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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 adversorial 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 canvases 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

Paper: Resisting the Palimpsest: reclamation of the female cultural body.
“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 & Aihluwalia, 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
or otherwise is an act of violence. It is an act of violence be-

and the acknowledgement of boundaries, psychological

ising and upholding the hierarchy of hegemonic patriarchy.

According to Culler (2008) in his text On Deconstruction: 

theory and criticism after Structuralism, he states that decon-

struction has “been variously presented as a philosophical posi-

tion, 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 phi-

losophical 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 Der-

rida (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 femi-

ninity all jostle for position within the paradigm of culture as 

imperialism (Ashcroft & Ahluwalia, 1999).

The process of othering, as a system of recognising the sub-

altern and the acknowledgement of boundaries, psychological 

or otherwise is an act of violence. It is an act of violence be-

cause it means one is actively engaged in a process of dehu-

manising, 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 

gone conclusion. It also holds that by othering, one is recog-

nising and upholding the hierarchy of hegemonic patriarchy.

As Said (1999) states, “The struggle for domination, as Fou-

cault shows, can be both systematic and hidden. There is an un-

ceasing 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 do-

minate is also the intention to exist” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tif-

fin, 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 an 

gendered female, one must marvel at how much of that domi-

nation 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 
immaculate, so unimportant that its significance is almost trans-

parent. 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 (Bhabha, 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 peripheric 

cultural margins. He states, “Terms of cultural engagement, 

whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively. 

The representation of difference must not be hasty 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 mo-

tments of historical transformation” (Williams & Chrisman, 

1994).

The representation of difference, if taken at its most literal 

and obvious semantic 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 commodo-
fied 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 Der-

rida states, difference persists (Wood, 1988) and a space for 

that persistence to exist, is on the margins, on the cultural pe-

riphery.

For those who actively buy into fashion and image, they also 
buy into the mythology of signifiers that these brands and la-

celbs profess to mean. But deep down, we all know it is a con-

struct, that it is all a lie? That we are cultural consumers con-

structed 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 cri-
tique.

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 institu-
tions” would make themselves an outcast. And as an outcast,
eexisting in exile in an extra-hegemonic performative cultural
space, one can witness the liminality of Bhabha’s minority per-
spective. If one looks like an outcast, then surely one must be so.
The psychological decoding will always be an insufficient way
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
decomstruction 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,
one 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, con-
structs us, controls us and financially governs us. The Ideolo-
gical State Apparatus (Althusser, 2008) clearly demarcates ap-
pearance based performativity with its guaranteed financial re-
turn. Accept of course, for those existing in cultural exile, expe-
riencing 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 cul-
tural practices become outwardly manifest, sometimes in pro-
test, sometimes as an act of solidarity with other subalterns and
sometimes as the reclamation of space. This refusal is the rec-
ognition that we have the power to change our appearance and
construct ourselves through it.

One does not presume to preside over all alternative life-
styles with the same rule of thumb but for some the process of
tattooing occupies an interesting body and cultural performativ-
ity.

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 bod-
ies 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, out-
moded cultural stereotypes, “while body art used to be associ-
ated 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 deep-
est 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
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 as-
sault in the British Isles. It doesn’t take a leap of faith to un-
derstand 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 cer-
tainly 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 priva-
tization. Whilst this shifting backdrop provides the economic
frame to which culture performs, the working and middle class-
es struggle to find themselves. By engaging in direct body au-
tonomy 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 wo-
men 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 par-
ticular economic and cultural stereotype. The “art” is less of a
primary signification and more of a lucky chance. What is par-
ticularly 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 this invariably evolves into is the cultural recognition that if a woman has the audacity to display to such explicit body control 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 marketplace 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 bodies 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-cultural 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-