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Tattooed Bodies:
Embodying and Expressing Identity

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Abstract

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Body modifications have been prevalent for centuries and are practices for a great variety of reasons. Lately, tattoos in particular have become increasingly popular. Thus, a better understanding of the underlying motivations behind getting tattooed is required. This thesis presents an anthropological analysis as to the connection between identity and tattoos, and how tattoos can both embody and express one's identity. As such, this thesis explores the implications of tattooing for the creation of identity and its management. It is comprised of a series of recorded ethnographic interviews of tattooees and examined through the lens of pre-existing themes in the literature review. This data collection and its analysis serves as ethnographic support for these themes along with other various themes that emerged such as the concept of symmetry, matching tattoos, pain and addiction, satisfying a desire, along with the aftermath of being tattooed. Seven broad themes were established for reference in future research. These seven themes include the tattoo as a choice that allows the reclaiming of the body, using the tattoo to internalize life events and personal narrative, tattoos as a form of self-expression, the symbolic meaning behind it along with its permanence, the prevailing historical stigma attached to tattoos, pain and addiction and of course the aftermath experiences and feelings of getting tattooed. In effect, this paper is an in-depth exploration of the impact of tattooing on the self not only as bodies of flesh but as individuals.

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Literature Review

➤ *Body Theory:*

The body is the “intersection between self and society; it is a medium through which we negotiate life; and a conveyer of personal and social meanings” (Kosut 32). In this way, the body serves as a “boundary phenomenon” between the individual and society, acting as a crossroad between the individual self and society. As a result, with the rise of modernity came the increased concern with the body and its management. Yet, with this came the unprecedented individualization of the body. Shilling (1993) has theorized this development with the concept of ‘body projects’. He notes “in the affluent West there is a tendency for the body to be seen as an entity which is in the process of becoming; a project which should be worked at and accomplished as part of an individual’s self-identity” (Featherstone 19-20). Thus, the body is an endeavor for the construction of self and individuals have each become responsible for the design of their own bodies. As such, it is important to recognize that since the body has become a project, it “entails accepting that its appearance, size, shape and even its contents, are potentially open to reconstruction in line with the designs of its owner” (Shilling 5). Such an examination of the body shifts the focus from the natural biological body to the socially and culturally constructed body.

When considering the body as a project, one has to invest in it to alter it and change it or keep it healthy. Such investment in the body or body modification “provides people with a means of self-expression and a way of potentially feeling good and increasing the control they have over their bodies” (Shilling 7). Not only does it give people agency especially in terms of constructing a relationship between body and society, but it also allows for the expression of one’s identity. Thus, the notion of the body as a project is very much related to question of identity. As quoted in Shilling, Goffman explains, “the

management of the body is central to the maintenance of encounters, social roles and social relations, and also mediates the relationship between an individual's self-identity and social identity" (Shilling 8). Thus, the body takes on the status of a resource that can be managed in various ways to essentially construct a particular version of the self. Yet, it not only helps create personal identity but also social identity with regards to all the other bodies out there. Essentially the body is the physical barrier between the self and society and as such it serves as a medium by which we negotiate our lives. Anthropologists in particular have focused on this and how the body, especially the "inscribed body serves as a marker of identity in terms of gender, age, and political status" (Schildkrout 319). The body can serve as clear indicator or mark of social status, family position, tribal affiliation, age, gender and religious condition. Through it we represent ourselves and our experiences and distinguish our bodies from those of others, on an individual, societal and worldly level.

➤ *The Inscribed Body – Writing on the Skin:*

The body, especially its surface has been the site of considerable theoretical interest in anthropology. Skin in particular has been a surface onto which "anthropology and related disciplines have projected their understandings of the relationship between psyche and society, the commonalities and differences between cultures, and even the meaning of art" (Schildkrout 338). The outer layer of the body, the skin can be altered or modified by the individual to suit their needs for expression, decoration, demarcation, and individualization. This process encapsulates the notion of body modification or the process of altering and controlling one's physical appearance. One important factor that forms of body modification share is what could be called a "kind of corporeal absolutism: that it is through the body and in the body that personal identity is to be forged and selfhood sustained" (Caplan 236). Thus, putting great emphasis on the body and its construction.

How humans modify their bodies, the where, what and when essentially marks people as individuals and identifies them in a large group. Yet, while there are many visible and public transitory markers that convey the body and self– hairstyle, clothing, and jewelry– humans are also drawn to permanent body modifications. A permanent and existent form of body modification is tattooing which is arguably “the oldest and most widely used form of permanent body modification” (Kosut 32). The practice of tattooing itself constitutes inserting ink under the skin through the pricking, piercing or cut of a needle. Thus, they are “intrusive modifications to the body whose production involves pain, blood and the penetration of the skin in a non-medicalized setting, not to mention varying degrees of planning and ‘after-care’” (Featherstone 64). As such, contemporary tattoos fit in as a specific case to the body theory and serve as a subcategory of the body project.

There are multiple implications of tattoos on identity formation. The tattoo essentially can hold a multiplicity of meanings and is strongly linked to self-construction and embodied knowledge. In this respect, tattoos serve as corporeal expressions of the self and can be seen as instances of contemporary body projects (Shilling, 1993) and as attempts to construct and maintain a coherent and viable sense of self-identity through attention to the body and, more particularly, the body’s surface” (Featherstone 53). In the spirit of the contemporary body project, as a form of body modification, tattoos have the amazing ability to transform the exterior surfaces of the body “‘in line with the designs of its owner’ and can allow a ‘whole-sale transformation’ of the body along these lines” (Featherstone 68). Thus, the tattoo is strongly linked to the person and their body.

It's important to note that this idea of the body project as a postmodern phenomenon marks a clear distinction from the so called 'traditional' or pre-modern societies. Within these societies, identity was seen more as "relatively fixed, and the size, shape and appearance of the body accepted more or less as given" (Featherstone 68). As for tattoos in particular, their purpose especially those customarily done by hand, and not machine, in aboriginal cultures is usually ornamental, ritual or identity-oriented in nature" (Bell 53). In addition, they continue to act as "'rites of passage' as well as straight-forward badges of identity for bikers, sailors, prisoners or gang members (Caplan 245). Thus, their original historical context is still very much attached and prevalent. It should also be mentioned that contemporary tattoo narratives do in fact suggest that there are certain traditions, for example, using the tattoo to commemorate a rite of passage or even a significant biographical event, that surpasses historical and cultural boundaries.

It's interesting to point out how the tattoo is seen as a form of individual action devoid from all others, yet it actually is a result of engagement. There is an existing false sense of self-willingness for getting the tattoo. As such, "the tattoo, then, is a consequence of engagement, imagined as detachment: in Euro-America, as in Polynesia, 'The apparently self-willed tattoo always turns out to have been elicited by others'" (Caplan 251). In this sense, a person might get a tattoo believing they got it to make them unique, that is in comparison to others. Once again, the others provoked such an action and the act itself is always in relation to others – them and us. In other examples, the person might have gotten the tattoo not for themselves but for others to see and recognize.

➤ *Ethnographies and Literature of Inscription:*

There has been a lot of literature and studies regarding tattoos and them being a form of body modification that can impact not only the physical body but also the mental self. To this regard, the literature out there whether ethnography or not deal with and question the “social significance of body decoration and the way in which body art creates identity for the individual and determines boundaries between groups” (Schildkrout 328).

There have been many studies under the field of psychology regarding tattoos and their link to anti-sociality and deviance. This literature focuses strongly on mental health and the association of tattoos and deviant behavior. One branch of this research has been undertaken but the mental health community in the form of survey data (Armstrong 1994). This research generally concluded that tattoos and other forms of body modification act as predictors of future deviance, a highly derogatory view of tattooing. As such, for mental health experts who share the assumption that the voluntary inscription of the body is an indicator of self-hatred or social alienation, tattoos operate as external reflections of inner pathology. Yet, the problem with such work and many like it is that it heavily relies on survey data for its conclusions which essentially precludes capturing the more nuanced reasons and motivations that individuals get tattooed. As such, it is not really ethnography work. Consequently, one needs to supplement survey data with in-depth narratives of the tattooed individuals and take a more intimate look at the tattoo community from an ethnographic vantage point.

With regards to exploring a wider range of motivations for getting tattooed, a considerable body of research on motivational aspects already exist. They mainly use explorative approaches to describe

motivations, while only some proposed larger motivational clusters. The scientific paper *Modifying the body: Motivations for getting tattooed and pierced*, published by Elsevier serves as a great example of motivational investigation to provide a basis for understanding why people modify their bodies while also contributing to the elimination of the outdated negative stigmatization of body modification. They provide a broad description of motivations from the literature out there, but most importantly they establish general motivational categories for reference in future research. In the end, the major motivations were expressed by ten categories: beauty, art and fashion; individuality; personal narrative; physical endurance; group affiliations and commitment; resistance; spirituality and cultural tradition; addiction; sexual motivation and no specific reason. It's important to note that the most frequently mentioned motivations are the expression of individuality and the embellishment of the own body while other motivations reflect personal attributes and values.

For my research, I have decided to focus on the tattoo culture in contemporary America in particular. To this regard a lot of the scholarship out there lies under the fields of anthropology, sociology and cultural studies. These works in particular pursue their analyses of tattoos and tattooing from a strictly qualitative aspect, mostly ethnographic bent as opposed to the scientific psychological approach. Thus, providing a more nuanced approach at the practice of contemporary tattooing and containing rich narrative data.

One work in particular that deals specifically with the narrative aspect of tattooing and using tattoos to construct personal narrative is the article *Inscribing the Personal Myth: The Role of tattoos in Identification* by Anne M. Velliquette, Jeff B. Murray and Deborah J Evers. The article attempts to better understand the role of tattooing in identity construction and the ways in which consumer's stories about

being tattooed can help us understand the ways these experiences contribute to their identity formation. It also addressed the ways in which the study of tattoo consumption opposes traditional forms of consumer research in that tattoos are “permanent, infinitely customized, and destabilize object/body opposition” (Belk 35). Consequently, it is because of these reasons that tattoos became a means for people to make meaning of their lives and this meaning-making is strongly linked to the action of storytelling. As such, with each story the article discusses the on-going process of identity negotiation via an exploration of the informant’s personal myth – “a story that brings together a wide range of experiences into a purposeful and convincing whole” (Belk 35). The purpose of this research is then to further understand the role of tattooing, as one form of consumption, in the process of identity construction. It should be noted that this purpose builds on a stream of research that focuses on the role of the body and body adornment on the consumer’s continuous task of identity negotiation (Murray, 2002).

Another work of literature that really builds on narrative and the practice of participant observation is Shannon Bell’s essay *Tattooed: A participant Observer’s Exploration of Meaning*. As a heavily tattooed woman herself, she took it upon herself to further explore the complexity and variation of meaning ascribed to tattoos. She also discusses the subculture of tattooed people and most importantly the relationship of tattoos to identity. In addition, her focus was on Western, specifically American tattoo culture, since she believes aboriginal tattooing has already been covered extensively in anthropological literature. Like most of the literature, she starts out by providing a brief history and overview of tattooing across different cultures but uses this to put the complex American subculture into context. One of her insights at the end was the unique quality of American tattooing with all its imagery and literalness is but a product of it being such a “surface-oriented society” (Bell 57). With this, Bell refers in particular to American culture’s obsession with the physical and the tangible, especially when it comes to physical appearance and materiality. As

such, what you look like has a great impact on your life, the way you perceive yourself and the way others see you.

Other narrative driven works about tattooing also capture the changing nature of the tattoo in recent decades, as it has shifted to become a thing for middle-class consumption (Atkinson 2002). One piece of literature that deals with this shift is the article *The Tattoo Renaissance: An Ethnographic account of symbolic consumer behavior* from the University of Arkansas. The article looks at tattoos through a lens of consumer culture as the act of tattooing has become prevalent more now than ever. It presents an ethnographic account of product symbolism and fashion imagery within this consumer culture. This in effect was a result of the Tattoo Renaissance which in the article is referred to as the New Tattoo Subculture. It explores a historical interpretation and through it discusses four a priori themes: Renaissance, extended self, risk and satisfaction/addiction for which ethnographic evidence was found along with the emergence of two other themes – design versus act and the simulated self. More importantly, the article also explores the implications of tattooing for the formation of one's identity. In essence, the Tattoo Renaissance with all its vibrancy and explosion of artwork, symbolism and culture proved such a creative and lush context to study issues related to symbolic consumer behavior along with identity.

Another relevant work of literature was DeMello's work which shows how the "Tattoo Renaissance" of the 1970s changed the face of the tattoo community in the United States (DeMello 200). He demonstrates how middle-class punks, neo-tribalists who strongly believe in strong social networks and the formation of tribes, along with hippies appropriated tattooing which used to be a practice reserved for working-class white males and turned it into a lucrative art form. Moreover, while the original clientele were servicemen, bikers, carnival workers and other working-class men, the new tattoo culture is much

more varied and diverse. The new consumers are from a variety of backgrounds and now get large, lavish, custom pieces especially designed from themselves rather than choosing flash drawings on the walls of the tattoo shops (Atkinson 2002; DeMello 200).

Marc Blanchard's paper *Post-Bourgeois Tattoo: Reflections on Skin Writing in Late Capitalist Societies* explores the practice of tattooing not only from a historical perspective but a cross-cultural perspective as well. Yet, unlike the previous works it does not rely heavily on ethnographic accounts. The paper essentially argues that tattooing in the West has shifted from being at the margins of society to the core of the middle class and examines the political and economic repercussions of such a shift. Another important exploration is the relationship between the socio-cultural and economic aspects of tattooing with its symbolic and communicative functions. This is where the intersection between tattooing and identity comes into play. Interestingly enough, the paper also raises the question of the relevance of a tattooing practice and aesthetic to the "postmodern or postbourgeois anthropological and humanistic perspective" (Blanchard 11).

The ethnographic work and literature on tattooing reviewed above captures contemporary tattoo practices much more fully than does the survey research in the field of psychology and amongst the mental health community. Instead of just looking at trends en masse, these accounts allow for the rise of cultural and human explanations as to the motivations behind taking part in such a subculture. Furthermore, it allows for an in-depth analysis of the trends and changes within such a culture and thus deserves to be acknowledged and read. Motivational investigations, especially through narrative and ethnographic works are very important. They provide a basis for understanding why people modify their bodies and can also possibly shed light on the commonalities within a particular cultural context and make clear the set of norms

and values. In addition, such literature along with my project will contribute to the eliminations of what I like to call the outdated negative stigmatization of body modifications and in this case, tattoos.

➤ *Emerging Themes:*

Tattoos connect to both the creation and maintenance of the tattooee in various ways. Many of the emergent themes from the literature on tattoos relate to reclaiming the body, the notion of choice, memory, pain, the tattoo as a symbol of defiance of time, the tattoo as an aesthetic form, and the tattoo as a way of internalizing things by the subjects. These will all be further discussed and explained in the following section.

Tattoos are strongly related to identity construction and maintenance as they can be used as a means of reclaiming the body. The tattoo in of itself can be “read explicitly as statements of the self” (Caplan 249). As Caplan expresses, no longer is it accounted for as “drunken impulse or forcible subjection”, tattoos like piercings are to be ‘chosen’ after much deliberation (Caplan 249). This choice is then reflected in the chosen design by the subject which in most cases would eventually go on to form a greater coherent and aesthetic whole. As such body modification is ‘done with complete consciousness’, ‘usually considered for some length of time’ and is often publicly witnessed: inscribed on the skin will be the mark of self-possession” (Caplan 249). The tattoo then becomes a mark of ownership on one’s body and a way of ‘reclaiming’ the body for the self. It can also serve as a means of self-realization and or creation. That said, “in tattoo-talk the focus is rather on the body as an ‘expression’ of the self, a site for self-realization” (Caplan 249). The act of getting tattooed can be viewed as an act of ‘self-creation’ as through it, the body is physically modified and in doing so helps construct a viable sense of self-identity for the subject (Featherstone 68).

