

**Tattooed Lives:
The Indelible Experience of Meaning and Identity in Body Art**

by © Chris William Martin

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the increasingly popular practice of tattooing from the perspective of tattoo enthusiasts and tattoo artists. While the topic of tattoos and tattooing have been researched by sociologists and cultural theorists in the past, this treatment of the subject uniquely combines the perspectives of symbolic interactionism, social semiotics, and Bauman's ideas about liquid modernity, to help understand the meaning-making semiotic potential of tattoos for enthusiasts and artists within the context of their wider socio-cultural environments.

This thesis is informed by in-depth qualitative research data gathered from over a year of ethnographic field research in a tattoo studio. It also offers enthusiast narratives which were gathered from semi-structured interviews. It is important to better understand a practice like tattooing in a post (or liquid) modern era which prizes a more ephemeral existence, especially in relation to fashion, technologies, and human relations. Appreciating the meanings and reasons behind tattoos and tattooing is highly relevant in order to understand why the practice is more common, culturally relevant, and artistic than ever before despite theories of impermanence associated with liquid modernity (Bauman 2000). Indeed, some estimates say that up to 40% of those 18-35 have at least one tattoo and that it is a billion-dollar industry (Pew Research 2008).

My results show that despite liquid modern life, tattoo enthusiasts continue to indelibly mark their skin with ink to express (1) self-identity (2) cultural and gender shifts and (3) artistic and emotional connections. From the perspective of tattoo artists, this research shows how artists must demonstrate dramaturgical discipline and navigate symbolic interaction to effectively traverse the cultural shifts occurring in their practice and work with their clients to produce and co-construct body art. These cultural shifts have led tattooists to become better known as tattoo artists and caused for tattoos to be more artistically demanding and aesthetically sophisticated than ever before.

For Alex

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Introduction

My most recent tattoo is a daisy on my right hand. I see it now while I write. Getting a tattoo on the hand, neck, or face is a point of no return. It means crossing a symbolic line which carries a lot of significance in regard to things like job prospects or future situational identities (Thompson 2015). The tattoo was executed at “The Studio,” the ethnographic research site explored in this thesis. Our daughter Daisy will celebrate her first birthday in a couple of months. I like having a constant reminder of her, but I chose to tattoo my hand because its visibility symbolizes a key part of my identity. Both of my arms are tattoo sleeves; my chest, back, legs, and feet all have tattoos and most were acquired because of my research. Still, that evening, while driving, I looked down to see my freshly tattooed hand and an overwhelming wave of anxiety hit me. I pulled into a parking lot and contemplated. Did I go too far?

The anxiety I felt is the fear of permanence. The fear is real even if a person could credibly argue that in the long run everything in life is ephemeral. Permanence in this work is considered primarily in its phenomenological sense as an idea shared by research participants as a subjective perception of the irreversible and irreducible. While tattoos change with time and space, both physically and with regard to its meanings, the initial practice of getting tattooed has a feeling of commitment to the finite. Indeed, as a concept, permanence is one of the major recurring themes explored in the following

pages. Readers will see it as an antecedent to fear and as a force to spur a sense of defiance.

Sociologist Michael Atkinson divides the history of Western tattooing into six eras or generational moments: the colonist/pioneer (1760s-1870s), circus/carnival (1880s-1920s), working-class (1920s-1950s), rebel (1950s-1970s), new age (1970s-1990s), and supermarket era(s) (1990s-2003). His book *Tattooed: The Sociogenesis of Body Art* (2003) is on the verge of becoming a classic within the tattoo literature. But today, it is time to update the history because the increasing social acceptance and artistic nature of tattooing is changing its meanings. We have also moved further into the era sociologist Zygmunt Bauman called *liquid modernity*. Ours is a world loud with desires in which stability and permanence must contend with insatiable consumerism, swift-paced existence, throw-away products, and a globalized world of humans ever competing for the newest and the best. Changing fashions and the transitory are increasingly powerful social forces and may be a challenge for practices like tattooing which command devotion, commitment, and permanence. In some ways tattooing is inconsistent with the spirit of the age. If Bauman is right, liquid modernity is more of a threat to tattooing than its earlier associations with deviance and disrepute.¹

This thesis is about tattoos and tattooing in liquid modern times. I study the social semiotics (investigation of meaning-making potential) of tattoos for enthusiasts and artists

¹ While Atkinson's (2003: 46) supermarket era—characterized by choice—is still relevant in considering tattooing today, I suggest that framing the current period as the liquid modern era helps us appreciate the ambivalence we feel *because* of our choices. Overwhelmed with choice, the liquid modern citizen must navigate an uneven terrain and will often avoid making decisions (like getting a tattoo) because they are limiting, constraining, and permanent.

in the wider socio-cultural environments they inhabit. Although the research that informs this thesis took place in Canada and is of a Canadian context, I believe it has a degree of theoretical generalizability applicable to a broader Western context. For instance, in the narratives of tattoo enthusiasts in later chapters, which were collected and analyzed under a social semiotic lens, I will argue that tattoos provide an anchor of stability in the treacherous waters of contemporary society. Some enthusiasts take refuge in using their body to represent self-identity, cultural change and gendered resistance, artistic and emotional signifiers, and a trove of other meanings through their engagement in body art practices. Moreover, and perhaps more strikingly, I suggest this anchoring of self in tattoos is an act of rebellion against the superficiality of contemporary life and its ephemeral qualities.

A powerful example supporting these claims has recently made the news. The May 2017 bomb attack in Manchester, England, that targeted young concert-goers spurred a major fundraising effort by local tattoo parlors. Artists offered to tattoo a bee at a cost of 50 pounds. The proceeds went to the victims and their families. With lines spanning city blocks, the effort was a major success by all accounts. Noteworthy is the fact that while wristbands, pins, or slogans—as one-time efforts—could have represented the same message, authors like Davidson (2016) have noted that tattoos have always been used as memorializing symbols and that this is part of their allure even today. In fact, a BBC report quoted one of hundreds of people who had gotten the bee tattoo: "Danielle Kosky, 22, who managed to get tattooed, said: 'it's a nice way of showing support for the victims, their families and to remember them forever – not just now.... I didn't know how

else to offer my support. Facebook and Instagram are good, but this will be on me forever, not just words that you see on a screen.” (BBC, 27 May 2017)



Figure 0.1 A flyer advertising the fundraising efforts of the “Manchester Tattoo Appeal” shared by @Sambarbertattoo, reproduced with permission.

To understand why the bee was chosen for these memorial tattoos we need to momentarily shift topics. I ask readers to picture in their minds the spider web elbow tattoos which many contemporary enthusiasts don as they represent, from a historical perspective, an old-school Americana tradition originally attributed to the black and grey

work of East Los Angeles in the mid 20th century. Alex, my main informant into the world of tattooing for the ethnographic field research which will inform much of this thesis, was touching-up some color on one of my tattoos and said: “I really want to do a spider web tattoo. Do you want one?” My first reaction was to question if I was “cool” enough to be a spider web tattoo kind of guy. But I went ahead and got it anyway and after a couple of hours of particularly sharp pain I was indeed a spider web tattoo kind of guy. (I am tempted to say that the elbow is a notoriously painful place to get tattooed but then every part of the body has a trove of enthusiasts who claim that it is the most painful place to get tattooed.)

A little while later, I was approached by a heavily tattooed man smoking outdoors by the college where I teach. He asked, “So how long was you bid, man?” After some clarification, I had to say I served no time in jail and that I got the spider web because I love the history of tattooing. I had the center of the spider web highlighted in blue to counteract the boldness of the black and grey shading.

This experience emphasizes an important theme of increasing relevance in the contemporary era. How can a bee possibly represent sorrow and solidarity? Polysemy is defined as “multiple meanings.” Drawing attention to the polysemic nature of tattooing is crucial to understanding why people get tattooed and what it means to create and define their work as a tattoo artist when negotiating with potential clients. The bee has long been an indexical symbol for Manchester, a city integral to the Industrial Revolution, its work ethic, and its working-class history. The new meaning it takes on for the hundreds who received it is a permanent reminder of the terrorist attacks. Yet, meaning does not stand still, and perhaps it will later remind these people of their youth, of where they used to

live, or of a plethora of other things. Meanings change with time and space. This is illustrated in full detail in what follows.

If you find a book or electronic resource that tells you what a tattoo means, be skeptical. It is probably false, culturally specific, or at least simplistic. I have witnessed some of the most profound reasons for getting a tattoo (death, love, sorrow) and I have witnessed some of most trivial symbols (beer logo, the design on a *Starbucks* cup, martini glass). The meanings are rarely what you imagine at first glance. In fact, these three examples are on my body. The reasons behind them are not as trivial as they sound. As Deborah Davidson (2016: 2) notes, “tattooing is one of the persistent and universal forms of body modification, and while tattoos have been most recognized as marks of deviance, they have also always been used for a myriad of deeply human reasons.” Stuart Hall (1991: 9) in a discussion of semiotics, visual language, and meaning may have said it best when it comes to signifying practices such as tattooing:

...meaning is not straightforward or transparent, and does not survive intact the passage of representation. It is a slippery customer, changing and shifting with context, usage and historical circumstances. It is therefore never finally fixed. It is always putting off or ‘deferring’ its rendezvous with Absolute Truth. It is often contested, and sometimes bitterly fought over. There are always different circuits of meaning circulating in any culture at the same time, overlapping discursive formations, from which we draw to create meaning or to express what we think.

This thesis is interested in describing what tattoos mean to the enthusiast, artist, occasional on-looker, the audience of cultures, and others. In the myriad of interpretations, we find hints of cultural codes and the dynamism of social agents as they organize and define art works. First though, it is useful to have a statement about the history of tattooing and to discuss some of the prior insights into the practice

from the literature that this work builds on.

A Brief History of Tattooing

Although everyone knows the meaning of getting a tattoo, it is useful to have a technical statement about the processes which are involved:

Tattooing refers to the insertion of pigment into the skin with needles, bone, knives, or other implements, in order to create a decorative design. Tattooing is a permanent form of body modification and has been found on every continent of the world as well as among most island populations; it is one of the most persistent and universal forms of body modification and body art (DeMello 2014: xxix).

Largely, a modern tattoo is a visceral art form in which an artist navigates aesthetic principles of art such as light and shadows in grayscale, and principles of color and shading in watercolor or realist portraiture, while also mastering the craft of piercing the outer layer of the skin's epidermis down into the underlying layer called the dermis just enough to allow the phagocytic cells called macrophages—which are normally tasked with ridding the body of foreign hazards—to expand and absorb the ink in an ideal fashion without causing scarring, bleeding, or trauma.

One version of the history of tattooing is that it was born on seas of change. In the West, the practice is most often said to have begun with the English exploration vessel *The Endeavor* and its Captain James Cook, who is credited with the first written recording of tattooing (Sanders 1989; Pitts 2003; Atkinson 2003; Back 2007). Ten years after Cook and his crew finished plotting out the new British territory known as Newfoundland in 1759, they were sent to the South Pacific for further exploration. It is in the South Pacific that the “tatau” (a Tahitian word, meaning “to strike”) was observed,

recorded, and eventually exported to Europe. Now known as a “tattoo,” the practice travelled back on the arms of many sailors, and—in true colonialist fashion—in the form of a living Tahitian prince named Omai aboard Cook’s vessel.

Of course, historians and physical anthropologists contend that tattoos have likely existed for thousands of years before Cook. Anthropological evidence brings us female Egyptian mummies dating from 2000 B.C. and the famous “Iceman” (or Ötzi), who was uncovered in the Swiss Alps in the early 1990s with over 60 visible tattoos still intact. Historical dating then shows that tattoos existed at least 5300 years ago and likely even earlier considering culture must have influence the iceman to get inked in the first place. Indeed, Matt Lodder, a contemporary art historian and expert on tattoos as body art, contends that it is likely tattoos existed much earlier even in the West than the Cook legend indicates, and evidence points to the fact that tattoos were covering skin in Europe at least as early as the 14th century. Lodder (in Lewis 2013: 1) supports these claims by pointing to museum collections such as those studied by Gemma Angel, an expert on preserved tattooed skin, which includes the skin of a medieval pilgrim who “had been tattooed, rather than picking up a cockle shell, to commemorate his visit to *Santiago de Compostela* in Spain.”

The first Western voyages in the South Pacific have come to symbolize colonial histories and the ways in which ethnic and racial dominance persists. Yet there is an important second wave of cultural destruction in Indigenous communities which was undertaken by religious missionaries throughout the world in the 19th and 20th centuries which must also be acknowledged. These missionary excursions represent efforts to systematically destroy and discredit the practice of tattooing the skin on the basis of moral

superiority and biblical scripture forbidding the manipulation of the flesh. Not averse to using violence along with other moral assertions “the White missionaries were violently aggressive in stamping out indigenous practices and forcing their own religious practices of Christianity upon the native people” (Thompson 2015: 23). For instance Thompson (22) notes that by the time of Charles Darwin’s S.S. Beagle voyages in 1836, “tattooing customs had nearly disappeared in native cultures.” Moreover, historical evidence points to a man, Samuel Marsden of the Church Missionary Society, who in 1836 effectively sought to get rid of the tattooing practices called *ta moko*, amongst the Maori peoples through religious-based condemnation.

For the current state of tattooing practices amongst Indigenous populations, Lars Krutak (2014) offers the most comprehensive socio-historical perspective. In his work *Tattoo Traditions of Native North America: Ancient and Contemporary Expressions of Identity*, Krutak finds tattooing practices dating back at least 3200 years within Indigenous societies. In comprehensively documenting the meanings of tattoos across groups and tribes in North America, Krutak reveals the ways in which these traditions have deep spiritual connections to deities, spirits, and ancestors and are gradually making a resurgence through concerted efforts by people within these communities to pass along their traditions to younger generations. As Krutak (2014: 7) writes:

The Indigenous peoples of North America have produced astonishingly rich and diverse forms of tattooing for thousands of years. Long neglected by anthropologists and art historians, tattooing was a time honoured traditional practice that expressed the patterns of tribal social organization and religion,

while also channeling worlds inhabited by deities, spirits, and the ancestors.

Strikingly, Krutak also documents the ways in which colonial and missionary interventions threatened the future of these practices in a way that demonstrates real impacts on people. On the difficulty he has faced as a cultural anthropologist in researching the names of the people lost to time who wore the tattoos which have been documented, Krutak (8) writes that “explorers, travel writers, and early anthropologists considered these forgotten people to be ethnological specimens that helped document a ‘vanishing way of life.’” This thesis was not enriched by perspectives of Indigenous peoples through the research data I collected. I caution readers to appreciate that the following work is an account of contemporary tattooing practices in the West and I suggest Krutak’s work as the single most important text offering an alternative Indigenized history to the more-widely known history of tattooing in the West.

These histories share a lot of the same origins, hardships and cultural backlash; however, as is unfortunately all too often the case when considering Indigenous history, tattooing in Indigenous cultures has been threatened on the level of existential survival rather than just disapproval. This is not to minimize the plight of tattooing throughout the rest of the world but it is to inform readers that this present work must be considered as a piece of a puzzle much more complicated than can be covered in a single work.

Away from Negative Deviance

Deviance, ritual, and primitiveness are prominent themes in discourses about tattooing. They formed the dominant discourse about the practice for at least a century (DeMello 1993; Govenar 1988; Rubin 1988). At the same time, there has been a minority, counter discourse about tattooing. It has always come either directly from people in the tattoo community or from scholars who spent time with tattooees and artists (Atkinson 2003; DeMello 2000; Sanders 1989; Thompson 2015; Webb 1979). How common this alternative discourse has been has varied over the decades at least since the late 1800s. Tattooing in the West, following the original colonial and religious missionary purging in the 18th and 19th century, has often been discredited by its association with circus performers, bikers, sailors, and gangs; and underappreciated in terms of its artistic qualities and purposes. As Les Back (2007: 75) notes, in the mass media “images of tattooed men are associated with violence and football hooliganism. Similarly, tattooed working-class women have been associated, up until recently, with sexual deviance, prostitution, and criminality.”

Deborah Davidson (2016: 3) points to evidence as far back as a story in *The New York Times* from the turn of the 20th century which reported that “tattoos are not just for seamen” and “the stereotype of tattooing being related to deviant behavior has been difficult to dispel.” Similarly, Mary Kosut (2006a) advocates shifting perspectives away from the subject of deviance to the representation of tattoos in the art world and among enthusiasts. In a study of the connections between insanity and creativity in cultural milieus, Kosut (2006a: 90) says that “like the pseudo-scientific myth of the mad genius, the notion of the tattooed deviant is an enduring construct. The historical relationship among art, creativity, and various physiological maladies demonstrates the relativity and

fluidity of cultural beliefs.”

Supporting claims that for some generations tattoos have been moving away from negative deviance, Rowsell, Kress, and Street (2013: 101) note that “at some time around the late 1880’s fashionable society was gripped by a tattoo craze. Tattoos entered the mainstream at this point and become decorous for middle and upper classes.” Like other socially challenging art forms, such as street art, tattooing is not without its detractors, the literature from these scholars points out that if we are to understand the range of the meanings of the tattoos on 40 percent of the population of millennials (2008 Pew research poll), we need to drop the biased and limited lens of deviance.

One of the strongest advocates for listening to tattoo artists and enthusiasts is Matt Lodder (2011). The idea that tattoo enthusiasts are akin to modern primitives is a myth, Lodder argues. As a heavily tattooed scholar, he concluded that assuming tattoo enthusiasts are examples of “modern primitives” is not only false but undervalues the work that artists like Spider Webb and Don Ed Hardy (to name only two) have been doing since the 1970s in promoting tattoo aesthetics (103). He pointed to Atkinson (2003), Sanders (2008,1989) and Pitts (2003) as examples of authors who – even while providing a careful and thoughtful engagement with the tattoo community – still felt compelled to appeal to the myth of modern primitivism. Unequivocally, Lodder (109) observed “there never has been a ‘movement’ of Modern Primitives, driven by explicitly and avowedly ‘primitive’ desires to seek a higher state of consciousness through direct manipulation of their own flesh.” In his estimation as an art historian, there have been highly aesthetic ways of beautifying bodies for some time now.

I suggest that the image of tattoo art as deviant or primitive resembles the treatment

accorded American artist of Haitian descent, Jean-Michel Basquiat. At a 2017 auction, long after his death, Basquiat proved to be an unstoppable force in the art world when an untitled piece of his, a skull painted in his signature neo-expressionist style, sold for 110.5 million dollars. According to *The New York Times*, the auction made it the sixth most expensive painting ever sold and the highest by any American artist (Pogrebin and Reyburn, *The New York Times*, May 18, 2017). Alice Gregory (*GQ Magazine*, September 18, 2015) quotes a conversation between art critic Marc Miller and Basquiat in which Miller asked for a response to what critics had been calling a “primal expressionism” in his work. Gregory went on to recount, “Basquiat, still smiling, eyes glassed over in gentle and almost invisible disdain, says, ‘Like an ape? A primate?’ Miller, surprised and embarrassed, stammers back, ‘I don’t know.’” The reasoning raises the question of why the myth of the modern primitive persists in the tattoo literature? Moreover, one could also question the use of the word “primitive” in some sort of savage depiction of those who ritualize pain or body mutilation. There is a need for sociologists and other scholars to take a step back and assess the perverse political, social, and economic biases that seem to be influencing social definitions.

In this spirit, it can be said that even though the subject of tattooing continues to thrive in different disciplines such as psychology (Silver et al. 2009), psychiatry (Stirn and Hinz 2008), and health/wellbeing research (Suarez and Redmond 2014; Kostić et al. 2013), it is debatable if topics in these fields have tread significant new ground in terms of social and cultural appreciation since Atkinson (2003: 55) diagnosed the problem as “the substantial psychological literature on the subject severely limits a broader understanding of tattooing as a culturally meaningful practice.” In the social sciences and

humanities, key writers such as Barron (2017); Davidson (2016); DeMello (2000, 2007, 2014); Kosut (2000, 2006a, 2006b, 2011, 2013); Kjeldgaard and Bengsston (2005); Mun et al. (2012); Thompson (2015); and Yamada (2008, 2009) have continued to pave the way for the inclusion of the study of tattoos in the wider fields of sociologies of art, body, gender and culture.

Sociologist Deborah Davidson's edited volume *The Tattoo Project: Commemorative Tattoos, Visual Culture, and the Digital Archive* (2016) is an important resource for those interested in how deeply meaningful tattooing can be as a source of remembrance, memorialization, and homage. Her book invokes Atkinson and Young's (2001: 118) concept of the "flesh journey" and my earlier work on the social mapping enthusiasts find themselves doing, by representing in ink their own life journeys and the lives of the deceased and lost (Martin 2013). Davidson's book has been acclaimed a work of public sociology by her contributors Ariane Hanemaayer and Christopher Schneider because of its accompanying online database. For those looking to find others who have experienced the meaning-making process tattoos provide for dealing with feelings of loss, Davidson's book is an excellent source. She looks into a side of tattooing explored only superficially elsewhere.

Building from Davidson's example, this thesis asserts that tattoos and tattooing have been stepping out of the shadows of negative deviance for nearly a century. Today enthusiasts seek out highly aesthetic custom body art performed by professional and artistically savvy tattoo artists (rather than tattooists), using tattoo machines rather than tattoo guns, organic ink rather than whatever ink they can find, and surrounded by fashionable art on the walls in place of "flash" (common popular designs displayed on the

walls of studios or in binders and used for quick tattoos). The following chapters will discuss these semiotic shifts in cultural definition, artistic practice, and meanings involved in tattoos and tattooing.

Organization of the Chapters

In Chapter 1 of this thesis, readers are offered a sketch of the theoretical and methodological tools provided by social semiotics, symbolic interactionism, and dramaturgy as they aid in the extraction of enthusiasts' reasons implicitly or explicitly justifying tattoos in a liquid modern world. Zygmunt Bauman's liquid modernity is a prominent and recurring dilemma dealt with throughout this thesis and is thus defined and explored here as well. Indeed, it is of high relevance when considering the sort of historical circumstances and the slippery nature of meaning Stuart Hall (1991) mentioned in the quotation discussed earlier.

Chapter 2 offers a description of the qualitative research methodology of this study including the steps I took becoming truly acquainted with the tattoo world in finding a research site for my ethnographic fieldwork. The Studio became so much more than just a place where I wrote notes. It became a hub of friendship, entertainment, and a source of social bonds for me and my family due to role engulfment (Scott 2015). When my wife April and I moved to a metropolitan Canadian city from St. John's, Newfoundland, I came with two half-sleeve arm pieces and few friends. The Studio provided me with a lot more ink, some very telling and important sociological research, and also some lifelong friends.

Chapter 2 also provides readers with a description of the term, contemporary-style tattooee. This is a term I use to describe tattoo enthusiasts who fit my research goals and thus constitute my purposive research sample. A tattoo enthusiast for this research is a broad term referring to someone having more than one tattoo, who experiences interest, enjoyment, and often social connections with the tattoo world. My semi-structured interviews with 29 participants (20 contemporary-style tattoo enthusiasts and 9 tattoo artists) form a large part of this thesis and allow me to offer detailed social semiotic analyses of tattoos as well as symbolic interactionist/ dramaturgical reflections on tattoo artists. Readers should also pay close attention to the biases and limitations section of the methodology chapter which discusses ways in which this research may fall short of generalizability and indicates room for future research on the topic.

Chapters 3 and 4 follow the daily lives of tattoo artists and a tattoo ethnographer through autobiographical confessional tales (Van Maanen 2011). In a work environment people perform their occupational roles with confidence (Goffman 1969), which is to some extent a theatrical or stage performance. To address such themes, these chapters weave narratives from field notes into an analysis of interviews with nine tattoo artists who try to maintain the interaction order from different viewpoints. In other words, I explore how these tattoo artists can draw on what Halliday (1978: 192) called *semiotic resources* to maintain a definition of the situation in their everyday work in order to appear to an audience of clients/consumers and other artists as credible, artistic, professional, and likeable. Five of these artists either currently work—or once worked—at *The Studio* (a fictitious name). The other four I spoke with are employed throughout the

city. One currently works downtown, another from home, one in a nearby province, and the last in the suburbs of the city.

In Chapter 3 the literature from the symbolic interactionist and dramaturgical schools of thought will be adopted to help make sense of tattoo artists and their everyday life. I discuss tattoo artists as performers of a role exploring theoretical issues related to these artists as they commit symbolic and strategic interaction while managing face and committing acts of deception. Studies from symbolic interactionism (a qualitative type of sociology not unlike literary analysis) help one appreciate the nuances of micro social interaction and everyday social processes (Scott 2015).

Building on the insights explored through the work of Davidson (2016), DeMello (2000), and Lodder (2011), Chapter 4 discusses further the shift from culturally underappreciated tattooist to tattoo artist. Readers are offered an exploration of data which suggest tattoo artists have been separating themselves from the labeled past deviance of their profession for some time and have been doing so by pushing ahead through higher standards for apprentice artists to a deeper demand for aesthetic principles of sophisticated work by both artists of the craft and by their tattoo enthusiast consumers, and finally by managing clients' expectations coming from television and media depictions of their practice. I also discuss how the present is the time when more tattoo enthusiasts and artists use the formal aesthetic properties of the larger art worlds to produce, consume, and define tattoos. This process of using formal aesthetics in tattoo design has been defined as an "artification" of a previously devalued art form (Baumann 2007; Kosut 2013). Artification is not unique to tattooing. It also occurred in European one-ring circuses in the late-20th century (Bouissac 2012). In this artification we see

tattoos gain an unprecedented use as meaningful semiotic resources of status and identity suitable for conversations and hanging on the walls of fine art museums. Thus, I will explore how artification becomes a factor in a tattooee's choice to assuage fears of permanence and become inked.

Chapter 4 also takes an inside look at tattoo artists and the theme of permanence. In this section, we address the idea of permanence in the day-to-day occupation of tattooing. This includes an analysis of how artists cope with mistakes and how they consider the indelibility of their work during the execution of a tattoo. As with any list of categories, there is a strong sense that categories will blend into one another. By the end of these two chapters readers should appreciate how tattoo artists reflect upon all of these prominent themes on a daily basis as part of their occupational goals and responsibilities.

Chapters 5-7 delve into the topics of self-identity, cultural change, gendered bodies, and artistic and emotional expression as important, over-arching factors to explain why tattoos are still a relevant means of displaying meaning and identity. In this exploration, we broach topics as diverse as Japanese versus Western tattooing, esoteric religions and the left-hand path, biopower, gender in sports, Cubism, modern art, and many other topics as the referencing and mapping exploits of enthusiasts. This takes us through time and space in order to interpret the polysemic relationship between signifiers which, following the literature in the field of social semiotics (Abousnnouga and Machin 2013; Hodge and Kress 1988; Hodge 2017; Van Leeuwen 2005) we refer to as semiotic resources. Their multiple unfixed meanings describe their semiotic potential.

I hope you will enjoy reading about my experiences becoming heavily tattooed, working with—and becoming close friends with—tattoo artists, and speaking to over a

hundred tattoo enthusiasts who indelibly mark their skin with ink in the pursuit of meaning, identity, and – well – even happiness. Through empirical research and social scientific rigor, my consistent goal has been to do justice to the practice and the interviewees in portraying their stories. I hope you learn as much as I did about yourself and others.

Ultimately, this is a study of tattoos and tattooing at a time when the practice is more artistic, culturally relevant, and common than ever before. Readers will learn about a practice as deeply human and universal as tattooing while finding answers to important questions regarding embodied semiotic practices. Why do people put indelible marks on their bodies in an era characterized by fluid cultural change? How do tattoos as semiotic resources convey meaning? What goes on behind the scenes in a tattoo studio? How do people negotiate the informal career of tattoo artist?

Chapter 1

Tattoos and Tattooing in the Era of Liquid Modernity

Theoretical Approaches

Basically, this work is about the cultural resources individuals use as they go about creating and expressing meaning in their everyday lives through body art practices. This thesis draws on symbolic interactionism, socio-semiotics, and Bauman's theory of *liquid modernity* to provide the broad theoretical basis for a study of tattoos, tattoo enthusiasts, and tattoo artists. This multi-pronged approach is necessary if the sociological spectrum of tattooing is to be addressed. From transactions occurring in studios to descriptions and interpretations of the tattoos themselves. Symbolic interactionism and semiotics are complementary because both offer their own unique tools for understanding the production of meaning in everyday life. Social semiotics can provide a more systematic approach than symbolic interactionism for the analysis of signs and symbols.

Zygmunt Bauman's ideas about the fluidity and insecurity of identity in contemporary Western societies frame interpretations within the societal mode of post (or liquid) modernity. Although Zygmunt Bauman (1925-2017) was never a self-declared symbolic interactionist, his skepticism about the natural sciences as a model for the social sciences was consistent with the philosophy of symbolic interactionism. This combination of perspectives is typical of symbolic interactionism after circa 1990 when research by symbolic interactionists became increasingly eclectic.

Positivist and Humanist Sociology

This chapter will endeavor to provide readers with a brief history of the theoretical perspectives used in the thesis while offering a description of the ways in which they will be utilized. Yet, to acquire a comprehensive understanding of symbolic interactionism, some knowledge of the two broad “traditions” in sociology is required: positivist sociology and humanistic sociology.² There are a variety of labels for these traditions. Their meanings overlap but are not identical. Positivist sociology may be referred to as scientific sociology. Humanistic sociology is also known as idealist and interpretive sociology (Wilson 1983). Positivism can be defined, in one sentence, as the application of the methods of the natural sciences to the study of social life. The fact that the words “positivism” and “sociology” were coined by the same person, Auguste Comte (1787-1857), is important because it is an indication that throughout the history of sociology, positivism has been the dominant tradition.

In contrast, humanistic sociologists, like those in the symbolic interactionist tradition, relate sociology to the humanities, literary studies and social criticism because they are skeptical that people can be studied properly using the methods of the natural sciences. These two traditions are a matter of degree. Sociologists may identify with one without agreeing with all of its typical characteristics. Thus, the approach adopted in this

² Some scholars prefer to conceptualize the history of sociology in terms of three categories. For example, Randall Collins (Ed.) (1985) referred to the conflict tradition, the Durkheimian tradition, and the micro-interactionist tradition. John Wilson (1983) conceptualized the history of sociology using the categories positivism, idealism, and realism. Alan Sears and James Cairns (2010) use the terms positivism, interpretive, and critical. Finally, John Parker et al. (2003) conceptualize social theory in terms of five basic concepts: individuals, nature, culture, action, and social structure.

work might be characterized as “symbolic interactionist friendly” rather than mainstream symbolic interactionism (Helmes-Hayes and Milne 2017).

Positivists emphasize logic and reason as the way to unearth information leading to generalizations about our shared sociality. Positivists assume that there are objective social realities which can be “discovered” just as natural scientists discover the so-called laws of the natural world. Facts are considered neutral. They are not a product of an investigator’s interpretation. In order to discover social facts a researcher should try to retain an outsider’s non-involved, apolitical perspective. In principle (although not always in practice), positivists reject the advocacy of moral values. What ought to be is not science. Morality is left to politicians, religious leaders, and philosophers. Objective reality is best revealed through quantitative methods of research. The proper focus of research is thus the observable and the measurable because research must be replicated and verified.

Historically, positivists have also described social phenomenon as a result of structures of control which exist independently of an agent. Agents are viewed somewhat like pawns in a game in which they have little true understanding of their actions. Commonsense is rarely an avenue to truth, at least an intellectually exciting version of truth. Communities of social scientists, not the untrained public even though they have personally experienced the issue under investigation, are the experts in judging the quality of research because commonsense is assumed to be simplistic, confused, superficial, and ethnocentric.

The heyday of positivism in North American sociology was the 1950’s and 1960’s. It (rightly) came under attack by sociologists influenced by Marxism for abandoning

commitment to social justice which motivated an earlier generation of sociologists, by feminists for underestimating the extent to which one's standpoint in society influences opinions about social theory; by post-structuralists for its exaggerated emphasis on logic and reason; by symbolic interactionists for insensitivity to the power of individuals to

The two traditions of sociology, positivism and anti-positivism (or humanistic sociology), also exist in semiotics. Although it is a simplification, it is common to distinguish between *structural semiotics*, in which a system of signs and codes take precedence over the intentions of the senders of a message; and *social semiotics*, which emphasizes the interactions of speakers, writers and other participants in communication. Structural semioticians are “primarily interested in understanding how signs and structures of semiotic rules make people, rather than in understanding how people make, use and renegotiate semiotic rules” (Vannini 2007: 115). In structural semiotics, the origins of systems of signs and codes may be something as pre-social as thinking in binary categories which reflects the structure of the brain. In contrast, it is not unusual for some of the fundamental ideas of social semiotics to sound a lot like symbolic interactionism.

Symbolic Interactionism

The theory with the longest tradition of anti-positivism in North American sociology is symbolic interactionism. I will introduce this theory now through an appreciation of some historical underpinnings of its origins before discussing how it came to be developed in more modern uses and how it will be used here to understand tattoos and tattooing. By doing so, readers should appreciate how this thesis is largely a

humanistic study and adopts a critical lens of positivistic approaches to knowledge-gathering through theories of symbolic interaction, dramaturgy, and social semiotics.

Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s must have been something to see. Any historian may close his/her eyes and see glorious art deco façades, Al Capone and prohibition, and men and women walking The Loop which, if viewed from above, would make up a sea of fedoras and top hats. But ask sociologists and they may picture Robert Park and Ernest Burgess building a legacy based on the groundwork of philosophers from the American pragmatist tradition like Mead, Dewey, James, and C.S. Peirce and together shaping what would become known as the Chicago School of Sociology (circa 1915-1935)³. The legacy of pragmatism can be seen in the ideas and writings of the Chicago School by observing how the humanistic epistemological turn that would become symbolic interactionism shared an appreciation of the study of meaning and that the thought and experiences of individuals shape, and are not just shaped by, social reality (Reynolds 2003: 47).

As G.H. Mead (in Strauss 1956: 286) wrote concerning Comte and positivism: “the positivistic doctrine assumes that our objects are given in such observation, and that is the logical weakness of positivism. It assumes that the world is made up, so to speak, out of facts, is made up out of those objects that appear in the experience of the scientific

³ It has become common to refer to a First Chicago School and to a Second Chicago School (circa 1946-1960). Key figures in the first school are Robert Park, Florian Znaniecki, Louis Wirth, and W.I. Thomas. In the second school they include Howard Becker, Herbert Blumer, Everett Hughes, and (arguably) Erving Goffman. This research draws in particular on Erving Goffman. His PhD is from the University of Chicago but, as will be explained, he did not consistently follow the theoretical ideas or the research methods of symbolic interactionism. The terms First and Second Chicago Schools of sociology refer explicitly to symbolic interactionism.

observer.”⁴ Susie Scott (2015: 5) says pragmatism was a precursor to symbolic interactionism by the way it “...suggests that the self has two sides: subject and object simultaneously.” This then depicts symbolic interactionism and modern-day semiotics as both having an origin traced to elements found in the ideas of C.S. Peirce and the pragmatist tradition (See Collins 1985: 185-191; Rochberg-Halton 1983)⁵.

