

RECLAMATION THROUGH ALTERATION OF THE BODY: HEAVILY  
TATTOOED WOMEN'S PERCEPTIONS OF SELF

By

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## ABSTRACT

### RECLAMATION THROUGH ALTERATION OF THE BODY: HEAVILY TATTOOED WOMEN'S PERCEPTIONS OF SELF

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Younger generations, and specifically women, are receiving tattoos in much larger numbers than ever before in the United States (Thompson 2015). However, this does not mean the stigma of tattoos has necessarily shifted. People get tattoos for a variety of reasons, and those reasons may vary by gender. Women are currently becoming heavily tattooed in much larger numbers compared to men (Thompson 2015). There is a lack of literature asking women why they choose tattooing as a form of body modification, and how it may help to define or express themselves. There continues to be a lack of research done on how women who choose to become heavily tattooed perceive themselves. To understand women's self-perceptions of themselves and their tattoos, I will conduct 15 to 20 qualitative interviews with heavily tattooed women, or self-identified women with five or more tattoos. These women will be located in Humboldt County, California and Mesa County, Colorado (during summer 2018). In Humboldt County, I will recruit respondents by posting flyers around HSU campus, attending tattoo conventions to make connections and pass out flyers, and through snowball sampling. In Colorado, I will recruit at local tattoo parlors and through my personal social networks. During the interviews, I will also take a photo of the two tattoos or pieces the women find

most meaningful, and ask the respondents to share the story behind those two pieces, specifically.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
LIST OF FIGURES .....	viii
INTRODUCTION .....	1
Defining Terms .....	3
REVIEW OF LITERATURE .....	6
History of Tattoos .....	6
Perceptions of Tattoos .....	14
GOFFMAN, QUEER, AND FEMINIST THEORY .....	22
Goffman's Stigma.....	22
Queer Theory .....	29
Feminist Theory .....	35
METHODS: ASKING ABOUT INK MUST BE CONSENSUAL .....	40
Interviews and Recruitment .....	40
Visual Sociology .....	42
DATA ANALYSIS: TELLING THE STORY .....	44
Reclaiming Body Image .....	44
Empowerment the Many Forms .....	49
Agency over Body and Expression.....	59
Stigma Still Lingers .....	67

DISCUSSION .....	72
CONCLUSION .....	76
REFERENCES .....	77
APPENDIX: INTERVIEW GUIDE .....	81

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 .....	47
Figure 2 .....	49
Figure 3 .....	53
Figure 4 .....	56
Figure 5 .....	56
Figure 6 .....	59
Figure 7 .....	61
Figure 8 .....	62
Figure 9 .....	63
Figure 10 .....	63
Figure 11 .....	66
Figure 12 .....	66
Figure 13 .....	69
Figure 14 .....	69
Figure 15 .....	71



## INTRODUCTION

I started graduate school like most other grad students. I had a taste of what I was interested in and curious about but I lacked a specific topic that I would write a thesis on. The idea to do my thesis revolving around tattoos generated fairly quickly. I simply sat down with my advisor and she asked what I liked to do for me? Where I enjoyed spending my time? Looking down at my full sleeve it became a clear answer for me it was tattoos.

Since, before I was 18 I had been in tattoo shops collecting body art. It began with the mainstream tattoos that you see an abundance of girls posting on Pinterest of Instagram. The small cute infinity sign on the back of the neck or a feather hidden behind the ear. I proudly have these tattoos. However, these first tattoo experiences opened a door for me. Those first couple sessions I had, helped me negotiate my own appearance as a woman. How I wanted to be defined and looked at. Getting tattoos felt good to me. It felt right. After a couple of small tattoos I envisioned myself with larger pieces. It took a long time for me build a whole sleeve but once I had the first tattoo on my arm I was committed to creating a much larger flowing piece. I liked the way tattoos looked on my body, I felt empowered, I felt like I was in control on my body, I liked how I perceived my own body. I was fascinated by the possibilities of who I could be as a heavily tattooed woman.

After realizing I wanted to do my thesis around tattoos, I began to engage with the literature. The first book I read was, *Covered in Ink: Tattoos, Women and the Politics of*

the Body by Beverly Yuen Thompson. I love this book and as you will notice throughout this thesis it is overly cited. Thompson's work has much inspired my own. After reading *Covered in Ink*, I began to want to know more about how woman with tattoos thought of themselves. I felt like growing up I was constantly warned not to get tattoos and even after I had become heavily tattooed I was warned about the lingering stigmas. Tattoos somehow came with the caution of what will other people think of your tattoos? There is even a good amount of literature on how men view women with tattoos. I came to a point where I was frustrated with the fact that we cared so much more about what other people will think about body art, especially women's body art instead of how women with tattoos felt about themselves and their own body art. I wanted to know if other tattooed women felt as strongly about their body art as I did about mine? I wanted to know if women who were tattooed felt better about their bodies. I wanted to know if women who were tattooed felt more empowered and in love with themselves and their bodies? I wanted to know if tattoos helped women to feel more confident in their bodies and made them feel badass. I narrowed down what I wanted to research. I wanted to know how women perceived themselves in terms of their tattoos.

I would never say that I was the first person to think of or even ask these questions. Thompson's work along with others have focused on woman's experience and relationship with their tattoos and tattooing. My research however, has emphasized the positive influences that tattoos have had on women's self- confidence, body image, and life experiences. My research was specific in that I wanted to capture heavily tattooed women's narratives about themselves. I wanted to give heavily tattooed women a space

to hold a conversation about how they felt about themselves and their tattoos and nothing else. I provided an interview guide but each woman unveiled their own stories.

What is to follow in this thesis is first, the definition of all the terms that will be frequently referenced throughout this thesis. Secondly, a literature review that is inclusive of the history of tattoos and the perceptions that people have about individuals with tattoos. Third, the methods that were used to collect the data for this research. This will describe both the interview and photography process around women's tattoos. Fourth, is the theory section that includes a mixture of traditional sociological theory, queer theory, and feminist theory. All of which provide rich theoretical frameworks when looking at the phenomenon of heavily tattooed women. Fifth, is where I share the findings of my research and break down my data into main themes that were fluid throughout my interviews and research. Finally, is the discussion section where my thesis contributions will be summarized and the limitations to my research will be discussed.

### *Defining Terms*

For the sake of this thesis there are a few terms that need to be clearly defined so when discussing the history, previous literature, and findings of this project readers have a clear understanding of what is being presented. Throughout my thesis I will refer to terms such as Body Art, Body Modification, and being heavily tattooed. I also find it important to define Stigma and Deviance. Specifically, how I see stigma and deviance interconnecting when it comes to discussing how tattoos and the act of getting a tattoo have historically been labeled as deviant and have been heavily stigmatized among

different populations within different time periods. First, within the American tattoo history and more narrowly and specifically among women who are currently choosing to become what I label as heavily tattooed.

**Body Art:** Tattooing is often time referred to as what is called body art. For the most part we consider body art to be anything from clothing and jewelry to said body modifications like tattoos and piercings. I would argue however that Body Art has a loose definition. A simple definition from the dictionary defines body art as, “art that uses the human body as a medium” but specifically “decorative tattoos or piercings” (Merriam Webster 2018). Anthropologist define body art and modification as a way for one to identify themselves with a specific group, this could mean religious, tribal, or gang; as a way to distinguish one’s financial status or marital status; and as a way for one to beautify their body (Greif, Hewitt, and Armstrong 1999). Body art is essentially a form of art used to help achieve a person's ideal identity. Although I say there is a loose definition of body art, many scholars like Greif, Hewitt, Armstrong, and others refer to body art as the act of modifying the body with piercings and tattoos (1999). Under these loose definitions when I refer to body art, I mean it to describe specifically tattoos and the art of tattooing.

**Body Modification:** There are many forms of body modification including: tattoos, dermal, piercings, scarification, branding, and some even consider plastic surgery to be a form of body modification (Sanders & Vail 2008). These are some of the more popular forms of body modification but body modification is not limited to only these

given examples. For the sake of this project however, these examples are how I will define body modification specifically referring to the act of tattooing the most.

**Heavily Tattooed:** Everyone may have a different conception of what being heavily tattooed means. Beverly Yuen Thompson discusses how when women choose forms of tattooing that divert from socially typical tattoos that have been designated to women, these can usually defined as being cute, small, feminine, and hidden, then women are have crossed social lines and can therefore, be considered heavily tattooed (2015). For this project heavily tattooed will be defined as having five or more tattoo pieces. There was no size distinction that tattoos had to meet to be considered a piece. While the number five, is somewhat arbitrary, the assumption is that five pieces would be considered fairly large and that they would potentially cover a fair amount of skin. Again these were assumptions and self-determined definition of what heavily tattooed could mean.

**Stigma:** Stigma is something that goes hand in hand when talking about tattoos and the act of tattooing. Erving Goffman is one of the main theorist who discusses stigma and stigmatization. He defines stigma as, “the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance” under three distinct identity altering grounds (Goffman 1963: 9). Goffman’s theory around stigma will be flushed out later but it is important to include how he defines stigma because this is largely helped how I define stigma. When stigma is referred to throughout this thesis, it means a bad reputation that exist or a person may carry due to the particular markings they have chosen to place on their body through the act of tattooing.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### *History of Tattoos*

Tattooing has been around for over 5,000 years and present throughout most of time, history, and geographies (Cortez 2013). They have been traced and documented back to almost every culture (Raymond 2008, Sanders 1989, and Armstrong 1991) and have been widely present in many countries. Specifically, western countries such as, Japan, Italy, and New Zealand (Armstrong, Owen, Roberts, & Koch 2002). Raymond mentions in her brief history of tattooing, how currently the oldest dated tattoo on a human that we have record of is on an “Iceman” that was found in Italy. The body was dated back to around 5,300 years ago (2011). There are also evidence that tattooing can be traced back all the way to the Stone Age. There are both European and Egyptian figures that have markings both on their face and bodies that indicate that people were practicing tattoos around the year 6,000 B.C. and steadily continued to do so. In the Egyptian culture many mummified bodies, specifically women’s bodies, have been found to have line and dot work on them. Tattooing in the Egyptian culture was sacred among women who were considered entertainers or who were idolized in placed in higher roles (Sanders and Vail 2008). Archaeologists have discovered bodies from Europe, Egypt, Siberia, and many other well preserved sites around the world that have resemblance of tattooing on them.

The word tattoo originated from the Tahitians and their word, “ta-tu” which translates to mean mark or strike something that will leave an impressionable message that is being sent by the tattooed individual (Raymond 2008, Bell 1999, & Grief, Hewitt & Armstrong 1999). The word emerged and became popular in the English language after Captain James Cook became fascinated with the practicing of tattoos among people in the South Pacific. Captain Cook’s encounter with the tattoo culture also marks the beginning of sailors becoming engulfed in the tattoo culture and practicing the art (Levy, Sewell, & Goldstein 1979). Captain Cook and his sailors received tattoos from a Tahitian tattoo artist of the time to remember and symbolize their journey across the seas as explorers (Cortez 2013). The tattooing phenomenon was then able to spread through a diffusion of cultures when the expansion of explorers took off. For instance, the practice of tattooing spread to western countries and islands like Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, and the Hawaiian Islands when they were exposed to South American explorers who practiced tattooing or had tattoos (Sanders and Vail 2008). However, when sailors and voyagers returned home with tattoos this was immediately seen as an inappropriate act to practice and was rejected due to cultural values (White 2005).

People have chosen to become tattooed for a variety of different cultural reasons including, marking one’s social status, tribal affiliation, and to express individuality (Wohlrab, Stahl, & Kappeler 2007 & Cortez 2013). (Cortez 2013). It is important to note that scholars have recognized a multiplicity of social meanings attached to tattoos over different time periods and history (Wohlrab, Stahl, & Kappeler 2007). For example, in New Zealand the Maori tribes created a tattoo patterned that they called, “Moko” which

is basically a traditional tribal design that is made up of lines and spirals. Usually Maori men would get large Moko tattoos that would cover large sections of their bodies from their face to their buttocks (Levy, Sewell, & Goldstein 1979). The practicing of tattooing both men and women's faces became something that was highly common and idolized in the Maori culture. Specifically, for women they would tattoo their lips and their chins to identify that they were married (Levy, Sewell, & Goldstein 1979). There are various other examples of tattoos social meanings in other cultures that could be discussed but it overall is important to recognize that tattoos representations differ based on the time and place. Tattoos can mean something different to each culture and individual person. Within American society however, tattoos have historically been seen as a form of deviance as well as resistance from the social norm.

