MARKING THE SOCIAL SELF

Tattoo, Social Memory, and Experiential Insight

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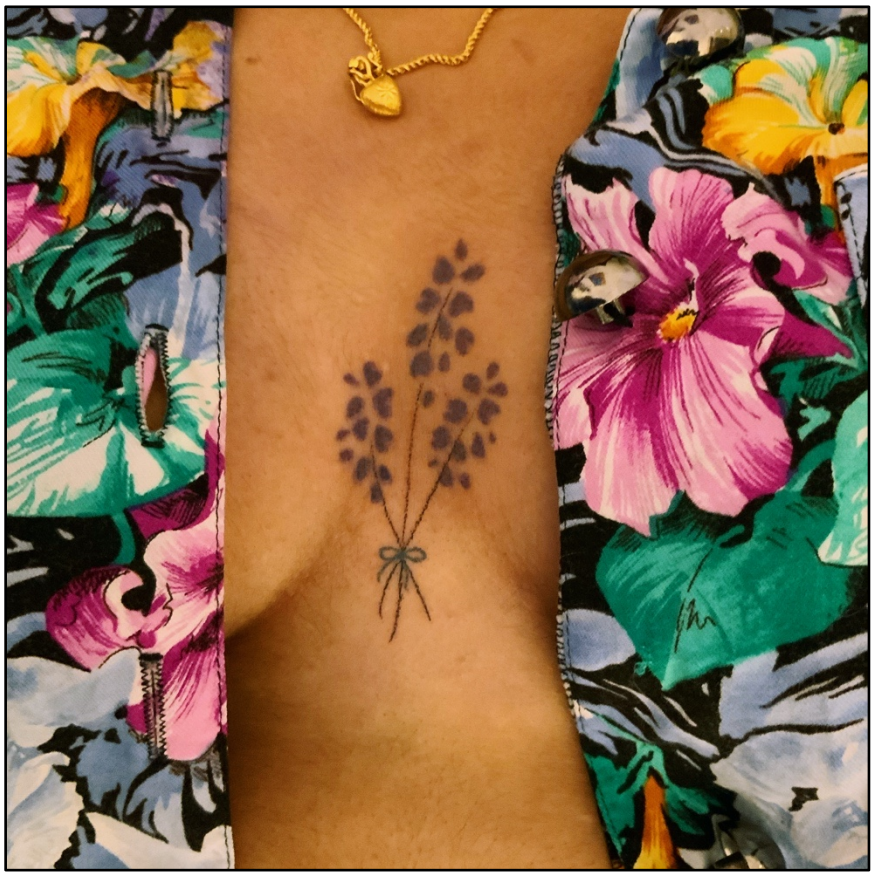
April 2021

Introduction



"Naina's Hyacinths" by Beth Pollard. Ink in skin. 2021.

"I didn't realize this before I was getting tattooed but when I was getting tattooed, I thought, 'this is kind of like pressing a flower, but into my skin.' It's very much a memory that I've collected, that's a physical symbol that I was there in that moment. This thing happened, I thought it was beautiful, so I took it, and I saved it."[1]

Naina trusted me with her first tattoo: purple hyacinths hidden between her breasts. A sapphic allusion to queer love, Naina wanted hyacinths pressed next to her heart, in a space that she could hide from her South Indian parents with a high neckline.

[1] Pollard, February 15 2021, interview

When Naina wants, she wears dresses that show the tips of the flowers peeking through, and our housemates all celebrate the hint of tattooed queerness that it represents. She went through the pain of marking herself with something beautiful, reconnecting with a handpoked tattoo process similar to those eradicated by the British in South Asia, and for the rest of her life she will embody the memory of that choice.

Tattoos allow people to commemorate their values, memories, and experiences by placing images into their skin. They grow with us, age with us, and document the moments in our life that we choose to permanently carry with us. What other art form evokes such visceral reactions from conservative parents? What other art form requires a painful sacrifice of living flesh? What other art form can communicate with the public, and tell people "this is who I am"," who I was", or "who I hope to be"?

