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GLOBAL CULTURES, LOCAL INTERPRETATIONS:
A Comparison of Wearing Tattoos in
Ecuador and in the United States

By

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ABSTRACT

Marissa Peck GLOBAL CULTURES, LOCAL INTERPRETATIONS: A Comparison of Wearing Tattoos in Ecuador and in the United States. Department of Anthropology, June, 2014.

This thesis explores the practice of tattooing and how it has been affected by the globalization of local practices. Tattooing is an ancient practice that virtually all societies have performed. Today, tattooing is practiced in an infinite number of ways and it is interesting to understand local influences as well as global themes portrayed in modern day tattooing. A study abroad trip from September 2012 to May 2013 in Ecuador gave me the opportunity to study tattooing in the Latin American country. A series of the same interviews in the United States from September 2013 to December 2013 allowed me to gain another perspective on the practice of tattooing.

Tattooing in Ecuador is happening in an informal, unregulated manner in which there are professional tattoo shops and also informal and often unhygienic shops that have popped up around the country. Due to the lack of regulations and the conservative catholic pressures of the mainstream Ecuadorian society, tattooing has been deemed out of the norm. Furthermore, those that tattoo have replicated the same social structure of the mainstream society, which has caused a type of self-imposed norm in the tattoo world.

Meanwhile, in the United States tattooing is an accessible way to purposefully assert one's uniqueness. People in the United States are constantly pushing the boundaries of tattooing while at the same time struggling to conform to Corporate-America standards. Many Americans tattoo in easily covered places to assure that their tattoos do not prevent them from being hired.

Introduction

“You have a tattoo?”

“Yea”

“Can I see it? What is it of?”

...I pull my hair back and turn my head to expose a small tattoo hidden behind my left ear...

“Cool! Why did you choose that?”

“Um, it’s a long story. The symbol means a lot to me, and it looks cool too.”

If you have a tattoo, you probably have had this conversation with random strangers, friends, even teachers or your parents. I remember how when people noticed my tattoo, which is behind my ear, I would go through the awkward motion of pulling my hair back with one hand and my ear back with the other to reveal a two-inch-long Jesus fish drawn in a simple black line. Some people would automatically recognize the symbol and ask me if I was super religious, which I am not. Others would ask me what it was of, and I would have to explain that it is commonly known as a Jesus fish, and no, I was not super religious; it represented to me my childhood as I was raised in a Congregational church. I began to feel the need to defend my church, and so I would explain that church was a fun place where we would learn about the bible but through arts and crafts and games. I also went to Jesus summer camp every summer and that this was really the most fun of all. Most people would sort of nod like they understood, but their blank stares made me realize that they had never associated anything fun with church. The story of my first tattoo brings up some interesting questions, dilemmas, and practices that are common among people who are tattooed. The following section will break down different topics through which we can understand the tattoo on an individual level and in a societal context.

Reason to tattoo: rite of passage, honoring a life experience

I got my first tattoo when I was eighteen years old with my best friend Annie. We were finally legal and the tattoo was one of the first official acts that proved that. This was a way for us to mark or recognize a rite of passage in our lives, our transition from childhood to independent adulthood. The tattoo that I chose was a symbol of a past experience and also connected me with a community of people, my church, who essentially raised me. I wanted to always remember the lessons and values that I learned at church and camp, and I also wanted to honor the friendships that I had made there.

The Actual Tattoo Experience: at the shop with the artist

Annie and I were sitting my Volvo station wagon in the parking lot of the *12 Tattoos*, the tattoo shop in my town. We looked at each other, nodded in confirmation of our commitment, and got out of the car. I had never been in a tattoo shop before, yet *12 Tattoos* looked and felt exactly as I had imagined it. The vibe was comfortable and intimidating at the same time. Annie and I just stood and stared, not really sure of proper etiquette. We looked towards the desk, it appeared to be a reception desk just like at a doctor's office except this one was covered with stickers and drawings. Suddenly a head popped out from behind the desk, and a tall, skinny guy, who had many piercings and was covered in tattoos on his arms, hands, fingers, and neck, smiled and greeted us. He said his name was Mason and that he was the apprentice and secretary of the operation. He asked us what we wanted to do, and I told him about the Jesus fish. He responded by pointing at his middle finger - "I have Jesus right here," he said. I smiled shyly. Annie was getting the phrase "Pura Vida" which is the Costa

Rican multiple meaning catch phrase for “enjoy life.” A big book helped us decide on the font, which was much more difficult than one would think.

Finally with our designs picked Mason gave us clip boards with waiver statements and payment information. They would cost \$60 each, which was the minimum cost of a tattoo at *12 Tattoos*¹. The waiver form relieved the shop from any liability by the artist or the shop should infection occur. The shop promised to be up to health code and surgical sanitary standards. The waiver also made it necessary to confirm that the client was at least eighteen years of age, the legal age to be tattooed in the United States.

We were told to come back in a few hours, which damped our energy a little as we were ready to do it right then and there. Annie went first and I just watched in awe. This was the first time I had ever seen a tattoo machine, the ink, and someone being tattooed. It was very new to me. Like most tattoo shops, there were a number of chairs in different corners of the shop. The spaces were separated with partitions, and each artist had set up and decorated their space in their own way. I could see an older female tattoo artist with alarming facial piercings across the room from us who was tattooing a large tattoo on the back of a large woman. To my left there was a guy getting a leg tattoo. The artists were constantly busy, which surprised me because I did not realize how many people in my area were interested in tattoos.

Ten minutes later it was my turn. I was nervous and took some deep breaths. The artist, Ed, was cleaning every inch of the space. He told me that it would take him longer to clean everything than to actually do my tattoo. This was reassuring because in my eyes, the

¹ The cost of the tattoo depends on the size and level of complication of the tattoo. At most tattoo shops the prices are fixed and the shop receives a portion of the cost while the artist receives the other part. Different shops have different fixed prices depending on shop location, skill level of the artists, and reputation of the shop.

more he cleaned, the safer this whole thing was, and there is some truth to that.² The tattoo felt like little prickles gently being jabbed into the side of my head. It did not hurt as much as I expected, but I was going into the whole thing expecting excruciating pain. And then, it was over. Ed told us to apply cream a few times a day to keep the space moist. We left with huge smiles on our faces, hardly able to contain our excitement. I realized that day that I had done something to visibly and permanently change the appearance of my body. It was comforting but at the same time unfathomable to know that my Jesus fish would never go away.

The Reactions/Judgments of Others: my mom, my friends, and random strangers

I was excited to show people, but also aware that I would not be telling my mom because I knew she would not be happy. To this day she does not approve of tattoos and even after lengthy discussions we have not been able to reach a consensus on the issue. From what I understand, my mom does not like tattoos because she cannot imagine herself getting one. She does not understand why anyone would want to physically harm their body, endure pain, and then live with the scar, in the form of an image or design, forever. She cannot personally conceive wearing tattoos herself and therefore cannot understand why anyone else would want to. My mom knows some people who are “covered in tattoos”, as she calls it. It makes her squirm uncomfortably and even a little angry that that such a “beautiful girl” now has visible tattoos all over her body. This comes from the stigma of tattoos that is still present in American culture today, although it is changing. Older generations grew up with the stereotype that tattoos were associated with criminals, sailors, and other people of low status

² I have since learned that when someone is being tattooed, their blood and skin cells fly everywhere and stick to every surface. This is why tattooing has the hygienic standards of a surgical operation. It is also deemed a surgical procedure because tattooing punctures through the first layer of skin, the dermis, and inserts ink into the second layer, the epidermis.

in society. The professionals and the beauty icons for the majority of their lifetime were clean as a whistle when it came to tattoos, at least visible ones. My mom associates beauty with people who do not have tattoos and who also do not have piercings, strange hair styles, and who do not choose to dress like someone of lower status in society, like punk or hippie groups.

I do not consider my mom to be close minded, racist, sexist, or have any other type of prejudice, but she is a product of the social environment in which she was raised. She does not publicly ridicule people for their personal body modification choices, but she personally disapproves of them. The line is a little blurred when it comes to her daughter, because I literally came from her. I can understand that, but I also have decided to pursue my own desires to tattoo. I have respected her feelings in some ways; for instance, I do not have any tattoos that are visible when I am wearing typical clothing. I know that this would upset her and also make her worry that I will not be as successful in life because of my tattoos. And while this idea that to be a successful professional you must not wear tattoos or piercings is changing, it still holds true to a certain extent. My mom's concerns are valid but ultimately she has given me enough freedom to make my own decisions over my own body. We are women of the twentieth century and we have been afforded the freedom over our own bodies because of the hard work of strong women that have come before us. This is something I know that my mother and I agree on and that is why I think she realizes that her personal feelings about tattoos cannot be imposed onto her adult daughter. That being said, I still have not told her about my second, and rather large tattoo on my hip...

After I received my first tattoo I was confronted with the frustrating dilemma of people misinterpreting my tattoo. Their lack of comprehension caused me to question my

decision to tattoo and celebrate my affiliation with my church. Eventually I had to reevaluate and accept what I had done, which revealed a newfound self-confidence in not only my tattoo but also in the community in which I was raised. My awkward tattoo explanations began to make me second guess my decision to tattoo a Jesus fish. I began to vaguely explain it to people when they asked in order to avoid misunderstanding. One time a boy saw my tattoo and matter-of-factly stated that he liked my tattoo of a Pieces, the Zodiac symbol. I smiled and said thank you, not wanting to have to correct him and then go through the trouble of explaining what the tattoo really was of because that would have also involved a reevaluation of who I was as a person by this new friend that I had made in my first year of college.

I thought about covering my tattoo so that others would easily understand, and I would still know the true meaning that it held. I had a few ideas to make it into an ambiguous styled flower. People might not have even asked me what my tattoo was of if it was just a basic and obvious flower. But then I began to feel an overwhelming sense of pride; I wanted to feel confident in my decision as I did not decide on getting the tattoo on whim. It was well thought out, and I was decided. The fact that people did not understand my tattoo made me question my decision and confidence in myself. I understood that I should be proud of my tattoo and the part of my life it represented. People do not have to understand it, and I have felt a close connection to those few people who do. Through my experience I learned that I could not judge other people's tattoos. Before carrying out this research about tattoo practices, I had even shied away from talking to people about their tattoos. Instead of asking what their tattoo was, I would comment on the image or the line work or the color use. I did not ask a stranger why he got that tattoo because I knew how it feels when someone put me on the spot about my personal tattoo. I know what I will never fully understand why someone

has a tattoo just as most people do not understand my Jesus fish. Encountering tattoo practices in Ecuador, however, made me realize that in order to research how tattoo practices became global, I would have to begin asking questions about why people get tattoos and what they mean to them.

My Tattoo and My Research

In my research I have learned about many different cultures and their tattooing practices. I realize that there are many aspects of other cultures' practices that I can relate to my personal tattoo experience, but I also realize that there are key differences. The literature review will briefly examine different cultures and their tattooing practices throughout history. It begins with the origin of tattoos, moves to a deeper look at tattooing in the South Pacific, and ends with the European encounter with Pacific Island cultures. The English word "tattoo" is believed to come from the Tahitian and Samoan words for the practice, *tataue* and *ta*, respectively. The literature review delves into the complex history of tattooing as the practice was carried around the world and has evolved into a modern day global practice. It is important to see the different reasons why people tattoo and also to understand how the tattoo functioned as a tool in certain groups and societies. The main difference that I see between my tattooing experience and a tattoo experience of a person who belongs to the tattooing world (a term that will be defined later in this work) is that my tattoos were self-motivated and personal. While I felt certain connections with others in my tattoos, I decided to mark those connections and experiences for myself and by myself. My tattoo was not part of a communal action, and it did not automatically bring me closer to the community I was honoring. I do not feel a strong association with others who have tattoos solely because we

both have tattoos. I feel like an individual who has tattoos, and that is the stark difference between me and a Polynesian person with a *pe'a*, a type of leg tattooing that will be explained later, or a Maori person with a *moko*, a facial tattoo that will also be explained later in this work. There has not been a tradition of tattooing in my family or community and therefore my tattoo was personally motivated and realized. This I believe is the basic foundation of the global tattoo practice today. There is a “tattoo culture” made of a community of tattooed people and tattoo artists. But, the majority of people with tattoos do not belong to this culture or world. They are individuals who have personally chosen to wear their tattoos without identifying with a “tattoo culture” or dedicating themselves to the tattoo world. I am left fascinated with the question: why did I/do we tattoo?

There are many secondary questions that follow: What does this tattoo mean? How does the tattoo change the wearer? And, is the wearer ever really in control of how their tattoo is perceived by others? The questions surrounding tattoos are plentiful, unlimited, and are being asked only more recently in Western society and academia. While people have been tattooing for thousands of years and the western world as we know it today learned about tattooing three hundred years ago, the dialogue about tattooing has really only entered mainstream society in the later 20th and early 21st century. Tattooing has lived on the fringes of society as a practice for the criminal, the violent, and the lowly; nobody who was anybody had tattoos, and they surely did not show them if they wanted to be successful. For most of 20th century, tattoos were for the most part unacceptable and inappropriate in mainstream society. They were for sailors, addicts, rock and roll stars, and/or rebellious youth. They were not allowed in the white collar family nor were they accepted in the world of academia or business. But then something happened. It started with a few celebrities and athletes. It

moved also into the worlds of art and music. And then, it smacked society straight in the face; today over 40% of Americans have at least one tattoo, and it is obvious that the tattoo has snuck its way from the fringes of society into the mainstream culture and become a legitimate force in our society (Pew Research Center 2013).

My ethnographic research began almost accidentally, when I was on an academic year abroad in Ecuador for my junior year of college. I was living in a co-op style house, and there was a soccer team that had formed from a group of friends. I began to play with them at least twice a week. One of the players was a tattoo artist and we spent a lot of time together. Eventually, he invited me to join him and travel around Ecuador with him, since he would go on trips to tattoo friends and friends of friends who lived in small towns or cities. We mostly traveled along the coast, to some of the poorest regions of the country. Many Ecuadorians were interested in tattooing, especially young people. I could not help but think about why people, especially these people, so seriously wanted a tattoo, and my research took off from there.

I conducted nine interviews in Ecuador with young people who were in the process of being tattooed. I asked them all the same questions and took a photo of their tattoos. When I returned to the U.S. I translated the interview questions into English and interviewed seven young people on my college campus, including my professor who is Ecuadorian. I also visited a local tattoo shop and spoke with the artists there. In this work I used pseudonyms for all of the people I interviewed to protect their identity. Most of my research has occurred organically in conversation with friends and acquaintances. It seems that everyone has something to say about tattoos.

Through my research I aim to better understand the complex modern day social phenomena of the tattoo. Through observation, conversation, and personal practice, I have been able to understand the tattoo as a global practice and I have also realized some interesting and important differences in how tattoos are practiced and perceived. In general, the tattoo is slowly entering the mainstream society in Ecuador and the United States. Ecuador has more conservative practices than current society in America with respect to tattooing and other forms of body modification.

In general, young people in both countries are at the driving force that is pushing the tattoo into mainstream culture. By and large, the older generations are the part of society that criticize and even reject the tattoo. There are still strong stigmas about people who wear tattoos and I have spoken with people in both countries who know that future job prospects could be compromised if they have a tattoo that cannot be hidden by their work attire (e.g. a tattoo on the hand or neck). The tattoo has a long history, and it has been fascinating for me to realize that even though the tools have evolved and the designs have changed, the mainstream cultural institution of the tattoo has not been established in most places outside of the South Pacific. Remarkably, people are tattooing for many of the same reasons today as they were five hundred or even two thousand years ago. With this, the tattoo is emerging as an entirely new cultural force and in many ways can be considered a total social fact. A total social fact is a term coined by the French Sociologist Marcell Mauss (1872-1950). It refers to an activity that has consequences throughout society through various spheres: the economic, religious, political, legal, artistic, etc. As you read this work, be aware of your own ideas about tattoos and try to separate your personal feelings about them with the work that is presented here. We all have preconceived notions and judgments that create biases, and

tattoos certainly bring up a lot of conflicting opinions and strong emotions. I ask that you be considerate of your own feelings and try to understand what factors have influenced your ideas on the matter. Happy reading.

Literature Review

The story of tattoos begins 50,000 years ago. Richard Klein and Blake Edgar believe that at this time a quantum leap in human thinking occurred, and the result was art on cave walls (Klein and Edgar 2002). Art served as an extension of the individual's daily life and experiences. Hunting scenes, predatory animals, rites of passages and rituals have been found painted on caves all around the world. I believe that the necessity to mark one's story and other's stories is a basic learned behavior motivated primarily in response to the marks left by Mother Nature. Also, there is a need to record in hopes of not forgetting, with the intention of demonstrating and teaching others what has occurred. So with this natural connection to marking, humans painted caves, carved into pottery, and even into their own skin. Therefore, 50,000 years ago when humans began to paint their ideas on the walls of caves they began to mark their experiences. It is not clear when humans began to mark themselves in the form of tattoos but John Rush, author of *Spiritual Tattoo*, believes that tattooing surely closely followed the first cave paintings because the "coding of the body... [is] something owned by the tattooed, and is never separate from the mind or culture that thought it up" (Rush 2005:5). Hence, while the caves belonged to Mother Nature, the tattoo belonged primarily to the individual, which made these permanent body markings an even truer representation of personal experience and pertinent to the culture of the individual. The location and theme of tattoo, the individual who is tattooed at a certain point in their life, and

the cultural significance and societal acceptance of the tattoo and its wearer are all factors which are important in understanding tattooing in context of society. There are many similarities between tattooing 50,000 years ago and today, and there are a few key differences.

