

Tattooing the Body, Marking Culture

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Literature on American tattooing appears in varied forms, from the scholarly journals of anthropology, history and sociology to newspaper stand magazines that can be construed as 'soft' pornography. What this spectrum of literary forms has in common is a relative marginalization in which American tattooing is perceived as part of a deviant subculture and not a topic of serious intellectual interest. Academics involved in this research have referred to colleagues' attitudes about research on tattooing as a deviant interest in deviance. In addition, many academics have an agenda of legitimating the practice of tattooing by explicating its social and cultural patterns. Although much of this work is important scholarly investigation, I have found that many authors romanticize the practice of tattooing in ways that often do not correspond with their analyses. This article will, in part, respond to the tensions between analyzing and romanticizing tattooing as cultural practice(s).

The purpose of this article is to explore the complex relationship between power and the physical and social practices of tattooing in the late capitalist state. Beginning with the history of tattooing as a cultural practice – from ancient Greece through the colonial period to contemporary USA – I will highlight the temporal and geographical changes in the practices and perceptions of tattooing. My hope is that its history in Western civilization will offer insights into the ways in which tattooing is practiced in the late 20th-century USA. In addition to creating a historical narrative, I will also situate the sociocultural practice of tattooing the body for the tattooist and the 'tattooee'. This investigation into body inscription will serve as a means to elucidate the contemporary practice of tattooing as one that is simultaneously physical and social, with multiple levels of constructed meaning. And finally, I will explore the ways in which tattooing acts

as a cultural signifier in the late 20th-century USA. I will attempt to show how tattooing as a form of body modification can be analyzed as a form of resistance to or a symptom of a culture that has commodified the body.

From *Stigma* to *Tatau* to Late Capitalism

The history of tattooing is somewhat difficult to trace. Although the word 'tattoo' did not emerge until James Cook's voyage to Polynesia in the 18th century, the practice of indelibly inking the body has a much longer history. Jones (2000) posits that the Greek word *stigma(ta)*¹ actually indicated tattooing and that evidence suggests that this word was then transmitted to the Romans.² Of course, this linking of tattooing and *stigma* has contemporary value when considering the current meaning of 'stigma' in English. It marries the process or mark of tattooing with its interpretation, indicating that the meaning of stigma today may come from the ancient practice of tattooing.

In spite of the uncertainty surrounding names associated with the practice of tattooing, Jones suggests that the Greeks were not the first to tattoo. He writes:

Cultures which were familiar to the ancient Greeks practised what we would call tattooing. . . . Tattooing in its social aspect, whether as a mark of high status or as pure decoration, the Greeks associated with 'barbarians' of the uncivilized kind, and never adopted it. (2000: 15)

The way in which tattooing was adopted by the Greeks was as a punitive or proprietary action. In other words, because the Greeks associated *stigmata* with their rival neighbors, its social importance was degraded and, subsequently, *stigmata* were used for marking 'Others' within Greek culture, such as criminals and slaves.

This association between social *others* and tattooing was then transmitted from Greece to the Romans. Gustafson (2000) interprets the use of tattooing by the Romans as a state control mechanism. Using a Foucauldian framework to think through social control, he quotes from *Discipline and Punish*, 'But the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs' (Gustafson, 2000: 24). By indelibly marking the unconsenting bodies of criminals and slaves, the Roman state could more easily control their movements by means of the external mark upon these individuals. Their bodies would act as agents of the state emitting a visible sign of their social role.

Both Jones (2000) and Gustafson (2000) are interested in the visibility and messages of these tattoos. Jones has posited that the act of tattooing the foreheads

of slaves and criminals must have been common up until the 4th century, when Roman Emperor Constantine explicitly forbade inscribing the face with tattoos. Constantine suggested that the hands or calves should be tattooed instead. His reasoning, as Jones interprets the texts, is that 'the face, which has been formed in the image of the divine beauty, will be defiled as little as possible' (Jones, 2000: 13).

Gustafson (2000) has identified three types of penal tattoos. The most common inscribed the name of the crime on the criminals' bodies. The other two were inscriptions of the name of the emperor under whom the crime was committed and the name of the punishment that the criminals were given.³

Established as a punitive or proprietary symbol in Greece, tattooing continued through the Middle Ages in Europe as a means to mark the bodies of criminals, and thus tattooing as a social practice in Western civilization became intertwined with criminality and deviance.⁴ Introduced as a practice of the enemy in ancient Greece, tattooing's reintroduction into European culture was through similar circumstances during the 18th century. The colonialist projects in Africa, Asia and the 'New World' (re)presented tattooing as a practice of the primitives who would become the colonized (i.e. Africa and Asia) or the enemies of colonization (i.e. Native North and South Americans). How did this re-emergence of tattooing influence the social and cultural patterns of tattooing in Europe and what would become the USA?

