

## ABSTRACT

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DECONSTRUCTING *INK* AND THE  
CONTESTED “TATTOOED BODY”

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The extent to which tattoo culture has been pervasively corporatized within the mainstream over the past decade indicates a critical juncture in the history of Western tattooing, one that signals the transition of the tattoo from a signifier of stigma to one of status, and a turn from the tattoo *community* of the past to a tattoo *industry*. I argue that a seemingly accurate body of knowledge called “tattooed reality” is disseminated through this industry and must be analyzed because it conveys a particularly problematic way of knowing, organizing, producing, and representing tattooed bodies. Using data from a media analysis of *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* to inform interviews with local tattoo artists, I highlight how the tattooed body has become a contested space as “tattooed reality” discourse fragments and divorces tattooing from its disreputable past, and reappropriates it as an aesthetic cultural commodity of the middle-class.

REALITY FOR WHOM? DECONSTRUCTING *INK* AND THE CONTESTED  
“TATTOOED BODY”

By

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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
Chapter 1: Locating the Tattooed Body.....	1
Mapping the Western Tattooed Body.....	6
The Exoticized Body.....	7
The Enfreaked Body.....	8
The ‘All-American’ Body.....	10
The Disaffected Body.....	12
The Therapeutic Body.....	13
The Bourgeois Body.....	15
Chapter 2: Methods.....	20
Media Analysis.....	21
In-depth Interviewing: Locating Artists.....	23
Data Analysis.....	26
Reflexivity.....	28
Chapter 3: Discussion.....	31
‘Ink’ Deconstructed.....	31
Spectacle.....	32
Panacea.....	34
Fragmentation.....	35
Policing Corporeal Inscription.....	36
Artists’ Narratives.....	37
Product.....	38
Practice.....	41
Process.....	45
Chapter 4: Conclusion.....	49
Appendix A: Empirical.....	51
The Exoticized Body.....	52
The Enfreaked Body.....	54
The ‘All-American’ Body.....	56
The Disaffected Body.....	58
The Therapeutic Body.....	60
The Bourgeois Body.....	62
Other Empirical Revelations: Media Analysis.....	65
Other Empirical Revelations: Artists’ Narratives.....	67
Appendix B: Methods.....	69
Media Analysis.....	70
In-depth Interviewing: Locating Artists.....	72
Media Analysis Themes.....	76
Spectacle.....	77
Panacea.....	78
Fragmentation.....	79

Policing Corporeal Inscription .....	80
Artists' Narratives .....	81
Product .....	82
Practice.....	84
Process .....	89
Reflexivity.....	92
Appendix C: Theory .....	95
Appendix D: Interview Guide.....	105
Works Cited .....	107

This Table of Contents is automatically generated by MS Word, linked to the Heading formats used within the Chapter text.

## Chapter 1: Locating the Tattooed Body

During a holiday party last year, I indulged in a conversation with a complete stranger strictly because of the shirt he was wearing. More than a materialistically inspired endeavor, I was struck by the cultural meanings associated with the particular iconography and name that adorned the article of clothing. The shirt was chocolate brown and featured a large skull pierced by a dagger and draped in a banner that read “Death or Glory.” I knew I had seen this image before, but it was usually on an individual’s body in the form of a tattoo. Taking a closer look I saw the name “Ed Hardy” in familiar script under the neck of the shirt. My suspicion was on point. I had read extensively about Don Ed Hardy, commonly referred to as one of the “godfathers” of Western tattooing. Among other accolades, Hardy is credited with introducing a Japanese influence into Western tattoo culture and is renowned for vibrant and highly masculine imagery like the skull and dagger.

I was intrigued by the shirt and approached the stranger anticipating a lively discussion about tattoos. Much to my disappointment that conversation did not transpire. When I asked the stranger if he was a fan of Hardy’s work he scrunched his face and cocked his head in such a way that suggested he was baffled by my inquiry. I pointed to his shirt and repeated my question. The stranger’s eyes followed the direction of my gesture, pulled on his garment, and shook his head rebutting, “Christian Audigier.” The stranger must have sensed that I was now perplexed because he elaborated that the shirt was made by designer Christian Audigier. I nodded and we mutually excused ourselves from the miscommunication. I later researched and found that Audigier had licensed the rights to produce a high-

end clothing line featuring Hardy's tattoo images in 2004. This was the first in a series of incidents that led me to question the spatial and temporal location of tattooing within contemporary Western culture.

Soon after that holiday party I was in Washington, D.C. and caught a glimpse of various billboards sponsored by the Verizon Center (home to the NBA's Washington Wizards, the NHL's Washington Capitals, the WNBA's Washington Mystics, and the Georgetown Hoyas men's basketball team) featuring popular D.C. celebrities proudly displaying blue and gold temporary tattoos. Intrigued, I did some investigating and discovered that the sport and entertainment venue had recently launched a stylish advertising campaign in conjunction with its corporate partner, Verizon Communication, Inc., to celebrate its ten-year anniversary. The District-wide marketing promotion featured D.C. Mayor Adrian Fenty, local radio personality EZ Street, Alana Beard of the Washington Mystics, Caron Butler of the Washington Wizards, the director of the International Spy Museum, and others wearing tattoos in honor of the Verizon Center's tenth anniversary. The tattoo featured a Roman numeral ten and silhouettes of a female figure skater, an ice hockey player, a male basketball player, and a musician, accompanied by the slogan "TEN YEARS AT THE CENTER OF THE ACTION."

Like Audigier's licensing of Ed Hardy's designs for his clothing line, the Verizon Center detected a fashionable quality in tattoo imagery and utilized it to market their product (in this case, entertainment). Thinking about these developments I was reminded of a reality television program I had seen on The Learning Channel (TLC) a handful of times. The show was called *Miami Ink* and



featured everyday people and celebrities getting tattooed, focusing on the stories behind their respective corporeal inscriptions. The particular episode I recalled featured *Murderball* (2005) star and Paralympic athlete, Mark Zupan, receiving a large “tribal” tattoo from artist Ami James. James “freehanded” the design, meaning he tattooed directly onto the skin without using a stencil or sketch to guide him, and was finished within approximately twenty minutes (of television time). The tattoo spanned the entire right side of Zupan’s upper body from his back to his chest. As James inscribed the image, he listened in awe as Zupan recounted the story of the car accident that confined him to a wheelchair. Emotional tales such as Zupan’s are characteristic of the show along with vibrant tattooed creations that seemed to unfold in a relatively short amount of time. The combination of poignant drama and aesthetic markers invite audiences to explore the “real” and expressive culture of tattooing, which for so long had been considered a scandalous practice within the United States.

*Miami Ink* was not necessarily marketing tattoos in the same manner that the Verizon Center and Audigier were, but based on the presence of all three entities it was undeniable that tattooing had come to occupy a unique place within contemporary society. The incorporation of tattoo culture into clothing lines, marketing campaigns, and a national cable television show indicates that ink is now a popular faction within mainstream culture. Additionally, the incidents that I have reflected upon are not isolated. In 1999 Ed Hardy and fellow tattoo artist Mike Malone partnered with a small independent clothing business in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to establish Sailor Jerry Ltd., manufacturing clothing items and other

artifacts adorned with the iconic images of tattoo artist Norman Keith “Sailor Jerry” Collins. Likewise, compared to a time at which tattoos were only sparsely used by companies like Philip Morris and Zippo to sell cigarettes and lighters, respectively, ink is now regularly incorporated into a variety of consumer products and advertisements. The corporations that produce VISA credit cards, iPhone, Blackberry, and Motorola cellular phones, Juicy Couture and Coco Chanel apparel and fragrances, Chrysler vehicles, Barbie dolls, and many others have successfully co-opted tattoos into their marketing strategies and manufactured goods. Furthermore, *Miami Ink* is only one-third of the *Ink* franchise, and one-fourth of the reality tattoo television genre. The Arts & Entertainment channel (A&E) and TLC introduced *Inked* and *Miami Ink* during the same week in July 2005, followed by *L.A. Ink* in August 2007, and *London Ink* in September 2007. *London Ink* was created by TLC’s sister-station Real Time and can only be seen in the United Kingdom. A&E stopped airing *Inked* after the completion of its second season October 17, 2006.

The extent to which tattoo culture has been pervasively corporatized within the mainstream over the past decade indicates a critical juncture in the history of what I have labeled the Western “tattooed body,”<sup>1</sup> one that signals the transition of the tattoo from a signifier of stigma to one of status, and a turn from the tattoo *community* of the past to a tattoo *industry*. Within this spectacularized industry, I argue that cultural intermediaries are competing to sanction “authentic” views of tattooing, thus making the contemporary tattooed body a contested cultural space. In this project I

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “tattooed body” here to encompass the populace of tattoo artists and their customers, along with particular tattoo styles and imagery. I use it with the intent to differentiate it from the important concepts of “industry” and “community,” which, as I argue, are specific and historically situated terms that characterize tattooing.

focus on the contention between the dominant media discourse that has co-opted tattoo culture, specifically within the RTV shows *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink*, and local tattoo artists' responses to it. I have playfully termed the dominant media discourse "tattooed reality," as there is arguably more fiction than fact in TLC's "reality" programming. I assert that "tattooed reality" is a problematic, seemingly accurate or "truthful" body of knowledge regarding tattooing that seeks to legitimize the practice for maximal profit and middle-class consumption. In addition to conducting a media analysis and in-depth interviews to highlight the contested nature of the contemporary tattooed body, I provide a historical mapping of the tattooed body within the United States in an effort to articulate how I arrived at my position.

This research is informed by the Physical Cultural Studies (PCS) project, which is dedicated to the critical interrogation of "the corporeal practices, discourses, and subjectivities through which active bodies become organized, represented, and experienced in relation to the operations of social power" (Andrews, 2008, p. 55). Likewise, the burgeoning PCS field is driven by the empirical and holds an emancipatory political impetus that strives to "illuminate, and intervene into, sites of physical cultural injustice and inequity" (Andrews, 2008, p. 55). With respect to these commitments, my research seeks to examine the cultural and social forces that organize, (re)present, and (re)produce the tattooed body, and intervene at the site of injustice. This project is important because the tattooed body stands to be subjugated and disempowered as particular ways of knowing are disputed and privileged in the contemporary tattoo industry.

### Mapping the Western Tattooed Body

I begin by mapping the cultural history of the tattooed body within the United States to demonstrate its dynamic and polysemic nature, that is, the iconic tattooed body is a socio-cultural construction that shifts and adapts with the contemporary context in which it is located. Within this cartographical endeavor, I have identified several transformations in the dominant or iconic inscribed corporeal – ones that I have labeled “The Exoticized Body”, “The Enfreaked Body”, “The ‘All-American’ Body”, “The Disaffected Body”, “The Therapeutic Body”, and “The Bourgeois Body”. While there were other “types” of individuals getting tattooed during these periods, I contend that particular tattooed bodies served as cultural icons at particular historical moments. It is important to note that each of the body eras I expand upon in this mapping was heavily contested within their respective historical moments, and, while it is problematic to place a label on the contemporary tattooed body (i.e. The Bourgeois Body) given its disputed nature, this branding is not set in stone and only represents my thoughts on the modern body.

Tattooed bodies have existed in a myriad of cultures throughout the world for centuries, and while there is much debate within historical literature as to the origins of corporeal inscription, many scholars recognize that it was European explorers’ late eighteenth century encounters with tattooing in the South Pacific that afforded modern interpretations of the practice in North America. Thus, I approach this historical mapping from the Western perspective that was unfamiliar with tattooing, because it was the West’s reactions to inked bodies that rendered them exotic and triggered a series of events that transported the practice to Europe, and later the

United States. This brief history is vital to the paper because it aids in contextualizing the contemporary tattooing moment, illuminating the magnitude and complexity of the tattoo which has transformed as history has.

#### The Exoticized Body

The era that I have labeled “The Exoticized Body” begins with the politically imperialist exploits of Captain James Cook during his late eighteenth century expeditions of the South Pacific and ends with the arrival of tattooing in the United States in the early 1800s. The dominant form of tattooed corporeality during this time was characterized by hand-pricked shapes and designs. During his 1769 explorations of the South Seas, Cook documented the presence of “tattooed” Samoans, Hawaiians, Tahitians, and Maori (Atkinson, 2003; DeMello, 2000; 2007; Pitts, 2003; Thomas, Cole & Douglas, 2005). Fascinated by their “discovery,” Cook and his crew forcibly captured inked “natives” and brought them to Europe to be placed on display. For Europeans, the tattooed “Other” denoted the primitive savagery of uncivilized, non-Christian cultures, and simultaneously accentuated the progression and erudition of the Western world (DeMello, 2007; Kosut, 2006b; Thomas et al., 2005). Public response to the tattoo has been described as a mix between “fascination, disgust, irreverence, and wonder” (Atkinson, 2003, p. 32) as it inspired condemnation of the practice, and a tattooing fad among seamen and members of the leisure classes who yearned to discern themselves with badges of the exotic (Kosut, 2006; Schilkroun, 2004). As Atkinson (2003) describes

Sailors found tattooing their bodies to be a source of excitement and adventure, a keepsake from interaction with fabled tribes and exotic Others. Elite and popular European social circles equally envisioned tattooing to be an exotic source of entertainment, yet interpreted such exoticism to be spiritually vulgar and culturally uncivilized. (pp. 32-33)

The vulgar reading of tattooing amongst members of the leisure class caused the fad to be ephemeral, but seafarers adopted the practice in customary fashion. Tattooing arrived in the United States by way of European sailors in the early 1800s and was welcomed by American servicemen who sought to signify their devotion to their country and feelings for loved ones through corporeal inscription (Atkinson, 2003; DeMello, 2000; 2007; Parry, 1933; Pitts, 2003). Martin Hildebrandt became the first professional American tattooist in 1846 and opened a makeshift shop in New York where he tattooed sailors, Yankee and Confederate soldiers, and all other walks of life curious about the exotic undertaking. Hildebrandt's career further thrived with the influx of circus industry clients during The Enfreaked Body era of the late nineteenth century.

#### The Enfreaked Body

The spectacularization and exhibition of inked bodies in carnivals and circuses emphasized the culturally imperialist aura of Western society, and characterized the epoch of The Enfreaked Body. P.T. Barnum's 1873 human oddities side show, and the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia popularized the public display of tattooed bodies in North America and motivated women and men to transform their corpuses into inked spectacles. This subsequently sparked a symbiotic relationship between tattoo artists and the growing number of tattoo-seeking circus and carnival performers (Atkinson, 2003; DeMello, 2000; 2007; Oettermann, 2000; Schilkrou,

2004). Likewise, the advent of the first electric tattoo machine by Samuel O'Reilly in 1891 made the process easier, faster, and much less painful, thereby motivating even more people to get tattooed (and to do so more frequently) (Atkinson, 2003; Bogdan, 1988; DeMello, 2000; 2007). For the sideshow community tattooing "became a vehicle for exploring deviant yet exciting body practices, a means of engaging in forms of corporeal subversion strictly forbidden in everyday life" (Atkinson, 2003, p. 36). Tattooed women and men within carnival and circus sideshows concocted elaborate tales, telling audiences they were held captive by non-Christian savages who had forcibly tattooed them (Atkinson, 2003; DeMello, 2000; 2007; Mifflin, 1997; Oettermann, 2000). In reality, O'Reilly, Hildebrandt, Charlie Wagner, and other tattooists of the era had executed the artistry, but the public was naïve to the overtly Western iconography (i.e. cannons, battleships, crosses, etc.) on their bodies. For inscribed men, stories of heroism and bravado mesmerized their audiences. But female captivity narratives became "America's first form of pornography," and, combined with the unprecedented amount of skin they revealed to display their ink, tattooed women were accused of being promiscuous (Braunberger, 2000, p.10; DeMello, 2000; Mifflin, 1997). The hypersexualized readings of tattooed women, as well as the non-normative meanings behind "freak shows," fueled the consideration of tattooing as an abnormal and vulgar practice. These understandings also sanctioned tattooing as a masculine endeavor, further emphasized with the institution of tattoo shops during The 'All-American' Body period.

## The 'All-American' Body

As industrialization swept through the United States, so did the first slew of tattoo establishments. A popular staple in the alleyways, pool halls, and barber shops of metropolitan areas, the tattoo parlor served dual purpose as a locale to get inked and “a social club where individuals existing on the fringe of society would meet and swap stories of adventure, grandiosity, and bravado” (Atkinson, 2003, p. 36). The ‘All-American’ Body came to dominate the public imaginary during this time. Marked by a “traditional Americana” style of tattooing, this era became adorned by highly masculine and hyper-patriotic imagery like eagles, snakes, pin-up girls, daggers, skulls, hearts with banners, and military insignia (DeMello, 2000; 2007; Atkinson, 2003; Pitts, 2002, 2003; Govenar, 2000). The nationalistic spirit of The ‘All-American’ Body’s iconography corresponded with the great wars that ensued during the era, and provided for one of the least stigmatized periods of the Western tattooed body (DeMello, 2000; Turner, 2000; Atkinson, 2003; Govenar, 2000; Kosut, 2006). The medical field even became interested in the use of tattooing for plastic surgery, using the practice to restore color to the faces of men injured and disfigured in war (Govenar, 2000). Likewise, tattooing at this time provided a “marginal, but nonetheless positive medium for largely male working-class feelings of *community* and belonging,” and the tattoo artifact became a badge of class and occupational solidarity (Pitts, 2003, p. 5).

The ‘All-American’ Body was not without problems, however. Albert Parry’s 1933 release of *Tattoo: Secrets of a Strange Art as Practiced Among the Natives of the United States* highlighted the relationship between sex and tattooing, referring to



the practice as something in which only prostitutes and homosexuals participated. “The sexual elements of sadism and masochism—the pleasurable infliction and endurance of pain—are more than evident in the act of man’s tattooing,” Parry (1933) stated. He continued that soldiers who had “tattooed pictures of the most frankly lubricious inspiration” were “homosexuals who deny their perversion by insisting, often with blatant obscenity, upon their normality” (p. 21; 26). Chapters of Parry’s book were published in popular magazines and newspapers, issuing misguided and vulgar interpretations of tattooing as inherently connected to sexual perversion and reinforcing unfavorable perceptions of individuals that engaged in the practice.

Women who were not already in the industry were increasingly discouraged from getting tattooed during the period of The ‘All-American’ Body because the “tattooist, like the woman’s other male keepers, took it upon himself to keep ‘nice girls’ (i.e. attractive, middle-class, heterosexual women) from transgressing the class and sexual borders of the time and turning into tramps” (DeMello, 2000, p. 61). As Samuel Steward, a college professor turned tattoo artist from the mid twentieth century explained

When I finally discovered the trouble that had always surrounded the tattooing of women, I established a policy of refusing to tattoo a woman unless she were twenty-one, married and accompanied by her husband, with documentary proof to show their marriage....In those tight and unpermissive 1950s, too many scenes with irate husbands, furious parents, indignant boyfriends, and savage lovers made it necessary to accept female customers only with great care. (1990, p. 127)

Steward also claimed that lesbians (who only had to prove that they were twenty-one) were the only exception to that rule because there were no angry husbands or boyfriends with whom he would have to contend. Furthermore, lesbians, he argued,

and already transgressed the socially normative standards of femininity and, as such, had nothing to lose.

