

CARTOGRAPHIES OF SKIN:
ASIAN AMERICAN ADORNMENT AND THE AESTHETICS OF RACE

by
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A Dissertation Presented to the
FACULTY OF THE USC GRADUATE SCHOOL
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA
In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
(AMERICAN STUDIES AND ETHNICITY)

May 2011

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the members of my dissertation committee for all their guidance, support, and mentorship: Dorinne Kondo, Ruthie Gilmore, Jack Halberstam, Karen Tongson, and Akira Mizuta Lippit. I am truly grateful for their presence in my life. My advisor and chair, Dorinne Kondo, deserves extra special thanks for all her support throughout the past six years. Without her patience and generosity this dissertation would not have been possible. I would also like to thank my cohort for creating a welcoming and supportive intellectual community while at USC: Chrisshonna Grant, Mark Padoongpatt, Abigail Rosas, Gretel Vera Rosas, Margaret Salazar, Terrion Williamson. I am also extremely grateful to the entire staff and faculty at the Department of American Studies and Ethnicity for all their help and support, including Kitty Lai, Sonia Rodriguez, Jujuana Preston, and Sandra Hopwood. In particular, I would like to thank Kitty Lai for her tireless efforts in providing the guidance necessary to navigate through the many corridors of the university.

I would also like to thank all the people whose voices can be heard throughout this dissertation. In particular, I would like to extend my thanks and appreciation to all the artists who took the time to help in my research: Aleks Figueroa, Yutaro Sakai, Grime, Marcus Pacheco, Horiyoshi III, Bling Bling Roxx, Scott Sylvia, Su'a Sulu'ape FreeWind, C.W. Eldridge. I would also like to thank all the tattoo enthusiasts who allowed me into their lives and provided interviews for this project, including Joshua David Reno, Mimi,

Michael, Vikki and Alex, and the members of the Mark of the Four Waves Tribe. Thank you so much for sharing your insights and experiences with me.

I would like to thank the following for their generous support in providing funding at various stages of my research: the USC Graduate School, USC East Asian Studies Center, Historical Society of Southern California. I also wish to thank Tomoko Bialock at the East Asian Library for all her assistance.

I am extremely grateful to all the faculty I have had the pleasure of working with at USC, including Jane Iwamura, Fred Moten, David Lloyd, Nancy Lutkehaus, Roberto Lint Sagarena, and Janelle Wong.

Finally, I would like to thank all my friends and family without whose help, encouragement, support, and laughter none of this would have been possible. Thank you to my parents and all my family members in Southern California. Thank you to my friends who kept me laughing and kept me sane. Thank you to my friends at UCLA, especially Christen Sasaki. To my swan compatriots, Sharon Luk and Jake Peters, I owe an inexpressible amount of gratitude and ketchup. To my brother, Brock, I owe the greatest thanks, for being the first person to really mark me in an indelible way.

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Abstract

“Cartographies of Skin: Asian American Adornment and the Aesthetics of Race” examines the construction and performance of tattooed bodies as sites of circulating materialities: where art, labor, culture, and ideology converge to “color” our understanding of race and the politics of visibility. Focusing on Asian and Asian American tattoo practices in California and their relationship to the larger Asia-Pacific region, I incorporate interdisciplinary research methods, including archival research, ethnographic field work, visual and discursive analysis, and critical theory, to investigate three case studies: the transnational movement of labor and aesthetics between tattoo shops in San Francisco and Japan; the meanings of diaspora, temporality, masculinity, and post-coloniality within the context of tribal tattooing among Filipinos in the suburbs of Orange County; and the embodied ontologies and performative epistemologies of a Korean American tattooed drag queen and her queer aesthetics of adornment. By analyzing the body in relation to convergent ideologies and aesthetics of race, space, and place, I locate skin as the site in which to rethink how knowledge is constructed and transformed through corporeal perception.

I center my work in port cities such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, Long Beach, Honolulu, and Yokohama, areas that have allowed for cultural combinations and convergences due to their readily available access to overseas contact. I also analyze how tattoo practices have spread to non-coastal areas, such as the suburbs of Orange County

and inland cities such as San Jose, California. By situating California as both the western coast of the United States as well as the eastern edge of the Pacific World, I examine how the circulation of bodies, labor, aesthetics, and ideologies redefine dominant conceptualizations of race and its relationship to place. Some of the key questions that my research seeks to address include: What are the intersections and transnational dimensions of race and tattooing, particularly when complicated by issues of class, gender, sexuality, and nationality? What type of (real or imagined) cultural heritage do Americans of Asian ancestry try to reclaim through the modification of the body? How do these meanings and symbols transform through the geographic, cultural, technological, and temporal displacement of these customs? Ultimately, my dissertation asks us to consider how *all* bodies are modified in some form or another, thereby destabilizing normativized notions of what is considered “natural” and “normal” forms of cultural and national belonging.

Chapter 1: Skinscriptions

1.1 Tattoo aesthetics

“I don't think I have anything meaningful to say,” confesses Mimi, as we sit and talk about tattoos in a newly opened vegan spot in Berkeley, California. Mimi and I met while we were both getting some ink work done at the Sword and Skull tattoo studio in San Francisco. While she agreed to take part in my study, she was skeptical about whether her interview would provide anything of “value” for my dissertation. She self-consciously noted that her tattoos do not hold any particular stories about her family or death or overcoming a great obstacle—all familiar tropes that serve as narrative story arcs for various reality tv shows about tattooing (*LA Ink*, *Miami Ink*, *Tattoo Stories*, et. al.). Indeed, US tattooing in the 21st Century has become legitimized through various forms of media, where everyone seems to have some deep “meaningful” story about their family, ancestry, death, tragedy, illness, that somehow makes marking up your body a-ok. What’s interesting for me is the lack of recognition that tattooing in and of itself is not seen as meaningful (or as meaningful), unless accompanied by a sob story about personal redemption. I think that the “non-meaningful” tattoo is just as meaningful as the “meaningful” one precisely because it forces the very recognition of the structures of feeling, or common-sense, that posits the marking of the body as important only in so far as it legitimates forms of acceptable action dictated by social propriety. Fuck that!

Yet this is instructive since it points to exactly why aesthetics becomes a crucial and contested realm central to my project on tattooing. In *The Critique of Judgement*,

Immanuel Kant writes, “A figure might be beautified with all manner of flourishes and light but regular lines, as is done by the New Zealanders with their tattooing, were we dealing with anything but the figure of a human being” (1972, 52). In order for Kant to experience an aesthetic appreciation for tattoo designs he must first de-corporealize the tattoo itself, which effectively evacuates said designs from being a tattoo at all. In his failure to recognize the art of tattoo, or the tattoo as art, Kant shows us how certain forms lie outside the realm of comprehension. In other words, meaning becomes legislated by the legible, regimes of comprehensibility, or what Rancière (2004) calls the “distribution of the sensible” that set the conditions of possibility for an understanding of aesthetic judgment.

Following Rancière (2009), I use the word “aesthetics” in two senses: to designate both “a general regime of the visibility and the intelligibility of art and a mode of the interpretative discourse that itself belongs to the forms of this regime” (11, n6). In other words, aesthetics names both the analysis of form and content operating within artistic discourse as well as the sense of perception—or “corporeal sensorium” (Castronovo 2007, 10)—that allows us to recognize the form and content in the first place. To again quote Rancière (2004):

aesthetics can be understood...as the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time. (13)

Rather than a transcendental, transhistorical concept, aesthetics is deeply embedded within time and space, contextually specific and historically contingent (Williams 1977). Thus, temporal and geographic considerations play crucial roles in how we understand aesthetics, in both senses of the term. At stake here is what Castronovo (2007) succinctly identifies as the way “aesthetics can enable a questioning of the forms by which we organize domains of politics and art in the first place” (12).

Thinking about tattoos and race, as conditions of existence and categories of analysis, opens up the consideration of the “dialectic of identity and difference” (Smith 1992, 67) that give these onto-epistemological categories meaning. This entails the production, reproduction, and visualization of ideologies and forms located between and within different physical and imaginary locations. In other words, my dissertation explores cartographies of self-making that operate at different spatial scales of analysis that are attentive to the relationship between material and metaphorical constructions of space (Smith, 1992, 60-64). While the body, or more precisely, skin, is the primary site of analysis in my dissertation, I also attempt to tease out, following Neil Smith (1992), “bodily access as a means of jumping scales” (68). Smith writes that “the importance of ‘jumping scales’ lies precisely in this active social and political connectedness of apparently different scales, their deliberate confusion and abrogation” (66). The body circulates, and this circulation (whether physical, ideological, psychological) serves as the condition of possibility for the onto-epistemological formations that I examine in this dissertation. Cartographies of skin: skin as site (and sight) in which to understand the

articulation of tattoos, race, place, and aesthetics; cartographies as, quoting Felix Guattari (1995), how “every individual and social group conveys its own system of modelling subjectivity; that is, a certain cartography—composed of cognitive references as well as mythical, ritual and symptomatological references—with which it positions itself in relation to its affects and anguishes, and attempts to manage its inhibitions and drives” (11).

1.2 Literature review

The study of contemporary tattooing in the North American context remains heavily indebted to anthropologist Arnold Rubin’s (1988) collection, *Marks of Civilization*. In this highly influential work, Rubin charts the development of tattoo culture and aesthetics in the United States in what he has periodized as the “Tattoo Renaissance,” beginning in the 1960s and continuing to the present day. Prior to Rubin’s work, North American body modification scholarship had associated tattooing with criminality and pathologic psychology (Grumet 1983; McKerracher and Watson 1969; Paine 1979; Favazza 1987). In the years since Rubin’s work, studies of tattoos and other forms of body modification have proliferated exponentially, with scholars in fields such as anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, history, and literature seeking to understand the increasing popularity of tattooing in the “West.”

The past ten years has been especially productive for tattoo scholarship. Histories of tattooing have been published in both academic (Caplan 2000; Guth 2005) and popular

presses (Gilbert 2000; McCabe 2001; Hesselt van Dinter 2005; Mifflin 1997). Literary and cultural studies scholars have analyzed tattoos as identity markers of resistance and reclamation of socially stigmatized bodies (Beeler 2006; Sullivan 2001; Brauberger 2000; Sweetman 1999 and 2000). Anthropologists and sociologists have used ethnographic research to explore identity and community formation in North America (Pitts 2003; Langellier 2001; Phillips 2001; DeMello 2000; Atkinson 2003; Sanders 1991 and 1989). The paradigmatic way of understanding North American tattooing has been within a framework of subculture (Gelder 2005; Pitts 2003; DeMello 2000). However, such a designation reifies the U.S. nation-state and obscures a larger geo-historical context within which to understand tattooing, histories that pre-date capitalism and the development of the modern nation-state.

Renewed scholarly attention to tattoo cultures outside North America provides a counterbalance to the selective myopia of the North American tattoo scholarship. In particular, recent studies of Pacific tattooing, within both pre- and post-colonial contexts (Thomas 2005; Kuwahara 2005; Ellis 2008) provide crucial inroads into our understanding of cultural exchange that precedes what is now commonly referred to as the transnational (Hau'ofa 2008). While I situate my work within the field of Asian American Studies, I hope to create a "productive engagement" with the field of Pacific Studies (Kauanui 2004). I contextualize Asian American tattooing in California within a broader geography of the Pacific to understand "Asia/Pacific as a space of cultural production" (Wilson and Dirlik 1995) to look at how the Pacific occupies a spectral

presence in all discussions of tattooing and racialization.. However, my work is attentive to the various criticism about the place of the Pacific and Pacific Islanders under the rubric of “Asian/Pacific Islander,” specifically within the field of Asian American Studies (Diaz 2004; Kauanui 2004). My project takes careful heed against treating the Pacific as an undifferentiated zone of engagement, but rather recognizes it as a site consisting of its own complex (and, at times, contested) space of (pan-)ethnoracial formation (Teaiwa 2006; Kauanui 2004; Diaz and Kauanui 2001; Dirlik 1998).

While North American-focused scholarship on body modification has addressed the uses of tattoos by groups marginalized along axes such as gender and sexuality (Pitts 2003; Atkinson 2003; Langellier 2001) and class (DeMello 2000; Sanders 1991), the issue of race has received scant attention despite the influx of new research. Race is most commonly invoked when discussing the Primitivist and Orientalist discourses surrounding the racialized spectral Other (Clifford 1988) in the “Modern Primitive” movement (Pitts 2003; Eubanks 1996; Rosenblatt 1997). Tattoos in Chicano culture is one of the few areas of research that has been explored by academics in relation to people of color and their involvement in U.S. tattooing (Govenar 1988; Phillips 2001; Perez 2000). Tattoos in Asian American culture have yet to receive any in-depth scholarly attention despite the popularity of the topic of Asian tattoos in the popular press (Kitamura 2004; Kitamura and Kitamura 2000; McCabe 2005; Mullooney 2005). My project fills this gap by looking at the twin tropes of aesthetics and race and their relationship to the processes of tattooing among Asian Americans. I draw upon key works

in Asian American Studies that look at the relationship between race and aesthetics, including studies on fashion and theater (Kondo 1997), fine art (Kim, et. al. 2005) and literary production (Lowe 1996; Lye 2005). I approach racial formation as an “aesthetic phenomenon” (Roelofs 2005) situated within the complex matrices of gender, sexuality, labor, commodification, citizenship, transnationalism, and globalization (Tsing 2000; Appadurai 1996 and 2001; Ong 1999). My analysis of the aesthetic dimension of race draws from theories of the aesthetic found in continental philosophy (Kant 1952) and its various critics (Lloyd 1990; Moten 2003; Roelofs 2005).

In addition to the tattoo scholarship, my work has been informed by the anthropological literature on the body, particularly the discourses about skin by Leenhardt (1979) and Turner (1993). In thinking through ideas of inscription, I am indebted to various schools of critical theory, including Marxian theories of bodily inscriptions (Marx 1972 and 1976; Lowe 1995; Hennessy 2000) and post-structuralist theories of the body (Foucault 1977, 1978 and 1985; Derrida 1995 and 1998; Deleuze and Guattari 1983 and 1987; Butler 1990, 1993 and 2004; Lippit 2006). I also situate my work in relation to the fields of cultural studies (Benthien 2002; Ahmed and Stacey 2001; Connor 2003) and queer studies (Prosser 1998; Halberstam 1995) that looks specifically at skin. Finally, scholarship on the body in the field of Ethnic Studies is crucial to my understanding of the racialized body (Brooks 2006; Hartman 1997; Spillers 2003).

1.3 Skinscriptions: toward a theory of tattooed skin

In his oft-cited passage from “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” Foucault (1977) explains the important work of genealogy in understanding the constructedness of the body within society. He writes:

The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated Self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history’s destruction of the body. (148)

Many feminist theorists have challenged Foucault’s formulation, critiquing his assumption of the existence of a pre-inscriptive body. (For a summary of such debates, see Brush 1998.) In contesting the existence of a “pre-inscriptive body,” Elizabeth Grosz (1997) writes,

If the writing or inscription metaphor is to be of any use to feminism—and I believe that it can be extremely useful—the specific modes of materiality of the “page”/body must be taken into account: one and the same message, inscribed on a male or female body does not always or even usually mean the same thing or result in the same text. The elision of the question of sexual (and racial) specificity of the inscribed surface occurs throughout the history of accounts of the body. (156)

A number of unusual, and inter-related, issues are at work in this quote. Grosz’s argument against Foucault’s “pre-inscriptive body” is motivated by a feminist political project, which she identifies as an attempt “to provide an autonomous notion of female subjectivity, sexuality, and corporeality” (155). While I am sympathetic to her concerns and respect her critique regarding Foucault’s selective myopia in not discussing the female body in his work, I am also troubled by the foundational opposition that undergirds Grosz’s work: that her understanding of the “always already” sexed body

demands recognition and representation within the same discursive structures that Foucault offers up to genealogical scrutiny. In some ways, Grosz's arguments are predicated on an almost conservative entrenchment within an identitarian politics that refuses to think beyond the historical categories that Foucault is precisely trying to critique. In other words, in believing in the pre-inscriptive body, Foucault is pointing to the possibility of relating to the body in ways other than those governed by, among other things, heteronormative patriarchy. That he doesn't concern himself with the specific experiences of the female should not in itself negate his own political project, one that can be alternately conceptualized as a necessary deterritorialization of the body. Grosz seems to be advocating for an ontological reterritorialization (an always already reductive materiality) by which she decidedly insists on the immutable material differences between male and female (for example, her critique of circumcision vs. clitoridectomy). But why should such biological differences be overdetermined categories of differentiation? In other words, her critique of Foucault, and by extension her taking for granted the fixity of categories of male and female, has the unintended effect of reifying what Stuart Hall calls the "fatal couplings of power and difference" (Hall, quoted in Gilmore 2002).

Ironically, I think that Grosz is actually arguing the same point as Foucault, despite her insistence otherwise. She concludes her essay as follows: "That does not mean that the metaphor of the social inscription of corporeal surfaces must be abandoned by feminists but that these metaphors must be refigured, their history in and complicity with the

patriarchal effacement of women made clear, if there is to remain something of insight or strategic value in these texts” (159). Foucault’s exclusion of females bodies from the history of male-defined and male-dominated concepts such as “ethics” cannot be interpreted solely as a failure of historicization, but rather a concerted attempt not to reduce the female experience to the Procrustean bed of a totalizing masculinist logic. In other words, Foucault does leave open the possibilities of “refiguring” the metaphors that Grosz asks others to do.

Yet my concern here is not so much whether or not Grosz and Foucault would make belligerent bedfellows. Instead, I am interested in what can be interpreted as Grosz’s own myopic tendencies in the previously block-quoted text in which she problematizes the concept of “the body” but does not produce a similar critique of either the metaphor of inscription or to her dismissive parenthetical usage of the term “race.” Hers is a curious lack of interest toward precisely what the metaphor of inscription should be making clear: an insistent visibility of socially constructed bodies. Grosz privileges the avial in looking at metaphors rather than materialities of inscription, which allows her to evade the visibility of something like an inscription and the inscriptive substrate, that of skin itself.

Judith Butler (1990) levels yet another critique on Foucault’s interest in the pre-inscriptive body, this time challenging his inconsistencies in thinking about the pre-discursive, pre-judicial constructed “body” throughout his various works. Butler makes

an important point when she writes, “If the presumption of some kind of precategorical source of disruption is refused, is it still possible to give a genealogical account of the demarcation of the body as such as a signifying practice?” She goes on to state:

This demarcation is not initiated by a reified history or by a subject. This marking is the result of a diffuse and active structuring of the social field. This signifying practice effects a social space for and of the body within certain regulatory grids of intelligibility. (166)

If we think more specifically about the social space of the body, such a line of inquiry will lead to a necessary consideration of skin. This is a strategic side-stepping of the “anatomical” “differences” between “men” and “women” (just playing it safe with all the scare quotes!) and posits the skin as space/substrate that doesn’t necessarily display specific visual differentiations between what has been labeled male and female, gay or straight.¹ Yet at the same time, this focus on skin then brings to the forefront the differences between color—the problematic parenthetical, or parenthetical problematic, in Grosz’s formulation—and the types of pigmentocratic regulatory regimes that has become a shorthand characteristic of the racial state.

Within this complex metaphoric and material field of signification, tattooed skin confounds a strict separation between these two discourses. Yet, in order to highlight the specificity of inscription on skin (rather than a generic “body”), I propose the term *skinscription*. Skinscription: a neologism that combines the terms skin and inscription, the shared commonality between the two being the “in”, the “in” existing in an in-

¹ Dermatological research on the issue of morphological skin variation between men and women offer contradictory and inconclusive results. For example, see Azzi, et.al.(2005), Jacobia, et.al. (2005), and Muhammed, et.al. (2003). For the purposes of this paper, I am more concerned with the “external” visualities of skin rather than its biochemical make-up.

betweenness, the space that belongs to neither and both (the inability of possession), confounding binary distinctions in such a way that I hope parallels the blurred boundaries (internalities/externalities, metaphoric/material) of tattooed skin. “The surface on which both scripts are formed—the human skin—is a tissue that erases the boundaries between inside and outside,” writes Akira Mizuta Lippit (2006). “Everything that happens on the skin’s surfaces represents an unresolved encounter between interior and exterior elements” (109-110).

At the same time, the blurred distinctions between the material and symbolic inscriptions of ink lay bare the contradictory discourses regarding the legibility and illegibility of the body within the panoptical sphere of the U.S. nation-state. Tattooed bodies enact this by way of what Agamben (2000) calls “the very ambiguity of the fundamental notions regulating the inscription of the *native* (that is, of life) in the juridical order of the nation-state” (19). The tattooed body has the potential to increase this ambiguity (just as it has the potential to decrease ambiguities), and foregrounds the de-naturalized coloration that is inscribed on the palette of skin, an attempt to move outside the normative pigmentocratic legibilities of the U.S. nation-state. The tattooed body, then, creates a type of hypervisibility of skin: “it makes the invisible visible, or rather it makes visibility visible; it forms from the thresholds of the visible and invisible world, an order, mode, or aesthetic of visibility” (Lippit 2006, 106). This insistent visibility is a critique of racial discourse. The multiplicitious melanogendered body is involved in what Peggy Phelan (1993) calls a “visibility politics,” how “these variations underline the psychic, political,

and philosophical impoverishment of linked the color of the physical body with the ideology of race. Race-identity involves recognizing something other than skin and physical inscriptions” (8).

Foucault’s reading of the pre-inscriptive body seems to recognize this incommensurability between visibility and identity, which is not accounted for in Grosz’s dismissal of the visual. As Peggy Phelan notes, “Identity cannot, then, reside in the name you can say or the body you can see...Identity emerges in the failure of the body to express being fully and the failure of the signifier to convey meaning exactly” (13). This leads to the question of what are the limits of thinking in terms of metaphors? And how do metaphorical inscriptions affect material practices? For example, Derrida (1995) refers to circumcision as an archive, the “writing, the trace, inscription, on an exterior substrate or on the so-called body proper, as for example, and this is not just any example for me, that singular and immemorial archive called *circumcision*, and which, thought never leaving you, nonetheless has come about, and is no less exterior, *exterior right on your body proper*” (26).

Lack of a visibility (or a desired form of visibility) can induce material practices of marking, inscribing, tattooing. Victoria Pitts (2003) calls such tattoo practices a “politicized aesthetics of deviance, where overt bodily display is seen as a powerful affront to essentializing norms.” She goes on to state, “The stylization of the queer body involves not simply the fixing of homosexual identity onto the body, but rather the

creation of a body that is always in the process of becoming sexual, erotic, and pleased” (91).

“Nothing in man—not even his body—is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men,” states Foucault in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” (153). The instability of the body, as Foucault suggests, is both a source of subjection and subjectification, rendering it possible for the collective force of history to inscribe upon it the regulatory mechanisms of power and control. More precisely, the interpellating power of the nation-state and its state apparatuses seek to harness this inherent instability and construct a body, *the body*, that is at once legible and docile. “The construction of stable bodily contours relies upon fixed sites of corporeal permeability and impermeability,” writes Butler (1990), in her *analysis* of sexed and sexualized bodies, noting how certain bodily orifices “presuppose a heterosexual construction of gendered exchange, positions, and erotic possibilities” (169). She continues, “The deregulation of such exchanges accordingly disrupts the very boundaries that determine what it is to be a body at all” (169). Tattoos presuppose a body that is endlessly subject to penetration, the skin, a punctum, that disrupts what is considered external and internal. Tattoos create the entire stretch of the body, the stretches of skin, as a possible orifice. Tattoos are visible marks of unstable boundaries, the body’s vulnerability and resilience, and the potential for a new approach to radical openness.²

² A more detailed account of the genealogy of thinking about the body as boundary is necessary here. Benthien (2002) provides a useful starting point in her analysis of the “epistemological moments and cultural practices that led to the symbolic recoding of the skin as a final body boundary” (37). See specifically Chapter 3 of her book.

