

# Stories on the Skin: Tattoo Culture at a South Florida university

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## Abstract

This paper describes a multidisciplinary creative and research project at a South Florida public university. “Stories on the Skin: Tattoo Culture at FAU” has explored and presented tattoos as a shared cultural experience, rather than as a symptom, or a fad. Considering relevant scholarship in various disciplines, tattoo emerges as a repository of memories and a site of affirmations, but also a significant form of creative self-expression beyond temporary fashion. Proposing a positive value to connecting mind and body, story and skin, the project offers a model for other universities to engage a diverse student body in the complexities of living an embodied self in a virtual world. It also offers a way to open the minds of those who would discriminate. It is not about promoting, but about understanding, this moment of ink, deploying the arts and humanities for the sake of self-knowledge and tolerance.

## Keywords

Art, body, culture, embodiment, humanities, tattoo, tattoos

## Introduction

The practice of tattooing has exploded in recent years. A 2012 Harris Poll estimated that one in five Americans now wear tattoos. Representing 21%, this is up from 14% in a similar 2008 poll. Historically, that can be compared with only 3% in the 1980s. Other data suggest that for the under-30 population the percentage today increases to one in three, and for millennials, 40% (Braverman, 2012; Jimerson, 2012: 9; Taylor and Keeter, 2010: 1; also Martin and Dula, 2010; Woodstock, 2011). While this is an international phenomenon, American mass media has demonstrated its particular talent for popularizing and thus monetizing the trend from every conceivable perspective. Through advertising, reality

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television, sitcoms, broadcast and cable news stories, and movies, tattooed bodies have become characters in every conceivable 21st-century scenario, from high art to baby boomer banality to millennial malaise, to carceral dystopia. The media schizophrenia corresponds to the general state of tattoos which, as Derek John Roberts wrote recently, hangs in “cultural limbo” (2012: 156). Tattoo scholarship, across a broad range of fields and methodologies, can also appear to be of two minds, generally distinguished between modes constituted as diagnosis and those as interpretive.

“Stories in the Skin: Tattoo Culture at FAU,” the project described in this article, was launched in this moment of ambiguity.<sup>1</sup> One of the earliest activities was the gathering of references to tattoos from various sources—newspapers, magazines, websites, literature, art, film, television—which has resulted in a remarkable collection, a capsule account of the shifting perspective on tattoo in recent years. For example, a recent story about a young orchestra conductor was headlined “Maestro with the Turtle Tattoo” (Wakin, 2013: AR1). The lengthy article only included a brief mention of the ink, but the headline was enough to lend this music world hotshot the requisite coolness. By contrast, the “cretinous and tattooed” Oodie brothers are “heavily armed and not all that bright” in Stephen Holden’s (2012) review of *The Baytown Outlaws* (2013).

From the beginning it was clear that when thinking about people with tattoos in the 21st century, we cannot assume that we know anything about them (or indeed, that we ever did). Our project began with the premise, a metaphor really, posed by my collaborative creative partner Arthur Jaffe (1921–2015), Professor Emeritus and founder of the Jaffe Center for Book Arts (JCBA), in the Wimberley Library at FAU, in Boca Raton. Jaffe offered that tattooed bodies are walking books, which can be read and interpreted. Jaffe, a philanthropist and collector of artist’s books, has made it his life’s work to expand the notion of what, exactly, constitutes a book, which is the underlying spirit that animates the JCBA. Every corner of the space occupied by the main gallery of the JCBA contains objects unlikely to be immediately identified as books. They may have pages, words, pictures, and stories, but the Jaffe Collection exemplifies the concept of books as esthetic objects. If artist’s books are estheticized ideas, then tattoos as we have approached them are estheticized lives. The project and what I’ve come to term “tattoo culture” was developed out of my fortuitous association with the JCBA, a living center of culture at the university, a wing of the library which not only makes books from scratch (papermaking, letterpress, binding) but also presents the arts, in multiple forms including exhibitions and live performances, to the FAU community, and a broader South Florida audience. The metaphor of the book shaped the kind of questions we asked as creative partners, and by extension my scholarly research and writing on the project.<sup>2</sup>

The university is a microcosm which demonstrates the steep rise in the practice of tattooing, a profoundly bodily expression, at the just historical moment when our lives are becoming increasingly virtual. With the rise of online education, you can get a college degree without ever stepping into a classroom, and increasingly,

you can have a working life that does not require you to perform a bodily self; conducting business via a widespread array of telecommunications options, and never showing up at a physical workplace.<sup>3</sup> A large percentage of the people you deal with on a daily basis may never know what you look like, would not recognize you passing on the street, let alone know your body language, facial expressions, or even vocal intonations. However, tattoos, like other bodily expressions, anchor the self in the physical realm, which this paper proposes as a positive value (Sweetman, 1999).

