

Pretty in Ink: Conformity, Resistance, and Negotiation in Women's Tattooing

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Since the early 1990s, Canadian women have participated in tattooing in unprecedented numbers. These women are utilizing tattoo "body projects" (C. Shilling, 1993) to communicate a wide range of personal and cultural messages, and challenging the long-standing association between tattooing and masculinity. However, and perhaps more consequentially, women's tattoo projects express diverse sensibilities about femininity and the feminine body. For some Canadian women, contesting culturally "established" (N. Elias & J. Scotson, 1965) constructions of the female body is central in their tattoo body projects, whereas others participate in tattooing as an explicit form of consent to such constructions. In this paper, women's tattooing activities and their subsequent tattoo narratives are critically inspected as deeply gendered practices and discourses. I present participant observation and interview data on tattoo enthusiasm in Canada. The focus is directed toward the ways in which conformity to, resistance against, and the negotiation of established cultural ideas about femininity are equally embedded in women's tattooing. Drawing upon feminist theories about bodies (cf. S. Bordo, 1990; K. Davis, 1994; J. Price & M. Shildrick, 1999; S. Williams & G. Bendelow, 1998) and central tenets of process-sociology (N. Elias, 1991, 1994, 1996; N. Elias & J. Scotson, 1965), emphasis is given to how women employ tattooing as a communicative signifier of "established" and "outsider" constructions of femininity.

KEY WORDS: tattooing; women; resistance; process-sociology.

INTRODUCTION

Shilling (1993, 1997) described the deliberate modification of one's physical size, shape, appearance, or ability for movement as purposive "body projects," and contended that such projects are integral in constructing and representing identity over the life course. Shilling (1993, 1997) noted that individuals are socially encouraged and expected to engage in body projects that range from the routine (e.g., a hair cut) to the physically invasive and traumatic (e.g., breast augmentation). In response to the increased exploration of bodies as floating symbols of cultural identification, sociologists have critically inspected a wide range of body projects

(Featherstone, 2000; Williams & Bendelow, 1998; Woodward, 1997). Research efforts are usually directed toward the myriad ways cultural ideologies are inscribed upon/into bodies, and how the preponderance of North Americans' body projects are dialogical with normative standards about bodies and their representation. In particular, most of the research has focussed on North American women's experiences with corporeal modification and how women's body projects are typically congruous with "hegemonic masculine" (Donaldson, 1993; Herek, 1987) constructions of femininity. Forms of cosmetic surgery (Balsamo, 1996; Gillespie, 1996), excessive dieting (Ellman, 1993; Lupton, 1996; Orbach, 1993), and aerobic exercise (Loland, 2000; Maguire & Mansfield, 1998; Markula, 1995) have been interrogated as highly ritualized, commonplace, and deeply gendered projects that embody patriarchal ideas about femininity.

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One of the more popular body projects among North American women since the late 1980s has been tattooing—despite the fact that North American women have been dissuaded traditionally from involvement in tattooing as a result of cultural prohibitions that emanate from both inside and outside of the larger collective of “tattoo enthusiasts” (Atkinson, 2001; DeMello, 2000; Mifflin, 1997; Sanders, 1991; Steward, 1990; Wroblewski, 1992).² In general, sanctions against the widespread participation of women have come from (sub)cultural associations between tattoos and masculinity, as tattooing has been historically relished within male-dominated subcultures (e.g., military groups, prisoners, street gangs, motorcycle clubs) as a mechanism for creating and confirming aggressively strong, or “dangerous,” (cf. White & Young, 1999) masculinities (Coe, Harmon, Verner, & Tonn, 1993; DeMello, 1993; Kent, 1997; Sanders, 1989; St. Clair & Govenar, 1981; Steward, 1990).³

Some authors, however, have suggested that non-normative body projects such as tattooing are increasingly adopted by North American women *precisely* because radically marked bodies tend to subvert hegemonic ideologies about femininity—especially images of the weak, sexually objectified, or otherwise submissive woman (cf. Butler, 1990; DeMello, 2000; Gillespie, 1996; Mifflin, 1997; Pitts, 1998). The overriding meta-narrative in the emerging literature on the practice is that tattooing is intentionally structured by North American women as political resistance against misogynist ideologies and social structures of oppression (Atkinson & Young, 2001; DeMello, 2000). Almost without exception, contemporary discourses point to the socially rebellious and personally emancipating nature of tattooing for women.

I argue, however, that such homogenizing accounts of women’s tattooing are somewhat misleading—in that only a portion of women’s experiences are represented by this line of inquiry (cf.

DeMello, 2000; Irwin, 2000; Mifflin, 1997; Sanders, 1991). Clearly, although more women include tattoos in their respective repertoires of self-expression, and choose to articulate their body modification practices as political protests against culturally preferred, masculinist constructions of the female body in North America (Atkinson, 2001), researchers have not sufficiently examined the largely hidden, private, or *negotiated* nature of these protests. Furthermore, investigators have overlooked the extent to which many North American women’s tattooing projects express a degree of consent to “hegemonic masculine” (Connell, 1995) constructions of femininity.

In this article, tattoos are analyzed as embodied signifiers of gender. More specifically, I tap into critical feminist and profeminist research on the body, and Elias and Scotson’s theory of established/outsider social relationships (Elias & Scotson, 1965), to *argue that women’s tattoos are layered with culturally established, resistant, and negotiated images of femininity*. Through the examination of 40 Canadian women’s tattoo narratives, a critical investigation of how bodies are encoded with cultural messages about femininity is offered. Emphasis is given to both the intended (encoded) messages about gender embedded in tattoos by female wearers and the established cultural codes about “appropriate” gender display that influence how tattoos are decoded by audiences.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Curiously absent from the burgeoning literature on contemporary body projects are many in-depth, *empirical* analyses of tattooing. Given the booming popularity of tattooing in North America (especially among the 18–35-year-old age group (Atkinson, 2001)), this stands out as a rather peculiar gap in the literature. Even though extant sociological (Gallick, 1996; Grogard & Lazi, 1994; Irwin, 2000; Mifflin, 1997; Myers, 1997; Pitts, 1998; Sanders, 1989, 1991; St. Clair & Govenor, 1981; Steward, 1990; Vail, 1999), cultural anthropological (Brain, 1979; Camphausen, 1997; DeMello, 1993, 1995, 2000; Ebin, 1979; Gell, 1993; Gray, 1994; Kent, 1997; Martischning, 1987; McCabe, 1997; Richie & Buruma, 1980; Rosenblatt, 1997; Rubin, 1988; Vale & Juno, 1989), and psychological (Gittleson & Waffin, 1973; Grumet, 1983; Howell, Payne, & Roe, 1971; Houghton, Durkin, Parry, Turbett, & Odgers, 1996; McKerracher & Watson, 1969; Newman, 1982; Verberne, 1969) analyses of tattooing are unquestionably groundbreaking along a number of theoretical and substantive lines,

²The term “enthusiast” refers to all individuals who have voluntarily chosen to tattoo their bodies at some point. Although there are qualitative distinctions to be made between various types or categories of tattoo enthusiasts (cf. Atkinson, 2001), the term is employed here simply as a tool for discussing the conceptual similarities between people’s experiences with tattooing.