In this section I will examine tattooing by ancient cultures, Europeans in the eighteenth century, and society in recent history to uncover the universal characteristics of tattooing that transcend time period, culture, and place and also to critically delve into current day tattooing practices in order to understand what tattoos are really saying about today's culture. I will begin with John Rush, who gives a spiritual and anthropological account of ancient tattooing and body modification practices while making connections to the present day to demonstrate how people today are tattooing for the same reasons as they were thousands of years ago. Nicholas Thomas, Anna Cole, and Bronwen Douglas have put together a collection of long articles about tattooing and cultural exchanges between locals and others in the book *Tattoo: Bodies, Art, and Exchange in the Pacific and the West*. The book begins with English Captain James Cook in the pacific island of Tahiti, describes how Christian Missionaries dealt with tattooing in the pacific, and explains New Zealand's Maori facial tattooing in the present day. These articles look at the concept of tattooing from a historical perspective which puts an emphasis on dates and the actual people who played a part in making the tattoo to be what it is today: a global and relatively mainstream phenomenon. I will also look into a collection of articles edited by Fritz Allhoff titled *I Ink, Therefore I am* which takes a philosophical and ethical look into the world of tattooing. With these three different vantage points, I will bring us through the long history of tattooing in hopes of shedding light on this practice. As Aristotle said, "If you would understand

anything, observe its beginning and development,” and in this literature review we will do just that.

I. Early Tattooing

The first tattooing tools have been found dating back to 30,000 BCE, and while no skin has survived from that time, the evidence is strong that tattooing was practiced in some form (Rush 2012:3). Jane Caplan supports this idea in her book Written on the Body by asserting that practically every culture at one time or another practiced tattooing (Caplan 2000:xi). It is not necessary to pin point the exact date when tattooing started; besides, it is impossible to do so. It is important, however, to understand that permanent body markings were indeed practiced by various prehistoric cultures and were probably developed independently by each culture. It was an integral way to mark and document an individual's experience just as cave painting was to these people. Early humans were motivated or compelled to tattoo and the practice still appeals to people today.

So the question then is, why tattoo? Why were early humans compelled to mark themselves? At its basics, to tattoo is to express one's ideas. I believe that all tattoos begin here, just as all cave paintings were also motivated by this same drive of expression; one can even argue that all art is an expression of an individual's ideas. Rush points out that tattoos can be understood as “...what an individual or culture values or considers important at the conscious or subconscious level” (Rush 2005:18). In early human history humans were tattooing what was important to them and relevant to their lives. Their tattoos were most likely inspired by the natural world, forces of energy, and what lay in other worlds, thus

taking on magical or mythical properties. The next paragraphs are examples of early tattoos to understand what they reveal about their respectful cultures.

Otzi: a healing art

Otzi the Iceman was discovered in 1991 in a glacier in the Italian Alps. He died around 3,200 BCE, and his body was perfectly preserved by the glacier. Fifty-eight tattoos were found on the Iceman, and many were found over arthritic joints. The tattoos were a series of dots and lines that are thought to have been used in the same way that acupuncture is used to target points of the body (Rush 2005: 26). This discovery shows that tattooing was quite possibly used by people during this time period as a healing art, or an attempt at it. It reflects Otzi's society's understanding that the body has specific pressure points and that when touched in the right way, pain can be alleviated.

Mummies of the Tombs of Pazyryk: preserving culture and history

People living in nomadic lifestyles have been uncovered with tattoos, most notably in the frozen tombs of Pazyryk. The burials took place between 500 and 300 BCE in the foothills of present-day Russia, China, and Mongolia. The nomadic tribes faced frequent geographic changes and they were likely to run into other tribes, which meant conflict was inevitable. Rush believes that tattoos were used by these nomadic people to identify clans. Markings on the skin could connect clans and tribes that may have once been united in previous generations. These tattoos would be of the utmost importance to identify alliances made in the past. They were vital to preventing wars and violence between or amongst clans. Some of the tattoos were used to tell stories or the generalizations of stories (Rush 2005:27).

While each nomadic group had different stylistic tendencies, the stories held a common theme. It is interesting to see that while the groups identified as different, they shared a lot of similarities as they lived in the same regions and were exposed to basically the same conditions. The ink on the mummies appears on the muscles but not on the layer of fat between the muscle and the skin, which suggests that the tattoos were made when many were between the ages of fifteen and eighteen, a pivotal point in the body's development and also in the individual's place in the community (Rush 2005:28).

Rush suggests that these tattoos were done to mark a rite of passage into adulthood, which would have "imbued the individual with power" (Rush 25:28). Marking the rite of passage of an individual not only asserts said individual's identity and place within the community but also demonstrates the vitality of the community as a whole. The community is surviving and continuing to grow and each individual member is an intentional and essential part of the whole. I believe that tattooing was a way for these people to record cultural traditions and events and pass them down to future generations. Rites of passage, creation stories, and different alliances were all recorded by these peoples and they were important to the group and to its survival. The tattoo was not like a document, which could be lost and easily destroyed. Rather, the tattoo was preserved as long as the wearer lived. The cultures stories, traditions, and alliances could not be separated from the members of the community as the tattoo went wherever the individuals went. Tattooing also was a painful mark to represent physical pain that these people surely endured living in such temporary conditions with frequent threat of battle. For the nomadic peoples of Eurasia, the tattoo served as a testament of strength, a preserver of culture, and a marker of adulthood.

Amunet: a living symbol of cosmic connections

The earliest written documents we have about tattoos from a specific culture belong to the Egyptians (Rush 200:19). It is unclear when they began tattooing and why they practiced tattooing and ear piercing, but archaeologists have uncovered some interesting connections between tattoos on mummies and designs on artifacts and the Egyptian god and goddess. Amunet was a priestess of the Goddess Hathor, who symbolized the cosmic mother to all life on earth, during Dynasty XI (2160-1994 BCE) (Gibert 2000:11). The mummy of Amunet is well preserved and one can clearly see tattoos on her arms and thighs and most notably an elliptical pattern below her naval. It has been suggested, by scholars including Rush, that these tattoos have a spiritual connection. The lines on Amunet's abdomen are a series of symmetrical arches. The lower set curves upwards so the minimum is at the pubic area and the upper set curve downwards making the maximum just below the naval (Gilbert 2000:11). These tattoos have an undeniable connection with fertility and death, its opposite. Amunet was the living symbol of the goddess of the mother to life, and, therefore, her tattoos may have served as a spiritual connection with this goddess. I believe that it was also a way for others and Amunet herself to recognize her spiritual connection with the Goddess Hathor, but I am not convinced that her tattoos were meant to literally connect Amunet with the Goddess Hathor. Her tattoos were her identity and because they were permanent – neither she nor anyone could ever forget it. Every morning and every night when Amunet looked down at her naked body she would have been reminded of her role as a priestess of the Goddess Hathor. Whether Amunet's tattoos served as a spiritual connection to the cosmic world is debatable. I believe that the tattoos were primarily to connect people who were living in the present moment and were less about connecting to other dimensions. The tattoo

has served primarily to affect the wearer by employing direct physical pain. This demonstrates the primary importance of being present in the moment, connecting with gods and goddesses or people who have lived in the past could have been a secondary consequence of the tattoo. I believe that Amunet's tattoos were an unfading reminder of her place in the Egyptian society in which she lived.

17th Century Japan: establishing new cultural meaning through art

Tattooing has been common among groups in opposition to a dominant culture and one of the most observable historical events that marks this was in Japan in the seventeenth century (Taliaferro and Odden 2012:7). Not only did tattooing take part in the counter-culture movement of the imperial world, but it also played a powerful role in “establishing cultural meaning...free from the rigid social system (Taliaferro and Odden 2012:7-8). Along with tattooing, ukiyo-e prints, irezumi, and Kabuki Theatre became popular among the middle class because these forms of expression focused on depicting ordinary life in a way that was seldom done in Imperial Japan before that time (Taliaferro and Odden 2012:8). Tattooing had a negative connotation in Japanese culture until the practice adopted the term horishi which was also used by wood block carvers. This allowed for the concept of tattooing to evolve into an art form which caused society to be more apt to accept it as a form instead of a barbaric, painful, and ugly practice (Taliaferro and Odden 2012:8). So, with the depiction of ordinary life in many artistic practices for the first time in Japan, what was once a counter culture movement became mainstream and representative of the Japanese culture we now know today. Taliaferro and Odden explain that the tattoo was a perfect medium for Japanese at this time because it has the amazing power, as an art form, to “mirror its audience and

simultaneously alter them” (Taliaferro and Odden 2012:8). This give and take between the tattoo and the individual, the tattoo and the artist, and the tattooed and the society can be seen time and time again. What is curious to understand is what the tattoo is saying about the society and then how by visibly asserting an identity on the skin, society is forever changed. This concept will be important to keep in mind throughout this work.

II. Tattooing in the South Pacific

It is believed by many that the English tattoo is derived from these words belonging to the societies of the South Pacific. The Tahitian word *tatau* means to strike or to mark (Thomas 2005:7) while the Samoan word *ta* means striking something (Taliaferro and Odden 2012:4). Thomas and Talifero and Oden suggest that Tahiti was the place where tattooing significantly entered the mainstream societies of Europe and then consequently the United States. The voyage of explorer Captain James Cook of England to the South Pacific and specifically Tahiti was the first time that Europeans not only observed but actually practiced tattooing on their own bodies. This happened in 1769, and ever since the tattoo has slowly evolved from a subcultural practice in the West, initially popular among sailors, into a fairly common and mainstream practice in present day Western society. This next section will look at tattooing practices in the South Pacific and what happened when the Europeans began to adopt and adapt the tattoo.

Tattooing has been practiced by South Pacific cultures for thousands of years. The Tahitians, Samoans, Polynesians and Maori of Aotearoa/New Zealand, are some of the more well-known tattoo cultures in today’s society that have a long and somewhat complicated history of tattooing. In Tahiti, for example, tattooing was basically abandoned for about one

hundred and fifty years due to missionary oppression on the island. Its revival in the 1980s has permitted for Tahiti to redefine the tattoo as a representation of the island's culture not only in Tahiti but also on a global scale. This has not always been a smooth process and many questions have arisen about the authenticity of the Tahitian tattoo, especially when it is taken out of its contexts of the traditional practice in the island. Tahiti is not alone in this struggle in this globalized, interconnected world, and this will be a reoccurring topic throughout this thesis.

While on different islands, the tattoos of the South Pacific all appear similar in design. They are known as “tribal tattoos” in today's western culture and are typically black ink tattoos comprised of geometrical patterns of curves, lines, and dots. The tattoos traditionally cover large parts of the body, such as the legs and lower abdomen, the chest and arms, the face and head, or even the whole body. While the tattoos are similar in appearance throughout the South Pacific, they serve a different role and have a specific place in each Polynesian culture.

In published research about South Pacific tattooing there are many generalizations made about the place of tattoo in the context of the community or the individual's life. There are certainly many aspects of tattoo culture in the Pacific that are common and true for all societies. Primarily, to tattoo was to assume a legitimate role in the community. Juniper Ellis writes in her chapter of *I Ink, Therefore I Am* that “tattoos [in the Pacific] allowed one to become a full adult, to own land, to marry, to assume one's place in both community and cosmos... Without tattoos, one lacked social standing and floated free, unregistered in relation to other humans and the gods” (Ellis 2012:17). Taliaferro and Odden explain the ‘requirement’ of everyone in the community to tattoo as a highly ritualized “way to anchor

the organizations in their society, regulating everything from politics to religion” (Taliaferro and Odden 2012:8). This suggests that control through rituals, such as coming of age rites of passage, was used to establish order in an otherwise potentially chaotic environments. While Ellis explains the tattoo as allowing the individual to find his/her place in the community and the world, Talaferro and Odden understand the tattoo as a tool to control the community. Although both are valid interpretations, it is important to understand the differences in the author’s approach to explaining the role of the tattoo in the Pacific. It also demonstrates the fact that the tattoo can serve different purposes for different people. This suggests that understanding the tattoo in any context is complex and ultimately open ended.

Samoa: tattooing as part of community ritual

In Samoa “to tattoo” is the word *tatatau*; *ta* means to strike and *tatau* refers to lines and motifs. Archaeologists have found pottery of ancestors of Polynesian people dating back to 1500 BCE. The same tools that Samoans use to tattoo were found amongst the pottery, and the designs on the artifacts were similar in design as the traditional Samoan tattoo (Mallon 2005:148). While the origins are contested, there is certainly a connection with the Samoan tattoo and the pottery of the early South Pacific peoples. There are two family branches on Samoa that used to be associated with tattooing specialists, or *tufuga tatatua* (Mallon 2005:147). The tattooing methods and motifs have been passed down from generation to generation. This not only allowed for the learning of technical knowledge of the practice but also, and maybe more importantly, served as an agent to remembering and recording cultural events, knowledge, and stories of the Samoan people. Today, there are a number of tattoo practitioners in Samoa who are not related to the two main families. It is interesting to note

that typically these practitioners use electronic machines whereas the *tufuga tatatua* today still practice traditional methods using ‘*au*’ or tattooing combs made of shell, bone and wood. The old or traditional style normally consisted of large plain bands and dark areas while the new or more current tattoos done in Samoa tend to have more ornamentation and fine details (Mallon 2005:150).

Men tattoo from the waist to the knee which is called *pe’a* while Samoan women traditionally tattoo *malu*, which is from the knees to the top of their thighs. The style of *malu* is light line work with simple patterns or designs whereas *pe’a* is characteristically comprised of dense shading and parallel line-work (Mallon 2012:145-146). Taliafero and Odden describe *pe’a* as a highly ritualized practice and they argue that the ritual is just as important, if not more important, than the final image – the tattoo itself. This idea of the ritual being as important as the final product can be seen in Mallon’s description of the tattooing of the sons of the *tulafae*, who are the orators or talking chiefs of the community. All of the sons of appropriate age (usually marked by puberty) are tattooed simultaneously in the public village open space. This process of the *pe’a*, special for the sons of the orators, would last anywhere from four to six weeks. Friends and family would plan events, such as dance and wrestling, while the sons were being tattooed (Mallon 2005:150). Because of the length of the tattooing process and the events that were planned during that time, the ritual of the *pe’a* was important and Taliafero and Odden argue perhaps more important than the tattoo itself. This is not to say that the tattoo aesthetically was disregarded. Here, tattooing is one part of a ritual coming of age celebration, but not the only aspect and arguably not even the most important part of the ceremony.

There has been controversy over what it means to tattoo in the traditional or authentic Samoan style because of the difference in practice and instruments, the evolution in motif, and also the globalization of the tribal tattoo. There is a strong movement to define Samoan tattooing as only the tattoos practiced by Samoans in their early history. The *tatau* is an unchanging and ancient practice that is a strong symbol of the Samoan culture and a source of pride in the Samoan identity (Mallon 2005:149). While this is true in some ways, it is not true in others. For example, many of the designs are basically the same yet there has been a shift to finer line work and ornamentation that Samoans three hundred years ago did not practice. Also, Mallon points out that while the *pe'a* still occurs to this day, the traditional dance and music that used to take place within the community has been replaced by “young men with modern musical instruments” (Mallon 2005:151). The ritual has changed, or rather evolved to suite the people, and specifically the youth, of Samoan society. Therefore, if contemporary Samoans who were born and raised on the island are tattooing in such a way that they are upholding certain practices of their ancestors but also “acting on creative impulse and responding to their changing social environment,” (Mallon 2005:151) is that not a truly authentic embodiment of the Samoan tattoo? The argument goes both ways and sheds light on the many conflicts that globalization has created, especially in traditional indigenous cultures and when dealing with a multidimensional practice like tattooing.

Tahiti: marking warrior masculinity and male friendship

The island of Tahiti has a similar history as Samoa with the tattoo but with some key differences, such as distinct cultural practices and European interaction in the eighteenth century. The Tahitian word *tatau*, the same as that of Samoa, means to strike or mark

(Thomas 2005:7). The traditional practice of Tahitian tattooing is called *Ma'ohi* in which the tools and motifs are considered the 'authentic' Tahitian tattooing practice. Makiko Kuwahara explains in his article *Multiple Skins: Space, Time and Tattooing in Tahiti*, that to tattoo with traditional methods, as opposed to electric razors or needles, prolongs the pain so that people suffer more; this is important "in terms of warrior masculinity" of the Tahitian culture (Kuwahara 2005:186). Pain is an important part of the tattoo experience because it allows the tattooed person to understand pain and also tolerance. This was of the utmost importance to Tahitian warriors, who had to fight and also know their limit of physical pain and mental strength.

According to Kuwahara, the tattoo world in Tahiti is male dominated and is a means by which men in the community express masculinity and friendships with other men. All Tahitians go through a coming of age period called *taure'are'a*. Both males and females experience this coming of age practice in their late teens or early twenties. Women usually start spending most of their time in the home, learning the practices of keeping the home. This is when young women enter the female domain of the Tahitian home. They work with the women of the household, usually their mother, to learn from her how to be the head of the home. Males spend time with their fathers and uncles working or hanging out with their male friends. Activities usually include playing soccer, surfing, drinking, smoking, and tattooing. For Tahitian males, this period of *taure'are'a* is characteristically frustrating as they are in-between defined roles in society. The Tahitian word to describe this feeling is *fiu* which means 'to be fed up with' (Kuwahara 2005:173). They are no longer children who are protected and guided by elders in the community but they also have not settled down to the stability of marriage and a family.

Tattooing is a common practice during taure'a for a couple of reasons. Tattooing for Tahitian males is a way to express masculinity. Their ancestors, who were warriors, tattooed as a display of strength and perseverance of pain and this is still true for those who have tattoos today, especially tattoos that cover large areas of the body. Tahitian tattoo artists are typically male and therefore there is a great bond that is formed between the male tattoo artist and the male being tattooed. It is important during taure'a that males spend time with other males (Kuwahara 2005:174). It is essentially the last time in their life, before marriage, when they will be free to do so. So tattooing is a natural practice for young men to share during taure'a. These bonds that males make during this time are important for the future as it is typical for men to form and maintain strong male bonds during their lives. Tattooing here plays an important link to the Tahitian male culture.

