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Resisting the Palimpsest: Reclamation of the Female Cultural Body

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The implicit politics of female body performativity are played out constantly within the liminality of socio-cultural space. Women need to be able to renegotiate the complexity of constructed and encoded gender expectations and representation in order to expand the contemporary narrow vision of femininity that interpellates all of us in an advertorial way. The most visceral component of corporeal semiotics is the skin which can, certainly in Post-modern and Post-colonial terms be seen as a *liminal space*, which according to Homi Bhabha, is a space for cultural hybridity, performativity and minority diatribes to exist. In order to negotiate prescribed notions of physical aesthetics and ideas of femininity and beauty, the skin can be used to perform the renegotiation of this encoded, fixed tablet of gender traditions. How that skin exists culturally requires inspection. Space unfolds to interaction (Massey, D) and if, as McLuhan stated, the medium is the message, then the skin and the body are the medium. People, more predominantly women, who use their skins as semiotic canvasses by being tattooed, actively choose to perform subverted notions of beauty and performativity and challenge the dominant culture through the ritual of tattooing. The female body is perennially rewritten by the hegemony of each historical period. By using tattooing as a process of reclamation, one can refuse to let one's body be inscribed by cultural hegemonic texts and practices. Through tattooing, bodily reclamation can resist the palimpsest by marking one's journey, ideologies and artistic tastes on one's skin. According to William Blake and Edward Said, 'the foundation of empire is art and science; remove them or degrade them, and the empire is no more' (4; 87). By tattooing the body, this process resists engendered codes of behaviour, constructed aesthetics of beauty and of the imposition of cultural imperialism because there is already a fixed, irremovable narrative in place that is autonomous and not state sanctioned. This paper will examine notions of female cultural space, encoded gender expectations, performativity and aesthetic constructs to demonstrate that through the process of tattooing, alternative ideological positions that are not represented by the hegemony exist in a liminal space and occupy a vital but subordinated (and therefore categorised female) position. As a result, revolution becomes embodied and performed on the skin.

Keywords: Feminism; Cultural Theory; Liminal Space; Tattooing; Performativity

Introduction

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"When a woman cannot feel comfortable in her own body, she has no home" (Winterson, 2013).

"Identity—who we are, where we come from, what we are—is difficult to maintain in exile... we are the 'other', an opposite, a flaw in the geometry of resettlement, an exodus. Silence and discretion veil the hurt, slow the body searches, soothe the sting of loss" (Ashcroft & Ahluwalia, 1999).

The polemics of exile and home, of diaspora and belonging dictate a problematic rubric for those uncomfortable in their own skin. Reasons are multitudinous but suffice it to say, there will be some parallelism of emotional and psychological responses that allow us to know that we all want to feel a sense of belonging and of home and when we do not, a journey begins. As Winterson acutely suggests, our first, primary signification

of home, should be our bodies. And for women, this becomes a fight for control over that space. Our bodies are the colonial terrain of the state apparatus (Althusser, 2008), of cultural imperialism, of patriarchal dogma and of every conceivable manipulative tactic measured at making sure the hierarchy is not displaced. Fighting for space within our culture heralds a constant threat of usurpation over our bodies and ourselves and in order for us to gain understanding of how and why this occurs, to provide some knowledge and enlightenment of these damaging paradigms, we must deconstruct, extrapolate and break down the walls and dividing lines that keep women islanded (Gutman, 2008) and shepherded by patriarchy in order to reclaim body and cultural space.

Some of the most significant reasons that post-colonial theory is applied herein and sits so comfortably within the notion of cultural reclamation for women, is that the space of the colonised terrain, of the subjugated body, is a concern for both post-colonialism and feminism. Categorised perfectly by Suleri

(1994) in her essay *Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition* the juxtaposition of these two theoretical positions enables discussion in terms of minority perspectives and performativity. To aid this, Post-Structuralist notions of deconstruction are also vital in ascertaining a philosophical and political position to engage directly with the hegemony.

According to Culler (2008) in his text *On Deconstruction: theory and criticism after Structuralism*, he states that deconstruction has “been variously presented as a philosophical position, a political or intellectual strategy and a mode of reading” (Culler, 2008). This paper roundly applies all three positions to the notion of reclamation of the female cultural body because the critical approach necessary for deconstruction is both philosophical and political in its application and strategy. As a mode of reading, our cultural texts and practices ought to be approached as concisely as any student of literary criticism in order for the latent narratives to be fully demonstrated.

