(Re)Inscription: Reclaiming O'odham Identities through Tattoos

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Author
Alvarez, Pauline Estela

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(Re)Inscription:
Reclaiming O’odham Identities through Tattoos

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts in American Indian Studies

by

Pauline Estela Alvarez

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

(Re)Inscription:
Reclaiming O’odham Identities through tattoos

by

Pauline Estela Alvarez
Master of Arts in American Indian Studies
University of California, Los Angeles, 2017
Professor Michelle F. Erai, Chair

Persistently challenging discourses that frame Indigeneity as incompatible with urban spaces and confined to rural ones, urban-based Indigenous peoples creatively construct and assert their identities. Incorporating the lived realities of my relatives by employing kinship based oral histories, this thesis examines their complex processes of identity production as O’odham living in Los Angeles and away from O’odham Jewed (O’odham Land). To demonstrate how both, urban spaces and our ancestral territories inform my relatives’ identities, I focus specifically on their tattoos as a culturally innovative form of identity expression. Imprinting spaces of home and cultural knowledge(s), my relatives’ tattoos emphasize their resiliency and affirm their identities.
The thesis of Pauline Estela Alvarez is approved.

Mishuana R. Goeman
Shannon E. Speed
Duane W. Champagne
Michelle F. Erai, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles
2017
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INTRODUCTION

In 2014 at the age of 21, I received my first and long-awaited tattoo. At a tattoo studio in Arcadia, California I had I’itoi (Man in the Maze) tattooed on the center of my upper back.

Figure 1: The author during and after the tattooing process. 2014. Photo courtesy of Elvira Alvarez.

I chose to have I’itoi tattooed on my skin because of its cultural significance to my tribal nations.¹ My maternal relatives, particularly eñ-hu’ul (my maternal Grandmother), and their

¹ There are five O’odham nations whose traditional territories rest in the Sonoran Desert. They include the Tohono O’odham Nation (Desert People), Gila River Indian Community (Akimel O’otham/River People), the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community (Onk Akimel O’odham and Pee-Posh), the Ak-Chin Indian Community (Arroyo Mouth), and the Hia Ced O’odham (Sand People). My usage of “O’odham,” which translates to people, is not to homogenize, but to recognize that our ancestors are the Huhugam (the ones who have disappeared/perished), also known as the Hohokam. I acknowledge the sovereignty of each nation and the distinct life-ways within these nations, such as various dialects, traditional practices, and migration patterns. For the purpose of consistency, I will mostly utilize what is considered Tohono O’odham dialect along with O’odham words that eñ-hu’ul (my maternal grandmother) has taught me.
tattoos also inspired me. In 2016, I received my second tattoo, which some would consider to be cliché and overdone. I decided to have the iconic Los Angeles Dodgers symbol tattooed on the inner side of my left wrist.

My kitschy tattoo isn’t meant to convey any affection towards the baseball team. Rather, I chose to have this tattooed on my body to represent my family’s history in Los Angeles and our rootedness and attachment to this city. Through my tattoos, my identity as an O’odham woman born and raised in Los Angeles is embedded in my skin. Similarly, several of my relatives have tattoos identical to my own. This invoked my interest in tattoos and their function as markers of identity, particularly for my family as O’odham living away from our ancestral territories and in

Figure 2: The author during the last moments of the tattooing process. 2016. Photo courtesy of Isabel Dagio.
the Boyle Heights neighborhood, just a ten-minute drive (without the nightmare of LA traffic) from Dodger Stadium.

In 1959, my maternal Grandparents, Mary Enos and Robert Enos moved to Los Angeles County through the American Indian Relocation Program. With their two children, Alfred and Kathy in tow, they were first moved into temporary housing in Azusa, California then Paramount, California. Their move to southern California was short-lived because in 1962, they returned to the Gila River Indian Reservation, due to the death of my Grandfather’s brother. They were back on the Rez briefly before my Great Grandfather encouraged eñ-ba:b (my maternal Grandfather) to move back to Los Angeles.2 Eñ-hu’ul (my maternal Grandmother) remembers my Great Grandfather stressing to eñ-ba:b that since their return to the Rez, eñ-ba:b wasn’t caring for his children the way he was able to in Los Angeles. This was because eñ-ba:b struggled to find employment on the Rez.

So, eñ-ba:b reapplied for Relocation and in 1964 my grandparents and their five children, Alfred (6), Kathy (5), Phyllis (4), Robert Jr. (3), and Nelson (1) moved back to Los Angeles.

My family’s emplacement in Los Angeles mirrors those of approximately 155,000 Native peoples’ who migrated to cities through the American Indian Relocation Program.3 Prior to Relocation, Indigenous peoples moved to urban spaces at increasing rates. However, there was a clear and dramatic increase in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. In 1950, the percentage of Indigenous peoples in urban areas was 16.3%. In 1960 it was 27.9% and in 1970 it was 44.9%.4

2 I capitalize ‘Rez’ when referring to the Tohono O’odham Nation reservation or the Gila River Indian Community reservation.


In 1952, the United States Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) officially initiated the Relocation Program. Relocation was advertised as helping Indigenous peoples who were seeking economic opportunities, move from reservations to cities. However, the underpinnings of this federal Indian policy expose Relocation’s entanglement with Termination legislation as efforts to reinforce the logics of settler colonialism.5 Increased nationalism after WWII coupled with anti-Communist paranoia during the McCarthy Era fueled the rhetoric of Termination and Relocation. Termination legislation claimed to “free” Indigenous peoples from the paternalistic role of the U.S. government by omitting federal government responsibilities to Native nations. One proposed method of ceasing Native peoples’ “dependency” on the federal government was to distribute communal tribal land to individual tribal citizens, easing private access to land.

Along with withdrawing the federal government’s responsibilities and obligations to Native nations, Termination and Relocation were implemented to propel the integration of Native peoples into mainstream white America. This integration required spatially organizing Native peoples in a way that would disrupt Indigenous relationships to their homelands, kinship systems, and ways of life. Comprehensive analyses of Termination and Relocation often interpret this era of federal Indian policy as assimilative, but as I will argue later, further interrogation of Relocation and its spatial organizing of Indigenous peoples in cities demands a more nuanced interpretation.

Relocation directly and indirectly caused an influx of Indigenous peoples to move from reservations to cities. This increased movement of Indigenous peoples consequently aided in the maintenance of the socially constructed urban/rural dichotomy. Colonial spatial processes engendered in Relocation operationalized through this dichotomy. Long-standing assumptions produced by this binary constrain formations of Indigeneity and realities of urbanity. Understandings of Indigeneity through this dichotomous model depict urban Indigenous peoples as victims of “culture loss” and severed connections to their ancestral homelands and tribal communities. Further, disputes about what constitutes an “authentic” Indigenous identity arise from this dichotomy and continuously overshadow the complex ways in which Indigenous peoples living in cities shape their identities. The urban/rural dichotomy attempts to confine Indigeneity to the boundaries of rural spaces by enabling non-Indigenous peoples to delimit Indigeneity and facilitating the internalization of non-Indigenous definitions of Indigenous identities.

The purpose of this thesis is to work towards undoing the urban/rural dichotomy by investigating my family’s experiences of urbanization and their processes of identity formation. I rely on the specificity of my family’s experiences to avoid unproductive generalizations and to illuminate innovative techniques of identity formation and assertion. I have chosen to focus on tattoos and their inscription of identity in order to uncover O’odham reclamations of identity. Similar to my tattoos, my relatives’ tattoos illustrate the realities of urban-based Indigenous peoples and their negotiations of identity. Analyzing how my relatives’ tattoos inscribe their identities emphasizes the binding of home spaces to identity and the transmission of cultural knowledges. I utilize home spaces to signify complex and inseparable relationships to land and community, resistant to colonial spatial processes. Understanding the dynamics of embodied
identities offers insight into innovative reconfigurations of Indigeneity, countering rigid colonial conceptions of Indigenous identities.

**Literature Review**

The layers of this thesis require a review of the scholarship, which it contributes to. Rather than provide an overview of in-depth examinations and interpretations of Relocation policy, I will focus on the scholarship surrounding Indigenous urbanization and the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples dealing with its consequences. I do so because this work largely concentrates on the narratives of my urban-raised relatives who have and continue to form their identities in congruence with an urban milieu, an outcome of my Grandparent’s relocation to Los Angeles. With more Indigenous peoples living in urban areas than reservations, as a result of Relocation or otherwise, it is imperative that we attempt to understand the dynamics of Indigenous urbanization, which include, but are not limited to, strategies of adaptability, reconfigurations of Indigeneity, and refusal of colonial spatial processes.6

Early literature on Indigenous responses to Relocation and urbanization often provides an overgeneralized perspective, homogenizing Indigenous peoples and their experiences.7 Portrayals of tragedy and victimization seemed to control narratives of Indigenous peoples in cities. Furthermore, early literature on Indigenous urbanization assumed successful adaptation to cities correlated with assimilation.8 Donald L. Fixico’s (Shawnee, Sac and Fox, Muscogee

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8 Here I use “successful” to indicate Indigenous peoples’ ability to adapt to urban spaces.
Creek, and Seminole) effort to include Indigenous voices and experiences in his policy-focused text follows:

The social and psychological problems of relocatees mounted as maladjustment to city life fostered an identity crisis that tormented many relocatees. After leaving their traditional social structures on reservations and in rural communities, which served as a basis for their psychological balance with kin and nature, they had nothing. Isolation and loneliness in big cities confronted them. The city’s alien environment was unlike anything they had experienced. Their perceptions of space, time, matter, energy, and causality differed vastly from that of the urban scene.9

A statement such as Fixico’s presents Indigenous peoples as disenfranchised and incapable of adaptation, unsuccessfully capturing the dynamics of Indigenous urbanization. While I acknowledge and exemplify the very real feelings of isolation and loneliness encountered by urban Indigenous peoples later in this text, solely focusing on these struggles detracts from the resiliency of Indigenous peoples.