The main difference between Samoan tattooing and Tahitian tattooing is that in Tahiti the practice was abandoned in the 1830s due to missionary suppression and only recently, in the 1980s, has been revived (Kuwahara 2005:171). Samoan tattooing, while it was suppressed by missionaries, was never completely abandoned. The revival of tattooing in Tahiti in the 1980s allowed for the practice to be reestablished on the island and around the world in a unique way. Today, Tahitian tattooing is very connected in the global tattoo network while Samoan tattooing has never really been able to evolve into a global force, in part due to the strong force to keep Samoan tattooing on the island in order to maintain 'authenticity'. Also, Tahitian tattooing has been fueled by youth in a cultural revitalization effort by young Tahitians. Tattooing has become a way for Tahitians to create and assert their identities while the Samoans have used tattoos to represent their identity but not necessarily affirm it.

I believe that it is not a coincidence that Tahitian tattooing is very well connected to the global tattoo network and Tahitian tattooing was revitalized by youth in the 1980s. This demonstrates that the Tahitian youth at the time were connected with other parts of the world and identified with global forces as well as local ones. Samoa, on the other hand, never lost its traditional tattoo practice with the arrival of the missionaries. Therefore, there was never a revitalization the practice; there was never a need for the Samoan youth to recreate and reassert their identity, and therefore there was never the same circumstances that allowed Samoan tattooing to enter into the global network. Some say that Samoan tattooing is more true to ‘authentic’ Polynesian tattooing than the tattooing that is happening in Tahiti. But, I do not believe that it is fair to decide that one practice is more legitimate or ‘authentic’ than the other. The histories of Samoan and Tahitian tattooing are different and therefore their current tattooing practices in a local and global context are also different.

Maori of Aotearoa: asserting beauty, identity, courage, and presence through *moko*

The Maori peoples of New Zealand/Aotearoa practice full body tattooing similar to the other South Pacific islands but also have the tradition of tattooing *moko*, or facial tattoo. Men wear a full faced *moko* while women tattoo their lips and chin. *moko* has become the symbol of the Maori people and has come to represent the revitalization and pride of the indigenous of New Zealand. The fact that *moko* is worn on the face makes it an always present and visible symbol of one’s identity. Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, a female Maori *moko* wearer, explained in an interview with Aaron Schachter that the Maori tattoo is part of a Pacific tradition of beauty, identity, courage, and “it is very much an assertion of who a person is; it may be assertion of who the person wants to be” (Schachter 2013:1:51). She explains that

moko is a celebration of life, a way to remember those who have died, and also a declaration to the rest of the world by the Maori saying “we are here, we survived what has happened and we will never go away” (Schachter 2013:2:20). She is referring to the brutal persecution of the Maori by the missionaries and Europeans who colonized New Zealand, and this interaction will be discussed further later in this section.

The male *moko* has traditionally been worn by Maori warriors as “tattooing and modification of the face...can engender for the viewer strong feelings of intimidation” and is also a testament of strength because of the painful process of facial tattooing (Nikora, et al. 2005:201). The symbols in the tattoo are unique to each individual and serve as the story of one’s life while simultaneously becoming their identity. Te Pehi Kupe, Ngāti Toa paramount chief, traveled to England in 1826 to demonstrate his *moko*. When he was asked what his tattoo meant, in the little English that he spoke he explained that it was like how the Europeans signed their names; it was his identity and the story of his community and of his life. He drew the symbols of his *moko* for the English to demonstrate their meaning, and these drawings traveled around the world. They were copied and reprinted on books and papers that had nothing to do with nor paid any attention to Te Pehi Kupe.

Ellis ponders the phenomena of copying, reprinting, and reinterpreting someone’s *moko*. What happens when a tattoo design was that intended specifically for one person of a certain culture is spread around the world and removed from the face (or body) of the wearer to be copied onto books or even tattooed onto other individuals? The consequences of this are exacerbated by the fact that those who encounter this design have no knowledge of the cultural significance; they might only understand that it is “Polynesian” or “tribal”. The identity of an individual has been removed, distorted, and, if re-tattooed, ignorantly applied

to someone else's body. The tattoo, which was once a symbol of strength and cultural identity, has suddenly become an artistic ornament ignorantly worn by an individual who has no real concept of the culture it was created by or the individual it was created for.

This "identity theft" has occurred countless times, and Ngahuia admits that it is upsetting to see Maori designs go global as it is a rip-off, but it can sometimes be tribute. She explains that it is a tribute when the tattoo serves as a connection between peoples and cultures. She gives the example of Mike Tyson, who has a partial *moko*, as a clear connection to a warrior identity and an attempt by Tyson to connect to his family history, even though his ancestry has been lost. Ngahuia admires the fact that Maori tattoos can serve as a way for those without knowledge of their past to recreate a deeper connection with one's place in the world (Schachter 2013:3:30). So while some tattoos can rip off cultures, Ngahuia gives the tattoo advice of "do it, but do it with meaning and intent" (Schachter 2013:10).

Today, the wearers of *Moko* have come to represent the cultural leaders of the community. In an article written by Linda Waimarie Nikora, Mohi Rua and Ngahuia Te Awekotuku titled "Wearing *Moko*: Maori Facial Marking in Today's World", Ngahuia explains how after she got her *moko* she was handed a role to be the female chanter in a welcoming ritual, even though there were other non-*moko* wearing women in the tribe who were fully qualified to assume this role (Nikora, et al. 2005:199). As a consequence of this always visible tattoo, *moko* wearers are expected to possess a high degree of cultural competence. While most of the time *moko* wearers possess such cultural competence, I believe that this high expectation can be problematic. A non-*moko* wearer might know the traditional rituals and the stories of the Maori but exclude his or herself because a *moko* wearer seems more capable of leading the community solely because of their *moko*. This

exclusion may be by others or by the individual and overall the community could lose out on positive participation by its community member. This situation demonstrates the power of the tattoo and the importance of placement on the body.

Ngahua Te Awekotuku wears the traditional female *moko* of a simple lineal design on her chin and completely solid tattooed lips and it is interesting to note that female *moko* has been the dominant practice of the modern Maori society. Christian missionaries banned tattooing in New Zealand in the nineteenth century deeming it uncivilized. Maori men were especially not allowed to tattoo *moko* because of the blatant and intimidating appearance of their full faced tattoos. Furthermore, the missionaries and Europeans in New Zealand feared the violent warriors of the Maori people, and they associated the male *moko* with fighting. The female *moko* was much less intimidating in appearance and also not associated with violence, but rather with marriage age and adulthood within the community. For this reason, women have continuously worn *moko*, even throughout the missionary ban. This has empowered Maori women with *moko* to be the visual representatives of Maori tattooing and the Maori culture which differentiates New Zealand tattooing with the male dominated cultural representatives of Samoa and Tahiti.

III. Europeans in the South Pacific

Captain James Cook arrived in the South Pacific island of Tahiti for the first time in 1769. Previous voyages by other European explorers allowed for more cultural exchange than ever before, primarily because the sailors already had a basic grasp of the Tahitian language (Thomas 2005:17). The Tahitians understood that it was in their best interest to receive Cook and his crew without resistance in order to minimize violence as had occurred

with previous encounters with European crews. Both of these factors permitted an open sharing of cultural practices. “Cook and his crew were invited to enter into Tahitian sociality,” and many of the sailors stayed in the locals’ homes, ate meals with them, and notoriously partook in relations with local women (Thomas 2005:18). This unique set of circumstances meant that tattooing, or *tatau*, was not only observed, but also practiced willingly on Cook’s sailors (Thomas 2005:18).

Thomas points out that it was not only the seemingly perfect circumstances that allowed for the tattooing of European sailors but also the changing mindset from that of the Spanish voyagers who had come before them

The Spanish were more or less insensitive to, and intolerant of, cultural difference. They described indigenous custom fleetingly and superficially, and exhibited no desire to adopt any aspect of it. Cook’s curiosity was the product of epochal rather than national difference. His voyages represented stereotypically enlightened adventures. [Thomas 2005:17]

This difference of perception between the Spanish and English not only explains why Cook’s voyage to Tahiti was the first time that European sailors were tattooed but also helps us to understand the circumstances in which the Spanish viewed the cultural practices and body art of the indigenous people of Latin America during the Conquest. This surely still has an effect on the stigma associated today with tattooing in the culture.

The word “tattoo” first appeared in English in 1771 after the return of Cook’s sailors (Thomas 2005:8). It is thought that tattooing was a practice in Europe beforehand as there are accounts of Greek, Roman and Celtic tattooing practices that survived on the fringes of society (Caplan 2000:xvi). This raises the question as to why tattooing as Cook and his sailors experienced in Tahiti was rediscovered and adopted by Europeans when it already existed in Europe. It could be for the appeal of the exotic that differentiated Tahitian tattoos

from early European tattoos. Furthermore, why were Cook's sailors the first sailors to tattoo? It could simply be a question of timing and circumstances that allowed for personal relations and friendships between Cook's voyagers and the Tahitians (Thomas 2005). The act of tattooing in which skin is punctured and blood is shed demonstrated a level of mutual confidence and trust between the Tahitians and the sailors (Thomas 2005:17) and that in itself can explain why tattooing was brought back to Europe and adopted in a completely new way. Tattooing was a practice used to visibly demonstrate the relationships between the locals and the visitors and although it was a painful experience, the relation marked an overall positive encounter with two somewhat opposite groups of the time.

Cook's Sailors: adopting and adapting the tattoo to meet their needs

Many sailors were interested in tattooing because it was a souvenir from their trip that they would never lose and could always readily demonstrate. Thomas explains that this was common ship culture as many sailors sought to "privatize an aspect of the voyage's official mission" (Thomas 2005:19). Sailors were not able to have a space of their own nor many personal possessions on their voyages, therefore the idea of a tattoo was appealing as it was not only a souvenir but also a form of self-expression, and a private and intimate belonging that took up virtually no space (Thomas 2005:19). Tattooing was also a form of collecting that transcended the "acquisition of a material object" (Thomas 2005:20). This can explain why tattoos are appealing to our modern day consumerist society and also to anyone wanting to escape from material consumerism. The fact that the tattoo is "unambiguously part of you" (Thomas 2005:20) is probably the most powerful reason as to why Cook's sailors were first

intrigued to partake in the experience and why many sailors, and people, to come after them were also attracted to the tattoo.

Tattoos among sailors were also used to mark a collective relationship between crew members. John Elliott, a mid-shipman during Cook's second voyage, reported that he and his messmates tattooed the same star on their left breast (Holms 1984:20). They observed an elite group of natives in Barbara with the same tattoo as a way to distinguish themselves from other Islanders and decided to do the same (White 2005:74). This motif was reported to have quickly spread around the ship as many other sailors tattooed the same star or their own group symbol (Holms 1984). The concept was not only influenced by the sailors' interest in a souvenir from their trip but also their desire to feel connected to a small group and to emphasize a collective experience, which thus meant that no sailor was alone. This feeling of solidarity was of the upmost importance for the sailors' mental health and stability during their voyage.

Sailors also held many superstitions to save them from harm and the tattoo became a method of protection. Sailors have been known to tattoo 'H-O-L-D F-A-S-T' onto their fingers to prevent them from falling overboard. Some have tattooed animals that know how to quickly find shore if they fall overboard because they are hydrophobic, like pigs or roosters. These animals are tattooed on the feet of the sailors so that if they fall overboard they too will find shore quickly, guided by the pig or rooster tattooed on their foot (Taliaferro and Odden 2012:6). This gives tattoos a spiritual and energetic power that relates to similar intentions of indigenous tattooing practices.

A difference has been observed between European visitors and those who spent considerable time in the local community. White explains that for the sailors and other

travelers who were visiting the islands, “being tattooed was a novel activity [which was] engaged in out of curiosity,” while people who spent considerable time in the community tattooed themselves as symbol of their participation in the culture (White 2005:74). The motifs of the tattoos were those of the indigenous tattoo artists and were evidence of the European’s encounter with the Pacific culture (White 2005:74). At the same time, there was another type of cultural exchange occurring between the European sailors and the local tattooists. With the traditional tattoo practices and expertise, the sailors were requesting European motifs including their initials, important dates, and names (White 2005:74). This choice of tattoo theme marks the point in which Pacific tattooing was no longer just adopted but also adapted by Europeans and it spread quickly among crew members and ships.

The history of tattooing in the Pacific demonstrates many general themes and practices of tattoo culture- past and present. Sailors tattooed themselves to gain a sense of control over their bodies and personal possession at a time in their lives when those two sentiments were lacking. They also tattooed to mark a collective group bond and/or an important life experience. Tattooing was a cultural exchange between the Europeans and the locals that demonstrated a basic level of trust and confidence in the newly formed friendships and also helped Europeans gain acceptance among the islanders (White 2005:72). In this, tattooing becomes an institution as it was a prescribed practice which performed a specific social function and shaped identities, both personal and social (White 2005:73). I believe that Cook’s sailors are the prime example of the place of tattoos in cultural exchange, and this story has repeated itself time and time again. This is the most obvious example that I have found in the history of tattoos where one culture literally learns tattooing, takes it, and then makes it their own. It is interesting to see how the tattoo changes, whether it be the design,

technique, body placement, or gender differences, when a different group of people begin to practice it.

Process of the Tattoo: the artist and shop

I spent nine months in Ecuador, studying sustainable development. During the final six months of the trip, I spent a lot of time with an Ecuadorian tattoo artist named Sebastian. When friends and family asked him to, Sebastian would travel to them with his tattoo equipment and tattoo them. We took two tattoo trips together, one to Jipihapa and Manta in the province of Manabí and the other trip to his mother's house in Machala. The following pages describe my experience on our first trip. This was the moment when my interests were sparked to begin my research on tattooing.

Blanca: the butterfly cover-up

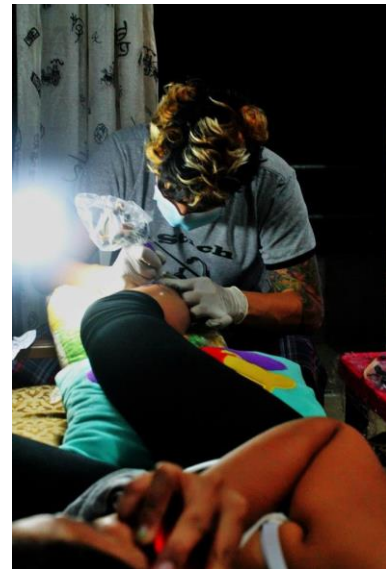
The first trip I went on with Sebastian was to the coastal town of Jipijapa in the province of Manabí. We stayed with Blanca, a friend of Sebastian's, at her mother's house. I was not exactly sure who lived in the house and who was visiting, but there were always at



least five children, four young adults, and three or four older adults in the house. The grandmother also lived in the house, or nearby. The family had a cook who also washed the dishes. I stayed in Blanca's daughter's bedroom, which had a brightly colored hand painted Disney themed mural on three of the walls. Sebastian and I stayed in Jipijapa for two days, during which Sebastian worked on a tattoo that Blanca had on her leg.

It was a black ink calf tattoo of shooting stars that she had done a few years back. She did not like the tattoo and wanted it covered. Sebastian planned to cover it up with a tattoo of three butterflies and two flowers. The picture on the previous page is of the tattoo Sebastian did that night. It is the first stage of the cover-up. In the next session, Sebastian planned to add bright colors to the butterflies and the flowers in order to brighten up the work.

He did the tattoo on the couch of the living room in Blanca's house (as seen in the photo below). In order to maintain a clean work space, Sebastian saran wrapped the pillow and couch. While he tattooed, I painted with three little girls, one of which was Blanca's daughter, and took pictures of the tattoo. Sebastian liked to take a before and after picture of the tattoo and also some action shots of him tattooing to put up on Facebook. We listened to the local Jipijapa radio station, which gave a shout out to Sebastian tattooing at



Blanca's house. People came in and out of the room to see the tattoo. It was a very familiar experience. In terms of payment, Blanca did not have the \$90 in full so, she promised to pay half at that time and half later, when Sebastian came back to add the color. Sebastian was happy to make this deal, but in the later months became frustrated when Blanca did not want to pay nor did she want him to come back and finish as she was not happy with the work.

Evelyn: the birthday butterfly tattoo

After two days in Jipijapa, we traveled to Manta, the fifth most populated city in Ecuador and located on the coast in the province of Manabí. We arrived by bus and Evelyn,

an acquaintance of Blanca, met us at the station. She had contacted Sebastian through Facebook that she wanted a tattoo for her birthday. They had never met before but shared some common friends. We took a taxi to just outside of Evelyn's barrio. As we walked down a dirt road towards a cluster of unstable looking houses, we drew the attention of everyone outside. Sebastian was wearing plaid shorts and a grey polo, and he was carrying his equipment in a plastic tool box. The tattoos on his arms and his calves were clearly visible. I, at his side, was wearing green skinny jeans and a black crop top. My light skin, my non-conservative style, and the fact that I am 5'10'' turned even more heads.³ We visibly were outsiders and while we did not draw any negative attention, it was clear that Evelyn was providing us with a level of protection that I was thankful for.

Evelyn lived in a modest home with a cement floor. We sat in the living/dining room and greeted her mother and her brother. Sebastian pulled out his computer and began to talk with Evelyn about her tattoo. She wanted a butterfly and I remember her telling Sebastian that she didn't really care what it looked like. She wanted him to make the design. While this is something that Sebastian and any other tattoo artist loves to hear, it is a little concerning when the client wants to have no input at all. The risk is that the artist takes full reign of the design and then the client is upset after the tattoo is done, or halfway done, because the design is not at all what he or she wanted. So, Sebastian began to question Evelyn as they looked at pictures of butterfly tattoos. He asked her how many she wanted, the position she wanted them to be in, and how big she wanted the tattoo. Meanwhile, I sat on an armchair and talked to Evelyn's mother about who I was and where I came from. She was very sweet and I could tell she was genuinely curious about how I had arrived at her home all the way

³ The average height of an Ecuadorian male is 1.6 m and I am 1.7 m tall.

from the United States. She also asked if I had any tattoos. And I smiled shyly and said no, but that I wanted one. I was not comfortable showing her my tattoo behind my ear mostly because it would require explanation in Spanish, and while my language skills were advanced enough to explain I still grew tired from a full day of speaking Spanish so I had learned how to avoid certain unnecessary stories. How that affected my time in Ecuador requires another investigation for another time.

