

## Getting Inked at a Tattoo Convention: Subjectivity and Belonging within an Alternative Cultural Heterotopia

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# *Getting Inked at a Tattoo Convention: Subjectivity and Belonging within an Alternative Cultural Heterotopia<sup>1</sup>*

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## **Abstract**

The article explores the Tattoo Convention environment as a privileged context to observe the power relations and the negotiation of meanings framed by the tattoo culture. We focus our analysis on the dynamics that regard the field of Tattoo Convention as an alternative cultural heterotopia (St. John, 2011), giving particular attention to the tension between the desire for community and belonging - which shapes the bio-sociability (Ortega, 2004; Ferreira, 2009) in the space of the convention - and the pursuit of a unique and exclusive body-project. We see broader dynamics of conflict - between inclusion and exclusion, “cool” and mainstream, standardisation and artistry - resonating with this tension. Within this frame, corporal dimensions such as the pain take on the intensification of the biographical meanings (Le Breton, 2002) for individuals and liturgical element for the community.

Keywords: Tattoo Convention; bio-sociabilities; alternative cultural heterotopia.

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<sup>1</sup> Although the article is the result of the collaboration of the two authors, Sebastiano Benasso has written paragraphs 2-4-7, Luisa Stagi has written paragraphs 3-5-6. Paragraphs 1, 8 and 9 have been written by both the authors.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, when professional tattoo artist organisations began to spread, Tattoo Conventions have become a worldwide phenomenon in which tattoo artists, tattoos and tattooed bodies are celebrated (DeMello, 2000). As public events, these conventions offer tattoo artists and consumers the opportunity to get together and celebrate their bodies through the art of tattoos (Fenske, 2007). In this context, styles and languages are spread and hybridised, and community ties are formed around the celebration of tattooed bodies through a partial overturning of the hierarchies that normally regulate them (Ferreira, 2009). Tattoo Conventions constitute temporary gathering spaces for the tattooed community and represent both a place where a sense of belonging is built or reinforced and a market where people can acquire new “pieces” to work on their identity construction which is displayed through work on their bodies (Ferreira, 2014).

In this article we aim to reflect on the information gathered through multi-method research during four editions of the Italia Tattoo Convention in Genoa. Italia Tattoo Convention is the trademark of a tattoo trade fair format held in various Italian cities. These usually take place over three days, are generally hosted in exhibition centres, and comprise about a hundred tattoo artists’ stands and ten or so areas where accessories are sold. In the middle of the aisles where the stands are located, there is a recreational area with a host/MC who entertains attendees with live interviews and footage of past years shown on a large screen. Every afternoon, the same space hosts tattoo competitions and other entertainment events revolving around the spectacularisation of bodies. An entry fee is charged to access the convention and get a wristband which grants access for all three days. The majority of participants attend the event to see tattoo artists at work; only a fraction of participants get tattooed during the convention.

For some time, we wondered which type of conceptual framework would be most suited for this space. At first, the environment and the way the space is organised recall a trade fair. However, some features make this situation more akin to a temporary community, by which we mean the spatial gathering place where Michel Maffesoli (1988) has located what he calls neo-tribes. This term describes fluid social formations with porous boundaries and without specific objectives. The identity of these temporary gatherings is based on a sharing of emotions which is experienced as a community, on a belonging which is tied to a temporary and fluctuating aesthetic dimension. Tattoo Conventions form an ideal backdrop for the celebration of forms of belonging which, as Ferreira wrote with regard to contemporary youth scenes, are characterised by “thin solidarities and cool loyalties” (2009: 287).

During the three days of the event, however, the liturgical and ritual dimension, as will emerge from the analysis of the materials we have gathered, is definitely relevant. For this reason, we have chosen to reconsider Victor Turner's (1988) concept of liminoid over the concept of neo-tribal communities. Liminoids (quasi-liminals) are spaces of suspension which are typical of post-industrial societies and are characterised by mythical and sacred aspects. Unlike in liminal spaces, which are found in pre-modern tribal societies, in liminoids the nature of rituals and ceremonies is ludic and experimental. Compared with liminals, liminoids allow people to enact a very wide range of experiences. In addition, participation is optional and the aim is inscribed in the action itself. Both the realm of the liminal and that of the liminoid are simultaneously located *on* and *beyond* the margins of the societies to which they refer. They are grey areas which are not totally outside society, precisely because they exist in relation to it (Turner, 1969, 1988).

In addition, it is not only the continuity with external reality, but also the heterogeneity, tensions and contradictions that characterise Tattoo Conventions which position them close to the definition of heterotopic space. By heterotopia, Foucault meant those spaces in which individuals "whose behaviour seems deviant with respect to the average person and the norms imposed" are located and in which different mutually incompatible places are juxtaposed (Hetherington, 1997 quoted in St. John, 2011: 51). Hetherington reworks the concept of heterotopia further and applies it to "real spaces and events whose existence sets up unsettling juxtapositions of incommensurate 'objects' which challenge the way we think, especially the way our thinking is ordered". Moreover, Hetherington adds that they are "sites which likely possess an aura of transgression, and which always possess multiple meanings for agents" (Hetherington, 1997 quoted in St. John, 2011: 51.).

Graham St John brings together all the above-mentioned aspects in the concept of "alternative cultural heterotopia", which for him consists in "a matrix of performance zones occupied by variously complementary and competing neotribes and identity clusters" (Hetherington, 1997 quoted in St. John, 2011: 48). In the case of public events within the alternative lifestyle movement, he uses this concept alongside that of liminoid embodiment. These types of spaces, in fact, "provide an especially significant arena for an exploration of embodied subjectivity since, there, one's art – one's body – is public, on display, on parade. There, the body, as the principal medium through which one engages in experiments of the self" (Hetherington, 1997 quoted in St. John, 2011: 58).