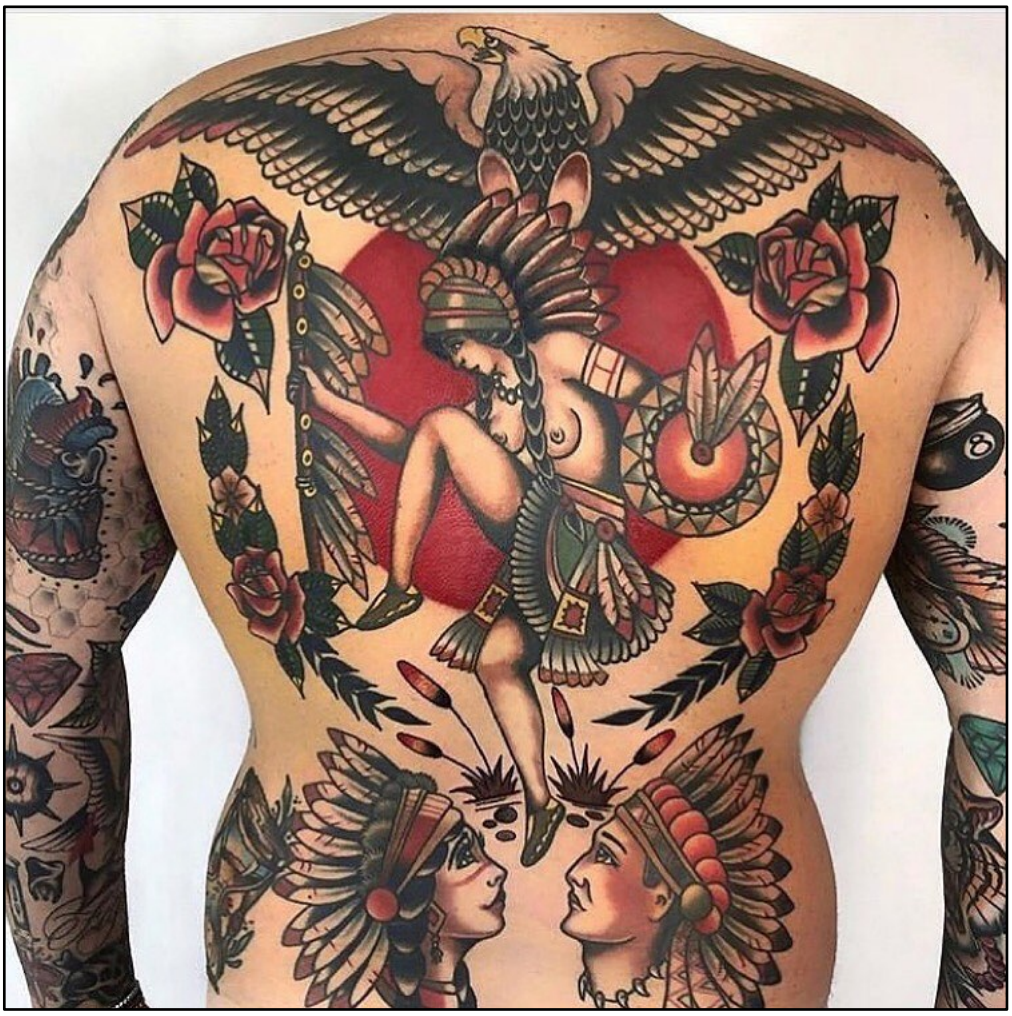
Throughout history, tattoos have empowered individuals, passed information across generations, and they continue to serve as a uniquely embodied visual art form[2]. Yet the limited discussions surrounding tattoos in academia mostly fail to consider tattoos through the lens of memory studies. With this paper, I hope to get the ball rolling on questions like: How do tattoos challenge our understandings of the construction, communication, and preservation of memory? What unique insights does this medium provide into generational and embodied remembering? How do the history and modern manifestations of tattoo practices in America reflect our cultural values? As the field of memory studies grows, how might the study of tattoos demonstrate the benefits of a radically interdisciplinary research approach?

[2] Krutak, "Cultural Heritage of Tattooing," 1.

Part one of this paper will provide a brief historical contextualization of the evolution of tattoo practices in America. Part two will explore experiences of tattooing from a contemplative studies perspective, proposing the advantages of critical first person approaches to memory studies and introducing the ways in which tattoo practices can challenge common western notions of mind-body dualism. Part three describes the ways that tattooing can be conceptualized within established memory studies frameworks. Finally, part four concludes that the combined experiential and memorial aspects of tattoo uniquely position this art form as a means for understanding the relationship between the actions of individuals and the creation of social memory.

