Chapter 7

‘Heavily Tattooed and Beautiful?’: Tattoo Collecting, Gender and Self-Expression

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Abstract

The act of becoming ‘heavily tattooed’, with its historical association with deviant subcultures, continues to carry a social stigma and evoke negative sanctions. This is especially so for women, who must also contend with gender norms within the highly masculinised tattoo subculture. For women, the experience of becoming heavily tattooed comes to represent an embodied resistance to normative ideals of beauty, against which the participants construct their own alternative gender and beauty philosophies. Besides gender norms, the tattoo world has specific ethos which divides the serious subcultural member from those more casually connected to it. The physical parameter of the subculture finds people gathering in tattoo studios and at tattoo conventions, as well as consuming tattoo-oriented media, such as magazines and television shows. This study draws on in-depth interviews with 36 participants across the United States who consider themselves serious tattoo collectors. From their stories, we learn about the importance of participating in this leisure activity and how becoming heavily tattooed impacts their sense of self, gender and identity.

Keywords: Tattoos; deviance; gender; stigma; identity; body art

Introduction: Women in the Tattoo Subculture

It was the end of the '80s and I was five years old. I remember holding my mom's hand in the mall and seeing my first punk rock chick. She had a 'freakin' half-and-half mohawk thing. She had a...
tattoo of dates [numbers] on her skull. She was awesome to me. I said to mom, “what is that?” My mom was doing the earmuffs thing, covering my eyes. Don’t look at it. I’m like, “that is awesome!” And my sister said, “that’s a tattoo.” She was older, she knew all. So that was my first sense of anything subcultural.

Rene, a tattoo artist in St. Petersburg, Florida, was suddenly exposed as a small child to the punk rock aesthetic in a moment that profoundly resonated with her. Her exposure to such style was accompanied with her mother’s disdain, making it clear that this alternative was unacceptable. Her sister represents subcultural knowledge that is beyond her own awareness. For some participants, their childhood exposure to alternative culture was impacting and life changing. They vowed to begin their tattoo collection as soon as they were of age. While excited by the stylistic expression, little did they realize how taking on such an image would introduce conflict in their world. If they were still living with parents, such adolescent attempts of playing with self-presentation were swiftly censored inside the home, in schools and the general public. For girls in particular, they have a potentially different path to subcultural membership and different social costs. For girls, their subcultural membership in male-oriented communities can be at odds of social expectations of femininity and have a specifically female-shaming flavour to social sanctions. For boys, male-oriented subcultures provide a space for them to enact their masculine roles in a distinctive style reinforced by other group members, reaffirming a shared gender solidarity. When girls enter such spaces, they face barriers that are enacted through gendered practices such as limiting their roles to sexualised ones, or creating a situation in which they begin to break out of a channelled femininity. Such is the case of women in the world of tattooing in the United States, where they are artists, collectors and fans of the art form. Historically, tattooing was almost completely done by men and for men, sequestered into masculine subcultures such as the military, prisoners, bikers and criminally associated subcultures. In the early 1900s, the only women associated with this underground practice, stigmatised by such deviant group associations, as well as occasional outbreaks of blood-borne illnesses, were women romantically involved with male artists, their wives and girlfriends. A few women became heavily tattooed as a stand-in for the artist's portfolio. Some women went on to become tattooed performers in sideshows and circuses. Tattooing in the 1950s, Samuel Steward (1990) – an English professor turned tattooist – writes that most tattooists ‘in those days was composed of ex-cons or conmen, drunks, wife-beaters, military deserters, pushers, and even two murderers’ (p. 32). Steward writes about his decision to create a policy of not tattooing women – except with permission from husbands – after encountering many angry husbands rushing his shop and accusing him of desecrating their wives. Thus, the hyper-masculine environment, and actual practices and policies, reinforced the gender segregation of the tattoo subculture, which women would be hard pressed to enter, and few would have such an interest.

