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Scored in Ink: A Narrative of Tattoos as Self-Care, Healing, and Reclamation

Em C. Huang

Tattoos are often deemed as unprofessional in many career fields, including higher education. They carry stigmas linked to rebellion, “trashiness”, and a lack of refinement, and professionals who have tattoos either feel a need, or are asked, to conceal them. This article addresses the stigma surrounding tattoos in higher education and provides a lens through which tattoos can instead be appreciated as a way to navigate through identity development and healing from trauma. Because student identity development is a significant focus within student affairs and higher education, it is important for student affairs professionals to understand how tattoos are often connected to identity and experience. The role of acceptance and pride in identity development further necessitates that the stories behind tattoos are acknowledged and celebrated. Reflecting upon the relationship between my tattoos and my queer and trans identities, I share the experiences and emotions that have shaped my process of obtaining tattoos. Through my narrative, I hope to show that tattoos can challenge hegemonic ideals of professionalism and have value not only as art, but as a means of expressing self-work and self-care.

Ink in My Skin

I chose to use my story to explore the relationship between tattooing, the processing of trauma, and the embracing of identity. When I first started to get tattoos, I struggled with the conflict between my visible tattoos and the standards of professionalism that I felt I needed to abide by. As my tattoos became increasingly important aspects of my story and identity expression, I decided that their significance was worth their visibility. I chose to challenge the idea that tattoos are

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unprofessional by looking deeper into the meaning-making aspect of tattooing, which is also tied to the history of the practice. This allowed me to expand my understanding and value for the entire tattoo process, rather than just the finished product, and further develop the connections between tattooing, self-care, and personal identity.

I share my journey by explaining the symbolism that the tattooing process holds for me. Starting with the initial act of tattooing, followed by the healing stage, and finally the reclamation of the new tattoo as a part of my body, I connect this progression to the way I have processed the experiences and identities that I hold. In detailing the stories behind my tattoos, I address my experiences with issues including suicide and self-love, and explore the ways in which they relate to my identities as queer and trans. Through the symbolism they hold, my tattoos have become an important part of my identity. My hope is that this narrative will be able to honor the meaning represented in my tattoos and reflect the ability of my ink to tell my story in a different way.

Tattooing in Culture: A Brief History

Tattooing has been practiced in cultures around the world since ancient times, with the earliest evidence of tattooed skin dating back to 6000 BCE (Gilbert, 2000). Depending on the time period and society it was found in, a tattoo could be used to mark a criminal, nobleman, religious pilgrim, astrologer, slave, or soldier (Caplan, 2000). The practice developed significance as a means of expression in non-Western and Indigenous cultures, particularly in places like Japan and Polynesia (Schildkrout, 2004). In these societies, tattoos were often used as a rite of passage, part of the cultural method of expressing identity.

Although the practice of tattooing has been in existence in the Eastern world previously, the first documentation of professional tattooing in the Western world dates back to the mid-nineteenth century (Caplan, 2000). During this time, tattooing was done by hand, a time-consuming and expensive process. This meant that tattooing was only financially accessible to members of the upper class, who often used tattoos as a way to signify their wealth. With the advent of the electric tattoo needle in 1891, the tattoo process became significantly cheaper and faster (Schildkrout, 2004). Tattoos became more prevalent among the working class and in turn were abandoned by the upper class, which started the shift in perception of tattoos from a mark of status towards one of poverty and deviance. This view persisted for over half a century until tattoos saw a resurgence in popular culture in the 1960s and 1970s, due to the effects of the “Tattoo Renaissance”, a term coined to mark the advent of technological, artistic, and social change in tattoo culture. The Tattoo Renaissance was characterized by a change in approach to tattooing when it became seen as an art form with a connected profession, influenced by tattooists

with fine arts backgrounds entering the field and renaming their roles as “tattoo artists” (Velliquette, Murray, & Creyer, 1998). The prevalence of custom tattoo designs soared, with the clientele broadening to include those in the middle and upper class who were now seeking body art, as tattoos were starting to be viewed. When tattoos continued to increase in popularity, societal perception began to shift towards viewing tattoos as an acceptable form of expression (Roberts, 2012).