A student's description of her tattoo illustrates this perfectly. Krista inked a Celtic knot on her inner wrist, a symbol, she explains, of the trinity of body, mind, and soul, and of, "where I've been, what happened, and where I am now."<sup>4</sup> Acquired while beginning recovery from acute alcoholism, her sacred knot is placed where it is visible: "to take a drink I would have to look at it." This particular biographical detail is one she generally withholds when asked about her ink. Like many others, Krista's story encompasses several key points: the body/mind split, the power of sacred symbols, and the significance of revealing the story, as a reaffirmation of the original intention. The tattoo is an active agent in lived experience, and in the narrative that agency is reinforced in the telling.

This article will explore the concept of "tattoo culture" by recounting, and interpreting, the various phases of our creative research project and what they accomplished. As will become clear, "tattoo culture" in this context is differentiated from the traditional understanding of the term as referring to tattoo studios, conventions, publications, and so forth. "Stories on the Skin: Tattoo Culture at FAU" now constitutes an extensive archive of varied materials related to 21st-century tattooing, including the results of a survey, interviews, photos, hundreds of creatively presented tattoo stories, several short films, and a professional documentary about the project. There have also been public events, art exhibitions, talks, live performances, film screenings, and class projects. Instead of asking what a tattoo tells us about its bearer, which has historically been the most common method, our approach was always "tell us about it." As an Associate Dean recently characterized it, I then "curated" the idea around the concept of "tattoo culture." Encouraging the blending of ink and story in imaginative and meaningful ways has engaged a university population and the South Florida community with a more nuanced exploration of the phenomenon.

Four years of developing the concept has elicited sophisticated questions about embodiment and the performance of self in the so-called information age. The remainder of this article will attend to some of these questions and will argue the value of such a project through the lens of relevant scholarship in order to address first, the stigma of body modification, second, the efficacy of deploying creative activities as our platform, and third, the gains of potentially increasing somatic awareness by reactivating these "stories on the skin."

I explicitly borrow a structure of interrogation from philosopher Susan Bordo: rather than attempt to "explain" the current phenomenon of mainstream tattooing through one or another available model, I have developed a creative framework,

*Stories on the Skin*, and an interpretive model, “tattoo culture” in order to examine, in several articles, the potential which adheres to interdisciplinary, collaborative research and creative activity (Bordo, 2003: 32). This essay situates the above specifically within the university context. Ultimately, I offer the framework of “tattoo culture” as a model for other universities to engage their student bodies, and minds, across colleges and disciplines. It is a period of particular stress for the humanities in higher education, as “national priorities” drive policy and media attention, and ultimately university resources toward the so-called STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and math)<sup>5</sup> (Kent, 2012). A project that ranges broadly across the humanities and social sciences disciplines (arts, literature, languages, women’s studies, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, sociology) suggests the rich possibilities for interdisciplinary inquiry and collaboration.

### **Student body art**

From the beginning this project engaged students in numerous ways. A survey was conducted, classroom assignments were given, and invitations were extended to participate. Often we just took a sign out to a central thoroughfare and invited students to “Show us your tattoos.” Through all these interactions, we found that the pages of these walking books have esthetic merit and narrative content, and include rich mythological and meaningful cross-cultural content. Like most books, the story and image are inextricably linked.

From early on we realized that the tattoo narrative—in its simplest form this is the answer someone gives you when you ask about their tattoo—has been central to studies of tattooing in the west in recent years, in disciplines including anthropology, cultural studies, psychology, sociology, and women’s studies.<sup>6</sup> That research considers those stories regularly published in tattoo magazines, or that are part of reality TV shows like *Miami Ink*, and also those collected directly from participants in studies (DeMello, 2000; Kosut, 2000; Littell, 2003; Oksanen and Turtiainen, 2005; Woodstock, 2011) As DeMello’s oft-cited book examines, narratives have part of their origin in the defensive mode, an explanatory strategy to respond to disapproving questions and comments, especially as tattoo moved into more mainstream populations. More to the point though, the narratives are embedded in the ink, not only as origins, but in the deeper sense, as instrumental in identity formation.

Students shared meanings rooted in history, philosophy, science, music, religion, sports, literature, film, art, art history, politics, and popular culture. A snapshot of university culture, and culture at large, representing innumerable styles and dozens of languages, tattoos express and embody as many longings and aspirations, commemorations and celebrations, heritages and traditions, as there are students. FAU is distinguished by the diversity of its student body; its tattoo culture reflects this mosaic of references. Gathering and archiving hundreds of images and stories encourages students to reaffirm those meanings, which are often, as we saw above with Krysta, aspirational.