This act of self-creation through the tattoo is further reinforced as a tattoo is simply “enough to separate oneself from society at large” (Bell 54). It thus physically marks your body as separate and unique from others.

This then brings up the theme of ownership of one’s body, which is strongly linked to the process of acquiring a tattoo. This is especially true with regards to the pain experienced while getting a tattoo. “Pain, like the tattoo itself, is something that cannot be appropriated; it is yours alone; it stands outside the system of signification and exchange that threatens the autonomy of the self” (Caplan 251). It is an experience only you can feel and no one else can actually relate to it and as such could be considered a way in which one could take control and ownership of their body through their own individual feelings. Moreover, just like the flesh, pain is also conceived as really ‘real’; it speaks its own truth” (Caplan 251). It also makes the act of acquiring a tattoo even more worth-while and truly subjective, emotional and tangible experience. This however, is strongly connected to the notion of viewing the body as property. Something that seems to be distinctive in contemporary tattoo practices is the linking of permanence to ideas of the body as property and possession– “a statement of ownership over the flesh” (Caplan 251). This is especially true within a capitalist society such as the USA in which the only true possession of the self in a world filled with accelerating commodification and unpredictably is your body: ‘the one thing you get in a culture where you are what you do’ (Caplan 251). Thus, in this case, the body not only acts as a site of personal creativity and ownership but also a so-called touchstone of authenticity and truth” in a superficial culture (Caplan 251).

What we see more of now, especially in late-, high- or postmodern societies, like America for example, is how the construct of identity is gradually fluid and “the body is mobilized as a plastic resource

on to which a reflexive sense of self is projected in an attempt to lend solidarity to the narrative thus envisaged” (Featherstone 68). The body is essentially a molding project that can be shaped and formed as the owner wishes. The world being as it is, there are a few things that people as individuals actually have control over and their body is one of them.

The tattoo can also serve as a symbol for the defiance of time. And in this act of self-creation, the idea of permanence of the tattoo is very critical. The tattoo’s permanence establishes “a different regime, an instantiation of the will in defiance of process and time” as you can never get it off (Caplan 250-251). In another sense, the tattoo exists in defiance of time, nothing about the self thus inscribed can ever be denied or discarded. This again in a culture where things are constantly on the move and changing is what lies at the root of the fear of the tattoo. It is the permanence of the tattoo itself and “its evocation of the private depths of the self upon the surfaces of the body and its non-negotiable relationship to that body, that reminds us of the fixed end-point of all this mutability and self-fashioning, our own death” (Caplan 251). Thus, its permanence is strongly linked to death as it serves as a constant reminder of our mortality. Moreover, the practice of tattooing sets up “a unique dichotomy of surface-permanence unparalleled by other forms of adornment and decoration” (Bell 57).

The tattoo was also used as a means for enhancement and display, thus used for purely aesthetic reasons. There is great consideration for the placement, size and color of the tattoos one decides to get. Designs that incorporate untattooed areas of the skin as opposed to going for ‘that blanket coverage look’ attract more direct visual attention to the qualities of the subject’s body, whether it be to their curves or the shape of their limbs (Caplan 245). Consequently, there is a shift from an emphasis on “incorporating and wrapping of the body to one of enhancement and display” (Caplan 245). Moreover, in doing so, this draws

attention not only to the flesh itself but also the issue of 'design', this strongly connecting to "the relationship between the intentions of the self and the marked body, the relationship between what lies within the body and the tattoo" (Caplan 245).

The concept of choice, especially personal choice is very relevant to today's contemporary tattooees. Getting a tattoo is very much a decision and a choice. The act of getting a tattoo seems to have been strongly enmeshed in a discourse of the individual and as a result completely ripped from social relationships and social purpose. This relates to the idea that people get tattoos for themselves and get them as something to be possessed, not something to be looked at (Caplan 250). As such it is no surprise that a reoccurring answer in the testimony of the tattooed is that acquiring the tattoo was 'for me' (Caplan 251). As a result, we can see the efforts to construct what could be termed as "sealed selves: persons who are, in Shakespeare's memorable phrase, 'lords and owners of their faces' and thus not dependent upon external powers (Caplan 251). Getting a tattoo is a conscious choice made by the subject for themselves and only for them— their body, their choice.

The most salient theme to emerge from the explored literature was that of the external to the internal, in the way that the tattoo was used as a means of internalizing things by the subjects. According to Gell, tattooing is 'simultaneously the exteriorization of the interior which is simultaneously the interiorization of the exterior' (Schildkrout 38-39). It's important to note here that the tattooed skin negotiates between the individual and society but also between different social groups and facilitates those relations (321). Yet, it also allows for perceptions and memories to be entangled inside and through the body's surface. In this sense, tattoos serve as a voluntary, once again the importance of choice, "way of

writing one's autobiography on the surface of the body", expressing belonging and exclusion, merging the past and present, and, for the individual, define 'a way of being in the world' (Schildkrout 10).

Tattoos are an essential provider of symbolic information about the individual. One of the ways in which this information can be conveyed is by taking what is external and internalizing it. This is the case among the subjects that seek tattoos as a form of memorialization of those loved and lost, 'to remember my friend', as one person put it, 'in a way that is now part of me' (Caplan 246). As such, many people choose to honor their family members or lovers, display their religious beliefs (ironically, and importantly, despite scripture's words against tattoos) or even their association with the military (Bell 55). In addition, the inscription of the self on the skin or getting a tattoo can be used to memorialize the self's past, in this case, it might not be actual people but rather events that marked the subject's life. Such a concept is referred to by Atkinson as a 'flesh journey': "the process of intentionally reconstructing the corporeal in order to symbolically represent and physically chronical changes in one's identity, relationships, thoughts or emotions over time" (Schildkrout 118). In this way, tattoos strongly connect to the subject's identity and its construction as people are constantly engaged in the permanent re-ordering of their identity narrative with the body being the central focus (Featherstone 19). In addition, subjects are also able to further anchor and stabilize their sense of self-identity in part through the establishment of a coherent personal narrative (Featherstone 53). To put it in the words of the fully inked artist Vladimir Franz who tried to run for the Czech presidency, "being tattooed is synonymous with "living in the truth," one's personal truth, my truth", that being their own personal narrative and its meaning (Bell 54).

Memory is another important theme, especially with regards to converting the external into the internal. Effectively, what is external is transformed into something internal to the subject, and memory, a critical property of contemporary self-identity is in turn externalized and secured on the skin (Caplan 246). As a result, the act of getting tattooed tends to develop a person's awareness of memory as "the tattoos

become points of reference that reinforce the self and its history” (Caplan 246). Tattoos then act as a “registration of external events upon the self”, thus serving as a private diary or as in the tattoo artist Lyle Tuttle’s terms, ‘a montage of my life’ (Caplan 246). They are more than just reminders or reinforcements, they can even Lazonga puts it ‘elicit who the person is or is becoming’ (Caplan 246). In this sense, tattoos evoke not only the recording of external events but internal depth of the person as well and in doing so connect past, present and future along with inscribing distinctions between them.

➤ *Contextualization of the Study:*

Taking into consideration all the research that has been done in this regard, what I intend to investigate are the ways in which tattoos express, embody and help construct identity within contemporary America. I want to examine what people’s different engagements with the practice of tattooing are, especially nowadays within the 21st century in the American Capitalist and consumer society. I want to delve in deeper and take a closer look at the middle-class comfort zone tattooing and attempt to problematize it. I will focus on contemporary tattoo narratives and see what common trends and traditions come up.

The specific questions that I intend to answer are what motivates a person to participate in this subculture and get a tattoo? Has there been a shift in the reasons behind acquiring a tattoo? As opposed to just being bound by social class and expression of deviance or ideology, have tattoos become a mere purchase of a commodity in our consumerist society? In what ways is the tattoo used as a form of expression? What are the stories/narratives behind their tattoos? And How can tattoos help express and embody identity?

In this research project, I will use some of the themes that emerge through the theories and literature within the field along with the interviews to attempt to answer the questions above. These themes range from more traditional ones such as rites of passage, symbolic bearers of information, mechanisms of social communication, a measure of decoration but also more contemporary notions such as reclaiming the body and self-possession, memory, private diary and of course individual choice. The contemporary tattoo is enmeshed in discourse of the individual and ripped from social relationships and social purpose. In addition, there seems to have been a surge of a new engagement with the tattoo that is more superficial and plays on reflected and un-reflected identity. To address these themes and issues, I will essentially use Body theory and the ethnographic method using semi-structured interviews and converse with tattooed subjects. I will also use participant observation in the field to answer my questions, especially with regards to the tattoo shops when interviewing the tattoo artists.

With all the depth, complexity and variation of meaning that could possibly be ascribed to tattoos, I would like to explore the variation through a discussion of the subculture of tattooed people and the relationship of tattoos to identity and its formation. Although this thesis might only scratch the surface of the meaning associated with tattoos, I hope I can shed some light on it through my research. I am primarily concerned with Western tattoo culture, especially in America since I believe aboriginal tattooing has been a topic of extensive research especially within the field of anthropology.

Socio-Historical Background on Tattoos

‘Tattoo’ is a loaded word, with various visual associations ranging from circus sideshows or tribal warriors, to WWII sailors, the Holocaust to media stars like rappers. With such vivid associations, very few people enter the discussion about tattoos without a predisposed emotional outlook (Velliquette 461). Yet, it’s important to note that tattoos have played an important role within many premodern, non-Western societies. Various Anthropological studies record a wide range of practices recounting the symbolic significance of tattoos and their many functions (Kosut 33). That said, from an anthropological perspective, the practice of tattooing is probably one of the oldest discovered forms by archeologists (Velliquette 461).

The word ‘tattoo’ is actually derived from the Tahitian word ‘ta-tu’ which means “to strike or mark”. The “ta” part of the word referred to a piece of bone that had sharp jagged edges for which different types of bones were used to create different designs on the skin using ink derived from the shell of a particular nut which was burned and left to dry out (Velliquette 461). Thus, the “ta” was the very original precursor to the Western tattoo machine. The person responsible for bringing the Tahitian word ‘ta-tu’ into the common dialect was Captain James Cook who traveled to the South Pacific in the 1770s (Kosut 34). Yet, tattoos were present in Europe even prior to Cook’s voyage. As Caplan’s study suggests, “tattooing in nineteenth-century Europe shows that in the early modern period, tattoos were widely used as occupational emblems, religious insignia, personal mementos, and insignia of patriotism and loyalty” (Schildkrout 326). To this regard, it’s interesting to note that the purpose of the tattoo customarily done by hand in aboriginal cultures is usually “ornamental, ritual or identity-oriented in nature” (Bell 53).

According to Bell, the Anglo-Saxon form of the tattoo is believed to have originated from the ancient tribes of the British Isles and is noted to have been practiced by the aristocracy at various times throughout history (Bell 53). Yet, for most of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, in Europe and the United States, the practice of tattooing was associated with marginalized populations; circus workers, sailors, criminals, gang members, and the economically deprived (Kosut 34). It's important to note here that despite the odd nobleman with tattoos, this heterogeneous but commonly lower-class population dominated the realm of Western tattooing until the mid-twentieth century (Schildkrout 327).

Historically, American tattooed people have been military personal, circus "freaks," bikers, convicts and other marginal groups. The earliest tattooers were often sailors, who would travel from port to port looking for customers (Govenar 218). Yet, all those marginal groups were really struggling for survival in the increasingly suburbanized, family-centered era of the 1950s. "Postwar society emphasized middle-class conformity and material comfort" and all this went against the impulse of tattooing (Caplan 230). In this context, it was only normal that tattooing became associated and identified primarily with rebelliousness, especially among adolescents and young adults. In this way, tattoos became considered as 'lower class' and deviant. Later on, after the end of World War II, the practice of tattooing subsided as the "taboo against tattooing intensified". This was mainly due to unsanitary conditions in certain tattoo shops but also because of the large number of people who regretted their tattoos while in the military (Govenar 218). Ultimately, after the war health authorities along with the police and courts began thorough investigations in the practice of tattooing (Caplan 229). Thus, there were greater attempts to regulate tattooing. Eventually, all this changed as the current popularity of tattoos shifted to become associated with celebrities, models and the middle class (Bell 54).

For much of the early part of the twentieth century, the tattoo remained a marginal although increasingly commercialized practice with a relatively restricted clientele. Yet, the popularity of tattoos among the 'leisured class' decreased within a decade due to the invention of the electric tattoo machine. At this stage, the tattoo became something that was affordable and accessible to both the working class and the middle class (Kosut 34). The great electric machine was invented by Samuel F. O'Reilly in New York in 1890 and was the main factor leading to the spread of tattooing throughout the United States by circuses and carnivals (Govenar 218). It allowed for faster and less painful application. In addition, it also impacted the tattoo designs as tattoo artists "for the most part unconcerned with aesthetic experimentation, working mainly from 'flash', a fixed repertoire of designs displayed on their walls (Caplan 240). This in turn led to a highly stereotyped range of images. In addition, it also led to the first spike in tattooing as "populist trend and set the stage for the beginning of a revolution in the esthetics of tattooing" (Kosut 36).

Although the practice of tattooing was increasing in popularity after the invention of the electric tattoo machine in the 1890s, it was not until the mid-1960s that a radical shift in tattoo culture occurred – the "Tattoo Renaissance". Which when Rubin coined the term 'Tattoo Renaissance' (Rubin 1988b, pp. 233-62) he referred specifically to the shift in many aspects of Western tattooing. Among these "(the nature of the people who created tattoos, involving a shift from tattooists to tattoo artists); a change in clientele (from sailors, bikers, and gang members to the middle and upper class); and a change in iconography (from the badge-like images based on repetitive premade designs known as 'flash' to the customized full-body tattoo influenced by Polynesian and Japanese tattoo art)" (Schildkrout 335). It essentially "revived the practice and signaled major changes in aesthetics, population and discourse (Kosut 34).

Major social changes, such as the civil rights and women's movements, resulted in shifts in American culture that allowed for a resurgence of the sub-cultural and artistic activities. In addition, the 1960s countercultures— social justice, feminism, hippies, anti-war movements, neo-tribal to even Goth — led to a renewed interest in tattoos within an environment of protest. It also led to shift in focus on the body and the body as a site of “symbolic dissent” (Kosut 34). Recognizable symbols such as peace signs, butterflies and marijuana leaves became very popular and were used to differentiate rebellious bodies (Kosut 34). As such, body art and modification became a means of affirming identity. Not only tattooing but practices such as “piercing, and other forms of body modification crossed class boundaries” (Schildkrout 326). They became very common among people who would never before have considered getting tattooed and from there moved into the media as part of the celebrity culture and eventually fashion. It is interesting to note here that this Tattoo Renaissance may have been an effect of the new social movements as they advocate for more inclusion and participation in a pluralist consumer culture. This Tattoo Renaissance did not just lead to a creative medium for artists but it also led to a creative form of expression for the consumer. (Velliquette 462).

Since the practice of tattooing has had historic association with the lower class and deviant subculture, Demello, in her 1995 article “*Not Just for Bikers Anymore*” suggests that the media and middle class have worked together to “tame” the image of tattoos” (Bell 55). That being said, as more and more middle-class people were tattooed, and as artists with formal artistic training in other media entered the profession, the tattoo gained new respectability. In addition, the clientele began to represent a wider spectrum of occupation and social class, among them mechanics, truckers, policemen, football players, corporate executives, physicians, and lawyers (Govenar 216). Among this middle-class clientele came an increase in custom work which replaced ‘flash’ or a set of standardized tattoo designs typically displayed on the walls of tattoo shops to give walk-in customers ideas for tattoos. Eventually, the rise of custom work

made possible the collection of tattoos as works of art (Schildkrout 336). As such, designs became more diverse and esthetically complex.