Published in 1769, James Cook's memoirs of his travels to the South Sea Islands introduced the word *tatau* into the English language from the Polynesian word referring to the practice of inscribing the skin with indelible ink. This word quickly morphed into 'tattoo' in English and spread through other European languages, including French and Spanish. It is very unclear in the literature if penal tattooing practices were still occurring at the time the word was introduced into the language. There is evidence, however, that prisoners were 'tattooed' at the end of the 18th and in the early 19th century.

After tracing the evolution of the word *tatau* into European languages and documenting the early anthropological work on body modification in the colonies, there is little scholarly work in history or other disciplines examining tattooing practices in Europe or the USA from 1770 to 1860 (Bradley, 2000; Caplan, 2000a). It is probable that during this period sailors were returning to their homelands with tattoos that they had received on their voyages. There is also some indication that tattooists were practicing in Europe and the USA, but who they were and what their tattooing methods were remain unclear.

One of the first explicit references to tattooing that offers insight into 18th-century practice was during the American Civil War. Alan Govenar (2000) has

found evidence that tattooing was an acceptable practice for soldiers, especially tattoos that were overtly political and were symbols of allegiance to their 'side' in the war. In his article, Govenar suggests that the American Civil War was the first instance in which soldiers were systematically tattooed with symbols of the military or their cause.⁵ One way in which to interpret this mass tattooing practice is that the Civil War was an event in which people were struggling with their positions in a politically confusing time. Other than the color associated with the military uniforms, what were the differences between Confederate and Union men who were caught in the war? Perhaps through creating specific war images, and inscribing them on the bodies of soldiers, the opposing armies could create difference between otherwise very similar men.

Changes in the social practices of tattooing were also significant for prisoners. During the 1880s, criminologists in France and Italy became interested in a cryptography of tattoos. They believed that tattoos were bodily inscriptions of the crimes and offenses of criminals and deviants, and consequently, they set out to decipher the meaning of the imagery (Caplan, 2000a). Thus tattoos were seen as physical indicators of criminality. By the late 19th century, in France and Italy, tattooing as a social practice had changed only a little from 2000 years before. The most important change had been from non-consensual tattooing of prisoners to mark their bodies with their crimes, to voluntary tattooing which was perceived by the state as evidence of their crimes.

Ironically, during this same period, England and the USA were experiencing a tattoo 'craze' in 'fashionable society' in spite of the long-standing association of tattoos with criminality (Bradley, 2000). Until the 1880s, criminals, sailors and the working class were the major groups that were tattooed. Suddenly, toward the end of the 1880s, tattoos became fashionable and spread through the upper classes of England and the United States. Tattoos remained fashionable for the next decade or two.⁶

In spite of more socioeconomic groups seeking tattoos during this time, there was no sense of class unification through tattooing. Those in the lower classes receiving tattoos were still interpreted by the tattooed wealthy as deviant. In part, this attitude was based on tattoo imagery and designs, which changed quickly during this period. Bradley clarifies this point:

On the most basic level, tattoos acted as a badge of social and cultural differentiation that separated the tattooed from the non-tattooed. On a deeper level, however, social and cultural homogeneity did not unite the tattooed, for the subject matter and aesthetic style of the tattoos created a fault-line that divided the classes. (Bradley, 2000: 148)

One of the characteristics of the new design was the addition of the 'ethnic' tattoo. This generally meant designs that were influenced by Japanese tattoos.

Coming to symbolize for the wealthy a (usually false) message of worldliness, these tattoos indicated that its bearer had traveled and consumed other cultures. This physical appropriation of another culture was seen as a class commodity in which one's social standing could be based on the consumption of other cultures, a form of what I call *cultural cannibalism*. Thus, the design of the tattoo was crucial for sending specific class messages for the wealthy, while tattoo designs were generally chosen based on personal experiences or characteristics among the working class. One way of (over)simplifying this class difference can be summed up as follows: in the wealthy class, the purpose of tattoos was to impress, and in the working class, tattoos were to express.

