

The Fashion Institute of Technology

Tattooing and the Notion of the Female Identity

The feminist poet Adrienne Rich once wrote,

“We need to imagine a world in which every Woman is the presiding genius of her own body.”

As the female role in Western culture evolves, tattooing has become a vehicle in which a woman can ascertain control over what it means to be feminine. In this thesis, I examine the evolution of tattooing in relation the development of the identity of a women in society.

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Tattooing: A Vehicle for Self Expression

The skin is the human body's largest organ. On the average adult, it covers around 22 square feet of surface area and weighs about 8 pounds ("Skin and How it Functions"). People use skin as a physical protector from the outside world guarding them from temperature, sunlight, and harmful chemicals ("Skin and How it Functions"). It is one of the connections to your brain which helps to tell it how to interpret the outside world. Through it, we experience pain and pleasure, we express emotion through blushed cheeks and goosebumps; and for women, it is a way in which they can flaunt or flout traditional notions of feminine decorum. Women shave their legs to achieve baby-like smooth skin, they use creams to "reverse" aging, and they brush on makeup to enhance characteristics. In Western culture, it is even encouraged (means permitting) for women to undergo surgical procedures to enhance curves in some areas and slim others, or subjugate themselves to painful waxing or laser treatments to permanently remove hair. When such drastic measures are taken to conform to Western beauty standards, it becomes necessary to question why other surface-level modifications like tattoos, piercings, or fashion choices are placed under such scrutiny in comparison. For a woman, getting a tattoo is a way of asserting control of her own body in a world where the social norms of what she looks like has historically not been her own choice. "I want a mark on my body that my husband has never seen' says a woman who set out to shed her wifely identity after a divorce" (Mifflin 5). For another woman, she tattooed her rib cage with her middle name 'Rose', a name passed down for generations of women in her family (Nathan 58). And for others it is simply an aesthetic choice.

Tattoos are a medium for self-expression as well as an act of transformation which can turn something negative into something positive. This notion is clearly important to the female population, because, for the first time in history U.S. women are more likely to have a tattoo than men (Harris Poll). For the past century, or what could be considered the most progressive time period for women in Western culture, the act of tattooing has served as both a vehicle for self expression and a marker of the changing identity of female roles in society. A tattoo is a mark of rejection of traditional notions of feminine aesthetics as well as of the conventions of what it means, in general, to be a woman in this world.

The Turn of the Century: Tattoos Give Women Means of Independence

Tattooing as a business began to evolve in the late nineteenth century into the early twentieth century (DeMello 59). Before this tattooing was found only on sailors who wore them as marks of their worldly travels. They would receive them from peoples in parts of the world where tattooing had been a ritualistic and even religious component of their culture for *thousands* of years. Between 1880 and 1920, the tattoo parlor appeared in small spaces next to barber shops, under circus tents, or on carnival midways— they became a place that *men* could call a home-away-from-home. “Inside the tattoo shop was a unique world where ex-sailors swapped sea stories, young servicemen attempted to outdo each other with the grandeur of their tattoos, and others told stories about their travels and experiences. The talk was lewd and often revolved around sex” (DeMello 60). This is also around the time that a handful of the first recorded women adorning tattoos in Western culture began to appear, but certainly not as members of the ‘Boys Only’ club that the tattooing industry was being shaped into. Between 1880 and 1940, women with tattoos mostly appeared as attractions to circus acts, dime museums, and were studied by scientists, doctors, and anthropologists (Mifflin 12-13).