### The Disaffected Body

The 'All-American' Body gave way to The Disaffected Body in the 1950s as the freak show died out and tattooed women faded from the public eye. At mid century, bikers, convicts, gang members, political protestors, and other socially marginalized groups began to join the community, sporting tattoos that signified disorder and rebellion against a post-industrial capitalist society that placed substantial worth on class, wealth, and consumer goods (Govenar, 2000; Atkinson, 2003). Although there was a time when body marks were employed by state governments to punish and classify individuals who had strayed from normalized cultural practices or committed criminal acts, The Disaffected Body's tattoo was reappropriated by alienated "members" of the populace to outwardly display their restless dissatisfaction with society (Atkinson, 2003; Caplan, 2000; DeMello, 1993; 2000; Govenar, 2000; Sanders, 1989). The increasing usage of corporeal inscription to denote identity and gang affiliation within prisons produced a distinct style that dominated the corporeal reality of The Disaffected Body and prompted the stereotypical association of tattoos as indicators of criminality (DeMello, 1993; 2000; Atkinson, 2003). Similarly, the tattoos of motorcycle gangs caused panic and hysteria coupled with the media's depiction of them as "outlaws who terrorised and pillaged local communities" (Atkinson, 2003, p. 38). The menacing "Fuck The World" logo of bikers, the monochromatic *pachuco* symbols of Chicano gang

members,<sup>2</sup> and the jailhouse iconography of prison ink represented the estrangement of particular groups from mainstream culture (DeMello, 1993; 2000).

During The Disaffected Body era, the tattoo became a symbolic expression of discontent for those masculine populations on the fringes of society, but while “prisoners and other social deviants transformed their imposed stigma into something meaningful and resistant, they ironically reproduced their own disreputable status” (Atkinson, 2003, p. 39). Adding insult to injury, the safety and sterility of tattoo shops were heavily scrutinized, and some cities even outlawed the establishments as outbreaks of hepatitis were publicized in the media and scientific journals (DeMello, 2000; Govenar, 2000). Tattooing took a step backwards during The Disaffected Body era and was reinstated as a threatening symbol of the deviant “Other” and a disreputable practice in the popular social imagination. These negative connotations lingered through the successive period of The Therapeutic Body, and it could be argued that they have yet to be reprieved completely.

#### The Therapeutic Body

As the United States transitioned into a period of intense activism in the 1960s, the body became politicized “as a primary site of social control and regulation,” and also as “a site upon which to imagine a new culture of the body that is more spiritual, healthful, empowered, and sexually liberated” (Pitts, 2003, p. 6).

The primary influences on this new age of what I refer to as “The Therapeutic Body”

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<sup>2</sup> *Pachuco* imagery was inspired by the Zoot Suit Riots of the 1940s, a series of confrontations between servicemen and both Mexican and Mexican-Americans in the Los Angeles, California area. The demonization of the Latino population by the media instigated the violent targeting of anyone seen wearing a zoot suit (apparel that was favored by members of the Mexican community) which subsequently incited rioting between military personnel and Latino youth.

were the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights movement, the gay rights movement, the rise of Feminism, the sexual revolution, and the self-help and new-age movements of the 1970s and 1980s. Marijuana leaves, peace symbols, rainbows, flowers, and imagery inspired by Eastern religions, the occult realm, and Japanese culture began to permeate into the corporeal imaginary of The Therapeutic Body, and women played an integral role during this time.

The first oral contraceptive, Enovid, was approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in 1960 after previously being submitted for authorization in 1957 as a treatment for infertility and menstrual maladies (Junod, 1998). Within three years more than 2.3 million women were on “the Pill,” revealing that sex was no longer an undertaking solely for the purpose of procreation. Along with popularization and widespread availability of birth control pills, the historical outcome of *Roe v. Wade* in 1973 secured the reproductive rights of American women. As this occurred, women reemerged in the tattoo community and began inking their sexual independence at escalating rates—most readily on the breast (Mifflin, 1997). Additionally, the various movements that erupted during and after the 1960s encouraged the public to engage in self-exploration and work through their emotional tribulations via tattooing—literally inscribing their treatments onto the body (Atkinson, 2003; DeMello, 2000; 2007; Pitts, 2002; 2004).

Women radically impacted The Therapeutic Body juncture, advancing new ways of thinking about the tattooing practice and body. Atkinson (2003) explains

Indeed, women challenged and undermined cultural constructions of femininity through tattooing, but similarly breached the integrity of cultural associations between the tattoo and the working-class male, the criminal, the sailor, the circus performer, the gang member and the biker. As women demanded more feminine imagery than commonly found in traditional Western tattoo art, more personalized and sensitive treatment in the studio, and a higher quality of work, their participation in tattooing transformed the structure and ideologies underlying the practice. (p. 44)

As women's involvement in *The Therapeutic Body* impacted the tattooing subculture in arguably positive ways, their participation was heavily scrutinized by some critics who viewed women's corporeal markings as a deviant behavior, sign of promiscuity, and a violent/blatant disregard for their bodies (Atkinson, 2002; Benson, 2000; DeMello, 2000; 2007; Featherstone, 2000; Pitts, 2000; 2003; 2004). Negative backlash aside, the era of *The Therapeutic Body* had a constructive and crucial impact on Western tattooing practices. The social movements on the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s emphasized the psychic and spiritual benefits of tattooing and motivated generations of Americans to expel feelings of fear, uncertainty, transformation, and healing through public display of body art (Atkinson, 2003; 2004). Not only did this stimulate a gradual rethinking and re-imagining of the tradition, it laid the foundation for the tattoo artifact's transition from a signifier of collective solidarity to a marker of individual expression and lifestyle politics (Pitts, 2002; Sweetman, 2000).

### The Bourgeois Body

The Bourgeois Body emerged in the 1990s as the enduring epoch of tattooing in the United States, distinguished by commercialized and commodified tattooed bodies and an overemphasis on the reflexive and individualistic qualities of the tattoo artifact. During the early years of *The Bourgeois Body*, tattoos were established as the hallmark of alternative youth fashion and identity, glamorized by MTV and

saturation music venues like Lollapalooza and the Vans Warped Tour (Kosut, 2006a; Pitts, 2003). Midway through the 1990s a “tattoo renaissance” transpired, characterized by a surge in the number of studios, highly trained tattoo artists, people getting inked, and efforts to legitimate tattooing as a sophisticated middle-class aesthetic (Pitts, 2003). In 1995, a prominent non-profit art institution in Soho, New York, The Drawing Center, featured “Pierced Hearts and True Love: A Century of Drawings for Tattoos.” Although various galleries and museums had exhibited photographs and pictures of tattooing in the preceding decade, the Soho showcase displayed American tattoo flash<sup>3</sup> and marked the first time that the tattoo would be labeled under the distinctive banner of “art” (DeMello, 1995; Kosut, 2006a; 2006b). Tattooed bodies continued to gain visibility through various media sources, including new publications devoted to skin and ink, and tattoo websites on the Internet (DeMello, 1995; 2000; 2007; Atkinson, 2003).

With the turn of the century, as postmodernity dissolved traditions of social order and meaning, and the heightened value of the body as a site for self-identity and reflexivity entrenched late-capitalist consumer culture, the tattoo was projected as an expression of individualization (Kleese, 2000; Turner, 2000; Sweetman, 2000). Studies conducted by MSNBC in 2001 and the University of Connecticut in 2002 revealed that 20% of the Americans—from college students to professionals to “soccer moms”—bore tattoos (Kosut, 2006a). Around the same time, publishers began to market books that focused on celebrities’ tattoos and the meanings behind

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<sup>3</sup> Flash is series of designs drawn by artists usually printed on 11”x14” paper or cardboard. Flash is commonly seen on the walls of tattoo shops and was originally used to display a tattooist’s credentials, provide ideas for people seeking tattoos, and act as a quick point of reference or stencil for artists when they applied the tattoos.

them, revealing that corporeal inscriptions had transitioned into high-priced commodities that could fulfill an individual's deepest expressive desires (See, for example, Gerard's *Celebrity Skin: Tattoos, Brands, and Body Adornments of the Stars* and Ritz's *Tattoo Nation: Portraits of Celebrity Body Art*). This conception was endorsed through propaganda like the 2001 VISA commercial that took place in a tattoo shop, "announcing to Gen-Xers that you can charge *everything* on your credit card, even body modifications" (Kosut, 2006a, p. 1039, emphasis in the original). Tattoos fully infiltrated the mainstream within *The Bourgeois Body* in terms of the sheer number of people receiving them and their visibility within the commercial market. Numerous corporations began co-opting ink into their marketing strategies, incorporating Western tattoo culture into the fashion industry.

The commodified representations of the tattoo insinuated that consumers could construct a unique sense of self with the procurement of their merchandise (and in extension, by acquiring a body mark). Like the stranger described in the opening of this paper, consumers could purchase these products devoid of any affiliation with the (disreputable) history of the Western tattooed body. The increasing popularity of corporeal inscription that ensued with the persistent commercialization of tattooed culture caused many academics and mainstream journalists to dismiss *The Bourgeois Body's* tattoo as "a superficial trend, one instance among many of the incorporation of 'the exotic' into the fashion system" (Sweetman, 2000, p. 66; Kosut, 2006a). Tattoos were indicted as just another mark in Baudrillard's "carnival of signs," a symptom of a postmodern, late-capitalist society (Fisher, 2002; Sweetman, 1999).

Coinciding with the implosion of culture and the pervasive corporatization of tattoo culture was the rise of surveillance-entertainment, or reality television (RTV) (Andrejevic, 2003; Heller, 2007; Hopson, 2008; Jones, 2008; Rail, 1998). Described as “symptomatic of a waning sense of reality in the postmodern era” (Andrejevic, 2003, p. 8) and a “cure and disease of modern life” (Durham Peter, 2006, p. 59), RTV collided with tattooing in July 2005 and took the corporatized self-expression narrative to a new exploitive level. The Learning Channel’s (TLC) *Miami Ink* and A&E’s *Inked* offered viewers an inside look at the “real” world of tattooing. The premier of both shows garnered much attention initially, but it was the continued success of *Miami Ink* that spawned the *L.A. Ink* and UK’s *London Ink* spinoffs in August and September of 2007, respectively (*Inked* was unofficially cancelled after the end of its second season in October 2006). *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* were a creation of the increasingly commodified postmodern tattoo industry, but their success indicates that they also contributed to its intensification. According to Nielsen Media Research, over 3 million people watched the season two finale of *Miami Ink*, and the season one premier of *L.A. Ink* amassed 2.9 million total viewers (making *L.A. Ink* the most-watched series debut for TLC since January 2003). This placed TLC at the top ranking among basic cable networks in Tuesday primetime among the key demographics ages 18-34 and 18-49 and allowed the network to outperform the ABC, CBS, and NBC networks in 18-34 age group.

What was unique about these shows was their portrayal of the practice and populace involved in tattooing, something that I have referred to as a “tattooed reality.” As a tattooed person, I felt that the “tattooed reality” projected by these



shows was not an accurate reflection of my personal experiences, however, numerical data indicated that the shows had garnered a strong following. Recognizing this, I sought to critically interrogate *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* by reviewing their discourse and engaging with tattoo artists, the gatekeepers of the practice, to understand how they made sense of the “tattooed reality” the shows projected.

## Chapter 2: Methods

In an effort to deconstruct the contemporary tattoo industry and the contested nature of the tattooed body, I employed the methods of media analysis and in-depth interviewing. Collectively, the information I gained while situated in the tattoo empirical guided my research. I conducted seven interviews with tattoo artists from the Maryland and Washington, D.C. area. Prior to those meetings, I analyzed content from the RTV shows *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink*. My media analysis incorporated an examination of the first two seasons of *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* and a close reading of the TLC, *Miami Ink*, and *L.A. Ink* websites in an effort to deconstruct the “tattooed reality” discourse emanating from mediated versions of the tattoo industry.

The data I gathered from the investigation was used to engage my discussions with tattoo artists, and my interviews subsequently informed my analysis of the shows. While I initially interviewed non-artist tattoo wearers, I elected to pursue interviews with artists for this project because I believe they are best able to understand what is happening in the contemporary moment<sup>4</sup>. As the tattoo has transitioned from a community to an industry, the number of people involved in the subculture has grown exponentially. However, the number of individuals who have committed themselves to the profession of tattooing remains comparatively smaller than the multitude of people that have had their bodies marked with an indelible design. Likewise, artists act as the gatekeepers to the tattoo industry, determining

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<sup>4</sup> I elaborate upon this decision within my “Reflexivity” section.

who gets tattooed, where they get tattooed, and how they get tattooed.<sup>5</sup> While it may be argued that the client controls the tattooing process, I contend that artists hold the authority to grant or deny access to any person seeking a tattoo. Anyone who bares ink more than likely played a significant role in the idea or inspiration behind the tattoo, but it is the person who holds the tattoo machine that makes it possible for those ideas and inspirations to be realized. For every corporeal inscription that exists there, is a tattoo artist that helped to generate it.

### Media Analysis

I approached my media analysis concerned with the spatial and temporal location of corporeal inscription, and the “tattooed reality” projecting from mediated spectacles in the tattoo industry. The media can be a powerful and dangerous outlet as Durham Peters (2006) notes in his review of C. Wright Mills’ *The Power Elite*: “the media do not simply shape people’s voting, fashion, movies, or shopping choices, but provide ordinary people with their aspirations, identities, and even experiences” (p. 58). Taking this idea into consideration, along with the “tattooed reality” I argue is being constructed and presented through mediated versions of tattooing, I decided to review the *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* television shows and websites, along with their parent company TLC. I chose these outlets because of their widespread popularity (evidenced by their approval ratings within Nielsen Media Research), and because Hopson (2008) suggests that each media network has a

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<sup>5</sup> Artists reserve the right to not tattoo someone for any reason whatsoever—especially if they appear intoxicated or not of sound mind. Likewise, most tattoo artists are artistically trained and educated in anatomy. Because of this they can determine by a client’s body structure where a particular design or image will look best and what colors and techniques must be employed to achieve the desired outcome.

specific mission that caters to particular audiences and identities. Keeping this in mind I approached the deconstruction of TLC as a means to better understand the discourse of and motivation behind *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink's* “tattooed reality.” It became evident through their network profile and programming schedule that TLC was dedicated to producing “docu-series” that allowed their audiences to gaze into the lives of the exotic and non-normalized “Other,” rather than shows that reflect “authentic experiences and relatable lives” as their website proclaims.

The media analysis I conducted was much like what Johnson et al. (2004) refer to as a piecemeal procedure—it involved “highlighting or underlining particular words and phrases that seem[ed] interesting, that jump[ed] off the page” (p. 179). In this case, however, it was the words and phrases that jumped off of the screen and television set. To begin, I watched each episode of the first two seasons of *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* and took notes as if I were conducting participant observation—I jotted my impressions and feelings, made note of any significant events that occurred, and included the (inter)actions of the “actors” within the field (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1997a). After completing the first two seasons of *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink*, I turned my attention to the TLC website and each of the shows’ respective websites. I noted the network profile description for TLC and each of the television shows’ synopses, and took extensive notes while working my way through the individual websites. I paid close attention to the application process for selection onto the show and distinguished between any differences in features for each show’s website.

*In-depth Interviewing: Locating Artists*

Following the emancipatory and collaborative impetus of PCS, I set out to conduct semi-structured in-depth interviews *with* tattoo artists from the Maryland and Washington, D.C. area in an effort to understand how they interacted with and made sense of the “tattooed reality” projected in *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink*. I employed purposive sampling techniques for my thesis because there was a specific population whose experiences I was concerned with understanding (Babbie, 2004; Daly, 2007). I networked with artists by attending tattoo conventions, walking into local shops, and utilizing my personal contacts with artists who worked on my tattoos. In each case, I offered a brief description of my research and my intent to interview artists. I found that this approach successfully inspired artists’ enthusiasm for my project and created further word of mouth interest, also referred to as snowball sampling (Babbie, 2004; Daly, 2007). I asked the artists to commit a minimum of one hour and a maximum of two hours of their time and notified them that the interviews would be documented with a digital recording device. I created an interview guide (see Appendix D) for my interviews based on open-ended questions designed to elicit responses that would help me acquire insights to the conditions and characteristics of contemporary Western tattooing. I transcribed all of my interviews shortly after each one took place and utilized those pages of text later in my data analysis.

Selection criteria for the co-creators of this research thesis was solely based upon occupation, but I did seek out artists according to the length of time they had been tattooing. I designated “New-School” as those artists who had ten or fewer years of tattooing experience, and “Old-School” as those artists with more than ten

years of tattooing experience. During the networking phase of my thesis, I was able to ascertain this information through my conversations with artists. My motivation behind creating these categories was to understand whether perspectives differed between artists that cultivated their craft in conjunction with the corporatization of tattoo culture, and artists that experienced their trade transition from a stigmatized practice to an expression of status. The hectic schedules of the artists precluded my intent to interview five artists from each category; in the end, I was able to talk with seven artists: four from the “Old School” designation and another three I classified, a priori, as “New School.” Nevertheless I feel the information these interviews provided offered enough breadth and depth to successfully complete my thesis. Ultimately, I did not determine significant differences in the responses from “Old-School” and “New-School” artists.

Among the seven artists I interviewed<sup>6</sup>, two were women (Mick, Laura) and five were men (Matt, Tom, Jacob, Johnny, Bill). Three were “New-School” artists (Matt, Jacob, Bill), and four were “Old-School” artists (Mick, Tom, Johnny, Laura). Jacob was the youngest artist at 23, and Tom was the oldest at 55. Bill was the co-owner of a tattoo studio where he and Laura worked. Mick and Tom boasted 55 years of combined experience at the studio they co-owned, and Jacob was in his third year of tattooing at the same shop. While these artists were based in the Northeastern part of Maryland, Johnny worked for a tattoo studio that had three locations in the suburbs of Washington, D.C.

