An Identity in Ink:

Tattoos as Literary Artifacts

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Introduction

The act of sinking a needle below the skin’s surface and sending a pulsing injection of ink into the skin’s membrane is an act of near permanence. It is through this act, this inking, that one marks their body with an alien visual component. In this addition of a visual expression into a person’s skin comes the notion of evolution. As a new form, image, or phrase is physically manifested into the skin, so begins a complicated entanglement between one’s identity and said image. The question I aim to raise is one with concern for the relationship between the ownership of a tattoo and how one identifies themself both individually and in accordance with others. I believe that with the addition of a tattoo into one’s physical composition comes the addition of a new form of personal literacy—something that I will call tattoo literacy.

This tattoo literacy encompasses any and all meaning that could be derived from an image of ink sunken into the surface of the skin. This notion of a single image encompassing as much meaning as a literary tattoo discourse and also serving as a means by which to identify one’s self or strengthen concepts or ideals that are possessed by an individual may sound daunting. The reality is that this tattoo discourse, this idea of a tattoo as a literary artifact, is so strong and abounding that it serves as a means of communication, expression, and individuality to those who are members of the tattoo discourse community. Through this study I aim to answer some of the questions revolving around the ways that people with tattoos identify themselves with their tattoos and also with others. I aim to inquire about how tattoos affect the ways one identifies them self as well as inquire about the ways that tattoos serve to negotiate evolving meanings from both the viewer and possessor of the tattoo.

Literature Review

As I embarked on somewhat of a quest for greater understanding and appreciation for the relationship between a tattoo and an identity through tattoo literacy, I turned to several scholars working and studying in the field of literacies. The purpose I set out with in reviewing such scholarly sources as writing by David
Kirkland or James Paul Gee was to gain a lattice of conceptual framework cornering themes of identity with literacy, as well as incorporating this new idea of tattoos as literary artifacts. As David Kirkland states in his article “The Skin We Ink: Tattoos, Literacy and a New English Education” a literary artifact is “the evidence of performed or human deeds” (Kirkland 2009). In this sense, a tattoo serves its purpose as a literary artifact as it is the visual representation and result of a human deed. Through this deed, the receiver of the tattoo is adopting this human act of inking images, words, and expressions into the skin and therefore articulating a new literacy.

In a study done by David Kirkland, a young adult and the stories of his inkings were studied for meaning and a greater understanding of tattoo literacy, primarily found within youth culture. The young man present in Kirkland’s study utilized his tattoos to serve as a reminder, expression of self, and method of communication. As Kirkland studied Derrick and his tattoos for meaning it was found that: "for Derrick, tattoos represent this actualization, a performed act or deed through which human beings develop a sense of identity. Identity, as Bakhtin describes it, does not belong solely to the individual; it is shared by all." (Kirkland 2009). Here, this notion of a performed act or deed, which is shared between all who view the tattoo and the individual possessing the tattoo serves to illustrate some of the relationships that exist in the discourse of a crosshatching of literacy and tattoos.

An important definition in the study of literacy and identity is an agreement on the term “literacy”. From the article “What Is Literacy?” by James Paul Gee comes a working definition for the term literacy; Gee writes: “literacy is control of the secondary uses of language (i.e., uses of the language in secondary discourse,” (Gee 1998). So, from this we can infer that the topic of tattoo literacy is a secondary discourse that is only acquired, not learned, by an individual. Using this term as a starting point in the understandings of tattoos as a new literacy helps illustrate the idea that tattoo literacy is a malleable discourse that not only involves the tattooed individual in creating meaning, but also involves the onlooker. Through the observation, story-telling, and discourse regarding one’s tattoo is a larger understanding and realization of both meaning and identity, for not only the tattooed individual, but for all parties involved. It is through these instances of observation, story-telling, and discourse that a new tattoo literacy is acquired and a new control of the secondary uses of language is realized (Gee 1998).
Research Design and Methods

Setting

As I set out to collect my data from any and all willing participants, I knew that one of the most important features of my collection would be the way in which I approach my interviewees. Today, the discourse communities found on online social media websites and networks are ones that function as a way for individuals to express themselves in one way or another, whether it be via tweet, status update, blog post, or vlog post. This self-indulgent and seemingly narcissistic discourse we participate in online promotes and glorifies the expression and explanation of ourselves towards the fellow members of the online discourse community. In an effort to follow suit with this inquisitive and innocently narcissistic discourse, I chose to assemble my thoughts into questions and format my inquisitions into a survey. Through my own nearly self-admiring tweets, status’, and blog postings I invited members of my online discourse communities to inject themselves into my study. I provided a link to my online survey in each posting soliciting for participants in my research. To continue the trend of this polite narcissism, I also invited each participant to involve an image of his or her tattoo as a complement to his or her survey response.