Of the more famous was a woman named Irene Woodward. Presented on stage in scant black velvet and gold clothing as “The Original Tattooed Lady”, Woodward displayed some 400 tattoos which onlookers were even permitted to touch. Her tattoos depicted things like ornamental birds and flowers, stars, figures, and the word “*liberty*”. In a biographical pamphlet she would distribute at shows the main text read, “The lady’s tattoos... Is not offensive to anyone, no matter how sensitive they may be. Her tattooing is of itself a beautiful dress” (Mifflin 14) To justify the tattooing women who participated in these acts created grand stories of Indian capture and torture through needle and ink, although, this was never actually the case. Another woman by the name of Nora Hildebrandt was given 365 tattoos by her husband with the best ink he could buy at \$1.50 an ounce so that the lines he created on his wife would not cloud (Mifflin 12). Although it would be poetic to attribute these womens’ tattoos to love of the art, the real reason behind their ink was most likely a business choice (Becks 24). Women who displayed their tattoos at dime museums and circuses were paid between \$100-\$500 a week. For them, the act of tattooing their female form was a job which supported them and their families (*Anni Irish and the History of the American Tattooed Ladies*). None-the-less, these “first tattooed women

braved the lingering skepticism of middle class audiences that had historically associated public women with sexual availability” (Mifflin 13).

As the first women to be tattooed, these women were able to earn a living at the price of selling themselves as a peep show within a freak show. In a trade where men and women could both participate, women were often more popular than men. The female form was both provocative and alluring. In a time where societal norms dictated that women were to cover most of their bodies in public, a woman who shared intimate parts of her body in that realm was captivating and unusual. Although these women made profit from the sexualization of their bodies, it was the act of tattooing their skin which allowed them to retain a certain level of dignity and safety that other women, who exploited their sexuality through livelihoods like prostitution, were unable to. When they were not performing they covered up, for only paying customers could see the ink which adorned their bodies. It is important to reiterate that although the tattoos themselves were an aesthetic choice, their motives were not rooted in vanity. While some women gained independence monetarily through the showing of their tattooed bodies, it also possible during this time that business-minded husbands encouraged the inking of their wives to profit from the spectacle of a tattooed female body.

By the 1920’s the “Tattooed Lady” act had proliferated and become a regular sight within traveling carnivals. The change that occurred during this time was that women mostly began to tattoo themselves independent from male influence. These were women who were business-savvy, who learned how to make a living and profit by capitalizing on the fascination with tattoos during this time (Waxman). Although these women were tattooed as a means to an end, they were of the first to break the mold of traditional feminine presentation in this manner. Often these women were known for, “[their] respectability and ladylike behavior” outside of the shows in which they performed (DeMello 59). When decorum was proper but presentation wasn’t, it must have prompted those who got to know these women to question what beauty really referred to. These women made the choice to ink their bodies for reasons that served their own well-being without sacrificing decent behavior otherwise. It was in the 1930’s that motives began to truly shift to adventure and self sufficiency (Mifflin 24). In this time period, tattooed lady, Betty Broadbent’s, second husband, Charles Roark was quoted saying, “She wanted to be her own woman– she never wanted to be dependent on anything or anyone.” Broadbent was

an example of a woman who traveled the world and made a career of her heavily tattooed body. “Tattoos were an early way that women took control of their bodies” (Waxman). In 1939, she distinguished herself from other tattooed women of the time by entering the World’s Fair to compete in the first televised beauty contest (Mifflin 25). Before the televised world, tattoos of Pancho Villa on her left leg, Charles Lindbergh on her right, and Madonna and child on her back, amongst many more, were presented as a notion of alternative beauty. Although she did not win the contest, she was the first of many women to come who would challenge what they were told they must do or wear to be considered feminine.

