ILLUSTRATED AMERICA: FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND THE
DEMOCRATIZATION OF TATTOOS IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN
CULTURE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI‘I AT MĀNOA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

IN

HISTORY

AUGUST 2014

By

Sung P. Kang

Dissertation Committee:

Herbert Ziegler, Chairperson
Margot Henriksen
Marcus Daniel
Njoroge Njoroge
Kathryn Hoffmann

Keywords: tattoos, skin art, sports, cultural studies, ethnic studies, gender studies
Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not be possible without the support and assistance of many of the History Department faculty and staff from the University of Hawaii, colleagues from Hawaii Pacific University, friends, and family. I am very thankful to Njoroge Njoroge in supplying constant debates on American sports and issues facing black athletes, and furthering my understanding of Marxism and black America. To Kathryn Hoffmann, who was a continuous “springboard” for many of my theories and issues surrounding the body. I also want to thank Marcus Daniel, who constantly challenged my perspective on the relationship between politics and race. To Herbert Ziegler who was instrumental to the entire doctoral process despite his own ailments. Without him none of this would have been possible. To Margot (Mimi) Henriksen, my chairperson, who despite her own difficulties gave me continual assistance, guidance, and friendship that sustained me to this stage in my academic career. Her confidence in me was integral, as it fed my determination not to disappoint her. To my chiropractor, Dr. Eric Shimane, who made me physically functional so I could continue with the grueling doctoral process. To Kats and Pat Kiwada, who have put up with my antics and temper throughout the years while maintaining the type of support that I have been lacking given my parents’ absence in my life. They gave me constant encouragement and advice to finish my studies. To my mother who has watched over me in life and death, making sure that I have people who care for me and look out for my best interests. I want especially to thank my wife, Kris, who has really been tolerant of my mood swings during the most difficult four years of my life. She has constantly provided unconditional love that has sustained me to this point. Finally, to the most cherished member of the
Kiwada family, Chibi, who passed away a couple years ago—he will always be remembered.
Abstract

This dissertation examines the evolving democratization of tattooing and the shifting significance of tattoos in an analysis from the 1950s to the current era. Unlike previous scholarship, this study also links the democratization of tattoos to the continuous struggle over the body against state institutions—not just limiting it to the 1960s counter-culture. Often absent in other studies concerning the popularization and eventual commodification of tattoos is the “hip-hop element”; I argue that marking the skin was a logical extension of drawing attention to an “invisible generation” experiencing economic neglect and the impact from the “War on Drugs,” “War on Gangs,” and “War on Youths” in the 1980s. Rapper Tupac Shakur contributed to the growth and contraction of marking the body, and this is symptomatic of the discursive dialectic between the tolerance for and the backlash against civil rights in recent America history. The context of my investigation is specifically American, as I argue that decades of tattooing practices have rendered tattoos peculiarly evocative signifiers of diverse American identities. After the 1950s, marking the skin became part of the discourse over civil liberties regarding the body. My study centers on women, gays and lesbians, blacks, the military, and entertainers or professional athletes. Individuals within these groups have been among the most ardent practitioners of tattooing and among the most visible recipients of tattoos; not coincidentally, these groups have also been among the most marginalized or celebrated of Americans, often voluntarily distancing themselves from the larger American society through their commercialized tattoos and their defiantly political uses of their bodies. The primary thrust of this discussion is to identify how various groups
have used tattooing to assert their self-determination or civic identities publicly, and to define themselves by writing on their bodies.
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments........................................................................................................... iii  
Abstract............................................................................................................................ v  
List of Figures....................................................................................................................... viii  
Introduction: The Semiotics of Tattooing........................................................................ i  
Chapter 1: “Cooked and Raw”: Adornment, Magic, Spirituality, and Punishment through Marking the Skin......................................................................................... 17  
Chapter 2: "Primitive and Freakery": The Rise and Decline of Tattooing from the 1800s to the 1960s.................................................................................................................. 53  
Chapter 3: "Down on Me": The Counter-Cultural Body, Deviancy, and Tattoo as Art Form from the late 1950s to the early 1970s................................................................. 95  
Chapter 4: "Illustrated Community": The Creation of the Modern Tattoo Community from the late 1960s to the 1990s................................................................. 128  
Chapter 5: “Tattoo Vision”: The Division, Objectification, and Democratization of Tattooing from the 1980s to the Present..................................................... 169  
Chapter 6: “Thug Life”: The Hip-Hop Ethos and Criminalization of the Black Tattooed Professional from 2001 to the Present................................................................. 196  
Chapter 7: A Conservative Counter-Culture and the Backlash Against Tattooed Americans..................................................................................................................... 238  
Conclusion: “Tattooed Nation”: The Democratization and Self-Determination of Indelible Marks............................................................................................................. 260  
Bibliography...................................................................................................................... 270  
Appendix and Figures...................................................................................................... 288
## List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>Pazyryk tattoos with mythical creatures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>Pazyryk tattoos showing the natural order of the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>Timucuan Chief Outina and his elite guards wearing gold jewelry around their neck, which represented the sun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>Woodland ranger who was tattooed with a serpent on his back</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>Yoruba Osilumi was a mark on the face signifying sorrow for the loss of a close friend or relative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>Abaji marks on a Tiv woman. Handsome calves are emphasized by scars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>Stages of Hleeta scarification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>Diagram of application of Hleeta in the back of Ga’anda women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>Timucuan Chief Holata Outina with his elite escort. Outlina and his warriors were extensively marked on the skin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>Samoan design for males encompassing front and back of the thigh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>Warrior Te Phei Kup with moko</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>A moko signature on a land grant signed by Tuawahiki, a chief of the Otago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>Scarified statue of Baule and unblemished perfection of Heracles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>Examples of tattoo designs for Christian Pilgrims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>Design of Saint George and the Dragon, collection of Jacob Razzouk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>Tattoo designs depicting The Crucifixion and the Resurrection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.01</td>
<td>Nora Hildebrant standing in a classical pose to offset her decivilizing marks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>Male and female Picts, England’s savage ancestor, extensively tattooed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>and 2.04 Secota maidens (left) and matrons (right) with geometric designs on the arms and legs. The matrons were more extensively tattooed to show higher status over maidens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>Olive Oatman with her “decivilizing” marks on her chin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>Part of the process of enslavement which involved branding the slave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>A popular design worn by white and black mariners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>Omai, a Tahitian who was associated with the “noble savage” because of the tattoos on his hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>Jean-Baptiste Cabri, who has “gone native,” was extensively marked and had a Marquesan wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>Examples of tattoos depicted in Seaman’s Protection Certificate application. Clerks often sketched the tattoos as well as described them</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.11 Mermaids, roosters, pigs, or anchors were tattooed on the bodies of many seafarers during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries………………………………………………………………..300
2.12 Tattoo of “Adam and Eve and the Tree of Life” taken from an early nineteenth century preserved skin specimen………………………………………………………………..301
2.13 Seafarers or members of the military often got tattooed in foreign ports. In this case, an officer getting tattooed in Japan………301
2.14 An illustrated guide book for P.T Barnum’s first museum, emphasizing “reference” and “instruction”………………………………………………………………..302
2.15 A pamphlet promoting P.T Barnum’s show of “natural history”………302
2.16 A pamphlet giving a description of the circus “freaks”………………………………………………………………..303
2.17 An illustration of Captain Constentenus submission and tattooing by a woman. Reversing the traditional active and passive gender roles in the nineteenth century………………………………………………………………..303
2.18 An advertisement for Captain Constenteneus, “The Tattooed Greek Prince”………………………………………………………………..304
2.19 An advertisement for Irene “La Belle” Woodard………………………………………………………………..304
2.20 Tattooed circus attraction, Jean Furella Carson, who bared it all for spectators………………………………………………………………..305
2.21 The Great Omi, who wanted to become a human zebra………………….305
2.22 A portrait of Irene Woodard showing that she was still a “lady” with the exception of tattoos………………………………………………………………..306
2.23 A classic depiction of captive women at the hands of “savages”……306
2.24 Circus attraction Betty Broadbent at the 1939 World’s Fair……………..307
2.25 Circus attractions, Emma de Burgh and Princess Beatrice, with depictions of “The Last Supper” on their backs………………….307
2.26 A popular design during the American Civil War………………………………………………………………..308
2.27 Naval personnel often tattooed images of their ship and commander. In this case, Admiral William Thomas Samson was superimposed on the ship………………………………………………………………..308
2.28 A design commemorating the sinking of the Battleship Maine in 1898………………………………………………………………..309
2.29 Tattooist often linked themselves to seafarers and the military by placing the term “sailor” in front of their names. The most famous is Sailor Jerry………………………………………………………………..309
2.30 Examples of erotic women tattoo designs on the bodies of U.S. servicemen………………………………………………………………..310
2.31 U.S. Marine Corp. mascot, the Teufelhunden, became popular with marines after WWI………………………………………………………………..310
2.32 These are some examples of the Pearl Harbor commemorative tattoo designs many serviceman wore after Japan’s attack on 7 December 1941………………………………………………………………..311
2.33 Tattoos on “criminal sailor” (left) and “criminal soldier” (right) both of which were labeled as “homosexuals,” according to criminologist Cesare Lombroso………………………………………………………………..311
3.01 A tattoo design of a garland of roses worn by a gay man………………………………………………………………..312
3.02 The sexuality of getting “punctured” or tattooed……………………312
3.03 Marlboro advertisement aimed at women “mild as may”…………………313
3.04 Original Marlboro Man as a cowboy with a tattoo on his hand…………313
3.05 An iteration of the Marlboro Man, in this case, a navy serviceman…………………………………………………………………………..314
3.06 Another iteration of the Marlboro Man showing his tough nature………..314
3.07 This iteration of the Marlboro Man looks very similar to President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who happened to be the President during the extensive use of the Marlboro Man Advertisements…………………………………………………………..315
3.08 Lesbian couple with newly acquired “lovebirds” on their ankles…………315
3.09 Janis Joplin showing her Florentine bracelet design on her wrist…………316
3.10 Mastectomy survivor Linda Marie with a tattoo over her scar……………..316
3.11 Mastectomy survivor Andre O’Connor with a rose tattoo over her scar………………………………………………………………………317
3.12 African-American tattoo connoisseur, Laura Lee, with a Malcolm X and depiction of the “Black Holocaust”…………………………………..317
3.13 Both tattoo designs are re-casted black versions of Betty Boop………………318
4.01 Rod Steiger as the Illustrated Man……………………………………………319
4.02 Fakir Musafar reenacting the Sioux “Sun Dance”…………………………..319
4.03 Ed Hardy’s first issue of Tattoo Time “New Tribalism”…………………..320
4.04 Vyvyn Lazonga shortly after she opened her first tattoo shop………………320
4.05 A tattoo design done by Vyvyn Lazonga……………………………………321
4.06 Abstract and Leopard Designs by Jamie Summers…………………………321
4.07 Back and neck tattoo done by Jamie Summers……………………………322
4.08 Women using scarification to add new meaning to their bodies.
   Woman (left) appropriating phallic symbol on leg, while the Modern primitive woman using piercings to suppress the flesh………………322
4.09 Modern Primitive woman adding scarification to the idealized smooth…………………………………………………………………………323
4.10 Tattoos disseminating the message of Tupac Shakur………………………323
4.11 Sailor Jerry transformed the American style of tattooing by incorporating Japanese aesthetics…………………………………………………324
4.12 Tribal style tattoos by Leo Zulueta…………………………………………324
4.13 Former presidential candidate Barry Goldwater and a letter to Spider Webb. Goldwater admits to having a tattoo on his left hand…………325
4.14 Bicentennial design to commemorate Spider Webb’s “Tattoo Club of America,” of which President Gerald Ford complimented…………325
4.15 Spider Webb staging his protest of the ban on tattoo parlors in New York………………………………………………………………………..325
5.01 Typical tattooed male model advertising designer clothes for Ink: Culture. Art. Style. Magazine………………………………………………..327
5.02 Advertisement for tattoo supplies in Skin & Ink magazine……………………327
5.03 Annual Pin-up issue for Skin & Ink magazine without any editorials…………………………………………………………………………328
5.04 Sink & Ink Dolls featured in every issue……………………………………328
5.05 Rapper Lloyd Banks showing off his tattoos and his women................329
5.06 Video Vixen “Miss Paris.” (left) was often in rapper Lil’ Wayne
Both were featured in Urban Ink magazine.................................329
5.07 Former porn star and model Adrenalyn, for SuicideGirls featured
in Skin & Ink magazine.................................................................330
5.08 Featured cover model with “full sleeves” much like a second skin,
and wants to be treated like a lady..............................................330
5.09 Lisbeth Salander (Noomi Rapace) in the Girls with the Dragon
Tattoo series. Salander (left) with the wasp tattoo on her neck
and the dragon (right) tattoo on her back.................................331
5.10 Fashion Designer Jean-Paul Gaultier’s reimagining of a Coke
bottle as woman with tattoos.....................................................331
5.11 Audra Kunkle, owner of Oddities in San Francisco, and featured in
Science Channel’s Oddities.........................................................332
5.12 Tattooist Jasmine Rodriguez featured on Spike Channel’s
Tattoo Nightmares........................................................................332
5.13 Tattooist Megan Massacre featured on TLC’s America’s Worst
Tattoo.................................................................................................333
5.14 Kat Von D featured in TLC’s LA Ink........................................333
5.15 Tattooists Kat Von D, Kim Saigh, Hannah Aitchinson, and Corey
Miller, stars of TLC’s LA Ink. Von D refers to them as her family.................................................................334
5.16 Part of the marketing for the advent of the WNBA in 1996 to show
their athletes were still feminine..................................................334
5.17 WNBA star guard for the New York Liberty, Theresa Witherspoon
had cornrows and a tattoo on her left leg....................................335
5.18 WNBA guard Sonia Chase with short hair and a “Superwoman”
tattoo on her right arm..............................................................335
5.19 Guard Deanna Nolan of the WNBA who admitted, she loves
schooling the guys.........................................................................336
6.01 Allen Iverson was considered the most “tatted” NBA player in
2001..................................................................................................337
6.02 NBA star Al Harrington with Christian symbols on his body along
with the portrait of Jesus ..............................................................337
6.03 Al Harrington with family portraits on his body......................338
6.04 NBA star Stephen Jackson with a “praying hand” holding a gun tattoo
Design...............................................................................................338
6.05 NFL linebacker James Harrison posing for Men’s Journal ........339
6.06 Amare Stoudamire with tattoos of Poverty/Prophecy and biblical
Psalms..............................................................................................339
6.07 NBA star Brandon Jennings tattooed with “young money” on his
back.................................................................................................340
6.08 NBA star LeBron James tattooed with “Chosen 1” on his back........340
6.09 NBA star Shaquille O’Neal at LSU (left) with no tattoos and with
many tattoo (Right) when he played for the Miami.......................341
6.10 NBA star LeBron James in high school (Left) with one tattoo and with many tattoos (Right) with the Miami Heat ......................................341
6.11 NBA star Allen Iverson at Georgetown without tattoo (left) and with many tattoos (Right) with the Philadelphia Seventy-Sixers .............341
6.12 NBA star Kenyon Martin tattooed with “Bad Ass Yellow Boy” ..........342
6.13 NBA star Jason Williams or “White Chocolate” tattooed with “White Boy” ...........................................................................342
6.14 NBA player Joel Pryzbilla tattooed with B-Boy symbol .................343
6.15 NBA player Joel Pryzbilla tattooed with “praying hands” symbol ....343
6.16 NBA players Carmelo Anthony (Left) and J.R. Smith (Right) when they were called the “Denver Thuggist” ........................................343
6.17 Seattle Seahawks “Legion of Boom” defense ..................................344
6.18 Brawl between a Chinese professional team and Georgetown University players during a “Goodwill” exhibition game in China ..........344
7.01 Kayle Leogrande, owner of a tattoo shop, was a key reason for Lance Armstrong’s ban from professional cycling .........................345
7.02 Staff Sgt. Robert T. Ham’s documentary, Level Black, on PTSD focuses on Staff Sgt. Billy Caviness. Caviness is showing his war scars and tattoos ....................................................................345
7.03 Hawaii tattooist Mike Higuchi recalled one serviceman who got an American bald eagle sewing a tattered United States flag with the phrase “Awakening a Sleeping Giant.” ...........................................346
7.04 Robert, an intelligence analyst, tattooed with a medieval battlefield ......346
7.05 Travis, a combat medic, tattooed with a fetus in a blender .............347
7.06 Mohammad Abass drawing a tattoo of a skull on fellow Iraqi in Baghdad ....................................................................................347
7.07 Jimbo Carriero, owner of a tattoo shop, had “Do Not Resuscitate” emblazoned on his chest after a heart attack ..............................348
7.08 Three tattooed women shown prominently supporting abortion rights .........................................................................................348
7.09 NBA players, Amare Stoudamire (left) and Dennis Rodman (right) promoting “Ink Not Mink” for PETA .....................................349
7.10 Tattooist Megan Massacre promoting “Ink Not Mink” for PETA .........349
8.01 Trayvon Martin, killed in 2012, a victim of black criminalization ....350
8.02 Miami Heat donning protest “hoodies” for Trayvon Martin ..........350
8.03 Kevin Durant, “The Servant,” has extensive tattoos but chooses to have them hidden under his uniform .........................................351
Introduction:
The Semiotics of Tattooing

Written in 1951, Ray Bradbury’s *The Illustrated Man* was a series of science-fiction short stories. Usually set in outer-space or in a futuristic world, Bradbury’s narratives focused on the relationship between humans and technology—particularly the psychological costs of this relationship. Some of his short stories dealt with issues prevalent during the 1950s. For example, “The Other Foot” imagines a Mars colonized solely by “negroes.” News breaks out among the black colonists that a ship carrying white travelers will be arriving soon. Willie, a black man who remembers life in the segregated South of the 1960s, states, “Well, the shoe’s on the other foot now. We’ll see who gets laws passed against him, who gets lynched, who rides the back of streetcars, who gets segregated in shows. We’ll just wait and see.”¹ Many among the black crowd want to institute a Jim Crow system of segregation on Mars similar to that in America—aimed at whites, in this case. After the arrival of the spaceship, a single white traveler steps out and explains to the black crowd that Earth had been destroyed. There had been a big war or the “Third One.” Bombs and radiation had destroyed everything in America, including a particular tree associated with the lynching of blacks. Feeling sorry for the white man, the black crowd disperses to return to their homes—“A new start for everyone.”² The frame for this didactic tale, which connected to the other Bradbury stories, was the body of the Illustrated Man.

Tattooed with moving pictures of the future, the Illustrated Man was marked by a time-traveling, old woman. A “little old witch who looked a thousand years old one

² Ibid, 34 and 38.
moment and twenty years old the next.” The female skin artist, according to the Illustrated Man, had tricked him with a sign which read, “Skin Illustration! Illustration instead of tattoo! Artistic!” Since then, the Illustrated Man has been hunting her down to exact revenge. Like his skin art, tattoo culture in America has its own story situated in the past rather than the future. Similar to Bradbury’s “The Other Foot,” many of the tattoo narratives were rife with issues within American culture. Possibly looking for a new start, tattooed Americans in the new millennium faced a better future given the recent democratization of marking the skin.

Within the past few decades, tattoos have made their mark on the general American populace. Stefan Jost, director of the Honolulu Museum of Art, estimated in 2012 that "some forty-five million Americans now have tattoos, including nearly forty percent of people age 25 to 29.” Nancy Schiesari’s 2010 documentary, Tattooed Under Fire, estimates that nearly ninety-five percent of United States military personnel have tattoos. These figures highlight the transformation of American attitudes toward body modification that has taken place in the contemporary United States. No longer exclusively perceived as marks of deviancy or as markers associated with sailors or the military, tattoos have experienced a renaissance of sorts and have become significant elements in the discourse of the American body. This discussion reflects both the diversity of American identities and the desire to establish control over the body. The recent rise in the popularity of tattoos is just the latest episode in the history of body scarification.

---

3 Ibid, 3.
4 Anthony Aalto’s interview with Stefan Jost, in Hana Hou Magazine, Hawaiian Airlines, August/September 2012, 45.
5 Tattooed Under Fire, dir. and prod. Nancy Schiesari (MOTI Productions, 2010). The estimated percentage of U.S. soldiers tattooed is taken from the documentary.
The oldest evidence of body alterations was discovered in 1991, when Otzi "the Tyrolian Iceman" or "Frozen Fritz" was found in a glacier in the Italian Alps. This five-thousand-year old corpse had fifty-eight tattoos adorning it. According to archeologist K. Kris Hirst, Otzi had inscribed a "cross on the inside of the left knee, six parallel straight lines arranged in two rows on his back above his kidneys, each about 6 inches long; and several parallel lines on the ankles."\(^6\) Physician M. Moser conjectured that Otzi was a shaman of sorts, and had used his tattoos to treat stomach and backache problems.\(^7\) Bluish-black lines of ash were injected with a bone or wooden needle, and the locations closely matched those of more contemporary acupuncture points. Moser further raised the possibility of acupuncture having originated in the Eurasian continent at least 2000 years earlier than previously attributed to the Chinese. Human mummies from Egypt, Siberia, Peru, and Chile reinforced the therapeutic as well as the cultural value of marking the skin.

In 1891, the tomb of Amunet, a priestess of the goddess Hathor at Thebes (2160-1994 BCE) was uncovered at Deir el-Bahari, Egypt. Amunet's body had a series of markings with dots and dashes covering the shoulder, neck, breast, and abdomen. As a priestess of Hathor, her tattoos, according to archeologist Robert Bianchi, had "undeniably carnal overtones" and suggested an association with procreation and motherhood.\(^8\) The "brides of the dead," or female statuettes in many Egyptian male tombs, had the same designs as Amunet and other female mummies, positing the possible

\(^7\) L. Dorfer, M. Moser, F. Bahr, K. Spindler, "A Medical Report from the Stone Age?," Department of Medical History from The Lancet Medical Journal, Volume 354, 18 September 1999.
need for sexual arousal by the deceased and to insure resurrection in the afterlife.⁹ Conversely, the Greeks used tattooing or “stigma” as a means of designating criminality while Roman legionnaires had their hands marked to symbolize the possession of their bodies by the Roman emperor.¹⁰ Within these examples, marking the skin underscored the duality of the human body, whether male or female, autonomous or subjugated.

From ancient Egyptians and Romans to present-day American celebrities, tattoos, body-painting, piercing, and branding have served as a language or have functioned as signifiers of exchange between individuals or groups—with tattooing as the "oldest and most widespread of these...body alterations."¹¹ Marking the skin demarcates inclusion and exclusion—or both at the same time—while establishing ownership rights over the body.¹² Within American history, tattoos have continued to highlight the duality of human and bodily status, regarding autonomy and dependency, entitlement and dispossession, and freedom and bondage.¹³ Tattoos have highlighted the diversity of American identities given the variety of peoples who have relied on tattoos as a means of cultural communication. Tattoos speak to both a collective, group identity and to individual identity within or apart from a group. Tattoos speak, thus, both to inclusion within and exclusion from groups in America. Tattoos as a means for freedom of expression or individuality came into bolder relief in the twentieth and twenty-first

---

⁹ Steve Gilbert, Tattoo History: A Source Book (Hong Kong, 2000), 11.
¹¹ Jane Caplan, Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History (New Jersey, 2000), xi.
¹² Theorist Roland Barthes stated that texts from books anchor images, in the case of tattoos, without any text, the images themselves become “floating chain” of signifieds and the reader is able to choose or appropriate “some and ignore others.” This is discussed in Roland Barthes, Image, Music, Text, trans. Stephen Heath (New York, 1977), 38.
centuries, even though tattooed personalities often derived significance from their tattoos through the web of past collective practices of writing on the skin.

The recent popularity of tattoos has led to many coffee-table books for a popular audience, such as Jim Gerard's *Celebrity Skin: Tattoos, Brands, and Body Adornments of the Stars* (2001) or Andrew Gottlieb's *In the Paint: Tattoos of the NBA and the Stories Behind Them* (2003), and these works contain many illustrations and no text or very little in the way of historical analysis. Others such as Arnold Rubin's *Marks of Civilization: Artistic Transformations of the Body* (1988), John A. Rush's *Spiritual Tattoo: A Cultural History of Tattooing, Piercing, Scarification, Branding, and Implants* (2005), and Wilfred Dyson Hambly's *The History of Tattooing* (1925, 2009) are anthropological surveys of body scarifications around the world. Rubin reverses the traditional dichotomy of "civilized" and "savage." For him, the "civilized" is marked, textured, or scarred. For anthropologist John A. Rush, body modifications appear to be "an exclusively human phenomenon" and are, therefore, “a sign of culture or 'cooked,'” while the non-tattooed or uninitiated body is natural, virgin, primitive, blank, or 'raw.'”

Hambly's work, first published in 1925, is the most comprehensive and interesting of the three works. It was clearly written to preserve "indigenous native tattoo traditions...suppressed...[by] the efforts of missionaries and the impact of European imperialism." The fear of vanishing tattoo cultures led Hambly to provide abundant descriptions of "vanishing" tattoo cultures around the world. His overall purpose was to trace the origin, migration, and contemporary geographical distribution of body modifications. All three works, along with Rufus C. Camphausen's *Return of the Tribal*:

---

A Celebration of Body Adornments (1997), highlight an atavistic or primitive human need to adorn one's body for creative expression—this is especially important in later discussions on the modern primitivism of the 1960s to the 1990s and its role in democratizing tattoos.

Kim Hewitt's Mutilating the Body: Identity in Blood and Ink (1997) and Rush's Spiritual Tattoo discuss pain, self-mutilation, and suffering as a step toward spiritual redemption, and these were important components of the modern primitive in the 1960s with the punk movement and its revival in the 1990s. Psychologist Victoria Pitts' In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification (2003) discusses the revival of non-Western, "primitive" body rituals and the aim of body modifiers in "demonstrating symbolic control over their bodies by experiencing and adorning them in ways prohibited by Western culture."

Both Hewitt and Pitt's works historicize the discourse surrounding the body from the 1800s to the 1990s with the rise of medical authority and "medicalization" of the body. This is especially important considering that tattooed bodies were often viewed to be sick, degenerate, and pathological by medical researchers and social commentators in the mid-twentieth century. More academic, scholarly works on tattoos include Margo Mifflin's Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoos (1997), Jane Caplan's Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History (2000), Margo DeMello's Bodies of Inscription: The Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo.

---

17 Pitts, 9.
Community (2000), and Steve Gilbert's Tattoo History: A Source Book (2000). Gilbert's work is especially useful as he offers an anthology of historical writings or primary sources about tattooing in various parts of the world from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries. The contributions of Mifflin, Caplan, and DeMello are apparent in this research as they offer a much more rich analysis in historicizing the meanings of tattoos within the subcultures and eras in which they were produced—yet most of their significant research ends in the late 1990s.

This dissertation examines the evolving democratization of tattooing in the United States and the shifting significance of tattoos from the 1950s to the early 2010s. Unlike earlier academic works on body modification, this study links the democratization of tattoos to the continuing struggle over the body against state institutions—not just limiting it to the battles within the 1960s counter-culture. Often absent in other studies concerning the popularization of tattoos and their eventual commodification is the hip-hop element. In this study, I argue that marking the skin was a logical extension of drawing attention to an “invisible generation” experiencing economic neglect and “war” in the 1980s. Rapper Tupac Shakur contributed to the growth, contraction, and reemergence of marking the body. These shifts are symptomatic of the discursive dialectic between the tolerance for and the backlash against civil rights. The context of my investigation is specifically American, as I argue that centuries of tattooing practices have rendered tattoos peculiarly evocative signifiers of diverse American identities. After the 1950s, marking the skin became part of the discourse over civil liberties regarding the body. My study centers on women, gays and lesbians, blacks, the military, the military,

---

18 War in this instance concerns the “War on Drugs,” “War on Gangs,” and “War on Youths” in the 1980s, mentioned by many scholars on the Hip-Hop movement and generation.
entertainers, and professional athletes. Individuals within these groups have been among the most ardent practitioners of tattooing and among the most visible recipients of tattoos. Not coincidentally, these groups have also been among the most marginalized or celebrated of Americans, often voluntarily distancing themselves from the larger American society through their commercialized tattoos and their defiantly political uses of their bodies—as in Shakur's message of angst and freedom in his back tattoo, which defiantly reads "Fuck the World." The primary purpose of this study is to identify how various groups have used tattooing to assert their self-determination or civic identities and define themselves.

This study takes a chronological approach starting in the 1950s. It centers on important figures, discourses, and movements which symbolized the evolution and eventual democratization of tattoos in recent American society and culture. By examining the role of the media, celebrity culture, and state institutions—and their confluence in outlawing and later legitimizing the tattooed body—other conjunctions between tattoos, gender, race, and ethnicity, and class become apparent in an analysis that links the American past and present. The marking or branding of the body, whether forcibly or voluntarily, has determined how the body has been defined. In this instance, body modifications were part of a larger discussion on the shifting definitions of the corporeal body. The body was simultaneously a “physical, biological entity and a symbolic artifact.” In other words, the body was created in nature, but also reconstructed by a culture, where the body then becomes “text” that can be read and interpreted by others.19

---

Chapter one provides an overview of the practice of scarification in the pre-modern world. In pre-modern Russia, Africa, early North America, and Polynesia, scarification of the body was employed as therapy, as adornment, for religious or spiritual reasons, or to demarcate rank or rites of passage. For these early societies, marking the body proved culturally integral as tattoos were socially reinforced by their respective communities and institutions—expectations placed upon them by parents, authorities, and role models. In other words, the marked body was “cooked” or infused with the cultural values of the community, which underscored self-determination over the body as it upheld values and structured relations in the community. (LEVI STRAUSS)

This chapter then contrasts with the punitive function of marking the skin associated within the Greek, Roman, and Judeo-Christian-Islamic world. Scarification for early Mediterranean societies excluded, punished, designated property or justified the excommunication of Christian subjects. In these instances, the unmarked, unblemished body was closer to perfection or idealized excellence, while the branded body highlighted the trappings of the "microphysics of power." Theorist Michel Foucault explained that “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.” Signs or tattoos that signified the power held over denigrated bodies appeared in early Mediterranean and European societies. However,

---

21 Jessica Johnston states that the body is simultaneously a “physical, biological entity” and a “symbolic artifact.” The body is created in nature, but also reconstructed by a culture, where the body becomes “text” that can be read and interpreted by others, in Johnston, The American Body in Context (Delaware, 2001), XVII.
there were instances when tattooing the body also allowed expression and resistance to a dominant ethos. A shift in discourse among early Christians foregrounded the ways in which body modifications for display in the public sphere designated dominion by slave owners and the state, or conversely, self-determination over one’s own body. The divergent readings of the marked body highlight the continuous interactions of conflicting discussions in the West.

Chapter two analyzes discussions by travelers, social commentators, and criminologists in the West before the modern era as tattooing was generally reserved for marginalized groups or "social deviants." In early America, these groups included Native Americans, African Americans, Pacific Islanders, sailors, military men, and "freaks." However, the legitimization of the carnival "freak" allowed the visual consumption of tattoos for middle-class spectators. According to cultural historian Robert Bogdan, human "abnormalities were not the result of Satan or evil acts...but were part of God's natural order, an order that could be understood by rational science."24 Legitimated by doctors, clergy, newspapers, and scientific societies, carnival performers like tattooed women were presented as morally uplifting and educational endeavors of the natural order of society which aligned with nineteenth-century middle-class views on race and gender. This process of the validation of "freakery," a term coined by Bogdan, explained the socio-economic opportunities afforded to those perceived as "different," "savage" or as an exotic "other" for public consumption.25 This toleration of freakery proved short-lived as competing elements from similar institutions that had validated tattooed

---

25 "Freakery" is a term used by historian Robert Bogdan in his work *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago, 1988), 3.
performers attacked them as "sick degenerates" within the discourse of criminology, imperialism, Nordic superiority or white supremacy, and purity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Understanding the discussion surrounding the body and early antecedent shifts in attitudes to marking the skin serves as a foundation for the study of contemporary topics dealing with tattoos, especially given the recent cultural turn in the legitimization and democratization of being indelibly marked.

Chapter three focuses on the dominant discourse that denigrated tattoo culture in America based partly on the increased medicalization of the body. Medical research linked skin art to diseases symptomatic of the sick and deviant. The inclusion of tattoos within a general discourse surrounding the body proved especially significant as there was a nationwide ban on tattoo parlors after the 1950s, the result of hepatitis outbreaks. Fear of hepatitis infection led many states to maintain the ban on tattoo parlors until 1997, and as late as 2006 in South Carolina and Oklahoma. These regulations meant that access to tattoos remained limited to the West Coast or that tattooing went “underground.” Tattoos were only obtainable if individuals knew a tattooist or were indelibly marked in states where the ban was not strictly enforced.

Exacerbating the condemnation of the tattooed community was the visual confirmation linking skin art to marginalized groups like the Pachucos in the late 1950s and the Hells Angels in the 1960s. However, these groups also embraced the rebellious appeal of marking the body in opposition to mainstream America. The second half of

---

This is when the health departments, medical researchers, and psychologists become part of the new repository of “truth” or knowledge, as these institutions are invasive by ‘medicalizing’ much of daily living” or knowing a patient’s family history. In other words, they determine “healthy” and “ill” relevant to an ever-increasing part of human existence. Irving Kenneth Zola, “Medicine as an Institution of Social Control,” in Jessica R. Johnston, ed., The American Body in Context, An Anthology (Delaware, 2001), 221-240.
Chapter three examines the unlikely alliance of the media with the counter-culture of the 1960s that offered an alternative discourse on tattoos and the body. Tattooed animated characters and advertising connected marking the skin to masculine ideals as seen with the advent of the “Marlboro Man.” Also contributing to this counter-cultural narrative was the continued association of skin art to soldiers and patriotism because of conflicts in Korea and Vietnam.

The backdrop of the Vietnam War, peace movements, gay and women’s liberation, and the Civil Rights Movement fueled the Body Movement of the 1960s and the 1970s. For the tattooed community, the use of the human body as a medium for expression marked one of the most visible symbols of the rock era, Janis Joplin. Known by her fans as the "Queen of Rock and Roll" or the "Queen of Psychedelic Soul," Joplin gained fame and notoriety for her moral and sexual transgressions. Openly bi-sexual, Joplin visibly displayed her Florentine bracelet tattooed on her wrist and a heart on her breast. The Florentine bracelet symbolized sexuality and feminine power. The appropriation of marking the skin by women after the 1960s was symptomatic of the feminist movement as women re-ascribed new meaning to their bodies. More importantly, the body movement established marking the skin as a medium for self-determination and shifting the boundaries of the normative body in America.

Chapter four examines the growth of the modern tattoo community from the late 1970s to the 1990s. The addition of new aesthetics by various subcultures in America expanded the functions and appeals of scarification. Contributions by the modern primitives, female tattooists, “queering” community, and hip-hop proponents offered new means to inscribe the American body. This chapter also emphasizes the importance of
the emergence of hip-hop culture and its incorporation of marking the skin in the early 1990s. Hip-hop gained definition with the emergence the "gangsta" rappers, particularly Tupac Shakur. Sporting a "Thug Life" tattoo on his abdomen, he shaped the association of tattooing with hip-hop culture. For Shakur’s fans, his lyrics and his body became a projection of hip-hop’s “keeping it real” ideals. The universalization of tattoos within hip-hop culture as an empowering expression influenced by Shakur coincided with a seminal period for the democratization of tattoos. Shakur, along with contributions from former graffiti artists turned tattooists, were in large part the reasons for popularity of marking the skin after the 1990s.

Another reason for the legitimacy of the tattoo culture was the “renaissance generation” of tattooists—Spider Webb, Don “Ed” Hardy, and Cliff Raven—who dispelled images of the dingy, unsanitary tattoo shop. Through their efforts, skin art became more appealing to mainstream Americans, as both an art form and symbol of individuality. The acceptability of tattooing for middle-class consumption was possible with the professionalization of the tattoo industry. With assistance from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the ban against tattoo parlors was lifted. Accessibility to marking the skin also came in the form of conventions and organizations dedicated to tattoo aficionados. However, the progress and growth of the modern tattoo community also revealed divisions, as new normative standards marginalized the gay and convict body.

Building on previous discussions on accessibility to tattoo culture in the 1980s, chapter five focuses on the drawbacks to the legitimization of tattoo culture. The legitimization of tattooing as an art form also revealed divisions within the tattoo
community as seen through tattoo magazines. The uneven treatment by the media revealed past prejudices, particularly in films featuring tattooed characters. Some reality-based programming perpetuated established notions of the primitive, uncivilized tattooed body. However, the mainstream press, tattoo magazines, films, and reality-television programming devoted to or focused on skin art gave greater exposure and normalized tattoo culture for many Americans. This growth or democratization of tattooing allowed greater participation by women using skin art to empower and ascribe new meanings to their bodies.

The designation of meaning over the marked body is the subject of chapter six. Ironically, the “thug” or criminal element that was marginalized with the transformation of the tattoo industry discussed in chapter four, was a key element in the democratization of skin art in recent America. Chapter six explores the impact of hip-hop culture in aggrandizing the empowered, black tattooed body after the 1990s. National Basketball Association (NBA) players Dennis Rodman and Allen Iverson accentuated the conflicting discussions on the modern black athlete. On the one hand, tattoos on professional athletes made visible the empowering, abrasive, and indifferent attitude for American consumption. On the other hand, the institution of the 2005 NBA Dress Code revealed a conservative backlash against hip-hop and the tattooed athlete. Marks on the body reinforced the “thug” or criminality of the black body. This conflict in professional sports served as a microcosm of the greater struggle for self-determination considering the heightened surveillance and infringement on civil rights after the 11 September 2001 attack on the United States.
The terrorist attacks fueled a felt need for a greater role by the federal government manifested in systems of surveillance and restrictions on civil liberties that mirrored similar restrictions placed on professional athletes after 2001. With new technologies, any action or statement by those in the public view became magnified. For this concluding seventh chapter, this study examines the conservative-counter culture and the restrictions placed on the American body. The conservative shift toward American bodies was especially seen in the increased visibility of tattooed soldiers in the United States after 11 September 2001. Conflicting regulations regarding tattoos on U.S. soldiers from 2001 to 2013, proved symptomatic of the larger backlash in regulating the American body.

This concluding chapter examines the backlash within the greater context of conservatism during President Barack Obama's administrations. Conflicts over abortion and same-sex marriage highlighted key issues concerning civil liberties and the body, including tattooing. For many Americans, the cultural legitimization of body art continues to function as a signifier of an individual or group identity—further reflecting American diversity. Protected under the First Amendment, tattoos are symptomatic of the dialectics of the conflicting discourses on civil rights and the body, and the recent rise in antipathy represents a backlash or conservative reaction against tolerance for civil rights in every respect, including tattoos.

My primary sources are the tattooed bodies that have been described, depicted, and photographed in the American past and present. Representations of tattooed bodies—whether appearing in historical sources, scholarly works, or contemporary collections of photographs—comprise the corpus of evidence used in this study. I
interrogate these images of tattoos and bodies and situate them historically and culturally in order to read them and render them meaningful in terms of American identities. These tattooed bodies served as alternative historical and cultural texts that offer testimony to values and beliefs otherwise inaccessible and/or invisible in traditional academic sources. Tattoos provide historians access to a unique way of understanding or interpreting the evolution of cultural and political identity in America, especially the identities of groups usually marginalized or stigmatized, those on the fringes of the grand narrative of history.

These sources are also supported by other traditional primary materials that include recent autobiographies and documentaries, newspaper articles, novels, magazine articles, and editorials. Other primary sources include film, television, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest as they offer significant documentation of contemporary America's visual culture of tattooing. Given the popularity of tattooing in contemporary America, many observations are supported by secondary sources on tattooing. The efficacy and attractiveness of tattooing as a means of cultural expression is documented in my dissertation from the nascent counter-culture of the 1950s to the early 2010s, when tattooing has become a commodified cultural art form marking celebrity, "gangsta" or urban flair, and resistance. Tattoos are no longer solely seen, as in the past and often incorrectly, as marks of shame, as stigma, since tattoos have become a very visible means of stabilizing or fixing identity and self on the body. Whether inked on those at the margins of society in the 1950s or on those in the current spotlight of the media, tattoos have functioned to politicize the body and skin. A rebellion against powerlessness, invisibility, and repressively narrow definitions of gender, race, ethnicity, and nationalism has a prominent place in the long history of the skin markings.
“Cooked and Raw”:
Adornment, Magic, Spirituality, and Punishment through Marking the Skin

Before the term "tattoo" was introduced in the Western world, Europeans had terms to describe body scarifications. The English used "pounce," "pink," "carve," or "mark," the French had pique, the Dutch used prickshilderen or stechmalen, the German terms were stuphen or stempeln, while Italians used marco, nzito, segno, or devozione. "Tattowing" was first recorded by Captain James Cook in July 1769, in reference to Tahiti. However, the ritual of marking the skin has been in practice at least for 7000 years and "in virtually all parts of the world at some time."¹ In tracing the migration of scarification practices around the world, anthropologist Wilfred Hambly conjectured that Egypt was the epicenter of skin art. From Egypt, the culture of marking the skin spread east from the Middle East to Polynesia. Hambly believed that the early "Polynesians undoubtedly played a most important role in the distribution of tattooing in association with religious beliefs and fertility rites."² In other words, Polynesians appropriated and amplified these beliefs, and Polynesia became the crossroads between the eastern and western hemispheres. In this case, the Americas, particularly South America, witnessed the "entry of tattooing...from [the] islands of the Eastern Pacific."³ (See appendix 1.01) Considering Hambly’s geographic mapping of tattoo transculturation helps to explain the strong presence of tattoo cultures in societies from the Middle East to Polynesia, a presence that remained strong until European incursion in the eighteenth century.

¹ Jane Caplan, ed., Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History (New Jersey, 2000), xi.
² Wilfred Hambly, The History of Tattooing (New York, 1925), 327.
³ Hambly, 333.
The other half of this expansion of body modification traveled northwest of Egypt and took root in early Mediterranean and European societies. However, prejudices and feelings of *hubris* led to the denigration of marking the skin as established in ancient Greece, Rome, and the later Judeo-Christian-Islamic world. From the early Mediterranean and European societies, discourses surrounding tattooing are often negative or ambivalent at best. Historian Jane Caplan argues that in the West, there existed a cultural or historical rupture where "the tattoo was part of our culture; then it was not." This discontinuity suggests, according to historian Alfred Gell, that the tattoo’s “unfixity...is most blatant in Western society”—leaving it open for appropriation or dialectical conflict. This conflict has often seen the primacy of a discourse that discourages body modification as it often served punitive purposes.

For the Greek, Roman, and the Judeo-Christian-Islamic world, tattooing had a “boundary status.” The unmarked, unblemished body was closer to “excellence of any kind,” associated with Greek *arête*. *Arête* was the excellence or nobility of mind, soul, and body. The reality was that tattooing was a marker of differentiation between insiders and outsiders for many in the Mediterranean world. Body modifications literally "marked" off entire "barbarian" or "savage" groups from their "civilized" neighbors. Forcibly marking a criminal or a prisoner of war declared a person's offense to the general public—forever shamed. Yet, the historical rupture which Caplan mentions also highlighted instances when indelibly marking the skin also allowed individual expression and resistance to a dominant culture.

---

4 Ibid, xii.
5 Alfred Gell’s discussion in Caplan, xv.
This bifurcation surrounding marking the skin is symptomatic of the conflicting discourses on the body in the West. This conflict by the nineteenth century witnessed the supremacy of a discussion that disparaged the tattooed body. This ambivalence remained a dominant theme in twentieth-century America and proved a key difference when comparing scarification practices of the early Mediterranean and European societies from other communities around the world. For cultures like those in the Pacific, skin art stabilized the identity of the bearer of such marks and were less open for appropriation as the meanings were socially reproduced by each successive generation. In other words, the marked body underscored self-determination of the body as it upheld values and structured relations in the community. In describing the Maoris, anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss believed that the voluntary act of tattooing served to "stamp onto the mind all the traditions and philosophy of the group."7 Marking the skin provided a substitute for coercion by providing necessary institutional "stamping" for the functioning of major institutions or aesthetics present in early Russia, peoples of India, eastern and southeast tribes in North America, and some Polynesian groups.

**Magic and Religion**

For many cultures, according to scholar Alfred Gell, marking the body was often an "integral part of the organization and functioning of major institutions (politics, warfare, religion and so on)" so that any “description of tattooing practices [was] a description of the wider institutional forms within which tattooing was embedded.”8 In pre-modern Russia, Africa, India, early North America, and Polynesia, indelible marks on the skin highlighted control over the environment, healing, and upholding religion. Body

---

modifications also served to decorate, reinforce social status, and divide insiders from outsiders. The tattooed body in these instances underscored the importance of self-determination and idealized indices of civilization. For example, Pazyryks mummies, found in Russia from the sixth to the second centuries BCE, were adorned with elaborate real-life and mythical creatures on their bodies. A tattooed Pazyryk chief had a donkey, a mountain ram, "two highly stylized deer with long antlers and an imaginary carnivore on the right arm. Two monsters resembling griffins decorate the chest, and on the left arm are three partially obliterated images...to represent two deer and a mountain goat."9 (See figures 1.01 and 1.02) On the lower half of his body, the chief had a large fish and a connected series of rams. Anthropologist John Rush argues that the combination of predatory and herbivorous symbolism is an analogy for natural aggression, where "predator pounces on the herbivore, just as the sun pounces on the moon, and the warrior pounces on his enemy."10 These marks also suggest the Pazyryk view of the natural order of their world, where humans are at the apex as predators and above animals because of their ability to decorate or heal through tattoos on the skin.

The Pazyryk mummy also had a series of small circles aligned along his vertebral column. According to archeologist Sergei Ivanovich Rudenko, the last set of marks had a therapeutic purpose, as the marks appeared similar to those on contemporary Siberian tribesmen who use tattooing to relieve back pain.11 Tattoos were not limited to men, as a female Pazyryk mummy was found in 1993 and she too had mythical creatures indelibly marked on her body, thus suggesting the importance of skin art among both Pazyryk

---

genders. Also prevalent was the importance of using skin art for adornment and for its healing or protective properties. Tattoos as markers of protection or self-determination was also important, when discussing scarification among early Indian societies.

For certain groups in India during the seventh century, scarification was integral in providing life, defense against death, and controlling the afterlife. Like the ancient Dravidians, the Agariyas used scarification to promote fertility. If an Agariyas woman was barren, she was indelibly marked below her abdomen. This remedy was also used for women whose children were unhealthy or had died young. Besides protecting the unborn or the young, skin modifications also protected a woman’s husband. According to Yuan Chwang, a Chinese monk and traveler in the seventh century, there was a community in India, where women tattooed a conch shell on their bodies so that they would not become a “widow in the world or the next [life].” 12 These examples highlighted the importance of marking the body as signifiers of self-determination. Symbolic of this willpower, Agariyas women made certain of their destination in the afterlife by tattooing themselves with the symbols of their deity. Indelible marks on women to secure their passage to the afterlife were also seen in northern India among the Nagas of Assam. 13 However, given the inevitability of death, Chwang also mentioned that he witnessed a ritual, where an Indian community blackened or gashed their faces as a sign of mourning. 14 These instances of marking the skin suggested the importance of using the body for determinants to control life, death, and the afterlife. The empowerment in using tattoos as charms and tools within religion was also present with particular Native American tribes.

13 Ibid, 290.
To the Muskogean-speaking Indians in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, tattoos were a central part of their culture. Marking the skin among native groups amplified their innate abilities, provided supernatural protection, and clarified the wonders of nature. Like the Pazyryk people, the Southeast Indians acquired motifs of animals of their bodies. Often these natural representations would take the form of a crow, an eagle, a beaver, or a deer. These natural representations functioned in several ways for the men. The first role was to show the community’s relationship to nature. As hunters for the tribe, men adopted animal representations as badges of their achievements. Hunting was an essential job, which the men performed because the meat from their “kills” supplemented the agricultural diet of the village. By physically assuming these natural symbols, they showed their specialty and adeptness in hunting. The flesh-embedded symbols of their occupation were similar to the uniforms worn in contemporary society, which readily identify police officers, blue-collar workers, and their like in America. Much like the specialization apparent in contemporary society, the Southeast Indians had an order of their own to keep.

The second function manifested in the roles of hunters, warriors, and leaders. These aspects of the male character prompted Indian men to assume animal representations to empower themselves. These symbols of power imbued the wearer with the strengths of these animals. For example, if the wearer tattooed an eagle on his body, he became as perceptive as the eagle. These functions showed a close relationship to nature and demonstrated the power these symbols had in Native American culture. Besides their use in transferring animal abilities to the bearer, they also empowered the individual with their supernatural protection. The sun was usually associated with power
and it was feared because of its destructive depictions in Indian myths. There were many myths that portrayed the sun as an angry and often harmful being. It can be inferred that the Timucuan chiefs placed sun designs either in the form of jewelry or tattoos on their chests to inspire respect and fear from the rest of the community. (See figure 1.03)

Another design that was often used and that was arguably the most important symbol in Native American culture was the serpent. The serpent was seen as a creature of ambiguous attributes, both feared and admired by Southeastern Indians. In some Native American folklore, snakes have been associated with poison and were therefore harmful to humans. It can be deduced that warriors and chiefs also decorated their bodies with serpents to gather power and instill fear in their enemies. (See figure 1.04) There were also less foreboding connotations attached to serpents in Native American culture. In Indian mythology, according to scholar Patricia Galloway, “the rattlesnake was the creature that saved mankind from the diseases sent by the sun to destroy it; thus one has the serpent in the role of savior.”15 The snake was also regarded as a guard against sickness and evil. These motifs were etched into the skin and were seen as a second layer of protection from hostile forces.

In these instances, some native groups were elaborately tattooed with symbols because they thought marking the skin had actual force. It was true in the case of the Chippewas, who believed tattooing cured toothaches. These motifs were supposed to protect them from weapons, diseases, and existing pain. They may have been more apparent and prevalent upon the arrival of European explorers, who unknowingly brought diseases that devastated whole villages. This use of tattooing as a second layer of

---

protection was similar to the Maori facial marks or *moku*. Alfred Gell, a contemporary historian, argued that the “doubling of the face, in particular expresses an omnipotence and invulnerability that people such as warriors and chiefs were driven toward.”16 The need for extra protection, for second faces or second skins, was understandable considering the high mortality rate in early America. It was obvious that the symbols and motifs of the Southeast Indians empowered individuals, but they also clarified the wonders of the world in human terms.

Native Americans relied on oral traditions as a major part of their religions and cultures. The oral traditions of Native Americans took the form of myths and legends. These myths explained the phenomena that Indians encountered in everyday life. For example, the Creek had a myth that explained why the Moon followed the Sun and why they rarely appeared together. In the “Myth of the Incest of the Sun and the Moon,” the Sun was personified as a woman while the Moon was her brother. The problem was the Sun had a secret lover who came to her every night. One night, she decided to place ashes from the fireplace on her hands so that she could mark her lover and find out his identity during the day. The next day, she saw her brother, the Moon, with ashes on his face and she confronted him. He was so ashamed that he rarely appeared with Sun thereafter, and was always in the background. As seen in this story, the mysteries of nature were humanized and resolved to create a closer relationship to nature. This closeness was demonstrated through the use of tattoos, and these inky marks became the icons used in ceremonies.

The symbols embedded in Indian ceremonies usually involved animal and cosmic representations. These icons were apparent in Native American building structures and

---

on the bodies of the Southeast Indians. House structures in the Indian community were
decorated with various paintings and sculptures. William Bartram noted that “the pillars
and the walls of the houses…were decorated with paintings and sculptures…of some
kind of animal as those of a duck, turkey, bear, fox, buck, and those kind of creatures are
represented having the human head…. The pillars…of the council-house were
ingeniously formed in the likeness of vast speckled serpents.”17 Southeast Indians also
reproduced these supernatural icons in the form of tattoos. In this case, tattoos were
further legitimated as symbols of power. Through these important indelible signposts,
native groups reinforced oral traditions, religion, and their aesthetics as a community. As
markers strengthening the community and providing protection from outsiders, tattoos
also individualized and differentiated members from the larger community.

Adornment and Markers of Individual Status and Position in the Community

For the Yoruba, situated in West Africa, scarification have traditionally served to
identify tribal members and to articulate aesthetic ideals. The kolo, noted by scholar
Henry Drewal in the 1970s, was a marking on the body done by the oloola, meaning
“those who cut lines.”18 An egalitarian profession open to both sexes, the artist had to be
skilled with a special “Y” shaped blade to execute what Henry Drewal in his work on
Yoruba body art describes as a “closely spaced series of marks.” He pointed out that the
mastering of such “refined technique is the difference between art and accident. The
attainment of technical proficiency is recognized and rewarded in a profession which is
described as very dangerous.”19 These artists held an elevated position within the

18 Henry John Drewal, “Beauty and Being: Aesthetics and Ontology in Yoruba Body Art,” in Marks
19 Ibid, 85.
community, marking themselves off from fellow Yoruba, just as they marked fellow tribal members from “others.” Like individuals in contemporary America, the Yoruba used custom designs to differentiate themselves from other Yorubans. One Yoruban proverb stated, “faari to make yonga,” which meant “has no reason, just for funning.”  

In this instance, kolos were also employed for purely decorative purposes. This individualism was also visible with others types of kolos.

The kolo known as osilumi differentiated individuals who had lost someone dear to them by placing symbols on the skin that represented the dead. Later, as a result of European and Islamic influence, the Yoruba used calligraphy to represent a fiancée’s name, a proverb, or a prayer. (See figure 1.05) Yoruba markings could also signify an individual’s courage, fortitude, or strength. The kolos were emblems of courage because the individual had to go through great pain to acquire them. For example, tattooed women were praised for being fearless, while unmarked women were ridiculed as cowards. Yoruba women with kolos showed potential suitors that they were able to endure the pain of childbirth. To Yoruba women, these social signifiers were very important when they became of marriageable age. These distinguishing marks were an integral part of Yoruba identity as tattooing relayed their individualism and self-determination within the general confines of the community. The vanity of kolos was also seen with another African group, the Tiv.

