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Tattoo Narratives
The Intersection of the Body, Self-Identity and Society

Mary Kosut

Drawing upon Frank's (1995) discussion of the personal and social aspects of embodied storytelling, this paper considers the tattoo as a form of visual communication created within a multiplicity of contexts. Based on in-depth interviews with eight tattooed men and women, the focus of this article is the stories that these individuals tell about their tattoos. I argue that the tattooed body is a distinctively communicative body. It has a great deal to say, not only about the identity of the wearer, but also about the culture in which she lives. I conclude with some reflections on examining the tattoo as a conceptual latch-key—a tool that may enable researchers to begin to unlock the complicated relationship between the body, self-identity and society.

Through the course of everyday interaction we encounter and interpret a profusion of signs. In modern life it appears as if any physical entity may serve as a medium to convey a message; we encounter symbols and logos on clothing, advertisements on taxis, trains and buses, and billboards papered directly onto the sides of buildings. Just as architecture, transportation and clothing carry signage, so too does the human body. Characteristics such as race, gender, size, and looks are a few of the "sign vehicles" that we read when we interact with others (Goffman 1959). Sign vehicles such as these are birth-given, yet the body is also replete with signs that are culturally given. While some may choose to place temporary signs on the body such as make-up and clothing, others choose sign vehicles of a permanent nature, such as tattooing.

Figure 1: Black outline of St. Michael the archangel (approx. 12 inches).

Mary Kosut is an ethnographer and Sociology doctoral student at The New School for Social Research, New York. Her research interests include alternative art forms and lifestyles, the body, fashion, and working-class culture.
Although tattooing is a way to construct one's body and self in one's own desired image, it is also a phenomenon that reflects cultural influences. An important characteristic of the tattoo as a form of communication is that it largely "speaks" through non-verbal transmission. It is seen (or read) by oneself and if placed in a visible location, it may also be read by others. While interactions with others may provoke a verbal exchange, much of the conversation that attributes to a tattoo's meaning is unspoken. Notwithstanding, the meanings of tattoos are formed and reconstructed as individuals participate in daily life.

Tattooing is an ancient non-Western form of body modification, yet it continues to become an increasingly prosaic phenomenon in contemporary American culture. Because of its ubiquity, commodification and growing visibility within diverse populations, some sociologists have studied tattooing. With a few exceptions (see Myers 1992; Sanders 1989), tattooing was addressed exclusively in anthropological and psychiatric journals, the former focusing on non-Western body modification and its cultural significance (Brian 1979; Hambly 1925; Rubin 1988; Teilhet-Fisk 1988), the latter on linking tattooing to psychopathological disorders and bizarre sexual practices (Caplan et al 1996; Gittleson et al. 1969; Hamburger 1996; Newman 1982; Post 1968). Until recently, research on tattooing has focused almost exclusively on male subjects (see DeMello 1995, 2000; Marcia-Lees and Sharpe 1992 for exceptions). Nevertheless, some contemporary studies that address tattooed women as a subject of inquiry have succumbed to a similar deviance bias found in previous male-centered studies. For example, Hewitt's (1997) investigation places tattooing within a context of "mutilative" body practices such as cutting and eating disorders. While her "goal was not to pass judgement on people who adorn their bodies with tattoos," she perpetuates antiquated stereotypes by characterizing tattoos within a context of psychological illness (Hewitt, 1997:2). Similarly, Pitts' (1998) analysis of contemporary female body modifiers situates tattooing within a context of "grotesque" and "carnivalesque" modification that includes the extremely rare practices of cutting, scarring and genital piercing.

By narrowly focusing on motivational factors within very select populations, or situating tattoos within extreme and highly unusual types of body modification practices and psychological illness, some academic investigations of tattooing have failed to account for the diversity and richness of contemporary tattoo cultures. Instead of focusing on the motivational factors that drive individuals to get tattooed, or theorizing the tattoo as an aberration, I theorize the tattooed body as a distinctively communicative body created within a multiplicity of contexts. Drawing from Frank (1995), I assert that the tattooed body is most profitably conceptualized as an unfinished corporeal and social phenomenon that is transformed, to a certain degree, as a result of social interactions. In The Wounded Storyteller, Frank (1995) posits that the stories that ill people tell are not simply told by, but are communicated through, the body. The body in crisis encounters its own corporeality, while it is simultaneously constructed by institutions that govern the culture of illness. As such, illness narratives are embodied stories that are both personal and social. Frank takes into account that the individual exists within a triad of body, self and society. This study considers tattooed bodies within this framework.

In the following interpretive analysis, eight tattoo narratives from four men and four women between the ages of 23 and 31 are presented within three sections of narrative typologies: Social Landscapes, Self Stories and Body Talk. This select group of eight was culled from an original snowball sample of 35 people of similar characteristics. As evidenced in their narratives, this discrete sample represents a highly creative and articulate group of people. Five of the eight informants are college educated and three have master's degrees. The eight informants are of European-American descent. At the time of the interviews, all were employed and could be considered functional or even successful by society's standards. Older people, non-European Americans and economically disadvantaged people with tattoos who have
altered their bodies within dissimilar cultural and historical contexts may experience their tattoos in a considerably different manner. Although this sample is limited by its homogeneous ethnic and age make-up, it can tell us something about how relatively socially advantaged young adults experience their tattoos.