Herbert Blumer, who coined the term symbolic interactionism in the 1930s, used ideas like the generalized other which had been discussed at Chicago for some time, primarily by Mead and others, as the theoretical basis of his perspective. It has since become a standard way of introducing symbolic interactionism to summarize the principles found in Blumer’s (1969: 2) landmark book *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*.

[1] human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them... [2] the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows... [3] these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters.

Moving to more recent discussions of symbolic interactionism, David R. Maines, (2001) in his book *The Faultline of Consciousness: A View of Interactionism in Sociology*

⁴ In the article “The Real Nature of Pragmatism and Chicago Sociology”, Rochberg-Halton (1983: 141) notes that “Peirce took delight in pointing out that Comte’s maxim... that the only way we can completely verify something is through *direct* observation, is itself not based on any direct observation but is inferential. Comte breaks his own rule in uttering it.”

⁵ Manning in Reynolds and Herman-Kinney (2003: 121) importantly also discusses how Mead, one of the direct influences in Blumer’s formulation of symbolic interactionism, also had a student in Charles Morris who then went on to teach Thomas Sebeok. Morris and Sebeok together represent two of the prominent figures in the ongoing growth and development of semiotics in the 20th century.

is a source for the basic principles of symbolic interactionism while also offering increased insight into both the First and Second Chicago School. In this work, Maines defines symbolic interactionism in broad terms. He distinguishes between “interactionist promoters” and “interactionist utilizers” (or “unaware interactionists”) and argues that the latter category is more common in contemporary sociology than many people realize. Maines’ explanation of symbolic interactionism is in terms of four “facts” and a few related orienting propositions. This discussion combines facts and propositions.

The Four “Facts” Emphasized in Symbolic Interactionism

1. *People can think, and they possess self-awareness.* Cognition, self, and identity are central concepts in symbolic interactionism. Commonsense thinking is assumed to be rather sophisticated because people naturally think about the situations they encounter in everyday life, although to differing degrees depending on the person and situation. A study of people’s actions should begin with their conscious motives and self-identity. Social scientists’ explanations of other people’s acts which contradict commonsense are questioned. The authorities on a research topic are the actors who have experienced the subject investigated. Consequently, good sociology is an elaboration of commonsense and has a phenomenological element. Meaning it allows for a view of meaning from the perspective of the consciousness of those observed.

2. *Communication is central to all human social activity.* The aspect most in line with social semiotic inquiry is that meaning is created, shaped, and reshaped through social interactions and is thus a product of symbolic exchanges by knowledgeable social actors. Human interaction is impossible without communication whether it is the silent

internal dialogue of individual cognition (inner speech) or communication with others. Humans are radically different than other animals whose ability to communicate is quite limited. It is not just human vanity to emphasize differences between animals and humans due to language, culture, and the remembrance of the past. All systems of symbols (language, gestures, material artifacts, clothing, music, etc.) are relevant for understanding insiders' wisdom. But no system is as important as language because a lot of "interaction" is just talk. Emphasis is on the inherently ambiguous meanings of symbols and the practical problems of interpreting what others mean. Human communication is never easy.

3. *All forms of human activity occur in situations.* Societies are aggregates of individuals. British society and French society, for example, are constructs. No one has ever seen them. Interacting individuals and their symbols are the observable, fundamental features of societies. "Situation" is defined as the "factors with which an actor must deal in forming a line of conduct" (Maines 2001: 5). Interaction occurs in "cultural, institutional, gendered, national, racial, economic, and/or historical contexts" (Maines 2001: 3). Historically, face-to-face interaction was emphasized in symbolic interaction but its principles can be extended to include interaction via mass media and social media (Hogan 2010).

4. *Human relationships and collectivities are forms of activity.* All activity is agency endowed. Interaction is a dynamic process in which actors adjust to each others' responses and the perceived evaluation of responses. "Others" may not react in the way an "actor(s)" anticipated. Rules are negotiated and are typically more flexible than one would think by reading a rule book. Symbols and institutions are created, maintained, and

changed through human activity.

The preferred research methods of symbolic interaction are supposed to be faithful to the empirical world of experiencing actors. The ideal methods are ethnography and unstructured interviews, which are utilized in this work. Quantitative methods, on the other hand, are considered less sensitive to the subtlety of people's thinking. Moreover, multiple-choice surveys are at best gross indicators of commonsense. Careful observation is more important than explicit, abstract theorizing since the latter is not the way people think about the various situations they confront daily.

Symbolic interactionism, deriving from Mead who was, in turn, influenced by Peirce, should be compatible with the detailed commentary on discourses undertaken by discourse analysts and semioticians. In general, discourse analysis and semiotics are developed from a more critical view of commonsense and are sometimes unable to capture that level of meaning like symbolic interactionists because they are concentrated more on texts rather than interpretive practices. Or, as Manning (in Reynolds and Herman-Kinney 2003: 1037) puts it "since semiotics does not provide a basis for systematically connecting the coder to the code but only orders material once uttered and written, it is inevitable that its contribution is primarily made in the syntactical and semantic aspects of narrative analysis."

One aim of symbolic interactionist theories used in this thesis is to draw attention to the ways in which these ideas and social semiotics complement one another. Take, for example, the discussion explored in later chapters of the occupational identities, trials, and tribulations of tattoo artists as they worked within The Studio. Here, it is useful to observe what Everett Hughes (1971: 334-339), said about social identity as it is

intertwined with occupations and the ways in which meanings are shaped by structures and occupational codes: “The occupational group tends to build up a set of collective representations more or less peculiar to the occupation....The longer and more rigorous the period of initiation into an occupation the more deeply impressed are its set of social attitudes upon the person.” Becoming a tattoo artist requires a long period of initiation. The practice of tattooing the skin is indeed a craft and an art. This distinction between craft and art in tattooing in relation to the spatial, material, and social semiotic elements of social interaction is discussed in detail in the pages that follow in an effort to understand how meaning is made and interpreted among tattoo artists who build collective representations to make sense of their unorthodox occupations.

Erving Goffman and Dramaturgical Analysis

The second source of models for understanding the social process involved in tattooing is Goffman’s dramaturgical analysis which was strongly influenced by symbolic interactionism despite Goffman’s break with some of its central tenets. The dramaturgical perspective on face-to-face interaction is an elaboration of Shakespeare’s famous statement in *As You Like It* (act 2, scene 2) that “all the world’s a stage. And all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and entrances. And one man in his time plays many parts.” Erving Goffman (1922-1982), especially in his early book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) is most insightful for understanding everyday interaction rituals or micro-situational rituals including those which occur in almost any workplace. Goffman’s dramaturgical theories give us a framework for understanding how an actor, such as a tattoo artist, can and must perform multiple, shifting, formal, and

informal roles (confident professional, artist, friend, trustworthy, cool person, unorthodox person, etc.) to control and construct a definition of the situation.

Adopting the idea from W.I. Thomas (1925: 42), Goffman used the phrase “the definition of the situation” to describe the ways in which we all try to create and live by a shared sense of appropriate behavior in specific social contexts.⁶ The definition of a situation is a result of norms, rules of tact, and past experiences akin to the actor’s teleprompter which in everyday life serves to keep us reliable actors before our audiences. Life in groups requires that people be predictable. Not knowing how to define a situation causes anxiety. Either a consensus of values or a *façade* of consensus tends to occur in a situation in which public displays of difference are avoided by the participants. In many multi-focused events competing definitions of the situation are apparent. However, there is likely to be one overarching definition and underneath it brief moments in which different or conflicting definitions emerge. Goffman is more sensitive to the fragility of definitions of a situation in his book *Frame Analysis* (1974). A consultation with a tattoo artist might be understood as a business transaction, but at the same time there are likely to be moments of friendship, artistic professionalism, role distance, flirting, joking, bargaining, and insulting. There are definitions within definitions.

Goffman suggests that we are never “off stage.” He is interested in both impressions which are relatively deliberate and those which are rather spontaneous,

⁶ Goffman later used “frame” for a concept similar to “definition of the situation.” He never explained the difference between the two terms. This volume retains the original term. See George Gonos (1977) “‘Situation’ versus ‘Frame’: The ‘Interactionist’ and the ‘Structuralist’ Analysis of Everyday Life,” *American Sociological Review*, 42: 854-867.

perhaps accidental.⁷ Actors strive to appear as authentic and spontaneous but may not succeed in this act. Dramaturgical awareness may be a part of commonsense knowledge but not everyone is equally aware or equally skilled. Nor is everyone equally committed to an identity. In everyday life the same individual is performer, audience, and critic of other people's performances. We cast our own roles and the roles of others.

The audience in interactions at a tattoo studio is normally made up of clients, potential clients, and visitors. But actor and audience continually shift depending on who is speaking or listening. In aiming to control the definition of the situation, tattoo artists will mostly maintain the role of actors in the client-artist exchange as they effectively aim to steer the direction of the social encounter in a way that favors their skill and their authority. However, in the course of everyday life it is perfectly natural for the tattoo artist to take a back seat as an audience member to the acting portrayals of the client who is also invested in controlling the definition of the situation or in exercising impression management. Clients seem to want to be seen as friendly and likable and will often show efforts to prove themselves as unique or interesting to artists, especially while they sit in the chair under the needle for extended periods of time.

Front Stage and Back Stage

It is important to consider where interaction occurs because people assume there is a consistency between place, the identities displayed, and action. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959: 106), Goffman enlighteningly distinguishes between front

⁷ Goffman (1974: 133-144) realized that there are significant differences between the traditional theater and everyday interaction.

stage and back stage regions. Goffman's famous example is a restaurant. The front stage is the dining room, controlled primarily by the customers because the waiters are subservient in order to get tips. The back stage is the kitchen where the waiters socialize with each other. That situation does not require waiters to show the same level of impression management or dramaturgical circumspection. They can be more spontaneous and genuine, although for Goffman there is no such thing as genuine authenticity on the back stage. Joshua Meyrowitz in *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (1985: 46-49) points out that the key here is not the spatial location but the presence or absence of an audience the actors want to impress. The front stage is characterized by unequal levels of power; ideal role behavior; good manners – politeness and decorum by the underdog. The back stage is characterized by greater social equality, informality, and open displays of doubts and anxieties. The fieldnotes that I highlight in the following chapters involve instances of front stage and back stage performances. In general, when clients, potential clients, and visitors were present, the studio functioned as the front stage. When only the staff was present, the studio functioned more as a back stage. As an ethnographer, I was a member of a team of workers, who colluded to make The Studio appear a business and an artistic environment.

Meyrowitz showed that Goffman's "either/or" of front stage and back stage behavior actually required a middle region he called the "forefront of the back stage" where mildly discrediting and antisocial acts are allowed. This is particularly relevant to the analysis of tattooing in the context of tattoo studios. An example is seen in Chapter 4 when tattoo artists making mistakes work with the dynamic situation to show both private reactions (anxiety) and professional or public reactions (artistic reasoning, reserve, and

stoicism). Flexibility in performance is required. As an ethnographer, I tended to see the front stage and the forefront of the back stage. I personally witnessed the shifting of the persona of these artists from confident to nervous, from truthful to deceitful. All the while my job was to complete the performance by strengthening its portrayal to the client by supporting front stage roles and occupational expectations. Only occasionally did I get insight into the level Meyrowitz calls the “deep backstage,” the realm of the most discrediting secrets.

With respect to shifting situational demands and performances, the final element which needs to be introduced is “face.” According to Goffman who writes in his article “On Face-work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction”, face refers to the “positive social value a person effectively claims for himself” (Goffman 1955: 222). Indeed, most of our experiences and encounters imply that we are at times trying to “save face.” Thus, agents or social actors require a great deal of skill in being able to define the situation while, at the same time, reflexively monitoring our actions so they appear to be consistent. To best theorize about acting in everyday encounters at work, I assert that we must see tattoo artists in the everyday environment of The Studio and make note of how they do their jobs assuming they have a strong interest in saving face and casting roles and definitions of a situation for other actors in their encounters.

Limitations of Goffman

The use of Goffman’s model for the analysis of tattooing must be qualified. Symbolic interactionists in general, and Goffman in particular, are inherently interested in meaning and how it is portrayed, owned, and transformed. In our lives, we all try to

control meaning, own it, and convey it by using our bodies, language, and clothing. Symbolic interactionism allowed for an inward turn in social sciences which is *not* characteristic of Goffman. He wrote about typical situations rather than actual situations. His ethnography in Scotland and in a mental hospital in Washington, DC, led him back to the library rather than talking in more depth to hospital patients and staff. Writing individualized portraits of informants was not his concern. He conveyed practically no information about his roles as an ethnographer within these two settings. The legacy of the First Chicago School was its emphasis on the qualitative, reflexive, and meaning-centered approach to interaction. However, Goffman's mentor, anthropologist W. Lloyd Warner, impressed upon him the importance Durkheim attached to the social order in his account of rituals in technologically simple cultures. In essence, what Goffman did was to take Durkheim's ideas about ceremonies and rituals and apply them to the micro-rituals of everyday life. Whenever Goffman is a follower of Durkheim and emphasizes the influence of groups and places rather than agency, he is not a traditional symbolic interactionist:

There is a relation between person and role. But the *relationship answers to the interactive system* [italics added]—to the frame [or definition of the situation]—in which the role is performed and the self of the performer glimpsed. Self, then, is not an entity half-concealed behind events, but a changeable formula for managing oneself during them. (Goffman 1974: 574)

Are the motives of an individual the major feature shaping life as theater or is the self which is on display a reflection of the situation? Goffman seemed to be saying both depending on which passage one quotes. At first glance, Goffman's publications, especially the early books, seem to be easy to understand, light-weight, anecdotal, and

sometimes gossipy. *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* has been assigned in introductory sociology courses. However, Goffman said little about his intellectual lineage and even those few statements are scattered and hidden. Thus readers must figure this out on their own. The result is that there are surprisingly different ways of understanding Goffman (Burns 1992; Fine and Manning 2003; Jacobsen 2010; Riggins 1990; Smith 2006).

Erving Goffman was not the first sociologist to study face-to-face interaction. He may not even be the best specialist in this domain. Other scholars have certainly been more systematic (e.g., semioticians for narratives and story-telling, ethnomethodologists and critical discourse analysts for language, human ethologists for gestures, specialists in material cultural studies for the symbolic codes characterizing the design features of objects and clothes). Goffman, however, is the best-known source for dramaturgical analysis in contemporary sociology.⁸

Semiotics

Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) contended that the study of language was only a part of a more inclusive “science of the life of signs in society” which he called sémiologie (Saussure as quoted by Hodge & Kress 1988: 1). The term “semiotics” is now more generally used to designate the same approach to the science of signs and their meaning-making potential. According to Marcel Danesi (2007: 5), “its central aim is to investigate, decipher, document, and explain the *what*, *how*, and *why* of

⁸ See also Dennis Brissett and Charles Edgley (Eds.) (1990) *Life as Theater: A Dramaturgical Source Book*. Second edition. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

signs, no matter how simple or complex they are.” At some point the nuanced theoretical debates among semioticians can be a distraction for other social scientists. Their actual analyses of communicative acts, however, are enlightening and their basic models can be grasped without a deep understanding of theory. This introduction will concentrate on defining some basic semiotic terms which will be used in the discussion of tattoos. In some cases, I liberally blend theories which *may* have different metaphysical assumptions behind their conception but are nonetheless quite compatible in digging into practical matters of solving problems and ideas. Combining Saussure and Peirce, Hodge (2017: 12) says is fruitful if both are supplemented through the lens of socially motivated actors who interact with structures to produce signs.

Semioticians and sociologists share the same subject matter—the daily actions of humans—and since almost anything can be interpreted as a meaningful sign, the two share the same interest in digging for hidden meanings where they “erupt into social life” (Hodge 2017: 49). Semioticians, in studying and documenting the life of signs, theorize about all forms of communication, from animal communication to literature, art, film and artistic performances. Some semioticians have claimed that both linguistics and sociology should be understood as sub-disciplines of semiotics (See, for example Hodge 2017: xi; Manning 2003).

The study of modern-day semiotics is traced back to Ferdinand de Saussure and to the American philosopher and mathematician Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914). They were contemporaries but never met, let alone collaborated. For Saussure, it was his *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) compiled and published posthumously on the basis of his students’ notes that made him a central figure in semiotics. Some of his basic ideas

were tentative and their complexity may not have been fully grasped and recorded by the small number of students who took his courses (Bouissac 2010) but his basic concepts or models have inspired many researchers, notably in socio-linguistics. Among them is the British linguist Michael Halliday (b. 1925), known for introducing the term “social semiotics” and developing a robust methodology to analyze choice and meaning within texts and codes through what he called “systemic functional linguistics.”

Social Semiotics

According to Anderson et al. (2015: 2), Michael Halliday ascribed a sociological character to semiotics by claiming that “in a social semiotic approach semiosis [meaning-making] is not done by minds but by social practices in a community. Meaning does not arise in the individual; meaning is a superindividual and intersubjective activity.”

Halliday is credited with bringing agency back into the equation in linguistics and thus laying out an intellectual thread which this study of tattoos takes as a beginning point for combining social semiotics with sociological theory. Halliday has inspired a whole range of scholars who appreciate the element of choice people express as they speak and select (or omit) language within the realm of a system. This then grounds meaning-making in the everyday processes of our lives. It does so by describing how our world is filled with socially-influenced semiotic resources (rather than signs) which impact and are impacted by our sociality. For example, authors writing in the social semiotic tradition stress that it is essential to appreciate the importance of agency or choice in the selection of the semiotic resource, as Kress notes in the case of tattoos:

In a social account of sign-making...the semiotic work of the sign-makers, their agency, is at the center. In this approach, sign-makers choose a form (a signifier) which, in its material characteristics and as the result of shaping in often long histories of social and semiotic “work”, in different social places, bears the potential to express most aptly that which I wish to “to mean” at this moment here, now. (Rowse, Kress, and Street 2012:107)

Still, as Danesi (22) states “it is accurate to say that semioticians today use a blend of Saussurean and Peircean concepts and techniques at various stages of analysis and for diverse purposes. They also often use ideas and finds from related or cognate disciplines.” Following Saussure, signs can be understood as composed of a *signifier* (carriers of meaning) and a *signified* (the actual meaning). In his *Semiotics of Emoji* (2017: 31), Danesi illustrates the relation between Saussure’s terms by stating that “the same signifier (a physical form such as the thumbs-up emoji) will have different signifieds (conceptual meanings), as per speech community.” For communication to work as intended the sender(s) and receiver(s) must share *conventions about meaning*. Shared meaning and value in the form of codes must be assumed in order to make any sort of sense of what someone says.

Tattoos should be understood as meaningful statements in a general system of values and forms agreed upon by a community. Tattoos might be considered a language in Saussure’s sense of “parole,” that is a particular realization of a system. There is no grammar of tattoos but the meaning exists in the cultural memory at a given point of time, in a set of expectations, and in a visual code such as the many genres of styles. A set of expectations, a tattoo code does indeed exist and causes artists to create via a system or interpretive framework. This notion of a tattoo code is explored throughout this work, especially observable in Table 4.1 found in Chapter 4.

Following Peirce, a distinction is made between an *index* which is a sign that is said to draw attention to the connection between it and an object like a pointing finger or a road sign, an *icon* which is in some respects similar to the object it represents, and a *symbol* which is a cultural convention of an unrelated arbitrary referent that represents an object. All signs are *polysemic* but there are contextual constraints on their interpretations. Each tattoo carries multiple meanings and can function as an index, icon, or symbol depending on the perspective of enthusiast, viewer, and tattoo artist. This does not, however, impute complete relativism to the interpreter. Not every interpretation is equally valid. At some point an interpretation can tell us more about the viewer than the objective components of a symbol. Given how common tattoos are today, they are not just a passing fad riddled with superficiality and devoid of meaning (Joseph Brean, *National Post*, August 2013), a carnal practice for those seeking to act out primal urges (Lodder 2011), or a mark of deviance to be cast aside.⁹

In semiotics, the notion of a text has been expanded to include non-linguistic messages. According to Paul Bouissac, what makes a message a textual artifact is not the medium of expression but its formal properties, including both its components as well as the context in which it is decoded. He developed an abstract model of non-linguistic texts to describe circus acts, but it can be applied to visual media. He defined a text as “any permanent set of ordered elements (sentences, objects, or actions, or any combination of these) whose co-presence (or collocation) is considered by an encoder and/or by a

⁹ Twenty-one percent of American adults have at least one tattoo and spend approximately 1.65 billion dollars annually on the practice (DeMello 2016; Pew Research 2008).

decoder as being related in some capacity to one another through the medium of a logio-semantic system” (Bouissac 1976: 90). The semiotic terms for the components of a text should be categories; and a full description of a tattoo might then refer to poetic terminology such as symmetry and parallelism, metonymy, and metaphor. Following the Saussurean stream, Bouissac implied that all texts are coherent. Elements of a text tend to be predictable and thus easy to duplicate.

The Tattoo is the Message

If the human body can be considered a *medium of communication* (Back 2007: 75), a *message* (Martel in Davidson 2006: 33), and a *sign vehicle*, it can logically be argued that tattoos can be described and interpreted using a variety of terms in communication theory depending on a researcher’s point of view. Metaphorically, tattoos can be considered a medium of communication, a message, a genre, a text, and a language¹⁰. Important to consider then, especially for our purposes, social semiotics allows for an appreciation of the nuanced multimodality of meaning-making in our everyday experiences. Multimodality is defined in the detailed analysis of an enthusiast’s tattoo in Chapter 5 but readers should appreciate how this development in semiotics, notably explored through the work of Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen (2001; 2006), allows for a trained literacy of all different semiotic resources (text, spoken word, images,

¹⁰ Tattoos can be construed as messages. *Message* is defined by Hodge and Kress (p. 262) as the “smallest unit of meaning that can have an independent material existence.” A *text* is a combination of messages. The term *genre* refers to typical forms of texts. Genres are socially ascribed. The conventions of a genre are established and perpetuated by a social group (Hodge and Kress 1988: 7).

gestures, etc.) to interpret meaning-making and judge their relation to the larger socio-political environments which shape our actions and choices.

Inspired by the Canadian media theorist Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan's ideas about media carry the tradition of appreciating the power which can be exerted through durable and ephemeral media while also taking into account how "the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology" (McLuhan 1964: 23). Some semioticians questioned the soundness of this approach. Semiotician Umberto Eco (1986: 221-238), for instance, argued that McLuhan's famous phrase "the medium is the message" showed a confused understanding of the basic terminology in communication studies. But for McLuhan analyzing the content in a message while failing to appreciate the importance of the medium itself left out a key part of its meaningful components. A literal reading of "the medium is the message" allows us, indeed, to appreciate that the choice of medium is as much a part of the message as the message itself.

A *medium* is a channel of communication. Medium refers to the material basis of a sign. Few semioticians would consider tattoos to be a medium. Instead, tattoos are usually an example of *visual messages* or instances of *visual communication*. But messages about self-identity can be conveyed in a variety of ways. Tattoos are at once visceral, painful, and indelible – functioning as both a message by the medium of the body and as a medium in and of itself which carries messages of aesthetics, people, places, and a multitude of markers of personhood and culture. For some tattooists and members of the public their implied message is excess (which can be welcomed or feared) and passion.

The body is very fluid in interaction due to movement and gestures. To some extent a tattoo freezes a certain expression (this is not to deny the concept of polysemy). Tattoos function like clothing. A tattoo is likely to be perceived rather than the characteristics of the body on which it rests. A tattoo is likely to be the *foreground* and the body is the *ground*, although the reverse may also happen. In the early stages of his career, Zygmunt Bauman speculated about the functions of culture through semiotics. In doing so, Bauman (1968: 72) stated “just as a spear lengthens the short human arm, so the differentiation of attire and ornament, movements and etiquette, habitat and food complement in different ways the semiotic poverty of the human body.” It is debatable if Bauman was right about the semiotic poverty of the body, yet there is no denying that the body has semiotic richness in the ornament of tattoos now more than ever and on a global scale.

The Significance of Liquid Modernity

Zygmunt Bauman, one of the main social philosophers of post-modernity (or liquid modernity) died in 2017 at the age of 91. He left behind a legacy of some of the most telling theories related to contemporary society: globalization, immigration, cruelty, the human cost of modernity, ethics, and the growing precariousness of human bonds. Bauman was born in Poland in 1925 and was a Holocaust survivor fleeing to the Soviet Union with his family after Germany invaded Poland in 1939. A Marxist in his youth, he was exiled in the 1960s from Poland in the wake of an antisemitism campaign. Bauman spent the rest of his long career in the UK at the University of Leeds. He became a major contributor to debates about post-modernity (a term he disliked) always with ethical

commitments which can be traced back to Marx, Weber, and Simmel with their concerns about exploitation, rational individualism, and the calculation of human relationships. Bauman had a unique ability as a social theorist to blend personal experience, astute cultural observations, and effective writing. In the book *What Use is Sociology?*, Bauman (2014: 117) wrote “I believe that it is the vocation of sociology to draw the human world out of the invisibility of ‘doxa’ (common, unreflected-upon sense—knowledge we think *with*, but hardly ever *about*) to become the focus of attention, area of awareness and field of purposeful action—through defamiliarizing the familiar and problematizing the unproblematic.” He then went on to add “practicing our vocation requires a balanced blend of self-confidence and demureness. It also takes some courage: interpreting human experiences it is not the kind of life I would recommend to weathercocks” (131).

At first glance, Bauman’s ideas about the nature of contemporary Western societies can seem unconvincing and exaggerated. It is useful to see a parallel between Alexis de Tocqueville’s writings about the US in the 1830s and Bauman on Western societies at the turn of the 21st century. Neither Tocqueville nor Bauman was trying to capture the full complexity of these places and times. Tocqueville was looking for the new democratic and more egalitarian society in the northern American states which, he thought, would come to Europe. Bauman also concentrated on what was new. He theorized using an ideal type in which little or nothing remains from the past as we transition from solid to liquid modernity. This focus needs to be born in mind when reading Bauman on liquid modernity.

It was at the turn of the millennium that Bauman introduced his theories of liquid modernity, which are of primary interest for this work, and which describe the swift

nature of modern life in which ideas, technology, fashions, consumer products, and even intimate relationships leave our lives as quickly as they enter it. Liquidity highlights the treacherous and ephemeral ground we all walk on today in which singular career-paths have long since gone and we focus on short-term plans for short-term gains. As Bauman (2014: 90) boldly stated, “change is the only permanence, and uncertainty the only certainty.”

In his 2008 book *The Art of Life*, Bauman observed that all of us are the artists of our own lives in liquid modern times and that “these days each man and each woman is an artist not so much by choice as, so to speak, by the decree of universal fate.... We are happy as long as we haven't lost the hope of becoming happy (Bauman 2008: 56).” Bauman used the French “*précarité*”, which he claims is an ideal term. The origin of “*précarité*” or precarity in English is “obtaining by prayer.” Nothing is sure; nothing is solid in precarious lives. Uncertainty and ambivalence which come to be acted out in the form of unethical behavior and an indifference to the suffering of others or “*adiaphora*” (from the Greek, meaning “to make indifferent”). Bauman raised the thought-provoking question of whether we can expect that people working at precarious jobs today will have the altruistic politics associated with the proletariat in the 19th century. Bauman called the refugee crisis in Europe a “crisis of humanity.” Fear of refugees stems from a fear of strangers because of the already precarious existence we lead.¹¹ With impermanence comes tensions of uncertainty. Uncertainty in social, cultural, political, and economic

¹¹ Interview accessible via this link:
<http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/talktojazeera/2016/07/zygmunt-bauman-world-crisis-humanity-160722085342260.html>

position then lead to a feeling of inadequacy. This inadequacy has many far-reaching consequences from political leaders who capitalize on politics of fear, to economic interests who sell security and insurance to those made afraid through the manufacturing of a risk society (Beck 1992). Uncertainty also bleeds over into our personal lives and our self-identities.

Tattoo Removal and Cover-ups

As long as tattoo removal is rare, removal does not destroy the idea that permanence is one of the defining characteristics of tattoos in opposition to Bauman's liquid modernity. In Sophia Harris' (2014) provocatively (and deceptively) titled CBC News story, "Tattoo Removal Business Booming as Inked Teens Grow Up," statistics from the American-based market research company IBISWorld showed that the tattoo removal industry was worth \$75.5 million, an increase of 500 percent from a decade earlier. This is a shocking finding indeed, considering the ineffective, painful, and controversial nature of removal (Cegolon et al. 2011). But removal studios account for less than 5 percent of the profits in the American tattoo industry according to Pew Research (2008). Tattoo studios with tasteful walls and storefronts nestle on key city blocks in most major Western metropolitan centers. Tattoo removal clinics, which are usually paired with hair removal and other cosmetic procedures, can be hard to spot as they hide under a clinical guise.

To some extent tattoos and the practice of tattooing seem inconsistent with liquid modernity. This thesis, through social semiotic analysis combined with the nuances of meanings gathered from symbolic interactionist and Goffmanian models, tries to explain why more and more people are willing to become permanently tattooed today despite

embracing the impermanence of the contemporary world in other ways. After all, a tattoo is unlike a mobile phone, which was once so beautiful in your eyes, and then quickly turned into a source of shame as soon as a new one came on the market. In terms of liquid modernity when all of us are “artists of our own lives,” an inward reflexive gaze is expected, commercialized, and obsessively promoted. Actively looking for permanence is one of the reasons for getting tattooed. Some aspects of identity may be fluid, but tattoo enthusiasts continue to show commitment, devotion, and human qualities that run counter to Bauman’s astute observations.

A potential exception in the battle of tattoos versus liquid modernity rests in the popularity of cover-up tattoos. This is the practice whereby a tattoo artist usually different from the original is tasked with covering an old tattoo and transforming it into a new semiotic mark rich with new meanings. Cover-up tattoos are much cheaper and easier to receive than tattoo removal. Cover-ups are typically most successful when the previous tattoo is relatively small in size and is not boldly shaded with dark colors. Popularized by television shows such as the rather tasteless (in its representation and spectacle) “Tattoo Nightmares,” cover-up tattoos have become part of the industry and for some a good source of income. Tattoo artist Jean Guy, discussed later in this work, mentions that he was considered the de-facto cover-up guy at the shop where he previously worked. McLuhan and Galbraith (in Davidson 2016: 81) discuss how cover-up tattoos provide a sizable portion of business and prominently feature a chance for commemoration tattoos to trump other commemorations; such as the case of celebrating independence from a former lover with a new tattoo design to obfuscate the old one.

Cover-up tattoo statistics are not readily available. In my experience working in a

tattoo studio, cover-ups may have accounted for approximately 1 in 10 tattoos received. This approximate value corresponds with statistics provided by IPSOS in 2012 which show 10% as having reported regretting a tattoo. The propensity for people to change their minds and change their lives is not to be taken-for-granted. Yet, the polysemy of tattoos does appear to show that while meanings of tattoos change through time and space, people change with them and are not changing the tattoo itself as often as some people might think.

Chapter 2

Methodology

This work involves the use of in-depth qualitative interviews with an interview sample of 29 participants; 20 tattoo enthusiasts and 9 tattoo artists. I also spent over a year conducting ethnographic field research by volunteering full time in a dual functioning tattoo shop and art gallery which involved the process of going through a formal apprenticeship whereby I learned the tools, trade, and practice of tattooing— a process I completed by tattooing myself. Beyond my 29 semi-structured interviews, I spoke with over 100 other clients and nearly a dozen other artists who spent time at The Studio, at conventions, or in daily life and recorded many of these interactions as part of my fieldnotes. All names of people, places, and events have been anonymized through pseudonyms in keeping with my promise made to research participants during the process of informed consent.

Table 2.1 Selected background characteristics of the research population associated with The Studio

Background	Artists	Enthusiasts
Gender (self-identified)		
• Male	6	13
• Female	3	7
Age		
• 18-25	2	5
• 26-40	7	9
• 41-60	N/A	5
• 60 and above	N/A	1
Education level		
• High school	4	2
• Some post-secondary	3	11
• Degree or diploma	2	7

Ethnography: How I Got Started

Ethnography is described by Duneier et al. in their “best hits” collection, *The Urban Ethnography Reader* (2016: 2-3) as “a method of social science research that investigates people’s lives, actions, and beliefs within their everyday context.” The editors then further discuss how ethnography involves entering the world of your research subject to appreciate the nuances of their everyday lives and the forces that shape their decisions and actions. Table 2.2 lists some of the key considerations and tools relevant to ethnographer.

Table 2.2 Ethnography as a Product of the Chicago School of Sociology

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Origins come from early 20th century anthropology. Researchers would attempt to study populations on far off shores to gather data about different ways of life from the perspective of those who live it.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• It is a form of participant-observation research. Researchers need to build rapport, blend in and be comfortable. These qualities usually require at least partial participation in the activities of the research population.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Relies heavily on fieldnotes of the ethnographer as sources of data. Fieldnotes need to be empirically considered which means they need to be systematic, consistent, and thorough. Smells, tastes, and every aspect of the senses should be documented.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Both subjective and objective analysis are needed. Reflection on part of the researcher can supplement or change interpretations based solely on objective observation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Utilizes communities, subcultures, areas, and enclaves within the urban metropolis as study subjects.

Entering the tattoo world to conduct ethnographic field research was certainly a challenge I knew I would need to overcome to provide good research and some answers to questions I had about what it means to tattoo the skin for a living. Upon moving to a major Canadian city for new opportunities with my fiancé, I scoured the city for its tattoo

shops and was left with feelings of doubt about my chances of accessing the tattoo world. I would walk into shops impersonating a potentially interested client to get a feeling for the atmosphere and personalities and would often leave with only a card in hand. Each time I had the impression that I would have nothing to offer tattoo artists who seemed to have little time to waste considering how they work on strict schedules and always face the threat of precarious employment. Still, walking in my new neighborhood, with its post-industrial neo-bohemian style (Lloyd 2002), I stumbled across a shop I had not noticed on my internet searches. It is this shop I call “The Studio.”

I had a hunch my best chance would be to try The Studio because after some research I realized it had been open for only a few months and the owners seemed young and eager for experience. I also relished the chance to infiltrate a tattoo studio that was doubling as an art gallery and thus apparently on the cutting edge of the practice. I felt this studio would allow me the opportunity to address a prominent topic in the literature and thus continue theorizing about the artification of the practice of tattooing (Kosut 2013).

