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**The Art of Misogyny:
The Struggle of Female Tattooists in an Industry of Men**

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Women's History
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I currently have thirteen tattoos. When I was sixteen I got my first “tattoo” but I do not count that in my thirteen. It was never finished. While out one night, a friend of mine came up to me and asked if I would like a “stick-and-poke.”¹ Earlier that day I had seen the adorable little tattoo this friend had done on my friend Eddie. Two little stick figures graced his ankle; it looked tiny, cute, and delicate. This was in 2008, just as tattoos had come into vogue in the mainstream, especially for women.² I decided, sure, why not? Without putting much thought in to this decision, she began to poke my left breast with a needle dipped in ink and tightly rubber banded to a pen. About three dots in, she said that my chest was “too squishy,” so she did not want to continue. This was for the best. The end result would have been awful and I would have had to walk around with a visible, subpar tattoo.

A lot can be drawn from these three dots. Her tattooing us in such an informal manner demonstrates the yearning of women to be tattooists with the body as their pallet, as well as the eagerness of young people to acquire tattoos, especially young women.

I chose that spot on my breast particularly since, at the time, the tattoo would have been hidden and I would not have to worry about my mom seeing it. After my body developed further, that spot moved to a place where my mom would definitely have noticed it. She never liked tattoos; she associated them with harassment and grief. When my mother was a child, she would go to carnivals with my grandmother. The men who

¹ The stick and poke method of tattooing, traditionally popular for inmates, sailors, and for those who do not have access to tattoo machines, commonly involves the use of a basic sewing needle and India ink. The person actually performing the method will either just use a needle on its own, or will attach it to a pen or longer device to increase the usability of the needle. This is not a common practice used in professional shops.

² "Tattooed Women Outnumber Men in a New Poll." Reuters. March 05, 2012. Accessed December 13, 2015.

worked the rides at the carnival were all heavily tattooed. My mother recalls these men catcalling her mother constantly with my grandmother having to say, “buzz off” to each man as they made their way through the event. In addition to that negative memory my mother also associates tattoos with sadness. She remembers that when men returned from the Vietnam War they sometimes sported new ink that they had gotten while overseas. To her, their indelible marks seemed connected to their blank affect.

As many times as I have chosen to get tattoos – 14 times since then – 13 of them were ink drawn by a man. Only one was by a woman, whom I met at a tattoo convention while researching this project. This was accidental rather than a choice: I never actively resisted using female artists; as it happened, I just never came across any at the local shops I went to for tattoos. This is shocking because there are currently more women than men in the United States who are tattooed, leading one to assume that the commonality of female tattooists should have risen as well.³

Usually my process for picking a tattoo shop involves factors such as where I live at the time, whether I know any artists locally, and if talented local artists have tattooed any of my friends. Surprisingly to me, most of these shops never had any female artists. I began to wonder, why this was. Why was my old friend the only woman that I came across in seven years who was tattooing, and still only just for fun? To answer these questions I turned to secondary sources, TV shows, documentaries, interviews, and studies about women in the labor force in general. At first, it seemed like maybe tattooing was not a popular choice of field for women. However, that is rarely, if ever, the whole story regarding the lack of women in male dominated fields. I decided to seek out this story.

³ "Tattooed Women Outnumber Men in a New Poll." Reuters. March 05, 2012.

Tattoos have become increasingly popular over the last thirty years. The number of tattoo parlors in the United States has grown from an estimated 300 shops in the 1980s, to 4,000 shops in the early 1990s. As of 2009 there are an estimated 15,000.⁴ The increasing popularity of tattoos has brought more people into the space of the tattoo community, customers and aspiring tattooists alike. Starting in the 1980s, the professionalization of tattooing led to a shift in popularity from what are called “flash” tattoos to more detailed custom tattoos. This shift demonstrates the stratification that soon emerged between those formally trained in the fine arts, versus those who only practiced flash tattooing. The formally trained artists moved the practice of tattooing to more of a focus on custom pieces. This, in combination with the shift from tattoos as biker culture to more mainstream culture, has led to a steep change in clientele. Rather than tattoos only adorning soldiers, prisoners, or bikers, tattoos can now be found on police officers, professional athletes, corporate executives, lawyers and doctors.⁵ And many of those people are now women.

Some credit the increasing popularity of tattoos to celebrities. With the sexual revolution of the 60s came a greater sense of liberation for women, including more education and say regarding their own bodies. This new sensibility created an entire counterculture of women who firmly believed in their own agency over their bodies. This is perhaps best demonstrated by rock and roll legend Janis Joplin, one of the first celebrities to bring tattoos in to the mainstream.⁶ In April 1970 Joplin created a sensation

⁴ Xuan Santos, "The Chicana Canvas: Doing Class, Gender, Race, and Sexuality through Tattooing in East Los Angeles," *NWSA Journal* 21, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 92.

⁵ Alan B. Govenar, "Culture in Transition: The Recent Growth of Tattooing in America," *Anthropos* Bd. 76, H. 1./2. (1981): 216.

⁶ Margot Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo* (New York, NY: PowerHouse Books, 2013), 54.

by commissioning a tattoo of a Florentine bracelet she drew herself from the then-famous San Franciscan artist Lyle Tuttle. Tuttle credits both Joplin and the Women's Movement for the rapid increase of women acquiring tattoos.

At the start of the new millennium tattooing saw another resurgence. With the widespread availability of the Internet, new tattoo designs and styles became more accessible.⁷ Newly popular reality television shows brought tattooing right in to the homes of middle class Americans. During this time actress Angelina Jolie – considered one of the most beautiful stars of her day-- became known for the dramatic tattoo of her ex-husband's Billy Bob's name on her shoulder, a tattoo she publically had removed in 2003 upon their divorce. She is known for her tattoos that symbolically represent moments and people throughout her life.⁸ As one of Forbes' "100 Most Powerful Women in the World" she certainly has had an influence on the popularization of tattoo culture. At last count, she is known to have 20 tattoos. Clearly both Jolie and Joplin played a part in bringing tattoo acceptability to the female body.