About the Body

There may be aspects of the body that are not self, and vice versa, but just where one ends and the other begins is undecidable. (Frank 1995)

Although the body is a dichotomous entity, simultaneously biological and cultural, it is still an obvious obdurate fact. It is the principle means by which others know us and the way we can immediately distinguish ourselves from others. Giddens (1991:99) explains:

...the body is not just a physical entity which we possess, it is an action system, a mode of praxis, and its practical immersion in the interactions of day-to-day life is an essential part of the sustaining of a coherent sense of self-identity.

According to Giddens, self-identity is reflexively understood by an individual in the context of her own biography and is sustained by her ability to keep her own narrative going. Moreover, because the self is embodied, "the reflexivity of the self extends to the body" (Giddens 1991:77). While Giddens acknowledges that individuals are embodied, in his work "the unconscious receives more play than embodiment" (Giddens 1991:36). Frank (1991, 1995) argues that the body must be brought back into focus by taking corporeality seriously. Embodiment cannot be treated as a given or as tangential to the mind, as each body has a unique experience of embodiment within social contexts. Although Giddens maintains that the body is an "actions system" and a "mode of praxis" he doesn’t explain the personal and social components of embodiment. According to Frank, theory must not only interpret the body as both medium and outcome of social "body techniques," but also recognize society as both medium and outcome of the sum of those techniques. Frank offers a more complex theoretical frame in which to consider bodies:

Body techniques are socially given—individuals may improvise on them but they rarely make up any for themselves—but these techniques are only instantiated in their practical use by bodies, on bodies. Moreover, these techniques are as much resources for bodies as they are constraints on them; constraints enable as much as they restrict. (Frank 1991:48)

Currently, individuals are using an extensive variety of body techniques in the process of working on the self. Many are adopting diet and exercise regimes to control the appearance of the body. Breakthroughs in medical technology have introduced a variety of more dramatic body modification options for those who can afford them. Through plastic surgery the body can now be permanently altered via facelifts, liposuction and breast augmentation and reduction. Although these types of modifications exist within a continuum of disparate meanings, one characteristic that temporary and permanent body modification practices share is that they are socially acceptable. For example, even though a small minority of the population gets fatty tissue removed from their bodies through liposuction, it is an act that is not stigmatized. Notwithstanding, others are choosing to permanently alter their bodies through the process of tattooing, a traditionally non-sanctioned modification steeped within a history of deviant discourse. In Western society, tattoos were historically linked to criminals, service men, and those associated with outlaw subcultures like biker gangs and drug users. They were viewed as stigmatizing symbols voluntarily acquired as a sign of group affiliation, or badges employed to distance and differentiate from the mainstream. More recently, tattoos have filtered into mainstream culture through a process of commodification and mediation. In addition to members of the working class and groups typically relegated to societies fringe, sports heroes, super-models, and sorority girls are "sporting ink." Although tattooing has become increasingly visible, this type of permanent body modification violates dominant appearance...
norms. Regardless of whether tattooed people are perceived as disfigured, deviant or trendy, they all share a common characteristic—the need to fulfill a uniquely “human self re-touching impulse” (Myers 1992:267).

As Goffman (1959) established, when an individual appears before others her expressive and verbal actions will influence the definition and outcome of the social exchange. Our physical appearance—how we look to others—also shapes everyday interactions. Inferences can be made regarding an individual’s social status, ethnicity, class, gender and occupation, by reading various bodily “sign vehicles.” In this framework, a tattoo, much like a person’s clothing, hairstyle, or body shape, functions as a communicative device. However, unlike clothing, a tattoo is permanent—it will be inscribed onto the body for life (see Figures 2–6). People may change their sense of style, but their tattoo will remain constant. Moreover, unlike plastic surgery, a tattoo is pictorial. It alters the body’s surface through iconography, not reconstruction or the addition/subtraction of fat, tissue, or saline. Thus, all bodies transmit messages, but the tattooed body is a distinctively communicative body because it employs a unique form of articulation.

**Tattoo Narratives**

Tattoos are visual phenomena that often evoke powerful responses—ranging from curiosity and admiration to disgust and fear. Regardless of the individual’s response, tattoos compel one to gaze. It is difficult not to recognize a tattooed body. Yet, aside from their obvious visual and aesthetic quality, tattoos also have a distinctive narrative quality. Like every photograph, every tattoo has a story behind it. In what context are tattoo narratives constructed, to whom are tattoos being communicated, and what is being said?

No tattoo narrative fits neatly into one category; themes overlap, meld and merge within each story. Nevertheless, using a heuristic framework enables interpretative understanding of the multiple experiences of having a tattoo. Simply put, I use narrative typologies as a way to organize ideas so that I can analyze and interpret the informant’s stories. In the following sections, I attempt to deconstruct three types of tattoo narratives in the process of constructing a sociological narrative.

