

Tattooing: Across Skin, Beyond Limits

Lee Nok'si Livingston

Everyone in my family has tattoos. I grew up admiring them as the highest form of art— my mom's sleeve of birds and arrows—my dad's Communist slogan from his years in Szechuan— my grandfather's Sailor Jerry heart with my grandmother's name inside. They made the people in my life who they were.

In a reversal of many people's families, you are *heavily* encouraged to get one the day you turn eighteen. It was a sign of adulthood, but also the continuation of a very old mark-making practice. "When you die," my O'SS¹ told me, "you need to have a mark that shows you were alive. It helps keep you a full person, ties you to the world." It didn't have to be a tattoo; scars (especially from battle or childbirth) were also acceptable, if more difficult to obtain. You just had to be marked.

I turned eighteen amidst the deepest days of the COVID-19 lockdown. No tattoo shops were open. I watched the winter melt into spring, rise into the steam of summer, and waited to become a person.

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Tattoos are one of the first forms of human art. The oldest known tattoos adorn the body of Ötzi, a heavily tattooed European Tyrolean man buried beneath a glacier along what now forms the Austrian-Italian border about 5,300 years ago.² About five hundred years his junior is El Moro Man, one of the Chinchorro mummies of Chile who had just one tattoo—a series of dots, resembling a mustache, above his upper lip.³

While Ötzi's tattoos likely had medicinal as well as social motivations, El Moro Man's mustache is a purely social symbol, marking him as part of a particular culture as well as being of high status within that culture.⁴ They serve simultaneously as an expression of his personhood and the contextualization of that individuality within a particular culture, a specific place and time. Like a time capsule, his mummy carries the story of who he was to us thousands of years after his death.

I was given the name ZṾḅ (Nok'si) by my grandfather. It was my first name, before anyone had signed a piece of paper to tell any government or nation who I was or where I came from. It

¹ Pronounced "Ududu," the Tsalagi word for grandfather.

² Aaron Deter-Wolf, Benoît Robitaille, Lars Krutak, Sébastien Galliot, "The world's oldest tattoos"

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

means star, or meadowlark, a bird that flies in the shape of a star, in a language his parents were taught not to speak. They pretended to be good, white Southerners their whole lives and raised a son who spent the rest of his life trying to reclaim what they had given up for survival. He was A\$, Goka, the crow. My mother is GΨW\$, Tsa'quolade, the bluebird. The meadowlark on my arm, a first tattoo for a first name, is in good company among my family's names, among their marks. I am a spotted yellow bird in a colorful cacophony of ancestors. I am part of a flock.

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My other tattoos contain similar expressions of selfhood, connection, and joy. A grasshopper, to remember a lesson of self-kindness from someone who saved my life during a difficult time. A sacred heart, on fire, because I wanted something with connections to the history of an artform I love. Callalillies growing out of locks, chosen off a book of flash but which has come to hold layers of personal meaning. Nine of wands, the tarot card for strength and resilience. The pattern of a keffiyeh. A rainbow molotov. A weevil with flowers for a nose. An eye to watch my back, with wings and hands to match. Three stars, connected, which a mentor did to show me their handpoke technique. A flash of light on my leg, to get over my fear of tattooing myself.

My tattoos connect me to others, through my relationships to the people who tattooed me, the cultures and peoples who my tattoos come from and are inspired by. They traverse geography, traverse time—they archive my body and make my body into an archive. They are constructions and contextualization of the self, made visual and tangible on the skin. I do feel that they are crystallizations of my personhood, that they have made me more of a full person.

Tattoos cannot be reduced to personal signifiers, though. They transcend semiotics. Tattooing does not just situate one's insides on their outside, one's history in the present. They bridge public and private space by their very position on our skin, our largest and most vulnerable organ, the visible and biological border between ourselves and everything that is not us. They compromise our sense of separation, our interiority, by breaking open the edges of ourselves.