The recent development in the 20th and 21st century of popular interest in tattooing has led to a revival of both traditional and modern art forms and since then has attracted various new artists, some of which are classically trained at respected art institutions (Velliquette 461). In addition, the ‘tattoo community’ has also become more visible and more organized, with the development of big and well-publicized conventions, an increasing number of books, magazines and now websites devoted to the tattoo and “a sure sign of coming of age” – publications and museums dedicated to the documenting of its own past (Caplan 240). Ultimately, by the turn of the millennium, tattoos became a fashion statement and for the most part become disassociated from the sailors, bikers and carnies who once claimed it as their own (Schildkrout 327). Yet, it is difficult to say whether or not the practice of tattooing will ever completely lose its marginality and marginal status in American culture.

Methods and Presentation of Study

My goal for this thesis was to get to the heart of how the tattoo as a form of body modification can be used as a form of expression and relate to one's identity in a multitude of ways. In order to do this, I first had to receive the Institutional Review Board consent and acquire consent forms for the participants to sign as part of the study. After having done that, I decided to conduct a series of semi-structured interviews with a total of 23 tattooed people. Amongst this pool of candidates, two were professional tattoo artists. In terms of gender, 8 participants were male, 14 were female, and one self-identified as a transwoman. The ages varied from 18 years old to 73 years of age, with a large sample of the participants in their early to late twenties (17 participants). In addition, the number of tattoos varied from people having one or two small and easily cancelable tattoos to interviewees who were fully covered or almost fully covered – amongst them were the much older participants and tattoo artists.

The process of recruiting participants consisted of starting with friends that I knew were tattooed and they then put me in touch with their tattooed friends most of which I did not know personally. I thus relied on the snowball effect interview. A comfortable setting was chosen, and pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity if the participant wanted. Interviews were audio-taped using a recorder and lasted anywhere from twenty minutes to an hour. I then proceeded to transcribe the interviews using a transcription software called Trint to then use direct quotes as my main source of data.

Once all the interviews were transcribed, I then advanced to analyze the interviews through the themes that emerged in my literature review. My goal was to try and look at the diversity in experience within the participants and there were some special cases that emerged as new themes. Essentially, I

attempted to understand what motivates people to get tattoos and to better understand if there has been a shift in the reasons behind acquiring a tattoo. I got to listen to a series of stories and narratives behind the participants tattoos, one's that varied from being very personal to simply aesthetically driven. Among these new themes were location and the idea of symmetry, addiction and pain, personality along with the what I like to call the cool factor, matching tattoos and satisfying a desire. These surfaced from the emic codes often taken from the participants' own words and concept from the interviews.

Results and Discussion

What follows is an analysis of the interviews in relation to the previous themes discussed in the literature review among which are identity construction and maintenance, choice and ownership of the body, tattoos as a symbol for the defiance of time, for purposes of enhancement and display, tattoos as means of internalizing things and events and providers of symbolic information. It is also a discussion of the various themes driven by commonalities discovered through the interviews as well as other new themes that emerged through special case interviewees.

1. Choice and Reclaiming the Body:

Tattoos serve as a physical mark deliberately placed on the body to mark self-possession. The motivation behind the act of getting a tattoo can be a means to assert that self-possession and claim ownership of one's body. One of the interviewees named Mackenzie, a 21-year-old female college student from Boise Idaho touched up on this by saying, "I think reclamation almost because I know for our family it was like you are destroying your body when you have a tattoo. And in some ways, I think part of like me being okay with tattoos has been shifting my perspective to like I'm reclaiming my body as mine. And what I'm able to do with it." As such, being able to get a tattoo was a way for Mackenzie to be ok with the idea of really claiming her body as her own and being able to do with it as she wants, despite of what her family believes. On the same note, another interviewee a 21-year-old senior originally from rural Mississippi named KT said, "Yeah I was raised in a really conservative household and so like I always wanted to a tattoo. But I was never allowed to. And then coming here and being able to know that I can do what I want to do is kind of like my way of being like ok I'm going to do this. I'm on my own now. Yeah so reclaiming

who I am.” Once again taking full ownership of their body is very important but also knowing that you have that choice to make in a way that only you decide, is fitting and relates to who you are.

In her interview, Darby an 18-year-old female college student from New Mexico mentioned, “You are marking it. I mean it is your own body but you're also like marking it as like with your specific likes or expressiveness which is I guess another mark of like this is only me, like I don't really care what you think. It's my body or whatever I can do whatever I want with it.” In this sense, you are marking your body with a tattoo, a permanent thing that you picked that not only tells other people who you are but also marks your body as your own. That said, your body is one of the things you indisputably own and as such there is a tendency to adorn things that you own to make them especially yours.

One interviewee in particular, Megan, a 20-year-old junior in college from Pittsburgh Pennsylvania said something that really struck me with regards to not only taking full ownership of the body but also in terms of having a say in the way you look through the act of body modification as she states:

“I think kind of what I said before about like kind of taking ownership of your own body and like deciding who you are not based on your appearance. I feel like especially for women like in this culture, appearances are like everything a lot of the time and it's just it's freeing to like do something you want to do to your body because you want to and something that's more meaningful than just an appearance like it stands for like what I want to do with my life. And like what I care about. And it was like my decision and not just like the universe telling me you're going to look this way because you do, you know.”

She brings up the idea of freedom in deciding to willingly alter your body in a way that not only you want to but also in a more meaningful way. One in which appearance projects meaning. The tattoo not

only changes your appearance, but it also conveys meaning and, in her case, it deals with her Major in college and what she wants to do later on in life. Once again, we see the importance of the fact that it was her decision and no one else's. To this regard, Dwitya, a 21-year-old female international college student from Bombay India said, "I think it's more about feeling empowered... because it's you taking charge of what you put on your body and you having full control over it." It's important to note here that the control of the own appearance reflects in and of itself the creation of identity.

It's interesting to note that all the previous quotes are from tattooed women, yet one man in particular, Pavel, a 23-year-old Russian- American also mentioned this idea of ownership and taking control over your body. In his interview he said, "After I got my first tattoo I thought my mother was going to flip her shit which she did when she found out. But then also I felt free in a way it was a very freeing experience it was an experience that I wanna say, it's like I want to do whatever the hell I want to do with my body and nobody can stop me." Again, the idea of freedom is brought up and the ability to be able to physically alter your body in any way you want and not caring about what others think. It is thus as stated previously "a statement of ownership over the flesh" (Caplan 251).

Not only does one take complete ownership of their body, but they also made the actual choice to do get tattooed and alter their body in any way they like and want. Just as Shilling described, giving the tattooee the ability to transform the exterior surfaces of their body "in line with the designs of its owner". One of the interviewees, Sabrina a 20-year-old female college student from the Bay Area of California elaborates on this fact as she states, "it's a way for me to make my body like a more genuine form of myself. Owning my body more. It was my choice, I wanted it. I got it. I love the way I look when I look in the mirror. I love the way it makes me feel like." Not only was it a way for her to take ownership of her body

by making it a more real and true version of herself but she did so willingly and made the choice and was very happy with the result. With regards to the concept of choice another interviewee, Michael a 43-year-old university professor brought up the notion that these tattoos have always been for him and no one else. As he states, “So for me when I started getting tattooed I wanted them to be mine. I didn't get them for anybody else”. As such he made the choice to get them, and made the choice to get them only for him and no one else. Thus, it was a personal choice one in which the tattoo was conceived as something to be possessed, not just something to be seen.

Twenty-one-year-old college student John from Manhattan New York also expressed this notion of personal choice as he stated “You know the common thing is like oh you're going to regret that in five, ten, thirty years and I'm like maybe they will. But I mean it's my choice, my body to do that. And I think that's a lot of the autonomy comes with that. And just like that's where a lot of the power and going back to your other question the worth of it like really increases the value because you're like look at me I made a decision on my own. No one can really stop it or change it. So as indicated by my mom she tried.” John clearly emphasizes the fact that it is his choice and his body and that grants him great autonomy. Not only that but the fact that he has such a power to do so increases the worth and value of his body as he is in fact taking ownership of his body and no one can stop him. John then adds, “I think the freedom of choice in that I am able to do something to my body that no one else had an influence over and I am able to express how I feel or things that I view or just like an aesthetic or an art form in a way that doesn't hurt anybody”.

Another interviewee who touched upon the idea of personal choice was Pavel. He clearly emphasizes that the act of getting tattooed was a personal choice a highly values that as he states, “I just think it's a personal choice and personal choice is the biggest thing that I respect in this world. If a person

decides to tattoo themselves that is their choice, I ain't got no problem with that.” He then goes on to add, “I don't necessarily see my body as a piece of art. I view it more as my personal thing. My personal canvas. And I believe that I choose to do things to it that I think are right and if certain people believe it isn't right well that's their opinion. I mean they can make their own choices, but I've made mine and it's up to them to be close minded or open minded about it.” Once again there is a clear connection between the act of self-possession of the body by getting tattooed along with the choice and decision to do so prior to the act. It is a personal choice to get tattooed and in doing so, people reclaim their bodies for themselves. A tattoo on its own then becomes “enough to separate oneself from society at large” (Bell 54).

2. The External to Internal:

For the vast majority of the interviewees, tattoos were a way for them to make the external internal. A perfect example of this is using the tattoo as a means of memorialization or commemoration. As Ryan Weaver, a tattoo artist and owner of Kingdom Tattoo in Decatur who has been tattooing for almost 20 years told me, “People come and commemorate things all the time you know it could be like your five-year anniversaries or with regards to marriage or relationships or even like you know milestones of sobriety.” It is thus a very common thing. This was the case for Karla a 20-year-old Dominican female college student who got a tattoo to commemorate her father who passed away. As she describes, “So one of mine is to commemorate my father who had passed away when I was younger. I got the Roman numeral of the day he passed away and then his handwriting in Spanish which means love me a lot from like a letter he wrote to my mom. So that was like something like really meaningful.” In this case, the tattoo served as a way for Karla to remember her father and make him permanently a part of her.

Figure 1: Karla



Another participant, Kira a 21-year-old college student from Tampa Florida also got a tattoo to commemorate the death of a loved one, in her case a dear friend. As she told me, “Over the summer I got a tattoo on my arm that says “simply”. And it was for one of my friends that passed away over the summer. This was something that we always used to say to each other.” Once again, the tattoo serves as a way to commemorate her friend and the words themselves also had great meaning. Getting it tattooed was a means to not only keep it with her forever but on her and a part of her forever.

Figure 2: Kira



Another way in which the external is turned into the internal through the tattoo is the way in which certain beliefs can be expressed through the tattoo outwardly to the world. This was the case for Ryan's first tattoo. As he recounts, "Just you know the first tattoo you get is the biggest deal psychologically anyway. So it had to reflect in a big way something personal and it was with regards to my faith. So that was the first one and the first reason I got a tattoo." In this way, Ryan's religious identity is then externalized through the tattoo and placed directly on the skin, the outer layer of the body for all to see and know.

The tattoo is thus a way to internalize certain things about the individual and truly make them a part of them by physically putting them on their body. Beliefs are not the only things that can be expressed through tattoos. The tattoo can also be a tool to express and outwardly portray sexual identity. In this case, there was one interviewee in particular who really addressed this. As Donna explains, "For me it's an expression of my identity right. Like so it's about my queerness I think so both like sexuality queerness that

I'm in a relationship with a woman but also my gender. So when I have them covered up and then like you know summer comes or whatever people are like oh my God, it feels like I'm more myself. It's a way that I identify myself." It's important to note here that the tattoos that she has gotten not only serve to express her sexual identity but her gender as well. They are a conveyor of information about her. In addition, she feels more herself only when she can actually show her tattoos, then she is truly herself. As she then goes on to add, "I mean it's about marking parts of my life. It's about celebrating beauty but it's also about kind of asserting my queerness I think for sure." As such, through her tattoos, Donna is able to further anchor and stabilize her sense of self-identity – in this case sexual and lesbian identity. This lesbian identity in particular is very much so asserted through one tattoo in particular as she describes:

"The one of my lower back. The tramp stamp. Again it was the 90s. It's like a black triangle and then there's this kind of like tribal pattern. I have two that are tribal. That was what was cool in the 90s and it has like these swishes that come out of it. And so for me the black triangle yeah I mean I think that was about my sexuality you know the pink triangle was a huge symbol used in the concentration camps to mark gay people. I think probably gay men more than gay women just because I think people didn't think about women being gay. And so the black triangle is more about like lesbian identity and the Keltic knot that for me was about kind of unity. It was when I was like in the heart of my master's in women's studies and so I was really working through like you know working towards equality and all that kind of stuff and inequality. And so yeah that one is definitely about I think about my sexuality. The rest of them I don't think as much."

In this way, Donna's tattoo was a way of expressing her inner self, her sexual identity as a lesbian woman. For her, the tattoo was an ideal way of projecting it to the world to see and further asserting her identity.

Other than sexual identity, another asserted identity was both national and regional. Where you are from had a lot to do with some of the tattoos of certain participants. It is also strongly linked to their identity and thus their chosen tattoos. The first participant, David a 20-year-old Kuwaiti-American college student said, "I always knew generally the theme I wanted to follow on getting it was going to be related to Vienna. I knew I was going to get something related to that and I thought you know the cities coordinates would be

nice as a symbol of my connection to that city.” As such, he got the coordinates of the city of Vienna tattooed on his chest and in his words, “it is meaningful to me.”

Figure 3: David



He then adds on, “I think you know like I have a strong connection to where I grew up and it's you know greatly influenced who I am today, my personality, my values, the way I act socially culturally. And you know it's kind of a reminder of home. It's a reminder of a temporary feeling I used to have. Actually, like the other day I heard a saying and I think it like very well kind of represents you know what tattoos are they're a permanent reminder of temporary feelings. For me I've always associated myself more with Vienna than I did with my Kuwaiti origins and so to have that reminder on my body, it's nice you know.” The tattoo for him was more than just about the location as the location helped shape who he is and it serves as a constant reminder of home or in his words is a permanent reminder of a temporary feeling, home. This interestingly parallels to the childhood memories and the way in which the tattoo serves as a form of remembering them. It was his home as a child and will remain his home, once again something that can and will never change about him.

Another participant that got a tattoo that strongly linked to home and helps shape his identity was Pavel. As he described, “So the first tattoo that I got was the hammer and sickle and that tattoo was the first one because my family lived through the Soviet Union. And it was just something that I believed was important. I mean I grew up in that kind of system. I mean not necessarily in that system but I was raised by the people who grew up under that system. And to me it meant more of a commemoration of my family and my relatives and everybody else that you know I would take to my grave.” In this way, the tattoo serves as not only a reminder of home but it also a way for him to deal with where he comes from and accept it. He thus externalizes it in the form of a tattoo, something that he will take to his grave and will always be a part of him. You can’t deny where you came from.

Figure 4: Pavel



Enzo was another interviewee who had tattoos pertaining to his home country Uruguay. As he explains, “I immediately knew that I wanted something that was significant to me and not just some random picture or anything that I thought looked cool. So the first one is an indigenous quote that's kind of equivalent to like the Uruguayan version of like eye of the tiger which means like Uruguayan grit. The second one is also pertaining to Uruguay. And I wanted different elements of my culture as part of it and inside of it to just kind of not necessarily remind myself but kind of show off who I am and what represents me.” Enzo’s tattoos are very much linked to where he is from and as he said not only serve as a reminder for himself but they are also a means for him to display to others where he is from and who he is and does so proudly. He then adds, “Yeah I mean two of them are about Uruguay, so they definitely speak to who I am and even here in America I don't want to lose or forget any of that aspect of myself. I just have a pretty strong sense of identity like who I am.” More than anything, it’s a way for him to maintain his national identity and to never forget it.

Figure 5: Enzo



Figure 6: Enzo



Other than national identity, another interesting identity that popped up was regards to regional identity, especially here in the states. One interviewee in particular, Donna displayed this through her tattoos. She got one in relation to where she's from, the Midwest as she describes, "Regionally like I got these are maple leaves. I'm not Canadian. But growing up in Chicago the suburbs of Chicago we had a maple tree in front of my house and I wanted a tree because I was also interested and rooted in the Midwest and no matter where I live I'll always be Midwestern." That tattoo in particular stood as a symbol for where she was from and stood for home, her roots and her identity as a Midwesterner, something that would never change.