Some of my interviews were carried out in relatively “traditional” semi-structured in-depth interviewing fashion, but others contained varying group

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<sup>6</sup> All of the artists gave me permission to utilize their real names within this project.

interview dynamics. Matt, Mick, and Tom notified me prior to our interviews that they would be tattooing clients during our interviews. Additionally, Mick asked if I would mind interviewing her and Tom in tandem while they tattooed clients. I happened upon my interview with Jacob by luck, as he was stopping by the studio to speak with Mick and stayed to interview with me. I felt it was important to take advantage of these opportunities because I did not want to take the chance of losing out on interviews and because I thought the addition of group dynamics might elicit significant and useful information. Fontana and Frey (2005) state that group interviews are valuable because they have the potential to effectively

...aid respondents' recall or to stimulate embellished descriptions of specific events... or experiences shared by members of a group. Group interviews can also be used for triangulation purposes or used in conjunction with other data-gathering techniques. For example, group interviews could be helpful in the process of "indefinite triangulation" by putting individual responses into a context. (p. 704)

Mick and Matt stated ahead of time that the clients being tattooed were "regulars" and had already been informed that I would be conducting interviews. Any concerns I had about the artists curtailing their responses because of clients being present were eliminated the moment the interviews commenced. After telling Matt and his client that I wanted to talk about the tattoo reality television shows, he quickly indicated his aversion to the subject quipping, "You mean the guys that make us look like assholes?" (Matt, Interview, June 3, 2008). This and other colorful responses were emblematic of my interviews with Matt, Mick, and Tom.

### Data Analysis

When it came time to analyze the data I had collected, I turned to my interview transcripts and the notes I took throughout my media analysis. I generated twenty pages of text from my media analysis and 123 pages of text from my interviews. While I only conducted seven interviews, the high number of transcript pages can be attributed to three separate hour-long visits with Bill and my joint session with Mick and Tom, which lasted just over five hours. I utilized the *Sony Digital Voice Editor, Third Edition* software that came with my Sony Digital Voice Recorder to transcribe my interviews into a Microsoft Word document, but did not import my data into a qualitative coding program such as NUDIST or ATLAS.ti to indentify themes. In my brief experience using ATLAS.ti I could not help but feel as if I was mechanizing the rich lived histories I have been taught within my graduate education to appreciate unconditionally. To counter this feeling I opted for a more hands-on approach to distinguish themes within my media and interview data. I do believe, however, it will be advantageous to my development as a researcher to experience data interpretation through one of these programs in future investigative endeavors.

Sitting down with my transcripts and media analysis notes, I scanned each page line by line and highlighted key concepts, quotes, and moments as suggested by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1997b). Although I did not attend to the formalized processes of open, axial, and selective coding, I paid close attention to language and gave precedence to themes that arose often and seemed of significance to the tattoo artists (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1997b). Because of the sheer number of pages of



text I generated from my media analysis and interviews, I decided to attend to each method's data separately at first. This allowed me to navigate the material better and bring the sections together after I had completed them to make comparisons. As I describe my data analysis process it should be understood that I took the same approach for each method before uniting the information together in the end.

After the first round of data review, I went back through my text pages to see if I could draw connections between the content I had initially highlighted. I jotted remarks next to the quotes and other notes that originally struck me as pertinent. These comments were generally one or two words that summarized the highlighted data. These words were instinctive, meaning they represented my immediate reaction after reading the phrase or quote. Following the second round of data analysis, I made a list of the annotations I had written next to the highlighted text. I looked for repetition within my wording and grouped similar remarks together. I referred back to the actual quotations and phrases that coincided with the comments I had linked together in an effort to determine if the groupings made sense were appropriately connected. After this was complete and minor adjustments were made, I generated a title for each of the categories of remarks and their respective excerpts. Some of the titles were words or phrases that were originally found in the groupings, but others were terms that I felt best represented all of the commentary within a particular subset. These titles collectively comprised the themes of project and will be elaborated upon in the "Discussion" section.

### Reflexivity

PCS scholars recognize that empirical foci are mediated, shaped, and affected by social forces within the contexts they are situated and, as such, engage in self-reflective, collaborative, and polyvocal writing methods to add rigor and depth to their research (King, 2005; Saukko, 2003). Reflexivity is one of those methods researchers in PCS apply. As a form of critical self-checking, reflexivity allows scholars to attend to how their subject-positions affect the ways in which they and their collaborators make meaning (Daly, 2007). I remained sensitive to my location within the empirical because tattooing is a very personal subject for me, and I am aware that I hold biases in favor of this subculture. During my research I struggled with identity and authenticity, going out of my way to wear clothes that showed off my tattoos and making sure to have all of my facial piercings in whenever I met with a tattoo artists. While I do not necessarily conceive myself as part of a subculture, I took these measures because I wanted the artists to be able to identify with me. I readily divulged the intentions of my research to my collaborators, in part, because I was nervous in my first research endeavor, but more importantly, because I wanted the artists to know that I was “on their side.” In addition to being completely candid with my collaborators, I offered to provide each of them a copy of my thesis once it was complete so they would have the opportunity to review the ways in which I described them, their specific quotations I selected to use in this project, as well as the ways in which I interpreted those quotations. I believe that my complete disclosure aided in establishing rapport and gaining trust from the artists, and I took these steps

because I recognize that realities are co-produced and efforts must be taken to uphold the integrity of the information generated (Saukko, 2005).

I also considered the possibility that “gendered interviewing” could have taken place within and affected the research, given my position as a woman researcher in a historically masculine and male-dominated empirical setting. Fontana and Frey (2005) explicate the concept of “gendered interviewing,” stating that “the sex of the interviewer and the sex of the respondent make a difference because the interview takes place within the cultural boundaries of a paternalistic social system in which masculine identities are differentiated from feminine ones” (p. 710). But after considering this and reviewing my interactions with the artists, I do not believe that gendered interviewing took place in my research. The men and women I interviewed offered relatively equivalent insights in terms of breadth and depth. I do not feel that the men artists patronized me, nor do I suspect that they abstained from being forthright with me because I am a woman. The women artists did not empathize with me because I am a woman, nor did they seem to divulge more information. I believe the range and profundity of the content that was co-produced through our interviews and conversations was a consequence of my identification and presence in the Western tattoo subculture. While this is specifically my interpretation of the tattoo artist interviews, I believe the research presented in the interviewing section of this paper will clarify my understandings.

In preliminary undertakings of this project I conducted a series of eight shorter interviews with non-artist tattoo wearers in an effort to understand how they made sense of *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* and other commercialized depictions of the

contemporary tattoo industry. While the responses within these interviews carried ample breadth and depth, I ultimately opted not to include them in this paper (though I now realize the error of my decision). I initially thought that including interview data from both populations would complicate my project, but it was the divergent tone among the two groups' responses that prompted me to impetuously dismiss one set of narratives. Non-artists provided overwhelmingly favorable feedback regarding *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink*, stating that they enjoyed the art and stories highlighted within the shows. A few individuals even declared that the shows inspired them to get tattooed. On the contrary, the tattoo artists I interviewed were more critical of the shows, pinpointing various flaws and inaccuracies within their content. With haste and naivety, I abandoned the non-artists' responses and privileged the voices of the tattoo artists, doing so because I believed the artists' arguments were aligned with my critique of the shows. In actuality, had I included the insights of the non-artist tattoo wearers, my research would have been better informed and the true contested nature of the contemporary tattooed body would have been illuminated and put into perspective. For future projects I plan to expand upon this research and incorporate the range of voices within the contemporary tattooing collective.

## Chapter 3: Discussion

Within this section I direct attention to the “tattooed reality” thematic topics that came to the fore in my media analysis and interviews. Specific to my analysis of *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink*’s discourse were the themes that I have labeled *spectacle*, *panacea*, *fragmentation*, and *policing corporeal inscription*. Additionally, the artist interviews identified a host of ways in which the themes that I have termed *product*, *practice*, and *process* of tattooing were misrepresented and contested within the *Ink* series. *Spectacle*, *panacea*, and *fragmentation* are salient within each of the interview themes of *product*, *practice*, and *process*, and *policing corporeal inscription* is the means by which “tattooed reality” is successfully constructed by the RTV cultural intermediary. The sum of these interlocking and overlapping themes demonstrates how the tattooed body has become a highly contested cultural entity in the contemporary moment.

### *‘Ink’ Deconstructed*

The *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* series construct a “tattooed reality” through four distinct interconnecting themes: *spectacle*, *panacea*, *fragmentation*, and *policing corporeal inscription*. The first concept, *spectacle*, refers to the ways in which tattooing is spectacularized within the RTV shows and through promotional materials for the series. *Panacea* denotes how the tattoo artifact is constructed as a cure-all for postmodernity through the highly emotional client stories featured in the shows. *Fragmentation* speaks to series’ continual appropriation of the tattoo as an aesthetic marker of the middle-class, and the blatant exclusion of the stigmatized history of the

practice from their “tattooed reality” discourse. I highlight the discriminatory online application to get onto the RTV shows within *policing corporeal inscription* as the means by which producers are able to methodically construct “tattooed reality.” Overall, these themes emphasize how *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink*’s “tattooed reality” functions to exploit the tattoo as a panacea for contemporary late-capitalism and fragment Western tattoo culture for the purpose of entertainment and profit. This is made possible by TLC, a network that objectifies and makes a spectacle of its reality television programming subjects.

#### Spectacle

Discovery Communications, the global company that owns TLC, boasts about the network on its corporate website:

TLC, one of the 15 most widely distributed cable networks in the U.S., celebrates life’s surprises with programming that explores those unmatched, one-in-a-million, “you had to be there” moments. Connecting a community of real people—whether they are on television or watching it—the network’s hit programming reflects authentic experiences and relatable lives. Funding fun and beauty in the unexpected, TLC will always be a trusted destination for viewers who want the “real” in their reality. (*The Learning Channel*, n.d.)

Although this sounds innocent, TLC’s corporate profile is a facade for the exploitive programming regularly broadcasted on the network. In addition to *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink*, TLC’s more popular series include the spectacles *Little People, Big World* and *Jon & Kate Plus 8*. *Little People, Big World* focuses on the Roloffs, “an extraordinary family composed of both little and average-sized people,” and *Jon & Kate Plus 8* traces the lives of the Gosselins, a family struggling to maintain an ordinary life with twins and sextuplets (*Little People, Big World*, n.d.; *Jon & Kate Plus 8*, n.d.). These indicate that TLC does not actually provide programming that

“reflects authentic experiences and relatable lives,” they provide an outlet for audiences to gaze into the lives of the exotic and non-normalized “Other” (*The Learning Channel*, n.d.). Moreover, TLC’s RTV series provide a platform for voyeurs “to consume the lived experiences of the Other without compromising the privacy of one’s own experiences” (Hopson, 2008, p. 443). This applies also for the *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* series, which TLC decided to produce because, according to their Senior Vice President for Programming and Development Chris Drobynk, tattooing has “a community of people that lends a coolness that we really enjoy and offers a strong new media proposition as well” (Heiges & Arenstein, June 8, 2007). Likewise, Drobynk stated, “There’s a great element of story that makes the meat of every tattoo.” Combining the “coolness” and reality elements together, TLC encourages audiences to consume the lived experienced of the exotic tattooed “Other” by promoting *Miami Ink* as the “hot show about the art and drama of tattooing” on their website, and gives the following storyline on the series’ DVD packaging:

When Ami James, Chris Garver, Darren Brass, and Chris Nunez open a tattoo parlor in Miami, it’s the fulfillment of a dream the buddies have harbored since studying under the late, great Lou Sciberras more than a decade ago. This Discovery Channel reality series takes viewers inside their world. It’s a glimpse into the stories behind the often elaborate body art and the personalities who dream of making their bodies their canvases.

Motivated by the success of *Miami Ink*, TLC executives gave artist Kat Von D the opportunity to promote her own tattoo show through *L.A. Ink*. The show was publicized as the edgier and more hip than *Miami Ink*, and promoted a “Girl Power” narrative sure to capture key female demographics (if they were not already watching):

For centuries the tattoo industry has been dominated by men. In TLC's new series *L.A. Ink*, the glass ceiling is shattered as three of the most respected female tattoo artists, along with one legendary male artist, come together to work at the newest and hottest shop in L.A....With the majority of the artists in the shop being woman, *L.A. Ink* shows that great art shares no gender bias. (Forman, June 22, 2007)

The show's website provides the same type of flashy promotional material, playing up the "coolness" factor of the series' aura and focusing very little on the actual practice of tattooing:

Playing by her own rules, Kat lives a fast-paced, rebel lifestyle. Hers is a life of freedom: she sets her own schedule, picks her clients, sleeps late, and parties all night. For her shop to be a success, Kat will need to learn how to balance her lifestyle and her business while managing a colorful staff of renowned artists. *L.A. Ink* will offer a rare glimpse into an L.A. that is seldom seen, through the eyes of a true insider.

In conjunction with these advertisements, *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* disseminate a "tattooed reality" discourse that is seductive and laden with the qualities of "cool." They draw in audiences in record numbers, but as the tattoo artists I interviewed revealed, the shows do anything but provide the "reality" of contemporary tattooing.

Panacea

*Miami Ink* features cast members/tattoo artists Ami James and Chris Nunez, the co-owners of Miami Ink, as well as Chris Garver, Darren Brass, and James' apprentice Yoji Harada. *L.A. Ink* follows cast members/tattoo artists Corey Miller, Hannah Aitchison, and Kim Saigh, along with Kat Von D, the owner of High Voltage Ink. Von D first appeared on *Miami Ink* at the end of Season 1 but had a falling out with James in the final episode of Season 2. Shortly thereafter promotions for *L.A. Ink* began to appear. *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* work with the same format: following their artist "casts" as they tattoo four to six people in a one-hour episode. Integral to



the shows are the clients' stories and explanations behind their tattooed aspirations. Each client "confesses," either to the tattoo artist or to the camera in a separate segment of the episode, why she or he has sought out a particular tattoo. For example, in one of the very first episodes of *Miami Ink*, a professional surfer sought out tattooist Ami James to pay homage to his homeland and get the Hawaiian Islands inscribed on his ribs. In that same episode a young woman came to see Chris Nunez to get a tattoo memorializing her brother who had committed suicide a few years prior. Interspersed with these confessions are the narratives of the cast members, who share personal details of their lives and their tattoos, and provide "insider" knowledge of the tattoo industry. As Nunez completed the tribute to the young woman's brother, the camera broke to a shot of him outside the studio describing how his own father had committed suicide when he was younger, and how he empathized with the young woman. Much like this example, the tales of the clients and cast are somehow intertwined with one another in each episode. The chronicles range from tragedy to celebration, but each is strategically captivating. Memorializing passed loved ones and marking triumphant recoveries from illness, injury, or particularly rough life periods are the most frequently recounted stories. Juxtaposed against reclamation and commemorative discourse, the tattoo artifact is presented as a panacea to the ills of postmodernity (and has longer lasting effects than anti-depressants).

#### Fragmentation

In addition to the cure-all discourse within the "tattooed reality," the shows overemphasize tattooing as an art form. While the artists I spoke with also regarded tattooing as a form of art, they stated that it has perpetually been considered, as one

interviewee put it, a “poor man’s art,” and recognized that historical actors had battled with critics of the practice just to earn that distinction. In contrast, *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* rarely acknowledge the troubled past of the Western tattoo. Instead, they correlate tattooing with historical primitive civilizations (i.e. Samoan, Maori, Hawaiian, Japanese, etc.) in which tattooing was deeply embedded in social processes, and regard corporeal inscription as the new cultural markers of the middle-class (high-priced aesthetic commodities that allow individuals to embody their identity politics). As the shows appropriate non-Western cultural rites and legitimize tattooing as an artistic endeavor in the “tattooed reality,” they simultaneously fragment and divorce the practice from its dishonorable history. This is accomplished not only through the shows’ content, but also in their marketing materials previously discussed in the “Spectacle” sub-section (e.g., websites and DVDs). Without acknowledging the contextual forces and moments that produced the tattoo artifact, a one-sided view of the culture ensues and effectually silences and re-marginalizes the historical actors of the practice.

#### Policing Corporeal Inscription

Producers of *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* exercise power and maintain the fragmented discourse that spectacularizes and portrays tattooing as a panacea and middle-class aesthetic through a discriminatory online application process. Potential clients must have access to the Internet and an expendable income to apply, as a \$100 non-refundable deposit is required in order to submit the application. While that fee will be applied to the total cost of the tattoo if the applicant is selected for the program, the minimum charge for a tattoo at the studios is \$500 and the cost per hour

of tattooing is \$200. In addition, ink enthusiasts must be willing to travel to Los Angeles, California or Miami Beach, Florida as the tattoo artists do not make house calls. Exclusionary as those requirements are, potential patrons must also submit their headshots (presumably to assess the telegenic quality of the applicant). It is also mandatory to provide a detailed 250 word description of the image they wish to have tattooed—size, shape, color, and photograph of desired style—and a 100-150 word detailed story regarding why they seek the desired tattoo. Failure to include either of these will result in immediate rejection of the submission. The online application process contributes to the “tattooed reality” discourse by methodically scrutinizing and policing what bodies and what narratives make it onto either of the shows.

### Artists’ Narratives

After reviewing my interviews and field notes, I found three themes related to “tattooed reality” that came to the fore most often: *product*, *practice*, and *process*. The first, and I would argue most important, was the concept of the false *product*—that the “tattooed reality” discourse stemming from the shows is not representative of the contemporary public body of tattooing in the United States. In other words, the tattooed bodies featured on the television shows do not represent the complete populace of individuals being tattooed in contemporary Western society. This theme extended not only to the particular subject-positions of the tattooed population, but also to the expressions, meanings, and motivations behind their tattoos. The second theme to emerge from my interviews was the notion of *practice*. It was overwhelmingly expressed in the interviews that *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink*’s “tattooed reality” offers an inaccurate depiction of the tattooing practice, which covers

everything from the ways in which the lifestyles of the tattoo artist casts were excessively glamorized to the general sentiment that tattoo culture is not stigmatized (but rather, explicitly accepted). The third theme that materialized in the interviews was that of *process*, or the varying ways in which the “tattooed reality” discourse misrepresents the physical process of receiving a tattoo. Grievances ranged from the unsanitary tattooing procedures regularly displayed on the television shows, to the hasty, made-for-television rendering of the tattoo process from start to finish. Taken together, these themes demonstrate that *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* provide a risky, inaccurate, and misleading representation of tattooing.

