

Tattooed Bodies:
Embodying and Expressing Identity

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Literature Review

➤ *Body Theory:*

The body is the “intersection between self and society; it is a medium through which we negotiate life; and a conveyer of personal and social meanings” (Kosut 32). In this way, the body serves as a “boundary phenomenon” between the individual and society, acting as a crossroad between the individual self and society. As a result, with the rise of modernity came the increased concern with the body and its management. Yet, with this came the unprecedented individualization of the body. Shilling (1993) has theorized this development with the concept of ‘body projects’. He notes “in the affluent West there is a tendency for the body to be seen as an entity which is in the process of becoming; a project which should be worked at and accomplished as part of an individual’s self-identity” (Featherstone 19-20). Thus, the body is an endeavor for the construction of self and individuals have each become responsible for the design of their own bodies. As such, it is important to recognize that since the body has become a project, it “entails accepting that its appearance, size, shape and even its contents, are potentially open to reconstruction in line with the designs of its owner” (Shilling 5). Such an examination of the body shifts the focus from the natural biological body to the socially and culturally constructed body.

When considering the body as a project, one has to invest in it to alter it and change it or keep it healthy. Such investment in the body or body modification “provides people with a means of self-expression and a way of potentially feeling good and increasing the control they have over their bodies” (Shilling 7). Not only does it give people agency especially in terms of constructing a relationship between body and society, but it also allows for the expression of one’s identity. Thus, the notion of the body as a project is very much related to question of identity. As quoted in Shilling, Goffman explains, “the

management of the body is central to the maintenance of encounters, social roles and social relations, and also mediates the relationship between an individual's self-identity and social identity" (Shilling 8). Thus, the body takes on the status of a resource that can be managed in various ways to essentially construct a particular version of the self. Yet, it not only helps create personal identity but also social identity with regards to all the other bodies out there. Essentially the body is the physical barrier between the self and society and as such it serves as a medium by which we negotiate our lives. Anthropologists in particular have focused on this and how the body, especially the "inscribed body serves as a marker of identity in terms of gender, age, and political status" (Schildkrout 319). The body can serve as clear indicator or mark of social status, family position, tribal affiliation, age, gender and religious condition. Through it we represent ourselves and our experiences and distinguish our bodies from those of others, on an individual, societal and worldly level.

➤ *The Inscribed Body – Writing on the Skin:*

The body, especially its surface has been the site of considerable theoretical interest in anthropology. Skin in particular has been a surface onto which "anthropology and related disciplines have projected their understandings of the relationship between psyche and society, the commonalities and differences between cultures, and even the meaning of art" (Schildkrout 338). The outer layer of the body, the skin can be altered or modified by the individual to suit their needs for expression, decoration, demarcation, and individualization. This process encapsulates the notion of body modification or the process of altering and controlling one's physical appearance. One important factor that forms of body modification share is what could be called a "kind of corporeal absolutism: that it is through the body and in the body that personal identity is to be forged and selfhood sustained" (Caplan 236). Thus, putting great emphasis on the body and its construction.

How humans modify their bodies, the where, what and when essentially marks people as individuals and identifies them in a large group. Yet, while there are many visible and public transitory markers that convey the body and self– hairstyle, clothing, and jewelry– humans are also drawn to permanent body modifications. A permanent and existent form of body modification is tattooing which is arguably “the oldest and most widely used form of permanent body modification” (Kosut 32). The practice of tattooing itself constitutes inserting ink under the skin through the pricking, piercing or cut of a needle. Thus, they are “intrusive modifications to the body whose production involves pain, blood and the penetration of the skin in a non-medicalized setting, not to mention varying degrees of planning and ‘after-care’” (Featherstone 64). As such, contemporary tattoos fit in as a specific case to the body theory and serve as a subcategory of the body project.

