

## Ink in the Flesh

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### Navigating Tattooing, Identity, and the Body for LGBTQ2+ BIPOC Individuals

*Western tattoo culture and its industry have been historically dominated by white heteronormative males. For individuals who are outside of this group, they may encounter difficulties and obstacles as they navigate tattoo spaces. The nature of tattoos as body art and self-expression presents itself as an opportunity for intersectional identities and bodies to resist against this Western normative culture. Through qualitative interviews and photography, I showcase lived experiences of individuals who are LGBTQ2+ BIPOC, and the process and politics of tattooing within their stories. With background research on tattoos and meaning-making, I examine how identity and intersectionality informs the meanings and motivations for LGBTQ2+ BIPOC folk with at least one tattoo. In this collective contribution of personal narratives, I highlight the relevance of the negotiation of the self and body to achieve resistance against and movement beyond the traditional tattoo spaces in Western normative culture.*

**Keywords:** tattoo, intersectionality, body, identity, LGBTQ+, BIPOC

Tattoos and its processes are tales as old as time. From Indigenous peoples, to sailors, to various subcultures, tattoos have harmonized with and resisted against dominant culture throughout different societies (DeMello 2000; Sanders & Vail 2008). Today, the contemporary Western tattoo industry remains predominantly white, heteronormative, and male-oriented (Atkinson 2003; Daily Vice 2019; Sanders & Vail 2008; Thompson 2015), despite its origins from Indigenous and tribal peoples (Sanders & Vail, 2008). As a Filipinx queer female with three tattoos, I have experienced a lot of misalignment and disconnect with my place within Western normative tattoo culture. Thus, I was driven to explore tattoo processes and experiences with other individuals who identified both as members of the LGBTQ2+ community and as Black, Indigenous, and persons of colour (BIPOC).

Gell (1993) proposes the notion that “the basic schema of tattooing is thus definable as the exteriorization of the interior which is simultaneously the interiorization of the exterior” (39). Given this framework, can we understand tattoos among LGBTQ2+ BIPOC folk as to the dominant “heterosexual, white, middle-class” position (DeMello, 2000)? How does the intersectionality of race, gender, sexuality, class, and other factors relate to the motivations and meanings of tattoos in this context?

To explore these questions, I have interviewed four participants in my social network based on their self-identification as members of the LGBTQ2+ and BIPOC communities and having at least one tattoo. I use an intersectional approach (Collins 2000) to study the tattoo process and the collective contributions of BIPOC LGBTQ2+ folk in resistance to Western normative tattoo culture.



### The Individualized Body Project and Imagining the Self

*"I got it for me and not anyone else" - Blue*

Blue, a genderqueer FTM transgender Colombian, has multiple tattoos of various subjects all over their body. Altogether, these tattoos are a "mix of things [they] like, connection to [their] identity, and hopes for [their] future".

Together, we went through five of their tattoos and recounted the narratives that they entail. The first is of a small smiley face on their foot that was self-done when Blue was in their sophomore year of high school. It served as a needed reminder that everything was going to be okay at a time when they were figuring out their identity. Their second tattoo is an outline of the country Colombia, with the colours of the flag in watercolour paint style, and a mark to represent the capital on their inner bicep. Blue moved from Colombia to Canada as a child so whenever they see this tattoo, they "feel a connection with [their] Colombian culture". The third tattoo is of a flower on their ankle. This tattoo imagery comes from a design that a supportive friend had created. Although they are no longer friends, Blue holds positive memories through this tattoo and that friendship. The fourth is of a geometric seahorse, placed on the top of their right foot. The seahorse is representative of Blue being transmasculine and hoping to have children in the future: "taking testosterone, I thought maybe I wouldn't be able to have kids later on. But I've seen people who have taken testosterone for years and they go off of it for a while and are able to have kids." Lastly, Blue's fifth tattoo is of the molecule heme, type B, on the inside of their wrist. It is a nod to the fact that they are a biochemistry student. The inclusion of a bee functions as a pun, as it is a type B heme molecule, as well as showcasing Blue's fondness for bees and the environment. In regard to its placement, Blue said, "I wanted the bee to be facing me because I got it for me and not anyone else."