In the *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, Foucault (1978) writes, “It is not that life has been totally integrated into techniques that govern and administer it; it constantly escapes them” (143). How does life constantly escape the techniques of governmentality? A key word here is “constantly.” If something constantly escapes, why is it that we are not more aware of these constant *lines of flight* (to use a Deleuzian phrase) within our midst that evade the disciplinary mechanisms of the state? In other words, why are they not *visible*? Could it be that just as ideologies of power have been naturalized into our every day existence, so too have the constant escape routes? Or perhaps our inability to recognize these flight patterns is precisely because they have been rendered illegible not only to the state and their interpellating apparatuses, but also illegible to our very selves. What this requires, then, is a new form of recognition, an alternate aesthetics of visibility, in the form of the willful inhabitation of a failed legibility outside the bounds of state power. “The individual is the product of power,” Foucault writes in the introduction remarks to *Anti-Oedipus*, “What is needed is to ‘de-individualize’ by means of multiplication and displacement, diverse combinations” (xiv).

Skinscriptions, formed through diverse combinations of melanin and ink, can be thought of as material processes that collide, collude, and contradict in various ways the discursive formations adhering to the body. Tattoos, as skinscriptive marks, hold the capacity for both the “conservative reterritorialization of subjectivity” (Guattari 1995) and also possibilities of escape, the “radical defamiliarization of the body” (Brooks 2006)

that breaks with history, ideology, normativity. Insofar as skin has become coterminous with the discursive production of the body, skinscriptions attempt to divorce these connotations and posit the corporeal deterritorialization of body vis-à-vis a differentially articulated re-inscription of skin. In other words, skin—in its so-called “natural” form—has been so deeply codified within the cultural/capitalist logics of the state and its oppressive hierarchies that skinscriptions allow for alternative onto-epistemological uncertainties, slippages, possibilities...“a counterinvestment that creates its own interest in terms of new social aims, new organs and means, a new possible state of social syntheses” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 344).

1.4 Methodology

My dissertation incorporates mixed methods, including archival research, ethnographic fieldwork, and critical theoretical analysis. My research has been divided into two phases. Phase one consists of archival research at the two of the world’s foremost tattoo historical collections, the Tattoo Archive located in Berkeley, California and the Tattoo Museum in Yokohama, Japan. Phase two consists of ethnographic research at two different field sites: San Francisco and Los Angeles.

For phase one, I spent four months (during the summers of 2006 and 2007) investigating the histories of tattooing in California and its relation to Asia/Pacific by using the documents and resources housed at the Tattoo Archive and the Tattoo Museum. Although much has been published about the history of tattooing in the West, no in-depth study of

the transnational dimensions of California tattooing has been undertaken. Thus, in order to firmly situate my project within this framework, I explored these two collections to uncover previously unexamined primary documents and reread canonical texts to inform my research.

For phase two, I engaged in ethnographic fieldwork in both San Francisco and Los Angeles. These two cities occupy important sites for both global body modification cultures as well as Asian American community formations. Since 2005, I have attended annual tattoo conventions and researched various tattoo studios in San Francisco and Los Angeles as a participant observer in order to experience first-hand the social interactions among different members of the tattoo community: the tattooers, the tattooed, managers, merchandisers, etc.; I was also able to observe the performance, on and off stage, of tattooed bodies at these conventions. During this time, I identified and contacted individuals who I would like to interview for my project. Beginning in Spring 2006 and continuing until Fall 2009, I have conducted unstructured interviews with various members of the Asian American tattoo community. These interviewed have been captured on videotape, and I have also compiled photographic documentation of my interview subjects' tattooed bodies and, when/where appropriate, the processes of getting tattooed. Throughout this phase of my research, I had been processing, transcribing, and analyzing my field notes so as to allow for follow-up inquiries and clarifications as needed.

1.5 Chapter outline

Chapter two, “Pushing Ink Across the Pacific,” examines the historical and contemporary iterations of overseas exchanges of aesthetics and labor between Asia and the United States. Looking at the relationship between the United States and Japan as a particular case study, I look at the shifting multiple migrations of tattoo artists and enthusiasts, such as Takahiro Kitayama (Horitaka), Junii Salmon, and Maron Hasegawa to explore how transnational movement has not only allowed for specific forms of artistic development but also played a crucial role in the individual’s own particular subjectivity and ethnoracial identity formation. In doing so, I investigate and (re)theorize current understandings of global tattoo circuits to suggest a more complex linkage between the racialized exchanges that take place between U.S. and various regions of the Pacific Rim.

Legendary American tattoo artist Don Ed Hardy, one of the first “Westerners” to be apprenticed in Japan, has referred to the cultures of tattooing as “borderless.” While the term “borderless” often connotes a naïve understanding of the mechanics of world geopolitics under the auspices of neoliberalism, within the context of tattooing, this statement may not simply signal a reductive characterization of tattoos as transcending the politico-economic circumstances of the nation-state. Instead, “borderless” implies a rich and nuanced history of global exchange that perhaps *precedes* the origins of the modern nation-state, that globality/global culture has always already constituted a crucial part of the cultures of inscription. Such a formulation asks us to reconsider the very terms that we use in describing patterns and trajectories of movement, and whether narrations

of migration and movement are adequately served by the terms such as the “transnational.”

Chapter three, “Phantastic Formations of Skin,” examines Filipino tattooing in Southern California. In particular, I look at the Mark of the Four Waves Tribe (*Tatak Ng Apat Na Alon*), a self-identified “tribe” of Filipino Americans based in the Los Angeles/Southern California region whose mission is to revive traditional Filipino tattoo arts. Homi Bhabha has famously noted that the colonized mimicry of the colonizer is always already “not quite, not white.” However, the auto-mimicry of Filipinos in the diaspora does not share the same type of racial discontinuity that marks their corporeal otherness. Rather, the diasporic subject’s auto-mimicry of an “indigenous” image veers uncomfortably close to autoexoticization (Savigliano 1995), self-Orientalizing (Kondo 1997), and imperialist nostalgia (Rosaldo 1989). Building on theories of mimesis by such scholars as Michael Taussig, Homi Bhabha, and Robert Cantwell, I plan to explain and develop a theory of “automimesis” in order to complicate previous theories of mimesis by placing at the center the lives and perspectives of the post-colonial diasporic subject. This “automimetic” faculty can be explained as an identificatory process that is the result of post-colonial dispersal, strategic nostalgia, and the willful corporeal self-othering that (attempts to) disrupt colonial teleologies of modernity and the static boundaries of the nation-state.

By examining as a particular case study Filipino American tribal tattooing, I will explore how symbols and meanings of such embodied aesthetics transform through the geographical, cultural, technological, and temporal displacement of these customs. I also plan to address such question as: In what ways can such practices be read as acts of resistance to histories of U.S. colonialism and (re)articulations of cultural pride and self-determination? What are the trappings of these forms of self-imposed exoticizing marks and idealized constructions of an “authentic” tribal culture/community? How is the commodification and packaging of culture by “native” descendents similar and/or different from white populations who appropriate the markings of the so-called “primitive’ Other?

Chapter four, “Monstrous Skin, Monstrous Excess,” focuses on the idea of becoming-monstrous, the morphological transformation of the body that not only identifies and challenges various racial, gendered, and sexual normativities of the U.S. nation-state, but also opens up alternative possibilities of inhabitation and corporealization. In considering the ontological and epistemological positions of the non-normative body, more specifically, the queer mixed race modified body, I will focus exclusively on one particular body, the body of Joshua David Reno: first in his everyday, quotidian presentation, and then within the context of drag performance as his alter-ego Faux Pas. I take up the theme of the monstrous as a way to look at the corporeal processes of recombination and reconfiguration, thematics of embodiment (i.e., racial, gendered,

sexualized, modified) reflected through the idea of the Derridean *supplement* and Deleuze and Guattari's theories of inhabiting multiplicities.

Thinking about the body within this critical theoretical apparatus leads to a consideration of the concept of excess: racial, sexual, corporeal. Framed in this way, an analysis of mixed race bodies allows us to challenge dominant racial categories by refusing to accede to a reductive singularity. Similarly, the proliferation of modern discourses of sexuality, as Foucault (1978) outlines in his discussion of the repressive hypothesis, stems from an excess beyond those inscribed as normatively heterosexual. Finally, tattoos represent an excess pigmentation of skin that hypervisibilizes the skin in which we live. I approach the subject of Josh/Faux Pas as an investigation on how “more than fullness”—a productive rather than debilitating excess—can be a place of radical possibility. In other words, I am asking the question: What are the ways in which the recombinatory, multiplicitous, “non-full” subject challenges normativized notions of ontology and epistemology? By attempting to think about both Josh and his alter-ego Faux Pas in all their complexity or multiplicity, I will examine the body as a site of embodied ontologies and performative epistemologies.

My dissertation concludes with an interrogation of intertwined discourses surrounding race, color, beauty, and the tattooed body. By examining the distinct bodily processes involved in tattooing, in which the skin is injected, bled, peeled, cared for, and healed, I theorize about the ways in which corporeal forms of knowledge are inhabited, modified,

and rearticulated. In doing so, I argue for the need for a “strong visuality,” a transformed logic of the senses, to acknowledge how the senses are imbricated within networks of power and privilege, but at the same time recognizing the potential and possibility of (re)imaging both our selves and the world around us.

Chapter 2: Pushing Ink Across the Pacific

2.1 Introducing skin to ink

The intersections between the subjects of race and tattoos have remained relatively untouched in the realm of scholarly inquiry. Considering the formative relationship between American and Japanese tattoo traditions, the intersectionality between identitarian studies centered around the body in terms of race and in terms of tattooing holds a great deal of promise for furthering studies of transnationalism. Recent scholarship in the field of Asian American Studies has stressed the need for a more transnational approach to studying the subject, one that is not bound by static conceptions of the nation-state (Chuh and Shimakawa 2001). So, too, do the transnational dimensions of the tattoo subculture need to be incorporated into contemporary studies of body modification. (For example, see recent works by Pitts (2003) and Atkinson (2003), whose research are limited to the United States and Canada, respectively). In her work on the cultural politics of body modification in the U.S., Pitts (2003) points out

The body, then, is positioned in multiple ways, including as a site for establishing identity that is read by the self and others; as a space of social control and social investment; and as an ever-emerging, unfinished materiality that gains meaning through various forms of symbolic representation and material practice. (29)

The “site and space” of the body that Pitts interrogates also requires the consideration of the *geographic* and *temporal* placements of the corporeal, especially when considering the roles and meanings of tattoos inked onto the bodies already “of color” in the United States. In order to make such an intervention, the first half of this chapter considers the role of the Pacific in the production and reproduction of transnational tattooing; the

second half of the chapter examines the specific movements between California and Japan as a particular iteration of transnational ontologies and epistemologies.

2.2 The Pacific Ocean and the audiospatiality of inscription

The *Wood Skin Ink* conference held in 2005 on Maui was billed as a historic meeting between Japanese and American aesthetic traditions, noteworthy not just for the contextualization of tattoos and woodblock prints within shared histories in and beyond Japanese national contexts, but also for the increasing recognition that tattoos have come to occupy within both the academy and the “high art” world. In its advertising pamphlets, promoters excitedly marked the conference as a site where “tattoo enthusiasts, Ukiyo-e experts, woodblock Print Masters and icons of American tattooing will converge on the Hui for two days and two nights of talks, panel discussions and demonstrations.” While many different borders seem to be functioning here (high vs. low art, US vs. Japanese aesthetics, woodblock prints vs. tattoos, etc.) the binary that I am most interested in is the promotion of the conference within the standard “East meets West” trope of cultural mixing. More specifically, I am interested in the types of borders that cohere, culturally and geographically, within and around such a construction. In so doing, my strategy here is to juxtapose the East/West distinction undergirding the conference with the similarly “/-ized” term Asian/American to look at the geospatial logics that inform the non-phonetic “/”. This non-phonetic “/” exists as a type of Derridean *différance* (to both defer and to differentiate), one that hints at a distinction always already there between the pre- and post-“/”, a binary binational-bicontinental formulation that reinscribes the nation-state but

also posits the boundary, the border, the geospatial separation between these two terms. Audibility here proves key when considering formations of lexical, geographical, and corporeal inscription, and it is precisely the audible yet inaudible mode of listening that will transition this schematic into the consideration of tattoos as a type of embodied border aesthetic. Tattoo is a word that for many conjures immediate visuality of the flesh, an optical materiality, yet also—for many who are tattooed—also performs, to use Fred Moten’s elegant phrasing, a “sonic materiality,” an audible corporeality, existing not unlike the materiality of the “/.”

But first, let me back up a bit by way of some context. In his theorization of the formation of the multiply constitutive identitarian subject, David Palumbo-Liu (1999) posits the term “Asian / American” as a way to critique successive temporalities implied by terms such as “Asian American” or “Asian-American” and its relation to modernity, particularly an American modernity that advances a very specific procedural becoming, a becoming that emphasizes the eventual emergence of the American citizen-subject in the nominative. Within such a rubric, the ethnic (“Asian”) is thus relegated to a purely descriptive function, all the while reinscribing the centrality of the U.S. nation-state. Implicit within this “/”-theorization is also the critique of the Hegelian teleological view of history (see also Walter D. Mignolo 1998 in his analysis of globalization and civilizational processes). However, what is left un(re)marked in Palumbo-Liu’s formulation is the imperial underpinnings of this phrase, one that casts the terms of relational identity solely within the framework of politico-economic super-powers. In

other words, what is striking about the phrase Asian/American is how such a linguistic mapping is in effect a performative way of setting up both the phonic and material invisibility of the Pacific. Or stated more directly, language functions here as a spatial mapping: the signifier Asian/American (or similarly, East/West) directly invokes quite literally a cartographic representation of its signified, namely [Asian continent]/[American, here, of course, coded as U.S.]. What's more, if we take the specific directional orientation of this phrase, the signification "East/West" is represented, much like on a Eurocentric map, in reverse: East is on the left while West is on the right. Of course, this is only in "reverse" as someone looking straightforward from in front of the page directing her/his vision onto the page. It wouldn't be the case if, perhaps, we literally inhabited the phrase, or were viewing it from the other side of the paper.

The externality of text, or the viewer's viewing of the text, then, gives rise to another important point regarding this debate on the transnational and diasporic in relation to Asian/American, Asian American, Asian-American, etc. subjectivities. Palumbo-Liu states, "Diaspora always takes place after a border crossing" (346). But what border? He never explicitly specifies the border to which he refers. Perhaps because we all assume he is talking about the border between Asia and the U.S. But no one ever verbalizes this. Again, it remains the unpronounceable, phonically-absent "/." The Pacific, or more specifically, the Pacific Ocean as a border remains the unspoken, the implicitly understood, the outside always already inside. What accounts for this lack of recognition? One way of answering this, by way of another question, would be, what is the mode of

mobility that allows for the migratory movement of the diasporic or transnational Asian/American subject? To quote the other Tattoo, the homophonic Tattoo that people sometimes think (or wish) that I were studying: “De plane! De plane!” Aeriality. The preferred vehicle of transport in these days of so-called “transnationality” is the flight. Flights allow travel in the air, above the surface, above the Pacific, so that the ocean below loses its very materiality, and instead appears to the viewer as a canvas of water, an indistinct emptiness, or a selective myopic nothingness. Perec (1974) writes: “How does one think of nothing? How to think of nothing without automatically putting something round that nothing, so turning it into a hole, into which one will hasten to put something, an activity, a function, a destiny, a gaze, a need, a lack, a surplus...?” (33) We are always already putting something around this Pacific “nothing,” for Palumbo-Liu, as with most Asian American scholars, this something around the nothing is that which is said to construct our identity, an identity that sidesteps consideration of the space in-between. The /, coded here as the Pacific, becomes the borderline, nay, borderspace, that needs perhaps a better theorization for understanding its relation to the bookending of its adjacent imperial powers.

I say all this, perhaps longwindedly, in order to emphasize the point of the discursive, the importance of words, images, and visions, the lexicon and logos that inscribe our society, our bodies, and our earth. If we think about the aerial in relation to the signified “Asian/American,” aeriality exists on a plane above, not just the vehicular plane, but a spatial plane, a plane that allows the vision directed below from which to inscribe the

surface. This similarly parallels how we view the writing on this page, the method of viewing print on paper, the eyes that must hover above the paper surface in order to see, read, think. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) call these kinds of interconnections modes of becoming, becoming-paper, becoming-print. The things seen (and unseen)—bodies, society, earth—are always already in modification, always already inscriptively marked, in processes of emergence and becoming. Derrida (1998) likens this emergence, this language, this birth and inscription, as “not necessarily an infant but a tattoo, a splendid form, concealed under garments in which blood mixes with ink to reveal all its colors to the sight” (52). Again, the notion of the visuality of the sign, the visuality of border, a visuality that is constantly being erased despite its very materiality, hidden within the rubric of Asian/American or East/West. This looking away, this refusal to see, this blindness, reveals something else, something more on the meta level, that is, what Fred Moten (2003) calls an “ocularcentrism.” He writes: “Does the blindness held in the aversion of the eye create an insight that is manifest as a kind of magnification or intensification of the object—as if memory as affect and the affect that forges distorted or intensified memory cascade off one another, each multiplying the other’s force? I think this kind of blindness makes music” (199).

What is the music that the border creates? What is the music of the border itself? If we take Derrida at his word—and I am inclined to take Derrida at his word (for as he states in *Monolingualism of the Other*, what other words do we have?)—then what is the sound of this tattoo which he speaks? Would it be an overstatement, for me speaking for the

tattooed, as one tattooed (but not as Tattoo), that tattoos do indeed give off a sound? It's not a structured musical sonority, not something that can necessarily be placed on staff lines or tablature. If I had to represent it visually, it might be something like this:

BrrrZZzzZRmzzRrrrrmmMZZMRMmrzzzzrrrrrmMMRz

The tonalities depend on the thickness of line, the depth engraved into receptive flesh, the size and strength of the needles that reverberate in and out, puncturing the skin. This is the music of the tattooed, the sound of immediate recognition for the initiated, the smirk and the smile that crosses people's lips when they hear "it." And at a tattoo convention, when you hear a multiplicity of "its" sing in unison, it is song.³ In the following sections, then, we will be maneuvering around the ocularcentrism that characterizes most tattoo research and think about the music of tattoo, the music that was created at the *Wood Skin Ink* conference, and what that sounds like, looks like, as border music. Josh Kun (2005) writes: "by calling for a renewed attention to music's spatialization, to its cartographies and mappings, I not only want to draw direct links between music and the formulation and policing of national spaces—through audible borders and boundaries—but also to suggest that audiospatiality also involves the production of identities in sound" (22). Add to that, Moten's discussion on the aesthetic, "that aural aesthetic is not the simple reemergence of the voice of presence, the visible and graphic word...Something is remembered and repeated in such complications" (201). Sight and sound, visions and voices, of the border. That's where we'll eventually be heading. But first, let's talk more about the Pacific.

³ Like music, the sound of tattooing elicits affective responses. For example, once while doing research at a tattoo studio, a patron came into the shop and upon hearing the sound of the electric needle, exclaimed, "That sound is so therapeutic!"

2.3 1848: becoming, by way of (rear-)ending

“Liquid is always the problem element,” writes Christopher Connery (1996), “shapeless but not abstract; temporal; changeable” (290). More specifically he writes, “The Pacific Rim was the geoimaginary of the postoriginary...pure flow” (284). The mythos of the Pacific Ocean is smooth; that is, it is what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) would call a *smooth space*, an open space, in perpetual movement, unrestricted, undefined, and open to possibilities (480-81). The smooth space (the opposite of the striated) is a space of multiplicity, a stratum of intensities, a field of anuses. Deleuze and Guattari write:

A field of anuses, just like a pack of wolves. Does not the child, on the periphery, hold onto the wolves by your jaw and your anus. The jaw is not a wolf jaw, it's not that simple; jaw and wolf form a multiplicity that is transformed into eye and world, anus and wolf, as a function of other distances, at other speeds, with other multiplicities, between thresholds. Lines of flight or deterritorialization, becoming-wolf, becoming-inhuman, deterritorialized intensities: that is what multiplicity is. (32, emphasis in original)

Let me explain by way of an example closer to our consideration of borders, space, and sound. In *The Sound of Music*, vexed nun Maria finds refuge in the mountains, the non-striated spaces, the smooth spaces, where she feels free, unencumbered by the rules of the nunnery, where she can find her line of flight that allows her to navigate between boundaries, between the binary divide of being inside or outside the cloth. It is here that she sings, arms outstretched in deterritorialized *jouissance*, that “the hills are alive with the sound of music.” Maria, in a sense, is inhabiting the sonic materiality, the audiospatiality of the smooth. She is becoming-sound, becoming-earth. Maria is becoming-anus. The hills, the curvaceous interpenetrability, represent, in Deleuzo-

Guattarian terms, the “field of anuses,” which force Maria’s disciplinarian nunnery colleagues to ponder the imponderable: *How do you solve a problem like Maria*, if Maria isn’t the problem? By analogy, how do you solve a problem like the border? That is, how do you solve a problem if the problem isn’t the problem that needs to be problematized? According to the global capital logic, by imposing a restrictive space, by striating it, by tracing onto an artificial border (rather than, say, a “natural” geographical divide) to construct and maintain separation between nation-states. According to Deleuze and Guattari, this border drawing is a tracing, not a mapping,⁴ in the sense that it readily accepts a pre-envisioned naturalization of the natural. While US colonial expansion across the Pacific may seem to be an attempt at mapping, what it really amounts to is an attempt to striate a smooth space. Or as Herzog (1990) writes, “The political act of drawing a boundary imposes an artificial line on a landscape whose physical and social geography may overshadow it” (16).

Roland Barthes says that ocean resists signification, but America (i.e., the United States) thinks otherwise. As Connery (1996) writes, “The Pacific Ocean as a temporal destiny is an American idea...America’s Pacific is an extension, temporally and geographically, of the ‘American West’” (299). Connery continues: “The terrestrializing of the Pacific thus had as its obverse a Pacification of Asia and the Pacific Islands: a *borderless* proto-rim where free access reigned” (301, my emphasis). Connery agrees with scholars such as Gary Okihiro (1994) who believe that in light of American desires for imperialist

⁴ For Deleuze and Guattari (1987), a tracing is an “overcoding structure” whereas a map “is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real” (12). See their explanatory principles of cartography and decalomania in *A Thousand Plateaus*.

expansion into Asia in the 19th century, Pacific wasn't looked at as a border so much as an entryway into a transpacific expansion into Asia: "Reflecting on the second period of America's manifest destiny, after the annexation of the Philippines and Hawaii in 1898 and after Secretary of State John Hay's pronouncement of an 'Open Door' with China, Theodore Roosevelt declared: 'Of course our whole national history has been one of expansion...'" (27)⁵ While I appreciate their historical acumen, I think they are forgetting to visualize with their ears, to listen to the ideological underpinnings of the racialized U.S. nation-state. Listen to the "Pacific," the homophonic levels of Derridean *differance* that Connery likewise recognizes in the word "Pacific," as in Pacification, as in domestication, but also as in Pacifier (the nominal subject of Westward expansion), and with it the infantilization of the peoples of the Pacific. This is a racialized discourse, a hierarchy of human scale, whose very essence relies upon the border, a border between the "civilized" and "uncivilized," the white and non-white, a teleological tracing that seeks to justify Manifest DestiNation. Palumbo-Liu (1999) astutely characterizes this border as the "racial frontier": "the edge of the Pacific marks the limit of America's ability to extend the European race (and, by implication, European culture and civilization) beyond its own geographic limits" (31). More specifically, Eiichiro Azuma (2005) analyzes the Pacific as borderland, where competing imperialisms, U.S. and Japanese, meet head on:

⁵ On the foundations of the U.S. as an expansionist state, Frederick Jackson Turner states, "Since the days when the fleet of Columbus sailed into the waters of the New World, America has been another name for opportunity, and the people of the United States have taken their tone from the incessant expansion which has not only been open but has even been forced upon them" (37).

