

A Negotiated Rebellion: Conformity and Resistance in Women's Tattooing Practices

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ABSTRACT

A Negotiated Rebellion: Conformity and Resistance in Women's Tattooing Practices

Jessica Antony

Tattooing has enjoyed a resurgence of popularity in contemporary Western culture as of late, although it is hardly a new phenomenon. Appropriating the practice from those encountered by the Europeans on land-claiming voyages as far back as the 1600s, Westerners have used tattooing to represent their identities in one form or another—military and naval loyalty, patriotism, exotic entertainment, and subcultural affiliation. For women in particular, tattoos have functioned in a unique way, from marking the eroticized Other in the circus sideshows of the early 1900s, to a means of reclaiming their bodies in the 1970s. Feminist literature surrounding the theories of the body provides some insight into the ways in which women's bodies and identities are constructed, and how tattooing informs those constructions. The purposes of this research are to investigate the reasons why women tattoo their bodies, how women's tattoos intersect with body image and gender politics, and the impact of tattooing on women's self-identification and their relations with others, given tattooing's political underpinnings. I argue that although tattoos seem to represent permanency—they are, after all, permanent marks on the skin—they are in fact fluid in the ways in which we understand them, the meanings they hold for us, and what they say about us. What results is a type of *negotiated rebellion*: tattooing is a negotiated form of rebellion given the nuances and complexities of the issues that tattooed women face, namely, the struggle for authenticity within an increasingly commodified practice and the gendered nature of tattooing.

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INTRODUCTION

BECOMING A TATTOOED WOMAN

I graduated from high school in 1999 and that fall, at 18 years old, I travelled to Australia by myself in search of independence, excitement, and a means by which to discover what it is that I wanted to do with the rest of my life. While I was in Sydney for the 2000 Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, I decided to get my first tattoo. I wanted to mark my trip and I saw a tattoo as a permanent, personal way to do that. I walked down the street from my hostel and, at a little shop that the hostel manager had recommended, had two small stars tattooed under my collarbone.

That experience led to a fascination with tattooing and tattoos, as I now have five more tattoos in addition to my original stars. One of my more involved pieces of body art—and the largest—is a phoenix covering half of my left arm. This piece took over a year to complete and has given me not only a greater appreciation for the artwork and talent involved in tattooing, but has also allowed me a window through which to view the socio-political ideas regarding women, tattoos, and women with tattoos. After having the outline of this piece tattooed onto my arm, I was struck at first by a sense of shock—shock that I had been able to sit through it, and shock that I was now visibly marked. I noticed immediately that based on whether or not I chose to display my tattoo, people's reactions to me were different than before. Having such a large piece (as well as having such a beautiful piece done by a very talented artist) on my arm had the effect of shifting my identity in a number of ways. At the time it was a symbol of rebellion, of resistance, and it simply made me feel distinct from the average early-twenties woman. When

people saw that I was (somewhat) heavily tattooed, I felt that they knew immediately that my politics and ideals were counter to the mainstream. While these feelings may not be representative of what the average person thinks upon seeing a heavily tattooed woman, this is the conclusion that I came to based on my own interpretations of women with large tattoos.

Being tattooed in such a way, I was overwhelmed at times with feelings of panic (and an accompanying sense of shame regarding that panic) as I felt the need to overcompensate my femininity to counteract what I saw (and, I suppose, what I thought others saw) as a 'masculine' design tattooed on my arm. I found myself wearing more pink, paying more attention to the way my hair was styled and the makeup I wore, and at times choosing to cover my tattoo. I have always struggled with body image, and as a result I have often felt the need to exaggerate my femininity to compensate for the ways in which my body does not conform to the normalized feminine ideal (thin body, glowing skin, small stature). My tattoo, in some ways, acted against my often-unconscious desires to appear as close to this feminine ideal as I could.

It took me a while to reconcile my tattooed body with my self-identification, and there are still times when I choose to cover my phoenix tattoo; however, I am no longer conflicted with a sense of lost femininity. Nevertheless, my own experience leads me to ponder the ways in which other women may negotiate their identity in relation to being tattooed.

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate these issues. I interviewed eighteen tattooed women in an effort to explore the ways in which gender politics and body image intersect with women's tattooing practices in North America. How do women

understand and construct their identities, their tattoos, and their tattooed bodies in a culture where tattooing is becoming increasingly acceptable? How do women work within—and against—the gendered nature of tattooing in their decision to be permanently inked?

The central theme that guides this investigation is the struggle between conformity and resistance. In coming to this project I viewed conformity and resistance as binary opposites. I saw women's conformity as simply the submission to the dominant forms of femininity and, for lack of a better term, 'fashionability' in the context of tattooing. Resistance, then, to me, involved women's acknowledgement—and outright refutation—of gender norms and popular notions about tattooing. Through this project I have learned that these concepts are more complex and nuanced; they are not the binary constructions that I had once imagined. *Conformity* does come into play given that the practice of tattooing has become a mainstream commodity and that there are pressures on women to subscribe to hegemonic constructions of femininity when they engage in the gendered practice of tattooing. At the same time, *resistance* features in the ways in which women respond to the popularization of tattooing as a practice in contemporary Western culture, as well as the de-feminization and ultra-feminization that many tattoo designs and placements have come to represent. In the context of identity formation, I have come to see resistance as more accurately described as a form of 'reinvention,' as women endeavour to construct (and reconstruct) their sense of self through the practice of tattooing. One way of conceptualizing this interplay of conformity and resistance/reinvention is to foreground the issue of *authenticity* in the construction of identity. As I've come to understand it, authenticity conveys a number of things in

relation to the gendered practice of tattooing, particularly: a personal commitment to the culture of tattooing, sincerity, legitimacy, originality, and a unique sense of self or identity. In these terms, women may engage in conformity through the act of tattooing at the same time as they endeavour to reinvent their sense of self or identity.

In short, in responding to the question of how women construct their own tattoo projects I argue that although tattoos seem to represent permanency—they are permanent marks on the skin—they are in fact fluid in the ways in which we understand them, the meanings they hold for us, and what they say about us. What results is a type of *negotiated rebellion*: tattooing is a negotiated form of rebellion given the nuances and complexities of the issues that tattooed women face, namely, the struggle for authenticity within an increasingly commodified practice and the gendered nature of tattooing. Despite the myriad ways that women use tattooing and understand tattooing, as a form of rebellion it is necessarily negotiated. Rebellion is not whole, but rather a give and take; not totalizing, but rather strategic and relational. In sum, through my conversations with tattooed women and with the support of the tattoo literature, I have found that tattooing is a sign of how people engage in a negotiated form of rebellion.

The Study

With the increase in the practice of tattooing in Western societies such as ours, it is important to ask whether and how women's identities and social status are changed as a result of their decision to be tattooed, more specifically, how women negotiate the balance between conformity and reinvention when they decide to get a tattoo. In order to answer these questions, I set out to interview twelve to fifteen tattooed women—those

who are heavily tattooed or who have only one or a few tattoos, and women of a wide range in age.

Sample Selection

I was born and raised in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and I am somewhat familiar with the tattoo scene, having been tattooed in Winnipeg myself and knowing a large number of people who are tattooed and living there, so I decided to conduct my research in Winnipeg. I chose interviewing as my methodology as I believe that talking to tattooed women themselves is the most effective means of eliciting what constructed meanings women associate with their tattoos, how women talk about their tattoos, and why they decide to get tattooed. Literature on women's tattooing practices suggests that tattoos weigh heavily on a woman's sense of identity (see, for example, Atkinson 2003 and Pitts 2002); however, during previous pilot studies I conducted, my conversations with women suggested that, for some, tattooing did not have a major influence on their sense of identity. Talking with women, rather than focusing solely on text (such as in discourse analysis) allows for the opportunity to respond reflexively to the ways in which women talk about their tattoos and the stories they tell about their tattoos, and ultimately to dig deeper into their interpretations of tattooing. This approach allowed me to explore a variety of views on the practice and its constructed meanings, rather than coming to a positivist 'truth' (Ciclitira 2004; Golombsky 2006; Moloney 2007; Hurd 1998). As well, and in keeping with feminist research methods, interviewing was particularly important for my research as it is consistent with my interest in avoiding control over the participants. Interviewing, as Shulamit Reinharz (1992: 19) notes, allows "access to

people's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher." Open-ended interviews, in particular, allowed the opportunity for the discussion to grow and develop in areas that I had not anticipated, ultimately allowing "the research question, not the method, to drive the project forward" (Reinharz 1992: 22).

I started out by interviewing friends of mine who are tattooed—both those who are heavily tattooed and those with only one, as well as the newly tattooed and those who have had them for several years. My plan was to use snowball sampling to find enough women for my research. To supplement this strategy, I put up a poster in a local tattoo shop advertising my research and asking interested women to contact me. I did not receive the response I had hoped for from the poster, so when a friend who I had interviewed suggested that I try using Facebook to advertise for interview participants, I decided to try this strategy.

I set up the group, called "Jessica Needs Your Help," on Facebook in the Winnipeg, MB network. The group description outlined my thesis research, asking any interested tattooed women in Winnipeg to contact me either through Facebook's private messaging service or through my own email address. In addition to information about my thesis project and my personal email address, the group includes "related groups" (which are all other groups of which I am a member), a discussion board, a list of the group's twenty six members, and a "Wall" on which people can post anything they like. After creating the group, I invited people to join—those who are listed as my Friends, who live in Winnipeg, and who I thought might be interested. I asked these people to share the group's information with anybody they thought might be interested in participating.

I received instant results. Within the first five days I made contact with eight women, setting up interviews or making other arrangements with all but one of them. In total, I received responses from eighteen women, fifteen of whom I made appointments with, and twelve of whom I ended up interviewing. The huge response was unexpected, and a bit overwhelming at first, but made the research process incredibly easy, and a lot quicker than it would have gone had I relied on word of mouth, or the poster I put up in the tattoo parlour in downtown Winnipeg.

Because I had invited my “Facebook Friends” to join the group I had set up in order to find interested tattooed women to interview, I thought I might only receive responses from volunteers that I am in some way connected to, given Facebook’s ‘network’-style construction. I was, however, able to reach individuals with whom I had no connection, and some who do not even live in Winnipeg, as those who joined the group shared my request for participants with friends and co-workers who are not members of the site or who live in other cities. Of those that joined the group, six are people that I did not previously know. Of the respondents found through Facebook, only one was a person to which I have any connection—a woman I went to high school with.

The women I interviewed ranged in age from 21 to 54 and had as little as one and as many as nine tattoos. Three of the women I made contact with submitted their responses to my questions via email, as they were living outside of Winnipeg at the time. The overwhelming majority of the women I spoke with are white, while one woman is Aboriginal (see Appendix A).

The Interview Process

Each interview or, perhaps more precisely, discussion, took between thirty minutes and an hour and each was, with the consent of the participant, digitally recorded. Prior to each interview, participants were asked to read, agree to, and sign a consent form (see Appendix B), and were reminded of their right to withdraw from answering any and all questions at any point during the interview, without penalty. Participants were reminded that they could choose to not have the recorder operating (in which case I would have taken detailed notes) and could request to have it turned off at any point during the interview. Finally, participants were made aware of my intent to publish the research findings.

I met with each woman in a place of their choosing—a coffee shop, restaurant, my home, or their home. I asked them questions regarding the number, design, and location of their tattoo(s), what influenced them to decide to be tattooed, what having a tattoo means to them, how family and friends have responded to the tattoo(s), occasions when they make the decision to hide or display their tattoos, and how having a tattoo has altered their body image (see Appendix C). The discussions were conducted according to a semi-structured schedule of questioning, keeping in mind a general sense of direction and area of investigation that I was interested in exploring; however, allowing the women the opportunity to discuss any issues they felt were important or any issues that I had perhaps overlooked provided a richer set of data to work with (see Ciclitira 2004, Golombsky 2006, Moloney 2007, Hurd 1998, and Reinhartz 1992). After each interview, I asked permission from the women to photograph their tattoos. The accurate description of what are often unique and intricate tattoo designs is difficult to achieve through text

and, as such, photographs do them better justice. Because the design and placement are important factors with regard to acceptance, presumptions, and the interpreted 'identity' of a tattooed individual, it is important to be able to *see* the tattoos to better situate the responses of the women interviewed. I have photographs of the majority of the tattoos of the women I interviewed (see pages 64—67).

Data Analysis

Once the interviews were transcribed, they were examined for what they revealed, the central tension between the theme of the struggle between conformity and reinvention, with a focus on body image as a factor in identity construction, and the association between women's tattooing practices and issues of authenticity and meaning. I also paid attention to any emergent themes that appeared, such as ownership over one's body, stereotypes, tattooing as a trend or fad, and the internalization of memories. The literature on tattooing places a great deal of significance on the tattoo as a driving force of identity construction, so I kept in mind the discrepancy I found during earlier pilot studies between the literature and the responses of tattooed women.

Furthermore, the negotiation between acceptably feminine tattoos and those that do not conform to hegemonic constructions of femininity is one to which I paid attention when analyzing and interpreting the responses from the women interviewed. Particularly, I was interested in whether or not the literature is accurate in its portrayal of the seemingly precarious balance between conformity and non-conformity, and the social repercussions for women who choose to have 'masculine' tattoos, a non-normative number of tattoos, or chose non-normative placements for their tattoos. Do women use

tattoos as a means of transgression? Is the permanent tattooing of the skin seen as a meaningful, political bodily expression? How much of an influence do those around the women—be it friends and family or culturally prescribed norms—have on their decision to be tattooed? Additionally, in what ways do tattoos alter a woman's body image? Do reactions from other individuals affect a tattooed woman's body image, and in what ways?

After each interview I took notes on a few key points that emerged from each discussion. I read through each interview after it was transcribed—some of which I transcribed myself, others I had transcribed for me—to refresh my memory of the conversation I had with each woman, and then re-read each interview in order to single out themes and unanticipated issues or comments. While I had structured each interview in a similar direction, asking questions that focused on specific themes, I often found new and interesting issues in reading the transcripts that I had not anticipated in the beginning stages of my research. The women, then, played a huge role in how the project unfolded.

In writing the results, I chose not to use pseudonyms to identify each of the participants, as each woman indicated that she was comfortable with my using her real name.

Chapter Breakdown

My discussion and exploration of the main themes of the study is broken down into three chapters. In Chapter One I look back on the historical and theoretical context within which contemporary tattooing resides. This includes a chronological history of Canadian and U.S. tattooing from its introduction by explorers and the foundational theories of the

body, gender, and identity construction that inform my analyses in the subsequent chapters. It is important to consider this history and theory as they are essential to understanding the ways in which the women I spoke with told the story of their tattoos—tattoo narratives, much like any discourse, are shaped and informed by a larger historical and theoretical discourse context—and made cultural connections to their tattoos.

Chapter Two focuses on the themes of authenticity and meaning in exploring the ways in which tattoo discourse has changed and evolved over time, and how that change is reflected in each woman's ability to adapt her tattoo narrative to the social and historical context of the moment. The main finding that emerges from this chapter is that through constructing narratives around their tattoos, the women I spoke with were able to make connections between their tattoos and a larger history, ultimately reconciling the tension they face between conformity and resistance.

In Chapter Three I focus on the themes of femininity and gendering the tattoo, and examine the ways in which the women I spoke with reconcile their tattoos with ideal forms of femininity. I found that it is through rejecting, embracing, or negotiating the boundaries of the gendered nature of tattoos that these women walked the balance between conformity and resistance—a negotiated rebellion.

Finally, the Conclusion ties my analyses together, reinforcing the overarching theme of negotiated rebellion that the women I spoke to engaged in through their tattoo projects. I also reflect in more detail on my use of Facebook as a methodological tool as well as the ways in which my own understandings of tattooing have changed as a result of this project.

CHAPTER ONE

HISTORICIZING AND THEORIZING THE TATTOO

Tattooing has enjoyed a resurgence of popularity in contemporary Western culture as of late, although, as I will discuss in this chapter, it is hardly a new phenomenon. For women in particular, tattoos have functioned in a unique way, from marking the eroticized Other in the circus sideshows of the early 1900s to a means of reclaiming their bodies in the 1970s. Feminist theories of the body provide insight into the ways in which women's bodies and identities are constructed, and how tattooing informs those constructions. Within this literature, which draws from the psychoanalytic theories of the skin, the body is understood as a site of inscription on which culture acts and is read. The female body and, more precisely, the tattooed female body, is read from the perspective of a male gender model—one which sees femininity as Other and the female body as the sexed body. In order to understand the ways in which the women I spoke with make sense of their own tattoos and the difficulties they face in light of their tattooing projects, it is necessary to understand not only the foundational theories of the body, identity construction, and gender that inform and upon which I base my analysis, but also the historical context within which these tattooed bodies exist. In situating the discussions I had with tattooed women within a larger historical and theoretical context, we can better understand the connections that the women are making with tattooing's past, their own understandings of their tattooed bodies, and the ways in which contemporary discourse surrounding tattooing and women's bodies inform their own tattoo stories.

Historical Context

Tattooing is a practice that reaches back thousands of years and can be found in nearly all parts of the world at some time (Caplan 2000: xi). Reaching back to colonial times, Westerners have had contact with cultures that revered tattooing. These practices eventually found their way into Canadian and U.S. culture.

Colonial Exposure

North American (colonial) tattooing is rooted in the sea voyages of early European travelers of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Explorers to the South Pacific came into contact with the tattooed ‘Other’ in Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia. While Europeans had experienced tattooing among other cultures as early as the 1600s, it was James Cook who first documented the “pervasiveness of ‘tattooing’ (a derivation of the Tahitian term *ta-tu* or *tatau*) among South Pacific cultures” (Atkinson 2003: 31).¹

European explorers’ exposure to tattooed tribal natives had a profound effect—the explorers considered the tattooed natives to be savage and queer, and saw tattooing as a frightening foreign ritual. Native peoples were captured and transported back to Europe with the explorers as “living evidence of primitivism in the New World” (Atkinson 2003: 31). Sold and paraded through European museums and dime shows, these individuals—women especially—were seen by Europeans as the “radical self-expression, physical vanity, and exuberant sexuality they had denied themselves ... in the service of their restrictive deity” (Atkinson 2003: 31). Many Natives were baptized and given new,

¹ It is important to note here that Europe has its own rich history of tattooing among the Celts, the Picts, and others. See Caplan 2000 for more on Europe’s history of tattooing.

Christian names, in an attempt to liberate them “from their ‘spiritual and physical slavery’” (Oettermann 2000: 195). Many European sailors returned home decorated with tattoos, exposing the upper and middle classes of European society to the practice, and arguably “reaffirming [their] understanding of their own cultural advancement and progress, as the outwardly uncontrolled libidinal bodies of ‘backward’ tribal cultures of the world articulated a brutality long overcome in Western cultures” (Atkinson 2003: 31).

The practice among South Pacific Islanders changed too, as a result of colonizers’ visits. Tattoo designs soon came to include images such as ships, flags, guns, cannons, and even portraits of European royalty. Their meanings, as well, shifted, too. For example, Hawaiian tattoos were once thought to protect the person from harm but after the introduction of guns and other weapons the significance of protective tattooing dwindled away. The Maori of New Zealand have traditionally tattooed their faces as a sign of status and lineage; however, after European explorers and colonizers began trading goods for the tattooed heads they found so fascinating, the Maori stopped tattooing their faces in fear of being decapitated (Atkinson 2003: 32; Govenar 2000: 213).



