

# Intimate Clips: Sealskin Sewing, Digital Archives, and the Work of the Mittimatalik Arnait Miqsuqtuit Collective\*

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*Abstract: This article reflects upon the interplay of digital, material, and social relations in the context of a small-scale digital archiving project currently being undertaken by a group of women ethnographers, videographers, and sealskin seamstresses in the Canadian Eastern High Arctic Inuit settlement of Mittimatalik (Pond Inlet). I illustrate the documentation work of our Mittimatalik Arnait Miqsuqtuit Collective, situating it in the new media landscapes that have developed in the Canadian Arctic, and draw on case studies to challenge claims that new communications technology has led to the breakdown of social and environmental relationships. Clips from our digitizing work in progress offer insight into the relational ecologies emergent the making of this archive: illustrating how the unique materiality of sealskin and digital archives, the politics of Inuit hunting, the sensibilities of family and friends, and the challenges of broadband connectivity in Arctic settlements shape this initiative. Technology also emerges here as a key agent, enabling new collaborative relationships, political voice, and forms of knowledge production, but also denying others.*

[Keywords: *digital media*; collaborative methods; digital anthropology; *digital archives*; indigenous media; *material culture*; *visual anthropology*. Keywords in italics are derived from the American Folklore Society Ethnographic Thesaurus, a standard nomenclature for the ethnographic disciplines.]

## Introduction: Melding the Material, Digital, and Social

The family had just turned in for the night when fifteen-year-old Skylar arrived at her grandmother's house with a half-sewn sealskin baby bootie in hand. February is a cold, dark month in the Canadian Eastern High Arctic Inuit settlement of Mittimatalik (Pond Inlet), and Skylar had walked across town in mid -40°C temperatures. She had been working that afternoon as a youth production assistant on a digital archiving project her mother and I were running with a group of seamstresses and media makers in town (see figure 1). The footage we had been recording was of a locally renowned Inuit elder and seamstress, Ruth Sangoya, sewing the insteps into a pair of sealskin kamiks. The elder had stitched at a swift tempo, and like all skilled artisans, she had made it seem effortless (see figure 2). But when Skylar returned to her own project that night—a pair of boots for her baby daughter, Annelyse—she'd hit a snag. Unzipping her parka and settling herself on her grandparents' sofa, she pulled the skin boot out of her pocket to show where she was stuck. Putting thoughts of sleep aside, grandmother and granddaughter worked into the night, and soon after, a photo was shared by Skylar on Facebook, eliciting praise and delight from her friends.

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Through this collaborative act, the material, digital, and social were sewn together as one and became mutually constitutive.



Figure 1. Frame taken from a video clip of Ruth Sangoya measuring while Skylar Katsak softens a seal-hide boot sole with her teeth. The video clip is archived and accessible at: <https://purl.dlib.indiana.edu/iudl/media/j13900q47h>.

This article explores the intersection of the material, the digital, and the social through an interim analysis of a work in progress, an anthropological and community-driven initiative to advance and promote Inuit women’s sealskin sewing through the creation of a digital archive and set of skills-based master classes profiled on different platforms. The Mittimatalik Arnait Miqusuqit Collective (MAMC) (translated as The Pond Inlet Womens’ Sewing Collective) is located in the High Arctic community of Mittimatalik (Pond Inlet, population 1,800) on northernmost Baffin Island, Canada, and is made up of a group of Inuit seamstresses, media makers, and scholars, some of whom I’ve known since I first began anthropological fieldwork there in 1991. Over the past three years of its operation, MAMC has launched and populated an internet channel in its name (<https://vimeo.com/mamc>) with seventy-four films, and we continue to experiment with new projects and knowledge-sharing platforms. Currently, twenty-five women are members of MAMC, but involvement changes when different projects are under way and with the ebb and flow of each woman’s household and work commitments.!

Augmenting the “ethnographic eye”—with vision made keener by what I have learned to be a seamstress’s eye for detail—I focus on particular moments in this act of making (garments, films, archives, and social relationships). Skills required in this ethnographic process are akin to Anna Tsing’s (2011) “art of inclusion” or “art of noticing,” drawing insights from moments of recognition occurring between seamstress, videographers, anthropologists, family members,

and/or friends. Transpiring in living-room or kitchen conversations, on social media, during impromptu creative collaborations, and through unsaid understandings (like the one between Skylar and her grandmother described previously), these are moments when a motherly act, an internet upload, a video recording session, a sealskin seam or a social media post come together, for an instant, in a generative moment of cultural production. Our work brings these brief moments together to explore a number of questions: How might internet communications technology help reinvigorate this art form? How might the creation of online digital archives of women's work support the sustainability of the seal hunt? How might the MAMC recording or audience viewing of such master classes inspire young people like Skylar to seek out training from their elders?



Figure 2: Frame taken from the documentary video *Master Class 3: Isialiqsijuq: Adding the Instep*. The video clip is archived and accessible at: <https://purl.dlib.indiana.edu/iudl/media/188158cs8j>. It is also accessible via <https://vimeo.com/166970120>.

For centuries, Inuit women have been making sealskin garments for their loved ones, processing skin by-products of the hunt into cured hides and stitching them into richly intricate, carefully designed, lovingly crafted, and wholly practical sealskin garments. Learning these skills was essential to a young girl's apprenticeship and to a family's survival. More recently, and as is central to my article and to our overall project, digital communications have become part of this training. Here, I address how intimate moments of creativity connectedness across social and digital realms shed light on this refashioned ages-old process of making.