The American West constituted a borderland where America's westward expansionism met Japanese imperialism around the question of immigration from the nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries. It was also where different national ideals and ideologies clashed, became intertwined, and fused through the interplay of the nativist push for racial exclusion and the immigrant struggle against it...Not only did the geopolitical context of the borderland fashion the form of exclusionist and assimilationist politics there, but it also promoted the appropriation of Japanese and American colonial thinking by many Issei, as they fought the Orientalist charges of unassimilability and justified their rightful place in the frontier land. (10)

Legal scholar Neil Gotanda (1999) convincingly writes about "borders and geographical exclusion" as means to police racialized U.S. immigration policies. Underlying these laws is an implicit understanding that appealing to a geographic logic avoids the overt mention of race since the border of the Pacific is always already characterized by racial division. In his analysis of the exclusion laws introduced in the 1917 Asiatic Barred Zone and reproduced in the 1952 Asian Pacific Triangle as part of the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act (commonly known as the McCarran-Walter Act), Gotanda writes:

This use of a geographical area, inscribed upon the South, East, and West Asian subcontinents, is notable for the absence of national, racial, and ethnic conditions. Congress's choice of a set of [latitudinal and longitudinal] lines on the Earth's surface can be seen, in modern terms, as a set of conditions that do not discriminate on the basis of race, ethnicity, or national origin. This pre-figuration of modern antidiscrimination considerations is not an accident. Immigration law reflects congressional experimentation with these color-blind forms of categorization and exclusion. (137)

Gotanda employs the multisensorial to both listen and visualize the racial articulations at the border. Alejandro Lugo (1997) makes an important observation, that "the border region and border theory can erode the hegemony of the privileged center by denationalizing and deterritorializing the nation/state and culture theory" (45). Let's take up this challenge and discuss more about the line, the "/" at the center of this debate.

2.4 2005: aural aesthetics of ink

As the previous discussion indicated, the Pacific Ocean as a border space can be interpreted as different things to different people, a multiplicity, a Foucauldian (1967) heterotopia, what Canclini (2003) calls “the instability of referents at geographic borders” (283). It can be a zone of inhabitability or uninhabitability, a site of paradisaical ethnotourism or indigenous genocide, a smooth space of uncharted waters or a striated space of colonial occupation. In Deleuzo-Guattarian terms, if we revisit the concept of the field of anuses, the Pacific OceAnus, this formulation will help us think of this space in its different forms. The anus is a site of many possibilities, all of which I won’t go into detail here, but for example, I am thinking of the dialectics between life and death, pleasure and pain, the forms of embodiment that Leo Bersani (1988) acknowledges within the context of the AIDS pandemic in his provocatively titled essay, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” The field of anuses metaphor allows for the thinking of space as a site of penetration. This is particularly useful in the consideration of inscription in general, tattooing in particular. Let me first put forth an analogy vis-à-vis Herzog (1990) in which he writes: “On the subject of nation-state boundaries, Ratzel offered the analogy of the state as a living organism. The boundary, like the epidermis of animals and plants, was the ‘skin’ of the living state” (19). Let’s consider the border as skin alongside Deluze and Guattari’s (1983) view of the earth as a type of skin, as “the surface on which the whole process of production is inscribed, on which the forces and means of labor are recorded, and the agents and the products are distributed” (141). Further still, let’s add to that what

Perec says, “the perceiving that the earth is a form of writing, a *geography* of which we had forgotten that we ourselves are the authors” (79, emphasis original). What these authors are all concerned about is the inscriptive surface of the geospatial landscape. I am interested in considering the inscriptive penetrability of this landscape in tandem, or co-constitutive with, with the penetrative processes that lead to inscribing the surface of the human body.⁶

But what of the sonic materiality that I mentioned at the outset of this paper? Can we really think of tattoos within the frame of an aural aesthetic? Going back to Moten’s quote: “that aural aesthetic is not the simple reemergence of the voice of presence, the visible and graphic word...Something is remembered and repeated in such complications.” What is the remembered and repeated that constructs the aural aesthetic? Before attempting to answer that, let’s look first at the idea of the “non-simple reemergence”: of the voice and the visible. What seems to be happening here is the wresting away of the simple linear correspondence of the self to language, “I think therefore I am,” or perhaps more accurately “I speak therefore I am.” Rather than just an ontological uncertainty, then, is also an epistemological one: can the voice really emerge from the visible, from the graphic language? Or the visible from the voice? If so, what is it saying, what forms of knowledge production, cultural production, is occurring when sonic materiality is not one and the same as the lexical materiality?⁷ This uneasy

⁶ I use the term “the body” mindful of the warnings that Adrienne Rich (1984) puts forth regarding conceptualizing the body as a totalizing unitary experience, that is, non-reducible to “grandiose assertions” (67).

⁷ The (re)consideration of the ontological and epistemological, particularly in relationship to tattoos, can be restated as a debate of ontoepistemology, by way of the work of William Haver

correspondence, an incommensurate correspondence that moves away from the Saussurian signifier/signified binary, is exactly what Derrida is referring to, in the *supplement* and *différance*. “*Something* is remembered and repeated in such complications.” Yet the refusal to name that something is precisely the space of possibility. The sonic is irreducible to the written representation, in the endless chain of deferring and differentiating, it cannot be so easily contained. It is within such a formulation that we can hear the sonic in the tattoo, and likewise the sonic in the Ocean, both inscriptive surfaces of “skin,” interlinked, or as Stuart Hall would say, “articulated,” in their audiospatiality.

So what precisely is this aural aesthetic? Realizing the aforementioned limitations in any linguistic recapitulation of a non-reducible phenomenon, the best I can put forth here are a few examples, culled from personal experience (autoethnography!) or from tales told to me by fellow tattoo enthusiasts. At the outset I mentioned the *ZzzrrmZZmmrRrrrzzzzzzrrRRzZZZM* of the tattoo machine, a sound that evinces an immediate bodily recognition of the pain/pleasure of ink work. I also hear this same sound when I see other people’s tattoos. It is a sonic (non-)correspondence to the visual, one that is also an affective one. When I hear Slayer, Danzig, High on Fire and Flipper, I think of my back, the long draining (emotionally and corporeally) multi-hour sessions, sitting still while the needles injected ink into my flesh; and when I think of my back I

(1996); however, not necessarily governed by the same instantiations of contagion illustrated within his readings of seropositivity, or for that matter the blood-borne pathogenic spread antiquatedly, though not necessarily inaccurately, equated with modifications, particularly tattooing in its various forms. This is a zone of inquiry, though no doubt fruitful, lies outside the scope of this chapter.

Japanese artists Horihide, Horiyoshi II, and Horisada. (For more on this history, see DeMello 1999.) It is most likely this legacy that the *Wood Skin Ink* conference is trying to invoke, but not without certain costs. Pacific Island activists and scholars have long protested their non-inclusion within the debates around the Asian/American rubric (see Diaz 2004; Trask 2000; Dirlik 1998 and 1998), their voices form an aural aesthetic. And so too do their tattoo practices.

I focus on the aurality not to avoid speaking about the visuality of tattoos, but rather to highlight what Kuwahara has called the “discontinuity and displacement’ of tattooing in the colonized Pacific. In her ethnographic study of contemporary Tahitian tattoo practices, Kuwahara examines a variety of tattoos designs, styles, and motifs, a culturally hybrid form that can be considered its own type of border aesthetic: a combination of *le style local*, *le style polynésien*, *le style européen*, *le style américain*, *le style japonais*, etc. Developed through convergent histories of French colonialism, Pacific Rim circuits of trade, and international tourism, this polyglot of styles has distinctive geospatial and temporal specificities. They inscribe not only bodies but space and time. The aural aesthetics of discontinuous and displaced tattoo practices is sonically embodied in the polyvocality of the Polynesian border region. Kuwahara’s elaborate study allows us entry into spaces of tattoo production where “artists [act] as witnesses who see the world without a definite atlas or cartography, who adopt several points of view simultaneously, and show how they can be interchanged” (Canclini 2003, 284). Looking at the images in the book, one can *hear* the processes of inscription, the signs of colonialism, and the

markers of global culture. (For example, the tattoo machines, the infusion of French language, and the death metal Deicide beanie in the photographs, respectively.) The hybridity of the Tahitian tattooing practices serves as an example of the possibilities of a Pacific Ocean border culture, a deterritorialization of various imposed and selected engagements of inscription. Lugo (1997) writes, “‘Deterritorializing’ from ‘within’ is a multilinear process and a complicated political project. It is multilinear because there are several fronts of struggle: the nation-state, contested communities, theory itself, and the individual subject, among many others” (62, n2). Indeed, Kuwahara’s research carefully attends to these productions of scale, and points the way to the very possibilities of collaboration and cultural contact that could have occurred if the *Wood Skin Ink* conference had been mindful of the unacknowledged “/” foundationally at play in their referential treatment of tattoo history and community. In other words, instead of an American and Japanese aesthetic trade on a post-colonial border landscape, the conference could have been a site of a more complex interarticulation of border region aesthetics and politics, a Japan-Hawaii-American Pacific Rim network of cultural production.

Audiospatiality in its Pacific context is necessarily discontinuous and displaced, not simply because of histories of conquest and colonialism, but also because of the very multiplicitous nature of the Pacific region. The region is one that is ontologically forged in multisingularities, in regional *différance*, contestation, and collaboration. When Don Ed Hardy writes in the *Wood Skin Ink* catalog that tattooing is “borderless,” perhaps he is

not simply trying to say (in what could be interpreted as a rather uncritical postulation) that the aesthetics of tattoos transcend the politico-economic circumstances of the nation-state, but rather is implying that its history is one that *precedes* the modern origins of the nation-state, that globality/global culture was always already a part of the cultures of inscription. Certainly, this is not a new formulation (for example, see recent work in the Nicholas Thomas 2005 anthology, *Tattoo: Bodies , Art, and Exchange in the Pacific and the West*), but one that precisely needs repeating if we are to find what Foucault would call, “the thought from the outside.” The dystopic vision that shapes Jameson’s anxiety, the threat of “worldwide Americanization or standardization of culture, the destruction of local differences, the massification of all the peoples on the planet” (57), is not an inevitable futurity. Things weren’t always this way, they have been constructed as such, and because it is constructed, it can be dismantled, rethought, and rebuilt. Pacific tattooing, then, is a zone of possibility. The “/” that at once seems like an erasure, an elision, a marginality, becomes—in its refusal to be named, spoken, and signified—instead a space of possibility. It is what Deleuze and Guattari call the abstract line, the line of flight that refuses to be compartmentalized into one of the stagnant points of categorization or submission. In other words, it refuses the dichotomy, the free/unfree dialectic that only reinforces each another, and instead inhabits the multidirectional vector of escape.

2.5 Artists of the floating world

As many tattoo scholars and historians have pointed out, the aesthetic and commercial trade between the United States and Japan has evolved since the opening up of Japan in the Meiji Era (1868-1912) (for example, see Kitamura 2001; DeMello 2000; and Caplan 2000). While Americans initially used this commodity exchange to collect trendy Japanese curios, which included tattoos, the 20th Century ushered in a new relationship between the United States and Japan centered around the trade between technological innovation from the “West,” on one hand, and artistic influence from the “East,” on the other. Often conceptualized as an “even” exchange of technological versus artistic know-how, tattoo scholars have often overlooked the racialized, and oftentimes blatantly racist, underpinnings of hegemonic Western superiority driving these interactions. The formal introduction of Japanese tattoo aesthetics into American tattooing is often credited to Sailor Jerry (Norman Keith) Collins starting in the 1950s and 60s. However laudatory such cultural “borrowing” and hybridity may be considered today, accounts of Collins’ attitudes toward the Japanese were strikingly racist and point to the predatory nature of his cultural appropriation. DeMello (2000) has noted that “[w]hile Collins developed a close business friendship with tattooists Horihide, Horiyoshi II, and Horisada, he also never forgave the Japanese for attacking Pearl Harbor and for what he saw as their economic takeover of Hawaii...In fact, by his own admission, Collins wanted to ‘beat them at their own game’: to create an American style that was based on what he called the ‘Jap style of tattoo,’ yet one that reflected imagery from the United States” (75). While Collins and his hugely influential body of work helped to usher in the “Tattoo

Renaissance” that tattoo scholar Arnold Rubin (1988) charts as beginning in the 1960s and continuing up to the present day, Collins’ personal prejudices and use of tattooing as an ideological and artistic weapon to defend his nativist, anti-Japanese sentiments have seldom been analyzed in either popular and academic tattoo scholarship.

While I admit that a historical (and historiographical) analysis and critique of the racial discourse found within American tattoo communities would greatly enhance the scope of this chapter, I mention this issue not to embark on such a voyage, but rather to point out that global tattoo circuits have always held a racialized dimension, both historically and in the present, which requires further investigation if we are to better understand the role that embodied aesthetics plays in the construction and maintenance of the racialized citizenry and hegemonic logics of the U.S. nation-state. By examining the relocation of Takahiro Kitayama (Horitaka) from the United States to Japan and Junii Salmon from Japan to the United States, this section will explore contemporary iterations of migration that underscore how the transnational movement of two particular Asian/Asian American tattoo artists not only allowed for artistic development but also played a crucial role in the individual’s own identity formation. In doing so, I will recast the terms of the aforementioned global tattoo circuits to suggest a more complex linkage between the racialized exchanges that take place between U.S. and Japan.

Historically, very few “outsiders” have been able to gain educational access to the traditional tattooing methods used in Japan. One of the first “Westerners” to be

apprenticed in the traditional Japanese style was Don Ed Hardy, a massively influential tattoo artist who has been instrumental in the ongoing dialogue between Japan and U.S. tattoo cultures. Since then, Japanese apprenticeships, while certainly not easy to come by, have become much more accessible. Born and raised in California, Takahiro Kitamura (rechristened “Horitaka upon completion of his apprenticeship) places himself within this historical legacy, evolving from a Japanese American tattoo artist working in the American style to an artist trained by the master Horiyoshi III in the art of the traditional Japanese tattoo. His journey began through a desire to reconnect to his ethnic roots. Horitaka (Kitamura 2001) writes, “What began as a stereotypically teenage, angst-ridden search for the culture of the ‘motherland’ has been redirected and transformed into what I hope is a fruitful awareness of the traditions of past generations” (133).

After apprenticing with Horiyoshi III, Horitaka considered permanently moving to Japan to continue his tattoo practice, but instead was persuaded by Horiyoshi to “spread Japanese culture” in the United States—a task Horitaka has taken to heart, opening up his own tattoo studio in San Jose, CA (which includes a space to conduct traditional non-electric Japanese, or *tebori*, style tattooing) and publishing two books on the art of the Japanese tattoo. He states, “In general I believe there are people all over the world into body suits and Japanese culture (even without really understanding what it means) and as an American Japanese I am very proud of this” (15). While Horitaka expresses his joy and commitment as an educator to Western audiences on the art of Japanese tattoos, what I find most striking about this passage is his self-identification as “American Japanese”—

a reversal of the more common identity marker of Japanese American. In making such a switch, Horitaka seems to foregrounding his Japanese identity, where American here is used as a modifier instead of as the nominative. It is a move that echoes E. San Juan's formulation of "U.S. Asian," which he coins in order account for the consequences of U.S. empire, privileging the subjecthood of a diasporic Asian identity as opposed to second-class citizenship into the U.S./American polity. Since I was not able to interview Horitaka for this project, one can only guess as to what extent his experiences in Japan contributed to this identificatory movement into the subject position of American Japanese, despite the somewhat precarious relationship he admits to having to Japan. As he explains, his awareness about Japanese culture "comes from the fact that I inherit Japanese culture but was born and live in America, in California, so American culture is part of me and I'm certainly not turning my back on it. I go to Japan as often as I can but there is not my home. I feel my life is flowing in between two different cultures" (Violetto 2004, 11). As his movement back and forth across nations and cultures suggests, Horitaka's in-betweenness embodies what David Palumbo-Liu (2001) cites as the "Asian/Asian American split"—"a vacillating, multidirectional attempt at predication, rather than a teleologically predetermined and irreversible phenomenon" (213).

The challenges to an insistently Eurocentric teleological development of subjectivity and modernity is also reflected in the experiences of Junii Salmon, a Japanese born tattoo artist now working in San Francisco. Junii's experiences underscore the highly gendered aspects of the tattoo community, not just in Japan but in the United States as well. In an

interview published in a popular tattoo magazine, she notes that tattoos have always held a certain fascination for her since childhood, but her attempts at apprenticing were met with a slew of rejections, often being told that “tattooing was not woman’s work” (Coleman 2004). While traveling to the United States with artist Horitoshi as a model for his work, Junii met Bill Salmon who encouraged her to not give up her dreams. As a result of his encouragement, Junii decided to move to the United States to pursue her goals of becoming a tattoo artist. In deciding to immigrate to the United States, Junii’s story reinscribes hegemonic notions of Western modernity, whereby the United States represents a liberatory space of sexual/gendered freedom. Ironically, this “modernist teleology of evolution” (Puar 2001, 171) contradicts the juxtaposition of Japan and the “West” within the telos of tattooing and modernity. DeMello (2000) notes that one of the major reasons why Japanese tattooing has been so influential in the United States is because “[u]nlike traditional American tattooing, which is seen as folksy and primitive, Japanese tattooing is thought to be more modern, sophisticated, and linked to the more spritual and refined East” (75). Within this contradictory conceptualization, the “East,” or more specifically Japan, is defined in Western terms as being both backward- and forward-thinking, a hegemonic formulation more indicative of Euro-American ideologies fixated on establishing neo-imperialist social hierarchies while paving the way for unfettered artistic (and economic) exploitation.

Ironically, upon returning to Japan, Junii met artist Horiwaka, who offered her an apprenticeship to learn traditional Japanese tattooing practices. Upon completion of her

apprenticeship, Junii persisted in her move to the United States, because of her love affair with Bill Salmon (as well as, perhaps, by an anticipated difficulty in finding work in Japan). Junii's Asian/American subject position, as defined through her Japanese ancestry and artistic training, has both enabling and disabling characteristics in the context of the United States. Her expertise in the art of the Japanese tattoo has allowed her entry into the highly competitive Bay Area tattoo community, but at the same time such entry has been predicated on a gendered and racialized exotic Otherness, most notably exemplified by such exoticizing labels found in various tattoo trade magazines that refer to her as "The Mistress of Oriental Art."

The individual narratives of artists Horitaka and Junii Salmon reiterate in tattooed terms the point that Lisa Lowe (1996) makes in her seminal work *Immigrant Acts*: "The making of Asian American culture includes practices that are partly inherited, partly modified, as well as partly invented; Asian American culture also includes the practices that emerge in relation to the dominant representations that deny or subordinate Asian and Asian American cultures as 'other'" (65). In fact, tattoos represent the very embodiment of such a formulation at the most corporeal level. In other words, Lowe's formulation not only describes the Asian American tattoo culture but also, in the case of the tattooer/tattooed, references the Asian American body itself: a corporeal identity construction that is "partly inherited, partly modified, as well as partly invented" based on natural and self-inflicted skin pigmentations that display particular ethnoracial meanings that are at once tied to, yet distinct from, their so-called originary locations, characterized by Deleuzo-Guattarian

“deterritorializations.” By analyzing the position of the tattooed Asian American subject, the next section explores the potentialities implied by the deterritorialization of tattoos in the construction of one’s racialized self-identity.

2.6 Suiting the body in skin and ink

Just as the overseas movement of artistic talent enact historical patterns between and within the Pacific Rim, so too does the practice of tattoo collecting remain firmly situated within a history of global commodity exchange. As Christine Guth (2004) notes:

Tattoos provide an especially resonant metaphor for the complex, subtle transformations in attitudes toward Japanese culture brought on with the advent of global tourism. Tourists were fascinated by these exotic manifestations of the “artistic nature” of Japanese people. Some men even “went native” by having themselves tattooed. In so doing, they celebrated the natural life, freedom from convention, and aestheticization of the male body they had discovered in Japan. The costumes Longfellow had made for himself and tattoos he “collected” on his back and chest dramatically illuminate the process through which Euro-American visitors claimed Japanese heritage to fashion their self-identity. (xviii)

The question that I seek to explore in this section revolves around the use of Japanese tattoo aesthetics in the (re)fashioning of an American identity, but one that is complicated by the insertion of the Asian American body in place of the Euro-American citizen-subject. Guth makes the point that while tattoos in Japan evolved as emblems of working class occupational identity and criminality, for the Euro-American global tourist, they became artistic souvenirs of “aestheticized leisure travel and play” (158). She further notes that “positive evaluations of the practice [of Japanese tattooing] tended to focus on the tattoo’s decorative qualities rather than on the body it served simultaneously to conceal and reveal” (33). Yet the oversight in Guth’s argument is that the recognition of

the “decorative” is precisely predicated upon the aesthetic legibility of the racialized white body, an ironic nod that “simultaneously conceals and reveals” the racial discourse within her own argument.

Guth’s historical analysis of white men using Japanese tattoos as decorative fashion rather than markers of social standing resonate quite strongly within the tattoo subculture even to this day. Scholars in the field of tattoos have noted the use of non-Western symbols and motifs as ways for white people to appropriate an idealized identity through ink. Rubin (1988) notes how such adornment “provides an expanded, alternative, volitional identity: one *can* come to terms with the psychic constraints of the slot(s) one occupies in society. One *can* escape to a simpler time and more straightforward values by putting on the marks of a...Japanese samurai” (255). However, more recently, scholars have become increasingly skeptical of such appropriative displays, noting how the discourse surrounding the body as a blank canvas onto which one can project a self-determined identity reeks of Western/white privilege, and fails to account for the multiple ways in which certain bodies (people of color, women, queers, etc.) are always already marked as Other. As Eubanks (1996) notes, “To assume that all bodies are unmarked...is to deny the systems of patriarchy and racism that exist in our culture and, therefore, to shut down the possibility of reforming those systems” (76). In addressing the concern about the double marking of tattooed people of color—or more specifically inked Japanese Americans—this section investigates how identity is reformulated through the

use of tattoos as a type of racial signifier in the construction of an Asian American subjectivity.

Maron Hasegawa, a Japanese American tattoo enthusiast living in San Francisco, chose to spend an entire year living in Japan in order to complete his traditional Japanese body suit. Maron states that he chose world-reknowned artist Horiyoshi III because “his artwork is the best. His style represents Japanese tattooing for me” (McCabe 2005, 60). His desire to endure the long and costly procedure was inspired by the “cultural connection and cultural commitment” that Japanese tattoo represented (ibid). While it is certainly difficult to critique his choice of artist—after all, Horiyoshi III is considered a living legend and is one of the most recognized and respected artists working today—Maron’s choice does open up certain important considerations in light of the other alternatives that were available to him. Since Maron lives in San Francisco, he certainly has access to artists like Junii Salmon and Horitaka, both trained in the traditions of the Japanese tattoo and now working in the SF Bay Area. Instead of choosing to patronize these artists, he spent upwards of \$40,000 and rearranged his entire lifestyle to accommodate a year-long residency in Japan in order to complete his body project. Obviously, his travels to Japan resonate within the conditions of material privileges afforded to the global tourist. However, instead of representing “aestheticized leisure travel and play” that function as decorative souvenirs, Maron’s use of traditional Japanese tattoos instead are meant to draw specific attention to the racialized body, the double marking of Japanese art on Japanese skin, the processual re-creation of racial identity.

Similarly, others Asian American tattoo enthusiasts echo these same motivations, although not necessarily going to the same extremes, either of body coverage or geographic displacement. For example, the recent popularity of kanji (Chinese lettering) tattoos among Japanese Americans (as well as other Asian Americans) has become a way for individuals to express their pride in their ethnoracial heritage. In a recent article, one journalist has observed, “Ken Arata, 25, is planning to get his family name tattooed down his spine in kanji to show that his Japanese heritage is the backbone of his existence even though he does not speak the language” (Lyn n.d.). The examples presented above illustrate the use of tattoos as ethnoracial signifiers, markers of both an individual’s pride and an understanding of the body’s placement in the racialized matrix of U.S. society. To reiterate, such a strategy relies upon real and/or imagined transnational linkages to cultures that position the Asian American subject as existing both within and outside of dominant U.S. racial social structures, a challenge to any unitary conceptualization of a state-sanctioned U.S. citizen-subject.

In her discussion of various Asian American literary texts, Kandice Chuh (2001) argues for the recognition of an epistemological transnational subject rather than a national one.