I had previously been tattooed six or seven times in St. John’s, Newfoundland and once in Los Angeles and so through anticipatory socialization and adjustments for deference and demeanor based on these past experiences, I made my way to The Studio one summer day in July of 2014 with copies of my Master’s Thesis, the printed journal article from my thesis, and my copy of Michael Atkinson’s 2003 book on tattooing. I marched right into The Studio and showed co-owner and tattoo artist Alex who I was, and what I intended to do in terms of writing a book about what tattooing is today and how it is a different practice than it was even ten years ago. I had not regarded the shop’s official

hours and I actually came marching in on a day The Studio was open only to appointments. Nonetheless, Alex and his partner and co-owner, Zofia saw the potential of the research right away. I now know they both had a strong desire to open The Studio to be part of the trend of providing both custom and artistic tattoos in a clean and professional environment. Something I said about wanting to show how tattooing had evolved struck a chord with them as an opportunity to promote their business and support another facet of the fine arts.

Working in The Studio primarily as receptionist and studio assistant for a year meant a lot of things to me. I experienced the excitement of pouring ink, helping prepare work stations, and consulting with co-owner/tattoo artist Alex over the design of the tattoos he was drafting. There was a rush of excitement when, for example, I suggested Alex add a line here or compose the image differently there. Later, I could see the artwork which I had influenced being permanently etched in someone's skin. Beyond this, I was the person on the phone or behind the desk who welcomed clients. Although dull days started to occur as I became desensitized to the excitement of body modifications happening under my eyes, I always chose to write extensive notes and appreciated how almost everything can seem relevant to a researcher. Therefore, I decided never to hide my role as a researcher.

My note-taking intrigued most clients and tattoo artists at The Studio. And although there were times when I was politely asked to buzz off while important line work was being executed for complicated pieces, generally the artists liked the fact that I considered their life and work important enough to document and that I was able to distract their clients from staring at them while they tattooed, from flinching too much

with pain, and importantly, from over-indulging in conversation with them and thus lowering the toll of emotional labor (Hochschild 1983) involved in such an intimate client-artist exchange.

An important role of mine, I learned quickly, was that I had to balance a tightrope between acting suitably academic and as a typical tattoo shop receptionist. This transformed the way I spoke, dressed, and how I represented myself to clients and customers. For example, when asked for details about my research by clients I could tell within twenty seconds and by their eyes if they wanted to hear the short and superficial answer or the theoretical and academic answer. Of course, the artists (specifically Alex) heard both versions. After six months they could often recite my answers.

Biases and Limitations

Over time, it became apparent that I had fallen in love with tattooing. Consequently, I spent over 30 hours sitting in the tattoo chair at The Studio going under the needle. I even tattooed myself (a green four-leaf clover above my right knee) after nearly a year of learning technique and paying proper attention to the same methods of respect and honor to the craft expected of an apprentice under traditional circumstances. As a result of this deep training and immersion into my research population, I began to hold the highest admiration for the craft, history, art, and designs. And so my goal shifted from conducting meaningful social semiotic research alone to one that would also convince me and others that my research could properly represent previously untold stories of the tattoo world. This profound admiration for the craft of tattooing necessarily begs for a disclaimer. And so, like Atkinson (2003: 89), I acknowledge that my interpretation of all that occurred

during my research and which is represented in my fieldnotes and interview transcriptions is only one reading of the data and is subject to personal bias. I explore these biases in the following paragraphs. But readers should realize that because of my awareness of biases, I encouraged my research participants to provide me with their opinions and feedback as much as possible. I was significantly encouraged in my research by my participants and thus learned to be confident in my analysis of the research.

Though I did not record the ethnic backgrounds of my research populations beyond what came out in our conversations, the majority of clients and artists spoken to during this research were identifiably white with the exception of the sizable minority of East-Asian clients who were attracted to The Studio because of one of its Asian artists and his propensity for this style of tattooing. Thus it is important to consider the limits of ethnography as a methodological tool and for researchers to consider the limitations of their own place in the research more broadly. This is true in terms of the generalizability of ethnographic methods and by the way researchers tend to “take sides” (Becker 1967) in the research and exude biases.

On the point of generalizability, Daynes and Williams (2018: 10) claim that “it is commonly argued that what (ethnography) loses in reproducibility and generalizing ability, it gains in depth and verifiability, for the ethnographer gets to know the individuals he works with and accompanies them in repeated occurrences in their daily life.” This thesis can in no way capture the range of reasons for tattooing the body in contemporary Canadian culture and the nuances of working as an artist tattooing the skin for a living in truly reproducible ways. Yet, I do propose to have earned an intimate knowledge of the practice of tattooing and the daily life of tattoo studios through

prolonged empirical research.

Furthermore, I would like to fully and honestly acknowledge the limits of this research in regards to ethnicity, class, and even gender in its most nuanced perspective. With the exception of artists I spoke with of Asian and South American descent and an enthusiast who identified as of Lebanese descent, most other research participants (both artists and enthusiasts) were identifiably white and likely of European descent. I suggest these shortcomings do not hinder the overall project, instead they provide opportunity for further research and questions. In acknowledging the limited scope of this work it is also necessary to recognize my place in my own research. In the introduction to this thesis I offered a brief history of tattooing which demonstrates that the practice is much more diverse than the trajectory found in the West. Although this trajectory is the one this thesis takes off from, readers should be aware of this focus and the alternative histories that exist.

In discussing ethnography, Fassin (2011: 31) writes that “anyone can understand how a researcher may feel more or less sympathy for the people among whom he conducts his research, and that, especially when taking a qualitative approach, which is more susceptible to moral judgement or emotional investment, strict neutrality is an illusion.” I am a white male who was born and raised in a small town in Newfoundland and Labrador. I am a first-generation university student and my parents are working-class by most definitions (my father was a paramedic and my mother a nursing assistant). The extent of my privilege and place in the world, personally and professionally, are still being revealed to me. Thus in acknowledging that I am not neutral in analyzing my research, it is important for readers to note that I acknowledge the masculinist, cisgender

perspective I may adopt in this thesis. Most likely this will be more latent than manifest because I have made every honest effort to limit its impact. In other words I have made my best attempt to reflectively consider this work from a variety of perspectives, but I do wish to say that I believe claiming strict neutrality would be an “illusion.”

A Note on Gender

Chapter 6 discusses the shifting cultural understandings regarding the fluidity and socially constructed aspects of gender by comparing these changes to the increased popularity and accessibility of tattooing. It does so by contemplating how increased social acceptance and artistic appeal provide a gateway for more people to get inked. Yet, I would like to acknowledge the limitations this work has with respect to fully considering themes related to gender and sexuality more broadly. Tattooing as a practice has historically been highly masculine and often misogynistic. For instance, magazine covers, Instagram accounts, and media depictions continue to show overly sexualized images of women with tattoos. Publications such as *Things and Ink*—stationed in the UK with a mission of furthering tattooing as an artistic practice—are an outlier in seriously considering women and non-binary figures in tattooing.

Sociologist Beverly Yuen Thompson is a leading researcher on tattoos and tattooing from a gendered perspective and delves into the hegemonic masculinity that has been, and continues to be, pervasive in the tattoo world. Discussing embodiment theories of Judith Butler, Thompson (2015: 36) generalizes that masculinity and femininity are embodied social constructions which are primarily artificial but are nonetheless central to the performance of socially accepted notions that go along with biological sex. In essence,

there is no separation of sex and gender at the minute we come into existence. Norms and traditional ideas of gender immediately become part of who we are expected to be.

Because tattoos are traditionally masculine, Thompson (36) notes that as “women become heavily tattooed, their femininity can become weakened, and we see this when they face public social sanctions along these lines.” Because the women interviewed as part of my research do not typically fall in the category of heavily tattooed or “covered,” as Thompson lovingly dubs it, there are limitations in this current study of considering just how much a role gender identities play in tattoos and tattooing. Thus I encourage readers to supplement the research conducted here with Thompson’s important work.

In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification (2003) by Victoria Pitts highlights the specific types of body modifications, such as scarification, flesh-hanging, and becoming heavily tattooed, which provide rich discourses about the limits of expression and bodily control which disrupt socially constructed gender norms. Pitts (2003: 43) writes that when “seen most radically, the abject or grotesque bodily performance may be gender disruptive, refusing the body’s sex-gender script. The tattoo artist Rhyanne served as an interviewee in this research and is featured in the following pages. She is heavily tattooed. She also identifies partly as a feminist and has had a portion of her arm “blacked-out” or tattooed entirely in black ink as a way of transforming her arm into part of the abject body through its transgression of the normalized body. Yet, in this research this is one of the few recorded cases of such transgression of more dominant cultural codes of gender and so it opens an opportunity for future research.

Analyzing notes and Confessional Tales

According to Byczkowska-Owczarek and Jakubowska (2018: 156), key characteristics of autoethnography include 1. The researcher's subjectivity as a source of data which sometimes serves as a primary source. This is sometimes termed evocative autoethnography. 2. The researcher's position as a tool to understand others after it has been critically considered. This is sometimes termed analytic autoethnography. Researchers may blend these categories.

My method for analyzing my notes and experiences during my ethnographic field research is derived from John Van Maanen's (2011) typology of the different forms ethnography can take as the author retells the tales of his/her research to readers. Van Maanen discusses realist, confessional, and impressionist tales as ways researchers try to represent positivist, idealist, or more idiosyncratic approaches to writing and analyzing fieldnotes. My approach has been mostly consistent with confessional tales, which is not unlike autoethnography. In fact, Van Maanen's confessional tales parallel the characteristics of autoethnography highlighted above but importantly the confessional tale describes the point of data analysis rather than data gathering.

Thus, readers will notice in analyzing my data and in writing this work I chose to write in a confessional tone even though I originally intended to provide realist accounts. The distinction lies between a desire to represent everything I was seeing as an outsider looking in—as with realist tales—to what became my reality through actually recounting my time at the studio as it fell in line with an attitude of “tackling back and forth between an insider's passionate perspective and an outsider's dispassionate one.” Van Maanen

also notes that “perhaps no other confessional convention is as difficult for the writer as maintaining in print this paradoxical, if not schizophrenic, attitude toward the group observed” (77).

To be specific, the confessional tale’s account of reciting, reflecting-upon, and analyzing one’s ethnographic fieldnotes is, as Van Maanen notes (91), an effort in lifting “the veil of public secrecy surrounding fieldwork.” This is done with the goal of providing the most detail possible into The Studio, while also offering self and social reflections. According to Van Maanen (91), a confessional tale most profitably lifts this veil by providing a “blurred account, combining a partial description of the culture alongside an equally partial description of the fieldwork experience itself.”

An example of this conflict between realist and confessional reflections and analysis of research can be noted in the following excerpt from my fieldnotes. This event was the initiation ritual to my new research surroundings. It involved getting tattooed for the first time with a design that I had not carefully chosen.

14th July 2014

I will leave soon before any customers come by on day one because I am focused on maintaining a good relationship. I estimate that it is best not to come on too strong or immediately get in the way. Before I go, and to show that I am serious about tattoos, I tell Alex that I want to be a customer as early as possible, partly because it has been over a year since I have been tattooed, and partly because I believe it is a fitting way to begin this portion of my research. Alex tells me about the promotion he is doing for a micro-

brewery called Craft Beer House (CBH). During the recent festival “Neighborhood Happening” Alex and one of the co-owners of CBH thought up the idea that The Studio would provide free tattoos of a stylized CBH logo drawn to be tattooable by Alex on clients and fans of CBH. The Studio would be paid a set rate of 50 dollars for each tattoo by CBH as advertising. The client would also receive a free 64 ounce growler of beer for their support. I had read about this promotion before approaching The Studio as part of my background research about the shop.

My immediate thought was that such brand name tattoos are probably not going to be too popular given the demand for custom tattoos in the industry and which is the main purpose of my research.

Alex suggested I get the CBH logo and showed me the one he had tattooed on his calf (tattooed by his friend as he could not do it himself properly) and even though I have never tried the beer or really like beer, let alone craft beer, I agreed and we booked it in for two days from today, on the 19th. I figure it will mean a great deal to me as an important aspect of mapping out the beginning of my research and reminding me of my new life in a new city.

On day one when I went home I realized it would be undeniable that my ethnography would take an honest tone and will connect more with my life. During data analysis, I realized how much I had used my tattoo experiences not only to provide connections with artists and enthusiasts for purposes of seeking out participants but to connect me on an emotional and personal level with people who share my respect for tattooing and wish to help me in understanding it better.

In this spirit, it is useful to note how Van Maanen (2011: 3) writes that “fieldwork asks the researcher, as far as possible, to share firsthand environment, problems, background, language, rituals, and social relations of a more-or-less bounded and specified group of people.” He later notes (9) that fieldworkers often need to function as exiles in an “alien community” in order to best immerse themselves fully in an environment which *will* test the emotions and comfort level of the researcher. Insight about how emotions and comfort level can be tested while conducting fieldwork also becomes relevant to my experiences. Let us look at my day on November 8th for an example of testing emotions and of my high personal stake in my research population. Changes did happen at The Studio during my year there. Kraken eventually abandoned his job there a short time after one of his apprentices was fired for drinking on the job.

I arrive after noon so Alex and I can go for lunch around the corner from The Studio at Armstrong’s Bake and Shake. As I am walking toward The Studio I see Carlos (Kraken’s apprentice) walking next door and entering the Craft Beer House (CBH). He has been hanging out here a lot lately and flirting with the girls who work the counter. We all usually go there after work but Alex is extremely strict about never having even a sample of beer while on the clock. (They only serve samples next door.)

While sitting down to eat our sandwiches (best homemade sandwiches in town), I initially struggle if I should tell Alex about Carlos going into CBH but then I realize that my loyalty has to be 100 percent with Alex as he is my research sponsor and my friend and not to tell him could cause friction between us. I weigh this against the friction that could arise between Carlos and me for “ratting” him out. Alex is very angry with the

news as Carlos has a tattoo scheduled for later today with a young girl. On the way back to the shop Alex confirms with the girls at CBH that Carlos had a drink and asks me if I want to accompany him to talk with Carlos and tell him he will not be tattooing. Cowardly, I say no. When we get back, Alex asks Carlos to come outside and I see them talking from the window. Carlos looks scared and regretful and all I can think is how hard it must be to run a business and that I probably wouldn't be able to cut it myself. Carlos mopes around the rest of the day. There is a sense of awkwardness among all of us. This instance, combined with others, will eventually lead to Carlos' dismissal from The Studio.

My actions in this instance combined with many other situations I have experienced and documented highlight how my friendship with Alex led to situations in which my being an ethnographer had real consequences for my subjects. For this reason, there is an importance in appreciating how methods like confessional tales can aid in explaining how I was transformed into more than an outsider looking in. Realist ethnography quickly became insufficient by itself for my data recording and analysis. Through exploring the results of my observations, as Van Maanen (2011: 75) writes, I aim to offer “an intimacy ... with readers, a personal character to develop, trials to portray, and, as with realist tales, a world to be represented within which the intrepid fieldworker will roam.” Most of all, my fieldnotes expose “emotional reactions, new ways of seeing things, new things to see, and various mundane but unexpected occurrences that spark insight.” (76)

Role Engulfment

In her book *Negotiating Identity* (2015: 104), Scott discusses the idea of *role*

engulfment as a form of role immersion and defines it as: “occur(ing) when a performance takes over an actor and change’s one’s sense of self. Acceptance of the role is so complete that it becomes a new identity, preventing the capacity for role distance.” Putting one’s full self into research can be crucial for providing honest and self-reflexive perspectives on a research population. However, once one becomes inextricably intertwined with a new role and its social nuances it can be exceedingly hard to separate from the role before a new self-identity forms. Citing an example from Adler and Adler (1990) Scott (104) helps define an example of role engulfment through the basketball player on school campus who begins to become noticed for her athleticism and before long begins to imagine herself as having celebrity status so much that she begins to fully dream out her professional career as a national athlete.

Over time I began taking home instructional aids and books which provided line-by-line lessons of how to draw some of the most common and in-demand tattoos. These books were loaned to me and they were relics from likely the 1990s. I spent several evenings drawing koi fish, anchors, and practicing script. Mano (41-year-old man working as a tattoo artist for over 20 years), perhaps strictly because of our friendship, agreed he would consider me as an apprentice if I showed promise. Coming this close to even attempting to take on tattooing as a profession through an extended apprenticeship was a symptom of the fact that I became so involved with my role in my research that everything about my “new life” in the city to which I moved before this research connected with my research self. My only friends are tattoo artists or were met through them, my styles of clothing and the way I present myself have changed to reflect my new self-identity and like Alice Goffman (2014: 245), I began to see myself as having more in

common with my research population than that of my fellow students; and more and more out of place at university and professional conferences. When I eventually began teaching nearly two years after finishing my research, for example, I mostly wore baseball t-shirts, hoodies, and sneakers and owned no button-down shirts.

Tattoo artist Mano stood as a groomsman at my wedding and I stood in the wedding of Alex. Importantly, I also stood by the side of my dear friend Alex as he fought through stage four colon cancer. I was with him only a few days before he passed away in January of 2018 (I miss him very much). And so, although I officially closed the book on my research after a full year of immersive ethnography, it would be a bold lie to pretend these experiences may not get in the way of traditional scientific ideals of objective social research and reporting.

Yet, in keeping with the critical stance this work takes to positivistic reasoning, I contend that my intimate place within the research, once I became aware and critical of how much I was experiencing role engulfment, aided more than hindered the process of data collection and analysis. Becker, Faulkner and Kirschenblatt-Gimblett (2006: 15) explain that if you are already involved in the thing you want to study “[y]ou know what forms of collective activity are there to be studied, what the typical problems of participants in the activity are, what to ask people about, what kinds of events to be on the lookout for. You’ve already done a pilot study.”

Tattoo artists can be like the magician who does not want to spill his or her secrets. This reluctance is because tattooing the skin is not just an art form but also a craft¹². In

¹² The distinction between craft and art is fully defined Chapter 4.

fact, this is one of the first realizations a prospective tattoo artist makes while beginning his or her foray into the practice and is how acclaimed artist and maverick of tattooing, Don Ed Hardy, describes the distinction in his book *Wear Your Dreams* (2014). To this day tattooing is still primarily taught through a master and apprentice relationship and its nuances are guarded from those who look at the practice as a way to make a quick buck by tattooing in their basements or garages and from visual artists who believe that because they can paint or draw they can tattoo. These amateur tattooists—unflatteringly termed “scratchers” by those in the tattoo world—have historically been ridiculed by professional tattoo artists. At the end of the day and after separating myself from my position of role engulfment I realized that my identity in the studio amongst artists and in my own analysis of my research data had to be reaffirmed as the writer and researcher and not as someone looking to learn to tattoo.

Middle-Class Sensibilities

Margo DeMello made an important class distinction in her publication *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community* (2000: 7) by writing:

I am interested in tracing a broad set of ideas held by one class group about another, and in particular, how middle-class ideas about working-class and about itself help to define contemporary tattooing for *all* participants (emphasis in original). Because class is not an essentializing category, class position does not inevitably determine the type of tattoo one wears nor the value system one associations with tattoo. Rather, class is, per Bourdieu

(1984), an indicator of the processes by which cultural taste is ranked and distributed.

By focusing more on the everyday lives and lived meaning of tattoos, this thesis is largely devoid of critical class analysis. There is a danger in this omission and DeMello fully articulates the ways in which class has indeed played a major role in the formation of the modern tattoo community in the West. Thus in incorporating DeMello's insights into the perspectives of this work, readers must take note that my work does not claim to make assertions or statements which are true for everyone in the tattoo community. Rather, by considering class as an over-arching structure this thesis carefully frames its analysis alongside the insights of DeMello while also focusing on micro-social aspects of interaction and meaning-making which are, no doubt, influenced by class but are also influenced by a myriad of other factors which come across through the close social semiotic analysis of tattoos.

Interviews with the Contemporary Style Tattooee

In Chapters 5-7 this work focuses on learning about tattoo enthusiasts and the cultural practices of marking one's skin with ink from the tattoos themselves and from interviewees' narratives about their meanings. My research participants (N=20), engaged through semi-structured interviews were carefully interviewed following considerations for research ethics such as informed consent. Interviews typically lasted an hour, while some lasted two hours or more. I sought out participants primarily through my work at The Studio before using snowball sampling strategies. I did so to further my interest in

interviewing a group of tattooed individuals who I have previously termed the “contemporary-style tattooee” (Martin 2012; 2013).

In other words, now is a time when choice, professionalism, and artistic quality govern the practice of tattooing and have shaped tattoo parlors into tattoo studios. They have replaced flash art and “old school” images associated with American traditional designs and more crude line and shading techniques with custom work and more refined work that is planned and discussed through free consultations before enthusiasts go “under the needle.”

The contemporary-style tattooee is an individual who takes advantage of such institutional shifts and receives work that is custom made, typically sophisticated in color, shading, or design, and highly professional. This also means these tattoos are more expensive (custom shops average a \$150 an hour fee with \$100 being the minimum even for a small design that takes less than an hour) and thus cater to those of higher socio-economic status. Keeping the limitations of class and access-bias in mind, I propose that the contemporary-style tattooee allowed me to sample a population which is articulate and culturally informed about tattoos and about their symbols and not necessarily a sample population that is ideally generalizable to the larger tattooed population.

These individuals also demonstrate a lineage in their designs in that cosmopolitan-inspired new school tattooing practices build on the old school practices of the era of Americana flash art while also adding new aesthetic principles and designs from the contemporary tattoo artist who is more likely now than ever to be educated and have some form of training or apprenticeship (Kosut 2013: 12-13).

A Social Semiotic and Material Culture Method

Whatever form communication takes, whether it be language, images, text, etc., meanings arise because of many social, political, and economic forces. They are not fixed but rather have semiotic potential in that they can and will be acted upon by those with agency and knowledge of the cultural code. Social semiotic and symbolic interactionist approaches are thus interested in studying and creating an inventory of these meaning-transmitting forms to help understand the ways in which we can interpret how social actors use and are used by semiotic resources. It could be said that both approaches meet on what has been called the meso domain analytical dimension of meaning-making. As Hall (1991: 130) states

Meso domain analysis is guided by the following assumptions: structure as process: structure as condition: structure as dialectical; detotalization and dereification; contingent/minded/emergence; essential temporality; comparative longitudinal observation and triangulation. A major analytic goal is to dissolve structure as a determining object apart from humans into constituting and consequential processes. However, the forms, arrangements, and distributions of “structures” provide the conditions and contexts which shape but do not determine the interactions. Meso domain analysis views structuring conditions and processes as not simply constraining but simultaneously facilitating. That dialectical relationship, however, varies across and within contexts and situations.

The aim of Chapters 5-7 is to create a dialogue about tattoo enthusiasts and the cultural practices of marking one’s skin with ink from careful social semiotic analysis of the tattoos themselves, the structures and conventions which influence these practices, and the language interviewees’ provide through their narratives about their meanings.

As I have done in past publications (Martin 2013), I adopt terms Riggins (1990, 1994, 2013) provided for analyzing the domestic artifacts which populate living rooms.

Like objects in the home, tattoos come to be filled with meanings supplied by the enthusiast and meanings from a broader cultural context. The adopted terms, *referencing* and *mapping*, fruitfully allow me to dig into tattoo enthusiasts' interpretations, focusing on one design at a time, and offering both a cultural/artistic history in *referencing* the tattoo and allowing enthusiasts to demonstrate how they draw a lineage in their own personal and familial histories when *mapping* their ink.

In adopting methods from the socio-semiotics of "things," I am also paying attention to Danesi's three-step formula for effective semiotic analysis (2007: 141) by asking of the semiotic resources: 1. What do they mean? 2. How do they encode meanings? 3. Why do they mean what they mean? The first two questions are explored through referencing the inked skin and the last question comes primarily through mapping. Paying close attention to sociologists who have argued for a combination of social semiotics and sociological inquiry (Denzin 1987; MacCannell 1986; Vannini 2007), this thesis thus bridges the gap between semiotic and sociological interpretations, theories, and methodologies by crossing epistemological and disciplinary boundaries.

Chapter 3

The Art and Artist Behind Your Tattoo

In 2014, I managed to secure a position as an unpaid receptionist at a tattoo shop. This chapter will tell you about my experiences working for a year at The Studio, which is located in a large Canadian city. In addition to being employed at The Studio, I was tattooed there (for over 30 hours) and observed the activities of the shop's artists. In the following pages, I will weave fieldnote narratives into a depiction of the way two tattoo artists, Alex and Kraken, try to maintain their status in the interaction order and provide a nuanced understanding of the strategic interaction and impression management used in the day-to-day practice of tattooing. These tattoo artists convinced, deceived, and impressed people by committing aspects of strategic interaction pioneered in the theory of Erving Goffman (1959, 1968), reinterpreted by others exploring his work (Scarborough 2012; Manning 2000), and used here to aid in interpreting my own experiences.

The occupational and situational demands these two artists face, specifically around performance and precariousness in tattooing, are common for tattoo artists. Although some experiences might not be the same for all artists, it is important to appreciate the rich complexity micro theories of social interaction can have in interpreting the work of tattoo artists generally.

The Dynamics of Interaction

With every stroke of the needle the tattoo artist permanently changes the appearance

of a client's body, and often, his or her sense of self. I am sitting in a client's chair getting tattooed at The Studio with the overwhelming buzz of the coil machine ringing in my ears; my heartbeat rising with anticipation; the intoxicating mixture of ink, blood, Dettol, and ointment in the air; and my breathing labored by pain. In this situation, I have often had an image of an older version of myself going about adult responsibilities and looking down on my inked skin and wondering what I had done years ago, who I was, and most remarkably, what my research has meant to me. Meanwhile, the tattoo artist who is marking my skin may be filled with insecurity, uncertainty, frustration, excitement, pride, or a multitude of other possible emotions but performing a version of self which exudes only confidence and assuredness. After all, each stroke of that needle is irreversible.

There are few authors more influential in the subdisciplines within sociology and semiotics (Danesi 2017; Hodge 2017) dealing with the constitution of micro social interactions than Erving Goffman. Indeed, as social semiotician Bob Hodge (2017: 16) notes: "while he is usually classified as a sociologist, he (Goffman) made significant contributions to social semiotics... (as) participants try to create meanings about themselves to create 'impressions' and see through the impressions of others."

In the opening pages of his *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. (1959: 4), Goffman claims that in all interactions there are two kinds of communication: those given and those given off. Goffman claims to be most interested in the latter because we find the rich bits for sociological analysis in the 'given off.' We find the ways in which actors attempt to control and define situations by actively engaging and manipulating the co-participants in their worlds. In this Chapter we look at the many semiotic resources ("sign vehicles" as Goffman called them) that tattoo artists use and give off in an effort to

control the definition of the situation. In describing and defining types and characteristics of orderly social interaction or social rituals we understand the work of tattoo artists and even my role as part of the team of artists during my research. It also allows us to introduce the world of tattoos and tattooing by first glimpsing the view of the performances from the forefront of the back stage.

In The Studio

Alex is my main research sponsor. He is a co-owner of The Studio, a tattoo artist, and he was the person at The Studio who most encouraged my research. He quickly became a close friend and a trusted ally. One of the things I immediately found most interesting in my observations of Alex—and in observations of others— was how often being a tattoo artist involves anxiety and moments of self-doubt. Indeed, during my time at The Studio, I began to see more clearly how theory can make situations in everyday life more comprehensible, even though everyday life can vary so much for different people.

Alex is a junior tattoo artist. This is an informal role. It means he is a recent graduate of his apprenticeship and has been practicing tattooing professionally for less than five years. This reality influences what he will tattoo on people, his rate of pay, and the kind of clients he can attract since they are understandably sensitive to his level of experience. If you want an intricate piece, for example, you will likely go to a more experienced artist. If you want a more conventional or traditional piece, or one which is less time and space intensive, then a junior artist is usually more than suitable. It is frightening for these artists to execute such widely varying designs of different styles

while juggling the difficulties that go along with the actual craft of tattooing such as the uncertainty of the canvas—in terms of skin type, pain tolerance, and general attitude—as well as other factors such as tattoo machine performance, and rules about pressing harder or deeper depending on the general area of the body. Lines can easily be blown out or skin can be chewed up if the machine is applied with the same pressure in areas more likely covered by thin skin such as joints and crevices.

Several times Alex would pace the studio wondering how he was going to pull off certain pieces, if clients would show up, what to do if clients decided to make last-minute changes to the design, etc. My fieldnotes for 27 August 2014 give an example of some anticipatory actions Alex contemplated in terms of face work and controlling the situation:

27 August 2014

Alex and I are waiting for a client to arrive for his tattoo appointment. Alex has set up everything, including the needles and tubes, on his work station. The client is over a half hour late and there is a biting nervous anxiety in the air. It has been tough with the shop running on only Alex's business while he waits for the master artist he hired to start in September. He begins to curse his obsession about being so prepared for everything. The needles and tubes for the tattoo machine are disposable on opening and if not used this is approximately 20 dollars of wasted materials. We go on outside the shop to the table and chairs out front to wait for the client. Alex looks around anxiously until finally we see the client walking around the corner. The client gives an excuse about traffic and comes in for his tattoo.

While getting tattooed, the client (in his 40's – a school teacher) points to a folder he has brought along full of other ideas for tattoos he intends to get in the next year. Alex seems to ease up on him for being late when he realizes this client fully intends to be a repeat customer. The client already has—rather crude—tattoos spanning his arm and hands. He even has his knuckles tattooed. He talks with me about sociology as he says he teaches a version of it in his classes. He goes on for a while about existentialism and so I use the opportunity to philosophize and chat with him in turn. Later, Alex curses me for indulging his chatter so much because a high degree of concentration is needed while working the lines for tattoos. But in the end he actually thanked me because he realized that if it were not me chatting with the client, he would have been expected to do it.

In these encounters, we see the performance of everyday tasks as they are influenced by the desire to give an impression of both confidence and professionalism. Goffman (1971: 185) observed that “the individual does not go about merely going about his business. He goes about constrained to sustain a viable image of himself in the eyes of others. Since local circumstances always will reflect upon him, and since these circumstances will vary unexpectedly and constantly, foot work, or rather self work, will be continuously necessary.” Managing a business and maintaining clients—particularly in situations of precarious employment—rely heavily on impression management and the kind of “face work” Goffman discusses.

Roscoe Scarborough (2012) highlights the idea that, Goffman’s theories of impression management and role distancing relate to face work and maintenance of the front-stage persona of musicians. This allows us to imagine a cross-comparison between

the tattoo artist and the musician when we look at a description he gives of a saxophone player “faking it” while performing jazz solos. “Though the sax player does not have the requisite technical proficiency of someone occupying his position as the de-facto leader—as evidenced by his atypical attempts at ‘voice leading’ through transitions between chords in his solos—he otherwise presents himself in a manner that adheres to the contextually appropriate conventions of a jazz nightclub” (Scarborough 2012: 543). For an example of a face-saving technique in a situation of everyday audience doubt and speculation let us look at my fieldnotes from 24 July 2014:

24 July 2014

I was told by Alex through a text message to come by today to see him tattoo a client who had already been tattooed by him two weeks ago. Alex makes the stencil in front of me to show how he uses a photocopied, drawn, or printed image with thermal paper to outline the image on the skin as a guide during the process. The stencil is the phrase “I want to Believe” along with a UFO. I immediately recognize the phrase from the television show The X-Files.

The young male client arrives with two spectators (his wife and her sister). The client chats with me a little while Alex sets up his needles, machines, and other tools required in his work space. I step in to ask Alex if he wants any help and he says “no thanks, I wouldn’t want to contaminate my work station as it is always easier with only one person in charge of the station.”

During the tattoo, the client’s wife is very hands-on in suggesting color and shading ideas. Alex is very receptive to her suggestions and shows a demeanor much different

from the tattoo artists I have personally experienced in the past. He is very kind in allowing so much input from spectators. He seems to be taking her seriously because he knows he needs to be good to customers, especially repeat customers, and not necessarily because he values their opinions. He confirms this after the appointment with frustration at how annoying she was. Alex even allows a client, while wincing in pain, to exclaim “what the fuck are you even doing right now?” And laughs while saying, “sorry.”

After the happy client leaves, Alex tells me that he was actually having trouble with one of his new rotary machines, specifically the liner. Rubber bands are used to stabilize the needle so it snugly fits in the tube and Alex was having difficulty with weak bands which cause a machine to run inefficiently and increase the chance of crooked lines and damaged skin from overworking areas.

This example shows us how maintaining the definition of the situation in the practice of tattooing involves assuring confidence, regard for client opinions, and a professional appearance. This makes the practice of tattooing, normally a front stage activity, have elements of the forefront of the backstage (Meyrowitz in Riggins 1990) by nature of the fact that artists must transition in roles from serious artist, to kind and patient entrepreneur and amend both roles to appear as convincing and credible. In my past experiences, tattoo artists usually display confidence by acting so stern or behind the curtain that you feel too timid to ask if everything is going okay or if something might be changed. My new experiences at The Studio prove that the “artification” (Kosut 2012) of the practice of tattooing requires that even a practice as guarded as tattooing must rely on different methods of defining the situation which include reassuring clients and appealing

to more aesthetic reasons for color and line choices. Importantly, the tattoo artists of The Studio will often define their choices in the context of what the art requires whether it be white accents to satisfy theories of light or blood (grey) lines to promote realism.

Further, it might be noted that in this focused social gathering the client and artist come together in the composition of a piece of art, each displaying different levels of give and take—each play for their own team. Goffman (1959:167) describes how two forces can come together to represent their own teams and their independent interests. In this occasion, the members of each team cannot cross lines or relax their group interests for fear that lines can become blurred to the advantage of one team over the other. Tattoo artists must maintain the professional standards of an artist and as my role at The Studio quickly became part of the tattoo artists' team, I realized that my role was to aid in maintaining a unified perspective with the artist in order to fend off clients and their friends' demands for greater power over the situation. For instance, when friends come as spectators for the tattoo they may suggest changes to the tattoo last minute. If the artist is trying to convince away from these changes in the interest of maintain autonomy in the situation, my role was to agree with the artist and strengthen the team perspective.

I refer again to Scarborough's (2012) dramaturgical insights about the way musicians "deflect, substitute, underscore, or neutralize" themselves to threats against maintaining face, I believe tattoo artists like Alex in this instance most effectively display cultural capital through artistic knowledge by "underscoring" their talents and knowledge in their field above those of audience or client. The following example demonstrates how I become more of an insider and therefore a functioning "team member" along with the tattoo artists of The Studio as my interests aligned with the successful performance of the

artist.

13 August 2014

I am invited to see Alex tattoo script lettering on a client's bicep. Script tattoos have become one of most common tattoos people request over the past 10 years despite the fact that this type of tattooing has been shown to have its origins with the gangs of East Los Angeles and single-needle prison tattoos. (The 2012 documentary film, Tattoo Nation provides a great history of both script and black and grey scale tattooing.) The tattoo read "Be Brave" and because the man had such large muscles (he is a personal trainer specializing in hockey player clients as I later found out), Alex needed to wash off the stencil and resize it three times to get the right size to compliment the client's body. The client seems a little upset about this at first but Alex assures him that it will be worth it because the right size will also assure that the tattoo will hold up better over time.