It is important to note that while the tattoo industry appears to be more inclusive, its history is heavily racialized. For most of American tattoo history society viewed tattooing as a white lower class phenomenon due to biker culture. Until 1976, there were not any female African American tattooists of notoriety until Jaci Gresham. Gresham and her former boyfriend turned business partner, Ajit Singh, decided in 1972 to move from Detroit to New Orleans to open up a tattoo shop. Singh initially instituted a rule that in their shop, women could not be tattooed. Gresham quickly abolished this rule, demonstrating that she had control in the shop and thereby emphasizing the importance

⁷ Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 101.

⁸Ibid., 132.

of female clientele, which she claimed made up 70% of her clients. By the early 1990s, this division began to lessen and artists and people of color began to blend in with the rest of the tattoo industry.⁹ Gresham even notes that by this time her black female clients began asking for larger work that incorporated African symbols.¹⁰ Although the line of race in that tattoo industry has begun to fade, it is nowhere near irrelevant.¹¹

So, why is tattooing such a male dominated space? Male sailors were the first westerners to bring the practice of tattooing to modern Europe.¹² European sailors became fascinated by tattooing through their encounters with indigenous peoples throughout the Age of Exploration. The practice was handed from indigenous people directly to male sailors, and it became common on European vessels. As a kind of initiation, an older sailor would tattoo a symbol onto a young sailor's arm; common emblems included anchors or other seafaring emblems.¹³ Through this interaction tattooing in the West remained in the hands of men for centuries.¹⁴

By the early 1900s freak shows that included heavily tattooed people became the norm. People would flock to these freak shows to see at first, tattooed indigenous people,

⁹ Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 62.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹¹ For more information on the experience of black female tattooists, see Jeanie Riess, "The Oldest Tattoo Shop in New Orleans." *Gambit*. May 5, 2014; and Margot Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo* (New York, NY: PowerHouse Books, 2013). For information on the experience and struggles of black artists in general see "Exploration of Blackness: Tattooing While Black." *Strong Families* Blog. February 22, 2012.

¹² Amelia Klem Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady: A History* (London: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2009), Introduction, Kindle.

¹³ Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady: A History*, Introduction.

¹⁴ This was not always the case. With some native tribes, women were just as tattooed, if not more adorned, than men. In the 1970s a group of 500-year-old Inuit women mummies were discovered. This archeological find demonstrates that native women were tattooed and that there was a rich culture around the practice of tattooing. Recently this practice has been recreated with a careful attention to Inuit traditions. For more on these traditions see "A Return to Native Roots, Traced in Ink." NPR. 2015. and "This is so powerful: Kitikmeot women receive traditional Inuit tattoos." CBC News. 2016.

then, tattooed white men. Soon enough, tattooed white women stole the show.¹⁵ As freak shows with amply tattooed women became most popular, tattoo shops began to spring up around the country.¹⁶ Tattoo shops were most common in port cities, since the practice of sailors getting tattoos remained popular.¹⁷ As quickly as tattoo shops emerged around the country, women began to pick up the needle. A few female tattoo artists became known during the early twentieth century, but their numbers were small. Men who owned and ran shops knew that if they apprenticed their wives, then they could expand without incurring any further costs; what's more, they would not have to worry about their wives opening up a competing shop in town.¹⁸ Few women without such mentorship could learn the trade, much less participate in it.

To this day, exclusivity remains. Some men still see female tattooists in an unfavorable light, clearly wishing to preserve an all-male enclave. An example of this is James Vaughn who was a tattooist featured on Season 1 of *Ink Master*, a competition television show for tattoo artists. At The Westchester County Tattoo convention, he told me frankly how he views female artists looking to enter the tattoo industry, so frankly that he declined to be interviewed on tape. I began our conversation by first asking him about his opinion on female tattoo artists in general. He started by comparing female tattoo artists to waitresses at "titty bars." Perplexed, I asked him to elaborate. Waitresses at "titty bars," he told me, are fine doing what they are doing until they see that the women who remove their clothes make all the money. I then asked him to please make the connection to the tattoo industry. Vaughn did this by comparing women who work at

¹⁵ Thompson, *Covered in Ink*, 24.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 30.

the reception desk at tattoo shops to the aforementioned waitresses. Women, he implied, had no real interest in the artistry of tattoo. It was all about the money. I stood there mouth agape for a moment before asking, “so, you don’t think any female artists actually had the dream or goal of becoming a tattooist?” Vaughn did not have a response. He just said, “Well, that’s my opinion.”¹⁹ This kind of hostility, of course, can help explain the way male exclusivity persists.

Both traditionally and today, women typically enter the profession with the help, mentorship—and thus permission—of men. At the 2015 Westchester County Tattoo Convention, for example, a male tattoo shop owner could not stop gloating about his newest apprentice, his nine year-old daughter.²⁰ He proceeded to show me videos of the small child using a tattoo machine to create indelible art on a faux human foot; it was both hopeful and a little jarring to see a young child holding a tattoo gun, a masculine tool, and making such beautiful designs. Other women, such as one of the female artists I go on to interview, Britt Bolduc, were first loyal clients of their masters.²¹ Women who do not have prior connections tend to struggle in gaining a foothold.

While in college I decided it was time to get a large tattoo. When I was younger, I was afraid of regretting my tattoo decisions. As I got a little bit older I realized that if a large tattoo was something I wanted, then I should get it. It’s my body, and I should be able to do with it as I please. I settled on a feather on my left thigh. I decided on a

¹⁹ James Vaughn, conversation with author, Westchester County Tattoo Convention, October 15, 2015. I spoke with Sarah Miller about this and she assured me that not all male artists feel this way. James, she told me, is “one of the most raunchy, foul mouthed people I have ever met. He says whatever the fuck comes to his mind.” It may be, however, that he voices what others think but might be too reticent to share.

