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# Understanding the Culture and Subcultures of Nakedness in Antarctica

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**Abstract:** Depictions of nakedness in Antarctica are rare, although there are many sub-cultures and traditions there that involve nakedness – often as an expression of the human body confronting or overcoming the extreme environment. An examination of some of the sub-cultures of nakedness, shows that there are markedly different attitudes to nakedness “off-station” and “on-station”, with official attitudes sanctioning nakedness as not appropriate behaviour “on-station”, but with less rigidity as to what happens “off-station”. There is also a strong sense that naked behaviours, or depictions of nakedness, from earlier eras having a sense of cultural heritage, which can be at odds with contemporary needs of stamping out sexism, as more and more women take up positions on Antarctic stations – often in roles of management. And while no longer condoned in contemporary practice, that such former depictions of nudity can be seen as worth preserving - demonstrated in the reaction to the destruction of the nude pinup pictures on the ceiling of a heritage hut in Australia’s Mawson Station (mainly due to their inherent sexism and objectification of women) shows that views of nakedness can be seen as both heretical or heritage, from different perspectives.

**Keywords:** Antarctica, Naked, Nude, Feminism

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## 1. Introduction

“Two words that don't go together: Antarctica and Naked.”  
[7]

There is a strong culture of nudity in Antarctica, often as an expression of the human body confronting the extreme environment. However over time these have moved to a sub-culture, to avoid official approbation and censure, in line with contemporary workplace norms, and stand in stark contrast to more blatant expressions of nakedness during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Understanding the cultures and sub-cultures of nakedness in modern Antarctica therefore presents a challenge to researchers as much of behaviour is self-censored, and stories and images and not widely shared, to prevent official condemnation. However it is possible to use stories and social media posts, outside of official records, to gain and understanding of contemporary attitudes and behaviours involving nakedness in Antarctica.

## 2. The Sistine Ceiling of Mawson Station

This is a story about 92 naked, or near naked, women who

traveled down to Antarctica in the 1970s and 1980s, taking up residence in the Australian Mawson station’s old carpenter’s hut, where they remained until 2005. It is a story that is not widely known amongst Antarctic social researchers, despite the strong defensive emotions it evokes within the Australian Antarctic expeditioner community. It is a story about conflicting values of what is heritage and what is heretical. And it is a story about a subject that is as offensive to some as it is titillating to others – both of which obscure a deeper understanding of its relevance as an example of how Antarctic sub-cultures can exist, largely outside official records.

It is also a story about what defines our ideas and practices of heritage and the heretical – both of which are imported in Antarctica. All cultures and sub-culture in Antarctica are constructs, unique to time and place and shaped by the environment, and perhaps difficult to fully fathom from a distance of time and place. But attempting to understand them gives us some insights in the way that sub-cultures are created, tolerated or prohibited, within the dominant official cultures on Antarctic bases.

The 92 women in question were centrefold pinups,

predominantly from Playboy and Penthouse magazines, that were stuck onto the ceiling of the old carpenter's hut, earning it the nickname of the Sistine ceiling. In the early decades of Antarctic settlement, being a very blokey place, it was not uncommon to find pinups and soft-core porno-pictures decorating the walls and workshops, much as they were common in other blokey environments in most developed countries, such as in motor mechanic or plumbing workshops of the era. From the earliest days of human exploration of Antarctica it was primarily a man's world, and as tends to happen in such all-male environments, pictures of naked women tend to decorate the walls. We can debate whether this was due to an overt display of heterosexuality in an all-male environment, or just a longing for women – but when women eventually did start living in Antarctica, it was not in a way that would have accorded with any fantasies being perpetuated by pinups.

