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Savage skins: The freakish subject of tattooed beachcombers

Abstract
When the first beachcombers started to return to Europe from the Pacific, their indigenously tattooed bodies were the subject of both fascination and horror. While some exhibited themselves in circuses, sideshows, museums and fairs, others published narratives of their experiences, and these narratives cumulatively came to constitute the genre of beachcomber narratives, which had been emerging steadily since the early 1800s. As William Cummings points out, the process of tattooing or being tattooed was often a ‘central trope’ (7) in the beachcomber narratives.
ANNIE WERNER

Savage Skins: The Freakish Subject of Tattooed Beachcombers*

When the first beachcombers started to return to Europe from the Pacific, their indigenously tattooed bodies were the subject of both fascination and horror. While some exhibited themselves in circuses, sideshows, museums and fairs, others published narratives of their experiences, and these narratives cumulatively came to constitute the genre of beachcomber narratives, which had been emerging steadily since the early 1800s. As William Cummings points out, the process of tattooing or being tattooed was often a ‘central trope’ (7) in the beachcomber narratives.

Tattoos represented for the white spectator an instant signifier of the savage otherness of the inhabitants of the South Seas, and the practice was increasingly deployed in colonial literature as an immediately visible example of the exotic primitivity of the Pacific ‘savages’. In light of this, tattooed white men symbolised a problematic straddling of racial identities. As Judith Butler points out, a disruption or renegotiation of the accepted norms and practices in regards to bodily boundary ‘disrupts the very boundaries that determine what it is to be a body at all’ (Butler 169). A ‘white’ body, indelibly inscribed and transformed by a ‘savage’ text, created in the minds of the European public a sense of unease and confusion that ultimately led to the common perception of beachcombers — and especially tattooed beachcombers — as untrustworthy rogues. The Indigenous tattoo perfectly highlights the notion of the skin as boundary or border, and the tattoo itself as that which crosses that border, yet simultaneously resides within it. The beachcombers both crossed borders (in Greg Dening’s terminology, the beach) and lived within them. Likewise, their tattoos were symbols of the crossing, embodied on and in the corporeal self.

In this essay, I explore the representation of tattoos, tattooed bodies and the practice of tattooing in beachcomber narratives of the nineteenth century. The presence of tattooing in these narratives, I argue, responds to, engages with and reiterates the notions of otherness and savagery that surrounded tattooing since its reappearance1 in Europe in the late 1700s. Captain James Cook was responsible for re-introducing the practice of indelibly marking the skin, and his naming of the phenomenon —
tattoo, taken from the Polynesian, *ta-tau* — meant that tattooing was intrinsically and invariably linked to themes of racialisation and othering that were fundamentally linked to the colonial agenda.

The beachcombers’ engagement with Cook’s terminology and definition is essentially responsible for the creation and entrenchment of ‘tattoo’ as a permanently othering practice, which is capable of both blurring and transforming racial identity. The symbol of the tattoo, I will argue, is used in these narratives as part of an already emerging yet still developing discourse of colonial power, which utilises the tattoo as a symbol of racialisation, cultural transformation and inexplicable degeneracy. In this essay, my discussion focuses on only those men who returned to Europe wearing Indigenous tattoos, prior to the popular adaptation and Europeanisation of tattooing by later sailors. It is important to make this distinction, since the tattoo at this point was still viewed as a symbol of exotic otherness, and had not yet been co-opted by criminologists such as Cesare Lombroso as a symptom of criminal degeneracy. I am interested in this earlier interpretation — tattoos as the mark of the exotic other — because I believe that all subsequent interpretations of the tattoo are embedded in and feed off the earlier, colonially determined definition. My intention in this essay is to establish a discourse surrounding tattoos that considers and interrogates their colonial history. Beachcomber narratives provide an excellent subject for such an interrogation since they are the first popular literary representations of Indigenous tattooing.

In *Islands and Beaches*, Greg Dening defines the beachcombers as

those who crossed beaches alone. They crossed the beach without the supports that made their own world real into other worlds that were well-established and self-sufficient. They were strangers in their new societies and scandals in their old…. They confronted, as few other men confront, the relativity of everything that made them what they were: their values, their judgements, the testimony of their senses.

