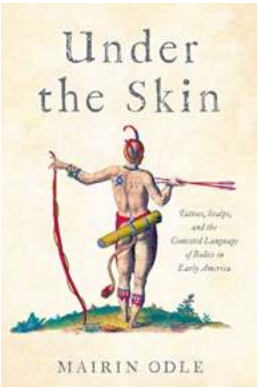
Tattoos, Scalps, and the Contested Language of Bodies in Early America

From the moment Europeans set foot on American soil, the clash of civilizations brought forth a complex and oftentimes violent interaction between the native inhabitants and the newcomers. As early settlers established colonies and pushed westward, they encountered indigenous cultures with deep-rooted traditions surrounding body modification, such as tattoos and scalping. These practices were not only part of the daily life of the indigenous peoples but also carried significant meaning and cultural significance. However, as the colonies expanded, the European settlers began to view these practices through their own lens, resulting in a contested language surrounding the bodies of early America.

The Art of Tattooing in Indigenous Cultures

Tattooing has a long history in indigenous cultures across the Americas. For many tribal communities, tattooing served as a form of personal and communal expression, reflecting an individual's accomplishments, social status, and spiritual beliefs. Various techniques, such as hand pricking and tapping, were used to create intricate and meaningful designs on the skin. These tattoos often carried cultural symbols and narratives that connected the individual to their community and ancestors.

In contrast, European settlers viewed tattoos as signs of savagery and primitiveness. The colonizers often saw the indigenous peoples' body markings as a reflection of their perceived lack of civilization. This clash of worldviews resulted in a contested language surrounding the bodies of early America, with the settlers trying to suppress and erase indigenous tattooing practices.



Under the Skin: Tattoos, Scalps, and the Contested Language of Bodies in Early America (Early American Studies) by Alex Genadinik (Kindle Edition)

4.7 out of 5

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File size	: 23795 KB
Text-to-Speech	: Enabled
Screen Reader	: Supported
Enhanced typesetting	: Enabled
Word Wise	: Enabled
Print length	: 237 pages

The Macabre Practice of Scalping

Scalping, on the other hand, was not originally an indigenous practice but became intertwined with the history of early America through colonial violence. Indigenous cultures had their own forms of ritualized violence, such as counting coup or taking prisoners, but scalping was typically associated with European settlers. The act of scalping involved removing the scalp, often with the hair intact, from an enemy's head.

The settlers, especially those on the frontier, justified their practice of scalping by their belief in the superiority of their culture and race. They considered scalping a necessary measure to protect themselves from "savage" attacks. However, this justification for violence against indigenous peoples only further perpetuated a contested language surrounding the bodies of early America.

Contested Language and Cultural Supremacy

The contested language surrounding the bodies of early America can be seen as a manifestation of cultural supremacy. The European settlers attempted to

impose their cultural norms and beliefs on the indigenous peoples, judging their practices through their own lens of civilization. This resulted in the erasure and suppression of indigenous traditions, including tattooing and the meanings associated with them.

As history progressed, the contested language surrounding the bodies of early America continued to evolve. The rise of museums and ethnographic displays in the 19th century further distorted the understanding and representation of indigenous cultures. Native peoples' bodies were often objectified and fetishized, reducing their rich traditions to mere curiosities for European amusement.

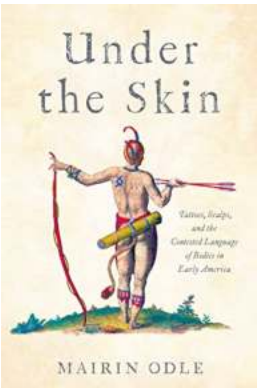
Reclaiming Identity and Preserving Heritage

Today, many indigenous communities are working diligently to reclaim their cultural practices and revive the traditions that were suppressed and oppressed during the colonial era. Tattoo artists from these communities are researching and reviving traditional tattooing techniques, infusing them with contemporary expressions of indigenous identity. By embracing their heritage and asserting their own narratives, indigenous communities challenge the contested language surrounding the bodies of early America.