As an aspiring tattoo artist, I utilize the embodied knowledge I've acquired in practicing this craft and the interviews I've collected from clients over the past semester to inform my inquiries and analyses. Due to COVID-19, I was unable to document and collect information on tattoo experiences beyond my own home studio space. Nevertheless, the seven interviews I recorded were indispensable in developing a better understanding of how individuals may experience the process of tattoo. All subjects' names have been changed for the sake of anonymity.

Part I: American Tattoo: Appropriation, Individuation, Decolonization



"Sun Dancer with Eagle and Heads" by Fabio Onorini. Ink in Skin. 2018.[3]

Understanding the social dimensions of global tattoo traditions is necessary for contextualizing the memory practices embodied in American tattoos today. Humans have been tattooing around the world for thousands of years, from Egypt to Madagascar to Iceland, Australia, Polynesia, and the Americas[4]. While evidence for tattoo practices in Western Europe exists minimally within Ireland and ancient Greece[5], it remained

[3] Vandyck, "Sun Dancer Tattoos."
[4] Jablonsky, *Skin a Natural History,* 22.
[5] Renaut, "Tattooing in Antiquity," 22.

mostly out of sight and out of mind in Europe until the 1700s, after Captain James Cook's explorations into the Pacific documented extensive tattooing practices among Pacific island communities[6].

The direct exposure to tattoos in Europe following this time remained limited, but these practices were heavily stigmatized in colonial endeavours[7]. Christian colonizers cited Leviticus 19:28 "ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you" as biblical condemnation of the "primitive" and "savage" tattoo practices in order to justify the oppression and exploitation of tattooed indigenous peoples[8]. The actions of European colonizers in both suppressing and spreading tattoo practices cannot be understated, as colonized people were targeted for their tattoos by their explicitly visible identifying factors, which assisted in the systematic extermination of tattooed people, followed by religious proselytization, and the criminalization of tattooing[9]. For many Pacific Island communities in particular, tattooing is a form of intergenerational storytelling, and its colonial prosecution disconnected people from their cultural histories by attacking their tattoo practices[10]. With the other hand, colonizers exposed to indigenous tattoo practices were intrigued by the "exotic ritual"[11] and got tattooed as an intentional sign of deviance from their own cultural norms, creating a steadily growing counter culture of tattooed people in the west, blossoming into much of the modern tattoo industry[12].

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[6] Douglas, "'Cureous figures,'" 35.
[7] D'Alleva, "Christian Skins," 92.
[8] Lev 19:28
[9] D'Alleva, "Christian Skins," 90.
[10] Cole, "Governing Tattoo," 111.
[11] White, "Marks of Transgression," 80.
[12] Kaviani, "Becoming heavily tattooed," 24.

Notable in this long and continuing thread of violence and appropriation is the social function of tattooing, wherein each circumstance that tattooing appears, it marks an individual as identifying with or belonging to a social group[13]. Whether that social group was one's cultural norm, a change of status, an act of involuntary identification, or willing membership to a counter-cultural movement, tattooing brings information about an individual to the surface of their skin, making it easier to be identified by strangers, enemies, and members of one's own chosen community.

What I am highlighting here is that becoming tattooed shifts social perceptions of the tattooed person[14]. How exactly that social shift manifests depends on the dominant cultural opinion on tattoos in any given space, but the voluntary choice to become tattooed entails an anticipated and permanent change in one's social treatment[15]. As such, I believe that tattoos must be analyzed within their social and cultural contexts, because the choice of tattoo marks a desire for the individual to differentiate themselves from the ways that they have previously been perceived. The study of tattoos therefore aligns well with Halbwach's ideas that "memory is no purely individual phenomenon, but must be seen in its fundamentally collective dimension, it is the combination of various group allegiances and the resultant frameworks for remembering that are the actual individual element which distinguishes one person from another"[16].

As an individualist society, 21st century Americans pride themselves on personal expression and demonstrations of agency. Tattoos are often seen through this lens, as many tattoos reflect an individual's accomplishments and personal values[17].

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[13] Lane, "Tat's All," 400.
[14] Martin & Dula, "More than Skin Deep," 200.
[15] Lane, "Tat's All," 400.
[16] Erll, *Memory in Culture,* 16.
[17] Schonberger, "Inking Identity," 26.