The fruits of this interaction with the FAU population led to an exhibition, “Student Body Art,” featuring photographs shot by artist/designer Patricia “Z” Koppisch, mounted with accompanying quotes, a short essay, and a catalog. By merely putting up a sign reading “Show us your tattoos” we found ourselves surrounded by students eager to bare their flesh, and sometimes their souls. Koppisch’s stylish photos zero in on the marks of the busy life of the student; its essentials, including smart phones, water bottles, used books, bicycles, and skate boards. Combined with the dizzying array of tattoos, “Student Body Art” captures the essential energy of the 21st-century college campus (Figure 1).

## Tattoo culture

Next, to pursue the narrative side of the tattoo more in more depth, we did a call for participation, inviting students to submit stories about tattoos in any form, and received a selection of thoughtful and varied written submissions.

A few of these became the basis of our experiment, to work with the students to develop their stories into performances. With a professional film crew present, a



Figure 1. *Student Body Art*, cover design by Z. Koppisch, 2011.

group of students worked with creative faculty for two afternoon-long workshops, leading to *Stories Live!*, an evening of “tattoo culture” before a live audience at the JCBA played to a packed and enthusiastic audience and, again, the film crew (see Figure 2).

Joyce (Psychology) used this opportunity to creatively express her ambivalence about her daughter’s choice to be tattooed. In front of projected images taking the audience from daughter Rachel’s infancy to the present day, Joyce read “Fingers and Toes”:

That single rose  
on your once innocent flesh  
that I fiercely guarded  
was a harbinger  
that you belong to today  
and I to yesterday  
left behind to revel in the memory  
of that glorious day  
that I counted your fingers and toes. (Excerpt)

Rebekah (Psychology) accompanied herself on guitar and drew the audience into a rhyming tale of a lover’s crush, a tattoo, and the realization that it was action, not ink, that was really needed: “I realized that my skin heals faster than my heart.”



**Figure 2.** *Stories Live!* performer Grace Fonseca, photo by Z. Koppisch, 2011.

Her tattoo of anime character Spike Spiegel's motto "Whatever Happens, Happens" was an attempt at nonchalance that the narrative reveals as appealing, but unlikely to win the object of her affection.

Grace (Anthropology) wove a web of poetic connections to offer a more universal portrait of tattoos as integrated into life's passages:

The skin tells stories,  
 Blood and tears mark new beginnings,  
 Don't hate destiny,  
 Just embrace what has happened,  
 Listen,  
 Everytime the needle goes off  
 The past gets buried,  
 It could be as painful as a funeral  
 Full of joy like a brand new baby,  
 The pain of life. . .  
 (Excerpt)

Cierra (English) submitted the vivid story of someone who regrets getting inked: "I've dreamt my nails into razor blades, grating the top layer of skin right off with that tattoo." Although we didn't realize it at the time, the story was fiction and Cierra had no tattoos. When she came to perform though, she told that story, then revealed her first tattoo, the Chinese character for Queen, and performed the spoken word poem "Royal Ink":

Sewing up the scars with ink, tell me I have become better than before.  
 Now I know I am a book worth reading. (Excerpt)

Moving the students beyond the simple repetition of a personal narrative to crafting new interpretations in various art forms has been the most experimental and most satisfying part of the project. With the expertise of writer/producer Susan Rosenkranz, the documentary film *Stories on the Skin: Tattoo Culture at FAU* presents these stages (Figure 3). In January 2013, the film was premiered to an audience of roughly 400 in FAU's University Theater. The event included a tattoo-related exhibition of paintings, photographs, and other media, and an evening of music, dance, theater, video art, and poetry, a collaborative effort between multiple departments, undergraduates, graduate students, faculty, staff, and administration.

In the lobby, painters, sculptors, ceramic artists, photographers, and designers exhibited works investigating tattoos, but also bodies and art, artful bodies, and embodied stories. Undergraduate Gaia's arresting photographs, and MFA student Kandy's striking paintings, incorporated tattoos into probing character studies. Faculty member Suzie Khalil's contributions dug into alternative traditions, one a monumentalized photo of a tiny tattoo, a marker for directing radiation therapy; the other an affectionate portrait of a man playing pool, which stops you in your



**Figure 3.** Shooting *Stories on the Skin*, student Lucas Andahl, photo by Z. Koppisch, 2012.

tracks when you notice the holocaust tattoo. This is only a small sampling of what was exhibited.

Among performances on the main stage, saxophonist Stephen (Music) played Bozza's haunting *Aria*, accompanied by Kevin on piano. It is a piece of music he has inked on his skin in memory of his beloved grandmother. Images of her, vintage and more recent, appeared behind him as he connected his love of family, and music, with the education he was receiving in part due to her. Shannon and Danielle (Theater) interpreted portions of Jane Martin's monolog "Marks," about becoming visible to the world by the marks you bear (Martin, 1983). Coached by theater professor Laura Wayth, they artfully brought to life the work's central metaphor. Shannon is the unmarked version of Alain, describing her life as "smooth. . .placid. . .like one of those baroque string quartets" until she is cut by a rebuffed hook-up. Danielle, a more aggressive Alain, asserts her presence through her visualized life story, tattoo by tattoo she comes into view. In an admittedly dark turn, the piece ends with her urging others to allow themselves to be marked, perhaps by her.