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**Figure 2: Tattoo artist Eric Mermagen preparing his workstation. Some tools of the trade are pictured: bottles of different colored inks on counter, razor in Eric’s hand (to shave skin clean of any body hair prior to tattooing), and deodorant stick (used to prepare the skin as it creates a smooth and moist surface to apply the tattoo design to; it also contains a high percentage of alcohol which is believed to help destroy bacteria). There are packaged sterilized tattoo needles in the bottom right-hand corner underneath the counter.**
Figure 3: Electric tattoo machine. Needles of varying size are placed within the machine depending upon the tattoo design. By changing the needles, the artist may create bold outlines or very subtle shading.

Figure 4: Eric keeps the client's skin taut as he presses the machine into her back. The tiny needles puncture the skin evenly, moving in and out at about 2,000-2,500 insertions per minute.
Figure 5: The client must remain perfectly still throughout the often painful process.

Figure 6: Approximately 1.5 hours later the tattoo is complete.
Social Landscapes

Life may not be much of a gamble, but interaction is. (Goffman 1959)

Part of the social dimension of the tattoo as a form of non-verbal communication is contingent upon whether it is visible or non-visible to others. Choosing either a public or private location for a tattoo is a significant decision in the tattoo process. Invisibility or limited visibility allows control over who the audience will be. For some, only a select number of others will be privy to the communication. Having visible tattoos significantly alters the tattoo experience, as people may respond negatively or affirmatively to their presence. In turn, these responses may influence how someone experiences their tattoos. As illustrated in the following narratives, some tattoos are symbolic messages that address specific individuals or communities of people. However, sometimes others may not always be aware that they are engaging in a conversation, as it were.

Managing the Gaze

They. There is a they. The ruling people ... not like us. (Eric, 31)

The drunken sailor, the rowdy biker, the sideshow freak, and the urban punk are a few sub-cultural and often anti-social archetypes that are associated with the presence of tattoos. Subcultures and their symbolic representations have always had considerable power to provoke and disturb as they violate authorized codes through which the social world is organized and experienced (Hebdige 1979). Although these social codes do not exist in written form, clearly, they do exist—tattoos break the code. Historically, a tattooed body was regarded as scary, deviant, and ultimately dangerous to mainstream, middle-class, Euro-American society’s ideals and norms. Regardless of the complexity and expansion of tattoo culture and its overlap into popular culture (vis-à-vis film stars, rock stars, athletes, etc.), most members of the social mainstream will invariably relegate people with tattoos to the status of the Other.

For some informants achieving self-bestowed Other status is a positive and important aspect of having a tattoo. By placing a tattoo on their body, they reject traditional ideologies that undergird rigid bodily appearance proscriptions. Moreover, a tattoo can convey a decidedly political message. For example, I asked 27-year-old Mona, to talk about having tattoos visible on her hand and her wrist (see Figure 7):

M: I think that they serve as ... some sort of social aberration. You know that somebody can see me and know that I am not your typical whatever.

I: You mean in distancing yourself from mainstream culture and all that comes with it?

Figure 7: Mona’s wrist: “Nothing Without Labor” is etched in black ink with a red “back shadow”.

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M: Maybe, but maybe just more sympathetic to the left. I think that now that I am teaching, my students notice my tattoos and think that I am approachable or ... I would lend them an ear. I am not certain things. So I think that aligning myself with certain parts of society happens by making my tattoos visible.

I: Have you ever felt uncomfortable in a public situation because of your tattoos?

M: Umm hmm, sometimes. Like I spent this summer in the Mid-West and sometimes I am really conscious of the fact that people won't be comfortable with the tattoos. And umm, at first, when I first had them I thought I should hide them if people are uncomfortable. But then I realized that it's not a matter of them being uncomfortable, it's a matter of me being comfortable with my own body. So I don't do that anymore.

When interacting in disparate social situations, Mona is cognizant that her tattoos are read differently. In certain milieus, they may function as an asset to varying degrees. However, her tattoos have also caused emotional stress. Nonetheless, by directly encountering the gaze of others, Mona has consciously become more “comfortable” with her body. Even though this process stems from self-reflexivity, it is triggered by social interaction. Mona is aware of reactions to her tattoos, yet consciously rejects the idea that she should feel uncomfortable because of her body’s appearance. The long-standing stereotypes and negativity associated with tattooing are issues she has carefully considered, but has chosen to subvert. Her tattoos are a message to herself, not to others. For Mona, tattoos are experienced primarily as personal, rather than social symbols.