Scarification could also be used to denote beauty in traditional African culture. The Tiv, noted by Paul Bohannan in the 1950s, used markings on the skin in the same way Europeans used clothing, jewelry, and cosmetics. The Tiv’s fashionable markings or abaji were made by hooks that lifted the skin, segments of which were cut away by a Tiv.

---

20 Ibid, 84.
razor. Afterward, charcoal and indigo were rubbed into the wounds situated around the eyes. These scars were limited to adults above the age of thirty-five. The younger groups used *mkali*, scars made by a razor and colored in with charcoal to leave a black marking. The tattoos used by different age groups demarcated the line between elders and the young, but the primary purpose of scarification was to bring attention to areas of the body individuals deemed beautiful. For example, if a female felt that her calves were her best feature, she would emphasize them with tattoos. (See figure 1.06) Markings upon the body denoted what the Tiv viewed as attractive, which put pressure on both sexes to enhance their appeal by conforming to a group ideal. Those who achieved these ideals added to their desirability and status within the community. As markers of status, tattoos also highlighted individual achievement and allowed further distinction from the larger community. This separation was especially visible among early Native American communities.

A report in 1663 by a Jesuit stated that an Iroquois chief known as "Nero" had sixty tattoos, "each symbolizing an enemy kill with his own hand." Also linking tattoos with a warrior's prowess was Reverend John Heckwelder in his 1742 report, in which he described a member of the Lenape Nation:

This man, who was then at an advanced age, had a most striking appearance, and could not be viewed without astonishment. Besides that his body was full of scars, where he had been struck and pierced by arrows of the enemy, there was not a spot to be seen on that part of it which was exposed to view, but what was tattooed over with some drawing relative to his achievements, so that the whole face, neck, shoulders, arms, thighs, and legs, as well as on his breasts and back, were represented scenes of the various actions and engagements he had been in; in short, the whole of his history were there deposited, which was well known to

---


those of his nation, and was such that all who heard it thought it could never be surpassed by man.23

These marks signifying a warrior’s power recorded important events in his life and suggested a function of stratifying native groups based on merit. The southeast Native Americans placed a wide variety of designs upon their skin that connected them to their culture and denoted their social standing, beyond militarism.

Charles Hudson, a historian of southeast Indians, noted that Native Americans usually tattooed designs of “scrolls, flowers, animals, stars, crescents, and the sun, with the latter placed in the center of their chests. The serpent was frequently used as a design.”24 These type of designs were reserved for the elite class consisting of the chiefs, the warriors, and the religious leaders. The hierarchy in the tribes was an essential part of Native American culture because it meant that all members knew their relationships and positions within the community. For example, the men were the hunters and protectors of the community while the females were the producers of the tribes’ sustenance, meaning they were in charge of planting the crops, manufacturing their goods, and rearing their children.

Besides their use as personal adornment, these tribal motifs signified family relations and gender roles. Tattoos also distinguished free individuals from slaves and underscored the stratification of Native American groups, while serving as certificates of bravery for passing prescribed rites of passage. In some cases, tattoos were important in grouping family members together. For example, the wives of the chiefs and warriors were tattooed with geometric designs on their arms and legs to show their elevated status.

---

within the community. With the inclusion of the wives of chiefs and warriors into the elite community, women enjoyed a greater amount of autonomy and influence.

Skin art also reinforced prescribed gender roles in the community, as particular markings were reserved to each sex. For example, women chose geometric designs to resemble the same symbols that were employed on pottery and basket weaving. This visually revealed their roles as the producers of their tribe and the marks were there to reinforce that connection. Women’s skin art was also intimately related to their rites of passage. There were apparently two sets of patterns laid upon them in regards to marriage. First, a teenage girl was tattooed when she was of marriageable age. This was to signify that the girl was old enough to enter the next stage in her life and to show the men that she was available for courting. The second tattoo involved the next passage in a woman’s life. Geometric motifs were applied after her marriage and served as a marriage certificate. Body modifications among some Native Americans were important as skin marks simplified mating rituals and showed marital status as a life-altering moment in Indian culture. These gender specific marks were also seen in Ga’anda communities.

In Ga’anda society, scarification of the body was integral in empowering both sexes and constructing tight kinship and interdependent relationships. The Ga’anda live in what is today northeastern Nigeria. In Ga’anda society, markings on the body are limited to women. On the one hand, the mark known as hleeta was a tool for men to appropriate the female body. For example, the first of the six stages of hleeta involved marking a woman above the navel with two chevron-like symbols to emphasize her reproductive role with the community. (See figures 1.07 and 1.08) While this may seem to limit the woman’s role to the biological, it can also be interpreted as a sign of
empowerment. Even though most African families were patriarchal, the women—or more significantly the mother—held a very special position within the community. In Ga’anda society, the prominence of mothers was emphasized with markings upon the skin. *Hleeta* on Ga’anda women can be seen as a mark of power because, as scholar Marla Berns noted, “it plays a key role in the transmission and reinforcement of sociocultural values.”

Tattoos further transmitted and reinforced the sociocultural values of the community by becoming markers in the initiate’s life. While females were waiting for their *hleeta*, males had to stave off their own initiation ordeal, *sapta*, until the women completed a particular stage.

The male’s initiation, *sapta*, consisted of three stages, which taught three important skills: 1) hunting; 2) defending the family; and 3) making tools and weapons. These rites of passage both strengthened and limited both sexes, but they also defined gender roles within the tribes and reinforced their interdependent relationship. The markings of womanhood started when a girl was five or six years of age. The tribe would mark her back, as Bern noted, with “rows of closely placed cuts that scar to form slightly raised dots somewhat lighter than the surrounding skin.”

Traditionally, since women were forced to marry outside their particular community, *hleeta* served as a means of further heightening the power of women because they were integral in strengthening kinship ties within the Ga’anda tribes. The purposes for which the Ga’anda used tattooing were not unique, as some Native American communities used scarification practices to denote status on the body.

---


26 Berns, 59.
Like the men in the Huron, Iroquois, and Lenape nations, tattoos among certain southeastern Indian men had designs that connoted personal achievement or some special office. In a hierarchical society, there are always signifiers of class to demarcate the upper and lower. The Indian hierarchy was derived from a respect for age, or for men of accomplishment (warriors, war or peace chiefs, religious and medical practitioners). Tattoos reinforced the tightly structured community of the Southeast Indians. The Timacuan and Creek communities restricted markings on the skin to the chiefs, warriors, and their wives. (See figure 1.09) The Creek chiefs were intricately tattooed with precise designs around the legs, arms, and body. These geometric marks were divided into zones and were permeated with names, titles, and the seats they occupied within their council house. The warriors of the southeast, as William Bartram, a traveler in the eighteenth century, testified, “were decorated with representations of the sun, with fanciful scrolls winding around the torso, thighs, arms, and legs, dividing the body into ‘tablets’ which were then filled in…[with symbols of] military actions as visible marks of exploits and achievements.”

In another example, the warriors of the Natchez tattooed a war club on their right shoulder as a symbol of their fighting class. These war motifs separated honored warriors in the village from others by bestowing respect on their skin and thus elevating their status among the uninitiated and weaker men. However, a man could try to rise above his station by appropriating the wrong seat or assuming tattoos to which he was not entitled. In this case, the offender was “peppered with humiliating catcalls and would immediately take a more appropriate seat; and…[those] Indians who tattooed themselves with [uneearned] designs…were forced to go through the painful process of removing

---

27 Hudson, 380.
them.”28 Through such rewards and punishments, the Indians of the Southeast were able to demarcate those positions of honor from the lower classes. This duality made visible by tattoos was also seen in distinguishing autonomous from dependent individuals.

These signifiers of class also extended to distinguishing the free and the slave individuals in the tribe. The “mourning ritual” was a custom where members of a tribe would assuage the pain over dead loved one and friends. The process involved members of the community capturing or kidnapping individuals from other tribes. Captives during this ritual were either tortured to death or absorbed into the community. According to James Adair, an eighteenth-century observer, the captives who were “pretty far advanced in life, as well as in war-gradations, always atone for the blood they split, by the tortures of fire.”29 It was usually the older men who were put to death because of their established allegiance to the beliefs of their former tribe. As for the war gradations mentioned by Adair, assimilation also proved problematic due to past wars and sacrifice was an atonement for past grievances. Those captives who found themselves spared were assimilated into the community as either slaves or as full-fledged free members. Since many of those who were assimilated were young, they may have not had markings that signified previous affiliation. Those who did have previous tribal markings experienced the painful process of tattoo removal. The extraction of the tattoo entailed the scraping of the design until it was thoroughly scarred. Then, as James Adair described, the southeast Indians removed the symbols “by stretching the marked parts, and rubbing them with the

28 Hudson, 203.
juice of green corn, which in a great degree took out the impression." While this erased any earlier affiliation, the scarring would have stigmatized the new member. It would then have made the process of complete assimilation more difficult. It was through these methods that captives or slaves were incorporated into the tribes. More importantly, these instances accentuated the importance of tattooing among these various cultures as these voluntary marks reinforced the culture and structure of communities with a strong tattoo tradition. These body modifications were also important in connecting the community and separating members from outsiders or the uncivilized.

**Cooked, Marked, and Civilized**

In contrast to stereotypes about the marked "savage other," the Baule tribe of West Africa until the 1940s saw voluntary scarifications of the body as marks of civilization. Like abrasions or cuts, body modifications served as memory devices or reminders of events. However, an accidental scar or *kanvuen* was unaesthetic, in comparison to an aesthetic voluntary mark. A Baule proverb noted that, “there are scars on all the beautiful girls *[kanvuen wo talua klaman kroa be wun]*”—meaning nobody is perfect. Similarly, the Yoruba believed that to be unmarked was to have smooth, shiny skin and this was seen as flawed—while being textured by *kolo* was seen as beautiful. An *ooloola*, in explaining beauty, said, “To make it beautiful, one must make it black…. It is to change the color of the body.” The Yoruba saw the body as purer as the individual appropriated more “blackness.” For the Baule, to have a *ngole*, meaning a voluntary mark, was to be included in what was seen as “civilized.” Until the mid-twentieth

---

30 Adair, 389.
32 Ibid, 91.
century, the Baule decorated themselves with textured patterns consisting of clusters of three, six, or nine marks on the temples and both sides of the nose. By understanding the symbolism associated with Baule sculptures, African studies scholar Susan Vogel saw scarification as “a civilizing force for they are the principle means of social control in Baule villages even though their performances are wild and unruly. Their appearances reinforce the social order and encourage the virtues of respect and productivity that are the foundations of communal life. It is accordingly appropriate that they wear such marks of civilization.”

The Baule categorized individuals into two groups, the marked and the unmarked human being. The marked human represented humanity’s will or control being imposed on nature. Likewise, Yoruba’s kolos articulated their notions of the controlling forces in society. The kolos that reflected these concepts were called ase. Ase was markings on the individual which produced skin patterns resembling “tortoises, alligators, and the favorite lizard, stars, concentric circles, lozenges, welts.” The use of fauna ranging from rocks to animals, and words which connoted songs, curses, and speeches, represented the innate potential power contained in all aspects of life. Like the Baule, the Yoruba believed success in life depended on an individual’s ability to impose his or her will upon nature and the unscarified.

Both the Baule and Yoruba believed the “unscarified, uncivilized, unembellished, raw human being is opposed to the civilized, idealized member of society.” In other words, unblemished people were human, but not necessarily civilized, and those who did

---

34 Drewel, 87.
not follow the social mores of Baule and Yoruba society were stigmatized by the absence of marks. This is not to say that scarification defined humanity, but to the Baule, civilization represented upon the skin reflected people who were productive and who shared a respect for traditional conventions by observing the correct rules. In this respect, early Mediterranean and some African societies viewed the meaning of civilization in similar ways, but used different means to reinforce their institutions and values. In these cases, body alterations captured or contained cultural ideas and beliefs of the community—for better or worse. This indelible stamping of culture and the ideals of the community was also seen in some societies in Polynesia.

For the Samoan *O le ta tatau*, or the traditional art of tattooing proved integral to the individual and the community. All respected men as a rite of passage subjected themselves to *tatau*. (See figure 1.10) Those who avoided the pain were known as *pala'ai* or "coward" and most likely were refused any prospective marriage suitor. The process of being marked was a communal activity, involving whole villages or provinces in the case of a chief's son. While the tattoo artist or *tafunga* skillfully worked on the tua-stripe which extended over the entire back, some of the other *tafungas* would sing:

Patience. Only a short while, and you will see your tattoo, which will resemble the fresh leaf of the ti-plant.
I feel sorry for you I wish it was a burden which I could take off your shoulders in love and carry for you.
The blood! It springs out of your body at every stroke. Try to be strong.
Your necklace may break, the *fau*-tree may burst, but my tattooing is indestructible. It is an everlasting gem that you will take into your grave.
O, I am sad, you are weak, O I feel sorry that the pain follows you even in your sleep and you resist it.36

The villagers who were invited would also participate in feasts and dances, and the ceremony was "usually opened with sham fights and war exercises which were followed

36 Gilbert, 51.
by the first distribution of presents to the *Tafunga.*" The whole process, in some cases, lasted three months depending on the stamina of the recipient. Once done, the *tafunga* received the last payment from the initiate’s family. Those who had participated in the celebration, which included the “family of the tattooed sons of the *tulafale* [district], all relations to the chief,” gave their gifts to the recipient’s family. The gift-giving was part of a reciprocal relationship as the family had “contributed to the event by providing food for the many guests.”

Thus, the cohesiveness of the community was reinforced through reciprocity and the achievement of the marked individual. The bonding of the community created a boundary status against unmarked outsiders and this was also the case with the Maoris of New Zealand.

The *moko* among the Maoris from the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries was the most visibly striking tattoo as it was intricately placed on the face. Unlike the punitive use of marking the face in classical Greece and Rome, the Maoris voluntarily carved into the skin to make scars "in the form of parallel ridges and grooves....An elegantly tattooed faced was a great source of pride to a warrior, for it made him fierce in battle and attractive to women." The process involved nearly covering every part of the face, including the eyelids. For the women, the lips and chin were outlined and tattooed with blue lines. Both sexes were marked with traditional components or standard patterns linking all wearers to the Maori community. However, the patterns were "varied and elaborated by the artists so that although all facial tattoos resembled each other, no two were identical." Much like a fingerprint, each *moko* was unique and emphasized the individuality of the person. According to Gilbert, Maori chiefs were able to draw

37 Gilbert, 52.
38 Gilbert, 67.
their own facial tattoos from memory. (See figures 1.11 and 1.12) When the British arrived in New Zealand during the nineteenth century, Maori chiefs also used their *moko* signatures for any contract from land grants to deeds. Te Pehi Kupe, a Maori warrior, who visited England in 1826, was besieged by many admirers to sketch his *moko*. He drew for "Dr Traill the mokos of his brother and of his son; and on finishing the latter, he held it up and gazed on it with a murmur of affectionate delight, kissing it many times and, as he presented it, burst into tears."\(^{39}\)

The markings were so important that family members embalmed and preserved the heads of the deceased and kept them in "ornately carved ceremonial boxes." The heads were also treasured as trophies by their enemies. Unmarked heads were "treated with indignity and kicked to one side, [while] those which were conspicuous by their beautiful moko were carefully cut off, stuck on the turuturu, a pole with a cross on it, and preserved; all of which was gratifying to the survivors, and the spirits of their late possessor."\(^{40}\) More importantly, these examples underscore the distinction of the unmarked and marked face. According to Peter Gathercole, a scholar of Maori culture, a face devoid of a *moko* was *papa-tea* or “bareboards.”\(^{41}\) In other words, the person without a *moko* was raw, partial, incomplete, and not a full Maori. These examples of tattoo cultures around the world magnify the importance of voluntary scarification practices in creating stability by reinforcing beliefs and structures of their respective communities. This was also the case with early Mediterranean and European societies, but as markers of barbarism, criminality, dependency, dispossession, and alienation.

*Uncooked, Unblemished, Unmarked perfection*

---

\(^{39}\) Gilbert, 74.  
\(^{40}\) Gilbert, 75.  
\(^{41}\) Peter Gathercole, “Contexts of Maori *Moko*,” in Rubin, 174.
In early Mediterranean and European societies, tattoos were important in differentiating the unmarked body from the marked, savage “Other” or barbarian. Hambly argues, "With advancing civilizations tattooing tends to become a contemptible practice." For example, during the Roman occupation of Britannia, Roman observers noted societies on the fringes of their civilization who scarified their bodies. The ancient Picts of Britain were known to puncture their bodies with designs of animals. According to scholar Wilfred Hambly, the Cruithnae or Picts had tattooed "beasts, birds, and fishes [that] ...may have been totem marks." Julius Caesar, Pliny the Elder, and Tacitus also noted other painted Ancient Britons during Roman occupation. This distinction was seen in another example with the rise of Islam on the Arabian Peninsula after the seventh century. Islamic communities began associating tattooing with lower classes of people, particularly the Badawy (Bedouins). According to Hambly, the Badawy were "wanderers, who are at once feared and held in contempt by better class Arabs" because they were indelibly marked. The stigmatization of these tattooed groups clearly marked the Ancient Britons and Bedouins as outsiders. The antecedents to these prejudices had to do with ideas concerning the unblemished, unmarked body developed in the Hellenic world.

Unlike some communities in early Russia, India, Africa, and North America, perfection in early Mediterranean societies implied excellence of body without blemishes and scars. Arête as mentioned in Plato’s Republic (ca. 380 BCE) was the excellence or nobility of mind, soul, and body. Whether Plato considered skin art as a contradiction to arête, the reality was that tattooing was a marker of differentiation between insiders.

---

42 Hambly, 287.
43 Wilfred Dyson Hambly, The History of Tattooing (New York, 2009), 284.
and outsiders for many in the Mediterranean world. This becomes especially apparent when comparing Greek sculptures of human figures to those of the Baule. (See figure 1.13) Conspicuously absent are scarifications or marks on Greek human statues, whereas the Baule figures have the ngole.\textsuperscript{45} This suggested that if an individual or community voluntarily marked themselves, then it was further proof of their savagery. This boundary status was reinforced as tattoos were used to mark prisoners of war and those processed to become slaves.

For the early Persians, tattooing implied loathsome indigenous rituals or practices—a sign of the savage "other." The punitive function of stigmatizing prisoners was applied by the Persian king Xerxes in his treatment of the Greek Thebans. Greek historian Herodotus stated, "The Thebans who deserted to the Persians did not entirely prosper, since the barbarians killed some of them, and marked most of them with the royal tattoos [\textit{estixan stigmata basileia}]."\textsuperscript{46} The marks designated Xerxes’ mastery over the Thebans much as all his subjects were symbolically regarded as his slaves. For the early Hellenistic Greeks, the stigma attached to \textit{barbaroi} was unstable as it merely referred to someone who did not speak Greek. With the rise of Greek civil societies or \textit{poleis} in the seventh century, \textit{barbaroi} by definition was reserved for the \textit{oikumene} or individuals or communities who did not share the collective cultural values of the Hellenic community.\textsuperscript{47} The \textit{oikumene} included the Berbers of North Africa, the Turks, the Turks, the Turks.

\textsuperscript{45} When the Baule described statues with scarification, they stated, “man of the village” or law-abiding productive person. In comparison, there were recent debates concerning the painting of Greek statues since archeologist Vinzenz Brinkmann revealed pigments on structures in the Parthenon. While they may have been painted, there was no evidence showing scarification or tattooing on Greek statues.


\textsuperscript{47} Anthony Pagden, \textit{The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology} (New York, 1982), 16.
Scythians, peoples of Ethiopia, and the Thracians. The stigma attached to marking the skin was visible for the Greeks who were familiar with the voluntary tattooing of their barbaroi neighbors, the Thracians. According to scholar C.P. Jones, Thracian tattoos were displayed to the Greek visitors to highlight the "children of good families...entirely decorated on back and front, being tattooed [estigmenous] with flower." The shifting view of marking the body was reinforced when the Greeks also adopted the disciplinary function of tattooing.

Asius of Samos, a poet in the sixth century BCE, referenced these indelible marks as stigmatias, as identifying a "marked slave." These deliberate scarifications also served a contemptible function when they were forced upon the bearer. Later in the fourth century, the Samians who revolted and were captured by the Athenians had their foreheads marked with a representation of the Samian ship, Samaina, while the Samians inscribed Athenian prisoners of war with an owl, the emblem of Athens. In another example, Athenian prisoners suffered the same fate in 413 when Athenian expeditions into Sicily failed. The Sicilians, according to Plutarch, marked "them with a horse on the forehead [stizontes hippon eis to metopon]." These examples clearly support scholar Michel Foucault's "microphysics of power." In these instances, the marked body was the site for the cultural and political manipulations of the state and visibly stigmatized.

---

50 Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (New York, 1979), 25-26. Foucault argued that “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.”
This stigmatization was expanded as the boundaries of the marked “Other” extended to slaves, soldiers or assets of the state, and criminals.

Herodas' *Mimes*, a series of short sketches written in the second century BCE, described an unhappy love story concerning Lady Bitinna and her slave, Gastron. Bitinna was jealous as Gastron was unfaithful, so she had him stripped and ready for lashings. Instead of being beaten, Gastron "begs her to have him tattooed [*stixon*] if he is ever unfaithful again." She relented and sent for Kosis, tattooer [*stiktes*]. During the process, a female slave attempted to intercede and Bitinna stated that he will "soon 'know himself' when he has this inscription on his forehead." This mark was a reminder to 'know thyself,' to know one’s status as a slave. Epidermally, the tattooed slave was marginalized and degraded. His body served as a vehicle clearly showing who was in charge—in this case, Bitinna. Other examples where power was exerted by the state over an individual came during the Roman Empire. During the latter part of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, Bishop Ambrose of Milan noted, "Young slaves are inscribed [*inscribuntur*] with their master's mark [*charactere*], and soldiers are marked [*signantur*] with the emperor's name." Like slaves, soldiers and key workers were properties of the state. The military writer Vegetius described, according to scholar C.P. Jones, "how recruits are 'inscribed with permanent dots in the skin,' apparently the names or numbers of their units." Jones added that in 398 CE, the practice was extended to "arms-manufacturers [*fabricenses*]." The less obvious effect, according to scholar Mark Gustafson, is the "subjectification of the soul. The forcible imposition of the external

---

51 Jones, 8.
mark, this disfigurement, serves also to make a lasting impression internally, which is
difficult (though not impossible) to escape.\textsuperscript{53}

Among the Greeks and Romans, state authorities normally tattooed the offense on
the criminal's forehead. Gustafson noted Plato's mention of a temple robber being
marked on his hands and forehead. For example, a thief was marked with \textit{fur} (thief),
while a runaway slave was stained with \textit{fugitivus} (runaway). Cicero, commenting during
the Roman Republic, indicated that the letter "K" for \textit{kalumnia} (sophistry or sham) was
placed on those guilty of making false accusations.\textsuperscript{54} These instances show the
disciplining of the offenders’ bodies by visibly advertising the crime, further making it
difficult to escape their past and present. Given the need to escape this permanent shame,
Greek and Roman physicians profited in the business of tattoo removal. According to
Aetius, a sixth-century Roman physician, the removal was a long and painful process:

> When applying, first clean the tattoos with nitre, smear them with resin of
terebinth, and bandage for five days. On the sixth, prick the tattoos with a pin,
sponge away the blood, and then spread a little salt on the pricks….Leave on for
five days, and on the sixth smear on some of the prescription with a feather. The
tattoos are removed in twenty days, without great ulceration and without a scar.\textsuperscript{55}

Other physicians were, according to Gilbert, more inventive in the tattoo removal
process. Many used vinegar mixed with pigeon feces or "Cantharides (popularly known
as Spanish fly—a dried beetle) mixed as a powder with sulfur, wax, and oil."\textsuperscript{56} Removal
was especially important considering the placement—the face—as it defied most
attempts at concealment and for this reason marking the face was most effective against
criminals.

\textsuperscript{53} Gustafson, 25.
\textsuperscript{54} Gustafson, 26.
\textsuperscript{56} Gilbert, 15.
Marking the face was, according to Gustafson, "without a doubt, the worst place to receive a tattoo against one's wishes....One's own face is so deeply internalized...either through a mirror or through the eyes of others. The gaze of the onlooker is virtually inescapable, there is little defense against it."

Symbolically, the scarification of criminals' faces with their offense became a political ritual like a public execution—an important tool of the state. Foucault states that besides the "victim, the crime attacks the sovereign: it attacks him personally, since the law represents the will of the sovereign." The punitive tattoo on the forehead or the face was a permanent testament to the power of the state and its authority over anyone's body in that state. This was clearly an indictment of the body which stripped the rights of self-determination by state authorities. This was also seen with religious edicts that further stigmatized marking the skin.

The third book of the Hebrew Bible Leviticus 19:28 stated, "Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor imprint any marks upon you." Since this passage or interpretation forbade tattooing, Roman emperor Constantine (272-337 CE) prohibited inscribing criminals on the face. The Theodosian Code (438 CE) preserved Emperor Constantine's edict (316 CE) that stated:

If someone has been condemned to a gladiatorial school or to the mines/quarries for the crimes he has been caught committing, let him not be marked on his face, since the penalty of his condemnation can be expressed both on his hands and on

---

57 Gustafson, 25.
58 Foucault believed that disciplining the body through an act like a procession of the offender through the streets with a placard announcing the criminal act showed that justice had been served.
59 Ibid, 25.
60 As interpreted and noted in Kim Hewitt, Mutilating the Body: Identity in Blood and Ink (Ohio, 1997), 66.
his calves, and so that his face, which has been fashioned in the likeness of the
divine beauty, may not be disgraced.\textsuperscript{61}

Essentially the law prevented criminals, slaves, or enemies of the state from being
punitively tattooed on the face. This also explains the increase in the use of slave collars
rather than tattoos by Christian slave owners. According to Jones' discussion with
archeologist David Thurmond, the collars, for example, were emblazoned with "I'm a
runaway, take me back to the house of His Excellency Potitus near the Decian Baths on
the Aventine."\textsuperscript{62} The majority of the collars also had Christian emblems. Constantine’s
edict implied the difficulty of manumission for marked criminals or slaves since the
permanent stigma of a tattoo would have alienated them from the general populace. The
solution was the substituted collar or indelibly marking the arms or wrists which were
easily covered. Stigmatizing others visibly on the skin proved very effective in
controlling people and this explains the persistence of punitive tattoos throughout the
penal history of the West.

In 360 CE, the Bishop of Poiters, defending his fellow bishops who were
punished and sent to work in the mines, wrote an angry letter to Constantius II that stated,
"The complaint is well known: on your order,...they [bishops] have been tattooed on their
catholic foreheads \textit{in ecclesiastics frontibus scriptos}."\textsuperscript{63} Later in 373 CE, during the
Arian controversy, Emperor Valens condemning orthodox Christians in Alexandria had a
deacon marked on the forehead and sent to work in the mines. Other examples were later
seen in the Byzantine Empire during the Iconoclasm controversy in the late eighth and

\textsuperscript{61} The \textit{Theodosian Code} was a collection of imperial Roman legislations by Christian emperors
after 312 CE. Noted in Mark Gustafson, "The Tattoo in the Later Roman Empire and Beyond," in Jane
62 C.P. Jones, 13.
63 Gustafson, 18.
early ninth centuries. In 793 CE, Emperor Constantine VI had a thousand of the defeated rebels chained and paraded before him. He tattooed on their foreheads, "Armeniakon traitor." Emperor Theophilus (813-842 CE) ordered the tattooing of twelve lines of iambic verse on two monks, the Graptoi brothers, charged with idolatry. Both Byzantine examples were significant, especially as Pope Hadrian I in 787 CE banned tattooing of any kind. These actions by Orthodox Byzantine emperor suggested an affront to Hadrian's Catholic ban or more likely the effectiveness of marking unlawful people. However, the stigmatization was a matter of perspective as religion, particularly Christianity, gave scarification an ambiguous legacy.

Suffering and Scarred for Christ

Within the Judeo-Christian-Islamic world, the functions or meanings of tattoos were more fluid and proved difficult in controlling individuals through their bodies. Caplan argued that marking the skin had not been “fully integrated into Western culture.” Therefore, ideas surrounding skin art in Europe has often been conflicting. Caplan added that the “European tattoo has been free to roam at will…and opens itself to the variety of appropriations and inversions” in terms of functions. This also holds true when examining Judeo-Christian-Islamic policies toward marking the skin. Often vague or unclear, religious authorities were often conflicted about body modifications. The lack of a consistent discourse on tattooing was a key reason Caplan described the history of tattoos in the West as being "episodic."

A sympathetic account of the Graptoi brothers, Theodorus and Theophanes, highlighted the appropriation possible with tattoos in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic world.

---

64 Ibid, 20.
65 Caplan, XV.
According to Gustafson, an account undercutting Orthodox Emperor Constantine VI, stated:

In commanding that their faces be inscribed...you [emperor] involuntarily and unwillingly revealed them to be martyrs of Christ...The cherubim and flaming sword, beholding the countenance of these holy martyrs thus inscribed, will be overawed, will retreat and yield to them entrance to paradise.66

The inversion of meanings of punitive marks on the Graptoi brothers appeared possible as there had been a fair amount of voluntary tattooing among early Christians. The book of Revelation 19:16, according to Gustafson, describes a martial Christ leading the armies of heaven with "his cloak and on his thigh the name inscribed 'Kings of kings and Lords of lords.'" This inspired the Manichaean monk Clementianus in 480 CE to indelibly mark his thigh with, "Mani, the Disciple of Jesus Christ."67 According to Gustafson, Procopius of Gaza in the fifth century recorded Christians choosing to mark their wrists and arms with the "sign of the cross or the name of Christ."68 Christians in the fifth century also advised Scythians, who were suffering the plague, to tattoo their children on the forehead with the symbol of the cross. These cases were significant when taken in conjunction with the twenty-seventh Canon of Saint Basil’s ban on scarification in the fourth century. Gustafson states that it forbade "tattooing as the pagans do and declares it a contemptible practice of Satan's adherents."69 While the government and church often prohibited tattooing, there existed a counter-tradition of voluntarily marking the body among some early Christians.

According to historian Charles W. MacQuarrie, there are various descriptions of markings in the Bible. In Exodus, God placed a mark on Cain which it was "prophesied

---

66 Gustafson, 30.
67 Passage from Revelations translated and noted in Gustafson, 29.
68 Ibid, 29.
69 Gustafson, 29.
that the anti-Christ will put on his disciples in *Revelation*.” In contrast to *Leviticus* 19:28, which forbade any markings on the body, Apostle Paul's letter in *Galatians* 6:17 stated, "I carry the marks of Jesus [stigmata] on my body." MacQuarrie suggested that this passage concerning Paul's suffering in the name of Christ, which marked him as Christ's disciple, "may also be interpreted or referred to the identifying 'stigmata' [tattoos] worn by the Roman soldiers and slaves to indicate their allegiance."\(^{70}\) Suffering or pain from inscribing the skin was also discussed by the Council of Northumberland in 787. An edict declared, according to Gilbert, "When an individual undergoes the ordeal of tattooing for the sake of God, he is to be greatly praised. But one who submits himself to be tattooed for superstitious reasons in the manner of the heathens will derive no benefit therefrom."\(^{71}\) This edict highlighted the dominant ethos of Christianity, which was the denigration and repression of the human body. By subordinating the needs of the body, Christians achieved “‘higher’ spiritual ends.”\(^{72}\) More importantly, church authorities were clearly differentiating between profane or pagan and Christian scarifications.

As marks of self-determination and self-mutilation, tattoos were further legitimized by *Mark* 9:43-48, which read "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go to hell." *Matthew* 5:29-30 stated, "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away." These passages, according to Rush, if read literally, not "only justify self-mutilation but mutilation in the name of God and State in order to protect you from the ravages of hell,


\(^{71}\) Gilbert, 150.

and through fear you remain subservient to the tribe or State."\textsuperscript{73} For Christian officials, this suggested a vague policy concerning the method by which Christians were to uphold their faith on their bodies. Acceptable marks to Christians were also described in an eighth-century manuscript, \textit{Cambrai Homily}, which held that devout Christians should receive physical marks which convey Christ's crucifixion. These instances highlighted the ways that marking the body defined commitment to Jesus, God, and more importantly the Church. Service and sacrifice in the name of God were also indelibly committed on the skin by Christian crusaders and pilgrims.

Crusades, deriving from the Latin \textit{Crux} meaning "cross," began with Pope Urban II's proclamation in 1095. The reclamation of the Holy Land of Jerusalem entailed that Christian warriors take up the cross in the form of the sword and by inscribing the sign on their clothing, helmets, and even bodies. According to scholar Ludwig Keimer, medieval crusaders upon reaching the Holy Lands had crosses tattooed on their arms as "souvenirs of their travels."\textsuperscript{74} This became a custom as other travelers throughout the Middle-Ages also scarified their bodies to commemorate their pilgrimages. (See figures 1.14, 1.15, and 1.16) English traveler George Sandys, writing in the early seventeenth century, recorded that pilgrims had tattooed the names of "Jesus, Maria, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, the Jerusalem Crosse, and sundry other characters."\textsuperscript{75} Henry Maundrell's \textit{A Journey from Aleppo to Jerusalem at Easter 1697} (1707) gave a more detailed description:

The next morning nothing extraordinary passed, which gave many of the pilgrims leisure to have their arms marked with the usual ensigns of Jerusalem. The artists who undertake the operations do it in this manner. They have stamps in wood of any figure you desire, which they first imprint off upon your arm with powder of charcoal; then, taking two very fine needles tied close together, and dipping them

\textsuperscript{73} Passages from \textit{Mark} and \textit{Matthew} translated and noted in Rush, 43-44.
\textsuperscript{74} Gilbert, 150.
\textsuperscript{75} Gilbert, 151.
often, like a pen, in certain ink compounded...of gunpowder and ox-gall....These punctures they make with great quickness and dexterity,...seldom piercing so deep as to draw blood.\textsuperscript{76}

Maudrell's account clearly showed the frequency of permanently marking pilgrims as the stamps of wood served as stencils similar to modern \textit{flash} designs in many modern tattoo shops. Gilbert argued that the tradition has continued without interruption into the twentieth century. To support this, Gilbert discussed author John Carswell of \textit{Coptic Tattoo Designs} (1956), who visited Jerusalem in 1956. Carswell had spoken to professional tattooist Jacob Razzouk, who was "still using the tattoo designs carved on woodblocks that had been handed down from father to son in his family since the seventeenth century."\textsuperscript{77} These allowances within Christianity reflected the bifurcation of marking the skin—forbade or condoned—and this was also seen with Judaism and Islam.

While \textit{Leviticus} 19:28 forbade scarification, the author of \textit{Deutero-Isaiah} in the sixth century BCE predicted, according to C.P. Jones, that the Jews too would adopt the practice after their redemption: "This man will say, 'I am the Lord's man...another shall write the Lord's name on his hand."\textsuperscript{78} This statement indicated that the ancient Hebrews were at least familiar with some forms of scarification. Gilbert, citing biblical scholar William McClure Thomson, stated, "Moses either instituted such custom (tattooing) or appropriated one already existing to a religious purpose." Thomson, reading \textit{Exodus} 9 and 16, theorized that Moses adopted the practice of marking the skin from the Arabs and created patterns "so devised as to commemorate the deliverance of the Children of Israel from bondage."\textsuperscript{79} Like early Christians, Moses also differentiated between tattoos which

\textsuperscript{76} Henry Maudrell, \textit{A Journey from Aleppo to Jerusalem at Easter 1697} (Oxford, 1707), 445-446.
\textsuperscript{77} Gilbert, 151.
\textsuperscript{78} Passage from \textit{Deutero-Isaiah} translated and noted in Jones, 2.
\textsuperscript{79} Passages from \textit{Exodus 9 and 16} translated by William Thomson, noted by Gilbert, 150.
were pagan and prohibited from those that were religiously sanctioned. Thomson, citing *Deuteronomy*, states that Moses scolded those who have "the spot which is not the spot of God's children." While vague or unclear, these ancient passages are often difficult to read and opaqueness was a key reason for the ambiguity surrounding tattooing. This uncertainty has also been seen in areas where Islam has been dominant.

In contemporary Iraq, tattooing with U.S. military occupation is more widespread than before. Arabs living there call the practice of puncturing the skin, *daqq* or *dagg*. Probably based on an older custom before Islam dominated many areas in the Southwest Asia, tattooing had magical and religious purposes. In most cases, scarification existed to cure some pain or injury that included chronic headaches, eye problems, or sprains. The marks were placed in the localized areas of the problem—a headache required a tattoo near the eye. Traditionally in Arabia, according to Hambly, men and women were tattooed to cure rheumatic afflictions and "this is lawful in spite of Koranic prohibitions." However, if beauty or adornment were the aim of body modifications, then in these instances, "Allah's curse" was invoked. Another purpose of marking the skin done in the past and persisting thereafter was the custom of marking pregnant women to induce pregnancy. An added function for protective markers was serving as charms, which protected or guarded the children, "especially boys, against death." This was comparable to a reference by Hambly concerning face gashing in Mecca. He stated, "In most families male children forty days old are taken to the Ka'abah, prayed over and carried home. Here the barber draws with a razor three parallel gashes [Mashali] from

---

80 Ibid, 150.
82 Hambly 287.
83 Gilbert, 153.
the external corner of the eye to the mouth."\textsuperscript{84} Citizens speaking to Hambly explained that the custom arose to prevent kidnapping by Persians, and that it was now preserved as a mark of the Holy City. These examples highlighted the inconsistencies surrounding body scarifications in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic world. This ambiguity became less pronounced by the nineteenth century as discourses denigrating tattooing dominated.

With the backdrop of the Enlightenment, various revolutions, improving technologies, and new “scientific” studies like phrenology, the nineteenth-century conception of humanity was very different from the ancient Greeks. Rather than the one or the “Other,” there were gradations of human beings. The debates on the institution of slavery in the eighteenth century had revealed that access to human status did not lead “\textit{ipso facto} to self-determination.”\textsuperscript{85} Yet, when examining the vocabulary of the early nineteenth century, conceptions of humanity remained similar to the Greeks. According to scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot, there existed a duality or dichotomy, where one spoke of a “man of color” against “unmarked humanity” that was white. In other words, there were white men and the rest of humanity.\textsuperscript{86} This dualism was also noted by scholar Amy Dru Stanley, who argued that Americans after the American Civil War had the same dualistic assumptions about human beings. While there was no slavery, the exchanges between equal individuals did not necessarily mean equitable market relations. The exchanges between individuals implied “autonomy and dependence, volition and

\textsuperscript{84} Hambly, 288.
\textsuperscript{85} \textit{Philosophes Abbe Raynal and Denis Diderot signing of L’Histoire des deux Indes} discussed in Michel-Rolph Trouillot, \textit{Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History} (Boston, 1995), 81.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid, 81.
coercion, equality and inequality, entitlement and dispossession, self proprietorship and alienation.”

Founder of the Italian school of Positivist Criminology, Lombroso’s theory of atavism equated “white men with civilization, while black, brown, and yellow men with ‘primitive’ or ‘savage’ societies.” A clear indicator of the primitive man and his criminality was the “frequency with which they undergo tattooing.” Lombroso added, “There is not a single primitive tribe that does not use tattooing. It is only natural that a custom widespread among savages and prehistoric peoples would reappear among certain lower-class groups.” Like the Persians, Greeks, and Romans, Lombroso was ascribing savagery to the “other.” He was also transposing them to lower-class Europeans. This dichotomy of the unmarked and marked body also became an important debate in modern America—especially with definitions on race, gender, and class becoming more rigid. Even before Lombroso’s views had taken root in early twentieth-century America, many Americans were aware of conflicting discourses of the tattooed body as seen with Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, tattooed-circus women, sailors, and the military.

---

88 Cesare Lombroso, Criminal Man, trans. Mary Gibson (Durham, 2006), 17.
89 Lombroso, 62.
"Primitive and Freakery":
The Rise and Decline of Tattooing from the 1800s to the 1960s

The captive narrative that accompanied nineteenth-century tattooed exhibitionists was often one of exaggerated stories of violence and horror perpetuated by Native Americans. Part of the promotional efforts included a booklet or bill card which might say, "Miss Nora Hildebrant: The Tattooed Lady." (See figure 2.01) The talker followed up the bill card by declaring that Miss Hildebrant was originally from Australia. However, due to family tragedies, she had traveled to New York "friendless and alone." In 1878, Hildebrandt’s father, a tattooist, sent for her from Salt Lake City so they could be together. While traveling through the "Wild West," Hildebrant and her father were attacked by the Lakota-Sioux tribes. Chief "Sitting Bull" forced her father to tattoo her every day for a year "before he decided he couldn't torture his daughter any longer and broke his needles. Her father was killed for this but Nora was rescued by the famous cavalryman General George Cook."¹ The conclusion of her cover story stated that she was hospitalized with temporary blindness until sideshow manager W.K. Leary saved her from her infirmity and gave her a purpose to educate the world on the savageness of the Indian.

To the audience, Hildebrant was clearly a victim, threatened by native "savages" and showing what these barbarians were capable of doing. The marks were proof of submission to and control by the natives. Yet, redemption in this narrative was also available through the efforts of charitable white males. This discourse "ensured that the audience members understood that a man had control over the tattooed woman's body,

¹ Miss Hildebrandt’s “cover story” taken from Amelia Klem Osterud, The Tattooed Lady: A History (Colorado, 2009), 44.
that she had no choice or say about being marked.”\(^2\) In contrast, the real Hildebrant came from London, England, and eventually met Martin Hildebrant, considered the first professional American tattooist. By 1882, the Hildebrant couple had a common-law marriage and she had allowed him to tattoo her entire body. Female tattooed exhibitionists like Hildebrant were manipulating the audience. She was ensuring her financial success by playing the victim and subverting the captive narrative with a “message of defiance and self-control over her own circumstances.”\(^3\) Like the shifting boundaries of exclusion seen in early Mediterranean societies, discussions on the tattooed body remained fluid in the United States before the 1960s. From the seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries, scarification was associated with non-Anglo "others" such as Native Americans, African Americans, and Pacific Islanders—from which they had no control over the Euro-American projections of savagery on their tattooed bodies. The indelibly marked also included sailors and men of the military as they traveled abroad and crossed boundaries—both of geography and the definitions of the western body. Their stories of strange lands and people amalgamated with existing discriminations into a discourse that legitimated the carnival "freak" from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries.

This was an advantageous discussion that allowed the visual consumption of tattoos for working and middle-class patrons. Legitimated by doctors, clergy, newspapers, and scientific societies, carnival performers like the tattooed women were presented as morally uplifting and educational emblems of the natural order of society. By the mid-twentieth century, the combination of new mediums of entertainment from

\(^2\) Ibid, 54.  
\(^3\) Ibid, 56.
film and television to modern science shifted the boundaries against the marked body, which led to the decline of the tattooed performer. Nevertheless, tattoo culture in America continued to flourish as the tattooed, patriotic soldier during the period of the world wars allowed a counter discussion against the medicalization of the body. Still, the dialogues from the nineteenth century surrounding the conditions of the healthy body brought persistent unfavorable attention to marking the skin. The medicalization of the body led to the eventual fragmentation in meaning and denigration of tattoo culture, which associated marking the skin with deviancy or "Others" by the 1950s. This “othering” of the savage, tattooed body was first associated with Native Americans living in North America.

"Naked Savages" in North America

The first European report that attempted to explain the function of marking the skin among Native Americans was written by French explorer Gabriel Sagard-Theodat in 1615. In describing the Huron, Sagard-Theodat noted:

But that which I find a most strange and conspicuous folly, is that in order to be considered courageous and feared by enemies [the Hurons] take the bone of a fish which they sharpen...to engrave or decorate their bodies....During the process they exhibit the most admirable courage and patience. They certainly feel the pain...but they remain motionless and mute....Subsequently they rub a black color or powder into the cuts in order that the engraved figures will remain for life and never be effaced, in much the same manner as the marks which one sees on the arms of pilgrims returning from Jerusalem.4

Significantly, this passage underscored French awareness and acknowledgment that Christian pilgrims had the custom of marking the body much like the Huron—both groups were enduring pain for a spiritual purpose. This report was especially interesting when compared to later seventeenth-century reports by French Jesuits who labeled

---

4 Quoted in Philippe Dube, Tattoo-tatoue (Montreal, 1960), 24-25 and translated by Steve Gilbert, Tattoo History: A Source Book (Hong Kong, 2000), 89.
tattooing a "bizarre custom." These instances highlight the changing notions of the tattooed body, particularly considering the context of those discussions. For example, English politician Sir Walter Raleigh had tasked Thomas Harriot to explore possibilities for material gain in North America and to find ways to address population relief in the urban centers of England. Harriot’s “A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia” (1590) attacked other negative reports on North America and its indigenous inhabitants and replaced them with a more favorable view. In his report, he emphasized the similarity between Native Americans on the east coast and the ancient ancestors of the British, the Picts who were known for their savagery. (See figure 2.02) Like the Picts, native tribes in North America wore jewelry and were indelibly marked—both were biologically the same but the key difference was that the social development of the Native Americans was slightly underdeveloped. The British in this case would provide the guidance for the savage Indians. Traditionally, when Europeans and later Americans looked upon Native Americans, they saw naked savages.

According to scholar Karen Kupperman, “naked” and “savage” were terms that were often grouped together when describing apparently primitive peoples. The positive aspect of this signifier focused on the romanticizing of primitive culture such as Thomas Harriot’s sixteenth-century construction. European artists who depicted early Native Americans imposed upon them European perceptions of beauty and form. Theodore de Bry, a Flemish engraver, and other European artists, “meticulously recreated the patterns of tattoos, jewelry, and other decorations.… But they completely changed their faces, postures, bodily proportions. The faces were sweetened, softened and Europeanized. With their new foreheads, puckered mouths, and ringleted hair, they resembled classical
figures in German traditions…long, thin feet and hands became small and chubby, and postures were rendered more graceful to European eyes.”5 (See figures 2.03 and 2.04) The purposeful imposition of European views on Native depictions changed with successful colonization of the New World, leading to more negative connotations for "naked" and "savage."

Kupperman demonstrated this by deconstructing how observers used the term “naked”: “Naked also hinted at a more pervasive vulnerability to some writers. To be naked was to be weak and defenseless against both the weapons and the ideas of Europeans. Indians, they implied, lacked a hard shell of complex culture and were therefore open to the new.”6 Such ideas pervaded Euro-American thought, resulting in the marginalization and “justified” expulsion, or the destruction of indigenous people in some cases. Like early Mediterranean societies, Americans paid special attention to the roles of demeanor and bodily appearances as indices of civilization after the eighteenth century. For example, clothing was an attribute of civilization while actual body modification was associated with the native and/or “uncivilized” body. Tattooing, therefore, was not commonly associated with Euro-Americans unless they were sailors or in the military. This boundary was problematic in the nineteenth century as "native" marks found themselves on the body of a white woman.

In 1851, Olive Oatman and her family were attacked by Yavapai Indians. At age fourteen, Oatman and her nine-year-old sister were held captive and later traded to the Mohaves. Adopted by a Mohave family, both girls were Ki-e-chook or tattooed on their chins and arms against their wishes. Oatman recalled:

5 Karen Ordahl Kupperman, Indians and English: Facing off in Early America (Ithaca, 2000), 42.  
6 Kupperman, 50.
We had seen them do this to some of their female children, and we had often conversed with each other about expressing the hope that we should be spared from receiving their marks upon us. I ventured to plead with them for a few moments that they would not put those ugly marks upon our faces.  

Both girls had their chins tattooed with five parallel lines stretching from her lower lip to the jawline, framed on each side by two cone-shaped horizontal lines. The markings were symbolic of their tribal membership, and were also used for captives so that the Mohave could reclaim them as runaways if another tribe detained them. After her sister died, Oatman was ransomed to the U.S. army and, through no fault of her own, she would be seen thereafter as an outsider. Oatman was “permanently marked in more ways than one: a tattooed savage, she became, in essence, a de-civilized freak, and could never fully rejoin society as a natural woman (her husband even tried—unsuccessfully—to have her tattoos removed).”

She was further stigmatized when her story was published in Royal B. Stratton's *Captivity of the Oatman Girls* (1857). (See figure 2.05) Stratton accentuated Oatman and her sister’s roles as victims of savage Indians who had captured and forcibly branded or tattooed both girls. Oatman relayed her experience during her travels across America and perpetuated the "victim" image to gain some acceptance from the white world. Oatman’s story, according to Mifflin, inspired other nineteenth-century women to tattoo themselves for the purpose of exhibitionism and profit. Along with similar stories of captivity in the Pacific, body modification firmly linked Native Americans with the markings of savagery and their potential to brand others like Oatman as slaves.

---

Branding the Foreign and Blackness on Africans and African Americans

From the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, Africa served a crucial function in the triangular trade system. Africa provided the slave labor needed to work on plantations in the Caribbean and the Americas. Slaves were typically caught or kidnapped, and forced on an arduous journey from which there was no return. Captured blacks were tied together and forced to march hundreds of miles to reach the African sea coast. Suffering from thirst, hunger, and exhaustion, many often died or were reduced to a very weak state by the time they were processed as slaves. From the barracoons or holding pens, captives were inspected from head to toe, made “to jump up and down, had fingers poked in their mouths and their genital organs handled by a doctor.” 10 Those chosen by the Europeans were then branded as proof of their submission. Their bodies were permanently marked with a pattern consisting of two circles or a cross on the shoulder to symbolize their Christian conversion. (See figure 2.06) It was also the first step in the European process of dehumanizing Africans and reducing the black body to the status of property. Visible markers of denigrating the black body were further applied by slave owners in America.

A prominent way for slave owners to differentiate the members of the underclass was to permanently mark their bodies with symbols that dehumanized them. The ancient Greeks had scarified “barbarians” as a means to identify slaves, prisoners, and criminals; slave owners in America found precedents closer to home. A parliamentary statute passed in England stated that the symbol “V” was to be placed on the chest of “any able-

bodied person adjudged a vagabond.”¹¹ Once branded, the runaway convict became a slave for two years. If a runaway slave was caught, he or she was branded on the cheek or forehead. By 1643, such punishments were seen in the New World where black slaves and white runaway servants were also branded with an “R” for “rogue” after a second offense. A Virginia act of 1659, entitled “Against Runaway Servants,” required slave owners to cut the hair above the slaves’ ears so their brands were easier to see.¹² By the end of the seventeenth century, slavery became synonymous with black bondage as there was a drastic reduction in white-indentured servitude. The stigma of slavery was further reinforced with scarification or blemishes on the black body. Punitive marks shifted and made visible the racial boundaries in the “New World.”

Physical torture of black slaves included deadly lashings, chopping off an ear or an appendage, and burning and branding the body. Since branding was used to demonstrate white supremacy over the black body, slaves tried harder to escape their captivity and branding took on a second purpose—to deter and identify runaways. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, a South Carolina law required slave owners to punish female slaves running away for the fourth time. Such a slave was to be “severely whipped…branded on the left cheek with the letter ‘R,’ and her left ear cut off.”¹³ By the mid-eighteenth century, branding was frowned upon by colonial authorities, but this did not mean that it ceased. In a 1777 issue of the Virginia Gazette, Peter, a frequent runaway, was advertised as having a brand with an “S” on one cheek.

¹³ Jordan, 112.
and an “R” on the other. The “S” may have represented the owner’s initials or signified “slave,” while the “R” probably stood for “rogue” or “runaway.” In this manner, white slave owners attempted to limit the mobility and define the black body and this was further demonstrated as slaves were imprinted with reminders of their white masters.

By the eighteenth century in the American colonies, reports described runaway slaves with the owner’s initials branded upon them. A notice circulated by a South Carolina slave owner, James Bulloch, described three runaway slaves branded upon their right breast with the initial “B.” Another South Carolina owner, Alexander Frissel, branded his slave “Cesar” on the left thigh with his initials “A.F.” Even worse was the slave who was described as having the mark of “I Hill” on the forehead and breast.14 These markings placed on the slaves’ bodies were part of the routine of slavery, a means of identifying black slaves as chattel and associating them with animals. Besides branding slaves, slave owners bestowed names on slaves much as they did for their pets. They “bridled, haltered, padlocked…slaves as if they were domesticated livestock.”15 These observable acts of degradation were perceived by white slave owners as tools to reinforce their elevated position over their black slaves and as ways to define and claim ownership. More importantly, reports or notices of runaway slaves contributed to the discourse of associating scarifications to the lower castes of American society. This discussion also included the African or "foreign" nature of the slaves when marks were voluntarily done.

14 From the South Carolina Gazette (9 August 1735 – 15 June 1754), recorded in Daniel Littlefield, Rice and Slaves: Ethnicity and the Slave Trade in Colonial South Carolina (Baton Rouge, 1981), 124.
Beneath the masks of submission by slaves, there was always the threat of the foreign element and resistance to white supremacy, especially with marks signifying reminders of a prouder past, particularly for Africans who were processed as slaves, but were known as warriors or royalty in their tribes. In South Carolina, blacks outnumbered white slave owners two to one in the 1700s. A Swiss immigrant in 1737 remarked that South Carolina looked “more like a negro country than a country settled by white people.”16 The massive presence of blacks fueled a slaveholder need to distinguish various African ethnic groups, particularly factions known for disruptions on slave plantations. Scarifications or “country marks” were permanent marks of African culture, and they communicated many of their social values and aesthetics. One reason for a toleration of a voluntary scarification was that it served the same function as the white practices of branding slaves—to identify slaves and their ethnic backgrounds. For example, Will, from the “plantation of Jordan Anderson in Chesterfield, Virginia, in October 1768, would more readily have been recognized by the country marks on his face, arms, and chests and by his manner of speaking than by his relatively standardized dress.”17

In another instance, Pawley was described as “a Negro who spoke no English and was marked down his temple and cheeks thus ))).”18 The attention to detail, and the accuracy with which white slave owners reproduced any feature that could distinguish their slaves, showed an awareness of the diverse ethnic groups among the slaves and the African or "Othered" nature of the marks. While these country marks were useful to

16 Stated by Swiss immigrant taken from Littlefield, 116.
18 From the South Carolina Gazette (18 November 1756), recorded in Daniel Littlefield, *Rice and Slaves: Ethnicity and the Slave Trade in Colonial South Carolina* (Baton Rouge, 1981), 117.
white slave owners, this practicality created space for African cultural transmission within slave plantations. Scholar Michael Gomez noted the testimony in 1937 from C.G. Samuel who recalled the diffusion of “country marks” to the next generation. Samuel said that his “father was a half African and my grandfather was a full blood African. My father had an African mark on his chest which was a circle with a small dot in the middle.” These indigenous marks came to be identified as signifiers of foreignness but also as a constant symbol of resistance as slaves politicized their bodies with reminders of African heritage.

