RESEARCH PROPSAL

Women, Tattoos and Colonization: A look into the History of women with tattoos

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Abstract

Women’s participation in tattoos and tattooing is full of rich information about the lives of women from different cultures, but at the same time. Women receive tattoos to escape gendered beauty norms, while at the same time receive feminine tattoos. The tension between oppression and agency creates a conflict, when looking at tattooed women’s functions within different contexts. While some women felt liberated, others were seen as monstrous, freaks, and criminals. Looking at the historical research on tattooed women and colonization, a stigma about tattooed women surfaces in order to deal with the conflict between liberation and agency, operating under oppression. Tattooed women served as reminders of colonial rule’s lack of control. As a result, colonization regulatory forces sought to gain control using control techniques such as evaluation, regulation and discipline. I want to address how gendered expectations about the body create a stigma toward women because of colonization’s historical discourses. The research also will show how these women negotiated through these spaces by obtaining certain types of tattoos to justify their femininity with body art.

**Introduction**

Tattooing and tattoo’s have a rich social and cultural history among, many different cultures around the world. For example, tattooed mummies are found all over the world dating back from around 2000 B.C.E,[[1]](#footnote-1) as well as, primitive tattooing tools dating back from 10,000 to 38,000 B.C.E.[[2]](#footnote-2) With this type of body modification practice in existence for thousands of years, it is s interesting to see how different societies, cultures and groups perceive tattoos. Throughout history the tattoo’s significance to some groups as honorable and decorative is often interpreted by other cultures as punitive and stigmatic.[[3]](#footnote-3) Jane Caplan’s *Written on the body,* describes this as a “paradoxical double skin” that carries cultural specific messages assigned on and under ones skin.[[4]](#footnote-4) These cultural messages vary, but have great significance to different social groups depending on the perspectives of those in and outside of the group. These messages are historically assigned from not only ones cultural values, but from outsiders who do not understand the significance of this type of body art.

Although the histories of tattoos in the literature explain these contradicting attitudes, most of this research focuses on tattoos and their social functions within different groups. Often these functions are culturally based and/or serve religious functions. Throughout the literature, men with tattoos are more historically visible than women, although women historically also received tattoos. Steve Gilbert notes that often this is the case with early accounts because early ethnographers were men, who did not access or want to access female spaces. This has left bias in many early reports about women and tattoos in various cultures[[5]](#footnote-5). Despite this, in many different cultures women along with men receive tattoos. For example, the Tonga and Samoa of Polynesian held ceremonies and celebrations of great significance for young men. They were often tattooed from the waist down, while women where limited to flower like geometric shapes on their hands and some lower parts of their body.[[6]](#footnote-6) In the artic, tattooing among women was commonly practiced by eskimo women. Tattooing was usually tasked to well-respected elderly women who had extensive training.[[7]](#footnote-7) In the Northwest coast, Haidas women received tattoos on their bodies that represented family names, symbols and totem animals. Steve Gilbert explains that these marks are not usually visible to outsiders, and as a result, little is known about the extent of women with tattoos[[8]](#footnote-8). These are a few examples of women’s participation from different cultures.

Women’s participation in tattoos and tattooing is full of rich information about the lives of women from different cultures. There is some information available, such as, historical accounts from, sailors, anthropologists and ethnographers. This information dose not always paint an accurate picture of the lives of women with tattoos. There are often bias and cultural assumptions attached to these accounts. Although there are some specific accounts and bibliographies about some tattooed women available, their needs to be more available to fully understand the significance of how the lives of these women relate to historical discourses and events that affect future understandings of women with tattoos.

I want to focus on historical discourses and how they relate to the lack of information available. There are many accounts of tattooed women that are minimal available. Fro example, there is a lack of information about colored tattooed women. Most biographical accounts available are about white women. There is also information lacking about women as tattoo artists. This lack of information results from discourses that attempt to discourage tattooing among women because of regulatory forces that encourage cultural beauty norms and femininity. This lack of information provides new avenues and opportunities for researchers to investigate different theoretical areas that include, but are not limited to body art, gender, women. This research will attempt to investigate the lives of women with tattoos and try to uncover how these pervious accounts of tattooed women affect our assumptions and gendered expectations of women.