So, Sebastian drew while I chatted with Evelyn and her family. Her mother went into the kitchen to make lunch, which is a biggest meal of the day in Ecuadorian culture. I poked my head into the kitchen to ask if I could help in any way. I always liked to help prepare meals, especially in Ecuador because the ingredients and recipes were different than what I was used to at home. Evelyn's mother looked at me, smiled, and politely declined. I asked her if she was sure and told her that I was happy to help. She poked her head out of the kitchen and said something to Sebastian about how nice I was. Without even looking up from his drawing, he said "*ella no es la típica gringa*" - "She is not the typical white person, or American." He had a slight smile on his face. At that moment I realized the extent to which many people in Ecuador saw me and saw the typical, or their idea of the typical, young American. Their perception of me was influenced by U.S. television, movies, and other forms of media, but, also by their actual experiences and interactions with Americans. For Evelyn and her family, during the past fifteen years their beach city had become a tourist town, but their interaction with the tourists were limited. Many resorts in cities like Manta are gated and there is little to no interaction between the tourists and the locals. This sets up a barrier which is reinforced by strong class difference, language difference, and cultural divisions. I was graciously accepted into their home and I acted as if I were in any other

home in any other part of the world when I offered to help prepare lunch. I cannot say if an Ecuadorian would have done the same. I do not know. Regardless, Evelyn's family was surprised that I was nice enough to offer to help. Her mother refused politely, as any Ecuadorian mother would do when hosting guests. This experience will always stay with me because I was rather surprised that she was surprised. I did not realize to what extent some people saw the color of my skin and automatically expected a certain behavior. So, in the end, we ate a delicious lunch of hot soup, white rice with tuna salad, and *chifle*-plantain chips-and chatted about tattoos.

After lunch, Sebastian had finished the design, and he prepared the space to tattoo. He set up a makeshift table in the entryway to the house where there was a tin roof and an open room. He covered a table with plastic wrap and placed his inks and tattoo machine on it. We set up chairs for the spectators. Evelyn wanted that tattoo right above her hipbone on her side. It was a simple design of one large butterfly and three small ones, all connected by curvy lines. Sebastian applied the design, and I took a picture of it. He began to tattoo.

Soon, Evelyn's aunts arrived. We sat in the entry way on chairs and chatted. The women were laughing and grimacing at the same time for the suspected pain that she was



experiencing. A little later, one of Evelyn's uncle arrived. He was quick to show us his arm tattoo and one on his back of a Catholic saint. The tattoos were faded and looked to be at least ten years old. It reminded me of tattoos I see on fifty year old American men who were tattooed in their younger years. Three young boys also came to see the show. They said that they heard the buzz of the tattoo

machine and were curious to know what was going on; they had never heard a tattoo machine before. First, they stood outside of the house staring at Sebastian and Evelyn through an open window. This lasted for a while. Then, they came inside and also just stood and stared right in front of Sebastian and Evelyn. Evelyn's mom said that they probably had never heard or seen an artist tattooing before. They soon became bored and left to play. This tattoo was very much a group experience. Most of Evelyn's family showed up at least for a little while. Her father opened a bottle of sparkling wine for us to share. We laughed and shared stories meanwhile Sebastian worked, and Evelyn stayed as still as possible.

After three hours, and a nap for me, the tattoo was complete. I took a picture of it (as seen on the left) and also the tattoo that Evelyn had on her wrist, which Sebastian touched up for free. I asked Evelyn why she wanted a butterfly and she told me that it was because butterflies are free, and they can fly. I remember thinking that I could understand how by admiring the ability for butterflies to fly freely, she herself wanted to feel the same freedom from her barrio. But, I also remember feeling like her response did not reflect the whole story. It did not explain why she chose to put the tattoo on her side, in a very sexy area. Nor did it explain her choice of shades of the color pink. Did Evelyn want a butterfly because Blanca had just tattooed a butterfly? Did she put it on her hip because she considered it to be sexy? Why pink when butterflies, especially in Ecuador, are commonly to be orange, red, brown, and blue?

Sebastian and Blanca were convinced that Evelyn got a butterfly tattoo to compete or put herself on the same level as Blanca. The tattoo was a symbol of status or even competition-competition of sexiness, prestige, and of relative wealth. I say "relative wealth" because there is no class difference between Blanca, Evelyn and many of their other friends,

but their tattoos demonstrated relative wealth within their social group. The way in which this status was asserted, communicated, and rivaled was through the internet and primarily Facebook. In a small, poor city where there is not much to do, I observed that Facebook was the main way for these girls to communicate amongst themselves. Everything was communicated through Facebook and this virtual profile was a more powerful representation of the individual than the individual herself. Sebastian was successful in marketing his business and obtaining clients from all around Ecuador through Facebook because it was the main means of communication for the population he was aiming to reach.

Tattoo Artists without Borders: Sebastian's work in Ecuador

It was important to Sebastian to travel around the country, enter poor barrios, and tattoo people who do not have access to formal tattoo shops. He thought that everyone should have the opportunity to tattoo, and he was providing a service to those who were excluded because of their class, status, or location. Most importantly, he wanted to deliver a clean and safe service to these people because most lower class citizens only have access to amateur tattooists who use harmful inks and dirty needles. Sebastian felt that it was his duty to provide clean tattoos and a professional experience to all classes of Ecuadorians, and he used his opportunity to also educate his clients and their families on safe tattoo practices in hopes that they would tattoo with him or other safer artists in the future.

This experience, of entering somebody's home and tattooing them in their living room, is something that is not allowed to take place by professional tattoo artists in the United States because of regulations. Because of this, tattooing is a safer practice in the US than in Ecuador, tattooing is more of a professional business interaction in the U.S. than in

Ecuador, and the tattoo is slightly more exclusive in the U.S. than in Ecuador. The tattoo industry is more developed in the United States, and therefore more people have access to the product (the tattoo). These professional shops exclude the people who cannot pay in full at the time of the visit. It is important to remember that the minimum tattoo price is about \$60 in the US. On the other hand, in Ecuador Sebastian was able to tattoo people who wanted a tattoo for a minimum price of \$30 and regardless of their ability to pay in full. He was able to travel to the clients to tattoo them. He shared meals and spent the night at the homes of his clients. And, while doing all of this, he was able to tattoo his clients safely. His work was educational and familiar. This circumstance in Ecuador has created and allowed for a unique tattooing experience. In Ecuador, the tattoo is shared, familiar, and inherently social. It takes on a different meaning than the U.S. tattoo. In the United States, the tattoo is business first and social second, at least for mainstream society. Of course, there are exceptions to this rule, and I will later discuss how sub-cultures that practice tattoos have a social priority over an economic one. But, these groups make up a small fraction of the national population. In the rest of this chapter I will further explore the tattoo practices in the U.S. and Ecuador.

The Consumption of the Tattoo: U.S. versus Ecuador

Today it is common that people, especially those who are getting their first tattoo, have just recently met the artist. This sets up an interesting dynamic because basically a stranger is making a mark that will last forever. The wearer proudly demonstrates the tattoo to the world without really knowing the one who marked them. This creates a disconnection between the producer (artist) and the consumer (wearer). The consequences are obvious: the wearer intended for a different design, but the artist did not understand the wishes of the

client; the wearer does not feel a strong connection to the tattoo and treats it much like the other things they wear that are made by people they do not know (clothing, shoes, etc.); the artist feels and acts like a machine that pumps out tattoos for people to wear them in the world but never return; or, the artist never understands the gravity of his work. Tattoos are not like paintings, which are under the total control of the artist. On the contrary, tattoos walk out of the shop and take on a life of their own. The wearer is disconnected from the tattoo artist, and the artist is disconnected from his art and his canvass. This can be a struggle for some, and inspiration for others.

I consider the tattoo business in the Western world to be extremely entrepreneurial; there will never be a state run tattoo industry. The closest thing that we see to this is Cuba's government program, which offers free tattoo removal to any of its citizens. Unlike shoes made in China and jeans made in Bangladesh, the consumer in this scenario does have contact with their producer. Even if the moment is fleeting, nobody ever forgets their artist because on that day their body has been permanently marked forever. Tattoos are expensive, for the artist and for the client. The artists and shops in America must follow sanitary regulations of operating rooms under U.S. law. The high prices for equipment and materials forces the artist to open a shop and advertise to a wide client base. These circumstances set up for a disconnected relationship between client and artist because money is the important factor of the interaction. The artist depends on money from the client, and on top of that, the shop takes a large cut of the money which makes the artist even more dependent on acquiring clients.

This is the general tattoo experience in the United States and Europe. It is not to say that the artist and the Client are not amicable, nor is it to say that there is not a real personal

relation between the two⁴. The fact that the tattoo is based on money makes it a commodity, and therefore the social relations are weakened, but not necessarily eliminated. It is only relatively recently, in the 20th and 21st centuries, that the tattoo has become an economic commodity with a sale value. In other parts of the world and in the past, the tattoo was a cultural institution that was not marketed. It was engrained in the culture and social order. There were one or two families in the society who were the tattoo artists. There were specific peoples in the society who were tattooed. There might have been goods or food traded for a tattoo, but the tattoo did not depend on these goods. The tattoo was a gift that was ceremoniously given. It did not hold a price, and it did not require payment. Today, in the United States I have seen that the social value of the tattoo, which was and still is dominant in tattoo cultures such as the Maori of New Zealand, has been replaced by the economic value that capitalism requires of business.

In comparison, Ecuador has a unique tattoo practice due to its history and predominately Catholic, mestizo population. Tattooing has been practiced in Ecuador for the past couple of decades. It is not a new thing but the tattoo very much remained on the fringes of society until very recently. Many Ecuadorians I spoke with in my interviews explained that tattoos were still taboo and that general culture associates tattoos with criminals or bad people. This sentiment was very strong with just about everyone with whom I spoke. This was an interesting thing to acknowledge because all of the people I interviewed were getting a tattoo as they were explaining how they were not accepted by the general population. These people were young students and completely broke the stereotype that they were describing.

⁴ It is important to note that there is a strong community of people who tattoo and are tattooed. They attend tattoo conventions and pertain to a specific tattoo culture. Within this culture there is a strong emphasis on the social relationship between the client and artist. But, the majority of people who have at least one tattoo in the U.S. do not pertain to this tattoo culture.

So, either they were courageous individuals who were prepared to face harsh backlash from their society, or the sentiments are changing. I think that there was a little bit of both factors at play. Firstly, many young people accept tattoos as they accept gay people, piercings and non-religious peoples. Younger generations tend to be more accepting than their parents', who are more accepting than their parents'. This is something that is happening around the world as we participate in a more globalized and tolerant world than ever before. Secondly, most of the backlash someone with a tattoo would receive would be from their family, namely their mother. With many students living at the university and more young people going to university than ever before in Ecuador, they do not have to face every day confrontation of their tattoos by their family. Therefore, young people have more freedom to tattoo because the negative consequences are minimalized due to their living circumstances.

It is of the utmost importance to understand the tattoo business in Ecuador because how business is conducted and who the artists are are crucial to the tattoos themselves. There are no formal regulations in Ecuador for how tattoos are practiced. In contrast, in the United States there are specific regulations that determine the size of the tattoo room, the materials on the walls and floors, the types of objects that can be in the space, the cleaning methods of the equipment, and all artists must be licensed. This system is to ensure clean and safe tattoos. Even though this system is not in place in Ecuador, a small group of artists in the capital are working to form an association, but they function outside of the government's control.

Three Levels of Tattooing in Ecuador

In Ecuador there are three different types of tattoo experiences. They create three different levels of tattooing that inherently reflect social status and class. The first level or experience, which is of the highest status, is the proper shop that is identical to a shop in the US. The social order between working artists and shop owner functions basically the same in both countries. The clientele arrive at the shop, meet with the artist, and buy their tattoo. The interaction is based around money, just as in the US. These shops, which are centralized in the three major cities of Ecuador-Quito, Guayaquil, and Cuenca-cater to a foreign clientele base; I was told by Sebastian that these shops do their best to overcharge tourists, or more specifically *gringos*, in order to make them pay similar prices that they would pay in Europe or America. A girl on my trip got a tattoo from one of these shops and she paid \$120 whereas Sebastian, who belongs to the second level, would have charged her \$60 or \$70. The tattoo was clean and well done, but out of the reasonable price range for many Ecuadorians. For this reason, the commercialized tattoo shops in Ecuador are accessible to upper class Ecuadorians and foreign tourists, the two groups that are generally considered to be of the highest social status in Ecuadorian society.

The second level of the tattoo shop is the shops that are not formal businesses and occur in more of the informal sector of the economy. Sebastian worked out of his father's house in an office room turned into studio. There was a cushioned table for the client, a desk chair for Sebastian, a table holding the equipment, a lamp, and various wall decorations typical of an artist. The floor was wooden; the walls were made of plaster, and a large window took up the space of one of the walls. This studio was by no means sanitary by US standards, but Sebastian kept it clean. He said he had a cleaner practice than most of the more professional looking studios. He always wore gloves and a face mask, and he always covered

his appliances with saran wrap. Sebastian's prices were just high enough to cover his material costs (ink, cleaning supplies, and needles), plus give him about 40% for profits (to buy food, pay rent, and personal expenses). His lowest price for a tattoo was \$30. In the US, the lowest price is \$60. Sebastian also was flexible and allowed clients to pay in installments. This is something that would not be allowed in the more professional looking tattoo shops in Ecuador.

Sebastian's clientele were predominately students that he had connections with through his university. His main form of advertising was word of mouth and through Facebook. This type of personal business functions closer to the informal sector of the economy and aims to serve more of a general population of Ecuador than the elite tattoo shops. Sebastian had worked in a couple of shops in the past but decided to work on his own because it allowed him a more flexible schedule and more freedom artistically. He also told me that he had lower prices because he liked making his tattoos accessible to more people, especially young Ecuadorians. He thought that everyone should have access to tattoo and the biggest exclusion factor was the price. Therefore, Sebastian's work was aimed at all populations in Ecuador. His business had a strong sense of social interaction, with capitalist intention taking second or third place. This was sometimes a drawback for Sebastian as he did not always have much money saved, and sometimes he was not able to buy the equipment and materials that he needed.

The third level of tattooing in Ecuador is tattooing that happens outside of the shop. Many tattoo artists have booths set up in beach towns or chairs on the streets of cities. This is the lowest level of tattooing in terms of artistic ability and sanitary practices. This is the most dangerous tattooing practice of the three. It is also the least expensive. This level of tattooing

serves the lower economic classes of Ecuadorian society, which correlates with the people of lower social status as well. The tattoos are often done with bad ink that when first tattooed is black, but then after a few weeks turns blue or green. Sometime the body rejects the ink entirely and the clients are left with a partial tattoo that is essentially ruined. The artists are not usually professionally trained; they are poor Ecuadorians who pick up a tattoo machine and tattoo with whatever materials they can get a hold of. Sebastian has told me stories of artists washing off needles in the ocean water and then using them on a different patient. This is completely unhygienic as needles should be disposed of as bio-hazardous waste and needles should never be shared or reused. This level of tattooing should not be allowed by the government as risk of infection and of contracting diseases are extremely high. But, there is no strength in the institutions in place to control these informal tattoo businesses. Also, these tattoo artists are able to work because people keep tattooing with them. There is such an interest, or demand, or pressure to tattoo that people who cannot afford a good tattoo-one that is safe and aesthetically pleasing-choose to tattoo on the streets, even though they run a high risk of infection and of an ugly tattoo.

Sebastian explained this phenomenon, of the three levels of tattooing, as a system controlled by the highest level, the professional tattoo artists. They saw the levels as a set system that allowed for all classes of Ecuadorians to tattoo. Most Ecuadorians would get their first tattoo on the streets of Guayaquil. It would be ugly and of poor quality ink. A few years later, they would get their next tattoo at the lower level of the professional shop, or second level informal shop. This is where most Ecuadorians were intended to stay. Sebastian understood the politics and agenda of the elite tattoo artists as to only allow a small sector of the population to be tattooed, those of the upper socioeconomic class or of high social status

(which could also be determined by your relationship to elite tattoo artists). This elite group would be the only people in Ecuador with the highest level of tattoos, in terms of artistic complexity and quality of ink. The professional artists were also reducing their competition by keeping low level tattoo artists on the streets.

This dynamic has meant that the system has not been pushed, nor has it been allowed, to change. The elite tattoo artists are the ones who have the most power to create legislation for tattoo regulations to ensure safe tattoo practices, but they are the ones who control the system and benefit the most from keeping the system as it is. Right now they have a monopoly on the highest paying clients and on the best materials-most of which they buy in bulk, import from the US, and mark up 300% to sell to lower level artists. Sebastian had many ideas to change the system, which included safety training for low level tattoo artists, bio-hazardous waste facilities for used needles, cooperative shops in each region to organize the artists on the streets, and tattooing regulations added to the constitution. Sebastian has realized some of these ideas on a small scale. For instance, he collects his own bio-hazardous waste and drops it off at the local hospital. He also organized a Red Cross Certification for bio-safety and many artists paid the fee and attended the class. But, he told me that he was afraid that he would make a lot of powerful tattoo artists angry if he began to try to change the system. He also was afraid that if he approached the government with his ideas, they would steal them from him, enact changes to the tattoo world poorly, and end up doing more harm than good.