This opposition was especially seen among black seafarers who kept company traditionally with ethnically diverse mariners. A typical crew might consist of whites, East and West Indians, Maoris, other Pacific islanders, and blacks. In the late eighteenth century, blacks made up nearly eighteen percent of the seafaring work force. This was an occupation into which many blacks were forced. For example, in 1779, Connor, a black sailor on the Virginia sloop, Jean, was noted to have had Guinea marks on his temples. However, many black mariners were also involved voluntarily and like most sailors, blacks also chose to mark their bodies. Most seafarers did this to “record the dangers of their occupation,” but in doing so they also left invaluable sources since “the words and the images engraved on their skin disclose the most about their beliefs and values.”

According to scholar Jeffrey Bolster, some “black sailors sported the same designs as their white counterparts” while others appropriated the symbols of American freedom and

---

20 Ibid, 61.
patriotism.\textsuperscript{21} (See figure 2.07) Thomas Lane, a black sailor in the late eighteenth century, was tattooed with an eagle and stars on his palm. Lane's body symbolized a developing “Black Radical Tradition” in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This tradition furnished the “first sustained theoretical critique of slavery in the western world.”\textsuperscript{22}

In the late eighteenth century, many black sailors were active participants and provided leadership in anti-slavery movements. For example, Paul Cuffee, a fourth mate on the \textit{Alexander Coffin}, inspired “many of the blacks in New Bedford and Nantucket…[by] protesting the payment of taxes in Massachusetts without the right to vote; he had erected a school at his own expense.”\textsuperscript{23} There were also groups which objected to the plight of enslaved blacks by politicizing it upon their body. In 1774, Michael Jones, a black seaman born in Louisiana, was marked with a figure representing “Justice.” Jones’ tattoo can be interpreted as his way of championing justice for oppressed blacks and their defiance on the eve of the American Revolution. However, the association of scarification with blacks suggested an ambivalence that contributed to narratives used in the "freak shows" or carnivals of the nineteenth century. It was, according to literary scholar Leonard Cassuto, "no accident that the freak show was known in the circus trade as a 'Nig Show.'"\textsuperscript{24} Like Native Americans, marks on the black

\textsuperscript{21} W. Jeffrey Bolster, \textit{Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail} (London, 1997), 93.
\textsuperscript{22} Black Radical Tradition is a development seen after the American Revolution as issues of freedom and slavery were debated by black activists Absalom Jones, Richard Allen, and later David Walker. It is a tradition that demanded abolition rather than gradual manumission as argued in Manisha Sinha, “To ‘cast just obliquy’ on Oppressors: Black Radicalism in the Age of Revolution,” \textit{William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd Series}, Vol. LXIV, Num. 1 (January 2007), 149.
\textsuperscript{23} Martha S. Putney, \textit{Black Sailors: Afro-American Merchant Seamen and Whalemen Prior to the Civil War} (Westport, 1987), 100.
body confirmed their subordinate status in the white natural order of the world and this framework also included Pacific Islanders.

Omai, Tattoos Work for Pacific Islanders but not Euro-Americans

In 1774, Captain James Cook brought to England a special guest from Raiatea, an island near Tahiti. His guest was Omai, the living embodiment of the "noble savage." Omai's appearance throughout England sparked a tattooing vogue among the English aristocracy. (See figure 2.08) Omai's presence also brought opinions as commentator George Forster stated, "O-Mai has been considered either as remarkably stupid, or very intelligent, according to the different allowances which were made by those who judged of his abilities."25 Like Native Americans, Pacific islanders were blank canvases for the imposition of Western notions. Joseph Banks, a naturalist who had accompanied Cook on his journeys, had many opportunities to record the customs of Pacific Islanders. Describing the Tahitian tradition of marking the skin, Banks gave his critique, stating, “What can be a sufficient inducement to suffer so much pain is difficult to say; ...possibly superstition may have something to do with it, nothing else in my opinion could be a sufficient cause for so apparently absurd a custom.”26

Herman Melville's Typee (1846) centered on the character Tommo, who arrived in the Marquesas among the tattooed Typee tribe. Melville's work crystallized the nineteenth-century debate "when race had become the central issue in American political and social life,...the roots of prejudice, the cause and effect of perceived differences


among human beings." Melville, in the avatar of Tommo, was comfortable with the Typee practice of extensive tattooing, but changed his demeanor when the tribe's tattooist, Karky, wanted to mark his face. In describing the "assault" on him, Tommo recalled:

When his forefinger swept across my features, in laying out the borders of those parallel bands which were to encircle my countenance, the flesh fairly crawled along my bones. At last, half wild with terror and indignation, I succeeded in breaking away from the three savages.

Melville/Tommo was comfortable with "others" practicing tattooing, but not when it involved him. Partly based on his own experiences as a sailor, Melville was familiar with real-life instances of Euro-Americans being marked in their Pacific journeys.

With Europe's infatuation of tattooed "savages" well established in the late eighteenth century, a discovery in 1804 brought it to fervor, when a Russian expedition found Jean Baptiste Cabri, a French deserter. (See figure 2.09) Cabri had been living on a Marquesas island long enough that he nearly forgot his original language, was tattooed extensively, and married to the daughter of a lesser chief. He returned to Europe and briefly toured throughout Europe, where he was "examined by distinguished physicians and exhibited to royalty." Cabri's real-life story inspired other Europeans like John Rutherford, considered the first tattooed English showman. His account centered on the Maoris of New Zealand who had captured him, and during his ten years there was "forcibly tattooed by two priests who performed the four-hour ceremony in the presence

---

of the entire tribe."³⁰ He was later promoted to chief, offered sixty brides (he chose “only” two probably due to his English sense of prudence), and participated in tribal activities such as headhunting. This type of cross-cultural appropriation done abroad was also seen in America.

Nearly at the time Melville was publishing _Typee_ (1846), James F. O'Connell was the main attraction at Phineas T. Barnum (P.T. Barnum) American Museum in 1842. Considered the first tattooed man exhibited in the United States, O'Connell's theatrical backstory centered on the Ponape of the Caroline Islands in the western Pacific Ocean.³¹ The savages of Ponape had supposedly captured him and subjected him to "tattooing at the hands of a series of voluptuous virgins. He discovered to his great distress that island custom obliged him to marry the last of the maidens who tattooed him. She was, of course, a princess, and O'Connell became a chief."³² In the instances of Rutherford and O'Connell, the narratives were re-ascribing traditional gender roles in the nineteenth century. Both stories included large numbers of women who had temporary power over the bodies of men. The submissions of Rutherford and O'Connell emasculated them but power was later balanced when they procured the positions of chief.

The stories of Cabri, Rutherford, and O’Connell also demonstrated the shifting definitions of indigenous groups, moving from the noble to the ignoble savage. These instances also show the fluidity in the transference of savagery signified by tattoos on Euro-American bodies. Cabri, Rutherford, O’Connell drew attention to the instability of the borders between the "civilized" and "savage" body. This shift also justified Pacific expansion and the colonization by Euro-Americans in the nineteenth century. However,

³⁰ Steve Gilbert, _Tattoo History: A Source Book_ (Hong Kong, 2000), 135.
³¹ James O’Connell made his debut 15 June 1837.
³² Gilbert, 136.
given the frequent contact between seafarers and indigenous groups, the convergence and appropriation of tattooing by these cross-cultural travelers made marking the skin more visible in Europe and America.

Sailor and Military Tattoo Culture in the Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries

By the eighteenth century, European exploration resulted in contact with very different cultures. Like tattooed-Christian pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem, Euro-American seafarers were crossing cultural boundaries and coming into frequent contact with their so-called “primitive” neighbors. Predating the Pacific encounter, Euro-American sailors had firmly cultivated a tattoo custom not indebted to the Polynesian tradition. Unlike abstract patterns covering the entire torso or face seen in Pacific cultures, Euro-American seafarers favored one or two small images—initials, hearts, Christian icons, or maritime symbols. (See figure 2.10) As early as 1708, sailors began marking themselves indelibly. For later seafarers, the Pacific islanders inspired many of these sailors. Tattooing became fashionable as it was transmitted from indigenous to white cultures. As one whaler stated, “They were fantastically tattooed on different parts of their bodies.”

In the late eighteenth century, Captain Cook made several trips through the Pacific, where he encountered tattooed natives such as the Hawaiians and the Maoris. Sailors’ adoption of tattooing suggested an ongoing cultural transmission from indigenous cultures to those Euro-Americans on the fringes of the empires of the West. Tattooing represented an alternative lifestyle to the discipline and systematic brutality aboard many ships of the eighteenth century, where a sailor’s experience was similar to

---

that of a plantation slave. Tattooing became an expression of independence from naval conformity and reflected the perceived freedom within indigenous societies. The rooted tattoo culture in the western seafaring tradition, along with inspiration from indigenous tribes of “far away” lands, highlighted a process of convergence of both tattoo customs—reinforcing the practice of marking the skin among sailors and the military.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the resurgence of tattooing among seafarers in the Euro-American world—most especially among the British and then among Americans. Cultural historian James Bradley “pinpoints seafaring culture as the cradle of the modern Western tattoo.” Like Christians marking their bodies to honor their pilgrimage to Jerusalem, one seafarer tradition involved marking their bodies signifying their wayfaring achievements. According to Doc Webb, a prominent tattooist, after “5,000 miles at sea, you got a bluebird on your chest…. When you’d gone 10,000, you got the second bird on the other side…. When you made your second cruise, you got a clothes line with skivvies and girls’ stockings between them. If you crossed the equator you got a Neptune on your leg…. A dragon showed you had crossed the International Date Line.” Sparked by indigenous tattoos, the western seafarer tradition often served similar functions to body modifications around the world.

For sailors, tattoos often served as protection or talismans against the hazards of their occupation. This function of tattoos appealed to many sailors as marking the skin offered comfort to those facing the uncertainties of sea life. These symbols of power and protection included roosters or mermaids, and crosses or other religious icons. (See figure

2.11) Roosters and mermaids were marked on the bodies of seafarers to prevent drowning. It is unclear why the rooster was important or related to seafaring (save for the obviously masculine association with “cocks”), but the mermaid symbol was seen as a way of summoning these mythical creatures to rescue drowning sailors. Crosses and other religious icons were used as talismans against the uncertainty of seafaring and to show religious affiliation. A cross on the back or the arm showed Christian allegiance, but if placed on the feet it was a talisman against shark attacks. Another religious symbol that was often used was an image of Adam and Eve under the “Tree of Life.”36 (See figure 2.12) These indelible links to Christianity showed the faith of the sailor and empowered the individual, much as tattooing did for indigenous peoples in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The protective power behind tattoos imbued the sailor with confidence and served to stabilize male identities overseas. Sailors were traveling around the world adorning themselves at foreign ports with marks that showed their service and travels. (See figure 2.13) Accounts of adventure and exoticism from the Pacific, seen with Cabri, Rutherford, and O’Connell, reinforced the allure of the outside world and the societies of “others.” It also highlighted the masculine nature of marking the body among military men in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

According to writer and folklorist Alan Govenar, the designs that U.S. service men sported during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries expressed devotion and loyalty to their country. In 1796, the United States Congress passed an Act for the Relief and Protection of American Seamen to provide protection from impressment into the

---

British Navy. ³⁷ This law required a payment of twenty-five cents, which certified applicants with citizenship. These applications documented the “seaman’s name, age, birthplace (or the date and place of his naturalization), race, height, literacy (as reflected in the applicant’s ability to sign his name), scars, injuries, marks of diseases, and any tattoos on his body.”³⁸ This is an invaluable source for documenting the lives of sailors from 1796 to 1818 as the records of 9,772 men have survived—many of whom were tattooed. This suggested that the protection from impressment either took the form of a certificate of citizenship or markings on the skin to symbolize the United States, such as the U.S. flag or an eagle. The link between tattooing and the military with patriotism and love of country, especially in times of war, was a persistent thread that added to the discourse surrounding the marked body in the twentieth century. Like the seafarers, tattooed exhibitionists in the nineteenth century were also crossing boundaries and shifting definitions of the American body.

The Tattooed Freak

During the early part of the nineteenth century, tattooing in America was mainly associated with select groups such as the military, seafarers, and the aforementioned tribal groups. While skin art among these groups was marginally accepted by society, it was unheard of for a white woman to be tattooed during this era. This could be attributed to the idea of “polarities between the imperial and the native body.”³⁹ Military men and sailors who tattooed themselves were asserting their masculinity through visible symbols of their adventures from “distant lands” and their exposure to indigenous cultures. It was

³⁷ Simon P. Newman, “Reading the Bodies of Early American Seafarers,” in William and Mary Quarterly, Third series, Volume LV, Number 1 (Williamsburg, 1998), 60.
³⁸ Ibid, 60.
also acceptable for Native Americans, African slaves, and Pacific islanders to have markings upon their skin because the scarifications showed their origins and visibly marked them as the “Other.” This dichotomy was blurred in stories involving Euro-Americans who were abducted and forcibly tattooed by either Polynesians or Native Americans. From Cabri to Oatman, their bodies were appealing as they refuted the impermeable nature of race and gender. The captive narrative was familiar and contemporaneous with other popular forms of entertainment in the nineteenth century.

For example, minstrelsy or "blackfacing," where white actors "corked" their faces black and performed skits that highlighted discriminatory black stereotypes. Within this context, the captive narratives in America, along with similar stories from abroad, enabled and inspired other men and women to tattoo themselves for the purpose of exhibitionism and profit.

Rolling in on wagons, the circus paraded into town with elephants, cages with other exotic animals, tattooed exhibitionists along with dwarves, Siamese twins, and beautiful women in bright outfits. The twentieth-century circus and carnival were the product of less mobile museums of the early nineteenth century, when "would-be scientists as educational enterprises [attempted] to educate through entertainment." P.T. Barnum, considered the greatest showman in the world, made the sideshow a big business. Barnum turned tattooed exhibitionists, along with other converted "freaks and sports of Nature and art into the stuff of dreams (and of nightmares)" and placed them in a "respectable" museum setting. (See figure 2.14) Using particular words in his

---

40 DeMello, 54.
advertisements such as “reference,” “education,” and “instruction,” Barnum was legitimizing the popular amusement industry for middle-class consumption.

As proprietor of the American Museum in 1840, P.T. Barnum exhibited people with disabilities, wild animals, natives from abroad, and tattooed people; he concocted bizarre explanations of their origins, stories that were "morally and socially uplifting as well as educational." (See figures 2.15 and 2.16) Discourses on cannibalism, savagery, and the primitive man/beast were visually consumed by customers, who were "white, civilized, and healthy," leaving them "feeling good not only about themselves but about the natural order and their place in it."42 It was an education that offered urban, middle-class patrons a "justification for colonial domination and for maintaining the so-called natural hierarchies of race, class, and gender."43 Labeled as a "natural wonder" from the 1870s to the 1890s, the "freak" was the "king of dime museum attractions"—which included the tattooed person.44

By 1870, Barnum expanded his reach by combining two established circuses to form "Barnum's Great Traveling Exposition." Due to new modes of transportation like the railroad, wagons were replaced by railroad cars carrying larger and more marvelous attractions. Indirectly, Barnum contributed to growth of the tattoo industry as many of his exhibitionists were indelibly marked. Other venues like the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show and Ringling Brothers followed suit. By the 1920s, amusement parks and dime

42 DeMello, 54.
43 Scholar Donna Haraway quoted by DeMello, 54.
44 DeMello argues the freak was the “king of the dime museum.” However, the position of the tattooed person would be denigrated after 1891 with the invention of the electric tattoo gun which made marking the skin more accessible because it was cheaper and faster. Tattooing was associated with the working class. For these reasons, Robert Bogdan’s own study of circus “freaks” discusses the hierarchy and differentiation of “born” and “made” freaks. His argument that “made” freaks were lower on the “freak” hierarchy is valid but only after the 1890s.
museums on various boardwalks had their own tattooed exhibitionist. Scholar W.L. Alden, writing in the 1890s, wrote that Barnum "invented the tattooed business, and for a while it was the best line of business in the profession. Every museum was bound to have a tattooed girl, with a yarn about her having been captured by the Indians and tattooed when she was a little girl."\(^45\)

Additionally, each venue was most likely to employ or to have a tattoo artist nearby. For example, tattooist Bert Grimm toured with the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show in the early twentieth century charging customers (exhibitionists and audiences) fifty cents to a dollar for a small tattoo. For the tattooed performer, a tattooist charged "about thirty-three dollars in those days for a total body cover job, which took about six to eight weeks to complete."\(^46\) The expanding professions of the tattooed performer and tattooist became possible because of Sam O'Reilly's patented first electric tattoo machine in 1891. Because the new machine allowed "a number of needles simultaneously for outlining and shading, the true Americana style of tattooing was born: strong black lines, typically made with five (or more) needles; heavy black shading; and a dab of color (first black and red, and later, green and blue became available)."\(^47\) More importantly, tattoos were cheaper, less painful, and less time consuming, thus allowing fantastic tattooed performers.

Sporting 388 indelible marks of animals and constellations, Alexandrino or "Captain Constantenus" quickly replaced James O'Connell in P.T Barnum's show from 1870 to 1880. Originating from Greece, Alexandrino claimed he was from a wild race near the Balkans and had been taken prisoner in the land of the Mougongs (possibly

\(^{45}\) W.L Alden’s notations taken from Oettermann, 200.
\(^{46}\) DeMello, 57.
\(^{47}\) Ibid, 50.
Malaysia) and forced to undergo the “Chinese tattoo torture.” (See figures 2.17 and 2.18) Like Rutherford and O’Connell, Alexandrino’s story underscored his emasculation as he was tattooed or forcibly punctured by a woman. It was also no coincidence that Alexandrino's success came during an era of an increased xenophobia that spurned Chinese, southern European, and eastern European immigration. These elements together suggested a theme familiar to working-class Americans—insecurity in light of increased competition for jobs.

Alexandrino's barbaric origin was further confirmed and legitimized by anthropologists A.W. Franks, A. Lacasgne, W. Joest, R. Fletcher, and G.R. Stetson, who viewed tattooing as a feature of savage non-Western cultures. Alexandrino's success was also acknowledged by scientific and medical societies in Europe. For example, Oettermann noted that Alexandrino was "inscribed in the medical literature as 'Homo notis compunctis'.” 48 Alexandrino was also included in physician and dermatologist Ferdinand Hebra's Atlas der Hautkrankheiten (Dermatological Atlas, 1872). Making $1,000 a week, Alexandrino inspired other exhibitionists and contributed to their legitimization by becoming tattooed marvels—particularly women.

Irene "La Belle" Woodard, a highly regarded successful exhibitionist in the late nineteenth century, got further confirmation from the scientific community when Dr. Johannes Ranke examined and presented her to the Munich Anthropological Society in 1891. Ranke observed “images done in red and blue colour...most artistically executed....This pretty young woman's skin glows and has the feel of velvet; her

48 Dr. Johannes Ranke, Allegemeine Zeitung (Munich) 13 January 1891, in Stephan Oettermann, "Tattooed Entertainers in America and Germany," 202.
nakedness seems beside the point.\textsuperscript{49} Ranke's comments also highlighted the primary reason women supplanted men as tattooed exhibitionists. Women offered "titillating enticements: forced to bare a scandalous amount of flesh in order to show their work, women provided a sensational double whammy onstage—a peep show within a freak show."\textsuperscript{50} (See figures 2.19 and 2.20) Driven by competition, male tattooed performers like Horace Riddler or the "Great Omi" were forced to go to the extreme—in Riddler's case, he became a human zebra. Riddler's entire head and body were covered with heavy black designs similar to a zebra, and included other body scarifications such as filing his teeth to sharp points and an ivory tusk through his nose.\textsuperscript{51} (See figure 2.21) His extreme form of "blackfacing" further symbolized the competitive challenge posed by tattooed women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Woodard continued to astound the scientific community when the Berlin Anthropological Society judged her to be "really most artistically tattooed on all visible parts of her body" and recorded some regret at her modesty as they were only allowed to view her arms, neck, and legs "to just above the knee."\textsuperscript{52} (See figure 2.22) The lament expressed by the Berlin Anthropological Society is noteworthy considering that most female tattooed exhibitionists, no matter the biography or narrative, emphasized the chastity, femininity, and vulnerability of these marked women. The pitch cards, handbills, and stories that emphasized her respectability and ladylike behavior reinforced the virtues of the true or traditional female—which legitimized her role in educating

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid, 202.
\textsuperscript{50} Mifflin, 18.
\textsuperscript{51} DeMello, 56.
Woodard’s success underscored the appeal of becoming an indelibly-marked lady as it was a lucrative occupation.

Most women who displayed their tattoos to audiences in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries came from poor or working-class families and were profiting from America's interest in their flesh. Woodard, who enjoyed a great deal of success, told the *New York Times* in an 1882 interview that she was motivated to join her new profession after seeing Captain Constantenus' 1870 tour. More likely, it was Constantenus' salary that inspired other tattooed exhibitionists, particularly women during this period. The average female factory worker in America during the 1910s made between five and fifteen dollars per week, while tattooed women such as Woodard made one hundred dollars per week. The monetary rewards of the circus profession offered financial liberation from male dominance, something other working-class women craved. More importantly, female exhibitionists benefited from “late nineteenth-century mass culture, a culture devoted to the individual pleasures and commercial profits derived from seeing and being seen.” Regardless of their situation, female tattooed exhibitionists wanted their audiences to believe that they were traditional, respectable women with the exception of indelible markings. Woodard had pamphlets supplementing her shows that stated, “The lady...is not offensive to anyone, no matter how sensitive they may be. Her tattooing is of itself a beautiful dress.” Hildebrandt likewise wore designs that would be described by contemporary standards as feminine, and assumed “softer” designs that

---

53 Ibid, 59.  
55 The pleasure of “seeing” and “being seen” or “scopophilia” is discussed in Susan Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge, 2002), 12.  
56 Mifflin, 15.
consisted of ornamental birds and flowers. Their identification with traditional Victorian femininity also explained the public narratives female exhibitionists used for their act.

The "captured by natives" public biographies which had been situated in the South Seas or the Far East were transformed by Nora Hildebrant and other women, as they transposed the savage to the Wild West. For example, Irene "La Belle" Woodard said that “her tattoos were [required] protection that she needed in the ‘Wild West of Texas’ to escape the sexual attention of hostile ‘Red Indians.’”57 Playing the "victim" was extremely important in offsetting any negativity associated with their profession especially since their captivity was an allusion to rape and sexual assault. Implicit in the narratives was a message of sexual defilement or rape as the language included words such as “violation, “outrage,” and “indignity.”58 (See figure 2.23) In reality, circus women such as Hildebrant and Woodard represented the new woman of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They were exhibiting ambivalence and steering between both safe Victorianism and dangerous sexuality. The suggestion of being pierced by savages showed audiences that women had very little control over their bodies and therefore needed the protection of a man. The reality was the tattooed lady was in complete control over her body and she was independently supporting herself by deluding audiences with her helplessness.

By the 1920s, the captive narrative was less persuasive, so female tattooed performers invented other biographies, such as the love or the romantic narrative, which reflected modern anxieties about boyfriends and husbands during an age of greater sexual independence. For example, tattooed performer Lotta Pictoria publicly lamented her fate

57 Irene Woodard’s backstory taken from DeMello, 58.
58 Osterud, 54.
as “a foolish girl’ who got tattooed “out of love for a human fiend with flashing eyes.”\(^{59}\)

Another exhibitionist, Jean Carroll, told audiences that she was originally working as the "bearded lady" until her boyfriend told her that he could not stand to kiss her—so "she shaved her beard, got tattooed, and they were happily married."\(^{60}\) Performer Artoria was remembered by her audience for running away with a carnival tattoo artist at fourteen years of age so she could be his muse. Possibly a product of mass media, the narratives reflected "changes that occurred in popular story lines, especially as radio, movies, and television brought more ideas into American homes"—ideas that emphasized careers and independence from their families.\(^{61}\)

The second generation of tattooed performers like Lady Viola and Betty Broadbent represented the new ambitions for women in the twentieth century. For example, Lady Viola claimed that she had an agreement with her father that if she finished nursing school, she could pursue other career options. She held up her end of the bargain and her father paid for her tattoos to become a circus performer.\(^{62}\) Broadbent's public biography stated that when she was seventeen, she got a small tattoo when she went to Atlantic City with some friends. When she returned home, her "mother was furious and her family disowned her. With no options, Betty returned to Atlantic City and got more tattoos, which led to her becoming a tattooed lady."\(^{63}\) Broadbent was described by Charles Roark, one of Broadbent’s former husbands, as being “her own


\(^{60}\) Osterud, 60.

\(^{61}\) Osterud, 62.

\(^{62}\) Ibid, 62.

\(^{63}\) Osterud, 62.
woman—she never wanted to be dependent on anyone for anything.” 64 (See figure 2.24) Broadbent’s success and that of other circus women proved similar to the achievements women in the theatre were enjoying. Both venues for women were “critical arenas for cultural exploration, and powerful agents of cultural transformation.” 65 These very public women were different from their more political counterparts who were active in the suffrage movement. The circus women did not have a shared set of ideological principles, nor a specific agenda and, as their proven material motive showed, they were more concerned with individualism and economic freedom.

By 1932, there were approximately three hundred tattooed men and women who exhibited themselves in traveling circuses and in urban dime museums. 66 While tattooing was usually seen as part of the male domain, the popularity of the marked circus women allowed the woman’s body to be scarred permanently and rewarded well, “in spite of, or even because of, her transgressiveness.” 67 Yet, it was this contravention that also led some women to patriotic and religious themes. In the 1920s, Emma de Burgh had designs that included an American eagle on one knee and Leonardo Da Vinci’s "Last Supper" on her back, while Mildred Hull, the self-proclaimed “only lady tattooist” in Chatham Square, New York, had among her 300 tattoos, an eagle on her neck and fourteen angels on her back. (See figure 2.25) These women further legitimized their careers with respectable iconography. 68 These efforts by female tattooed performers allowed them to maintain their independence and overshadowed the critical discourse.

64 Charles Roark description of Betty Broadbent in Mifflin, 30.
65 Susan A. Glenn, Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism (Cambridge, 2000), 2.
66 DeMello, 57.
67 Glenn, 7.
68 Mifflin, 23.
surrounding the indelibly marked body. And while the appeal of the circus declined because of the persistent "medicalization" of the freak, the popularity of tattooing continued into the mid-twentieth century, as it was associated with military patriotism, freedom, and liberation.

**Patriotism and Military Identity in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries**

It was estimated by the Mariners Museum in Virginia that by “the end of the nineteenth century 90 percent of all sailors in the United States Navy had tattoos.”\(^{69}\) The popularity of tattoos can be attributed to the flexibility of the functions tattoos served after the mid-nineteenth century. Designs on the bodies of U.S. sailors and soldiers from the nineteenth century established the antecedents to tattoos worn in the twentieth century, marks that commemorated “home,” their occupation, and emblems of allegiance or links to patriotism. Reminders of home included images of entwined hearts with initials over them to signify their loved ones, names of their hometown, or a reference to a family member such as “Mom.” These commemorations of home were similar to the British use of tattoos because both British and American servicemen used such themes on the skin to give them links to home and family when they were far off overseas, helping them to create stability in their uncertain lives. Other popular motifs were occupational symbols consisting of traditional anchors and mermaids, or sailing ships and steamboats. Tattoos also allowed the celebration or commemoration of important national events.

The American Civil War has been described as a struggle that pitted brother against brother. Americans experienced a fragmentation in their national identity as regional identity became dominant. The prevalence of a regional identity transformed the

---

tattoos acquired by Americans servicemen during the American Civil War. This division in American society was met on the battlefields and also on the skin. Martin Hildebrant, the first known professional tattoo artist in the United States, was said to have tattooed “both sides in the Civil War and was instrumental in establishing the U.S. tradition of tattooed servicemen.”70 The American Civil War saw soldiers with tattoos depicting battles such as the one between the USS Monitor and the CSS Virginia (formerly the Merrimack). (See figure 2.26) Another design showing the transformation of the American identity from a national to regional one was a tattoo of a warship of the Union, the Kearsage, sinking a Confederate warship, the Alabama. It was also reported that the crew and officers of the Kearsage had “stars tattooed on their foreheads to celebrate their victory over the Alabama, which took place on June 19, 1864.”71 This solemn act of remembrance may be another reason for the dominance of tattooing and its legitimization from the nineteenth to the twentieth century.

Both sides acquired images that would “commemorate battles; they wore their rank on their skin…. Majors, generals, field commanders, and soldiers wore marks of valor, and portraits of the Commander in Chief.”72 (See figure 2.27) Besides the usual flags and eagles that created cohesion within a group, there were also hierarchical marks, such as those worn by sailors who were gunner’s mates with cannons on the arm, while boatswains wore anchors. Tattooing flourished during this period as it was linked to times of war. In times of war, young men wanted to show their allegiance to their country and be remembered for it. According to former Chief of Individual Training,
Mortuary Affairs Center, U.S. Army Quartermaster School, Captain Richard W. Wooley, “42% of the Civil War dead remain unidentified.” This type of anonymity proved detrimental to the morale of soldiers during the Civil War—to spill their blood for their country and not get any credit or to be essentially lost and forgotten by loved ones. The Civil War included the first recorded incidence of American soldiers ensuring that their identities would be known in the case of an untimely death. According to Wooley, “In 1863, prior to the battle of Mine’s Run in northern Virginia, General Meade’s troops wrote their names and unit designation on paper tags and pinned them to their clothing. Many soldiers took good care to mark all their personal belongings. Some troops fashioned their own ‘ID’ tags out of pieces of wood, boring a hole in one end so that they could be worn on a string around the neck.” This fear of being listed among the unknown was of great concern for the men laying their lives on the line. Soldiers may have tattooed benchmark events in their lives as “battle commemorations” because of the need to remember their “fallen brothers” or to enable the identification of their bodies in the event of their deaths.

Tattooing during the Civil War period thus served as an early form of the modern “dog tag,” and this may be why military men have traditionally placed names, rank, or division insignias on their bodies. This also helps to explain why tattooing as an identifier gave greater comfort to American servicemen and became prevalent with them until the first decade of the twentieth century. It was not until 1899 that Chaplain Charles C. Pierce, who established the Quartermaster Office of Identification in the Philippines,

---

74 Ibid.
suggested an “identity disc’ in the combat field kit as the answer to the need for standard identification. Still, it was only the Army Regulations of 1913 that made it mandatory for servicemen to wear identification discs around their neck. The chances that a serviceman could die an “unknown soldier” were high and a very unsettling aspect of military life.

The Spanish American War of 1898 exacerbated this disturbing facet of being a soldier in the late nineteenth century, but it also allowed American men publicly to display their national identity once again. For example, after the sinking of the *USS Maine* in 1898, U.S. soldiers had a portrait of the ship along with a banner above stating, "Remember the Maine," and superimposed over the ship was a portrait of her commander, Charles D. Sigsbee. (See figure 2.28) Another tattoo design during this conflict depicted the *USS Iowa* participating in the final defeat of the Spanish navy. The functions of these military tattoos in the nineteenth century established a tradition that allowed it to flourish in the twentieth century and explained the reason DeMello labeled the period between the world wars as the "Golden Age of Tattooing."

By the twentieth century, a tradition had developed among servicemen, especially sailors. “Stewed, screwed, and tattooed” became words to live by as sailors drew into foreign or domestic ports. In the late nineteenth century, two main factors contributed to the popularity of tattooing. Innovations by tattooists and studies done by scientific researchers greatly affected how tattoo practices were perceived. In essence, these factors raised the popularity of tattooing to new heights and military men went in droves

---

75 Ibid.
76 Gilbert, 125.
77 “Stewed” referred to the use of alcohol as it eliminated any of the sailor’s inhibitions. “Screwed” “filled the void of a long period spent” at sea, “without the favors of a lady.” Finally, “tattooed” enabled servicemen to indelibly mark their exploits on the skin. Ibid, i.
to have their skin marked. One reason for the popularity of marking the skin among servicemen by the turn of the century was innovation in tattooing. One such advance was the marketing and advertising of tattooists. Many tattooists moved their businesses from traveling circuses or boardwalks to nearby ports or military installations such as in Norfolk, Virginia. This made it easier for servicemen to gain access to these signifiers on the skin. Also, business cards that depicted sailors with tattoos and the nicknames of tattooists, such as “Sailor Ned,” emphasized the targeting of the military, especially sailors. (See figure 2.29)

A second innovation was O'Reilly's electric tattoo machine that enabled cheaper, less painful, and less time consuming tattoos. While this catering to servicemen contributed greatly to the rise of tattoo practices among men, it would be the technological advancements of the late nineteenth century that took tattooing to new heights. These factors thus led to another evolution in the tattoo shop, the use of “flash” designs. Flash designs were readily available and were displayed on the walls of tattoo shops much like a menu at a restaurant. These advances in the application of tattoos allowed access for the lower classes and led to the working-class association of marking the skin in the twentieth century. The increased accessibility of tattoos rekindled associations between tattoos and toughness, leading to the construction of a hyper-masculine, male military identity.

One method of displaying a soldier's masculinity was emblazing representations of women. Images of exotic or erotic women became arguably the most popular theme on the bodies of servicemen throughout the twentieth century. (See figure 2.30) Many

[78] Before the invention of the electric tattoo gun, tattooing was time consuming and accessibility was limited. In the late nineteenth century, it became a signifier of conspicuous consumption as only the rich or well-traveled European royalty or dignitaries could get a tattoo at a foreign port.
servicemen acquired images of sensuous women on their chests or arms, so that they would dance or wiggle when muscles were flexed. These images served as decorations or perpetuated links to “home,” but these female figures also united men in patriarchal domination. By placing an overtly sexual woman on his body, he was reflecting his sexual orientation as a heterosexual male who possessed his woman. The need to project a heterosexual orientation also meant a respectable design, as tattooist and historian Lyle Tuttle recalled. A 1909 naval regulation stated, “Indecent or obscene tattooing is cause for rejection but the applicant should be given an opportunity to alter his design in which case he may, if otherwise qualified, be accepted.” 79 This declaration revealed the increasing conservatism of American imperialist militarism in the early twentieth century.

Significantly, the political conservatism was seen after the United States expanded its interests into “primitive cultures” such as Hawaii and the Philippines. 80 So-called “obscene images,” such as nude women, were transformed to meet societal and military expectations. This regulation by military authorities had little effect as tattooists took “advantage of this rule by advertising to correct (cover up) obscene tattoos, and many sailors returned to the navy with their formerly naked ladies clothed as nurses, hula dancers, or ‘Indian squaws.’” 81 The adjustments made by the tattooist and his clients showed the flexibility of tattoo practices during the twentieth century as new designs were developed upon preexisting motifs. It also justified less stringent actions or

79 Lyle Tuttle, quoted in DeMello’s Bodies of Inscription, 51.
80 The political conservatism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was seen with the Progressive Movement, anti-immigration legislation from 1880s to 1920s, and organizations like the Anti-Imperialist League.
81 DeMello, 51.
restrictions during both world wars and further established the popularity of tattoos during this period.

By the time the United States intervened in World War I and II, the “repertory of American folk tattoo designs…included the following: hearts, flowers, daggers, scrolls, women, animals, serpents, birds, ships, occupational emblems, military insignias, and Christian icons and scenes.”82 Both wars witnessed the usual profusion of tattooed patriotic symbols, such as flags and eagles; but the wars also encouraged the creation of new motifs as the practice of tattooing reflected new important experiences and changes to units or branches of the military. For example, the U.S. Marine Corp adopted the Teufelhunden, or “devil dog” as a mascot. Teufelhunden was based on a World War I myth that the Germans called the U.S. marines Teufelhunden because of their tenaciousness after the Americans had driven the Germans out of Belleau Wood. The Belleau was known for its fountain with a bullmastiff’s head spouting water from its mouth. It was from this incident that the bulldog became the mascot and a popular motif in tattooing for the marines. (See figure 2.31) The Teufelhunden was a new design, but it was playing on existing conceptions of esprit de corps.

Another pre-existing theme with new designs centered on death, such as the “sailor’s grave” that depicted an anchor or eagle design perched above a sinking ship. This design reflected both a dedication to the country as well as a fatalistic attitude toward dying in war. While war was often romanticized in literature and by young men eager to become “heroes,” the tattoos of some servicemen reflected a darker reality of war that condoned killing another human being and acknowledged the fine line between honor and death. Another design known as the "Rose of No-Man's Land" made light of

82 Govenar, in Caplan, 218-219.
the darker reality and offered "a silver lining," as it featured the face of a Red Cross nurse. These new designs during World War I were relaying and reinforcing the same messages as the previous era about the male identity and this was also true with World War II.

By World War II, the ever-expanding “flash” repertoire gave servicemen more latitude in their choices, which added to the complexity of tattooing. For example, the *Teufelhunden* was the mainstay of the U.S Marine Corps after World War I, but by World War II, new motifs involving slogans became popular. The U.S. Marines had slogans that included “First to Fight,” “Semper Fidelis” or “Always Faithful,” or “Death or Glory.” Other services had their own superstitious symbols. U.S. paratroopers usually tattooed designs of parachutes and boots. Some designs again revealed a darker side of war, as did the designs of soldiers’ World War I brethren, but they also offered a beneficial sense of purpose for servicemen and may explain the military approval of the unrestricted use of tattooing during the war.

Another benefit ascribed to tattoos was the aggressive edge that sailors and soldiers felt while adopting fearsome themes such as dragons, skulls, snakes and the “grim reaper.” Such practices were similar to those warriors in Native American and Polynesian societies who ritually painted or tattooed themselves before a war. The purpose of this was to impress upon their opponents feelings of admiration or fear, but it also added to the self-esteem of the recipient as the painful process marked them with an aspect of “toughness.” Other tattoos like parachute designs or religious icons gave the wearer feelings of comfort when uncertain situations were thrust upon him. The frequency with which tattoos appeared on military bodies reinforced *esprit de corps* that
military commanders cherished. This was integral as the draft for World War II brought together very different men from very different areas.

Especially in places such as Hawaii, the center of U.S. activity in the Pacific, cohesion was very difficult to achieve considering the differences in class, region, race, and gender. The elasticity of tattooing allowed individuals to over-step cultural boundaries in creating a more cohesive American identity. Tattoos unified members of platoons, divisions, or a whole branch of service. (See figure 2.32) This cohesion was seen at Fort Campbell in Kentucky, which had a tradition among new recruits that involved tattooing them with “Jump School.” Another group, a “tank-destroying outfit,” tattooed a design with the head of a black panther and a halftrack in its mouth. While tattoos enabled individuals of different backgrounds to form cohesive groups, marking the skin individualized soldiers because of its subjective aesthetics. Platoon slogans and insignias on the body helped to form cohesive units, but only because of the commitment, exploit, and pride involved in being part of a group. These tattoos created an identity that differentiated other groups or individuals. For example, tattoo artist St. Clair noted:

> The most common time for a military man to get a tattoo was after the completion of either basic training or a more specialized kind of advanced training…. I’ll tell you a guy had a hard time if he had those chutes and boots [tattooed] on before he took his first jump…. The rest of them guys worked him over if he got that tattoo too soon. The tattoo was a mark of accomplishment, and if you hadn’t accomplished anything, you didn’t deserve the tattoo.\(^{83}\)

This group consciousness may explain the competition that occurred between the various branches of the U.S. armed services. For example, the U.S. marine slogan, “First to Fight,” documented the marines’ uniqueness and excluded this imperative from the other services. Tattoos demarcated platoons, squadrons, or any other unit but they also created

\(^{83}\) St. Clair quoted by Govenar, in Caplan, 228.
a sense of camaraderie for marked military personnel. However, by the 1950s, the popularity of tattoos was in decline as the scientific and medical communities’ persistent discourse that originated in the late nineteenth century finally eclipsed earlier discussions that had legitimized and popularized tattoos.

Counter-Narrative and the Denigration of the Tattooed Body from the Late Nineteenth to the Mid-Twentieth Centuries

In 1876, Italian criminologist, Cesare Lombroso published *L’Uomo Deliquente* or *Criminal Man* which specified that criminals was throwbacks to the primitive man. Lombroso argued that the easiest way to recognize criminals were by their tattoos, and marking the skin clearly signified their membership in a secret criminal organization. He added that for the criminal man, who is in “constant struggle against society, tattoos—like scars—are professional characteristics.”

Among his test subjects were 4,380 soldiers, and 2,734 “criminals, prostitutes, and criminal soldiers.” Not surprisingly, after examining his 7,114 subjects, he hypothesized reasons for the custom of tattooing which included religion, laziness, vanity, camaraderie, remembrance, and passion of love or intense eroticism. By the early twentieth century, Lombroso’s ideas, while discredited by other European criminologists, had made inroads into American social thought. To his American readers, Lombroso denounced his European colleagues and declared, “What can one expect from a race of advocates and rhetoricians? [The United States alone could] boast of having conscientiously applied scientific knowledge

---

86 It is should be noted that only ten percent of Cesare Lombroso’s test subjects had tattoos. Ibid, 60-61.
of criminal anthropology to criminal therapeutics.\textsuperscript{87} Lombroso’s interpretation of criminal tattooing greatly impacted the discourse surrounding the tattooed American body.

Lombroso’s influence was seen as American physicians began linking tattooing to syphilis. Infectious microbes were thought to have been transmitted to the bodies of the recently tattooed because of the unsanitary conditions of tattoo shops, given the reuse of tattooing needles, and since most servicemen acquired tattoos in groups, syphilis often infected many American regiments. For the scientific community, their conclusions included a link between tattooing and “sexual permissiveness”—a key facet of Lombroso’s criminal/primitive man.\textsuperscript{88} These discussions explained more stringent regulations similar to the 1909 naval regulation concerning obscene or vulgar tattoos. In 1918, Major General O’Ryan wanted to ban tattooing for soldiers in the National Guard Empire Division because he wanted to “upgrade the image of his men.”\textsuperscript{89} These biased discussions were especially seen with anyone working as a sideshow freak in the twentieth century.

By 1903, the word "freak" in freak show was stigmatized enough that Barnum and Bailey Circus replaced it with “human curiosities.”\textsuperscript{90} Scientists, doctors, newspapers, and scientific societies that had confirmed the educational value of the circus sideshow performers in the nineteenth century denounced them in the twentieth century. The


\textsuperscript{88} Robert Bogdan, \textit{Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit} (Chicago, 1988), 249.


marvel surrounding the sideshow performer was replaced with pity as the power of the scientific and medical professions increased and the eugenics movement grew strong. People with “physical and mental anomalies came under the control of professionals” and the “freaks” were “secluded from the public.” The circus freak, along with the tattooed exhibitionist, declined in visibility because of the new medical understandings of physical anomalies along with growing concerns about minority rights. For the tattooed performer, there was nothing physically special or abnormal but rather it was a psychological problem.

By the 1930s, the tattooed person was perceived to be a sexual deviant, one who publicly displayed it on his or her skin. In 1933, academic Albert Parry wrote:

> Very seldom are the tattooed aware of the true motives responsible for their visits to the tattooers....Tattooing is mostly the recording of dreams....Much of man's dreaming is, of course, of his true love--of his repressed sexual world fighting its way to the surface. Thus we should expect that tattooing, the recording of dreams, would be a decidedly sexual character. The very process of tattooing is essentially sexual. There are the long, sharp needles. There is the liquid poured into the pricked skin. There are two participants of the act, one active, the other passive.

Susanna S. Haigh, writing in *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, agreed with Parry's assessment but added that he failed to discuss the "anal element in the tattoo." Haigh added that "there is surely a definite relationship between the impulse of the child to


92 Medical diagnosis replaced nature's marvels as the primitive "pinheads" were identified as microcephalics, dwarfism was defined as a hereditary disorder, the "dog-faced boy" was known to have hypertrichosis, "the Giant" had acromegaly, "the Ossified Man" suffered from polyarthritis deformeds. Discussion of "Freakery" by Bogdan and David Gerber in "The 'Careers' of People Exhibited in Freak Shows: the Problems of Volition and Valorization," 45.

smear itself with feces and that of the adult to have himself smeared with indelible paint."  

Psychoanalyst Walter Bromberg, in analyzing the most popular motifs during the 1930s, argued that the tattoos symbolized "sadistic fantasies, masochistic fantasies, sadomasochistic fantasies, guilt arising from incestuous wishes, masturbation, repressed homosexual desires."  Bromberg's analysis established him as an authority on tattooing and the subconscious, and like Lombroso, he was cited by many subsequent researchers. The validity of these conclusions surrounding the tattooed subject was uncertain because many of these studies had been limited to prison populations and that would have certainly influenced the links between tattoos and psychopathology. Also, many psychiatric researchers had no personal experiences with the actual process of being tattooed and as a result may have been more prone to making negative comments. Nonetheless, links between male homosexuality and tattooing continued and contributed to the "myth of the national disease" created by sexologist Alfred Kinsey in the late 1950s.  In his studies, he concluded that fifty percent of American men and twenty-eight percent of American women had homosexual tendencies. While males bore the brunt of "sexual witch-hunting by the government," women were also affected by the "homosexual scare" as the medical profession created a monolithic definition of tattooing as a signifier of homosexuality. The reality was that tattooing was in decline by the end of World War II as American perceptions surrounding the act of marking the skin changed.

94 Gilbert, 159.
95 Gilbert, 159.
97 Ibid, 142.
Americans had seen first-hand what racist ideology could produce: Nazi genocide. According to Alan Govenar, Americans had knowledge about the Nazi custom of tattooing Jews in concentration camps and this contributed to the downfall of tattooing in the post-war period. Another factor for the critical discussion on marking the skin came from servicemen returning from the war. These soldiers regretted their wartime tattoos and realized at "home that they were neither valued by wives and sweethearts nor by potential employers." Tattooist Leonard "Stoney" St Clair noted that "he was confronted by numerous individuals who wanted him to remove the tattoos that they had got[ten] when they were supposedly drunk and unaware of the consequences."99

A decidedly contributing factor to the decline of tattooing was the increased health (both physical and mental) concern over marking the skin. The first legal action against a tattooist occurred in 1944, when the city of New York fined Charlie Wagner for failing to sterilize his needles. William Irving, shortly after, was fined for tattooing a minor. State by state, more stringent health regulations led to the closure of many tattoo shops and many areas banned tattooing altogether. By the 1950s, tattoos and their link to the strangers from the Pacific or the American West, the sideshow marvel, and patriotism were overshadowed by discourses that increasingly diagnosed the marked body as self-destructive, sick, and degenerate. This discriminatory approach was reinforced as tattooing after the 1950s became associated with social deviants and the counter-culture movements of the 1960s—with Chicano gangs, bikers, prisoners, gays, and hippies—further bifurcating the function of tattoos in America.

98 DeMello, 66.
"Down on Me":

The Counter-Cultural Body, Deviancy, and Tattoos as Art Form
from the late 1950s to the early 1970s

A former academic, Dr. Samuel Steward recalled his first tattoo in the late 1940s:
"The sensation hurt like hell—at times, burning, at other times like a knife of ice." Later he remembered the shock and the dismay among his close friends, who usually asked, "Why in the world would you want to do a thing like that?" When discussing the issue of getting indelibly marked, most of them shook their heads or retorted, "Me get tattooed? Never! That's too low-class for me." Steward also noted that his academic colleagues had no discernible marks on their bodies; he attributed the disdain toward tattooing to the usual arrogance of the middle class and a fear of declining status in being visibly marked. Steward argued that "TV, movies, and newspapers had imprinted on the public mind the connection between tattoos and criminal or derelict behavior." Steward's association of tattoos with the criminal or derelict also explained the liberation he felt when he decided to become a tattoo artist. He wanted to escape the academic life which had "imprisoned" him. He added, "I had to take a benzedrine tablet to face the doltish students....All my life I had made a living with my brain, and it had brought me little."

In 1952, Samuel Steward became Phil Sparrow, working as a tattoo artist for the next eighteen years. He also provided first-hand accounts of his clientele and their motivations for being indelibly marked. His accounts, while insightful, also reflected a disdain for many of his customers, many of whom he felt were somehow

2 Ibid, 10.
3 Ibid, 8.
overcompensating for their shortcomings. Steward's interest in tattooing represented the ambiguous attitude Americans had towards scarification practices in the 1950s. While his tattoos and new profession had liberated him, his recorded accounts suggested his association of deviancy with marking the skin. This deviancy included and highlighted latent homosexuality according to Steward's colleague and renowned sexologist Dr. Alfred Kinsey. It was also a topic with which Steward was familiar, as he was also gay.

It was at Kinsey's request that Steward documented observations of his clients. Kinsey stated, "You are probably one of a half dozen literate tattoo artists in the country—if indeed that many....Keep a journal for us on what you can perceive as the sexual motivations for getting tattooed." Kinsey became the anchor to his former academic past and was symbolic of the increased "medicalization" of the body which reinforced an existing discourse that associated tattoos with deviancy and sickness, and further pushed tattooing "underground."

This chapter builds upon earlier discussions concerning conflicting discussions about the body. Along with the medicalization of the body, tattooing became part of a larger discourse on the modern body, when body scarification became an avenue to self-determination for the body as seen in the counter-culture punk movement of the 1960s and the 1970s. This movement viewed the body as the site for self-mutilation or beautification (depending on the point of view), and conscious display in the public sphere. Some women and members from the sadomasochism (S/M) community often used tattoos as a medium for rebellion against the static, normative body of mainstream America. The expansion of visual rebellion on the marked body and its alliance with tattooed marginalized groups included the Pachucos in the late 1950s and motorcycle

---

4 Steward, 39-40.
gangs like the Hell's Angels in the 1960s. The body became a canvas of self-expression and appeared in one of the most visible symbols of the rock era, Janis Joplin. Known for her moral and sexual transgressions, Joplin’s song, “Down on Me,” reflected her views on life. In her song, Joplin sings:

```
Down on me, down on me,
Looks like everybody in this whole round world,
They’re down on me….
I’m saying they’re down on me, all down on me, oh!
It looks like everybody in this whole round world
Down on me!  
```

Joplin was clearly inserting a sexual innuendo in her lyrics, where the world was against her and that the “love” or the world going “down on her” made her feel better. Joplin’s assertion of her choices or rights was reflected through tattoos. The appropriation of marking the skin by women after the 1960s was symptomatic of the feminist movement as women claimed rights over their bodies—highlighting an alternative sexual orientation or redefining aesthetics of feminine beauty through tattoos. This chapter provides the foundation for the development of new aesthetics discussed in the next chapter, where scarification became an avenue of greater female expression with more women becoming tattoo artists and because of the efforts of Don "Ed" Hardy. These changes in tattoo culture allowed the practice of marking the skin to shed the critical discourse established after World War II.

**The Fall of Marking the Skin and the Rise of the Medical and Scientific Communities**

With the end of World War II, attitudes about tattooing were becoming more critical among many segments of American society. The “fad” of marking the skin had run its course among wealthy Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth

---

centuries. Mifflin stated that “a [1938] newspaper article sneeringly catalogued 50 prominent tattooed Americans—many of their tattoos—taking this upper crust diversion down a notch.”⁶ Thereafter, social elites had their tattoos airbrushed out of magazines, and sleeves and bracelets were being worn to conceal fetishes of their past. These indelible marks had become too common among the lower classes and were no longer signifiers of wealth and status but of “commonness.” Also, members of the middle class saw a tattoo as “a decorative cultural product dispensed by largely unskilled and unhygienic practitioners from dingy shops in urban slums.”⁷ Given the reasons discussed in chapter two, the decline was especially seen in the military.⁸

For new recruits shortly after the war, the 1909 naval regulation concerning "indecent or obscene tattooing" became more pronounced by 1945 and expanded to the other armed forces. Govenar stated that recruiting officers at "Army, Air Force, and Navy Examining and Entrance Stations [were told] a person may not enlist in the Armed Forces with an obscene tattoo."⁹ This excluded applicants with the obvious "fuck you" on their hand, and depending on the examiner, a potential recruit with a naked woman.¹⁰ Ultimately, there was no written standard for "obscene," so the final decision "rest[ed] with the commanding officer."¹¹ By the 1950s, the decline of tattoos accelerated as the

---

⁸ Reasons for the decline of tattooing mentioned in Chapter two were 1) rising health concerns of the 1940s indicative of an increasingly conservative attitude in American society; 2) the disappearance of the traveling circuses by the 1940s that led to the infrequency of viewing the tattooed exhibitionist; and 3) the end of the World War II, reversed previously important indelible symbols of military service into markers of shame for some servicemen.
⁹ Ibid, 229.
¹⁰ This would lead to greater numbers of cover-up tattoos such as nurses, hula girls, and Indian squaws mentioned in Chapter Two.
¹¹ Alan Govenar, 229.
medical and scientific communities persistently denigrated the practice, which ultimately led to increased regulations for or outright bans on tattoo parlors—thus limiting access to these indelible marks.