Additionally, American innovation in tattooing since the turn of the 20th century evolved to cater to our individualist tendencies[18]. Individually customized tattoos have become the norm, whereas only fifty years ago, most tattoo artists only tattooed their own pre-determined designs, or "flash", making only minimal adjustments to the base concept for a client, and mass producing the same design on multiple bodies using the unprecedented speed of the electric tattoo gun[19].

On another note, while today nearly 40% of Americans are tattooed, 72% report that their tattoos are usually hidden from view[20]. Still, there will be moments in one's life where other people see these tattoos, and react accordingly. As such, there is always a social dimension to tattoos, though individuals certainly exercise personal agency in choosing the circumstances and frequency at which others come in to contact with them.

As such, while American tattoos lean steadily towards prioritizing individualized designs, I argue that this does not negate the inherently social elements of tattoo. In my view, this shift in how we practice tattooing directly reflects our current social values, just as tattooing throughout history has reflected the social values of the societies that practice it.

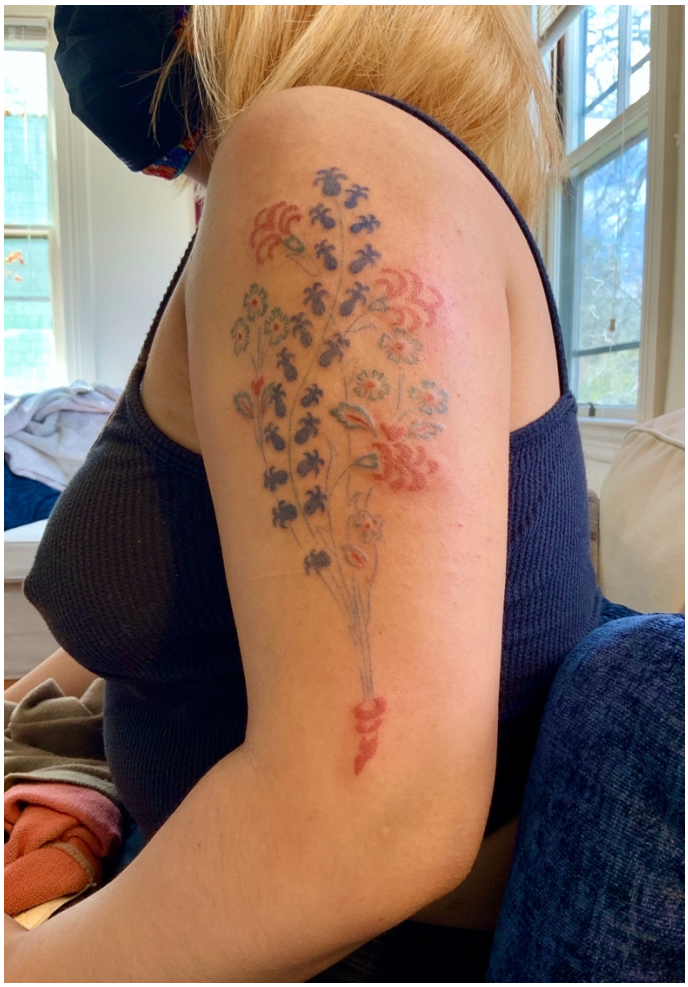
Within the currently dominant individualist paradigm of American tattoo, the history of colonial violence remains deeply embedded within many of our practices and public perceptions[21]. However, American tattoo is not monolithic, and as undercurrents of indigenous revitalization tattoo practices, queer tattoo practices, and fine art tattoo

[18] Schonberger, "Inking Identity," 46.
[19] Schonberger, "Inking Identity," 61.
[20] Berkery, "National Tattoo Day."
[21] DeMello, *Bodies of Inscription,* 44.

steadily grow in their influence, analyzing the social roles of tattoo becomes an exceedingly complex task[22]. As such, I find that a postcolonial studies perspective is necessary to address the tangled, contested, and diverse traditions of tattoos currently interacting and coexisting within our social spheres. Erll explains that "postcolonial studies have always been dealing with shared, entangled and contested pasts as well as with equally complex, often hybrid, practices of remembrance in (post)colonial and multicultural societies – in what one could call 'mnemonic contact zones'"[23]. This is to say that in a globalizing world which is becoming increasingly aware of social pluralism, we have to make space to examine the ways in which tattoo traditions are interacting with each other, and how that plays out both on the individual's skin and in their social communities.