The literature on subcultures, focused so heavily on male-oriented subcultures, and the performances enacted by members, overwhelmingly accepts the absence of women without examining the ways in which gender segregation is enforced. Furthermore, much of the earlier literature ignores subcultures which might predominantly comprise women. Ethnographies of tattoo artists and collectors make note of gender distinctions, but rarely focus specifically on the female experience of collecting tattoos, especially the social consequences of collecting many tattoos that are large, visible and unfeminine. This chapter attempts to examine

Subcultures, Neo-Tribal Style and Women’s Prominence in Tattooing

Subcultures have always been the topics of study for sociologists, following traditions such as those which emerged from the Chicago School, from which scholars went out into the city to capture the descriptive lifestyles of communities – immigrants, low-income and marginal. Albert Cohen (1955), Walter Miller (1958), Clifford Shaw (1930) and Frederic Thrasher (1927) all completed major works on criminal gangs using Marxist and Gramscian theories to explore this culture from a more grounded, interactionist perspective. In the post-war years, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham, England, was at the forefront of documenting subcultural communities based on youth music and style. Most notably, the volumes Resistance through Rituals, edited by Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (1990) and Subculture: The Meaning of Style, by Dick Hebidge (1979), brought attention to specific groups such as the mods, rude boys, Rastafarians, punk rockers and skinheads. Swiftly, the CCCS research faced critique (including from its own writers), for its exclusive focus on masculine worlds.

The one exception was Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber’s (2006) article ‘Girls and subcultures’, in Hall and Jefferson’s anthology Resistance through Rituals. The article focused on how girls’ subcultures were often staged in the spaces of their bedroom, where they would engage with peers and media, and try on various elements of femininity and identity performativity in this safe space. This was in contrast to young male subcultures staged and performed in public spaces. As the only article outlining girls’ subcultures, McRobbie and Garber’s (2006) article established a foundation for the subfield of ‘girls’ studies’, which produced many more studies on bedroom cultures, girls’ engagement with popular culture media and girls’ lives as sites for societal anxieties (Harris, 2001; Kearney, 2009).

Other cultural studies perspectives introduced concepts such as ‘post-subcultural’, ‘lifestyle’, ‘scene’ and ‘neo-tribal’ to describe primarily youth-based subculture communities. French sociologist Michel Maffesoli’s (1995) concepts of ‘tribes’ and ‘neo-tribal’ contends that instead of communities based on socially established divisions such as race or class, connections are instead fragmented and random, easily adapted or discarded. This disposable and mutable adaptation of lifestyles was echoed by Ted Polhemus (1996) in his concept of a ‘supermarket of style’, from which people can simply pick and choose their constantly
evolving stylistic expressions. This concept was adopted by other theorists who support the idea of subcultures that can be entered into, and exited from, without the complicated encumbrance of rigid identity politics structures (Bennett, 1999; Bennett & Kahn-Harris, 2004; Riley et al. 2010). Others have been more critical of the post-subcultural perspective, stating that it ‘reduces “real” subculture to surface signifiers without authenticity where identity is determined by choice’ (Blackman, 2005, p. 15).

The central concept of the subcultural and post-subcultural theories is the idea of ‘style’ as a symbolic representation of one’s community, inner identity and/or resistance to hegemonic culture. David Muggleton (2000) argues that ‘appearance is not free-floating, available to be put on and cast off as a mere whim. To engage in such acts would be evidence of one’s superficiality and insincerity, for style is viewed as an expression of one’s inner self’, it is not an empty signifier (p. 103). Derek Roberts (2015) cautions that style cannot be the only ‘method of distinction’ or else the group will have to continuously incorporate new ‘objects and techniques’ or else ‘face extinction’ (p. 1101). While theoretically, items of material clothing and accessories can be adopted by anyone, the underlying message expressed by such objects is not so interchangeable, and individuals do not adopt styles radically outside of their self-presentation, or switch identities on a whim (Jaimangal-Jones, Pritchard, & Morgan, 2015). Subcultures incorporate elements of other time periods or cultural objects, but the final (yet changing) representation has a significant meaning, which work to reify the subculture, for example the hyper-masculine bodies in gay male subcultures (Kates, 2002), the adoption of militaristic objects in hardcore music (Willis, 1993) or single-strap bag of the bicycle messengers (Fincham, 2008). In their research on dance music culture and associated dress, Jaimangal-Jones et al. (2015) demonstrate that such clothing is adopted ‘within specific club environments while generally being invisible on the street’ and therefore, style is also located in particular sites and performed for appreciative and expectant observers.