The evening culminated in the film screening (Figure 4). The film takes the project from the beginning and presents the audience with various aspects of FAU's tattoo culture. Filmmaker Rosenkranz conducted interviews with many students and several of the faculty participants, and interspersed these with an original musical score, footage and photos from our exhibitions, events, and creative workshops and performances (Leader and Jaffe, 2012).

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Figure 4. Film premiere, poster design by Z. Koppisch, 2013.

In a climax to the evening as rare as it is telling, the crowd remained seated throughout the credits, breaking out into applause no less than three times. It was not specifically for the film that they were applauding, but for a project that took an aspect of university life, tattoos, and presented it in surprising, sophisticated, and deeply moving ways. In a sense students were seeing the potential in their own life stories. "Tattoo culture" struck a chord.

Like the premiere, at each stage of the project we have had public events, and in some cases question and answer sessions, expanding the project beyond the student body. We have also received substantial South Florida media coverage, extending the project's impact. There is absolutely no doubt that the minds of skeptics have been, if not changed, at least opened. While this was certainly not our primary reason for pursuing the project in this way, it is in and of itself a worthy outcome given the negative associations still adhering to tattoo.

## At FAU

South Florida generally refers to the southern part of the state, but more specifically to the three counties, Miami-Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach, that make up the Atlantic side of the southern peninsula, including the greater Miami metropolitan area and extending down to the Florida Keys. It is the only part of the continental U.S. with a tropical climate, which could explain its vibrant tattoo culture purely by virtue of the year-round opportunities for display of one's body art. It is distinguished culturally, economically, and politically from the rest of the state for various reasons including immigration patterns, both from Latin American and Caribbean countries, and from the northern states as both temporary "snowbirds" and permanent retirees. It is, for these and other reasons, quite culturally vibrant, more politically liberal, and more ethnically varied than the rest of the state.

FAU, with six campuses located in both Palm Beach and Broward counties, is a public university, a state school founded in the "Great Society" project of the 1960s. It is the most racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse institution in Florida's State University System and is ranked 27th or 28th most diverse in the nation. FAU is recognized nationally for its excellence in graduating a diverse student population, ranked 32nd nationally in the number of Bachelor's degrees conferred on minorities (Catanese, 2006; Quick Facts, 2013). We attract students from all races, ethnicities, ages, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The range of experiences and worldviews our students possess enriches our classrooms and enlivens the public life of our campuses. It is this richness that provides the content for our project. Within the university context, *Stories on the Skin* is, among other things, a sustained argument about the things a university can do, and the humanities can exemplify.

## "Why would you do that to yourself?"

The first and most obvious value of such a project is to combat the stigma that still adheres and the discrimination that endangers the futures of our students (Burgess and Clarke, 2010; Kaufman, 2013; Said, 2013). Denying a job because of visible tattoos is not illegal, and while I have located no statistics, it most certainly happens. Starbucks, the US Army, and police forces across the country have received media attention due to their shifting (sometimes hardening) policies toward tattoos

(Johnson, 2014). Despite their increasing popularity, glance at the comments of any online article related to tattoo and you will see that prejudice and stereotyping are alive and well (Kakoulas, 2009). The sustained and relentless treatment of tattoos as the externalization of trauma, in scholarship, and then as shorthand in media culture, skews our perception of the multiplicity of motivations for choosing ink as an expressive form. Thus, in opposition to this stereotyping, our project offers a praxis of the proposal that “sometimes the tattooed cousins are the most interesting characters at the family reunion” (Coyner quoted in Jimerson (2012: 27)).

Cultural theorist Nikki Sullivan argues the significance not of the tattooed body, but of the encounter with it. Questioning what the tattooed body *does* in Western culture, Sullivan pivots away from meaning or significance, arguing:

...tattoo is not simply reducible to a symbolic representation of the truth of the subject, but rather that the tattoo is inseparable from the subject and can be understood as a process (rather than an object) in and through which the ambiguous and open-ended character of identity and of meaning is constantly (re)negotiated *in and through relations with others and with a world*. . . The tattoo will generate different meanings depending on *the embodied history of the subject who interprets*, and also on the relationship between him or her and the tattooed person. (19, emphases added)