In 1891 Samuel O'Reilly created the first electric tattoo machine that would transform tattooing forever. Before this invention all tattoos were hand poked or chiseled into the skin (Thompson 2015, Gilbert 2000). Soon after, a man named "Lew- the- Jew" Alberts, a former sailor who was unhappy with the designs of hand poked tattoos created what we know as "flash sheet" design tattoos. He would draw up designs and hang them up on the wall like wallpaper so that sailors could easily come in and choose an image that was typically patriotic. This made tattooing much easier and allowed sailors more access to the receiving tattoos (Thompson 2015, Gilbert 2000). Sailors were filling tattoo shops by the early 1900's. These tattoo shops were accommodating to and serving sailors tattoos needs from east coast to west coast (Thompson 2015, Gilbert 2000). At the same time criminals and those who were labeled as the undesirables within society were also



filling up tattoo shops in large numbers (Gilbert 2000). While serving prison terms criminals or inmates usually get tattoos to create separate identity or to create identity that shows they are part of a group membership. This often reflects inmates association with gangs, their distinct identity of being a prisoner and serving time, and while in prison inmates also choose to get personal tattoos that can have other symbolic meanings (Fenske 2007). As tattoos grew in popularity among people deemed criminal, the tattoos themselves became an indicator of criminality (Sullivan 2001, Post 1968). However, in earlier day's men who were labeled as criminals could be associated with the act tattooing but not women because women who were labeled as criminals were not receiving or participating in the tattoo culture at the rate of men who were criminals (Thompson 2015). Female criminals getting tattoos was basically nonexistent (Lombrose 2004). The associations between tattoos and criminality meant that tattoos soon became associated with other deviant behaviors. Especially those revolving around sex and sexual practices. Albert Parry argued that men who had chosen to become tattooed could also be presumed as sexually deviant and associated with being homosexual (Parry 1933 (2003)). For instance, Richard Post connected tattoos and the practice of tattoo with high amounts of abnormal sex (1968). Although these connections are based more on assumption and not empirical evidence (Thompson 2015), Post and Parry probably weren't the only ones to believe such assumptions so tattoos being seen as sexually deviant if a frequent stigmatization. Prostitution a heavily stigmatized and sexually deviant act has also been closely related to the act of tattooing. The famed criminologist Cesare Lombroso, was so convinced of the link between tattoo culture and sexual deviance that he attempted to link

tattoos with the act of prostitution as well as criminality of women (2004). Women who are deemed criminals don't have as strong of an association with tattoos and tattooing compared to male criminals. However, women who have historically been be labeled as sexually deviant are have been associated with tattoos and the tattoo culture more frequently (Thompson 2015, Lombroso 2004).

While tattoos have historically been heavily stigmatized and associated with criminality, gang membership, prostitution, sailors, and the military (DeMello 2013), these stigmas have lessened over recent decades (Thompson 2015). This is largely due to what is known as the "Tattoo Renaissance" that emerged in the 1960s-70s and fully incorporated the act of tattooing into popular culture (Sanders and Vail 2008). This era saw numerous counter cultures and people started receiving tattoos as a way to rebel and deviate from societal expectations. Tattoos acted as a way to express association to social movements, countercultures, as well as create individual identities, promote ideologies, open mindedness, and open the door to the idea of alternative expressions and appearances (Thompson 2015). Many prominent figures of the time were also starting to sport tattoos including, actors, musicians, and athletes (Sanders and Vail 2008). Popular figures receiving tattoos stirred a desire in youth who admired such said figures to also start becoming tattoo collectors and this is where we see the tattoo industry enter and expand into popular culture (Sanders and Vail 2008).

This cultural shift of tattoos moving from being a "mark" to being a form of "art" meant that women could now more easily become affiliated with the practice. With the popularity of tattoos on the rise since the 1960s-70s we have seen an increase of both

men and women receiving tattoos and becoming heavily tattooed (Govenar 1981, and Hawkes, Senn, and Thorns 2004). As with everything else in our society, tattoos, the experience of being tattooed, and tattooing has been seen and told through the male experience (Ferrell 1993). However, the literature has followed the changes within the tattoo culture such as, how tattoos have shifted from being a predominantly male hobby to the rise of women receiving and becoming heavily tattooed in much larger numbers (Thompson 2015, Laumann and Derick 2006). According to Raymond around 24% of Americans currently have tattoos, and from the age range 18-30 the number is expected to increase by nearly 40% (Raymond 2011, Armstrong et al., 2008). Women make up around 45- 65% of the people who are receiving tattoos (Armstrong et al., 2008). Women in younger generations are becoming more heavily tattooed currently compared to anyone else (Laumann and Derick 2006, Ferreira 2014). Thompson discusses how popular media and public figures such as, Janis Joplin and Cher receiving tattoos encouraged women during the time of the Tattoo Renaissance to also partake in the tattoo culture. Women had already started collecting tattoos that were deemed acceptable for their bodies of the time which can be summed up as small, cute, feminine, and hidden. With popular figures such as, Janis Joplin sporting tattoos however, this lead feminine tattooing even further into the public spotlight (2015). Thompson also credits the protest culture and feminist movements that were challenging body politics as well as encouraging women to have control over their bodies that took place at the same time the Tattoo Renaissance was occurring, for the increase numbers of women participating in the tattoo culture (2015). The tattoo artist of both Janis Joplin and Cher, Lyle Tuttle, also

accredits the women's movement of the time for shedding light on tattoos, popularizing tattoos, and increasing the amount of women willing to engulf themselves within the tattoo culture (Thompson 2015). Tuttle believed that the women's movement, "opened 50 percent more of the population to the practice" (Thompson 2015: 32).

Sanders and Vail discuss how with more people receiving tattoos this creates a chain reaction of more people being introduced to tattoos and thus, encourages the tattoo trend (2008). With tattoos present within popular culture this has opened an opportunity for media also bring attention to tattoos through shows such as "Miami Ink" and through popular tattoo artist like, Kat Von D which have also added to the trend of people desiring tattoos (Sanders and Vail 2008). With the increase of awareness of tattoos and people receiving tattoos the tattooing market has been able to move away from targeting the lower class and move more towards the middle class population (DeMello 2000) We now see tattoos becoming increasingly more popular among middle class Americans (Pitts 1999). The focus on tattoos today specifically in western culture like that of the United States is largely important to understand because in the past two decades according to Raymond (2011) but now three decades tattoos along with other forms of body modifications have been on the rise. Although tattoos have become much more mainstream and have been popularized as fashion, there symbolic meanings vary. They are still stigmatized and can be seen as deviant, and can create social disruption but the stigmatization and disruption of tattoos by far has lessened from the beginning of the tattoo history (Thompson 2015).

As tattooing has become increasingly more popular -Thompson 2015, Laumann and Derick 2006, and Armstrong et al., 2008). It has become a legitimate form of self-identity expression for women. It has helped women to memorialize events as well as establish their individuality (Raymond 2011; Armstrong 1991). According to Armstrong most people choose to get tattoos to help themselves create and express individual identity and that's why tattoos have become popular for creating one's "self-expression" (2004).

Although tattoos have been deemed as more acceptable in recent times compared to the past, stigmas still remain attached to the body art. This is especially true for women due to the multiplicity of gender dynamics that exist and the inequalities that women face. Within our patriarchal society our understanding of femininity has been determined by the dominant narrative of masculinity (Donaldson 1993) and this has set gender expectations for what being feminine is supposed to look like (Raymond 2011). Atkinson discusses how our society expects women to modify their bodies in order to please men and that these said men prefer women's bodies that can easily be labeled as, "soft, supple, thin, sexy, unblemished feminine bodies" (Atkinson 2002: 232, and Raymond 2011). Heavily tattooed women go against these expectations and therefore, can easily be seen in a negative light (Raymond 2011). Although these expectations around the female body still exist and women are stigmatized for becoming heavily tattooed and breaking the boundaries of the ideal feminine body. Women still persist and choose to become heavily tattooed. For instance, the amount of women who have gotten tattooed has quadrupled in two decades (Armstrong 1991, Raymond 2011) and women currently make up more than

50% of the tattooed population in America (Armstrong 1991, Hawkes, Senn, & Thorn 2004, and Raymond 2011). While women are critiqued for choosing to become tattooed and especially for choosing to become heavily tattooed, they have also however, redefined what being tattoo means to them. Women are refusing to label their choice to become tattooed and their taste in tattoos as something that is stigmatized as “ugly”. They are redefining tattoos as something that can be seen as beautiful and that helps them achieve their own individuality. Women are resisting typical beauty standards are choosing to live by, “it’s my body, it’s my choice” (Thompson 2015). Women who choose to become heavily tattooed are challenging societal expectations around the female body, our current standards on what we deem as “beautiful”, and the beauty culture as a whole. By challenging societal expectations and our confined beauty culture along with creating self-identity by receiving tattoos, heavily tattooed women are reclaiming their bodies and what it means to be “beautiful”.

### *Perceptions of Tattoos*

There is an abundance of previous literature revolving around the perceptions that people have around women with tattoos and how people at the individual level, institutions, and society as a whole view women with tattoos. This is inclusive of a variety of women who choose to become tattooed or heavily tattooed as well. Mary Armstrong began exploring career women who had chosen to become tattoo, the study was originally set out to provide information about potential health risks that women could face when choosing to become tattooed (1991). Surveys were administered to

women who had been tattooed for six or more months, identified with professional careers, and had education levels that were high school graduates or higher. Survey questions that were administered asked women health problems that they could of faced but even more applicable they asked women the responses they received about their tattoos from family and friends, as well as the decision process these women went through before and after their tattoos (Armstrong 1991). The studied showed that many women choose to become tattooed because they had exposure from tattooed family members or friends, who were typically male, and this exposure lead to referrals to tattoo artist and shops (1991). Many women said that they had gotten tattooed in order to express individuality, be expressive, and to be unique. These women reported receiving negative feedback in many forms including: losing jobs and clients, not having support from friends and family, and feeling the need to cover and not expose tattoos to both strangers and close friends and family (Armstrong 1991). Overall, women felt supported by their significant partners when it comes to getting and being tattooed but there is a strong lack of support from mothers, siblings, children, and especially fathers (Armstrong 1991). Father's responses to women's tattoos played a huge role in how these women thought that others would react to their tattoos as well (Armstrong 1991). Fathers typically tend to be more critical of their daughters receiving and flaunting tattoos (Armstrong 1991) and older men in women's life generally stigmatize them for their choice in receiving tattoos (Swami and Furnham 2007).

This leads to the good amount of literature that focuses on how men specifically perceive women with tattoos, and how some literature indicates that men find women

with tattoos to be more attractive, while other studies indicate that men find women with tattoos less attractive and will be less likely to marry someone with tattoos because of this unattractiveness (Guéguen 2013, Armstrong 1991 Hamermesh 2013, Swami and Furnham 2007). Guéguen conducted an experiment where two women, one with a lower back tattoo, and one without a lower back tattoo would lay on the beach and record men approaching them and what their intentions were in the approach (2013). The study ended up concluding that men would approach the woman with the lower back tattoo more frequently and that when they approached the woman with the lower back tattoo they had the assumption that they would be more likely to go on a date or have sexual intercourse with this woman (2013). A lot of assumptions are applied to women with tattoos, including that a tattooed woman is more likely to drink, use drugs, and be sexually promiscuous (Guéguen 2013). There are a variety of physical cues including but not limited to tattoos that lead men to assume women's sexual intentions (Guéguen 2013). Guéguen discusses how men assume that women with tattoos are easier to approach, more likely to go on dates with them, and overall more sexually promiscuous (2013). Armstrong however, indicated that women's significant partners were a huge supporter when deciding to become heavily tattooed (1991). This is an indication that both male and female partners are in support for women to be tattooed. There are also studies showing that both male and females portray negative stigmas towards women with tattoos and this is largely to do with the fact that tattoos on the female body break traditional gender norms for women (Hawkes, Senn, and Thorn 2004). Swami and Furnham conducted a study where both male and female college students would rate



women who had tattoos on attractiveness and their assumptions of these women (2007). There were different degrees of tattoos were some women would be considered lightly tattooed while others were more heavily tattooed. In general women who had tattoos were labeled less physically attractive, sexually promiscuous, and drank more than non-tattooed women (Swami and Furnham 2007). The more tattoos a woman had the more both male and female college students would associate that woman with negative qualities (Swami and Furnham 2007). Similarly to Guéguen, Swami and Furnham found that when women have tattoos, men tend to assume that these women have greater sexual intents than actually exist (2007). A common theme within the literature that largely stands out is the association of tattooed women and sexually promiscuity (Guéguen 2013 & Swami and Furnham 2007).

