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Tattoos and the Longing-To-Be *Another* World Monotheistic Bans vs. Contemporary Tattoo Revival

Abstract

The theme of belonging is certainly deep-rooted in tattooing practices of the Ancient World. I would like to explore a complementary theme: tattooing as an attempt to include world features on/in the skin and body so as to attune an individual life to the cosmos. Even today, the inscription of signs on the body and the resulting transformations were and are—I think—intended as a sort of proactive means of controlling the world and its dynamics. In a sense, drawing figures on the body is very similar to drawing figures from the stars in the sky, and then using them for divination and the art of foreseeing the future. Writing the body and writing the sky, in other words, are two complementary but phenomenologically inter-related ways of exerting power over the world (or, at least, an attempt and the illusion of succeeding). So, for example, “drawing this specific figure or symbol on my body will make me invulnerable to hostile forces or safe from evil spirits or bad luck.” In this sense, the trans-epochal practice of tattooing transpires a deep and somehow karstic “longing-to-be,” a living embodiment of the world’s life and, at the same time, a symmetrical “longing for the world to be,” a spatialized reification of human mind/body projections or affordances. In short, tattooed or inked bodies are intended as pro-active cosmograms.

Such goals carry a whiff of magic and, almost inevitably, have been branded by monotheisms as forms of idolatry. Nonetheless, I think the primary concern of monotheistic theologians had less to do with the signs or images in and of themselves, and more with a rejection of people taking on the work of God through bodily inscriptions and transformations, that is, imposing their own will onto “creation.” On the contrary, the symbols, drawings and garments provided by monotheisms manifest acceptance, and thereby belonging, to an order, a specific order of things, which corresponds and ‘reifies’ God’s will. In this sense, I think, we can interpret the monotheistic legal ban of permanent inscription on the body differently from impositions of some God’s orders (for example circumcision, or invisible “tattoos” such as Christian baptism). These kinds of bodily or spiritual transformation are instead intended as doorways to God’s world order, the only true one.

Within the spectrum of the religious resilience of monotheistic faiths, the contemporary revival of tattoos can also be read as an emancipatory attempt to break pre-existing social constraints and schemes, transforming every tattooed body/person into a sort of hero, a superman—a puerile aim, to be sure, but nevertheless attractive and widespread among so-called adults. In this direction, I analyze the phenomenological synthesis of conduct which “signs of belonging” and “signs of a proactive powerful being” might generate. A “code of belonging” may very well produce a kind of control over the world, while at the same time “recipes for the proactive molding of the world” could become devices of belonging.

Keywords: Tattoos, religion, bans, proactive signs, semiosis, belonging, cosmos, embodiment, *l'évinas*; emancipation; dissent.

Prologue

The theme of belonging was vital to the tattooing practice of the Ancient World. In this essay, I would like to investigate a complementary function of tattooing, namely, the attempt to include world features on/in the skin and body so as to attune individual life to the cosmos. The inscription of signs on the body and the resulting transformation of bodily fashion was and—I think—is even today intended by people as a sort of proactive means to control the world and its dynamics. In a sense, writing and drawing figures on the body is very similar to the passion for outlining figures on the sky for the art of divination and foreseeing the future. “Writing the body” and “writing the sky,” in other words, are two complementary but phenomenologically inter-related ways to exert power (or, at least, the attempt and the illusion to obtain it) over the world. As if to say, for example, “drawing this specific figure or symbol on my body will make me invulnerable to hostile forces, or safe from evil spirits and bad occurrences.” In this sense, the trans-epochal practice of tattooing reveals a deep and somehow karstic “longing-to-be,” a living embodiment of life in the world and, at the same time, a symmetrical “longing for the world to be,” a spatialized reification of human mind/body projections or affordances. In short, tattooed or inked bodies are intended as pro-active cosmograms.

Such goals carry the scent of magic and, almost inevitably, have been branded by monotheisms as form of idolatry. Nonetheless, I think that the primary concern of monotheistic theologians was not so much the signs or images in and of themselves but rather the aspiration to act as gods by means of bodily inscriptions and transformation, that is, behaving as beings able to impose their own will onto “creation.” On the contrary, the symbols, drawings and garments provided by monotheism were meant to demonstrate acceptance, and thereby belonging, to an order, a specific order of things which corresponds to and ‘reifies’ God’s will. In this sense, I think, we can understand the monotheistic legal ban of permanent inscription on the body as different from the bodily practices imposed by God’s commands (for example, circumcision or invisible “tattoos” like Christian baptism). These kinds of bodily or spiritual transformations were intended as a doorway to God’s world order, the only true one.

In the spectrum of the religious resilience of the monotheistic faiths, we can read an emancipatory attitude in the contemporary revival of tattoos. They appear oriented to achieve a breaking of pre-existing social constraints and schemes, turning each tattooed body/person into a sort of hero, a superman—a very puerile aim among the majority of the so-called adults, but not any less attractive or widespread for being so. The interesting aspect of this is the phenomenological synthesis of conduct that “signs of belonging” and “signs of a proactive powerful being” can create. This is because a “code of belonging” also produces a practice of control over the world, while the “recipes for the proactive molding of the world” turn into devices and brands of belonging.

