Covered in Ink

Tattoos, Women, and the Politics of the Body

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When I discovered feminism at age 14, it rocked my world. I was struggling with identity and body image issues. I imprinted these struggles in the form of tattoos onto my body by collecting several feminist-themed tattoos when I turned 18. Struggling with my own understanding of embodiment, feminism, and representation, I wondered if other heavily tattooed women had similar experiences. Did they feel that they were armoring themselves against the mainstream beauty culture, or were their tattoos another path toward an alternative beauty standard to which they aspired? Why did this beauty need to be labeled “alternative”? Did they feel more empowered than women who were following the dictates of beauty culture more directly? Or were they equally entrenched in beauty aspirations and insecurity? Or was tattooing just one more oppressive form of body modification, not so different from plastic surgery? And is tattooing just one more aspect on the continuum of women’s body projects? This chapter explores the overlapping worlds of normative beauty standards in the mainstream media and that of real women who struggle with their own identities as heavily tattooed women in American culture. I provide an overview of various social theories of the body so that we can understand the normative pressures under which women are placed. I next explore what happens to deviant bodies that step outside of normative expectations. Finally, I present the experiences of the participants: their tattoo narratives, encountering social sanctions and struggling to define their agency under these various social pressures.
Feminism and Embodiment Theories

Feminist theorists such as Judith Butler⁴ and Anne Fausto-Sterling⁵ have argued that there is a need for distinction between our understanding of biological sex and our public gender presentation. Furthermore, they argue that these categories are not a dichotomy (biological sex vs. socially constructed gender) but rather inextricably linked, as our social world affects the physicality of our bodies. While we are used to hearing arguments that justify social inequality between men and women based on biological differences, Butler’s main argument is that both men and women are performing gender through appearance, movement, voice, and social interactions. Making a distinction between “masculinity” and “femininity” and socially organizing particular human traits as one or the other is an artificial social construction that individuals work to maintain in their daily lives to uphold this mirage (for example, that men are physically dominant, that women speak in a more passive voice). For both men and women, creating a masculine or feminine appearance is central to our identity. This gender construction is significant for our understanding of women’s tattooing practice, since tattooing has been historically associated with masculinity. Therefore, as women become heavily tattooed, their femininity can be considered weakened, and we see this when they face public social sanctions along such lines (e.g., “Why would you do that to your pretty body?”).

Many theorists who write on the topic of the materiality of the body have described the body as a cultural text, rooted in a particular social context.⁶ Bodies are not “ahistorical, precultural, or natural objects,” explains Elizabeth Grosz in her book Volatile Bodies; rather, they are “inscribed, marked, engraved, by social pressures external to them.”⁷ For women, this pressure stems from a “hegemonic ideology about femininity.”⁸ Women are expected to pursue the beauty ideal and often face social sanctions when they “let themselves go” or give up on the pursuit of body maintenance.⁹ Alternative body projects that do not pursue beauty are considered deviant: female bodybuilding, gender reassignment, butch lesbians, and heavily tattooed women. In response, many who pursue these alternative body projects often recast them as alternative forms of beauty and self-expression.
The heavily modified body is considered by theorists to be “a distinctively communicative body,” both in person and in media representation. As we saw in the previous chapter, tattoos have historically been associated with masculine subcultures. The female body is read within the context of normative beauty ideals. And while tattoos are becoming increasingly visible in the media, they remain marginal. Tattoos are also understood to be “aspects of the presentation, performance, politics, principles and practices of self.”

The heavily tattooed body provides an important example for concepts including “subjectivity, textuality, ethics, pleasure, and power/knowledge.” It is literally a body-in-progress, telling the story of past journeys and those yet to come. These understandings of the body resonated strongly with the participants, many of whom considered their tattoos to be a visible journey through their life story. Consider these two representative statements from participants. Elisa Melendez states:

Some people keep a diary. Some people keep a blog, a scrapbook, they knit, or cross-stitch. I just wear it all on me. I can tell you what I was doing in my life. Probably about how old I was. I can tell you that this one took three sittings, and two of them occurred right before my brother’s wedding.

Elisa shows us that tattoos not only have autobiographical imagery but also mark time by chronicling both special events as well as one’s age. As one ages, one collects more tattoos. Some participants comment on how old they were by noting how many, or how few, tattoos they had at the time (when discussing photographs of oneself, for example). Elisa compares tattooing to socially acceptable ways in which people document their memories: a diary or a blog. She also compares tattooing to a creative form of self-expression. Most participants discussed the ways in which their tattoos represent their life story. A similar comment from Carmen Guadalupe reinforces this point:

To me they’re like little memories that I keep on my skin. Some people take pictures of their little kids when they’re small and put them in a photo album. I get tattoos. You remember where you were at—who did
it and the reason why and what you were thinking while you were getting it done.

In the article “Skin Memories,” Jay Prosser states that the “skin is the body’s memory of our lives.”¹¹ This is especially true for tattooed people, many of whom incorporate personal imagery into their designs as expressions of personal identity. In “The Social Skin,” Terence S. Turner argues that the skin provides the frontier of the social self, as well as a boundary between the self and others.¹² Theories by women of color have been especially inclusive of embodiment and identity overlap. Consider how these two passages by theorists apply to both the search for an (ethnic) identity as well as tattooing an image that is self-reflexive. Trinh T. Minh-ha states:

The search for an identity is, therefore, usually a search for that lost, pure, true, real, genuine, original, authentic self, often situated within a process of elimination of all that is considered other, superfluous, fake, corrupted or Westernized.¹³

Tattoos will show this search for identity, as over time the recipient has inevitably collected both highly personalized, poignant imagery, as well as, perhaps, kitschy tattoos. Both styles of imagery represent the authentic self, demonstrating humor and aesthetics. In this second passage, Gloria Anzaldúa writes poetically about the ways in which the body visibly reflects the inner self:

Even when our bodies have been battered by life, artistic “languages,” spoken from the body, by the body, are still laden with aspirations, are still coded in hope and “un desarme ensangrentado,” a bloodied truce.¹⁴

For heavily tattooed women, their bodies continue “speaking,” even when they do not want to be interrupted by strangers who reach out to feel these bodily texts. These personal tattoos often include a lesson learned through a particular life-changing event, the hope that the future will be enriched by this lesson—and its tattooed reminder. “A bloodied truce” is created during the moment of inscription, enduring the pain of permanence in order to earn this lifelong memento.
Ironically, while the heavily tattooed women express themselves in the most visible of forms, they are mis-read by the public and labeled as simply deviant. Maria Lugones writes on the positionality of inhabiting multiple identities: “There may be ‘worlds’ that construct me in ways that I do not even understand . . . or accept.” For tattooed women, their subcultural identity is one that is often mis-read: They are visually representing the stories of their lives; however, strangers may read the ink as anti-social outbursts.