When it comes to actual behaviors of tattooed individuals, and specifically tattooed women, risky behaviors are frequent among this subgroup. Previous literature indicates that women who are tattooed tend to partake in risky behaviors such as, consuming drugs and alcohol more frequently, having more body piercings, partaking in shoplifting, and smoke cigarettes more frequently (Ferreira 2014, Romans, Martin, and Morris, et al. 1998, Drews, Allison, Probst 2000). People who get tattooed at a younger age tend to go to college in smaller numbers, and have lower socioeconomic statuses (Silver, Silver, Siennick, and et al. 2011, Ferreira 2014). Tattooed individuals are more likely to engage in sex at a younger age, and partake in sexual acts such as, anal and oral sex in higher numbers, and tend to have a higher amount of sexual partners in their lifetime (Sipiński, Kuczerawy, Kozłowska-Rup, and et al. 2012). This is inclusive of

individual women who are both simply tattooed and heavily tattooed. While women with tattoos are associated with forms of risky behaviors. This can't be inclusive of all heavily tattooed women and these women should still be disassociated from stigmas revolving around tattoos in general.

A continuing issue with tattoos is the ineligibility for certain jobs within the workforce. People who are tattooed fear that when it comes to being hired for a job that they desire that they will not be hired because their tattoos have made them less suitable for a job position (Atkinson 2002 and Burgess and Clarks 2010). Burgess and Clarks study looked at whether or not a tattooed individual would be turned away from a job opportunity due to their body art and if the style of tattoos one possessed impacted whether the tattoo individual would be hired or turned away from the workplace (2010). Burgess and Clark had the assumption that if tattoos were viewed the same then all individuals no matter their characteristics and their tattoo type would be viewed at negatively (2010). However, this is not true because studies like Musambira, Raymond, and Hastings study indicate that older versus younger women with tattoos are viewed entirely different (2016). Older women who don't have tattoos were more favorable among college students compared to older women who did have tattoos. If a older woman were to have a more traditional feminine tattoos this woman became more favorable than an older woman who displayed more masculine or intense form of tattoos. Whereas younger women were favored more if they had a tattoo and they were favored more if their tattoo cross gender barriers. For younger women having untraditionally feminine tattoos was more praised compared to that of older women (Musambira,

Raymond, and Hastings 2016, & Raymond 2011). People whose tattoos can be categorized as small, cute, contemporary, and less aggressive compared to that of traditional tattoos are seen in a more positive light (Burgess and Clarks 2010). Burgess and Clarks study found that tattooed people with traditional style tattoos or what is considered more masculine may be considered less eligible for a job compared to people who have more contemporary tattoos or tattoos that may be considered more feminine due to popular trends (2010). In general people with visible tattoos are viewed more negatively compared to individuals who don't have tattoos or don't visually display their tattoos. Individuals who display their tattoos become less eligible for a desired job and within the workforce. This then causes tattooed individuals to become limited in forms of personal growth and development (Burgess and Clarks 2010). Women especially worry that their tattoos could have a negative impact on potential jobs and careers that they may be interested in (Atkinson 2002). Burgess and Clarks confirm that these fears are rational due to the way people may perceive tattooed individuals when considering them for potential job positions (2010). However, the displayed tattooed women in Burgess and Clark's study were not viewed as harshly in compared men and this is largely to do with the fact that women often displayed what is considered to be cute, small, potentially hidden, and feminine tattoos (i.e. butterflies and dolphins) (2010).

Kang and Jones explain how there is not just one single explanation for the amount of increasing numbers of tattoos. Instead they enforce that people use tattoos as a way to self-express, display their lived experiences, and as a way to relate to others and a way to view themselves in relation to others around them (2007). Women are getting

tattooed in much larger numbers than men (Thompson 2015, Hawkes, Senn, and Thorn 2004) and previous literature indicates, that this is likely due to the fact that tattooing has a deeper meaning to women who choose this form of body modification. Tattoos are helping women create an image and identity for themselves that in history they weren't able to achieve. In general, tattooing has become a way for women to display a new form of identity to others but to also create a new form of identity for themselves (Pitts 2003, Atkinson 2002). A huge part of this new identity is being able to break traditional gender roles and to defy traditional femininity (Anastasia 2010). For women, tattoos have become a way for them to exert control over their bodies as well as step away from traditional female roles such as, wife, mother, and caretaker (Kang and Jones 2007). DeMello discusses how since the Victorian age women have been using tattoos as a way distance themselves from stereotypes of what it means to be female (2000). For instance, DeMello says tattooed women were, "less likely to accept the idea of the quiet, pale, and bounded female body." (2000). Tattooing for men has traditional been about reinforcing stereotypical gender roles and masculinity, whereas for women, tattoos have been both about breaking away from traditional gender norms and repeating them due to mainstream media (Kang and Jones 2007). Women can use tattooing as a way create a unique identity for themselves, break traditional gender norms, or defy traditional beauty expectations (Strohmenger 2012, Pitts 2003). By becoming heavily tattooed women are able create a realistic form of beauty and femininity for themselves (Anastasia 2010). Some women believe that by becoming tattooed this represents more of a commitment to defying ideas around the female body compared to wearing men's clothing, changing

hairstyles, or acting masculine (Kang and Jones 2007 & Atkinson 2003). At the same time because tattooing has become more mainstream it has become more common for women to sport tattoos. So, rather than it being seen as deviant it has become another sexualized symbol on a woman's body (Atkinson 2003). Women are choosing to get tattoos in areas of their bodies that help define their bodies as well as show off their bodies or sexualized part of their bodies ( hips, lower back, thighs) (Atkinson 2003).

While the area of tattoos is important, what women are choosing to tattoo on themselves is what is responsible to repeating stereotypes of femininity. Mainstream tattooing has enforced the continuance of women choosing to get feminine objects tattooed on them. These tattoos are small, cute, and they are typically images of animals, flowers, hearts, and etc. (Atkinson 2003, and Kang and Jones 2007, Thompson 2015). Traditionally feminine tattoos could be seen as less empowering to women (Kang and Jones 2007, Mifflin 2013, DeMello 2000). Women who prefer to get tattoos because they are sexy or feminine are losing the richness in which tattoos can be empowering because they can defy femininity and step away from the role of always having to be "sexy" (DeMello 2000). Women use tattoos in a variety of ways to reclaim their bodies from, including: disease, sexual assault, domestic violence, low self-confidence, and feeling othered (Kang and Jones 2007).

## GOFFMAN, QUEER, AND FEMINIST THEORY

Traditional Sociological theory such as, Erving Goffman's, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* acts as a foundation for interpreting the phenomenon of heavily tattooed women. Goffman's work allows us to see how heavily tattooed women continue to be stigmatized in terms of body image, beauty culture, and the conceptions around what it means to be a woman and feminine. Goffman's framework conveys the historical timeline of stigmas that heavily tattooed women have been faced with. As tattooing became more mainstream, stigmas around the tattoo culture and heavily tattooed women's bodies started to shift causing the discourse around this phenomenon to shift as well. In order to make sense of this shift, the utilization of Queer/feminist theories like that of Julia Serano's, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, and Sara Ahmed's, *Living a Feminist Life*, become necessary. Queer and Feminist theory provide a more contemporary lens for understanding the modern discourse surrounding the phenomenon of heavily tattooed women. These theories combined will add new dimensions around the existing research around heavily tattooed women.

### *Goffman's Stigma*

Goffman starts by defining how the Greeks originally termed the word stigma. They understood stigma as, "bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier" (Goffman 1963: 1). Goffman, refers to stigma as,

“an attribute that is deeply discrediting, but it should be seen that a language of relationships, not attributes, is really needed.” (1963:3). He stresses the importance that stigma is essentially a relationship between an attribute that one holds and the stereotypes around that said attribute (1963). There are three different types of Stigma that have been established but, only two will be discussed. The first type of stigma known as, “Abominations of the body” describes any physical deformities one’s body might carry (Goffman 1963). These physical deformities can be inclusive of any physical trait a body may carry that is most likely to be visually noticeable. The second form of stigma is referred to as, “Blemishes of Individual Character” this stigma is more complex in that it describes flaws that an individual might possess. For instance, Goffman mentions that a person could be, “weak will(ed)”, “dishonest”, or have “unnatural passions” (1963: 4). Blemishes of Individual Character can also refer to that of a person who may have the track record of a mental illness, addiction, being imprisoned, alcoholism, and etc... (1963:4). People who have been categorized with or personally identify with having a physical flaw or character flaw are understood as being part of a stigmatized population. Those who don’t possess flaws whether they be known or unknown are the people that Goffman labels as the, “Normals” (1963). These people don’t carry any form of physically “bad” attributes and don’t have character flaws. Such persons are not easily stigmatized because there’s nothing they possess that is considered to be easily flawed (Goffman 1963). People can have flaws that are unknown or that go unseen and these people can go on “passing” as “Normals”. Goffman’s, highly visible stigmas or “Abominations of the body” can be directly tied to character flaws or “Blemishes of

Individual Character”. These separate stigmas are intertwined and mutually affirming when it comes to heavily tattooed women. Body art can be seen as both an, “abomination” of the body and as a “blemish” of character. Tattoos are both a stigma of the physical body and of a person's character.

Traditionally tattoos have been associated with populations such as sailors, gang members, prostitutes, criminals, and the mentally ill (DeMello 2013, Pitts 1999 & Thompson 2015). In the second half of the 18th century Sailors began to collect tattoos to memorialize their journeys as voyagers (Thompson 2015 & Raymond 2008). These tattoos became representative of where Sailors had been and what they had seen in a time where traveling wasn't as easily accessible. Sailors had the tendency to also partake in other stigmatized activities on their journeys such as, drinking heavily and encountering with prostitutes on top of becoming tattooed (Thompson 2015). In this way, Sailors created a name and stigma for themselves (Thompson 2015) and although not intentional, tattoos became associated with other social practices that led to the stigmatization of a particular type of individual who was understood to be “marked” in a certain way.

The stigmas around tattoos that first began with Sailors, link to Goffman's, “the language of relationships”. The relationship of sailor's voyages, interactions with indigenous populations, tattooing, and other promiscuous and rowdy behavior they chose to partake in created stigmas around what it meant to be a sailor. Tattoos then came to be representative of said behavior. Because Sailors had tattoos they became social cues and representations of the rowdy behavior and untraditional life someone engaged in. It is the lifestyle of sailors and their interactions that lead to their stigmatizations and began



stigmatizations for tattoos (Thompson 2015). It is not the actual attribute that should be stigmatized according to Goffman, but rather the understanding of the language of relationships is needed in order to understand the attribute and stigma around that attribute (1963). So, it comes to be that the actual art of tattooing and tattoos themselves aren't necessarily what would have been stigmatized. It is rather the nonconforming lifestyle of sailors and their non-traditional relationships of the time with their travels, indigenous populations, and other foreign and worldly practices that lead to the stigma of tattoos. As Goffman stresses: stigmas are the relationship between an attribute one possesses. In this scenario it is possessing the body marker of a tattoo and the stereotypes around that attribute, which in this case, is the stereotypes around the lifestyles that sailors chose to live (1963). The stereotypes that were associated with Sailors and their lifestyles lead to stereotyping of the physical attribute of tattoos.