With the medical community shifting its understanding of the circus freak to the aegis of sick and degenerate, the repercussions for the tattooed performer, tattooist, and others who were indelibly marked were also critical. The tattooed body was viewed as a carrier of infections or diseases, and a tattooed individual clearly had psychological problems. Physicians by the late nineteenth century had already begun to link tattooing to syphilis. Infectious microbes were thought to have been transmitted to the bodies of the recently tattooed because of the unsanitary conditions of tattoo shops. John F. Briggs, a researcher in the 1930s, attributed the epidemic of syphilis in Philadelphia to one particular tattooist. He also mistakenly attributed the transmission of leprosy to tattooing.¹² In contrast, plastic surgeons by the 1950s were using tattooing in greater frequency to cover up skin grafts, scars, and discoloration from diseases such as leprosy.¹³

In any event, civic groups led by outraged parents pushed for greater restrictions on tattoo parlors and by the 1950s most cities and states had prohibited the tattooing of minors. This ban expanded as many city and state law codes eliminated tattoo parlors altogether. The first area to approve a city-wide ban of tattoo parlors was Norfolk, Virginia, an area in the 1930s and 1940s noted for its tattoo shops, taverns, and burlesque shows. It was also the hub of the United States Navy and the reason why many

servicemen knew that if they wanted a "USN" or an eagle on their arm, Norfolk was the place as it had dozens of tattoo shops. However, by 1950, the Norfolk City Council approved a city-wide ban on tattoo parlors as they were deemed unsanitary and generally undesirable, even "vulgar and cannibalistic." The ban spread from Norfolk to Portsmouth, then to Tidewater and eventually to every city in Virginia.

By the 1960s, state-wide bans were approved in New York, Oklahoma, Indiana, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Wisconsin, Arkansas, Tennessee, Ohio, Michigan, and Virginia. In the case of New York, the conflict over expelling tattoo parlors was symbolic of the importance of tattoos as an expression of Americans’ civil rights. In 1961, tattoo shops were banned in Nassau and Suffolk counties as medical examiners attributed thirty cases of infection, including one fatality, to tattooing. Dr. Lewis Thomas of the Board of Health hypothesized that of "every thousand persons, one or two got hepatitis as a result." Thereafter, many tattooists went "underground" for thirty-six years, practicing their craft in "secret backrooms and loft apartments" until the prohibition was lifted in 1997. By drawing attention to the biological repercussion of marking the body, the medical community, concerned parents, and local and state institutions were infringing on the civil rights of the tattooed. This “medicalization” of the tattooed body was also seen in the field of psychology.

---

17 This medicalization of the body was discussed in the introduction. It is when health departments, medical researchers, and psychologists become part of the new repository of truth indicative of an “insidious and often undramatic phenomenon accomplished by ‘medicalizing’ much of daily living.” In other words, they used the labels “healthy” and “ill” as relevant to an ever-increasing part
Based largely on criminologist Cesare Lombroso's nineteenth-century argument which linked tattooing to criminality and sexual permissiveness, some Americans were extending his biological argument to the psyche of the marked body. Psychologist Joseph Lander in 1943 argued that "psychopathology or social and or emotional maladjustment is significantly higher among tattooed than nontattooed men."\(^{18}\) In 1958, John Briggs stated that "the presence of a single meaningless tattoo mark suggests a prepsychotic or psychotic phenomena…. [T]he appearance of multiple tattoo marks…which have no symmetry, and which have no apparent connection one with the other, is always diagnostic of a severe psychoneurosis."\(^{19}\) By the 1950s, the sexual nature of tattooing became the subject of study for the psychiatric profession. Researchers were particularly interested in the sexual symbolism behind tattoo designs. A book published in 1955 and edited by Hal Zucker, *Tattooed Women and their Mates,* described homosexuals as “inverts,” who when “largely in the company of normal men (sailors) will have nude girls or other normal matter tattooed…as a decoy. When the invert is not constrained…he often chooses ostentatious and bizarre designs” such as a garland of roses surrounding his pubic region “so that his organ would appear to be one of the flowers that made up the garland. (See figure 3.01) Another tattooed his organ in red and white to resemble a barber pole.”\(^{20}\) For many researchers during the 1950s and 1960s, a common explanation for the use of “overtly heterosexual images [for example,  

---


nude women, ‘pornographic’ phrases] as actually revealing the homosexual interests or hidden homosexual anxieties of the bearer.”

Building on earlier studies of tattoo designs and their meanings, psychiatrists in the 1950s regurgitated the same conclusions—marking the skin was a signifier of homosexuality. The new contribution of the 1950s psychologist focused on the actual process of tattooing. Getting tattooed was viewed as a sexual act with “long, sharp needles. There are two participants of the act, one active, the other passive. There is the curious marriage of pleasure and pain.” (See figure 3.02) A later study in 1968 by criminologist Richard S. Post echoed earlier arguments by stating that tattooed individuals were sexually repressed and that the insertion of the needle was similar to the “depositing of a fluid in the skin representing the coital act.” Post also argued “TRUE LOVE” scrawled across both hands “almost certainly indicates that the bearer is a homosexual.” Some researchers have also seen tattooists as being latently or overtly homosexual because choosing this occupation allowed them to touch the male body “which they can feel, stroke, and fondle without arousing suspicion.” Both the tattooed and tattooist were perceived to be sexual deviants and this supported other studies which attempted to link tattooing with criminal tendencies.

The New York Times journalist Gay Talese wrote in 1959, that a team of psychiatrists at the Oklahoma School of Medicine had studied sixty-five tattooed subjects. The research compared tattooed males from the Oklahoma City Veterans Administration Hospital to other non-tattooed men. The study claimed that the indelibly-

22 Sanders, 38.
24 Ibid, 38.
inked man "is more likely to have been divorced, is more of a rebel, has more trouble with society and authority, and is more likely to have been in jail." Talese also reported that the National Education Association had declared that "potential juvenile delinquents might sometimes be spotted as 'those with male kin who are tattooed.'" Talese described the tattoo phenomenon as similar to a biological contagion, much as U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy did during the period of mass hysteria stemming from the "Red Scare" of the 1950s, which suggested the influence of other studies linking tattooing to infections and diseases. It should also be noted that Talese's credentials, as outlined in her article, included her position as a staff reporter for the New York Times. She also stated that she was "one of the 157,000,000 conservatives in the country who have never been tattooed."26

Another example of this conservatism in the scientific community was found in 1959 with Lieutenant Richard P. Youniss’ "The Relationship of Tattoos to Personal Adjustment Among Enlisted Submarine School Volunteers." Youniss argued "that tattooed men really were potentially poor material for a branch of service in which there was little room for maladjustment." The results also concluded that thirty percent of the men who were tattooed with "two or more designs had unresolved sexual and aggressive conflicts....[S]ubjects desiring future tattoos obtain scores higher in the direction of personal maladjustment and conflict than subjects who disclaim the desire to obtain tattoos."27 The denigration of the tattooed body was also seen in another study on prisoners at a penal institution. Dr. William Haines and Arthur V. Huffmann investigated

26 Talese, 42.
inmates at an Illinois prison and they argued that the research results "clearly indicate certain tattoos can be deciphered as having latent [criminal] motivations." Haines also concluded that servicemen tattooed with "Death Before Dishonor" were candidates likely "discharged under conditions other than honorable." Once they were in the general population, Haines and Huffmann argued, a tattooed person was more likely to engage in some form of property crime.

The conclusions by the medical and scientific community were especially problematic as the subjects were preselected from pools favorable for their findings, which overlooked the effects of the institutional milieu on the subjects. Richard Post even admitted that Haines' conclusion had little evidence to "correlate tattoos with specific criminal tendencies." Most medical or psychiatric researchers had no personal experience with tattoos and were more likely to come to critical conclusions. Their findings were also reflective of the scientific community and symbolic of the increased frequency with which many Americans associated tattoos with deviancy. These malignant discussions exacerbated hostilities toward tattoo practitioners and suggested the "social pressure against tattooers was so great that they were forced to close their shops and move to other cities or states more hospitable to their practices." Increased city and state regulations for tattoo shops pushed their practices westward to new "deviant clients," who visually reinforced the abnormal nature of being marked.

Marks of Deviancy

29 Post, 521.
By the 1960s, tattoos were associated with social deviants and the counter-culture movements of the 1960s in the West, which included Chicano gangs or Pachucos, bikers, prisoners, gays, and hippies. Tattooing reflected the changes in American society as the designs were reflective of defiance and a challenge to mainstream middle-class values. Subcultures like the Chicano gangs and bikers reinforced fears among the middle class and marginalized tattooed individuals or groups. Practicing homemade tattoos and becoming increasingly visible after the Zoot Suit Riots in the 1940s, Chicano gangs developed their own style. In the barrios of California and New Mexico, tattoos were originally done by "a sewing needle dipped in India ink." DeMello stated:

Classic Chicano tattooing uses black ink exclusively; fine lines to create the classic images of Christ, the Virgin of Guadeloupe, and women; and bold shading for the locas (hometown or neighborhood) and other word tattoos....Chicano tattoo art is very similar to other forms of Chicano art, such as mural or low-rider art....Without a doubt the most classic Chicano tattoo is the small pachuco cross tattooed on the hand between forefinger and thumb.31

Newly immigrated Mexicans brought over by the Braceros program, which imported nearly 200,000 workers in the 1942, were brought in as an agricultural labor force. Many settled in California, New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas, establishing large Mexican communities that faced much Anglo hostility. Mexican teenagers joined street gangs or the Pachucos wearing baggy pants, long jackets, exaggerated watch chains, and "duck tail" hairstyles when not wearing broad-brimmed hats. Their excessive style attracted animosity and infamously, in 1943 for four days, riots escalated after U.S. servicemen attacked a group of zoot-suiters while the police watched and did very little. In this atmosphere of hostility, solidarity within Chicano gangs was an important mechanism for

31 DeMello, 68-69.
protection from outsiders and other neighborhood gangs. Tattoos representing gang membership solidified ethnic ties.

Steward recollected that he tattooed a small bear for a member of the "Bearcats," "cocktail glass with a tiny red cherry for the "Manhattans," or a stylized wildcat for the "Valiants." 32 Usually used as part of an initiation or to identify one another, Chicano tattoos reflected crime and violence to outsiders. Steward noted that by the 1950s, "literally thousands of young men who had never been near a real 'pachuco' inscribed the webs of their left hands with the pachuco mark, a simple cross with three rays." He added that it caused a minor scandal with the Air Force when many airmen were "dismissed because of it; and was for many years a cause for police questioning when it was seen on the hand or elsewhere." 33 Besides signifying Pachuco status, Chicano tattoos were murals or artworks representing Mexican ideals which included “loyalty to [the] community, family, women, and God—very similar in theme to the nationalist designs seen among sailors, but stylistically, a world apart.” 34 The Chicano style of marking the skin reinforced their foreign nature, much as tattooing did in the nineteenth century with Native Americans, Africans, and Pacific Islanders. This rebellious nature of tattooing seen with the Pachucos was also seen with bikers in the 1960s.

By the 1960s, tattoos were seen in greater frequency among bikers, and it was no accident as many members of outlaw biker clubs attained their first tattoos in prison. This period, sometimes called the "second prison boom," with the first coming shortly after the American Civil War, saw dramatic increases in the national crime rate. Law

---

33 Ibid, 67.
34 DeMello, 69.
professor Michelle Alexander stated that "street crime quadrupled, and homicide rates nearly doubled...[due in part to] the rise of the 'baby boom' generation" and soaring unemployment rates in the 1960s.\(^{35}\) Within this atmosphere, the Hells Angels were the most visibly tattooed outlaw biker gang. Considered a crime syndicate by the U.S. Justice Department, the Hells Angels Motorcycle Club (HAMC) was founded in 1948 in the Fontana/San Bernardino area and became infamous during the 1960s counterculture scene in California.

The origin or myth, according to the HAMC official website, had them wrongly associated with ex-servicemen, particularly pilots, who were disgruntled "drunkards, military misfits...[who] would not adjust to a return to a peacetime environment."\(^{36}\) However, the HAMC official website conspicuously dedicates a large portion of its origin story to listing the accomplishments of various military squadrons—thus suggesting that early members with military experience may have gotten their tattoos during World War II and continued to display them. Officially, the club had no military lineage, except for the organization's name, which was suggested to the founders by Arvid Olsen, an associate of the Hells Angels and a former squadron leader of the 3rd Pursuit Squadron "Hells Angels" during World War II. For members without military experience, their first tattoo might have been done by hand with a single-needle, where many "white, supremacist bikers from prison had racist slogans tattooed on their arms by their Chicano counterparts.” An ex-convict stated, "The best tattooists in the joint are


Mexicans.” As for the imagery on their bodies, bikers normally had motifs that were anti-social. Classic designs included Harley-Davidson motorcycles and emblems, "V-twin engines, club logos, marijuana leaves, swastikas, skulls, and logos such as FTW; Born to Lose; Live to Ride, Ride to Live; and Property of [biker's name] on women bikers.”

Samuel Steward, who was the "official" tattoo artist for some members of the HAMC during the late 1950s and 1960s, was more specific in describing the designs that marginalized the Hells Angels, which included "DFFL, which meant 'Dope Forever, Forever Loaded'; and AFFA, Angels Forever, Forever Angels." Another popular design was "1%," a derisive reference to the American Motorcycle Association statement that "only 1% of motorcycle riders in the States are outlaws." One member of the Hells Angels, Saint Luke, explained other designs to Steward. If a member had "13" closed in a lozenge, it was a reference to the thirteenth letter of the alphabet, "M" which either stood for marijuana or masochist. The Air Force patch design with wings reddened and a red circle meant that an "Angel [member] had performed cunnilingus on a menstruating woman; the same design with a black circle meant the Angel preferred boys or had jackrolled homosexuals, or been a hustler." Finally, a favored design included the numbers "666" because, as Saint Luke explained, a southern Baptist denounced the Hells Angels to his congregation: "They are tattooed with the number of the Beast—666!"

Luke saw the statement in the paper and told Sonny Barger, founder of the Oakland chapter, that if the minister "said so, it must be true.”

---

37 Interview with ex-convict noted in DeMello, 70.
38 "Fuck the World" (FTW), Ibid, 68.
39 Steward, 69.
As for placement, both men and women wore marks in public areas of the body, with men getting "sleeved out" on their arms, along with their "back, chest, hands, and head." Legs were quite infrequently tattooed as jeans would hide the tattoos. For women, the arms, breasts, back, and hips were the usual spots as they were easily seen when wearing a tank or halter top. Having these marks visible to the public created a literal system of communication associating them with drugs and violence and highlighted their antisocial nature much like a "FTW" tattoo. For mainstream Americans in the 1960s, the visibility of indelibly marked Chicanos and biker gangs made implicit the deviancy of the tattooed body. However, the aura and lure of rebellion and strength attached to marking the skin remained a powerful incentive for many who wanted to be inked.

"Man Up": The Masculine Mark

From the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, servicemen were the main recipients obtaining tattoos and, while tattooing declined after World War II, there was always a need to get marked during times of conflict. This was seen during the American Civil War, the Spanish-American War, and during the world wars. With the outbreak of the Korean War, there was a repetition of the earlier pattern of servicemen getting patriotic tattoos. Also, many servicemen who had served in World War II took their marks with them into conflicts in Korea and later Vietnam. Sergeant Herbert Livingston had the head of a horse and his girlfriend's name tattooed on his arms when he was stationed in Australia during World War II. He reenlisted for the Korean War and served as a volunteer gunner on medevac choppers during the Vietnam War—taking his
permanent inspiration and previous wartime experiences with him. These tattooed servicemen also served as examples for the people with whom they were fighting. It was reported by the *New York Times* in 1962, that Captain Ho Tan Quyen, acting commander of the Vietnamese Navy, sent a requisition to the United States Navy for two tattoo machines. Quyen wanted new recruits for the government's new junk fleet tattooed on their left breasts with the words, "Sat Song, meaning Kill the Communists." For servicemen, tattoos were intimately linked to masculinity and they became much more prevalent in mainstream America.

Despite its negative connotations, tattooing was a quick but painful way of donning an aura of masculinity. This was in part because of the iconic images in the 1950s from cartoons and advertisements. *Popeye, the Sailor Man* was created as a comic strip in the 1920s, a cartoon feature in the 1950s, and film in the 1980s. Known for his iconic anchor tattoo on his massive forearm, Popeye displayed his masculine strength whenever he ate spinach. Every episode witnessed his success in defending his love, Olive Oyl, from the obvious brawn of Bluto. Another comic strip that featured a tattooed character was *Beetle Bailey*. Popularized in the 1950s, Beetle Bailey was an inept, lazy private who drove other military characters into hysterics. Oftentimes, Bailey was the target of verbal and physical abuse. One character who assaulted Bailey was Sergeant "Cookie," the mess hall cook, who had a beard, hairy shoulders, and a tattoo of a heart on his forearm. Both Popeye and Cookie were characters obviously linked to the military and its masculine tradition of tattoos.

---

This masculinity was also seen in the successful advertising of Marlboro cigarettes from the 1950s to the 1970s. In 1956, the Philip Morris Company wanted to expand the appeal of its Marlboro brand to males. Since 1924, the Marlboro brand had been aimed at women with slogans such as "Mild As May," going so far as having a filter called a "beauty tip" that had a printed red band around it to hide lipstick stains.\(^\text{42}\) (See figure 3.03) By the 1950s, Marlboro, "America's luxury cigarette" for women, needed a new direction after studies linking cancer to smoking resulted in declining sales.\(^\text{43}\) Leo Burnett's advertising agency wanted to change the perception of the Marlboro brand as filters were considered "sissy." Burnett stated that his research subjects considered all filter cigarettes as "slightly effeminate."\(^\text{44}\) Sporting a new "Flip-Top Box" that protected cigarettes, Marlboro needed an iconographic male symbol for the brand. Burnett felt that the most accepted signifier of masculinity in America was a cowboy who could tell his fellow American men that Marlboro "delivers the good flavor" even with a filter. However, his competitors also used men with some form of "masculine confidence." To set his cowboy apart from other masculine icons, Burnett had his Marlboro men tattooed on the hand and wrists—"reinforcing the masculine personality of the advertising and the brand."\(^\text{45}\) (See figure 3.04)

To keep the cowboy icon fresh, he alternated with "a succession of he-men--explorers, sailors, athletes, and an occasional tuxedoed but no less rugged gentleman." (See figures 3.05 and 3.06) At one point, the Marlboro brand had the likeness of former


\(^{44}\) Burnett, 42.

\(^{45}\) Burnett, 42.
U.S. general and president Dwight D. Eisenhower. (See figure 3.07) In each case, the common denominator was an “elemental masculinity and, of course, the tattoo.” Test subjects responded by telling Burnett's researchers, "This man looks successful and sophisticated but rugged and as though he might have had interesting experiences.” Burnett was gratified with the story-telling quality associated with his tattooed men, especially when he came across a quotation attributed to early twentieth-century author Jack London. Known for novels *Call of the Wild* (1903) and *White Fang* (1906), London was quoted as saying, "Follow any man with a tattoo and you will find a romantic and adventurous past.” Apparently women responded to the tattooed man, as Burnett's studies also saw an increase in sales among women. Using the tattooed Marlboro men from 1955 to 1962, Burnett's campaign successfully propelled Marlboro to the status of America's most popular filter cigarette.

Many letters were written to Philip Morris Company from tattooed people who wanted to pose for Marlboro. Tattooist Samuel Steward recalled that when the Marlboro ads were run, he and other tattooists had a difficult time, as many "ethical tattoos artists" did not work on hands or faces. Young men wanted the tattoos on their hands and did not care that the actors who portrayed the Marlboro Man had temporary designs. This did not deter customers as they wanted to "look right when the hand was held up to light the cigarette.” Comedian Lenny Bruce appeared on *The Steve Allen Show* and satirized the Marlboro ads by pointing to the "top of his hand [the location of the Marlboro tattoos] and said, 'I'm so bad, my tattoo even moved up my arm.' He then rolled up his sleeve and

---

46 Lohof, 443-444.
47 Burnett, 42.
48 Steward, 58.
showed the tattooed heart on his forearm." In light of the critical discourse on tattoos by the medical and scientific community, the iconic images in the 1950s and 1960s put a positive spin to marking the skin. The confluence of both discussions, to some extent, reinforced the masculine nature of tattoos to mainstream America.

In 1959, tattooist Stanley Moskowitz "estimated the tattooed population of the United States at about 17 million men and 3 million women." Considering that the United States population was estimated to be 177,829,628 in 1959, roughly over eleven percent of the population had tattoos. Criminologist Richard Post had reached nearly the same conclusion, that "one person in ten has a tattoo." The masculine aspect of tattooing, ironically, was the appeal for homosexuals by the late 1950s. Steward noted that when he started keeping a record of his clients’ tattoos, less than "one percent were put on obvious homosexuals." Contrary to most scientific studies before the 1950s that linked homosexuality to tattooing, Steward believed most gays did not find tattoos appealing. Like many of his gay friends in the 1940s, he concluded it was easy to determine why most homosexuals before the 1950s were reluctant to indelibly mark their skin. The most important determinant was vanity because "many homosexuals did not want to spoil their bodies with anything so vulgar as a tattoo"—a conclusion with which Kinsey agreed in their discussions.

---

50 Talese, 42.
52 Post, 519.
53 According to Steward, Alfred Kinsey made occasional visits to Steward’s tattoo shop, spoke with clients, and reviewed Steward’s notes. Their discussion was noted in Steward, 53.
The seminal event that changed this narcissistic attitude occurred in 1953, following the national release of the film *The Wild One* starring Marlon Brando. Steward argued that the film "seemed to crystallize or release, the obscure and long-hidden feelings of many homosexuals. In a sense the so-called leather movement began with this movie, and the pounding hearts of many persons sitting in darkened theaters told them that here was something they had been wanting for a long time." Steward's assessment suggested a nascent rebellious gay culture developing in the 1950s. This culture contributed greatly to discussions surrounding the body, with tattoos as an avenue of gay expression and rights in the counterculture of the 1960s. After the film, Steward noted that many homosexuals came into his tattoo shop wearing leather outfits. Many of the male homosexuals acquired hyper-masculine symbols such as black panthers, daggers, snakes, or skulls. Steward said that he “abandoned all records as the impulse of many homosexuals to be considered more masculine—by the addition of a tattoo—grew stronger.” This reaffirmation of masculinity probably surprised Steward because it contrasted with other male homosexuals who usually appropriated more feminine designs such as a rose or a heart.

For lesbians, obtaining tattoos was less confusing and less problematic for tattooists like Steward. Many male tattooists felt that “nice girls don’t get tattooed” and if one did it was either that she was forced to because of her boyfriend or husband, or because she was a lesbian. Stewart noted that there were problems in tattooing women because of “those tight and unpermissive 1950s, too many scenes with irate husbands,

---

54 Steward, 53.
55 Ibid, 54.
furious parents, indignant boyfriends, and savage lovers.” Steward refused to tattoo a woman unless she met the following prerequisites: 1) she had to be at least twenty-one years old; 2) she had to be married and accompanied by her husband; or 3) she had to be a lesbian and “prove it.” These conditions essentially left tattooing open to two groups of women—housewives or lesbians.

The lesbian, or the woman who loved other women, implied emotional instability and weak moral fiber to social observers. Sentiments of this sort lumped lesbians together with “biker women” and “tramps” because they were more likely to get a tattoo and because they were “bad girls.” When sailors asked Steward whether or not women got tattooed, he replied, “Yes, tramps and dykes. Nice girls don’t get tattooed…. I put a tattoo on only one really beautiful girl…a stripteaser…. The rest were large lank-haired skags, with ruined landscapes of faces and sagging hose and run-over heels.” The obvious disdain Steward had for these “bad girls” was indicative of the challenges faced by women seeking to be indelibly marked during the mid-twentieth century. Perceived as deviant, women were visibly stigmatized by marking the skin and these attitudes were exacerbated for the tattooed lesbian.

According to Steward, lesbians were not good for business because they scared the sailors and other male clients away. Lesbians usually came in as couples, and as Steward observed, the “butch…was usually fat as a pig, in slacks, which from behind made her butt look like two little boys fighting under a blanket. The ‘male’ ones had mannish haircuts and bellowed. In a sense they were no different from the boys getting their girl-friends’ names on them…with a little floral design, and then they wanted their

57 Steward, 127.
58 Ibid, 127.
59 Ibid, 71 and 128.
name on the ‘lady’ of the pair.”60 Mifflin showed that not all lesbian couples had a “butch” and “lady” (or “femme”) dichotomy. A photo of an unknown female couple dressed very differently from Steward’s “butch” description shows the women displaying recently tattooed “lovebirds” above their ankles. (See figure 3.08) Steward’s obvious hostility toward lesbians may be attributed to the gender slippage these women represented as they assaulted conventional notions of femininity. Steward's opposition was generally reflective of attitudes among most male tattooists before the 1960s. Their attitudes suggested the “consistency of the practice of tattooing among lesbians”—as lesbians were infringing on an obvious male preserve—straight or gay.61

A man would usually have his name tattooed on the body of his girlfriend or his wife in an effort to possess the female body. Steward recalled an instance when a young man brought his wife to the shop and demanded that his name be tattooed on her thigh. Steward placed a small rose with the husband's name beneath on her thigh. After it was done, the husband declared, "She's my woman, I made her get tattooed, and now that she is mine, I want her."62 However, women tattooing women’s names showed that they were appropriating the masculine usage of tattooing while at the same time making their lesbianism visible. The literature that attempted to define aspects of lesbianism and the hostility that confronted lesbians after World War II ironically enabled them to create a subculture and facilitated the creation of a group consciousness that defied traditional notions of womanhood. Yet, lesbians were not denying their femininity as the “butch” with the floral design showed or as the lesbian with “lady-like” qualities demonstrated. In this respect, the tattooed lesbian was similar to the marked circus woman because both

60 Steward, 128-129.
61 DeMello, 63.
62 Steward, 49.
were dismantling or shifting traditional gender roles publicly on their skin. These nascent rebellious expressions by women in the 1950s, both straight and lesbian, were indicative of the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s. Some women used "graphic, vulgar performances to express feminine themes of sexuality, power, and violence."63

**Tattoo Revival as a Mark of Counterculture: A New Discourse on the Body**

With the backdrop of the Vietnam War, peace movements, the Civil Rights Movement, and gay and women's liberation, tattoo designs were changing and expanding in the 1960s and 1970s. Peace symbols, marijuana leaves, and other countercultural symbols became part of the repertoire of many tattooists. Hippies, bikers, gays and women were using tattoos for their liberation from mainstream America. Some celebrities also became visible indicators of the changes in America. Among those who were famously marked were Joan Baez, Peter Fonda, Flip Wilson, Cher, and Janis Joplin. Known as the "Queen of Psychedelic Soul," Joplin joined Big Brother and the Holding Company in 1966. Their brand of music, similar to The Velvet Underground, Iggy Pop and the Stooges, and The Jimi Hendrix Experience, wanted to replicate the experience of psychedelic drugs and liberate the minds of youths. These bands, along with Joplin, laid the groundwork for the punk sensibilities of the 1970s which can be viewed as part of the "backlash against the groovy-love-peace-hippie idealism of the 1960s. The music was loud and abrasive and the clothes punks wore conjured images of violence and self-mutilation."64

The youth culture, according to psychologist A.J.W Taylor, gravitated to tattooing at an early age. In Taylor's 1970 study, she stated, "Many delinquents obtained their first

---

tattoos around the age of 13 while they were mixing with society at large with delinquent gangs." For the "delinquents," punk aesthetics included ripped clothes, outrageous dyed hair like Joplin or Mohawks, safety pins through their ears, and tattoos, while listening to subversive music. Managed by artist Andy Warhol, The Velvet Underground (1964-1973) presented apocalyptic visions in its music and outward appearance. Wearing sunglasses and all black clothing, member of The Velvet Underground played their music with their backs to the audience. Rather than focusing ending the Vietnam War, as in much protest rock’n’roll, The Velvet Underground addressed issues of drug use, domestic violence, cross-dressing, and sadomasochism. Performances by Iggy Pop and the Stooges, like other punk bands in the 1960s and 1970s, often displayed body fluids such as blood, spit, and vomit—"the antithesis to the integrity and hygiene of the Western humanist body."

Tattooist Lyle Tuttle was responsible for one popular form of punk self-mutilation or counterculture expression. Having tattooed many celebrities in the 1960s, he also "mutilated" Joplin. Openly bi-sexual, Joplin visibly displayed her Florentine bracelet tattooed on her wrist and a heart on her breast. (See figure 3.09) According to DeMello, Joplin explained to Rolling Stone that the wristlet was for "everybody," while the heart was "for me and my friends. Just a little treat for the boys, like icing on the cake." The Florentine bracelet and heart clearly symbolized sexuality and feminine power. Tuttle, who indelibly marked Joplin, exclaimed: "Women's liberation! One hundred percent

---

66 Hewitt, 110.
67 DeMello, 54-55.
women's liberation!" Tuttle also recalled that Joplin "ran around at concerts all over the world telling about it [the tattooing]. She wrote the best advertisement for tattooing that could ever be written. She got up there, her and her chihuahua, one time and told them, 'People who get tattooed like to fuck a lot.'"

Peggy Caserta, in an account of Joplin’s sexual life, remembered her own experience with Joplin: “I was stark naked, stoned out of my mind on heroin, and the girl lying between my legs giving me head was Janis Joplin.” Joplin was also noted for her insatiable appetite for men and was reported to have bragged “loudly about her male conquests.” Besides announcing her alternative sexual preferences, Joplin was symbolic of the new pattern of counterculture expression and was a visible proponent of the expansion of tattooing. In an interview on the The Dick Cavett Show (1968-1974) in 1970, Joplin proudly displayed her tattoo to America. She also told Cavett that after she got marked, she invited Tuttle to a party where he tattooed eighteen other people. Even in death, Joplin inspired other women to indelibly mark their skin. Tuttle said that the day after Joplin died, a girl wanted “the heart I put on her [Janis Joplin], in remembrance. Hundreds of them [women] got the same idea at the same time.”

---

69 DeMello, 77.
70 Casserta, Peggy, Going down with Janis, by Peggy Caserta as told to Dan Knapp (New Jersey, 1973), 7.
73 Janis Joplin died of a drug overdose on 4 October 1970.
74 Mifflin, 58.
within and outside the mainstream to establish her own notions of gender. By marking her skin, Joplin was inspiring others to politicize their bodies against mainstream normative ideals.

For scholar Kim Hewitt, the triad of youth culture, sexual revolution, and civil rights in the 1960s brought "new attitudes toward the body and its realities of both pleasure and discomfort and laid a groundwork upon which today's awareness of the interrelations between corporeal existence and mental health has been built." Proponents of the body movement of the 1960s created a counter-discussion to the increased "medicalization" of the body by the medical and scientific communities, a medicalization that associated tattooing with homosexuality and a visible indicator of psychological disorder. Discussions surrounding sexuality, drug use and its effects, and self-representation through outward appearance and expression became an important facet of the body movement. This movement included subcultures from "performance art, punk, queer activism, pro-sex feminism, SM/leather fetishism, New Age spiritualism, and Western tattooing."

According to Pitts, segments of the gay and lesbian community after the 1960s embraced art, tattoos, and body piercings. Marking the skin became a part of a gay subcultural style along with "scarification, branding, and corsetry....[L]eathermen, leatherdykes, and others in the sexual underground were interested in 'exploring sexuality

---

75 Hewitt, 96.
76 Biological determinism was an important ideological weapon in mainstream America for maintaining normative gender standards. Proponents of the body movement viewed the body as a site of investment, control, and cultural production, and irregular bodies threatened the established social order. Mikhail Bakhtin's grotesque in medieval carnival is applicable to the methods of rebellion used by proponents of punk, and homosexuals. For example, farting, burping, and excrement are natural human functions—that are done in private—yet displaying them is a refusal of orderliness and social control.
and the body in relation to ritual and technology.”

By embracing elements that undermined biological determinism or a two-sex model, proponents of the body movement assaulted normative gender standards of mainstream America. Because of the masculinity associated with tattooing in the late 1950s and 1960s, women, lesbians, and gays marked their bodies to invest new meanings in their bodies.

There are debates among "radical feminists, postmodern feminists, and women body modifiers" on whether body modifications are detrimental to the cause of women, straight or lesbian. Women are disciplined into believing that chances for upward mobility and happiness are significantly linked to being "thin, young, and white." Furthermore, when women conform to spending more time and money in terms of "shaping the body, combating signs of aging...[women] lose in other ways, such as experiencing self-esteem problems or eating disorders."

In 1974, feminist Andrea Dworkin's assessed:

Standards of beauty describe in precise terms the relationship that an individual will have to her own body....They define precisely the dimensions of her physical freedom....In our culture, not one part of a woman's body is left untouched, unaltered. No feature or extremity is spared the art, or pain, of improvement....From head to toe, every feature of a woman's face, every section of her body, is subject to modification, alteration.

For some female activists in the 1970s, any modification of the female body was linked to its victimization. Feminist Emile Buchwald adds that the media also "prepares girls to

---

78 Pitts, 93.
79 Jessica Johnston states that “feminist scholarship is critical of the two-sexed biological foundation underlying much of Western thought” and how heterosexual norms have constrained understandings of the body. Jessica Johnston, The American Body in Context, An Anthology (Delaware, 2001), 64.
80 Pitts, 51.
81 Pitts, 51.
82 Pitts, 52.
become victims, just as surely it teaches men to be comfortable perpetrators of violence."\textsuperscript{83}

Historically, Chinese foot binding, the European corset, dieting regiments, cosmetics, and even tattoos and piercings have been considered forms of self-hatred or self-mutilations by some feminists. However, for other feminists, the normative bodily practices of beauty are problematic while those modifications that "reject such ideals can be perceived as instances of women's assertion of agency in relation to their bodies."\textsuperscript{84}

One example of female assertiveness was seen in a 1970 study by A.J.W. Taylor. A female subject in the study explained her impetus for getting a tattoo. She stated, "I'm wrapped in the girl whose name it is, and because I want to act like a boy...anything they can do I can do too."\textsuperscript{85} This agency explains the appeal of tattooing for women in the past and the present as it allowed or allows them to ascribe new meaning to their bodies.

Tattoos and other scarification practices outside of piercings on the earlobes violated the normative body in mainstream America. For some women, modifications such as tattoos empowered them, especially for those who have been victimized. In an interview with Pitts, “Karen” recalled that she was the victim of child abuse that haunted her throughout her young adult life. At the age of twenty-four, she came out as a lesbian and joined an S/M organization for women where she learned about body modification. A dragon tattoo on Karen's breast was part of the process of recovering from her early victimization and gaining a sense of independence. Karen explained:

So, the dragon was my way of claiming my body, claiming my breasts. Because I grew up having very large breasts and having men ogle me...and having guys

\textsuperscript{83} Emile Buchwald, ed., \textit{Transforming Rape Culture} (Minneapolis, 1993), 197.
\textsuperscript{84} Pitts, 54.
drive by and yell, 'hey baby'...And it made it really difficult for me to feel comfortable in my body. So having the dragon put on my breast was a way of saying, 'this is mine.'

The re-inscription of her breast was clearly important to Karen when she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She made one request to her doctor and it was to "save the tattoo." After surviving breast cancer, she covered her scars with nipple piercings and other tattoos, noting that "they were ways of claiming my body for me."

Another victim of physical abuse who used scarifications to purge herself of her past was “Mandy,” a fifty-three year old member of the women’s S/M community. She recalled her victimization:

I was afraid of knives. I had a partner, my daughter's father, who became violent...and used to threaten me with knives a lot...Friends knew, and if somebody brought a knife...I'd go off to make coffee in the kitchen and somebody would say, 'Mandy is really uncomfortable around knives.'

The incisions or cuts made from tattoos and other scarification practices allowed Mandy to face her fears of being punctured and regain command over her body. Like flagellation among early Franciscans, Karen and Mandy used tattooing as a vehicle for their spirituality, where the procedural pain from marking the skin allowed the purging of their past. This was also similar to Christian crusaders and pilgrims who denigrated and repressed their bodies for spiritual rewards.

For anthropologist John Rush, spirituality or transformation from the pain of tattoos was comparable to other alterations: plastic surgery, exercising, yoga, and even anorexia and bulimia. All of these methods attempted to modify the body along with one's conception of self—even those considered as mutilation or pathological, such as

86 Karen was the pseudonym given to subject by Pitts, 59.
87 Pitts, 59.
88 Mandy was the pseudonym given to subject by Pitts, 69.
89 The tattooing of Christian pilgrims was discussed in Chapter One.
bulimia or anorexia. Rush argued, "For bulimics there is a sin of eating (gluttony) and the purging of that sin." According to Hewitt, anorexia is also perceived to be harmful, but if placed in the context of religion then it symbolizes "'supreme mind control' in order to ignore the pain." Hewitt added, "In medieval culture, controlling the appetite [if sanctioned by the Church] was an accepted method of demonstrating...suffering and service to mankind. Fasting was considered 'fundamental to the model of female holiness.'" However, with the increased "medicalization" of the body by the 1960s, bulimia, anorexia, and tattooing were thrust into the discourse of disorders, pathology, or harmful self-mutilation. In opposition to the “moral synthesis” created by the medical and scientific community, tattoos proved to be therapeutic in rewriting a hurtful past; they also became important in stabilizing feminine identity when mainstream idealized boundaries of the flesh were violated.

In a culture where a great deal of emphasis is placed on the totality of the corporeal body, a missing limb or breast from a mastectomy can sometimes be perceived as the end of beauty and desirability for some women. For example, mastectomy survivor Linda Marie recalled, “I had always found pleasure and comfort in my naked visits with myself in front of my mirror. My mastectomy robbed me of that private joy. Four years passed and my sorrow grew and finally got my attention.” Shortly afterwards, Marie was directed to a picture of another mastectomy victim who had

---

90 Both Mike Featherstone and John Rush discuss this “no pain, no gain” ideal within Christianity. Featherstone uses the monks who are demanded to emphasize exercise and dietary control as part of their ascetic routine. John Rush, Spiritual Tattoo: A Cultural History of Tattooing, Piercings, Scarifications, Branding, and Implants (Berkeley, 2005), 74.

91 Hewitt, 48.

92 Michel Foucault’s "moral synthesis" discussed in Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason (1988), where the medical degree was a guarantee of the doctor’s wisdom and respectability in creating assumptions about the self, body, and truth that contribute to producing pathological meanings of bodily practices.

93 Madame Chinchilla, 34.
tattooed a rose over the scar. Inspired by this woman in the picture, Marie tattooed her chest with an ocean theme consisting of a seahorse and a fish swimming through seaweed. (See figure 3.10) After she was tattooed, she said, “I cannot explain why or how this tattoo on my chest made it possible for me to feel whole again. But it has. Now when I stand in front of my mirror, the woman I see and love is happy and eager again. I am grateful to have her back.” 94

The inspiration for Linda Marie was Andree O’Connor, whose photos were featured in articles, on television, and in magazines such as Ms. Magazine and The London Guardian. In discussing her battle with breast cancer, O’Connor poetically said, “A rose grew in its place, a rose that climbs into my dreams. Alchemy being afoot, beauty tricked the cops. The cancer police made me an outlaw and a child of the plants. My rose is a badge admitting me to the green promises. Wild we die. Wild we go with life.” 95 (See figure 3.11) Both Marie and O’Connor initially mourned the loss of a prominent body part that was integral to their feminine identity, but with tattooing they were able to assuage their loss and restore their self-esteem. This recovery process enabled both Marie and O’Connor to understand some of the issues surrounding the mainstream normative female body. By not using other alternatives such as prostheses or breast reconstruction, Marie and O’Connor were adopting tattoos as part of their new aesthetics of beauty.

The new notions from the youth culture of punk and the sexual revolution cross-fertilized with ideas on race from the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. "Black is Beautiful" became one of the catchphrase of the Black Power movement in the late 1960s.

---

94 Ibid, 34.
95 Ibid, 32.
and this caught on with Jacci Gresham. Gresham added her own aesthetics to the expanding tattoo expressions of the contemporary era. One of Gresham’s clients, Laura Lee, had two portraits of Malcolm X on her body. (See figure 3.12) Gresham stated, “I tattooed most of her [Laura Lee’s] body and talked her into getting the African-American pride stuff.” Lee was also tattooed with skulls on her body to represent “every victim of the black holocaust, in which untold numbers of Africans died on slave journeys from Africa to America.” Gresham recalled during her career that her black female clients would often want “African symbols or sometimes request ethnic spins on white American icons, such as Betty Boop…recast as a black character, triggering a mini-trend among her black women clients.” (See figure 3.13) This appropriation of a previously white sexual American icon is a telling sign of the militant black struggle for rights during the late 1960s and 1970s, as issues of skin color and caste were emphasized. Slogans like “Black is beautiful,” according to historian bell hooks, “worked to intervene and alter those racist stereotypes that had always insisted black was ugly, monstrous, undesirable.” As seen from these examples, tattooing for African-American women was a way to visibly politicize their bodies with the empowering militant black slogans and images of the 1970s.

---

96 African American leaders like Malcolm X wanted to "unbrainwash" his people from believing that black was ugly and shameful. This message was repeated by Stokely Carmichael in 1966 and James Brown exclaiming, "Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud!" The contribution of black aesthetics to American culture was also seen in the arts of the 1960s that used the body.

97 Mifflin, 132.
98 Ibid, 132.
99 Ibid, 131.
100 bell hooks, Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations (New York, 1994), 174.
The empowerment from marking the skin and the denigration of tattoo culture by the scientific and medical communities highlighted the dialectics of conflicting discussions surrounding larger issues with the American body in the 1960s and the 1970s. The permeable nature of the body allowed further re-ascription as other groups cannibalized non-western cultures. The aesthetics of punk incorporated elements of Native American cultures like the Mohawk hairstyle, facial piercings, and tattoos. This appropriation by various subcultures allowed the infusion of new aesthetics in the tattoo culture of the 1970s and 1980s. The subject of the next chapter, developing subcultures like the modern primitives from the late 1970s contributed new ideals and brought larger segments of Americans into the tattooed community of the 1980s. This expanded participation within the tattoo culture of the 1980s was due to a new generation of “professional” artists who transformed tattooing into skin art. This transition to art form and symbols of individuality made tattoos more accessible to mainstream America. From the media to tattoo magazines, Americans gained a greater appreciation of tattooing as skin art, thus allowing more interaction among tattoo enthusiasts after the 1970s.
"Illustrated Community":
The Creation of the Modern Tattoo Community from the late 1960s to the 1990s

In 1939, Groucho Marx of the Marx Brothers sang one of his signature tunes, "Lydia, the Tattooed Lady" in the film At the Circus. In his lyrics, Marx detailed various tattoos from the Battle of Waterloo to President Andrew Jackson, implying Lydia’s "experience" and suggesting her desirability. Toward the end of the rendition, Marx crooned:

She once sweeps an admiral clean off his feet  
The ships on her hips made his heart skip a beat  
And now the old boy's in command of the fleet  
For he went and married Lydia.

"Lydia" symbolized an object of male pleasure and an "encyclopedia" for the male reader. Scholar Karin Beeler argued that because Marx was famously known for his lustful advances to women in films, he became a "reinforcer for the dominance of a masculinist aesthetic." Traditionally, tattoo culture in America had been dominated by men, as clients and as practitioners in the profession of tattooing. Women were usually restricted to roles as objects of the male gaze as seen through pin-up or nude designs. However, after the 1950s there was a significant gender shift as seen in the previous chapter. This change was reflected in Ray Bradbury’s The Illustrated Man.

Adapted to film in 1969, The Illustrated Man provided a significant break from Beeler's "masculinist aesthetic." As a collection of eighteen short stories, it was a

---

3 Karin Beeler, Tattoos, Desire, and Violence: Marks of Resistance in Literature, Film, and Television (North Carolina, 2005), 40.
narrative of sorts linked and told through the body of a tattooed drifter. The narrator of the film encountered the Illustrated Man (Rod Steiger), who was looking for work in the carnival or as a sideshow attraction. The narrator notices that the tattooed man was a walking work of art which produced “unusual aesthetic effects, because they (tattoos) move[d] at night and predict[ed] the future.”

(See figure 4.01) The Illustrated Man explained that he became a canvas for a time-traveling woman who deceived him with her arts of deception. Presented as the femme fatale in the film adaptation, the female tattooist was an object of obsession for the Illustrated Man (Rod Steiger). She has indelibly stamped him, starting with a rose on the palm, stating, "There is rose, a rose you'll always carry in your hand. A rose from Felicia." Much like earlier examples of women having a lover's name tattooed on their bodies, the Illustrated Man was the property of Felicia (Claire Bloom). Felicia was also "demonized" as she had appropriated the skill of marking the skin, traditionally a male prerogative. Moreover, the Illustrated Man's horror at the magical nature of the moving images suggested a "resistance to female generated texts or images." His horror highlights male anxieties with female tattooists, especially as women became the creators of images instead of "merely serving as a tattooed object of masculine desire."

By the 1970s, tattoos were no longer a fully white male preserve as other groups contributed to new aesthetics that expanded participation by larger segments of Americans. This chapter examines the impact of modern primitives, female tattooists, gay activists, and the hip-hop generation. Part of this study also reveals the growth of the

---

4 Beeler, 48.
6 Beeler, 49.
modern tattooed community, with the publications of works which revealed the new
direction of the tattoo industry. These publications made tattooing more accessible to
mainstream America, thereby increasing the appeal of tattooing as an art form and as a
symbol of individuality. This chapter also highlights the professionalization and
regulation of the tattoo industry among the “renaissance generation” of tattooists who
challenged established bans against tattoo parlors. With help from the American Civil
Liberties Union (ACLU), tattoo culture became acceptable for middle-class consumption.
Tattoo conventions and organizations devoted to the illustrated body also allowed greater
interaction among tattoo enthusiasts. However, like the Illustrated Man's horror at the
power of female generated texts, these advances leading to the growth of tattooing
highlighted divisions within the indelibly marked community. In order to expand their
clientele and improve the reputation of scarification, those conventions and organizations
of tattooists often marginalized gays, the disabled, and convicts.

New Voices: Expanding Aesthetics on the Male Skin

Tattooist Cliff Raven offered his thoughts to anthropologist Arnold Rubin on one
of the reasons for the tattoo renaissance after the 1970s. Raven asserted that tattoos were
an avenue to soothe or reinforce the “ego under pressure.” Tattoos provided an outlet for
an alternative identity enabling a person to escape the psychic constraints of society.
Raven illustrated this evasion with an example of someone who wanted to “escape to a
simpler time and more straightforward values by putting on the marks of a Maori chief, a
North African courtesan, a pirate, an Indonesian headhunter, a Japanese samurai,…a
Scythian Warrior, [or] a Buddhist monk.”7 In other words, tattoos were a romanticist link

Transformations of the Human Body (Los Angeles, 1988), 255.
to pre-industrial societies that modified their bodies and therefore it was believed to be natural. Tattooing like the “Hottentot Venus,” who was displayed in nineteenth-century Europe, was savage, sexually unrestrained, and dangerous.\(^8\) It was dangerous to the modern, imperialist, white, male body because of its elements of the exotic “other,” which both repulsed and attracted.\(^9\) It also referenced the romanticism situated in western thought since Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s eighteenth-century discussion of man in the state of nature, where each step after the “savage” stage toward perfection of the individual was, in fact, the opposite—the decay of man. In contrast to the decay or deadness of industrialized Europe, primitive life for some romanticists was supposed to be more “authentic.”\(^10\) By the 1970s, this romanticist aesthetic found expression with the men of the modern primitive movement.

Coined by Fakir Musafar in 1978, modern primitivism linked body modifications to non-Western, spiritual, and communal rituals. Possibly influenced by William Whyte’s best-selling work, *The Organization Man* (1956), Musafar’s modern primitivism gravitated to tribal or indigenous cultures as those communities were perceived to be more authentic, and spiritual. For the modern primitives, America was in the stage of advanced capitalism fraught with environmental, social, and spiritual problems.\(^11\)

Largely consisting of white, middle-class males, modern primitives after the 1980s were

\(^8\) The Hottentot Venus or Sarah Baartman was a South Africa woman sold into slavery and paraded through Europe often disrobed. Her bodily features, particular her buttocks became proof for many Europeans about the oversexual nature of African people.

\(^9\) For example, while cartoons of thick lips or body piercings highlighted the repulsive difference of a Filipino displayed in the 1904 World’s Fair in St. Louis, it also reflected nostalgia when Europeans and Americans regretted the loss of the very cultures it was their mission to assimilate and civilize.


\(^11\) William Whyte argued that corporate life with concepts of “commitment” and “loyalty” meant conforming to an ideal which meant the loss of individualism. Besides themes of conformity, Whyte argued the corporate man felt “empty” as the ethos of materialism dominated his life.
rebelling against the alienating, repressive, and technocratic nature of modern America. Like the early European romanticists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, modern primitives focused on the past or cultures from distant lands. Musafar promoted "flesh hangings and other practices modeled after those of indigenous cultures like the Native American Sun Dance..., Meso-American teeth filing, Burmese neck rings,...and African forms of scarification and lipstretching."\(^{12}\)

Modern primitivism as an ideal works to confound historically produced borders between the primitive and civilized body. The documentary *Dances Sacred and Profane* (1985) has Musafar and Jim Ward simulating the Sioux Sun Dance. (See figure 4.02) Musafar, sporting a bone pierced through his septum and tribal tattoos on his back, and Ward, with a tattoo “sleeve” on one arm, were donning traditional Native American clothing during their presentation.\(^{13}\) In the background, there was a sound akin to a Native American flute. After Ward applied paint onto the body of Musafar, both men were seen with hands raised, communing with the sky. Musafar then proceeded to pierce the skin of his chest and hang from ropes attached to the branch of a tree.\(^{14}\) Musafar’s flesh hanging performance was famous in the body modification subculture, especially for the modern primitives. The purpose of reenacting traditional body practices of native cultures is to “invert hierarchies of ethnicity by valorizing the ‘primitive’ as politically, culturally, and spiritually superior.”\(^{15}\)

\(^{12}\) Victoria Pitts, 119.
\(^{13}\) Tattoo “Sleeves” are design pieces that fully-cover the entire arm.
\(^{15}\) Victoria Pitts, 127.
The return to the primordial man through practices like tattooing was an idealization of primitive cultures in contrast to the “over-civilized” America. In other words, the textured, marked body was layered with spiritual meaning, while the normative American body was smooth and empty. Marking the skin made the modern primitives “closer to nature, in harmony with the spiritual realm, egalitarian, [and] nonrepressive.” The modern primitive movement coincided with increased documentation of tattooing in tribal cultures such those in Borneo, Samoa, New Zealand, and Hawaii. One such publication was Ed Hardy’s *Tattootime*. The first issue in 1982, titled “New Tribalism,” had three articles detailing the new aesthetic: 1) Cliff Raven’s “Thoughts on Pre-Technological Tattooing”; 2) Leo Brereton’s “Tattooed in Borneo”; and 3) Dan Thome’s “Manuia Le Pe’a.” (See figure 4.03) This confluence of the primitive movement and the new tribal style tattooing also came to define the modern tattoo community as a tribe.

DeMello stated that the concept of a “tribe” or of the “tribal” has “within certain circles” become a “metaphor for the tattoo community in the 1980s and 1990s, incorporating notions of both community as well as the ideology of modern primitivism.” This is a significant foundational paradigm considering that with the influence of hip-hop and rapper Afrika Bambaataa’s Zulu Nation in the 1980 and early 1990s, the conception of “tribe” shifts to “nation” for the tattoo community in the twenty-

---

16 Fakir Musafar’s modern primitivism was similar to other trends in the 1980s, where corporate retreats involved going to a sweat lodge. Other movements involved the New Age or Western Spiritualism which combined Eastern and Western spiritual and metaphysical traditions. Inspirations came from major religions around the world such as Buddhism.
17 DeMello, 176.
19 DeMello, 177.
first century. The influence of modern primitivism was also seen in the lexicon used by members of the modern tattoo community who were outside the circle of modern primitives. DeMello noted in the narratives she collected of people who described their tattoo experience that they frequently used words such as “archetypal,” “ritualistic,” “primal,” “instinctive,” and “pagan.”

An example of the modern primitive aesthetic was seen with “Blake,” who wore “dreadlocks, stretched earlobes, blackwork and full-sleeve tattoos, scars, burns, facial piercings, and a bone through the septum.” His goal was to educate the public about global cultures and to “see that we’re all connected as human beings.” Blake exclaimed, “When we learn to respect each other enough, then that makes us more understanding about the people we’re destroying in the rain forest!” “Andrew” was similarly modified and he felt that his modifications liberated him from his bodily urges. He argued, “That is what is steeped in their (non-Western) ritual and not in ours.” In other words, indigenous rituals offered a spiritual release that was absent in modern America. The modern primitive discourse allowed men to address spiritual issues through tattooing. This empowerment through marking the skin was also seen with women asserting their views over bodily rights and sexuality.

New Voices: Expanding Aesthetics on the Female Skin

By the 1970s, tattooists like Lyle Tuttle used a "softer and kinder art form" that conformed to the contours of the female body. The appropriation of marking the skin by

---

21 DeMello, 177.
22 Blake was a pseudonym given by psychologist Victoria Pitts, 130.
23 Blake interview with Victoria Pitts, 130.
24 Andrew was also a pseudonym given by Pitts, 131.
women after the 1960s was emblematic of the feminist movement as women asserted rights over their bodies. However, breaking into the profession proved especially problematic. With women more prominent from the feminist movement of the 1960s, female tattooists became more prevalent during the 1970s. In 1977, Sheila May opened a tattoo shop in Los Angeles that catered to women. Her style also set her apart from her male counterparts, as May used pastel colors rather than black, bold outlines which appealed to more women. In 1981, May, with her subtle touch, expanded into cosmetic alteration, applying ink to lips, eyelids, and brows. Singer James Brown had his eyebrows done by May.