#### Product

When I asked the artists whether the tattooed bodies shown on *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* correctly reflected the people they tattooed on a daily basis, the answer was a resounding no. While each of the artists acknowledged that the RTV tattoo shows had opened the doors for new groups of individuals who previously thought tattooing was not for them, they also noted that their personal clients continue to request many of the historical cultural icons of the tattoo community, such as traditional “Americana” and flash designs, despite the fact that such imagery was absent from the television shows. Likewise, Matt explained that many of the historical actors from the tattoo community continued to seek out tattoos regularly, even though those individuals were not represented on the show: “We tattoo doctors, lawyers, all the way through to junkies and the homeless. All walks of life.” He continued that the seemingly “normal” middle-class bodies and charismatic stories within the “tattooed

reality” continuously featured on the shows were idealistic at best, as he never ceased to be shocked and surprised by his clients and their antics

I just tattooed a 17-year-old mother. She got her son’s footprints on her arm. It’s like, you know, your mom’s out there signing for you [to get the tattoo] and holding your baby while she is outside smoking a cigarette, and you’re in here getting tattooed. I mean, that’s fucking classy if you ask me. (Interview, June 3, 2008)

Johnny echoed Matt’s sentiments and, in addition to working-class individuals not included in the “tattooed reality” discourse, noted that he tattooed a number of servicemen. Johnny also drew attention to race, stating that even though he did not see a representation on either show, “98% of my clients are black” (Interview, July 21, 2008). All of the artists recognized that geographic location plays an important role in determining what “types” of individuals populate a particular tattoo studio, but it is incredibly problematic that the “tattooed reality” of *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* fails to represent these various cultural groups.

In addition to the contrived tattooed populace of the shows’ “tattooed reality,” the particular types of tattoos publicized and meanings associated with them fail to represent the public body of tattooing in the United States. As described in the media analysis, the idea of the tattoo as a panacea for the ills of contemporary late-capitalism dominates the “tattooed reality” discourse, but the artists I interviewed revealed that the meanings behind their clients’ tattoos were across the board. Laura stated that the emotional tales on *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* resonated particularly well with her because of her signature tattooing style.

Yeah I'm a good psychologist. Because of the impressionist stuff I do I get a lot of the um, mourning and, you know, I do a lot more of the emotional tattoos, and um, and I like it that way. I like it that a lot of the time the, I can help people with a portrait and, um, give them something to memorialize the person. (Interview, May 5, 2008)

But other artists expressed that some of their clients sought out tattoos strictly for their shock value, while others came in for tattoos that just looked cool or made them look cool but carried no symbolic value. Additionally, all of the artists reflected on the pain involved in receiving a tattoo and noted that they had many clients that simply enjoyed the way the process of tattooing felt. No matter the circumstance, these meanings and expressions were not being included in the "tattooed reality" of *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink*.

Jacob, Johnny, and Bill indicated that a large percentage of the images they tattooed on their clients came from flash art, unlike the highly customized designs *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* place a substantial emphasis on. The esteemed valuation of customized pieces (and discounting of flash designs) within the "tattooed reality" discourse is done to accentuate the political and individualistic properties of the aesthetic commodity, and presumably to increase the profits of the studios featured on *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* (as mentioned before, the shows have a \$500 minimum charge for their tattoos and a \$200 hourly rate). Bill expressed the antithetical irony of this trend, regarding flash designs as foundational to the history of tattooing in the United States. He recounted how artists created sheets of flash art for other tattooers to learn from and follow, most notably Sailor Jerry and Don Ed Hardy whose namesake have been branded into fashion statements (Interview, April 1, 2008).

## Practice

Questions of *practice* evoked the most personal and introspective responses from the tattoo artists who spoke with me. This did not surprise me, given the problematic and disreputable history of Western tattooing, but I did find the reactions of the artists significant. Bill was the first tattoo artist with whom I had the fortune to meet. The length of time it took to schedule a meeting with him initially made me feel as though I was getting the runaround, but I soon discovered that this was a defensive tactic, and a well-warranted one at that. When I finally sat down to talk with Bill, he immediately probed me to divulge the details of my research. Without any hesitation I explained that I was concerned about the way tattooing was being portrayed through the contemporary tattoo industry, and, in particular, through *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink*. I answered with complete candor and openness, for I believe there is an injustice occurring in the contemporary that is placing tattooed bodies in a position of exploitation; I wanted Bill to know that it was my intention to present his interpretations as balanced and as fairly as possible. As I explained my thesis, Bill revealed that he had been hesitant to meet with me or participate in the project because he had been wronged by a journalist from a Maryland newspaper and college students from a neighboring university. Bill stated that the college students did not like something that he said, or rather he did not say what they wanted to hear, so they stopped meeting with him. In the newspaper scenario the journalist misquoted Bill and took something he said out of context. Both circumstances were damaging because Bill, his establishment, and tattoo culture as a whole were depicted in a negative manner—a trend that has ensued since the inception of Western tattooing,

relegating the practice to the margins of society. After explaining this, Bill asserted that tattooing made his and his family's life possible, and was not something he took lightly.

Bill's apprehension and accounts of transgression were antithetical to *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink*'s generally favorable depiction of Western tattooing. And he was not alone. Johnny acknowledged that he probably would not be able to get a job aside from tattooing in the future because of his own heavily tattooed body. He also stated that he was weary of his nine-year-old son someday wanting to get a tattoo because of the stigma continuously attached to the process and product: "You know, a lot of places say they don't discriminate, but, if it comes between you and the guy that doesn't have any visible tattoos, he's probably going to get the job" (Johnny, Interview, July 21, 2008). *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* have reflected on the downside of tattooing, but it has been done in such a way as to caution the audience from selecting a bad tattooist or a design they might not like years down the road. For instance, in the first season of *L.A. Ink*, shop manager Pixie went to see a dermatologist that specialized in laser tattoo removal because she had "prime real estate" going uncharted due to an existing tattoo she was less than thrilled about (*L.A. Ink*, Season 1, 2007). This provoked Kat Von D, renowned artist and owner of High Voltage Tattoo, the shop at the center of *L.A. Ink*, to discuss the tattoo of her ex-husband's name that she regretted, warning viewers to think wisely about the permanency of a specific image before going through with the process. Only once has either of the shows made mention of the drawbacks of tattooing. In one episode of *Miami Ink*, artist Ami James refused to tattoo his apprentice's head because James' own neck



tattoo had caused him much grief and unwanted public attention. James quickly declined the request, stating that he was “not running a freak show” (*Miami Ink*, Season 1, 2005). While that example was an exception to the “tattooed reality” discourse’s overwhelmingly positive depiction of the practice, subsequent episodes and seasons of either show have not revisited the problems of tattooing.

In addition to Johnny’s concern, Mick explained in grueling detail that she had spent the past few months meticulously constructing legislation to fight a Maryland city councilman who was working to have her tattoo studio put out of business. Their establishment had been in the same location for over 30 years but was facing expulsion on allegations that tattoo shops were not “family-friendly.” Mick and Tom were both outraged and flabbergasted by this charge, stating that their studio was devoted to the notion of family. Mick explained that she had given each of her children the opportunity to learn how to body pierce at the age of 16 and tattoo at the age of 18. While most of her kids elected to pursue other careers, her youngest son consented. Like any proud parent, Mick boasted that her son, Jacob, had been piercing for five years and was in the third year of his tattooing apprenticeship (I was able to interview Jacob later when he stopped by to bring his mother coffee). In addition, Tom described the process of filling out a school-required work permit form so his 15-year-old granddaughter could start working the front desk of his and Mick’s tattoo studio. The fact that a tattoo establishment grounded in family tradition is vehemently discriminated against speaks to the conservatism of the era, and the narrowly-defined familial institution in conservative thought and discourse. These are issues that are never addressed in either *L.A. Ink* or *Miami Ink*.

The failure of *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* to critically address the pitfalls of tattoo culture was only one *practice* concern expressed by the tattoo artists with whom I spoke. The ways in which the shows glamorized the tattoo profession was equally problematic. The cast of *Miami Ink* closed down their tattoo shop and took a fishing day trip to the Florida Keys in the first season because they were stressed out by the grand opening. The tattoo artists I spoke with expressed disbelief at such a preposterous occurrence, noting the amount of money that would be lost for doing such a thing. Many of the artists noted that they worked six or seven days a week just to make a living in the competitive industry and that their shops were open seven days a week.

Celebrities and glamorous lifestyles are the foundation of *L.A. Ink* given that the shop is located at the epicenter of super stardom, Hollywood. The majority of the clients featured on *L.A. Ink* are celebrities, even the shop owner, Von D, who was given the opportunity to have her own spinoff show after initially appearing on the first and second seasons of *Miami Ink*. The cast of *L.A. Ink* is shown splitting their time between tattooing famous people, going to the beach, and partying all night long, alluring viewers to an unrealistic depiction of the profession. In an ironic episode, Hannah, one of Von D's artists, "confesses" that many people are misled into believing tattooing is a "rock star" profession. On the east coast, the cast of *Miami Ink* is often featured consuming massive quantities of alcohol and staying out late into the evenings, and James and Nunez go on to open up their own bar in the second season. Tom stated that the thought was ridiculous—trying to run one business is hard enough, let alone two (Interview, August 8, 2008). Matt shared the same

sentiment, continuing that the shows were gaining incredible popularity, but at a potentially detrimental cost.

They've definitely had an impact on the industry. But as far as a good impact I can't really say yet because there is a lot more people thinking it's a glamorous job—that all of us are rock stars and we make money, blah, blah. It's not like that at all. Tattooing is a very starving artist career. Even the guys that are full scale for a few, two to three years, that are charging \$100 an hour—they might be happy working, but look at how much work they have to do. (Interview, June 3, 2008)

Laura echoed Matt's feelings, stating that the glorified career path promoted within the “tattooed reality” discourse undoubtedly reached audiences in record numbers. She stated that she, along with one of the shows' cast members who was a close friend (whom she did not reveal), received an influx of emails from young people who wanted entry into the profession because it looked like a lot of fun for a lot of money and not a lot of work (Interview, May 5, 2008). This idea could not be farther from the truth considering each of the tattoo artists I spoke with revealed that they constantly miss out on time with their family, friends, loved ones, and others because of the commitment their profession requires.

#### Process

The third theme of *process* revealed that the “tattooed reality” of *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* erroneously portrayed the physical process of tattooing. The artists described this injustice as disadvantageous to anyone seeking a tattoo, and had the potential to negatively impact the Western tattoo industry. I was especially interested in speaking with Mick after reading her extensive list of credentials that highlighted a dedication to improving the profession and culture of tattooing. She was recognized for her “Outstanding Contributions to the Tattoo Profession” by the National Tattoo

Association for, amongst other accomplishments, working with the Federal Drug Administration to develop written standards for safe tattooing. When I asked Mick if she thought *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* provided an accurate depiction of the contemporary tattoo industry, she quickly responded “no.” She stated that the number of gross errors in sterility safeguarding were alarming, from the way in which the *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* artists’ tattooing stations were unsafely set up, to the improper wrapping of their clients’ finished tattoos. Jacob reiterated his mother’s concerns, almost verbatim, adding that he refused to watch the shows again after seeing a *Miami Ink* artist give his client a high-five while still wearing the plastic safety glove he wore during that tattooing process. Health and safety is not something that should be taken lightly, a point made absolutely clear by Mick, who would not allow me to take her word for it. She brought me to the back of the studio to educate me on proper autoclaving<sup>7</sup> procedures and offered to show me the studio’s autoclave log. Mick informed me that she offered monthly classes on microbial invasion prevention (which I asked if I could attend and was strongly encouraged to) and sent me home with an autoclave log manual, that she developed and published more than a decade ago. Mick, Tom, and Jacob unequivocally disapproved of *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink*, arguing that the shows were doing a disservice to the tattoo industry and the people involved in it by frivolously displaying improper and unhealthy tattooing techniques.

In addition to the unsanitary practices seen on *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink*, the accelerated progression of the tattooing process within the “tattooed reality” was cause for much criticism from the tattoo artists that spoke to me. Each one-hour

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<sup>7</sup> Autoclaving is a process that uses high pressure and high temperatures to sterilize tattoo equipment.

episode features four to six people getting tattooed and the stories behind their respective inscriptions. The artists on *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* meet their clients, hear their ideas for their elaborate tattoos, make a line drawing for the stencil that will be placed on the clients' bodies and used as a guideline for the tattoo, and start the tattoo, only to be finished a few minutes later. Even without speaking to the tattoo artists I knew this was an unrealistic presentation considering the smallest tattoo I have took an hour and a half to complete from the time I walked into the tattoo shop to the moment the artist bandaged my fresh ink. In most real-life cases, a client must first meet for a consultation with the artist, give them anywhere from a few days to a few weeks to draw up the stencil, and be prepared to come back for multiple sessions to see the completion of the tattoo.

These circumstances are rarely addressed in the shows, except for the first season of *Miami Ink* where the cast was shown asking clients to come back to see their line drawings and warning them that the tattoo they wanted would take several sittings to complete. That first season of *Miami Ink* was the only one to put any emphasis on the process of tattooing (e.g., how tattoos were drawn up, how stencils were made, what types of needles would be used and why, the length of time it takes to get a tattoo, etc.). This was not seen in the second season of *Miami Ink* or either of the *L.A. Ink* seasons, most likely because the producers realized this did not make for good viewing. In talking with the tattoo artists, it became clear that the telepoetic representation of the tattooing process within "tattooed reality" set audiences up for disappointment when they went in for their own tattoos. Laura elaborated

I guess you could say, because of the way they film things it, you know, um, makes it look real easy and quick and able to be drawn and done in, like, five minutes. It's like, [mocking a conversation between a client and artist on the show] 'Hey I have this great idea for a back piece.' 'Oh hold on, I'll be back in 20 minutes!' When it actually takes them several hours to complete.

Laura continued, referring back to what her friend that works on one of the shows had told her

I know that often times they have requested that the artists and clients where the same clothes for several sessions in the early parts of the show. You know, so it could look like in a half an hour you could come out with this elaborate tattoo. And it's very disappointing to see it on TV and walk into a place and not understand why you can't, you can't, um, get it done right then and there. And they make it look like the artist had nothing to do that day and was just sitting down without any other clients. (Interview, May 5, 2008)

This false representation of the tattooing process in the "tattooed reality" discourse is problematic, potentially setting viewers up for negative experiences and allowing them to fill the gaps of their tattooing knowledge with the accessible (but incomplete) information.

## Chapter 4: Conclusion

Within the pervasively corporatized and commercialized contemporary tattoo industry, the tattooed body has become a site of contestation where cultural intermediaries compete to legitimize an “authentic” understanding of the practice. In this project I focused specifically on the contention between the dominant media discourse that has co-opted tattoo culture, specifically within the RTV shows *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink*, and local tattoo artists’ responses to it. Data gathered from my analysis of TLC’s reality television spectacles *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* revealed that the shows impart a controversial “tattooed reality” discourse that spectacularizes and fragments tattoo culture in the United States through enticing marketing strategies, dramatic storylines, and a discerning online application process. Interviews with local tattoo artists informed this analysis, revealing that inauthentic accounts of the product, practice, and process of tattooing were central elements of the shows’ “tattooed reality.”

*Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* execute “a virtual overhaul of consumer principles, strategy and lifestyle” by splintering and refashioning the tattoo as a middle-class aesthetic while exploiting the self-expression and panacea narrative to emphasize “physical change and material/service acquisition as the paths to genuine expression of one’s inner self and better nature,” (Heller, 2007, p. 2). Likewise, the dominant media’s interpretations of the contemporary tattooed body are maintained through an online application process that effectively polices the crisis of corporeal inscription (i.e. who gets on the shows and what narratives get heard). Rather than take the opportunity to truthfully educate the large viewership of *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* on

the particulars of corporeal inscription, TLC instead manufactures a narrow depiction of the subject-positions, profession, and approaches associated with it for the purpose of maximal profit and middle-class consumption.

The contemporary industry's "tattooed reality" is problematic because it possesses the detrimental potential to operate as a powerful normalizing discourse that determines how tattooed bodies are organized, represented, and experienced. Through the RTV spectacles *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink*, the history of tattooing in the United States is fragmented and subtly divorced from its disreputable past, allowing the tattoo artifact and practice to be reappropriated as an artistic commodity and cultural marker of the middle-class. By carefully editing out specific subjectivities and tattooed bodies from its discourse, "tattooed reality" functions to minimize and (re)marginalize the historical actors of the community—those individuals that local artists' indicated still exist despite their silencing in the shows. Within this paper I have tried to expose the contention between "tattooed reality" and the contemporary tattooed body, but I believe it is imperative that more research be conducted so empowering knowledge related to the cultural practice of corporeal inscription can be propagated.



## Appendix A: Empirical

In order to interrogate the transition of Western tattooing from a community to an industry, I provide an extensive mapped history of the cultural practice. This mapping helps me to articulate how tattooed bodies have been organized, (re)presented, and (re)produced in relation to social forces, and follows the contextually based impetus of the Physical Cultural Studies (PCS) project. Central to the inherently contextual PCS is the theory-method of articulation, which seeks to radically contextualize the empirical focus of analysis. Radical contextualism conceptualizes that no historical moment exists independently of the context (i.e. social, cultural, political, economic, and technological) it resides in. As such PCS researchers are charged with the task of recreating the social, economic, political, technological, and cultural forces that shaped the context out of which the object of study materialized.

Within this appendix, I seek to articulate the contextual forces and processes out of which the Western tattoo culture was formed in an effort to fully understand the contemporary tattoo industry. In this mapping I distinguish between eras that I have labeled “The Exoticized Body,” “The Enfreaked Body,” “The ‘All-American’ Body,” “The Disaffected Body,” “The Therapeutic Body,” and “The Bourgeois Body.” While there were other “types” of individuals getting tattooed during these periods, I contend that particular tattooed bodies served as cultural icons at particular historical moments. After the mapping I highlight the other information and understandings that arose from situating my research in the tattoo empirical. This

includes the material gained from the media analysis and in-depth interviewing methods I employed.