Major General Horatio Robley with the heads of Maori men
Source: www.vanishingtattoo.com/tattoo_museum

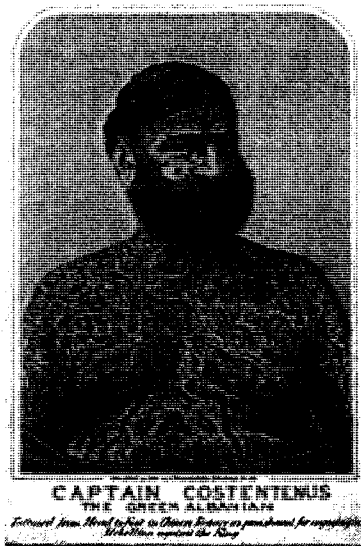
During this period, Europeans saw tattooing as both fascinating and deplorable—a paradox of sorts—and interpreted the tattooed body as a source of exotic entertainment. Sailors tattooed their bodies as both a keepsake of their overseas adventures and as a form of excitement, setting themselves apart from the majority in European society. With more and more sailors coming home with cultural inscriptions permanently marked on their bodies, tattooing started to creep into mainstream European culture, and eventually (colonial) North American culture (Atkinson 2003: 33). In 1876 at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, some of the first tattooed native peoples were put on display for the enjoyment and wonder of the audience. Even as members of the Navy were coming home adorned with tattoos, the majority of European and North American society had little to no knowledge of the practice.

Circus Culture

During the late 1800s and through to the 1920s the tattooed human sideshow gained popularity, eventually establishing itself as a permanent attraction in carnivals and circuses (Atkinson 2003; Govenar 2000; Oettermann 2000). Natives, usually taken as slaves from their home countries by explorers and colonizers, were most often used in the tattoo attractions of the circus and sideshow. They were generally used in combination with wild animals and other exotic attractions, furthering the notion of tattooing as a representation of the savage tribal world.

One of the most famous tattoo attractions in North America was a Greek man named Alexandrino, made famous by P.T. Barnum, and known in North America as Prince Constantine, Prince Constantenus, Captain Constantenus, or ‘The Turk’

(Oettermann 2000: 200). Allegedly having over three hundred and eighty tattoos, Prince Constantine was a star in the circus/dime museum network, making nearly one hundred dollars a week as a tattooed exhibit—people became fascinated not only with the Burmese-style tattoos that covered his body, but also with his incredible stories of treasure seeking, arms trading, and his eventual capture. His fame fostered the fascination with tattoos of many North Americans, especially members of the Navy and tattoo artists (Mifflin 1997; Atkinson 2003).



Prince Constantine

Source: www.vanishingtattoo.com/tattoo_museum

Taking their cue from the success of tattooed sideshow performers, tattooed Navy servicemen coming back from overseas started to exhibit themselves in traveling circuses and sideshows. Part of the attraction, however, was the notion of a savage native from a foreign land covered in frightening markings. As the Navy men were obviously of European heritage, they concocted elaborate back-stories to accompany their exhibitions. Many would claim to have been captured by savages and tattooed against their will, thus perpetuating the notion of tattooing as the frightening ritual of an uncivilized Other

(Atkinson 2003). Many of the first of these life-stories were mimicks of the real life story of Olive Oatman, a 13-year-old girl who was sold to a group of Mohave Indians after her family was attacked by a band of Yavapi on the westward trail in 1851. Olive and her younger sister were held by the Mohave group until government officials, in 1856, saw her and identified her as ‘a white’ near Fort Yuma, and seized her back. She was found with the typical facial tattoos of the Mohave woman—“five vertical lines with two or three triangular designs on the two outer lines” (Oettermann 2000: 201). Olive’s story was published and sold in unison with a “lecture trip” that she made across the United States, exhibiting her as the victim and prisoner of the savage Indians (Oettermann 2000).



Olive Oatman

Source: <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=1855>

Along with the demand to see tattooed bodies was the demand for tattoo artists. The sideshow circuit provided the opportunity for tattooists to make a living marking the skin of the ‘exhibits’; tattooists often traveled with the sideshow from town to town. By 1932, for example, there were approximately three hundred completely tattooed men and women traveling with circuses and carnivals and dime museums exhibiting themselves

across the U.S., and tattooists would add more tattoos as the performers traveled from one town to the next (Govenar 2000:221). The community of tattooed people that developed out of this profession of sorts gave way to a well-developed private communications network—tattooists and tattooed men and women would share information about equipment, designs, and good or bad places to work. In this regard, tattooing, and particularly tattooing in the sideshow circuit, provided the foundation for establishing lines of communication between otherwise marginalized individuals (Govenar 2000).

The designs that were popular largely consisted of patriotic symbols, religious imagery, and erotic illustrations of women. These designs, Alan Govenar (2000: 217) argues, constituted a “folk art form” generated by word of mouth and imitation. This “folk art” provides, to some extent, insight into the cultural context of the time, as tattoo artists were necessarily aware of the demands of their audience. The social coercion that the designs adhered to promoted not only conformity but tradition, thus serving as a visual representation of important symbols of the day. Primarily patriotic and religious, these designs communicated loyalty, devotion, and (oddly enough) conservative morals (Govenar 2000).

By the end of the 1930s tattoo exhibits were becoming less exciting and exotic as more and more people were becoming tattooed and exposed to tattoos. Tattooed performers then had to develop more elaborate back stories to entice their audiences—such as the “abducted farmer’s daughter” who was tattooed against her will—and women, in particular, found it necessary to dress more provocatively in order to maintain the interest of the audience. As tattoos became more common, sideshow audiences

turned to the circus for entertainment. To attract audiences, women took centre stage as tattooed attractions—women who were often the wives and girlfriends of tattooists, or simply lured into the profession with the promise of fame and fortune (Atkinson 2003: 35). The show then became somewhat pornographic, as women would take the stage and strip before the crowd, displaying their tattooed bodies. These shows became some of the most popular midway shows through to the 1940s.

The introduction of tattoos into the carnival and sideshow exhibitions ultimately served as a means of exploring “culturally repressed desires and emotions” (Atkinson 2003: 36) in a controlled way. Tattoos were seen as a form of deviance and tattooed bodies were considered savage and frightening. The sideshows provided the means for “North Americans to experience subversive pleasures with and tortures of the flesh without sacrificing commonly held cultural understandings of corporeal respectability” (Atkinson 2003: 36). This era firmly established the association between tattooing and social deviance, a particularly important connection to note as this association has carried through to the conversations I had with tattooed women.

Working Class Involvement

During the off-season, tattooists traveling with sideshows would set up shop in city centres that were frequented by transients. Downtown areas in major North American cities slowly became a hotspot for tattoo parlours—frequented by “carnival workers, servicemen, criminals, social outcasts, and pseudo-tough guys” (Atkinson 2003: 36). The tattoo parlour became a meeting place for the marginalized classes, and tattoos were embraced by the working and lower classes as symbols of (heterosexual) masculinity and

hyper-nationalism. Tattooists started to develop their own style—now known as ‘traditional’— around this time, which included patriotic images, military designs, pin-up girls, memorials in hearts and banners, skulls, and daggers.

Canadian tattooing during this period matched the developments in the United States, specifically in that tattoos were least stigmatized in the working class culture. For these working class individuals, tattoos represented an “embraced sense of jingoism” (Atkinson 2003: 37) and were a sign to others of national pride (Atkinson 2003; Govenar 2000). A form of group expression, tattooing was almost seen as normative among servicemen and the working class. The next decade, however, saw a shift in the ideology of tattooing.

Tattoos as Disreputable and Deviant

Returning home after the Second World War, servicemen found that their once symbolically patriotic tattoos held a great deal of negative social value. The significance once associated with tattooing started to diminish, and by 1946 new recruits were no longer interested in becoming tattooed. Tattoos were even restricted in the military in the 1950s—if they limited the effectiveness of a man’s ability to work (due to infection, for example), he would be prosecuted. In the context of the increasingly urban, family-centered nature of North American culture in the 1950s, tattoos were once again associated with disrepute and deviance. Societal values shifted toward material comfort and middle class conformity, and tattoos were strongly identified as lower class, criminal phenomena. Once a symbol of group expression and national pride, tattoos were now interpreted as a widespread sign of criminality (Govenar 2000).

Those who embraced tattoos during this period often used them as a sign of “social protest or political dissent” (Atkinson 2003: 38). Among prisoners, for example, designs developed to distinguish ‘convicts’ (those who accept and embrace their status as criminal) from ‘inmates’ (those who resist negative labeling), thus creating specific identities and links within the prison institutions. Oftentimes gang affiliation would be tattooed on the skin; at this point tattooing became no longer a white phenomenon, as Latino, Native American, and African American individuals also participated in the practice. At the same time, motorcycle gangs became involved in tattooing, using it as a way to communicate rank and status within a particular motorcycle club. Due to the popularity of tattoos among motorcycle gangs, a widespread moral panic developed in the public media regarding tattoos as an indication of criminal behaviour. Bikers were largely known for their wild, violent, and law-breaking behaviour, and since one of the most immediately identifiable characteristics of a biker was his or her tattoos, tattoos then became “culturally decoded as a visible indicator of one’s predisposition to crime” (Atkinson 2003: 41).

Furthering the association of tattoos with deviance was the growing popularity of tattoos with radical youth subcultures in the 1960s. Used as a representation of collective belonging, youth subcultures (such as Rockabilly, Greasers, Rockers, and urban youth gangs) appropriated tattoos as “part of rejecting class-based social norms, values, and beliefs” (Atkinson 2003: 41). During a time marked by highly conservative morals and values, youths used tattoos to distinguish themselves from and reject mainstream values. Along with these new uses came new designs that reflected the political climate at the time. New, younger tattooists saw the need for organization as a professional group—

tattooing was seen as highly deviant and dangerous, and tattooists' appeals for ethical or medical standards were largely ignored. Tattoos were now perceived by those who celebrated the art as marks of inclusion, "a normative and culturally celebrated means of establishing one's status within a culture" (Atkinson 2003: 42). The rest of society, however, saw them merely as voluntary marks of deviance (Govenar 2000).

Radical Shifts: Contemporary Commodification

The political upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s brought with it a shift in the popular conception of tattooing. Women, in particular, began to question and fight normative notions of femininity and gender roles, resurrecting tattoos as a means of redefining themselves as women. Women, as Margot Mifflin (1997: 56) explains,

Began casting off their bras as they had their corsets a half-century earlier, tattoos were rescued from ignominy and resurrected in the counterculture by women who were rethinking womanhood. The arrival of the Pill in 1961 had given women a new sexual freedom; a little over a decade later legalized abortion secured their reproductive rights. Not surprisingly, the breast became a popular spot for tattoos—it was here that many women inscribed symbols of their newfound sexual independence.

With the swell of popularity—especially among women—in tattooing, the middle classes began to become involved in the historically marginalized practice. Cultural icons such as musicians and actors started to embrace the practice, thus enticing young middle class individuals to follow suit. While the popularity of the practice was already entrenched among the marginalized classes, the 1960s and 70s saw an increase in popularity among a more privileged class, introducing it to the mainstream and drawing widespread attention to the practice. The designs that had held up since the early 1900s, however, were no longer of interest to young people. Not able to identify with the

extremely patriotic imagery, they demanded more customized, personal images, which opened up the art to the appropriation of designs from other cultures. Tattoo artists as a whole also became a more educated, artistic group in keeping with the demand for more complicated, personalized designs. Young tattoo artists began to see tattooing as a representation of identity, “treating the body as less and less of a canvass to be filled with tattoos and more as an integral part of the self, the young middle-class insurgence into the tattoo artist profession redefined many of the old ideologies held strongly in the trade” (Atkinson 2003: 45). Artists experimented with different styles and shops moved from the urban ghetto to the youth centres of the city.

The 1970s and 1980s saw more people than ever before embrace tattooing as a form of self-expression. As Michael Atkinson (2003: 46) explains:

Influenced by political movements that shook conservative understandings of the body to the ground, interpretations of tattoos were more varied and subject to contextual construction. As women and more ‘respectable’ social classes participated in tattooing it transformed into a practice of political identity construction.

By the 1990s tattoos had become mainstream phenomena, with scores of tattoo shops cropping up in many major North American cities. In the present context, therefore, artists must now be able to adapt to new styles, designs, and needs of their customer base. New methods of communication have brought a whole new dimension to the tattoo industry, with tattoo magazines, websites, message boards, and online communities developing and flourishing, bringing artists and enthusiasts alike together “into an information-rich community of social actors” (Atkinson 2003: 48). As people are now able to learn more about the process of tattooing via online resources, as well as

communicate with tattoo enthusiasts around the world, more and more people are being drawn into the practice as both tattoo artists and tattooees.

As tattooing becomes more and more a mainstream phenomenon, the ability to decipher a tattooed body's authentic membership in a particular subculture, while once quite apparent, now becomes an exercise in futility. As a mainstream phenomenon, tattoos have become commodified—a trend, an immediate mark of individuality that can be bought and sold. Nevertheless, tattoos still serve as a popular means of communication. *What* they communicate, however, is indeed more difficult to determine.

Theorizing the Body, Identity Construction, and Gender

The ways in which the body is understood and represented in contemporary culture is important to the ways in which we make sense of and talk about tattooing. Theories of the body, identity construction, and gender inform my analyses of the conversations I had with tattooed women, and are thus necessary to review.

The body is an important vehicle in identity construction; it is a text on which culture is written. Sociologist Erving Goffman claimed that the body is a dramaturgical tool for performing a self that has no essential ontology or core (Pitts 2003: 25). The body, it can be argued, is malleable—a communicative tool for producing and ordering the self. It is, however, always open to history and culture, and is thus always changing and shifting to allow for the necessary and inevitable historical changes and shifts. As Victoria Pitts (2003: 29) explains, contextually situated in a culture, place, space, and time, the body “is positioned in multiple ways, including as a site for establishing identity

that is read by the self and others; as a space of social control and social investments; and as an ever-emerging, unfinished materiality that gains meaning through various forms of symbolic representation and material practice.”

The positioning of one’s body, particularly in relation to others, is of chief importance in the construction of individual identity. In this regard, one’s personal sense of uniqueness is created in relation to the ideologies, practices, and identities of those around him or her. Individuality, then, is only created in a group setting, and is established in differentiation from others (Atkinson 2003: 202). As Michael Atkinson explains (2002: 209), “the self is formed through reflection on verbal and physical feedback offered by others in situated contexts of interaction over time.”

A particularly useful concept in the examination of identity construction is Norbert Elias’ notion of the “habitus.” Elias argues that personality structures, or figurations, are the “complex web of social relationships” (Atkinson 2003: 6) and interdependencies that bind humans together, and that individuals are “best understood as mutual (but not necessarily equal) relationships” (Atkinson 2003: 6). These personality structures are socially learned and make up our ‘second nature’ or habitus—it is through “ongoing socialization processes [that] individuals learn seemingly taken-for-granted ways (i.e. habits) of experiencing, utilizing, and interpreting their bodies” (Atkinson 2003: 8). As Elias (1994: 214) explains, “since people are more or less dependent on each other; first by nature and then by social learning, through education, socialization, and socially generated reciprocal needs, they exist, one might venture to say, only as pluralities, only in figurations.” The habitus, then, is both culturally and socially specific,

and is subject to change and transformation over time in ways that may not necessarily be intended by the individual.

Much like the way that identity construction is informed and influenced by those around us—by our social interactions—gender construction takes place along similar, albeit more specific lines. According to Judith Butler (2004: 1), gender is “a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint.” ‘Performing’ one’s gender is complex and nuanced, as we are not in control of the conditions that make up our gender, but rather subscribe and conform to stipulations that have been determined by the “moral entrepreneurs” (Bartky 1988) of a given society. While some may argue that gender is inherent, that we are born with the blueprints of a particular sex/gender, I would argue that gender is learned, something that we adopt and take on and understand as culturally and socially acceptable. There are, of course, nuances in genders, but in learning how to act as a man or a woman, we take cues from social interactions and cultural norms. As Butler (2004: 1) explains, “the terms that make up one’s own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author (and that radically contests the notion of authorship itself).”

Additionally, gender is not always constructed consistently, but rather intersects with such notions as race, class, and sexuality. In these terms, the notion of gender as ‘constructed’ becomes complex, if not problematic. To say that gender is socially or culturally constructed implies a form of social determinism: that we are merely passive receptors of “an inexorable cultural law” (Butler 1999: 12) and that gender is fixed. Is it possible to take on any gender one pleases? Do we have agency in the adoption or formation of our gender? How exactly does gender construction take place? It is not my

intention, in raising these questions, to come to a definitive conclusion, but rather to illuminate the various complexities of the notion of gender and gender construction.

Given that the terms of gender exist outside ourselves, it is important to ask: what forces are responsible for the maintenance of these idealized notions of gender? The systematic organization of our society is ultimately based on a “binary gender schema” (Lorber and Moore 2007: 2), which divides men from women, males from females, as polar opposites existing completely separate from one another. The position of these binaries is executed through social processes and interactions which are taken for granted—to the point that they are oftentimes invisible to us. We conform to these idealized notions of what it is to be female or what it is to be male because we have been taught that this gendered binary is ‘normal’ and ‘natural’; that the gendered notions of feminine and masculine emerge from our bodies. While the notion that gendered differences between men and women are rooted in our biology, our sex, is a strongly held position, I maintain that gender is better understood as a result of the social processes in which we engage, and the social and cultural agents—mass media, religion, schools—that police the boundaries of this gender corral. Failure to conform to hegemonic constructions of masculinity or femininity—that way of being a man or woman that has come to be accepted as ‘natural’ as a result of its development and maintenance as the norm by culture-producing agents—brings with it scrutiny and ostracism. Thus, a society of self-policing bodies is born; we impose our own checks and balances as we navigate the acceptable and unacceptable ways to behave as a man or a woman.

Women living in this self-policing gender binary, however, are faced with an additional set of challenges. While we maintain and uphold the constructions of gender

through our conformity to them, we also maintain the privileging of the powerful male over the powerless female within a social system that benefits men over women. We see this privileging economically—as of 2007, women still make only 64.7% of men’s annual earnings (Statistics Canada 2008a)—culturally—the United Nations estimates that one in every five women will be a victim of rape or attempted rape (Leahy 2006)—and politically—as of the last Federal election, women held only 20.7% of seats, while they make up 52% of the country’s population (Sidhu 2007). Justified as rooted in biology, the privileging of the masculine and the Othering of the feminine is upheld by the system of patriarchy in which we live. Patriarchy is “the institutionalization of men’s power over women within the economy, the polity, the household and heterosexual relations” (Greig, Kimmel, and Lang 2000: 7). In these terms, women must not only conform to the appropriate gender norms, but are subjected to a gendered oppression—authority over women’s bodies through normative notions of femininity, violence, or abuse—in the privileging of the male gender, ultimately limiting women’s “access to and control over political, economic, and cultural power” (Greig, Kimmel, and Lang 2000: 7).

Important to understanding the construction of a woman’s identity is the contradiction between the ‘embodied subject’ and the ‘objectified body’ (Bartky 1988; Price and Shildrick 1999; Alsop et al. 2002). Kathy Davis’ (1996) research on women’s obsession with plastic surgery, for instance, demonstrates how women are socially identified through their bodies. Under continuous surveillance by society, women begin to see themselves as “objects of the intentions and manipulations of others” (1996: 427). Their bodies on display and constantly critiqued, women come to feel that they must find ways to alter their bodies in order to re-invent themselves. Davis (1996: 427) explains

that the female body is “both the site of entrapment and the vehicle for expressing and controlling who they [women] are.” To the extent that women’s identification with their bodies is central to their subjective sense of self, the body becomes the central sign of a gendered identity. Thus, the ability to reclaim and re-invent one’s body may constitute a positive, identifying experience (Alsop et al. 2002; Schertenlieb 2004; Atkinson 2003).

