gender. Honor markings on the face with dotted lines on the chin and traveling down the neck to the chest, each dot indicating all the 2S, women, and children she has tirelessly fought for over her many years of service. Battle markings for this 60s Scoop2 survivor and warrior who has represented Indigenous peoples in the courts, and in marches and rallies on the streets of Montreal.

Figure 28: Photo credit Marie-Claude Fournier, background and tattoo design, Mel Lefebvre, 2020.

[2] "The term *Sixties Scoop* was coined by Patrick Johnston, author of the 1983 report *Native Children and the Child Welfare System*. It refers to the mass removal of Aboriginal children from their families into the child welfare system, in most cases without the consent of their families or bands." https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/sixties_scoop/

6.5. Traditional Body Modification and Tools

Tattooing, scarification, piercings, and face painting are all part of recorded Plains Indigenous adornment (Light, 1972; Krutak, 2014; Thwaites, 1980; Skinner, 1911; Mandelbaum, 1979; Gillreath-Brown et al., 2019). The ways Plains Indigenous peoples adorned their bodies and the tools used have always been dictated by our environment, from bones, quills, stone, and thorns, to everyday pins and needles, to charcoal, red willow, ochre, and eyeliner. Whether before contact or after, we listened to what our bodies and spirits needed in ceremony, to overcome illness, and celebrate milestones (Kaszas, 2018; Krutak, 2014; Light, 1972; La Flesche, 1921; Johnston, 2018) and innovated with what we had around us on the land (Kaszas, 2018; Krutak, 2014; Light, 1972; La Flesche, 1921; Robitaille, 2007).

6.5.1. Body Modification and Relationships to Land and Between Nations

In D.W. Light's work Tattooing Practices of the Cree Indians, he highlights the integrated lives of the Plains nations (Assiniboine, Cree, Ojibway) and the cultural practices we shared, one of them being tattoo (Light, 1972). Similarly, David G. Mandelbaum (1979) in The Plains Cree, states that the tattooing practices were shared with "Assiniboin, Blackfoot, Dakota, Crow, Hidatsa and Mandan. In the southern part of the area, the Oto, Osage, Ponca, Omaha and Quapaw" with similarities in designs as well, with Plains Cree women wearing lip and chin tattoos as did the Eastern Cree and those in the "Labrador and Eskimo areas" (Mandelbaum, 1979, p. 274).

Light references other explorers and fur traders like Alexander Henry (1760), Dr. John Richardson and John Franklin (1821), Edwin Thompson Denig (1930) who wrote about the "Sioux, Arikara, Ojibway, Saulteaux, Assiniboine, Cree and Crow" and anthropologist Alanson Skinner, touted by Light as one of the first to write about Cree and Saulteaux tattooing. Like David G. Mandelbaum (1979), they collectively speak to observing puncturing, pricking and sewing the skin with awls, single needles as well as varying numbers of grouped needles set in a frame or tied together, thread and cord dipped in ink and pulled through the skin or ink rubbed into the opening. Ink was made with charcoal, burnt bark, or wood. For Eastern Cree who practiced tattooing and scarification, Skinner writes:

> "Bilaterally symmetrical cross tattooed on each cheek, as a charm against toothache and headache…[and] on the legs and wrists to ward off rheumatism....Tattooing was performed by charring birchbark or wood and rubbing it on a thread which is fastened to a needle and the design sewed under the skin, the pigment making it permanent" (Skinner, 1911, p. 124)

In the late 1700s, Scottish explorer and fur trader Alexander Mackenzie traveled and documented the Canadian North locating the Cree people on their original territories:

> "...on the Atlantic…and continues along the coast of Labrador, and the gulf and banks of St. Laurence to Montreal. The line then follows the Utawas river to its source; and continues from thence nearly West along the highlands which divides the waters that fall into Lake Superior and Hudson's Bay. It then proceeds till it strikes the middle part of the river Winipic, following that water to the Lake Winipic, to the discharge of the Saskatchiwiue into it; from thence it accompanies the latter to Fort George, when the line, striking by the head of the Beaver river to the Elk river, runs along its banks to its discharge in the Lake of the Hills ; from which it may be carried back East, to the Isle a la Crosse, and so on to Churchill by the Missinipi. The whole of the tract between this line and Hudson's Bay and Straits (except that of the Esquimaux in the latter), may be said to be exclusively the country of the Knisteneaux" (Mackenzie, 1902, p. exl-exli).

Locating us on our territories and seeing the extent to which we occupied these lands is critical in understanding the relations we had with other Nations and our shared cultural practices. Mandelbaum notes that the tattoo designs of the Eastern Cree correspond to the Plains Cree as well as "throughout the Labrador and Eskimo areas" (Mandelbaum, 1972, p274). Hand poke and skin stitch methods of tattooing, he states, were common for Cree, Ojibway, Chipewyan, Wabanaki, and New England peoples as evidenced in the writings of Danish anthropologist Kaj Birket-Smith (Mandelbaum, 1972, p. 274).

Mackenzie notes that some of the Cree women were tattooed with "three perpendicular lines, which are sometimes double: one from the centre of the chin to that of the under lip, and one parallel on either side to the corner of the mouth" (Mackenzie, 1902, p. exliv). And similarly, naval officer and Arctic explorer Sir John Franklin wrote:

> "Tattooing is almost universal with the Crees. The women are in general content with having one or two lines drawn from the corners of the mouth towards the angles of the lower jaw; but some of the men have their bodies covered with a great variety of lines and figures" (Franklin, 1823, p. 71).

Some of the earliest writings by the Jesuit missionaries in the 1600s speak to our body adornment and the ways in which we celebrate our culture and relationship to the land:

> "many impress upon the skin fixed and permanent representations of birds or animals, such as a snake, an eagle, or a toad, in the following manner: With awls, spear-points, or thorns they so puncture the neck, breast or cheeks as to trace rude outlines of those objects; next, they insert into the pierced and bleeding skin a black powder made from pulverized charcoal, which unites with the blood and so fixes upon the living flesh the pictures which have been drawn that no length of time can efface them…The men as well as the women pierce the lobes of their ears, and place in them earrings made of glass or shells. The larger the hole, the more beautiful they consider it" (Thwaites, 1980, p. 279-281).

Scarification and piercing were also part of Plains body modification processes. Skinner states that scarification

"was used as a sign of personal valor. The scars were raised welts of a lighter color than the natural skin…six straight scars: a vertical mark in the middle of the forehead on a line with the nose and between the eyes, a second vertical scar from the lower lip to the point of the chin on a line with the fii'st scar, and two parallel horizontal scars on each upper cheek below the animals pulled through the holes" (Skinner, 1911, p. 23).

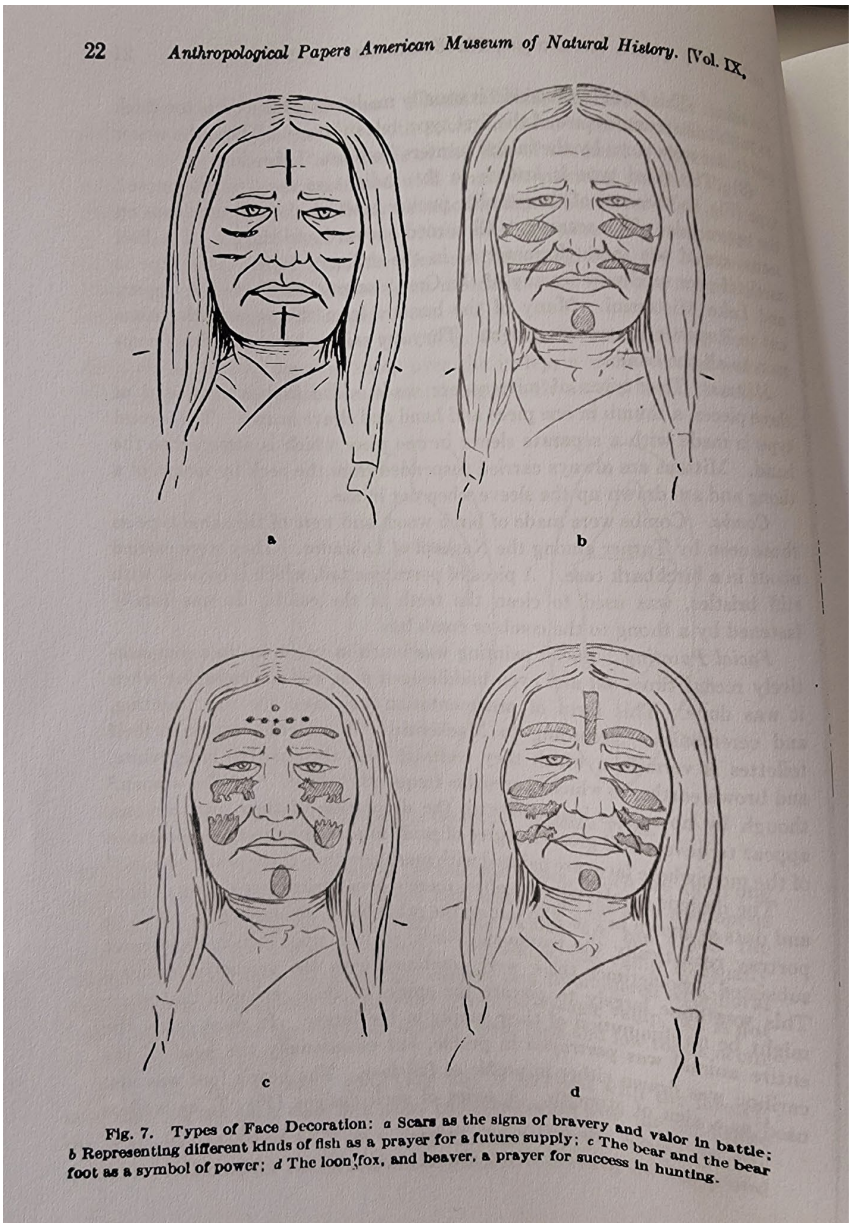


Figure 29: Skinner, A. (1911). Notes on the Eastern Cree and Northern Saulteaux. Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History, Vol. IX(1). p22.