Sarah Thornton (1996) writes that ‘club cultures are taste cultures’, based on a shared preference in music and common consumptive practices (p. 3). Subcultures establish style, meanings and rituals and individuals interact with these symbols through revision and diffusion. Yet, these meanings do not necessarily have a ‘wider ramification beyond the local context’ (Kates, 2002, p. 396). For individuals to rise in the ranks and become an elite member of the subculture, intensive efforts must be placed into stylistic interaction, its circulation and development (Force, 2009). In the tattoo subculture there are many points of distinction to mark the difference between a novice and an ‘old timer’. One of the distinctions is the continuation of collecting significant tattoos. Derek Roberts makes this distinction:

People who have tattoos usually have one or maybe a couple tattoos strategically placed on areas of their bodies that are easily hidden. Tattooed people, on the other hand, get ink that is visible to others. Bold tattoos on lower arms, hands and/or necks are common for tattooed people (italics added, p. 1–2).

Roberts (2012) continues, ‘though the number of people who have tattoos has boomed, I argue that the number of tattooed people remains relatively small’ (2). This suggests that simply having one, or a few tattoos, is not significant enough to position someone as an esteemed subcultural member. One must prove their commitment by extensive coverage. Katherine Irwin (2003) has written about this distinctive ‘elite tattoo collector’ who have earned the highest subcultural capital. These include having extensive knowledge of tattoo artists, styles and norms; collecting works from the best in the industry, paying thousands of dollars, booking time on wait lists, travelling long distances and collecting images valued by the subculture, which can include classic Americana (flash style, old school sailor designs, originating with Sailor Jerry) or specific styles, such as hyper-realism, horror or portraits. Irwin (2003) describes such imagery further: ‘Aesthetically, elite collectors and tattooists prefer tattoos depicting fringe themes. Images of monsters, demons, beheadings, severed hands, and aliens are popular tattoo images among this crowd’ (p. 39–40). Such collectors are often attempting to achieve a tattoo ‘body suit’ in which their entire body is covered with tattoo, with ‘patches of plain skin serve as aberrations and reminders of the unfinished, unbalanced nature of their body suits. Light, pale and colourless skin is only valued for its potential to hold future art’ (Irwin, 2003, p. 29).

Collecting extensive tattoos puts one into a distinct, or elite group among other collectors, and a deviant among the non-tattooed. Therefore, having tattoos positions one to belong to the community or subculture around this specific art. One of Paul Sweetman’s (2000) interviewees explains that when you become tattooed or pierced you feel like part of a club or community that in some ways is like any other lifestyle group (p. 89). Moving beyond the casual collector, or, as Derek Roberts called them, ‘people with tattoos’ and becoming a ‘tattooed person’ represents subcultural authenticity. The external stylistic expression is supposed to represent a claim of one’s internal feelings, an essential self, that happens to be best represented by a particular subculture to which one feels strong affinity (Muggleton, 2000). It may also be held as an unattained, but striven for, authenticity. For example, Agnes Jasper (2004) found that gothic party visitors often stated that they were not goth, or not authentically so, which Jasper assumed to be a way of ‘guarding some kind of subcultural authenticity in the all-absorbing context of commerce and dominant culture’ (p. 91). After all, ‘authenticity therefore derives its power from its apparent distance from mainstream mediation’ (Serazio, 2013, p. 69).