Figure 7: Donna



All these tattoos that deal with where one is from or sexual identity are things that will stay constant forever and never change no matter what. They will always be a part of the individual and as such serves as a good motive to permanently put that on your body. Yet, among other things that will never change and will always remain a part of you are memories. Memories essentially make you who you are and they pertain to you and only you. It is thus only natural for humans to want to remember certain things about themselves.

For many other participants, the tattoo was a way to remember something and served as a reminder of something and the tattoo was a visible form to do so. As Sabrina describes, “Like some of my like tattoos are definitely symbolic of struggles and things like that. But it's more so when I look at them they are a reminder of things that I want to remember.” As such, memories are important parts of what makes us human and more specifically what makes us who we are, and preserving our memories is a very vital part of self-preservation. For Daniel a 21-year-old male college student from Atlanta Georgia, his tattoo had a lot to do with his childhood and serves as a good point of reference for his childhood when he wants to remember it. As he recounts, “I was like wow this is permanent like I just have like a deathly hallow symbol with three spells on it. Like what. And I was like oh that's still like to me at least like that's always going to be a part of my childhood. So it's like a good remembrance of it.” In this way, he is memorializing his past, and in Daniel’s case it’s not actual people but rather a specific time period that marked the subject’s life.

Figure 8: Daniel



Several other participants also had tattoos that related strongly to their childhood and served as a way to memorialize it or certain parts of it. For Karla, she got a tattoo of a lotus flower on her back as she claims:

“I was attracted to like floral things and I also like learned about the lotus flower and how originally, they grow in like ponds so not so like aesthetically pleasing places like not nice clean surroundings but this beautiful like flower emerges and I feel like that has a lot to do with my upbringing. Like obviously I haven't had like a bad childhood but I've been through things and I feel like it's a really good epitome of how I feel about myself growing up.”

In this way, the lotus flower something that grows in a not so pleasant environment emerges to become this beautiful flower was away for Karla to memorialize her childhood and the circumstances in which she grew up with. Thus, the tattoo in her own words served as an epitome about how she felt growing up and about her childhood.

Figure 9: Karla



The other interviewee who also got tattoos that related strongly to her childhood was KT. Interestingly enough, just like Karla her first tattoo also related to nature. As she describes, “So my mom is a music teacher and when I was little we would always listen or watch the Sound Of Music at least like 3 times a year. And the song Climb Every Mountain is like always what my mom would say when my sister and I were going through a hard time. And so I got the mountains. As like a reminder of that.” In this way, the tattoo of the mountains was a reminder of her childhood and something that her mother would always sing to her and her sister during tough times. Thus, memory, a critical part of contemporary self-identity is in externalized and secured on the skin (Caplan 246).

Figure 10: KT



For other participants, their tattoos were acquired after a difficult time in their lives and the act of getting the tattoo was a way to remember that difficult time and how they overcame it. Thus, serving as a permanent point of reference or reminder of personal growth and happiness, especially when looking back.

For Darby in particular, she got her tattoo during a very dark time in her life as she was struggling with bulimia and getting the tattoo was both a permanent reminder to stay healthy but also a promise to herself to not break.

Figure 11: Darby



As she recounts:

“So since for about I guess my sophomore through senior year of high school I struggled with bulimia and my senior year like November through February was like really bad. And so eventually I just started going to therapy but it still wasn't necessarily helping as much. And so one day I decided to go get a tattoo. And that was actually the first day in probably about a year that I was like completely healthy and I've been healthy since then. And that was on March 17th when I got it. And so now it's close to six months I think. When people ask me about it I say it's the most permanent promise I could make myself. And so that's why I got it. And I can't. If I break the promise it just means, it means nothing. So. Yes. I mean it's definitely a huge part of my identity.”

It thus serves as a symbol of personal growth and a promise to herself to stay on the right track and stay healthy and looking back at the tattoo she can remember just how far she has come. Another interview, John actually said something that relates strongly to this as tattoos for him “signify a point in life and you get to look back on that always and remember you know, tattoos are really personal so you'll always kind of remember the story behind each time.” Thus, the story behind it will always be relevant and since the tattoo itself is permanent it will always be there.

Another interviewee also got her tattoos as a means of positive reinforcement and a constant reminder to keep pushing forward after a difficult time in her life. Dez, a 21-year-old female college student who identifies as half Puerto Rican and half Black actually has two tattoos that relate to this the first being an arrow. As she explains:

“I think I picked this specific design because I liked it but I was looking up some tattoos and stuff I was reading, just randomly and I came across like the meaning of arrows and like it's kind of like with the bow you pull the arrow back and then it shoots forward. It's super cheesy but like you see it happening every day like you mess up and then you kind of take a step back and then eventually take two steps forward. So like I really like the idea because I've had a lot of experiences like that in my life and I continue to have them so it's like a nice little reminder of like persevering.”

Figure 12: Dez



The meaning behind the arrow was very significant to Dez as it really reflected what she was going through at that particularly difficult moment in her life. Yet, just like the arrow she was held back but then went forward and that's what life is, you get pulled back but then you have to get up and keep going. Thus, that tattoo is a great reminder for her to keep persevering and pushing through. This theme was also carried over in her second tattoo which was a quote "Just keep swimming" from the movie Finding Nemo. As she describes, "Under my collarbone I have "just keep swimming" and yes it's from Finding Nemo. It's super cheesy and it's like that thing that Dory says but like it's so true. It's dark and you gotta keep going and I just think it was another good reminder that sometimes you have to keep pushing even though you don't want to and you can't see the end of it."

Figure 13: Dez



Not only is it from a childhood favorite movie of hers but it also relates to her life as an adult and once again is a very clear reminder as to keep swimming forward no matter what. These tattoos are definitely a part of her identity and her powerful ability to look on the bright side and not let things bog her down. As she elaborates herself:

“They are very personal and they serve as little reminders, permanent reminders about life, things that I have gone through so like I think they connect to my identity because like even if someone else can't tell they are literally pieces of me and like I got them specifically because I went through this, because I really connected to the meaning behind the tattoo or the quote I guess.”

They are thus important permanent lessons to keep in mind throughout one's life. Moreover, not only are they a part of the way she perceives herself but they are also physically a part of her and relate to her

specifically as only she knows the particular negative events that she overcame in her life. As such, they are very personal and unique to her.

Another interviewee who also got her tattoo after a rough patch in her life was Dwitya. Her tattoo was a way for her to overcome her depression and her past as a bullied kid. As she describes:

“So I wasn't really sure what I wanted to get. And then I went through this phase of depression from about say like 14 to 18 or like 20 maybe. But it was a significant period of time. And I had been bullied as a kid. So I just wanted something that represented a new start when I was coming to college and so I got a tribal seven and a half inch Phoenix on my back and yeah it was intense, it took about three and a half hours to do in one sitting.”

Not only was it a way to overcome her negative past but the tattoo was also a reminder and symbol of a new beginning. In a sense marking the start of a new life period, in this case her transition to college and what better way to express rebirth than a phoenix.

Figure 14: Dwitya



She then explains, “For me it's sort of if there's something that I want a specific reminder of or you know something that's meant a lot to me. So I get a tattoo as a reminder of things and like messages for myself.” Thus, this was both a reminder of starting anew but also a message to herself to not give in to negativity or depression.

In this way, tattoos not only serve as permanent reminders but they also made the body a means of projecting a person's narrative to the world. Thus, the tattoos on the body serving as a private diary about

the tattooed person's life. This is what Atkinson refers to as a 'flesh journey' (Schildkrout 118). As Kira explains, "I view it more as like a life map or like a scrapbook almost kind of that you know I can look back and be like Oh when I was 18 this thing really mattered to me you know and I can remember like what I was going through at that point in my life and like why that thing meant so much to me. So I guess more like a life map than a piece of art." For her, the tattoos served did in fact serve as a 'flesh journey' as she is literally marking her body with events that occurred in her life that were meaningful and significant. In this way, it's also used as a great reflection tool about her own life where she can look back and reminisce. As she elaborates, "I've always viewed it as kind of like a time map on your body to look at what was important to you at certain points of your life. So it's a good way for me to reflect on my own life." John, on the other hand described his tattoos more as being a timeline of his life as he expressed, "I mean I always think about like oh like I remember when that part of my body didn't have a tattoo on it but now I feel like my body has been enhanced or upgraded because I have like these little you know snapshots of where I was in life and what these tattoos mean to me. So it's kind of like your own timeline." Not only do they serve as his own timeline of his life but each tattoo individually as he puts it is a snapshot of where he was in his life when he got the tattoo thus marking particular events in time that happened.

Another participant, Karla told me that her tattoos were a piece of who she is and they speak to who she is. As she describes, having something that you feel is a piece of you and has meaning. For me anyways it's like something that speaks about you, like little stories of like things about you that you want the world to know." For her they are these little stories of things that have happened to her that she would like to share with the world. A similar feeling was expressed by Ryan the tattoo artist who said, "Yeah for me personally all I can say is that each piece has a place in my story and they are reminders of that journey. So I guess it could be a way of valuing our lives more than our bodies I think." Thus, each tattoo plays a role in the story of his life. In addition, I thought his last statement brings up a really good point in the sense

that by getting these tattoos somehow might suggest that we value our lives and our experiences more than our own bodies. Yet both things contribute to a person's identity and the case of tattoos, both are intertwined.

All the tattoos carry personal meanings and these meanings reaffirm an individual's unique identity. For Donna, a woman in her 40s working in the university administration, one of her tattoos was dedicated to her son Felix as she got his name tattooed on her arm. As she explains, "I think I mean obviously like Felix's name for me is about being a mom and loving him. And it was a goal of my life and I finally achieved it." It was thus a way to commemorate a life goal or milestone, that of finally being a mother, something that she had been wanting for a really long time.

Figure 15: Donna



For Michael in particular, his tattoos really started having significant meanings behind them as he got older. In fact, his first really meaningful tattoo was a means to commemorate his mother that passed away. As he describes, “I mean there's a story behind all of them especially as I've gotten older. It was probably when I was 20 when I got my first like real meaningful piece. My mother died when I was 19 so I got her portrait on my whole side. And then from there everything has a meaning.” From there, his next tattoos were dedicated to his kids as he just like Donna got his kid's names tattooed on his arm. Yet, everything kind of changed after that. As he explains:

“Some of them are more explicit like explicit meanings than others. Like I have my kids on my arms. I've started to develop a kind of a good and bad side. So kind of everything in my life that's traumatic or that's happened to me has a good part and a bad part to it. And so that gets kind of reflected in some parts of my body. So like I have rise of like angels coming up my leg like that would be good. This other side would be like fall of the rebel angels. So that would be the bad. Angel on one foot. Devil on the other foot. So that's definitely kind of one theme that's in there. But yeah they all have some sort of personal meaning to them.”

In this way, Michael's tattoos instead of serving as commemorations or as symbols for loved ones switched to serving as representations if you will of both the good and the bad things that happened in his life, to the point of even developing a theme on each side of his body, a good and a bad side. All of which regardless of whether good or bad get represented on his body, reflecting who he is and serve as a way of quite literally wearing his life on his body – a true ‘flesh journey’. As Michael elaborates, “You know I'm wearing parts of my life on my skin. You know you may not be able to look and tell what it is but if we sat down and talked about it like I could tell you like the whole story a variety of stories of my life. So I'm expressing whatever happy sad good bad things that I've been through and what it means to me and how it's made me a person.”

In the end, the internal workings, experiences, and values of the person are projected onto his or her skin—the body's outer layer – thus representing the fertile depth and complexities of his/her being.

Figure 16: Michael



3. A Form of Self Expression:

Across the interviews the tattoo repeatedly came across as being a form of expression, more specifically a form of self-expression. As Michael describes it, “I mean I guess we all do it in some way shape or form. I mean as much as I want to claim it's integrated into me and I don't notice it, it is my form of expression.” This was actually Michael’s response to my question about whether the tattoo is a part of him or simply an adornment. It’s interesting to note that he claims its fully integrated into himself but it still remains his own personal form of expression. Karla, another interviewee also emphasized how the tattoo is a form of personal expression and not simply just artistic when she said, “it's artistic and also like a personal expression for me in terms of like me personally and like my past.” As such, the tattoo as a form of body modification can serve the purpose of expression and in that way, is not bound to a particular type of expression. Yet, in many cases it serves as a form or personal expression which is relative to each person. For Dana for example, it was more of a unique and cool way to express herself. As she puts it, “I do want to get more just because it's a really cool unique way to express yourself like the same way that you like choose the clothes you wear or how you style your hair.” It’s a personal choice to express whatever you want about yourself only unlike other things like hair and clothes, it is a permanent form.

Dana’s response also relates to another concept that emerged through the interviews which was that tattoos were not only a form of expression but they were a cool form of expression. This then brings up this idea of what I would like to call the “cool factor”. As John in his interview explained, “Yeah I know I said the word a lot but it's just cool like that's the general word that I can think of. You're just a cool dude for having tattoos and that's kind of how I feel.” It’s become a cool thing to have and this really links back to the way in which tattoos have become so socially acceptable and widespread, especially when considering music artists like rappers and other celebrities who get them. Not only that but they have become a

commodity in the sense that it's a cool thing to own, as you do in fact buy the tattoo and pay to have it inked on your body. The cool factor also connects to the idea of seeing tattoos are art and as an artistic expression. To this regard, Mackenzie told me, "I think like it's cool to have art on my body and perpetually. Yeah. I think it's it is cool to have like this blank spot now filled with something that's really beautiful." In her eyes, it's a beautiful thing to have on you and she adds that, "you're literally like you're putting art on yourself. Like you're manipulating your body in a way that makes you like distinct but also like it shapes meaning sometimes or just looks really cool and you dig that." It's essentially a form of body modification that involves beautiful art that can shape meaning or it could also just simply look cool which is something that connects to the design and the aesthetic value of the tattoo.

Tattoos were also used as a means of enhancement and display of the body and thus a way to convey identity. Designs were chosen not because they symbolized past experiences or personal traits but because they were aesthetically pleasing. In this regard, a lot of the participants claimed that the reason behind their tattoos were purely aesthetic. Alexa, for example said, "When I get a tattoo now it's because there's a lot of thought about the aesthetics of it." The tattoo needs to be aesthetically pleasing to the person putting it on the body and the importance of this was very much so elaborated upon by the tattoo artist and owner of Stygian Gallery Tony Mancia:

"I have a totally different mentality when it comes to what I get tattooed on me. I would never get something tattooed on me that means a lot to me or that I love or am obsessed with the idea of it because things change. I get things that I like simply like. I like the imagery I like the art. But I will never get something more than that on me because that will never change. You're not going to not like something if it's appealing to you. If you want something personal that has so much meaning to you, things can change and then you're going to be upset about it. And that's people's biggest problem with getting the first tattoo is they just it's their first tattoo, it's on them forever. They overanalyze the whole situation and then they hate it. So it's easier to get something that we like."

For him personally, the aesthetics precedes everything. It is much more important than the meaning or story behind the tattoo. He claims that he would just get something that he truly likes, this being in terms of the imagery and the art but he would never get a meaningful piece. His justification for this is that meaning changes, especially as one grows old and lives. New meanings will be attributed to the original meanings and so instead of focusing on that, people should get a tattoo based on their aesthetic preferences which for Mancia is something that you will always appreciate.

Another interviewee that also expressed how her tattoos were more aesthetic than actually carrying a meaning behind them or a story was Allison a 21-year-old Asian- American female college student from Morristown New Jersey. She described her tattoos by saying, "I feel like my tattoos are more fun. They are more for aesthetic reasons than they are for any profound or emotional reasons. And getting a tattoo can be a really meaningful and significant process it's just not necessarily that way for me." As such, for Allison her tattoos are simply aesthetically pleasing, and the aesthetic value is more important than the emotional meaning behind a tattoo. Another interesting comment that she said had to do with Instagram and seeing other people's tattoos and thinking that would look cute or really nice on herself. As she put it, "Honestly I'm just like one of those like Pinterest bitches who just like sees cute stuff on Instagram and it's like damn that would look so cute on me like I don't know." The tattoo is thus stripped of true meaning and the simple justification for getting it is due to the way it looks and based on the tattooed person's aesthetic taste.

