

PERSONAL AGENCY AND THE TATTOOED BODY:
INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY COMMUNICATED
THROUGH VOLUNTARY AND
INVOLUNTARY TATTOOS

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I dedicate this thesis to my loving husband, Aaron Velsor,
the first person I told of my acceptance into the Graduate Program.
Without his encouragement and support, the completion of this work
would not have been possible. May I always make him proud.

I also dedicate this thesis to my parents, Mike and Vanetta Stephens,
who instilled in me the value of an education and the importance of hard work.

Finally, I dedicate this work to my precious son, Noah Phoenix.

I hope my example will spur him to tirelessly chase his dreams.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the concepts of identity and ownership of one's body in relation to voluntary and involuntary tattoos. When personal agency has been removed through forcible tattooing, individuals can ultimately create new meaning for their involuntary tattoos.

The study begins with analysis of the skin as an influence on personal identity, drawing primarily upon the theories of philosophers published in books and scholarly journals. The next section details how tattoos communicate individual identity and group membership with emphasis on the voluntary and involuntary tattoos on the historically marginalized groups of prison inmates, women, and more recently, victims of human trafficking. The final two sections examine the related concepts of tattoos that show ownership of the body and tattoos that mark the body as property of another, more powerful, individual or group. This study concludes that tattoos can be used to injure as well as repair the souls of tattooed individuals.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As an art form that is also part of an individual's body, tattoos are intimately connected with statements of personal freedom and the concept of ownership of the body. Throughout history and in diverse cultures, one motivation for individuals to get tattoos is to convey membership in a group. In addition to showing group membership, tattoos, particularly in the postmodern era, are also a symbol of personal freedom, an assertion of one's individuality. Along with the function of tattoos as statements of group and individual identity, tattoos may carry a more sinister meaning if a person has been tattooed against his or her will. Often the purpose of such tattoos is to socially isolate the individual—for example, by visibly marking that the person is a slave or criminal—and also to express that the individual is the property of another person or group. Involuntary tattooing has a long history, from the marking of slaves and convicts in antiquity to the modern practice of tattooing victims of human trafficking. While involuntary tattoos convey a message that the body is the property of another person, victims of forced tattooing have reclaimed their bodies through changing the imagery of their unwanted tattoos into statements of personal freedom.

In this analysis, I examine the concept of ownership of one's body in relationship with voluntary and involuntary tattoos. Even in cases where personal agency has been removed through forcible tattooing, individuals can ultimately create new meaning for involuntary tattoos. I focus on how historically marginalized groups, including prison

inmates, women, and more recently victims of modern human trafficking, have reclaimed their bodies through covering or adding to involuntary tattoos. While several disciplines are involved, including literature, philosophy, and anthropology, my analysis is primarily from an art historical viewpoint. I employ a combination of theoretical frameworks in art history, including iconology, feminist, semiotic, and Marxist. My approach mainly consists of analysis of written works in books and scholarly journals.

Since tattoos are marks on and in the skin, an analysis of tattooing should take into consideration the function of the skin as a living organ and its connection to a person's soul as well as his or her body. Schilkrou, Gell, and Fleming have proposed theories of the skin as a permeable boundary that allows communication between body and soul—a concept that Schildkrou terms “introjection” (3). Alfred Gell discusses an “inside facing” and “outside facing” skin that allows a two-way communication between soul and body (39). The notion that tattoos make visible on the skin the unseen aspects of a person coincides with the concept of abjection, which Fleming defines as a “border” between the interior and exterior of a person (37). Inscriptions on the skin comprise an additional boundary that marks inclusion and exclusion in social groupings (Caplan, *Written on the Body* xiv). Schildkrou focuses on how tattoos create boundaries between individuals and between cultures and writes, “Inscribed skin highlights an issue that has been central to anthropology since its inception: the question of boundaries between the individual and society, between societies, and between representations and experiences” (322).

In the instance of punitive tattooing, a mark of social exclusion is involuntarily imposed in order to punish an individual. Tattoos have long been associated with punishment; literary evidence indicates the practice of involuntary tattooing of slaves and prisoners in ancient Japan, China, Greece, Rome, and the Yucatan (McCallum; Gilbert; Jones; Gustafson). The rationale for punitive tattooing, a practice found in an array of cultures and spanning centuries, is to permanently mark the prisoner or slave's body and to show the ruling individual or government's control over the physical body of the condemned. According to Caplan, "the marked bodies of slaves, criminals, and vagrants—their whipped backs, branded foreheads, cropped ears—recorded the involuntary and painful infliction of power by a sovereign authority" ("Speaking Scars" 115).

While involuntary tattoos show the attempt of a person or government to inflict an identity on another—that of property, slave, or criminal—voluntary tattoos are markers of individual as well as group identity and are, as Schidkroun states, "ways of writing one's autobiography on the surface of the body" (338). According to Benson, tattoos are "badges of identity," communicating membership in communities of bikers, sailors, prisoners, and gang members (245). However, tattoos can also be indicators of personal identity that convey, as Benson states, "the idea of *individuation*...as one contributor to the Bodyart Ezine puts it, as 'a declaration of me-ness'" (245, emphasis original).

Whether a person chooses to become tattooed or that choice is forced upon an individual, tattooing involves the concept of ownership of the body. Benson addresses the

notion of ownership of the body in postmodern western culture, where the body is viewed as the only thing individuals can really possess and control (251). Women and members of marginalized cultures continue to struggle with asserting ownership of the body, as others—typically males and members of the dominant culture—stake claims of possession over their bodies. Mifflin and Gilbert focus on modern ideas of ownership of the female body. According to Mifflin, women's tattoos serve as “emblems of empowerment” at a time when women's sexual and reproductive rights are still in question. Gilbert writes that the postmodern woman often gets tattoos to “symbolize the fact that she is taking charge of her body and reclaiming her life” (159). Lei and Santos address ownership of the body for Chinese women and Chicanas respectively, adding cultural factors in addition to gender in consideration of who controls an individual's body.

In conjunction with the notion of ownership of the body is the view of a person's physical body as property. In a number of societies, the bodies of prisoners have been viewed, and in some cases are still viewed, as property of the state. Both Govenar and Olguin mention that prisoners in the United States who tattoo themselves or practice self-mutilation are punished for damaging state “property” (Govenar 210; Olguin 164). Concerning involuntary tattoos and brands on Russian convicts in the nineteenth century, Schrader writes, “The state sought to brand its property in order to exert ownership, and hence control, over it. In so doing, it implicitly attempted to fix the status of this property” (180).

While the perception of women as physical property has changed in much of the postmodern world, there remains an implicit perception that a woman's body still belongs to a man, usually her husband or romantic partner. According to Mascia-Lees and Sharpe, for women tattoos "indicate not her identity but that of the man to whom she is tied; they signal sexual exclusivity, fidelity to one man, hence her identity as someone's exclusive property" (152). Women have contributed to the view of the female body as property by voluntarily getting tattoos that proclaim that the woman is the "property of" a specific man. Less overt is the male approval many women seek or assume is necessary before a woman gets a tattoo. Braunberger and Atkinson have noted that often the first question asked of a woman who has gotten a tattoo is what her husband thinks of it. Braunberger states, "In the mysteries of tattoo, the proprietorship of the body goes to the one whose approval is sought. By their questions, these women demonstrated that on some level they do not think that [a woman] owns her body, nor do they seem to think that they own theirs" (19).

While scholarly articles exist regarding individuals' efforts to reclaim their bodies after being involuntarily tattooed, the individuals discussed were most often slaves in antiquity, convicts, or members of colonized cultures, and very little information is available in such articles regarding tattoos on victims of human trafficking. Schildkrout briefly mentions involuntary tattooing of slaves, convicts, and sex workers and the fact that that such individuals can "reclaim" their bodies and, as a result have "reinterpreted these forms of subjugation and transformed them into signs of rebellion" (323). Since information on modern-day human trafficking has only fairly recently received

widespread attention, the bulk of information available regarding tattoos on human trafficking victims is found in recent newspaper articles, from the United Kingdom and the United States, and in journals for healthcare providers. In the latter, tattoos are mentioned as a way for healthcare providers to ascertain whether a patient might be a victim of human trafficking. These articles mention that tattoos of a man's name, gang name, or tattoos resembling barcodes are suspect (Ernewein 799). In my analysis, I turn attention to the marked bodies of the growing population of modern-day slaves and how they are exerting agency over bodies that have been marked as the property of others.

CHAPTER 2

THEORIES OF THE SKIN AS A COMPONENT OF INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP IDENTITY

With traditional art forms, such as drawing and painting, typically only brief attention is given to the ground or canvas. However, with tattooing, the “canvas” for the artwork is living, moving human skin. A discussion of the nature of skin and its relationship to the individual encased in the skin, as well as the relationship between one’s skin and others in society, is a useful starting point when considering the connection between tattooing, identity, and personal agency. When discussing the psychological importance of tattoos in revealing a person’s soul, it should be noted that some tattoos do not carry great personal meaning to the wearer. Some individuals get tattooed on impulse or in altered states of mind and might later regret the tattoo or at least not assign much meaning to the tattoo. Nevertheless, tattoos also serve as a record of a moment in a person’s life, however fleeting or impulsive that moment may have been, and still reveal aspects of the tattoo wearer’s inner state or personality.

Anthropologist Alfred Gell proposes that the skin is more than simply the shell that encases an individual; it is a permeable boundary between a person’s inner being and exterior that allows communication between the soul, the body, and other individuals. In *Wrapping in Images: Tattooing in Polynesia*, Gell discusses the social function of the skin and its importance not only as a boundary between an individual and others but as a means of communicating aspects of one’s inner being to the outer world. In contrast to

the Western notion that what is outside of a person is less important than what is inside, Gell believes that the skin is also part of one's identity and states, "The skin is on the outside of the body [therefore] the outside of the body is the part which is public and which comes into contact with other people [therefore] the person is his/her skin" (24).

Each person's skin, whether marked or unmarked, gives clues to others about at least some aspects of an individual's identity. Gell cites a psychoanalytic theory of the skin proposed by Didier Anzieu, who points out the function of the skin as a boundary between one individual and another. Anzieu extends this boundary theory to include the skin as a defining factor between social groupings or classes (Gell 29). Anzieu proposes that the skin has two sides or faces: the "inside-facing" and the "outside facing;" thus the skin, and consequently marks on the skin, communicate to the soul of an individual, and through the skin, marked or unmarked, an individual communicates aspects of his or her soul to the world (Gell 39). According to Gell, "The inside-facing and outside-facing skins are, meanwhile, one indivisible structure, and hence the skin continually communicates the external world to the internal one, and the internal world to the external one" (29-30).