As digital media networks proliferate in less metropolitan places of the world, such as Mittimatalik, new and welcome challenges emerge for anthropologists of art and material culture who find themselves increasingly conducting research within and between networked spaces. This is a far different picture from my first ethnographic fieldwork in Mittimatalik in the early 1990s,

when there were few television channels and people communicated largely by telephone or CB radio. Then, upon my return to university each summer, my friends and I exchanged an occasional long-distance telephone call or letter, but the frequency of our communication was limited by long-distance phone charges and arctic postal services. The Canadian North has long since had a bombardment of southern media from cable TV networks, and interactive social media is now part of people's everyday lives and creative practices, reforming relationships at all levels, not least those between anthropologists and their collaborators. Information and opinion are now shared instantly in fieldwork sites, bringing new dimensions of power into play as processes of ethnographic knowledge production can be easily and publicly contested. Collaborative anthropology in these new digital media worlds involves interrogating how, as scholars, we can best attend to our own representational agendas while at the same time being attuned to the materiality of the art form; to interwoven social, political, or intimately familial imperatives that go into processes of making; and to technological developments, capacities and local uses. Social, material, digital, and ethnographic practices can sometimes appear to come together seamlessly in the creation of a garment, a film, or an ethnographic moment. But there can also often be other times when there appears a looseness to the fit. Ethnographies set within these new networked domains thus demand attention to the broader sets of social relationships, to the tensions in these new media worlds, and to creative synergies and innovative forms of social action enabled by the digital. But they also demand a seamstress's eye for detail.

When approached about contributing to this volume on works in progress, I responded enthusiastically in that it promised to do justice to the flexibility of purpose worked into our project design. If a project encompasses its action within wider sets of such social relationships, then is there ever a time when it becomes a final finished product, one bounded, fixed, and formed, ready to invite scholarly analysis and interpretation? There is, of course, a cultural appeal and analytic potential in the finished product, one open to scholarly contextualization and analysis. But so too does the unfinished hold analytical potential, for it speaks to the multiplicity and variability of perspectives and experiences that are part of a creative process. Celebrating rather than lamenting the fragmentation or messiness of MAMC's digital archiving work opens it to new forms of vision, conversations, and connections. Also, it does justice to, what I will go on to explain are, the real-life experiences of digitally archiving and animal skin processing and garment making. Figure 3 shows a woman's kamik making interrupted by a text from her sister. The social, material, and digital networks in which our project was embroiled were constantly in flux.

This article begins by describing some of the collective workings of our community archiving project, in its current form. Digital communications technology emerges here as one of many key agents steering this collaborative process—along with elders, family members, ancestors, the seals themselves, animal rights activists, and internet communications technology policy makers—enabling new social relationships and forms of knowledge production but also resisting others. I demonstrate how the improvisational dynamics of family life and the transformative nature of the materials—animal and digital—exist at the heart of this generative interface and underline possibilities for learning offered by MAMC's unfinished digitizing initiative.

From a consideration of skin sewing's forms of local meaningfulness, the remaining sections of the article address the importance of creating digital forums for the exhibition of sealskin sewing arts. I explore the tensions existing between Inuit and animal rights activists over Inuit claims as

modern-day subsistence seal hunters. I describe how Inuit communities have a stake in indigenizing, or Inuitizing, the internet. Bringing wider aspects of their subsistence harvesting activities—be this hunting, processing of the kill, or skin garment making—into an online forum works to effect change to the medium. Inuit activists have become savvy to polemical politics of animal rights campaigners and use platforms such as MAMC’s to reframe Inuit seal hunting within a deep cultural context. Thus, I conclude with reflections on the new media landscapes that have developed in the Arctic, the infrastructure challenges Inuit face, and the new social and environmental relationships media technologies nonetheless work to foster. Throughout the piece, I demonstrate how internally and externally derived, familiar, personal, and more encompassing or geopolitical agendas shape our making and remaking of this digital archive. Each new need established becomes part of an unfolding social dynamic, each distinctive in its own way and central to the project’s execution and success.



Figure 3: A frame of seamstress Jane Singoorie’s hands texting with a partially sewn kamik on her lap.

### **The Mittimatalik Arnait Miqsuqtuit Collective**

It is by now commonplace to state that Inuit now live in a media-saturated world. Increased broadband capacity has made social media, gaming, photo sharing, and video streaming play a progressively more central role in how inhabitants of arctic settlements communicate with each other, seek entertainment, express themselves creatively, and spark community forums and discussions further afield (Christensen 2003; Wachowich and Scobie 2010). As my longtime friend, Mittimatalingmiut media activist Sheila Katsak, reported when we were discussing platforms for our collection of sealskin sewing master classes, “most women under sixty in

Mittimatalik have an iPod or a smartphone. Women need them to keep track of their kids.” Indeed, handheld devices, tablets, and social media sites connect families, neighbors, and communities; and, as I flagged previously, they also bring local attention and global reach for an emerging generation of Inuit activists and artists to address issues such as hunting rights, food security, climate change, and cultural appropriation. For Inuit seamstresses in particular, increasingly popular closed groups like Facebook’s Inuit Creative Productions <http://tinyurl.com/FBInuitWP> (over four thousand members) and Iqaluit Auction <http://tinyurl.com/FBIQAuc> (over thirty thousand members) offer up new possibilities for creative collaboration. They serve as: platforms where sewing projects can be put up for exhibition or sale; display spaces where heirloom items can be admired; sites where individual, family, and regional designs can be compared; and crucibles for inspiring new sewing projects.

The MAMC emerged as part of this new connectivity. It was the result of months of online messaging between me and Sheila. Project planning and methodology evolved organically in the lead-up to the first recording phase, developed through online messaging across time zones and adjusted in sync with our work and family lives. Funding from a larger Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) partnership grant titled *Mobilizing Inuit Cultural Heritage* provided us with the means to envision a digital archive that would operate at different levels, as an open and accessible learning platform, a cultural resource championing sealskin sewing as an artistic tradition, and a tool to advocate for the resilience and sustainability of Inuit seal hunting internationally.<sup>3</sup> Our conversations came to incorporate visions from neighbors, relatives, children, and friends as we worked through designing an initiative that might work best for Mittimatalingmiut (inhabitants of Mittimatalik) users and seamstresses, plus showcase Inuit sealskin sewing more broadly. Sheila brought her teenage daughter, niece, older relatives, and neighbors into the project. I brought in my Norwegian anthropologist friend, a UK-based Romanian undergraduate film studies student / video editor, and eventually my young son, who accompanied me on fieldwork. Three intensive sessions devoted to visual documentation over a three-year period (MAMC 1.0, 2.0, 3.0) were agreed on and carried out during bracketed times when we came together in Mittimatalik to collect footage and photographs of skin-sewing skills. The months in between were taken up in post-production editing, uploading, circulation, promotion, and future planning. Plans for our next phase, MAMC 4.0 loosely defined, are in action but dependent on continued funding and on family and work commitments coming together. As the following sections go on to explain, our archive mirrors the contingencies, provisions, and chance operations of everyday life; it is, by its very nature, a work in progress.

