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Revolting Bodies:
The Monster Beauty of Tattooed Women

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This is an essay about bodies in revolt. Tattooed women complicate recent body theory by staging an aesthetic revolution in “feminine” beauty. My research combines elements of participant observation, oral history, archival research, and the use of secondary sources in order to trace the motives of, and cultural responses to, tattooed women. This essay will proceed through several competitive venues, from the nineteenth century to the present, where the meaning of tattoos for women, and the concomitant authority over women’s bodies, has been challenged: from beauty salons to courtrooms, high society to the working class, freak shows to tattoo contests, soft porn to novels. By demonstrating the ruptures that have occurred at various points of conflicts between and among these sites, I will show how aspects of what I am calling monster beauty have developed. I will argue that we read the risks women have taken in becoming tattooed in terms of a revolutionary aesthetic for women.

A woman who works at my favorite bookstore recently told me about her boyfriend’s reaction to the large intricate tattoos adorning her shoulders. “He said they make him think of prostitutes and biker chicks. I’ve never even been on a motorcycle. So I said, ‘but this is me. You know me.’ But he says he needs time to get over the connection.” My bookseller’s struggle with the disjunctive identification occasioned by her tattoos is not unusual. Tattooed women register on many people’s radar screens for the first time either as circus side-show acts, “the tattooed lady,” hippies, prostitutes, or “biker chicks.” The rebellious politics and performances of these “types” of women seem easily identifiable: they are physically transgressive, rootless, loose, troublemakers. Less discernible has been the discomfort caused by their speaking bodies that exceed the protocols of simple body language. As symbols demanding to be read, tattoos on women produce anxieties of misrecognition. Masculine tattoo connotations—brave, heroic, macho—slip off the skin of women. The stories behind sailors’ tattoos are not women’s stories. In a culture built on women’s silence and bent on maintaining silence as a primary part of the relationship between women’s bodies and cultural writing, the rules have been simple. The written body may only speak from a patriarchal script that tries to limit women’s voices and bodies to supporting roles and scenery. So on a woman’s body any tattoo becomes the symbol of bodily excess. When a woman’s body is a sex object, a tattooed woman’s body is a lascivious sex object; when a woman’s body is nature, a tattooed woman’s
body is primitive; when a woman’s body is spectacle, a tattooed woman’s body is a show. It would seem that whatever manifold meanings women attach to their tattoos are culturally written over to simply and only punctuate meanings already attached to their bodies within a larger cultural domain.

Whatever women have wanted to demonstrate with their tattoos—a rejection of those supporting roles, perhaps, or an embrace of the heroics those roles require—their tattoos have been always already culturally remarked to hold them at stable symbolic borders. But does the choice to become tattooed denote only scripted excess, or are there other remainders here as well? While we may seem culturally well-equipped to read women’s skin, feminists know that women aren’t necessarily interested in simply maintaining and punctuating their roles as the workhorses of the culture’s symbolic, inhabiting the overdetermined constituent in gendered pairings: mother to father, wife to husband, desirable to desiring, victim to perpetrator, and also as nature to culture, emotion to logic, and beauty to beast. Language and power make and re-make us into entities that both breathe and have representative meaning. And while we may know this intellectually, where we really feel it is in our guts. The body has become a site for commentary and resistance to these scripts.

This essay is about women writing bodies in a culture of smothering inscriptions. It is about women who change their skin, who deliberately transform themselves through and against the cultural imaginary of what their transformations mean. Tattoos complicate the current interest in the skin and body as field for self-expression, a trend discussed by such theorists as Kathy Davis in regard to plastic surgery (1995, 1997); Susan Bordo in regard to dieting and weight control (1993, 1997); Anne Balsamo in regard to body building (1996); and Naomi Wolf in regard to cosmetics (1991). Unlike plastic surgery and diets that speak, in simple and complex ways, about desires for normalcy, beauty, and control, tattoos in American culture are not “normal.”

Tattoos also complicate the two distinct positions feminist theory has negotiated in order to speak the written body. Broadly stated, we either follow Judith Butler (1990, 1993) in intellectual play with our symbolizing selves, becoming obscure Madonnas forever in a game of dress-up, or agitate with Andrea Dworkin (1974, 1991) to get the make-up off. At the moment, feminism seems polarized in these two modes, more inclined to address theories of performance in academic realms, and sexual objectification in political realms. Alternatively, I find myself returning to Sandra Bartky’s call for a “revolutionary feminist aesthetic,” which would both support narcissistic gratification and seek to eradicate “introjected representatives of agencies hostile to the self” (1990, 42–4). Women need to be able to make the double move of decolonizing the “fashion-beauty complex” from our minds, while allowing for the joy and exploration in the body play of masquerade and performance. Interweaving the now-familiar
arguments that have followed the work of Butler and Dworkin creates a new politics of the performative, a third term that addresses the need for aesthetics and anger. Language for this third term is beginning to develop when performance artist Joanna Frueh speaks of “monster beauty” and critic Mary Russo writes of “monstrification,” creating new possibilities for body aesthetics on the limitations of former definitions [Frueh 1994, Russo 1994]. Materialization of this third term comes to life in women’s tattooed bodies.

In the following pages I will show how the monster beauty of tattooed women has developed through larger struggles over the author(ity) of women’s bodies. By tracing the “primitive” excitement of tattooed society women and the “criminal” agency of tattooed working-class women to the ambiguous stages of freak shows and tattoo contests, I believe we can make some sense of the impulse toward bodily transformation that runs counter to cultural acceptability. In addition to analyzing tattoo artifacts, I will recount relevant material from my participant observation and oral history work that I conducted primarily in the Chicago area from June 1998-March 1999. My primary argument is that tattoo provides one access point for revolutionary aesthetics for women. This is not to say that everyone would or should get tattoos, or to confer some awesome power to being tattooed. Instead, I want to encourage the development of a tattoo aesthetic for women as a way to configure radical difference in rewarding, self-confirming ways.