This idea of aesthetic pleasure or preference also has a lot to do with considering tattoos as pieces of art. To this regard, Dez told me, "I think in general they are just artwork. They're beautiful. And even if they're not necessarily beautiful to me they're beautiful to someone because like it doesn't have to have a super deep meaning but you get a tattoo." For her, tattoos are beautiful pieces of art and they don't

necessarily need to have as she puts it a super deep meaning. You get it because you think it's beautiful and artistically pleasing. This then bring up the question of tattoo artists and their technical ability and styles. Michael touched upon this by saying, "But yeah I mean again throughout all of this there is still a huge element of artistry in it. I mean that's kind of why you're going to one artist or another is because of their abilities." Once again, each one has their own personal preferences and tastes when it comes to what is beautiful and the fact that you can get something on your body because you simply like it is in and of itself a form or self-expression. You thus, physically display your likes to others.

Displaying such preferences was also another way in which tattoos were significant. In this way, tattoos also served as an extension of the self and a means to express the inner self. This in particular related to the tattooed person's personality or simple likes in terms of things they value. The tattooees explained that tattoos helped them celebrate their favorite personality traits or their passions and in doing so chose designs with symbolic meanings to do so. In this sense, "Tattoos are also employed as symbolic representations of how one conceives of the self, or interests and activities that are key features of self-definition" (Sanders 46).

One participant that really touched upon how the tattoo does this was Dez. As she describes, "You get a tattoo because you really like something even if it's just something you really like. You have an attachment to it and like for me like I think that's really cool. It's like expressing something that takes me like a minute to like say and it basically condenses a lot of like ideas, feelings and memories into like this one tangible piece." The tattoo thus condenses all these ideas and feelings and memories into this one piece that is then permanently placed on your body. In this case in particular, the tattoo can symbolize a part of the person's personality or even reflect their personality or one particular part of who they are.

Allison in particular, related very much so to this as her tattoos were very much related to her personality.

As she explains:

“When I was thinking of getting my tattoo I wanted something that was kind of edgy but also like fun and lighthearted that's kind of why I have this little cartoon cloud just because I thought it was cute. Like kind of shows like the more youthful side of my personality which is something that I think that you know not that many people see about me because I can be kind of shy when you first get to meet me. So I don't know I feel like yeah my tattoos kind of communicate stuff that I don't necessarily show to people I don't know very well.”

Figure 17: Allison



She claims that the tattoos that she got revealed the “youthful” side of her personality which is something that people usually don’t see when they first meet her. The tattoos thus serve as an extension of her inner self, her personality that is only something people who get to know her will see.

Another participant who's tattoo also coincides with her personality more than anything was Amelia. As she explains, "Yeah I think maybe not any of the markers that you mentioned of identity but definitely personality. It's really like free flowing and it's not like this is solid thing and this is what it means. Like I like that it's really flexible and fluid, just like I really don't like kind of strict rules or stuff like that. So I think that's just a part of like how I like to go through life and just kind of see what comes my way and just go with the flow. So I think that's an expression of that."

Figure 18: Amelia



Thus, for Amelia, her tattoo in fact had nothing to do with other markers of identity like gender, race, culture or religion. It does however have everything to do with her personality. It also links directly to the meaning to because the meaning behind the tattoo was in and of itself devoid of a specific meaning and instead free flowing. This links back to Amelia's personality as she is also free flowing and goes through her life going

with the flow. The tattoo thus serves as an expression of that. Going back to Dez's quote, tattoos also encompass feelings and ideas in one visual piece.

One particular interviewee who identified with this was Dwitya for whom one tattoo in particular had a lot to do with her feelings and her moods. As she describes:

“This one was also kind of related to my depression. But I would say it was more about like my moods. I had seen this quote a while ago that said "if you want to know how I'm doing don't ask me how I'm doing. Listen to the music I'm listening to" and I'm heavily into music and I sing. And so you know I used to play the piano so there's a lot of musicality sort of running through my family as well. The design was the dreamcatcher on top and then the music headphones and the music notes running through them so it's almost like the bad thoughts and the bad dreams are being made positive through the music I'm listening to or the music I'm listening to is affecting the dreams I have. It works both ways”.

Figure 19: Dwitya



As she mentions, this tattoo in particular is strongly related to her depression along with her feelings and moods. Not only that but it also connects to one of her passions, music as she herself is very musical and comes from a musical family. The quote mentioned really links both moods and music together as they are strongly interconnected and affect one another. Her tattoo is a direct depiction of that connection and expresses both her passion for music and her current mood. It thus serves as an expression of her inner self with regards to her feelings and her interests.

Another interviewee who displayed this idea of tattoos serving as a representation of the inner self and interests was Daniel. His tattoo was a way of showing just how much he loves Harry Potter and how big of a fan he is. As he describes it, “So I love Harry Potter and ever since I was young I was like my first tattoo is going to be Harry Potter. So that's what I got. And like I drew out the design and everything so it was fun. Personally, I think at least for me in terms of my tattoo I think it just shows a part of me to like show other people like that is Harry Potter but like I love Harry Potter so much that it's a part of me and So I think I get to share that with people like visibly that makes sense.” Clearly it serves as a very clear signal as to his great interest in Harry Potter and just how much he loves it. Not only that but it also shows people just how big of a role Harry Potter played in his life to permanently become a part of him through the form of a tattoo.

Expressing your interests and hobbies through a tattoo was also done by Pavel who decided to get a tattoo that symbolizes his interest and passion for film. As he describes it, “The third tattoo that I got was basically a woman smoking with kind of a man smoking a cigarette in a kind of rhombic shape and then on top of it was the camera. That I got because I wanted to do film in my life and my favorite genre of film was film noir and I felt like that represented all of those factors combined.”

Figure 20: Pavel



It was a way to physically express this inner interest and to also permanently make it a part of him. In this way, “Tattoos commonly represent the self by choosing designs that symbolize important personal involvements, hobbies, occupational activities, and so forth” (Sanders 47).

Other participants that also expressed their passions were strongly related to the academics and their majors. Mackenzie for example explained, “So I have corn, wheat and soy on my foot which is very weird. But it came out of me being a food justice major and essentially reminding myself of what I was really passionate about and like wanted to, sounds really cheesy, but devote my life to.”

Figure 21: Mackenzie

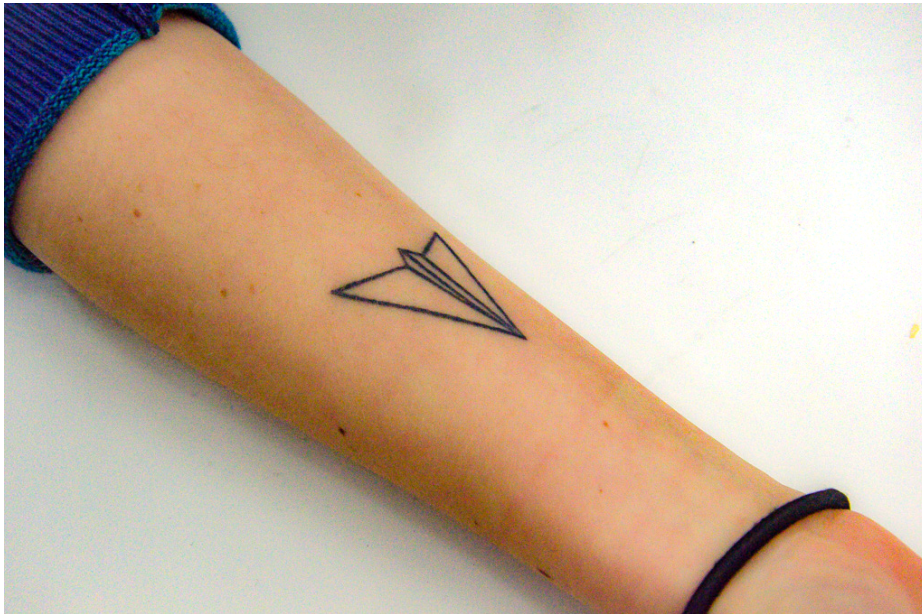


It serves not only as an external expression of her passion but it's also a constant reminder, for something that she truly loves to the extent of studying it for life.

Another similar case arose through Megan's interview. She also got her tattoo not as a reminder of a particular event, person or thing but simply for her passions, likes and personality. As she describes:

“So I got a paper airplane which connects to my majors, creative writing and Spanish and also since I love to like read, write and like and travel, explore the world and I know those are the things that like are never going to change for me. So the paper for writing and then the traveling part for like the plane but then also it's like a paper plane. It's like. You kind of just like when you have a paper plane you just throw it and you don't really know where it's going. So I guess to me it means like open mindedness about the future and about the possibilities for my life. I shouldn't be so set on like this has to happen and I can just be more relaxed about it as long as I remember what I'm passionate about and work towards it then things will be ok.”

Figure 22: Megan



Similarly to Pavel, each part or element of the tattoo serves to symbolize a particular part of her interests and passions. As she explained the paper plain serves as a constant reminder of her majors which she loves to do along with other things such as travelling. The entire tattoo as a whole however is an extension of her inner self in that it also represents a part of her personality. She, just like the paper airplane, is free flowing and open to possibilities but the things she is passionate about will always be there and will never change.

Tattoos as such are a great way for people to express themselves, things about them and display their preferences through a visual representation on the skin. Not only is the practice considered by many as a cool form to do so, but it is also simply an aesthetically pleasing way to do so.

Yet when considering the idea of self-expression, especially when it comes to tattoos, one has to think about the arising tension between the individual and the collective. This is to say that getting a tattoo is in fact an individual way of expressing one's self but at the same time it is also a collective aesthetic. As such, there is this strong dichotomy between individual self-expression and a pretty narrow group aesthetic. It is in a way a universal form of expression and aesthetic in which many people partake in, but it is also a personal choice and what the tattoo represents, or expresses can be very much individualistic and personal. This is the case for many of my participants but in doing so they take part in a greater more shared experience.

4. Symbolic meaning and Permanence:

There is a lot more than just the symbolic meaning behind the tattoo. To this regard, a lot of the interviewees recognized that other people might get tattoos for multiple reasons, some of which don't even need to have a meaning behind it. As John expresses, "Yeah I mean that's pretty personal to me. But it doesn't have to be you know. I know people get like you know some people get really really really deep meaningful tattoos. Other people get butterflies because they think it looks cool like you know people get tattoos for any sort of reason". There is thus a clear sense of acknowledgment that there are in fact a multitude of reasons behind getting a tattoo and the meaning behind it may or may not be one. Yet it's important to note that that does not in any way undermine the significance of the tattoo, especially to the tattooed individual. In this way, the meaning behind it or reasoning is very much personal and only truly significant the tattooed individual.

With this in mind however, there seemed to be this kind of dichotomy between the people that thought that a tattoo had to have a meaning behind it and those that didn't think it necessary. As KT explains, "I don't know. I've asked myself that. I mean I've thought about it. But to me like I like to have meaning associated with it because to me if I'm going to put something on my body and it's going to be there for like the rest of my life. I want it to mean something to me." For her, if it's going to be permanently on her body, it needs to have a meaning associated with it and not only does it need to have one but she also wants it to mean something to her specifically. It's a way for her to truly make it personal. Another interviewee Sabrina told me, "People get tattoos that aren't meaningful to them. But I wouldn't because I also love my like actual body like I love every single inch of skin that's on it. Like the initial idea of covering a piece of skin is like very painful for me because like I do love my own body. But it's like I would only cover it with something that's really meaningful basically." Once again, Sabrina also recognizes that people get tattoos

that aren't meaningful but for her it needs to have a meaning behind it. The main reason being the fact that she really loves her body and every inch of skin that covers it. Consequently, the idea of covering a section with a tattoo would only ever be ok if it truly meant something important to her.

In relation to the tattoos meaning, it was interesting to discover just how location could play such a vital role in enhancing the tattoo's meaning. Location proved essential for the participants that placed importance to the meaning behind the tattoo and strongly associated to the reason behind getting tattooed in the first place. As such, the location of a tattoo can help further ascribe meaning to it or simply support the given meaning. For Pavel, he said that "The first tattoo that I've got (of the hammer and sickle) I have on my left shoulder and that had a particular symbolical identification because my right arm is stronger but my left arm has more endurance and that's how I felt about the people who grew up in the Soviet system is they've had a lot of endurance and that's why I got it on my left arm on my left shoulder." As such, having the Soviet symbol on his left arm had a lot to do with the meaning behind the tattoo as it further supported the meaning and in a way legitimized it. He then added, "The second tattoo I've got on my right shoulder because I simply like symmetry so I wanted it to be symmetrical. And then my third tattoo I've got on my right forearm because that's where I wanted it to be. But then at the same time I am a symmetrical individual so I believe I will get another tattoo on my left forearm in the future." This is where the idea of symmetry comes into play as he refers to himself as a "symmetrical individual" and as such got the tattoo to feel more whole and complete and will do the same thing for his next tattoo in the future. Another interviewee who also brought up the idea of symmetry was KT. In the interview they said, "So the mountains actually I got on a whim because after my first one healed I was like well now my ankles aren't balanced so I wanted like symmetry I wanted something else on the other side but I didn't want another tree." Once again, we see how symmetry and balance plays an important role in acquiring a tattoo as placement is a very important tool and should be considered heavily.

Figure 23: KT



Two other interviewees also revealed to me just how important the location was to the meaning behind their tattoo. Darby for example said, “I got it tattooed behind my ear because it was like the closest spot I could make it to my brain. It's like a constant reminder. And like there often times were even like if because like once you have an eating disorder there's always going to be thoughts in your minds. And sometimes I just like put my hand on it I guess and I'm like ok you got this like if I was able to do it then in like such a bad situation I can do it now.” Placing the symbol for eating disorder behind her ear was deliberate in the sense that that was the closest she could have it to her brain and so it could be a constant reminder to stay healthy. It thus adds to the significance of the tattoo. The other interviewee, Mackenzie said, “I got it on my foot because I wanted like to be grounded. Like very literally grounded. So like my foot is the first thing that would touch soil. And like as plants I wanted to be grounded in that. And then also like when I step I often step with my left foot. And so I wanted to always lead knowing why I'm leading and like what the intention is behind that. So that's why I got it on my foot on the left foot.” Again, the

placement of the tattoo was very much related to the tattoo itself as she decided to get subsidy crops on her foot so that they could literally be grounded and touch the soil. In addition, her left foot was chosen as her left foot is more dominant than the right and that gives the tattoo more meaning in that she is always leading with those notions in mind. It's very easy to completely disregard placement but it proves to be an important tool in either deciding to get another tattoo or to address the meaning behind it and reinforce it.

On the other hand, there were participants for which meaning didn't matter and believed that to get a tattoo you don't need it to have a story or meaning behind it. One interviewee in particular, Dana a 20-year-old female college student from Atlanta Georgia expressed an important point in the way that her first tattoo was very meaningful because it was her first. Yet, that doesn't necessary need to be the case for all upcoming tattoos. As she explains, "Well I knew that from the first one I wanted it to definitely be something more meaningful. But that doesn't mean that I think every single one has to be meaningful though. I think that's a misunderstanding of them". In this way, she believes it's a misunderstanding of the tattoos as meaning is not the only important association to a tattoo or the reason for getting it.

Dana also brought up an important point with regards to the meaning behind the tattoo in relation to getting matching tattoos. In this case the tattoo itself or the image chosen can have less meaning than who you get the tattoo with or the circumstances in which you get tattooed.