Because I did my study online and collected responses via survey, there is no geographical location to pinpoint my setting on. While most of my fourteen participants are from East Lansing, there were some participants from the Michigan cities of Ann Arbor, Novi, and Grand Rapids, and even from places out of state like New Jersey. However, ultimately, the true setting of my study took place online in an accessible manner to all regardless of geographic location.

Participants

As my setting for advertising my survey was solely reliant on social networks and was inherently directed towards those who would find themselves viewing a status, tweet, or post from me, my participants of my study fell within the age range of 18-26. I did not intend for such a polarized group of young adults to be the sole participants, but through this exploration of the tattoos, identities, and literacies of people from my own
peer group I was able to more intimately study one age demographic. I was also able to nearly submerge myself into the study because I myself fall into this age demographic.

Overall, I had fourteen individuals complete my survey. All of these participants are between the ages of 18-24 and are also female. While I was initially setting out to conduct my study I did not intend for such a small and specific demographic as 18-24 year old females to be the basis of my study. Through the survey that my participants completed and in the conversations that were had with fellow members of my same gender and age demographic, I feel that I was able to more closely relate to each participant.

Data Collection

In a study of a topic as broad and malleable as the relationship between identity, literacy and tattoos, I recognized the need for a strongly qualitative manner of data collection. As my research sought to question and implore about my participants’ beliefs about how their tattoo has contributed to an evolved identity or a new literacy, I knew that I needed to question my participants in an open forum. The idea of comfort and security was one that I wanted to radiate through my design of data collection; I wanted my participants to feel safe as they thoughtfully shared some of their private stories and explanations regarding their identity and tattoo literacy with me. I came to love the idea of a somewhat anonymous forum that allowed participants to purge their thoughts and share their story to the furthest degree they wished, and for this reason I decided to create an online survey using “Survey Monkey”.

The purpose of my survey was to allow for an open forum for participants to reflect upon their tattoo literacy and identity through the completion and contemplation of my carefully worded questions. I knew that by composing a survey to discuss such an abstract topic as tattoo literacy and identity, I ran the risk of not effectively communicating my intent or purpose to my participants. In an effort to stint any confusion and in an effort to inform my participants of some background to the study, I composed a short introduction of sorts to preface my questions:
Through my preface, as shown above, I hoped to welcome my participants into my study and encourage them to be both candid and genuine in their responses. I aimed to illustrate the direction that I was headed with my research through explaining a working definition for the term “literary artifact” and relate this somewhat abstract concept to the notion of tattoos serving as a connection to identity.

Also important to me was the option for my participants to only share as much information as they wished. For example, I provided the opportunity for my participants to remain anonymous by choosing the name by which I would refer to them in my research. By this, my participants would have the option to keep their name and identity from my research and through this, they might also feel free to be candid.

While I did only receive one survey result with a changed or anonymous name, I do think that it was important for me to establish a trusting relationship with each of my participants through providing them the option to remain anonymous.

By nature, the literacy of tattoos is a very visual and physical expression. In recognizing the importance of the impact that visual representations of my participants’ tattoos could have upon my study, I opted to provide the option for those willing participants to share their tattoo visually with the study. One of the questions in my survey allotted for participants to select “yes” or “no” as to whether or not they intended or felt comfortable sharing an image of their tattoo with me. Of my fourteen participants, ten people indicated that they desired to share an image of their tattoo with me, and of those ten people only nine people actually did
send me an image. By making this offer, a trust exchange was elicited; in exchange for sharing a personal or private image of a tattoo, I provided the participants with my own personal cell phone number and e-mail address by which to contact me. By exposing my personal contact methods, I hoped to gain a measure of trust from my participants.

It was for many reasons that I chose to collect my data in the format of a survey, some of these reasons being: to allow for anonymity, to have a standard set of questions, to create a trust relationship with my participants, and to be able to easily access the qualitative data. Upon completion of the survey, some of my participants personally contacted me and offered to be interviewed or contribute to further discussion regarding my project. I did take advantage of this offer and conducted very casual interviews in a conversational format with two of my participants. The purpose of the interviews/conversations was to supplement my survey results as well as to form a greater understanding of my participants and their tattoo literacy in relationship to how they identify themselves.