Unfortunately, there is a lack of cooperation and of collaboration between tattoo artists. I see this to be for two reasons: Firstly, the tattoo world is male dominated. From my time in Ecuador, I did not see many groups of men working effectively together. This is due

to the country's long history of patriarchy, paternalism, and machismo. So, it is understandable why no progress has been made in male dominated practice in a *machista* culture. Secondly, by nature, the tattoo world is highly competitive. Tattoo artists have a competitive mindset because of the competitive and personal nature of art and because of the economic competition of attracting clients. For these two reasons, the tattoo world in Ecuador is predominately controlled by the elite tattoo artists and unfortunately does not seem to have the means to change anytime soon. This means that many people experience unsafe and unsanitary tattoos.

Interviews in Ecuador: understanding culture and identity

After my first trip with Sebastian to tattoo on the coast, I decided to do some interviews with his clients who he was tattooing in his studio in Quito. I wrote up a series of questions to understand the people's backgrounds and social circumstances to get a sense of their ideas about tattoos. The interview can be found in the appendix. The interviews were conducted in Spanish; everyone I interviewed was open and willing to share, and I feel that my Spanish-speaking abilities were strong enough that they did not censor or greatly simplify their responses. That being said, many of the interviews I later conducted in the United States were much more in depth than the Ecuadorian interviews, even though the same questions were asked. I see two explanations for this. First, the Ecuadorian interviews did not reach a deep level of detail and self-analysis because of the language/cultural barrier. This could have been due to an actual language barrier, or a perceived one by the Ecuadorians I interviewed. Perhaps they thought that I would not understand their complicated responses. Or, perhaps they did not understand the nature of my questions or my work and therefore did

not respond with as much detail as an American student who had more experience and understanding of an anthropology thesis. Second, perhaps the Ecuadorians I interviewed had not thought critically about their tattoos nor about how their actions were a reflection of and influenced by their cultural. When I asked if tattoos reflected one's culture and how their tattoo reflected their culture, many Ecuadorians did not understand what I was asking. When asked the question again, but substituted "identity" with "culture," some were able to respond, but others still were hesitant. In comparison, in the United States all of my interviewees understood the use of the term "culture" and were able to respond to my questions without any explanation on my part.

I. Defining Culture and Understanding Ecuador

While defining "culture" was difficult for both groups of interviewees, the American clients were much more comfortable with the use of the word and with describing and reflecting of their own culture. Conversely, the idea of culture was a foreign concept to the Ecuadorian clients. This can be attributed to difference in education. In the United States there is a stress of cultural diversity and identity. We are taught from a young age that there are many different cultures and that there is also a strong American culture. This is inherent to the *land of immigrants*. However, Ecuador has struggled with embracing and celebrating a diverse culture and has encouraged the homogeny of the mestizo culture which is, above all, Catholic. Only recently has Ecuador formally acknowledged other ethnic groups or cultures, such as the numerous indigenous groups that live within the borders of the country. In 2008, for the first time in the country's history, the Ecuadorian constitution identified the republic as "multiethnic" and "pluricultural" and since has integrated and begun to celebrate the

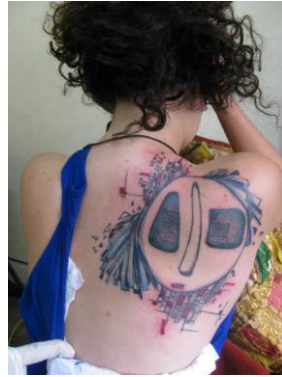
diversity of its population. This movement is controversial and slow moving, as is any movement that challenges social norms and stereotypes. The interviews I conducted were an explicit example of this slow moving change. The clients were aware of cultural diversity, but clearly had not been encouraged or challenged to reflect on their own. However, it is evident that they are beginning to and some have due to their level of education and field of study. Most of my interviewees were students and the ones that best understood their own culture were those studying communications and social sciences.

Ecuadorian Culture Marked in Tattoos

The interviews I conducted in Ecuador showed some interesting themes and phenomena that reflect certain cultural values specific to Ecuador and generally to Latin America. As we will see, many of the Ecuadorian clients' tattoos were in honor of people or ideas they were close to or strongly identified with. They were personal tattoos that represented their love for their father or son, for instance. Or, they were symbols of equality or of Jesus. Many times, two friends came to Sebastian's studio and tattooed together. Or, they would bring along the person their tattoo was honoring. I see the tattoo experience in Ecuador to be strikingly familiar in comparison to the tattoo experience in the United States. The shared group experience is important to Ecuadorians and this reflects the strong tradition of group unity that has been supported and encouraged in football clubs and strong extended family bonds. These are values that can be seen across Latin America. The socialist and communist movements that have arisen on the continent have been strengthened by and also have reinforced the strong sense of familiar experiences common of Latin Americans.

Something else that I noticed to be strikingly different in Ecuador was the designs that people were tattooing. The majority were simple line drawings filled in with color. They were of what many would consider to be generic images. Most were not pushing the limit and experimenting with designs, themes, or color use. The only exceptions were those who were artists themselves or those who were on the fringes of society due to other forms of artistic or social expression. It is as if these people were *allowed* to get outrageous tattoos because they were themselves considered outrageous by their community. Or, conversely, the mainstream people who were tattooed were confined to simple, safe, and conservative tattoos. They were taking enough of a risk by getting a tattoo that to tattoo something outrageous, controversial, or inappropriate would be socially fatal. The following pictures are of the tattoos of three Ecuadorians who have also broken other social norms, such as in their career paths, style of dress, and sexual relations. The first picture of a male artist who told me that his family would not be surprised by this tattoo because they expected him (or allowed) him to behave outside of the norm because of the nature of his life work: art. The second photo is a tattoo designed by the wearer. She was an artist and drew this face as a type of self-portrait. This tattoo breaks with the standard tattoo norm because of its abstract design. The third picture is of a female Ecuadorian who was an active communist. She had multiple tattoos and this was one that she got at a tattoo convention in Ecuador. As you can see, this convention is representative of the Ecuadorian culture of tattoo artists and looks very much like other modern tattoo cultures around the world; most people in this culture have a large

portion of their bodies tattooed and also have other forms of body art, including piercings and dreadlocks.



The “Tattoo Culture” vs. the “Tattoo World”

It is important that the term “tattoo culture” is explained. I see there to be two distinct types of tattoo groups and it is easy to distinguish between the two, but difficult to name them appropriately. On the one hand, there is a “tattoo world” that encompasses anyone who has a tattoo. There are also cultures or peoples who have a culture of tattoos, like the Maori or Tahitians. Both the “tattoo world” and cultures that tattoo have institutionalized tattooing in some aspect of the society, and they have associated rituals and practices with tattooing.

Conversely, there is a “tattoo culture” that has existed in the last century comprised of people who have dedicated their bodies to tattoos. They have covered a significant portion of their bodies with tattoos; they usually have piercings and other non-mainstream forms of body modification; they tend to work and function on the fringes of society and have historically been looked down upon or completely ignored. The people of “tattoo culture” typically have large portions of their bodies tattooed. People who have one tattoo, or a few small tattoos, belong to the “tattoo world” and one can distinguish them from those who do not wear tattoos. Through my research, I have understood that many people who have tattoos-one or a few-but do not belong to the “tattoo culture”-have tattooed for specific social

reasons, mainly to be cool, to feel a part of a group, or to set oneself apart from, and thus socially slightly above, other people in their group.

The integration of the “tattoo culture” into mainstream society has drastically changed in the last fifteen years as in the Western world we see celebrities and people of high social status crossing over into the dedicated “tattoo culture” while maintaining their high status. How and why people of high status have adopted tattoos is another topic for another time. But, the fact is that more people than ever are tattooing, and to have many visible tattoos no longer automatically lowers your social status in the Western world. While the Western culture tends to dictate modern global trends, many countries, Ecuador being a prime example, catch onto the trend a little later. It is influenced by the local culture to create a hybrid trend, which has many similarities to the original trend but is inherently different. Tattooing in Ecuador is not as main stream, diverse, or socially accepted as it is in the United States. This can be explained because Ecuadorian tattoo culture has been introduced and developed a little later than Western tattoo culture and also because Ecuadorian culture and values have influenced the development of those in the Ecuadorian tattoo world.

II. The Interviews in Ecuador

The following section looks specifically at interviews I conducted in Ecuador. While reading this section, pay close attention to the reasons why people tattoo. You will see that many people feel a personal connection with their tattoos and that they are meant to mark their experiences or their love for others. Also, when looking at the pictures try to think about the tattoos you have seen on other people. How are these designs similar and different to American tattoos you have seen? Stars, infinity signs, and butterflies are common themes in

Ecuadorian tattoos and also in American tattoos. But, I would say that these symbols are less frequent today in the U.S. than they were fifteen years ago. Today, many people in the United States have moved beyond the five pointed star or the name written in cursive, yet these are the fresh inks happening today in Ecuador.

It is as if Ecuador is *behind* in United States in terms of tattooing practices. I hesitate to use the word *behind* because that implies that Ecuador is slower and somehow inferior. It also implies that Ecuador is going to follow the same path as the United States in the evolution of tattoo practices. I have used *behind* because I lack a better word. The only meaning of the word I wish to imply here is the fact that the themes, designs, stigmas, and manner in which people are tattooed is similar to how tattooing used to be in the United States. Tattooing in the U.S. has evolved in recent years, influenced by abstract art, more radical European motifs, and improved technology of tattooing machines. Ecuador has been and will continue to be influenced by these same forces, but will evolve in a unique way from the United States because of their different cultural norms and access to materials. The most significant factor that I have found in determining the path of tattooing in Ecuador is the society's compulsion to conform to the masses instead of celebrating individuality and uniqueness. This is a reoccurring theme in the Ecuadorian interviews and will be starkly apparent when we come to the American interviews, which are quite obviously influenced by individualism.

Clara: a tattoo of infinite love to cover a mark of previous pain

Clara is an Ecuadorian female who was twenty-five years old at the time of the interview. She was born in Machala, the same city as Sebastian. She lives in Quito and was

tattooed in Sebastian's studio there. She belongs to the upper-middle social class. She works in a preschool and identified herself as Catholic, but is not practicing. She has four tattoos and her tongue pierced. This is a picture of the first round of the tattoo, which is on her lower back. She had plans to add colors, but could not stand the pain to do so in one session.



For Clara, her tattoos did not reflect or connect to her culture; they were personal. This tattoo was meant to represent her eternal love for her husband José, whose name is on the bottom left of the design, and the love she will always have for her two deceased relatives, which are represented in the two butterflies. The large infinity sign, which is central to the design, is meant to express infinite love and the fact that a tattoo is permanent compliments this idea.

When asked what her tattoos revealed about her personality, she responded: *“Uno es tristeza, otro amor incondicional, otro vanidad y belleza.”* – “One is sadness, another is unconditional love, and the other is vanity and beauty.” This shows the very personal connection that Clara has with her tattoos. She has emotional relationships with their designs, not only in the symbols of the artwork but also because she herself has designed them. This tattoo is covering a scar, which you can barely see running through the middle of the design. She explained that she chose to cover her scar with this tattoo in order to *“cubrir algo de dolor con algo más bonito.”* – “cover something painful with something more beautiful.”

She was very confident in her tattoo, and she had a clear understanding of her motives for the tattoo.

Clara was close friends with the artist; they went to high school together. She brought her husband and her two friends with her. The two friends, another couple, also had come to get tattooed by Sebastian. All six of us were in Sebastian's studio while she was being tattooed. Music was playing, and the conversation was light and in good humor. This was a fond interview for me because of how friendly the experience was. At one point, they called Sebastian's mom, who knew the clients but had not seen them in over ten years. This tattoo experience was extremely familiar which allowed for a revealing interview. Clara was sharing with all of us what her tattoo meant while at the same time answering my questions. There was an energy of celebration in the studio that day when Sebastian was doing this tattoo. Old friends were reunited, a love between husband and wife was being permanently marked, and family members who were no longer on Earth were being honored.

Andrea: a tattoo of rejection and acceptance

Andrea is an Ecuadorian female who was twenty-five years old when I interviewed her. She was born and still lived in Machala at the time of the interview. She was tattooed at Sebastian's mother's home during one of our trips to the coast. She belongs to the middle class, and she works for her family in sales. She identified herself as Catholic but did not say whether or not she was practicing. This was her first tattoo, which was placed on her wrist. She has also had her tongue pierced.



Andrea's tattoo is of a well know species of bird in Ecuador, the Golondrino. Each bird in this tattoo represent an immediate family member and this was important to Andrea because she wanted that each member "*vuela a su propia forma.*" – "fly in

their own way." Her tattoos represented love that she had for her family, and she used this tattoo to express her true feelings.

It is interesting that she saw her tattoos in this way because she later told me that her family would not approve of her tattoo and that she would hide it from them as much as possible. So, she was tattooing a symbol of her love for her family as her way to represent her true emotions even though her family would not accept her symbol of love because it was in tattoo form. Yet, the tattoo is permanent which means that Andrea and her family would always have to confront this symbol of love. It seems that the tattoo could serve as a pledge of devotion in the presence of conflict. Perhaps Andrea did not feel that she could adequately express her love for her family, but this tattoo was able to do it for her. Perhaps this tattoo served as a personal reminder that she indeed loved her family, even when it was difficult for her to love them all of the time. It is also interesting that Andrea has permanently marked birds in flight on her skin because she wanted each family member to fly on their own path. There is an obvious contradiction between a permanent tattoo and a free flying creature.

Andrea showed Sebastian a picture of the tattoo she wanted on Pinterest, an online photo sharing network. She wanted the exact same tattoo as the tattoo in the post on

Pinterest. Sebastian convinced her to add little white details because he did not like copying a tattoo exactly. He also changed the bird's order and figuration. Based on my conversation with Andrea and an analysis of her tattoo, it seems that her ideas about her tattoo and the reality of her tattoo are disconnected. The fact that she wanted the exact tattoo of someone else (the Pinterest photo) shows her desire for a tattoo, with less of an emphasis on originality, creativity, or personal connection. She then created a meaning for the tattoo, but after she had chosen the design and perhaps only because she was encouraged to by Sebastian and by my interview about the meaning of her tattoo. The fact that she planned to hide her tattoo all of the time meant that she did not think clearly of the consequences of her tattoo. The inner wrist is a difficult place to cover all of the time, especially in a tropical costal city near the equator. It seems that Andrea used the tattoo to enter the group of tattooed individuals, the "tattoo world" for social benefit, even though she admitted that she would receive backlash from her community. Andrea belongs to the Ecuadorian "tattoo world" but will probably never be a part of the extreme Ecuadorian "tattoo culture".

Carlos: a celebration of self

Carlos was a twenty-two year old Ecuadorian male from the highland town of Ambato. He



was a student living and studying in Quito. He was of the middle class and he was homosexual. He was raised Catholic but considered himself only to be spiritual. He had three small tattoos, two on his middle fingers and one on the inside of his wrist. He also has had ear, eyebrow, and nose piercings.

Carlos's tattoos were of the equality sign and a pink triangle. They also were pause and play symbols when his hands were positioned on their side, like in the photo. To me, these were obvious symbols of the LGBTQ community, but as many Ecuadorians were not familiar with the community or its symbols, Carlos could wear them a little more conspicuously. His tattoos represented his personal life experiences and his ideologies. The tattoos represented his identity, something that he adopted, rather than his culture which is something he believed to be inherited.

When asked to describe the reasons for these symbols, he surprised me by giving more meaning to them than the simple idea that they represented equality for all and pride in the gay community. To him, the triangle meant *"balance, una Trinidad divina, y play en la musica."* - "balance, the divine trinity, and the play in music." He explained that while he was no longer Catholic, he would never lose its influence in his life. The equality sign meant *"igualdad y la pausa en la musica"* - "equality and the pause in music" and he explained that he put it there to balance the triangle aesthetically. He did not make direct and specific references to the LGBTQ movement because it seemed that it did not have a large presence in his life. He certainly agreed with the movement and he understood his association with it, but these images were inspired by ideas that he developed independently from the movement. Carlos did not believe in covering up or removing tattoos. He stated that *"un tatuaje sea hecho en la forma que sería hecho. Nunca debe repentar eso, borrarlos es rechazar tu pasado"* - "a tattoo is made in the form that it should be. Never should one regret this; to erase it is to reject your past." This idea reflects a strong sense of not regretting choices, which is something that one only can learn from the experience of accepting past mistakes. I had a feeling that Carlos was speaking about his experiences directly relating to coming out

in his community. He came from a small, conservative town where being gay was so against the norm and surely was not talked about often or well received by his family. Carlos was evidently happy with his coming out and his life in general, and I see his tattoos as a celebration of himself. He was not worried about how his parents would react because he had already achieved independence from his hometown through studying in a university in the capital of Ecuador. I would bet that he would not have gotten any visible tattoos if he was still living and planning to forever stay in Ambato.

When I saw Carlos' tattoos, I immediately thought of the equal rights movement by the gay community. I associate the pink triangle and the equality sign with this movement, as the movement uses these two symbols to identify themselves and their supporters. I think that Carlos created other associations of the symbols, play and pause, to defend himself. If anyone asked, he could easily tell them that these symbols were of music. Many people in Ecuador have not been exposed to the symbols of the gay rights movement and therefore Carlos' explanation would not be challenged. Carlos also explained the general meaning of the symbols to me, equality for all (the equal sign) and balance and the holy trinity (the triangle). This, of course, is the basic meaning of the symbols and why the LBGTQ community uses them. But, Carlos was not able to say to me that he used the symbols because he was gay and believed in gay rights. I think that deep-down he associated his tattoos with the gay rights movement, and he took pride in wearing its symbols on his fingers, for the world to see. But, he was not able to admit that in the interview, and I don't think he was able to anyone else either, including himself.

This experience has made me realize that my experience with the gay community in the United States has been extremely positive. This is the first time I have really had to

confront that fact that in many people in the world are not celebrating homosexuality as we are in (some parts of) the United States. Carlos took a big step towards asserting his identity and celebrating his sexuality. He was clever to safeguard his tattoos by giving them a double meaning. In this way, he could celebrate personally and with others who recognized the symbols while at the same time projecting a non-offensive tattoo on the rest of society.