Also during this time women began to develop the idea of who was doing the tattooing. New Yorker, Mildred Hull, was a maverick in the tattoo industry of the 1920’s and 30’s. She was billed as “the only lady tattooist” and during her 25-year long career she had tremendous success (Mifflin 32). In an interview with *Foto Magazine* she was quoted saying, “you know how men are in any business,” and continued, “Always sort of jealous if a woman does as well as they do. Some of the men tattooists along the Bowery are cutting prices trying to put me out of business” (Mifflin 32). With around 15 customers a day, she had no trouble keeping up with her male counterparts. During this time, a growing number of artists created an environment which began to shape tattooing into an art form. Tattooists who designed original work and developed techniques which yielded more refined results were desired. Like painters with unique styles, tattooists who created work which was considered aesthetically pleasing were in higher demand among the community of people who participated in tattooing. Hull also pointed out that as an artist, men seemed to prefer her. In the same interview with *Foto Magazine* she explained, “[Men] think a woman is more likely to be more careful” (Mifflin 32). Hull worked out of a barber shop on Bowery where 25¢ would buy a shave, a shower, or a small tattoo (Mifflin 35). In her time as a tattoo artist she tattooed women as well—*débutantes* and sorority girls who requested hearts with lover’s names, “Mother” tattoos, or, most often, Mickey Mouse™. According to Cristian Petru Panaite, assistant curator of exhibitions at the New York Historical Society, “Over the years, the story of the tattoo industry has been more male-centric.” Panaite continues, “But I noticed in my research that women kept popping up and were making these strong statements” about who is doing the tattooing and what it means (Nalewicki). As demonstrated by women like Hull, tattooing *technique* did matter and could be appreciated aesthetically as an art form. Those

who chose to get tattoos were choosing tattooists whose work was more refined and original.

As the thirties came to an end so did what could be considered as “The Golden Era of Tattoos” (DeMello 59). After the second World War, tattooing gained an unfavorable reputation—and rightfully so. In Nazi concentration camps, tattoos were repurposed as a *tool* and used as a way of reducing human identity to only a number (Martin). As well as the general focus on war efforts, this contributed to a global population seeing tattoos as anything but art. As tattoos shifted meaning in this time period, they saw a drastic downturn in popularity for the female population in particular. Prior to the war’s end the majority of people who inked their bodies during this time period were men away at war who got tattoos of nationalist symbolism (DeMello 62).

The Fifties: Good Housewives Don’t Have Tattoos

After World War II, the female role in society began to change. Men who returned from war took back over the jobs that women had assumed responsibility of during the time that their male counterparts were overseas. The war was over and people wanted peace, the depiction of the “American Dream” was strong in all forms of public outreach and traditional male and female roles in society were emphasized. Male dominated industries, like advertising, made sure of it. Whether it was intentional or not, it is fact that female independence and expression was discouraged (Hill). The thread that held together the “American Dream”, the happy housewife, was expected to be the picture-perfect woman that magazines, radio, television advertisements, and news broadcasts portrayed them as. Society dictated that women should have ambitions of marriage, children, and an ‘ideal home’ full of newly purchased goods (McQuiston 76). In 1956, *Forbes* published a study which stated that women made up “85 percent of all consumer buying” (Hill viii). Consumerism, defined as “the preoccupation of society with the acquisition of consumer goods” was at an all time high. So advertisements, produced by men at advertising agencies, were made in abundance to target women, the object of buying power in America. The ads that were created depicted a female reality which was void of originality and independence. Men made money and women spent it—on the things that men approved of them to buy. “Nobody argued whether women were inferior or superior to men; they were simply different” (Friedan 19). Although women were the buyers of their families, they were not to be troubled with major decision making, even when it came to their own bodies. Tattoo artist, Samuel Steward, writes about his account of tattooing in the early fifties:

When I finally discovered the trouble that always surrounded the tattooing of women, I established a policy of refusing to tattoo a woman unless she were twenty-one, married and accompanied by her husband, with documentary proof to show their marriage. The only exception was the lesbians, and they had to be over twenty-one and prove it. In those tight and non-permissive 1950s, too many scenes with irate husbands, furious parents, indignant boyfriends, and savage lovers made it necessary to accept female customers only with great care. (DeMello 61)

As one could probably guess, women who wanted tattoos were likely not permitted to get them if their husbands, boyfriends, or fathers did not agree. “Good” women were expected to wear pearls, clean the dishes, take care of their families and keep up with the most recent fashion trends which they read about in magazines. Tattoos which were still largely taboo were certainly not included in the identity of a feminine and proper American lady. Sadly, women blindly participated in the notions of femininity that Consumerism had prescribed.