Our research shows that Tattoo Conventions are characterised as alternative cultural heterotopias and liminoid embodiments, as they are temporary community spaces in which very different participants co-exist who

are brought together by the celebration of the spectacularisation of the body. This, to quote Ferreira (2009: 286), turns them into “somatised contexts [where] the body is at the epicentre of the social production of identities and sociabilities”. Moreover, within them we find the tensions and contradictions that are produced in the debates about tattoos: tattoos as a fashion (Turner, 1999), as a permanent or removable (through laser) mark (Sweetman, 1999), tattoos as art or as consumer practice (Kosut, 2014).

Within the space of the convention, such contrasts become elements upon which boundaries and definitions of insiders and outsiders are built. For tattoo artists, this means acknowledging and recognising themselves in the different positioning as either ordinary tattooers or tattoo artists (Sanders, Vail, 2008). For the participants, this sets apart those who inscribe biographical trajectories through work on the body and those who see tattoos as a trendy product in the “supermarket of style” (Polhemus, 1997). Although not always immediately clear outside the space of convention, due to the increasing diffusion of tattoos among different social groups, such distinction get evidence in its context. The aim of our research is thus to trace narratives of authenticity among those who tattoo and those who get tattooed at a convention, focusing on the dimensions of autobiographical mark, stigma, pain, and authorship. In this article, we intend to reflect on how these peculiar aspects of this practice take on specific meanings within the context of an alternative cultural heterotopia like the Tattoo Convention.

## **2. The theoretical contextualisation**

By now, there is a consolidated body of literature on tattoos. In their work on the evolution of the sociology of tattoos, different scholars (see for example Bengtsson, Ostberg, Kjeldgaard, 2005; Patterson, 2018; Macchia, Nannizzi, 2019) agree on a reconstruction which sees a progressive extension of the thematic foci from niche contexts to the mainstream, which occurs at the same time as the emergence and spread of skin marking practices. Between the 1980s and the 1990s scholars began to write about tattoos, especially in the context of studies on deviance, mostly framing tattoos as a manifestation of embodied stigma. However, it was not until the end of the ‘90s that the extent of the belonging and symbolic relevance of tattoos as identity construction gained currency in scholarly debates. The contextualisation of this branch of studies on youth subcultures highlights in particular the distinctive functions of skin marking. It is precisely from the latter approach that, in the 2000s, new interpretive perspectives arise in the wake of research on youth cultures whose focus on class and symbolic resistance by Working-class youth is replaced by

the representation of porous subcultural boundaries through which subjectivities and symbols circulate and become hybrid. The dimension of style and its interpretive grids thus become less rigid, the sense of belonging loses fixity and the representation of identity increasingly looks like the result of subjective – and often temporary – choices regarding the integration of symbols from a broader range of repertoires. Thus, mobile interpretive frameworks become necessary to understand the continuous overturning of social meanings constructed around skin marking. In a diachronic perspective, the phenomenology of tattoos as embodied marks ought to move between the two poles of conformism and self-determination, configuring itself as a perpetual motion which is not necessarily resolved with a move towards increasing emancipatory power. As MacCormack reminds us,

the tattoo has signified liberation (through choice), commodification (as fashion) and terrorization (in the Holocaust). It suggests individuality and belonging (subcultural, tribal, but also through the forced homogenization of tattooed people by non-tattooed culture). The surface the tattoo creates complicates the already complex sense of immediacy between the internalization of social discourse (from institutionalized discourse, such as the prison, to gendering) and the externalization of self as an enacting entity in the world (2006: 59).

Metaphorically as well as materially speaking, the emergence of tattoos seems to be about their visibility if we consider the recent increase in people who choose to mark parts of their bodies which had been previously considered inappropriate or taboo (Baumann, Timming, Gollan, 2016), such as their hands, necks and faces (Zestcott, Bean, Stone, 2017). Further confirmation of the democratisation of skin marking practices comes from the fact that, since 2016, tattoos have been on the list of consumer items compiled every year by ISTAT, the Italian National Institute of Statistics, which gives us a sense of the evolution of its cultural meanings. Ideally – and through a conscious simplification of representations – tattoos have spread from the arms and faces of inmates, who through the ostentation of ink tears permanently adhered to the criminal identity given to them by the institutions and by society, to the skin of 12,8% of Italians and over 20% of under-24s (Renzoni et al., 2018).

The combination of these dynamics places the social and subjective meanings of tattoos at the centre of old and new tensions. On the one hand, the commercialisation of tattoos contributes to the erosion of that aura of stigma that had traditionally accompanied its manifestations. On the other hand, this simultaneously produces new instances of resistance in the tattooed community, bringing back to the foreground the issue of pain, which is re-

signified by some as an antidote to the trivialisation of this practice or as a self-evident measure of the awareness in the choice of getting tattooed beyond the influence of trends (Ferreira, 2014). It is once again in the context of resistance to vulgarisation of tattoos that new potential distinctive thresholds are defined among tattooed people, with the ‘great tattooed’ (Ferreira, 2014.) interpreting their skin-canvas-project in ways which are fundamentally unsuitable for the analysis of the choices made by the vast and generic mass of tattooed people. Thus, we can frame such dynamics as strategies for safeguarding the value of an embodied subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995), such as tattoo, from the assimilation into mainstream. Even their irreversibility and permanence, which have always constituted the core of the metaphorical value of tattoos, appear to be changing along with social mutations. In relation to the increasingly widespread tendency to read tattoos as tools through which people can enact their individuality and uniqueness (Ferreira, 2009), their value as autobiographical support grows further, even insofar as they represent an individual strategy to rebuild a sense of personal history problematised by the de-standardisation of life courses (Mun, Janigo and Johnson, 2012) and of the related orders of meaning (Benasso, 2013).

