

Call Me Angakkuq: Captain George Comer and the Inuit of Qatiktalik

Appelle-moi Angakkuq : Le capitaine George Comer et les Inuit de Qatiktalik

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Résumé de l'article

Après de nombreuses années sur le terrain dans l'Arctique canadien, le capitaine George Comer a jeté des bases solides pour l'avenir de l'anthropologie muséale. Avec le soutien de Franz Boas, le capitaine Comer – un maître baleinier de la Nouvelle-Angleterre peu scolarisé – a rassemblé une vaste collection d'artefacts ethnographiques et archéologiques inuit, de photographies, d'enregistrements sonores et de spécimens d'histoire naturelle pour le compte du musée américain d'histoire naturelle de New York, ainsi que pour les grands musées de Berlin, Ottawa et Philadelphie. Cet article examine une section remarquable de cette collection, la production de moulages faciaux inuit – portraits de plus de 200 hommes, femmes et enfants – créés par Comer à Qatiktalik (cap Fullerton), un site de chasse à la baleine sur la côte ouest de la baie d'Hudson. En lien avec les photographies prises par Gerald Comer, Geraldine Moodie et d'autres à l'époque, ces moulages de visage constituent un chapitre vital de l'histoire sociale des Inuits, préservant la mémoire des individus et des familles qui ont vécu, travaillé et échangé à Qatiktalik. Accompagné d'une documentation biographique détaillée préparée par le capitaine Comer, cette collection extraordinaire reconnaît l'importance de l'identité individuelle, concept clé de la théorie anthropologique moderne, et fournit un aperçu significatif de l'histoire sociale, culturelle et politique du Nunavut dans l'Arctique canadien.

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Bernadette Driscoll Engelstadⁱ

ABSTRACT

Through many years of dedicated fieldwork in the Canadian Arctic, Captain George Comer laid a solid foundation for the future of museum anthropology. With the support of Franz Boas, Captain Comer—a New England whaling master with little formal schooling—assembled an extensive collection of Inuit ethnographic and archaeological artifacts, photographs, sound recordings, and natural history specimens for the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, as well as major museums in Berlin, Ottawa, and Philadelphia. This article examines a remarkable segment of that collection, the production of Inuit facial casts—portraits of over two hundred men, women, and children—created by Comer at Qatiktalik (Cape Fullerton), a whaling site on the west coast of Hudson Bay. In tandem with photographs taken by Comer, Geraldine Moodie, and others at the time, these facial casts comprise a vital chapter of Inuit social history, preserving the memory of individuals and families who lived, worked, and traded at Qatiktalik. Accompanied by detailed biographical documentation prepared by Captain Comer, this extraordinary collection acknowledges the significance of personhood, a key concept in modern anthropological theory, and provides meaningful insight into the early social, cultural, and political history of Nunavut in the Canadian Arctic.

KEYWORDS

Inuit social history, Arctic whaling, Hudson Bay, facial casts, Nunavut

RÉSUMÉ

Appelle-moi Angakkuq: Le capitaine George Comer et les Inuit de Qatiktalik

Après de nombreuses années sur le terrain dans l'Arctique canadien, le capitaine George Comer a jeté des bases solides pour l'avenir de l'anthropologie muséale. Avec le soutien de Franz Boas, le capitaine Comer – un maître baleinier de la Nouvelle-Angleterre peu scolarisé – a rassemblé une vaste collection d'artefacts ethnographiques et archéologiques inuit, de photographies, d'enregistrements sonores et de spécimens d'histoire naturelle pour le compte du musée américain d'histoire naturelle de New York, ainsi que pour les grands musées de Berlin, Ottawa et Philadelphie. Cet article examine une section remarquable de cette collection, la production de moulages faciaux inuit – portraits de plus de 200 hommes, femmes et enfants – créés par Comer à Qatiktalik (cap Fullerton), un site de chasse à la baleine sur la côte ouest de la baie d'Hudson. En lien avec les photographies prises par Gerald Comer, Geraldine Moodie et d'autres à

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l'époque, ces moulages de visage constituent un chapitre vital de l'histoire sociale des Inuits, préservant la mémoire des individus et des familles qui ont vécu, travaillé et échangé à Qatiktalik. Accompagné d'une documentation biographique détaillée préparée par le capitaine Comer, cette collection extraordinaire reconnaît l'importance de l'identité individuelle, concept clé de la théorie anthropologique moderne, et fournit un aperçu significatif de l'histoire sociale, culturelle et politique du Nunavut dans l'Arctique canadien.

MOTS-CLÉS

Histoire sociale des Inuit, chasse à la baleine dans l'Arctique, baie d'Hudson, moulages faciaux, Nunavut

During a long and celebrated career in the Arctic whale fishery, Captain George Comer (Figure 1) made over a dozen voyages to the whaling grounds of Davis Strait and Hudson Bay. Coming “before the mast” at the age of seventeen, Comer joined the crew of the *Nile*, under the command of New England Captain John O. Spicer, bound for Davis Strait and the American whaling stations on the coast of Baffin Island (Calabretta 1984). During this initial voyage in 1875, young Comer exhibited a keen interest in Inuit material culture, making his first trade with Inuit. Following more than a decade of working in coastal trade along the Atlantic seaboard and in the seal fishery of the southern hemisphere, Comer returned to the Arctic in 1889, and spent the remainder of his maritime career as a whaler, ship’s captain, fur trader, photographer, and museum collector, primarily along the west coast of Hudson Bay.

The detailed history of Hudson Bay whaling by W. Gillies Ross (1975) emphasizes the key participation of Inuit in the commercial whale hunt carried out by American and Scottish seamen. As Captain of the *Era* (1895–1906), and later the *A.T. Gifford* (1907–1912), Comer worked with Native crews under the direction of the Aivilingmiut leader, Tassiuq (known also as Ippaktuq/Maliki/Shenuckshoo) but called “Harry” by the American whalers, while Angutimmarik (“Scotch Tom”) directed Inuit crews working for the Scottish whalers farther up the coast (Eber 1989, 108–11). The presence of American and Scottish ships drew Inuit families from distant camps to the west coast of Hudson Bay. For over twenty years, Comer maintained close friendships within the Aivilingmiut community, developing a broad knowledge of Inuit social, cultural, and spiritual practices.