Piercing of the ears, nose, and lips was practiced by Plains peoples. After openings in the skin were made by poking with an awl or needle or cutting into the skin using sharp rocks and left to heal, we would insert various organic materials from our territories. Mandelbaum cites Alexander Henry who witnessed Cree using the bones of fish and land animals as well as shells (Mandelbaum, 1979, p. 273) and Skinner writes: "earrings were worn, the ears were…slit…by holding the ear against a block of wood and cutting along the cartilaginous outer rim for an inch or more with a piece of sharp flint. When the openings were healed, pieces of marten skin were suspended through them" (Skinner, 1911, p. 125).

Prehistoric Archaeologist Aaron Deter-Wolf and his colleagues present the oldest tattoo tool from western North America and pre-dating contact by 1400 years in their article Redefining the age of tattooing in western North America: A 2000-year-old artifact from Utah (2019). The tool was constructed out of "a sumac stem, prickly pear cactus spines, and yucca leaf strips," (p. 19) all natural elements found in the area. The article posits that during the period of Neolithic Demographic Transition (79–130 CE), which saw the rise of agriculture and a change in Indigenous lifeways of the Southwestern U.S., tattooing indicates a method of relationship building between and within communities (Gillreath-Brown et al., 2019). This is the oldest tattoo tool yet to be discovered in North America (Gillreath-Brown et al., 2019).

Figure 30: "Section of (D) The Turkey Pen tattoo implement consists of a wooden skunkbush sumac (Rhus trilobata) stem, yucca (Yucca spp.) split leaf wrapping, and two prickly pear cacti (cf. Opuntia spp.) spines" (Gillreath-Brown et al., 2019).

Figure 31: Cactus spines of the Turkey Pen tattooing artifact. (Gillreath-Brown et al., 2019). "Cactus spines of the Turkey Pen tattooing artifact. (A) An image of the artifact cactus spines showing staining on the tips taken with a stereomicroscope at 15.625× magnification. The top spine shows post-break rounding. The bottom spine exhibits rounding. Both spines indicate use-wear" (Gillreath-Brown et al., 2019).

Understanding the nature of the materials (strength, construction, cellular makeup, ability to puncture the skin) and how the tool was constructed: The cactus spines (prickly pear or hedgehog cactus) were pushed into the interior pith of the sumac wood or what looks like a branch and are stained in black tattoo ink (Gillreath-Brown et al., 2019) can support us in our efforts to recreate these tools, learn from the innovation, and bring this knowledge forward to future generations. The language on our bodies becomes evidence of the ways in which Indigenous Nations shared knowledge and practices, and how the land gave us what we needed to celebrate our cultures.

6.5.2. Tool Making

Looking to ancestral methods of body modification and the ways in which Nations converged and shared cultural practices across the Plains provides an example of how we can be in good relation today, with each other and with the materials we source for this work. During my mentorship with Kaszas, whose practice and scholarship is focused on Nlaka'pamux ways of being, we allowed ourselves to dream and share our perspectives, which manifested in creating bone needles for skin stitching and hand poking tattoo methods. Kaszas taught me how to saw, sand, polish, and sterilize bone needles for skin stitching, and I experimented with creating hand poke bone tools using similar methods (Lefebvre & Kaszas, 2021-2024). We used the bones we had on hand, which were bison, moose, and nondescript “bovine” bone ordered online. Kaszas mailed me a set of tools: jeweler’s saw, blades, diamond bits, and sandpaper. As bones are porous, the possibility of contamination from one client to the next is a possibility and so a new tool must be created per person.

Figure 32: Buffalo leg bone before being broken to make traditional skin stitch and hand poke tools, Mel Lefebvre and Dion Kaszas, 2022.

Figure 33: Hand saw, bovine bone pieces to make traditional tattoo tools, Mel Lefebvre and Dion Kaszas, 2021.

Figure 34: Diamond drill bit, bovine bone piece to make traditional tattoo tools, Mel Lefebvre and Dion Kaszas, 2021.

Figure 35: Bovine bone made into traditional hand poke tattoo tool, Mel Lefebvre and Dion Kaszas, 2022.

Figure 36: Bovine bone made into traditional skin stitch tattoo needles, Mel Lefebvre and Dion Kaszas, 2022.

Once the tools were made, I needed to experiment with them. As can be seen in the image of the cactus spines of the Turkey Pen tattoo tool (see Figures 34 and 35), my hand poke and skin stitch bone tools also dulled after some use. In Figure 41, the top row of four stitches yielded a dulled bone needle and increasing force was required to sew it through the skin on the fourth stitch. For a significant amount of stitches one would require more than one bone needle. The last two lines and the circle are tattooed with the hand poke bone tool. This tool has a single point and so creating clean, tightly connected lines is a challenge. The hand poke bone tool also dulls quickly although was easier to work with as I was not required to pull it through the skin as with the bone skin-stitch needle (Figure 36).

Figure 37: My leg with experimental skin stitch and hand poke tattoos using the traditional bone tools (Figures 39 and 40) made in mentorship with Dion Kaszas, 2022.

I moved on to a more complex design of a flower. The hand poke bone tool went into the skin very easily and as a result, it was somewhat difficult to gauge the depth to which the tip was reaching, causing “blow out” in some areas or blooming of the ink in the fatty tissue under the skin. Again, it was difficult to get tight lines and filling areas completely in a reasonable time frame proved challenging. However, in remembering the ancestral practice and notions of time, patience and commitment, some tattoos took several days to complete and involved fasting, journeying, various feats of strength and will, storytelling, ceremony, and communing with the spirits (Light, 1972 p. 12; Krutak, 2014 p. 152; Skinner, 1911, p. 23)

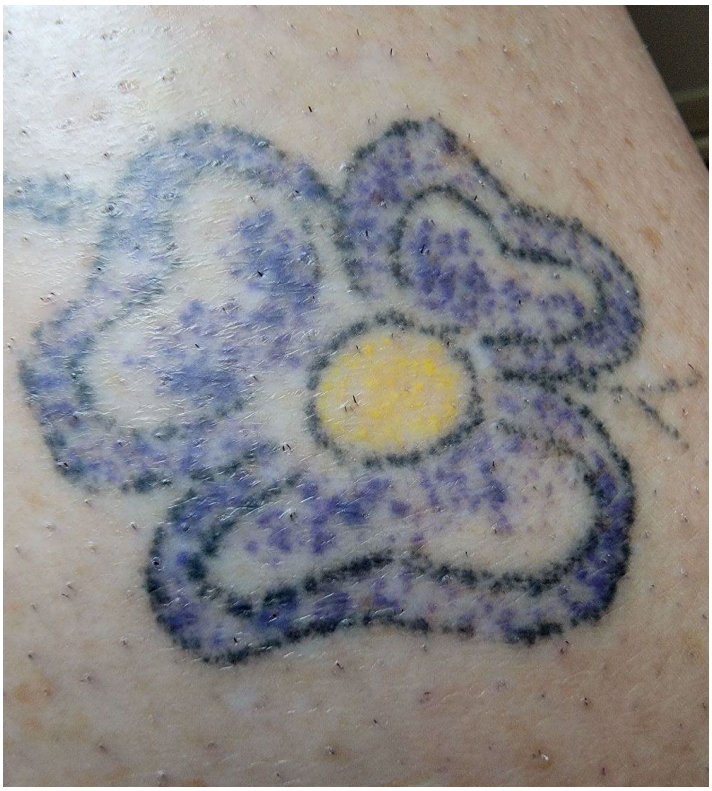


Figure 38: My leg with hand poke tattoo using traditional hand poke bone tool in Figure 40, 2022.

Sterilization of bone needles is a practice Kaszas learned from friend, scholar, and Filipino hand-tap cultural tattoo practitioner, Lane Wilcken. Across Indigenous Nations, sharing protocols and practices enable us to strengthen each other and contribute to the health and safety of each other and our communities (Kaszas, 2021).

I also began to experiment with making a comb hand poke tool similar to those presented in Robitaille, 2017, and described to me by Kaszas during our mentorship. Wide and narrow, these combs are efficient at filling areas and creating lines. While the peoples of the Pacific Islands are known for these tools and for the hand tap method (Kaszas, 2018; Robitaille, 2007), I have yet to see this type of comb tattoo tool in reference to Plains Indigenous tattoo practices and wonder how viable the tool is when used for hand poke.

Figure 39: Beginning to saw the hand poke comb tool, 2022.

Figure 40: Unfinished hand poke come tool, 2022.

While ancestral tool making in contemporary times is important exploration, much needs to be remembered and implemented in this experimentation. The diseases and pathogens of today can create unsafe conditions, even when using sterile, medical-grade, one-use disposable tools. Extra care and awareness is required when using these ancestral methods.

One of the most inspiring stories of Indigenous resilience and tattoo tool making is demonstrated in Martina Michelle Dawley's (Navajo and Hualapai) Indian Boarding School Tattooing Experiences: Resistance, Power, and Control through Personal Narratives (2020) in which she offers the testimonies of female Indian boarding school students from the 1960s and 70s and their experience with tattooing. Late into the night, by candlelight, Indigenous girls trapped in residential schools took control of their bodies and found empowerment in marking themselves with pins, and needles, using eyeliner for ink (Dawley, 2020). This expression of Indigenous resilience and sovereignty was not without its risks as indicated in this testimony from a residential school survivor:

> “She was a [. . .] good friend. Tattooing your hands [was common]. And she done that, she used a common pin or needle . . .and wrote her initials on her hand and then it got blood poisoning from the ink. Like her hand was swelling and swelling. Two or three days later . . . she started getting a fever. So, she showed the nun and they just sent her to bed. And when she must have been in bed about two days . . . she was getting so she wasn’t even herself . . . And she just lay in bed and two days later she died” (Dawley, 2020, p. 281)

The stories Dawley’s research participants so generously share speaks to our innovation and courage as well as the fact that traditional tattoos can be gifted using a variety of methods; using contemporary tools is a valid method of traditional tattooing. When I see youth taking up this practice at gatherings, I am inspired and hopeful, and I think of Dawley’s research and the Indigenous residential school youth who were held in those places of assimilation and death, and denied access to their families and cultural practices (Truth and Reconciliation, 2015). As this new generation of traditional tattoo artists joins the revival, I look forward to the innovation and imaginings they will bring with them.