²⁰ Pastor James Nott, conversation with author, Westchester County Tattoo Convention, October 16, 2015.

²¹ Britt Bolduc, interview by author, Artifact Tattoo, Newington, CT, November 22, 2015.

feather because I always found that a tattooist's ability to show different textures was truly an art and I wanted that art on my body. To find a local artist in Hartford, CT, I asked Danielle, a friend of mine about the artists at the shop she worked at. She told me that one of the artists was great at doing feathers and that she would book me an appointment the next time she was at work. I trusted Danielle: she was an art student at my school and I knew she had good taste. We also had a passion for feminism in common. I was confident that if she suggested I go to a tattooist at the shop she worked at, the male artists there would treat me with respect.

Three weeks later the day came for me to finally get my feather tattoo. I knew Danielle was going to be working that day; I was looking forward to seeing what she did at the shop. I imagined that as an art student at the well-respected Hartford Art School, she was spending at least part of her time there drawing potential tattoos and working on her lines as well as learning the fundamentals of tattooing. I was quite surprised that during the three-hour period while I was getting tattooed all I saw her do was clean and get the male artists food and drinks. It was a shock that the tattoo artists be so willing to waste Danielle's talent on menial tasks. Soon it all started to click. If the artists were not working with Danielle on her artwork or asking her to watch them produce tattoos, Danielle was not a part of a formal apprenticeship at this shop. I found out later that they had hired her to work the front desk and only promising her an apprenticeship upon her graduation from art school.

I recently interviewed Danielle and, eager to hear her thoughts, asked her what her role had been at that tattoo shop four years before. Rather than her telling me what I expected to hear, that her role had changed after graduation, Danielle confessed that she

had finally given up. This was not as a result of sexism in the shop leading up to her awaited apprenticeship. That she had expected and was used to; it was what she had to live through to get what she wanted. She was quite conscious of this:

It was an all guys shop so sometimes I felt like they were being misogynists and sexist at some points, but when it's a dude's shop, it's not like I don't understand the dynamic of some men and some older men and I wasn't trying to be there with a feminist agenda.²²

Danielle and I both knew that sometimes acting on feminism was just not appropriate and to point out someone's sexist behavior rarely did anyone any good and could generate hostility that might not otherwise be there. Although I always thought of Danielle as an outspoken feminist, I was not surprised when she told me that she felt she had to act a particular way when trying to get her foot in the door of a male dominated industry. She continued, "I was there to hopefully get a tattoo apprenticeship and at that point I didn't give a fuck if they were going to talk about how they think women were shitty. I wouldn't have cared as long as I was getting a tattoo apprenticeship at the end." Since tattoo apprenticeships are hard to find, even for aspiring male artists, Danielle knew, especially as a woman, that she would be faced with situations where she would have to bite her tongue and keep her opinions to herself. The next part of her story highlights how women face sexism in all types of workplaces:

After being there for over a year and as it was getting closer and closer to graduation that idea of getting an apprenticeship became further and further away and when I graduated I asked if I could transition and the response was 'well you just do so well at the front desk'. And then I lost it and found out how many other women worked at that shop with that same intention...I was so angry that I stopped pursuing an apprenticeship anywhere else.²³

²² Danielle Duncan, interview by author, Artifact Tattoo, Newington, CT, November 22, 2015.

²³ Danielle Duncan, interview by author, November 22, 2015.

This, one imagines, has dissuaded many women artists from pursuing skin art as their profession.

Danielle's suspicion that her greatest obstacle to the coveted apprenticeship was her gender was soon proven. The shop did, in fact, hire an apprentice, she related:

At the end they were hiring this dude who had already apprenticed and had been tattooing, but wherever he had apprenticed didn't do a good job with him, so their plan was to reapprentice [sic] him and then have him do walk in clients...someone who has already learned bad habits from another fucking shop and I was there fucking kissing their ass every goddam day, cleaning up the whole shop to perfection.²⁴

Here was an apprentice who clearly had already begun his work at a disadvantage, and yet the advantage of gender had improved his chances over those of a committed art student and employee of many months. The only place that the owners could imagine Danielle was at the front desk. This, it seems, was not unusual. Since most of the shops that I have visited did tend to have women working the reception desk, I was not surprised to hear that Danielle knew that the artists at the shop wanted a woman tending to their clients, reinforcing gender stereotypes.

Aspiring female artists do not always face such challenges. A lucky few find experienced female artists who actively seek out female apprentices. For example experienced tattooist Sarah Miller, a finalist on Season 2 of the popular competition reality TV show *Ink Master*, shared her story with me.²⁵ Miller never had to seek out an apprenticeship at all. While in college Sarah's roommate, Alex Branwin (AKA Ashley

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵ *Ink Master* is a popular reality television show. It is the first of its kind. The competition show encompasses challenges regarding all of the skills needed to be "Ink Master." Each season features a new group of people. Occasionally, some artists may come back for another season. Presently there are 7 completed seasons of the show. Many tattooists have made a larger name for themselves through the show. This show is significant because it helped bring tattoo culture further in to the mainstream.

Claypool), saw Sarah's artwork and spent three months pressuring her into trying tattooing, with her as Sarah's mentor.²⁶ Miller was fortunate that Ashley offered to be her mentor. When Sarah picked up the machine for the first time, she told me, she knew immediately that she wanted to be a tattooist. Sarah is well aware of how fortunate she was to tattoo under Ashley and how having a female master and mentor made her experience unlike the experiences of most other aspiring female tattoo artists. This uncommon experience paved an unusually smooth path for her transition into the tattoo world.²⁷

As hard as it is now, the industry used to be even *more* of a boys' club. With the cultural revolution of the 1970s and the emergence of feminism more women began to demand space in the industry.²⁸ Vyvyn Lazonga, a well-respected female tattooist based out of Seattle opened one of the first female run tattoo shops in 1979. Her experience exemplifies the struggles that women had entering the industry prior to the millennium. But her experience was complicated; she was initially able to get in the door, but not very far in. For the first few years Lazonga was tattooing, people thought it was great to have a woman tattooist in the shop.²⁹ She apprenticed under tattooist Danny Danzl—seemingly a lucky break—but he began grooming less experienced male artists at the same time, consistently promoting them over her. Danny even went out of his way to make sure that Vyvyn's faulty equipment at least had feminine jewels inlaid within the machine. In an interview with scholar Margo Mifflin, Vyvyn discussed the small but significant ways

²⁶ Sarah Miller, Skype interview by author, June 4, 2016.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Thompson, *Covered in Ink*, 134-135.