Capitalism is driving this moment of ink. The tattoo studio is one of the top five or six new retail industries; new populations, including women in their 30s and 40s are the latest growing demographic; and marketers now use tattooed models and celebrities in advertisements to sell products (Kosut, 2006). Opinion data suggest a leveling off of reactions based on stigma. In our 2010 survey, our students, tattooed and not, had the roughly the same opinion of tattooed people (see also Braverman, 2012).<sup>7</sup> Significantly though, while an overwhelming number of students, both tattooed and not (97.36%) responded in the affirmative to this question: “Were you aware that employment recruiters have a generally negative opinion of visible tattoos?”, an equally impressive number responded affirmatively to a query about their intention to get tattooed (for those without) or get more tattoos (for those already tattooed). While recognizing the significance of the word “visible” in our question, and acknowledging that acquiring easily hidden tattoos was an option, we nevertheless found it striking that hundreds of students at a single university intended to start or continue getting tattoos, despite the full awareness of the possibility of discrimination in the job market. Disapproval of the practice still present in society at large is justification for that discrimination.

There is no doubt that Arthur Jaffe and I witnessed extremely negative responses to the project from our local community. We were surprised at the resistance and sometimes downright hostility to this topic. That some of this population is older, and Jewish (as was, significantly, Mr. Jaffe) explains this to some extent, but this was by no means the only group to object. Combining virulent reactions with the

possibility of job discrimination based solely on being tattooed, and having students overwhelmingly choosing to do so anyway suggests that this is, to borrow a cliché, more than skin deep.

Generational shifts will eventually change the view of marked bodies, altering, if not entirely cancelling out the stigma. Our project was never explicitly about addressing that in broader society. Nevertheless, the ramifications for college students cannot be ignored, given general socioeconomic conditions that make their entry into the working world challenging, to say the least. Interlocutors, those both my age and Mr Jaffe's (40 years apart) have unapologetically expressed disapproval, referred to a lost generation, defiling their bodies, ruining their lives: "ugly," "foolish," "they'll regret it," "they are permanently marked as criminals and deviants."<sup>8</sup> These are people who would, without a second thought, deny someone a job despite their qualifications, simply because they were tattooed. To be clear, they are referring to our business majors, nursing, engineering, journalism, arts, and biosciences. They are our graduating classes. Are they all doomed?

University populations have certainly been the locus of significant tattoo scholarship. Studies of sexual activity, religious beliefs, high-risk behavior, and disease have all focused on college students. (For a thorough bibliography of such studies, see Martin and Dula (2010).) Important among these for the purposes of this article is a 2001 study by Gordon Forbes. This passage is crucial:

There were very few differences in the childhood experiences or personality characteristics of people with or without body modifications. Although people with body modifications *did not* differ from people without modifications on the Big Five personality measures, [neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, conscientiousness] people without modifications *perceived* people with modifications as much different from themselves on these measures. These results indicate that tattoos and piercings in college students are *associated with* significantly more risk-taking behavior, greater use of alcohol and marijuana, and less social conformity. However, the traditional stereotype that body modifications are indicators of social or personal pathology does not describe contemporary college students. (773) (emphases added)

My added italics emphasize Forbes' important point that however *perceived*, the psychological differences are not, in fact, significant. But these perceptions, indeed, these assumptions about the character of the tattooed have deeper and older roots. Nikki Sullivan coins the term "dermal diagnostician" to characterize this historical approach (2001). According to Amy Littell, newer research suggests the "links between psychopathology and tattoos are an artifact of the subject selection in the studies" (2003: 19). In particular, these studies are located within populations already identifiable for antisocial behaviors, such as prisons or gangs, without a control group such as sailor or sports tattoo traditions. While the scholarship on deviant behaviors, subcultures, risky lifestyles, and self-mutilation might be relevant to pockets of the population, a stroll around a shopping mall or college

campus will reveal that the old assumptions no longer apply, and probably never did. Either tattooing is now mainstream behavior or we have a student population, and an estimated 50 million Americans who are subcultural deviant self-mutilators.

As seen earlier, there is no doubt that our students are aware of the stigma, and again, some choose discrete locations for this reason, rather than not inking at all. Many expressed the hope that this project would change some minds and shared stories of remarkably antisocial behavior from strangers in grocery lines expressing their disapproval. In addition, tattoo removal may be held out by some as an easy option. It is, in fact, painful and quite expensive. To reiterate, while not our primary purpose, my creative collaborator and I find the presence of the kind of prejudice we witnessed a compelling reason to continue, and to extend the spirit of the project, as an exploration of a shared cultural experience, beyond its South Florida origins.

*Stories on the Skin* offers a model of engagement with a population facing formidable challenges. Since 2003, the average student loan burden for a 25-year-old with student debt has grown an astounding 93%, with 10% of student loan borrowers owing more than \$54,000. It is not strictly that tuitions and fees have gone up, though they have, but also that, for public institutions such as ours especially, states squeezed due to ongoing financial contractions and austerity measures contribute less (American Student Assistance, 2014; Brown and Caldwell, 2013). These costs are shifted onto the backs of students and their families who, while still convinced of the value of a college education, mortgage their futures for a dubious employment horizon.

