

Deeper than the Surface: Analyzing Tattoos in a Modernized World

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In the late 1990s, anthropologist William Peace entered the American Museum of Natural History's special exhibit, *Body Art: Marks of Identity*, a display he later described as prompting a "measured respect for body art [as well as] great skepticism" (589). The exhibit displayed the many ways that a variety of cultures have practiced body art and body modifications over the past several centuries. Peace showed particular interest in the cultural phenomenon of tattooing, and how the practice was (and still remains) synonymous with cultural symbolism. In other words, it served as a way to visually transcribe certain aspects of human existence, as well as an impression of culture shared among generations. (589, 591). By definition, the word *tattoo* is indicative of "permanent marks or designs inserted on the skin by puncturing it and inserting pigment or pigments" ("Tattoo"); however, Peace describes the age-old art form much differently. According to Peace, body art, particularly tattoos, are a worldwide medium of expression, and as the name of the exhibit suggests, tattoos inherently are marks of human identity (589, 593). Though tattoos themselves are permanent, the role these century-old markings play in shaping human identity is, somewhat ironically, ever-changing. In fact, it has even changed in just the two decades following Peace's publication.

While the practice of tattooing is not new, it certainly has become more prominent, as these days it seems harder to find someone without a tattoo as opposed to with one. Nonetheless, can this age old practice really be associated with "cultural symbolism" when Zac Efron has the word "YOLO" tattooed under his left pinky or with rapper Gucci Mane sporting an ice cream cone tattoo under his left eye? Well, as evidence suggests, yes. According to statistics recorded by Emily Sanna, more than 38 percent of individuals born after 1980 reportedly have tattoos,

with 69 percent of that population having at least two or more (28). Just as Peace suggested, tattoos surely are a medium of expression, but if they remain compatible symbols of culture, their portrayal in the current time period is certainly worth looking into. Hence, this research investigates the philosophy of modern day tattooing, as well as the role of tattoos in twenty first century culture. Additionally, this analysis explores how current day society has moved away from religion, and instead is centered around science, reason, and the option to navigate personal identity and destiny. This historical movement has lead to an inevitable rise in individualism, ultimately coming to take the place of collective religion. However, it also has left a gray area in terms of developing personal identity, purpose, and morality. Further, by examining interviews conducted among a variety of tattooed individuals over the last twenty years, this art form conclusively appears to be less about being trendy, and more about personal development of identity. This paper examines how tattoos in the twenty-first century have evolved into instruments used to exercise individual *anima*¹ and establish identity, something once done through collective religion.

According to author Kelly Gibson, the practice of tattooing, originally common among Mayo-Polynesian cultures, became especially popularized during the British colonial exploration, as well as during the American Revolution (44). British commanders actually encouraged tattoos during the Revolution, claiming that they were a symbol of unity and dedication to service. In a more morbid sense, they also made for easy identification of corpses. As described by Gibson, tattooing became a way for soldiers to remember where they had been, what they had done, and to express loyalty and fellowship to their time spent in the military (44-5). Common themes for these tattoos, not surprisingly, include(d), “pride in service, patriotism, unit identification, and memorials,” and are still a common ritual for soldiers even in the current day (46-7). As military-inspired tattoos continued to grow in popularity, they also became a source of confederation. Wilfred Dyson Hambly, author of the

1. For the purpose of this paper, *anima* is meant in reference to the inner soul and personality of an individual, something that resonates with them even when they are not consciously aware.

publication *The History of Tattooing*, construed this idea, claiming that “Interesting cases of present-day employment of tattooing to express social solidarity are common enough among soldiers” (qtd. in Gibson 45). The publication was subsequently written in 1925, a time when nearly 90 % of US Navy Sailors reported having tattoos (Gibson 45). Accordingly, Gibson continuously reiterates how tattoos in the military not only told (and continue to tell) a sort of personal story, but also served as a symbol of shared homage to their duty and sacrifice (45). Generally speaking, these tattoos became a positive symbol of unity among soldiers worldwide, permanently binding them to something much greater than just themselves.

