

**(Im)Permanent Body Ink:  
The Fluid Meanings of Tattoos, Deviance, and Normativity  
In Twentieth-Century American Culture**

By

Christina Fabiani  
Bachelor of Arts (Combined Honours), Carleton University, 2006

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the symbiotic relationship between the meanings of tattoos and social norms through a comparative analysis of three distinct periods in twentieth-century American history. I use extensive archival material and an interdisciplinary approach to explain how the meanings of body ink shifted and to identify factors that influenced the public's perceptions of tattoos as deviant or acceptable. In the 1920s and 1930s, tattooing practices among favored social groups, specifically military personnel, middle- and upper-class white men and women, and circus performers, generally received more positive reactions than those among lower-class and criminal subcultures. In the 1950s and 1960s, body ink became practiced primarily by marginalized individuals, such as criminals, bikers, and sex workers, and the general public's understandings of tattoos as indicators of deviance and dangerous immorality strengthened. The new clientele and practitioners of the 1970s and 1980s mainly came from a high socio-economic status and reframed their tattooing practices as artistic expressions of individuality. I argue that, although body ink aesthetic by and large supported American values of patriotism, heteronormativity, and racial advantage, tattooing practices among 'respectable' groups were more accepted than those by 'deviant' subcultures. My research shows that the fluctuations between public rejection and appreciation of tattoos in these periods rested principally on the appearance and function of the inked design and on the position of the tattooed body in the social hierarchy. This thesis demonstrates that tattooing practices created and perpetuated but also destabilized and influenced gender-, race-, and class-based American ideals, and my research exposes the nuanced connections of body ink with deviance and normativity, the malleability of social conventions, and a complex web of power relations constantly in flux.

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## **Introduction – Tattoos, Deviance, and Normativity**

“Those things are for tramps!” my grandmother proclaimed as she examined my first tattoo, a reaction contrasted to the enthusiastic “Cool!” I received from my younger brother. The varying feedback I experienced on my tattoos led me to question how the perceptions of cultural trends, in this case the use of body ink, differed so drastically among individuals and social groups. The meanings of tattoos fluctuate despite their physical permanence. Others have similarly witnessed changes of tattooing practices, clientele, and the public’s perceptions of body ink, and their testimonies can shed light on how such changes happen.

Leonard “Stoney” St. Clair toured America as a heavily-tattooed entertainer in the 1920s and 1930s, and freak shows, he explained, “brought tattooing to areas [in America] where people had previously only heard or read about it.”<sup>1</sup> Outside of the circus, some social groups practiced tattooing for specific purposes. For example, St. Clair noted the fervor with which servicemen used body ink as “an acceptable means of expressing devotion and loyalty to country,” an observation which shows the overall tolerance of tattoos that supported American patriotism.<sup>2</sup>

St. Clair left the circus in 1950 to pursue work as a tattooist, but recalled his financial struggles because “there wasn’t much business” then in his line of work.<sup>3</sup> St. Clair remembered that during the low point in American tattooing practices, he inked mainly criminals, sexual “deviants,” and the “dirty, filthy men” of biker gangs in clandestine venues, such as “big poolrooms,” “dank arcades,” and the back rooms of barber shops.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Leonard St. Clair and Alan B. Govenar, *Stoney Knows How: Life as a Tattoo Artist* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1982), xx.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, xviii, 61.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 59, 78.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 77-79, 107.

From the end of the 1960s to his death in 1981, however, St. Clair profited from a growing interest in body ink among higher-class social groups, such as “university kids” and professional men and women.<sup>5</sup> When St. Clair opened his first tattoo shop in the downtown shopping district of Columbus, Ohio, in 1970, he complained that “a lot more tattooers” followed suit.<sup>6</sup> He chastised young tattooists, who he called the ‘Now Generation,’ for “glorifying tattooing” to make “big money.”<sup>7</sup> St. Clair resented the public’s interest in his life’s history in the trade, balking to reporters: “I don’t want any publicity, just leave me alone...I’m just making a living.”<sup>8</sup>

St. Clair experienced distinct phases in American history in which the meanings of tattoos and the public’s attitudes towards inked bodies drastically shifted. However, while he acknowledged that styles, clientele, and stereotypes changed, St. Clair believed that “they’ll change again” because such flux was “nothing new in tattooing.”<sup>9</sup> Archival evidence confirms St. Clair’s recollections of the tattoo’s mutable meanings in twentieth-century American culture, but leaves many questions unanswered. *How* did the meanings of tattoos shift? What factors contributed to fluctuations of tattooing practices between deviance and normativity in the public’s perceptions? Can a better understanding of the acceptance and rejection of American tattooing practices then be used to explain similar histories of other body modification trends, such as piercing or plastic surgery?

This examination of three phases in American tattooing history argues that social norms and the meanings of tattoos hold a symbiotic relationship. Tattooing practices created and perpetuated but also destabilized and altered normative American values during these periods. My

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 125, 141.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 99, 140.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, xxix, 137.

research exposes the nuanced relationship of body ink with deviance and normativity, the malleability of social conventions, and a complex web of power relations constantly in flux. As sociologist Mary Kosut argues, the meanings of tattoos in twentieth-century America are “formed and reconstructed as individuals participate in daily life” and shift within a spectrum of stigma and fashion.<sup>10</sup> I map the relationships between the meanings of tattoos and social norms throughout twentieth-century America to show how both changed as a result of their interactions. This comparative history demonstrates that tattoos both supported and challenged ideals of gender, race, and class in ways that largely corresponded to the tattoo’s aesthetic and function and to the social status of the wearer.<sup>11</sup>

In the 1920s and 1930s, we see the tattoo’s existing connection to deviance, rooted in its racialized origins in ‘primitive’ cultures, amplify as body ink became symbols of affiliation in stigmatized subcultures. However, while tattooed members of lower-class groups were largely shunned by conventional, white America, body ink among more favorable social groups enjoyed greater acceptance in public. During these decades, servicemen and mid-to-high class men wore body ink to display their patriotism and conventional masculinity. Well-to-do white women practiced tattooing strictly in ways that supported *au naturel* feminine beauty. Tattooed circus performers occupied spaces with relaxed social norms, but ideals of gender, race, and class influenced their appearances and personas both on and off freak show stages. Tattooing practices among circus performers and high-ranking social groups generally experienced public favor, but the dominance of normative tattoo functions and designs suggests that their selections aimed to deflect negative stigmas of inked bodies.

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<sup>10</sup> Mary Kosut, “Tattoo Narratives: The Intersection of the Body, Self-Identity and Society,” *Visual Sociology* 15:1 (2000): 80.

<sup>11</sup> Gregory Blue, “Comparative History,” in *A Global Encyclopedia of Historical Writing: Volume 1*, ed. D.R. Woolf (New York/London: Garland, 1998), 192.

In the 1950s and 1960s, tattoos were practiced nearly exclusively by outcast groups and became markers of subcultural belonging among working-class men, criminals, gang members, and sex workers. Tattooed bodies virtually disappeared outside of the margins of ‘respectable,’ white American society and negative stigmas concurrently gained power. However, gender-, race-, and class-based values continued to influence tattooing practices.

The meanings of tattoos in the 1970s and 1980s shifted again as middle- and upper-class consumers and counterculture groups adopted the practice.<sup>12</sup> For many new customers, tattoos signified personal liberation from traditional values. Outcast groups continued to use tattoos as symbols of affiliation, but the tattoo’s growing clientele reframed the practice as professional ‘body art.’ In these decades, an upsurge of tattoos among individuals of higher social status complicated contextual understandings of deviance and normalcy. Nonetheless, popular tattoo designs across social groups reflected long-standing norms, showing the pervasiveness of conventional American values during a cultural tipping-point.

### **Literature Review and Theoretical Underpinnings**

The scholarship on the history of American tattooing practices appears extensive, yet a lack of interdisciplinary analysis leaves one wondering exactly how changes in the meanings, practices, and social perceptions of body ink occurred. My research builds on existing literature on tattoos as fluctuating symbols and highlights factors that affected tattooing trends, clientele, and the general public’s views of the practice.

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<sup>12</sup> It is important here to note the distinction between countercultures and subcultures – although both consist of small social groups with central ideologies that characteristically conflict with widely-held social norms and conventions, the former seeks to transform larger society in accordance with their views while the latter generally does not. For further information, see Chris Jenks, *Subculture: The Fragmentation of the Social* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), and Harri Peltola, “Counterculture – What For?” *Temenos* 14 (Jan. 1978): 198-215.

Scholars examine tattooing practices in twentieth-century America from various angles. Some stress the influences of gender norms. For instance, *Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoos* (1997), by journalist and English professor Margot Mifflin, analyzes the tattoo's history through a gender-studies lens and argues that social conventions of the traditional masculine/feminine binary predominantly regulated design choice, size, and location. Cultural anthropologist Margo DeMello likewise stresses the influence of gender on traditional tattoo imagery in *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community* (2000), which challenges interpretations of body ink as resistance. Both Mifflin and DeMello highlight the impact of gender ideals on tattoo trends, yet they rarely discuss the impact of race and class on the American tattoo's history. This thesis builds upon gender-based analyses by incorporating race and class and analyzing how their intersection influenced tattooing practices.

Scholarship on American circuses places great weight on the role of freak shows in early twentieth-century American culture. English professor Mindy Fenske identifies the freak show as a “highly classified” space with “strongly territorialized boundaries,” in which tattooed entertainers were portrayed “as simultaneously sleazy and celebrated.”<sup>13</sup> In *Tattoos in American Visual Culture* (2007) and “Movement and Resistance: (Tattooed) Bodies and Performance” (2007), Fenske argues that tattooed circus acts held “the greatest potential for the disruption and (re)articulation of...deviant/normal norms” but she avoids a firm stance on whether or not they realized that potential.<sup>14</sup>

Body theorist Victoria Pitts' article “‘Reclaiming’ the Female Body: Embodied Identity Work, Resistance and the Grotesque” (1998) identifies abnormal bodies as “hypervisible text” that

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<sup>13</sup> Mindy Fenske, *Tattoos in American Visual Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 67.

<sup>14</sup> Mindy Fenske, “Movement and Resistance: (Tattooed) Bodies and Performance,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 4:1 (2007): 53.

normalize the spectator's appearance through contrast. For her, freak shows were "the marginal space outside official discourse," a space that explored and celebrated blurred boundaries.<sup>15</sup> However, she concludes that freak show acts ultimately assured the audience's understanding of its own normality and reinforced social norms. My research allows for a more nuanced relationship between deviant bodies and normative society and shows how their interactions influence both tattooing practices and widely-held conventions of gender, race, and class.

Scholars generally identify the 1950s and early 1960s as the 'dark ages' in the history of American tattoos.<sup>16</sup> Many pinpoint factors that entrenched negative stereotypes of tattoo wearers.<sup>17</sup> Pitts focuses on the pathologizing of tattooing by the scientific community in her book *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification* (2003). Mifflin highlights a hepatitis scare as the final straw that broke societal tolerances of tattoos. In *Tattooed: The Sociogenesis of a Body Art* (2003), sociologist Michael Atkinson argues that body ink became deeply stigmatized when ostracized social groups increasingly adopted tattooing as subcultural totems of belonging. While many scholars argue that tattooing practices moved to the fringes of 'respectable' society in the 1950s and 1960s, they frequently overlook the pervading influences of social norms on tattoo trends within 'deviant' subcultures. To further existing literature, I explore the impact of social conventions on tattooing practices and vice versa, and demonstrate how the meanings of body ink took a negative turn in this period.

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<sup>15</sup> Victoria Pitts, "'Reclaiming' the Female Body: Embodied Identity Work, Resistance and the Grotesque," *Body & Society* 4:3 (1998): 80.

<sup>16</sup> See Michael Atkinson, *Tattooed: The Sociogenesis of a Body Art* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 41-42, Beverly Yuen Thompson, *Covered in Ink: Tattoos, Women, and the Politics of the Body* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 34, Clinton Sanders, *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 2, and Christine Braunberger, "Revolting Bodies: The Monster Beauty of Tattooed Women," *NWSA* 12 (2) 2000: 1, 14.

<sup>17</sup> Atkinson, *Tattooed*, 41-42.

Many scholars define the 1970s and 1980s as pivotal decades in the history of American tattooing and stress contextual elements that influenced the meanings of tattoos. Most highlight the increasingly popular American values of self-expression and individuality, and the emergence of identity groups that challenged long-standing conventions of gender, race, and class. In *Bodies of Inscription*, DeMello identifies individual self-awareness as a distinctly middle-class ideal that altered the meanings of tattoos in these decades. She links self-expression to consumerism and traces the “superficial” efforts of many young, urban professionals to reframe the tattoo as a highbrow “sign of status.”<sup>18</sup> In *Covered in Ink: Tattoos, Women, and the Politics of the Body* (2014), sociologist Beverly Yuen Thompson links the changing meanings of tattoos to “the media, music subcultures, and social protest movements.”<sup>19</sup> She attributes the popularity of body ink among women to second-wave feminism, arguing that “self-expression and identity politics were central to the women’s movements, and tattooing provided the perfect outlet.”<sup>20</sup> Mifflin likewise attributes the revival of tattoos at the time to feminist rejections of “Barbie doll” beauty ideals and argues that tattoo trends reflected the “alternative” values of the new clientele.<sup>21</sup>

The literature generally concludes that American tattooing practices “normalized” in the 1970s and 1980s, but scholars often simplify the complex relationship between tattoos and enduring stigmas.<sup>22</sup> My research shows that although tattooing practices expanded to more socially acceptable groups during this time, widely held gender, race, and class ideals continued to direct tattoo trends and allowed culturally assertive ink wearers to, at least partially, refute negative stereotypes. In addition to the mentioned scholarship, my analysis incorporates deviant body and

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<sup>18</sup> Margo DeMello, *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community* (N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000), 3, 16.

<sup>19</sup> Thompson, *Covered in Ink*, 34.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>21</sup> Margot Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo* (New York: Powerhouse Books, 1997), 27-29.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

subculture theories to better understand the connections between the fluctuating meanings of tattoos and social understandings of deviance.

French philosopher Michel Foucault's canonical influence on understandings of bodies buttresses my study of twentieth-century American tattoo history. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977), Foucault outlines the relationship between knowledge and power, social methods of subjugation, and both conscious and subconscious self-regulation according to ideals of normativity. Foucault identifies the body as the primary site of social control and the nexus of power relations because it is "directly involved in a political field."<sup>23</sup> He discusses the processes by which individuals become mechanized units of the political anatomy and tools used in the establishment and perpetuation of power relations. In *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays* (1977), Foucault states that bodies remain "totally imprinted by history," an argument that undergirds my examination of the factors that contributed to the shifting meanings of tattoos.<sup>24</sup> Within a Foucauldian framework, tattoos reflect a subjectification to power mechanisms that propagate ideals of normalcy and deviance, and his theories can be applied to explain why tattooing practices in twentieth-century America commonly supported gender, race, and class norms.

In Foucault's theory, power-based social divisions necessitate regulated spaces, such as we find in the circus freak show, to control and conceal abnormal bodies. Pitts channels Foucault in her sociological analyses, *In the Flesh*. She explains that people cannot "freely or limitlessly shape their own bodies and identities" because we live within and thus are "inscribed by...power

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<sup>23</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), 25.

<sup>24</sup> Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays*, ed. D. Bouchard (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), 148.

relations.”<sup>25</sup> The history of American tattooing practices certainly supports readings of inked bodies as regulated by hegemonic social structures, but my research requires further theoretical base to show how tattoos also destabilize norms.

Foucault’s later works, specifically his seminars in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (1988) and his interviews in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (1997), present “a critical philosophy” concerning “the conditions and the indefinite possibilities of transforming the subject, of transforming ourselves.”<sup>26</sup> He reflects quasi-optimistically about “the possibility of resistance” and the “space of freedom we can still enjoy” within discursive power structures.<sup>27</sup> He investigates “practices of the self” as exercises “of the self on the self by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself” to “attain a certain state of perfection or happiness.”<sup>28</sup> That is, in sociologist Steve Garlick’s words, through “the will to transgression and transformation,” an individual can create his or her life “as a Foucauldian work of art.”<sup>29</sup> Along this line of thinking, tattoos signify a struggle against “mobile, reversible, and unstable” power systems and provide outlets for individual “liberation.”<sup>30</sup> However, Foucault’s conceptions of freedom do not posit it as existing outside of hegemonic power, which he explains “comes from everywhere” rather than from “an institution or a structure.”<sup>31</sup> Foucault instead argues that “the possibility of self-determinism” occurs only within “social mechanisms [and] forms of repression and constraint.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Victoria Pitts, *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 5.

<sup>26</sup> Michel Foucault, “Subjectivity and Truth,” in *The Politics of Truth* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1997), 179.

<sup>27</sup> Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, et al. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 11, and Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: New Press, 1997), 292.

<sup>28</sup> Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 282, and Foucault, *Technologies of the Self*, 4.

<sup>29</sup> Steve Garlick, “The Beauty of Friendship: Foucault, Masculinity and the Work of Art,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 28:5 (2002): 567.

<sup>30</sup> Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 292.

<sup>31</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge*, trans. R. Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998), 63.

<sup>32</sup> Michel Foucault, “An Aesthetics of Existence,” in *Foucault Live: Interviews, 1961-1984*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Lysa Hochroth and John Johnston (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989), 452.

This element of Foucault's theories can explain why tattoos as acts of deviance often conformed to and perpetuated long-standing social norms.

Many scholars of American tattoo history echo Foucault's optimism concerning the individual's ability to reclaim the body from imposed normativity.<sup>33</sup> However, my work emphasizes the symbiotic relationship between individual freedoms and power structures as mirrored by that of tattooing practices and understandings of deviance. For this project, a Foucauldian foundation illuminates how social norms and body ink practices interact and influence each other. Furthermore, I engage subculture theory to demonstrate how the meanings of tattoos fluctuate depending largely on the social group to which the wearer belongs, in conjunction with the tattoo's design and function.

In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), Dick Hebdige examines British punk fashion and its diffusion into mainstream society. He explains that "the meaning of subculture...begins with a crime against the natural order [and] ends in the construction of a style [that] signals a Refusal."<sup>34</sup> Hebdige's mapping of how subcultural signs of deviance enter the "commodity form" as "mass-produced objects" lays the framework for my analysis of tattoos as fluid symbols.<sup>35</sup> He shows how mainstream groups often appropriate certain styles of marginalized groups as in-trend fashions and alter the significance of subcultural signs for their own purposes. My work employs Hebdige's theories to show how the tattoo's meanings changed depending on the socio-economic status of wearers, who experienced varying levels of public acceptance as a result.

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<sup>33</sup> For one, English and Gender Studies professor Jennifer Putzi argues that individuals can resist "victimization and objectification" by the complex web of social power relations through body modification practices. See Jennifer Putzi, *Identifying Marks: Race, Gender, and the Marked Body in Nineteenth-Century America* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 156.

<sup>34</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen & Co, 1979), 3.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

Several scholars of American tattoo history evoke Hebdige's theories in their analyses. Victoria Pitts argues that some individuals embraced the negative stigmas surrounding tattoos to "stage a symbolic rebellion and create a subcultural style."<sup>36</sup> She states that tattoos allowed wearers to "express social disaffection, establish one's own individual, unique identity...and [create] bonds to others."<sup>37</sup> Michael Atkinson argues that tattoos infiltrated popular culture in the 1970s and 1980s because "the body and its modification were commodified."<sup>38</sup> He expands Hebdige's discussion of a style's commodity form when he compares tattoos to items in a supermarket – shoppers can choose products that reflect their class identity and its associated norms and values.<sup>39</sup>

This thesis furthers the works of Atkinson and Pitts by exploring how some social groups selectively welcomed the tattoo's historical associations with deviance yet reframed long-standing stigmas to suit their own ideologies. I use the theories of Foucault and Hebdige, as well as the rich scholarship on the topic, to frame my interpretations and expose the connections between the social status of the tattoo wearer, the tattoo's aesthetic, and the level of social acceptance.

### **Chapter Overview and Evidence**

The first chapter begins with the introduction of tattoos to America and then examines the relationship of tattoos with deviance and normalcy in the 1920s and 1930s. Colonialism brought tattoos to the Western world, and nineteenth-century social elites appropriated the fashionable "art of the savage" as signs of wealth and worldliness.<sup>40</sup> However, the creation of an electric tattoo machine in 1891 opened the practice to lower classes, and much of the American elite then shied away from tattoos as criminals, rowdy sailors, and sex workers began to flaunt body ink. The

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<sup>36</sup> Pitts, *In the Flesh*, 5.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

<sup>38</sup> Atkinson, *Tattooed*, 49.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-51.

<sup>40</sup> "Tattooing is a Fad: Art of the Savage Gains Favor with Gentle Folk," *Winona Republican-Herald (WRH)*, Feb. 21, 1903, 4.

works of criminologist Cesare Lombroso and his successors in the early 1900s entrenched associations between tattoos, atavism, and innate degeneracy, and reaffirmed existing class- and race-based tensions. Tattooing practices that followed gendered rules nonetheless continued to enjoy some social acceptance, and tattoo trends among middle- and upper-class white men and women exposed the public to tattooed bodies in ways that supported rather than challenged social norms.

Sources for the thesis include ethnographic studies, which detailed the various meanings of tattoos in this period. Historian Albert Parry's *Tattoo: Secrets of a Strange Art* (1933) provided an account of tattooing trends and revealed tensions and contradictions in the general public's understandings of body ink. Many contemporary sources shared Parry's views of tattoos as tokens of "anti-social" tendencies, specifically criminality and sexual deviance.<sup>41</sup> Parry's research on the motivations of tattoo participants shed light on common practices, as well as on the varying receptions of tattooed bodies both in public spaces and freak shows.

Personal memoirs also detailed tattooing practices at the time. George Burchett, a tattooist in England and America for over fifty years, shared his professional experiences tattooing sailors, criminals, society women, and circus performers in *Memoirs of a Tattooist* (1958). He thoroughly described the impact of social norms on tattooing practices and exposed the inner workings of his trade. He often perpetuated the negative stigmas that shrouded his career path, specifically in his complaints that most tattooists lacked "a professional style" and practiced "the cruder kind of tattooing...in the slums."<sup>42</sup> Newspaper, magazines, and interviews with both tattooed and non-

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<sup>41</sup> Albert Parry, *Tattoo: Secrets of a Strange Art* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1933), 107. Parry moved to America from Russia in 1921 to earn a PhD in History from the University of Chicago.

<sup>42</sup> George Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, ed. Peter Leighton (London: Oldbourne Book Co., 1958), 136, 185.

tattooed Americans substantiated the accounts of Parry and Burchett and exposed the era's contradictory social attitudes towards body ink.

With some exceptions, negative stigmas largely tainted many people's perceptions of tattooed bodies in the 1920s and 1930s. Interestingly, tattooed circus acts peaked in popularity in these decades, and large audiences marveled at heavily-tattooed spectacles. From the 1920s on, tattooed women overshadowed men on freak show stages, and their bodies conveyed conflicting messages of conventional femininity and abhorrent deviance. Most circus performers used captivity narratives to exploit white Americans' fears of contamination and defilement by racial inferiors, but women's tales added elements of sexual violation that further complicated the meanings of their tattooed bodies. I argue that circus women, like Betty Broadbent and Anna Gibbons, supported and challenged social norms in their behavior, aesthetic, sexualization, and tattoo imagery, in more complex ways than tattooed circus men did.

From interviews with circus performers, I reconstruct their daily experiences within a defined subculture of social outcasts.<sup>43</sup> Employment contracts and promotional materials reveal that the circus world stood somewhat apart from 'respectable' society yet, in many regards, remained bound to normative ideals of race, class, and gender. Discourse used in newspaper and magazine articles recorded conflicting public perceptions of tattooed performers and highlighted the social tensions triggered by their appearances.

As mentioned, Leonard "Stoney" St. Clair recounted his experiences as a tattooed circus performer during the 1920s and 1930s in *Stoney Knows How: Life as a Tattoo Artist* (1981). Rheumatic fever crippled St. Clair as a child and rendered him wheelchair-bound for life, and his physical disability amplified his transgressive skin. He spoke from the standpoints of "born freak"

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<sup>43</sup> It is important to note that most of these interviews were published by popular presses (newspapers, magazines) for particular purposes and thus not transcribed in full.

and “made freak,” and exposed how both were treated by normative, able-bodied Americans during this era.<sup>44</sup> In addition to St. Clair’s insights, I draw on the observations of Burchett, who tattooed many circus performers in the 1920s and 1930s, such as the Great Omi, and recounted aspects of circus life that remained subjugate to social norms.

The second chapter explores how tattooing became primarily associated with dangerous and immoral characters in the 1950s and 1960s. After a brief tattoo revival in WWII, the public’s exposure to tattooed bodies diminished and public interest in freak shows declined. Stigmatized groups, such as street gangs, biker gangs, and sex workers, became the main groups to continue the practice in America in this period, and early twentieth-century linkages between tattoos and criminal behavior resurfaced and gained public support. In this chapter, I aim to show the continued influence of social norms during the period when tattoos were judged most ‘deviant,’ and to detail the general social context from which tattooing practices launched into mainstream culture during the 1970s.

In the 1950s and 1960s, despite the stigmas, the body ink of so-called “slummers” did not escape the influences of social norms.<sup>45</sup> Men’s tattoos conveyed clear messages of heteronormative masculinity, and women remained largely excluded from the subculture. As in the early 1900s, tattoos again came under the scientific gaze, and the growing authority of criminology,

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<sup>44</sup> W. Gresham, *Monster Midway* (New York: Rinehart, 1948), 24-28, noted the distinction between “born freaks,” “made freaks,” and “novelty acts.” According to these classifications, “born freaks” had a physical anomaly that made them unusual (such as Siamese twins or limbless people), “made freaks” rendered themselves unusual (such as tattooed performers), and “novelty acts” displayed an unusual performance (such as swallowing swords or charming snakes). Gresham neglected to mention “the racial freaks,” who were not physically deviant in the context of their own culture, but whose presence in the United States as examples of primitiveness served as the basis for their display. For further discussion of these classifications, see Leonard Cassuto, ““What an object he would have made of me!”: Tattooing and the Racial Freak in Melville’s *Typee*,” in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, 241-245, A.W. Stencell, *Circus and Carnival Ballyhoo: Sideshow Freaks, Juggers and Blade Box Queens* (Toronto, ECW Press, 2010), 29-35, and Robert Bogdan, “The Social Construction of Freaks,” in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, 28-29. For further discussion of St. Clair’s physical disability, see St. Clair, *Stoney Knows How*, xii.

<sup>45</sup> Samuel M. Steward, *Bad Boys and Tough Tattoos: A Social History of the Tattoo with Gangs, Sailors, and Street-Corner Punks 1950-1965* (New York/London: The Haworth Press, 1990), 176.

psychology, and sociology perpetuated long-standing stereotypes. A hepatitis outbreak in New York in the 1950s led authorities to target tattooing businesses and clientele as social dangers and spurred anti-tattoo legislation.

Some tattooists described the conditions of the practice during its historical low point. In *New York City Tattoo: The Oral History of an Urban Art* (1997), Michael McCabe interviewed two dozen tattooists, such as Edward “Crazy Eddie” Funk, who began their careers as apprentices in the 1950s. Many recounted the unsanitary practices of tattoo shops and cast the trade then as a competitive and isolated milieu in which men vied for power and reputation. St. Clair corroborated these accounts and outlined his struggles during the ‘dark ages,’ remembering wistfully “I lived better when I was in show business.”<sup>46</sup> Samuel Steward, a tattooist in Chicago and Oakland for eighteen years, captured the tattoo subculture at the time in *Bad Boys and Tough Tattoos: A Social History of the Tattoo with Gangs, Sailors, and Street-Corner Punks 1950-1965* (1990).<sup>47</sup> This insider’s perspective perpetuated the derogatory class and gender stereotypes that engulfed his trade and designated most tattooed men as “low-class...bums” that “really needed a bath” and women clients mainly as “tramps” or “dykes.”<sup>48</sup>

The final chapter of the thesis examines the return of middle- and upper-class Americans to the practice in the 1970s and 1980s and the concurrent push for the tattoo’s redefinition as art. The ‘Now Generation’ professionalized the trade and distinguished themselves from the stigmatized tattoo subcultures of the 1950s and 1960s. Young tattooists, often with formal art training, banded together in official organizations for the first time in the history of American

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<sup>46</sup> St. Clair, *Stoney Knows How*, 59.

<sup>47</sup> Steward earned a PhD in English from Ohio State University in 1927 and held teaching posts at various universities until the late 1940s, when he left academia to pursue a tattooing career under the name Phil Sparrow. In the 1960s, he began writing and publishing homosexual pornographic novels under the pen name Phil Andros. For more information on Steward’s life, see Justin Spring, *Secret Historian: The Life and Times of Samuel Steward, Professor, Tattoo Artist, and Sexual Renegade* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2010).

<sup>48</sup> Steward, *Bad Boys and Tough Tattoos*, 95, 127.

tattooing. These collectives established trade standards that stressed sanitation and artistic skill to combat stereotypes of tattoo practitioners as dirty and dangerous. Countercultures of the late 1960s used tattoos to express central ideologies of individualism and nonconformity. Celebrities, most notably Janis Joplin, proudly donned tattoos in front of large audiences and reframed tattoos as symbols of personal liberation.

Tattoo-specific publications at this time educated the public about industry protocols, and tattoo conventions provided opportunities for large crowds to celebrate tattoos as legitimate art. Mainstream culture largely accepted the redefinition of tattoos as “as American as baseball and apple pie,” and tattoos appeared in museums, art galleries, and academic literature.<sup>49</sup> At this point, body ink became a standard commodity in American consumer culture. Interestingly, despite tattoo enthusiasts’ claims to individualism, social norms continued to sway customers towards specific images, sizes, and locations that supported heteronormative, white American values.

The 1970s and 1980s offer an abundance of sources that can be used to reconstruct the tattoo’s status in mainstream society. Trade magazines, books, and articles redefined tattoos as professional ‘body art’ and practitioners as ‘artists.’ Tattoo literature often featured interviews with well-known tattooists, such as Lyle Tuttle, and conveyed a new interest in tattoo histories and practices. Tattoo advocates reclaimed some elements of the tattoo’s historical link to rebellion as their own legacy to legitimize the trade at the time.

Memoirs and books of tattooists reflected the era’s emphases on professionalism and artistic self-expression. Joseph O’Sullivan, a tattooist known as Spider Webb, released two popular books, *Heavily Tattooed Men and Women* (1976) and *Pushing Ink: The Fine Art of Tattooing* (1979). Both traced the history of tattoos in America and identified the public’s “ignorance” as the

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<sup>49</sup> “Tattoos are the trend that stays with you,” *Star News*, Sept. 21, 1986, 18.

key reason for the trade's negative reputations.<sup>50</sup> Webb focused his efforts on reframing tattoos as art and opened *Pushing Ink* with Oscar Wilde's instruction that "one should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art."<sup>51</sup> Yet, Webb stressed differences in men's and women's tattoo imagery, size, and location that implicitly perpetuated gendered tattooing practices.

Unlike Webb, St. Clair's memoirs did not promote the professionalization of the trade and instead showed that tensions among tattoo practitioners became more defined in this period. In *Stoney Knows How*, St. Clair expressed hostility towards the new generation of tattooists because, he claimed, the "pork-and beaners...want to make themselves into gods" by reclassifying tattoos as refined, upper-class, artistic endeavors.<sup>52</sup> He admonished Spider Webb for gaining popularity after he "put out that book of his with a lot of old pictures in it [*Heavily Tattooed Men and Women*]," explaining that "it's that [kind of] glorification that bothers me the most."<sup>53</sup>

Cultural historian Clinton Sanders' book *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing* (1989) provides invaluable material on tattoo trends, increased professionalism, and widespread receptions of tattoos in the 1970s and 1980s. He presented a decade of surveys, interviews and observations from his interactions with tattooists, their clientele, and non-tattooed members of the public, and detailed the daily experiences of tattooed bodies. Webb's and St. Clair's memoirs offer insider's perspectives on the fluctuating meanings of tattoos at the time, and Sanders' research complements these sources with a rigorous methodological approach.

Like many others, St. Clair's livelihood depended largely on popular perceptions of tattoos and their wearers, and he experienced changes in the meanings of tattoos throughout the twentieth

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<sup>50</sup> Spider Webb, *Heavily Tattooed Men and Women*, ed. Spider Webb (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), ix.

<sup>51</sup> Spider Webb, *Pushing Ink: The Fine Art of Tattooing* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979), iv.

<sup>52</sup> St. Clair, *Stoney Knows How*, 64.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

century. He made a small fortune in the circus in the 1920s and 1930s, struggled to find employment in the 1950s and 1960s, and became glorified for his participation in American tattooing history in the 1970s and 1980s. My comparison of these distinct time periods shows how body ink both supported and destabilized social norms, and argues that the meanings of tattoos and concepts of deviance maintained a reciprocal relationship. Even today, the uses of tattoos as tokens of criminal affiliation relegate them to the fringes of 'respectable' society while their application as artistic self-expression grants them a valued position in mainstream culture. This thesis explains that the tattoo's fluctuations between social rejection and favor in twentieth-century American history rested principally on the appearance and function of the tattoo and the social position of the inked body in the Foucauldian grid of power relations.

## **Chapter One – Tattoo Practices and Spaces in the 1920s and 1930s**

*One should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art.*

- Oscar Wilde (1894)

The research presented in this chapter shows how, in the early twentieth century, the public's views of tattoos as deviant or acceptable shifted based on the demographic niche of the wearer and the function of the design itself. Heteronormative tattooing practices among middle- and upper-class men and women generally received more favorable reactions than those by lower-class and criminal subcultures. This supports the Foucauldian model of power relations, as socially-valued groups often practiced tattooing in ways that supported American traditions of patriotism, heteronormativity, and racial advantage. The status of the tattooed body, as well as the design aesthetic and function, affected the meanings of tattoos and directly influenced widespread understandings of body ink.