One of the questions that is worth exploring about the upper-class interest in tattooing is why tattooing became fashionable at this precise historic moment in these locations.⁷ One of the most interesting events that parallels the tattooing trend is the development of the electric tattoo machine. With dates of this technology's emergence varying from as early as the 1870s to the 1890s to its US patent in 1901, most authors cannot agree when the electric tattoo machine actually came into use in the USA (Blanchard, 1994; Bradley 2000; Govenar 2000; Sanders, 1989). One of the reasons that the date is so uncertain is that it came into use quietly. Designed and used privately for years before being patented, the electric tattoo machine was the tool of one individual before it was diffused into the tattooing trade.

Although the date is uncertain, there *is* consensus as to the inventor: New York City tattooist Sam O'Reilly. Building his design from Edison's 1876 electric stencil pen, O'Reilly called his device the 'tattaograph' (Sanders, 1989). This device was seen as an important improvement for tattooing because:

The electric tattoo machine (patterned after the rotary mechanism of a sewing machine) not only quickened the process and decreased the pain involved, but facilitated greater detail and subtlety in coloration and shading. With the increased technical proficiency in tattooing itself, the quality of the drawings and paintings on which they were based also improved. (Govenar, 2000: 215)⁸

Although the machine had the potential for creating better-quality drawings, it was seen as a means of deskilling the tattooist because it was 'easier' to inscribe the designs well.

In addition to inventing the first tattoo machine,⁹ O'Reilly and his partner Lew Alberts designed and sold tattoo designs and stencils through mail order. This was also interpreted as deskilling the tattooist and as standardizing tattoos. O'Reilly is also credited with bringing Japanese designs to the United States. Sanders (1989) reports this event in the following terms:

For a brief time in the 1890s the Japanese master Hori Chyo was enticed by a \$12,000 a year offer from a New York millionaire to practice in America and two other Japanese tattoo artists were brought to New York under the sponsorship of Samuel O'Reilly. (Sanders, 1989: 16)

O'Reilly learned the Japanese designs and had high sales volumes of his sheets of Japanese tattoo designs (Blanchard, 1994).

The upper class had their phase of fashionable tattooing at the end of the 19th century, which corresponded temporally to these three advances in tattooing associated with O'Reilly: the electric tattoo machine, availability of design sheets and stencils, and access to Japanese designs and styles in tattooing. These three elements provided a less painful tattoo with more designs from which to choose, with more detail in the image than previously achieved. Situated by these changes in the tattooing process, the upper class craze of the late 19th century can be understood within its historic context. The brevity of the wealthy's fascination with tattoos may be due to two factors: a simultaneous increase in the number of social 'deviants' getting tattoos during this same time period and an increased visibility of 'vulgar' tattooed bodies.

Although the middle class did not have a similar involvement in tattooing at the end of the 19th century as did the wealthy, there was a concurrent movement among the working class and among entertainers. A growing interest in the circus spectacle or 'freak show' added to the upsurge in tattooists' business. As more and more men and women covered their bodies in indelible images, tattooing became more and more associated with vulgarity and deviance. Furthermore, as more individuals decided to tattoo themselves to earn money from public spectacle, these performers were forced to increase the number and diversify the design of their tattoos. Tattooed women in the circus found themselves wearing more revealing costumes in order to show how much of their bodies were actually tattooed, leading some critics to describe this as a 'peepshow within a freak show' (Mifflin, 1997). As the 20th century progressed, these performers complained that their bodies were becoming less profitable. By the 1940s, the tattooed 'freak' was no longer able to draw a crowd. The tattoos were still perceived as vulgar by the general population, but the novelty of seeing someone's body covered with tattoos had worn off (Govenar, 2000).

The military also became publicly opposed to tattoos,¹⁰ due in part to the erotic images soldiers chose as tattoos, but also due to fears that tattooing was a public health hazard. Few cases of communicable diseases were documented as transmitted through tattooing, but even today, tattooing has an aura of risk about it.¹¹ Although military officials tried to warn soldiers about the danger of being contaminated by tattoo needles, it seems that the numbers of military men being tattooed did not decline. While serving an important role in soldier bonding or

group identification perhaps, the tattoo was not publicly accepted and had 'negative social value' when soldiers returned to civilian life (Govenar, 2000).

Govenar (2000) associates this rejection of the military man's tattoo as part of the American Return to Normalcy movement of the 1950s in which conformity and rejection of the war played a large part. The tattoo was a symbol of the breach that the Second World War had caused in society. During these years after the war, tattooing was primarily associated with the working class, gangs and drunks. At the same time, however, tattooing became one of the most common forms of teenage rebellion,¹² and tattoos were widely depicted in film and advertisement with nationally recognized figures like Popeye and the Marlboro man having tattoos.