The addition of indelible marks on and under the skin further facilitates the two-way communication between an individual's interior and exterior. Gell describes the tattoo as a type of "protective layer," a marking applied to and visible on the exterior but which has also been absorbed into the interior of a person. According to Gell, "The basic schema of tattooing is thus definable as the exteriorization of the interior which is simultaneously the interiorization of the exterior" (39). While numerous examples exist

of tattoos that communicate one's identity to others and to oneself—examples that will be explored in detail in the next section—a brief example includes tattoos that function as “badges of identity,” such as those worn by bikers, soldiers, and members of street gangs (Benson 245). These tattoos communicate to others that the wearer is part of a group and reinforces to the wearer that he or she is a biker, soldier, or gang member and has committed to this identity to the extent of permanently marking his or her body.

Like Gell and Anzieu, Juliet Fleming and Christine Braunberger have written about the role of the skin in communicating a person's interior world to the outside world and in absorbing information from the surrounding world into the individual. Fleming and Braunberger also discuss the role of tattoos in this exchange that occurs through the skin. Fleming describes tattoos as a form of abjection, which Fleming defines as an intermediate place or “border,” neither inside nor outside an individual (37). Fleming's concept of abjection builds upon Gell's theory of the skin and includes a psychoanalytic viewpoint, drawn from Freud and Kristeva, which places the tattoo between “the somatic expression of something repressed” and “the deflection, without repression, of a drive” (Fleming 37). Tattoos, according to Fleming, bring to the surface an image already inside or beneath a person's skin (37).

While Fleming writes of tattoos occupying an intermediate place between inside and outside and between consciousness and repression, Braunberger uses the term “introjection” to describe the role of the tattoo in communicating between an individual's interior and exterior. Braunberger describes introjection as “a two-way flow between the body and its world” (3). Braunberger continues, “Introjection opens a mediating site

between one's psychic interior and cultural exterior. One site of introjection is the tattoo" (3). Braunberger acknowledges that tattoos communicate aspects of an individual's inner world, yet cautions against formulaic readings of tattoos since the human soul is complex, and "skin cannot so easily speak for the self that inhabits it" (3).

Just as the skin is a visible boundary between the soul and body and between the self and others, marks on the skin can also occupy what Caplan terms "boundary status on the skin" which serves as an "index of inclusion and exclusion" (*Written on the Body* xiv). Through tattoos, individuals demonstrate their affiliation with certain groups and their exclusion from other individuals or groups. In the instance of involuntary tattooing, for example the forced tattooing of convicts and human trafficking victims, the tattooed person is excluded from members of respectable society (in the case of punitive tattooing) or included in a group (in the case of tattooing of human trafficking victims) against his or her will. For individuals who cover an involuntary tattoo with a new tattoo or who choose to get a tattoo in the process of recovery from past abuse, tattoos, instead of opening communication between the body and soul and between an individual and others, can function as Benson describes, "a defense or seal against [the skin's] own past, while the violence and pain entailed in the process of cutting or piercing both mimics and expunges a previous violation" (249). Such recovery tattoos may still include an individual who chooses to share the meaning of the tattoo in a group of survivors from similar abuse.

While the skin and marks on the skin serve as a boundary between body and soul and between individuals, tattooed skin can also create boundaries between cultures.

Schildkroult focuses on how tattooed or “inscribed” skin communicates cultural values and creates boundaries between societies (322). Schildkroult writes, “Inscribed skin highlights an issue that has been central to anthropology since its inception: the question of boundaries between the individual and society, between societies, and between representations and experiences” (322). Examples of tattoos creating cultural boundaries include tattoos specific to tribes, as seen in the South Pacific Islands. Such tribal tattoos identified and separated members of different tribes. On a larger scale, such tattoos were a novelty to European explorers who first recorded their encounters with tattooed islanders in the eighteenth century and became a mark of distinction between Europeans and the cultural “Other” (Gilbert 33). When European explorers published their accounts of tribal tattooing and brought tattooed islanders to Europe to exhibit as cultural oddities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, tattoos became a cultural marker distinguishing the “civilized” Europeans from the exotic and “savage” people of other lands.

In instances of involuntary tattooing, boundaries are crossed or created against the tattooed individual’s will and illustrate power dynamics inherent in hierarchical societies.

According to Gell, it is only in the social context that a tattoo has meaning:

Tattoos register the impinging social milieu on the skin: sometimes tattooing is compulsory, in which case tattoos register power/authority relations; in other instances, it is voluntary, in which case tattoos register the strivings of individuals in relatively open competition. (37)

Benson states that, through tattoos, “images of power are trapped and held, on yet inside the skin. Such processes of inscription draw into the self potentialities—fearful or powerful—that are imagined as coming from elsewhere; and thus fix and possess them” (246). However, since there is two-way communication between a person’s soul and the outside world through the skin, an individual absorbs an involuntary indelible mark but also can change that mark, either through a change in perception or through physically altering the mark, to communicate a new meaning to his or her soul and to the world. According to Gell, “External powers impose themselves and leave their indelible traces; they are everted and turned back against themselves in a display of defiant subservience, passive heroism, pitiable grandeur” (39).

CHAPTER 3

TATTOOS EXPRESS INDIVIDUAL
AND GROUP IDENTITY

According to tattoo artist Don Ed Hardy, “A tattoo is never *just* what the appearance is. . . . You can only *really* know about the tattoo by getting to know the person wearing it. Tattoos are indicators, or little vents to their psyche” (Mifflin 124, emphasis original). While a tattoo may not communicate the totality of a person’s identity, it does allow all who view the tattoo a glimpse into the tattoo wearer’s sense of self. Sanders writes, “[tattoos] have the function of providing symbolic information about the bearer’s personal interests, social position, relationships, or self-definition” (21).

Tattoos, among other body modifications, are a form of what Clinton Sanders terms “social communication” (20). According to Sanders, body modifications, such as tattoos and piercings, “move the recipient closer to the aesthetic ideal of the group—be it conventional or deviant—with which he or she identifies” (20). In addition to communicating aspects of the tattooed individual’s identity, tattoos signify an association between individuals. Sanders writes:

Tattooing also has affiliative impact in that it is routinely employed to demonstrate one’s indelible connection to primary associates (for instance, name tattoos), or groups whose members share specialized interests and activities (for example, motorcycling, use of illegal drugs, or involvement with a specific youth gang). (41)

According to the Maori, tattoos, while communicating collective identity to one another and to outsiders, also communicate group identity to each tattooed individual and “stamp onto the mind all the traditions and philosophy of the group” (Gustafson, “The Tattoo in the Later Roman Empire” 24).

Voluntary tattoos serve as markers of individual identity and also of group affiliation. While diverse groups of people get tattoos to signify group membership, I focus on the tattoos of two specific groups: convicts and women. Both groups have systems of symbols to show individual identification within a larger group, and both groups have also frequently been the victims of involuntary tattooing. Through first examining voluntary tattoos of members of these groups and then turning to involuntary tattoos on members of the same groups, I explore the role of tattoos in forming and re-forming an individual’s identity.

Voluntary Tattoos on Convicts

Examples of tattoos signifying group identity include tattoos convicts get in prison as well as tattoos that represent cultural and gender identity. In an analysis of studies about tattooed inmates, Sanders summarizes three reasons prisoners choose to become tattooed: through a tattoo the prisoner “affirms membership in a protective primary reference group, asserts independence from oppressive authority, and symbolically reestablishes key aspects of an identity, which is ritually stripped during the official initiation into the total institution” (40). Tattooing among convicts is widespread, spanning centuries and geographic areas. In fact, the negative view that people in the

current time period have concerning tattooing is often a result of the association of tattoos with inmates. Although the iconography of prisoners' tattoos varies, a common theme is the crucifix, a symbol of suffering with which prison inmates identify.

Russian Convicts

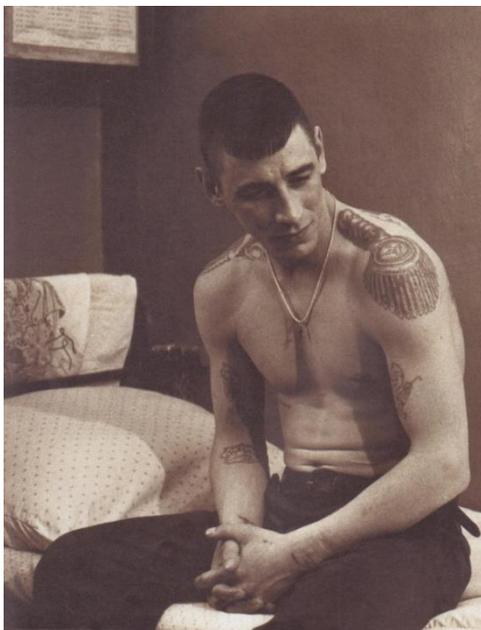


Figure 1. Robert Klanten and Floyd E. Schulze; Russian convict in the 1990s; picture taken from *The Mark of Cain* documentary, 2007; *Forever: The New Tattoo Tattoo* (Berlin: Gestalten, 2012) 111; print.

Schrader discusses how convicts and vagrants in nineteenth century Russia used their existing tattoos, some of which were involuntary, as well as new tattoos they acquired in prison to identify themselves and create a class system within the prison setting. Russian convicts in the twentieth century continued the tradition of tattooing themselves in prison; these tattoos served as a rite of passage that also identified group membership. According to Schrader, “Twentieth-century Russian and Soviet convicts

used, and continue to use, tattoos as one means of upholding long-standing traditions, signifying group solidarity, and conversing in a language which they attempt to keep secret from authorities” (187). In the mid-1990s, Soviet prisoners continued to use tattoos to signify social standing within the prison milieu (Klanten and Schulze 110). Prisoners who occupied the highest “rank” got elaborate and decorative tattoos in prison, such as

the ornate epaulets tattooed on the Russian convict pictured (fig. 1), while sex offenders considered the “lowest caste” were forcibly tattooed on their faces (Klanten and Schulze 110).

European Convicts

European convicts were routinely shipped to Australia in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century to serve their sentences. Prisoners often tattooed each other on the journey to Australia, usually to hinder identification since government officials documented each convict’s tattoos before the voyage. Maxwell-Stewart and Duffield discuss the iconography of these convicts’ voluntary tattoos. Many convicts were tattooed with an anchor, a symbol of hope, often with the word “hope” near the anchor (Maxwell-Stewart and Duffield 125). Convicts also tattooed themselves with crucifixes either during or after transport to serve their sentences, and “some convicts appear to have drawn parallels between their own and Christ’s sufferings by placing their initials in proximity to representations of the passion” (Maxwell-Stewart and Duffield 133).