Colonialism first exposed the Western world to the tattooed bodies of South Pacific tribesmen during the late 1700s, and European and American sailors quickly “bastardized” native tattooing rituals.<sup>54</sup> During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, tattoos enjoyed favor as marks of wealth and worldliness among the upper classes of Western society. Historian Albert Parry explained in his 1933 book *Tattoo: Secrets of a Strange Art* that “the roster of tattooed rulers and their courtiers” increased in the 1880s and 1890s, and newspapers confirmed that tattooing

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<sup>54</sup> Jocelyn Camacho, “The Tattoo: A Mark of Subversion, Deviance, or Mainstream Self-Expression?” (MA Diss. University of South Florida, 2013), 1.

practices attracted patronage from “distinguished people.”<sup>55</sup> Tattooist George Burchett stated that his career brought him “in close contact with the rich and mighty.”<sup>56</sup>

European tattoo trends spread to America in the late nineteenth century, and Parry estimated that by 1897 “three-quarters of the [elite men and women] in America were tattooed.”<sup>57</sup> Some chastised the upper classes because they mimicked “frivolous” European fashion trends.<sup>58</sup> For one, New York socialite Ward McAllister expressed his “genuine disgust” of the fad when he called English society men who acquired tattoos after the Prince of Wales displayed his own body ink “a flock of sheep driven by their master.”<sup>59</sup> This shows that tattoos received some negative reactions, but many in the upper echelons of American society accepted tattoos as signs of worldliness and exposure to the practice’s ‘primitive’ roots.

Sociologist Derek John Roberts argues that tattoos signified “one’s knowledge of foreign cultures” from a well-travelled and leisurely lifestyle and thus indicated the wealth of the wearer.<sup>60</sup> Contemporary evidence substantiates Roberts’ interpretations. For example, British tattooist Tom Riley stated that “the present fancy for being tattooed...mainly exists among men who have traveled much,” and in his view society women followed suit “for want of something better to do” than spend free time “in the hands of her coiffeur.”<sup>61</sup> Riley travelled to California in 1903 “under

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<sup>55</sup> Parry, *Tattoo*, 89, and “Royalty and Tattoo: Distinguished People Decorated with Needle,” *The Victoria Advocate*, July 5, 1899. For further information on tattooed royalties, see also “Tattooing is a Fad,” *WRH*, Feb. 21, 1903, 4, Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, 99-102, and Hanns Ebensten, *Pierced Hearts and True Love: An Illustrated History of the Origin and Development of European Tattooing and a Survey of its Present State* (London: Derek Verschoyle Ltd., 1953), 29. Tattooed persons included British King Edward VII, his brother Alfred Duke of Edinburgh, Russian Czar Nicholas II, German Kaiser Wilhelm, and Lady Randolph Churchill, who reportedly had a snake tattooed around her wrist.

<sup>56</sup> Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, 63.

<sup>57</sup> Parry, *Tattoo*, 103.

<sup>58</sup> Ward McAllister, quoted in Parry, *Tattoo*, 107.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 107-108.

<sup>60</sup> Derek John Roberts, “Secret Ink: Tattoo’s Place in Contemporary American Culture,” *The Journal of American Culture* 35:2 (2012): 154. See also Alan Govenar, “The Changing Image of Tattooing in American Culture,” *Journal of American Culture* 5:1 (1982): 30-37.

<sup>61</sup> “Royalty and Tattoo: Distinguished People Decorated with Needle,” *The Victoria Advocate*, July 5, 1899.

contract to leaders of fashion” but refused to name these “society folk” because “to do so would be violating a professional secret.”<sup>62</sup> Tattoo statistics from this era are unreliable because, unlike the Prince of Wales, few tattoo wearers publicly displayed their body ink.<sup>63</sup> This may have been due to the tattoo’s negative associations with the Western world’s perceived racial inferiors. Sociologist Katherine Irwin argues that, at that time, tattoos on white bodies carried undeniable racial undertones because in “American society, light, clear skin [was] a long-enduring beauty ideal” and “dark skin [was] a metaphor for evil.”<sup>64</sup> Advertisements from the era showed the emphasis on whiteness and racial purity. (Figure 1) From this, we may infer the racialized origins of negative stigmas surrounding body ink in American history. Tattoos not only derived from non-white and thus ‘uncivilized’ cultures, but also rendered the wearer non-white and thus excluded from groups with preferential pigmentation. Nonetheless, many members of the American elite continued to discreetly mark their bodies with tattoos as symbols of worldly exposure.

Western imperial activity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries strengthened tensions between “civilized white folk” and non-white cultures.<sup>65</sup> Many Americans believed that tattooing as an archaic practice would disappear as ‘primitive’ cultures became ‘civilized’ through contact with the modern world.<sup>66</sup> The roots of tattooing practices, in conjunction with Christian, capitalist expansion, may explain the white, upper-class appreciation of what gender theorist Christine Braunberger calls a “colonialist chic” style.<sup>67</sup> However, as the following paragraphs will

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<sup>62</sup> “Will Tattoo Society Folk: London Expert Arrives in New York Under Contract to Leaders of Fashion,” *San Francisco Call*, vol. 97, no. 2, Dec. 2, 1904.

<sup>63</sup> For example, newspapers detailed Lady Rudolph Churchill’s snake tattoo but no visual evidence exists to corroborate reports. Churchill herself remained aloof when questioned about her alleged tattooing practices. See “Royalty and Tattoo: Distinguished People Decorated with Needle,” *The Victoria Advocate*, July 5, 1899, and “Tattooing is a Fad,” *WRH*, Feb. 21, 1903.

<sup>64</sup> Katherine Irwin, “Saints and Sinners: Elite Tattoo Collectors and Tattooists as Positive and Negative Deviants,” *Sociological Spectrum* 23:1 (2003): 35.

<sup>65</sup> Parry, *Tattoo*, 59.

<sup>66</sup> “Carved Faces: South Sea Inhabitants and their Peculiar Ideas of Beauty,” *South Side Signal*, March 6, 1897, 1.

<sup>67</sup> Braunberger, “Revoluting Bodies,” 6.

show, the exotic ‘otherness’ of the tattoo’s meaning lost appeal among elites as tattoos increasingly became “signs of deviance” when stigmatized American social groups began to wear body ink.<sup>68</sup>

### **Expansion of the Tattoo Market**

The invention of the electric tattoo machine in 1891 meant that tattoos as fashion items no longer eluded lower-class Americans’ buying power.<sup>69</sup> Ethnohistorian Hanns Ebensten stated in his 1953 *Pierced Hearts and True Love* that “the commercialization and reduction of tattooing fees which made it so popular amongst the lower orders ruined it as an attraction or fashion amongst the wealthier, more discerning sets.”<sup>70</sup> Although the early mechanization of tattooing processes “was a crude affair” that produced low-quality images, technological advancements spread the practice among various, and sometimes unsavory, social groups and, according to sociologist Josh Adams, “cemented [the tattoo’s] status as an indicator of deviance.”<sup>71</sup>

Newspapers and magazines encapsulated the growing stigmas around tattoos. An 1896 *Los Angeles Herald* article discussed “certain young bloods” who made “fools of themselves” with tattoo marks that were “horrible to gaze upon.”<sup>72</sup> This article invoked prominent concepts of racial superiority to sway the American public from tattoos and even contended that the native Maoris in New Zealand denounced “the ugliness and torture of this practice.”<sup>73</sup> The author intended to shame readers from practicing tattoos through comparison with a non-white, thus inferior, ‘other.’ The subtext read: even ‘primitive’ groups that originally wore body ink have begun to view the practice negatively as their cultures become more ‘advanced’ through contact with the Western

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<sup>68</sup> Adams, “Marked Difference,” 270. See also Jill A. Fisher, “Tattooing the Body, Marking the Culture,” *Body & Society* 8:4 (2002): 16.

<sup>69</sup> See “Tattooing is the Fad,” *Lewiston Saturday Journal*, Jan. 1, 1898, for reference to automation of tattoo gun by New York tattoo artist Samuel O’Reilly.

<sup>70</sup> Ebensten, *Pierced Hearts and True Love*, 28.

<sup>71</sup> Adams, “Marked Difference,” 270.

<sup>72</sup> “Tattooed Young Swells: A Silly Fad That is Thriving in London,” *LA Herald*, vol. 26, no. 25, Oct. 25, 1896.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

world. Numerous articles cited the works of late nineteenth-century criminologists that linked tattoos to atavism and strengthened the connection between body ink, race, and criminality.<sup>74</sup>

Following the “short-lived flirtation of...American elites” with body ink, the growing popularity of tattoos among lower classes sparked investigations into the relation between tattoos and degeneracy.<sup>75</sup> Many scholars argue that the research of Cesare Lombroso, the internationally-famous Italian criminologist and physician, “firmly established [tattooing] as a...deviant practice in the public mind.”<sup>76</sup> Lombroso advanced the notion that an individual’s physical traits indicated his or her moral character in his 1899 work *Crime: Its Causes and Remedies*.<sup>77</sup> Along this line of thinking, “an evolutionarily regressive specimen,” such as a criminal or “degraded” woman (i.e. a prostitute), practiced tattooing primarily as “the exterior sign of inward moral obtuseness” and body ink thus indicated danger to society at large.<sup>78</sup>

Scientific confirmations of the links between tattoos, the practice’s racialized origins, and its perceived deviance square with Foucault’s earlier notions of power relations in that they “have an immediate hold upon [the body]; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it...to emit signs.”<sup>79</sup> As tattooing practices crossed class lines, body ink became increasingly affirmed as a deviant characteristic. Journalism perpetuated these negative stigmas, and numerous newspaper articles referred to tattoos as visual signs of “a criminal tendency,” “a form of insanity,” and

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<sup>74</sup> See “Tattooing is the Fad,” *Lewiston Saturday Journal*, Jan. 1, 1898, “Tattooing is a Fad,” *WRH*, Feb. 21, 1903, 4, and “A Fad for Tattoos,” *Herald Democrat*, Feb. 26, 1895.

<sup>75</sup> Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 17-18.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 18. See also Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 46, and Atkinson, *Tattooed*, 24-26.

<sup>77</sup> Cesare Lombroso, *Crime: Its Causes and Remedies*, trans. Henry P. Horton (New Jersey: Patterson Smith, 1911), first published in 1899 in Italian.

<sup>78</sup> Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero, *Criminal Woman, the Prostitute, and the Normal Woman*, trans. Nicole Hahn Rafter and Mary Gibson (N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 116-120, first published in 1893 in Italian. See also M. Gibson, *Born to Crime: Cesare Lombroso and the Origins of Biological Criminology* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Press, 2002). The works of Austrian cultural theorist Adolf Loos and French criminologist Alexandre Lacassagne strengthened Lombroso’s connection between tattoos and delinquency. For reference to “Dr. Lacassagne’s book, *Ornament and Crime*, which was published in 1881,” see Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, 85. See also Kosut, “Tattoo Narratives,” 80-82, and Braunberger, “Revolting Bodies,” 10.

<sup>79</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 25.

“degeneracy.”<sup>80</sup> Although certain members of academic communities, such as historian Albert Parry, challenged Lombroso’s theories, the connection between tattoos and deviance nevertheless endured.<sup>81</sup> Ward McAllister identified tattooing as “the most vulgar and barbarous habit,” and by and large Americans came to share his belief that “slum-dwellers, toughs, sailors, and other plebs constitute the majority of the tattoo fans.”<sup>82</sup> By the 1920s and 1930s, many contemporary sources presented tattooing as the activity of marginalized social groups and swayed the public from participation.<sup>83</sup>

Outcast groups, however, quickly adopted tattoos as symbols of subcultural belonging and created common images for specific messages. For example, Parry claimed that thieves often received a dagger tattoo with the words “Death Before Dishonor” to show their allegiance to lawlessness.<sup>84</sup> Burchett confessed that he tattooed law-breakers but held that body ink “has never been more frequent among professional criminals than among honest men.”<sup>85</sup> He explained that “some men who had acquired tattoos as sailors, soldiers, or artisans, had later chosen a life of crime,” which resulted in “the fallacy that ‘all criminals are tattooed.’”<sup>86</sup> Burchett testified that tattooed people did not necessarily participate in criminal groups but popular media, according to

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<sup>80</sup> “Tattooing is the Fad,” *Lewiston Saturday Journal*, Jan. 1, 1898, and “Tattooing is a Fad,” *WRH*, Feb. 21, 1903, 4.

<sup>81</sup> Parry rejected the notion that “people of the modern age and civilized countries tattoo themselves in an atavistic reversion to their primitive criminal type” (*Tattoo*, 1). He countered that “only a small portion of the tattooed today are criminals or even semi-criminals...and primitiveness does not necessarily involve crime” (*Tattoo*, 1). However, Parry supported Lombroso’s work when he discussed the link between tattoos and sex workers. He claimed, “not infrequently prostitutes undergo tattooing” because “tattooing...is in itself a sexual act” (*Tattoo*, 24-25). He posed sexual abnormality as the primitive drive behind women’s tattoos rather than criminal predispositions. In his article “Tattooing Among Prostitutes and Perverts,” *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 3 (1934), he speculated that “prostitutes in America” used tattoos to “give themselves more cause for self-pity...for their sorry fate by undergoing the pain of tattooing” (476-477). He identified “strong masochist-exhibitionist drives” as the motivator behind women’s tattoos and denied innate criminal tendencies (476).

<sup>82</sup> Ward McAllister, quoted in Parry, *Tattoo*, 92-3.

<sup>83</sup> “Tattoo Warning,” *The Watchmen of the Sunrise Trail*, Nov. 26, 1936, 2.

<sup>84</sup> Parry, “Tattooing Among Prostitutes and Perverts,” 478-479.

<sup>85</sup> Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, 75.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 75, 185.

Fenske, “reinforced those assumptions” and perpetuated stereotypes of tattoo wearers as dangers to the moral fabric of American society.<sup>87</sup>

Associations between tattooed women and sex work continued through the 1920s and 1930s. Parry stated that tattooed prostitutes tried to “prove their respectability” with specific images, such as floral embellishments placed “directly under [their] low, narrow, hanging breasts,” but that such attempts were “pathetic” because only “lower category” women undertook the profession.<sup>88</sup> Other sources revealed that even feminine-identified images, such as flowers and butterflies, became signs of a woman’s immoral disposition and legally justified her being abused. For example, the judge of a late-1920s Boston case acquitted two young men charged in the rape of “a young girl of good family” after the defense revealed a photograph of the victim with “a butterfly tattooed on her leg.”<sup>89</sup> Parry admitted that “the two young men were hardly to be praised for their conduct” but ultimately “the girl had been guilty of contributory negligence” because she “misled the men by her tattooed mark into taking her for a loose character.”<sup>90</sup> Sociologists Miliann Kang and Katherine Jones argue that the victim’s tattoo inscribed her as sexually promiscuous despite a physician’s report that confirmed her virginity.<sup>91</sup> In this case, the victim became the defendant, forced to defend her moral character, and in the court’s opinion her tattoo established her guilt, which reveals how tattooed women were largely perceived in 1920s America.

This example shows the power of widely-held stigmas that linked tattooing practices and clientele to depravity, even when physical evidence indicated otherwise. In the Foucauldian framework, the legal system creates, supports, and perpetuates existing power relations that govern

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<sup>87</sup> Fenske, *Tattoos in American Visual Culture*, 2.

<sup>88</sup> Parry, “Tattooing Among Prostitutes and Perverts,” 478, and *Tattoo*, 24-28.

<sup>89</sup> Parry, *Tattoo*, 3. See also Marcia Tucker, “Pssst! Wanna See My Tattoo...” *Ms.* April (1976): 33.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, and Miliann Kang and Catherine Jones, “Why Do People Get Tattoos?” in *Understanding Deviance: Connecting Classical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Tammy L. Anderson (New York: Routledge, 2014), 268. See also Braunberger, “Revolting Bodies,” 4.

deviance and normativity. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that “the discourse of criminology...provide[s] the mechanisms of legal punishment with a justifiable hold not only on offenses, but also on individuals.”<sup>92</sup> As we see in the Boston case, “the judges have...taken to judging something other than crimes.”<sup>93</sup> The victim in this case did not conform to dominant ideals of normative femininity and thus her deviant body became a target for institutional punishment.

For decades, popular media showcased the regret expressed by tattoo wearers to deter others from acquiring body ink. A tattooed young man was quoted in 1914 as stating that he “regrets [his] boyish folly” because the small patriotic image on his forearm “attracts attention” and left him “mortified” and “handicapped.”<sup>94</sup> Over twenty years later, a woman echoed his remorse, saying that she “was very foolish when I had [tattoos] put on.”<sup>95</sup> She explained that her inked arms prevented her from wearing “a decent dress” in public due to the negative reactions she received.<sup>96</sup> The editor replied that this “should be a good lesson and is shared by most of those who indulge in the practice.”<sup>97</sup> These sources indicate the low level of social acceptance experienced by tattoo wearers due to negative stigmas that grew in accordance with the increase of tattooing practices among marginalized groups.

Changed circumstances, most often related to expired romantic relationships, also led to regrets. In a 1922 *New York Herald* article, clients of tattoo removal procedures explained that “the happy times the tattoo marks represent no longer exist and they do not wish to be constantly reminded of past happiness.”<sup>98</sup> Burchett reported that he had to “mend marriages” when a customer

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<sup>92</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 18-19.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-19.

<sup>94</sup> “Regrets Boyish Folly,” *Sausalito News*, no. 3, Jan. 17, 1914.

<sup>95</sup> Letter to Editor, *WRH*, Nov. 4, 1937, 8.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.* For early warnings of tattoo regret, see “Royalty and Tattoo,” *The Victoria Advocate*, July 5, 1899.

<sup>98</sup> Sources presented a cacophony of solutions guaranteed to remove tattoos. One newspaper article claimed that “unsightly tattoo marks” dissolved when rubbed with salt, glycerin, and silver nitrate in a routine procedure performed by dermatologists. See “How to Remove Tattoo Marks,” *Suffolk County News*, Sept. 14, 1923, 12. Dr.

requested to cover or alter an old lover's name.<sup>99</sup> A 1936 article speculated on the declining popularity of body ink among servicemen and concluded that "sailors got tired of running to a tattooer every time they found a new girl."<sup>100</sup> Several sources stressed that "the permanence of tattoos can lead to trouble" and dissuaded audiences from "the contemplated decoration, unless you are willing to bear the consequences."<sup>101</sup> Tattooed bodies largely received negative reactions from members of mainstream American society because, according to Sanders, they "violated appearance norms."<sup>102</sup> However, some tattooing practices among higher-class groups enjoyed moderate social acceptance when they adhered to strict guidelines of function and appearance.

### **Social Tolerance**

Contemporary sources generally promoted the use of tattoos for utilitarian purposes, specifically physical verification. Parry reported that parents tattooed their children as a means of identification, a trend that boomed "each time the newspapers report[ed] an accidental exchange of babies in maternity hospitals."<sup>103</sup> He observed that the height of tattooing minors occurred "in the spring and summer of 1932, at the time the Lindbergh baby was kidnapped."<sup>104</sup> Adults also practiced tattooing for self-identification following the Social Security Law of 1937. (Figure 2) Burchett tattooed many Americans who wanted "to have their number recorded permanently on their skin" because they "did not rely on their memory."<sup>105</sup> Generic designs, such as "a spread

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Clendening, a family physician, observed that "the desire for the removal of tattoo marks is just as popular as the desire to put them on" and spoke of an influx of tattooed patients in search of "a cure." See "Tattoo Mark on Skin can be Removed Now," *WRH*, May 19, 1932, 10. Parry devoted a chapter of his book to the "methods of removal scientifically tested and approved by chemists, physicians, and surgeons." See Parry, *Tattoo*, 145-167. See also "Specialist Claims He Can Remove Tattoos," *New York Herald*, sec. 2, Sept. 3, 1922, 10.

<sup>99</sup> Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, 93-94.

<sup>100</sup> "Tattooing Decline," *WRH*, Sept. 2, 1936, 6. For the superstition that tattooing a lover's name on one's body "guaranteed" future regret, see "Royalty and Tattoo," *The Victoria Advocate*, July 5, 1899.

<sup>101</sup> "Tattoo Warning," *The Watchmen of the Sunrise Trail*, Nov. 26, 1936, 2. See also Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, 94.

<sup>102</sup> Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 2.

<sup>103</sup> Parry, *Tattoo*, 119.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>105</sup> Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, 201.

eagle with the social security number floating from its beak,” became popular at the time.<sup>106</sup> Following Foucauldian theory, this trend may have enjoyed favor because wearers used body ink to support their own entitled positions within power structures and thus normalize their marked differences.

Military personnel used tattoos as identification “in the event of sudden death in a far-off place.”<sup>107</sup> A 1934 newspaper article discussed the benefits of tattoos for wounded or killed soldiers and prompted military authorities to support the practice.<sup>108</sup> A sailor admitted to Parry that he acquired tattoos “so they’ll know me if I get bumped off.”<sup>109</sup> Parry also reported that Frank Graf, a popular Coney Island tattooist, received requests from customers for “identification marks to be placed between their toes.”<sup>110</sup> This discreet location held multiple purposes – it acted as postmortem identification, yet protected the tattoo wearer from public scrutiny and association with negative stereotypes. Many Americans of various social groups used tattoos as physical verification in the 1920s and 1930s, and body ink with this specific function was generally accepted in the public realm because it did not threaten social values. Similarly, normative tattooing practices among white men and women of mid-to-high social status experienced higher levels of acceptance than parallel practices by stigmatized groups.

Tattooing practices among white men at the time often symbolized heteronormative masculinity and ‘all-American’ values.<sup>111</sup> For example, “an anchor” signified a man’s naval career,

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<sup>106</sup> Tacoma Ledger, “Security Tattooing,” *The Ellensburg Capital*, no. 18, ed. 4, May 7, 1937. Interestingly, Burchett criticized utilitarian tattoos: “I disapprove of any tendency to treat the human body as simply a useful thing to put things on. It should be decorated, not crammed with information like an almanac” (201). He emphasized the aesthetic value of tattoos rather than the practicality of permanent ink.

<sup>107</sup> Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, 201. For late nineteenth-century reference to military tattoos as identification, “Tattooed Young Swells,” *LA Herald*, vo. 26, no. 25, Oct. 25, 1896, and “Tattooing is the Fad,” *Lewiston Saturday Journal*, Jan. 1, 1898.

<sup>108</sup> “Tattooing the Army,” *WRH*, Nov. 5, 1934, 8.

<sup>109</sup> Parry, *Tattoo*, 111.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>111</sup> “Tattooing Out of Style,” *The Port Jefferson Echo*, Aug. 28, 1909, 7.

an American flag his patriotism, and “female beauties” his heterosexuality.<sup>112</sup> Parry reported that ninety percent of the American servicemen decorated their arms, chests, and backs with images of “coats of arms, flags, anchors, eagles, female figures, ships, clasped hands, daggers, crosses, bracelets, and hearts.”<sup>113</sup> (Figure 3) Generic images, or “tattoo flash,” hung on the walls of tattoo shops and provided customers with a limited selection of “American work” to choose from.<sup>114</sup> Some tattooists stated that flash designs remained popular among men for decades because they left “no doubt as to one’s masculinity” and identified the wearer as “a red-blooded American man.”<sup>115</sup> Traditional masculine-identified images affirmed a man’s privileged social position in normative, white America.

On the other hand, women who practiced tattoos as permanent makeup also enjoyed high levels of social acceptance. Pitts argues that women’s tattooing practices at the time largely reinforced beauty norms that invoked “hierarchies of ethnicity, race, economic status” and gender, and archival evidence supports her emphasis on the intersectionality of social norms.<sup>116</sup> Permanent makeup, predominantly practiced by affluent white women, denoted wealth because clients required both funds and free time, and signified the wearer’s conformity to ideals of *au naturel* feminine beauty. (Figure 4)

The early twentieth-century tattoo “craze” among well-to-do white women continued for decades and remained fairly static in practice and appearance.<sup>117</sup> According to Braunberger, beauty

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<sup>112</sup> Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, 37, 86.

<sup>113</sup> Parry, *Tattoo*, 85-87. See also Danielle Meyer, “Inked Identity: A Social History of the Tattoo in America: 1900-1950” (PhD Diss. University of Wisconsin, 2010), 16.

<sup>114</sup> Parry, “Tattooing Among Prostitutes,” 479, and *Tattoo*, 76.

<sup>115</sup> Steward, *Bad Boys and Tough Tattoos*, 57, and Tuttle, interview with author, July 5, 2016. See also Pitts, *In the Flesh*, 5, and Rosemary Gallick, “The Tattoo: An American Pop Art Form,” *The Mid-Atlantic Almanac* 5 (1996): 2.

<sup>116</sup> Pitts, *In the Flesh*, 39.

<sup>117</sup> “Society’s Tattoo Craze,” *South Side Signal*, Dec. 5, 1908, 4. For more information on this ‘craze’, see “A Tattoo Artist claims he is able to tattoo a permanently rosy complexion on the face of anyone who will pay the price,” *San Francisco Call*, vol. 87, no. 87, Aug. 26, 1902, “Tattooers Turn Beauty Doctors,” *Los Angeles Herald*, no. 303, Oct. 21, 1919, and “Girl Creator of Tattoo Fad is in LA,” *Los Angeles Herald*, no. 125, March 26, 1920, 30. It is

salons offered “cosmetic procedures” to “add a glow to one’s cheek, an arch to one’s brow, a pout to one’s lips, and for the very brave, the illusion of a few more eyelashes.”<sup>118</sup> A 1919 *Los Angeles Herald* article showcased the “professional tattoo man” who guaranteed the “perpetual bloom of youth [and] a rosy complexion.”<sup>119</sup> Tattooists were “no longer...satisfied with decorating sailors or prize fighters with...national emblems” and incorporated permanent makeup to their repertoires.<sup>120</sup> This article depicted multiple gendered elements at play – men’s traditional tattoo imagery, their general dominance of the practice, and the inclusion of women in the tattoo world under strict pretenses of conventional feminine beauty. Tattoos gained higher levels of social respectability when they reinforced conventional American values, which supports theoretical interpretations of tattoos as controlled expressions of deviance.<sup>121</sup> Many tattoo wearers in these decades marked their bodies in ways that conformed to and perpetuated gender-, race-, and class-based norms, and thus supported their own positions in the Foucauldian grid of power relations.

Contemporary advertisements stressed the practicality of permanent makeup compared to conventional beauty products. Jack Gavett, a San Diego tattooist, bragged to Parry that he could “fix a young lady with a nifty pair of cupid’s lips that won’t come off under any pressure.”<sup>122</sup> A 1927 *St. Petersburg Times* article questioned, “why buy lipsticks when a tattoo gent can give you blushes that will last?”<sup>123</sup> Marketing campaigns often framed the tattoo’s permanence as a plus,

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important to note that the clientele of permanent makeup practices were not exclusively women. Burchett reported occasional instances of men requesting “complexion tattoos” that concealed scars, birthmarks, and black eyes (151-152).

<sup>118</sup> Braunberger, “Revolting Bodies,” 4-5.

<sup>119</sup> “Tattooers Turn Beauty Doctors,” *Los Angeles Herald*, no. 303, Oct. 21, 1919.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 126-131.

<sup>122</sup> Jack Gavett, a San Diego tattooist, quoted in Parry, *Tattoo*, 10.

<sup>123</sup> “Tattooed Lips Latest Style,” *St. Petersburg Times*, vol. 45, no. 162, Nov. 14, 1927, 8. Interestingly, popular makeup brands capitalized on tattoos as hot market items. One brand introduced its “Tattoo” line of lipsticks and advertised, “if you really want excitement, tattoo your lips” because “true to its name...only the color stays.” See “Tattoo” advertisement, in *Herald Journal* (Spartanburg, SC), Mar. 18, 1934, 13. For further mention of this makeup brand, see Parry, *Tattoo*, 12-13.

yet distinguished makeup trends from the tattooing practices of stigmatized social groups through deliberate word choices that appealed to upper-class women.<sup>124</sup>

Braunberger notes that advertisements went to “extravagant lengths” to avoid words that evoked negative stigmas.<sup>125</sup> Burchett remembered that his own ads described “medically supervised complexion treatments” that used “a mechanical process” to “improve the epidermis texture.”<sup>126</sup> He recalled further that “procedures” took place in “salons,” where trained professionals “applied permanent, pink blushes to ladies’ cheeks.”<sup>127</sup> Burchett catered to his upper-class clientele – he consciously conveyed a supportive, safe, and professional demeanor by wearing a white lab coat and “smiling all the time” to, he said, “make my lady clients as comfortable as possible.”<sup>128</sup> (Figure 5) Burchett recalled that the “fortunate recipients” of permanent makeup rarely realized they had been tattooed because popular discourses avoided direct references.<sup>129</sup> By reframing body ink as cosmetic enhancement, upper-class white women deflected negative stigmas of tattooed women as sexually promiscuous. Rather, permanent makeup practices supported ideals of feminine aesthetics and became a favorable tattoo trend in early twentieth-century America.

In summary, tattooing practices among different social groups conveyed varying meanings dependent on the tattoo’s appearance and function and the wearer’s status. Tattoos on lower-class and/or criminal persons were linked to deviance, dirtiness, and danger. Although common tattoo designs among ‘deviant’ subcultures often supported gender norms and ideals of racial superiority,

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<sup>124</sup> Meyer, “Inked Identity,” 10.

<sup>125</sup> Braunberger, “Revolting Bodies,” 4.

<sup>126</sup> Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, 130-136.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

tattoo wearers from these groups rarely experienced social acceptance. Rather, they inspired and perpetuated negative stigmas that, as we shall see, permeated decades of American history. Popular tattoo trends among people of higher social positions similarly affirmed normative racial, class, and gender identities, but these body ink wearers generally enjoyed more social acceptance than their stigmatized counterparts. This shows that the meanings of tattoos and concepts of deviance fluctuated according to the tattoo design and the status of its wearer.

Nonetheless, tattooing practices among favorable social groups gradually declined throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The Depression drained the American population of disposable income for luxury purchases, such as permanent makeup. Charlie Wagner, a famous New York tattooist for over fifty years, explained that the daily struggles of many Americans during the interwar period deflated patriotism and men, servicemen in particular, shied away from tattoos because “the fight’s all out of ‘em.”<sup>130</sup> Public outcry in the 1930s about tattooed minors prompted some states, including New York, to pass age restriction laws on tattooing practices.<sup>131</sup> In 1936, military authorities again introduced legislation, as they had in the early twentieth century, to hinder tattooing practices among servicemen.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Wagner, quoted in Parry, *Tattoo*, 36. See also Govenar, “The Changing Image of Tattooing,” 219.

<sup>131</sup> A brief trend for “couple tattoos” among American teenagers angered middle-class parents. Burchett explained that “quite often...a couple in love desire to have similar tattoos made, or even fragments of a design, halved in such a manner that the two parts form an entity if put together” (83). Parry also reported that, for teenage girls, “acquisition of each transient sweetheart is celebrated by the affixing of his initials to [her] arms or legs” (*Tattoo*, 25). For further discussion of this trend, see Govenar, “The Changing Image of Tattooing,” 221. For information about New York age restrictions, see “N.Y. State Assembly Passes Bill Making It Misdemeanor to Tattoo Children Under 16 Years,” *New York Times*, col. 1, Feb. 21, 1933, 13.

<sup>132</sup> “Tattooing Decline,” *WRH*, Sep. 2, 1936, “Navy Rejects Men with Nude Tattooed on Arm,” *WRH*, Feb. 27, 1937, 13, and “Tattooing on Way Out in the Navy,” *Suffolk County News*, Oct. 22, 1937, 11. Anti-tattoo legislation appeared in previous decades as well but not with the same fervor as in the 1930s. A 1906 newspaper article declared “Navy enlisted men take steps to abolish tattooing” and described the conviction of a Brooklyn tattooist “for mutilating the arms” of young servicemen. See “Navy Enlisted Men Take Steps to Abolish Tattooing,” *San Francisco Call*, vol. 100, no. 69, Aug. 8, 1906. Another article from the same year claimed, “tattoo marking likely to be done away with by sailors.” See “Tattoo Marking Likely to be Done Away with by Sailors,” *WRH*, Aug. 9, 1906. A decade later, anti-tattoo military policies advanced a “tattoo censure for new recruits” in order to “keep risqué views out of the army.” See “Tattoo Censure for New Recruits,” *Madera Tribune*, no. 129, March 31, 1916. The tattoo industry experienced “a sudden death in consequence of the order of Josephus Daniels, Secretary of the Navy,

As tattooing practices reached what contemporary sources called the “lowest ebb” of general public participation in the 1920s and 1930s, tattooed circus attractions peaked in popularity.<sup>133</sup> Using Foucault’s theories of spatial regulation, circus stages can be said to have provided social spaces to contain unfavorable bodies and regulate the boundaries of normal/abnormal. Freak shows presented deviance as spectacle and, as French philosopher Julia Kristeva argues, “the actor and the crowd [were] each in turn simultaneously subject and addressee of the discourse.”<sup>134</sup> Foucault, at least in his early phase, leaves little room for individual resistance to power relations and posits that oppressive social structures ultimately prevail. However, the following examination of tattooed freak shows argues that performers and their acts conformed to *and* destabilized dominant social values, and it maps the general reception and impact of staged inked bodies in conventional American society.

### **Circus Freak Shows**

According to deviant body theorist Rosemarie Garland Thomson, early twentieth-century freak shows complicated “the social, economic, political and ideological structures” of American culture.<sup>135</sup> Performers represented ‘otherness’ and embodied, as feminist theorist Shirley Peterson argues, “what the culture fear[ed] most about itself.”<sup>136</sup> Performance theorist Marvin Carlson and sociologist Michael Atkinson agree that freak shows provided “an unstructured testing ground”

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placing a new restriction against the Navy League of the U.S.” See “Taboo in Tattoo Artists,” *WRH*, Sept. 28, 1917, 10.

<sup>133</sup> Tattooing on Way Out in the Navy,” *Suffolk County News*, Oct. 22, 1937, 11.

<sup>134</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, ed. Leon Roudiez, trans. T. Gora, A. Jardine, and L. Roudiez (New York: Columbia Press), 46.

<sup>135</sup> Rosemarie Garland Thomson, “Introduction: From Wonder to Error – A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity,” in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 4.

