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Conceptualization of the Memorial Tattoo in Scholarly Literature

by

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Abstract

The intent of this study is to examine the “self-help tattoo,” specifically the sub-genre of the self-help tattoo, known as the memorial tattoo in scholarly literature. Over the past few decades, tattoos became increasingly popular within the United States’ middle- and upper-class communities. The widespread use and increasing acceptance of such body art in Western society have invited researchers in many scholarly fields to interpret the memorial tattoo’s meaning. This study finds that the memorial tattoo is conceptualized differently across scholarly fields and there isn’t an overarching theoretical framework that all scholars follow.

Keywords: memorial, tattoo, grief, grieving, self-help

Introduction

While tattooing is not a new practice in the United States, the recent development of middle and upper-class participants in tattoo culture provoked academic interest. The work of the cultural anthropologist, Margo DeMello, provided essential information serving as background to this thesis. Her analysis of the self-help tattoo, a type of tattoo inspired by the self-help movements of the 1980’s, helped to explain the sudden rise in tattoo popularity during this time period (DeMello 94). The movements advocated for self-awareness, expression, and improvement, and could be expressed using a variety of techniques, like therapy. DeMello found that the self-help tattoo was another way to accomplish this (DeMello 144). As I looked at DeMello’s work, I realized there was an interesting sub-genre of the contemporary tattoo, the memorial tattoo—a type of tattoo that represents the death of a loved one. The memorial tattoo has multiple disciplinary points-of-view and is found to be represented in literature using disciple-specific methodology.

Approach

My thesis examines scholarship from several fields on the self-help tattoo and the memorial tattoo, framing the differing treatments in the context of disciplinary practices. Six sources from various fields of study are examined and then organized topically with comparative analysis embedded within each source.

Discussion

Margo DeMello

Margo DeMello, a cultural anthropologist, was dedicated to researching and understanding the contemporary tattoo in the middle- and upper- class communities. My thesis relies on one of DeMello's books, published in 2000, *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community*. Though DeMello has produced other books and publications since *Bodies of Inscription* that are not consulted in this thesis, which discuss tattoos, body adornment and decoration, and body studies. *Bodies of Inscription* offers an introduction to her work, a history of the tattoo, influences on the modern tattoo, and personal narratives from tattoo wearers. Out of the 265-page book, I relied on DeMello's introduction, in order to understand her disciplinary background and research methods, and her section on the self-help tattoo, pages 144-145. DeMello also analyzes other types of tattoos and their influences, though her analysis of the self-help tattoo is useful when comparing DeMello's work to that of other scholars who explore the memorial tattoo, because her analysis served as background to my exploration into the memorial tattoo.

DeMello received her PhD. in cultural anthropology and has thereafter been a researcher in the field. DeMello's ethnography produced through close observation and engagement in the tattoo community is a key aspect of DeMello's professional apparatus. Thus, we can understand

that DeMello's attendance at tattoo conventions, as a means to conduct interviews with middle- and upper-class tattoo wearers, and reading of elitist tattoo magazines, are discipline-appropriate research methods. An elitist tattoo magazine highlights middle- and upper-class tattoos and interviews with this class-targeted group.¹ In contrast, non-elitist magazines are written for a more working- and lower-class audience. DeMello's research allowed her to analyze the self-help tattoo specifically in the middle- and upper-class communities. The construction of the self-help tattoo was based on the self-help movement of the 1980's in the middle- and upper-classes, a movement inspired by self-improvement and self-expression (DeMello 144). DeMello argues that the self-help tattoo is another self-improvement technique. While DeMello specifically analyzes the importance of the self-help tattoo in middle- and upper-class communities, she does not explore the self-help tattoos function in the working- and lower-classes.