Following Sailor voyages were missionaries who visited the same indigenous islands and were exposed to the same cultural practice of tattooing. Having already been introduced to tattoos through the life of sailors, the attached Stigmas and presumptions around tattoos had already altered how these missionaries would view individuals who had tattoos. Due to the fact that Sailors engaged in, "savage" like behavior tattoos became a symbol of behavior only savages would partake in. When missionaries encountered indigenous people who practiced tattooing, this then became a cue (along with many other foreign practices) to further label indigenous people as "savages" (Thompson 2015). These indigenous practices also conflicted with missionary's religious views (Thompson 2015). This lead to the violence against many indigenous populations across

the world. The violence was inflicted in attempt to try and control and “civilize” indigenous populations because many practices like tattooing entertained the idea that indigenous people were anything but humane (Thompson 2015). Missionaries forced a literal interpretation of the Bible (Thompson 2015) along with other religious practices on indigenous people in attempts to convert them to Christianity. The idea was that missionaries were trying to save souls of the “savages” but by using mass force, religious tactics became more about obedience, control, and elimination of indigenous populations. With trying to control indigenous populations through the conversion to Christianity many cultural practices were forbidden and shamed including that of indigenous tattoo practices. Thompson reviews how, a man named Samuel Marsden who was part of the Church Missionary Society became one of the first people to ban the act of tattooing and the prohibition of bodies essentially sporting or holding tattoos within the Maori Culture (2015, & Lombroso 2004). With the expansion of colonization, having the mark of a tattoo made individuals and cultures vulnerable to further suppression (than they may have already been facing) (Thompson 2015). It caused indigenous people who displayed tattoos to be highly stigmatized along with a variety of other reasons and because tattoos were associated with such “savage” people the act of tattooing and the tattoo culture was frowned upon and stigmatized. Due to stigmatizations that Sailors had associated with tattoos and to the enforcement of labeling indigenous people who had historically practiced forms of tattooing with these same stigmas, lead to missionaries forcefully preventing the art form and caused tribal tattooing to go into decline and disappear until

later in the 1980's/90's. Sailors and Missionaries marked the beginning of a long history of associating stigmas with tattoos.

The stigma of tattoos inflicted by sailors and missionaries carries on to be the stigmas that heavily tattooed women faced during the late 1800's and early 1900's. Due to being heavily tattooed, a certain segment of women became known for participating in sideshows, circuses, or freak shows (Mifflin 2013 & Raymond 2008). Thompson refers to these heavily tattooed women as the "Sideshow of Human Oddities" while Mifflin refers to these women as the "Circus Ladies and Society Women" (Thompson 2015 and Mifflin 2013). These women became significant for being heavily tattooed during a time when there were few cases of heavily tattooed women. These same women became largely significant for playing a role in an entertainment industry of the time (Mifflin 2013). Either way the women who choose to become heavily tattooed during this time period are to be considered mile markers for heavily tattooed women today. They are the women who paved the way for the continuance and growing practice of women becoming heavily tattooed (Mifflin 2013). To distinguish there are two ways women became heavily tattooed while simultaneously entering the entertainment industry. There are the women who chose to become heavily tattooed intentionally, of their own free will and desire to, and then later entered the entertainment industry because they saw both financial and social opportunities (Mifflin 2013). Then there are the women whose original intentions were to seek out fame, adventure, and financial gains. Then from the advice of others or through self-determination concluded that becoming heavily tattooed was a way for them to achieve their desired fame, adventure, or financial opportunity

(Mifflin 2013). Some women found fame through their tattoos but fame did not secure social acceptance. In these cases of fame women were associated with social stigmas attached to body art because they were already being displayed as circus freaks.

In the 1950's freak shows had died out and the popularity of tattoos started to shift to establish masculinity, military, and sexual fetishes (Mifflin 2013). Tattoos were banned throughout the 1950's and 60s. Hepatitis outbreaks started to occur due to the usage of dirty needles that would transfer the virus (Mifflin 2013). By banning tattoos this created a shift in who was associated with tattoos. There was a shift from freaks, freak shows, and circus ladies being associated with tattoos to criminals, gang members, bikers, prostitutes, and degenerates being associated with tattoos (Mifflin 2013, and Thompson 2015). However, in the 1950's we see more women slowly but surely entering tattoo shops and choosing independently to become tattooed. Yet, tattooed women, especially heavily tattooed women, still couldn't show off or proudly display their tattoos due to the shifting but continuing stigma around this choice of body art (Mifflin 2013). There were however, women in the 1950's-60's who didn't care what society would think about them and their tattoos and choose to bare the stigmas associated with tattoos and tattooing in order to proudly show off their body art. These women also paved a way for future women who would become tattoo enthusiast themselves (Mifflin 2013). After this time period is when we start to enter the tattoos renaissance of the 1970's. A time period where women were choosing to become tattooed and heavily tattooed for a variety of reasons like, wanting to rethink womanhood, self-beauty, and the desire to be different (Mifflin 2013). During this time period is when we also see a shift in stigmas due to the

large popularity that tattoos started to gain (Govenar 1981, and Hawkes, Senn, and Thorns 2004).

### *Queer Theory*

Here Goffman's theoretical frameworks become limiting when understanding the phenomenon of heavily tattooed women. Rather, Serrano and Ahmed's theoretical frameworks serve as tools to enhance our understandings of femininity, the female body, and patriarchy. Although there are lingering stigmas that still do exist and affect heavily tattooed women. There are also a variety of other outside complexities that are happening simultaneously while women are choosing to become heavily tattooed. Women are faced with stigmas regarding ideas around the female body (i.e. weight, skin color, beauty appearance), while also facing the lingering stigmas around tattoos. These intersections of stigmas can disproportionately affect heavily tattooed women and our understandings of these women. By applying queer and feminist theories to the phenomenon of heavily tattooed women we are able to identify the complexities and understand how these complexities may overlap with the phenomenon of heavily tattooed women. Using Goffman combined with Serrano, and Ahmed, allows us to develop a new perception around the phenomenon of heavily tattooed women that explores how women who choose to become heavily tattooed are criticized for both their tattoos and failure to reach ideal versions of what it means to be a woman or feminine.

Serrano's understandings of what is considered to be inherently female or considered inherently feminine, her work around femininity, what is hyper femininity

versus hyper masculinity, what she talks about as “Oppositional Sexism”, as well as Misogyny are main themes that are directly related to heavily tattooed women and the perceptions of the body. Serrano’s sets up a theoretical framework that challenges the ideas around what is inherently female, hyper femininity and masculinity, and our misogynistic culture. When we place the phenomenon of heavily tattooed women within that framework, we see that women who are engulfed within the tattoo culture and who choose to become heavily tattooed are also challenging the same things that Queer theory has inherently challenged.

Serrano uses the term “oppositional sexism” to denote a condition where those things considered to be inherently female are seen as inferior to what is considered to be male or masculine. To be considered female or feminine, women have to act or dress in a certain manner and by acting or dressing these ways we fulfill the roles of portraying that women are submissive and passive (2007). Femininity can be understood as something that is artificial or that has to be manipulated to be achieved. For instance, women are constantly being depicted as hyper-feminine in media (this goes for both women/trans-women). Meaning they are always being portrayed to put on makeup, wear extraordinarily feminine clothing, working to achieve an ideal body type and size through diet and exercise, and are always seen as having to put in work or change things about themselves from the moment they wake up to the moment they go to bed. Nothing about being a female and achieving femininity should come “naturally”, meaning you should always have to be altering something about yourself to achieve femaleness (Serrano 2007). Striving for hyper-femininity, putting in the work to alter oneself to meet ideal

expectations of femaleness, and presenting oneself as feminine or in other words fulfilling the stereotypes of being submissive and passive is what is inherently female or feminine. If you aren't striving for hyper femininity, which is the most extreme version and changes to the female body, or if the willingness to practice these alterations don't come as something that should be, "natural" to a woman then you aren't seen as achieving what is considered inherently female. Yet, even what is "natural" to women is always somehow artificial and, or performed.

"Oppositional Sexism" means to see what is inherently male and masculinity as everything that is the extreme opposite of female and femininity. This means that instead of the artificial or manipulated version of the female, men are everything that is considered "natural". The performance of masculinity has become invisible. Being a man and achieving masculinity is something that just is. Men are born the way they are and do not or should not have to strive to be anything more or less. To be a man and masculine is deeply rooted in our society as something that just inherently is, causing maleness and masculinity to be the standard for what everyone should want to be. This also allows room for misogyny to play out in our society. What is female and femininity within our society is the opposite of male and masculinity and so those who are not inherently male or masculine are ridiculed and derailed. Since, our society (for the majority) only see's gender in terms of black and white, male or female, femininity and masculinity, everything that is not male, which only leaves female, is dismissed and derailed as the lesser of the two. So, if women do meet the expectations of femaleness and femininity they are dismissed largely. When women don't meet the ideal expectations of femaleness

and femininity (hyper femininity), and yet still aren't male or masculine, and instead practice other forms of femininity they are then challenged and also still highly dismissed and ridiculed. Often times even more intensely than those women who do strive, practice, and achieve the Set expectations around femaleness and femininity (Serano 2007).

The understanding of, "Oppositional Sexism" is recognizing everything that is female and male as polar opposites. There is never any overlap between female/male and femininity/masculinity because that would challenge what inherently exist (2007). We can see this play out when it comes to tattoos and heavily tattooed women. A woman's body is to be everything opposite of that of a man's. A woman's body is to be, "soft, supple, thin, sexy, unblemished feminine bodies" (Atkinson 2002: 232) A man's body can be the opposite of this including being seen as "blemished" by receiving visible tattoos. So, as tattoos have been promoted through and for the male figure. The extreme opposite of a woman, is to not desire such tattoos and most definitely not choose to become tattooed. Tattoos are to support hyper masculinity, and are anything far from feminine and hyper-feminine. If a woman is to get tattoos those tattoos are expected to be feminine and encourage hyper-femininity. Usually by being an image of art that is associated with the female body or femininity, such as, flowers. Women are to avoid getting tattoos that resemble those of a man. For example, women are to avoid getting large, thick lined, dark, and more graphic pieces. This includes images that can be associated with masculinity and maleness. Examples of these tattoos are often, skulls, flames, or dragons. Objects that women are not typically associated with. Oppositional Sexism is when a woman is not supposed to be tattooed or especially heavily tattooed compared to the



acceptance of men being tattooed or heavily tattooed (2007). It is when a women does choose to become tattooed and those tattoos are to represent and look nothing like those of a man (2007). Oppositional Sexism exist everywhere but we can see it as largely relevant when it comes to the art of tattooing, the tattoo culture and industry, and the body image of both males and females (2007).

Tattoos traditionally haven't been seen as a characteristic that is inherently feminine (Raymond 2011). Tattoos have traditionally been associated with masculinity (Armstrong et al, 2008). DeMello states that tattoos are something that are seen as, "permanent, painful, and masculine" (2000: 13). Tattoos have been mainly told through the male perspective (Atkinson 2002) and this is largely due to the fact that for so long tattoos were associated with male dominated groups such as, Sailors, the Military, Gangs, and Criminals (male criminals because female criminals didn't practice tattooing as frequently as the men) (Thompson 2015). Tattoos have also been largely promoted onto the male body and not the female body and they are also believed to be a male behavior and not a female behavior (Raymond 2011). There is the notion that tattoos were created by man and thus, should only pertain to men (Raymond 2011). For instance, Braunberger states that tattoos, "functioned like a hundred other rituals implicitly designed to keep men together and exclude women" (2000: 4). Since, tattoos have been visualized on the male body and have always been associated with men it has come to be seen as a masculine characteristic and associated with what is male/maleness. This has caused tattoos to represent the opposite of what is inherently feminine and female. Tattoos rather become a standard marking for masculinity.

This leads to Serano's understanding of our current society and how it is still misogynistic. Serano defines Misogyny as anything that dismisses and derails anything that is female or feminine (2007). So, women who defy the stereotypical expectations of femininity, especially that of hyper-femininity, by becoming heavily tattooed women are challenging the ideals of what is supposed to be seen as inherently feminine. Women who choose to become heavily tattooed are redefining femininity and in way creating their own version of femininity when it comes to body image. When women choose tattoo pieces that are large, visible, and typically labeled as masculine (dragons, and flames) they tend to get much more negative attention and comments around their body image (Raymond 2011 and Thompson 2015). Heavily tattooed women's femaleness and femininity is often then challenged and can be seen as unauthentic because these women are consciously choosing not to practice hyper-femininity and choosing tattoos that don't encourage typical femininity. Heavily tattooed women's self-versions of what it means to be a female and feminine is therefore, dismissed and derailed. Firstly, because heavily tattooed women don't meet patriarchal, male standards around the female body. Secondly, because they don't practice traditional femininity. Thus, heavily tattooed women are seen as defying what is considered to be inherently feminine and because of that, their versions of femaleness and femininity are dismissed as illegitimate. I would argue that their female bodies and the way they express their femininity through tattoos is derailed even more so than that of women who would be considered inherently feminine or choose to practice hyper-femininity. Within femaleness and femininity there are different layers that are favored over others. Hyper-femininity is the preferred practiced

form of femininity and because heavily tattooed women's versions of femininity is seen as lesser than this, they are open to more criticism and are dismissed and derailed more frequently. Which in and of itself is Misogyny.