There are structural constraints impinging upon one’s stylistic expression such as, aging and employment. Andy Bennett (2013) documents the subcultural aging process. For Bennett’s participants, their use of subcultural fashion accessories often diminishes, whereas their belief system is confirmed without the need of objects. Their values have been ingrained and ‘do not need to be dramatically reconﬁrmed through the more strikingly visual displays of commitment used by younger punks’ (p. 76). Samantha Holland’s (2004) ethnography was based on interviews with older ‘alternative style’ women in the UK. For this group, their continuation of flashy subcultural stylist markers contrasted with their age, as women are supposed to become more muted. The women discuss their negotiation
between expectations of femininity and their own attempts to escape such restrictions, which have different expectations with each age cohort that they enter. Even for younger hardcore punk, as Susan Will’s (1993) discovers, they would employ a hair style in which the lower part of their head was shaved, but a longer bob on top could be left down for passing at work. Such shifting of stylistic display and covering up at work was a common practice. When one is involved in a spectacular subculture, they face ‘targeted public harassment’ which has a result of ‘strengthening group identification,’ as Paul Hodkinson and Jon Garland (2016, p. 542) find during their interviews with goth scene participants.

For women, this subcultural identification is more complicated with its relationship to the socially expected performance of femininity. Feminist theory centres embodiment in order to recognize the body ‘as a source of knowledge, as a site of resistance, and as the locus of subjectivity’ (McLaren, 2002, p. 81). Valerie Fournier (2002) brings this perspective to life vividly when she writes ‘bodies get enrolled in the production of gender not simply as materials to be written upon but also as mass of hurting flesh’ (p. 70). Judith Butler (1990) focuses our attention on the process of how gender itself is not simply body parts, but an active production engaged upon by the body and its expressive capabilities. This embodied production is based upon women internalising the gender messages of the hegemonic cultures which reinforces the desirability of femininity and beauty and these messages are internalised and empowered by women’s self-surveillance’ (Frueh, 2001, p. 164; Gimlin, 2002). While men’s identities are based on a variety of factors, especially employment, women are more narrowly valued by their body and its perceived attractiveness.

Women’s tattooing, in order to be aligned with the beauty process, needs to reinforce femininity, which come to mean tattoos that are ‘small, cute, and hidden’, otherwise imagery would be considered ‘disrespecting the sanctity of their female bodies’ (MacCormack, 2006, p. 57). When women first began collecting tattoos in increasing numbers in the United States, during the social revolution of 1970s, getting a feminine tattoo was itself rebellious. Janis Joplin introduced small tattoos to a new audience of women rock fans in 1970. Yet, it was not until the late 1990s and 2000s when women (and men) started becoming ‘heavily tattooed’ (Miffin, 2011).

There have been notable ethnographies outlining the personal and social role of tattoo collecting. Clinton Sanders and D. Angus Vail’s (1989/2008), interviewed collectors about their tattoo imagery, 32 percent of whom were lightly tattooed women. Michael Atkinson’s (2003) ethnography of Canadian collectors predominantly comprised women struggling with cultural standards of normative beauty. Margo DeMello (2000) explores the ‘middle-class repackaging of the tattoo, a process that highlights the tattoo’s ‘primitive’, exotic roots and at the same time seeks to erase its white, working-class beginnings’ (p. 3). Victoria Pitts (2003) work spotlights extreme body modification subcultures, such as extensive piercing, flesh hanging, body-suit tattooing and subcutaneous implants, echoing the focus of the classic book Modern primitives by Vale (1990/2010). Katherine Irwin’s (2003) work focuses on the situational deviance of the heavily tattooed individual, which she classified as negative in the mainstream context, yet positive in the subcultural world of tattooing. Xuan Santos (2009) explores the world of Chicana, an east Los Angeles tattoo studio where he interviewed 47 women and observed the gendered interactions such as tattoo display designs targeted for women, male artists objectifying female clients and the long female artist inundated with clients more comfortable with her. Santos focuses on the struggle for agency where women are referred to as ‘the Chicana canvas’, meaning an unmarked woman transformed into a new social identity by taking on the permanent marking, and the power of gatekeeping that this bestows upon male artists. Finally, my book (Thompson, 2015) Covered in ink extends the ethnographic research on tattoo communities to heavily tattooed women in particular, not simply those with one or more tattoos. By emphasizing the distinction between lightly tattooed and heavily tattooed women, the study gets to the nuance of how becoming heavily tattooed specifically creates hardship for women in ways that feminine conforming tattoos do not create.