Tattooist Vyvyn Lazonga was not a feminist in the 1960s but had her feminist consciousness raised when she "hit the glass ceiling" at Danny Danzl's tattoo shop. As an apprentice, she was given shoddy equipment and passed over for promotion by less qualified male apprentices. Lazonga recalled, "There was sexism and prejudice and I resented it. I had to use faulty equipment and I just felt jealous. The springs on the machine broke every week and I wasn't allowed to change them [so] I wasn't able to do good work." While Danzl did not have the time to fix her machine, he did have time to "lovingly inlay them with glittering fake jewels." Vyvyn Lazonga or “Madame Lazonga” as she became known, went on to open her first shop in 1979 and, along the way, she had been voted "Most Beautifully Tattooed Woman in the World" in 1978. (See figure 4.04) Lazonga proved a shock to most people in the 1970s and 1980s as she had

---

25 While there were female tattooists in the past like Maud Steven's and Mildred Hull in the 1920s, tattooing as a profession was a male preserve. Hull describes the hostility from male tattooists in Mifflin, 36.
26 Mifflin, 57.
27 Mifflin, 57.
"sleeves" or full arm pieces that extended from her shoulders to her thighs. It was not the novelty that gained her recognition. It was her skills with Japanese aesthetics, art deco, and Victorian floral patterns "that follow[ed] the natural curves of the body and enhance[d] rather than cover[ed] bare skin." (See figure 4.05) Lazonga stated in an interview with Skin and Ink magazine, "Women are masters of illusion. They always have been with makeup and clothing. A tattoo is just part of the illusion." In 2010, Lazonga told Inked Magazine, "Tattoos don't need a great, grand story. I want to go the opposite; I don't want any of my tattoos to mean anything. I want people to see them as walking art, which is different than trying to convey many messages on your body." Lazonga’s view underscored the importance of the artistic expression, considering that tattooing, historically, was dominated by a "masculinist aesthetic," as seen with the typical pinup designs on many men. It was an aesthetic which usually resulted in the representation of women as objects of male desire. Rather than inking objects of male desire, female tattooists—along with some of their male counterparts—contributed to the "renaissance" in tattooing by injecting a feminine aesthetic and allowing greater appreciation among mainstream Americas regarding tattooing as an art form.

Jamie Summers or "La Palma," had studied at the San Francisco Art Institute. She had become disenchanted with the “petty and trivial aspect” of the artist’s life, which involved “playing gallery politics, producing irrelevant commodities, [and] installing

---

28 As mentioned earlier in Chapter Three, tattoo “sleeves” are fully-covered designs on an arm.
29 Vyvyn Lazonga’s interview with Skin and Ink magazine taken from Mifflin, 57.
31 Karin Beeler, Tattoos, Desire, and Violence: Marks of Resistance in Literature, Film, and Television (North Carolina, 2006), 40.
With her art background, Summers later apprenticed under Hardy until they argued over her efforts to "enrich tattooing by rejecting traditional imagery and techniques." Taking a shamanistic approach, she evaluated clients through a consultation that led to surreal images. Decisions over designs emerged from interior sources (the client's psyche), "rather than from the artist's ego or through the process of intellectualization." Summers eventually partnered with Ruth Marten, who had studied at Boston's Museum School. By 1980, both women were producing a distinct "New York aesthetics" with abstract designs. Summers used frog or leopard spots while Marten applied a "Mondrian painting on a woman's thigh." (See figures 4.06 and 4.07) For Summers, Hardy was undoubtedly creating the best Japanese-American designs, but he had "never developed his own style." Summers acknowledged that her position on tattoo styles "would appear elitist to traditional tattooists," but she, like Hardy, wanted to elevate the tattoo craft to great art.

By the 1980s, the ranks of female tattooists were growing and attaining prominence. Along with Madame Lazonga, Sheila May, Jamie Summers, and Ruth Marten in the 1970s, there were other women such as Christie “Toots” Squire, “Original Sin” of Spider Webb Studios, and Angela “The Shadow” who were changing “the basic assumptions about tattoo design.” Tattooist Spider Webb’s former apprentice, Angela, learned the entire craft from him, which included using and sterilizing the equipment to

---

33 Summer’s approach to tattoo designs also suggested the influence of New Age Spiritualism that came in vogue in the late 1970s and lasted well into the 1980s.
34 Rubin, 257.
35 Mifflin, 58.
36 Rubin, 258.
creating subtle effects with color. Like many of her female peers, she had natural talent and formal training as an artist. According to Webb, she was “rapidly” becoming one of the “finest tattooists in the world, male or female.” Webb believed that women’s influence in tattooing would not “merely change traditional designs by adding a ‘feminine’ flair, but will create a radically new aesthetic.”

Efforts by female tattooists in the late 1970s to raise tattooing to an art form with its expanded aesthetics brought greater participation for future generation of female tattooists and their clients.

With the backdrop of diagnosed eating orders, women participating in bodybuilding contests, and the horrors of plastic surgery, the 1980s brought sharper criticism from some feminists. According to Mifflin, the physical transformations incurred a backlash from groups ranging from "radical feminists...[to] fundamentalist Christians in their assault on pornography,...cosmetic surgery and tattooing." Those who supported tattooing and body scarification felt that these transformations "afforded a means of control through 'modifying the only temple over which one is sovereign.'" Like cosmetic surgery, scarring or marking the skin also brought out opposition during the backlash against women in the 1980s. Mifflin argued that cosmetic surgery highlighted the "conformist" impulse to "blend in," while tattoos underscored the "resisters who got tattoos to stand out." She added that the contradictory impulses showed the "conflicted state of feminism in a decade when women were enjoying new freedoms and backsliding against the forces of unexpected demons."
Just as feminist-performance art in the 1960 and 1970s violated normative beauty standards set by male domination, tattooing served to challenge the male vision of the female body—smooth, glossy, and sexual. Built upon the modern primitivism of the late 1970s, and running concurrently with self-help and New Age enthusiasms, body modifications were tools to shift the boundaries of the female body—to be textured and layered with new meaning. (See figures 4.08 and 4.09) First articulated in an issue of *Modern Primitives* in 1989, body modifications intended to shift the normative limits of the female form. Body piercer Raelyn Gallina suggested that the appropriation of non-western indigenous scarification practices in new rituals could serve as a path to salvage female bodies from rape or abuse.41 Like Karen and Mandy, “Elaine” was part of the lesbian S/M community and a victim of abuse and incest by her father.42 According to Pitts, Elaine was perceived to be a tomboy or "butch," and she held the position of forewoman on a construction team. Elaine felt body modifications allowed her to ascribe new meaning to her body. Her realization was that "the only thing I have even the semblance of control over is my body. And how it looks. So I can make it bigger, I can make it smaller. I can scar it, I can pierce it. And some of those things I can make go away."43

An underground film, *Stigmata: The Transfigured Body* (1991), also highlighted this body movement which viewed "nonmainstream body markings” as “significant forms of gender resistance." Cyberpunk writer Kathy Acker equated the normative female body with constraint and oppression and stated, "I dislike that because you're a

42 Subjects Karen and Mandy mentioned in Chapter Three were given pseudonyms and interviewed by Pitts.
43 Elaine is the pseudonym given by Pitts, 62.
woman you can't do things, that the word 'no' is the first word you learn and it's burnt on your flesh." Another woman in the film who had tattoos and genital piercings claimed her body modifications were "upsetting" to men because "men impose their wills and their ideas about how women should look." 44 For these women, tattoos provided alternative way to express feminine power and establish new meaning for their bodies. On the other hand, “Lisa” was not a victim of physical abuse, incest, or rape. For Lisa, body modifications were an avenue to feminine power. 45 The owner of many scars, tattoos, and piercings, she became interested in the body art movement when she was in college. She had studied contemporary body image and gender relations and had made comparisons to pre-industrial societies. She began imitating elements from Native American and African rituals and soon convinced her friends to do the same. The ritualistic scarring for her and her friends was a bonding experience as women independent of men yet supported by one another. 46 In these instances, some female clients and tattooists, during the period of Self-Help and New Age enthusiasm of the 1980s, were using new designs and ritualized tattooing as an expression of personal growth and this was also seen with radical gay, lesbian, and transgendered activists.

New Voices: Expanding Aesthetics on “Queer” Skin

Before 1973, homosexuality was diagnosed as a disease, curable with treatments that included hormone and shock therapy. 47 By 1973, homosexuality was no longer considered a psychiatric disorder, but with the later spread of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), the discourse on homosexuality continued to emphasize a

44 Description of Stigmata in Victoria Pitts, In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modifications (New York, 2003), 56.
45 Pitts, 62.
46 Pitts, 62.
47 Pitts, 90.
malaise with sexual transgression—thus its original name, Gay Related Immunodeficiency Syndrome (GRIDS). By the 1980s, the fear of AIDS was rising. A 1985 poll taken by the Los Angeles Times found that fifty-one percent of respondents supported a “quarantine” of AIDS patients. Fifty-five percent also refused to send their children to a “classroom where another pupil had AIDS.” Seventy-five percent supported passing stronger laws targeting homosexuals and others in groups with “high risks for AIDS” to keep them from donating blood or having sex with another person. This homophobia discovered by the Los Angeles Times confirmed that a “majority of Americans” favored drastic measures such as using “tattoos to mark those with the deadly disorder.”

Journalist William F. Buckley echoed sentiments from the poll and felt that everyone detected with AIDS “should be tat[0]ooed in the upper forearm, to protect common needle-users, and on the buttocks, to prevent the victimization of homosexuals.” The debate surrounding tattooing AIDS victims clearly highlighted struggles over civil rights on the body. One angry respondent compared Buckley’s recommendation to the state policy of Nazi Germany. The respondent stated, “Tattooing was another Nazi idea for keeping track of undesirables marked for destruction….Strong language, yes, but not too strong when one considers what Mr. Buckley is proposing: stripping away the civil rights and probably the livelihoods of – how many?—people to

---


preserve the purity of the race.”50 Another reader also emphasized Buckley’s antipathy to homosexuals and the violation of basic civil rights in tattooing AIDS victims.51 Facing these challenges in America, gay and lesbian groups were more active in subverting notions of the normative body.

By rejecting the biological determinism promoted by mainstream America, some feminists, gays, and lesbians exposed sexuality and gender as ideological constructions. The "queering" of bodies through non-normative desires, pleasures, and identities had been the strategy of gay radicals since the rise of AIDS. This was especially seen in the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP) and Queer Nation, which attempted publicly to counter the heterodoxy of mainstream culture in the late 1980s. According to scholar and gay activist Lucas Hilderbrand, what made ACT-UP so queer was that it "infused politics with polymorphous desire and subversive sensibilities." Hilderbrand added that ACT-UP was as "intimidating as a gay bar" with its radicalizing effects, including "blazing graphics, chants, television cameras, police hostility, and deep passion."52 This form of radicalism was also seen in body art practices and modifications among segments of the gay and lesbian communities.

According to Pitts, "wearing" the queer body is "politicized as a speech act." In this case, queering modalities included piercing, scarring, branding, and other practices like S/M that violated sexual norms and "raise[d] homophobic and erotophobic responses

---

from mainstream culture."  

Body theorist Michel Foucault, before his death from AIDS in 1984, served as a proponent of gay rights. He stated:

> I think that S/M [practitioners]...are inventing new possibilities of pleasure with strange parts of their body—through the eroticisation of the body. I think it's a kind of new creation...which has [as] one of its main features what I call the desexualization of pleasure....These practices are insisting that we can produce pleasure with very odd things, very strange parts of our bodies, in very unusual situations, and so on.  

For Foucault, queering the body through "odd things" like scarring, piercing, or tattooing positioned the body as the site of contention over sexual pleasure and difference. It reflected a radical "politicization of the erotic, sexual body, and engages issues that are of particular importance to gay, lesbian, and transgendered communities." As highlighted previously in Chapter Three, tattooing and piercing were a substantial part of the gay and lesbian subculture in the 1960s and 1970s, and this continued into the 1980s as it commingled with non-western rituals and practices in the 1980s and the 1990s.

   Gay magazines, videos, books, and e-zines were publicly promoting scarification practices similar to those of the modern primitives, along with corsetry for both men and women. Among the most prominent publications was Fakir Musafar's *Body Play and Modern Primitives Quarterly* (1992-1999), which linked erotic pleasures to indigenous and spiritual rituals. Another publication *Bad Attitude!*, according to Pitts, was a lesbian S/M magazine that "admiringly describes how International Ms. Leather is a woman who ends her workday by going home and cutting her wife." These

---

53 Pitts, 91.
55 Pitts, 92.
57 Pitts, 93.
publications added to the articulation of a discourse that identified body markings as a practice politicizing and publicly queering the body.

According to Pitts, “Dave” was formerly married and currently part of the local gay and transgendered activist movement, and he participated in the "body modification/fetish/SM scene." He thought of himself as transsexual and considered his gender "it," showing off his liminal nature through "corsetry, piercing, and branding, to create a spectacularly anomalous body." His permanent modifications by branding were done publicly by a female body artist who had his skin "reddended from the wounds it received; later, the nearly foot-long burn scarred, keloided, and browned in a permanent design." Dave described his experience as a "pleasurable, intimate, erotic drama." Tattooist Spider Webb’s 1979 discussion on the relationship between tattooing and S/M explained that “the practice of tattooing can itself, of course, be seen as sadomasochistic, with the tattooists [or body modifier] as the active partner and the tattooee as the passive.” In other words, normative gender roles were inverted as the normative male who was supposed to be “assertive and even aggressive” was actually passive during the scarification process. In contrast, the normative female was supposed to be passive, when in reality the female tattooists was active and penetrating. Pitts argued that Dave’s passive character in the performance subverted the dominant ideology that prescribed "sexuality as other-directed, heterosexual, and procreative, in which the male is supposed to be assertive and even aggressive."

According to scholar Kaja Silverman, a man who participates in this type of masochism brings “into question his identification with the [normatively] masculine

58 Dave was the pseudonym given to the subject and interviewed by Pitts, 99.
60 Pitts, 99.
position."\textsuperscript{61} For Dave, the ideal situation would be to "show off" his branding and his other body modifications without ill consequences, as he asked, "Are we fighting for the rights of straight people? Or are we fighting for a larger set of rights including a woman's right to go topless in public, or...for showing off the branding? Because people could see that as sick. I was walking on a beach and I had my pierced nipples and a straight man said, 'that's sick.'"\textsuperscript{62} "Queer" aesthetic, in some cases, was a commentary on the larger context of discrimination by mainstream America, and it formed the continuity with the earlier leather and S/M gay subcultures of the 1960s and 1970s that used scarification for spiritual and therapeutic uses. It was a body movement where the spiritual and therapeutic function of tattooing was adopted by “individuals [who] belonged to both the tattoo community and S/M scene” and allowed the "cross-fertilization" of tattoo functions which were appropriated and popularized by "the middle-class tattoo community."\textsuperscript{63} The appropriation of "queer" aesthetics by the middle-class tattoo community was also possible because of the rise of another style, hip-hop.

\textbf{New Voices: Expanding Aesthetics on the Hip-Hop Skin}

African Americans born between 1963 and 1978 were dubbed by scholar Mark Anthony Neal, the “Soul Babies,” or the “Hip Hop” generation, the generation that matured after the Civil Rights Movement and faced the realities of “Reaganomics,” which included the “change from urban industrialism to deindustrialism, from segregation to desegregation, from essential notions of blackness to metanarratives of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{61} Kaja Silverman, \textit{Male Subjectivity at the Margins} (New York, 1992), 185.
\item \textsuperscript{62} Pitts, 102.
\item \textsuperscript{63} DeMello, 143.
\end{itemize}
blackness.” In other words, places like the South Bronx in New York in the 1970s and South Central in Los Angeles, California in the 1980s witnessed the ghettoization of neighborhoods as federal funding for social services was continuously cut from these predominantly black and Hispanic areas. Fueled by urban frustrations, the “Afro-Latinized” backbeat of hip-hop culture took form in graffiti, DJing, break-dancing, and rapping. These cultural expressions were central for the “invisible generation” of Hispanics and black youths suffering from such economic neglect. The hip-hop culture was a “litmus test indicating and accenting many of the urgent issues and ills of black America, as well as those of mainstream America.” For the hip-hop generation, this entailed the realization of the failures of the Civil Rights and Black Power generations and their “inability to curtail institutional racism and combat ongoing structural inequality.”

Hip-Hop was also an “in-your-face-B-Boying” attitude with an extreme competitive and individualistic ethos, and it was a style reflected in dance, graffiti, rapping, DJing, or “tatting” the body like rapper Tupac Shakur. For hip-hop scholar Jeff Chang, it was “going to war. What do we say? We say you’re going to battle. You go out to fight.” The vanguard of the new culture and its spread to mainstream culture was the graffiti artist who crossed “demarcated turfs…[to say] ‘I’m here’ and ‘fuck all y’all’ at the same time.” Graffiti artists used the New York urban landscape as their canvas, and their tags were essentially advertisements for themselves. After a brief love affair in

---

64 Reiland Rabaka, *Hip Hop’s Inheritance: From the Harlem Renaissance to the Hip Hop Feminist Movement* (Maryland, 2011), 2.
65 Rabaka, 5.
66 Rabaka, 3.
68 Chang, 73.
the highbrow art world, graffiti became a “scourge” to the mainstream press again in 1985—bringing the graffiti artists to the crossroads of their lives. Some of the graffiti writers, according to graffiti-artist-turned-tattooist Alain “Ket” Mariduena, turned to tattooing. Mariduena stated:

When subway and street painting exploded…tattoos were still seen as outlaws [sic] or outsiders [sic] symbols usually worn by tough, anti-conformist men….Many subway painters from New York fell into this category since painting was an illegal act for them and they were subsequently marginalized from the traditional art world. For that reason, tattooing seemed to be a perfect fit for some of these rebels.69

By the 1990s, the transition from graffiti artist to tattooist was seen by “UA crew’s Seen, Duster, and Med picking up the gun and applying their talents to skin.” This hip-hop generation of tattooists brought their aesthetics to the expanding trade. Old English was replaced by “elaborate script styles, cholo placa lettering, and tag hand styles on young tattoo collectors. B-boy characters…replaced Bugs Bunny; Betty Page pin-ups are now Vaughn Bode’s broads, and instead of the usual small name souvenir, arms are getting sleeved up with colorful, stylized burners.”70 With the success of rap, particularly “gangsta rap” in the late 1980s, Shakur’s tattooed body brought the message of hip-hop and style to mainstream America.

Shakur was the modern incarnation of the “badman” or “Stackolee” in African-American folklore.71 According to folklorist John W. Roberts, the Stackolee trope emphasized black heroes, who were the “champions of violence.” Their actions were not

69 Alain “Ket” Mariduena, Graffiti Tattoo: Kings on Skin (Berlin, 2010), 7.
70 Ibid, 8.
71 Among the “badman” characters in African-American folklore were Railroad Bill, John Hardy, Harry Duncan, Devil Winston, and Stackolee. For more on this subject, see John W. Roberts, From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom (Philadelphia, 1989).
always positive but rather they stood “against anything that constrains them.”72 From facing down slavery to white violence after emancipation, the “badman” reflected the “conditions and situations of the black community” and the refusal to “accept white abuse, to participate in the ‘ritual of deference.’” Roberts added that the “badman” archetype was seen in real individuals like Malcolm X and others who “aggressively fought for black civil rights as political organizers. In these cases, they became ‘men’ and ‘women’ in the eyes of the black people” providing a model of aggressive behavior in attaining freedom and equality.73

According to scholar Greg Dimitriadis, this inspiration from the badman archetype explained the reason why noted Black Panther Bobby Seale named his son after the mythic African-American badman and directed his organization to “channel the outlaw energies of Stackolee into productive political agenda.”74 Linked to the Black Panthers, Tupac Shakur, who had a panther tattooed on his left shoulder was the Stackolee of the 1990s as he balanced his “gangsta” and revolutionary heritage. Shakur, the son of Black Panther Afeni Shakur and the godson of famed Panther Geronimo Pratt, had “juice,” which meant “power, influence, and respect.” Shakur’s life mirrored both the potential and self-destructiveness of many black youths in America. Shakur had experienced “maternal drug abuse, social isolation, federal agents, fugitives, and deeply flawed father figures.”75

73 Roberts, 174-177.
74 Greg Dimitriadis, Performing Identity/Performing Culture: Hip Hop as Text, Pedagogy, and Live Practice (New York, 2001), 100.
75 Tayannah McQuillar, Tupac Shakur: The Life and Times of an American Icon (Philadelphia, 2010, 46.)
Shakur’s body, marked with gunshot wounds and tattoos, reflected his turbulent past and contributed to his commentary on black life in the “hood.” According to friend and rapper Young Noble (Rufus Cooper III), “us and [Tu]Pac seemed like the only rappers we'd really see with tattoos. I think [Tu]Pac really started the whole tattoo trend, and we was right there with him.”76 On his back, he had the classic theater masks of comedy with the caption “smile now,” while the tragedy face read “cry later.” If there was a nihilistic side to Shakur, it was expressed by the “fuck the world” scrolled across his back, and the message “My Only Fear of Death is coming back Reincarnated.” (See figure 4.10) Shakur’s style and content reflected a “noble marriage of criminality, black rage, and black nationalism.”77 The marks on his body were “keeping it real,” as the acronyms he used subverted historical black stereotypes of criminality and unprovoked violence.

When Shakur used the word “N.I.G.G.A,” it was an acronym—“Never Ignorant about Getting Goals Accomplished.” This was accentuated with the word “50 Niggaz” over an image of an AK-47 machine gun tattooed on his abdomen. Some of Shakur’s followers were convinced that this motif referred to his belief that if one black person from every U.S. state (totaling fifty) came together, then they would be stronger than any weapon (AK-47)—united.78 His first solo album, 2Pacalypse Now (1991), was a statement about the results from the War on Drugs and Gangs in the late 1980s and early

---


78 2pac2k, “Website community dedicated to Tupac Shakur’s life,” [http://www.2pac2k.de/tattoos.html#des](http://www.2pac2k.de/tattoos.html#des) (accessed 1 December 2013).
1990s and the need for black unity. Reeves argued that Shakur’s album reflected Black Panther ideology because of America’s containment of blacks in “ghettos, in jails, in poverty, in ignorance.” In his single, “Violent,” Shakur rapped:

I told ‘em fight back, attack on society  
If this is violence, then violent’s what I gotta be  
If you investigate you’ll find out where it’s comin’ from  
Look through our history, America’s the violent one.

Shakur’s message was similar to that of Bigger Thomas’ character in Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940). In Wright’s novel, Bigger Thomas was the black, native son of America, the product of American violence toward African-Americans.


Shakur exclaimed:

Trapped in the community  
One day I’m gonna bust  
Blow up on this society  
Why did ya lie to me  
I couldn’t find a trace of equality  
Work me like a slave while they lay back  
Homey don’t play that,  
It’s time I let ‘em suffer the payback.

Shakur’s emphasis on black resistance or militancy and their links to the African-American past was highlighted by a tattoo on his back with the image of a cross and the words: “Exodus 1831.” Shakur’s tattoo was a reference to Nat Turner’s rebellion on 21 August 1831 that led to the deaths of fifty-five whites.

Tupac Shakur had a deep interest in black history, and figures such as Turner, Frederick Douglass, Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr. were important

---

79 Reeves, 159-160.  
inspirations for Shakur.\textsuperscript{82} His plan for the betterment of the black community was scrawled on his abdomen: T.H.U.G L.I.F.E.. While the word “thug” conjured images of black criminality or hoodlumism, and confirmed his criminal status for his detractors, the acronym actually meant “The Hate U Give Little Infants.”\textsuperscript{83} Former Black Panther Watani Tyehimba was horrified and questioned, “What have you done?” However, after their discussion, Tyehimba realized that Shakur had not forgotten the dispossessed. For Shakur, he would “never forget where he came from. He was straddling two worlds. And he saw that we never make it as black people unless we sell out. He was saying that he never would.”\textsuperscript{84}

Shakur’s “thug life” translated into his social reform movement to protect the black community and its rights. This new code of the streets was meant to “curb the twin scourge of drugs and violence that were ravaging black neighborhoods” and this was why Shakur had “Outlaw” tattooed on his left forearm—“Operating Under Thug Lawz Az Warriors.”\textsuperscript{85} In 1992, Shakur was instrumental in organizing the “Truce Picnic,” when gang leaders from the Bloods and Crips agreed to a twenty-six item code of Thug Life. Like the Black Panthers of the 1960s and the Ghetto Brothers of the 1970s, the code was there to protect black innocents (children and the elderly) from drugs and violence through self-sufficiency or community self-police enforcement. Rule eleven of the code stated, “The Boys in Blue don’t run nothing; we do. Control the Hood, and make it safe

\textsuperscript{82} McQuillar, 101.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid, 100.
\textsuperscript{84} Watani Tyehimba’s conversation with Shakur taken from McQuillar, 104.
\textsuperscript{85} McQuillar, 102 and Website community dedicated to Tupac Shakur’s life. Taken from http://www.2pac2k.de/tattoos.html#des (accessed 1 December 2013).
for squares.” In the end, Shakur’s efforts would be criticized, but his conviction was indelibly marked on his left arm: “Only God Can Judge me.”

Shakur confirmed his Stackolee status in 1993 after he was acquitted for shooting two off-duty police officers who had been harassing a black motorist. According to journalist Sara Vilkomerson, Shakur had satisfied all his “families”—to the “riders, dope dealers and OGs [Original Gangsters] he’d befriended, he became Thug Emeritus. To the Black Panthers who raised and claimed him, he became a revolutionary. To his fans, he became the realest of the real.” Former editor-in-chief of Vibe magazine Danyel Smith wrote, “Shooting cops? And living to tell the story? And beating the rap? He was beyond real.” Shakur’s music and body were iconic, as he was able to tap into “universal human needs like an accomplished motivational speaker. Or a great Ad campaign. Plan your goals. Just do it. Ride on your enemies.” Fans were able to identify with Shakur as his lyrics were adorned with stories of disturbing personal and psychological insights. According to hip-hop scholar Greg Dimitriadis, Shakur had surpassed the goal of presenting a violent snapshot, but “help[ed] us understand what was happening inside the figure of the hero.” For example, Shakur’s “Dear Mama” stated:

And even as a crack fiend, mama
You always a black queen, mama
I finally understand it ain’t easy trying to raise a man
You always was committed
A poor single mother on welfare, tell me how ya did it.

---

86 McQuillar, 103.
88 Danyel Smith statement cited by Vilkomerson, 37.
89 Kris Ex, “G.O.A.T,” in XXL Mag
90 Dimitriadis, 100.
Chronicling his lack of a father figure, his mother’s drug addiction, and his turn toward crime, Shakur at once showed his vulnerability in explaining his choices while maintaining strength and “realness” through his signature style on stage—rapping onstage shirtless, revealing his scars and story through his life tattoos.

Overlooked by scholars of tattoo history were the contributions of Shakur and hip-hop culture to the popularity of marking the skin during the 1990s. Besides the incorporation of hip-hop aesthetics in tattooing by former graffiti artists turned tattooists, Shakur exposed Americans to his brand of “real” as hip-hop became global. According to E.D.I Mean (Malcolm Greenridge), a rapper and member of Shakur’s inner circle, Shakur “inspired the whole culture to start getting tattoos. ‘Pac had been getting tatted when he was still a teenager, before he got his record deal. When he started doing photos with his shirt off, people noticed he had a lot of tattoos.”92 From his lyrics to his tattoos, Shakur was “keeping it real” and inspiring fans, other music artists, and professional athletes to follow his message of resistance, individualism, and disdain. Rapper Hussein Fatal (Bruce Washington) also got a “thug life” tattoo and performed shirtless. Other music artists such as DMX (Earl Simmons), Lil’ Wayne (Dwayne Carter), and Chris Brown exposed their tattoos and imitated his hip-hop style, contributing to the popularity of tattoos within American culture. Marking the skin within hip-hop culture as an empowering expression shaped by Shakur coincided with a seminal period for the democratization of tattoos. From rappers to “queers,” members of the tattooed community were asserting their non-conformity to middle-class values and attitudes. For

this reason, tattooist Cliff Raven asserted that the tattoo renaissance of the late 1980s was representative of the social conventions torn out of each sector and subculture as they laid claim to:

…full participation in the social, economic, political, and artistic life of the country—from hippies to punks, from Black to Women’s to Gay Liberationists. The Tattoo Renaissance, then is another reflection of the end of the idea of America as a melting pot. The insecurities and anxieties previously felt only by marginal populations began to encroach upon the middle class in the form of inescapable interest-group identities (based on, for example, race, religion, national origin, residence, age, or economic, legal, or medical status).\(^9\)

However, that was the double-bind of any rebellious subculture. With the dissemination of individualistic values from these subcultures, the rebellious appeal was subject to appropriation and, in this instance, fostered the spread of tattooing to the middle-class.

**Disseminating Tattoo Culture**

The discourse surrounding the body from the counterculture/body movement of the 1960s and 1970s brought new possibilities as the body was reified. The illustrative nature of tattooing allowed these aesthetics to promote resistance against heterosexual, white, middle-class values. The need for new designs also ran concurrently with changes in the tattoo profession, which ironically, allowed the renaissance of tattooing as it became more palatable to middle-class sensibilities. Tattooist Sailor Jerry (Norman Keith Collins) was a key figure in the renaissance of tattooing as he expanded on the folk-art style of Americana tattooing. Before Sailor Jerry, traditional Americana tattoo pieces were smaller, independent designs like hearts, daggers, women, or Christian icons. Ironically, Sailor Jerry, a former World War II veteran with a prejudice against the

---

Japanese, found his inspiration by incorporating Asian aesthetics into his art. He was especially impressed with the use of imagery, colors, and shading. For Japanese tattooists like Hirohide or Kazuo Oguri, the whole body was a canvas for art which meant themes or styles remained consistent. This also meant that while traditional Americana folk tattooing had a centerpiece as the focus, the Japanese considered the background to be also important. Sailor Jerry was the "first to create a unified look...by using images of wind and water in the background." He influenced a new generation of tattoo artists, or the so-called "Renaissance Generation," including Don "Ed" Hardy, Cliff Raven, Don Nolan, and “Spider Webb.”

The first publication by a tattooist that offered a voice to the tattooed community was *Pushing Ink: The Fine Art of Tattooing* (1979) published by Joseph O’Sullivan or “Spider Webb.” Spider Webb’s purpose, according to his preface, was to “treat tattoo as fine art.” He argued that earlier books and references to tattoos “always took a judgmental stand against the art…[with] statements like: ‘murderers have three or more tattoos, rapists have six or more….’ All of the books were saying it was wrong.” To support his view, Spider Webb included statements from museum director Marcia Tucker and writer Oscar Wilde which linked tattooing to the fine aesthetics of art. After giving a brief history of tattooing around the world, he continued with a chapter in a question and answer format, presenting questions most commonly asked by those “who are interested in tattooing or have a general curiosity about tattooing.” Those questions included: “what are the dangers of infection?”; “does tattooing hurt?”; and “can tattooing have

---

95 DeMello, 74.
psychological value?” He also included chapters on the role of women, both as clients and tattooists, and the ways women had changed the practice of tattooing. Adding further legitimacy to marking the skin, Spider Webb explained the professionalization of his trade with artists who had college degrees and technical training in the fine arts.

It was Hardy who most fully represented the new artistic direction of the tattoo industry by taking up the craft in the 1960s and early 1970s. He graduated from the San Francisco Art Institute and apprenticed under Hirohide, thereby becoming more familiar with Japanese aesthetics. Like many modern tattooists, Hardy possessed technical art skills that became crucial to promoting tattooing as an art form, further disseminated his views through his publishing company, Hardy Marks in 1982. Hardy was also crucial in recognizing and patronizing other promising artists with unique styles. In 1977, Hardy met Jack Rudy and Charlie Cartright, who were developing Chicano/prison-style tattooing and "was so impressed by their work that he sponsored them." A year later in 1978, Hardy met Leo Zulueta, who was working on Indonesian tribal designs and Hardy sponsored him as well. In an interview with DeMello, Hardy noted the new styles were perceived to be more "sophisticated, visually powerful, and culturally and spiritually vibrant, while traditional U.S. tattooing was seen as outdated and ignorant." For this reason, Hardy made the style of tribalism, which was extremely popular with the punk movement and modern primitives of the late 1970s and early 1980s, the focus of the first issue of his magazine, TattooTime. (See figure 4.12)

Sold at tattoo conventions to further spread his views on tattooing, Hardy’s publication of TattooTime (1982-1991) consisted of five hard-bound magazines.

---

97 DeMello, 81.
98 DeMello, 81.
According to Hardy, it was to be a “high quality magazine that would reflect well on the intellectual grounding of this new tattoo movement [in the 1980s], without being stuffy.” Unlike other tattoo magazines which were published after *Tattootime*, Hardy refused to place advertisements of any kind. His first issue was titled, “New Tribalism,” which consisted of the new tribal aesthetic from the Pacific along with historical articles on tattooed mummies, Sailor Jerry, and the Swastika (pre-Nazi regime). “New Tribalism” was followed by other issues: “Tattoo Magic” (1983), “Music & Sea Tattoos” (1984), “Life & Death Tattoos” (1987), and “Art from the Heart” (1991). Hardy wanted to “spread the story of tattoos and their history.” Hardy felt that *TattooTime* “lit the fuse for the explosion of tattoo.” This was confirmed in the spring of 1983, when a tattooist approached Hardy at convention and asked, “Ed, I want you to check out the tribalism I’m doing on my girlfriend.” According to Hardy, he and Leo Zulueta made the title “New Tribalism” as a “joke.” And, as the tattooist showed the fine black graphic design on the calf of his girlfriend, Hardy thought to himself, “Tribalism—We’ve invented an art movement.”

This body movement was further publicized by other artists in books and magazines in the 1980s and 1990s. Edited by V. Vale and Andrea Juno, *Modern Primitives* (1989), and Samuel Steward’s *Bad Boys and Tough Tattoos: A Social History of the Tattoo with Gangs, Sailors, and Street-Corner Punks, 1950-1965* (1990) were works that further revealed movements surrounding the body. *Modern Primitives*, in general, gave an overview of tattooing, piercing, and other forms of scarification. Included were interviews with Fakir Musafar, Ed Hardy, Leo Zulueta, Raelyn Gallina,

---

100 Ibid, 209.
Lyle Tuttle, and Madame Lazonga, among others, all of whom discussed the spiritual rewards that came from body modifications. Steward’s work listed seventeen different reasons, aside from homosexuality, that compelled customers to get tattooed. In the end, both works highlighted that tattooing or other forms of scarification functioned similarly to “putting rings on fingers, red lacquer on toes and fingernails, rouge on cheeks, colors on eyelids, dyes on hair. If those quaint habits are all matters of personal taste and preference, then so is the decoration of the skin on tattoos.”

This exposure and expansion out of the traditional Americana tattoo style were crucial in expanding the clientele base in the 1970s and 1980s and allowed the development of a tattooed community after the 1980s. This was a community that also saw greater participation by women as clients as well as in the tattoo profession. Both Arnold Rubin and DeMello argued that Hardy’s documentation of trends in tattooing made it more palatable to the middle class.

Hygiene, Regulation, and the Freedom of Expression

Beginning with Steward and Sailor Jerry in the 1950s and 1960s, the “renaissance generation” of tattooists continued to develop methods to professionalize the tattoo craft in the 1970s and 1980s. To improve hygiene, tattooists Hardy and Tuttle were advocates of sterile procedures and environments. While Lyle Tuttle did very little to contribute to the new aesthetics, he proved crucial in further professionalizing the craft by improving health regulations for the tattoo profession in San Francisco. The regulation of the tattoo industry placed an emphasis on hygiene by modern tattooists. The shop and the actual

---

work space of the tattooist, according to tattooist Spider Webb, should be “immaculate
[or]….The best thing to compare it to is a dentist’s work area.” Quoting the
“Regulations for tattoo parlors” by the Los Angeles Department of Health Service, Spider
Webb offered guidelines which most current tattoo artists followed. Spider Webb was
clear in his intention, which was to dispel any urban myths and make available
information to mainstream America. This was especially apparent in his struggle to
overturn prohibitions against tattoo parlors in New York City. Spider Webb was
relentless in challenging the ban against tattoo shops across the nation. His book was
important in advertising the tattoo trade, as a modern craft with no “seedy” secrets and
rigid sanitary policies. As a final part of his presentation, Spider Webb included a gallery
of tattooed people who ranged from young to old, Caucasian to Asian, gay to straight,
working class to white collar—including former presidential candidate Barry Goldwater.
(See figure 4.13) Spider Webb’s goal, like that of many of his contemporaries after the
1970s, was to present tattooing in a way that made it palatable to middle-class
Americans.

Transforming perceptions surrounding marking the skin involved challenging the
critical tattoo discourse and institutional or state bans against tattoo shops. Tattooist Cliff
Raven’s assertion that the tattoo renaissance was a reflection of various subcultures
laying claim to “full participation” in America is particularly relevant considering that
tattooing since the ancient Greeks has been about rights or liberties over the body.
Within in the context of civil liberties, Spider Webb from the 1960s to 1980s publicly

questioned the New York health department’s attempts to link tattoos to hepatitis.\textsuperscript{104} Given the illegality of tattoo parlors across a number of cities and states after the 1950s, Spider Webb believed the bans against tattoo parlors were an affront to civil liberties. He argued, “If people become used to having their liberty taken away in any area, it will be easier to enslave them in others.”\textsuperscript{105} Any laws that infringed on civil liberties, according to Spider Webb, were couched in liberal terms—“for the good of the people.” He added that the ban on tattooing and linking it to hepatitis, were part of a sham to show that “our legislatures [were]…vigilant in their crusade to ensure the well-being of the people.”\textsuperscript{106}

In 1976, Spider Webb invited members of the media and publicly protested against the New York City ban on tattoo parlors in front of the Museum of Modern Art. (See figures 4.14 and 4.15) His protest took the shape of tattooing his assistant’s shoulder with a black dragon while police officers watched. After he was done with the tattoo, Spider Webb was given a ticket. He had violated Section 1706 (4) of the New York City Health Code, a code he challenged in court using the First Amendment which guaranteed freedom of expression. State Judge Geraldine Eiber ruled in favor of the City of New York and Spider Webb was found guilty. He attempted an appeal but his lawyer informed him of the cost, which ranged between $5000 and $50,000. He sought help from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and Lawyers for Artists, and both organizations refused, stating that “tattooing is not an art.”\textsuperscript{107}

Spider Webb’s protest was joined by others throughout the 1980s, when Webb again chose the steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art for his demonstration. He

\textsuperscript{104} By 1997, the state health department in New York realized there had been no hepatitis outbreak from tattoos in forty years.
\textsuperscript{106} Spider Webb and Marco Vassi, 59.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid, 71.
tattooed porn star Annie Sprinkle, who was noted for "fetish urination performances and her idea of combining sex with meditation."\textsuperscript{108} The melding of tattooing with the porn industry highlighted the clash over civil rights and the importance of the First Amendment—an umbrella which the American Civil Liberties Union used to repeal bans and protect both industries after the 1980s. According to Spider Webb, the ban on tattoo parlors was not the solution, since “with bathtub gin and the grass you buy from a friend, the survival of tattooing shows that legal prohibition doesn’t eliminate anything the people want.” He added that if a person looked hard enough, he or she would find an “underground” tattooist in New York working in their apartment. However, there was no “guarantee whatsoever of either cleanliness or competence.”\textsuperscript{109} Spider Webb and others from the “Renaissance Generation” of tattoo artists like Ed Hardy, Cliff Raven, Don Nolan, and Lyle Tuttle continued to professionalize their crafts from within. As advocates of sterile procedures and environments, these skin artists were altering the perception of tattoo parlors as dark, dingy, and unsanitary spaces.

By 1989, sixteen states had some form of regulation of tattoo parlors: Alaska, Arkansas, Connecticut, Florida, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, and Washington. In their struggle, tattoo artists finally gained assistance from the ACLU, state health departments, and various politicians to lift the bans on tattoo parlors and instead to regulate the tattoo profession. Using the First Amendment, the ACLU reversed bans on tattoo parlors in Massachusetts and other states and cities. After New York City’s repeal


\textsuperscript{109} Ibid, 71.
of the ban on tattoo parlors in 1997, there were only two states that continued the prohibition—South Carolina until 2004 and Oklahoma until 2006.\footnote{Dr. Benjamin Mojic, State Health Department Deputy Commissioner for Disease Prevention, testified before the New York City Council that it “was a clear waste of critical public health resources” to enforce the ban. To see cases where the ACLU was directly involved see http://aclum.org (accessed 2 December 2013).}

Beginning in 1989, Arkansas, Hawaii, Maine, New Hampshire, and Washington required the licensing of tattoo studios while Arkansas, Hawaii, and Maine were more stringent in also requiring the licensing of the artists and instituting hygiene standards for the tattoo studio.\footnote{Robert Louis Stauter, “Laws Regulation Tattooing,” \textit{American Journal of Public Health}, Vol. 79, No. 9, September 1989, 1308-1309.} Examples of select hygiene standards included: 1) the “operator” should be free of communicable diseases; 2) there should be no smoking during the administration of the tattoo; 3) the operator should “wear a clean light-colored short-sleeved smock during the tattoo operation”; 4) the operator should wash his or her hands with soap and water before administering the tattoo; 5) all equipment shall be cleaned with soap or detergent, thoroughly rinsed, and dried before being sterilized; and 6) steam sterilization of the “above listed equipment shall be accomplished in an autoclave with at least 15 pounds pressure per square inch (251 degree Fahrenheit) for at least 15 minutes.”\footnote{County of Los Angeles Department of Health Services, “Regulations of Tattoo Parlors,” 1979, stated by Spider Webb, \textit{Pushing Ink: The Fine Art of Tattooing} (Pennsylvania, 1979), 149-152.} With the exception of South Carolina and Oklahoma, most states did not allow the tattooing of minors unless accompanied by a parent or legal guardian. Illinois, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Texas have established a minimum age (either eighteen or twenty-one) below which “a person is not permitted to receive a tattoo.”\footnote{Robert Louis Stauter, “Laws Regulation Tattooing,” \textit{American Journal of Public Health}, Vol. 79, No. 9, September 1989, 1308-1309.} These measures facilitated the transformation from a tattoo parlor to a “fine art studio” owned or operated by individuals with fine art degrees. It was these
transformations that were mediated and emphasized by the new generation of tattooists in the 1980s and 1990s. However, the process of mediation by tattooists also created a new standard or “taste” that often marginalized certain groups.

**Bringing the Tattoo Community Together**

Probably the most well-known tattoo artist in America after the 1980s, Don “Ed” Hardy proved significant in giving voice to the tattooed community. His vision of spreading tattooing to the world was realized through organizing his own “Tattoo Expo” or convention (12-14 November 1982) on the *Queen Mary* moored in Long Beach Harbor. Tattoo conventions in the 1980s were crucial in further disseminating tattoo culture to many curious Americans. Started in 1976, the National Tattoo Club of the World evolved into a non-profit organization known as the National Tattoo Association (NTA) in 1978. As an organization it was a key element in creating a sense of community among tattoo enthusiasts in the 1980s. The NTA provided important services such as “legal assistance, technical information, tattoo equipment, and a newsletter (since 1976) to its offerings to members.”\(^\text{114}\) Since 1979, the NTA had created networks within the tattooed community as it also has been the host for the largest annual tattoo convention bringing together tattooists and enthusiasts from around the world. The NTA’s mission statement emphasized the pursuit of creating “heightened social awareness of tattooing as a contemporary art form” and raising the profile of an organization that advanced “quality, safety standards, and professionalism in the tattooing community.”\(^\text{115}\) It also conferred a certificate of membership “suitable for display in

\(^{114}\) DeMello, 126.

one’s studio” or tattoo parlors, thereby adding to the aura of professionalism for the tattooists.  

However, it was a membership that conferred, according to DeMello, the highest status and honors to “elite tattooists” rather than the “working-class street shop tattooists.”  

Tattoo historian Clinton Sanders described the NTA as a “deviant organization” whose purpose was to “reeducate the public by recasting the behavior as socially non-threatening—or even beneficial.”  

In doing so, the NTA presented a more palatable version of tattooing to expand its influence, to bring in new clients, and to further the protection of the tattooed individual. Like the NTA, the Alliance of Professional Tattooists (APT) was concerned from a legal standpoint with promoting professional standards of health and safety within tattooing. For the APT, it was better to regulate internally than to commit violations which would bring external or more stringent state regulations or worse—banning tattoos altogether. The Living Art Association (LAA), another tattoo organization based in Sacramento, was also concerned with the elevation of tattooing to a true art form for mainstream America. Professional tattooists had a vested financial interest in the success of the NTA, APT, and LAA, as the conventions sponsored by these organizations allowed elite tattooists to provide “promotional materials to [particular] tattoo studios and [their] tattoo art.” In this way, professional tattooists influenced what were considered “exemplary work exhibiting aesthetic content and technical skill.” These elite tattooists also strengthened their position by stressing the “historical and cultural roots of contemporary tattooing”

---

116 DeMello, 126.
117 Ibid, 126.
(especially classical Japanese work), and emphasize[d] the academic training and conventional artistic experience of key practitioners.”\textsuperscript{119} In other words, these tattooists were legitimizing their position by highlighting their superior knowledge and skills over their competition.

The NTA’s goal was to stress professionalism among its members which included censoring obscene or racist images, and non-normative scarification practices. In other words, the NTA’s mission was to divorce the “deviant” elements of the past from tattooing and develop a standard for acceptable skin art or expression.\textsuperscript{120} This exclusion, according to Sanders, disavowed gays, the disabled, and “other disvalued social actors.”\textsuperscript{121} Ironically, it was the rebellious aesthetics and their shock value which gave tattooing its appeal. The NTA was pre-filtering or coopting S/M, modern primitives, and “queer” subcultural body styles from the 1960s to the 1990s and rendering them powerless. Tattooist Drew B. was especially critical, stating that the NTA was “completely outmoded, they’ve been passed up. It’s just silly, they’re just not very equipped to deal with the world as it is today.”\textsuperscript{122}

By appeasing certain aesthetics perceived as normative in America, tattooed groups such as bikers, S/M, modern primitives, and convicts were marginalized. This was logical from the NTA perspective, considering that biker designs could be abrasive because of racist or obscene messages. It could also be demeaning for a woman to see a biker woman with the tattoo—“Property of ...(name of boyfriend or biker club).”

\textsuperscript{121} Sanders, 157.
\textsuperscript{122} Drew B.’s interview in DeMello, 131.
However, tattooist and biker Julia Alphonso, a woman who was herself “property” of a motorcycle club, asserted that the “property of...” tattoos on women bikers were “an honor.” The mark, according to Alphonso, came “out of love and respect” and had nothing to do with “servitude.” Some biker women were less likely to be passengers but riders in control of their own machines. Marilyn Stemp, editor of IronWorks, argued that the biker “culture started shifting to be less rugged, less male dominated.”

The static nature of the NTA also appeared in its treatment of the S/M and modern primitive communities. Considering that the rituals among both communities were viewed to be harmful or to be forms of “self-mutilation” (“flesh hangings,” “cuttings,” branding or genital piercings), the NTA has specific rules at its conventions which included no disrobing in public places, no facial tattoos, or genital piercings. This conservatism was especially apparent with Terry Wrigley, a columnist for the NTA. He described a past convention where he saw “a little man in the plastic mini skirt and fish net stockings.” Wrigley added, “It demonstrates that National’s policy of no facial tattoos or body piercings…is correct. But freaks apart, the Expo was good.” These suppressive policies and attitudes in the NTA during the 1980s, designed to bring mainstream legitimacy to tattooing, also meant marginalizing tattooed “Others.” Those “Others” who greatly influenced the evolution and democratization of tattooing were perceived outside the normative convention.

This led to the alienation of a new generation of tattoo enthusiasts who were often young, gay members “blatantly disregard[ing] National’s rules through their ostentatious

---

124 Mifflin, 76.
125 Terry Wrigley, National Tattoo Association Newsletter, Nov-Dec 1992.
display of facial tattoos, piercings, and S/M gear.”126 This exclusion brought forth greater conflict between the NTA and the APT, which was more inclusive of perceived “outsiders.” Sanders noted that with tattooing expanding to the targeted middle-class, ironically, the influence of the NTA had decreased given its intolerance of non-normative groups. This decline led to infighting among different organizations, especially between the NTA and APT. This conflict also spread to tattooists who were associated with opposing organizations. This factionalism meant a battle for controlling “the future of the community.”127 This struggle and fragmentation were intensified especially in the treatment of the tattooed convict, or the “thug” component that perpetuated the rebellious appeal of tattooing in modern America.

Due to the low technology involved, the Chicano-stylized lettering, the body placement (hands, face, or neck), and the imagery, Chicano tattoos occupied the lowest status position in the tattoo community before the 1990s. Because of its gang or Pachuco association, with the exception of Hardy, Chicano tattoos were rejected by the NTA and other professional tattooists in the 1980s. Whether it was done by hand (hand-picked) in the Barrio or in prison, the absence of a tattoo machine gave the Chicano style a crude look. Hand-pick tattoos usually signified the lower socioeconomic status of the bearer. Tattooist Jimmy Farmer noted that many of his Chicano clients had their hand-picked tattoos covered with “larger machine-made tattoos.” He added, “They can’t afford professional [machine-made] tattoos until they get older, more established with money.”128 Hispanics in the military usually pay to “cover-up” their hand-pick tattoos

126 DeMello, 129.
127 DeMello, 129.
with patriotic designs. Freddy Negrete, a former tattoo artist from East Los Angeles, respected tattooing. However, he also has a “strong negative reaction to some tattoos.” Negrete added, “Anyone who tattoos their face with tears [to show how many years they have spent in prison] or with gang marks on their hands, is branding themselves for life. They are cutting themselves off.”\textsuperscript{129}

Chicano/prison style of tattooing was an important visible mark of opposition to institutionalized social control, particularly in prison, where inmates have very little control over their lives. For those who were released from jail, most ex-convict tattooists believed that their ability to tattoo was a means to “find a straight job on the outside.” The reality was that “most find that professional tattooists for the most part have no interest in hiring ex-convicts.”\textsuperscript{130} DeMello noted that when a convict from Folsom State Penitentiary wrote a letter to 300 professional tattooists in 1991, which was accompanied with a prison-designed flash called “Convict Tattoo Pattern Book,” he was largely ignored by his “fellow tattooists on the outside.”\textsuperscript{131} Without the pedigree needed to gain acceptance with organizations like the NTA, the criminalized tattooist and tattooed bodies highlighted class divisions and the exclusion of prisoners or “non-entities” without civil rights. This division and marginalization that started in the 1980s became more pronounced with the legitimization of tattoo culture in contemporary America. Films, television programs, and magazines have given greater coverage on tattooing to Americans, and this has contributed to the democratization of skin art.

\textsuperscript{129} Tattooist Freddy Negrete’s interview (1981) in Govenar, 217.
\textsuperscript{130} DeMello, 132.
\textsuperscript{131} DeMello, 133.
“Tattoo Vision”:
The Division, Objectification, and Democratization of Tattooing from the 1980s to the Present

Even in the 1980s, Americans remained largely ignorant about or hostile to greater participation in tattoo culture. For example, a New York Times article in 1980, reported a “hubbub” by residents of Deep River, a “quiet” New England town. Many in the community of Deep River objected to the arrival of the Fine Line Tattoo Studio. A local resident, Joseph Miezejeski, recalled that other townspeople were saying, “It’s not the kind of thing I want in Deep River.” Miezejeski added that people thought it was going to “destroy the whole town.”

There were also remnants of previous associations of tattooing with disreputable and unsanitary tattooists as seen in the harassment by the town’s sanitarian and building inspector Thomas Lombard. It was determined that there was no legal recourse against the tattoo studio, so owners John Brewer and Eelise Twomey opened their tattoo business. Since its opening, Twomey stated:

Most of the people—at least 75 to 100 since we opened—have been women. A lot of people are under the assumption that tattooing is a dying art, but it’s been coming back in the last three years and now it’s stronger than it’s ever been. Most women want them on the upper chest, the shoulder, or the hip bone. The big question they ask is, does it hurt? It doesn’t hurt like it did years ago. We’re also fixing up a lot of men’s tattoos, old ones done maybe 25 years ago and the guys are totally amazed how modernized we’ve become. We’ve covered up a lot of jail-house tattoos, too. Those are ones that were hand-done in jail: little moons, little hearts, little crosses. Some guys put their prison number or the names of their prisons.

Twomey’s statement, on the one hand, acknowledged the increase of female participation in tattooing during the 1980s, especially in light of past prejudices toward marking the

---

2 Ibid, CN1.
skin. On the other hand, his statement also acknowledged a service for a “deviant” group who were formerly in prison. Much like the ancient Greek and Roman physicians who removed punitive tattoos from prisoner’s faces, the modern tattoo industry’s new methods for “touch-ups” allowed former convicts to escape the “microphysics of power.”

This salvaging and re-ascription of the convict body was evident when Twomey stated, “A couple of guys needed their whole arm redone—they’ve done so much time”—in other words, they had paid their debt to society and did not want further stigmatization.

During the 1980s, newspaper articles concerning tattoos continued to highlight the adverse elements of marking the skin. From its gang associations to its potential use on AIDS patients, the discussion on tattooing persistently remained critical as marking the skin stigmatized the bearer. However, by the early 1990s, most newspaper editorials acknowledged that tattooing was no longer monopolized by bikers, carnival performers, and drunken sailors. Reporter Chris Hedges noted that there were nearly one hundred “underground” tattoo businesses in New York City that were thriving in 1990. Hedges argued that the type of person getting a tattoo had “changed…the last few years….You get more and more professional people.” Women were also getting tattooed in greater numbers as they “usurp[ed] a man’s territory and…people find this usurpation erotic. It helps a woman assert her independence,” she became “a bit of an outlaw,” as she

---

3 Michel Foucault’s “microphysics of power” is where the body is the site of cultural and political manipulation by the state or an institution.