Figure 24: Dana



Dana addressed this concept while explaining her bat tattoo as she said:

“The second one that I have is on my ankle and it's of a bat, that one there's not really any meaning by the image of it. It's more so the situation in which I got it. I was visiting my best friend and she's my best friend from high school. We've been best friends since like sixth or seventh grade. I was there for one weekend and we both kind of went you know we should just get a tattoo together. So we both have the same bat on opposite ankles and if we sat next to each other you can see both of them next to each other. The bat itself doesn't have much meaning it's more so like the connotation of like getting it with my best friend and it's like a reminder of like not being alone because I was also going through a really rough time during that time. So it's more so like just making sure that you have someone there with you through tough times like that. So I don't always think that the image itself has to be important more so just like what it's about or who you got it with.”

The fact that the image itself isn't or can be completely arbitrary while the person which you get the matching tattoo with or the circumstances behind getting it are is very interesting. Usually, the image itself

serves as a representation of the thing, or person but I guess in this case it doesn't even matter what you get tattooed.

One interviewee in particular, Alexa a self-identifying transgender woman in her early 70s explained to me how none of her tattoos actually relate to anyone in her life. As such, most of them were related to aesthetics as opposed to telling a story or having a particular meaning behind them. As she expressed:

“I suppose they are all personal. You've probably heard people talk about oh this is because of you know my friend who died or they have dates on there for the birth of a child or the death of a friend or a relative. I don't have anything like that. When my oldest daughter was killed when she was 17. I didn't get anything that was a memorial to her. I never attached and maybe this is deliberate. I've never attached the design or application of a tattoo based on somebody who's in my life which may be selfish or maybe not. Yeah it's selfish”.

Figure 25: Alexa



This however, does not take away from the fact that all her tattoos are still personal but none of them are a form of commemoration or linked to a particular individual in her life. As such, not all tattoos need to be a form of commemoration to be meaningful or personal and this is one of the many important decisions made by the tattooee prior to getting their tattoo. As she explained, even when her seventeen-year-old daughter passed away she didn't get a tattoo to remember her. While I was interviewing her, she actually paused for a moment and then came to the conclusion that it was actually a selfish thing to do. Interestingly enough, she later on added, "And it does set you apart. I mean you can't look at any work that I have on my body that says oh that identifies you with fill in the blank. It doesn't. It only has to do with Alexa Carmichael." Thus, it's all about her and no one else. None of her tattoos are associated to a person in her life and it makes sense because it was all for her, about her and in the end, it is her body.

Figure 26: Alexa



In this regard, what the symbolic meaning of the tattoo is to the tattooed person may be complex or it may be simply aesthetic. “What does this mean” is one of the most common questions posed to a tattooed person. The more tattoos one has, the less literal meaning that is intended for oneself and for others. This is because the need for each tattoo image to be an exacting identifier decreases as you become more comfortable with yourself and your tattoos. On the other hand, it makes sense that if you plan to have only one or two tattoos, there is much at stake in these select images. This explains Dana’s comment on how her first tattoo had to be meaningful. This was also the case with Michael who’s first tattoo was a way to commemorate the death of his mother. As such, it seems like so much pressure and thinking is put on the first tattoo and the expectation is that it is supposed to be and should be very meaningful. As such, if you only intend on getting one or two so much about you, your identity, past and future must be expressed in the tattoos because they will be limited. Yet, heavily tattooed people, on the other hand, like Alexa are constantly being tattooed, thus the meaning is more in the act, and importance is placed on the personal aesthetics.

Another important concept that emerged throughout the interviews relating to the meaning of the tattoo was that of permanence. To this regard, Alexa in particular expressed how permanence and the permanency of the tattoo played a big role in the getting her tattoos. As she expresses, “The permanence is one of the great appeals to me. There's something really exhilarating about saying I'm making a decision to do something to myself that you cannot change. So yes, the permanence was part of the appeal. I mean otherwise why not just go get a temporary tattoo.” For her the permanence was one of the reasons why she got her tattoos as it was exhilarating for her to get something on her body that no one else could have an impact on or change.

One way in which this permanence was dealt with for one of the participants was to get tattoos that are easily concealable. Thus, the location of the tattoo played a huge role in the ability to cope with the tattoo's permanence. As Allison describes:

“Like definitely it's a part of your body but I feel like if you can conceal it then you can kind of forget about it if you get tired of it. I know that the process of getting a tattoo removed is supposedly like ten times more painful than actually getting a tattoo itself which is in my experience fairly painful. So yeah I don't know. I definitely think that I have considered the permanence and that's kind of my solution to get things that I think are easily concealed and things that I can kind of forget about if I'm ever tired of them and things like that.”

Essentially, for Allison the solution to permanence is getting easily concealable tattoos. It's a way for her to forget she even has them when and if she gets tired of seeing them. It's a quick and easy fix to a permanent solution.

Another way in which the permanence of tattoo is tackled by various interviewees was the way in which the meaning behind the tattoo itself is not permanent but ever changing. For Amelia, a 21-year-old senior in college from New Mexico her tattoo has no direct meaning but rather meaning can be ascribed to it and that meaning can change. As she describes, “So it doesn't really have like a direct meaning I would say which I liked because it can change meaning which is something that I wanted cuz like it's just a square. So it's like an abstract shape and so it doesn't like inherently have a meaning but it can change meaning. And right now I have my own message of what I want to think of when I look at it.” She then elaborated on the idea of permanence by saying, “Permanence is something that everyone talks about like. Everyone's like are you sure you're ready to get a tattoo, it's permanent. Many things are permanent. But no I don't regret it and I think it's because mine is like really specific to me.” Thus, she has thought about the permanence of the tattoo and does not regret it in any way as the tattoo she got is very personal and specific

to her in that she can assign it any meaning she wants based on her current situation in life. This makes it easier for her to deal with the permanence of the tattoo in that it's meaning is variable to change and thus can fit any meaning she wants it to.

Dana also expressed how the meaning behind the tattoo is variable to change as she expressed, "What I value the most about being tattooed is it like being personalized just like it's permanent and something like you really wanted that. And like you can ascribe your own meaning to whatever tattoo you get so." As such, the permanence of the tattoo doesn't matter or rather isn't as significant anymore but the meaning and being able to ascribe it any meaning you want is. Not only that but the fact that the tattoo is so personalized is of great appeal to her. In this way, the permanence is thus not a source of anxiety or a problem anymore.

Another interviewee who also really considered the idea of permanence was Dez. As she explains, "I've got to stare at my body for the rest of my life and so I want to make sure it's something I don't mind staring at. So I think for me it's a really thoughtful process and I'm like do I want this. So is 30-year-old Dez gonna be okay that she has an arrow and just keep swimming on her. So yeah I think they change as you get older like new meanings get attached to them." Once again, the fact that the tattoos meaning changes and grows with you as a person makes it easier to cope with the fact that it's on you forever. And as she explains, new meanings can also get attached to your tattoos which allows the tattooee to become more comfortable with the idea of having something on their body perpetually. Another participant who also expressed these feelings and elaborated up this concept was Sabrina. As she told me, "I think like the meaning has already changed for both my tattoos like throughout the years that I've had them like I feel like it's kind of this idea that it's not like it's a closed book or anything like that. Like the meanings of it grow."

In Sabrina's case, the meaning has already evolved for both of her tattoos and there is an appeal in the fact that the meaning is so fluid and malleable. It grows with you as a person as you live life and grow old. This point was very much reiterated by KT as she describes, "I like specifically chose my tattoos to go in places where they will age gracefully but also at the same time I really like the idea of permanence because as I said earlier you can have a piece of art on your body or just like a tree. And it grows in meaning over time. And it's still on you. And as you grow and age the tree grows and ages with you and the meaning too. Sometimes it may sag. And that's ok. But like that's life".

One participant in particular really related to this idea of how the tattoos change not only physically as you get older but their meaning changes as well. As Michael recounts:

"I mean because the vast majority of mine really all of them at this point are linked to a personal memory. I mean that was kind of my rationalization for getting my arms done. It's like I'm always going to have my kids. My wife was like why don't you get my name on you. Nope that's a jinx. You'll get divorced tomorrow but can't divorce my kids. The meanings haven't changed in the sense that it's not meaningful, it's changed in that I've kind of matured and the meaning has grown with me. So like all the horrible things that have happened in my life and how those have shaped me like I now have a different perspective on those. It's still the same perspective of that was something horrible and this horrible thing happened to me as a result of it but something awesome really happened because of that as well. So again it's two sides of the same coin. So if nothing else the meanings have evolved as I've grown which again I mean answering that question that actually makes me feel good because it means looking back like I don't have any frivolous irrelevant things on my body. It's still all mine and meaningful and you know I can look at it and be like god I freaking remember. But yeah they've grown with me fat and skinny".

Figure 27: Michael



Figure 28: Michael



As Michael explained, a lot of his tattoos are very much related to personal memory but more importantly linked to things that will not change such as his kids, he will always have them unlike his wife. Yet, in terms of the meaning behind the tattoos, they have changed in the sense that their meanings have also grown as he has grown and matured. More importantly, this allows for a great deal of reflection and especially self-reflection as he himself states that he's gotten a much different perspective on all the horrible things that have happened in his life that he still decided to get tattooed on him. In his own words, "the meanings have evolved as I've grown" and this just further reinforces his acceptance of his tattoos as he has absolutely no regrets since looking back they all originally meant something and still do. Yet, another important thing to point out is that not only does their meanings change, but the tattoos also physically change and as Michael humorously said, "they've grown with me fat and skinny."

On the other hand, there were some interviewees for whom the idea of permanence was very much linked to the meaning being fixed and permanent as well. For example, Enzo a 20-year-old Uruguayan-American male student in college expressed "Yeah that's definitely why I wanted to get something so meaningful because I don't think that I'll really change the way I view them. So that was like a huge part of my decision. I didn't want anything that I thought in the long run would change". For him, the meaning behind his tattoos was of great importance and was the main reason why he got them. As such, the permanency of the tattoos just reinforces their meanings. In his case in particular the tattoos were symbolic of where he was from— Uruguay —and related directly to who he is and that is something that will never change. Another interviewee who also fit this was John. As he explains, "The first two tattoos I tried to get things that like would always be, like you know I'm always going to be adopted. And I'm always going to be Russian. Those things don't change. So in that sense yeah you have to think about the permanence in the sense that this is always going to apply and so your tattoos will stick around forever unless you get them like removed but don't do that". Just like for Enzo, the meanings of John's tattoos are related to things that

will never change. In his case, the fact that he is originally from Russia and that he was adopted. In doing so, his tattoos will always be relevant to him throughout his life and the permanency only reinforces their meanings and their importance.

Another participant who also expressed how the meaning of her tattoo will not change and how that was a way for her to deal with the permanency of the tattoo was Megan. As she describes:

“Yeah I definitely considered the permanence a lot before I got it. That's kind of why I wanted it to be like simple and like wanted it to be something that I know like isn't going to change. It's like if I don't know what I'm passionate about then I know literally nothing about myself so I feel like that's the one thing that I know more than anything. I also feel like the fact that it's meaningful now is what will make it still meaningful later because even if I don't love it as much as I do now like in 20 years I can still look back and be like that was really meaningful to me when I got it”.

For Megan, she really considered the permanence and as a result decided to get something that was both simple but also something whose meaning would not change for her. Thus, she decided to go with what she's passionate about which is something that to her is really strongly connected to who she is. In addition, her passions for reading, writing and traveling are such an important and integral part of who she is that it's something she is very certain about. Yet, the most important statement is the one related to how if it's meaningful now, that is what will make it meaningful later on in life and even if she doesn't like it later it will always remain meaningful at the particular moment in her life when she got it. Thus, the permanence itself doesn't become such a problem or worry as the meaning will remain there forever.

An interesting new motivation that seemed to arise and that also had absolutely nothing to do with the meaning behind the tattoo was that of getting the tattoo simply because you want it. It was driven by a

motivation to satisfy a desire – a want. It should be noted that this new motivation arises as a direct consequence of the greater acceptance of tattoos within American culture, which strongly links to the shift in tattoo culture and the wide variety of people who get tattoos now-a-days.

One of the tattoo artists that I interviewed, Tony Mancina had a very interesting take on this idea of satisfying a desire. In the interview, he said, “Everyone wants to tell you why or a story. I want to know what they want and a concept so I don't know my customers I actually never meet them until they're here the first day. I speak with them on the phone. We correspond through e-mail but most travel in so I want to know what they want. I don't want to know why they want it. Because if I know why they want it's much more of a challenge for me to create something for them because I'm focused too much on the why as opposed to what it is.” From a professional standpoint, I understand why as an artist you are not really interested in the why but more so the what so that you can deliver the best piece to your customer.

Mancina then adds, “I don't do personal tattoos, I don't do memorial tattoos because I don't know the person. But everyone does want to tell you a story. And in a sense, it's them justifying the reason to get the tattoo instead of just getting the tattoo because it's what they want. So I think people need to really look at the situation realistically and stop trying to convince themselves that they need a story for something and get it because they want it. It's as simple as that.” The interesting thing though is that he clearly doesn't deny that everyone wants to tell you why or convey a story through their tattoo, yet he claims that that is just a way for the person to justify their desire for simply wanting a tattoo. As such, you don't necessarily need a story to back up what you want and if people want a tattoo they should just go ahead and acquire one. Thus, the meaning behind it is not as important anymore but fulfilling that desire or want is. Yet, through his quote there also seems to arise an instated tension between the said and the unsaid. There's this

sense of contradiction between the tattoo being evidently personal and not really wanting to acknowledge that. That said, even the desire to get a tattoo and getting it because it is something you want is very much personal too, it's satisfying a longing that relates to you as a person.

As such another new theme that developed through the conducted interviews was that of getting a tattoo simply because you want to get one. The act of getting tattooed serving as a way to satisfy a desire, you want it, you get it. One participant in particular that really identified with this was Sabrina who mentioned, "I've kind of always thought about tattoos as like I really really really want this. Now I have it. Like even when I didn't have it I envisioned it on my body like at all times it just kind of became a part of me like I had the tattoo before I even went into the place because I wanted the tattoo." That craving for one is very apparent and she even envisioned the tattoo on herself even before she went in and got it. Interestingly enough, I feel like this notion of wanting something and getting it really connects to the idea of consumerism and how tattoos have become this sort of thing that can be absolutely devoid of meaning and you just get tattooed because you want it. This new trend if you will also seems to define tattoos as a simplified form of consumption where one goes out shopping for them essentially.

One interviewee in particular, Pavel, agreed with the fact that if you want to get a tattoo then just get it. He told me, "I just think that if you want to get a tattoo just get a tattoo. And that's about it. But I don't necessarily think that tattoos are transformational or rites of passage or ritualistic or anything like that. I just think that tattoos are art and if you want to have a piece of art on yourself then that's what it is." For him, that desire to get one should not be ignored. He views tattoos more as pieces of art and believes that they are devoid of ritual and like any other thing, if you really want it on your body, then there is no reason for you not to get it.

Yet, on the other hand, you also have some people that have to prove themselves but more importantly need approval and permission from their family before getting it. One interviewee had a very interesting story as to how she convinced her mother to let her get a tattoo that she really wanted. As KT recounts:

“I am from like a really conservative Protestant family like Mississippi stereotype. And so I told my mom I wanted one and she was like ok ask me in a year. And then I waited a year. During that time, I started looking at tree designs like figuring out what I wanted. A year later I was like hey mom I still want a tattoo. She was like ok you've had a year to think about this now we made a deal as to like I showed her the design and she said ok if you draw this on yourself every day for the next nine months then I will let you get a tattoo. And so I had an eyeliner pen that I would use to draw it on my ankle every morning and I would Hairspray over it. And then I would do that like every two to three days because it would like wash-off after a few days. And I did that for nine months and she was like ok. And then a few months later I got it, it was a tree.”

Figure 29: KT



Since she came from a conservative family, KT had to prove to her mother that the tattoo was indeed something that she really wanted. Not only that, but she also had to ask permission from her mother even

before doing anything. She thus made a deal with her mother and drew the tattoo on her with an eyeliner pen every day for the next nine months to prove to her mother just how much she really wanted it. That took a lot of dedication and perseverance but in the end, KT did satisfy that desire and got her tattoo.