²⁹ Vyvyn Lazonga, interview with Margot Mifflin, as quoted in Margot Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo* (New York, NY: PowerHouse Books, 2013), 57.

she was thwarted. She had no other choice, for example, than to use faulty equipment because she was not permitted to personally adjust her tattoo gun. Shoddy equipment led to the production of flawed tattoos. Danzl's insistence on Vyvyn's machinery looking feminine came at the cost of her work. The master/apprentice relationship can be a tricky one, especially when a male master sees what they are doing as comparable to charity. He gave Vyvyn an opportunity that he, most likely, believed that no one else would offer her.

Female tattoo pioneers, such as Lazonga, were able to go on and provide opportunities for women to finally gain some semblance of equal treatment and opportunity in an industry where they are consistently denied entry. Presently there are even some shops, such as Lazonga's, that strictly hire women because the work environment in all-women shops tends to be preferable for female artists. Vyvyn purposely chose to hire women because she believed that they were all better at communicating together.³⁰ Vyvyn also finds that when a shop is constructed of only female tattooists competition is not as fierce which makes for a more pleasant and productive work place.

Female tattooists have taken steps to overcome the hurdles that many of them currently face and have faced throughout their time in the industry. In 2011 Emma Griffiths, a tattooist at Forget Me Not Tattoo in Brooklyn, hosted a group art show for female tattooists entitled, "Ladies! Ladies!"³¹ Although some female artists declined to participate because they felt that such a show would lead to increased gender

³⁰ Vyvyn Lazonga, interview with Beverly Yuen Thompson, Madame Lazonga's Tattoo, as quoted in Beverly Yuen Thompson, *Covered in Ink: Tattoos, Women, and the Politics of the Body* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 135.

³¹ Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 109.

stratification in the industry, other women wanted to participate in order to create a space for female artists to be honored. The women who decided not to participate feared that highlighting the plight of female artists might trigger greater resentment from the males in the industry. Yet female tattoo artist Virginia Elwood felt such an exhibition to be imperative to the advancement of women in the field. Elwood explained this to Margot Mifflin in an interview regarding the art show:

I thought, you know what, there are all these fucking books being written about these guys who helped change the course of tattooing, or who did this and that. There are women who've been tattooing for 30 plus years who you've never heard of. They are out there fighting the good fight, and doing good work, and they need to be honored... I remember saying 'Thank you Debra Yarian. Thank you, Pat Fish. Thank you, all these women who are really talented and who've been plugging along and going for it. Thank you for letting me be able to take [her easy entry in to the tattoo industry] for granted.'³²

Reflecting on this art show and on the history of the profession allowed Elwood new insight into the meaning of her own journey, and gave her the space to express gratitude. Sarah Miller was also keen on meeting women who were helping female artists create a place in the industry. Unfortunately Sarah was left even more jaded about the industry after a conversation with a woman who she believed to be a champion for female tattooist opportunity:

I started working at this one shop and going to conventions. And this one convention, this fucking lady had this thing called, like, the gypsy readings and it was supposed to be empowering females in the tattoo industry. I was like all right, really cool. And, the one guy that I was working for was like, you can talk to her. And like we had pretty good conversation, it was pretty awesome. And she [asked], "Well, where do you see yourself? Where do you want your career to go?" I said, "I want other artists to want my work. I want to be recognized for my own style and I want to be remembered." And she goes, "Oh, well, you have to suck dick."³³

³²Ibid.

³³ Sarah Miller, Skype interview by author, June 4, 2016.

Sarah was shocked that this woman who claimed to be all about “girl-power” was so jaded as to advise that Miller debase herself to get ahead. This might have been a pragmatic response, an acknowledgement of the sexist barriers they all faced, but it was undeniably cynical and dispiriting to Miller. Miller’s expectation was a mix of realism and support, a way through the thicket of sexism that did *not* require conceding to it unduly.

Scratchers; the bane of every tattooist’s existence. Scratchers are people who order a tattoo gun and ink online, and decide that they are now tattooists. Scratchers lack formal tattoo training and a proper shop to work out of. Since, as was noted earlier, it is quite difficult for aspiring female tattooists to obtain apprenticeships, many who have the drive and the passion turn to scratching in order to learn. Can anyone blame them?

I am not encouraging anyone to become a scratcher: the only claim I am going to make is that if the industry doesn’t want scratchers tainting client’s skin, then maybe there need to be more apprenticeship opportunities and some self-imposed quotas on the amount of female apprentices.³⁴

Tattoo shops are male enclaves, and any women – clients or front desk attendants—become aware of casual and accepted sexist practices. For example, at my local shop there was a tradition that if a good-looking woman walked in to the shop, the artist closest would ring a bell. This alerted the others to take a look; women’s attractiveness was to be commonly consumed. Unspoken rules apply and negative comments regarding clients or each other can be made without the fear of another

³⁴ For more information on formal apprenticeships in the trades see Francine A. Moccio, *Live Wire: Women and Brotherhood in the Electrical Industry* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009). and Molly Martin, *Hard-hatted Women: Stories of Struggle and Success in the Trades* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1988).

tattooist or customer cutting in. Tattoo artists are viewed like rock stars. People respect them; people want to be friends with them; and people want to be them. Due to the culture and the rules of the space it is difficult if not impossible for female artists to gain respect within the confines of the shop. We already know Danielle's story. Sarah has a similar one.