Data & Analysis

In order to thoughtfully present my data, I plan to illustrate the individual questions I posed on my survey and then follow each question with a brief synopsis of my results. As my data is solely qualitative, I have
decided to highlight each participant only at a point where I feel they best illustrate that they are answering each question.

The first question of my survey is as follows:

**2. Please describe what your tattoo looks like.**

i.e. What words are in your tattoo (if any)? What is the image depicted in your tattoo? Where is your tattoo placed on your body? What colors are in your tattoo? "If you have multiple tattoos, please share as much as you like about each of them."

Through this question, I simply prompted my participants to explain the composition and visual component of their tattoo. My participants kept their answers to this question very concise while still providing enough detail to allow for a reader to visualize the image. Below is an excerpt of the responses from four of my participants:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ankle—pink breast cancer ribbon; left hip in black script—“I have been her kind” (Anne Sexton poem); down right side in black—</strong></td>
<td>10/1/2012 9:48 PM</td>
<td>View Responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>“You shall love your crooked neighbor with your crooked heart” (W.H. Auden poem); under left breast in my cursive handwriting in</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>black—“I am, I am.” (Sylvia Plath); left upper arm in typewriter font in black—“The question isn’t who is going to let me. It’s who</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>is going to stop me.” (Ayn Rand); left shoulder—black outline of a jumping rabbit upper left arm—Peter Rabbit in blue, black,</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>yellow, brown, and red; upper right thigh in black font used for Harry Potter chapter titles—“Expelliarmus”</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I have four, all are black and white 1. The word “Bruce” in Japanese on my right ankle 2. A solid black peace sign behind my right ear</strong></td>
<td>10/1/2012 9:19 PM</td>
<td>View Responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. The words “Matthew 19:26” on my left wrist 4. The word “imagine” in script on my left foot</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>It’s a black and grey sunflower. The flower was done to make it look more realistic with shading and no outlining rather than</strong></td>
<td>10/1/2012 12:02 PM</td>
<td>View Responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>graphic. The diameter is about 2 1/2 inches and it’s on the side of my hip (not on the front) so you can only just see it from the front</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>but you can see the whole thing from the side. It is covered by pants and shorts but if I wear a bathing suit most of it shows above</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>the bottoms.”</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. simple dove on my wrist, no words... it’s only a thin, black outline 2. black saying on my foot: “and all the trees of the field will</strong></td>
<td>10/1/2012 9:08 PM</td>
<td>View Responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>clap their hands” with 4/8 images of simple trees, on the top of my foot</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the above graphic depicts, the responses of my participants vary in length- those with multiple tattoos obviously had longer responses that those who only have a single tattoo. Also, some participants included more detail than others in explaining what their tattoo looks like. The third participant on the above graphic who explains her “black and grey sunflower” tattoo used more detail than most other participants as she explained size, placement, shading, and color. This participant was also one of the five people who opted not to include an image of their tattoo, and this participant was also the only participant who opted to create an alias name for herself as “Madeline”.
My fourth question on the survey acts to serve as a bridge between the aesthetics of the tattoo and the meanings or implications that erected each droplet of ink under the skin for each participant. I wanted to give my participants a chance to explain, justify, describe, or gloat about tattoos because it was important to my study to understand the motivation behind choosing to get a tattoo. The question is as follows in the graphic below:

4. Why did you decide to get a tattoo?

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*To express yourself, to serve as a reminder of something, to memorialize someone, because it is aesthetically pleasing etc. There is no “right” or expected answer. Your answer can be as simple as you got a tattoo because you “just felt like it”!

A spread of answers was derived from this question, and I have displayed the same four participants’ answers as I did for the previous question (see the above graphic). Throughout my data, there were nine instances of participants getting memorial tattoos in memory for a loved one who passed away. While some people chose to keep their explanation very short and simple as saying “The breast cancer ribbon is for my Granny” or “The two sparrows are for my deceased mom and dad”, others chose to compose a longer description and incite more meaning into their description. Two participants who had memorial tattoos in celebration of the life of the same person chose to elaborate on their motivation for the memorial tattoo in quite
different ways. The first person, Emily, chose to explain the death of her loved one, as well as why she felt it fit to get the same image tattooed upon herself as Nate had upon himself.