<sup>136</sup> Shirley Peterson, “Freaking Feminism: *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* and *Nights at the Circus* as Narrative Freak Shows,” in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 291. See also Leslie Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 25-27. For further discussion of “the Other...as a mirror for the white, Western self, through which we can see ourselves, imagine ourselves differently, critique our social problems, or adorn ourselves in identities that satisfyingly contrast with and complement our own,” see Pitts, *In the Flesh*, 149.

for tensions between binary categories, and allowed boundaries of male/female, beautiful/grotesque, normal/abnormal, to be “explored in a controlled way.”<sup>137</sup> Thomson further argues that the display of deviant bodies in sanctioned spaces “soothe[d] the onlookers’ self-doubt by appearing as their antithesis.”<sup>138</sup> American audiences marveled at “excesses and transgressions” of acceptable appearance, and freak shows, Braunberger argues, determined “where the ‘real’ boundaries are.”<sup>139</sup>

Freak shows demonstrated relationships between space and power.<sup>140</sup> According to Foucault, the compartmentalization of society necessitates spaces for deviance because all public spaces are “structured by power and invested with knowledge.”<sup>141</sup> Early twentieth-century American freak shows were removed from, yet intrinsically bound to, processes of daily life and embodied Foucault’s concepts of “an internal, articulated, and detailed control.”<sup>142</sup> Freak shows made abnormal bodies visible to the culture that banned them from public life and reinforced power structures in ways that made the “total authority” of certain social groups, namely those that adhered to ideals of appearance and behavior, appear “both legitimate and natural.”<sup>143</sup> I go further and argue that, while tattooed circus performers certainly challenged conventional boundaries, social norms continued to influence the lives, performances, and personas of tattooed actors in the

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<sup>137</sup> Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 23. See also Atkinson, *Tattooed*, 36.

<sup>138</sup> Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 65.

<sup>139</sup> Braunberger, “Revolting Bodies,” 12.

<sup>140</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, Part 3: Discipline. For further analysis of self-regulating societies, see Tina Besley and Michael A. Peters, *Subjectivity & Truth: Foucault, Education, and the Culture of Self*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 65.

<sup>141</sup> Besley and Peters, *Subjectivity & Truth*, 79.

<sup>142</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 72.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 72. See also Hebdige, *Subculture*, 16. Interestingly, the classification of space within the circus “inverts the class distinctions of the outside world” because “the outcast freak show performers and carnival workers controlled who was allowed to enter what spaces and under what conditions.” See Fenske, *Tattoos in American Visual Culture*, 67. Spatial power shifted to those ostracized to the margins of polite society and permitted agency within the Foucauldian framework.

dialectic between deviance and normalcy. These concepts interacted on the freak show stage and disturbed the influences of power relations on abnormal bodies.

Freak shows remained popular in America from the late nineteenth century through the 1930s and displayed tattooed bodies alongside those of people with physical abnormalities, such as bearded ladies and limbless entertainers.<sup>144</sup> (Figure 6) P.T. Barnum introduced America's first tattooed performer in 1870, a Greek man variously titled Prince Constantenus, "The Turk," and "The Living Picture Gallery."<sup>145</sup> (Figure 7) Burchett reported that this "totally tattooed" spectacle with "marvelous designs on his chest, arms and legs" shocked audiences and established heavily-inked bodies as permanent freak show fixtures.<sup>146</sup> White men originally dominated the profession but the entrance of tattooed women to the circus over the following decades boosted box office sales, and contemporary sources noted that, by the early twentieth century, "no [dime] museum was complete without a tattooed 'lady.'"<sup>147</sup>

Tattooed circus performers, who were predominantly white, working-class Americans, complicated dominant ideals of gender, race and class. Their tattoos often evoked the racialized

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<sup>144</sup> Gresham, *Monster Midway*, 25-31.

<sup>145</sup> Parry, *Tattoo*, 62. See also Stephan Oettermann, "On Display: Tattooed Entertainers in America and Germany," in *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*, ed. Jane Caplan (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 200. Displays of tattooed bodies began with the introduction of tattoos to white Western society. British explorer Captain Cook returned to England in the late 1800s with Omai, "a heavily tattooed Tahitian prince...who was exhibited as an object of great curiosity to members of the British upper class" and became "a national treasure." See Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 15. Several heavily tattooed Europeans capitalized on this exhibitionist trend and Americans quickly followed suit. In 1795, the first tattooed European, a French sailor named Jean Baptiste Cabri, toured Europe, followed by Englishman John Rutherford who "became the object of great public interest." Rutherford had reportedly jumped ship while on duty as a mariner and "had chosen to marry a native woman and become tattooed." See Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, 24. For an overview of Rutherford's torture and captivity tale, see G.L Craik, *The Great White Chief John Rutherford*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London, 1830/1947). For further discussion of American tattooed circus performers prior to 1900, see Margo DeMello, *Encyclopedia of Body Adornment* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2007), 643, Fenske, *Tattoos in American Visual Culture*, 133, Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 16, and Mary Kosut, "Mad Artists and Tattooed Perverts: Deviant Discourse and the Social Construction of Cultural Categories," *Deviant Discourse* 27:1 (2006): 75.

<sup>146</sup> Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, 104-5.

<sup>147</sup> "The Trade in Tattooing: A Once Profitable Industry that has Fallen Off in Late Years," *Edgefield Advertiser*, June 25, 1902. For reports of box office intake for tattooed women versus tattooed men, see Parry, *Tattoo*, 73-75, and Atkinson, *Tattooed*, 35.

origins of the practice and unsettled established understandings of white and ‘otherness.’ Some gained great wealth from their deviant appearances and shook class-based stigmas that linked body ink to underprivileged social groups. Tattooed performers also disturbed concepts of normative femininity and masculinity, and men and women faced different performative expectations, which exposed the complex relationship of tattoos with malleable social norms. The following section argues that tattooed freak shows both affected and were influenced by American values of heteronormativity, patriotism, and racial superiority.

As stated, tattooed circus performers reached the height of their popularity as public tattooing practices declined in the 1920s and 1930s. A 1932 *Literary Digest* article reported over three hundred tattooed men and women in travelling circuses and urban “dime museums.”<sup>148</sup> Women performers attracted larger crowds than men and, according to Parry, eventually “edged [men] off the stage” in these decades.<sup>149</sup> Tattooed performers commanded some of the highest salaries in circus rosters, “up to \$100-\$200 per week.”<sup>150</sup> Burchett tattooed Horace Ridler, a performer from the late 1920s to the early 1940s, for “more than 150 hours, spread over more than a year” so that he could “become a freak” and “earn a livelihood.”<sup>151</sup> Ridler, known as “The Great Omi” or “The Zebra Man,” was, according to Burchett, “a star act in all the great and famous halls in the world” and “commanded some of the highest fees paid in show business.”<sup>152</sup> (Figure 8) Leonard “Stoney” St. Clair travelled with circuses from 1928 to 1950, and initially performed as

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<sup>148</sup> “Prosperity Flourishes Unchecked in the Tattoo Industry,” *Literary Digest*, Oct. 1, 1932, 32-33. For confirmation of this number of tattooed circus attractions, see Parry, *Tattoo*, 73.

<sup>149</sup> Parry, *Tattoo*, 64. See also Amelia Klem, “A Life of Her Own Choosing: Anna Gibbons’ Fifty Years as a Tattooed Lady,” *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 89:3 (2006): 34.

<sup>150</sup> DeMello, *Encyclopedia*, 261-2. US inflation records calculate that these figures translate to approximately \$1200-\$2400 in 2017. Parry reported that P.T. Barnum “began to count quick profits” upon the introduction of Constantenus to the freak show stage and paid this performer “\$1000 a week.” See Parry, *Tattoo*, 62-63.

<sup>151</sup> Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, 167-169.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 169-170.

a sword swallower before he learned that “you can make a living” from tattoos.<sup>153</sup> (Figure 9) He decided to “get rid of them swords” to become a tattooed performer and, after his circus career, a tattooist.<sup>154</sup> Large paychecks attracted men to circus careers, but able-bodied white men generally enjoyed more opportunities for a stable income outside of the circus than more marginal groups, such as non-whites, physically-disabled persons, and women.<sup>155</sup>

Most American women in this era had “little chance for an education, highly paid work, or travel” and, DeMello argues, some viewed circus life as “the only way...to have an independent career.”<sup>156</sup> Parry stated that women performers “longed for the profits of a tattooed body” primarily to achieve financial independence and personal freedom.<sup>157</sup> Gender theorist Jennifer Putzi argues that the wealth, freedom of movement, and independence “represented by the tattooed lady” mirrored the desires of “many American women.”<sup>158</sup> Freak shows catered to diverse audiences of men, women, and children, and, Putzi continues, performative elements frequently “highlighted [the performer’s] similarities to as well as their differences from” normative spectators.<sup>159</sup> Circus women exemplified an independence coveted by many American women at the time, and their lifestyles may have shaken existing notions about the social roles and functions of the “fairer sex.”<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> St. Clair, *Stoney Knows How*, 30, 53.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-30. Few opportunities existed for St. Clair outside of these marginalized occupations because rheumatic fever as a child confined him to a wheelchair. He reminisced that he “could easily be out on the street like a lot of cripples, selling pencils to get money for wine,” but his tattoo career granted financial self-sufficiency. See St. Clair, *Stoney Knows How*, xii.

<sup>155</sup> Klem, “A Life of Her Own Choosing,” 32.

<sup>156</sup> DeMello, *Encyclopedia of Body Adornment*, 261-2.

<sup>157</sup> Parry, *Tattoo*, 64. See also Katherine H. Adams and Michael L. Keene, *Women of the American Circus, 1880-1940* (North Carolina: McFarland & Co. Inc., 2012), 44, and Thompson, *Covered in Ink*, 25.

<sup>158</sup> Ironically, their bodies excluded tattooed women from normative society but “gave them access to a world outside the home, free from...many restrictions otherwise placed on women’s lives.” See Putzi, *Identifying Marks*, 155.

<sup>159</sup> Putzi, *Identifying Marks*, 154.

<sup>160</sup> “In New York,” *Frederick Post*, April 23, 1934, 4.

Nonetheless, sources from the era do not support Putzi's arguments that tattooed circus women exercised a conscious "rebellion against women's place in American society."<sup>161</sup> Instead they affirm librarian and tattoo enthusiast Amelia Osterud's views that some women became tattooed in this period simply "to make a living."<sup>162</sup> Betty Broadbent, a popular circus performer for over forty years, stated "I went into the circus as a business venture...I wanted to be independent and to take care of myself."<sup>163</sup> Broadbent's contemporary, Anna Gibbons, became tattooed "as a matter of survival" because she "didn't have any money."<sup>164</sup> She stated that her transformation into "Artoria, tattoo girl, a human art gallery" provided her "a nice way to make a living."<sup>165</sup> (Figure 10) Parry reported that Mae Vandermark, one of the first tattooed performers with the Ringling Brothers Circus, was "hesitant to mar [herself] for life" until testimonies of high salaries "easily persuaded [her] to become a professional tattooed woman."<sup>166</sup> In circus careers, women attained financial self-sufficiency and degrees of freedom unknown to most American women at the time. Although it may not have been their primary objective, tattooed circus women implicitly destabilized gender roles. However, employment contracts and informal rules ensured that circuses paralleled American domestic life.

Gender norms regulated the "working class realities" of circus employees, and scholars of American circuses Katherine Adams and Michael Keene argue that their lives "did not especially

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<sup>161</sup> Putzi, *Identifying Marks*, 154-155.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 156, and Amelia Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady: A History* (Colorado: Speck Press, 2009), 10.

<sup>163</sup> Judy Aurre, "Meet Betty Broadbent," *Tattoo Historian* 1: 21, 40.

<sup>164</sup> Arthur Lewis, *Carnival* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970), 155-161. See also Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 22.

<sup>165</sup> "8,000 on Hand as Ringling-Barnum Circus Gets Under Way: Big Outdoor Events Set," *Billboard*, Apr. 11, 1931, 77, and Gibbons, interview, "In New York," *Frederick Post*, April 23, 1934, 4.

<sup>166</sup> Parry, *Tattoo*, 64, 76. It must be noted, however, that it is possible that tattooed circus women stressed financial motivations over other possible, 'unspeakable' objectives, such as queer desire. However, the increase of feminist ideologies and agendas in the 1920s and 1930s are not reflected in archival evidence that has so far come to light, leaving scholars today to speculate about these women's underlying motivations to enter circus professions.

differ from other Americans at the time.”<sup>167</sup> Circus women cooked, cleaned, and raised children while circus men handled manual labor and public relations. Codes of conduct mandated employee behavior “in the circus tent, around the lot, and in town” because “we should want the ‘town folks’ to feel that the ‘show folks’ are real...men and ladies.”<sup>168</sup> Charlie Roark, a circus ventriloquist throughout the 1920s and 1930s, recounted the common rules of behavioral contracts – no stealing, no alcohol, and no “loud noise after eleven o’clock.”<sup>169</sup> Circuses regulated employee behavior to avoid having members run out of town and safeguard the financial and professional security of the business.

Particular rules about behavior that targeted circus women were ostensibly aimed to “protect the girls.”<sup>170</sup> Roark stated that “they had women-only cars with lady porters worse than a convent...you couldn’t fraternize.”<sup>171</sup> Circuses hindered sexual promiscuity and reinforced traditional ideals of chastity outside of marriage. Furthermore, employment contracts bound married women to room only with their husbands (if they travelled with the show) and “not be seen socially in contact with other men.”<sup>172</sup> Employment contracts ordered domestic life for all circus performers yet stressed the importance of ‘respectable’ femininity in the appearances, personas, and performances of tattooed women.

Freak show reviews rarely stipulated anything about a tattooed man’s demeanor or physical appearance other than his inked skin.<sup>173</sup> By the 1920s, all circuses “contain[ed] a tattooed man,”

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<sup>167</sup> Adams and Keene, *Women of the American Circus*, 69, Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*, 10, 19.

<sup>168</sup> Rule Sheet, 1912, Ringling Bros. Vertical File, Circus Women, in Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*, 76.

<sup>169</sup> Charlie Roark, interview by Stencell, *Circus and Carnival Ballyhoo*, 37-38. Roark married tattooed circus performer Betty Broadbent in 1940, with whom he worked, travelled, and raised her young son for over a decade. For further information about their marriage, see Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*, 112.

<sup>170</sup> Adams and Keene, *Women of the American Circus*, 75.

<sup>171</sup> Charlie Roark, interview by Stencell, *Circus and Carnival Ballyhoo*, 37.

<sup>172</sup> Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*, 75.

<sup>173</sup> Sources described Constantenus’ tattoo designs at length but rarely mentioned his physical appearance or personal character. See *P.T. Barnum’s Own Illustrated News*, 1878, 14. Many circuses in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries distributed such curriers, multipage advertisements for the various acts, prior to the arrival of a circus. An

and their performances no longer surprised or shocked audiences to the same degree as during past decades.<sup>174</sup> Oversaturation of men may account for the increase of tattooed women in circuses, and the heavily-inked bodies of attractive, white, ‘all-American’ women conveyed distinctly different messages than the skins of their male colleagues.

Long-established ideals of feminine beauty and behavior remained quintessential traits of tattooed circus women both on and off the freak show stage. Parry stated that “beautiful and chic... girls are recruited for the platform” and achieved higher levels of fame than their less conventionally-attractive contemporaries.<sup>175</sup> For example, St. Clair remembered Broadbent, the “most photographed tattooed lady in the business,” as “a young...pretty girl,” and Ward Hall, one of her employers, called her “a lovely lady, with the emphasis on ‘lady.’”<sup>176</sup> Similarly, an interviewer of Anna Gibbons described her as “a demure and modest woman...conscious of the stigma imposed upon her chosen profession” and therefore very careful about “her image.”<sup>177</sup> Evidence implies that tattooed circus women understood the social tensions created by their appearances and worked to mitigate that danger by stressing characteristics that satisfied

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1877 advertisement highlighted Constantenus as “tattooed from head to foot” but neglected further descriptions. See *The Aggregation*, July 25, 1877. Sources detailed the “388 small, delicately etched designs” that “covered every part of [Constantenus’] body” but mentioned no other physical characteristics. See Ebensten, *Pierced Hearts and True Love*, 17. Constantenus “wore his hair curled and braided, and fastened to the top of his head” but this simply made his appearance more exotic than conventionally attractive. See *P.T. Barnum’s Own Illustrated News*, 1878, 14. An 1881 review of Constantenus revealed that he stood “about six feet in his boots” and “had a rather short temper.” See “Farini’s Foreigners,” *Punch, or the London Charivari*, vol. 81, Dec. 3, 1881, 264, in C.W. Eldridge, “T.A.B.C.,” *Tattoo Historian*, March 1983, 8-10. Such descriptions placed little emphasis on physical attraction other than the tattoos on his skin. Similarly, sources highlighted the extreme appearance of the Great Omi rather than conventional good looks. See Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, 168-171.

<sup>174</sup> “Tattooing Out of Style,” *The Port Jefferson Echo*, Aug. 28, 1909, 7.

<sup>175</sup> Parry, *Tattoo*, 75-76. For one, the notoriety of one of the earliest tattooed circus women, Irene Woodward, was due at least in part to her good looks. Newspaper articles described “La Belle Irene” as a “brown-haired, brown-eyed maiden of about nineteen years of age, of medium-size, of pleasing appearance,” and “a lady of refinement.” See “The Tattooed Woman,” *New York Times*, Mar. 19, 1882, and “Museum,” *Wichita Eagle*, Dec. 2, 1887, 5. Sources from the peak of tattooed circus women’s popularity nearly fifty years later continued to stress these characteristics. See Ebensten, *Pierced Hearts and True Love*, 17, and Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 20.

<sup>176</sup> St. Clair, *Stoney Knows How*, 145, and Ward Hall, interview by Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*, 113.

<sup>177</sup> Lewis, *Carnival*, 155-161, and Ebensten, *Pierced Hearts and True Love*, 19. See also Klem, “A Life of Her Own Choosing,” 34.

conventional standards.<sup>178</sup> However, their respectability contrasted with their exposure of unconventional amounts of skin that further complicated the meanings of their bodies.

The exposure of an attractive woman's skin added sexual elements to tattooed circus performances and may explain the popularity of women in the profession. Scholars generally agree that their performances "violated gender norms of proper physical exposure" and "trounced upon Victorian limits of what was deemed acceptable for women."<sup>179</sup> Tattooed men and women drew similar audiences but their performances followed different formulas. Men showcased their skin as the main spectacle. No structured stage scripts existed for tattooed circus men, and, Fenske remarks, they "merely had to sit or stand nearly nude upon the stage."<sup>180</sup> Circus clown Robert Sherwood remembered that Constantenus had to "strip...to semi-nakedness" and recount his tattoo origin tale "a dozen times a day."<sup>181</sup> Burchett reported that Omi often paced the stage, invited audience members to examine his skin, and answered questions related to tattooing processes.<sup>182</sup> These sources revealed little sexual objectification of tattooed men's naked bodies but rather positioned their abnormal appearances as the height of the show.

On the other hand, audiences held sexualized expectations for tattooed circus women based on their physical exposure, an obvious necessity of this lucrative career. Parry reported that women "had to perform" rather than "sit or stand idly and draw the stares of admission-payers."<sup>183</sup> He

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<sup>178</sup> Thompson, *Covered in Ink*, 39. Other physically deviant circus women who blurred the conventional boundaries between genders, such as bearded ladies, also upheld behavioral standards of respectable femininity. See Sean Trainor, "Fair Bosom/Black Beard: Facial Hair, Gender Determination, and the Strange Career of Madame Clofullia, 'Bearded Lady,'" *Early American Studies* 12:3 (2014): 548-575.

<sup>179</sup> Fenske, "Movement and Resistance," 61. See also Braunberger, "Revoluting Bodies," 9, and Klem, "A Life of Her Own Choosing," 34.

<sup>180</sup> Fenske, "Movement and Resistance," 61. See also Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 104-110, 247.

<sup>181</sup> Robert Sherwood, *Here We Are Again: Recollections of an Old Circus Clown* (Indianapolis, IN: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1926), 151. Sherwood expressed sympathy for his tattooed male colleague, who had to remove his clothes in cold temperatures "under a wet circus top in the early spring" (151-152).

<sup>182</sup> Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, 168-171.

<sup>183</sup> Parry, *Tattoo*, 65.

argued that tattooed women gained “a better box-office” and “healthier receipts” than men because their performances were “heavily and frankly tinged with the sex motive.”<sup>184</sup> Osterud (née Klem) similarly attributes women’s popularity to their skimpy costumes that “brought a sexual allure to the sideshow that a tattooed man never could.”<sup>185</sup>

Adams and Keene argue that progressively shorter costumes reflected “the desire of the crowd to see the highly-sexualized woman,” and testimonies from tattooed circus performers support their claim.<sup>186</sup> Gibbons wore “a lacy bra and miniskirt” onstage throughout her forty-year circus career, a stark contrast to her reported modesty when offstage.<sup>187</sup> Broadbent reflected that, by the time she retired in 1967, “you had to wear little or nothing to attract any attention.”<sup>188</sup> Promotional circus materials featured tattooed circus women in low-cut shirts, short skirts, and sexualized poses. Postcards of Broadbent depicted her with lifted skirt in positions reminiscent of sailor’s ‘nudie’ tattoos.<sup>189</sup> (Figure 11) Fenske draws from photography theorist John Pultz’s arguments to explain that staged circus images were “highly formalized... with a set of rules articulated by the conventions of display.”<sup>190</sup> Circus materials and the testimonies of tattooed performers revealed that women experienced degrees of sexual exploitation not felt by their male counterparts. This shows that the meanings of tattoos rested largely on the social position of the

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<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 73-75. See also Braunberger, “Revolt Bodies,” 12, and Atkinson, *Tattooed*, 35.

<sup>185</sup> Klem, “A Life of Her Own Choosing,” 34. See also Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 77, and DeMello, *Encyclopedia*, 261.

<sup>186</sup> Adams and Keene, *Women of the American Circus*, 85.

<sup>187</sup> Lewis, *Carnival*, 160.

<sup>188</sup> Aurre, “Meet Betty Broadbent,” 40.

<sup>189</sup> Images of sexualized women in provocative poses, popular in the first half of the twentieth century, were frequently cut from magazines, newspapers and postcards and pinned up on walls in male-dominated spaces (frequently military bases, barber shops, and taverns). For further discussion of pin-up girls, see Joanne Meyerowitz, “Women, Cheesecake, and Borderline Material,” *Journal of Women’s History* 8:3 (1996): 9-35.

<sup>190</sup> Fenske, *Tattoos in American Visual Culture*, 97. See also John Pultz, *The Body and the Lens: Photography 1839 to the Present* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1995), 9.

wearer. In the case of tattooed circus performers, inked women reiterated messages of sexual deviance and promiscuity well-established in the minds of many spectators.

Circus women's tattooed skin and revealing costumes linked them to prostitutes and erotic dancers because, as Fenske argues, their "exposed bodies were purchasable commodities."<sup>191</sup> Sociologist Robert Bogdan explains that the amount of skin revealed in women's acts "would have been lewd if not illegal" under other circumstances and allowed "showmen a way of sliding a little bawdiness into the freak show tent."<sup>192</sup> My research likewise demonstrates that freak shows provided legitimate spaces to sexually objectify women because a tattooed circus woman's sexual allure was not the overt spectacle. Late-night circus "girlie shows" explicitly identified a sexualized woman as the main attraction.<sup>193</sup> (Figure 12) St. Clair remembered that "hoochie-koochie" acts featured "naked, dirty, beautiful broads" and were essentially strip shows.<sup>194</sup> On the other hand, tattooed women's acts kept sex appeal implicit and emphasized their inked skin as the featured transgression.

Nonetheless, women's exposed bodies added a sexual charge that audiences came to expect and numerous scholars, such as DeMello and Mifflin, argue that tattooed women often "used their sexuality to sell tickets."<sup>195</sup> That is, they removed layers of costume in what Atkinson calls an overtly sexual "semi-strip tease" that added "a libidinal element to the veritable peep show."<sup>196</sup>

Scholars of tattooed circus women often group performers into a homogenous subculture, but my

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<sup>191</sup> Fenske, *Tattoos in American Visual Culture*, 97.

<sup>192</sup> Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 251.

<sup>193</sup> Adams and Keene, *Women of the American Circus*, 121. For further information on hoochie shows, see Stencell, *Circus and Carnival Ballyhoo*, 65-68. He argues that "the cooch dance in the sideshow blow-offs [unmarked tents located behind circus grounds] was usually short and sweet. Male patrons sometimes saw total nudity but often just quick flashes of bare female flesh before the lecturer or the lone musician hollered, 'It's all out and over, gentlemen!'" (66). See also Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 14.

<sup>194</sup> St. Clair, *Stoney Knows How*, 43.

<sup>195</sup> DeMello, *Encyclopedia*, 645, and Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 21.

<sup>196</sup> Atkinson, *Tattooed*, 35.

research has uncovered important cases of difference that complicate generalizations. For example, Broadbent described hers as a “respectable” act and differentiated herself from “those carnival floozies with one or two tattoos who would bump and grind.”<sup>197</sup> She shamed her contemporaries because they profited from their sex appeal rather than their tattooed skin.

Broadbent’s example shows that widely-held connotations of women’s bodies as sexual objects were to some extent challenged within the confines of regulated spaces for deviance. Foucault originally argued that relations of power pervade all social spaces, but he allows for individual agency in his later works. In “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom,” he explains that “there is necessarily the possibility of resistance because if there were no possibility of resistance...there would be no power relations at all.”<sup>198</sup> Along this line of thinking, Broadbent both conformed to and challenged social norms, and showed the relationship between regulated ideals of normalcy (i.e. a tattooed woman’s body as a sexually-available object) and individual struggles against widely-accepted meanings of body ink.

Women’s exposed and heavily-tattooed bodies interacted with predominantly non-tattooed, white audiences in different ways than did those of circus men. Women frequently conformed to certain norms to render themselves more acceptable to spectators but they also complicated social expectations of masculine-identified images on men’s bodies when they donned similar tattoo motifs. ‘Manly’ designs on women’s bodies amplified tensions in gender boundaries and understandings of deviance and normativity, which then altered the meanings of their body ink.

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<sup>197</sup> Aurre, “Meet Betty Broadbent,” 21. For further discussion of Broadbent’s resistance to sexualization, specifically her objection to the stage moniker “The Tattooed Venus,” see Charlie Roark, interview by Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*, 112. Roark reported that she complained to the circus managers and introduced herself to the audience as Betty.

<sup>198</sup> Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 292.

Men and women in freak shows mainly chose patriotic and religious imagery in attempts, Parry believed, “to convince themselves and the spectators that tattooing was not a thing of ugliness or shame or desecration.”<sup>199</sup> Here Parry implicitly described negative stigmas that remained largely associated with tattoo wearers in the 1920s and 1930s. However, tattooed circus men had become passé by the mid-1920s, and many male performers took up other acts, such as sword-swallowing, to “maintain their audience and, consequently, their livelihood.”<sup>200</sup> Others adopted unconventional tattoos that garnered fresh interest, such as the symmetrical body suit of The Zebra Man. Contrarily, circus women’s bodies tattooed with ‘all-American’ images remained popular in these decades, perhaps because an attractive woman’s body covered in masculine body ink exacerbated the ambiguous boundaries of race and gender.<sup>201</sup>

Nearly all tattooed circus women’s body ink referenced foundational American values of patriotism, whiteness, and Christianity. Broadbent wore a bald eagle soaring in front of an American flag on her chest and described to an interviewer, “I have Lindbergh on the back of my right leg and my back’s covered with a copy of Raphael’s *Madonna and Child*.”<sup>202</sup> Gibbons wore a portrait of Thomas Jefferson surrounded by American flags on her chest, and her back depicted a battle scene from the Civil War, which Parry appreciated as “one of the best examples of the tattoo-art ever shown in the Ringling circus.”<sup>203</sup> Irene Libarry, a lesser-known contemporary of

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<sup>199</sup> Parry, *Tattoo*, 77. See also Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 22.

<sup>200</sup> Fenske, *Tattoos in American Visual Culture*, fn. 34, 166.

<sup>201</sup> Popular culture illuminated the appeal of circus women’s American iconography as a generic element of their trade that audiences came to expect. A well-known 1939 Groucho Marx song described *Lydia the Tattooed Lady*: “On her back is the Battle of Waterloo/Beside it the Wreck of the Hesperus too/And proudly above waves the Red, White, and Blue.” These verses depicted the typical tattooed woman adorned with images of American patriotism and folklore. See Groucho Marx, *Lydia the Tattooed Lady*, 1939, quoted in Braunberger, “Revolting Bodies,” 8. Another “freshly created folksong” of the 1930s recounted a visit to the dime museum: “I paid a bob to see/The tattooed lady/Tattooed from head to knee/She was a sight to see... But what I liked best/Across her chest/Was my home in Tennessee.” See Parry, *Tattoo*, 68-69. Original song by William Jerome and Walter Donaldson, 1915.

<sup>202</sup> Aurre, “Meet Betty Broadbent,” 21.

<sup>203</sup> Parry, *Tattoo*, 23. See also Lewis, *Carnival*, 161.

Broadbent and Gibbons, had a classic American battleship design on her back.<sup>204</sup> Ironically, white Americans appropriated the tattooing practices of non-white cultures, deemed by many at the time as racially inferior, to honor American history. Patriotic motifs may have aimed to remove tattoos from their racialized roots. Tattooed circus performers further tested existing racial tensions with formulaic tattoo origin stories that positioned non-white groups, most often Native Americans, as dangerous aggressors and body ink wearers as victims.<sup>205</sup> Such tales demonized indigenous cultures and may have encouraged audiences to overlook obvious contradictions, namely the performer's 'all-American' tattoo imagery.<sup>206</sup>

Most tattooed performers used "incredible tales" of "capture, torture, tattooing, and dramatic escape" from a group of "savages" in their acts.<sup>207</sup> The Great Omi described his abduction

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<sup>204</sup> Irene Library, interview by Albert Morse, *The Tattooists* (San Francisco: Albert Morse, 1977), 26-28.

<sup>205</sup> Thompson, *Covered in Ink*, 177.

<sup>206</sup> Andrea Stulman Dennet, *Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America* (NY: New York University Press, 1997), 7. Importantly, circus freak shows often featured displays of "wild men" or "savages" that reinforced racial stereotypes and prominent notions of white civility and superiority. In these acts, performers acted in "exaggerated stereotypic ways" and would "grunt or pace the stage, snarling and growling," dressed in a loincloth and perhaps "a string of bones around the neck." See Bogdan, "The Social Construction of Freaks," 28. Cassuto discussed the "standard practice to exhibit non-Westerners in freak shows as primitive humans or 'missing links'" in displays of "the racial freak." See Cassuto, "Tattooing and the Racial Freak," 241-245. See also Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 104-106, and Stencell, *Circus and Carnival Ballyhoo*, 29-35. Such displays situated white society as the apex of human civilization and progress.

<sup>207</sup> Ebensten, *Pierced Hearts and True Love*, 18, and Atkinson, *Tattooed*, 34. See also DeMello, *Encyclopedia*, 260. Interestingly, sex workers in early American culture also used captivity narratives. Brothels provided performance space for prostitutes to account for their entrance into this deviant career, likewise removing themselves of responsibility for their actions. For further information of women's use of captivity narratives, see Anna Tinnemeyer, *Identity Politics of the Captivity Narrative after 1948* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 21-23. Constantenus established a narrative tradition followed by most tattooed circus performers in the early twentieth century. Barnum introduced Constantenus to the stage "as an Albanese prince who had been abducted in his childhood to the Far East, where he was held prisoner at the court of the King of Burma and forcibly tattooed." See Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, 104-105. Another report of Constantenus said that "he was an arms trader and treasure-seeker who had been taken prisoner in the land of the Mougongs and forced to undergo the 'Chinese tattoo torture.'" See "Ein tatowierte Europaer," *Illustrierte Zeitung* (Leipzig), Nov. 2, 1872, 33-36, trans. in Oettermann, "On Display," 200. Constantenus' colleague Robert Sherwood reported that after "young Constantenus was captured [by] the wild raids of Ali Tebelen," he "fell a victim of the tattooing-needle through his Christian faith." See Sherwood, *Here We Are Again*, 148-149. Interestingly, Sherwood recorded that Constantenus wore a loincloth onstage, which also invoked the tribal beginnings and racial elements of this social practice. An 1896 book stated that "every [dime] museum" featured a tattooed performer with a story of "having been captured by the Indians and tattooed." See W.L. Alden, *Among the Freaks*, New York, 1896, 4. A 1909 newspaper article repeated this tale and described circus performers who "were tattooed by their captors when they were taken prisoner in savage wars." See "Tattooing Out of Style," *The Port Jefferson Echo*, Aug. 28, 1909, 7.

and torture by a South Pacific tribe when he travelled as a sailor.<sup>208</sup> Tattooed woman Miss Mara billed herself as “The Abducted Farmer’s Daughter” and “ruralized the tale” to suit American interests, changing the aggressors from eroticized foreigners to North American tribesmen.<sup>209</sup> Libarry reflected on the common use of captivity narratives, claiming that “we were forced to embellish our already heavily-decorated bodies with exotic stories in order to compete with each other.”<sup>210</sup> Some performers explained the origin of their ‘all-American’ tattoos in ways that kept non-white groups as offenders. Nora Hildebrandt claimed that she and her father were kidnapped by the Sioux tribe, and he was forced to tattoo his daughter as sadistic punishment by his captors for attempting escape.<sup>211</sup> Libarry implied that, despite evidence from a performer’s tattoos that an origin story was false, circus audiences overall responded favorably to stories of racial violence on white bodies, particularly those of women.<sup>212</sup>

Braunberger observes that captivity narratives “catered to prevailing fantasies that supported colonial and genocidal efforts” because they featured “savage interlopers” who “preyed on ‘delicate pioneer women.’”<sup>213</sup> Osterud argues that weighted words, such as ‘violation’ and ‘indignity,’ delivered implicit messages of sexual defilement and “tattoo rape.”<sup>214</sup> Many audience

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<sup>208</sup> Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, 169-171. See also Atkinson, *Tattooed*, 34.

<sup>209</sup> Irene Libarry, interview by Marcia Tucker, “Pssst!” 31-33. See also Ebensten, *Pierced Hearts and True Love*, 18.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-33. See also Govenar, “The Changing Image of Tattooing,” 225.