Reclaiming the Body Through Tattooing?

In the view of some writers, such as Margot Mifflin and Victoria Pitts, women have tattooed their skin as a means of redefining themselves as women to challenge hegemonic notions of femininity (Mifflin 1997; Pitts 1998; Pitts 2003). Mifflin (1997) argues that during the political climate of the 1960s and 1970s, women found new freedoms—sexual, political, and otherwise—that complimented and informed their use of tattooing in an effort to reclaim their bodies.

Young tattoo artists of the time saw tattooing as a representation of identity, and redefined the traditional notion of tattooing as more than patriotic pride or masculine symbolism. Atkinson (2003: 45) notes that “the young middle-class insurgence into the tattoo artist profession redefined many of the old ideologies held strongly in the trade.” Eventually, as is arguably the case today, tattooing has become a form of self-expression. Using the body as a medium through and on which to present a particular identity or a particular set of values, marking the skin with tattoos has become a form of political identity construction (Atkinson 2003).

In addition to the conception of marking the skin as a form of political identity construction, some feminists (Pitts 1998, 2003; Wegenstein 2006) have argued that

women can use this practice as the medium through which to reclaim their bodies. Victoria Pitts (1998) describes the culturally marginal setting in which body modification resides—the practices are still seen, for women, as subversive and non-normative, and are thus marginalized. Nevertheless, women’s use of body modification practices, such as tattooing, scarring, or branding the skin, is also surrounded by a “reclamative discourse” where “women’s norm-breaking body practices [are interpreted as] resistances against bodily subordination and victimization” (Pitts 1998: 68).

Marking the skin through body modification practices, therefore, can serve as a symbolic resistance to gendered oppression. Situated within Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the grotesque body—the “eating and drinking body, the body of open orifices, the coarse body which yawns, hiccups, nose blows, flatulates, spits, hawks” (Pitts 1998: 69)—Pitts sees women’s use of marking the body as a way of replacing the traditional conception of the ‘grotesque’ female body with a new conception of the ‘reclaimed’ female body. The grotesque body is one that is juxtaposed with the ethereal, spiritual body, which is traditionally associated with masculinity. Related to the traditional mind/body split of Western philosophy, the ‘grotesque body’ is the female body, representing “the world outside serious official, ecclesiastical, feudal and political ceremony” (Bakhtin as qtd. in Pitts 1998: 70; see also Russo 1994). The grotesque body is that which is not smooth, closed, and pristine; that which sweats, sneezes, and breaks; that which bleeds and scars. Tampering with the idealized notion of the body as pristine and pure is a “denaturalizing act of subversion” (Pitts 1998: 70), as to do so would render the body as fragmented, unconcealed, and defiled—ultimately rejecting the ethereal ideal (that the female body is powerless to attain). As Elizabeth Grosz (1994: 138) notes, the inscription of the body

offends and alarms Western sensibilities, as “we are not so much surfaces as profound depths, subjects of hidden interiority, and the exhibition of subjectivity on the body’s surface is, at least from a certain class and cultural perspective, ‘puerile.’”

In reorienting the marking of the skin as a reclamation of identity and body, the practice can provide a woman with authority over her body, a reconciled holistic image of self-body wholeness, and a rewritten identity. Marking the skin, self-marking or otherwise, is interpreted in these terms as the achievement of a new bodily character. Visually and tactually modified, the marking of skin “implies the dissolution of boundaries between bodies and their reconstitution as subjects” in which the body’s boundary is opened and serves as a site of “symbolic inversion” (Pitts 1998: 71). Bernadette Wegenstein (2006) notes that the historical conceptions of the fragmented body common in psychoanalysis have now been integrated into a holistic notion of the body. The history of the body is a history of mediation, and the body then becomes a site to be worked on, a site of self-identity. Pitts (1998: 71) argues that for women engaging in body-marking practices, piercing, scarring, or cutting the skin are practices “presented as planned, self-directed rituals aimed at achieving a transformation of the self’s relation to the body in response to a specific situation of bodily oppression.” In these terms, the self is repositioned in relation to the body through the marking of the skin. The use of the oppressed skin, then, is a way of gaining power and “celebrating that which is constituent of oppression” (Seaton 1987: 20). Bodily oppression—and in these terms the oppression referred to is specifically gendered oppression—is reoriented as bodily reclamation through the marking of the body’s outer surface. Gendered oppression can be combated and identity rewritten through the manipulation or ‘defilement’ of the skin.

Reclamation and defilement coexist, as the borders of the skin are opened and liminality invited in, the skin's surface transgressed, its "envelope is punctured" (Pitts 1998: 76), and gendered declarations on the skin and body are violated and reclaimed.

As the construction of identity and, more specifically, a gendered identity are social processes, it is important to understand the ways in which these processes and the resultant norms are formed and maintained. Patriarchy informs and upholds the gender binary that we conform to—albeit oftentimes unconsciously—and privileges the masculine as powerful over the feminine as powerless, or Other. In these terms, women are faced with the challenges of conforming to hegemonic notions of femininity and, at the same time, struggling with the gendered oppression that results from the binary to which they are expected to conform. Tattooing, then, as a non-normative practice, can be understood as a symbolic resistance to gendered oppression, providing women with authority and ownership over their bodies within a system that routinely denies them such control. What becomes unclear, however, is that with the increasing mainstreaming of tattooing, are women truly resisting gendered oppression through their tattooing practices, or are they conforming to a different, 'updated' normative feminine ideal?

Concluding Remarks

North American tattooing has a rich history that is important in understanding the contemporary context within which tattooing resides. Born out of the marginalized classes, Canadian and U.S. tattooing has necessarily been shaped by historical context, but also important are the ways in which current discourses surrounding the body and identity construction also inform tattoo culture. The ways in which we talk about and

understand our bodies inform the ways in which we talk about and understand our tattoos. It is in understanding both the history from which contemporary tattooing has evolved, and the discourses that have shifted, grown, and shaped the ways we understand tattooing that the practice and culture can be fully understood in a contemporary context. Discourse, in particular, is essential to our understanding of the ways in which the women I spoke with explain and 'tell' their tattoos. I consider the issue of tattoo narratives in more depth in the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWO

TATTOO NARRATIVES AND AUTHENTICITY

Historically, tattoos have been seen as negative (Hawkes et al. 2004: 593). Tattooed bodies were thought to be monstrous—as examples of bodily excess, as sex objects or hypersexual beings, or as primitive, threatening, or circus-like spectacles. Tattoos were associated with class location and sexual behaviour—a “destructive decoration that flouts the possibility of untainted flesh” (Braunberger 2000: 1). Situated within a racist ideology, tattooing and body art were interpreted not as “the rational choice of an enlightened individual, but constitute[d] instead a primitive response more usually associated with the uncivilized behaviour of savages” (Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1995: 139). Low class, marginalized people embodied the notion of tattooing—the sailor, military man, biker, gang member, or prisoner—and were seen as rebellious and counter cultural.

Today, however, what was once a practice reserved for the seedy underbelly of society has become an easily appropriated marketing tool. In the last year, the 7-Eleven convenience store chain has started selling a new energy drink, called “Inked,” to their young customers who are either tattooed, or “those who want to think of themselves as the tattoo type” (Associated Press/CBS News 2007). The drink’s can features tribal-style designs, while the promotional posters include the outstretched, tattooed arm of a white male. 7-Eleven’s manager of non-carbonated beverages said that this new marketing strategy was created to sell a drink “that appealed to men and women, and the tattoo culture has really become popular with both genders.” Tattooing can be used to sell products to the young or those who, according to 7-Eleven, “think and act young”

(Associated Press/CBS News 2007). Other corporations are jumping on this marketing bandwagon as well, offering, for example, four free tires to anyone who has Dunlop's flying 'D' logo tattooed on their body. It would seem that tattooing's dubious past has all but disappeared.

The Western history of tattooing, however, has posed a conundrum for contemporary North American capitalist culture: in order to create a tattoo market and accommodate the commodification of tattoos in the pursuit of profit, a distance from this history had to be established in order to achieve a social acceptability—especially for the middle class consumer. One way in which social acceptability has been accomplished, according to scholar Margo DeMello (1995, 2000), is by means of the appropriation of Eastern culture—a culture in which tattoos have had cultural and spiritual significance, and mark a rite of passage in the achievement of personal growth. This aspect of Eastern culture easily colluded with the Western self-help and personal growth discourse of the 1970s and 1980s.

The 'new generation' of tattooing is one that has been defined both by rejecting the traditional working-class meanings and history associated with the practice, and by appropriating and creating new meanings, a new history, and a new discourse surrounding tattooing practices. DeMello (2000) examines the focus of the 'new generation' of tattooing enthusiasts on the practice's use as a means of personal and spiritual growth and the creation of individuality—a set of meanings that differ significantly from working-class meanings traditionally associated with tattooing, such as masculinity and patriotism. Furthermore, the creation of an entirely 'new' history focuses on its roots in Japanese and Polynesian cultures, rejecting the association of

tattooing with the low-class, marginalized individuals that originally introduced the practice to Western society. As well, this new discourse surrounding tattooing borrows from the self-help discourse of the 1970s and 1980s, as tattoo enthusiasts now locate tattooing as an identity-altering practice.

Nevertheless, the remnants of Western history have not been completely erased. There is still the association of tattoos as a sign of the “Other”—and therefore potentially as a sign of ‘difference’ and resistance. In this regard, the mainstream acceptability and popularity of tattoos have proved problematic for those women who endeavour to utilize tattooing as a means of expressing self. The tattoo is particularly strange as it represents at once permanence and change. While in the physical it is permanent, meanings surrounding tattoos change over time. How is it, then, that women negotiate the tension between conformity and resistance/reinvention?

The women I spoke with told me the stories of their tattoos: why they got them, how they decided on them, and how they feel about them. These ‘tattoo narratives’ (to borrow a term from DeMello) serve as a means of making connections between each tattoo project and a broader historical context, ultimately reconciling for them the tension between conformity and resistance. So, rather than appropriating a history, these women are connecting to a history through their tattoo narratives. For some women, like Katie, the connection being made is to a personal struggle with religion. For others, like Karen, connections are made between tattoos and cultural heritage. Yet, for some women, making connections to the longer history of tattooing was not important; it was rather the connection to identifying with or belonging to a counter cultural group that counted.

While DeMello's work on the cultural appropriation of Eastern tattooing history is important in understanding the context in which the contemporary tattoo industry resides, I have found that the women I spoke with used the stories or narratives about their tattoos as a means of—not appropriating something—but rather connecting them *with* something: a history, a cultural belonging, or a sense of identity. Thus, these links are not understood as cultural appropriation, but rather cultural connection. In these terms, we can see the nuances of appropriation, and the complexity of ways in which it permeates contemporary tattooing practices. The ways in which the women I spoke with used tattoo narratives to make connections to culture is representative of the struggle and tension that they face as tattooed women, and the ways they reconcile these challenges. It is in hearing their narratives that we can see how they, like cultural narratives generally, are changing and shifting over time, from one historical era to another.

Authenticity, as a key theme in this chapter, is understood in a number of ways. It is used to refer to the desire the women I spoke with expressed in creating a legitimate, original self-identity through their tattoo projects; a sincere, long-term commitment to a tattoo; and the sense of uniqueness that comes from being marked as different. The women I spoke with acknowledged the nuances of 'authenticity' not overtly, but through the ways in which they explained and understood tattooing today. DeMello's argument that, through the appropriation of the Eastern history of tattooing, contemporary North American tattoo enthusiasts have created a new text by which to understand the practice is important to make sense of the ways in which the women I spoke with understand their tattoos. But DeMello's argument falls short in that the constant shifting in the meaning of and narratives surrounding tattoos is not recognized. Rather than cultural appropriation, I

suggest that it is cultural connections that are made by these women in the justifications for their tattoo projects.

Appropriation and Connection

Margo DeMello (2000), in her book, *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community*, examines the role of class hierarchy in the tattoo community, coupled with the re-inscription of the culture with the influx of middle-class wearers and artists in the so-called 'new generation' of tattooing.

DeMello begins her investigation by outlining the history of Western tattooing, and examines the state of the practice after WWII, as technological, artistic, and social changes were affecting the practice. The introduction of academically-trained tattoo artists, the use of tattooing as a counter-cultural symbol, and the appropriation of 'exotic' designs and images (as opposed to traditional old-school Americana designs), created a shift in the culture, which DeMello refers to as the Tattoo Renaissance. As a result of this cultural transformation, tattooing began to appeal to a more middle-class clientele. DeMello goes on to explore the distinction in this transformed culture between 'high' and 'low' tattooing practices and the ways in which this distinction has been perpetuated and maintained within the tattoo culture—including through media interpretations, academic approaches, and publications produced from within the community. Media accounts in particular—both those produced within and outside the tattoo community—have had a significant effect on the polarization of the tattoo culture. Mainstream media have focused on the increased popularity of tattooing among more conventional individuals, ultimately softening the public image of the practice and making it easier to digest.

Tattoo publications produced within the community have focused on fine art tattooing, moving away from the 'biker' and 'sailor' image traditionally associated with tattooing. These two main sources of information dissemination have re-defined the tattoo community.

DeMello compares the re-appropriation of what was a low-class art form to the appropriation of 1940s Hollywood glamour in gay camp: camp being the "recreation of surplus value from forgotten forms of labour ... by liberating the objects and discourses of the past from disdain and neglect" (DeMello 1995: 11). The problem being, however, that these forms are not 'forgotten' but actually still used by those 'low class' people. DeMello argues that while the middle-class appropriation of tattooing may seem liberatory, it is in fact an illustration of how "characteristics of social difference are appropriated within our culture to provide the trappings of individual difference" (Williamson, qtd in DeMello 1995: 11). While many traditions are based on a pre-existing 'text' through which new cultural symbols can be created, the middle-class appropriation of tattooing is different in that middle-class tattoo wearers do not possess the lower-class 'text' (such as a similar socio-economic status), thus that previous 'text' is ignored and the new, middle-class text is created.

Perpetuating this new tattoo cultural text is the separation of low-class from middle-class (or biker and fine art) tattoos. The separation of the two allows middle-class tattoo wearers to reject and separate themselves from a tradition historically seen as negative, but still maintain the symbol. The distinction, DeMello argues, is upheld not for aesthetic reasons, but for political and social ones. Since the prior text has been rejected, and with it the prior history of tattoos (including bikers, prisoners, sailors, and

prostitutes), a new history must be developed—one based on a “mythical, primitive past” (DeMello 1995: 13). This new, fictionalized past legitimizes a tradition historically seen as negative. It is through middle-class tattoo magazines (like *TattooTime*) that this past is perpetuated and introduced into the public discourse. *TattooTime*’s first edition (*The New Tribalism*) as well as Re/Search’s *Modern Primitives* represent this desire to return to a primitive past and to naturalize the practice of tattooing.

This leads to us to ask: has tattooing’s negative past been effectively eliminated? DeMello argues that it has not, the evidence being the tattoo culture’s increasing presence into the mainstream, especially given its shady roots, through both mainstream and alternative media publications. She argues that, if anything, this presence illustrates “the power of the media to affect, if not real social change ... at least symbolic transformations” (DeMello 1995: 14).

Introducing the Women

In order to set the stage for this exploration of the issues of appropriation and authenticity, five of the women I interviewed—Karen, Sara, Kendra, Katie, and Lynda—will be featured here.

Karen is a 38-year-old Mohawk mother of two. She teaches Aboriginal History of Canada and works as a student advisor at both the University of Manitoba and University of Winnipeg. She got her first tattoo, a unicorn on her arm, when she was 16, and since then has collected five more tattoos, the majority of which hold personal family and cultural significance for her. At 19, she had a dragon tattooed on her hip, “just for fun ... because dragons are cool,” and a small frog and mushroom on her shoulder that

she told me she would likely get covered up in the future. Years later she had the unicorn covered with a large tribal piece on her left arm and shoulder that is based on tribal designs from around the world, “intended to represent the concept of all my relations.” On her right arm she has a wolf that was done in honour of her grandfather, who is a member of the wolf clan. On her right leg is a turtle surrounded by Celtic knot work that she explained is in honour of her parents: “because my father’s turtle clan, because my grandmother’s turtle clan, it’s matrilineal, and my mom’s British so I have the Celtic knot work.” Most recently, she’s had the confederacy wampum belt tattooed on across her back. She had been intending to get this particular tattoo for the past ten years, but the time wasn’t right until recently, when she completed her Master’s degree. “And then when I start my PhD I’m going to get my status card tattooed on my ass.”

When Karen started getting tattooed as a young girl, however, tattooing wasn’t the mainstream practice that it is today. “I’m old enough to remember when it was an act of rebellion, not conformity, and that’s exactly what it was. I left home at a very young age, so I was a street kid, and it was part of that culture.” When I asked her what made her choose her first design, a unicorn, Karen told me about her experience getting that tattoo:

I was at a big house party at a flop house, because I mean we were all street kids, and there was some guy who had just gotten out of Stoney [Mountain Penitentiary] with his little homemade jail gun and was like ‘hey anybody want a tattoo?’ and that was pretty much what he knew how to draw, one of the things he knew how to do. So [I said] ‘Okay.’ So that’s kind of how I got that one. But, I mean, it’s covered up now.

Karen describes her tattoos as an expression of her identity, of her self. For her, tattoos represent “both my ethnic and cultural identity as well as my spiritual beliefs ...

your body's a temple, you've only got it once, you might as well paint the walls, right?" In addition to representing her cultural and spiritual identity, her tattoo projects have all been thought out and planned in consultation with her artist to balance both her body and the art. "All of my tattoos have been thought out, I mean, there's a reason behind them all. They either mark a point in my life or they have some sort of meaning. It's never just sort of 'Oh that looks cool, put it here' which so many tattoos today are."

Sara is 26 years old, and a recent graduate from the Red River College Creative Communications Program. She has three tattoos, the first of which, a line drawing of a woman that would eventually become a part of Salvador Dali's painting "The Burning Giraffe," was a gift from her parents for her 21st birthday. Six months after her first tattoo, she had a piece done on her calf—a collection of images from one of her favorite books, Clive Barker's *The Thief of Always*, that represent key ideas that the book portrays. "It's a tree with a tree house in it and its got a kite and the tree house has a ladder doing down and then there's a fish coming up on the bottom; it's all just different parts from the book." A short while later, Sara had three large peonies, her favorite flower, tattooed on her right arm.

Unlike many women that I talked to, Sara doesn't associate any deep, personal significance with her tattoos: "I didn't get them because I had gone through some horrible trauma, and I didn't get them because I wanted to make a particular statement." Sara explained to me that she got her tattoos for aesthetic reasons—"because I like them"—rather than to cover a particular body part, or relay a particular message to others through her choice of design. Sara explained that she does not immediately identify as a 'tattooed person' and chooses not to show them off. What is important to her, however, is that her

tattoos are unique, not easily defined, and not something you would see on either the wall of a tattoo shop or the arm of another tattoo enthusiast. She takes pride in her tattoos, even though, as she explained, some think of them as “weird.”

Kendra e-mailed her responses to my questions as she is currently living and teaching English in Thailand. A 23-year-old Winnipegger, Kendra had the Chinese characters for “true love” tattooed on her left calf seven years ago, at 17. She chose this design because, as she explained, true love is something she believes in and aspires to. After spending some time in Paris, France, the “city of romance,” ideas of love were floating around in her head: “true love represented the hope I had (and still have) for the future. I decided on Chinese because my best friend is Chinese Canadian and I always thought the language looked beautiful.” Kendra’s tattoo makes her feel special and hopeful, and serves as a reminder for her never to ‘settle.’ She sees her tattoo as a legacy, a means of self-expression, “like holding the answers to a secret.”