Drawing on the work of Lisa Lowe, she writes

“immigrant,” rather than citizen, most insightfully describes the epistemologies inhering in Asian American social subjectivities...The immigrant descriptor rhetorically references that position of being both *of* and *not of*—that transnational space that cannot be singly located in space or time. By anchoring American cultural studies with the figure of the immigrant rather than that of the assimilated citizen, the orientation of such studies, while remaining specific to the U.S.

cultural and political context, is reconfigured to accept axiomatically difference and mutability rather than identity and fixity as the default quality of the national character. Transnationalism in this sense becomes a strategy for recognizing the incompleteness of national identity formation. (292)

What may be so fascinating about considering this formulation in relation to the use of traditional Asian tattoo motifs is the way that they are used in order to help achieve, from the perspective of the tattooed subjects presented here, a processual formation leading towards a *completeness* of the self identity. In other words, transnationalism is the “strategy” that allows Asian Americans to enact both a literal and symbolic “return” to their cultures of “origin” in order to corporealize ethnic and racial ideologies of being. Such processes out-manuever the artificial binary cultural allegiances (i.e., Asian vs. American) oftentimes mandated by the US nation-state, instead highlighting the inherent mutability and flexibility of this identificatory positionality. As the aforementioned examples suggest, through the use of tattoos, a claim to Asianness is displayed literally in the flesh, while at the same time reiterates a symbolic reinvestment/reclamation of a particular racial form. Body modification, in these terms, can be thought of as functioning on multiple levels: both the physical alteration of tattooification and the psychic alteration linked to (an acceptance of) one’s racialization.

However, as previously noted, the formation of a racial(ized) self is never solely a volitional formation of individuation. Rather, bodies exist within particular systems of ideologies and power that create and act upon the material self, both individually and collectively. To put it another way, in her critique of Modern Primitive discourses, Pitts (2003) points out the fallacy of the post-modernist myth of freedom of choice in

determining one's own identity/body/cultural affiliations, noting how such myths obscure "the many ways we *are* privileged and constrained according to systems of power—through what are often deeply entrenched categories of race, sexuality, gender, and citizenship" (148). So while the voluntary articulation of one's own cultural/ethnic/racial heritage through tattoos can be viewed as a form of reclamation of one's own body, it still functions within an overarching gaze of those in the dominant hegemonic positions of power. For example, going back to the example of Maron's body, while his traditional-style Japanese tattoos are a celebration of his Japanese ancestry, they also contribute to his own externally imposed racial formation. More specifically, under the surveillance of mainstream white America, his tattoos aid in the creation of his body being cast as the foreign "Other," allowing the spectatorial public to essentialize his identity based on his racial attributes. Furthermore, his phenotypical "Asian" features coupled with his traditional Japanese tattoos serve to perpetuate various assumptions about the "naturalness" of an Asian aesthetic projected onto an Asian(-looking) body, American or otherwise, thereby reinscribing normative codes of race and nation.

These examples point to the complexity in how we interpret the use of tattoos as the individual expression of the self. As Dorinne Kondo (1997) points out in her study of race and fashion, what we choose to wear "can have a political edge as signifiers of subcultural style and as components of ethnic/racial pride," but we must also be mindful of the ways that such articulations perform *us* (16). Or to put it another way, "Body projects do not simply display the inner self in a language that only experts—or,

alternatively, members of a subculture—can read. ...[T]he meanings of marked bodies cannot be severed from the intersubjective processes of the body's reading and writing, including those offered up by both marginal and institutional discourses" (Pitts 2003, 84). By looking at how multiple forms of displacement intertwine in terms of both physical bodies and aesthetics of meaning, the transnational configurations of art and migration that ultimately converge onto the Asian American body allow us insight into how the very category of Asian American is constantly renegotiated and in flux.

Rather than bemoan the instability of such an identity formation, it is important to consider this ambiguity as one of epistemological possibility, especially when coupled with the potentially transformative conditions of the modified form. This transformative, or deterritorialized, effect of tattooing is possible, according to Nicholas Thomas (2005), precisely "because tattoo practices and tattoos have possessed cross-cultural efficacy and salience as well as culturally specific meaning. That cross-cultural efficacy has entailed the potential for their interested recognition and misrecognition, the possibility that they may be adopted or appropriated rather than ignored" (225). Like processes of racialization, processes of tattooing are contextually specific, a product of the individual's choices as well as the social milieu that mediates its acquisition. As such, tattoos can both resist and perpetuate individual and social categorization, for "different modes of tattooing may be fundamentally distinct in their predicates, in the notions of the person, the body, and society, that underlie them" (226). The Asian American tattoo artists and enthusiasts discussed in this section seem to have instinctively understood this

formulation, remapping cartographies of skin and ink that navigate the complex meanings of their identities as functioning between and among the variegated borders of race and nation. As Stuart Hall (1994) notes, cultural and ethnoracial identities are a matter of becoming as well as being, belonging as much to the future as to the past (393). By looking at mutually constitutive effects of race and ink, the creation and articulation of tattooed subjectivities reiterate Chuh's (2001) challenge to "defy the conventions of U.S. hegemonic epistemology...to amplify purposefully the cross-geographic, cross-historical, and cross-discursive dynamics between Asianness and Asian Americanness in the critical methods of knowledge production" (293). The multiple "crossings" presented here between the body and its various social markers of pigmentation illustrates a cultural politics fashioned out of conditions once previously considered criminal, freakish, and outcast—conditions that insist an aesthetic re-evaluation rife with possibilities of subversion, resistance, and transformation, yet ultimately, as Hall would say, without guarantees.

Chapter 3: Phantastic Formations of Skin

My concern with mimesis, then, is with the prospects for a sensuous knowledge in our time, a knowledge that in adhering to the skin of things through realist copying disconcerts and entrances by spinning off into fantastic formations—in part because of the colonial trade in wildness that the history of the senses involves.

- Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*

This brief quote from Taussig's study of mimesis identifies several key concepts that inform my study of Filipino tribal tattooing in the United States. In borrowing his idea of skin as a site of "fantastic formations," I slightly alter his conceptualization through an intentional substitution of "f" with a "ph." While on one hand such an act can be interpreted as a politically-inspired linguistic move to subvert the imposition of the letter "F," which does not exist in pre-colonial linguistic systems, this was not my intention.⁸ Instead, I am more interested in the strategic conflation of the words "fantastic" with "phantasmic" in order to describe tattoo practices based on fantasy and phantasm. In other words, I consider the inter-related processes through which Filipino tribal tattooing functions as a type of (re)invented tradition, as well as a contemporary instantiation of a spectral pre-colonial presence that forms around the fetishization of skin. I am interested in how skin becomes the medium through which an affective "history of the present" (Foucault, 1989) becomes refigured in Filipino American lives, exemplified by the Mark

⁸ While the F vs. P debate alludes to the importance of self-representation and the politics of naming, it remains outside the particular scope of this chapter. In order to most accurately represent the Tribe and its members, I make it a point to use the self-referential terms they themselves use on their own website (i.e., they use "Filipino" not "Pilipino").

of the Four Waves Tribe (henceforth simply referred to as “the Tribe”), a group of tattoo enthusiasts based in Southern California whose mission is to revive Filipino tattooing.

The first section of the chapter deals specifically with the Tribe and the development of what I call the *baliktad* aesthetic, a Tagalog term meaning “backwards” or “inside-out.” Then I situate the execution of this aesthetic within a theory of what I term *automimesis* in order to tease out the complexities and contradictions of (post-)diasporic cultural production as a form of postcolonial mimicry. Finally, I end the chapter with another perspective on Filipino tattooing put forth by a Filipino American tattoo artist whose ideas run counter to the Tribe and its purported mission. By examining tattoos as contested sites of identity/social formation, I challenge facile notions of agency and representation currently at play in certain areas of tattoo scholarship.

3.1 Baliktad: a diasporic aesthetic



Figure 3.1: Tatak Ng Apat Na Alon

According to their website, Tatak Ng Apat Na Alon, or Mark of the Four Waves is

an organization dedicated to reviving the traditional cultures and tattoos of the Philippine Islands. Tatak Ng Apat Na Alon translates to Mark of the Four Waves, a reference to the “waves” of immigrants who came to the Philippines over many millennia. The influence, both good and bad, of each of these waves has combined to create the islands’ culture. Tatak Ng Apat Na Alon intends to resurrect the positive, repair the negative, and move into the future while keeping their roots firmly planted in the past.

During the weekend of the Annual Festival of Philippine Arts and Culture in San Pedro, I was able to conduct a group interview with members of the Tribe as they convened at the house of one of the group’s founders, which also functions as the Tribe’s headquarters, located in Buena Park, a city located in the northwest part of Orange County, California.

According to Elle, one of the founders of the group, he and a group of friends traveled to Hawaii and were struck by the local tattoo practices there. He and his friends wanted to get Hawaiian style tattoos but one of the artists there told him to search out his own ethnic history instead of appropriating someone else’s culture. As a result, Elle and his friends began to do their own research on Filipino tattoo customs, most of which had been wiped out during the centuries of Spanish colonialism. (For a discussion of the lack of extant materials on pre-colonial Filipino tattooing, see Ricafrente 2008; Salvador 2002). “We wanted to be like selfish and get our own tattoos,” says Elle. “We thought we were supercool cuz we had recently invented something.” His devotion to seeking out the hidden history of Filipino tattooing led to the purchase whatever materials he could find that would give him clues to tattoo patterns and design: books, carvings, weapons,

textiles, artifacts—anything that had designs ingraved on them. Elle notes that his mom started telling him, “You’re *baliktad*”—going backwards.

The concept of *baliktad*, or backwardness, functions along different aesthetic registers. *Baliktad*, used as a derogatory marker, signals Elle’s mother’s perception of a naturalized “forwardness”—a Eurocentric teleological narrative characterized by the temporal and geographic movement from a primitive past towards a civilized future. On the other hand, for the tribe, *baliktad* becomes a way to challenge said narratives in its attempt to resist incorporation within such a diasporic evolutionary schema. Part of their strategy is how they choose to represent themselves in the media. On their website and in articles in the popular press such as *Tattoo*, *Skin and Ink*, and *Filipinas*, the tribe are always depicted wearing tribal costume, such as the banig and head dresses. “We need to educate how our culture was looking other than the barong,” states Elle. “A lot of the older Filipinos try to dress us up not looking indigenous, to not scare the white man. They think to look indigenous is too scary. To put us in the magazine, it looks beautiful to look like a savage. Naked is looking good still... Looking indigenous is not bad.”

Leny, one of the newest tribe members, located in Canada and visiting Los Angeles for the tribal get-together, agrees, “it actually says a lot to ourselves, that we can hold an unpopular idea. To look aesthetically unpopular. Nakedness is beautiful in our culture. Savage is unclean, indecent, but to us it’s beautiful... This is our roots, this is beautiful

too.” When I ask whether they may be inadvertently perpetuating stereotypes about Filipinos as savage, Tina, another Tribe member, responds:

What we’re trying to do is perpetuate indigenous culture as something beautiful, that tattoos are something beautiful. I don’t think it perpetuates the stereotype of a savage in a negative form. One of the reasons why we have the weapons, why we have the clothing, is cuz people, Filipinos, don’t know that aspect of their culture. It’s a way to make it interesting for them to see it that way.

Looking backwards, the search for one’s roots, had led the tribe to forge connections with the tribal peoples of the Philippines. As stated on their website, “Tatak Ng Apat Na Alon members stress that their tattoos are not a fad or a fashion statement. The tattoos are intended to bridge the gap to their ancestors, and every pattern is sacred.”

“The kalinga community [people of the cordilleras region in Luzon, Philippines], they are members of our tribe,” states Elle. “The Kalinga were ashamed of their tattoos. But when they saw the article that was about our group they were proud.” Elle then explained how he tattooed the mayor and elders of the Kalinga. According to the Tribe, fostering awareness about the beauty of tattooing has helped the Kalinga, and other tribal groups in the Philippines, re-evaluate their relationship to their tattoo customs, social practices that had been denigrated under centuries of colonialism and that often put tattooed people under the threat of execution.

“A lot of them were almost ashamed about showing off their tattoos because a lot of the Filipinos back home think it’s a negative aspect of it, like they killed someone back then,” explains Riazal. “But last year we had the opportunity to go back and what we told

them was that back then what they were trying to do was protect their family and their land, not really something to be ashamed of. But what we're trying to do is collecting heads to educate, and seeing how we're doing that and reviving it that way was when they said, 'oh ok' and wanted to show off their tattoos. [They] felt more at ease showing their tattoos rather than having to cover it up all the time." The process of "uncovering" enacts a second meaning of *baliktad*: "inside-out." Thinking about *baliktad* as both "backwards" and "inside-out" highlights the simultaneity of movement: temporal, geographic, corporeal, that attempts to negate the imposed restrictions of colonial propriety.

In a more symbolic sense, members of the Tribe corporealize this "inside-out" movement through the invention of their own tattoo traditions. Tina explains:

I'd been searching for something that was significant to me culturally, and I didn't have a whole lot of info on Filipino tattoos...Once I have met up with the with the Tribe and got my tattoo, I felt it had always been there, like it had always been on my skin, but just underneath my skin and it just needed someone's help to bring it out so that it was visible. But now that I have it, I kinda felt like I've always had it.

For Tina, tattoos function as a form of writing that excribes the latent visibility of ethnicity located just beneath her skin, bringing her Filipinoness to the surface despite it being always already there. Akira Lippit (2005) writes that the human skin "is a tissue that erases the boundaries between inside and outside. Everything that happens on the skin's surface represents an unresolved encounter between interior and exterior elements" (110). This unresolvability, this incommensurability, between different forms of marking

—racialization and tattooing—presents itself when Tina describes how she is seen by other Filipinos:

The interesting thing for me about seeing other Filipinos that have tattoos that aren't necessarily like my tattoos, is that I like to see how long it takes for them to come ask me about my tattoos because they can kind of tell by looking at me that I'm probably Filipino. And so then they see the markings, their first assumption is that I'm Hawaiian or Samoan or Tongan, or somewhere along those lines, until they ask me about my tattoos.

Tina's narrative illustrates the unreliability of visual cues to orchestrate knowledge of the racial. In other words, the ideological field does not have neat correspondence in the visual field. As this story points out, tattoos and race cannot be read simply as visual markers from which to present an easily readable identity. And yet if skin serves as the site to express something that is intrinsically inside of you, as Tina's experiences suggest, how do you go about determining what design is appropriate for you? Jay explains that each person who comes to the Tribe fills out a questionnaire form to determine their tattoo design. "The form gets them to talk to the people, to their family. They are doing research on their family."

Tina says, "So when we see other people who have Filipino tattoos that don't necessarily look like tribal tattoos we don't hate on that, it's an opportunity for us to help them see that there's something more significant out there." Jay, who recounts his tattoos going from the American flag, baybayin script, and warrior marks, states that everybody who gets a Filipino tattoo is on a journey. Ironically, the Tribe members' idea of a journey of identity reinscribes a narrative of "proper" development, and presupposes tattoos as something that must signify a natural correspondence between your body and your

identity. Their reliance on so-called family genealogy assumes a link between your identity, your body, and the geographic region where your family supposedly comes from—something that may not always be the most “accurate” in the context of the multiple colonizations that have occurred throughout Filipino history (see Rafael 2000).

Yet there is a certain insistent authenticity that the Tribe seeks to establish through their practices, an essentialism between one’s body and one’s ethnic identity. “Your skin is basically your temple, don’t waste your skin for improperly researched tattoos,” states Elle. “If you’re gonna spend money on some tattoo, try to do *real* research on it.” Tina agrees, “If you google Filipino tattoos, one of the first things you come across is alibata....alibata is not really indigenous Filipino. What we’re trying to help people understand that there’s more to Filipino tattoos than just getting alibata or the Filipino sun.... We have a lot of people come to us who that have existing tattoos of Japanese tattoos like dragons and koi fish and things like that because that’s what they liked before they found out that there was something more significant to their Filipino culture than copying another culture’s tattoos.”

When Elle speaks of the recent trend in alibata (or baybayin, a form of pre-Spanish script that developed from Sanskrit) tattoos, he becomes visibly agitated. “Instead of getting kanji, instead of getting Chinese and Asian writing, we’re getting Indian writing. This was 15 years ago when I got this [alibata tattoo]. So now everyone is getting alibata, Indian writing...It’s not our language, bro. Isn’t that sad?” Elle’s sadness displays the

structure of feeling that underlies the Tribe’s reactionary cultural nationalism: a refusal of Asian American pan-ethnic solidarity. In an interview in a local Los Angeles pop culture magazine, Elle states, “I believe it’s quite sad to see some Filipino-Americans and even Filipinos on the islands who lose their identity with the generalized label as ‘Asian,’ or saying that they want to be what they are not” (ExGirl/Canoe 2005). How the Tribe express who they are and how they come into being through their performance of “tribalism” is explored in the next section.

3.2 (Sub)Urban warriors: theorizing *automimesis*

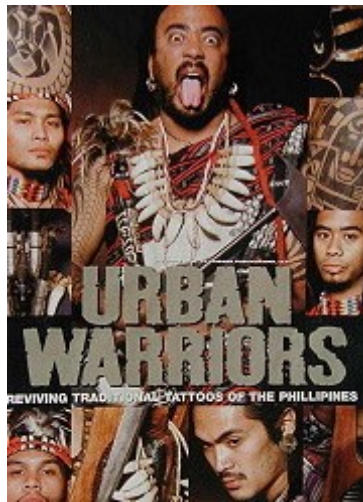


Figure 3.2: Promotional image of the Tribe labeled as “Urban Warriors”

While many in the mainstream tattoo community are quick to celebrate the Mark of the Four Waves Tribe for their revitalization efforts, there are also those who criticize what they do as a misguided attempt at advocating a pseudo-tribal experience from the safety

of their affluent suburban residencies. Indeed, the spatialized containment of the Tribe's headquarters in an Orange County gated community functions as an apt metaphor for the similar type of gatekeeping and insularity that they seek to maintain through their restrictive tattoo community. Part of this undertaking is a very controlled way of presenting themselves in the visual culture they produce for their group. So while the previous section explored what I call a *baliktad* aesthetic from the perspective of the tribe members themselves, here I would like to analyze the performances they enact in their promotional materials within a theoretical framework of what I term *automimesis*.

Before embarking on a more detailed analysis of the visual culture surrounding the Tribe, I would first like to take a moment to tease out some of the themes that will be explored in this section. My core concern is the question of how cultural forms are willfully (re)inscribed within various modes of being, "being" taken here as both existence and its living surfaces, the tattooed landscape of nature and flesh. The theories of "deterritorialization and "reterritorialization" promulgated by Deleuze and Guattari play an instructive role in exploring the ways that tattoos, wilderness, and the human body multiply constitute each other in a complex interplay of insertion and interpellation. Deleuze & Guattari (1987) write: "Reterritorialization must not be confused with a return to a primitive or older territoriality: it necessarily implies a set of artifices by which one element, itself deterritorialized, serves as a new territoriality for another, which has lost its territoriality as well" (174).

While the concept of deterritorialization and reterritorialization has been applied to tattoos in previous scholarship (DeMello 2000), it has been mostly incorporated in a unidirectional manner. In other words, scholars writing about tattoo cultures in the West attempt to resignify tattoos severed from their geographic, temporal, and cultural locations. Framed in such a way, tattoos *act on* the body, and not vice versa. This asserts a type of appropriative rewriting of culture that glosses over histories of exchange, often steeped in colonial/imperialist projects, in favor of individualistic agency that recast bodily markings, in Western philosophical tradition, as symbols of one's individual essence, the externalization of an inherent internal selfhood (Rosenblatt 1997, 318). Nikki Sullivan (2001) has taken this paradigmatic framework of North American tattoo scholarship to task, asking us to “explore how the subject in/of tattooing exists in contemporary Western culture; what it *does*” rather than what it means (3). While her critique is certainly welcomed and warranted, ironically, it coincided with a particular academic moment when scholarship on body modification erupted in the academy, in which number of other tattoo scholars were undertaking precisely these same types of inquiries (Pitts 2003; Caplan 2000; Atkinson 2003; Rosenblatt 1997).

Rosenblatt's (1997) study of *Modern Primitives in the US* exemplifies this type of contextual strategy. His study mirrors Hayden White's use of the primitive in his discourse surrounding the “noble savage” (i.e., it's more about us than it is about them), yet all but ignores how the tattooed subject always already exists within histories of colonial abjection towards the primitive other. For Filipino Americans in the *Mark of the*

Four Waves Tribe, it is precisely this history that signals the rescripting of tattoos within its contemporary moment. Like White and Rosenblatt, the Tribe seeks to critique “modern” Western society, yet it pays particular heed to the colonial relationship at the heart of this discourse. The histories of corporeal subjection and subjugation compel us to not take the body for granted and instead scrutinize corporeality and forms of embodiment as terrains of meanings and movement. In other words, deterritorializing/reterritorializing processes occur not just with tattoo customs but with bodies themselves—processes of disarticulation and reconstitution. The reterritorialization of Filipino American bodies consists of both insertion of ink into skin as well insertion of the bodies into the Philippine wilderness (vis-a-vis photoshop), recombinant processes that strike from the micro-molecular level all the way to the macro-social.

For the Tribe, then, the deterritorialization of place, practice, and skin allows for their reterritorialization within an instinctively renaturalized order, a reconstitution of particular associations between bodies of nature, bodies of aesthetics, and human bodies. That is to say, the purposeful collage of flesh, art, and wilderness create a “system of horizontal and complementary reterritorializations” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 174), whereby each of these elements mutually constitute, or perhaps more accurately, mutually interpellate each other within particular cultural, temporal and geographic locations. However, this is not to imply that this process is to be viewed as a simple “return” to precoloniality or a reversal of evolutionary narratives of modernity (both of

which reinscribe dominant Western conceptualizations of spacio-temporal movement). Rather, the “invented traditions” of the Tribe disrupt such teleological entrenchments and instead highlight the unevenness of movement and mobility that occur as the direct outcome of various forms of (post)colonial dispersal and exchange.

The collection and display of racialized Otherness has a long and varied history in the United States. Filipino bodies, in particular, have been imported, objectified and exhibited in a performance of primitive alterity and racial spectatorship, most notably at the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair (Vaughan 1996). Even today, the bodies of Filipinos continue to be put on display and used for entertainment purposes, although in an entirely different context. The “tribal” body is commonly used in Pilipino Culture Night (PCN) dances as one sampling of Filipino culture. However, as Gonzalves (1997) has pointed out, certain dances within the standard performance arc of college student-produced PCNs adhere to “indigenized rather than indigenous” cultural formations and raises “a question as to the authenticity of the presentations” (175) According to Gonzalves, “To say that something is indigenized is to point to an active and complicated process of editing. This is the process in which a vision of the Philippine life is manufactured whose immediate origins may be located within Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos’s management of cultural images through major exponents...” (ibid). While one can argue the meanings of authenticity and the notion of “indigenized” versus “indigenous,” the point I am trying to make here is with regards to the temporary scripting of primitive Filipino American bodies as opposed to the relative permanence and commitment embodied by those

possessing tattooed skin. That is, the one-night stand, no-strings-attached tribalism extrapolated for entertainment purposes needs to be contrasted to existing cultural tribal formations such as those found in communities such as those in the Philippines as well as the Mark of the Four Waves Tribe.⁹

Just as the Philippine landscape has been constructed within the Filipino American tribe's imaginary, so too are Filipino American tribal bodies/images constructed according to an idealized pre-contact nostalgic yearning. On the Tribe's website, photographs of the members are strategically juxtaposed against 19th Century photographs of "real" tribal Filipinos. (See Figures 3.3 and 3.4.)



Figure 3.3: Promotional image of the Tribe posing in tribal costume

⁹ For a more sustained discussion about the performativity of post-colonial diasporic identities, particularly in relation to indigenous/indigenized forms of culture such as dance, see Scull (2005).