Tattoos and Professionalism

During the Tattoo Renaissance, tattoos became marks of rebellion. Those who were a part of the counterculture of the time, such as members of the LGBTQ community, displayed their tattoos as symbols of their resistance to the ideals of the White, heterosexual, middle and upper class (DeMello, 2000). With the professional workplace acting as an epitome of those values, visible tattoos were delineated as counter to professional appearance and dress codes. Though tattoos have become increasingly socially acceptable, the idea that tattoos are incompatible with conceptions of professionalism is still prevalent in Western culture. A survey conducted by CareerBuilder (2015) revealed that 27% of the 2,175 employers polled stated that visible tattoos would be a top reason for them not to promote an employee that they worked with. Similarly, a 2013 survey conducted by Salary.com polled 2,675 people and found that 76% of respondents felt that tattoos and piercings negatively affected an applicant’s chances of being hired (Gouveia, 2013). The survey also found that 42% of those surveyed believed that visible tattoos were always inappropriate at work.

With these perceptions and attitudes in mind, it is important to determine who they impact—the tattoo holders who are constrained by these constructs of professionalism. A White, patriarchal, heterosexist, and classist hegemony has historically defined professionalism in the Western world, and the effects of this in the context of tattoos are seen when examining the demographics of those with tattoos today. According to a 2012 Harris Interactive poll, 23% of women surveyed had at least one tattoo, compared to 19% of men, and Black (21%) and Hispanic (30%) respondents were more likely to have tattoos than White respondents (20%) (Braverman, 2012). In addition, tattoos have traditionally been a part of many non-Western cultures, including those from Indigenous, Native, Asian, and Pacific Islander backgrounds. Another Harris Interactive study found that 31% of those polled who had tattoos self-identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, nearly twice as many as the 16% national average (Hesse, 2012). This depicts more starkly how those who do not fit into the identities valued by the creators of this hegemony are still forced to conform to this notion of professionalism.

As students and professionals engaging in higher education, we are expected to conform to its standards of professionalism, which are defined largely by the

society in which this field exists. While higher education claims to value diversity and inclusion through conversations around identity and encourages those in underrepresented populations to enter the field through initiatives like the NASPA Undergraduate Fellows Program, the constructs of professionalism are still reproduced within the field of student affairs. This is further solidified by the distribution of power that can be seen when examining the demographics of those in senior level administrative positions in higher education. In an analysis of higher education administration demographics, the Chronicle of Higher Education reported that 87% of U.S. college and university presidents, and 88% of those recently hired, were White (Supiano, 2015). Similarly, the National Center for Educational Statistics (2008) found that 83% of those in executive, managerial, and administrative staff positions were White. These and other demographics within student affairs and higher education that reflect and amplify the lenses of dominant identities serve to perpetuate the existence of the same constructs of professionalism that have persisted. Unless these constructs are challenged to evolve and broaden in inclusivity, alternative ways of expression and meaning-making will continue to be undervalued, dismissed, and unheard. It is necessary for the narratives and means of expression of individuals with marginalized identities to be recognized and validated—not only for professionals in higher education and student affairs, but for the support that students of these identities will be provided through the acknowledgement of their experiences.

Stories Held by My Body

The Tattoo Process

To explain how a tattoo acts as my personal source of healing and meaning-making, it is important for me to begin with the symbolic connection to the physical process that occurs with a tattoo. In its simplest form, the tattoo process involves the insertion of pigment into the dermis, the layer of skin that lies beneath the outermost layer, the epidermis. In order for the pigment to remain in the dermis, it requires the skin to be injured, whether through a cut, as done in some traditional tribal forms of tattooing, or a puncture, as seen in the modern tattoo process. After the initial injection, the pigment disperses along the wound into the upper dermis and epidermis. The presence of this foreign material within the skin then activates an inflammatory immune response in which white blood cells engulf particles of pigment and fibroblasts grow and form a new layer of the upper dermis (Khazan, 2014). This allows the wound to heal while the pigment remains caught in the white blood cells and fibroblasts, now visible as a part of the new layer of skin. The body is able to integrate the new material of the pigment as a part of itself, leaving a visible reminder of the wounding and healing processes that occurred.