[22] DeMello, *Bodies of Inscription,* 3.
[23] Erll, *Memory in Culture,* 64.

Part II: Experiencing Tattoo: Consensual Pain, Insight, Flow



"Erica's Iznik floral" by Beth Pollard. Ink in skin. 2021.

"After a few hours I just stopped feeling the pain. My body was still going through it, and I was absolutely exhausted at the end, but in a weird way all that time really helped clear my head about why I wanted this piece, and I why I wanted you to do [this tattoo]" [24]

[24] Pollard, April 2 2021, interview

As a tattoo artist, I try to engage with the social realms of every tattoo I perform, which means that every session involves a long conversation with the client in which we can make these connections together. In my experience, albeit limited, the tattooing process creates a unique social environment and bodily experience which makes these conversations fruitful, intimate, and illuminating. In this section, I explore how the process of handpoked tattooing which I practice creates an environment of trust between tattooer and tattooee, mediated through a prolonged process of consensual pain. This experience deeply engages both mind and body in the process at hand, and I argue that this "flow" experience can help the individual to mindfully reflect on the personal and social meanings of their chosen tattoo.

In his groundbreaking text, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi defines flow as a state in which one becomes fully immersed in an activity, such that concerns surrounding performance, ego, and self-evaluation fade into the background[25]. Csikszentmihalyi details many components of flow experience, but, for the sake of this paper, I am interested first in his ideas on the self-interpretation of pain and second on how flow states blur the lines between mind, body, and environment.

Csikszentmihalyi claims that "it is the self that interprets raw information in the context of its own interests, and determines whether it is harmful or not"[26]. In other words, our responses to painful stimuli differ based on how we expect to interpret the pain. In the context of tattoo, the client consents to pain and understands the expected duration and location of the pain. Unlike pain in unexpected settings, pain is anticipated in tattoo and one knows that the pain is not sadistic, ill-intentioned, or meaningless.

[25] Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow,* 4.
[26] Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow,* 38.

This acceptance and celebration of pain creates an altered experience of consciousness induced by the body's reaction to the foreign material of the ink, the brain's response to extended periods of mild pain, and the mind's ability to take charge, control one's attention, and remain calm as the artist pricks out the design[27]. Comparing the long, tedious, yet lighthanded method of stick and poke to previous machine tattoos, one of my clients said:

> "That one felt very painful and almost traumatizing? All at once, done with a tattoo gun in a tattoo parlor by a white dude and I'm in a little cubby and it's over in twenty minutes. It felt almost harsh and there was no conversation happening over the buzz of the gun. Whereas this [handpoking] takes a long time so you get to sit with that. It's not a trigger where suddenly I'm feeling everything and then the next moment I'm not. More that I'm feeling it in these little pokes these little doses. More like healing.[28]

In medical and cognitive sciences, nociception, one's awareness of pain, is "defined by social context, individual beliefs, and emotions"[29]. With a consensual and mindful approach to experiences of pain, repetitive and painful stimuli can become a point of non-judgemental bodily focus[30]. Practices of consensual pain, such as tattoo, create a state of altered consciousness which, as pain continues to take a toll on the body's stress and immune response symptoms, most notably depletes one's psychological sense of ego[31].

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[27] Cheon et al, "Pain in altered states," 1177.
[28] Pollard, April 11 2021, Interview.
[29] George, "Pain Management," 219.
[30] Cheon et al, "Pain in altered states," 1178.
[31] Erickson, "The Effects of Consensual Pain," 14.

Reconnecting these discoveries in pain science to Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow, there is a common thread of blurring the lines between experiences of the mind, body, and environment. Attentional focus on a specific point in the body, one's naturally arising thoughts related to the pain, and the body's immune response to ink create this environment of heightened awareness in body and mind together. As a visual medium, a memorial medium, and an embodied experience facilitated by the state of pain-induced altered consciousness, tattoo reminds us that "it is through the body that we are related to one another and to the rest of the world"[32]. Four of the seven people I interviewed independently mentioned that a connection to one's natural environment was central to their decisions surrounding their tattoo's imagery and method.