In addition, the Great Recession of the 21st century, along with extreme political polarization, has normalized catastrophic unemployment rates, the fetishization of “job creators” who are doing no such thing, and the demonization of “takers” purportedly living off of the government teat. The racial dog-whistling of these memes has gotten louder in recent years, in part due to the election and reelection of a black president, and is of no small consequence to the racially diverse student body described earlier. Wealth and income inequality at historical levels portends a future far less promising for today’s graduating seniors, than even one generation past.

Naysayers might respond that people should just stop getting tattoos, because they might be hurt in the job market. To this one must respond, tattoo is a cultural phenomenon as old as culture itself, which is intervening at this moment in the human relationship between body, mind, and culture. Naysayers should object more stridently to starvation chic, rape culture, or racial stereotypes. In relation to these, a full sleeve is small beer. The ideas explored in the project have broader relevance to considering the role of such creative experimentation to broad social issues of tolerance, bodily acceptance, and shared values.

## **What tattoos do**

When asked why he wanted to participate in *Stories on the Skin*, one student responded that while he had been very aware of his tattoo and close to its

significance when he got it, he found this opportunity to reaffirm that connection very powerful, because it meant so much to him. That, in a nutshell, defines the potential value of engaging students this way. It is not a nostalgic reminiscence of a time gone by, but instead a reactivation. Reactivating “what,” is the central question, and begins to make the connection between the personal and the political dimensions introduced earlier. Whether the motivation for getting a tattoo was deeply meaningful, or relatively fleeting, the work itself is a lived experience, a permanent change to one’s external appearance and, perhaps, their sense of self. Most are, to varying degrees, both.

That tattoos have agency has been a refrain in both the interviews for our project and in the scholarship. In one dramatic example, FAU student Danielle had the word truth, flanked by stars, tattooed on her inside lower lip, such that when folded down the word appears to the viewer. Otherwise hidden, the tattoo was acquired, she recalled, at a time when she was lying a lot, and hurting people in the process. Henceforth words coming out of her mouth would have to make it past TRUTH. The idea that tattoos actively participate in the shaping of behavior is a constant refrain in student responses. As Mary Kosut describes it,

The act of tattooing permanently reinscribes the living body—thinking, breathing, sweating, wrinkling—with a type of agency that is ongoing and inexhaustible, as compared with the consumption and display of sartorial body modifications that are, by their nature, ephemeral and disembodied. Tattoos invite a level of engagement because they become a permanent addition to the body/self. (2006: 1042)

Simply by the fact of telling us about, and allowing us to photograph her otherwise private tattoo, Danielle reinforced its “gatekeeper” role for her utterances.

Some stories give evidence of the significance of this kind of permanent embodiment of experience. David has a syringe encircled by vibrant blooms, colorful art which stands out from afar on his upper arm. It celebrates survival through a lifetime of chemotherapy, the aggression of the needle tempered by the floral beauty, a confirmation of his appreciation for the life he has been given through the crucible of the poison. The reminder is twofold, don’t forget the pain, but remember to grow as well.

“God is love” is not a simple statement for Shaina, whose tattoo declares this in Hebrew. While it confirms her belief that “the bible is the most true and powerful love story ever” its intention at a deeper level, according to the student who interviewed her, is to address religious radicalism: “because she says that religion should be run by love, not hate.”

The concept of “tattoo culture” proposes that the reiteration of such personal engagement in the details of tattoos offers a means beyond the dismissive “therapeutic language that focuses on individual suffering and healing while obscuring the social conditions that contribute to that suffering” (Woodstock, 2011: 3). I don’t disagree with Louise Woodstock’s critique of the narrow range of stories she discusses: “Tattoo narratives are formulaic, suggesting a readily available,

cultural template in active use. In other words, when tattooees speak about their tattoos, they draw upon social narratives learned while participating in popular culture” (14). Her argument is in the context of reality TV (Miami Ink, LA Ink) and how it serves a neoliberal discourse of self-improvement and self-surveillance, constraining the self that is narrated to an acceptable “brand,” while vacating any “radical political or social expression.” Likewise Victoria Pitts “challenges the postmodern reading of body modification as self-narration.” Bodies, she emphasizes, are always marked by power relations and symbolic meanings. While the practices to which she devotes most attention are more radical “body projects,” Pitts poses the most relevant questions to any consideration of how much agency any individual body might possess:

What are the roles of the body in social, political, and economic relations, and how do individuals negotiate these? . . . To what extent are the meanings of bodies shaped by individual bodies and selves, and to what extent do collective histories, cultural values, and patterns of inequality and social stratification shape them? (2003: 15, see also Brandt (2004))

To pose these questions vis-à-vis our students requires us to bring to bear the economic circumstances that bring them to a state school, the flip side of celebrating “diversity” narrative presented above; to acknowledge that the “face” of our student body is shaped by class and by extension race. A colleague asked astutely if I was willing to pair our tattoo statistics (how many, where placed) with an Ivy League student body. The assumption, unspoken but laden with insinuation, is that tattoo remains a “low class” activity, and that stigma clings to certain types of media portrayals, despite statistics proving otherwise, such as the Harris Poll cited earlier (Braverman, 2012).