As alternative cultural heterotopias, Tattoo Conventions thus represent a material and symbolic space in which the temporary community bond is maintained in a tension between the sharing of a certain type of body aesthetic and the celebration of individual uniqueness.

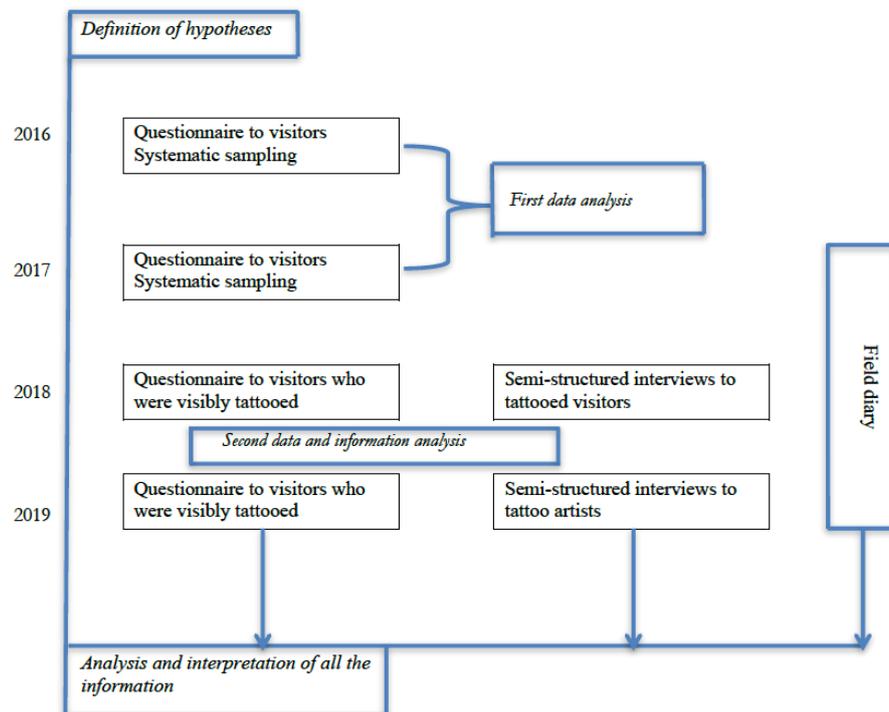
### **3. Methodology: research stages and design**

The research question from which our work initially stemmed was the following: why do people get tattooed in a context like that of a Tattoo Convention? The hypothesis from which we set out is that the convention is a significant place for two sets of reasons. The first has to do with the community factor, that is the importance of experiencing rituals, practices, and convivial moments together with those who belong to the same culture. The second one is related to the presentation of self which can rely on ample choices of styles and tattoo artists.

As a consequence, in the first stage of our research we built appropriate tools to operationalise this hypothesis. Our immersion into the field, however, broadened our questions and, following Grounded Theory (Corbetta, 2005), we therefore broadened the initial research design. In relation to the evolution of the fact-finding questions (Campelli, 1998) on which this research is based, we can affirm that the methodological framework was progressively reconfigured

towards a triangulation between qualitative and quantitative methods<sup>1</sup>. We thus integrated tools and techniques at the “level of research practices”, considering the criterion of appropriateness, that is the set of choices and decisions “which, in real research situations, are deemed to be the most appropriate for the nature of the research problem” (Agnoli, 2004: 58).

FIGURE 1. *Research stages and design.*



At first, given the initial hypotheses, we built a questionnaire that would allow us to identify participants in the Tattoo Convention and their main motivations. Therefore, we built a tool with a more structured part and other less standardised parts with open questions aimed at exploring the boundaries and outlining the variations within the object of our research. To administer the questionnaire, we decided to use a systematic sampling (interval = 10) (Corbetta, 2005). In this first stage, we interviewed participants at two Tattoo

<sup>1</sup> For an accurate discussion of the epistemological and methodological questions raised by “triangulation”, see Rossi (2015).

Conventions (in 2015 and in 2016), regardless of whether they were just visitors or people who had got tattooed or were about to get tattooed. The following analysis of the open questions and above all the spontaneous chats gathered after administering the questionnaire made us lean towards integrating further research tools in the subsequent two years.

Starting from the second Tattoo Convention that we visited, we started keeping an ethnographic observation diary and, alongside the questionnaire, from the third year onwards we also proposed semi-structured interviews (Cardano, 2003) to those who had declared that they had got or intended to get a tattoo during the convention. On that occasion, we were also able to catch several tattoo artists. Our exchanges with them were the starting point which made us decide to proceed with some semi-structured interviews with tattoo artists the following year.

We have collected a total of 177 questionnaires plus 20 interviews with participants and 15 interviews with tattoo artists.

After a brief description of the Tattoo Convention participants' profiles based on the data gathered through the questionnaires, the following paragraphs draw on the information gathered through qualitative techniques.

#### **4. Survey results**

The questionnaires were gathered at the annual Tattoo Conventions held in Genoa between 2015 and 2019. The total number of respondents involved was 177, a third of which were women. The Italian respondents accounted for almost 100% of the total, while the average age was 31 (in a range that goes from a minimum of 15 to a maximum of 56 years of age). The percentage of respondents with a high school degree was nearing 50%, but there were many more graduates among the women; as for their occupational status at the time when they filled the questionnaire, the two largest groups were employed people (about a third of the total) and students (about 20% of respondents).

For over a third of respondents, the conventions during which they were interviewed was the first one they had attended (this applied in particular to males under 25), while the remaining 60% had participated in an average of 6 conventions (with a minimum of one and a maximum of 30 conventions) and the comparative analysis of averages by age group showed how for 31-40-year-olds the average number of conventions they had attended went up to 8.6.