Kendra told me that once she was tattooed, she felt older, if at times a bit “cliché” given the popularity of Chinese characters as a tattoo design. At one time shy about her body, Kendra started wearing clothing in an attempt to show off her tattoo, and is now really happy with her choice of location, as it is a place on her body that won’t change as she ages: “at least it won’t get saggy and gross like if it was on my boob or my tummy.”

Kendra was initially worried about the pain and the ability to cover the tattoo, as once she is finished with her time in Thailand she will be working as a teacher in Manitoba, where there are strict guidelines concerning the visibility of body modifications. She explains, “When I was in university and student teaching I heard a principal say he would ‘never hire anyone with a visible tattoo.’ Funny thing was the

grade 1, 2, 5, and 6 teachers all had tattoos. Guess they never told him. I stuck to wearing pants.”

Katie is a 28-year-old graduate student of Theology at the University of Manitoba. She has two tattoos, both of which were completed within the last year and a half: one is a simple, open concept line drawing of a dove on her left shoulder; the other is a large “vine with Greek text as the trunk” starting at her foot and ending about five inches above her knee. The text is “Koine Greek, which is what the New Testament was written in, and it’s a Bible passage, and it translates into ‘Lord I believe help my unbelief.’” Raised Mennonite and having worked as a youth pastor for four years, Katie’s faith has been and still is a large part of her identity. As well, the image of peace that she has tattooed on her left shoulder is something she feels constitutes her self. While Katie is proud of her faith, she told me that people react to her differently once they find out that her leg piece holds religious connotations:

That’s probably one thing that makes me uncomfortable with my leg piece, is when people ask what the text means, all of a sudden they find out that I’m a person of faith, and they react to me differently. I don’t want people to feel like I’m trying to evangelize to them because I’ve got this, it’s my faith and it’s my faith struggle and my faith journey. That’s why I got it. It had nothing to do about wanting the world to know.

Despite some of the negative reactions to her tattoos that she gets from people, Katie finds the fun in it as well: “In the back of my mind I have a couple of joking translations that I would give people because who the hell’s going to understand Greek? Like, if I’m out at a bar and some person is like ‘hey what’s that mean?’ [I’ll say] ‘Look but don’t touch’ or ‘It’s all Greek to you.’”

Once she had the piece on her leg done, Katie realized she was “that girl with the huge-ass tattoo on her leg.” But she doesn’t mind the attention. Alternative culture has always appealed to her, so she felt that it made sense for her to have such a visible tattoo. While being so visibly tattooed noticeably changes the interactions she has with people, Katie isn’t ashamed of her artwork, but rather sees her body now as more of a potential canvas for future projects.

Lynda is 54 years old and has two sons, aged 13 and 29. She got her first tattoo for her 50th birthday along with her eldest son. The tattoo, a small purple lily on her chest just under her collarbone, symbolizes a number of things for Lynda: lilies are a symbol of rebirth, which correlates to her entering a new stage in her life and celebrating moving forward; she chose purple as it is one of the highest energy centres for chakras; and purple is also a colour associated with royalty, and she explained that “anyone who knows me knows that I kind of like to be the Queen of Everything.” Lynda had also given considerable thought to the placement of her tattoo. It was located on a part of her body that wouldn’t change much over time and could be easily covered, and because the location was easily visible to her the tattoo acts as a reminder that this is a good stage in her life. She researched tattoo studios in Winnipeg with her eldest son, who had already been tattooed and was quite encouraging of her decision to be tattooed, for about two to three years before she had it done, speaking with an artist at one studio with whom she did not feel comfortable, and finally finding a place that felt right.

Lynda explained to me that fifteen years ago she thought of tattooing as a strange practice, but now she finds happiness in having this pretty piece of art permanently on her skin. While she told me that she has always had issues with her body image, “finally

having something that is quite pretty that I chose leaves me more open to accepting [my body] because it's the part of me that's always going to be beautiful." Being tattooed later in life has made an impact on her self-identity as well:

I think it did make a difference because reaching your 50s is a difficult age, I think as women we all have those goddess archetypes in us and I know my Aphrodite had been submerged for many years and it was like a coming out, and I mean, it's very simple, it's just a little tattoo, but it really is quite powerful.

Additionally, because her generation has not subscribed to tattooing in the same way that younger generations have embraced it, she enjoys the "shock impact" when people see that she is tattooed. Working with a number of people who are younger than her, she said "I'm the age of their mothers and their mothers aren't getting tattooed, so that obviously sort of switches things around for them, and somehow this tattoo takes a few years off, makes me more contemporary maybe?" In this regard, she has fun with her tattoo—keeping it covered most of the time at work, as it is still something that is personal for her, but showing it off in particular settings or when the topic comes up in conversation. "People don't know what to do with it sometimes, so I just have fun with it, it's just fun!"

These women use tattoo narratives to make connections to a number of things: for Karen, her tattoos connect her to her cultural heritage and to a past in which tattooing was considered an overt form of rebellion; for Sara, tattoos serve as a means of marking her as different; Kendra's tattoo connects her to culturally important notions like friendship and love; for Katie, her tattoo is a connection and reminder to her struggles with her faith; and for Lynda, her tattoo connects her with a sense of identity. However, the connections made are done so in the context of a capitalist consumer culture.

Tattoos Commodified

While these five women all have different reasons for being tattooed, and approach tattooing in different ways, they share the fact that they have become a part of a culture that is growing like wildfire. Tattooing has moved from the sphere of the rebellious and into the mainstream over the past few decades, helped in part by its use in advertising campaigns (7-Eleven's 'Inked' energy drink, for example) or television programming, such as *Miami Ink* and *LA Ink*. Tattoos have saturated our culture, to the point where they no longer garner the immediate shock and attention that they did many years ago.

This 'normalization' of tattooing was not lost on the women I interviewed. During our conversations many of the women expressed that they regard tattoos in the same way they do fashion. As Breccan, 27, told me: "It's like permanently wearing a very flashy skirt or something." Katie said that she doesn't particularly feel a bond with other tattooed women, as it has become such a popular form of body modification, "it would be the same as walking down the street and seeing someone dressed in the same style that you dress." Karen associates her tattoos with fashion as well, in the sense that they are an extension of her personality, "like wearing fancy shoes or a really nice dress or something like that, except it's permanent." Some of the women I spoke with commented that today there are so many people with tattoos, piercings, and other body modifications, that it is those who are 'pure'—those who are without any modifications—that are the true rebels. Sara noted that as tattoos have become so much a part of our culture now, when you see someone who doesn't have a tattoo, "they're almost prevailing more, and they're almost like the anti- or counter-culture now."

So, knowing this context in which the practice of tattooing is presently situated, how do tattooed women reconcile it? The women I spoke with understand that tattoos have become commodified, rendered 'normal' and fashionable, but how do they negotiate this? Given the context in which tattooing has become normalized, what, in spite of this process, makes them different? There are a number of ways in which the women I interviewed negotiate this tension between the conformity associated with tattooing, given its mainstream popularity in Western culture, and their efforts to resist that commodification in the endeavour to construct an authentic sense of self.

Reconciling Trendiness/Maintaining Authenticity

I don't think I would relate to somebody who had a massive tribal tattoo on their arm just for the sake of getting one. I think that's, I think that's part of the big issue is just, like, getting one just to say you have one. (Amber, 21, five tattoos)

As I mentioned at the outset of this chapter, authenticity is a theme and term that is used in a variety of ways. For the women featured in this chapter, authenticity can be an expression of long-term commitment, uniqueness, and individuality, and partly a reaction to trendiness and fashionability, as Amber alludes to in the quote above. In speaking with each woman, I came to understand how she defined authenticity—overtly or otherwise—and her desire to make connections that are constantly shifting, or locate herself in a larger historical context. The nuances of what it means to be authentic and how one can connect in a legitimate way through her tattoos ultimately highlighted for me the complexity of appropriation, and provided a new way of understanding DeMello's argument in light of the conversations I had with each woman.

The women I spoke with have agency. While they are aware that tattooing has become a trend, they are constantly both constructing and locating themselves within this process of mainstreaming. Reconciling the desire to express themselves on their own terms and the desire to be regarded as authentic is not an easy task. Karlie, a 22-year-old Insurance Claims Adjuster with three tattoos, expressed this in our conversation:

Well, I think there's a lot of people who, you know, critique tattoos, think that every tattoo has to be very personal, have huge deep meanings, and it can't be like, funny or whatever. But as much as I do agree with them in some sense, that your tattoos should mean something, they don't always have to be serious. That's just me. I plan on getting some ridiculous tattoos, but other people would look at those and be like "Well why the hell did you get that? That's absolutely ridiculous." But, I don't know, I think some people take it a little bit too seriously, and sometimes I'm completely guilty of that. Even though I'm getting them, I'm judging people for them. But a lot of people just take it really seriously and they don't always need to. But on the flip side, some people don't take it seriously enough and get little fluffy unicorns on their lower back.

Karlie's comments illustrate the complexity of issues that tattooed women are faced with in their decision to get tattooed. Rejecting the need for a personal story to contextualize a tattoo design, which in its mainstream popularity has become a sign of *inauthenticity* to some tattooed women, can lead to the opposite: choosing a tattoo design that is devoid of meaning, which Karlie suggests is similarly inauthentic. The women I spoke with have recognized this difficult binary; yet, they have found ways in which to work around it and justify for themselves the legitimacy of their tattoo projects.

Karen, 38, has tattoos that are all strongly connected to her family and spiritual identity, although when she started getting tattooed in the late 1980s and early 1990s, tattooing was a means of rebellion for her:

Well, I guess there was always a push [for me] to be unique and different. I was never mainstream. You know, I was never one with the crowd and it was just one way of making myself distinct and making myself unique, right? I don't fit in and that's totally cool. So it's just another way of expressing that, really.

Karen has also witnessed the change in the industry itself, along with the public perception of tattooing:

Back in the day it was illegal, right? We just did it out the kitchen, right? I mean, like, I'm old enough to remember when getting tattoos were an act of rebellion as opposed to conformity. Which is really what all mine are, um, and, I mean, back in my day people would cross the street to avoid you if you had piercings and tattoos and looked like a punk rocker, with purple hair, right? And they did, people would look at me like "Holy shit, you're a freak." Now people don't even blink twice, it's become mainstream. So yeah, some of my earliest tattoos were work done in the kitchen, with home made guns and things like that, the jail house style, because, I mean, you really didn't have much of a choice back in the 80s.

Despite the development of the industry into a mainstream practice, Karen locates herself as someone who remains committed to tattooing's rebellious roots. She doesn't see herself as subscribing to trends. Rather, given her own lengthy history with the practice, tattooing constitutes for her an act of rebellion and a means of adornment—no matter how much more difficult it may be to define tattooing as rebellious in today's culture.

For Sara, the uniqueness of her tattoos serves as means of separating herself from the mainstream. She explained, "I never felt the need to be like, 'Oh I think I'm so boring-looking that I need to go do this or that,' because I think everybody fits in their own niche. But I think my tattoos just sort of set me apart a little bit more." When she made the decision to get tattooed, Sara knew she wanted to get something that was a little different: "I didn't want to just go down and pick out from all the artist flash.... I didn't

want to get something that everybody else would have.” In this way, Sara locates herself outside of the trendiness and the mainstream because her tattoo projects are not easily defined, and not something typically found on the walls of a tattoo studio. She explains her “unusual” tattoos:

I guess you have to kind of really look at it and sort of figure out and discern what everything is.... So, I think that they make a statement that I've chosen to do something to myself to sort of differentiate myself from the masses. But in the same breath, I don't want it to seem like I felt that I was some ordinary plain Jane to begin with.

Despite her tattoos setting her apart from the mainstream, Sara recognizes that the practice is still very much “an everyday thing” and doesn't get wrapped up in the popularity and hype of the practice: “People make a much bigger deal out of it than I ever made out of getting them, and, like, honestly sometimes I forget I have them.” This suggests that, while her tattoos serve as a connection to a subcultural practice that is seen as somewhat deviant, Sara has chosen to reject the claims to celebrated, definitive individuality that has propelled the practice into the mainstream to begin with. It is clear that, in these terms, authenticity is a complex phenomenon.

Additionally, the women find their own meaning and context within the practice by connecting it with events in their lives (such as turning 50), honouring their family members, or honouring their faith. For Lynda, the decision to become tattooed wasn't one that was tied up in her subscription to a new trend. In fact, she admitted that in the past she found the practice strange. Instead, she sees tattooing as a permanent way to celebrate herself—as a rite of passage in turning 50. She explained, “Well a lily is a symbol of rebirth, and I was very excited about getting it to symbolize entering a new

stage in my life, becoming a crone, that whole moving forward celebration.” She also expressed her understanding of tattooing as a new art form for women to explore:

I think mostly men had owned the art, or the realm, and I think it’s our new art form. Maybe we’ve pushed the limits more, because I don’t think anyone’s really encouraged us, women, to get tattooed. But I think it could have to do with it being a safe way for women to express themselves, because you can do it but not be in somebody’s face about it. You don’t have to talk about it, it’s just a statement.

Katie sees her tattoos as a part of her identity. Her faith is a large part of her identity, and her tattoos reflect that. For her, tattooing is not about participating in a trend, but rather is about her struggle with her own faith: her leg piece reads “Lord I believe help my unbelief.” In her words:

That’s the story of my faith. I’ve spent a lot of years not believing and a lot of years believing but still being uncomfortable with believing. I’ve been a minister, I was a youth pastor for four years, full time. It was really hard. I mean this, it comes from the book of Mark, and I’m not really one of those people to sit around and quote Bible passages, but this one just stuck with me because it takes faith to say ‘Lord I believe help my unbelief.’ It really leaves room for questions and doubts and insecurities about it and all that kind of stuff.

It is also evident that the women are not all getting tattooed for the same reason; they have very different, and often personal, reasons for getting a tattoo. What is similar among the women, however, is the personal narrative that each constructs by way of explaining her tattoos. These narratives, like other cultural discourses, are expressed in similar, learned terms. Kendra, for example, attaches a great deal of personal meaning to her calf tattoo—the notion of ‘true love’ is something that holds a lot of significance for her in her life. She explains:

True love is something that I believe in. True love meaning the ultimate love—something that is real, romantic, unique, extraordinary, beautiful, passionate, and life long. I got the tattoo when I was quite

young and I saw true love in everything. I was really hopeful about love despite never having been in a relationship at that point. I saw relationships in movies, on television, in magazines, and in school. The concept of true love was always floating around in my head. What sealed the deal was when Pacey on *Dawson's Creek* named his boat 'True Love' in an episode. I could see true love everywhere and knew that it had a strong meaning for me. I wanted something as special as that in my life, I believed in it.

This idea of love is one that is learned through dominant discourse—television shows, for example—and Kendra's tattoo, as it connects her to the idea of true love, suggests an expression of emotional value. Tattoos, in this regard, can connect us with learned cultural values. For Kendra, being tattooed was a way of expressing her desire for true love, and having a tattoo feels like "a legacy." Her tattoo provides her with a message of hope:

Sometimes women settle, and I wanted my tattoo to remind me to never settle. I have seen love fall apart and I have seen people fool themselves into thinking they are in love. True love is the ultimate experience in love and something that I hope to experience in my life. I think I am on my way. In fact, I know I am.

While Kendra acknowledges the "cliché" of having Chinese characters tattooed on her, she maintains her claim to authenticity—her justification for the originality of her tattoo—as she was the first of her friends, and the first of many of her classmates, to be tattooed:

It made me feel special to have something with so much personal meaning in it. I also felt a little cliché at times. Chinese characters aren't exactly unique. I got a lot of attention for being the first kid in my class to have a tattoo. Soon after, two of my friends got one. They both got lower back tattoos and both regretted their decisions afterwards. They didn't spend a lot of time thinking about their designs. One decided in two weeks, the other in one week. But as for me, I was really proud of my tattoo and thought it was special. It made me feel special and hopeful to have the message on me.

In this way, authenticity can take on several meanings—in Kendra’s case, being the first of her classmates and friends to be tattooed lent her tattoo (which she acknowledged as ‘cliché’) a sense of legitimacy in its originality. The meaning of her tattoo has shifted, as she implied, as the design she chose has become quite popular—at once new and original, the symbol of the Chinese character is familiar. For Kendra, the meaning of her tattoo remains a permanent reminder of her hope for true love being a part of her life. In this regard, tattoos are somewhat paradoxical, as they are about permanence, but at the same time their meanings shift and change.

In the same way that the reasons for getting tattooed vary from woman to woman, the importance placed on tattoo projects shifts over time, suggesting that significance is a fluid concept. Jenn, a 28-year-old legal assistant who sports a large tribal back piece in addition to a group tattoo that she had done with her sisters, explained to me that tattooing has become less of a priority as she’s grown older:

Yes, the years I was getting my back done, it seemed like the most important thing to do. But now with a mortgage and trying to start a family it’s not really something I think about. I mean, it’s there and it’s part of me but it’s not something I think about every day—it doesn’t define me anymore.

Interestingly, some of the women reject the need to attach personal significance to their tattoos, thereby resisting the self-help discourse that locates tattooing as a means of personal growth. For instance, Sara was aware that some women were motivated to get tattooed as a way of coping with difficult life experiences: “I think it’s great, you know, if somebody who’s had some horrible trauma done to them and then they need, this is something that they need to do to heal themselves, then right on.” But this was not Sara’s

motivation. April, 27, who has a chrysanthemum tattooed on the side of her torso made this point more directly:

I don't personally think that everyone does it to make a statement, because, like mine, a lot of people ask me if there's any meaning behind it, and I'm like "No not really." ... It shouldn't have to mean anything. If you want there to be a meaning behind it, look up the actual meaning of it, like the phoenix rising out of the fire, or the particular type of flower. Like, there's always going to be a meaning behind something. If it's personal, for personal taste, then that's your meaning. Like, the meaning is who you are and why you have it on you.

Similarly, Ryse, a 21-year-old woman with five tattoos, told me that her notion of meaning is not static, but rather always changing: "Well I'll just find a meaning for tattoos after I get them. Meanings of tattoos will always change too."

The Fluidity of Tattoo Discourse

As the meanings of tattoos change, so too do the terms with which we discuss tattoos.

DeMello's (1995) work on the popular representations of tattooing is particularly helpful in understanding how we come to learn to *talk* about our tattoos. How do we understand them? How do we think about them? DeMello argues that mainstream media, academic publications, and tattoo artist/enthusiast publications are responsible for shaping the way that the tattoo community is presented and understood.

DeMello argues that while the mainstream media have portrayed tattooing and the tattoo culture in the past as something to fear (tattoos are for deviants, tattoos are dangerous, and so forth), media now focus on the increasing rise in popularity of tattoos. Explaining what tattooing *used* to be and who *used* to get tattooed illustrates the practice's seedy roots and association with nefarious characters, and then focusing on the

'new generation' of tattooed people—the middle-class, educated people—effectively silences those groups of people (such as bikers and prisoners) who were traditionally associated with the practice. By selecting those who are interviewed, mainstream media choose who is allowed to talk, and who is given a voice. Academic representations of the practice are similar in that they highlight the distinctions between middle- and low-class tattoo users and fail to recognize the possibility of the media's role in creating this distinction in the first place. Also in line with mainstream media's presentation of the practice is academia's failure to elaborate on low-class tattooing, such as the distinctions between the tattoo use of bikers, sailors, and prisoners, for example. This is dismissed in favour of a focus on the popular use of artistic tattooing.