As more and more women started coming down to Antarctica (over-wintering from 1974 on for Americans, from 1975 on for Australians and from the early 1990s on for the British [8] and challenging this blokey culture as no longer appropriate, there was pressure to remove such pictures. We can view this as a time of transition, with Antarctic communities moving from being a male domain, with certain freedoms, to a cross-gender domain – with new rules. According to Raymond J Noonan, who has undertaken one of the few studies of sex and sexuality in Antarctica:

“In the late 1980s and early 1990s, when anti-pornography feminists came in and sexual harassment laws became common, they caused much acrimony and angst at the stations, as pinups and other materials had to be removed. For example, an uproar in the Australian press occurred over one explosive episode when a female leader banned the private posting of this type of material in one's personal area” [21].

Those who were down on ice at the time have said that this was largely due to few “plank-heads”\* who had insisted on sticking pinups in places where they could easily be seen when their doors were opened, to be deliberately provocative [5] thus moving from a private space into one that was also a public space. And former station leader, Joan Russell, who was at Casey station in 1990, said of this period:

“...The senior woman scientist made a complaint about the inclusion in the daily newspaper of an increasingly explicit page three. I found her request to be entirely acceptable and directed that it would stop forthwith. And a balloon went up. The blokes were scandalized. I don't believe that the men on the station cared two hoots about pornography. What they did care about was this 10 feet-tall, hairy-legged feminist coming in with the big broom and sweeping all the girlie magazines into a pile and setting fire to it” [23].

The Sistine ceiling, however, survived this porno pinup purging, perhaps because of its isolation from the main living

and working quarters, which were more governed by such policies of prohibition. There seems to be an unwritten norm in play that the further one goes from the main station quarters the less such sanctions apply, so that often the remote field huts were the last places where soft-core porn magazines could still be found, and while displays of nakedness in the public or communal interior spaces is frowned upon, in the outdoors it is treated differently, as we shall examine shortly.

The Sistine ceiling was even included in the 2004 heritage listing of the buildings from the original Mawson station around it. But in February 2005, the night before the last crew of the summer were due to fly out, the Sistine ceiling was destroyed. All the pictures were torn down and ripped into pieces. The incident both shocked and surprised many, including women who stated they had found it more an historical fascination than demeaning to them [5].

One female expeditioner who had been there at the time of the incident, said, “These were all 1960s and 1970s type pinups. If you could see a nipple in there anywhere it was a pretty rare thing” [5]. Looking at photos of the Sistine ceiling there are in fact very many nipples to be seen, as well as occasional full-frontal nudity, but there is also an air of naïve playfulness about the photos, with some women posing wearing cowboy chaps, or half-covered in bath bubbles, or wearing 1980s leg-warmers and gym headband – so different from what the expeditioner described as the stark or aggressive pornography common on the internet today. Indeed the images on the Sistine ceiling do seem tame by today's standards, according with the description of the traditional naked woman pinup as described by Maria Elena Buszek, in her study of pinups: “it doesn't represent sex, so much as suggest it” [2].

However she does also point out that few issues have caused more debate within feminism than the sexualized representation of women, and whether such mass produced images liberate women from, or enforce traditional patriarchal notions of female sexuality.

Despite internal enquiries conducted by Antarctic Division staff we might never know who it was who had assumed the right to play heritage vandal or moral police for everyone. But the attitude of the Mawson station over-winters to the destruction was demonstrated by them spending the winter sticking the photos back together. They are now preserved in a large hand-crafted wooden book that sits at the top of the main stairs in the living quarters at Mawson station. It is made out of different types of wood, with metal worked letters on the cover that state “The Heritage Girls of Mawson” – clearly defining how they viewed the pinups.

Inside the book the 92 pinup photos of the women are each carefully restored, stuck down on tissue paper, some sealed with contact. The damage to each is evident, but so is the care in restoring them. And interestingly, inside the book are two extra photos that a female expeditioner had taken of herself to include in the collection. They show her posing in a black bikini and winter boots, in one photo she is bending over quite provocatively, but in both she is turned away from

\* A term referring to those with an obstinate view that the Antarctic present should retain the values of the Antarctic past.

the camera. This did not ensure her anonymity though, as when I was examining the photograph I asked one of the Mawson station staff if he knew who it was and he said: “Yes. I’d recognise that arse anywhere” [5].