The physical tattoo process holds significance for me as it mirrors my personal

reasons for getting tattoos. The initial stage of deciding upon the content of the tattoo and collaborating with the artist is when I reflect on my experiences and find a way to incorporate images and words into a design that honors the impact that past events have had on my life. The actual process of getting the tattoo involves pain, which creates a time for me to form a deeper connection between my physical, mental, and emotional states and fully engage with the significance of the modification of my body. Finally, the healing process, which lasts several weeks, allows me to observe the way my body accepts the ink and integrates it into my skin. My tattoos are reminders of the important events and journeys in my life, the connections between my personal processes of navigating trauma and coming to terms with my identities. Each of them has played an important role in my learning and the way that I understand myself: through the processing of the trauma, the healing that follows, and culminating in the renegotiation of the way I understand those experiences and identities. Thus, rather than denying the existence of the wound after it has healed, I choose to acknowledge the impact of that trauma and the way it has affected my life and reframed my perspective, which has shaped the person I am today.

Scored in Ink

When asked about my tattoos, I often say that they are my story “scored in ink.” The word “score” has multiple definitions, depending on the context. Merriam-Webster (2015) defines it as the way “to mark with lines, grooves, scratches, or notches,” as well as the way “to write or arrange music for a specific performance medium,” the audible illustration of the storyline. My tattoos are the narrators of my story, and the lines and colors are the illustrators of my experiences.

Love, save the empty. My first tattoo is a simple one—four French words in script that flow across my right hip. “L’amour, sauvez les vides,” which translates to “Love, save the empty,” are the words I chose to remind myself of the journey I began in discovering my queer identity during high school. The tattoo is derived from the title of a song that became important in my life when I first began to understand my sexuality.

Growing up in a conservative home and community, I never knew anyone who identified as gay. My Chinese-Vietnamese family had attended the same Evangelical Christian church since before I was born, and with several pastors and missionaries in my family, I was heavily involved in the church as a leader in the youth group and worship team. From this community, I was taught that being gay was both a choice and a sin, and those who made this choice would go to hell. Similarly, my family prioritized passing on their traditional Christian values to me and did not allow for any exposure to or conversations around sexuality, except for at rallies supporting California’s Proposition 8 where queer people were denounced

as hell-bound sinners bent on destroying the sanctity of marriage. I had never encountered a discussion of what it meant to question one's sexuality and to identify as anything other than straight until the summer before my sophomore year of high school, when I watched an episode of the television show *Grey's Anatomy* for the first time. Through the show's portrayal of Dr. Callie Torres and her coming out process, I found a story that resonated with the experiences and feelings I had never before been able to name.

As I began the process of coming out to myself, I continued to watch *Grey's Anatomy*, hungering for more depictions of this identity I was finally able to name and claim. This journey of self-discovery gave meaning to the pieces of my life that I had ignored in the past, told by my family and community that they were a sinful mistake. Encouraged by the stories portrayed in the show, I gained a greater understanding of what love was and what it could look like in my own life beyond what was approved by my church. Throughout the next three years, I moved away from the blind devotion to the church I had grown up with, learning instead to make meaning from my identities in my own way. I found these experiences expressed by a song featured in the show; "Love, Save the Empty" by Erin McCarley (2009), which included the lyrics "Sad boy, you stare up at the sky when no one's looking back at you / Again, the false attention / Again, you're breaking inside / Love save the empty / Love save the empty, save me." These lyrics became a reflection of my journey, and "Love, save the empty" became the phrase I held on to as I continued to work towards self-acceptance.

