

Conceal, Reveal: Tattoos and the Dressed Body

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Abstract

Tattooing, though a permanent modification of the body is subject to fashion trends in the same way as less permanent methods of self-expression such as fashionable clothing. Yet both are used in combination as means of forming personal identity. When we dress our bodies we are choosing a version of ourselves to present. We may choose to present ourselves in alternative ways with regards to the different situations we may find ourselves in throughout that day. For work, socialising, sport, we may wear different garments due to practicalities of use. There will however be a choice and some control over our outwards appearance. This study intends to evaluate how tattooed women and men choose to display their personal identities through dress and appearance. The early stages of this research involves a series of in-depth interviews and wardrobe analyses with tattooed individuals to discuss self identity, aspects of the self, the public / private body, continuing identities and identity constraints with regards to clothing and appearance. Though tattoos are permanent their meaning can be transient, changing and evolving with personal identity. Along with garments in the wardrobe tattoos can have periods of favour where they are chosen to be on display, in contrast they can also be seen as something of regret and chosen to be concealed. Over long periods of time and even on a daily basis, individuals have an evolving relationship with their tattooed bodies and the clothing they use to reveal and conceal it. In this short paper I will focus on the theme of protection in regards to the heavily tattooed female body.

Keywords: Tattoos, Women, Fashion, Body, Gaze, Feminism

Introduction

As a somewhat heavily tattooed woman I never imagined the impact becoming tattooed would have on my life at the start of my tattoo journey. I certainly didn't envision my research topic being led by tattoos, nor my first thought each morning as I dressed being led by the perception of my tattoos from others. Having now lived more years of my life with tattoos than without, the difference in having a tattoo (one or two small tattoos) and being tattooed (large scale tattoos covering a full limb or area) became apparent in levels of what the general public finds acceptable for a woman. General conversations with friends who had similar experiences to my own led me to formally research the topic both academically and creatively. Initially this research set out to look at the relationship both tattooed men and women have with their clothes. Through a series of interviews however gender differences became apparent and the research presented here focuses on tattooed women. Interviews were carried out face to face, via email and through social media and are currently on going. The numbers allocated to each interviewee here are for clarity and continuity in this paper.

Clothes as Concealment

Many of the female interviewees admitted to being touched on their tattoos without permission and receiving verbal harassment.

'I am at the bar, its so busy and crowded, my group of friends are all sitting down saving our table. I am surrounded by a group of men having to pretend I can't hear their lurid conversations. I am wearing a strapless dress, the very top of the tattoo on my back is visible, its only the outline at this stage. Suddenly I feel a hand try to pull down the back of my dress, I scream, turn around and one of the men is yelling at me to calm down, he only wanted to see how far my tattoo went – he's nudging his mates, go on love show the lads. Fortunately another man, I don't know if he is with them or not, drags him off and tells him to stop acting like an idiot. I go and sit in the toilets and have a bit of a cry, touch up my make up, before returning to the girls, I don't mention what happened' (Interviewee 1).

Other authors have noted this too, it would seem that choosing to display yourself as a women in a non-stereotypical way is considered aberrant.

'Modified women often received the criticism like "You're such a pretty girl, why would you do that to yourself?" [Tattooed women] are deviant in their gender presentation, and this transgression justifies public comment' (Beverly Yuen Thompson, 2015:167).

Being viewed as deviant creates two negative viewpoints for heavily tattooed women, they are demonised but they are also fetishised. Swami and Furnham in their 2007 study state *'while men see tattooed women as less attractive, they also see them as more promiscuous.'* This narrative was continued by Guéguen (2013) *'when men saw the woman with the tattoo, they judged her as less athletic, less motivated, less honest, less generous, less religious, less intelligent and less artistic'.*

In a response to these stereotypical views and unwelcome actions many heavily tattooed women find their clothing often fulfils another purpose - that of protective barrier from the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975).