More experienced practitioners can provide the youth with guidance and information, and encourage them to use all the tools they have available. For example, Kaszas’ catalog of Nlaka'pamux cultural designs based on his archival research has enabled him to dream and realize full-body tattoos that celebrate, communicate, and perpetuate his culture (Kaszas, 2023). He is able to bring these full-body designs to life on more people, offer this medicine and healing in a more timely way at a less expensive cost by using the Western machine method. Both Kaszas and I agree that Indigenous peoples are contemporary and using contemporary tools does not make us less Indigenous, but simply adds to our toolbox (Kaszas, 2018; Lefebvre & Kaszas, 2021-2024).

The journey of exploring ancestral methods of body modification and tool making for traditional tattooing leads to a profound reflection on the intersection of heritage, innovation, and resilience. The act of creating bone needles for skin stitching and hand poking is more than a technical process; it is a reclamation of cultural practices passed down through generations.

6.6. Contemporary Designs and Relationships

A contemporary traditional tattoo design merges the relationships we experienced in the past with present Indigenous realities (Kaszas, 2018; Lefebvre & Kaszas, 2021-2024). Our Indigenous “past” links many things like territories, ceremonies, teachings, relationships with other Nations, governance, daily life, and more. Many of these aspects have survived colonialism and others have not. Any of these elements can inspire tattoo designs and in fact, we can revive and celebrate disappeared elements of our past through this practice.

6.6.1. The Travois / ᐊᑯᑦᐸᐣ / akotâpân

Take for example the travois, a technology used by Plains Indigenous peoples to transport items and people:

Figure 41: "A Cree family and travois ready for a journey.", [ca. 1880s], (CU1124187) by Unknown. Courtesy of Glenbow Library and Archives Collection, Libraries and Cultural Resources Digital Collections, University of Calgary.

The travois was a form of transportation for Plains peoples using crossed poles to essentially drag heavy loads or people who might be compromised in some way. Using this important object as inspiration for a traditional tattoo design, connects past and present, as one can see in my Instagram post from February 22, 2024:

> “the travois // ᐊᑯᑦᐸᐣ // akotâpân was a mode of transporting goods, children, folks with mobility issues, on the plains by Plains Indigenous peoples. this technology can reduce very heavy loads by 75%. the travois was often constructed out of tipi poles. i use this travois design to uplift you, help you to carry those heavy burdens as we often do in service of our communities. i also know that many folks carry the burden of the truth on their shoulders, and sometimes it's dangerous to share that truth. many times folks have trusted me with their stories and i hold those for them until we leave each other, then give those stories over to the Creator, until i meet with that person again. on your legs, arms, back, this medicine will support you. portal medicine and 4 stars keep you connected to ancestors, sky world, grandmother spider who helps us with her webs/life lines, 4 seasons, 4 directions, 4 elements, 4 aspects of the person: physical, mental, emotional, spiritual.
> there is lots in here for you 🌿
>
> designed on bodies Diana the Huntress by Giampietrino (1526)” (Mel Lefebvre, 2024).

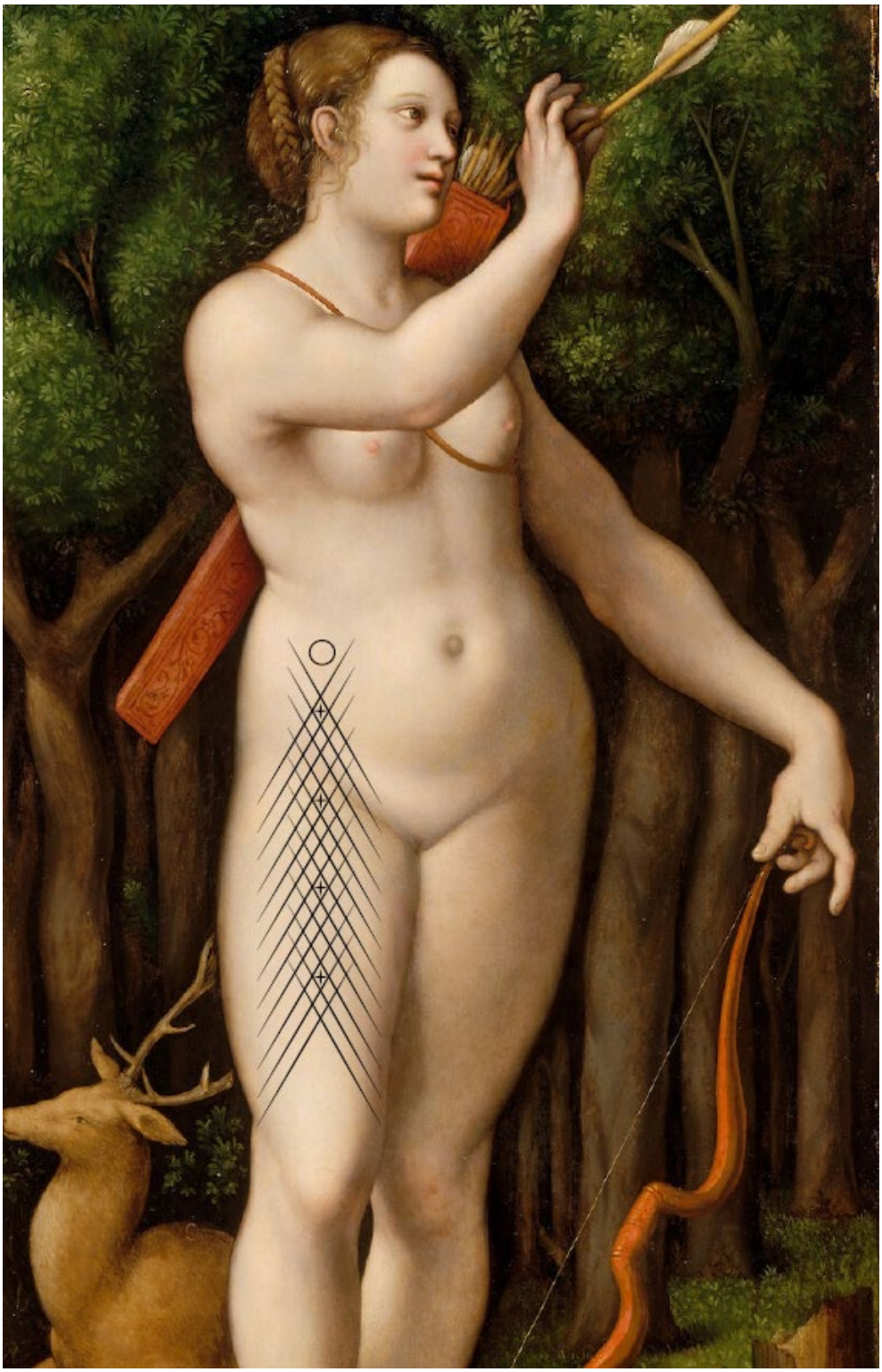


Figure 42: Giampietrino, Diana the Huntress, 1526 with tattoo designs, Mel Lefebvre, 2024.

Figure 43: Travois as tattoo, designed and hand poked tattooed, Mel Lefebvre, Tyendinaga Traditional Tattoo Gathering, 2024.

Being inspired by and connecting to the past, bringing these stories into today, can help us to understand how our ancestors lived, the strength it took them to survive, the skills they had and the distances they traveled, this all gives us strength, and a feeling of belonging to something far deeper than ourselves. Placed on different areas of the body, the travois design can offer strength where needed most. We can bring worlds and temporalities together on one body.

6.5.2. The Scraper / ᐊᑕᐦᐃᑲᐣ / mâtahikan

Everything we created had a use and contained meaning. The scraping tool like the one in Figure 44 was used to process hide and are smooth from many years of use. They have a defining shape, are handed down from one generation of women to the next or are buried with them, and etched along the lengths of the scrapers were sometimes the ages of a woman's children (Reilly, 2015, p. 41). These intricate details enable us to see the symbolic importance of an essential utilitarian tool and translated into design, can signify a woman's strength, persistence, care, and community:

Figure 44: Scraper, North American Plains, V-L-39, Collections of the Canadian Museum of History, visit 2022.

Figure 45: Tattoo design based on the scraper, Mel Lefebvre, 2023.

The scraper tattoo displays the shape of the tool and is the medicine of generations, physical strength, perseverance, skill, relationships to and honoring of animals, and the love that comes from the provider. The design can be tattooed on any part of the body that needs this medicine and the qualities it holds.

6.5.3. Seneca Snake Root / ᓇᒣᐱᐣ / namepin

Beyond Indigenous technological innovations such as tools, tattoo designs can also be inspired by plant medicines from our territories. I often consult books like A Cree Healer and His Medicine Bundle (Young, Rogers & Willier, 2015), Medicines to Help Us by Christi Belcourt (2007), and Herbs of Long Ago by Cree Metis language and cultural worker Dr. Anne Anderson (1982). These sources help me to situate medicines on their territories, see what medicines look like, and provide information on their traditional uses. Once I understand these elements, I can begin to contemplate and explore how the plant properties relate to different aspects of a person; where on the body the designs can be placed to help collaborators celebrate or move through challenges in their lives that have manifested in their bodies; the size and style of the tattoo design in terms of placement on the body and the plant properties; and how this plant medicine can contribute to the well-being of the collaborator as they move forward in their life journey.

Seneca Snake Root plant in its natural state:

Figure 46: Photo credit Janet Nelson, 2020.

Seneca Snake Root as tattoo:

Figure 47: Titian, Venere di Urbino (also known as “Reclining Venus”) with Seneca Snake Root tattoo, Mel Lefebvre, 2024.