As tattoos became increasingly popular within the military, the ancient phenomenon soon became assimilated into American culture (Gibson 46). While some members of the upper class fancied tattoos at first, the practice was quickly overtaken by the nontraditional, stereotypically deviant, social groups (Swami and Harris 58). Bikers, gang members, convicts, and members of the circus used tattoos as “a sure way to dissociate one from the rest of society” and to outwardly claim their mainstream rejection in both a public and personal manner. (Bell 54). Though typically seen as unruly, these new wave tattoos echoed the individualized personas of the select few who had them, something that transcended any social boundary. Even homosexuals, a generally unaccepted demographic at the time, began using tattoos to express their rejection to binding social norms (Swami and Harris 58). Their tattoos may not have been approved or endorsed by the majority, but their personal ink was shared and celebrated by others walking a similar life path, creating some sense of a unified entity of social minorities. Much like the tattooed soldiers, these tattoos were not just marks of rebellion, but helped to give these so-called “rejects” their own identity within a collective, also nontraditional, group. Even if the public could not accept their identity, their tattoos were a permanent reminder to still perpetually accept their own. And it was this concept of accepting personal identity that would pave the way for the role of the tattoos in the twenty-first century.

As noted, up until the twenty-first century, tattoos helped

to generate a sort of collective identity among the perceived “outcasts” of mainstream society. However, for those without tattoos, this sense of collective identity was typically found not through tattoos, but rather through religion. Yet, at the close of the twentieth century, American culture made an apparent shift towards “modernization,” or a period of time characterized by rapid industrialization and a break from traditional, secular, authority (Gray 178). This shift in social structure ultimately gave way for the rise individualism, as an increase in industry and capitalism in turn created an increase in the opportunity for autonomous individual economic goals. These civil changes shaped what we know today as the “modern era,” with *modern* meant in reference to up to date behaviors, outlooks, opinions, etc., as well as embracing new innovations and ideas (“Modern”). The modern era, structured by science, reason and technology, discredits the previous power of *collective religion*, moving towards a more individual, secularized society (Benisecke 367-9). Mel Gray better explains this societal shift by describing the three aspects that shape modern society in the following ways: “*economic* dominated by industrial capitalism; *political* characterized by the rise of the nation state, liberal democracy, civil liberties, human rights, and social justice; and *cultural* in which rationality has replaced traditional authority and given rise to a pluralistic society in which people are free to select from a number of life options” (178). Thus, Gray argues that current day society is inherently modernized, resulting in a decline in mainstream religion and increased individual autonomy (178-9). Igor Grossmann and Michael E.W. Varnum back this premise in their study of the cultural changes in America over the last 150 years, finding that individualism has consistently risen throughout the last century. Of the several factors the attribute to the incline, secularism and increased socioeconomic status (by way of capitalism) were of most significance (322). This is not a surprising conclusion, as individualism inevitably generates autonomy, decreasing the need for a structured, collective religion (Gray 179). And as the role of the individual began to dramatically change in American society, tattoos simultaneously experienced a dramatic cultural shift of their own.

At the same time that American society turned towards a more individualized culture, tattoos experienced a drastic growth in popularity, and no longer just among specific, collective, groups (Swami and Harris 59). Correspondingly, the resurgence of this age-old practice can be attributed to loss of social collectivism, something not necessarily anticipated by those undergoing these societal changes. Religious ideology has traditionally been used to conceptualize and provide insight about life's most impacting moments; however, the modern era makes these ideologies appear no longer pertinent or even appropriate. But, as suggested by Black Hawk Hancock and Roberta Garner, the human relationship to sacred value still exists, it just has been displaced. Going off theories by Erving Goffman, Hancock and Garner have discovered what is known as "territory of self," or the idea that the self is never biologically changed. Instead, the "self," or one's inherent identity, is shaped and constructed by the modern world (181). In lieu of becoming inherently more individualized, we have actually been socially constructed to accept these patterns of behavior in order to adapt to the culture of a modernized society (181). Thus, in the wake of declining religious ideology, the members of this generation must develop personal anima without the help of a collective group, a process that is assisted through the art of tattooing (Bell 58).