In keeping with these aims, one aspect of this project refines two of the broad strokes made by Margot Mifflin in her engaging Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Tattoos and Women (1997). Mifflin attempts to chronicle women’s interest in tattooing along a time line coincident to feminist successes, with surges in the 1880s, 1920s, and the 1970s. While I am drawn to her premise, the anecdotal evidence does not convince me of this correlation. The impulse to align these historical events as scriptors of a diffuse interest in tattooing misses other important dynamics such as the colonialist-driven appeal of primitivism in the 1880s. Mifflin’s summary, that “tattoos serve as . . . visual passkeys to the psyches of women who are rewriting accepted notions of feminine beauty and self-expression” implies that tattoos may be read in some simple and transcendent manner, missing their radical undecidibility and the complexity of introjection [1997, 9]. One does not become immanently “knowable” by virtue of being tattooed. Tattoos can be as inexplicable to the selves who wear them as they are to their viewers. Skin cannot so easily speak for the self that inhabits it. Where Bartky uses the term introjection for the way cultural symbolism is absorbed into the body, I understand introjection through the definition offered by psychoanalysts Maria Torok and Nicolas Abraham, who write of a two-way flow between the body and its world (1994, 113–4). Introjection opens a mediating site between one’s psychic interior and cultural exterior. One site of introjection is the tattoo.
The Making of a Spectacle

Hélène Cixous writes of the crimes of art and writing that women must commit to take over the “discourse of man.” In her discussion, she also asks, “who hasn’t accused herself of being a monster?” suggesting a bodily transformation at the heart of these expressive crimes [1976, 348]. Women’s tattooed bodies have presented a dilemma for a culture bent on women’s silence; their bodies have been read as criminal trespasses into the masculine, their inky digressions a secret language stolen from men. Censured by neglect, women have been erased from the history of Western tattooing which remains almost exclusively about male bodies, growing out of the homosociality of sailing and military communities. From the 1770s on, when Capt. James Cook re-introduced tattooing to the Western world from the Polynesian Islands, tattooing has primarily been done by men for other men, and has functioned like a hundred other rituals implicitly designed to keep men together and exclude women. Early efforts to keep women away from tattoo—and then perversely to draw women in—both involved degradation of the female body as a desirable object and desiring subject. An extreme but not atypical example occurred during a rape trial in late-1920s Boston. When the prosecutor realized the raped girl had a tattoo, he asked that the case be summarily dropped. Judge and jury concurred that through the butterfly on her leg the girl had misled the two men who raped her. She was thus reinscribed, “accused of being a person of previous sexual experience—because of her tattoo” (Parry [1933] 1971, 4). As we no doubt remember from feminist history, rape has been—and really continues to be—a matter of property rights. The girl was defaced by her tattoo, functionally damaged goods, so the rape became insignificant in light of what she had chosen to do with her body. In the court’s oxymoronic reading, she had perhaps even invited the rape, her sexual appetite expressed by an otherwise inexplicable butterfly. Not surprisingly, the connection between tattooing and sex, in which tattooing is deemed a sexual act, is staunchly refuted by men when they tattoo each other, while considered obvious when the tattooed body is female.

For every woman damned by her tattoo, another was tattooed without her knowledge. In his memoirs tattooist George Burchett describes the extravagant lengths used to tattoo women in beauty salons while not telling them that they were being tattooed. At the turn of the last century, Henri Marcel’s permanent waving created the beauty salon boom. The idea that one could buy permanent beauty became instantly attractive, even as the throes of fashion continued to pitch clothes and bodies about. To capitalize on the intrigue of permanence, the fashion of an outdoorsy, rosy complexion, and the social danger of appearing to be “painted,” salons began to discretely offer tattooing to add a glow to one’s cheek, an arch to one’s brow, a pout to one’s lips, and for the very brave, the illusion
of a few more eyelashes. Advertising never spoke of tattoos, but instead of "complexion treatments" using a "mechanical process" that was "medically supervised" [Burchett 1958, 130–5]. Once a woman was at the salon, a "doctor" would describe the procedure of "injecting vegetable dyes under the top layer of skin." Thus placated, and without tattooing ever being mentioned, the woman would be led to the tattooist who, in Burchett’s case at least, was to speak as little as possible lest his lowly accent be discerned. By the time his employer announced to the press that the "treatments" were tattoos, Burchett estimates that literally hundreds of women had cosmetic tattoos, apparently without their realization (139).

In both of these examples, players in power cast the female body as virtually uninhabited, a shell of skin desiring only to be desirable, to be raped, to have permanent beauty mysteriously drawn upon it. One need only read and follow the instructions implicit in the very ink of the tattoo. The vulgarity of such crude responses to tattooed women has at least as much to do with gender as with class. Burchett regularly tattooed women from "the lower classes," so the idea that cosmetic clients should be charged more was troublesome to him. The salon owners, however, were set to charge whatever they thought they could get away with: "Some of the blue-blooded clients were charged as much as fifty guineas for a job which I would have been glad to do for ten bob at my salon in the Waterloo Road" (1958, 134; italics in original). While there is nothing new in gouging customers for whatever they’re worth, class position became an important indicator of how to [mis]read tattooed women. The co-optation of women’s bodies, which sees them as thoughtless objects to be painted, could only dupe women who were expected not to know their own bodies. Victorian fashion depended on such amnesiac introjection that replaced the libidinal body with a pure virtuous chaste vessel, and that is what the salon owners counted on. Only the upper class could afford the appearance of such luxurious refutations, of course, but even they soon found other buying impulses satisfied by tattoos. So much for the merchants of fashion.