In the design above, Seneca Snake Root is offered as tattoo on the ribs and lungs. In Young et al., Cree medicine man Russell Willier describes Snake Root as “for heart problems and blood purifier” and carried by Cree “on long journeys to ensure health and safety” (p. 124-125). He also indicates its important use as an expectorant, for pneumonia and bronchitis (p. 125). During my many years of personal interest in plants as medicine, I have been told by naturopaths and Chinese medicine practitioners that the lungs are an area in the body where sorrow and grief are held. The first time I heard that I knew it to be true and that I indeed carry sorrow there due to past personal trauma. And so, with my own connection to this plant and knowledge reaffirmed by Willier, I offered this design as medicine to move through challenges, as one can see in my Instagram post from January 19, 2024:

> “milkwort or seneca snakeroot is used for all kinds of lung ailments. the lungs are a site of sorrow, where we can carry deep wounds that manifest in many ways, one of them being acute/chronic lung issues like bronchitis, pneumonia, etc. markings of healing for lungs brings new energy into those deep spaces, opens portals to new opportunities. breathe deep into this seneca”
>
> designed on Venere di Urbino (also known as “Reclining Venus”) by Titian”
> (Mel Lefebvre, 2024)

Plant medicines as tattoo can help us celebrate our traditional knowledge, personal healing journeys, and relationships to land as Indigenous territory. Plants as tattoo explore and honor the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of the person, offering a connection to personal narrative and holistic transformation.

Bringing technological innovations and traditional medicinal knowledge of the past and blending with contemporary realities through traditional tattoo offers a deep channel for connection and empowerment, and can also provide a way to manage our traumas. Some of these plants and tools we may still use today and others have been phased out for various reasons, but they all echo and remind us of our profound cultural practices, relationships, and responsibilities. With each mark, we become vessels of our cultural heritage, ancestral wisdom, and collective memory.

6.7. New Michif and Nehiyaw Tattooing Methodology O and Δ

Grounded in and inspired by the existing Michif and Nehiyaw methodologies of kiyôkêwin (visiting), wâhkôhtowin (relational ethics), kitimahkinawow (pity and compassion), and tâpwêwin (truth telling), and through this research-creation journey over the past five years (2019-2024), a new Michif and Nehiyaw tattooing methodology was born. the triangle and the circle have been reimagined and infused with specific meanings and purposes that align with Michif and Nehiyaw cultures, as well as universal symbolism:

○ and △

These symbols recur repeatedly in Michif and Nehiyaw life (past and present) and material culture. They are now particular marks of healing in my traditional tattooing practice. I have appropriated these as tattoo symbols, expanded their meanings, and embedded them with new meanings. Both possess attributes of the land, opportunity, healing, and remembering. These symbols are infused with the entirety of the tattooing experience and they help support us as Indigenous people in the process of celebration and grief, mourning what we feel has been lost—culture, identity, belonging—and then finding reconnection. These symbols are reminders of who we were, are, and who we will become through this transformational tattooing process.

This new methodology, therefore, is fluid and evolving, requiring continuous reflection, flexibility, adaptation, and awareness. It involves a constant dialogue between the theoretical and practical, and the ethical and the cultural. This methodology is deeply rooted in my lived experiences and those of my collaborators. Our cultural values and spiritual traditions inform the process that we engage in together. This new methodology is holistic, a way of being, a reminder of how to move through and relate to this world, guided and supported by our communities. It is a way of life.

6.7.1. O as Methodology

In my Michif and Nehiyaw worldviews, the circle is the moon, sun, the earth itself is a circle and the medicine wheel is based on that circle forming the four seasons, four directions, four aspects of the person: mental, physical, emotional, spiritual.

Figure 48: Photo credit Mel Lefebvre, 2019.

Figure 49: Photo credit Mel Lefebvre, 2019.

Figure 50: Art by Juliet Mackie.

The fire is a circle. Food and family and relationships with the land and more than human kin are circular, not hierarchical. Our drums and dances and ceremonies are circles.

Figure 51: Photo credit Mel Lefebvre, 2018.

Figure 52: Photo credit Mel Lefebvre, 2018.

Figure 53: Royal Saskatchewan Museum Mural, First Nations Gallery; My drum, 2018.

We experience time in circles, repeated cycles such as seasons, moon cycles, migratory patterns, and ceremonies. The circle is the buffalo's eye in our cultural designs (see section 5.2.2.). Many Indigenous cultures sit in sharing circles as part of governance (Kovach, 2019, p. 124). Circles are doorways and portals (Buck, 2021). Through this research I have learned that the circle tattooed on the body is an opportunity for healing, transformation, letting go and release, and a welcoming in of newness, a way to communicate to our past and future ancestors.

When community members contact me for tattoo medicine, their requests are usually in response to a milestone or challenge in their lives, a moment that they want to mark and honor. The markings I design for them usually incorporate a circle and I communicate the intent of these circles in direct relation to what they are seeking through the tattoo. For example, along with the broader meaning of the circle explained above, intentions and meanings can vary depending on the medicine needed and where the circles are tattooed on the body:

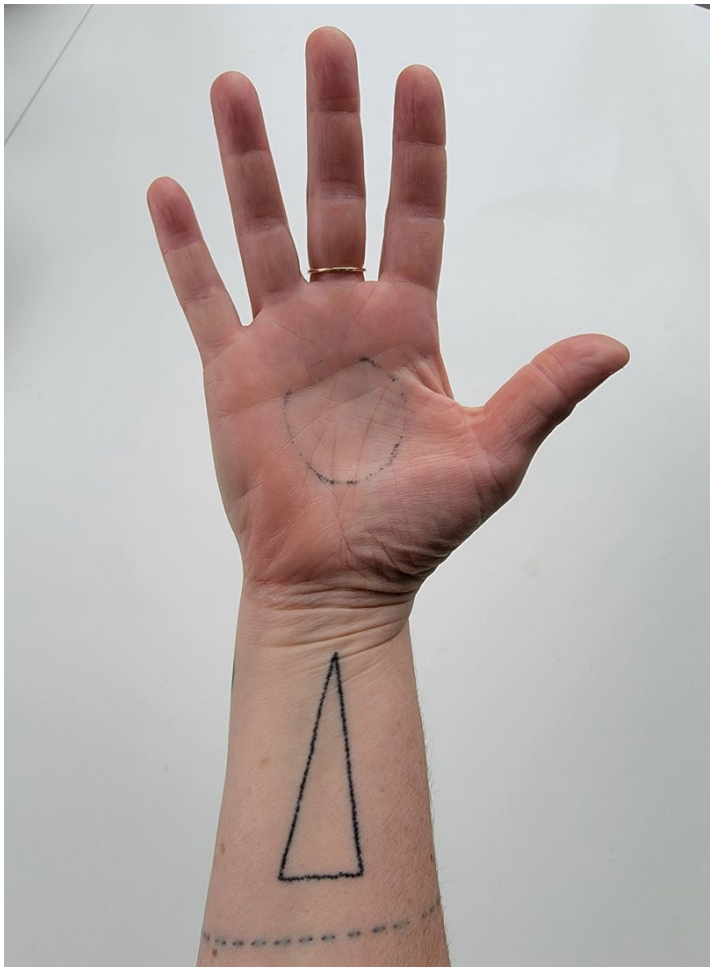


Figure 54: Tattoos of circle and triangle by M. Lefebvre, 2020; skin stitch by D. Kaszas, 2021.

For example, in Figure 55 (as well as Figure 13) I have tattooed my palm with a circle as a form of acknowledgement and importance of the service I give to community. The circles help to center my energies when I am tattooing, they represent my responsibilities as a healer, and they enable me to hold lightly the stories that are so carefully shared with me by collaborators and then create space for new stories to be shared and held. My hands are how I give, they have helped me cook for clients at the shelter, they have picked up and carried donations, they have delivered meals and supplies to those in need. I use my hands to gather people and hold them. The circle on my palm is a portal through which the tattoo medicine flows, conduits of energies from the ancestors. The duty my hands have is very clear to me. These circles remind me daily of this duty.

Those ancestral energies I have discovered echo in the teachings of Cree astronomer and educator Wilfred Buck, whose stories of Pakone Kisik or the hole in the sky have supported and inspired my explorations into this new methodology, into thinking about and creating artwork and tattoos around our creation, our connection to ancestors, and realms of possibility. In his book I Have Lived Four Lives… Buck offers the creation story of Achakos Iskwew:

“Our mythology tells us the first Kisikook (being of light) who ventured here was a being called Achakos Iskwew… Star Woman, and through her and ALL our female relatives, we come to this place we call Aski to visit. This refers back to the term pimatisiwin.

Looking into the night sky we identify a group of stars… achakosuk, as Pakone Kisik… the hole-in-the-sky. To mainstream astronomy these are the Pleiades, the Seven Sisters. The mythology says Achakos Iskwew (star woman) was roaming the cosmos and came across Pakone Kisik (the hole-in-the-sky). As she looked through this hole in the sky she saw this planet, Aski (earth). After observing this place for a while, Achakos Iskwew decided she wanted to go to Aski to learn, experience, teach, and live. She found she could not just go through Pakone Kisik and do and experience the things she wanted to experience. She needed assistance.

She approached another of her kind called Kokominakasis—Grandmother Spider, who sat on (what we now call Achak Sipi—river of spirits) the Milky Way. Kokominakasis held all access to Aski and knew there were certain conditions that needed to be addressed in order to experience Aski. Kokominakasis told Achakos Iskwew, “if you want to visit this place there are three conditions that you must agree to.

One: you must take a physical form when you go to Aski.
Second: you cannot stay there forever. At some point you have to leave.
Third: You must bring a gift that will comfort and remind all who come after you… where it is they come from and where it is they return to when their visit here is done.”
Achakos Iskwew agreed to these conditions and Kokominakasis sent a single strand of webbing through the-hole-in-the-sky and lowered Achakos Iskwew to Aski.
The gift Achakos Iskwew bought was the star blanket which had seven points to represent the seven visible stars of the Pleiades.
The other condition agreed upon was that she take a physical form and this form she took was us, Ininew… or if you prefer humans.
The length of time Achakos Iskwew would visit was a lifetime. For a being of energy how long is long, so a lifetime would suffice.
This is how we all come to this place, through Pakone Kisik, to begin our journey of a physical life. The single strand of webbing we are lowered down with is called mitisai or mitisayapiy—umbilical cord. This term is the root word for the term my people have for life, Pimatisiwin.
We are star people and when we leave “this mortal coil” we continue our never ending journey amongst the cosmos.”
(Buck, 2021, p. 115-116)

For me, our ancestral teachings sound, feel, vibrate at different frequencies and what has been transmitted to me from the circle is that we all have access to this creation story, to Achakos Iskwew, to our ancestors, to their teachings, we only need to ask. Placed on the body, these circles then call in those teachings, specific healing energy, to move and shift what is required, and to bring us to a new point of being and understanding. My collaborator and I are brought together by our ancestors into each other's lives through a seed that was planted, an idea, and then into the tattoo space so that a specific shift can take place.