4 Rozhon, CN1.

5 An online search of “tattoos” through The New York Times database from 1979 to 1989 revealed discussions referencing tattooing with the Yakuza, the Japanese Crime Syndicate, and AIDS.
“doesn’t abide by traditional rules.”

6 Journalist Elaine Louie stated that more than half of the customers at a local tattoo shop, Inkspots, were women. 7 The changing perception of the tattooed body in America, as discussed in the previous chapter, was brought about with the infusion of new aesthetics and the professionalization of the tattoo industry. This section builds upon the earlier discussion in chapter four, with an examination of the contribution of the mainstream media and tattoo magazines from the 1980s to the present. Along with the mainstream press, and film or reality-television programming dedicated to the tattooed body, tattoo magazines gave greater exposure to skin art culture in America. This coverage led to the democratization of tattooing in contemporary America, with women in particular becoming greater participants in the culture of skin art. However, this legitimatization created a complex problem. For scholars of tattoo history, Margo DeMello and Margot Mifflin, the media coverage has led to class divisions within the tattooed community and the objectification of marked women. For DeMello, the uneven treatment by the media revealed past prejudices and divisions within the community. For Mifflin, in a similar fashion to a traditional pin-up girl design on a sailor’s body, the media particularly tattoo magazines—continued to objectify and commodify the female body. Both discussions were valid, but like the tattooed women in the 1960s and 1970s, marking the skin allowed some “older” women and female professional athletes to stamp their liberation from their past and ascribe new meanings to their bodies.

The Press and Tattoo Magazines: Hierarchy and Objectification of Women

---


The first publication of *TattooTime* in 1982 spurred the production of other tattoo magazines by Paisano Publications, LLC. Established in 1971, Paisano Publications was responsible for the biker magazines *Easyriders* (1971) and *In the Wind* (1978). In 1984, the company launched *Tattoo* magazine. Due to the greater acceptability of tattooing in the 1990s, Paisano Publications expanded in 1993 with other publications, *Tattoo Flash* (1993) and *Tattoo Savage* (1993). Another influential publisher of tattoo magazines was Outlaw Bikers/Art and Ink Publication. Known for *Outlaw Biker* magazine, it distributed *Tattoo Revue* (ca. 1987) in the 1980s and later expanded after the 1990s with *Skin Art* (1991), *Tattoos for Women* (ca. 1995), and *Tattoos For Men* (ca. 1997). These publications and their diversification cemented the success and the visibility of tattoos by the 1990s. However, these magazines and their readers also reflected the divisions within the tattoo community based on class, status, and gender.

In legitimizing the expansion of tattooing as an art form, typical media accounts differentiated the type of tattoos worn by bikers, sailors, and convicts as opposed to those worn by mainstream Americans. For example, a “FTW” on a biker or rapper, a pinup of a naked woman or regimental mark on a soldier, or a *placa* on the hands of a Chicano convict appeared different in imagery from those worn by corporate professionals.  

According to Margo DeMello, the reasons for acquiring a tattoo differed for professionals as they were not “stereotypical,” therefore not “low-class trash and, by implication, [not] easily disregarded” in contrast to the biker, rapper, soldier, or convict. The mediation of discourse through the mainstream press, tattoo magazines, and tattoo organizations had

---

8 Chicano *Placa* was a hand-picked tattoo usually designating gang membership.
been a controlling factor “by silencing some voices while amplifying others.”\textsuperscript{9} This underscored that bikers, soldiers, or “other non-middle-class tattoo wearers are usually not interviewed and are thus silenced by this exclusion.” This mediation of class differences also included the discussions of tattoos as “art” done by “tattoo artists” who “hold the prestigious Master of Fine Arts (M.F.A) degree,” while the recipients of tattoos included “white-collar” patrons, “students, secretaries, artists, teachers, and other members of the middle-class considered respectable.”\textsuperscript{10} A sample of this media mediation appeared in Hedges’ report, where he featured an interview with white-collar professional Lisa DiGennaro, a manager for employee communication at Abraham & Straus. DiGennaro emphasized the spiritual nature of tattooing in that tattoos relay deep feelings which “they [tattooed recipients] can’t articulate” in words.

Hedges also generalized about the tattooed wearer by stating, “People are more aware of tattooing as an art form and see tattoos as living art on their body.”\textsuperscript{11} Another convention in the legitimatization of tattooing was using professional testimonials from either doctors or lawyers.\textsuperscript{12} For example, Dr. Gerald Grumet in an interview with Hedges stated that the tattoo is a “pictorial quest for self-definition, easing one’s sense of inadequacy and isolation. It offers the tangible promise of a final identity, the clarified picture of a diffuse ego.”\textsuperscript{13} These conventions in the mainstream media have divorced tattooing from its more contested past and incorporated a discourse more palatable to the middle class. By the 1990s, with a greater appropriation of tattooing among mainstream

---

\textsuperscript{9} Margo DeMello, \textit{Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community} (Durham, 2000), 98.
\textsuperscript{10} DeMello, 99.
\textsuperscript{12} DeMello, 99.
\textsuperscript{13} Hedges, B3.
Americans, the modern tattooed community fractured as seen in the publication of various tattoo magazines.

In her study of the modern tattoo community, DeMello noted two broad categories of tattoo magazines after the 1980s, which were the “biker and nonbiker, or lowbrow and highbrow.”¹⁴ The aforementioned Paisano Publications’s *Tattoo, Tattoo Flash*, and *Tattoo Savage*, and Outlaw Bikers/Art and Ink Publications’ *Tattoo Revue, Skin Art, Tattoos for Women*, and *Tattoos for Men* served as examples of DeMello’s lowbrow category. Examples of highbrow tattoo magazines included: *TattooTime* (1982-1989), *Tattoo Advocate* (1988-1990), *International Tattoo Art, Tattoo World*, and *Tattoo Ink*. These categories were not based on the readership but on the “editorial content, which is determined by the publisher.”¹⁵

The highbrow magazines have been published by “middle-class, professionally trained tattoo artists…aimed at a middle-class audience.” They differed by investing in “cultural capital.”¹⁶ This cultural capital included knowledge of the “finer” things in life as seen in recent publications of *Inked: Culture. Art. Style.* magazine (ICAS, 2008) which featured the “inked life.” The inked lifestyle incorporated knowledge of art, of drinks (mixology), the use of grooming products, travel, vehicles (high-end or vintage cars and motorcycles), and activities (films, video games, and DVD reviews).¹⁷ There were specific sections or columns in the highbrow magazines dedicated to the academic

---

¹⁴ DeMello, 101.
¹⁵ DeMello, 101.
¹⁶ Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “cultural capital” entails social status acquired through either skills, education, or knowledge, and this is seen by attaching tattooing to the fine arts of painting, sculpture, literature, and poetry.
¹⁷ In every issue of *Inked: Culture.Art.Style.* from 2011 to 2014, there is a section on “inked life.”
disciplines of “anthropology, philosophy, art history, and medicine,” with articles written by academic scholars with interests in tattooing.\textsuperscript{18}

Highbrow magazines included high-quality photos of “fine art” tattoos with a credit for the artist’s name. For example, according to DeMello, \textit{Tattoo Ink} prided itself on its policy “never to run a photo of any artist’s work with an ‘Artist Unknown’ credit.”\textsuperscript{19} Although this has changed in recent publications, until the 1990s, highbrow magazines used high-quality, glossy paper for their photos and were less sexually explicit. Another policy of highbrow magazines was the refusal to accept advertising from tattoo suppliers. Starting with Hardy’s \textit{TattooTime}, this policy continues with current magazines such as \textit{ICAS}. \textit{ICAS} actually has advertisements for mainstream products from motorcycle and helmet companies, Vade jewelry with macabre themes like skulls, cigarettes and alcohol, or mainstream products like Casio’s G-Shock watches. As in a gentlemen’s or glamour magazine (\textit{GQ} or \textit{Vogue}), there were models but they were visibly tattooed and draped in designer fashion. (See figure 5.01)

These highbrow magazines also included a section for “inked” celebrities, usually musicians, actors, or athletes. The use of tattooed celebrities was an important way of distinguishing \textit{ICAS} from other tattoo magazines by demarcating social differences of an imagined lifestyle.\textsuperscript{20} The working class was purposely excluded to define and legitimate differences in “taste” as seen through the consumption of tattoos. The discourse in highbrow magazines created boundaries in the tattoo community based on class and

\textsuperscript{18} Clinton Sanders, Alan Govenar, Tricia Allen, Mike McCabe, Margo DeMello, and Margot Mifflin, along with doctors, sociologists, and academic researchers have contributed articles to \textit{Inked}.

\textsuperscript{19} DeMello, 102.

status. In this instance, middle-class professionals had well thought out spiritual or highly artistic tattoos that were professionally executed. In contrast, the working class stereotypically was given to the drunken indiscretion or “spur-of-the-moment decision” tattoo that was poorly executed: “bikers and trash.”21 This elitism was especially apparent in Tattoo Advocate.

Produced by tattooist Shotsie Gorman, Tattoo Advocate promoted fine art tattoos and “actively disparaged other, less sophisticated forms of tattoo, as well as the various biker magazines that display them.” Gorman’s editorials also reflected his middle-class aesthetic as they were accompanied by a photo of him attired in a dress shirt and tie. This aesthetic also led him to promote a positive image of tattooing and to coordinate action among the tattooed community. In an interview with DeMello, Gorman stated:

> There were no organizations that were representing tattooists at the time. So what I tried to do was to set up Tattoo Advocate to coordinate legal, medical, and historical issues around tattooing, to become sort of a warehouse and to eventually hire a lobbyist and have lawyers available to answer questions.22

Gorman’s purpose was commendable considering prejudices about tattooing in the past and the vulnerability of tattoo parlors due to the increased political conservatism in the 1980s. His liberal leanings allowed him to give a voice to the tattooed community and to protect the rights of the tattooed by promoting tattooing as a humanistic art form that led to “more tolerant sensibility”—particularly, rejecting patriarchal attitudes toward women.

For this reason, Gorman did not include the classic pin-ups of nude or semi-nude women seen in the lowbrow biker magazines of the 1980s. He stated in his editorial that women should not be “held back by simple minds, [by publishers] showing what a woman should be and how she should be treated.” However, his political views also

---

21 DeMello, 113.
22 DeMello, 107.
meant silencing or disparaging others in the tattooed community. Forced to shut down his publication in the 1990s, Gorman reflected on the reason for the failure of his magazine. He stated, “I was ostracized by a lot of the community. [Critics said] it was elitist, too intellectual, there were too many words in my book.” The “marketing guys” felt “it would offend people” and “it’s not a hard core biker magazine” and that was the way “they saw tattooing in that context.” Gorman felt that his magazine was ahead of its time and if it were to be published with the current popularity of tattooing, “it would be a hit.” Gorman and many others publishing highbrow magazines were not successful in sustaining their publications as the reality of financial costs and “too many words” overshadowed the narcissistic and voyeuristic function of tattooing—a theme prevalent in lowbrow or biker magazines.

The long-term success of Paisano Publications and Outlaw Bikers/Art and Ink Publications was due to appeasing the needs of its readers—narcissism and voyeurism. Biker magazines devoted a significant portion of space to their readers who sent in photos of their tattoos, which may or may not have given credit to the artist who did the design. This also meant that tattooists, both professional and amateur, had their art featured in the magazine—thus democratizing the craft. This democratization in lowbrow magazines was forwarding by allowing advertisements by tattoo suppliers. An amateur or “scratcher” could easily order ink, a Tuttnauer Valueklave Sterilizer, or design sheets of tattoos.24 (See figure 5.02) This fear of competition by amateurs without any formal training was a key reason highbrow magazines associated with professional tattooists

23 DeMello, 108.
24 Many professional tattooists are against having the tools of the tattoo trade available to anyone without a license or certification by a state.
snubbed advertisements from tattoo suppliers and promoted the regulation and professionalization of their trade.

This inclusiveness of lowbrow magazines was also evident in *Tattoo* magazine and its sister magazine *Tattoo Savage*. Both publications included greater coverage of tattoo and biker conventions and “stories of fans or collectors and tattooists or tattoo shops” rather than tattooed celebrities, musicians, or athletes. *Tattoo* and *S&I* magazines further catered to the vanity of their readers by allowing them to send in artwork or “reader’s flash” (*S&I* Tattoo Flash Contest) which could garner small prizes or a free one-year subscription.²⁵ *Tattoo* also acknowledged and printed letters from “convicts (usually tattooists), sometimes accompanied by an example of the artist’s flash.”²⁶ DeMello stated that many convicts have subscriptions to *Tattoo* and *Tattoo Revue*. This is particularly significant considering that a recent highbrow magazine such as *Tattoo Society* was advertised as a magazine for “Good Art for Great Artists,” and stated on its website, “If you are serving time please don’t buy.”²⁷ In recent years, the differences between highbrow and lowbrow magazines have blurred as both have sexualized women on higher-quality glossy paper. Both types of magazines have incorporated articles focusing on the history of tattoos in America or in other cultures. However, magazines such as *Tattoo* are more inclusive, with examples of fine art tattoos alongside biker tattoos and prison tattooing—further democratizing tattoo culture in America.

Besides their narcissistic appeal, biker magazines have been more successful than their highbrow counterparts in the 1980s and 1990s because of their voyeuristic

---

²⁵ In every issue of *Inked: Culture.Art.Style.* from 2001 to 2014, there is a section of “S&I Tattoo Flash.”

²⁶ DeMello 114.

sexualization of tattooed women. Since 1984, *Tattoo* magazine, like many other biker magazines, featured semi-nude women on their covers. Women have also posed for a significant portion of the photos in the classic pin-up style of the 1950s. Fox Run Publications’ *Skin & Ink* (*S&I*, 1999) has an annual “Pin-up Tattoo” issue featuring tattooed-female models without any editorials or articles. (See figures 5.03 and 5.04) Like its parent magazine *Easyriders*, *Tattoo* magazine also had the advantage over its highbrow contemporaries given its inclusion of nude women, although this changed during the 1990s, since it limited their market sales with its accessibility only to adults due to the nudity.

However, since the 1990s, most tattoo magazines continued to objectify the tattooed woman. This was especially apparent with *Urban Ink* magazine, which launched in 2008. Promoted as a publication for “people of color,” *Urban Ink* was troubling on both issues of race and gender. The pages were often packed with tattooed rappers with gold teeth and gold-laden jewelry. Many of the featured music artists in the articles looked as if they were in a music video surrounded by “video vixens.”28 (See figures 5.05 and 5.06) Mifflin observed that the magazine was filled with “bad tattoos and bodacious black women in G-strings.” In essence, *Urban Ink* magazine was reinforcing the rampant commercialism of rap, where black artists often presented a formula or self-parody which aggrandized black bodies with excess (money and sex) to satisfy consumers. Hyper-sexualizing African-Americans, lacking in editorials, having inferior quality paper, *Urban Ink* was such a second-rate magazine that some black artists “refuse[d] to appear

---

28 “Video Vixens” are usually sexualized black or Hispanic women in hip-hop videos. They are often wearing G-strings and portrayed as “gold-diggers,” or “holes.”
Ron Zulu, a tattooist and former *Urban Ink* columnist, gave his assessment after he quit the publication. He stated:

> I told them I will write for this magazine if you can keep it out of the ghetto. If this is going to be a very informative and intelligent publication, then I’m on board….Then I started to get letters from a lot of black women asking me how can I write for this magazine that exploits black women. There are just booty pictures in there, women just displayed in a very vulgar way….I talked to the editor and said that the way black women are being exploited by this magazine is unacceptable.\(^\text{30}\)

While there have been many transformations within tattoo culture, Zulu’s statement was an indictment of the static nature in the presentation of African Americans, particularly women within tattoo culture.

In the 1990s, “Riot Grrrls,” formed an underground feminist punk rock movement situated around the Pacific Northwest. Using music, women associated with Riot Grrrls addressed issues from rape to female empowerment. For some of the Riot Grrrls, tattoos were used as “emblems of their do-it-your-self punk feminism and symbols of self-definition.” Similarly, SuicideGirls was another organization from the Pacific Northwest, which profiled alternative female models. SuicideGirls consisted of pierced and tattooed models, some of whom were employed in the adult film industry (mainstream and alternative).\(^\text{31}\) (See figure 5.07) Initially, in 2000, the organization was promoting “alternative paradigms of female beauty and sexuality” through advertisements and alternative pornography. More recently, SuicideGirls lost its “alternative” status with the majority of their models being “thin, mostly white, and generically pretty” and featured

\(^{29}\) Mifflin, 121.  
\(^{30}\) Mifflin, 124.  
\(^{31}\) Alternative adult films include gay and lesbian, and bondage films, or feature entertainers with extreme body modifications.
in mainstream tattoo magazines. Although there are many tattoo shops owned or managed by female artists in America, every tattoo magazine may be considered by some as “soft porn” given the overloaded pages of scantily-clad women which overshadow the actual tattoos. Kakoulas of NeedlesandSins.com at one point spoofed Inked magazine’s “Girl of the Day” with her own series “Objectified Tattooed Men” for “gals and gays.”

The commercial appeal of using exploitative photos of women in publications was a complicated, considering those images of scantily-clad tattooed might be offensive to some female readers. However, for female subscribers of these “exploitive” magazines, a pin-up of a tattooed woman with a “full sleeve” on her arm could also be attractive and liberating. As a reader, a woman would most likely be a participant in the tattoo culture. The “full sleeve” appropriated by women, which was traditionally a masculine choice, redefined normative gender notions of the “sleeve” and the tattooed body. (See figure 5.08) The inclusion of women in lowbrow magazines extended in featuring scholarly articles by female academics such as Tricia Allen, Margo DeMello, and Margot Mifflin, along with female tattooists like Katherine von Drachenberg or “Kat Von D” and Megan Woznicki or “Megan Massacre.” The greater attention to these women reflected the increased participation of women in the tattoo culture, and this was also reflected in films and reality-television shows aimed at women.

Film and Tattooed Women

Historically, women have been the victims of tattooed characters in films. One of the earliest examples of this was the film, Night of the Hunter (1955). Harry Powell (Robert Mitchum) was the antagonist who had a love/hate attitude toward women. For

---

32 Mifflin, 114.
33 Mifflin, 103.
Powell, his attraction to women was also his curse, and for that reason he married and murdered widows for their money. Powell, known for his sermons and preaching, believed that he was doing God’s will in doing away with women who aroused the carnal instinct in men. His ambivalent attitude toward women was reflected in the tattooed words “love” on his right hand, and “hate” on his left hand. The demonized portrayal of tattooed characters associated with murder and crime was typical within films and television shows. With tattoos becoming more popular in the 1990s, films continued to associate tattooed men with murder, stupidity, or the primitive man given to base instincts such as sex and violence. More importantly, these films also underscored violence against passive women.

This presumed passivity on the part of women has been addressed in a more recent series of films. *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* film series (Sweden, 2009), based on author Stieg Larsson’s *Man som hatar kvinnor* (*Men who hate women*, 2005), placed Lisbeth Salander, a tattooed woman, in the active role. Salander, a Goth-punk computer hacker, has short hair with bangs partially covering her face and nine tattoos, including a dragon on her shoulder. She also has a wasp image tattooed on her neck, designating her hacker identity and her stinging personality. Collectively, Salander’s many tattoos and cultivated boyish looks served as a protective shell or armor against exploitative men. (See figure 5.09) For example, Larsson’s first installment, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, has Salander’s situation compromised, as she was raped by her male legal guardian. As a reminder, she got a painful ankle tattoo. Salander later tortured, raped,

---

and tattooed her guardian’s abdomen with “I am a sadistic pig, a pervert, and a rapist.”\textsuperscript{35} With her tattoos and boyish body, Salander was flagged as a “noncomformist” and this marked her evolution as a “feminist vigilante.”\textsuperscript{36}

*The Girl Who Played with Fire* (Sweden, 2009) has a more complex characterization of Salander. This second installment of Larsson’s series has Salander obtaining breast implants—indicative of her conflicted identity as a woman—or her willingness to adopt many disguises or “don the trappings of conventional femininity in order to bring down abusive men.” *The Girl with Dragon Tattoo* series was a significant break from the trope of passive women as victims of tattooed aggressive men. Salander was active and her tattoos gave her an edge or “grittiness,” a quality needed in completing her difficult tasks. Salander’s body as a text was central to understanding issues facing her; however, there was no consensus on the ways to read her body. For Mifflin, Salander was an “anti-hero, a man in drag, a victim too often shown sexually compromised, a vindicator for all women, a loner, who learns to trust only men, a waif, a poser, and a Valkyrie whose tattoos can be interpreted as marks of empowerment or tallies of defeats.”\textsuperscript{37}

Regardless of the interpretation, the character of Salander and her tattoos raised questions concerning the female body. Larsson’s use of tattoos shifted the boundaries of normative gender roles. This was a significant break, when considering how often tattooed women were linked to their sexuality. For example, fashion designer Jean Paul Gaultier’s work with Coca-Cola had him envisioning the Coca-Cola bottle as a “curvy


\textsuperscript{36} Mifflin, 146.

\textsuperscript{37} Mifflin, 146.
feminine body.” He designed a corset on the bottle with a tattooed sparrow sitting on
“her rib cage.”38 (See figure 5.10) Much like the appeal from the “peep show within the
freak show” of the tattooed, circus women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth
centuries, these hyper-sexualized presentations of women was a key reason for the
criticism surrounding the popularity and attention given to women with tattoos. This
criticism has come about because of the recent popularity of reality-based television
programming focused on tattoo culture.

Exposing and Normalizing Tattoo Culture in Recent America

Since 2005, there have been four main types of television programming focused
on tattooing. The first presented tattooing as a primordial practice among indigenous
groups around the world. This type of programming was seen in the Smithsonian
Channel’s Tattoo Odyssey (2010), which discussed the history of tattooing among tribal
groups in the past and compared it to the modern renaissance of body modification in
America. Following a tribal group in Sumatra, the documentary shocked and perpetuated
the image of the “other” associated with the primitive. This primitive theme is not
limited to indigenous groups outside of America, as has been seen in the Science
Channel’s Oddities (2010-2014) and its spinoff Oddities: San Francisco (2012-2014).
Both shows followed an antique shop that specialized in the bizarre, grotesque, and
unique collectables. Interestingly, most of the people featured on the show were clearly
coded as bizarre or outside normative American society—accentuated with tattoos or
body piercings. The owners of the antique shop were usually women such as Audra
Kunkle, who was clearly into Goth fashion. (See figure 5.11) Like Salander, Kunkle—
within the context of the show—was outside the normative standards, as she dealt with

the odd and bizarre on a weekly basis. Arguably, these programs were not produced for a younger audience ingrained into the tattoo culture, and this was especially clear when examining the corporate advertising during their broadcasts.

The Smithsonian Channel promoted itself as the “most believable,” most authoritative,” and “most trusted” cable programming available. According to its website, the Smithsonian Channel’s demographics included a median age of thirty-eight, income median at $85,393, and a male to female ratio that was near even. The sponsors of Tattoo Odyssey supported the demographics outlined by the website for the Smithsonian’s channel—upper-middle class, professional, and home owners with families. In comparison, the Science Channel was a subsidiary of Discovery Communications and appealed evenly to both men and women between the ages eighteen to forty-nine. The diverse list of sponsors for Oddities and Oddities: San Francisco suggested their target audience was mostly male, and aged eighteen to forty-nine. Both networks under the canopy of scientific inquiry were giving a tattoo cultural safari for non-tattooed Americans, taking advantage of the recent popularity of tattooing.

The second type of programming featuring tattooing in a competitive format hosted by a celebrity musician. Spike channel’s Ink Master (2011-2013) was hosted by former Jane’s Addiction guitarist, Dave Navarro, noted for his many tattoos. Ink Master

---

40 The sponsors included hearing aids, Wen Hair Care for women, Disney Travel, and Ziploc’s portable storage bags during an airing (September 2010) of Tattoo Odyssey, dir. Andrew Gregg (90th Parallel Film and Television Productions, 2010).
brought ten (season one) to sixteen (season three) tattoo artists to compete for $100,000
and the title of Ink Master. Each week’s challenge highlighted an important tattooing
skill, from shading to doing black and white portraits—with the loser of the challenge
going home. Each episode highlighted the drama between contestants, which often
overshadowed the actual skill trials. This was also true of Oxygen’s Best Ink (2012-
2014), hosted by Fall Out Boy guitarist, Peter Wentz. Like Ink Master, Best Ink pitted
ten (season one) to fourteen (season three) tattooists against one another for $100,000 and
the honor of being on the cover of Tattoo magazine.

While the format of both shows was similar, the demographics for each formed a
stark contrast. Spike’s Ink Master appears on a channel that is a subsidiary of MTV
Networks Entertainment Group. According to New York Interconnect cable service, the
Spike channel was “the first network for men…that addresses the lifestyle of today’s
modern man.” Demographically, seventy percent of Spike’s viewers are men, of which
seventy-one percent were between the ages of eighteen and forty-nine. These men were
also in college or never finished college, as only twenty-five percent of Spike’s viewers
have at least four years of college. Viewership also did not include many white-collar
professionals, group comprising only eleven percent of viewers.43 This suggested that the
typical viewer for Spike is a non-professional man between eighteen and forty-nine years
of age.

In contrast, Best Ink on Oxygen Media, LLC was a subsidiary of NBC Universal.
According to New York Interconnect cable service, the Oxygen brand “delivers relevant
and entertaining content to young women, everywhere.” Like the Spike channel, the

(accessed 18 February 2014).
percentages were skewed, but in the case toward women. Seventy-nine percent were women, sixty-four percent of whom were between the ages of eighteen and forty-nine. The gendered demographics were especially seen in the advertisements for both networks. Oxygen’s sponsors dealt in feminine hygiene or household products like tampons and Lysol wipes, while Spike advertised male products such as Rogaine or Selsun Blue for Men. Like Spike, the percentage of Oxygen’s viewers with college degrees remained low, at twenty-three percent, and only fourteen percent were white-collar professionals.\textsuperscript{44} Besides the difference in gender, demographics for both networks remained the same—highlighting that tattoo shows were geared toward a younger audience largely without academic degrees and not part of the corporate world. The demographics of tattoo shows were especially clear when examining corporate sponsors for various networks, including the third type of programming featuring tattooing.

The third type of programming concerned “fix-it” shows that highlighted “nightmarish” tattoos which needed to be covered up. Rather than resorting to the pain of tattoo removal, recipients on fix-it shows received a “cover-up” done by an expert tattooist. Spike’s \textit{Tattoo Nightmare} (2012-2014) featured tattooists Big Gus Demented, Tommy Helm, and Jasmine Rodriguez. Each week, their task was to cover up embarrassing tattoos, from a portrait of an ex-boyfriend to a dragon “tramp stamp” ruining a client’s sex life.\textsuperscript{45} Interestingly, when examining the female clients on the show and tattooist Rodriguez, these women would be considered “eye-candy.” (See figure 5.12) In order to reveal the nightmarish tattoo (many times the breast or genitalia or near


it), these female clients often have to show their bodies. Using the female body to draw audiences, under the aegis of an examination, legitimized the exploitation by these shows, and this was also true with A&E’s *Bad Ink* (2013-2014) and TLC’s *America’s Worst Tattoos* (2012-2013). More revealing were the sponsors for or the advertisements aired during these shows.

During the airings of *Tattoo Nightmares* from 23 October 2012 to 20 November 2012, advertisements were clearly aimed at men.⁴⁶ There were also a slew of commercials from fast food franchises and miscellaneous items that suggested a younger target audience.⁴⁷ In contrast, TLC’s sponsors targeted women, apparent in the dominance of feminine or family oriented products. This became clearest during a marathon airing of TLC’s *America’s Worst Tattoo* in April 2013.⁴⁸ For the thirty-three percent of men who watched TLC’s *America’s Worst Tattoo*, the show featured tattooist Megan Massacre, who was extremely talented and attractive; she has posed for many tattoo magazines. (See figure 5.13) This emphasis on women and the success of these reality programs were due in large part to the establishment of the final type of tattoo show.

Although presented like a documentary, the last type of tattoo programming emphasized the “drama” that was usually associated with other reality shows. TLC’s *Miami Ink* (2005-2008) and A&E’s *Inked* (2005-2006) were the first shows set in tattoo

---


⁴⁷ McDonald’s, Carl’s Jr., Pizza Hut, Dominos, Taco Bell, Red Robin, Sonics, 5 Hour Energy, Twizzlers, Ruffles, Orbit gum, and Ice Breakers mint in Ibid.

shops that gave a glimpse into the lives of tattooists and the “would-be” tattooed. Of the two shows, *Miami Ink* was the more popular show because of the constant conflict between tattooists Ami James and Katherine von Drachenberg (Kat Von D.) that ultimately ended with Von D’s ousting at the end of Season Three. The popularity of TLC’s *Miami Ink* and Von D’s beauty led to her own reality show *LA Ink* (2007-2011).

When Von D was offered her own show, she knew it was partly because of her physical appeal. She stated, “I knew they were going to do this show anyway, with or without me and that’s why I signed up. If I didn’t do it, I’d be damned if I let some hot girl who had been tattooing for three years represent everything I’d worked for since I was 14.”

(See figure 5.14) TLC, a subsidiary of Discovery Communications, demographically was more appealing to women. In Von D’s case, she was alluring to both men and women for her beauty and as an independent owner of her own tattoo shop. However, given possible concerns about alienating its female base, TLC also requested that Von D’s “staff be mostly female.”

For the first two seasons, Von D hired and worked with two accomplished female tattooists, Kim Saigh and Hannah Aitchison. While this hinted at an attempt to further appeal to a female audience, the success of *LA Ink* and the prominence of Von D, as the most recognizable tattooist in America, was an indicator of the growing profile of talented women in the tattoo industry.

According to Mifflin, Von D was “hardly wholesome in appearance or behavior (she wore gobs of makeup, drank too much, and sported an array of low slung spandex pants) but she was genial and effervescent.”

However, she also brought a familial feel to her show as seen in the first episode. In bringing “her crew” together, she stated that

---

49 Mifflin, 111.
50 Mifflin, 112.
51 Mifflin, 114.
she wanted “a family.” Saigh and Aitchison were two artists she greatly respected, much like her sisters or wise aunts. The most important addition to her family was Corey Miller, the “godfather of black and white tattoos” and her “father figure.”\(^{52}\) (See figure 5.15) Whenever she spoke of the people working at her shop, High Voltage, she referred to them as her “tattoo family.” For example, Nate Fierro was the youngest of her “crew.” Von D described him as being “our little baby boy, you know? Dennis took him under his wing, and he’s growing so crazy fast. It’s incredible.”\(^{53}\) For the most part, *Miami Ink* and *LA Ink* “offered wholesome depictions of tattoo enthusiasts—family—focused people ready to tell the generally tiresome stories of love and loss that inspired their tattoos.”\(^{54}\) The format of these reality-based shows essentially normalized the participants and reduced the rebellious dimensions of tattooing.

This normalization further led to other programs following a similar format, which included TLC’s *London Ink* (2007), and *New York Ink* (2011-2012). The popularity of TLC’s programming led to VH1’s *Black Ink Crew* (2012-2014) and Oxygen Media’s iteration, *Tattoo After Dark* (2014). According to Marisa Kakoulas, the creator of the blog site NeedlesandSins.com and a lawyer, the tattoo reality-based shows have raised the artistic aesthetic bar because “all artists [on the shows] tend to be good—none of them are really bad.” She added that “people are seeing the possibilities of the art. They’ll go to a local shop and see what those offerings are and understand that they can get better.”\(^{55}\) This narrative focused on the artistry rather than the rebellious function of


\(^{54}\) Mifflin, 111.

\(^{55}\) Marisa Kakoulas interview with Mifflin, 111.
tattooing, and this was an important reason for the legitimation of tattooing. However, this normalization has also brought criticism to Von D.

According to Mifflin, Von D was described as a “sellout who made a commercial spectacle of a secret society.”56 As the author of four books, the star of her own reality show, and the creator of a cosmetic make-up line and tattoo concealer, Von D was profiting off of her sexual appeal and many felt it was detrimental to the achievements of women in the tattoo industry. Artist Ainslie Heilich stated, “I think the Kat Von D phenomenon is helping to push that idea that a woman can’t be in this industry unless she is presenting herself sexually.” She also expressed dismay in regard to women hired and featured in Von D’s LA Ink. Aitchison and Saigh, who were the first females hired by Von D, wore “impractical and revealing clothing” and the women who replaced them had “less talent and showed more cleavage.”57 Tattooist Stephanie Tamez was more ambivalent as she applauded Von D’s success, but regretted that it was a feat “contingent on a ‘very cultivated, feminized’ look.”58 Ironically, Tamez, who offered the criticism, was also responsible for painting model Liu Wen with temporary tattoos for the 2012 Victoria’s Secret fashion show. Von D felt that she was promoting the image of “the strong, empowered female doing whatever the fuck it is she wants to do.”59

Kat Von D did profit from tattoo’s popularity and the attention and wealth gave her agency in expressing herself on the skin. Von D’s code of “whatever the fuck she wants to do” showed her defiant nature. Tattoos on her face, arms, and legs further showed Von D’s independence, as she chose a profession which accepted marks on the

56 Mifflin, 114.
57 Ainslie Heilich interview taken from Mifflin, 114.
58 Stephanie Tamez interview taken from Mifflin, 114.
59 Kat Von D’s statement taken from Mifflin, 114.
body, often unacceptable in other work environments. Her tattoos underscore a key function of marking the skin—choice, self-determination, or basic civil rights. More revealing about the plethora of reality shows in the new millennium was the greater exposure to an expanding audience about the burgeoning tattoo culture in America. Tattoo magazines, films, and tattoo reality programming fueled the democratization and normalization of skin art. Von D and others such as Megan Massacre were indicators of the greater presence of women in the American tattoo industry.

According to Washington Post journalist Tara Bahrampour, tattoos were on the rise among the “50 and older crowd.” Darlene Nash, a fifty-seven year old grandmother, reflected the recent changes in attitude toward tattoos. Nash stated, “When I was young, I worried about what other people thought, but as I got older I didn’t care. I think with maturity comes a certain level confidence.”  

Sandy Parsons, a sixty-three year old woman and owner of Great Southern Tattoo in Virginia, estimated that her business from people older than fifty had gone up by thirty percent in the past twenty years. Parson suggested that the increase of tattoos among the fifty and older crowd could be attributed to the “screw it stage,” when they stated, “I’m going to do what I want, and screw the rest of the world.” This attitude of indifference was seen with seventy-seven year old Georgina Cortina, a grandmother of twenty-four. She got her first tattoo at the age of seventy to honor her dead son. In getting her tattoo, Cortina stated, “I did it, I like it, I’d do it again. My husband doesn’t like them, but after you’re married 60 years, who cares?

---

61 Susan Parsons interview with Tara Bahrampour.
When it comes to my body, I’m the boss.” These thoughts about taking ownership over the body reflected an important function of tattooing and its recent popularity in America.

Journalist Gay Talese in 1959 had estimated that twenty-million Americans were tattooed, roughly eleven percent of the American population. Art Director Stefan Jost’s 2012 estimate of tattooed Americans was forty-five million, with nearly forty percent of tattooed people between the ages of twenty-five to twenty-nine. There was clearly an increase in tattooing in modern America. A recent article from The Week magazine noted “America’s booming tattoo economy: by the numbers,” and its estimates echoed those of Jost. Among Americans eighteen to twenty-five years of age, thirty-six percent in 2012 were tattooed. Among those thirty to thirty-nine of age, thirty-eight percent of Americans were indelibly marked. Finally, among those fifty to sixty-four years of age, the estimate was at eleven-percent tattooed. The magazine also suggested that the annual revenue of the tattoo industry was over two billion dollars, a figure that has continued to grow. There were also fifteen thousand tattoo parlors in the United States. Interestingly, the percentage of men who were tattooed was estimated at nineteen percent, with tattooed women at twenty-three percent. This was significant when comparing Talese’s 1959 estimate of seventeen-million tattooed men to three-million tattooed women. Not only had tattoos become more prevalent among Americans, but marking the skin had also increasingly become democratized considering the higher female to male ratio of tattooed Americans. This democratization was the impact of the rights revolution, since the 1960s, and the legitimization of skin art was reflected in greater exposure and

---

62 Georgina Cortina interview with Tara Bahrampour.
acceptability in recent films and television programs. In other words, the reality in the democratization of marking the skin was driving the cultural production of tattoo culture in America.

The normalization or democratization of tattooing in America was reflected in the advent of the Women’s National Basketball Association in 1996. From its inception, the WNBA was promoted with hip-hop slogans of “we got next” and “they got game” to show that female athletes were playing at the same level as their male counterparts. However, a second part of this promotion was to show that while these women were athletes, and they were also very feminine. (See figure 5.16) The WNBA campaign was an acknowledgement of past prejudices, when women involved in sports usually dominated by men were portrayed as more masculine. For example, the tennis players of the late 1970s, Martina Navratilova and Billy Jean King, have often been portrayed as masculine women, and this was exacerbated when the media pronounced that they were also lesbians. This type of gender crossing had often been ascribed to female athletes because of male insecurities. The WNBA made a conscious effort to deflect these representations of its players. Recently, for female athletes like Teresa Weatherspoon (New York Liberty), Sonia Chase (Charlotte Sting), and Deanna Nolan (Detroit Shock), tattoos accentuated their inclusion into the professional ranks, where tattoos have been normalized.

Weatherspoon wore cornrows and a tattoo of a flaming basketball on her left leg, much like her male counterparts. (See figure 5.17) Chase has the “Superman” logo on left arm, much like Shaquille O’Neal. (See figure 5.18). Chase’s tattoo adoption was interesting considering O’Neal changes Superman’s race, while Chase changes the sex
and race of Superman to create a black superwoman. Nolan, who was part of *Inked* magazines’ “2008 All-Tattooed-Team,” has twenty-two tattoos and has also adhered to hip-hop aesthetics through her clothing and posture. (See figure 5.19) She admitted in an interview with *Inked* that she “schools” the guys “all the time. There were still so many guys who think that because you’re a woman you can’t play. It’s great to get them out on the court.”⁶⁴ Players like Weatherspoon, Chase, and Nolan—from their hairstyles to their choices of tattoos on their bodies—helped to blur rigid gender distinctions and emphasized their skills and accomplishments as professional athletes. The growing number of tattoos among female athletes reflected the idea that tattoos were no longer a male preserve as there were more women in America getting tattoos, including “full sleeves.” This tattooing democratization seen among women, along with accompanying concerns over the objectification of the female body, likewise arose when examining the male counterparts of the WNBA.

---

“Thug Life”: The Hip-Hop Ethos and Criminalization of the Black Tattooed Professional from 2001 to the Present

For some, hip-hop is “a way of life, a worldview which informs and impacts life-worlds or life-struggles.”¹ Hip-hop had the potential for social and political change as was seen with rap music in the 1980s, which often highlighted abuse and neglect by American institutions. The hip-hop generation was characterized as being “reactive” and possessing “the in-your-face, chip-on-the-shoulder demeanor.”² For this reason, many adults and authority figures viewed hip-hop as a “cultural virus infecting everything from their children to their church life with its cancerous conundrums and contradictions.”³ The criticism of the hip-hop movement, particularly rap, was part of the larger conservatism in the 1980s and 1990s with the “war on crime” or first wife Nancy Reagan’s “Just Say No to Drugs” campaign. Ironically, according to scholar Stephen Tuck, with black rap artists dominating popular culture, black men were “reinforcing negative stereotypes that dated back to Jim Crow.”⁴ The rampant commercialism of rap music meant black artists often presented a self-parody which aggrandized black bodies through violence to satisfy consumers.

Within American popular culture, this self-parody of black men meant a constant barrage of aggressive, jewelry-laden men. This chapter examines the relationship

---

between tattoos and recent professional athletes, particularly those in the National Basketball Association (NBA) and the National Football League (NFL). This chapter builds on an earlier discussion from chapter four, where rapper Tupac Shakur’s tattooed body associated marking the skin with the hip-hop ethos of the 1990s. Besides being a cherished figure in hip-hop culture, Shakur’s connection to black athletes in the early 1990s was highlighted in the film *Above the Rim* (1994). In the film, he played a local drug lord who lured a talented high school player to play on a team he had assembled for a tournament. The tournament was based on showdowns at Rucker Park in New York City’s upper Manhattan, the site for Entertainers Basketball Classic (EBC) since the early 1980s. According to scholar Jeffrey Lane, the EBC, which was founded by rappers, brought elite amateur and professional talent in front of “an overheated, raucous crowd.” The play was considered rough and “all about street credibility….Like the streetballers pining for an NBA contract and the cash and validity that come with it, the NBA players want the coveted of-the-people legitimacy that the local street heroes enjoy.” Legendary EBC coach Tony Rosa stated, “Hood fans: they know when you’re real and when you’re not, they know when you’re fronting and when you’re not.”

Especially in the basketball world, where blackness is front and center and normalized, those defined “otherwise would be individuals who defy the assumed class distinction of being from the ‘hood.” For modern athletes in the new millennium, tattoos signified their “keep it real” or “hood” status. Self-professed “bad boy” and former NBA player, Dennis Rodman recalled in 1996, that when he “first got a tattoo, there were a few guys in the league—or in all of sports—with tattoos. Now look around. Everybody’s got

---

5 Jeffrey Lane, *Under the Boards: The Cultural Revolution in Basketball* (Lincoln, 2007), 4-5.
6 Boyd, 135.
one. I’m not unique anymore, even though I’m leading the league with eleven. Just about every other guy in college has a tattoo now.” The prevalence or frequency of skin art among the new generation of athletes suggested a new intermixture of professionalism and the hip-hop ethos of “keeping it real” in honoring one’s convictions, whatever they may be—from their views on family and religion to monetary goals. However, their supreme confidence or skills were wrapped in their conception of “blackness.”

This chapter also examines the increased regulation of black athletes. Whether it was wearing uniforms or thinking of themselves as part of a business or franchise, players have become commodities or properties of their respective teams and their leagues. However, like the commercialization of hip-hop or rap music, tattoos on the bodies of black stars in the NBA and other professional sports reinforced critical images in the American media which led to increased corporate control over professional athletes. Former NBA player Allen Iverson and NFL player Richard Sherman represented the drastic change after 2000 of the new hip-hop, black professional, and their continued clash with the corporate world represented a microcosm of the backlash against tattoos in recent America.

Marks of Hip-Hop: Family, Faith, and the Challenges Facing Black Men in America

Arguably the most visible African-American bodies being displayed were those selling their skills in the NBA. In general, African-Americans have been a majority in the NBA compared to other professional sports. Many black players hailed from the inner-city, and basketball was uniquely suited to the urban environment. The game required little space, minimal equipment, and could be played by an individual, unlike football or baseball. According to a CNN study in 1997, black men represented eighty

---

7 Dennis Rodman, *Bad as I Wanna Be* (New York, 1996), 119.
percent of the NBA league total, while the National Football League (NFL) had sixty-seven percent and Major League Baseball (MLB) had seventeen percent.\(^8\) During the 2000-2001 season of the NBA, African-American men made up seventy-four percent of the 425 players. Since then, the percentage of African-Americans has remained consistent or slightly below the high of eighty percent: seventy-three percent in 2004; seventy-five percent in 2007; and seventy-three percent in 2010.\(^9\) This slight decline can be attributed to the influx of international players, who compromised fifteen percent of the league total. The women’s counterpart of the NBA, the Women’s National Basketball League (WNBA), in 2001 had sixty percent African-American women out of a group of 210. While the percentage of black men experienced a slight dip, the percentage of black women in the WNBA had risen to seventy-four by 2010. African Americans therefore comprised the majority in professional basketball and to a certain extent to in all major professional sports in America save baseball.

In other words, in professional sports, particularly basketball and football, blackness was normalized, packaged, and visually consumed by mainstream America. Part of this consumption involved hip-hop and its association with skin art. Of the 425 men in the NBA during the 2000-2001 season, at least thirty percent (twenty-five percent African-American and five percent white or international players) had tattoos. For the 2010-2011 season, of the 434 players in the NBA, at least forty-four percent (forty-one percent African-American and three percent white or international players) of them were


\(^9\) These statistics were compiled unofficially by me from looking at official rosters from NBA.com and crosschecking their ethnic backgrounds and profiles from other sources such as Hoopedia.com (December 2001 and December 2010).
tattooed and in greater frequency, with tattoos covering their entire torso or with “full sleeves” on their arms. It should also be noted that, as a whole, more recent international players especially those of African descent, do not have tattoos.\textsuperscript{10} This suggested that the influx of tattooing among blacks has a distinct American component. The greater frequency of tattoos can be attributed to the “coming of age” for the new generation of black athletes growing up watching and idolizing Shakur and NBA star Allen Iverson. Allen Iverson, who was considered the most “tatted” player in 2001, would almost be considered “normal” by current standards. (See figure 6.01) The visual dominance of tattoos on professional athletes demonstrated skin art as an added signifier that accentuated their professional status. Tattoos in professional sports were not directly regulated and they offered more culturally-specific insights into the individuality of African-American identity in all its complexity. Tattoos in the NBA challenged black cultural stereotypes, as skin art informed Americans of an individual’s conviction to family and faith. Marking the skin also revealed challenges facing black youths in America, and a player’s resiliency and his agency in attaining the American dream.

Iverson and many other players used tattoos to “keep it real” or to express concepts that were important, like their loyalty to family. In an interview with journalist Larry Platt, Iverson discussed the meaning behind his twenty-one tattoos. On his neck, he has the Chinese character for loyalty and that has translated into other tattoos representing his family. He has the names of his kids, Tiaura and Deuce, tattooed on the right side of his chest. He tattooed their names because “they’re everything to me. They

\textsuperscript{10} The rare exceptions are New Jersey small forward Johan Petro (French National) and Oklahoma City Thunder guard Thabo Sefolosha (Swiss National).
make me want to make better decisions every day.”11 Next, he has his wife’s (his former high school sweetheart’s) name, Tawanna, tattooed on his lower abdomen. On his left chest, he has a set of praying hands with his deceased grandmother’s initials above and his mother’s initials below.

A former teammate of Iverson, Larry Hughes, also expressed his commitment to family through tattoos. Hughes has a portrait of his daughter, Lauren, with the phrase “God’s Gift” tattooed on his left chest. He also has a tattoo of a burning skull over a cemetery to represent his brother, Justin. This last design probably symbolized the near-death experience of his brother, who had a heart transplant in the late 1990s. This was the main reason why Hughes entered the NBA draft after his sophomore year at St. Louis University—he wanted to pay the mounting medical bills. This showed that while he was, like many young players, attracted to the NBA’s promise of instant wealth and fame, his intention was to relieve his mother’s financial burden.

Like Iverson, “K-Mart” Kenyon Martin of the Denver Nuggets also symbolized love for family by tattooing portraits of family members on his arms.12 Martin tattooed a portrait of his baby with the phrase “Flesh of my Flesh, Blood of my Blood” on his right arm. The phrase around the baby portrait was an adaptation from two possible sources: 1) a line from the Bible, Genesis 2:23, when upon seeing Eve, Adam said, “This is now bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh and she shall be called woman”; or 2) rap artist DMX’s song “Flesh of my Flesh, Blood of My Blood.” In either case, Martin expressed his manly pride in “creating” a life and emphasizing his commitment to his family.

11 Allen Iverson interview taken from Playboy magazine (March 2002), 57.
12 Other NBA players tattooed with designs representing family since 2001 include Clifford Robinson (Detroit Pistons); Corliss Williamsom (Detroit Pistons); George Lynch (Charlotte Hornets); DeMarre Carroll (Memphis Grizzlies); Jordan Farmar (Los Angeles Lakers); LeBron James (Miami Heat); and J.R. Smith (Denver Nuggets).
Contemporary players have continued the trend Iverson started. Doug Christie of the Sacramento Kings also has portraits of family members on his body. Christie has a tattoo of his wife and daughter framed in a heart. He also has a portrait of his infant son tattooed on his shoulder. The prominence of family and this “softer” sensibility by Christie also made him a target. Journalist Andrew Gottlieb and author of *In the Paint* (2003) stated, “Opponents and opponents’ fans rib him for his close connection to his wife. In an attempt to needle a perpetual rival, Shaquille O’Neal once suggested that the best treatment for his ailing big toe would be to have Jackie Christie massage it.”¹³ This type of emasculating insult was similar to another comment in which O’Neal called Christie and his teammates the “Sacramento Queens.” This did not bother Christie as he replied, “I’m around athletes, married guys who commit infidelities. I don’t judge them for that. I just decided I want to be a basketball player, and I want to be a married man, and I want to be faithful.”¹⁴

While Christie’s tattoos clearly showed commitment to family, Kobe Bryant was trying to save his marriage by getting indelibly marked. Bryant, a scoring guard for the Los Angeles Lakers, was charged with the felony assault of a nineteen-year-old Colorado woman in 2003. With his trial pending and Lakers’ camp opening in Honolulu, Bryant unveiled his new tattoos to the public. On his forearm he displayed his daughter’s name, Natalia Diamante. On his right arm, he had a motif symbolizing his reaffirmation of love for his wife Vanessa. The motif included “a crown ‘for my queen,” angel wings, a

---

¹⁴ Ibid, 22.
butterfly, a halo and Psalm 27.”^15 Although Bryant denied any assault, he did admit that
the sex was “consensual.” So while his actions suggested otherwise, his tattoos allowed
him to project his faithfulness. Bryant explained that he “has found peace in God, and
quoted a scripture from Psalm 27, which stated: ‘The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid.’”^16 For
players like Bryant, tattoos represented a way to face adversity and reaffirm their
relationship to family.

Another oft-used design was the “praying hands,” much like the one Iverson has
on his chest. ^17 Many NBA players tattooed their commitment to their faith, particularly
with Christian symbols such as the cross or portrait of Jesus on their bodies like J.R.
Smith and Al Harrington, both players with the Denver Nuggets. (See figures 6.02 and
6.03) While it was difficult to determine the strength of players’ convictions, their tattoos
suggested their commitment to their faith because the very act of getting tattooed
required conviction. Psalms or biblical proverbs were also popular with NBA players. ^18
For example, Daniel Gibson of the Cleveland Cavaliers has Philippians 4:13, “I can do all
things through Christ” on his chest because his grandmother recited it to him “all the
time.” Gibson added that it gave him “inspiration,” something he can “visually
see…[as] It drives [him].”^19

---

^15 Broderick Turner, “Bryant Puts his feelings in Ink,” Free Republic Press, 9 October 2003,
^16 Ibid.
^17 Other NBA players with the “praying hands” design included Kelvin Cato (Houston Rockets),
Mike Bibby (Sacramento Kings), Steve Francis (Houston Rockets), D eshawn Stevenson (Dallas Mavericks),
and Joe Smith (Minnesota Timberwolves).
^18 For other NBA players like Kobe Bryant, Amare Stoudamire, and Chris Robert-Douglas (New
Jersey Nets), imprinting a psalm on their bodies gave them strength and allowed them to overcome
adversity rather than emphasizing violence.
^19 Daniel Gibson interview with Clive Young taken from Urban Ink Magazine, Blackmen #18
(2011), 42.
More recently marks of Christian icons, psalms, and proverbs have become more revealing about the realities facing young black men. For example, Stephen Jackson of the Charlotte Bobcats had the “praying hands” holding a gun tattooed on his stomach. (See figure 6.04) This tattoo was especially interesting when considering it came on the heels of a recent 2010 “break-in” of his home in Charlotte. The way he proudly displayed it to reporters on the opening day of training camp clearly showed anxiety on the part of Jackson and his need to protect his home. This highlighted the recent concerns over black athletes carrying firearms, ever since Sean Taylor of the Washington Redskins was killed at his home in 2007. There was an embarrassing episode when former receiver Plaxico Burress accidentally shot himself in the leg at a New York nightclub in 2008. Then, tragically, Jovan Belcher of the Kansas City Chiefs, in a murder-suicide case, shot himself in the head after he killed his girlfriend in 2012. The connection between athletes and firearms appeared especially visible and controversial when linebacker James Harrison (Pittsburgh Steelers) posed for *Men’s Journal* in August 2011, shirtless with tattoos exposed and arms crossed with a gun in each hand. (See figure 6.05)

Tattoos in the NBA reflected the trials or the history of violence and sadness in the lives of some African-Americans. To symbolize the tribulations in his life, Iverson tattooed “NBN” on his left forearm to represent “Newport Bad News,” his hometown where “a lot of bad shit happens.” He also tattooed a soldier’s head on his right arm because, as he said, “I feel like my life has been a war and I’m a soldier in it.”

Larry Hughes also expressed the struggles in his life, much like Shakur, by separating his body

---

20 Ibid, 57.
21 Ibid, 57.
into two chapters, the left side representing “his personal hell” and the right side symbolizing heaven. On the side of hell, he had a “Grim Reaper” design imprinted, symbolizing the “dark side, the ghetto unfabulousness of Black life.”

On the right side, he had Jesus and a cross design inscribed to represent the “hope, the light, the fact that despite the long struggle it took [him]…to reach a point where, as Naughty By Nature sang, ‘Everything is gonna be alright.’”

This duality associated with Shakur was again seen in Amare Stoudamire’s “Poverty/Prophecy” tattoo. (See figure 6.06) In an interview with *Inked* Magazine, Stoudamire of the New York Knicks explained his tattoo: “both of those words are off the same P. What that means is when you are in poverty and you’re praying for something better, to make it to the NBA or to become a professional skateboarder, you’re pretty much prophesizing.” This explanation also suggested why Stoudamire has “Black Jesus” on his neck, as he may see himself as prophet like Jesus. J.R. Smith, a teammate of Stoudamire, also has a portrait of “Black Jesus” opposite a portrait of his mother. Smith explained, “Those are two of the most important things in my life.”

Brandon Jennings of the Detroit Pistons has the words “Black Jesus” scrawled on the inside of his biceps. Like Amare Stoudamire, Jennings may have viewed himself as a savior, as is seen with the word “Messiah” tattooed on his left leg. The reflected confidence and optimism in these marks suggested the resiliency of NBA players in

---

overcoming obstacles growing up as black youths in America and attaining the American dream.