Daniela: the unconscious burden of motherhood

Daniela was twenty years old who was born and raised in Quito, Ecuador. She



belongs to the lower-middle class, and she was studying to be an accountant when I interviewed her. She was born Catholic but does not practice the religion. She had a tongue and bellybutton ring in the

past. She was the mother of a three year old boy.

Daniela had the name of her son tattooed on her upper back. She said that it represented her relation with him and all that they had lived through together. She explained that her tattoo represented the youth of Ecuador and their culture as “*es más común que los jóvenes hacen los tatuajes.*” – “it is more common for young people to tattoo.” She did not go into detail as to why the younger generations were tattooing more than older ones, but I see this to be a global phenomenon of younger generations breaking norms and pushing the line of what is acceptable or not.

It is interesting to note that all of the clients interviewed thus far have also had piercings, something else that is not as generally accepted nor practiced by older generations. Piercings and tattoos have an appeal to youth because they are not common among their parent's generation. As young people turn into adults, they are in the process of asserting their identities. Wanting to be different from older generations is common throughout history but has just been expressed in different ways. Tattoos and piercings also are a form of pain that I believe many young people seek to experience. It is more socially approved than self-inflicting harm by cutting or burning, but essentially accomplish the same task of forcing the individual to feel, which many use to ground themselves or to wake up from the monotony of life. Pain is a motivation for tattooing that I am not prepared to fully explain in this work. It would require a separate study and research on the psychological aspect of tattooing and body modification.

Daniela told me that she chose to tattoo on her upper back because she said that it was easy to show off, but also easy to hide. It was also the same place that Gaby, her best friend, was planning to get her tattoo, and therefore, the tattoo also was a symbol of friendship. After the two girls left, Sebastian told me this interesting phenomenon that he had seen in a number of his clients. He said that every time that someone tattooed something on their upper back it was because they were carrying a burden that was somehow related to the image they tattooed. He said that clients were unconsciously compelled to put the tattoo that represented their burdens on their back. I will refer to this as "the Burden Hypothesis" from here on out. He had seen this time and time again, and after seeing Daniela and Gaby's tattoos, I have found this hypothesis to be applicable.

Daniela tattooed her son's name, whom she gave birth to when she was seventeen years old. She hid her pregnancy for 8 months from her parents while living under the same roof as them. The father of her son was not very present. Now, three years later she has tattooed his name on her back and while she did not put it on her back because she wanted to identify her greatest burden and hardship in life, she was for some reason attracted to tattooing on her upper back. As we will see, Gaby had a similar story.

Sebastian designed the tattoo. The two girls (Daniela and Gaby) worked with Sebastian to get images off of his computer. He added his own flare and style, and they were happy for him to take charge of the design. This, like with Andrea, can signify that the girls wanted to have a tattoo for the primary reason of attaining a higher social status. Their secondary motives of tattoos were the meaning and the design, which were created to justify the tattoo itself. In contrast, Carlos tattooed the triangle and equality sign primarily because he wanted to wear those symbols. He was not seeking a higher status; he used the tattoo to express his feeling. The same is true for Clara.

It is interesting to note that for both Clara and Carlos, the tattoos they were receiving at the time of our interview were not their first whereas Andrea, Daniela, and Gaby all were receiving their first tattoos at the time of our interview. I think that the reasons for and perceptions of tattoos change from one's first tattoo to any subsequent tattoos that come after that. I have personally experienced this and in my interviews have seen this. This is not true for all people, but certainly for many. The intrigue for a tattoo sometimes overpowers any sense of design or meaning. Any tattoo would do (within reason, of course). I have even heard tattoo artists and people with a number of tattoos say that nobody really likes their first tattoo, especially if they go on to get many more. While this is exaggerated, I agree that there

is a difference in the first tattoo and ones that come after. This is a phenomenon that I have only witnessed in Ecuador and the U.S. and therefore it cannot be applied to all tattoo experiences, everywhere.

Gaby: a dark motivation

Gaby was a twenty year old at the time of the interview. She was born and raised in Quito, Ecuador. Daniela and Gaby are best friends, and the two girls got their tattoos together on the same day. She was a student and pertained to the lower-middle class. Like Daniela, she too was not a practicing Catholic. She had had her tongue, belly button and ear pierced.



Gaby chose to put her name on her back, surrounded by four stars. The large star represents herself and the other three stars represent “*tres historias...que no debería ser. [Pero,] lo hice y marcó mi vida y siempre voy a llevarlo en mi consciencia.*” – “three stories...that should have not happened. [But,] I did it and [it] changed my life and I will always carry this on my conscious.” Gaby has used her

tattoo to mark three experiences, or people, from her past because she never wanted to forget her past, especially her mistakes. This is a dark or negative motivation for a tattoo. She had bad experiences and chose to mark them as to not forget them, using this as a motivation to

not make the same mistakes and to also remind her of how far she has come. The fact that she tattooed her own name can be seen as vain or self-absorbed. But, perhaps she liked the tattoo her friend had done, but because she did not have a child or significant other, she decided to use her own name.

It is interesting that she also chose to put the tattoo on her back, in the same place as her friend. Perhaps she unconsciously chose to put it on her back because of the Burden Hypothesis. Maybe her placement was due to peer pressure, and she was compelled to put it in the same place as her friend. Or, she could simply have liked the idea of putting it on her upper back; it is a place that is easy to cover but also to show; it is not visible by the wearer unless they are looking in a mirror; the upper back is relatively not as painful of a place to tattoo as other parts of the body. Perhaps, the answer is a combination of all three. Gaby chose to mark her negative experiences but has wrapped them up nicely in her name. It is as if she has embraced her past as to move forward and be sure she does not forget where she has come from.

Rachel: a take-home tattoo

Rachel was a twenty-three year old female from the United States. She was tattooed in Quito, Ecuador the day before she flew back home. She had been living and working in Estero de Plátano, a poor coastal town in Ecuador, for twelve months through a postgraduate fellowship from Union College. She pertains to the upper-middle class, and she is Jewish. This was her first tattoo, and she also had a piercing in her ear.

This tattoo-*vaya bonita*- roughly translates to “may you walk beautifully.” It is



something that Rachel’s host mother in Estero would say to her every morning when she left the house. Rachel explained that she wanted this tattoo as a memory of “*una época muy especial en [su] vida.*” – “a very special time in [her] life.” This tattoo was her way of honoring her time in Ecuador and the people-whom she

described as family-who had helped her during her stay. She put the tattoo on her foot because she always wanted to walk beautifully in her life, no matter what may happen. Rachel wanted to mark her experience, but also imbue herself with grace and positivity in a similar way that sailors tattoo “H-O-L-D F-A-S-T” on their fingers. It is in part superstition and part mental training; if you see something every day, it is always present in your thoughts and eventually becomes second nature.

Rachel came to Sebastian’s studio/house the morning of her tattoo with her friend, who was an American who had been working with her in Estero de Plátano. We all came from the same college; the girls were two years ahead of me. We drank tea and talked about our experiences in Ecuador. Rachel showed me her idea and the font that she wanted it in, and I traced the letters and made the design. They came back later that evening with two male friends from Estero. We listened to music, joked with each other, and spoke in Spanish as much as possible while Sebastian was tattooing Rachel. The experience was very social and familiar. It was just like the other tattooing experiences that I had been present for in Sebastian’s studio.

This was one of the final interviews I did in Ecuador and the only interview I did with a non-Ecuadorian while I was there. While this tattoo experience seemed similar to the other Ecuadorian tattoo experiences, looking back over the interview I realize some interesting differences. When I asked Rachel if she thought that tattoo reflected aspects of one's culture, she responded: "*No pensé sobre la cultura de tatuajes. No me importa mucho. Estoy pensando más en mi personalmente.*" – "I did not think about the tattoo culture. It doesn't matter much to me. I am thinking more of myself personally." This is a unique answer, compared to the other Ecuadorian interviews I conducted. Rachel is acknowledging a tattoo culture. She also is admitting that she is not motivated to tattoo because of her wish to become a part of said culture or even the broader "tattoo world." She is thinking of herself as an individual and acting purely on this. While the tattoo was in honor of her host mother and her time in Ecuador, the tattoo was for Rachel and would only be enjoyed by Rachel.

This is starkly different than Clara's tattoo in honor of her husband and their love because it was for Clara *and* her husband; her husband would be there to see the tattoo and also be reminded of their love. It is also different from Andrea's tattoo of her family because she worked and lived with her family and so even though she said she would try to hide it, they would inevitably see it. Daniela tattooed her son's name on her back and she told me that she thought her son would like her tattoo. The tattoo was for her, but also for her son. Rachel tattooed a symbol of her time in Ecuador and the love for her host family, and yet she was leaving Ecuador the next day without plans to return. The two friends from Estero de Plátano were there to see the tattoo, but that was the only time they would be interacting with it. Rachel's connection with the inspiration for her tattoo was separated, and she understood this. She intended for this tattoo to be a personal act for only her individual self to enjoy. The

next chapter will analyze the interviews I did in the United States. It will be interesting to see if this motivation of individualism is a reoccurring theme and if tattoo experiences in the United States incorporate the familiarity that we have seen in Ecuador.

Interviews in the United States: making connections and understanding differences

When I came back to the United States from Ecuador, I began to prepare the English version of the interview and look for tattoo artists to work with. There is a tattoo shop in downtown Schenectady, New York, near my college, and I visited it one afternoon. *Tattoo Blues* is run by a father and son who I would consider to do American genre tattoos, with black line outlining, glitzy lettering, generic tattoos that are spiced up by the artist at the client's wish, and the shop had a plethora of books of Chinese characters, tribal styles, and photos of their tattoos. I was a little intimidated when I first walked into the store. Even though I had become very comfortable in Sebastian's studio, *Tattoo Blues* seemed much more legitimate, and my first impression was that it was a tattoo parlor for hardcore bikers and war vets. After a lengthy and enthusiastic conversation with Chaz, the son, I felt much more comfortable and welcome in the shop. I returned once more to talk with him a little bit more but soon realized the demographic at *Tattoo Blues* was not similar to my Ecuadorian interviewees as *Tattoo Blues* draws an older crowd and few students. Rather, I was looking to interview young adults who were students or recent graduates. So, I turned my attention to my college campus and to my surprise found that there were too many students with tattoos to interview. The interviews I conducted were with friends and acquaintances who crossed my path, just as I had found my interviewees in Ecuador. The main difference with my interviews in the United States is that they were with people who were not in the act of

tattooing, like in Ecuador. While I don't think this has a big effect on the answers to my questions, I do think that one's opinion about their tattoo changes after having worn it for some time. If anything, the wearer gains a deeper understanding of their tattoo and how it has an effect on their life. This is a possible reason why my interviews in the United States were more in depth and critical than my interviews in Ecuador.

There are some general trends that I have noticed about tattoos done in America. Firstly, the tattoos that people wear in the United States are extremely diverse and vary greatly. There is no general tattooing style inherent of America. There is a classic American style, such as a hula girl on the bicep or a heart with an arrow through it with gothic lettering of a loved one's name, but the tattoos Americans wear are as diverse as the population itself. Secondly, there is an intrinsic desire to be unique and different in the United States. It is no secret that American culture promotes individualism, and this is very much reflected in how people talk about their tattoos and also in what they tattoo. This idea sometimes goes as far as to deny any collective experience with others who share similar experiences, which is the negative aspect of individualism. In the interviews I conducted the interviewees expressed the uniqueness of their tattoo and also explained the personal gratification they felt from their tattoos. Their tattoos were for themselves: to mark a rite of passage, honor an experience, or to break with norms dictated by mainstream society. In the interviews I found that tattoos were not used by the wearers to enter into a tattoo culture, nor to elevate status. In fact, most of my interviewees expressed to me that they did not really care how their tattoos were perceived by others; what was most important was how they personally felt about their own tattoos. The rest of this chapter breaks down each interview that I conducted in the United States at Union College in Schenectady, New York.

Greg: the multiple interpretations of art

Greg is a twenty year old American male from south western Connecticut. He is in his second year of college and his family pertains to the upper-middle class. He is not religious, and he does not have any piercings. Greg has a deep level of understanding of tattoos and of his motivations for getting one.

This tattoo is of a candle burning at three ends. The tattoo artist made the design from Greg's



description. He put the tattoo on his foot so that no one would have to see it if he did not want them to. As a male who walks around frequently with his shirt off, he saw the foot as an easier place to hide a tattoo. He got the tattoo when he was eighteen years old and while he was still living at home. He did not want his mother to see it as she would have not approved and this was another motivation for putting the tattoo on his foot. He also liked being able to control who saw

his tattoo because it meant that he would not have to justify or explain it to as many people.

He could chose who he explained it to and this was something very important to Greg.

He also put it on his foot because he would never face future problems in the work force. This is something that is much more pertinent to the American interviewees in this study. Many of the clients I interviewed in Ecuador were students, but did not feel that they would have trouble in the workforce whereas the American clients I interviewed were all extremely aware of the risk of tattoos in jeopardizing their job prospects. I see this difference

to be for three reasons. Firstly, many of the Ecuadorian clients I interviewed did not work in a corporate job that would have strict regulations about tattoos; they were students and had not decided on a career path. Furthermore, a job in the United States might have strict regulations on employee presentation whereas the same job in Ecuador might not have the same rules. Secondly, there is, in my opinion, an exaggerated and overwhelming fear of not being hired because of tattoos, piercings or other personal presentation details in the United States. As college graduates begin their job searches and enter the work force they face high levels of competition and pressure to be successful; having a visible tattoo is seen as a risk that could be the deciding factor for being hired. Or, at least this is how college graduates see the issue and how adults portray the consequences of tattoos. Thirdly, some of the clients I interviewed in Ecuador were not planning on entering the corporate workforce. There are less of these types of jobs in Ecuador than in the United States, and they require a high level of education that some of the Ecuadorians I interviewed were not planning realizing. Tattoo's place in the workplace will be discussed again later in this chapter.

Greg believed that tattoos reveal one of two things about a person:

It either says the person is reckless enough to get it on their body, or has spent enough time thinking about it that they understand the consequences of getting something permanently attached to their body and are fully accepting of its significance in the future.

This way of understanding the motivation to tattoo is accurate but not complete. As we have seen, tattoos can elevate someone's social status and many people tattoo with this intention. They describe it as a "cool" thing to do, or something along those lines. We will see this in a later interview. Greg explained that he thought for a long time about his tattoo and tried to fully understand the consequences of his actions. At the same time, it is interesting to note

that while he thought deeply about getting a tattoo, he thought for a very short time about the actual image as the tattoo artist made the design and then immediately proceeded to tattoo it. This is interesting because while Greg had the image in his head and had thoroughly thought about the image and the tattoo, his tattoo had an aspect of recklessness because of the little time he had to contemplate the actual design, which was drawn for him by a stranger whom he had just met. In this sense, his decision to tattoo was not reckless, but the decision he made of what to tattoo was somewhat reckless.

When I asked Greg: What does your tattoo reveal about you? He responded that it shows that he has “thought about the extent of consequences,” which demonstrates a holistic understanding of the tattoo. Greg thought about multiple reasons for and consequences of his tattoo; his tattoo was intentional. Furthermore, he explained that the fact that his tattoo is a picture means that he appreciates its artistic qualities, “even if I change my reasons and significance for getting it in the future.” This perfectly explains the flexibility a drawn image has, as opposed to tattoos that are words or precise symbols. A picture can be interpreted in an infinite number of ways and this allows for the wearer to have a personal interpretation of their tattoo that is not static. Greg was intrigued by this because of the circumstances of his tattoo; he got it when he was a young adult, and he is aware that in the future his ideas and perceptions will change. Conversely, he explained that words can be “interpreted in a limited amount of ways.” Greg chose to tattoo an artistic design to allow room for his tattoo’s meaning to grow as he also grows.

Greg had a keen insight on how tattoos reflect or represent aspects of culture. He agreed that a tattoo can be influenced by and also be a representation of the wearer’s culture, but this is not always the case. Today in America “a lot of tattoos try to represent cultural

significance but I feel that they fall short because no one is really practicing the culture to the full extent.” Greg concluded that this “reflects our globalized bastardization of culture and a misunderstanding of culture. They try to emulate cultures, but they do not fully understand the ones they emulate.” In this case, he referred to Americans with tattoos of Chinese characters when they have no or very little connection or understanding of the culture, the country, or the language. Greg makes an important point here and one that I have thought about before. I find myself criticizing those who I see wearing a tattoo of Chinese characters when they are a non-Asian American, or a tattoo of Native American symbols on non-indigenous Americans, and even Polynesian or tribal tattoos on those whom I know to not be Polynesian. While I understand that my criticism might be harsh, I cannot help myself from judging these people to be ignorant. In this way, I agree with Greg’s use of “globalized bastardization of culture.” At the same time, through my research of tattoos, I have come to understand that some people tattoo a symbol of another culture because they feel in some way connected to a certain aspect of the culture. This cross-cultural appreciation is usually more positive than negative; it is only really negative if the symbol is horribly misunderstood by the wearer. I also believe that many lines between cultures have been blurred by today’s globalized world, permitted mainly by the internet. This allows for ideas and symbols that used to be local to travel to other places. The tribal tattoo is tattooed all over the world, for instance, and as it has been adopted by different cultures, it has also been influenced by the local culture thus creating an adapted interpretation of the Polynesian tribal tattoo. We will see a specific example of this next with Juan and in the subsequent interview I will touch again upon the phenomenon of borrowing from other cultures.

Juan: the complexities of globalization

Juan is a thirty-two year old Ecuadorian male who is a professor at Union College. He was born in Quito and moved to the United States in 1999. He pertains to the middle class. He was born Catholic, as a teenager went through an Evangelical phase, and now does not associate himself with any religious or spiritual practice. He is gay. He has two tattoos and a small ear piercing.