Symbolic meaning and its importance proved to be a thing of debate as for some participants the meaning behind the tattoo was so essential that they even enhanced it through the location or placement of the tattoo. On the other hand, others claimed that the meaning was not important or needed to get a tattoo. A special case was simply getting a tattoo as a way to satisfying a desire. All this linked strongly to the idea of permanence and how to deal with it which was something every participant grappled with one way or another.

5. Stigma and History:

Figure 30: Alexa



In this thesis, I had the opportunity to interview two great tattoo artists and get their perspective on the tattoo culture and if and how it has changed since they started. The first artist Ryan Weaver was from Kingdom Tattoos in Decatur and to this is what he had to say in this regard, “Well nowadays it's pretty simple. Back when I was getting tattooed early on you had to suffer. You know tattoo shops nowadays and tattooers nowadays they're very kind and you know because now people come to this great conclusion that it's still a customer service-based industry so you have to provide customer service. Two decades ago, a decade ago, it was not like that you know not everybody was going to get tattoos so you would go to your local biker shop and you know endure insults just to get your tattoo and then get out the door you know and that was part of the experience. But nowadays that has changed.” Clearly, in his opinion the tattoo industry has changed in the last two decades or so. Nowadays it is much more a commodified industry in the sense

that the tattoo has become something that anyone can just walk in and purchase. This again reinforces this idea that the tattoo has been simplified as a form of consumption, one that people from all walks of life, gender and race can partake in.

This was not the case before as in order to get a tattoo one had to prove themselves worthy in a way and overcome all the intimidation associated with the biker shops. It used to be considered a rite of passage in that sense but now, it has been stripped away from that context and has just become something anyone can just go and do if they want. For Ryan, the tattoo culture especially within the industry has shifted and become heavily reliant on customer service and as a result the entire experience of acquiring a tattoo has changed essentially.

In terms of the way in which tattoos have become more accessible, Weaver then adds on:

“I mean you know tattoos become a lot more accessible to the mainstream you know. It used to be when you get tattooed it was a way to express some type of rebellion. Some people even got tattoos because they were extremely introverted and didn't want to interact too much with society. But nowadays you know tattooed brain surgeons, principals, teachers I mean across the board. And it's not so much a sign of rebellion anymore as it is a sign of self-expression. So you know that's subjective down to each individual case but that's really been the driving force I think why people get tattoos for the most part.”

As explained by Weaver, there has been a drastic shift in the demographics and you don't have to belong to a certain social group of social status to get a tattoo. Even your job nowadays doesn't dictate whether you can get a tattoo or not. Tattoos have become so mainstream and widespread that everyone can get one. It used to be that tattoos used to be a way to express rebellion but that is not the case anymore, rather tattoos have shifted and become more about expression now more than ever. Yet, according to my interviews using

the tattoo as a way to express rebellion still seems to be the case to some extent, especially when it came to parents and their approval. Nevertheless, the reasons behind acquiring tattoos has changed and it's important to note that Weaver takes into account that it is subjective and down to the individual but in his opinion, the ability to express one's self has now become the driving force to getting a tattoo.

The other artist I interviewed was Tony Mancia from Stygian Gallery. I asked him whether tattooing could be a form of ritual and this was his response:

“If you look back to when tattooing became more popular here in the states 20s, 30s and 40s. The ritual was mostly for military Navy mainly going to port. Get a tattoo it's cool and you're a sailor. And also for criminals. Fast forwarding to when it started becoming more socially acceptable for bikers, people of a lower income mainly. And there still really you can consider that a ritual because it was just part of a lifestyle. When I think of a ritual it's a spiritual routine. It's something that you do for a reason not because of what you are, quote on quote what your status is. Now a days tattooing depending on the age of the person usually or their social status is trendy or fashionable. There's no ritual at all.”

This brings up the question of tattooing as a form of ritual. The tattoo is an identifiable ritual, linking theories of scholars like Turner and Van Gennep. Anthropologist Van Gennep in particular noted that virtually all human societies use ceremonial rites to mark significant transitions in the social status of individuals. These rites both emphasize and validate changes in a person's status, especially on occasions of such life-transforming events like birth, puberty, marriage, parenthood and death among many others. These particular rites are referred to as rites of passage that often share similar features such as a period of segregation from everyday life, a liminal state of transition from one status to the next and a process of reintroduction to the world with a new standing (Van Gennep 350). There are also often analogies between rites of passage and the human life cycle in that within these rites, individuals are symbolically killed, renewed and fostered as they take on new social statuses, and then essentially reborn into society as new

and different people. In this sense, the tattoo may have infinite personal meanings or reasoning behind it but it still acts as a ritual as it follows a strict set of episodic activities from thinking about the design to going into the tattoo shop to the aftercare. A tattoo also conveys specific meanings, which can include tribal membership. In this case, the membership of the tattooed 'tribe' if you will. Thus, in terms of a ritual, tattooing serves as a liminal ritual in that it transfers an individual from being in the state of being non-tattooed to being tattooed. Something actually changes about the individual as they go through a rite of passage. Moreover, the tattoo itself is situated on the boundary of the body – the skin – a liminal area thus it is not in the body or on the body, but rather on both the inside and outside of the person.

For Tony Mancia in particular, the tattoo nowadays has been stripped away from the context of ritual. As he states, "There's no ritual at all." For him there had been a dramatic shift in the reasons behind acquiring a tattoo in that it used to be a ritual in the case of like the Navy and bikers but nowadays its simply become fashionable and trendy, devoid of all meaning really. In this way, the sense of ritual originally embedded in the tattoo and existent within its initial usage was detached. Mancia elaborates on this by saying:

"So then you see people getting a lot of geometric work and Mandala based work. But once again they just like the way it looks even if they say it's a ritual. It has nothing to do with themselves besides it looks nice. So once again tattooing is totally changed. The only thing close to a ritual is nothing now. Like there is none. There is no spiritual meaning for Americans, for tattooing in the United States. But yeah I would say ritual wise we don't really. It would be the wrong term to describe people getting tattooed today personally."

Consequently, tattooing in America became an aesthetically driven business devoid of ritual or true spiritual meaning. And in Mancia's opinion ritual is the wrong term to use to describe people getting tattooed today. It thus could be said that it is used as expression, but expression of simply aesthetic

preferences more than anything. Another very interesting point that Mancina brings up is the idea of the tattoo being a commodity in the sense that you walk in and get it and walk out but you get it just to get a tattoo. In this way, it was stripped from spiritual meaning and instead infused with ideals of consumerism and simplified to a practice of consumption. As he describes it, “There was a big influx in people who were always too afraid to get tattooed and now that it became socially acceptable really did exactly that. They just went in got a small tattoo or a big tattoo and they did it just for the you know the commodity of being able to get it, not caring what it was. So it's in and out they get it just to get a tattoo.” As such, the fact that it's become so mainstream and socially acceptable has prompted people to just go in and do exactly that, thus changing the true nature of the tattoo in that it is no longer a ritual and doesn't necessarily need to mean anything or have a story behind it. In this sense, the widespread social acceptance led to the practice of tattooing to take on a more commodified status and become something you just walk in and buy.

Another important aspect to note here is the way in which tattoos were also used as emblems that provide a sense of belonging. Yet another motivation for getting tattooed. As Sanders writes, “Wearing a tattoo connected the person to significant others who were similarly marked” (Sanders 45). Ryan Weaver, the other tattoo artist interviewed elaborated on this by saying, “You know when people who don't have I think a strong grounding in themselves when they want to identify or feel like a part of something like say a celebrity gets a tattoo and these people maybe are very creative but they want to feel like a part of something bigger. They'll use that as a reference point to say oh this helps me be relevant and you know be a part of something bigger. So it seems that while there are reasons, some people's picked subject matter seems very superficial but I think a deeper meaning behind that is just a sense of belonging because it's so widespread now.” He believes that some people acquire tattoos as a means to feel like they belong and to be a part of something bigger, regardless of the true meaning behind the tattoo, if any. This also has to do

with the fact that tattoos nowadays are a lot more mainstream and widespread and as such people want to become a part of that culture – the tattoo culture.

Yet, with this widespread social acceptance of tattoos and them being a way to become part of a larger group come the tensions between the individual and the collective. For many of my participants, tattoos are very much personal and individualistic yet in choosing to express themselves through tattoos they have inevitably become part of the collective that does so – the tattoo culture. Thus, this begs the question, to what extent is the act of getting a tattoo truly individualistic? Furthermore, this also reinforces the dichotomy that tattooing is individual but also a collective aesthetic.

One of the interviewees, KT, also touched upon this point of belonging and being a part of a group or community. She stated, “There's a really strong sense of community. Yeah, like I have some friends who have gotten tattooed after me and they talk to me about it and they're like wait you get this. And I was like yeah. But like if you talk to someone else who doesn't have a tattoo they're like what the hell are you talking about. Like this doesn't matter. And it's just like having a completely different community.” Essentially, being tattooed allows you membership into the tattoo group and culture and you cannot be a part of it and a real member unless you get a tattoo yourself. This idea of community and being understood and being part of a bigger group regardless of race, gender, ethnicity is very special. This then relates to the idea of uniqueness which one participant in particular, Karla, mentioned by saying “I think I definitely like know the feeling of how you are unique like nobody else like most people around you. And I feel like special and like to think that people can see my art like see this part of me. And like I just felt like I'm part of this little club of like people that have tattoos.” Yet, it should be mentioned that such pride in being part of the club of tattooed people would not have been in the case if it weren't for the mainstreaming of tattoos and the

widespread acceptance. According to a Harris poll in 2012, one out of every five adults in the US— 21 percent —has at least one tattoo. In addition, an earlier Pew Research Center study discovered that the number was actually closer to 40 percent among those aged 18 to 29 (Greenblatt). Yet, even if it's so mainstream people still feel special and part of a bigger group. One in which every person underwent the similar process of tattooing from picking the design to going into the shop, getting tattooed and later on undergoing the healing process. Humans can't help but want to belong to a group and feel part of something bigger.

However, belonging to such a bigger community or group has a price. Historically, the tattoo has always been conventionally regarded as a stigma symbol. For Sanders, "The decision to acquire a tattoo is not only a decision to alter one's physical appearance; it is a choice to change how the person experiences his or her self and, in turn, how he or she will be defined and treated by others" (Sanders 58). This was very much so the case for a couple interviewees.

While talking to Alexa, I found out that she was part of Navy had gotten her first tattoo while being stationed in Japan. This brings up the notion of tattoos and their historical context but importantly its connection to stigma. To this regard Alexa said, "See that's tricky because that's part of the stigma thing I was afraid people would think well maybe he or she is part of a gang or some sub class that I'm not even remotely a part of. The one thing I could say to people in the early days that would make it ok in their minds was oh well I was in the Navy. Oh well of course you got a tattoo. And there was this sort of double standard like it's not ok with these people but oh if you were in the Navy it's ok. And then eventually it became Army, Marine Corps not so much air force. There has been something culturally about Navy people in particular."

Figure 31: Alexa



It seems like the only thing Alexa could tell people for them to be accepting and understanding was that she was in the Navy. That one fact somehow made it all ok. And she brings up this important idea of the double standard and how somehow being in the Navy made it ok in everyone else's eyes that you were tattooed and everyone else wasn't allowed to or would be shunned for doing so. Essentially, in her own words there was indeed something culturally about Navy people and that it was culturally acceptable to be tattooed and in the Navy. This is strongly linked to the historical context of tattoos and where it all began which makes sense. Yet the stigma and the stereotypes are slowly falling as tattooing has become more socially acceptable in all walks of life.

This stigma and the stereotypes was further addressed by the tattoo artist Weaver who also agreed that the stereotypes are indeed falling. As he describes, “So I think all the stereotypes are falling. There's still some there. When I was younger and in bands we would tour and we'd go to the Midwest. And I think that was probably the closest thing to racism I've ever experienced because we'd walk into a place and it would be a dead stop and people would look at us and they would you know pull their kids in or like try to keep distance. And I'm sure that was just because they associate tattooed people with criminals or something like that.” This personal experience sheds a lot of light into the stigma of being a tattooed person and its really interesting how Weaver calls it “the closest thing to racism I've ever experienced” which really shows the extent to which the judgment was so strong. Yet, that had to do with the associations people had of tattooed people as being criminals, gang members and just generally bad people and this association is a very strong one. To this Weaver adds, “Each generation like my grandmother she was 95 when she passed away, she associated tattooed people with carnies because traveling carnivals would have the tattoo lady or the tattoo guy. So that's what she associated tattoos with. My mom she's in her 60s. She associated tattooed people with like bikers and criminals and convicts and sailors and things like that. So I think every generation coming through has a particular stereotype they identify with tattooers, our generations and under it's a cool thing. And at some point it'll be a not cool thing coming up.” This generational association of tattooed people is very much true as. Each point within history tattooed people belonged to a certain group with a certain negativity attached to them but this group has slowly dismantled and is now including just tattooed people in general and does not relate them to a particular social class or group. As Weaver points out, each generation has a stereotype they identify tattooed people with and for us it has just become a cool thing and not a bad thing anymore.

Tattooing has indeed become more socially accepted and the tattoo Artist Mancina brought up a good point to this regard claiming there are good and bad consequences to that. As he explains:

“Tattooing is at a very interesting point in time right now. You've seen a huge acceptance of visible tattoos in our culture now. There's good and bad to that. The good is that you know people who are middle aged who would never think about getting a tattoo now get their first tattoo and it's a back piece. And they have done their research and seek out artists they want and they mainly do it because they don't feel pressured by society that it's so wrong that they can't have it. It's not that they never wanted one, it's just now they're comfortable enough to get it. The problem is people take it to an extreme sometimes and don't really consider their own future and how that will be affected by a tattoo. So you know your first tattoo shouldn't be on your hand.”

Figure 32: Alexa



As such, the cultural acceptance of tattoos now has led to a huge influx in the amount of people that get tattoos. You also have older people getting tattoos that they've always wanted since the societal pressure of it being seen so negatively is slowly dissipating. Yet, on the other hand you have people that take it to a whole other level and for Tony these specifically include younger people who don't really consider their

future and the impact that tattoos might have on them, as unfortunately the stigma is still present especially within the workforce.

Yet, with this stigma comes the tension between freedom and self-control. As mentioned earlier, the first theme discussed was that of reclaiming the body and the notion of choice which with the acknowledgment of the stigma makes it hard to truly take ownership of one's body and freely express one's self. There is still this unstated and ever-present self-control that tattooed people feel which was evident through some of my participants, especially the younger ones. Tattooes have the freedom to express themselves but it has to stay in the realm of the socially acceptable. This was very well elaborated upon by one of the participants, Dana, who said, "I got to be careful about where I place them obviously because there's still a lot of stigmas in the world and even if you don't agree with it you have to acknowledge that they still exist." That said, a lot of the participants acknowledged the existence of the stigma and put that into consideration when deciding to get a tattoo, especially with regards to its visibility. In this way, there is an apparent tension between the individual and the collective in the way that when one's decides to get a tattoo, they ultimately need to consider the collective and their response to that decision. As such, there exists an unstated tension where people actually care about other people's opinions and being judged by others based on the way they choose to express themselves. To this regard, it's important to consider that a lot of the interviewed participants were still in college thinking about their future careers and the repercussions of their tattoos on their futures. In our era, tattoos are still taboo and there are a still lot of professional settings where they are not allowed. Yet, nowadays that doesn't seem to be a deterrent to getting a tattoo, you just simply need to be smart about it especially as a teenager or young adult which Tony reinforces in the quote above.