In nineteenth century France, typically only sailors, convicts, and members of the lower classes were tattooed (Gilbert 113). According to Gilbert, “there are few records of tattooing outside of prisons in France during the latter part of the nineteenth century” (115). In 1876, Cesare Lombroso published a detailed account of tattooing among Italian convicts and theorized that tattoos indicate a disposition to criminal activity, judging by the large percentage of convicts who were tattooed (Gilbert 115). In 1880, Dr. Alexander Lacassagne catalogued the tattoo imagery of convicts, and arranged the tattoos according to subject matter. In addition to the “perennial favorites,” such as stars,

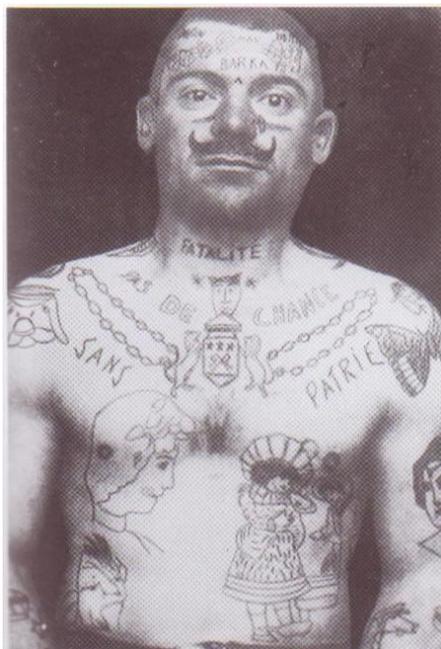


Figure 2. Steve Gilbert; French convict; the tattoo on the neck reads “fate” or “inevitability;” the tattoo on the chest reads “No luck” and “Without Country;” *Tattoo History: A Sourcebook* (New York: Juno Books, 2000) 119; print.

daggers, pierced hearts, initials, dates, and anchors, French convicts commonly had phrases or “mottoes” including “Vengeance,” “Liberty or Death,” and “Child of Misfortune”—tattooed on their chests or backs (fig. 2) (Gilbert 116). Lombroso’s studies of tattoos on prisoners contributed to the still prevalent association of tattooing with deviance. Lombroso viewed tattooing as a type of primitive writing that allows tattooed individuals to advertise their experiences. The “multiplicity” of tattoos covering the average prisoner’s body signified to Lombroso a penchant for promoting the convict’s every exploit (Gilbert 120). According to “The Savage Origin of Tattooing” by Lombroso, “there is a kind of hieroglyphic writing among criminals, that is not regulated or fixed, but is determined from daily events and from *argot*, very much as would take place among primitive men” (Gilbert 119). Lombroso cites examples of tattoo placement and imagery on convicts and observes, “Never, I believe, have we had a more striking proof that tattooing contains real ideological hieroglyphs which take the place of writing. . . . Certainly these tattooings declare more than any official brief to reveal to us the fierce and obscene hearts of these unfortunates” (Gilbert 122).

In addition to revealing the tattoo wearer's deviant nature, Lombroso observed that some tattoos were for the purpose of identification and recognition among criminals; for example highway robbers in Germany and Bavaria “who are united into a real association, recognize each other by the epigraphic tattoo marks T. and L., meaning ‘Thal und Land’ (valley and country), words which they exchange with one another, each half the phrase when they meet” (Gilbert 122).

Chicano Convicts



Figure 3. Alan Govenar; Tattooed back of Chicano ex-convict Lawrence Honrada; photograph by Alan Govenar; *Marks of Civilization* (Los Angeles: Univ. of California, 1988) 211; print.

Chicano convicts frequently get tattoos while in prison as a marker of Chicano prison identity (Olguin 165). *Tatuajes* are “the group-specific body tattoos which are illegal, difficult to obtain, and thus highly valued in prison” (Olguin 165). According to Olguin, “*Tatuajes*—like extended ‘sentences’ or supplemental penalties—become badges of honor and status symbols among convicts” (169). The iconography of *tatuajes* is familiar to Chicano/as in and out of prison and is linked to the “political unconscious” of the Chicano people (Olguin 187). One such image is that of the suffering Christ (fig. 3), with whom Chicano convicts identify, and who is part of the Catholic

faith espoused by the majority of Chicanos; another symbol commonly seen in *tatuajes* is the Virgin of Guadalupe (Olguin 187).

Japanese Outlaws

While not all members served time in prison, tattoos communicated the collective values and signified membership in a group of Japanese men on the fringes of society. During the Tokugawa regime in eighteenth century Japan, tattooing was outlawed but continued to be practiced by the lower classes (Gilbert 78). Gangs of gamblers, known as *Yakuza*, were formed from members of the lower classes. According to Gilbert, “Although the *Yakuza* engaged in a variety of semi-legal and illegal activities, they saw themselves as champions of the common people and adhered to a strict code of honor that specifically prohibited crimes against the people, such as rape and theft” (78). *Yakuza* were known by their tattoos and communicated their principles through tattooing: “Because it was painful, it was proof of courage; because it was permanent, it was evidence of lifelong loyalty to the group; and because it was illegal, it made them forever outlaws” (Gilbert 78).

Voluntary Tattoos on Women

For centuries tattoos have served as markers of group membership and collective identity for convicts. More recently, Western women have adopted tattoos to both demonstrate affiliation with feminist values and also to oppose male-imposed standards of beauty. The impetus for individuals of both groups—convicts and women—to get tattooed is similar: to signify membership in a group, to assert freedom from bodily

oppression, and to establish personal identity when historically society has denigrated members of both groups.

Tattoos on European and American Women

In nineteenth century Europe, the only women known to bear tattoos were circus performers and prostitutes (Caplan, "Speaking Scars" 120). For tattooed circus ladies, displaying their tattooed bodies was a way to gain financial independence at a time when women depended on men for financial security. By the close of the nineteenth century, European society women began to get tattoos as an expression of fashion on their own terms. These women who chose to be tattooed selected the design and location and also chose whether to display or hide their tattoos.

The increasing number of "respectable" women who got tattoos in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries coincided with growing freedom within society as women "were going to college and joining the rising industrial workforce; they had earned the vote and were even entering public office" (Mifflin 34). Unlike female circus performers who exhibited their tattoos for a living and typically wore religious and patriotic tattoos to lend respectability to their status as a tattooed lady (Mifflin 23), society women wore diverse tattoo imagery, "ranging from portraits of husbands and lovers to automobiles" (Mifflin 32-33). After the tattooed Egyptian princess Amunet was discovered in 1923, women began to request "dainty" images such as butterflies, flowers, and scarabs (Mifflin 34-35). Women's preference for dainty tattoos continued through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century where tattoos of butterflies, hearts, and flowers still remain popular among female tattoo clients (fig. 4). According to Mifflin,



Figure 4. Margot Mifflin; Tattoo enthusiast Edith Weinzirl writing a letter, 1961; photo courtesy of Mary Jane Haake; *Bodies of Subversion* (New York, Juno Books, 1997) 51; print.

Men's tattoos "advertised social status or affiliations, while women preferred decorative natural imagery and often got tattooed to mark a personal transition" (59).

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, women's voluntary tattoos often mark physical, psychological, or spiritual rites of passage.

Mifflin discusses the spiritual and emotional significance of tattoos, especially among women:

"The term 'psychic armor' is sometimes used to describe tattoos acquired during periods of change" (106). Mifflin presents a theory drawn from Margaret Mead, suggesting that men in

tribal societies used tattoos as rites of passage to

mark life events; such significant events for women were usually marked by biological factors, such as the onset of menstruation or pregnancy, so tattoos were not needed to commemorate these events. In modern society, such biological rites of passage are downplayed, which has given rise to women getting tattoos to mark milestones in their lives (Mifflin 106-108). Mifflin states, "Perhaps because they lack public recognition of private passages that seem so elementally important, many more women than men tend to ritualize tattooing" (108).

Although women typically choose images that carry personal or emotional significance, tattooed women, especially women who wear what society considers an excessive amount of visible tattoos, are typically viewed unfavorably, particularly by men. While most literature focuses on males and tattooing, about half of tattoo clients are women (Santos 94). Men's tattoos are generally more visible while women tend to get tattoos in places that are normally covered by clothing, largely because of the stigma that still lingers regarding tattooed women (Santos 94). According to a study of undergraduate students conducted in 2004 by Diana Hawkes, Charlene Y. Senn, and Chantal Thorne, "both men and women students view women with visible tattoos in a negative light; tattooed women are seen as persons who flaunt their freedom from gender norms or as individuals who threaten women's traditional space in society" (Santos 94). According to Braunberger, "It would seem that whatever manifold meanings women attach to their tattoos are culturally written over to simply and only punctuate meanings already attached to their bodies within a larger cultural domain" (2). Braunberger discusses the "scripts" of women particularly as the counterpart to a male aspect; for example, wife to husband, desirable to desiring, emotion to logic (2). However, women continue to get tattoos in defiance of society's norms. According to Braunberger, "The body has become a site for commentary and resistance to these scripts" (2).

Tattoos on Chicanas

Both cultural and gender identity intersect in tattoos worn by Chicanas. In a study of modern Chicana tattoo practices, Santos found that the tattooed Chicana resists restrictions Chicanos place upon her body by getting tattooed as "an aesthetic symbol of

her social identity” (93). Santos uses the term “Chicana canvas” to denote “an unmarked woman’s body that will undergo a permanent transformation with a new tattoo as an aesthetic symbol of her social identity” (93). In a 2004 study by Louise Baca and Patricia Hernandez regarding Chicanas’ reasons for getting tattoos, they discovered that “among Chicanas in group therapy, becoming tattooed was a mechanism to better cope with social problems associated with substance abuse, gang hostility, and domestic violence” (Santos 94).

Santos states that “while tattoos as personal expression are becoming more acceptable for men and women alike in the mainstream, they continue to be a source of social stigma for Mexican Americans” (96). The American public tends to view Hispanic tattoo iconography, such as images of the Virgin de Guadalupe, crosses, and tears, as signifiers of the lower classes, outsiders, and criminality (Santos 96). Male tattoo artists act as “gatekeepers” and refuse to tattoo such images on women, and as such exercise their own repression of women (Santos 96).

Chicanas who choose to take ownership over their bodies by getting tattoos often select images that express their multiple identities, including gender, culture, and social standing (Santos 106). Santos discusses interviews with two tattooed Chicana clients who chose tattoos that “reflect and redefine their femininity, crafting a new version of Chicana gendered identity, one that emphasizes their alignment with other women, as well as their gendered resistance to social expectations and exclusionary practices that uphold communal patriarchal standards” (107).