(Dening 129)

It is in this theorisation of the nature of the beachcomber that the notions of liminality, or, in the words of A. Irving Hallowell, ‘transculturisation’, is first suggested. As Ian Campbell points out, tattooing often functioned as an ‘important channel of assimilation’ for the beachcomber. Problematically, however

[c]ontemporary observers had both a fascination and a horror of the tattooed white man, regarding the native tattoo as a sign of extreme degradation and depravity. Nothing else seemed to symbolise so evocatively the extent to which a white man had ‘let himself go’ or ‘sunk’ than having his skin marked in the manner of ‘savages’.

(Campbell 99)

For the returned beachcombers, this popular attitude presented a contradiction in their identity — the tattoos that they had received as a means of integrating into native Oceanic societies, meant that they were unable to fully re-integrate back into their own European culture. As Campbell points out, ‘Returning and
fitting back in turned out to be more difficult than might be expected and, in many cases, appears to have been more difficult than the adaption to Polynesian life had been’ (Campbell 99). The border crossings that these men experienced — physical, corporeal, geographic and cultural — each added to the reception they received from European and American society. Campbell indicates that ‘the term [beachcomber] generally had connotations of opprobrium because a man who chose to “live among natives” was not merely an emigrant; he was regarded in European society as a renegade’ (4). For tattooed beachcombers, this opprobrium was made immediately visually apparent. Cummings notes that few beachcombers, if any,

truly crossed cultural boundaries and came to live as did their Polynesian hosts, though many later capitalised on the presumption that they had accomplished precisely this. For beachcombers, tattoos became permanent reminders of their experiences and an ever-present prompt to tell stories about exotic peoples and customs in distant lands. (Cummings 7)

Such an indelible ‘prompt’ inscribed upon the corporeal border meant that reintegration was intrinsically linked to constant re-enactment of the border crossing. The return crossing is therefore suspended, never able to be completed on account of the constant reminder. For returned tattooed beachcombers, the transgression of their corporeal boundary by the Indigenous tattoo facilitated a suspension of identity. Marked and coloured by the Indigenous ‘text’ of the tattoo, these men were no longer fully ‘white’. They are othered, not only by their experiences, but also by the permanent and immediately visible symbol of them.

For many beachcombers, Indigenous tattooing was a necessary procedure in order to confirm and affirm their status within the tribe of which they became a part. Barnet Burns, an Englishman who settled in New Zealand in about 1831, claims to have allowed himself to be tattooed ‘as it would be of service to me’ (Bentley 4), and he received a Maori facial tattoo or *moko* that indicated his assimilation. Similarly, Edward Robarts, who voluntarily left his ship in the Marquesas Islands in 1797, reluctantly allowed himself to become tattooed as a matter of survival. The Marquesans amongst whom Robarts resided, tattooed extensively, and most Marquesans were heavily tattooed with symbols of initiation, status and familial affiliation. Despite his twenty-two-year residence in the Islands, Robarts received only one tattoo, which Dening describes as a ‘meal ticket’ (Dening 2004 308). The tattoo symbolised Robarts’ membership into an elite group that afforded him food in a time of famine. Like Burns’ *moko*, Robarts’ mark symbolised his acceptance into a group that ensured his survival, but it also signified a compromise of identity and autonomy. This compromise, and the unease it may have created for Robarts, is indicated within his narrative by his unusual treatment of the subject of tattooing.

Unlike other beachcombers who published their narratives in the nineteenth century, Robarts does not comment extensively on his own, or others’ tattoos. He
makes no mention of his own tattoo throughout his journal, and details of this mark come only from others’ descriptions of him. Adam Krusenstern, the Russian explorer who visited the Marquesas and published his account in 1805, provides a description of Robarts, the ‘light coloured person’ who met them on arrival: ‘We soon found out that he was an Englishman, who had already spent five years in the island; he was almost entirely naked, having only a narrow girdle tied round his middle, and was tattooed on the breast’ (6–7). Robarts’ lack of description of his tattoo(s) suggests that his relationship to these marks was tentative. He either did not want his European readers to know that he had been tattooed, or he was unwilling to admit his dependence on the tribe.