As Karen Barad writes: “‘We’ are not outside observers of the world. Nor are we simply located at particular places *in* the world; rather, we are part *of* the world in its ongoing intra-activity.”⁵ The body is corporeal material, irreversibly linked to the materiality of the world. We are not just located in it, but a part of it. Our fundamental building blocks (carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen) are temporarily caught in clusters, moving through states of life and decay. We don't just return to ash and dust when death dissolves our personhood, returns us to the earth. We are always ash and dust. It moves through us. Even in the momentary clusters of our bodies, we are not closed off by strict biological borders. Nancy Tuana's concept of “viscous porosity” addresses this

⁵ Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter.” pg. 828

paradox—that we are simultaneously *viscous* (in relationships, blockages, states of interconnectedness and interdependence) and *porous* (open, flowing, inhabited).⁶

European tattoo scholar Gemma Angel writes that “The peculiar location of the tattoo as both an internal and a surface entity further complicates the relationship of interior/exterior experience. The skin as both the site of social and intimate contact and a highly sensitive sensory medium, frequently provokes a visceral response in others when it is breached, damaged, or broken. Through the inevitable wounding of the body surface, the tattoo transgresses this boundary and invokes pain in the mind of the viewer, even when this is merely imagined, as in the case of the healed mark.”⁷

Pain, like the wounds that cause it, transverses interiority and exteriority. We feel emotional pain in our physical bodies, our feelings exteriorizing themselves biologically. When we see others in pain, we feel their pain—we are connected by viscosity, disgust, fear. We faint at the sight (or imagining) of another’s blood as well as our own. Pain depersonalizes ourselves, leaving us unable to think/speak/act. It becomes the whole world, it feels unending. Pain also forces us to pay attention to ourselves, as individuals and individual organisms. It demands to be noticed, to be spoken, to be acted upon. It erases us from existence just as it reminds us we are alive.

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Tattoos occupy a messy ontological space. They are part of us, but also a foreign invader within our bodies. They are permanent within those bodies, but only as permanent as those bodies. They signify meaning for the person they inhabit, but also in the eyes of those that witness them. That meaning can be abstract and symbolic, but also have real material consequences.⁸ They are both a service and a product. They are bought as a physical phenomenon but can only be sold as an idea, and the process of putting that idea into action. They are some of our oldest global cultural heritage, but exist in Western cultural imaginations as a contemporary phenomenon, something untraditional and taboo. Like the body itself, they can hold traumas, memories, aspirations, loves, losses—a site for oppression, or for liberation.

Tattooers are reckoning with this complexity. Artist Gesiye calls tattooing a “portal,” writing: “I envision the tattooing process as a ritual that is both transformational and empowering, facilitating a reclamation of agency and acting as a portal to re-connection with self, with each other and with the land.”⁹ Tattooer and oral historian Tamara Santibañez names the tattoo

⁶ Nancy Tuana, “Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina”

⁷ Gemma Angel, “Roses and Daggers: Expressions of Emotional Pain and Devotion in 19th Century Tattoos” pg. 226

⁸ Discrimination, incarceration, deportation, harassment: for a recent example, see Noah Lanard and Isabela Dias, “You’re Here Because of Your Tattoos”

⁹ Gesiye, *The Wound is a Portal* (2022)

exchange as a form of alchemy, a site of collaboration and solidarity with enormous political potential.¹⁰ There is some magic in our ability to construct and modify our bodies, the images of those bodies—to partake in ritual, in alchemy, to open portals to new worlds through the newness of ourselves. There is radical potential in this practice of truthmaking, worldshaping.

Tattooing, then, embodies many of our most critical paradoxes. It expresses our individuality just as it connects us to our cultures and histories. It actualizes personhood through the body as it cracks open the borders of that body, revealing our blockage and flow. We are destroyed and created through the pain of the experience, and left changed. We open a portal to a new version of ourselves and of the world through the very alchemical ritual that destroys the borders between the two. A new story is told. We become not the objects of our bodies, but their subjects, moving towards their limits, transgressing those limits entirely. We enter a state of movement, one that Nietzsche called “the innocence of becoming,”¹¹ and in that movement “something in the object becomes visible which it is orthodoxy’s secret and objective aim to keep invisible.”¹²

¹⁰ Tamara Santibañez, *Could This Be Magic?*

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Humanities.”

¹² Theodor W. Adorno, “The Essay as Form” pg. 23

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