A little less than half of the people who had already participated in a convention got tattooed during one of them (this applied in particular to women). Either way, over 50% of all respondents went on to get tattooed at

the convention during which they filled the questionnaire and, again, this applied particularly to women, with a slight inverse correlation to their age.

The interviewees had about 9 tattoos on their bodies (with a minimum of no tattoos and a maximum of 50 tattoos), a number which was slightly higher among women. With regard to other socio-demographic variables, the most significant deviation was found in the inverse correlation between the number of tattoos and the qualification as well as the direct proportion between the number of tattoos and the age group, with the exception of over-40s who on average had fewer tattoos than 31-40 year-olds.

Almost 75% of tattooed respondents had their first tattoo done by a professional (in most cases at a tattoo studio, with only 10% getting tattooed at a stand during a convention) and nearly half of these tattoo artists was chosen drawing on networks of direct relations.

The parts of the body that were most frequently chosen for the first tattoo were the arms (in nearly 40% of cases) and shoulders (in about 20% of cases) and these choices seemed to condition subsequent choices too, if we consider that the most tattooed parts of the respondents' bodies were the arms (about 40%, especially among male and younger respondents) and the back (15%, particularly women and older respondents overall, who often got their torso tattooed).

In the opinion of almost 85% of the people we interviewed there was a link between life events and choosing to get a tattoo and, for nearly 40% of those who shared this interpretation, the event corresponded to a positive change.

For about half of respondents, pain was a fundamental component of the tattoo experience and, for a quarter of them, pain could be considered as a measure and demonstration of an "authentic" motivation to get tattooed.

For over two thirds of the people we interviewed there were parts of the body that were not tattooable and these often included the face (particularly among males, for whom the head as a whole reached fairly high percentages) and, with a much lower percentage, the neck (especially among women, for whom the abdomen also reached significant figures). In relation to the age group, the most significant variance on this matter concerned the tendency to exclude the neck from the tattooable parts of the body among the oldest respondents.

Less than 20% of respondents regretted one of their tattoos at least once and over two thirds of these people had it covered with a new one. 80% of respondents had never experienced problems due to being tattooed, whereas about 9% had experienced problems at work – something which happened particularly often to women.

Talking about the future, the vast majority of respondents expected that in 30 years' time their tattoos would remain substantially unchanged with respect to the present.

## **5. Writing with and on the body: existential intensification**

Writing on the body through a tattoo is a performative process. Body design carried out by the subject is made significant not only through discourse (written on), but also since it actively involves them in their own production (writing themselves) (Feske, 2007). Tattooed skin functions as a metaphor of the relationship a person has with society and with themselves: “a tattoo can simultaneously accentuate and mask one's personal identity” (DeMello, 2000: 42).

It is no accident that tattoos made a comeback in the 1990s, when a series of movements turned tattoos into a way to affirm one's political belonging and ethical position. A body-manifesto which, through its shape and coatings, expresses the culture to which one wants to belong. One of the consequences of the return of tattoos in the '90s, in fact, was the proliferation of discourses which attributed personal, ritual and/or spiritual meaning to the object and practice of tattoos. Within this discursive community tattoos were reinvented, going from profanatory practice to decorating practice, which became a means to express one's subjectivity and spirituality (DeMello, 2000).

From this perspective, tattoos can thus be read both as a performance of the self and as work on the self through the body. In fact, if on the one hand a mark on the body immediately makes one's belonging explicit, on the other, such indelible marks can represent a 'reflexive' response to the need for stability and permanence. Tattoos can represent, as we will see in various testimonies, a strategy to reclaim power and self-determination through the choice of self-imposed pain, sometimes to carry out a subjectivation, wearing what, in any case, has remained deeply rooted in stigma.

As they constitute work in and on the body, tattoos allow us to support one's identity in various ways and for different subjectivities. Moreover, the many studies that examined the relationship between tattoos and construction of the self (see, for example, Mun, Janigo, Johnson, 2012 Swami, 2011) have shown that tattoos can generate a new self-confidence and sense of self-control (Mun, Janigo, Johnson, 2012).

The process of marking one's body does not merely involve the construction of a unique look, but also the experience of a personal bodily sensation. Due to the invasive nature of work on one's skin, getting tattooed or pierced is an embodied experience which involves the senses, produces pain,

blood, and scars (Simpson, Pullen, 2018). Marking the body is thus a form of individual existential intensification through an actual bodily experience, in a culture in which pain is usually an experience to be suppressed, a sensation to be anaesthetised, an emotional sign subject to medicalisation and control (Le Breton, 2002).

For those who have experienced it, tattoo pain gives them a sense of pride for being the result of a deliberate choice (Ferreira, 2014). Discourses on pain during body marking often refer to images which were originally attributed to these practices within the ritual structures of so-called “primitive” social formations, where a certain degree of exposure to pain represented an act of courage and strength (Lévy-Strauss, 1963; van Gennep, 1981). Although it is no longer connoted by the stoicism attributed to it in the past, the experience of pain felt during the body-marking process is still subject to being interpreted in light of its traditional collective memory as a ritual which creates and consolidates belonging (Ferreira, 2014):

pain is part of the process, I don't know... I wouldn't like to do it without the pain... (tattooed respondent 12)

to me pain signifies passion for tattoos... if you like tattoos, you're willing to have that hour or so of pain... the tradition should be kept, traditions are traditions... the machine MUST be felt (tattooed respondent 3)

The pain experienced during the making of a tattoo is a world apart from the kind of pain that reminds people of the vulnerability of the body and the consequent fragility of the human condition; it is unlike pain that is not chosen, which is out of one's control. As it is accepted and expected, tattoo pain presupposes instead a perception of self-fulfilment and autonomy, of self- and self-control on individual actions (Simpson, Pullen, 2018).