Methodology

Research for this project began at the annual Marked for Life tattoo convention in Orlando, Florida, in January 2007 – a gathering dedicated to female tattoo artists (and a few male artists dressed in drag) – organized by tattooist Deanna Lippens. I attended this convention for five years, making strong connections with the community of women artists. I found Sofia Estrella and commissioned a large-scale back-piece tattoo from her, which would take over five years to complete. I collected smaller tattoos from several other participants as well, embodying the research in a sensory fashion. From this beginning, I branched out to other regional tattoo conventions in search of participants in Florida, Washington state, Texas, California and New York. I approached both female tattoo artists and collectors and video interviewed each for an hour. A tattoo convention is a leisure event that brings tattoo artists and collectors together. These conventions fill with booths, each representing a tattoo studio, complete with their artistic portfolio, merchandise and gear. Potential clients walk the halls, studying the portfolios and seek a tattooist with a specific style. Some artists may have travelled far; therefore, customers have brief access to non-local artists. Onlookers can watch people get tattooed. Contests such as ‘best tattoo of the day’ are hosted on the stage, where a long line of tattooists and their artworks are displayed.

Through networking, I was invited to specific tattoo studios to interview artists and their clients. Two participants contacted me through the social networking site Myspace, popular in the early 2000s, before Facebook came to prominence. Jane, at Abstract Art, in Webster, Texas, brought together 12 women over a three-day period. Tammy, from Outer Limits Tattoo and Body Piercing, in Long Beach, California, connected me to a handful of tattooists who worked at the four studio locations. I reached out to my hometown friend Vanderbrood who connected me with nearly a dozen of her clients.

There were 36 participants in this study: women in the United States who have collected a significant number of tattoos, ranging in age from 20–63 years of age, with 20 percent having ethnic backgrounds that were either Latina or
Asian American, with the remainder being white. Only one participant was African American and none were Native American. While all ethnic and racial groups collect tattoos in the United States, the shops and conventions they attend are generally racially segregated. The class background of the participants ranged between working class, lower-middle class and middle class. Their professions ranged from student, service industry workers, office workers and several white-collar professionals.

The research was IRB-approved by Florida International University and allowed for video-recorded interviews which would result in the feature-length documentary film Covered (2010), besides academic analysis. The women were asked questions on how they discovered tattooing, how they began their collection, imagery stories, impact of transforming their bodies and social lives and the significance of this practice in their daily lives. Interviews were transcribed in full and coded by hand focussing on various themes that emerged from the transcripts around how marginality is created through social interaction, such as identities, symbolic meanings, relationships, leisure experience, process and social context.

**Discussion: Self-Expression through Tattoo Art**

Pressures to conform to feminine standards of appearance complicate women's participation in subcultures in ways not experienced by men and therefore demonstrate the importance of focussing specifically on the female experience. Both Lauraine LeBlanc's (1999) research on adolescent punk rock girls and Samantha Holland's (2004) research on alternative older women, we see that at each age group, women struggle to balance mainstream beauty culture with their own self-expressive desires. In contrast to McCrobie and Garber's (2006) focus on girls' bedroom culture, where they can practice feminine performances in the privacy of their own room, LeBlanc and Holland are focused on public presentations and interactions with others. The women in this study have no conflict with their own self-presentation, the conflict only arises in interaction with others, such as family, employers or the public. The participants use tattooing to express important values, identities and cultural tastes.