Such an experience is craved by many in the modern west, as our deeply ingrained notions of mind-body dualism leave many with a sense of isolation, dissociation, and aimlessness that can be debilitating especially for people who don't see their life experiences reflected in the world around them[33].

All of these factors parallel key dimensions of bodily-focused insight meditations as explored by contemplative studies scholars. Insight meditation practices most notably lead to a sense of self-acceptance, and increased awareness concerning one's place as a conscious entity of the world[34]. As such, I argue that consensual experiences of pain provide, in a way, an accessible shortcut to insight experiences which blur the lines between body, mind, and environment.

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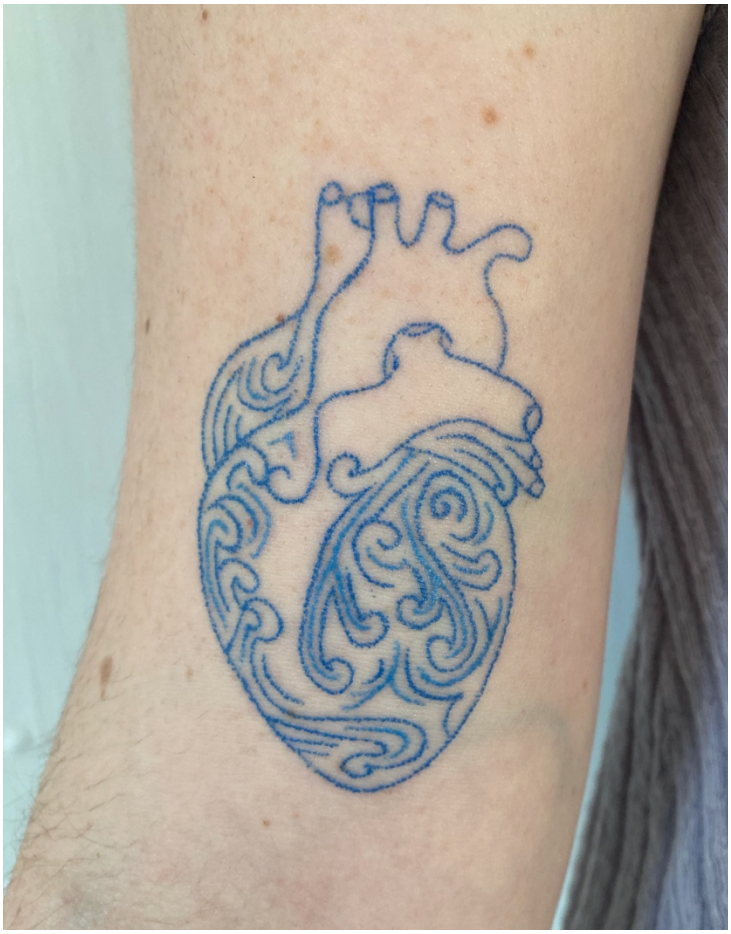
[32] Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow,* 115
[33] Duncan, "Mind-body Dualism," 485.
[34] Ataria, "Where do we end," 1129.

The novelty of such an experience leaves a lasting impression in one's memory of the event[35]. But what makes tattoo unique from other forms of insight experience, is that one leaves with a permanent alteration to one's body which can serve as a point of reference, or as one of my clients puts it, "a sign post for recalling the memories of the tattoo"[36] later in life[37]. Understanding the novelty of such an experience informs us on the ways that tattooing can be a socially mediated act of both embodied ritual and material inscription, uniquely positioned to challenge dualistic assumptions on the nature of commemorative acts.

[35] Kaviani, "Becoming heavily tattooed," 55.
[36] Pollard, February 11 2021, Interview.
[37] Kaviani, "Becoming heavily tattooed," 47.

Part III: Memory, Medium, and Materiality



"Chloe's Heart of Waves" by Beth Pollard. Ink in Skin. April 2021

"it's on the surface of your body so it literally brings things to the surface and gives things a point of contact at which to synthesize everything and to see it come together and to make it feel very present…I'm also grieving a lot of loss in the past year, so thinking what this tattoo represents in terms of resiliency—or what I hope to have in resiliency. And how this tattoo is a reminder and a fortification of healing and breaking and rebuilding and trying to feel connected and grounded in that pain"[38]

[38] Pollard, April 11 2021, Interview.