<sup>211</sup> Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 10-13. Mifflin reports Hildebrandt’s full story: “She’d been attacked by the Sioux, menaced by Sitting Bull, orphaned, saved by the legendary general George Crook, [and] blinded and cured” before she performed in “a museum of curiosities” (11).

<sup>212</sup> These narratives remained popular for decades, although some contemporary sources indicated a general awareness of their fiction. Parry spoke of Prince Constantenus and declared it “unlikely that [he] had acquired [his tattoos] as a punishment or as a prisoner of war,” but instead “had paid some native master to be tattooed for exhibition purposes” (*Tattoo*, 61). One of Constantenus’ tattooed colleagues identified his story as “invented to make him more interesting.” See “A Tattooed Woman,” *The Sedalia Weekly Bazaar*, Oct. 28, 1884, 7. Burchett admitted “I always thought this fairy-tale a little unfair both to the King of Burma and the art of the tattooist” (104-105). Other sources highlighted the fiction of these “yarns” through the word choice used in circus act reviews. See “Tattooing Out of Style,” *The Port Jefferson Echo*, Aug. 28, 1909, 7.

<sup>213</sup> Braunberger, “Revolting Bodies,” 9-10.

<sup>214</sup> Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*, 53. For further discussion of allusions to “tattoo rape” in captivity narratives, see Braunberger, “Revolting Bodies,” 19, and Klem, “A Life of Her Own Choosing,” 34.

members may have enjoyed and expected captivity narratives from circus women because of the historical connections between tattoos and forced slavery. The seventeenth-century autobiography of Mary Rowlandson, a Massachusetts pioneer kidnapped and held hostage by the Nashaway tribe, and the 1857 story of Olive Oatman, a young girl kidnapped and forcibly tattooed on her face by the Mohave tribe, were popular American histories that established precedence for the stories told by tattooed circus women.<sup>215</sup> (Figure 13) Media theorist Stephan Oettermann argues that such examples from the American past served as prototypes “for the stylized life-stories” of tattooed women, and the tales told in freak shows recycled common tropes.<sup>216</sup>

Captivity narratives enabled female performers to deflect widely-held views of tattooed women as sexual deviants.<sup>217</sup> By positioning themselves as victims, tattooed women renounced responsibility for their deviant appearances and, according to Braunberger, reinscribed themselves as “good girls.”<sup>218</sup> Most tattooed circus women “emphasized their chastity, femininity, and

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<sup>215</sup> For Rowlandson’s story, see Mary Rowlandson, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God: Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*, ed. Neal Salisbury (Boston: Bedford-St. Martin’s, 1997, original 1682). For Oatman’s story, see Royal B. Stratton, *Captivity of the Oatman Girls*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (San Francisco: Whitton & Towne, 1857). After Oatman escaped, her story became an American legend and pastor Royal B. Stratton published a sensationally-written account of her harrowing experience. Oatman toured America on a public lecture trip that allowed audiences to observe her facial tattoos as she recounted her story. In Stratton’s account of Oatman’s tale, which sold over thirty thousand copies in the first year, Oatman stated that the facial tattoo served multiple purposes. For one, the Mohave knew “we expected to return to the whites, and we would be ashamed of it [the tattoo]” (182). She continued that her “slave marks” also provided a means of identification because “if we should get away, and they should find us among other tribes, or if some other tribes should steal us, they would by this means know us” (182-183). For more information on Oatman, see Edward J. Pettid, “Olive Ann Oatman’s Lecture Notes and the Oatman Bibliography,” *San Bernardino Museum Association Quarterly* 16 (Winter 1968): 19, Putzi, *Identifying Marks*, 28-48, Oettermann, “On Display,” 200-201, Thompson, *Covered in Ink*, 23-24, and Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 16-18.

<sup>216</sup> Oettermann, “On Display,” 201-202. A crisis in masculinity gripped American men in the early twentieth century. Growing industrialism destabilized understandings of the all-American man as “an honest toiler, unafraid of hard work, proud of his craftsmanship and self-reliance.” See Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 36-38. Changing work environments and increased immigration emasculated American men and unsettled their sense of physical strength and racial superiority. The Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 established all Native Americans as US citizens and diminished the legal gap between white Americans and non-white indigenous groups. These heightened anxieties that surrounded race and gender in the 1920s and 1930s explained the continued allure of captivity narratives to American audiences.

<sup>217</sup> See Lombroso, *Criminal Woman*, and Parry, “Tattooing Among Prostitutes,” 477.

<sup>218</sup> Braunberger, “Revolting Bodies,” 10.

vulnerability” to jar with their on-stage physical exposure and added elements of race with scripted narratives that, Putzi argues, exploited the “horrifying possibility of the white body being permanently marked by an indigenous culture.”<sup>219</sup> Scholarship generally agrees that captivity narratives invoked the racialized roots of tattoos and demonized non-white cultures. However, few scholars analyze cases of tattooed circus women who achieved success without racially-charged fictions. Broadbent told her audiences a factual, albeit romanticized, tale of leaving home at a young age to pursue a life of wealth, travel and adventure.<sup>220</sup> Gibbons recounted the true story of how she met a tattooist at a travelling circus, fell in love, and joined the circus to work and travel with her new beau.<sup>221</sup> These two examples show that captivity narratives were not required as performative elements for a tattooed body to be a deviant spectacle. Audiences by and large attended tattooed freak shows in the 1920s and 1930s because visible body ink became increasingly stigmatized in the public realm.

Mifflin argues that circus performers covered their tattoos when offstage as a practical way to “protect their work from the sun’s damaging rays” and “ensure that only paying customers took in the show.”<sup>222</sup> However, archival evidence pinpointed negative public reactions to tattoo wearers in everyday interactions as the main reason for offstage coverage. Libarry admitted that she dressed modestly in public because “I just didn’t like to make an exhibition of myself on the street.”<sup>223</sup> Freak shows provided spaces that welcomed heavily-tattooed bodies but the spectacle became intolerable outside of the circus. Plus, the anonymity of fully-clothed circus performers enhanced

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<sup>219</sup> Putzi, *Identifying Marks*, 16. See also DeMello, *Encyclopedia*, 645-646.

<sup>220</sup> Broadbent, interview, *Hamilton County Record*, 2.

<sup>221</sup> Lewis, *Carnival*, 155-161. See also Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 21-23.

<sup>222</sup> Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 23.

<sup>223</sup> Libarry, interview by Albert Morse, *The Tattooists* (San Francisco: Albert Morse, 1977), 56. See also DeMello, *Encyclopedia*, 647.

their allure to non-tattooed audience members because, as Braunberger notes, onstage “they could be the type [of people] your mother warned you about but offstage they could be everywhere.”<sup>224</sup>

Most performers only inked areas that conventional clothing covered and rarely marked “public skin” (the face, hands, and neck), a choice which afforded them the ability to blend in with the non-tattooed public.<sup>225</sup> The tattooed performer’s transformation from visibly ordinary to deviant enchanted audiences. Broadbent pinpointed the climax of her performance at this moment:

In the summer I wore a floor-length satin robe and in the winter a velvet one. The platform lecturer would announce, “And now, ladies and gentlemen, the lady who’s different!” Up till then, nobody had the slightest idea what was different about me. I’d unzip my robe and I’d be wearing a costume underneath.<sup>226</sup>

Only her undoubtedly skimpy outfit exposed her body as markedly different from others in the crowd and complicated dominant understandings of tattooed bodies as obviously abnormal and thus easily detectable.<sup>227</sup>

The meanings of tattooed bodies changed when they left the freak show stage, and most performers displayed their body ink only in, according to Foucault’s theories, spaces designed to contain deviance. Outside of the circus, the stigmas associated with non-normative tattooing practices largely encouraged self-regulation – that is, performers covered their tattoos to achieve levels of acceptance in the public realm unattainable if their inked skin was exposed.<sup>228</sup> Performers largely adhered to the freak show’s spatial boundaries but occasionally tested and weakened them, which shows that, in Foucault’s words, “power relations are mobile, they can be modified, they are not fixed once and for all.”<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> Braunberger, “Revolting Bodies,” 12.

<sup>225</sup> Irwin, “Saints and Sinners,” 37-38.

<sup>226</sup> Aurre, “Meet Betty Broadbent,” 21.

<sup>227</sup> Tattooed performances in the 1920s and 1930s echoed those of Constantenus, who began his act fully clothed and removed his clothes until “the grand reveal” of his tattooed body. See Sherwood, *Here We Are Again*, 151.

<sup>228</sup> For further discussion of self-regulation, see Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, Part 3: Discipline.

<sup>229</sup> Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 292.

In 1939, Broadbent appeared in the world's first televised beauty contest at the New York World's Fair, and the meanings of her tattooed body changed based on the space in which she performed.<sup>230</sup> (Figure 14) She presented herself in a contest that “showcased values, concepts and behavior” central to American normativity, an antithesis to the freak show.<sup>231</sup> Braunberger argues that, by doing so, Broadbent transformed herself from “spectacle” to “monstrosity.”<sup>232</sup> Mifflin claims that Broadbent had “no chance of winning” because her tattooed skin excluded her from dominant ideals of feminine beauty and behavior.<sup>233</sup> Broadbent's example depicts Foucault's power relations at play – normative American culture generally detested deviant bodies outside of specific places. For Foucault, the subject is not wholly determined by external influences but rather, as philosopher Daniel Smith interprets, “there is always a point of absolute freedom hidden deep within us that cannot be completely subjected to power.”<sup>234</sup> Broadbent demonstrated that freedom by shirking spatial regulations for her perceived deviance, and she showed that individuals can express resistance in ways that manipulate the boundaries of social norms and regulated spaces.

By the late 1930s, newspaper sources reported that heavily-inked acts no longer drew large circus crowds because “a tattooed arm [was] no longer a curiosity” to many spectators.<sup>235</sup> Tattooed circus performers increasingly added dramatic feats to their stage shows to maintain popularity.

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<sup>230</sup> Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*, 112, and Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 25. See also Braunberger, “Revolting Bodies,” 13.

<sup>231</sup> Colleen Cohen et al, *Beauty Queens on a Global Stage* (New York, Routledge, 1996), 2. Braunberger points out that P.T. Barnum held credit for the introduction of beauty contests to America. In 1854, he suggested that “women take the stage so that their beauty may be judged” (9-10). The newspaper quickly picked up these stories and “thus began the public warming to this form of scrutinized beauty” (10). The introduction of beauty contests to American culture contributed “to the shift in the general public's perception of women as commodity images without women directly participating” (11). By 1880, a Miss U.S. contest existed and by 1920, the Miss America contest was “designed to publicize resort areas” (11). See Braunberger, “Revolting Bodies,” 9-11.

<sup>232</sup> Braunberger, “Revolting Bodies,” 13.

<sup>233</sup> Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 25.

<sup>234</sup> Daniel Smith, “Foucault on Ethics and Subjectivity: ‘Care of the Self’ and ‘Aesthetics of Existence,’” *Foucault Studies* 19: 145.

<sup>235</sup> “Tattooing Decline,” *WRH*, Sept. 2, 1936, 6. See also Tucker, “Pssst!” 31-33.

For example, Broadbent learned to ride “jump horses and bucking mules,” and Omi flirted briefly with sword-swallowing before his retirement in the 1940s.<sup>236</sup> Other performers, such as St. Clair, began tattooing to supplement their lowered salaries and eventually left the circus to pursue careers in the trade.<sup>237</sup>

To sum up, in the 1920 and 1930s tattoo wearers experienced a range of public responses based on their positions in American society, as well as the appearance and function of their body ink. Circus performers, servicemen, and well-to-do white women generally adopted tattoos in ways that conformed to gender, race, and class ideals, and thus enjoyed moderate acceptance in public. However, as the 1930s drew to a close, body ink practices nearly disappeared among these groups. Military regulations became stricter, and a 1937 law that declared any servicemen with tattoos “would receive no pay” drastically decreased tattooing practices among enlisted men.<sup>238</sup> The Depression affected women’s ability to afford permanent makeup treatments, and the trend never regained comparable popularity. Circuses struggled financially and left many tattooed performers unemployed.<sup>239</sup> Furthermore, as tattooist Samuel Steward argued, the “medicalization of human differences” diminished the popularity of freak shows.<sup>240</sup> A 1938 newspaper article declared that “the popularity of tattoos [was] waning” both in the military and among the public.<sup>241</sup>

By the 1950s, the American public had limited exposure to tattooed bodies, and, as stigmatized subcultures increasingly practiced tattoos, negative stigmas about the meanings of

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<sup>236</sup> Govenar, “The Changing Image of Tattooing,” 223, and Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, 169-171.

<sup>237</sup> Aurre, “Meet Betty Broadbent,” 40. Broadbent and Gibbons both learned this trade and tattooed in circus booths after their stage performances. Libarry retired from circuses in 1939 and opened a tattoo shop in San Francisco. See DeMello, *Encyclopedia*, 647.

<sup>238</sup> “Ban is Put on Tattooing at Fort Totten,” *The New York Times*, June 16, 1937, 25.

<sup>239</sup> Steve Gilbert, *Tattoo History: A Source Book* (New York: Juno Books, 2000), 140.

<sup>240</sup> Bogdan, “The Social Construction of Freaks,” 23.

<sup>241</sup> “Tattooing Days Gone Except Sailors,” *Port Jefferson Echo*, May 2, 1938, 2.

body ink grew. The earlier popularity of tattoos among some favored social groups was largely forgotten by the American public. The author of the 1953 obituary of Charlie Wagner, a pioneer of the American tattoo industry, lamented that this man's death went "unnoticed" and that the unceremonious passing of a forefather of the art reflected "the current and sad state of tattooing."<sup>242</sup> In the next chapter, I argue that the rise of negative stigmas about body ink wearers aligned with the increase of tattooing practices among marginalized subcultures. I show that the fluctuating meanings of tattoos in the 1950s and 1960s reflected the nuanced relationship between body ink and social understandings of deviance, and I demonstrate that their interactions both supported and challenged ideals of gender, race, and class.

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<sup>242</sup> Rex Bonesteel, "Vanishing Tattoo," *Holiday*, June 1953, 29-31.

## Chapter Two –The ‘Dark Ages’ of Tattooing Practices in the 1950s and 1960s

*Sometimes I think it ain't none of us pure crazy and ain't none of us pure sane  
until the balance of us talks him that-a-way.  
It's like it ain't so much what a fellow does,  
but it's the way the majority of folks is looking at him when he does it.*

- William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (1930)

Tattoos enjoyed a brief boom during the Second World War when military regulations that banned tattoos on servicemen became relaxed, perhaps due to needs for high enrolment numbers or improved morale.<sup>243</sup> Writing as a practicing tattooist, Charlie Wagner reported that servicemen, specifically “sailors, soldiers...and fliers,” regularly requested “to be marked” with patriotic totems before deployment.<sup>244</sup> St. Clair explained that his military customers got a tattoo as “a mark of accomplishment.”<sup>245</sup> Burchett had experienced the increase of tattooing practices during the First World War and “knew exactly what to expect” at the dawn of WWII, predicting “long queues” for “regimental badges [and] flags.”<sup>246</sup>

Nonetheless, a 1946 *New York Times* poll reported that most military recruits were not interested in tattooing.<sup>247</sup> Ebensten observed in 1953 that tattoos had lost “their significance as status symbols in the military” and “as evidence of valor” shortly after their wartime resurgence.<sup>248</sup> He argued that servicemen had found that “their well brought-up girlfriends frowned upon their

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<sup>243</sup> “It is estimated that one fifth of men and one fifteenth of women in the US is or has been tattooed,” *WRH*, Sept. 20, 1944. See also, “Fighting Men Rush to Tattoo Shops,” *The Evening Independent* (St. Petersburg), vol. XXXV, no. 112, March 14, 1942, 11, “Tattooing Still Popular Amongst Service Men – And Women,” *The Troy Record*, no. 152, June 26, 1943, 4, “Tattooing Business Booming,” *St. Petersburg Times*, vol. 58, no. 340, June 29, 1942, 9, and “The Liberty Boys are Needling Thousands: War Boom Tattooing,” *Milwaukee Journal*, May 27, 1942.

<sup>244</sup> Charlie Wagner, interview by Helen Cumming, “War Booms the Tattooing Art,” *New York Times*, Sept. 19, 1943, 38.

<sup>245</sup> St. Clair, *Stoney Knows How*, 76.

<sup>246</sup> Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, 122-124. Interestingly, Burchett wondered “if I ought to be ashamed of myself for being a sort of war profiteer” (73). However, he thus justified his wartime wealth as the fruit of public service, arguing that “a good tattoo could help a service man” because “it strengthened his self-confidence” (73-74).

<sup>247</sup> “Poll Shows Decline in Tattooing Among Seamen,” *New York Times*, sec. 5, col. 7, Aug. 11, 1946, 6.

<sup>248</sup> Ebensten, *Pierced Hearts and True Love*, 70.

‘common’ markings” because tattoos held “negative social value at home.”<sup>249</sup> This reveals that class-based stigmas continued to affect tattooing practices among favored social groups (i.e. servicemen) that typically embraced heteronormative and patriotic values.

Changing tattoo trends affected the meanings of body ink among the public at large. Tattooist Samuel Steward reported that, as the practice dwindled among servicemen, “the disadvantaged strata of American society” increasingly adopted body ink.<sup>250</sup> Outcast groups, such as criminals, bikers, and sex workers, had long used tattoos as symbols of their transgressive views and lifestyles, but, in the 1950s and 1960s, tattoos became particularly important markers of belonging for these subcultures.<sup>251</sup> During what Atkinson titles “the ‘dark ages’ of tattooing” in America, marginalized individuals “latched onto tattoos in the process of outwardly representing feelings of discontent with society.”<sup>252</sup> Media and popular culture scholar John Fiske echoes the view that tattoos became devalued in mainstream society in these decades as “vulgar and tasteless” social expressions of nonconformity and indicators of low class and status.<sup>253</sup> I argue that, while body ink became further stigmatized in the opinions of many law-abiding, normative Americans at the time, tattoos transmitted positive meanings of affiliation to ostracized subcultures. This chapter shows that tattoos conveyed multifaceted meanings depending on the purpose of the tattoo to the wearer, as well as the social position of the inked body.

Cultural theorist Dick Hebdige argues that “obviously fabricated...codes” allowed subcultures to “declare themselves different” from groups that supported mainstream norms and

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<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-67. See also Govenar, “The Changing Image of Tattooing,” 229.

<sup>250</sup> Steward, *Bad Boys and Tough Tattoos*, 94.

<sup>251</sup> Interestingly, as tattooing crossed class lines, the practice remained chiefly dominated by white men. Sanders noted that Hispanic gang members used tattoos as badges “commemorating prison experience,” but made few other mentions of tattooing practices among minority groups. See Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 179.

<sup>252</sup> Atkinson, *Tattooed*, 41-42. See also Thompson, *Covered in Ink*, 34, Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 2, and Braunberger, “Revolting Bodies,” 1, 14.

<sup>253</sup> John Fiske, *Reading the Popular* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 29. See also Fenske, “Movement and Resistance,” 54.

values.<sup>254</sup> For instance, street gangs often used acquiring tattoos as rites of passage, biker gangs to display shared values of heteromascularity and racial superiority, and sex workers to symbolize their availability ‘for hire.’<sup>255</sup> Samuel Steward, a tattooist through the 1950s and 1960s, stated that these individuals “seemed almost eager to flaunt their tattoos in defiance of authority.”<sup>256</sup> As negative stigmas of tattoo wearers increased, people of higher socio-economic status perpetuated derogatory meanings of tattoos. Steward remembered that, at the time, many Americans shared the “largely...middle class” notion that tattoos were “too low-class for [them].”<sup>257</sup> Tattooist Spider Webb echoed the view that body ink became intrinsically linked to deviance and criminality as popular opinion reflected demographic changes in the tattoo’s clientele and practitioners.<sup>258</sup>

Members of outcast groups dominated tattooing practices in the 1950s and 1960s, much to the chagrin of other tattooists. Steward stated that “the entrance into the [tattooing] game of con-men, winos, and ex-convicts...gave [the profession of tattooist] an extremely bad name.”<sup>259</sup> According to Steward, the new generation of tattooists became known as “jaggers” due to their reputations for “doing bad work [and] being dirty and filthy.”<sup>260</sup> Like Steward, Burchett also “emphasized [his] distinction” as a professional, categorically different from “dabblers and low alley-fellows” who were simply out to make a quick buck.<sup>261</sup> Here we see the beginnings of a professional hierarchy among tattooists that would be further defined in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>262</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 101.

<sup>255</sup> Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 38-41.

<sup>256</sup> Steward, *Bad Boys and Tough Tattoos*, 11.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>258</sup> Webb, *Pushing Ink*, 17.

<sup>259</sup> Steward, *Bad Boys and Tough Tattoos*, 190.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, 20. See also Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, 105-107.

<sup>261</sup> Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, 106.

<sup>262</sup> Tattooists in the 1970s and 1980s built upon the foundations of this trade hierarchy in the pursuit of professionalism and codified basic standards of tattooing practices.

The spread of tattooing practices among stigmatized social groups sparked the spatial relocation of tattoo shops from boardwalks, circus tents, and street fronts to dark arcades, the back rooms of barber shops, and city districts that, Atkinson notes, were “characterized by poverty and crime.”<sup>263</sup> The movement of the practice to unsavory spaces mirrored the segregation of deviant subcultures to the outskirts of ‘respectable’ society. That is, the common locations of tattooing practices at the time reflected and perpetuated dominant stereotypes of the process and of its participants as low-class, unhygienic, and dangerous. A Foucauldian reading is applicable here – the self-regulated confinement of tattooed bodies to spaces hidden from public view shows how social norms and power relations pervaded body modification practices. Tattooed bodies segregated themselves to locations largely unseen by mainstream members of the public to avoid negative and disapproving reactions.

Existing stigmas of body ink as evidence of moral deviance were amplified as tattooing practices increasingly became linked to physical uncleanliness. The trade became targeted by medical authorities following a hepatitis outbreak in New York in the 1950s. Fenske argues that the hepatitis scare “enhanced the tawdry reputation of tattooing” as “a dirty, unhygienic practice associated with illness.”<sup>264</sup> Tattooists’ testimonies supported stereotypical views of a tattoo shop as a “sinister, greasy hole.”<sup>265</sup> Steward reflected on his early employment at “a dirty shop of the kind which could bring down the reputation of tattooing to the level of the 1920s.”<sup>266</sup> He described the floor as “a filthy mess of mud, sawdust, dried spittle, torn newspapers, and wine bottles here and there.”<sup>267</sup> The needles had “such a gummy coating of old dried ink-spatters and grease that

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<sup>263</sup> Atkinson, *Tattooed*, 36. See also St. Clair, *Stoney Knows How*, 77-79.

<sup>264</sup> Fenske, “Movement and Resistance,” 65.

<sup>265</sup> Hill, “Tattoo Renaissance,” 38.

<sup>266</sup> Steward, *Bad Boys and Tough Tattoos*, 23.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-24.

you were afraid to touch them.”<sup>268</sup> Moved by such feelings, Steward left his mentor’s shop once he completed his apprenticeship and opened his own tattoo shop that he described as “absolutely antiseptic.”<sup>269</sup> (Figure 15) Unfortunately, Steward’s emphasis on professional and hygienic standards did not resonate with the majority of his contemporaries at the time.

Tattooist Stanley Moskowitz trained with Charlie Wagner and remembered the industry legend as “an alcoholic” who often “would be tattooing away, drunk as he was.”<sup>270</sup> Other accounts of Wagner affirmed his unclean and unprofessional reputation. St. Clair recalled that he once witnessed a piece of plaster fall from the ceiling into open ink containers in Wagner’s shop. Wagner instructed St. Clair to “think nothing of it,” saying “it can’t hurt a thing.”<sup>271</sup> Edward “Crazy Eddie” Funk, a tattooist from 1952 to his death in 2016, recalled his naivety as an apprentice when he realized that what he had taken to be “red ink all over the walls” of his mentor’s shop was actually blood.<sup>272</sup> This shows that, through their practices, some tattooists perpetuated negative stereotypes of body ink wearers and practitioners as unhygienic, while others combatted stigmas by emphasizing their cleanliness standards.

Over a decade before the hepatitis outbreak, city officials had often targeted tattoo businesses for inspections and fines.<sup>273</sup> Funk remembered that various health departments “raided [our shop] three or four times a year” and recalled “you had to expect this to happen to you.”<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, 20, 23.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, 23. The tendency of newly-trained tattooists to open shops in direct competition with their former mentors demonstrated a lack of professional loyalty and hindered trust among practitioners in the trade. Govenar argues that older tattooists “distrusted the younger generation,” who strove to distinguish themselves from “their elders.” He furthers that many tattooists guarded their “trade secrets” and “isolated themselves from their colleagues.” See Govenar, “The Changing Image of Tattooing,” 223. The competitive atmosphere festered until professional collectives organized in the late 1970s to unify the tattoo trade and its practitioners.

<sup>270</sup> Stanley Moskowitz, interview by Michael McCabe, *New York City Tattoo: The Oral History of an Urban Art* (New York: Hardy Marks, 1997), 25. Like Steward, Moskowitz opened his own business after his apprenticeship.

<sup>271</sup> St. Clair, *Stoney Knows How*, 67.

<sup>272</sup> Edward Funk, interview by Michael McCabe, *New York City Tattoo*, 73.

<sup>273</sup> For example, New York City fined Wagner in 1944 for failure to sterilize his tattoo equipment. See “Charlie Wagner Fined for Failure to Sterilize Needles,” *New York Times*, col. 4, Sept. 27, 1944, 23.

<sup>274</sup> Edward Funk, interview, *Inked Magazine*, Sept. 2012.

Legal anti-tattoo action climaxed with the 1959 hepatitis fatality of a New York adolescent who, according to newspaper accounts, “had recently been tattooed.”<sup>275</sup> In 1961, New York introduced legislation that restricted the use of tattoo equipment to medical doctors, and many other states, including Virginia, Massachusetts, and Michigan, followed suit.<sup>276</sup> Govenar observes that anti-tattoo laws forced some tattooists to “close their shops and move to other cities or states more hospitable to their practices.”<sup>277</sup> Funk, for one, initially fought the New York ban but eventually relocated his Coney Island business to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where officials were more tolerant of his trade.<sup>278</sup> Although tattooists at the time generally acknowledged the commonness of unsanitary tattooing practices, most agreed with Funk that “tattooing was the scapegoat” in the hepatitis epidemic.<sup>279</sup>

The virus outbreak nonetheless entrenched associations between tattoos and physical disease in the minds of many Americans, and several scientific communities magnified negative

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<sup>275</sup> “Ban on Tattooing,” *New York Times*, col. 4, Oct. 10, 1961, 45.

<sup>276</sup> The New York ban on tattooing experienced a brief appeal when the New York Supreme Court ruled the 1961 ban as unconstitutional. However, the New York State Appellate Division called tattooing a “barbaric survival” and overturned the 1963 ruling. See “N.Y. State Supreme Court Rules Unconstitutional ’61 Ban on Tattooing,” *New York Times*, col. 2, July 2, 1963, 31, and “N.Y. State Appellate Division Overturns ’63 Supreme Court Decision,” *New York Times*, col. 2, Dec. 2, 1964, 49. In 1966, the American Civil Liberties Union filed a case with the New York City Appeals Court to remove the ban because there was no medical evidence linking tattoos to the hepatitis outbreak. The ACLU argued that this “recognized art form” should be protected by law rather than banned. These efforts proved fruitless; in June 1966, the Appeals Court upheld the ban. See “ACLU to File Brief in N.Y. State Appeals Court,” *New York Times*, col. 6, March 20, 1966, 76, “Court Upholds Ban,” *New York Times*, col. 1, June 3, 1966, 41. For general anti-tattoo legal history, see Govenar, “The Changing Image of Tattooing,” 232-234, and Adams, “Marked Difference,” 274. For a list of states that followed New York’s anti-tattoo legal action, see Thompson, *Covered in Ink*, 31: Oklahoma, Virginia, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Ohio, Arkansas, Wisconsin, Tennessee and Michigan. For discussion of medical tattooing allowances, see William Kaufman, “Tattooing Could Save Your Life,” *Science Digest*, Oct. 1952, 71-73.

<sup>277</sup> Govenar, “The Changing Image of Tattooing,” 229.

<sup>278</sup> Interestingly, Funk stated that New York’s long legal battle against tattoos eventually succeeded in 1966 because “there was nobody there [in New York] to fight,” as so many tattoo artists had likewise moved their shops to other cities. See *Inked Magazine*, Sept. 2012.

<sup>279</sup> Edward Funk, interview by Michael McCabe, *New York City Tattoo*, 75. Other tattooists mentioned in McCabe, Introduction to *New York City Tattoo*, 23, and Webb, *Pushing Ink*, 59. Ruth Marten, a tattooist in the 1970s and 1980s, reported that the outbreak “was ultimately pinned to a Coney Island practitioner.” See Reba Maybury, “An Interview with Tattoo Artist Pioneer Ruth Marten,” *Sang Bleu Magazine*, Dec. 14, 2015.

stigmas when they rehashed Lombroso's connections between body ink and mental illness.<sup>280</sup> Fenske argues that the growing authority of the social sciences, specifically psychology, criminology and sociology, fostered the "desire to classify and categorize abnormalities."<sup>281</sup> She states that tattooed bodies became subjects of "medical and scientific investigation" in the 1950s and 1960s, and 'experts' again identified body ink as "external manifestations of internal social deficiencies."<sup>282</sup> Evidence from medical literature likewise stressed, as Fenske describes, "the nexus of criminality and tattooing" and validated widely-held stigmas with scientific authority.<sup>283</sup>

Here again a Foucauldian perspective proves relevant. In *Birth of the Clinic: An Archeology of Medical Perception* (1963/1973), Foucault traces the historical shift of medical care from a person's home to authoritarian institutions, specifically the clinic. He problematizes modern clinical perceptions as the result of a historically-specific system of knowledge and power that controls the definition of illness and the treatment of 'sick' persons.<sup>284</sup> Foucault argues that through "this constant gaze," the medical profession can "preserve itself, to assume little by little the figure of a truth that is definitive [and] to develop...in a continuous historicity."<sup>285</sup> He concludes that the medical profession "had bound truth and time together" and established an authority largely unquestioned by the public, which then validated "all subsequent simplifications whereby clinical medicine became simply the examination of the individual."<sup>286</sup> Along this line of thinking, tattooed bodies became defined by medical authorities in this era as physically and morally deviant and targeted for institutional control.

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<sup>280</sup> Thompson, *Covered in Ink*, 34.

<sup>281</sup> Fenske, "Movement and Resistance," 63-64.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*, 63-64. See also Steward, *Bad Boys and Tough Tattoos*, 190.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>284</sup> Michel Foucault, *Birth of the Clinic: An Archeology of Medical Perception*, trans. A. M. Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973), 120-121.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, 54-55, 57.

Tattooist Spider Webb reported that “articles by doctors, psychologists and laypeople” at the time emphasized the “antisocial, eccentric, and bizarre aspects of tattooing.”<sup>287</sup> Numerous studies on tattooed subcultures verified the supposed connection between tattooing and deviance.<sup>288</sup> A 1958 psychiatric study by the Oklahoma School of Medicine concluded that a tattooed person “is more likely to have been divorced, is more of a rebel, has been in trouble with society and authority, and is more likely to have been in jail.”<sup>289</sup> Criminal psychologist Richard Post’s 1968 article “The Relationship of Tattoos to Personality Disorder” reduced the motivations behind tattoos to sexual deviance, including “homosexual inclinations and suppression of sexual desires.”<sup>290</sup> These studies, however, were not received wholly without contest. Methodological weaknesses plagued such research in the eyes of later scholars because, as Sanders has objected, “subjects [were] drawn from highly selected populations” and “researchers’ conclusions commonly [were]...over-deterministic.”<sup>291</sup> As early as 1953, however, Ebensten argued that criminals too frequently constituted study groups, and he critiqued findings that reinforced “the erroneous belief that tattooing is more widespread amongst the criminal classes than elsewhere.”<sup>292</sup>

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<sup>287</sup> Webb, *Heavily Tattooed Men and Women*, 1-2.

<sup>288</sup> To name but a few examples: E. Hamburger, “Tattooing as a Psychic Defense Mechanism,” *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 12 (1966): 60-62, J. Yamamoto, W. Seeman, B. Lester, “The Tattooed Man,” *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 136 (1963): 365-367, J. Briggs, “Tattooing,” *Medical Times* 87 (1958): 1030-1039, O. Pollak, “Tattooed Psychotic Patients,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* (1945): 56-69, Shirley Ferguson-Rayport, “The Psychiatric Significance of Tattoos,” *Psychiatric Quarterly* 29 (1955): 112-131, and H. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: The Free Press, 1963).

<sup>289</sup> “Find Out What Tattooed Man is Really Like,” *Science Newsletter*, May 31, 1958, 342.

<sup>290</sup> Richard Post, “The Relationship of Tattoos to Personality Disorder,” *Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology and Police Science* 59 (1968): 519. For reference to Post Study, see Steward, *Bad Boys and Tough Tattoos*, 11, Kosut, “Tattoo Narratives,” 82, Camacho, “The Tattoo,” 7, and Thompson, *Covered in Ink*, 26-29. Importantly, Parry’s 1933 psychoanalytic *Tattoo* had laid strong foundations for the association between tattooing and sexual dysfunction, specifically homosexuality. He argued that deviants openly “extol their perversion” via tattoos (26). He also charged that soldiers and criminals who had “tattooed pictures of the most lubricious inspiration [referring to popular ‘nude’ designs of women]” were “homosexuals who deny their perversion by insisting, often with blatant obscenity, upon their normality” (26). Ebensten’s 1953 ethnohistory also followed Parry’s postulation that “the whole existence of tattooing...is based upon and strongly connected with sexual impulses” and “finds its chief impulse in a sexual urge” and that tattoos as “pious symbols” reflected “their [the wearer’s] low moral code” (16-18).

<sup>291</sup> Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 37.

<sup>292</sup> Ebensten, *Pierced Hearts and True Love*, 21.