This estrangement from embodied representation particularly colors the experiences of women, as they are engulfed by the prevailing gender norms. Both men and women are in a continuous production of gendered identity through behavior and self-expression. Heavily tattooed women are deviating from gender norms by taking on a “masculine” body adornment and reframing it as “beautiful.” This could be considered a form of “camp,” which Diane Griffin Crowder defines as a way in which to “call attention to the artificiality of gender roles, to mock the very concepts of masculinity and femininity.” Betty Broadbent, a tattooed lady in the circus sideshow during the 1940s, entered a beauty pageant to illustrate this contradiction between beauty standards and heavily tattooed women. She stood no chance of winning.

Beauty Culture Context

Women are hyper-visible; their social value is heavily dependent upon their physical appearance and beauty. In contrast, men’s power stems from their social status: their employment and financial ability. Beauty norms, as represented in the models chosen in mainstream advertisements, show bodies that are unobtainable for the vast majority of the population—often weighing up to 23 percent less than average American women. Vogue Magazine model Gisele Bundchen weighs 115 pounds and is five feet eleven inches tall, and Kate Moss, at five foot seven inches tall, weighs ninety-five pounds. Yet even with such out-of-reach thinness, air brushing of models by graphic computer editing programs makes their appearance even more unrealistic, reducing the sizes of their body parts, eyes, and mouths, smoothing out skin, and creating an appearance that even the models themselves do not possess. Creating such unobtainable beauty images perpetuates widespread insecurity
Figures 2.1 and 2.2. At the Tampa Tattoo Fest in March 2008, women compete for Miss Tattoo, a tattooed women pageant.
in women and, increasingly, in men, thus creating more demand for products—the ultimate bottom line. Normative beauty standards present a passive and tamed body, anorexic and flawless.

The impact of these unobtainable beauty standards has been significant. Some of these outcomes include an obsession with weight and dieting, eating disorders, hyper-consumer culture, and normative body modifications such as plastic surgery. While tattooing is often called mutilation by critics, plastic surgery, which is much more invasive and dangerous to the body, has become increasingly normalized. Television shows that glorify the magic of plastic surgery inevitably promote the industry. (Tattoo reality television shows also promote their own industry.)

When women conform to a beauty ideal by constricting their eating or by obtaining plastic surgery, they are often rewarded for their adherence (more so than women collecting tattoos). The growth of elective plastic surgery has escalated dramatically over the last few decades and is increasingly common, paralleling the rise of tattoo studios across the nation. In 2011, the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery conducted a survey and found that over 50 percent of Americans approve of elective surgery, with much higher numbers in various income and age brackets. Emily Jenkins points out an important distinction between plastic surgery and tattooing: Plastic surgery “does not announce itself as artificial. It is—at least, it is supposed to be—invisible.” While tattooed women often face social sanctions, women who have plastic surgery often feel an increase in self-esteem and social acceptance afterward. One study found that women who undergo plastic surgery often choose to do this at transitional moments in their lives, similar to tattoo collectors. Victoria Pitts-Taylor points out in her book Surgery Junkies that her feminist colleagues were “aghast” when they heard of her own plans for cosmetic surgery—which was a similar reaction to the alternative modifications that Pitts-Taylor represented in her previous book, In the Flesh. In some circles, any consideration of body modifications—from surgery to tattooing—represents pathology. Between these two extremes, Pitts-Taylor picks apart the socially constructed narratives of surgery participants, from the normative to the extreme, with an emphasis on the extreme collector, or “surgery junkie.” She points out that, on the one hand, feminists pathologize
any consideration of plastic surgery or body modifications, while on the other hand, surgeons attempt to normalize and sell the process to the widest audience as a solution for everything from depression to deformity. Plastic surgery is often considered just one more option available to the discerning consumer who demands the “right” to fix perceived imperfections of their bodies to achieve self-esteem and social status. However, extreme dependency on plastic surgery has been listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders as Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD)—that is, individuals who find their bodies flawed (and this is reminiscent of the association of tattooing with mental disorders). From the outside, the excessive pursuit of plastic surgery and body perfection, and the excessiveness of becoming heavily tattooed, may appear similar in their extremes of body transformation. However, it is the motivation and outcome that distinguishes the processes—one pursues a normative body project, and the other goes against socially acceptable standards of self-presentation.

Encountering the World of Tattooing

Before women are ever exposed to the world of alternative body modification, they have been overexposed to the beauty culture through their personal interactions as well as the media. They have developed an identity based upon their gender performance, sexuality, race, nationality, age, and ability. With the addition of becoming heavily tattooed, their embodiment identities intersect with these other factors. While White women may be given more space to experiment with their body modification, women of color, lesbians, disabled people, and other already-marked bodies will be interpreted more harshly, as multiply “deviant.” People of color’s bodies are often criminalized and discriminated against; with the addition of heavy tattooing, these pressures can become magnified. Lesbians and bisexual women may face additional stigma if their tattooing reinforces a butch appearance, but less so for a feminine one.

To become heavily tattooed, one must first be exposed to the idea by seeing a tattooed individual in the media or in her personal life. When interviewing participants, I asked them about this initial moment of exposure to the world of tattooing. In Spokane, Washington, I met
Sparkill-icious, a thirty-one-year-old mother of a toddler, a student, and a participant in Roller Derby (hence her use of her Roller Derby name). Her chest-length brown and blond hair cascaded over her shoulders, hiding the tattoos on her neck. She wore eye shadow, a lip ring, and a black tank top that showed off the extensive tattoo work on her arms and chest. A studded belt hinted to her punk rock, subcultural style. For Sparkill-icious, the first heavily tattooed woman she saw was a family friend as a child:

I was about five years old . . . and there was this woman named Tattoo Julie. I remember this. This is my first memory of childhood. I’m looking up at this lady and she is just full tattooed. Oh my God, I thought it was the coolest thing I’ve ever seen in my life.