It is difficult to know her full intent – defiance or mockery – without a deeper level of enquiry, but it does demonstrate the strong knowledge networks that operate internally in Antarctica. And such networks can prove very difficult to penetrate for the short-term visitor, or researcher at distance, which is the point of studying the different meanings of the Sistine ceiling in more detail. It represents a sub-culture of pornography, as it existed in the past (before the age of internet and digital porn) that largely lies beyond the official records, and is difficult to fully understand from afar, particularly as modern values have tended to silence the voices of those expeditioners of that era, who often do not wish to be judged by contemporary standards.

Of course pinups didn’t exist only on Australian stations. The removal team working on the dismantling of the old British station on Danco Island in 2004 described a “toilet complete with original Playboy pinups from the 50’s” [23]. A semi-clad painting of Marilyn Monroe, painted on the door of the old generator hut at the British Port Lockroy station, not only survived the station being declared an historic monument, but now stands in the station’s souvenir shop, making it undoubtedly the most viewed example of a pinup in Antarctica, as Port Lockroy is amongst the most often-visited tourist sites.

Also, legendary Australian Antarctic Phil Law once recalled that the Australians were always astonished at the number of nude photos on the walls of the American stations [17]. And Australian journalist Jo Chandler, who in 2010 visited the former Soviet station Oasis, later renamed Dobrowolski by the Poles, wrote:

“It’s reassuring to remember, rummaging in the cupboards, that there can be no rats, no spiders. Just ghosts. Behind the gramophone a Soviet flag hangs over the doorway to one of the dormitory rooms, where thin horsehair mattresses and old blankets don’t promise too much comfort in the biting cold. Speaking of cold comfort, there are, of course, the inevitable soft-porn posters of women, much cherished in an unreconstructed era of boys own adventure” [3].

The Japanese, however, according to Antarctic legends, went one step further, having a life-like sex doll known as Antarctica, that scientists at the Showa station used “to keep warm during the long Antarctic winter” [18].

There has not been much published on the Sistine ceiling, nor indeed the use of pornography in Antarctica, and most comments tend to focus on its meaning as a statement of male domination of Antarctica. Christy Collis has written:

“As a memorial to the ‘good old days’ when men were men and women were photos, the Weddell hut’s ‘Sistine ceiling,’ composed of ninety-two 1970s and 1980s porn pinups, was declared an Australian national heritage site of ‘high significance,’ a ‘shrine to the red-blooded pioneering spirit’ of the masculine frontier... Heritage is the formal

process of assigning places official meaning; the preservation of the Weddell hut’s dated porn signals a desire to valorize and memorialize the AAT’s status as a man’s world” [4].

The Sistine ceiling provides some interesting insights into the attitudes and values of the men serving on station at the time, beyond the clear symbolism of staking out Antarctica as a masculine domain. For instance, a closer examination of the photos of the Sistine ceiling shows that many of the photos had the individual women’s names written on them in thick text. So Miss June 1972 becomes Debbie Davis, Miss September 1980 becomes Lisa Welch and Miss December 1972, in her fury cowboy chaps, becomes Mercy Rooney. Could this represent something beyond objectification of women, transforming them into something closer to actual absent women (albeit naked and alluring women) by being able to name them? Writing about the relationship between images and their beholders, W. T. J. Mitchell (in an appropriately titled interview – Pictures Want to be Kissed...) said that pictures need to be understood in terms of the interaction of the picture and beholder [20]. Again we can only speculate as to the nature of this relationship, though it was undoubtedly more complex than any single interpretation can provide.