In the fifties and early sixties, tattooing was marginalized even more by hepatitis outbreaks which were associated with dirty tattooing needles (Mifflin 27). The practice became outlawed in many places and became adopted by only those in society who were willing to break the law. The people who were getting new tattoos in the 1950s were those who were associated with gangs, bikers, and degenerates (Thobo-Carlsen). In a 1959 study by the Oklahoma School of Medicine that compared tattooed individuals to untattooed individuals, it was concluded that, “the tattooed [individual] is more likely to have been divorced, is more of a rebel, has more trouble with society and authority, and is more likely to have been in jail.” This study was largely biased and a reflection of mounting prejudice against the practice during this time period (DeMello). It was no longer novelty and to mainstream society it was considered deviant. A practice which challenged mainstream notions of femininity was not to be tolerated, for if women could look different than they were supposed to, what else could they do?

An Anti-Establishment Mood: Tattooed Women Rebel

Although unpopular opinions of tattoos permeated into the sixties, ink began to appear again in new places for new reasons. Women of the fifties had been made into “Sex creatures” said a psychiatrist at the Margaret Sanger marriage counseling clinic. “She has no identity except as a wife and mother. She does not know who she is herself. She waits all day for her

husband to come home and make her feel alive” (Friedan 29). Just as before in the early part of the century, women had become possessions of their husbands, to be seen and not heard. Their houses were their prisons and it was time to break free. The 1960s brought on a wave of social unrest. The mood of the time was “anti-establishment” and the vehicle for emancipation was through protest and self-expression. “It was time for change: to fight for liberation, power and rights. Sexual liberation, black liberation, gay liberation, and women’s liberation.” (McQuiston 79). The Womens Liberation movement, the civil rights movement, and rock and roll ushered in a time period of cultural upheaval which began to be reflected through the tattoo industry’s rebellious spirit. Tattoos which had traditionally had roots in patriotism declined, with a population who did not support the Vietnam War, and cause-specific ink began to proliferate which symbolized rage towards many injustices (*Inkbox*). A new wave of independent women began to emerge at this time. Through the introduction of the pill, as a means of birth control, women gained sexual independence which allowed them to break the housewife mold which the fifties had forced many women to conform to (Mifflin 54). Women in the public eye began to portray themselves with personal style that was truly their own. Women who supported the Women’s Liberation Movement expressed themselves in ways which aimed to disassociate themselves from mainstream media (McQuiston 80). The anti-establishment look consisted of “decorative patterns and logos [which] adorned textiles, posters, graphics, buildings, cars, and were even tattooed or painted on bodies” (McQuiston 80).

Amongst the most famous advocates for female independence and in turn mainstream tattooing during this time period was musician, Janis Joplin. In 1970 she graced the cover of *Rolling Stone* sporting a wrist tattoo of a Florentine bracelet which she had drawn herself (Thobo-Carlson). “The wristlet Joplin told *Rolling Stone*, was for ‘everybody’ and (the small heart tattoo she also had) was ‘for me and my friends’” (Mifflin 54). For the first time, tattoos were seeping into pop culture which began to normalize the notion of tattooing and on a woman no less. Lyle Tuttle, the tattoo artist who inked Joplin, as well as Cher and Joan Baez, spoke positively about women during this time period. In an interview with *Prick* magazine he was quoted saying, “With women getting newfound freedom, they could get tattooed if they so desired. It increased and opened the market by 50% of the population... Women made tattooing a softer and kinder art form.” It was because of individuals like Joplin, whom younger audiences

looked up to, that tattooing became more desirable. If you had something you wanted to say and you wanted to put it on your body, people like Joplin who “ran around at concerts all over the world telling about it” made it okay for members of the mainstream audience (Demello 76).