As Sanna claims, "for experiences which have no words, people have to make use of the tools and languages of their time. Right now one of those tools is tattoos" (28). To further illustrate this idea, after conducting interviews with approximately fifty individuals ages 18-50, nearly 80% of them reported getting their tattoo either because it was symbolic of a specific moment or event of their lifetime or in memory of a loved who has passed away. Regardless of whether their tattoo(s) of choice were quotes, flowers, symbols, et cetera, each individual reported having some sort of sentiment associated with their personal ink, serving to symbolize something greater within the individual. For example, several participants revealed tattoos designs that portrayed different variations of the Tree of Life, a symbol that is cross-culturally associated with personal

connection to life and spirituality, as well as in connection to immortality. Though none of these individuals reported having a religious connection to their tree tattoos, in the wake of secularism, they still appeal to internal spiritual awareness, with the tree calling attention to something “greater.” Additionally, another participant’s tattoo was in memory of a childhood friend who tragically passed away at a young age. The tattoo reads, “Omni ir re bonum reperi,” which translates to “find the good in everything.” Again, no religious tie specifically, however the mark is spiritual in scope; it is not only a permanent memoir for their beloved friend, but also a daily reminder of the participant’s intrapersonal anima. The mark sheds light on an experience which may otherwise may be difficult to make sense of, as suggested by Sanna. As exemplified, tattoos offer an introduction to sacred value, an alternate “language” of spiritual identity in a world that continues to move towards the secular.

The secular, a prominent aspect of the twenty-first century, has in large part helped to disfavor the foundation of religion. However, it has also generated an obvious advancement of both science and technology. New media technologies, particularly social media, have created a sense of collective online “community,” a modernized opposition to community within religion. Adversely, these online forums have also blurred the lines between “real” and “simulated,” ultimately setting unrealistic expectations and standards for both personal experience and appearance. As Hancock and Garner claim, the “self” has come to be socially constructed, with obscured ideas of what is essentially “real.” Further, “the self is increasingly motivated by the limitless wants and ‘false needs’ ...[which] emanate from the media” (167, 169). This new age, infatuated with the likes of Instagram and Facebook, is hyper focused on *persona*, as opposed to *anima*. And while the generation who invented the “selfie” appears to be *externally* self-obsessed, this portrayal of the “self” is only a façade. Consequently, these modern individuals are failing to establish the same recognition of identity *internally*. Mel Gray has dubbed this generation as a “risk society,” or a society that has become so individualized and fragmented that much of the world has fallen into an identity crisis (180). How-

ever, the ability to combine both an external, as well as internal, aesthetic through personal ink brings a whole new meaning to the word depth. A personal tattoo is on display for the world to see and admire, which is particularly appealing in this self-obsessed society. Each tattoo also offsets the artificiality of a media-crazed society; each mark is unique and specific aspect of an individual, differentiating them from any other being, *permanently*. For instance, to revert back to the interviews, of the nearly fifty people consulted, each interviewee, regardless of their age, had a distinct and personal story behind their ink. One participant described their flower tattoos as representing, “who [they] are as a person and time markers in [their] life.” In this sense, the tattoos are a way of documenting one person’s life, but in a much more personal way than merely posting about it online. Another interviewee reported having their skin decorated with some of their own personal drawings, a tangible style of self-expression for only *that* individual. Her artwork is on display to be admired and observed by the eyes of the world, but also recreates a personal connection to her own internal anima. Accordingly, in a world caught up in photo filters and simulated “self,” the tattoo is externally pleasing to the generation that is obsessed with seeing and being seen. However, it also tugs at the internal, more spiritual aspect of “self,” which enlightens, but also unravels, Gray’s supposed “risk society.”