### **New Communications Media, Collaborative Frames, and More Intimate Imperatives**

Our aims in undertaking this work have been to produce a digital archive focusing on sealskin garment-making skills rather than garments in their finished form. This focus on documenting process rather than product made sense to us as it was considered more accommodated to the needs of apprentice seamstresses. Yet it has also presented for us a number of methodological challenges. Skills are not bounded entities. They are not packaged items but are instead grown in the fluctuating relationships between beings and their environment (Ingold 2007). We understood from the start that such a digital archiving project necessarily had to be attuned to the wider relational ecologies that circumscribe processes of enskillment.

But how might such a focus on the technological, social, environmental, and material dynamics at play define our archive differently at various stages of its production? During the MAMC 1.0, February 2015 session, anthropologist Gro Ween from the University of Oslo had with her on loan her institution's high-definition (HD) Handycam camera: an indispensable tool to capture movement in low winter lighting conditions and soft indoor light. Sessions were conducted mostly in Inuktut (the Inuit language), so research coordinators Sheila Katsak and Leah Kippomee, and their teenage production assistant daughters, Skylar and Amy, stage-managed these afternoon sessions, receiving Inuktut instruction from the elders and pointing Gro to scenes of interest or picking up our project iPad, single-lens reflex (SLR) camera, or their own phones to achieve a certain angle or a shot in the midst of filming. (See figure 4.)



Figure 4: Frame taken from a video clip of a filming session in Ruth Sangoya's living room with Gro Ween filming and Sheila Katsak with the SLR camera. The video clip is archived and accessible at: <https://purl.dlib.indiana.edu/iudl/media/346d07j313>.

Family and work commitments meant that Gro, Leah, and her daughter Amy did not take part in the following year's recording sessions. New members joined for MAMC 2.0's June 2016 recordings: seven young apprentice seamstresses/videographers each with a sixth-generation 16 GB iPod touch (with 8 GHz cameras). Without the HD camera, image quality and sound were sacrificed, but the handheld devices invited a more organic participatory video documentation. Ethnographic authority was dispersed as documentation sessions were coordinated by the apprentice seamstresses/videographers, using iPods, all with minimal instruction and each with her own frames and creative vision. Familiarity with mobile devices was taken as a given as iPods are now used in many people's daily lives for entertainment and communication. Skills training/archiving took place between mothers and daughters, nieces and aunts, sisters and friends, often occurring late into the night in the twenty-four-hour early summer sunlight. The younger

women videographers often shared in the task.

At the directive of a weary elder, the ipod camera was quickly handed over to someone in the room, and the skin and tool passed to the videographer, as the elder moved outside the frame to provide instruction. As figure 5 shows, children were part of almost all the sessions filmed in these domestic spaces.

June 2017's MAMC 3.0 further experimentation with different filming formats. This time we set about inventorying sealskin-sewing terminology with unilingual Inuktitut-speaking Inuit seamstresses.



Figure 5: Frame taken from a video clip of Georgina Pewataoluk and her baby, Neil, on her lap filming Louisa Amagoalik. The video clip is archived and accessible at: <https://purl.dlib.indiana.edu/iudl/media/j52w130d9k>.

## **Mediated Enskilment**

In earlier times in the Arctic, the training of young women was of a far different nature than that described in our work. Before the importation of European textiles, much of a woman's day-to-day work was taken up keeping her family clothed. Processing animal skins and sewing them into garments was valued work, essential to a family's survival, and youth learned by watching their elders and shadowing their mothers from a young age. Curing rawhide and hand-sewing skin garments are complicated, painstaking, and prolonged processes, demanding years of apprenticeship and practice to achieve mastery at all stages.

In the past, an increasing facility for making mittens, kamiks, parkas, and trousers was exhibited publicly, on the bodies of closest relatives. The staged production of specific items—first mittens, then kamiks, trousers, and finally parkas—delineated a young girl's transition into adulthood. Beyond its utility for the wearer, clothing existed as a material manifestation of a woman's proficiency as a seamstress, and it granted status to her husband as a hunter and to herself as a wife and mother. The importation of trading-post textiles in the twentieth century made clothing family members more efficient, but skin garments remain warm and often more practical for hunting trips on the land. And they remain highly fashionable and desired. Today, young women are still praised for the quality of their handiwork, their resourcefulness with raw materials, and for each new sewing milestone achieved. The suppleness and finish of a woman's processed sealskins, the size and uniformity of her stitching and gathers, and the design and fit of the garment on its wearer are sources of great discussion and praise—or alternatively, subtle admonishment. The condition of hunted animal skins provided, the sewing designs employed, and the intended wearers embody hunting stories, sharing networks, ancestral histories, and a family's future.

With the Inuit move into settlements in the late 1960s and the imposition of mandatory school laws, the regeneration of such elaborate land-based skill sets was seen to be at risk. A culture-conscious movement emerged in the 1990s to pass on these skills to younger generations, drawing in elders as culture-bearers to work in schools and community workshops. In 1997, I took part in one such traditional knowledge workshop while doing fieldwork in the neighboring settlement to Mittimatalik, Igloolik. There, I joined a group of students, mostly young mothers, who met each week with elder seamstresses in a community garage (cold temperatures are best for working skins) to learn how to sew caribou-skin kamiks. While instructive, there was an ever-so-slightly-stilted feel to these lessons. Such externally funded training initiatives have had variable success. Traditionally and still today, the enskillment of young seamstresses is a far more organic process, taking place at quiet intervals in households when a window of time appears. One of our questions has been whether digital archiving could provide an alternative space for intergenerational learning, one where learning occurs more in line with Inuit cultural protocol.