As a friend of her mother’s, Tattoo Julie brought the possibility of becoming tattooed into the realm of her family life. Later on, when Sparkill-icious began her own tattoo collection, it was her stepfather who first tattooed her. Later, she had these tattoos covered up with higher-quality work by another artist, which is referred to as a “cover-up tattoo.” Since her family members were very much interested in alternative cultures, Sparkill-icious was exposed early on. Family influence is an extremely important aspect in developing perspective on tattooing, but children do not always follow their parents’ perspective. Other women I talked with had parents who attempted to shield their children from the idea of tattooing, yet it backfired. Such was the experience of the Florida tattooist Renee Little. While her mother attempted to shield her from the sight of a heavily tattooed woman when she was a child, Renee was similarly mesmerized:

I was five and it was the end of the eighties. I remember holding my mom’s hand in the mall and seeing my first punk rock chick. And she had a freakin’ half-and-half mohawk thing. She had a tattoo of dates on her skull. She was awesome to me. I said, “Mom, what is that?” I remember my mom doing the whole earmuffs thing, and covering my eyes. “Don’t look.” I’m just like, “That is awesome.” [Later] my sister told me, “That’s a tattoo.” She was older; she knew all. So that was my first sense of anything subcultural.
Though Renee's mother showed disdain toward "deviant" female bodies and their possible effect on her young daughter, Renee was still taken with the style. The image stuck. Regardless of whether parents approve or disapprove of alternative self-presentation, children will have their own particular tastes. The approval or non-approval from parents merely dictates how comfortable their child will be later on in sharing their alternative appearance with their parents. Many of the participants expressed strong resonance with the first time they saw an alternative-looking person. Others came to their taste for body modifications later on in life, in a less dramatic fashion.

Becoming a Heavily Tattooed Woman

The participants in this study are "heavily tattooed," as opposed to "lightly tattooed." Simply having a tattoo is not gender transgressive. Tattoos are feminine so long as they are "small, cute and hidden," preferably located on a sexualized part of the body. As we saw in the previous chapter, when women began collecting tattoos in larger numbers during the 1970s and 1980s, these images were usually always feminine—a small rose on the breast, a butterfly on the ankle, perhaps a small dolphin or sun. These tattoos were small, only a few inches in diameter, and easily hidden, placed on the breast, shoulder, or hip. Tattoo shops had flash images on the wall "for the ladies," on which these small designs lived. Janis Joplin had collected two tattoos from Lyle Tuttle starting in 1970, both of which were small and feminine. Her Florentine wrist bracelet tattoo was bold for being so publicly visible, but it represented an ornate piece of jewelry, and to her it represented women's liberation. Additionally, she had a small heart tattooed on her left breast, about which she stated, "I wanted some decoration. See, the one on my wrist is for everybody; the one on my tit is for me and my friends." She paused and chuckled, "Just a little treat for the boys, like icing on the cake."25 Her heart tattoo was very much in line with women's tattooing of the day, but the wrist tattoo was one of the first publicly visible tattoos on a woman, and it was bold for the time. As a famous rock and roll singer, she could get away with it. And her statement of the tattoo being "a little treat for the boys" demonstrates the sexual and feminine nature of a
small, cute, hidden tattoo—or “icing on the cake” for a lover. Joplin’s tattooist Lyle Tuttle, well-known as a celebrity tattooist, talked about how he enjoyed doing the small tattoos on women during our interview at the Spokane Tattoo Convention:

It was small butterflies and rosebuds. I loved to put on small, colorful designs, so that was ideal for me. . . . And women are fun to tattoo. I mean, women will hold an intelligent conversation with you. Guys want to talk to you about their god damned Harley Finkelberg, ya know. I’d rather smell perfumes than grease.

Kari Barba, another veteran tattooist from Southern California, recalled that before 1980, there were few female clients, and they would only be in the market for small tattoos:

They are getting bigger stuff, for sure. It used to be just a little quarter-size piece most of the time. . . . And it used to be when I first started, maybe 10 percent of the clients were women. And now it is definitely fifty-fifty. In fact, sometimes I think we definitely get more women.

Such dainty tattoos are in stark contrast to the heavy tattooing that the participants in this study boldly wear. While most research on tattoos make their distinction between those individuals who have tattoos and those who do not, I mark the distinction between women who are “lightly tattooed” and those that are “heavily tattooed.” As tattooing soars in popularity, it is not transgressive for women to have one, or even four, small tattoos hidden somewhere on their body, or perhaps even publicly visible, as long as it has at least two of the three categorizations in the mantra “small, cute, and hidden.”

However, when women’s tattoos become the opposite of “small, cute, and hidden”—“large, ugly, or public”—they begin to encounter social sanctions for their ink. Encountering social sanctions and prejudice when their tattoos are visible is an indicator that one has become heavily tattooed and “crossed the line.” For the heavily tattooed individual, being tattooed usually becomes important to their self-concept, and they become an “elite collector.” As defined by Katherine Irwin,
The elite collector . . . is a subset of heavily tattooed individuals who desire the best art available, pay many thousands of dollars for their tattoos, and travel to cities around the United States, Europe, Japan, or Australia to acquire pieces from famous artists.29

In her study of elite tattoo collectors, Irwin describes a common aesthetic of tattoo imagery that the collectors often gravitate toward, as they are popular within the subculture: “images of monsters, demons, beheadings, severed hands, and aliens.”30 Christine Braunberger points out that once women become immersed in this subculture, they become “revolting bodies.”31 Braunberger states, “As symbols demanding to be read, tattoos on women produce anxieties of misrecognition.”32 Historically, heavily tattooed women were associated with the biker subculture, gangs, or prostitutes. Even in the 1970s, when tattooing was much more associated with the biker culture, women bikers still were steered toward “tattoos for the ladies,” as many shops announced on a separate section of the flash art displays on the walls of the shop. Yet in the decades since then, women have moved away from the “tattoos for the ladies” sections and have begun to collect their own imagery of monsters, which the public still finds shocking on the female body. Because of this violation of gender norms, the women become monstrous in their violation and become the recipient of public scorn. The following sections look at common public reactions and self-defenses that heavily tattooed women encounter, shaping the narrative of their tattooed identity.