The Evolution of the Tattoo Parlor: A Place for Women Too

With the new found feeling of freedom which the females of counterculture movements helped to establish, the population who was getting tattooed became increasingly more womanly. Notably, this was not so for the population that was doing the tattooing. In the early 1970s, there were only *two* female artists on record that were tattooing in shops (Mifflin 55). As previously mentioned, the industry of tattooing was largely male-dominated. Tattoo parlors were less approachable when they only offered the services of male tattoo artists. This was especially true for women and even more so for women who wanted tattoos on intimate areas of their bodies. One of the few women who was a known tattoo artist during this time was someone named Sheila May. In 1977 she opened her own Los Angeles based shop which catered specifically to women (DeMello). This was the first time that women had the opportunity to be tattooed in an environment that specifically accommodated them and their needs. May speaks on women and tattooing, “I would say half of the men [I worked on] got tattooed just to get tattooed, whereas almost all the women were getting a tattoo for a reason” (Mifflin 56). May continues, “Women preferred decorative natural imagery and often got tattooed to mark personal transition. Some did it just because they thought it was *pretty*, but usually there was symbolism” (Mifflin 56). May was also one of the first tattoo artists to experiment with cosmetic tattooing. She would shape eyebrows and create soft and subtle tattooed makeup. Later in her career she became known as the cosmetic tattooist to the stars, with clientele including James Brown, who has her to thank for his eyebrows. Women like May were the first of may to come who, with her style of work, began to chip away at the egos and intimidation which are historically associated with tattoos. When tattoos enhanced traditional notions of feminine presentation in subtle ways, like makeup-lined eyes or perfectly shaped eyebrows, suddenly permanent ink on skin didn’t seem so bad.

Also during this time another female tattooist named Vyvyn Lazonga, who is now considered one of the most influential women in the field, opened a shop in Seattle in 1979. She was ultimately convinced to open her own business when men who she had worked for refused to repair equipment which she was expected to tattoo with; instead they would cover

her machine in fake gems and advertise her as a novelty to attract men who liked the idea of being tattooed by a woman. Independently, she was able to refine her skills and became known for the artistry and unique style of her tattoos. Lazonga was recognized for her art deco, Japanese, and floral patterns that “follow[ed] the natural curves of the body and enhanc[ed] rather than cover[ed] bare skin” (Mifflin 57). “Women are masters of illusion,” Lazonga told *Skin and Ink* magazine. “They always have been with makeup and clothing. A tattoo is just part of that illusion.” Also noted by other tattoo artists, the application of ink to skin is different for women than it is for men. In tattooist Spider Webb’s book, *Pushing Ink: The Fine Art of Tattooing*, he comments on the difference, “Women tend to approach tattooing with more reserve.” He continues, “They do it more for their own delight than to show the thing off... Men often go into a peacock syndrome and get tattoos which will be visible indiscriminately while women often get tattoos to show to special people.” Lazonga recognized exactly this and still works out of the same shop she opened 40 years ago. Since then she has also become known for her work for women who are breast cancer survivors that have undergone mastectomy surgeries (Sillman). Women who have scars where their breasts once were now come to Lazonga to have intricate designs tattooed over them. Female breast cancer survivor Andrea May describes the tattoo Lazonga gave her which is comprised of a delicate rose vine, foliage and lace, “Having a tattoo is a way of feeling better about your body, of having that place you feel like you’re in control after something that was out of your control happened to you” (Sillman). The tattoo is for her and her husband and celebrates her survival of cancer. In 1999, The Breast Cancer Recovery Act allowed physicians to add tattooing to their reconstruction services (Mifflin 87). This meant that the act of regaining control of the female body through tattooing was legitimized. Women who covered mastectomy scars with artwork or realistic nipple designs through the medium of permanent ink would be able to have the work covered by insurance.