Journalist Jeffrey Lane, in *Under the Board: The Cultural Revolution in Basketball* (2007), argued that for many black youths, selling drugs, rapping, or playing a professional sport were often the only options. The connection between hip-hop or rap and basketball was cemented, as both offered opportunities for wealth and social mobility unlike “other walks of life, where the often invisible tenets of racism potentially hinder Black participation, especially for those Black people who hail from the lowest rung of the urban social ladder.”

Recently, basketball and rapping have been enmeshed within a tattoo culture well-suited to hip-hop aesthetics: being innovative and “in your face” to white America. With basketball and hip-hop consistently providing tangible economic opportunities for many black men, they were viewed as the “only viable options.” Redefining “the American dream from the perspective of the young, Black, and famous” became indelibly accentuated by marks on the body.

Stephon Marbury, a former NBA player, was blatant in advertising his monetary goals. Marbury who created his own clothing line, “Starbury,” further promoted it by tattooing his logo on the left side of his head. This highlighted the monetary rewards of the NBA, and such wealth was the goal for many African-American youths growing up in poorer neighborhoods. Sports have often been the popular avenue of economic advancement for minorities in America. This was illustrated by Brandon Jennings, who had grown up in Compton, California. Jennings followed the path many promising athletes—transfer to a “powerhouse” private school, get recruited by a top college

---

26 Boyd, 13.
27 Boyd, 15.
basketball program, go to college for one year (for the exposure to NBA Draft scouts), and declare for the NBA Draft. Jennings followed this plan until he took the SATs and, rather than waiting for the results from a third exam, he signed with a professional Italian team. He was drafted tenth overall by the Milwaukee Bucks and became an instant success, which he showed on his back by tattooing “Young Money,” a term based on rapper Lil’ Wayne’s album label and his album We Are Young Money (2009). (See figure 6.07) J.R. Smith also has “YM” or the logo of Young Money record label (or Young Money Athletes, an agency representing black athletes) tattooed on his throat. Smith also followed a similar path by going to powerhouse Saint Benedict’s Preparatory School, being recruited by the University of North Carolina, but opting for the riches of the NBA to become young, black, and famous.

Many black players like Iverson used tattoos to highlight their individual skills in overcoming obstacles facing the black community. This individualism was entangled in hip hop aesthetics and was suited for tattoo culture and basketball. These links explained instances where many NBA players again, like Iverson, also recorded their own rap albums. According to Boyd, just as a rapper must “first develop their lyrics in their own mind,” the game of basketball can be pursued by an individual. Individuals can perfect their own skills in solitude before going on to perform with a larger group of people.” Shakur’s album, Me against the World (1995), reflected the self-reliance mantra for embattled young black men and, according to Lane, was a “commonly found

---

28 Among those NBA players who have recorded their own rap albums are Chris Webber (Sacramento Kings), Shaquille O’Neal, Ron Artest (Los Angeles Lakers), Carlos Boozer (Chicago Bulls), George Hill (Indiana Pacers), Kevin Durant (Oklahoma Thunder).
29 Boyd, 12.
tattoo on hoopsters’ bodies.” This success from this individualism adopted by Iverson was especially on display for many Americans during NBA great Michael Jordan’s ascendency, which “dovetail[ed] perfectly with hip hop being recognized in mainstream culture.” Bolstered by Nike’s campaign, which was directed by filmmaker Spike Lee, Jordan’s style meant to “foreground the individual and in doing so [make] the team that much better by sheer will and force of character.” In other words, Jordan made clear, it was “his team.” The world of the Chicago Bulls, and at a certain point the world of the NBA, would revolve around Jordan, not the other way around.” For players like Iverson who followed Jordan’s example or grew up with “be like Mike” commercialism, this individualism often created tensions among scorers on the same team who believed they were the franchise player. Points per game, playing time, and shots taken were viewed as integral to solitary success like Jordan’s.

Iverson and LeBron James, who later started his career with the Cleveland Cavaliers, fit the “Jordanesque” model of individualism. James was viewed as a basketball prodigy during his junior year in high school and hailed as “the Chosen One,” according to an issue of Sports Illustrated in 18 February 2002. With Jordan’s retirement in 2003, James became the heir apparent and looked the part when he declared for the NBA draft out of high school. His obvious confidence and individualism in replacing Jordan was seen with the tattoo, “Chosen 1” on his back. (See figure 6.08) Much like Jordan and Iverson, James asserted his will and often carried “his” teams into the playoffs and enjoyed much solitary success with consecutive MVP awards from 2009 to 2010.

30 Lane, xii.
31 Boyd, 101-102.
However, in chasing that elusive championship ring, James later subsumed his individual success for the team. As a free-agent year in 2010, he was courted by many teams vying for his services. On an ESPN special titled, “The Decision,” aired on 8 July 2010, James announced that he was taking his “talents to South Beach and join[ing] the Miami Heat.”32 The reaction outside of Miami was critical, with some not caring for the “spectacle.” Teaming up with talented and close friends Dwyane Wade and Chris Bosh, all three, or the “Big Three,” signed similar contracts with Miami for less money so their collective talent could win a championship. In trying to fathom James’ decision, Jordan stated:

There’s no way, with hindsight, I would’ve ever called up Larry [Bird], called up Magic [Johnson] and said, ‘Hey, look, let’s get together and play on one team.’ But that’s ... things are different. I can’t say that’s a bad thing. It’s an opportunity these kids have today. In all honesty, I was trying to beat those guys.33 James’ decision was rewarded with consecutive NBA championships in 2012 and 2013. The criticism James received from “The Decision,” and Jordan’s perplexity, highlighted the success NBA commissioner David Stern and Jordan had in creating an NBA culture where the “selfish ‘ballhog’” was transformed into the centerpiece of any team desiring a championship. In other words, it was believed that a marquee or franchise player had the ability to “take over the game” when the team needed it in order to be “successful.”34 For some black youths, individual success in sports, hip-hop, or dealing drugs translated to

---

34 Boyd, 103.
markers of wealth and success, according to Lane, which included “Escalades, bling, gorgeous arm candy.” If team success followed, then it was a bonus.

This individualism and a supreme confidence in the skills needed to overcome obstacles and attain the American dream were often reflected with Iverson. He has the Chinese character for respect on his right arm because “I feel that where I come from deserves respect—being from there [Newport], surviving from there and staying true to everybody back there.” Also tattooed on his right arm was a black panther (which covered up a “grim reaper” holding a basketball) representing the terror Iverson brought to players guarding him. Iverson also has a cross of daggers knitted together with the caption “ONLY THE STRONG SURVIVE” on his left shoulder. As he said, “That’s the one true thing I’ve learned in this life.” This last sentiment seems especially pertinent for Iverson, since his six foot, one hundred sixty-five pound frame had to go up against much larger players. More importantly, Iverson represented the new black professional athlete after 2001.

Signifiers of “Thug Life” and the “blaxploitation” of modern athletes

Unlike Michael Jordan, who was the face of the NBA from the 1980s to 1990s and arguably the most recognized person on the planet, Iverson was not embraced by the “older White media, and the middle-American White fans, nor among many conservative Black fans.” A former NBA MVP, Iverson has other monikers such as “AI,” or “THE ANSWER,” while others have critically labeled him a “thug,” or “just another misogynistic rapper.” Iverson and many among the current younger generation of black

35 Lane, 24.
37 Allen Iverson interview taken from an interview with Playboy magazine (March 2002), 57.
38 Boyd, 157.
players who grew up with hip-hop have been much maligned for their “prison chic,”

wearing cornrows and tattoos and projecting the “wrong” image. Iverson recorded a
gangsta rap album and was arrested for marijuana possession—further fueling a negative
association with hip-hop. NBA commissioner David Stern also contributed to the
infusion of hip-hop culture in the NBA after the mid-1980s when his efforts to draw in
black viewership meant highlighting African American players such as Los Angeles
Lakers great "Magic" Earvin Johnson and Michael Jordan with their improvisation and
playground style coded as black.

According to NBA beat writer Chris Broussard, Stern was integral in selling
mainstream America on a sport dominated by African Americans by “embracing the style
of the league’s black ballplayers to a degree never seen in any mainstream American
industry, other than perhaps music.” The NBA was popular because Stern was able to
market black individuals like Johnson and Jordan. Broussard added that “practically
every team has a marquee name. That player may not have a marquee-quality game, but
his name recognition made him a draw at the box office.” If a white player was
promoted, it was in opposition to a black player, as seen in Boston Celtics legend Larry
Bird and his rivalry with Johnson in the 1980s. Halftime shows and NBA All-Star games
after the 1990s also featured black athletes in the slam-dunk contest with hip-hop music
blaring in the background. Broussard argued that the NBA was popular with younger
fans because of Stern’s supervised, filtered “embrace” of hip-hop culture.39

The prevalence of black players in the NBA and the NFL meant these modern
athletes also upheld their association with hip-hop culture. The success for some modern

39 J.A. Adande, “The Many Sides of David Stern,” ESPN, 31 January 2014,
athletes meant adopting “a particularly urban style or sensibility.” It was that hip-hop element (cholo-placa lettering, tag-hand styles, or B-boy characters) and brash attitude that linked Iverson and other professional athletes to tattoos, expressing themselves as individuals looking out for their self-interest. According to Boyd, Iverson was noted to have told a close friend after he blew off a commercial shoot, “I give them muthafuckas a commercial every night. What the fuck else they want.” With a supreme indifference that matched Shakur’s, Iverson bucked “convention, taste, or standards.” Iverson was a “walking, dribbling embodiment of this (hip-hop) sensibility.”

Contributing to Iverson’s villainous reputation in the NBA was his habit of traveling with “his boys” or “A.I’s posse” from his neighborhood of Hampton, Virginia. Boyd stated that Iverson’s friends were perceived to be so “visibly connected to the ‘thug life’ mentality and way of life that they put fear in the minds of many who saw them and their close relationship to Iverson.” Boyd argued that when the media and “mainstream White society” described a “large group of Black men,” they “constitute[d] a gang.” Boyd added, “White guys have friends; Black guys have a posse.” Iverson’s hip-hop attitude of “not giving a fuck” and “keeping it real” reflected the power stemming from the salaries of professional athletes which enabled them to exercise the “freedom to express their individual style.” Without an official dress code in the NBA until 2005, athletes like Iverson had no fear of financial indictment. Unlike other professions, where tattoos must be covered or unseen, modern athletes enjoyed greater accessibility to the skin art culture. The attention given to Iverson by the media and by fans, because of his

---

40 Boyd, 11.
41 Boyd, 153-156.
42 Boyd, 156.
43 Boyd, 153-154.
attitude and tattooed body, explained why Iverson was a “lightning rod for controversy and a hero of hip hop.”

Criticism of Iverson came quick by 2000, as the number of tattoos on his body increased. *Hoop* magazine, an official NBA publication, went so far as to alter Iverson’s pictures by airbrushing out his diamond necklace, earrings, and tattoos in 2001. Iverson was outraged and went on to say that the re-touched photograph “was an insult, terrible…. I wish they wouldn’t use me at all if they can’t accept all of me. I have things on my body that are just tattoos to others but mean a lot to me…about my mother, my grandmother, my kids, my fiancée. These aren’t just tattoos to me.” This censoring of skin art was also seen more recently with the exclusion of J.R. Smith’s “YM” or “Young Money” tattoo in the videogame *NBA 2K13*. Although the renderings of players were quite accurate, down to their tattoos, Smith expressed disappointment of the exclusion of his “YM” tattoo.

Smith’s disappointment and Iverson’s strong sentiment about tattooing was indicative of how many people in contemporary America felt about expressing their identity on the skin and defending those liberties. For some professional athletes, tattoos served as an important counterpoint to the institutional containment asserted over professional athletes by the NBA, the NFL, and MLB. In their cases, tattoos were emblematic of their resistance to being treated as “slaves.” For example, Dennis Rodman in 1996 described himself as a “sports slave,” and he was punished financially by the

---

44 Boyd, 3.
NBA because he was deemed uncontrollable in a league which wanted to protect its image. Rodman explained, “I speak my mind. Everybody else is going to do what they’re told because they’re the NBA Kids. They have to say something that won’t burn their daddy’s feet, and that daddy is David Stern.”

Before game four of the 1999 NBA finals between the New York Knicks and San Antonio Spurs, power forward Larry Johnson, in referring to his teammates, stated “What we have is a lot of rebellious slaves on the team.” For many, it was difficult identifying with such sentiments or believing that wealthy athletes like Johnson compared themselves to slaves. However, like Rodman, Johnson’s issues stemmed from alienation from his own labor and body. The urge to control labor and bodies, as commodities, has had a long history within the big business of sports. For example, the “reserve clause” in 1879, virtually bound a player for life with the same club. Like slavery which had been abolished fourteen years earlier, the reserve clause brought a similar system of control over white baseball players. Baseball players could be bought, traded (for cash or another player), and discarded by team owners or the commissioner of baseball.

---

47 Dennis Rodman, 68.
49 It should be noted that Larry Johnson had signed a contract for 12 years/ $84 Million in 1993.
50 In an effort to manage labor relations and stabilize team rosters, the National League of Professional Baseball Clubs in 1879 allowed teams to “reserve” five players for the season. This “reserve clause” was eventually extended to cover all major league players. Discussed in Dave Zirin, A People’s History of Sports in the United States: 250 Years of Politics, Protests, People, and Play (New York, 2008), 20.
51 For this reason in 1887, journalist John Montgomery Ward asked, “Is the Base-Ball Player a Chattel?” In his piece, Ward stated, “Like the fugitive-slave law, the reserve-rule denies him a harbor or a livelihood, and carries his back, bound and shackled, to the club from which he attempted to escape.”
While not as restrictive as the 1879 clause, modern sport franchises still retain substantial power over their players. NFL teams used the “Franchise” tag, which was similar to the reserve clause, but only for one player a year rather than the whole team. In the NBA, rookie contracts were signed for two years (with a team option for year three and four) and players were designated a salary based on their draft position. If a player like Allen Iverson reached his fourth year, his team usually offered a larger contract so other teams were not able to match his original team’s offer. The reality was that modern professional athletes were commodities and this was seen in the language describing them. Terms often used by teams or the players themselves included “franchise player,” “face of the franchise,” “brand,” “piece of the puzzle.”

In exchange for financial security, players as part of a franchise were subjected to greater lengths of supervision, which included random and frequent drug testing from recreational and Performance Enhancing Drugs (PEDs). Larry Johnson and Rodman’s comments about the NBA and commissioner David Stern underscored the heavy policing of players who clearly felt owned by the league. For Iverson and other tattooed athletes entrenched in hip-hop culture, indelible marks on the body reflected in “true hip-hop fashion,…[a don’t] give a fuck” identity in contrast to their mandatory uniforms, which expressed institutional ownership, regulation, and control by team owners, the league, and player’s union.53

For some observers, the prevalence of tattoos as signifiers of hip-hop culture symbolized everything that was wrong in professional sports—too much hip-hop. This was seen when Stern instituted the NBA Player Dress Code in 2005. Players were

52 For a greater discussion on the control of athlete’s labor and mobility, see Dave Zirin and William Rhoden.
53 Boyd, 156.
expected to wear “business casual attire whenever they participate in team or league activities, including arriving at games, leaving games, conducting interviews and making promotional or other appearances.”54 The new “professional” code prohibited: 1) sleeveless shirts; 2) shorts; 3) T-shirts; 4) Chains, pendants, or medallions worn over the clothes; 5) sunglasses while indoors; 6) headphones (excluding when on team bus, plane or locker room). When players were injured and not in uniform, they were expected to wear a sport coat on the bench. The reasoning behind the dress code was voiced by sportswriter Phil Mushnick: "NBAers were showing up to speak at schools and in airports and for TV interviews looking like the recruitment officers for the Bloods and Crips.”55 The dress code was an obvious attempt to contain or curtail the more dangerous, gang association with hip-hop, and tattoos. Raja Bell, who questioned the dress requirements, felt that the NBA product appealed “to kids and people who [were] into the NBA hip-hop world,” not “corporate or big business.”56 For example, Iverson’s #3 Philadelphia 76ers jersey was the best-selling jersey in the NBA for 2001. Bell’s comments, though naïve, had not taken into account how protective the NBA was in presenting an image or product that was palatable for white sponsors, investors, and team owners—a protectiveness further compounded when calculating the global impact of American sports around the world.

According to legal historian Andre L. Smith, the NBA Dress Code was “racist because it directly maintains White cultural supremacy and indirectly maintains White
economic supremacy.” Smith put forth that by “penalizing” players who do not adhere to fashions valued by “White men,” the dress code explicitly “subordinates non-White cultures,” including a subset of black and Latino culture—hip-hop aesthetics.\footnote{Andre L. Smith, “Describing Racism as Asymmetrical Market Imperfections, or How to Determine Whether the NBA Dress Code is Racist,” in Andre Cummings and Anne Lofaso, ed., Reversing Field: Examining Commercialization, Labor, Gender, and Race in 21st-Century Sports Law (West Virginia, 2010), 46.} It was also ironic that when players were practicing or working, activities broadcast to millions on television, they were wearing shorts and sleeveless shirts—their work apparel. Yet, they also had to wear “appropriate shoes and socks” that did not include sneakers or “work boots.” The code, under the aegis of corporate culture or “professionalism,” conveniently covered tattooed bodies and contained any negative connotations about players like Iverson and solved the NBA’s image problem. The creation of the NBA Dress Code coincided nearly a year to the day after the infamous Detroit Pistons-Indiana Pacers brawl in 2004. Set in Detroit and involving conflict among black players, the most infamous brawl in NBA history had a clear black tinge to it.\footnote{The 2004 Detroit Pistons-Indiana Pacers brawl involved only black players and the suspensions after were of black players.} Coincidently, Stephen Jackson of the Golden State Warriors who was involved and suspended because of the infamous brawl, commented on the NBA Dress Code in 2005. Jackson stated that the ban on “bling-bling is racially motivated…and targets young black males because chains are associated with hip-hop culture and the league is afraid of becoming ‘too hip-hop.’”\footnote{Seattle Times News Service, “NBA Notebook: Dress Code targets blacks, says Jackson,” The Seattle Times, 20 October 2005, http://seattletimes.com/html/sports/2002571873_nba20.html (accessed 3 February 2014).}

Reporter Bob Kravitz reframed the issue by asking, “How can we use the same word—racism—to compare treatment of (Rosa) Parks to the imposition of a dress code
for NBA players? We can’t. And yet, in a way, we can. And should.” While the situations were not the same, Kravitz stated that the “fact remains, an injustice is an injustice, whether it involves basic civil rights or something as relatively insignificant as a dress code.” The dress code did not have the outward racist intent identified with the Eugene “Bull” Connor or Donald Sterling type of racism, because Stern’s singular focus was on profit maximization for team owners and the league and therefore it was not overtly racist. The fact remained that the dress code was targeting one specific group who identified with hip-hop aesthetics, conveniently covering-up skin art, and taking away the player’s profitability. For example, sneakers were not considered “appropriate shoes,” which decreased the visibility of associating athletes with their brands to maximize their potential and profits. In encouraging business casual, the dress code placed commercial associations with hip-hop and other “ethnic designers” at a disadvantage. If hip-hop entrepreneurs and the players were allowed to promote their brand (reinforced visually through tattoos) with “billions of fans watch[ing] NBA basketball worldwide,” then their profitability would be maximized.

Tattoos were symptomatic of the many levels of exploitation prospective athletes faced in their lives. A year after the dress code was instituted, the NBA required a minimum age of nineteen years or one year of college for an amateur player entering the

---


61 Eugene “Bull” Connor was Commissioner of Public Safety in Selma, Alabama. He became the face of the enforcement of racial segregation in the South during the 1960s. Connor became known for using attack dogs, fire hoses, and tear gassing peaceful demonstrators. Donald Sterling, owner of the NBA franchise Los Angeles Clippers, was caught on tape making a racist rant, in Braden Goyette, “LA Clippers Owner Donald Sterling’s Racist Rant Caught on Tape,” The Huffington Post, 26, April 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/04/26/donald-sterling-racist_n_5218572.html (accessed 28 April, 2014).
NBA draft in 2006. Some argued that a year in college allowed potential professionals to mature—physically and mentally—and handle the rigors of NBA life. The reality was that the business of college basketball or football would take a significant hit with the top high school players going straight to the NBA or NFL (the NFL required two years of college). If the purpose of a university was to get an education, then institutions of higher learning were failing many student athletes. Most top high school preparatory players like Greg Ogden and Derrick Rose in 2005 were usually “one and done”—fulfilling their required one year of college and declaring for the draft.62

Stern argued that high school players were not seasoned enough and yet many of the top players in the NBA—including Kevin Garnett, Kobe Bryant, Amare Stoudamire, and LeBron James (all of whom were tattooed)—skipped the college experience. Private high schools and the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) have "professionalized" black athletes from the time they reach junior high. Some private high schools worked hard on recruiting the best athletes as early as sixth grade. Sneaker companies such as Nike and Reebok funded many of these schools as sponsors—which included St. Anthony of New Jersey, St. Raymond of New York City, Roman Catholic in Philadelphia, and Mater Dei in California.63

AAU basketball was also backed by the various sneaker companies, where the best athletes in the nation were outfitted by the sponsors—shoes, uniforms, warm-ups, travel bags, and promises of "glamorous nationwide trips." With pressure on college

62 The tension between college players and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has become more pronounced with student-athletes at Northwestern forming the first union for college athletes. "Pay for Play" has also been raised, where student-athletes were advocating pay for playing for colleges which make millions off the labor of college athletes.

63 Kevin McNutt, Hooked on Hoops: Understanding Black Youth’s Blind Devotion to Basketball (Chicago, 2002), 121.
coaches to win, the coaches made alliances with AAU coaches who had no similar restrictive access to players. Both the private high schools and the AAU became pipelines for coveted black athletes. For black student-athletes, these institutions were stepping-stones to the next level—each one more exploitative than the next. Kevin McNutt added that many commentators wanted to blame the black community for early entries to the NBA Draft. He stated, "This is a typical theme: Blame Black society for America's ills."64

Realistically, most black athletes did not graduate and were “simply shuffled through fluff courses to maintain their eligibility.”65 Ironically, ESPN college basketball analyst Dick Vitale, who made his living on identifying top college players as his “diaper dandies,” also questioned the right of stopping “someone from making a living.” Vitale added, “The bottom line is this…if a player has the talent of a LeBron James, Kobe Bryant, or Kevin Garnett, they should be allowed to enter the draft.”66 Young black athletes leaving school early for the NBA was symptomatic of youths everywhere. In contrast, McNutt explained that there was "no media outrage over white youths going pro in tennis, golf, and baseball."67 There were no constraints on “whiter” sports like tennis, golf, NASCAR, or baseball. Andre Smith argued that the NBA and the NFL have the “greatest combination of salary restraints” which included age requirements, draft-slotted salary, limited free agency, and salary caps. Baseball has no salary cap, which has allowed teams like the New York Yankees to “buy” a championship, and this benefitted

64 McNutt, 144.
65 McNutt, 145.
66 Dick Vitale argued that in college, amateur players have constraints on time allowed to practice in the gym (NCAA rules). In contrast, NBA players have no restrictions of practicing and played against a higher level of talent. Dick Vitale, “High Schoolers should be in draft,” ESPN news, 26 June 2006, http://espn.go.com/dickvitale/vcolumndraft.html (accessed 4 February 2014).
67 McNutt, 144.
players (the basis of a free-market system). Smith noted that in NASCAR, the driver can “own the team he races for, and golf and tennis players are not even exclusively controlled by their respective associations.”68 In other words, the vision of young, black men earning millions highlighted America as a color-blind society, whereas in reality, there were institutional restrictions on the “economic and cultural freedom of Black athletes.”69

The comparison of sports and slavery evoked by professional tattooed athletes was not unusual.70 Alan Grant, a former NFL player, reflected on the status of players as “slaves,” while the NFL commissioner and league owners were “slave masters.” Figuratively, Grant explained that “black men are told to just shut up and take the money.”71 With the hyper-visibility of the thuggish, "blinging" black tattooed athletes in the media, there was little sympathy when black players spoke of racism or compared the NBA or the NFL to slavery. However, the percentage of black owners, general managers, and coaches in both sports was less than ten percent. The majority of players were African Americans who were traded, restricted through free agency, and fined and disciplined for detrimental conduct. Boyd described a situation involving NBA player Rasheed Wallace who was called for a technical foul in a playoff game in 2000, because of an “intimidating stare.” Boyd argued that the technical foul was the equivalent of “reckless eyeballing,” a Jim Crow charge often leveled against Black men when it was perceived that they had been looking at a White woman or looking in a way thought to be

68 Andre Smith, 52
69 Andre Smith, 53.
70 Professional athletes who compared sports to slavery included NBA players Dennis Rodman in 1996 and Larry Johnson in 1999, and NFL player Warren Sapp in 2002.
disrespectful to a White person.\textsuperscript{72} Players were taught to play with passion, but in Wallace’s case, too much passion was “often misperceived as a violent threat.”\textsuperscript{73} In evaluating players before the NFL and the NBA drafts, analysts spoke positively of athletes if they played with a “mean streak.” The draft itself resembled a modern slave market which highlighted the physical statistics of prospective professionals.

When Larry Johnson made the comment that he was a “common slave,” he was not implying material poverty, but the "powerlessness" of a player. Rhoden, in an article for \textit{The New York Times}, wrote that athletes perform in an “economic atmosphere where everyone except them makes money off their labor….In the revenue-producing sports of football and basketball, athletes are the gold, oil, the natural resource that makes the NCAA engine run and its cash register ring.”\textsuperscript{74} From college to the pros, “from plantation to plantation,” Johnson provided insight into the NBA’s plantation-based disparity of power, where power was not shared and players could be bought, traded, and discarded. Johnson was a "runaway slave," escaping the "ghettos" and identifying with his "brothers and sisters...who are still being heavily policed" within a perpetuated racial caste system in the twenty-first century.\textsuperscript{75}

Besides having the wealth and mobility to afford and acquire tattoos, athletes used skin art to mark their survival and achievement of professional status. This explained the evolution of an athlete's body from college (from no tattoos to a couple) to the professional ranks (full sleeves and extremely covered). (See figures 6.09, 6.10, and 6.11) The prominence of tattoos within the NBA culture founded by Rodman and

\textsuperscript{72} Boyd, 182.  
\textsuperscript{73} Boyd, 183.  
\textsuperscript{74} Rhoden, 240.  
\textsuperscript{75} Rhoden, 244.
Iverson has led to the normalization of tattooing among more recent players. Dorell Wright of the Philadelphia 76ers saw himself as part of another generation contributing to the greater acceptability of tattooing. Wright stated, “I’m happy to be a part of a group that really express ourselves through body art.” He believed that the “previous generation” was adjusting its attitudes and discussions were about “having a tattoo.” For Wright’s generation, skin art was about the “quality of the work [tattoo] itself.” More importantly, tattoos made racial discourse visible in the NBA. Skin art allowed the re- ascription and subversion of racial stereotypes.

For example, Kenyon Martin has the phrase “Bad Ass Yellow Boy” tattooed on his right chest to affirm his black identity. (See figure 6.12) Martin’s tattoo was also making a comment on the “pigmentocracy” within black culture, considering that, according to journalist Chris Ballard, he came from a neighborhood where he was “teased unmercifully...because he was quiet and a stutterer, and light-skinned.” One aspect of this pigmentocracy was a hierarchical gradation, whereby darker skin has been perceived as more athletic and potent, while being “yellow,” on the lighter side of black, meant being less powerful. Martin’s tattoo affirmed his black identity and acknowledged his lighter-skin tone and potency. While a darker skin color may have been perceived as a signifier of blackness, tattooing allowed lighter-skinned blacks and non-blacks to appropriate “blackness” for their assumed professionalism.

With “blackness” normalized within many major professional sports, other players expanded black boundaries or went “old school,” as seen with former players Rasheed Wallace and David Benoit. Both men had Egyptian symbols tattooed on their...
bodies. These tattoos suggested linkages to a radical black identity that historian Martin Bernal attempted to construct in his book, *Black Athena* (1991), where African culture was traced to ancient Egypt. These varying views concerning race and ethnicity showed the diversity of identities among African-American players. Skin art also emphasized individualism, as these players offered their own unique perspective on their heritage and on the cultures offering inspiration. Wallace, according to Boyd, epitomized the idea of “retro” as he alternated between cornrows and “a nappy old-school ‘fro.” This was true also for another former NBA player, Brian Grant. Known as the “the Rasta Monsta,” Grant sported dreadlocks and had Bob Marley’s face with the words “prophet” tattooed on his left shoulder. Grant’s inspiration came after a vacation to Jamaica, where he learned that Marley was revered as a political hero. Grant’s stated, “I got into Marley pretty heavy, that guy was deep. He was fighting for the rights of his people and, at the same time, equality for everyone.”

For Grant, Marley stood as an inspiration for pan-African blackness and resistance.

While the reinforcement of individual heritage was one of the main appeals of tattooing, the inclusionary language of marking the skin provided another for a hip-hop, black professional. Black players with tattoos or cornrows have created an image in which tattooing or a style of play like dunking was an aspect of “blackness.” In discussing ideas surrounding the contemporary body, historian Paul Gilroy has argued that the body has been reduced to a “task.” This notion, when applied to African Americans, promoted the belief that “blackness [was] a substantial asset,” which underscored Gilroy’s discussion of theorist Franz Fanon’s “cycle of the biological,”

---

78 Gottlieb, 32.
79 The construction and association of blackness with dunking was in contrast to “white men can’t jump.”
where attributes were assigned to a particular race.\textsuperscript{80} If the very act of getting tattooed was a tool in acquiring blackness, then marking the skin was either an affirmation of black identity or an accumulation of black physical prowess for the player.

Former white NBA player Jason Williams has often been compared to black players because of his style of play. His “no-look” and “behind the back” passes awed fans and players alike, and thus he was dubbed “white chocolate.” Williams grew up in a predominately black neighborhood in West Virginia and went to Dupont High, where most of his friends were African Americans. In 2001, Williams was fined $15,000 for calling a heckler a “slant-eyed motherf—”\textsuperscript{81} and then pretending to shoot him. He then said, “I’ll shoot all you Asian motherf—. Do you remember the Vietnam War? I’ll kill y’all like that. Just like Pearl Harbor.”\textsuperscript{82} His racial obscenities about Asians reflected the prejudice that some whites and African Americans harbor toward Asians, particularly Korean storeowners. Williams also mistakenly mixed references to Vietnamese and Japanese people. Similarly, rapper Ice Cube’s single, “Black Korea,” generalized and insulted all Asians. Ice Cube rapped, “I gotta go down to the store with the two oriental one-penny counting motherfuckers…. ‘Look you little Chinese motherfucker, I ain’t trying to steal none of yo’ shit, leave me alone!’ ….Yo, yo, check it out, So don’t follow me, up and down your market. Or your little chop suey ass’ll be a target….Cause you can’t turn the ghetto into Black Korea.”\textsuperscript{83}

\textsuperscript{80} Paul Gilroy, Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond The Color Line (Cambridge, 2000), 22.
\textsuperscript{81} Jay Mariotti, The Sporting News (May 14, 2001), 7.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid, 7.
Williams was an anomaly of sorts because of the “racial slippage” he represented. His situation was similar to white rap artist Eminem, who likewise has an occupation usually dominated by blacks. Williams, who has seven tattoos to go along with his “black style” of basketball, may be appropriating “blackness,” yet his fingers were tattooed with the letters “W-H-I-T-E-B-O-Y.” (See figure 6.13) Both Williams and Eminem were physically white, but were culturally linked to black. This slippage included Joel Przybilla of the Milwaukee Bucks. He was one of the few white players tattooed with the “praying hands” symbol popular among many black athletes. He also has a “b-boy” character with the hip-hop based caption “Not in My House” on his right arm. (See figures 6.14 and 6.15) The designs and the act of tattooing by Williams and Przybilla highlighted the ways black and white players appropriated or accumulated “blackness” and were examples of how tattooing transcended racial boundaries and created a common bond for professional athletes entrenched in hip-hop aesthetics.

These slippages also showed the inconsistencies within racial constructions, and tattoos demonstrated how skin markings on the body were tools for others to appropriate in crossing over, blurring, or delineating racial boundaries and identities. Reading the tattoos on professional athletes underscored the malleable nature of the body, as certain interpretations were often different from those identified by the media and society. For some observers, the new generation of players was viewed as thuggish and this perception was reinforced by black athletes sporting their fancy jewelry, cornrows, and tattoos. This perception has not changed much since the Denver Nuggets’ roster in 2010, which boasted Carmelo Anthony, Chris Anderson, J.R. Smith, Marcus Camby, and Kenyon Martin, and was considered the most “tatted” team in the NBA. The players
were insulted, being called the “Denver Thuggest” by Dallas Mavericks owner, Mark Cuban, after his team was eliminated from the playoffs in 2009. (See figure 6.16)

The struggle over the meaning of tattoos, either the act of tattooing or tattoo designs, underscored the clash over defining or maintaining the image of “professional” in sports and managing the subversiveness of tattooed athletes. For example, interpreting and managing an athlete’s image with the stature of Carmelo Anthony could be problematic. He was arguably the most important and influential player on his team, so when Anthony had the Warner Brothers symbol tattooed his left shoulder, any analysis of his body was ambiguous. For the uninformed, his tattoo could be read as Anthony “selling out” to corporate America. More likely, the skin art was his attempt at co-opting the “WB” symbol which meant “West Baltimore,” where he went to high school. NBA players Luther Head and Dominique Jones have shown their aspirations by tattooing the NBA logo on their bodies, a logo that included an outlined player modeled after Los Angeles Lakers legend Jerry West, a very good, white player in the 1970s. Both players may have subverted the NBA logo by injecting “blackness” into the conversation. However, without any personal insight into the player’s lives, observers may have viewed them as properties of the NBA brand much like slaves on the plantation in the NFL.

So when the NFL followed suit with its own Player Conduct Code in 2007, it was just another restriction placed on professional athletes with hip-hop aesthetics. Also, while there has been no prohibition on players having tattoos in any professional sport, it was not surprising when columnist Bill Plaschke reported that Carolina Panthers owner, Jerry Richardson, asked his former number one draft pick of 2011, Cam Newton, if he had any "ink or trinkets?" Newton, a black player, replied, "No.” Richardson responded,
"Good. We want to keep it that way. We want to keep no tattoos, no piercings and I think you've got a nice haircut." Recently, in light of the arrest of NFL player Aaron Hernandez (who has “full sleeves” of tattoos on both arms) for murder, journalist Bruce Feldman reported that NFL teams may start using “police experts” to inspect NFL draft hopefuls to make certain they have no gang affiliation. The difficulty of managing tattooed athletes in the NBA became more pronounced in the NFL, particularly with the democratization and commodification of tattoo culture in America.

### Criminalization of the black professional in the NFL

After deflecting a pass that was intended for receiver Michael Crabtree in the 2014 National League Football Championship game, Seattle Seahawks cornerback Richard Sherman stated, “I’m the best corner in the game. When you try me with a sorry receiver like Crabtree, that’s the result you going to get.” Both players took to Twitter, trading insults, and given the recent availability of social media, Sherman’s actions went “viral.” The subject of many discussions on ESPN, Foxsports News, and the national media, Sherman received more criticism when he reiterated his actions by describing Crabtree as a “mediocre receiver….I appreciate that he knows that now.” Some described Sherman’s actions and statements against Crabtree as “classless,” “disrespecting the game,” or “poor sportsmanship.” Sherman admitted that many

---


criticisms via social media (Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest) were “racist in nature.” In attempting to justify his postgame tirade, Sherman responded:

To those who would call me a thug or worse because I show passion on a football field—don’t judge a person’s character by what they do between the lines. Judge a man by what he does off the field, what he does for his community, what he does for his family. But people find it easy to take shots on Twitter, and to use racial slurs and bullying language far worse than what you’ll see from me. It’s sad and somewhat unbelievable to me that the world is still this way, but it is. I can handle it.87

Sherman also defended himself on Twitter by stating, “Last night shows that racism is alive and well….And that’s so sad…At least some people respect MLK’s dream.” Hank Aaron, a hall of famer in baseball, tweeted his support and told Sherman to hang in there.88 Spartan Daily Columnist Austin Belisle pointed out the obvious in stating that the controversy concerned the appropriate professional behavior in victory, meaning athletes were expected to exhibit good sportsmanship.89

The not so obvious reason was that the Seahawks defense dominated with black men indelibly marked and labeled with the moniker “Legion of Boom.” Critics labeled Sherman a “thug.” (See figure 6.17) In contrast to most mainstream media treatment of Sherman, Belisle added, “It’s refreshing to see a player be so honest and real in the heat of the moment.” In “keeping it real,” Sherman did not give the politically-correct response that the “Peyton Mannings and the Tom Bradys of the league” usually gave to

87 Ibid.
the media.\textsuperscript{90} By focusing on a black man from Compton, California with dreadlocks, tattoos covering his arm, and “spouting off,” it was often easy for the media to concentrate on image rather than deeds.\textsuperscript{91} Widely considered one of the best corners in the league, Sherman skills and personal appearance often overshadowed his other accomplishments, which included having a Master’s degree in communication from Stanford University and the establishing Richard Sherman Family Foundation’s “Blanket Coverage,” which ensured children have proper school supplies and adequate clothing. 

Often the negative publicity about a few professional athletes eclipsed the efforts of most players in the NBA or the NFL. Players in the NFL viewed themselves as part of the team franchise, so most athletes were compelled to do charity work or to volunteer time for community service. Most players in the NBA and the NFL, like Sherman, have their own charitable foundations.\textsuperscript{92} However, Sherman’s situation underscored the connectedness of American society through the media and social networks. Emails, text messages, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, and YouTube highlighted a higher degree of surveillance and scrutiny, particularly after 11 September 2001. These technologies also compounded the potential for backlash, as also seen in Sherman’s situation. Taken in context, Sherman’s remarks or boasting were comparable to other athletes like Muhammad Ali in 1971, when he described opponent Joe Frazier as a “gorilla” and an “Uncle Tom.” Like athletes in the NBA, the NFL has increasingly

\textsuperscript{90} Peyton Manning (Denver Broncos) and Tom Brady (New England Patriots) were white quarterbacks in the NFL and were considered the perfect “faces” of their franchises because of their clean image and non-controversial mannerisms.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{92} Each year, the top community-minded NFL player is recognized with the Walter Payton Award. For a list of finalists and their community contributions from 2010 to 2014, http://www.nfl.com/news/story/0ap2000000315367/article/walter-payton-award-finalists-announced (accessed 25 April 2014).
contributed to the normalization of “blackness” in sports, accentuated with tattoos. Tattoos signified their status as professional athletes and, for some, their identification with hip-hop “thug” culture has led to financial success.

While Richard Sherman was critiqued for his remarks on Michael Crabtree, he also became quite famous or infamous (depending on the point of view) because of the media exposure. On CNN’s *The Lead with Jack Trapper*, Sherman stated that “thug” is the new “N-word.” In discussing Sherman’s rant, Trapper argued that Sherman had reinforced his “thug” status, and the publicity would have a positive impact that would pay off through endorsements. The immediate impact was seen in the sale of Sherman’s jersey from NFL.com. From January 2014 sales, Sherman recorded the tenth best-selling jersey for 2013-2014—making him the only defensive player on the NFL sales list. Columnist Chris Isidore predicted that Sherman’s rants and hip-hop attitude “could stand to make about $5 million in endorsements.” These predictions were not hard to fathom considering that Beats Electronics, LLC., famous for its line of high-end headphones Beats by Dre, aired a commercial a day earlier featuring Richard Sherman in a mock locker-room interview with reporters. When a reporter brought up a concern about being called a “thug,” Sherman turned away and placed his noise-canceling Beats by Dre headphones over his ears. The background music featured singer Aloe Blacc’s “The Man” and the caption, “Hear What You Want.”

---

Beats Electronics, LLC. was founded by former NWA member Andre “Dr. Dre” Young and their products clearly reflected a hip-hop attitude. “Hear What You Want” was a toned-down version of “I don’t give a fuck” and, for this reason, the company’s endorsements included black tattooed athletes such as Kevin Garnett, LeBron James, Colin Kaepernick, and the most recent addition, Richard Sherman. The visibility of these tattooed athletes and their attitudes through the platform of sports and the media played a critical role in the “commodification and consumption of the subcultural body.” In this case, the obvious link to hip-hop attitude through tattoos was part of the trademark packaging or branding of professional athletes that allowed them to sell themselves for increased visibility and endorsements. For example, Kaepernick has been featured in many articles or photo shoots with his shirt off, exposing his much-tattooed body. In January 2013, Kaepernick also trademarked “Kaepernicking,” his signature touchdown celebration that involved him kissing his tattooed bicep with the words, “My Gift…Is My Curse” and “Faith.”

Another example of this commodification was seen with Seahawks running back Marshawn Lynch, who has dreadlocks and is heavily tattooed on his torso. He was also noted for his powerful, bruising running style which, earned the moniker “Beast Mode.” Accentuating his nickname was his penchant for snubbing the media or giving very brief statements. Lynch’s anti-social stance or hip-hop attitude was on display during the week leading up to the 2014 Super Bowl, when he spoke to the media for six minutes and twenty seconds. Lynch ignored the media thereafter except for telling the NFL Network

---

in a brief interview, that media day “ain’t my thang.” whether the publicity was negative or positive, being in the public eye has also earned him “mid-six figures” from registering the phrase, “beast mode.” with his trademark, Lynch has the power to approve every design and, he typically earned twenty percent royalties from companies with which he agreed to work—not among them was Nike who endorsed him for their products, but was not allowed to use his image and moniker conjointly. the branding of athletes has led to greater marketability for athletes and greater familiarity for them with consumers; in Lynch’s case, this led to an endorsement deal with Skittles candy before the Super Bowl. Before the endorsement, Lynch had a habit of eating Skittles or his “power pellets,” and as he received greater coverage by the media during Super Bowl week for his standoffish hip-hop attitude, he coincidentally got a sponsored deal with Skittles the same day.

In Sherman and Lynch’s cases, both reaped the financial benefits because of their association with hip-hop aesthetics that included being indelibly marked. However, the function of tattoos and tattooing’s association with resistance and rebellion came into question, as marking the skin became coopted by business or corporate control. Whether commercial interests were controlling their bodies or images, athlete’s commodification of hip-hop and black tattooed bodies further aggrandized the “thug” element in American popular culture. When Sherman argued that “thug” was the new “N-word,” his statement underscored the repercussions for modern America and the world. According to Boyd,

---

the attacks of September 11 exposed the fact “that America [was] no longer exclusively ‘white’ country. Though Whiteness was still considered the norm in America, the rapidly shifting population dynamics of the country have forced a reconsideration of…the nation’s cultural identity.” Since slavery, blackness has broadened the nation’s sense of representation. Boyd argued that with entertainment and popular culture becoming America’s biggest export, particularly with basketball, the nature of that “Americanness” was black. On a global scale, black athletes dominated in the summer Olympics and for America, historically, black athletes have represented the greatest American achievement, from Jesse Owens to Cassius Clay (Muhammad Ali).

However, their accomplishments meant little at home with Owens relegated to racing a horse or Clay denied admission to a segregated facility. For modern professional athletes, the cultural exportation mediated through the media and corporate sponsors coded black tattooed athletes as “thugs.” This was seen in an incident involving Georgetown University’s basketball team and a Chinese professional basketball team on 18 August 2011. A “Goodwill” exhibition game in China between the two teams erupted into a brawl, when Chinese player Hu Ke gave a hard foul to Georgetown player Jason Clark. (See figure 6.18) The game was described as physical with a Chinese player yelling at Coach John Thompson III before the melee. Considering that the NBA continued to bring in “outsourced” international players who were sometimes described as “soft” or as not physical in their game, the Chinese team played Georgetown extremely physically and were “jawing” at their opponents much like American players.

101 Todd Boyd, Young, Black, Rich and Famous: The Rise of the NBA, the Hip Hop Invasion and the Transformation of American Culture (New York, 2003), 175.
This altercation suggested that the American exportation of successful black athletes involved thuggish violence.

While the commodification of black tattooed athletes has led to self-parody to sell violence or brand themselves, the wealth, skill, and publicity garnered by professional athletes also gave them leverage or agency in their own affairs. Two of the most recently publicized trades in the NBA involved tattooed players, Carmelo Anthony going from the Denver Nuggets to the New York Knicks and Dwight Howard leaving the Orlando Magic for the Los Angeles Lakers. Both were unhappy with their respective teams and were able to maneuver a trade to a team they wanted. For Boyd, these tattooed athletes were no longer “just being used when it’s convenient to make the country look good. These individuals were now necessary because they comprised the core of America’s cultural identity on a global scale.”

If Iverson, Sherman, and other professional players wanted to sport the prison chic of cornrows and tattoos, then have the owners or league fine them, they could afford to make the choice over their body which underscored a key function of skin art.

Tattooed athletes in contemporary America operate under different standards from those established by Michael Jordan. Unlike Jordan, current players are much more community-minded and outspoken on issues facing America. Granted, some of their comments are misinformed, their spread accelerated by Twitter and other forms of social media. However, modern athletes also know their worth or value. Sherman felt that the best way his team could show him respect or appreciation was to “show him the

---

103 Boyd, 174.
money.” With student-athletes clamoring for “pay-for-play” in college athletics and
the movement to create student-athlete player unions, modern athletes are rebelling
against the alienation of labor. With social media, modern athletes are using their hyper-
visibility for more than financial gain. For example, Richard Sherman and other NFL
players participated in a recent forum at Harvard University. Initially, a discussion on
social media veered to a symposium on race. Sherman felt that his treatment by the
media was important in calling attention to problems facing African Americans. Former
player and president of the NFL players association, Domonique Foxworth, compared
Sherman to 1968 Summer Olympic Sprinters John Carlos and Tommie Smith, who raised
their black-gloved fists to call attention to the mistreatment of blacks in America.
Foxworth added, “I’m proud of what Richard did. He forced us to have a
conversation.”

Richard Sherman and other tattooed athletes were profiting from their brand.
However, indelibly marking the skin for modern athletes continued to function as visible
avenues for choice, self-determination, or basic civil rights. For contemporary
Americans, the greater exposure to tattoo culture has led to wider visual consumption,
acceptance, and participation. With this legitimization or democratization also came the
pitfalls of the cooption of a once subcultural style of resistance for profit or
commodification which, in some instances, highlighted black criminality. However,

---

104 ESPN new service, “Sherman: Show me the money,” *ESPN*, 24 April 2014,
(accessed 24 April 2014).

105 For example, NFL players Arian Foster and Adrian Peterson have been extremely vocal on the
issue of exploitation by college athletics. Both have also remarked that with the money earned in their
careers, they have little fear of institutional repercussions.

106 Stephen Crockett, “Richard Sherman, NFL Players School Harvard Students on Race,” *The Root*
magazine, 24 April 2014,
http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2014/04/richard_sherman_nfl_players_school_harvard_studen
beneath the veneer of acceptance in America, in certain regions a tattoo still represented a problem or had the potential for rebellion in America, accentuated by the increased surveillance after the attacks of September 11, 2001.
A Conservative Counter-Culture and the Backlash Against Tattooed Americans

According to journalist Vicki Viotti, the attacks of 9/11 eroded much resistance to the centralized collection of data or information given the need to stop terrorism. Scholar Scott Robertson at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, stated, “Even the characteristic baby boomer critique of government cracked when the towers came down. If terrorism required vigilance, and most people thought it did, using technology to heighten defenses seemed the rational response.”

The Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001, or the USA PATRIOT Act, was signed into law by President George W. Bush on 26 October 2001. As the acronym suggested, agencies concerned with national security were permitted to collect public and private data either through wiretaps or surveillance. Another way to interpret the Patriot Act was as a dismissal of or infringement on civil liberties in America. This chapter builds upon an earlier discussion concerning the conservatism and the counter-cultural discourse developed by the medical communities and the mainstream press. The legitimization of tattooing remains a work in progress, as the political climate has brought conflict over civil rights to the forefront, including the rights of marking the skin.

The centrality of civil rights has become more pronounced in light of recent events concerning Edward Snowden, a former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) employee, who leaked classified documents about sweeping U.S. surveillance programs by the National Security Agency (NSA). Since Snowden’s defection, the debates over

---

the balance between security and liberty were more noticeable. RedBlueAmerica columnist Joel Mathis stated that when American leaders were asked to balance security and liberty, they chose the former “just about every time.” Mathis listed his grievances about recent security measures:

President Barack Obama has decided he has the authority to assassinate American citizens abroad, without review, if they’re suspected of terrorism. Gitmo (the U.S. detention center at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba) remains open. Warrantless wiretapping is now legal. The National Security Agency is probably capturing (if not directly peeping at) every single one of our electronic communications.² Yet, given events from the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting on 14 December 2012 to the Boston Marathon Bombing on 15 April 2013, there was also room for heightened security and surveillance. For the tattooed community, this increased surveillance was symbolized in a seemingly benign “fix-it” show, Tattoo Rescue (2012-2013).³

Each week “Joey Tattoo” (Joey Germinario) traveled to a failing tattoo studio and was tasked with transforming it into a profitable business. Before Germinario did so, and without any knowledge of his impending visit (except for the owner), Germinario sent in spies and had set up surveillance cameras to view problems with the daily operations of the shop and its employees. The October 2012 pilot episode, “Just Deadly,” had Germinario visiting Just Deadly Tattoo shop in California.⁴ He played back his camera footage to the Just Deadly artists, and the first part of his plan involved pointing out issues concerning cleanliness and shop culture. For example, Art, one of the artists, was

---
³ As of 2014, shows that feature surveillance are Undercover Boss (2010), Bar Rescue (2011), and Restaurant Stakeout (2012). The current trend of reality-programming also exhibits surveillance as cameras are constantly on the lives of families or participants.
caught eating pizza in the tattooing area, which Germinario pointed out was a $1,000 fine in the state of California. Germinario also berated the artists for “horsing around” when there were customers (Germinario’s spies) in the shop, stating that they “lacked professionalism.” He then chastised Patti, the owner, to the point where she told him to “get out!” For dramatic effect, Germinario soothingly explained to her that he needed to “break them down, so he can bring them back up.” Germinario’s second step was to advertise and improve the shop brand through “Internet Presence” and through the creation of a new sign with a memorable logo that could be seen throughout the shop. The third step, which scientific manager Frederick Taylor would have enjoyed, involved either bringing in a successful tattooist or body piercer who discussed shop protocol and procedures so that there was no wasted time or motion during their job. The final part of Germinario’s plan was the completion of the renovation of the shop within forty-eight hours. While entertaining, the show highlighted the recent reforms of the tattoo industry. However, the tools of surveillance used by Germinario in his attack on and transformation of the shop underscored the scrutiny and technological methods used to spy on people. This critical examination of tattoo shops by Germinario reflected past prejudices, similar to those in the medical community and media in the 1970s.

Studies and reports done by the medical community and the media before the 1970s had contributed to a damaging discourse on marking the skin, and contemporary tattoo enthusiasts have faced the same adverse challenges. Researchers Myrna Armstrong and Kathleen Murphy’s 1997 study, “Tattooing: Another Adolescent Risk Behavior Warranting Health Education,” found it alarming that skin art was on the rise among adolescents (from seventh to twelfth graders). They also reported that drug and
alcohol use was more frequent among tattooed adolescents. They concluded that for “tattooed adolescents, psychosocial and health risks were compounding adolescence, a time already filled with psychosocial pressure.”

S.T. Carroll, R.H. Riffenburgh, and T.A. Roberts came to similar conclusions in their 2002 study, “Tattoos and Body Piercing as Indicators of Adolescent risk-taking behavior.” Their research contended that adolescents with some form of body modification showed various dangerous symptoms:

These included disordered eating behavior, gateway drug use, hard drug use, sexual activity, and suicide. Violence was associated with males having tattoos and with females having body piercings. Gateway drug use was associated with younger age of both tattooing and body piercing. Hard drug use was associated with number of body piercings.

The study advised that the detection of body modifications among students was an important part of “health maintenance.” Like the medical studies before the 1970s, these examinations featured the mental instability of their tattooed subjects. For these researchers, tattooing was on the rise and would be difficult to contain and this has been reflected in more recent studies.

Scholar Lorrie Blair’s 2007 study, “Tattoos & Teenagers: An Art Educator’s Response” suggested difficulty of preventing “students from getting tattoos they may later regret.” Blair’s solution was to educate students on the health issues surrounding tattoos. This included an education on the consequences of being indelibly marked, as there were multiple messages that come with having such a mark. For Blair, tattoo


7 Ibid.
recipients need to be aware that “wearing one (tattoo) involves social responsibility.”

This instructional approach was adopted as well by researchers Eric Silver, Stacy Silver, Sonja Siennick, and George Farkas’ 2011 study. In “Bodily Signs of Academic Success,” they associated tattoos with “fighting and bullying, school truancy, failing grades, and gang membership.” For Silver and his research team, evidence showed that teachers “reward and punish students with encouragement and grades based on physical appearance.” Their conclusion was that, over time, students with body modifications would experience differential treatment from teachers that might result in “differences in academic performance, college aspirations, and school attachment….A second source of discrimination may be that colleges select students for admission based in part on their physical appearances.” In other words, their research pointed out that tattoos and body piercings could hinder any success in a student’s life. By linking the student’s appearance to success, these researchers were generalizing about their subjects and contributing to a backlash discourse, which obviously discouraged skin art. This backlash also appeared in the media.

This conservatism was reflected in a 2011 letter to the editor of the Honolulu Star-Advertiser: “Tattoos hurt your employment chances.” As the vice-president of human resources for a “major company,” Lynn Bailey stated that, according to a secret poll taken at a conference, ninety-two percent of her peers would not hire a person with a tattoo. She listed her own reason why she would not hire a person with a tattoo: 1) Tattoos are associated with “low-class individuals”; 2) People with tattoos are generally

---


insecure and “hence the need for people to look at them through their tattoo”; and 3) “They just look ugly for the most part.”