This research is important because it involves a group of women, who are not always historically visible. The accounts available are not enough to fully represent all women with tattoos, but are a great stepping-stone for further research into this field. It is important to understand the lives of tattooed women in order to understand the cultural values, assumptions and system of beliefs in place that lead to their tattoos. It is also important to understand how the lack of information on women in this group relates to theories of regulation and control. Exploring the lives of women with tattoos gives us the opportunity to research women with a different social experience that helps us gain a richer understanding of women’s history and the challenges some faced. This research is also significant because it will investigate how others viewed women with tattoos and if there are any underlying assumptions that are prevalent now in this time period. With the increased numbers of women obtaining tattoos, this research is relevant to understanding body modification practices among women.

**Literature Review**

Although women’s participation is mentioned from various cultures, our understandings of tattooed women in other cultures are based on pervious perceptions, attitudes and discourses about women’s bodies in relation to western society. For example, Jane Caplan’s  *Written on the Body*, discusses the root word of stigma. The Greeks and romans used this word to describe body marking. It was also used in religious groups as signs of devotion and membership within a group. Within the Christian histories it is also known as a mark of degradation. In the 18th century, the Cesare Lombroso studies used the language of stigma to associate anyone with tattoos as deviants and criminals. *Written on the body,* describes how language has evolved to change the original meaning of stigma and as a result is often associated with tattoos.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The literature also discusses accounts of first impressions from travelers and sailor’s. That has lead to discussions on colonization affects on our views about tattoos. In Jane Caplan’s *Written on the* *body*, Harriet Guest describes the tattoo as projected in terms of European power. In drawings and descriptions of the south pacific, the natives are described as exotic and as physically different from their European counterparts. This “othering” of women’s tattoos effected their gender expectations. As a result, their tattoos were viewed as erotic representations of accessible feminization.[[10]](#footnote-10) At the same time colonization, sought to change their differences in the form of assimilation. Tattoos then became threatening to colonial rule, while at the same time a form of rebellion against colonial powers.[[11]](#footnote-11)

These ideas and perceptions about difference from colonization with the Lombroso’s studies about criminals and deviants effected the perceptions that emerge about women’s bodies that inhabit tattoos. For example, Christine Braunberger talks about tattooed women’s participation in the carnival in the 19th and 20th century. These women prominently displayed their tattoos with little to no clothing despite dress codes of respectability. They often were free to travel and earn a living, but at the expense of putting their bodies on display for the public.[[12]](#footnote-12) The life of Olive Oatman is another example of tattooed women on display. In the 1850’s, she was a pioneer girl who was captured by Native Americans and assimilated to their culture. Because she was part of their tribe, they marked her with a blue tattoo on her face. She was later recaptured and assimilated back into western society. Her story fascinated audiences of her time because of her blue tattoo’s associations with Native Americans. She traveled and lectured her story, while at the same time concealed her tattoo in public, thus casting her an outsider.[[13]](#footnote-13) The spectacle of women’s tattooed bodies leads to a misreading of women’s bodies and contributes to the gendering of women’s bodies. Braunberger argues that women’s resistance to feminine social codes by getting tattoos has often led to assumptions that women with tattoos are “scary, hyper sexualized, freaky, threatening, excessive..in other words monsterous .”[[14]](#footnote-14) Braunberger explains that patriarchal society marks women as pure bodies connected with nature and by women marking their bodies with tattoos, their bodies become denaturalized, impure and challenges society's control over the female body.[[15]](#footnote-15) This forced gendering of tattooed female bodies results in a tension between women who choose to get tattoos and those who view them. As a result, women’s tattooed bodies make people uncomfortable because of the historical attachments of tattooed bodies with lower classes, deviants and other non-western groups.