There are multiple implications of tattoos on identity formation. The tattoo essentially can hold a multiplicity of meanings and is strongly linked to self-construction and embodied knowledge. In this respect, tattoos serve as corporeal expressions of the self and can be seen as instances of contemporary body projects (Shilling, 1993) and as attempts to construct and maintain a coherent and viable sense of self-identity through attention to the body and, more particularly, the body’s surface” (Featherstone 53). In the spirit of the contemporary body project, as a form of body modification, tattoos have the amazing ability to transform the exterior surfaces of the body “‘in line with the designs of its owner’ and can allow a ‘whole-sale transformation’ of the body along these lines” (Featherstone 68). Thus, the tattoo is strongly linked to the person and their body.

It's important to note that this idea of the body project as a postmodern phenomenon marks a clear distinction from the so called 'traditional' or pre-modern societies. Within these societies, identity was seen more as "relatively fixed, and the size, shape and appearance of the body accepted more or less as given" (Featherstone 68). As for tattoos in particular, their purpose especially those customarily done by hand, and not machine, in aboriginal cultures is usually ornamental, ritual or identity-oriented in nature" (Bell 53). In addition, they continue to act as "'rites of passage' as well as straight-forward badges of identity for bikers, sailors, prisoners or gang members (Caplan 245). Thus, their original historical context is still very much attached and prevalent. It should also be mentioned that contemporary tattoo narratives do in fact suggest that there are certain traditions, for example, using the tattoo to commemorate a rite of passage or even a significant biographical event, that surpasses historical and cultural boundaries.

It's interesting to point out how the tattoo is seen as a form of individual action devoid from all others, yet it actually is a result of engagement. There is an existing false sense of self-willingness for getting the tattoo. As such, "the tattoo, then, is a consequence of engagement, imagined as detachment: in Euro-America, as in Polynesia, 'The apparently self-willed tattoo always turns out to have been elicited by others'" (Caplan 251). In this sense, a person might get a tattoo believing they got it to make them unique, that is in comparison to others. Once again, the others provoked such an action and the act itself is always in relation to others – them and us. In other examples, the person might have gotten the tattoo not for themselves but for others to see and recognize.

➤ *Ethnographies and Literature of Inscription:*

There has been a lot of literature and studies regarding tattoos and them being a form of body modification that can impact not only the physical body but also the mental self. To this regard, the literature out there whether ethnography or not deal with and question the “social significance of body decoration and the way in which body art creates identity for the individual and determines boundaries between groups” (Schildkrout 328).

There have been many studies under the field of psychology regarding tattoos and their link to anti-sociality and deviance. This literature focuses strongly on mental health and the association of tattoos and deviant behavior. One branch of this research has been undertaken but the mental health community in the form of survey data (Armstrong 1994). This research generally concluded that tattoos and other forms of body modification act as predictors of future deviance, a highly derogatory view of tattooing. As such, for mental health experts who share the assumption that the voluntary inscription of the body is an indicator of self-hatred or social alienation, tattoos operate as external reflections of inner pathology. Yet, the problem with such work and many like it is that it heavily relies on survey data for its conclusions which essentially precludes capturing the more nuanced reasons and motivations that individuals get tattooed. As such, it is not really ethnography work. Consequently, one needs to supplement survey data with in-depth narratives of the tattooed individuals and take a more intimate look at the tattoo community from an ethnographic vantage point.

With regards to exploring a wider range of motivations for getting tattooed, a considerable body of research on motivational aspects already exist. They mainly use explorative approaches to describe

motivations, while only some proposed larger motivational clusters. The scientific paper *Modifying the body: Motivations for getting tattooed and pierced*, published by Elsevier serves as a great example of motivational investigation to provide a basis for understanding why people modify their bodies while also contributing to the elimination of the outdated negative stigmatization of body modification. They provide a broad description of motivations from the literature out there, but most importantly they establish general motivational categories for reference in future research. In the end, the major motivations were expressed by ten categories: beauty, art and fashion; individuality; personal narrative; physical endurance; group affiliations and commitment; resistance; spirituality and cultural tradition; addiction; sexual motivation and no specific reason. It's important to note that the most frequently mentioned motivations are the expression of individuality and the embellishment of the own body while other motivations reflect personal attributes and values.