By applying deconstruction as a unit of extrapolation, it can be used to gain some much needed ground. According to Derrida (1988), in “une strategie generale de la deconstruction”,

“In a traditional philosophical opposition we have not a peaceful coexistence of facing terms but a violent hierarchy. One of the terms dominates the other (axiomatically, logically, etc.), occupies the commanding position. To deconstruct the opposition is above all, at a particular moment, to reverse the hierarchy” (*Positions*, pp. 56 - 57/41, qtd in Culler (2008) *On Deconstruction*)

One can therefore state that to apply deconstruction herein provides a means by which one can understand the hegemony by placing it under the microscope for interrogation. By doing so, certain notions become foregrounded; space, the subaltern (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1996) and constructions of femininity all jostle for position within the paradigm of culture as imperialism (Ashcroft & Ahluwalia, 1999).

The process of othering, as a system of recognising the subaltern and the acknowledgement of boundaries, psychological or otherwise is an act of violence. It is an act of violence because it means one is actively engaged in a process of dehumanising, of distancing oneself from others, of manifesting the notion that only certain people matter, only the hegemony is of any consequence. Once this process is underway, it casts its net far and wide to include any number of peoples who do not fit hand-in-glove into a culturally constructed hegemonic remit. Given that the remit is heavily weighted in favour of white, able-bodied, conservative men, becoming “othered” is almost a forgone conclusion. It also holds that by othering, one is recognising and upholding the hierarchy of hegemonic patriarchy.

As Said (1999) states, “The struggle for domination, as Foucault shows, can be both systematic and hidden. There is an unceasing interaction between classes, nations, power centres and regions seeking to dominate and displace one another, but what makes the struggle more than a random tooth and claw battle is that a struggle of values is involved, a struggle to attempt to dominate is also the intention to exist” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1996)

To take Said’s point of systematic and hidden domination, it correlates directly to the notion of culture as imperialism. If ideology always permeates culture, then as William Blake once wrote, “the foundation of empire is art and science. Remove them or degrade them, and the empire is no more”. Ideology is the imperial systematic, hidden puppet master that theorists such as McLuhan and Packard were all too aware of even in the

1950s. As Wright (1997) states, “we are all puppets, and our best hope for even partial liberation is to try to decipher the logic of the puppeteer” (Rapaille, 1997).

To return to Said’s above statement, the one significant issue missing from the above list is gender. As the subaltern is engendered female, one must marvel at how much of that domination and displacement is an act of violent misogyny that is metered out on the subjugated and oppressed. Locating where they exist, and what space they occupy becomes a salient issue.

It is easy to overlook the notion of space. It seems at first so innocuous, so unimportant that its significance is almost transparent. It is only when one begins to examine issues concerning a person’s weight, height, appearance, how much noise they make, how loudly they express their opinions, that one realises how you choose to occupy the space you have, is significant. How constructed that space already is, dictates how much of a battle ground it becomes.

If space unfolds to interaction (Massey, 1994) then the lion’s share of the socio-cultural space is occupied by the hegemony. They are the dominant share holders, the dictators and cultural executioners, and consequently this would indicate that there is no empty space (Brook, 1990) left for any wriggle room, should one be requiring any. Space, it would seem, is at a premium. It could be said that we are existing in a cultural Venn Diagram, where the most composite and solidified unit occupies the most influence; hegemony, 1, everyone else, 0.

The notion of liminal space (Bhabha, 1994) plays a significant role when attempting to deconstruct space and how one can exist within it when balancing on the precipice of peripheral cultural margins. He states, “Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively. The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation” (Williams & Chrisman, 1994).

The representation of difference, if taken at its most literal and obvious semiotic level, is the way something or somebody looks and the space that they occupy; it becomes a question of aesthetics. We are given to enact psychological decodings of people based on the coded signifiers provided by appearance. We process clothing, hair, tattoos, make-up, shoes, accessories in some kind of shopping centre of the mind that’s been pre-programmed by advertising and Next outlets and TK Maxx to culturally assimilate a bank of acceptable and/or inappropriate appearance based information that will indicate what sort of person would wear “that outfit.” Through the engineering of consent, consumerism and the ideological assault of commodified cultural imposition, we are actively encouraged to police one another, to weed out difference, to identify and isolate the ones who are obviously and performatively, demonstrating and displaying themselves as outside of the hegemony. But, as Derrida states, difference persists (Wood, 1988) and a space for that persistence to exist, is on the margins, on the cultural periphery.