With that comment, I looked at Blue's tattoos collectively and noted that most faced inwards on their body. For Blue, these positions are intentional: "for me, my tattoos are private. I only tell people about them if I'm close to them. If not, I'm just like, 'I like seahorses!' When I look at them, I know their meaning. Not everyone knows them." There is a task at work when tattoos are in the private realm. The choice of visibility controls who the audience of the tattoo is (Kosut 2000). For Blue, they would prefer if the tattoos were for themselves. Yet, the body is a social and political symbol, and

its meanings are formed by and within social forces and power relations (Pitts-Taylor 2003). By placing tattoos on the body but denying them being legible by others, tattoos become an attempt to construct self-identity without undue outside influence. Pitts-Taylor (2003) states that “body projects suggest how individuals and groups negotiate the relationships between identity, culture, and their own bodies” (35). On a surface level, we can attribute Blue’s tattoos to aspects of their identity and personality they find important. However, they are also representative of what kind of a future Blue wants to lead. Blue’s tattoos are not displays of deviance against mainstream society, as are common among people who get tattoos within the Western cultural paradigm (Sanders & Vail 2008), instead these tattoos function as representing and imagining the self.



### Reclamation of Identities and the Body

*“I just want to feel agency over my goddamn body” - Orange*

Orange is a Bengali non-binary femme. On the nape of their neck is a stamp-like tattoo of the word “WEIRDO” in all capital letters. “WEIRDO” becomes an important piece for them in negotiating “duplicitous ideas of things and [them]self”. In navigating the liminal spaces of identity, culture, and body, Orange reflects on the amount of moving around they have done (Kolkata to Dallas, back to Kolkata, then to Pittsburgh back to Kolkata, then to Waterloo, to Toronto, and, at the time of this interview, in Waterloo), and with dealing with their feelings about their body.

Growing up, Orange initially admired Western culture and worked towards accessing its ideals of power. However, upon realizing that Western normative culture “was all shit” and feeling that “white people are just ruining [their] life”, they started understanding how so much of their existence is confined within a space that is discordant with their lived reality. With this in mind, they also realized the lack of ownership that they truly have over their own body:

*I honestly feel that my body is co-opted by everything. I'm tired all the time because I'm working constantly, and I have issues with appetite when I'm stressed or overworked. I've also gotten assaulted a weird amount of times or been near*

*situations of assault. Then money goes to all these things like rent, which is important... but I feel that my time is not my own and my body is not my own and my money is not my own. I feel like nothing belongs to me. So, this is reclaiming this space [their body]. Tattoos make my body my own and brings me back to my body and it's like, yes! I just want to feel agency over my goddamn body.*

Tattoos for Orange become a form of body praxis based on their social position, and their personal narrative. DeMello (2000) speaks to how tattoos unravel personal and emotional issues in two ways: “first, through tattooing personally meaningful images onto themselves and second, through interpreting those images within a therapeutic framework” (145). Orange takes ownership of themselves and, through embracing the term “WEIRDO”, inscribes their body with the idea that “I don’t really fit in anywhere and I’m not really supposed to.” With the strategic placement of the tattoo at the back of the neck, it is a public piece, but it is not visible to Orange. It becomes therapeutic because when needed, they know it is there. Otherwise, the term retains its celebratory power because they cannot project conflicting ideas onto it. With all of the forms of invasion that Orange experiences, this tattoo remains a strong piece of reclamation of the self. The body, invaded with power relations within Western normative society, is now a vessel of agency through tattooing.



### **Ink Myths and the Tattoo Appointment Experience**

*“Are you sure that you wanna go with that shade?” - Trinity*

Trinity, a queer half-Jamaican half-Canadian female, speaks to the encounter between an individual and their tattoo artist as a meaning-making relationship. On her right wrist is an image of a diamond, coloured in with light blue ink. The tattoo acts as a form of memorialization in two ways: one, for a musician she admired who completed suicide, and two, as “a reminder of the struggles and hardships of life.” The location of the tattoo is intentional to reflect these ideas as the wrist is a known place for self-harm.

In speaking about the importance of the form of the tattoo, Trinity recounts thinking about the tattoo over the course of several months until it “felt that the timing was right”. In particular, she reflects the importance of making sure her first tattoo was meaningful and was created in a way that did justice to her values. When it came to the appointment, she was confronted with the possibility of changing its colour:

*When I went into the tattoo parlour to get it done, [the tattoo artist] wasn't like rude or anything, but he was like, “Are you sure that you wanna go with that shade of blue?” And I was like, “Yes”. Like, did he see a different colour when I showed him the design? He pushed towards a different blue at first that was darker and that kind of pissed me off. I was like, “No.”*