For my research, I have decided to focus on the tattoo culture in contemporary America in particular. To this regard a lot of the scholarship out there lies under the fields of anthropology, sociology and cultural studies. These works in particular pursue their analyses of tattoos and tattooing from a strictly qualitative aspect, mostly ethnographic bent as opposed to the scientific psychological approach. Thus, providing a more nuanced approach at the practice of contemporary tattooing and containing rich narrative data.

One work in particular that deals specifically with the narrative aspect of tattooing and using tattoos to construct personal narrative is the article *Inscribing the Personal Myth: The Role of tattoos in Identification* by Anne M. Velliquette, Jeff B. Murray and Deborah J Evers. The article attempts to better understand the role of tattooing in identity construction and the ways in which consumer's stories about

being tattooed can help us understand the ways these experiences contribute to their identity formation. It also addressed the ways in which the study of tattoo consumption opposes traditional forms of consumer research in that tattoos are “permanent, infinitely customized, and destabilize object/body opposition” (Belk 35). Consequently, it is because of these reasons that tattoos became a means for people to make meaning of their lives and this meaning-making is strongly linked to the action of storytelling. As such, with each story the article discusses the on-going process of identity negotiation via an exploration of the informant’s personal myth – “a story that brings together a wide range of experiences into a purposeful and convincing whole” (Belk 35). The purpose of this research is then to further understand the role of tattooing, as one form of consumption, in the process of identity construction. It should be noted that this purpose builds on a stream of research that focuses on the role of the body and body adornment on the consumer’s continuous task of identity negotiation (Murray, 2002).

Another work of literature that really builds on narrative and the practice of participant observation is Shannon Bell’s essay *Tattooed: A participant Observer’s Exploration of Meaning*. As a heavily tattooed woman herself, she took it upon herself to further explore the complexity and variation of meaning ascribed to tattoos. She also discusses the subculture of tattooed people and most importantly the relationship of tattoos to identity. In addition, her focus was on Western, specifically American tattoo culture, since she believes aboriginal tattooing has already been covered extensively in anthropological literature. Like most of the literature, she starts out by providing a brief history and overview of tattooing across different cultures but uses this to put the complex American subculture into context. One of her insights at the end was the unique quality of American tattooing with all its imagery and literalness is but a product of it being such a “surface-oriented society” (Bell 57). With this, Bell refers in particular to American culture’s obsession with the physical and the tangible, especially when it comes to physical appearance and materiality. As

such, what you look like has a great impact on your life, the way you perceive yourself and the way others see you.

Other narrative driven works about tattooing also capture the changing nature of the tattoo in recent decades, as it has shifted to become a thing for middle-class consumption (Atkinson 2002). One piece of literature that deals with this shift is the article *The Tattoo Renaissance: An Ethnographic account of symbolic consumer behavior* from the University of Arkansas. The article looks at tattoos through a lens of consumer culture as the act of tattooing has become prevalent more now than ever. It presents an ethnographic account of product symbolism and fashion imagery within this consumer culture. This in effect was a result of the Tattoo Renaissance which in the article is referred to as the New Tattoo Subculture. It explores a historical interpretation and through it discusses four a priori themes: Renaissance, extended self, risk and satisfaction/addiction for which ethnographic evidence was found along with the emergence of two other themes – design versus act and the simulated self. More importantly, the article also explores the implications of tattooing for the formation of one's identity. In essence, the Tattoo Renaissance with all its vibrancy and explosion of artwork, symbolism and culture proved such a creative and lush context to study issues related to symbolic consumer behavior along with identity.

Another relevant work of literature was DeMello's work which shows how the "Tattoo Renaissance" of the 1970s changed the face of the tattoo community in the United States (DeMello 200). He demonstrates how middle-class punks, neo-tribalists who strongly believe in strong social networks and the formation of tribes, along with hippies appropriated tattooing which used to be a practice reserved for working-class white males and turned it into a lucrative art form. Moreover, while the original clientele were servicemen, bikers, carnival workers and other working-class men, the new tattoo culture is much

more varied and diverse. The new consumers are from a variety of backgrounds and now get large, lavish, custom pieces especially designed from themselves rather than choosing flash drawings on the walls of the tattoo shops (Atkinson 2002; DeMello 200).