The “Five Percenters”

Besides rejecting bodily appearance taboos, others choose to reject prevailing cultural standards of mainstream success. Specifically, the idea that one must devote their lives to the accumulation of material and economic capital through working in a white-collar profession. Even though 27-year-old Ted did not get his tattoo to differentiate himself from others, he discussed at length how he consciously made a decision to “rebel towards his upbringing,” middle-class success in general, and how his tattoo related to that:

T: It’s a total program. You are in high school to get into college. You are in college to get the good job and you are having a family with 3.2 kids and a dog. I am not saying at this point that I don't want that but ... I am deviant from that I think. Yeah, considering that I studied architecture for five years and I am not anywhere near that and I don’t plan on being. And I am happy with that, you know? It’s more about doing what you WANT to do (emphatically).

I: How does the tattoo fit in with that?

T: It fits very well into that. It’s like a statement of, if you can’t deal with what I have put on my body and you can’t deal with what I want to do, then don’t deal with me ... But it can be a challenge to other people. Like when I had long hair my mother said you’ll have to get a real haircut when you get a REAL job. As far as I am concerned, I have a real job ... if somebody can’t deal with what I have on me or how I present myself, I probably don’t want to work for that person anyways.

Ted is aware of the fact that he will undoubtedly come across prejudice and perhaps even discrimination because of his visible tattoo. Although much like Mona, he doesn’t view that as his problem, but rather, as society’s problem. Ted made a visible commitment to the rejection of mainstream ideas and categories governing what a “real” occupation is or what a successful person should look like. For Ted, making “deviant” decisions is not a negative characteristic of the tattoo experience, but a positive one. In the process, he achieves a sense of personal authenticity.

For 23-year-old Claire, the freak-show or carnivalesque stereotype that has historically surrounded tattooing played a significant role in her initial attraction to tattoos. She recounted her long-standing interest in the “community of freaks”:

C: You know what they say ... running off and joining the circus. Just that outward
display and some sort of acceptance. Not even acceptance, just this sort of community based on this potentially damaging—in the regular world thing—was really interesting to me. And you know in that way perversion is exciting ... people who were tattooed like that—just the power of rejecting. You know, like there are people who are above and beyond and not affected by other kinds of social constraints was something really interesting to me and something that I at once aspired to.

I: So do you experience your tattoos in those terms? In being a way of disengaging from social constraints?

C: I guess in a way—yeah. I was really aware of the fact that I came from a really conservative place, so for me having a tattoo was in a way this sort of this representation of difference and in what I choose I guess it was a celebration of difference. Of saying I am aware of that and I celebrate that and I am sort of marking myself permanently.

In this context, the circus-freak archetype is characterized as admirable rather than grotesque. Claire views the circus or sideshow community as a place of empowerment as its members do not conform to social bodily or lifestyle norms. Within this context, Claire's tattoos (see Figures 8–10) celebrate others who have chosen "difference" while making a permanent commitment to her own.

Mike, age 25, also discussed how his tattoos fit into his rejection of mainstream categories and ideologies that dictate standards of personal success. Much like Claire, he views himself as being different from others:

M: I don't prescribe to the mentality of the generation before me, of my parents' generation where you have to be clean-cut. You know, I want to be successful in life so I have to do whatever the normal people tell

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Figure 8: Claire's lower back. Three large black stars measuring approximately 4 inches (less than six months old).
me to do ... I don't have to conform to a certain way. I still plan on being a productive member of society, but I don't have to look like I am (laughs), in that normal category of what people expect of you, you know?

I: Do you see yourself as living an alternative lifestyle?

M: I see myself as an elder in the whole alternative scheme of things. I have been doing this for a long time ... acting a certain way ... you don't have to get all freaked out just because you are 25 and you are not in a corporation, you know? I am into chillin', I really am. And I have been into chillin' for a long time.

Mike has the letters “X-ST” rendered in a stylized graffiti font across his lower back. He chose ST because that was his graffiti “tag” and because he viewed himself as a “Saint.” The X was derived from the name of his friend, Xoel, who happened to give Mike his tattoo. He explained how it all fitted together:
M: I designed a nice ST for St. Michael because at the time I viewed myself as a saint. Because when I designed it I was, you know ... in the 5%.

I: What does the 5% mean?

M: Oh, you know. You know ... in the 5%. The people who know. The people who aren’t living just to just, you know, make a bunch of money. The people who actually care about what they are doing and why they are living and think about that shit. And the person I got the tattoo from, Xoel, put his initial in front of mine.

On a literal level, Mike’s tattoo functions as a basic mark of self-identification—his graffiti tag or the symbolic name he uses to identify himself through graffiti art. However, it also represents a reflexive struggle with existential concerns related to his sense of self and his place within mainstream society. Because Mike identifies himself as an artist and has “always viewed (his) body as a pretty good canvas,” his self-work can be applied directly to his body. His tattoo also enables him to differentiate his body and self from others who are not in the “5%.”