Tattooing as a fashion or as a craze re-emerged during the late 1960s and 1970s with the hippie and rock star subcultures. This trend has had its peaks and lulls during the past 35 years, but it has sustained itself as a movement. Cutting across diverse social and class groups, there are more people today who get tattoos, and yet there is still a relative marginalization of the practice within the larger culture. It is perceived as a social marking that, if not inscribed on the bodies of deviants, then constitutes a deviant practice on the bodies of individuals. Before turning to an analysis of the practice of tattooing as a symptom of late capitalism, I will first situate the individual who becomes a tattooist and the individual who gets tattooed in a sociological framework.

Tattooing and the Profession of Modifying Bodies

This article has concentrated solely on the social and cultural perception of tattoos as they exist on the body. This second section of the article will explore the profession of tattooist. I will outline the trade, discuss the ethical decisions in tattooing, and raise the issue of tattooist as artist or service provider.

With men making up about 85 percent of tattooists, tattooing is predominantly a male occupation in the USA. Although women tattooists generally make the same salary as men tattooists, and have the same degree of professional security, the occupation is very difficult for women to enter. Learning the trade is based almost solely on an apprenticeship model, in which trade secrets are passed from the tattooist to the novice by working closely together. Tattooing equipment is easy to acquire (with sufficient funds, around \$500–1000), but the techniques are not so obvious. Finding a tattooist who is willing to teach and work with an apprentice can be crucial to establishing oneself in the trade, and women are often discouraged from serving an apprenticeship.

Trade secrecy in tattooing is due in part to the lack of vertical mobility of the

profession. Tattooists' aspirations tend to fall into one (or both) of two categories: owner of a profitable shop and recognition as an artist. Because tattooists can only expect horizontal mobility (i.e. changing from one shop to another or changing cities), the tattooists, after establishing themselves, have little opportunity to increase their status or their income (Sanders, 1989). Thus, training too many novices in the trade can negatively impact the tattooist because this could lead to decreased profits from sharing the client base.

The skill of the tattooist, however, is not confined to his/her ability with the tattooing needles. Often these people need to have an acute business interest due to much economic uncertainty. Business is sporadic, depending on time of the day, day of the week, and season of the year.¹³ In order to maintain their shops, tattooists have to plan for this uncertainty and develop ways in which to compensate for their time waiting for clients in the shop. For example, many tattooists require a deposit when clients come in to make an appointment. This helps guarantee that the client will come back, come at the designated time and day, and if he/she does not show up, the tattooist is still compensated for the time spent waiting.

Another important aspect of tattooing which is harder to learn is the tattooist's interpersonal skills. Many clients are frightened when they come for tattoos, and the tattooist must repeatedly answer the same questions: Will it hurt? What does it feel like? How much does it cost?¹⁴ In addition, many clients have very specific ideas about the image that they will have tattooed, and the tattooist will have to negotiate these desires with the cost, feasibility, and the long-term psychological and social welfare of the client. In his book, Sanders (1989) quotes at length from an interview with a tattooist regarding this last point. The tattooist relates the case as follows:

The girl came in and she said she wanted – a really stupid name – ‘Larry Joe Vitelli’ tattooed around her nipple on her breast. This girl was extremely fragile. I sensed that immediately. She was not, in the American sense of the word, a beautiful girl. . . . She wanted this ‘Larry Joe Vitelli’ tattooed on her nipple. So I spent about 20 minutes trying to talk her out of getting this guy’s name tattooed on her because I just don’t think it is a good idea . . . although I will do vow tattooing because I think it is a valid tattoo image. I do my best not to do it, first. Then I realize that it is futile to try to talk them out of it – love has its way of blinding the logical person. So I didn’t want to do this tattoo and [the artist/proprietor] comes out because this girl is protesting because she wants this tattoo. He says, ‘You’re going to do this tattoo because that is what I hired you to do and that is what she wants. So you do it.’ Ok. So I thought, ‘Here I am in a moral dilemma. I don’t want to do this tattoo because I know that this girl has problems emotionally and I’m forced into it or I’m going to blow my position here.’ So I decided I’ll do the tattoo. So I start to do the tattoo and I’m half way through it – I got ‘Larry Joe’ on there – and she starts making passes at me . . . sexual sort of come on things. Here I am writing ‘Larry Joe Vitelli’ on her and she wants to get sexually involved with me. So I said to her, ‘Well, you and Larry must have quite a relationship to do something like this. I mean, this is a really intimate kind of thing – having your breast tattooed with this guy’s name. You’ll never be able

to jump in bed with anyone else without them seeing “Larry Joe Vitelli” written there.’ I said, ‘You must have quite a relationship: you must really care about each other.’ She goes, ‘Yeah, I really love him but I have no idea how he feels about me.’ I’m in the middle of tattooing this on her. I didn’t trust my own intuitions. I didn’t follow my own standards. I compromised . . . I felt sick, nauseous . . . I’ll never do anything like that again! That was a real lesson for me. (Sanders, 1989: 79–80)