Also striking is Robarts’ lack of comment on the tattooed bodies of his Marquesan companions. While other voyagers to the Marquesas could not help but comment ad nauseum on the heavily tattooed indigenous inhabitants of the islands, Robarts remains strangely silent on the topic. Even in his otherwise extensive and comprehensive anthropological observations and descriptions, no comment is made. Indeed, Robarts’ most detailed accounts of tattooing are made in reference to his interactions and descriptions of another Marquesan beachcomber, Joseph Cabris. In these descriptions, he displays an attitude of fear and abhorrence towards the tattooed white man, who he considers to be somehow transformed.

The Frenchman, Joseph Cabris, was a contemporary of Robarts in the Marquesas, and although they were quite possibly the only white men permanently residing in the same island group during the same period of time, the two exhibited extraordinarily different attitudes to the tattoos they received. Both men were fully integrated into Marquesan society, becoming fluent in the language and customs of their adopted people and marrying into Indigenous families. Both were tattooed in the Indigenous Marquesan manner as a matter of necessity, however Robarts was marked reluctantly and less extensively than Cabris, who seems to have embraced the practice and was heavily tattooed. Robarts comments on his first meeting with Cabris since receiving his facial tattoo. ‘I lookt at him, but did not Know him. The face was tattooed all over [and this] disguised the features. When he spoke, I drew my hand from him. I Knew him to be the french boy’ (Robarts 97). In this interaction, Cabris is ‘masked’ by his facial tattoo, and therefore unrecognisable. The denial of visual recognition — in Robarts’ terms, visual ‘Knowledge’ — indicates the removal of Cabris from Robarts’ visual perception of what a fellow white man should be, and Robarts recoils in horror from this permanently masked — and therefore transformed — individual. Robarts’ recoiling from Cabris’ transformation illuminates his own reluctance to become tattooed, and suggests a disinclination towards this kind of ‘transformation’.

Many beachcombers express within their narratives a similar sentiment of reluctance when it comes to their being tattooed by the Indigenous people. As
Cummings has indicated, tattooing is a central trope of beachcomber narratives from the Pacific, and features prominently in many accounts, however few beachcombers admit to being tattooed voluntarily. Where Robarts hinted at his distaste for Indigenous Marquesan tattoos in his abhorrence for Cabris and his failure to mention his own tattoos, many beachcombers are more explicit in their rendering of Indigenous tattoos in a negative light. Frequently, the process of tattooing is elaborately conveyed as being a torturous, painful process that they were either forced into, or reluctantly submitted to as a matter of survival.

John Rutherford was resident in New Zealand from 1816, and his narrative was published as a substantial section of George Lillie Craik’s book, *The New Zealanders*. In his account, Rutherford suggests that he was the unwilling recipient of his tattoos, and maintains that he was a passive victim in the process.

The whole of the natives then seated themselves on the ground in a ring, we were brought into the middle, and, being stripped of our clothes, and laid on our backs, we were each of us held down by five or six men, while two others commenced the operation of tattooing us. (Craik 135)

Given the previous mentions of cannibalism within the text, where Rutherford and his companion wondered if the Maori ‘were examining us to see if we were fat enough for eating’ (Craik 134), it may be argued that Rutherford’s depiction of the scene is calculated for suspense. Surrounded by ‘all’ of the natives, ‘stripped’ of their clothes, and ‘held down by five or six men’ the process is obviously not something the men submitted themselves to willingly. In maintaining this unwillingness, Rutherford essentially denies responsibility for the othering marks that he has received. This, in turn, establishes two important meanings. Firstly, Rutherford denies responsibility and willingness, and therefore ‘maintains’ his whiteness and civilised racial and cultural identity. He has not willingly submitted to the ‘transforming’ process of tattooing, and is therefore, in essence, not entirely transformed. Secondly, the tattooing process is depicted as an inflicted, torturous event, where the white men are victimised, and therefore establishes the Maori as barbarous and savage. In turn, the tattoos are implicated as both the means and the result of the torture.