Although decades have passed, and leaps and strides have been made by women in the industry of tattooing, present day woman tattooists are still less common than men. According to a 2010 Columbia University study just one in six tattooers are female (Neilson). At Nice Tattoo Parlor in the Carroll Gardens section of Brooklyn, the concept — a tattoo shop with a friendly staff of female artists in a welcoming, judgment-free space — is both simple and a striking departure in the tattoo world” (Neilson). Female owners, Hannah Kang and Jes Dwyer

recognized the intimidation of an archetypal parlor and how that could be discouraging for women who were looking to get tattooed. Their mission is “to make the tattooing experience a kinder one not only for clients, but also for women trying to make headway in a business that has often been marked by macho behavior and sexist treatment” (Neilson). Spaces like this are what has led to growing populations of tattooed women. For whatever reason a woman may be getting a tattoo on her body, a safe and comfortable setting is essential in the process. The same goes for women who make a career of tattooing other people. If men are allocated environments for growth within their trade, why shouldn't women be given the same privilege? The relationship between the tattooed and the tattooer is intimate and it is one in which a great deal of trust must exist. When women are able to work alongside men in the industry of tattooing, it opens the doors for a lot of female clients who may only be able to develop that special relationship with another woman.

Tattoos Go Mainstream: Pop Culture, Opportunities and Observations

Through out the eighties and nineties tattooing made its way into mainstream culture. In 1981 MTV began broadcasting alternative culture through music— “a breeding ground for herd-like nonconformity, delivered to the masses” (Mifflin 73). Rock and Roll musicians of the eighties proudly wore tattoos all over their bodies on the covers of records, in magazines, and on stage for the world to see. Celebrities of all kinds began to adorn their bodies with tattoos and fans were soon to follow. In 1996 Pamela Anderson and Tommy Lee exchanged tattoos instead of wedding rings and Dennis Rodman began the NBA tattoo craze which is still prevalent today (Mifflin 95). In 1999, to celebrate her 40th birthday, toy manufacturer Mattel released the Butterfly Art Barbie which allowed kids to apply temporary tattoos to the doll's midriff area (McComb 222). At the turn of the century, the unimaginable even happened, and female tattooist Kat Von D appeared on a reality show called *Miami Ink* which quickly gave her recognition as the single best known tattoo artist (male or female) in the world (Mifflin 100). With the rise of the Internet, sharing of tattoos, techniques, and stories of meaning could be found in abundance. Tattooing was also legitimized through community and convention. Worldwide, pockets of tattoo enthusiasts and artists were popping up that created trade shows and competitions where the industry could grow through community (DeMello). Unfortunately, this excluded or misrepresented many women in the industry. “Women artists rarely got the recognition they

deserved, and some artists observed that women collectors, like female body builders, faced a double standard when they competed: beautiful tattoos were (and are) more likely to win awards if they adorn shapely bodies” (Mifflin 98). During the late nineties and early two thousands, female body image was misrepresented in tattooing and mainstream media alike. Double standards for women in regards to body image, which existed in different ways for generations, were still (and still are) prevalent in male-dominated industries. Although, with time, Western cultures have become more aware of such standards and work to be more inclusive of *all* women, sexualization of the female form (tattooed or not) is something that women must be aware of and not allow to be perpetuated.

For some however, the act of tattooing the female body was a way of doing just that. To tattoo the female form was to “liberate the objectified body, literally inscribing it with alternative forms of power” (DeMello). The power of awe, contemplation, and the desire to understand why a woman would inscribe her body with permanent ink. Krystyne Kolorful, the woman who holds the Guinness World Record for “the world’s most decorated woman” is resolute about her philosophy behind tattooing the female body. “Heavily tattooed women really confront people with their independence” she says. “Even if you get just one, you are doing something that is so contradictory to the morals of our society. That’s why women like me took it to the level that we did: we wanted to make a really big statement that this is my body and I’m doing with it what I chose” (Mifflin 78). When women outwardly project the inner workings of their mind through the act of tattooing, a wondrous thing happens: her individuality permeates and suddenly society loses a little bit of control of who it says she is supposed to be. When a culture depicts women as objects that majority of the female population cannot identify with, modes of expression like tattoos help to give power back to women who have historically had it stolen from them.