Captain Comer’s skill as a fieldworker and ethnographic collector earned the hard-won respect of Franz Boas, curator at the American Museum of Natural History. Along with contributions from James Mutch and Rev. E.J. Peck, Comer provided a vital core of the research published by Boas in *The Eskimo of Baffin Land and Hudson Bay* (1901, 1907; see also Calabretta 1984, 2008a, 2008b;

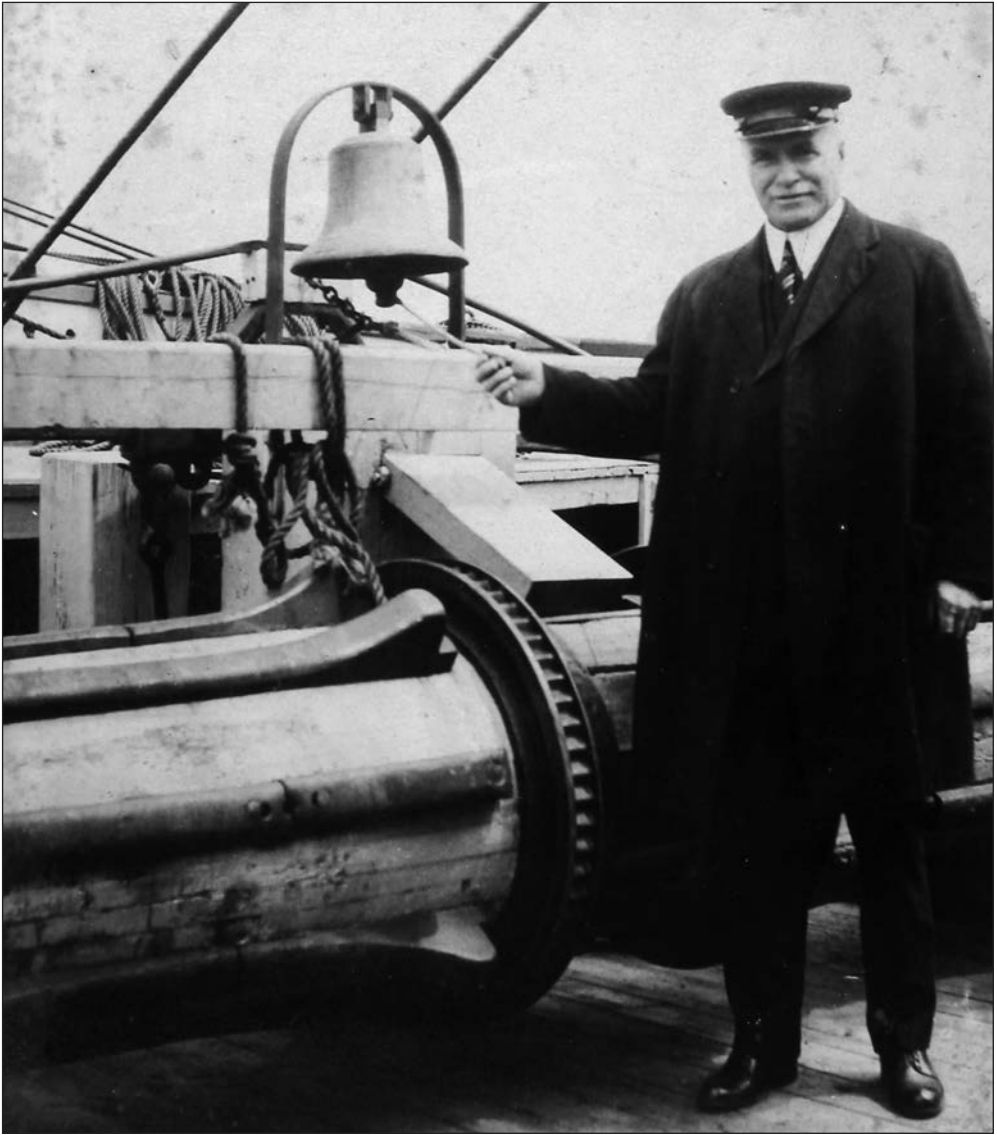


Figure 1. Captain George Comer on an unidentified vessel, May 1926. Photographer unknown. Mystic Seaport Museum 1983.25.12.

Harper 2008, 2016; Ross 1984; Saladin d'Anglure 1984). The captain's handwritten whaling journals offer a firsthand account of the whaling experience. His only published journal, describing the voyage of 1903 to 1905, includes a historical overview, extensive notes, and appendices by editor W.G. Ross (1984). Dorothy Harley Eber's (1989) rich oral history, *When the Whalers Were up North: Inuit Memories from the Eastern Arctic*, provides valuable insights into Inuit social history during the whaling era. Based on interviews with Elders and community

leaders, Eber recounts the close interaction between the Inuit community and Scottish and American whalers and the pivotal role of individuals (Inuit as well as whalers) in the cultural history of the period. Canada's mission to affirm political sovereignty in the Arctic, initiated during the whaling era, became a major focus of national development in succeeding years (Low 1906; Ross 1976; Burant 1998).

This article discusses a significant component of Comer's ethnographic endeavour: the production of over 250 facial casts of Inuit men, women, and children, more than three generations of Inuit who once gathered in the vicinity of the whaling site at Qatiktalik.¹ Reminiscent of the roughly hewn facial images created by the French sculptors Auguste Rodin and Émile-Antoine Bourdelle, these expressive portraits were produced by George Comer between 1900 and 1912.² Made at the initial request of Franz Boas, the majority of these portrait casts (c. 175)—in addition to numerous hand casts—were acquired by the American Museum of Natural History in New York City.³ An additional forty facial casts were purchased from Captain Comer by the Geological Survey of Canada in 1909 and are in the collection of the Canadian Museum of History.⁴ Along with a collection of ethnographic artifacts, twenty-four facial casts produced between 1910 and 1912 were purchased by George B. Gordon, director of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia), in the fall of 1913. Never formally catalogued into the museum's collection, this group of portrait casts is still to be located (William Wierbowski, pers. comm., 2013).

