Inking the Line: Tattoo Artists, Cultural Appropriation, and Stolen Histories

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Introduction

It all starts with communication…

I sit on the phone with Mya, a tattoo artist and shop owner. Occasionally, Mya calls me to rant about the insanity of her work, because she knows no matter how much she complains, I understand she still loves what she does. It is the things we love that hurt us the most, which is perhaps a more apropos colloquialism for tattoos than most interests.

"Last year it was things turning into birds; fancy quill pens turning into birds, dandelions turning into birds, birds turning into birds! Right now I'd kill to do another thing turning into birds!"

"What is Pinterest telling white girls in yoga pants to get now?" I ask, knowing if it trends online, it will be inked on thousands of pale shoulders.

"Mandalas."

"The Hindu symbols?"

"Yup, I just had one white girl want me to do a Mandala version of her own face!"

"Did you do the tattoo?"

Mya sighs, "Yeah… I need to keep the lights on, it just kind of sucks…"

Woman with Mandala tattoo; Courtesy Google Images, 2019

Cultures of Ink — Verses — An Inked Culture

Cultures worldwide have tattooed for centuries for important religious, ceremonial, and identity forming purposes (Govenar, 1987):

Whang-Od, The Last Mambabatok Artist; Courtesy BBC, 2019

- Tattoos (such as the Mambabadok practiced by Whang-Od above) still hold deep cultural meaning for many indigenous people and ethnic groups worldwide (Salvador-Amores, 2011).
- Many traditional forms of tattooing face the challenges of an increasingly consumerist society (Chen, 2017).

An estimated 1 in 4 Americans has at least one tattoo (Laumann & Derick, 2006). Current research on tattoos and perceptions of people with tattoos has examined:
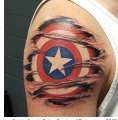
Captain America Tattoo; Courtesy of Pinterest.com, 2019

- Tattoos in the workplace (Foltz, 2014; Timming, 2015)
- How people with tattoos are perceived (Mallon & Russell, 1999)
- The ways people use tattoos to construct identity (Atkinson, 2004)

Cultural Appropriation In Tattoos

Cultural appropriation occurs when a tattoo that holds historical or sacred importance to a culture, such as the signature Ta Moko Tattoo of the Maori (pictured left) is tattooed on by someone who is not of that culture (pictured right), leaving a permanent form of cultural theft.

Woman with Traditional Ta Moko Tattoo; Courtesy Google Images, 2019

White Woman with Ta Moko Tattoo; Courtesy Google Images, 2019

There is Currently a Lack of Academic Research on Both Culturally Appropriative Tattoos and the Tattoo Artists Who Choose Whether or Not to Provide These Problematic Tattoos

Research Questions → Theoretical Underpinnings

RQ1: How do tattoo artists and body modification culture contribute to perpetuating the problematic issue of cultural appropriation in Western society?

RQ2: How do tattoo artists communicatively navigate these problematic forms of art?

1. Cognitive Dissonance (Festinger, 1957) – Humans like it when our self-image matches our actions. When our actions clash with who we see ourselves as people, it causes us to feel dissonance. We will either rationalize or change our behaviors to reduce dissonance.

2. Sensemaking (Pratt, 2000) – People tend to manage their identity by reflecting on others' reactions to their actions. They then create narratives that reaffirm their personal perceptions of their own identities or explain behaviors.

Methods

Approach
- Critical ethnography permits researchers to observe organic interactions and discussions around culturally appropriative tattoos to happen between tattoo artists and customers as naturally as possible (Bochner, 2014).
- The researcher spent five months and over 50 hours watching tattoo shop interactions.
- The researcher blended in by hanging out in customer waiting and artists' areas, with permission, and taking notes on her phone (which made her look like she was texting or on social media).

Participants
- Seven tattoo artists' and one tattoo apprentice's interactions with customers were observed.
- The tattoo artists come from everywhere from Illinois, to Georgia, to Mexico, to Canada.
- The observed tattoo artists ranged in tattooing experience from 3 to 25 years.
- All observations were performed in Arizona, with all tattoo shop owners and artists' permission in accordance with IRB.

Data Analysis
- Preliminary onsite notes were converted into full-length field notes once the researcher was offsite.
- Notes were then analyzed and grouped utilizing Thematic Analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochran, 2006).
- Themes were sorted into differing response categories (see chart below) of what a tattoo artist was willing to tolerate as far as performing or refusing to perform a culturally appropriative tattoo .
- Narrative vignettes were then distilled to help exemplify and explain those categories.