Even if an individual does grow to regret their personal ink, it invalidates Gray’s so-called “risk society,” securing a *real* and permanent trace of identity and existence in an ever-changing world. A small percentage (roughly 10%) of the interviewees admitted they no longer felt the same connection to their ink as when they first got it. Yet, their tattoo is still a permanent aspect of their (past or present) identity, captured on their body forever. This aspect of permanence is yet another reason why tattooing is prevailing in the twenty-first century. In accordance, E. M. Dadlez offers an interesting perspective regarding tattoos. He claims that tattoos are an augmentation to the body, and can symbolize an acknowledgement of absolute control of the body (743-4). Though somewhat of varying viewpoint, in reference to Hancock and Garner’s “territory of self,” Dadlez seems

to suggest that tattoos symbolize that the inner “self” can only be physically altered by the individual and not by the world around them. There is something to be said for Dadlez’s insight, as it suggests that while society can construct the “self” and social media can encourage external persona, tattoos are a permanent reminder that the individual still holds ultimate internal control over their mind and body. And unlike online expressions, a tattoo will never change or disappear, offering a freeze frame moment of self-awareness and reflexivity (Dadlez 743-4). To illustrate this idea of permanence, one interviewee explained that her tattoo, symbolized by a small scallop shell, was in memory of her summers at her family home on Cape Cod. Unfortunately, the property was sold this summer after being in her family for several decades. Though somewhat disheartening, her childhood memories will not only be permanently remembered, but will be a perpetual aspect of her existence. And it is this pattern of securing static, persistent connection to the intrapersonal that continues to make tattoos so popular in the twenty-first century. Subjectively speaking, tattoos seem to be one of the only permanent aspects left in the modern era. This constantly changing and indifferent generation has cast inexplicable doubt between the external and internal self. However, tattoos offer something to hold onto, shedding new light on the concept of permanence in the twenty first century. In doing so, tattoos not only help to better exercise personal identity, but also call on an intimate element of inherent anima, a key component in this increasingly individualized world.

As noted previously, Peace was definitely on to something when referring to tattoos as a sort of “cultural symbolism.” During the twentieth century, sailors and social minorities helped to revitalize the ideology behind tattoos in ancient cultures and civilizations, who used body art to express and communicate their identity in a collective, yet still personal way. Today, the twenty-first century generation has come to adopt that same ideology once again, only this time with a modern twist. In a final example, one interviewee revealed having four personal tattoos, each one indicative of a certain point in their life. One reads “Fate Loves the Fearless,” symbolizing moving thou-

sands of miles away from her childhood home. The next one is a spiritual symbol meaning to “Embrace Life,” and symbolizes the hardships and angst associated with inevitable life change. The final two, both of intricate design, each symbolize several aspects of her self-described anima, including finding inner voice, as well as lightheartedness and levity. Each tattoo emulates an externally unique and beautiful aesthetic, while still demonstrating eminent understanding of the internal “self.” Originally appearing to just be an extraneous jumble of words and symbols, these permanent marks can actually be broken down into a much deeper explanation of identity in the twenty-first century.

As the world continues to gravitate towards modernity and increased secularism, even as it is overrun by technology, society is increasingly vulnerable to becoming further independent and impersonal. However, in the wake of this new age, tattoos offer an alternative to this perceived “risk society.” Whether it is their connection to spiritual identity, exhibition of both internal and external personal aesthetic, or correlation to seemingly impermanence, each tattoo actively demonstrates exclusive personal anima. And in the wake of secularism, personal anima has replaced a collective, religious identity. Rather than just being a trend for the rebellious, tattoos are an alternate reflection of permanent self animus, outshining the superficiality intertwined with modern culture. Correspondingly, as they continue to become a tangible aspect of humanity, it is important to remember that tattoos are, in fact, much deeper than the surface.

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