James O’Connell, a beachcomber on Ponape in the Caroline Islands, depicts his own tattooing in a similar manner. Like Rutherford, O’Connell sets a scene of suspense prior to his description of the process, describing an ominous journey to the place where they were to be tattooed, which ‘would have been pleasing, if we had not been so utterly in the dark as to the purpose of the journey’ (113). On arrival, O’Connell and his companion busy themselves in speculation as to their ‘end’. The woman who tattoos O’Connell’s hand is described as his ‘executioner’, and the process itself is described by O’Connell as a ‘battering’ and ‘punishment’. According to O’Connell, he heartily entreated against any further tattooing, but to no avail: the ‘savage printers’ continued their torture, and O’Connell ‘often thought [he] should die of these apparently petty, but really acutely painful
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inflictions’ (116). Again, the tattooing process is established as a kind of torture, and the tattooing natives are rendered as ‘savage printers,’ indelibly inscribing their native text into and onto the passive white body.

O’Connell’s companion in captivity, George, was apparently unable to bear the pain of being tattooed, and begged not to have the operation completed. This wish was granted, but not without ‘unequivocal expressions of disgust at his cowardice and effeminacy’ (115). In O’Connell’s narrative, George is emasculated by not being able to endure the tattooing. This in turn establishes O’Connell as being brave, honourable and essentially more of a ‘man’. In addition to this, O’Connell claims that the Ponapeans exclaimed ‘Jim Chief brave!’ in admiration of his endurance. This exclamation does much for O’Connell’s standing: he is denoted as a ‘chief’, with all its implications of power, authority and status, and he is also established for the reader as being ‘brave’ even in the eyes of the savages. Further to this, George’s cowardice at the ‘tattoo hospital’ meant that when he was married, he received a wife of ‘no rank’, unlike O’Connell, who was married to a member of the ruling family — his father-in-law was chief of the island Net. Therefore the tattooing also translates, albeit subtly, into an indication of O’Connell’s sexual prowess. While O’Connell engages with the pattern of depiction where Indigenous tattoos are applied against the will of the white recipient, he simultaneously revels in the glory and status that the tattoos avail. O’Connell’s justification of the process therefore becomes double-barrelled: not only does he relinquish responsibility by indicating that he was tattooed against his will, he also clearly outlines the benefits that the tattoos availed.

According to O’Connell, the final tattoos he received were administered by his wife as a part of the marriage ceremony. Like his tattoos, O’Connell depicts his marriage as something he succumbed to unwillingly and unwittingly. Suggestions of voluntary submission to ‘savage’ ways were to be denied, especially in relation to indigenous tattooing and marrying into indigenous societies. For many beachcombers who aimed to sell their stories as a means of making a living upon returning to European or American society, it was important to re-establish their European identity so that they were not viewed by the public as degraded rogues.

As Daniel Thorp points out, beachcombers were considered by white populations to be ‘more degraded than the Natives,’ presumably on account of their ‘fall’ from civilisation: while the indigenous people had never been civilised, the white-man-gone-native had held civilisation in his grasp, and thrown it away in favour of the indigenous, ‘savage’ way of life (Thorp 2). For this reason, depictions of Indigenous tattooing, marriage, and other rites that may have been perceived as evidence of a white man’s ‘fall’ into native degeneracy, were suitably framed to absolve the narrator of responsibility. Saul Reisenberg, O’Connell’s biographer and a prominent anthropologist of the Caroline Islands, indicates O’Connell was a pathological liar, who actually deserted from his ship and
fabricated much of his narrative in order to cover up a convict past (Reisenberg 4–5). Indeed, O’Connell’s career upon his return to Europe hinged upon his tales of shipwreck, captivity and torture. In 1835, performing with the Lion Circus as the first tattooed man to be exhibited in the US, the ringmaster ‘had a rare story about this man, of the torture inflicted by savages doing the work of tattooing’ (Obrien qtd in Riesenberg 12). Within his narrative, O’Connell also justifies his tattoos by evoking the ever-present threat of cannibalism. He claims that his tattoos prevented him from being ‘eaten’ by another tribe when he was travelling through the islands. ‘Notwithstanding the representations of Ahoundel that we were in danger of being eaten if we ventured out of his sight, nothing but the most courteous treatment was received by us. My tattooing, speaking of my relationship to Ahoundel-a-Nutt, was better than letters of introduction’ (182).

