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Tattoos as Personal Archives
Expanding "Archival" and Reading the Body as a Text

Having always been a fairly shy person, entering the realm of the tattooed had a fascinating impact on how I interact with the world. I discovered that the addition of large, noticeable tattoos to my arms ensured that I'd never have to start a conversation again. My cityscapes have attracted attention from people ranging from little old ladies to buttoned-up businessmen to children asking if the pictures on my arms will wash off.

One of my very favorite tattoo experiences happened a year ago at the SAA conference in Chicago, when I attended the Cubs game with dozens of other archivists. As I was searching for my seat, a group of gentlemen – all older than me and fairly buttoned-up, some might say the stereotypical archivists – gave me the up-and-down for a minute before asking me if I was an archivist, thinking I'd lost my way. I ended up sitting by them, enjoying a lovely conversation, and later learned that one of the three called a mutual friend and colleague from Flagstaff (many hours and beers later) to verify that there was in fact, a tattooed archivist from Arizona.

People often ask me about the meaning of my tattoos, and I like to jokingly respond that I just wanted pretty pictures that went with all my outfits. But the truth is that, for me, having tattoos was less about having meaningful content, and more about having tattoos. It was about marking my body in an effort to fit in with a group of tough, bike riding, guitar-playing girls in Portland, Oregon; about walking down the street and not having people mess with me. So yes, I suppose my tattoos *do* have significant meaning, which made me consider this quote by Jane's Addiction guitarist Dave Navarro: "My skin is my canvas. The artwork on it represents something that is very powerful and meaningful in my life. I look at my skin as something of a living diary because all my tattoos represent a time in my life. And I never wish to shut the door on the past, so I carry it all with me."

As archivists, tattoos pose an interesting challenge for us to address: they force us to examine not only where tattoos show up in our profession, but also where they show up in our holdings, and what we consider to be "records." They are just one way for us to contend with age-old questions of how we have come to define modern, Western archives - to problematize notions of representation and self-representation within the

archival record, and to examine what something like the tattoo can tell us about gender, regional variation, definitions of "class," and how categories like "race," "class," and "gender" interweave.

I will preface the following by saying that my work focuses primarily on North American tattoo history in more contemporary settings, particularly the 20th century onward. I will also mention that I work as and am trained as an archivist, but am also working on a Ph.D. in history, so I wear both the archivist and the historian hat. Forgive me if I sometimes blur the two.

Tattoos in North America have historically served as symbols and records of masculinity in predominantly male spaces. Penal institutions, the military, motorcycle clubs, fraternal organizations, and street gangs have, in a sense, served as the informal archival repositories for tattoos that function as demarcations of rebellion, delinquency, and machismo. However, tattoos have become more ubiquitous in North America beginning in the mid-twentieth century, crossing lines of gender, class, and ethnicity.

Margo Demello writes, "The tattoo was first brought to the West from Polynesia by eighteenth-century British explorers. Since then, tattooing has been mapped and re-mapped through its history in the United States, first by nineteenth-century American servicemen and carnival exhibits; later by members of the American working class; then in midcentury by bikers, convicts, and other marginalized groups; and finally in the late twentieth century by members of the middle class."[i] One group that has been increasingly represented among the tattooed is women. Sociologist Michael Atkinson writes, "women's tattoo projects express diverse sensibilities about femininity and the feminine body."[ii]

This raises a number of critical questions surrounding discussions of tattoos as a method of identity-creation and self-representation: does the choice to be tattooed stem from a desire for individual representation, as a record of belonging to a collective, or a complex interplay between the individual and the collective? Are tattoos a means for inscribing gendered constructions of self in the body with ink, or does the increased presence of tattoos on both men and women represent a shift in gender roles? Further, does the appearance of tattoos across gender lines encourage scholars to problematize the construction of gender in binary terms altogether? While studies of tattoos have been done largely within sociological, anthropological, or artistic contexts, both historians and archivists have effectively written tattoos out of consideration as primary sources.

Historically, when tattooed women DO show up in the archives, records creators tend to present tattoos in rather fetishized contexts of circus freak shows – "the tattooed lady" or as examples of indigeneity. Margot Mifflin's *The Blue* Tattoo, tells the particularly unusual story of Olive Oatman who, as the story goes, was a Mormon pioneer who was kidnapped by the Yavapai, traded to the Mohave, then tattooed with conspicuous blue tattoo on her chin, seen here. One can't help but wonder how much of the Olive Oatman story is truth and how much is legend, as it has been incorporated into many pieces of fiction, screenplays, and lore which reinforces stereotypes of American Indians ranging anywhere from admiration/intrigue with indigeneity to fear of the "primitive" and "savage."

In light of the historically masculine nature of tattoos, the increase of tattoos among women begs the question: what can these dermal and epidermal records tell us about gender? Michael Atkinson remarks that women are using tattoos to "communicate a wide range of personal and cultural messages, and challenging the long-standing association between tattooing and masculinity"[iii] Feminist scholar Susan Bordo challenges us to take it one step further to read the body as a text: "Through the pursuit of an ever-changing, homogenising, elusive ideal of femininity—a pursuit without a terminus, a resting point, requiring that women constantly attend to minute and often whimsical changes in fashion—bodies become what Foucault calls 'docile bodies'—bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, and improvement."[iv] With this in mind, the tattoo becomes more than just a way to identify people within a database of prison inmates – choices about how the body will stand out against or conform to body standards established by our society have the opportunity to inform historians about widespread shifts in power structures and culturally-defined roles.