In response to the limitations of general and monolithic representations of Indigenous peoples in cities, scholars became more interested in recognizing the specific Native nations Indigenous peoples were migrating from and how their tribally specific cultures might’ve impacted their strategies of adaptability.10 Rigorous interviews with participants of Relocation and/or non-participants, who migrated to cities, provided ethnographic evidence of adjustment strategies and negotiations of tribally specific identities. Building a communal identity with other Indigenous peoples in cities, regular visits to tribal homelands, and remaining connected to kin within urban spaces, despite proximity, were several processes of Indigenous urbanization. This


shift in the literature challenged prevailing assumptions of Indigenous peoples and cultures as unfit for urban landscapes and prompted further investigation into the lived realities of Indigenous peoples in cities.

Frequently, identity is a focal point in examining the lived realities of Indigenous peoples living in cities. Susan Lobo suggests, urban is a place rather than people, thus urban does not define Indigenous peoples. Rather, urban spaces and urban experiences contribute to the construction of identity. Corresponding with the work of numerous scholars, Lobo seeks to answer the questions, what constitutes urban Indian communities and how do these communities foster fluid Indigenous identities? Joan Weibel-Orlando defines the Los Angeles Indian community as a structure and states, “[it’s] sustained by a network of and intersecting participation in an impressive array of institutionalized, political, economic, medical, religious, educational, recreational, and informational organizations.” Scholars overviewing and outlining Native organizations in urban spaces position them as integral to urban Indian communities and Indigenous self-identity. Detailed examinations of urban Native organizations unravel how they contribute to sustaining tribally specific identities and formulating new identities, reflective of relationships to other Indigenous peoples in urban spaces.


13 Joan Weibel-Orlando, Indian Country, LA, 4.

14 I utilize Lobo’s analysis of urban as a place rather than a person when employing the terms “urban Native” and “urban Indigenous”
approach to understanding Indigenous identities in urban spaces reveals processes of creating
new kinship systems and mobilizations to reclaim and assert tribal sovereignty.15

Simultaneous to carving out Indigenous identities, urban Native organizations (re)carve
out Native spaces. Donna Martinez (Cherokee) contends that intertribal organizations build an
“Urban Rez,” which reclaims “Native space [that] has extended well beyond reservations to
encompass all of the lands in Indian Country as it was before contact with Europeans.”16 Also
approaching urban Native organizations and community from a spatial and geographical
analysis, Renya Ramirez (Winnebago/Ojibwe) refers to the spaces in which Native organizing
occurs as the hub. Ramirez credits Laverne Roberts, a Paiute woman who moved to San Jose on
Relocation in 1971, in conceptualizing the hub. Further, Ramirez builds upon Roberts’
articulation of the hub and asserts, “The hub offers a mechanism to support Native notions of
culture, community, identity, and belonging away from tribal land bases.”17 By unveiling how
Indigenous peoples in cities articulate their relationships to urban spaces, spatial analyses of
urban Native communities contribute to the refusal of colonial spatial processes and its workings
to contain and immobilize Indigenous peoples.

Discussions of spatiality center unbounded relationships to tribal homelands and
communities and the creation of new relationships within urban spaces. Additionally, they reject
representations of Indigenous peoples in urban spaces as placeless and lacking any significant

15 Susan Lobo, “Urban Clan Mothers: Key Households in Cities” in Keeping the Campfires Going:
Native Women’s Activism in Urban Communities eds. Susan Applegate Krause and Heather Howard-Bobiwash (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009) 1-21.
cultural connections.18 Mishuana Goeman (Tonawanda Band of Seneca) provides an analysis of colonial spatial organizing within an urban context and its attempts to immobilize, fix (temporally and spatially), and disappear Indigenous peoples with the aim of disrupting relationships to land and community.19 Goeman examines American Indian literature that refutes colonial spatial ideology through (re) mapping.20 This discourse mobilizes Indigenous bodies through the “imagining [of] new possibilities embedded in much older philosophies, which connect us to land and community.”21

While these analyses of Indigenous urbanization are productive and actively work towards undoing the urban/rural dichotomy, they tend to concentrate on connections to (non-urban) tribal homelands and community building with other Indigenous peoples in the city as processes of identity formulation. Less attention, if any at all, is given to Indigenous peoples’ relationships to particular urban spaces and interactions with non-Indigenous peoples and how these relationships and interactions shape our identities. This indicates a gap in the literature on Indigenous urbanization, which I will fill here. In the introduction to *Indigenous in the City: Contemporary Identities and Cultural Innovation*, Evelyn Peters and Chris Andersen (Métis) critique analyses centering (non-urban) tribal territories as an indicator of Indigeneity. They argue:


20 Goeman defines (re) mapping as “the labor Native authors and the communities they write within and about undertake, in simultaneously metaphoric and material capacities of map making to generate new possibilities,” *Mark My Words* 3.

Privileging a connection to ancestral homelands as a marker of Indigenous identity reinforces dominant visions of Indigenous peoples as authentic only if they live in remote areas and engage in “traditional” lifestyles or, conversely, only if we assume that these homelands are located exclusively in such areas. When the source of Indigenous identities and the focus of life ways is located outside the urban milieu, innovations that emerge from interactions with non-Indigenous society are positioned as less central or even less “authentic” than transplanted tribal traditions.²²

Peters and Andersen assert that when we discuss Indigeneity within an urban context unilaterally through the privileging of connections to tribal homelands, we only offer a glimpse into the experiences and lives of Indigenous peoples living in the city. Furthermore, we must not minimize how Indigenous peoples’ identities are formulated by interactions within cities.

Although I build upon dialogues of Indigeneity and connections to tribal homelands, I also draw upon the work of Peters and Andersen to investigate how my family’s home space in Los Angeles and the interactions within influence their identity formation. By integrating both approaches, I hope to highlight the interdependence of tribal homelands and urban spaces as integral to mine and my relatives’ identities.

Methodology

To begin understanding Indigenous urbanization and how it impacts my relatives’ identity construction and assertion, I employ family-based oral histories. By applying oral history work for this project, I deliberately position n-hu’ul, n-je’es (my uncle who is my mother’s older brother), n-tatal (my uncle who is my mother’s younger brother), and my cousins as co-researchers because of their tattoo narratives that were shared with me. I do so to disengage from the hierarchies of knowledge production and to “reclaim and incorporate the personal and

political context of knowledge production.”23 Conducting oral history work in concert with my family emphasizes the significance and persistence of `I:migī (O’odham kinship).

Simultaneously, working with my family encapsulates how Indigenous kinship structures undoubtedly inform our identities as Indigenous peoples contrary to imposed colonial definitions.24 Specific to this project, working with kin illustrates how kinship has the ability to form the basis of tribal identity, especially as O’odham living away from our traditional territories.

Alongside working with kin, oral histories are central to this project. My family’s stories and my own facilitated the conception of this project and it is our stories that are weaved throughout. From the start, my family’s stories shifted and guided this project. For instance, I was initially interested in my family’s identity formation as O’odham living in Los Angeles and how they utilized their tribally specific tattoos to assert their identities. As I began conducting interviews and collecting oral histories, ñ-hu’ul and ñ-je’es, Robert Jr., asked why I didn’t plan to interview ñ-tatal, Rodney. My response was “well, although he has tattoos, they’re not O’odham specific and that’s what I’m focusing on.” They understood and didn’t bring it up again. However, during a visit with ñ-hu’ul and ñ-tatal, Rodney, ñ-hu’ul suggested ñ-tatal tell me about his experience living on the Rez. Ñ-tatal, Rodney was born and raised in the Boyle Heights neighborhood and from his late 20s (roughly around 1995) to the present he’s been living on the Rez.


His move to the Rez was no more than accidental. Ń-tatal broke his leg during a visit and instead of returning to Los Angeles with my grandparents, he stayed with my great grandmother on the Rez to let his leg heal. He’s been living on the Rez ever since. To my surprise, while telling me about his transition from the city to the Rez, Ń-tatal shared his tattoos stories. He recalled that his reason for getting Los Angeles centric tattoos was because on the Rez he was frequently asked, “where are you from” and he felt that tattoos representative of Los Angeles and the specific neighborhood he grew up in, would answer that question. Immediately, I realized Ń-hu’ul was leading me to listen to Ń-tatal, Rodney’s stories, which would ultimately shift the direction of my project. His story led me to also inquire about how his tattoos, symbolizing elements of Los Angeles, are utilized to assert his identity. This takes into account that as Indigenous peoples living in the city, our identities are informed not only by our connections to our ancestral homelands, but also our connections to urban spaces.