Trends, as any marketing student will tell you, often move from the bottom up. For upper-class women, tattoos arrived from two ignoble positions, the primitive other and the working class. The class issue most important here lies in women’s potential to transgress bodily strictures, a realistic possibility for women who cannot, by the demands of their lives, be passive creatures. Anthropologist Margo DeMello explains:

Working class women have more experience than their middle class sisters in using their bodies to destabilize dominant notions of power, whether through clothing, makeup, or hair styles, and it is not accidental that working class women have worn tattoos for much longer than middle class women . . . . Working class women are less likely to accept the idea of the quiet, pale, and
bounded female body, and tattoos have long been a sign of that resistance within the working class. [1995, 74]

Butterflies, hearts, flowers, and the faces and initials of loved ones have comprised a long-standing narrow repertoire, but it has been one symbolic of transgressive subjectivity. Excluded from aspects of the iconography of beauty in which pristine skin and other signs of indolence reigned, working-class women could nevertheless access alternate forms of beauty, such as that of the tattoo. More than simply another aesthetic option, tattoos are a destructive decoration that flouts the possibility of untainted flesh. This is one version of monster beauty.

For wealthy women, then, tattoos performed the functional equivalent of “slumming it,” a symbolic inversion with several implications. In part, they could perform the transgressions of working class women, but also they could engage the imaginative history of tattoo’s primitive past. At the same time that a butterfly led men to declare a rape justified, women with names like Vanderbilt [in the United States] and Churchill [in England] were tattooed for what we are safe to imagine, in light of the social mission of imperialism, was the thrill of colonialist chic. Women could be charmed by the uncanniness of tattoo embellishments, a savage fashion, that allowed imaginative access to exotic locales and the “primitives” that inhabited them. The tattoo comes to represent what Marianna Torgovnick calls the “inexact expressive whole” of the primitive “out there” (1990, 21). Upper-class crazes for tattoos waxed and waned around the turn of the century, as people toyed with what it might mean to bring “out there” in. Two contrasting viewpoints illustrate the different positions taken. In an 1897 New York Herald piece, the writer chastises the non-tattooed reader: “[Until tattooed] gracious madam and gentle sir, you cannot be au courant with society’s very latest fad” (qtd. in Parry 1971, 103). In 1896, Ward McAllister, a society don, lamented, “It is certainly the most vulgar and barbarous habit the eccentric mind of fashion ever invented. It may do for an illiterate seaman, but hardly for an aristocrat” [ibid.]. McAllister’s classist distinction does more than disallow the narcissistic thrill of following a fad. More importantly, he is distancing himself from the actions that bring his peers closer to monstrous “savage” others. The possibility of sympathy that lies at the heart of mimicry is all too real for McAllister, who perceives an encroaching barbarism in tattoos. McAllister has little to fear, however; dalliances with the savage also function to foreclose the possibility of any material union.

Carl Van Vechten’s popular novel, The Tattooed Countess (1924), set in 1897, provides an extended example of ambivalent readings projected on the female body that elided the hedonism of wealth with the primitive and sexual. Van Vechten, it should be mentioned, was a happily married but also gay member of Gertrude Stein’s “lost generation,” roving be-
between Paris and New York, championing Stein (he was responsible for seeing that *The Making of the Americas* was published), and re-invigorating interest in Melville. Van Vechten understood the contours of life on the edge: the end of a century, the border of acceptable sexuality, and, as he became involved in bankrolling the Harlem Renaissance, the shape of racism. Seen in this light, Van Vechten’s *The Tattooed Countess* is less the morality play about a fallen woman it implies than a drama about a woman whose vitality is only explicable through her subversion of social boundaries. The Countess Ella Nattatorrini is an Iowa girl of new money who was widowed soon after her marriage to an Italian count. For 20 years she roams Europe having a succession of affairs with young men, the last of which is so psychically scarring that she marks it with a tattooed bracelet around her wrist accompanied by the phrase, “Que sais-je?” (What do I know?). She returns to the Iowa town of her birth to live with her spinster sister and is welcomed with open arms by society—such as it is—until she becomes involved with another young man, this time the 17-year-old son of a wholesale grocer. In the end, they run off together, each professing love, though our omniscient narrator allows us to understand the subterfuge of the young man anxious only to see the world.

The Countess’ tattoo completes and marks the transgressive persona of one who smokes, when other women don’t, wears make-up, when other women don’t, is so large that “she would have been hard put to appear to advantage in the styles of 1923,” sleeps late, and is generally self-indulgent. Her distasteful decadence, her feminine excess, is cast by Van Vechten as specifically not American. When her sister first notices her tattoo she is shocked less by its existence, which she is willing to put down to fashion, than by its public location, “That is the sort of thing we would keep hidden here” (43). It becomes increasingly evident that what one would hide in Iowa is just what one would flaunt in Paris and vice versa. In the novel’s typical sentimentality, the Countess reflects, “I am tattooed on my arm while they are tattooed on their hearts” (162). Wearing her heart so literally on her sleeve bespeaks her sexuality—and her inability to “manage” it—with uncomfortable frankness.