The Influence of Involuntary Tattoos on Identity

The physical and invasive nature of a tattoo affects more than an individual's body; it also affects the soul, a fact that is recognized across cultures. According to Clare Anderson, the Hindi word for tattoo, *godna*, means "to prick, puncture, to dot. . . . Invoking the piercing which *godna* involves, the word can also mean to wound (or lacerate) a person's feelings" (108). While both voluntary and involuntary tattoos affect the soul of the wearer, the individual does not have a choice in the imagery placed upon his or her body when involuntarily tattooed. Gustafson states, "The forcible imposition of the external mark, this disfigurement, serves also to make a lasting impression internally, which is difficult (though not impossible) to escape" ("The Tattoo in the Later Roman Empire" 25).

People choose to become tattooed for a variety of reasons, yet the underlying motivation typically involves identity—proclaiming one's affiliation with a specific group of people, or forming and communicating one's individual identity. When a person is tattooed against his or her will, issues of identity arise as well. According to Schildkrout, "Tattoos, scarifications, and brands can be imposed by authoritarian regimes in a symbolic denial of personhood" (323). In addition to attempting to cancel individual identity, involuntary tattoos are designed to impose a new identity on the tattooed individual and typically identify the tattooed person as property, slave, or criminal. Gustafson discusses Michael Foucault's theory of the body and power relations:

Marking the body with a permanent sign and in a compulsory situation is a clear means of what [Foucault] calls a 'micro-physics of power' over that

individual. That person is thus clearly subjected to the authority that imposed the mark, and the domination and institutional framework and hierarchy relations are clearly expressed in it. (“The Tattoo in the Later Roman Empire” 24)

Punitive Tattooing

The forced tattooing of slaves and individuals convicted of crimes has been documented in a number of cultures from ancient times through the present. According to Caplan, “[Tattooing in Western culture] has occupied an uneasy and ambiguous status within a dominant culture in which body-marking was usually treated as punitive and stigmatic rather than honorable or decorative” (*Written on the Body* xi). Gustafson discusses the rationale for punitive tattooing in ancient Greece and Rome: “Tattooing is an indelible mark of infamy which adds insult to injury, and makes the punishment permanent should (under unforeseen circumstances) the other punitive situation prove temporary” (“Inscripta in Fronte” 90).

While Gustafson refers specifically to tattoo practices in ancient Greece and Rome, the reason for punitive tattooing is similar across cultures and eras—punitive tattooing permanently disgraces the individual and fixes the person’s status as slave or criminal.

Ancient Greece and Rome

Tattooing in ancient Greece and Rome was exclusively practiced on convicted criminals and slaves. According to Gustafson, “For the Romans, as for the Greeks,

tattooing usually signified degradation (that is, a lowering of status), because it was a treatment customarily reserved for slaves” (“Inscripta in Fronte” 86). Freed slaves held no political rights and occupied “the lowest possible category of free non-citizens. The association of tattooing with degradation is thus made plain. In this case, it was the permanent mark, not the crime itself, that was decisive” (Gustafson, “Inscripta in Fronte” 86).

The Greeks adopted the practice of tattooing in the late sixth century B.C. from the Persians, who used tattoos to mark slaves. Greek terminology for tattoo, variations of the word “stigma,” conjures negative imagery (Jones 1): “The very first reference to [tattooing] in [Greek] literature is in the word *stigmatias*, a ‘marked slave,’ which occurs in a fragment from the poet Asius of Samos, usually dated in the sixth century” (Jones 7). According to ancient Greek literature, the practice of tattooing slaves and convicts was prevalent by the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. (Jones 8). Jones traces the practice of tattooing through the Byzantine period, where tattooing continued to be used primarily for punishment by both Greeks and Romans: “Decorative tattooing continues to be noticed by Greek observers among the barbarian peoples such as the highlanders of Scotland, but never among those subjected to the civilizing influence of Greece and Rome” (11).

Involuntary tattoos on slaves in ancient Greece and Rome were usually placed on the forehead, and iconography varied from images to, more commonly, words (Jones 7-8). In Rome in the late 250s, under the rule of Emperor Valerian, Christians were tattooed on the forehead and were sent to work in the mines (Gustafson, “The Tattoo in the Later

Roman Empire” 18). This trend continued over the next century. Gustafson writes, “A tattoo on the forehead, as starts to become clear, accompanied the punishment of condemnation to the mines” (“The Tattoo in the Later Roman Empire” 19). The choice of the face as the site for a punitive tattoo permanently affects others’ perception of the individual. Not only could that tattooed person not easily hide the tattoo, “the face is also commonly viewed as the reflection of one’s person, of the self, of the soul” (Gustafson, “The Tattoo in the Later Roman Empire” 25). Under Constantine’s rule, the practice of tattooing prisoners and slaves was modified. Constantine decreed that “hardened criminals should not be ‘inscribed’ on the face, but rather on the hands or the calves. ‘This will ensure,’ observes the emperor, ‘that the face, which has been formed in the image of the divine beauty, will be defiled as little as possible’” (Jones 13).

Since slaves were typically prisoners of war from defeated cities, tattooed images were often emblems of the captor’s country. Words that were tattooed on a slave’s forehead or face usually proclaimed that the person was a slave and sometimes listed the slave’s crimes or vices: “According to an ancient commentator on the orator Aeschines, runaway slaves were ‘inscribed’ on the forehead with the words, ‘Stop me, I’m a runaway’” (Jones 9). Most punitive tattoos consisted of words or acronyms that listed the convict’s crimes (Gustafson, “The Tattoo in the Later Roman Empire” 25-26). In the late Roman Empire, prisoners of war were tattooed with the name of the emperor or a symbol of the kingdom; slaves were often tattooed with the names of their master (Gustafson, “The Tattoo in the Later Roman Empire” 26-27), a clear indication of the view of a person as property owned by another. Less commonly, the tattoo referred to the

punishment, such as hard labor, the galleys, or death (Gustafson, “The Tattoo in the Later Roman Empire” 28).

India

In ancient India, criminals were branded on the forehead or cheek with a circle or branded on the chest with a description of the crimes they committed (C. Anderson 106). The practice of tattooing and branding slaves and convicts became more prevalent as Europe colonized the Indian subcontinent, and “as in Europe, the use of tattooing and branding was crucial to facilitating control over slave populations” (C. Anderson 107). According to Clare Anderson, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, “life convicts, perjurers, and forgers in the Bengal Presidency had their name, crime, date of sentence, and court by which convicted—in the vernacular—tattooed on the forehead (108).

Russia

Punitive tattooing and branding were widespread in Russia during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Under the rule of Peter the Great, Russian convicts were branded with the image of an eagle, the symbol of the state (Schrader 180). In the eighteenth century, the state substituted acronyms for images branded on convicts; these brands were often on the face, usually the forehead or cheeks, and indicated the severity of the crimes committed (Schrader 180-181). While punitive tattooing and branding were originally reserved for serious offenders, in the nineteenth century the Russian government began branding fugitives from exile. Brands were usually placed on the shoulders and were used to identify those who had escaped. Eventually the Russian

government also branded vagrants in order to fix their status; for fugitives as well as vagrants, brands consisted of acronyms that indicated the status of the individual (Schrader 181-182). Once branded, the person could never escape the classification of criminal or vagrant.

Central America

According to Friar Diego de Landa's account of his mission to the Yucatan in the mid-sixteenth century, the Maya tattooed themselves voluntarily and also forcibly tattooed those who were caught stealing (Gilbert 101). The Maya enslaved thieves and forcibly tattooed some thieves on the face. De Landa witnessed such involuntary tattooing and writes, "If they were lords or chieftains, the people of the town gathered, and having caught the criminal, they tattooed his face from chin to forehead on both sides as a punishment, for they held this to be a great disgrace" (Gilbert 101).

China and Japan

The practice of punitive tattooing in ancient China has been recorded as early as 770 B.C., during the Zhou dynasty (Lei 103). According to Lei, tattooing was reserved for punishment and signified disgrace: "Popular Confucius and Buddhist beliefs generally discouraged any kind of cutting, mutilation, or permanent marking on the body" (Lei 103). Most punitive tattoos consisted of words and not images (Lei 103). Similar tattoo practices were found in ancient Japan. According to Gilbert, "The first written record of Japanese tattooing is found in a Chinese dynastic history compiled in 297 A.D. According to this text, Japanese 'men young and old, all tattoo their faces and decorate their bodies with designs'" (77). The Chinese held a negative view of tattooing and used

it only for punishment; this ideology was adopted by Japanese rulers, who began to use tattooing solely for punishment by the seventh century A.D. (Gilbert 77). According to Gilbert, “Tattooing was reserved for those who had committed serious crimes, and individuals bearing tattoo marks were ostracized by their families and denied all participation in the life of the community” (77).

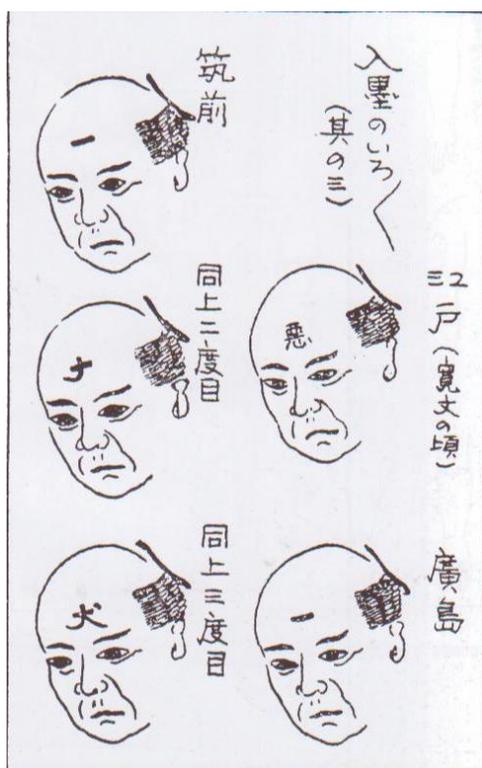


Figure 5. Steve Gilbert; Japanese Penal Tattooing (after Tamabayashi); *Tattoo History: A Sourcebook* (New York: Juno Books, 2000) 77; print.