Figure 3.4: Archival photo displayed on the Tribe's website

What do we make of this pre-colonial mimicry? How do we explain the reorganization of this diasporic community into a tribe? Previous theories of mimicry (Bhabha 1994) and mimesis (Taussig 1993) detailing how the colonized copy the forms and practices of their colonizers, while useful, are inadequate in fully explaining the specific processes that occur when, as in the case of the Filipino American tribe, the post-colonial diasporic subject tries to mimic one's own "home" culture. Similarly, theories of "ethnomimesis" (Cantwell 2003) that explain the white Westerner's appropriation of non-Western culture does not take into account the subjectivity of the non-white Western subject and the strategies of racialized opposition that set these two groups apart. What is needed is a new articulation, which I posit here as "automimesis," that attempts to complicate these equations by placing at the center the lives and perspectives of the post-colonial diasporic subject. This "automimetic" faculty can be explained as an identificatory process that is the result of post-colonial dispersal, strategic nostalgia, and the willful corporeal self-othering that (attempts to) disrupt colonial teleologies of modernity/progress and the rigid boundaries of the nation-state. The Tribe's use of tattoos, indigenous costumes, and wilderness relief signal a psychic and material desire to reclaim a lost heritage, governed

by a nostalgia “used to counter hegemonic narratives that erase or distort the experiences of Asian Americans or of marginalized peoples in the United States” (Maira 2002, 193). At the same time, this nostalgia takes on distinctively imperialist overtones, which Rosaldo (1989) calls “imperialist nostalgia”: “nostalgia, often found under imperialism, where people mourn the passing of what they themselves have destroyed,” “a process of yearning for what one has destroyed that is a form of mystification.”

While Bhabha has famously noted that the colonized mimicry of the colonizer is always already “not quite, not white,” the auto-mimicry of Filipinos in the diaspora do not share this similar racial discontinuity that marks their corporeal otherness. Rather, the diasporic subject’s auto-mimicry of an “indigenous” image veers uncomfortably close to autoexoticization (Savigliano 1995) or self-Orientalizing (Kondo 1997), and in fact can serve to “reify identities, freeze the past, and encourage the commodification of ethnicity that situates Filipinos abroad in a touristic—that is to say, neocolonial—relationship with the Filipinos at home” (Rafael 2000, 14). However, the overt discontinuities that mark Bhabha’s colonial bodies are still expressed, albeit differently, in the racialized alterity of the post-colonial diasporic subject. For example, the very artifice that is displayed in the doctored photographs betray their constructedness. Whether intentional or not, the imprecise impersonation (perhaps read as an aesthetic marker) expressed in these obviously digitally altered/enhanced images are themselves a form of modification. Here Taussig’s conception of mimetic machines—i.e., machines (and their mechanical reproductive abilities) that enable varying forms of mimesis—operate on multiple and

multiply-constitutive levels: the tattoo machine/needle, the photography camera, the photoshop computer software, etc. These powerful representational devices enable such mimicry/modification and allows for the visual articulation of what Ketu Katrak calls the “simultaneity of geography”; the reterritorialization of automimetic selves engage in “the possibility of living here in body and elsewhere in mind and imagination” (quoted in Espiritu 2003, 11).

The dislocations between psychic and corporeal inhabitations mimic the uneven dispersal of bodies and aesthetics that ultimately converge in circuitous pathways onto the post-colonial diasporic body. In this way, the automimetic subject disrupts predictable linear outcomes of global movement/migration. Nicholas Thomas (2005) has pointed out that certain forms of Pacific tattooing are “always already a cross-cultural, historically shaped adaptation” (225). Automimetic adaptations, such as those within the Filipino American Tribe, debunk erroneous notions regarding the fixity of culture (see, for example, the incorporation of traditional vs. modern tattoo machines, deterritorialized aesthetics, mimicry based on mechanical reproduced images rather than direct contact, transnationally-imbued consciousness, invented nostalgia, etc.) and challenge, disrupt, and destabilize teleological narratives of modernity. Yet in considering this vacillation between here and there, between the United States and Philippines, between primitivity and modernity, between the natural and the constructed, rather than a “postmodern pastiche” of identities and identity formations that freely move in a neo-liberal globalized world, these cultural forms must be contextualized as specific outcomes of world

historical processes always already overlaid with issues of power, the consequence of imperialist ventures, and the diasporic subject's refusal to accept his/her subordinate status. This entails a reclamation of the body that challenges the constructs of colonial victimhood/victimization, one which Sarita See (2002) has discussed in terms of the aestheticized Filipino/American bodies and bodily inscriptions/modifications framed within discourses of victimization/mutilation based on colonial/Catholic legacies of the "Passion/Pasyon." In interpellating the Filipino/American body within the context of the tribal, the Tribe rematerializes the body outside these Catholic/colonial paradigms, so that the modified body embraces community/genealogy rather than victimhood/subjugation.¹⁰

Another important consideration is the Tribe's specific focus on the Philippines as the focal point of identity/culture, instead of viewing their work within a broader field of diasporic cultural production. The notion of "4 waves" flows unidirectionally into the archipelago, in contrast to the outward waves of immigration from the Philippines into the United States. Given the centrality of the Philippines as the location of culture, then, how does this diasporic homeland function in the tribe's collective imagination? The production of the Philippines as an idyllic natural landscape is displayed in many of the Tribe's promotional materials. For example, in the merchandise section of the site, the Tribe sells three different postcards in which tribe member photos have been superimposed onto a background of "traditional" Filipino landscapes. In one such postcard, tribe member Buggz squats with cigar in mouth, in front of the famous Banaue

¹⁰ I realize that the role of religion, colonialism, and tattoos/body modification requires much more elaboration and theorization than what I can provide here.

rice terraces (Figure 3.5) while in another postcard, two tribe members stand in front of a generic natural landscape (Figure 3.6). While the first photo of Buggz depicts him wearing jeans thereby juxtaposing the modern with the traditional, the latter photo tries harder at recreating an aura of verisimilitude, whereby nature is augmented by the members adornment of both tattooed skin and traditional Filipino garments. The use of black-and-white color schematic in both images reinforces a specific kind of strategic nostalgia in a diasporic production of “home.” As Dorinne Kondo (1997) has pointed out, the construction of “home” by those who inhabit marginalized spaces in society is a political necessity in order to “create, produce, and assert [their] identities” (207).



Figure 3.5: Tribe member in front of the Banaue Rice Terraces

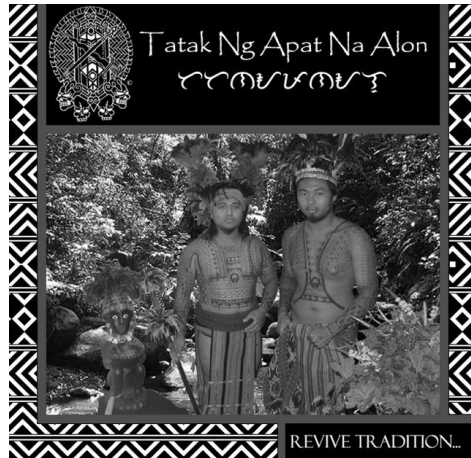


Figure 3.6: Promotional postcard of the Tribe

Home for these Filipino Americans rests within a paradisaical landscape that signifies freedom from the oppressive contours of US society. However, unlike paradise-seeking vacationers and adventure tourists whose attraction to the Pacific come steeped in colonial histories of conquest and exploitation, the visual construction of home in these photos rely upon a reimag(in)ing of a land freed from its colonial contradictions. The pre-contact Philippines exists as a fantastic and phantasmic symbol in the consciousness of the Tribe; the photo-postcards try to re-imagine, or re-envision, the body naturalized within these environs. Tattooed brown bodies, they seem to be saying, work naturally within this particular “indigenous” landscape. The members of the tribe try to show the body as not divorced from nature, the literally embodied construction of self in a home of skin and wilderness. Reverting back to pre-colonial Philippines, no attempts need to be made to tackle other social/societal pressures associated with “contemporary” Filipino

society.¹¹ The imagined homeland is free of the messiness of colonialism and insurgent Third-world politics. As Espiritu (2003) explains:

The idealization of the home country, however, becomes problematic when it elicits a nostalgia for a glorious past that never was, a nostalgia that elides exclusion, power relations, and difference or when it elicits a desire to replicate these inequities as a means to buttress lost status and identities in the adopted country. (15)

How does the idealization of the Philippines and its tribal organization replicate these exclusions and inequities of power? For example, while the Filipino American male's embrace of the "Urban Warrior" label can be interpreted as a reclamation of their particular culture in the process of decolonization (Strobel 1997), it also re-enacts specific forms of racialized hyper-masculinized identities/performativities that must also be mindful against reinscribing heterosexist forms of power/patriarchy. In other words, the question that needs exploring is how are masculine and feminine identities being (re-)assigned in this particular tribe? How does the Tribe try to subvert or transgress gender and sexual hegemonic formations in opposition to those found in dominant US society, if at all?

One particular visual marker of the site is the predominance of its male members. Although women are indeed members of the tribe, they are not depicted as prominently

¹¹ This is not to imply that cultural politics is somehow divorced from more overt forms of politics. Indeed, these communities of culture can act as important social networks in propagating political movements. For example, at 2005's *Pintadas* photography exhibit of tattooed Asian American women held in NYC, where the Tribe was a prominent presence, the gathering of a concentrated group of Asian Americans, most notably Filipino Americans, allowed for mobilizing tactics by groups such as Gabriela in helping to spread literature/information about their particular political organization and ongoing struggles in the Philippines.

on the website or in media accounts of the tribe (Krutak 2006; Exgirl/Canoe 2005). As half-naked male bodies come to stand in for the Tribe, implicit within this visual formulation is a stark homosociality that invokes Western paradigms of “man vs. nature” or “man in nature”—a masculinist discourse that emphasizes rugged individualism that both contests and maintains the Tribe’s attempt at collectivity. This homosociality is on display in the various pictures that adorn the website—fraternizing at tattoo conventions, engaging in recreated indigenous tattoo “tapping” rituals, and photoshopped male bonding amidst the natural landscape of the Philippines. The performance of primitivity, gendered male, implores us to reconsider whose bodies become legible/illegible within certain forms of (cultural) citizenship, nationalism, and state power. By examining the traditional tattoo rituals associated with this tribe, I will analyze how homosocial male contact is embedded in the very structures of the tribal relationships.

Photographs depicting the traditional tattoo ceremony (*batek*) involve a significant amount of male-on-male touching, stretching, and needle penetration (Figure 3.7). In considering the sexual overtones of tattooing practices, Alfred Gell (1993) writes that “the technical schema of tattooing sets up a further series of analogies which tend towards the same end. The sight of a tattoo evokes imagery of sexual subjection, piercing, and flex, which are equally resonant seen from the perspective of either sex; these resonances arise from the manner in which tattoos are made” (36). While both Euro-American machine-based techniques and traditional Filipino tapping techniques involve male-on-male touching, it is the latter that truly evokes a more communal homosocial

atmosphere. Whereas machine techniques usually involve two actors, the artist and the recipient, the traditional technique requires at least three, usually four, persons to be involved in the process: the tattoo artist, the recipient, and one or two skin stretchers. (See illustrations.) As the artist rhythmically taps the needled instrument (usually a stick with the tattoo needles—traditionally made of bone or horn—affixed to one end) into the skin, the stretchers hold the skin in place, creating a taut surface for the needle to puncture.



Figure 3.7: Tribe members practicing traditional tattooing techniques

The process of tattooing requires the recipient to temporarily relinquish his individual agency, lying submissively on the ground while the penetration of skin and injection of ink takes place. This process results in what can be interpreted as a highly homoerotic atmosphere, and requires countless hours of direct man-on-man contact, including the skin stretchers' hands on the receiver, as well as the stretchers' overlapping hands on each other. Despite the pain involved, all this touching creates a tactile atmosphere of sensuality, if not sexuality. Thus, in order to achieve the type of power/agency over the body that the tattoo comes to symbolize after the fact, it ironically entails the supplication

of the body in order to spend the hours getting penetrated, stretched, and groped by other males.¹² Stated another way, the tattoo-aspiring tribe member is forced to be the metaphorical “bottom” to the tattooist’s “top.” This openness to the phallic insertion of the tattoo needle highlights how the traditionally “feminine” role of being penetrated (in heteronormative terms) enters into the construction of the masculine body. As Evans (2005) points out, “To be penetrated is to acknowledge one’s vulnerability to penetration, an experience that conflicts with how masculinity is constituted within Western discourses. Allowing oneself to be penetrated opens both the body and the psyche to different meanings of masculinity.” In the context of the Filipino American tribe, they ask that only the most dedicated members volunteer themselves to the traditional hand-held methods of tattooing.¹³

Thus, the spaces of tattooing can be interpreted as “an intensely homosocial context in which the love of manliness must be reconciled with the desire to be manly” (Evans

¹² While the relationship between the tattooer and tattooed is often, quite accurately, portrayed as one of collaboration within the context of aesthetic design and psychic understanding, during the actual physical process itself, everything is pretty much under the control of the artist. Particularly in traditional Pacific tattooing contexts, such as Samoan tatauing, verbal direction-giving during the process is quite limited. Instead, the artist takes the liberty of physically contorting the recipient’s body to his own whim, to the exaggerated effect of “you either move or you lose your limb” (personal interview with traditional tatau artist Su’a Sulu’ape Freewind, May 6, 2006).

¹³ While my focus is on the traditional (non-electric) forms of tattooing, this is not to imply that the electric tattooing practices do not also create a atmosphere of male homosocial relationships. For example, the Tribe collaborates with an African American tattoo artist named Speezy, who says, “Although I am of African American descent, I understand what the tribe’s missions about reviving lost traditions, I very much can relate to that, that is why I am there, helping and tattooing....I am very much honored to help the Filipino BROTHERS movement” (Tribe’s website, emphasis in original). This emphasis of “Filipino BROTHERS” not only indicates the overtly masculinist/male-dominated composition of the tribe, but also alludes to the homosocial kinship networks that are being forged in and through the tattoo.

2005). As a visual marker of one's subjectivity and authority, tattoo culture is also characterized by male-on-male spectatorship. In other words, it is not uncommon for other men to look at each other's tattoos, show them off, fraternize around them, as a form of homosocial bonding, a recognition of the pain and dedication that each has mutually endured for the sake of inscribing the skin. The (homo)erotics of the penetrating gaze has been theorized by Gell (1993) in his study of Pacific tattoos:

The eye...enters the body of the other, because the peculiarity of tattooing is that it is inside the skin rather than on its surface. Thus to view a tattoo is already to be in a position of seduction; it provokes, not an aesthetic response but a kind of bodily looking which is intrinsically sexualized, especially when the design is localized in a way which reflects the erotic possibilities of the body. (36)

Although this may be a bit of an overstatement, it is true that within the tattoo community, the habitual process of "show and tell" is quite characteristic of any tattoo gathering/social event. However, I disagree with Gell in his pronouncement that this is not an aesthetic response—I would say that this is based explicitly on an aesthetic response: that is, the appreciation of the tattooed skin (or what Gell calls the "artefactual body"), being both a sexualized and racialized gaze, is inherently based on an aesthetic valuation of the body. Wallace (2003) makes this point quite clear in her analysis of Russian contact with the inhabitants of the Marquesan Islands, where the aesthetic response to the tattooed body intrinsically contained both overly racial and sexual overtones. In her description of the moment of contact, the elaborate tattoo designs "visually enhance[d] Marquesan flesh, accentuating the contours of the male form and further defining its perfectly developed musculature and torso" (72). While Wallace makes the point that such an aesthetic appraisal did not necessarily "avow an erotic

interest,” it did elicit a strong urge in the Russians to “stroke” the skin of the male natives, and contributed to the devaluation of the native female as “degenerate specimens” of femininity (72-75).

While the homoerotically charged atmosphere of the male-dominated tattoo space has received limited scholarly attention,¹⁴ there has been acknowledgement, particularly within the context of the military studies, of how the “tattoo creates a safety valve for expressing physical bonds of intimacy toward a community of men in a (homo)erotic but communally sanctioned, and distinctly unofficial form” (Braunberger 2000). While both situations seem to involve regimes of authority that dictate the role of men in their respective community, the exact hierarchical arrangement of the Tribe is not clear based on the information on its website.¹⁵ What is common between these two societies is the way in which tattoos are looked upon as markers of masculinity, a certain form of initiation into manhood. This type of rite of passage is not at all uncommon in the tattoo world and is particularly salient today within Modern Primitive communities (DeMello 2000; Klesse 1999; Pitts 2003), as well as in indigenous societies in the Philippines (Salvador 2004). Judging from their visual depiction on the website, for the members of the Tribe, the uses of tattoos as inscriptions of masculinity and cultural heritage are not complete without an overall context for their tribalism.

¹⁴ Individual narratives of homoeroticism in the tattoo studio does appear in certain works. See Zeeland (1996) and Steward (1990).

¹⁵ Indeed, when I interviewed the Tribe they admitted that although the tribal structure is in place, that not many of the members are “serious” enough to actualize said structure.

3.3 The Dream Jungle saga

“I’m not trying to sell you the tribal experience,” says Aleks Figueroa, a Filipino American tattoo artist based out of Long Beach. “I have tribal interests, I love tribal art. But I’m not trying to sell you that...I’m not trying to sell you anything other than my artistry.”

If the Mark of the Four Waves represent a narrowly cultural nationalist model for tattooing, in particular, and ethnic formation in general, then Filipino American tattoo artist Aleks Figueroa represents a flip side (no pun intended) to that: namely a view of Filipinoness that isn’t essentializing or isolationist, but one that arises from a relational conception of identity. “It has to do with relation,” says Aleks, when I ask him about his views on ethnic and racial identity and how this plays out in the realm of tattoo. “Somehow Filipinos have been able to accidentally say we’re Filipino without saying we’re Asian... I think it is equally important to embrace Asian American as it is Filipino American. If people want to identify as Pacific Islander/Polynesia, ok it is [that, too].” Instead of trying to locate Filipinos as either a complete separate entity or within a mutually exclusive paradigm of Asia or Pacific, Aleks challenges imperialist cartographies that divided the Pacific into geopolitical zones of colonial acquisition (Thomas 1989) and views the Filipinos as possessing commonalities with both ethnoracial groupings.

As a former community health worker in Oakland's Asian Health Center, Aleks brings to tattooing his experience as an activist as well as cultural worker. He acknowledges that he approaches tattoo from what he calls a "political" perspective, one that is tied to the community. His experiences and awareness manifests itself as an inclusiveness towards the changing internal diversity that makes up the heterogeneity encompassed by the term "Filipino":

I think it would be good to acknowledge that we [Filipinos] are of [different] cultures as well...it is important because it is inclusive and not exclusive. And I think Filipinos have been good at being exclusive. I think that's the shit part of nationalism because then you don't know shit about anyone else.

From the onset of his career in the tattoo scene, Aleks says that he was aware of the racial aspect of tattooing and became interested in Asian American tattooing as a distinct aesthetic form. "I don't let just anyone touch me," he states. "With something as symbolic as a tattoo, I was looking for someone of color." He received his first tattoo in 1993 from legendary artist Pinky Yun, an alibata/baybayin tattoo—despite the fact that Pinky Yun is from Hong Kong and does not specialize in what is now termed "black work." When Aleks expressed interest in apprenticing with Pinky, he declined the suggestion and instead referred him to Leo Zulueta¹⁶, who "loosely guided me into the direction I am now."

¹⁶ Leo Zulueta is a highly influential tattoo artist who is credited for the introduction of "tribal style" tattooing into the United States. Zulueta, who is Filipino American and born and raised in Hawai'i, based his tribal style on Polynesian and Micronesian tattoo patterns. Ironically, he is not known for doing any Filipino work. Thus, Ricafrente (2008), in his typology of Filipino American tattooing assigns him into the category "non-traditionalist" (43).

Yet the development of his own aesthetic of Filipino tattooing proved to be difficult due to the lack of information available. Aleks explains:

At the time, there was nothing on the internet, books were scarce...and then I traveled to wherever I could when I could for maybe about five years, and I unearthed what I could and what I found, and what I found was my job was to not take those designs verbatim but expand on it. That's what I think anyone would be proud of, ancestors or an artist of yesteryear. They wouldn't want to put that exact same design on someone because that was reserved for someone else. My job is to innovate and take it to somewhere else, in my own interpretation.

Ironically, while the Four Waves believe that misguided Filipinos who get "incorrect" tattoos are on a journey that will eventually lead to their group, Aleks' own personal trajectory through Filipino tattooing was once characterized by what he acknowledges to be a similar type of cultural nationalism, which he says he grew out of, partly due to his views on the Four Waves.

"I used to be about Filipino tattoos by Filipinos for Filipinos, [that kind of] separatist nationalism...[which I] grew out of by me now saying I'm a tattoo artist who happens to be Filipino." Part of this comes from his reaction to seeing what the Four Waves were doing in the tattoo community. "I viewed them as pretentious wanna-be tribalists, modern day primitives... 'You are not Filipino unless you have a Filipino tattoo' kinda shit. That's when I lost my mind. No, I can't be lumped with those guys, in any way, shape, or form."

He continues:

It seemed like a mockery to me. I know they mean well, but I kept hearing one lie after another...I thought it would be a disservice if I didn't do anything...[I needed to] make a change: telling history as it is, and not fabricating what design comes from where and what it means...Art's just art.

While the Four Waves art is about a search for lost origins, Aleks' art these days is about finding interconnections. He explains that he is inspired by a lot of Filipino art, but also art in general—art from Southeast Asia, Polynesian, Micronesian, as well as Aztec and Puerto Rican art. He is inspired by an Oceanic aesthetic, and when asked why he chose to set up shop in Long Beach he answers, that it was “the last city with the word ‘beach’ in it that was still affordable.” At his location in Long Beach he comes in contact with a clientele of various ethnic backgrounds: Filipinos, Latinos, African Americans. Although Aleks mentioned earlier in our interview his concern for a specifically Asian American aesthetic, his current work seems to point towards something that might be considered as a postcolonial aesthetic, as his location in Long Beach (as well as the other artists who work at his shop) allows for new groupings and connections, leading to new aesthetic, and perhaps racial, formations.

Despite the serious differences that Aleks has with the Four Waves, he is still quick to point out that they all operate within what he calls the “Dream Jungle saga”—the ever-changing contours and cartographies of the Filipino American diasporic community. On his website, filipinotattoos.com, Aleks writes:

Dream Jungle is a book by the brilliant Filipina-American author, Jessica Hagedorn. The book is an amazing read. The naming of his shop is an ode to her as she has been a great inspiration of creativity in my life through her words, insight and humor. The title is form fitting of the work that I share and of the people that I represent. As much as I love and hate our politics, I am proud to be part of the Dream Jungle saga.

When I ask him to elaborate on what he means by “our politics,” he states: “Politics of identity: I love and I hate it. I love people able to call myself Filipino and being part of

the community...I hate it at the same tie because everyone wants the cookie cutter tattoo, the cookie cutter experience, the cookie t-shirt to make them proud of being Filipino. It's like a really cheesy telenovela, I hate it but I love it, but I hate it but I love it..."

Aleks finds that through his tattooing, there's what he calls a "spiritual" factor in his work: he becomes a facilitator of experience in the process of people finding their identity. He notes that "the people who get tattooed by me want to symbolize something of their life, typically family, community, culture." He relishes the exchange of time and energy that tattooing provides:

I hope to continue to make people happy with what I share with them, exchange is really important to me, and if I can continue to achieve that then I'm happy. The exchange of energy the exchange of thought, perspectives, stories. That time shared. If I can continue to get that, that's cool with me.

Tattooing serves as an intimate practice that allows us to think about the proximities between peoples, cultures, and possibilities of connections. "We're all learning about each other," says Aleks, "and that's what I like the best."

Chapter 4: Monstrous Skin, Monstrous Excess

That is what we owe to monsters: the break with teleology and eugenics opens the problem of what the source of creation is, how it is expressed, and where it will lead.

- Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*

4.1 Becoming monster



Figure 4.1: Performance artist Faux Pas

In *Bodies of Dissent*, Daphne Brooks (2006) opens her discussion by seeking to understand the ways in which “critically defamiliarizing” the body can yield “alternative racial and gender epistemologies” (5). Hers is an elegant formulation, one that leads to many productive lines of inquiry, particularly if we consider techniques through which the body may not just discursively and ideologically be defamiliarized, but also morphologically modified, deterritorialized and reimagined. Not just alternative epistemologies, then, but alternative ontologies may result. Such is the potential of thinking about monstrosities. Christine Braunberger (2000) adopts this theme of the monstrous in her critical interpretive history of tattooed women as criminals, spectacle, and freakshow from the late 19th century to the present day. “Monstrification” allows her

to locate the creation of “new possibilities for body aesthetics on the limitations of former definitions” (3). The idea of the “monstrous”—both the subversively beautiful and spectacularly threatening—provides a useful framework from which to approach the tattooed body in contemporary society. As Rosi Braidotti (1994) has pointed out, the construction of the “monster” has been used not only to identify the aberrant, but to reinscribe what is considered the “correct” or “proper” body. Furthermore, Judith Halberstam (1995) has argued, “The monster always represents the disruption of categories, the destruction of boundaries, and the presence of impurities and so we need monsters and we need to recognize and celebrate our own monstrosities” (27). This chapter focuses on this idea of becoming-monstrous,¹⁷ the morphological transformation of the body that not only identifies and challenges various racial, gendered, and sexual normativities of the U.S. nation-state, but also opens up alternative possibilities of inhabitation and corporealization.

In considering the ontological and epistemological positions of the non-normative body, more specifically, the queer mixed race modified body, I will focus exclusively on one particular body, the body of Joshua David Reno: first in his everyday, quotidian presentation, and then, in the second half of this chapter, in the context of drag performance as his alter-ego Faux Pas. I take up the theme of the monstrous as a way to look at the corporeal processes of recombination and reconfiguration, thematics of

¹⁷ I use the concept of “becoming” in the Deleuzo-Guattarian sense, as a dynamic alliance of creative “involution” that runs counter to teleological notions of progress/regress. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) write: “to involve is to form a block that runs its own line ‘between’ the terms in play and beneath assignable relations” (238).

embodiment reflected through the idea of the Derridean *supplement* and Deleuze and Guattari's theories of inhabiting multiplicities. Derrida refers to the *supplement* as a "non-fullness," a non-fullness that oftentimes gets interpreted as "less than full," but a non-fullness which can also be interpreted as "more than full."¹⁸ Thinking in terms of the body, it raises the question of excess: racial, sexual, corporeal. For example, framed in this way, an analysis of mixed race bodies allows us to challenge dominant racial categories by refusing to accede to a reductive singularity.¹⁹ Similarly, the proliferation of modern discourses of sexuality, as Foucault (1978) outlines in his discussion of the repressive hypothesis, stems from a type of excess beyond those inscribed as normatively heterosexual. Finally, tattoos represent an excess pigmentation of skin that hypervisibilizes the skin in which we live. As an ethnically mixed queer male, oftentimes frustrated by friends, relatives, and strangers who have constantly looked upon the mixed modified queer body as embodying that "less than fullness" (e.g. "not ___ enough"), I approach the subject of Josh/Faux Pas as an investigation on how "more than fullness"—a productive rather than debilitating excess—can be a place of radical possibility. In other words, I am asking the question: What are the ways in which the recombinatory, multiplicitous, "non-full" subject challenges normativized notions of ontology and epistemology? By attempting to think about both my friend Josh and his alter-ego Faux

¹⁸ I owe this insight to Fred Moten and his discussion of the *supplement* in his English 501 course, Fall 2006, University of Southern California. See also his book, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*.

¹⁹ For example, those who occupy "mixed" ethnoracial heritages are not simply half this and half that, but constitute two wholes, thereby being more than just a singularity, but as Deleuze and Guattari call it, inhabiting multiplicities.

Pas in all their complexity or multiplicity, I will examine the body as a site of embodied ontologies and performative epistemologies.

4.2 The archives and aesthetics of monstrosity



Figure 4.2: Self-portrait of Joshua David Reno



Figure 4.3: Joshua David Reno's torso modifications

Josh says, “My tattoos are the painting of my past, and of things I choose to recognize, the story of me.” For Josh—as for many ink enthusiasts—tattoos represent a personal archive of one’s self, an inscribed exscription to be read (or misread) by both the self and

society. In *Archive Fever*, Derrida (1995) meditates on the meaning such archival inscriptions: “The foliaceous stratification, the pellicular superimposition of these cutaneous marks seems to defy analysis. It accumulates so many sedimented archives, some of which are written right on the epidermis of a body proper, others on the substrate of an ‘exterior’ body” (20). On the other hand, as decorative ornamentation, tattoos also function within a Foucauldian *technique of the self* used to achieve a corporeally inhabited aesthetics of existence. Foucault (1985) defines the aesthetics of existence as the “intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular²⁰ being, and to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria” (10-11). The body, or more specifically, the skin is a site/sight of both the archive and the aesthetic, both a historical project and a disciplinary performative of multiple individuations.

To see how such monstrous archives and monstrous aesthetics are achieved, let’s delve a bit into the ethnographic: Josh’s involvement in body modification began at the age of 15 when he had his nipples pierced at a bikerfest he attended with his mother, which was followed a year later by his first tattoo at 16.²¹ He considers his first tattoo (which has

²⁰ I must note here that I interpret the word “singular” in this sense as meaning “unique, distinctive, and remarkable” instead of as a numerical signifier. This singularity, or uniqueness, then, does not preclude, but rather is a necessary precondition of the kind of individual “multiplicities” that Deleuze and Guattari (1987) point out that we all inhabit.

²¹ This is below the age of consent in the state of California, which requires that individuals under the age 18 obtain permission from their legal guardian before getting modified (pierced, tattooed, etc.) in any way.

since been covered up) as a “Fuck you I’m being independent” tattoo, the result of his history of physical abuse as a child and a reminder “not to look up to anybody who is an adult and to protect myself.” This first tattoo can be interpreted as a violent example of the type of *subjectivation*²² that goes into these technologies of self. In the years that followed, Josh’s adornments continued to accumulate. Currently he has two 00-gauge nostril piercings, 7/16” conch piercings, 1/2” cartilage piercings in his upper ears, 1.5” lobe stretchings, multiple septum and lip piercings, and a subdermal implant within a small tattooed teardrop below his eye.²³ In terms of tattoos, he has an assortment of inkwork including pieces on his chest, neck, abdomen, back, head, face, and sleeves.

Instead of going into detail about the story behind each and every tattoo on Josh’s body, I would rather think about the differences in approach and design that his tattoos embody. In other words, within tattoo culture, a distinction is often made between what is known as “flash” and “custom” work. Flash is standardized pre-set designs, usually found on the walls of tattoo shops or in tattoo books, that customers can choose to be stenciled onto their skin. In contrast, custom work refers to tattoos that are specifically designed for the individual, a process that often entails lengthy consultation appointments and a back-and-

²² In the *Use of Pleasure*, Foucault (1985) refers to various modes of *subjectivation*, the dialectical processes through which one becomes both subject and subjectified, living under prescribed social rules and codes while at the same time asserting one’s own sense of agency as a desiring subject (28-29).

²³ While tattooing and piercing, today, are commonly linked together under the umbrella term of “body modification,” the two forms of corporeal alteration have quite distinct genealogies in terms of their introduction and eventual acceptance into U.S society. Such a discussion lies outside the scope of this chapter. See DeMello (2007).

forth discussion between the artist and client in order to come up with a design specific for the person getting inked. When considering the flash versus custom designs as aesthetics of the self, it might be useful to think of this distinction in terms of what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) pose as the map versus trace. They write that the tracing is “an overcoding structure or supporting axis, something that comes ready-made” whereas a map “is entirely oriented toward an experimentation with the real” (12). In other words, the tracing upholds the arboreal structure of society, which casts individuals within preordained sets of rules and thought, while the map is a space of possibility and agency, where the individual can craft his or her own direction of movement. Not just an archive, then, tattoos are mappings of the body, cartographies of skin, a technique or aesthetic that “is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification....reworked by an individual, group, or social formation” (12).

For Josh, body modification is a crucial component to his process of “becoming,” one that is open to constant (re)negotiation. He considers his body as a work constantly in progress, a continuous project, not ever finished. For him, his body is a malleable canvas of reinvention. For example, he states that if he is not satisfied with any of his tattoos, he plans on completely blacking them out, or undergoing more scarification and rubbing ink over them. He reflects on his unprescribed process of becoming by saying: “I just don’t know what I’ll end up looking like...except for old!”²⁴ When I ask Josh about his most

²⁴ This “becoming old” points to the process of becoming that we are all on, modified or not. Although in light of various anti-aging technologies—such as plastic surgery, botox, micro-dermabrasion, etc—even that assertion is debatable.

painful experience, he describes the scarification on ribs: three lines, 6 inches long, on each side of his ribcage, acquired in 2000 when he was 20 years old. He states:

That was a lot about me bleeding out a lot of the negativity of my past and my upbringing, another symbol of me turning 20, me making a personal decision to not allow the drama of my past and all the pains and negativities that came from my life where I grew up to affect my future. So that was my little tribute, my little medallion for making it through.

Scars in this context are not simply an unintended trace of a past injury but a willful self-infliction for a present reminder of multi-directionality, at once pointing to the past, present, and future. In Deleuzo-Guattarian terms, it is an anti-stagnant line of flight²⁵ that attempts to maneuver away from a particular normative telos of self-development.

After a childhood of being “given hell” because of his race, not being white enough, not being Asian enough, Josh enacts a refusal of both those categories and instead focuses on the *smooth spaces*.²⁶ “I don’t really identify as having a race,” he asserts, “I’m a mutt, I’m a Heinz 57, I’m a hybrid. But it’s never really been an issue for me, I never really think about it, unless I’m filling out some doctor paperwork, and then I’m baffled by it.” His

²⁵ Deleuze and Guattari (1987) explain “lines of flight” as movements of possibility that enable rhizomatic connections, deterritorializations, and multiplicities. In other words, they attempt to conceptualize a multidirectional (non-)model of irreducible in-betweenness, “a transversal movement that sweeps one *and* the other away, a stream without beginning or end (25).

²⁶ Deleuze and Guattari (1987) discuss the dialectical tensions between what they term smooth versus striated spaces, the former being a space of nonprescriptive becoming and the latter being held captive by the structuralizing logics of hegemonic power. Applying such distinctions to skin in this context, as a striated space, skin is subject to the regulatory pronouncements of racialization, morpho-illogical assessments that seek to impose state-sanctioned racial categories upon different gradations of pigmented skin. And yet, skin is also a smooth space, where pigments can be willfully inserted by the subjectivized individual in a non-predetermined, non-prescriptive process of coloration that challenges (but by no means negates) the singular (as in number, non-multiple) vision of racialization.

disavowal of race can be seen as a way in which he enacts a mode of individuation that refuses to be rendered aberrant or abject, qualities that have long been associated with the queer, the tattooed and the mixed-race body. In other words, Josh's refusal of race, or racial identification, is a refusal to accede to what he believes to be "unnatural," namely the monstrous labeling of such normativized identificatory markers as race, gender, and sexuality—those hierarchically-determined, state-sponsored recombinatory processes of limitation and control. Echoing Anna Tsing's (2005) critique of the crippling categories that impose a calcified framework around which to make sense of our ever-changing material reality (175), Josh is likewise attempting to resist categorical hegemony to think through what it means to inhabit gaps, in-betweenness, that which falls out of the discursive imperatives of our pre-existing vocabulary. By flipping the script on what we think of as normal versus monstrous, Josh insists upon a recognition of what body modification scholar Victoria Pitts (2003) calls a "politicized aesthetics of deviance, where overt bodily display is seen as a powerful affront to essentializing norms." She goes on the state, "The stylization of the queer body involves not simply the fixing of homosexual identity onto the body, but rather *the creation of a body that is always in the process of becoming* sexual, erotic, and pleased" (91, my emphasis).

This aesthetics of deviance is another way to think through what Brooks (2006), after Carla Peterson, calls an "empowering oddness" that can produce "new possibilities of difference," a mode of becoming that allows "a means to move more freely and to be culturally 'odd,' to turn the tables on normativity and to employ their own bodies as

canvasses of dissent” (6). Thinking about the tattooed body as a kind of canvas of dissent foregrounds the de-naturalized coloration that is inscribed on the palette of skin, an attempt to move outside the normative pigmentocratic legibilities of the U.S. nation-state. The tattooed body, then, creates a type of hypervisibility of skin: “it makes the invisible visible, or rather it makes visibility visible; it forms from the thresholds of the visible and invisible world, an order, mode, or aesthetic of visibility” (Lippit 2006, 106). This insistent visibility is a critique of racial discourse. The multiplicitious melanogendered body of the mixed race tattooed queer is involved in what Peggy Phelan (1993) calls a “visibility politics,” how “these variations underline the psychic, political, and philosophical impoverishment of linking the color of the physical body with the ideology of race. Race-identity involves recognizing something other than skin and physical inscriptions” (8).

This critique of color becomes central to the performative aspect of identity that will be explored in the second half of the chapter, where I consider one of Josh’s alter egos, the drag personality Faux Pas, and the performances she uses to remake the body. Performing the modified body (in all its guises) not only brings up avenues of possibility but at the same time underscores and reinscribes the normative in order to attempt an escape from those limitations. In the next section, I will move from embodied ontologies to performative epistemologies, to uncover the insights that can be gleaned from the performance of the smooth and striated body. same day, is becoming less of a realistic option.

4.3 Performing the monstrous and the criminal



Figure 4.4: Faux Pas with cheek spear

Faux Pas' performance of Fiona Apple's "Criminal" at the "Tres Chic!" fundraising party on October 7, 2006 in San Francisco highlights the ways in which the coupling of body modification and drag performance work together to enact an onto-epistemological critique of social norms. Her performance can be considered what Jose Munoz (1999) calls an act of *disidentification*, that which "resist[s] the social matrix of dominant publicity by exposing the rhetorical/ideological context of state power" (168). Drag, particularly the kind of drag found at Trannyshack where Faux Pas regularly performs (while not specifically devoted to queers of color performance) enacts this type of social critique. As David Hawkins remarks in the documentary *Filthy Gorgeous: The Trannyshack Story*: "It's all about taking our culture, dismantling it, making commentary on it, and then reconstituting it as a drag show. And it's an ode to the cleverness and originality of the drag queens that they will take things that you've never seen in a drag context, and they will do it and do it well, and show you why it fits into that aesthetic."

Hawkins implies that Trannyshack drag operates as a decisively politicized aesthetic project, a project that critiques aesthetic propriety and generic boundedness, and provides an alternative mode of inhabitation, if only for one night.²⁷

The cumulative weight of history—historical becoming and historical constraint—bears down upon Faux Pas’ performance of the song “Criminal,” a performance that makes use of a body where many forms of “criminality” converge: queerness, mixed raciality, and markings such as tattoos. Performing on a bed of nails, the long sharp spikes that jut up from the bed evoke elements of both the sexual and carceral, sites of both the home and the state, where the regulatory jurisdiction imposes physical and psychic violence upon the “non-natural” queer raced inked body. By laying on top of these spikes, Faux Pas symbolically exerts her agency over these multiple forms of imprisonment, but also exhibits her willing acceptance and accession to subjugation as well as subjecthood, allowing the body to experience the pleasure of pain in performance. One of the verses of the song goes like this:

Heaven help me for the way I am / Save me from these evil deeds / Before I get them done / I know tomorrow brings the consequence at hand / But I keep livin’ this day like the next will never come.

By parodying “evil” and “criminality,” the disidentifying drag queen occupies what Judith Halberstam (2005) calls queer space and time, or “the inhabitation of worlds outside heteronormative reproductive and familial space-time” (10). The presentness alluded to in the song lyrics show a blatant disregard not only for the legal consequences

²⁷ I owe this insight to Judith Halberstam and her graduate seminar, “The Status of the ‘Alternative’ in Contemporary Critical Theory,” Spring 2007, University of Southern California.

of the singer's supposed "evil deeds," but also towards a futurity that she tries to keep at harm's distance away. Yet this queer time also functions in another valence, which is to say, the uneven temporal plane of corporeal historicity, highlighted by the specific instances of criminality that Faux Paux embodies in her performance.

Faux Pas lip syncs, "All I need is a good defense / because I'm feeling *like* a criminal..." The word "like" here functions not unlike the "like" that Judith Butler discusses in her analysis of Aretha Franklin's rendition of "(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman" (Butler 1990, 29-30). Faux Pas' drag is not only parodying socially constructed formations that naturalize sex/gender/desire (vis-à-vis Fiona Apple's post-adolescent sexual "maturity"), but also the criminalization of these very formations. In other words, Faux Pas is not only laying bare the "ontological illusions" that posit continuities between sex, gender, and desire, but is also critiquing the state's regulation of these illusory systems and categories. As the "criminality" of the tattooed body helps to make visible,²⁸ the power of the state and its juridical enforcements converge heavily upon the body that is rendered both queer and mixed-race, a body that is at once the site that challenges heteronormative reproductive values and is also the literal embodiment of historically criminalized forms of heterosexual reproduction (in other words, the product of miscegenation).²⁹ Stated another way, what Faux Pas seems to be saying in her act is

²⁸ For a more detailed discussion regarding tattoos as markers of criminality, see work by Steward (1990), Caplan (2000), and Demello (2000).

²⁹ For a discussion on how antimiscegenation law represents the "power of legal language to construct, criminalize, and appropriate the human body itself" (39), see Saks (1988). See also Martinot (2003). In relation to specifically Asian Americans, see Takaki (1989) and Chan (1991).

that no matter how much you try to prohibit our actions or prevent us from existing, we are always already here among you. Furthermore, the flirtation with “criminality” that is embodied and performed in monstrous drag challenges onto-epistemological foundations of the moral and the legal, calling attention to the production of criminality as a necessary process in the production of bourgeois power.³⁰

In contrast to Butler’s (1993) analysis in *Bodies That Matter*, drag here is not solely about the hyperbolic allegorization of heterosexuality/heteronormativity (235), but takes on additional forms and meanings. In revisiting her thoughts on drag, Butler (2005) expands her analysis and writes:

The point to emphasize here is not that drag is subversive of gender norms, but that we live, more or less implicitly, with received notions of reality, implicit accounts of ontology, which determine what kinds of bodies and sexualities will be considered real and true, and which kind will not...This differential effect of ontological presuppositions on the embodied life of individuals has consequential effects. And what drag can point out is that (1) this set of ontological presuppositions is at work, and (2) that it is open to rearticulation. (214)

Recent examples of such rearticulations include work by Munoz (1999) in writing about Vaginal Cream Davis. He points out, “her drag mimesis is not concerned with the masquerade of womanliness, but instead with conjuring the nation’s most dangerous citizens. She is quite literally in ‘terrorist drag’” (108). Drag for Faux Pas, like Davis, becomes a useful tool for critiquing the nation-state, reinterpreting the performative disruptions of the “monstrous” or criminal constituencies of race, gender, and sexuality. By inhabiting an identity that exceeds various mechanisms of the state, Faux Pas

³⁰ Thanks to Judith Halberstam for pointing me towards this Foucauldian reading of Faux Pas’ performance.

materially and symbolically inscribes herself within competing and contradictory discourses regarding the legibility and illegibility of the body at “home” in the panoptical sphere of the U.S. nation-state, in an attempt to “rearticulate life outside these constraining legibilities.”³¹ Faux Pas does this by way of what Agamben (2000) calls “the very ambiguity of the fundamental notions regulating the inscription of the *native* (that is, of life) in the juridical order of the nation-state” (19). Hers is a strategic move to enact a reconsideration of what we take as given, an urge “to abandon decidedly, without reservation, the fundamental concepts through which we have so far represented the subjects of the politics...and build our political philosophy anew” (Agamben 2000, 16).

4.4 Making monstrosity work

“Who works and what works, for whom, and to what end?” In her essay “Terror Austerity Race Gender Excess Theater,” Ruth Wilson Gilmore (1993) asks this difficult question, forcing us to consider both the possibilities and limitations of any artistic practice, and in so doing highlighting the dialectical tensions that inhabit and embody every critical performance.³² She continues, “For the project at hand the question turns toward this particularity, What work do certain kinds of acting—of performance—do, especially when the venue straddles the chasm of a crisis of the crisis state?” (25). The question asks us to consider the blurred boundaries that (cease to) exist between dreaming and waking,

³¹ I owe this insight to Ruth Wilson Gilmore, in her post-panel discussion of a shortened version of this chapter at the Crossing Borders Ethnic Studies Conference, University of California, San Diego, March 5, 2007.

³² Gilmore lists these tensions as existing “between drama and realness, between repetition and invention, between spectator and actor, between invention and work, between Fordism and Americanism, between economy and culture” (25).

imagination and reality, fantasy and fulfillment, fact and fiction. As Robin Kelley (2002) asserts, “It is not enough to imagine what kind of world we would like; we have to do the work to make it happen” (187).

So what kind of work does “monstrous drag” do, for whom, and to what end? The body of Faux Pas, and by extension Josh himself, illustrates, quite literally, the illusory stabilities of state-sanctioned categories and naturalized causalities that are taken for granted as being easily visibly read at the level of the corporeal. As Peggy Phelan (1993) notes, “Identity cannot, then, reside in the name you can say or the body you can see... Identity emerges in the failure of the body to express being fully and the failure of the signifier to convey meaning exactly” (13). The potential for new identities also emerges within the failure of the overall structure of the field of signification, the state apparatus’ failure to fully interpellate the body’s multiplicities. Ideological states apparatuses, as Chandan Reddy (1998) reminds us, “produce contradictory interpellations, not only because they might conflict with an adjacent or previous interpellation, but because each apparatus is itself a material institution. The forms of strata, division, and ‘difference’ found within that material site and required for its maintenance and reproduction are often the ground for negating the fantasy of equivalence or identity lodged in any hailing” (358).

The ground for negating the fantasy of equivalence. If queers of color, as Reddy suggests, illuminate the failures of the state’s ability to hail the impossible ideal of the citizen-

subject, they do by way of excess. That is to say, “the conflicting, noncorrespondent, and overlapping constitutive interpellations of race, gender, and sexuality” (367) are always already inadequate delineations for compartmentalizing what William Haver (1996) calls the nontranscendent nonreducible materialities of our being. The “field of power” that Reddy locates within the contradictory relations between the fallacious veracity of the interpellating apparatus bent on producing a “social reality” and the enactment that parodies the existence of such a “reality” is the field of fantasy. Stated another way, by striking at the artificial divide between fantasy and reality and recognizing that what the state and civil society projects as reality is in actuality fantasy, helps to pave the course for thinking about how fantasy is, or can be, in fact, our reality. Negating the fantasy of equivalence, then, is not simply an affirmation of the reality of nonequivalence, but establishes the grounds for alternate forms of fantasy altogether. “Fantasy is what establishes the possible in excess of the real,” writes Judith Butler (2004). “Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise” (216-17).

“The new world of monsters is where humanity has to grasp its future,” writes Hardt and Negri (2004, 196). Josh and Faux Pas enact what can be considered a “becoming-futurity,”³³ a type of *posthuman*³⁴ *performativity*, which not only blurs the boundaries

³³ I owe this term to Ruth Wilson Gilmore from our personal discussions about this topic.

³⁴ I owe my understanding of “posthuman” to Halberstam and Livingston (1995), in which they write that the posthuman “participates in re-distributions of difference and identity...The posthuman does not reduce difference-from-others to difference-from-self, but rather emerges in the pattern of resonance between the two” (10).

between what is internal and external, real and unreal,³⁵ but whose conditions of possibility lie precisely at the spaces of (structured) failure within and around competing states apparatuses. The becoming-futurity of the monstrous drag queen enacts a strategically non-essentialist move from being objects of organized abjection and abandonment to multiplicitous *subjects who refuse*,³⁶ or in Reddy's terms, subjects who "produce cultural formations that fail to separate cultural productions from material circumstances and political representation, producing powerful confusions of culture, politics, and economic circumstances that engender contradictory subjectivities" (368). Indeed, such "productive failures" calls into question the notion of "subjectivity" itself—insofar as it is (over)determined by state power and its interpellating apparatuses—and asks us to divest, de-essentialize, and deterritorialize the conditions upon which we relate to our self, each other, and the world. Through these productive failures we find what doesn't work and try to imagine what can and will work. Imagination, as Kelley (2002) says, is "our most powerful weapon" (159). This is when fantasy and imagination can (and) do *work*. Quoting Gilmore (1993): "Our work is to rearticulate our own connections in new (and frightening) forward-looking moves in order to describe, promote, organize, bargain in the political arenas" (30).