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1. Comer's production of facial casts is noted by Eber (1989) and Ross (1984), while the facial casts of Evaluardjuk and Pilakapsi are discussed in the context of Igloolik community history by Saladin d'Anglure (1984). The exhibition *Captain George Comer and the Inuit of Hudson Bay*, organized by senior curator Fred Calabretta for the Mystic Seaport Museum was presented at the Embassy of Canada, Washington, DC (May–July 2018). Highlighting whaling logs, artifacts, photographs, and recording equipment used by Captain Comer, the exhibit also included five Inuit facial casts produced by Comer in the collection of the Canadian Museum of History. An earlier exhibition organized by Calabretta for the Mystic Seaport Museum (2008) explored Comer's ethnographic contribution and relationship with the Inuit community.
 2. Ten facial casts created by Captain Comer during his time with the Crocker Land Expedition in Greenland (1915–1917) are also in the American Museum of Natural History collection.
 3. Almost 2,300 artifacts of Inuit cultural history brought together by Captain Comer are accessible through the AMNH's Anthropology Collection Database, online at <https://anthro.amnh.org/collections>. See also, Driscoll Engelstad 2018.
 4. Several facial casts at the Canadian Museum of History made during Comer's voyage of 1907 to 1909, portray individuals whose images were first cast during the captain's voyage of 1900 to 1902. For example, the portrait cast of Nivisanaaq (aka Shoofly) at AMNH is described as taken "about age 35," while the facial cast at the Canadian Museum of History is described as taken "about 38."

With few exceptions, Captain Comer carefully documented the Inuktitut name, whaling nickname, age, height, -miut affiliation, and, often, family relationships of individuals portrayed, producing a remarkable record of Inuit social history. Initially created for the benefit of distant museums, these portrait casts provide a compelling counterpart to photographs of many of the same individuals taken by George Comer, Geraldine Moodie, A.P. Low, and J.D. Moodie at Qatiktalik. In contrast to the two-dimensional images mediated by the photographer, a facial cast provides a sculptural, three-dimensional representation of the individual, sometimes even incorporating bits of hair in the plaster.

George Comer: Whaling Master

Born in Quebec City on April 22, 1858, George Comer was baptized three days later at St. Patrick's Church on McMahon Street, which served the city's burgeoning Irish Catholic population in the aftermath of the Irish famine.⁵ Comer's father—later described by Comer as “a seafaring man”—was absent from the baptism. His father, Tom Comer, was believed to have died at sea soon after George's birth (Comer Family Papers). Despite the social and political upheaval of the American Civil War (1861–1865), Comer's mother moved with her young son to New England in 1862, possibly in an attempt to confirm her husband's death. At the age of seven, George and his mother were living in Springfield, Massachusetts (Commonwealth of Massachusetts 1865); and by twelve, he was working as a farm apprentice for the family of William Ayres in East Haddam, Connecticut (U.S. Census 1870). Located along the Connecticut River, the historic village of East Haddam remained his home port and refuge in retirement. The word “Restwood,” later inscribed on Comer's personal stationary, remains chiseled in the front steps of the family home.

From his first voyage on the *Nile*, Comer kept journals of his travels. His pencil-written diary provides the following details: “August 1, 1875: we fired eleven bombs into him / the whale came up so that I could put my hand on his head but I did not want to / we did not get him that night / it is now the 2[nd] of August but it is blowing a gale and we have not seen the whale yet.”⁶

Other entries give insight into his broader interests, such as “the library opened today / all manner of books”; and most notably, record his first trading encounter: “the esquimaux brought the suit of [seal] skins and I gave him the powder pouch [*sic*] / shot flask and a box of caps” (October 18, 1875).

5. The baptismal record for George Comer (April 25, 1858) was located by the author in the Drouin Collection of Quebec parish registers, originally transcribed as “Conner” (www.ancestry.com).

6. Comer 1875 diary on the *Nile*, American Museum of Natural History Archives, New York. The slash (/) indicates a line break.

In 1889 Comer rejoined Captain John O. Spicer on the topsail schooner *Era*, sailing out of New London, Connecticut. Serving as first mate, the crew sailed to Cumberland Sound in 1889, 1890, and 1891, restocking whaling stations en route and picking up hunting proceeds from the previous season (Calabretta 1984). Following Spicer's retirement in 1892, Thomas Luce & Son of New Bedford, Massachusetts, purchased the *Era* and refitted it for extended Arctic service. In 1895 Comer succeeded Spicer as captain of the *Era* and set out for Hudson Bay. Comer returned to Hudson Bay on six subsequent voyages, usually wintering over at Cape Fullerton (Qatiktalik), located between Naujaat (Repulse Bay) and Chesterfield Inlet (Igluligaarjuk). His journals provide a detailed record of the crew's whaling successes and failures, along with daily commentary on ship life and his interactions with Inuit and others at Qatiktalik.⁷ Following the voyage of 1903 to 1905, Thomas Luce & Co. sold the *Era* to F.N. Monjo, a New York-based fur company trading in Hudson Bay, due to declining profits in the whaling industry. Retained as captain, Comer set sail for Hudson Bay in the spring of 1906 when the *Era* was suddenly grounded near Petite Miquelon, a French island possession off the south coast of Newfoundland. A long-familiar sight in the waters of Hudson Bay, the loss of the *Era* must have been keenly felt by all. Its memory, captured under a starlit Arctic night, endures in the beaded hood emblem of an Aivilingmiut woman's parka (Figure 2). Likely commissioned by Comer, this beaded *amautik* (more precisely known as a *tuilli* for its prominent shoulders) was purchased by G.B. Gordon for the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania in 1913 (Dean 2010; Driscoll Engelstad 1984, 1987a, 1987b, 2010; Kunuk and Dean 2006).

Returning to Qatiktalik in 1907 as Captain of the *A.T. Gifford*, Comer recalled, "Skins and furs were becoming more valuable and whales were becoming fewer and less valuable" (Stefansson 1919, 4). His journal entries emphasize this shift as Inuit hunters whom he had recruited during his previous voyage arrived with stockpiles of furs collected from distant camps. Although whaling continued, it was clearly a faded semblance of what it had been in earlier years. Whale-sightings were seldom treated with urgency, and at times were even ignored. As a means of augmenting his declining income, Comer pursued the ethnographic collecting begun as a pastime early in his career. Arriving in Qatiktalik with the *A.T. Gifford* in 1910, Comer remained over the next twenty-eight months, fur trading, whaling, photographing, and collecting.

7. With the exception of his 1903–1905 journal (Ross, ed., 1984), Captain Comer's journals, whaling logs, and account books, located in the archives of the Mystic Seaport Museum, Mystic, CT; the American Museum of Natural History, New York; and the New Bedford Whaling Museum, New Bedford, MA, remain unpublished.