Results

Reaction Categories	Narrative Examples	Description
Flat Refusal ▪ *It's Not Yours* ▪ *I Don't Want My Name Tied to It* ▪ *I Won't Mess Up Their Life*	As Jay bent over my wrist, slowly inking in the first line of the latest addition to my skin's permanent art gallery, a random question came to mind, "So, what kinds of tattoos do you hate doing?" Jay grimaced, "Those nasty tribal tattoos." "Why?" Jay blew out a sigh as he continued to work, "Because that's someone's culture man, and it's always some lame-ass white person. You have to earn that shit. It's pretty, but it ain't yours."	▪ Artists who refused to perform culturally appropriative tattoos often cited the practice as unethical. ▪ To make sense of their own identities as ethical individuals (Sensemaking), there are some lines tattoo artists won't cross (Darley & Pittman, 2003). The tattoo artists' identity was wrapped up in performing "good" or "ethical" art. ▪ In regards to RQ1, tattoo artists who flatly refused stopped the spread of cultural appropriation.
Reluctant Acceptance ▪ *At Least I Can "Save" the Art* ▪ *"I have to pay the bills."*	Roxy dons her tattoo gloves in preparation to start another piece. We had been talking about tattoo trends and I brought up the Mandalas that she mentioned a lot of white people had been getting. She shrugged her shoulders a little uncomfortably, "If they want to be dumb, that's on them. I try to talk them into something else most of the time, but if they are going to get it done, then they might as well get it done well by someone like me instead of some kind of scratcher in a dump somewhere. At least I can save the art."	▪ Some tattoo artists, while still reticent, would perform appropriative designs if the customer could not be persuaded away from the problematic design. ▪ In regards to RQ1 and RQ2, these tattoo artists understood the tattoos were problematic, but rationalized (Cognitive Dissonance Reduction) their actions (Festinger, 1957). ▪ Artists expressed both the economic pressures of needing customers to pay the bills and their fears that if the appropriative designs were taken elsewhere, the designs would not be tattooed well. ▪ By placing the choice in the customer's hands and trying to do justice to the art, the tattoo artists were able to reduce the dissonance around performing these tattoos and protect their self-perception of their ethical identity.
Reparative Work ▪ *I'm Fixing A Problem*	Mike nods, "It's going to take a lot of shading, but yeah, I can cover that." The man lets out a relieved sigh, and looks down at the large Kanji that stands out on his pale skin, "Thanks man, I still don't know why I got this shit. I mean, I'm not Japanese, and I'm not even really sure what it says. It's embarrassing." "Not a problem man, shouldn't be too hard to hide. Glad I can help you out."	▪ Whether tattoo artists would perform a culturally appropriative tattoo or not, they consistently showed compassion for people seeking help in covering their culturally appropriative or racist tattoo. ▪ This kind of non-judgmental compassion has been shown to help sway people away from destructive ideas or ideologies (Tracy & Huffman, 2017). ▪ In reference to RQ2, the tattoo artists' displays of compassion meant that they could help suggest non-appropriative designs, and the client would listen to the artists' suggestion. In the case of sensemaking, the artists saw their actions as benevolent, the artistic experts righting the wrong that someone else in their industry had perpetrated.
Apathetic Acquiescence ▪ *Whatever, It's Your Body*	The young man begins to describe the tattoo he wants to get, "Uh… there's this phrase in Sanskrit, it's really deep it means…" Tiffany waves a hand and interrupts him, "Who did you get to translate it?" He shrugs, "I don't know, I just saw it online." Tiffany reaches under the front counter and pulls out an extra form, "No one here speaks that language, so if that's what you *really* want to get, you're going to have to fill out this form. It basically says we're not responsible if you end up getting nonsense tattooed on you in Sanskrit."	▪ Some artists simply did not choose to invest the emotional energy to care about appropriative designs, oftentimes because the appropriative design has become common (which responds to RQ1). ▪ The artists did not particularly enjoy doing these pieces, but often rationalized with statements like, "It's a free country," and, "It's their body." ▪ Artists in this category also cited the financial need not to turn away customers. ▪ In light of RQ2, these artists put the onus on the customers choice instead of taking direct responsibility for the art. ▪ All of these artists, however, drew the line at racist or openly derogatory tattoos.

Discussion

- Aware of the permanence of their work, all of the tattoo artists spoke to the degree at which they felt their art contributed to the perpetuation of cultural art theft (RQ1).

- All of the tattoo artists agreed that culturally appropriative tattoos were, at some level, problematic or wrong.
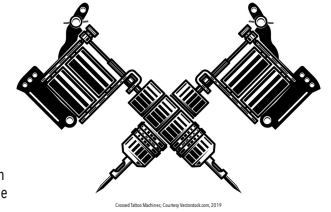
- Artists who fell into the Flat Refusal and Reparative Work Categories faced the least amount of cognitive dissonance and had to engage in fewer verbalized sensemaking narratives to maintain their self-image or public identity (RQ2).

- Artists who fell into the Apathetic Acquiescence category faced the highest level of Cognitive Dissonance, and as such, found that they had to explain their behaviors in greater length and provide more excuses to reduce that dissonance.

- Tattoo artists who had been in the business longer had more freedom to turn away tattoos they did not want to perform as they had a more stable clientele and reputation.

- Those who had been in the business a shorter time expressed more reticence to turn away a piece, even if they didn't feel perfectly comfortable with it, both due to the loss of money and the fear of getting a "hard to work with" reputation.
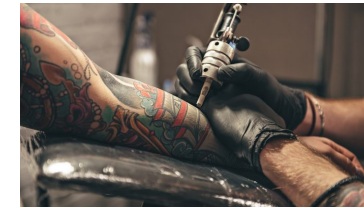
Crossed Tattoo Machines; Courtesy Vectorstock.com, 2019

- All tattoo artists drew the line at performing racist or hate-speech oriented tattoos, no matter the potential for financial loss.

- This research has wider implications for cultural appropriation in other artistic and consumerist markets and can help speak to how artists and image creators face these ethically murky areas.

- This work also begins to address the lack of research on tattoo artists.

Tattoo Artist; Courtesy of Earth.com, 2019

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