### *The Exoticized Body*

While there is much debate within historical literature as to the origins of tattooing, many scholars recognize Captain James Cook as the first person<sup>8</sup> to document the prevalence of tattooing after his late eighteenth century expeditions to the South Pacific where he encountered inked Samoans, Hawaiians, Tahitians, and Maori (Atkinson, 2003; DeMello, 2000; 2007; Pitts, 2003). Cook and his men were bewildered by the primitive process, noting that “tattooing” was practiced amongst men and women of the tribes his men encountered (Thomas, Cole & Douglas, 2005). Though Cook and his men were unable to attain the meanings behind the body markings, anthropologists and historians understand that tattoos of non-Western cultures were deeply embedded in social processes and served to demonstrate religious devotion, spirituality, lineage, social status, and rites of passage amongst men and women (Turner, 2000; Atkinson, 2003; Pitts, 2003; DeMello, 2007). In an exploit inspired by political imperialism, Cook and his crew removed tattooed “natives” from their homes and brought them to Europe to be placed on civic display (DeMello, 2007; Thomas et al., 2005). These proceedings inspired the era of *The Exoticized Body*, in which the dominant form of tattooed corporeality was

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<sup>8</sup> Christopher Columbus is said to have journaled extensively on pagan natives who adorned their bodies with permanent markings in the sixteenth-century, but again, this is heavily debated. Archeologists and anthropologists have documented Neolithic artifacts from 6,000 BCE in Europe and mummies from 4,000 BCE Egypt that demonstrate the early usage of tattooing, and it is thought that the tattoo spread to the Pacific Islands from the Middle East by way of Japan, India and China (DeMello, 2007). There are also early detailed accounts of tattooing amongst Greeks, Romans, and Celtic soldiers, for both decorative and punitive purposes (Anderson, 2000; Atkinson, 2003; Caplan, 2000; DeMello, 2007; Schilkroun, 2004).

characterized by crude designs and public bewilderment. The capture and display of tattooed “natives” after Captain Cook’s 1769 expedition to the South Pacific signified the imperialism and progress of the Western world, as well as the primitive savagery of uncivilized non-Western cultures (DeMello, 2007; Kosut, 2006b; Thomas et al., 2005). Public response to The Exoticized Body tattoo was described as a mix between “fascination, disgust, irreverence, and wonder” (Atkinson, 2003, p. 32), yet an ephemeral fad ensued among seamen and members of the leisure classes who yearned to discern themselves with badges of exoticism (Kosut, 2006; Schilkrou, 2004). Atkinson (2003) describes the paradoxical tattoo fad:

Sailors found tattooing their bodies to be a source of excitement and adventure, a keepsake from interaction with fabled tribes and exotic Others. Elite and popular European social circles equally envisioned tattooing to be an exotic source of entertainment, yet interpreted such exoticism to be spiritually vulgar and culturally uncivilized. (pp. 32-33)

Tattooing in the United States arrived by way of European sailors in the early 1800s and manifested itself as highly masculine and male-dominated tradition, particularly among servicemen. This trend could be attributed to Martin Hildebrandt, who became the first professional American tattooist in 1846. Hildebrandt opened his shop to all walks of life in New York, marking not only sailors, but both Yankee soldiers and Confederate soldiers throughout the Civil War who sought to signify their devotion to their country and feelings for loved ones through corporeal inscription (Atkinson, 2003; DeMello, 2000; 2007; Parry, 1933; Pitts, 2003). Hildebrandt’s career would thrive furthermore with the influx of circus industry clients in the late nineteenth century.

### *The Enfreaked Body*

The spectacularization of inked bodies displayed in carnivals and circuses emphasized the culturally imperialist aura of Western society and characterized the epoch of The Enfreaked Body. In 1873 P.T. Barnum featured the king of the tattooed freaks, Prince Constantine, in his human oddities side show, but it was the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia that popularized the public display of tattooed bodies in North America (Atkinson, 2003; DeMello, 2000; 2007; Oettermann, 2000; Schilkrou, 2004). The exotic lifestyle and rumors of Constantine earning \$1000 per week inspired men to become tattooed spectacles, sparking symbiotic relationships with tattooists like Hildebrandt (Atkinson, 2003; DeMello, 2000; 2007). Likewise, the advent of the first electric tattoo machine by Samuel O'Reilly in 1891 opened the floodgates for previously apprehensive ink enthusiasts because it made the process easier, faster, and much less painful (Atkinson, 2003; DeMello, 2000; 2007). For this community tattooing "became a vehicle for exploring deviant yet exciting body practices, a means of engaging in forms of corporeal subversion strictly forbidden in everyday life" (Atkinson, 2003, p. 36). American sailors and other tattooed men of the sideshow concocted elaborate tales of heroism and bravado, telling audiences they were held captive by non-Christian savages and forcibly tattooed (Atkinson, 2003; DeMello, 2000; 2007; Mifflin, 1997; Oettermann, 2000). The public was naïve to the overtly Western iconography on these men's bodies and mesmerized by visible markers of brutality and bravery. In reality the men had been tattooed by Hildebrandt, O'Reilly, Charlie Wagner, and other tattooists of the time. The meanings behind 'freak shows' and carnival performers fueled the association of

tattooing as an abnormality and vulgar practice, but nevertheless inspired more than just soldiers and sailors to get inked.

Women came to dominate the latter years of The Enfreaked Body era, but their presence reinforced the highly gendered and stigmatized nature of tattooing. In 1882 the first “tattooed lady” of the freak show appeared at Bunnell’s Museum in New York. Her name was Nora Hildebrandt, daughter of Martin Hildebrandt (Mifflin, 1997). Two weeks after the daughter Hildebrandt took to the stage, Irene Woodward followed suit. Woodward’s career was much more celebrated than Hildebrandt’s, probably because of what *The New York Times* described as her “pleasing appearance” and “artistic” tattoos (Mifflin, 1997, p. 10). Hildebrandt, Woodward, and the many tattooed women that followed completely upstaged the tattooed men in the circus industry. While their presence contradicted Victorian ideals of femininity with the unprecedented amount of skin they revealed to display their ink, tattooed women captivated audiences by providing a titillating peep show within the freak show (DeMello, 2000; Mifflin, 1997). Like their male counterparts, tattooed women fabricated tales of imprisonment and forced tattooing by non-Christian savages.<sup>9</sup> Captivity narratives, “America’s first form of pornography,” relegated tattooed women to marginal gendered pairings of victim/perpetrator and beauty/beast (Braunberger, 2000, p.10). These narratives, coupled with their exposed bodies, caused inked women to be viewed as hypersexual—both an object of desire and a desiring object—and their decorum was always the subject of scrutiny. In the

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<sup>9</sup> Nora Hildebrandt maintained that her markings were compulsorily inscribed by her father after they had been kidnapped by Sitting Bull and his tribe. She alleged that Sitting Bull would only grant them liberty if the elder Hildebrandt tattooed his daughter from head to toe. After working six hours per day for one full year, the father and daughter were finally rescued, leaving the 365 tattoos on Nora’s body as permanent marks of their ordeal (Bogdan, 1988).

late 1920s two men were acquitted of any wrongdoing in a Boston rape trial after the young woman that accused them was discovered to have a small butterfly tattoo on her leg. The prosecutor, judge, and jury decided that the girl was “guilty of contributory negligence, having misled the men by her tattooed mark into taking her for a loose character” (Parry, 1933, p. 4). Negative connotations regarding tattooed women would continue to resurface throughout the history of the Western tattoo.

### *The ‘All-American’ Body*

As industrialization swept through the United States, so did the first slew of tattoo establishments. A popular staple in the alleyways, pool halls, and barber shops of metropolitan areas, the tattoo parlor served dual purpose as a locale to get inked and “a social club where individuals existing on the fringe of society would meet and swap stories of adventure, grandiosity, and bravado” (Atkinson, 2003, p. 36). The ‘All-American’ Body came to dominate the public imaginary during this time. Marked by a “traditional Americana” style of tattooing, this era became adorned by highly masculine and hyper-patriotic imagery like eagles, snakes, pin-up girls, daggers, skulls, hearts with banners, and military insignia (DeMello, 2000; 2007; Atkinson, 2003; Pitts, 2002, 2003; Govenar, 2000). The nationalistic spirit of The ‘All-American’ Body’s iconography corresponded with the great wars that ensued during the era, and provided for one of the least stigmatized periods of the Western tattooed body (DeMello, 2000; Turner, 2000; Atkinson, 2003; Govenar, 2000; Kosut, 2006). The medical field even became interested in the use of tattooing for plastic surgery, using the practice to restore color to the faces of men injured and disfigured in war (Govenar, 2000). Likewise, tattooing at this time provided a “marginal, but

nonetheless positive medium for largely male working-class feelings of *community* and belonging,” and the tattoo artifact became a badge of class and occupational solidarity (Pitts, 2003, p. 5).

The ‘All-American’ Body was not without problems, however. Albert Parry’s 1933 release of *Tattoo: Secrets of a Strange Art as Practiced Among the Natives of the United States* highlighted the relationship between sex and tattooing, referring to the practice as something in which only prostitutes and homosexuals participated. “The sexual elements of sadism and masochism—the pleasurable infliction and endurance of pain—are more than evident in the act of man’s tattooing,” Parry (1933) stated. He continued that soldiers who had “tattooed pictures of the most frankly lubricious inspiration” were “homosexuals who deny their perversion by insisting, often with blatant obscenity, upon their normality” (p. 21; 26). Chapters of Parry’s book were published in popular magazines and newspapers, issuing misguided and vulgar interpretations of tattooing as inherently connected to sexual perversion and reinforcing unfavorable perceptions of individuals that engaged in the practice.

Women who were not already in the industry were increasingly discouraged from getting tattooed during the period of The ‘All-American’ Body because the “tattooist, like the woman’s other male keepers, took it upon himself to keep ‘nice girls’ (i.e. attractive, middle-class, heterosexual women) from transgressing the class and sexual borders of the time and turning into tramps” (DeMello, 2000, p. 61). As Samuel Steward, a college professor turned tattoo artist from the mid twentieth century explained

When I finally discovered the trouble that had always surrounded the tattooing of women, I established a policy of refusing to tattoo a woman unless she were twenty-one, married and accompanied by her husband, with documentary proof to show their marriage....In those tight and unpermissive 1950s, too many scenes with irate husbands, furious parents, indignant boyfriends, and savage lovers made it necessary to accept female customers only with great care. (1990, p. 127)

Steward also claimed that lesbians (who only had to prove that they were twenty-one) were the only exception to that rule because there were no angry husbands or boyfriends with whom he would have to contend. Furthermore, lesbians, he argued, and already transgressed the socially normative standards of femininity and, as such, had nothing to lose.

### *The Disaffected Body*

The 'All-American' Body gave way to The Disaffected Body in the 1950s as the freak show died out and tattooed women faded from the public eye. At mid century, bikers, convicts, gang members, political protestors, and other socially marginalized groups began to join the community, sporting tattoos that signified disorder and rebellion against a post-industrial capitalist society that placed substantial worth on class, wealth, and consumer goods (Govenar, 2000; Atkinson, 2003). Although there was a time when body marks were employed by state governments to punish and classify individuals who had strayed from normalized cultural practices or committed criminal acts, The Disaffected Body's tattoo was reappropriated by alienated "members" of the populace to outwardly display their restless dissatisfaction with society (Atkinson, 2003; Caplan, 2000; DeMello, 1993; 2000; Govenar, 2000; Sanders, 1989). The increasing usage of corporeal inscription to denote identity and gang affiliation within prisons produced a distinct style that



dominated the corporeal reality of The Disaffected Body and prompted the stereotypical association of tattoos as indicators of criminality (DeMello, 1993; 2000; Atkinson, 2003). Similarly, the tattoos of motorcycle gangs caused panic and hysteria coupled with the media's depiction of them as "outlaws who terrorised and pillaged local communities" (Atkinson, 2003, p. 38). The menacing "Fuck The World" logo of bikers, the monochromatic *pachuco* symbols of Chicano gang members,<sup>10</sup> and the jailhouse iconography of prison ink represented the estrangement of particular groups from mainstream culture (DeMello, 1993; 2000).

During The Disaffected Body era, the tattoo became a symbolic expression of discontent for those masculine populations on the fringes of society, but while "prisoners and other social deviants transformed their imposed stigma into something meaningful and resistant, they ironically reproduced their own disreputable status" (Atkinson, 2003, p. 39). Adding insult to injury, the safety and sterility of tattoo shops were heavily scrutinized, and some cities even outlawed the establishments as outbreaks of hepatitis were publicized in the media and scientific journals (DeMello, 2000; Govenar, 2000). Tattooing took a step backwards during The Disaffected Body era and was reinstated as a threatening symbol of the deviant "Other" and a disreputable practice in the popular social imagination. These negative connotations lingered through the successive period of The Therapeutic Body, and it could be argued that they have yet to be reprieved completely.

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<sup>10</sup> *Pachuco* imagery was inspired by the Zoot Suit Riots of the 1940s, a series of confrontations between servicemen and both Mexican and Mexican-Americans in the Los Angeles, California area. The demonization of the Latino population by the media instigated the violent targeting of anyone seen wearing a zoot suit (apparel that was favored by members of the Mexican community) which subsequently incited rioting between military personnel and Latino youth.

### The Therapeutic Body

As the United States transitioned into a period of intense activism in the 1960s, the body became politicized “as a primary site of social control and regulation,” and also as “a site upon which to imagine a new culture of the body that is more spiritual, healthful, empowered, and sexually liberated” (Pitts, 2003, p. 6). The primary influences on this new age of what I refer to as “The Therapeutic Body” were the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights movement, the gay rights movement, the rise of Feminism, the sexual revolution, and the self-help and new-age movements of the 1970s and 1980s. Marijuana leaves, peace symbols, rainbows, flowers, and imagery inspired by Eastern religions, the occult realm, and Japanese culture began to permeate into the corporeal imaginary of The Therapeutic Body, and women played an integral role during this time.

The first oral contraceptive, Enovid, was approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in 1960 after previously being submitted for authorization in 1957 as a treatment for infertility and menstrual maladies (Junod, 1998). Within three years more than 2.3 million women were on “the Pill,” revealing that sex was no longer an undertaking solely for the purpose of procreation. Along with popularization and widespread availability of birth control pills, the historical outcome of *Roe v. Wade* in 1973 secured the reproductive rights of American women. As this occurred, women reemerged in the tattoo community and began inking their sexual independence at escalating rates—most readily on the breast (Mifflin, 1997). Additionally, the various movements that erupted during and after the 1960s encouraged the public to engage in self-exploration and work through their emotional

tribulations via tattooing—literally inscribing their treatments onto the body (Atkinson, 2003; DeMello, 2000; 2007; Pitts, 2002; 2004).

Women radically impacted The Therapeutic Body juncture, advancing new ways of thinking about the tattooing practice and body. Atkinson (2003) explains

Indeed, women challenged and undermined cultural constructions of femininity through tattooing, but similarly breached the integrity of cultural associations between the tattoo and the working-class male, the criminal, the sailor, the circus performer, the gang member and the biker. As women demanded more feminine imagery than commonly found in traditional Western tattoo art, more personalized and sensitive treatment in the studio, and a higher quality of work, their participation in tattooing transformed the structure and ideologies underlying the practice. (p. 44)

As women's involvement in The Therapeutic Body impacted the tattooing subculture in arguably positive ways, their participation was heavily scrutinized by some critics who viewed women's corporeal markings as a deviant behavior, sign of promiscuity, and a violent/blatant disregard for their bodies (Atkinson, 2002; Benson, 2000; DeMello, 2000; 2007; Featherstone, 2000; Pitts, 2000; 2003; 2004). Negative backlash aside, the era of The Therapeutic Body had a constructive and crucial impact on Western tattooing practices. The social movements on the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s emphasized the psychic and spiritual benefits of tattooing and motivated generations of Americans to expel feelings of fear, uncertainty, transformation, and healing through public display of body art (Atkinson, 2003; 2004). Not only did this stimulate a gradual rethinking and re-imagining of the tradition, it laid the foundation for the tattoo artifact's transition from a signifier of collective solidarity to a marker of individual expression and lifestyle politics (Pitts, 2002; Sweetman, 2000).

### *The Bourgeois Body*

The Bourgeois Body emerged in the 1990s as the enduring epoch of tattooing in the United States, distinguished by commercialized and commodified tattooed bodies and an overemphasis on the reflexive and individualistic qualities of the tattoo artifact. During the early years of The Bourgeois Body, tattoos were established as the hallmark of alternative youth fashion and identity, glamorized by MTV and saturating music venues like Lollapalooza and the Vans Warped Tour (Kosut, 2006a; Pitts, 2003). Midway through the 1990s a “tattoo renaissance” transpired, characterized by a surge in the number of studios, highly trained tattoo artists, people getting inked, and efforts to legitimate tattooing as a sophisticated middle-class aesthetic (Pitts, 2003). In 1995, a prominent non-profit art institution in Soho, New York, The Drawing Center, featured “Pierced Hearts and True Love: A Century of Drawings for Tattoos.” Although various galleries and museums had exhibited photographs and pictures of tattooing in the preceding decade, the Soho showcase displayed American tattoo flash<sup>11</sup> and marked the first time that the tattoo would be labeled under the distinctive banner of “art” (DeMello, 1995; Kosut, 2006a; 2006b). Tattooed bodies continued to gain visibility through various media sources, including new publications devoted to skin and ink, and tattoo websites on the Internet (DeMello, 1995; 2000; 2007; Atkinson, 2003).

With the turn of the century, as postmodernity dissolved traditions of social order and meaning, and the heightened value of the body as a site for self-identity and

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<sup>11</sup> Flash is series of designs drawn by artists usually printed on 11”x14” paper or cardboard. Flash is commonly seen on the walls of tattoo shops and was originally used to display a tattooist’s credentials, provide ideas for people seeking tattoos, and act as a quick point of reference or stencil for artists when they applied the tattoos.

reflexivity entrenched late-capitalist consumer culture, the tattoo was projected as an expression of individualization (Kleese, 2000; Turner, 2000; Sweetman, 2000). Studies conducted by MSNBC in 2001 and the University of Connecticut in 2002 revealed that 20% of the Americans—from college students to professionals to “soccer moms”—bore tattoos (Kosut, 2006a). Around the same time, publishers began to market books that focused on celebrities’ tattoos and the meanings behind them, revealing that corporeal inscriptions had transitioned into high-priced commodities that could fulfill an individual’s deepest expressive desires.<sup>12</sup> This conception was endorsed through propaganda like the 2001 VISA commercial that took place in a tattoo shop, “announcing to Gen-Xers that you can charge *everything* on your credit card, even body modifications” (Kosut, 2006a, p. 1039, emphasis in the original). Tattoos fully infiltrated the mainstream within *The Bourgeois Body* in terms of the sheer number of people receiving them and their visibility within the commercial market. Numerous corporations began co-opting ink into their marketing strategies, incorporating Western tattoo culture into the fashion industry.

The commodified representations of the tattoo insinuated that consumers could construct a unique sense of self with the procurement of their merchandise (and in extension, by acquiring a body mark). Like the stranger described in the opening of this paper, consumers could purchase these products devoid of any affiliation with the (disreputable) history of the Western tattooed body. The increasing popularity of corporeal inscription that ensued with the persistent commercialization of tattooed culture caused many academics and mainstream journalists to dismiss *The Bourgeois*

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, *Celebrity Skin: Tattoos, Brands, and Body Adornments of the Stars* (Gerard, 2001) and *Tattoo Nation: Portraits of Celebrity Body Art* (Ritz, 2002).

Body's tattoo as "a superficial trend, one instance among many of the incorporation of 'the exotic' into the fashion system" (Sweetman, 2000, p. 66; Kosut, 2006a).

Tattoos were indicted as just another mark in Baudrillard's "carnival of signs," a symptom of a postmodern, late-capitalist society (Fisher, 2002; Sweetman, 1999).