Figure 2. Woman's beaded *tuilli* (woman's parka with wide shoulders), University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, NA2844.

Captain George Comer: Museum Collector

As curator at the American Museum of Natural History, Franz Boas was eager to expand the museum's Arctic collections, reaching out to Captain John O. Spicer, whom he apparently came to know during his own fieldwork on Baffin Island, 1883–1884. Perhaps at Spicer's suggestion, George Comer gifted a small collection of “curios from the North” to the museum in 1897—a transaction that seeded a long-standing, mutually beneficial association linking Comer, Boas, and the American Museum of Natural History.⁸ Boas provided Comer with supplies and equipment for his use in the North and arranged for the museum's purchase of ethnographic material upon his return. Following his abrupt resignation from

8. Boas included the illustration of an Inuit-carved narwhal from the Spicer collection in *The Central Eskimo* ([1888] 1964). As described by Calabretta (2008b), Comer systematically collected natural history specimens for the Peabody Museum at Yale University during sealing voyages in the southern hemisphere. Despite Boas's resignation, Comer remained committed to the AMNH, working with his successor, Clark Wissler, while remaining in touch with Boas at Columbia University. For his part, Boas retained a formal association with the AMNH, continuing to publish on the Arctic collection (1907) as well as contributing to and overseeing the various publications of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition (1897–1902).

the museum in 1905, Boas requested Comer to continue to collect for him during his tenure at Columbia University, noting his interest in oral traditions written by Inuit in “Reverend Peck’s syllabics” as well as songs and incantations of *angakkut* (shamans); grave goods and archaeological artifacts from Southampton Island; and human skulls from grave sites. For his part, Comer sought Boas’s help with introductions to museum colleagues and advice on the monetary value of collections that he was offering to other museums. Through a periodic exchange of letters, their close relationship appears to have continued until about 1917.⁹

Comer’s collaboration as a surrogate fieldworker greatly assisted Boas, allowing him to expand the research results of his own work in the Arctic (see, for example, Harper 2016; Müller-Wille 2008; Ross 1984; Saladin d’Anglure 1984). In fact, Comer’s ethnographic collecting may have compensated for Boas’s personal shortcoming in this area, for as Boas ([1888] 1964, 1) writes in the introduction to *The Central Eskimo*, “Owing to unfortunate circumstances, the larger portion of the author’s collections could not be brought home.” Consequently, artifacts illustrated in *The Central Eskimo* were drawn largely from the collection of the Smithsonian Institution with a small selection from private collectors and artifacts deposited by Boas at the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin. Perhaps in an attempt to supplement his original collection, Boas recruited Comer to gather a more comprehensive collection for the Berlin museum from Inuit in the Hudson Bay region.¹⁰ Throughout his work, Comer demonstrated a strong aptitude for fieldwork, not only in his close relationship with the Inuit community but also in his willingness to engage in the ethnographic mission—to collect, pack, and ship artifacts to the museum—as well as to meet with Boas and museum staff in New York and at his home in Connecticut. Boas’s mentorship, and the financial support of the American Museum of Natural History and other museums, transformed Comer’s passionate interest into an informed and profitable skill. Ultimately, however, it is Comer’s precise documentation of the whaling period through journal entries, census data, photography, sound recordings, and portrait casts that has created such an inimitable historical repository, detailing the social life of the period through the presence and interaction of named individuals.

9. Correspondence between Comer and Franz Boas, 1906–1917, American Philosophical Society Archives, Philadelphia.

10. In a letter to the director of the Berlin museum, May 1903, Boas writes that Captain Comer was setting out for a voyage north and would be willing to assemble a full collection for the Berlin museum at a cost of five hundred dollars. AMNH 1902-78.

Qatiktalik Social History: Portraits and Photography

Ably trained by the museum's sculptor Caspar Mayer, Comer was a natural—one might even say “gifted”—technician in the creation of plaster facial casts. With the rapid development of museums as centres of public education, living casts provided for a more realistic portrayal of Native figures in museum exhibits. From 1900 to 1912, Comer created almost 250 portrait casts of Aivilingmiut and Iglulingmiut from the coastal region of Hudson Bay; Qaernermiut, Hauneqtormiut and Netsilingmiut from the interior; Tununermiut from north Baffin Island; and Padlimiut from north of Churchill. While engaged in the relief mission for the Crocker Land Expedition (1915–1917), Comer created an additional ten facial casts, including portraits of Iggiannguaq (Eginguau), Uutaaq (Outah), and Sigluk (Sigloo), three of the four Inuit men to accompany Robert Peary on his expedition to the North Pole.

In 2013 whaling historian Fred Calabretta and I photographed the collection of Inuit facial casts at the American Museum of Natural History, incorporating the census data gathered by Comer to create an illustrated inventory of the collection. Despite having laid in storage in the museum attic for over a century, individual personalities seemed to emerge through the camera lens. By virtue of Comer's identification of each facial cast by name, age, height, -miut affiliation, and, for some, family relationships, the collections at the American Museum of Natural History and the Canadian Museum of History comprise a visual census of more than two hundred individuals, replacing a mask of anonymity with the names and personal identities of more than three generations of Inuit visiting or living at Qatiktalik at the time.

Comer's census records the use of anglicized first names, such as Paul, Gilbert, Charley, Ben, Susie, Hattie, and Jennie, either arbitrarily assigned by the whalers or perhaps adopted by Inuit. More playful nicknames appear as well, including Tidle winks, Butter Cup, Bye n Bye, Shoofly, Queen Emma, and Stonewall Jackson. As the late Inuit Elder Joe Curley recalled, Inuit also engaged in nicknaming the whalers: Captain John Murray was known as Nagungajuq or Cross-Eyes, while Comer was called Angakkuq (shaman), for his ability to create photographs—transforming living images to glass negatives and paper—as well as for his interest in shamans and shamanistic practice (Eber 1989, 111–14). Comer's photographs of staged demonstrations of shamanistic feats (Figure 3) are reminiscent of Boas's field photographs from the Northwest Coast, which were intended to be used as models for exhibit installations or published illustrations (Kendall, Mathe, and Miller 1997). In addition to attending “anticooting” performances, Comer recorded the mystical vision of Qingailisaq, the Iglulik shaman whose spirit encounter while hunting inspired the design of his shamanistic vestments collected by Comer for the American Museum of Natural History in 1902 (Driscoll Engelstad 1983b; 1987a, 1987b; Issenman 1997; Saladin d'Anglure 1983).