### *Feminist Theory*

To extend the conversation of how social reactions to heavily tattooed women are often underwritten by misogynistic attitudes, I will be using Sara Ahmed's concepts of, "Gender Fatalism", and the "Feminist Killjoy. Ahmed's theory follows nicely behind Serano's because as Serano challenges what is inherently female or feminine, Ahmed also challenges the notions of the inherent, "what is" when it comes to understanding the dynamics and complexities around gendered phenomenon's like that of heavily tattooed women. Ahmed also offers her understanding of what a Killjoy is and this acts as a tool for displaying how heavily tattooed women can also be seen as Killjoy's. Finally, feminist theory is able act as an overarching tool to recognizing where sexism still exist and how heavily tattooed women face sexism when it comes to their tattoos and actively participating within the tattoo culture.

Ahmed uses the term, "Gender Fatalism" this is the applied assumption of gender roles. She gives the example of, "boys will be boys". She stresses that what "will be" is inherently "what is" (2017). She uses this term to describe how individuals and institutions encourage, reward, and perpetuate our current sexist culture. Ahmed argues that with sayings like, "boys will be boys" or inherent set standards around gender, come first with set predictions, and with these predictions comes the command for people to act

out those original predictions, and then those predictions and commands become the set expectations for men and women (2017). Ahmed gives the example that because the saying, “boys will be boys” is enforced as an expectation this allows for, “because you are a girl we can do this to you” (2017: 26) which perpetuates and allows for violence against women. This then creates the prediction that women will modify their behavior and bodies in public space, which then becomes a command, and then becomes our societal expectation of women to practice. This is how we see sexism being practiced within our everyday society. Sexism broadly defined, can be understood as the stereotyping or discrimination mostly against and of women. By enforcing expectations of both men and women is to enforce stereotypes of those two genders. By encouraging or upholding higher standards of men to act in a certain manner, or to basically encourage Misogyny as Serano sees it... is Sexism (Serano 2007 and Ahmed 2017). Although, the majority of Ahmed's work (I feel) revolves more around recognizing and addressing sexism rather defining it. Through her term of, “Gender Fatalism” she proves that sexism is still relevant now more than ever in our society because we still predict, command, and expect certain behaviors of men and women (2017). For women to currently have to be modifying their behavior and maneuver within social spaces to meet societal expectations, to avoid larger amounts of discrimination, and to ensure safety is proof that our society is in a sexist state and that sexism does exist.

Ahmed’s term “Feminist Killjoy” describes the person who addresses something that is problematic, someone who chooses to be heard. Typically it is a women that disrupts social order because she recognizes that something is problematic and chooses to

addresses the sexism or racism in the room (2017). For Ahmed she is the Killjoy at her family table.... (When she does what?) . She is the Killjoy when she speaks and addresses what is problematic is seen as being the source of argument. The person who is disrupting social order becomes the problem rather than the root cause of sexism being seen as the problem (2017). The Killjoy creates intensity and disrupts the normal flow of communication. Ahmed states that it is not necessarily what the Killjoy is saying to be heard but it is the action of her speaking out that disrupts social order (2017). It is problematic and uncomfortable for others when the Feminist Killjoy chooses to call out sexism but it is far more disruptive for this woman to speak and choose to disrupt a social setting. In Ahmed's case she constantly is seen as disrupting family meals and events (2017). Ahmed also states that the Killjoy wherever she goes experiences the, "Rolling Eyes". Before the Feminist Killjoy is ever able to speak, wherever she goes, and whatever she says; eyes are always rolling at her as a way to dismiss what she says and as a way to avoid her calling attention to sexism (2017). The eye roll is a way for people to ignore the Feminist Killjoy and the way she disrupts social order so that they too don't disrupt social order and actually bring their attention to the sexist ways of society. It is a way for others to remain comfortable in settings that are actually highly uncomfortable for women, feminist, our society as a whole, and especially the Feminist Killjoy.

Ahmed's, Gender Fatalism applies to the study of heavily tattooed women because these women by choosing to become heavily tattooed are challenging what is inherently feminine. By challenging what is inherently feminine is to challenge the, "what will be" or what we understand to be the definition of female or feminine, and by

challenging the “what will be” is also to challenge and change the course of the, “what is”. Women who choose to become heavily tattooed are challenging the definitions of what is inherently feminine or the “what will be” and by participating in tattoo culture they are changing the course and altering their bodies in a way that ultimately changes the, “what is”. Heavily tattooed women again are challenging stereotypes around women’s bodies. Again, they are challenging the ideas that women’s bodies should: please men by being, “soft, supple, thin, sexy, unblemished feminine bodies” (Atkinson 2002: 232, and Raymond 2011). When a woman challenges the, “what will be” by becoming heavily tattooed she drastically changes her course of the, “what is” because she never fulfills the predictions that were set out for her. She doesn’t meet the “ideal” definitions of what it means to be female, to achieve femininity, and the definitions of what a woman’s body should look like. She is challenging the set version of femininity and what it looks like. Heavily tattooed women are redefining and creating their own versions of femininity.

Heavily tattooed women become Killjoy’s because they are disrupting the social order of what a woman’s body is inherently supposed to look like. Instead of being a Feminist Killjoy by speaking out when something is problematic and choosing to be heard, heavily tattooed women are speaking out through the discourse of their bodies. They are women who are choosing to be seen. Becoming heavily tattooed is a socially unacceptable compared to that of the norm or the set standard of an inherently feminine body. Instead of vocally disrupting heavily tattooed women’s version of Ahmed’s Killjoy is to visually disrupt through their large, visual, feminine, and unfeminine tattoo pieces.

Visually disruption still creates discomfort within the set social order because it is challenging the rules around body image and beauty culture. Heavily tattooed women who become the Feminist Killjoy through their visual disruption often times catch the attention of the eye rather than experience the eye roll that Ahmed discusses. Women who are heavily tattooed often times experience the unwanted attention of staring, touching, and inappropriate questions (Thompson 2015). When a heavily tattooed women walks into a room she captures the eyes of many because her skin doesn't reflect that of the majority, specifically the majority of other women who may meet inherently feminine standards. She does not experience judgement and awareness that she is the Killjoy through the eye roll rather, judgement and awareness that she is the Killjoy by the number of people who stare.

The Feminist Killjoy that chooses to visually disrupt is essentially able to call out sexism by addressing the ways in which our society has established unrealistic expectations around what it means to be considered female, feminine, and around the female body. Stigmatizing those bodies that defy or don't meet societal expectations or our beauty culture standards is a way of reinforcing sexism. Heavily tattooed women who choose to define their own definition of femininity and beauty by becoming tattooed and disrupting the visual social order are challenging sexism within our society. They are creating new discourse and standards around the female body and femininity.

## METHODS: ASKING ABOUT INK MUST BE CONSENSUAL

My study focuses on how heavily tattooed women see themselves in terms of a society where stigmatization towards tattoos is changing but still exist. I'm looking at why these women choose to becoming heavily tattooed and how they determine what representative artwork to place on their bodies. To narrow themes in my study, I have used a multimethod approach that includes qualitative interviews and visual sociology. The term visual sociology will refer to capturing the visual image of body art and the narrative that follows the photographed object. Specifically for visual sociology I asked participating women if I could take pictures of two tattoos of their choosing. These tattoos were either their favorite or most meaningful tattoos. The data collected was gathered in Humboldt County, California and Mesa County, Colorado. All Data Collected was done in a six month time period. From February of 2018 and July of 2018. My IRB was approved on February 20, 2018, and the confirmation number is 17-135. Over the six month time period I interviewed a total of 15 women who all identified as heavily tattooed (meaning five or more pieces).

### *Interviews and Recruitment*

My recruitment began by reaching out through email to heavily tattooed women that I knew here in Humboldt County. I then recruited through email to a list full of women who my advisor Meredith Williams had connected me to. I sent formal emails to potential individual participants asking if they would be interested in allowing me to



interview them. After interviews were conducted I gave participants a recruitment flyer and asked if they would be willing to pass my information on to other heavily tattooed women they may know. All of my interviews occurred in public spaces (coffee shops, on Humboldt State campus, restaurants, etc...). Due to the fact that all interviews were done in public, participants might have felt pressure to censor themselves in the interview process, but overall participants seemed excited to share their knowledge and opinions about their tattoos and the tattoo culture, and were especially open to showing off their tattoos.

For my interviews I resorted to using non-probability and snowball sampling methods (Berg and Lune 2012). All interviews were audio recorded using a secure recording application on personal iPad/iPhone devices. Interviews lasted anywhere between 20 minutes to one hour. Participant's ages ranged from 21- 48 years old. A majority of my participants were Caucasian. There were 11 participants that identified as white, two that identified as mixed (Mexican and White), and two that identified as Mexican. The race of my participants can be representative of the areas in which data was collected. Participants were allowed to pick a nickname for themselves. Only 2 out of the 15 choose a nickname they would prefer to go by. The other 13 participants felt comfortable with their given names. For this study however participants signed confidentiality forms so their full real names will not be provided.

All interviews were opened up by reviewing consent form with participants and answering any questions participants may have had. I used a semi-standardized interview using questions I had predetermined prior to interviews (Berg and Lune 2012). All

questions were asked in the same order. Questions were explained if participants asked for clarification or didn't understand (Berg and Lune 2012). The questions were simplified and remained unbiased. I probed for further explanations. Asking participants why or asking if they could expand more on what they had told me (Berg and Lune 2012). My questions revolved around asking participants the history behind their tattooing trends, how their perceptions changed about themselves before and after becoming heavily tattooed, how they thought others viewed them, stigmas they faced, and their future with tattoos and tattooing.

I knew of many heavily tattooed women prior to this study. So, it was easy for me to connect to a population of heavily tattooed women and ask them to become participants in the study. But, because I am also considered a heavily tattooed woman it was easy for me to relate to and understand their position of what it's like to be a heavily tattooed woman (Berg and Lune 2012; Bishop 2008; Johnson 2002). I was able to understand what participants were communicating because of my experience being tattooed (Berg and Lune 2012; Bishop 2008; Johnson 2002). I had to remain conscious about relying too much on personal experience and knowledge's so that it wouldn't lead to misrepresenting participants. Also to be able to eliminate my own interpretations, assumptions, and biases from the overall outcome of the study (Charmaz 2014; Johnson 2002).

*Visual Sociology*

Again, visual sociology acted as a tool to connect the subject of heavily tattooed women and the object of body art. The pictures themselves acted as the median between the subject and the object. At the end of each interview, I asked participants if I could take pictures of two of their tattoos. These tattoos were of their choosing and were tattoos that they either liked the most or that meant the most to them. Participants consented both verbally and by checking the box labeled, “yes” on the consent form. All 15 participants consented to having two of their tattoos photographed. Photographs were stored on a secure and locked device of an iPhone/iPad. Photographs were kept in a single file dedicated to their purpose. The pictures of these women’s tattoos are to be further representative of the artwork and explanations they gave in their interviews. Faces and bodily features that would be a distinct form of identifying someone were avoided and not photographed for the sake of participant’s safety.

Coding took place along with the transcribing of interviews. However, the photos collected were not coded and are present because they are aesthetically pleasing and add to the richness of the data collected. I have chosen to code line-by-line instead of focusing and coding the individuals. I choose to take a grounded theory approach where I present my analysis directly from my collected data rather than basing my analysis around already established theoretical frameworks (Charmaz 2014).

## DATA ANALYSIS: TELLING THE STORY

After conducting my qualitative interviews and coding them line by line, I was able to identify four solid themes based on knowledge from previous literature around heavily tattooed women and recurring/similar answers and statements that ran throughout all 16 of my interviews. The themes I identified consistently overlap with one another but this had helped with embracing valuable key points that my study found.