In Mittimatalik, there is still a generation of unilingual elders, women who were raised on the land, with the intricate environmental knowledge and design skills required by Inuit seamstresses. Yet in crowded social housing in the settlement, the enskillment of young people in traditional ways remains difficult to orchestrate. Furthermore, Inuit rules of etiquette dictate against imposing your will on another person. They prohibit young people from asking elders pointed questions, demanding insight or tuition. Children were said to learn by watching, by patient observation of their parents and grandparents in the context of everyday life (Briggs 1991). Elders are often the first to mention that the Western educational system has not prepared students for more culturally appropriate, patient, and respectful forms of tuition, nor do the current dynamics of settlement life, with full-time schooling and employment, enable it. Some young women feel self-conscious at their own level of skill compared to that of their mothers at similar ages. Both generations are keen to foster new ways of learning but shyness and rules of etiquette make this difficult.

Consequently, using the camera and the archive as intermediaries, apprentice seamstresses working as videographers are able to position their relatives, neighbors, and friends as instructors. In this economically deprived settlement, honoraria payments (from our research grant budget) offered also made it easier for videographers/seamstresses to approach revered elder seamstresses,

women to whom they are not related, women with whom they may not be in regular contact or from whom they could not normally request instruction. Figure 6 shows elder seamstress Mary Amagoalik teaching MAMC videographers inside and outside the iPod's frame. (Insert figure 6.)



Figure 6: Frame taken from a video clip of an Elder seamstress, Mary Amagoalik, teaching three MAMC videographers. Sheila and her baby, Candace, are on the sofa, and Jemima and Jeannie are shooting the video from outside the frame. The video clip is archived and accessible at: <https://purl.dlib.indiana.edu/iudl/media/376316r708>.

The terms of our collaboration were by nature improvisational and multiple, evolving organically and taking different forms as we sought to accommodate different agendas of local participants, be they political, academic, community, familial, or intensely personal. Indigenous media scholars have written about the insight derived when Western scholarly visions of media making become refracted through the lens of more local ones generating different angles of vision, what Faye Ginsburg (1995) describes as a “parallax effect.” For MAMC members—almost all of whom are busy mothers juggling innumerable commitments of work and family—adjustment, accommodation, and give became as central to our digitization work as it is to everyday family life. Family life and childcare is, by its very nature, improvisational; and aims and visions of a digitizing initiative set in women’s homes inevitably become refracted when the needs of family members (immediate and more long-term) join those of documentation as a priority of action. Sessions were arranged with little notice and made to fit within small pockets of time in busy household schedules. Accordingly, participants in recordings changed with each session. Sometimes houses were largely vacated or made quiet, allowing the filmed event to become the focus of the room, but more often, in the open-space central rooms of crowded Inuit homes, the filming became one of many activities simultaneously occurring. Daughters-in-law cooked, children played, husbands rested, and visiting relatives arrived for a few minutes to say hello, warm up, and leave again. Changing audiences in the room, as well as meals, cigarette and coffee breaks,

and school hours, framed each session as much as the task at hand. And in this process, assessing and managing social environments in the settlement and in homes became part of the documented skill of a seamstress.

While cultural agendas may outwardly drive our work, equally determinant of its course are more immediate, routine household obligations to ensure loved ones are accounted for, well looked after, fed, and tended to. This flexibility of purpose made it possible and sometimes even productive for recording sessions to change direction midway through their execution and for focus to shift to events and conversations occurring when the camera was turned off.

Three examples of multitasking illustrate this relational view of skills. A clip from our archive shows Louisa Amagoalik sewing in front of the camera and amusing her baby, Timotee, who is restless and in need of a nap (see figure 7). Patience and motherly understanding become part of this lesson on how to sew sealskin zipper pulls. Another clip (see figure 8) shows seamstress Sarahme Akoomalik talking about sealskin sewing, but her gaze is refracted. She stares not at the camera but at Sheila Katsak, her neighbor and close friend (positioned just outside the frame). Simultaneously, she tends to her toddler, Ashley, who is hungry and making it known. As the little girl fusses, the scene ends with a good-humored but abrupt halt in proceedings. Sarahme puts away her sewing implements, and the filmmakers put away the camera. Another clip shows Georgina Pewatoaluk sewing sealskin hairclips for the camera while rocking her baby, Neil, to sleep (see figure 9).

Children like Timotee, Ashley, and Neil, who was nestled in his mother's parka hood during most of the filming, emerge as key participants in such creative collaborations. Their futures as hunters, seamstresses, parents, educators, politicians, artists, or media makers are in many ways the archive's impetus and its drive. And their more immediate needs are incorporated into those of the larger initiative, directing its course and refracting its vision from countless vantage points again and again. And, when the camera is turned off abruptly, when a lesson is left unfinished, when a stitch is interrupted, viewers are invited to fill in the gaps, to take up the process of learning on their own.

Digital platforms such as ours, with their punctuated clips of footage and short master classes, do not re-create a learning environment, but they do offer new visual fields. Video cameras—be they HD or simply an 8 GHz iPod camera mounted on a tripod—allow for a concentrated attention, a continuous focus. Normally, an interested learner might not stare at a seamstress's hands for an hour on end. Social imperatives inhibit this staring. Yet the camera allows the viewer to keep this continuous, meditative focus. And they can go back again and again to the same stroke of a seamstress's hands' rhythmic maneuvers—fold and stitch, fold and stitch—again and again. Specialist micro lenses and zoom functions on devices also allow for a close-up inspection of the grains of a fur or of finely placed stitches, detail not available to the naked eye. Moreover, the rewind/playback function also enables the viewer to examine a clip on his or her own, innumerable times, and in a manner that does not play on the reserves of patience of the elder. Ordinarily, we understand the elder as a patient individual, but even with the most skilled and forbearing educator as a sitting subject, skin processing and sewing, like other creative processes, are unidirectional. A seamstress cannot resrape a sealskin if a tear is made. She can't redo a stitch. Apprentices needed to have paid attention the first time. For many contemporary learners—members of this

new digital generation who operate in a learning environment where time is commodified, where young people's attention span is trained to operate in short bursts, who don't have skin processing and sewing happening in the backdrop of their lives like their grandmothers and great-grandmothers would have had in the past—access to digital archives either online or in a downloaded clip on a mobile device allows learning to operate in one's own time, at the speed of the learner, and in a familiar (digital) format. A maneuver can be reviewed endlessly, until a sufficient level of learning can be achieved. Or, at least, until enough knowledge is gained to get started and then to be able to approach your grandmother, mother, sister, or aunt for help.