Within memory studies, questions about the relationship between mind and body; performance and preservation; and ceremony and memorial create the foundations of broad scholarly discussions. Tattoos in their materiality, embodied performance, and ritualized acquisition can illuminate additional dimensions into concepts within memory studies concerning the construction, communication, and preservation of social memory.

To start, the ritual process and experience of becoming tattooed constructs the tattoo as an inherently meaningful commemoration of some personal value. As a ceremonial avocation, Connerton explains how such processes "display membership of an ancient group. These avocations represent an investment of time and skill in a particular type of symbolic capital: the objects endowed with the greatest symbolic power are those which display the quality inherent in the possessor by clearly demonstrating the quality required in their appropriation"[39]. In other words, the mode of acquisition through an experience of pain infuses the healed tattoo with symbolic meaning, standing as a strong statement of commitment to one's choice to permanently display this image on one's body. While Connerton uses this framework to break down displays of bodily social memory, such as court manners and dress, tattoos introduce questions of bodily permanence that do not easily fit in to his ideas concerning the acquisition of incorporated memory, intergenerational ritual enaction, and what it means for a ceremony to be commemorative without necessarily being a repeated rite. While I cannot speculate as to how Connerton might adapt his arguments in order to encompass tattooing, but it is certainly a fruitful conversation which challenges the

[39] Connerton, *How Societies Remember,* 87.

notion that "the life of human beings, as a historical life, is understood as a life reported on and narrated, not life as a physical existence"[40].

Moving on to examine the material dimensions of tattooing, tattoo practices are a particularly unique medium of social memory due to several connected factors. Tattoos age in the skin just as the individual ages, becoming predictably muddier over time, and so the artist has to consider how the color content, complexity, and exposure to environmental factors will affect the longevity and legibility of the work[41]. Another material dimension of tattoos is that, due to their embodied nature, a work of tattoo cannot be passed down to a different generation in its original form. The ritual must be re-enacted and re-created on an entirely new body, probably by an entirely different artist. Much like oral histories, there has to be an active incentive to re-enact the memory in order for it to cross generational divides .

Unlike other visual media such as text, sculpture, and architecture, tattoos will go to the grave with their owners unless their skin is cut from their body and preserved. For many tattoo traditions, this is common[42], but in the context of 21st century America, it is much more likely that the tattoo will be a story buried with the body, though exceptions exist[43]. In this circumstance where tattoos stay on the body after death, tattoos exhibit *intra*generational social memory, which helps to define an individual in the context of their own generational views. As tattoo culture in the west has changed so dramatically over the past century, the generational divides in public opinion surrounding tattoos is

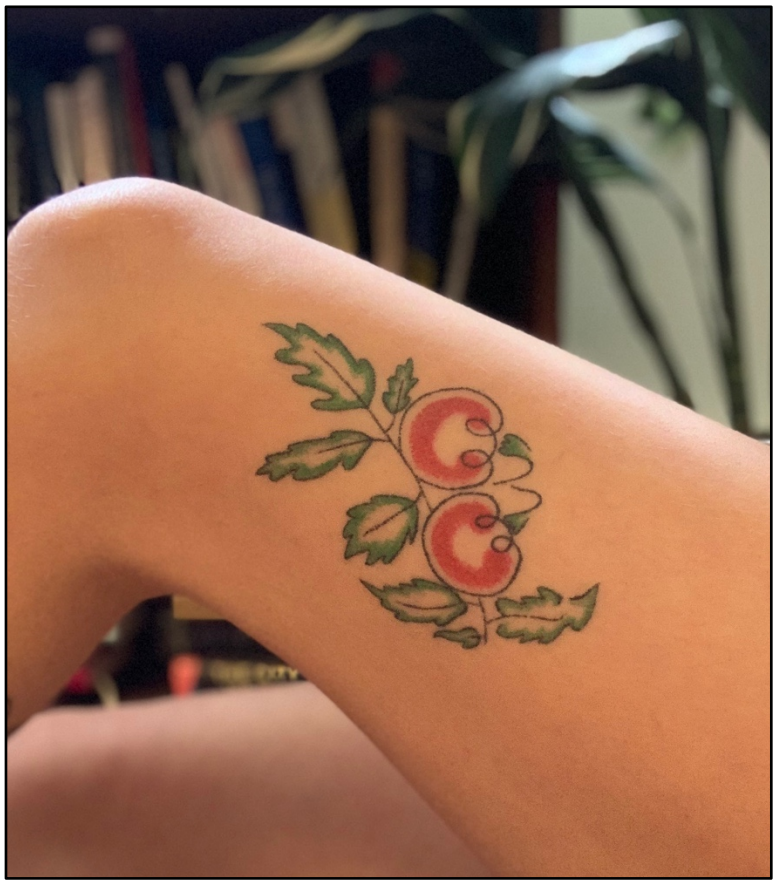
[40] Connerton, *How Societies Remember,* 101.
[41] Owers, "How Tattoos Age."
[42] Cuevas, "Reviving the cultural tradition of tattooing indigenous communities."
[43] "Save My Ink Forever"