For those who actively buy into fashion and image, they also buy into the mythology of signifiers that these brands and labels profess to mean. But deep down, we all know it is a construct, that it is all a lie? That we are cultural consumers constructed as walking, talking advertising boards traipsing through

that miserable rainy market place, balancing on our fake Labou-tins and swinging our simulacra Dolce and Gabanna bag from Primark? Baudrillardian allusions notwithstanding, it simply does not have the weight of meaning it leads us to believe it has. It is a Lacanian parade, a Rivieran masquerade of false pretence and mythologies of which Barthes (1994) would surely wish to critique.

He begins *Le Plaisir du texte* (Williams & Chrisman, 1994) by stating that a person who willingly chooses to rid themselves of the worry of contradiction and of the “rules of our institutions” would make themselves an outcast. And as an outcast, existing in exile in an extra-hegemonic performative cultural space, one can witness the liminality of Bhabha’s minority perspective. If one *looks* like an outcast, then surely one must be so. The psychological decoding will always be an insufficient way of determining who someone is from what they look like. We cannot ever presume to know of someone’s experiences, of their heartache for example, from appearance. Yet, this mode of deconstruction persists.

All of those consumer cultural signifiers, the shoes, the hand bag, even the hair and eyelashes can be removed, they can be taken off and the canvass, the body, to all intents and purposes, once again becomes blank. We are human palimpsests for the Corporatocracy to imprint whatever it wants on our minds and bodies. It immediately locates us, compartmentalises us, constructs us, controls us and financially governs us. The Ideological State Apparatus (Althusser, 2008) clearly demarcates appearance based performativity with its guaranteed financial return. Accept of course, for those existing in cultural exile, experiencing culture differently and thus the “social articulation” Bhabha discusses becomes altered and re-encoded when it doesn’t concern the hegemony.

By refusing to be constructed by cultural heteronormativity and homogenous appearance-based practice, marginalised cultural practices become outwardly manifest, sometimes in protest, sometimes as an act of solidarity with other subalterns and sometimes as the reclamation of space. This refusal is the recognition that we have the power to change our appearance and construct ourselves through it.

One does not presume to preside over all alternative lifestyles with the same rule of thumb but for some the process of tattooing occupies an interesting body and cultural performativity.

As a process and site of ritual, tattooing is no new fad or fashion. It has a significant anthropological function that has existed for millennia on a global scale. The fact that the term Briton, means “People of the Designs” and in four B.C.E. the Greeks recorded the Britons as *Prittanoi* or ‘tattooed people’ (Harper, 2013) demonstrates how embedded a cultural practice this ritual really is.

Published in The Sun in October 2012, (Jones, 2013) which admittedly is not a source of any legitimacy, it openly states that Great Britain is the most tattooed country in the world, with an estimated “twenty million designs decorating our bodies and the number of parlours doubling in the last three years”. Source notwithstanding, it is interesting nonetheless that as a nation, we actively engage with such an historical and ancestral practice.

However, this is not to say that it is culturally accepted. It is problematic particularly with issues such as employment, outmoded cultural stereotypes, “while body art used to be associated with sailors, criminals and thugs” (Harper, 2013) and gen-

der constructs. Some maintain a peripheric position and some invest completely in the practice, but by engaging in the ritual of tattooing the recognition that the skin is a canvass on which one can depict one’s ideologies, allegiances, desires and regrets is a notion that has captured a nation.

For women, who openly fight the body battle ground, to openly inscribe our bodies, our homes, with our own stories is significant. Initial understandings and preconceptions of the tattoo ritual is that it is engendered as a masculine practice. However, according to *Bodies of Subversion* (Mifflin, 2013).

“In a culture where surfaces matter, skin, the largest organ, is the scrim on which we project our greatest fantasies and deepest fears about our bodies [...] no form of skin modification is as layered with meaning as tattooing, especially for women [...] Tattoos appeal to contemporary women both as emblems of empowerment [...] and badges of self-determination at a time when controversies about abortion rights, date rape and sexual harassment have made them think hard about who controls their bodies and why. For these women, the significance of a tattoo can lie in the mere act of getting inked (as a form of rebellion or a way of reclaiming the body after rape or sexual abuse) or in the timing (to commemorate milestones such as marriage or divorce or in remembrance of the dead)” (4, 2013).