The idea that tattooing for women was a French fashion of exposure did circulate during this time period; an article in an 1897 issue of the *New York World* erroneously located the trend’s beginnings there when the actual origins were in England, not France (36). These two nationalist distinctions, that American women hide what the French reveal, and the idea that women were first taken with tattooing in France, cast tattooed women in a curious otherness, exotic, but just barely so. Parisian flirtations with the primitive during the *Belle Epoch* led the French to seem just a bit further away than their culture or language would otherwise place them. The Countess—accustomed to the “European habits” her sister contemptuously sniffs at—is fascinating to her old Iowa commun-
nity, but not to be emulated. Indeed, she must be reined in from ideas such as having dinner parties so that she will accept her role of a curiosity. This blend of interest and contempt means she is invited everywhere, yet never asked even the most basic questions about her life in Europe. Her tattoo, so seemingly revealing of her amorous past—if one were to but ask—is never commented on, despite the title of the novel. Its literary function, like her royal title, promises more than it delivers. For Van Vechten, such exoticism was an empty sign to be filled with a variable assortment of fantasmatic sexuality.

In Van Vechten’s little Iowa town the indecipherable exotic body of the Countess, with her excessive desires and transgressive pigment, moved thrillingly close to that of the freak. Freak shows were at their height of popularity at the fin de siècle, operating as circus and carnival sideshows. Through a confluence of interests in the explanatory power of science and the promise of encounters with exotic peoples, bodily difference became big business. Joining people with physical deformities was a cadre known in the business as “self-made freaks.” As freak show historian Robert Bogden notes, “‘Freak’ is a way of thinking, of presenting, a set of practices, an institution—not a characteristic of an individual” (1988, 10). For some there was little choice; if they were to have an occupation, freak was the only one available. What is interesting in our present context is the turn of mind that makes someone decide to be a freak, that turns the pretty midwestern girl into “Zentra, the Circassian Beauty” or, more to my point, drew women to become extensively tattooed. Unlike the tall person who is willing to play giant, tattooed women had to undergo a long process to become freaks. For them, to become a freak was to go to the edge and not come back; it was to undergo an alteration at the level of identity, and to radicalize body politics, ideas I will return to in the next section.

Freak Shows, Beauty Pageants, and Tattoo Contests

Lydia, oh Lydia,  
Say, have you met Lydia?  
Lydia the tattooed lady . . .  
On her back is the Battle of Waterloo  
Beside it the Wreck of the Hesperus too,  
And proudly above waves the Red, White, and Blue.”  
—Groucho Marx song, “Lydia the Tattooed Lady” (1939)

In the United States the staging of women’s bodies in freak shows, tattoo contests, and beauty pageants all grew up on the same carnival stage that P.T. Barnum had dedicated to the monstrous, the beautiful, and their hybrids. Although physical contests enjoy a global ubiquity, Ameri-
cans can credit Barnum with the Western version of these. Barnum was staging contests for children and pets to extend his side-show business, when, in 1854, he suggested that women take the stage so that their beauty may be judged (it may be noted this is six years after Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton took another stage at Seneca Falls, but this is not the place to explore that connection). Women refused to participate in Barnum’s scheme, so their daguerreotypes were used instead, and thus began the public warming to this form of scrutinized beauty, later picked up by eager newspapers. This shift in playing fields, from the stage to the newspaper, made it possible for beauty contests to contribute to the shift in the general public’s perception of women as commodity images without women directly participating. It also encouraged women to take those stages and accept scrutiny. By 1880 a Miss U.S. contest was in existence, and by 1920 Miss America, both designed to publicize resort areas (Cohen et al. 1996, 2–5).

Concurrent with the first Miss U.S. contests was the arrival of tattooed women on sideshow stages. Beginning in 1882 with Nora Hildebrandt, a handful of women became heavily tattooed so that they could travel with circuses and carnival sideshows. Their appeal superseded that of tattooed men for the titillation they engendered in their audiences, not only were “tattooed women” publicly displaying themselves with fewer clothes than women in any other line, but the stories describing how they became tattooed typically consisted of tattoo rape (Mifflin 1997, 18–25; Parry 1971, 64–8). Each woman was kidnapped and forcibly tattooed by savages, often cast as American Indians. Their stories were the new captivity narratives, granddaughters in spirit to Mary Rowlandson—whose seventeenth-century autobiography became the prototypical captivity narrative—and from show to show and woman to woman, these stories varied little. For Nora Hildebrandt, whose father had the first tattoo shop in America, the story was necessarily somewhat different. In her version she and her father were kidnapped by Sitting Bull, who, along with his tribe, forced father to tattoo daughter. Every day for a year, so the story goes, she was tied to a tree until she was tattooed from head to toe (Mifflin 18).

For several reasons deprivation of agency was always the crucial element in these stories. On one level, these were the narratives on which America was built. Annette Kolodny identifies captivity narratives as the “single narrative form indigenous to the New World,” filling the popular imagination with “the victim’s recounting of unwilling captivity” (1984, 6). Like the captivity narratives of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in which savage interlopers preyed on “delicate pioneer women,” the (fictive) fact of savage mistreatment catered to prevailing fantasies that supported colonial and genocidal efforts. Tattooing would be cast as torture, thus making any tattooed man that much more brave, the poor tattooed woman on stage that much more pathetic, and the savage that
much more savage (see fig. 1). Most importantly, the female body was a spectacle of admonition against women having/taking too much physical freedom.