Juan has two Polynesian tattoos, one on his hip and the other on his shoulder, as we see in the photo below. The shoulder tattoo was his second tattoo, and he got it after he completed his PhD in Anthropology. When I asked him if he thought that tattoos reflected or represented aspects of culture, he responded:

I think they do. It is interesting because I have never been to New Zealand, but I like the fact that in Maori culture it is a rite of passage, of becoming a warrior or adult. I got this one because I felt more like an adult when I got my PhD; I felt like I had a profession, and I got that tattoo to mark the new phase in my life. I see myself marking every phase. I think it is unfortunate that we don't mark out bodies when we enter a new phase.



Juan tattooed on his shoulder to mark an experience. He has acknowledged the moment that he felt that he had become an adult with his tattoo. Even though he is not Maori and has never been to New Zealand, he felt such a strong connection to the Maori people and their tattooing practice, that he adopted it himself. Unlike the ritualized practice of tattooing by the Maori people, he chose when it was his time to tattoo. He was able to do this because he does not belong to a culture in which the tattoo is a ritualized practice. This

demonstrates the flexibility that the modern world has permitted in terms of cultural sharing. The internet has made it incredibly easier to learn about people all around the world. Practices are constantly being adopted and adapted by peoples in every country. This tattoo is a perfect example of the global tattoo practice.

The Brazilian tattoo artist has incorporated his personal style into the design of the tattoo, which makes me question if this should be technically called a Polynesian tattoo. Many people use the term “tribal” instead of Polynesia, but this word also presents possible contradictions and tensions. This is certainly a Polynesian style tattoo because of the geometric line work and the use of only black ink. But, it is just as much Brazilian as it is Polynesian. In fact, this Brazilian tattoo artist has never been to the Polynesian Islands; he had never trained with Polynesian tattoo artists, and he had created his own images and symbols that were not necessarily the same as those used in Polynesian tattoos. It is important to understand that “Polynesian” is a general term as well. When speaking about specific tattoos and designs, one must understand that Samoan tattoos and practices are different than Tahitian tattoos, which are different from Maori tattoos. The three cultures use different symbols, line work, tattooing instruments, and also have different practices on an institutional level in terms of who is tattooed and for what occasion. The Brazilian artist designed Juan’s shoulder tattoo with symbols that the artist had created himself. For instance, a sunset is depicted in the center of the tattoo to represent Brazilian sunsets, something that Juan fondly remembers of his time in Brazil. Fish scales represent strength, and there is also a fertility symbol somewhere in the design. Juan told me that the tattoo artist thought that the symbolism mattered, but he did not know Juan well enough to really personalize it. Juan liked the tattoo for more aesthetic reasons than what it symbolically represented. The symbol

he really cared about in his tattoo was that of the sunset; the rest were invented and added by the artist. The Brazilian tattoo artist then has created his own, unique tattoo style that has clear Polynesian influences but has no real connection to the Maori people even though he advertises as an artist who specialized in Maori tattooing.

Globalization has created many contradictions, and in this case the problem is twofold. First, tattooing did not come from Brazilian culture. It was introduced to Brazil, and Juan explained that it came with surf culture. It is not a national practice, and those involved in the tattoo culture of Brazil do not associate this culture with the Brazilian culture. Therefore, the tattoo world is a global practice that does not have specific ties to any one specific place. Perhaps tattoos are appealing for this very reason. "I wanted to become a global citizen and the tattoo connected me to the world in a way," is how Juan described the cultural significance of his tattoo. He explained that he does not associate his tattoo with Ecuador. Rather, he associates it with Brazil and the tattoo culture of Brazil, which is more connected to the global tattoo culture than with local Brazilian culture. But, as we see, local artists influence the designs that they create. The second aspect of this contradiction is that the tattoo is done in "Maori" style by an artist who specializes in "Maori" tattooing but, the neither the artist nor the wearer have any legitimate connection with the Maori people. Their only experience with it is via the internet, books, magazines, and people-like the tattoo artist-who claim to practice something from a specific culture. Borrowing from cultures has been happening as long as different cultures have been in contact with each other. But, modern globalization and wide-spread internet use has allowed humans to borrow-and steal-from cultures in an entirely new way. The consequences of this are not fully understood; some include cultural diversity and acceptance, but also the trading of local culture for a more

appealing global and dominantly western, material culture. Amazing hybridizations are occurring as creative people share more aspects of their culture. Remarkably, Juan's tattoo is global and local, Polynesian and Brazilian, authentic and counterfeit all at the same time.

Mark: a contemplation of borrowed culture, uniqueness, and monochrome

Mark is a male from Massachusetts. He is twenty-eight years old and works as a dean at a small college in Lynchburg, Virginia. He pertains to the middle class. He defines his sexual orientation as hetero normative, and he does not identify with any religion or spirituality. He has three tattoos and one ear piercing.

On Mark's left bicep, he has a monochromatic Japanese style tattoo with clouds and two large leafs laying over them. This tattoo was designed by the tattoo artist. Mark and his



wife met with the artist for a consultation some time before they were tattooed to talk about their ideas so that the artist could create a personal design for them. Mark and his wife both tattooed designs that were influenced by Japanese culture because of their experiences with Japanese cultural practices. They both practiced Kendo, a Japanese marital art form, and Mark's wife had participated in a Taiko group, which is a drumming practice born out of Japan.

Both Mark and his wife had learned a lot about Japanese culture and had made trips to Japan.

When I asked Mark how tattooing reflected or represented his culture, he responded:

Identity can be constructed. We are not separate from our environment. There is no consistency in my tattooing; they are little separate tattoos, not one big one. I have

had things in my life in whims, same way as my tattooing. My tattoos have come together to give me a sense of my personal identity, which is always evolving. As for cultural, many of us have a lost culture. We come from immigrant grandparents and we have no strong ethnic culture but we do have an American culture. So, I relied on other cultures to inform and give me a sense of identity. My tattoos expresses my variety of identity and non-culture...Pretty damn American.

Mark has acknowledged the fact that he has borrowed from Japanese cultures, among other cultures, to create his own unique hybrid culture. He has done this because he feels that he has been left without a strong sense of culture from his immigrant ancestors. This is common among many Americans whose families have not maintained strong cultural practices or who have slowly lost them over time. Mark sees his borrowing from other cultures as an inherent aspect of American culture.

In contrast, Greg sees this borrowing as a “bastardization of culture” as a white American with a Chinese tattoo tries to emulate a culture without fully understanding the culture they are emulating. This is interesting because Mark sees the emulation of culture as a natural and obvious practice while Greg acknowledges this common practice but strongly disapproves of it. I think that Greg is more strongly opposed to people who tattoo a cultural symbol that they have very little or no knowledge of, as opposed to someone who has studied and even practiced part of the culture that they eventually represent in their tattoo. Greg is really criticizing those who tattoo other culture’s symbols because it is a fad or generic theme. Chinese characters, tribal (Polynesian) arm bands, gangster tattoos (which have specific fonts), and Celtic symbols are a few examples of borrowed cultural symbols that have turned into generic tattoos that people tattoo even though they have very little or no connection with the original culture. However, if someone tattoos in one of these styles but claims no connection or false interpretation of the culture, is this a bastardization of the

culture, or can it be understood as a simple appreciation for the aesthetic style of the tattoo? Furthermore, if someone from New York City tattoos a Chinese symbol because they see a lot of other people with Chinese symbols on the streets of New York, do these tattoos remain a reflection of Chinese culture, or do have they taken on a culture of their own that has very little or no connection with the origins of its design? We have once again come back to the fact that cultures have been sharing since the first two cultures came into contact with each other, and in today's globalized world this cultural sharing has become easier than ever as the sharers do not have to physically come into contact with each other. Sharing is done over the internet and sometimes without the knowledge of the people who are 'doing the sharing'. This phenomenon can be considered copying more than sharing. And it is in the copying, which many consider to be synonymous with stealing, that Greg sees the "bastardization" of culture whereas Mark sees the opportunity to learn about and incorporate other cultural practices into his own life.

Mark, like Juan, works in a professional settings at colleges. Both have tattoos that are easily hidden under long and short sleeve shirts, and both also told me how students and co-workers are sometimes surprised to learn that they have tattoos. Mark explained that he thought about where he was putting his tattoos to ensure that he would not affect his career. At the thought of getting more tattoos, he said, "I would have to be smart about it. If I had full arm tattoos, I think it would negatively affect my work environment." This shows a level of comprehension of how tattoos are received that the Ecuadorians I interviewed did not explain to me, and perhaps they did not care to think about their tattoos in this way. I believe that this is due to the demographic of Ecuadorians I spoke with; they were younger, many were students, and none were professionals like Mark or Juan. But, I also believe that a

professional in Ecuador at the same level as Mark or Juan would not have any tattoos. I believe this because of the stricter level of conformity professionals and especially educators in Ecuador are required to adhere to. This is not something I looked into, but rather it is an assumption that I am confidently proposing based on the people that I met in Ecuador. Mark explained that “with changing professional outlook, we have less reliance in conforming to corporate culture...[as there is] more individualism and expression in work places, at least in some places.” The conservative nature of the corporate world is changing and becoming more liberal in both the United States and Ecuador. But, I see Ecuador to be a little slower to change and even changing on a different path than the United States, just as with other cultural practices, like the style and designs of tattoos as discussed earlier.

Mark’s response to my question of, “are some tattoos more acceptable than others?” was the clearest and most complete answers of all of my interviews. He explained how there are many types of tattoos. Some are of images, some are only letters, and some are a mix of the two. Tattoos are attractive because of their infinite options, which he described as an “unimaginable variety.” According to Mark, tattoos are an art form that is “attainable for common consumption because it is not as confusing as high art.” Personally, he does not care what someone else has tattooed. To him, there are not some tattoos which are more acceptable than others. But, Mark explained that for others, “tattoos that demand consumption or attention (obscenity or vulgarity) are less socially accepted and are often paired with socially bad behavior.” Mark believes that tattoos can tell you a lot about a person, but not all of the time. In this way, tattoos are like art because of their multiple interpretations. Furthermore, “people can say you can divorce the artist from the art, and the art should stand on its own. But it is hard to separate art, in this case the tattoo, from wearer;

also the artist usually goes unnoticed.” This is a complex issue in which the wearer is judged for their tattoo in the same way an artist of a piece of work-not done on the skin of another-can be judged for their artwork. The wearer of the tattoo is often highly regarded for an awesome tattoo and judged for an esthetically unpleasing tattoo when in reality the wearer could have had very little or no control over the outcome of the tattoo. Tattoo artists put pictures of their tattoos on their webpage or in a book to show off their talents, but their artwork walks freely and independently of them.

This is an idea that was discussed in “The Artist and the Shop” chapter. The complex situation of artist separated from his artwork and wearer bearing the brute of judgment for someone else’s artwork is further complicated by the way in which society perceives tattoos and stereotypes tattoos and their wearers. There are many cases where a tattoo is accepted by certain subgroups and rejected by society at large. Conversely, there are other tattoos-which we term ‘generic’- that are accepted by society at large and therefore copied obnoxiously to the point of then being rejected by many subgroups because the design is seen as cheesy or not unique. In the United States, there are many individuals who seek to assert their individualism and uniqueness and therefore they seek tattoos designed specifically for them.

Mark has one tattoo designed by the tattoo artist, and two designed by his wife who is an artist. He admitted that his strive for uniqueness and a tattoo designed personally for him as “egotistical” and “narcissistic,” which he explained as reflecting his personality. His tattoos are for him and not really to please others. He also explained that it is a common and natural desire to want to make oneself stand apart. While this may be common for American culture, the same cannot be said of Ecuadorian culture, which has the long time tradition of conforming and adhering to the masses, *el pueblo*. While tattoos in Ecuador break from the

general mass, they form a smaller group, but the idea to conform remains. This explains why generic tattoos are more commonly seen in Ecuador than in the United States.

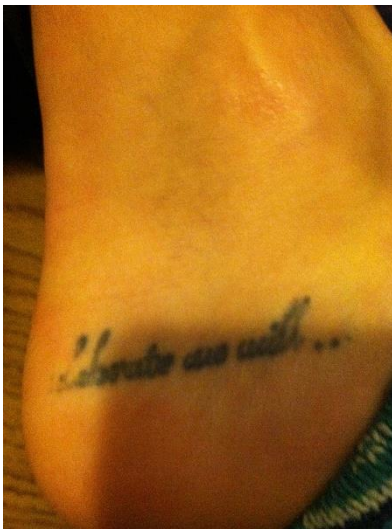
Mark ended the interview by explaining that with the more tattoos he has done, the less picky he has been on the design. His first tattoo (the picture at the beginning of this section), was the most important tattoo for him. His subsequent tattoos (below) have been done much more on a whim, and he has begun to experiment with designs and themes. That being said, all of his tattoos are monochromatic, which he attributes to two aspects of his personality. One, he likes the minimalism of monochromatic artwork. This is conceptually and aesthetically pleasing to him. Two, he does not have the confidence to use color for fear of complicating the design. He thought about this for a moment and then said, “this can represent a fear of taking risks in my life.” In our interview, Mark was able to be self-reflective and insightful. This was the only interview I did over the phone, and perhaps Mark was able to be more honest with me because I was not sitting next to him, writing down his every word. The phone can be a much less imposing way to converse because there is no fear of a visual rejection or judgment. Mark is also an open person who is interested in self-

analysis. This fact, paired with a phone interview, resulted in a through and insightful exploration of one man's ideas about tattoos.



Claire: an extreme individual

Claire has a tattoo on her foot that says “celebrate we will...” (see picture below), a quote from a song of Dave Matthews Band. She is twenty years old and from Connecticut.



She pertains to the middle class. She is spiritual but not specific to any religion or practice. She has one tattoo, her belly-button pierced, and a dreadlock with beads on it in her hair.

Claire has a unique story to her tattoo. She and her friend went to a tattoo studio where her friend picked the lyrics on the spot with the needle pointed at Claire's foot, ready to tattoo. She said that her friend tattooed the other half of the phrase: “...for life is

short but sweet for certain.” The girls did this when they were sixteen years old; they used fake IDs at the tattoo shop.

When I asked Claire how her friends and family reacted, she explained that she told her parents that it was a fake tattoo, and they believed her for a little while until they noticed that it had not faded. Her parents thought that tattoos were trashy, and this is what compelled her to lie. When they did find out the truth, they appreciated that she had gotten a tattoo in a place that was not highly visible. Claire said that her friends “admired that [she] did something so drastic and random without planning it or it being meaningful” and went on to explain that “for young people to get a meaningful tattoo is admirable, but to do something that doesn’t mean anything is like ok, that’s cool.” This idea of her tattoo *not meaning anything* was something that Claire brought up numerous times in her interview. She made it clear that she believes that a *meaningless* tattoo is cooler than one that is full of emotion and meaning. Her notion of meaningless seems to come from the fact that her friend picked a lyric immediately before she had it tattooed on her foot. About halfway through the interview I asked her “What does your tattoo reveal about you?” and she responded:

The quote doesn’t really mean anything to me but what the tattoo means is that I just like to jump into things and go for things and I don’t look back...it reminds me of the importance of being careless, that’s when you grow as a person.

She has begun to assign some meaning to a *meaningless* tattoo, but is clear to differentiate between the tattoo and what the tattoo is of. Here, it is not the words that have meaning to Claire, it is the actual presence of a tattoo on her body that demonstrates her *carelessness*. But then at the end of her answer to this question she assigned meaning to the words:

“Celebrate we will...helps me to interpret things in a positive way.” So, Claire has gone from asserting that her tattoo was meaningless due to its spontaneous nature to assigning meaning

to the tattoo and the lyrics themselves. Throughout this work, I have come to conclusions and contradictions (like how a tattoo can be local and global at the same time) but, this is by far the most contradictory idea of a tattoo that I have encountered. I have just begun and will continue to peel back the layers of this tattoo and how the wearer has described her tattoo experience.

Many people, especially parents, see tattoos as a form of rebellion. It has given tattoos a stigma of being daring, dangerous, and outside of the norm. This is certainly true in the United States, even though this stigma is being challenged now more than ever. It is no longer necessary to be a brooding teenager or a criminal fed up with the system to tattoo. For instance, women who have had mastectomies are tattooing flowers over their scars to find beauty in wake of a painful experience.⁵ That being said, tattoos still serve as an outlet to rebel and certainly to express nonconformity. This is even truer in Ecuador than in the United States. When I asked Claire how her tattoo represented her identity or culture, she answered:

It represents the fact that I have rebelled from my culture. My identity, my age and the way I live means 90% of what it [her tattoo] means. I define myself as rebellious and I do things out of the norm. It connects me to adventure, what I pride myself in. It proves something to myself more than anything else. It was not just a stupid mistake. I have convinced myself to not regret it because it represents the carefree side of me that I hope will never diminish.

Claire has this strong idea that she is different and that the things she does are outside of the norm. This is clearly something that she takes pride in and also flaunts. I view this as an extreme desire to be a different and unique individual. Claire's tattoo is one of the many ways that she seeks to personalize her look and to stand out.

My final question of the interview was "Why did you want to put something that is permanent on your body?" To which she answered:

⁵ See <http://www.pinterest.com/personalink/> to learn more.

I always thought tattoos were cool and liked the style, socially. I like saying that I have a tattoo. It says that I am easy going and that I don't read too much into things. Something being physically permanent doesn't really mean that much. Most people get tats because it is permanent and serious. I am the opposite. I got something permanent and it will be there forever, but so are my hair and nails. It is just a thing I decorate my body with. It doesn't have a very big emotional presence in my life because it is a random quote.

She sees her tattoo as being 'cool' but does not see her tattoo as connecting her with a broader social group of people who have tattoos. Her idea of her tattoo and her exaggerated efforts to get a spontaneous tattoo when she was underage further exemplifies her desperate yearning to be carefree, cool, and different.