6. Pain and Addiction:

Figure 33: Tony Tattooing



Pain is another factor shaping the tattooee's decision to get tattooed. Pain is the only thing that is truly yours and can only be experienced by you. As Caplan said, "Pain, like the tattoo itself, is something that cannot be appropriated; it is yours alone (Caplan 251). This was very much true for one interviewee in particular as Michael describes, "Invigorated. Invincible. I felt like I had conquered some sort of weird perceived pain barrier. Little did I know that it was nothing compared to what pain I would feel like later on. Oh yeah. I mean again clearly like it affected me because I was right back there within a couple of weeks to get the next piece. So definitely feel that addiction to it." Not only was the pain very much real and his alone, it did however prove addicting. Yet, the pain of acquiring a tattoo served to reveal a lot about himself and how much he's capable of. As he then adds, "Well again I think it kind of goes back to the idea of being able to sit and endure the pain and that is it's really informed me of who I am and what I'm capable

of doing and accomplishing. It's kind of this accomplishment that you've learned something about yourself and about your body and about your mental state and about your psychology which to me is invaluable.”

An interesting point later brought up by Michael was the fact that when he was much younger the act of a tattoo served as a form of catharsis. The pain was a way to overcome all the bad in his life and just sit there and focus on that pain. As he describes, “Oh absolutely. I mean it was one of those things and I don't view it that way so much now as I've gotten older. But when I was younger it was definitely a form of catharsis. You know you had a bad day or things were tough school was tough. You know relationships were tough. This was a way that you could go and sit for. I mean I used to sit for like six seven hours at a stretch. And by that time your endorphins are so wiped out you don't have anything else. So whatever pain you walked in there you weren't leaving with you, were just wiped. So in that regard there was times I definitely was looking forward to getting tattooed just as a means to rid myself of demons, it is a little strong but to rid myself of any other negative sort of feelings.” Thus, with all the pain, the process eventually became one of liberation, of forgetting all the other negatives out there and focus on the moment, in that it become so addictive.

The process of acquiring a tattoo with all its pain can be very addictive. To this regard, Pavel in his interview said, “I mean I believe there is a certain addiction aspect and I feel like pain especially I think that it definitely has an appeal.” This was also mentioned by Alexa in her interview as she said, “The pain can be very addictive. And that was part of it for me you know because pain in a controlled process like that can be very numbing. And there were times when I wouldn't feel pain at all.” Once again going to this idea of how pain is a personal experience and can serve as a form of dealing with other life problems. This was evident in Alexa's interview as she said, “We got married, had kids, got divorced about four and a half

years later sadly. And boy, there was so much pain in my life from that divorce. The first thing I thought about to ease the pain was getting a tattoo.” Not only was the addiction there but the pain from the divorce was so strong that it prompted her to go and get a tattoo as means to deal with that emotional pain. It was a form of catharsis in that way. Alexa then described to me just how bad the addiction was when she explained, “And at the height of my addiction to this, it was so bad that I would start almost hyperventilating picking up the phone like a junkie.”

Figure 34: Alexa



Alexa’s case in particular proved very special. With regards to this addiction, for her it wasn’t just about the pain but about much more. It had to do more with a sexual addiction, a sexual buzz as she puts it that arises from the getting tattooed. As she describes it, “So now in retrospect you know if you’d asked me when I was 19 years old I thought excitement adventure. Now in retrospect because this is the thing that’s kept me motivated all these years is addiction and here is the really different thing that you probably won’t

hear from anybody else. It is a sexual addiction. But when I get a tattoo now at my age I don't get that sexual buzz from it. I used to.” She also attempted to ask various tattoo artists about that as she explains, “So going back to the sexual thing I've asked several artists about this. Have you ever had people who've said I have a sexual motivation to this. They say absolutely not. They've never heard it they've never heard that before. I do know what it is. I am or have been in the past, I'm not a sex addict anymore.” Once again, it is a unique case yet she is not a sex addict anymore and the reasons behind acquiring the tattoos that she did later on in life have changed as she clearly mentioned in the first quote.

Another interesting response with regards to the notion of addiction was from Megan's interview in which she did not mention pain as the main factor but rather the ability to alter your body and have the choice to do so. As she explains, “Yeah I think there's something addictive about it because it's cool to be able to decide what your body looks like because like when you're born you don't get to pick any of your features. You don't really get to pick like what you look like. So tattoos are like kind of the way to like altering your body in a really physically permanent way that you can't do with just clothes or hair. So I think it's addictive in that sense.” Here we see not only the importance of choice and the ability to be able to modify your body but we also see the importance of permanence as it is a permanent decision. This gives the person a great deal of power over their body and I think that power to alter something willingly and permanently can certainly be addictive and empowering.

7. Aftermath of getting Tattooed:

Figure 35: Tony



One of the things that obviously came up through the interviews was in terms of the experiences of being a tattooed person and the emotions after the fact. One of my interview questions involved asking the interviewees about how they felt after their first tattoo. Most of the responses to this question were actually positive. Karla for example said, “I felt awesome like I felt so accomplished like there's this thing that I have here on me permanently and it's just like it's there, it's like a statement, it's like part of me and I just felt like so like a little bit complete like a little like satisfied I just loved it.” For Karla, the experience of getting a tattoo was one of accomplishment, it was something she had wanted for a long time and had finally gotten it. It also was a way for her to express herself as the tattoo served as a statement about herself and she was very satisfied with the result.

Another participant expressed feelings of surprise and satisfaction after the fact as Megan describes, “It's really weird. I didn't really believe that I'd actually done it. I was kind of like surprised at myself because like I guess when I was a little kid I didn't think I would get one. And you do have like the stereotypes that you associate with people who get tattoos and like kind of like a fear about like will this affect my future like jobs or whatever because people judge. But I felt good though I felt also like free you know because like I said no to like those stereotypes and like done it because I wanted it and because it was meaningful to me.” Initially Megan couldn't really believe that she went through with it but she wanted something and went through with it. In addition, an important thing that she touches upon is the stereotypes associated with tattooed people. She acknowledged these but yet went through with it and said no to these stereotypes and got the tattoo because she wanted it and it was very meaningful to her.

Kira , another interviewee, expressed feelings of happiness and amazement in that getting a tattoo was something that she had always wanted and finally did. As she describes, “I was like happy because it was something I'd been thinking about getting for such a long time. And then just like to finally have done it I was like wow.” Moreover, an interesting thing that she added later on related to the idea of how the experience of acquiring a tattoo changed her outlook on her life and the events that happen to her. As she explains, “Like it happened and it kind of opened my mind up to thinking about more things that I would want to get in the future and I think it like switched my perspective on how I view different events because I do kind of think about things in a way that I would be able to put them on my body to remember.” As such after her first tattoo, her entire perspective of life events shifted in a way that everything that happens to her could potentially be put on her body or shaped into the form of a tattoo. Thus, expressing the exterior or life events that have meaning into the visual – a tattoo.

Another interesting story was Darby's as the aftermath of the tattoo had and still does have such a huge impact on her life. The tattoo was a way for her to get healthy and stop partaking in the practices of bulimia. It was a permanent promise and reminder to herself to stay healthy. As she told me, "I felt really empowered. Because like I could say the tattoo changed my life. But it's more just like mental, like knowing that I don't know. That was just a way to like push myself out of my comfort zone to change my life. And so like afterwards I've always felt really good about it." It was a positive thing in her life, something that served as positive reinforcement and made her go out of her comfort zone and actually make a change in her life.

Other interesting experiences or rather consequences of being tattooed were expressed by other participants. One participant in particular expressed how being fully tattooed or almost fully tattooed serves as an armor. Michael goes on to explain, "I would say their biggest value is that it's my armor in several different ways. You don't screw with a lot of people that are sleeved. I mean it's just no one fucks with me. No one messes with my family." Thus, being tattooed served as a means of protection in the sense that the negative stereotypes are still present and people do still stay away from fully sleeved people. Yet, in this case Michael uses that to his advantage. He does however later acknowledge the negative side to this. As he describes, "The flipside of that is I don't get served, like I have a hard time at the mall or something like that. I have to go ask for help. Nobody comes up and helps me. So that's kind of more explicit ways but also in the sense that to get this far into it like I had to deal with a bunch of freaking pain and now I know that I can deal with that." Thus, it's a lot harder for him especially in public settings such as restaurants and retail stores. He needs to make the first move most of the time as people are apprehensive around fully tattooed people. Another important note that Michael touches up is the notion of pain. For Michael, the tattoos played a big role in shaping his identity and the pain was a part of it. As he explains, "So in terms of my identity it really kind of just shaped me and maybe shaped my I guess confidence as a person to like

do things like understand that when things get tough I can make it through. I can overcome that. That it's not going to beat me.” Once again, going through such a painful process tells you a lot about yourself and what you can endure and go through in life so that’s something.

Another participant, Alexa, also had an important take on the repercussions of being fully tattooed and the stigma associated, but in a positive sense. As she recounts:

“Being quote “unique” goes against my basic nature which at the time I started this I was very much an introvert. What it's done and I don't know if this is by design on my part or not. What it's done is it's drawing me out. I can't go back in the shell, people are going to be attracted to me or at least going to ask me questions. They're going to accept me even though on the face of this, these tattoos should make me a social pariah. They don't, people are interested, they're curious. People don't run from me anymore. They want to know.”

Figure 36: Alexa



The reasons behind her tattoos had nothing to do with being unique. As she describes, Alexa actually used to be an introvert but getting all those tattoos actually made her stand out and people are actually intrigued by her appearance. They are willing to ask her questions and are interested in knowing why. In her case, the tattoos had a positive impact as in her opinion they did not in fact make her a social pariah but rather the opposite. As such, this proves how the negative stigma is in fact slowly going away and people have become more accepting now more than ever than and are willing to converse and start a dialogue around tattoos and the reasons and stories behind them. This then brings me to another interesting common theme that a lot of the participants claimed related to their experiences as part of the tattoo culture.

The theme of tattoos serving as conversation starters was very apparent throughout various interviews. Karla for example describes her tattoos as doorways as eh said, "It's a doorway of asking like how did you get this. Where did you get it? And like it starts a good conversation." As such, tattoos are a means to engage others and for Karla she enjoys being asked questions about her tattoos and is willing to talk about them. This was also the case for Kira who said:

"I think it's a conversation starter. It's a good way to connect with other people. A lot of my tattoos do have like deeper stories behind them than what I mentioned here and putting them on my body as a way of knowing that eventually I might have to talk to people about these things. And I think it's a way for me to start opening up about them because I'm putting it out there for the world to see and if someone asks me about it I should be able to tell them the story behind it so I think more than anything it's a way to open up to others."

Her tattoos are a great way for her to connect to others, but not only that but to also share her stories. She is also happy to share her story as her tattoos in fact meaning something to her. In addition, she knew that getting those tattoos would incite intrigue and questions from others and was already prepared for that. For her this was a chance to open up about them and their meaning and stories and share those with the world.

The fact that her tattoos serve as conversation starters allowed her to be more open about her tattoos and made it ok for her to open up to others about them.

Another participant that really acknowledged the power of tattoos as conversation starters was Pavel. He described his experience as follows:

“I mean people always come up to me and they ask me hey why did you do that and why did you do this. And I give them a story and they're kind of willing to listen. So in my opinion, actually right now tattoos are a means of starting a dialogue. And I believe that if you want to learn anything, it's better to talk to people. And I believe that my tattoos are a really good way to start a dialogue. So I just, I believe that when people ask questions it's the best way to go about living your life, being curious and if people are curious about what the hell I got on my body I'm more than happy to talk to them about you.”

He is also very willing to engage with others when they ask him why he got the tattoos that he got. For him currently, the tattoos are a great means of starting dialogue and talking about them. In addition, his point about if you want to know something about a person, there's no better way than to talk and ask questions is a great point and the majority of my participants were more than willing to talk about their tattoos. It is also very true as that is exactly what I did for my project, ask questions about people's tattoos and listen to what they have to say. Moreover, I think using tattoos as a means to start a conversation or dialogue is also a great way to overcome all the negative stereotypes still out there and to become more accepting as to what people do with their bodies whether it carries true meaning behind it or not.

Conclusion

Tattoos as a “thing” if you will, that individuals get change, it’s a dynamic process and the reasons behind it vary. The tattoo has traveled across continents, crossed social class and gender lines. It was a symbol of exoticism for the leisure classes at the turn of the twentieth century; a source of patriotism and pride for military serving in World War I and II; and a mark of distinction and membership for prisoners, gang members, carnies, and other self-proclaimed and socially deviant groups for years. At the turn of the twenty-first century, tattoos become commonplace in American culture. They are now everywhere— from college classrooms and malls, to high-fashion photoshoots and art galleries. Once used by traditional Polynesian cultures as a symbol of social status, today tattoos are used more as a form of expression and are more individualized now more than ever.

For many enthusiasts, a tattoo is ‘the only truly precious possession we can ever have and know, and which is ours to do with as we will’ (Caplan 244). This is especially prevalent within the consumer capitalist society, such as the United States, in which everything is ephemeral and superficial and where people are constantly encouraged to consume things. Thus, in American culture today, tattoos have become simplified to a form of consumption. Moreover, in such a context, tattoos seem to be strongly connected to both the “over-valuation of certain aspects of contemporary Western ideas of the self, such as the idea of autonomy and self-fashioning” (Caplan 251). As such, tattoos have become the perfect means to ascribe individual identity on a person.

Through this research, the overall emerging trend for tattoos over time is its major shift from being marginal as indicated by its history to becoming mainstream and widely accepted, especially within

contemporary America. It's interesting to note that what is different about modern tattoo meanings and functions is the fact that they are often described as having significant personal, rather than social value. It's all about the individual now.

This idea of 'individuals-ness' or the "individuation; of the tattoo", or what could be viewed as 'a declaration of me-ness' is very much present and central to a lot of contemporary tattoo talk (Caplan 245). Essentially, the contemporary tattoo has become an emblem of the expression of self rather than as a marker of group identification. Accordingly, they might be best described as "a form of 'expressive individualism' which in attending to the body and its appearance, shares considerable affinities with other forms of contemporary 'body project' (Shilling, 1993)" (Featherstone 67-68). The body is essentially constructed in a manner that the owner has total and full control over its appearance and alteration. This strong relationship between the body and self-identity was very much stressed by writers like Shilling and Giddens as one that manifested itself in the growing tendency to treat the body as a 'project' through which self-identity is created and maintained (Featherstone 68).

Essentially, tattoos help in the creation and maintenance of an undeniable and uncontested identity. In this way, "wearing a tattoo connected the person to significant others who were similarly marked, made one unique by separating him or her from those who were too convention-bound to so alter their bodies, symbolized freedom, self-control, and satisfied an aesthetic desire to decorate the physical self" (Sanders 45). These were among the many themes that emerged throughout this paper in that tattoos were not only a choice that allowed the reclaiming of one's body, but it was a tool for self-expression in various ways and a way to recount one's personal narrative on their skin. In addition, tattoos were also a painful and addictive process for many that related directly to the experience of getting tattooed. In this way, the tattoo can be

seen as central to the creation of the identity, or more accurately the molding or modifying the body and hence the identity of the individual. The most obvious being the movement or transition from an unmodified un-tattooed body to a tattooed body and hence a modified body. Yet, the permanence of such a body modification cannot be ignored, but rather must be accepted and dealt with. This identity is created for the tattooee by the act of being tattooed and cannot be rejected but can at best be temporarily ignored or hidden by clothing if and when possible.

To the tattoo artists however, there has been a great shift in the motivations behind acquiring a tattoo and the practice itself has become more widely accepted. Yet, both artists and tattooees still acknowledge the historical stigma still attached to the act itself and its aftermath. Most participants in this study seemed to agree that tattoos have essentially become “less as markers of group identification, and more as expressions of the self” (Featherstone 66). Thus, shifting from being a symbol of the group to becoming a marker of the individual, distinct from the collective. Yet indirectly tattooees are taking part in a collective aesthetic which in a way takes away from the individuality. Nonetheless, people still claim and strongly believe it’s an individualized form of self-expression and a decision to take ownership and total control of one’s body. Thus, evoking tensions between the individual and the collective but importantly between the said and unsaid.

In the end, the material within this thesis elucidates some interesting tensions and contradictions, for example between freedom and self-control, and between individual self-expression and a pretty narrow group aesthetic. However, with these in mind, one cannot disregard just how much tattoos and more importantly tattooed bodies still are and will remain embodiments and expressions of identity.

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