These narratives demonstrate that some people with tattoos embrace the status of the unique Other. They consciously reject mainstream norms that narrowly define and categorize individual lives and bodies. However, as Hebdige (1979) points out, the breaking of rules should not be confused with an absence of rules. The experience of getting and having a tattoo allows people to make their personal ideological standards and conduct codes permanent, and in some cases, visible to others. It also illuminates how the tattoo functions in relationship to social institutions like the family, economy and educational system.
Self Stories

*Do we continually have to prove to ourselves that we exist? (Baudrillard 1988)*

Overwhelmingly, the meanings of tattoos are often directly related to, or derived from, the bearers' self-identity. In the process of telling their narratives, every informant mentioned their sense of self. As these “body-selves” speak in different voices, similarities emerge within their stories. Tattoos may function as a documentary history of the self, display unresolved conflicts with the self, and can represent an exteriorization of the self.

**Self-portraits**

Like each symbol, each self narrative varies from informant to informant. For some people a tattoo can be a type of presentation of the self, to the self. For instance, 26-year-old Kenny described his first tattoo as a “self-portrait.” The tattoo is a colorful flaming skull with blood oozing out of the eyes and mouth. Kenny explained its meaning this way:

That is how I saw myself going into the navy—as an angry young man, because I was and that is how I felt on the inside.

Since it had been almost ten years since he first got his tattoo, I asked whether the tattoo’s meaning had changed over time. He replied that his tattoo had not evolved in meaning *per se*, although it did help him “develop into a state of mind.” I asked him to explain what he meant by that:

What I mean is that when I look at this, I think of how angry I was back then. And I look at it now and I look at myself and I see how angry I’m not.

While considering his tattoos, Kenny reflects upon changes relative to his self-identity. Although the meaning of his tattoo remains constant, Kenny’s relationship to his tattoo changes as he consciously rewrites his own self-identity narrative. According to Giddens (1991), self-identity is reflexively understood by an individual in the context of his own biography and is sustained by his ability to keep his own narrative going. In this case, the tattoo is a visual reminder that allows Kenny to ground his story on this body.

Kenny’s tattoos have changed aesthetically since his first flaming skull “self-portrait.” He describes the graphic tribal-style work that he was in the process of getting tattooed on his chest in the context of evolution:

K: [It represents] a totally different symbolism of myself ... It is like I said earlier from the depths of your soul, your soul will evolve. It’s all up to you, and why I am doing this tribal thing is because after all these years I actually feel like in my head I have changed a lot. And I have been able to come to a better grasp with myself and figure exactly what I am about ... with the tribal work it is almost like an evolution.

I: So how does the tribal work fit into your...

K: Evolutionary pattern?

I: Yeah, obviously you have evolved, your tattoos have changed.

K: I’ve changed. My tattoos have remained the same.

I: Does that bother you?

K: I can deal with it. It’s a good thing. It’s a good reminder not to go back to the way that you were.

The sign vehicles on Kenny’s body have not only evolved visually, their meanings shift as he reflexively negotiates his sense of self over time. They are permanent documentation of stages in his life as he constructs them, stage by stage.

Thirty-one-year-old Eric also discussed his tattoos as a metaphor for himself within the contexts of his own life experiences (see Figures 11–15). I asked Eric to describe the tattoo he has on the inside of his calf (see Figure 11):

E: His name is Shoki—he’s a Japanese guy. The story is that he was a student, an intellectual ... but he failed his tests and committed hara-kiri and dedicated himself to an eternity of hunting down demons and eradicated them from the islands ... the spirits all have a very humorous aspect to them. None of the spirit world is infallible. So
this guy is rather bumbling. He's a nimrod. I kinda identify with poor little Shoki. I am always failing my tests. He's fighting the good fight.

I: And you choose that based on that idea. That you are also, you have your trials...

E: Yeah, nobody's perfect. I am giving it the good fight and so is he.

I: How long ago did you learn about him?

E: Well my aunt and uncle lived in Japan for lots of years and they used to send me all of these stories that were Japanese fables when I was a kid ... So I have known about him pretty much forever. As much as I have been involved in foreverness.

I: And you see him as a metaphor for yourself?

E: I am always trying, ya know? If I didn't keep trying ... There are a lot of roads that I could've gone down that could have been absolutely disastrous if I didn't have an absolute desire to ahh, I don't even know what it is—to survive with myself. You know these roads that I went down that could have been disastrous, I went down to ... to know about, you know? ... To get in touch with yourself. It's kinda like swallowing a grenade. Knowing yourself by what's left after you blow the parts off.
Eric's tattoo represents an ongoing conversation that involves marking an authentic self, by symbolically removing all "the parts" of his self(s) there is a core that is real and stable. According to Giddens, the process of being able to act authentically hinges on disentangling "the true from the false self" (1991:79). Yet it also symbolizes his persistence and perseverance in the face of everyday disappointments, failures, tragedy and complications that hinder ones ability to "fight the good fight."

The large self-designed tattoo on Eric's upper thigh is based on Pacific Northwest Indian iconography (see Figure 12). Eric has always been interested in the relationship between the "incredibly graphic imagery" and its meanings within Tlingit culture. I asked him if his tattoo was based on any figure in particular:

E: Mine is a sea monster. I have never seen a sea monster like this. My sea monster has a wolf's head and mouth and eyes and has a wolf's ears. And it's got a blow hole like a
Figure 15: Eric's upper arm. Traditional American tattoo that combines star, eagle and banner. Although the banner is empty here, names of significant others, important dates or nicknames are often written inside.

whale and it has big scary claws unlike anything ... It's a sea wolf.