This project centers experiences of Indigenous urbanization and identity negotiations through storytelling. Cree/Métis scholar Kim Anderson argues “Indigenous oral history” is a reaffirmation and continuity of identity and culture and is “more about the truths of who we are and want to be as people rather than the ‘truths’ about ‘what happened.’”²⁵ Prevailing assumptions of urban Indigenous peoples as assimilated and “inauthentic” impinge on our identities. To ensure that my family’s voices and perspectives are amplified in this project, I refrain from editing their quotes that are dispersed throughout this thesis.

Doing arduous oral history work with my family has indeed been a *process*. Kim Anderson asserts, “oral history is much about process as it is about product.” 26 Oral history work has required me to pay close attention to why storytellers share certain stories and certain aspects of stories at particular times. 27 For instance, upon transcribing my grandmother’s oral histories I grew frustrated. My impatience was dissatisfied with her fragmented stories and “forgetfulness.” Originally I viewed these elements of my grandmother’s oral histories as limitations, but as I reflected, I came to understand that eñ-hu’ul was forcing me to work harder than I ever have to obtain knowledge(s). Her stories would suggest possible answers to my questions, but never a direct one, this encouraged me to decipher them on my own with the information she did provide and in that process, I seemed to find more pieces of my family’s story than I had anticipated.

**Roadmap to Chapters**

Tattoos are the primary marker of identity investigated in this thesis. Chapter One details how I arrived at investigating O’odham identities through tattoos. Within this chapter I touch upon the long and often overlooked history of Indigenous tattooing in North America and explicate the reasons for mainstream society’s intentional dismissal of Indigenous tattooing practices in the past and present. I emphasize the significance of contemporary forms of Indigenous tattooing and tattoos, whether through revitalization movements and/or new and reconfigured practices. Chapter Two concentrates on the narratives and experiences of ñ-je’es, Robert Jr. and ñ-tatal, Rodney. In order to demonstrate the numerous and complex processes of identity negotiation urban Indigenous peoples engage in, this chapter will explore how *home*

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27 Ibid., 22.
spaces and identity are bound together. Tracing the relationship between home spaces and identity requires a discussion of the geographical context where forms of Indigeneity are constructed. This discussion of urban space invokes a closer examination of Los Angeles, the spaces within, and inquiry about the production of these spaces, which transcends general analyses of this city and the Indigenous population within. Lastly, Chapter Three is dedicated to the continuity and futurity of O’odham identity and O’odham Himdag. I begin this chapter with a brief overview of written sources on O’odham tattooing methods and techniques to recognize the cultural significance of this practice. Through this chapter, I exemplify how tattoos are not only a form of resistance to the eradication of Indigenous tattooing practices, but also to the eradication of Indigenous knowledge(s) due to their ability to inscribe and transmit cultural knowledge(s) beyond the Rez.
CHAPTER ONE: (RE)INSCRIPTION AND THINKING THROUGH THE SKIN

My decision to focus on tattoos as a medium for identity stemmed from my visible awareness of my family’s tattoos. Their tattoos profoundly impacted my decision to tattoo my body, thus my own experiences are closely linked to the genesis of this project. Growing up, I was especially fascinated by my Grandma’s tattoos. Small, yet unhidden, her tattoos mark the area of her inner forearms closest to her wrists. Her right inner forearm is imprinted by her name ‘MARY’ and my Grandfather’s initials ‘RE’ are etched into her left inner forearm. Not exactly depicting any artistry, my Grandmother’s tattoos are simply black script.

Figure 3: Grandma Mary’s tattoos. 2017. Photo by author and used with the permission of Mary B. Enos.
tattoos often came to me in snippets or from other relatives. Although the fragmented details of my Grandmother’s tattoo stories were frustrating for my curiosity, never being too pushy with questions was ingrained in my upbringing so, it wasn’t until recently that I gained a fuller understanding of her tattoos.

Between the years 1953 and 1956, eñ-hu’ul attended Sherman Institute (now Sherman Indian High School), an off-reservation BIA run boarding school in Riverside, California. She was 15 years old when she first began attending and by the time she turned 18, she didn’t return. Boarding school was where she received her first tattoo, her ‘MARY’ tattoo. During the years that she was attending boarding school she also received her second tattoo. Although, this tattoo she received while back on the Tohono O’odham Nation reservation. While both tattoo stories (which will be further detailed later) are compelling, I’ve been mostly intrigued by the fact that eñ-hu’ul chose to become marked, especially in visible places. For me, my grandmother’s tattoos signify empowerment. Her tattoos are affirmations of the control she has over her body, control she is often denied as an Indigenous woman. My grandmother’s authority over her body was the inspiration and justification for my own tattoos.

During an early stage of my life I undoubtedly knew that I wanted to be tattooed and that I wanted I’itoi tattooed on my body. At the same time I was uncertain about whether or not I would actually step into a tattoo studio. Once I made the final decision that I would in fact take my first steps into a tattoo studio, I informed my parents about this decision. I did so because I was curious of their thoughts and ultimately, I was seeking their approval. As I’ve reflected on this moment in my life, I’ve come to realize that I sought out their approval out of fear. I was fearful of disappointing them, particularly my father. I vividly remember feeling apprehensive about my father’s reaction towards my desire to be tattooed. Even though my father didn’t
blatantly link my relatives’ tattoos to criminality and disfigurement, I knew he felt negatively about tattoos based on the comments he’d make about others and their tattoos. He’d disapprovingly criticize people with visibly large and/or facial tattoos, claiming it looked “ugly” and was nonsensical thing to do.

Recognizing the fear of my father’s disapproval revealed to me the root of my continual hesitation about becoming tattooed. While the idea of needles pricking my skin repeatedly, filling it with ink, may seemingly be the cause of my hesitation, this was not the case. I doubted becoming tattooed because of internalized colonial heteropatriarchal expectations of what my body was “supposed” to look like, delicately feminine and desirable to men. I falsely believed tattoos would taint my body and that if I tattooed my body, it would be an affront to my father and he too would believe my body was tainted. The notion of a pure body is not uncommon for women, especially women of color. Indigenous women and representations of them are subjected to rigid binaries including the squ*w/Indian princess and la Malinche/la Virgen de Gudalupe as a tool of colonialism and heteropatriarchy. Consequently, Indigenous women internalize these misrepresentations and the men in their lives, who are situated in forms of colonial masculinity, reinforce and uphold these rigid dualities. Such is the case in my experience seeking my father’s approval to mark my body. However, I don’t share this aspect of my tattoo story to criticize my father or to scrutinize the “necessity” for his permission to have my body tattooed.


My relationship with my father is more complicated than his ideas about my body image and an understanding of his fatherhood deserves more attention than I can provide here.\textsuperscript{30} Rather, I share this experience for multiple reasons. One is to illustrate a manifestation of colonial heteropatriarchy and its aims to determine the appearance of Indigenous women’s bodies. Another is to stress that these aims never go unopposed. When I approached my father with my desires to become tattooed, I mentioned my Grandmother’s tattoos as a reason why I wanted my own. Despite my father’s uncertainty about me becoming tattooed, my maternal Grandmother’s impact and influence were indisputable.

Emerging from this experience was my interest in recognizing tattoos as a form of resistance and resilience. Thinking deeply about my experience and how my Grandmother’s marked body rejects heteronormative conceptions of Indigenous women’s bodies prompted me to think critically about the reasons why my other relatives tattooed their bodies and how their tattoos are forms of resistance and resilience. My understanding of my grandmother’s tattoos also led me to question how my relatives’ tattoo narratives decenter mainstream North American narratives.

\textit{Unmarking Indigenous Bodies}

Historically, mainstream American society has posited tattoos as markers of difference. In response to the stigmatization of tattoos and the criminalization of tattooed peoples, scholars have worked towards centering tattoo narratives, which deemphasize the association between tattoos and deviance.\textsuperscript{31} However, recognition of the intersection of identities and accounting for


the significance that sex, gender, and race play in the reception of and access to tattoos is limited. Within white American society, tattoos reinforce difference, which is already marked onto the bodies of people of color through processes of racialization.³² While Indigenous peoples’ tattoo experiences likely parallel those of non-Indigenous people of color, I contend Indigenous peoples’ experiences vary significantly, especially considering the long history and prevalence of Indigenous tattooing practices.

Commonly, scholars who write about the history of tattooing in North America tend to falsely credit James Cook as being fundamental to its origins.³³ Overlooking the long history of Indigenous tattooing in North America, Margo DeMello states, “The history of North American tattooing begins with voyages of discovery, colonialism, and missionary activity in the islands of the Pacific in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.”³⁴ Contesting this discourse, Anna Friedman Herlihy, cautions scholars from adhering to the “Cook Myth” and encourages them to carefully consider historical attitudes towards tattooing and that “visibility does not necessarily equal presence.”³⁵ Across North America, Indigenous peoples practiced innumerous forms of tattooing that were well established prior to colonization. Dependent on each Indigenous nation, tattoos could serve as markers of important life events, genealogies, therapeutic medicine, and

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³⁴ Margo DeMello, Bodies of Inscription, 45.