Judith Sarnecki

While DeMello discussed the self-help tattoo in a broad sense, many researchers (Sarnecki, Johnson, Ord, Cann, Koch and Roberts) began to explore a sub-genre of the self-help tattoo, the memorial tattoo. Judith Sarnecki explores the memorial tattoo in her eight-page article published in 2001, "Trauma and Tattoo," using cultural studies appropriate research methods. Sarnecki has other publications discussing politics, and others written in French, that I do not attend to in my thesis. Sarnecki received her PhD. in French and her BA in teaching; being that cultural studies is a multidisciplinary orientation, her education in humanities introduced her to basic methodology used in cultural studies. Moreover, Sarnecki is an emerita professor of and researcher of French and cultural studies, further subjecting her to discipline-specific methodology. Sarnecki's understanding of important artifacts in culture, during a

¹ (From *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community* pg. 40): ...Editors of the magazines try their hardest to put a clean, "middle-class" face on the art form...

specific time period, is critical to the discipline. The cultural studies field, as an interdisciplinary approach, examines many aspects of culture; including, high culture, popular culture, and everyday practices.² This is accomplished by inspecting important artifacts of culture in a specific time period, because the field believes culture is constantly changing. Sarnecki demonstrates this in her treatment of the current cultural phenomenon, the memorial tattoo; in order to establish her stance, she first relies on Freudian theory, and then on memoirs, film, and an interview.

Sarnecki discusses Sigmund Freud's "little Ernst" and the "fort-da" game, using the interpretation of Cathy Caruth, a professor of English and comparative literature, in her 1996 text *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Caruth describes the fort-da game as a "game" where Freud's grandson symbolically "played" with his mother's body (Sarnecki 36). Freud witnessed his eighteenth-month old grandson playing with a wooden reel and a piece of string. When he couldn't see the reel, he would say "fort" or "gone," and when he could, he would say "da" or "there."³ According to Caruth, the fort-da game is used to explain the need for a person to repeatedly experience pain in order to create an understanding of the loss and incorporate it into their psyche (Sarnecki 36). Sarnecki argues, using Caruth's analysis, that the tattoo is an appropriate platform to repeatedly experience trauma, due to the permanence on the skin. In Sarnecki's analysis, it seems that she relies more heavily on Caruth's discussion of Freud, than Freud's discussion himself.

In addition to the fort-da game, Sarnecki uses two memoirs to form her argument for the memorial tattoos ability to memorialize someone. She introduces Madam Chinchilla, a tattoo

² (From Wikipedia "Cultural Studies"): "Culture" for a cultural studies researcher, not only includes traditional high culture (the culture of ruling social groups) and popular culture, but also everyday meanings and practices.

³ (From Encyclopedia "FORT-DA"): "*Fort* !" and "*Da* !" are exclamations that Sigmund Freud heard his grandson Ernst utter while playing. This pair of words meaning "Gone!" and "There!"

artist of twenty-seven years; because she has tattooed memorial tattoos and believes they are a part of the grieving process. Sarnecki also relies on Peter Trachtenberg, a writer and tattoo wearer, who states, from personal experience, that memorial tattoo is a way to remember traumatic events. Sarnecki also relies on two films, *Beauty, Art and Pain*, and *American History X*, which she only briefly mentions because of their indirect connection to her interviewee, a man named Sky. Sarnecki discusses Sky, a former prison and gang member, and his experience using a tattoo to deal with the trauma associated with being in prison. She uses these research methods to end her article solidifying her argument that tattoos can memorialize traumatic life experiences (Sarnecki 41).

Frankie Johnson

Frankie Johnson also studies the memorial tattoo, yet her work relies on sociological methodology. Johnson received her undergraduate degree in sociology; during her education she wrote a paper for a sociology class, which had won the “Best Overall Best Paper Award” at the Pennsylvania Sociological Society Conference in 2007. That undergraduate paper, “Tattooing: Mind, Body and Spirit. The Inner Essence of the Art,” was thereafter published in the journal *Sociological Viewpoints*. While Johnson’s publication was not peer-reviewed, it could be considered accredited because of its citation in a couple books, most notably the textbook *Nonverbal Communication* from JK Burgoon, LK Guerrero, and K Floyd. Johnson relies on the sociological theory from the social scientist Paul Willis, symbolic creativity theory, to inform her argument. Though Johnson also depends on the interpretation of symbolic creativity theory from Shannon Bell, an assistant professor of sociology, in her article “Tattooed: A participant observer’s exploration of meaning.” Bell states that symbolic creativity theory argues that creative expressions and symbols help to create one’s identity and presence. She then relies on

Bell's argument that symbolic creativity theory can be applied to the tattoo, because it has the creative means to form an identity.