Marc Blanchard's paper *Post-Bourgeois Tattoo: Reflections on Skin Writing in Late Capitalist Societies* explores the practice of tattooing not only from a historical perspective but a cross-cultural perspective as well. Yet, unlike the previous works it does not rely heavily on ethnographic accounts. The paper essentially argues that tattooing in the West has shifted from being at the margins of society to the core of the middle class and examines the political and economic repercussions of such a shift. Another important exploration is the relationship between the socio-cultural and economic aspects of tattooing with its symbolic and communicative functions. This is where the intersection between tattooing and identity comes into play. Interestingly enough, the paper also raises the question of the relevance of a tattooing practice and aesthetic to the "postmodern or postbourgeois anthropological and humanistic perspective" (Blanchard 11).

The ethnographic work and literature on tattooing reviewed above captures contemporary tattoo practices much more fully than does the survey research in the field of psychology and amongst the mental health community. Instead of just looking at trends en masse, these accounts allow for the rise of cultural and human explanations as to the motivations behind taking part in such a subculture. Furthermore, it allows for an in-depth analysis of the trends and changes within such a culture and thus deserves to be acknowledged and read. Motivational investigations, especially through narrative and ethnographic works are very important. They provide a basis for understanding why people modify their bodies and can also possibly shed light on the commonalities within a particular cultural context and make clear the set of norms

and values. In addition, such literature along with my project will contribute to the eliminations of what I like to call the outdated negative stigmatization of body modifications and in this case, tattoos.

➤ *Emerging Themes:*

Tattoos connect to both the creation and maintenance of the tattooee in various ways. Many of the emergent themes from the literature on tattoos relate to reclaiming the body, the notion of choice, memory, pain, the tattoo as a symbol of defiance of time, the tattoo as an aesthetic form, and the tattoo as a way of internalizing things by the subjects. These will all be further discussed and explained in the following section.

Tattoos are strongly related to identity construction and maintenance as they can be used as a means of reclaiming the body. The tattoo in of itself can be “read explicitly as statements of the self” (Caplan 249). As Caplan expresses, no longer is it accounted for as “drunken impulse or forcible subjection”, tattoos like piercings are to be ‘chosen’ after much deliberation (Caplan 249). This choice is then reflected in the chosen design by the subject which in most cases would eventually go on to form a greater coherent and aesthetic whole. As such body modification is ‘done with complete consciousness’, ‘usually considered for some length of time’ and is often publicly witnessed: inscribed on the skin will be the mark of self-possession” (Caplan 249). The tattoo then becomes a mark of ownership on one’s body and a way of ‘reclaiming’ the body for the self. It can also serve as a means of self-realization and or creation. That said, “in tattoo-talk the focus is rather on the body as an ‘expression’ of the self, a site for self-realization” (Caplan 249). The act of getting tattooed can be viewed as an act of ‘self-creation’ as through it, the body is physically modified and in doing so helps construct a viable sense of self-identity for the subject (Featherstone 68).

This act of self-creation through the tattoo is further reinforced as a tattoo is simply “enough to separate oneself from society at large” (Bell 54). It thus physically marks your body as separate and unique from others.

This then brings up the theme of ownership of one's body, which is strongly linked to the process of acquiring a tattoo. This is especially true with regards to the pain experienced while getting a tattoo. “Pain, like the tattoo itself, is something that cannot be appropriated; it is yours alone; it stands outside the system of signification and exchange that threatens the autonomy of the self” (Caplan 251). It is an experience only you can feel and no one else can actually relate to it and as such could be considered a way in which one could take control and ownership of their body through their own individual feelings. Moreover, just like the flesh, pain is also conceived as really ‘real’; it speaks its own truth” (Caplan 251). It also makes the act of acquiring a tattoo even more worth-while and truly subjective, emotional and tangible experience. This however, is strongly connected to the notion of viewing the body as property. Something that seems to be distinctive in contemporary tattoo practices is the linking of permanence to ideas of the body as property and possession– “a statement of ownership over the flesh” (Caplan 251). This is especially true within a capitalist society such as the USA in which the only true possession of the self in a world filled with accelerating commodification and unpredictably is your body: ‘the one thing you get in a culture where you are what you do’ (Caplan 251). Thus, in this case, the body not only acts as a site or personal creativity and ownership but also a so-called touchstone of authenticity and truth” in a superficial culture (Caplan 251).