I ask the significance of the phrase "Be Brave" and he tells me that "my father is a cancer survivor and he says it all the time" And, he added, "it also happens to be my grandmother's 90th birthday today so it seemed fitting." Alex has already begun. He starts at the elbow and works his way in for two reasons: first so he doesn't rub off the stencil with his hand while working, and second because it will inevitably hurt more as he gets closer to the armpit.

After the tattoo, Alex and I discuss my roles in the shop. I ask because during the tattooing, Alex had me replenish his black ink cap and cut paper towels for the tattoo (two jobs typically reserved for an apprentice).

I tell Alex that this client is the first to come in that I believe could beat him up. I

say “he is the first one with bigger muscles than you!” A couple of days later (August 18th) I tell Alex after a particularly impressive and smart client, “he is the first client who was obviously smarter than me.”

We agree that I will work sort of like an apprentice so I can get a broader understanding of tattooing for my research and so I can provide useful help before Kraken and Carlos begin September 3rd.

My roles are as follows:

- control the music (nothing typical tattoo shop, indie music mostly)
- get coffee/offer client water or juice
- refill ink
- cut paper towel
- help with adjustments to tattoo bench/arm rests
- Learn to disinfect and dismantle the work station



Figure 3.1 Receiving the first of many tattoos from Alex at The Studio. Notice the notebook in hand. Photo from the author's collection.



Figure 3.2 This photo of the client waiting area of The Studio highlights the features of the space that resemble an art gallery more than the traditional image of the tattoo parlor and thus suggest symbolic and strategic interaction with objects that hold semiotic potential. Postmodern art, modernist furniture, and the nostalgic appeal of a gramophone resting on the table act as semiotic resources which help blur the distinction among styles while elevating the perceived sophistication of the space. Photo by the author.

Kraken's Deceptions

The methods tattoo artists employ to appear as competent, clean, professional, and likeable persons are crucial to working in a field with no guarantee of clients and variables of work which can quickly change. Sometimes artists who are focused on building their career in a field where image can mean getting paid will often have to

commit forms of strategic interaction in order to convince clients to commit their skin canvas to them. I just discussed a form of strategic interaction which aims to maintain the definition of the situation and the orderliness of interaction in the case of Alex. Now, Goffman's concept strategic interaction will be used to unpack the sociological concept of deception. Goffman stresses how strategic forms of interaction involve the "calculative, game-like aspects of mutual dealings." He further adds that when "an individual hides such things as contraband or strategic plans, he must not only be skilled at the material task of concealment and possess sufficient emotional self-control and intellectual control so as not to give away strategic information inadvertently; but in addition he must refrain from willfully communicating his secret" (Goffman 1968: 37).

In other words, the body of societal artistic knowledge becomes semiotic resources tattoo artists wield while making sense of their unorthodox occupation and while aiming to convince clients of a particular point of view in order to have them believe that they are able and best suited for the job. Importantly, as I would learn, this point of view given off by the artist, can be deceptive because secrets are withheld and truth becomes a contested concept.¹³

Before I met Kraken, a man of large stature and presence, I was told repeatedly by Alex how great it would be for his shop and for my research to get involved with an Asian master artist. Kraken had secured the job at The Studio after responding to an

¹³ As Susie Scott (2015: 206) notes, "symbolic interactionism encourages us to consider the paradox that deception might be a socially good thing" and even more importantly that "from (a) morally neutral perspective, it does not matter whether a deception actually occurs or reality has been distorted, only what the various players involved perceive to have happened"

internet ad at his current employer in another Canadian city and wrote that he wanted to make a move to The Studio for a new opportunity with his family. Kraken had been tattooing for approximately sixteen years and had a very impressive portfolio of traditional Asian-style tattoos including many tattoo sleeves, shirts, and full back pieces. When I first met him in the autumn of 2014 he seemed to be a polite man, quite harmless and lovable. He drove an expensive car, boasted about his training with his own Asian master tattoo artist and his experiences in different East Asian countries, and committed acts of conspicuous consumption with kindness and a down-to-earth quality. In fact, he once called me “one of his good Canadian friends” and repeatedly supported my writing on tattooing. He really helped me by sharing many stories and experiences with me and he told me and Alex about practical matters of tattooing which resulted in the reintroduction of the loud coil machines at The Studio, discussions of tricks and nuances of Asian-style tattooing, and the use of curved magnum shaders for more exact and soft shading (details of the importance of these technologies and changes are discussed in Chapter 4).

But over time things became strained with Kraken and his apprentices in one camp and me and Alex in the other. I started to become good friends with Alex and a trusted companion able to look after the studio with my own key and pass code. I was tasked multiple times with managing Kraken and the operation of The Studio. Through all of this, even I could tell that although Kraken was a gifted tattoo artist with lots of experience, not every tattoo he was turning out was up to the standard he set for himself as a “Master Artist,” especially when he tackled genres outside the realm of Asian traditional. Moreover, he and his apprentices showed sloppiness in matters of cleaning

and looking after their workstations. Alex began to be concerned and would confide in me. After three months, more problems, and the necessary dismissal of Kraken's apprentice for drinking on the job and acting unprofessional, Kraken began slowly and secretly to make moves to escape from The Studio. He did so by taking things home slowly and claiming, for example, that he should take his ink home and only carry in what was necessary for his daily work to avoid clutter. One day, after Christmas break and a so-called "guest spot" back home to make extra money while The Studio closed for the holidays, Kraken simply did not show up at work. He left over a dozen tattoo appointments hanging and several people with half-finished tattoos.

We never saw it coming. Alex had some suspicions that things didn't seem right and some of the stories Kraken told about his past life which included stories of run-ins with the Yakuza in Japan or his famed in-demand reputation elsewhere, all seemed to be recipes of knowledge Kraken appealed to in order to sell himself as something he may only have aspired to be.¹⁴ It can be a confusing situation distinguishing between real and fake performances, as Joshua Meyrowitz (in Riggins 1990: 71) comments: "Social truth, then, is an elusive entity. One might say that it is a region-relative concept. Goffman suggests that behavior in front regions, even though it is 'staged', represents a kind of 'objective' social reality. The manner in which people behave and respond is, after all, the way they really behave and respond. And individuals come to define themselves and

¹⁴ Goffman (1959: 59) describes how "the more closely the imposter's performance approximates to the real thing, the more intensely we may be threatened, for a competent performance by someone who proves to be an imposter may weaken in our minds the moral connection between legitimate authorization to play a part and the capacity to play it."

others in relation to the way in which role performances 'come off.'”

The reality Alex and I initially saw at The Studio with Kraken may have been due to our personal and emotional investment in the quality of someone else’s performance. When “audience” members have a personal stake in bolstering their own prestige by identifying with a “performer,” they may have great difficulty seeing through an act to the hidden reality underneath. This is the central reason the elephant in the room went unnoticed for so long. Even for the attuned or skilled ethnographer it can be a real problem in understanding which performances are real and which are deceptive and how this has influenced role performance, especially if the performer has internalized, externalized, and institutionalized his or her performance for so long that it takes a major disruption in the flow of everyday life in order to expose what was amiss. Manning (2000: 287) claims of Goffman’s contribution to studies of deception that “the theme of deception is at the center of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, a book that could have easily and perhaps more appropriately been called *The Misrepresentation of Self in Everyday Life*.” Deception requires dramaturgical discipline as well as impression management. In other words, Goffman thought that both trust and deception require the same ingredients to succeed.

Considering Goffman as a social semiotician—as Hodge (2017) and Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) often do—and dramaturgical discipline as a mastery of cultural codes to “give” and “give off” certain meanings, we might evoke Umberto Eco’s famous definition of semiotics (1976: 12): “the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie, because if something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth; it cannot, in fact, be used to tell at all.” This quotation shows us that

the actions Kraken made were full of signs used masterfully to imply intentionality.

Whether the intended meanings were a lie or truth, they show that the social actor has the requisite tools and cultural codes to convey meaning in an intended way which is the core of dramaturgical theory and clearly demonstrates the actual potential of semiotic resources.

In Kraken's case, there was no denying his specific talents as a tattoo artist and that in some ways he was a friend. It is only on close inspection in hindsight that we all began to see how some of his tattoos did not hold up to the high artistic level he convincingly claimed at the time. He may never have really cared whether we were his friends or not. Essentially, the problems of quality consistency in Kraken's tattooing combined with his displays of abandonment and dishonesty have caused skepticism about almost everything he told us. The deceptive tool of skillful and consistent reassurance, a mark of one who maintains a steady "dramaturgical discipline," helps us in understanding Kraken's ability to constantly remind people while he was tattooing them that "you are getting a quality piece." Moreover, he craftily appealed to the traditional Asian tattooist title of "Master Artist" as a script of inherent cultural capital and did so with such command that people still call The Studio asking for "Master Kraken." Other examples of techniques used by Kraken to convince us of his professionalism include how he would consistently view the work of other local and international artists on the internet or in magazines and tell us what was wrong with it and how he would have perfected the designs even if it would take him twice as long on average to complete tattoos of similar sizes and thus receive twice the payment.

My fieldnotes of 10 September 2014 provide an example of how I may have been

tricked by Kraken.

10 September 2014

I arrive for the work to begin on my tattoo sleeve. Even though I have received some small tattoos in the past few weeks from Alex, I am actually very nervous as this tattoo will be below the point of being coverable with a t-shirt because my left arm will now be a full tattoo sleeve. I have rationalized this choice to myself and to my fiancé April as an inevitable part of researching tattoos and as an artistic and tasteful way to complete the Japanese-inspired half sleeve on the top half of my left arm. I already have a mandarin duck sitting on rocks which are surrounded by water (Kraken calls this type of background, kakubori) and a large, pink lotus flower on the inner side of my bicep with petals stretching right up to my armpit (the most painful part of my skin that has been tattooed to this point).

Kraken shows me the drawing as soon as I come in the door. It is a cute leopard with its paws extended on rocks with water splashing up. The underside of my forearm will later be filled with more water/kakubori and a cherry tree with blossoms falling into the water. The scene is meant to be serene and true traditional Japanese images in a contemporary execution, filled with bright colors and photo-realism.

As I sit staring at the image that as long as I live will be indelibly marked on my forearm, I begin to be overcome by an anxious feeling in the pit of my stomach. But I keep thinking to myself, this is actually an extremely valuable feeling to have while in the middle of my research. I believe this feeling needs to be experienced and to the degree I feel it right now in order to conduct meaningful research.

I think about permanence, I think about the consequences of getting inked in such visible places, I think about an older me with a giant leopard tattooed on my forearm. Especially because I initially thought I would be getting a tiger. Of course, the type of feline did not matter to me, but the fact that this image was so foreign to me has heightened the saliency of this moment as a powerful experience for an observer.

I did ask for a realistic tiger and I received a cartoonish leopard. Kraken convinced me that what he drew for me that day when I walked into The Studio was more original and interesting than a tiger and so I decided to trust him. It is true that I love my leopard and I would not change it for the world (not that I can anyway), but with hindsight, it is also true that I could have said something about how I had asked for a tiger and he did promise realism. Kraken has that effect on people; you just want to agree with him and he knows when people can be convinced that the tattoo they are receiving will be better than what they may have initially imagined. Kraken may not have always proven to be a master of tattooing, but the methods he executed to convince people of what he wanted them to believe proved he was a master wielding recipes of knowledge to, at times, deceive others.



Figure 3.3, My left arm featuring a leopard as part of my tattoo sleeve. Tattoo artist for the top half (above the elbow): Fred Sharpe. Tattoo artist for the leopard: Kraken, Tattoo artist for the rest: Mano

An example of when Kraken's deception may have been exposed can be noted in the following example of an unhappy client.

15 October 2014

Today we are expecting a dissatisfied customer to come in and talk with Kraken. He

has recently had a large tattoo put on his bicep of a silhouetted yoga figure with a cosmic background. The customer left happy and even tipped Kraken but for unspecified reasons he had been calling very irate saying he did not get at all what he wanted. Alex's anxiety has caused him to feel ill because of anticipating his arrival.

The man, white mid-30's, walks in with an agitated look and his face already red. Kraken and Carlos greet him and Kraken asks "Tattoo no good, buddy?"

He begins:

"Well we had a shit load of references to go from and this right here (points to the cosmos background) looks like fucking tie dye! This is not cosmos, this is not it."

Kraken:

"Well how can I help, you tell me what I can do."

Client:

"You tell me! This is my skin and I have to walk around with this thing. I am not happy with this crap the way it is."

Kraken asks the client to go outside and smoke with him so they can talk in more detail (and so they are not arguing in the shop). I try to listen to them but I can only hear a little bit of the discussion. I walk outside pretending to be getting some air but then I realize I am being obvious and I am not going to be able to record the rest of the conversation.

I start talking with Alex, I ask him what he thinks. He tells me "I thought it was a pretty good tattoo and he left happy originally so I don't know what happened. And you know, it is very important to be very specific because there is photo-realistic and there is artistic interpretation.

I agreed with Alex that day, I thought the tattoo looked well executed and it is entirely possible that the client was just influenced by outsider opinions which can be a frustration for artists as their work is always under scrutiny by uninformed onlookers. However, because cosmos tattoo backgrounds involve a great deal of vivid and deep coloring, it is arguably more likely that an Asian traditional artist like Kraken was not the right fit for a tattoo more in line with the expertise of a new-school or neo-traditional artist who is used to working with bold colors and spacey images.

Chapter 4

Tattoo Artists as Artists

When sociologist Clinton Sanders (1989: 157) wrote that “tattooing must first be separated from its deviant connotations before it can hope to be included in the repertoire of art forms,” he predicted a shift not just in the common practices and professional representation of tattoo studios. He also predicted that tattoo shops would move away from the waterfront and the downtown core in the interest of offering exclusivity and more high-brow services. In the revised and expanded edition of his landmark book Sanders and Vail (2008: vii-35) observe:

Much has changed on the tattooing landscape since *Customizing the Body* first appeared in the late 1980’s. Perhaps the most important change has been the transformation of tattooing from the ostensibly ‘deviant’ practice I discussed in the first edition to the popular cultural phenomenon it is today....

Chafing under the continuing public distaste for the tattoo medium. They consistently refer to themselves as "tattoo artists" and their establishments as "studios." They take great pains to disassociate themselves from "scratchers" who are technically unskilled and "stencil men" who are incapable of doing creative custom work.

This chapter will discuss the cultural shifts over the past several decades which come to reflect the way tattooists became better known as tattoo artists in general discourse and

popular culture.¹⁵ We do so through an analysis of place—both spatial and symbolic—in terms of tattoo studios, semiotic materials, objects in the case of tattoo machines and other tools of the trade, and shifts in major trends. For instance, we discuss at length the emerging concern that tattooing could lose its craft qualities in favor of becoming an institutionally endorsed art form and one of major mainstream appeal for entrepreneurs. By following these shifts, I see the transition of the way cultures, and tattoo artists themselves, define their role and position in society, and I raise questions about the future of the practice.

This chapter ends with an analysis of the ways that tattoo artists use this new-found role and title as true artists to define their work in the face of permanence both as a concept and as an occupational hazard. When it comes to mistakes (we all make them at work) how do tattoo artists work and negotiate with clients who now have a potentially permanent mistake emblazoned on their skin? Readers will see artists take control and navigate the client-artist negotiation to co-construct an artistic mark that can leave both artist and client permanently happy.

Neo-Bohemian Tattoo Studios

Michael Atkinson (2003: 71) rightly notes that certain types of studios will attract particular classes and types of clients. Urban centers attract the best of the creative class. However, it is no longer true that the downtown core can hold the monopoly on the more

¹⁵ Even a cursory look at Google demonstrates that the search for “tattooist” yields 15,800,000 results and the first of which is the Wikipedia entry for tattoo artist. Searching “tattoo artist” yields 38,500,000.

upscale locales for tattooing. Tattoo studios such as The Studio now pop up in more artistic, post-industrial, and less-centralized neighborhoods. Richard Lloyd (2002: 118) terms neighborhoods such the one hosting The Studio *neo-bohemias* because of the way these areas maintain a level of “grit as glamor” by catering to the middle class, artists, and students who are looking for a unique and more hip experience by entering an area which also showcases inner-city, urban, and lower class characteristics. The combining of grit with glamor is, in Lloyd’s view, what creates a true highbrow and “hipster” experience more and more in these post-industrial neighborhoods. It is therefore also true in the case of The Studio that these gentrified neo-bohemias are often “in transition” which, in turn, helps expand the range of individuals who make their way to The Studio.

The Studio employs two full-time tattoo artists and operates only by appointment. Other tattoo studios in the large Canadian city in which this research is based can employ anywhere between 1 and 20 tattoo artists. Most tattoo studios outside of the downtown core (and many within it) operate primarily by appointment only and maintain a level of agency by granting appointments around their schedule not that of the clients. Consultations may be provided to walk-in clients interested in co-constructing the design of their tattoo with an artist but to receive the tattoo the client will usually need to wait a few weeks after the initial consultation to find an available booking time. At The Studio, there were several occasions when I noted that the artist could technically have tattooed a walk-in client but optioned to book a future appointment and take a cash deposit instead. The reasoning behind this decision was explained to me as an effort to maintain the standard they have set for themselves and for their clients.

Lloyd (2002: 521) observes that the choice of research site is crucial in any

ethnographic study because generalizing from a single site has limitations. As such, neo-bohemias must be clearly identified to provide readers an awareness of the nuances of place. Importantly, the clientele and the artists of The Studio can, in no way, represent the diversity in the practice of tattooing. However, I argue that the neo-bohemian flavor of the neighborhood and the artistic nature of The Studio, as it doubles as an art gallery, allow for a level of theoretical generalizability in helping to explain growth in the industry and for an appreciation of the nature of the “artification” (Kosut 2013) of the practice of tattooing in Canada and in the West, more generally. Laura Neilson, writing for *The New York Times* (February 28, 2018), chronicles Brooklyn’s *Nice Tattoo Parlor* and explains how tattoo studios looking for success within the contemporary market must make strides to become more open to the growing clientele from both sides of the traditional gender spectrum by fancying up the décor and focusing on a new image of aesthetic sophistication. This effectively sheds the last of the rough and tumble of tattooing from a bygone era. Of course, as always, this raises questions of class influence, distinctions, and limitations. There is little doubt that while class does not determine whether or not you get a tattoo, but it does determine the quality of the tattoo in a market that grows ever more competitive like tattooing.

Although the idea of displaying artworks on the walls is nothing new for tattoo studios, the transformation from “flash” to pieces of fine art is nonetheless a rather innovative and growing practice in modern tattoo studios which allows them to double as fine art galleries. As is the case with The Studio, the art gallery side of the business need not generate a great deal of income but instead it can function to substantially increase what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu terms *cultural capital* as it can now cater to a

larger variety of classes while also making its walls look more attractive and apparently sophisticated. At The Studio most exhibits have been by local artists who practice contemporary art through mixed media (sculpture, oil, acrylic, photography, diorama, etc.). Artists might gain more prestige by exhibiting somewhere else, but they appreciate the lower cut Alex and Zofia take from their art sales.

Considering the importance of place and environment and its key role in ethnographic research we come to appreciate literature like actor-network theory or, as it is also called, *material semiotics*. In the book, *Making Meaning Out of Mountains: The Political Ecology of Skiing*, Mark Stoddart uses actor-network theory—most popularly associated with the early works of Bruno Latour—to describe and elucidate the ways nature and other members of the “non-human world” acquire the characteristics of meaningful actors. In this sense, we appreciate that objects hold semiotic resources in their own right. This can be seen, for example, in the way nature controls human action and interaction in the landscape of snowy mountains. Stoddart (2012: 67) notes that weather conditions and geography can impact the choices of sport-seekers to ski and can even influence their overall health and wellbeing in the case of extreme weather conditions. Considering both material and non-material culture then allows us to think about the ways the tools and practices of tattooing have changed and grown and how these elements of the trade can structure the situational properties of a tattoo studio.

Tools of the Trade

While conducting custom tattoos of high detail and soft painterly shading, artists now rely heavily on curved magnum needles. These needles are an innovation of the past

10 years. They are ready-made needles that come out of the package pre-curved (instead of the “flat” magnum shaders of the past) to simulate the same feel, and look, of flexible bristles on a paint brush. The curved magnums allow for soft shading, more control in tight spaces (when angled properly), and for the trained artist to choose how many needles to apply to the skin in the interest of depth and detail. In fact, tattoo artists may set up several tattoo machines equipped with different needle configurations to make certain each element of the tattoo design will be well accounted for. For example, one machine may serve as a liner and may have a 9 round liner (the 9 indicates the number of smaller needles packed together), while the artist may also have a 13 curved magnum shader in another machine. They may even have a third (or fourth) machine set up with a 3 liner or something similar in size for small details and fine lines.

Another such progression in the field comes from the use of rotary tattoo machines instead of the loud coil machines of the past. This rotary machine is propelled by an internal motor and thus is lighter, quieter and, some argue, provides a more consistent stabbing of the skin than the traditional electro-magnetic coil machines. Although the coil machines are still popular, rotary machine advancements such as the *Neotat* machine or the *Cheyenne Hawk* pen (German-engineered rotary tattoo machine shaped like a pen) continue to push tattoo artists to create differently. These tools, combined with other new innovations such as organic ink, and healing-promoting solutions used during and after the tattooing are prime examples of the power of technology to influence—and be influenced by—how tattoo artists work and define themselves. These machines and new technologies inspire through their ability, now more than ever, to encourage artists to pull off big pieces with a sense of depth and complexity unparalleled in the past.

The way artists can name their machines (Alex loves to use his coil, “Ol’ Mickey”) or choose one for a certain job to make sure to mind the machine’s temperament is symbolic of the way machines take on a distinct and individual character. For example, a coil machine can be so heavy and powerful that it can be taxing and detrimental to the health of the artist on pieces which require a long session. This is an important and necessary lesson an artist must learn while cooperating with this particular type of machine. Also, let’s consider that tattoo artists cannot maintain the same image we expect to see when we walk into a studio without the buzzing tattoo machine in their hands or close by. The machine must be ready to form a bond with the artist who depends on it for the creation of new meaning and art.

The expectation of the client and his or her acquaintances is not only that their artist will behave a certain way but also that they will be surrounded by the tools of the trade which she or he have come to expect of tattooing through popular understandings of the practice picked up through television programs, internet searches, or other anecdotal evidence. In fact, all of the non-human actants present in the tattoo studio such as the ink, cleaning supplies, tattoo chair, and of course the tattoo machines, are not only crucial tools and props for a performer of a role in dramaturgical terms, they are often theoretically neglected members of a semiotic collective with the tattoo artist which are key for an artist in maintaining the old school practices of tattooing (coil machines, elastic bands, and flat magnums) and pushing the envelope on new methods of tattooing (rotary machines, vegan/organic ink, and curved magnums).

My fieldnotes from the very first day of my tenure working at The Studio highlight how these messages and the very principles of the shifts in tattooing were told to me

immediately.

14 July 2014

Alex gives me the tour and says “my shop is the cleanest in the city and you won’t hear any of that loud classic rock shit.” He then tells me about how he chose to paint his shop flat white and put down concrete during renovations so clients and customers would recognize his shop as something different right away and as a place more suited to functioning as an art gallery.

Alex is also quite proud to show me his new rotary tattoo machines that have come from a special order by a producer in Slovakia who hand-makes the machines. They differ instantly from the coil tattoo machines used predominantly in the past 100 years in the way they run from a small motor rather than electromagnetic pulses. This change has made the rotary machine quieter, lighter, and some may argue, more precise.¹⁶

I reference the tattoo gun and Alex tells me right away that calling it a gun is old school and he tells me not to call the machine a gun again as artists and those in the tattoo world have long since changed the terminology to reflect a far less brutish association. Other hints Alex begins to explain about tattooing include: stretching skin is essential for getting good lines and the different settings on the power supply adjust the needle speed. He tells me the needle does not need to actually go that deep to make it stick.

¹⁶ Samuel O’Reilly, a New York City tattoo artist, is known for his 1891 patent of the first electric tattoo machine and is said to be based on an earlier Thomas Edison design of an electric pen.

Old School vs. Neo-traditional Tattooing: From Craft to an Art Form

“Old school” is a popular term referring to a post-war Americana style of tattooing which first appealed to servicemen, bikers, and rebels looking for “pick and stick” flash work that involved only a couple of primary colors, bold lines, and easily readable images. It has become most associated with the works of Sailor Jerry Collins, Lou “The Jew” Alberts, Lyle Tuttle, Phil Sparrow, Jack Rudy, and Ed Hardy (to name a few). Thus, old school tattooing is a mentality, an era, and a style. It is, however, a style that has never really gone away despite new and more artistically sophisticated shifts in the tattoo world which have largely been fed by middle-class sensibilities (DeMello 2000). In fact, some scholars of tattooing like myself (and others such as DeMello 2014) now use the term neo-traditional to represent the fact that a lot of the mentalities of old school tattooing—including the primary use of flash—have become outdated and the aesthetics of classic images have changed in that the application of an anchor, heart, or eagle now requires more customization, more exact line work, and more brighter and dynamic colors.

Building on these expectations, and especially in neo-traditional tattoo studios, the public’s expectations of tattoo artists has sharply increased. It is safe to say, for example, that most tattoo artists today are expected by clients and by their peers to have a strong background in drawing, painting, or other artistic skills. Custom shops where each tattoo design is drawn and altered especially for one client and for one-time use have become extremely popular since Don Ed Hardy opened the first custom shop, Realistic Tattoo, in 1974 (DeMello 2014: 531; Hardy 2014: 249). When asked to describe how she deals with difficult tattoos, a tattoo artist interviewee Anna (32) demonstrates that—like Alex or

Kraken—using art and principles of aesthetics as a tool for displaying cultural capital can be extremely valuable in maintaining the definition of the situation in moments of panic or error.

There's plenty of times in the moment when I think 'oh shit' like when I shade something and I think 'oh that's too dark' but if you are creative and aware of art theory, you can rely on strong fundamentals and use lots of ways to correct mistakes.

Treating tattooing as an art form demands that clients have a basic knowledge of the most common styles and their origins. Table 4.1 thus lists and describes some of the popular styles of tattooing today and provides an accompanying list of distinguishing elements. Although this list will serve our purposes, I encourage readers to seek Margo DeMello's impressive volume *Inked: Tattoos and Body Art Around the World* (2014) for more supplementary reading.

Table 4.1 Selection of Popular Tattoo Art Styles/Codes

Selection of Popular Tattoo Art Styles/Codes	Origins	Key Characteristics
Old School/Neo-Traditional	<p>Originating in post-war WWI America, old school tattoos have been and continue to be a popular style of tattooing.</p> <p>Sailor Jerry Collins (1911-1973) is usually heralded the king of old school but there are many classic and current artists working in the genre.</p> <p>Although this style is originally associated with working-class military personnel, old school tattooing is both a style and mentality prevalent today and is popular among men and women of all classes and backgrounds.</p>	<p>Old school tattoo parlors today rely much less on the use of flash (which in the past meant it could be completed in a flash).</p> <p>Today, artists working in this genre will create custom tattoo works based on the icons of the past.</p> <p>Though used more in academic circles than in the studio, the term <i>neo-traditional</i> has become a descriptor for the style because of the way it describes the shift in the style and the overall practice of tattooing. This title alludes to the maintenance of traditional elements while highlighting the transformation to more professional and aesthetic-based forms.</p>

**New School
(Skool)**

New school tattooing is not the binary opposite of old school. New school tattooing was popularized in the 1990's and maintains elements of old school tattoos like the use of bold outlines and primary colors for easily readable designs but differs in the more cartoon-like, graphic images which serve as the primary motifs which define the tradition.

As DeMello (2014: 476) observes, artists working in this style will "...borrow from Japanese anime, graffiti, and comic book art to create a totally new tattoo form."

Watercolor

Currently experiencing a high degree of popularity, partially thanks to the dominance of Instagram and Pinterest in attracting prospective clients in their portfolio searching, watercolor tattoos resemble watercolor paintings in the use of custom mixed colors (mixing together tattoo inks) which are softly applied yet striking in color.

Designs are usually abstract and rely on little or no use of black outlines. The Russian artist, Sasha Unisex, currently has nearly 900,000 followers on Instagram and has become internationally known as a master of the style.

Portraiture/Photo-Realism

Developed from the black and grey scale tattoo work coming from East Los Angeles in the late 20th century, portraiture and photo-realist tattoos owe their history to single needle prison tattoos which were often executed to display religious iconography such as praying hands, rock of ages designs, Virgin Mary, and Jesus.

These tattoos were initially associated mostly with Chicano-style art and with L.A. gang affiliations. Freddy Negrete, working out of Good Time Charlie's in East L.A., along with Jack Rudy are pioneers of the style which would develop into a much broader style of tattoo art for a more diverse clientele.

Neo-Tribal

The title alone suggests the colonial history in this style of tattooing as Westerners became fascinated in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries with styles of body marking found on indigenous populations during sea expeditions and appropriated these designs while editing or adding to them as they desired.

Thus neo-tribal tattoos are based on the traditional tattoos of populations primarily in the South Pacific which, through antiquity and beyond, served as rites of

The Samoan islands of Polynesia and their distinctive Pe'a tattoos are revered forms of tattooing which have been adopted outside of these cultures. Pe'a are traditionally very precise black line work tattoos that adorn the buttocks, thighs, and calves of Samoan men and from afar were reportedly first mistaken as clothing by Western onlookers (DeMello 574).

passage, ritualistic symbols, and as key markers of identity among the indigenous populations.

Japanese

Japanese tattoos (*irezumi*) feature vivid, rich colors, the purposeful use of negative or empty space and body contours, and the use of background and foreground images to create highly aesthetic pieces of body art.

These styles are said to have developed during the late Edo period (1804-1868).

These tattoos are often focused on iconographic images of Japanese history, folklore, literature and classic art. These include flowers, like the lotus, cherry blossom, or chrysanthemum. Animals such as the koi fish, tiger, lion, phoenix, and dragon. And the display of earthly elements like water, wind, and fire.

Traditional Japanese tattoos involve little agency on the part of the enthusiast but demand a lot of devotion as the pieces are often quite large and can make up a tattoo sleeve, shirt, backpiece, or body suit.

Artification of Tattoos and Tattooing

An important concept I have been touching on throughout this thesis comes from Mary Kosut's (2013) article "The Artification of Tattoo: Transformations within a Cultural Field." Kosut (9) notes that it is academy-trained artists who are becoming increasingly involved in the art of tattooing to support themselves and their art careers. Often discouraged by the difficulties of entering the contemporary fine art world, many trained artists become full-time tattoo artists. She then goes on to note how "this development has brought the ideologies and techniques acquired in the academy into the tattoo world, resulting in significant changes in tattoo styles, techniques and discourses." Indeed, it might be said that visual artists, constrained (and perhaps enabled) by a need to make money, will have to find ways to work in different media to perform as an artist. Those who had trouble establishing careers in the art world have created a more aesthetic form of tattooing that is similar to the careers of students in the theatre in the 1970s and 80s in Europe, who were not able to establish satisfactory careers as actors, and thus used their knowledge of the theatre to revitalize the circus (Bouissac 2012: 188-198).

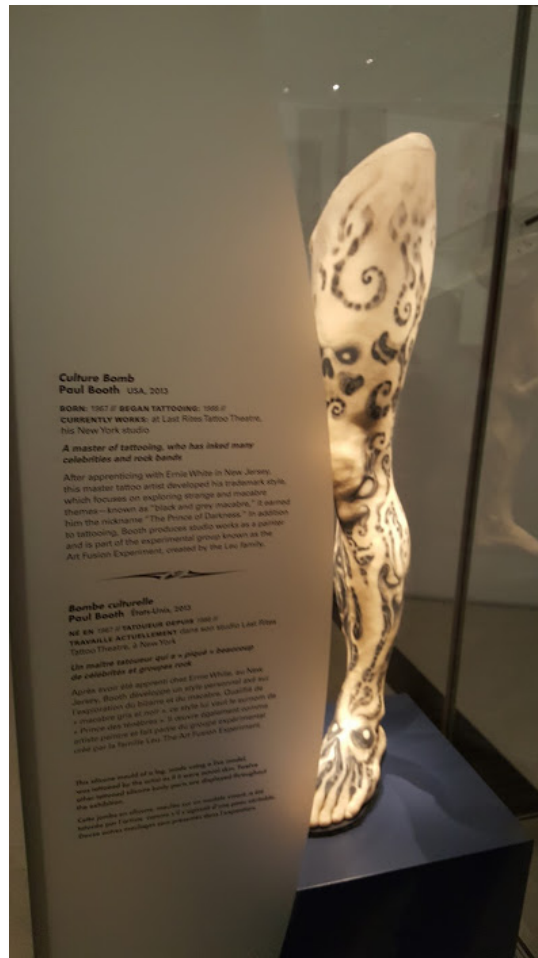
Although tattoos in the contemporary context are not without previous connotations—which are arguably largely based upon class, ethnic, or gender inequalities—and therefore not considered as an art form by everyone, there is nevertheless growing legitimation and cultural acceptance of tattoos as art that is spurred by these movements of formally trained artists into the tattoo world. Proof rests in the rise of tattoos being defined as art and thus being featured in art galleries and museum exhibits internationally. Kosut (3), for example, points to the 2005 inclusion of tattoo art

in an exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York as a more recent example of an almost two-decade-old trend.

In 2016, the Royal Ontario Museum, partnering with the Paris Musée du Quai Branly, presented the exhibit *Tattoos: Ritual, Identity, Obsession, Art*. The title and subject matter of this exhibit overwhelmingly support theories relating to the artification of tattooing through the sophisticated collection of genres of tattoo art displayed, prized correspondence between Sailor Jerry and Don Ed Hardy, and faux skin in the shape of appendages tattooed by the likes of a classic old school black and grey tattoo artist such as Jack Rudy. Or a modern avant-garde tattoo artist like Yann Black. It is worth noting that these pieces are encapsulated in glass as one would expect of pieces of fine art at The Louvre.¹⁷

¹⁷ Of course, this says nothing of the macabre practice of hanging actual tattooed human flesh of the deceased in other exhibits throughout the world. Lodder (2010: 208) describes and demonstrates these exhibits in his work while also pointing to the fact that separating the tattoo from the wearer becomes the point when it is easier to separate the narrative of meanings from the aesthetic purposes of the artist as in other artistic practices.





Figures 4.2 and 4.3 Photos taken at the Royal Ontario Museum. Figure 4.2 is an original piece of artwork by Don Ed Hardy and Figure 4.3 is a faux skin leg piece tattooed by Paul Booth who is known for his skill in horror and dark work genres of tattooing. Photos by the author.