1. Contemporary Celestial Tattoos and Ancient Religious Bans: a Journey to the Sources and Grammatology of Tattooing

To introduce the analysis of the tattooing experience I will focus on celestial tattoos. These kinds of figurations lie at the core of a very recent trend that gives access, nonetheless, to the most ancestral and seminal meaning of tattooing. A celestial tattoo, like other kinds of tattoos, is simply a sign on

the skin, nothing out of the ordinary. Typically, however, it is designed to look like a breach of the dermis, a blue hole which gives the illusion of giving a glimpse of an inner depth beyond the skin's surface.¹ This view of the innermost being of the tattooed individual bounces the mind's eye of the observer to outer space—something beyond the Earth and the topical scene—which, in turn, encompasses and overcodes both the actors. When a celestial tattoo is observed, it opens a visual door between the inner subjective depth and the sidereal abysses. This journey is, actually, a representative one. Nevertheless, it conjures up a hidden reality that supersedes the evidence of usual experience and reveals a kind of silent attunement, a secret harmonization between the individual existence of the tattooed person and the overall cosmic order. The inside mirrors the outside, and vice versa. Such concomitance is not only a representative description but also, in sequence: a proactive device, a periphrastic cipher of the events, an expression, somehow, of magic power, a processive and carnal spell, a pragmatic divination, and finally a prophecy which, at the same time, depicts and shapes the future by virtue of its immanent cosmic significance.



Fig. 1

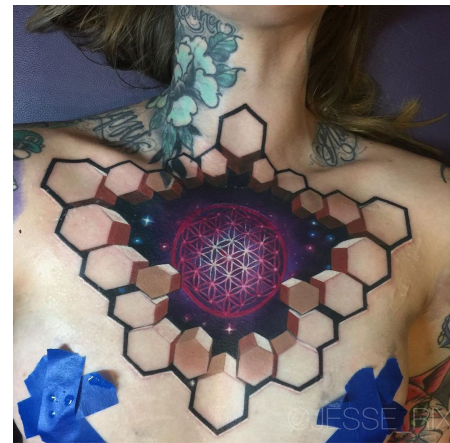


Fig. 2

Knowledge and control, divination and power over events comprise the main traits that define the antagonistic dialectics between tattooing and monotheistic religions.² Though tattoos can function as proactive devices only if they embody a code of the cosmos and its phenomenological unfolding, nevertheless, they come from an ancestral ambition to superimpose human will onto the world. Knowing in order to control the world, rather than understanding so as to respect the divine cosmic order: this is the sacrilegious and idolatrous essence of tattooing according to monotheistic theological judgment. In some sense, thus, tattoos are icons of the human defiance against God's

¹ An interesting if brief reading of celestial tattoos and their recent diffusion can be found at the following link (Italian): <https://tattoomuse.it/incredibili-tatuaggi-intergalattici-luniverso-sulla-pelle/>

² See Scheinfeld (2007). An interesting comparative analysis between Christian and Confucian positions regarding tattoos can be found in Barkman (2012). An intriguing view of the relationship between Buddhism and tattooing is proffered by Lynch (2012). For interesting anthropological insight on the meaning of tattooing in Buddhism, see Cook (2007).

project; tattooing is a writing act equaling rebellion against God's will and, as such, stands in opposition to the dutiful acceptance which all faithful owe to their Creator. In all likelihood, this is the main source of the monotheistic bans against tattoos, especially permanent ones, because of their ontological constitutive power over the individual's nature and destiny. A sort of counterfactual evidence of the moral theological roots of the monotheistic interdiction against tattooing can be found in the protean history of such bans in Hebrew sacred texts.

Tradition tells us that Judaism condemns tattoos absolutely. Jewish authorities identify the origin of such opposition in a passage from Leviticus 19:28:³

Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you: I am the Lord.

If taken in isolation, this statement does not seem to allow any exception. Indeed, it sounds like a radical ban. Nonetheless, other biblical passages appear more inclined to soften or at least relativize the absoluteness of that prohibition. For example, consider Genesis 4:15:

And the Lord said unto him, Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him.

or even Isaiah 44:5:

One shall say, I am the Lord's; and another shall call himself by the name of Jacob; and another shall subscribe with his hand unto the Lord, and surname himself by the name of Israel.

Isaiah 49: 14-16:

But Zion said, The Lord hath forsaken me, and my Lord hath forgotten me.
Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee.
Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands; thy walls are continually before me.

and, finally, Ezekiel 9:4:

And the Lord said unto him, Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark [likely a Tau, namely an X] upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof.

³ But see also, by analogy both *Deuteronomy*, 14:1-2: "You are children of the Lord your God. You must not lacerate yourselves or shave your forelocks for the dead. For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; it is you the Lord has chosen out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession;" and *1 Kings*, 18:25-29: "Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many, and call upon the name of your god, but put no fire to it." And they took the bull that was given them, and they prepared it and called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, "O Baal, answer us!" But there was no voice, and no one answered. And they limped around the altar that they had made. And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, "Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened." And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them. And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention."