During Tattoo Conventions the moment of pain – which is usually experienced privately, away from room dividers and studio walls – is put on display and somehow celebrated. Lying down with large parts of one's body uncovered, in the middle of a crowd of passers-by, without giving away the pain caused by the needle piercing through the skin is a symbolic gesture which celebrates the value codes of the community. In the same way, parading around the space of the convention with a part of one's body wrapped in cling film and showing it off like a trophy, attests the occurrence of the rite of passage or confirmation, strengthening the sense of community belonging.

People passing by don't bother me. Actually, I'm very self-centred, so I'm only pleased. (tattooed respondent 4)

The more I see others getting tattooed the more I want to get tattooed, because I envy that moment, I like the very moment I get tattooed, the stencil, the pain... EVERYTHING, I live that moment from the beginning until the end (tattooed respondent 7)

This is another reason why, for the people we interviewed, the authenticity of community belonging was affirmed through the competence in the choice of the design and the part of the body, but it is also shown through the acceptance of pain:

when you see people smiling here [while getting tattooed] it's because they have anaesthetic lotion, which for old-school tattoo artists is unethical... if you don't want to suffer, why do you do it? (tattoo artist 4)

Tattoos are a technology of self which can be used to say very different things. Through their body-manifestos, people put on display the elements of their subjectivity that they want to project outwards. For some, they represent one of the many practices to adorn one's body. For others it is a code to express one's belonging. Others see it as an outward projection of a deep reflection on their own personal story which uses tattoos as a way of inverting the stigma and achieving subjectivation.

Tattoo Conventions are alternative culture heterotopias where different ways of expressing one's subjectivity through tattoos coexist and interact. The different tattoo artists attending these events provide very heterogeneous material for identity construction. The fact that there is a shared grammar makes them community spaces, but the different ways of conceiving tattoos create hierarchies and classifications that revolve around authenticity. The amount of tattooed skin, the types of designs chosen, and the choice of pain are all practices which, for insiders, connote people's position within the community. However, participation in different forms of ritual – such as displaying the body during a tattoo, containing manifestations of pain when the needle penetrates the skin, parading with exposed parts of the body wrapped in cling film – creates a further symbolic boundary between participants (insiders) and spectators (outsiders).

## **6. From bodies that don't count to bodies that count**

It is the culture of reference that activates the codes with which people 'write' their own display of the self. Such a validation finds its strength and place in community moments like Tattoo Conventions, which have different

functions: these are spaces in which neo-tribal models are reproduced, but they are also situations in which countercultural attitudes take shape. In particular, tattoo competitions can symbolise the transformation of bodies which are considered deviant because they are tattooed into a work of art through the same otherings carried out by the categories with which tattoos are associated.

Judith Butler's (1993) linguistic turn also concerns the way in which the discursive 'materialisation' of bodies simultaneously produces bodies that count and bodies that do not count, that is abject bodies. For Butler, the abject position becomes the centre of critical attention. Bodies which are explicitly tattooed are marked ambivalently, in the sense that tattoos are visible signs which "ruin" "natural bodies", but they are also unmarked, because they are deviant bodies without any social privileges. The explicit visibility of excessively tattooed bodies therefore displays the multiple discourses which seek to control the meaning of the body (Fenske, 2007).

Bodies which are extensively or unusually tattooed force us to visually recognise the social construction of the body, while simultaneously questioning the logic of such construction. Unlike other forms of social inscription which can be concealed because they have been naturalised, tattoos are constantly confronting this naturalisation, because they 'ruin' the pure and 'natural' surface of the body. Metaphorically and literally, thus, tattoos illustrate and confront the inscription of social norms and codes onto the body. Tattoos mark the skin, becoming part of the body, and this is where their power and the consequent desire to regulate their meaning lie (Fenske, 2007.). Despite using the same grammar, however, tattooed bodies can be more or less deviant: the number, types of designs chosen or the parts of the body that are tattooed draw the boundaries of the abject.

Echoes of this deviant vision are present in the words of tattooed people and tattoo artists alike. Tattoos are thus seen as a mediation between one's subjectivity and the social order which still retains traces of old beliefs and associations:

It's an ongoing project, that of tattoos on my leg. I've been working on it and I'm satisfied: there are all the symbols of my family, there is a tattoo for each member of my family [...] choosing my leg is also a work matter, because the arms, the hands... these things are a bit uglier, harder... whereas on my legs I always go to work wearing long trousers... (tattooed respondent 10)

I avoid tattooing the hands, faces, necks, heads and fingers of anyone who doesn't have a certain number of tattoos on the rest of their body... first you understand what it means to have a tattoo on you, also because if someone who isn't a tattoo artist gets a tattoo on their hand, they're going to preclude

themselves many job opportunities... tattoos have become much more acceptable, but there are still prejudices. (tattoo artist 4)

As Butler claims, bodies which never totally respect norms establish a domain in which the force of regulations can be overturned to generate reticulations which question the hegemonic strength of those very same regulations (1993).

At Tattoo Conventions, bodies which may be considered deviant due to the number and visibility of their tattoos are not judged based on the norms developed by the dominant culture, but rather they are judged based on the internal standards of the community. Norms on their looks are still being violated through the display of these bodies, but the application of the classification discourse aimed at assessing this violation as unnatural or deviant is subverted. Dynamics of competition successfully adapt the oppressive classification discourse to its own aims, thus using the logic behind the norm itself to subvert it.