I: Why is this one particular image attractive to you?

E: Because I use it as a kind of talisman. My last name means sea stomach or sea monster I am not sure. But actually that isn't why ... I got it because it's this terrifying creature that scares evil spirits away. Because I have this big giant black cloud that follows me around. It's fucking bad news ... It's a talisman to ward off evil spirits in the "they" sense of the word. I am convinced that evilness and goodness are real. I don't know whether or not I believe that tattooing a scary monster to scare them away really works or not, but all throughout history any culture that gets tattoos, generally speaking, has gotten them to tap into this goodness/badness power. Not necessarily good and bad as much as POWER...
"A Landmark for Myself"
Tattoos as Biographical Documentation

To some extent, every respondent described the meaning of their tattoos in relation to their sense of self and change within a context of varying degrees of significance. However, several of the respondents descriptions encompassed another theme—the tattoo as a historical reference point. As such, some tattoos function as permanent documentation of significant events and affiliations. In this context, tattoos mark and maintain memories. Like Eric, 27-year-old Paige also discussed the concept of tattoos as having power (see Figures 16–18). Unlike Eric, she explained her tattoos within a context of important events throughout her life:

I: So what happened on that morning to make you want to do this?

P: I was just starting over and I moved to Seattle and I didn’t know anybody and I quit school and I was like really on my own. Living by myself for the first time and it seemed like a decision that I could make that was going to be on my body for the rest of my life and I don’t know what it was but it seemed like symbolic of something.

I: So how did you feel afterwards?

P: I felt really good. There is a certain amount of power in being able to go in and get it done and have it on you. And nobody can tell you that you can’t do that.

I: That was a long time ago. How much do you think about that time in your life?

P: When I look at it and really think about it, I can remember that time. I don’t have a great memory. Like as soon as something passes it usually gets real furry for me. And so the tattoos are interesting because they are really clear memories and I can remember the day that I got them and what was going through my head. And I don’t know if it is the relationship with the pain or with this thing that is still with me. What it is. But it is powerful.

I: That is an interesting word—power. You think your tattoos have a certain degree of power?

P: To myself I think they do. Power I guess. They have more meaning. A personal meaning. So I think that each time I have gotten one done it’s been the beginning of a different ... it’s been some kind of landmark for myself. Just a personal one of starting another time in my life.

Analogous to Paige, Mike also experiences his tattoo as a symbol that identifies a turning point in his life. For him, "It is an actual bookmark of one chapter closing and one chapter opening." In this case, the tattoo commemorates a transitional time or a stage marker. It is a
physically reminder of a personally significant event. Other informants echoed Mike and Paige's view of the tattoo as a bookmark or landmark. For example, Claire sees her tattoo as a "reference point":

C: I have a great fear of forgetting places in my life. Emotional and philosophical places in my life. And the idea of permanence was I guess scary ... But I thought it was good. You know it is very important to have a sense of memory for me. To have a sense of place and home and reference points to that...

While the others spoke in general terms about remembering a time in their lives, Mona discussed the importance of remembering a very specific consequential event. She got the phrase: "Nothing Without Labor" tattooed on her wrist in direct response to the ending of her marriage:

M: It is positioned so that I can read it not so that other people can read it ... This one was in response to a divorce that I was going through actually, so it was something that I really wanted to remind myself of and continually want to remind myself of...
Mona wanted to get a tattoo since she was a teenager but it was important to her to document something "substantial." Considering that people change throughout their lives to varying degrees, I asked her if she thought that there would come a time when she wouldn’t want to have the tattoos anymore:

M: I think part of the reason in getting them is documentation. So I hope that if I changed into a different sort of person every time that I would look at them I would be reminded of integrity or something that I used to possess. So just the way they are documentative of that is important too.

Narratives encompassing the self, reveal that tattoos play an important function in reflexive self-construction. Giddens maintains that self-identity is reflexively understood through the process of sustaining coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives. A person with a normal sense of self-identity "has a feeling of biographical continuity which she is able to grasp reflexively, and to a greater or lesser degree communicate to other people" (Giddens 1991:54). As historical reference points or aides-mémoire, tattoos permanently illustrate biographical stories. They are communicative devices that support and sustain "philosophical and emotional places" and significant events as people strive to (re)tell plausible self-narratives.

Body Talk

People with tattoos seem to have what Frank (1995, 1991) refers to as a “self-relatedness” of the body. While some people have bodies, other people are bodies. Tattooed people are bodies. In tattoo narratives a sophisticated awareness of the corporeal dimension of existence is articulated. Those with tattoos are mindful of not just the surface of their bodies, but how their physicality relates to their own being. In addition, tattooed people also demonstrate an understanding of various ways their bodies are culturally constructed and read by others in the course of everyday interaction. For some, the act of tattooing allows the possibility of owning the body, in addition to living within it.