How could such inconsistency be explained? Could there have been underlying historical and/or anthropological causes? Some answers might emerge from an analysis of the relationship between cuneiform writing and divination in Ancient Mesopotamian civilizations. In ancient Mesopotamia there was a widespread belief that spoken words and written cuneiform symbols were ontologically linked to the natural world. In the same vein, written symbols were deemed to embody an implicit correspondence to objects, events, and terrestrial as well as celestial and divine entities. Cuneiform symbols held meaning in both their semantic contents and their graphemic substance. All symbols and their combinations possessed an inner significance in their graphic shapes that corresponded to the elements of a cosmic grammatology.⁴ In this sense, all the cosmos could be considered a text, punctuated and embroidered with signs. The ability to recognize and read such signs in the empirical world gave the possibility to understand the omens inscribed both inside things and in their morphological appearances. This hermeneutic method was applied in various areas of knowledge and experience: for example, health care, physiognomy, astronomy, and the interpretation of exta.⁵

With particular regard to physiognomy, it is notable that the natural signs on bodily skin were considered to be connotative traits of the individual as well as iconic prophecies about her/his future destiny. Among these signs, particular significance was given to expressive wrinkles or frown lines on the forehead.⁶ Insofar as these facial marks were reminiscent of cuneiform symbols they were deemed to be scriptural omens, means by which the individual's destiny was already written in a kind of bodily prophecy.

The Genesis passage above describing the mark God put on Cain's forehead could be considered to be an instance of Mesopotamian cultural influence on Jewish religious literary tradition.⁷ Although I shall return to Cain's mark below, what matters for now is that this Biblical reference to tattoos could be interpreted and justified by the coincidence between nature and God's will in each human being's destiny. Facial marks were natural features, God's mark on Cain's forehead was the effect of a divine molding. But nature and God coincide, at least in the ancient world imageries. Therefore, both expressive wrinkles and Cain's mark are inscribed in a natural/divine order. What lay within those dermal signs was the pragmatic epitome of the individual's life, which is nothing but the periphrastic conjunction of the human complexion and the cosmic order in which each human being was enfolded.

Cain's mark is to be taken, therefore, not so much as an idolatrous or magic device as rather a natural/divine tattoo that decrees God's generative power and thereby his cosmic order. From this perspective, any inconsistency between the Genesis passage and the Leviticus ban on tattoos would seem to dissolve. Leviticus marks the act of institutionalization and societal reification of God's mastery over the Jewish people. The cosmic order is immediately immanent in the rules of Leviticus. Consequentially, from the moment of its creation/emanation, the Jewish people will no longer have any need to look for the signs of God's will outside the Law, for example in natural phenomenon or in bodily features. On the other hand, Cain's mark is itself God's imperative, an implicit rule

⁴ See Frahm (2010: 95 ff.)

⁵ See Frahm (2010)

⁶ See Frahm (2010: 114 ff.)

⁷ See Frahm (2010: 131-132)

endowed with the pro-active power common to both divine will and legislative statements. Both grasp the future using words, and precisely for this reason speak in a special kind of eternal present—at least in ancient world imaginaries, even if modern and contemporary laws worldwide are also almost always written in the present tense.

In any case, the coincidence between dermic marks or tattoos and the cosmic divine order functions as a device cutting-off the Leviticus' ban and this is proved precisely by the Isaiah and Ezekiel passages mentioned above. The crucial point of this conclusion relies on the historical and social contextualization of Isaiah's and Ezekiel's words. Their prophetic activity was carried out during the Babylonian exile of Israel. Tattoos and dermal marks served, therefore, as both counterfactual evidence of God's will and protection for the Jewish people. Through those signs, the true divine order was already achieved by means of the act of writing the skin. The mark of God's hand upon Jewish foreheads constituted a seal of belonging and simultaneously the inclusion of Israel salvific destiny within a cosmic order of justice. In other words, by means of their tattoos, Jews demonstrated their conformity to the Divine project of history and the injustice of their enslavement. In differentiating themselves from Babylonians, Jews proactively put their lives on the path of God's will and within the real cosmic/historical order.

The apparently protean succession of Biblical provisions about tattoos shows that the Leviticus ban was not so much about the act of tattooing in and of itself but rather against the idolatrous and somehow wizardly use of tattooed figurations. On the other hand, it is not a coincidence that after Israel wriggled free from Babylonian enslavement, the Leviticus ban recovered its strictly literal meaning and rigid application.

In so far as signs on the skin, either natural or artificial, corresponded to a cosmic/divine order, they were not considered idolatrous. On the contrary, they constituted a veritable channel of attunement between the inside and the outside, the soul and the world. Of course, when this order was deemed immanent to public life because of the divine legitimation of social and political institutions, the meaning of tattoos would have inevitably been considered seditious, as it simultaneously challenged both the political-immanent order and the cosmic/divine one. Conversely, tattoos were considered legitimate, if not even sacred, when their exposition was designed to contest institutions and expressions of political power (considered by Jewish authorities to be) devoid of divine legitimation.

The connection between inner human nature and the cosmic order in the Mesopotamian as well as the Jewish understanding of dermic signs and tattoos is also proven by the significance that both attributed to them regarding individual health. From this perspective, the inner body and its order were assumed to be isomorphic to the worldly one, and the dermic signs functioned as interfaces between these two domains. The grammatology of the signical cuneiform collection, precisely because of its evidence on the skin, constituted the semiotic code of the events, including personal destinies and the overall cosmic path they were to share.