made even clearer, while other cultural contexts have chosen to use this medium as an actively intergenerational medium of memory. All in all, this goes to show that:

> The materiality of the medium is every bit as much involved in these constructions as is the social dimension: The producers and recipients of a medium of memory actively perform the work of construction – both in the decision as to which phenomena will be ascribed the qualities of memory media, as well as in the encoding and decoding of that which is (to be) remembered. Media and their users create and shape memory, and they always do so in very specific cultural and historical contexts.[44]

[44] Erll, *Memory in Culture,* 125-6.

Part IV: Skin in the Game



"Tomato self-tattoo" by Beth Pollard. Ink in skin. 2021.

"I've definitely had days where I wake up and think: 'Okay, how much skin do I have left? How much time do I have left?' Because I just want to keep track of how I'm growing. Before I started tattooing, I couldn't really picture my life after about thirty five years old, since I didn't want kids and the world is quite literally melting around us. But now I'm looking forward to being an old person covered in tattoos and able to tell stories about who I was when I received each of them. And then I'll go and they'll go with me. I'm not sure it means much in the grand scheme of things but it does keep me going"[45]

[45] Pollard, April 12 2021, Interview.

Tattoos make it clear that "memories are not objective images of past perceptions, even less of a past reality. They are subjective, highly selective reconstructions, dependent on the situation in which they are recalled"[46]. In many ways, I find that tattoos are the easiest way for me to conceptualize how memories are experienced, selected, and embodied by individuals, but are constructed, preserved, and bound by social communities. It's difficult to understand the varying and complex relationships between individual actions and public memory, but tattoos certainly create a tangible setting in which some of these relationships can be explored.

As the field of memory studies navigates new challenges in the 21st century, "we can lay the foundation for future memory research that addresses the social, medial, and mental dynamics at work whenever people deal with, or are influenced by, the past and from there address their present reality and future prospects"[47]. As an increasingly interdisciplinary field, the future of memory studies lies in creativity and questioning the methods of research that we hold as omnipotent. In this paper I've attempted to bring my personal subjective experiences, critical first person approaches, and third person perspectives to inquire as to how we might study memories while they are actively created, enacted, embodied, and carried through an individual's life. While memory studies attempts to understand the role of memories in our present and in our future, introspecting and articulating on our experiences of memorial arts, like tattooing, can be an real asset to the field.

Tattoos, like memories, are often perceived as permanent and fixed, when in reality, they evolve with the individuals and societies that hold them. Examining the history,

[46] Erll, *Memory in Culture,* 8.
[47] Erll, *Memory in Culture,* 173.

embodied experiences, and commemorative creation in the process of tattooing, we can gain a more progressive understanding of memory as "movement, rather than as a phenomenon that is fixed in time and space, [which] might challenge and help to rethink some fundamental categories of memory studies"[48].

The opportunities that the study of tattooing can provide to memory studies are unparalleled, especially as diverse tattoo practices become more widely recognized and accepted within the global west. Tattoos have been stigmatized by the western elite for centuries, and those legacies remain within the modern tattoo industry and many of our culturally dominant public opinions. If memory scholars decide that tattooing is worth exploring, we will need to have ongoing discussions about how the suppression and invalidation of tattoo practices throughout history has been used, and is still used, as a tool of colonial oppression.

Tattoos are an art form that requires pain, personal sacrifice, bodily engagement, and trust with the artist, which is why I believe that the study of tattoos should not shy away from the fruitful knowledge acquired through subjective experiences of becoming tattooed. After all, how can we study memories without creating our own?

[48] Erll, *Memory in Culture,* 173.

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