The forced incest allusion in Hildenbrandt’s story was a fitting addition to the traditional captivity narrative, America’s first form of pornography. Captivity narratives invigorated excitement over the unknown, encouraging the press onward. Writing incest and kidnapping together on a woman’s body was a powerful combination for protecting some boundaries and eradicating others. Not only could the Indians steal women, but their whims included the theft of civilizing propriety as well. Such concepts were to find their expression through a young Sigmund Freud in the next decades. In Civilization and Its Discontents he writes that the taboo against incest is necessitated by “the progress of civilization” (1961, 51). It was this line that Irene Woodward capitalized on in her 1880s tale of father/daughter tattoo; postcards she sold read “In spite of the pain the girl [daughter] was delighted and coaxed her father to continue” (qtd. Mifflin 1997, 20). One hardly needs Freud’s curiously inverted reading of little girls wanting their fathers sexually to understand how well this story sold.

More broadly, tattooed women had to fashion responses to the impact of Cesare Lombroso, one of the first “criminal anthropologists” who, in the 1880s, was an outspoken critic of tattoos. In developing his “scientific” theory of criminality, Lombroso studied 7,000 tattooed people over a 13-year period. He concluded that tattooed people were “instinctive criminals,” something which they demonstrated by tapping into this “most characteristic trait of primitive man” (Scutt and Gotsch 1974, 109). Lombroso’s work vindicated all those disgusted or otherwise put off by tattoos, but for the sideshow stage his work was useful because it provided scientific backing for tales of savagery, criminality, and decadence (Bogden 1988, 251). When Lombroso focused specifically on tattooed women, he found that their criminality manifested most often in prostitution. Reasoning in circles, he concluded that the more “degraded” the prostitute, the more likely she was to have tattoos (Lombroso 1958, 116–20). Tattooed women were thus in the position of either representing criminality, which in terms of tattooed bodies meant prostitutes, or its victims. While their tattooed bodies hinted at prostitution, hinted that they were “bad girls,” their stories renounced ownership of their tattoos—and bodies—reinscribing them as “good girls.” In her study of fin de siècle prostitution, Shannon Bell argues that the pathologizing efforts by Lombroso and his ilk could never eradicate the ambiguity between these two positions (1994, 40–3). For tattooed women, then, playing the role of victim created the most viable mix of good and bad.

In contrast to their stories of victimization, women who made their livings off their tattoos had more independence, money, and opportunities for travel than were otherwise available to women, save through
Fig. 1: Note the Indians in the bottom left corner of this turn-of-the-century circus poster, and the woman just visible at the edge who appears to be tied up while being tattooed. In contrast, note the patriotic images of the women’s tattoos.
precious few vocations. In effect, their tattoos and the tales they told of them spoke one reality while they experienced quite another. Such doubling is often the role of those who embody a society’s boundaries, and as Bakhtin has taught us, carnivals are a place where we may witness and/or experience excesses and transgressions that remind us of where our “real” boundaries are. In other words, the (patriarchal) culture that marks women with purity and a “connection to nature,” and then values them/us for those projected marks is bolstered by evidence that women can be marked impure also; efforts to protect purity can be that much more rigid when hints that it isn’t natural seep through, as in a freak show tent.

In Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Tattoos and Women, Margot Mifflin notes that tattooed women on the freak show circuit “sacrificed social respectability for their profession” (1997, 32). Indeed, their stories could never quite mediate their tattoos; these women claimed frightful experiences as their own with words never designed to erase their markings. Had the intent of their stories been to recuperate their marked surfaces into respectability, no stories would have been told. But to call this choice a “sacrifice” suggests that respectability was and is always a preferable goal in comparison to entering the category of what was known as a “self-made freak.” It is wrong to assume that their tales of victimization effectively victimized them as outcasts. It is more accurate to say that during these early years women were playing with the limits of women’s social respectability. They made their livings as freaks, but they also had full (albeit feminine) freedom in public. Because they were never tattooed on their faces, necks, or hands, the fashions of the day allowed them to cover their tattoos completely when out in public. This discretion translated into financial remuneration—no one was getting it for free—but also added to their fierceness. One never saw the heavy tattoos of these women in public, which meant that no one (seemingly) had them and everyone (imaginatively) had them. On stage in the tents they could be “the women your mother warned you about,” but off stage they could be everywhere.

There is a reckless kind of freedom in horrifying others, in making one’s body into the seductive and scary and strange combination that is monster beauty. Tattooed women could revel in their freakiness, enjoy the act of display, and delight in the tease of their tales. But such pleasures rarely last. With the advent of electric tattooing, tattoos became more plentiful and less exotic. By the late 1920s there was a glut in the business of being a tattooed attraction, and women had to capitalize on the sexual side of their work (Bogden 1988, 253). In order to have a viable career, the stories told by tattooed women necessarily grew more lurid, tainted with economic desperation. Enter Betty Broadbent (see fig. 2). Broadbent had run away to join the circus in 1927, and by 1939 was a Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey “youngest tattooed woman” sideshow (Mifflin
1997, 30). While working the sideshow at the 1939 World’s Fair, Broadbent also participated in a beauty pageant there. Perhaps she simply intended to pull a publicity stunt, but her actions were also a commentary on the politics of beauty and the ownership of women’s bodies. Through her smiles and tattoos of the Madonna and Charles Lindbergh that she wore, she was demanding a revision of feminine beauty. Broadbent didn’t have a prayer of winning, of course, but her challenge to the ideal feminine beauty of the beauty contest existed on several levels. Her face and body were conventionally beautiful according to the standards of the time, but her skin was monstrous. The transgressive agency she manifested in her body alterations were what drove people to see freak shows, which was how she made her living; now she was asking to be judged based on her adherence to cultural ideals. Eliding the gap between beauty pageant and freak show, she was, in that moment of contest participation, two Barnum acts in one.
Beauty pageant ethnographers [gathered in the 1996 volume, *Beauty Queens*] agree that “these contests showcase values, concepts and behavior that exist at the center of a group’s sense of itself and exhibit values of morality, gender, and place,” but also can constitute ritual spaces in which these same values are challenged [Cohen et al. 1996, 2]. Here I am casting Broadbent as a forerunner to the women who participated in the watershed 1968 protest of the Miss America Pageant. Often cited as the beginning of feminism’s second wave (and erroneously the infamous site of bra burning), the demonstrators galvanized watching women by reinterpreting beauty pageant contestants as pieces of meat. Ironic for this equation, they carried posters of a naked woman, on whose body were drawn lines delineating various butcher cuts labeled “ribs,” “chuck,” “loin,” “round,” etc., and they crowned a sheep as Miss America. The media reading of this event attempted to turn the protesters into monsters, as Susan Douglas summarizes:

[It] equated the women’s movement with exhibitionism and narcissism, as if women who unstrapped their breasts were unleashing their sexuality in a way that was unseemly, laughable, and politically inconsequential, yet dangerous . . . the media, with a wink, hinted that these women’s motives were not at all political but rather personal: to be trendy, to attract men. (1994, 160)

Operating on social margins, the tattooed woman and the protester are both read as excessively sexual while the pageant contestants on center stage operate within acceptable sexual parameters. At the same time, for the protesters it is those in the beauty pageant who are excessively sexualized. Not only does this paradox signal a marked difference between the female and male gaze, it fixes that difference through the bodies that look back. The tattooed women who mark themselves as alien, as freaks, cannot be contained by their fictive autobiographies of victimization. They look at their audience with a tacit demand that it recognize itself as their other: pale, quotidian, bland, normal. In the world of the freak show, a challenging gaze may have reduced the bravery of hecklers, but more importantly such looks doubled the probable challenge experienced by audience members. For their part, the pageant contestants are as willful as the media in avoiding any possibility of alienation—their looks are full of hope that they will be judged worthy by their viewers.

The multiple determinations of these gazes created a space for women to follow Broadbent’s lead in being both sexual subjects who welcome certain gazes and at the same time challenge them through marks that continue to have multiple readings. Still, little happened for tattooed women in the years between Broadbent’s pageant participation and the wholehearted embrace of the freak in the countercultural praxis of the 1970s. An excerpt from a 1967 article in the soft-porn magazine, *Night*
and Day, entitled “Tattooed Teasers: A Threat to American Womanhood” illustrates:

Before you become too alarmed about this threat to American womanhood, we should point out that the blue scourge hasn’t yet reached our hallowed shores in any significant strength. But the threat is definitely in the air. If we did it to our cars, we might easily do it to our women. (16)

Whatever this “threat” is, the writer clearly expects the reader to implicitly understand it. Perhaps the threat isn’t clearly articulated because it isn’t clearly understood. Tattooing, here, is something men do to women, akin to detailing their cars, an analogy the article opens on. It seems that the implied male audience potentially can control this threat, which threatens them by way of threatening “their” women. Encroaching from foreign origins, the danger is of national scope, an impurity on its way to conquer American women. Accompanying the article are several photos of tattoos lurking dangerously in the skin of smiling Australian women.

The real danger was that women might identify with the tattooed Aussies, a possibility largely dormant until identifying with otherness became an important political move, to “freak out” was the early call of 1960s social movements (Russo 1994, 75–7). Hundreds lined up for Janis Joplin’s heart tattoo after her death, and countercultural identification focused on the “freak,” a term popularized in the language of rock. The liner notes to Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention’s first album Freak Out! (1966) capture the spirit:

On a personal level, Freaking Out is a process whereby an individual casts off outmoded and restricting standards of thinking, dress and social etiquette in order to express CREATIVELY his [sic] relationship to his immediate environment and the social structure as a whole. . . . We would like everyone who HEARS this music to join us . . . become a member of The United Mutations . . . FREAK OUT!

By the 1970s freaks were everywhere, and particularly for women the call to mutation, to radical fundamental change, could be answered with a commitment-demonstrating tattoo. By militantly re-marking their bodies and embracing alternative bodily aesthetics, the spirit of carnival sideshows’ tattooed women was revived and embellished.

From the 1970s into the 1990s, the obvious femininity of the most popular images—butterflies, flowers, and hearts—equated the feminine with the natural and seemed to annul the contestation of the tattoo. These two contradictory meanings of the possessed and liberated body functioned simultaneously, meaning that for some bodies the feminine was celebrated through these images (without, I might add, anyone perceiving a need to interrogate them). For others the omnipresent rose floated next
to the man’s name who “possessed” that woman’s body. Twenty-plus years of “Property of . . .” tattoos mark an extended backlash to feminist possibilities, and continue to factor in the lives of gang women. While these tattoos signify membership and mark a sense of community, of “belonging,” their larger purpose is to demand a sacrifice of autonomous subjectivity.