³⁵ For a more sustained theoretical meditation on body modifications that are both inscriptive and exscriptive, see Lippit (2006). For a discussion of performatives that are both introversion and extroversion, see Sedgwick (2003).

³⁶ Gilmore writes: "But even stand-ins, in times of austerity, might unionize, might move from being objects of organized abandonment, redlined along with the buildings and neighborhood, to subjects who refuse—who refuse to bear the weight of late capitalism's stark utopia, the abstraction of abandonment, the violence of abstraction" (34).

Henri Lefebvre (1991) writes: “Any revolutionary ‘project’ today, whether utopian or realistic, must, if it is to avoid hopeless banality, make the reappropriation of the body, in association with the reappropriation of space, into a non-negotiable part of its agenda” (167). For Josh and Faux Pas, the monstrous body and the spaces it inhabits are sites of multiple de-territorializations and recombinations, ever-expanding processes of becoming, developing “new ways of thinking and being.” Josh shares a similar sentiment as expressed by Robin Kelley (2002) in his writings on the revolutionary potential of surrealism. Kelley notes that “any revolution must begin with thought, with how we imagine a New World, with how we reconstruct our social and individual relationships, with unleashing our desire and building a new future on the basis of love and creativity rather than rationality” (193). For Josh, revolution entails “people not limiting themselves, and accepting themselves and their bodies for who they want to be and what they want to do with their lives.” He goes on:

I’m more speaking to ways of overthrowing old ways of thinking, and in doing that, and affecting change with each one of us, starting with one person and then leading to the next and leading to the next...eventually it will start affecting bigger ways of change. If each one of us woke up loving ourselves and loving our bodies, and really cherishing our loved ones and our families and being in that mode every single day, we would not have war, we would not have these things that limit us and hurt us and hold us back from the world that *we possibly could be*. [my emphasis]

Josh and Faux Pas’ inhabitation of the monstrous and the multiple is the inhabitation of the Deleuzian line of flight, an *adventure of possibility* (Gilmore 2007, 241) into the fantastic realm of monstrous futurity. “I also believe it is not too late to act,” Gilmore writes, “to make work work, through rearticulation of the ‘complex skein of relatedness’: organic integrations of the earth, technology, desire” (1993, 34-35). The “rearticulation of

the complex skein of relatedness” is the rearticulation of the complex *skin* of relatedness, an imaginative reinscription of our bodies and our world for the purposes of a revolutionary vision, for living our lives far beyond simply survival.

Chapter 5: What Color is the Racial?

5.1 Beauty and color

At all times man knows how to apply an intrinsic standard to the object. Thus man creates also according to the laws of beauty. –Karl Marx

In a recent episode of the reality show *Tattoo Wars*, a sunglasses and t-shirt clad white male flashes a smile for the camera and proclaims, “Beautify the world, get colored!” It’s a striking statement for a number of reasons. One is that it raises questions such as: who is colored and who is not? Why are certain bodies considered colored while others not? In what ways are we colored? Of course, the intended meaning from this unidentified white male is that color is synonymous with tattoo. Underlying this seemingly innocuous and playful catch phrase “get colored” lies the assumption that people without tattoos are not colored. Yet aren’t all our bodies always already “colored” under the ideological logic of the US racial state? What this man seems to be indicating is that we have the ability, the choice, the free will, to modify the bodies that we are born with, that we don’t have to be limited by the supposed “naturalness” of unadorned skin. Of course, his statements and the implications that lie therein merely reflect dominant understandings of the skin. Under such a logic, skin color, as Angela P. Harris (2009) puts it, possesses a “seemingly natural, unmediated quality” (4). Yet as Marx (1976) reminds us, the so-called “natural” is a socio-historical concept, complex and contradictory, infused with labor and value—a perceptual aesthetic (over)determination of value. Likewise, creative labor is involved in both the production of the beautiful as well as the very idea of beauty itself. “Labour is,

first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature,” writes Marx. “He sets in motion the natural forces that belong to his own body...Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature” (283). Thus, a dual transformation takes place —“man and nature”—highlighting the relationality and mediated quality of both our bodies and our environment.

The changing nature of bodies has long been a topic of close scrutiny in feminist theory. In her influential writings on cyborgian bodies, Donna Haraway (1991) explains how our bodies are always already constructed, factualized and fictionalized, under various overlapping ideological economies of embodiment. So to what extent is color something that we can just “get”? In other words, is it really simply a matter of individual volition? Sitting on a couch, watching the digital transmission of this well-meaning white male on the tv screen in front of me inspired a knee-jerk reaction that “of course a white man would make such a statement!” Such a pronouncement can be easily interpreted as the oh-so-typical workings of white privilege and the authoritative voice it lends. But what if we were to give this man the benefit of the doubt? What if what he is saying is the result of a particular consciousness, an informed statement, regarding the way in which the body is not tethered to the concept/categories of race. In other words, in my immediate annoyance towards an apparent declaration of white privilege, I myself had reinscribed the very categories/concepts that I have set out to disrupt! (Oh how effective ideology is!)

An extensive body of literature exists in the humanities and social sciences that have attempted to divorce the concept of race from the body.³⁷ And yet, there's a certain indelibility, a stain on our skins that is difficult to remove, regardless of how much we try. Popular discourse still relies upon a reductive substitutability that shorthands skin color for race. As Harris notes, "Color is haunted by race both in the substitutability of color for race in the naturalization process, and also in what it communicates about the human" (5). The result of such a misguided equation is that both liberals and conservative tend to agree that to "overcome" racial discrimination is to cast a blind eye, to embrace a naïve chromophobia and aspire to "color blindness." But is it a problem of our eyes? Or of color? Or the relationship between them? Vijay Prashad (2001) explains, "the conservative theory of the color blind...smuggle[s] in biological ideas of race to denigrate the creativity of diverse humans" (xi). In other words, such a formulation operates under the assumption that race exists and that it exists as a material (biological) fact. So much for social construction!³⁸ At the same time, according to Prashad, this "denigrates the creativity of diverse humans." In other words, the reification of the racial suspends both the human "procreative" capacity of endless variation (as if reproduction proceeds in a uniform and predictable way!), as well as the creative capacities of who we

³⁷ Some of the most convincing critiques of the socially fabricated relationship between race and the body come from scholars working in what is now regarded as Science Studies. For example, see work by Stephen J. Gould, Gloria Marshall, S. L. Washburn, and Frank Livingstone. A number of these writings have been collected in an insightful volume by Harding (1993).

³⁸ In addition, this "color-blind" logic also rests on the assumption of the visual as being outside of social construction—that social construction is something we do to the so-called "truth" of the visual, thus the need for blindness.

are as living, thinking, feeling (sentient) beings. This creative capacity, as Marx notes in the epigraph, points us towards a quest for beauty.

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” Or so the saying goes. But according to this unidentified white male, beauty exists under the skin. Aesthetics is not just visual, it is corporeal. Thus, the ocularcentricity of vision may not be sufficient to understand the processes of aesthetics, tattoos, and race. “Beautify the world,” he says. But what is this process to “beautify”—an active verb that signals a process of change. And as beauty connotes aesthetics, aesthetics connotes epistemology, epistemology connotes ontology—our way of knowing and understanding the world, who we are, and our relation to it. As color is deposited under the skin, its visibility relies upon its ability to permeate the layers underneath which it sits, a self-permeation that creates the capacity of visual interpretation and beautification: tattoos, aesthetics, and racial form. These are the keywords of this chapter. And we take our cue from the blues writings of Clyde Woods (1998), when he writes, “Attempts to analyze the lyrics separately as literature ultimately fail because meaning and abstraction in the blues emerges from the simultaneous interaction between language, music, and movement” (35). Similarly, unlike other scholarship on tattoos, this dissertation has approached tattoos as a subject that must be studied as the simultaneous interaction between the body, aesthetic senses, and various forms of movement within and across spatial scales. This movement started with the skin (Chapter 1), traversed the trans-Pacific (Chapter 2), traveled across temporalities (Chapter 3), dragged out the body (Chapter 4) and now ends back here at the skin. We

can pause here, at the conclusion of this journey, to reflect upon the most intimate of scales—the scale of the body and the processes of creativity, beauty, and form that converge in color.

5.2 The racial viscosity of blood and ink

“I don’t think people who aren’t tattooed understand how involved the process can be,” Michael, one of my interviewees states. He explains his views on the tattoo process as we sit and chat over dinner at one of his favorite Thai restaurants in the Castro district of San Francisco. Michael has just endured a four-hour ink session, and he looks both tired and hungry, anxiously awaiting his entrée to arrive. Michael, a Filipino American tattoo enthusiast, has been working on a large Japanese dragon on his right calf for the past four months. We have known each other for over 10 years so there’s a level of familiarity that permeates the conversation. “It’s exhausting, yeah, but not only that, everything about you feels so *raw*,” (see Figure 5.1) he says in between mouthfuls of pineapple fried rice. When I ask him to elaborate on this feeling of rawness, he responds: “Well, not only does it require a lot of endurance to sit through hours of having a grip of needles penetrating you over and over again, but there’s this heightened sensitivity to everything around you. You kinda reach that point where it stops hurting and it just is. Like, you’ve left yourself open to this...and you can literally see all the little openings in your skin, oozing blood and ink and all the other stuff the artist smears all over you, vaseline and all that...you feel all raw and sticky and hyper-sensitive...but at the same time, you feel so...so alive. I

guess that's why I keep coming back, it's an addictive feeling!...but y'know, that could just be the adrenaline talking.”



Figure 5.1: An example of tattooed skin bloody and raw

Ink, blood, vaseline, bactine, latex, needles...the sight, smell, sound, and touch of the tattoo process—the simultaneous penetration of the multi-sensorial. Laura Marks (2002) discusses how these types of materials trigger corporeal “memory associations” that stay with us, auto reflexes that circulate within our collective “connective materiality” — intersubjective connective tissue that locates us by and through “its particularity, its strangeness, its precious and inimitable place in the world” (Marks, xii). Michael recalls such associations when it comes to the healing process. “I prefer getting drilled with the needle to the healing process. Getting all wrapped up in the bandage ... and then the next morning having to peel it off—how sticky the new tattoo is from all the dried blood, excess ink, oozing plasma, and vaseline. You have to be really careful not to fuck it up.” The fluids that make up the tattoo—ink, blood, vaseline, bactine, water—are sticky and viscous, and altogether necessary for the skin coloring process. (See Figure 5.2.) This

viscosity creates form. Arun Saldanha (2007) uses the concept of “viscosity” to explain racial form. According to Saldanha, “race is simultaneously discursive, genetic, neurochemical, technological, aesthetic, and more” (207). He continues,

It is thus defined not simply by boundaries between self and other but by the lines of flight of its components: for example, the capacity of phenotype to connect to music, or the capacity of music to connect to phenotype. What can and does frequently precipitate from all these connections is viscosity, bodies slowing down, sticking together, and collectively becoming impenetrable. ‘Slowing down’ means connections endure, not necessarily that bodies decelerate in Euclidean space ... The way out of viscosity, out of racism and the privilege white bodies enjoy in this world, is not to abolish race but to multiply it, to use its lines of flight toward a situation wherein skin color, genitals, AIDS, hunger, obesity, beauty, wealth, and speed connect in less predictable ways than they do now. (207)

Saldanha is concerned with assembling a “materialist theory of race” (9)—of bodies, spaces, movements, relations—in order to consider how appearance *matters*. For Saldanha, viscosity becomes a useful theoretical concept to understand the materiality of racialized bodies and their attractive/repulsive properties. Similarly, viscosity can be a way to think through the materiality and tactility of tattoo: viscous fluids like blood, ink, plasma, vaseline, and how they combine and reform in different ways—phenotypical, biomorphological, racial. They also play a part in the intersubjective relationships (intimacies) surrounding their usage. Being as becoming by way of the viscous. We are held together as well as kept apart by this viscosity, fluidities that pass or don't pass through the semi-permeable membrane known as skin. Skin should be understood not as a text or envelop or any other metaphor (that lends itself to inaccurate abstractions), but rather as its own material, its own metaphor. Skin is also the site of convergence of the “corporeal sensorium” (Castronovo 2007) surrounding the viscous: touch, smell, vision,

sound—the simultaneous interaction between skin, ink, needles, blood, energy, music, movement, stillness.



Figure 5.2: An example of a bandage the morning after a tattoo session

Saldanha’s theorization highlights how bodies are contradictory sites, created and recreated within what Donna Haraway (1991) calls an “apparatus of bodily production,” constructing material-semiotic actors whose boundaries, or lack thereof, materialize through social interaction. “Viscosity explains why...white bodies stick and exclude others. Viscosity is about how an aggregate of bodies holds together, how relatively fast of slow they are, and how they collectively shape the aggregate...Viscosity is also about how this holding together is related to the aggregate's capacities to affect, and be affected by, external bodies” (Saldanha 2007, 50). I depart from Saldanha’s use of the viscous in two significant ways. While Saldanha views this “stickiness” as the perpetuation of whiteness (i.e., racial privilege and exclusion), in my work, thinking through the stickiness of tattoos and race allows us to examine the ways that new social groupings come into being (not automatically tied to privilege and exclusion, but are certainly

susceptible to such outcomes). Secondly, despite Saldanha's insistence on the materiality of racial formation, he falls back on metaphors of the viscous, not an actual substance but a metaphoric stickiness between bodies. Unlike the metaphorical stickiness of Saldanha's subjects, tattoos actually do involve stickiness—ink, plasma, vaseline, bactine, blood, etc.—and the interactions between such sticky substances identifies the technologies that go into the re/creation of the body itself.

Despite these differences, I do agree with Saldanha when he writes, “What the concept of viscosity does is sense that the flows of people are at once open-ended and gradually thickened by recurring, allegedly conscious decision making. Both the thickening and the opening up are functions of the particularly dynamic interactional nature of human nature” (51). These dynamic interactions have the capacity to create different forms of social groupings, what Gengenbach (2003) calls “webs of affective ties” formed through the relations sustained through blood, ink, and the care of the body.

For example, Vikki and Alex, two Vietnamese American sisters living in San Francisco, bond over their shared love of tattoos and express the importance of having each other there during the tattoo process. “It’s nice to have someone there to distract you, y’know, the pain and stuff. A lot of times we go together,” explains Vikki. Alex elaborates, “I think we have a very distinct process. When I get tattooed, she [Vikki] drives.” They nod in agreement as we sit at Samovar café in the Hayes Valley District, trading tattoo stories. “I feel like it takes a lot out of you,” Vikki continues, “Afterwards I just want to sit back

and relax, cuz you're kind of spacey and out of it...and it's nice to have someone take care of you." Alex concurs, "See some people don't get that, but that's a really important thing." While tattooing in the "West" is often coded as a mark of independence, Vikki and Alex share with me the ways in which it is precisely the opposite that, and instead requires *interdependence*, a Foucauldian sense of caring that displays how the body is both enacted and acted upon. Foucault (1994) writes, "The care of the self is ethical in itself; but it implies complex relationships with others insofar as this ethos of freedom is also a way of caring for others" (287). The process of getting a tattoo requires different forms of relationships: a body on which the tattoo can materialize, as well as with an artist to apply the ink. Furthermore, other forms of intimacy can cohere around tattooing, such as the intimacy of caring: self-care as well as the care of another person. Rather than independence, then, creation requires interconnection.

Taken together, the tattoo experiences of Michael, Vikki, and Alex are characterized by issues of intimacy and vulnerability, challenging ways of thinking of the body as bounded and monadic. Skin is the site whereby the tattooer and the tattooed create what Laura Marks would call a "haptic relationship." She writes, "In a haptic relationship our self rushes up to the surface to interact with another surface... We cannot help but be changed in the process of interacting" (xvi). The body is modified through this process of haptic permeability. The marking of skin is also a marking of touch and movement, a process of visualization that exceeds the visual, or the *visuality* of tattoo: the excessive *visuality* of race.

All three chose tattoos that avoided the immediate correspondence with their ethnic background. Michael (Filipino), Vikki and Alex (Vietnamese) chose to adorn their skin with Japanese aesthetics. When I ask Michael about why he chose Japanese aesthetics rather than, say, Filipino, he explains, “Well, I do have Filipino tattoos. But I wanted to get a dragon because I was born in the year of the dragon. All my tattoos don't necessarily have to be Filipino. I am Filipino but I am also Asian American. I decided on the Japanese dragon because I am Asian American.” Likewise, both Vikki and Alex explain how they are drawn to Japanese tattoos regardless of their ethnic background as Vietnamese. For them, getting Japanese tattoos is not a sign of their being any less Vietnamese, but that their appearance takes on an additional identity of being Asian. Race comes into being simultaneously on the skin at the same time as the tattoo itself. The overlapping categories of ethnicity, race, ink, symbology/motif, gender, affect, and taste challenge the notion of a singular, unified, bounded subject, but instead allows the recognition of the body as a contested site of multiple possible embodiments, or as Dorinne Kondo (1990) has pointed out, “how selves in the plural are constructed variously in various situations, how these constructions can be complicated and enlivened by multiplicity and ambiguity, and how they shape, and are shaped by, relations of power” (43).

A common thread that runs through the experiences of Michael, Vikki, and Alex is that they all frequent the same tattoo artist, Yutaro Sakai, a San Francisco-based tattoo artist

who attracts a large Asian American clientele. Those who continue to get inked by him cite similar reasons: skill, authenticity, and that “he's just a really nice guy.” Ironically, Yutaro—a Japanese immigrant who himself doesn't identify as Asian American (he is not a US citizen and doesn't claim an American identity)—becomes a nodal point for the construction of the Asian American body in ink. Indeed, Yutaro inhabits what Lisa Lowe (1996) calls the “unfixed liminality of the Asian immigrant” and his role in the production of the Asian American identity of his clients can be understood within the “partly inherited, partly modified, as well as partly invented” construction of Asian American culture to which Lowe refers (65). However, just as the category “Asian American” is typically coded as East Asian in the United States, the go-to aesthetics for Asian American ink enthusiasts are similarly East Asian, or Japanese, to be precise. My interviewees state a number of reasons: the beauty, the intricacies (highly developed design motifs), and as Alex says, “there's a timeless quality to Japanese aesthetics.” Production of the tattooed body entails the (re)production of race, coming into being by and through the body. So while race is a construct that is not located on the body, these examples serve as a way to *relocate* race on the body. This demand can be seen as less regressive than as a creative capacity of becoming, a desire for phenotypical imagination, striving towards what James Scott (1990) calls “the imaginative capacity of subordinate groups to reverse or negate dominant ideologies” (91). Again, to quote Saldanha:

Understanding how phenotype matters in social formations and interactions can thus be the first step toward a situation in which phenotype can be appreciated outside of the entrenched racist configurations now in place. An *ontological* approach to racial formations asks how they merge as physical aggregates, how what Guattari would call the molarity of race comes about, rather than merely how race is known or represented. (208)

The phenotypical construction of both race and tattoo elicits an interrogation of how the creation of the visual entails grappling with tactility and the embodied aesthetics of the bio-political subject in ways that challenge, re-create, or launch a “counter-creative” movement that lays bare the insidious “multifarious realities” (Saldanha 2007) of race.

Yet Saldanha also cautions, “Becoming less sticky isn't always liberating” (52). The formation of the subject proceeds by way of the dialectical forces of creation and subjection, with no guaranteed results. But the point is that viscosity is a property that possesses varying degrees of change and flow; viscosity reconfigures and reshapes. So do relationships formed in its wake. Artists and enthusiasts promiscuously come together and come apart. Tattoo artist families and loyalties converge and diverge. (In fact, a number of the relationships that I have studied during my research have since dissolved. For example, as of this writing, the relationship that I detailed in Chapter Two between Horitaka and Horiyoshi III has since ended, whereby Horitaka is no longer part of the Horiyoshi family.) Relationships form, break, reform in different ways. Similarly, Omi and Winant (1994) remind us that racial categories are constantly in the process of being created, recreated, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed. So, too, then, must our perceptions, or aesthetic understandings, of the racial be malleable, versatile, modifiable enough to keep up with these transformations.

5.3 The hurt and the hum

Skin houses the network of nerve endings that connects us to pain and pleasure, and it's the casing that protects us from bacteria and disease. Our sense of touch resides in its top layer, the epidermis, and a second layer, the dermis, holds the ink and ash that tattooed people have used to decorate themselves for more than 5,000 years. Skin is expressive: it bears our unique pore patterns and fingerprints, and registers temperature (through chills, hot flashes, and goose bumps) and emotion (through blushing and blanching). —Margot Mifflin

In Chapter one, I opened the dissertation contemplating the second most asked question addressed to a tattooed person: “What does it mean?” Here I return to that popular discourse to address the number one most asked question: “Does it hurt?” The question itself displays an immediate recognition that a tattoo involves a relationship not simply between the enthusiast and the artist, but a relationship to one's own body as well. (What is the “it” in this equation? The body? The tattoo? The process? All of the above?) The assumption or expectation is that the acquisition of the tattoo involves pain. Or, at the very least, a tactility, between needle and flesh, that culminates in the coloring of skin vis-a-vis a process which can be characterized as the “wondrous reciprocity of passivity and activity” (Taussig 2009, 48). The interviewees in my research all agree, getting tattooed involves this reciprocity of activity and passivity—that tattooing requires an extreme focus, not to move (so as not to disturb the artist) and to endure the incessant rupture of skin. So when asked the inevitable question, “Does it hurt?,” many answer: “Hell yeah, of course it hurts!” To endure the hurt is a rite of passage, a way of proving that you've earned your tattoo.³⁹

³⁹ Endurance is a large part of the tattooing process: time, movement (lack thereof), control (reflexes, urges to squirm or scratch, etc), “pain,” and monetary compensation. Even as a

Others take a more meta approach and counter the question with another question: What is pain? Fakir Musafar, in an interview on the TV series *Eye of the Beholder*, maintains that pain is something that we don't want, so can we really call something 'painful' if it's something we *do* want. According to his logic, if we choose the modification, and we embrace the process it entails, including what some would call pain, is that really pain? In Chapter Four, Joshua David Reno refers to the pain as a "bleeding out of negativity." His is a unique yet not exceptional story. As many scholars of tattooing in the "Western" world have pointed out, many people use tattoos to reconfigure the definition of pain and reappropriate the body as an expression of creativity rather than condemnation. The vehicle for this creative capacity is the skin. For example, Mifflin (1997) describes her encounters with tattoo enthusiast Laura Lee: "Until her death in the early '90s, Laura Lee was the only well-known black woman collector to travel the convention circuit...Lee wore an ever-increasing collection of skulls; she said she ultimately wanted to have a skull for every victim of the black holocaust, in which untold numbers of Africans died on slave journeys from Africa to America" (132). Mifflin (1997), Pitts (2003), and Langellier (2001) write about women, tattoos, and the aftermath of breast cancer. For one particular breast cancer survivor, "tattoos allowed her to rebuild her physical and sexual self-image on her own terms—not those of the American Cancer Society, which, she says, all but demands that post-mastectomy patients wear prostheses in the name of

researcher, I, too, must endure long hours of sitting and watching the process take place. Interviewing subjects during the process often proves difficult during a session not only due to the level of discomfort that the tattooed person feels during the process, but also because the loud sound of the electric tattoo machine gets in the way of hearing/recording.

looking 'normal.' The tattoo also gave her the satisfaction of attacking the site of her illness and spitting in the face of death" (Mifflin 1997, 154). Michael Atkinson (2003) notes how tattoos have been used by gay men to express a previously repressed identity: "A vital part of the tattooing process for these enthusiasts is the ritual cleansing of a previously oppressed body, mind, and soul" (196).