### **The Unfinished Skin and the Unfinished Archive: Becoming Anew**

Focusing on the active process of making pulls us out of the illusion of the timelessness quality of this traditional skill, to focus on the constantly evolving interplay of contemporary artistic visions, motives, and social and technological imperatives. For sealskin sewing, this focus on a generative flow of events rather than on a finished product is crucial, as the art form's very essence is entwined in immeasurable regenerative cycles in the north: those between hunters and their prey, husbands and wives, mothers and children, and among extended families. Animal skin sewing has always been considered not a derivative of the hunt—not an end point—but instead part of a series of ongoing and reciprocal acts that enable the hunt to happen. Prey animals are said to give themselves to the hunting families who behave morally and follow cultural prescriptions (see Bodenhorn 1990; Fienup-Riordan 1994; Pelly 2001). Thus, the procurement of sealskins through the hunt and their material transformation from a raw skin to a cured hide for sewing are as much social as material undertakings: dependent as much on a seamstress's moral conduct as on her technical expertise as a seamstress, as much on her ability to attune hide-processing to perceived prevailing environmental conditions as on the type of skin she has in her possession. And yet, even when all these elements come together and the clothing is sewn, these air-cured garments are always at risk of drying out or rotting. Their material forms are thus inextricably temporal; the environmental conditions of their keeping are continually in flux.

Recent scholarship in the fields of anthropology and material studies can help us understand the generative processes at work in organic matter such as sealskin. Hallam and Ingold (2014) call into question the strict division between animals and artifacts by attending to the inherent properties of materials and the forms of knowledge and sensory experiences involved in an organism's or artifact's making or unmaking (decomposition). For those sewing animal hides, questions arise about when an animal ceases being an animal and becomes an inanimate object or garment. When is the life force abandoned? Or does the transformation of skin into garment generate a new or renewed life force (Driscoll 1987, Wachowich 2014)?



Figure 7: Frame taken from a video clip of Louisa Amagaolik trying to sew while her baby wants to play ball. The video clip is archived and accessible at: <https://purl.dlib.indiana.edu/iudl/media/j03c97n15s>.



Figure 8: Description: Frame taken from a video clip of Sarahme Akoomalik and her little daughter who was wanting the filming to end. The video clip is archived and accessible at: <https://purl.dlib.indiana.edu/iudl/media/623h93j710>.



Figure 9: Frame taken from a video clip of Georgina Pewatoaluk sewing sealskin hairclips for the camera while rocking her baby to sleep. The video clip is archived and accessible at: <https://purl.dlib.indiana.edu/iudl/media/079524kx5c>.

If skin garments, their life forces, and their social relations of production cannot be fixed in meaning, then in a parallel manner, digital archives themselves also resist being cordoned off from the processes involved in their making. A metaphoric comparison between processes of sealskin sewing and digital archiving is useful here as both are subject to tailoring at the hands of their various makers. Like sealskin garments, archives can be said to be living, generative, open to transformation, and at the same time, vulnerable to entropic decay. Physical archives are all too often weeded, or trimmed, by archivists needing shelf space, and digital archives can be easily lost entirely with changes in their custodianship or the incompatibility of computer interfaces. Just as sealskin garments defy being characterized as inert or finished, so too does the archive that can be added to or refashioned (Banks and Vokes 2010).

In the context of MAMC, it was left to our UK-based Romanian video editor, Melisa Costinea, in the months in between our recorded sessions, to trim, pattern, and stitch together film clips into master classes of individual skills (between three and fifteen minutes in duration), along with short compilation films and longer real-time pieces. These pieces, once reviewed and approved locally, were uploaded to the MAMC internet channel <https://vimeo.com/mamc/> and circulated locally on portable flash drives and DVDs. In building this digital archive and making it open access, assorted pieces of footage documenting scenes from the production life of a garment have inevitably been taken apart and stitched together again, in variable forms generating new meaning-making processes and new creative possibilities. Outtakes edited out by Melisa are reinserted and used to patch together new scenes for different forms of output required. Images or raw footage filmed on

mobile devices are added. Footage deemed to be of poor quality, irrelevant, inappropriate, or embarrassing can be removed or maintained on another platform. Digital archives like MAMC's are subject to countless translations as images and footage acquire new networks of meaning with the build-up of metadata (Geismar 2013). Each alteration, each tag, each networked connection further prevents the archive from standing outside the process of its making.

Highlighting the act of making an archive in this initial analysis also allows us then to flag processes of knowledge construction and to contest this exotic image of an Inuit traditional skin garment as a relic of a past way of life. It brings into sharp relief the overlapping motivations and contemporary concerns of garment makers, videographers, and interested anthropologists in keeping this women's art form alive. Through this, the collaborative processes involved in making digital archives *fit* with a community come alive. And in this the creative possibilities of focusing on the unfinished nature of sealskin garments and living digital archives are made visible.

### **Mediating Relationships between Humans and with Animals**

As the previous stories of documentation illustrate, the making of sealskin garments and digital archives presented opportunities for elders and youths to come together in ways that were affirmative but had become increasingly uncommon. The development of affordable digital media and recording technologies was regarded as timely and opportune by youth and elders alike, since the latter represent a generation of unilingual Inuit women—those who escaped the imposition of a southern education system and spent childhoods on the land apprenticing as seamstresses—now late in life. For these women, inasmuch as skin sewing was known to mediate relationships between people, so too it represents a living articulation of Inuit environmental knowledge and the reciprocity understood through social relations between people and animals. The skill sets required to process skins and stitch together wearable garments are practice-based and object-oriented manifestations of a deeper perceptual orientation, awarding skin-sewing a kind of transformative power bonding humans and animals.