On stage this entanglement of intentions and bodily ownership plays out in the tattoo contest: a mutant progeny, one part beauty contest, one part freak show. There is little to no money in winning, but tattoo contests have flourished since their inception at tattoo conventions in the early-1970s. Conventions began as a place for tattooists to find some professional camaraderie, share information, and show off their work, but are now prime locations for tattoo aficionados to connect with artists. Today scores of conventions are held in the United States and around the world, with a hierarchy established following regional, national, and international lines. Local conventions include Inkin’ Lincoln, which happens every March in Chicago, Illinois; for the last seven years New Orleans’s Tattoo Voodoo has taken place at Halloween; the Meeting of the Marked in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, is also seven years old; the 10th annual Shades of Blue Tattoo Show took place in LaCrosse, Wisconsin, in 1999; the second annual Northern Ink Xposure takes place in June 2000 in Toronto, Ontario; Am-Jam takes places every January in Schenectady, New York. Larger-scale conventions include The Inkslinger’s Ball, which takes places every September in Hollywood, California; the Lucky Seven Tattoo Convention in Berlin takes place every December; and the 13-year-old Mad Hatter’s Tea Party took place in February in Portland, Maine. The Old School Tattoo Expo focuses on artist training and changes venue every year. Marked for Life in Orlando is the only convention dedicated to women artists alone. These events are tattoo safe-havens where social rules governing bodies change, and an exhibitionist melancholy to share one’s tattoo can be eased. People are free to stare; strangers touch each other as they admire tattoos, they tug clothing away; most wear little to begin with. On the contest stage, women and men display themselves in relative proportion to their presence at the convention [there are more men on stage because there are more men off stage], but their desire to do so manifests in radically different, clearly gendered ways.

At several of these conventions, I’ve watched two different kinds of competitions happening during tattoo contests. For male bodies the tattooist is represented, and the tattooed men on stage act as proud but often only grudgingly willing hosts. They shuffle on stage, eyes fixed on the floor, shoulders frequently hunched. For a female participant it is never clear whether the judges give more weight to her tattoo or her body, but it is clear that her body’s desirability is part of the competition. High heels
and swimsuits comprise the typical ensemble, but however they are clad, the women are not embarrassed to take the stage the way their male counterparts are. Acknowledging this disparity, Mifflin quotes veteran tattoo competitor Stephanie Farinelli about a loss at a prior competition, “I felt that I was not feminine-looking enough and scantily-clad enough to win. I got a wardrobe change, went on a diet, and won first place the following year” [1997, 162]. At first it seems that these different kinds of exhibition are simple enactments of cultural expectations that associate voyeurism with men and exhibitionism with women. Farinelli altered her body in order to display herself to her best advantage within the codes she understood were important for her performance, those of the beauty pageant. The men, meanwhile, display their discomfort along with their bodies because this is their expected stance. As Kaja Silverman notes, the exhibitionism at the heart of men’s spectator sports is a functional equivalent of the more thoroughly interrogated woman-as-spectacle, only with codes men have come to understand and embody [1994, 185].

Between the stage and the convention floor, the competition for ascendance of bodily codes collapses. For both genders, tattoo conventions promise—and deliver—relief from the alienation they have written upon their bodies. However, the safe boundary space of the convention, which values tattoo above all, is disrupted by the act of staging bodies. Even here at this permeable limit of body aesthetics, women are expected to maintain their bodies within larger social codes of size and shape. The stage re-establishes the importance of these codes, as if a normalizing discourse were inherent in its geography.

By seeking to be judged, contestants straddle an undecided boundary, in part because this other space of the tattoo contest isn’t other at all, but more of the same. A story like Farinelli’s presents some possible insight into why women bother in terms of the monster who is afraid of frightening others. Farinelli’s tattoo is a necklace of stunningly colorful variety of thickly veined penises. Judges and audience members might interpret her tattoos as trophies or marks of castration fantasies. Farinelli does what she thinks is necessary to put her fellow tattoo enthusiasts at their ease through gestures that recuperate non-threatening female spectacle. Hers is an obvious example, but less overt tattoo imagery can be read as threatening, too. William Gibson articulates this threat in his description of a character and her tattoo in *Idoru* [1996]:

> . . . Kathy Torrance. Palest of pale blonds. A pallor bordering on translucence, certain angles of light suggesting not blood but some fluid the shade of summer straw. On her left thigh the absolute indigo imprint of something twisted and multibarbed, an expensive savage pictoglyph. Visible each Friday when she made it her habit to wear shorts to work. . . . The tattoo looked like something from another planet, a sign or message burned in from the depths of space. [5–6]
A radical otherness from “the depths of space” displaces the otherness of Kathy’s inner space. She is frightful, but because of some agent ultimately outside her, something written on her body à la Kafka, rather than by a paid artist and by her own choice. Coupled with this other-worldly reading is the juxtaposition of “expensive” while also “savage.” Framed in this way, Kathy becomes the postmodern realization of a society woman’s fad from 100 years ago, off-putting but inert. Such interpretations do not succeed in taking her bodily power away from her, however. Her tattoo still seems like a weapon, “twisted and multibarbed,” forever at hand for an attack. The “depths of space” from which her tattoo has come may indeed be inner space, a sign burned outward, a warning glyph only recognized when her conservative clothes are shed. Casual Fridays can reveal so much more than skin.

Thus far, I have described tattooed women in a culturally familiar sense: scary, hyper-sexualized, freaky, threatening, excessive, and slippery to read, in other words monstrous. Exploring the machinations of the tattooed body as a cultural artifact begins to explain the transgressive opportunities women have found in tattoos: working class women at the turn-of-the-century defied the convention of quiet, pale beauty with colorful tattoos; tattooed women in carnivals used their tattoos as passkeys to travel; Van Vechten’s fictional countess announces her impassioned female body through her tattoo, while her real-life counterparts explore Colonial exoticism through theirs; hippies of the 1970s find peaceful militancy in tattooing. Despite this history of monster beauty, part of the tattoo’s radical undecidability means that women assume a tremendous risk by refusing the cultural claim on their/our bodies to be decidedly not freaky. Limits placed on the value of difference not only mean “don’t get a tattoo,” but also drive women to starvation diets and cosmetic surgery. Women who get tattoos as a way to defy this proprietorship must face the other women still trapped by its spell.