“You’re Such a Pretty Girl, Why Would You Do That to Yourself?”

It is a lot more acceptable for men to have excessive amount of tattoos. I think it’s normal for girls to have the lower back or one on the shoulder. That seems to be deemed okay, but when you start getting into the full sleeves or the full bodies it’s like, “Oh My God, you’re such a pretty girl, why would you do that to yourself?”

—Dawn Harris

The message that heavily tattooed women receive from the public is loud and clear: They are mutilating their bodies and making themselves ugly. Yet, in an interesting twist, the women reframe tattooing from their
own perspective—tattoos are beautiful, they are marks of individuality. Or else they resist the pressure for normative beauty—it's my body, my choice. In this quote above, Dawn Harris, a tattoo collector from Houston, Texas, expresses the negative social sanctions from the public that all of the women I interviewed report receiving. I interviewed Dawn during a visit to Webster, Texas, where shop manager Jennifer Wilder connected me with quite a few women from her shop Abstract Art, including customers, friends, and partners of the male tattoo artists. At the time, Dawn was twenty-eight-years-old and working at the Apple Store, where she was able to show her tattoos at work, although
they elicited attention. In fact, she observed, “Pretty much everywhere you go, especially around here, [people notice].” Dawn is an attractive woman, with straight black hair cut in a rockabilly fashion, straight bangs just above her eyebrows. She has two old-school roses just below her collarbone and was already getting extensive work on her arms, which extended from wrist to shoulder. On her left arm, she was getting a Japanese geisha zombie head touched up during one of our talks. I interviewed her as she got tattooed; she showed no reaction to the pain she was receiving. This led the tattooist working on her to observe that “women sit so much better than men.” Tattooists and collectors alike, whom I encountered, made this observation. Dawn’s arms were covered in medium-sized designs that were brought together with shading and background filler images to make the sleeves appear of a more solid ink design. Her images were “old-school,” like those one would encounter on flash sheets in the front of a street shop during the sailor years: nautical stars, a skull, a spider in a web. But her left arm was becoming covered in Japanese-style work, with red flowers and black water wave bars in the background. For Dawn Harris and her friends, they believe their body art is beautiful; however, they know that many in the general public would beg to differ. To many observers, it is inconceivable that a woman would purposely make herself “ugly,” and this disbelief compels many people to breach the lines of appropriate public self-presentation. Strangers often touch the tattooed person without warning and continue to ask questions such as, “Are those real?”

Often tattoo artists warn customers against getting tattoos that they find highly visible or controversial. Before 1980, several of the women tattooists would warn women clients to avoid large, bold tattoos because of such public, negative treatment. In his research on Chicana tattooing, Xuan Santos found that several Chicano tattooists in East Los Angeles often “refused to tattoo Chicanas in areas of the body that are visible to the public eye . . . and encouraged women to tattoo on a private body region.” For the most part, women conform to feminine limitations. The tattoo collector Eileen Megias pointed out that many Cuban women in Miami keep their ink gender appropriate, unlike herself:

They have the appropriate tattoos. There are tattoos that are acceptable if you’re a Cuban girl. Tattoos that are to enhance your sex appeal, like the
one on the lower back, or on your hip, or maybe something small by your ankle. They are in prescribed places and subject matters, like a butterfly is okay. Your boyfriend’s name may be strategically placed on your butt. That kind of thing. But definitely no large graphics, and definitely not a lot. Men have their manly tats that they are allowed to have, no hibiscus for a Cuban man. Lot of names in script, or a memorial portrait of their baby, or dead brother, or a big 305 across their back. It’s always to maintain the line—what makes you an attractive man or an attractive woman. It’s just wrong to mess with those female assets; you’re not supposed to ruin them.

In this quote, Eileen demonstrates the ways in which tattoo imagery reinforces normative gender roles, which are more restrictively reinforced in the Cuban culture that Eileen has experienced in her family and community. Imagery patterns are often established within subcultures, and for Latina/o, Black, and Native American women and men, script and memorials recognizing family members are common. She presents two gender-divergent tattoos designed for men (a big 305 on the back, which is the area code for Miami and represents hometown pride) and for women (flowers). Eileen Megias was a student of mine at Florida International University. While I was busy making sure all of my tattoos were tucked under my suit, I was grateful to walk into the classroom and see her sitting in the front row, with her bold, black tribal tattoos covering a good percentage of her arms, visible in her short sleeve shirt. She had short hair, was more masculine presenting in appearance, and had a big, assured smile on her face. She was older than some of the classmates, and her life experience was easily demonstrated in her confidence as she spoke up in class, voicing well-thought-out opinions, and, of course, in her ability to look different from the mostly hyper-feminine Cuban women students in the classroom. Eileen was also a lesbian, and she brought her partner to my office one day to be interviewed, freely discussing their identities as heavily tattooed lesbian women in the gender-normative environment of Miami. It was difficult for them, and they hoped to soon move to a city that was “more tattoo friendly.”

For women, part of becoming heavily tattooed is to negotiate this decision within our beauty culture. In order to collect large, public, and so-called ugly tattoos, the women have to defend their choices on
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For women, part of becoming heavily tattooed is to negotiate this decision within our beauty culture. In order to collect large, public, and so-called ugly tattoos, the women have to defend their choices on
a daily basis. This is often a difficult position, even for the most confident. Greta Purcell, a participant from Spokane, Washington, describes this fear:

Women are afraid of what people will think, extremely afraid. Young girls are really, really afraid of what people will think. And so they get their tattoos really hidden. Maybe somewhere where even their underwear would cover it. I just don't understand the shame.