Since 1492, when Columbus ‘adapted’ the word cannibal from the Arawak caniba, the threat of encountering ‘cannibal savages’ was a constant fixture in explorers’ journals, travellers’ and beachcomber narratives, and most writers seem to be fixated upon the question of whether or not the people they encountered actually did or did not practice anthropophagy. As Frank Lestringant points out, by 1533 the word cannibal was ‘already firmly attached to manifestations of a barbarity which was as mythical as it was extreme’ (33). Therefore ‘cannibal’s’ etymological history is in mythological barbarism. Like the word ‘tattoo’, it is an entrenched cultural myth that is embedded in a process and discourse of othering and colonialism. For readers of the time, cannibalism and tattooing were tantamount horrors, and I would suggest that this is a result of the corporeal transgression that each represent — the physical crossing of the boundary between the savage and civilised body. By implying that he was shipwrecked and captured, and that his participation in the ‘savage’ act of tattooing was forced, and in fact justified by the equal or greater threat of being ingested by the savage body, O’Connell disavows responsibility for his participation in the Ponapeans’ primitive way of life.

John Rutherford, who marketed himself and displayed his tattooed body in the same way as O’Connell, engaged a similar tactic of disavowal in order to make himself more ‘marketable’. In England in 1828, Rutherford made his debut appearance as a man captured and tattooed by New Zealand Maori. Like O’Connell, he also claims to have been shipwrecked, however, as Thorp points out, ‘most modern scholars believe he was a deserter who jumped ship’ (8). Of course, such an unromantic truth would have done little for his performance, which instead relied heavily on the drama and suspense created by the already familiar trope of captivity and torture. What Rutherford also failed to mention in his performances was that most of the tattoos on his body were in fact in the Tahitian style (Fellowes 7), with only his facial tattoos being those of the Maori. That Rutherford was able to exhibit himself as a man ‘tattooed by Maori’ in spite of his Tahitian designs is indicative of the notion of ‘blanket primitivism’
that tattooing evoked. The tattooed body was merely marked by ‘savagery’, and the cultural and geographic origin of those marks was ultimately inconsequential. This idea was enforced as more tattooed performers started to emerge. Some, claiming to have been shipwrecked and/or captured in the South Seas and forcibly tattooed, exhibited tattoos depicting American flags and presidents. Yet their stories were still valid in the eyes of the viewing public because the idea of the savage tattoo had been so ingrained into popular consciousness. In the context of Rutherford’s captivity and involuntary, torturous tattooing, the tattoo emerges more potently than ever as a symbol of universal savagery and barbarity. In denying responsibility for the tattoos and implying that they were forcibly applied, Rutherford attempts to avoid being objectified because of his othered and racialised

‘John Rutherford — from an original drawing taken in 1828’. (Reproduced from George Lillii Craik, The New Zealanders, p. 87, Charles Knight, London, 1830.)
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(coloured) skin. Rutherford set a trend for future performers, who inevitably found it easier to claim that their tattoos were forcibly applied by savages, rather than to admit that they had volunteered to be the subject (or object) of such a barbaric practice. This disavowal of responsibility for the marked skin was virtually the only avenue by which a tattooed individual could attempt to maintain their ‘civilised’ identity despite their ‘savage’ skin.

The return of beachcombers from the Pacific was frequently fraught with such contradictions of identity, especially for those who were tattooed during their sojourn. While their tattoos had allowed them to assimilate into Indigenous Pacific societies, they essentially disallowed their full re-integration into European society. For heavily tattooed white men and women in Europe and America in the nineteenth century, occupation as circus and sideshow freaks was usually the easiest, if not the only, option, and most tattooed beachcombers found themselves employed in this capacity. In becoming a tattooed body, the beachcombers took on not only the perceived primitivity of the natives, but they also subjected themselves to multitudes of other interpretations upon their return to Europe or America.