### *Reclaiming Body Image*

The first theme I identified I will refer to as Body Image. Body Image can be understood as something that is both structured by society and created by an individual. For heavily tattooed women they choose tattoos as a way to create their own self-image. Tattoos have allowed for women to create and meet their own personal ideals around what they would prefer their body to look like or who and what they want to represent. Along with that women often times use tattooing as a way to reclaim their bodies from societal expectations around what a woman should look like. Women who choose tattooing are reclaiming both their ideal versions of body image for themselves as well their physical bodies. By tattooing their bodies, women have been able to make a canvas out of themselves and step away from the modeled version of what a woman's flesh should visually look like and what being a woman stereotypically represents. With the reclamation of Body Image by becoming heavily tattooed, many women experience a boost in confidence. Almost all of the women interviewed remarked that they felt more

confident after becoming heavily tattooed or receiving tattoos. These women felt more confident in themselves, in their ideal versions of body image, and their now physically displayed body image.

I interviewed Roz, a 24 year old, white, queer, woman who stated that she had 14 tattoos all together. Many of which were large, visually displayed pieces. When Roz was asked how she felt about her body before she had tattoos had stated:

Super shitty let's be honest but that was because I was also working through issues of like body image because as a fat person...like obviously everyone has body image issues but I was coming to terms of like me being fat.

Roz shared with me that her thought process when first deciding to become tattooed was:

Well if I get a tattoo here on this body part maybe I'll be more comfortable showing it...like my arms.

But, when discussing how tattoos altered her self-perception she states that:

...it was like my fat body just allows me to have more space for more tattoos so (I) definitely had like more of a negative relationship with my body and getting tattoos definitely helps me be like oh now I'm going to wear cute clothes because I want people to see me and my artwork.

Roz directly addresses that her “fat body” actually just allows her more space for body art and gives her the ability to have much larger pieces in areas of her body. Women often see their bodies as blank canvases for body art. In Roz's case tattooing transforms the perception of her body from being thought of as, “fat” or undesirable. Instead, into a body that has a larger area to be filled with body art. For Roz fatter means more canvas. Tattooing assisted in radically altering Roz's perception of her own physicality along with many other heavily tattooed women who face bodily stigma.

I later interviewed Darian who identified herself as a white, bi-sexual, 22 year old female. She had about 9 tattoos depending on if you were counting the number of sessions that took place when receiving the tattoos or the tattoo pieces in general. Her body art consisted of large colorful pieces that would always be visible when wearing a short sleeve or tank top. Similarly to Roz, I asked Darian how she felt about her body before she had tattoos. She responded with:

All of my tattoos aren't really in like places that define my body I guess. I felt not as confident as I do with my tattoos because I love having art on my body and having something to show off.  
But, when I then asked how Darian would have gauged her own self-confidence before she had tattoos she stated:

I would say my self-confidence was probably like a 5. Now I'm probably looking at like a 9.5.

When digging deeper to try and understand what had transformed Darian's confidence that would be related to her tattoos, I had asked her what had changed in her confidence and why she had a lower confidence prior to having tattoos. Her response was:

Yes, so I have a tattoo on my arm right here. I have pretty flabby arms is my personal thought about myself. So, I got a tattoo there to cover up my flab. Now it makes me feel a little less flabby when I have some pretty art on it.

Both Roz and Darian expressed specific dislike towards their arms but also both expressed that by tattooing their arms along with other various tattoos helped with boosting their confidence. Tattooing a once self-conscious area of the body lead to encouraging both women to show off their arms and feeling more comfortable in the body they are in. Tattooing for both women acted as a way to transform preconceived

notions of body image and help these women transform their bodies into meeting their expectations for their own self-image and ideal body-image.

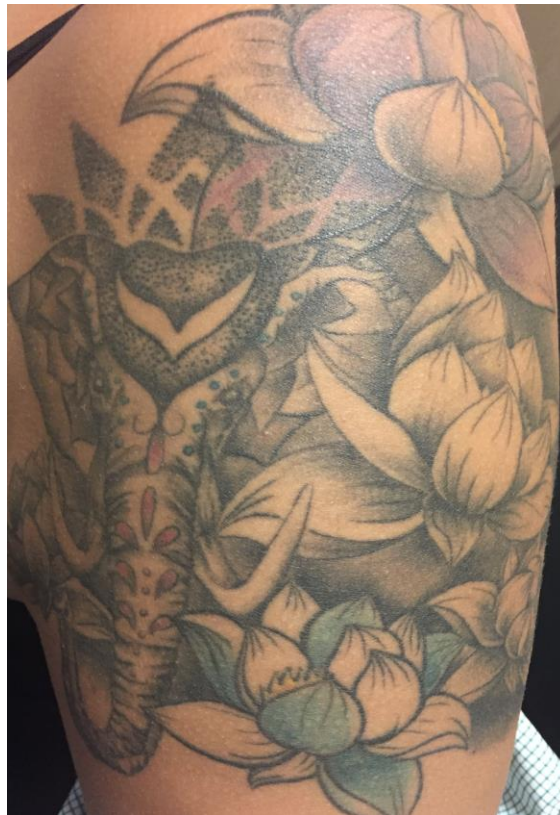


Figure 1

Roz and Darian, along with many of the other women I interviewed recognize that tattoos allow them to create their own self-image. Tattoos help these women to reclaim their bodies and help create what being a woman looks like to them specifically. It is common for people, and for this study, woman to battle with societal expectations around body image. Roz faced a common battle of negotiating with her weight, and while every woman's body image battle is different. Here it is important to recognize that tattoos can

act as a way for women to reclaim both their physical body from societal expectations and reclaim body image by creating self-image through the expressiveness of tattoos. Roz and almost every other woman in my study used tattoos as a way to feel more confident about themselves and as reason to show off their bodies. Tattoos act as an encouragement to women to show off their bodies, which has led to women feeling more confident about their projected body image. As well as wanting to project those body images more frequently.

Later in the interview I had asked Roz what were two of her most meaningful tattoos. She identified that one of her most meaningful tattoos was a curvier lady that was located on her upper right arm that had a quote from Maryland Juan that says, “Life’s too short for self-hatred and celery sticks”. When I asked Roz why this had become one of her favorite tattoos she stated:

The whole point is to represent like going against like diet culture... That was the tattoo that I got as a representation of trying to distance myself from like bodily control and diet culture.

It is important to note here that not only is Roz going against societal expectations around body image by becoming a heavily tattooed female but that she has also chosen body art that displays breaking away from those bodily expectations. She is both embracing her body and body image by being heavily tattooed and reclaiming what it means and looks like to be a woman through her body art. Her curvy figured woman represents the variety of women’s bodies that do and can exist. The figure along with the quote challenges typical assumptions that women who don’t fit into the traditional definition of what it



looks like to be a woman must feel bad about themselves, and these women to feel better about themselves have to do everything it takes to fit into the one, slim definition of what it looks like to be a woman. Roz's choice in tattoo becomes powerful in helping to reclaim not just her own body but challenging false ideas of women's bodies everywhere (Figure 2).

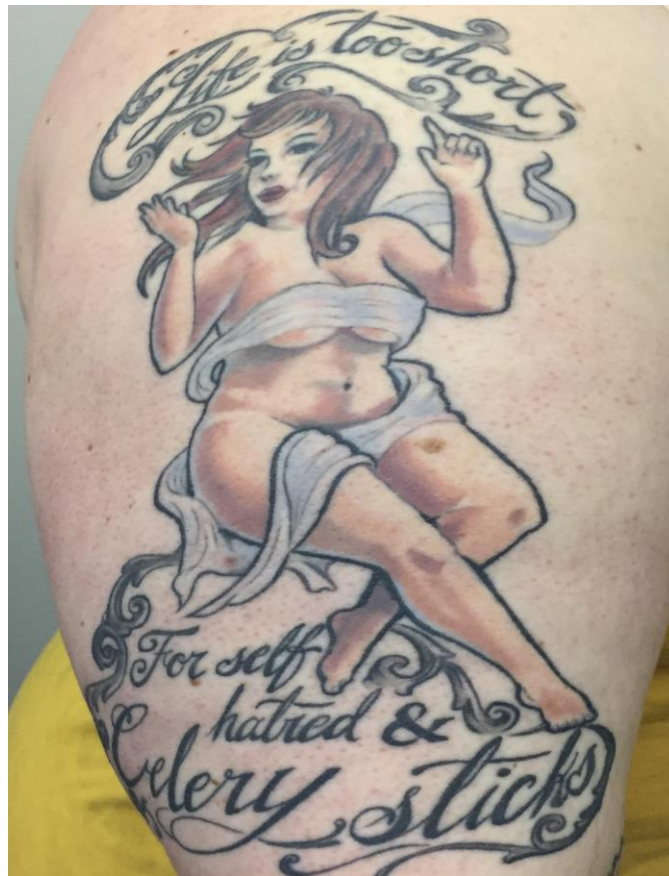


Figure 2

### *Empowerment the Many Forms*

The second theme I identified I am choosing to call Empowerment. The act of becoming heavily tattooed seemed to empower women in a variety of different

directions. Empowerment will overlap a lot in terms of body image but this is beneficial when it comes to understanding the effects that tattoos have on the interviewed women's confidence. Confidence is a direct measurement of both body image and empowerment. The difference between empowerment and body image that I would stress is that body image seems to be a more internal process while empowerment is more external. While confidence plays a huge role in these women's body image. Tattoos also lead to women feeling more empowered which gives them confidence to engage with the outside in broader terms. Prime examples would be that tattoos often times help women tell stories about themselves they wouldn't otherwise share to outsiders. Tattoos allow heavily tattooed women the space to be different from other people and to feel good about their differences. Here Empowerment will be understood as, the confidence that women found in becoming heavily tattooed and how this lead to feeling good about one's body and body image. Tattoos act as a way to empower a variety of stigmas that women face including physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Tattoos can empower women to challenge typical definitions of femininity and to take on forms of what is considered, "alternative" forms of femininity. Finally, tattoos are a way to challenge our current expectations around beauty culture and a way to empower women to feel beautiful in their own skin and with who they are.

I interviewed Laura who identified herself as a white, lesbian, 33 year old female. Laura never told me specifically how many tattoos she had but had responded to the email and the flyer I had sent her saying she would allow me to interview her about her tattoos. This led me to believe she had five or more pieces. When I sat down with Laura

at a coffee shop and she removed her jacket I could automatically see visually displayed tattoos that were sporadically spread out on both arms. Unlike a lot of the women I interviewed, Laura was keen about how her tattoos were specific in representing things in her mind rather than for some form of external beauty. Using tattoos as a way to control or transform body image was not something Laura related too much. Her interview back rather unique in that she was consistent in telling the stories of her many tattoos and what they represented to her in her mind rather than on her body. The mind over the body became a really powerful and empowering form of expression of Laura.

There are a variety of points throughout Laura's interview when the theme of empowerment is brought up. The first time I saw empowerment emerge was when I had asked Laura, what being heavily tattooed represented to her. Her response:

It's a way to talk about things with people that aren't necessarily what you talk about. I didn't get tattooed to look pretty. I know that there's that kind of pinnacle. Look pretty, die pretty. But, for me it's a conversation starter... I have one (tattoo), probably my favorite piece that is a  $\frac{2}{3}$  of a sleeve and it was kind of this battle with my depression and this theme in this book I really like. It's a really cool way to talk to people about depression and take some of the stigma away from it. So, that what I like about it I guess.

There are several other occasions throughout our interview process where Laura is able to express how her tattoos have acted as a way to empower her when experiencing depression and empower her to share her story about battling depression with others through her body art. For instance, I asked Laura if she felt like her tattoos were able to help express who she is and why or why not, she replied with:

Yes, I guess. Along those lines I can't just walk up to somebody and talk about depression, it's important, and people die because of it. But, when

they see what's on my arm and they're like why do you have that then I can relate it to a book I have read and how I envision this theme that followed this book right? And, how it directly spoke to me about my own struggles with depression like it's a really cool way to have a conversation about it. It provides that opportunity.

From a first impression we couldn't and probably wouldn't assume that Laura's  $\frac{2}{3}$  sleeve would represent a relationship with depression. However, for Laura that becomes the key point for empowerment. She believes her tattoo isn't cosmetically pleasing. Its purpose wasn't to look pretty. Laura's tattoo acts, for her, as a talking point to discuss a rather stigmatized mental illness that is popularly ignored in society. The tattoo when addressed by others empowers Laura to talk about depression and the thoughts and connections she makes in her mind. Tattooing for Laura ultimately, can be seen as empowering her to be vulnerable both physically with the displayed body art and mentally/emotionally when displaying the deeper meaning her tattoo beholds and her experience with depression. Tattoos can be empowering for heavily tattooed women to express their own versions of vulnerability. That's what we can choose to see here with Laura.