The categories of tattoo competitions during Tattoo Conventions receive authority from this discourse (these are the norms for the assessment of the body) and therefore they produce the tattooed body as a text to be assessed. In its reiteration of these norms, however, the competition also shifts the authority of the discourse. The new context of the Tattoo Convention commandeers the classification and turns it into privilege. In this location, tattoos are no longer marks that “pollute” the “natural” body but works of art. Tattoos are no longer marks of deviance, but evidence of something else (Fenske, 2007).

Just like photographs of tattoos which place them at the centre of the frame, cutting out the rest of the body – a bit like surgical blankets depersonalise the patient by framing the surgical site and concealing the rest of the body – the context of tattoo competitions frames the part of the body and attempts to delete the person (Fenske, 2007).

I came here for my tattoo artist who is going to take part in the competition, I'm getting a tattoo of something I like, but at the same time I'm here as a guinea pig, I chose the design and all, but respecting the theme of the competition. (tattooed respondent 3)

Those who come here and get tattooed for the competition do so because they like tattoos in the first place, then maybe because I have something nice in mind and I ask them if they're available... in the case of a competition you try to do something that reflects you as a tattoo artist... the bodies of those who make themselves available for the competition are like canvases and with the tattoo they become works of art. (tattoo artist 13)

The new discourse on tattoos as a form of art, however, also produces another less liberating performative effect. The attempt to equate tattoos with high culture stratifies the tattoo community, dividing it into categories of “high” and “low” class. Terms like “biker”, “sailor” or “scratcher” are used in tattoo magazines and articles to refer to the tattooing practices of the working class which are said to be obsolete and are differentiated from more recent practices defined as “professional” or “art”. These are all status-related terms which disguise class differences within a presumably egalitarian tattoo community (DeMello, 2000).

In theory there ought to be no difference between a tattoo artist and a tattoo maker... but there is a difference and it's a very strong one: you don't have to be tattoo maker to be an artist and you don't have to be an artist to be a tattoo maker [...] perhaps the context of the convention emphasises it much more than that of a tattoo studio, because you don't have that kind of constraint, when you come to a convention you are there with tens, sometimes hundreds of tattoo makers, and you are completely free to decide the style you prefer. (tattoo artist 5)

The effect of the effort to turn the tattooed part of the body from symbol of deviance into work of art recreates the class distinctions within the subculture, while resisting the very divisions that were imposed on it from the outside. By overturning traditional cultural norms, artistic tattooed bodies partly replicate their logic within the tattooed community (Fenske, 2007).

Tattoo competitions are a form of liminoid embodiment because they celebrate, through a liturgical practice, the spectacularisation of tattooed bodies. Despite maintaining a continuity with the hierarchisation of categories outside this context, the differences in styles and designs become homogeneous classifications which are useful for assessment within the competition. All the participants, tattoo artists and individuals involved in the competition, insider and outsider audience members are united in the celebration of tattoos as a form of art.

## **7. Four-handed writing**

Looking at phenomenologies of tattoos to reflect on inequalities has proved to be a promising analytical perspective, which takes on further meaning in relation to the broader socio-historical context and to “typically” neoliberal processes of individualization. If pushes towards individualization have modified collective dynamics of subcultural aggregation – in a process that, in short, takes us from the stability of subcultural formations to the temporary

nature of scenes (Bennett, Peterson, 2004) – subjective relationships with belonging and participatory dynamics are also reshaped to celebrate individuality. This also concerns tattoos, whose meaning is reframed as they represent an “ideal strategy to demonstrate uniqueness and individuality through the body” (Ferreira, 2009: 291). For those who embrace this interpretation of the symbolic function of tattoos, the choices concerning their design, style and position then converge towards the search for a balance between using a socially recognisable and a desirable grammar (Watson, 1998), on the one hand, and the uniqueness of the mark, on the other. Indeed, tattoos must be able to express “the pride of being the only and inseparable owner of an itinerant masterpiece which, given its permanent and embodied nature, cannot be sold, exchanged or stolen” (Ferreira, 2009: 296). As a consequence, it is the relationship between those who execute and those who receive a tattoo. If this relationship has always required a certain investment in terms of mutual trust, given the emphasis on the uniqueness of tattoos this is now configured even further in terms of “mutual artistry” (Fisher, 2002) which is reified in the outcome of the negotiation between the artistic choices of the tattoo artist and the selection of metaphors which can adequately represent the individuality of the client (Garcia-Meritt, 2014). A distinctive threshold is thus defined and reinforced. On one side, we have those who, in collaboration with their tattoo artist of trust, build a complex set of meanings and narratives, attributing different nuances of meaning to each stage of its production (from co-defining the blueprint to presenting it publicly, via the valorisation of the pain felt during the execution sessions). On the other side, we have those who standardise the process into “real time” selection of a design which is widespread enough to be found on the body of some celebrity or other and/or on a standard catalogue of tattooable images<sup>2</sup>. This distinction emerges very clearly from the interviews with tattoo artists, who often reconstructed the characterisation through a parallel between the kind of work they do in their studios and during conventions and the two types of clientele.

The more people trust you the less they usually ask you to change the drawing [...] there was a guy who had half his body done Polynesian-style who said: “It’s up to you!” ... I drew free hand, it was a big job, and he never changed a thing even if he didn’t even know what the result would have been like! (tattoo artist 7)

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<sup>2</sup> Several tattoo artists that were interviewed agreed that, like with any other market sector, even for tattoos there are times when specific designs are particularly popular, especially among clients who are less socialised in tattoo culture. In particular, one of the most wanted designs in the last few years seems to have been the “Belen butterfly”, the mathematical symbol of infinity and the word “resilience”.