³⁵ Anna Felicity Friedman Herlihy, “Tattooed Transculturites,” 16-23.
beautification. During early colonization, tattoos played a role in marking interactions and relations between colonizers and Indigenous peoples. Antithetical to colonial conceptions of the body, Indigenous body markings were used to entrench colonial ideologies that framed Indigenous peoples as “primitive” and “savage” to justify conquest. By interrogating colonial discourses about Indigenous tattooing, we unsettle the dominant historical narrative of tattooing in North America and uncover settler colonialism’s deliberate attempts to literally and metaphorically unmark Indigenous skin.

In 1566, a tattooed Inuit woman and her child were violently kidnapped by French sailors, taken to Belgium, and put on exhibition in various locales in Germany. Handbills detailing the kidnapping and advertising the display of the Inuit woman and her child exemplify the inherent violence enacted in the process of racializing Indigenous peoples, a mechanism to legitimize colonization. Lars Krutak provides a translation of the handbill, which describes the Inuit woman’s tattoos and the rationale for her kidnapping:

The paint marks she has on her face are entirely blue, like sky blue, and these the husband makes on his wife [when he takes her for his wife] so that he recognizes her by them, for otherwise they run among one another like beasts, and the marks cannot be taken off again with any substance...Let us thank God the Almighty for His blessings that he has enlightened us with His word so that we are not such savage people and man-eaters as are in this district, that this woman was captured and brought out of there since she knows nothing of the true God but lives almost more wickedly than the beast. God grant that she be converted to acknowledge him.

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38 Krutak, Tattoo Traditions of Native North America, 15.
Handbills, such as the one mentioned above and other early colonial depictions of tattooed Indigenous peoples, convey the deliberate attempts to dehumanize and exoticize Indigenous peoples.

Between the seventeenth and nineteenth century, exhibitions of Indigenous peoples similar to the one mentioned above, were common in Europe and eventually appealed to white Americans. In 1876, the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia displayed Indigenous peoples, specifically tattooed Indigenous peoples, and according to Beverly Thompson, “Such expositions of Indigenous villages became increasingly common, eventually leading to world fairs, carnivals, and sideshows.” In 1901, the first human “oddities” show took place at the Buffalo World’s fair and at these shows tattooed Indigenous peoples were no longer physically required to produce a spectacle. Instead, white American tattooed men and women fabricated stories of “Native capture.” Their stories described how they were “captured” by a tribe and “tattooed against their will.” However, their tattoos depicted images of U.S. patriotism and/or Christianity. It appears that during the rise and popularity of these fabricated stories Indigenous tattooing practices were being relentlessly targeted for elimination through forced assimilation and assaults on the skin.

Illustrating the unmarking of Indigenous skin is Richard Jensen’s recount of Indian Agent Albert L. Green’s passages in his notebook detailing his time in Nebraska. Revealed in Green’s passages are expressions of overt opposition to an Otoe ceremony, which involved gifting visiting attendees, typically with horses, and tattooing them after the gifting. In 1870, at a meeting with other agents of the Northern Superintendency, this ceremony was ordered

39 Beverly Yeun Thompson, *Coverd in Ink*, 23.

forbidden. According to Jensen, “One good result achieved was a stop to the practice of tribal visitation and giving away of horses, the latter of which resulted in discrediting the greatly prized “KRAKA” (tattooed) mark, that after years was in many cases removed by a surge[on], leaving a deep scar.” There is no description of the surgical removal process, but one can infer that violence is indispensable to a process such as this. Not only was this a direct assault on the skin, but it was also an attack on the interconnections with other Indigenous nations, which were signified by tattoos.

According to tattoo scholars Lars Krutak and Steve Gilbert, while the sources on Indigenous tattooing in North America are sparse, following the nineteenth century there is a noticeable decline in the attention this practice received. Simultaneous to this decline, tattoos began receiving favorable attention from U.S. military personnel and some elitist. In 1891 the first electric tattoo machine was patented and people from various socioeconomic statuses were being tattooed. Margo DeMello argues that, the first tattoo machine originated what she calls the “true Americana style of tattooing.” Simultaneously, Indigenous tattooing practices were also being eradicated at this time.

When we fast-forward to the late 60s and the beginning of what tattoo historians refer to as the “Tattoo Renaissance,” colonization’s intent to erase Indigenous tattooing practices and unmark Indigenous peoples becomes just as clear as it was during the surgical removal of Otoe tattoos. The “Tattoo Renaissance” period is defined as a time of musician influence, centering body and identity politics, tattoo as art, and appropriation.

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43 Ibid., 164.
During this period, white Americans began appropriating Japanese, Chicano, and Indigenous styles of tattooing claiming that they were acts of resistance to classist standards and western notions of the body. One group of people seeking tattoos that would reject western norms of the body called themselves, “Modern Primitives.” According to Victoria Pitts:

Refusing the role of the anthropologist, art collector, or museum curator as interlocutor or expert, modern primitivism presents tribal body practices…as accessible resources for individual self-invention and political and artistic expression. In exploring these, modern primitives create a new kind of spectacle that shifts representations of primitivism from [I]ndigenous bodies onto the bodies of largely white, urban Westerners. In doing so, they preserve the historically imagined exceptionality and anomaly of [I]ndigenous bodies and cultures while promoting new notions of identity for postmodern subjects.44

Pitts’ precarious attempt to excuse “Modern Primitives” of cultural appropriation by distinguishing their motives as contrary to those of anthropologists, art collectors, and the like reasserts how their motives are actually aligned. “Modern Primitives” engaged in nothing more than the misappropriation of Indigenous cultural practices, imposing their own interpretations onto these practices. Denying the violent and long history of attempting to eliminate Indigenous tattooing practices and making the process of recuperation almost irretrievable, “Modern Primitives” falsely view themselves as saviors of Indigenous cultural practices. Moreover, non-Indigenous tattooists who appear slightly skeptical of their own rationale for appropriating Indigenous cultures, legitimize themselves by stating they are “appreciating” Indigenous cultures and that they are maintaining “dead” art forms.45

Despite relentless attempts to literally and figuratively unmark Indigenous skin, Indigenous peoples, like my family and myself, persistently participate in (re)inscription. I employ the term (re)inscription to capture revitalization movements and/or reconfigured forms of


Indigenous tattooing. (Re)inscription is meant to move beyond centering pre-colonial Indigenous tattooing practices and deeply considers the continuity and adaptability of tattooing traditions. Illuminating the reclaiming of Indigenous identities and knowledge(s), (re)inscription is a visual method of asserting identities and intergenerationally transferring Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies, and cosmologies.
CHAPTER TWO: HOME IN THE SKIN

“It’s more than just a tattoo, it represents who we are and what we are. It represents me and my tribe and my culture.”

- Robert Enos Jr.

In 1964 when my grandparents returned to Los Angeles for their second time on Relocation, they were moved into the Pico Gardens housing projects, located in the Boyle Heights neighborhood. Eñ-hu’ul recalls accompanying the BIA agent in search for their new home while eñ-ba:b worked. She remembers the agent insisting Pico Gardens was the appropriate location for their family to live. Unfamiliar with the spatial and housing policy history of Los Angeles, eñ-hu’ul trusted the agent’s judgment. After all, Relocation promised “nice homes” and a suburban lifestyle. My grandparents lived in the Pico Gardens housing projects for thirty-three years where they raised their eight children and made the projects their home space. I employ the term home space to emphasize the indivisible relationships my family has to Pico Gardens, the people surrounding them during the years they lived there, O’odham Jewed, and the people of it. Home space enables us to recognize how identity and home are interdependent.

Throughout this chapter, I have chosen to center my Uncles and aspects of their tattoo narratives. Arising from their narratives are glimpses of urban Indigenous experiences and realities. While my Uncles discuss pivotal points in their life when they decided they wanted to become tattooed, these points in time were also linked to other encounters they had while growing up and living in an urban space. Thus, I seek to illustrate how the events and interactions they shared with me, contribute to their identity construction as urban-based Indigenous peoples. However, before proceeding with my analysis it is imperative to contextualize the space in which the preponderance of these identity formulating events and
interactions occurred. This is crucial not only to begin comprehending the intricacies of this particular space and my family’s relationship to it, but also to refrain from perpetuating the erasure of the Indigenous peoples whose land Pico Gardens is located on.