Katherine Irwin agrees that women face additional pressures when they become heavily tattooed because of the beauty culture norms. While men become more masculine with their extensive tattoo work, even invoking a hyper-masculine image that can be misconstrued as criminal, women “are sometimes accused of being ‘masculine,’ ‘ugly’ or ‘slutty.’” Many heavily tattooed women reclaimed their inked status as being one of alternative beauty. In her article “Beauty Secrets,” the tattoo collector Lee Damsky describes this reclamation of “ugly” tattoos as a means of alternative beauty construction:

Later that year, I got a tattoo of Medusa on the back of my neck in an attempt to find empowerment in ugliness. In Greek mythology, Medusa was a creature so ugly [destructively powerful] that anyone who looked at her was turned to stone. I thought that embracing this symbol of ugliness and inscribing it on my skin would be the first step in accepting my body and claiming it as my own. Determined to abandon the cult of beauty once and for all, I resolved to be ugly and proud.

Many of the tattoos reflect this sentiment by taking a portrait of a beautiful woman, such as Marilyn Monroe, or a traditional pinup, and turning her into a zombie. Others collect images of beautiful Hollywood stars or pinups as a symbolic stand-in for the beautiful woman with which they identify.

“It's My Body, and Tattoos Are Beautiful to Me”

In spite of the world questioning their desire for extensive body art, heavily tattooed women are drawn to this particular style and must
endure the offensive questions, unpermitted touches, and outright scorn. Collectors love tattoos because they find them beautiful, self-expressive, and represent independence.36 When women consciously reject beauty culture, it can be liberating. Women express that they are reclaiming their bodies and developing a heightened self-confidence. Becoming tattooed often makes women feel “closer in line with their own self-image.”37 Collecting beautiful tattoos on body part that one is critical of also creates a sense of reclamation. The tattoo collector Reva Castillenti from Tampa, Florida, describes her experience:

I think it helped out with my personal body image a lot. I was pretty uncomfortable in my own skin, and then after I started getting tattooed, it helped. Before, in high school, I would never wear a tank top or a shirt that has a little bit of cleavage showing, it was completely taboo. . . . Because you don’t want to show someone your fat rolls and be like, “Look at my love handles.” But put a tattoo on it. Now they’re not looking at your fat anymore. . . . So I think it was a means of reclaiming myself.

Another participant showed that tattoos also promote pride in the body and increased self-care. Bernadette Martinez explains:

I take better care of myself now. I have to take care of myself to heal. And I am going to have to heal for a long time if I’m going to do both arms solid. So it made me be healthier. I work out a lot more, because I have this beautiful tattoo, I don’t want my arms to be flabby. It’s been a positive change in my life. Because now I work out, I eat healthy, and I take care of myself a lot more.

The tattoo collector Talia Robertson poignantly describes a situation that boldly placed her heavily tattooed status in sharp contrast to the beauty culture—her wedding. Weddings are the most prominent moment of enforced beauty culture, and women pay large amounts of money on their dress, hair, and makeup (but men are spared such expense).38 On such occasions women are often expected to hide their tattoos. Indeed, there are products such as heavy concealer makeup, or even skin-colored cloth, which are made specifically to cover tattoos.
However, Talia Robertson saw her wedding as an opportunity to show off her beautiful artwork, and personality, to her family and friends:

My wedding dress will be designed to show off my tattoos. I’m looking for something that cuts very low in the back so it will show what I have on my back. And I want spaghetti straps or something that is going to show my arms off. The goal for a fall wedding is to have my half sleeves finished by then. So that’s why I started this so soon and I’m going straight to this other tattoo. I want that to be a part of my outfit for my wedding day. So it’s going to be in-your-face. And all of our friends and everybody know, so I’m not really worried about them accepting that or anything. My parents will probably be the ones that have the issues, but his parents are fine.

Especially upon getting married and raising a family, women are expected to be “other oriented.” Women become the default caretaker of their spouse and children and face social sanctions if they prioritize their own interests above that of their family. Yet tattoos are something for oneself. Kerri Newman, a tattoo collector in Spokane, Washington, and mother of five, states, “It makes me feel like I’m doing something for myself. I do so much for my family; this is what I have decided for me. It makes me feel like I have a piece that’s mine alone. It’s just something that I’ve always wanted.” Kerri has tattoos that represent her children, as well as other subjects close to her heart. Gaynell Simmons, an African American woman who was visiting Miami Beach for work when I was able to interview her at Kolo Tattoo, started her tattoo collection at age forty-three because her children had always come first. For decades, she had desired to start her tattoo collection, but her children had always been her financial priority, and her desire for body art was always delayed. During this work visit to Miami, she began visiting Kolo Tattoo each Friday after work, to collect another small tattoo that represented her identity: a Gemini symbol, a theater mask, a heart, a Japanese design, and a yin-yang symbol. The owner of the shop, Cyndi White, had developed a friendship with Gaynell and invited me to interview her before she returned home to Maryland. Cyndi was especially impressed that Gaynell had sacrificed a great deal of her own interests and pursuits in order to support her children materially and
emotionally. For the first time in her life, she was taking this trip to focus on getting the tattoos she had desired for so long. Her consistent approach to getting a small tattoo each week, on payday, was also highly unusual for frequency; but it provided the time for Gaynell and Cyndi to get to know each other. While Cyndi was a new mother with her infant son in the shop, Gaynell’s children were adults, and the women bonded over their shared motherhood.

Becoming heavily tattooed changes women’s bodies and, potentially, their social relationships. Women overwhelmingly express their tattoos as a form of self-empowerment, especially because of their potential for self-expression. The visual content of their tattoos are often symbolic of important issues within women’s lives, the topic to which I now turn.

“What Does That Tattoo Mean?”

The process of becoming heavily tattooed means letting go of social expectations of normalcy in appearance. This decision represents a certain authenticity to the self. The question of what imagery people select and why is one of the most often asked and researched. The short answer is that people choose any imagery possible, with the aim of a vast array of self-expressive purposes. People get certain images tattooed on their bodies because they have personal meaning. The imagery and reasons follow certain themes: identity, family, hobbies/interests, pop culture, and transitional life moments. In an article entitled, "Managing Meaning and Belonging: Young Women’s Negotiation of Authenticity in Body Art," authors Sara Riley and Sharon Cahill’s participants describe their body art as a pathway to “being your own person.”