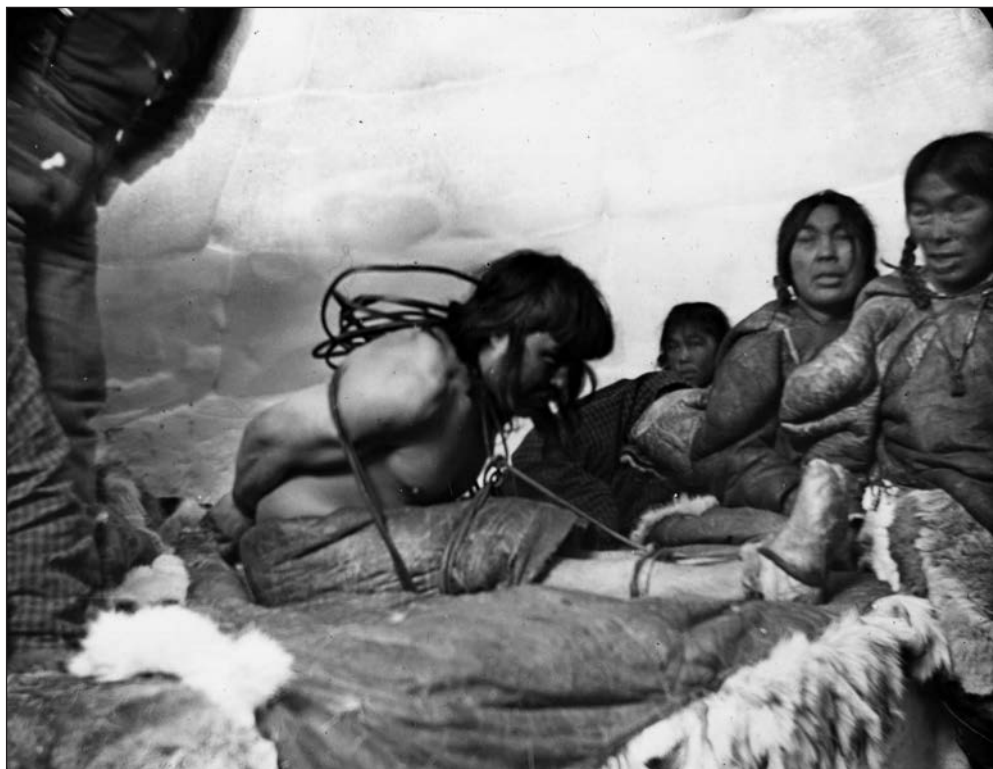


Figure 3. Inuit inside a snow house, including an *angakkuq* bound in preparation for a ritual trance, 1900–1905. Photo: George Comer. Mystic Seaport Museum 1996.339.11.

Throughout his years at Qatiktalik, Comer produced facial casts and photographs of individuals well-known to him. According to his numbering system, the Aivilingmiut leader, Tassiuq, known as Harry, was his first sitter (Figure 4a); followed by Tassiuq’s wife, Nowyer (Tulugak, called Pouty by the whalers) (Figure 5a). In his notes, Comer describes Tassiuq as “a man who is far more intelligent than any Native now living in the various tribes of whom I have taken casts. His father was an Igloodic [Iglulik] and Mother was a Kiacknuckmuite [Qaernermiut].” Tassiuq appears in solo, family, and group photographs. Figure 4b shows his skill in carving an ivory walrus tusk, a favourite pastime of New England whalers, also mastered by Inuit carvers along the south coast of Baffin Island, Hudson Bay, and Alaska (Driscoll Engelstad 1983). In Figure 5b, the shamanistic practice of head-lifting is demonstrated by Nowyer with Tassiuq posing as the patient. Responding to questions by the shaman, the ease or difficulty of raising the patient’s head indicates the appropriate positive or negative response (Laugrand and Oosten 2010).



(a)



(b)

Figure 4. a) Portrait cast of Tassiuq. Courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History, AMNH 99/4108. b) Tassiuq working on ivory tusk, 1897–1905. Photo: George Comer. Mystic Seaport Museum 1967.1767.64.



(a)



(b)

Figure 5. a) Portrait cast of Nowyer/Tulugak (Pouty). Courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History, AMNH 99/4109. b) Head-lifting demonstrated by Tulugak with her husband Tassiuq as the patient, Cape Fullerton, April 13, 1905. Photo: George Comer. Mystic Seaport Museum 1963.1767.52.

In describing the method for producing plaster casts, the physical anthropologist Aleš Hrdlička notes the usefulness of casts in “demonstrations and museum exhibits” (1904, 19–21).¹¹ With a muslin band wrapped around the forehead and back of the head to encase the hair, the subject’s face and neck as well as the band are brushed with light paraffin oil; soap paste is used to cover the eyebrows, moustache, and beard; and cotton is applied in the ears. As Hrdlička writes, “See that the face preserves throughout its most natural expression, the eyes being open, and warn the subject against moving, swallowing, coughing, sneezing, or spitting. The lips should not be held tight or puckered, or the mouth distorted....No nasal tubes are required....Only the best dental plaster should be used” (19–21).



(a)



(b)

Figure 6. a) Mold and b) Portrait cast of Santa Anna. Courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History, AMNH 99/4591a, b.

The plaster, amply applied to the face and neck, creates a negative image of the person’s face as it hardens. Once removed, the mold is filled with plaster (about $\frac{3}{4}$ ” thick), creating a positive portrait image of the individual, as in the case of a man known as “Santa Anna,” who together with his son Joe worked with Comer (Figure 6b). In a commentary in the *American Anthropologist*, Franz

11. Life groups and portrait casts of Native individuals were popularly used in museum settings; see Jacknis 1985, 97–103.

Boas pointed out that this procedure (specifically, the ability to eliminate nasal tubes thus ensuring a more faithful representation) had been developed by sculptor Caspar Mayer at the American Museum of Natural History; in his response, Hrdlička confirmed that he learned the method directly from Mayer.¹² Although an uncomfortable procedure for the sitter, the initial experiment in 1900 provided such amusement to onlookers on the *Era* that Comer writes in his journal that he had to threaten to clear the deckhouse to calm the laughter of the crowd.