“The Biggest Housing Projects West of the Mississippi”: Creating Settler Spaces and Racialized Dilapidated Ones Within

Low-rise apartment buildings, open courtyards with playgrounds, clotheslines, and occasionally “tagged” walls and metal trashcans (reminiscent of the one Oscar the Grouch lives in) are a few of the things I remember about Pico Gardens. My memory of Pico Gardens is very limited because in 1997 when I was four years old, following a relentless pattern of slum clearance in Los Angeles, the Pico Gardens my parents and family knew and grew up in was demolished. The Pico Gardens housing projects are located in the Boyle Heights neighborhood. Directly east of downtown Los Angeles and the LA River, nestled in an area surrounded by the interchanges between the 10 and 60, the 10 and 5, and the 10 and 101 freeways is where you’ll find Pico Gardens. The place that my family calls home was apart of the largest configuration of housing developments in Los Angeles. Opening in 1942, Pico Gardens was one of four housing developments built as a result of the 1937 Housing Act. Built in response to unemployment, housing decay, and housing shortages following the Great Depression, Pico Gardens also originated from displacement.
For colonizers to make claims to land, they must first dispossess the Indigenous peoples of the land. A multitude of techniques have and continue to be mandated to displace Indigenous peoples from their ancestral territories. Sherene Razack’s assertion of this follows:

Colonizers at first claim the land of the colonized as their own through a process of violent eviction, justified by notions that the land was empty or populated by peoples who had to be saved and civilized. In the colonial era, such overt racist ideologies and their accompanying spatial practices (confinement to reserves, for example) facilitate the nearly absolute geographical separation of the colonizer and the colonized.46

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Specific to the land Pico Gardens is located on, colonizers’ claims to this land required the Tongva’s violent eviction to the San Gabriel Mission in 1771. The San Gabriel Mission lies 10 miles east of present day downtown Los Angeles and roughly 9 miles east from Pico Gardens. Heather Valdez Singleton’s “Surviving Urbanization: The Gabrieleno, 1850-1928,” addresses the violent removal of the Tongva to the San Gabriel mission while counteracting conceptions of the Tongva simply as victims of missionization. Singleton notes that following the secularization of the San Gabriel Mission, several Tongva moved to the pueblo of Los Angeles in search of work. Successfully finding work, the Tongva’s labor was essential to the expansion of the pueblo into a city.47 Yet, despite the founding of Los Angeles as a city being heavily contingent on Tongva labor, an 1847 proclamation of the city of Los Angeles government forced Tongva and other Indigenous rancho workers to move out of Los Angeles. Ultimately, Tongva and other Indigenous peoples were forbidden from entering Los Angeles without employment.48 While the labor of the Tongva physically constructed the city of Los Angeles, the sanctioned expulsion of Tongva and other Indigenous bodies from Los Angeles is determinant of this space as settler produced.

Enforced colonial spatial processes, such as confining Indigenous bodies to reservations or in the case of the Tongva to the San Gabriel mission are subsequently reenacted within urban spaces. Pockets of racialized spaces exist in opposition to white settler spaces within urban landscapes, ensuring the continuity of these white settler spaces. Raszack describes this colonial spatial process as follows:


48 Ibid., 51.
At the end of the colonial era, and particularly with the urbanization in the 1950s and 1960s, the segregation of urban space replaces these earlier spatial practices: slum administration replaces colonial administration. The city belongs to the settlers and the sullieding of civilized society through the presence of the racial Other in white space gives rise to a careful management of boundaries within urban space. Planning authorities require larger plots of suburbs, thereby ensuring that larger homes and wealthier families live there. ⁴⁹

Placing Pico Gardens within a historical context demonstrates the segregation of urban spaces for the purpose of maintaining white settler spaces.

Pico Gardens and Aliso Village were built adjacent to one another and replaced the slums called The Flats. In 1910, the Flats were home to many working class immigrants of Russian and Mexican descent. They were often considered the worst slums in Los Angeles due to overcrowding, poorly built housing courts, and lack of adequate plumbing. ⁵⁰ Architecture and urbanism scholar Dana Cuff describes how the poor conditions of the Flats supplemented the racist and classist rhetoric of slum clearance for public housing developments in Los Angeles. Ideology surrounding the demand for public housing “was utopian in the comprehensiveness of its sociopolitical goals to produce better citizens, boost economic mobility, and create shared social networks.” ⁵¹ Moreover, the assimilative goals of public housing implied that living in public housing developments was meant to be temporary rather than life-long.

Differing from the high-rise public housing developments in New York, the architecture of Pico Gardens included garden apartments, which are characterized by low-rise buildings,

⁵¹ Dana Cuff, “The Figure of the Neighbor: Los Angeles Past and Future,” American Quarterly 56, no. 3 (Sep., 2004) 565.
courtyards, and open lawns. 52 Ironically, the architecture was “socialist in terms of image and provision, [and] public housing was originally advocated for the same reasons it would later be viciously attacked by critics in the McCarthy era.” 53 Although the real-estate lobby had contested the design and rationale behind public housing developments since their origins, Don Parson claims that opposition to public housing, specifically in Los Angeles, cultivated in 1946 following “the Burke Incident.” 54 Sidney and Libby Burke were members of the Communist Party and when this became public information, the Los Angeles City Housing Authority at Rodger Young Village, a veterans’ housing development, evicted them. Parson’s claims suggest that objection to public housing at the national level carried minimal weight, but once mobilized locally with help from the press, opposition resulted in materialized effects. This was particularly exemplified when public housing opponents in Los Angeles were convinced they needed a new mayor after Fletcher Bowron authorized the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles (HACLA) to enter into a contract to build 10,000 units of public housing under the 1949 Housing Act. Of the 10,000 units, over 300 were built between Pico Gardens and Aliso Village, which would later be known as Pico-Aliso and the largest concentration of public housing west of the Mississippi River.

In 1953, Mayor Bowron was voted out of office and by 1955, no new public housing developments, like the ones envisioned under the 1937 Housing Act were built. Funding towards public housing maintenance halted and instead, HACLA concentrated on voucher and leased


53 Dana Cuff, “Figure of Neighbor,” 564.

housing programs, which were meant to “reroute [federal] subsidies to the home-building industry, in essence to create more homebuyers.” But it should be made clear that the real estate market was only interested in white homebuyers.

Here, it is necessary to turn to Native American Studies scholar Kasey Keeler’s (Potawatomi/Tuolumne Band of Me-Wuk) work on American Indian housing policy. Keeler contends that the implications of the GI Bill and American Indian Relocation highlight the racialization of housing policy. Home loans were widely distributed to white veterans through the GI Bill as an effort to produce suburban homebuyers while Native veterans were encouraged to apply for Relocation instead of receiving benefits from the GI Bill. Relocation’s promises of economic opportunities and suburban homes often went unfulfilled. Keeler’s critique of Relocation follows:

If Relocation was intended to integrate American Indian people into mainstream, white America, then American Indian people should have been provided access to home loans while being encouraged and supported along the way to becoming suburban residents, rather than being pushed to become urban dwellers in “slum” areas in need of “revitalization” on a temporary basis.

Keeler’s analysis of the Relocation Program as an American Indian housing policy complicates discussions of Relocation as assimilative and enables further critiques of the program’s goals. For instance, Relocation sought to destroy communal living due to its link to socialism yet, BIA agents moved Indigenous peoples, like my family, into public housing developments despite the backlash they received during the McCarthy era.

When my grandparents were moved into the Pico Gardens housing projects, Pico Gardens occupied a space that had been racialized, isolated, and marked by dilapidation and

55 Dana Cuff, *The Provisional City*, 212.

poverty. Pico Gardens was no longer what it was envisioned to be in the 1937 Housing Act. In fact, Pico Gardens had become completely opposite of what it was designed to be. Once families moved into the projects, they hardly ever moved out and no efforts were made to promote economic mobility. Anthropologist James Vigil stated that during his research, “Well over half of the families in Pico Gardens [had] resided in the same place for more than five years.”

Instead of confinement to reservations, the Relocation Program confined Indigenous peoples to spaces on the periphery of urban centers metaphorically and physically. The physical isolation of the projects is often noted. According to Vigil, “Pico Gardens and the adjacent housing developments are isolated from downtown and the rest of East Los Angeles by physical barriers, including decaying industrial buildings and warehouses, the riverbed, railroad tracks, and freeways.” Closely examining the spaces relocatees were moved into presents the inconsistencies of Relocation and its aims to assist Native peoples into the middle-class and exposes its intentions to place them into spaces lacking and cut off from resources.

While mainstream perceptions surrounding Pico Gardens centers racialization, isolation, dilapidation, poverty, violence, and gangs, pathologizing its residents, resistance to this narrative has taken place. Simultaneously, Indigenous peoples, living in cities, specifically in spaces like Pico Gardens, resist monolithic narratives of tragedy, placelessness and cultural loss. When my relatives, particularly my mom and her siblings, share their experiences living in Los Angeles, they stress their rootedness in Pico Gardens and its impact on their identities. Realities of marginalization, racialization, and violence in the projects are weaved through their stories, but


58 Ibid., 23.
never point to feelings of shame or hopelessness. Rather, strategies of survival, sense of community, and Pico Gardens as a home space are illuminated.

**Inscribing Pico Gardens**

Ñ-tatal, Rodney’s first tattoo was the iconic LA Dodgers logo, which he got during his first years living on the Rez. He explained that he got this tattoo because

[People on the reservation] would asked me, “Where are you from, Rodney” and I’ll tell them, “well, my family is from here, but I didn’t grow up here. I grew up in LA.” And I was always asked that and this is my home, my ancestors, my relatives, but my home is [also] LA, where I grew up. So I got tired of people asking me where I’m from or where do I come from so I went and got a tattoo of LA on my arm.  

Along with his ‘LA’ tattoo, ñ-tatal has two other sizeable tattoos on the back of his right arm, which are ‘213’ (the area code of the section of Los Angeles he lived in), and ‘Pico Gardens.’ He also has ‘So-Cal in Old English style font on the side of his forearm. When I asked ñ-tatal why he chose these particular tattoos he stressed, “I was respecting my neighborhood, I was respecting my place of birth, and where I grew up, the projects.”