As DeMello notes, those who are given a voice all seem to say the same thing, and use the same discourse to talk about their tattoos. Borrowing from the self-help discourse of the 1970s and 80s, these 'new generation' tattooed individuals discuss how tattoos have given them a sense of individuality, aided in their personal growth, or heightened their spirituality. These motivations for becoming tattooed can be easily contrasted with the reasons people (such as bikers) *used* to get tattoos: they were drunk, they wanted to prove their masculinity, or they had no real reason at all. Mainstream media representations are made to be easily accessible and understandable to even non-tattooed readers:

.... by first focusing their articles around a select group of middle-class individuals, most of whom have relatively small, inoffensive tattoos; by second, denying all of those who do not fit into this category the right to be represented, except as the absent unit of comparison; and third, by centering the discussion around ideas which are very popular outside of the tattoo community, the journalists are able to make the world of tattooing a safe and understandable place for the reader. (DeMello 1995: 6)

While tattoos may be seen as counter-hegemonic, the contemporary discourse around them is not: combining popular self-help and personal growth discourse with middle-class, educated tattooers and tattooed people, contemporary representations of tattooing feature it as a safe and accessible phenomenon.

The 'new generation' of tattooing is one that has been defined both by rejecting the traditional working-class meanings and history associated with the practice, and by appropriating and creating new meanings, a new history, and a new discourse surrounding tattooing practices. DeMello's book, *Bodies of Inscription*, examines the focus of the 'new generation' of tattooing enthusiasts on the practice's use as a means of personal and spiritual growth and the creation of individuality—a set of meanings that differ significantly from working-class meanings traditionally associated with tattooing, such as masculinity and patriotism. Furthermore, the creation of an entirely 'new' history focuses on Japanese and Polynesian roots, rejecting the low-class, marginalized individuals that originally introduced tattooing to Western society. The new discourse surrounding tattooing borrows from the self-help discourse of the 1970s and 1980s, as tattoo enthusiasts see tattooing as an identity-altering practice. Her research is particularly helpful in understanding the ways in which tattoo discourse has changed and evolved over time, and the ways in which other discourses inform and influence the ways in which we make sense of tattoos.

DeMello defines the self-help movement as:

.... the burgeoning interest in pop-psychology and self-awareness that developed in the 1970s and continues today. Self-help describes a movement whose adherents use psychotherapy, twelve-step programs, and other psychological techniques to become happier and to eliminate negative behaviours or attitudes such as codependency, depression, and eating disorders, or to achieve loving relationships with others. (2000: 144)

This movement appealed to “therapeutic sensibilities” (Lasch 1979 quoted in DeMello, 2000: 144) and an increasing interest in mental and emotional health and the power that is “ascribed to the individual will in achieving this” (144). Additionally, the new age movement, which began around the same time, saw middle-class individuals experimenting with Eastern religions and “consciousness-transforming techniques” (144), borrowing practices like Buddhism, tarot, Wicca, and meditation. Within this social climate, tattoos came to be interpreted as a transformative practice, a way of getting in touch with one’s spiritual essence. Many popular tattoo images and designs are derived from this new age philosophy, such as zodiac signs, yin yang, or Sanskrit and Japanese writing. With modern Western society seen as repressive, alienating, and lacking ritual, non-Western symbols and practices were adopted as they were thought to be more meaningful than those found in Western culture. It is through narratives, derived from the self-help and new age movements, that people provide meaning for their tattoos. DeMello argues that these meanings are especially important “within a middle class context that traditionally has not viewed tattoos in a positive light,” and that they “form the basis of the individual’s personal understanding of his/her tattoo” (149).

Judy, 32, has one tattoo and explained that while she is proud of it, and sees it as a symbol of her strength and independence as a woman, most people are shocked to find out that she has one:

I think sometimes it surprises people when they find out that I have a tattoo. Like, I have a fairly recent new group of friends that I’ve been hanging out with. I happened to mention that I had a tattoo and all of the girls were very shocked. I know this group of friends happens to be middle class to upper middle class. I think they don’t really see a white, middle class girl getting a tattoo. Those are the people that are a little more shocked and don’t see it blending with my personality.

This suggests that the discourse through which Judy's friends understand tattooing is one that represents the practice as a phenomenon of the marginalized classes.

DeMello points to three main narratives that have shaped the 'new generation' of tattooing—its redefinition and re-inscription—and are used to describe tattoos by this 'new generation' of tattooed individuals: individuality, spirituality, and personal growth. These themes, she argues, have shaped both the nature of the tattoo community and the meaning of the tattoo—the increasing middle-class participation in tattooing has resulted in a transformation of the culture itself.

In her research, DeMello found that while both men and women favoured narratives of individuality, spirituality, and personal growth, women alone also explained their tattoos in terms of control, healing, and empowerment. Women were more apt to interpret their tattoos as a means of reclaiming their bodies—women's bodies are, as many scholars (Judith Butler and Elizabeth Grosz, for example) have argued, the site “for the inscription of power and the primary site of resistance to that power” (173), thus women interpret their tattoos as a means of marking their bodies in an effort to negate the marks of oppression and patriarchy they feel on their bodies. While the most common narratives, DeMello argues, have been popularized by the middle-class and are thus more popular among the middle-class, the themes of empowerment common among tattooed women do not fall within such definitive class boundaries. Lower-class women, she notes, have had much more experience using their bodies as a site of resistance (through, for example, clothing and hairstyles) and, similarly, have been getting tattooed for much longer than middle-class women have. Despite this, however, DeMello argues that

heavily tattooed women of both classes “can be said to control and subvert the ever-present ‘male gaze’ by forcing men (and women) to look at their bodies in a manner that exerts control” (173). DeMello even connects this sense of control and empowerment to the tattooed ladies of the 1920s and 1930s circus and sideshow circuits—women who were independent and decided to make a living for themselves. While women today do not get tattooed to earn a living, it can be argued that tattoos on women serve as a sign of independence.

These discourses have, indeed, been influenced by dominant middle-class ‘liberatory’ discourses, and the women (myself included) who see their tattoos as a means of securing an empowering identity are necessarily connecting with and repeating these discourses in their own narratives. Nevertheless, tattoo narratives, like any discourse, are constantly changing. They are used to “re-create,” for both the teller and the listener, the complex justifications for the tattoos—justifications that are constantly changing “as the teller is exposed to other discourses that might further inform his or her narrative” (152). As tattooing becomes mainstream, however, many tattooed people’s claims that their tattoos are deeply meaningful and spiritual come into question, which, according to DeMello, suggests a class backlash: “the very same middle-class tattooists who were at the forefront of the renaissance now look nostalgically back to the old days of blue-collar values” (191). While Judy may not necessarily subscribe to the “blue-collar values” of tattoo wearers in the early 1900s, she recognizes and notes the ways in which the mainstreaming of tattoos has left many, as some would argue, devoid of meaning:

When I see women with flowers and Chinese characters, they don’t know what they’re saying. They’re White like me and they have Chinese chicken-guy-cue on the back of their neck or on their foot. That really irritates me. They’re trying to be cool. They’re trying to be

something and that's not the way to do it. I don't feel tattooing is the way to make you free and strong and independent. It might be a symbol of that for some people but, just looking at other women, it really depends on the individual tattoo.

Judy interprets the preponderance of tattooing as having a negative effect on the practice as a whole, with symbols and designs permeating the industry and effectively lessening the power of some individual tattoos. The increasing popularity of tattoos creates a whitewashing effect: in order to stand out, one will have to wear increasingly more visible and subversive tattoos. Sara echoed this argument during our conversation:

It's become such an everyday thing that it really takes something quite extraordinary for me to be like, 'wow, that's cool.' Like, if I see a woman who has a whole back piece or something insane, that's rad.... Women who aren't tattooed, I look at them and I'm like 'wow, you're pure.'

Sara's comment illustrates the changing discourse around tattooing. While at one time a tattoo can be seen as shocking—to Judy's friends, for example—in another context, tattoos become an “everyday thing” and it is instead those *without* tattoos that become shocking.

While DeMello's research on tattoo discourse is indeed helpful in understanding the ways in which the women I spoke with ‘tell’ their tattoos, where her argument falls short concerns the ways in which contemporary tattooing has, according to DeMello, lost its ‘message.’ It is here that I suggest that we need to turn back again to the fluidity of tattoo discourse (as with all discourse) rather than to glorify the ‘easy to read’ tattoos of the days of sailors and bikers. DeMello argues that while the traditional, working-class tattoo was characterized as “lacking in sophistication and significance and is worn by people who put very little thought into their tattoos” (DeMello 2000: 193), a number of

tattoo artists today are arguing that classic Western tattooing did, in fact, have a simple, recognizable message that has been lost in contemporary fine art tattoo imagery, tattoo trends, and tattoo magazines. DeMello (2000: 193) notes:

The traditional American tattoo—with its easy-to-read imagery that reflected the old-fashioned values of God, mother, and country—is being displaced in favor of the contemporary tattoo, with its often unrecognizable imagery and exotic content. The contemporary tattoo is high fashion, but at the same time alienates those whose tattoos are no longer favored.

These traditional tattoos are able to tell a story all by themselves, DeMello argues, while contemporary tattoos often require the wearer to construct a narrative in order to explain them. Given the discussions I had with the tattooed women I interviewed, I maintain that contemporary tattoos hold just as much meaning as did the traditional designs. It is through the ability of the tattoo wearer to adapt their tattoo narrative to the historical, social, and cultural context of the moment that contemporary tattoos remain meaningful through their lifespan. While traditional designs may have seemed simplistic in their message, I believe that the overarching association with deviance was perhaps the most overt ‘message’ they delivered. The story they are able to tell all by themselves is one that we have come to understand through a changing discourse. Just as an eagle meant something in the early part of the century, a Chinese character or a flower means something today. After all, not all tattoo wearers construct elaborate stories to connect their tattoos to a larger history. As with Sara, for example, some women find meaning not in the tattoo but in its resultant marking.

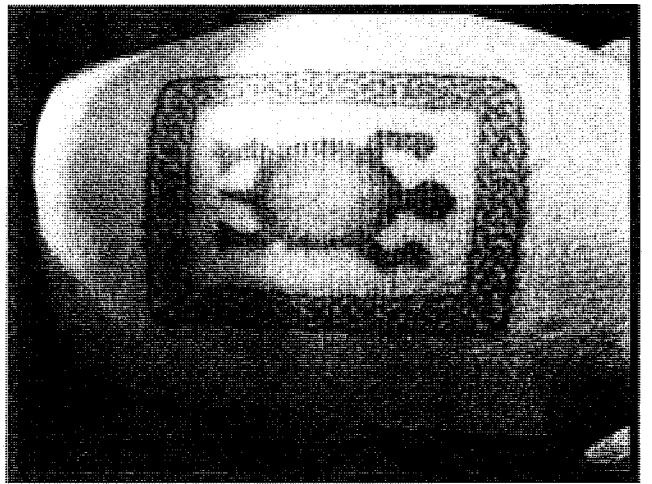
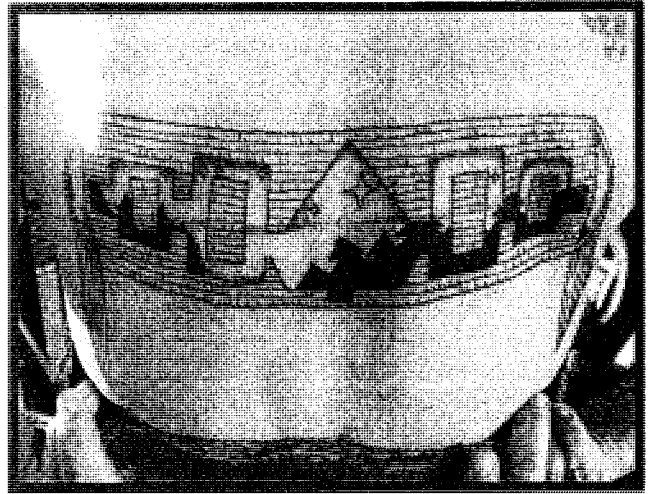
Concluding Remarks

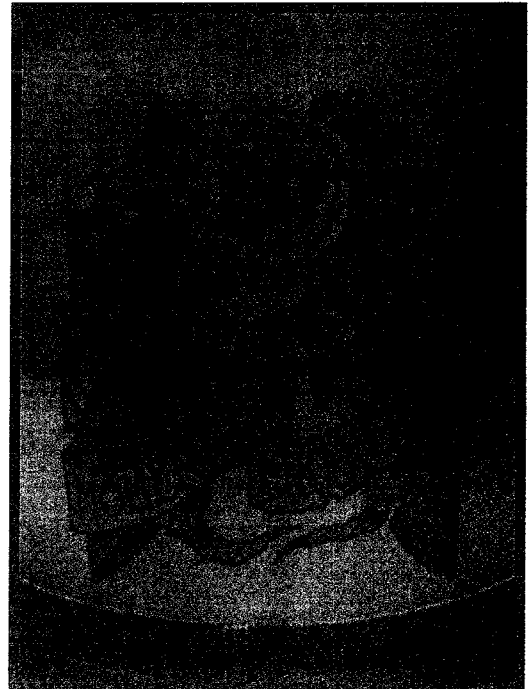
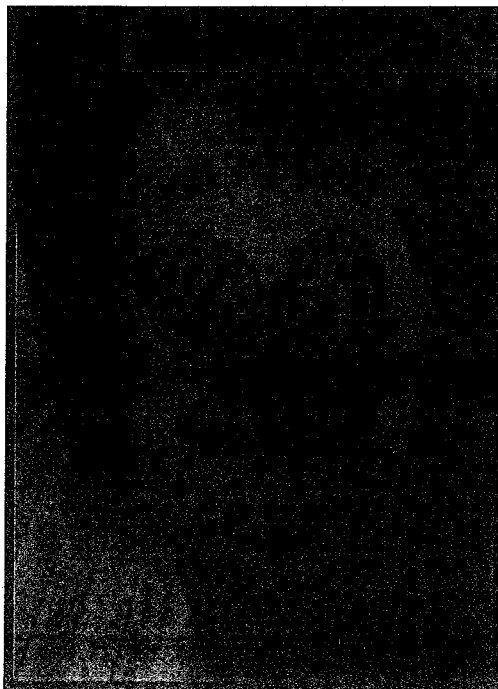
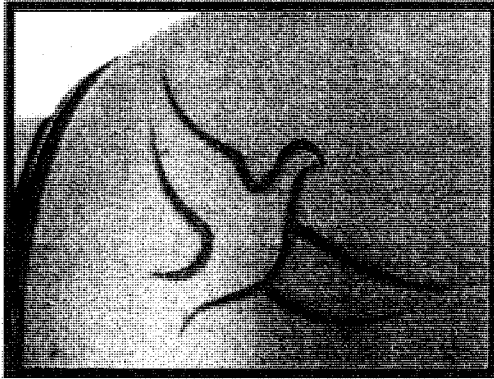
With the new generation of tattoo enthusiasts comes a 'new text' through which tattooing is understood—a new history, focusing on the Japanese or Polynesian roots of tattooing effectively distances middle-class tattoo wearers from Western tattooing's low-class, marginalized roots. In order to market tattooing as a safe, acceptable commodity by which to mark your individuality or identity, capitalist culture has framed the practice in terms of its ability to aid in personal growth—a rite of passage or marker of strength similar to the uses of tattooing among tribal cultures.

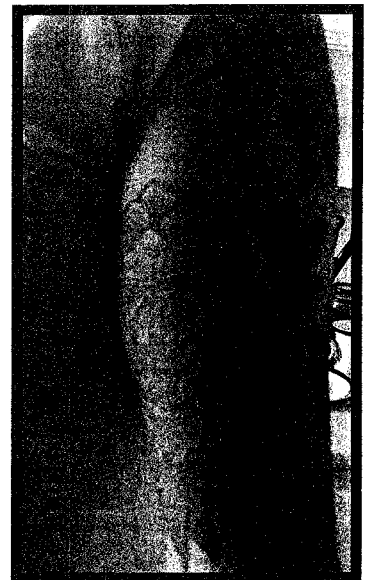
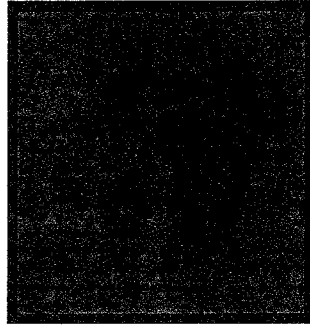
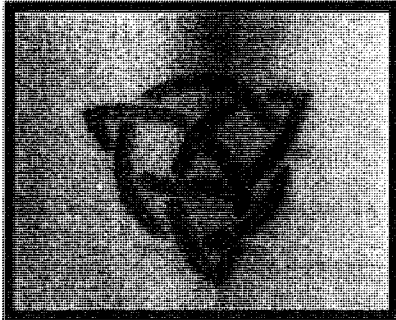
DeMello's theory helps to make sense of the ways in which tattoo discourse has changed over the years, and the nuanced and often complex ways in which tattooing is interpreted and perceived by contemporary enthusiasts. Indeed, the women I spoke with echoed the complexity of issues that arise with the decision to become tattooed and the motivations for becoming tattooed. The ways in which these women understand and talk about the meanings of their tattoos, necessarily shaped and informed by the discourse of tattooing that permeates the current social climate, reflect DeMello's argument. Personal significance and authenticity play large roles in the ways in which these women construct their tattoo projects, and the fluidity of meaning and authenticity then necessarily affects the ways in which tattoos are perceived and discussed. Their construction of tattoo narratives to tell the story of their tattoos were ways that these women could make connections with, rather than, as DeMello argues, appropriate, a larger history.

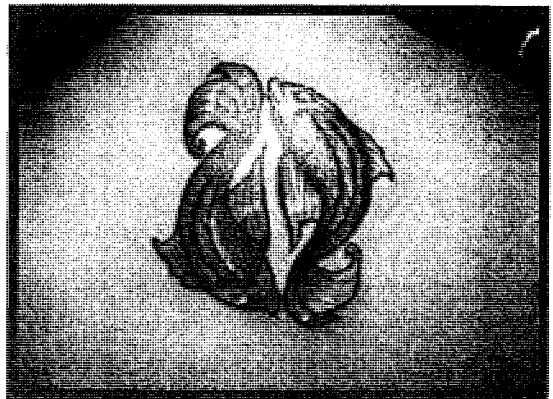
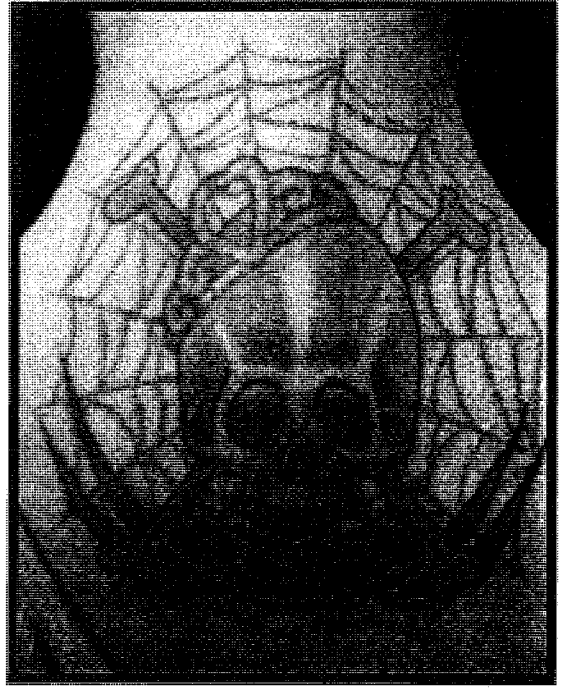
Additionally, it is in the 'message' that the women I spoke with where DeMello's argument is countered. Rather than see contemporary fine art tattoos as unrecognizable and exotic, the women I spoke with find meaning in their tattoos through their adaptation

to the changing nature of tattoo discourse. It is through their tattoo narratives that their tattoos resist conformity and remain authentic—be that original, legitimate, or sincere, long-term commitments to the culture of tattooing.