Babylonians interpreted astronomical figurations in the same vein.⁸ The recognition of constellations is actually the outcome of a creative action; seeing them requires drawing them in the

⁸ On astronomy, astrology and divination among Babylonians, see from an historical and cross-cultural point of view, Campion (2000); more generally, on the ancient astronomical and astrological traditions see Krupp (1994, 2000: spec. 17 ff.)

mind. It is a form of writing. It comes as no surprise that the ancient Mesopotamians saw cuneiform combinations in the spatial relations among stars in the night sky. Their astronomical divination included, and in some sense equaled, their understanding of cosmic order. As already noted, cuneiform symbols and their morphological features were considered to be semantic codes immanent in the inner complexion of the universe. Therefore, writing and understanding cuneiform symbols were creative and (re-)cognitive activities. Writing in the sky, or better '*writing the sky*' and interpreting it to foresee future events were expressions of a pro-active knowledge.⁹ Making and seeing, recognizing and divining were two sides of only one action: astronomical observation. In turn, the shape of each constellation was related to gods and goddesses, so that the dermic signs corresponding to the cuneiform equivalences of constellations' shapes could be assumed as phenomenal prophecies foretelling the entrustment/belonging of individuals to specific deities.

The triadic relationship 'dermic sign/constellation/divine dimension' shows that the power of tattoos is not necessarily to be associated with sorcery. The very function of tattoos seems to be rather that of accomplishing an attunement between the individual and the world order.¹⁰ This function coincides with the use of tattoos as marks of belonging to both divinities and slave-masters. In fact, historical sources show that the practice of tattooing concerned mainly believers and people dedicated to divinities or slaves. The order of belonging, be it divine or social, proactively molded the destiny of individuals. This was also the reason that runaway slaves were considered outlaws but were nonetheless inclined to interpret their tattoos as a scriptural code that could divine their future.¹¹

The transformation in the self-perception of slavery brands during an individual's life would seem to imply that the dermic signs of the time had inherent significance, and that it was independent from the circumstances of their original application. These signs were endowed with a generative power that was directly rooted in their partaking in the cosmic grammatology. In this sense, each figuration had ulterior significance and produced a phenomenological coordination between the individuals' interior and the exterior world. Tattoos did not merely represent something but rather were proactive icons engendering implicit consequences, or better, their meaningful horizon.

This semantic and pragmatic function is reminiscent of the inner transformative power that religions ascribe to symbols of conversion. Historically, the inventory of these symbols among world religions includes body modifications (as, for example, circumcision, scarification, tonsure, etc.) or specific garments taken as idiomatic signs of the identification/belonging of the believers.¹² Insofar as garments assume such a signification, they almost transmute into a second skin which, as with dermic signs and tattoos, works as an interface between the soul and the world, the inner dimension of believers and the cosmos. Despite the well-known saying "the clothes do not make the man," religious garments and tattoos give a renewed sense to individual's life and gestures; or, if nothing else, they are crucial to its accomplishment. Actually, the wearing of a garment has often been used as a sign of

⁹ Something similar can be experienced even today by using an astronomy laser pointer. The act of pointing to the stars with a laser pointer and tracing their connecting lines to form recognizable shapes is perceived as a creative action that gives shape to the night sky.

¹⁰ Champion (2000: 534)

¹¹ Frahm (2010: 131)

¹² See Levinson (2016: especially 127-128)

conversion, whether in ancient or in modern times, so much so that such a belief can wind up having real effects: the change of garment alters the relationship between the converted and her/his social context. Seeing a veil, a cassock, or a frock worn by an individual who had never previously worn such garments could be a shocking experience for those who have known her/him for a long time. The new clothes can suddenly change the reaction one encounters in one's own social context, thereby determining a real alteration of her/his life, conduct, experiences and opportunities.¹³ Religion applies a sort of phenomenological power to garments that is dense with cosmological significance, exactly how culture impacts tattoos.

Garments and tattoos function, ultimately, as prophetic maps. They engender meanings and events that reify those meanings. Dressing and writing, in this sense, evoke the myth of Gaia. The archetypal myth of the sacred wedding between Zeus and Ctónia tells us that the Father of the Gods gave his wife a mantle. On this mantle there were inscribed all the lands, their contours and the greenery on them. After having put on this mantle, Ctónia became Gaia, as if the mantle had become a second skin, covering the deep, hidden, infernal dimensions of the Earth.