Ancient Japanese literature indicates that punitive tattooing was common until the seventeenth century. Punitive tattoos usually consisted of words and were commonly placed on the face (fig 5). According to Gilbert, “By the early seventeenth century, a generally recognized codification of tattoo marks was widely used to identify criminals and outcasts” (77). Outcasts were tattooed on the arms, often with cross or a straight line, while criminals were tattooed with images that told where they had committed

crimes; these images were commonly tattooed on the face or arms (Gilbert 77). A writing dated 400

A.D. tells of the Emperor Richu, who as an

alternative to having a traitor executed, sentenced him to be tattooed near his eye

(McCallum 116-117). Another account dated A.D. 467, tells of the Emperor Yuryaku

who sentenced a man to be tattooed on his face after his dog killed a bird (McCallum

117). A third account from the 450s, during the reign of Emperor Anko, tells of an encounter with an old man who had a tattooed face. According to McCallum, “The context of this story (together with the later execution of the tattooed man) indicates clearly that he had originally received his tattoo as a punishment for some sort of crime” (117).

During the Pre-Edo Period (A.D. 600 – 1600), little information is found about Japanese tattooing. According to McCallum, “Some sources indicate that it continued to be a form of punishment during these periods, and there are also indications that out-castes were tattooed” (118). According to Gilbert, Punitive tattooing gradually became less common and was replaced by other punishments. By the end of the seventeenth century, people in Japan increasingly got voluntary, decorative tattoos (77).

Europe

Most Europeans held a negative view of tattooing until the late nineteenth century. Caplan states that although ancient European cultures practiced tattooing:

The first major rupture occurred in Classical Greece, in the discursive effort to distinguish civilization from barbarism. Body-marking lost its older association with honourable status, was disdained as a barbarian practice, and was increasingly confined to the stigmatization of criminals, captives, and slaves. (“Speaking Scars” 113)

The practice of physically marking slaves and prisoners continued through the Middle Ages; by this time, to Europeans, tattooing represented “the involuntary and painful infliction of power by a sovereign authority” (Caplan, “Speaking Scars” 115).

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Britain deserters from the army were forcibly tattooed, and in France prisoners who were sentenced to hard labor were also involuntarily tattooed (Caplan, “Speaking Scars” 115). In the late nineteenth century, scientists and physicians—most notably the Italian physician and criminologist Cesare Lombroso—published studies on prisoners’ tattoos and associated tattoos with deviance. According to Schildkrout, “Although many people who were not criminals got tattoos, the criminological literature contributed to the popular understanding of tattooing as a form of negative deviant behavior” (326).

Involuntary Tattoos on Female Captives



Figure 6. Margot Mifflin; Olive Oatman after her captivity; photo courtesy of Arizona Historical Society/Tucson; *Bodies of Subversion* (New York: Juno Books, 1997) v; print.

When examining the concept of identity and the opposition between a voluntarily assumed identity—symbolized by tattoo imagery of an individual’s choosing—and an identity forced upon a person by a more powerful authority—represented by an involuntary tattoo—there also exists a middle ground that illustrates the complexity of personal identity. Examples of this middle ground include Olive Oatman (fig. 6) as well as modern victims of human trafficking. Olive Oatman was an American woman who was

abducted by the Yavapai Indians in 1851 and forcibly tattooed on her face by her captors (Mifflin v). According to Jennifer Putzi's analysis of Oatman's biography, written by Royal B. Stratton, Oatman's experience demonstrates that identity is a spectrum. As a result of the identity of slave and property imposed upon Oatman by her captivity and memorialized by her tattoos, Oatman's identity exists somewhere between native woman and white woman. Similarly, women who have been trafficked have been held against their will and have often received tattoos against their will. The permanent physical marks on the bodies of these women serve as a reminder of their captivity and often change how they perceive themselves. Putzi observes, "while the tattoo appears to fix identity, to mark it forever in the flesh, it can also be seen as the mark of fluid boundaries of identity, resisting any definitive interpretation" (187).

Olive Oatman

According to Oatman's account of her captivity, she resisted the facial tattoos but was forcibly tattooed by the Yavapai to "protect their property" (Putzi 186). The marks on Oatman's face and chin were used by the Yavapai to mark their slaves and not members of the tribe (Putzi 186). Olive Oatman's tattoos illustrate that one's identity can be found essentially between identities. After returning from captivity, she did not fully occupy the place of white woman or American Indian. According to Putzi,

Oatman could simultaneously be seen as "one of us" and "one of them."

She was a white person, whose tattoos and words demonstrated the danger and savagery of the frontier and the necessity of taming it. Yet she was also an "Other," a white woman who looked native, who had lived in a

native culture, and was rumored to have been adopted by or even married into a native tribe. (193)

According to Oatman's biographer, Oatman requested a dress as soon as she was released from captivity, rejecting the native attire she wore while among the Indians. This underscores Stratton's message that "you can take the woman out of civilization, but you can't take civilization out of the woman" (Putzi 185). However, Oatman could not remove her tattoos, a permanent reminder of the "uncivilized" life that she led among the Yavapai (Putzi 185). Putzi writes that one of the purposes of Oatman's biography and lecture series was to "reassure audiences of the unassailable nature of gendered and racialized identity, even within the extreme conditions of Indian captivity" (179). However, Putzi argues, the focus on Oatman's tattoos has the opposite effect. Oatman's tattoos "do not reflect or conform the fixedness of identity; rather, these marks raise the possibility that the boundaries of identity are ultimately permeable and unreliable" (179).

Victims of Human Trafficking

Like Oatman, victims of modern-day human trafficking are held against their will and are often marked as the property of a pimp or gang. According to the Department of Homeland Security, "Human trafficking is a modern-day form of slavery involving the illegal trade of people for exploitation or commercial gain....Traffickers use force, fraud or coercion to lure their victims and force them into labor or sexual exploitation" (DHS). Victims of human trafficking are often young women who have been abducted or who have left abusive home environments and end up living on the streets.

Traffickers frequently tattoo their victims with the trafficker's name, symbols, or barcodes to mark the woman as their property. In a report from the National Crime Agency in the United Kingdom regarding the growth of child sex trafficking, the victims were "branded 'like cattle' with tattoos to show who owned them and whether they were over the age of 18" (Amako). A number of the victims were also tattooed with numbers, but the meaning of the numbers is unknown (Amako). While tattoos are often used to mark victims as property, traffickers also carve designs into victims' bodies or brand them with a hot item, such as a key (M. Anderson). Sometimes victims consent to the tattoos, while more often traffickers forcibly tattoo their victims (Kelly). In an interview with Jennifer Kempton, a former victim of human trafficking, Kelly paraphrases, "[Jennifer] tells me of crack houses where a tattoo artist would often be in residence, swapping tattoos for drugs and branding the women as they came in between jobs" (Kelly).

Although victims of human trafficking have been held captive, because of the troubled backgrounds of many victims, they often feel a sense of belonging with the gang or individual who traffics them. According to CC Murphy, who runs the Ohio-based Catch program, pimps often initially give young girls on the street "the first hope of love and protection they've ever had, and once they're inside their heads, especially if addiction is part of that dynamic—then the psychological and emotional manipulation is often more powerful than the physical stuff" (Kelly). Further, the tattoos on victims' bodies serve as reminders of a painful time in their lives when their bodies were controlled by others. Kempton states, "Those tattoos to me meant betrayal, because I

went from thinking I was in the first loving relationship of my life with a guy who treated me like a queen, to becoming an addict and being sold by him to supply his drug habit” (Kelly).

Reclaiming the Body and Forming New Identity After an Involuntary Tattoo

According to Putzi, “There can be no erasure of the marked body—only additional markings” (195). While some people may wish to erase their voluntary tattoos, those who have been forcibly tattooed must find a way to cover the involuntary mark or assign a new meaning to it. Individuals who have been forcibly tattooed or branded have found various ways of re-forming their personal identity through either leaving the tattoo intact and changing the meaning they assign to the tattoo, or by covering or removing the involuntary tattoo.

Altering the Meaning Assigned to the Tattoo

Gustafson concludes that tattooing, including punitive tattooing, has an ambivalent nature. Concerning involuntary tattoos on convicts, Gustafson states that such tattoos were “first applied as punishment and intended to signify criminality and degradation, but then seen by those so marked and their comrades as positive group symbols” (“Inscripta in Fronte” 101). The convicts in Gustafson’s example have not removed or changed their involuntary tattoos; instead, they view such tattoos on themselves and on their comrades as signifying group membership and not punishment.

In an account concerning modifying a punitive tattoo, the historian Theodoret, who wrote in the mid-fifth century, tells of a deacon who was sentenced by another

Christian faction to the mines, “with the sign of the sacred cross inscribed on his forehead” (Gustafson, “The Tattoo in the Later Roman Empire” 19). It is not likely that a Christian would tattoo the sacred symbol of a cross on another person as a form of punishment, so Gustafson surmises that “the deacon was tattooed with a more mundane mark, but Theodoret’s figurative description of it as a cross points to a willful transformation of the tattoo’s meaning” (“The Tattoo in the Later Roman Empire” 19-20). Gustafson cites similar examples of early Christians who were forcibly tattooed and who were received as “heroes” after they were released from imprisonment or exile; the marks on their bodies testifying to the suffering they endured for their beliefs (“Inscripta in Fronte” 100).

Russian convicts and vagrants used their existing involuntary tattoos to construct systems of social standing within prison or exile. Tattoos, which prisoners termed “regalia,” functioned as badges of honor instead of symbols of government ownership (Schrader 185). According to Schrader, “In the process of appropriating the tactic of marking their bodies and constructing a corporate identity for themselves, vagrants and convicts attempted to subvert the power relations inherent in autocratic policies and transform these into a strategy of resistance (182-183). Vagrants, who occupied the “upper class” of prison social status, tattooed themselves with “calling cards”—images that proclaimed their identity to others (Schrader 185).

Removing or Covering an Involuntary Tattoo

While some victims of involuntary tattooing change their perception of the tattoo without altering the physical mark, others get new tattoos to cover their involuntary

tattoos or, less commonly, use chemicals in an attempt to remove the tattoo. Gustafson writes, “In ancient Japanese society there was a change from punitive, non-representational tattooing to the non-punitive elaborate representational tattooing called *irezumi*, due in part, to the effort to mask criminal stigmata with attractive designs” (“The Tattoo in the Later Roman Empire” 30). According to Schrader, Russian and Soviet convicts used tattoos to take power away from the state by adding voluntary tattoos to state-imposed brands (189-90). Additionally, convicts intentionally frustrated the state’s attempts to decode their voluntary tattoos by adopting their own, ever-changing tattoo “language” (Schrader 190). According to Schrader, “That tattoos are subject to multiple interpretations contributes to convicts’ ability to keep the outside world at bay and thereby allows them to preserve their exclusivity” (Schrader 190). For example, convicts used acronyms and symbols, such as an eagle, originally used by the state to mark convicts and instead assigned a new meaning to the image (Schrader 190-191). Soviet prisoners took control of their bodies by tattooing their own foreheads with “prisoner of Brezhnev,” which Gustafson states is “a clear example of defiance, of appropriating a customary tool used by those in power, and thereby turning the tables and using that same tool for one’s own empowerment” (“Inscripta in Fronte” 100).