However, while these exhibits serve to offer institutionally endorsed legitimation to tattooing, Kosut rightly points out that there still remains a “flux” in how tattoo art is generally perceived by the mainstream and whether it can be called art with any certainty outside the tattoo world (See also Lodder 2010: 112-114). “Audiences read the meanings

of tattoos differently” Kosut (3) writes, “because it is still to an extent a marginalized activity thanks to its unique history.” Tattoos are “a cultural form that hovers between high, low, and popular culture, depending upon the tattoo and the context in which it is produced and evaluated” (3). Atkinson (2003: 183) echoes this point by describing how DeMello’s (2000) understanding of the middle-class adoption may not always be true in the Canadian case and, in fact, “tattoo enthusiasts may willfully align their identities with social deviance in order to declare outsider affiliations, engage in cultural resistance, mark changing interdependencies, or find excitement in unexciting societies.” Indeed, tattoos do not belong solely to one class or category of art. This is because tattoos have always been used in different circles to represent varying meanings. Tattoos have a chameleon character in that even while they are more and more considered a legitimate form of fine art, many who get their first tattoo still do so in the interest of committing themselves to an act of rebellion.

Clinton Sanders original 1989 publication *Customizing the Body* is a trailblazer and a source of inspiration (revised and expanded in 2008 with Vail). Coming from an education provided in part by the expert on art worlds, Howard Becker, Sanders champions the use of art and culture to help us appreciate tattooing. In his concluding chapter, Sanders discusses the possibilities of tattooing clawing its way up the cultural hierarchy, past its deviant connotations, and to a level of cultural appreciation where it could begin to be considered as an authentic form of art. Using the institutional theory of art, Sanders discusses graffiti (now street art) by writing (1989: 162):

It is imminently reasonable to anticipate that contemporary tattooing, with its demonstration of technical skill, consistent aesthetic appeal, organizational promotion, changing audience, gallery and museum exposure, and increasing

academic and critical attention, will be at least successful as was graffiti in achieving the status of a minor art form and acting as a source of stylistic innovation in established artistic genres

Sanders, writing on the cusp of the tattoo revolution, was able to speak with such forward thinking on tattooing and this explains the longevity and force of his text even today in understanding tattoos as art and culture.

In an article for the *New Statesman*, Helen Lewis, while referencing an exhibition of the tattoo work of Japan's Horiyoshi III at Somerset House in London, says that according to Horiyoshi's apprentice "in Japan, there are fewer hang-ups about whether tattoos can be art because there has always been much more overlap between the motifs and styles of folk art and those of tattoo masters." Yet, it must be stated that in the West, cultural shifts have allowed tattooing practices to achieve much more than the modest wish of Sanders that tattoos could achieve the status of a "minor art form." In fact, as an art form, tattoos are more readily used and enjoyed by the public today than many other forms of art. As the prologue to the edited volume *Tattoos: I Ink Therefore I am* (Arp 2012) written by the Editor-in-Chief of *Inked Magazine*, Rocky Rakovic notes (xii) that according to a Pew research poll of 2008, 40 percent of Americans in the 18-35 age bracket are tattooed. "That means there are more people with tattoos than blondes in the United States." Tattoos are an art form that transcends class and have been proudly worn by the most hardened criminals and by the most culturally attuned artists such as celebrated musicians and painters, and everyone in between.

One cannot turn on the television, walk down the street, or browse the internet without seeing advertisements which include tattooed people. Tattoos have largely gone

mainstream and this influenced the people who came by The Studio during my research tenure. This also widely influences who could be interested in this research. This thesis is NOT a study in deviance like my predecessors. This is a study in art and culture. As Matt Lodder (2010: 117) describes, it is a common fallacy, even 20 years after Sanders laid out a foundation for seriously considering tattooing as art, to regurgitate the same tired arguments about tattoos as deviant because they do nothing to further a discussion of tattoos as art. Thus, in the following section we discuss the struggle within the tattoo world between craft and art which prevents tattooing from gaining widespread attention in the art world.

The Future of the Practice: School's Out

Because principles of the art of tattooing are still largely passed down from master to apprentice there is a strong contingent of artists who maintain the history and folk qualities of the craft of tattooing. In the following section we will be discussing the tension between the craft and artistic qualities of tattooing. Though definitions are contentious and limiting, for operational purposes here we define the craft element of tattooing as being characterized by a grass-roots origin and having a folkloric quality in that the messages and practices are passed down through master-apprentice relationships. This differs from the artistic turn of contemporary tattoos which have largely been propelled by middle-class sensibilities and the rise of institutionally-trained artists into the world of tattooing (DeMello 2000; Kosut 2013).

If one reads Don Ed Hardy's *Wear Your Dreams* (2012) or watches the documentary film *Tattoo Nation* (2013) by Eric Schwartz, you quickly become impressed

by the craft of tattooing as it remains today. During my ethnography, I could see this pride as old school artists such as Mano would talk about how he had to make his own needles and order industrial printer ink for tattoos when he began (raising all kinds of questions about what is currently still lodged in the skin of people walking around the city) and how he was amazed when one machine did not need to be used for everything and pushed faster or slower by a careful hand to measure the need. Toward the end of my research tenure I even witnessed the beginning relationship of Mano with his new apprentice, Yves, and could see qualities that are familiar to me from my own relationship with my Ph.D. supervisor. Some lessons cannot easily be learned without a human connection. My ethnographic research also taught me to respect the craft of tattooing when I had to wait a year to tattoo myself after I first proposed the idea.

The worry that the practice of tattooing could lose its proud history and its folkways seems very real in the industry. Even though there is still evidence that the practice is thriving and has not yet been reduced to a service industry devoid of its craft qualities and the magic that makes the practice unique. In fact, nearly two decades ago, DeMello (2000: 94) wrote about the potential demise of the apprenticeship system which has, to this day, remained largely intact.

Tim Hendricks posted the following picture, reproduced with permission, on his social media accounts along with the story in italics below about his experience being in a master-apprentice relationship and the importance of maintaining the craft history of the practice. Hendricks is a second-generation artist after his father, a painter, Don Hendricks. Tim Hendricks is a modern-day legend of tattooing within the industry.

Some could argue that it is ironic such pleas come from Hendricks as he has

appeared on the massively popular and mainstream television programs, Miami Ink, NY Ink, and as a guest judge on Ink Master. Indeed, during an interview with “Last Sparrow Tattoo” Hendricks discussed these tattoo “dramedies” (comedy-drama) and showed both a sense of regret and pride for his part in the shows. While the television programs have become notorious for providing misconceptions about the tattoo industry and reducing the client-artist exchange to soap opera proportions, they have also done much to show the public how spectacularly beautiful tattoos can be and how the work of the tattoo artist does not resemble the life of a rock star. Because he is a proud historian of the practice and an exceptionally gifted tattoo artist working now primarily out of his tattoo parlor in Fullerton, California, Classic Tattoo, I believe it is fair to say that he is widely respected in the industry either despite or because of this time on television. He also now makes his own hand-crafted coil tattoo machines through his company, Salt Water Tattoo Supply. The name of the company is itself likely a tip of the cap to where tattooing came from on the piers (see <http://www.saltwatertattoosupply.com>).

This is me and my apprentice @_bryan_black_ taking a photo with the legendary Thom DeVita. Many years ago, Bryan asked me to apprentice him when he was a teenager, at the time I was too busy and traveling too much to teach him, so I turned him down. Bryan persisted. I told him to just take an apprenticeship at one of the shops in our area, he said he'd rather wait for the opportunity for me to teach him. In the meantime he took art classes to better his drawing skills. He patiently waited years, YEARS, and once I was able to spend more time with him he gave it 100 percent. He was over my shoulder watching me tattoo any chance he could, he must've wound at least 1,000 coils in my

workshop, learned how to make needles even though it's irrelevant these days, built his own machines, power supply and clipcord. All the while scraping by financially to make ends any way he could. He built his career from patience, hard work and above all, integrity. I couldn't be more proud of this man, he worked his ass off and learned how to tattoo a proper way, the same way that people have been learning to tattoo for hundreds of years. Even though it was hard on him sometimes, and hard on me sometimes, I have some of my best tattoo memories from those years. Bryan is like family to me now, we have a brotherly bond for life and I'm grateful for the opportunity to have taught him.

With all the talk about tattoo schools lately I just wanted to share this story with the younger generation, this is one example of a proper way to learn. You learn to tattoo from other experienced tattooers, whether it be one specific person or many (like myself). You don't learn at a "tattoo school", except maybe how NOT to tattoo.

I would like to call upon all my tattoo brothers and sisters to please share their story, either of your apprenticeship or of your teaching someone. These stories are so lovely to hear and it's a way to show the youth the beauty and soul in an apprenticeship and the lack thereof in a "tattoo school".

[@notattooschools](#) [#notattooschools](#) [#shareyourstory](#)



Figure 4.4 From right to left, Hendricks' then-apprentice Bryan Black, Thom DeVita, and Tim Hendricks. Bryan Black now works out of the famous Elm Street Tattoo in Texas. Thom DeVita is known as a legend of old-school and a relentless innovator of style. His paintings and tattoos focus on the traditional aesthetics of tattoo art blended with religious imagery. Photo courtesy of Tim Hendricks, reproduced with permission.

The craft element of the practice of tattooing largely exists in the ways in which the practice is discussed and culturally organized. Tattoo studios, like The Studio are mostly still owned by tattoo artists. Master-apprentice relationships are still the most respected and honest form of making the foray into the practice, and stories in tattooing largely

retain their folkloric qualities as they are told through people who proudly share it. Indeed, in order to understand how proud the history of the craft of tattooing is and how this pride both coincides with, and hinders, the push for the practice to be considered an art form all you have to do is look at the true innovators of the medium of tattooing—luckily many are still alive and touring tattoo conventions like Lyle Tuttle, Thom DeVita, or Don Ed Hardy—and you will notice that tattooing like the tattoos themselves, are a deeply human practice and maintain a unique craft character that has largely managed to persist on the fringes economically. As Hendricks implies, this is not the last word on the topic of where tattooing will be in the future and whether all the mainstream popularity and acceptance of tattooing will prompt more institutionalization of the art form to the point that tattooing loses its craft essence in the process of being taught in a tattoo school?

Tattooing is not unique in experiencing this friction between institutionalization of the art form and the maintenance of the craft history. This is common for the arts generally and here I contend that treatment of an idea of tattoo schools is evidence of this tension. For instance, Algonquin College in Ottawa, Canada, put out a call of interest to the local community in 2014 about the idea of starting a program geared toward educating those interested in the tattoo industry. This was met with strong and decisive opposition by the tattoo world as evidenced by the petition started by local artists vehemently against the idea (<http://algonquintimes.com/news/algonquins-tattoo-program-fails-launch/>). Yet, it is important to consider that there are other art forms which have been institutionalized and still do share a lot of social and cultural history within their practices.

For example, going back to the case of the circus, semiotician Paul Bouissac (2010: 104) passionately writes about how European one-ring circus offerings feature clown

performances which maintain complexity and nuance while also appealing to characters which fit with what Barthes would call essential *mythologies*. Tattoo artists do not always have the agency to pick and choose their tattoo projects. While discussing how, inevitably, market principles and the arts must meet, Bouissac (2010: 151) observes:

The concept of performance implies an audience both from the point of view of economics and from that of semiotics. Although it is possible to abstract one of these two aspects and to ignore the other, both are obviously inextricably mixed. Performances are communication processes in which a proportionally sufficient number of potential spectators/listeners are persuaded to allot some time and money through a promise that they will derive some form of gratification from an experience that is strictly limited in time, and that is bound by conventional strictures.

Circus schools have existed for many years and across several continents with contemporary examples including the New York Circus Arts Academy (U.S.), The U.K. National Centre for Circus Arts (U.K), and the Flying Fruit Fly Circus (Australia) plus many others in Europe which seem to be generally supported by insiders and various levels of government. In tattooing there are no equivalent of circus schools. Yet.

While visiting the bookstore of the college recently I encountered a tattoo advertisement that I would later see as a massive sign on the side of a Coca-Cola truck. It featured a young man donning a rose hand tattoo with knuckle ink throwing back a “refreshing” carbonated beverage. It has me wondering just how much the continued mainstream notoriety of tattooing will be a double-edged sword that will allow tattoos to complete the artification practice and be even more widely accepted as a fine art but also run the risk that the practice may go the way of film or music (of even the circus in North America) which largely became controlled by corporations who monopolize the market and deprived the art of a lot of its human elements and character. Indeed, one must

wonder what the future will look like for young people who consider taking on tattooing as a profession. Supporting the fears of Hendricks and others, one may heed this warning given in the concluding sentences of their book when Sanders and Vail 2008: 163)

contemplate this question:

The central issue to be confronted by key members of the tattoo community is whether the advantages that originate from producing and consuming yet another mode of establishment cultural capital outweigh the intense pleasures of exclusionary identification with the deviant social group symbolized by the tattoo mark. In the final accounting, an enlarged market, increased income, decreased stigmatization, and artistic status can be very costly when purchased from those who control the social resources. Imperialism rarely works out well for those who are subjected to it.

Can a practice like tattooing survive as both a craft and an art? What happens when the practice shifts further into one realm over the other? The following analytical tool known as the *semiotic square* was first popularized through the writings of A.J. Greimas (1917-1992) from the Paris Semiotic School and allows readers to imagine the possibilities discussed here as tattooing reaches a true art form while also trying to maintain its craft roots. While meaning is an infinite loop of possibilities, the semiotic square nonetheless does provide a useful image, although reduced to a set of dyadic models, of the possibilities of the way the practice could be culturally defined. This adoption of the square is one that has been adjusted for our needs here.

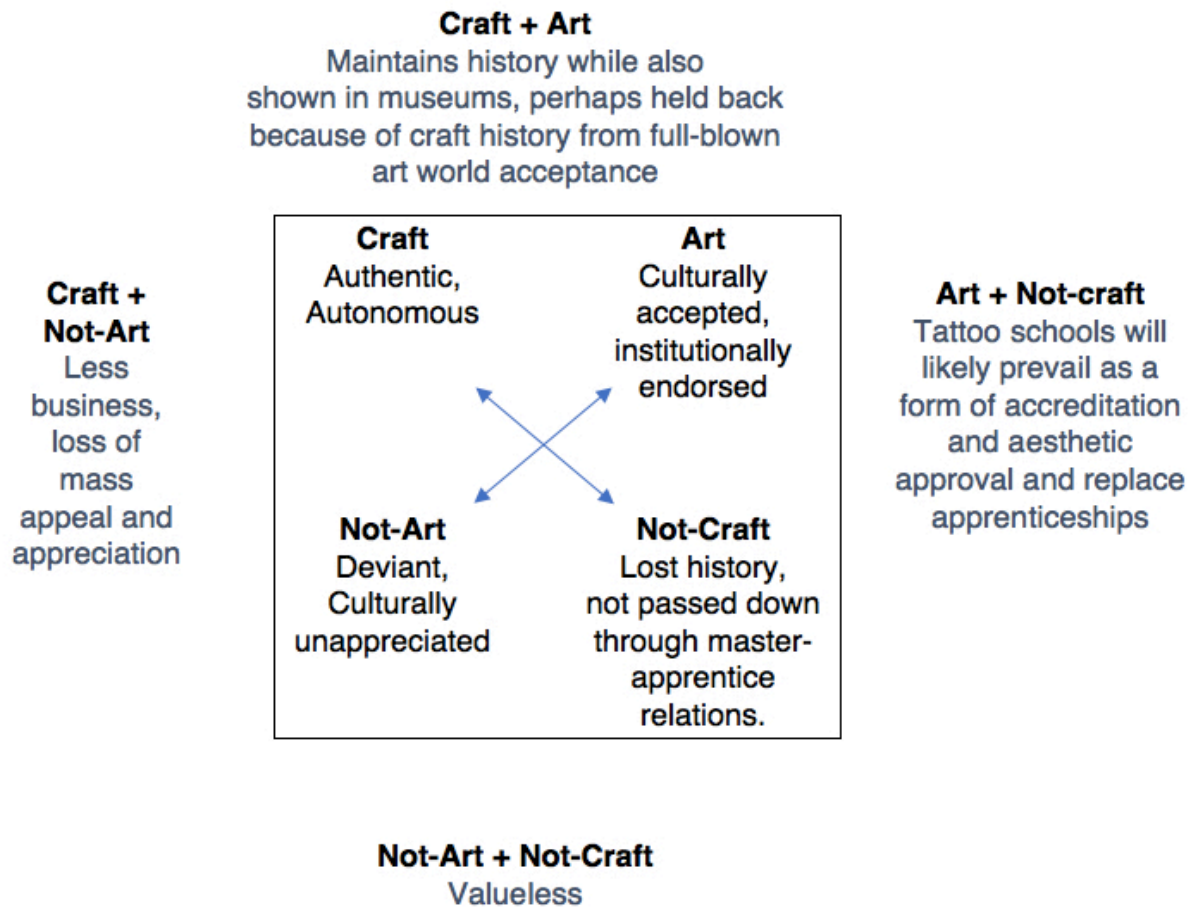


Figure 4.5 The Semiotic Square allows for a showing of analytical classes to demonstrate the possible relationships between craft and art in the contemporary tattoo world.

Client-Artist Negotiation Tactics: Who is The True Creator?

Sensing what deconstructionist philosopher Jacques Derrida would call an *aporia* or an impasse because of the realization that both sides of a duality have something to offer

and something to lose, we must move on from our desire to predict what the increased artification will do to the craft history of the practice of tattooing. Instead, let us now turn our attention to the process of getting a tattoo as a way of understanding a shift in the practice. The first step in getting inked, after choosing the type or subject matter of your desired tattoo, is choosing an artist and a studio that you believe is right for you; preferably (from the perspective of an artist) this will be based on portfolio and style and not on price. As Tim Hendricks pleads “go portfolio shopping and not price shopping.” Next you set up a free consultation where you and your artist discuss the composition, placement, size, and price of your tattoo. The consultation process comes from the birth of the custom shop tattoo studio and is becoming a standard across the industry. If you want to have a uniquely drawn tattoo or even if you just want to approach the situation of getting tattooed, being knowledgeable in advance about the process, pain, and price is important.

Professional standards, reputation maintenance, a consumerist society of choice, and the customer-is-always-right mentality give the client a certain expectation that the consultation process is available to strengthen the potential client’s opinion and knowledge of tattooing and to collectively agree on the tattoo. Importantly, this is where client and artist first begin the process of working together to create a tattoo. Tattoos can be a unique art form in which the consultation becomes a dialogue between artist and client. The result is more a compromise between the two than a piece reflecting the artist’s inner mindscape. Indeed, as Lodder (2010: 130) notes, “whilst cultural theorists are keen to pin authorship on the tattooed individual, and whilst certain tattoo artists boldly proclaim their artistic legitimacy, the key point here is that the work of the tattoo is

always already inter-subjective. Any attempt to tie down authorship to either the client or the tattooer is futile.”

This is, of course, a challenging scenario for both parties because identity-hungry tattooees can demand changes to a composition to reflect things that mean something to them. The aim of dates, names, astrological signs, etc., is to make a piece of artwork more personal. Artists can have difficulty incorporating favorite colors, fonts, symbols, and an infinite amount of other demands into a drawing that is primarily governed by an appreciation of aesthetic quality. This means that artists must effectively control the definition of the situation to assert their autonomy as the artist above that of the client while still effectively working with client specifications in order to come to a final piece which reflects the desires of both client and artist. Below is a situation I witnessed in which artists and client could not come to a compromise and the client was left to find another place to get tattooed. Interestingly, beyond reputation, Alex worried about the potential for regret from a permanent decision like getting inked. This reflects the daily awareness of the gravity of the choices artists make—elaborated more in the following section on permanence—when they are in control of the appearance of someone else’s body.

19 March 2015

A client comes in for a noon consultation with Rhyanne. They sit down in the waiting area with me standing at the desk. The client begins to tell Rhyanne that he wants a neck tattoo, his girlfriend’s lip impressions tattooed on him. Rhyanne immediately says “I’m sorry, but I’m not really the right person to do that. Maybe Alex will do it.”

Alex comes in the room and says: “Well are you tattooed right now?”

Client: “I have both of my knees tattooed and some other tats all around my body.”

Alex: “I only ask because I don’t like to do neck or hand tattoos on someone unless they are already heavily tattooed. I am just afraid you’ll regret them.”

Client: “I won’t. It is my girlfriend after all.”

Both Rhyanne and Alex turn the tattoo down. Rhyanne says “maybe check one of the places downtown but I’m sorry that we wouldn’t be able to make it the way you want it.” When he leaves they both agree they will not do tacky or horrible tattoos. Alex says “I don’t want to put something bad on someone for them to regret it later. I don’t want to be part of their regret.” Similar to this daily happening at The Studio, tattoo artist Tim Hendricks wrote the following in a blog post on 9 June 2015 in his personal website (timhendricks.com):

I personally won’t do neck or hand tattoos on anyone who isn’t already heavily tattooed in other places, although I have made exceptions. These exceptions are usually based on the financial stability of the client, age, career status and the rare obscure other circumstance.... There are sometimes exceptions to the rule, but we as tattooers should always practice good tattoo ethics. Of course, it is always up to the tattooer on where to draw the line, some may be more strict than others.... So to all the people out there

young, old and every age in between, don't be mad if you are possibly turned down for a neck, face or hand tattoo. We are just doing our job as tattooers and are doing our best to use our experience in the art of permanency to assure you don't ruin your life, as horrible as that may be.

Another challenge comes from those potential clients who use internet shopping to completely design their tattoo. One hundred percent of the artists I spoke with refused to completely copy a tattoo from the internet, although most agreed that they would borrow designs in order to draft their own drawing. Anna says “tattooing is going in a direction from pre-made stamps to actual art and because the popularity and the styles people want is becoming so eclectic, it is way more diverse.” Artist Jean Guy (38), however, states that “Pinterest is the new flash and Instagram is the new portfolio. People just see cute little shit on that Pinterest and want me to do it on them, but Instagram is actually a cool way of getting your stuff out there and seeing what others have done.” The consensus is that the internet is a double-edged sword and must be used carefully and morally by artists. It also demands that artists step in with clients to tell them they will not use the internet for anything but inspiration and marketing. Thus, juggling client and artistic demands requires artists to display agency and autonomy, to set limits on what they will do, and to follow a moral code whereby the use of the internet is limited to inspiration and not plagiarism and all of this is done in contention with the fact that every design will be a permanent mark on the skin of the client and a walking portfolio for the artist behind the ink.

The authorship of tattoos in later chapters of this thesis seem to be taken-for-granted

and placed on the shoulders of the enthusiast. This is evident in the speaking space I provide to the wearer's narratives, motivations, and aesthetic sensibilities. I caution readers to appreciate that this research considers meaning as contextually defined. Thus, I consider both cultural/aesthetic referencing of tattoos and personal/historical mapping of tattoos. The reason is to compare an enthusiast's subjective motivations in the final work of body art for what is objectively emblazoned on the skin. It is relevant to say that I could have focused only on the tattoo artist, leaving out the social semiotic analysis of enthusiasts' narratives. While this too would have been fruitful, ultimately this was not my focus. I try to give tattoo artists their proper credit as creators but at the same time enthusiasts add and amend the meanings of their body art over time, reflecting personal and cultural changes.

Tattoo Artists and Permanence: Mistakes and Pressures

A major cross-cutting theme of my research is the topic of permanence. This theme provides a backdrop to much of the activity in the tattoo shop and in the thought process of those new and established in the tattoo world. It is increasingly relevant in an occupation like tattooing which is led by artists wishing to leave their mark both literally and figuratively. Indeed, I have observed and lived through the notion that permanence hangs like an albatross around the neck of the whole culture of tattooing. It is something always considered by artists and enthusiasts alike and is, I propose, one of the major obstacles to overcome for those who consider getting a tattoo. Whether it be fear of regret, mistakes, or changing identities, there is always discussion of commitment and living with the indelible nature of tattooing forever. However, as we will see in the

following chapter, impermanence can also be a current which sparks rebellion amongst tattoo enthusiasts and motivates them to get inked in the first place.

As I have already suggested elsewhere, Zygmunt Bauman makes vividly clear the relevance of his theories of liquid modernity (2000; 2004; 2011) to help us appreciate the ephemeral and fleeting behaviors of living in the contemporary world. Whether in relationships, technology, or fashion, we must abandon the old as quickly as possible to make way for the new. Tattooing is a practice left over from solid modern times and forms a paradox to the theories of liquid modernity. This realization however, helps us appreciate the need for the growing complexity of tattoo art and how enthusiasts explain the shifting meaning and identity of their ink over time especially considering the cultural pressures for body projects in contemporary society (Atkinson 2003; Bauman 2011; Giddens 1991; Shilling 1993). I will elaborate more on this need for complex meanings and identity in tattoo art from the perspective of tattoo enthusiasts in the next chapter, but for now we must appreciate how permanence influences the daily lives of tattoo artists and shapes how they perform and define their jobs.

Because of my early experiences at The Studio watching the reactions of clients to meeting artists and coping with placing trust in their abilities, combined with my interest in the social psychological importance of permanence in opposition to the transient nature of the liquid modern world, I made it a point to ask every tattoo artist I interviewed to tell me if they had ever made mistakes and how they corrected them (if they have made one). Incredibly, 100 percent of the artists I spoke with admitted making mistakes ranging from blown-out lines, chewed-up skin, spelling errors, design errors, wrong colors, to wrong placement. The list goes on. I was able to extract such information because the artists I

spoke with felt that I was one of them. I worked closely with artists and my research so closely mimicked what an apprenticeship would be that some outside The Studio assumed I was an apprentice and not just a “nerd.”

Here is an example of the artist Mano (41-year-old man working as a tattoo artist for over 20 years) making a mistake early in his career and choosing to completely ignore it. This was his method of impression management:

Mano: “Look, you always have to put the stencil on while the client is standing naturally. This one time, I was putting this stencil of a butterfly or some shit for a tramp stamp on a woman’s back and she is leaning over in the chair with her shirt up. So I go ahead and slap the stencil on. So here I am working away at it and when I am finished I think that looks pretty good. Then she stands up and I see all the skin that was stretched while sitting down starts to wrinkle over itself and make the tattoo look fucked!

Me: “Did you charge her?”

Mano: “Of course, I just slapped the bandage on right away, got paid, and sent her on her way. Hahah.”

Because Mano has been tattooing so long, it means he has lived through the transition from old school tattooing to modern day custom tattooing. Yet this longevity in his career is not reflected in his tattoo work. I have personally observed (and received tattoos from him). Many of his pieces are complex and compete with the work of other contemporary artists. However, in other ways he is old-fashioned such as still calling the tattoo machine a “gun” or working really fast even while completing intense pieces because he comes from a time and place that shop owners and clients wanted tattoo artists

to work quickly. From an owner's perspective and as discussed in the documentary film *Tattoo Nation* (Schwartz 2013), the word "flash" received its name not just because it provided flashy art on the wall but because it could be done "in a flash." From a client's perspective, fast means it hurts less and costs less.

11 March 2015

Mano is preparing a mandala tattoo for a young client who will be receiving her first tattoo today. The mandala, along with other geometric tattoo designs, has become an immensely popular style as of late as an aesthetically pleasing tattoo design that can also maintain elements of a more socially traditional form of femininity associated with lace and floral patterns. I am sitting next to him at the desk browsing Google images for neat tattoo designs for inspiration for a potential new tattoo for myself when I see Mano struggling with the fact that the design is going to include a lot of small lines and details.

With all of his experience, we are all confident he can pull off generally any style of tattoo, but Mano knows that he must not make lines too small as he is always thinking of the integrity of the tattoo design over time. Mano has told me how lines expand in the skin over time naturally with healing and although a lot of clients want tattoos to be smaller and more detailed than ever "you can only work with what you've got. It's skin not canvas."

Me: "Do you ever think about how every line you draw there on that stencil will later be permanently marked on some young girl's skin? You must make a lot of mothers angry."

Mano: "Yeah. Hahaha. And thanks for reminding me, man! But they ask for it and I

just try to do the best job I can for them.”

I particularly loved this daily happening at the studio because it proved to me that Mano, a veteran tattoo artist with over 20 years of experience, not only has to worry about mistakes, fine details, and the longevity of his tattoo work on people’s skin as they leave the studio and go about their lives, but the fear was real when I asked him if he thinks about permanence. He is one of the more relaxed tattoo artists I have met, particularly obvious in the way he approaches tattooing, as he will tattoo just about anything (fingers, neck, face) and will do so with little notice—unlike the other artists I worked alongside who preferred weeks of notice and time to prepare. Ultimately, though, this instance demonstrated that he is not immune to worry about the human consequences of his work.

When asked to give an example of a mistake made while tattooing, another artist, Jean-Guy (35, working out of his home studio) admits to a disruption of roles that left him on the forefront of the backstage as he has to come clean and be confident at once:

Some cyclist-type woman comes in and is obsessed with Lance Armstrong and so she wants “live strong” tattooed on her wrist. You know, to fill the spot where those funny little yellow bracelets used to go. I prepare all my script tattoos and stencils by hand (as opposed to using a word processor and electronically printing an exact stencil) and so I did it up in this fancy little font. I ask her if she likes it and we both agree it is perfect. It is not until we have already finished the tattoo that I look down and realize it says “live stong” no “r.”

Me: “What did you do?”

Jean-Guy: “I decided to own up to my mistake right away and so I said ‘look, don’t

freak out but we have a mistake in your tattoo but I will fix it for you.’ After I assured her everything was okay I put the little ‘r’ in and thank God I made enough room that it didn’t look that bad after all. But we all make mistakes, including the client because she didn’t even pick up on it first or last until I told her.”

I was first introduced to Jean-Guy when he walked into The Studio one day to introduce himself and to see what Alex had done with the place. Jean-Guy had his training at the same place Alex learned to tattoo. In some ways, tattooing is still a closed society much like it was in the old school tattooing days when artists would hide their tips and tricks because information really was only passed down from master to apprentice. However, because of the internet, competition between shops has actually been amplified as artists use Facebook and Instagram to post their newest tattoo work. It is not quite as simple as labelling the culture of tattooing a closed society. The growing popularity in the craft has spawned many young clients hungry for ink and this allows many shops to flourish in an urban centre. I have noted that there is a level of camaraderie and a more fun approach to competition among many tattoo studios – as long as business is not affected. This conversation between the artist Jean-Guy and Alex speaks to the conflict between old school and modern tattoo practices.

3 September 2014

Tattoo artist Jean-Guy walks in to visit. Alex had tried to hire Jean-Guy in the past and he coincidentally stops by for a visit on the first day of work for The Studio’s new master artist, Kraken and his apprentices. Jean-Guy talks about how he has some “bad

blood” with Benito, his master/trainer. He talks about how he told Benito about curved mags for his back pieces and Benito told him “to fuck off.”

“Then he ordered mags the next day.”

Benito is old school, from Europe and been tattooing for 30-plus years. Jean-Guy says that he worked every day constantly for 10 years without vacation. “They kept giving me more work at the last place I worked but always damn cover-ups.... Do you know how hard it can be to always have to wrap your head around cover-ups, especially when they’re real dark black ink. I had to quit.”

Alex and Jean-Guy describe the place where they trained to tattoo as a trap. Whereas, over here in this urban center there is more intricate, artistic, and eclectic tastes in tattooing and in the art scene.

Because of the all-in nature of tattooing, artists and studios leverage their professionalism and their ability to adapt to all the new technologies and techniques of tattooing to assure they will get the right tattoo. Artists like Benito either must adapt to the new principles of tattooing or they won’t survive in a competitive commercial environment. Jean-Guy also points out the prominence of cover-up work as a skill that tattoo artists must acquire because of the permanence of tattooing. New artists must learn techniques to cover up the past generation’s mistakes and do so in a way that leave clients confident that their new tattoo can properly out-shadow what lies beneath. It has long been a joke of the industry that clients seek partner’s names on their bodies only to separate and end up with a permanent mistake. See, for example, famous actor Johnny Depp’s “Winona Forever” tattoo which signified his relationship with fellow actress

Winona Ryder which has since been changed to read “Wino Forever.”

Human error can never be done away with, but the sophisticated and artistic nature of contemporary tattooing means designs are based on art and aesthetic principles more than ever before as enthusiasts seek more “individual” ways of showing their love. As tattoo artist Anna (32) notes regarding the topic of leaning clients toward a more informed perspective:

It is beneficial for me and them to have my twist on the art that they want. This is how they get something unique. I've never had anyone turn that option down. It is important to have their input in as well because if you don't listen to them or help them they could walk away or you could lose their confidence. Business decisions also weigh in but the art always kicks in. The money is secondary.

Chapter 5

Permanence as Rebellion: Skin and Self

We might speak of people being in dialogue with objects in the sense that it is difficult to construct one's self, and to present that self to others, in the absence of objects.... Through objects we keep alive the collective memory of societies and families which would otherwise be forgotten. Just as language is polysemic, open to multiple interpretations, so are material artifacts.

S.H. Riggins (Ed.) *The Socialness of Things* (1994: 2-3)

The visually stunning book about the growing world of avid vinyl collectors and aficionados, *Dust and Grooves: Adventures in Record Collecting*, is an assemblage of narratives from research subjects who share, through multimodal impressions, their deep love for more than just the sound of a record. The book's author and photographer, Eilon Paz, moves from Tel Aviv to Brooklyn and discovers some of the world's most avid vinyl-heads through networking and his interest in photographing them. Beginning in 2008, on the cusp of what's become known as a full-on vinyl resurgence, Paz comes to question why people collect records when they can be such a cumbersome object and not necessary by the standards of a world more promptly organized in ones and zeroes. Yet he concludes "but even in this digital age, we humans still love to have objects, we love

to have stuff—it's comforting. Music is comforting. And at the intersection of these timeless human comforts, we find this beautiful obsession called record collecting" (Paz 2015: 2).

"Things" and "stuff" are indeed comforting, the home-made and the mass-produced alike share this capability. Humans form a deep bond and profound sense of meaning in their lives from parts of material culture. It was Barthes (1988: 182) who said that "these objects always have, in principle, a function, a utility, a purpose, [which] we believe we experience as pure instruments, whereas in reality they carry other meanings, they are also something else: they function as the vehicle of meaning." Indeed, in many ways, these things we gather during our lives form our legacy and provoke and carry infinite meanings, including after death as objects form ways for others to remember us. Writing about material culture studies, Kader (2003: 20) describes how material culture and the study of artifacts is closely related to archaeology, anthropology, and art. To study material artifacts is to dig, to interpret through the lives of your subject, and to appreciate the meanings that these pieces of material culture maintain.

I begin this chapter through the crackle and shifting pitch of playing a record on a turntable because it highlights but one of the ways humans try and make sense of their lives and to live out a life of meaning in a world where identity and meanings are shifting phenomena built on unsteady foundations. To tattoo the skin is not quite as bulky and cumbersome a practice as collecting vinyl. Yet for different and more embodied reasons, it can be hard to carry on these pieces of culture as we develop and change.