Coinciding with the implosion of culture and the pervasive corporatization of tattoo culture was the rise of surveillance-entertainment, or reality television (RTV) (Andrejevic, 2003; Heller, 2007; Hopson, 2008; Jones, 2008; Rail, 1998). Described as "symptomatic of a waning sense of reality in the postmodern era" (Andrejevic, 2003, p. 8) and a "cure and disease of modern life" (Durham Peter, 2006, p. 59), RTV collided with tattooing in July 2005 and took the corporatized self-expression narrative to a new exploitive level. The Learning Channel's (TLC) *Miami Ink* and A&E's *Inked* offered viewers an inside look at the "real" world of tattooing. The premier of both shows garnered much attention initially, but it was the continued success of *Miami Ink* that spawned the *L.A. Ink* and UK's *London Ink* spinoffs in August and September of 2007, respectively (*Inked* was unofficially cancelled after the end of its second season in October 2006). *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* were a creation of the increasingly commodified postmodern tattoo industry, but their success indicates that they also contributed to its intensification. According to Nielsen Media Research, over 3 million people watched the season two finale of *Miami Ink*, and the season one premier of *L.A. Ink* amassed 2.9 million total viewers (making *L.A. Ink* the most-watched series debut for TLC since January 2003). This placed TLC at the top ranking among basic cable networks in Tuesday primetime among the key

demographics ages 18-34 and 18-49 and allowed the network to outperform the ABC, CBS, and NBC networks in 18-34 age group.

What was unique about these shows was their portrayal of the practice and populace involved in tattooing, something that I have referred to as a “tattooed reality.” As a tattooed person, I felt that the “tattooed reality” projected by these shows was not an accurate reflection of my personal experiences, however, numerical data indicated that the shows had garnered a strong following. Recognizing this, I sought to critically interrogate *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* by reviewing their discourse and engaging with tattoo artists, the gatekeepers of the practice, to understand how they made sense of the “tattooed reality” the shows projected.

#### *Other Empirical Revelations: Media Analysis*

After completing my media analysis I came to the understanding that *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* are spectacularized and fragmented representations of Western tattoo culture. Likewise, these interpretations are maintained through an online application process that effectively polices the crisis of corporeal inscription (i.e. who gets on the shows and what narratives get heard). *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* work with the same format following their artist “casts” as they tattoo four to six people in a one hour episode. Integral to the shows are the client stories. Each client “confesses,” either to the tattoo artist or to the camera in a separate segment of the episode, why she or he has sought out a particular tattoo. Interspersed with these confessions are the narratives of the cast members, who share personal details of their lives and their tattoos, and provide “insider” knowledge of the tattoo industry. The tales of the clients and cast poetically mimic one another in each episode. The chronicles range

from tragedy to celebration, but each is strategically captivating. Memorializing passed loved ones and marking triumphant recoveries from illness, injury, or particularly rough life periods are the most frequently regurgitated stories. Juxtaposed against reclamation and commemorative discourse, the tattoo artifact is personified as a panacea to the ills of postmodernity (and has longer lasting effects than anti-depressants).

In addition to the cure-all discourse, the shows overemphasize tattooing as an art form. While the artists I spoke with also regarded tattooing as an art form, they recognize that the Western tattoo has gone through a painstaking history to get to this point. In contrast, *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* rarely acknowledge the troubled past of the Western tattoo. Instead, they correlate tattooing with historical primitive civilizations (i.e. Samoan, Maori, Hawaiian, Japanese, etc.) whose tattoos were deeply embedded in social processes, and regard corporeal inscription as the new cultural markers of the middle-class (high-priced aesthetic commodities that allow individuals to embody their identity politics). As the shows appropriate non-Western cultural rites and legitimize tattooing as an artistic endeavor, they simultaneously fragment and divorce the practice from its dishonorable history. Without acknowledging the contextual forces and moments that produced the tattoo artifact, a one-sided view of the culture ensues and effectually silences and re-marginalizes the historical actors of the practice.

Producers of *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* exercise power and maintain the fragmented discourse that portrays tattooing as a panacea and middle-class aesthetic through a discriminatory online application process. Potential clients must have



access to the internet and expendable income. A \$100 non-refundable deposit is required in order to submit the application, and if the person is not selected, she or he automatically forfeits that money. While that \$100 will be applied to the total cost of the tattoo if the applicant is chosen, the minimum charge for a tattoo at the studios is \$500 and the cost per hour of tattooing is \$200. Ink enthusiasts must be willing to travel to Los Angeles, CA or Miami Beach, FL as the tattoo artists do not make house calls. Exclusionary as those requirements are, potential patrons must also submit their headshot (presumably to assess the telegenic capacity of the tattoo seeker). It is also mandatory to provide a detailed 250 word description of the image they wish to have tattooed—size, shape, color, and photograph of desired style—and a 100-150 word story/narrative linking to the desired tattoo. Neglecting to include either of these will result in the submission not being considered. Through this process prospective clients are methodically scrutinized and policed to ensure they meet TLC's prototype of the contemporary tattooing population.

#### *Other Empirical Revelations: Artists' Narratives*

After reviewing my interviews and field notes, I found three themes that came to the fore most often. I have labeled these product, practice, and process. The first, and I would argue most important, was the concept of the false product—that the shows are not representative of the public body of Western tattooing. Meaning, the tattooed bodies that are featured on the television shows do not encompass the complete populace of individuals being tattooed in contemporary Western society. This theme extended not only to the particular race, class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity of the tattooed population, but also to the expressions, meanings, and

motivations behind their tattoos. The second theme to emerge from my interviews was the notion of practice. It was overwhelmingly expressed in the interviews that *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* present an inaccurate depiction of the tattooing practice, which covers everything from the way in which the lifestyles of the tattoo artist casts were excessively glamorized to the general sentiment that tattoo culture is not stigmatized (but rather, explicitly accepted). The third theme that materialized in the interviews was process, referring to the varying ways in which *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* misrepresent the physical process of receiving a tattoo. Grievances ranged from the unsanitary tattooing procedures regularly displayed on the television shows, to the hasty, made-for-television rendering of the tattoo process from start to finish. Taken together, these themes demonstrate that *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* provide a risky, inaccurate, and misleading representation of tattooing.

## Appendix B: Methods

For the purpose of my thesis I employed the methods of media analysis and in-depth interviewing. I used this multi-method approach because “different methods correspond to the different modes by means of which culture impresses itself on us as an object” (Johnson, , Chambers, Raghuram, & Tincknel, 2004, p. 27). Ultimately my goal was to unite the information I gained from the media analysis with the understanding I gained from the in-depth interviews to inform my thesis. As I did this I came to the conclusion that *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* exploit, fragment, and Other tattooed bodies while reappropriating Western tattooing as a middle-class aesthetic and cure-all for the ailments of contemporary society. The only thing we learn from watching these shows is how minimize the Other and be entertained.

For the media analysis I watched the first two seasons of *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* and conducted a close reading of their websites (as well as the website of their parent company The Learning Channel). I used the information I gained from these analyses to engage with the tattoo artists when I carried out the interviews. I elected to pursue interviews with tattoo artists rather than tattooed non-artists for two reasons. First and foremost, I did not want to make tattooed bodies the object of my analysis—more specifically, I did not want to objectify individual tattooed bodies. I recognize tattooing as a deeply personal and distinctive process whereby meaning is created and can only be fully be understood by the individual whose corpus is inscribed. It goes without saying that my subject-position as a tattooed person affords me zero conceptual authority in the matter—asking anyone to define their tattoo forces them express her/his self “within the dominant system’s mode of intelligibility, given by

whoever asks the question” (MacCormack, 2006, p. 72). My other reasoning for appealing to tattoo artists is because of the unique power-laden position they hold in the tattoo subculture. Artists determine who gets tattooed, where they get tattooed, and how they get tattooed. If part of the goal of this thesis is to assess the veracity of the commercialized depictions of contemporary Western tattooing, I believe tattoo artists are better able to appraise this problem. Although this statement effectually privileges artists’ voices over non-artists’ voices, there is a rationale behind my declaration. While tattoo artists and non-artist enthusiasts can be devoted to tattoo culture on equal personal, political, and even spiritual levels, artists pilot every incident of corporeal inscription—in essence they co-create every tattoo that exists.

### Media Analysis

For my media analysis I watched the first two seasons of *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* and conducted a close reading of the series’ websites (and their network’s website) in an effort to ascertain the dominant narratives that are being projected through mediated versions of the tattoo industry. I used the information I gained from watching the shows and examining the websites to engage with the tattoo artists when I carried out the interviews. I chose to take a deeper look at the tattoo television programs because it was my original experience viewing *Miami Ink* that sparked my curiosity and pursuit of this thesis topic. As a tattooed person I had always felt there was something amiss with the content of the show. Not only did it seem to exhibit an idealistic interpretation of the physical process of tattooing, but it also provided a very narrow and exclusive portrayal of the tattooed population. Perhaps most troubling was the fact that these series fell under the problematic genre of reality television

(RTV). The media can be a powerful and dangerous outlet, and as Durham Peters (2006) highlighted in his review of C. Wright Mills' *The Power Elite*, "the media do not simply shape people's voting, fashion, movies, or shopping choices, but provide ordinary people with their aspirations, identities, and even experiences" (p. 58). Taking into consideration Hopson's (2008) suggestion that each media network has a specific mission that caters to particular audiences and identities, I did a close reading of The Learning Channel (TLC), the cable network that broadcasts *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink*.

The media analysis was much like what Johnson et al. (2004) referred to as a piecemeal procedure—it involved "highlighting or underlining particular words and phrases that seem[ed] interesting, that jump[ed] off the page" (p. 179). In this case, however, it was the words and phrases that jumped off of the screen and television set. To begin, I watched each episode of the first two seasons of *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* and took notes as if I were conducting participant observation—I jotted my impressions and feelings, made note of any significant events that occurred, and included the (inter)actions of the "actors" within the field (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1997a). Once this was complete I reviewed my notes and identified the key concepts, quotes, and moments that came to the fore most often, as suggested by Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw (1997b). After completing the first two seasons of *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink*, I turned my attention to the general TLC website and each of the shows' respective websites. I noted the network profile description for TLC and each of the television shows' synopses, and took extensive notes while working my way through the individual websites. I paid close attention to the application process for selection

onto the show and distinguished between any differences in features for each show's website.

### *In-depth Interviewing: Locating Artists*

I employed the dialogic method of interviewing in an effort to understand how the tattoo artists interacted with and made sense of the mediated representations of their industry. Referring to the importance of interviews, Amis (2005) noted that narratives “offer a depth of information that permits the detailed exploration of particular issues in a way not possible with other forms of data collection” (p. 105). And in an academic field criticized for being imperialistic and lacking in legitimacy, “taking local realities seriously is the starting point” for capturing the crystallization impetus (Saukko, 2005, p. 348; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

For my thesis I conducted seven semi-structured in-depth interviews with tattoo artists from the Maryland and Washington, D.C. area. While my original target was to conduct ten interviews<sup>13</sup>, my goal was cut short by the hectic schedules of the tattoo artists I wanted to speak with (summer is the busiest season for tattooing). Nevertheless I feel the information that materialized from the seven interviews I was able to carry out has enough breadth and depth to successfully complete my thesis. I employed purposive sampling techniques for my thesis because I am concerned with understanding the experiences of a specific population (Babbie, 2004; Daly, 2007). I networked with artists by attending tattoo conventions, walking into local shops, and utilizing my personal contacts of artists that worked on my tattoos. In each case I offered a brief description of my research and my intent to interview artists. This

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<sup>13</sup> Ten interviews were suggested by my thesis committee after initially proposing to interview fifteen artists and this change was reflected in my thesis addendum.

approach allowed me to generate immediate interest as well as word of mouth interest, also referred to as snowball sampling (Babbie, 2004; Daly, 2007). At the “Drawin’ the Wild Card” tattoo convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, and the Baltimore Museum of Art’s “Baltimore Ink: Patterns on Bodies” exhibition in Baltimore, Maryland I spoke with more than twenty local artists that were intrigued by my research project and expressed a desire to be interviewed. I obtained their contact information and followed-up over the course of the summer to schedule interviews.

My selection criteria for co-creators was solely based upon occupation, but with the encouragement of my thesis committee I sought out artists according to the length of time they had been tattooing. I designated “New-School” as the classification for artists that had ten or fewer years of tattooing experience, and “Old-School” as the classification for artists that had more than ten years of tattooing experience. During the networking phase of my thesis I was able to ascertain this information through my conversations with artists. With this information I strove to interview five artists within each group. My motivation behind creating these categories was to understand whether perspectives differed between artists that cultivated their craft in conjunction with the corporatization of tattoo culture, and artists that experienced their trade transition from stigma to status. After interpreting the information from my interviews I was not able to find any significant differences in the responses from “Old-School” and “New-School” artists.

Among the seven artists I interviewed, two were women (Mick, Laura) and five were men (Matt, Tom, Jacob, Johnny, Bill). Three were “New-School” artists

(Matt, Jacob, Bill), and four were “Old-School” artists (Mick, Tom, Johnny, Laura). Jacob was the youngest artist at 23, and Tom was the oldest at 55. Bill was the co-owner of a tattoo studio where he and Laura worked. Matt tattooed at one studio when I interviewed him but soon left to split time in between two other shops in the same area. Mick and Tom boasted 55 years of combined experience at the studio they co-owned, and Jacob was in his third year of tattooing at the same shop. While these artists were based in the Northeastern part of Maryland, Johnny worked for a tattoo studio that had three locations in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. Over half of the artists noted that they worked more than five days per week, and all but two regularly worked more than eight hours daily. All of the artists gave me permission to use their real names.

Prior to the interview, each artist was asked to commit a minimum of one hour and a maximum of two hours of time. They were notified that the interviews would be documented with a digital recording device and notes would be taken if necessary. I asked each artist to select a location and time for the physical interview that was most convenient to her/him. All but one of the interviews took place in the artists’ place of business. Johnny was the only artist that asked to meet outside of the studio. Our interview took place at a coffee shop half of the distance from each of our residences. Prior to starting the interview, each participant was asked to sign a consent form per the guidelines of the University of Maryland Institutional Review Board. I informed the artists that their interviews could be transcribed and made available to them if so desired. For most of the interviews I utilized an interview guide with open-ended questions designed to elicit responses that would help me



acquire insights to the conditions and characteristics of contemporary Western tattooing.

My interviews with Laura and Johnny were carried out in relatively” traditional” semi-structured in-depth interviewing fashion. Both meetings lasted approximately one hour and fifteen minutes and followed the interview guide order with little variation. My interviews with Bill, Matt, Mick, Tom, and Jacob were anything but conventional. Matt, Mick, and Tom notified me prior to our interviews that they would be tattooing clients during our interviews. Additionally, Mick asked if I would mind interviewing her and Tom in tandem while they tattooed clients. I complied in each case because I did not want to take the chance of losing out on the interviews and because I thought the addition of group dynamics might elicit significant and useful information. Fontana and Frey (2005) state that group interviews are valuable because they have the potential to effectively

...aid respondents’ recall or to stimulate embellished descriptions of specific events... or experiences shared by members of a group. Group interviews can also be used for triangulation purposes or used in conjunction with other data-gathering techniques. For example, group interviews could be helpful in the process of “indefinite triangulation” by putting individual responses into a context. (p. 704)

Mick and Matt stated ahead of time that the clients being tattooed were “regulars” and had already been informed that I would be conducting interviews. Any concerns I had about the artists curtailing their responses because of clients being present were eliminated the moment the interviews commenced. After telling Matt and his client that I wanted to talk about the tattoo reality television shows, he riposted, “You mean the guys that make us look like assholes?” (Matt, Interview, June 3, 2008). This and

other colorful responses were emblematic of my interviews with Matt, Mick, and Tom.

I happened upon my interview with Jacob incidentally as he was stopping by the studio to speak with Mick and stayed to interview with me. I used the same interview guide for the unconventional interviews and adapted the order of questions and follow-up probes for each situation. With the exception of Bill I spoke with each artist only one time. I met with Bill at his studio on three separate occasions over the course of two months. I found him quite resourceful and although we never conducted a formal interview, he addressed every question from my interview guide through our conversations. We discussed everything from the history of tattooing to how he had tattooed most of the members of the D.C. United Major League Soccer team.

### Media Analysis Themes

For my media analysis I watched the first two seasons of *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* and did a close reading of their respective websites, as well as the website of their broadcasting company TLC. The information I gathered from these analyses was used to inform my thesis and provided talking points for my in-depth interviews with tattoo artists. I did not explicitly code for themes in my media analysis because I did not want to be confined by the information when I engaged with the tattoo artists. However, I did come to the understanding that the *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* series function to exploit the tattoo as a panacea for contemporary late-capitalism and fragment Western tattoo culture for the purpose of entertainment and profit. This is

made possible by TLC, a network that objectifies and makes a spectacle of its reality television programming subjects.

#### Spectacle

Discovery Communications, the global company that owns TLC, boasts about the network on its corporate website:

TLC, one of the 15 most widely distributed cable networks in the U.S., celebrates life's surprises with programming that explores those unmatched, one-in-a-million, "you had to be there" moments. Connecting a community of real people—whether they are on television or watching it—the network's hit programming reflects authentic experiences and relatable lives. Funding fun and beauty in the unexpected, TLC will always be a trusted destination for viewers who want the "real" in their reality. (*The Learning Channel*, n.d.)

Although this sounds innocent, TLC's corporate profile is a facade for the exploitive programming regularly broadcasted on the network. In addition to *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink*, TLC's more popular series include the spectacles *Little People, Big World* and *Jon & Kate Plus 8*. *Little People, Big World* focuses on the Roloffs, "an extraordinary family composed of both little and average-sized people," and *Jon & Kate Plus 8* follows the Gosselins, a family struggling to maintain an ordinary life with twins and sextuplets (*Little People, Big World*, n.d.; *Jon & Kate Plus 8*, n.d.). Each of the previously mentioned shows indicates that TLC does not actually provide programming that "reflects authentic experiences and relatable lives," they provide an outlet for audiences to gaze into the lives of the exotic and non-normalized "Other" (*The Learning Channel*, n.d.). More specifically, TLC's RTV series provide a platform for voyeurs "to consume the lived experiences of the Other without compromising the privacy of one's own experiences" (Hopson, 2008, p. 443). Even

the *Learning* and *Discovery* in the titles of TLC and Discovery Communications, respectively, have an imperialistic aura to them.