To illustrate this point: for her 60th birthday, North Dakota lawyer Elaine Schieve had a small tattoo of a Nile River goddess tattooed on her right ankle. The figure is approximately two inches high; a female form holding a small sphere above her head, the whole image cast in swirls of light blue. Elaine is reluctant to philosophize about her choice of image, much less her choice to be tattooed, though she does note that it is bound up in the difficult transformation from “a head-turning beauty to another old lady” coupled with the “liberation of menopause.” Contemplating her tattoo after one year, she remarked, “I like it every time I see it. But I know it could be used to label me as a flake and would be almost unanswerable.” Recognizing that the risk of being interpreted in terms of a negative symbolic, as “a flake,” could be professionally damaging, that the tattoo could be used as proof of some deficit of character, she nonetheless had it placed in a visible spot [1998].
Expecting a positive response, Elaine shared her tattoo with friends. Female friends, many of them professional women like herself who are all-too-well acquainted with the continuing struggles to be taken seriously by their male colleagues, asked first what her husband thought and went on to comment on what their husbands would think if they were to get a tattoo. They did not ask if it hurt (the most common first question), they did not ask if she was pleased (a common second question), nor did they ask how much it cost, how long it took, why she chose the image, or how she planned on negotiating the public space of her ankle in court or at depositions. In murder mysteries, the murderer is the one who doesn’t ask how the crime was committed. In the mysteries of tattoo, the proprietorship of the body goes to the one whose approval is sought. By their questions, these women demonstrated that on some level they do not think that Elaine owns her body, nor do they seem to think that they own theirs. Theirs is a common response, though for Elaine, a woman-oriented woman who has been a life-long feminist and tries to surround herself with like-minded women, the reaction was shocking.

Discussing her similar experience, novelist Kathy Acker suggests that many women have reacted negatively to her tattoos because of the “bad girl” stigma: “[W]hat women have done is internalize this bad girl/good girl distinction, and out of fear say, ‘I’ve got to be a good girl; I’m not going to be a bad girl.’ So they’re the ones who really get down on the bad girls” (1991, 179). This dichotomy returns us to the Butler/Dworkin to-perform-or-not-to-perform split. Policing the “bad” body is a familiar maneuver for women who have learned they can just barely contain the evidence of such indiscretions as aging, childbirth, and eating. Through creams, cosmetic surgery, and diets one may perform her, but there really is no good girl. Acker’s detractors seem unaware that bodies have a world of things to say beyond whether one is good or bad.

It may be that women interested in tattooing will find inspiration in those artists, like Acker, who do “body art,” Amelia Jones’s catch-all term for performance and other forms of art that focus on the body (1998). Several women artists, novelists and painters, singers and sculptors, have gotten tattoos as part of their artistic experiments with the speaking body. Across the knuckles of one hand, singer Diamanda Galas has spelled out H-I-V-+, an homage to a brother who died of AIDS, and a political act demonstrating humanity’s interconnected implications of HIV and AIDS, or as Galas says, we are all HIV positive (Galas 1991, 12). On performance artist Valie Export’s left leg, a rendering of a garter belt clip acts as a “historical antique” reminding her of “obsolete” definitions of women (Export 1991, 193).

I have argued that the history of tattooed women as freaks provides a touchstone for many tattooed women in the West. The boundary position of the tattooed freak is a chosen one, a refusal to submit to the cultural
inscriptions written on women’s bodies. This act of transgression does not reverse the insidiousness of cultural inscriptions, however. Rather, by speaking one’s bodily ownership, tattooed women risk further reinscription by the Others who are troubled by their tattoos. What tattooed women’s bodies do, by writing back to the larger culture through their tattoos, is subvert proscribed physicality and broaden our sense of body aesthetics with monster beauty.

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Notes

1. See, for instance, Greer [1999]; Zita [1998]; and such anthologies as Conboy, Medina, and Stanbury [1997]; and Price and Shildrick [1999].

2. Those following Butler include Grosz [1994 and 1995]; Jones [1998]; and within the frame of queer theory such work as Case, Bret, and Foster, eds. [1995]. Those taking what I am calling the Dworkin tack include Bordo [1993 and 1997]; Wolf [1991]; and such recent work on cosmetic surgery as Haiken [1997]; and Davis [1995].

3. The term “monstrification” was coined by John Ruskin in relation to architectural practices of marking the borders of buildings with gargoyles. Following Russo, I am expanding the concept to include bodies who alter themselves to thus mark the borders of culture. I move between the terms “monster” and “freak” in this essay with the understanding that “monster” was the preferred term during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries until the dawn of teratology inaugurated the “freak.” See Thomson [1996].

4. For examples from across the disciplines of history, sociology, and philosophy see Taylor [1997], Scutt and Gotsch [1974], Steward [1990], Sanders [1989]; McCabe [1997].

5. In another, more recent legal context a woman’s butterfly tattoo was again read as a symbol of sexual enticement. In a 1972 National Police Gazette article Bernard Kobel suggests that a butterfly tattoo is an invitation “to be chased and caught” [18–9].
6. Suffragists railed against this disavowal of the body because women were being told they were naturally invalids when their torpid social roles made them ill [Wolf 1991, 233]. The medical industry did not expect women to know the difference.

7. For one example see Hebdige (1993) in which he chronicles this move through the popularity of punk in Britain.

References