If we take the quotation from Riggins at the beginning of this chapter as typical of material culture studies, we may assert that tattoos are theoretically not too different and,

in fact, may be substituted for “objects” in the quotation. The idea that the pluralistic facets of one’s self and social identity are a result of a plethora of legitimate and situationally-functional identities is comparable to the role tangible “things” acquire as identity tools and signifiers. As Bouissac (2016: 61) observes “like words in a sentence or a text, objects are tools of signification.” This state of mind in which we understand that some “thing” (like meaning or identity) is never one “thing” (like deviant or normative, craft, or art) is what I have attempted to prove thus far while discussing tattoo artists in all their modern-day complexity. This is what I wish to explore further as I try to answer: Why get tattooed?

Why Get Tattooed?

Clinton Sanders (in Dietz, Prus, and Shaffir 1994: 204) provided a specific set of reasons over 20 years ago for why people get tattooed. He attributed the inclination to ink the skin as a venture toward the “symbolization of interpersonal relationships, self-identity, group affiliation, a representation of important personal interests and activities, and as something decorative or as an aesthetic statement.” As a main research question guiding this study, “Why Get Tattooed?”, readers will see that all of Sanders’ reasons for becoming tattooed are still true today. This is significant. Although some reasons such as expressing self-identity or demonstrating personal interest in art and aesthetics are what I theorized when approaching this research—based upon readings in sociological literature that focus on the heightened pursuit of selfhood in contemporary culture (Bauman 2008; Giddens 1991)—other reasons and meanings revolving around group affiliation and interpersonal relationships are still very much present despite the backdrop of a liquid

modern culture. Therefore, the meanings behind research respondents' tattoos in what follows demonstrate that the permanence of tattoo art is important because it retains principles which are undoubtedly influenced but not determined by the swift-paced cultural change all around us.

Self-Identity

This chapter focuses on the first major theme I identified through the course of my research explaining why enthusiasts get tattooed in liquid modernity—self-identity. Indeed, given the perpetual search for happiness and the artistic state we must take in crafting our own lives in liquid modernity according to Bauman in his 2009 text *Art of Life*, it came as no surprise that in my research findings a significant portion of the tattoo enthusiasts with whom I spoke demonstrate a strong emphasis on the importance of building and maintaining a distinct self-identity. Tattoo researcher Sonja Modesti (2008: 201-2) suggests that “recognizing that postmodern spaces contain many material components, the nature of our natural bodies shifts, becoming a series of performances or enactments that interact with this materiality. These performances and enactments are designed to aid in the process of identity construction.”

Social scientists question the idea of a socially autonomous self by emphasizing the notion of a collective, relational self. This is because people typically have an exaggerated notion of the power of “I.” Sociologists for at least a century have claimed that the self emerges primarily from social interaction. In an argument resembling that of symbolic interactionists, social psychologist Vivien Burr writes: “When people interact, it is rather like a dance in which they are constantly moving together, subtly responding to

each other's rhythm and posture. The dance is constructed between them and *cannot be seen as the result of either person's prior intentions*" (italics added, Burr 2003: 140).

Anthropologist Debora Battaglia (1995: 1-15) writes that selfhood requires collaboration with other people. However, this takes the form of complex "entanglements" which are achieved in part through an "argument of images," ideational and visual. To some extent we define ourselves by reacting against categories of people we perceive as profoundly different than us. Selfhood is thus always unstable because it is voiced in situations, which are themselves inconsistent; and at least in the contemporary era the rhetoric of individuality takes place in societies characterized by consumerism and the pervasive influence of mass media.

Sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991: 52) in his book *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* explains that self-identity is "something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual." Identity is not a continuous storyline given to a person. "A person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor ... in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going. ...[It] cannot be wholly fictive" (Giddens 1991: 54). Cultivation of the body, whether through diet, exercise or tattoos, is a way of taking charge of one's life – or a deceptive way of convincing one's self that he or she is in charge. Self-identity is both "fragile and robust." The validation of difference through multiculturalism has the consequence of making people more knowledgeable about the varied options and images concerning gender, relationships, spirituality, cultivation of the body, etc.; and in contemporary societies there are also more options for actually experimenting with these alternatives. At the same time because of inevitable transitions in life (such as

geographical mobility, divorce, and extended formal education, etc.), self-identity needs to be sufficiently robust to weather change.

Indeed, keeping a narrative of self-identity going can best be served by making choices and pursuing selfhood in a manner consistent with a vision of the self-based on desired meanings and connections. We do so largely through the body and the self becomes an embodied phenomenon, shifting and being reenacted anew within subsequent interactions. Susie Scott (2015: 5) defines the self under the lens of the symbolic interactionist by noting that the “self is a dynamic *process*, which is never complete: we do not simply ‘have’ selves but rather ‘do’ or ‘make’ (and re-make) them, through constant reflection.” In what follows, we see the negotiations of the process of crafting and maintaining a self-identity through those who choose to explore tattooing as a means of making permanent the pursuit the social actor must go through in order to earn a sense of selfhood in liquid modern times.

Readers will see that appreciating that self-identity is a reason to ink skin aids in better understanding the phenomenological perspective of tattooed individuals in a world which is seeing tattooed bodies become much more common and associated with the mainstream. A social semiotic analysis is well situated to appreciate self-identity in tattooing because of its ability to dissect meaning-making through multimodal communicative forms. Tattoos maintain a distinctive sense of multimodality (read multiple meaning-transmitting forms or modes) in the way that the visual, linguistic, spatial, and cultural components of one tattoo all speak to the meaning of that sign. Gunther Kress, a pioneer of both social semiotics and multimodality coauthored a paper

with Rowsell and Street (2012) in which he describes how tattoos are a core example of social semiotic multimodal processes:

In the complex of subjectivity and identity, of a life in social time always shaped by (the itself socially and affectively shaped) personal interest, of the ceaseless flow of meaning-making, of semiosis punctuated and framed now and then and only ever for a moment, and fixed by means of complex signs inscribed and displayed on the body—in our example here, all the issues which are at the core of social semiotic multimodality can be seen to be at work and in process.

Thus, in this chapter, through an analysis of tattoos from enthusiasts we discuss how performances of selfhood are as important as ever for living in the social world and that performances require a sense of ontological security (Giddens 1991) provided through anchors of the self. I suggest that tattoos provide an anchor of the self and these permanent marks are so important in impermanent times because they form a part of the performance of selfhood through their personal, social, and artistic connections and through their ability to represent our identities even while they remain fluid. Fruh and Thomas (in Arp Ed. 2012: 91) suggest this last point rings true from a philosophical perspective by noting:

tattoos can have an anchoring effect. As years and miles add up, it becomes easy to feel adrift in your own life. A couple of anchors can keep you in touch with where you have been, commit you to being somewhere you want to be, and provide fixed points of reference in which to chart new voyages. This is the chief contribution tattoos can make to narrative personal identity, and one way of explaining how inking it can make you feel at home in your own skin.

In the case of the first enthusiast discussed, Dr. Harry, we see an example of an enthusiast who anchors his self-identity through the symbolism of his ink and through connections with group affiliation. Through social semiotic analysis, we will take a voyage to places I

could not have previously guessed we would go at the beginning of our interview.



Figure 5.1 and Figure 5.2 Dr. Harry's black outline tattoos symbolizing his Priesthood in the Temple of Set, photos by the author with permission from the enthusiast, tattoo artist

unknown.

Harry (early 40s, male)

The Temple of Set

Referencing

I first met Dr. Harry when he walked into The Studio one day for his tattoo appointment. I was working the reception desk and after taking his information and letting the artist know his appointment was waiting, I noticed Harry's t-shirt. It depicted Plato's Allegory of the Cave and inspired me to strike up some philosophical banter with him. This then led me to schedule a formal interview for another time. During our interview, I learned that Dr. Harry holds a Ph.D. in a field of study that mixes philosophy, religion, and psychology. He is an expert on esotericism and the left-hand path. He led me down a rabbit hole of symbolism, Jungian individuation, and obscure deviant religions. A priest in the Temple of Set, Harry shared a conversation with me that lasted almost two hours. We went from talking about his tattoos—sparingly spread around the surface of his arms—which were inspired by his quest for deeper knowledge and the separation of his psyche into the antinomian path, to the nuanced details of the Setian order.

Since all of Harry's tattoos share similar subject matter, inspiration—even though they were executed at different periods of time indicating significant moments of perceived personal growth for the enthusiast—I group them into one narrative in order to explore their cultural meanings and history as they relate to each other and to Harry's path. Starting with the icon of the neopagan pentagram, as it is the most easily

recognizable of Harry's tattoos, we uncover a symbolic complexity in Harry's ink. The familiar representation of the inverted five pointed star, drawn using a continuous line technique with the distinctive outer circle, has come to have an indexical reference, through mass media depictions, with images of Satan, Wicca, or the dark and deviant.

This symbol received ample attention by arguably the world's best known symbologist, Robert Langdon, the title character in author Dan Brown's second and most famous novel *The Da Vinci Code*. In this story, Langdon first encounters the pentagram on the deceased body of a curator at The Louvre. A true semiotician, Langdon is not satisfied with the obvious qualities of what he sees and traces the pentagram back to the binary opposition between masculine and feminine. The symbol on the body is *not* meant to represent devil worship or the dark and deviant as the informed observer might guess. Instead, he claims, that the curator is surely attempting to illuminate, after death, the sacred feminine history of the symbol which related to the Goddess Venus.

Fiction aside, referencing Harry's tattoo raises questions of *what* this tattoo means and *how* these meanings are encoded. In answering these questions, let us review the February 2008 edition of *Skin and Ink* magazine which features an article by famed body modification photographer Charles Gatewood titled "Tattoo Magic" and deals with the relationship between neopaganism and tattooing. It attributes beginnings of this form of tattooing to the 1980s and coins the practice as "sacred tattooing." Meant to evoke the ritual nature of tattooing in classical ages such as the tattoo as a totem in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (Durkheim 1995: 234), the magic-inclined enthusiast getting tattooed is said to be seeking a strong sense of sacred connection to the symbols in question. Gatewood (2008:12) writes: "their magical symbols include the pentagram,

totem animals, energy chakras, spirals, pictographs, and images of various deities.” In Harry’s words, this is what his tattoo is supposed to represent:

This is a pentagram with roman numerals for 45. This represents 45 years after 1966 which is the first year of Satanism. I’m a member of the Temple of Set and although we use a different organization we adopt the Satanic calendar. The pentagram isolates the psyche from all those around. Everything that has been piled on you through life and experiences has to be pushed out in order to rid yourself from this narrow mindset. This is the first and most challenging step to becoming a member of the Temple of Set. The Temple of Set members are supposed to represent nobility. We are not part of the objective, but instead part of the subjective universe. You become obsessed with yourself, but in a good way. I cut out a lot of friends because they were not doing anything for me. I only have so many seconds left on this planet, you know?

This one over here is a stylized hieroglyphic, it should be a little more elongated but I cut it short so it wouldn’t come down too far to be exposed past my sleeve. I didn’t know how far I wanted to go with tattoos at this point. It represents a knife in Egyptian culture and that is the knife which cuts the symbolic umbilical cord. A violent cleaving, you have to not fall asleep and be aware of how you are being influenced. Not to be isolated but to be isolate, fully contained and engaged while looking outward. I was focusing on darkness at the time, the unconscious, if you will. This represents me developing into an even more aware member of the Temple.

Deriving from humble beginnings in California and propelled by founding member, Michael Aquino, the Temple of Set is defined by the current High Priest of the Church of

Satan, Peter H. Gilmore (2016), as “fundamentally at odds with the Church of Satan” and that “the ex-Satanists who formed the Temple of Set follow a path quite different from that of the Church of Satan, which has never veered from its dedication to rational self-interest, indulgence, and a glorification of the carnal and material.” From the doctrine provided by the Temple of Set themselves, *Set* refers to the Prince of Darkness, Satan, but adopts the predynastic Egyptian term for Satan as a way of evoking history, symbolism, and mystery (xepher.org). Dr. Harry suggests that the Temple of Set is about separating oneself from everyone else because the members work toward achieving a level of higher intelligence gained through perfecting an introspective gaze. He also tells me how the Temple of Set takes its beginnings from Anton LeVay’s Church of Satan but extends itself much further into self-exploration (indulgence) and the pursuit of “an opening of intelligence.”

Rational self-indulgence is undisputed amongst the Setian order, yet one must be careful not to dismiss the pursuit of higher intelligence as entirely an exercise in being shallow. As Bauman (2008: 14) points out, it was Georg Simmel who observed that “values are measured by the other values which have to be sacrificed to obtain them, and delay in gratification is arguably the most excruciating of sacrifices for people cast in the fast-moving and fast-changing settings characteristic of our liquid modern society of consumers.” To separate oneself from social norms and regulations in the pursuit of antinomianism is indeed an anomic practice in delaying gratification. “Indeed, why work on self-improvement with all the strenuous effort and painful self-sacrifice such toil inevitably requires?” (Bauman 2008: 14).

Bauman’s *The Art of Life* (2008) answers this question and describes Harry’s

pursuits by noting that all of us are the artists of our own lives in liquid modern times and that “these days each man and each woman is an artist not so much by choice as, so to speak, by the decree of universal fate” (56). Harry’s own academic idol, Carl Jung, described the role of symbols like the pentagram as “giving meaning to the life of a man” and offers a suggestion of why Harry would look toward religion and deities to provide him with guidance toward individuation: “the individual who is not anchored in God can offer no resistance on his own resources to the physical and moral blandishments of the world” (1990 [1957]: 14).

In the book, *Sacred Canopy*—written following his seminal coauthored text *The Social Construction of Reality*—Peter Berger (1967: 28) claims that “religion is the audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe as being humanly significant.” He later goes on to justify this claim by stating that in order for the precarious order of human-social realities to maintain themselves, they need a sense of legitimation which is best achieved through religious dogma. “Religion legitimates so effectively because it relates the precarious reality constructions of empirical societies with ultimate reality” (32). In other words, the ability religions have to jump to the primordial thesis allows individuals a social canopy protecting themselves and people around them and therefore a claim for how to behave via legitimation in the social construction of reality.

But Harry’s religion of choice, the Temple of Set, is antinomian and therefore against traditional religious practices and this is where the complexity and contradiction begin in Harry’s philosophies represented in the symbolism of his tattoos. Why associate with such a distinctive and indoctrinated religious order when one wishes to separate one’s self from social norms? Why choose to represent this separation through entering

into another community such as the one of the tattoo enthusiast?

In *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements* (2006), Canadian sociologist Lorne Dawson helps us gain answers to the curious case of Dr. Harry. While referring to the breakdown of institutional norms and controls in a risk society, Dawson writes that people turn inward more frequently in a world full of perceived risk and uncertainty. They do so to work on a reflective project of self-identity where they search to fill their lives with meaning. Because interpersonal relationships are more and more unstable and treacherous, the argument becomes that “religions tend to ‘remoralize’ life, providing the reassurance required to make important commitments when only partial information and understanding is available” (Dawson 2006: 58).

The topics of morality and self-anchoring become salient while considering a tattoo as the way to represent these complicated feelings social actors have about constructing self-identity in liquid modern times. Thus through his knowledge and admiration for the symbolism of the Temple of Set, Harry evokes strong associations with simple tattoos and complicated meanings. What Dr. Harry seems to see in the Temple of Set is the potential for personal growth transcending conventional people who lack strength. He has the assistance of a group of intelligent fellow members of a distinguished deviant subculture.

In his discussion of the Freemasons, another group shrouded by symbolism, the esoteric, and by societal mystification and misunderstanding, Kenney (2012) notes “by far the largest group of respondents (in his research) claimed *Freemasonry as a means of moral development and action* (i.e., as something that helped improve and regulate one’s ethical actions and moral character, something that gives men a core or standard to live up to).” Thus, there is a strong suggestion that those who enter groups which are deviant by

their separation from mainstream culture and society are looking for an avenue, and importantly in others, to build and co-construct the art of their lives via a path toward higher claims to morality and knowledge. Bauman (2008: 53):

Human life consists of a perpetual confrontation between “external conditions” (perceived as “reality,” by definition of a matter always resistant to, and all too often defying, the agent’s will) and the designs of its “auctors” (authors/actors): their aim to overcome the active or passive resistance, defiance and/or inertia of matter and to remould reality in accordance with their chosen vision of the “good life”.

Mapping

The answer to the question of *why* a person interested in going against the grain would associate with a religious order and choose to represent this association through symbols like tattoos, must be found in Harry’s connection with himself and his self-exploration. Building self-identity and finding moments of improvement in his art of life, Harry is dramatizing himself as a modern citizen using tools of permanence.

Well we are born the way we are born and the first step of antinomianism is to change that natural state about yourself and tattoos seem like a great way to alter your essence. It’s not rebellion because they are so common. Mine are just basic and simple ways of separating my former self from my new altered psyche.

It is arguably ironic that those uninterested in traditional religions for reasons associated with their inclination to build alternative realities would turn to religions—rife with their own traditions and rules. But as the above quote from Bauman suggests, we are all interested in pursuing a vision of “the good life” and in the case of Dr. Harry, and others

banding together under the moniker of deviant religious orders, there is a strong sense that seeking others with which to share in this experience is still of importance when conducting a perpetual search for self and social identity. Choosing the art of tattooing as the avenue for representing such a search for identity means that even though the reasons for joining religious (or fraternal) organizations in the liquid modern world may be geared more toward improving one's self-identity—rather than altruism as in the past—the way we represent such associations has not changed. In fact, it seems that marking these experiences through permanent means is such a human venture that even liquid modernity cannot dissolve it.¹⁸

¹⁸ In his *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) [1995]: 232-234), Durkheim writes about totems of early religions which are being tattooed on people in small island cultures. While doing so, Durkheim proves to be equal parts master of prose and founder of sociology. Although technologies continue to develop, tattoos remain and still represent instances of collective conscience and collective effervescence: “Wild passions that could unleash themselves in the midst of the crowd cool and die down once the crowd has dispersed, and individuals wonder with amazement how they could let themselves be carried so far out of character. But if the movements by which these feelings have been inscribed on things that are durable, then they too become durable....in fact, it is understandable, especially where technology is still underdeveloped that tattooing is the most direct and expressive means by which the communion of minds can be affirmed.”



Figure 5.3 Zoë's Frida Kahlo inspired tattoo in a neo-traditional style, photo by Alex, the tattoo artist, reproduced with permission

Zoë (late 30s, female)

Me: Permanence. Did that weigh into your decision to get tattooed?

Zoë: I've thought about it more with this one. I sought this most recent one out because of a realization in my life recently that everything does change and maybe I just really want something permanent. It is the one thing that is permanent. Death is permanent and tattoos. I can't think of anything else that is really permanent. I'm living with such impermanence right now especially when it comes to relationships that I just wanted something that was permanent and that was beautiful. And that's not going to

change. Or it will change with me; not change and leave me.

So this recent one inspired by Frida Kahlo is extremely different than my previous smaller tattoos. I thought a long time about what I want and I knew I wanted it to be connected to Frida Kahlo because she's an important figure in my life.

Frida Kahlo is very famous for her eyebrows and her unconventional beauty, in terms of the way she dressed, in terms of the way she acted, and in terms of her facial features. She had very thick eyebrows, almost a unibrow. And so in one of her self-portraits she made her eyebrow into this swallow-looking bird.

So I told my artist I wanted that bird. It was the main inspiration. I wanted it to represent Frida. Then the banner is from a quote of hers which discusses, in Spanish, how nothing stays the same and everything changes.

Referencing

Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) was a Mexican painter, feminist, and activist. In her lifetime, she achieved several art world successes such as being the first 20th-century Mexican artist whose painting was purchased by The Louvre. In the 1940s she was featured or participated in a series of successful exhibits in New York City. Elizabeth Garber (1992: 47) points out that in understanding Kahlo's work art critics tend to find four major themes to discuss and use to unpack the meaning behind the art work. These four themes are: 1. Her work as a separation from her Mexican heritage 2. Her work as part of the feminist movement 3. Her work as highly autobiographical and 4. Her work as expressions of gender. On the last point Garber (47) says that while these categories can

be limiting “to interpret Kahlo’s work without reference to her existence as a woman, however, gives an incomplete reading of her paintings.”

While Kahlo did not identify as a surrealist, many have considered her work distinctly surrealist (Mahon 2011). Surrealism is a unique genre of painting, literature, and poetry that emphasizes the logic of the illogical, the “logic” of dreams, for example. According to Crepaldi (2007: 207) in *Modern Art 1900-1945: The Age of the Avant-Gardes*, the surrealist movement had no unitary structure, instead it has been described as having an anti-logical and irrational character. Surrealists are typically considered hostile to rules and hierarchies and the philosophies behind the surrealist movement transcend more than just artists practicing in the tradition. A precise definition of the art form can be taken from André Breton’s 1924 *Manifeste du Surréalisme* which defines surrealism as “psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express – verbally, by means of written word, or in any other manner – the actual functioning of thought. It is dictated by thought in the absence of any control being exercised by reason and is exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern” (Breton, as quoted in Crepaldi 2007: 206).

What made Kahlo’s art work surrealist, as is evident in one of her more well-known portraits titled *The Broken Column* (1944), is the way in which it unconsciously showcases emotions of anguish and sadness while substituting incompleteness and the unexpected for everyday elements. The human spine is depicted as a crumbling stone column, for example. This duality of nature and culture within the context of the breakdown of the physical body was painted around the same time as some lost personal relationships and, following Garber (1992), could be said to represent the inner struggle Kahlo was feeling between herself and the outside world of a patriarchal culture.

Specifically, we might expect that this painting represents the breakdown of her relationship with the artist Diego Rivera and the physical pain she felt as a result of a personal injury in a bus accident.

The quotation in Zoë's tattoo can be translated as "*nothing stays the same and everything changes.*" It is based on an original remark by Kahlo, which uses parallelism. "*Nada hay absoluto. Todo se cambia, todo se mueve, todo revoluciona, todo vuela y se va*" (*Nothing is absolute. Everything changes, everything moves, everything revolves, everything flies and goes away*). In looking at Zoë's desire to have something that stays permanent we can sense a strong connection between Kahlo and Zoë's narratives which she shared with me about her own love, loss, and about impermanence and her wish to be at peace with it.

In analyzing the message of the text, we may well consider how it comes to symbolize the way enthusiasts encode meanings in their tattoos. In this instance, the message raises an awareness that Zoë chose a permanent means of discussing and contending with the impermanence of modern living and in so doing proved once more that the medium is indeed the message. For someone like Zoë, there remains a strong reaction as permanence is actively sought out to counteract the liquid love (Bauman 2003) she found herself experiencing. This reaction took the form of symbolic opposition to ephemeral forces.

Mapping

Well I think it's a whole bunch of things. It's life in general. I decided the quote based on two things: 1. When my husband and I separated last December it was really

tough for me and 2. unrelated to the separation I fell in love with someone else but that didn't work either. I think the heartbreak inspired it but I also think it applies more broadly. In terms of turning forty, in terms of my kids getting older, you know, time flies. My kids will eventually leave. That's also change. I don't feel like I need to have control over my life. And I think a lot of people do feel like that and maybe they forget that everything changes so it's that kind of reminder as well.

In her edited volume, *The Tattoo Project*, sociologist Deborah Davidson (2016: 195) concludes the book with a beautiful and sad personal reflection in which she says:

Many years ago when my infants died shortly after birth, the message to me and to others like me was clearly 'do not remember'...because the social expectation had been that the loss of a baby is best left forgotten, my children were never included as part of me and my family. My first tattoo of two butterflies, representing my son Jason and my daughter, Mary, embodied their memory and showed others that I do remember, and they remain with me.

Like Davidson and many others cited in this work and beyond, Zoë uses her tattoos as a way of opposing the rationality of human experiences by inscribing things on her body which otherwise may be forgotten as they could prove to be cumbersome or unnecessary. Enthusiasts turn the tide on this sort of "eternal sunshine of the spotless mind"¹⁹ by mapping out their self-identities and what is important to them. In this case, it is family; even triumphs and failures like her failed relationships which show growth, change, and

¹⁹ How happy is the blameless vestal's lot!
The world forgetting, by the world forgot.
Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind!
Each pray'r accepted, and each wish resign'd
Alexander Pope – Eloisa to Abelard, Stanza 14.

not perfection. These experiences, when made durable through the art of tattooing, act like anchors of the different stops in the shores of her life. In the tattoo, we may tour her time spent studying in Mexico and her own artistic sensibilities. And yet, it also encapsulates her loss and heartbreak. Her self-identity is marked by pursuits of happiness and moments of separation. This tattoo, for Zoë wasn't just meaningful because of who and what is mapped out in the imagery but also because the timing coincides with the gaining of a sense of personal freedom which goes along with the loss of her romantic relationships.

Bauman's *Liquid Love* (2003) is a work that explores how modern relationships may fit into our understanding of a swift-paced world. Bauman (viii) states quite clearly that "in a liquid modern setting of life, relationships are perhaps the most common, acute, deeply felt and troublesome incarnations of ambivalence." The popular sentiment Bauman discusses is that people seem to think that as long as we are able to remain very conscious and calculating about our relationships, we too will be able to receive pleasure without enclosure. Or, in other words, as long as relationships remain "diluted when consumed" (ix) or better yet within the realm of a "top-pocket" or "semi-detached relationship" (36) we may be able to have our pleasure and remain relatively unscathed by drama or heartbreak.

This sort of rationalization of even the most basic of human experiences such as intimate relationships is reminiscent of Max Weber's earlier account of the growing rationality of human relations which coincided with capitalist modernity. In this development, Weber said that we become wrapped in a *shell made of steel*, which, according to Peter Baehr (2001: 153) is a "metaphor [that] sums up, graphically and

dramatically, the predicament of modern human beings trapped in a socioeconomic structure of their own making.” While Baehr’s translation is said to be truer to the original German source than the Parsonian translation of the “iron cage,” a qualifying statement needs to be added here that humans do not just construct these steel shells of rationality alone and, in Weber’s astute observations, it happens as “everything and everyone become subject to rules and expectations that are calculable, standardized, predictable, and instrumental” (McLennen 2011: 72).

In his *Art of Life* (2008: 8) Bauman writes in the chapter titled “What’s Wrong With Happiness?”, that “observers suggest that about half the goods crucial for human happiness have no market price and can’t be purchased in shops. Whatever your cash and credit standing, you won’t find in a shopping mall love and friendship, the pleasures of domesticity, the satisfaction that comes from caring for loved ones or helping a neighbor in distress (5).” In the same chapter, Bauman references humanist psychologist, Abraham Maslow, made famous by his often-cited “Hierarchy of Needs,” who is being taught in business and economics courses. In practice, the hierarchy has been transformed into a recipe for financial success in honing one’s motivations. Many have thus come to think of the hierarchy of needs as a ladder to climb in the pursuit of happiness, the same way most in the liquid modern era incorrectly tie together affluence and happiness. Yet, as Myers (2004: 458) notes, “Maslow’s hierarchy is somewhat arbitrary (read: socially constructed); the order of such needs is not universally fixed.... People have starved themselves to make political statements.” Maslow’s true intent behind the hierarchy of needs was to show what people are able to achieve if they are made capable of reaching their full potential. Maslow, who, in an interview with Bauman, concluded that happiness,

however elusive, can come from really holding on to memories of your children or placing love and belonging above all else on your own hierarchy of needs much the same way Zoë tries to do when she discusses her sadness that her children will eventually get old and move away:

The great humanist psychologist Abraham Maslow and his little son shared their love for strawberries... 'my son', Maslow (once) told me [Bauman], 'was as most children are, impatient, impetuous, unable to slowly savor his delights and stretch his joy for longer; he emptied his plate in no time, and then looked wistfully at mine, still almost full. Each time, it happened, I passed my strawberries to him. And you know', so Maslow continued, 'I remember those strawberries tasting better in his mouth than mine.'



Figure 5.4 Sadie's origami crane tattoo with added symbolism to map out aspects of people she loves who have died (see the halo, sewing needles, and heart). Photo courtesy of the enthusiast, tattoo artist unknown, reproduced with permission.

Sadie (early 20s, female)

People who like tattoos tend to really like them, but people who dislike tattoos seem like they will never get that they have meaning and they are important. I feel like in the next 10 years, people will start to understand that being tattooed is part of us.

Referencing

Origami (in English, “paper folding”) was often used in ancient Japan to symbolize happiness, peace, longevity, and good health. Folding the cranes is supposed to demonstrate the power of unity and virtues of patience. James Minoru Sakoda (1997: 4) describes how literary references clearly show that by the middle of the Edo Period (1614-1868) origami had become a popular pastime in Japan. Sakoda finds that the earliest citation of origami is from a work published in 1682, in which “reference is made to a seven-year-old child playing *orisue* (as origami was called) and making birds and flowers.” Cultural practices from the East seem irresistible to Westerners seeking aesthetically pleasing images that can hold coded meanings as their personal mapping is intentionally obfuscated by cultural coding. But why? Semiotic analysis may help us appreciate the value of nuanced appreciations of meaning as reasons for social action.

Denotation and Connotation

In discussing how adding emoji (Japanese for “picture word”) to a text message can add “specific connotative nuances to its meaning, most of which (can be) derived from culture-specific symbolism,” Marcel Danesi (2017: 59) offers insight into how the semiotic concepts of denotation and connotation work that is quite useful for our purposes. This is because enthusiasts are communicating messages intended when choosing their tattoo, while the range of implications within their semiotic resources are not so obvious to them.

To be specific, and without its more technical jargon, denotative meaning is that which is built into the signifier. By the agency behind the choice of sign, it comes to express more explicit and intended meanings. Danesi (59) notes that linguists like Saussure would call this system paradigmatic meaning. A specific message is being communicated by the positioning of referents within a system or code. In simple terms, the denotative meaning of the cranes in Figure 4.3 on Sadie’s ribs, evoke specific ideas when paired with the elements she has added—the halo, sewing needle, and heart. These cranes symbolize a more personal version of the iconic image of origami and thus imply meaning associated with people or events specific to her.

Connotative-level meaning, according to Danesi (59), fits within what semioticians call a syntagmatic structure, where culturally-specific meanings complete the interpretation and give culturally-specific meaning to a signifier. In Sadie’s cranes, this plays out in the way that Westerners will not have the same connotative interpretation of an origami crane as those steeped in the traditions of the East and will rely on the viewer to add his or her commonsense to complete the message. It is true that the same can be

said about the range of interpretations of a sign within the same culture. This is the level of non-shared meanings that enthusiasts thrive on when choosing symbols that are not easily defined. Citing Peirce, Danesi states that “the purely denotative aspect of a sign’s referent [is] the ‘immediate’ object, and [Peirce] called the many connotations that it evoked its ‘dynamical’ objects.”

For example, Robert J. Lang (2003: 3) who comments that the art of origami is traditionally Japanese and existed for 15 centuries would have connotative meaning for the symbol vastly different than a North American admiring Sadie’s work. In this difference, we come to appreciate how sophisticated and dynamic meaning is and therefore how each multimodal signifier acquires a sense of polysemy with vast semiotic potential. The designs of Japanese-style tattoos and the detailed shading found in Sadie’s origami cranes are the elegant shapes and lines appearing on the canvassed bodies of contemporary tattoo enthusiasts. This is the new professionalism in tattoo art which is also often tied with the art of far-off cultures and myths.

For Sadie and many others, tattoos also denote not just a sense of aesthetic sensibility but also sexuality through their connections with passion, beauty, and commitment. This aspect of tattooing first occurred to me through informal conversations during this research. Sadie told me: “I think tattoos look good on people, like they are an attraction thing.” While describing the lust for tattoos on others Sadie claims “I find myself dating tattooed guys. They just work for me, you know.” The following poem is included here because it demonstrates the sexuality of tattoos on the body while also demonstrating the artistic lure of Japanese-style art through its word-play involving popular Japanese tattoo designs like snakes, waves, and dragons. It should also be

observed that the subject of death is significant because of its irrevocable connection with the theme of permanence.

First Poem for You

Kim Addonizio

Credit: Addonizio, Kim. "First Poem for You" from *The Philosopher's Club*, BOA Editions, 1994, copyright Kim Addonizio.

*I like to touch your tattoos in complete
darkness, when I can't see them. I'm sure of
where they are, know by heart the neat
lines of lightning pulsing just above
your nipple, can find, as if by instinct, the blue
swirls of water on your shoulder where a serpent
twists, facing a dragon. When I pull you
to me, taking you until we're spent
and quiet on the sheets, I love to kiss
the pictures in your skin. They'll last until
you're seared to ashes; whatever persists
or turns to pain between us, they will still
be there. Such permanence is terrifying.
So I touch them in the dark; but touch them, trying.*

Mapping

Sadie's friend died of heart failure as a result of a rejected heart transplant. She was uneasy about giving details and I was uneasy about asking. From what I could gather, it

was back when the two of them were in high school at the age of 17. The only specific detail I was given was that he had received the transplant when he was young, around the age of 10. Because “fighting rejection is an ongoing process” for those with transplants and even “if rejection can be controlled, survival increases (to only) 10 years” (BhiMij and Zieve 2011). Some might say this individual had experienced the best of a bad situation.

However, this kind of optimism is usually overshadowed by the sorrow brought on by losing a friend, son, or brother at an age when adult life is only beginning. This individual now exists for Sadie as a collection of memories which are durably inscribed on her ribcage as one of the origami cranes in the photo. Sadie describes the rest of the tattoo by saying: “I have three paper cranes, the first with a halo represents my mom. The second has knitting needles and that is Nan. The third has an atomic heart, like the heart inside your chest, and that one is for my friend who needed a better heart.” I asked her why she decided to represent such complex feelings in a tattoo and she responded, “you can’t predict big moments, but when everything was set off with all these people dying I felt I just had to get these done.” The choice of the origami crane to represent loved ones who had died is something we can now appreciate. For some the connotation is intertwined with historical references to good virtues like luck, hope, and happiness; but for Sadie, what is most important about these images is having highly aesthetic pieces of art which can properly and beautifully embody meanings of the people they represent and which are fused with her sense of self-identity.

A Tattooed Person

An enthusiast, Stella (early 20s, female), pulled her shirt up in our interview to expose a very large black and grey-scale image of Audrey Hepburn extending down her ribs to her hip. She told me:

For me, she [Audrey Hepburn] is just a huge pop icon. I have been obsessed with her for a long time. She was the most gorgeous woman who ever lived. While being graceful and into fashion she had balls, you know? She had gone through the holocaust before her later career brought her to be this rad ambassador for UNICEF. She was more than just a pretty face. I have a different tattoo for my dad. I have one for my grandma. Audrey is just for me. It represents the parts of me that I think make me, me.

When an enthusiast gets tattooed they are not just someone with a tattoo. They are a tattooed person. The tattoo becomes an integral part of one's identity and part of the larger narrative of the self. If the self is made and re-made through interaction, then each time meanings shift in our life and influence the way our bodies look to us and others we weigh the anchor and set sail for the pursuit of our future self-identity.