³One should be careful to note that women have a long history of participation within the larger tattoo figuration in North America—particularly among circus or carnival groups, as part of elite fashion and haute couture trends, as part of women’s liberation movements, and in some nefarious subcultures or lifestyle enclaves (cf. Mifflin, 1997). In comparison to men, however, women have played a marginal role in tattooing practices until recently.

the bulk of the research is relatively unreflective of the array of sensibilities toward the practice held by the newest generation of tattoo enthusiasts. This is compounded by the fact that sociologists who have addressed the subject have almost uniformly failed to explore sociological theories about bodies and body modification in their respective works.

One of the most neglected areas within research on tattooing is women's involvement in the practice. As tattooing has long been associated with masculinity, only a handful of researchers have attended to issues in the cultural construction and expression of femininity through tattooing (Atkinson, 2001; DeMello, 2000; Mifflin, 1997; Sanders, 1991; Wroblewski, 1992). When issues related to femininity have figured into analyses of tattooing, emphasis is principally directed toward how acquiring tattoos can significantly jeopardise a woman's femininity. For example, Steward (1990, p. 127) classified North American women who have participated in tattooing as "tramps," "dykes," and "farm wives." Adopting the position that women who choose to mark their bodies with tattoos wilfully violate existing norms about gender, links have been made between tattooing and the "fallen" or overtly masculine woman (Gray, 1994). In a similar way, recent research has focussed on (and perhaps overemphasized) the liberating nature of tattoos for women, as marking the body with tattoos immediately connotes a significant violation of feminine body practice (cf. DeMello, 2000; Mifflin, 1997; Vale & Juno, 1989).

Although information gleaned from existing research illuminates a series of relevant questions pertinent to women's tattooing, we ultimately know very little about how tattoos are actively constructed and experienced by women—especially in the Canadian context, as no empirical research has been conducted on Canadian women's experiences with tattoos save for the partial analyses provided by Atkinson (2001), and Atkinson and Young (2001). In order to pursue a more theoretically stimulating and empirically informed account of Canadian women's tattooing experiences (as theoretical understandings of tattooing have been largely constructed around men's experiences with the body project), several concepts central in feminist and profeminist research on the body are worth (re)consideration.

Feminisms, Bodies, and Tattooing

Building largely upon the works of Foucault (1977, 1979, 1980) and other poststructuralists, fem-

inist researchers have illustrated how hegemonic masculine authority in Western cultures is partly maintained through the active biological (i.e., medical) and social (i.e., norms, values, beliefs) control of women's bodies (Balsamo, 1996; Davis, 1994; Haug, 1987; Nicholson, 1990). In these processes, women's bodies become socially constructed, monitored, and regulated in accordance with a dominant image of the "feminine body" as thin yet curvy, placid yet playful, sexy yet wholesome. In describing the female body as a "text of culture," Bordo (1989) wrote:

Through the pursuit of an ever-changing, homogenising, elusive ideal of femininity—a pursuit without a terminus, a resting point, requiring that women constantly attend to minute and often whimsical changes in fashion—bodies become what Foucault calls "docile bodies"—bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, and improvement. (p. 14)

Bordo (1989) maintained that socially accepted women's body projects such as breast augmentation or excessive dieting are best viewed as caricatured expressions of dominant ideals of the female body, because these body projects express traditional images of the female body (and women's marginalized positions within social structures that produce them) in excess (Bordo, 1989, 1993; Davis, 1997; Miller & Penz, 1991). Central in the feminist literature is, then, the relationship between body modification and social structures of power/authority:

It is no coincidence that this sexual ideal (of the slim, soft, innocent body) is an image which connotes powerlessness. Admittedly, the actual ideal is not of a demure, classically "feminine" girl per se, but a vigorous and immature adolescent . . . it is not a shape which suggests power. (Coward, 1985, p. 41)

In order to conceptually synthesise the pioneering work of feminist scholars in this area, we may draw upon Elias and Scotson's process-sociological understanding of "established" and "outsider" figurational relationships (Elias & Scotson, 1965). Elias and Scotson (1965) principally argued that community life is moulded around the relationships between established and outsider social groups. Elias and Scotson (1965) inferred a model of figurational dynamics that takes into account the distribution of power chances between and within a series of mutually identified social groups. Established social groups are those that are more deeply embedded in both the base and superstructural segments of a figuration—typically because they have a longer history there, and/or greater

access to resources (e.g., material, cultural, political, and educational) in the figuration—and consequently control key ideological state apparatuses (Elias & Scotson, 1965). Established groups have considerable ability to influence the construction of social laws, promulgate cultural norms, and promote collective ways of interpreting social rituals, such as body modification practices.

Conversely, outsider groups are more marginal members of a figuration, less embedded in power positions, and socially/culturally dominated (in varying degrees) on the basis of their marginalized statuses and associated roles. Outsiders are generally excluded from participation in socially influential power structures within a figuration, and as a result, their social opportunities and cultural experiences are often “given” to them (or interpretively configured) by members of established groups. Thus, what is deemed to be acceptable for an outsider to participate in as a form of social interchange or cultural expression is restricted in accordance with established conventions and practices (including, e.g., how to modify one’s body). To break established rank and violate cultural idiom within a figuration by transgressing established norms can be risky social practice for an outsider, as it may warrant social contempt or some other control response (Elias & Scotson, 1965). Jibing, then, with the more central principles of Elias’ work on civilizing processes in Western cultures (Elias, 1983, 1991, 1994, 1996)—and feminist research on body projects more generally—Elias and Scotson (1965) revealed how social standards (including norms of acceptable bodily display) protect the vested interests of established groups, such as a figurational patriarchy.

Feminist and process-sociological researchers have argued that body projects can accomplish more than the simple reproduction of established gender codes. That is, although many have inspected body projects that reaffirm and reproduce established images of the beautiful female body, the study of how body projects can be used by outsiders to resist established cultural ideology is equally germane. For example, Maguire and Mansfield (1998) suggested that the “unnatural” strength cultivated by women who participate in aerobic exercise breeds both a physical and a social power that challenges the established masculine hegemony. By poaching an established male body practice (i.e., athletic exercise) women challenge the gender order. Through the study of radical forms of cosmetic manipulation, Davis (1997) illustrated how women contest established cultural codes by engaging in certain types of “gender appropriate” plastic

surgery to the extreme, and in the process, excessively embrace the images and practices of the socially marginalized. These theatrical body modifications are vulgar or “grotesque” (Bhaktin, 1984) in comparison to established images of the beautiful woman.

Without question, research on women’s body projects has greatly advanced our theoretical understanding of how bodies are socially constructed and monitored (cf. Price & Shildrick, 1999; Williams & Bendelow, 1998). Feminist, profeminist, and process-sociological research underscores how bodies are texts upon which established and outsider relationships are reproduced and contested—as body projects can involve the ongoing maintenance of established ideology and/or the conscious attempt to subvert established ideologies by employing the body as a site of outsider resistance (Coward, 1985; Nicholson, 1990; Ollenberger & Moore, 1992; Sanford, 1992; Scott & Morgan, 1993; Wolf, 1990). Unfortunately, few who have conducted empirical research on tattooing body projects have explored the wealth of theoretical insight offered about bodies by feminist or process-sociological research. Even fewer have considered the ways in which tattoo body projects are used by women in the process of *negotiating* established gender ideologies and codes of physical display.