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59 Rodney Enos, interview by author, 20 February 2017, Gila River Indian Reservation.

60 Rodney Enos, interview by author, 20 February 2017, Gila River Indian Reservation.
Figure 6: Uncle Rodney’s tattoos. 2017. Photo by author and used with the permission of Rodney Enos.
It appears that when ň-tatal, Rodney moved to the Rez, he wanted to reassert his rootedness in Pico Gardens. When people on the Rez repeatedly asked him where he was from, he chose to imprint tattoos signifying his home space, Pico Gardens, noticeably onto his skin. Urban planning scholars, Jacqueline Leavitt and Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, discuss the predicament residents of public housing developments face when calling the projects home. They state, “The symbolic role of the home as an expression and confirmation of desired identity is important. The home is bound up with one’s own identity and for many it is a symbol-mirror of the self.”\textsuperscript{61} The predicament outlined by Leavitt and Sideris is especially clear when my uncles referenced gangs, violence, and poverty in Pico Gardens. When I asked ň-tatal, Rodney to describe where he grew up, he said, “There were gangs that had been there for years and there was always violence going on so we grew up used to the violence.”\textsuperscript{62} He further explained, while the violence always existed, the late 80s and early 90s saw a rapid increase. He stated,

Everyday there was a shooting. Everyday someone was getting shot in our neighborhood and it was just normal for us to go to sleep, wake up, look out the window, we see a group of guys standing in a bunch and we know somebody got shot or killed. And some of those guys were our buddies and we’d go and meet with everybody and they’d say so and so got shot last night or someone in another neighborhood down the street got shot. It would be because of other gangs down the street and if there was a fight, there was retaliation. There was just fighting all the time.\textsuperscript{63}

Similarly, ň-je’es, Robert Jr. addressed how during his youth, he and his friends were immersed into gang lifestyle. He mentioned how a few individuals he knew growing up did not join gangs voluntarily, but were forced into them in order to maintain their continuity.\textsuperscript{64} As ň-je’es shared

\textsuperscript{61} Jacqueline Leavitt and Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, “A Decent Home, And A Suitable Environment,” 225.

\textsuperscript{62} Rodney Enos, interview by author, 20 February 2017, Gila River Indian Reservation.

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{64} Robert Enos Jr., interview by author, 2 January 2017, Commerce, California.
this with me, he chuckled and said, “I kind of laugh about it, I know it’s not funny.” My uncle’s laughter indicates a complex understanding of gangs and the violence perpetuated by the. This complexity is also present when n-tatal, Rodney rationalizes gang fights and retaliation as protecting or “backing up [your] neighborhood” and when he refers to older gang members as “heroes of the neighborhood.” Mainstream notions of the projects strategically operate to free the settler state of culpability for intentionally moving and keeping people of color in urban blight. These notions are challenged by my Uncles’ articulations of Pico Gardens as a home space. Further, the rhetoric legitimizing the criminalization and marginalization of Pico Gardens’ residents purposefully refuses to acknowledge the multitude of forces pushing individuals towards gang membership and interactions with gangs, such as economic distress and isolation.

My intention here is not to romanticize gangs or minimize gang violence, but to recognize the complexities of interactions with gangs and gang members while living in the projects and how these interactions allude to strategies of survival and a sense of community. When my Uncle Rodney referred to older gang members as “heroes,” he went on to say, “When we grew up, we were apart of those guys because then we were the ones fighting.” Although, my uncles do not explicitly speak of community in relation to gangs, it is inherent when they talk about protecting and fighting for their neighborhood. When citing Venkatesh, Vigil states, “gang members are reviled at times because of their often destructive activities, while they are simultaneously depended upon for financial opportunities and protection that are not sufficiently

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65 Rodney Enos, interview by author, 20 February 2017, Gila River Indian Reservation.

66 Rodney Enos, interview by author, 20 February 2017, Gila River Indian Reservation.
provided by outside agencies.”

My Uncles’ emphasis on community occurred when they talked about the poverty and urban decay of Pico Gardens. When ŭ-tatal, Rodney remembered what his experience was like going to school, he talked about how kids that lived outside of the projects and in houses often thought of him and other residents as “poor, dirty, and having nothing.” Immediately following this statement, he asserted, “But considering we had nothing, we had our own, our own community. We did things together, with the people living there. It was just like a whole big family, everyone that lived in the projects. Everyone there knew each other.” Community within Pico Gardens, was not solely contingent on community organizations, but also on mundane interactions between residents. ŭ-tatal, Rodney’s sense of kinship with the community of Pico Gardens challenges the notion that Indigeneity and urban living are incompatible and highlights the ways urban Indigenous peoples form communities with non-Indigenous peoples.

ônica, Rodney’s tattoos and the experiences he encountered, which led him to become tattooed offer insight into how interactions within the city shape the identities of urban-based Indigenous peoples. Furthermore, ŭ-tatal, Rodney’s decision to become tattooed following his move to the Rez forces us to refrain from minimizing how influential urbanity is to urban Indigenous identities.

**Inscribing O’odham Jewed**

My relatives frequently mentioned the necessity to physically and verbally “stand up” for themselves because they were one of the few Native families living in Pico Gardens, which

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68 Rodney Enos, interview by author, 20 February 2017, Gila River Indian Reservation.

69 Ibid.
triggered feelings of isolation and placelessness. They explained it as, “You learn how to stand up for yourself, especially being Indian living in the city where you’re mostly alone.”

The act of “standing up” for oneself was typically initiated by non-Indigenous peoples’ reactions to their Indigeneity. Ñ-tatal recounted, “We would be considered Mexican, but once they found out we were Indian, they were always joking and they laughed at us.” While my Uncle’s description doesn’t provide much detail, discrimination and feelings of isolation are evident based on his statement, they laughed at us, highlighting oppositional relations. Although my relatives did have Indigenous friends in the projects, their marginalization persisted.

Internalized discrimination and racism impacted my relatives’ perceptions of their identities. Ñ-je’es, Robert Jr., shared two significant life events, which were fundamental to his identity formation. He described an incident that took place early in his life when he was about 5 years old. According to ñ-je’es, the school he was attending at the time conducted mandatory physical exams for the students. He remembers, “When I had to do my physical, the doctor didn’t take me into another room. I was checked in front of a lot of people and it kind of traumatized me. I was striped naked. I was a little boy. I guess back then they did it on purpose or they didn’t care. But, that traumatized me.”

As ñ-je’es reflected on this violent and traumatic experience he made note of its lasting effects, indicating intertwinement of racism and mental health. Additionally, he asserted, “It felt like another way of conquering Natives.” His recognition of settler colonialism as a process rather than an event reveals tactics of producing

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70 Rodney Enos, interview by author, 20 February 2017, Gila River Indian Reservation.

71 Ibid.

72 Robert Enos Jr., interview by author, 2 January 2017, Commerce, California.

73 Robert Enos Jr., interview by author, 5 May 5 2017, El Monte, CA.
Indigenous bodies as degenerate and disposable, undeserving of bodily integrity. The second event my Uncle recounted was when he was in the 3rd or 4th grade and his teacher called him up to solve a math problem on the board and when she noticed he was struggling, she called him dumb and said it was because he was Native. Ñ-je’es stressed, “School was kind of rough, we had a lot of racist teachers and not all of them were white…there was an African American teacher and she would tell me I was dumb and stupid because I was Native American.” Similar to the event above, my Uncle mentioned feelings of inferiority, which led to insecurity.

For the purpose of contextualization, it is crucial to consider the temporality and spatiality in which this event occurred. This incident took place at a public school in Boyle Heights during the early 70s and while this neighborhood was historically a diverse neighborhood, the 70s witnessed the transformation of Boyle Heights into a predominantly Mexican enclave. My discussion on racism within multiracial communities is not to obscure the origins of these ideologies, but to expose the inner workings of settler colonialism.

Despite the detrimental effects these life events had on my Uncle’s identity, including trauma, shame, and placelessness, they prompted him to visibly assert his identity as O’odham, which illuminated his resiliency and resistance. Ñ-je’es has I’itoi (Man in the Maze) tattooed on his chest. He received this tattoo in his early 30s and his reason for getting this tattoo and the placement of it follows:

When I was growing up I was made fun of for being Native. Kids from the reservation and city picked on us. But as I got older I started to feel more proud. My identity is a lot different than when I was younger. I didn’t care who saw it or who didn’t see it. This was for me, as Tohono O’odham and Akimel O’odham. I knew this was our design. I didn’t want to have something I didn’t know about. It’s not something you just put on. You need to have a feeling for it. It stamped my identity on me.75

74 Robert Enos Jr., interview by author, 2 January 2017, Commerce, CA.

75 Robert Enos Jr., interview by author, 2 January 2017, Commerce, CA.
Similar to ñ-tatal, Rodney’s tattoos, ñ-je’es imprinted our home space, O’odham Jewed. This imprinting resists racism and assumptions of Indigenous peoples in urban spaces as “inauthentic.” Both of my Uncle’s tattoos inscribe their identities, which are formulated by their experiences and interactions in Pico Gardens. While their tattoos capture different home spaces and embed different stories, my Uncle’s tattoos mark their experiences as urban-based Indigenous peoples.