For MAMC, this presented a challenge: how to acknowledge and offer up this wider affective spectrum of social relationships that go beyond the human interface? Inuit seamstresses will often tell of how, in the process of working a hide, they come to know, even internalize, a hunted animal—knowing it from the inside out. An animal's sex, approximate age, injuries incurred during its life in the water and on ice, signs of its diet, and state of health upon death all become apparent and readable during the flensing and the curing of its skin. The extent and variety of ways in which an animal continues to come into being forms a dynamic part of this creative process. Representational technologies are enfolded in this larger living material process. In some of MAMC's productions the camera, camera operator and seamstress seemed to become part of this intimate transformation, creating a frame for action and prompt for conversation, and inviting audiences to these online master classes to experience and embody what film scholar Laura Marks (2000) describes of intercultural cinema as the "sensorium," a culturally specific use of the senses translated into cinematic languages. For Marks, film viewing is a tactile experience, what is watched draws on our embodied senses, triggering cultural memories and grounding us in the world. This sensorium came through most clearly in our work when documenting the processing and curing of raw sealskins. For Inuit seamstresses, MAMC videographers, and audiences, both

local and geographically distant, the intimacy of the relationships with animals emerges in the curing of the skin and, through the MAMC project, in the creation of an archive of afterlives.

Excerpted material from the MAMC archive that shows Koopa Kippomee scraping the fat from a fresh sealskin in February 2015 exemplifies this process (see figure 10). The seal that Koopa dresses in this clip was hunted by her husband, and its hide was designated to become a pair of bleached white kamiks for her much-cherished adopted daughter, Dora. Delays in our film schedule meant the skin had started to stiffen slightly: it was harder to scrape and to remove the hairs. As Koopa rhythmically scraped, different epidermal layers told different stories. Yellowing fur around the flippers and the absence of nipples on the belly skin told us that this was a male seal. Scrape marks around its neck and sides soon became visible in its processing: likely from the seal scraping himself on jagged ice around a breathing hole, Koopa deduced. These were different from the more ominous graze marks we'd seen along the side of a great bearded sealskin the previous day. Those were suspected to have been from a polar bear, likely a narrow escape. With Koopa's seal, once the subcutaneous fat was scraped, small cysts became apparent under the skin on his back. Possibly pollution? What had it swum into or ingested? An unreported oil spill, sewage from a cruise ship? We deliberated but without the means of uncovering the cause.



Figure 10: Frame of Koopa Kippomee's hands scraping the fat from a raw sealskin.

Both examples demonstrate how aspects of the seal's life stories emerge through the curing of its skin. Through their careful processing of skins, seamstresses themselves become part of the animals' transformative shifts as do the audiences experiencing this visual sensorium. Our digitizing project records on film these merging life histories that happen for an instant, the intimacy of which is recognized by few but preserved in an archive for posterity. Figure 11 (a thirty-second clip) shows Koopa, a day later, preparing to patch and sew the holes on the same sealskin with tender movements and almost motherly love.



Figure 11: Frame taken from a video clip of Koopa patching a sealskin before putting it on a stretching frame. The video clip is archived and accessible at: <https://purl.dlib.indiana.edu/iudl/media/791s45rm8m>.

## **Mediating Animal Rights**

As I have mentioned, social media intensifies the ways in which Inuit are vulnerable to outsider condemnation for their continuing lifestyle as contemporary hunters. As such, for many members of MAMC, there is an urgency to offer up an appreciation of the local values that encompass sealskin sewing, what Faye Ginsburg (1994), writing about indigenous media, more broadly terms the “embedded aesthetics.” The tension is felt most profoundly in small communities where the effects of the decades-old animal rights movement and its well-known opposition to the seal hunt continue to be felt acutely. Elders still customarily recount dark memories of the sudden collapse of their subsistence seal-hunting economy caused by the European Economic Community’s (now European Union) 1982 ban imposed on the importation of marine mammal products. Overnight, hunters could no longer secure cash sales for skins and thus were unable to maintain snowmobiles or purchase rifles, ammunition, and hunting gear. Ultimately, families went hungry (Wenzel 1991). In Mittimatalik, being referred to as a “Greenpeacer” is no term of endearment. Visiting tourists are eyed suspiciously if they seem to be pointing their cameras in the direction of carcasses lying in doorways, waiting to be butchered. The decades of political rallies and media campaigns by Inuit lobbyists against animal rights have only just recently led to the European Union’s recognition of the sustainability and distinctiveness of the Inuit subsistence hunt (from the North Atlantic commercial harvesting of harp seals), but for many, this “indigenous exemption” to the ban on the importation of seal products came too late. The damage to Inuit subsistence seal hunting

is already done.

A portentous tale often recounted in Mittimatalik centers on Heather Mills, a British celebrity and high-profile animal rights activist who traveled to the settlement in the early 2000s with her stepdaughter, I was told, posing as adventure tourists. They were taken out across the sea ice by skidoo and sled to the narwhal hunting camps on the floe edge. “No one here knew who they were,” said my friend, who went on to tell me how her husband, an outfitter on the trip, was “shouted at” once they arrived at the hunting camp, admonished for eating whale and wearing leather. “She threw her shoe at him,” my friend elaborated, “and told him to ‘eat that!’” As the story goes, the young hunter/guide packed up the sleds straightaway and returned the celebrity to the settlement, from which she flew out the next day. A few years later, Mills and her husband, musician Paul McCartney, traveled to the Gulf of St. Lawrence to be filmed on ice cuddling baby seals. Inuit politicians and activists responded voraciously in print to the criticisms and media blitz of the event, condemning the couple’s characterizations of the seal hunt as “barbaric” and “archaic” (see Watt-Cloutier 2015).

In the face of such sustained prejudice, could a multifunctional digital archive, online exhibition, and cultural learning space also allow for greater shared understanding about the cultural distinctiveness and sustainability of Inuit seal hunting? This possibility was raised repeatedly in MAMC project-planning discussions, especially by its younger members. During the past five years, social media has increasingly provided platforms for Inuit tradition bearers and online activists to directly confront issues where intercultural misunderstanding, friction, and exchange exist. Such undertakings are not without difficulties or challenges. Online materials and social media platforms take diverse forms and, as such, demand a tech-savvy 2.0 community of Inuit custodians, poised and ready to defend local interests and cultural sovereignty in these eclectic digital spaces.