(a)



(b)

Figure 7. a) Portrait cast of Nivisanaaq/Siusarnaq (She-u-shark-en-nuck/Shoofly). Courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History, AMNH 99/4113. b) Nivisanaaq using sewing machine aboard whaling schooner, 1907–1912. Photo: George Comer. Mystic Seaport Museum 1983.25.55.

Nivisanaaq,¹³ known as Shoofly (also identified by Comer as She-u-shark-en-nuck/Siusarnaq), appears in numerous solo and group photographs taken by Comer, as well as by A.P. Low and Geraldine Moodie (Figure 7a and 7b). Nivisanaaq's parka, acquired by Comer in 1906 for the American Museum of Natural History, features a red stroud chest panel with beaded images, including

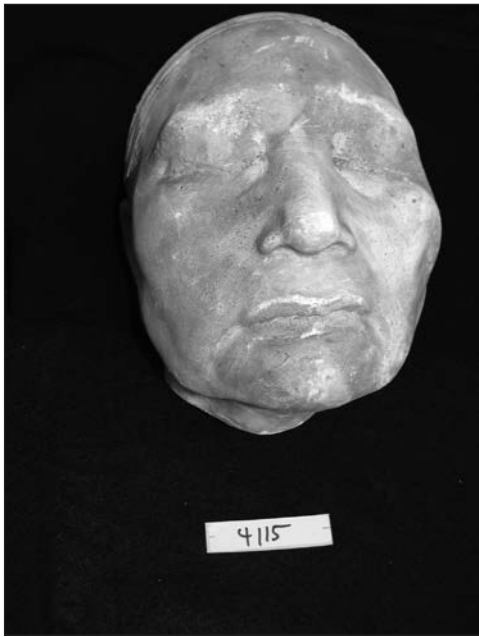
12. Caspar Mayer (1871–1931) received a silver medal at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition (St. Louis World's Fair) for his skill in producing life casts.

13. In Inuit cultural tradition, an individual may be known by personal ancestral names, Christian name, or familial relationship to the speaker (Alia 2007; Otak and Pitsiulak-Stevens 2014). *Nivisanaaq* was a term of endearment used by family members (Bernadette Miquisaaq Dean, pers. comm., 2016). As noted by Nivisanaaq's grandson, Samson Ell of Coral Harbour, the nickname Shoofly, given to her by Comer for her habit of shoofing away flies (Eber 1989, 114, 178n7), is also linked to a popular American tune of the 1860s (Ross, ed. 1984, 151n5).

a compass rose and high-topped boots, fashionable footwear in the Victorian era. The name “ShooFLY” is written in white-beaded script on the lower right side. As Bernadette Miqqusaaq Dean writes, “I have been told by various elders and elderly relatives that the late Captain Comer designed some of the patterns on my grandmother Shoo-fly’s tuili.... Another elder told me that the boots on her parka represent the boots that Captain Comer brought back to Shoo-fly. The actual boots were too small, so a replica of the boots went on the chest piece. Was it a symbol of their love for each other?” (2010, 259).

Nivisanaaq was one of two wives of Auqqajaq (Ben), a valued member of Comer’s whaling enterprise who is often mentioned in his journals. In the early months of 1894, Ben saved Comer from drowning, an act that may have cemented their friendship and perhaps initiated their wife-sharing relationship with Nivisanaaq. Comer became deeply attached to Nivisanaaq, caring for her onboard ship when she was ill (Ross, ed. 1984, 151–53); he was also clearly moved by Ben’s death, participating in his burial service (191–92). In addition to bringing her handsome gifts, including the first sewing machine at Qatiktalik, Comer apparently looked after Nivisanaaq in a fuller capacity following Ben’s death when she and her son, John Ell, named for the “Great John L. Sullivan,” heavyweight boxing champion of the time, travelled on the *Era*. Elders recall that she had a proprietary role (in Inuit wifely fashion) distributing trade goods brought by Comer to other women in the community; and she sewed calico skirts and dresses on her sewing machine, which she exchanged with other women for beadwork (Joan Attuat in Eber 1989, 122, 178n22). In this way, Nivisanaaq assisted Comer in his collecting pursuits.

Facial casts of Nivisanaaq, taken during separate voyages in 1900–1902 and 1907–1909 are in the collections of the American Museum of Natural History and the Canadian Museum of History. During the winter of 1900–1901, Comer also created a facial portrait of Nivisanaaq’s mother, Taqqalik (Tuck-er-lik, nicknamed Queen Emma by the whalers) and of her son, John Ell (Aullanaq/Ullanaq, written by Comer as Oudlynnock) (Figures 8a and 8b). Although some confusion has been suggested as to whether or not John Ell (born c. 1899) was a biological son of Nivisanaaq and Comer, this is firmly denied by many Inuit (see, for example, Eber 1989, 178n25). A question—perhaps a wish or desire—may have lingered in Comer’s mind, for in his 1911 census of births at Qatiktalik, a question mark follows Ben’s name as father of John Ell. Moreover, a photograph of the *Era* crew shows John Ell sitting prominently at the Captain’s side. Without question, an intimate bond united the three, and Comer gifted his cameras, photographic equipment, and photographs to John Ell when leaving the North (Ben Ell in Eber 1989, 123). An elegantly beaded belt created by Nivisanaaq, inscribed with her name and that of John Ell, remains a treasured memento in the Comer family collection.



(a)



(b)

Figure 8. a) Portrait cast of Taqqalik (Tuck er lick/Queen Emma), mother of Nivisanaaq. Courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History, AMNH 99/4115). b) Portrait cast of Aullanaq/Ullanaq (Oud lin nock/John Ell), son of Nivisanaaq. Courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History, AMNH 99/4116).

Captain Comer also had an intimate relationship with Nivisanaaq's younger sister, Ukkuq (Ookok/Ooktok), who gave birth to their son, Laurent Pameolik (Eber 1989, 162–63). Ukkuq (known as Hattie to the whalers) is featured in group photographs by Comer and others (see, for example, Figure 10a), as well as in a striking solo portrait by Geraldine Moodie in the British Museum collection. Following Ukkuq's death, Nivisanaaq and her husband, Angutimmarik, adopted young Pameolik (K. Harper, pers. comm., 2017).