Panacea

After reviewing the network website, I set out to read for narratives in the first two seasons of the *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* series. *Miami Ink* features cast members/tattoo artists Ami James and Chris Nunez, the co-owners of Miami Ink, as well as Chris Garver, Darren Brass, and Ami's apprentice Yoji Harada. *L.A. Ink* follows cast members/tattoo artists Corey Miller, Hannah Aitchison, and Kim Saigh, along with Kat Von D, the owner of High Voltage Ink. Kat Von D first appeared on *Miami Ink* at the end of Season 1 but had a falling out with Ami in the final episode of Season 2. Shortly thereafter promotions for *L.A. Ink* began to appear. The shows follow the same general format featuring four to six people getting tattooed in a one hour episode with Ami and Kat's commentary in the background. An integral feature of *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* are the client stories. Each client "confesses," either to the tattoo artist or to the camera in a separate segment of the episode, why she or he has sought out a particular tattoo. The stories range from tragedy to celebration, but each is designed to captivate the audience. Memorializing a friend or loved one and marking a triumphant recovery from an illness, injury, or particularly rough period are the most common tales recounted. Interspersed with these confessions are the narratives of the cast members, sharing their personal experiences (i.e., why they got tattooed, relatable narratives to their clients' stories, etc.) and providing "insider" knowledge of the tattoo industry (i.e., why their clients get tattooed, the benefits of getting a tattoo, etc.). As the clients' and the cast members' accounts merge, the

underlying theme of the series comes to the fore. Highlighting disempowered, commodified, and dis-eased bodies that have been reclaimed through corporeal inscription personifies the tattoo artifact as a cure-all to contemporary late-capitalist consumer society.

#### Fragmentation

Celebrities, musicians, and athletes are common bodies featured on *L.A. Ink* and *Miami Ink*, and there is an overemphasis on tattooing as an art form. While the artists I spoke with also regarded tattooing as an art form, they recognize that the Western tattoo has gone through a painstaking history to get to this point. In contrast, *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* do not acknowledge the troubled past of the Western tattoo. Rather, they regard corporeal inscriptions as cultural markers of the middle-class, high-priced aesthetic commodities that allow individuals to embody their identity politics. While the shows anchor and legitimize tattooing as an artistic endeavor, they subsequently divorce the practice from its dishonorable history. This is accomplished not only through the shows' content, but also in their marketing materials (e.g., websites and DVDs). The *Miami Ink* website proclaims that “*Miami Ink* is TLC's hot show about the art and drama of tattooing” (*Miami Ink*, n.d.), while the Netflix synopsis indulges

When Ami James, Chris Garver, Darren Brass, and Chris Nunez open a tattoo parlor in Miami, it's the fulfillment of a dream the buddies have harbored since studying under the late, great Lou Sciberras more than a decade ago. This Discovery Channel reality series takes viewers inside their world. It's a glimpse into the stories behind the often elaborate body art and the personalities who dream of making their bodies their canvases.

The same emphasis on high culture and art can be seen on the *L.A. Ink* website which states,

Kat Von D has come home to Los Angeles to fulfill her dream of opening up her own tattoo shop. The news has spread and celebrities, rising starlets, punk rockers, musicians and tattoo collectors alike are lining up for some of Kat's famous black and grey ink. In a city known for its tattoo culture, *L.A. Ink* is sure to stand out. (*L.A. Ink*, n.d.)

Focusing on the artistic value of contemporary tattoo commodity without acknowledging the contextual moments that preceded it provides a one-sided view of the culture. This effectually silences the historical actors of the practice, replicating the cycle of marginalization.

#### Policing Corporeal Inscription

Producers of *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* exert privilege and power and are able to maintain a contrived portrayal of the contemporary tattoo industry through a tedious and discriminatory online application process. First and foremost, potential clients are limited by their access to a computer and the internet. Next, the tattoo expectant must have expendable income in the amount of a \$100 non-refundable deposit in order to have their application privy to a once over. Should the person be selected on the show, that \$100 will be applied to the total cost of their tattoo. However, if the person is not selected, she or he automatically forfeits that money. Likewise, if the ink enthusiast does not live in the Los Angeles, CA or Miami Beach, FL area, they must have the means by which to reach their destination, as the television shows do not reimburse for travel costs (and candidates are strongly preferred to be available on a 24 hour emergency notice). Potential patrons are also required to submit their headshot for casting purposes. It is also mandatory to provide a detailed 250 word description of the image they wish to have tattooed—size, shape, color, and photograph of desired style—and a 100-150 word story/narrative linking to the

desired tattoo. Neglecting to include either of these will result in the submission not being considered. At the end of the application a friendly thank you is offered, as is a strong warning to not submit multiple entries because of the high volume of forms received on a daily basis. Through this process prospective clients are methodically scrutinized and policed so that they meet the specified subject positions that conform to a preconceived, camera-friendly and marketable prototype of the contemporary tattooing population.

### Artists' Narratives

After reviewing my interviews and field notes, I found three themes relating to “tattooed reality” came to the fore most often. I have labeled these *product*, *practice*, and *process*. The first, and I would argue most important, was the concept of the false *product*—that the “tattooed reality” discourse stemming from the shows is not representative of the contemporary public body of tattooing in the United States. In other words, the tattooed bodies featured on the television shows do not represent the complete populace of individuals being tattooed in contemporary Western society. This theme extended not only to the particular subject-positions of the tattooed population, but also to the expressions, meanings, and motivations behind their tattoos. The second theme to emerge from my interviews was the notion of *practice*. It was overwhelmingly expressed in the interviews that *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink*'s “tattooed reality” offers an inaccurate depiction of the tattooing practice, which covers everything from the ways in which the lifestyles of the tattoo artist casts were excessively glamorized to the general sentiment that tattoo culture is not stigmatized (but rather, explicitly accepted). The third theme that materialized in the interviews

was that of *process*, or the varying ways in which the “tattooed reality” discourse misrepresents the physical process of receiving a tattoo. Grievances ranged from the unsanitary tattooing procedures regularly displayed on the television shows, to the hasty, made-for-television rendering of the tattoo process from start to finish. Taken together, these themes demonstrate that *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* provide a risky, inaccurate, and misleading representation of tattooing.

#### Product

When I asked the artists whether they thought *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* showed an accurate representation of the people they tattooed on a daily basis, the answer was a resounding no. While each of the artists acknowledged that the RTV tattoo shows had opened the doors for a new group of individuals that previously had thought tattooing was not for them, they also noted that many of the historical cultural icons of the tattoo community were still being tattooed (even though they were not being represented on the shows). Matt explained, “We tattoo doctors, lawyers, all the way through to junkies and the homeless. All walks of life,” and continued on to say that the seemingly normal middle-class bodies and charismatic stories continuously featured on the shows were idealistic at best, as he never ceased to be shocked and surprised by his clients and their antics.

I just tattooed a 17 year old mother. She got her son’s footprints on her arm. It’s like, you know, your mom’s out there signing for you [to get the tattoo]and holding your baby while she is outside smoking a cigarette, and you’re in here getting tattooed. I mean, that’s fucking classy if you ask me. (Interview, June 3, 2008)

Johnny echoed Matt’s sentiments and, in addition to lower and working-class individuals, noted that he tattooed a number of servicemen. Johnny also drew



attention to race, stating that even though he did not see a representation on either show, “98% of my clients are black” (Interview, July 21, 2008). All of the artists recognized that geographic location plays an important role in determining what “types” of individuals populate a particular tattoo studio, but I find it problematic that *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* fail to represent these differing people. With a nationwide following and an online recruiting process, TLC has the opportunity to cast an inclusive group from the tattoo population. However, they fail as the application becomes a tool for discriminating against candidates that do not meet the director or producer’s selection criterion.

In addition to the contrived tattooed populace being portrayed on the show, the particular types of tattoos publicized and meanings associated with them fail to represent the public body of Western tattooing. The artists’ responses to questions of expression and meaning in terms of their clients’ tattoos were across the board. Laura stated that the emotional tales on *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* resonated particularly well with her because of her signature tattooing style.

Yeah I’m a good psychologist. Because of the impressionist stuff I do I get a lot of the um, mourning and, you know, I do a lot more of the emotional tattoos, and um, and I like it that way. I like it that a lot of the time the, I can help people with a portrait and, um, give them something to memorialize the person. (Interview, May 5, 2008)

But other artists expressed that some of their clients sought out tattoos strictly for their shock potential, while others came in for tattoos that just looked cool or made them look cool but carried no symbolic value. Additionally, all of the artists reflected on the pain involved in receiving a tattoo and noted that they had many clients that

simply enjoyed the way the process of tattooing felt. No matter the circumstance, these meanings and expressions were not being included on the television shows.

Jacob, Johnny, and Bill indicated that a large percentage of the images they tattooed on their clients came from flash art, unlike the highly customized designs *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* place a substantial emphasis on. The esteemed valuation of customized pieces (and discounting of flash designs) on the shows is done to accentuate the political and individualistic properties of the aesthetic commodity, and presumably to increase the profits of the studio (as mentioned before, the shows have a \$500 minimum charge for their tattoos and a \$200 hourly rate). Bill expressed the antithetical irony of this trend, regarding flash designs as foundational to the history of Western tattooing. He recounted how artists created sheets of flash art for other tattooers to learn from and follow, most notably Sailor Jerry and Don Ed Hardy whose namesake have been branded into fashion statements (Interview, April 1, 2008).

#### Practice

The second theme to emerge from my interviews was the notion of *practice*. It was overwhelmingly expressed by the tattoo artists that *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* present an inaccurate depiction of the tattooing practice. The idea of practice covers everything from the way in which the lifestyles of the featured tattoo artists were excessively glamorized to the general sentiment that tattoo culture is not stigmatized (but rather, explicitly accepted). Questions of practice evoked the most personal and introspective responses from the tattoo artists that spoke with me. This did not

surprise me given the problematic and disreputable history of Western tattooing, but I did find the (re)actions of the artists significant and worthy of mention.

Bill was the first tattoo artist I had the fortune to meet with. While I initially felt like I was getting the runaround from Bill and his associates because of the length of time it took to schedule a meeting with him, I soon discovered that this was a defensive tactic, and a well-warranted one at that. When I finally sat down to talk with Bill, he immediately probed me to divulge the details of my research. Without any hesitation I did just that. Being a novice researcher and interviewer I can only assume that this was not correct *modus operandi*, but I had nothing to hide. I believe there is an injustice occurring in the contemporary that is placing tattooed bodies in a position of exploitation, and in the spirit of Howard Becker (1967) I wanted Bill to know just whose side I was on.<sup>14</sup> As I explained my thesis, Bill revealed that he had been hesitant to meet with me or participate in the project because he had been burned by a journalist from a Maryland newspaper and college students from a neighboring university. Bill stated that the college students did not like something that he said, or rather he did not say what they wanted to hear, so they stopped meeting with him. In the newspaper scenario the journalist misquoted Bill and took something he said out of context. Both circumstances were damaging in that Bill, his establishment, and tattoo culture as a whole were depicted in a negative manner—a trend that has ensued since the inception of Western tattooing, relegating the practice to the margins of society. After explaining this Bill asserted that tattooing was his life and not something he took very lightly.

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<sup>14</sup> I am aware that my subject-position plays an integral part in the construction of knowledge and should not be glossed over, but I am reserving that discussion for my reflexivity section.

Bill's apprehension and accounts of transgression were antithetical to *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink*'s generally favorable depiction of Western tattooing. And he was not alone. Johnny acknowledged that he probably would not be able to get a job aside from tattooing in the future because of how heavily tattooed he was. He also stated that he was weary of his 9 year old son someday wanting to get a tattoo because of the negative effects that accompany tattoos. "You know, a lot of places say they don't discriminate, but, if it comes between you and the guy that doesn't have any visible tattoos, he's probably going to get the job" (Johnny, Interview, July 21, 2008). *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* have reflected on the downside of tattooing but it has been done in a cautionary manner to reappropriate the practice as a high-brow performance. Ami refused to tattoo his apprentice Yogi's head on *Miami Ink* because Ami's neck tattoo had caused him much grief and unwanted public attention. Ami quickly squashed the request, stating that he was "not running a freak show" (*Miami Ink*, Season 1, 2005). In the first season of *L.A. Ink* Pixie went to see a dermatologist that specialized in laser tattoo removal because she had "prime real estate" going uncharted due to an existing tattoo she was less than thrilled about (*L.A. Ink*, Season 1, 2007). This provoked Kat to discuss the tattoo of her ex-husband's name that she regretted, warning viewers to think before you ink.

In addition to Johnny's concern, Mick explained in grueling detail that she had spent the past few months meticulously constructing legislation to fight a Maryland city councilman that was working to have hers and Tom's tattoo studio banished. Their business had been in the same location for over 30 years but was facing expulsion on allegations that tattoo shops were not family-friendly. Mick and

Tom were both outraged and flabbergasted by this charge, stating that their studio was devoted to the notion of family. Mick explained that each of her children was given the opportunity to learn how to pierce at the age of 16 and tattoo at the age of 18. While most of her kids elected to pursue other careers, her youngest son consented. Like any proud parent Mick boasted that her son, Jacob, had been piercing for five years and was in the third year of his tattooing apprenticeship (I was able to interview with Jacob later when he stopped by to bring his mom coffee). In addition to his stepson Jacob, Tom described the process of filling out a school-required work permit form so his 15 year old granddaughter could start working the front desk of his and Mick's tattoo studio. It is bizarre to think the shops of *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* do not experience prejudice but a tattoo establishment grounded in family tradition is vehemently discriminated against.

*Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink*'s neglect to critically address the pitfalls of tattoo culture was only one *practice* concerns expressed by the tattoo artists in this research. The ways in which the shows glamorized the tattoo profession was equally problematic. The cast of *Miami Ink* closed down their tattoo shop and took a fishing day trip to the Florida Keys in the first season because they were stressed out by the grand opening. The tattoo artists I spoke with expressed disbelief at such a preposterous occurrence, noting the amount of money that would be lost for doing such a thing. Many of the artists stated that they worked six or seven days a week just to get by in the competitive industry. Likewise, all of the artists noted that the shops she or he worked at were open seven days a week.

Glamour is the premise of *L.A. Ink* given that the shop is located at the epicenter of cinematic endeavors, Hollywood. The majority of the clients featured on *L.A. Ink* are celebrities of some form, even the shop owner, Kat, who scored the opportunity to have her own spinoff after initially appearing on the first and second seasons of *Miami Ink*. The cast of *L.A. Ink* is shown splitting their time between tattooing famous people, going to the beach, and partying all night long, alluring viewers to an unrealistic depiction of the profession. In a quintessential ironic episode, Hannah “confesses” that many people are misled into believing tattooing is a “rock star” profession. On the east coast, the cast of *Miami Ink* is often featured partying hard in the evenings, and Ami and Nunez go on to open up their own bar in the second season. Tom stated that the thought was ridiculous—trying to run one business is hard enough, let alone two (Interview, August 8, 2008). Matt shared the same sentiment, continuing on to say that the shows were gaining incredible popularity, but at a potentially detrimental cost.

They’ve definitely had an impact on the industry. But as far as a good impact I can’t really say yet because there is a lot more people thinking it’s a glamorous job—that all of us are rock stars and we make money, blah, blah. It’s not like that at all. Tattooing is a very starving artist career. Even the guys that are full scale for a few, two to three years, that are charging \$100 an hour—they might be happy working, but look at how much work they have to do. (Interview, June 3, 2008)

Laura echoed Matt’s feelings, stating that the hyped career path was definitely reaching audiences in record numbers. She and someone she knew on one of the shows (who she did not reveal) were receiving an influx of emails from young people that wanted a foot into the profession because it looked like a lot of fun for a lot of money and not a lot of work (Interview, May 5, 2008). This idea could not be farther

from the truth considering each of the tattoo artists I spoke with revealed that they constantly miss out on time with their family, friends, loved ones, and others because of the commitment their profession requires.

#### Process

The idea of *process* was the third theme that arose from the interviews. The artists that spoke with me articulated their frustrations with the varying ways in which *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* misrepresent the physical process of receiving a tattoo. Grievances ranged from the unsanitary tattooing procedures regularly displayed on the television shows, to the hasty, made-for-television rendering of the tattoo process from start to finish. The tattoo artists that spoke to me revealed that repeated indiscretions such as the ones featured on *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* were disadvantageous to anyone seeking a tattoo, and had the potential to negatively impact the Western tattoo industry.

I was especially interested in speaking with Mick after reading her laundry list of credentials that highlighted a dedication to improving the profession and culture of tattooing. She was recognized for her “Outstanding Contributions to the Tattoo Profession” by the National Tattoo Association for, amongst other accomplishments, working with the Federal Drug Administration to develop written standards for safe tattooing. When I asked Mick if she thought *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* provided an accurate depiction of the contemporary tattoo industry, she quickly responded no. She stated that the number of gross errors in sterility safeguarding were alarming, from the way in which the *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* artists’ tattooing stations were unsafely set up, to the improper wrapping of their clients’ finished tattoos. Jacob

almost identically reiterated his mother's concerns, adding that he refused to watch the shows again after seeing a *Miami Ink* artist give his client a high-five while still wearing the plastic safety glove he completed the tattoo in. Health and safety is not something that should be taken lightly, and this was made absolutely clear by Mick who would not allow me to take her word for it. She brought me to the back of the studio to educate me on proper autoclaving procedures and offered to show me the studio's autoclave log. Mick informed me that she offered monthly classes on microbial invasion prevention (which I asked and was encouraged to attend) and sent me home with an autoclave log manual, which she developed and got published more than a decade ago. Mick, Tom, and Jacob unequivocally disapproved of *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink*, arguing that the shows were doing a disservice to the tattoo industry and the people involved in it by frivolously displaying improper and unhealthy tattooing techniques.

In addition to the unsanitary displays seen on *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink*, the accelerated progression of the tattooing process was cause for much criticism from the tattoo artists that spoke to me. Each one hour episode of the shows features four to six people getting tattooed and the stories behind their respective inscriptions. The artists on *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* meet their clients, hear their ideas for their elaborate tattoos, make a line drawing for the stencil that will be placed on the clients' bodies and used as a guideline for the tattoo, and start the tattoo only to be finished a few minutes later. Even without speaking to the tattoo artists I knew this was an unrealistic presentation considering the smallest tattoo I have took an hour and a half to complete from the time I walked into the tattoo shop to the moment the artist



bandaged my fresh ink. But *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* generally feature medium to large sized tattoos. In most real-life cases a client must first meet for a consultation with the artist, give them a few days to a few weeks to draw up the tattoo, and be prepared to come back for multiple sessions to see the completion of the tattoo. These circumstances are rarely addressed in the shows, except for the first season of *Miami Ink* where the cast was shown asking clients to come back to see their line drawings and warning them that the tattoo they wanted would take several sittings to complete. That first season of *Miami Ink* was the only one to put any emphasis on the process of tattooing (e.g., how tattoos were drawn up, how stencils were made, what types of needles would be used and why, the length of time it takes to get a tattoo, etc.). This was not seen in the second season of *Miami Ink* or either of the *L.A. Ink* seasons, most likely because the producers realized this did not make for good viewing. In talking with the tattoo artists, it became clear that the telepoetic representation of the tattooing process set audiences up for disappointment when they went in for their own tattoos. Laura elaborated,

I guess you could say, because of the way they film things it, you know, um, makes it look real easy and quick and able to be drawn and done in, like, five minutes. It's like, [mocking a conversation between a client and artist on the show] "Hey I have this great idea for a back piece."