Bailey’s sentiments reflected a strong conservatism about marking the skin, as tattoos continued to signify deviant elements in American society. Like the hepatitis scare associated with tattoos in the 1940s, a recent article reflected the anxieties concerning diseases and infections. Mike Stobbe’s “Contaminated ink blamed for tattoo recipients’ rash,” discussed contaminated ink which has led to a New York outbreak of hepatitis, staph infections, and “even the superbug known as MRSA.” While this report may be true, it has contributed to an adverse discourse surrounding tattoos. This critical narrative concerning skin art was also seen in the ways the media formatted its news about and pictures of tattooed people.

In discussing the fall of legendary cyclist Lance Armstrong, journalist Ian Lovett traced it to a “small strip-mall tattoo parlor.” Armstrong who received a lifetime ban from the sport of professional cycling for “doping” was brought down because of the misfortunes of Kayle Leogrande, a tattooist and former professional cyclist. In 2008, the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency suspended Leogrande, who tested positive for a blood-boosting hormone. Leogrande’s suspension sparked further investigations that eventually led to Armstrong’s indictment. Interestingly, this article emphasized the tattooed nature of Leogrande from the opening vignette to the statement, “Who is this stupid tattooed guy?” The article also centered a photo of Leogrande in his tattoo shop, fully revealing his tattooed-sleeved arms. (See figure 7.01)

---

The critical formatting of the tattooed body was also seen evident in journalist William Cole’s 2013 discussion of Post-Traumatic-Stress-Disorder (PTSD). Cole’s article “His Dark Battle” reviewed *Level Black*, an award-winning documentary on PTSD, which highlighted the struggles of Staff Sergeant Billy Caviness, who served and was injured in Afghanistan. The accompanying photo for the article has Caviness displaying shrapnel the doctors removed from his body. More revealing were his outstretched, tattooed arms which exhibited his war scars, or reminders. (See figure 7.02)

The dangerous association of tattoos was compounded when Caviness stated, “I used to be able to determine combat zone and home. But now, to me, everything’s combat zone.”

Besides underscoring Caviness’ mental instability, Cole’s article linked tattoos to the physical and mental anguish stemming from conflicts abroad. This critical conservatism or counter-culture against tattooed Americans surfaced, in particular given the visibility tattooed soldiers in the United States after 11 September 2001.

The military has had a long tradition of marking the skin among its servicemen, and tattooing of soldiers usually has experienced an upswing during times of conflict or war. After the tragic events of September 11, journalist Gregory Yamamoto reported a “surge in [the tattoo] business,” when servicemen chose more patriotic themes like “9-11-01” or “Old Glory.” Hawaii tattooist Mike Higuchi recalled one serviceman who got an American bald eagle sewing a tattered United States flag with the phrase “Awakening

---

13 Scholar Lisa McGirr discussed the rise of the conservative new right in Orange County in reaction to the new left in her work, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New Right* (New Jersey, 2001).
a Sleeping Giant.”\textsuperscript{15} (See figure 7.03) The soldier had decided to appropriate a phrase that had been associated with America after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Sudden Rush Tattoo in Waipahu, like other shops across the nation, offered free tattoos of an American flag to anyone over the age of eighteen. As during the eras of the two world wars, military identity once again became vested in patriotism. This patriotism, in some cases, also dehumanized the enemy and underscored the demand for retaliation as seen with a design offered by tattoo shop in Georgia. According to Yamamoto, the Alien Arts Tattoo Shoppe offered a cartoonish image of Osama Bin Laden, the face of terrorism, with a “broken nose and a dagger stabbed through his head.”\textsuperscript{16}

Another trend that arose during this anxious time appeared in Savannah, Georgia. United States Army Rangers assigned to Hunter Army Airfield were tattooing “their name, Social Security number, religion, and blood type…under the armpit—just like a military dog tag.”\textsuperscript{17} Anthony, a combat medic from Fort Hood in Texas, had a tattooed name tag “Hello, my name is Anthony.”\textsuperscript{18} While this may seem strange, it suggested the impact of new military regulations regarding the placement of tattoos. The 2002 limitation expressed in Army Regulation 670-1 (AR670-1) stated, “Visible tattoos or brands on the neck, face, or head are prohibited. Tattoos on other areas of the body that are prejudicial to good order and discipline are prohibited. Additionally, any type of tattoo or brand that is visible while wearing a Class A uniform and detracts from a

\textsuperscript{15} Personal interview with Banzai Tattoos’ Mike Higuchi on 24 April 2002.
\textsuperscript{16} Yamamoto.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
soldierly appearance is prohibited.” Anthony, who was deployed to Iraq in 2005, was also heavily tattooed along his body and his arms. He also made sure that all tattoos were a quarter-inch below the line of dress uniform. He stated:

Army regulations states that I cannot get anything that will show in my dress uniforms, so I guess I will finish it up when I get out. When in uniform I have to be the exact same as everyone else. I need to look like exactly like them. Tattoos is kind of just like a way of me expressing myself and showing everyone else that when I’m not in uniform I am somebody different, I am me.

Anthony’s statement, and his name-tag tattoo, suggested the insecurities of male identity when dealing with the possibility of death from new weapons developed for the war on terrorism. More revealing in his confession was his need to maintain his distinctiveness through tattoos within a conformist institution like the military. Robert, Anthony’s tattooist, explained that soldiers like Anthony “give up all their freedom and rights to go over there (Iraq) and do their thing. One of the few luxuries they have is getting tattooed.” Besides the implication of losing something of his inner-self before joining the military, Anthony’s attraction to tattoos linked him to individual freedom, self-determination, and the preservation of his bodily rights rather than the patriotism from earlier American conflicts. Anthony’s anxieties were mirrored among his fellow soldiers, as illustrated in a recent documentary, Tattooed Under Fire (2008).

A film about tattooed soldiers based at Fort Hood in 2005, Nancy Schiesari’s Tattooed Under Fire emphasized the terror and uncertainty facing soldiers heading to Iraq or Afghanistan. For some servicemen, as for many Americans in the general

---

populace, the enthusiasm for the war on terror had lost some of its vigor by 2005. Roxanne, the owner of the tattoo shop featured in the documentary, stated, “Early on in the war, these guys would tattoo all night long, literally seven in the morning and would have to be back the next day at noon.” However, by 2005, the enthusiasm had “died down.”\textsuperscript{22} The lack of zeal was especially apparent in the darker themes among Fort Hood soldiers awaiting their deployment. Robert, an intelligence analyst, was marked with a medieval battlefield, littered with death. (See figure 7.04) In explaining the symbolism behind his tattoo, Robert stated, “You can never be ready for what you’re gonna see. You just go in with an open mind and hope you come back, that’s it…in one piece.”\textsuperscript{23} Travis, a combat medic, was much more fatalistic in his choice of tattoo—a fetus in a blender. (See figure 7.05) He stated:

\begin{quote}
C’mon tell me that shit ain’t funny, y’know. Guess we really don’t know what we in for. Look at this tattoo in a literal sense of a small child in a blender that doesn’t know y’know what fixing to happen to it. Y’know fixing to get chopped up and chewed up and turned to mush. And that’s the possibility that happening to me.
\end{quote}

The reality for soldiers deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan was reflected in a term used to describe a tattoo on soldiers—“meat tag.” Tattooist Diamond Glenn explained to a soldier that it was the “info where you or dogtag…usually tattooed on your right arm…that’s if you’re right-handed cause if you get your shit blown away…typically one of the parts that’s left is where you held your rifle.”\textsuperscript{24} Roxanne and Diamond Glenn’s comments, and the tattoos by Robert and Travis, echoed an overall criticism of the war on terror by 2005 and this was seen in other tattooed soldiers.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Tattooed Under Fire}, Roxanne interview taken documentary. \\
\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Tattooed Under Fire}, Intel analyst Robert interview taken documentary. \\
\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Tattooed Under Fire}, Diamond Glenn interview taken documentary.
\end{flushright}
Latoya, a supply specialist, had completed her service by 2005, and she got the names of her family on her ankle. She explained that her indelible marks underscored the importance of family over fighting for her country. For Latoya, her realization about the hypocrisy of the war came as soldiers in Iraq were “losing limbs and paying for Internet” so they could communicate with family at home—all the while some private contractor was “getting rich off” providing Internet service. An anonymous soldier supported Latoya’s criticism by stating, “You go there and realize people make a lot of money off of war. Civilian companies…makes money off soldiers dying.” For this reason, the soldier had a tattoo of an obese rat with the caption “Rats Get Fat While Good Soldiers Die.”

An anonymous soldier supported Latoya’s criticism by stating, “You go there and realize people make a lot of money off of war. Civilian companies…makes money off soldiers dying.” For this reason, the soldier had a tattoo of an obese rat with the caption “Rats Get Fat While Good Soldiers Die.” Roxanne, the owner of River City Tattoo, concurred with these negative sentiments and pointed out the positive financial impact of the war economy in America.

Using Killen, Texas, where Fort Hood was stationed, as an example, Roxanne pointed out that businesses profiting on the war included: 1) car sales, 2) barbershops, 3) “4 or 5 cleaners or alterations shops” for uniforms, 4) motorcycles, 5) strip clubs, 6) pawn shops “because soldiers are usually broke before payday,” 6) loaning establishments, 7) and tattoo shops. By 2006, with less support for the war and declining enlistment, the U.S. Army revised its policy on tattoos in an effort to bolster recruitment of qualified individuals “who might otherwise have been excluded from joining.”

---

27 Scholar Lisa McGirr also discussed that the rise of the conservative new right in Orange County was in part because many conservatives work or have a vested interest in the United States defense industry. This conservatism is discussed in McGirr’s *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New Right* (New Jersey, 2001).
reporter J.D. Leipold, a modification of Army Regulation 670-1 (AR670-1) prohibited tattoos on the face or head, but allowed them “on the hands and back of the neck if they were not ‘extremist, indecent, sexist or racist.’” Whether or not this had a positive effect on recruitment for the military, 2007 marked the peak of U.S. forces in Iraq at 190,000. However, with U.S. President Barack Obama’s promise to “pull all” troops out of Iraq by 31 December 2011 and his more recent push to create a “smaller, nimbler military,” the image of America’s “professional” army came under scrutiny again.

In a proposal that coincided with the planned U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, Secretary of the Army, John McHugh, eventually approved a modification to AR670-1 in September 2013. Among the changes, new Army recruits would “not be allowed to have tattoos that show below the elbows and knees or above the neckline.” Sergeant Major of the Army Raymond Chandler stated, “Current soldiers may be grandfathered in, but all soldiers will be barred from having any tattoos that are racist, sexist or extremist.” Chandler added that once the modifications were implemented, each soldier would “sit down” with his or her unit leader and “self-identify” each tattoo. Soldiers would also be “required to pay for removal of any tattoo that violates the policy.” According to journalist Josh Smith, when some soldiers inquired about whether the Army would ever “allow more visible tattoos” in the future, Chandler’s response was that it was a matter of

---

maintaining “a uniform look and sacrificing for the sake of the force.” Chandler spoke hypothetically of a soldier tattooed with a curse word on his neck and questioned, “Why there? Are you trying to stand out?” For Chandler, if soldiers stood out then it should be for their achievements, not because of the “way they look.”

Ironically, with the withdrawal of U.S. troops and policies which reduced tattoo visibility, the influence of tattooed soldiers left the legacy of a thriving tattoo culture in Iraq.

According to journalist Bushra Juhi, after years of watching U.S. soldiers on patrol, young Iraqis have adopted the “hip-hop styles, tough-guy mannerisms and slangy English patter.” These Iraqis are donning “hoodie sweat shirts, listening to 50 Cent or Eminem and watching ‘Twilight’ vampire movies.” This adoption of American culture was also seen in the prosperous tattoo businesses in Baghdad. (See figure 7.06)

According to tattooist and shop owner Hassan Hakim, most men ask for grim designs of “coffins, skulls, snakes, dragons, bar codes, Gothic letters, and crosses,” much like American soldiers. He added that for women, they prefer “flower and butterflies on their shoulders.” Along with the tattoos, Iraqi women were also adopting tight tops and “hip-hugging jeans with their hijabs, or head coverings.” Like the exportation of hip-hop culture through the NBA and its tattooed players, American soldiers were part of this globalizing aspect of American tattoo culture. With the presence of U.S. troops and the absence of former Iraqi dictator Suddam Hussein, Iraqis were also experiencing greater globalization through satellite television, cellphones, and the Internet. For some Iraqis, like sociologist Fawzia A. al-At-tia, the changes, especially tattoos were not welcome.

---

33 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
He complained that “young Iraqis now reject school uniforms, engage in forbidden love affairs and otherwise rebel.” The adoption of hip-hop culture and marking the skin in Iraq underscored the importance of tattoos in signifying freedom of expression. However, the criticism advanced by Fawzia A. al-At-tia and the recent modifications to AR670-1 symbolized a larger conservatism in modern America.

Key issues for Americans on the national level specifically deal with the protection of or infringement on civil rights. Among them were gun rights, the repeal of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the traditionally controversial issues surrounding immigration, gays, and abortion. For example, more stringent immigration laws in states such as Alabama, Mississippi, Texas, and Arizona have led to racial profiling by law enforcement officers and greater persecution of Hispanic-Americans. The rise of bullying and hate crimes against gays like, Jamey Rodemeyer, who killed himself after years of harassment, reflected a viral conservative counter-culture in America. Another example of this counter-culture appeared in the recently-vetoed Arizona Senate Bill 1062, which would have allowed a denial of services to gays based on religious beliefs. These recent conservative measures underscored the freedom to discriminate against certain groups by infringing on their civil rights in contemporary America.

The conservatism was in part a reaction to more vocal and public groups, as those in the gay community. The promotion of gay equal rights became national as President Obama voiced his support for same-sex marriage in May 2012. Additionally, with members of the gay community more visible in the national media, as talk-show hosts,

---

news anchors, or athletes, they became targets of conservative elements in American society. This was evident in professional sports. Historically, the culture of professional sports promoted heterosexual masculine ideals and in some cases has a tendency to be homophobic. Former and current professional athletes, like Manny Pacquiao, Tim Hardaway, Kobe Bryant, Joakim Noah, DeSean Jackson, David Tyree, and Chris Culliver, have at one time or another made derogatory comments about gays.38 Culliver’s comments came during the 2013 Super Bowl media day and, on the national stage, he stated that he “wouldn’t welcome a gay player,” and, if there were any “homosexual players…those players should leave.”39 These discussions became more pronounced with the arrival of openly-gay professional athletes. The first openly-gay athlete was Orlando Cruz. Heavily tattooed, his body magnified Cruz’ status as the first openly-gay boxer. Along with Cruz, there were Jason Collins (Brooklyn Nets) with the NBA and Michael Sam, a 2014 NFL draftee. Interestingly, both Collins and Sam were conspicuously absent of tattoos unlike many other professional athletes, which suggested their choice in not participating in the hyper-masculine culture which at times degraded homosexuality. Tattoos, or the absence of such marks, have become part of the discourse of self-determination or civil rights and this was illustrated in a recent controversy over medical-alert bracelets and abortion.

According to the Canadian Medical Association Journal, medical tattooing appeared to be increasing, “the often pricey medical alert bracelets can be lost or broken,

---

some people prefer tattoos and others can’t wear jewelry at work.” The new medical
tattoos done at tattoo shops detailed information on diabetes, blood types, and end-of-life
wishes. Jimbo Carriero, a heart-attack survivor and owner of Body Branding Tattoo
Emporium, has a tattoo that read, “Do Not Resuscitate” (DNR). (See figure 7.07) In
explaining the reason behind the DNR tattoos, Carriero reflected that when he was dead
for a few minutes, he felt an “overwhelming feeling of total bliss….It was beautiful, just
a beautiful feeling, like all my bills had been paid.” According to Dr. Saleh Aldasouqi,
who began studying the issue four years ago, the medical-alert tattoos could be “life-
saving” considering that bracelets could break or be lost in an accident. However, while
he believed in tattoos which detail medical information, he did not support DNR tattoos.
Aldasouqi explained that if a person had a DNR tattoo, “doctors and EMTs would begin
resuscitation” rather than adhering to end-of-life wishes because “tattoos may help as
guidance, but not for decision-making.”

Aldasouqi’s concern over DNR tattoos raised complex issues considering that patients could change their minds about DNR after
receiving the tattoo. However, for someone like Carriero, his wishes and choices for his
body were not being respected. The issue of choice was raised anew in another recent
event.

A 2013 article entitled “Federal judge: Texas abortion limits unconstitutional,”
by journalist Chris Tomlinson, provided coverage on District Judge Lee Yeakel’s
decision to overturn new Texas abortion restrictions on women. He determined that the
new restrictions, like House Bill 2 (a ban on abortions after twenty weeks), a denial of
safer abortion-inducing drugs, and the use of surgical facilities rather than abortion

\[40\] Aisling Swift, “Medical-alert tattoos gain as option to pricey bracelets,” Honolulu Star-
clinics (essentially the closure of all abortion clinics), were unconstitutional. Similar restrictions were passed by Mississippi legislators in 2012, and federal judges in both States “believe that there is a legitimate constitutional question.”\(^41\) While the Texas decision was important in the protection of women’s rights, there were questions about the ways the news was disseminated. The photo accompanying Tomlinson’s article had three women in the foreground who were “tatted-up” on their chests and arms, with one of them holding a sign which read, “Free Abortion on Demand Without Apology.”\(^42\) (See figure 7.08) This picture suggested that within the general context of choice or civil rights, the inclusion of tattoos was part of that discussion. This was true whether the issues involved human or animal.

A campaign that started in 2004 by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) featured tattooed celebrities—mostly athletes, musicians, models, and famous tattooists—promoting “Ink not Mink.” Among them were athletes Chad “Ochocinco” Johnson, Gilbert Arenas, Amare Stoudamire, Ty Lawson, and Dennis Rodman; musicians or rappers Dave Navarro, Tommy Lee, and Waka Flocka Flame; models like the SuicideGirls and tattooists Ami James, Mario Barth, and Megan Massacre of TLC’s *America’s Worst Tattoos*. These celebrities revealed their “tats” to save animals. (See figures 7.09 and 7.10). It should be noted that scholar Mifflin was critical of the choices for spokeswomen as most were models such as the SuicideGirls, with names like “Cake” and “Missy Suicide.” Mifflin argued that for a progressive organization like PETA, its


campaign had a regressive assumption that “men of power, influence, and achievement will best convey its ‘ethical message’ and unknown naked ‘girls’ somehow qualify to do the same.”

While there was some truth to Mifflin’s criticism, the recent inclusion of Megan Massacre dispelled those concerns. Megan’s photo has her revealing only tattooed arms rather than being nearly naked, like the men, which suggested the objectification of men rather than women. Also, rather than captioning the usual motto of “Ink not Mink,” Megan’s read, “I am Megan Massacre, and I am a vegetarian.” She told *Inked* magazine, “It makes me feel good knowing that I can enjoy food as much as the next person, but I didn’t have to kill an animal to eat it.” Her campaign, unlike others, were protecting animals rights on two levels—fashion and consumption. This protection showed a greater awareness beyond human rights and the importance of self-determination—even for animals. Similarly, Ty Lawson’s feature had the caption, “I Choose Ink, Not Mink, because…My Skin Is Mine And Their Skin Is Theirs.” The association between tattoos and animal rights contributed to a greater discussion of the linkage between tattoos as signifiers of self-determination and civil rights, especially as those privileges could be taken away at any time.

By 2006, the last of the state-wide bans on tattoo parlors were lifted when Oklahoma joined the rest of the nation. However, there has also been a greater awareness of the precarious nature of those rights in the new millennium. Since 2000, the Church of Body Modification (CBM) has brought interfaith members together, connected by the spirituality gained from body modification. The mission statement of the church was “to

---

43 Mifflin, 115.
44 *Inked Life*, “We’ll have what she’s having,” *Inked: Culture. Style. Art.*, January 2013, 16.
educate, inspire, and to help our members along a path of spiritual body modification. As members of the Church of Body Modification, we aim to practice our body modification rituals with purpose, to unify our mind, body, soul, and to connect with our higher power.45 In their Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section, one inquiry focused on whether the church was real, suggesting that it was a ruse to protect the tattooed and pierced under the First Amendment. CBM responded by stating, “Usually, when people talk about a church being real or ‘Federally recognized,’ they are talking about two things—incorporation as a non-profit entity doing business within a particular state, and a tax-exempt status from the IRS as a non-profit entity. In both ways, yes, the Church is real.”46 For Theresa Winge, the founding of CBM was proof of the “depth and range of the body renaissance” in recent America.47 More likely, the existence of the CBM suggested the fear of the surveillance and conservatism against the tattooed community in the public sector and the workplace.

While the U.S. army favorably modified AR670-1 to bolster recruitment, some fire departments across the nation like the Godfrey Fire Protection District in Illinois approved a new policy which prohibited tattoos on the “neck, face, hand or any other exposed area of the body while on duty.”48 Efforts to give state employees a more “professional appearance” were also adopted by various police departments across the nation. According to a 2013 article by the Huffington Post, police departments “all over the country” were imposing “tattoo bans of various scope on their officers.” The most

46 Ibid.
47 Winge, 124.
recent was instituted by the Honolulu Police Department (HPD), which banned “any visible tattoo, piercings, or ‘dental ornaments.’” Considering that there was a vibrant tattoo culture in Hawaii, some local residents and other law enforcement officials across the nation have questioned the restrictions, where tattooed officers would have to wear long-sleeved uniforms in humid or heated weather.

Beverly Neely, a Hawaii resident, summed up the problem by stating, “Somebody’s going to get a heat stroke.” Mark Spencer, president of the Phoenix Law Enforcement Association, echoed Neely’s sentiment when Phoenix adopted the tattoo restriction in 2011. He stated, “Imagine having to wear long sleeves along with body armor, a gun belt and having to get in and out of a police car 50 times every day.”

There has been some resistance to the restriction, especially as many potential applicants come from the military and this rule essentially eliminated them from the pool of qualified individuals. For this reason, among others, the New Orleans Police Department was reviewing its proposed ban on tattoos. These restrictions on members of the fire and police departments were supported under the aegis of professionalism and also arose in other public institutions.

Since 2010, various school districts, like Ogden in Utah, have adopted strict dress codes that ban tattoos and piercings on students and teachers. Mark Johnson, a teacher at


Ogden High School for fifteen years, covered up his tattoo when disciplinary action was launched against him. District spokeswoman Donna Corby defended the new policy by stating, “The dress code that the Ogden School District has implemented has to do with raising the bar of professional dress.”

For Johnson, the one covered tattoo that he has on his forearm was a tribute to his wife and kids. Commenting on the restriction, Johnson stated, “Covering up, to me, is burying and keeping the stigma of tattooed people alive.”

From the fire and police departments to various school districts, the conservative backlash used the umbrella of professionalism to attack the freedom of expression through body modification, much like the 2005 NBA Dress Code, and those limitations were spreading.

A recent proposal put forth by the city council in Bettendorf, Iowa would have banned tattoos and piercings in public places. The reason for the proposal concerned protecting children from “potential offensive material.” Steve Grimes, Director of Parks and Recreation, stated, “We had an incident last year where someone had a tattoo that was at our pool…and someone brought it to the attention of a staff member that they thought the tattoo was offensive.” The difficult part was discerning the offensive from non-offensive tattoos, so Bettendorf city leaders decided “the only thing to do would be to ban them all (tattoos).” Contrarily, while the public sector from the federal to local levels experienced a backlash against tattoos, some areas of the private sector promoted tattooing.


In an effort to increase corporate morale, some firms offered incentives to employees who tattooed the company logo on their bodies. Rapid Realty, a New York City brokerage firm, rewarded employees with a fifteen percent raise if they tattooed the company logo on their bodies. CEO of Rapid Realty Anthony Lolli estimated that forty employees had gotten “inked with the logo in the past two years.” Lolli added that their workers were “passionate about the brand.” In December 2012, Rapid Realty gave further incentive to its agents after it struck a deal with Aflac Insurance. The new incentive offered a forty percent discount on health and life insurance for those who got tattooed with the Rapid Realty company logo. According to journalist Mila D’Antonio, the legion of “tattoo-seeking branding enthusiasts” were growing. She reported that employees and customers were “getting inked with tattoos of logos representing such companies as Apple, Rackspace, McDonald’s, and even Walmart.” These adoption of corporate logos on the body highlighted the cooption of tattoo culture by capitalist elements and the greater acceptance of being indelibly marked in America. The democratization or legitimatization of tattooing in contemporary America has brought many body issues to forefront, including rebelliousness and politicization through tattooing, a diverse vision of democratization that persists despite a backlash against marking the skin.

Conclusion
“Tattooed Nation”:
The Democratization and Self-Determination of Indelible Rights

In the way that Ray Bradbury’s novel *The Illustrated Man* featured moving, living tattoos, this dissertation has illustrated the evolution of tattoo culture from early Mediterranean societies to recent America and its democratization of skin art. Taking a chronological approach, this examination has focused on important the figures, discourses, and movements which enabled the legitimatization of tattooing in America. Tattoos made visible the shifting boundaries and definitions of the body. The larger part of this study was concerned with the corporeal body, as the body became a text read and defined by culture and society. In many pre-modern societies, scarification served as adornment, for religious or spiritual purposes. More importantly, voluntarily marking the skin stamped bodies with many of the institutional values of those communities or societies. In contrast, tattooing among the ancient Greeks and Romans served a punitive function and underscored the microphysics of power. The branded body, in opposition to the unmarked, unblemished figure, signified a lack of self-determination or the absence of rights. However, this scholarship has highlighted the importance of skin art and its link to freedom and resistance to the dominant ethos, and this was seen among early tattooed Christians.

Such conflicting meanings and uses of tattoos underscored the permeable nature of the body. Attached to freakery, savagery, patriotism, deviancy, and rebellion from the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries, tattoos in America made visible the complicated discourses concerning the American body. Within the context of imperialism, criminology, and the medicalization of the body, the marked body was further denigrated
and stripped of its civil rights in the twentieth century. The issue of civil rights came to the forefront, especially as the renaissance generation of tattooists from the 1960s and 1980s battled nationwide bans on tattoo parlors. Gaining assistance from the ACLU, the renaissance generation brought about the legitimization of skin art as a form of individual expression protected under the First Amendment. Through the professionalization of the tattoo industry and through rights protest, as seen in tattooist Spider Webb, the renaissance generation of skin artists also made tattooing freer and palatable for middle-class consumption.

This consumption or growth of the modern tattoo community was possible with the infusion of new aesthetics involving modern primitives, female tattooists, members of the “queer” community, and the hip-hop generation. As this dissertation has shown, unlike other academic scholarship dealing with the history of tattoo customs, the emergence of hip-hop culture and its incorporation into marking the skin was key to the success and spread of tattoo culture in modern America. The seminal shift came with the emergence of rapper Tupac Shakur and his tattooed body, which linked skin art to the empowerment of “thug life.” This legitimization and growth of the tattoo culture after the 1990s also revealed contested American understanding of tattoos, given the uneven treatment by the media, as seen in the mainstream press, tattoo magazines, films, and reality shows, which continued to objectify women and perpetuate black criminality.

As this study revealed in chapters five and six, the recent popularization of tattoo culture in America has at times upheld traditional notions of gender and race. Female tattooists such as Kat Von D enjoyed great financial success because of sexual appeal. Magazines and reality shows featuring tattooed Americans often sexualized women to
draw in male readership and audiences. For black professional athletes in the NBA and NFL, the association of skin art with the hip-hop ethos promoted an empowering attitude of indifference and aggression. However, tattoos on black athletes also reinforced the criminality of the black body. This perpetuation of the “thug” image was especially seen with Allen Iverson of the NBA and Richard Sherman of the NFL. While there were select drawbacks to the popularization of skin art, this dissertation has demonstrated that the growth or democratization of tattoo culture also entailed greater participation by women, many of whom were using skin art to empower themselves and ascribe new meanings to their bodies. For professional athletes, tattoos made visible important cultural values like their dedication to family. Marking the skin was also symptomatic of the institutional control and conservative backlash against hip-hop and the tattooed black athlete. Tattoos were emblematic of the power that modern athletes wielded, especially with rising salaries and free agency.

The democratization of tattooing has spurred criticism from Jim Gerard, author of *Celebrity Skin*, who stated in his introduction that the practice of tattooing was a “ridiculous sentiment…by millions trying to live la vida loca vicariously…. I suppose body art has its function…. It’s a fashion accessory…[and] a conversation piece for the socially challenged.”¹ Gerard’s obvious disdain for tattooing may have been understandable considering the capitalist elements associated with tattooing. For Gerard, tattoos of butterflies and other “pretty” tattoos were no longer a sign of rebellion or resistance. The democratization of tattooing, like any practice perceived to be rebellious, dangerous, or “cool,” left tattooing vulnerable to being coopted or compromised by the

Guy Debord, a French Marxist theorist and filmmaker, believed that when an item or practice became a “spectacle” within popular culture, it was transformed into “capital to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image.”² In other words, tattoo culture was integrated into everyday life to such an extent that it became “ordinary, banal, insignificant” and lost “some of its [original] specificity.”³

The compromising or commodification of skin art culture was exhibited in the retail chain store Hot Topic.⁴ Hot Topic “sells subcultural styles to mainstream and subcultural consumers alike. As products are released and sold at Hot Topic, the co-opted subculture and its members are impacted.”⁵ Recently, the subculture of body modifications has been coopted by this retail giant. Hot Topic was a popular source for body jewelry and faux tattoos for the forearms among teens and young adults. Another example of this commodification was seen in the 2012 Victoria’s Secret fashion show, where tattoo culture was further compromised as model Liu Wen was painted with temporary skin art by tattooist Stephanie Tamez. Tamez stated that she was asked to “make the tattoos feel and look like classic Americana tattooed circus-lady style.”⁶

Those instances of commercialism or commodification likewise reflected the cultural democracy and legitimacy of tattooing. Capitalism’s interest in and/or acceptance of body modifications were significant indicators of tattoos’ widespread appeal in the postmodern commercial society of America. The rebellious appeal of

² Guy Debord, Society of Spectacle (Detroit, 1983), Excerpt 34.
³ Lawrence Grossberg, Cultural Studies in the Future Tense (Durham, 2010), 181.
⁴ Hot Topic is an American retail chain started in 1988, specializing in popular culture related clothing and accessories.
tattooing underscored the retention of its history and its potential for resistance—thus highlighting the popularity of indelibly marking the body. Historically, the discussion surrounding tattoos was concerned with larger issues dealing with the body—class, gender, and race—that often signified the tattooed as criminals, savages, slaves, or other deviant elements in American society.

In these cases, marking the body underscored the power of the privileged discourse as it denigrated and controlled the body of the “other” in America. However, in some cases tattoos continued to bring an alternative and often rebellious means of employing the body to sell a message. Those messages over the decades involved declaring Native American pride or the “stackolee” black resistance; promoting differing views on femininity, feminism, sexual orientation, or gay culture; accentuating the military male identity, distinguishing homosocial servicemen from civilians, or underscoring fears of young soldiers during times of war. The recent democratization or legitimization of tattooing meant that skin art did not have to function as it had in the past—as a sign of rebellion and resistance—because of a more permissive America. And while tattoos continued to symbolize self-determination, institutions like the Church of Body Modifications and recent measures banning tattoos in the public sector highlighted the precarious nature of those civil rights regardless of the protections of freedom of religion or expression.

The reality was that being indelibly marked meant being vulnerable to external threats, whether the objectification of tattooed women in “soft-porn” tattoo magazines or the perpetuation of the criminality of black tattooed bodies. The commodification of skin art can have detrimental effects on a complacent tattooed community, especially when a
conservative backlash attacks other civil rights in America. The resurgent challenges to abortion rights and the repeal of the Voting Act of 1965 were examples of this conservatism. A recent Associated Press (AP) study concluded that racial prejudice toward African Americans and Hispanics increased from 2008 to 2011. Scholar Frederick Harris noted that the research was an indicator of the “growing polarization within American society.” This polarization crystallized in the 2012 presidential campaign and contest between President Barack Obama and Republican nominee Mitt Romney. One division between both camps and their constituents involved the balance between federal and state powers.

This conflict over jurisdiction had underlying issues concerning self-determination—abortion and same-sex marriage. The constituents for Obama, according to a CNN study, were mainly aged eighteen to twenty-nine. This age group, or the millennial generation was more diverse and tolerant of other groups, according to political analyst Richard Borreca. He stated, “The millennial generation is multi-hued. They have parents and grandparents from Asia, Latin America and Mexico….The younger generation cares deeply about a strong economy, but they also believe in gay rights and women’s rights.” Coincidentally, another recent study by the Journal of American Academy of Dermatology showed that thirty-six percent of Americans in the same age cohort had at least one tattoo. Taken in conjunction, both studies suggested that

---

tattoos for the millennial generation symbolized American diversity, and tolerance and protectiveness of issues concerning self-determination.\textsuperscript{10}

Furthermore, another study by the AP revealed that Obama also won with women. Political scientist Paul Kellstedt concurred with the AP study and added that as a “group women tend to like bigger government with more health and welfare programs; men lean toward smaller government that spends less, except on the military.”\textsuperscript{11} In contrast to women’s embrace of federalism and First Amendment freedoms, Romney and the Republican Right advocated increasing state power in determining regulations for the bodies of women and gays. For this reason, and given the recent surge of conservatism against skin art, the inked community must transform itself into tattooist Corey Miller’s vision of \textit{Tattoo Nation}—“solidarity in face of other groups.”\textsuperscript{12}

The effect of perpetuating thug-like images among tattooed professional athletes and hip-hop artists proved dangerous to the black community. For example, the deaths of Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis in 2012 highlighted the impact of negative racial stereotypes.\textsuperscript{13} Rapper Jayceon Taylor or “The Game” recently posted a picture on Instagram that revealed a new tattoo, a portrait of Trayvon Martin in a hoodie.\textsuperscript{14} (See figure Conclusion.01) LeBron James and the rest of the Miami Heat players posted


\textsuperscript{13} Trayvon Martin, a seventeen-year old African American, was fatally shot by George Zimmerman in Florida, on 26 February, 2012. Jordan Davis, another seventeen-year old African American, was fatally shot by Michael Dunn on 23 November 2012. Both deaths have brought the issue of race to the forefront, particularly as Martin was wearing his “hoodie,” while Davis was listening to “hip-hop” and were key reasons for their deaths.

photos of the team on Facebook and Twitter wearing hoodies, their heads bowed, and their hands stuffed into their pockets. (See figure Conclusion.02) Taylor and the Miami Heat players were witnessing first-hand the dangers of the commodification of hip-hop and tattoo cultures which aggrandized the “thug” aspect of black culture. By honoring Trayvon Martin through their actions and bodies, they were politicizing racial problems in America—which was rare.

At most times, professional athletes avoided controversy so that their sponsors were not alienated. Gatorade was the first sponsor to promote NBA legend Michael Jordan with the slogan “Be Like Mike.” He has remained the ideal spokesperson for advertising products as he was never drawn into controversial issues. In a similar vein, Kevin Durant of the NBA franchise the Oklahoma Thunder also enjoyed many endorsements which netted him fourteen million dollars annually.15 Interestingly, Durant, who is extensively tattooed, was careful to have his skin art below his tank-top uniform line thus distancing himself from other tattooed players on the court. (See figure Conclusion.03) As he lacked a “cool” moniker like LeBron James’ “King James,” Durant told reporter Bill Simmons to “call him, ‘The Servant’ from now on.” Durant explained that he wanted to “serve everybody. My teammates. Ushers at the game. The fans.”16 This may have been a poor choice in a nickname considering that it implied subservience. Journalist Todd Boyd argued that the modern athlete has become too concerned with being a “role model,” which also meant being apolitical. Boyd stated that

---


being a role model was the “modern-day version of saying that someone was a “credit to their race.” He added that telling young, black professional athletes to be role models meant, “Stay in your place, speak when spoken to, and do as you are told…[and] be thankful for what you’ve got.”

Tattooed professional athletes are members of a tattooed nation, and they should understand the long history of discourses surrounding the body and its link to skin art. It may be that this understanding was evident in Kevin Durant’s “The Servant.” While the placement of his tattoos and moniker underscored his obeisance to mainstream America, his adoption of the “blerd” signified the opposite. Wearing glasses without lenses, a plaid shirt buttoned to the top (covering his tattoos), and carrying a child’s backpack, Durant was technically adhering to the 2005 NBA Dress Code. (See figure C.04) Yet, the “outlandish” style was clearly highlighting the hypocrisy of the NBA dress code. Durant’s style, which was mimicked by many other NBA players in 2012 and 2013, was also clearly a criticism of stereotypes attached to black athletes.

While the thought of tattoos as part of mainstream life in America brought criticism from the “inked rebels” in society, psychologist Viren Swami, viewed this democratization to be liberating, as being indelibly marked was no longer “restricted to any particular social class, gender, or ethnic group.” Unlike the Greeks and the Romans, tattoos in America have functioned as marks of self-determination. At various

---

19 Other professional black athletes who adopted the blerd style include Amare Stoudamire (New York Knicks), Brian Westbrook (Oklahoma Thunder), LeBron James and Dwyane Wade (Miami Heat).
20 Temma Ehrenfeld, “What does your tattoo say about you,” Inked magazine, April 2013, 69.
times in American history, marking the skin sent messages of dissent, deviance, and diversity in American identities. While critics like Gerard viewed tattooing as a passing fad that would “be replaced by some other form of mass media-induced post-hypnotic suggestion,” he did not take into account the long history of instability and malleability within the semiotics of tattooing or the body. The practice of being indelibly marked has been around for at least six-thousand years, and the permanence of marking the skin provided a potent historical metaphor: tattooing or other forms of body modification will likely continue as cultural practices and as languages of inclusion and exclusion. The pain in acquiring a tattoo symbolized the painful evolution tattooing has undergone to meet individuals’ need for self-expression. Like the evolution of tattoo culture over the centuries, the discourse surrounding the body is never ending. Tattoos are no longer solely seen, as in the past and often incorrectly, as marks of shame, as stigma, since tattoos have become a very visible means of stabilizing or fixing identity and self on the body. Whether inked on those at the margins of society in the 1950s or on those in the current spotlight of the media, tattoos functioned to politicize the body and skin. A rebellion against powerlessness, invisibility, and repressively narrow definitions of gender, race, ethnicity, and nationalism has a prominent place in the long history of skin markings.
Bibliography


Associated Press. “Hank Aaron defends Richard Sherman on Twitter.” *11 Alive*


Borghese, Matthew. "Norfolk, Virginia Ends Ban on Tattoo Parlors," 21 September


Bradfield, Robert. "Army expands tattoo ban, parlors see increase in removals," 13 January 2012.


Camphausen, Rufus C. *Return of the Tribal: A Celebration of Body Adornment*. 


Pitts, Victoria. In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification. New York:


Steward, Samuel M. Bad Boys and Tough Tattoos: A Social History of the Tattoo


Swift, Aisling. "Medical-alert Tattoos Gain as Option to Pricey Bracelets." Honolulu Star Advertiser, 15 July 2012, A15


Appendix 1.01 Distribution and movement of scarification practices before the 1920s (Hambly).
Figure 1.01 Pazyryk tattoos with mythical creatures (Gilbert).

Figure 1.02 Pazyryk tattoos showing the natural order of world (Gilbert).

Figure 1.03 Timucuan Chief Outina and his elite guards wearing gold jewelry around their neck, which represented the sun (Funderburk).
Figure 1.04 Woodland ranger who was tattooed with a serpent on his back (Benjamin West).

Figure 1.05 Yoruba Osilumi was a mark on the face signifying sorrow for the loss of a close friend or relative (Rubin).
Figure 1.06 Abaji marks on a Tiv woman. Handsome calves are emphasized by scars (Rubin).

Figure 1.07 Stages of Hleeta scarification (Rubin).
Figure 1.08 Diagram of application of Hleeta on the back of Ga’anda womem (Rubin).

Figure 1.09 Timucuan Chief Holata Outina with his elite escort. Outina and his warriors were extensively marked on the skin (Funderburk).
Figure 1.10 Samoan design for males encompassing front and back of the thigh (Gilbert)

Figure 1.11 Warrior Te Pei Kupe with moko (Gilbert)
Figure 1.12 A moko signature on a land grant signed by Tuawhaiki, a chief of the Otago (Gilbert)

Figure 1.13 Scarified statue of Baule and unblemished perfection of Heracles (Rubin)
Figure 1.14 Example of tattoo designs for Christian Pilgrims (Gilbert)

Figure 1.15 Design of Saint George and the Dragon, collection of Jacob Razzouk (Gilbert)

Figure 1.16 Tattoo designs depicting The Crucifixion and the Resurrection (Gilbert)
Figure 2.01 Nora Hildebrant standing in a classical pose to offset her deciviizing marks (Mifflin).

Figure 2.02 Male and female Picts, England’s savage ancestors, extensively tattooed (Kupperman).
Figures 2.03 and 2.04 Secota maidens (left) and matrons (right) with geometric designs on the arms and legs. The matrons were more extensively tattooed to show higher status over maidens (Kupperman).

Figure 2.05 Olive Oatman with her “decivilizing” marks on her chin (Stratton).
Figure 2.06 Part of the process of enslavement which involved branding the slave (Blassingame).

Figure 2.07 A popular design worn by white and black mariners (Dye).
Figure 2.08 Omai, a Tahitian, who was associated with the “noble savage” because of the tattoos on his hand (Caplan).

Figure 2.09 Jean-Baptiste Cabri, who had “gone native,” was extensively marked and had a Marquesan wife (Gilbert).
Figure 2.10 Examples of tattoos depicted on Seaman’s Protection Certificate application. Clerks often sketched the tattoos as well as described them (Dye).

Figure 2.11 Mermaids, roosters, pigs, or anchors were tattooed on the bodies of many seafarers during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Dye).
Figure 2.12 Tattoo of “Adam and Eve and the Tree of Life” taken from early nineteenth-century preserved skin specimen (Dye).

Figure 2.13 Seafarers or members of the military often got tattooed in foreign ports. In this case, an officer getting tattooed in Japan (Gilbert).
Figure 2.14 An illustrated guide book for P.T Barnum’s first museum, emphasizing “reference” and “instruction” (Klem).

Figure 2.15 A pamphlet promoting P.T. Barnum’s show of “natural history” (Klem).
Figure 2.16 A pamphlet giving a description of the circus “freaks” (Klem).

Figure 2.17 An illustration of Captain Constantenius submission and tattooing by a woman. Reversing the traditional active and passive gender roles in the nineteenth century (Gilbert).
Figure 2.18 An advertisement for Captain Constentenus, “The Tattooed Greek Prince” (Gilbert).

Figure 2.19 An advertisement for Irene “La Belle” Woodard (Klem).
Figure 2.20 Tattooed circus attraction, Jean Furella Carson, who bared it all for spectators (Mifflin).

Figure 2.21 The Great Omi, who wanted to become a human zebra (Gilbert).
Figure 2.22 A portrait of Irene Woodard showing that she was still a “lady” with exception of tattoos (Klem).

Figure 2.23 A classic depiction of captive women at the hands of “savages” (Gilbert).
Figure 2.24 Circus attraction Betty Broadbent at the 1939 World’s Fair (Mifflin).

Figure 2.25 Circus attractions, Emma de Burgh and Princess Beatrice, with depictions of “The Last Supper” on their backs (Mifflin).
Figure 2.26 A popular design during the American Civil War (Mariners Museum).

Figure 2.27 Naval personnel often tattooed images of their ship and commander. In this case, Admiral William Thomas Samson was superimposed on the ship (Gilbert).
Figure 2.28 A design commemorating the sinking of the battleship Maine in 1898 (Gilbert).

Figure 2.29 Tattooist often linked themselves to seafarers and the military by placing the term “sailor” in front of their names. The most famous is Sailor Jerry (Mariners Museum).
Figure 2.30 Examples of erotic women tattoo designs on the bodies of U.S. servicemen (Mariners Museum).

Figure 2.31 U.S. Marine Corp. mascot, the Teufelhunden, became popular with marines after WWI (Mariners Museum).
Figure 2.32 These are some examples of the Pearl Harbor commemorative tattoo designs man servicemen wore after Japan’s attack on 7 December 1941 (Mariners Museum).

Figure 2.33 Tattoos on “criminal sailor” (left) and “criminal soldier” (right), both of which were labeled as “homosexuals,” according to criminologist Cesare Lombroso (Lombroso).
Figure 3.01 A tattoo design of a garland of roses worn by a gay man (Zucker).

Figure 3.02 The sexuality of getting “punctured” or tattooed (Zucker).
Figure 3.03 Marlboro advertisement aimed at women, “mild as may” (Tobaccodocuments.org).

Figure 3.04 Original Marlboro Man as a cowboy with a tattoo on his hand (Tobaccodocuments.org).
Figure 3.05 An iteration of the Marlboro Man, in this case, a navy serviceman (Tobaccodocuments.org).

Figure 3.06 Another iteration of the Marlboro Man showing his tough nature (Tobaccodocuments.org).
This iteration of the Marlboro Man looks very similar to President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who happened to be the president during the extensive use of the Marlboro Man advertisements (Tobaccodocuments.org).

Lesbian couple with newly acquired “lovebirds” on their ankles (Mifflin).
Figure 3.09 Janis Joplin showing her Florentine bracelet design on her wrist (Mifflin).

Figure 3.10 Mastectomy survivor Linda Marie with a tattoo over her scar (Madame Chinchilla).
Figure 3.11 Mastectomy survivor Andre O’Connor with a rose tattoo over her scar (Madame Chinchilla).

Figure 3.12 African-American tattoo connoisseur, Laura Lee, with a Malcolm X and a depiction of the “Black Holocaust” (Mifflin).
Figure 3.13 Both tattoo designs are re-casted black versions of Betty Boop (Mifflin).
Figure 4.01 Rod Steiger as the Illustrated Man (IMDB).

Figure 4.02 Fakir Musafar reenacting the Sioux “Sun Dance” (Camphausen).
Figure 4.03  Ed Hardy’s first issue of TattooTime “New Tribalism” (Kang).

Figure 4.04 Vyvyn Lazonga shortly after she opened her first tattoo shop (Mifflin).
Figure 4.05 A tattoo design done by Vyvyn Lazonga (Rubin).

Figure 4.06 Abstract and leopard tattoo designed by Jamie Summers (Rubin)
Figure 4.07 Back and neck tattoo done by Jamie Summers (Rubin)

Figure 4.08 Women using scarification to add new meaning to their bodies. Woman (left) appropriating phallic symbol on leg, while the modern primitive woman using piercings to suppress the flesh (Spider Webb and Camphausen)
Figure 4.09 Modern primitive woman adding scarification to the idealized smooth (Camphausen).

Figure 4.10 Tattoos disseminating the message of Tupac Shakur (2Pac2k.de).
Figure 4.11 Sailor Jerry transformed the American style of tattooing by incorporating Japanese aesthetics (Sailor Jerry Collection).

Figure 4.12 Tribal style tattoos by Leo Zulueta (Rubin).
Figure 4.13 Former presidential candidate Barry Goldwater and a letter to Spider Webb. Goldwater admits having a tattoo on his left hand (Spider Webb).

Figure 4.14 Bicentennial design to commemorate Spider Webb's "Tattoo Club of America," of which President Gerald Ford complimented (Spider Webb).
Figure 4.15 Spider Webb staging his protest of the ban on tattoo parlors in New York, 1976 (Spider Webb).
Figure 5.01 Typical tattooed male model advertising designer clothes for Ink: Culture. Art. Style. magazine (ICAS magazine).

Figure 5.02 Advertisement for tattoo supplies in Skin & Ink magazine (S&I magazine)
Figure 5.03 Annual Pin-up issue for Skin & Ink magazine without any editorials (S&I magazine).

Figure 5.04 Skin & Ink Dolls featured in every issue (S&I magazine).
Figure 5.05 Rapper Lloyd Banks showing off his tattoos and his women (Urban Ink magazine).

Figure 5.06 Video vixen “Miss Paris,” (Left) was often in rapper Lil’ Wayne music videos. “Tiffini Truth” (Right) model for SuicideGirls. Both were featured in Urban Ink magazine (Urban Ink magazine).
Figure 5.07 Former porn star and model, Adrenalynn, for SuicideGirls featured in Skin & Ink magazine.

Figure 5.08 Featured covered model with “full sleeves” much like a second skin, and wants to be treated like a lady (Inked magazine).
Figure 5.09 Lisbeth Salander (Noomi Rapace) in the Girls with the Dragon Tattoo series. Salander (Left) with the wasp tattoo on her neck and the dragon (Right) tattoo on her back (IMDB).

Figure 5.10 Fashion Designer Jean-Paul Gaultier’s reimagining of a Coke bottle as woman with tattoos (Inked magazine).
Figure 5.11 Audra Kunkle, owner of Oddities in San Francisco, and feature in Science Channel’s Oddities (IMDB).

Figure 5.12 Tattooist Jasmine Rodriguez featured on Spike Channel’s Tattoo Nightmares (IMDB).
Figure 5.13 Tattooist Megan Massacre featured on TLC’s America’s Worst Tattoo (Skin & Ink magazine).

Figure 5.14 Kat Von D featured on TLC’s LA Ink (Inked magazine).
Figure 5.15 Tattooists Kat Von D, Kim Saigh, Hannah Aitchison, and Corey Miller, stars of TLC’s LA Ink. Von D refers to them as her family. (Von D).

Figure 5.16 Part of the marketing for the advent of the WNBA in 1996 was to show their athletes were still feminine (WNBA).
Figure 5.17 WNBA star guard for the New York Liberty, Theresa Witherspoon. Witherspoon had cornrows and a tattoo on her left leg (Fleer cards).

Figure 5.18 WNBA guard Sonia Chase with short hair and a “Superwoman” tattoo on her right arm (Fleer cards).
Figure 5.19 Guard Deanna Nolan of the WNBA who admitted, she loves schooling the guys (Inked Magazine).
Figure 6.01 Allen Iverson was considered the most “tatted” NBA player in 2001 (Sports Illustrated).

Figure 6.02 NBA star Al Harrington with Christian symbols on his body along with the portrait of Jesus (Urban Ink).
Figure 6.03 Al Harrington with family portraits on his body (Urban Ink).

Figure 6.04 NBA star Stephen Jackson with a “praying hand” holding a gun tattoo design (Google).
Figure 6.05 NFL linebacker James Harrison posing for Men’s Journal (Men’s Journal).

Figure 6.06 NBA Amare Stoudamire with tattoos of Poverty/Prophecy and biblical psalms (Stoudamire personal website).
Figure 6.08 NBA star LeBron James tattooed with “Chosen 1” on his back (Internet).

Figure 6.07 NBA star Brandon Jennings tattooed with “young money” on his back (Jenning’s personal website).
Figure 6.09 NBA star Shaquille O'Neal at LSU (left) with no tattoos and with many tattoo (Right) when he played for the Miami Heat (ESPN).

Figure 6.10 NBA star LeBron James in high school (Left) with one tattoo and with many tattoos (Right) with the Miami Heat (ESPN).

Figure 6.11 NBA star Allen Iverson at Georgetown without tattoo (left) and with many tattoos (Right) with the Philadelphia Seventy-Sixers (ESPN).
Figure 6.12 NBA star Kenyon Martin tattooed with “Bad Ass Yellow Boy” (Sports Illustrated).

Figure 6.13 NBA star Jason Williams or “White Chocolate” tattooed with “White Boy” (Google).
Figure 6.14 NBA player Joel Pryzbilla tattooed with B-Boy symbol (Yahoo).

Figure 6.15 NBA player Joel Pryzbilla tattooed with “praying hands” symbol (Yahoo).

Figure 6.16 NBA players Carmelo Anthony (Left) and J.R. Smith (Right) when they were called the “Denver Thuggist” (Inked).
Figure 6.17 Seattle Seahawks “Legion of Boom” defense (Seahawks website).

Figure 6.18 Brawl between a Chinese professional team and Georgetown University players during a “Goodwill” exhibition game in China (Huffington Post).
Figure 7.01 Kayle Leogrande, owner of a tattoo shop, was a key reason for Lance Armstrong’s ban from professional cycling (Honolulu Star Advertiser).

Figure 7.02 Staff Sgt. Robert T. Ham’s documentary, Level Black, on PTSD focuses on Staff Sgt. Billy Caviness. Caviness is showing his war scars and tattoos (Honolulu Star Advertiser).
Figure 7.03 Hawaii tattooist Mike Higuchi recalled one serviceman who got an American bald eagle sewing a tattered United States flag with the phrase “Awakening a Sleeping Giant.” (Higuchi)

Figure 7.04 Robert, an intelligence analyst, tattooed with a medieval battlefield (Schiesari).
Figure 7.05 Travis, a combat medic, tattooed with a fetus in a blender (Schiesari).

Figure 7.06 Mohammad Abass drawing a tattoo of a skull on fellow Iraqi in Baghdad (Honolulu Star Advertiser).
Figure 7.07 Jimbo Carriero, owner of a tattoo shop, had “Do Not Resuscitate” emblazoned on his chest after a heart attack. (Honolulu Star Advertiser).

Figure 7.08 Three tattooed women shown prominently supporting abortion rights (MSN News).
Figure 7.09 NBA players, Amare Stoudamire (Left) and Dennis Rodman (Right) promoting “Ink not Mink” for Peta (PETA).

Figure 7.10 Tattooist Megan Massacre promoting “Ink not Mink” for Peta (PETA).
Figure 8.01 Trayvon Martin, killed in 2012, a victim of black criminalization (Google).

Figure 8.02 Miami Heat donning protest “hoodies” for Trayvon Martin (ESPN).
Figure 8.03 Kevin Durant, “The Servant,” has extensive tattoos but choses to have them hidden under his uniform (ESPN).