The small graphic displaying an answer below was written by the participant named Allie. Allie’s tattoo is a script of the commemorative statement: “May You Never Walk Alone”. Both Allie and Emily chose to get memorial tattoos in celebration of the same person’s life. The contrast between Allie and Emily highlights the depth by which each participant chose to explain their tattoo. Whether or not each participant chose to deeply reflect upon the meaning and motivation for their tattoo, it is evident that the depth of these two memorial tattoos is great and that both Allie and Emily hold their loved one so dearly that they would dedicate a portion of their flesh to reflect the life of their loved one.

After asking the participants to explain the motivation behind their tattoo, I incorporated the question of identity into the survey. Shown in the graphic below are questions five and six:

5. What do you think that your tattoo says about your identity?  
   i.e. What does your tattoo express about yourself? How has your tattoo possibly changed/affected how you identify yourself?

6. What might others say or assume about your identity after viewing your tattoo?  
   i.e. What are some remarks you’ve received from others about your tattoo? Did people “approve” of your expression of identity? How did people “question” your expression of identity?
Questions five and six served the purpose of encouraging my participants to share and reflect upon how their tattoo has contributed to, altered, or factored into their identity. Question six sought for the participants to even go as far as to examine the relationship of their identity to the approval or questioning of outsiders who may have agreed or disagreed with the act of acquiring a tattoo in an expressive movement.

The graphic below displays some of the responses to question five that asked participants to elaborate upon the existing relationship between themselves and their tattoo(s):

The results to this question widely displayed that peoples’ tattoos served as a reminder to themselves about something that strengthened their beliefs or ideas, and by extension: identity. Sierra, the participant who wrote the top response on the above graphic stated that her tattoos “express my carefree attitude about life” and that her tattoos “have not changed the way I identify myself but have only strengthened the ideas they reflect.”

I found Sierra’s reasoning of meaning and identity from her tattoos to be very powerful. Sierra states her claim in such a way that she is able to assert power and ownership over not only her tattoos as body art, but as abstract ideas and a system of values that she chose her tattoos to represent. This instance of ownership of both an image and a strengthening idea, as Sierra has illustrated, is an instance that is indicative of a tattoo as a literary artifact that serves to contribute to and deepen how she identifies herself.

In response to question six that inquires about the reaction from outsiders to the acquisition of a tattoo by a participant is the echoing of the same general statement. Most participants chose to address their parents’ or family members’ dislike or misunderstanding of the tattoo, and also address how they were either mostly...
indifferent to their family’s aversion to the tattoo, or how they did seek for approval, but went ahead with the tattoo despite disapproval. Below is a sampling of the results to this question:

Through the discussion of approval or disapproval of tattoos from onlookers is when the strength in identity arises within the participants who possess the tattoos. In the responses to question six (as shown above in a sample), the participants generally relay that despite opposition to their tattoo, they ultimately own the meaning and aesthetic in their tattoo(s) as part of their identity.

One participant referenced the idea that there is actually a “type” of person who would be more likely than another to have a tattoo. What this participant, Kellie, wrote was that “people were surprised when they found out I got a tattoo as I guess I don’t seem the ‘type.’” Here, Kellie pointed out an important issue within the discourse of tattoos: stereotyping. What I found to be very valuable is that Kellie, a member of the tattoo discourse community, recognized that she might not fulfill the stereotyped identity of someone who would be most expected to have a tattoo.

Through this critical awareness of stereotyping and an awareness of the disparity between her own identity and this stereotyped image of the tattooed woman, Kellie is able to transcend through stereotypes and
expectations of others. Kellie is a prime example of a tattooed individual from this newer generation of wider acceptance. In Kellie’s extra comments on the survey she added in that: “I am a librarian and people generally think of librarians as somewhat conservative, stiff, mundane (enter any librarian stereotype). And while I know better and know that it is far from the truth about most librarians, it still surprised me the number of tattoos some of them have, especially the older librarians. I see nothing wrong with it, of course; it just one more thing that shows how far we’ve traveled from the stereotype of the crotchety, tight-bunned librarian.” Kellie’s awareness of the multiple stereotypes that she both fulfills and transcends demonstrates that she is acutely cognizant of her own identity. Through Kellie’s critical awareness of stereotypes within the literary tattoo discourse community and her own pride for her own tattoo, she is able to fully embrace her own identity as a member of the literary tattoo discourse community. By challenging the stereotype model of a “tattooed woman”, Kellie stands her ground and impresses her literary tattoo confidence further into her identity.