Johnson then uses a qualitative research design, through the use of open-ended interviews with 34 men and women ranging in age from 20-65 years old, in order to create an understanding of the social phenomenon, the modern tattoo. Johnson uses Paul Willis' grounding sociological theory when organizing her interview data and concludes that the tattoo is used for self-expression. Though Johnson articulates the use of tattoos for self-expression in a broad sense, she doesn't completely identify the memorial tattoo as a proven concept to deal with loss. While Johnson doesn't express the memorial tattoo's benefits in depth, she entertains the possibility of its importance through the use of narratives from persons with memorial tattoos from her interviews. While Johnson gives confirmation that memorialization is possible through memorial tattoos, the reasons as to how the tattoo can memorialize someone are unclear. The lack of an extensive explanation makes it hard to generalize Johnson's stance on memorial tattoos and makes the reader question the authenticity of her claims.

Robyn Ord

Robyn Ord also inspects the memorial tattoo using disciplinary appropriate research methods in the sociology field, yet she aims to deconstruct common discourses of grief in order to suggest the memorial tattoo is an alternative. Ord is an administrator at an HMO, and was published in the peer-reviewed journal, *Canadian Social Work Review*. My thesis specifically explores her 2009 publication "IT'S LIKE A TATTOO': Rethinking Dominate Discourses on Grief." In order to inform her argument in this article, Ord uses multiple theories on dominate grieving discourses, as well as alternative grieving methods. She depends on Freud's *Mourning*

and Melancholia, Hadad's stage-based models, Foucauldian post-structural ideas, and Queer theory. She then uses primary interview research as a part of her professional apparatus.

Ord initiates her argument by referring to Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* and Marilyn Hadad's analysis of many stage-based models for dealing with grief in her 2008 publication *The Ultimate Challenge: Coping with Death, Dying and Bereavement*. Both analyses describe universalized strategies to manage grief. In one sentence, Ord summarizes Freud's theory stating that there are normal and abnormal ways to experience grief. Ord also introduces Hadad's analysis of stage-based models, which present many approaches to understand grief and allows for definitions of universalized grieving experiences in order to compare and manage grief. Ord argues that these ideas advocate for the medicalization of grief because it allows for a set of diagnoses and treatments for grief, though it is troublesome because grief is complicated and not universal.

Foucauldian post-structural ideas about discourse, power and resistance, and Queer theory are then explored, in order to challenge dominate grieving constructions in Western society and to support her conclusion that tattoos are another appropriate discourse. She relies on many scholars' interpretation of Foucauldian ideas, as well as Foucault's himself, who states that dominate discourses exist to categorize and manage people, and have the power to do so, though resistance to those discourses also exist (Ord 203). Foote and Frank's analysis of Foucault in their text "Foucault and Therapy: The Disciplining of Grief" was especially useful in Ord's argument for alternative discourses of grief. They claim that people's resistance to dominate discourses creates the need for reconstructed and alternative grieving discourses (Ord 201). Ord then discusses Queer theory, citing ten different scholars, yet cites Tracy Ford's text, "Queering Education from the Ground Up: Challenges and Opportunities for Educators," most

often. Queer theory explores multiple ways of constructing approaches and practices, criticizing the one-size-fits-all approaches, like those Hadad presents (Ord 202). Ord uses Queer theory principles of multiple approaches in her argument for multiple approaches during the grieving process.

Ord uses all of these theories to argue that grief cannot be a universalized experience, because dominant discourse don't account for all grief. She suggests that existing frameworks be challenged and improved, and that additional grieving methods are encouraged in our society. An alternative to the medical model, Ord suggests the memorial tattoo. Ord references the memorial tattoo's ability to challenge dominant discourses, and quickly asserts that the memorial tattoo is a powerful way to perform grief in her article section entitled "It's like a tattoo" (206). Her quick assertion lacks explanatory reasoning and citations for other scholars, not following the trend from the other sections of her article. Ord's claim, that the memorial tattoo is a powerful way to perform grief, seems to be based on her personal experience with having a memorial tattoo. While this assertion was important to explore in my thesis dedicated to the memorial tattoo, it doesn't seem imperative to her argument because she is focused on challenging dominant discourses, not exhaustively exploring alternatives.

Candi Cann

Candi Cann also explores the memorial tattoo, though her work demonstrates specific methodology from her discipline, comparative religions. Cann received her PhD. in comparative religions and is now an assistant professor of world cultures and world religions. In her scholarship, Cann applies her academic background in comparative religions with her interest in thanatology, the study of death and dying, in which she has received certification. Cann has two published books and six other refereed publications, yet my thesis exclusively relies on chapter

2, “Wearing the Dead” from her book, *Virtual Afterlives: Grieving the Dead in the Twenty-First Century*. “Wearing the Dead” is dedicated to understanding the memorial tattoo, while other chapters examine different “virtual” ways of memorializing a lost loved one, for example through social media.