These types of moral choices in which the tattooist has to decide whether to do the tattoo or risk having the client go elsewhere are not only relevant to this sort of psychological case. Whether or not to inscribe individual names on the bodies of clients is often placing the tattooist in the position of a therapist,¹⁵ but there are other ethical choices the tattooist must make regarding tattoo design. Clients might request tattoos of swastikas or overt racist or anti-social phrases, and the tattooist must learn to negotiate with these clients or refuse to do the tattoo. Most of the time, tattooists are unwilling to do tattoos that they are morally opposed to because they are fearful of getting a reputation for this type of tattoo, having to do more of them, increasing their own occupational stigma, and perhaps losing other business as a result.

As stated above, tattooists have little opportunity for vertical mobility, and so many individual tattooists aspire to receive recognition as artists. This is one of the most severe tensions for many tattooists. Can their craft be considered art when it is based on a skilled service and profit-driven? Many people, especially those in the art world, argue that it is not an art. How can tattooing be art when most of the work done is based on standardized designs that the clients choose from the wall of the tattoo shop? Many tattooists themselves do not argue with this. Some tattooists have a concept of mutual artistry for which they often strive (Sanders, 1989). This can best be characterized as a process in which the tattooist and client design a tattoo based on the individual personality of the client and based on the client’s body, using the natural contours of the body to make a more beautiful tattoo. This process is often restricted by the client’s cost considerations and his/her desire to know exactly how the finished product will look in the end.

Are these clients seeking art? How do they choose not only a tattoo, but also a tattooist? What are the ways in which they envision the ink on their body? The next section will examine the ‘tattooee’ and their role in the social and cultural patterns of tattooing in the USA.

Inscribing the Body: A Demographic of Tattoos

Historically, men have been much more likely to get tattoos than have women, especially men who are members of particular groups, such as the military or

motorcycle gangs. Recently, however, this trend has reversed, with about 60 percent of tattoo clientele being women (Mifflin, 1997). This particular change is difficult to explain, and it seems that it may not be so much that women are reversing the stereotype, but rather that tattooing is equalizing between the sexes.¹⁶ One of the enduring sex differences in tattooing is the location of the tattoo. Most women choose a location on their bodies for the tattoo that they will be able to conceal relatively easily, whereas men often choose a location they will be able to reveal relatively easily. The torso, especially the hips, buttocks, or breasts, is the most common location for women, while men usually place their first tattoos on their arms.

Tattooing is generally a peer activity with about 64 percent of tattooees coming to the shop with friends or family. Although there is a stereotype of inebriation as one of the motivators in seeking tattoos, most tattooists refuse service to these people because of 'their inability to maintain the appropriate receiving demeanor' (Sanders, 1989). This is to say, they have trouble staying still during the tattoo, often vomit, and frequently hassle other clients and the tattooist him/herself.

Although clients are usually sober when they seek tattoos, getting tattooed is often not a deliberated decision. Several authors compare the decision to be tattooed with impulse shopping. Groups of friends are together, someone suggests getting tattoos, and they go to the nearest tattoo shop or one that someone may have heard of before. The vast majority of clients never research the process of tattooing nor the reputation or skill of the tattooist. Linking impulsiveness with tattooing creates a fascinating tension. By definition, tattoos are permanent.¹⁷ The choice of tattooist and design, therefore, should be a process rather than a capricious act. This impulsiveness can mean that the individual does not receive a well-designed tattoo, but in spite of the spontaneity of the act, the tattoo generally conveys multiple meanings for its bearer.

Both Blanchard (1994) and Sanders (1989) identify four primary overlapping functions of the tattoo. First, the tattoo functions as ritual. In a culture in which there are few rituals or rites of passage outside religion, the tattoo can serve (as it did for indigenous people who practiced tattooing) as a physical mark of a life event. These life events are interpreted as significant by the bearer, if not by society, and can vary from the winning of a sporting event or competition to the completion of a divorce to the remission of cancer (becoming a 'cancer survivor'). The tattoo also functions as identification. By inscribing established symbols on the body, the tattooee is identifying him/herself as part of a given group. Groups can be as broad as 'American' to the very specific, such as a family or partner's name.