**Theoretical Framework**

There are two feminist perspectives on tattoos, one states that women get tattoos to resist gender norms, while others state that women contradict themselves by getting feminine tattoos to cope with the male gaze. According to Shilling, deliberate modification of ones’ body is a body project that constructs and represents identity.[[16]](#footnote-16) Within western society, women are expected to conform to the dominant ideals of beauty that often exclude women of color, older women, obese women, poor women and androgynous women. These beauty standards are impossible to achieve and don’t relate to the experience and lives of different types of women.[[17]](#footnote-17) Since women and men often participate in body projects according to norms and ideals, body practices that seem to reject the dominant beauty ideals are seen as acts of agency towards their bodies.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Although tattoos represent acts of agency towards personal identity, despite cultural norms and standards, some argue that tattoos still represent forms of oppression and control. For example, many women obtain feminine types of tattoos that often represent and reinforce gender norms. According to Michael Atkinson, Atkinson finds that many of women’s tattoo projects are examples of performances of established femininity. The placement and types of tattoos women receive are examples of femininity inscribed on the body. Types of tattoos that reinforce femininity include, flowers, butterflies, floral patterns etc. Tattoos are also often encouraged or discouraged in certain locations of the body. Some locations are more controversial and criticized depending on visibility and scale. In order to deal with scrutiny and criticism, women get tattoos that embody femininity. Such negotiation with the body results from hegemonic constructions about how the display of the female body.[[19]](#footnote-19) Another reason is because women are forced to deal with the regulatory gaze that constantly surrounds everyone. Brush describes that our bodies are constantly inscribed with the judgmental gaze of the male viewer that evaluates, regulates and disciplines the way a women presents herself to others that causes us to adhere to cultural norms. [[20]](#footnote-20)

Looking at colonial history, tattooed women served as reminders of colonial rule’s lack of control. As a result, colonization regulatory forces sought to gain control using control techniques such as evaluation, regulation and discipline. For example, Jordanna Bailkin discusses a case from the late 1800’s where a British officer, as punishment, tattooed a Burma woman in the face for her crime of infidelity. Although tattooing was common for Burma women and men, and other surrounding indigenous women in the area, the officer used it in a different context. This case was controversial because the British officer’s actions were seen as barbaric and reflected the British’s inability to rule. At the same time, there was a tattoo craze among aristocratic women that reflected the anxieties of British rule’s lack of control.[[21]](#footnote-21) This brings up the following question: How has colonization affected gendered expectations of women’s bodies with tattoos? This tension between oppression and agency creates a conflict, when looking at tattooed women’s functions within different contexts. While some women felt liberated, others were seen as monstrous, freaks, and criminals. Looking at the historical research on tattooed women and colonization, a stigma about tattooed women surfaces in order to deal with the conflict between liberation and agency, operating under oppression.

It is important to understand the origins of the stigmatization of tattooed women in order to understand the relationship between tattoos as a form of agency and tattoos as another form of body control. This relationship is contradictory, and therefore, needs further investigation to understand how it is rooted in gender expectations of the body. From the growing literature about the body and tattoos, I want to address how gendered expectations about the body create a stigma toward women because of colonization’s historical discourses that have quite literally left their mark.

**Research Plan**

This research has a number of goals and objectives that this researcher will seek to accomplish. One goal is to find as much information about women and tattoos, and try to construct a brief timeline. When possible, read accounts about specific women’s lives and explore the social and culturally circumstances in which they lived. Another goal is to explore, how gender played a role in the way these women lived and how this affected the types of tattoos they received. A third goal is to explore how colonization’s history of “othering” and “hyper-sexualization” is rooted into our views of women with tattoos. And finally, to find out whether there are underling assumptions about women and tattoos that have long-lasting impressions.

With these goals in mind and looking at the literature on women with tattoos I propose that colonization’s historical discourses have lead to gender expectations about tattooed women that contributes to the lack of information on women with tattoos. These gendered expectations rooted in colonization also affect the perceptions of tattooed women and the types of tattoos they receive.

There are a number of primary and secondary resources that are utilized for this research. The beginning of my research consisted of looking at secondary sources, which discussed brief histories of women and tattoos. *A Source Book: Tattoo History*, provided me with useful preliminary information about tattoos and women within different cultures. Another source, Written *on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History,* lead me to start thinking about colonization relationship with tattoos and the way tattoos are perceived as a result. Some resources are already consulted, but more research will need to be conducted that looks further into the history of colonization.

Other secondary sources that need further investigation include biographies of specific tattooed women. For example, there are some biographies of tattooed women from the 1800’s through the 1980’s that need consultation. For example, Olive Oatman, Betty Broadbent, Irene Woddward, Ann Gibbions, Cindy Ray are all tattooed ladies who made a career in exposing their tattooed bodies as entertainment for others.