Nevertheless, newspaper reports showed that the public generally accepted conclusions from scientific studies, however flawed, that connected tattoos to mental and moral illnesses.<sup>293</sup>

Sociologists Michael Atkinson and Kevin Young claim that, in the 1950s and 1960s, tattoos largely became understood as “physical indicators of individual pathology” and behavioral disorders, such as sexual deviance, criminal tendencies, and lack of self-control.<sup>294</sup> Tattooed bodies became the subjects of medical scrutiny and were identified as threats to conventional American values. As lower-class, criminal, and sexually-transgressive groups increasingly practiced tattooing, medical authorities advanced pseudo-scientific theories that linked body ink to dangerous abnormality, which justified institutional governance of the trade and its practitioners.

Pathologizing tattooing practices in the 1950s and 1960s exemplifies Foucault’s theory of institutionally-based classifications that serve as historically- and culturally-grounded systems of knowledge and power, in that structurally-rooted relationships among power, discourse, and institutions engulfed and controlled deviant bodies.<sup>295</sup> The medicalization of tattooed bodies confined them to the periphery of ‘respectable’ society, where wearers of body ink formed subcultures with clearly-defined borders. In contrast to Foucault’s early theories that largely negate individual resistance, I argue that tattoo wearers practiced body ink as defiant symbols of their contentious positions within larger power systems.

Tattooing practices in these decades came to fit Hebdige’s definition of a subculture as “a process...of resistance in which experienced contradictions and objections to the ruling ideology

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<sup>293</sup> See “Ban on Tattooing Minors,” *Desert Sun* [Palm Springs, CA], no. 168, Feb. 17, 1962, and “Dear Abby” column, *Ellensburg Daily Record*, Nov. 11, 1967, 3.

<sup>294</sup> Michael Atkinson and Kevin Young, “Flesh Journeys: Neo Primitives and the Contemporary Rediscovery of Radical Body Modification,” *Deviant Behavior* 22:2 (2001): 122.

<sup>295</sup> Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. R. Howard (New York: Pantheon, 1965). See also Kosut, “Tattoo Narratives,” 76-77.

are obliquely represented in style.”<sup>296</sup> That is, body ink provided outcast groups a means of “defining themselves against the parent culture.”<sup>297</sup> Atkinson argues that existing negative stigmas about tattoos enhanced subcultural messages of “both in-group cohesiveness and disassociation from the dominant culture.”<sup>298</sup> Kosut agrees that transgressive individuals at the time used tattoos as “badges employed to distance and differentiate from the mainstream” and as signs of “group affiliation.”<sup>299</sup> Contemporary evidence confirms Atkinson’s and Kosut’s views that tattoos established immediate and visible bonds between ‘deviant’ individuals and acted as “a conduit of cohesion among small groups (e.g., gangs or subcultures).”<sup>300</sup>

Sanders observes that, in the 1950s and 1960s, “professional criminals, outlaw bikers, users of illegal drugs, prostitutes...and other members of counter-conventional subcultures” used tattoos as “a symbolic poke-in-the-eye” at “law-abiding, hard-working, family-oriented” Americans and as an expression of a collective distaste for many national values.<sup>301</sup> Hebdige argues that subcultures defined themselves through the “collective manipulation of symbols” that established ideological boundaries between the group and mainstream society.<sup>302</sup> Following this line of thought, tattoos expressed “a fundamental tension between those in power and those condemned

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<sup>296</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 132. For further discussion of subculture as a “process which involves the creation, negotiation, and diffusion of subcultural items,” see Gary Alan Fine and Sherryl Kleinman, “Rethinking Subculture: An Interactionist Analysis,” *American Journal of Sociology* 85:1 (July 1979): 18.

<sup>297</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 127.

<sup>298</sup> Atkinson, *Tattooed*, 98-99. See also Paul Sweetman, “Anchoring the (Postmodern) Self: Modification, Fashion and Identity,” *Body & Society* 5:2/3 (1999): 65. For a general definition of subculture, see Fine and Kleinman, “Rethinking Subculture,” 7: the “most widely utilized view of subculture context” as “a core of central values organized into a unified value system...which is distinct from the value system of larger society.”

<sup>299</sup> Kosut, “Tattoo Narratives,” 81. For further discussion of “the affiliative effect,” see Atkinson and Young, “Flesh Journeys,” 128, Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 41-42, and Caplan, “Introduction,” xiv-xv.

<sup>300</sup> Atkinson, *Tattooed*, 158.

<sup>301</sup> Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 18.

<sup>302</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 126-127. See also Fine and Kleinman, “Rethinking Subculture,” 9.

to subordinate positions and second-class lives.”<sup>303</sup> They thus became widely interpreted as “the practice of a rebel.”<sup>304</sup>

Contemporary testimonies support Atkinson’s argument that tattoo shops at the time “became a social club where individuals existing on the fringe of society” could meet as a collective.<sup>305</sup> Ebensten observed that men often “[made] a party of going to the tattooist” and described them “crowding into the small shop, discussing designs, daring each other to choose the most outrageous pictures, cracking coarse jokes and bragging.”<sup>306</sup> He paralleled the atmosphere of many tattoo shops to that of “an initiation ceremony into a secret and desirable society,” which emphasized the affiliative functions of tattoos to outcast groups.<sup>307</sup> Steward likewise discussed clients who came to his shop more to socialize than to receive tattoos.<sup>308</sup> Such evidence supports Hebdige’s arguments that subcultures “do not stand outside the reflexive circuitry of production and reproduction.”<sup>309</sup> It also echoes Foucault’s claims that practices of the self, in this case tattooing, are not removed from power relations but rather follow “models...proposed, suggested, imposed on him by his culture, his society, his social group.”<sup>310</sup> Media and cultural theorist Nikki Sullivan channels Foucault when she argues that to wear a tattoo as an act of resistance “is never

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<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, 132. See also Michael Atkinson, “Pretty in Ink: Conformity, Resistance, and Negotiation in Women’s Tattooing,” *Sex Roles* 47:5/6 (2002): 228.

<sup>305</sup> Atkinson *Tattooed*, 36-37. For discussion of the importance of tattooing practices “in the formation and maintenance of social units,” see W.D. Hamby, *The History of Tattooing and its Significance* (London: H. F. & G. Witherby, 1925), 171.

<sup>306</sup> Ebensten, *Pierced Hearts and True Love*, 67.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-68.

<sup>308</sup> Steward detailed these “hangers-on” as men who “insinuated themselves into my shop-existence” by “helping me out with odd jobs” to participate in an exclusive community. See Steward, *Bad Boys and Tough Tattoos*, 139-149.

<sup>309</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 86. For discussion of the relationship between subcultures and mainstream society as a “dialectical process...implicated in the construction and reconstruction of the other,” see Fine and Kleinman, “Rethinking Subculture,” 12-13. See also Patrick Feury and Nick Mansfield, *Cultural Studies and the New Humanities: Concepts and Controversies* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1997), 175, for discussion of “the point where the dividing line between acceptable and unacceptable, normal and abnormal behavior operates and is policed.”

<sup>310</sup> Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 291.

external to power.”<sup>311</sup> That is, stigmatized subcultures cannot escape the power of dominant social norms but they can resist degradation by reframing understandings of deviance as “a positive characteristic” that strengthens their group identity.<sup>312</sup>

However, as in previous decades, dominant cultural ideals in the 1950s and 1960s pervaded tattooing practices and influenced design elements according to long-standing binary categories. Foucault argues that the “character of power relationships...depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance.”<sup>313</sup> Outcast groups at this time certainly used body ink to express disenchantment with traditional American values yet, as in previous decades, social norms of gender, class, and race continued to influence and regulate tattooing practices.

### **The Persistence of Dominant Social Ideals in ‘Deviant’ Subcultures**

Tattoos as symbols of heteronormative manliness remained popular among marginalized white men in post-WWII America, a time that scholars generally pinpoint as a high point of conventional masculinity.<sup>314</sup> Steward reiterated the general sentiment among his predominantly-male customers that tattoos could “make you feel like a man” because ink on a man’s body “allied its wearer – at least in his own mind – with the tough, the real, the macho.”<sup>315</sup> Tattooists’ business cards and advertisements often exploited the long-established connections between body ink and masculinity, and depicted tattoo wearers as white, heteronormative, and stereotypically ‘manly.’ (Figure 16) Steward remembered that he occasionally heckled and berated nervous male clients by challenging their masculinity, saying: “Aren’t you a 100% red-blooded, snatch-lovin’

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<sup>311</sup> Nikki Sullivan, *Tattooed Bodies: Subjectivity, Textuality, Ethics, and Pleasure* (London: Praeger, 2001), 56.

<sup>312</sup> Adams, “Marked Difference,” 268.

<sup>313</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. R. Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 95, and Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for the Self,” 282. See also Tina Besley and Michael A. Peters, *Subjectivity & Truth: Foucault, Education, and the Culture of Self* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 22-25.

<sup>314</sup> See Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: The Free Press, 1996).

<sup>315</sup> Steward, *Bad Boys and Tough Tattoos*, 45, 57.

American?...You're supposed to be brave.”<sup>316</sup> Steward observed that “a young man’s buddies” proved “the best salesmen for a tattoo” because “they would urge him, badger him” and charge ““you ain’t a man until you do.””<sup>317</sup> Tattooist Burchett similarly claimed that his male customers “wanted to assert their manliness” because tattoos “let even a mummy’s boy feel like a man.”<sup>318</sup> Such evidence reveals that, while tattooed men in these decades largely belonged to lower-class or criminal subcultures, tattoo-wearers most often used body ink to signify their masculine and heteronormative status in line with traditional American values.

On the other hand, tattooing practices in the 1950s and 1960s continued to marginalize women, even as many tattooed men lamented that “the female was appropriating what had up to then been the exclusive property of the male.”<sup>319</sup> Steward perpetuated derogatory stereotypes of tattooed women as “tramps,” “dykes,” or “strip-teasers.”<sup>320</sup> He described his female clientele as mostly “large lank-haired skags, with ruined landscapes of faces and sagging hose and run-over heels.”<sup>321</sup> He stated that “lesbians were another matter” and complained of their “stomach-churning” smell.<sup>322</sup> These comments revealed common discomforts with women’s participation in tattooing practices and indicated, as Christine Braunberger argues, that tattooed bodies generally spoke “from a patriarchal script.”<sup>323</sup> She contends that masculine tattoo connotations “slipped off the skin of women” and exposed the instability of mainstream gender norms.<sup>324</sup> Tattooing practices among women in the 1950s and 1960s, although scarce, disturbed social conventions and

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<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>318</sup> Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, 73-74, 87.

<sup>319</sup> Steward, *Bad Boys and Tough Tattoos*, 45. For further discussion of how tattooed women were viewed as “prostitutes,” “biker chicks,” and later “hippies,” see Braunberger, “Revolting Bodies,” 1-3.

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.*, 127-128.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*, 127-128.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*, 128-129.

<sup>323</sup> Braunberger, “Revolting Bodies,” 1. See also Atkinson, *Pretty in Ink*, 227-229.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

aggravated tensions in subcultural status quos, much as heavily-tattooed women in early twentieth-century freak shows had done. Women's tattooed bodies thus exposed discord in the deviance/normality dialectic and showed that body ink was both influenced by and destabilized conventional understandings of feminine aesthetics and behaviors.

In summary, as predominantly white men of lower-class and criminal status increasingly practiced body ink during the 1950s and 1960s, the affiliative functions of tattoos, as well as the low social positions of most wearers, affected the larger understandings of body ink. Pre-existing stereotypes of tattooed people as social outcasts prone to dangerous behaviors and lifestyles became further entrenched in the general public's views at the time. The link between tattoos and deviance solidified in the first post-war decades due to medical pathologization, public health scares, and the increased use of tattoos by unsavory social groups. Negative stigmas regulated tattoo wearers to poor and/or crime-ridden locations and body ink became nearly invisible to most Americans. According to Braunberger, tattoos became subcultural tokens of "physically transgressive, rootless, loose troublemakers" who rejected conventional values and norms.<sup>325</sup> Contemporary evidence reinforces her arguments. For example, a 1959 *New York Times* article identified tattoos as "lower-class" totems of "crooks and hoodlums" that "will never be considered or appreciated as an art."<sup>326</sup> The future of tattoos would soon disprove such prophecies.

The next chapter traces how counterculture movements of the late 1960s and 1970s drew tattooing practices from the outskirts of 'respectable' society and reintroduced body ink to popular culture. Individuals of higher socio-economic status co-opted the tattoo's embedded messages of

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<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, and Irwin, "Saints and Sinners," 34.

<sup>326</sup> Gay Talese, "Twenty Million Tattooed: Why?" *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, Nov. 22, 1959, 42-49. See also Steward, *Bad Boys and Tough Tattoos*, 10, 179, and Ebensten, *Pierced Hearts and True Love*, 92.

deviance and transformed the “preferred readings” of body ink to suit their own agendas.<sup>327</sup> This shows that the meanings of tattoos changed according to the appearance and function of a design, as well as according to the social position of the inked individual. As members of the upper echelon of American society again began to don body ink, they did not experience the same levels of disapproval as members of outcast groups. New clientele and tattooists actively fought the negative stigmas that had strengthened in the 1950s and 1960s. However, just as in the 1920s and 1930s, tattooing practices among favored social groups that reinforced traditional American values enjoyed greater levels of public acceptance than those of ‘deviant’ subcultures. Individuals of high social status exposed the American public to body ink in ways that both supported and challenged contextual understandings of tattoos, deviance, and normativity.

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<sup>327</sup> For further discussion of “preferred readings” of cultural symbols, see Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” in *Culture, Media, and Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-1979*, ed. Stuart Hall et al. (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 117-127.

### **Chapter Three – The Revival of Body Ink in the 1970s and 1980s**

*What strikes me is the fact that, in our society, art has become something that is related only to objects and not to individuals or to life. That art is something specialized or done by experts who are artists. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object but not our life?*

- Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of the Ethics" (1997)

The "mainstreaming" of tattooing practices among middle- and upper-class white Americans in the 1970s and 1980s, a period that many scholars call the "tattoo renaissance," drastically altered the general public's tolerance and understanding of body ink.<sup>328</sup> New clienteles used 'body art' for personal expression and, according to Sanders, tattooing thus "moved away from its roots as a...disvalued practice pursued by producers and consumers who are marginal to mainstream social groups."<sup>329</sup> The "cult of the individual" atmosphere during these decades, which sociologist Nick Crossley defines as an era of "intense preoccupying self-absorption," led a wider demographic to embrace tattooing practices.<sup>330</sup> The function of tattoos changed for the new clientele base, and body ink became more welcome, even celebrated, in popular culture.

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<sup>328</sup> For "mainstreaming" in subculture theory, see Thompson, *Covered in Ink*, 34. For further discussions of the tattoo renaissance, see the following works: Fenske, *Tattoos in American Visual Culture*, 56-57, defined the renaissance as "a proliferation of discourses assigning personal, ritual, and/or spiritual meaning to the object and practice of tattooing." Webb, *Pushing Ink*, 40-42, associated the "so-called Tattoo Renaissance" with the increase of women into the tattoo community and the enhancement of tattoo designs by "formally trained, first-rate artists." Susan Benson, "Inscriptions of the Self: Reflections on Tattooing and Piercing in Contemporary Euro-America," in *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*, 236, described the "technical, professional and aesthetic developments" that "radically shifted tattooing from a marginal, predominantly masculine practice to a fashionable and decorative art form." Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 18-20, noted how the adoption of practices typical of "marginal, rootless, and dangerously unconventional social groups" by different social groups "as a form of expression" was a key element of the renaissance. For general reference to this era as the tattoo renaissance, see Juliet Fleming, "The Renaissance Tattoo," in *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*, 61-82, Arnold Rubin, "Tattoo Renaissance," in *Marks of Civilization: Artistic Transformations of the Human Body*, ed. Arnold Rubin (Los Angeles, 1988): 233-262, *Tattootime* 2:1 (1983): 64, Marcia Tucker, "Pssst!" 29, Rubin, "Prologue to a History of the Tattoo Renaissance," paper presented at the Art of the Body Symposium, January 1983, at the University of California, Los Angeles, in Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 19-20, Irwin, "Saints and Sinners," 43, Adams, "Marked Difference," 270-271, Caplan, "Introduction," xi-xiii, and Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, *Veils, Nudity, and Tattoos: The New Feminine Aesthetics* (London: Lexington Books, 2015) 120-121.

<sup>329</sup> Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 21.

<sup>330</sup> Nick Crossley, *Reflexive Embodiment in Contemporary Society* (New York: Open University Press, 2006), 16-17. For further discussion of this context, in which individuals are said to "live for the moment...for yourself, not for

The tattoo's historical associations with defiance appealed to countercultural groups at the time, and body ink became a widely-recognized symbol of individuality and anti-establishment frustrations. However, the tattoo's new clientele reframed common understandings of deviance and used body ink to convey "decidedly different meanings" than their stigmatized counterparts projected.<sup>331</sup> That is, lower-class and delinquent subcultures continued to practice tattooing as tokens of affiliation, and the media perpetuated stereotypes of individuals from these groups as "criminals, bikers, and promiscuous women."<sup>332</sup> At the same time, tattoo collectives and professional organizations flourished that supported the ostracization of lower-class practitioners, and excluded tattooing practices among 'deviant' groups from the redefinition of body ink as an art form with professional standards and ethics.<sup>333</sup>

In his later works, Foucault acknowledges the subject's ability to transform him/herself "in an active fashion through practices of the self" and to resist power relations in such a way as to attain happiness.<sup>334</sup> I interpret tattooing as a Foucauldian practice of the self that allows individuals to exercise power, resist social norms, and reclaim their bodies from objectification. Yet, practices of the self are, according to Foucault, "not something invented by the individual himself."<sup>335</sup> Rather, "the subject is constituted...through practices of liberation...on the basis, of course, of a number of rules, styles, [and] inventions to be found in the cultural environment."<sup>336</sup> Tattoos as acts of resistance maintain a symbiotic relationship with power structures, as both influence each

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your predecessors or posterity," see Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979), 5, and Atkinson, *Tattooed*, Chapter 2.

<sup>331</sup> Webb, *Heavily Tattooed*, 8. See also Roberts, "Secret Ink," 153-158, and T.J. Jackson Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities," *The American Historical Review* 90:3 (1985): 588.

<sup>332</sup> "Skin Game," *Life*, vol. 72, no. 9, Mar. 10, 1972, 59.

<sup>333</sup> Thompson, *Covered in Ink*, 34, and Adams, "Marked Difference," 271. For further discussions of internal subcultural divides, see Paul Sweetman, "Anchoring the (Postmodern) Self," 53

<sup>334</sup> Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom," 291. See also Besley and Peters, *Subjectivity & Truth*, 8.

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.

<sup>336</sup> Foucault, "Aesthetics of Existence," 451.

other as they interact. This theoretical framework can explain why many tattoo wearers in the 1970s and 1980s used body ink to protest against American values contextually deemed by many as oppressive, even though, as in previous decades, tattoo trends often supported ideals of normativity.

### **The Rise of Protest Groups and the Popularity of Tattoos**

The rights movements of the late 1960s shook American socio-economic structures, and in this turbulent period the body “became a popular billboard for ‘doing’ identity politics,” according to Atkinson.<sup>337</sup> Subculture theorist Ken Gelder argues that protest groups at the time opposed “the homogenizing forces of mass culture” and encouraged people to forge independent identities outside of “traditional” American conventions.<sup>338</sup> Newspaper articles made clear that “the general breakdown of conformity as a national value” expanded tattooing practices’ client base, so that body ink became, for many, “the last frontier of individuality.”<sup>339</sup> The cultural climate led large numbers of middle- and upper-class Americans to practice tattooing for personal expression.

Sanders noted that, in the late 1970s and 1980s, tattooing practices experienced “a marked demographic shift” towards people “from a higher socio-economic background than the traditional tattooee.”<sup>340</sup> He summarized his findings from extensive field research, saying that the “new tattoo client [is] generally affluent, well educated, and involved in professional and managerial

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<sup>337</sup> Atkinson, *Tattooed*, 42. See also Thompson, *Covered in Ink*, 32.

<sup>338</sup> Ken Gelder, *Subcultures: Cultural Histories and Social Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 130-131. For similar speculation that “it may be that American society has become so homogenized that there is a cry for individual identity which the tattoo provides,” see Gallick, “The Tattoo,” 8-9.

<sup>339</sup> “Tattoos are in: Embarrassment about them is out,” *Observer-Reporter*, Dec. 22, 1977. For further evidence of tattoos redefined as individual self-expression, see “Make Your Mark with your Own Tattoo,” *The Montreal Gazette*, Feb. 4, 1978, “A Tattoo is a Personal Thing,” *Observer-Reporter*, June 15, 1983, “Tattoos are the Trend that Stay with you,” *Star News*, Sept. 21, 1986, and Webb, *Pushing Ink*, 50.

<sup>340</sup> Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 29. See also K. Hewitt, *Mutilating the Body: Identity in Blood and Ink* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997), 15-21.

occupations.”<sup>341</sup> St. Clair reported that, in the 1970s, “you’re liable to walk into a bank and see a guy wearing a dress shirt and a tie and under his clothes, he’s got tattoos.”<sup>342</sup> A 1986 newspaper article confirmed that tattoos had entered the “world of executives.”<sup>343</sup> According to Kang and Jones, the new clientele made “the popular image of the tattooee” as “white, blue collar [and] working class” outdated.<sup>344</sup> St. Clair reported that tattoo shops now “opened in the shopping and business districts of large cities” and reflected the increase of clientele with “disposable income.”<sup>345</sup> This shows that tattooed bodies had become more palatable at large as the practice crossed class lines, and the public’s increased exposure to tattoo wearers affected widely-held notions of deviance and expanded the boundaries of regulated spaces where inked bodies were acceptable.

Thompson argues that to wear tattoos in the 1970s and 1980s amounted to “a statement of opposition against codes regulating acceptable gender, class, and ethnic display” and expressed an “open-mindedness to alternative appearances.”<sup>346</sup> However, she overlooks the varying functions of body ink among different social groups, and the appreciation of diversity that she specifies as the tattoo’s primary meaning in these decades does not hold up in all examples of tattooing practices. Stigmatized groups continued to use body ink to convey messages of subcultural belonging, while more favored social groups reframed the tattoo’s association with rebellion to assert their own causes. This reflects Hebdige’s arguments that symbols “are indeed open to double

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<sup>341</sup> For discussion of the “significant amount of diffusion of interest in and purchasing tattooing...occurring across class lines,” see Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 160.

<sup>342</sup> St. Clair, *Stoney Knows How*, 100. Interestingly, this passage evoked the ability of early twentieth-century circus performers to conceal their skin and remain inconspicuous in everyday interactions.

<sup>343</sup> “Tattoos Edge into World of Executives,” *The Telegraph*, Aug. 21, 1986.

<sup>344</sup> Kang and Jones, “Why Do People Get Tattoos?” 42. Applying Hebdige’s theories, this new clientele “magically recovered the lost sense of working-class community” and appropriated earlier connotations of tattoos for new agendas. See Hebdige, *Subculture*, 56.

<sup>345</sup> St. Clair, *Stoney Knows How*, xxv. For further discussion of client’s financial positions, see Adams, “Marked Difference,” 271.

<sup>346</sup> Thompson, *Covered in Ink*, 34, Atkinson, *Tattooed*, 59.

inflection: to ‘illegitimate’ as well as ‘legitimate’ uses.”<sup>347</sup> Thus, tattooing practices among outcast groups remained highly stigmatized at the time, while body ink among higher-class and educated groups generally experienced greater public acceptance.

A cultural emphasis on individuality in the 1970s and 1980s palpably influenced tattooing trends. Sanders noted that the tattoos of the era’s new clientele often held “deep personal meaning” as symbols of “how one conceives of the self.”<sup>348</sup> Of the 163 tattooed persons that responded to Sanders’ 1979 questionnaire, forty-four percent had acquired a tattoo “for self-expression” and twenty-one percent “for asserting uniqueness and individuality.”<sup>349</sup> A magazine article from 1989 echoed Sanders’ conclusions and identified tattoos as a “unique...means to express one’s identity.”<sup>350</sup> This shows that many Americans employed body ink as a Foucauldian practice of fashioning the self – that is, tattoos empowered individuals to express disagreement with and thus destabilize dominant social power structures.

Pitts argues that, in addition to signifying individualism, tattoos also established “loyalty and belonging” to “an alternative community.”<sup>351</sup> A 1973 newspaper article reported that “various Hippie-Yippie cults” used tattooing as “initiation rites” and simultaneous expressions of individuality and collectivity.<sup>352</sup> Counterculture groups often held these two values in tandem, and many tattoo wearers in these decades displayed both their uniqueness and their belonging to a subculture of like-minded others with their body ink. However, unlike ‘deviant’ subcultures,

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<sup>347</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 18.

<sup>348</sup> Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 46. See also Camacho, “The Tattoo,” 13.

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 2, fn. 6, 180.

<sup>350</sup> Andrea Juno and V. Vale, *Modern Primitives: An Investigation of Contemporary Adornment and Ritual* (San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 1989), 5, and Fenske, *Tattoos in American Visual Culture*, 56. For further discussions of tattoos as individual expression, see Gelder, *Subcultures*, 130, DeMello, *Bodies of Inscription*, 143-151, Atkinson and Young, “Flesh Journeys,” 131, and Camacho, “The Tattoo,” 10. For discussion of tattoos as “self stories” and personal “landmarks,” see Kostut “Tattoo Narratives,” 90-96.

<sup>351</sup> Pitts, *In the Flesh*, 7-8, and Crossley, *Reflexive Embodiment*, 16.

<sup>352</sup> “Salt Used for Removal of Tattoos,” *Eugene Register-Guard*, Apr. 9, 1973.

tattooed white, gender-normative members of mid-to-high social status largely gained approval and, according to Fenske, held “the seat of privilege” in the general public’s views on body modifications.<sup>353</sup>

Many contemporary sources argued that second-wave feminism influenced the course of tattooing practices. Webb attributed the drastic spike in tattooed women at the time to the women’s liberation movement because many feminists used tattoos in “their identity-politics projects.”<sup>354</sup> San Francisco-based tattooist Lyle Tuttle echoed that “women started getting tattooed [in the 1970s] because they wanted their rights, they wanted them right now!”<sup>355</sup> A 1972 *Life* magazine article argued that women appropriated tattoos, a traditional “mark of manhood,” to challenge gender ideals and assert women’s social and political equality.<sup>356</sup>

Numerous sources from print culture documented the increase of women in tattooing practices and showed that, by the mid-1970s, body ink was “not just for men anymore.”<sup>357</sup> One newspaper interviewed local tattooists, many of who reported that “half of [their] customers [were] women.”<sup>358</sup> A 1977 article stated that women, “who not so long ago would no more have entered a tattoo parlor than stood up to a urinal,” flooded body ink businesses and helped to “dissolve the tattoo taboo.”<sup>359</sup> A 1976 *Ms.* magazine article stated that “liberated” women used tattoos to express their “rebellion against traditional gender identification,” a cornerstone of the women’s

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<sup>353</sup> Fenske, *Tattoos in American Visual Culture*, 56.

<sup>354</sup> Webb, *Pushing Ink*, 50.

<sup>355</sup> Tuttle, interview with author, July 5, 2016.

<sup>356</sup> “Skin Game,” 60.

<sup>357</sup> “Tattoos are in: embarrassment about them is out,” *Observer-Reporter*, Dec. 22, 1977, and “Tattoos: Not Just for Men Anymore,” *Lodi News-Sentinel*, June 23, 1981.

<sup>358</sup> “Tattoos: Not Just for Men Anymore,” *Lodi News-Sentinel*, June 23, 1981. For further discussion of women’s participation in tattoo culture, see “Tattoos and Lady,” *Evening Independent*, July 14, 1983, “Tattoos are in: embarrassment about them is out,” *Observer-Reporter*, Dec. 22, 1977, Hill, “Tattoo Renaissance,” 1970, and “Skin Game,” 1972. In *Covered in Ink*, Thompson reported that the feminist movement “opened fifty percent more of the population to the practice” (32).

<sup>358</sup> “Tattooing – No Longer a Masculine Exclusive,” *The Dispatch*, Mar. 16, 1972.

<sup>359</sup> “Tattoos are in: embarrassment about them is out,” *Observer-Reporter*, Dec. 22, 1977, and Hill, “Tattoo Renaissance,” 39.

movement.<sup>360</sup> Mifflin argues that women “rescued [tattoos] from ignominy” and co-opted body ink to express their opposition to long-established notions of womanhood.<sup>361</sup> Body ink, in other words, provided countercultural women a platform to express feminist ideologies.

Gender determinist beliefs at that time largely limited “the second sex” to marginal social participation and value.<sup>362</sup> Kosut argues that tattoos empowered women to take ownership of their bodies, to “reclaim and redefine their femininity,” and to reject “capitalist patriarchal proscriptions that define[d] and regulate[d] [their] appearance.”<sup>363</sup> Atkinson similarly argues that, in the 1970s and 1980s, women began “to redraw themselves through tattooing” and reframed understandings of conventional womanliness.<sup>364</sup> I agree that tattooing practices among educated white women of higher social rank challenged dominant gender ideals that subjugated women to the rule of white, able-bodied American men. However, tattooing practices among women outside of this demographic did not receive the same levels of public favor, which shows that the tattoo’s larger acceptance rested primarily on the status of the wearer in the hierarchy of American society.

A 1972 *Life* magazine article claimed that “these days Barnum would go broke” because “women are getting tattooed all over the place.”<sup>365</sup> This quote implied that women’s increased participation in tattooing practices affected views of inked bodies as deviant spectacles and normalized the appearances of tattooed women in the public realm. As tattooing practices changed, the public’s general understandings of body ink as deviant likewise shifted, and the unstable

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<sup>360</sup> Tucker, “Pssst!” 29.

<sup>361</sup> Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 56. See also Atkinson, *Tattooed*, 43.

<sup>362</sup> “Second sex” refers to Simone de Beauvoir’s 1949 *La deuxième sexe*, a canonical feminist work that explored the subordinate role imposed on women throughout history and the generational conditioning that kept women in an inferior position to men. See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley (New York: Knopf, 1953). For discussions of biological determinism relating to tattooing practices, see Botz-Bornstein, *Veils, Nudity, and Tattoos*, 121.

<sup>363</sup> Kosut, “Tattoo Narratives,” 97-98. See also Botz-Bornstein, *Veils, Nudity, and Tattoos*, 121, and Pitts, “‘Reclaiming’ the Female Body,” 71-72.

<sup>364</sup> Atkinson, *Tattooed*, 43.

<sup>365</sup> “Skin Game,” 59.

boundaries of Foucault's socially-sanctioned spaces gradually loosened. This evidence also positioned early twentieth-century tattooed circus women as the symbolic grandmothers to the tattooed feminists of the 1970s and 1980s, and constructed a historical lineage to legitimate tattooing practices among certain social groups.<sup>366</sup>

Women entered the trade not only as customers but also as tattooists. Webb reported that by the time he penned *Pushing Ink* in the late 1970s, "there [were] dozens of women [tattooists] doing excellent work" because, he surmised, they were "not content merely to receive tattoos" and strove to make their mark on a growing industry.<sup>367</sup> New York tattooist Ruth Marten stated in a 1976 interview that she entered the tattoo profession because "she was disappointed in the quality of the designs put out by commercial shops" and she created "her own 'pieces' especially to suit each client."<sup>368</sup> Here Marten pointed to a change in tattoo trends among the new clientele, who shunned generic 'flash' designs in favor of custom-made body projects. The tattooing practices of middle- and upper-class groups embodied their central values of uniqueness and individuality, which shows that the meanings, functions, and general receptions of body ink fluctuated dependent on the race, class, and gender of the wearer.

As favored social groups began to display body ink, the practice received celebrity endorsement.<sup>369</sup> According to Webb, wearing tattoos in this era "entailed being labeled

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<sup>366</sup> The tattoo community of the 1970s and 1980s embarked on similar heredity projects to align with American tattoo traditions and legitimate tattooing as an age-old practice. Modern scholars have continued this thread and positioned tattooed circus women as early twentieth-century feminists. See Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 30, and Adams and Keene, *Women of the American Circus*, 59.

<sup>367</sup> Webb, *Pushing Ink*, 54-56.

<sup>368</sup> Ruth Marten, interview, *Sang Bleu Magazine*, Dec. 14, 2015. For reference to Marten, see also Tucker, "Pssst!" 33.

<sup>369</sup> Irwin argues that celebrities as cultural "darlings" appeal to large fan bases and influence social values and attitudes. See Irwin, "Saints and Sinners," 43. However, American tattooing practices in the 1970s and 1980s demonstrated more reciprocity than Irwin credits between popular figures and the public. Some celebrities expressed similar countercultural ideologies to their followers through body ink, and fans then mimicked, as art historian Rosemarie Gallick defines, the "designated glamorous hero." See Gallick, "The Tattoo," 9. For more on celebrity mimicry, see Fenske, *Tattoos in American Visual Culture*, 99, and Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony," 572.

‘freak’ ...by those who tend to condemn what they cannot understand.”<sup>370</sup> Hebdige’s theories argue that mainstream groups co-opt discourses and practices labelled deviant to express their social discontent. They struggle “for possession of the sign” and alter its meanings to fit their own agendas.<sup>371</sup> Along this line of thinking, the term ‘freak’ became a positive term in the 1970s and 1980s countercultures to define individuals who “cast off outmoded and restricting standards of thinking, dress, and social etiquette in order to express creatively his relationship to his immediate environment and the social structure as a whole.”<sup>372</sup> Tattooed celebrities acclimated large audiences to inked bodies and shifted the meanings of tattoos from negative to positive deviance.<sup>373</sup>

Archival evidence reveals the influence of popular personalities on the general public’s understandings of tattoos. Tattooist Lyle Tuttle listed notable musicians, actors, and public figures whom he tattooed throughout his fifty-year career, including Henry Fonda, the Allman Brothers, and Janis Joplin.<sup>374</sup> He believed that Joplin “did more for tattooing than anybody” because of her popularity and indiscreet exposure of her inked body.<sup>375</sup> (Figure 17) Webb noted feminist elements in Joplin’s tattooing practices, claiming that she “opened the eyes of the women of America to the fact that a tattoo was not a shameful thing but a mark of beauty and liberation.”<sup>376</sup> Tuttle, on the other hand, gave feminism no place in his interpretation of Joplin’s effect on mainstream fashion.

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<sup>370</sup> Webb, *Heavily Tattooed*, ix.