METHOD

Data were collected during a 3-year participant observation-based study of tattoo enthusiasm in Canada. During the research, I spent over 400 hr “hanging out” with tattoo artists and their clients in various tattoo studios—mainly, in the cities of Calgary (AB) and Toronto (ON). Through the research process I interacted with hundreds of tattoo enthusiasts, and eventually approached 92 of them to ask if they would be willing to be interviewed. Although both men and women were interviewed in the study, data discussed here pertain to the women I interviewed about their tattoo body projects.

I met the women involved in this research in several different locations, but first encountered a majority of them at tattoo studios in either Calgary or Toronto. Some of them were regulars within the studios; others were entirely new to the tattooing process. Almost all of the women with whom I spoke were overtly receptive toward the prospect of being interviewed—even though most had no prior experience with interviewing for any purposes other than employment. Interviewees were also met through the friendship networks I cultivated in the

participant-observation phase of the research (i.e., friends of individuals I became acquainted with in the tattoo studios). A smaller number of interviewees were students or friends of mine at a university in western Canada.

In total, 40 women were interviewed. Although the group of interviewees initially developed as a convenience sample, I eventually targeted several categories of tattoo enthusiasts for interview purposes including women with different socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnic affiliations, religious beliefs, and sexual or lifestyle preferences. Furthermore, I sought out women with assorted levels of involvement in the practice—in reference to how long they had been tattooed (in years); how many tattoos they had acquired (total number); how many times they had been tattooed (number of sittings or total number of hours); and, how extensively they had been tattooed (amount of skin covered by tattoos and locations of tattoos on the body).

The mean age of the women I interviewed was 24, with an overall age range from 18 to 50. Despite the long-standing association between tattooing and the working-class, only 6 (15%) of the women interviewed had working-class backgrounds. Of the women interviewed, 21 (52.5%) were employed at the time of the study, with an average annual income of approximately Cdn\$24,000. Considering that the majority of the unemployed women were students at the time of the study—most of whom had a modest income—this figure appears to be a rather conservative estimation. The women I interviewed in this study were also rather well educated. Thirty-one (77.5%) had a university degree or at least 1 year of university education. Of the group, 24 (60%) were single at the time of the study, and 12 (30%) of the women had children. Also, 35 (87.5%) of the women interviewed were White, and 5 (12.5%) were Asian-Canadian.

A majority of the women interviewed, 27 (67.5%), had one tattoo at the time of the interview. Seven (17.5%) of the women had two tattoos, 2 (5%) had three tattoos, and 4 (10%) had three or more tattoos. Experience in tattooing also varied; the age of entry into the practice ranged from 14 to 48 (with a mean of 22). Twenty-nine (72.5%) of the women were tattooed in either Calgary or Toronto (including seven different studios in Calgary and four different studios in Toronto). Other Canadian cities in which individuals were tattooed included Vancouver (BC), Edmonton (AB), Lethbridge (AB), Regina (SK), Winnipeg (MB), Kitchener-Waterloo (ON), Montreal (PQ), Halifax (NS), and St. John's (NF).

The interview strategy adopted in this research closely followed the prescriptions for open-ended interviewing as outlined by Glaser (1992, 1995), Glaser and Strauss (1967), Lofland and Lofland (1995), and Prus (1996), and simultaneously incorporated Gubrium and Holstein's suggestions for exploring and dissecting narratives via the "active interviewing" process (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). As little is known about the actual forms and meanings of women's tattooing in Canada, I required an interview strategy that would elicit free-ranging and highly descriptive responses from women about their experiences with the body project. Therefore, the interview sessions were designed to "open up" narratives about tattooing experiences in the quest of developing an understanding of how and why women select tattooing as a body project. Simply put, I needed an open-ended interview approach that would allow for a considerable amount of empirical exploration into how women decide to become tattooed, experience tattooing, and draw upon a series of "interpretive resources" (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, 1999) when creating narratives about their tattooing body projects.

Interviews were conducted in a variety of settings such as my office at the university, coffee shops, local restaurants, or tattoo studios (typically, the interviewee would choose the location). In all but a few instances, I avoided using a tape-recorder or other technological device in the sessions; instead, notes were taken both during and after the interviews. Notes were (within several hours, or at maximum within 1 day) transcribed onto computer files and filled in considerably as I analyzed the texts. Interviewees were given an explanation of informed consent prior to and after each interview. Interviews ranged in length from 45 min to (in some rare cases) 4 hr. All of the participants involved were interviewed one time, and each of them (with the exception of 6) were shown transcripts of the interview sessions at a later date so that they might review their own narratives (i.e., to freely amend or delete any portions of text). In all cases here, pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of the participants.

It is interesting that my being a male researcher seemed to stimulate a heightened degree of exchange about the subject of gender and tattooing. I found that in sharing stories about our social experiences with tattoos, the interviews became lively discussions geared toward dissecting how gender is central in framing one's interpretations of tattoos. Being able to relate to the women as fellow tattoo enthusiasts, but discussing our lived experiences with tattooed skin

from different gender standpoints, became central in developing a grounded understanding of how tattoos are constructed along gender lines. Stories about, and theoretical interpretations of, women's tattooing presented in this article have been assembled as a result of these "active" conversations. Although a degree of theoretical and conceptual abstraction is undertaken in order to cull the women's tattoo narratives around the theme of gender, my overarching goal is to present their gendered understandings of tattooing by using *their own* terms and categories.

RESULTS

In the sociological literature on body modification, cultural conformity and resistance via physical representation are recurrent themes, yet they are typically separated as dissonant forms of social expression. Conformity and resistance through body modification are often analyzed as the polar extremes of cultural identification (cf. Featherstone, 2000). As I contend here, this is a conceptually misleading approach to the study of cultural expression, as acts of conformity or resistance to social edict (which form the basis of most body projects) are inexorably intertwined. In the case example of tattooing, women's involvement in the body project illustrates the ways in which forms of body modification are simultaneously replete with cultural messages about conformity and resistance.

Established Conformity and Women's Tattooing

As critical feminists have suggested (Sanford, 1992; Wolf, 1990), established North American standards of feminine beauty tend to produce passive female bodies. The established female form is not a physical shape (i.e., we may think of the quintessential runway model or beauty pageant contestant as the ideal-type) that demands social attention for its foreboding, powerful, or authoritarian stature. Whereas masculinity is partially achieved through the corporeal display of strength, aggression, risk-taking, and the ability to withstand pain and injury (cf. Sabo, 1986; Young, 1993; Young & White, 1995), preferred understandings of femininity consider such display among women as repugnant. As a result, established feminine body projects (which, ironically, are often rife with pain) highlight the docility of women's bodies.

For many of the women I interviewed, attending to the body as a communicative symbol of established femininity is everyday ritual. Common body projects such as applying make-up; blow-drying, colouring, or fixing one's hair; wearing dresses or skirts; exercising at the gym; dieting; and of course, shopping for body modification projects, are clearly ingrained in the gendered habitus (Elias, 1994). In the process of linking body ritual to one's social status as a feminine woman, many women's tattooing projects are performances of established femininity. *In this study, almost two-thirds (25, 62%) of the women I interviewed conformed to established constructions of femininity through their tattooing projects.* This was initially evident in portions of their tattoo narratives that detailed the "pre-tattoo enthusiast stage," in which the women were debating whether or not to partake in the body project:

I couldn't decide whether or not I was going to get tattooed. One of the main reasons was that, I dunno, I guess I never thought it looked lady-like. And all the guys I knew, were like, "you want to do *what?*" They looked at me like I was crazy . . . But then I started talking about getting a string of roses tattooed across my lower back, right at the top of my butt. I think it looks sexy, and so do all my male friends. Like, when you go out with a high cut t-shirt on, and low-rise jeans, you can see it really well, and it looks great. I've got a pretty flat stomach too, and when I'm dressed up in the right clothes it makes my body look killer. (Janine, age 22)

As confirmed by Janine and 16 (40%) of the other women I interviewed, by taking into account how men would decode the tattooing project as a signifier of femininity, some women enter into the process only if it will homologically complement their established feminine body projects.