Many Black people and POC individuals with darker skin experience this type of tattoo gatekeeping where [read: white] tattoo artists attempt to alter the tattoo under the misconception that they are unable to meet expectations what the colour or design should be. The industry thus perpetuates ideas that coloured tattoos are only for those of lighter skin. Experiences for Black people getting tattoos range from individuals being outright rejected after the initial email inquiry, to individuals experiencing more pain as the tattoo artist treats darker skin roughly and thinks that digging deeper means that the coloured ink will stay (Daily Vice 2019). This is problematic because as it is not only creating harm, it is also removing tattooing culture from its origins among groups of Black peoples, Indigenous peoples, and other tribal peoples. Individuals with dark skin have always been able to receive tattoos. Trinity's experience exhibits the way in which Western normative culture constructs spaces that are exclusive of those who do not have lighter skin. She reflects on how she finds “that a lot of people try to have control over other people of different colours and gatekeeps on what sort of colours they can wear.” In going forward and not compromising on her tattoo, Trinity, as a mixed-race woman, took control and reclaimed her body from Western normative tattooing culture.



## Creating Intention and Supporting Spaces for Tattooing and the Self

*"Less of this skeezy, misogynist, rah-rah culture" - Girl with the Not Dragon Tattoo*

Girl with the Not Dragon Tattoo (GWTNDT), is a Vietnamese bisexual female. Adorned on her right thigh is a 4-inch scene of nature framed by a diamond in black fine-line work. It is an illustration of a Vietnamese proverb that she holds dearly: "Fathers are great like mountains, and a mother's love flows through like water." Her experience with her tattoo heavily revolves around the idea of affirming safe spaces for herself, her body, and others. When reflecting on the process of getting her tattoo, she recounts navigating obstacles in relation to her tattoo, and finding a tattoo studio that was appropriate for her:

*Traditional studios are known to be dark, male-dominated and they're usually rooted in like weird misogynistic stuff like pin-ups or cultural appropriative things like Asian dragons. That didn't vibe with me because that's not where I was coming from. The studio I went to was from Asia and so they definitely assumed this Asian heritage. The physical space was very bright, with white walls and light decorations, and they had a lot of women artists. There was an understanding that there would be less of this skeezy, misogynist, rah-rah culture.*

For GWTNDT, being an Asian female informed a lot of her tattoo process. She believed that having an Asian female artist was "very important." Female bodies are subject to the male gaze, and through getting a tattoo, this process becomes disrupted. In receiving a tattoo as a female from a male there is a worry that he will turn "her into an object of his desires" and the tattooing process becomes fetishized (Botz-Bornstein 2012: 5). Her ethnic background also exposes her to experiencing Asian fetishism, something that is rampant within Western tattoo culture. By controlling the way her tattoo is given and the tattoo process, she "exerts control" in the way her body is seen (DeMello, 2000: 173). With a sense of relief, she comments, "now you have to look at this piece of art and it's nicer for people to talk about the piece of art than like, weird 'compliments' on how nice my legs are."

GWTNDT also brings up the fact that her identity has changed from when she got this first tattoo to who she is today. Although this means more factors to navigate, she understands what this means for intentional tattoo practice for herself:

*Being vegan now, and not before, makes it different in terms of getting a tattoo because supplies aren't vegan all the time! So now I either need to find vegan tattoo artists or be like, "Can I special order ink and supplies to work this out?" In terms of coming out, it informs my view of artists and spaces a little differently. [...] I think open, LGBTQ+ spaces are important for the community and supporting them grow is way more important than giving into some standard that will continue to exist without my support.*

GWTNDT continues to emphasize the importance of supporting and creating space with intentionality within the tattoo community, even if it is difficult due to the excessive space taken up by white tattoos artists. Overall, stories of intersectionality within members of the LGBTQ+ and BIPOC are intricate and vast. From more individual and personal narratives such as ones from Blue and Orange, to the intentional practices of transforming the culture practiced by Trinity and GWTNDT, these stories weave through ink, identity, space, and body.

There is no way to reach a single conclusion about the meanings of these tattoos as these lived experiences are so complex and varied. Also, experiences may also shift over time, and so may

meanings for tattoos. Through the collection of tattoo narratives, I hope to highlight stories of negotiating the self and the body as BIPOC, LGBTQ+ peoples within and beyond Western normative tattoo space and culture. I also hope to highlight tattooing as a form of resistance against Western normative culture and the creation of opportunities to achieve actualization and the lived truths in the lives of LGBTQ2+ and BIPOC communities.

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## NOTES

All interviews were conducted in accordance with the proposal accepted by the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Waterloo in the Winter 2019 academic term, including the completion of the Tri-Council TCSP 2 Ethics course.

Images are all taken by Charmaine Pasadilla with consent of the participants that they will be included in this publication.