<sup>371</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 17.

<sup>372</sup> Liner notes to Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention’s first album *Freak Out!* Ryko, 1966, quoted in Braunberger, “Revolting Bodies,” 15.

<sup>373</sup> Braunberger, “Revolting Bodies,” 15-16. For further analysis of positive and negative deviance, see Irwin, “Saints and Sinners.” Importantly, most inked celebrities were white, which may explain their general public acceptance as the new faces of body modifiers.

<sup>374</sup> Hill, “Tattoo Renaissance,” 38-40. For further discussion of Tuttle’s relationship with Joplin, see Tuttle, interview with author, July 5, 2016, and “Skin Game,” 59-61.

<sup>375</sup> Tuttle, interview with author, July 5, 2016. Joplin “happily discussed and displayed her tattoos” for viewers of the Dick Cavett Show in 1969. See Hill, “Tattoo Renaissance,” 38-40. Interestingly, St. Clair claimed that “Lyle was not the first person to tattoo Janis Joplin” claiming that he had done so himself “in Tampa, Florida, two blocks from me, in jail.” He continued that “it’s no honor tattooing Janis Joplin” because “she was drunk” and obnoxious. See St. Clair, *Stoney Knows How*, 146.

<sup>376</sup> Webb, *Pushing Ink*, 50.

Echoing earlier ideas about sexuality as a motive for getting tattooed, he remembered that “she said that anybody that got tattooed liked to...fornicate (but she didn’t say ‘fornicate’)...everybody’s sitting in the audience going, ‘well, I like to fornicate a lot, so I need a tattoo on me.’”<sup>377</sup> In Tuttle’s view, Joplin used tattoos to indicate sexual freedom and prompted her fans to acquire tattoos to convey similar messages.<sup>378</sup> Here tattoos as symbols of non-conventional sexuality became reframed by counterculture groups as a positive trait and thus more socially acceptable.<sup>379</sup> However, promiscuous sexual practices among stigmatized social groups, specifically prostitutes, remained deviant in the eyes of most Americans. This shows that the meanings of tattoos differed based on the social position of the wearer in relation to American values, who then experienced corresponding degrees of public acceptance.

According to Hebdige, subcultural groups use visual cues and fashion to signify a shared belief system, one which often runs counter to dominant social norms and beliefs. Evidence from the 1970s and 1980s confirmed that mainstream groups continued to use tattoos as affiliative symbols, but ones deemed more socially permissible than those of ‘deviant’ subcultures. One of Sanders’ interviewees confirmed that tattoos enabled recognition among like-minded individuals – that is, someone who was tattooed became identified as “a particular kind of person.”<sup>380</sup> A 1970 *Rolling Stone* article echoed Ebensten’s and Steward’s earlier statements that tattoos enabled membership “in a club.”<sup>381</sup> However, in the 1970s and 1980s, this ‘club’ was no longer composed

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<sup>377</sup> Tuttle, interview with author, July 5, 2016.

<sup>378</sup> According to Kang and Jones, tattooed celebrities inspired “many youth to emulate their pop idols” (43). Fans and admirers imitated their icon’s use of tattoos as statements of individuality and occasionally mimicked the image itself. Tuttle reported that he tattooed Joplin’s signature heart tattoo on “hundreds of fans” following her death in 1970. See Hill, “Tattoo Renaissance,” 38-39.

<sup>379</sup> Webb pointed to the sexual revolution of the late 1960s as an important movement that altered the meanings of tattoos. He stated: “As the erotic revolution continues to allow people to come out of their closets, the tattoo revolution is there to grace with color and design the bodies which are moving into the light of freedom.” See Webb, *Pushing Ink*, 108.

<sup>380</sup> Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 50.

<sup>381</sup> Hill, “Tattoo Renaissance,” 39.

mainly of social outcasts and dangerous characters, as in the 1950s and 1960s, but of open-minded, mid-to-high class, ‘respectable’ individuals. The new generation of tattooists and clients separated themselves from stigmatized groups by establishing technical, aesthetic, and hygienic standards, and transformed widespread associations between the meanings of body ink and understandings of deviance.

### **Professionalization and Legitimation**

Like many other tattoo enthusiasts at the time, Webb voiced his “growing concern” with “the ignorance of the general public on the subject [of tattooing]” which, he argued, perpetuated negative stereotypes of body ink practices and wearers.<sup>382</sup> During the 1970s and 1980s, a wealth of literature exposed the inner workings of American tattooing practices and linked the trade to a rich cultural heritage. Many young tattooists came from high socio-economic backgrounds and, like their customers, struggled to differentiate themselves from ‘deviant’ groups.<sup>383</sup> Individuals with university- or art-school backgrounds became tattooists and, Sanders noted, called themselves “artists” in a “professional” trade, redefinitions that suited the values of their more refined clientele.<sup>384</sup> According to Hebdige, mainstream groups appropriate and redefine subcultural symbols by creating “a real network or infrastructure of new kinds of commercial and economic institutions.”<sup>385</sup> The new generation of tattooists and body ink enthusiasts did so with member-

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<sup>382</sup> Webb, *Heavily Tattooed*, ix.

<sup>383</sup> As mentioned, a collective of young tattooists in the 1950s and 1960s objected to unsanitary conditions yet lacked collective effort to formalize professional standards.

<sup>384</sup> Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 19. For example, Webb earned a Master of Fine Arts Degree from NYU. See Webb, *Pushing Ink*, 18. Hardy graduated in 1967 from the San Francisco Art Institute. See St. Clair, *Stoney Knows How*, xxix. For more information on Hardy’s background, see Albert Morse, *The Tattooists*, Frank Robertson, “The New Tattoo,” *City* 7:48 (1974): 36-39, “I See by Your Tattoo,” *San Francisco Magazine*, September 1976: 128, and “Tattooing Skin Pix in Living Color,” *The Advocate*, April 21, 1976, 4.

<sup>385</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 94-96. See also John Clarke, “Style,” in *Resistance Through Rituals*, ed. Stuart Hall et al. (London/New York: Routledge, 1993): 147-161.

based associations and publications, events at various levels from local to international, and technical, artistic, and sanitation standards.

The redefinition of body modification as a matter of personal aesthetic choice repositioned tattoos in cultural debates and provoked legal battles against tattoo bans that existed in most states.<sup>386</sup> Advocates of professionalization pushed for federal regulations of tattooing practices as a concern for public health and in this way distinguished themselves from their stigmatized counterparts who, as Funk charged, “went around infecting people.”<sup>387</sup> Sanders argued that, prior to the 1970s, no discernible tattoo community existed outside of a particular shop.<sup>388</sup> As we have seen in the last chapter, relationships among tattooists were characterized by suspicion, hostility, and closely-guarded secrets. In the 1970s and 1980s, however, many younger tattooists banded together and established professional standards, collective activity, and a hierarchical order within the trade. They changed the solitary and cutthroat nature of the profession and stressed group solidarity and uniform standards as key ways to combat social prejudice and legal restrictions.<sup>389</sup> Professional ‘artists’ reformed body ink practices to undermine dominant social understandings of tattoos as homogenous symbols of deviance. The aesthetic and technical quality of a tattoo visually established the social status of both the wearer and the tattooist, and body ink of higher quality became more appreciated than the work of ‘cheap’ tattooists.

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<sup>386</sup> As of 1979, tattooing remained illegal in Massachusetts, Florida, and Connecticut, to name a few states. Interestingly, contemporaries in Maine noted that “the double standard still flies” in regard to gender as of the late 1970s because the law allowed men to get tattooed but prohibited this practice by women. See Webb, *Pushing Ink*, 72.

<sup>387</sup> Edward Funk, interview by Michael McCabe, *New York City Tattoo*, 75. Interestingly, archival evidence reveals little about specific diseases, with no explicit mention of either Hepatitis C or the HIV virus, both of which became prominent public health concerns during the 1980s. As Funk does in this passage, most sources speak generally about ‘infection’ or ‘disease.’ See “Concern Over Disease Prompts the Closing of Many Tattoo Parlors,” *Kentucky New Era*, Apr. 30, 1973, 12.

<sup>388</sup> Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, ch. 4, fn. 4, 187.

<sup>389</sup> Govenar, “The Changing Image of Tattooing,” 232.

Established tattooists who had fled anti-tattoo cities years before now became empowered by the tattoo's growing popularity and fought for the legitimization and legalization of their profession. In 1976, Eddie Funk formed the National Tattoo Association (NTA), a non-profit organization that, he explained, aimed to "unite tattooers" and "have some power" against harassment from local authorities.<sup>390</sup> The NTA drafted rules for membership that included recommendations "by two (2) Artist members" because the group valued the "quality not quantity" of its tattooists.<sup>391</sup> Professional hierarchies that existed informally in earlier decades became official in the 1970s and 1980s, and tattooists deemed subpar in terms of skills and ethics were excluded from collectives. NTA members received newsletters with industry updates, equipment reviews, and "featured artist" sections for nominal annual dues (fifteen dollars) that, Funk explained, the group saved "to fight whatever steamroller came at us."<sup>392</sup> In the 1970s and 1980s, tattooists directly confronted this 'steamroller' and challenged tattoo bans by asserting First Amendment rights and showing concerns for public safety.

Tattooist Spider Webb launched what he called a "media bust" in 1976 to draw public attention to New York's long-standing tattoo ban that had, up to that point, "remained unchallenged."<sup>393</sup> Webb explained that he tattooed his apprentice in front of the Museum of Modern Art in New York to "make a statement concerning tattooing as an art."<sup>394</sup> (Figure 18) His

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<sup>390</sup> Edward Funk, interview, *Inked Magazine*, Sept. 2012. Earlier initiatives, such as the International Tattoo Artists Association, the National Tattoo Club of the World, the North American Tattoo Club, and the Tattoo Society of New York gained some interest but ultimately failed to establish collective aims and perimeters of member involvement. See Thompson, *Covered in Ink*, 140, and DeMello, *Bodies of Inscription*, 126. As late as 1989, "tattooists frequently recounted tales of...negative official attention," such as "legal difficulties, police harassment, [and] unannounced visits from health department inspectors." See Sanders, interviews with fourteen tattooists, either apprentices or proprietors of their own business, in *Customizing the Body*, ch. 3, fn. 11-16, 93.

<sup>391</sup> National Tattoo Association Website, "History," <http://nationaltattooassociation.com/wp/about-the-nta/>

<sup>392</sup> Edward Funk, interview, *Inked Magazine*, Sept. 2012. For publication and membership dues information, see National Tattoo Association Website, "History." For discussion of the NTA as a "more-or-less formal group" that "provides practitioners with technical information, legal assistance, access to the latest equipment and supplies, and other essential occupational resources," see Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 60-61.

<sup>393</sup> Webb, *Pushing Ink*, 62, 64.

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

demonstration led to a misdemeanor charge issued by police in front of local media and “a pretty large entourage” of spectators.<sup>395</sup> Webb brought the matter to court “on the basis of the First Amendment, which guarantees freedom of expression,” and remembered that he shared a celebratory toast with his apprentice to “our upcoming victory.”<sup>396</sup> Webb’s confidence fizzled, however, when he “was found guilty and given a conditional discharge.”<sup>397</sup> Although he did not win the legal battle, Webb successfully highlighted the discrimination against tattoos as a legitimate art form, as “no prohibitions had been placed on painters, sculptors, and other artists hanging in that building [MOMA].”<sup>398</sup> Webb’s alignment of tattoos with widely accepted forms of artistic expression was geared to legitimize the practice and help dissolve long-standing stigmas of body ink wearers.

Another important legal case echoed the cultural roots of American tattoos. David Yurkew, an established tattooist in Minneapolis, challenged the Minnesota State Fair’s Board of Managers because they repeatedly denied him booth rental at the annual event.<sup>399</sup> Yurkew received his third consecutive rejection in 1980 and brought legal action on the ground that “a tattoo is protected First Amendment activity.”<sup>400</sup> The State Fair Board responded that “the interests of the State in protecting the health of fair patrons...justify the exclusion of tattooing from the fair.”<sup>401</sup> Ultimately, the U.S. District Court of Minnesota supported the Fair Board because the “process of tattooing is not sufficiently communicative so as to implicate the First Amendment” and that “sterile and sanitary conditions were essential for the undermined contention that tattooing was a

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<sup>395</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-71.

<sup>398</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>399</sup> Minnesota did not prohibit tattooing but “left the subject of regulation or prohibition of the practice to local governments.” See 495 F. Supp. 1248 (July 31, 1980), [www.law.harvard.edu/faculty/martin/art\\_law/yurkew.html](http://www.law.harvard.edu/faculty/martin/art_law/yurkew.html).

<sup>400</sup> *Ibid.* See also Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 30-31.

<sup>401</sup> *Ibid.*

First Amendment activity.”<sup>402</sup> This case embodies Foucauldian power relations – body ink wearers and practitioners continued to be institutionally classified as unacceptable, but they objected to their social ostracization and challenged authorities to redefine deviance. The dialectic between normal/abnormal influences the meanings of tattoos and shows the symbiotic relationship between body ink practices and social norms.

Advocates of tattooing practices opposed legal prohibition because it forced tattooists to operate underground where, Webb argued, “there [was] *no* guarantee whatsoever of either cleanliness or competence.”<sup>403</sup> According to Sanders, tattoo collectives, such as the NTA, encouraged tattooists to “work clean,” to “present and maintain a neat and professional work setting,” and to “avoid practices that would perpetuate the negative reputation of tattooing and tattooists.”<sup>404</sup> However, these organizations lacked legal backing to enforce professional rules. Many tattooists supported governmental regulation of the trade because, as Webb argued, it would ensure “a very strict control of quality” through “proper health inspections,” and would also distinguish the “very fine and dedicated artists” from their unprincipled counterparts.<sup>405</sup> Legal support of professional tattooists was meant to defuse the stereotype of tattoo practitioners as law-breaking, dangerous characters, and normalize tattoos as state-regulated procedures. By harnessing the authority of institutions to define deviance, tattooists manipulated power structures to legitimate their trade and positioned themselves not as external to social ideals but rather as bearers and supporters of normative standards and practices.

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<sup>402</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>403</sup> Webb, *Pushing Ink*, 71. Amateur practices outside of the tattoo shop were completely excluded from professional recognition and largely detested by trained tattooists. St. Clair stated that most amateur practitioners operated out of their homes or cars, and would often “undercut” prices of professional tattooists. However, St. Clair argued that the low quality of their work revealed their lack of technical training and finesse. See St. Clair, *Stoney Knows How*, 108-109.

<sup>404</sup> Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 157-158.

<sup>405</sup> Webb, *Pushing Ink*, 65, 71-72.

Negative stereotypes were dissipated further when tattooists opened up access to the tattoo industry's practices through publications and conventions, which educated the public about what Tuttle had called the "rogue trade" of tattooing.<sup>406</sup> Sanders identified "the recent appearance of specialized 'serious' publications dealing with tattooing" as a crucial element in "the legitimization process."<sup>407</sup> The North American Tattoo Club, headed by David Yurkew, introduced *Needlepoint* magazine in 1978 and set the standard for tattoo publications in terms of content and language.<sup>408</sup> Tuttle himself circulated a quarterly, *Tattoo Historian*, in the early 1980s.<sup>409</sup> In 1982, Hardy founded *Tattootime*, a magazine described by Sanders as a "slickly illustrated annual" that focused on stylistic techniques.<sup>410</sup> *Tattoo Archive*, an initiative established in the early 1980s by tattooist C.W. Eldridge, published numerous articles that showcased American tattooing history and memorabilia.<sup>411</sup> Sanders reported that tattoo-trade literature commonly contained scholarly articles about trending imagery, technical developments, and "other issues of interest to academically inclined practitioners and enthusiasts."<sup>412</sup> Furthermore, some tattooists, such as Webb and St. Clair, published memoirs that humanized the authors and disturbed prevailing notions of tattooists as dangerous, immoral characters.

Sanders argued that "key members of the tattoo world" held "a vested interest in expanding the artistic reputation of tattooing" to continue the mainstreaming of the practice and thus ensure their financial livelihoods.<sup>413</sup> He explained that publications emphasized "conventionally accepted

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<sup>406</sup> Tuttle, interview with author, July 5, 2016.

<sup>407</sup> Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 34. See also Thompson, *Covered in Ink*, 147-150.

<sup>408</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>409</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>410</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>411</sup> For reference to *The Tattoo Historian* and *Tattoo Archive*, see Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 34.

<sup>412</sup> Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 34. The preceding paragraph named only the magazines in highest circulation. Other examples include *Tattoo Life* (early 1980s), *Tattoo News* (1983), *Tattoo World* (1984), *Tattoo* (1987), and *Tattoo Advocate* (1988).

<sup>413</sup> Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 35.

values” that appealed to clients of higher socio-economic backgrounds, and redefined “the tattoo mark as nonthreatening, unproblematic, and even admirable.”<sup>414</sup> However, the popularization of the practice was not without contest from some tattooists. St. Clair believed that “a tattoo guild” and trade publications were “going to ruin the business.”<sup>415</sup> Eldridge’s *Tattoo Archive* selectively permitted access to historical tattoo materials, perhaps to maintain intellectual and/or subcultural ownership of the property, and to control how and by whom the information was used.<sup>416</sup> A homogenous challenge to negative tattoo stigmas thus did not occur in this transformative period, but rather evidence shows that tensions and divisions existed between members in tattooing subcultures.

Tattoo literature of the 1970s and 1980s used language that supported the image of tattooing practices as artistic, safe, and far removed from the tendencies of past decades. New discourses referred to tattoos as “body art” and tattoo shops as “studios” or “salons.”<sup>417</sup> Professional “artists” called less-accepted practitioners “scratchers,” which Sanders defined as a derogatory term for those who were “technically incompetent, [who] marked public skin with anti-social symbols, and threatened the physical well-being of their unsuspecting and unsophisticated customers/victims with their unsanitary equipment and work practices.”<sup>418</sup> Popular media often

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<sup>414</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>415</sup> St. Clair, *Stoney Knows How*, 144.

<sup>416</sup> I have encountered these restrictions in my own research. Although the *Tattoo Archive* website claims that “a wealth of knowledge is available just for the asking,” my own request for access to a Broadbent interview was denied for no specific reason other than “we are not interested in being part of your project.” *Tattoo Archive*, <http://www.tattooarchive.com/>, and C.W. Eldridge, email to author, Jan. 27, 2016.

<sup>417</sup> For discussion of a tattoo establishment as ‘studio’, see Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 34. This mirrored the discourse used by Burchett, as he called his establishment a “salon” to differentiate his practices from those performed in seedy tattoo “parlors” and appease his middle and upper-class clientele. See Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, 131.

<sup>418</sup> Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 93. For definition of ‘scratchers’ as tattooists who “are technically unskilled” and “incapable of doing creative custom work” and thus lack artistic vision, see Adams, “Marked Difference,” 271. For further reference to ‘scratchers’, see DeMello, *Bodies of Inscription*, 5-6, Clare Craighead, “(Monstrous) Beauty (Myths): The Commodification of Women’s Bodies and the Potential for Tattooed Subversions,” *Agenda* 25:4 (2011): 44, and Fenske, *Tattoos in American Visual Culture*, 57.

then reproduced the language used in tattoo-trade publications. For example, a 1978 *Los Angeles Times* article stressed the “distinction between tattooists associated with bikers, gangs, and prisoners and the fine art done by professionals for an entirely different clientele.”<sup>419</sup> In short, tattoo enthusiasts of the 1970s and 1980s refined discourses and formalized a professional hierarchy that demoted ‘scratchers’ to the lowest rank of the trade.<sup>420</sup>

Tattoo publications educated the curious public and “first-time tattooees” who, according to Sanders, often entered a tattoo business “with little information about the process or the relative skill of the artist.”<sup>421</sup> Although industry standards remained unenforceable in anti-tattoo jurisdictions, trade literature presented an image of a professional tattooist and sanitary studio that many members of the public came to expect. Webb explained that “a good tattooist will help get you as comfortable as possible by providing not only comfortable chairs and couches but also a supportive and reassuring manner.”<sup>422</sup> Contemporary sources contrasted the intimidating stereotypes of gruff, rough tattooists who preyed on indecisive or intoxicated customers to images of the new generation of “conscientious tattooists...[who] always make sure their clients have firmly made-up minds before the needle starts to buzz.”<sup>423</sup> Tuttle reportedly offered “fatherly advice and/or discouragement to those he thinks may be making a major and permanent mistake.”<sup>424</sup> The same source alleged that he also greeted “all comers with the same unflinching

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<sup>419</sup> “‘Living’ Tattoos Are in Thing Now,” *The Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 25, 1978. For examples of mainstream press on tattoos, see Ed Ward, “Tattoo You,” *New Age Journal* (July/August 1986): 52-64, Tucker “Tattoo: The State of the Art,” *Artforum* (May 1981): 42-47, and Norman Green, “The New World of Tattoos,” *The Hartford Courant*, Jan. 7, 1982, B1.

<sup>420</sup> Irwin, “Saints and Sinners,” 30, and Fenske, *Tattoos in American Visual Culture*, 57.

<sup>421</sup> Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 44.

<sup>422</sup> Webb, *Pushing Ink*, 112. This quote again echoed Burchett’s recollection that he often soothed the anxieties of his female clients with a professional and calm attitude. See Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, 136.

<sup>423</sup> “Skin Game,” 60.

<sup>424</sup> Hill, “Tattoo Renaissance,” 39.

politeness and answer[ed] all questions with scholarly thoroughness.”<sup>425</sup> St. Clair claimed he did a public service by refusing customers who requested certain images that he called “mean as hell,” such as swastikas or profane words.<sup>426</sup> The redefinition of some tattooists as learned and compassionate professionals offered them higher levels of social acceptance and prestige than practitioners who embodied the negative traits that tainted their trade.

Industry literature portrayed a professional’s tattoo shop as “neat and clean [with] the appearance of a home where care is taken to keep the place in order.”<sup>427</sup> Webb demanded that “the space used for the actual tattooing must be immaculate” and defined a sanitary work environment as “the mark of the professional.”<sup>428</sup> Tattooists’ memoirs and magazine articles frequently applied medical language that compared a professional tattoo shop to the office of “the family doctor.”<sup>429</sup> *Rolling Stone* magazine described Tuttle’s shop as “clean and well-lighted” and his work area as “hospital-spotless” and “unstained of the blood of innocent victims.”<sup>430</sup> The association between tattooing and medical professionalism educated the public on how to differentiate between “good” and “bad” tattooists and further amplified the trade’s internal divide.<sup>431</sup> This may reflect an attempt to reclaim the tattoo trade from institutional subjugation by manipulating power relations in favor of ‘good’ practitioners. That is, stress on the medical qualities of tattooing practices shifted the position of tattooists and their customers within existing power structures. A Foucauldian reading

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<sup>425</sup> *Ibid.*, 38. Both Webb and St. Clair reported the barrage of questions they answered to appease hesitant customers. See Webb, *Pushing Ink*, 127, and St. Clair, *Stoney Knows How*, 39.

<sup>426</sup> St. Clair, *Stoney Knows How*, viii.

<sup>427</sup> Webb, *Pushing Ink*, 145, 149.

<sup>428</sup> *Ibid.*, 149. See also Don Ed Hardy, “The Mark of the Professional,” *Tattootime* 1:3 (1982): 47.

<sup>429</sup> *Ibid.*, 149. See also “Skin Game,” 60.

<sup>430</sup> Hill, “Tattoo Renaissance,” 38.

<sup>431</sup> Many primary sources used discourses of “good” and “bad” to reference tattoo practices that distinguished professional calibers of tattooists. For further discussion, see “Tattooing Making a Comeback?” *Beaver County Times*, Jan. 3, 1983, A1, A8, in which an unnamed tattooist outlined the characteristics of professional tattooists and claimed that “there are only one hundred *good* artists left in the US” (author’s emphasis).

implies that tattoo practitioners and wearers no longer required containment as ‘deviant’ because they participated in approved discourses and supported the authority of institutional standards.

Body ink devotees in the 1970s and 1980s strove to distance themselves from the practice’s unsavory history among lower-class social groups and criminal stereotypes, but embraced other elements of the American tattoo’s past. This selectivity reflects Hebdige’s theories of the appropriation of subcultural elements by mainstream groups, who transform the meanings of stigmatized symbols according to their own value system. He argues that the differences between mainstream groups and subcultures “are reflected not only in the objects of subcultural style, but in the signifying practices which represent those objects and render them meaningful.”<sup>432</sup> In this way, embedded cultural meanings of tattoos as deviant can be “purposefully distorted or overthrown” by mainstream groups to support their central ideologies.<sup>433</sup>

The new generation of tattooists and clients claimed and refashioned certain aspects of the American tattoo’s historical associations with deviance but discarded others that conflicted with their higher-class values. Multiple magazine articles, with titles such as “Early Tattoo Attractions,” “The History of the Tattoo Machine,” and “Skin Deep: A Brief History of Tattoos,” legitimated the trade as a deeply-rooted ‘all-American’ practice.<sup>434</sup> Published interviews with early twentieth-century tattooed circus performers idolized them by portraying them as pioneers in the long legitimization processes of tattoos as socially-valued art.<sup>435</sup> The San Francisco Tattoo Art Museum’s Hall of Fame, opened by Eldridge and Hardy in 1981, recognized and celebrated key figures in the American history of tattoos, such as Betty Broadbent and Charlie Wagner.<sup>436</sup>

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<sup>432</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 127.

<sup>433</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>434</sup> C.W. Eldridge, “Early Tattoo Attractions,” *Tattootime* 1:2 (1981): 10-12, “The History of the Tattoo Machine,” *Tattootime* 2:1 (1983): 4-14, and Jocelyn Paine, “Skin Deep,” *Mankind* 6 (May 1979): 18.

<sup>435</sup> Aurre, “Interview with Betty Broadbent,” 40, and Lewis, *Carnival*, 156.

<sup>436</sup> Tattooed circus performer Betty Broadbent was the first member of this Hall of Fame. Articles reported “over three hundred guests, including television camera crews from the major networks, crowded through the museum to

At the same time, tattooists transformed the link between tattoos and criminality to suit their own purposes. Historian Jane Caplan writes that tattoo advocates in the 1970s and 1980s excavated American tattoo history to “forge a chain of fixed historical and cultural markers to anchor and legitimize the practice” and to “rescue tattooing from its dishonorable and penal reputation.”<sup>437</sup> Tattoo-trade literature strove to reposition body ink as a valued American practice. For example, a 1987 issue of *Tattootime* explained that “in decadent phases, the tattoo became associated with the criminal [and] those who chose to live beyond the norms of society.”<sup>438</sup> However, this article argued that “the realm of the outlaw has been redefined” and “the power of the tattoo” has shifted to the new generation of tattooists and enthusiasts.<sup>439</sup> Here we see how transformations in the meanings of deviance occurred – tattooists reframed enduring negative stereotypes in the tattoo’s history to position themselves as a group of open-minded, reputable individuals. Hebdige argues that “violations of the authorized codes through which the social world is organized and experienced have considerable power to provoke and disturb.”<sup>440</sup> In this sense, the redefinition of body ink and its American history complicated long-established associations between tattoos and criminality, and blurred the boundaries of deviance and normalcy.

In addition to producing trade literature and redefining discourses, tattoo collectives also planned public events that celebrated tattoos as legitimate art with a rich American heritage. Tattooist Ed Hardy organized the Tattoo Expo of 1982, which many identified as the first official American tattoo convention.<sup>441</sup> The Expo offered informational and demonstrational workshops,

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view her photos and memorabilia which were displayed.” See Aurre, “Interview with Betty Broadbent,” 40. Furthermore, Tuttle’s Tattoo Art Museum (San Francisco) opened in 1981 and Funk’s National Tattoo Museum (Philadelphia) opened in 1983. See Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, ch. 5, fn. 7, 193.

<sup>437</sup> Caplan, Introduction to *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*, xiii.

<sup>438</sup> Edmund G. Brown Jr., *Tattootime* 2:1 (1983): 64.

<sup>439</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>440</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 91.

<sup>441</sup> DeMello, *Encyclopedia*, 648-649, and Fenske, *Tattoos in American Visual Culture*, 43. Funk organized the first gathering of tattooists in Philadelphia, in 1974, but this meeting lacked clear objectives and ultimately became more

showcased tattooing supplies and equipment, and staged contests that celebrated the artistic and technical skill of increasingly well-known tattooists.<sup>442</sup> DeMello argues that the Expo was “wildly successful” in terms of participation and effectively “spread the idea of tattoos as an art form.”<sup>443</sup> She further notes that such tattoo conventions provided “a space for the enactment of the tattoo community,” and contemporary evidence often referred to the sense of comradery at tattoo events.<sup>444</sup> Tattooist Madame Chinchilla viewed conventions as “an occasion to mix with cohorts, see and show tattoos, go to seminars and...communicate on like-minded subjects.”<sup>445</sup> Funk echoed the subcultural tones of Chinchilla’s statement, saying that tattoo conventions aimed “to get everybody together and be a union.”<sup>446</sup> Conventions provided large-scale opportunities to display and celebrate tattoos as art, and these events edged tattooing towards widespread social acceptance.

Tattoo contests were particularly significant to conventions at the time. According to Fenske, staged contests evoked “the prior cultural significance” of circus freak shows and strengthened the link between tattooing practices in the 1970s and 1980s and the less “seedy” histories of body ink in America.<sup>447</sup> Tattoo contests reframed the meanings of tattooed bodies from being spectacles of abnormality to being exalted for their aesthetic appearance and technical skill.<sup>448</sup> I argue further that the resignification of tattooed bodies through implicit references to the 1920s and 1930s circus subculture enabled tattoo enthusiasts to position the practice as a valued American tradition. Fenske describes contests as “premier events” in which tattooed bodies

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of a social night for local tattooists. See Thompson, *Covered in Ink*, 140-141. Conventions united young members of the tattoo community but “tended to alienate” older tattooists. St. Clair, a self-defined “Old Schooler,” avoided conventions because he felt the public exposure damaged the trade. See St. Clair, *Stoney Knows How*, xxvi, 64, 69.

<sup>442</sup> Fenske, *Tattoos in American Visual Culture*, 43, and Gallick, “The Tattoo,” 6.

<sup>443</sup> DeMello, *Encyclopedia*, 649.

<sup>444</sup> DeMello, *Bodies of Inscription*, 27, and Fenske, *Tattoos in American Visual Culture*, 43.

<sup>445</sup> Madame Chinchilla, *Stewed, Screwed and Tattooed* (Fort Bragg, California: Isadore Press, 1997), 62.

<sup>446</sup> Edward Funk, interview, *Inked Magazine*, Sept. 2012.

<sup>447</sup> Fenske, *Tattoos in American Visual Culture*, 58, 68, and Tuttle, interview with author, July 5, 2016.

<sup>448</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-47, 58.

paraded onstage before large audiences as well as a judging panel “composed of prominent tattoo artists.”<sup>449</sup> Funk compared tattoo contests to mainstream awards shows: “The movie industry had their conventions and gave awards to the good actors and to the supporting actors, for the scenery, for the ideas.”<sup>450</sup> He believed that “if we could do that for tattooing, there would be no end, no limits to where we could go.”<sup>451</sup> Tattoo contests redefined the inked body as a display of art rather than deviance, a central value among tattoo advocates at the time.

Gender and performance theorist Clare Craighead argues that, in the 1970s and 1980s, tattoos were changed from signifiers of criminal tendencies to forms of “creative (often critical) expression” that challenged “oppressive cultural ideology regarding what counts as beautiful and artistic.”<sup>452</sup> Many new-generation tattooists contributed to the ongoing stigmatization of low-class, less-educated tattooists by emphasizing technical and artistic abilities, and created clear hierarchical divisions within the trade. Sanders concluded from his interviews with fourteen “established tattooists” that many “did not see themselves as being responsible for the continued negative public image of tattooing.”<sup>453</sup> The interviewees, notably all white men with various kinds of art training, “focused blame on the most marginal members of the occupation” who were “driven largely by greed” and felt “no concern for their public reputation.”<sup>454</sup> The redefinition of tattoos as art in the 1970s and 1980s was geared to render body ink palatable to many Americans and increased the general acceptance of tattooed bodies that displayed ‘good’ ink.

In his legal battle against the Minnesota State Fair, Yurkew maintained that he was “an artist” and that tattoos were “an art form.”<sup>455</sup> Tattoo-trade publications similarly defined body ink

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<sup>449</sup> Fenske, *Tattoos in American Visual Culture*, 43.

<sup>450</sup> Edward Funk, interview, *Inked Magazine*, Sept. 2012.

<sup>451</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>452</sup> Craighead, “(Monstrous) Beauty (Myths),” 44, and Atkinson and Young, “Flesh Journeys,” 138.

<sup>453</sup> Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 92-93.

<sup>454</sup> *Ibid.*, 92-93.

<sup>455</sup> 495 F. Supp. 1248 (July 31, 1980).

“as a fine art” and claimed that “highly trained and skilled practitioners...are infusing this traditional discipline with new vigor and meaning.”<sup>456</sup> Webb defined tattoos as simultaneously “decorative art” and “a rebellious and antiauthoritarian act.”<sup>457</sup> He aligned tattooing with more accepted mediums, such as painting or photography, which made bold personal and political statements “to defy the status quo.”<sup>458</sup> Middle- to upper-class tattooists and clients thus attempted to elevate the practice from its stigmatized origins and edged body ink into more widely accepted realms of art.

By the late 1970s and 1980s, tattoos teetered on the brink of fine art status and appeared in public spaces beyond tattoo studios and conventions, such as art galleries and museums. Numerous exhibitions supported Sanders’ claim that “the larger art world has begun to take notice” of tattoos as body art.<sup>459</sup> In 1976, the Chuck Levitan Gallery in New York displayed photographs of Webb’s tattooed clientele.<sup>460</sup> Photographer Jeff Crisman exhibited images of tattooed bodies at the Chicago Public Library Cultural Centre in 1983 and at the Arc Gallery in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1986.<sup>461</sup> A 1986 tattoo photography exhibit at the Peabody Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, an agency that “set out explicit classifications of artistic work.”<sup>462</sup> This shows that tattooing practices became increasingly accepted by governmental and other institutions as legitimate and thus as endorsable examples of American art and culture. The redefinition of tattoos as valid forms of artistic expression shifted the meanings

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<sup>456</sup> Brown, *Tattootime* 2:1 (1983): 64.