European convicts who were transported to Australia during the nineteenth century added tattoos and changed their existing tattoos en route to thwart the state’s efforts to identify escaped convicts. By recording prisoners’ tattoos before the voyage, officials were better able to identify individuals who escaped. Prisoners knew this and would often cover up existing tattoos and add new ones on the journey to Australia in

order to frustrate the meticulous official descriptions (Maxwell-Stewart and Duffield 129).

In nineteenth century India, convicts were frequently tattooed on the face or forehead. Such visible tattoos permanently stigmatized the wearer as a criminal or a slave since the mark is almost impossible to hide (C. Anderson 112). In India, those who had received *godna* on the forehead attempted to cover the markings with hairstyles or turbans; less commonly, some used scarification or harsh chemicals in an attempt to remove the tattoo or brand (C. Anderson 115). Clare Anderson states, “There is no evidence that [*godna*] became a ‘badge of honor’ as was the case in Brazil, where runaway slaves, branded with an ‘F’ on the shoulder, proudly displayed proof of their resistance to authority” (C. Anderson 115). Indian convicts also re-named themselves in defiance of their government-imposed markings: “a new name was thus a means to reject the inscriptions of colonial authority” (C. Anderson 116). According to Clare Anderson, “The effect of *godna* was to stigmatize and facilitate control over certain populations....Perhaps most significant is the revelation that *godna* did not render convicts powerless. Those convicts whose foreheads were marked attempted to resist, redefine, or re-script their inscriptions” (116-17).

In the twenty-first century, women who are able to escape from trafficking are left with tattoos as a permanent reminder of the loss of agency over their own bodies. Contemporary tattoo artists Charles "Chuck" Waldo and Chris Baker, among others, have donated their services to help former human trafficking victims reclaim their bodies by reworking the victims' tattoos into symbols of their newfound freedom. In 2013, former



Figure 7. Annie Kelly; Erica's tattoo; photograph by Almudena Toral; *The Guardian*, 15 November 2014; Web; 18 March 2015.

sex trafficking victim, Jennifer Kempton started a scholarship program called Survivor's Ink that provides tattoo cover-up free of charge to women who have escaped sex trafficking. Kempton lives in Columbus, Ohio and works with Columbus tattoo artist Chuck Waldo (Erbentraut). One of

Waldo's clients, and a recipient of a scholarship from Survivor's Ink, Erica, now has a tattoo of a feather with the words "Free Yourself" beneath it covering the words "Sin City," the name of the drug gang that trafficked Erica (fig. 7) (Kelly). Tattoo artist Chris Baker provides free cover-up tattoos for sex trafficking victims (Fig. 8). His shop, Ink180, is located just outside of Chicago (Erbentraut).



Figure 8. Tattoo cover-up by Chris Baker; n.d.; "Tattoo Artist Helps Ex-Gang Members;" *ABC News*; Web; 10 March 2015.

CHAPTER 4

OWNERSHIP OF THE BODY

In addition to communicating aspects of individual and group identity, tattoos make a statement about ownership of the body. Individuals who choose to get tattooed often do so as a way to show themselves and others that they alone control their bodies. Sanders quotes an unnamed tattoo artist that he interviewed: “Tattooing is really just a form of personal adornment. . . . I associate it with ownership. Your body is one of the things you indisputably own, there is a tendency to adorn things that you own to make them especially yours” (51-52). While the desire to claim ownership of one’s body is likely universal, individuals who have had their freedom taken away, or who have not experienced freedom over their bodies in the first place, are especially interested in permanently marking their bodies to show ownership.

Tattoos Show that Convicts Control Their Bodies

As discussed in the previous section, convicts who received involuntary tattoos in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries often covered their state-imposed tattoos with new tattoos. Russian convicts frequently got new tattoos in prison to reinstate ownership of their bodies after the government had marked them. According to Schrader:

By marking their own bodies, they perpetuated older Russian traditions that associated the “juridical mark” and the brand with ownership,

implicitly insisting that they owned their own bodies and consequently that the police were unable to regulate their lives and practices. (189-90)

Similarly, a number of European convicts transported to serve their sentences in other countries, as an alternative to covering their tattoos to avoid identification, embellished their existing tattoos as a statement of ownership over their bodies. Maxwell-Stewart and Duffield tell of a prisoner named Aaron Page who had been branded with a “D” after deserting his military assignment. As he boarded a ship for transportation to his sentence in Nova Scotia, officials noticed Aaron had added a tattoo of a Union Jack flag to the “D” (129). Such tattoo “jokes,” according to Maxwell-Stewart and Duffield, “appear to be about ownership. The state asserted rights over the convict’s body but the convict could always reassert self and agency through tattoos defying that act of expropriation” (129).

Chicano inmates, though not involuntarily tattooed, frequently get tattoos in prison to claim ownership of their bodies as well as to assert their cultural identity. Olguin views *tatuajes* as an expressive form of writing that signifies difference between the Chicano community and the rest of the population and most importantly signifies Chicanos’ “re-articulation as oppositional Subjects with human needs, desires, rights, and above all, counter hegemonic agency” (Olguin 163-64). By tattooing their bodies, Chicanos give themselves a new identity as *Pinto*, an oppositional and not passive subject. Through *tatuajes*, convicts claim control over their bodies. Olguin quotes tattooed former inmate Raphael Salinas:

Similar to the intellectual’s declaration that “you can jail my body but you can’t jail my mind,” the act of tattooing oneself, or soliciting an artist to

tattoo you, is an act of defiance that declares: You can jail my body, but you can't control it; you can put me in solitary as punishment, but you can't take my tattoos away from me. (Olguin 174).

Ownership of the Body in the Postmodern West

While the average citizen in the postmodern world has not been tattooed involuntarily, tattoos are a way to claim ownership of the body at a time when many individuals view the body as “the only truly precious possession we can ever have and know and which is ours to do with as we will” (V. Vale and Andrea Juno, qtd. Benson 244). Permanently marking the body is a way to show ownership; in addition, the very intransience of a tattoo is reassuring in a postmodern society where instability is prevalent, particularly in the economy, which is linked to the ability to acquire personal possessions. According to Benson, “What is distinctive in contemporary tattoo practices is the linking of such assertions of permanence to ideas of the body as property and possession...indeed as the *only* possession of the self in a world characterized by accelerating commodification and unpredictability” (251).

Women's Tattoos Show Ownership

The bodies of women in the Western world have historically been controlled by men—by the woman's father or male family members until she married, and then by the woman's husband after marriage. Braunberger discusses how tattooed women in circus side shows in the late nineteenth century took the first tentative steps of claiming ownership over their bodies and, as a result also earning independence in their financial



Figure 9. Margot Mifflin; Nora Hildebrandt, the first female tattooed circus attraction, early 1880s; *Bodies of Subversion* (New York: Juno Books, 1997) 11; print.

lives (fig. 9). While these women were able to take ownership of their bodies, most did not admit that they did so voluntarily. In order to gain independence and retain their feminine dignity, tattooed circus ladies claimed that they were tattooed against their will. Nearly all of the tattooed female circus performers told a similar tale of “tattoo rape”—of capture and forced tattooing, usually perpetrated by American Indians (Braunberger 9). While tales of tattoo rape were true in some cases, such as in the experience of Olive Oatman, most of these

stories were fabricated. In addition to eliciting pity from the audience, such captivity stories undermined the freedom the tattooed circus ladies gained over their bodies and instead served as “a spectacle of admonition against women having/taking too much physical freedom” (Braunberger 10).

Fabricated tales of tattoo rape also cast women as victims, especially in the light of Cesare Lombroso’s research, which claimed that tattoos were a physical manifestation of a criminal nature. According to Lombroso, all tattooed women were prostitutes, since prostitution was the most common female criminal behavior (Braunberger 10). By taking away their choice to get tattooed and placing it on the “savages” who supposedly kidnapped them, tattooed circus ladies avoided being viewed as degenerates

(Braunberger 10). The stories the tattooed circus ladies told “renounced ownership of their tattoos—and bodies—re-inscribing them as ‘good girls’” (Braunberger 10).

Interestingly, the financial independence achieved by tattooed circus ladies allowed them to have more control over their lives than the typical turn-of-the century woman (Braunberger 12).

At the close of the nineteenth century, as feminism gained momentum, women of the higher socioeconomic classes in Europe and the United States began to get tattoos. With tattooing, women exercised control over their bodies and expressed feminism in contrast with male-imposed standards of beauty, such as the restrictive corset and unwieldy hoop skirt, which emphasized the parts of the body most men found attractive (Mifflin 34). During the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, tattoos became a woman’s statement of ownership over her body (Mifflin 56). At the close of the twentieth century, in addition to expressing female empowerment, Mifflin states that tattoos on women serve as “badges of self-determination at a time when controversies about abortion rights, date rape, and sexual harassment have many women thinking hard about who controls their bodies—and why” (ii). In Atkinson’s analysis of the reasons Canadian women get tattoos at the close of the twentieth century, he quotes a twenty-two-year-old interviewee: “To change Descartes’ terms slightly, “I tattoo, therefore I am.” Personally, I didn’t do any of this [points to tattoos on her arms] for anyone other than myself. When it comes to my body, I make the decisions.” (230).