Mifflin states some significant issues. Trauma and herstory will state clearly enough that after experiencing abuse, being prostituted, experiencing domestic violence, rape, stalking, all manner of sexual assaults, the need to make your home, your body yours again, is compelling. It could be said that there is a causal correlation between the increase in sexual assault, the sexualisation of culture (Penny, 2010) and the increase in tattooed in women in the UK. According to the Ministry of Justice’s *Overview of Sexual Offending in England and Wales* (Ministry of Justice, 2013), from 2011-2012, approximately 404,000 females and 72,000 males were subject to sexual assault in the British Isles. It doesn’t take a leap of faith to understand there may be a connection worth exploring here.

For women who choose to reclaim their bodies after trauma, it is possible to state that we experience a triple exile. Whilst cultural attitudes towards tattooing are changing, it is most certainly a classed based paradigm shift. Attempting to survive a double dip recession under the rule of a government who insists on severe austerity measures to cover the fault lines in the banking system, it is possible to witness the proletarianization of the middle classes as they become squashed into the working class as employment is scarce, university fees are astronomical and public services are once again, being threatened with privatization. Whilst this shifting backdrop provides the economic frame to which culture performs, the working and middle classes struggle to find themselves. By engaging in direct body autonomy it is possible to state that the process of reclamation is not just a bodily one but is written accordingly. The first exile therefore is economic. This is a pre-existent problem for women with the wage gap and lower figures of higher powered jobs where women are in leadership roles (Sandberg, 2013).

The double exile comes from the gender performativity and expectation. There is still an ingrained notion that women do not get tattooed, and if they do, then they must adhere to particular economic and cultural stereotype. The “art” is less of a primary signification and more of a lucky chance. What is particularly irksome to note, is that there exists a preconceived notion that you have rejected your womanhood because you have engaged in the process of tattooing. If you proudly display

your artwork, then you clearly ally yourself more with masculinity than you do your own 'natural' body. These are clearly cultural gender constructs but when the culture one is immersed in explicitly requests you identify yourself as female or risk being ostracised by patriarchal hegemony (Moseley, 2013) then gender performativity on the skin can invite unwelcome scrutiny.

The triple exile is that of cultural space. If a woman chooses to display her artwork on a night out for example, there is a pre-conceived notion that it is acceptable behaviour to touch without permission. The tattoo may be the point of identification and cue for dialogue but it is often a smokescreen to initiate a sexual power game between the female wearer and a male challenger. If you do not want to be touched, then it is as simple a transaction as that. Or certainly, it should be. However, what this invariably evolves into is the cultural recognition that if a woman has the audacity to display to such explicit body control in a public space, then she must suffer the consequences. One of those consequences is being touched without permission being given so others can bear witness.

The assumptions made regarding her attitudes and personality predicated on deconstructing her artwork are also problematic. Whether she chooses a rose on her ankle or a piece of tribal on her chin, it essentially, is nobody else's business. However, by performing a very visual and visceral practice as tattooing, as a woman, you are projecting yourself into the cultural market place in a different way and using your space in a re-encoded manner as something other than a "natural" woman.

According to the anthropologist Brain (1979) in his book *The Decorated Body*, quoted in Mifflin, he states, "(an) attempt to put on a new skin, a cultural as opposed to a natural skin" is of particular significance for women. Mifflin notes his observation is "especially resonant with women whose ties to nature have historically been used to justify their exclusion from culture" (Harper, 2013).

By the process of actively engaging with the process of tattooing, women can reclaim their homes and bodies and also claim in the first instance, cultural space. Whilst this space will constantly be a hard fought terrain against imperialist cultural, gender constructs and domination, the fact that it is happening should cause the hegemony to stop and think.

As Mifflin states, "In the never-ending project of women's self-transformation, tattoos are both an end and a beginning, a problem and a solution. Written on the skin—the very membrane that separates the self from the world—they're diary entries and public announcements, conversation pieces and counter-culture totems... collectively they form a secret history of women grappling with body politics from the Gilded Age to the present—women whose intensely personal yet provocative public art poses a complicated challenge to the meaning of female beauty" (Mifflin, 2013).

After all, who is to say that we have to remain as a singular-

ity? Human beings are composite cultural creatures that perform hybridity every day. For women, it becomes essential to challenge the contestatory limits imposed upon us culturally. We need to be able to transcend the stereotypical discursive boundaries by creating a new narrative for the mouth of the subaltern. If tattooing enables this to occur then as Tiffin (1996) states, we don't need to, "... subvert dominant discourse with a view to taking their place but to evolve textual strategies which 'consume' their own biases as they expose and erode those of the dominant discourse" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1996).

Consequently, it is possible to state that female cultural evolution and reclamation of body space is written on the skin. The revolution starts here.

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