When Sarah was starting out, she worked at a shop with experienced male tattooists. These male tattooists did not take so kindly to Sarah's advanced skills with such little experience and consistently tried to shame her.³⁵ One male artist, with about 20 years of experience, would audibly tell his clients how the tattoo he was providing them, Sarah could never do. Sarah would be sitting right next to him doing a much more detailed piece. After one such incident, Sarah's relationship with that tattoo shop went beyond repair, she told me:

I was at home and one of my clients texted me and basically they were snaking all my clients. They were trying to offer them better deals and threw me under the bus and then the one guy said I didn't even work there anymore. And I was like, well this is fucking news to me. So I got dressed. I got in the car and I drove over to the shop and I fucking, I walked in there and I was like, so I don't work here? Huh? Is that it? I don't work here? Oh, I do work here. I think you need to make up your mind. And then, like from the initial, like rage, I went from a rage to a seethe and I just packed up all my stuff and I just, I left. I didn't have a job or anywhere to go or anything like that.³⁶

The core issue in this situation was that the men in that particular shop did not respect Sarah, but they knew she was talented. First, the male artist discredited Sarah, and then decided to steal her clients. If Sarah were not talented then why would the other artists feel that they needed to try to steal her clients rather than letting them choose a new artist on their own? Sarah was a threat.

³⁵ Sarah Miller, Skype interview by author, June 4, 2016.

³⁶ Ibid.

Even prominent publications in the tattoo industry, such as *Inked Magazine*, do not present female artists as serious participants in the industry. Women tend to only be represented in many of *Inked Magazine*'s publications as sex objects meant to appease the male gaze. Most pages are littered with scantily clad women covered in tattoos. Pictures of women in a magazine are not problematic; the lack of content about these women or other women in the industry is. Although the publication features many articles, most of them do not even mention tattooing; kind of surprising for a tattoo industry magazine. The first digital issue of *Inked Magazine* available, from Fall 2007, contains articles featured on the cover such as, "Booze, Gear, and Gadgets," "The New Muscle Car," and "Beautiful Women with Ink," articles that are meant for a male audience.³⁷

The December 2007 issue was unusual in that it offered more information on female artists than previous one, notably it featured an interview with famous tattooist, Katherine Von Drachenberg, known as Kat Von D. With the hopeful expectation this article would give the reader insight in to Kat Von D's success, the reader is quickly disappointed by the interviewer's questions. The author leads with questions or statements such as, "I heard you were in a race to get your boyfriend Orbie's name tattooed on you," "Bam [Marger] told me a story about you throwing glasses at Metal Skool [a local Los Angeles hair metal band that plays at the Viper Room]," and "Do you ever get in to your pajamas and do dances of joy on your bed when you get ratings [in regards to her television show] back?"³⁸ This interview did not help to provide any actual information about Kat Von D's experience in the tattoo world, making what might

³⁷ *Inked Magazine*, Fall 2007, Cover.

³⁸ Chris Nieratko, "Inked Incorporated," *Inked Magazine*, December 2007.

be the gendered quality of her experience invisible. The questions about how she responds to favorable television ratings creates an image of Von D as a narcissistic woman who cares more for fame than art. There was no opportunity for discussion about the industry or about obstacles faced or overcome. The questions kept the interview light-hearted emphasizing Von D's heterosexuality, her rebelliousness, and her fame, perhaps so as not to deter the magazine's large male and presumably heterosexual audience.

Newer issues have addressed female artists in a more constructive way. The cover of the January 2014 issue seemed promising, offering intriguing articles on women and artists. Yet when I went to read these small tidbits of information about women and tattoos, women were only discussed in relation to other males. For example the title of one article was, "Krewella: The electro-pop princesses Jahan and Jasmine Yousaf share DNA and tattoos with each other and their producer, Rain Man."³⁹ Rather than discussing electro-pop princesses on their own, the article title implies that the women were only of interest because they have matching tattoos to their male producer, Rain Man. In regards to the extensive number of photographed tattooed women, the magazine only included tiny paragraphs that described the occupation of the female model and her favorite tattoo on her body. The rest of the issue featured articles aimed at a male audience. Rarely did they have anything to do with tattooing at all, "Get Lit: drinks have a new connotation, with their innovative new packaging" and "Engineering Works of Art: Four wheels are great, and two are better. Nut treads, wings and jets? Now we're talking." The tattoo models represented here, as elsewhere within the pages of *Inked*

³⁹ Jon Langford, "Krewella: The electro-pop princesses Jahan and Jasmine Yousaf share DNA and tattoos with each other and their producer, Rain Man." *Inked Magazine*, January, 2014, 33.

Magazine, tend to be included for the heterosexual male gaze. Female artists, such as Sarah Miller, find these “tattoo models” give women in the industry a bad reputation.⁴⁰ The issue that some female artists have with tattoo models is that they are representing women in the industry in a particular way that suggests that women in the industry are only sex objects for the male tattooists or tattoo fans, rather than active participants.

Women artists in the tattoo industry are still viewed as unicorns. People see their presence on television shows and see posters of female artists such as Kat Von D on the walls of their friend’s rooms, but it is still rare to see a female tattooist with one’s own two eyes. When a female tattoo artist is present at a largely male shop and is actually practicing the trade, she is viewed as an accessory.⁴¹ A 2011 documentary entitled *Feminine, Ink.* includes discussions with female tattoo artists about their place in the field, and how female artists are viewed in the industry.⁴² This documentary features a predominantly female owned and operated tattoo shop. One of the female tattoo artists featured in this film points out tokenism in tattoo shops that include one woman. She notes that the woman artist’s main purpose for the shop is to provide clientele with dainty, feminine tattoos such as flowers and hearts. The female tattoo artist is typecast. It is believed that if clients want a feminine tattoo then only a female artist can provide one. As a result clients believe female artists only excel at tattoos that match their gender; designs of snake and skulls could not be their forte.