What we see more of now, especially in late-, high- or postmodern societies, like America for example, is how the construct of identity is gradually fluid and “the body is mobilized as a plastic resource

on to which a reflexive sense of self is projected in an attempt to lend solidarity to the narrative thus envisaged” (Featherstone 68). The body is essentially a molding project that can be shaped and formed as the owner wishes. The world being as it is, there are a few things that people as individuals actually have control over and their body is one of them.

The tattoo can also serve as a symbol for the defiance of time. And in this act of self-creation, the idea of permanence of the tattoo is very critical. The tattoo’s permanence establishes “a different regime, an instantiation of the will in defiance of process and time” as you can never get it off (Caplan 250-251). In another sense, the tattoo exists in defiance of time, nothing about the self thus inscribed can ever be denied or discarded. This again in a culture where things are constantly on the move and changing is what lies at the root of the fear of the tattoo. It is the permanence of the tattoo itself and “its evocation of the private depths of the self upon the surfaces of the body and its non-negotiable relationship to that body, that reminds us of the fixed end-point of all this mutability and self-fashioning, our own death” (Caplan 251). Thus, its permanence is strongly linked to death as it serves as a constant reminder of our mortality. Moreover, the practice of tattooing sets up “a unique dichotomy of surface-permanence unparalleled by other forms of adornment and decoration” (Bell 57).

The tattoo was also used as a means for enhancement and display, thus used for purely aesthetic reasons. There is great consideration for the placement, size and color of the tattoos one decides to get. Designs that incorporate untattooed areas of the skin as opposed to going for ‘that blanket coverage look’ attract more direct visual attention to the qualities of the subject’s body, whether it be to their curves or the shape of their limbs (Caplan 245). Consequently, there is a shift from an emphasis on “incorporating and wrapping of the body to one of enhancement and display” (Caplan 245). Moreover, in doing so, this draws

attention not only to the flesh itself but also the issue of ‘design’, this strongly connecting to “the relationship between the intentions of the self and the marked body, the relationship between what lies within the body and the tattoo” (Caplan 245).

The concept of choice, especially personal choice is very relevant to today’s contemporary tattooees. Getting a tattoo is very much a decision and a choice. The act of getting a tattoo seems to have been strongly enmeshed in a discourse of the individual and as a result completely ripped from social relationships and social purpose. This relates to the idea that people get tattoos for themselves and get them as something to be possessed, not something to be looked at (Caplan 250). As such it is no surprise that a reoccurring answer in the testimony of the tattooed is that acquiring the tattoo was ‘for me’ (Caplan 251). As a result, we can see the efforts to construct what could be termed as “sealed selves: persons who are, in Shakespeare’s memorable phrase, ‘lords and owners of their faces’ and thus not dependent upon external powers (Caplan 251). Getting a tattoo is a conscious choice made by the subject for themselves and only for them— their body, their choice.

The most salient theme to emerge from the explored literature was that of the external to the internal, in the way that the tattoo was used as a means of internalizing things by the subjects. According to Gell, tattooing is ‘simultaneously the exteriorization of the interior which is simultaneously the interiorization of the exterior’ (Schildkrout 38-39). It’s important to note here that the tattooed skin negotiates between the individual and society but also between different social groups and facilitates those relations (321). Yet, it also allows for perceptions and memories to be entangled inside and through the body’s surface. In this sense, tattoos serve as a voluntary, once again the importance of choice, “way of

writing one's autobiography on the surface of the body", expressing belonging and exclusion, merging the past and present, and, for the individual, define 'a way of being in the world' (Schildkrout 10).