Beyond preserving the physical personae of individuals, these portrait casts revive memories of historical events. For example, the facial cast of Kumanark (identified as Charley by Comer) recalls the tragic accident of his death. Exhausted after a night of playing the accordion to entertain crew members and fellow Inuit, the victim (the son of Nivisanaaq's co-wife, Melia) fell asleep on the ice where he was shot by North West Mounted Police Constable Charles MacMillan who mistook the young hunter for a seal (Eber 1989, 119–21; Harper 2015, 65–67). His widow, Kukilasak (Kookooleshook), and her young son appear in studio portraits by Geraldine Moodie.

Facial casts at the American Museum of Natural History include portraits of two of the five Sallirmiut survivors from Southampton Island whose resident population perished between 1902 and 1903 by an introduced epidemic (Damas 1984, 396). However, according to Comer, the Scottish whaling station established on the island “brought over one hundred natives from other parts of the coast to work for it....This occupancy proved fatal to the Southampton Islanders of whom, by the spring of 1903, only one woman and four small children were left....The children were adopted by Eskimo of the Aivilik tribe” (Comer 1921, 243; see also Ross 1977).

Qatiktalik: A Community in Transition

In October 1903, the Canadian government steamer, the *Neptune*, under the command of A.P. Low, arrived at Qatiktalik to spend the winter season beside the *Era*. In addition to its crew, the ship carried scientific personnel as well as a detachment of the North West Mounted Police (NWMP), under the direction of Major J. Douglas Moodie. Establishing a permanent police presence at Qatiktalik represented a critical moment in Canadian political history in the move to affirm national sovereignty over the Arctic region (Burant 1998; Ross 1976).

Entries throughout Comer's 1903–1905 journal underscore the tense relationship between Comer and Major Moodie, stemming from the formal imposition of a customs duty on whaling activities, a halt to the purchase of muskox furs, competition from the NWMP in fur trading, and ultimately what Comer regarded as the major's officious attitude in his relationship with the Inuit community. Writing to Franz Boas, Comer requested an introduction to Boas's museum colleagues in Canada, feeling that the opportunity to collect for a Canadian museum would give him “standing in the Bay and with the Police.”¹⁴ In response, Boas put Comer in touch with his former student, Edward Sapir, at the Geological Survey of Canada, who later became the founding director of the National Museum of Man in Ottawa. Although Comer informed Boas that he planned to make a major collection for Ottawa in 1906, the ill-fated sinking of the *Era* forced a change in plan. Instead, this collection of more than 150 ethnographic artifacts, including hunting equipment, domestic tools, ivory carvings, a kayak, woman's beaded parka, and a set of forty portrait casts was made during his subsequent voyage on the *A.T. Gifford* (1907–1909).¹⁵ In a letter to Boas dated April 22, 1910, the director of the Geological Survey of Canada, R.W. Brock, asks Boas if he felt the collection offered by Comer was worth the

14. Letter from Comer to Boas, March 15, 1906, American Philosophical Society Archives, Philadelphia.

15. According to subsequent correspondence between Comer and Sapir (1913), two major articles—a kayak and beaded parka—were not received until 1913 (Canadian Museum of History Archives, Gatineau, QC).

captain's asking price of \$1,000. In his response, Boas provided a higher estimate of \$1,800 to \$2,000, stating, "I do not know what part of the collection has been sent to you, and what part has been retained by the American Museum of Natural History. The great scientific value of the collection lies in the fact that it proves the early, more artistic culture of the Eskimo of Hudson Bay and that it proves beyond cavil that the east coast of Greenland was settled by way of Smith Sound and the north coast of Greenland, and that the current of immigration probably came from Coronation Gulf across the islands of the Arctic Archipelago northeastward" (April 25, 1910).¹⁶

Despite the underlying tension with Major Moodie of the NWMP delegation, Captain Comer formed a collegial relationship with fellow photographer Commander A.P. Low, and the two often collaborated in photographing Inuit subjects, using the deckhouse of the *Era* as a makeshift studio during the winter of 1903–1904 (Calabretta 1984; Ross 1990). A series of photographs taken by Comer, Low, and J.D. Moodie illustrate regional variations in facial tattooing practised by Inuit women across the central Arctic. The *Neptune* departed Qatiktalik in June 1904 and was relieved by the *Arctic*, which arrived the following October under the command of Captain Bernier. Major Moodie returned to Qatiktalik on the *Arctic*, accompanied by his wife, Geraldine, an accomplished studio photographer and botanical artist, as well as their son, Alexander Dunbar Moodie, who served as a NWMP special constable. Whether it was a sense of adventure, intrigue with Inuit life and culture, or competition with the more amateur photographers of Qatiktalik, Geraldine Moodie, granddaughter of the pioneer writer Susanna Moodie, arrived at Qatiktalik at the age of fifty.

Comer and Moodie: A Comparison in Photographic Style

Given his earlier conflicts with Major Moodie, the family's arrival was noted with some apprehension by Captain Comer. In the course of the winter, however, Geraldine Moodie's presence seems to have reduced the tension between the two men, and Comer visited with the couple aboard the *Arctic* as well as in their newly constructed home (nicknamed Le Château by the *Arctic* crew) beside the police barracks (Ross, ed., 1984). By virtue of their mutual interest in photography, Captain Comer and Geraldine Moodie came to establish a personal, though formal, camaraderie. On one occasion, Comer shared with her a set of ivory cribbage boards that he had carved and presented her with a walrus tusk so that she might try her own hand at carving (Ross, ed. 1984, 163).

A noted photographer, Geraldine Moodie had established her first commercial studio in Battleford in the North-West Territories (later Saskatchewan) during her husband's posting there with the NWMP (White 1998a, 1998b, 1999).

16. These letters are housed at the Canadian Museum of History Archives, Gatineau, QC.

Her images, staged with the formal furnishings of the Victorian era, focus on studio portraits of local elite as well as school, sports, and music groups, and public events in town and on the prairie. Many of her commissions came directly from the NWMP, whose members she photographed individually and in group settings. When the family was transferred to Maple Creek, Geraldine sold her studio and opened a second in their new domicile. Despite subsequent transfers, she managed to retain her Maple Creek studio for many years, anticipating Virginia Woolf's admonition for "a room of one's own" by almost forty years. Numerous photographs, particularly during her time in Battleford (1891–1897), the former capital of the North-West Territories, demonstrate a keen interest in engaging Native subjects in outdoor as well as studio settings. Her correspondence to family "back home" suggests that she invited Native sitters whom she had met at First Nations gatherings on the prairie to be photographed: "I have not seen much of the Indians this spring. I have several promises to come and sit for their pictures when I get my new studio and fixtures finished" (White 1998b, 10; see also Close 2007, 48–73, 97–125).