Many of the participants had tattoos that represented their identity. Ethnic identity was a popular theme. The tattooist Angel Garza had imagery that represented both sides of her multiracial heritage:

I have the Mayan pieces on my forearms, because half of my family is Spanish and Native, from the middle of Mexico and Central America. And on my upper arms . . . I’ve got a big Chinese water dragon on the left arm. And the Chinese good luck bat, on my upper right. On my mom’s side of the family they go back to China. And I got the Hello Kitty on my wrist because I like Hello Kitty.
Even though Kerri Newman collected her tattoos to represent her own identity, she still ended up with imagery that represented how important her five children were in her life, thus reflecting the centrality of motherhood to her sense of self:

I had my two daughters names, which wasn't the smartest thing in the world to do, since I wasn't done having kids. I had four kids and I was done. So I came in and she tattooed this, it's my four kids' with their Irish birthstone tree and flower. My father passed away, so I had a tribute on my foot, because I wanted it near my kids. But I had a problem, because I had a fifth kid. So I had to squeeze them in also.

Even when family members' disapprove of the decision to collect tattoos, the participants still collected imagery that represented those family members. Even though Eileen Megias's Cuban grandparents were upset by her decision to become tattooed, they appreciated that the imagery represented them:

My family was happy because most of this arm has to do with my grandparents. This virgin is the patron saint of Cuba, I inherited my grandmother's statue of the virgin. The anchor is for my grandfather. That made them really happy. When trusted family friends would come over, they would say, "Show her the tattoo you got for me."

Carmen Guadalupe does not enjoy strangers questioning the meaning of her tattoos, as she feels they are personal and private, not the basis for a casual conversation. Her tattoos resonate deeply with her heritage and family. Ironically, as she was a former soldier, military oriented tattoos did not appeal to her in the least, even with the strong connection between the military and tattoos historically. Carmen waited until she was out of the military before she began her tattoo collection in earnest. She describes how her tattoos connect her to her mother and the difficult time they faced while Carmen was in Iraq as a soldier:

To me it's personal, because I got it to represent my mom. Women go through so much pain with their children. And by me going off to war—and my mom—the pain it must have caused her. I'm an only child. The
pain my mom must’ve gone through, while I was out there in Iraq. It’s like what the Virgin Mary went through with Jesus on the Cross. So it’s a representation of her strength, and the strength of the mothers around the world. I think they suffer the most.

Tattoos representing and honoring family members are popular imagery for both men and women, and they provide a genre that may be equally utilized by both sexes. From the “Mom” in a heart tattoo based on flash sheets, to portraits, script, or symbolic imagery representing family members, the family provides an endless topic for tattoo art. For Carmen, her tattoo goes further than a symbolic mom in a heart and represents their heritage, relationship, and her experience of serving in the war. Because of this deeper meaning to her tattoo, it becomes a personal image that she does not want to share superficially with strangers.

Transitional life moments were times when many of the participants chose to get a tattoo to commemorate the memory. In his study of tattoo collectors, Paul Sweetman also found that interviewees became tattooed in order to make transitional moments into a permanent reminder of “particular periods or events.” Rolene McClanathan described her “transitional moment” tattoos:

It seemed to work out where all my tattoos happened around times of transition in my life: leaving bad relationships or having my son. All of my tattoos are very intimate as far as points in my life that I have progressed through, or transitional moments. My first tattoo was the chaos symbol. I had left a really bad domestic violence relationship, and that was my way of celebrating leaving the chaos.

Margo DeMello reminds us that there is a particularly gendered motivation for collecting tattoos. In her study of the tattoo community, Bodies of Inscription, DeMello states that

women... are much more apt to explain their tattoos in terms of healing, empowerment, or control. I have not had any straight men report to me that they acquired a tattoo as a means of regaining control over their life while undergoing a crisis.
A more common motivation for both women and men in selecting tattoo imagery is to commemorate particular interests, hobbies, passions, or popular imagery. Heavily tattooed people often pride themselves on their custom design tattoos, distancing themselves from more casual collectors who may select images from flash sheet sets on the wall. The popularity of particular tattoo images go through phases, like any other art world: fairies in the 1980s, tribal tattoos in the 1990s, and in the 2000s, large Japanese style designs—such as koi fish and cherry blossoms—were popular. Several of the participants had imagery based upon popular culture references, especially film and music. Judith Davis collected references to movie characters that she enjoyed:

I really like pop culture. So, I am probably going to be covered with weird shit. This is going to be a half sleeve of the Marx Brothers. This is a monologue that Groucho Marx says in one of the movies. I'm saying something with my tattoos. It's not just artwork, or something cute. It's my personality on my arm. So you don't even have to talk to me to really get me. You just look at my tattoos.

Tattoos often "sample" from popular culture, just like music does; for example, cartoon characters, popular actor portraits, or corporate logos often make their way into tattoo artwork. Some lawyers and legal scholars have commented on issues pertaining to potential copyright violations by such tattoo art, including when tattooists copy tattoo designs straight from a photograph or tattoo magazine; however, such lawsuits have not yet started to be filed.

While some tattoo collectors feel their personal tattoo art is too close to the heart to share with strangers, others may be putting their interests on their sleeves in a way that could provoke both those with common interests and those who object to the imagery to comment. Judith Davis in her quote above is stating that she is making herself transparent with her tattoos, which act as a filter or a message to the public about her interests and passions. Those who share her subcultural references might be provoked to comment, and presumably, Judith may invite a conversation with a fellow enthusiast. Tina Ferris, a tattooist in Florida, was interested in classic movies and photography, which she commemorated in her extensive leg tattoos. She states:
The portraits I have are black and gray, and they are influenced by classical movie stars: James Dean, Marlon Brando, and Marlene Dietrich, some of my favorite actors from when I was younger. I did a lot of photography when I was younger; and James Dean did a lot of photography also. He would shoot with the photographer that used to take pictures of him. Actually, the portrait that I have on my leg is of him with a camera, taking a picture.