Sometimes, geographers see in this dialectical transformation the mark of a latent dualism.¹⁴ Accordingly, Gaia would represent order, the visible world, whereas Ctónia would embody the idea of chaos, inscrutable depth, the unknowable. I think, however, that this divide is somewhat overdramatized. The mantle of Gaia is intimately related to the inner substance of Ctónia. What is visible on that mantle is an epitome of the relationship between the surface and the depth. In a sense, the mantle/map veils and re-veils the inner potentialities and significance of Ctónia just as in the coupling with Zeus. The mantle Zeus gives to Ctónia is a dowry, something that enriches and completes the bride rather than fighting against or disintegrating her nature. The mantle parallels and attunes, from this perspective, with the canopy of the night sky, and both define and show the implicit code of the cosmic order and harmony. Just like signs extant or drawn on the skin, the metaphor of Gaia's mantle does not rely on a radical opposition between the kingdom of Hades and the world of living creatures. Zeus and Pluto are instead two sides of the same coin. The future of the surface is rooted in, and gushes up from, the hidden depth. This interplay is the deep source and the drive behind all the future-seeking descents into Hades carried out by the great heroes of Greek mythology and literature. The Earth's surface is brimming with significance, and meaning is not exclusively coextensive with morphological appearances or visible shapes: it is rooted in, and intertwined with, the invisible eternal forms or essences. It is anchored to the generative depths of Being, whether this is assumed as static substance (Parmenides) or assumed to coincide with an endless dialectical stream (Heraclitus). All geographical superficial forms, in parallel, are woven into a semiotic web distributed in both time and space. Everything else is only a partial, incomplete, and shallow semblance, therefore at least potentially deceptive. Symmetrically, the signification of tattoos is multilayered, multi-dimensional and dynamic. Their meaning is a synthesis of the modes (taken in a Spinozian sense) that the tattoos' proactivity produces through experience, and thereby across time and space as these are lived, represented, remembered and acted by the mind/body units to engender their worlds of experience. In short, ancient tattoos could be defined as "proactive cosmograms."

¹³ See Ricca (2016)

¹⁴ See Della Dora (2016: 226), Farinelli (2007: 8)

As cosmograms, ancient tattoos constitutively and nomotethically map the world and its phenomenological unfolding. The inherent correspondence between them and the cosmic order (according to the different cultural cosmovisions) provides them with a kind of jural function. Tattoos give simultaneous order to the triad comprising the body, the soul (or inner dimension of individuals) and the world. By means of their grammatology, tattoos make visible and understandable what is hidden and implicit in both the Self and the cosmos. They are, therefore, carnal cosmograms and dermic cosmographies, which have representational value and, at the same time, take part in the cosmic order. Through them people grasp and remold both themselves and the world. Inking tattoos is similar to the divine function of weaving the mantle of the Earth. It is a generative and legislative action. This *topos* also corresponds to Christian imagery. As Veronica della Dora points out, Eusebius of Caesarea describes God's creative work as clothing "the previously shapeless eternity with beautiful colors and fresh flowers."¹⁵ Moreover, from this perspective, he relates the Emperor Costantine's figure to God insofar as, like the Creator, he gives legislative order to the world.

Writing on the skin or on the mantle of the Earth are, therefore, aesthetic, cosmopoietic and anthropo-poietic actions. In the monotheistic visions, including Judaism, Christianity and Islam, this constitutive/ordering writing/drawing is legitimate only if the signs, symbols and figures it traces align with the divine order of the cosmos. Conversely, they are qualified as idolatry, as expressions of the human conceit and the diabolic greed for dominance over nature and events. See, for example, the Muslim *hadit* included in *Sahih al-Bukhari*:

"It was narrated that Abu Juhayfah (may Allah be pleased with him) said: 'The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) cursed the one who does tattoos and the one who has a tattoo done.'"

It is also for this reason that both Christianity and Islam, according to their traditions, allow their believers to make use of only non-permanent figurations on the body.¹⁶ Writing symbols or figures on the skin may not go beyond decorative activity and cannot attempt to modify the body and the 'soul/world relationship' because both are God's creations and constituent of the divine plan. As noted above with regard to Judaism, in Christianity and Islam the use of tattoos or writing/drawing on the skin also changes its religious/legal signification according to social and political contingencies. When Christians or Muslims have lived in a social context as minorities, the ban on tattoos has faded: this is the case, for example, of Christian Copts, traditionally constrained to geo-cultural contexts where they are treated as a marginalized minority. On the other hand, Islam allows the converted to maintain their tattoos if they acquired them before their conversion or when they remained unaware of the Islamic ban to change one's own body with potentially permanent signs. Of course, also from an historical perspective, such a provision makes sense primarily in the social and geographical contexts in which Islam was (and nowadays is) not yet widespread.

¹⁵ See Della Dora (2016: 227).

¹⁶ Even if Islam considers henna decorations on the skin suitable only for women because if placed on a man's skin such decorations would make him look effeminate. (Abu Dawood, 4928).

2. Psychosocial Reaction to the Tacit Resilience of Religious Bans on Tattoos: Tattooed Skin and its Proactive Function in Contemporary Experience

Looking from historical to contemporary times¹⁷ we can observe that today, tattoos have risen anew to the forefront. Their use is a pervasive worldwide fashion, almost a collective obsession. The gaze of scholars committed to the study of the renaissance of this reviving social practice seems to be entangled, however, in an exotic prejudice. Tattoos are silently treated as something alien to Western culture, as if they were still signs of primitive and remote cultures, somehow distant from the most advanced contemporary civilizations.¹⁸