"Oh hold on, I'll be back in 20 minutes!" When it actually takes them several hours to complete.

Laura continued, referring back to what her friend that works on one of the shows had told her:

I know that often times they have requested that the artists and clients where the same clothes for several sessions in the early parts of the show. You know, so it could look like in a half an hour you could come out with this elaborate tattoo. And it's very disappointing to see it on TV and walk into a place and not understand why you can't, you can't, um, get it done right then and there. And they make it look like the artist had nothing to do that day and was just sitting down without any other clients. (Interview, May 5, 2008)

This false representation of the tattooing process is problematic, potentially setting viewers up for negative experiences and allowing them to fill the gaps of their tattooing knowledge with the accessible (but incomplete) information.

### Reflexivity

PCS scholars recognize that empirical foci are mediated, shaped, and affected by social forces within the contexts they are situated and, as such, engage in self-reflective, collaborative, and polyvocal writing methods to add rigor and depth to their research (King, 2005; Saukko, 2003). Reflexivity is one of those methods researchers in PCS apply. As a form of critical self-checking, reflexivity allows scholars to attend to how their subject-positions affect the ways in which they and their collaborators make meaning (Daly, 2007). I remained sensitive to my location within the empirical because tattooing is a very personal subject for me, and I am aware that I hold biases in favor of this subculture. During my research I struggled with identity and authenticity, going out of my way to wear clothes that showed off my tattoos and making sure to have all of my facial piercings in whenever I met with a tattoo artists. While I do not necessarily conceive myself as part of a subculture, I took these measures because I wanted the artists to be able to identify with me. I readily divulged the intentions of my research to my collaborators, in part, because I was nervous in my first research endeavor, but more importantly, because I wanted

the artists to know that I was “on their side.” In addition to being completely candid with my collaborators, I offered to provide each of them a copy of my thesis once it was complete so they would have the opportunity to review the ways in which I described them, their specific quotations I selected to use in this project, as well as the ways in which I interpreted those quotations. I believe that my complete disclosure aided in establishing rapport and gaining trust from the artists, and I took these steps because I recognize that realities are co-produced and efforts must be taken to uphold the integrity of the information generated (Saukko, 2005).

I also considered the possibility that “gendered interviewing” could have taken place within and affected the research, given my position as a woman researcher in a historically masculine and male-dominated empirical setting. Fontana and Frey (2005) explicate the concept of “gendered interviewing,” stating that “the sex of the interviewer and the sex of the respondent make a difference because the interview takes place within the cultural boundaries of a paternalistic social system in which masculine identities are differentiated from feminine ones” (p. 710). But after considering this and reviewing my interactions with the artists, I do not believe that gendered interviewing took place in my research. The men and women I interviewed offered relatively equivalent insights in terms of breadth and depth. I do not feel that the men artists patronized me, nor do I suspect that they abstained from being forthright with me because I am a woman. The women artists did not empathize with me because I am a woman, nor did they seem to divulge more information. I believe the range and profundity of the content that was co-produced through our interviews and conversations was a consequence of my identification and presence in the

Western tattoo subculture. While this is specifically my interpretation of the tattoo artist interviews, I believe the research presented in the interviewing section of this paper will clarify my understandings.

In preliminary undertakings of this project I conducted a series of eight shorter interviews with non-artist tattoo wearers in an effort to understand how they made sense of *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* and other commercialized depictions of the contemporary tattoo industry. While the responses within these interviews carried ample breadth and depth, I ultimately opted not to include them in this paper (though I now realize the error of my decision). I initially thought that including interview data from both populations would complicate my project, but it was the divergent tone among the two groups' responses that prompted me to impetuously dismiss one set of narratives. Non-artists provided overwhelmingly favorable feedback regarding *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink*, stating that they enjoyed the art and stories highlighted within the shows. A few individuals even declared that the shows inspired them to get tattooed. On the contrary, the tattoo artists I interviewed were more critical of the shows, pinpointing various flaws and inaccuracies within their content. With haste and naivety, I abandoned the non-artists' responses and privileged the voices of the tattoo artists, doing so because I believed the artists' arguments were aligned with my critique of the shows. In actuality, had I included the insights of the non-artist tattoo wearers, my research would have been better informed and the true contested nature of the contemporary tattooed body would have been illuminated and put into perspective. For future projects I plan to expand upon this research and incorporate the range of voices within the contemporary tattooing collective.

## Appendix C: Theory

My research is dedicated to the expansive Physical Cultural Studies (PCS) academic project. Within PCS, scholars are committed to “the contextually based understanding of the corporeal practices, discourses, and subjectivities through which active bodies become organized, represented, and experienced in relation to the operations of social power” (Andrews, 2008, p. 55). We underscore a contextually based approach to physical culture within the PCS project based on the understanding that no historical moment exists independently of the social, political, economic, and technological context it resides in (Andrews, 2002). PCS contends that people define their own realities in a world that is complex and cognizant of the subjective and fundamental positions they hold in the broader social context (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Silk, Andrews, & Mason, 2005; Silk, 2005). Because of this PCS stresses the significance of the empirical for understanding how social power operates and encourages researchers to situate themselves within cultural spaces to observe and analyze the interactions and relationships between lived histories, experiences, and texts (Saukko, 2003). Following a sacred and moral epistemology, PCS is “distinguished by its commitment to exposing dominant configurations of power and it has done so by tracing the articulation of economic, political and social forces in the cultural field” (King, 2005, p. 33). PCS is unimpeded by a solitary methodological or theoretical influence, but advocates the theory-method of articulation as the keystone of its circumstantial impulsion. Following the PCS impetus, I locate myself and my research in the empirical Western tattoo culture to critically interrogate and articulate

how tattooed bodies have been organized, (re)presented, and (re)produced in relation to social forces.

PCS seeks to examine the structures that lived histories produce, but more importantly, the project is especially concerned with the lived realities of those marginalized and oppressed groups functioning within culture. The concept of culture operates on many overlapping definitional levels and cannot be classified neatly. Cultural studies does not seek to posit solidifying labels on these entities, rather it recognizes culture as processes that unify and divide, processes that are incapable of being technically defined, and processes that do not have some harmonious connection to a larger whole (Frow & Morris, 2000). The project of cultural studies examines the production of these culture processes in relation to other dynamic processes and structures in an effort to critically question their constitution (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). In PCS we are looking particularly at understanding the productions of physical culture (including but not limited to sport, exercise, and movement) and how they relate to a broader society. We accomplish this through articulation theory, as well as Lawrence Grossberg's notion of "radical contextualism" which is informed by Stuart Hall's "Marxism without guarantees" (Andrews, 2002).

Before moving to the theory-methods of PCS, it is important to emphasize the importance of the body and embodiment. PCS has worked to moved away from the sociology of sports and towards a more inclusive empirical physical culture focus. Hargreaves and Vertinsky (2007) reflect this move and emphasize the importance of the body as a critical site of culture. "The body is so central to our understanding of

physical culture and the articulations within physical culture because it is where the private becomes public” (Hargreaves & Vertinsky, 2007, p. 7). The body cannot be underrated because it is an explicit site of struggle, assimilation, and resistance. “There is a clear relationship between the anatomy of the body and social roles, so that our bodies are at the same time part of nature and part of culture” (Hargreaves & Vertinsky, 2007, p. 3). The body provides a central location for the study of how individuals concurrently effect and are affected by the context in which they live. “At first glance physical culture appears to be a free, autonomous activity incorporating the body in ways that are personally enriching. But...it is simultaneously a site of constraint and contestation” (Hargreaves & Vertinsky, 2007, p. 9). As such the body becomes a coherent and critical site to investigate the articulations of power that shape and constraint individuals within the social context. Andrews (2006; 2008) has stated that the boundaries of physical culture are fluid and dynamic and therefore expected to be challenged and revised on a constant basis which is why I believe the tattooed body, as a significant component of physical culture, matters as a critical site upon which social power operates (Hargreaves & Vertinsky, 2007).

### Radical Contextualism

Radical contextualism provides PCS scholars with a theoretical tool to better understand our “object” of study and charges us with the task of recreating the social, economic, political, technological, and cultural forces that shaped the context out of which the object of study materialized. Within radical contextualism, Grossberg explains that a cultural entity cannot “be defined independently of its existence within the context. An event or practice...does not exist apart from the forces of the context

that constitute it as what it is” (Grossberg, 1997a, p. 255, as quoted in Andrews, 2002). Similarly, Kincheloe & McLaren (2005) stressed that objects of inquiry cannot be interpreted as an “encapsulated entity” because they are ontologically complex (p. 319). In an earlier work, Kincheloe (2001) offered

Any social, cultural, psychological, or pedagogical object of inquiry is inseparable from its context, the languages used to describe it, its historical situatedness in a larger ongoing process, and the socially and culturally constructed interpretations of its meaning(s) as an entity in the world. (p. 682)

The emphasis on context is not to be underestimated or naively interpreted as the backdrop where certain activities occur. Saukko (2005) accurately states “the contextual dimension of research refers to an analysis of social and historical processes” (p. 346), but PCS scholars argue that context is far more complex and dynamic—an integral component in the (re)construction of lived social realities (Grossberg, 1997; King, 2005; Slack, 1996). Slack (1996) stresses that context cannot be regarded as distinct from social realities. Likewise, she maintains that context is more than the settings where practices occur—it is part of the production of these practices, and contributes to relations of power, identity construction, and lived realities

Interrogating any articulated structure of practice requires an examination of the ways in which the ‘relatively autonomous’ social, institutional, technical, economic, and political forces are organized into unities that are effective and are relatively empowering or disempowering...Context is not something *out there, within which practices occur or which influence the development of practices*. Rather, *identities, practices and effects generally, constitute the very context within which they are practices, identities, or effects*. (Slack, 1996, p. 125, original emphasis)

Slack also details the dialectic qualities of context, stating that just as context is part of the creation of social practices and power, those same practices and lines of power



create their own context. Whereas Slack emphasizes the need to understand context in terms of the articulations made within that context, Grossberg emphasizes the need to understand particular articulations in order to grasp the context from which they came.

Context can be understood as the relationships that have been made by the operation of power, in the interests of certain positions of power, the struggle to change the context involves the struggle to understand those relations that can be disarticulated and then struggle to rearticulate them” (Grossberg, 1997, p. 261)

Grossberg’s notion is elaborated upon by King (2005) who explains radical contextualism as a necessary tool of articulation. She emphasizes the political importance of radical contextualism as intervention because it provides a site where researchers must “excavate the nature, meaning and organization of the phenomenon under analysis, for it is at this level that the articulation of social forces is experienced and at which they might also be transformed or rearticulated” (p. 34). Through radical contextualism PCS researchers recognize that the only way to fully understand the cultural phenomena we are concerned with is to recreate the context from which it came and then study the phenomena in consideration of, and with respect to, that particular context. To study an empirical site outside of its constituting context would be incomplete because it would disarticulate the object of study from the context that enabled its existence in the first place.

#### “Marxism without Guarantees”

At the crux of Grossberg’s radical contextualism and our contextually based approach to PCS is Stuart Hall’s concept of “Marxism without guarantees” (Andrews, 2002). Karl Marx’s ontological underpinnings have been highly regarded and equally

criticized in the social sciences. Marx considered the most basic and equally complex of all relationships in the context of society to be that between man [*sic*] and nature.

Beamish (1982) summarized Marx's comprehension of this relationship

Man's social history, the subject matter of social science, is dependent upon his mediate relation with nature. Man must interact with nature to realize himself physically and potentially. His productive activity mediates man with nature and changes his own being and his social formations. It is, therefore, the point of departure for comprehending social history. (p. 145)

The basic contention of Marxism was that individuals did not subsist independent of their social context, but the arrangement of these entities was charged with being deterministic in character. Passages such as this were interpreted to be formulaic and earned the label of vulgar Marxism

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. (Marx, as quoted in Andrews, 2007, p. 3)

Speaking to the nature of industrial capitalist society, Marx posited that the economic base ("the mode of production of material life") was the determining factor for the social superstructure ("the general process of social, political and intellectual life").

Invoking the concept of class and revoking the possibility of individual agency, Marx accentuated that the conditions of social were grounded in a division of labor, with the ruling class determining the dominant ideologies of society (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944; 1969).

Seeking to mitigate the “continually contested terrain” of the cultural sphere which battled “between the constraining influences of the social structure and the creative impulses of human agents,” Hall turned his attention to Marxism (Andrews, 2002, p. 112). At the core of Marxism was the 53-word “single most important” quote acknowledging that individuals did not exist independently of the context they were situated in (Andrews, 2007, p. 4)

Men [*sic*] make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. (Marx, 1977)

Taking this against vulgar Marxism, “which asserted a *necessary correspondence* between the various elements of society and the overbearing economic realm” (Andrews, 2002, p. 112), Hall proposed a “Marxism without guarantees” where “*no necessary correspondence*” existed between individuals and their social settings or differing social configurations (Hall, 1985, p. 94, as quoted in Andrews, 2002, p. 112). In “Marxism without guarantees” emphasis is placed on historical specificity, or what Grossberg refers to as “conjuncturalism.” Conjuncturalism highlights that determinate relations occur, subsist, and interact, but they cannot be guaranteed or ascertained in advance (Andrews, 2002). With this understanding “Marxism without guarantees” becomes dialectical in nature (dialectical Marxism), a “movement that takes up key elements of the everyday and its contradictions, moves them to a higher level of conceptualization and understanding, and then spirals back to the concrete to reproduce in though a ‘rich totality of many determinations’” (Marx, 1989, p. 44, as quoted in Gardiner, 2006, p. 8). As a dialectical ontology, “Marxism without

guarantees” asks scholars of PCS to study physical culture not in isolation, but as an integral component of the social conjuncture.

### Articulation

To consider context and the formation of the physical culture, we turn our attention back to articulation. In its simplest form, articulations are the structure of linkages that elemental units within discursive formations shape (Andrews, 2002; DeLuca, 1999; Hanczor, 1997). Articulation theory is the first step in a radically contextual analysis in that it lays out the fabric of the context in question. It is “a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subject” (Hall, 1986, p. 53). Samantha King (2005) offers another useful explanation of the articulation theory-method, and while the following quote was designated for sport studies, I find the content salient within the specific Physical Cultural Studies (and my analysis of the tattoo industry).

In its manifestation as a theoretical sensibility, articulation offers for scholars in [physical cultural] studies a model of society as a ‘layered complex of elements’ - including [physical cultural] phenomena in all their variety- ‘all intricately and dialectically interrelated with one another.’ As a methodological ethos, articulation provides strategies for undertaking a cultural study of [the tattoo industry], that is, for contextualizing one’s object of analysis. (p. 24)

Context comes to the fore through King’s definition of articulation, and whether we recognize articulation informed through context, or context informed through articulation, the fact remains that the two cannot be separated. Articulation and

context cannot, and must not, be interpreted independently of each other, emphasized here

To operate within a contextual PCS strategy means recognizing that physical cultural forms (practices, discourses, and subjectivities, etc.) can only be understood by the way in which they are *articulated* into a particular set of complex social, economic, political, and technological relationships that comprise the social context. (Andrews, 2008, p. 57 emphasis in the original)

The significance of articulation demonstrated here is that without context, meaning cannot be inferred because it comes precisely from its arrangement within a formation—it is the product of the relationships among and between diverse articles a particular discourse and context. To consider how we might approach the process of articulating within PCS, we turn to the idea of the bricolage and the researcher as a bricoleur (Kincheloe, 2001; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Denzin & Lincoln (2005) put this into perspective for physical cultural studies

The qualitative researcher as bricoleur, or maker of quilts, uses the aesthetic and material tools of his or craft, deploying whatever strategies, methods, and empirical materials are at hand. If the researcher needs to invent, or piece together, new tools or techniques, he or she will do so. Choices regarding which interpretive paradigm to employ are not necessarily made in advance. (p. 4)

Beamish (1982) cautions, however, that even with this bricolage of theories and methods, the scholar cannot begin with the whole. Instead, she or he must begin with “reality as it immediately appears” so the analysis can “develop a comprehension of the relation of that part to the totality by ‘unfolding’ the multitude of connections (or mediate relations) that relates the part to other parts and all parts into a totality” (p. 145). For this we employ methodological contingency, in which different methodologies utilized to answer research questions correspond with the different “means of which culture impresses itself on us as an object” (Johnson et al., 2004, p.

27; King, 2005). Within my thesis I strived to understand the contemporary tattooed body by articulating the social forces and processes that have shaped and affected it. I accomplished this through contextual/historical mapping, in-depth interviews with tattoo artists, and a media analysis of the corporatized spectacles *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink*.

## Appendix D: Interview Guide

1. How long have you been an artist?
2. How did you become a tattoo artist (i.e. formal apprenticeship, do-it-yourself, professionally trained artist, etc.)?
3. Why did you want to become a tattoo artist?
4. Do you specialize in a particular style of tattooing?
5. What do you like most about being a tattoo artist?
6. What do you like least about being a tattoo artist?
7. Tell me about your worst experience tattooing a client.
8. Tell me about your best experience tattooing a client.
9. Would you describe the majority of your clients as first timers or repeats?
10. How would you describe the majority of your clients (class, race, gender, ethnicity, etc.)? Has this changed since you began tattooing?
11. Why do you think your clients come in for tattoos? Has this changed since you began tattooing?
12. How would you characterize your relationship with the majority of clients who come into your shop? Has this changed since you first began tattooing?
13. Would you classify contemporary tattooing as a community or an industry (or something completely different)? Why?
14. Do you think tattooing is localized/regionalized? More specifically, do you think tattooing practices are different across the United States? If yes, please explain why and in what ways.
15. Are you familiar with any of the corporate marketing strategies that have incorporated tattoo culture into their advertisements? If so, which ones?
16. Are you familiar with the reality-based programs that deal with the tattoo industry (i.e. *Miami Ink*, *L.A. Ink*, *Inked*, etc.)?
17. How often do you watch these programs?

18. Do you find that your clients mention watching these programs?
19. What is your overall perspective/opinion of these programs?
20. Do you think they accurately reflect the tattooing industry? Why or why not?
21. Have you noticed a change in the “type” of clients that frequent your establishment since these shows began airing? If so, please explain.
22. Have you noticed any differences in the reasons why people seem to be getting tattoos since these shows began airing? If so, please explain.
23. Has there been any change in requests, demands, or expectations from your clients since these shows began airing? If so, please explain.
24. Do you think the existence of programs like *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* have affected public perceptions of tattooing? Why or why not?
25. In what other ways do you think the existence of programs like *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink* have affected tattooing?
26. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your profession and experiences?



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