Findings and Results

Through the discussion that participants willingly inserted themselves into via survey, I have come to a more realized point of understanding regarding the literacy of tattoos in relationship to identity. My participants widely echoed the notion that their tattoos did not so much as change or alter their identity as they strengthened their ideals and affirmed their beliefs, or served as reminders.

One individual participant strongly resonated a rounded understanding of the relationship between their tattoo literacy and their own identity. In the last question of the survey, I allotted space for people to provide any further explanation or reflection as they saw fit. One of the answers to this question is as follows:

Tattoos aren’t all of a person. Many people will see tattoos and think that is all there is to someone. My tattoos are a part of me, they do not define me. They are an extension, a way to speak with out words. Tattoos, for me, are a story, a piece of my life I want to remember, and a way to hold onto people I never want to forget.

10/2/2012 12:06 AM  View Responses

This individual’s thoughts and assertions fulfill the hypothesis that I initially set out to expect to hear from participants. I expected to hear participants explaining how their tattoo is not a restraining form of expression, is not immovable, and is not rigid. What I had hoped for was for individuals to recognize and identify their own tattoo literacy- and even more than that, I hoped for individuals to realize the relationship that they create
at a literary discourse level with outside observers of their tattoo(s). In the above dialogue box, Halie, affirms my hypothesis that “they [tattoos] are an extension, a way to speak without words. Tattoos […] are a story.” Here, Halie explicitly upholds my understanding that tattoos serve as a form of literary expression, or “a way to speak without words.” Halie also upholds that tattoo literacy serves to please both the individual and also to interact in a sort of visual dialogue with others, as “tattoos are a story.” This particular participant demonstrates a strong understanding of the expressive and communicative literary acts that her tattoos commit, and she supports my initial hypothesis that emphasizes the interconnectedness between tattoos, literacy, and identity.

Another participant mirrors the concept of fluidity in her tattoo with her body and identity, as expressed in the graphic below. This participant states: “I don’t know if they [the tattoos] have changed my identity as much as become a part of it.” Here, this participant’s statement emulates this notion of incorporating and owning one’s tattoo on their physical body so deeply that the tattoo becomes one with the body; thus, the tattoo and the body are one and of one identity.

While many may read this research and be moved to read upon the reflections and private justifications these participants have explained, a “purist” of sorts may disagree that tattoos are a meaningful discourse by which one can or should communicate. One of my participants struck an interesting chord as she gave a brief explanation of the relationship between her tattoo and her personal identity:

This individual, Madeline, states that she personally doesn’t like tattoos and that she “believes that everyone’s body is beautiful and it looks how it is supposed to. I think it’s beautiful when people keep their hair natural, their skin unmarked, and no holes in their body. They’re in their purest form this way.” Here, Madeline serves
as juxtaposition to the other participants who do not admit that they much admire the “purest form” of the body, as Madeline does. Despite her dislike of tattoos, Madeline’s story illustrates, perhaps, the most beautiful instance of tattoo literacy and expression. Madeline states that she “has been marked just as my life has [been marked] by a death of a loved one.” Here, Madeline complicates her own beliefs about purity but admitting that her life has in fact been tainted, or marked, by the death of a loved one. The poetic part of this is that just as Madeline states that her life has been marked by this death, Madeline’s skin is now also marked as a result of a memorial tattoo for the lost life of her loved one. Here, Madeline obscures the arguments of those opposed to tattoos as a form of expression by succumbing to the desire to mirror a “mark” on her life with a “mark” on her skin.

 Discussions and Conclusions

This study sought to explore the dynamics and relationships between tattoos, literacy, and personal identity, and confidently argue that these three topics are so very related to each other. While it is unlikely that many people will assert that tattoos do not relate to identity or a shared communication, it is likely that a set of purist standards or stereotypes may be cast upon the inked individual. Throughout my research, multiple individuals acknowledged that they had received criticism from certain parental figures that asserted that their tattoo would hinder their ability to acquire a job. However, many individuals also acknowledged that getting tattooed is becoming more common in this generation of young adults.

As the expression of identity and personal value systems emerges through the visual representations of ink in skin, it is the hope of many for tattoos to be more widely accepted and admired. Through the questioning and reflection of my willing participants, I have highlighted the importance in recognizing the relationship that exists between tattoo literacy, expressionism and identity. Each individual that possesses a tattoo not only modifies or deepens their own identity or understanding of themselves, they also expose themselves and their tattoo to a discourse community discussion regarding the meaning and experience related to the identity in their ink.
Sources