<sup>457</sup> Webb, *Heavily Tattooed*, xi.

<sup>458</sup> *Ibid.*, xi. Interestingly, St. Clair opposed this parallel and instead argued that “tattooing is an art to itself. It doesn’t go with anything else.” See St. Clair, *Stoney Knows How*, 135.

<sup>459</sup> Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 34. See also Irwin, “Saints and Sinners,” fn. 5, 42.

<sup>460</sup> Webb, *Pushing Ink*, 183.

<sup>461</sup> “Arc Gallery News,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, June 12, 1986, 21.

<sup>462</sup> Paul DiMaggio, “Classification in Art,” *American Sociological Review*, 52:4 (1987): 452. Sanders also briefly referenced other exhibitions of tattoo art, such as at the Oakland Art Museum (1978) and the Sixth Sense Gallery in New York City (1987), in *Customizing the Body*, ch. 5, fn. 7, 193.

of body ink and influenced the levels of acceptance experienced by tattoo wearers of mid-to-high socio-economic backgrounds.

Mainstream publishers at the time responded to the tattoo's popularity and marketed coffee-table books with color photographs and articles "by accepted art critics that situate tattooing within the larger context of Western art history," according to Sanders.<sup>463</sup> Furthermore, academic conferences discussed the cultural meanings and historical implications of American tattooing practices. Sanders attended the 1983 "Art of the Body" symposium at the Museum of Cultural History at UCLA with anthropologists, art historians, dermatologists, sociologists, and "various other participants with conventional academic credentials."<sup>464</sup> Articles in scholarly periodicals and journals redefined tattooing practices further towards mainstream acceptance.<sup>465</sup> Increased public exposure shifted understandings of body ink towards recognition as legitimate art and largely exonerated tattooing practices among middle- to upper-class white Americans from negative stigmas.

English scholar Juliet Fleming argues that the elevation of tattoos into the realm of fine art supported the "middle-class aesthetic values" of the expanded customer base and separated their practices from those of criminal groups.<sup>466</sup> Irwin adds that, simultaneously, the increased cost of professional tattoos further excluded marginalized members of society from the body art world.<sup>467</sup> Hebdige's theories of how subcultural symbols enter "the commodity form" in mainstream significance effectively explain how groups of higher social value reconceptualized body ink from

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<sup>463</sup> Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 34. See also Stephan Richter, *Tattoo* (London: Quartet, 1985), Michel Thevoz, *The Painted Body* (New York: Rizzoli, 1984), and Chris Wroblewski, *Skin Show: The Art and Craft of Tattoo* (New York: Dragon's Dream, 1981).

<sup>464</sup> Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 160.

<sup>465</sup> Some examples include Clinton Sanders, "Tattooing as Fine Art and Client Work: The Art/Work of Carl (Shotsie) Gorman," *Appearance* 12 (1978): 12-13, and Marcia Tucker, "Tattoo: The State of the Art," *Artforum* (May 1981): 42-47.

<sup>466</sup> Fleming, "The Renaissance Tattoo," 61-2.

<sup>467</sup> Irwin, "Saints and Sinners," 29.

an act of defiance to one of consumerism.<sup>468</sup> However, tattooing practices continued to derive value from links to rebellious subcultures, which shows the nuanced relationship between the meanings of tattoos and understandings of deviance and normativity.

Adams argues that the increasing acceptance of tattoos as art may have “sanitized” the practice of negative stigmatization and rendered tattoos “fit for middle-class consumption.”<sup>469</sup> Magazine articles discussed the “purely decorative” functions of tattoos and positioned the tattoo as a commodity, alongside a “piece of jewelry” and part of a “new wardrobe.”<sup>470</sup> Contemporary sources stressed the practicality of everlasting ink. One woman explained that she “used to get soap stuck in the many antique rings she wore” but overcame this annoyance when she tattooed decorative bands on her fingers.<sup>471</sup> St. Clair argued that a tattoo was “more valuable than jewelry” because, unlike conventional trinkets, it could not be lost or stolen.<sup>472</sup> The emphasis on tattoos as practical personal decorations mirrored advertisements for permanent makeup in the 1920s and 1930s, similarly practiced by upper-class, white Americans. Both approaches to body ink aimed to normalize tattooing among certain social groups, and stressed the beauty and practicality of tattoos as aesthetic enhancement. In both eras, tattoo wearers from favored social groups viewed their body ink, as Sanders observed, “on par...with other items intended to enhance a particular ‘look’” and “fit into a style.”<sup>473</sup> Hebdige argues that mainstream groups alter the subcultural meanings of symbols from the ritual and affiliative to the vendible and decorative, and thus render signs as deviant to some observers and as fashion items to others.<sup>474</sup>

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<sup>468</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 3-9.

<sup>469</sup> Adams, “Marked Difference,” 268. For discussion of “the emergence of tattoos amongst the middle class, as consumer products,” see Craighead, “(Monstrous) Beauty (Myths),” 43-44. For further reading, see Kosut, “An Ironic Fad,” 1036, DeMello, *Bodies of Inscription*, 4, and Gelder, *Subcultures*, 131.

<sup>470</sup> “Skin Game,” 61. See also Hill, “Tattoo Renaissance,” 39.

<sup>471</sup> *Ibid.*, 61. See also Tucker, “Pssst!” 33.

<sup>472</sup> St. Clair, *Stoney Knows How*, 102. See also Tucker, “Pssst!” 33.

<sup>473</sup> Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 50, and Sweetman, “Anchoring the (Postmodern) Self,” 55.

<sup>474</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 19.

Some tattooists capitalized on the aesthetic allure of tattoos to American consumer culture and released clothing and fashion accessories emblazoned with tattoo designs. Tuttle remembered that he quickly sold out of his T-shirt designs at a San Francisco fashion show in the early 1970s because “all the young people [were] influenced by trends and fads.”<sup>475</sup> He also released a “body shirt printed with an exact replica of [his] tattoos” marketed to “those dubious about the charms of a permanently stenciled skin.”<sup>476</sup> (Figures 19 and 20) A 1972 *Life* magazine article emphasized that Tuttle’s shirt could be “slipped over the head for an instant of glory and then, with a change of heart, returned to the drawer.”<sup>477</sup> The same article argued that tattoos as fashion items required serious consideration because “they’re a cinch to get” but, unlike other personal decorations, “not [easy] to get rid of.”<sup>478</sup> Disclaimers of the tattoo’s permanence in these decades echoed sources from the 1920s and 1930s on tattoo regret and discouraged the general public from spur-of-the-moment purchases of body ink. Many sources from the 1970s and 1980s granted positive attention to popular tattooing practices but predicted that the trend would pass, as most fashion fads eventually did.<sup>479</sup>

Some tattoo professionals and enthusiasts bemoaned the practice’s newfound popularity in the 1970s and 1980s because, in Tuttle’s words, “there was people getting tattooed just to be trendy.”<sup>480</sup> Overabundance devalued tattoos as unique artistic expressions and, according to

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<sup>475</sup> Tuttle, interview with author, July 5, 2016.

<sup>476</sup> “Skin Game,” 58-60.

<sup>477</sup> *Ibid.*, 58-60.

<sup>478</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>479</sup> *Ibid.*, 58-61, discussed “painless [and temporary] alternatives” to tattoos surfaced in popular culture and provided “those who were too convention-bound to so alter their bodies” with a tattooed aesthetic. Temporary tattoos remained “big sellers with those who want to be with it today, but would just as soon be with something else tomorrow.” This replica “comes off with nail polish remover or cold cream” when the taste of the wearer changed. Temporary tattoos illuminated the appeal of a tattooed appearance and the consumerist nature of American society that transformed tattoos into commodities; such products rendered a tattooed appearance disposable and “as easy as changing your nail polish.” For further discussion of temporary tattoos and their cultural significance, see Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 45, and Gelder, *Subcultures*, 145.

<sup>480</sup> Tuttle, interview with author, July 5, 2016.

DeMello, reduced them to “an entirely mundane, mainstream practice” almost “considered passé.”<sup>481</sup> Hebdige argues that a style’s original meaning “is inextricably bound up with the process of production, publicity and packaging” and “inevitably leads to the diffusion of the subculture’s subversive power.”<sup>482</sup> However, I argue that tattoos did not lose value so much as change meanings. My research shows that body ink remained important symbols to the various social groups who used them for distinct purposes and, while meanings certainly varied, the tattoo’s significance to wearers of all demographics rarely diminished.

Tattoos as consumer items conveyed complex class divisions within both the tattoo trade and larger American society. Well-executed tattoos by professional artists cost more money than tattoos from lower-class practitioners and became visible markers of the wearer’s class identity. Cost reflected quality and embodied what Atkinson calls the “supermarket era” of tattooing practices, as consumers could “shop around” for products that best suited their tastes, needs and income.<sup>483</sup> Expensive products signified affluence and thus the aesthetic and technical quality of one’s body ink indicated their social status. Individuals with high-quality tattoos generally experienced greater levels of social acceptance than those with poorly-executed ink – the former reflected practices of favored social groups while the latter perpetuated negative stereotypes.

To sum up, people of mid-to-high socio-economic status who wore body ink in the 1970s and 1980s brought “their own specific class ethos, aesthetic and cultural capital” to the practice and used tattoos for “different meanings [than] the working class.”<sup>484</sup> The meanings, functions,

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<sup>481</sup> DeMello, *Bodies of Inscription*, 191. For further insight that tattoo “collectors and artists suggest that the popularization of tattoos threatens its fringe status,” see Irwin, “Saints and Sinners,” 38.

<sup>482</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 95.

<sup>483</sup> See Atkinson, *Tattooed*, 47-51, for discussion of the “supermarket era.” Of note, he defined this era from the late 1980s to the present (2003) and focused on the 1990s. However, the trends in the tattoo community and culture from the late 1970s through the 1980s fit his analysis of oversaturation. For further discussion of “the supermarket of style” in postmodern fashion, see T. Polhemus, *Streetstyle: From Sidewalk to Catwalk* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), and Sweetman, “Anchoring the (Postmodern) Self,” 52, 55.

<sup>484</sup> Crossley, *Reflexive Embodiment*, 36.

and aesthetics of tattooing practices among higher-class social groups generally received greater levels of public approval than those of ‘deviant’ subcultures, who remained heavily stigmatized. Mainstream participants selectively appropriated the historical meanings of tattoos. As Kosut observes, the new generation of body ink enthusiasts largely rejected the tattoo’s long-standing criminal connotations but embraced the “aura of cool and rebellion about them,” and refashioned the tattoo’s subcultural symbolism to fit their value systems.<sup>485</sup> Tattoos became decorative tokens of individuality and nonconformance, but ironically the new clientele’s choice of size, location, and imagery typically supported American ideals of gender, race, and class. This shows the reciprocal relationship between tattoos and understandings of deviance – tattooing practices simultaneously supported and destabilized dominant power relations that regulated large-scale concepts of normativity and abnormality.

### **The Persistence of Conventional Norms**

Throughout the twentieth century, as we have seen, men used tattoos in what Sanders described as “public displays of masculinity.”<sup>486</sup> Traditional patriotic and religious imagery remained popular even as new motifs emerged in the 1970s and 1980s and notions of masculinity evolved. Designs of eagles, presidential portraits, flags, and scenes from American “old West” lore and biblical stories remained popular selections among men.<sup>487</sup> Webb echoed Parry’s interwar view when he argued in 1979 that “patriotic images...offset the shocking effects of tattooing on the observer” because “it was hard to quarrel with the fervor that inspired their acquisition.”<sup>488</sup> Sanders reported that, from the 1970s on, tattoo designs of “snakes, bloody daggers, skulls, dragons, grim reapers, black panthers, and birds of prey” entered in “the conventional repertoire

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<sup>485</sup> Kosut, “An Ironic Fad,” 1043.

<sup>486</sup> Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 50. See also Kang and Jones, “Why Do People Get Tattoos?” 44.

<sup>487</sup> Webb, *Pushing Ink*, 41, and Webb, *Heavily Tattooed*, 107.

<sup>488</sup> Webb, *Heavily Tattooed*, 107-108.

of tattoo designs chosen by men.”<sup>489</sup> These tattoo trends similarly supported enduring concepts of manliness as strong, assertive, and dominant. Body ink that supported masculine ideals generally enjoyed higher levels of social acceptance than unconventional images. Gender-normative tattoo designs popular in groups of high social ranking (i.e. affluent, heteronormative, white men), which may have signified an attempt to deflect pervasive negative stereotypes of tattoo wearers, reveal the symbiotic relationship of resistance and conformance in Foucault’s later views of power relations.

Evidence showed that men continued to apply large tattoos to visible parts of their bodies, such as “the arms, biceps, and chest.”<sup>490</sup> Sanders reported that over seventy percent of the tattooed men he interviewed had “their work placed on their arm.”<sup>491</sup> Webb argued that men’s typical location for their body ink reflected “a peacock syndrome.”<sup>492</sup> That is, men opted for “tattoos which will be visible” to “appear more manly” and to “attract attention in general.”<sup>493</sup> For those reasons, men’s body ink practices rarely strayed from imagery and locations that supported American values of heteronormative masculinity.

At the same time, white men also chose imagery that evoked the tattoo’s roots in non-white, non-modern cultures to assert their conventional manliness. Sanders noted the growing popularity of “neo-tribal” tattoos that incorporated the traditional designs of “Pacific island cultures” and reframed the tattoo’s racialized origins in a positive light.<sup>494</sup> He argued that American men, mostly “of European descent” (i.e. white), donned this style to channel images of “warrior

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<sup>489</sup> Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 50.

<sup>490</sup> Webb, *Pushing Ink*, 41. For discussion that “the designs chosen by men are usually larger than those favoured by women,” see Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 50.

<sup>491</sup> Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 47. See page 49 for full chart of body locations tattooed by men and women respondents that included “arm/hand, leg/foot, chest/breast, hip, back/shoulder, genital, face/neck, abdomen, other.”

<sup>492</sup> Webb, *Pushing Ink*, 41, 76.

<sup>493</sup> *Ibid.*, 41, 76.

<sup>494</sup> Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 20.

tribesmen” in “Hawaiian, Maori, [and] Samoan” cultures.<sup>495</sup> The new tattoo clientele of the 1970s and 1980s adopted elements of the ‘primitive’ meanings of tattoos that best suited their interests, specifically to “denote the bearer’s status or social identity” and to “demonstrate their bravery to other members of the group.”<sup>496</sup>

Furthermore, the Neo-Primitive movement of the late 1970s, headed by renowned American body modifier Fakir Musafar, adopted ‘tribal’ styles and refashioned dominant notions of primitiveness as counter-progressive to ‘civilized’ cultures. Musafar reversed the paradigm and positioned body modifications as practices geared to overcome the oppressive forms of normativity that characterized the Western world.<sup>497</sup> In their introduction to *Modern Primitives: An Investigation of Contemporary Adornment and Ritual* (1989), body modification enthusiasts V. Vale and Andrea Juno described a primitivist as “a person who prefers a way of life which, when judged by one or more of the standards prevailing in his society, would be considered less ‘advanced’ and less ‘civilized.’”<sup>498</sup> Neo-Primitives viewed tattooing practices as positive attempts to “achieve an integration of the poetic and the scientific imaginations in our lives” and to negate “the stifling and life-thwarting” effects of modernity.<sup>499</sup> One member of the group explained, “we are not interested in the return *to* the primitive, we are interested in the return *of* the primitive.”<sup>500</sup> The NP movement reframed the racially-stigmatized origins of tattooing practices and positioned non-modern, non-white cultures as “the state of grace” from which the Western world had fallen.<sup>501</sup> The tattoo’s past shifted from stigma to value among some groups who, in Hebdige’s rationale, manipulated the meanings of tattoos to align with their central values.

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<sup>495</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11, 20.

<sup>496</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

<sup>497</sup> Juno and Vale, *Modern Primitives*, 4.

<sup>498</sup> *Ibid.*, 4. See also Sullivan, *Tattooed Bodies*, 37-38.

<sup>499</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>500</sup> Atkinson and Young, “Flesh Journeys,” 128.

<sup>501</sup> Juno and Vale, *Modern Primitives*, 5.

Although men often typically opted for large tattoos in visible locations, Irwin argues that in certain social settings concealability remained important “to escape disdain and disregard.”<sup>502</sup> Sanders argued that an arm tattoo “allows both casual public display” and “easy concealment” if the wearer predicted “critical judgment from someone whose negative reaction could have untoward consequences (most commonly, an employer).”<sup>503</sup> Tuttle admitted that he avoided tattoos “on my hands or my face or my neck,” like “most of the older tattoo guys,” so that he could easily cover his body ink with conventional clothing.<sup>504</sup> In an interview, he admitted, “I don’t own one short-sleeve shirt” because “you get into a lot of scrutiny with tattoos” and people “look down their nose at you, you know?”<sup>505</sup> Irwin argues that inked men, including tattooists like Tuttle, often wore long-sleeved shirts and pants when they had to “interact with non-tattooed people who view[ed] tattoos negatively.”<sup>506</sup> Roberts agrees that many tattoo wearers dressed “to pass as normal and prevent damage to their social identity.”<sup>507</sup> Men thus opted for masculine tattoo imagery, size, and location but retained the ability to cover their skin in public. This shows that men of higher socio-economic backgrounds with gender-normative tattoos experienced higher levels of public acceptance but continued to encounter negative reactions based on long-standing stigmas.

Braunberger argues that body ink allowed women to use “a secret language stolen from men” for self-expression and aesthetic decoration.<sup>508</sup> Tattooed women continued to fight derogatory stereotypes that largely derived from the predominantly masculine roots of American tattooing practices. Throughout the twentieth century, we have seen that for women only tattoos that supported ‘respectable’ femininity received any level of public acceptance, and the 1970s and

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<sup>502</sup> Irwin, “Saints and Sinners,” 37-38.

<sup>503</sup> Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 50.

<sup>504</sup> Tuttle, interview with author, July 5, 2016.

<sup>505</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>506</sup> Irwin, “Saints and Sinners,” 37.

<sup>507</sup> Roberts, “Secret Ink,” 162.

<sup>508</sup> Braunberger, “Revolting Bodies,” 4.

1980s differed only in terms of design trends. In this period, women veered from earlier practices of tattoos as cosmetic enhancement, but, as Sanders noted, still applied tattoos chiefly “to enhance and beautify the body.”<sup>509</sup> Tuttle stated that women’s decorative tattoos suited, according to him, feminine inclinations to “curl their hair, paint their toenails, and mess with everything in between.”<sup>510</sup> Irwin observes that women frequently confronted “the same expectations, stereotypes, and sexually explicit comments inside the [tattoo] subculture as they faced in conventional life.”<sup>511</sup> Women’s tattoo trends in these decades continued to support established gender norms and beauty standards, and those who applied gender-appropriate body ink experienced higher levels of social tolerance than those with ‘inappropriate’ tattoos.

Atkinson argues that when women adopted feminine imagery, they often received “favorable attention from others (e.g., parents, peers, boyfriends, husbands).”<sup>512</sup> Sources from the 1970s and 1980s showed that women generally preferred “the gentle imagery of nature and mythology (flowers, birds, butterflies, unicorns, and so forth)” and “classical renderings of animals and flowers.”<sup>513</sup> Braunberger and Atkinson agree that these popular motifs “equated the feminine with the natural” and supported views of innate “feminine qualities and attributes,” such as “being gentle, nurturing, playful, and delicate.”<sup>514</sup> In terms of tattoo locations, contemporary sources defined a variety of reasons why women commonly applied their tattoos in discreet “areas hidden from everyday view,” such as the breast, lower back, shoulder, or hip.<sup>515</sup> Webb argued that women

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<sup>509</sup> Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 45, 50.

<sup>510</sup> Tuttle, interview with author, July 5, 2016.

<sup>511</sup> Irwin, “Saints and Sinners,” 45.

<sup>512</sup> Atkinson, “Pretty in Ink,” 232.

<sup>513</sup> Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 50, and Tucker, “Pssst!” 33.

<sup>514</sup> Braunberger, “Revolting Bodies,” 14, and Atkinson, “Pretty in Ink,” 226.

<sup>515</sup> “Tattoos and Lady,” *Evening Independent*, July 14, 1983. In his survey, Sanders reported that nearly fifty percent of the 52 tattooed women respondents wore tattoos on the breast, with the remainder on the back or shoulder, abdomen, and hip. See Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 47, 49. For further discussion of Sanders’ survey, see Thompson, *Covered in Ink*, 8-9. Tuttle said that he frequently tattooed “a little butterfly or rosebud on [women’s]

chose intimate areas of the body because, unlike men, they got tattooed “for their own delight” and “the enjoyment of those with whom they are most intimate.”<sup>516</sup> Janis Joplin’s thinking supports Webb’s interpretation when she defined the tattoo on her breast as “a little treat for the boys, like icing on the cake.”<sup>517</sup> A *Rolling Stone* article echoed the idea that women enjoyed the “surprise-your-lovers syndrome” of their tattoos because “you can bet they’ll remember you” following an intimate encounter.<sup>518</sup>

Sanders noted that, like men, women opted for “hidden locations” to avoid “reprimand and scorn” from “casual associates or strangers...during nonintimate moments.”<sup>519</sup> A woman with a large design on her arm reported to Sanders in an interview that “people look at [my] tattoo and think ‘you’re real bad...a loose person’...but I’m not.”<sup>520</sup> This showed that women’s tattoos continued to be interpreted as signs of sexual promiscuity, even as women of high socio-economic status increasingly wore body ink. A 1972 *National Police Gazette* article remarked that a woman’s butterfly tattoo conveyed implicit messages that she desired “to be chased and caught.”<sup>521</sup> This attitude echoed discourse used in the 1920s Boston rape case that identified a woman’s tattoo as “a symbol of sexual enticement.”<sup>522</sup> On the contrary, women’s tattoo placements generally confirmed Atkinson’s arguments that concealability remained a primary concern to protect the wearer’s public reputation and adhere to “established constructions of femininity.”<sup>523</sup>

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bikini lines.” Tuttle, interview with author, July 5, 2016. For further discussion of the repetitiveness of “the delicate rosebud or butterfly” in women’s tattoo imagery, see “Skin Game,” 60.

<sup>516</sup> Webb, *Pushing Ink*, 41. See also Kay Inckle, *Writing on the Body? Thinking Through Gendered Embodiment and Marked Flesh* (Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 177.

<sup>517</sup> Joplin, quoted in Hill, “Tattoo Renaissance,” 38-39. Interestingly, women used the intimate locations of their tattoos to impress lovers while peacocking men displayed their ink to attract mates.

<sup>518</sup> Hill, “Tattoo Renaissance,” 39.

<sup>519</sup> Sanders *Customizing the Body*, 49. See also Roberts, “Secret Ink,” 162, and Atkinson, “Pretty in Ink,” 226.

<sup>520</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>521</sup> *National Police Gazette*, 1972, 18-19, in Braunberger, “Revolting Bodies,” fn. 5, 20.

<sup>522</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-19.

<sup>523</sup> Atkinson, “Pretty in Ink,” 226.

Interviews with tattooed women in the 1970s and 1980s revealed that many adopted specific tattoo imagery because they “liked the colors,” “thought it was pretty,” or felt “feminine and sexy.”<sup>524</sup> However, even fellow tattoo wearers frequently emphasized the importance of gender-normative designs on women’s bodies. For example, a tattooed man in Sanders’ survey stressed that “if a girl has a skull on her arm, it’s not feminine at all” but “if a woman gets a woman’s tattoo, that’s normal.”<sup>525</sup> He reiterated that “a woman should act like a woman and keep her tattoos feminine.”<sup>526</sup> Tattooist Denis Fyfe stated that he often advised women against visible tattoo placement because “it’s just not feminine.”<sup>527</sup> Women who opted for unconventional tattoos, Irwin observes, were often labelled “masculine,” “ugly,” or “slutty,” and received ill-treatment in public.<sup>528</sup> Most women’s tattooing projects therefore remained overtly feminized in these decades and correspondingly enjoyed some public favor. This shows that the meanings of tattoos and understandings of deviance simultaneously supported and challenged each other. Tattoos as Foucauldian self-practices remained under the influence of dominant social norms, yet allowed wearers to express resistance to power structures and “to create [themselves] as a work of art.”<sup>529</sup>

In summary, the meanings of tattoos shifted in the 1970s and 1980s from primarily symbols of criminal affiliation among outcast groups to expressions of one’s nonconformist individuality

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<sup>524</sup> Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 47-50, and “Tattoos: Not Just for Men Anymore,” *Lodi News-Sentinel*, June 23, 1981.

<sup>525</sup> Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 51.

<sup>526</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>527</sup> Denis Fyfe, interview by Stephanie Storey, *The Montreal Gazette*, Feb. 4, 1978.

<sup>528</sup> Irwin, “Saints and Sinners,” 38. For discussion of the importance of size in women’s tattoos and the fact that, “heavily” tattooed women often received labels as “disgustingly unfeminine,” see Atkinson, “Pretty in Ink,” 226. For further information on the stigmatization of women with unconventional tattoo imagery, see Shoshana Magnet, “Feminist Sexualities, Race, and the Internet: An Investigation of Suicidegirls.com,” *New Media Society* 9 (2007): 592, and Botz-Bornstein, *Veils, Nudity, and Tattoos*, 122-125.

<sup>529</sup> Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 1994), 261-262.

among members of educated and affluent social classes. Contemporary evidence showed, as Gallick argues, that tattooing practices “crossed cult lines and permeated new sectors of American communities,” and tattoo clients now ranged widely from the “stereotypical biker to the local business man.”<sup>530</sup> The growing professionalism of the tattoo trade standardized practices, co-opted a rich American cultural legacy, and differentiated the new generation of tattooists and clients from their stigmatized counterparts. Tattoo-specific publications, articles in magazines, newspapers, and academic periodicals, as well as exhibitions in art galleries, museums, and tattoo conventions, reflected the increasing public interest in tattooing practices and reframed body ink as an accepted form of personal and political expression.<sup>531</sup> As middle- and upper-class, white Americans increasingly entered the practice in these decades, tattoos became products in consumer culture and were prized for their decorative style. The reconceptualization of tattoos as art by more socially-valued groups distanced body ink from its connections with marginalized subcultures and diluted earlier messages of dangerous immorality.

Nonetheless, tattooed bodies continued to encounter mixed receptions in public and, according to Irwin, some circles still reacted “to tattoos in the same way as they might to a poke in the eye with a sharp stick.”<sup>532</sup> Sanders reported that, despite notable transformations in the tattoo’s meanings among the upper echelons of American society, tattooed bodies remained largely “isolated from ‘normals.’”<sup>533</sup> Many individuals combatted long-standing negative stigmas by applying tattoos that supported dominant social norms and traditional American values. According to Irwin, the “constraints of normative society” influenced tattoo trends, but she overlooks that

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<sup>530</sup> Gallick, “The Tattoo,” 11.

<sup>531</sup> *Ibid.*, 1. See also Mark Gustafson, “The Tattoo in the Later Roman Empire and Beyond,” in *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*, 1.

<sup>532</sup> Irwin, “Saints and Sinners,” 53. See also Gustafson, “The Tattoo in the Later Roman Empire,” 1, 17, and Gallick, “The Tattoo,” 1.

<sup>533</sup> Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 41.

tattooists and their clients simultaneously challenged long-standing conventions.<sup>534</sup> Sanders' surveys showed that many body ink wearers in the 1970s and 1980s believed that, despite some allowances, "American culture as a whole still does not accept tattooed people."<sup>535</sup> As tattooing practices entered the 1990s and 2000s into what Atkinson calls the "second renaissance," social norms and the meanings of tattoos continued to display reciprocal influences and to affect understandings of deviance and normativity.<sup>536</sup>

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<sup>534</sup> Irwin, "Saints and Sinners," 53.

<sup>535</sup> Sanders, *Customizing the Body*, 133-135, and Roberts, "Secret Ink," 158.

<sup>536</sup> Atkinson, *Tattooed*, 46-50.

### Final Thoughts – Tattooing Practices in the New Millennium

Tattooing practices continued to gain mainstream popularity through the 1990s and 2000s, and today body ink generally stands as a widely recognized art-form. Newspapers sometimes identify body ink as the “ultimate form of self-expression” that allows wearers to convey the notion that “I’m an individual...different than everyone else.”<sup>537</sup> Mainstream media continues to capitalize on the trendiness of tattoos, and, as Atkinson notes, inked bodies have become “substantially more visible” to mass audiences.<sup>538</sup> He argues that advertisements for commercial products “cleverly align the products” with “cool, tattoo-clad, young people,” thereby squaring body ink with American consumer culture.<sup>539</sup> In considering how subcultures can “be effectively incorporated” into mainstream society, Hebdige places great emphasis on “a wave of hysteria in the press.”<sup>540</sup> We indeed see this in American tattooing practices since the 1990s.

Popular figures continue to don tattoos and influence the public’s perceptions of body ink as self-expressive and decorative. The mainstream press frequently glorifies the growing list of tattooed celebrities, which includes athlete David Beckham, actor Johnny Depp, and musician Lady Gaga, thereby continuing to expose audiences outside of subcultural and countercultural groups to inked bodies as “sexy” and “cool.”<sup>541</sup> (Figure 21) Tattoo-specific television shows, such as *Miami Ink* (2005-2008), *LA Ink* (2007-2011), and *Best Ink* (2012-2014), highlight the creativity

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<sup>537</sup> “Illustrated Crowd Sees Tattoos as Ultimate Form of Expression,” *Reading Eagle*, Sept. 21, 1991. See also “Tattoo: The Ultimate Form of Self-Expression,” *Herald Journal*, Aug. 24, 1996.

<sup>538</sup> Atkinson, *Tattooed*, 62.

<sup>539</sup> *Ibid.*, 62. Interestingly, the connection between tattoos took on new forms in the 2000s. “Forehead advertising,” also called “body billboards,” experienced a wave of popularity after Karolyne Smith of Utah “auctioned off her forehead” on eBay for \$10,000. See Jennifer Guevin, “Woman tattoos forehead for \$10K,” *CNET*, June 30, 2005, <https://www.cnet.com/news/woman-tattoos-forehead-for-10k/>. For more information on body billboards, see Daniel Terdiman, “For rent: Your forehead for \$5,000,” *CNET*, Aug. 25, 2005, and Drew Guarini, “Tattoo Ad Craze Created Human Billboards for Now Defunct Companies,” *The Huffington Post*, Sept. 18, 2012.

<sup>540</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 92.

<sup>541</sup> Thompson, *Covered in Ink*, 165. See also “The Definitive Guide to the Coolest Celebrity Tattoos,” *Seventeen*, April 11, 2017, “Hot Celebrity Tattoos,” *Cosmopolitan*, Sept. 9, 2016, and “Celebrity Tattoos: Who’s Been Showing Off Their Latest Ink?” *Glamour*, Jan. 17, 2017.

and technical skill required for high-quality designs and application.<sup>542</sup> However, other shows, such as *Tattoo Nightmares* (2012-) and *America's Worst Tattoos* (2012-), focus on low-quality tattoos and continue to ostracize amateur and untrained 'scratchers' from the industry.

The professional tattoo subculture has recently begun to incorporate non-white groups into its folds, yet keeps a clear racial divide with such distinctly-labelled publications as *Black Ink* (2014-). Nonetheless, white men and women of mid-to-high socio-economic backgrounds continue to dominate the trade, both as tattooists and customers, and to largely exclude lower-class, non-white parties from professional acknowledgement.

Many acclaimed tattooists have reached celebrity status in both the tattoo industry and mainstream culture. For one, Katherine von Drachenberg, a.k.a. Kat von D, stands out as one of the most prominent tattoo celebrities today. She starred in *LA Ink* and *Miami Ink*, launched a successful makeup brand in 2008, authored the best-selling book *High Voltage Tattoo* (2009), and has appeared on several high-fashion magazine covers. (Figure 22) Furthermore, the number of tattoo publications has swelled since the 1990s, with such titles as *Skin & Ink* (1993), *Tattoo: Savage* (1993), *Tattoo: Flash* (1993), *Tabu Tattoo* (1996), *Skin Art* (1997), *Tattoo Revue* (1997), *Prick Magazine* (2000), and *Inked Magazine* (2004).<sup>543</sup> The frequency and range of tattoo conventions have likewise increased, with hundreds taking place throughout the United States annually.<sup>544</sup>

Many Americans now accept tattoos as legitimate avenues of artistic self-expression among some social groups, but, Irwin argues, have not wholly discarded associations between

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<sup>542</sup> In the televised competition series *Ink Master* (2012-), American tattooists compete for cash prizes and a feature article in the prestigious *Inked* magazine.

<sup>543</sup> For more information on tattoo magazine publications, see Thompson, *Covered in Ink*, 147-149, and Atkinson, *Tattooed*, 63.

<sup>544</sup> For more information on the increase of tattoo conventions, see DeMello, *Encyclopedia*, 89-92. For a list of 2017-2018 American conventions, see the World Tattoo Events Calendar at <https://www.worldtattooevents.com/upcoming-tattoo-conventions-calendar/>

body ink and “dangerous outcasts.”<sup>545</sup> A newspaper article from 2000 reports that the enduring connections between body ink and “motorcycle gangs” and “easy” women has led many tattoo wearers to seek removal methods.<sup>546</sup> Women interviewed by Thompson in the early 2000s admitted that they often experienced “really rude” reactions in public, and one respondent attributed her unpleasant daily encounters to the persistent stereotype that “if you’re a tattooed woman, you’re a whore.”<sup>547</sup> Such testimonies mirror the reaction I received from my grandmother when I revealed my body ink and show the resilience of negative stigmas. A 2001 newspaper article perpetuates other unsavory characteristics of tattoo wearers, such as “low self-esteem, delinquency, drug abuse, and participation in satanic rituals.”<sup>548</sup> Here we see the perseverance of links between body ink and deviance that characterize, to varying degrees, the tattoo’s history in twentieth-century America.

Derek John Roberts contends that tattoos remain “suspended in a cultural limbo” between decoration and stigma, but my thesis has demonstrated that body ink wearers are not ‘suspended’ so much as ever-involved in struggles for personal freedom and self-creation within the confines of Foucauldian power relations.<sup>549</sup> Today, inked individuals of high socio-economic status continue to battle enduring negative stereotypes perpetuated by lower-class tattoo practitioners and wearers, yet they often do so by adhering to widespread ideals of gender, race, and class.