Mortality and Purity

Some people believe that the body is pure until you fuck with it, and I don’t agree with that. (Mona, 27)

In contemporary culture, the term “natural” beauty designates a body that is deemed beautiful “as is”—without being modified by the excessive use of cosmetics or plastic surgery. A natural body is the ideal body: pure, pristine, a gift from nature. Even though the body is, of course, culturally constructed, the idea that there is a natural or untouched body dominates Western ideology, especially with regard to the female body. Although recent scholarship has challenged the dichotomous natural/cultural view of the body (see, e.g., Marcia-Lees and Sharpe 1992) as an ideological construction used to buttress male supremacy, the notion of an unspoiled, pure body prevails. Within this context, it is not surprising that people carefully considered the consequences of permanently marking their bodies for the first time. For example, Mona talked about why her tattoo served as a “way out of the Christian paradigm of the body”:

M: There is this whole Christian thing about the integrity of the body and how it is the temple of God and it can’t be an aberration of that. And I think that people that are conservative probably link them together in terms of anything like that you do to your body would be contestable.

I: Yeah, somebody said to me that after they got a tattoo that they felt tainted, or damaged—that their body was thrown off balance.

M: Yeah, well you are not pure anymore in that sense.

I: But you are comfortable with impurity as it were (jokingly).

M: Yeah, I mean I have always been trying to figure a way out of the Christian paradigm of the body. And I think this is one way out.

Obviously, for women, the tattoo is especially effective in subverting conservative bodily proscriptions. A tattoo not only defies the
female body's seemingly innate purity, but does so via an historically deviant masculine symbol. For feminists, getting a tattoo can serve as a symbol of power, protest and subversion. Notwithstanding, men also referred to the act of crossing the natural/cultural body divide. Twenty-eight-year-old Heinz talked about why getting his first tattoo was a "scary" experience:

H: Getting the first tattoo is kind of scary because it is the first time that you mark the body... there is this kind of barrier and umm, it's mostly fear of the unknown. There is this notion that the body is a permanent and natural factor. Just by having something in a sense that is more permanent than your body makes it obvious how much your body changes... your body changes a lot more than you assume it does. I think there is kind of a lot of people doing a lot of ascribing meaning to bodies. Yeah and whether it's kind of an ascription or kind of resisting an ascription of meaning and also resisting a denotation of permanence.

I: Do you like the commitment aspect of it?

H: Yeah, I think that in this case the permanence of the tattoo has the function of making my impermanence very obvious.

There is an inherent dichotomy in the experience of having a tattoo. The tattoo is a permanent emblem that is marked on a transitory entity. The body will change, but the tattoo's placement and iconography will remain the same. Of course, as the body ages and decays so will the tattoo. Informants mentioned the finite nature of their body within varying contexts. For example, Ted mentioned his mortality directly in his narrative:

T: It's kinda like me telling myself that I have one life to live and if I want to put something on my body that is going to be there for the rest of my life—I am fine with that. It's almost a mortality thing.

Like Ted, Mona also made a direct reference to her mortality. Her first tattoo forced her to come to terms with her temporal existence. She described an epiphanic moment she experienced shortly after getting her first tattoo:

M: I think it was the first time in my life that I had really come into contact with my mortality as kind of a given. Because I think every time that I looked at it I said to myself "you are a mortal person and this is going to be on you until you are dead," so I would think about that brevity of existence every time that I looked at it.

Although Heinz didn't refer to his mortality directly, he talked about the transitory nature of the body. He described the next tattoo he is thinking about getting within the context of physical impermanence and change:

H: [I'll] probably get a tattoo up my spine of a tape measure from the top of my coccyx to the base of my neck. And the reason for that is because again I think it is about some sort of the non-permanent body. My grandfather used to be the same height as me and now he is a foot shorter than me. I think the tape measure is going to be accurate inch wise, but when I am 70 or 80 I will be using fractional inches on my back.

I: That's kind of a testimony to your finiteness.

H: Right and to a kind of impermanence. I think that there is this cultural view that we get to a certain age and then you are this. And you are grown up... and you don't change. And that's kind of a way in which you do change in kind of a physical way.

Taking Back the Body

For ten thousand innumerable reasons, I felt really not connected to my body. (Liz, 34)

The majority of women that I interviewed discussed their tattoo(s) in connection to their bodies. A recurring theme in their narratives revolved around the concept of body reclamation. Specifically, taking ownership and control over their own by rejecting capitalist patriarchal proscriptions that define and regulate the appearance of the female body. Historically, tattoos were considered icons appropriate for male bodies. By deliberately inscribing a tattoo onto their body, respondents reclaimed and redefined their femininity and sexuality. For example, Mona clarified that "it's not the pain
that is addictive, it’s taking control of your body ... it’s kind of incredible the way that umm, that you can just transform your body.” I asked her what was incredible about it:

M: I think that there is a lot of, especially in being a woman there is certain ways that your body is socially read; or certain ways that you are proscribed to be, especially in sexual arenas. And I think that you know, making a mark on your body or documenting something or introducing metal—all of those things transgress those boundaries in different ways ... I think the next tattoo would somehow kind of prove ownership of my sexuality. And so I am trying to think of different sexy tattoos...