In this work, I have brought up the idea that in the United States the tattoo is a very individualistic act that seeks to set one apart rather than conform to appease a group. This can be understood in contrast to Ecuadorians, whose tattoos are acting out against the norm but are very much following another norm, a tattoo norm, which functions in very much the same way as the non-tattooed majority. Ecuadorians are tattooing more generic tattoos and more often than not attach personal meaning to their tattoos, which is shared with the person their tattoo is meant to be for. They are literally marking their love for those closest to them. On the other hand, Americans seem to tattoo for more individual reasons, or at least *not* to mark love for others. While they might share their tattoo experiences with their friends or their spouses, their tattoos are meant to be worn for themselves. Up until now, I have believed this difference- between Ecuadorian familiar conformity and American individualism-to be because of a capitalist, unfamiliar, and individualistic lifestyle typical of American society and because of the strong Ecuadorian conformist and Catholic society. I have seen this reality to be because of social rules imposed by their society on its individuals and have explained the tattoos analyzed here accordingly. However, Claire demonstrates that

it is very much her individual and personal drive to separate herself from society that has provoked her to tattoo. She feels different from others, like a rule breaker, and a nonconformist because of her tattoo. It is ironic that she feels this way because over 40% of the U.S. population has at least one tattoo, a percentage that is certainly higher than in Ecuador, although statistics of Ecuador's tattoo population is not known. Therefore, Claire only perceives herself to be a rebel or outside of the norm, it is not how society has perceived her and therefore societal rules have not pressured her to tattoo, she herself has had the strongest influence over her tattoo experience. This is the most extreme form of individualism one can possibly demonstrate.

Eva: tattoos as a filter, a self-regulation, and an alternative culture

Eva has eight tattoos. All of them are above her waist and were designed and tattooed by the same artist. Eva is a bisexual female of twenty-one years of age who was born in Colombia and raised in New York City. She is spiritual but not religious, and she has



piercings on her ears and used to have her lip pierced. She pertains to the middle class.

Eva told me that tattoos “express themselves in a way that is not in the norm.” The wearer of a tattoo must have a certain level of confidence to externally express an

internal meaning, she explained. This confidence is tested because “you sometimes can’t control what people think, but you are still putting it out there.” It is obvious that Eva is speaking from her personal experience of wearing tattoos, most of which are visible on a regular basis to everyone she interacts with. Eva is the person I have interviewed with the most tattoos and the most exposed tattoos. I would consider her to be on the fringe of the tattoo world and certainly pertaining to the general tattoo culture.

When I asked Eva about how tattoos reflect aspects of one’s culture, she immediately mentioned gang tattoos, which are representative of a specific sub-culture. She explained that tattoos:

can be used as exclusion and inclusion of whatever culture they want to be; the wearer is choosing to be included or excluded. There is a definite and active choice of which part [or kind] of culture you are in.

It is interesting that Eva understands personal choice of certain practices to be what determines which culture one belongs to. Conversely, some argue that culture is not a choice, but rather imposed on the individual. Eva has had the opportunity, or has been forced, to choose her own culture. She was born in Colombia to Colombian parents. The family moved to New York City when Eva was a baby. At the age of sixteen Eva left home and moved in with a friend and her family, who are of eastern European descent. Eva has actually chosen her own culture. The family she lives with, the values she possesses, her practices and traditions are all aspects of culture that have been decided by Eva. Many of her choices have been against the norm lifestyle and mainstream American and Colombian cultures. She is a tattooed electronic music DJ environmental activist with half of her hair shaved short and dyed red. She has chosen to adopt an alternative lifestyle, and this is why she see culture as a choice.

The style, design, and placement of a tattoo very much reflects or even dictates one's culture. As we have seen throughout this entire work, each client has a different tattoo which reflects at least one aspect of their culture, whether the wearer is aware of this or not. I asked Eva if she has been more influenced by Colombian culture or American culture. She told me that she has been most influenced by New York City culture which is the quintessential melting pot of cultures. Eva plans to keep growing and learning and she expects to reflect her internal self externally with her tattoos.

Eva told me the story of her first tattoo. She and her friend walked into a tattoo shop somewhere in the City. Eva told the tattoo artist that she wanted a heart tattoo on her wrist. He warned her that getting a tattoo on the inside of her wrist might prevent her from being hired at an office in the future. She assured the artist that she wanted her tattoo on the inside of her wrist because she "didn't want to be a job where the employees couldn't have tattoos." Eva purposefully eliminated herself from working at a place that did not allow tattoos because she did not want to live the lifestyle associated with corporate America. She told me that she also uses tattoos as a filter from people who might not approve of her in other ways. She said, "if people judge me and don't want to talk to me because of my tattoos, it saves my time." To Eva, her tattoos filter out the people and situations that she has decided she is not interested in experiencing. They serve as a regulation and a protection from certain lifestyles and cultures. Therefore Eva has chosen to use her tattoos to exclude her from certain cultures (like corporate America) and include her in others (basically any culture of lifestyle that does not have strong prejudices against tattoos).

Conclusion

As I came to the end of writing this thesis, I was left with a troubling feeling that throughout the research and writing of this thesis I have created more questions than answers about tattooing. I began my research because I was intrigued by Evelyn's birthday butterfly tattoo. I wanted to know why she was compelled to tattoo and what the significance was of the butterfly and its placement on her hip. I was curious to understand how her tattoo was affected by her culture and Ecuador's social practices. I also wondered how her tattoo played into defining and shaping the culture and values of her generation in Ecuador. When I returned to Quito from my trip to the coast, I developed an interview in hopes of answering my questions or at least collecting information to bring back to the United States where I hopefully would be able to explain the tattooing phenomenon. The more I talked to people in Ecuador, the more complicated the story became. People were tattooing for different reasons, and they were tattooing diverse and unique designs. At least, this is what I thought at first. I soon began to notice patterns, however. For example, many Ecuadorians tattooed symbols of their family, friends, and loved ones. Furthermore, the symbols that they were attracted to were not as diverse as I originally thought them to be. Stars, butterflies, hearts, and infinity signs are common symbols to tattoo in Ecuador. The artist is the person who takes these generic symbols and turns them into unique tattoos personalized for the wearer, at least this is what many tattoo artists hope to do.

My time in Ecuador made me understand the extreme individualism we teach in the United States. In contrast, I began to comprehend how uniformity is valued by many Ecuadorians and how anything unique or out of the norm is questioned, criticized, and often rejected. This can be seen in all aspects of Ecuadorian life, from mandatory school uniforms

to my host mother being worried because I was not going to the bars in *gringolandia*⁶ with all of the other students, but rather going with two other girls to the co-op house where my professor lived. My host mom was so worried that I was doing drugs or other bad things because I was spending time at this house instead of following the norm of what I, as an American, was expected to do. Unfortunately, I believe that my host mom was most worried about what others in her community would say about her if they found out that her host-student was ‘acting out’ in this way. Her place in the status quo was threatened by my actions. This situation is similar to that of mother and child. If the child acts out against the norm, it reflects on the mother and the family, and they all risk being criticized or rejected by the strong mainstream community. This phenomenon is self-regulating and perpetuated by fear, fear of rejection or difference.

Tattooing is seen as a practice that is against the norm in Ecuador. It is associated with bad people, drugs, and violence. Interestingly, tattooing is viewed this way in the United States and parts of Europe too. In Ecuador, to tattoo is to step outside of the norm. If the tattoo is visible, the individual should not expect to ever be a part of the mainstream. Women seem to be held to a higher standard as well, and it seems that it is more appropriate for men to wear visible tattoos in Ecuador. Today, there is a relatively large group of people in Ecuador who are tattooed. As equipment and materials become more accessible, more people are tattooing. Interestingly, there are enough people with tattoos in Ecuador today to form a sub-culture or a small mass of tattooed individuals, and this smaller group is structured and regulated in very much the same way as mainstream society. Consequently, a certain style of tattooing has become the norm for many Ecuadorians today. A new status quo of tattooed

⁶ *Gringolandia* literally means ‘gringo land’ and is what locals refer to the main plaza where the bars and clubs are in Quito.

individuals has been created and anyone who dares to deviate from the tattoo norm faces the same consequences of rejection and criticism as from mainstream society. Deviating from the tattoo norm includes tattooing obscene or vulgar images; abstract art; tattooing in taboo or highly visible locations like the neck, hands, face, and even the calves; or wearing large and/or many tattoos.

The fact that Ecuadorians have established a tattoo norm means that certain symbols are repeated over and over again, such as the butterfly and the star. This makes it hard for the artists to move beyond these generic images. Sebastian told me that he has stopped showing clients the latest radical tattoos from Europe or the United States. Many artists are integrating graphic design and modern art into their tattooing and also treating the body more like a canvas. The following images are examples of their work pulled from their website. The first picture is of Buena Vista Tattoo Club and the second picture is a tattoo by Peter Aurisch.



As an artist, Sebastian is interesting in exploring and experimenting with colors and images. His art is emotional and meant to challenge personal and social beliefs. Therefore, he naturally looks to do this in his tattooing. He wants to bring fantastic, brilliant, and modern tattoos to Ecuador, like the artwork pictured above. But, when he has shown clients what these German tattoo artists are up to most leave his studio not wanting to tattoo anything. He told me that he doesn't even try to show his clients these tattoos because he doesn't want to scare any more of them away. His clients see these extreme tattoos and fear that their tattoos will be viewed as outrageous and so far out of the norm that they will forever be rejected by their society. Their fear of rejection trumps all. Generic symbols, on the other hand, are considered to be safe because they have become normalized. Anything beyond what the mainstream tattoo world of Ecuador is tattooing is rejected as taboo and only those who already live alternative lifestyles are willing to challenge the tattoo norms. The basic conclusion that I come to from this analysis is: even though tattooing is breaking the norms of mainstream Ecuador, a new norm within the tattooed community has been established that perpetuates and strengthens the pressure to conform. In this sense, tattooing is not necessarily challenging the conservative forces of Ecuadorian society. These same forces are what oppress women, the LBGTQ community, the environmentalists, and the indigenous, Afro-Ecuadorian, and immigrant communities. This illuminates the fact that the mainstream mestizo community has an incredible strength in maintaining the status quo, and thus realizing equality for any or all marginalized groups is proving to be an even more difficult task to achieve.

After I returned from Ecuador, I translated my interview template into English and began to look for people to interview to try to understand the American tattooing experience.

I admit that I did not gain as much experience with the American tattooing culture. I did not have the chance to spend four months living with and shadowing a tattoo artist; I did not interview Americans in the act of being tattooed; and I did not have the chance to travel around the country to experience different tattooing practices. From the research I was able to do, however, I was able to draw some interesting conclusions about American culture. First and foremost, American culture is incredibly self-centered. This is not to say that Americans do not care for other people. It just means that we are taught from the very beginning that our personal feelings are important, that we are individuals first and part of a group second, and it is usually expected and even celebrated when we deviate from the norm. Americans are *revolutionists* and we as individuals are taught that we have the power to affect widespread change. Whether this is true or false is not important. It is only important that we are encouraged by our teachers, our politicians, the media, and our parents to believe this American dream.

When I was in Ecuador, many people asked me to tell them the typical American food. This is an easy question to answer for Ecuadorians; many would probably say rice, beans, plantains, and choclo (corn). I, however, was not able to describe the typical American food. Sometimes I would try, but most of the time I would explain that it depended on what part of the United States one was from and what culture was dominant in your community. While this did not normally suffice as a satisfactory answer, it was the best I could do. This same idea can be applied to tattooing; there are so many different tattoo styles in the United States that it is not possible to describe just one. Through my research, however, I have been able to make some connections between the American dream of individualism and American tattoo practices. The Americans I interviewed were tattooing specifically for themselves.

They did not have a fear of rejection from mainstream society like in Ecuador, but Americans did have a fear of rejection from corporate America. The Americans I interviewed, including myself, have chosen the placement of their tattoos with an awareness of how their tattoos would affect their chances in a job interview. Every American I interviewed except for one person chose to tattoo in a place that was easily coverable in a job interview or work setting. Jill, the last interview of chapter four, purposefully chose to tattoo on her wrist and forearm to exclude herself from being hired in a job that did not allow tattoos. She decided that she did not want to work in an environment that was not accepting of people with tattoos as it was probably not an open and accepting work environment in other ways. In America, there is not a fear of being rejected from the norm because of your tattoo, but there is a fear of not being hired. This shows American's fixation with their occupations and also the conservative nature of corporate America.

The other conclusion I have come to is about American's false sense of individualism. In chapter four Claire-the tattoo of "Celebrate we will..."-felt that she her tattoo set her out of the norm; it marked her as a unique individual and she associated this with being *cool*. Claire is failing to realize that in America just about half of the population has about one tattoo. She feels like a unique individual but fails to recognize that her tattoo also puts her into a group of about 40% of other Americans. Claire's sense of individualism comes from the fact that she pertains to the American culture, and I see her inability or unwillingness to connect herself with other Americans who are tattooed as a consequence of the American dream. We want to believe that we are unique to the extreme of denying any collective experience. This phenomenon makes it difficult for Americans to join together as a mass and affect change on larger issues like environmental justice, gun control, and corporate

power. The Occupy movement was successful in creating a collective group by identifying the 99%, but there are many people who cannot conceive their place within this group because of their false sense of individualism which they gives them a sense of pride and worth.

Coming to these conclusion has not been easy and there is certainly more to be explored and argued in regards to these ideas. As I have been analyzing my interviews in Ecuador and in the United States, I have come to question the consequences of interviewing someone face to face. The only interview I did not do in person was with Mark (chapter four interview titled **Mark: a contemplation of borrowed culture, uniqueness, and monochrome**). This interview was incredibly informative and I could tell that as were speaking on the phone Mark was thinking deeply about his tattoo in a new way. I think that talking on the phone allowed for a less intimidating conversation. Mark was not able to see my reactions to his questions and he was also protected from me seeing his reactions as he described his tattoos to me. When asked to talk about oneself, we often fear being called egocentric, selfish, self-centered, etc. But, over the phone much of that fear is calmed because the conversation is not happening face-to-face. It is like being in the dark and having a conversation with someone. I have shared my deepest and darkest secrets with my roommates while lying in the dark because I did not feel threatened by her judgment mainly because I could not see her. At the same time, face-to-face interviews are excellent because one is able to capture the complete reaction of the person. As an anthropologist it is interesting for me to see when someone is uncomfortable during an interview, understand why they may feel that way, and then make connections to cultural practices and possible

consequences of this uneasiness. In the future, I plan to use what I have learned about different interviewing methods to acquire the best information for my research.

As we have just seen, tattooing is just as much a global practice as it is local. Tattooing was introduced to both America and Ecuador and it has been valuable to see how the practice has been influenced by local cultures and evolved to function within the social structures of each society. Rush explained that tattoos are “what an individual or culture values or considers important at the conscience or subconscious level” and they are “never separate from the mind or culture that thought it up (2005:15). Taliaferro & Oden claim that tattoos “mirror its audience and simultaneously alter them” (2012:8). This thesis-Global cultures, local interpretations: a comparison of wearing tattoos in Ecuador and in the United States-has shed light on the tattoo cultures in two places in the world to show how culture is reflected and at the same time is influenced by those who wear tattoos.

Appendix

1. Interview in Spanish

Entrevista para investigación antropológica sobre tatuajes

- ¿Cuántos años tienes?
- ¿De dónde eres?
- ¿Dónde vives ahorita?
- ¿Cuál es tu género?
- ¿Cuál es tu orientación sexual?
- ¿De qué clase social eres?
- ¿En que trabajas?
- ¿Practicas una religión o tipo de espiritualidad?
- ¿Cuántos tatuajes tienes?
- ¿Tienes piercings u otro tipo de arte corporal?

Tatuaje:

- ¿Piensas que los tatuajes revelan algo sobre la personalidad de una persona?
- ¿Qué revela de ti tu tatuaje?
- ¿Piensas que los tatuajes reflejan aspectos de la cultura?
- ¿Con tu tatuaje, cómo refleja la cultura?
- ¿Para ti, que significa el tatuaje?
- ¿Qué quieres decir con el tatuaje?
- ¿Hay tatuajes que son más aceptables que otros? ¿Por qué?
- ¿Por qué quieres poner algo en tu cuerpo que es permanente?
- ¿Qué es el diseño de tu tatuaje? ¿Y por qué?
- ¿Dónde encontraste el diseño?
- ¿Dónde va a poner el tatuaje? ¿Y por qué?
- (Si tiene otros tatuajes...)
 - ¿Te gustan tus tatuajes?
 - ¿Quieres cubrir algunos? ¿Por qué?
 - ¿Cómo tu tatuaje nuevo tiene relación con tus otros?
- ¿Cómo van a reaccionar tu familia y tus amigos?
- ¿Piensas que vas a tener problemas consiguiendo trabajo en el futuro por tu tatuaje?
- ¿Vas a tratar de esconder tu tatuaje? (sí, ¿cuándo y por qué?)
- ¿Tienes algo más que quieres decir?

2. Interview in English

Interview for Anthropology Thesis on Tattoos

- How old are you?
- Where are you from?
- Where do you live now?
- What is your gender?
- What is your sexual orientation?
- What social class do you pertain to?
- What do you do for work?
- Do you practice a religion or type of spirituality?
- How many tattoos do you have?
- Do you have piercings or other type of body art?

Tattoos

- What is the design of your tattoo? Both Polynesian, tribal
- Where did you find the design?
- Where are you putting it and why?
- (If they have other tattoos...)
 - Do you like all of your tattoos?
 - Do you want to cover any?

- How does your new tattoo relate to your others?
- How will your family and friends react?
- Do you think you will have trouble in your future work place because of your tattoo?
- Are you going to try to hide the tattoo? (when and why?)
- Do you think that tattoos reveal something about the personality of a person?
- What does your tattoo reveal about you?
- Do you think that tattoos reflect or represent aspects of culture?
- With your tattoo, how does it reflect or represent your culture or identity?
- For you, what does it mean the concept of a tattoo?
- What do you want to say with your tattoo?
- Do you think that there are some tattoos which are more acceptable than others? Why?
- Why do you want to put something that is permanent on your body?

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