I think that this view is unwittingly driven by two different factors. On one hand, among Western scholars (or those trained in a Western context) I see the sneaking resilience of religious censure against the use of tattoos. This resilience induces the consideration of tattooing as a practice of Others, more precisely of people that are Other than Self, and thereby in some sense not “normal.” Doubtless, the renewed academic interest in tattoos has to do with their renewed diffusion among people, and so it stems from the observation of an objective empirical phenomenon. But, if we consider all this from a distanced meta-cultural point of view, we see an underlying contradiction, which is, however, the real source of the mentioned scholarly commitment and its peculiar connotation. For many analysts the contemporary spread of tattoos seems to be an odd conundrum. Such a perception is rooted—I suspect, despite the process of secularization—in Western cultural tradition and the influence that Christian moral theology exerted on it for so many centuries.¹⁹ Tattoos are out of “normality” but, in actual fact, unbelievably widespread: this is, in my view, the silent inconsistency within Western scholarly minds. Against this, I contend that tattooing is neither out of the ordinary nor exotic. Conversely, its significance is much like all the other typical gestures we make to live, to control our environment, to plan our activities and to ensure (or to strive toward) their efficaciousness. Tattooing is one of the many ways humans try to build their existential world and provide it with significance. Basically, this was the connotation underlying the Mesopotamian cosmic grammatology of cuneiform tattoos. Making people ‘consonant’ with the cosmic harmony assured the coincidence between their longing to control the environment and the alignment of it with the divine, or veritably *normal*, order of things.

On the other hand, and setting aside any possible flaws in the presumptive scholarly cultural neutrality, the cultural resilience of the religious tattoo ban, at least in social contexts with a monotheistic tradition, confers to the gesture of tattooing and its results an idiomatic dissident and emancipatory meaning. It is a sign of refusal, a visual challenge to the established order of things: in some sense, a rebellion against the still psycho-normative influence of the culturally resilient religion and its haunting pressure on social conduct. The theatre of such an emancipatory play is the skin, the dermic surface. The overall scene is carried on and experienced as the re-definition of a frontier line.

¹⁷ For a general introduction to the world of contemporary tattooing, see DeMello (2000). But see also Arp (2012).

¹⁸ As for the exoticizing primitivism nestled in recent tattoo fashion, see Klesse (2000), Pitts (2003: 119 ff.), Lingis (1994: 22; 215 ff.)

¹⁹ Of course, the same cannot be said for Islamic cultural contexts, where the ban against permanent tattoos is still in force.

By means of tattoos, individuals cross and simultaneously re-draw the profile of their skin/boundary, that is, the inside/outside the interface of their experiential world.

To understand this emancipatory process and the way contemporary people live it, the dermic surface is to be taken as an interface of communication and translation which conveys information from inside the body. The skin is to be understood, in other words, as an activity rather than as a thing, a static surface. Although people develop this idea and the related self-perception mainly unawares, their skin transmutes from a “visible thing” to a “contingent synthesis,” albeit apparently materialized, of a continually evolving activity. As the celestial tattoos paradigmatically show, when people tattoo themselves the dermic surface is treated as an osmotic and thereby mobile frontier.

I understand that could be difficult to resist reading tattoos as fixed representations and thus relativizing the materiality of the dermic frontier. Nonetheless, tattooing does no more than emphasize the biological functions inherent in that frontier. The skin shelters the body because it is an active border, an interface. Its activity, however, relies upon all the functions the body carries out in its interiority. Its reactions to the stimuli coming from the outside are not merely defensive but also proactive. In fact, not everything is intercepted at the border. Some things get across that frontier, some do not. Some things must pass for the body to live so that the same skin/boundary can endure. In order for the skin to perform its function, it makes a re-cognitive selection of stimuli and external agents that also involves the incessant activity of the whole body and its constitutive and proactive components. To follow the “frontier” metaphor, it should be observed that customs officers must also follow prior instruction, although those instructions might change. The important thing to underscore is that the biological-adaptive instructions the skin must follow are very different from those followed by someone who performs a function that is completely alien from the activities of those who are meant to be protected by that function—as in the case of customs officers. The “agents” living on the internal side of the skin work first hand to direct how the skin responds to the external world and, in close connection with this activity, to control what the skin permits inside the body. The customs officers do nothing but execute instructions. On the contrary, the skin proactively cooperates with the body and the world. It conveys information that gauges and molds the borders of the body and their disposition towards the external environment. In other words, the skin supports the whole organism in its continuous effort to generate operational synthesis with the world, as well as in the transformation of the world and its components in pragmatic prosthesis of the body. At least in part, the action plans developed by the mind/body unit result—as it were—*dermified* because they draw, also by virtue of the information previously conveyed by the skin, new behavioral paths.

Against the foil of the above biological/metaphorical frame, it could become more evident why tattoos, insofar as they conflate with the dermic surface and its pro-active functions, cannot be conceptualized as mere representations ‘on the body.’ Renewing the skin and its aspect by means of tattoos, people aim to give unprecedented rhythm to the relationship between their body and the world. And—I think—it is in this pro-active and strongly dynamic sense that the function of ‘recognition’ performed by tattoos should be understood. In other words, they are not only a graphic representation made by others (the tattooists) and designed only to increase the subject’s visibility, but also a co-constructive semiotic device oriented to the achievement of new relationships with the external world, at a social as well as cosmic level.