Because heavily tattooed women can express their numerous interests, family connections, and heritage, it is easy to see how they can quickly become covered in artwork expressed over a lifetime. Sailor Cher, a piercer in St. Augustine, Florida, walked through her tattoo collection as if down memory lane:

Of course, my first one was for my mom. Here is my anchor from my career in the Navy. This one was for my children. I've got a lot of daughters, so instead of getting all their names, I just had the rose tattoo as a reference to the Tennessee Williams play, The Rose Tattoo. This is my wedding band right here. My husband and I have matching tattoos, and when we hold hands they match up. When we were married, we actually put our wrists together. "And with this tattoo, I thee wed." So, I guess that's important... I like to play pool. I drink applejack. The one on the back of my leg is my menopause tattoo; the day after I became officially menopausal I had the Sailor Jerry pirate girl with the bloody saber tattooed... What else? In my previous life I was a pirate, so that's one. The little heart on my ankle I share with my daughters, they all have that same tattoo. And they have their birth order in them. We had that done on Mother's Day together. I've got more on my back, I have a que sera sera, "What will be will be."... And then of course there's my bat-winged penis. Okay and that has no significance whatsoever. And to counter that, I have the angel wing cherry pie.

Sailor Cher started her extensive tattoo collection at forty-two, after she retired from the navy, where she worked as a reporter. When I interviewed her at Ms. Deborah's Fountain of Youth Tattoo Studio, she was a fifty-six year old piercer, a mother of five daughters, and a grandmother. She had her salt and pepper hair shaved into a mohawk and
extensive tattoo work covering her from feet to chest, with full sleeve
tattoos visible, yet also wore a pearl necklace, red fingernails, and a full
face of makeup. In the tattoo studio and at the convention Marked for
Life, where I would also see her, she was much admired by the younger
women, as she represented an alternative image of an older woman.
Sailor Cher flaunted her alternative beauty and sexuality.

"I Want to Be Covered"

All of the participants in this study planned on continuing to collect tatt-
oos until they had a bodysuit—literally being covered from foot to neck.
By now, they were dedicated to this particular style of self-expression
and had no plans to change their direction. None felt complete, and all
of them had plans for further tattoos. First and foremost, they wanted
to finish works in progress. Second, they wanted to continue following
themes that reoccurred through their body art. And finally, they aimed
to collect new pieces that they had been thinking about for some time.
For example, Carmen Guadalupe planned on getting more tattoos rep-
resenting her Mexican heritage: "I'm going to get a sugar skull on my
elbow, to represent the Mexican side of my heritage. And my mom's
portrait will go here. I still have a castle to put here, because it goes along
with her background." For Jennifer Muniz, a tattooist in Miami, Florida,
she wanted to explore a new theme in her tattoo collection:

I really like movies a lot. So I want to do a movie homage on the side of
my leg, from my thigh to my ankle. Natural Born Killers is my favorite
movie. And A Clockwork Orange, Donnie Darko, a bunch of cool stuff.
Frankenstein, I'm just going to throw all the movies on the side of my leg.
With some film reels in the middle or something, it'll be cool.

The veteran tattooist Patty Kelley described her future plans for tattoo
work she found humorous:

I'm going to get both arms done, eventually. This is going to be all meat-
eating plants. That should make all the vegetarians very nervous, plants
that pay back. There are dozens and dozens of variety of meat-eating
plants. And the rest will be fruit.
Genevieve Arnold planned on collecting another nature-themed tattoo:

I liked how the scorpion tattoo looks. I want to have more insects. The insects are aesthetically beautiful, there are so many different insects and they're all so interesting, different shapes, colors, and sizes. I like that the scorpion has sort of a threatening quality, but they're whip-tail scorpions, so they're not really dangerous, they are usually underground and hide.

While many family members cringed with each new tattoo that the women brought home, pleading with them to stop, they themselves were only becoming bolder in their confidence to carry their growing art collection with them throughout their lives. All of the participants loved being tattooed and nearly all planned on continuing the journey. For some, they are content to collect one or two tattoos and stop. For heavily tattooed people who consider this one of their passions, it is hard to end the project of collecting tattoo art to represent continued interests, passions, and life milestones. This becomes one of their favorite means of self-expression, and there is always so much more to express. Further, the women appreciated the look of solid tattoo work covering the body (a "body suit").
Many of the participants said that they wanted to be “covered.” While the majority of people with tattoos may have one or two small images that they are content with, heavily tattooed women overwhelmingly want to have as much skin tattooed as possible while still avoiding the face and, perhaps, the hands and feet (that is, the “public skin”). In Miami, Andria Chediak had begun her journey of becoming heavily tattooed by her mid-twenties. Even though most of her tattoos could be covered with a T-shirt at that point, she intended to cover most of her body. Andria stated:

I have always wanted them. And not just little ones, I’ve always wanted full coverage. For me, it’s just my own satisfaction; they all mean something to me. They’re all an experience to me. And I just love the way it looks. Some people get plastic surgery, some people get lots of piercing. People change their hair. I get tattoos.