In the twenty-first century, women who get tattoos, especially numerous tattoos that are not covered by clothing, still face social stigma by other members of society. By

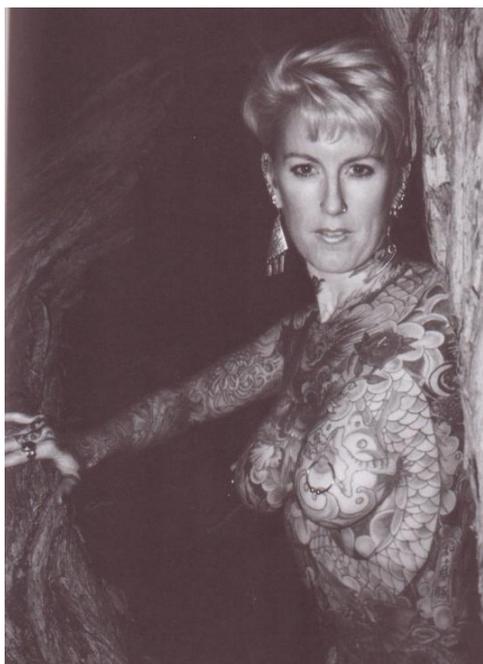


Figure 10. Margot Mifflin; Krystyne Kolorful; n.d.; *Bodies of Subversion* (New York: Juno Books, 1997) 119; print.

defying the social guidelines regarding where to get tattooed and how many tattoos to get, women assert that they control their bodies. Gilbert writes, “According to some postmodern feminist theorists, a woman may become heavily tattooed as an act of empowerment to express her defiance of convention and male domination” (159). One heavily tattooed woman, Krystyne Kolorful (fig. 10), who has tattoos on ninety-five percent of her body, addresses the idea of

of the body when women choose to get tattoos. Heavily tattooed women really confront people with their independence... That’s why women like me took it to the level we did: we wanted to make a really big statement that this is my body and I’m doing with it what I choose” (Mifflin 118). A woman’s sense of owning her body is especially important to women who have endured abuse. Krystyne’s tattoos were also a way of healing from childhood sexual abuse: “Krystyne also used tattooing as a way of writing over the sense of physical violation she’d carried into adulthood, and publicly exorcising it” (Mifflin 121).

Women in Pre-

Modern China

In pre-modern

China—from the third century B.C. until the nineteenth century A.D. — the female body was controlled by male relatives before marriage and by the husband after marriage.

According to Lei, “The Chinese female body can also be understood in light of patriarchy....The female body is to be preserved, to be kept intact for marriage, but not to be marked, displayed, or ‘read’ for significance” (Lei 109). Lei cites examples from Chinese literature of exceptions to the view that women’s bodies should remain unmarked. In each of the examples, a woman marks her own body “to express fidelity to her betrothed/husband,” and these acts serve to reinforce male “ownership” of the female body (Lei 110).

During the pre-modern period in China, tattoos were associated with criminals, outcasts, and the lowest levels of society, while the ability to read and write was associated with “male elite power” (Lei 101). The process of tattooing words onto oneself or using one’s blood to write a text, a ritual known as “blood writing,” combined a “lowly practice (tattooing) and elite power (text)...turning the marking of the body into a virtuous performative act” (Lei 101). Lei discusses how pre-modern Chinese women gained agency over their bodies through the theater by performing roles of “virtuous” women who carried out violence against their own bodies through tattooing themselves and performing blood writing (119). By the role in pre-modern Chinese drama of the actor commenting on the character, the female actor owns her body as she “commits the violence and suffers from it, she does the bodily writing in a beautiful fashion, she directs the gaze and enjoys the sensual object herself, she shifts between identifying with the male viewer and with the female object” (119). As a mediator between the character in the drama and the audience, the woman controls the character’s body as well as the audience’s gaze.

Chicana Tattoos

While it is socially acceptable for Chicanos to get tattooed, the same standard does not apply to Chicanas, who face stigmatization from the public and from their family, if they choose to get tattooed (Santos 104-105). According to Santos, although statistically more Chicanas get tattoos than men, “Chicanos represent the power structure that defines social desirability and aesthetics in decorating the Chicana canvas” (102). Chicanos attempt to control if a Chicana gets tattooed in the first place, the imagery chosen, and the location of the tattoo. Santos states that Chicanos influence the location of a Chicana’s tattoos by encouraging women to get tattooed in areas that are normally covered by clothing. Since women are often viewed as sex symbols, the parts of a woman’s body visible to the public remain unmarked, so that she appears to her family and the public as pure, and the erotic areas of her body are tattooed according to her male partner’s preference in location and imagery (Santos 102). According to Santos, “Overall, Chicanas were expected to get tattoos that would make them more exotic and sexually desirable for men” (103).

Since men typically operate tattoo parlors, and men are usually the tattoo artists, they are also able to control the tattoos on a Chicana’s body. Santos discusses the environment of the tattoo parlors where he conducted his interviews. Each shop had a selection of flash which clients often chose as their tattoo designs. Santos comments, “These male-constructed tattoo designs inform Chicanas about the metrics that shape a classed, gendered, sexed and racialized identity” (101). According to Santos, the flash in Chicano tattoo shops is separated by gender, with designs for male clients on one wall

and designs for female clients on the opposite wall (101). Santos states, “The ‘*hyna* [female] sections’ contain images of roses, suns, and pixies, whereas the ‘*vato* [male] sections’ include images of nude Aztec princesses and *Charras* (Mexican Cowgirls), *pinta* (prison) art, and skulls” (101). According to Santos, “Chicanas who decorate their bodies against artists’ expectations were subjugated through the threat of being labeled a *puta* (whore), *manflora* (lesbian), *jota* (queer), and *machonoo* (masculinist), among other derogatory terms” (103). While conducting interviews, Santos observed Chicano tattoo artists attempting to discourage women from getting tattoos in publicly visible locations on their bodies (103).

Chicanas continue to struggle to claim their bodies as their own and not controlled by their male family members and romantic partners. Santos states:

The act of patronizing tattoo parlors and permanently marking the Chicana canvas means that she is claiming her own body against what others believe should be a normative feminine ideal. These Chicanas are claiming their right to construct their own bodies against this gendered prohibition. (105)

In addition to facing Chicanos’ attempts to control their bodies, Chicanas, as members of a cultural minority, also face expectations placed upon them by the dominant culture. According to Santos, “Chicanas, like other colonized groups, constantly struggle with agents of social control who seek to have power over their bodies. These social pressures exacerbate feelings of estrangement where they experience subordination and the lack of

independence” (93). By exercising control over their bodies through their choice of tattoo imagery and location, Chicanas take ownership of their bodies.

CHAPTER 5

THE BODY AS PROPERTY

While individuals, particularly those marginalized by society, voluntarily get tattoos to show ownership of their bodies, the same individuals can also be marked by a more powerful agent in order to show that they are the property of another. According to Foucault, the body can show one agent's power over another: "Power relations have an immediate hold upon [the body]; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs" (25). The bodies of certain groups of people, whether marked or unmarked, have historically been viewed as property. Prisoners' bodies are deemed state property while women's bodies are often viewed as the property of their families or male romantic partners.

Convicts as Property of the State

Just as farmers branded their animals to indicate who owned the animal, the Russian government branded convicts during the nineteenth century to show that the convict was the property of the state (Schrader 179). The Russian government used the same terminology for branding convicts that they used for stamping currency and official documents (Schrader 180). According to Schrader, the government branded convicts to show that the government permanently owned the individual (180). Even if a branded convict managed to escape or earned freedom after serving his sentence, his body and status were irrevocably fixed as state property.

According to the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, convicted criminals are considered “property of the state” (Olguin 164). Prisoners in the United States who illegally get tattoos in prison or who practice self-mutilation can be disciplined for damaging state property (Govenar 210; Olguin 164). According to Olguin, “Prison officials (mis)classify body tattooing as an illegal form of ‘self mutilation’ and subsequently penalize it as they do all forms of ‘destruction of state property’” (166). Govenar mentions that tattooing in prison must be done in secret and quotes Lawrence Honrada, who served time in New Mexico State Penitentiary in the 1980s: “‘If the guards catch you, they take away that tattoo machine and ink. And if the tattoo gets sore or infected, you might be punished for defiling state property’” (210).

While individuals on the fringes of society in nineteenth century Europe were not branded by the state or labeled as property, the government used the existing tattoos on these individuals to monitor them. In Europe, tattoos were common on individuals that the government sought to observe and manage; such individuals were often on the margins of society and typically did not have large social or familial networks. According to Benson, “the spaces in which European tattooing flourished were precisely those spaces in which the expanding capacities of the nation-state’s will to order and regulate male bodies held most powerful sway: the armed forces, the laboring population, the prison” (238). Benson also mentions the prevalence of tattoos on prostitutes, who can be included in the populations of people the government wished to control (238).

Women as the Legal Property of Men

According to Gilbert, a woman may have various motives for getting tattooed, including expressing her personal freedom, or “because she is dominated by a male who wishes to mark her as his property” (Gilbert 160). Throughout history and in various cultures, women have been viewed as the legal property of men. Cameron discusses the legal practice of writing contracts as opposed to traditional familial heredity and notes that women were considered property in the practice of “tutelage of women” in Europe through the nineteenth century, where a woman was traded as property between families in marriage, moving from her father’s family to her husband’s family (191). The notion of women’s bodies as objects belonging to a man or to an entire community is pervasive and appears in literature as well as in film, where a woman’s body is depicted as a blank canvas to be marked by the man who owns her body; once the woman’s body is marked, she then becomes an object—a document for others to read.

According to Mascia-Lees and Sharpe, “the predominant Western cultural metaphor of writing on the body is one in which the woman is envisioned as the blank page awaiting inscription and the male as the writer” (164). Mascia-Lees and Sharp cite the short story “The Penal Colony” written by Franz Kafka as an example of the hierarchy of body marking: males are tattooed by a bodiless entity, by the “cultural machine” (165). On the other hand, females in literature:

[A]re marked (or unmarked) by the male. The male fears her not because she may inscribe him, but because he thinks she may be freer than he is,

that she may escape the mark that fixed meaning, carry multiple meanings, and thus remain ambiguous....If no story is written by men upon the women's body, she may make up her own that threaten male control.

(Mascia-Lees and Sharpe 165-66)

In China, women's bodies belonged to their fathers before marriage; as the property of her parents, a woman could be forcibly tattooed. Lei analyzes the novel *The Woman Warrior*, written in 1989 by Maxine Hong Kingston, focusing on the forced tattooing of the female warrior Fa Mu Lan by her parents. Lan is tattooed on her back with "oaths and names" so that, her parents tell her, "wherever you go, whatever happens to you, people will know our sacrifice...And you'll never forget either" (Lei 120). Lan essentially becomes a document, the property of her parents. Her tattoo is for others to read and not for her enjoyment (Lei 121). Lei states, "The woman warrior does not own her own body. Her body is claimed by her parents and by her village" (121).

An instance of a woman viewed not only as the property of her husband but also municipal property occurs in the nineteenth century novel *Mr. Meeson's Will* by H. Rider Haggard. In the novel, the body of Augusta, the female protagonist, becomes a legal document after she volunteers to get tattooed with her dying employer's will following their shipwreck on an island. Although Augusta is mistreated by her employer, Mr. Meeson, she chooses to get his will tattooed on her because of her love for Mr. Meeson's nephew Eustace, who marries Augusta at the end of the novel. After disinheriting Eustace, Mr. Meeson has a change of heart after the shipwreck; his updated will tattooed on the back of Augusta's neck reinstates Eustace as his heir. By sacrificing her body and

allowing the will of a man to be permanently inscribed on her body, Augusta provides for her future husband. According to Murphy, “The tattoo marginalizes, controls, and punishes the novel’s main character, a successful woman writer, for appropriating male privilege; by this means, the novel seeks to bind her to the conventional association of femininity with the body rather than the mind” (229). Augusta allows herself to become the recipient of another person’s writing on her body; instead of a writer, she becomes the page.