The circle can be recalled in my Michif and Nehiyaw teachings of kiyôkêwin, visiting around the table, telling stories, and governing ourselves and communities; wâhkôhtowin, relational ethics as non-hierarchical respect, reciprocity, awareness within which we are responsible to each other; kitimahkinawow, pity and compassion for all things, that service and care is a relational duty; and tâpwêwin, truth telling to call into the space that which is needed from myself and my collaborator and to have the courage to speak out truths so that we can access the necessary shift. It is all truly about relationships.

6.7.2. △ as Methodology

The Triangle is a symbol I have tattooed on collaborators as a celebration of 2S, Trans, non-binary existence. It is a three-sided shape that I consistently see as beyond the binary. Of course, it is not only that, and I have tattooed triangles for those who exist within the binary. Found in the cultural designs of Plains Indigenous peoples, the triangle is the shape of the quillwork often used by Plains peoples, and is symbolic of the cloud with ties to thunderbird medicine that governs the clouds, thunder, lightning, and rain. In my communities it is a tree, mountain, rock, tipi, and fire. It is the shape of porcupine quillwork that my people use in their artmaking. It is the arrow, direction, motivation, and purpose. The triangle, like the circle, also embodies portal medicine as an opportunity to release, let go, access ancestral wisdom, and welcome in newness. It is healing for those who need it. It is medicine.

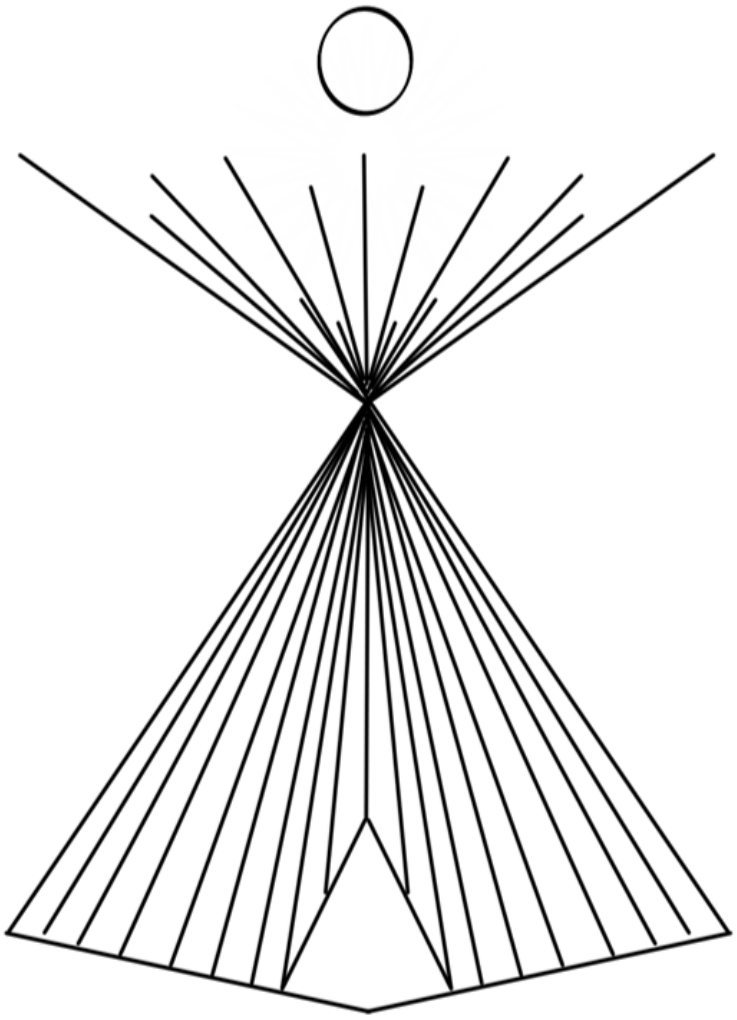


Figure 55: Interstellar Tipi, Mel Lefebvre, 2023.

Figure 56: Close up of shoulder, Metis, Sioux outerwear, V-E-294a., 1845, Collections of the Canadian Museum of History; Tattoo design based on the shoulder detail of the outwear, 2022.

Indigenous people are continuously imagining futures and living newness informed by the past, and this is what I am doing with the triangle. Many of us are making meaning and new connections by coming home to our traditional territories and cultures that we lost through forced diaspora and other colonial violence and legislation such as the 60s Scoop, the child welfare system, Scrip, the Indian Act and consistent underfunding of Indigenous communities (Fiola, C., 2021a; Kaszas, 2018; Lefebvre, 2020; Palmater, 2011). To counteract these disruptions, we can reconnect and celebrate our multitudes of genders and sexualities through the triangle, a marking that reaches out to the brilliant echoing phantasm of who we could have been as non-binary Indigenous peoples if colonization never was and manifest it in the now.

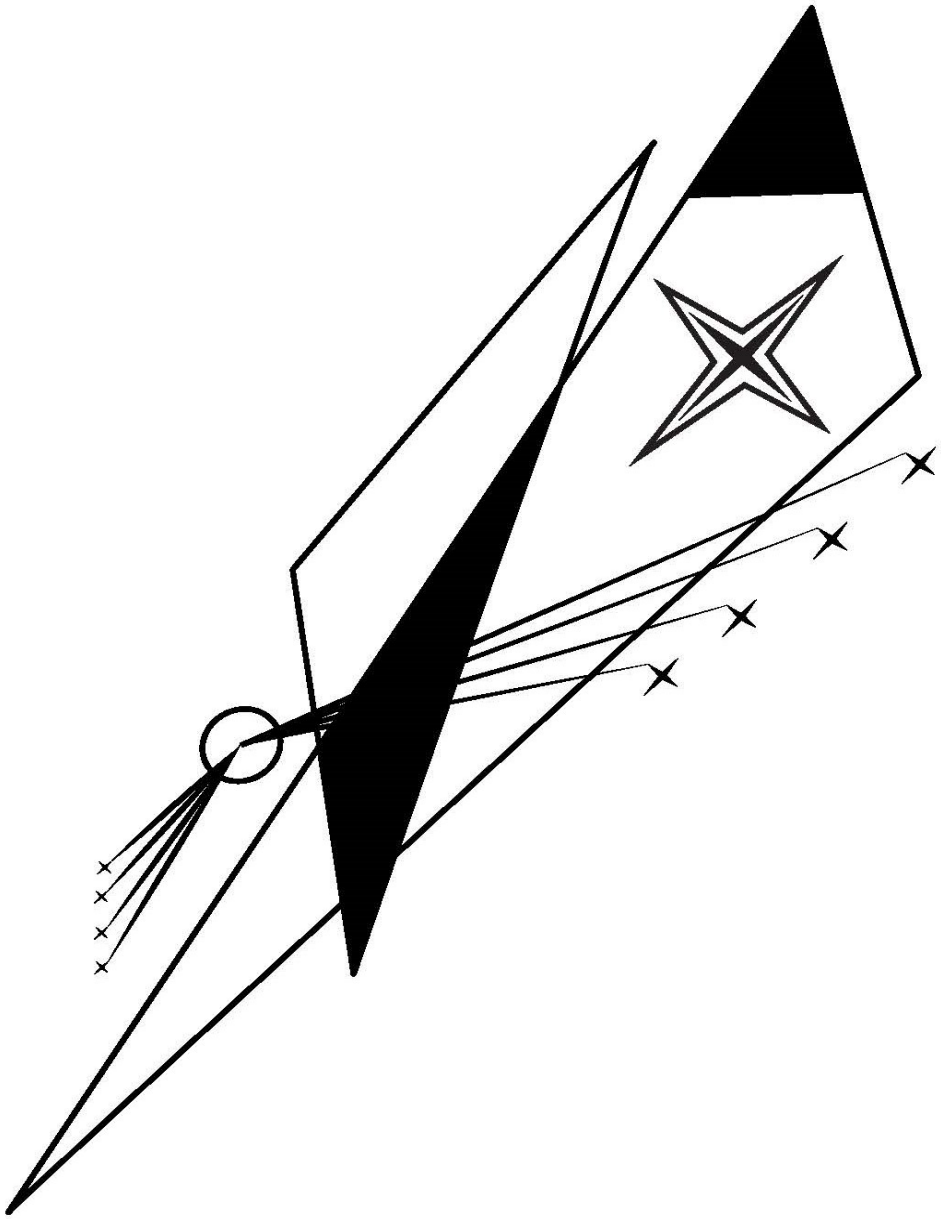


Figure 57: 2S tattoo design incorporating triangles and circles, Mel Lefebvre, 2024.

Figure 58: Friend and fellow Red River Michif traditional tattoo practitioner Sheri Osden Nault with 2S triangle design on neck, Mel Lefebvre, 2022.

Empowering Indigenous peoples in all ways including in their genders and sexualities is crucial as we struggle with being recognized and valued in many contexts including in our own communities. The Triangle as a 2S symbol can be tattooed on specific areas of the body that require more strength in relation to a non-binary existence. With the power of the arrow, the triangle can carry or direct energy away from an area of the body where it is too concentrated, heavy, perhaps with sorrow or grief. As a portal, the triangle can then welcome in new energy, new teachings, provide access to 2S ancestors, as trans temporal kinship (Pyle, 2018), reaffirming that as 2S people, we have always been here.

6.8. Challenges

These past five years of care, service, and research have been filled with so many emotions and teachings. I have done my very best to act in a responsible way with humility and generosity in everything I do, even in the most adverse moments. It is not easy and I have made mistakes, but I do think my ancestors would be proud. Some of the challenges I have encountered and what I have learned from them may help others who are on a similar journey.