At conventions there are those who walk-in and ask for tattoos, often they do it because they take the opportunity of the Tattoo Convention, so perhaps they choose to have a smaller, quicker tattoo done. (tattoo artist 14)

When a person comes to the studio, perhaps they come because there's a relation of trust with the tattoo artist, because maybe it's someone you've already tattooed... and the relation with the tattoo artist is ALL about trust [...] conventions are a bit like a supermarket, but there are also those who do it as collectors... (tattoo artist 8)

Thus, if the subjects who reproduce these two attitudes towards tattoos are unlikely to share the same space and time in tattoo studios, conventions represent a context in which these two typologies mix and participate in what Ortega (2004) and Ferreira (2009) call "bio-sociality". This concept refers to the forms of sociality which are no longer tied to the "traditional" structural dimensions of class, gender or generation, but rather originate from the bodily dimension and its relation to the criteria of "performance, illness, health and longevity" (Ortega 2004 quoted in Ferreira, 2009: 288). On the one hand, Conventions become a context in which the aspects of sharing related to the practice of tattoos can be amplified:

[people who pass by while I'm getting tattooed at the exhibition centre] will see a beautiful tattoo... it doesn't bother me, also because when I go to my friend's studio, my tattoo artist's studio, a good few of my friends come along... we like tattoos and we like to see how they do it and maybe sometimes we're even jealous, because you're getting tattooed and I'm not [so doing it in this context] adds something, absolutely. (tattooed respondent 11)

On the other hand, the very convention space is a privileged context where to show different equipment of subcultural capital, stressing distinctions between tattoo experts and general "tattooed people". This is often expressed by different approaches to selection of the tattoo artist, which sometimes is considered even more relevant than the subject to be tattooed. Tracing a boundary from the people

who just walk-in [the Convention], stop almost randomly at a stand and choose a drawing from a catalogue (tattooed respondent 10)

an interviewee who perceived himself as a tattoo expert proudly accounted for the thorough work of selection of the tattoo artist

I'm here to be tattooed by an artist whom I've been following on social networks and stuff for so long. I'm quite expert of his work and his style fits my taste, as otherwise it would be hard to reach him at his studio, he works in South Italy, it's a great opportunity having him here! (tattooed respondent 10)

Insofar as it is a stage on which tattoo culture and its implicit hierarchies can be celebrated in a new equilibrium that varies from inclusion through bio-sociality to distinction through taste (Bourdieu, 1983), the space of a Tattoo Convention is structured as a mediation between the organisation of a trade fair and the reproduction of the intimacy of a private studio. Moving between stands at the convention, we noticed some continuities with the stylistic model which prevailed in all the tattoo studios observed by Simpson and Pullen (2018). In particular, this concerns the coexistence of elements highlighting health and hygiene regulations (see, for example, the display of disinfectants and the staging of the sterilisation of tools before their use) alongside symbols of a “cool” and subversive aesthetic (see, for example, the widespread use of skulls, gothic images and other characteristic furnishings). The latter evoke a form of resistance which is, at least on a discursive level, applied to contrast the banalisation of tattoo culture. However, unlike in private studios where the accentuation of the threshold – for example through loud heavy metal music (Simpson and Pullen 2018.) – contributes to the enhancement of the symbolic capital of the tattoo artist, the trade fair layout of the convention is organised to foster accessibility. This involves a further accentuation of the relevance of the tattoo artists' bodies in so far as they are “cultural authorities of cool” (Botz-Bornstein, 2010 quoted in Simpson and Pullen, 2018: 182), as it is especially through their display and reproduction in expert poses that the hierarchies of the tattooed community are claimed, setting apart occasional participants and insiders.

## **8. Subjects and codes of skin writing**

Regarding the cultural pressures that shape the body in late modernity, the array of symbolic functions subjectively attributed to the practice of tattoos becomes broader. As a consequence, the meaning of tattoos is exposed to the contradiction between, on the one hand, the plasticity and the chameleon-like ability required of contemporary bodies (Stagi, 2009; Patterson, 2018) and, on the other, the search for elements (metaphorical and material) of irreversibility in biographical trajectories which are increasingly characterised by uncertainty and temporariness (Benasso, 2013). In our interviews, we also found references

to both dimensions. A significant proportion of questionnaire respondents talked about the idea of their tattoos in a twenty-year time frame, highlighting elements of continuity and permanence, both from an aesthetic point of view (“*they will always be as beautiful as they are now*”) and regarding their value in terms of personal expression and satisfaction (“*they will be a bit faded, but I’ll still be happy to have had them done: I’ll always be proud of them*”). In some passages of the in-depth interviews, however, there were accounts of more or less conscious processes of re-signification of the same tattoo in relation to the passing of biographical time.

I had “hard life” tattooed on my fingers at a time when I was partying a bit too much let’s say... I needed it to remind myself that unfortunately life is also made of hassles, work [...] if I look at it now to me it means “responsibility”, it’s no longer a negative thing. (tattooed respondent 19)

The possibility of capturing crucial moments in our lives onto our skin has often been interpreted as a potential form of compensation of the effects of applied reversibility – with varying combinations of choice and necessity – of individual management of reflexive biographies (Beck, 2000). However, it is precisely in relation to the increasing complexity of the construction of biographical meaning that the function of tattoos as antidotes to temporariness is reconfigured. In the context of biographical trajectories which are less and less linear and retrospectively frameable in coherent ways, even the metaphorical meaning of skin markings is required to become more fluid, pushing tattooed people to cyclically review the narrative and identity-related justifications assigned to their tattoos. More than a definitive biography captured with ink on the skin, the narrative developed and shared through the “shop window” of our skin (Codeluppi, 2007; Benasso, 2011) seems to resemble an open scenario on which the public representation of our story can be remodulated and staged.