Twenty-five-year-old Miami resident Guadalupe finds tattooing a positive way to visualise and express her Mexican heritage:

"Tattooing is beautiful. I appreciate people expressing feeling in images. And I think it also beautifies the body. I don't think it's something that is ugly. I think it's empowering, that women could get tattoos. It is kind of sad, because some people do criticize them, because we're supposed to be feminine. It kind of makes you butt or whatever. But as time goes by, more women are become more powerful. I think it's awesome. And I hope I keep getting tattooed. I can't picture myself without them, they're part of me. They express how I feel and what I like. To me they're like little memories that I keep on my skin."

Like the participants in other tattoo ethnographies (DeMello, 2000; Sanders & Vail, 1989/2008), these women interviewed here expressed that tattoo imagery was their favourite manner of self-expression. Tattoos provide a filter against people who discriminated against body art and therefore, themselves, and provide insight into their interests to public observers. Their tattoo collection became integrated into their personal identity to the point where they could not imagine their own image without ink. It also provided a pathway for their own bodily acceptance as they began customising parts that they previously may not have enjoyed. Raye in south Florida says, "Because you don't want to show someone your fat rolls and be like, "look at my love handles". But put a tattoo on it. They're not looking at your fat anymore." Many women talked about this reclamation of their body with their tattoo art, as they beautified parts that they previously saw as problematic, or else they wanted to take care of the tattoo, and thus, themselves. Brenda, a 32-year-old Latina woman in Spokane, Washington, talks about this positive view of her body that tattooing provides:

"It's an all-around good experience. I take better care of myself now. I have to, in order to heal. And I am going to be healing tattoos for a long time if I'm going to do both arms solid. So it just made me be healthier. I work out a lot more, because I have this beautiful tattoo, I don't want my arms to be flabby, I want them to be in shape. It's been a positive change in my life. Because now I work out, I eat healthy, and I take care of myself more."

It was also a way for women to focus on their own desires and to make time for themselves. This was especially important for women with children or parents who did not like tattoos, as their tattoo collection could put them at odds with family members. Women's family responsibilities are an important factor that can infringe upon their subcultural participation in ways which men may not be as limited, but has rarely been examined specifically outside of the subcultural research on aging (Bennett, 2013; Holland, 2004). I met tattoo collector Karen at Kolo Tattoos in Miami, where she was temporarily located for work. After having raised four grown children, she was now at a point in her life where she could fulfill her lifelong wish of collecting small tattoos that represented her interests and identity, such as a Gemini symbol or a musical note. Subcultural theories often focus on musical subcultures and the extent to which people submerge themselves into these stylistic communities, such as ravers, goths, heavy metal, mods or rockers (Hedlidge, 1979). Many of the women were expressing their love of their favourite bands with their tattoos. As 20-year-old Julie states, one can just look at her and understand her passions.

"I have two tattoos I'm going to get this summer. One is, 'What a Way to Die', in script, across my stomach, which is a song title by the band The Pleasure Seekers, which was Suzy Quatro's first band when she was sixteen. That's my life philosophy. And then the other one is about my love of pop culture. So, I am probably going to be covered with weird shit. One is going to be a half
sleeve about the Marx Brothers, a monologue that Groucho Marx says in one of their movies. I'm saying something with my tattoos which makes me happy. It's not just artwork or something cute. It's really my personality on my arm. So you don't even have to talk to me to really get me, you just look at my tattoos. This one is the Dead Boys, they're my favorite band. I'm obsessed with music. This tattoo says 'lick on my leather', which is a line from one of their songs. The whole line goes, 'she got on her knees just to lick on her leather'. But that was a little too much. So I just put, 'lick on my leather', which pretty much means, I am going to live my life how I want to live my life. And I'm tattooing it on my arms so that you all know I am not changing.