6.8.1. Responsibility to the Markings

These markings require collaborators to be mindful of their meaning and power. There is a responsibility to them once they are tattooed. One of the challenges I have encountered is seeing or hearing about those I have tattooed doing harm to others while embodying these markings. Of course, that is out of my control, but it is still a challenge. When tattoo medicine is not respected and the collaborator is doing harm, this is a disservice to the Indigenous community, our ancestors, to our youth, and to our future ancestors. The tattoos are reminders of our principles, laws, and teachings. It is not a common occurrence but it does happen. I try to address it through social media if the situation is not safe for me or others to address face-to-face because of potential violence. I am in ongoing discussions with other practitioners as to how to address those who do harm in our communities and frequent traditional tattoo spaces, thus making it unsafe for others.

6.8.2. Travel and Accommodations

One of the toughest obstacles is getting myself to the people who need this medicine most. Travel and accommodations are expensive. At times the event host was able to offer an artist fee, travel fees, and/or accommodations. Sometimes I paid for it myself. This is a challenge that comes up time and again and we as a community find ways for us to connect. Yearly traditional tattoo gatherings help us to bring knowledge together from other nations and problem solve. Lefort started the Tyendinaga Traditional Tattoo Gathering in 2021, which has seen a steady rise in practitioners and those seeking this traditional medicine; the tattoo family is grateful for Lefort's efforts and care.

6.8.3. Other Nations' Markings

A question that comes up now and again is whether or not traditional tattoo practitioners can tattoo the traditional marks of other Nations. I have deferred to Kaszas on this question and he taught me that it is the responsibility of the person who wears the mark to carry out whatever teachings come with it and to honor their ancestors accordingly. While each practitioner carries their own tools and methodologies specific to their Nation, we can only advise people to the best of our ability and in relation to our communities' teachings. The common teaching for all Indigenous people, in my experience, is to live life in a good way, with respect and reciprocity, and the same goes for our relationship with the markings.

6.8.4. Repatriation and the Four Sky Thunder Bundle

Light includes the story of the “transfer ceremony” in which he is handed the bundle from Bluehorn because “their old people were all dead, they themselves were getting old, and the younger generation did not understand the old ways and would not treat these sacred items with proper respect” (Light, 1972, p. 18). I am skeptical that the sacred bundle would have been trusted to a non-Indigenous person instead of buried amongst its people. However, there is no way to prove that at this point in time.

Over the past few years, I have conducted a relatively lengthy search within Canada for the Four Sky Thunder Bundle, conversing with various curators at the Glenbow Museum, Canadian Museum of History, the Royal Alberta Museum, and the Museum of Manitoba. As Light was a curator of ethnology at the Glenbow, I thought it might be held there, however they informed me that its whereabouts is not known to them. Similar answers were given by the other institutions. In discussion with a descendant of Kahneeokeesikopanis or Four Sky Thunder, they too had heard it may have gone to a museum in Calgary, which I assumed was the Glenbow, and while they are not the only descendant of Four Sky Thunder, they expressed their support in me seeking out its whereabouts so it could be returned home. Repatriating the sacred bundle would be an example of reconciliation and would allow the descendants of the original bundle carriers to decide how to best care for it. We are still waiting for it to come home.

In my time spent in museum archives the question has been raised around repatriation efforts. There are some non-Indigenous curators who are very forthcoming in their support and others who are still blinded or swayed by colonial racist policies. And so the obstacles are still there when it comes to bringing our kin home. In relation to the Four Sky Thunder bundle, it would not be up to me to begin repatriation efforts, but to the descendants of the carriers of that bundle. I would like to visit it as a Plains Indigenous tattoo practitioner. Inquiries are ongoing and I welcome any thoughts of Four Sky Thunder’s descendants regarding its repatriation and whether or not I can be of service.

6.8.5. COVID

I began this PhD in 2020 when COVID changed the world, and so some of my studies have been done virtually. It has been a challenge, especially when tattooing in community, traveling across the country by land and plane, and doing everything in my power to keep us safe. COVID has added an extra layer of challenges and in response, as tattoo practitioners, we have had to bring more care and commitment to these transformative moments.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

7.1. Research Question

The main research question this dissertation seeks to answer is: How does traditional tattooing provide healing and (re)connection for Indigenous peoples? The dissertation also pursues traditional Plains Indigenous tattoo practices, understanding representation and inclusion of 2SLGBTQIA+ and Indigenous women in this practice, and the creation of a new Michif and Nehiyaw tattooing methodology.

This research allows for the exploration of Plains Indigenous body modification practices of the past, how Plains Nations used traditional tattooing in their daily lives, and the protocols surrounding the practice and relationships that upheld it. This research delves into the logistical and spiritual process of designing a traditional tattoo, what kinds of designs were tattooed, the tools used, and how we can take this bundle of knowledge and bring it into contemporary practice to empower Indigenous peoples today. Through community stories and colonial archives, I explore gendered tattoos and how colonial influence sought to erase the multitude of gender variance and acceptance in Indigenous communities.

7.2. Objectives

The set objectives used to support the research question are as follows:

1. To present a brief history of Plains Indigenous tattooing as a mode of cultural healing and connection that has been practiced for thousands of years;
2. To demonstrate traditional tattooing as a contemporary culturally-specific way to honor the many expressions of gender and sexuality that have existed in our communities for millennia;
3. To show how it is crucial to engage with community members and listen to their perspectives on tattooing, past and present, so that they contribute to Indigenous research;
4. To demonstrate the significance of engaging with the past such as our material cultures kept within museum archives in order to produce contemporary tattoo designs.

7.3. Outcomes of Interest

7.3.1. Traditional Tattoo in the Academy

Bringing traditional tattooing into the academic space over the past five years (2019-2024) in tandem with traveling to communities to tattoo has provided valuable insight. Taking up space as an Indigenous person in a colonial setting is challenging and yet, the Indigenous cohort that exists there is supportive, and with that support I have been able to explore this cultural practice. I have successfully contributed to the reclamation of an ancestral practice, carved out space for Indigenous knowledges, added to the Indigenous knowledge base, and bolstered the community to honor and continue to support the traditional tattoo revival. This journey will help and encourage others to bring in other Indigenous cultural practices and advocate for one another in and outside the institution.

7.3.2. Tattoo Mentorship

The significance of mentorship in the preservation and evolution of our cultural practices has become clear to me as one of the most important aspects of traditional tattooing. The guidance and knowledge from Kaszas has been instrumental in my journey, building my knowledge base, instilling confidence, and providing an example of how to mentor. This transformational relationship has shown me that we can weave together our ancestral knowledge with contemporary expressions of our cultures as Indigenous peoples. Mentorship has shone a light for me to see the path forward as an Indigenous creative, scholar, traditional tattoo practitioner, and healer.

7.3.3. Traditional Tattoo Bundles

The research on Indigenous traditional tattoo bundles of the past reveal rich repositories of cultural knowledge, spiritual connections to land and other non-human beings, and the importance of ancestral connections. Along with tattoo tools and various plant medicines, the interconnectedness of all life is represented within these bundles. As contemporary practitioners, we can look to these bundles for guidance on protocols and techniques. Sharing my own bundle contents during this time of the traditional tattoo revival will support others as they begin this journey.

7.3.4. Markings to Honor Gender and Sexuality

Through this research, it is clear that markings to honor the diversity of Indigenous genders and sexualities is sought after and necessary. By exploring historical research, and comparing and contrasting that with personal experiences through my work as a 2S traditional tattoo practitioner, I am contributing to the empowerment and visibility of Indigenous 2SLGBTQIA+ and Indigenous women. Contemplating and creating tattoos for gender and sexual expression touches on our histories, realities, languages, sovereignty, relationships, and ancestral practices.

7.3.5.Traditional Body Modification and Tools

The ancestral process and practice of body modification, including designs, tools, and techniques reveals the ways in which we related to and relied on our environment. By exploring the process of making and tattooing with ancestral tools, I learned about the patience, physical strength, and commitment it takes to make these tools and utilize these methods. Traditional tattooing demonstrates our ability to adapt and innovate, our relationship to land and spiritual connections, and our collective efforts to reclaim ourselves. The more we look at tools and practices of the past, the more empowered we become as it shows us the depth and complexities of our cultures.

7.3.6. Contemporary Designs and Relationships

Inspired by our innovations and medicinal practices of the past, like the travois and Seneca Snake Root, I create contemporary designs filled with meaning and connection. This recall of the past offers collaborators tattoos with profound meaning, perpetuates our cultural knowledge, and educates on our responsibilities to one another. When we wear the tattoos we embody the daily lives of our ancestors, understand how they survived, and develop an appreciation for their skills and resilience. These designs bring worlds and temporalities together on the body.

7.3.7. New Michif and Nehiyaw Tattooing Methodology O and Δ

Grounded in and inspired by the existing Michif and Nehiyaw methodologies of kiyôkêwin, wâhkôhtowin, kitimahkinawow, and tâpwêwin, and through this five-year research creation journey, a new Michif and Nehiyaw tattooing methodology was born: O and Δ.

These symbols recur repeatedly in Michif and Nehiyaw life (past and present) and material culture. They are now particular marks of healing in my traditional tattooing practice. I have appropriated these as tattoo symbols, expanded their meanings, and embedded them with new meanings. Both possess attributes of connection to ancestors, opportunity, healing, and remembering. The circle in Michif and Nehiyaw worldviews is the moon, sun, relationships, drum, dance, and more. The circle is also an opportunity for healing, transformation, letting go and release, and a way to communicate to our past and future ancestors.

I offer the Triangle as a celebration of non-binary beings. A three-sided shape, I see this as inherently beyond the colonial gender and sexual binary. The triangle also encompasses the shape of Plains quillwork and is symbolic of the cloud with ties to thunderbird medicine. The triangle is three sided, so is immediately beyond a binary. In my communities it is a tree, mountain, rock, tipi, fire. The triangle is the arrow and I consider it symbolic of direction, motivation, and purpose, and it also embodies portal medicine as an opportunity to release and access ancestral wisdom.