And how does it change our thinking on the use of porn in Antarctica, or our thinking about the iconic Australian explorer Douglas Mawson, to know that he had a pinup of a naked woman over his bunk in his hut at Commonwealth Bay? The poster, which is still there today, shows a painting of a naked woman sitting on the grass, with a fawn sitting in a tree above her. The woman, the fawn and the tree were equally fantasy objects in Antarctica. It may be just a coincidence, but the woman in the painting bears some resemblance to Paquita Delprat, Mawson’s then fiancé. Certainly a case of a picture that wanted to be kissed!

Also of interest here is Mawson’s own view on women. Although he insisted that his daughters study science, he described the nature of women as:

“It so happens that man is a combination of certain qualities – woman of others. There is a fundamental dissimilarity just as surely as there is similarity. In the biologists’ classification the female represents the passive vegetative state – the male is the active animal state. The generalisation is true of woman and man no matter how much the new woman may think to the contrary” [9].

New woman, typified by the many women who have lived in Antarctica as scientists, trades people and station leaders, as well as those who have researched the impact of gender roles in Antarctica, might indeed think the contrary, even if such gender roles were clearly evident in the early years of Antarctic settlement. Cristy Collis, one such researcher, has described traditional gender roles in Antarctica as the masculine spaces being those of exploration and feminized spaces being those of colonization, which are now breaking down and becoming more complex [4].

And what are we to make, from our contemporary world view, of the insight into being a pinup woman provided by Adelie Hurley (the daughter of the photographer Frank

Hurley, who accompanied expeditions of both Mawson and Shackleton), who was a wartime pinup girl for magazines including *Pix*? Speaking in an interview with the *Age* when she was 90 years old, she said:

“Dad was over in the Middle East, photographing men in the trenches for a story for *Pix* and he saw the pinups of me that some of the soldiers had. He said, ‘Hey, that’s my daughter’. That’s when I realised about the impact the pictures were having. It made me feel pretty good” [11].

It would be interesting to track down Debbie Davis, Lisa Welch, Mercy Rooney and the other women, to see what they had to say about their images being stuck to the ceiling of the old Mawson Station’s carpenter’s hut for so long, and to find out what they thought of its destruction and then reconstruction – as well as whether their view of being a pinup model had changed over time. A Google search, however, provided little information on the current whereabouts of any of the women, except to reveal that Lisa Welch since went on to star in *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984) and is now living on an avocado ranch outside Los Angeles, where she is married and has raised nine children.

It is almost as difficult to find references to the Sistine ceiling at Mawson station on Google. A search using the terms ‘Sistine ceiling’ and ‘Mawson’ obtains nine relevant results, and a search for ‘Heritage girls of Mawson’ obtains one result.

I did attempt to ask expeditioners who had been on station in the 90s what the Sistine ceiling meant to them, but it is not a topic that men of that era I talked to are over-willing to share information on, expressing at best a concern that their responses will be distorted somewhat through a lens of different attitudes from a different era.

So researchers sometimes have to find ways to surmount the strong Antarctic barrier of “What happens on the ice stays on the ice”, particularly when trying to better understand sub-cultures that are not widely reported on. This is perhaps even more so the case today in regard to pornography use, as porn on stations is predominantly digital, being stored on hard drives and personal DVDs, and is even further beyond any ability to monitor or research as by contemporary cultural norms these are private space and not public ones. Yet moving pornographic images into this private space challenges the supposition that the role of pornography in all-male enclaves is to provide a means for men to assert their heterosexuality in a homosocial environment. Of course the modern Antarctic experience has changed substantially, no longer being an environment of all-male enclaves, and the cultural values of expeditioners have changed from those of late last century, so we can assume that the role of pornography has changed too.

Martin Francis has argued that a dominant cultural value amongst post-war men was a “flight from domesticity”, and he even uses the example of the 1948 film, *Scott of the Antarctic*, as an example of how men were able to creatively imagine “the energetic life and homosocial camaraderie of the adventure hero” [10]. Although, ironically, men who did travel to Antarctica ended up being highly-domesticated,

having to share all the cooking and cleaning duties with their male colleagues [8].