This documentary illustrates a kind of sisterhood within the industry. Just like Lazonga, the women at this shop believe that since they are all women there is less

⁴⁰ Sarah Miller, Skype interview by author, June 4, 2016.

⁴¹ *Feminine, Ink.*, directed by Carlie M. Schneider, Vimeo, Fall 2011.

⁴² This documentary focuses on artists at Beaver Tattoo, a tattoo parlor in Woodhaven, Queens. The producer interviews women in the shop as well as the one male owner, who is also aware of gender discrimination in the tattoo industry.

competition in the shop and because they all know what it is like to be a female tattoo artist they try to help each other rather than compete.”⁴³ Natalia, an artist represented in *Feminine, Ink*. claims that, “instead of telling someone to figure it out themselves, we tell each other the tricks of the trade, that way we can keep on progressing.”⁴⁴ For these women, that is how they overcome the sexism they have faced in the industry and continue to progress.

Television shows that feature tattooing have been on the rise since *Miami Ink* first aired in July 2005. This show originally focused on five tattoo artists that all moved to South Beach to open up their own shop.⁴⁵ Soon a spin-off of this show came out, *LA Ink* that focused on Kat Von D. *LA Ink* follows Kat Von D as she struggles to open up her own shop.⁴⁶ Kat Von D became the most famous tattoo artist in the country and used her place as a female to further her career. Soon after the show aired Kat Von D became a household name amongst teenagers and adults alike. Teenage boys were obsessed with her beauty and proudly hung posters of her in sexy poses on the walls of their bedrooms. Overnight, Kat Von D became the de facto representative for all female tattoo artists. *LA Ink* was the United States’ first look inside the world of a female tattoo artist. Yet, Kat Von D was not always represented in a favorable light. Just like in any other reality television show fights between artists at Von D’s shop were featured and lingered over, depicting Von D as a petty woman with stubborn tendencies.

Female tattoo artists did not take well to Kat Von D’s fame. Many female artists did not like that she was the only representation of female tattooists in pop culture.

⁴³ *Feminine, Ink.*, Schneider, Fall 2011.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ "Miami Ink," IMDb, accessed July 03, 2016.

⁴⁶ "LA Ink", IMDb, accessed July 03, 2016.

According to Sharkey from *Feminine Ink.*, “my only problem with LA ink is that Kat Von D somehow got nominated the ambassador to female tattoo artists across the world, which is bullshit because we don’t need anybody to represent us. And I’m sure she doesn’t want to do that either.”⁴⁷ Sarah Miller openly told me that everyone in the industry knew that Kat Von D slept with many male tattooists in order to advance her career.⁴⁸ Other female artists resented her because of how the media portrayed her as a sex symbol. On the show, Von D could either be seen wearing a tight corset or tight black jeans and a tight black top. This type of dress for female tattoo artists became an expectation henceforth, permeating the industry and the media.

On *Ink Master*, almost all of the female contestants were required to wear such clothing. When a friend of mine initially encouraged me to interview Sarah Miller, the first thing he suggested that I do is ask her about how the stylists on *Ink Master* made her dress. He was shocked when he saw her tattooing in real life wearing a baggy t-shirt and jeans rather than the outfits that female artists wore on the television show. As one of the early female participants, Sarah was the first female artist that really made a name for herself on the show.

Season 2 of *Ink Master* featured three women. Female tattooist Cee Jay Jones was eliminated from the competition in the first episode. After Cee Jay’s elimination only two women were left, Sarah Miller and Tatu Baby. Tatu Baby, a woman of Latin American heritage, is one of the stronger tattooists on the show. However, her talent was not recognized until she pushed herself past all of the other artists. The producers of the show made the choice to portray Sarah as “the girl next door” with an attitude and Tatu

⁴⁷ *Feminine Ink.*, dir. Carlie M. Schneider, Vimeo, Fall 2011.

⁴⁸ Sarah Miller, Skype interview by author, June 4, 2016.

Baby as her opposite.⁴⁹ Originally Sarah would be dressed in outfits that did not make her a sex symbol, while Tatu Baby was always pictured wearing a corset.⁵⁰ As Miller explains in our interview usually she “rolls out of bed, [I don’t] fucking do my hair, [I throw] on some jeans and some shoes, a fucking T-shirt and a hoodie ... That’s what I wear at work every day, that’s what I wear at conventions, you know, you’re lucky if you get makeup on me, because I like coffee, cigarettes and sleep.”⁵¹ Even her “girl next door” outfits were out of place for Sarah. The producers created this dichotomy to show the lack of unity amongst the female artists and to encourage insults and comments made about each woman because of “their” choice of dress.

During this season of *Ink Master* Sarah is portrayed in many different lights. One of these lights is “Sarah the bitch.” The fourth episode of the season begins with Tatu Baby arguing that it is impossible for *anyone* to create a perfect tattoo under such conditions: lack of sleep and the extreme pressure to succeed.⁵² Sarah responds by telling the camera, in a private moment, how she does not understand why Tatu Baby threw a “hissy fit” and that she should not have entered the competition if she was not ready to work under those conditions and that she should stop acting like a “little brat.”

This clip was placed in the show to heighten a sense of drama. Unfortunately, the producers used Sarah’s response to show how there is not a general sense of sisterhood

⁴⁹ Sarah Miller, Skype interview by author, June 4, 2016.

⁵⁰ There may be other racial implications of the producer’s choice in Tatu Baby’s dress. Chicana tattooists and tattooed Chicanas have had a much harder time assimilating in to the industry than white women. For more information see Xuan Santos, “The Chicana Canvas: Doing Class, Gender, Race, and Sexuality through Tattooing in East Los Angeles,” *NWSA Journal* 21, no. 3 (Fall 2009).

⁵¹ Sarah Miller, Skype interview by author, June 4, 2016.

⁵² *Ink Master*, season 2, episode 4, “Tattoo Her What?” aired October 22, 2012, on Spike TV, Amazon Video.

amongst female tattooists and if they want to succeed in the industry, they have to fit in to the expected aesthetics and behaviors of female tattooists. Either female tattooists are like Tatu Baby, weak and full of excuses, or they are like Sarah and are as hard as nails and with no sympathy for anyone.