Many scholars argue, with specific reference to tattoos, that the skin is a symbolic frontier between the inside and the outside, the inner body and the external world.²⁰ I think, however, that if the role of pro-activity is properly acknowledged, then it would be more accurate to give to the skin the meaning of a 'signical frontier,' or better a membrane or a film designed to support a process of translation between interplaying universes of signs. Anthropological research typically focuses on the representational function of tattoos and analyzes it by looking for underlying structures, as if the practice of tattooing necessarily had to abide by a codified syntax previously or even aprioristically forged and culturally established.²¹ As noted above, this approach can be effective when considering historical tattoos and their semantic correspondence to the cosmic order; something similar may be said for the many native populations. Nonetheless, the structural understanding of the use and figuration of tattoos does not seem to reach the anthropological sources triggering their origination. In attempting to grasp the meaning of the contemporary tattoo-renaissance the structuralist and/or formalist views end up missing the mark. As mentioned above, I think that in contemporary secularized and democratic societies tattoos have an emancipatory or dissident signification.²² From a cultural point of view, therefore, a structuralist reading of them cannot rely upon any *Greimasienne* 'contrat de véridition' precisely because the use of tattoos aims to subvert its semantic clauses; they are not coextensive with any previously established order. On the other hand, any attempt to identify the direction of this subverting according to an oppositional dialectical logic would be merely naïve or aprioristically presumptive, and as such equivalent to the groundless superimposition of a conceptual caging of real experience.

On a more general level, an ethnographic-representational analysis interprets tattooing as a social game. Representation, recognition and identity seem to be tightly and reciprocally tied within the spectrum of the communication play, as if tattooing were an act of psycho-social acculturation.²³ However, even in traditional and historical communities, the act of tattooing or inscribing signs on the body accomplishes both an articulation of codes and a related ontological transformation of the individual/world relationship. If it is true that in those cultures the interfacing role played by the tattooed skin attuned the internal universe with the external one according to their signical codes, this activity had however to do with individual experience and its continuous renewing. From this

²⁰ See, for example, Le Breton (2017).

²¹ For an overview on tattooing and the conceptualizations/analysis of this practice from both a historical and comparative perspective see Thomas, Cole (2005), Caplan (2000). Conversely, for a socio-semiotic interactionist approach to the study of the body/embodiment processes and the related criticism to structuralist-semiotic approach see Vannini (2004), Waskul, Vannini (2006: especially 10-12; 2006a: especially 188-192; 194-195). In (2006a) Waskul and Vannini propose the interesting formula 'Body Ektasis' to synthesize the dynamic, enactive and pro-active relationships between the body and the world, meaning and action, representation and experience, mind and bodily interaction with the environment, conceptualization and transactional experiential adjustments. I think it could be very useful to complement the original relational coincidence of signifier and signified in interactionist and enactivist views with Carlo Sini's philosophy of semiosis. With regard to Sini's philosophy of Sym-bolon (etymologically intended as the original 'putting together' of the signical relation, in turn, productive of the Being) see the very clear and insightful analysis carried out by Carrera (1998).

²² In a huge literature, see the survey proffered by Pitts (2003).

²³ This reading can be found also in historical studies such as Tassie's (2003: spec. 85): especially its reconstruction of tattoo practice and its social meaning in ancient societies. But contemporary contexts are to be assessed differently by also taking in account their (at least, allegedly) secularized cultural background.

point of view, tattoos were not only fixed and somehow prepackaged figurative formulas but were endowed with a cosmo- and anthropo-poietic power as experienced by each body/person unit. It may be that in the modern minds' eye, tattoos can only produce a social effect. Nonetheless, the ancient communities that commenced the multilateral use of tattoos did not give only this meaning to their bodily figurations. Compelled by mobility and the protean enfolding of experience, the codes of attunement between the inside and the outside were to be transformed. Consequentially, tattooing not only reproduced the social and cosmic order but wrote, chiseled and molded them both. This creative and world-renewing action predominantly connotes—in my view—the renaissance of tattoo fashion in contemporary secularized societies. From this perspective, tattoos nowadays have a psychopolitical proactive function, or at least are practiced and lived relying on a confidence in their inner (and almost magical) ontological power. However much such a belief may appear irrational and non-scientific, more and more people seem silently—and perhaps unknowingly—anchored by it. The desire to control and change the course of events constitutes the pro-active and anti-systemic (at one time: profane and idolatrous) meaning of tattoos.

According to the pragmatically challenging purposes inherent in tattooing today, I think that scholars should also include the so-called biographical tattoos, those which tell the personal fortunes as well as the daily goings-on in the life of individuals, their deeds, misadventures, etc., namely their identities. These figurations and their related biographical clues should be interpreted not so much as narrations but rather as habits-and-prophecies. They signify that what someone was able to do or navigate in the past s/he will be able to do also in the future, so that this possibility and the related personal power can maintain its grip on the both the present and the future by controlling the relationships as much with other human beings as with the rest of the natural world.