Andria Chediak explicitly compares tattoos to plastic surgery or changing one’s hair, which are part of normative beauty projects with which women engage. Throughout this research, I have wondered if heavily tattooed women have more positive self-esteem and love of their bodies, as they are not constantly comparing themselves against the beauty norm against which women who engage with normative beauty rituals may compare. For women who get plastic surgery or spend a great deal of time on hair, makeup and fitness, their journey is endless, as one can never have a beautiful, flawless, airbrushed body in the real world when comparing oneself to the glossy magazine ideals. Beauty must constantly be maintained. Facelifts need to be redone, the aging process continues. And age is the enemy of the beauty project—with its emphasis on perpetual youth. Pursuing beauty is like being on a treadmill; there is always more work to be done, more money to be spent. The procedures are superficial, literally on the surface of one’s skin, a costume, under which the body is hidden. But for heavily tattooed women, their journey is also endless, as there is more work to be done. When I take pictures of the participants, sometimes they are shy about having an incomplete tattoo photographed, similar to a woman without makeup who may shy away from the camera. When the participants look back at the photographs years later, they often comment on how “incomplete”
they were back then. "That was before I had my sleeve finished. Look how naked I appear." After each tattoo, they beam with delight, showing it off for the world to see. "Isn't it awesome? My new tattoo." They see their bodies as a constant work in progress. Whereas most people mark themselves by the age they demonstrate in photographs ("I looked so young then"), tattooed people have their ink progression to also mark the time ("that was before I had my arms done"). Therefore the desire to keep on with the project, be it normative beauty conformance or tattooing, can become a life's work. Do these groups—the tattooed and the plastic surgery recipients—overlap, both being body modifiers, or are they opposites on a binary? Of all the participants, only two mentioned getting plastic surgery (breast implants)—and one was Salma Hayek. In her piercing studio, a photograph of her—topless—adorns her wall, where she is showing off her new breasts, as well as her tattooed chest, pearl necklace and flawless makeup. Overall, tattooed women are not immune to beauty norms, but as they are going against the grain, they have the self-confidence and disregard for social pressures enough to accept themselves and follow their non-traditional bliss. They receive criticism and build defenses against it. In the end, I feel that the heavily tattooed women demonstrate a great deal of self-confidence and self-love in ways that those who aspire to be traditionally feminine do not. Women are especially valued for their youthful appearance, and the aging process erodes femininity, as older women are deemed less sexually desirable. Unlike the fashion exhibited through clothing, which can be muted as one ages, tattoos remain for life and provide a constant reminder of the women's alternative gender expression, which may become more surprising on their aging body, as tattoos can be associated with youthful rebellion. For women to embrace the possibility of aging gracefully, aging gracefully with tattoos becomes a statement of continued bold self-expression.

"What about When You're Eighty?"

Even though these heavily tattooed women did not regret their tattoos, they constantly encountered other people who argued that tattoos are regretful. The fear of permanency seems to be the motivation behind the question: "What about when you're eighty?" I find the question to be
an especially gendered attack on women. In our culture, the aging process is considered to be especially cruel to women; while men become “distinguished,” women simply become old and invisible. Consider how aging actors, news anchors, and performers face differential treatment later in life based on their gender. Whereas older male actors may be paired with very young women as their romantic leads, female actors become quickly replaced as they age. Many women report “becoming invisible” later in life. Once they are no longer considered a sexual being, they are no longer considered at all. This type of ageist sexism underlies perception of heavily tattooed people. Yet this is not a worry that the tattooed women expressed to me, as they all seem excited about entering their old age as “the coolest grandma ever” But all of the tattooed women have encountered this derogatory remark at some point. Therefore, responses to it have become part of their arsenal. Talia Robertson told me her typical response:

I had people say, “What are you going to do when you’re eighty? You know, what are your tattoos gonna look like?” I’m assuming they’re going to sag, because everybody sags at that age. And I’ve had a lot of women say, “What are you going to do when you get pregnant?” because of my stomach tattoo.

These comments remind Talia of her social role as a future wife and possible mother. The message is clear: She should not ruin her future of being a good woman with her temporary wild ways. Women are expected to fade in appearance and become more socially conservative as they grow older. However, all of the participants looked forward to having an interesting body in their later years, even if it is wrinkled or sagging. For these participants, they did not expect to fundamentally change as they aged; instead, they expected to become even more comfortable in their bodies. They are not going to have a turnaround and become conservative, regretting the life they have led. Samantha Holland studied older women who were eccentric in their dress and body art for her book Alternative Femininities. She writes, “Body modifications work against the idea of women becoming less visible as they age” and that an older modified woman would stand out more than a similarly adorned young woman because of the expectations for the different
generations. The participants often expressed hope that there would be more acceptance of body art by the time they were eighty. None of them were bothered by the idea of having faded or sagging tattoos, since that simply marked more of their life journey on their skin. Renee Little stated: "I’m going to be the eighty-year-old woman baking cookies, covered in tattoos." Several of the participants already were grandmothers, like Sailor Cher. During our interview at her piercing studio in St. Augustine, Florida, Sailor Cher recounted her experience of being a tattooed grandma and hoped her example would lead to more acceptance:

I’ve been asked about being a tattooed grandma. My grandchildren don’t know anything else. I mean, isn’t everybody’s grandma tattooed? That’s how they feel. And I think it makes them more tolerant of people that are different. So it has actually been a good thing. As far as my children, they are all tattooed and pierced. It’s a beautiful thing, and they appreciate it.

None of the participants expressed any concerns regarding the aging of tattoos. To the contrary, the tattoos seemed to provide the participants with a positive outlook on the process of aging in general.

Conclusion

The oldest woman that I ever tattooed was about seventy-six. She came in, and she wanted a little heart. And I was like, “Wow, why did it take you so long?” And she was like, “Honey, my husband just died, and he never wanted me to have a tattoo. And darn it, now that he is gone I’m going to do what I want!” And then she got her first tattoo. It was one of the best experiences I ever had.

— Kari Barba

Kari Barba told me this story in her Long Beach, California, studio. Several of the tattooists had reported working on elderly women clients who reported reaching a point in their lives when the felt that they could finally do as they wanted. For many people in general, they wait to get their first tattoo, or additional tattoos, because they are weighing out the negative social sanctions that may accompany their decision. Tattoos still carry the burden of stigma that originates in the historic
associations from the early part of the century: circus performers, criminals, sailors, drug addicts, and bikers. For women, the pressures of the beauty culture further stigmatize tattooing as masculine and, therefore, ugly for women.

The women I interviewed described their experiences of becoming heavily tattooed, the selection of artwork, and some of the social responses that they elicit. Strangers and family members alike often do not understand why “such a pretty girl would do that to herself.” But those interviewed described their tattoos as beautiful, accentuating their bodies in ways that made them feel more in line with how they saw themselves. As the Seattle tattooist Jacqueline Beach stated, “I can’t imagine myself without them. I don’t know myself without them.” When the participants retold their tattoo narratives, it provided an insight into their personality, interests, and histories. One could look at their permanent artwork and know important details about their lives. All of the participants wanted more tattoos; most of them realized that they would probably continue until their bodies were mostly covered. “I want to be covered,” was a popular sentiment among the interviewees. Yet the more they continued on their journey, the more social sanctions they received, such as the infamous tattoo question, “What will you do when you are eighty?” The responses from the participants indicated that they were happy about their choices in body modification and looked forward to a future in which they could feel that they were true to themselves.