But this image of our sense of sense is wholly complicated by cultural factors and ideas of femininity. In her book *Covered In Ink: Tattoos, Women, and the Politics of the Body* (2015), Beverly Yuen Thompson asks a provocative question in regard to what enthusiasts see as their tattooed self being their "authentic self" by writing "What if you were forced to be covered in tattoos and show them everywhere you went if you are a non-tattooed person?" Categorizing the authentic self as the image we see when we consider how we perceive ourselves to be, Thompson (120) states that for tattooed people

who are forced to cover up parts of their authentic self, there is an emotional and spiritual toll that builds up and has unforeseen or theoretically underappreciated negative consequences.

Chapter 6

Of Cultural Change and Gendered Bodies

This is a study of tattooing practices in the West (Canada). But beginning with an analysis of an enthusiast named Jones, readers should appreciate that talking about Western tattooing solely is impossible as tattooing is indeed a global practice. Much of its richest history exists in the South Pacific, and prominently in Japan. This chapter will show how definitions, customs, and social interpretations of tattoos not only shift cross-culturally but also across gender lines. Thus, the second major theme in my research dealing with why people get tattooed today is the power tattoos have to express feelings of intimacy, control, and personhood reflecting cultural change and gendered resistance.

First, Jones will take us to perspectives of East versus West in the aesthetics and culture of the tattoo while also opening a discussion of an emerging masculinity crisis in the liquid modern society of today. Secondly, Helen allows us to see how gender and the body always tend to intersect and do so in tattoos. As they represent sport, structural inequalities, and questions of Canadian pastimes.



Figure 6.1 Jones' Japanese style tattoo with crouching tiger. Photo by Jones, Tattoo Artist: Sarah Rogers.

Figure 6.2 A portion of "Sato Masakiyo's Tiger Hunt, 1860" by Kunitsuna II (1829 - 1874), obtainable as a print through the webpage fujiarts.com.

Jones (Late 40s, male)

Referencing

This tattoo of the Japanese goddess of thunder depicted with huge wings pounding the drums has a really wrathful look on her face and the tiger I added below her is on his back in a defensive position. I have often pondered if the tiger is me and the Japanese goddess represents the women in my life. [laughs.] In this tattoo, femininity has this

spiritual sophistication and the tiger is rather just a beast and so I often think about these tattoos as a metaphor for my life. I am the masculine below the power of femininity. I think I have always liked illustrations, I like bold lines and sharp images rather than sketchy lines or more painterly tattoos and so these images and their mythologies really lent themselves to looking the way I wanted them to look.

Jones's tiger and Japanese Goddess tattoo—surrounded by a background composed of depictions of traditional earthly elements like wind—is a great example of Japanese-influenced Western tattooing. The custom nature of tattooing practices which was first popularized from the West means traditional Eastern images can be tweaked and changed according to taste to reflect personal meanings and self-identity and in so doing, these tattoos help perpetuate cultural differences between traditional Eastern tattooing and contemporary Western tattooing.

As chronicled by Ed Hardy (2014: 111, 124), the first artistic images of Japanese origin that made their way into the tattoo pantheon in the West are said to have come from the famed master of the American old school, Sailor Jerry. Specifically, they originate in his fascination with tattoos of Japanese origin on the skin of islanders where he lived and worked in Honolulu, Hawaii and before this from his voyages in the South Pacific as a member of the United States Navy. Through written correspondence with Japanese tattoo artists, Sailor Jerry would find the style he was looking for attached in returned letters from Eastern tattooists to blend with his own unique Americana tattooing he had been championing. Eventually, in the early 1970s Ed Hardy would even arrange a trip to become the first Westerner to go East and learn the art of Japanese tattooing as a

guest of artist, *Oguri*. Confirming this, Margo DeMello (2000: 72) explains that Sailor Jerry (Collins) was the first person credited with bringing Japanese tattoo imagery and style to U.S. From there, tattooists like Ed Hardy took on this aesthetic and made these images of part of Americana tattooing. DeMello (2000: 73) discusses how Sailor Jerry had an ongoing “trade relationship with Japanese tattooist Horihide (Kazuo Oguri).” Yet, although Sailor Jerry may have maintained a working relationship with Japanese artists, he secretly held a grudge after the Second World War toward the Japanese. Because of this, he set out on a mission to use American imagery as a substitution for the focus images in traditional Japanese-style tattoos. DeMello (2000: 73) notes that Sailor Jerry believed “what was exceptional about Japanese tattooing was not the center image but the background.”

Aesthetic differences are not the only major rift in tattooing between the East and the West. Having been outlawed for the first half of the 20th century and still stigmatized by its association with the organized crime of the Yakuza, *irezumi* (tattoo in Japanese) shares the same checkered past as the practice of tattooing does in the West but has been slower to reach the level of cultural acceptance enjoyed in most Western countries. In their work on the rituals, myth, and symbolism of the mafia, Nicaso and Danesi (2013: 72) discuss how tattoos are still stigmatized symbols in many parts of Japan and this is likely because “the yakuza have elaborate initiation rituals, which include the application of elaborate tattoos covering the entire torso, as well the arms and legs. Naked, a Yakuza looks like a painted mural, with images of dragons, flowers, landscapes, and gang insignias. The new member is supposed to show his determination and courage by subjecting himself to hundreds of hours of painful tattooing.”

Moreover, a news story written for *The Independent* in the U.K. by Stephen Crabbe (5 March 2017) says that there exist approximately 2,228 tattoo parlors in the U.K. in comparison to only 898 Starbucks franchises. Citing the popular story of future King George V donning a Japanese tattoo, Crabbe points out that the rise in popularity of tattoos in the U.K. has been happening since the turn of the 20th century when the 16-year-old English prince committed his skin to be inked by a Japanese artist. Indeed, as Crabbe contends, it is remarkable that the British (and Westerners, generally) admire Japanese tattoo art so much, yet the practice has not been able to shed much of its heavy historical weight in Japan itself.

Mieko Yamada (2009: 322) claims that the modern period of Japanese history, credited to the Meiji restoration of 1868, first cast the practice of tattooing as deviant, distasteful, and as a symbol of primitive times. However, he does point out that the tide is slowly changing as it is the same “rise of modernization and westernization that changed the Japanese lifestyle, including the view of the body and tattoos” (322) that has allowed for a flood of Western influence, heightened by the rise of industrial capitalism and the spread of globalization throughout the modern and post-modern eras. As such, tattoo practices in Japan are slowly being redefined. Yet, an article by France 24 Observers online (April 2017) discussed that tattooing is merely tolerated and not really accepted by authorities. With the creative drain as talented tattoo artists leave Japan to practice the craft where it is appreciated, there has been a movement called “Save Tattooing in Japan” which has a Facebook page of over 12,000 followers. They also point to the fact that the 2020 Olympic games hosted by Japan will bring tattooed athletes and spectators and encourage cultural change and understanding.

Keeping this socio-cultural history in mind, I turn to Jones' tiger. Tigers and other indexical creatures are a fixture of traditional woodblock paintings of the *Ukiyo-e* genre. In the one pictured above by Kunitsuna II, the tiger is a crouching victim of a spear attack. Yang and An (2005) suggest that the mythology of the tiger in Japan—as represented in woodblock paintings—actually comes from earlier Chinese folklore. Presumably ferocious and feral, tigers hide until beckoned. While delving into the history of the queen deity, *Xiwangmu*, Yang and An (2005: 219) suggest that bronze statues crafted during the Han dynasty depict the deity as typically a “respectable goddess sitting on a cloud or a seat made of a dragon or a tiger.”

Multimodality in Jones's Ink

To further analyze the complex narratives across cultural and gendered lines in Jones's ink and stories, we can profit from a multimodal treatment of the tattoo. Multimodality, as Hodge (2017: 14) observes, is a modern-day answer to M.A.K. Halliday's concept of multidimensionality. “Language and meaning in social contexts are always multidimensional” as they exist in more than one sensory mode. Multidimensionality allows for more nuanced appreciation of how meaning is transmitted, defined, and consumed through a sophisticated ordeal that involves the use of coexisting modes of transmission. What makes multimodality the preferred concept—as it was formulated through the work of Kress and van Leeuwen (2001; 2006), who are champions of building on Hallidaysian insights—is that it comes out of a “changing media environment, in which print modes rapidly lost their long-standing dominance, and new multimedia forms flourished” (Hodge 2017: 14).

The world we live in, more than ever, offers competing forms of meaning-making signs which, taken together, can provide a rich sense of purpose, reason, and analysis of action for the social semiotician. Today, as Hodge (15) claims, “multimodal analysis is not optional here, it is essential to track the various meanings as they cross different levels.” To be specific, Hodge (17) defines a theory of signs that draws upon multimodal appreciation as “a complex relationship between language, meaning, and reality in social contexts.” Stating that multimodality is necessary because meaning comes from more than just what we traditionally term language (spoken and written), Abousnnouga and Machin (2013: 37) state that multimodal analysis allows one to expose the agency and intent behind a message; as Kress (2010: 61) says, multimodality importantly takes into consideration “histories of social shaping and cultural origins/provenance of elements of that mode.”

From this, we may find that the choice of language in the words Jones gives: “wrathful” for the powerful goddess and “defensive” for the helpless tiger, combined with the visual artistic language of tattooing, plus the tattoo itself—as a message—demonstrates that tattoos are a true multimodal form. They are not simply visual. Analysis of tattoos must combine the visual mode (the tattoo), the spoken mode (words chosen and omitted), and the historical-written mode. Jones’s appreciation of the historical meanings implied through his Japanese-inspired ink is inconsistent with the conception I provided above from Yang and An (2005: 219) who state the mythical implies the goddess sits on the tiger not out of dominance but out of service on part of the tiger. This is further implied by the language that the goddess is “respectable” and the tiger is merely a seat. Jones’s interpretation of the art shows a different, perhaps Western

interpretation of the meaning of this art in which tigers are associated with masculinity, strength, and virility. The visual mode of the tattoo, in the spirit of the medium being the message, is likely used by Jones as a complimentary meaning to this conception in that tattoos themselves are traditionally masculine forms of body communication in the West (Atkinson 2011).

In her analysis of the semiotics of marketing and advertisements in liquid modern Russian society and culture—made ever more uncertain by falling oil prices; the annexation of Crimea; economic sanctions from the West, and other social, political, and economic factors—Maria Papanthymou writes about “how brands protect us” for the online blog, *Semionaut*. In her content analysis of marketing materials, Papanthymou finds themes that, either from a denotative (manifest intended interpretations) or connotative (latent, culturally specific undertones) level, are meant to wrap viewers in a sense of safety, tradition, and comfort. Talking about advertisements geared toward men in uncertain times, the author discusses “The Hero” and says there are many ads that compare men with “strong animals like lions, tigers, bears, horses, and others [and these] brands are associated with power, energy and aggression of these animals” (Papanthymou 3 July 2017). Jones seems to relish his masculine strength as something that needs to be defended against oncoming attacks from the powerful women in his life.

Looking at an example from Hodge (49-51) who demonstrates the utility of multimodal social semiotic analysis through an examination of a *faux pas* in the workplace, he points out that “social semiotics plays a valuable role where hidden meanings erupt into social life...[and that]...normal social interaction is characterized by shifting relations of power and solidarity, which frame social semiotic analysis of every

instance, small or large. In this situation, meanings are routinely shifted, changed, concealed, or distorted, seen differently or denied by all participants.” This is a useful perspective to help us appreciate diverse interpretations despite the fact that a banana is not an apple even if it is mislabeled (this is one of the themes in ads on CNN about “fake news”). In appreciating how Jones maps his sense of masculine self in his ink, semiotics helps us appreciate how his relationships with women exist in a world of socially constructed definitions of gender and uncertainty of roles, much like the Russian case in Papanthymou’s analysis.

Gender and the Masculinity Crisis

Mapping

In asking what kind of meanings are encoded within this tattoo and why it means what it means (Danesi 2007), we are led back to more questions about gender.

I personally think about masculinity in the modern age sometimes and how men are more and more under the control of women around them. Not necessarily in a negative way, just the change in the ways we interact. My first tattoo was me expressing my individuality and taking control of my own identity and so I got the tattoo when my girlfriend at the time was out of town. I was like saying “here I am as a man and I do these things because I want to.”

Jones’s ideas about masculinity and femininity in liquid modern times fascinated me. The imagery of his tattoo as a perceived shift in the power women have over men in the

modern era was something that directly influenced his self-identity but the theme is expressed artistically, and perhaps indirectly, with classical images of Asian mythology whose meanings are likely to be obscure to most Euro-Canadians.

Raewyn Connell's book simply titled *Gender: In World Perspective* (2011) is a brilliant work to consider while tackling the social construction of gender. The author puts a nuanced and reflexive position on a topic that continues to define how we all, as social beings, interact with each other: "gender arrangements are thus, at the same time, sources of pleasure, recognition, and identity, and sources of injustice and harm. This means that gender is inherently political—but it also means the politics can be complicated and difficult" (7). To appreciate how gender can be pleasure and pain is to understand that "people construct *themselves* as masculine and feminine" and "most people do this willingly, and often enjoy the gender polarity" (6). Yet, as Connell noted, it is indeed difficult to dismiss gender as an uncontested topic where one can just go about constructing oneself without real, and most often unequal, consequences. Quoting statistics from the past ten years, the author makes readers aware of the disparity that still occurs between genders in that "women are less likely to be out in the public world than men, and, when they are, have fewer resources. Most women in the world, especially women with children are (still) economically dependent on men" (3).

Moller (2007: 268) critiques Connell's conceptions of gender and in particular her often cited idea of hegemonic masculinity by pointing out the drawbacks it holds in comparison to the post-structural theories of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault who see power as more pervasive and omnipresent rather than concentrated and unified.

Hegemonic masculinity conditions researchers to think about masculinity and power in a specific and limited way: that masculine power is possessive and commanding and that it is exercised by an identifiable few who can then be rightly (even righteously) criticized. This is, I suggest, a rather formulaic mode of thinking about power with which most of us are very familiar. Thus a central strategy in the literature which draws on Connell's work is to identify which groups of males possess a hegemonic masculinity, and to then elaborate how their masculinity subordinates women and other men

In other words, power exists in many forms and manifests in different ways beyond the simple domination of a few through masculine dominance. The masculinity crisis discussed below, for instance, can be criticized as something which may not really exist. Some people argue that the privilege of masculinity still far outweighs that of the feminine in several intersecting ways. In other words, criticisms such as this which help us think more critically of power raises the question: can the advantaged really be in crisis?

Yet, some authors would contend that Jones' stories about his tattoos allude to what he genuinely feels while living in an era characterized by a "masculinity crisis." For instance, sociologist Michael Atkinson (2011: 106) notes that "masculine hegemony has been maintained in Canada for quite some time through complex interplay between male-dominated capitalist power, institutional authority, social position, and common ideology across the social landscape." What Atkinson calls the "pastiche masculinity" of today means that men have the freedom (and the burden) to create themselves without the aid of

clearly held concepts of masculinity. In other words, men may imitate qualities of traditional femininity in dress, hair, and body projects (shaving), while still appealing to images of the traditional male. The more one can imitate these qualities the more successful the modern man is at navigating relationships. Atkinson (108):

Quite simply, in a post-traditional society where individualism and the narration of individual identity reign supreme, men who have been historically out of the masculine power loop, or those who have been cast out of Eden in late modernity, now have the opportunity to locate and exercise pastiche masculinity in novel ways.

Beverly Yuen Thompson (2015: 94) states that although women now “outweigh men as tattoo collectors” we see that patriarchy is alive and well in tattoos and tattooing. While more women (in a traditional gender binary) are more tattooed than ever before, the types of tattoo, the placement, and the subject matter are still overwhelmingly influenced by highly limiting and uneven perspectives of a hegemonically influenced culture in the West. Thompson (2015: 95) writes that “the expectation that women will put effort into creating a feminine appearance can be a burden for those who define their femininity in an alternative manner.” This quotation, which highlights the reality of tattooing today and its inequality of choice amongst women who wish to identify beyond an either/or, cuts right into the heart of feminist inquiry. Indeed, according to Susan Faludi (1992: 17) in regards to defining feminism: “Its agenda is basic: It asks that women not be forced to ‘choose’ between public justice and private happiness. It asks that women be free to

define themselves – instead of having their identity defined for them, time and time again, by their culture and their men.” Thompson (2015: 95) points out that dress codes which continue to unfairly target tattooed women are a relatively hidden manifestation of the lack of real choice women have to define themselves and to showcase this self to others.



Figure 6.3 Helen’s skates tattoo in photo-realism style, photo by the author with permission from the enthusiast, tattoo artist unknown.

Helen (early 50s, female)

So the story behind the tattoo of the skates is that my Dad died on me two years ago and because everyone else around me had already passed—my aunts, uncles,

grandparents—I really wanted to get something to remember him by. My Dad is my hero and my saving grace and so I thought to myself I would really like to get something to represent him properly. When I was little I really wanted to play hockey but I lived in Barrie and there was no hockey for girls. So I would go and watch my brother play with my Dad. But my Dad and I would play road hockey together and eventually he volunteered to be a girl's hockey coach so finally we could play!

So to honor him, I thought I would go and get the skates and because my Dad was also a police officer, I had pictures of his badge and badge number incorporated into the tattoo design. When my Dad retired, he was the longest serving officer in the province. His badge number was 2056 so you can see this represented on the bottom of the skates. Sometimes I will kiss my tattoo. I miss my Dad and this is my connection to him. Every time I look at it, I think of him. And I can carry this with me forever.

This last tattoo I got is located right next to the tattoo of the skates and is a Nikon camera. It was based at first on impulse as I walked by The Studio one day with my friend and said to her “come on, let's do it.”

Well I say impulse, but it is important to me because I spent a large part of my life as a teacher. And I spent many years of my life depressed, but not really knowing I was or why. And I decided one day I really can't teach anymore, so I was able to go through an early retirement and after being made to teach art one of my last years as a teacher I started to think about art more and more. Especially when this influenced me to learn to soapstone carve from an elder in Yukon. I started to realize I had a knack for art.

And so through exploring different artistic mediums like carving, watercolor, and clay, I started taking photos. And this has led me to my current path as I am about to

graduate from a photography class at college. I am the happiest I have been in a long time. For some reason, teaching just brought me down. And so this tattoo is a visual representation of following my dream, finding my happiness, and being lucky to have the chance to go back and do something with my life that I actually enjoy.

Referencing

Hockey is said to be Canada's sport and one of its most revered national pastimes. Indeed, the sport is as central to Canadian identity, locally and globally, as Tim Horton's coffee and maple syrup. Major cities with National Hockey League (NHL) teams come to life during playoff season as local economies receive boosts in the way of tourism and spending (CBC, Sep 22/2014). Hockey is still, however, most prominently a sport for males and the structural inequalities in the sport continue to dictate issues like disproportionate ice time, media attention, and fanfare between female versus male leagues (Theberge 2000: 8). Helen's childhood experiences showcase how small towns, in particular, promoted boys' hockey leagues at a much earlier and larger rate than girls' leagues.

Much like the practice of tattooing itself, the sport of hockey has at its focus the gendered body. Bodies are restricted by their social definitions and the dominant discourses about how bodies should behave and look. In her ethnography of female hockey players on the team called "Blades", Theberge (2000: 85) provides examples of how relationships with coaches can revolve around the politics of gender. Theberge remarks that "in her comments, a player suggests one element of the struggle over gendering of athleticism occurs on the Blades when the power and strength conveyed by

the players is on occasion countered by feminized constructions of their emotional fragility.”

To help us understand the politics of gender and the body as a subject of social control, it is profitable to turn our attention to Volume 1 of Michel Foucault’s series on *The History of Sexuality* (1982). As the philosopher Michel Foucault defines his concept of *biopower* as systematic, and purposeful power over bodies. Biopower is an “organization of power of life” (139) which means power shifts from a focus on doing away with life, but instead in controlling it through pervasive influence. In this conception, the number one function for influences of power are “no longer to kill, but to invest in life” (139). Biopower is not an accidental occurrence within history, but a hidden code which permeates different institutions and has several ingredients to its creation such as the *repressive hypothesis* and the *perverse implantation*. These themes, also found within Foucault’s project on the *History of Sexuality* (1982), are both uniquely elucidating ways of demonstrating the power of medicalized discourse and the never-ending cultural discussions around sex. For Foucault, these hegemonic influences of power are effective ways of further perpetuating repression in captive bodies.

As Anthony Giddens notes in *The Transformation of Intimacy*, Foucault’s ideas of power and control are not limited to a single text and constitute a continuing theme in his thought. “Foucault himself seemed to accept something of a similar view in his earlier writings, seeing modern social life as intrinsically bound up with the ruse of disciplinary power. Disciplinary power, the power to control rather than to do away with, supposedly produced ‘docile bodies’ controlled and regulated in their activities rather than able spontaneously to act on promptings of desire” (Giddens 1993: 18). Identity and other

forms of human expression are traced back to strict influence from structures which impose regimens of how to look, behave, and perceive others. Power over the body then is a tool of many different institutions which strategically couple knowledge and power and exert themselves on the “choices” of identity formation within society. In this sense, sex and desire are said to have become mystified above our own capabilities of understanding.

Mapping

Body Projects

Helen co-constructed a life as a semi-professional female athlete. Before progressing into her career as a physical education teacher she progressed from a past of hoping one day to play sports like her brother to shaping the attitudes towards sports among her young students. This is part of the cultural meaning and identity-representation of her tattoo. The tattoo is then part of a larger progression toward a self-identity of purpose and power. In this light, tattoos and other aesthetic body modifications can be viewed as useful examples of what Chris Shilling termed “body projects.” This term describes the way our bodies in the postmodern world are “increasingly a phenomenon of options and choices” (Shilling 1993: 3) for expressing individual agency and reflecting structures of influence. Matt Lodder (2010: 88) discusses the ways tattoos become part of a mission of separating body from control, “in certain circumstances, body modification can be said to function in this way, enabling the transformation of subjectivities rather than simply existing as a product of deterministic desires.” Similarly, investment in the body in other ways such as plastic surgery or other less severe appearance alterations (like

make-up or hair-cuts) may be powerful, though indeed dual-edged, tools in shaping the representation of self in society (Atkinson 2003; Lodder 2010).

Victoria Pitts writes in her book *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification* (2003) that “women’s marked bodies exemplify both the praxis of culturally marginal body projects and the limits of that praxis. As I see it, they highlight the female body as a site of negotiation between power and powerlessness, neither of which are likely to win fully.” Thus the notion that women using body modifications like tattoos may sometimes be seen as using powerful forms of agency which actively reclaim the body from cultural control is not necessarily a simple line to draw. Like Thompson (2015), Pitts is ambivalent about tattooing or body modifications outside of the fact that they are manifestations of culture. For the communication to occur to reassert power women must communicate intersubjectivity and place limits on where and how much they can tattoo.

Key to this form of “reclaiming the body” is that tattooing can redefine the understandings of the gendered body, even while contending with the limits that are still placed on this level of reclamation. The same is true amongst women hockey players who push the envelope on disobeying biopolitical regimes of corporeal control. Pitts (2003: 85) says that “reclaiming projects do not return the body-self to any pre-victimized state of body or selfhood, but rather newly co-construct a set of meanings that must share authorship with other intersubjective forces of inscription and interpretation.” In other words, the process of tattooing the body may retain elements of subjective desire and meaning and do so primarily through agency. But it does not wash away a world of hegemonic influence. Rather it works against it on an individual level. More needs to be

done outside the body to attack biopolitical control, but it is a good start from an individual perspective.

Chapter 7

Tattoos as Artistic and Emotional Signifiers

What we should realize, then, is that there is little or no reason to assume a work, because it is a tattoo, shouldn't be considered art... when we look at a tattoo, we see a work of art that is slowly disintegrating with the person upon whom it is placed. Because of that mortal disintegration, as an art form tattoos are in a special position to make us think deeply about art, performance, and our own mortality.

Nicolas Michaud in Robert Arp (Ed.) *Tattoos; A Philosophy for Everyone* (2012: 37)

This chapter concentrates on how tattooing differs from other practices within the contemporary art worlds primarily through its divergence from what some see as an aesthetic free-for-all in other artistic media (Danto 2013: 128). By doing so, it endeavors to show that tattoo art is increasingly purchased and produced to display a sense of artistic taste and emotional expression. I will be discussing theories from the sociology of art (Becker 1982; Bourdieu 1996), enthusiasts' tattoos which embody themes of modern and classical art, and sketching out a concept of a modern artistic movement in the practice of tattooing which I term *tattoo classicism*. This term describes how enthusiasts use tattoos which, through cultural shifts in the practice of the arts, have become commonly executed in a fashion that is equal parts aesthetic form and subtle sophistication allowing for nuanced emotional expression.

Showcasing one's aesthetic sensibilities has been a reason to get tattooed for some time now especially with the rise of custom tattoo studios like Ed Hardy's Realistic Tattoo in June 1974. It may have been the first to be commercially successful (Hardy 2014: 145). But tattoos have always been much more than just art in a traditional sense and have been used for deeply human reasons such as status, self-identity, ritual, and memorialization for centuries. Yet, in discussing theories of the artification of the practice (Kosut 2013)—and from the data gathered here—we will see that now, more than ever, enthusiasts are inspired by the highly artistic nature of contemporary tattooing. They assuage their fears of permanence and satisfy their desires to make durable the emotional expressions they wish to convey.

The Tattoo Aesthetic

To appreciate tattoos and tattooing today, it is important to consider how the practice is thriving in a larger art world which is dictated not just by classical realism, but also by the changing styles of the modern and postmodern in liquid modernity. It is a time when art and reality become ever more distanced—and the ground between them irrevocably shaken by art movements such as 1960s pop art by Warhol (with his Brillo Boxes and Campbell's soup cans) or earlier by the major rupture found in Picasso's revolutionary cubism of 1907 (Danto 2013: 7). In modern art we see the notion of the aesthetic critic as the gatekeepers of art worlds sink to irrelevance. Danto (2013: 128):

Today art can be made of anything, put together with anything, in the service of presenting any ideas whatsoever. Such a development puts great interpretative pressures on viewers to grasp the way the spirit of the artist undertook to present the ideas that concerned her or him. The embodiment of ideas, or, I would say, of meanings is perhaps all we require as a

philosophical theory of what art is.

With all of this uncertainty in the larger art worlds, the question becomes where does tattooing as a practice undergoing an artification (Kosut 2013), fit into this historical trajectory within the art worlds? Through Helen's tattoo of a camera we will find a partial answer to this question.



Figure 7.1 Helen's camera tattoo in a photo-realism style, photo by the author reproduced with enthusiast's permission. Tattoo artist: Kraken.

Tattoo Classicism: Return to Form

Referencing

Conducting a social semiotic analysis of Helen's black and grey scale camera tattoo requires that we look at the art history which led to the production of a tattoo like this. I address Danesi's (2007) first step of semiotic analysis in probing *what does it mean?* To answer, let's begin with Picasso's cubism—as first presented in his *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (1907), partially reproduced in a tattoo in Figure 7.2—because this is one of the first major avant-garde pieces to turn the art world on its head and a modern example which prompted deep reflection about the definitions and boundaries of art. Danto (2013: 4) claims that up to this point realism was the *raison d'être* for creating most artworks. Similarly, the beginnings of photography, iconically represented in Helen's camera tattoo, can be traced back to the 1830s when it earned its right to be defined as art because its proponents like William Henry Fox Talbot claimed that photography was art because it was the “pencil of nature” (2).

I argue that this stage of art history is particularly important for the tattoo world because contemporary tattooing, as an institution, largely thrives in this pre-cubist movement when form over expression becomes the key signifier. For our purposes, I will call this movement *tattoo classicism*. Indeed, I am suggesting it is no coincidence that photo-realism, as in Helen's tattoos, is one of the styles of art making the most waves in the contemporary tattoo scene (see, for example, the amount of attention given to realistic tattoos in tattoo magazines such as *Inked Magazine* and the television program *Ink Master*). I propose that this shows how tattooing, with all its proclivities to modern and postmodern styles (see, for example the rising popularity of Montreal tattoo artist, Yann Black who works without a regard for traditional aesthetics), is largely reaching on an institutional level the stage of being taken seriously in the art worlds by an appeal to

classical forms of art which emphasize form over expression, at least from the perspective of tattoo artists. I am also suggesting that this is partly what attracts potential clients who may seek this classical form of art on their skin as a status symbol as well as for its emotional significance.

Indeed, Lodder (2010: 217) at least partially supports these claims by stating “there are inherent complexities behind the simple comparison of tattooing and other forms of art-making, the fact remains that tattoos have acquired the title of “body art” in popular consciousness because to a substantial degree they resemble painting, drawing and carving.” Comparing tattoos with the clothing industry, as both industries are intertwined with culture, the body, and art, we might appreciate the following remark by semiotician Luca Marchetti (2007: 6) as recognition of the power symbols like the tattoo have as emotional expressions and aesthetically-infused semiotic resources: “the aestheticization of the object gives it an emotional aura. And the individual recognizes this emotional object as an object endowed with a soul or, more precisely, with an inanimate life, with meaning and power.”



Figure 7.2 The central figure reproduced from Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. Version O)* (1907). Tattoo artist: Lindsay April @lindsayapril. This artist, who currently has over 60,000 followers on Instagram is known for her use of single needle (1 liner) tattoo machines to achieve a "...soft-shaded realism. I want my work to resemble a pencil sketch on the skin."

Tattoo classicism is ideally displayed in the techniques tattoo artists currently employ which allow them to act on aesthetic principles. This includes highly realistic forms found on skin over the past several decades: pointillism; watercolor; and, perhaps the most revered, portraiture tattoos have reconstituted what tattoos can and should look like. These styles are beginning to receive high praise (see, for example the display of tattoos in fine art museums in Chapter 4) for making tattooing practices more digestible to the general public and to the fine art worlds. Indeed, these tattoos act as, what Peirce would call, resemblance *icons* of their representamen. In fact, one of the most popular

tattoo artists among mainstream Western cultures, Kat Von D, is known primarily for her portraiture style in which she reproduces realistic pictures of people and pets on the skin of her clients.

Further, in the documentary film *Tattoo Nation* (2013) director Eric Schwartz highlights how portraiture tattooing and the use of primarily black and grey shade in tattooing may have grown up from the streets of East L.A.—through artists like Freddy Negrete and Jack Rudy adopting the style from single-needle prison-style tattooing—yet these styles, with the help of visionaries and institutionally knowledgeable artists like Ed Hardy, would eventually attain to mainstream popularity. This process was carefully done as art school graduates, like Ed Hardy, shifted black and white tattoo to black and grey scale custom tattooing.



Figure 7.3 This portraiture tattoo of Hunter S. Thompson, author and pioneer of gonzo journalism, is provided here as further example of the kind of photorealism—executed using black and grey scale techniques — which is making some of the largest waves in the tattoo art worlds. Tattoo artist: Mano, reproduced with permission.

To help us understand why tattoos like black and grey scale pieces represented here by Helen’s camera and the portrait of H.S. Thompson in Figure 7.3 are shifting toward styles and genres of classical art—and thus how these tattoos encode meanings in Danesi’s second step of semiotic analysis—we need to turn our attention back to sociologist Mary Kosut’s (2013) theory of the artification of tattooing. Discussed in detail earlier in Chapter 4, artification refers to the process by which a practice comes to be popularly defined and associated with the fine arts. The movement toward tattoo classicism was signaled by the way tattoo artists moved slowly from the piers and into the city as the practice continued to be pushed in style and expectation into more artistic realms. At the same time, identity hungry enthusiasts existing in a liquefying world saw this aesthetically pleasing medium of displaying art as more suitable for making indelible aspects of their selves and the cultural and gender shifts they wish to connote. Take the case of Sami (early 50s, male) and his story about blending influences of music, literature, and Lebanese ancestry in the artistic nature of contemporary tattooing as an example:

I have the words “music is the language of the spirit” with headphones and cord tattooed on my arm. This was my first tattoo and, to me, it illustrates the meaning music has in my

life. I volunteer on the local university radio station to contribute to the community and work within the arts and the quote itself has a double meaning as a quote from the Lebanese artist, Kahlil Gibran. Gibran is famous for the philosophical treatise-type book, The Prophet, and I liked the idea that I could represent my Lebanese family background and ancestry in the quote as well. I've been attracted to tattoos for a long time, especially because they can be so artistic these days. I like the idea of thinking about tattoos as art and I like the idea I can permanently have something there that means a lot to me. And you know, I don't know a lot of lawyers who have tattoos and so admittedly there is that level of dissent in there as well.

Susan (late 20s, female) told me that finding a tattoo artist who could make the image she dreamed up come to life was key to making indelible her aspirations of being a writer of short stories:

For my second tattoo, I knew I needed to approach the tattoo differently. I need to find a real artist to bring my ideas to life. I had an idea about bringing together a quill and my love for the Canterbury Tales but the artist was needed to bring these elements together.



Figure 7.4 Susan’s tattoo of a quill pen with a background of the Canterbury Tales. Susan was motivated by her desire to find a tattoo artist skilled enough to make her high aspirations (in her tattoo design and in her career as an author) come to life on her skin.

Tattoo artist: Rhyanne

Indeed, much like the way film, music, and even the circus has its history of undergoing artification, tattooing has been redefined culturally and socially by this appeal to aesthetic principles of classical art. Paul Bouissac (2012: 93) referencing the semiotics of the circus writes that “indeed, an artist in whatever specialty has to prove what he or

she can do before enjoying the recognition by the audience of the status which has been acquired through the performance of exceptional feats.” Photo-realism like Helen’s tattooing is an example of the tattoo world flexing its artistic muscle and showing the world what it can provide for the skin canvas. Similarly, Sanders and Vail (2008: 35) observe that tattoo artists “concentrate on the production of unique and expensive ‘pieces’ for an upscale clientele that understands the relevant artistic rationales and for whom tattooing has overtly aesthetic meaning. This ‘new breed’ of tattooist is working to expand the boundaries of tattooing by experimenting with photo-realistic portraiture, oriental traditions, ‘fantastic art’ illustration, nonrepresentational abstractions, and other innovative stylistic approaches.”

Television shows like *Ink Master* on Spike T.V. (in 2017 in its seventh season) continue to define tattooing as a serious art while also banking off the spectacle of showing the world every dramatic and nitty-gritty detail of the previously misunderstood practice. Through featuring popular judges and respected masters of the tattoo world, *Ink Master* will usually feature a different popular genre of tattooing in each episode to prove that tattoo artists are indeed creative. Photo-realist tattoos are judged for their ability to represent the subtleties of the original subject matter.

On a cold November day in 2014, I walked into The Studio to find tattoo artist Kraken (who is the artist behind Helen’s camera tattoo) watching *Ink Master*. His talk with me that day effectively summarizes the value of the show for the tattoo world. It pushes the artifice narrative of tattooing even while cashing in on the more dramatic elements of the business.