More than attaching young people to a certain social affiliation, tattoos celebrate the emotional and biographical value attributed by their holders to a moment of their lives, in which a relation of identification was established and valorized. [...] The body marking project follows this nomadic trajectory, expressing graphically those turning points in a way that allows the marked subject to pretend to be not only aesthetically but also auto-bio-graphically consistent, coherent and original — even if the drawings may seem both heterogeneous and contradictory. (Ferreira, 2009: 294).

Therefore, a potential incompatibility arises between the baggage of autobiographical meanings attributed to tattoos and status passages (see, for

example, Horne et al., 2007) which take place throughout people's lives in ways that are increasingly unpredictable. According to the interviewed tattoo artists, this risk appears to concern above all people with less awareness and knowledge of the symbolic weight of skin marking. In the interviews gathered, this increasing "vulnerability" is especially tied to age and generational factors and young clients are the least equipped to manage the social costs of tattoos.

Before people used to get tattoos on their backs, arms, thighs... someone wearing shorts and a t-shirt could look as if they weren't even tattooed... now people get tattoos on the most visible parts first, especially younger guys want them to be visible. (tattoo artist 7)

There are some jobs that don't allow you to have tattoos on your hands and if you, 18-year-old, come and ask for one, I won't do it... (tattoo artist 14)

In a broader sense, we could thus hypothesise that, even in relation to tattoos, inequalities are present in the determination of power differences when it comes to defining the meaning that can be attributed to a cultural object. In other words, marks collected on bodies that are more exposed to the effects of inequalities seem to, in turn, be characterised by more temporariness. For those with less cultural capital this brings about a number of issues and requires a burdensome and continuous re-signification work on one's tattoos in two directions: reflexivity and public legitimisation.

The reason why people want to get a tattoo at a convention is not the same as the reason why people like me or people my age [about 45 years old] got one... now it's a bit like a fun fair, so people want a cheap souvenir, no matter who the tattoo artist or the design is, a bit like McDonald's... take away and go. (tattoo artist 2)

It is noteworthy how, at the 2019 edition, among the stands there was a new one dedicated to laser removal. The possibility of subverting the irreversibility of the tattoo opens up new scenarios, favouring re-signification practices.

Now a tattoo is no longer forever! [...] in general, those who regret it are especially people who had tattoos done during a time in their lives that's tied to an unpleasant memory or those who had tattoos with the names of other people with whom they eventually broke up (laser removal stand representative)

The varied landscape of Tattoo Convention stands therefore provides a rich repertoire of styles, designs, and grammars, which can be rearranged at will and, if necessary, “cancelled” through a laser procedure. What was once configured as an indelible writing has therefore become increasingly similar to a process of construction and deconstruction of meanings which are layered and change over time.

### **9. Concluding remarks: in and out of the kimono**

For the tattooed community, Tattoo Conventions are spaces where people collect identities, but they are also places where rituals are celebrated, codes activated, and a sense of belonging strengthened. Much like the construction of the identity mosaic has departed from the linearity and the combinatory nature of modern biographies, the construction of the body-project has become more complex and contradictory. Writings on the body reflect the same traits of identity change: from deep to superficial, from fruit of maturation and sedimentation to overexposure of the self, following a precarious logic which is tied to the mutability of fashion and consumption. Even the reversibility of choices, a typical trait of late modernity, is translated into that possibility to rewrite and delete made possible by covering and laser removal techniques. A body that is defined as a “bodyscape” to express the way in which ephemeral belongings and hybrid styles intertwine and find their place, without following a prearranged and internally coherent design. Tattoos were once seen as chapters in the story of a life’s journey and related belongings. In Japan they even had to be completely concealed under kimonos as they were illicit and private markings. However, they have now become a way of overexposing the self, breaking the boundary between public and private, like we have become used to doing on social media.

Even getting tattooed during a Tattoo Convention involves a negotiation with intimacy. When people expose uncovered parts of their body, but especially when they contain the manifestation of the pain they are feeling as the needle penetrates their skin, a part of what is going on behind the scenes is being put on display in favour of a liturgical dramatisation which celebrates the practices and rituals of a community. Feeling part of that neo-tribe, even if just for a limited period and thanks to temporary appearances, involves the acceptance of codes and norms which are rooted in an imaginary that draws from tradition to support subjectivation practices.

Insofar as they are a “somatised context” (Ferreira, 2009) dedicated to the celebration of the body and of the forms of sociability built around it, Tattoo Conventions have turned out to be the ideal context in which to test the

interpretive perspectives mentioned in the introduction. The interviews gathered, but also the ethnographic observation of the dynamics of gazes among participants have allowed us to map the implicit boundaries of a temporary community in which, however, uniqueness and subjective styles are glorified above all else.

The celebration of tattoos as art, however, also produces contradictory outcomes. The negotiation between the “author” and the bearer of a tattoo during contests shifts the balance in favour of the tattoo artist, as not only do the tattooed parts of the body become a canvas on which to paint, but the “authors” are also separated into makers and artists, producing a further split between “high” and “low” culture. Hierarchies are produced among the tattooed people too, with tattoo experts often showing off the subcultural capital they own by stressing the distance from the increasing number of persons who get inked without being aware enough tattoos’ meanings, styles and symbols.

Thus, choosing what to get tattooed and with which style, which tattoo artist to go to and which part of the body to mark represents a way to demonstrate one’s competence or, even better, to express one’s habitus, reproducing external hierarchies which internally can still contribute to the cohesion of a community. Tattoo Conventions are spaces of alternative cultural heterotopia precisely because they share some features with the outside world, as they include various different opposite places and are characterised by the profound heterogeneity of their participants. Through different ritual practises they become neo-tribal spaces of liminoid embodiment in which the construction of subjectivity through work on the body is celebrated and tattoos are recognised as a form of art and of reversal of the stigma.

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