CHAPTER THREE

NEGOTIATED REBELLION: THE GENDERED NATURE OF THE TATTOO

Tattoos historically have been gendered. While associated more with masculinity and men, women who had tattoos were seen as either over-sexualized or grotesque. This gendering of the tattoo continues to be evident in the contemporary moment. There are typically ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ tattoo designs, tattoo magazines for men and for women, and certain messages that are interpreted from a particular, gendered tattoo design. The ‘tramp stamp’ is an especially striking example of this—an image, usually derived at least in part from tribal design imagery, on the lower back of a woman that has come to connote sexual promiscuity. In the popular romantic comedy *Wedding Crashers* (2005), Vince Vaughn and Owen Wilson, who crash the weddings of strangers in order to meet and sleep with single, easily manipulated women, spot a woman at a wedding reception whose lower back tattoo is peeking out from under her shirt. The response by Vince Vaughn’s character was: “Lower back tattoo ... might as well be a target.” This example suggests that tattooed women still signify, in mainstream society, promiscuity and deviance, and that the construction of tattooed bodies—particularly women’s bodies—as sex objects or hypersexual beings has not been completely eliminated from contemporary perceptions of the practice.

Nevertheless, women’s use of tattooing has countered the traditional association of tattooing with masculinity and deviance. Despite their increased embrace of the practice, however, women are still faced with the remnants of its traditional associations. Tattoo image design and placement can affect the public perceptions of a woman,

whether or not she subscribes to the ideal notions of what it is to be female. ‘Feminine’ and ‘masculine’ tattoos are still very much entrenched in tattoo culture, evidenced in particular by the ways in which the tattoo community is represented, be it through television shows, advertising, movies, or magazines. In flipping through a copy of *Tattoos for Women*—which is, not surprisingly, focused on ‘feminine’ tattoos such as butterflies, flowers, vines, and animals—there were only a few tattoos in the entire magazine that would popularly be considered non-feminine: a skull, a demon head, and the Grim Reaper. Even the cover of the magazine perpetuates the ‘girly’ stereotype of female tattoos: “Beauty captures your attention, Personality captures your heart”; “In this issue: Pretty Tattooed Feet, Wings and Things, Red, Red Ink & Much More!” (*Tattoos for Women* 2007).

While women have been able to use tattooing as a means of asserting individuality—as outlined in the previous chapter—they still face issues concerning the gendered nature of tattoos, namely, the de-feminization that can result from choosing traditionally ‘masculine’ tattoos, and the subsequent pressure to conform to ideal notions of femininity in their tattoo projects. In speaking with tattooed women, I recognized the ways in which they reconcile the push to conformity—in the form of ideally feminine tattoo designs—and their desire to resist the patriarchal gendering of the tattoo. In particular, there are three ways in which the women I spoke with negotiate and reconcile their resistance to gendered tattooing: embracing and working within the boundaries of the gendered nature of tattooing, rejecting altogether the limiting boundaries within which women’s tattooing resides, or picking and choosing when and how to accept and reject those boundaries.

The Gendered Tattoo

Historically, tattoos have been seen as related to social deviancy regardless of the subject. Women with tattoos, however, arguably received greater negative judgment than men, represented as sexual objects and spectacles of the circus (Hawkes et al. 2004: 593). This reaction can be attributed to the masculine connotations that tattoos embodied—those of the sailor, military man, biker, gang member, or prisoner—that “slip off the skin” of women (Braunberger 2000: 1).

Much of the academic analyses of North American tattooing have, according to Michael Atkinson, Canadian sociologist and author of *Tattooed: The Sociogenesis of a Body Art* (2003), “misguidedly conjoined the entirety of men’s and women’s uses for, and interpretations of, tattoos around a core set of principles that were originally intended to explicate men’s tattooing practices only” (2002: 231). The focus on men’s experiences and the understanding of the practice in male terms has ultimately homogenized tattooing and “systematically persuaded individuals to overlook ways of knowing/seeing the tattooed body as a gendered entity” (2002: 232). To counter this oversight in the academic understanding of the practice of tattooing, Atkinson suggests an exploration of how and why *women* participate in tattooing, and the “gendered parameters within which women participate in the body project” (2002: 232).

The discourse of body image and acceptable representations of femininity are shaped by power (patriarchy, specifically) and inform the ways in which gender is performed. Victoria Pitts, author of *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification* (2003), argues that while tattoos, and tattooed women in particular, are non-normative phenomena, those women who choose to be tattooed in a way that promotes

their gender role are, for the most part, accepted, whereas those women who choose tattoo projects that refute idealized notions of femininity can represent “refusal of orderliness and social control” (2003: 41) and are thus seen as challenging normative gender roles. Additionally, a woman may assert a sense of uniqueness and individuality through her tattoo projects, yet “closely conform with established codes about acceptable female body play” (Atkinson 2003: 203) through her choice of tattoo size, placement, and style. Atkinson argues that the majority of women who undergo tattoo projects still choose smaller designs, places on the body that can be easily hidden, and “images encoded with established Western constructions of femininity ... includ[ing] flowers, dolphins and other docile creatures, abstract art, and cosmic imagery (suns, moons, and stars)” (Atkinson 2003: 203). Thus, according to Atkinson, while contemporary North American women may pursue tattooing as a means of delineating their own individuality, they often do so “*within the parameters* of established femininity in Canada” (Atkinson 2003: 203, emphasis in original). In these terms, dominant notions of ideal femininity are then reproduced through the tattoo process.

Men, as well, conform to gender codes through the tattooing process; however, their body projects are less likely to be emphasized by an impulsion toward concealment, and instead conform to the association between maleness and machismo (large and visible tattoos, aggressive designs, a propensity to displaying tattoos). The ways in which men, like women, come to understand their tattoos as unique or authentic are learned and perpetuated through their interactions with other tattooed men and women. According to Atkinson (2003: 205):

We must not lose sight of the fact that these understandings [of tattoos] are circulated and popularized in accordance with established social norms about

bodies and their modification—be they bound with cultural sentiment reflecting gender-, class-, sexual-, or religious-based ways of viewing the world. Justifications whirling around the premise of individuality are learned and intersubjectively promoted by enthusiasts in Canada, especially in relation to established discourses encouraging individuals to be different (while conforming!) through body work.

In these terms, while people may associate their tattoos with uniqueness and individuality, they may have unconsciously chosen a design or placement that they understand as being deemed acceptable by the majority of society, despite tattooing's underlying connections with an overall sense of deviance. That sense of deviance may in fact be the motivation behind deciding to become tattooed in the first place. One might choose a design that has little variation in interpretation, thus decreasing the chances of eliciting a negative response from others. Therefore, by choosing a design that will likely elicit a favourable response from others, one is able to “pass as normal” and remain a “discreditable deviant” (Atkinson 2003: 215)—the best of both worlds. In gendered terms, a woman who chooses a design that reproduces dominant notions of femininity—such as a butterfly, flower, or sun—is also able to pass as a ‘normal’ woman without rendering her a challenge to established gender norms.

Atkinson explains, though, that while many women opt for tattoo designs and images that they interpret as acceptable, there are still a great many women who use tattooing as a means of resisting gender norms. Some women choose images that are typically masculine—such as skulls or daggers—in an effort to disrupt the dominant notions of femininity. Others use tattooing as a means of personal reclamation or empowerment, a visible marker of an abusive childhood or relationship. As Atkinson (2002: 229) explains, “Choosing parts of the body that tend to be exposed or exposable in

everyday life situations, some Canadian women offer their bodies to be decoded as confrontational or different.”

Yet, some women find the overt refutation of gender norms through visible and/or traditionally deemed ‘masculine’ tattoos too public a statement for what can be a very personal addition to their bodies. With the “desire to engage in resistance to established gender codes while maintaining a semblance of conformity to such edicts” (2002: 230), some women opt to exercise their resistance through subtle acts, with tattoos that can be hidden. Not willing to be immediately labeled “deviant,” assessing public situations allows for the decision to either cover or expose a tattoo, according to context. In these terms, women undergo negotiated, contextual rebellion.

Resistance through tattoo projects is not a binary endeavour; rather, it occurs on a continuum. While some women take into consideration more than others the ways in which their tattoos will be read by outsiders—men especially—others use tattooing as a means of overtly or covertly refuting the gender codes within which tattooing is situated.

As Atkinson (2002: 231) notes:

The decision to engage in cultural dissent through body projects such as tattooing appears to be mediated by one’s purpose or motivation for the project and the degree to which the resulting body modification jeopardizes one’s achieved/ascribed cultural statuses ... Resistance, therefore, to established social constructions of gender through tattooing exists on a sliding scale.

Thus, while the ways in which tattooing is used by women varies—from the trend-following, to covert refutations of gender norms, to outright rebellion—women are necessarily aware of the patriarchal system within which their decisions regarding their bodies (including tattooing, among many others) are made. The hegemonic masculine notions of femininity, those which are determined and maintained by society’s “moral

entrepreneurs” (Bartky 1988), necessarily influence and inform the ways in which women construct their identity as women, and as tattooed women.

Introducing the Women

In order to lay the foundation for this examination of the hegemonic masculine notions of femininity and tattooing practices and the system of patriarchy within which these notions operate, five of the women I interviewed—April, Breccan, Judy, Carly, and Amanda—will be featured here.

April is 27 years old and has been a hair stylist for the past three years. She had her first and only tattoo done in the summer of 2006—a pink chrysanthemum which is about six inches in diameter on the bottom right side of her torso. She had been thinking of getting a tattoo for about ten years previous to her decision to get the chrysanthemum tattoo, which was derived from “a design on a Mexican cross-stitch quilt,” on which there are several flowers that she would still like to have tattooed on her. While she had originally wanted to get a hibiscus flower, she explained that “every time I saw them they just looked really cartoon-y, and I guess sort of overly feminine, but this one had a bit more of appeal to it, and it was prettier to me when I found it.” The chrysanthemum does not hold any personal meaning for April, but she explained: “I know there’s a meaning to it, like, if you look up the chrysanthemum, I can’t remember what it is though.”

The location of April’s tattoo seems to be something that she thought of quite carefully. Working in the beauty industry, she wasn’t concerned with being able to hide her tattoo for work (as many of the women I spoke with were); however, she wanted to have the option of keeping it hidden, “for family gatherings.” She told me that she chose

the placement on the side of her body because she “didn’t want it to be typical” but that she chose that spot “because it still seems very personal and somewhat sensual.”

Having a number of friends who are tattooed—some heavily—encouraged April to pursue a tattoo project even more:

I think I just wanted one for a long time, after seeing anybody else’s it just made me more, wanting something that was my own. And then looking at the hibiscus flower, I wanted that up until two years ago, and then realized that it wasn’t something that I wanted, and then looked into getting the one that I have now.

Having a very colourful and quite large tattoo on what she considers a “sensual” part of her body is important for April:

That spot particularly I think about more because it is in more of a sensual spot ... For me, it’s at a very generous curve of my body, so it’s, it sort of highlights it. And, like, that’s not a part of the body that you typically look at, not because it’s covered, but because nobody focuses ever at that area, you know?

While she explained that she is happy to show her tattoo to anyone who asks—being proud of the artwork she has on her—April told me that a lot of people were very shocked at the size of her tattoo. In fact, many people have been surprised that she even has a tattoo; as she told me “a lot of people think that I’m really conservative.” She recalled the time she showed her tattoo to a tattooed friend that works at a makeup counter in the same mall in which April’s salon is located:

She’s considered quite edgy and she came by one day, and I told her, I said “Oh, have you seen my tattoo yet?” And she’s, like, “No.” And I was like “Oh.” And before I was going to show her, like, I noticed how shocked she was. So I asked her what she thought it would be, and she, like, jokingly said “Is it a butterfly?” implying like, typical, you know? And then when I showed her she was, like, “Whoa, that’s crazy, that’s so beautiful.”

Breccan is a 27-year-old elementary school teacher. After completing her Bachelor of Education from the University of Winnipeg, she taught English in Japan for a year. She is currently teaching at an elementary school in Winnipeg. She has one tattoo, a Celtic design: “there’s a circle with a triangle type design winding around it, interlocking through it.” She thought of a design that she liked, which was inspired by a pendant she bought while she was travelling through Scotland at age 18. She got the tattoo in Montreal, QC, while on the way home from completing a French language learning program in Trois Rivieres at age 21. Flipping through tattoo images at the studio in Montreal, she saw the image that she had in mind, and so had it tattooed on her lower back.

Breccan chose the location of her tattoo specifically because

It’s easily disguisable, you can hide it easily, and also since it’s on my back it’s not something that I see all the time, so I wouldn’t ever get sick of it, so I thought. And it’s not a place that’s likely to stretch, you know, a part of your body that’s going to get messed up if I get pregnant or whatever. I wanted to get one on my hip or stomach but I thought it would stretch or get deformed if I got pregnant.

Being an elementary school teacher, Breccan is limited in that she cannot have visible tattoos, or, rather, does not want to “risk not being able to look professional.” While she can appreciate those who have larger, more visible tattoos, and sometimes even wishes she had “a sleeve,” she knows that it wouldn’t be the right decision for her: “I’m not somebody that has a lot of tattoos. Like, I’m not opposed to ever getting more, I just don’t want any that are going to be visible no matter what. And I don’t want ones either that are going to stretch.”

The meaning of the design and the meaning of the tattoo itself are separate for Breccan. She explained the difference to me:

The reason that I got it at that time was, well, I had been thinking about getting it and then I was [in Quebec] and I felt like I was, you know, away from home, living away from home for five weeks, which was at the time the longest that I'd been away from home. So I was in a different environment, made completely different friends, and it sort of felt like a, I don't know, like a change in my life. So I decided that I wanted to get it. Plus, you know, nobody else really had a tattoo. It was kind of cool.

And the meaning behind the tattoo is, well, the circle, it's like continuity, and the circle of life, and then since it's kind of a triangle, it sort of represents body, mind, and spirit, and the interconnection between everything.

Judy, like Breccan, is an elementary school teacher at a school in Steinbach, Manitoba. She is 32 years old and, like Breccan as well, has one tattoo on her lower back. She got tattooed in Vancouver when she was 22 years old. Her tattoo is, as she explains, a "modified Barbie stamp"—the word 'Mattel' with the year '1974' directly underneath it, like the brand and year stamped on the back of each Barbie doll. Judy altered the design from Barbie's by changing the year to 1974, the year she was born. She explained to me that she chose this particular design after thinking long and hard about what she would like to have permanently on her skin:

I guess Barbie was always a big influence on my life in a really positive way. I saw her being a strong character who could be whoever she wanted to be. She wasn't tied to a man. She was free to be a doctor one day when I played with her or whatever. So I identified not with her beauty so much as her being a strong female character without being tied to a man.

The location of the tattoo was chosen not only because that is where Barbie is stamped, but also because it was easily hidden:

Barbie has it on her back, but when I started looking closer she has generally this much of writing on her whole back. If I copied it exactly it would say "Mattel Incorporated Korea" and a whole bunch of stuff. I abbreviated it so that I didn't have my whole back done with that. It's

basically the same location as Barbie, but also I knew that I didn't know what my career would be in the end. Right then I was working at Starbucks and it didn't really matter, but I knew that I didn't know what kind of job I would get so I didn't want it across my face or anything—to be able to hide it if I needed to.

Judy was tattooed a decade ago, and has no desire for any more tattoos. She told me that when she had her tattoo done, it was still a practice that was considered unique, “before the huge trend, before everybody got them.... It was just starting to be kind of something cool.” Nowadays, though, Judy explained that tattooing has lost its once cool connotations as it has become a mainstream practice, losing meaning on a person when so many are tattooed. She put it quite clearly: “If you're getting tattooed in 2007, you missed the boat and you should find some other way to mark your body.”

Carly is 28 years old and has been working in Winnipeg as a tattoo artist since April 2003. She has twelve tattoos, ranging from those that were “more popularized” and chosen “off the wall” when she was younger, to pieces that she has had done more recently that express her love of art, and the “styles of art that tattooing provides.” Some of her tattoos include “old Sailor Jerry stuff I've got on my stomach” and a “new graphic style on my leg.” She explained that she is currently in the process of having some of her tattoos removed so that she can “get more that are way better.” Being a tattoo artist means that Carly is much more exposed to the art and influences of the tattoo culture than many of the other women I interviewed. She views tattooing as a means of covering herself in “cool artwork,” and is particular about the images she has tattooed on her and the locations in which she is tattooed. She explained to me that she doesn't want to end up covered in tattoos:

I don't want to look like I'm wearing clothes when I'm tattooed so I'm very particular about the design, because I do really want to project my own personal image. Like, if another artist saw me they'd go: "Hey, that's a really neat idea. Maybe I'm going to try that one day." I don't want to look covered. But I want obviously brightly-coloured, really interesting tattoos that are big and really interesting to look at. I don't want to turn out like some of my friends where it looks like they're wearing clothing when they're actually not.

Carly also explained that being in the industry has influenced her take on the practice of tattooing and the meaning it holds for her:

People that are really close to the industry, whether they're friends of ours, or they work at the shop, or they're tattoo artists or piercers themselves, have a way more easier time because it's so much more available to them that they'll get ridiculous stuff. I think because the regular crowd, people who aren't closer to the industry, they feel like it matters so much. Whereas we can do it any time we want. It's really available to us, but to them it's so foreign. They're not used to the idea.

In this regard, Carly's sense of humour comes across through her tattoo projects. She appreciates "funny" tattoos, like her first tattoo: the alchemy symbol for lead tattooed on her right foot at age 16, when she got her driver's license. Meaning, in Carly's case, is different from the mainstream notions as she explains her affinity for "funny" tattoos.

She explains:

I'll make up stories about what my tattoos mean. Like, on my stomach I've got a lock and key and wings and everybody asks me what it means and it doesn't mean anything. I just like the idea. So I just say "Oh, I'm my own true love." Not to mention, I have my favorite food tattooed on my foot: a box of noodles. I have a ghostly fish on my leg. I like things that are slightly funny that aren't going to get really old or stale, like the Chinese food. I've had that for three years and I still giggle. I think it's hilarious. I love showing it to people and they're like "Why would you do that?" "Because it's funny, it's so funny." And it is so funny to me. And I love it.

Amanda is 25 years old and is a homemaker who recently took up jewelry design. She has five tattoos, including a full sleeve of traditional Japanese imagery on her left arm. She started getting tattooed when she was 18 years old. Her first tattoos, which she got when she was living with a boyfriend in Ontario, were done by a tattooist friend in her home. One of her first tattoos, a Chinese-style dragon, has since been incorporated into her Japanese-themed sleeve. She explained to me the designs of her tattoos:

I have a diamond on my thumb which has some shine on it. I have some script writing on my wrist which says "Hell Hath No Fury." I have a tribal piece with a butterfly on my lower back, also known as the '18-year-old tattoo that everyone gets.' Then I have, on the back of my neck, a skull and crossbones with a spider web and the skull is wearing a tiara which says "Princess" in Italian. Then I have a sleeve which is all traditional Japanese artwork. Including, but not limited to, tiger lilies, a geisha, various different flowers of chrysanthemums, peonies. It's very colourful and big.