On these grounds and others, established female body projects are not simply the embodiment of diffuse cultural constructions of femininity, they are acts of consent to the underlying structures of figurational power distribution that help create such established images of femininity (cf. Bordo, 1993; Ellman, 1993; Gillespie, 1996). The ongoing self-monitoring of one's daily physical regimen and preferences for body modification, as part of "doing gender," help reproduce relational structures of authority and power between established and outsider gender groups. As a vital part of social organization within a figuration, these seemingly banal cultural rituals translate into justifications for and confirmations of the ways in which social statuses and roles are hierarchically divided along gender lines (Chernin, 1983; Sanford, 1992). This was clearly

evidenced in Celeste's (age 24) narrative about her decision to be tattooed:

My boyfriend always said that he didn't want me to get tattooed . . . but I harped at him for about a year and then he finally agreed that it was okay. He wanted to help me decide what to get exactly and where. He seemed really happy when I said that I wanted a tattoo on the front of my stomach, right under my bikini-line. He thought it would be special if only he and I could share it, well, you know when, right? I want him to be attracted to me, and appreciate how I look, and I don't want a tattoo to ruin that . . . He threatened to leave me a couple of times when I said I wanted to cut all my hair off and go real short. He hates short hair, and said "no way." I thought if he liked the tattoo, and so did I, then everybody would be happy.

In Celeste's case, and that of 9 (23%) other women I interviewed, her desire was to enhance her body aesthetically through tattooing. As with many other mainstay forms of female body modification such as liposuction or excessive dieting, the underlying act is not simply a process of beautifying the female form, it is also an act of self-imposed gender stratification. Celeste's tattoo project is an embodied reproduction of the established cultural standard that women conform to men's desires and sexual interests—to the extent that a woman will radically modify her body in the process of such conformity. Akin to the process of breast augmentation, then, tattooing the body for these reasons symbolically justifies women's (and femininity's) cultural position as the outsider, as the Other.

As suggested in Celeste's and others' tattoo narratives, although women have historically shunned widespread participation in tattooing, newly established sensibilities about female sexuality have incorporated this body practice into the mix. Reminiscent of the "carnival era" of tattooing in North America (ca. 1920–50) in which scantily clad tattooed women were paraded through side-shows to titillate male audiences, women's current tattoo practices are often constructed as a sexual curiosity by men (DeMello, 2000; Mifflin, 1997). Women's participation in this traditionally masculine body practice is often mediated by the ways in which it can be sexualized. Once more, the body project becomes an act of corporeal beautification if undertaken with reverence to established constructions of femininity. For example, Ashlyn (age 28) stated:

Some girls get big boobs [implants] and others get their lips or hips done. I chose tattooing because it

makes me look great, and it draws attention to my body. When I'm out at a club, I know guys will see my tattoo [on her upper right breast] and come over and talk to me. Not a lot of women have them, and I know it sets me apart from the crowd . . . guys are really cool about my tattoo, and no one has ever said that I look like less of a woman for having it. I mean, as long as I don't go out and tattoo a snake across my neck.

We must be careful not to reduce the manners by which women conform to gender codes through tattooing into such a neatly packaged process. Although the narratives above strongly suggest that pursuing established standards of femininity through body work may motivate one's involvement in the practice, it does not capture the myriad ways in which established constructions of femininity are (re)produced through tattooing.

As I have argued elsewhere (Atkinson, 2001), for example, another *learned* motivation that underscores how tattooing is undertaken in the process of conforming to established femininity centres on the manners by which a tattoo body project can be generically cast as a tool for "exploring femininity" in a culturally fragmented, postmodern world. Given that emotionality and introspection conform well with established interpretations of femininity, it makes sense that tattooing (if done as an expression of emotionality or self-exploration) can be reconciled in some cases as a feminine practice. Wrapped in discourses of empowerment, identity-exploration, and personal meaning, some women offer elaborate justifications for their involvement in tattooing as a "woman's" form of expression. For at least 7 (18%) of the women I interviewed, these quests for individuality, as personally emancipating as they may be conceived, concern established ideas about femininity:

Women are a lot freer to be who we want to be nowadays. I'm not like my mom, right, who looks and dresses exactly like the men in her life always expected her to. I love my mom, but she has an outdated way of thinking about how women should look. All prim and proper like a little schoolgirl. If you want to get a tattoo, get a tattoo. That's what I say . . . be careful, though, and don't go attracting all kinds of unwanted criticism you don't need . . . I decided to have my lower back tattooed [a sun and moon] about 10 months ago, and my friends all love it; especially my close girl friends. But I didn't do it for anybody else other than me. It's my own way of personalising my body. (Heather, age 21)

Even though these projects tend to be whitewashed with nouveau-hip sentimentalities about "girl power"

and the freedom of choice (vis-à-vis the dismantling of established gender codes), they almost invariably *reproduce* established ideas about femininity and the feminine body. This is plainly evidenced by the specific images chosen by the women, the location/placement on their bodies, and the actual sizes of the tattoos selected.

First, among women who are exceedingly sensitive about jeopardizing their established femininity through the tattooing process, the design of the tattoo is normally the principal concern. As tattooing is precarious social practice if undertaken with reckless abandon (re: one's gender status), the image selected must resound with established images of femininity:

I love the butterflies that I have done around my ankle. I know it's not cool to say it these days, but it looks cute and girly. Sometimes women like to look pretty, and I think that tattoo makes my leg look really pretty. That's why I asked Phil [tattoo artist] to colour them pink and yellow, because I want my butterflies to look beautiful. (Selena, age 29)

Floral imagery (e.g., roses, orchids, lilies, or abstract vine work), animals or insects (e.g., birds, dolphins, turtles, cats, butterflies, beetles, or ladybugs), celestial motifs (e.g., suns, moons, or stars), and cartoon characters (e.g., Minnie Mouse, Hello Kitty, Snoopy) are commonly chosen as they immediately connote established feminine qualities and attributes such as being gentle, nurturing, playful, and delicate. They are deemed less gruesome or violent than "typical" men's tattoos, and thus they become feminized. As Lenskyj (1999) described in her research efforts on female athletes, women who encroach onto a traditionally male terrain like sport must engage in a certain degree of "apologizing" for their conduct. In the case of tattooing, the only way the practice is acceptable for women in some social circles is to feminize the project overtly in accordance with established gender codes.