7.4. Importance of this Research

Traditional tattooing is Indigenous healing and connection through cultural revitalization. This is an ancestral practice that encompasses many aspects of Indigenous life including language, ceremony, relationships, health, identity, gender, sexuality, sovereignty, politics, and education. It is a critical area of research and practice that educates, empowers, and perpetuates our cultures. Indigenous 2SLGBTQ+ and Indigenous women who are disproportionately affected by colonization have another mode of healing and connection available to them as we continue to navigate colonial systems.

Through this research, traditional tattooing is now part of the Academy at a doctoral level and has inspired a new symbolic Indigenous methodology. As evidenced, traditional tattooing has the power to bring communities together to support one another in the spirit of our continued resistance to the colonial agenda. Traditional tattooing has inspired practitioners to bring their children together to learn the skills, responsibilities, teachings, and medicines of the practice. More youth are picking up their own bundles and coming into their roles as practitioners.

Traditional tattooing is visible to settler society as a mode of Indigenous resistance to the church and the state, and brings to the surface the voices of our ancestors. Traditional tattoos are visual markers of belonging to one's Nation, one's journey, and one's right to self determination, and collectively and individually empowers through the tattooing process and outcome. The traditional tattoo revival is growing and one of many cultural healing practices available to our people, and collectively, we will see it regain its important role in our communities.

7.5 The Future

Traditional tattooing is now part of the Academy at a doctoral level and the first traditional tattoo class will be held at Concordia University in the winter of 2025.

Together with the First Nations University of Saskatchewan, we are organizing a gathering for Turtle Island practitioners to be held in summer 2025 in order to share knowledge and spend time with each other, the size of which has never happened before.

I would appreciate the opportunity to continue conducting archival research to catalog Plains Indigenous items in the Canadian Museum of History as well as at the Manitoba Museum and the Glenbow Museum where I have already developed relationships with the curators via email and telephone and have received welcoming letters of support to continue this work. This archival work will be documented through photography in the creation of a catalog that will be produced and brought back to Plains communities, a process the Canadian Museum of History has offered to support with in-kind contributions (i.e. printing, binding, distribution).

I will continue to dream, create, and tattoo more designs for the community inspired by this research process and the ceremony of my practice. These new symbols and their meanings will be brought back to the community for others to use and add to the knowledge base.

I would like to bring this work to the broader public's attention as an important cultural artistic practice through an exhibition of photographs, design, and video with on-site traditional tattooing.

As mentorship is an essential part of this cultural practice, I look forward to passing on my knowledge. I have four community members who are interested in the mentee process.
I would like to engage with the land further, source natural materials, and continue to create traditional tools and inks.

Figure 59: Me after receiving my first facial tattoo at the Tyendinaga Traditional Tattoo Gathering 2024 by Waubanungohnse Gillian Prince to celebrate this achievement, for endings and beginnings, to represent all my ancestors and descendants.
Hay Hay / maarsii!

Ekosi / That's enough for now.

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Tattoo gatherings

13 Aug 2022, SAW Gallery, Ottawa, Ontario. Asinabka, Indigenous Film & Media Arts Festival & Two-Spirit Ball [traditional tattooing].

6 Aug 2022, Le Frigo Vert, Montreal, Quebec. Outreach Worker Tattoo Healing, Cedar Tea Project.

June 25-26, 2022, Regina, Saskatchewan. Blood Lines Indigenous Tattoo Symposium.

July 18-19, 2022, Merritt, British Columbia. Awakening our DNA tattoo gathering hosted by Lower Nicola Indian Band.

May 19-22, 2022, Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory, Tyendinaga Traditional Gathering

Aug 21-24, 2021, Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory, Tyendinaga Traditional Gathering

Appendices

Case study photos

All photos taken by Maurizio Solis, October 23, 2024, and copyright of Mel Lefebvre, 2024.


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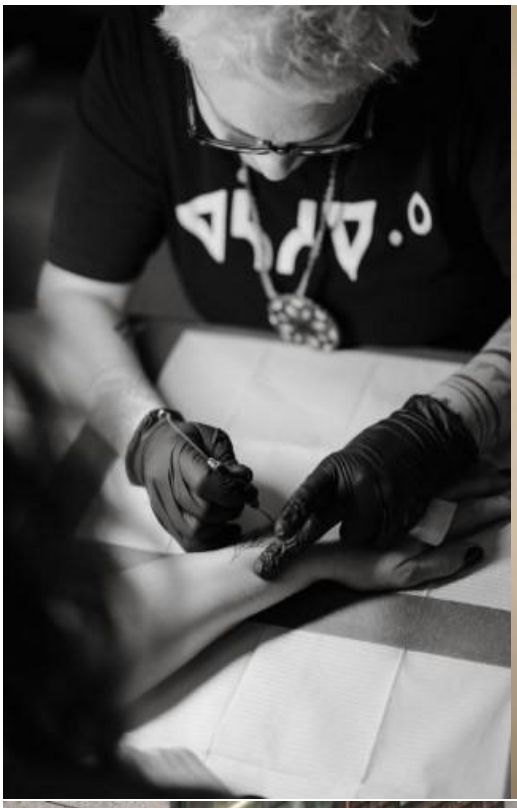
CHRISTI BELCOURT
This Wound is a World
TATTOOING PRACTICES OF THE CREE INDIANS

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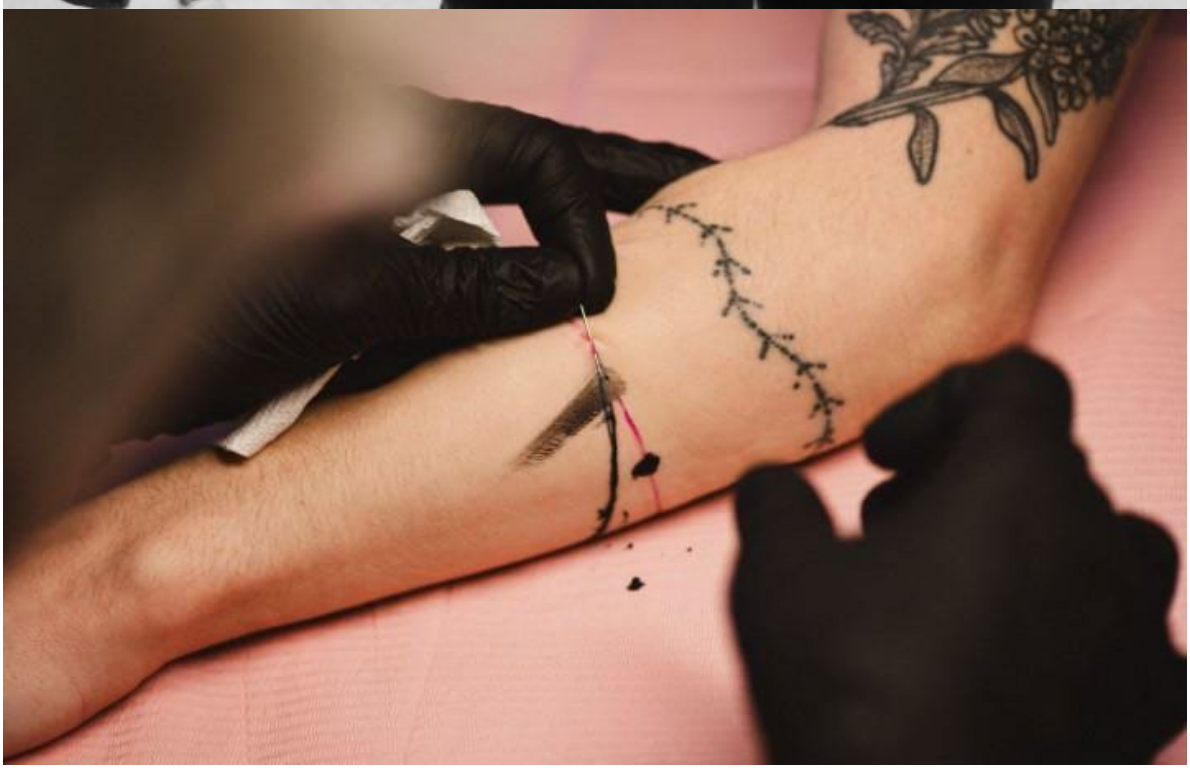
PAVILLON J.W. McCONNELL BUILDING


mother earth kombucha

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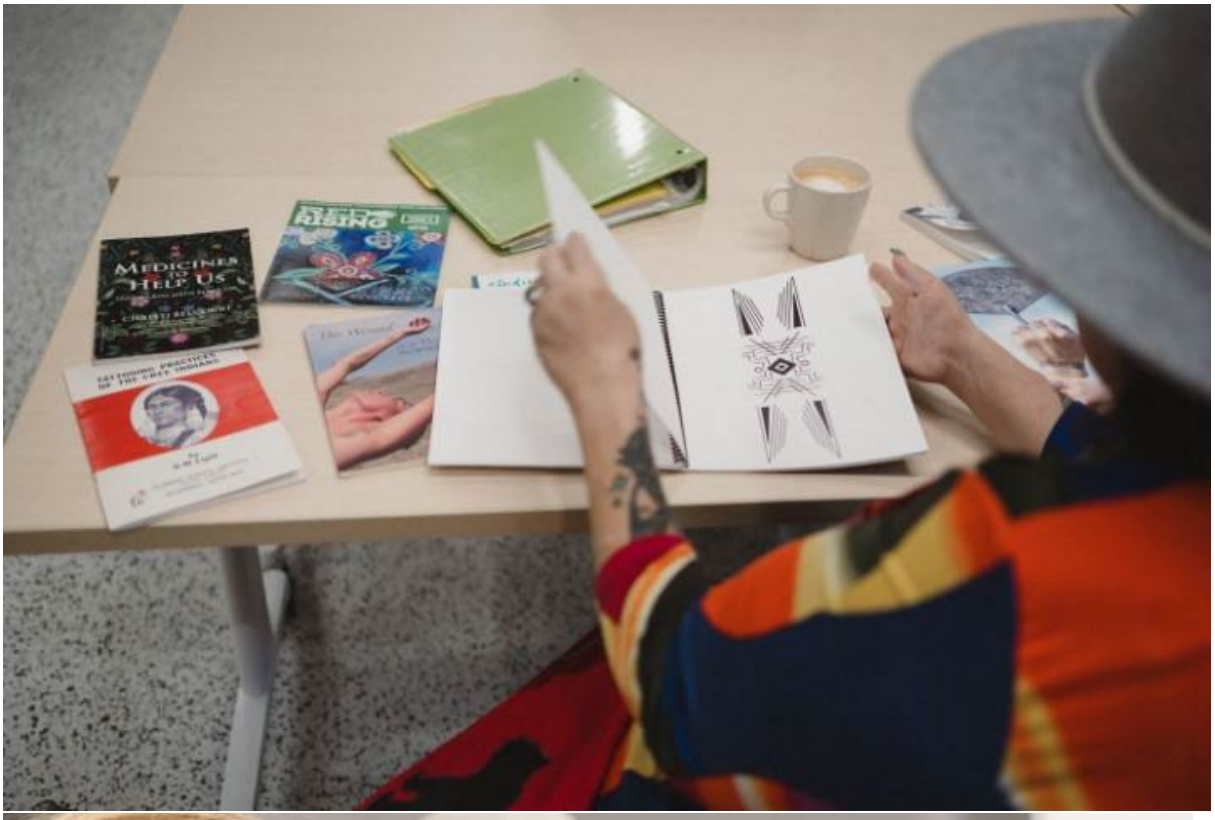
MEDICINES TO HELP US