A third function of tattooing is protective. The tattoo can be a symbol or

talisman to protect its bearer from general or specific harm. Sanders (1989) relates an interview with a man who had a tattoo of a fierce and angry bee inscribed on his arm. The man told Sanders that he was allergic to bees and had been stung so much that his physician feared the next sting might prove fatal. Having decided he needed protection against bees, the man decided to get a bee tattoo/talisman to frighten the bees from stinging him again. Finally, the fourth function of tattoos is decorative. Regardless of their particular psychosocial function for the individual, tattoos are images (even words become images as/within tattoos). By modifying the body with tattoos, the individual has chosen to add permanent decoration to his/her body.

Having this decorative function, tattoos are often associated with exhibitionism. Although there is indeed an element of desire to reveal tattoos, there is often an equally profound desire to conceal tattoos. Revealing the tattoo has several functions, including showing the individual's stylishness, identifying a group to which they belong, and demonstrating their rebelliousness. The desire to conceal can stem from the deeply personal meaning of the tattoo for the individual or from the deeply embedded social stigma. While the tattooed person enjoys the positive attention from his/her peers generated by the tattoo, most of these same people feel embarrassed about the negative reactions they get from others, especially when this reaction is coming from friends and family. People with tattoos try to avoid and resent questions such as 'Why would you do that to yourself?' or 'Do you know what kind of people get tattoos?'¹⁸

Even as tattooing becomes more prevalent in the USA, there is still a persistent taboo on tattoos. People with tattoos often feel that they should cover their body markings in public or risk social rejection. Tattooing remains a marginalized occupation, in spite of its record for professionalism and safety. Why is it that the tattoo can be so enshrouded by a myth of deviance, and elicit such disgust? What are the meanings that American culture has constructed for the social practice of tattooing? And how does this practice negotiate the social and cultural space in the USA to build personal meaning for the individual marked by tattooing?

Dermagraphics: The Tattoo as Cultural Signifier

The previous sections of this article have traced the history of tattooing in Western civilization, with a particular focus on the USA, and analyzed the characteristics of the tattooing profession in addition to examining individuals who acquire tattoos. Although this is a productive way of understanding the social role of the tattoo on a micro-level, the above work does not interpret the tattoo as a

cultural phenomenon. The remaining section of this article will position work from a semiotic model using tattooing as the signifier, the concept of body modification as the signified, and a socially 'dis-eased' body as the sign.¹⁹ By comparing tattooing with other forms of body modification, particularly socially sanctioned forms, I will interrogate the social and political construction of tattooing as a symbol embedded with cultural meaning.

American culture is replete with manifest contradictions about the body. The late capitalist economy has created a structure in which our lives and bodies have been violently commodified. The notion of flexibility has translated into bodies as a demand to reshape the identity through capitalism. Bombarding society with messages about the body has resulted in a cultural obsession or fixation with the body. Through advertising and other forms of popular culture, Americans accept the requisite need to commit themselves to 'body-work' or suffer social stigmatism and rejection.²⁰ While demographically America is becoming overweight, the ideal body is exerting more demands and more restrictions – thinner, more muscular, healthier – on the individual. And there are a million products marketed to help Americans reach this goal. Why is it that a culture that abhors permanent body modification, such as tattooing, infibulation and cicatrization, can simultaneously encourage incremental, semi-permanent and often expensive body modifications, such as clothing, make-up, hair trends, dieting and muscularity?

Fashion, by definition, has a fear of commitment. Consequently, the permanence of tattoos is terrifying. Permanence is a 'bad word' within late capitalist economies, which are dependent on and nurture change. Often in the form of (or rhetoric of) technological improvements, 'change' is commodified and packaged as another product that is more fashionable, that is more advanced, that will help Americans 'reinvent' themselves. Semi-permanent body modifications are ideal in a capitalist structure because there is always already space for the next body modification. Hair grows, bodies expand, clothes fade. Resistance is everything because there are always new (pre-packaged) battles to wage.

As fashion, tattoos have taken hold of the American imaginary and transformed tattooing culture. Mark Taylor (1997) writes about the tattoo as being the symbol of the 'postmodern primitive'. He discusses it as a cultural abandonment of the centuries of resistance to 'primitive desires' and 'savage impulses'. He highlights the use of tattoos as fashion to play at being pre-fashion and tribal (group identity). What Taylor does not discuss is the prevalence of the 'temporary tattoo' (all the faddish advantages of the tattoo without any of the permanence) and the transformation of the tattooist to laserist (one-stop shopping of tattooing the skin and of removing them with new laser technologies). The postmodern primitive can play at permanence when it is fashionable without any danger of commitment.