Figure 3

Quite differently from Laura, I interviewed Peach who embraced on multiple occasions that she was open to getting a variety of things tattooed on her. Peach was much more spunky in her choice of tattoo's. Peach identified as a mixed race of both Mexican and Caucasian, pansexual, 28 year old female. I first began to see the theme of empowerment in Peach's interview when I asked her what does being heavily tattooed mean to you. She said:

Being tattooed, I think it represents confidence and I think it represents who you are as a person. It's me representing myself to the world... I think it's also showing me that I can be comfortable in myself. In my own skin I guess like I said earlier it's a reminder that my body is beautiful and

that its fine and I can do whatever I want with it and I don't have to answer to anybody. I can put what I want on it and it's just me. It's all about me. It's the only body I have so I might as well dress it up a little bit.

Here with Peach we definitely see an overlap of her embracing body image because her tattoos help her to feel comfortable in her skin and remind her daily that her body is beautiful. I specifically like this statement because she says, "it represents confidence" and "It's me representing myself to the world". These key statements can be representative of empowerment in that her tattoos give her confidence to help represent who she strongly believes she is. Then she feels empowered to share who she is with others and with the rest of the world. She is able to tell her story of who she is through her body art. Internally she is practicing body image control by first feeling comfortable with who she is and feeling beautiful in ways she previously might not have felt before she had tattoos. Externally she is practicing empowerment by placing body art that tells a story of who she is. Her tattoos are a way of opening up and sharing who she is with the outside.

I had interviewed Jocelyn who identified as a white, queer, 21 year old, and female. I had asked her if becoming heavily tattooed had changed or altered her perception of herself. She responded with:

I'd say so... I guess it just proves to myself that I can do it. I've always kind of been like a wuss about pain like every time I get a piercing or shot I think like I am not strong in that way but I can sit through a tattoo just fine. So, each time I get one I tell myself that I am strong and I am not just a weenie who faints when they get shots.

I then specifically asked Jocelyn if she thought tattoos represented not only physical strength but other types of strength as well. She said:

Yes, like strength of character. Like strength of like being very strong in convictions because it's... You are so sure of something that you're gonna put it on your body forever you know? You have to feel pretty confident in your beliefs I guess. So, it represents that.

I draw a strong connection between Peach and how her tattoos have empowered her to share who she is with the outside and with Jocelyn's statement that tattoos represent strength in an individual person's convictions. For peach, her tattoos have provided various forms confidence. With new embarked confidence Peach feels empowered to show off who she is. Peach's confidence has led to as Jocelyn puts it, "strength of character". Peach feels confident in who she is or has become with her tattoos. She again as Jocelyn puts it is, "strong in (her) convictions" because she is empowered to get tattoos that represent who she is and to then share that body art, visually with the outside world. Tattoos have in some ways shaped Peach's strength of character and assisted her in feeling strong in her convictions about who she is which has led to her empowerment of showing off who she is by becoming a heavily tattooed woman.



Figure 4



Figure 5



For Peach, her tattoos didn't always have to represent something meaningful or have a story behind them. Whereas for Laura her tattoos were closely connected to her mind and there were deeper meanings behind her body art. There was a mixture of women who felt that all of their tattoos needed to have meaning behind them and others who didn't believe that all tattoos had to have purpose behind them. I had asked Peach if she thought becoming heavily tattooed had impacted her self-confidence and how. She responded with:

It just made me feel better about myself. It helped me realize that I don't need to be like everybody else. It's okay to be different. It's okay to enjoy what I enjoy as long as I enjoy it.

I then right after asked her if her tattoos had helped define who she was. She said:

Absolutely! I like to get just random shit tattooed on me. Like yes I have a meaningful one (tattoo) but I just have fucking weird ones. Like I was super into anime when I was younger called, *Digimon*. It was kind of like Pokémon but different and I fucking loved it. I got a tattoo from that show on my leg. No fucking reason I just really liked the character. I connected with her and I was like whatever, I'll put her on me. I understand why people would want to get a tattoo that's very meaningful to them or very special. At the same time out in the community people think that's the only kind of tattoo you should have but I don't really care. If I like it then I'm going to fucking get it on me because at some point in my life I enjoyed it so why not get it? It just reminds me of that time in my life.

I then specifically asked Peach if tattoos didn't always have to have deeper meanings like people expected and she said:

Yea. I want an avocado with a cat as the pit with its feet tucked in. For no reason I just like avocados and cats. I don't need to have a fucking story about it.

While tattoos have helped Peach to feel more self-confident, she also enforces that she doesn't feel pressured to be like everyone else while also embracing that it is acceptable to be different. This is another example where tattoos have led to Peach feeling more confident and confidence has led to empowerment. Here Peach feels empowered to be different from others by becoming a heavily tattooed woman. This is very similar to her having more self-confidence and feeling empowered to share who she is. However, here she is not only embracing who she is but she is embracing what makes her different. She also again is practicing strong conviction by choosing tattoos that she genuinely likes for herself. She is able to self-express by choosing body art that is representative of her own individual taste and likes. Peach does not feel pressured from outside sources to have tattoos that only represent deeper meanings. Instead she chooses tattoos that are in some way more individualized and assist in telling the story of who she is. By eliminating the obligation that tattoos have to have a deeper meaning, Peach is again embracing being different from others. This is inclusive of being different from other tattooed individuals and even other heavily tattooed women. However, while Peach feels empowered to be different from others, at the same time she still feels empowered to be distinguished as a heavily tattooed woman.



Figure 6

*Agency over Body and Expression*

The third theme identified was Agency. Specifically, the amount of agency that tattoos allowed women to reclaim and to display over their bodies. Here agency refers to the ability for women to reclaim their bodies when choosing to become tattooed for themselves. Heavily tattooed women are able to practice agency by using tattoos as a form of expression and self-art. They can exert agency to tell their personal life stories

and interpretations through the act of tattooing. Tattoos allow for women to have agency that leads to women being able to access both physical space, on their bodies, and social space when interacting and relating their tattoos to others.

I interviewed Ashlee who identified herself as a Hispanic, straight, 26 year old female. She had a variety of large visible pieces on her arms that were all meaningful and represented many different things to her personally (Figure 7 & 8). Being able to exert agency by expressing herself through her tattoos was something she brought up frequently in many of the questions I asked her throughout our interview process. The theme of agency through expression first appeared in one of the beginning questions when I asked Ashlee. Which was, what made her want more tattoos after her very first tattoo. She responded with:

Honestly, ever since I was little I knew I wanted to be covered in tattoos it's kind of weird but to me it was always a form of expression and art and I just knew I wanted to be able to express myself in this way... So, it's like you're an art collector but it's just on your body instead of in your house of something.

For Ashlee, the artwork of her tattoos is essential when being able to express who she is to other close to her and to a larger society. Tattoos are a way for women to exert agency because they are in a way able to give women space and a voice to visually vocalize who these women are and the stories they wish to tell. When I then asked Ashlee what being heavily tattooed represented to her, she said:

I don't know. Just self-expression, just being in your skin, being comfortable.

Ashlee's tattoos allow her to have agency in expressing who she is but they also act as a way for her to declare she is comfortable with who she is. Many other women I interviewed also related to how they were able to exert agency by expressing who they are through their tattoos. Her tattoos give her agency both over who she is broadly and over her body.



Figure 7



Figure 8

Emily who identifies as a white, bi-sexual, 22 year old female also commonly brought up that agency meant being able to open and freely express herself. When I asked Emily if she thought her tattoos helped define who she was, she stated:

I think maybe not defining who I am but being able to express who I am and in a new way that I haven't been able to or wouldn't be able to without them (her tattoos).

Tattoos for Emily act as a form of agency because before she had tattoos she lacked a valuable tool that was essential for her when expressing herself. With tattoos she is now able to show off who she is and have tattoo that represent stories of who she is (Figure 9 & 10).

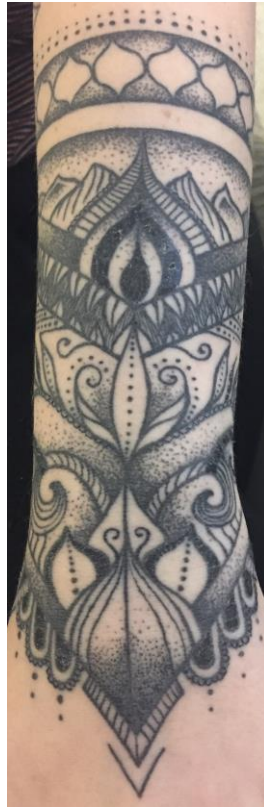


Figure 9



Figure 10

Ashlee however, brings up another very essential key point when understanding that tattoos as a form of expression can be a way to exert agency. I asked Ashlee what being heavily tattooed meant to her (note: this is different than what tattoos represent to her).

She stated:

I mean it can be your whole body covered in armor or something but it's just whatever those tattoos mean to you. Like it doesn't need to mean anything to anyone else as long as they're like... you get them for you and it's just like your own artwork and like a way of expressing yourself. So, it's just like a really beautiful form of expression I think.

Ashlee continues to discuss how powerful expression is for her when it comes to also having agency. She also mentions how it is essential that getting tattoos should be for an individual's satisfaction and not for anyone else. Almost all of the women I interviewed also stressed that getting tattoos was for self-satisfaction and not for the pleasure of anyone else or to meet any other expectation. Tattooing for the self becomes an act of agency in that it lays a claim to an individual's personal desires, and to the fact that these women have control over their bodies and they act on this control by choosing to become heavily tattooed.

Again, in Laura's interview she brought up many points that revolved around agency and reclaiming her body. I asked Laura if she has ever had to hide her tattoos how she would react to this and why. Her response revolved around if a potential job would ask her to cover her tattoos. She stated:

I won't do it. I won't take jobs where I can't have my piercings or my tattoos... You don't get to control anything about me. You pay me to do the one task that you hired me for and I'll do that but outside of that MY BODY MY RULES.

Many of the women I interviewed express agency that are similar to the saying, "My body my rules". Tattoos act as a way to reclaim the body in that women get to decide what their bodies will now look like when injecting ink into the skin. Women are the artist of their own bodies which can be viewed as their own personal blank canvases.



When choosing to become heavily tattooed women are aware of the strict guidelines that are set around the female body and what their bodies are expected to look like. Heavily tattooed women are aware of the consequences that could potentially emerge due to the fact that they are tattooed. However, they still choose to become tattooed despite these consequences. Women are intentionally getting tattoos in order to alter their bodies to look the way they desire. They choose tattoos that will represent the things they wish to display. For these women it's no longer about fitting into societal expectations of what their skin should look to define them anymore. These women are expressing agency by declaring that their bodies will be decorated how they choose and that they ideally will not be restricted by societal expectations around a woman's body. They are reclaiming their bodies.