So in a modern cross-gender environment where public displays of pornography are sanctioned, its continued use must have different motivations that might be multiple – which is probably true across all eras – and contemporary uses may have as much to do with reinforcing gender stereotypes as say fantasy and sexual stimulation, which might be possible to determine via more research. But it certainly wouldn’t be via a literature review.

While accessing information on sub-cultures has opened up somewhat in recent years through the medium of blogs, that can provide an alternative perspective to official and sanctioned accounts of life on Antarctic stations, even there self-censorship is evident. “Tell all” accounts of sub-cultures within Antarctica are rare. One exception is Nicholas Johnson’s *Big Dead Place* which recounts daily life for a contractor at the US McMurdo Station [16]. He reveals a world of numerous undergraduate-style pranks and includes an account of an “eggs and Porn” breakfast video screenings in a couple’s quarters. While such references to porn use in Antarctica are rare, discussions of gay sexual culture or women’s use of porn, which surely exists as they exist in wider society, are even rarer.

But that is one of the characteristics that defines a sub-cultures, that by their nature they tend to place higher value on keeping information internal rather than external (Hills 2002), providing difficult challenges to researchers.

### 3. Take off Your Clothes and Come on in

Looking at nakedness in Antarctica from a different perspective, there is also the phenomena of what might best be described as “take off your clothes and come on in” – to quote one YouTube clip of naked swimming in Antarctica [15]. This is the type of nakedness expressed by enthusiastic expeditioners who can’t resist the temptation to take their clothes off and run around, or pose, at the Antarctic Circle or the South Pole.

Behaviours of the early 70s, such as naked football games, may have diminished somewhat with more cross-gendered populations, but going naked in Antarctica is practiced by both sexes – though there are clear differences in attitudes towards nakedness in the outside Antarctica environment, and nakedness inside the public and official spaces of the stations.

But you won’t find many references to these in official records either, and not many more in unofficial records. There are a few accounts in blogs, which are in the public domain,\* but fewer pictures can be found – as if being captured in a photograph is somehow a higher level of infringement than being captured in text only. An examination of official and

\* For example see:

<http://iceblog.puddingbowl.org/archives/>

2003/12/antarctica\_the.html;

<http://www.outtraveler.com/features.asp?did=264;>

<http://www.bountydiscothequebali.com/strange-planet-antarctica-nudists-put-marylands-polar-bear-plungers-to-shame/>; Accessed 31 October 2016.

unofficial attitudes to nakedness in Antarctica shows that this is perhaps well-founded, as most people who visit Antarctica do so only with the support of an official body that can have strict sets of rules on appropriate behaviour, such as the Australian Antarctic Division lays down in its Antarctic Service Code of Personal Behaviour, which includes a prohibition against “indecent exposure and other gross, obscene or offensive acts” (Australian Antarctic Division 2002).

First some examples of traditions of nakedness that exist without sanction. On Australian stations there is the ‘Bliz Run’, whereby the loser of a bet has to run around the accommodation block wearing only boots. For New Zealand expeditioners there is the Royal Lake Vanda Swim Club. Visitors to New Zealand’s Lake Vanda station are able to dip into the high salinity waters during the summer melt. Many dignitaries and politicians have been said to have been inducted into the club, including former New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark, before she was Prime Minister [19].

The US base at the South Pole, the Scott-Amundsen base, has a tradition of the 300 Club [6], described by one member of the club as:

“Newcomers at the South Pole anxiously await the midwinter below -100 degrees Fahrenheit temperatures so that they can join the infamous 300 Club. The first time that the temperature drops below -100 degrees (and stays there), the newbies sit in a sauna until the temperature reaches 200 degrees Fahrenheit. Once they can no longer stand the heat, they run outside to the geographic South Pole marker – completely naked, except for shoes and perhaps a scarf to protect their lungs from the severe cold – to experience a shocking 300-degree temperature change. Most do not make it all the way to the Pole marker and return to the sauna before they get frostbite or the cold damages their lungs” [13].