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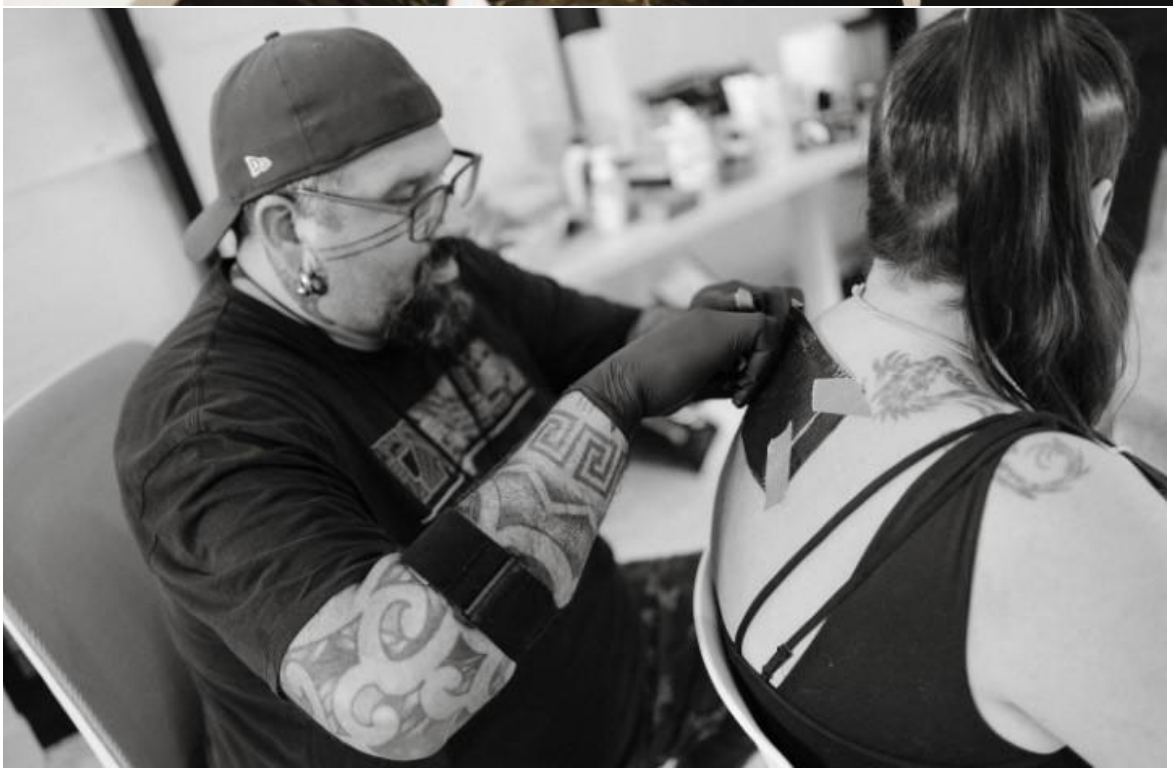

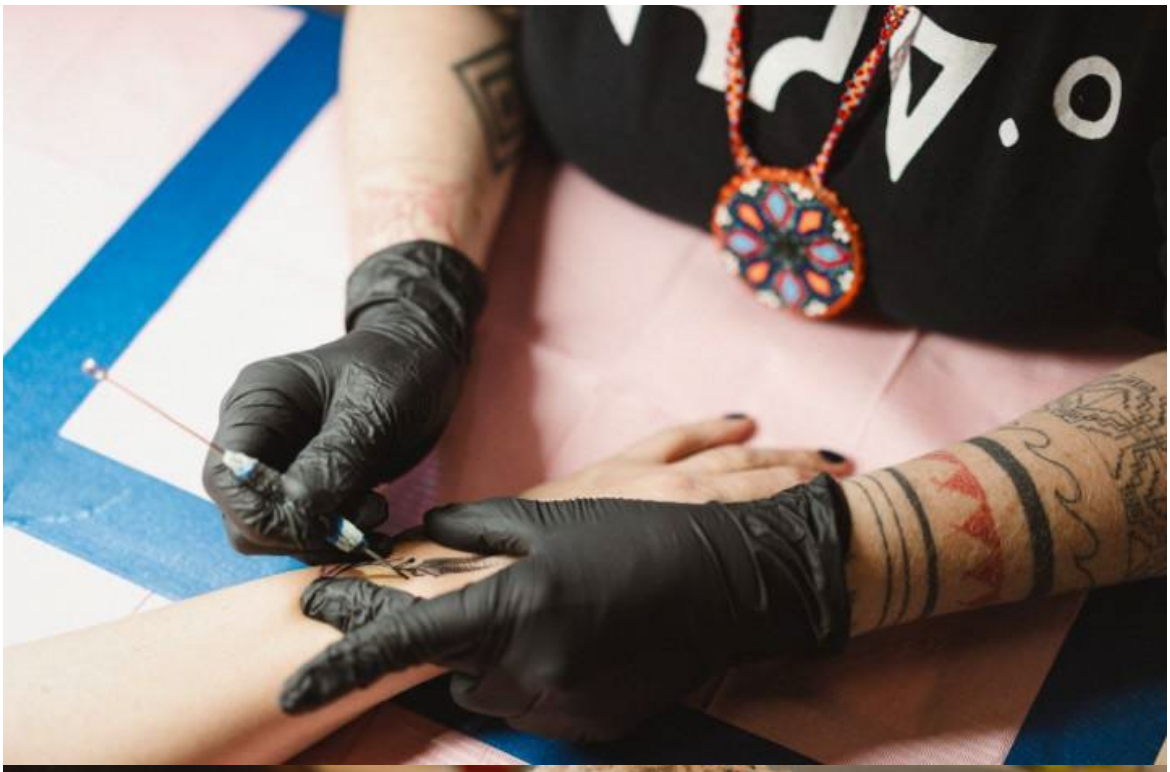

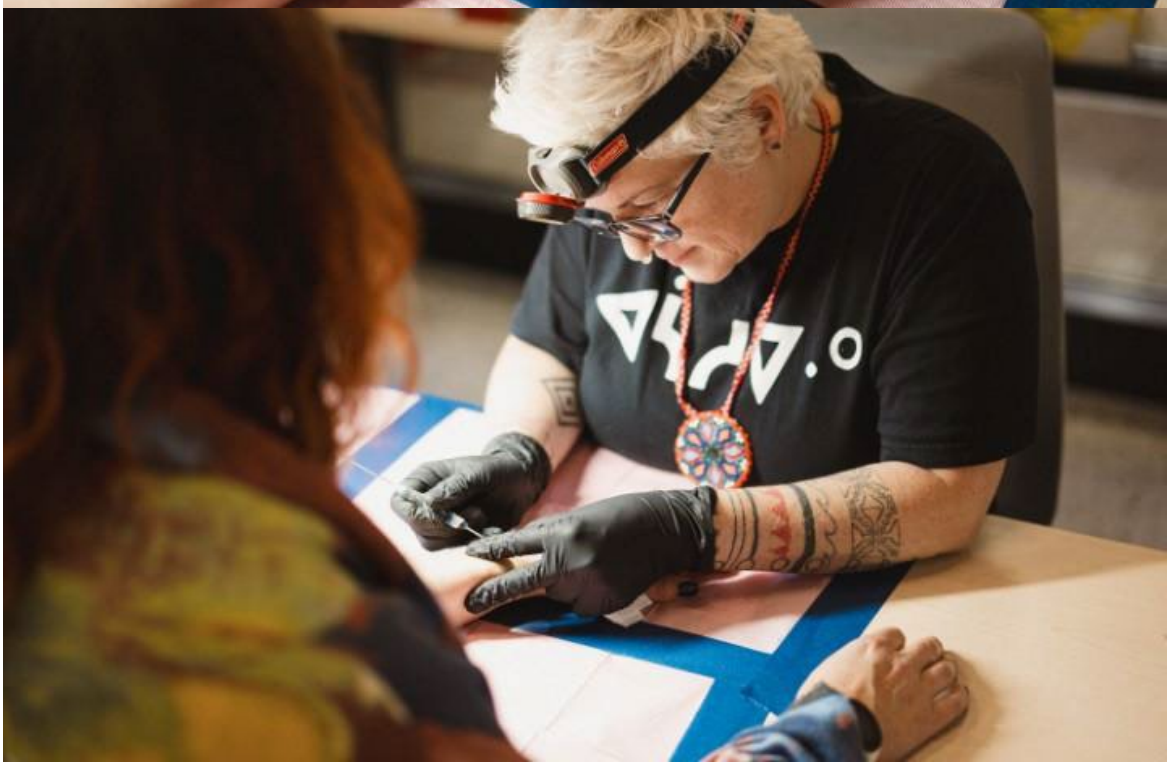


SAMOA