Figure 7: Ñ-je’es, Robert Jr.’s tattoo. 2016. Photo by author and used with the permission of Robert Enos Jr.
CHAPTER THREE: TRANSMISSION OF O’ODHAM KNOWLEDGE(S)

At the present time, two teen-age boys from a Reservation school are scheduled to come into the Sells Indian Hospital at weekly intervals for the gradual surgical removal of some markings put on a month ago.

Edward C. Hinckley, Training Officer of Community Health of the Tohono O’odham Nation

One I got at Sherman, the other one I got at home. Tattooed with the pickers from the cactus.

Mary B. Enos (En-hu’ul)

Considering the long and widespread history of Indigenous tattooing in North America, these practices go exceptionally unrecognized, but not by mere chance or coincidence. Indigenous tattooing practices are deliberately overlooked because they threaten the success of settler colonialism. Immeasurable amounts of knowledge(s) involved in tattooing practices are knowledge(s) that are rooted in our connections to land and community. Not only are knowledge(s) embedded in the method of tattooing, but within the tattoo itself. Tattoos imprint our knowledge(s) onto us. As Eve Tuck (Aleut) and K. Wayne Yang assert, “In the process of settler colonialism, land is remade into property and human relationships to land are restricted to the relationship of the owner to his property. Epistemological, ontological, and cosmological relationships to land are interred, indeed made pre-modern and backward. Made savage.”

Despite settler colonialism’s relentless attempts to eradicate Indigenous knowledge(s), we’ve maintained our knowledge(s) and continue to transmit them. Throughout this chapter, I overview the existing sources specifically on O’odham tattooing to demonstrate the prevalence of this practice. Avoiding static representations of Indigenous tattooing, I encourage us to understand tattoos as tools for cultural transmission by detailing my family’s reasons for

becoming tattooed, the meaning(s) of their tattoos, and conceptualizations of the cultural knowledge(s) embedded in their tattoos.

**O’odham Tattooing Practices: A Historical Overview**

The writings of Jesuit missionary, Ignaz Pferfferkorn is presumably one of the earliest written accounts of tattooing among the O’odham. Throughout his descriptions of the Indigenous peoples and their customs in this geographic area, Pferfferkorn failed to make distinctions between each tribal nation. Instead, he carelessly referred to all Indigenous groups in the Sonoran desert as “Sonorans.” This makes it difficult to decipher exactly whom Pferfferkorn is writing about, but it can be assumed that its based heavily on his interactions with the Opata, Akimel O’otham, and Tohono O’odham due to his missionary assignments with these specific tribal nations. According to Pferfferkorn, mothers would poke their children, particularly their daughters around the age of one, with a thorn of some sort on their forehead, cheeks, and around their mouth and eyes. He went on to say, “Charcoal dust is rubbed into the holes which are dripping with blood and when the blood has coagulated with the dust the figures remain ineradicable.”

Similarly, Hubert Bancroft discussed the tattooing of infants, specifically in reference to tattooing practices among Akimel O’otham. He stated, “some tattoo their newly born children around their eyelids.” But unlike Pferfferkorn, Bancroft included, “girls, on arriving at the age of maturity, tattoo from the corners of the mouth to the chin.” This explanation of O’odham tattooing implied an interrelationship between tattooing and women’s puberty rite and that

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79 Ibid., 532.
women were generally the bearers of tattoos. In support of this conclusion, John Bartlett described tattooing among the Pee Posh and Akimel O’otham as “a universal custom among the women when they arrive at maturity, to draw two lines with some blue colored dye from each corner of the mouth to the chin this is pricked in with some pointed instrument and remains through life.” 80 Aleš Hrdlička also noted “older women have tattooed lines on the chin, and frequently a single line from the external angle of each eye backward.”81

Two published O’odham centered narratives, which reference tattooing are anthropologist Ruth Underhill’s, *The Autobiography of a Papago Woman*, which Underhill transcribed for Maria Chona (Tohono O’odham), and Anna Moore Shaw’s (Akimel O’otham), *A Pima Past*. Both depict the link between tattoos and women’s puberty ceremony. Chona’s autobiography describes the time when she menstruated for the second time in her life, which was a year after her first so it was decided that she should do ceremony again. Following ceremony, her father-in-law suggested she be tattooed. Maria Chona stated, “my mother-in-law tattooed these four marks I have on my chin. I lay on the floor with my head in her lap and she pricked the lines with cactus thorns. Then she rubbed in greasewood soot.”82 Analogous to Maria Chona’s experience, Anna Moore Shaw recounts when an Akimel O’otham woman named Dawn had her lower eyelids and corners of her lower lip tattooed to complete her puberty ceremony. Shaw described that Dawn’s aunt “used the hard sharp thorns of a small tree called *uhs chewadpad*, the white man’s crucifixion thorn.”83 While it may seem that tattooing among

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O’odham was only designated to women, in 1908, Frank Russell made clear that this wasn’t exactly the case.

Compared to other writings on O’odham tattooing, Frank Russell has written the most extensively, particularly on Akimel O’otham tattooing. Russell is typically cited when discussing O’odham tattooing practices. Russell’s writings demonstrate that tattooing was practiced among Akimel O’otham men and women. Men were usually tattooed along the lower eyelids, temples, across the forehead, or with a band across their wrist, while women tattooed their chin and their lower eyelids like the men. Russell also photographed an O’otham tattoo kit, which consisted of mesquite charcoal, willow charcoal, and needles (made from prickly pear cactus thorns, which were bound together with sinew from the back and legs of deer). As other writings mentioned tattoos marking a specific life event, Russell stated otherwise:

The tattooing was done between the ages of 15 and 20; not, it would seem, at the time of puberty, but at any time convenient to the individual and the operator. Oftentimes a bride and groom were tattooed just after marriage. All the older [Akimel O’otham] are tattooed, but the young people are escaping this disfigurement. As in the case of painting, the practice of the art is passing away and the meaning of the designs is unknown. This statement alludes to the decline of O’odham tattooing, yet doesn’t explain the reason(s) for its decline. Furthermore, it captures a time when the tattoos themselves began shifting into other forms, rather than the act of tattooing declining.

In 1962 at the Co-Ordinating Council for Research in Indian Education annual conference held in Arizona, Edward C. Hinckley presented on “Tattooing Among Papago

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86 Ibid.,162.
Students.” Questionnaires were sent to Phoenix Indian School, Sherman Institute, St. John’s Mission School, and to five Bureau and four Mission schools on the Tohono O’odham reservation. Ninety-nine boys and 122 girls participated in the study. Responses to the questionnaires concluded that Tohono O’odham students were being tattooed just as much at home as they were in school. Moreover, approximately half of the students with tattoos had facial ones. Although Hinckley referenced several of the same accounts of O’odham tattooing as I have above, he purported that the nuances within the accounts, made the roots of ceremonial tattooing untraceable and insubstantial. Instead, Hinckley associated the tattooing with Pahuco culture and deviance, which was in accordance with white mainstream society’s sentiment towards tattooing during this period. Overall, he stressed tattoos resulted in lack of employment, infection, and disapproval from mainstream white society thus the urgency to remove existing tattoos and prevent further tattooing practices.

Following Hinckley’s criticism of tattooing practices among Tohono O’odham, he stated that anthropologists lacked discussion of tattoo removal strategies. He then went on to quote a dermatologist’s response about removing the tattoos of O’odham students, which follows:

Removal of tattoos is difficult in dark-skinned people. If you go deep enough to get rid of the ink…for obvious reasons you will come up with depigmented areas, which are as bad as what you have…I tried Tri-Chloracetic Acid on one tattoo mark…If this is satisfactorily tested in removing the tattoos…then the Herculean task confronts us as to treating the rest. This procedure is very tedious, but oddly enough, not too painful.87

Moreover, Hinckley noted that the dermatologist preferred surgical excision over chemical treatment. Visible in this dermatologist’s statement and Hinckley’s study not only overt racism, but the intent to assimilate Indigenous peoples and eradicate their knowledge(s) and cultural practices by disassociating tattooing practices with O’odham culture and surgically unmarking

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their skin. Hinckley’s effort to control and prevent tattooing practices among Tohono O’odham, particularly Tohono O’odham students, was met with resistance.

Martina Dawley’s (Hualapai/Diné) Master’s thesis exemplifies resistance in boarding schools by centering tattooing amongst Indigenous women attending off and on reservation boarding schools. Dawley interviewed women of the Navajo Nation, Tohono O’odham Nation, and Colorado River tribes who attended Phoenix Indian School, Santa Rosa Boarding School, and Fort Wingate Boarding School. Dawley traces the history of tattooing specifically in the Southwest region back to Huhugam human effigy jars (c. AD 950-1100). While Dawley contains tattooing as an act of resistance in boarding schools, I would add, these tattooing practices were also an act of resistance to settler colonialism’s unmarking.