Later on in that same episode, Sarah's weaknesses begin to show. After Sarah lost the flash challenge at the beginning of the show, which awards the winner with the choice of who tattoos what on which canvas for the main challenge, she is portrayed as weak and sensitive. One of the male artists even goes on to tell Sarah that he can tell she is not good under pressure and that she needs to stop throwing tantrums. This particular male artist tried to make it appear that Sarah is unable to control her emotions, a common stereotype for women. This particular insult affected Sarah by removing her credibility as a serious artist. It paints her in a childish light, further demonstrating to the audience that female artists are different than male artists, and possibly not as preferable.

As a skilled tattooist, Miller made the men on the show feel threatened. Because of that she dealt with a lot of nasty unfavorable comments from the other contestants. I made sure to ask Sarah about her experience during our interview. In one instance Sarah produced, what the judges thought was one of the worst tattoos of the day. For this particular challenge the contestants had to work in teams of two.⁵³ Sarah was teamed up with tattooist Clint Cummings. The two did not work well together. Their tattoo was voted by the judges to be one of the worst tattoos of the day. During the judges' critique, Sarah gave a teary-eyed emotionally powerful statement to the judges in the end stating, "Don't count me out." Following this interaction with the judges, the other contestants

⁵³ *Ink Master*, season 2, episode 8, "Holy Ink," aired November 20, 2012, on Spike TV, Amazon Video.

continually told Sarah how she was weak under pressure, and Tatu Baby, the only other female contest left, goes on to say that Sarah's display of emotion is "annoying."⁵⁴ This is a clear moment where Sarah is singled out because of her "feminine" expressions.

There are other instances throughout the season where Sarah is portrayed as cocky, mean, insensitive, too sensitive, threatening, and weak. One moment in the Season 2 Finale of *Ink Master* that has stuck with me was when Sarah stepped out on the stage at the Live Season Finale. The Finale was hosted three months after the original episodes of the season filmed. Once all three contestants reach the stage the first words out of Judge Oliver Peck's mouth are, "Sarah's been working out." Followed by host Dave Navarro's comment, "Yeah, Sarah you look good." Peck and Navarro are both commenting on Sarah's change in weight between taping the show and the finale. No comments, needless to say, are made about the male contestants' bodies although Navarro makes a quick comment about one of the male contestant's shirts in an effort to deflect his inappropriate comment towards Sarah. These types of remarks and enforced dress codes, especially on television, lead viewers to believe that female artists are only acceptable tattooists if they look the (imagined) part.

Female tattooers are just starting to truly make their mark in the industry; it is time to recognize that they are here to stay. There are many reasons why a client may choose a female artist over a male artist. One of the rumors I hear most often is that female artists have a lighter hand, leading to less painful tattoos. Some clients assume that since women are the "weaker sex," and are stereotypically gentler, that their inherent

⁵⁴ *Ink Master*, season 2, episode 9, "Buck Off," aired on November 27, 2012, on Spike TV, Amazon Video.

femininity would overlap in to their tattooing techniques. This is not the case.⁵⁵ That is a pure stereotype. Tattooists, just like fine artists, have their own techniques that they believe are best. These techniques include how hard the artist tattoos. Such statements take femininity into consideration when it just does not apply. An artist is going to tattoo however they see fit and do what, in their minds, will produce the most enduring and beautiful tattoo.

Some people feel more comfortable with female tattoo artists because the client may feel that a female artist will be a little more tolerant with the expression of the client's pain. This can be false as well. When I interviewed Brit Bolduc, I asked how she handles clients that are in pain. She reached behind her and grabbed a plastic penguin and said, "I make them stare at this, and that's all."⁵⁶ Brit made sure that I was aware that she did not have any sympathy for clients in pain. Another stereotype, debunked. This is not to say that there aren't female artist that sympathize with their clients in pain. Some even get jealous that some of their clients can sit for tattoos longer than they can as artists. Lisa Orth, owner of Alleged Tattoo in Seattle, reveals that she is "surprised at how tough people are. I'm a total wuss when I get tattooed, and I get these super badass clients who get big tattoos in painful spots and just sit there like champs, no breaks, no complaints, nothing but awesomeness. I wish I could be more like that!"⁵⁷ These two opposing opinions demonstrate that there is no singular way that one should expect a female artist to practice their craft.

⁵⁵ Sarah Miller, Skype interview by author, June 4, 2016.

⁵⁶ Britt Bolduc, interview by author, November 22, 2015.

⁵⁷ Julianne Ross, "10 Female Tattoo Artists Proving Ink Is Way More Than a Man's Game." Mic. March 30, 2014.

Although there are false reasons that some clients choose female artists over males, there may be some legitimate ones. Recently, I scheduled an appointment with a male tattoo artist who had previously tattooed me. He was a great help with this project so I decided to get my next tattoo from him. When I scheduled the appointment I sent him a couple pictures of what I wanted. I asked him to please send me a quick sketch of what he had in mind (a reasonable request since his art was soon going to be on my body forever). Two weeks went by and nothing. I finally asked him again and he said that I would just have to wait, that time had gotten away from him and he would not be able to prepare a sketch until the night before the tattoo. "Fine," I thought, "I trust him, he has tattooed me many times before, and I've never been disappointed by the result." The night before came and still no design. At this point I was furious. I felt that the artist was taking advantage of our friendship and the fact that I am not an especially assertive person.

I texted one of my friends and told him how upset the whole situation made me and that I felt that the artist was taking advantage of me because I was a woman. His response was that a female artist tattoos his mom and I should try and schedule an appointment with her, but that he did not find her work to be that good. After reading his response to me I realized that the female artist probably produces "bad" tattoos because she was not properly trained. Some may assume that artists are not good at what they do if they only produce flash tattoos rather than custom work. I believe that is the case with this artist. Although she has the passion, finding an apprenticeship was probably difficult for her, especially since she is from a rural area where finding apprenticeships are hard enough despite gender. This is going to be a recurring issue for female artists until the

industry is saturated with enough women for them to no longer be a token addition to a shop, but be taken seriously as tattooists.