In contrast, Comer was self-taught, creating photographs in the Arctic as early as 1893 (Ross 1990). In preparing to sail on the *Era* in 1903, he carried two cameras with him, one a last-minute gift from a friend in New Bedford who also provided twelve dozen glass plates.¹⁷ Transforming the deckhouse of the *Era* into a makeshift studio, he used a large sail cloth, often haphazardly draped, as a backdrop for solo and group photographs. The informal nature of his photography is evident in the image of Tassiuq carving a walrus tusk (Figure 4b) and Nivisanaaq working at her sewing machine (Figure 7b), while other photographs, such as those of women's facial tattooing, reveal a more studied approach with a clear aim to record Inuit cultural practices.

In terms of photography, Geraldine Moodie brought the flavour of the Victorian studio to Qatiktalik. A full-length portrait of Tassiuq with a hunting lance poised at his side projects the image of a classical, heroic figure reminiscent of a Roman gladiator (Figure 9). An album of Moodie's photographs from Qatiktalik deposited in the British Museum provides a representative overview of her work. The album features twenty-four portraits of hunters, forty-six images of women, many dressed in their elaborately beaded parkas, as well as twelve images of mothers with young children and seven of children, including portraits of a young boy dressed in the garb of a Victorian urchin.¹⁸ As suggested by the album, Moodie was especially interested in photographing women, with and

17. The second camera and glass plates were an unexpected gift from Mr. Charles Agard (journal entry for Monday, June 29, 1903) in Ross, ed. (1984, 40).

18. Individual images from the album of photographs created by Geraldine Moodie at Qatiktalik are accessible through the online database of the British Museum.



Figure 9. Portrait of Shenuckshoo [Tassiuq], Aivilik Chief and whaler, Fullerton Harbour (Qatiktalik), Nunavut, [ca. April 1905]
Photographer: Geraldine Moodie. Glenbow Archives PA-4033-80.

without children. Numerous photographs by Geraldine Moodie (as well as by Comer, Low, and J.D. Moodie) depict Inuit women wearing the striking beaded parkas (Figures 10a and 10b), which developed as an artistic tradition throughout the region following the early introduction of beads by European explorers (Driscoll Engelstad 1984a, 1987a, 2010; Dean 2010; Eber 1973; Issenman 1997). Indeed, photographs of women's beaded parkas taken by J.D. Moodie in his first



(a)



(b)

Figure 10. a) Portrait of three Inuit women, Fullerton Harbour (Qatiktalik), Nunavut, May 1904. L R Ukkuq (Ooktook/Hattie), Atunuck (Suzie), and Tutuucktuuck (Jennie). Photographer: J.D. Moodie. Glenbow Archives NB-60-Neptune-34; b) Odelle Panimiraq (Koo-tuck-tuck) in beaded parka, Cape Fullerton (Qatiktalik), Nunavut, February 1905. Photographer: Geraldine Moodie. Glenbow Archives ND-44-18.

year at Qatiktalik may have played a role in persuading Geraldine to make the arduous voyage north. Her graphic skill as a botanical artist is evident in the elaborately beaded parka commissioned by the Moodies for Lady Alice Holford, wife of Albert Grey, 4th Earl Grey, Governor General of Canada (1903–1911). The striking appearance of Inuit beaded parkas—as well as the elegant presence of the women wearing them—has resulted in a treasury of photographic images from this period, comprising a rich personal, family, and ancestral history for Inuit today. In his keynote address opening the 1998 Arctic Images conference at the British Museum, George Qulaut of Igloolik, identified his grandmother, Odelle Panimiraq (Koo-tuck-tuck), (King and Lidchi 1998, 14)—whose photograph by Geraldine Moodie (Figure 10b) highlights the cover of the exhibit catalogue.

After leaving Qatiktalik in 1905, Geraldine accompanied Superintendent Moodie to his posting in Churchill, Manitoba (1906–1909). However, her photographs from this period lack the close personal relationships that imbue her portfolio of images from Qatiktalik. In this regard, such intimately staged photographs may not have been possible without Comer's established relationship with the Inuit community and their willing participation in his photographic mission—a familiarity that fellow photographers, Geraldine Moodie, A.P. Low, and J.D. Moodie, were able to use to their advantage.

Conclusion

In 1912 George Comer ended his whaling and fur trading career, relinquishing command of the *A.T. Gifford* to pilot a prospective expedition to Hudson Bay organized by the American Museum of Natural History under the direction of Lincoln Ellsworth for 1913. Unfortunately, this expedition, as well as its proposed successor in 1914, was never realized. As Comer recalled in an interview with Vilhjalmur Stefansson, “I passed those two winters without doing anything, so to speak” (1919, 5). In 1915 Comer served as the ice pilot for the museum’s relief expedition to northwestern Greenland to return the stranded Crocker Land Expedition led by Donald MacMillan. Trapped in the ice for two years, Comer carried out excavations at Ummannaq, resulting in the recovery of a significant midden of archaeological artifacts dating to the Thule era. Comer made his final visit to Qatiktalik in 1919. Piloting the *Finback* for the Norwegian ethnomusicologist, museum collector, and aspiring entrepreneur Christian Leden, the voyage resulted in the loss of the vessel in Qatiktalik harbour (Douglas 1977; Leden 1990; see also Ross, ed. 1984).

The ethnographic and archaeological artifacts brought together by Captain George Comer play a vital role in the knowledge and preservation of Inuit cultural history. As research continues over time, these collections will become more widely known and deeply appreciated. The photographs and facial casts produced by Captain Comer retain the visual memory of over two hundred Inuit, encapsulating the biographical history and family ancestry of an entire region. In contrast to photographs taken at Qatiktalik, produced through the mediating role of the photographer, the portrait casts present a direct, physical representation of each individual, even with occasional wisps of hair from beards, eyebrows, or temples encased in the plaster. In tandem, the photographs and facial casts provide a unique insight into the early social history of Nunavut through the presence and interaction of named—and imaged—individuals.

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