Researchers in comparative religion understand that one religion may be vastly different from another, so representation in research from different cultures that display that religion is important. Cann demonstrates this by illustrating Western society’s use of memorial tattoos, her primary focus, as well as Asian and Latin American society’s use of memorial tattoos. While this is an important part of the comparative religions research methods, my thesis focused on her analysis of Western society to be consistent with preliminary research and other scholars. In doing so, Cann cites more than 100 scholars and interviewees in her book; more than 50 of them are introduced in her chapter on memorial tattoos. Interviews are conducted with tattoo artists residing in Hawaii, as well as tattoo wearers, though it is unclear as to how many there were. Because interviews are an important part of Cann’s professional apparatus, I rely on her section in chapter 2, *The Tattoo Artist as a Modern Memorial Maker*, pages 71-74. Cann introduces tattoo artists’ opinions of the memorial tattoo, as she argues that the process of tattooing is an important aspect of the memorial tattoo and the grieving process. Two interviewees state that there is a cathartic aspect to the memorial tattoo, or an emotional liberation following expression. Cann uses their analysis to make her claim that the memorial tattoo is an important, virtual way of grieving and memorializing someone.

Jerome R. Koch & Alden E. Roberts

Jerome R. Koch and Alden E. Roberts also study the memorial tattoo using sociology research methods, but their work concentrates on their special interests in religion in relation to

the memorial tattoo. Both scholars are professors of sociology and are members of “The Body Art Team,” a group consisting of multidisciplinary scholars who research and publish data on college students and their tattoos and body piercings. Together, Koch and Roberts have several publications on tattoos and body piercings in the sociology field. Their most recent work, published in 2015, “The Protestant Ethic and the Religious Tattoo,” is the sole work I rely on in this thesis. Koch and Roberts used *Weber’s Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism* and primary interview research with 60 college students, in order to understand the motivations behind religious tattoo choices. Their use of Weber’s text and the qualitative survey research method reveal characteristics of the sociology discipline.

Koch and Roberts aimed to understand college students’ reasons for acquiring a religious tattoo; throughout the survey process they noticed an inadvertent connection between the religious tattoo choices and *Weber’s Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber’s theory, on how a person’s religious identity helps to shape one’s behavior, and ultimately a desired self, was found in Koch and Roberts’ open-ended survey questions. Aspects of Weber’s typology on religious peoples relationships: anxiety, asceticism, and vocation, were used to categorize survey participants responses (Koch and Roberts 211). Weber described anxiety as a fear for outward expression of faith, but Koch and Roberts looked for a display of anxiety in their survey participant’s responses by them stating that their tattoos are based on a concern about an afterlife in heaven (212). In a few of the 60 responses, not clearly specified how many, the participants indicated they got a religious tattoo for a loved one who had passed on. Koch and Roberts’ state that these memorial tattoos represent Weber’s typology, anxiety, because of the wearers concern that their loved one didn’t make it to heaven. The study linked memorial tattoos with the emotion anxiety, while other sources tended to associate memorial tattoos with the emotion grief.

This may be because of the specific population being studied: religious college students. The other two typologies, asceticism and vocation, were equally important in Koch and Roberts study, yet my thesis focused solely on anxiety due its specific relationship with loss and the memorial tattoo.

Conclusion/Suggestions for Further Research

Currently, scholarly literature is scant and scholars have not been able to agree upon the meanings behind the memorial tattoo. Yet because of the vast number of people participating in tattooing in general, and memorial tattooing specifically, it is important to understand the memorial tattoo. Understanding the differences in scholar's views is of importance because it allows for a more complete picture of the current memorial tattoo culture in the United States. This thesis aimed to form an introduction to understanding the discipline-specific methodologies used by scholars to conceptualize the memorial tattoo. Future literature on the memorial tattoo is encouraged to continue my work on understanding the discipline-specific apparatuses used in scholars work in order to help form a greater understanding of the memorial tattoo. Ultimately, the memorial tattoo may have a more concrete meaning if in-depth research on the memorial tattoo were to exist.

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