Janet is obsessed with music and her favourite bands. She is also a performer in her own band, plays instruments and considers music central to her life passions. She wants to show the world that she is committed to these passions, no matter what the sceptics say. A unique ethos of the punk rock world is to commit to living one's life according to one's passions - not submitting to the normative life path of corporate employment, mortgages and childrearing. She is both enacting that 'unique ethos' in her rock performer lifestyle, as well as tattooing it on her arm. One of the 'special benefits' she is realising through her serious leisure pursuits is living up to her own ideals and expressing them to the world, in a manner that she loves (Stebbins, 2007, 2011).

Collecting extensive, and unique, 'custom' tattoos are at the centre of the elite members' behaviour - contrasted against selecting a simple image from a corporate logo, the Internet, or a piece of flash art displayed on the studio wall. Miami collector Katie wants to explore a new theme in her tattoo collection:

I really love movies! I want to do a movie homage on the side of my leg, from my thigh to my ankle. Natural Born Killers is my favorite movie. And A Clockwork Orange, Donnie Darko, Frankenstein. I'm going to throw movie images on the side of my leg, with some film reels, it'll be cool.

The veteran California-based tattooist PK described plans for future tattoo work that reflected her particular sense of humour:

I'm going to get both arms done eventually. One arm is going to be all meat-eating plants. That should make all the vegetarians very nervous - plants that pay back. There are dozens and dozens of varieties of meat-eating plants. And the rest will be fruit.

Subcultures are about community, bringing together like-minded individuals to share in their mutual appreciation. While outsiders may not understand tattoo culture humour behind design selection, such dark humour underlies many tattoo designs. Sparkill-icious, a roller-derby player in Spokane, has memorial tattoos in this distinct, classic Americana tattoo style:

So this would be my angel/devil arm. This right here is supposed to be me without skin, ya know. And then I have a dagger back here, it's for my mom, and I just recently get her name on it, Susan. And then this dagger right here is for my dad, he's a golfer so it's stabbing a golf ball. I have some devil looking tattoos. And now when I go to my daughter's school, I should probably cover those up. And not for me, because I'm proud of my tattoos. But because of my daughter, and because of what little kids think. And because of what their parents think. And that: sucks, that sucks.

Negotiating such stigma bonds, tattoo collectors together and provides shared experiences in ways that non-stigmatised body decoration or modification would not. While people do not form strong bonds because of their shared interest in getting their hair permed or coloured, they do share a connection over having tattoos. But this is not a community that naturally congregates, only those who are more involved in the practice may gather together. The tattoo community is created in locations such as tattoo studios, regional conventions, magazines, online media and at overlapping events, such as at music venues or roller derby rinks. Frankie Scorpio, a Latina living in Long Island, New York, founded the Gypsy Queens in order to promote women's visibility in the tattoo world.

The Gypsy Queens grew out of my friendships with Laura and Tracy Nicole. Lara helps me do everything with the company headquarters Tracy helps us organize the women at events. We now have chapters in the UK, Canada, and across the United States. We do a lot of charity events, benefiting schools. We want to spotlight women and their role in the tattoo community. We're a promotional team of tattoo women attending tattoo conventions and talking about gender issues in the community. We host booths and provide information on our group and organize events, tattoo pages, fashion shows, parties, and tattoo gallery exhibits.