These examples challenge normative assumptions regarding the question of pain and its relationship to physical and psychic violence. Another way of thinking about this is, what hurts more: the pain that results from the penetration of skin, or the pain that results from the violence of racism, sexism, homophobia? I illustrate this point by way of a brief anecdote of the autoethnographic variety. I have a pretty friendly relationship with my friend's eight year old son, let's call him Kevin. Kevin is intrigued by all my tattoos. He likes to look at them, talk about them, and often asks me excited questions about how, when, and why I got them and when I will get more. He certainly possesses the makings of a tattoo enthusiast in training! But one day, as we (my friend, Kevin, and I) are all having lunch at a restaurant in West Los Angeles, my friend asks me about my dating life. I tell her about a guy that I went out with on a couple dates, but speak in a level of generality mindful that my audience includes an eight-year old. But the more I talk about my dates, I begin to see a dark frown creeping across Kevin's face. When he realizes that the 'he' pronoun that peppers my speech is a clear indication of my sexual orientation, he sulks away from the table and reseats himself at a table across the room. At first I'm confused, but then I realize that he is reacting to the realization that I'm gay. When my

friend goes over to him and asks Kevin what is wrong, he says that he no longer wants to be my friend. I was shocked, hurt, confused. It had been a long time since I last felt the sting of such overt homophobia from someone in my inner circle of friends. But the question that such an episode leaves me with is this: What is more painful—a tattoo or homophobia? Maybe these two things are incomparable, but judging by the amount of people who get tattooed based on their experiences with psychic and emotional pain, the connections are very real. After all, these false dichotomies (body/mind) are both intimately tied to what bodies do and who they do it with; physical, phenotypical, psychological, or what Marcel Mauss (1973) refers to as the “physio-psycho-sociological assemblages” (85), that are never neat, always complex, often contradictory.

Indeed, many of the subjects in my project attempt to use tattoos as a form of re-articulation (in the Stuart Hall sense of the word “articulation”: to both express and connect). One of these re-articulations is the strategy of re-racialization, embodying race when we know that race has no biological basis in the body. Such aims force us to attempt to “work through the contradictions” of how race both is and is not embodied. Tribal tattooing among the Filipinos is a good example of this—“flipping of the scripts” of primitivity and the savage/backward aesthetic, while at the same time reifying those same categories and cultures. The “use of pleasure” (Foucault 1985) is fraught with questions of the biopolitical, which must take seriously the role that aesthetics plays in how we construct our bodies in relation to both oneself, each other, and the society we live in. This “beautification” process—and I use that term loosely, to refer not just to the

coloring of skin but also to the “beauty” of overcoming adversity and hostility⁴⁰)—is one that calls into question normative frameworks that act on the body, as discussed throughout this dissertation (ideological formations, structures of feeling). Furthermore, at the base level of zero-degree aisthesis (Haver 1996), it reveals the “body of this tattoo”—marked by historicity and sociality, nothing short of its always already natural unnaturalness. In other words, the normativity of the “natural” demands an interrogation of the relationships that constitute the “natural” in and of itself—one of which is the question of racial form (particularly in the form of bodies/skin). I wonder if tattoos hurt more for the person looking at them than the person who “wears” it. By this I mean it forces an aesthetic recognition and potential reappraisal that moves somewhere beyond the spectator’s normative framework. The observer perceives the experience of tattoos through ideas of pain and epidermal sensation, which is not necessarily corroborative of the “wearer’s” experience of getting the tattoo, nor necessarily where ‘pain’ is located in relation to the tattoo. To provide an example: one person’s hurt is another person’s hum.

On her facebook page, my friend updates her status to say, “missing the humm [sic] of the tattoo machine.” If the casual onlooker portrays the process of tattoo as pain, my friend portrays it as song. Judging by the large number of “like” comments appended to her post, she is not alone. In Chapter Two, I discussed how the sound of the needle creates audio inscriptions on the body. Indeed, the tactile sonority to which my friend’s facebook message alludes is a type of music that requires flesh to carry its tune--

⁴⁰ Gengenbach (2003) explains in regards to tattoo beautification techniques among women in Southern Mozambique: “Beauty is, of course, historically specific, constituted by ideals shared among people with a sense of common social location and cultural identity” (116-7).

corporeal music that doesn't privilege a single sensual perception but acknowledges the interlocking vibrations that penetrate the ear, sight, and skin. The hum of the tattoo reverberates through the aesthetics of the flesh.

The “hum” of the needle is a familiar melody to all those who undergo tattoo. In a study of Japanese tattooing, one recipient of a Horiyoshi backpiece commented, “My body loudly echoed the staccatoed rhythm of the tattoo needle” (Saito 2005). Indeed, the needle’s polyvocality (tattoos are administered using multiple needles held together in a bundle) creates unmistakable vibrations on the surface of the skin, and this conjoining of needle and flesh creates a sonority, a sonic materiality which Fred Moten (2003) says transcends “the ineluctably reductive systematicity of the opposition of phenomenon and object” (148). By refusing such a reductive systematicity, the tattoo hum and the tattoo hurt complicates our understanding of the visual as being both auditory and tactile, as well as both spatial and temporal. Entangled. These entanglements create rhythm, create meaning. Cedric Robinson (1983) reminds us, “Increments of time contoured to abstract measure rarely match the rhythms of human action.” The tattoo enthusiasts in my study are convinced that tattooing allows for the creation of new rhythms, heightened senses and senses of the self, towards a complex subjectivity rather than a singular reducibility.

5.4 Towards a “strong” visuality

Disarticulation and rearticulation of the wisdom of the body with that of its echo in our conscious awareness seems especially prone to a color-dependent process that involves playing off the natural with the artificial... – Michael Taussig

Is “race” a color? Is it visible? Omi and Winant (1994) define race as a “concept which signified and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of bodies.” They continue, “Although the concept of race invokes biologically based human characteristics (so-called ‘phenotypes’), selection of these particular human features for the purposes of racial signification is always and necessarily a social and historical process.” Such categorization, according to Omi and Winant, are “at best imprecise, at worst completely arbitrary” (55). Despite these fallacies, uncertainties, and contradictions, Omi and Winant are careful not to merely dismiss the fundamental role of race in structuring and representing the social world. Evelyn Nakano Glenn (2009) writes that “at the symbolic level, the meanings of skin color and race are inextricably linked, even when explicit reference to race is absent.” She continues, “Skin color, as well as other phenotypic characteristics...matter because they signify race” (6-7). But how has this “matter” clouded the way in which we approach our understanding of the visual? Or to state another way, how has our visual capacities of recognition and understanding been overcoded by ideologies of the racial—that we know what we know because we can *see* what we (think we) know?

David Theo Goldberg (1993) asserts, “Observing racial differences between persons can only be successful if significant racial criteria have been presupposed, and so observation cannot be the grounds of the differentiation. And it is altogether incredible that the supposed significance of the differences lies simply in the observable ‘givens’ of nature” (86). Yet, despite such warnings, these “incredible” strategies of observation persist.

Race, evidently, is held firmly in sway to the power of the visual. Under such a spurious logic, color acts as the defacto shorthand for the racial: white, black, yellow, red, brown.⁴¹ But as the previous sections have tried to make clear, color is not simply reducible to visual perception. Michael Taussig (2009) explains the tactility of color, “the way the color dissolves the visual modality so as to become more creaturely and close,” so close as to absorb the onlooker (19). Color dissolves visual modality, quite literally in the case of tattoo, as color is achieved through the tactile. One way of thinking about this is that color dissolves the distinction between the visual and other sense perceptions. The construction of a colored body (which includes, but is not limited to, a racialized body) involves the dissolution, or at least the challenge to, visual modes of perception. This is not to reify the body itself, for as the process of tattoo makes plain, the body possesses a phenotypical malleability of pigmentation. How we experience coloration involves the aesthetic faculties which Castronovo refers to as the “corporeal sensorium”—an insistent aesthetic materiality foundational to ontology and epistemology.

Recent scholarship on the senses have explored the role of synesthesia in how interlocking cognitive faculties make “sense” of the world. David Howe (2005) explains: “Synesthesia involves short-circuiting the conventional five sense model and experience of perception. It establishes cross-linkages between the modalities at a subconscious

⁴¹ This is not to dismiss the importance that metaphors of color have played in the realm of political struggles toward liberatory goals. As scholars in Ethnic Studies point out, color is not simply a reductive signifier for racialized bodies but refers to social-systematic stratification and exploitation, as well as the strategies of intervention and oppositional mobilization, that such metaphors both enable and foreclose. For example, see work by Espiritu (1992), Pulido (2006).

level, and so opens up a whole new terrain—the terrain of the inter-sensory” (292). While I agree that the short-circuiting of the conventional five sense model and experience of perception is necessary, my research on tattooing has shown how the cross-linking of the conventional “senses” occur at the subdermal rather than the subconscious.⁴² Furthermore, the examples from this chapter provide evidence about how sensual knowledge is not simply a relation of synaesthesia—which posits a discrete separation between the senses that need to be circuited together—but rather that the sensual is mutually constitutive of one another: the visual is the tactile is the sonic is the olfactory. In this way, rather than perpetuating categorical discreteness, I propose, for my purposes, a more useful theoretical model of “aesthetic entanglements.”

Nicholas Thomas (1991) examines what he calls “entangled objects,” how material objects circulate within various encounters and relations of exchange. The previous chapters examined how bodies themselves are “entangled objects,” or perhaps more accurately “entangled subjects” that circulate geographically at different scalar levels (local, regional, national, global, etc.) and different ideological economies within the Pacific World.⁴³ These entangled subjects navigate through connections vis-a-vis labor, aesthetics, technology, and citizenship to highlight the role that tattoos play in our

⁴² One may also go so far as say that the links between the materiality of the senses and the psychological are experienced through what Didier Anzieu (1989) calls the “skin ego.”

⁴³ Pacific World scholarship, as it has come to be recently called, explores how the United States is part of a larger global Pacific region, of which the US is but one actor, located along the eastern edge of Pacific. In situating this region in such a way, the term avoids the reinscription of such problematic terms as “Pacific Rim” and “Pacific Basin,” which inaccurately posits a false binary between and within the overlapping and mutually constitutive geographies of the Pacific region.

understanding of racial formation on the eastern edge of the Pacific World, within the context of what Arif Dirlik (1992) succinctly describes as, “a competing set of ideational constructs that project upon a certain location on the globe the imperatives of interest, power, or vision of these historically produced relationships” (56). Yet, bodies do not only circulate geographically. They are, at the same time, composed of internal circulations, circulatory systems of blood, lymph, nerves.⁴⁴ These aesthetic entanglements constitute Costronovo's “corporeal sensorium.” Corporeal aesthetic entanglements that are at times abstract, amorphous, improvisational, unpredictable.

What I have attempted to illustrate in this chapter about the process of tattooing is how tattoos serve as a model for understanding these aesthetic entanglements (touch, sound, smell, vision) and the construction of what Marx (1972) called a “sensuous knowledge of our times,” whereby the senses can be liberated (or recalibrated) from the oppressive imperatives of dominant racial ideologies. As this chapter has drawn inspiration from Michael Taussig's *What Color is the Sacred?*, I again return to his insights for guidance, as he highlights “forms of sensateness, of bodily knowing, that exist below the radar of consciousness and are all the more powerful for so being” (15). Yet here I depart from Taussig in the sense that the power of tattoo is precisely its sensateness *at the surface* rather than the depth, and its very ability to burrow beneath the skin, into our consciousness, to challenge prevailing “wisdom” regarding how we understand the body

⁴⁴ A recent anthology of creative work in the tattoo art field, entitled *Blood Work*, is instructive in this regard. By coupling the terms *blood* and *work*, the title itself recognizes the inter- and intra- corporeal circulations and processes of labor that create the tattoo.

and its myriad relations of color and pigmentation. How do tattoos allow us to question form, value, perception, interpretation?

I often return to a particular passage in Taussig's work that seems to burst with subversive potential. In an anecdote about the psychedelic poster art of 1960s Haight Ashbury district of San Francisco, he remarks:

Color has been snatched back from commerce in one of the few genuinely countercultural movements of the twentieth century. What is more, this is done not by replacing forms with streams of color, but by giving you a sense of the metamorphosis whereby—thanks to color—*form undoes itself*. (23, italics in original)

Applying such insights to the scale of the body, how do colors of the body enable an undoing of form? In other words, do the possibilities of color hold enough subversive potential to unravel hegemonic notions of race and its dialectical double, racism, as an “undoable” social form? Perhaps, at the very least, it can allow for a re-evaluation, maybe even a re-imagining of form and its potential for re-invention or re-formation.

This “undoing” is intimately tied to sensual knowledge, to how the body intakes and interprets—renders legible and valuable—forms and its social meanings. The visibility of certain types and certain forms of color, when applied to the body, creates hierarchies of form. The dominant discourse around race in the United States is predicated on a visual “common sense,” that race is easily “read” off the body. In other words, the simple, overly deterministic equation that race = skin color, whereby the equal sign means vision, and the so-called cure for racism is “color blindness” (rather than, say, problematizing the

very equation in the first place). Indeed, blindness seems to be a particular handy tool of American hegemony in its pursuit of so-called social and political equality. Let us not forget the iconic symbol of the blind-folded lady justice (of Enlightenment era Greco-Roman import) holding the scales of justice, indicating that within the legal system “justice is blind.” But poet Langston Hughes does not mince words when he writes:

That Justice is a blind goddess / Is a thing to which we black are wise / Her bandage hides two festering sores / That once perhaps were eyes.

The tactic of an-aesthesia, in a culture that David Howes (2005) calls “hyperaesthesia” may, in the end, be a regressive rather than progressive approach. Instead of striving for blindness, the opposite should be case: a heightened visibility, a critical visuality—or what I hasten to call, “strong visuality.”

Philosopher of science Sandra Harding soundly criticizes Enlightenment theories of neutrality and objectivity and instead advocates for what she terms “strong objectivity,” an epistemological intervention that recognizes the socio-historical nature of knowledge and its production within arenas of power and dominance. In her critique of positivist science, Harding (1991) writes,

Value-free objectivity requires also a faulty theory of the ideal agent—the subject—of science, knowledge, and history. It requires a notion of the self as a fortress that must be defended against the polluting influences from its social surroundings. The self whose mind would perfectly reflect the world must create and constantly police the borders of a gulf, a no-man's-land, between himself as the subject and the object of his research, knowledge, or action. (158)

Taking my cue from Harding's intellectual acumen regarding the role of a “strong” reflexivity in the field of knowledge production, “strong visuality” pushes for a

transformed logic of the senses that breaks from the assumptions regarding the autonomy of vision (both as an objective generator of perception as well as a stand-alone cognitive faculty). “A strong notion of objectivity,” argues Harding, “requires a commitment to acknowledge the historical character of every belief or set of beliefs” (156). Likewise, we need a “strong” notion of visuality that acknowledges the entanglements of the senses and the historical character of sensual perception. The cognition of the visual is not value-free and ahistorical, but moves within all the complex and contradictory relations of social life. Vision has a history, one that has involved power, subordination, exclusion, and reproduction. As Lindon Barrett (1999) notes, African Americans have been “barred from the privileged affirmation afforded by vision, the primary means of conceptualizing systems that define the world and one’s place in it” (217).

Visuality, like objectivity, “contains progressive as well as regressive tendencies. In each case, it is important to develop the progressive and to block the regressive ones” (Harding 1991, 161). Strong visuality not only recognizes that vision is always already mediated by and through particular culturally-specific ideological systems (hence warping the field of vision in the first place) but wrests free the visual from its ocularcentrism. In doing so, strong visuality requires a commitment to acknowledge that the visual is always already not simply the visual, but a non-reducible materiality/corporeality of aesthetic entanglements. The multisensorial entanglements of tattoo question the normative and the natural, an undoing of form and the entryway to a “recalibration of the senses” (Moten 2003). The “strong reflexivity” involved in such aesthetic reappraisals should be aware of

the ways that mutually constitutive stimulations function within a corporeal system of cognition as well as ideological infrastructures masquerading as social norms. Aesthetics, thus, plays a pivotal role in how we can disrupt the rhythms of subjection, the circulation of hegemonic logics that naturalize systems of oppression, and the interrogation of truth through the strong reflexivity of the senses—imaginative and interdependent, entangled and polysensual.

5.5 Forms of wounding

Man not only effects a change of form in the materials of nature; he also realizes his own purpose in those materials. —Karl Marx

It's easy to forget that tattooing has only become a socially acceptable form of modification within the past 50 years. At least here in the United States, tattooing has historically been relegated to a psychiatric disorder usually lumped in with other forms of self-mutilation (Favazza and Favazza 1987). Indeed, as scholars have often noted, a generation gap exists between today's tattoo enthusiasts and their disapproving parents (Atkinson 2003; Sanders 1989). A number of the enthusiasts I have interviewed likewise note the strained acceptance that have greeted their tattoos from their parents and other family members. For example, Alex described how her mother once called her tattoo the "open wound." Alex explained how she went to visit her mother after a tattoo session. Her mother became alarmed by the large bandage affixed to Alex's arm, with the plasma seeping through the covering. "It was scary for her," Alex remembers. "She didn't

understand the healing process and she saw it as a gaping hole.” As mentioned previously regarding the affective bonds of care and concern, Alex’s mother offered to help her clean and wash the tattoo, as she wanted to make sure that it healed properly and avoided the possibility of infection.

This idea of the open wound is an evocative concept that, in closing, I would like to explore further. The term “wound” has been used metaphorically by a number of scholars in the field of identitarian/oppositional studies.⁴⁵ One striking usage has been in the work of Wendy Brown.

In a chapter entitled “Wounded Attachments,” Wendy Brown (1995) wrestles with a central problematic that underlies what has been termed “identity politics”: “what kind of political recognition can identity-based claims seek—what kind can they be counted on to want—that will not resubordinate a subject itself historically subjugated through identity, through categories such as race or gender that emerged and circulated as terms of power to enact subordination?” (55) Brown skillfully disentangles the ways in which the production of political identities as (historically state-sanctioned) political categories reinscribe a dialectic of inclusion/exclusion within the framework of liberal humanism, dependent upon a specifically white, middle-class, masculinist ideal (65). This willful “resubjugation” has the effect of naturalizing capitalism and may necessitate a limited identification through class, specifically abjuring a critique of class power and class

⁴⁵ For example, see Matsuda, et al.’s *Words that Wound*, Wendy Brown’s *States of Injury*, Sniderman and Piazza’s *The Scar of Race*.

norms precisely insofar as these identities are established vis-à-vis a bourgeois norm of social acceptance, legal protection, and relative material comfort (60).

Brown invokes the Nietzschean concept of *ressentiment* in order to critique what she feels is identity politics' attachment to its "woundedness" or victimization—*ressentiment* at once signifying the affect of rage and righteousness, interlocutor of said hurt, and the site of revenge to displace the hurt (68). For Brown, "identity structured by *ressentiment*...becomes invested in its own subjection" wherein such politics reverses rather than subverts the "blaming structure" (70). Brown calls for a new structure of desire, one that is historically informed yet not closed or bounded by what she feels is the sedimentation and overdetermination of such presuppositional identity categories. This new structure of desire would entail a desire of futurity that moves away from the pathos of *ressentiment* (74-75).

Brown warns us against the reification of the very categories that have been used as tools of oppression, so that instead of race serving as a means to an end, it becomes an end in itself. But as Alex's mother suggested regarding the "open wound" of tattoo, the care of the self is mandatory, as such a technique of the body ultimately serves the goal of healing. In light of Brown's insightful warning, perhaps we should understand our wounds in direct (yet not necessarily causal) relationship to the process of healing. This is not to say that we should think of healing in some type of Deepak Chopra new age mystical way of "healing." But rather, if taking the metaphor of the "wound" is fruitful in

thinking about how identities have been created, perhaps the inevitable process of “healing” likewise presents a useful metaphor for what is to be done.

Central to such a conceptualization is thinking specifically through the skin. Metaphors of the body and bodily functions circulate within the humanities (blindness, wounding, scarring, inscribing) which run the risk of theorizing the body into abstraction. By bringing it back to the literal level, we can understand skin on its own terms—not as an envelop or a canvas or an inscribed surface or a boundary. It is all of those things; it’s what makes skin skin. And because skin is the external membrane that keeps our innards inside, we subject it to a lot of use and abuse on a daily basis. It gets scratched, scraped, stretched, cut, roughed up. It bleeds and bruises, breathes and oozes. But it also heals.

If we are attached to our wounds, as Brown suggests, is it not also possible that we can be re-attached by our healing? The body regenerates, in ways that are often unforeseen and unpredictable. The healing process produces changes, and with it, different possibilities. In other words, the “healing” of the skin allows the possibility of the body coming into being differently. As Alex’s mother recognized, the wound has the capacity to heal into something beautiful; that is tattoo. Here we can return to that white male who opened this chapter: “Beautify the world, get colored.” Healing does produce beauty. And this beauty can be something that doesn’t necessarily conform to the normative. After an injury, the body persists and endures and heals itself in some way. (And yes, it needs help, as my interview subjects have noted.) And healing doesn’t always proceed in ways that are the

most desirable or the most beneficial. There are no guarantees. (Even in tattooing, you run the risk of not healing “properly”: infection, scabbing, pre-mature stretching, lack of ink absorption that require additional touch-ups, etc. See Figure 3.3 of healing skin.) The point is that different possibilities exist. And as Raymond Williams (1989) insists, we must embrace these “practices of possibility.” In so doing, we can transform Brown’s pathos into excitement: the adrenaline of creation.



Figure 5.3: An example of tattooed skin peeling during healing process

But let me make myself clear so as to avoid any accusations of naive idealism or unwarranted optimism. I am not saying, tattoo yourself and change the world. If only it were that easy!! Such a formulation simply operates within—and yes, reinscribes—a power-evasive hegemonic individualism that does little, if anything, to change the very real and very persistent structures of oppression that exist in society. But those structures themselves are not immovable and unchangeable. They are creative too. (Just ask Wendy Brown!) What I am attempting to articulate is a bit of a reversal. Whereas theorists have used the body to metaphorize social processes, I am taking the bodily processes to

metaphorize society. Or more specifically, thinking through the materiality of the body (e.g., healing) to understand the creative capacity that exists within different scales of engagement. For as Terence Turner (1993) points out, “categories will be combined in culturally idiosyncratic ways to constitute the symbolic medium of bodily adornment, resulting in synthetic patterns that reveal much about the basic notions of value, social action, and personhood or selfhood of the culture in question” (36). How do we reconfigure these notions of value, social action, personhood/selfhood in different institutional arrangements so as to be in the service of social justice rather than social subjugation? How do we subvert the entrenched normativities of regressive forms of social reproduction? As Foucault (1988) insightfully maintained, “I don’t feel that it is necessary to know exactly what I am. The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning.”

Perhaps such a commitment for change raises more questions than it does answers. Perhaps such is the work of cultural critique. But what the study of tattoo enables is a consideration of the role that possibility and creativity play in structuring the political, as much as it is formed by and through those very same constraints. Examining tattoos as pigments of imagination asks us to consider how to embody the world differently. The “counter-creativity” (Taussig 2009) of the corporeal directs us towards “an ingrained and indestructible yet also changing embodiment of the possibilities of common life” (Williams 1989, 322). “Thanks to color—*form undoes itself*” (Taussig 2009, 23). Within the very capacities of the form itself, lies the kernel of its unraveling. Can color undo

racial form? To return to Harris, “Skin color...carries fantasies about personal identity and family unity as well as the confirmation, or disruption, of racial order” (5). Can color catalyze the disruption of order and the undoing of form?

Skin can be defiant.⁴⁶ Defiant to the natural, to the normative, to reification, to the undialectical. Prashad (2001) writes, “defiant skins come under the sign of the polycultural...a ferocious engagement with the political world of culture, a painful embrace of the skin and all its contradictions” (xi-xii). Pain is part of the process of regeneration, as is the discomfort of healing. Engaging and embracing the contradictory possibilities are what imbues it with its power. Nicholas Thomas (2005) writes, “To look at tattooing now—to look at tatau/tattooing now—is like looking through a kaleidoscopic device. When you turn the tube, every element of the world changes, to fall into place—or not—in a new way” (226). The dialectics of color and form, how we look at ourselves and each other, how we envision the future, can only be accomplished through a “strong” kaleidoscopic visuality that recognizes the possibility that the world can, indeed, be quite beautiful.

⁴⁶ Skin as a site of defiance against colonial subjugation has been well documented in regions of the Pacific and Africa. See work by Ellis (2008), Thomas (2005), and Te Awekotuku (2008).

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