'Countless nights out this has happened to me to the point I've got super uncomfortable/don't feel safe and have to leave. Guys have grabbed my arm pulling me back to see what's there and [pulling the] backs of my top to see back tattoos. I don't mind if someone wants to see a certain tattoo but [they should] ask I don't appreciate being pulled about like a showpiece' (Interviewee 2).

'My summer outfit consists of a tank top, shorts or a skirt. And my boyfriend. If my boyfriend cant be with me, I will sweat it out in jeans and a jacket to avoid any comments like, "Hey tatty, can I get your number?"' (Thirsk, 2016).

'I always find summer an uncomfortable time of year...I'm less able to

cover up and blend into the crowd with my usual 'security blanket' of winter coats, jeans and scarves...if I'm going anywhere on my own, for my own comfort and self-awareness, I will always have to wear a cardigan, jacket or jumper to cover it [her tattoo], no matter what the temperature' (Thirsk, 2016).

Here identity through dress is altered and shaped by the male gaze. The tattoos are concealed in situations that the women feel they will be used to draw unwanted attention and judgement on their character from men. Having to wear garments that cover the arms and legs such as trousers, jeans and jumpers – even when these garments are unsuitable for the climate causing physical discomfort. As well as being uncomfortable the women are constructing alternative identities, one identity protected from the male gaze and another identity when unprotected from the male gaze.

'It is a means of constituting the identity of the gazer by distinguishing her or him from that which is gazed at. At the same time, the gaze makes us aware that we may be looked at, so that this awareness becomes part of identity itself' (Mirzoeff, 2009:171).

Protection from the heterosexual male gaze may come from concealing the tattooed body with garments or by surrounding oneself with protective people, such as a group of female friends (so long as they outnumber the men) or another male. The group of friends offers to obstruct or reflect the male gaze by numbers, the more females gazing back at the male fragments the power of the gaze. Whilst the presence of another male signals to the gazing male that the tattooed female in his presence is under his protection (this could also read as ownership).

It is a daily struggle for many tattooed women who on the one hand wish to express themselves through their appearance and on the other hand feel they must alter their appearance to exist safely in their social environments. The construction of identity is constantly evolving, how we project our outward identity can in many ways evolve and be changed too. Body modification (tattoos, piercing, cosmetic surgery, body building, weight loss, hair dye etc.) can be used to alter physical appearance, as can clothing to some extent (corsets, high heels). Clothing however is more often used to construct style identity (which can be easily changed daily) rather than physical identity (which may be permanent or changeable only over a period of time).

Vignette 1: Corrie a heavily tattooed female in her 30's describes her style jokingly as 'goth', she favours black and always wears skate-style trainers such as Converse with black jeans and a t-shirt as her staple look. The jeans are ripped at the knee which show her tattoos, as does the short sleeve t-shirt. Working in an office environment she says she doesn't feel pressured to cover her tattoos, however the office appropriate wear of a simple dress and black tights tends to conceal them anyway. She used to have numerous piercings however confesses she removed them to appear more professional at work. Her hair colour is currently pastel lilac but more often it is a natural colour

be it a blond or brown shade. Corrie confesses that most of her work colleagues don't know she is tattooed as they are generally covered whilst at work.

In this vignette Corrie chooses to dress differently during her social and work hours. Whether her tattoos are visible during social hours and not visible during work hours they are still present on her body. They still hold the same meaning for her however without the gaze of others the tattoos have less presence and less impact on her externally projected identity.

In the illustrated novel 'The Tattooed Map' by Barbara Hodgson (1995) the main character Lydia unwittingly finds herself the owner of a tattooed map that begins to appear on her body. The tattoo starts as a small dot until towards the end of the narrative where it engulfs her whole body. Lydia has a male companion, Christopher, who can only 'see' her tattoos through photographs he finds in her journal after her disappearance. It appears that Christopher doubts the existence of the tattoos until he sees the photos. Here the gaze is controlled by Lydia, Christopher may only view her tattooed body through the photos and descriptions she leaves in her journal. This draws parallels with how women can control the gaze of their tattoos using clothing to reveal or conceal them. At first Lydia finds the tattoo alien to her *'It's beautiful, but ugly, too like the veins and arteries that you can trace on the inside of your wrist. My arm no longer belongs to me. It's become another thing to be admired and studied but not a functional object'* (Hodgson 1995: n.p).