The Gypsy Queens group is especially helpful for women to network with others and bring attention to gender issues within the promotional industry. Tattoo collectors forge a delicate alliance based upon their shared status as deviants in the mainstream. Tattoo collectors may share experiences of rejection or scorn from family members and may face workplace policies that do not allow visible tattoos. Issa, a Brooklyn-based lawyer, tattoo collector and writer, cautions elite tattoo collectors to keep their tattoos covered up, if need be:

I have worked hard in very conservative offices, and they had no idea I was heavily tattooed. But when they did find out, I was making them a lot of money, and I showed my value. If I had shown up to the interview with tattoos, I may not have had the opportunity to change their mind. So I believe in bargaining on the doors - but also sneaking in from the side. If we can do that two-prong approach, I don't think it's a bad thing to say cover up, if you want to change people's minds.
For EM, 24, an academic secretary, such negotiation was required for her job:

That's the problem with 'peek-age', it implies mystery. If people think you're hiding something, they are going to want to know what it is. I like to tell people up front at my job that I am not just a secretary. 'I'm a musician. I love rock music.' I put it in their heads that I'm different. So then, if they ever do see my tattoos, they are not as shocked or offended by it because they already know. Oh yeah, she's a musician, she's a rock star in her spare time. Of course she would have tattoos.

Tattoo collecting is both increasingly popular and continues to be stigmatised with real-world consequences such as strained social relationships and loss of employment. In the United States, where employment is at-will and union membership is in the single digits, employers can fire workers for any reason, except for discrimination of protected classes of people established in federal and state guidelines, such as gender, race, religion and national origin. Being tattooed is not a protected class of employment. Service workers will often have uniforms or personal appearance policies to which they must abide. Such structural discrimination is important to recognise and resist, as workers should be disciplined based upon their work, rather than appearance. However, strengthening labour unions and workers' organisations is the course for this particular issue.

Conclusion: Resistance, Subculture and Gender

Women's experiences in subculture and alternative self-presentation is different from men's, and should be analysed accordingly. How one presents one's self has serious implications socially and structurally, and therefore the participant's narratives here do not support Polhemus' (1996) idea of the 'supermarket of style', where looks can be tried on and discarded at will. Rather, Sweetman's (2004) idea of style as a representation of one's authentic self and inner feeling establishes the strong relationship between visual presentation and identity. Indeed, one has strong feelings and attachments to a particular representation of one's self through accessories such as clothing, hair style and body modifications (Irwin, 2003, Roberts, 2015). For women, their self-presentation will be measured against normative beauty standards and they will face sanctions accordingly (Butler, 1999; Sanders & Vail, 1989/2008). Most participants learn this lesson after they have acquired their tattoo collection and subsequent social reactions, which often comes as a surprise to the extent of the negativity. Such cost keeps many from collecting visible tattoos who would otherwise desire them. However, this is the social cost participants pay for their alternative self-expression. Most say it is worth enduring, though they regret the social conservatism that leads to such discrimination.

References

Chapter 8

The Spectacle of Russian Feminism: Questioning Visibility and the Western Gaze

M. Katharina Wiedlack

Abstract

This chapter analyses the presence of Russian feminists and female LGTBHQ+ activists within US-American mainstream media. In the course of a multimedia discourse analysis, it briefly raises questions of who becomes featured and how, to argue that current debates marginalize Russian queer female, trans*gender and intersex voices, compared to those of male queers. One exception to this trend is the case of the journalist and activist Masha Gessen. Together with Nadya Tolokonnikova of the protest group Pussy Riot, Gessen seems to represent Russian queer and feminists within US media. Although marginal, compared to the presence of US feminisms, especially popular culture figures such as Beyoncé Knowles-Carter or Lady Gaga, the two women become frequently featured within US news media and beyond. Frequently, those articles, interviews and discussions of their work open up a debate, or rather comparisons, between US values and Russian values, questions of modernity, progress and civilisation. Equally often, the female Russian dissidents are pictured as ‘Putin’s victims’ – the female versions of David fighting against Goliath – by focusing especially on their physical vulnerability and their female bodies. In this vein, feminism is constructed as inherently ‘Western’, while the bodies that carry out such feminisms and most of all their country of origin is entirely ‘othered’. Comparing the (self-)representations to other voices of female Russian dissent within US media, the author critically discusses the Western gaze of US mainstream media, its victimising strategies and homonationalistic construction of US identity and US nation in rejection of a ‘backward’ homophobic Russia.

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