Kraken is watching the T.V. show Ink Master upstairs today as his appointment has cancelled. He tells me he doesn't watch it often but it is interesting and some episodes showcase some really good tattoos. He also tells me that he feels it is better than Miami Ink (or the spin-offs) because it is not as much a sitcom. "Even if client just wants black tattoo this show lets them see how this requires at least 6 different tones of black (black and grey scale). Old School tattoos are just not good enough anymore"

Kraken tells me how "we are looking for 'wow' moment and it is attention to detail and a large palette that are the best ways to challenge yourself. Never satisfied, I am always thinking of the new design. I don't spend much time reflecting on my last piece except to learn from it and how the next piece can be better."

Mapping

We must be reminded however, that the meanings implicit and explicit within a tattoo are not just concerned with aesthetics. Though this is likely the case for the tattoo artist who executed the design, there is always the other side of the equation for the practice. Indeed, in the poststructural *death of the author* scenario—where meanings of texts, images, and other modes are completed not by the author but by the audience—the proprietor of the skin canvas completes the meanings of the tattoo but does so even before the final result. Indeed, in many ways tattoo artists act almost as ghost writers to the enthusiast's wishes as they suggest changes, elements, and garnishes to their designs.

Thus, in answering the third, and final, step of semiotic analysis in Danesi's (2007) conception *why does it mean what it means*, we are led to appreciate how the emotional expression found in mapping becomes prevalent in answering the *why* of the ink. This is

because mapping serves to bring the social back into the semiotic as choice and context define the meanings behind the art work in the eyes of the enthusiast as much (especially at the level of denotation) as aesthetic conventions. During our interview about her camera and skate tattoos, Helen began tearing up while talking about her Dad. Her tattoos represent him and what he meant to her. Admittedly this brought on a visceral reaction in me which prompted me to be reminded of the serious nature of tattoos. Being desensitized to their personal influence and power after an entire year of working in The Studio, I believe this was an important moment for this research and for me as a researcher.

Moreover, after drawing national headlines, spurring widespread interest, and publishing an edited collection, Canadian sociologist Deborah Davidson has become the expert on the topic of memorial tattoos like Helen's. Her edited volume, *The Tattoo Project: Commemorative Tattoos, Visual Culture, and the Digital Archive* (2016) continues Davidson's important work on the sociology of grief, death, and loss (Davidson and Letherby 2014). In the ongoing narrative about how people deal with perinatal loss Davidson and Letherby (2014: 216) note that "it is clear from the postings we observed that griefwork with similar others is useful and can help individuals and families to create meaning following their loss." In this instance, the authors are referring to the importance of social networks for those who experience grief as they gain understanding from others who have shared a similar loss. In the case of memorial tattoos then, enthusiasts like Helen permanently etch a reminder of someone into their skin while also plugging themselves into a community of tattoo enthusiasts. Thus, Helen becomes part of a tattoo project whereby meaningful relationships are never forgotten and become part of a lasting

and ongoing movement of enthusiasts who choose tattooing as a means of memorializing the dead, a movement Davidson has made her mission to document.

A Field of Cultural Production?

We have defined tattoo classicism as a movement where tattoos and tattoo artists become ever more aesthetic-based as they reach for institutional endorsement and to be taken seriously in the art worlds. I have also suggested that enthusiasts respond to these changes by continuing to appeal to the practice even in spite of their otherwise liquid modern existence. How then can we theoretically consider these changes and shifts? There is little question that the artification of tattoos has elevated the cultural capital of the practice. I am asserting that this, along with emotional expression, is a key theme in understanding why enthusiasts get tattooed. Helen didn't want to just remember her Dad. The elevated status of the medium of tattoos allowed her to do so through the soft shading of an artist's hand producing photorealism which provides a beautiful memorial that can be appreciated on many levels.

The person responsible for coining the term cultural capital and for helping to appreciate the scope of the field of cultural production was Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002), intellectual and social theorist, he was widely known for influential works, providing useful tools for understanding “the doings of actors who always have some practical knowledge about their world, even if they cannot articulate that knowledge” (Calhoun et al. 2007: 260).

Indeed, Bourdieu's three concepts of *habitus*, *capital*, and *field* have had a profound effect on social theory and on the quest for understanding different aspects of

social and artistic life. They help us understand how tattoo artists might feel they need to appeal to classical artistic movements in order to be taken seriously in artistic fields. As Calhoun et al. note (2007: 261), “to understand the dynamic relationship between structure and action, Bourdieu contended, is to enter into a relational analysis of social tastes and practices.” Though clearly inspired by French structuralism and the works of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Bourdieu often determines “difference” not by class alone, but by what he calls *distinction*. According to Bourdieu, actors in society conduct an act of position-taking by merit of their distinctions, fed through culturally informed dispositions (*habitus*) and differing amounts of money and knowledge they possess (economic, social, and cultural capital). The area in which positions take place, and therefore mediate future endeavors by way of the “rules of the game,” is known as the *field* (as in the field of art).

Bourdieu claims to establish a new basis for understanding production and consumption of art as something that cannot be universally influenced through human qualities of cognition, but rather through the learning of cultural sophistication via the attainment of different levels of educational and cultural capital. A prominent example of this type of class distinction between aesthetic judgements is exemplified in Bourdieu’s (1984: 45) demonstration of class-divided responses to an image of an elderly individual’s hands. When confronted with the photo of old hands, less privileged individuals appeal to what is more obvious in the picture, such as the ugliness of the hands (manual worker from Paris), middle-class individuals appeal to other artistic images like those of Van Gogh for comparisons (junior executive from Paris), and more abstract meanings are derived from those of an upper class (engineer from Paris). As Bourdieu (1984: 56) notes “taste (i.e, manifested preferences) are the practical affirmation

of an inevitable difference.”

It goes without saying that the social class are not equally inclined and prepared to enter this game of refusal and counter-refusal; and that the strategies aimed at transforming the basic dispositions of a life-style into a system of aesthetic principles, objective differences into elective distinctions, passive options (constituted externally by the logic of distinctive relationships) into conscious, elective choices are in fact reserved for members of the dominant class, indeed the very top bourgeoisie, and for artists, who as the inventors and professionals of the ‘stylization of life’ are alone able to make their art of living one of the fine arts (57).

In Bourdieu’s view then, high, middle, and low brow art exist as manifestations of their corresponding classes; they form a more-or-less mutual exclusion, based primarily on access and understanding in which fine art becomes downgraded on the basis of its imitations and turned into kitsch. So if we are to use field theory to help us explain the classicism movement in tattooing, we may assume that this means we must consider tattoo styles in relation to class distinctions of the enthusiast and the artist. For instance, we might expect the reason tattoos are becoming more realistic, symbolically rich, esoteric, intellectual and highbrow is because they are becoming more exclusive and adopted by those of an upper class.

Yet, this is not necessarily so. It is important to keep in mind that tattooing is much more dynamic than just a practice desperate for endorsement from elite institutions in the fine arts. Any discussion of talking away the master-apprentice relationship in favor of formal education in the practice is often met with strong resistance. The master-apprentice system maintains the craft-like essence of the practice and serves as the true gatekeeper for those interested in becoming tattoo artists. Even though Bourdieu’s theories of the field are useful for explaining the ways tattoo artists compete for

institutional endorsement and brought about the rise of what I am calling tattoo classicism, Bourdieusian theories lack a certain level of depth in dealing with a practice as diverse as tattooing. In opposition to the sole primacy of structures of the field in helping to understand art, Bauman (2011: 11) writes:

Bourdieu was observing a landscape illuminated by the setting sun, which momentarily sharpened contours which were soon to dissolve in the approaching twilight. He therefore captured culture at its homeostatic stage: culture at the service of the status quo, of the monotonous reproduction of society and maintenance of system equilibrium, just before the inevitable fast approaching loss of its position.

Peterson and Anand (2004: 324) make a similar observation: “now persons and groups show their high status by being cultural omnivores, consuming not only the fine arts, but also appreciating many, if not all, forms of popular culture.” Although elements of photorealism and high art help attract clients, fill the Instagram accounts of artists, and build client-bases, these are not necessary prerequisites for artists who work in a practice like tattooing that has always transcended classes and sticks around not because of its formal artistic qualities alone but because of the way it embodies deep and personal meaning. If art is something that embodies meaning, then it is true that an appreciation and understanding of form and expression are necessary for the appreciation of tattooing and the relationships of these ink marks. Thus, it is perhaps too complex to consider field theory as the singular statement in explaining tattoo artists’ positions vis-à-vis each other and the relationship enthusiasts have with their ink.

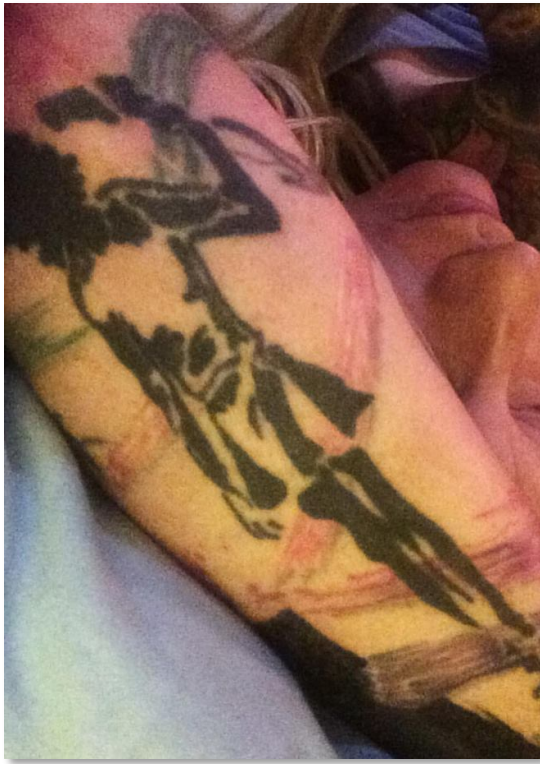


Figure 7.5 Rhyanne's Banksy tattoo, artist known, and Figure 6.5 the art from Banksy that inspired it. Photo courtesy of Rhyanne and Banksy art reproduced from Pinterest, in the public domain.

Rhyanne (early 30s, female)

I've had this tattoo of a Banksy piece for years now and it has turned out to be an innocent bystander, repeatedly beaten up by being caught in the many surgical crossfires from what I call the "hellbow" which I managed to shatter a few years ago because I am an athlete and an elite cyclist. It's been sliced open and patched back together multiple times. Surgeons have done a lovely job of keeping the scars consistent and the tattoo lines back up, every time. It has survived more than it ever asked for, not that tattoos ever actually ask for anything. Due to its location, and my arm positioning while working, it gets noticed mostly by my clients while I'm tattooing them. I often get asked:

"Um. Is that a girl shooting herself in the head?"

"Yes."

And then, more often than not: "Why would you get that?"

"Because. That's how I feel somedays."

That usually ends the conversation.

Who is Banksy?

Rhyanne's tattoo is the perfect complement to our discussion. The process of referencing, allows us to turn away from Bourdieu's field theory. Indeed, through Banksy, we find the ideal modern day example of the failure of traditional aesthetics to explain market and art world attention and to display a deeper sense of meaning through expression. Banksy has been a prominent global and highly revered artist for almost a decade and yet he remains essentially anonymous as he has consistently hidden from

public view. Beginning as a street-artist stenciling provocative and socially conscious epigrams in the City of London, Banksy rose to international fame in 2005 when he painted images in the West Bank on the barrier wall dividing Israel and Palestine (as depicted in Academy Award nominated *Exit at the Gift Shop* and *The Guardian* Newspaper 2011 story “Banksy at the West Bank Barrier”). By making his feelings known that Palestine is essentially a prison as a result of the West Bank Barrier, Banksy turned from common criminal dealing in the ephemeral art of defacing public and private property into a significant social critic and, more importantly, an artist of high demand and intrigue. Language and discourse are key to Banksy’s identity. It is its provocative nature which garners his attention and gives him credibility as a threat to the status quo.

After a series of more international displays such as secretly (and illegally) displaying his own painting in the Tate Britain Museum while also crossing the Atlantic, tagging Los Angeles and New York in the mid ‘00s, Banksy teamed with Paris-born and Los Angeles-based film maker Thierry Guetta (aka Mister Brainwash or MBW) and began documenting the otherwise fleeting images he had been creating. This relationship represented in *Exit at The Gift Shop* is a film which debuted at the Sundance Film Festival in 2010 and has been described by John Horn and Chris Lee of the *Los Angeles Times* (January 24th, 2010) as “a film-within-a-film that begins as a chronicle of guerrilla art and its most prominent creators but morphs into a sly satire of celebrity, consumerism, the art world and filmmaking itself.” *Exit Through the Gift Shop* defies categorization.

What is sociologically interesting about the movie and this phenomenon of street-art is that they are another example of a series of shifts in global and local art worlds which show artists working eclectically with unconventional forms—painting provocative

images, and borrowing from mass culture and folk art—while shifting trends in both dramatic and minimal ways. In this instance, this movie and its subject matter are melding Warholian pop art—iconoclastic and avant garde in its time (Crane 1987: 79)—with street-art and body art. The product of this marriage is a new and in-demand art form which can sell for six to seven figures. For comparison, when tattoos travelled back on the bodies of sailors following their trips to the South Pacific on Captain Cook’s voyages commissioned by the English elite (see Atkinson 2003: 30) shock and disgust quickly transformed into chic feelings of desire and intrigue—and little profit.

Art Worlds

In opposition to the staunchly class-based sense of art in Boudieu’s field theory, someone like Banksy and by extension many tattoo artists who live on the margins of acceptability from traditional art worlds, may best be understood through a theoretical appreciation of Howard Becker’s influential *Art Worlds* (1982). This is because Becker’s work implies that art need not be so limited by fields of cultural production (though, I do believe they should be considered) and that what makes something art is the social aspects of its creation and consumption.

Tattoo classicism has become a conventional movement within the art worlds of tattooing. We now need to explore how Becker’s theories help us appreciate how expression and agency are present within the movement as it has been culturally produced and becomes a shared structure that is pliable and porous; open to change and new influence. It is not owned by a class per se, but is a movement that inspires creation via convention by those that produce and reproduce culture.

Becker (1982:) provides an explanation of his rationale early in his book by saying “all artistic work, like all human activity, involves the joint activity of a number, often a large number, of people.” Later art world is more narrowly defined as “all the people whose activities are necessary to the production of the characteristic works which that world, and perhaps others as well, define as art” (Becker 1982: 34). Thus, this theoretical perspective is a way of accounting for the ability art can have in bringing many people together in a social and cooperative endeavor. Ultimately, it is definitive of how, through the same collective process necessary for any social interaction we may define both “the production and consumption of art” as an inherently cultural product and practice.

Theorists discussing the world of tattooing have long made use of Becker’s art worlds perspective, as Sanders (1989: 24) says “artist-craftsmen, their products, and their conventions that surround them often come to be the center of ‘minor art worlds.’”²⁰ Atkinson (2003: 48) emphasized the whole network of tattooing by saying “in many ways, by pursuing tattooing body projects, individuals may be actively and purposefully shopping for culture through their corporeal alterations” and the shopping occurs through many venues as “people learn online about the tattooing process, find out about artists through magazines, and contact artists all over the world.”

Indeed, the world of tattooing has grown ever closer because of bustling technologies.²¹ For Becker, however, this is not the catalyst for conventionality in

²⁰ This is a reference to the changing definition between craft and art taken up by Becker (1982: 277) later in the text.

²¹ One may consider technology to be simply a tool in the distribution of art works, but it is the “impresarios” in Becker’s terms (1982: 119) who actually make use of this technology to attract those to the art form.

practice and style. This is instead a direct result of an art world surrounding creators. How varied the world of tattoo art may grow to be, and where inspiration may come from, is not of key importance here. According to Becker (1982: 13): “each kind of person who participates in the making of art works, then has a specific bundle of tasks to do.” If they want to change the process within the division of labor, they may be faced with some difficulty.

Art worlds exist as a relationship among individuals, and its true value may be given by those who accept it. But as Becker (1982: 29) so aptly points out, “people who cooperate to produce a work of art usually do not decide things afresh. Instead, they rely on earlier agreements now become customary, agreements that have become part of the conventional way of doing things in the art.” How we understand culture and its relation to art, or art and its relation to the individual then, is turned into a whole world of discovery by Becker. The art world perspective is a tool in understanding not only how art is created and accepted, but what it means to be a culturally existing being, part of a collective, producing by way of convention and past understanding.

One of the most influential ideas emphasized in Becker’s work is his way of demolishing individuality and personal genius. “Works of art, from this point of view, are not products of individual makers, ‘artists’ who possess a rare and special gift. They are, rather, joint products of all the people who cooperate via an art world’s characteristic conventions to bring works like that into existence” (Becker 1982: 35). Art worlds do not have clear boundaries. Individuality remains only as an ideal, especially emphasized in the contemporary Western world. This does not mean that art is meaningless. But that it does not have meaning outside of social interaction. A tattoo will have multiple and deep

definitions of self for the individual, but the process of becoming a “tattooed individual” is, in many ways, a result of a history of collective and cultural actions. The art world, in this sense, means that we may account for the structures (and the collective action of subjective individuals which constructed them) which made agency possible in the art of the tattoo now existing on the body of an individual. Popular designs and fashions remain as part of the conventions of the art; meaning and relations bestowed on the art work are influenced by cultural definitions of art and significance. But the feeling and process is no less real, and is ultimately a combination of agency and structure.

Art worlds thus allows for an understanding that the structures and conventions that permit choices to be made and facilitated are as enabling as the idealized individualism which we often find ourselves searching for. This kind of negotiation between conventions and choices is evident in many artistic works. However controversial or cutting-edge, it is still present in Banksy’s works.

Mapping

Rhyanne is not just a research participant. I also consider her a friend. She has had a profound influence on this work as she is a tattoo artist and enthusiast. I have spent considerable time with her during my ethnographic field research at The Studio and have kept in casual contact with her since then. As evidenced by her remarks, her relationship with clients as a tattoo artist is complex and, like Banksy, she has a critical streak in her art and perspective. The sociologist Les Back contends that getting a tattoo or being pierced “is a moment when boundaries are breached, involving hurt and healing. It is profoundly a corporal experience...it involves perforating the boundary between the

internal and external so that the external becomes internal and the internal becomes external” (Back 2007: 73). Back claims that sociologists must train themselves to listen better to those who agree to share with them everything about their “life passed in living.” It is only then that sociologists can begin to understand the dynamic experiences of those they attempt to study. I was lucky to have spent enough time studying Rhyanne from a sociological perspective that I feel I was able to really listen to her professional life.

I believe Rhyanne’s story of her Banksy tattoo highlights how her whole career really does involve a balancing act between hurt and healing. Rhyanne’s body is just about covered in tattoos. Like her Banksy image, these tattoos are meant to say a lot but still allow privacy, (emotional) anonymity, and coded meanings.

Conclusions

My first image of sociology was through the writing of C. Wright Mills, whom I also imagined as an album cover. He merged with Jack Kerouac, Lenny Bruce, and Henry Miller in my mind; they were all heroes who knew the world through its edges—deviant, strident, and/or dirty mouthed. I figured all sociologists were something like that, all the names between the parenthesis in the journals I gobbled up. The only way to know the society that surrounds us is by understanding its margins...that means going outside: the taxi-dance hall, the housing projects, the protest march, the youth gang, and the dark places that most of us know only as haunting hints of the possible.

Harvey Molotch “Going Out” (1994: 231) *Sociological Forum* Vol 9, No.2

Why do we ink the skin? What do tattoos mean? And what goes on behind the scenes of the tattoo studio? The practice of indelibly marking the skin with ink is a deeply human and historical practice. It is one which transcends hundreds, if not thousands, of years of human history and has impacted cultures almost everywhere. However, only in the very recent past have tattoos and tattoo artists rightly made such enormous leaps out of the shadows of deviance and disrespect from the fine art world and the public. Through all this history, a story that is seldom told is what goes on behind the scenes in tattoo studios and about the struggles of artists to maintain reputation, push themselves

artistically, display confidence to clients, and overcome occupational fears and anxiety. We also rarely see research which takes the time to take apart the polysemy of individual tattoos and explore their meanings through its many layers. This thesis has provided a small snippet of data and stories recorded through a full year of ethnographic research in a dual tattoo studio and art gallery in a large Canadian city, interviews and discussions with dozens of other artists, and multimodal analysis of tattoos.

This work has attempted to provide some knowledgeable clues and theories to get closer to answering these questions. When Harvey Molotch wrote that “the only way to understand the society that surrounds us is by understanding its margins” (1994: 231), he was forwarding the message of a lineage of fieldworkers who, as Robert Park—one of the founders of the Chicago School of Sociology—proclaimed should never be afraid to “go get the seat of their pants dirty in *real* research (Park quoted in Duneier et al. 2014: 1). Researching and recording lives lived on the margins was the aim of this thesis. For tattoo artists and tattoo enthusiasts, tattoos mean so much more than they are often portrayed, and even though one-third of millennials are said to be tattooed, not to mention the growing *artification* of the practice explored in detail in this thesis, the growing minority of tattoo enthusiasts in Canada and elsewhere in the West still occupy the margins of society in terms of mass cultural appreciation and understanding.

The importance of “going out” into the world, as Molotch’s article in *Sociological Forum* is titled, means that even though I have spent 8 years at this point studying tattoos and tattooing, it was my time in 2014-2015 spending over a year working full-time in a tattoo studio as an ethnographer that afforded me the most foresight and intimacy with a practice as indelible as tattooing. In line with Les Back’s book *The Art of Listening* (2007:

160), where he lays forth an emblazoned plea to sociologists to cease neglecting real people and real voices in their work, the aim of this thesis has always been to strive for a “reflective engagement with a life passed in living” among my research population and toward the larger tattoo world.

This is true for the earlier chapters in this thesis which chronicle the lives of tattoo artists, working with skin canvas, themes of permanence, and institutional and cultural shifts in their practice. This was also true in our analysis of enthusiasts’ ink in the latter chapters of this work. Here we saw self-identity, cultural and gender shifts, and artistic and emotional expression as three over-arching themes to help understand how tattoo enthusiasts justify the practice of indelibly marking their skin with ink as viable aids in mapping out their lives and connecting with cultures and aesthetics while existing in a liquid modern world.

Some Directions for Future Research

There are many opportunities for future research using sociology and social semiotics to explore tattoos and tattooing. Topics to explore are infinite for such a meaningful and deeply human practice. A researcher could, for example, focus on the phenomenological elements of getting tattooed, the pain involved, and perhaps the claims by some within the tattoo world of being “physically addicted” to getting inked. Or research might take a more critical lens to discuss the ways in which tattooing is becoming ever more commodified and how inked skin is displayed as part of advertising and marketing campaigns.

Yet, to offer what I see as immediate promise I would like to suggest a gap that I

believe exists when considering the work of tattooing the skin within the lens of the sociology of emotions. Specifically, I believe there is potential for exploring *emotional labor* from Arlie Hochschild's groundbreaking study *The Managed Heart* (1983) to the practice of tattooing the skin for a living. I contend that a contemporary analysis of the practice of tattooing in the age of television programs such as *Miami Ink*, *L.A. Ink*, and similar spin-offs may well benefit from a perspective provided through theories of emotion.

Indeed, it may be argued that in the current cultural climate which demands the arts become service-oriented perpetuates emotional labor described by Hochschild (1983: 7) as "this kind of labor [that] calls for a coordination of mind and feeling, and it sometimes draws a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuality." This is because like no other art form, the practice of tattooing demands a sense of intimacy with "the other" as the artist penetrates the clients' skin in close quarters while also opening themselves up to be the bearers of meanings which can take an emotional toll or otherwise demand a different type of service from the traditional artist.

As women are involved in the tattoo world now more than ever, as both artists and enthusiasts, it is important to consider that Hochschild (58) observes that Western cultures expect women to focus more on feeling than action, especially in comparison to men. In fact, my own data suggest that gender may play a larger role in the occupation of tattooing than I have had the ability to capture in this study:

A female artist I interviewed who currently works in the suburbs at a high-end custom tattoo shop named Anna (32) discusses the difficulties women face, especially while making their entrance into the industry. Anna is also gay which compounded some of the

negative stereotypes she has faced from ignorant co-workers.

There's definitely a male-dominated feeling in the industry. The first shop I worked in was very difficult. The owner was extremely chauvinistic and openly sexist. The guy teaching me was openly like this with me too and went out of his way to make me feel crappy. There were times at the beginning I thought I would quit.

Moreover, it can be noted that Hochschild (132-135) writes about how three hard questions will ultimately confront those who work in fields where emotional labor is demanded. The answers professionals find to these questions will be significant for their sense of self. These three hard questions are:

1. How can I feel I really identified with my work role?
2. Am I being phony?
3. If I am disconnected from my audience and only pretend to care, how can I avoid becoming cynical?

I would not hesitate to argue that these three questions may be just as relevant to the tattoo artist as they are to the flight attendant (the research population of Hochschild's study). For instance, tattoo artists, like all artists, pursue the feelings associated with authenticity, to be called a true artist, and to be someone who has a good reputation.

Tattoo artists must work closely with clients, they must become amateur sociologists in their own right, appreciating the connections the enthusiast wants to make between their relationships with themselves and others and with the cultural and artistic

principles of their genre of choice. In closing, I believe future research on the work of tattoo artists would profit from exploring the utility of emotional labor following Hochschild's groundwork in the sociology of emotions.

Final Reflections

It is becoming increasingly more likely that you have a tattoo. If this isn't true think about your friends, family members, spouse, or children and how they are, or will be, tattooed. Go out in public, to the mall, the cinema, the park, etc, and you will see ink, covering parts of skin all around you. So why tattoos? Because tattoos, with their increased focus on professionalism, coded meanings, and almost limitless artistic complexities, are powerful tools which permanently influence the self and social interactions. They are indicative of the influence our bodies have on shaping who we are and how we express ourselves. This thesis has presented, explicated, and provided reasons for the necessity of a new understanding of what tattoos mean to the people who don them by positing how tattooing, just like culture and social theory, may be imagined as a historically and conceptually pluralistic endeavor upon which the self builds many different representations of itself.

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APPENDIX A

PRE-INTERVIEW BRIEF

Tattooed Lives: The Indelible Experience of Meaning and Identity in Body Art

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

My project will study tattoos and tattoo enthusiasts in a contemporary Canadian context and provide insight into tattooing practices that have continued to grow and cover more skin than ever before.

Your Participation

You have been asked to participate in this study because you have complex tattoos which I call “contemporary-style tattoos.” For that reason I assume you are relatively informed about tattooing practices and meanings. At the end of interviews, I ask respondents to suggest other potential interviewees. Your name may have been given to me in this manner. Your name may also have been suggested by a local tattoo artist.

For more information, please read the attached consent form.

Chris Martin
Ph.D. Student

Department of Sociology, Memorial University St. John's, NL, A1C 5S7
Tel: (709) 765-8872 e-mail: cwmartin@mun.ca



APPENDIX B

RESEARCH CONSENT FORM

Title: Tattooed Lives: The Indelible Experience of Meaning and Identity in Body Art

Researcher(s): Chris Martin Ph.D. Student Department of Sociology, Memorial University, St. John's, NL, A1C 5S7. Tel: (709) 765-8872, e-mail cwmartin@mun.ca

Supervisor(s): Dr. Stephen Harold Riggins, Professor, Department of Sociology.

You are invited to take part in a research project titled Tattooed Lives.

This form is part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. It also describes your right to withdraw from the study. In order to decide whether you wish to participate in this research study, you should understand enough about its risks and benefits to be able to make an informed decision. This is the informed consent process. Take time to read this carefully and to understand the information given to you. Please contact the researcher, researcher's name, if you have any questions about the study or for more information not included here before you consent.

It is entirely up to you to decide whether to take part in this research. If you choose not to take part in this research or if you decide to withdraw from the research once it has started, there will be no negative consequences for you, now or in the future.

Introduction: As part of my Ph.D. degree requirements in sociology at Memorial University in Newfoundland and under the guidance of my supervisor Dr. Stephen Harold Riggins, I am looking to study tattoo enthusiasts and artists to gain an understanding and appreciation for the practice.

Purpose of Study The purpose of the study is to help scholars and researchers better understand the experiences of becoming tattooed, and more importantly, provide a better understanding of the deep and varied meanings tattoos can have in contributing to self-identity and social identity and as artistic practices.

What I will do with this study? I would like to ask you a series of open-ended questions. I would also like to photograph your tattoo(s) to be presented in my research. My goal is to publish my study in scholarly journals or in the form of a manuscript so that others may appreciate the true complexities and artistic nature of contemporary tattooing practices. I will assure confidentiality to all participants by allowing participants to approve of what I write before I disseminate any research and I will never use real names unless otherwise approved.

Length of time: The interview may take about an hour to complete.

Withdrawal from the study: Please note that your participation is completely voluntary. You may decline to answer any questions or terminate the interview at any time.

Possible benefits:

This research will help inform other researchers and the general public about the importance of understanding tattoos, tattoo artists, and tattooed individuals as dynamic and important parts of society and culture. This research will ideally be published and will inform a wide number of people about the art and culture of tattooing.

Possible risks:

I will do everything in my power to assure no risk to research participants. This includes during our interview as participants are invited to stop the interview at any time or not answer any questions why chose not to answer. I will also provide participants with research report for approval before I disseminate the results to anyone else.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality will be assured as I will use pseudonyms to disguise names in my report and will not publish any pictures without consent both before our interview and before I publish any results.

Anonymity: The data from this research project will be published and presented at conferences; however, your identity will be kept confidential. Although we will report direct quotations from the interview, you will be given a pseudonym, and all identifying

information (list relevant possibilities such as the name of the institution, the participant's position, etc.) will be removed from our report

Recording of Data: Ideally, I would like to record the interview so that it can be transcribed. These recordings will be maintained in a secure environment for the duration of the study.

Storage of Data: After the study, data will then be kept for a minimum of five years, as required by Memorial University policy on Integrity in Scholarly Research. All data will be securely stored in a locked filing cabinet and will not be made available to anyone except the researcher.

Reporting of Results: The results of this research will be published into a Ph.D. dissertation and may be further published in scholarly journals or as a book/manuscript. I may also present findings at scholarly conferences.

Sharing of Results with Participants: Upon completion of data analysis I will seek participants to obtain permission for my report and to assure I present participants in a way they agree with and the facts are true and in line with their opinions.

Questions:

You are welcome to ask questions at any time during your participation in this research. If you would like more information about this study, please contact: Chris William Martin at cwmartin@mun.ca or Professor Stephen Harold Riggins at sriggins@mun.ca

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research, such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr@mun.ca or by telephone at 709-864-2861.

Consent:

Your signature on this form means that:

- You have read the information about the research.
- You have been able to ask questions about this study.
- You are satisfied with the answers to all your questions.
- You understand what the study is about and what you will be doing.

- You understand that you are free to withdraw from the study without having to give a reason and that doing so will not affect you now or in the future.
- You understand that any data collected from you up to the point of your withdrawal will be **destroyed* OR **retained* by the researcher for use in the research study.

If you sign this form, you do not give up your legal rights and do not release the researchers from their professional responsibilities.

Your signature: (replace italicized text as these are examples)

I have read what this study is about and understood the risks and benefits. I have had adequate time to think about this and had the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered.

I agree to participate in the research project understanding the risks and contributions of my participation, that my participation is voluntary, and that I may end my participation.

I agree to be audio-recorded during the interview	Yes	No
I agree to the use of quotations.	Yes	No
I allow my name to be identified in any publications resulting from this study.	Yes	No

A copy of this Informed Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

Signature of participant

Date

Researcher's Signature:

I have explained this study to the best of my ability. I invited questions and gave answers. I believe that the participant fully understands what is involved in being in the study, any potential risks of the study and that he or she has freely chosen to be in the study.

Signature of Principal Investigator

Date

Appendix C.

Interview Schedule

FOR TATTOO ENTHUSIASTS:

Major themes/follow-up questions I wish to explore: The role of the rising potential for tattoos as fine art in deciding to become tattooed. The negotiations of permanence. The negotiations of deviance through art. Are tattoo enthusiasts generally artistic? Have the reasons for getting tattooed stayed the same as Sanders (1994) described or has liquid modernity (Bauman 2000) caused more emphasis on art and tattooing to reinforce changing self and social identities?

Question 1.

Could you please describe your tattoo(s) to me?

Question 1.a.

What kind of meanings do you place on your tattoo(s)?

Question 2.

When and where did you get your first tattoo?

Question 3.

How do you often describe your tattoo(s) to others?

Question 3.a.

What kind of reactions do you get by others to your tattoo(s)?

Question 3.b.

Has this changed any of the ways you feel about your tattoo(s)?

Question 4.

Do you alter your descriptions while dealing with different people?

Question 4b.

Are you ever forced to justify your tattoo to others?

Question 4c.

How do you do this?

Question 5.

Have you ever hidden your tattoo(s) for any reason?

Question 6.

Have you ever purposefully displayed your tattoo(s) for any reason?

Question 7.

Do you often see yourself as a tattooed person?

Question 8.

Do you recall ever regretting the tattoo(s)?

Question 9.

Do you think you will always feel the same about your tattoo(s)?

Question 10.

How do you feel about the idea that your tattoo is permanent?

Question 10b.

Did the idea of “permanence” weigh on your decision to get tattooed/where you got tattooed?

Question 11.

Is it possible to describe a general reaction to your tattoo(s) which is basically the same for all groups of people?

Question 12.

Do you plan on getting any more tattoos in the future?

Question 13.

How would you describe the service while receiving your tattoo(s)?

Question 14.

Is your tattoo a unique design or a more conventional piece?

Question 15.

Was there a specific motivation for getting the piece?

Question 16.

Do you consider yourself artistic, or have any interest in the arts?

FOR ARTISTS:

Major themes follow-up questions: How do you see your profession changing? How important is art in the process of design for you and for the enthusiast? Do you think Canada is the same or different in the role of furthering the profession? Do you defend your profession against assumptions of deviance? If so, how?

Question 1.

How long have you been a tattoo artist?

Question 1.a.

Where/how did you train or apprentice?

Question 1.b.

What is your artistic education? What is the name of the Institution(s) of study?

Question 2.

Can you describe your typical relationship with clients?

Question 3.

How important is it for you to have input in the design?

Question 3.a.

How do you feel when clients come in with a completed design (from internet or other media)?

Question 3.b.

Has this changed any of the ways you feel about your work?

Question 4.

Where do you see tattooing practices going in the future?

Question 4b.

How do you feel tattooing has changed over time?

Question 4c.

Do you believe tattoos are mainstream or deviant?

Question 4d.

What role (if any) do you think the popularity of tattoos featured in T.V. shows over the past decade has had on your business?

Question 4e.

What role (if any) does the popularity of tattoos featured in T.V. shows have in clients' demands for designs?

Question 5.

How important is the Internet and global images to your designs/work?

Question 6.

What (if any) other artistic avenues interest you?

Question 7.

Describe some of the consultation process?

Question 8.

Can you give me examples of some works you are particularly proud of?

Question 8b.

Can you give me examples of some mistakes you have made?

Question 9.

How do you document this work that you are proud of? Do you take a picture of it?

Question 10.

How do you feel when your best work leaves with the client?