Second, the strategic placement of some women's tattoos brims with conformity to established constructions of femininity. For instance, the overarching "rule of placement" for more conforming women is concealability. Fearing reprimand or scorn from others, these women do not publicly flaunt their dalliances into tattooing, and thus the lower back, the hips, and the upper back are the most common locations for their tattoo projects:

The only thing that kept going through my mind was, "what about my wedding dress." There was no way in hell that I could see myself standing at the altar, right beside my future husband, right in front of the

whole congregation, with a fat tattoo of a heart stuck up there on my bare arm. That would look so tacky, and it would ruin the whole experience of being a bride. Brides in their lace gowns with huge tattoos showing don't paint a very attractive picture . . . My tattoo is on my lower back, where no one has to ever see it except me. (Devon, age 26)

However, regularly concealed parts of the female body are also those that tend to be highly sexualized. As a fringe benefit of concealing her tattoos, Trina (age 30) explained that by having them on her lower back (traced around the contours of her upper buttocks, and around the front of her pelvis), she had received "positive feedback" from her sexual partners:

There's quite an aesthetic pleasure that comes from seeing a naked body with elegant markings around its sensuous parts. We've all seen dozens of naked bodies in our lives, and when you are having sex with a partner, it's always exciting to experience difference . . . I remember one man I dated became immediately aroused when I told him about the tattoo across the top of my ass. When we eventually had sex, he couldn't wait to find out what it looked like. It's funny because he only wanted to have sex from behind so he could see it the whole time. He's not the only guy that I've slept with who has said that I have the most beautiful ass ever, and that they would have never guessed that I would be someone who was into tattooing.

In a conceptually related way, if the tattoo is placed "out in the open" (e.g., the ankle or lower leg), it can be discursively configured as a form of feminine/sexual ornamentation akin to a piece of jewelry. If viewed by the tattoo enthusiasts and their social networks as an act of compliance to established femininity, then, tattooing and femininity may become closely related.

Third, concerns about jeopardizing one's femininity will bear on the size of the tattooing project. Describing extensively, or "heavily" in the common parlance, tattooed bodies as "disgustingly unfeminine," Cora (age 28) articulated her thoughts about the size of her tattoo in the following way:

There's a fine line between something that is dignified and understated, and something that is boorish and ugly. When I see a woman with a lot of really large tattoos, I think, that doesn't become her at all. I can't see a heavily tattooed woman and say to myself, wow, that's really feminine. Aesthetically, it doesn't work.

Heavily influenced by the locations on the body preferred by these women for their tattoo projects, the size of their tattoos are relatively dictated by dominant understandings of how femininity and

tattooing are related. On the basis of the narratives of 32 (80%) of the enthusiasts I interviewed, there is little to suggest that a "large" tattoo is consistent with established constructions of femininity.

In sum, the desire to maintain a culturally established feminine status is either explicit or implicit in many Canadian women's tattooing body projects. In some cases, the women readily acknowledged the nature of their compliance; others were more reluctant to acknowledge any conformity. In either case, it became evident through the exploration of their tattoo narratives that the interpretive resource provided by one's gender mediates most aspects of the tattoo body project—from the selection of a tattoo, to the way it is displayed, to the way tattooed skin is socially experienced. It is this mediation that is key for understanding the processes of cultural conformity in women's tattooing. As suggested below, however, it is similarly crucial for interpreting processes of cultural resistance and negotiation in women's tattooing.

Cultural Resistance and Women's Tattooing

Even a cursory review of the sociological literature reveals a meta-narrative that suggests that tattooing is undertaken by North American women as acts of cultural rebellion. It is argued that North American women pursue alternative cultural constructions of femininity and the feminine form (Atkinson, 2001; Atkinson & Young, 2001) by wilfully violating established body idiom through tattooing. Rejecting the idea that women's bodies are passive and best unscathed, women tattoo enthusiasts express different standards for what they consider to be feminine through their tattoo projects. This version of femininity starkly contrasts established gender ideologies and traditionally feminine forms. As Caroline (age 31) described,

I've never heard anybody say, I think women are all about bows, daises, sunny days, and tattoos. When you say the word "tattoo," I mean, you think of a guy right away... Women nowadays believe that whatever men can do women can do better, and that includes tattooing. We're taking over the whole business [laughs].

For Caroline and likeminded women tattoo enthusiasts, indelibly marking the skin with tattoos is a social crusade into a historically masculine body practice. *Among the women I interviewed, 15 (38%) stated that one of their main interests in tattooing projects is*

derivative of the extent to which a woman's tattooed flesh is a breach of established body convention. Inferring the body as a communicative text of culture, emphasis is given to the ways in which the marked body resists established constructions of the "body beautiful," a body that is recognizable in its docility and attractive for its fleshy curves, shapes, and contours. By cleverly using a profane body modification project to disrupt entrenched cultural images of the beautiful female body, some Canadian women are drawing alternative images of femininity through their body work.

As body projects are typically expressions of conformity to established gender ideologies, modifying the skin to wage cultural resistance is an act of cultural subversion. The bricolage (Levi-Strauss, 1966, 1969) involved in the tattooing process bespeaks of a conscious attempt to expand the cultural boundaries of women's body projects. Rather than passively partaking in ritualized, mass-marketed, and painful body projects in the pursuit of ideal-type feminine forms, some Canadian women promote individuality and alternate constructions of femininity through body play:

Squeezing your breasts into a tight bra doesn't feel comfortable. Neither does pasting fake eyelashes to your eyelids, or going hungry all day just to stay a size 4. Pushing, pulling, stretching, or binding your body to look good for a man isn't my idea of fun... So when people tell me that I'm nuts for getting tattooed [because it's painful], I respond by telling them that I'm not the one who mutilates my body everyday to look like the fashion models in magazines. Punishing your body to appease somebody else is psychotic, and most of the women I know don't get that. But they still have the nerve to stare at me and think I'm less of a "woman" for choosing this [tattooing]. (Laura, age 24)

Just as some women have learned to inscribe cultural conformity upon their bodies through ritual projects of identity construction, other women have equally learned to confront the established gender order through body modification. A "flesh journey" (cf. Atkinson & Young, 2001) such as tattooing can, then, disturb the established order as it creates a certain amount of cultural "noise" (Hebdige, 1979) as a non-standard body project.

But why stir such cultural noise through tattooing body projects? Given the litany of non-invasive methods of contesting oppressive gender ideologies through physical style (cf. Clarke, 1976; Hall & Jefferson, 1976; McRobbie, 1994), why would someone choose to mark the body *permanently* with

tattoos? Eight (20%) of the women I interviewed suggested that a tattoo's permanence is actually one of the primary allures behind the body project. This was symbolized by Zeta's (age 25) words:

I'm going to the grave and beyond with my tattoos. If you are really committed to a cause, then you're prepared to give over your body and mind forever. I could talk, and talk, and talk about wearing grungy clothes or not dyeing my hair to look like a Barbie doll, and no one would care since all of that is superficial. A body is a temple, and how I decorate mine is a forever thing. I am not a Barbie doll, and will never be one. That's a played out image of women, and my temple is marked with symbols that read, "a strong and independent woman lives here . . . forever."

The personal significance of the body project is accentuated because tattoo enthusiasts are able to "customize" (cf. Sanders, 1989) the images with which they choose to contest established social convention over the life-course.

Tattooing can also be a rather flamboyant way to violate diffuse cultural rules about the gendered body. Although colouring one's hair with bright green or purple hues, wearing men's suits, or exercising the body to the point of hypermuscularity can be designed by women as spectacular forms of resistance to gender codes, some Canadian women believe the message is most dramatically conveyed through radical forms of body modification. Given the enduring cultural association between tattooing and the masculine social underbelly in Canada (i.e., gangs, prisoners, carnival workers, or deviant youth subcultures), the body project *itself* conjures images of the outsider, and is socially prepackaged as the practice of the rebel. Furthermore, because women have traditionally participated in tattooing in more limited ways than men, the social practice is, as Hebdige (1979) might describe, "pregnant" with social significance for women with vested interests in challenging the established gender order.