When Augusta is rescued and returns to England, the validity of the will inscribed on her skin is questioned. In the courtroom, officials debate whether Augusta can act as a witness because she is essentially a document; her tattoo has transformed her into “a readable object without a voice” (Cameron 183). According to Murphy, “In her function as ‘the will,’ Augusta serves as a vessel to transmit male words and is allowed to speak during the trial only to accomplish this task” (243). Since a legal document is public property, Augusta’s body also becomes municipal property as well as a public exhibition as the court examines the tattoo on her body (Murphy 243).

In *Mr. Meeson’s Will*, Augusta’s body is both sexualized and de-sexualized (Murphy 237). Augusta’s body is sexualized by the location of the tattoo—the back of her neck—especially since this is a vulnerable location where she is subject to the gaze of others but cannot look back at them (Murphy 238). At the same time, Augusta is de-sexualized because her body is now viewed as a marred object, permanently owned by one man. According to Murphy, “The desexualization of the tattoo derives, in part, from

its indication of one male's ownership, for Augusta is indelibly marked as Eustace's property" (240).

The model of a woman as an object to be desired and then marked by a man continues into the late twentieth century. In the 1981 movie *Tattoo*, directed by Bob Brooks, tattoo artist Bruce Dern becomes obsessed with fashion model Maud Adams. Dern kidnaps and drugs Adams then covers her body with tattoos while she is unconscious. Dern not only marks Adams' body as his property, he removes Adams' livelihood; she is no longer able to work as a fashion model because of the tattoos he has forced upon her. According to Mascia-Lees and Sharpe, "Dern turns to the woman's body as a site to control the play of the signifier, to dictate who can read it and what it can say" (153).

Women Viewed as Property in the Twenty-First Century

Braunberger discusses how women have remained largely on the sidelines of Western tattoo history, which focuses on tattooed men, particularly sailors and those in the military (4). According to Braunberger, "early efforts to keep women away from tattoo—and then perversely to draw women in—both involved degradation of the female body as a desirable object and a desiring subject" (4). Braunberger gives two examples of society's view of women as both desirable object and desiring subject. The first example is from a rape trial in Boston in the 1920s where the accused rapist was exonerated after it was discovered that the victim had a small tattoo of a butterfly. The rationale for the

acquittal was that the woman was “damaged goods” as rape is about “property rights” (Braunberger 4). The second example is of women in beauty salons in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century who received cosmetic tattoos without their knowledge; the women were led to believe that they were receiving a new beauty treatment and not a permanent tattoo. Braunberger states, “In both of these examples, players in power cast the female body as virtually uninhabited, a shell of skin, desiring only to be desirable, to be raped, to have permanent beauty mysteriously drawn upon it” (5).

The concept of women’s bodies as property of men was still evident in the late 1960s. An article in the magazine *Night and Day* spoke of the “threat” of tattoos on American women, using the analogy of men detailing and decorating their automobiles: “if we did it to our cars, we might easily do it to our women” (Braunberger 15). Braunberger comments, “Tattooing, here, is something men do to women, akin to detailing their cars, an analogy the article opens on. It seems that the implied male audience potentially can control this threat, which threatens them by way of threatening ‘their’ women” (15).

In the twenty-first century, victims of human trafficking are considered the money-making property of the person or gang who owns them and are marked by their owner. According to Liam Vernon, who is head of the United Kingdom Human Trafficking Center, “Put very simply, you brand cattle. And that’s how traffickers view people, as a commodity to buy and sell” (Amako). According to Sandra Johnson, the founder of Ladder of Hope, a North Carolina organization that provides information to

the community about human trafficking and provides aid to victims, “Traffickers use tattoos, a bar code, or another identifying symbol to establish ownership of a person. It is a form of control and to let other traffickers know who that person belongs to” (M. Anderson).

When a woman’s body has been marked as a man’s property, often her ability to survive independently of a man is compromised. In *Mr. Meeson’s Will*, Augusta becomes a passive subject—the page—instead of the writer. Maud in Brooks’ *Tattoo* loses her career as a fashion model after involuntarily receiving her full-body tattoo. In the twenty-first century, human trafficking victims who have been tattooed as the property of a pimp or gang not only face the psychological effects of the permanent reminder of loss of agency over their bodies, they may also have difficulty obtaining a job, particularly if the tattoo is visible. A human trafficking survivor, Andrea, was beaten and forcibly tattooed with the initials of one of the members of the gang who trafficked her. She states, “It didn’t matter what I’d say or do, the tattoo sent a message to everyone that I was owned and was not my own person....And even after I got away from him, I would have people ask me about the tattoo and then ask why I let him do this to me” (Kelly).

Voluntary “Property of” Tattoos on Women

In addition to marking a woman as property, a tattoo can serve as a man’s “stamp of approval” on her body (Mifflin 111). Examples of such “stamp of approval” tattoos are prevalent in the biker community as well as in the Chicano/a community where women commonly wear tattoos proclaiming that they are the “property of” a boyfriend or

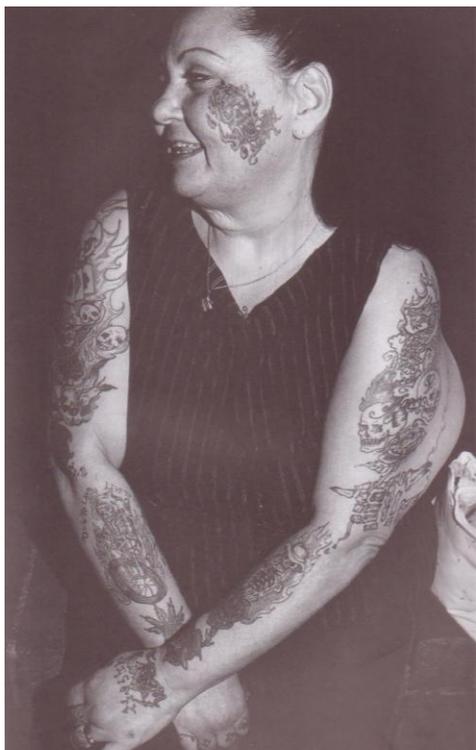


Figure 11. Margot Mifflin; Tattooed Biker at Bus Stop; a “Property of...” tattoo is visible on her left upper arm; photo by Kent Noble; *Bodies of Subversion* (New York: Juno Books, 1997) 112; print.

husband (fig. 11) (Santos 107). As Mifflin states, “One female former biker points out the logic, however, of tattoos that irrevocably connect women--many of whom grew up in dysfunctional or abusive families—to a clan that gives them a sense of belonging” (Mifflin 112). Braunberger discusses “property of” tattoos, worn by many women, indicating that the man’s name tattooed on the women is the man who owns that woman’s body (15-16). Braunberger comments, “while these tattoos signify membership and mark a sense of community, of ‘belonging,’ their larger purpose is to demand a sacrifice of autonomous subjectivity” (16). Braunberger and Atkinson

have noted that often the first question asked of a woman who has gotten a tattoo is what her husband thought of it. Braunberger states, “In the mysteries of tattoo, the proprietorship of the body goes to the one whose approval is sought. By their questions, these women demonstrated that on some level they do not think that [a woman] owns her body, nor do they seem to think that they own theirs” (Braunberger 19). The author of this thesis knows a woman who got her first tattoo on her first date with the man who eventually became her husband. Both the woman and the man had individually contemplated getting tattoos for some time, and both chose imagery that was personally

significant. After talking to each other about their desire to get tattoos, they decided that they should do it together on a date. The week before the scheduled tattoos, the woman traveled to a cousin's wedding. At the wedding reception, she mentioned the planned tattoos to another cousin, and that cousin's first question was if she was getting the man's name tattooed on her body.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

As a tattooed woman in the twenty-first century, I am thankful that I am free to mark, or not mark, my body as I choose. Although I have received a few disparaging comments about my tattoo, mostly by men who have asked why I would permanently mark my body, most reactions to my tattoo have been neutral or approving, likely because I am not heavily tattooed. While society's perception of the tattooed body has improved significantly over the past century, I am aware that freedom over one's body is not experienced by everyone, and especially not by women, who endure pressure from romantic partners, family members, and society to keep the canvases of their bodies unmarked, or marked only to the specifications of someone else.

Through the process of getting tattooed, I have experienced firsthand the almost inexplicable connection between one's skin and soul. For this reason, I have found Gell's theory of the skin as a boundary between a person's soul and body particularly insightful in explaining the metaphysical aspect of tattooing. Tattoos are more than a surface marking; the marks extend into the body and become part of the person. I have also discovered that my tattoo facilitates communication and connection with others, as Sanders described when he stated that tattoos are a form of "social communication" (20). I have had the opportunity to explain what my tattoo means, to those who are interested, and I have connected with other tattooed people because, although our lives are often vastly different, we have a shared experience.

When I chose to get tattooed, I realized that I might encounter criticism for my choice. As a lifelong people-pleaser, this gave me pause, but I determined to continue because my tattoo is personally significant, and to me it is worth any negative comments I might receive. Before I was tattooed, I wondered why individuals would willingly face ostracism for permanently marking their bodies, but my experience aligns with my research—tattoos are reminders of our identity, they are markers of permanence in a world where most things are transient, and they allow even the oppressed to take ownership of their bodies. For these reasons, people with tattoos are willing to face the criticism of others in society.

The aim of my research for this thesis was to present information on the power of indelibly marking one's skin. While a discussion of involuntary tattooing may seem to undermine my goal of improving the perception of tattoos, I believe that the very use of tattooing as an instrument of harm testifies to its significance as an expressive art form. If tattoos were insignificant marks on the surface of the skin, individuals and governing bodies would not go through the trouble of forcibly tattooing others. Involuntary tattooing takes away a person's agency and demoralizes the victim; physical wounds eventually heal and fade, but an involuntary tattoo is a permanent reminder of the loss of control over one's body. Tattooing remains a double-edged sword: an art form that has the potential to either hurt or heal an individual, depending on who wields the sword. Those who have been wounded through involuntary tattooing have also found restoration through tattooing by covering unwanted tattoos with imagery that represents their newfound freedom.

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