So such framing of tattoo as part of a performance of self, while useful as a metaphor, threatens to devolve into the modernist myth of individual sovereignty, or conversely postmodern deconstruction. Tattoo scholarship and body studies more generally have been instrumental in shaping the goals of the project, and while I am in dialog with these, the goal was never strictly academic, any more than it was simply to tell stories. “Tattoo culture” was/is intended to intervene, through creative activity.

## **Creating culture**

A common misunderstanding of culture is to see it as reactionary, a reflection of some superstructure. On the contrary, culture intervenes to create structures and their meanings. Culture doesn’t tell us the “meaning of life,” it produces it. By treating culture as an agent, rather than a passive reflection (vulgar Marxism) we look for the best examples, those which have pushed back against convention, subverted, laid bare, or otherwise resisted. The things we remember, find in our textbooks, and teach in our classrooms, lend themselves to complex, layered,

counter-intuitive and sometimes completely contradictory readings. In the humanities we present them, and encourage our students to interrogate them, to convey the sophistication, and sometimes the counter-cultural quality of the most influential works of art. That doesn't mean we don't read culture critically, of course we do: "differencing the canon" and teaching against the text (Pollock, 1999). As agents, we recognize cultural productions as purveyors of stereotypes and perpetrators of power dynamics, but also as profound meditations on fundamental human values. It is through this lens that *Stories on the Skin* engages with tattoos and their bearers (and occasionally the tattoo artist as well), not to ascertain whether a particular tiger or Chinese character is a "work of art," but to bring to bear the creative capacities of a culturally rich university.

A cultural skin and an embodied "symbolic creativity" of personal, societal, and multicultural iconography, such as much tattoo art represents, allows individuals, as Dr Caren Neile observes, to "literally embody their stories. . ." (Bell, 1999, Neile quoted in Leader and Jaffe (2012)). Thus, "tattoo culture" in this project opens the narratives to artistic interpretation, transforming individual stories into shared cultural experiences. Several years of FAU students have seen tattoo treated in an interdisciplinary research/creative approach rather than the shallow offerings of popular media. By encouraging the linking of the ink and the story, body, and mind, the complex cultural intervention that is the tattoo, the individual, the social, and the universal are bound (to use the book metaphor) into a more fully expressive form, and the public is invited in to share the cultural experience.

## Art and embodiment

Gaia, an undergraduate anthropology student, offered a concise summary of tattoo's potential in the digital age:

Technology and the emergence of new dimensions of social connectedness increase the number of roles and disparate identities we appropriate, making it increasingly harder to have one committed identity and sense of self. The multiplicity of ways and means to express one self, leave most people seeking in the midst of a multitude of flat facades, an expression of one's true ethos. Skin, and the permanence of tattooing are the opposite of the ephemeral nature of digitally mediated social lives.

The increasing focus on the body, as a locus of meaning, site of power, and instrument of resistance has preoccupied scholars across disciplines. At the same time, postmodern theory has denaturalized the body, treating it as a social construction (Mascia-Lees and Sharpe, 1992). Whether Haraway's cyborg, Hayles's "post-human" or Deleuze and Guattari's Body without Organs, the most advanced body theories not only denaturalize, but dehumanize the postindustrial, information-age body. This is not to dismiss or discount the importance of this body-centered scholarship, but to attend to the difficulty of transforming such theorizing

into meaningful terms, where physical presence is at stake. Countering this tendency in distinctly strident terms, Mascia-Lees and Sharpe ask:

But where do we turn when the body, the very place where social anxiety is traditionally concretized, has been abstracted into theory? Where can we find the living, breathing, secreting, sensing, reacting, weeping body on which today's concerns can be read? (1992: 146)

Obviously, this is not a strictly academic question.

At precisely this moment an art form as old as human culture itself explodes. The 2012 Harris Poll reporting the roughly 50 million Americans now wearing tattoos provides the evidence that it is not a simple matter of youthful transgression or classed or regional subcultures. While not, arguably, fully "mainstream," tattoos regularly appear in mainstream culture with, "as discussed in the "Introduction," varied inferences to their significance. So again, rather than ask "what is this symptomatic of?" the better question might be: "what can this do?" And at least one answer, as we have seen, is that it can anchor identity on the body, locate that physical self that acts, and is acted upon, not an avatar but an estheticized corporeal envelope.