For Amanda, having her tattoos visible is important. Having a full sleeve is a major commitment, and Amanda explained to me that she thought about it for a year before she started getting it done. For her, tattoos are pieces of art that are meant to be seen, so any concerns about visibility that some of the other women I interviewed have mentioned were not concerns of Amanda's. She explained the process of getting her sleeve done:

I actually planned the sleeve for a year before I even went and saw someone about it. I looked at a lot of different pieces. I had a lot of different pictures, a lot of different ideas. I think I still have them written down on paper. I'd go through tattoo magazines and mark them with stickies and post-its: I like this one, or what different parts I liked about it. I kept thinking about it. The thing is a sleeve is a big undertaking. Not just financially or time wise, but obviously it's on your body for the rest of your life. It took me quite a while. A lot of it, I worked it around [my dragon tattoo] because I felt it was kind of plain and dated—not even dated—I thought it was too common. A lot of people have Chinese or Japanese dragons; it's a pretty common tattoo. The one on my neck, I chose that one because it feels like a nametag. This feels like where your nametag would go. Tags in shirts are back

there and that's like my tag; it's kind of like my nametag. Plus it's visible, for the most part. I'm pretty big on my tattoos being visible. A lot of people say, "I get tattoos because I like the art." Well you can get tattoos because you like the art as much as you want, but what's the point in putting so much time and money into something if you're not going to show it off? To me, they're actual art pieces and you hang those on a wall. You don't keep them in your closet. I tend to get tattoos where people see them.

Amanda told me that she likes being one of the few women in Winnipeg that has a full sleeve, as it sets her apart from other people—particularly other women. For her, having visible tattoos does not risk her being taken seriously by others, be it professionally or otherwise, as she feels that her tattoos only enhance her already strong character:

As far as the "on my body for the rest of my life" thing, I'm not the most conventional person anyway. It never really concerned me that that would limit me in any area in my life. I could never see that defining me intellectually or defining me socially. I think that I have a strong enough presence that this only adds to it. It's never going to take away from it no matter what. I could be a doctor with this and still have people take me seriously.

Given the gendered nature of the tattooing practice, how do tattooed women reconcile their desire to be tattooed with the challenges of being marked as 'overly feminine' or 'overly masculine'? How do they use tattooing in the identity-constructing process, one that helps to construct their identity as women?

Reconciling Ideal Femininity/Resisting Patriarchy

While traditional analyses of women's tattooing practices interpret the female tattooed body as an inherently subversive entity—a negation of gender codes—Atkinson argues that women's tattooing practices go beyond this simplified analysis, in that women's

tattoos are “layered with culturally established, resistant, and negotiated images of femininity” (2002: 220). He explains:

By going beyond the popular idea that women’s tattoo body projects are simply crass refutations of established gender codes (perhaps a lingering product of mainstay decodings of women’s tattoo projects as the antithesis of men’s), we open up a possibility for understanding why women tattoo their bodies in the conscious effort of reproducing or negotiating established constructions of femininity (Atkinson 2002: 232).

The women I spoke with echoed Atkinson’s argument to an extent. All of the women I interviewed were very much aware of the gendered context within which their tattooed bodies (and before that, their bodies) are situated. The women explained, usually indirectly, that they would either work within the limited boundaries of the gendered nature of tattoos or reject altogether this gendered construct.

For some of the women I spoke with, the ideal notions of what it means to be feminine played a larger role in the decision to be tattooed; namely, the placement and size of the tattoo that they chose. The moment when ideal femininity came out most clearly in our conversations was when the women talked about getting married, an occasion when ideal femininity is put on display. For Breccan, 27, having an easily hidden tattoo was very important, not only for work, but for her everyday life. She explained that she wouldn’t want a tattoo to interrupt the image of herself that she imagines on her wedding day: “I just keep thinking, when I get married, like, wearing a pretty white dress and then having this big tattoo.” Jenn, a 28-year-old legal assistant with a large tribal back piece, told the story of her own reservations about having a traditional wedding ceremony and having such a large, visible tattoo:

I never cared what other people would think of me or my tattoo until I was getting married. I was so nervous for all of my friends, family,

colleagues, and future in-laws to see my tattoo on my wedding day. I just didn't think it was appropriate for the church or for the day. I tried to find a dress that would cover the tattoo, which was impossible unless I wanted to wear a turtle neck! My close friends and family told me not to worry, that it was a part of me and was beautiful. So, I picked a dress that looked like it was tattooed! The dress showed the top half of my back and then had stitching and beading that made it look like the tattoo was continued on the dress. I was still nervous up to the day. But people who had never seen it before and had no idea I had it were coming up to me and telling me they loved it and how great it looked with the dress. It wasn't until after my wedding that I was glad to have had it that day—if that makes any sense. In other words, before the wedding when people would ask if I regretted getting my tattoo I would say my wedding day would be the only day I would regret having it. But now looking back, it wouldn't have been the same without it.

Amber, 21, has five tattoos and expressed to me her frustration with those people who question her decision to be tattooed under the assumption that her tattoos will compromise the traditional "bride" image on her wedding day: "It's kind of irritating that a lot of people have given me the reaction of, you know, 'What are you going to do if you get married, and you have to wear a wedding dress?'" Amber explained that she's also been told, "you would look better if you didn't have tattoos." Being a woman with larger, or more visible tattoos means that issues of femininity—particularly what consequences any subversions to traditionally accepted femininity must be faced—necessarily arise. The notion that any woman who gets tattooed must consider her 'inevitable' wedding day seems to remain fairly common, given the comments from the women I spoke with. Taking into consideration how a tattoo—particularly a visible tattoo—can affect one's identity as a woman is something that many of the women I spoke with experienced.

April, 27, also took into consideration the fact that her tattoo design would likely be considered 'feminine'; however, she was happy with her choice. Having a large, pink flower tattooed on her side, April acknowledged the association with traditional

femininity that her tattoo conveys, that of being “feminine and delicate, like a flower,” because “most women are classified as delicate.” This association is not necessarily negative, she explained, because she *is* feminine. Most importantly, however, she argues that the purpose of her tattoo is not to define her personality or identity: “It’s not like I got it to make me look a certain way or anything.” Thus, April is aware of the associations with traditional femininity that her tattoo may likely hold for some outsiders, but she is content in her own reasons for getting tattooed, and doesn’t seek the approval of or acknowledgement from others that her tattoo is more than just the stigmatized notion of a woman with a flower tattoo, given its size, usually hidden location, and personal significance for her.

For Judy, 32, her tattoo was done in a place that is easily hidden as, at the time she was tattooed, she was unsure of her career path and did not want to jeopardize her professional life. While she told me that she used to think much more about her tattoo on a regular basis, she still finds power in her now 10-year-old tattoo. She explained that she only wants this one tattoo, and is happy with her decision to stick with her original design idea:

I’ve seen on other people that once they get one, the mistake I feel that so many people make is, “I should have got another because here’s another one that’s better.” And they can’t stop because it’s an addiction. And another thing, it loses its power. If you’re making this one mark on your body I can’t see the next one as being as great an idea. Because that was what was in my heart and deeply wanted, so I knew that whatever secondary idea I had or third idea or fourth and fifth would pale in comparison. And I feel it lessens the power ... for me anyways. I knew I would never be one of those people who had sleeves. I admire them on other people but I knew that wasn’t for me. So I knew I was going to have one and it was going to be one that I was going to be happy with for the rest of my life.

Judy's decision to only get one tattoo is something that she thought long and hard about. Her tattoo is different because it represents for her feminine strength and independence, and is not a design that was chosen, in her mind, in consideration of how it would negatively affect her identity as a woman. She did, however, understand the ways in which being tattooed could affect her job opportunities, and chose a placement that would work within those limitations. For Judy, her small, hidden tattoo does not represent a conformity to traditional gender norms, but instead is a symbol of feminine strength and power.

Working in the tattoo industry has given Carly, 28, the ability to be much more visible with her tattoo projects without the fear of work-related problems arising from her tattoo choices. That said, however, Carly explained to me that, "even as a tattoo artist, I'm in the business now and I'm allowed to look that way, I still don't want to get my neck or my hands tattooed because I like being able to blend in." She told me about her experience attending her brother's wedding:

When I went to my brother's wedding I made sure that I had a dress that covered up my tattoos and wore stockings so my leg tattoos weren't showing. I want to look nice like everybody else. I don't want to be the one person in the picture that looks like a total freak. Not to mention, one piece on my arm was in the midst of being removed, so it looked terrible. If I had really beautiful, nice, pretty tattoo, then I would have no problem showing it off at an event like that. Whereas, at a wedding, you want to look really nice.

Carly recognizes that being heavily tattooed affects the ways in which outsiders perceive her, not only as a tattooed person, but as a tattooed woman. Being able to "blend in" is important to her, and a way to work within the mainstream perceptions of tattooed bodies. Avoiding negativity or ostracizing from outsiders through selectively hiding or

showing off her tattoos is Carly's way of exerting power over the ways in which tattooed women's bodies are constructed and perceived.

For Amanda, 25, being heavily tattooed was a decision that was not very difficult for her to make. She planned her full sleeve for about a year, but when I asked her about any trepidation she may have had about committing to such a large tattoo project, she told me that it never really occurred to her that it would create any limitations for her socially or work-wise. For her, having tattoos done on visible parts of her body is the goal, and not something she is nervous about. Her boyfriend, she told me, was the one that suggested that she consider what direction she wants to take her career before getting any more visible tattoos. Amanda explains:

I wanted to get stars on my face and I still do, so badly. And he's like, "You have to wait until you've picked a career." Because I've been looking into and working on jewelry design—it's one thing if I'm doing that. That's pretty freelance, basic stuff. But if you want to become a real estate agent, which is something else I've also looked at, do you really want to have stars on your face? And I was like, "Yeah, I still pretty much do." I'll just cover it up with bangs or something. I'll just have them in my hairline. I don't know. If you have a strong enough personality, a strong enough presence on your own, I don't think that anything I had out on my body could ever mislead people about what they were going to get out of me or from me or what they could expect from me as a person. So it never really affected me. Plus, I wanted to be one of the few girls that have sleeves—set me apart from other people.

Being visibly and heavily tattooed, Amanda gets a great deal more public attention than she did before she was tattooed, and she told me that she feels more confident about herself now that she is tattooed—what she termed "automatic confidence":

I've been told that I carry it really well. It's kind of a part of my personality. Because it takes a bold person to do that, so people automatically will recognize me as a bold person and I don't have to act a certain way to get that recognition immediately. Less work for me. It's kind of like automatic, it's almost automatic confidence. You have

to have confidence to have it. There are other girls who have sleeves, but they would kind of be more...when I think of other girls that are heavily inked, I think of girls that are really into traditional. They're very pale. They've got the bangs. They're wearing glasses and Chucks and have their pants rolled up. They're cute, right? Or I can picture ones I've seen at tattoo conventions that are like the real pin up style confident, like, 'sex bomb' kind of girls. And I identify more with them. It's, like, automatic confidence.

Amanda's tattoos serve as a sign—they provide outsiders with a glimpse of her personality, the type of woman she is, and what they can expect from her. While already 'marked' as a woman, her tattoos further mark her as an outgoing woman, one who, according to Amanda, has a "strong presence." In this sense, Amanda uses her tattoos to reject the traditional notions of what it is to be female, and what 'acceptable femininity' looks like, instead creating her own image of confident femininity.

The women I spoke with reflected, in many regards, the bulk of Atkinson's argument of the ways in which women's tattoo projects reflect or reject established gender codes. Faced with the gendered construction of tattooing practices in Western society, these women find different ways to work with or around the gendered notions of tattoos. Some, such as Breccan, Judy, or April, work within the gendered construct of tattooing, choosing locations on their body that are easily hidden or smaller tattoos that will be less likely to affect their social standing in the workplace or as women. Aware of the consequences of subverting the traditional notions of what it is to be female, these women choose to frame their tattoo projects in such a way as to remain acceptable. Similar to the other ways in which women must "do gender" (Atkinson 2002: 225)—such as through their choices of dress, hair style, and makeup—the structuring of tattoo projects within the acceptable boundaries of 'feminine' allows these women to "pass as

normal” (Atkinson 2003: 215). This allows us to see the negotiations and strategies women adopt to present themselves as unique.

Others, like Amanda, choose to reject the gendered nature of tattooing, opting for highly visible tattoos in an attempt to ‘advertise’ themselves, a sign offered to others “to be decoded as confrontational or different” (Atkinson 2002: 229). Without this visibility, there is no challenge to gender norms. According to Amanda, tattoos are like any other piece of art: “To me they’re actual art pieces and you hang those on a wall. You don’t keep them in your closet.”

Still, some women, like April and Carly, see the nuanced nature of gendered tattoos and the resulting consequences of refuting or accepting this phenomenon. April understands the association with traditional femininity that her tattoos evoke, yet she is content with her choice of tattoo and does not feel that traditional femininity is necessarily negative. The size of her tattoo and April’s own discretion as to when to show it off allows her to engage in a subtle type of dissent and resistance to established gender norms: her tattoo is private, but can represent her own rejection of the typically small, commonly placed ‘woman’s’ tattoo (such as the ‘typical’ butterfly some may have guessed she would get). For Carly, the ability to “blend in” in particular situations means that she chooses when and how her tattoos reflect her own opinions about the female tattooed body. She can show her tattoos off when she feels comfortable doing so: “In the summer I like to wear my tank tops and go to the beach in my bikini and still be able to show off my tattoos when I want.” In this regard, she decides when she will be visibly (and proudly) marked as different.

The Changing Definition of the “Woman’s” Tattoo

Atkinson’s theory regarding the ways in which women’s tattoo projects reflect or reject established gender codes is helpful in understanding the ways in which the women I spoke with understand their own tattoos and how they are perceived. However, there are a number of discrepancies between the women’s comments and Atkinson’s argument. As it was explained in the previous chapter, tattoos and the ways of understanding tattoos are fluid—they change over time. Similar to how the meanings of tattoos change, so do the ways in which tattoos are understood by outsiders and tattoo enthusiasts alike. Through my conversations with these 18 women, I found three particular themes that countered or, more accurately, moved beyond Atkinson’s argument: the stigma of the small tattoo and the unexpected confidence gained from it; the stigma of the ‘tramp stamp’; and the ways in which men’s and women’s tattooing have started to blur across gender lines.

First, there is a stigma, according to the majority of the women I spoke with, associated with women—particularly young women—who choose to only have one, small tattoo, or those who choose traditionally ‘feminine’ tattoo images or designs. This stigma would suggest that while attempting to work within the boundaries of gender codes, women who have only one small tattoo also must take into consideration the lack of authenticity associated with their tattoo choice as perceived by other tattooed women.

Breccan noted the stigma she feels is associated with women who choose small tattoos:

I feel like sometimes people would be, like, “Oh, why can’t you get a tattoo somewhere where people can see it? You’re not as good as us because we have tattoos everywhere else.” But, like, I don’t know, I just don’t want to risk not be able to look professional.

Amber, 21, also expressed her thoughts on women who get small tattoos: "It irritates me when girls talk about getting tattooed but they have about the size of a dime tattooed on their ankle or something." Jenn, 28, also voiced this opinion:

Girls with quarter-sized butterflies or ladybugs are a joke, but I totally respect older women who get something small tattooed. At least theirs usually means something to them, not what's on the wall and what everyone else is getting right now. And, of course, I totally respect women with huge, kick ass tattoos—we are definitely a different breed.

Connected to this issue is the notion that a tattoo—even a small, seemingly 'inauthentic' tattoo—can provide its wearer with a sense of confidence in her body. Atkinson argues that those tattoos which serve as a radical resistance to gender codes—the large, highly visible tattoos—can also serve as a means of empowerment or the reclamation of a one's body. A number of the women I spoke with echoed this sentiment—their tattoo(s) made them more confident about themselves, their body, or a particular body part. This was not necessarily a planned result, but rather an unexpected outcome of the decision to get tattooed. Judy explained the way in which her tattoo was a source of power for her:

So I guess I feel good that I value my body enough that I can, it's my body and I can do what I want to it. In that way I maybe feel different than people who are maybe afraid to get a tattoo or women who aren't tattooed. It's tricky again because there's so many different variables. Women that don't have tattoos then, like, "Why not?" Right? Is it because they don't want them? Or is it because they're too scared? Or they think it's wrong? I don't know why they would not have one. So I guess I feel different in that I took charge of my body. I think that's a good thing. It's always positive when you claim your body. Like, it's yours to do what you want. So I feel good in that I chose how I was going to alter my body.

Similarly, April told me how her tattoo makes her feel about that part of her body:

That spot particularly I think about more because it is in more of a sensual spot. I mean, it's not necessarily on my breast or my butt or anything, but it's, you know, a very feminine part of my body and it makes me more comfortable [with] that particular spot.

Amber also reflected this sentiment: "Yeah, I think it's definitely changed the way I look at myself. [I'm] just more comfortable, not necessarily more confident, just probably more comfortable looking at myself." Carly as well explained how her stomach tattoo has changed the way she feels about her body:

When I got my belly tattooed I didn't like my belly. Most women have one part of their body they don't like. Once I got it tattooed, I loved it. All I wanted to do was show it off and say, "Look at my belly." Now there's actually a joke about 'Carly's bagel' and people ask me to show it at parties, where I scrunch it into a little bagel and scream "Where's the cream cheese?!" It's just made me more confident. I don't care how I really look because I'm covered in really cool artwork. It made me like a part of my body that I didn't like before. I didn't do it because I wanted to have that feeling; it was a by-product of getting my stomach tattooed. I didn't like my stomach and now I do. It's way more fun to have it. No sit-ups for me. I'm keeping it. I love my tummy.

The unexpected result of small, seemingly 'feminine' tattoos—those that Atkinson (2002: 224) would argue "highlight the docility of women's bodies" and "symbolically justify women's and femininity's cultural position as Other"—suggests that perhaps these 'conforming' tattoos are in reality a form of subtle dissent, in that they provide these women with a sense of confidence and peace with parts of their bodies that they feel fail to conform to the ideal notion of the female body.

Secondly, there has developed a stigmatization of particular placements or locations on a woman's body to be tattooed. This stigma, usually associated with tattoos on the lower back—the 'tramp stamp'—may have been born in the hegemonic, male-dominated society within which the gendered construct of tattooing operates, however,

many of the women I spoke with told me of their disdain for women with the stereotypically feminine tattoo. Amber, 21, expressed her resolve to never get tattooed in that location: "Anything on my lower back I wouldn't get. I think it's a ridiculous spot. There's parts of my body that I will *not* get tattooed." Amber was aware, however, of the ways in which the male gaze affects the perception of particular tattooed female body parts:

Whenever something is a trend, too, I think it becomes completely acceptable to all guys and they think it's really hot. Like, when girls started getting their ankles tattooed and guys [thought], "Oh that's really nice," and then when girls started getting their lower back tattooed. And now it's just not attractive. 'Cause I know a lot of guys that [say] "Oh girls with tramp stamps are really gross," even though years ago some of those guys were [saying the opposite].

Ryse, 21, has five tattoos and told me that while she does not like the association with promiscuity that the lower back tattoo evokes, "I would probably get something on my lower back just to spite everybody, but it would be something nice."

The lower back tattoo is a peculiar phenomenon. Once generally interpreted as 'sexy' on women, it is now seen as trappy, inauthentic, or "gross." This change in meaning would suggest that just as women are forced to self-monitor their bodies and self-police in accordance with the dominant notions of femininity and what women ought to look like, they also face similar limitations in the realm of tattooing. Although, while a woman's style of dress can be easily changed, a tattoo is much more painful and costly to remove or alter. In this context, it is interesting to note that while, at one point in time, any woman with a tattoo was seen as resisting (at least to some extent) gender norms, now this resistance is only perceived as legitimate in relation to certain tattoos. On the other hand, is a woman who refuses to be tattooed on her lower back resisting gender

norms (specifically, the construction of the 'tramp') or is she merely upholding this gendered, sexist notion? In some senses, the popular interpretation of the lower back tattoo has reverted to the traditional interpretations of tattooed women: the prostitute. Now, a woman who chooses to be tattooed on her lower back, it could be argued, is actually resisting the sexist nature that the lower back tattoo has taken on.