In the process of engaging in cultural resistance through tattooing, the idea that women are symbolically liberated via this "liminal rite of passage" (Pitts, 1998) is often promoted through situated narratives. Associating one's tattooing projects with gender discrimination and social stratification (i.e., as a method of struggling against such marginalization), the body project is inserted into collective identity politics. Exploring the ways tattooing can serve a mimetic function (cf. Atkinson, 2001) for social outsiders in patriarchal figurations, Canadian women reveal their tattoos as a means of exhibiting their gender wounds:

I participate in a women's group that meets once a month. About a year and a half ago one of the women mentioned she received a tattoo a couple of days prior to our meeting. All of the women in the group are very middle-class and we were pretty startled by this. We all clamoured around her, poking and prodding to see if we could guess where it was placed. After about 5 minutes of persistent badgering she lifted up the back of her shirt and showed us a tattoo of an angel with broken wings. I couldn't get over how beautiful it looked, and it made me gasp when she told us how it helped her manage her feelings about being raped when she was a teenager . . . We talked about her tattoo for hours and how she felt as a woman about being sexually abused. By the end of the session, 5 of us decided we were going to have tattoos done as well. I mean, the way it helped Sandy deal with her victimization was incredible. I think most women have been abused like that at some point in our lives . . . Ten of the women in the group now have tattoos, and each one of us has taken a turn writing a story about our tattoo and what it means. We present them at group meetings and go over how tattooing helps women feel in control of our bodies. It's absolutely exhilarating to hear the stories, and to be friends with such strong women. (Marion, age 29)

The resulting narratives become widely circulated scripts for decoding the significance of tattooing as acts of personal reclamation, self-definition, and gender empowerment. In this way, gender resistance through tattooing becomes discursively configured as an interdependent and intersubjective enterprise among Canadian women.

Not only are discourses shared among some Canadian women in the process of "doing" resistance to established gender ideologies, certain tattoo designs are also commonly worn. Rather than inscribing roses, butterflies, or moons onto the body, traditionally masculine tattoo designs are strategically chosen by some women. For instance, skulls and crossbones, hearts and daggers, eagles, or tribal (e.g., Polynesian, Melanesian, or African) motifs are often utilized to disassemble established cultural associations between femininity and weakness:

Why should men get to wear all the really cool "traditional" tattoos? All of the really boss designs that I like are from the old school days, like all the sailor tattoos . . . I'm not stupid, and I know tattooing is this macho thing, and that's why girlies have worn little rainbows or baby pandas or whatever, and dance around saying "ooh, look at my cute little tattooed ass." More of the girls I hang out with don't care about that crap, and don't buy into a tattoo because it's what looks right on a woman. I have these tattoos [heart and banner, navy ship] to show I'm strong-willed, just like the tradition of tattooing in our culture. (Jenna, age 19)

Similarly, by tattooing “pin-up girls” on her body, Clarice (age 26) sought to reclaim and redefine the naked/partially nude body as a symbol of femininity. As an avid tattoo “collector” (cf. Vail, 1999), she described her pin-up girl tattoos in the following way:

Every time I go into Chapters or some other bookstore and pick up magazines, all I see are half-naked women. Turn on the t.v., and it's exactly the same. All men know about women are their naked bodies, and usually it's men who get to control how many naked women are in a film or whatever. . . . Guys flip out when they see the two pin-up girls I have tattooed on my arm. Some of them, right, the first question they ask me, or want to ask me, is, “are you a dyke?” Guys are so predictable. But that is the reaction I want from men. I want a guy to look at me, look at my tattoos, and have everything he thinks about women screwed up.

In these cases, the tattooed body is literally designed to fracture established gender ideologies by inverting typical masculine or feminine icons and attributing alternative cultural meanings to them through a process of bricolage.

The strategic placement of the symbol on the body is also central in women's tattoo projects that are motivated by cultural resistance. Choosing parts of the body that tend to be exposed or exposable in everyday life situations, some Canadian women offer their bodies to be decoded as confrontational or different. By tattooing arms/forearms, hands, lower legs/calves, upper chests, and necks, women consciously breach established body idiom (Goffman, 1959, 1963) as part of their rejection of established cultural understandings of femininity. The designs tend to be larger than those selected by more conforming tattoo enthusiasts and encompass greater portions of body space. Even though the tattoos are concealable in most cases, enthusiasts often believe that tattoo body projects intended for social resistance must be visible to be effective. As a segment of Karen's (age 25) tattoo narrative described,

When it comes to tattooing, bold is beautiful. I hate women who talk tough about their tattoos, pretending like they've done something rebellious with their bodies just because they have an ant dot [tattoo] on their hip. What's the point in even getting tattooed if people aren't going to see it? For young women it's important that we aren't embarrassed about having tattoos, and we can't let what's expected of us “girls” restrict our involvement. . . . People don't respect half-stepping. If we're going to bother saying something through our tattoos, make everybody listen or the message gets lost.

According to Karen and her peers, without actually confronting others in the process of “being confrontational,” no discernable challenge to established understandings of the body can be initiated.

To imply, however, that all forms of resistance to established constructions of the female body through tattooing are similar to those described above would be patently false. Although the strategies outlined above seem to be the standards for interpreting when and how resistance through women's tattooing and other radical forms of body modification is undertaken (cf. DeMello, 2000; Pitts, 1998; Vale & Juno, 1989), they simply do not capture the full range of resistance expressed by women through this type of body work.

In this study, 6 (15%) of the women I interviewed stated that their resistance to established gender codes is more subtle and private than the wildly spectacular variation displayed by, what they perceive to be, more “radical” feminists. These women are astutely aware of the ways in which tattooing a “feminine” body undermines established body codes, and have become drawn into the recent popularity of women's tattooing in Canada for this reason. Many of these women have also become privy, in one context or another, to tattooing narratives that detail the liberating nature of the body project for women. Hence, some Canadian women are fascinated by the possibilities of using the body in a popularly rebellious way. At the same time, they are not eager to be labelled a “deviant female” through their participation in tattooing.

The pragmatic position that some Canadian women adopt toward tattooing is, then, founded upon a desire to engage in resistance to established gender codes while maintaining a semblance of conformity to such edicts. The contestation of established cultural body images and practices (and relationships of social inequality that produce them) is crucial here, but is not undertaken with social/cultural recklessness. The *negotiated* centre-point between outright conformity and unapologetic resistance allows a tattoo enthusiast to be compliant or rebellious in situated contexts of interaction. Assessing when the marks might be stigmatizing (i.e., involving an unbearable loss to identity, status, or role-set), or socially rewarding (i.e., having one's resistance to gender codes respected and appreciated, or receiving kudos from others about one's tattoos), is central in the negotiation process and can shape a woman's involvement in tattooing.