As temperatures do not get as cold at the US McMurdo station on Ross Island, the over-winters there have instead begun a 200 Club, when temperatures dip below -40 degrees. Also at McMurdo station, in co-operation with the nearby New Zealand Scott station, expeditioners hold an annual Polar Plunge, with participants jumping through a hole in the ice into the sea, wearing nothing but a pair of shoes. The water temperatures at the time are an estimated balmy -2 degrees Celsius [13]. A common element in all of these seems to be testing one’s body against the Antarctic environment, which is acceptable, but when nakedness moves into the interior environment of a station it is usually judged as unacceptable.

An example of this, and the official condemnation of going naked (which undoubtedly contributes to portrayals of nakedness not being widely promoted nor mentioned), was an incident in 2007 when a New Zealand university student at Scott station got into serious trouble for running naked around a billiard table. According to media reports she had attempted to outdo a man who had run around the pool table in his underwear.

“She offered to do the same – if bar patrons paid her \$NZ200 (\$A180). They did and she saw through the bet,

going a step further and removing her underwear. The incident is believed to have enraged Antarctica New Zealand management who may discipline those involved” [22].

The incident occurred a few days before dignitaries, including former New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark, were due to arrive at the base to celebrate its 50th anniversary (which is an irony considering Helen Clark’s believed accepted membership of the Royal Lake Vanda Swim Club). Had the student’s act of nakedness occurred outside the public space of the station building though, like Helen Clark’s, it would most likely have been outside the rules and behavioural norms of the station too.

Another example of official condemnation of nakedness relates to an attempt to protest against war at the US McMurdo Station in 2003, which caused official anger, and led to the protesters deciding to join the Baring Witness movement, whereby naked bodies are used to spell out anti-war messages. According to a participant in the protest:

“We were warned that anyone who organizes a protest demonstration will be fired ... The McMurdo Station Manager eventually told us that if we do anything of the sort, we must not give any impression that the National Science Foundation supported us in any way: No buildings, vehicles, or infrastructure could be in any of our photos” [14].

Also ironically they were told that any of the extreme cold weather gear they were issued was not permitted to be worn in any photos they took. The NSF, in this instance, appeared to extend its boundaries outside the station buildings, perhaps driven by the fact that the staff would be photographed and that pictures would be made available to the outside world, who might interpret the act as being within the authority of the station. Another irony is that by refusing to support the sub-culture of anti-war protesting in any way, the NSF actually contributed to an exhibition of the sub-culture of nakedness in Antarctica.

So we see that the transitory act of being naked in the isolation of Antarctica is valued differently to being visually recorded as being naked in Antarctica, resulting in similar prohibitions on the export of naked images from Antarctica as there are on the importing of naked images into Antarctica.

## 4. Conclusion

So, as we must invariably ask ourselves at the conclusion of any presentation of research and findings: what does it all mean? Well, certainly imagines of nakedness in Antarctica, like nakedness in many places, are (ironically again) multi-layered. They have meanings of sexuality and exploitation and rebellion and stimulation and individuality, and have been interpreted in these ways and many more. But it is also a useful metaphor for the sub-cultures that exist on Antarctic stations, that are often outside the official records, and like the ever-present symbolic Antarctic icebergs, are only partially glimpsed (not unlike Debbie Davis, Playboy’s Miss June 1972, half-submerged in bath bubbles). The challenge for

researchers is to not ignore the possible depths that are out of sight and not easily examined.

As is the way with many sub-cultures, with little information in official records, research relies on gray literature, social media and oral history – which are increasingly becoming accepted tools in areas of ethnography and other areas of social science.

Clearly there is a lot of scope for participant observation in this area, and it would be enlightening to read the grant application seeking support to research it. But I wouldn't bet on it getting official support – even if losing the bet meant I had to run around one of the Australian station's accommodation quarters wearing only a pair of boots.

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