Here parallels can be drawn between tattoos being seen as deviant, ruining and rendering the body ugly and unfeminine. Yet at the same time tattoos draw in both men and women to reach out and touch them uninvited, as reported by the interviewees. The interviewees who had experienced unwelcome touching and harassment mainly stated it was by heterosexual men, however also reported similar incidents carried out by other women though less frequently.

In the story Lydia finally embraces the map tattoo:

'As I lay on a rough stone block I can feel myself being pummeled and massaged and a voice, in a foreign language, says over and over. "We'll rub this off, then you won't have to leave again. We'll rub this off." I watch the map peel off in one piece and slither to the floor. The women emerge from the dark corners and slowly walk, bent over double and with arms outstretched, towards my map lying on the damp tiles. I sit up and watch them coming closer and closer, and then, suddenly afraid and cold, I grab the map, step into it one foot after the other. I draw it on like the skin of a cheetah, pull it up over my shoulders, stick my arms into it, until I am once again totally enveloped. The women begin to wail, and I understand. I finally understand. I have something they want. I had been someone chosen, but now I am someone who has made a choice. Secure in my map I leave, as rapidly as I can, and my last sight of the room is the images of the women returning to their darkneses and silences, confined by the steam left

by my tears. The map does indeed cover my whole body now'
(Hodgson 1995: n.p).

Beeler describes this scene as Lydia becoming an agent of change, as she now chooses to have the tattooed skin. Lydia becomes a 'mythic icon to other women who have not made active choices in their lives and who return to their "darknesses and silences"' (2006: 54). If we consider this narrative in regards to women touching tattoos of other women without permission it could be explained by an interest in the exotic, the alien, something they themselves wish they felt they could be part of. Like the shadowy women in the story, they reach out to touch and experience the tattoos gained by another, but without going through the process themselves, without making that choice, they cannot fully understand it. Lydia's shed skin on the floor renders the tattoo as an object, it separates it from her as a person, it becomes object-like.

'I used to work in the hospitality industry, where unfortunately it's very common for people to reach and grab your arms to "have a look at the ink". Although I'm a very open person, and don't shy away from interactions, I thought in most cases it would be more appropriate to at least ask first, or start a conversation about them. I've also had people grabbing my legs at the gym to have a look. I think that the fact that I was wearing shorts made them feel like it was appropriate to do so, but made me feel very uneasy. I do love the way the tattoos look on me, and show them off often, I would much rather someone asked me about them, rather than just feeling it is fine to grope me.' (Interviewee 3).

Tattoos on women have been seen as unfeminine, Dann et al (2016) state that 'dominant notions of femininity cannot be projected onto women's bodies that have been adorned with tattoos' and that in this sense tattooing is a way of retrieving the female body from the oppressive gaze. This however is reading femininity from a patriarchal construct.

Vignette 2: Kate is in the process of transitioning from male to female gender. She describes her personal style as girly but with a rock chick edge. She enjoys wearing 50's style dresses often with petticoats but prefers to wear Biker boots or Ballet flats as she isn't yet comfortable in heels. Kate enjoys experimenting with make-up and 'has a different hair style every week' from a short purple pixie crop to long red curls. It has taken her almost three years to transition into the confident woman she is today, however she is still undergoing medical evaluation that she hopes will soon allow her to have gender reassignment surgery. As part of the evaluation process she must attend psychological evaluations. I would love a tattoo she confides; in fact I have three designs already drawn out. When I ask why she hasn't yet had any of the tattoos she sadly expresses that the psychologist she has to see is a very traditional minded, middle-aged white hetero cis male. She must present herself as a stereotypical 'girly-girl', she feels she has to wear a pretty dress and a long blond wig when she attends her

appointments. To have a tattoo would be seen as a masculine act and she would be put back to the start of the long psych process.