**O’odham Markings**

Similar to the experiences of the O’odham students in Hinckley’s study and the Indigenous women in Dawley’s thesis, eñ-hu’ul is imprinted by two small tattoos, one she received in boarding school and the other at home, on the Rez. Eñ-hu’ul attended Sherman Indian Boarding School from 1953 to 1956, six years prior to Hinckley’s study. When I asked eñ-hu’ul why she decided to be tattooed, she replied, “I thought I was doing something nice. I call it nice.” Although she abstained from disclosing anything further about the tattoo she received in boarding school, she eagerly shared details about her other tattoo.

Eñ-hu’ul remembered being tattooed one night after a dance on the T.O. Rez (Tohono O’odham Nation). Instead of making their way home after the dance, eñ-hu’ul and her friend decided to stay over at a mutual friend’s house. They were all gathered outside recapping the

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89 Mary Enos, interview by author, 21 February 2017, Gila River Indian Reservation.
eventful night. Although my grandmother’s recollection of how tattooing arose in their conversation and how they came to be tattooed is fragmented, she did recall cactus spines were used to inscribe a small tattoo onto her left inner forearm. Further, she remembered that after some time, she wanted a portion of that tattoo covered up so she asked her brother to tattoo my grandfather’s initials over it. For this process, she only recalls that her brother used India ink to pigment her skin.

A basic understanding of my grandmother’s decision to become tattooed seemingly falls in line with Hinckley’s conclusion that tattooing in school and at home, amongst Tohono O’odham students was simply a temporal act of rebellion. Contrary to this assumption, I encourage us to analyze these tattooing practices as resistance to settler colonialism’s ongoing attack on Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies, and cosmologies through the unmarking of Indigenous skin. Through this analysis of tattooing, we also avoid static representations of Indigenous tattooing and consider how Indigenous peoples have revitalized their tattooing practices, adapted their tattooing practices, and/or utilized contemporary tattooing practices to transmit cultural knowledge(s). As Altamirano-Jiménez and Kermoal suggest, “rather than returning to a frozen Indigenous past, it is about reclaiming Indigenous knowledge to make sense of the present and imagine future possibilities.”

Although my grandmother’s tattoos don’t depict cultural significance, the processes of her becoming tattooed hold cultural knowledge(s). Imprinted in my grandmother’s skin are the multiple skills and knowledge(s) of tattooing with cactus spines. Our relationship to ha:ṣan (saguaro cactus), which allows us to use cactus spines for tattooing is (re)inscribed onto her. Transference of the knowledge(s) of these relations occurs when she shares about her becoming

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tattooed. While my grandmother’s tattoos don’t appear to be readable as O’odham and the transmittance of knowledge(s) is indirect, my other relatives’ tattoos, like ñ-je’es are.

When my cousin Lisa was 26 years old, she decided she wanted a tattoo that would embody her identity and represent her culture. One day she asked her friend’s brother if he’d tattoo her and he agreed to do so. The next day she borrowed her brother’s tribal ID as a source of reference to show her tattooist what she wanted. Lisa has an aspect of the Tohono O’odham Nation’s flag tattooed on the back of her left shoulder. Her tattoo is a depiction of the red staff with 11 feathers, representing Baboquivar, San Lucy, Chukut Kut, San Xavier, Gu Achi, Schuk Toak, Gu Vo, Sells, Hickiwan, Sif Oidak, and Pisinemo, the districts of the Tohono O’odham Nation.

Figure 8: Cousin Lisa’s tattoo. 2017. Photo courtesy of Isabel Dagio and used with the permission of Lisa Pasqual.
Lisa recalls that one of the fondest memories she shares with our Grandmother is when our Grandmother pointed at each feather tattooed on my Cousin’s back and said aloud the names of each village in O’odham Ñeok (language). This shared interaction between my cousin, Lisa and our Grandmother demonstrates how tattoos can be utilized as a tool to transmit cultural knowledge. Language and geographical locations, which are significant to the continuance of O’odham Himdag are being passed on through this interaction.

My Cousin, Lisa shared that her tattoo enables her to “always represent where she comes from.” She went on to say, “Going to the reservation with my Grandparents or Mom and Dad, growing up, I remember driving through and always asking what’s Covered Wells, what’s Santa Rosa and now I got them all on my back.” Covered Wells and Santa Rosa are within the Gu Achi district and by my Cousin explicitly stating that these places are inscribed onto her back, it is clear that her tattoo allows her to carry these home spaces with her, similar to our Uncles’ tattoos. Another way that my Cousin’s tattoo inscribes the home space is by connecting her to other O’odham. While non-O’odham may not understand the significance of her tattoo, it is legible to other O’odham. We recognize and understand the meaning of the tattoo while others may not.

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91 Lisa Pasqual, interview by author, 29 December 2016, El Monte, CA.

92 Ibid.
CONCLUSION: Possibilities of Indigeneity Visualized

Maybe one day we might talk with people from the reservation and we’ll explain to them how our life was. Then maybe they can explain to us how their life was. Maybe we can understand each other and probably grow as a people together and help each other out.

-Robert Enos Jr.

Currently, the majority of Indigenous peoples in the U.S. live in urban centers. Various factors have and continue to contribute to the large concentrations of Native peoples living in cities, affecting numerous Indigenous people and nations. Yet, Indigenous urbanization remains considerably unexamined. Instead, Indigenous realities and experiences are understood repeatedly through the rural/urban dichotomy. Working to fix Indigeneity to non-urban spaces, distorted representations of urban Natives ensued from this dichotomy. Urban Indigenous peoples are predominantly viewed as “inauthentic” and culturally lost by non-Natives and Natives alike. Contrary to mainstream beliefs that Indigenous cultures and identities are incompatible with urbanity, Indigenous peoples, like my relatives and myself, persistently engage in creative strategies of identity negotiation and assertion. Thus, bringing attention to the lived realities and experiences of urban Indigenous peoples has the ability to decenter the overgeneralized and too simplistic narratives while uncovering largely overlooked acts of resistance and resilience.

Although this project contributes to the discussions of Indigenous urbanization and at some points aims to make interventions, it is unquestionable that there is not only room for further examinations, but also a need for them. I recognize that my family and I undertake the work of disrupting prevailing conceptions about Indigenous identities and urban spaces on Tongva land, which warrants more investigation and discussion. Additionally, the layers of this project provide multiple opportunities for further research. Accounting for the significance that
sex and gender play in the reception and access to tattoos and tattoo placement on the body are also directions for future research.

This project is meant to illuminate processes of identity formation within urban spaces by examining how my family utilizes tattoos as a form of expressing and asserting their identities. My family’s tattoos imprint the spaces they call home, which are bound to their identity, and are visual representations of the dynamics of Indigenous urbanization. My family’s tattoos also serve as a tool for retaining and transmitting, cultural knowledge(s) intergenerationally. Drawing from my relatives’ experiences growing up and living in Los Angeles has enabled me to consider deeply how their identities are formed congruously and occasionally, incongruously with urbanity. This in-depth examination of my family’s lived realities also allows me to investigate their innovative forms of identity expression. Presenting a specified examination of urban Indigenous peoples offers a more nuanced understanding of Indigenous urbanization. The very little scholarly attention given to Indigenous urbanization and identity widely emphasizes connections to non-urban tribal homelands and/or Indigenizing urban spaces. While this project corresponds and engages with these discussions, it also opens possibilities for new discussions. Thinking through my relatives’ tattoos coupled with a spatial analysis of Pico Gardens, the urban space my family is rooted in, illustrates how this space informs their identities in particular ways. While explorations of Indigenous urbanization focused on particular cities exist, they neglect to account for the production of space within cities and further, how these distinct spaces influence experiences of urban living. Deviating from broad analyses of Indigenous urbanization in cities, this project looks closely at the urban space my family calls homes and explores interactions within this space, particularly with non-Indigenous peoples, while considering how these interactions impact identity formation and assertion. My relatives’ tattoos that were influenced
by their experiences and interactions in Pico Gardens housing projects, function as visual representations of the complexity of Indigeneity.

Along with highlighting urban living in Pico Gardens and the myriad of ways it shapes my Uncles’ identities, guiding their decisions to become tattooed, I focus on how tattoos transfer cultural knowledge(s) intergenerationally. Challenging pervasive assumptions that Indigeneity and cities are incompatible, my family’s tattoos heighten visibility of O’odham culture by imprinting O’odham knowledge(s). These knowledge(s) guide O’odham in securing the continuity and futurity of our communities. Tattoos embodying O’odham knowledge(s) are teaching tools, which have the ability to reach O’odham in various geographical locations. My family’s tattoos also demonstrate how processes of teaching and sharing cultural knowledge(s) evolve and adapt. My family’s tattoos push against misconceptions of urban Indigenous peoples and examining how they decided to become tattooed and what their tattoos mean offers new insights into Indigenous urbanization.

By analyzing Indigenous urbanization primarily on the basis of my family’s tattoos, I recognize an Indigenous practice that was widespread across North America prior to colonization, which receives little to no attention. Since early colonization, tattoos have been posited as markers of difference, specifically for Indigenous peoples. While tattooed Indigenous peoples were initially a spectacle for the colonial gaze, the brevity of colonizers’ fetishization of Indigenous tattoos resulted in this practice being a target for literal and metaphorical erasure. However, my family’s tattoos signify long-established forms of identity expression for Indigenous peoples. Simultaneously, their tattoos signify the adaptability of traditions.
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