The ‘criminal’ nature of the tattoo was, by 1900, well established in both popular and clinical literature, mainly thanks to the work of Cesare Lombroso in Europe, who pathologised the tattoo and ‘scientifically’ established these external marks as signifiers of the subject’s overt or latent criminal nature. Though Lombroso considered only the tattoos of convicted criminals, and did not analyse any kind of Indigenous tattooing, his theories both complied with and challenged the perception of Indigenous tattooing at a time when various interpretations of the phenomenon were being born. On one hand, Europeans perceived tattooing as an exotic mark of the noble savage, such as in the case of the Tahitian Omai, who visited London with Cook and was embraced by society. On the other hand, and in a school of thought more in keeping with Lombroso’s theories, it was perceived as a savage and barbaric act which had no place on a white man’s body. Under modern theoretical and scientific scrutiny, Lombroso’s work is exposed as under-researched and over-generalised, as shown by interpretations by Jane Caplan and Nikki Sullivan. These interpretations however, in highlighting the flaws in Lombroso’s century-old theories, expose a new set of questions surrounding the way that tattoos are interpreted and read in terms of a social language. As Sullivan points out, the flaw in Lombroso’s work is that he fails to address the possibility suggested by Foucault that the discursive production of identity and difference involves the embodiment of social beliefs and values, and that our reading and writing of the textual bodies of others may constitute an unconscious reiterative performance of particular codes and practices, rather than an initiative process of the recognition of innate truths. (Sullivan 25)

In other words, our ‘reading and writing’ of tattoos is a part of a broader discursive pattern. As I have argued, the Indigenously tattooed bodies of white beachcombers were written and read within the discursive framework that was availed by Cook’s
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re-introduction and framing of the term. What Sullivan suggests here is that
tattoos only signify in a broader context of a language of tattooed bodies, where
referents are available to generate meaning. Sullivan’s work is useful here as it
draws the tattoo away from the popular thought that the tattooed body is somehow
a symbol of some ‘hidden’ and essential interiority of the subject.

Like Cabris, Robarts, O’Connell, and Burns, George Vason, whose ‘Narrative
of the Late George Vason’ was published in 1840, returned to New York with a
full traditional tattoo and eked out an existence as an educational artefact of
exoticism. Vanessa Smith offers a useful interpretation of this phenomenon:

As performer, the beachcomber could maintain an identity in translocation, supporting
himself by representing the culture from which he had come, even as he had in the
Pacific Islands. The practice of tattooing meant that the body of the repatriated white
man often bore the inscription of an alien aesthetic, which could serve as the text of
performance. Not simply an anthropological or aesthetic value, the tattoo was also
the scandalous sign of degeneration. (Smith 47)

Smith’s interpretation is useful in that it raises the notion of translocative identity,
which was a common feature of many beachcomber narratives. The indelible
physical marks — the tattoo — signified the deeper marks upon the identity of
the ‘captured’ individual.

The returning beachcomber was subject to substantial shifts in cultural
placement, and therefore identity, as a result of the borders he had crossed. For
the tattooed beachcomber, who as I have shown was forced to make a life as an
exhibited freak, a border was also crossed between subject and object. Many
travellers to the Pacific described the dehumanising and objectifying effect of
tattoos. O’Connell likens his tattooed appearance to that of animals, claiming
that after receiving his tattoos he resembled a ‘rhinoceros’ (116), and writing
that ‘I came from the tattoo hospital a bird of much more diversified plumage
than when I entered’ (116). Possibly the most famous beachcomber of all, Herman
Melville, claims that the process of tattooing ‘obliterated every trace of humanity,’
and also likens the tattooed appearance to that of a rhinoceros (118). He exclaimed
that by being tattooed, he would have been transformed into an ‘object’ (298),
like the old chiefs whom he likens in appearance to ‘verde-antique’ (118). Horace
Holden, a beachcomber on Palau, wrote that he was ‘filled with horror by the
sight of being apparently human, and yet almost destitute of the ordinary marks
of humanity… They were fantastically tattooed on different parts of their bodies’
(Holden 32). John Martin, in his Account of the Natives of the Tongan Islands,
in the South Pacific Ocean, describes the tattooed skin as resembling ‘soft blue
satin’ (37). Similarly, Frank Coffee, a traveller who published his journal as
Forty Years in the Pacific: A Book of Reference for the Traveller and Pleasure
for the Stay-at-Home in 1920 likens the tattooed faces of elderly Maori to ‘plaques
of old wood’ (179). Given the frequency with which tattooed people were thus
described on returning to Europe or America, the tattooed person found himself
to be even more of an ‘object’. By bearing the generic marks of the savage, the tattooed beachcomber became an exotic artefact, whose primary value, and indeed currency, was derived from the objectification of the tattooed body.