Furthermore, museums and cultural institutions have started to engage in more ethical practices of exhibiting indigenous cultures. They collaborate with native communities to ensure that their stories are told in their own voices, respecting the autonomy and sovereignty of indigenous peoples. This shift in approach promotes a more accurate and inclusive understanding of the diverse cultural practices that existed in early America.

In

The contested language surrounding the bodies of early America reveals the power dynamics inherent in colonial encounters. By imposing their cultural norms and beliefs on indigenous peoples, European settlers attempted to erase and suppress indigenous traditions. However, the perseverance of native communities and the evolution of cultural institutions have led to a more inclusive and respectful understanding of the rich and varied traditions that existed in early America. The revival of indigenous tattooing practices and the reclaiming of cultural heritage continue to challenge the contested language surrounding the bodies of early America today.



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Under the Skin investigates the role of cross-cultural body modification in seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century North America, revealing that the practices of tattooing and scalping were crucial to interactions between Natives and newcomers. These permanent and painful marks could act as signs of alliance or signs of conflict, producing a complex bodily archive of cross-cultural entanglement.

Indigenous body modification practices were adopted and transformed by colonial powers, making tattooing and scalping key forms of cultural and political contestation in early America. Although these bodily practices were quite distinct —one a painful but generally voluntary sign of accomplishment and affiliation, the other a violent assault on life and identity—they were linked by growing colonial perceptions that both were crucial elements of “Nativeness.” Tracing the transformation of concepts of bodily integrity, personal and collective identities, and the sources of human difference, Under the Skin investigates both the lived physical experience and the contested metaphorical power of early American bodies.

Struggling for power on battlefields, in diplomatic gatherings, and in intellectual exchanges, Native Americans and Anglo-Americans found their physical appearances dramatically altered by their interactions with one another. Contested ideas about the nature of human and societal difference translated into altered appearances for many early Americans. In turn, scars and symbols on skin prompted an outpouring of stories as people debated the meaning of such marks. Perhaps paradoxically, individuals with culturally ambiguous or hybrid appearances prompted increasing efforts to insist on permanent bodily identity. By the late eighteenth century, ideas about the body, phenotype, and culture were increasingly articulated in concepts of race. Yet even as the interpretations assigned to inscribed flesh shifted, fascination with marked bodies remained.

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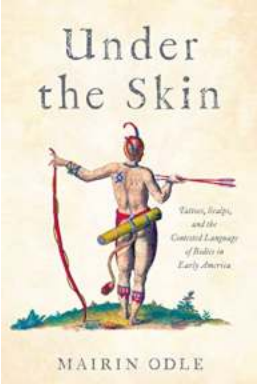

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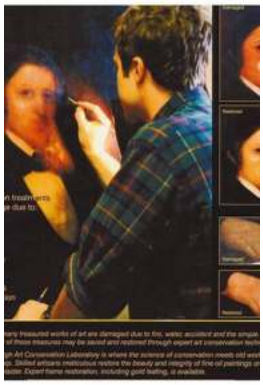

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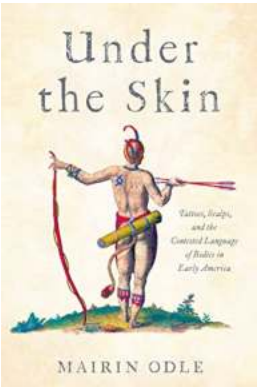

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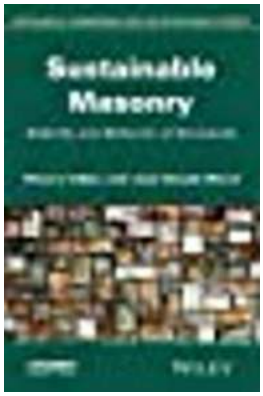

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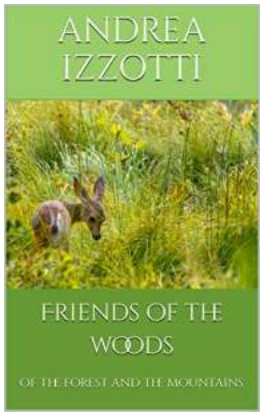

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