The main rationale for negotiating one's involvement in resistant forms of tattooing articulated by

the women I interviewed hinged upon the idea that tattooing should be a private customization of the female body. For these women, resistance to gendered ways of thinking and acting is accomplished through subtle acts of protest rather than overt and easily targeted forms of gender “bending.” The tattooed body does not necessarily have to be publicly displayed to others in this process, as a tattoo body project reflects a deeper and more symbolic dialogue with the self. The tattooed body is an illustrative diary of one’s innermost thoughts and feelings about established constructions of femininity and established gender ideologies:

To change Descartes’ terms slightly, “I tattoo, therefore I am.” Personally, I didn’t do any of this [points to tattoos on her arms] for anyone other than myself. When it comes to my body, I make the decisions. If I want to look different than I’m supposed to [as a woman], because that’s how I feel, then I can deal with that through my tattoos. I don’t have to stand on the top of buildings and scream out that I lived as an anorexic, or that I have been taught to hate the way my body looks—or, I should say, how it *used* to look . . . It wasn’t until I started to express myself through tattooing, and figured out how I wanted to look as a woman, that I had a grip on my identity and a strong sense of who I am. I don’t see any reason why I should include anyone else in that either. A tattoo is something that is supposed to be personally satisfying and meaningful . . . for me, it’s not about the public consumption of my identity anymore. (Chasey, age 22)

As McRobbie (1994) and Muggleton (2000) have pointed out, negotiated forms of social resistance can be injected into a gamut of private, personal practices that are never given to audiences for consumption. In the case of tattooing, there is an inner satisfaction derived from simply expressing anger, frustration, or depression about established constructions of femininity through a tattoo body project.

Still, from the moment that a woman begins to think about a tattooing body project as a private form of resistance, other people enter into the equation. On the basis of previous interaction with others (e.g., sisters, fathers, daughters, school mates, or employers), including the exchange of physical cues and body language, women develop “stocks of knowledge” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Garfinkel, 1967; Schutz, 1967) concerning others’ attitudes toward tattooing and the female body. From the onset, it seems that social reactions figure prominently in deciding how and when to participate in tattooing as negotiated gender resistance, including what image will be

tattooed, the location of the tattoo, and the size of the design:

I knew that if I went overboard and had the tattoo take up most of my arm or something, then people would go bonkers. It’s quite a jump to make from having no tattoos to having this massive one. You have to ease people into it, right, let them get used to the idea that your body is going to be “different” looking woman forever. I didn’t want everybody to think I was basically saying, I’m not myself anymore . . . So I figured I would start small and if I liked it, and people didn’t get too huffed, I could always go back and get something bigger [on another part of my body] if I decided. If you let your friends know that you’ve haven’t really changed that much, you can get into it as much as you like. (Rosalyn, age 22)

Rena (age 23) stated that her inclinations to be tattooed were tempered by the fear that her modified flesh would meet with significant disapproval from her family:

I wanted to get tattooed so badly. But my dad always said that he thought women with tattoos look like whores. And, he said that if people look at you like a whore, they will treat you like one. But that was the point for me, right . . . not looking like a good little girl, or always doing what I was told. My mom always agreed with him, and even my brother asked me why I wanted to do it. I have this friend named Marcy, and she has a devil girl tattooed on her shoulder. My dad won’t even talk to her anymore when she comes by the house, and has basically told me he doesn’t want me to hang around with her . . . So, I finally screwed up enough courage to be tattooed with the Chinese symbol of eternity and took the plunge. I thought my butt would be the best place because even when I am in a bikini, my dad would never see it. He’s never seen it to this day, and I don’t think I could ever bring myself to even tell him.

In Rena’s case, she interpreted her family members’ negative sentiments about tattooing as a form of social protection. By condemning the body project as outside the established gender norm, family members impress upon the budding enthusiast the importance of following established cultural practices. By selecting locations on the body for the project that are regularly covered by clothing, however, these tattoo enthusiasts are able to negotiate their involvement and “pass” as norm abiding (Goffman, 1959, 1963).

The reactions to tattooing body projects (experienced or anticipated) expressed by employers and coworkers can be even more tenuous than those provided by family members or friends. A primary concern for women tattoo enthusiasts, especially in neo-conservative business environments, is that negative

reactions from coworkers will interfere with their achieved statuses at work. For the most part, they come to view their tattoo projects as a form of "intolerable deviance" (Stebbins, 1996) in the workplace—a profane form of representation that carries immediate career ramifications:

When I go to work I'm not there completely on my own terms. I feel like the company pays my salary, and gets to tell me how to behave. That's the price you pay to get paid . . . I work in an office as a personal assistant and if you come in looking bizarre in front of all the stuffed shirts who hit on you all day, you catch hell. You have to maintain a business persona at work, and apparently you can't have a tattoo and be professional . . . especially if you are a woman. At work, I can't bring my [gender] politics there everyday, and I have to cover it up. I've had nightmares about going to work naked—not because everyone can see my breasts, but because everyone could see the tattoos on my breasts. [the company] gives off this image like they're hip and young and urban, but we'd see how hip they are if I came in with a low-cut top on. I'd be the hippest girl on the unemployment line. (Laura, age 24)

In recognizing that one's attitudes about gender resistance through tattooing may not be intersubjectively appreciated in the workplace, enthusiasts may negotiate their involvement in tattooing as personal necessity; that is, women enthusiasts are not oblivious to their economic interdependencies and curtail their body modification projects accordingly.

The impetus to negotiate one's involvement in this form of self-expression can, however, create internal tensions for women who perceive their conformity to established body politics as a character deficiency. Five (13%) of the women I interviewed used the term, "selling out" to describe their sense of public inauthenticity:

I made the conscious choice to tattoo my body, and I'll never regret it. It was probably the defining moment in my life so far . . . it was the only time I did anything solely for myself, to display who I am as an individual. Still, I'm not indifferent to ridicule from other people about my tattoos, so I keep them under wraps most of the time. I go home at night and cry sometimes because I don't have the brass to stand up and ask people to accept me for how I look. I had this vision of how tattooing was going to change my life for the better, and make me more socially confident. And when I sell out by hiding my body under the clothes I wear, I feel like a shy little girl again, peeking around my mother's skirt to see who's talking to me. (Adele, age 23)

Complying with pressures created by established gender codes and supported in institutional contexts such

as the family, school, or workplace, some women enthusiasts believe that they compromise a part of their resistant philosophies by putting on a conforming front (Goffman, 1959, 1963). In socially presenting a disingenuous persona in the front regions of everyday settings, these women experience an unsettling bifurcation of identity. By undertaking a series of body management techniques in order to hide their tattooed flesh when in the presence of others, some Canadian women come to view their negotiation as an act of cowardice.

In brief, the decision to engage in cultural dissent through body projects such as tattooing appears to be mediated by one's purpose or motivation for the project and the degree to which the resulting body modification jeopardizes one's achieved/ascribed cultural statuses. Although the central purpose of the body project may be to challenge the very basis of such statuses and associated roles (i.e., as they support established constructions of femininity), Canadian women are not impervious to established cultural norms about gender and its representation. Resistance, therefore, to established social constructions of gender through tattooing exists on a sliding scale. Although some women's tattoo body projects are flagrant violations of established body play and dominant images of masculinity/femininity, others are privately negotiated acts of dissent.