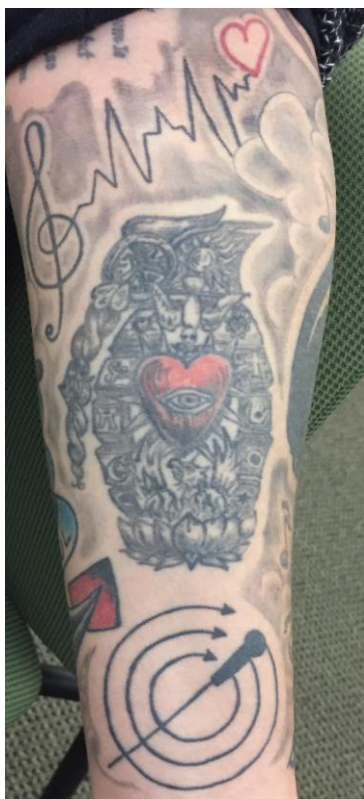


Figure 11

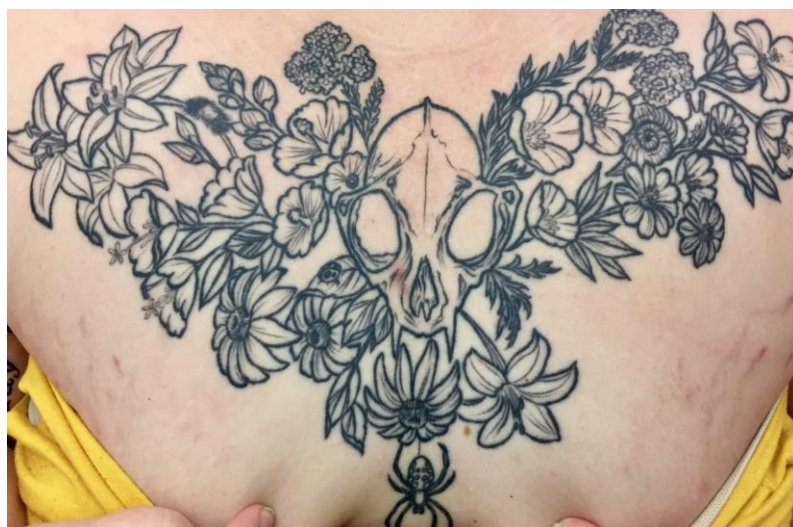


Figure 12

*Stigma Still Lingers*

The final theme I identified is Stigma. Women continue to feel stigmatized about their tattoos despite the fact that tattoos have become highly mainstreamed and this has led to the recent shift in stigmas especially among younger generations. Women feel that older generations and the workplace are still very much an influence in stigmatizing tattoos and especially heavily tattooed women. Moreover, tattoos continue to be masculinized and the tradition that tattoos aren't inherently feminine still lingers. I interviewed Char and Fern as a group interview. They were both white, straight, females. Char was 48 and Fern 23. They both frequently talked about how due to the fact that they are heavily tattooed they don't think they should be defined by labels or that people should assume less of them. I had asked Char and Fern how they felt about their bodies now that they were heavily tattooed. They responded with:

Fern: I think it has improved for sure. I think that I like going to work and I like people... I don't really show off my tattoos that much but when I do people are kind of surprised that I do have a half sleeve. But, I've been doing your job that you like the work I've been doing. You like the work that I have been doing and that is proof right there that a woman who is tattooed can do that and if not probably even better. That there is no reason for you to judge a tattoo or somebody who has a tattoo.

Char: I agree. I think that it is a very judgmental thing right now. It's getting better because of people like us, women like us. Because I am not a low class, ghetto girl. And, you don't have to be to have tattoo ya know? And, that's what people think.

Fern: It makes me want to get more and it doesn't change our work ethic.

A lot of the women I interviewed wanted to talk about stigmas and labels throughout many of the questions that I had asked them. Toward the end of my interviews is when I typically asked questions about stigma. But, more often than not, women were identifying various forms of stigmas that they felt strongly about and felt still existed. Fern frequently identified that stigma in the workplace was something she both felt strongly about and that she believed still existed. She was persistent in that tattoos should not be discriminated against within the workplace because that has not and will not affect heavily tattooed women's work ethics.

Char brings up an interesting point that tattoos are associated with, "low class, ghetto girls". That heavily tattooed women who have chosen the route of body art somehow become lesser of a person. There exist this strong association still that tattoos belong only on an already stigmatized woman's body. Like previously mentioned throughout history tattoos have been associated for women with prostitution. There's the idea that you have to be potentially poor and lack moral standards to be heavily tattooed. Essentially, this also comes back around to not fitting into ideal standards of femininity. Because women who are labeled, "poor" and "ghetto" are considered less feminine it becomes more acceptable somehow for these women's to be the ONLY type of women who would become heavily tattooed.

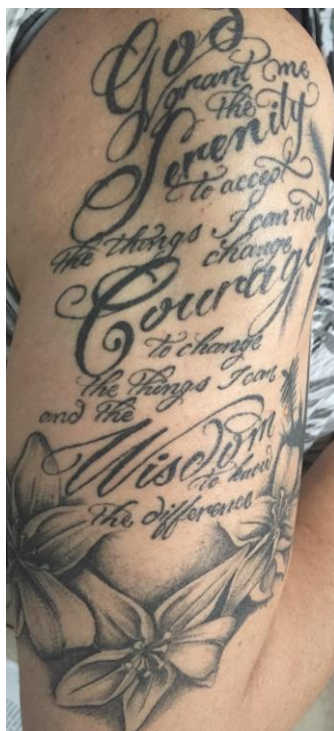


Figure 13



Figure 14

Again, later in the interview I asked Char and Fern if they ever felt like they had to hide or cover their tattoos. They responded with:

Fern: I definitely do. I think around an older generation sometimes. If I went into a job interview I feel like I do have to hide my tattoos because somebody who doesn't have a half sleeve may be viewed as more professional or something along those lines... Yea, I'm not as educated as I actually am. I think that definitely plays a role in that. So, I do notice that I do cover up my tattoos when I do go to work.

Char: Yes, sometimes. Yea like you're not as smart. It's mainly the older generation people. This guy came into my work he was probably close to 60 and he said, "You have tattoos" and I was like yes. He goes, "My daughter has tattoos too and I just can't understand it. I will just never understand it." And, I was just like okay you don't have to understand it but you can respect me.

There responses back up the notion that people who are already stigmatized as potentially being less educated or intelligent are thought to be the only bodies that would ever alter their bodies by being heavily tattooed. Here we see how the workplace stigmatizes tattoos by reinforcing that people with tattoos lack professionalism and lack the intelligence that is required for a job. We also see the disconnect between younger and older generations. How older generations seem to be more critical of tattoos specifically, tattoos on women. For older generations tattoos were not as mainstream as they are today so older people in our society had less interactions with people who had tattoos. While older generations may not understand why younger generations are choosing to become tattooed it is still important as Char points out that people still respect others who choose to be tattooed. That means respecting heavily tattooed women and their choice in body art.

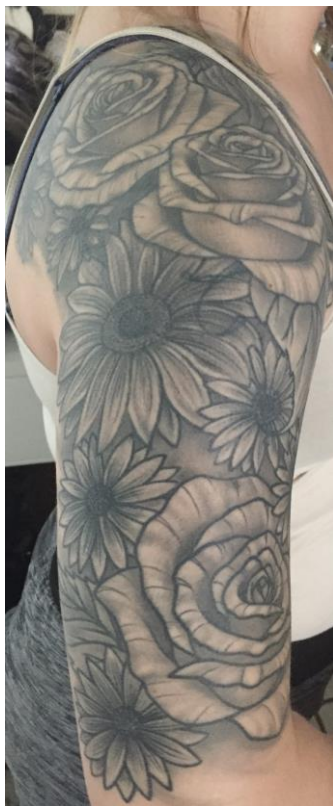


Figure 15

## DISCUSSION

Tattoos for women have become a symbol for empowerment. The relationship between heavily tattooed women and their body art is something that runs deep and can be transformative for these women. These tattoos help women in a variety of different way throughout their life's journey. As we know from previous literature tattoos have become increasingly popular and women are choosing to become tattooed in much larger numbers than ever before. While tattoos have predominantly been associated with men and masculinity. Heavily tattooed women are shifting these associations by continuing to collect tattoos and by being vulnerable enough to display their ink so that other women can encounter the possibility of choosing body art as a form of body modification. Heavily tattooed women have challenged tattoos as being male and masculine defined by increasingly getting tattoos in much higher numbers compared to men specifically. Women have been able to challenge our cultures current standards around what is feminine and masculine. As well as challenge the standards of our current beauty culture.

This research identified four core main themes that are valuable when looking at the phenomenon of heavily tattooed women. First, was Body Image, women were able to create unique identities for themselves as well as alter their body image in a positive way. The confidence that tattoos gave women affected body image a lot. Confidence played an internal role for tattooed women and shaped how they viewed themselves after they had become heavily tattooed. Many women previewed to look at their bodies as blank canvases waiting to be filled rather than "flawed" bodies.



Following, the second theme was Empowerment. Confidence was again also a measurement for empowerment but here confidence played an external role. After women had begun collecting tattoos and had become overall heavily tattooed they felt more confident in showing off their bodies and displaying their ideas through body art. Third, was Agency. Tattoos can act as a tool for women to reclaim their bodies by choosing body art that they feel achieves self-expression. Tattoos give women agency because it allows for women to take control of their bodies and allows them to tell a story or relate to others. Tattoos can act as a heavily tattooed woman's timeline. The final theme identified was stigma. Although stigmas are lessening due to the popularity that tattoos have encountered, lingering stigma still exist. Many of the women I talked with identified that stigmas still remains among older generations and within the workplace. Heavily tattooed women face stigmas around whether their tattoo is seen as feminine or not. There is a continuance of stigma around the idea that only women who are already stigmatized are deemed acceptable to carry tattoos. However, from the array of different women interviewed we can see that tattoos are for a variety of different women. That tattoos are no longer just acceptable for just one kind of body. But, rather tattoos are for anyone who desires them and that all bodies are beautiful.

While this study has been beneficial in supporting heavily tattooed women's self-perceptions and identifying main themes. This study has some limitations. The largest one being how, "heavily tattooed" was defined in the beginning. I choose to define it as five or more pieces. The size of pieces and the location were not distinguished enough within the definition. I thought that five pieces would be considered a lot among

women who have body art. However, many of the women I interviewed frequently commented that they didn't necessarily think of themselves as heavily tattooed. There is the misconception that heavily tattooed must mean being completely covered in body art. While being compared to someone who is completely covered in body art a woman with tattoos might not feel like she is heavily tattooed. When compared to an individual with no tattoos a woman with five or more tattoos might then feel heavily tattooed. The definition of being heavily tattooed will vary from individuals and in research. Here how heavily tattooed was defined could be limiting to the contribution to research on heavily tattooed women and can cause confusion of what being heavily tattooed is or might look like. This research also could have been more inclusive of different bodied women. The majority of my participants were white women who were mainly all educated and middle class. Being inclusive of women of color, different class, and educational background is essential when looking at such a broad topic of tattoos.

Having said that my research could have been more inclusive this is where I also draw my inspiration for where future research can go and where I would like research around heavily tattooed women to go specifically. It was brought to my attention after I had already finished my interviewing process that I could have reached out and potentially interviewed Native women in Humboldt County about their indigenous tattoos. Since, tattoos originated from indigenous people it is crucial to include their perspective and relationship with and around body art. Following this research model, it is important to specifically ask indigenous women about their relationship to their body art and how indigenous tattoos help women to perceive themselves. Connecting to

women of color is essential when it comes to furthering the research around tattoos.

Often times, women of color tend to be missing from the tattoos scene. So, giving heavily tattooed women of color space to share their experience about their tattoos. While I have briefly provided information of Heavily Tattooed Women's perceptions of themselves there are still more women every day that are choosing to become heavily tattooed. There are still more stories to be told and more connections be made for Heavily Tattooed Women.

## CONCLUSION

While this research has provided examples that tattoos can lead to empowering women and challenge cultural standards around women's bodies. The women I interviewed often stressed that while they have collected tattoos and transitioned into heavily tattooed women they simultaneously have experienced life. They have felt both joy and grief. They have been awarded and had to overcome life challenges. Tattoos have triggered empowerment but at the same time these women's life journeys have led to them feeling empowered and confident as well. I find it important to recognize all walks of life. I have been fortunate enough to see a fractal glimpse into these heavily tattooed women's lives. I see them and I recognize the journeys they have embarked on and I admire them for choosing to be the heavily tattooed women that they are.

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## APPENDIX: INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. What was your first tattoo?
2. What made you want to get it?
3. What made you want to get more tattoos after your first tattoo?
4. How did feel about your body before you had tattoos?
5. What was your self-esteem like?
6. How do you feel about your body now that you are heavily tattooed?
7. What is your self-esteem like now?
8. What does being heavily tattooed mean to you?
9. Did becoming heavily tattooed change your perception of yourself?
10. Did it impact your self-confidence? How so or why not?
11. Do you think your tattoos help you define who you are?
12. Do they help you express who you are? How so or why not?
13. Do you ever feel like you have to cover or hide your tattoos?
14. How does this make you feel or how do you react to this?
15. Do ever feel stigmatized because you are heavily tattooed?
16. Do you think stigmas of being heavily tattooed are starting to shift or disappear?
17. Are the stigmas different for you as a woman?
18. Do you plan on getting more tattoos or becoming more heavily tattooed? Why or why not?
19. What are two tattoos that are the most meaningful to you? Or that you like that most

and Why?

20. May I take a picture of them?

21. How do you identify your race or ethnicity? Does this affect your tattoos?

22. How do you identify your gender? Does this affect your tattoos?

23. How do you identify your sexuality? Does this affect your tattoos?

24. What is your current education level?

25. Age?