The power of being vigilant and ready to engage in digital activism to assert Inuit sovereignty online is evident. Three illustrative examples are worth recalling. In 2015, popular American comedian and talk-show host Ellen DeGeneres raised \$1.5 million (US) for campaigns against the seal hunt when she posted a highly publicized and retweeted selfie of a group of Hollywood celebrities on Oscar night. The Twitter post was retweeted over three million times, raising millions of dollars for DeGeneres’s charity: the Humane Society of the United States (a leading critic of the Canadian seal hunt). Like the McCartneys’ eight years previous, Degeneres’s fund-raising stunt was in support of organizations in opposition to the annual commercial harvesting of harp seals. Nevertheless, the Inuit subsistence seal hunt became implicated in this protest. Quickly mobilizing themselves online, Inuit activists in Nunavut responded by posting “sealfies,” photos of themselves proudly dressed in sealskins, on various social media sites accompanied by criticisms of metropolitan animal rights advocacy (Rodgers and Scobie 2015). Artist, activist, and spokesperson for the sealfie campaign, Alethea Arnaquq-Baril (2016), subsequently produced a documentary, *Angry Inuk*, outlining a case for ethical and sustainable hunting by Inuit and seeking to explain the struggles Inuit hunting activists face and the antagonism felt toward the anti-sealing lobby.<sup>3</sup>

In the aftermath of the Oscar-night selfie/sealfie controversy, Inuit broadcaster and Sheila’s aunt Salome Awa led a multimedia campaign against a UK fashion designer when she recognized the

design of her great-great-grandfather's parka on a high-end, \$925 CAD, sweater, being showcased and sold as part of a winter clothing collection. Awa's ancestor was an early twentieth-century shaman, who was photographed wearing this parka by early ethnographers visiting the region.<sup>5</sup> "I was furious. I was angry. I was upset. I was in shock, most of all," his great-granddaughter declared in an interview on national radio and in a later published piece online. In response to accusations of cultural appropriation, the clothing company withdrew the sweater from its apparel line, issuing a public apology.

The third example of Inuit monitoring and policing of online spaces occurred in June 2016 during a period of MAMC fieldwork. The heated talk among Mittimatalik residents was of an animal rights activist with malign intent, misrepresenting photographs sourced from popular public Facebook group Inuit Hunting Stories of the Day (eight thousand members), <http://tinyurl.com/FBhunting>. Picturing freshly killed animals, the images had been reposted (without permission) on his blog accompanied by one-sided polemics about animal cruelty. Discovering this blog, community members invoked copyright law as a means to force the blogger to remove the images from his site.

These examples illustrate just some of the ways in which new digital technologies carve a space for immediate action when Inuit sovereignty, subsistence, and cultural rights are threatened.

### **The Digital Divide in Inuit Communities**

Campaigning worlds and cultural contexts acknowledged, many members of the Mittimatalik Arnait Miqsuqtuit Collective have found incentive to create a digital archive locally framed and attuned to the training needs in the settlement and to widen Inuit cultural activism. However, our mandate relies on the aspiration of an open-access archive, a resource not unlike those taken for granted by internet users in metropolitan centers, those who can turn to YouTube for instructional videos at a moment's notice or can respond to a political challenge with relative ease. Visions of a fully networked North continue to be hampered by challenges of broadband accessibility and connectivity.

The provision of the internet in the twenty-five Nunavut communities has become an increasingly heated and contested policy issue over the last ten years. The vast geographical distances across arctic communities, the lack of roads, and the North's insufficient communications backbone (the infrastructure that connects northern communities to each other and the rest of the world) have all been flagged as negatively affecting the state of connectivity in arctic communities and service parity between settlements and with the south. For media activists, a connectivity strategy has become a question of access to essential services and thus a question of cultural survival. Working groups on infrastructure development and provision have been struck, commission reports have been tabled, and feasibility studies have been launched by various government and nongovernmental organizations. The laying of a fiber optic cable across the North has been a proposed solution that has gained substantial support but, at the time of writing this piece, estimated costs of bringing fiber optics to every Nunavut community was ranging from 750 million to one billion Canadian dollars. Alternative solutions proposed, such as laying an arctic fiber, which would bring fiber optic technology to four landing points and branch off from there, have

also been tabled. Concerns over the inequality of coverage and subsequent access to educational and socioeconomic and information opportunities, considerations to do with the physical geography of the territory, the installation time (with installation windows confined to the no-ice windows), and long-term maintenance and repair schedules have put this initiative on hold. Analysis of backbone requirements and national and international benchmarking on service standards and network modeling have continued (Imaituk 2011; Conference Board of Canada 2013).

Presently, satellite broadband access in Mittimatalik is supplied by internet provider Qiniq with personal accounts costing more than \$80 a month for 20 gigabytes. This allowance is highly subsidized, and yet this is no small cost for families living in a settlement with high rates of unemployment and exorbitant costs of living. And service remains slow. At the time of our first two years of MAMC work, Pond Inlet was identified as one of nine communities in Nunavut scheduled to receive 4G service, but the timing of when this will happen was still undetermined.<sup>6</sup> As it stands, a two-hour standard-definition film takes four hours to download. A three-minute master class from our digital archive takes fifteen minutes to finish downloading. And it slows down considerably once you use your allowance. Families will often use up their gigabytes, either through a technological glitch or unmonitored use by a household member or guest. Both times in the settlement, I experienced this firsthand, inadvertently losing my allowance halfway through the project. Without a phone or internet, I found myself virtually cut off and resorted to walking to friends' houses to deliver messages or to borrow their prized internet allowance.

The digital divide was anticipated during our planning of the archive work in that we restricted our productions largely to short master classes in hopes that they would be more accessible given household internet allowances. Yet what we had not anticipated in our initiative's design was that in the editing of the master classes, online communication was required between the video editor and the Inuktitut-speaking coordinators. Unable to send draft clips back and forth between members of the collective without using up family gigabyte allowances and without a private platform (a closed internet channel, for example), we experimented with a number of file-sharing technologies before resorting to finally sending films on readable DVDs and memory sticks by post. The irony of this predicament was not lost by collective members. Some of the very final master classes were also brought with me on hard drives to review with seamstresses and their family members in their homes. Figure 12 shows Koopa approving the final of her masterclasses for upload.