I: Why sexy?

M: I guess just because I want to be the person defining my sexuality ... Just staking claim to something is a certain form of ownership.

Claire echoed much of Mona’s standpoint in her narrative:

C: [My tattoo] really forced me to be in my body and it was an uncomfortable but desirable place ... It was really hard for me to feel like I owned my body. I felt like it was sort of my enemy all of the time.

I: So that’s how it was comforting, recognizing your physicality?

C: ...I know that there is a very strong need to be part of my physical self even though I hate it. Even though it is my enemy ... it’s just all that social stuff, all that attractiveness stuff, all that sexuality stuff, all that thinness stuff. I want more than anything to be immune to that, but I am not ... I am aware of the really profound effect that those feelings have on my life. Reclaiming my body and rejecting my body as like a very strong tension. I was willing to accept a certain amount of pain in order to own this thing. To be closer to myself. To be more with my own body. It was incredibly therapeutic. This was all related to sexuality. It was about claiming it. Claiming my own self. The tattoo made me feel stronger...

Body narratives demonstrate that a tattoo is much more than a way to decorate or beautify the surface of the body. Unlike jewelry, clothing, or hairstyle, tattoos are permanently inscribed into the body. Tattooed bodies are unique entities because they pose a threat to the “natural” sanctity of the body, in addition to conservative religious and political ideas about masculinity and femininity (DeMello 1995). Tattoo narratives are spoken through a body that has been physically altered, a body that must come to terms with its new physicality. According to Frank (1995), telling stories not only gives voice to the body, it allows the changed body to become once again familiar through the act of storytelling.

Conclusion

Stories, like the lives they describe, are always open-ended, inconclusive, ambiguous and subject to multiple interpretations (Denzin 1989). Stories are constantly edited and revised by those who tell them; their meanings are apt to shift over time. However, even if the tattoo narratives people recount don’t fully match the lives they have lived, they ultimately become the experiences of those lives (Frank 1995). Through the act of telling stories, multiple, subjective “truths” are constructed and edited. These truths are vital because they give meaning to the tattoo experience.

The tattoo is complex: it is a cross-cultural, historical and contemporary phenomenon. It is replete with meanings, both personal and cultural. Tattoos have been commodified and yet are still considered deviant. They are simultaneously visual and textual—an aesthetic icon that can be read in many ways. Although I can make no claim to demonstrating why people are choosing to tattoo their bodies or their exact meanings and functions, this analysis demonstrates the complexity of the tattoo as a form of embodied visual communication. Tattoo narratives unveil a complicated web of micro and macro relationships. Woven within these stories, we find individuals negotiating their selves and bodies, as society simultaneously pushes and pulls in divergent directions.
Contemporary tattoo narratives provide us with a new reading of an ancient body modification practice. They reveal information about how the body and self-identity are reflexively constructed and interconnected. Yet, tattoo stories also provide a certain resonance of the ways people think in modern life. Individual selves and bodies are no longer considered to be static or given entities. Like our everyday lives they are subject to change and adaptation. When framed within a context of contemporary body regimes, the tattoo parallels other contemporary body techniques used in the process of working on the body. At the most basic level of analysis people recognize their tattoos as a way to enhance, reclaim and redefine the body. However, this study suggests that the tattoo can also function to reinforce and work on the self. Tattooing exemplifies a truism, “that bodies are used purposefully by the consciousness within them” (Frank 1995:50).

Tattoo narratives are unique because they are told through the body; a body that is aware of its physicality, temporality and sexuality. What all of these narratives have in common is their sense of agency. They describe modern subjects whose selves and bodies are in praxis. Within these stories there is a continuous reflexive dialogue between the body, self-identity and society. Through interpreting tattoo narratives we can begin to decipher the intricacies of this communication.

Notes

1 This article is based on an ethnographic study I conducted between September 1996 and May 1999 in New Orleans, LA and in the New York City metropolitan area. This study uses in-depth semi-structured conversational interviews guided by me. I conducted participant observation at two tattoo studios; one in the Bronx, New York and the other in Montclair, NJ. The majority of the informants are European American, three are Latin American and one is Native American. Their body modifications vary from one small tattoo to a full body suit (complete coverage of the head, face and neck). Respondents had tattoos that were visible, semi-visible and hidden, some had a combination of both.

2 "Sporting Ink" is the name of a tattoo magazine. It is also a colloquial term used to denote having a tattoo. For example, I have been asked “Are you sporting ink?” on several occasions in the field.

3 Recent developments in laser surgery technology make it possible to have a tattoo removed. However, the process is painful, expensive and rarely restores the skin to its original appearance. Thus, for purposes of this study, tattooing is defined as a permanent procedure.

4 The names of the informants have been changed.

References