Many here might wonder why, at an archives conference, where our professional principles are deeply embedded in values of authenticity, fixity, and chains of custody, we are here to talk to you about something that seems so inherently non-archival. Tattoos are both permanent, in that they don't wash off, and ephemeral in that humans are not permanent – at least, not until archivists get into the business of cryonics. What I believe, however, is that historical scholarship will not evolve until we have a fundamental reconsideration of how we define the archival record. Many historians have presented some useful critiques of archives, but many have continued to place enormous faith in our archival institutions. Meanwhile, archivists seem to be lagging behind in assessing some of the fundamental flaws in how we define the archival record.

Many post-colonial scholars have begun to critically analyze the way "archives" have been defined in a Western context. Ann Stoler, whose book *Along the Archival Grain* uses 19th century Dutch colonial archives to demonstrate how bureaucratic record-keeping practices contained a complex web of fact, fiction, individual and collective memory, confusion, vision, and revision during the colonial project. She writes, "archives are not simply accounts of actions or records of what people thought happened. They are records of uncertainty and doubt in how people imagined they could and might make the rubrics of rule correspond to a changing imperial world."[v]

Meanwhile, Benedict Anderson's "Census, Map, and Museum" chapter in his 2006 revision of *Imagined Communities* documents how those three tools were used to imagine and shape the colonial state. The census served to systematically classify people, with a target goal being keeping track of them for tax and conscription purposes. The map served a similar classifying role, mainly for military purposes. However, many Native American and First Nations scholars in North America (such as Julie Cruikshank and Hugh Brody) have also demonstrated the impact the map had on people that didn't historically observe land ownership and exclusive property rights – for them, the map served to map them out of the landscape, or reduce them to features of the landscape. Like Benedict Anderson and Ann Stoler, Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues that certain voices are silenced in the making of sources, such as in his case studies of Haiti[vi]

By incorporating something like tattoo art into a discussion about archives, we are able to problematize both our own collective professional identity, and historical scholarship more broadly, in a couple of very important ways. First, we are able to grapple with some of the legacies we have inherited from a profession growing up out of colonialism - Enlightenment values that highlight science and reason, sharp categorization and classification, and a strict Western definition of authenticity. By incorporating postcolonial scholars such as Ann Stoler, Edward Said, Benedict Anderson, and Michel-Rolph Trouillot, we are able to better understand how our definition of primary sources evolved to be elite and exclusive, and effectively reaffirm cycles of institutional power. And by deconstructing many North American values that were ushered in by colonialism – binaries that served to divide male and female, rich and poor, black and white, oppressor versus victim, etc., we may be able to better understand how binaries have impacted these cycles of power, and how they have impacted our archival institutions. By inserting poststructuralists into archival discourse – Foucault, Judith Butler, etc., we may be able to better assess how binary thinking has pervaded archival science in an effort to combat such thinking.

Throughout this conference, I've noticed a lot of archival discussion geared toward leveling playing fields – we talk about social justice, participatory projects, community-driven metadata, etc. I myself am in involved in such projects. At home in Arizona, I'm part of a working group for a project called the Arizona Archives Matrix, a data collection tool we use to gather data from repositories around the state in order to get a better grasp of our under-documented communities in order and to rectify gaps in the archival record. Ironically, a tool we hope to use for social justice is the same tool that reduces communities to subject categories, and ignores formats that we can't place into Hollinger boxes or on servers. One dilemma with the Matrix is that it is a tool that our Native American colleagues have found it clunky and inappropriate for their materials. My point is that we as archivists are often well-intentioned, but fail to recognize some larger issues. We attempt to document the underdogs by slotting them into our formats, subject categories, and metadata elements, not realizing that we bypass more organic ways that certain communities document themselves and gather memory.

As we construct our own professional genealogy through a lineage determined by Hilary Jenkinson, T.R. Schellenberg, and the Dutch Archivists, we see that our family tree has been drawn up with the distinguished characters of textual records, photographs, docket books, maps, census records, and registers. New family members are described in bits and bytes and metadata. This family tree has survived at the expense of some of the bastard cousins: ephemera, indigenous knowledge, oral tradition, perhaps even tattoos. The omission of these non-traditional records from our archival institutions does not mean they don't exist: it simply means that we as archivists and historians have continued to demonstrate our lack of flexibility and creativity in defining our holdings, an act that has perforated our historical texts. Isn't it time that our construction of "the record" evolves? After all, sometimes the tattooed cousins are the most interesting characters at the family reunion.

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[i] DeMello, Margo. 2000. *Bodies of inscription: a cultural history of the modern tattoo community*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. p. 2

[ii] Atkinson, Michael. 2002. "Pretty in Ink: Conformity, Resistance, and Negotiation in Women's Tattooing". *Sex Roles.* 47 (5-6): 219.

[iii] Atkinson, 219.

[iv] Bordo, S. (1989). The body and the reproduction of femininity: A feminist appropriation of Foucault. In S. Bordo & A. Jaggar (Eds.), *Gender/body/knowledge: Feminist reconstructions of being and knowing*. p. 14.

[v] Stoler, Ann Laura. 2009. *Along the archival grain: epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. p. 4

[vi] Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. 1995. *Silencing the past: power and the production of history*. Boston, Mass: Beacon Press.