While it could be argued that most beachcombers actually objectified themselves by willingly being exhibited, my contention is that their exhibition was at times a dire response to the objectification and othering that the European and American public had already dealt them. For Joseph Cabris, the selling of his story was merely a way to make ‘a few rubles [sic],’ on his return to Europe, and his body of Marquesan tattooing had become his ‘major asset’ (Campbell 138). At the time of his death this ‘major asset’ was actually preyed upon by art dealers and collectors who intended to flay and tan Cabris’ tattooed skin. Like so many other tattooed bodies, traded as commodities across oceans and cultures, Cabris ended his life being most valued as a freakish object. I believe that the return of the beachcomber, the crossing of the border from ‘savagery’ to civilisation, and its inherent objectification was fundamental in promoting and maintaining the symbol of the tattoo as the mark of savagery, even on a white man.

As O’Connell points out, ‘Tattooing, spoken of in another connection as embalming the memory of the dead, is an art essential, in its symbolical language, to the preservation of the traditionary uses of the natives’ (151). In light of this, O’Connell, and other beachcombers who were inscribed in a similar manner, became physical embodiments of the ‘savage’ way of life and brought an element of this back to their own culture upon their return. For European and American readers and viewers, the tattooed white man was an example of exoticism who was physically and psychologically transformed by his experiences, wearing primitivity on, and in, his skin. Tattooed beachcombers became fixtures in the public imaginary and consciousness at a time when tattooing, as a phenomenon and as a discourse, was still emerging. For this reason, the beachcombers’ representation of their tattooed bodies played a fundamental part in the formation and cultivation of a discourse of tattooing that was linked to colonialism and projects of othering. The beachcombers’ impulse to offer justification for their Indigenous tattoos suggests that they were already subjected to the negative connotations and assumptions that tattoos held. Their texts however, in perpetuating the negativity and reiterating the need to distance the beachcombers from the process and/or deny agency in receiving the marks, enforce a discourse that represents tattoos as the visual signifier of a primitive other. When skin is considered as the physical boundary between self and other, these marks represented the vulnerability of ‘whiteness’ to be transgressed by the coloured other. As beachcombers became entrenched in the public consciousness as articles of exotic spectacle, the objectification they were subject to within Euro-American society was solidified. Having taken the ‘mark of the savage’ into their bodies, marking their border as that which has been crossed, the tattooed beachcombers who returned to their native cultures found themselves unable to reassimilate
and were therefore rendered as liminal figures for the rest of their lives. The writing and publication of their narratives served to justify and explain the tattoos the beachcombers received, however the visual titillation offered by the spectacle of performance rendered such explanations irrelevant. O’Connell relates for his reader an anecdote involving the Ponapeans’ discovery of some books he had in his possession. He writes,

> the leaves were torn out and sewed into blankets, under which half a dozen women were strutting in all the pride of peacocks. In addition to the beauty which the article thus manufactured possessed as a ‘lagow [likou],’ (blanket), it had another charm in the tattooing. The wearers imagined themselves connected with the English chiefs while thus wearing the white man’s tattoo. (110)

When it began to rain, and the garments were washed from their bodies, ‘They were very much chagrined … and protested that the white man’s tattoo was good for nothing, it would not stand. That the islanders’ tattoo will stand, my body is witness’ (110). Just as the ‘white man’s tattoo’ proved unable to ‘stand’, so too did the beachcombers’ attempts to play down or deny the pertinence of their tattoos. The freak show of physically embodied savage skins would always subsume the written word. What this shows is that the peculiar transgression that the indigenous tattoo emblematises — the visual stigma of a breach of boundary — was an inescapable transformation — one which resulted in a loss of concrete identity, status and home.

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this article was presented at the ‘Developing Diversity’ conference at The University of Wollongong, and I would like to thank conference participants for their suggestions and feedback. Particular thanks to Katherine Biber for their valuable contributions to this essay.

2. The practice of tattooing — that is, the injection of a pigment under the dermis of the skin — is in fact ancient and extensive. Tattoos have been found on the mummified skins of ancient Egyptians, depicted in paintings of ancient Britons and Picts, and on the frozen body of Ötzi the ‘Ice Man’ who was discovered in the Swiss Alps in 1991 and is estimated to have died around 3000bc. By the 1700s however, the practice had all but died out in Europe, so Cook’s voyages to the Pacific reintroduced the concept and practice to European consciousness.

3. Verde-antique is a type of marble, which is commonly engraved or carved.

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