For Kate the traditional notions of femininity as seen by her assessor are causing her to repress her true identity something she has already been struggling to outline in gender transitioning – she is a woman pretending to be a more stereotypical woman to please the gaze of the male psychologist. She is not yet a tattooed woman but she hopes to be one day. The challenges of femininity originate through the gaze of others and are not reciprocated by the women themselves:

'Feminine always seemed like a bit of a weird designation for tattoos to me, almost like people see tattoos as default being male, and you have to try to make them for women too. I guess you can make them pink and flowery if that's what you want, but in my opinion that doesn't make them any more 'female' than skulls and snakes and stuff (Interviewee 4).'

'I think they can be pretty and that is a gendered norm for women, however men can also have pretty tattoos. Its art on the body after all, and just one of the many things that doesn't define gender (Interviewee 5).'

'I never even considered that I wouldn't be seen as feminine because of my tattoos. In fact I find I can dress more feminine now I have tattoos. I recently bought a white floaty dress, something I would have felt a little silly, too pretty, wearing before but I think it looks cool now. I actually got harassed, very aggressively by two men last time I wore that dress because clearly wearing a short dress and having tattoos means I'm a slut right. It was upsetting, and I'm never sure what they feel they will achieve by yelling at me in the street but what they don't realise is that my tattoos are my armour (Interviewee 6).'

The notion that tattoos could act as armour or protective talismans is even more potent considering the negative connotations they have been given under the male gaze. When discussing the motivations for the tattoos of some of the participants many of the themes centred around self-healing:

'I also have a noose on the same arm, which I got as a motivational love tattoo, I was in a terrible place last year and tried to take my own life and suffered badly with my depression so having this tattoo and being able to see it reminds me to love myself, cause I broke the noose and was brave enough to carry on (Interviewee 7).'

I think tattoos have affected both the way I dress, and the way I feel about my body. I've been struggling with anxiety and eating disorders for over 10 years, which made me really aware and self-conscious about the way I look. Since my [tattoo] sleeves have started coming together, I feel more confident to show them, and very rarely wear [clothing with] sleeves, and I've now got an impressive collection of black vests (Interviewee 8).'

Protection

The theme of protection was explored further through a series of art installations. The first 'Reveal, Conceal' is a collection of portraits featuring some of the interview participants both male and female. The tattoo portraits were taken somewhat anonymously with the focus being on the garment draped to reveal the tattoo/s. Warm, ochre coloured garments in browns, beige and dusky pink were chosen to form a uniform colour pallet which still allowed for individuality to each subject. The photographs show tattooed women in strong poses, choosing to reveal their tattoos ('Reveal, Conceal' 2016, Costume & Fashion in context & practice, Huddersfield University).

Taking a series of words and phrases commonly used in a negative way towards tattooed women, the words were tattooed onto the petals of roses ('Les Fleurs des Mots', unpublished, 2017). The tattoos were created by hand using a tattoo needle and ink. Where the petals were undamaged the ink held well in the petal membrane, however in areas of damage the ink leaked out blurring the letter. The roses were then photographed in two stages, when the flowers were fresh and fully in bloom directly after tattooing, then again once they had shrivelled and died. As the blooms shrivel the words are taken with the decay, in some they are rendered invisible. In others the words remain clear to read however the stark contrast of the words that existed on the fresh blooms is no longer so, now the power of the words are lost and enveloped in the beautifully wilted petals. The rose photos when dispersed with the portraits evoke a new reading of the portraits - the words forced onto the petals as they are forced onto tattooed women.

This research is still on going, changing and evolving much like the perception and interpretation of tattoos.

Acknowledgements

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