Other secondary resources helped to solidify the theoretical framework about control, the body and gender. "Revolting Bodies: The Monster Beauty of Tattooed Women." And Pretty in Ink: Conformity, Resistance, and Negotiation in Women's Tattooing.

Primary resources will also play an important role during this research. These include articles and journals about tattoos from the 1800’s to 1900’s. These are important to consult because it provides me with a glimpse of attitudes and perceptions about tattoos. For example, I would like to look at an article from 1883, titled “Tattooing Among Civilized People.” Other primary resources that need investigation include newspaper articles that talk about circus performers that call themselves “tattooed ladies”. Tattooed women have become a source of entertainment among the masses in the 1800 s-1950 and this is important to investigate because there is a shift in the perceptions of tattooed women. This would be useful to my research to understand perceptions in different time periods. One article from the New York Times in 1882 discusses and describes a prominent tattooed lady. Another articles from 1939 from the New York Daily News discusses a beauty contest in which a heavily tattooed lady participates. Further research needs to be conducted looking through other newspapers to see how “tattooed ladies” were perceived by the media and how this relates to the general publics perspective.

Another important aspect to my research would require travels to several libraries and archives to look at other types of primary resources. For example, the Syracuse University Library has a collection of interest that contains photographs, newspaper clippings and memorabilia from the Ron Becker Collection. This collection focuses on the sideshow entertainers of circuses and living museums, which included “tattooed ladies.” There is material of interest and many photographs of tattooed women in various outfits. The University also holds a book from 1886 about a tattooed lady named Irene Woodward, which would also be of interest in investigating and comparing the social circumstances in which they were surrounded. My research would also require travels to the Tattoo Archive located in Berkley, CA. They hold a wide collection of photographs, and posters that include tattooed women. They also have a bookstore in which biographically accounts about some prominent tattooed women are available and hard to find anywhere else. The Baltimore Tattooed Museum would also be in interesting location to visit because it provides a glimpse into carnivals and the culture of tattooing, where many tattooed ladies made careers as entertainers. Looking at the portrayal of tattooed women in photographs and illustrations, the types of tattoos they displayed will allow this researcher to understand attitudes about women with tattoos, and how gender is reinforced and negotiated. Investigating specific women will also paint a boarder picture about their lives and how colonization impacts them through different mechanism of control and regulation.

Timeline:

January-February: Research

March-April: Travel to the Tattoo Archive in Berkeley, Baltimore Tattooed museum, Syracuse University Library. Spend a week to a week in a half traveling and researching at each location

May-June: Draft Complete

June: Make necessary revisions and submit final Draft to Conference or Journal.

**Budget**

1. Travel expenses-

a. Round –trip train to Berkley: $69

b. Round – trip train to Baltimore: $270

c. Round-trip train to Syracuse University Library: $255

2. Hotel expenses

a. Berkley, CA: $75 a night (3 nights)= $255

b. Baltimore, MD: $34 a night (3 nights)= $102

c. Syracuse, NY: $47 a night (3 nights)= $141

3. Food: about $25 a day x 9= $225

4. Miscellaneous expenses: $183

Total Budget: 1500

**Anticipated Results**

Research will provide a better understanding of tattooed women and their relationship with colonization. It is anticipated that the research will show how colonization influenced the phenomenon of “tattooed ladies” in sideshows, circuses and museums. Their entertainment allowed them freedom, but at the same time functioned to cast them as outsiders. This freedom also functioned within a certain space that allowed the availability of the audience’s gaze. The research also will show how these women negotiated through these spaces by obtaining certain types of tattoos to justify their femininity with body art.

**Limitations**

Since there is a lack of information about different types of women and tattoos, not all tattooed women’s experiences can be accounted for. For example, historical accounts of colored women are lacking. The ones that are available are from perspectives that didn’t take in to account their cultural practices. Individual biographies or primary sources about their lives are also minimal. The majority of narratives available about individual tattooed women focus on mostly white women.

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3. Jane Caplan. *Written on the Body, xi.* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., xiii. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Steve Gilbert, ed. *A Source Book: Tattoo History*, 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Steve Gilbert, ed. *A Source Book: Tattoo History*, 22-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 94-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
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