Pitter-pat the angel on my shoulder is haunting me tonight. I spent the next several years fighting for my queer identity. Though I did not come out to anyone for several years, my parents found out that I was questioning my sexuality by monitoring my media use. Rather than acknowledging this, my parents sent me to anti-gay Christian counseling for my last three years of high school, where therapists told me that I was the cause of my family's problems and that I was going to hell. The church I attended reinforced these messages with sermons on Bible passages that stated that homosexuality was unnatural and should be punished. Being in a family and community that so blatantly rejected a fundamental part of my identity made me question if these parts of myself could ever be reconciled. Without anyone around me to draw support from, I started to believe the things I was being told, and I believed less and less that I deserved happiness in my life.

After nearly two years of struggling with these thoughts, I could no longer see a positive future for myself without denying the existence of my queer identity, which I realized by then that I could not do. I felt that there was nothing left for me in life, and that I would never be able to feel real happiness or that I was enough without changing myself. I attempted to commit suicide during my junior year of high school, choosing a weekend when my parents were gone and telling

no one. I woke up from the attempt feeling severely weakened, but afraid to die. In that moment, I realized that though the pain and sadness still existed, I was not yet ready for my life to end. It was a turning point for me when I began to accept that my identities were not going to magically change into ones deemed acceptable by my family and church. I still struggled with this, but started to see other possibilities for my future that involved a life in which myself, and others, would be able to value all of myself.

When I planned for my second tattoo, I chose the lyrics “pitter-pat the angel on my shoulder is haunting me tonight” from another Erin McCarley (2009) song, “pitter-pat,” to symbolize that I will always carry that experience with me. It was invaluable to my coming out process, and the pain allowed me to remember the fears and struggles that were obstacles to my self-acceptance then, and that I sometimes find myself fighting against even now.

May 19th, 2013. As I continued to grow in my own understanding and acceptance of my identity, I became more open about my queerness to my friends. I came out to a friend for the first time during my senior year of high school. When I went to college I was able to engage openly in a queer community. However, I still was not out to my parents and had to live a double life, closeted when I was around family members or people who attended my family’s church. This was both mentally and emotionally draining, and not sustainable to my own well-being. During my first two years of college, I was able to combat this by building a support network of friends and chosen family which allowed me to become secure in my identity and develop emotional and financial independence. At the end of my second year, I realized that I needed to be open and honest about my identity, and I decided to come out to my parents. On May 19th, 2013, I told my parents about my queer identity. Though the conversation did not result in declarations of support and understanding, my parents were able to at least acknowledge that I was still their child. That affirmation allowed me to believe in the possibility of rebuilding a relationship with my parents where they would recognize my identity and perhaps even support it in the future.

To reflect this, the open book on my right shoulder displays the date May 19th, 2013. It is surrounded by five red and white striped carnations, with a single red carnation and buds sprouting up from its pages. The striped carnations, which are associated with refusal and rejection, signify the five years that I feared rejection from my parents because of my identity. The date of May 19th, 2013 is the day that I chose to become open about my queerness, with the open book acting as a symbol of my choice to stop hiding my identity. The red carnation signifies deep love, with the red buds representing the future relationships with my parents I hope to build, full of love and restoration.

Since May 19th, I have continued to learn about my queer identity and have further explored my gender identity, a process that continues to teach me about myself. It has come with its own challenges, but I am learning to understand and value this piece of my identity as well. On the days that I struggle most to love my queer and trans identities, I look at my tattoo and remember the experience that was the starting point for my journey of being out as queer, which has shaped my passions and still continues to help me to heal.

Conclusion

While these three tattoos are symbols that speak to one piece of my identity, there is, and will continue to be, more ink in my skin that tells other stories. My tattoos embody the pain and healing I have experienced, and through them I have been able to make meaning for myself in a deeper and more visceral way. These words and symbols scored in ink have allowed me to reclaim and own the stories that I hold in my body. As I continue with my graduate studies and, in the future, my professional career, I am defining what professionalism means for me. Even more important, I am still healing and I am still learning. My hope is that the stories I write will continue to teach me how to accept and love my body and my truth.

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