In terms of the third and final theme, in talking with Carly, a tattoo artist, it became clear from her comments that the designs that men and women are having tattooed may not be falling quite so neatly along gender lines. Carly explained:

Obviously women get a lot of fluffy, girly stuff and guys will get more hard, evil-looking stuff. But I find the crossover is pretty equal as well. As many guys get flowers as girls get skulls. On the whole, most of my clientele are women regardless—70% for sure. I find that just as many guys get quote unquote girly tattoos, in the classical sense. Like, they'll get classical Japanese flowers or Sailor Jerry roses. Girls will get skulls and top hats and spiders and spider webs. It crosses over because I think we're getting more asexual with our styles. They think I'm a boy at work because [I'm] boyish. "You look like a girl, but you're like a boy." I think it's the same with my clientele, it's sort of 50/50.

Nevertheless, while Carly explains that the crossover between men's and women's tattoo images is fairly equal among her clientele, the different styles of tattoo work and the gendered images that those styles include need to be considered. Sailor Jerry and other traditional tattoo work, while traditionally associated with the patriotic sailors and bikers of the early part of the century, include not just images of anchors, ships, and flags but also of gypsies, mermaids, and roses. As well, Japanese style tattoo work includes not just tigers and koi fish, but also flowers and Geishas. So it is not necessarily clear what types of people are getting 'masculine' or 'feminine' tattoo designs these days. It may very well be that women are embracing the designs traditionally associated with masculinity—the "hard, evil-looking stuff"—but those women could also be a small

percentage of tattooed women. While it is undoubtedly impossible to generalize on the basis of Carly's clientele, it is interesting to speculate nonetheless.

While Atkinson's work is useful for understanding the ways in which the women I spoke with make sense of their tattoo projects and choices, our conversations would suggest that his work is perhaps dated. In the sense that the interpretations of what were at one time considered 'feminine' tattoos have changed—just as culture is fluid, so too are the particular ideas about tattooing. Discourse on the body, in particular, has undergone a transformation in the last century. The ways in which we talk about our bodies necessarily inform the ways in which we talk about our body play and body modification practices. Feminists, specifically, have re-examined the classical discourse on the body in an attempt to re-conceptualize the body in a way that takes into consideration both men and women. In these terms, how has the feminist discourse of the body (and its evolution over the past century) informed and influenced the transformation of tattoo discourse, and how can it help us understand the ways in which these women make sense of their own tattoo projects?

The privileging of the mind over the body has been a tradition long held in philosophy and religion, where the mind is thought to reside in the realm of God, while the body is simply a resident of the realm of nature. A number of feminist approaches have attempted to move past the mind/body split and suggest a philosophy of the body that included the female body as more than a "functional device" (Wegenstein 2006: 18). Simone de Beauvoir suggested that in order to understand gender, differentiating it from sex may not necessarily be beneficial, and one must instead consider the body as a situation that grounds the experience of the self and the world (Wegenstein 2006; Grosz

1994). While feminist approaches to understanding the body have evolved over time, they all share a similar characteristic: a reliance (implicitly or explicitly) on the male hierarchical gender model. While women do not necessarily experience their bodies or their sexualities in a dependent relation to that of men, “the only socially recognized and validated representations of women’s sexuality are those which conform to and accord with the expectations and desires of a certain heterosexual structuring of male desire” (Grosz 1994: 202). In order to theorize the body without reverting to this traditionally problematic model, Elizabeth Grosz suggests a deconstructivist model, which argues that identity, and specifically a woman’s identity, is constructed through an ongoing process, as various layers of media accumulated through the interaction with one’s environment can be taken off and transformed.

It is, in Elizabeth Grosz’s terms, the materiality of gender that informs the creation of the body image. Rejecting the traditional mind/body split, Grosz sees gender as “the inscription, and hence also the production, of the sexed body” (Grosz as qtd. in Wegenstein 2006: 22). Sexual difference and gender are important for Grosz in the study of the body, because for her the body is informed by its situation—culturally, historically, and socially. Grosz suggests a model that accounts for the ways in which bodies have come to relate to other bodies and body parts and recognizing their capacity to “twist one into the other” (1994: 210). Using the metaphor of the Möbius Strip, a non-orientable surface with only one edge and one side, Grosz argues that there need not be a dichotomy between mind and body, and suggests that “subjectivity [is] to be understood not as the combination of a psychological depth and a corporeal superficiality but as a surface whose

inscriptions and rotations in a three-dimensional space produce all the effects of depth” (1994: 210).

In these terms, the shifting discourse of women’s tattoo practices is inevitable—body modifications, such as tattooing, that are part of a woman’s identity construction are necessarily contextual, and will shift and change according to the cultural and historical climate of the time. For the women that I spoke with, tattooing, with its increasing mainstream presence and shifting significance for women, takes on a different role in the construction of their identities as the discourse, interactions and relationships with others, and the exposure of the tattoo community change over time. Like Grosz’s Möbius Strip, the interpretations of women’s tattooing practices and the norms concerning the ways in which women’s tattoos are perceived “twist into one another” and are necessarily transformed over time.

In a similar vein, Grosz’s theory helps us to understand the ways in which capitalism and patriarchy extend their domination. The ‘tramp stamp,’ once a sign of deviance or resistance, is now seen, I would argue, as the sign of a ‘new’ traditional femininity. Hegemonic masculinity has managed to appropriate this symbol and turn it back against women in an attempt to broaden its command over women’s embodiment and the ideal notions of femininity.

Concluding Remarks

Atkinson’s theory regarding the ways in which women’s tattooing practices work to maintain or resist established gender codes, to varying degrees, is helpful in understanding how the women I spoke with make sense of their own tattoos. However,

some emergent issues from my analysis suggest that Atkinson's theory is not sufficient in understanding the nuanced and complex ways in which particular ideas about tattooing surface, change, and ultimately affect the ways in which women approach tattooing and understand it in the context of the hegemonic notions of what it means to be female and feminine. The discourse of tattooing is necessarily informed and influenced by social interactions, media and academic representations, and the overall system of patriarchy and capitalism within which it exists. Thus, the ways we interpret and perceive tattooing—particularly women's tattooing practices—will shift and change according to the social and historical context in which we are situated, of which patriarchy and capitalism play an influential role. Women must then be always aware of these shifts and changes, working within, around, or against the ways in which patriarchy informs the dominant notions of the tattooed female body. Similar to the discussion of the tattoo discourse's fluidity in Chapter Two, the reconciliation between conformity and resistance is never black and white, but rather acts on a shifting continuum. Rebellion is fluid, relational, and strategic, never whole. The women I spoke with face a number of challenges in their engagement with tattooing, and it is the process of negotiation that serves as the means by which to resist: they engage in a negotiated rebellion.

CONCLUSION

BEING A TATTOOED WOMAN

Thinking, writing, and talking about tattoos over the course of this research project have changed the ways that I understand both the practice and my own tattoos. I came to this project with an embarrassingly naïve idea of what it meant to be a tattooed woman: some women have small, seemingly ‘conforming’ tattoos, while other women have larger, more subversive tattoos. However, this simple binary construction is not what I found after speaking with the eighteen women that I interviewed. Being a tattooed woman is a nuanced undertaking—there are a bevy of challenges that women face on a daily basis, and being tattooed adds more complexity to the mix. Through this project I was able to obtain a better understanding and appreciation of just what those complexities involve. Whether it is the outright refutation of gendered notions of acceptable women’s tattoos, the rejection of a personal or spiritual context for a tattoo, or simply the acknowledgement of the commodification and gendered nature of tattoos, the women I spoke with found means of subversion in their tattoos. This finding suggests that challenging capitalism and patriarchy can be executed in seemingly small ways—like getting a tattoo.

As part of this project, I examined the ways in which, in a capitalist society, the indigenous tattooing practice in other cultures—a culturally and spiritually meaningful practice—has been appropriated in order to market tattooing as an acceptable practice to the mainstream public. This commodification of tattooing has multiple resonances—it is both negative and positive. In the first instance, it has blown open the tattooing

subculture, making the practice safer due to increased regulation and legitimizing the art of tattooing. But it has also transformed tattooing into a profitable commodity—one that is arguably devoid of the uniqueness, politics, and ‘deviant’ image that it once held, into a practice that is now used to sell a variety of products, from fashion to sports drinks and cell phones.

However, my study also engaged with another commodified social practice: I used a social network site to generate some of the data on which my analysis of tattooing rests. Social network sites have developed to the point where they have gained worldwide popularity and increased potential for advertisers. While they were, arguably, developed originally to enhance social interaction, the popularity of these sites has led to the creation of huge marketing machines of the likes of Facebook and Myspace. Facebook, in particular, started as a way for Harvard University students to connect with one another, and has since grown to include anyone over the age of 13 with computer access, boasting approximately 59 million users today. At the same time, Facebook has become a way for entrepreneurs to capitalize off of human interaction and inundate users with advertising.

While Facebook has turned human interaction into a marketing apparatus, I have been able to use it as a tool for conducting feminist research. It proved to be a valuable means for me to contact a wide range of women that I would not have otherwise been able to reach in such a short period of time. Nonetheless, it is a tool that can be problematic. For instance, Facebook uses some questionable means by which to market to its users, including sharing information from third-party sites that a user may visit, and sharing personal information about users with government agencies. As well, Facebook is

a social network site popular among mostly young, white, middle-class people who have access to the Internet. And because it began as a site for college students, the majority of Facebook users are students. Thus, my study is not able to generalize about all women because of these class- and generation-based limitations. Yet, these kind of limitations may very well have arisen through traditional snowball sampling as well—as obtaining a wide range of participants through snowball sampling requires a great deal of time and the reliance on participants to provide contacts that meet the requirements of the desired range. Despite these concerns, I was able to use Facebook to my advantage, but not without some struggles.

Feminist research has a political mandate—it is about connecting with women. In this respect, building relationships with the women being studied was a decided advantage of using Facebook to conduct my research. Those who joined my Facebook group were able to see all of the other group members—some of whom they may have known, many of whom they would not have known. While limited, the group served—and continues to serve—as a vehicle for the relationship of accountability that I have to my research participants. They are able to contact me directly through the group and explore the other group members' profiles.

Feminist research is also different from the traditional, positivist paradigm—in which the researcher is positioned as the 'expert' and the subjects of the research are seen as 'sources of data.' In this positivist paradigm, 'objectivity' is paramount—the researcher is to maintain a decided 'distance' from the subject of the research. In this regard, getting in touch with possible participants through Facebook meant that they had a great deal of access to my personal information (including my photos, friends, and

school and work information). While my profile is only accessible to those people that I have added as a friend, Facebook allows one month of access to my profile to anyone to whose message I respond. At first, I felt uncomfortable knowing that my personal information would be shared with those volunteers I responded to through Facebook. However, I came to realize that this sharing of information—of my publicly presented identity—was a benefit, as it let the participants know a bit more about me than they would had I engaged in traditional research methods, and thereby broke down some of the barriers between the ‘researcher’ and the ‘researched.’

Attending to the issue of power relations between the researcher and the research participants is another important aspect of feminist research. In this respect, providing participants with access to my personal profile helped to situate me as not just an ‘objective researcher,’ but a fellow tattooed woman, a fellow student, or even a fellow Led Zeppelin fan. In these terms, participants may have felt more comfortable going into the interview after having seen a snapshot into my life.

It would appear that human interactions have been commodified in the creation of SNSs like Facebook by Western capitalist culture to create marketing and advertising opportunities for corporate powers like Microsoft. Facebook, whose estimated membership will reach 200 million in the next year, is a stark example of the kind of success that capitalism has had in the commodification of communication and culture. There are clear parallels with the practice of tattooing. The advertising schema created by Facebook and its partnerships with other corporations is comparable to the commodification of tattooing, a practice that was once reserved for the ‘seedy underbelly’ of society, but is now a vehicle for marketing television programs, clothing

lines, and energy drinks. Nevertheless, I have found that, over the course of my thesis research, a vehicle that has been transformed in the interests of capitalist commodification can also be used for more feminist purposes. In essence, SNSs can be used for their supposed intended purpose: to further human interaction. Facebook served as a vehicle for connecting me with a significant number of tattooed women in a short period of time, and allowed me the opportunity to develop a meaningful relationship with the women I contacted. In this regard, Facebook was helpful in achieving some important feminist research goals, namely, connecting women to each other, breaking down the traditional power relationship between the researcher and the participants, and establishing a more meaningful interaction between the participants in the research process by allowing the women a glimpse of my own identity as a tattooed woman.

It was these connections with tattooed women that allowed me to come to understand the ways in which they make sense of their tattoos and their perceptions of themselves as tattooed women. Faced with issues of authenticity, given the increasing commodification of tattooing, and with the pressure to conform to ideal notions of femininity (both in every day life and with regards to tattooing practices), these women used tattoo narratives both to make cultural connections with a larger history, and as a vehicle by which to work within, against, or in and out of the boundaries of gendered identity. Conformity and resistance, which I once understood as a dichotomy, are not quite so simple. The use of narratives to 'tell' one's tattoo is a means of navigating the complex issues of authenticity and ideal femininity. Conformity and resistance are not mutually exclusive, but rather work together in shifting ways, and rebelling against commodified, gendered society through one's use of tattooing is never complete, never

whole. Because tattooing is a gendered practice that has been commodified by capitalist society, rebellion is, rather, a negotiation. In this sense, women's tattoo projects can be seen as a negotiated form of rebellion, with the meanings associated with tattoos evolving and shifting over time, and according to context. Tattoos are peculiar, in this way, in that they, on one hand, represent permanency, in that they are permanent marks on the skin, but they, on the other hand, represent fluidity, as their meanings change over time. In making the decision to become tattooed, these women were necessarily faced with issues of conformity—given tattooing's commodification and the pressures to conform to ideal notions of femininity. However, it is through the reinvention of their sense of self through the practice of tattooing that many of the women were able to subvert or resist the limitations that come with contemporary tattooing, in varying ways.

Using this physically permanent body modification as a means of exacting a negotiated rebellion against both the increasing mainstreaming of a seemingly counter-cultural practice and the pressure to conform to idealized notions of what it means to be female is not only a complex undertaking, but also a brave one. Speaking with these eighteen women and coming to understand the ways in which they construct and identify with their tattoos has given me a great deal of insight into the ways in which tattooing can be—and is—a subversive practice.

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APPENDIX A

Name	Age	Number of Tattoos	Occupation	Race/Ethnicity
Amanda	25	Full sleeve + 4	Homemaker	Sicilian
Amber	21	5	Market Research Translator	Caucasian
April	27	1	Hair Stylist	English/German
Bobbi	26	1	Hearing Consultant	British Caucasian
Breccan	27	1	Teacher	Caucasian/Canadian
Carly	28	9	Tattoo Artist	Canadian
Heather	26	1	Grad Student/Research Coordinator	Canadian
Jamie	25	2	Graphic Designer	Caucasian
Jenn	28	Back piece + 1	Legal Assistant	Caucasian Roman Catholic
Judy	32	1	Teacher	White
Karen	38	6	Sessional Instructor/Student Advisor	Mohawk
Karlie	22	3	Claims Adjustor	Canadian
Katie	28	Leg piece + 1	Graduate Student	White Mennonite
Kendra	23	1	Teacher	Caucasian
Lynda	54	1	Political Staff, MB Government	English White
Nicole	22	1	Student/Kitchen worker	French/Swiss
Ryse	21	5	Call Centre Translator	French
Sara	26	3	Student	Scottish/Russian Jewish/Canadian

APPENDIX B

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN INTERVIEW FOR NEGOTIATING THE BALANCE: BODY IMAGE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF TATTOOED WOMEN'S IDENTITIES

This is to state that I agree to participate in a program of research being conducted by Jessica Antony of the Communication Department of Concordia University (Email: j_ant@alcor.concordia.ca).

A. PURPOSE

I have been informed that the purpose of the research is to determine, through the process of interview, the effect (or lack thereof) that tattoos have on a woman's self-identification and identification with others.

B. PROCEDURES

The interview will take place at a location of the respondent's choosing, at time suitable to the respondent. The interview should take no longer than one hour, and at any time the respondent is free to decline answering any or all interview questions. As well, the respondent is free to decline the photographing of any or all tattoos. In order to protect the identity of the respondent, a pseudonym will be used in place of the respondent's name in the final project, if she so chooses. Photographs of tattoos will not include any additional distinguishing characteristics of the respondent. The respondent will have access to the final project once it is completed. The final project will be made available to the public through a written report.

C. RISKS AND BENEFITS

As the nature of the questions regarding the decision to be tattooed and the reasons for choosing particular tattoos can be personal, the potential risks involved in the interview would surround sensitive questions, however in order to protect the respondent from such risks, she is free to decline answering any or all questions, or to decline the photographing of any or all tattoos at any time during the interview. The benefits of participation in the interview include the furthering of knowledge for both the respondent and the interviewer regarding the politics of women and tattoos, a more complex understanding of the respondent's own decisions to be tattooed, and the contribution to a body of knowledge surrounding women's identities.

D. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

- I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at anytime without negative consequences.
- I understand that my participation in this study is confidential
- I understand that the data from this study may be published.

I HAVE CAREFULLY STUDIED THE ABOVE AND UNDERSTAND THIS AGREEMENT.
I FREELY CONSENT AND VOLUNTARILY AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

NAME (please print): _____

SIGNATURE: _____ DATE: _____

If at any time you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Adela Reid, Research Ethics and Compliance Officer, Concordia University, at (514) 848-2424 x7481 or by email at areid@alcor.concordia.ca.

APPENDIX C

Interview Schedule

Social Characteristics

1. How old are you?
2. What do you do for a living?
3. Can you tell me a little bit about who you are and where you grew up? (*How do you identify in terms of race/ethnicity?*)

The Woman's Tattoo(s)

4. How many tattoos do you have? Can you show them to me?
5. Can you explain the design of your tattoo(s)? Why did you choose that/those design(s)? Is there a particular meaning behind the design(s)?
6. How did you decide on the location of your tattoo(s)? (*Job concerns?*)
7. What made you decide to get your (first) tattoo? (What about the others?) When did you get them?
8. How long did you think about getting a tattoo? What were your pros and cons?
9. If you felt reluctant/hesitant to get a tattoo – why? What made you decide to go ahead and get it?

Identity

10. Now that you are tattooed, do you feel differently about yourself than you did when you weren't tattooed? How do you feel differently?
11. Do you think about your body differently now that it is tattooed?
12. What reactions have you received from people when they see that you are tattooed? (*Assumptions from others – stereotyping?*)
13. Do you think that being tattooed has changed the way people close to you perceive you? (eg. your partner/boyfriend, friends, family) What about strangers and acquaintances?
14. What do you think your tattoos say about you?

(*Note: reiterating question 10 to elicit more varied responses*)

15. Is there a particular message you are trying to send to people through your tattooed body? What would that be?

Perception

16. How do you interpret or perceive other women who are tattooed? Does this depend upon the kind or the number of tattoos they have?

17. How do you interpret or perceive celebrity women who are tattooed?

18. Do you think there's a difference in the ways in which tattooed men and women are perceived?

Politics

19. Why do you think tattoos are so popular now?

20. What is a tattoo that you would never get? Why?

21. Has your general attitude around or toward your tattoos changed over time? In what ways?

22. Do you see yourself as different than women who are not tattooed?

23. Do you feel a sense of commonality with women who have tattoos? What about men? (Why?)

24. Are there any issues relating to tattooing that we haven't covered that you think we should talk about?