Tattoos are an essential provider of symbolic information about the individual. One of the ways in which this information can be conveyed is by taking what is external and internalizing it. This is the case among the subjects that seek tattoos as a form of memorialization of those loved and lost, 'to remember my friend', as one person put it, 'in a way that is now part of me' (Caplan 246). As such, many people choose to honor their family members or lovers, display their religious beliefs (ironically, and importantly, despite scripture's words against tattoos) or even their association with the military (Bell 55). In addition, the inscription of the self on the skin or getting a tattoo can be used to memorialize the self's past, in this case, it might not be actual people but rather events that marked the subject's life. Such a concept is referred to by Atkinson as a 'flesh journey': "the process of intentionally reconstructing the corporeal in order to symbolically represent and physically chronical changes in one's identity, relationships, thoughts or emotions over time" (Schildkrout 118). In this way, tattoos strongly connect to the subject's identity and its construction as people are constantly engaged in the permanent re-ordering of their identity narrative with the body being the central focus (Featherstone 19). In addition, subjects are also able to further anchor and stabilize their sense of self-identity in part through the establishment of a coherent personal narrative (Featherstone 53). To put it in the words of the fully inked artist Vladimir Franz who tried to run for the Czech presidency, "being tattooed is synonymous with "living in the truth," one's personal truth, my truth", that being their own personal narrative and its meaning (Bell 54).

Memory is another important theme, especially with regards to converting the external into the internal. Effectively, what is external is transformed into something internal to the subject, and memory, a critical property of contemporary self-identity is in turn externalized and secured on the skin (Caplan 246). As a result, the act of getting tattooed tends to develop a person's awareness of memory as "the tattoos

become points of reference that reinforce the self and its history” (Caplan 246). Tattoos then act as a “registration of external events upon the self”, thus serving as a private diary or as in the tattoo artist Lyle Tuttle’s terms, ‘a montage of my life’ (Caplan 246). They are more than just reminders or reinforcements, they can even Lazonga puts it ‘elicit who the person is or is becoming’ (Caplan 246). In this sense, tattoos evoke not only the recording of external events but internal depth of the person as well and in doing so connect past, present and future along with inscribing distinctions between them.

➤ *Contextualization of the Study:*

Taking into consideration all the research that has been done in this regard, what I intend to investigate are the ways in which tattoos express, embody and help construct identity within contemporary America. I want to examine what people’s different engagements with the practice of tattooing are, especially nowadays within the 21st century in the American Capitalist and consumer society. I want to delve in deeper and take a closer look at the middle-class comfort zone tattooing and attempt to problematize it. I will focus on contemporary tattoo narratives and see what common trends and traditions come up.

The specific questions that I intend to answer are what motivates a person to participate in this subculture and get a tattoo? Has there been a shift in the reasons behind acquiring a tattoo? As opposed to just being bound by social class and expression of deviance or ideology, have tattoos become a mere purchase of a commodity in our consumerist society? In what ways is the tattoo used as a form of expression? What are the stories/narratives behind their tattoos? And How can tattoos help express and embody identity?

In this research project, I will use some of the themes that emerge through the theories and literature within the field along with the interviews to attempt to answer the questions above. These themes range from more traditional ones such as rites of passage, symbolic bearers of information, mechanisms of social communication, a measure of decoration but also more contemporary notions such as reclaiming the body and self-possession, memory, private diary and of course individual choice. The contemporary tattoo is enmeshed in discourse of the individual and ripped from social relationships and social purpose. In addition, there seems to have been a surge of a new engagement with the tattoo that is more superficial and plays on reflected and un-reflected identity. To address these themes and issues, I will essentially use Body theory and the ethnographic method using semi-structured interviews and converse with tattooed subjects. I will also use participant observation in the field to answer my questions, especially with regards to the tattoo shops when interviewing the tattoo artists.

With all the depth, complexity and variation of meaning that could possibly be ascribed to tattoos, I would like to explore the variation through a discussion of the subculture of tattooed people and the relationship of tattoos to identity and its formation. Although this thesis might only scratch the surface of the meaning associated with tattoos, I hope I can shed some light on it through my research. I am primarily concerned with Western tattoo culture, especially in America since I believe aboriginal tattooing has been a topic of extensive research especially within the field of anthropology.

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