In this culture of body fixation, boundaries are drawn of inclusion and exclusion based on the body. Americans form communities and friendships around athletics, gym membership, weight loss and behavioral support groups (quit smoking, drinking, disordered eating, etc.). Reinscribing boundaries, tattoos are marks of inclusion in different groups – fashionable, conforming, deviant. And as society focuses increasingly on the material body, individuals feel alienated from their own commodified bodies. This alienation stems from experiencing the world with rather than *through* the material body. Identity is fixed on what we are, rather than what we are becoming. The tattoo can serve as an indelible identity marker inscribing the boundaries of possibility for the body.

Before continuing this contemporary analysis of tattooing, it is essential to ask how this placement of the tattoo as a signifier of a socially dis-eased body operates within the historical perspective provided above. I think that this analysis can hold up, especially when contrasting voluntary tattooing, a comparatively recent phenomenon, with the centuries of involuntarily inscribing bodies. Susan Benson's work (2000) on tattooing emphasizes that, historically, groups whose bodies are regulated by the nation-state have been the most likely to have tattoos. She describes the recent predilection of prisoners, the military and the working class to tattoo their bodies. This tendency can be described as a reclaiming or reappropriation of the body. That is, in conditions of general repression and strict control of the body, these groups need to re-exert ownership of their own bodies. Accepting tattooing as a symptom in this context, it follows that the socially dis-eased body is suffering from a loss of agency due to the complex power of the state over the functioning of the body. Or in other words, the body has been infected by the state.

Expanding this model of state control over the body, why has tattooing become so common in the middle and upper classes? If tattooing remains a cultural reappropriation of the body, from whom or what are Americans reclaiming their bodies? The body is becoming commodified to such an extent that legal, ethical, political and social questions have arisen about the body as property. If the American body is a commodity, tattooing and other forms of permanent body modification can be construed as a way in which the individual reclaims some power over his/her own body. Benson writes on this point:

What is distinctive in contemporary tattoo practices is the linking of such assertions of permanence to ideas of the body as property and possession – 'a statement of ownership over the flesh', as one individual put it – indeed as the *only* possession of the self in a world characterized by accelerating commodification and unpredictability, 'the one thing you get in a culture where you are what you do'. (Benson, 2000: 251)

Not only a culture of 'you are what you do' but also a culture of 'you are how you look'.

If involuntary tattoos were a form of control over the body by the state from ancient Greece to Nazi Germany, voluntary tattoos may be viewed as a cultural appropriation and reinterpretation of a historically regulating technology in order for the individual to re-establish control over their body. Or, in Foucauldian terms, the classical model placed identity or selfhood internal to the body, while the state remained external. In this condition, the state needed to mark the body to control it. In the modern model the state has displaced selfhood by taking the former position of identity and is internalized (docile body) while the self has become external. In this modern condition, identity or selfhood imposes external inscription (i.e. tattoos) to tame the unruly body-state.

Historically, multiple meanings have been embedded within the practice of tattooing in the West. As tattooing has changed in form and function from the neighboring tribes' influence on ancient Greek tattooing, to contemporary American practices of body modification, tattooing has remained both a fascinating and repelling practice. Tracing the history of tattooing in Western civilization, I have attempted to illustrate the patterns of interaction between tattooing practices and social and cultural perceptions of tattooing. By examining changes in both practice and perception, most notably changes in technology or cultural patterns, the struggle between the physical and social body can be analyzed in terms of the individual in opposition to the state or culture. Tattooing appears then as a means to reappropriate the physical body from the socially dis-eased body, as a means to resist the cultural forces that have commodified the body, and continue to do so. And yet it cannot be seen as a 'cure' and, therefore, must not be romanticized because it is still operating within the 'infecting' cultural patterns, within the American state and capitalism. As a service, tattooing has its parallels with more acceptable types of body modification, such as hairdressing and other aesthetic forms, and so must be understood within its tense complexity. As a continued social practice, tattooing has and will persist as a symptom of the complex relationship between the physical and social body.

Notes

1. The root '*stig-*' means 'to prick'.
2. Jones (2000) makes clear that *stigma*(*ta*) is commonly read as the equivalent of 'brand' especially in Christian literatures. He argues that the practice of branding humans was almost unknown to the Greeks and Romans. Furthermore, he insists, 'Animal-branding was universal, and is virtually never designated by the word *stigma* but by a word denoting a burn or a stamp' (Jones, 2000: 2). For the purposes of this article, I will accept Jones's argument that the *stigma* in Ancient Greece and Rome was indeed denoting today's concept of tattooing.