There have been other instances in which clients have felt that male artists, in particular, did not care that a woman has agency over her own body. When one first walks in to a tattoo shop and requests to meet with an artist, they first tell the artist what they want tattooed. Artists tend to quickly pull up pictures of the requested design on their own and work from those and sometimes not listen to their clients. For example, one of my usual artists will not work from any tattoo design that a customer found on the app, Pinterest. Pinterest is an application where users can collect images that they like. There are different searches and “boards” people can look at. Searching for tattoos on Pinterest is popular. In his opinion Pinterest features tattoos that are fads and doesn’t believe that they are original enough. They feel that their designs are best, and input from the client is unnecessary. One *Jezebel* blogger experienced a situation that caused many different reactions from the tattoo community.

Jane Marie decided she wanted a small tattoo on her neck. When she went to get the tattoo, the tattoo artist told her that he refuses to ink a neck tattoo on someone who is not already heavily tattooed.⁵⁸ Jane Marie took this refusal as the tattooist, Dan Bythewood, telling her that she does not have agency over her body. In the defense the artist penned for *Inked Magazine*, he claims that it is his right to refuse to do tattoos that he does not agree with.⁵⁹ In this instance, the tattooist was uncomfortable tattooing a woman’s neck, when the rest of the body was not covered in ink, fearing that the neck

⁵⁸ Jane Marie, "Don't Tell Me I Can't Get A Fucking Neck Tattoo," *Millihelen* (blog), June 09, 2015.

⁵⁹ Rocky Rakovic, "No, You Can't Get A Fucking Tattoo Neck Tattoo, Jane Marie." *Inked Magazine*, June 12, 2015.

tattoo may have an adverse effect on her life. The real issue is with how the rest of the tattoo community responded. The author of the *Inked Magazine* article, Rocky Rakovic, claimed that Jane Marie was not given the neck tattoo because she did not follow, “the traditional tattoo honor code.” Tattoo artists take their trade seriously, and have put a certain emphasis on creating an insider/outsider dichotomy. An outsider is easily thought to not understand the seriousness of a tattoo or the seriousness of the trade. Maybe Rakovic was just preaching that belief. However, as a person with tattoos, I do not know this honor code. Did I miss something all 14 times I’ve sat in a tattoo shop while getting a tattoo? Rakovic used that language to quickly dismiss any valid argument that Jane Marie may have had. This comment is an effort to explain to the blogger about “tattoo rules,” that, frankly, are not actually rules; essentially treating her like a clueless outsider who did not maintain the right to be angry.

The artist was apparently most concerned about how the world would treat Jane Marie as a woman with a neck tattoo. An interpretation of this behavior is that the artist does not find it acceptable for women to have tattoos on their necks. As a grown woman, Jane Marie knew what tattoos she could get and what placement would be acceptable in her workplace. The tattooist’s concern for her job prospects and treatment from others was completely out of line. He was treating her like a child.

While trying to complete this project and find further information on why female tattooists are not prevalent as one might expect, I certainly got a lot of push back from male artists claiming that sexism did not exist in the industry.⁶⁰ What most of those male artists do not see is that sexism and misogyny are so engrained in the industry that it is difficult for them to notice. This lack of acknowledgement about sexism in the industry

⁶⁰ Cory Haberman, discussion with author, Addicted to Ink, White Plains, NY, April 24, 2016.

is used to keep business as usual. If no one admits that sexism exists, then no one feels the need for anything to be changed.

The sexualization of female artists sets a double standard for tattooists. Male tattooists just have to be talented artists; female artists need to be talented artists, highly driven, tough, and sexy. A female artist must be all of those things in order to make it in the tattoo industry. James Vaughn, mentioned earlier in this paper, is a clear example of how the expected aesthetics of a female tattooist do not cross over in to the realm of male tattooists. James Vaughn is not classically handsome, is usually informally dressed, and while still being prideful is usually disheveled. His success as a tattooist demonstrates that male tattooists are not held to the same aesthetic standard as female tattoo artists. This pattern creates unsafe spaces for women to practice their craft.

The only way to truly solve the problem of the lack of opportunity and struggle for recognition for female tattooists is from the inside. The tattoo community is tight knit and it is hard to get in as an outsider.⁶¹ Due to this, it is necessary for changes to start with the insiders, especially male artists. Male artists need to make the decision to support their sisters in art and fight for them. Since male artists are in a place of power, at the top of the totem pole, it is their duty to try and change the industry's discourse around female artists. Greg, the husband of Natalia Borgia-Kogut the owner of Beaver Tattoo, claims, "Men try to be the alpha male or something, and they are the most important person and the female are more nicer [sic]."⁶² I bet there are more male

⁶¹ For more information on men as gatekeepers to industries see Barbara F. Reskin, and Irene Padavic, "Supervisors as Gatekeepers: Male Supervisors' Response to Women's Integration in Plant Jobs." *Social Problems* 35, no. 5 (1988): 536-50.

⁶² *Feminine, Ink.*, dir. Carlie M. Schneider, Vimeo, Fall 2011.

tattooers than just Greg that see sexism in the industry. It's time for them to actually make important changes happen around sexism.

Other ways that female artists can create safe spaces for themselves would be to form something like a Facebook group, where they can share their experiences and find commonality. Another benefit of such a group is that female artists can use the platform to find mentors who understand their struggles. This could serve as a form of consciousness raising that may create an environment where female tattooists may be able to establish a more solid ground for them to stand on in their field. It's time for the tattoo world to become inclusive and welcoming. After all, more women are tattooed in the United States than men.⁶³

⁶³ "Tattooed Women Outnumber Men in a New Poll." Reuters. March 05, 2012.

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