It has been contested that women who are physically attractive are less vulnerable to scrutiny when they choose to tattoo their bodies. As a result of the sexualization of the female body, the form in which tattoos are placed is subsequently what helped sell tattoos to the minds of the mainstream audience. What was once known for its inclusive roots, tattooing had failed women in this one way. Since the nineties tattoos have been publicized on skinny, young, white female bodies and have excluded women of different shapes, colors, sizes, and ages. It is only until recently, with evolving notions of femininity that we have seen depiction of women

diversify in general, including in the portrayal of tattooed women. So when an argument about acceptability is posed concerning the attractiveness of the tattoo wearer, it is the subjectivity of the viewer in which I call into question for judging one woman more harshly than another as a result of varying physical attributes in which she may display.

As a result of the men and women who worked to legitimize tattooing as a modern art form and the pop culture icons who helped to bring the practice into mainstream society, women from all walks of life wear tattoos as a means of self-expression. Doctors, Artists, Athletes, Professors, Scientists, Bartenders, Saleswomen, and Lawyers, to name a few (DeMello). Some share them with only those who they are most intimate with, and some chose to wear them for the world to see. The mere fact that women can give and get tattoos is a marker of more progressive times; And although women still have so much more progress to make in society, it is important for even women who disapprove of tattoos to understand what their availability to the female population has given the demographic as a whole. From a mark by which a woman can earn a living to a totem of individuality in a world where everything seems the same, tattoos have served as markers of nonconformist femininity and a method through which a woman can express her inner identity on the outside.

An Account of a Tattooed Woman in 2019

“I am a twenty six year old woman and the year is 2019. I have twelve tattoos and otherwise I suppose I am what would be considered as an attractive female by traditional beauty standards. I have been getting tattooed since I was nineteen. What started as a small anchor tattoo on my right wrist has evolved into several more intricate designs that adorn the front and back of my upper right arm. I have several small tattoos on my left and right arm as well. Since my tattoos are visible when I wear shirts with shorter sleeves, the public is sometimes privy to the inner workings of my personality which I have decided to permanently project outwardly onto my skin.

I am an art student and a bartender. At school, I am surrounded by peers who oft have also decided to tattoo their bodies for one reason or another. In this environment we compliment each other if we like the needlework on each other’s skin, and in my experience, if people don’t like someone else’s tattoo, they don’t say anything. At work, the atmosphere is notably different. I make cocktails in a bar on the Upper East Side in Manhattan where customers frequently

comment on or question the tattoos on my arms. Like a curiosity to be examined, people often pry at the meaning of the ink. I wouldn't mind sharing those details with a friend or even acquaintance, but for some reason, a total stranger asking for this information feels invasive. Is a visible tattoo so welcome to questioning and sometimes even hurtful criticism? It would never be socially acceptable to ask a stranger why they cut their hair a certain way or to flat out insult someone for such a thing, so why are tattoos an exception? With time I realized that these interactions say less about my tattoos than they do about the people who initiate them. More often than not customers, strangers, judge me on my appearance and draw conclusions about who they think I am, or worse they're trying to hit on me. The volumes that interactions like these say about the narrow-minded personalities of these bare-skinned people tell me more than they could ever learn about me from my tattoos.

With time, I have grown to love the ink on my body more and more. Through my tattoos I am able to portray stories of moments in my life which I fondly remember. They make me feel individual and are reflective of my extrovert personality. They compliment my personal style and make me feel beautiful. Best of all, they tell me about other people. In a world where I can be myself and express part of me through my ink, I can also gauge tolerance, kindness, and empathy in other people through their reactions to my outward identity. So whether or not you like it, I am a confident, successful, and happy woman— and I have twelve tattoos.”