### **Conclusion: Building a Digital Archive—Cameras, Rifles, Needles, and Mobile Devices as Tools for Cultural Sovereignty**

In conclusion, an understanding of computer operating systems, the latest mobile phones, apps, and gigabyte allowance has come to be expected among younger people in arctic settlements. Just as they do in so many other parts of the world, children pull out their iPods and iPads in the middle of conversations, they post selfies online, and text and message each other throughout the day, just like in more southern metropolitan settings. However, the media ecology that has developed in the Arctic has not meant the surrender of Inuit perceptual orientation or aesthetic styles.



Figure 12: Frame taken from a video clip of Koopa reviewing her master classes with her grandson at her side. The video clip is archived and accessible at: <https://purl.dlib.indiana.edu/iudl/media/910j82mg0k>.

Anthropologists writing on digital media teach us that existing social relationships, moral codes, and material infrastructures can easily complicate visions of a wholly networked and determinate digital environment (see Horst and Miller 2012). Comparative case studies of media initiatives like ours draw attention to the broader sets of social relations from which they are generated, the “embedded aesthetics” (Ginsburg 1994; see also Geismar 2013) of the setting within which they operate, as well as the relationships or “media worlds” that they inspire (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002). In the Arctic, media savviness now exists side by side with an understanding of hunting equipment, hunting territories, weather conditions, and skin garment processing and making (Wachowich 2010, Wachowich and Scobie 2010). And, as this article sets out to prove, they have, in some ways, become mutually constitutive. Each skill set and tool serves a separate generative system, yet they overlap in scope, purpose, and function. Facebook messages that provide news on the well-being of relatives and their travel plans, the availability of meat to share, employment/resource opportunities, hunting routes, and weather conditions are passed among households and communities like spoken messages were transmitted in the past. In June of this year, families traveling out for the weekend to a popular snow-goose-hunting camp ten miles across the sea ice used their mobile phones to text back information on the exact location of cracks in the sea ice. Those departing after them took alternate trails across the ice to arrive at the hunting camp safely. Hunters are now familiar with landscape features that mark the limitations of the cell phone coverage in their region.

Taking into account this productive synthesis between digital practices and hunting allows for the impact of our Mittimatalik Arnait Miqsuqtuit Collective’s project to be measured in various ways. Its public recognition can, of course, be seen by statistics of site visits on the online channel

(number of plays, likes, followers, and shares). Yet, as the previous section explains, many of the site visits currently remain the license of people outside the Arctic, people in cities who, comparatively speaking, have seemingly unlimited internet. The more intimate, affective, personal, material, and political rewards for our efforts to date—for example, the confidence of learning new skills, those moments of personal fulfillment at having completed a project, relationships forged as apprentice seamstresses turn to their elders for help, or the cultural pride derived from seeing women from your community’s sewing work on the internet—are often far more nuanced and ephemeral. These aspirational elements sometimes do not fit well into statistical measures.

Digital recording and the archiving of cultural knowledge are now part of this newly networked Arctic. Yet how precisely are these endeavors to be undertaken and to what purpose? People’s eagerness to engage new media to create digital databanks for themselves, their families, and their communities offers up unique documentary and ethnographic possibilities, but it also means new challenges for anthropologists who no longer have sole control over the production or circulation of knowledge. New forms of collaboration must be developed that do not assume primary importance being given to the anthropological agendas. Take, for example, the impromptu and affectionate late-night kamik-making lesson held between Rhoda and Skylar described at the start of this article: how might a recognition of these new relational ecologies, inspired by digitizing initiatives but existing wholly outside them, inform collaborative and disciplinary practices in anthropology?

## Notes

1. Early production team members for the February 2015 MAMC 1.0 documentation session were Nancy Wachowich, Sheila Katsak, Leah Kippomee, Gro Ween, Skylar Katsak, and Amy Kippomee. We worked with three seamstresses that first trip: Ruth Sangoya, Paomee Komangapik, and Koopa Kippomee. Romanian-born and UK-based editor Melisa Costinea was hired on to work with the footage in Aberdeen. And for the June 2016 MAMC 2.0 session our group expanded to include Mittimatalik-based videographers Georgina Pewatoaluk, Jemima Innuaraq, Jeannie Kiguktak, and Eepa Ootoovak, and seamstresses Regilee Ootoova, Sarahme Akoomalik, Louisa Amagoalik, Mary Amagoalik, Jane Singoorie, Sheena Kasarnak, and Nancy Ootoova. For the June 2017 MAMC 3.0 sessions, elders Qamaniq Sangoya, Rhonda Koonoo, and Mary Mukpa held discussions and workshops on sealskin terminology.

2. The *Mobilizing Inuit Cultural Heritage* (MICH) program is a multimedia multiplatform project funded by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Collaborative Partnership Initiative and based at York University, Canada, <http://mich.info.yorku.ca/>.

3. [https://www.nfb.ca/film/angry\\_inuk/](https://www.nfb.ca/film/angry_inuk/).

4. A photo and description the renown caribou skin parka originally owned by a shaman named Qingailisak appears in Franz Boas’ (1907) and in Knud Rasmussen’s (1929) writings. It was collected in 1902 by George Comer for the American Museum of Natural History, and in the 1980s, seamstresses in Igloolik were commissioned to make five replicas that were later made part

of the collections at Laval University, the Canadian Museum of History, the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre in Yellowknife, the British Museum, and the Heard Museum of American Indian Art and History in Phoenix, Arizona. See: <http://www.canadiangeographic.ca/article/five-facts-about-shamans-parka>, <http://news.nationalpost.com/full-comment/tristin-hopper-this-is-what-actual-real-life-cultural-appropriation-looks-like>.

5. Published November 15, 2015, <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/as-it-happens-wednesday-edition-1.3336554/nunavut-family-outraged-after-fashion-label-copies-sacred-inuit-design-1.3336560>.

6. According to the Qiniq website, other communities that will be first to receive 4G service (in no particular order) are: Arviat, Baker Lake, Cambridge Bay, Rankin Inlet, Iqaluit, Cape Dorset, Igloodik, and Kugluktuk.

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