DISCUSSION

Canadian women's involvement in tattooing has risen dramatically over the past 10 years. Despite this noticeable shift in the demographics of tattoo enthusiasts in Canada, sociologists have failed to address adequately how and why women are now active in the practice. Contemporary analyses of tattooing in North America reveal a keen awareness that women's interest in the body project is burgeoning (DeMello, 2000; Mifflin, 1997; Sanders, 1991; Vail, 1999; Wroblewski, 1992), but do not offer many theoretical interpretations of this boom in popularity, or its consequences on established constructions of femininity. Furthermore, authors have misguidedly conjoined the entirety of men's and women's uses for, and interpretations of, tattoos around a core set of principles that were originally intended to explicate men's tattooing practices only. The preoccupation with men's tattoo experiences, and the subsequent creation of academic understandings/discourses about tattoos from this gaze, has conceptually homogenized

the body project between the genders and systematically persuaded individuals to overlook ways of knowing/seeing the tattooed body as a gendered entity.

Feminist theories and related theories about the body richly enhance researchers' understanding of how and why women participate in the body project. By attending to a full range of body projects commonly undertaken by women, feminist and profeminist researchers have struggled to expose the gendered ways through which corporeality is physically and socially constructed (Balsamo, 1996; Lupton, 1996; Price & Shildrick, 1999; Segal, 1994). In underscoring that one's preferences for body modification are partially reflective of one's socially achieved gender status, we are able to appreciate the ways in which tattooed bodies are defined via this key interpretive resource. Although a conceptualization of the gender-body link described in this paper is not a revelation within the larger literature on body projects, it is a major revelation in the study of tattooing as sociologists, psychologists, and cultural anthropologists have discussed gender and tattooing without theoretically interrogating the relationships between tattooing, gender, and gendered bodies.

To recognize the gendered parameters within which women participate in the body project is critical at this juncture. Recent estimates suggest that more women than men comprise the newest generation of tattoo enthusiasts in Canada, and a vast array of meanings have been attributed to women's tattooed bodies (Atkinson, 2001). By going beyond the popular idea that women's tattoo body projects are simply crass refutations of established gender codes (perhaps a lingering product of mainstay decodings of women's tattooing projects as the antithesis of men's), we open up a possibility for understanding why women tattoo their bodies in the conscious effort of reproducing or negotiating established constructions of femininity.

As the women I interviewed articulated through their narratives, feelings about one's gender status dictate one's tattoo body projects and subsequent interpretations of them. The women structured much of their tattooing narratives around the ways in which they decode their tattoos *as women*, or were tattooed as an expression of some "femininity." Almost without exception, the women's underlying reasons for being tattooed; the shapes, sizes, and placements of their tattoos; the social presentation of their tattoos; and the active construction of their tattoos reflected desire to communicate specific messages about gender to particular audiences.

These contextual communiqués are evidently dialogical with established constructions of femininity and the feminine body in Canada. For the most part, the women I interviewed voiced an awareness of the outsider social status women continue to hold in Canada and how women are expected to modify their bodies for the pleasure of men (i.e., men prefer soft, supple, thin, sexy, and unblemished feminine bodies). Recognizing the extent to which they regulate their bodies in accordance with prevailing established images of femininity, almost all of the women I interviewed recounted how their forays into tattooing were mediated (in some basic way) by this cultural understanding. In the majority of cases, traditional or established cultural constructions of femininity in Canada formed the mortar of the women's tattoo projects.

Canadian women who actively comply with established constructions of femininity through their body work deftly mould their tattooing projects into acts of gender conformity. Caught up in the current popularity of tattooing among the younger generations, and the ways in which it has been fashionably inserted into the mainstream (Atkinson & Young, 2001; DeMello, 1995; Irwin, 2000), these women narratively and physically construct the projects with deference to established gender expectations. By drawing attention to the beautiful/sexual feminine body and highlighting the docility of the female form, these women's tattoo projects are conceptually equivalent to other body projects such as liposuction, breast enlargement, excessive dieting, and corseting in that each reinforce the established feminine form as the cultural norm (Davis, 1994; Gillespie, 1996; Wolf, 1990). Furthermore, such tattoo projects garner favourable attention from others (e.g., parents, peers, boyfriends, husbands) as they are explicitly assembled as acts of consent to established constructions of femininity. As a result, these body projects symbolically reproduce women's outsider social status in Canada, and *physically* illustrate the ways women's bodies are sexualized, objectified, regulated, and monitored in accordance with established cultural constructions.

However, other women tattoo enthusiasts reject the oppressive outsider social standing that established femininity carries in Canada, and they challenge such depictions of femininity through their body projects. Subverting established reasons for engaging in body projects (i.e., the pursuit of an ideal-type femininity), these women utilize the tattooed body as a billboard for political protest. Instead of consenting to masculinist preferences for the female body through painful processes of body manipulation,

these women seek to dismantle established ideologies and the structures of gender stratification they buttress. In de Certeau's terms (de Certeau, 1984), they use "what they have" in order to wage resistance. As the body is one of the most socially recognized signifiers of one's gender, immediate confrontations to the established patriarchal hegemony in Canada can be initiated through bold and highly visible tattoo projects.

We must question, however, whether or not these acts of cultural defiance are merely "magical solutions" (Cohen, 1972/1999) to common problems of status adjustment among women in Canada. Because the flamboyantly tattooed woman's body tends to elicit negative responses from established others (i.e., as a "freakish," unattractive," or "deviant" body), does the campaign of resistance through tattooing further entrench these women into the status of the outsider? Just as Punk Rockers solidified their marginalized social class positions by adopting radical physical styles to express their collective sense of alienation and disenfranchisement (Hall & Jefferson, 1976; Hebdige, 1979), these women may very well be *reinforcing* the sanctity of established images of femininity (and related established body practices) as the cultural norm.

It is not surprising, then, that many of the women I interviewed preferred to negotiate their involvement in tattooing. Neither accepting nor consenting to established constructions of femininity in Canada (yet not ignoring their cultural saliency), some women tactically engage in tattooing as a form of *negotiated* resistance to dominant gender codes. Established and outsider social relationships (*vis-à-vis* gender) are partially maintained in this process of negotiation, but the women nonetheless derive an inner satisfaction from their negotiated cultural transgressions. The negotiation is justified by women as social necessity in most cases—as an overt tattooing body project may jeopardize key interdependencies one shares with conforming others. It is further justified as a deeply personal form of self-expression, and the tattoo designs or symbols represent an individual's unique biography. In all cases, the negotiation permits women to explore tattooing as a self-directed "flesh journey" (Atkinson & Young, 2001) of self-discovery without raising the ire of, or stirring unwanted critique from, "unenlightened" (Stebbins, 1996) audiences.

In conclusion, the discussion presented in this article is not a totalizing, static, or definitive account of women's experiences with tattooing in Canada or elsewhere. We must recognize that women's tattooing

experiences are highly varied, culturally contextual, and temporally bound. In this respect, there is a pressing need for extended and concatenated research (Stebbins 1992) on women's tattooing—both within Canada and elsewhere. Within this lacuna, we would immediately benefit from in-depth empirical analyses of the ongoing social construction of tattooing as an intersubjectively meaningful body project among women, the long-term and unintended impacts of women's participation in the body project on men's involvement in tattooing, and of course, the stylistic changes in North American tattooing as a result of the increasing "feminization" of the tattoo business (Atkinson, 2001). Future researchers should strive to enrich our knowledge about women's involvement in tattooing through theoretical innovation, methodological experimentation, and substantive exploration. As women's participation in the body project continues to expand and diversify, so must our sociological understanding of women's tattooing.

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