Even a brief overview of what tattoo has "done" and continues to do in various cultures would include medicinal and protective functions, class and status markers, rites of passage, beautification, and stigmatization (of criminals, and prostitutes, for example). Such processes continue today as our students relate not only what their tattoo "means" or why they got it, but, again, what it does. Offering a symbolic shield, Rebekah describes her tattooed "Psalm of protection" over her heart as God's constant presence, especially during her tours of duty in Kuwait and Iraq. Cancer ribbon tattoos change behavior in relation to health, and tattooed mastectomy scars reclaim the body from disease, through art. Wren's tattoo of a 19th-century scientific drawing of shark which is, she notes, thoroughly inaccurate, informs her own scholarly pursuits: "And so this kind of tattoo reminds me that in my science everything I'm seeing, I'm seeing through the lens of what I know to be true or what I think is true." The shape of her professional life as a scientist will be influenced by the lesson of her tattoo. Each of the above examples demonstrates the profound connection between tattoos and self-actualized personhood. If universities have one charge above all others, it should be the pursuit of this level of self-knowledge.

If the body is indeed marked, inscribed, continually colonized by power, then the only countervailing force, demonstrated continually through history, is taking ownership of the body, and hence, the body politic, physically embodying it. The recent "Occupy" movement offers a starting place for drawing the connection between embodied subjects and the political body.

Am I suggesting that tattooing is, or has the potential to be a persuasive political practice? No, it itself has been coopted by consumerism and fetishized by fashion. But as this essay has been arguing, the permanence undermines the fad and the narrative embeds the meaning. Living the experience of tattoo and speaking

yourself to others through the body turns the practice outward, into the social sphere. Form is transformed, through the creative process, from narcissistic and inner directed to interpretive and more universally expressive, drawing a line of ink through body, mind, and culture. When approached this way, “tattoo culture” is an agent of change rather than an indicator of trauma, which I believe is the more productive interpretive strategy. There is a depth that goes beyond fashion; and a danger, rooted in prejudice, in need of scrutiny. Narrative theories tell us that life stories are mutable, teleological, and instrumental. The tattoo serves as a marker, or again an anchor, so that despite the purported rootlessness or lack of shared meanings characteristic of the information age, the core narrative is inscribed (literally “written into”) and illustrated (“lighted up”) on the body.

The project described earlier offers a model, I believe, for other universities to engage students where they are, deepening our understanding of a phenomenon that, by its profusion but more importantly by its permanence, compels thinking beyond the fashion of the moment. Our goal has not been to find the “correct” meaning of a tattoo, or to insist that all tattoos have deep or fixed meanings, or even to suggest that it is “meaning” that matters. Instead, the creative and collaborative portion of the project has allowed our students to “tell their stories,” to publically express their connections to the texts and images inscribed on their bodies. Students should leave their time at university with something more than job skills, they should be different people. If we aren’t accomplishing that, we are merely vocational training. Exploring the shapes of our humanity is at the core of the university mission. Each time the story is told it is more deeply embodied, more part of the fabric of a life, an illustrated history, an adventure story. Through all its stages, we have offered a deeper understanding of the artful presentation of the self to the world, on the pages of the body.

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### Notes

1. Florida Atlantic University (FAU) is part of the State University System of Florida. More details about the project, which is ongoing, can be found at our website, [storiesontheskin.org](http://storiesontheskin.org) and our Facebook Page, [Facebook.com/storiesontheskinatfau](https://www.facebook.com/storiesontheskinatfau). Films related to the project may be viewed at <http://vimeo.com/66247144>.
2. A current doctoral student in the College of Education at FAU is using the JCBA as a case study for fostering individual and organizational creativity.
3. While numerous methodological perspectives are referred to and deployed in this article, the phrase “perform a bodily self” here is rooted in Erving Goffman’s sociological construction of the communicative body (Goffman, 1959).
4. Anecdotes from “Stories on the Skin: Tattoo Culture at FAU” represent the participation of hundreds of university students between 2010 and 2014. Students will be referred

- to by first name, and, when available, their major. Faculty and staff participants will be identified by first and last name.
5. Many aspects of this debate are addressed in the special double issue of this journal, "Humanities and the Liberal University: Calls to Action and Exemplary Essays," *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 13 (1–2) (February/April 2014).
  6. This study focuses on tattoo practices and scholarship of the last several decades in the west, primarily the US, beginning with the emergence of the so-called tattoo renaissance. Discussion of particular cultural practices of tattoo elsewhere, and in other periods, has bodies of scholarship devoted to them, which are not considered here.
  7. Ours is not a scientific finding given the motivation of interest in the topic for taking the survey.
  8. Even my own siblings insisted that it was perfectly acceptable to deny a job to someone because of visible tattoos. One of these siblings used to complain because he had to remove his earring at work. He no longer has to. Culture changes.

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