3. As well as penal tattoos and slave tattoos signifying ownership, Jones also indicates that early Christians would tattoo emblems of Christ on their bodies as proof of their religious devotion.

4. Some scholars (Caplan, 2000a; Fleming, 2000; MacQuarrie, 2000) have examined the use and social role of tattoos in Celtic traditions. There are some scholars who argue that it was not done at all, others who argue that tattooing was a decorative practice in traditional Celtic culture until the spread of Christianity, and still others who argue that it was introduced as penal inscription from contact with the Romans (after the introduction of Christianity). There is consensus among most scholars, however, that tattooing practices had virtually disappeared in the British Isles until the voyages of discovery and colonization.

5. Govenar (2000) continues his analysis to show how soldiers' tattoos quickly moved away from motifs of battle and nationalism and toward erotic designs. He demonstrates that by the First World War, the military authorities were discouraging tattooing because of this change in imagery. He writes, 'For example, women in tattoos were nude and posed in a sexually suggestive manner, while in the nineteenth century women in tattoos were usually clothed . . .' (2000: 214).

6. Of course the ironic thing about tattooing as fashion (which I will discuss further below) is that fashion is by definition dynamic and often quickly changing, while tattoos are indelible, permanent. We will also see the increased interest in developing tattoo removal technologies as the fashionableness of tattoos for the wealthy began to decline in the early part of the 20th century.

7. My intention in answering this question is not to invoke a causative model, but to show simultaneous historic events that might have influenced an upper-class interest in tattooing that did not exist prior to the late 1890s.

8. Unfortunately, the tattooing techniques that were used prior to the spread of the electric device are not described in any of the sources I have read. In part, this may be due to a lack of standardization in tattooing techniques. What we can surmise from descriptions of how the machine improved tattooing is that it was a previously painful process and there was less control over fine details of the image.

9. Charlie Wagner, another New York City tattooist, built a better design of the electric tattoo machine which was patented in 1904. Contemporary tattoo equipment has changed very little since Wagner's design (Sanders, 1989).

10. Although the Nazis' use of tattooing of prisoners in the concentration camps is currently one of the most visible historic uses of tattooing, I was not able to find a link to American perceptions of tattooing in the literature. It may have added to the general public distaste for tattooing during the 1950s, but I do not have any evidence that this was the case.

11. While the medical establishment was quite adamant about the dangers of tattooing during the mid-1930s through the 1960s, doctors were eager to learn ways in which tattooing could be used in medicine. Plastic surgery adopted tattooing techniques to achieve pigment coloration for patients who had skin grafts or transplants. Also, after the Second World War, some physicians lobbied for tattooing Americans' blood types and allergies on their bodies, so that in the case of nuclear war, physicians would be able to provide better care for their patients. Even today, groups of physicians are interested in tattooing problem patients, such as individuals who have Munchausen syndrome, so as to provide universal identification of these individuals.

12. Govenar documents some of the changes of tattooing as a social practice in respect to teenagers. He wrote:

From the few references in the New York Times in the 1930s, it is clear tattooing was also becoming popular among teenagers, a fact which angered middle-class parents and prompted the New York Assembly to pass a law in 1933 making it a misdemeanor to tattoo a 'child' under the age of sixteen. (Govenar, 2000: 221)

13. Sanders (1989) reports that summers are the busiest season, while demand is quite low in the winter.

14. Price and pain are largely dependent on the location of the body in which the tattoo will be placed, as well as on the difficulty or complexity of the design.

15. In addition, according to some tattooists, people seeking tattoos often do so in the hope that the tattoo will somehow transform their lives.

16. I was not able to find comparable data about the rates of tattooing by racial group or by class. There are many articles discussing how skin color can limit the types (i.e. colors) of tattoos the individual can request. There was also a mention that there was only one woman who was African American tattooing in the United States during the 1970s (Mifflin, 1997).

17. I will ignore the tattoo removal techniques for the moment.

18. There do seem to be major class differences in reactions to tattoos. Although people may be surprised to learn that their doctor or lawyer (male or female) has tattoos, they are generally more accepting (or at least less derisive) of the tattoos (Mifflin, 1997).

19. I have introduced this semiotic framework as a heuristic to think through the role of symbols in our interpretations of material reality. What I try to show here is that the practice of tattooing transcends the bounds of the material body in its symbolic role in society.

20. This stigmatism and rejection take both externalized and internalized forms in their impact on the individual.

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