Normative tattooing practices are largely supported within the trade. Tattoo magazines titled *Tattoos for Men* (1997) and *Tattoos for Women* (1998) perpetuate the gender binary and largely feature white bodies with high-quality, thus expensive, ink. Yet a design’s image, size, and

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<sup>545</sup> Irwin, “Saints and Sinners,” 50.

<sup>546</sup> “Tattoo Removal Often Preferable to Feeling Stigma,” *Sun Journal*, Apr. 5, 2000.

<sup>547</sup> Thompson, *Covered in Ink*, 160-161.

<sup>548</sup> “Tattoo Practices,” *Lodi News Sentinel*, Sept. 7, 2001.

<sup>549</sup> Roberts, “Secret Ink,” 156.

location continues to support the status of the wearer and the central value system of the social group to which they belong. Today, as in past decades, men often choose masculine-identified images associated with strength and bravado, such as birds of prey, dragons, and neo-tribal designs.<sup>550</sup> Women experiment with large tattoos in non-discreet locations but, in general, imagery tends to signify their conventional femininity and veers from tattoos deemed masculine or “grotesque.”<sup>551</sup> Heavily-tattooed Kat von D stresses offsetting body ink with “makeup and high heels and all things girly” because, she believes, when a woman dons non-normative tattoos, such as morbid imagery in highly-visible locations, “it’s important to still carry yourself in a feminine way.”<sup>552</sup> This may explain the enduring sexualization of tattooed women’s bodies in both the tattoo world and mainstream media.

Roberts observes that the covers of tattoo magazines overwhelmingly feature white women “as scantily-clad sex objects” and primarily focus on their nearly-nude bodies rather than on their tattoos.<sup>553</sup> Women commonly appear without shirts and cover their breasts with their hands, despite an absence of tattoos on their torsos that toplessness might be needed to reveal. (Figures 23 and 24) On the other hand, men are often displayed in strong, assertive stances with women posing as what Thompson calls their heteronormative “sexual decoration.”<sup>554</sup> (Figures 25, 26 and 27) As in the 1970s and 1980s, contests at tattoo conventions treat men’s and women’s bodies differently and frequently stress a women’s attractiveness in conjunction with her body ink. Tattooist Patricia Ball observes that audiences and judges often vote “for the sexiest body rather than the most

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<sup>550</sup> Thompson, *Covered in Ink*, 159.

<sup>551</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>552</sup> Kat von D, interview, *Bizarre* 161, April 2010, 59.

<sup>553</sup> Thompson, *Covered in Ink*, 148.

<sup>554</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

beautiful artwork.”<sup>555</sup> Braunberger argues that even within the “safe boundary space of the [tattoo] convention...women are expected to maintain their bodies within larger social codes of size and shape.”<sup>556</sup> This shows the perseverance of conventional social norms in tattooing practices. Tattoo wearers use body ink to express resistance to homogenizing relations of power, yet they remain largely subjugated to the authority of American ideals of gender, race, and class.

Today, the meanings of tattoos, deviance, and normativity continue to fluctuate. Socially-constructed boundaries allow for movement and manipulation, which can explain the tattoo’s “rushes of popularity to extreme disfavor” throughout the last century.<sup>557</sup> Hebdige theorizes that, to understand the changing significance of subcultural symbols, we must include “historical specificity” to “any explanation of why these particular forms should occur at this particular time.”<sup>558</sup> That is, the tattoo’s meaning, acceptance, and rejection shift depending on the status of the wearer in contextual power structures and the specific functions of the ink to both support and challenge their social position.

The future of tattooing practices remains uncertain because, as Webb observed, “no one knows all the variables.”<sup>559</sup> Tuttle believes that the current high-tide of the American tattoo’s popularity is already “going downhill.”<sup>560</sup> Even though he holds that tattooing practices “will never die,” he predicts boldly that this “fad...is going to fall on its face” because “it’s overexposed.”<sup>561</sup> St. Clair counters the “people [who] say tattooing is a dying art” by pointing to the sign over his

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<sup>555</sup> Patricia Ball, interview, “Living as a Work of Art,” *Free Lance Star*, Aug. 11, 1990. For further discussion of how the conventional tattoo contest “inverts and seeks to appropriate discourses and practices that have historically acted to cast it as deviant and low class,” see Fenske, “Movement and Resistance,” 53.

<sup>556</sup> Braunberger, “Revolting Bodies,” 16-17.

<sup>557</sup> Webb, *Pushing Ink*, 173.

<sup>558</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 73.

<sup>559</sup> Webb, *Pushing Ink*, 173.

<sup>560</sup> Tuttle, interview with author, July 5, 2016.

<sup>561</sup> *Ibid.*

shop that reads: “Tattooing is as ancient as time and as modern as tomorrow.”<sup>562</sup> He believes that “people are going to get tattooed as long as the world stands, even if they have to do it themselves in crude, unsavory manners.”<sup>563</sup> Webb envisages an optimistic future for the practice because tattooing “has had its ups and downs for thousands of years” and always endures.<sup>564</sup> He even foresees “a President showing off his or her tattoo the way Lyndon Johnson once exhibited his surgical scar.”<sup>565</sup>

Although the list does not yet include American presidents, today world leaders, such as Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, display their body ink to the international public, which shows the degree to which tattoos have crossed subcultural boundaries and shaken negative stereotypes. (Figure 28) Trudeau’s body ink notably embodies normative elements of the practice. He bears traditional tattoo imagery of the Haida, a Pacific Northwest indigenous group, and thereby channels the non-Western, masculine roots of the practice, received favorably as “badass” by the popular press.<sup>566</sup> Furthermore, he places his ink on his bicep, a conventionally-masculine location.

St. Clair implicitly details the constant interplay between tattoos and social norms when he admonishes the ‘Now Generation’ for putting his trade “on a pedestal” because “the more you try to build it up, the more someone’s going to try to tear it down.”<sup>567</sup> My research has demonstrated the symbiotic relationship between the meanings of tattoos and widespread understandings of deviance and normativity, and their reciprocal influences as they interact. I conclude that the level

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<sup>562</sup> St. Clair, *Stoney Knows How*, 144. Here again St. Clair points to the stigmatization and exclusion of amateur and self-tattooing practices from the trade.

<sup>563</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>564</sup> Webb, *Pushing Ink*, 173.

<sup>565</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>566</sup> Trudeau visited this group several times through his life and even became “adopted” as family. See Tristin Hopper, “Haida Leaders ‘Proud’ of Justin Trudeau’s Stylized Raven Tattoo,” *National Post*, Oct. 22, 2015, and Zi-Ann Lum, “Justin Trudeau Tattoo of Haida Raven is ‘Badass,’” *Huffington Post*, Oct. 23, 2015.

<sup>567</sup> St. Clair, *Stoney Knows How*, 141.

of social acceptance experienced by a tattoo wearer continues to rest primarily on the wearer's own status in Foucauldian power structures, dictated largely by gender, race, and class values, as well as by the aesthetic quality and function of their body ink.

## ARCHIVAL EVIDENCE

### Figures

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Figure 3 – "A Sailor Getting Tattooed Aboard the U.S.S. Olympia, c. 1899. *The New York Times*, May 22, 2009. [http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2009/05/22/arts/20090523-tattoo-slideshow\\_index.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2009/05/22/arts/20090523-tattoo-slideshow_index.html?_r=0).

Figure 4 – Photograph of Burchett applying permanent makeup to young woman. In Burchett, George. *Memoirs of a Tattooist*. Edited by Peter Leighton. London: Oldbourne Book Co., 1958.

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Figure 8 – George Burchett, in lab coat, tattooing Horace "The Great Omi" Ridler, c. 1920s. In Burchett, George. *Memoirs of a Tattooist*. Edited by Peter Leighton. London: Oldbourne Book Co., 1958.

Figure 9 – Leonard "Stoney" St. Clair in his tattoo shop, c. 1960s. In St. Clair, Leonard and Alan B. Govenar. *Stoney Knows How: Life as a Tattoo Artist*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1982.

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Figure 15 – Samuel Steward a.k.a. Phil Sparrow in front of his Chicago tattoo shop, c. 1950s. In “Sexual Outlaw on the Gay Frontier.” *New York Times*. By Patricia Cohen. July 25, 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/26/books/26secret.html>

Figure 16 – Samuel Steward a.k.a. “Phil Sparrow” advertisement, c. 1950s. In Morse, Albert. *The Tattooists*. San Francisco: Albert Morse, 1977. Also at Lucky Tattoo Museum, Largo, Florida. <http://www.lstattoomuseum.com/index2.asp?mid=5#>.

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Figure 1 – Advertisement for Pears' Soap. 1899.

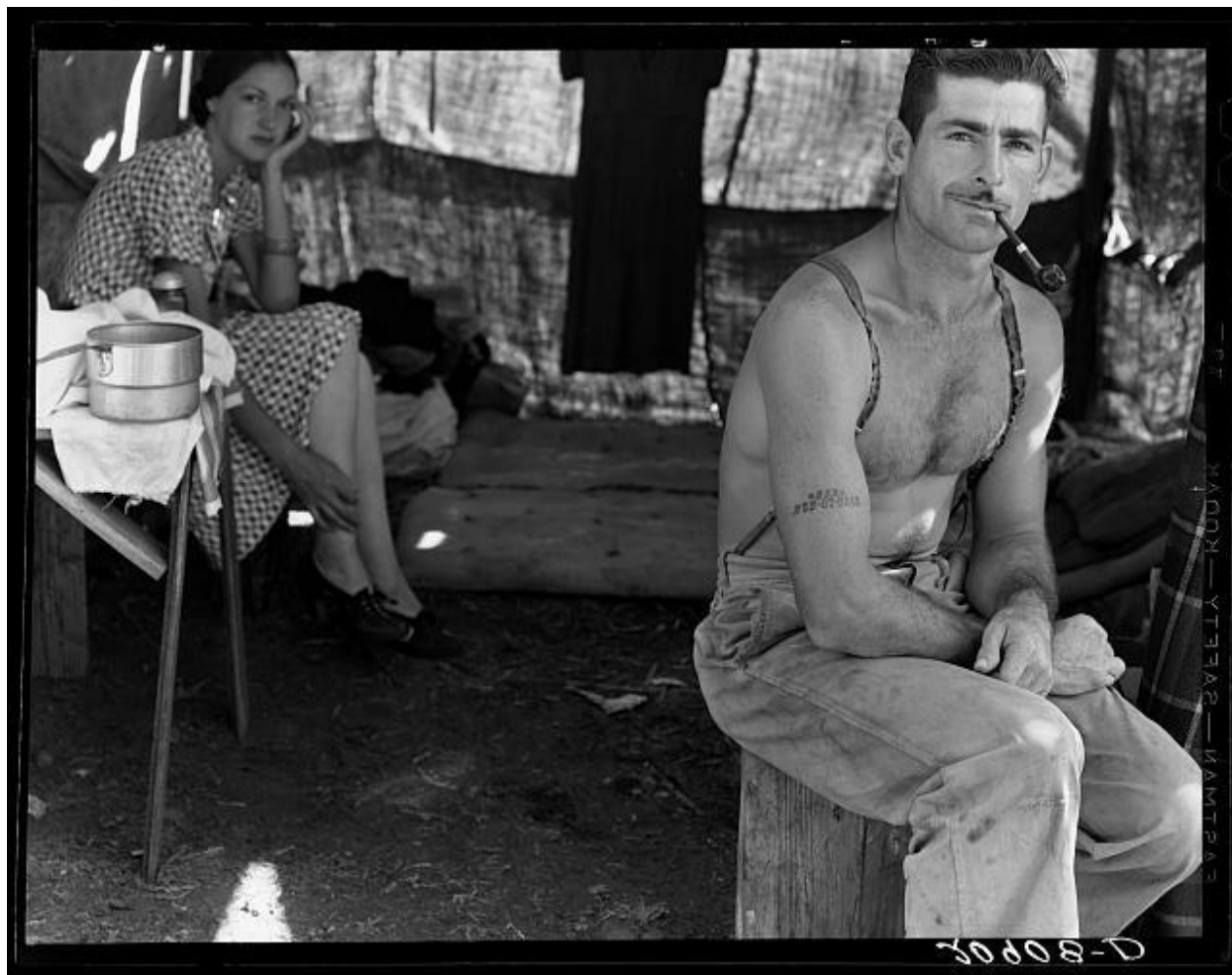


Figure 2 – Lumber worker with social security number tattoo. Oregon. August 1939.



Figure 3 – A sailor getting tattooed aboard the *U.S.S. Olympia*. 1899.

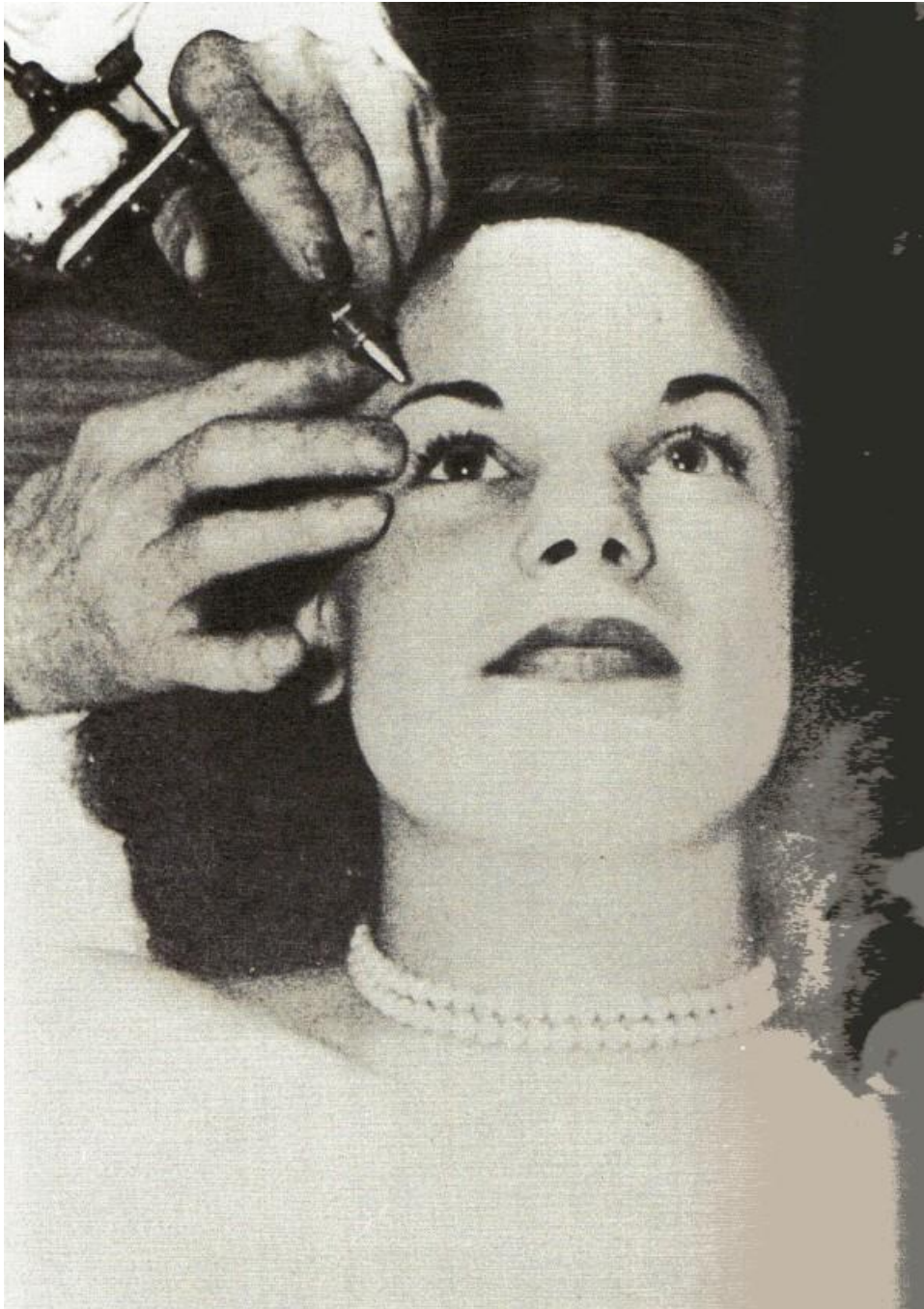


Figure 4 – George Burchett applying permanent makeup to client. 1920s.

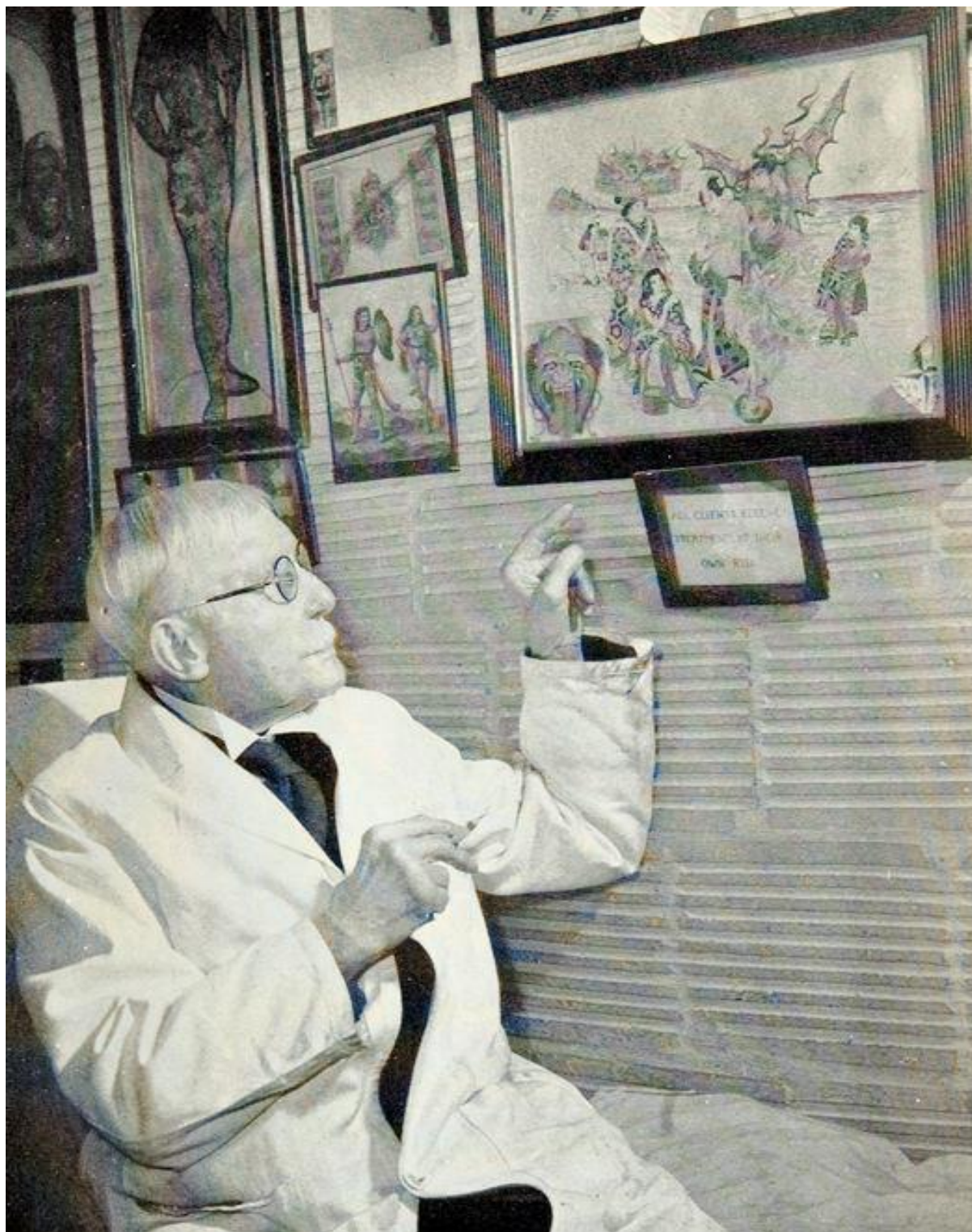


Figure 5 – George Burchett in his tattoo salon. 1950s.







Figure 8 – George Burchett, in lab coat, tattooing Horace “The Great Omi” Ridler. 1920s.



Figure 9 – Leonard “Stoney” St. Clair in his tattoo shop. 1960s.



Figure 10 – Anna “Artoria” Gibbons. 1920s.



Figure 11 – Betty Broadbent. Postcard. 1950.



Figure 12 – Betty Broadbent onstage with sailor. 1930s.

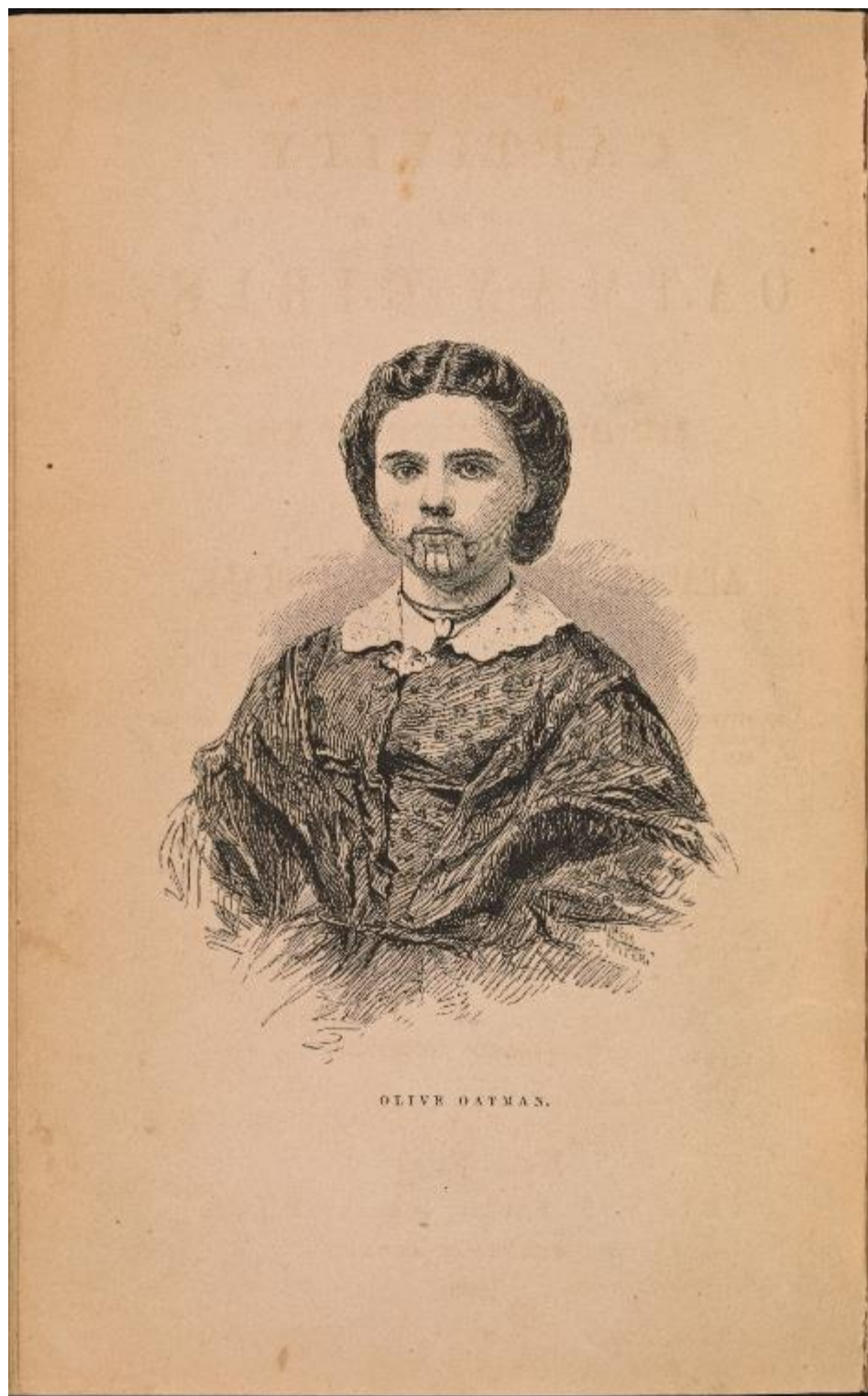


Figure 13 – Olive Oatman with tattoos on chin. 1857.



Figure 14 – Betty Broadbent at New York World's Fair. 1939.



Figure 15 – Samuel Steward a.k.a. Phil Sparrow in front of his Chicago tattoo shop. 1950s.



Figure 16 – Samuel Steward a.k.a. Phil Sparrow advertisement. 1950s.



Figure 17 – Janis Joplin. 1969.

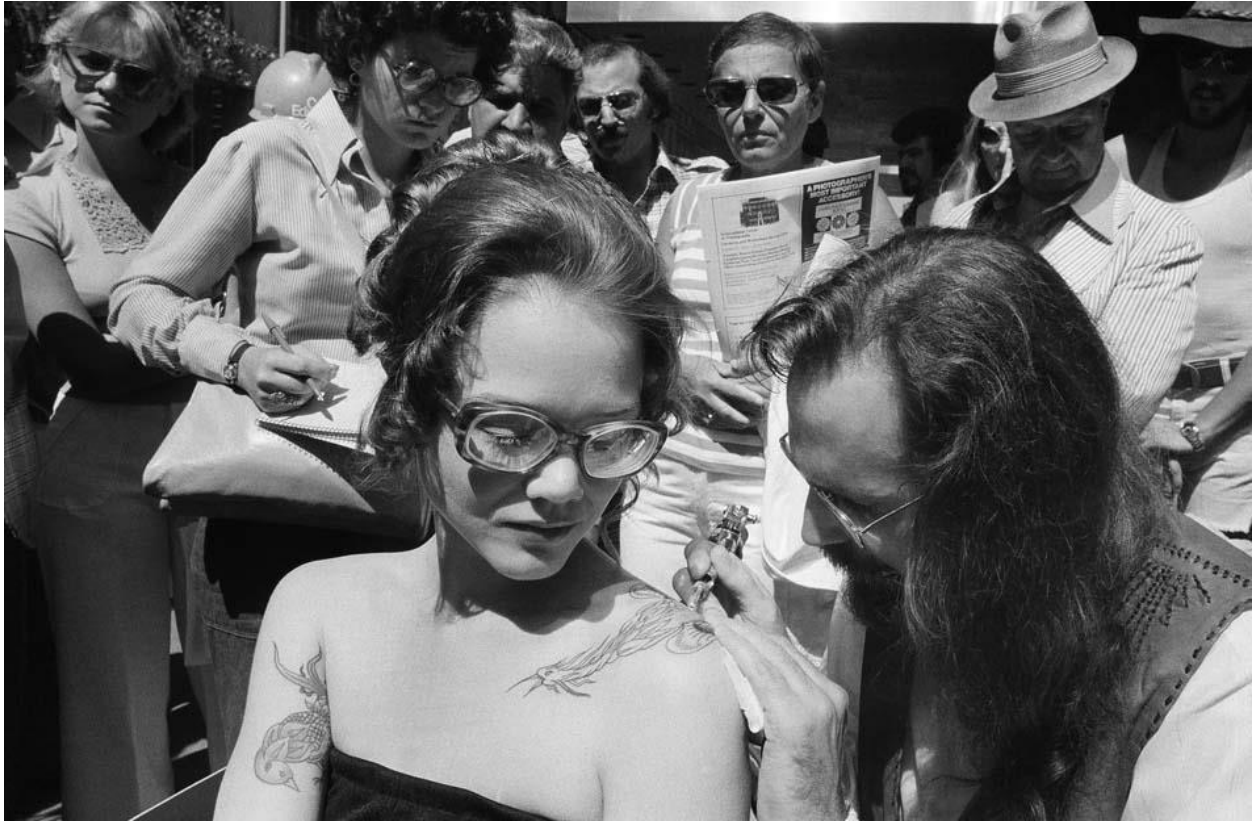


Figure 18 – Joseph O’Sullivan a.k.a. Spider Webb protesting New York tattoo ban at the Museum of Modern Art. 1976.



Figure 19 – Lyle Tuttle at his tattoo shop in San Francisco. 1960.



Figure 20 – Lyle Tuttle replica shirt. 1970s.



Figure 21 – David Beckham. *Men's Health*. March 2012.



Figure 22 – Kat von D. *Latina*. October 2013.



Figure 23 – *Inked Girls*. June 2015.



Figure 24 – *Tattoo Revue*. August 2009.

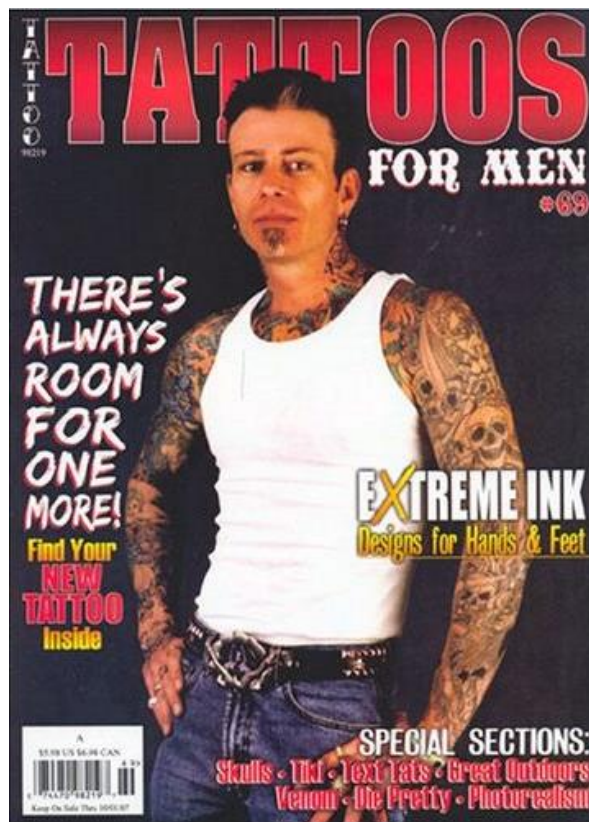


Figure 25 – *Tattoos for Men*. Issue 69. April 2005.

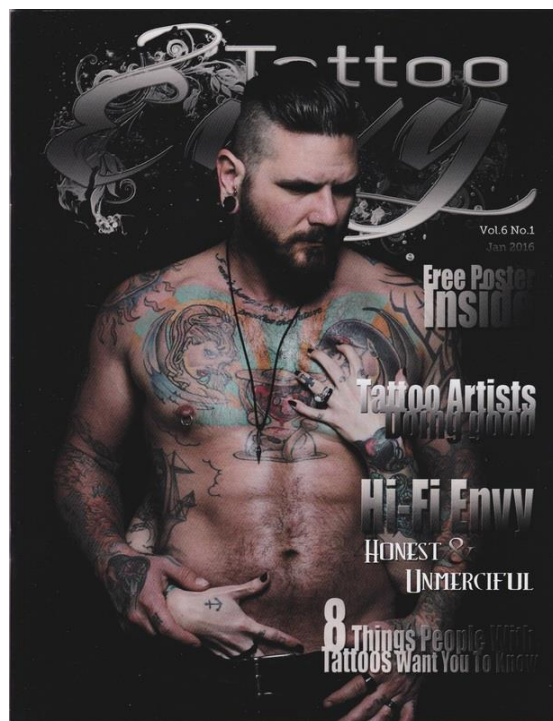


Figure 26 – *Tattoo City*. Vol. 6. No. 1. January 2016.



Figure 27 – Spider Webb on *Skin & Ink*. November 1997.

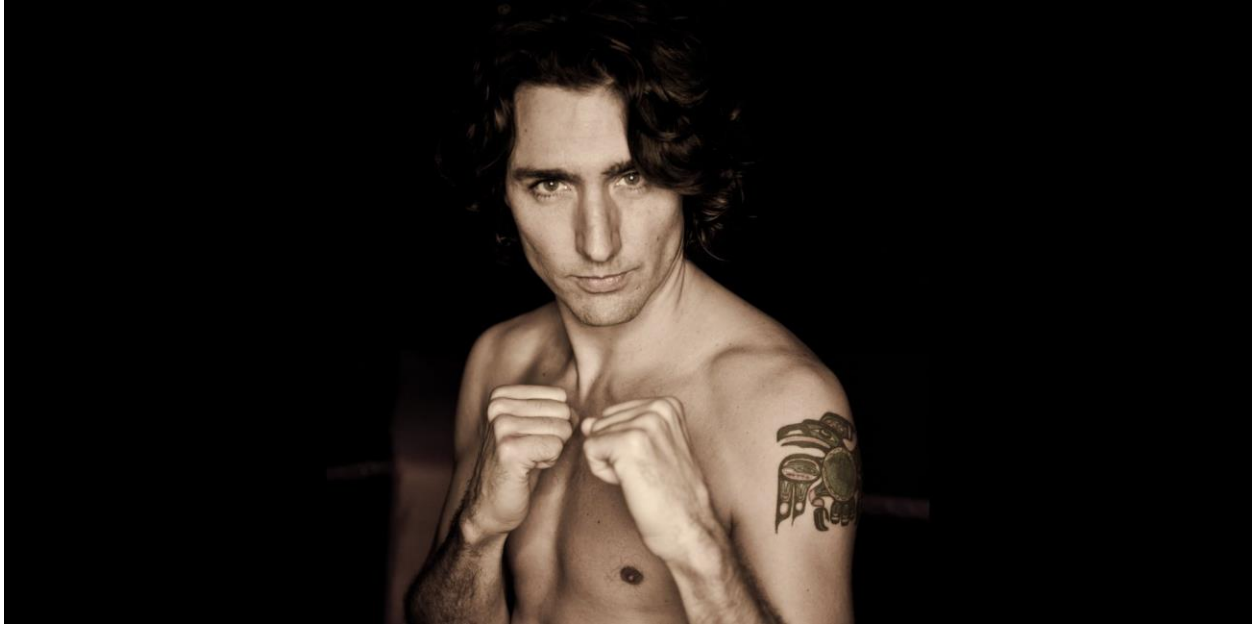


Figure 28 – Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau with tattoo of Haida raven. 2015.