In sum, tattoos prove to be a means rather than a mere representation; or, to put it differently, they could be considered as representations only provided that representations, in turn, are taken and conceptualized as means to be used when human beings have to set and manage their relationships with the cosmos. Of course, tattoos can play in the minds of people 'acting' through them as a visual trace of what an individual is, her/his history, the very fact of existing and having existed. The tattoo is, in this sense, the evidence of something sacred by virtue of its having gushed out from the nebulous streaming of cosmic events. Therefore, erasing or ignoring a tattoo would equal the annihilation of that 'emergence' from chaos: that is, the person and her/his figure. In any case, what an individual is does not refer to something that is simply in her/his innermost recesses, a metaphysical dimension sharply detached from experience and unrelated to it. Conversely—at least in my view—the tattoo performs as an icon that epitomizes experiences and/or experiential schemas and, by jiggling back and forth through time, projects into the future new possible or simply hoped for activities, even contrasting (albeit not necessarily oppositional) to those previously carried out. Tattoos aim at the reiteration or the remolding of already-lived experiential scripts. For this very reason, they maintain their pro-active function even when they seem to be designed for almost exclusively identitarian purposes. As a sign-trace, all tattoos intrinsically fluctuate through space and time.

3. Tattooing: Its Ubiquitous Spatialities and Temporalities

All tattoos are *also* somewhere other than the bodily space where they are displayed and its (physically) surrounding context. The reason for this 'spatial Otherness' of tattoos is their potentially continuous re-interpretation and re-contextualization. Any tattoo follows the individual body through its existential displacements. Such movement makes it work as a means. Therefore, tattoos do not change their signification merely because of the ineludible morphing of events, situations and identities. Rather, the original tattooing is being endlessly prolonged in a continuous *re-tattooing*: as if doing it once means ever-tattooing. However, this circuitous transformation stems from the fact that the significance of the tattoo also lies elsewhere, not only on the body's material surface. The final meaning of tattoos summarizes and synthetizes the psycho-bodily experiences that the individual has woven throughout her/his life and somehow conveyed in the visual-semantic spectrum of her/his body figurations. Moreover, as with all images, tattooed images communicate with the universe of signs by means of a web of time and space cross-references involving: *a*) the connotations of the individual's decision to tattoo her/himself; and *b*) the semantic unfolding that the tattoo will yield through time. In other words, the entire universe of signs and conceivable networks will concur and converge, at least potentially, to determine the meaning that the body figuration will assume. Precisely in this sense, the body image and the same phenomenological body is always elsewhere and somehow hetero- as well as holistically determined. They are inter-signical and thereby also inter-spatial bridges; or better, transducers of signs.

The mobile and variable signification of tattoos over time further substantiates its relational attitude. Since the skin is not merely a surface but rather an osmotic membrane exchanging information with the environment, its visibility also serves as a communicative medium. Therefore, when environmental contexts change, even the sense of what is seen alters in parallel. But such relational simultaneity does not mean that the result of the ensuing semantic transformation will coincide with the features of interiority and the purposes that her/his mind hoped to display/achieve by virtue of the tattooed image. Actually, the unpredictability of the semantic transformations stemming from the involvement of tattoos in the stream of experience shows, once again, the inter-relatedness of bodily figurations. They work as a mobile front within the environment and, at the same time, as semiotic and pragmatic interfaces between the inside and the outside of the body.

As observed so far, tattoos are not static iconic symbols, nor merely material borders. Nonetheless, their symbolic function is somehow coextensive with the apparent materiality of images. Almost inevitably, traditions passed along through them produce the transformation of figurations in people's imageries into thing-symbols capable of encoding actions and events that have already occurred, somewhat reminiscent of cosmic recipes, ontologically taken for granted in their replication. This interpretation of tattoos makes them resemble categorical frontiers, that is to say furrows and fences drawn by the mind and culture on the ongoing unfolding of experience. In this regard, a paradigmatic argument made by Jane Caplan is of interest:

The tattoo occupies a kind of boundary status on the skin, and this is paralleled by its cultural use as a maker of differences, an index of inclusion and exclusion [...] The tattoo has been taken to mark off entire 'civilizations' from their 'barbarian' or 'savage' neighbors; to declare a convict's criminality, whether by branding him as a punishment or because he has inverted this penal practice by acquiring voluntary tattoos (thereby, ironically, marking himself); and more generally to inscribe various kinds of group membership,

often in opposition to a dominant culture.²⁴

For Caplan, tattoos are categorical in-group/out-group frontiers. The above passage synthesizes very well a point of view that is quite opposite to mine. If one reads tattooed figurations as socialized conceptualizations, one runs the risk of missing that they are *signs*, as such able to support endless semiosis and thereby the transformation of their own meaning. The signality of tattoos, namely their ability to maintain their nature as signs rather than calcify into exhausted and fixed concepts, is proved by their dexterity in fluctuating and transmuting their signification across experience. In this sense, punitive and stigmatizing tattoos are idiomatic cases. Despite their original meanings and aims, their significance is open to re-negotiation through both self-reflexive activities and communicative transactions. Such a process of semantic transmutation has taken place many times, precisely in the case of prisoners and the stigmatizing tattoos with which their bodies have been branded. Almost unbelievably, something similar has occurred to the victims of Nazi concentration camps with regard to the numbers each was ‘awarded with’ at the inception of their captivity. Over time, those marginalizing and discriminating marks transmuted into signs of self-marginalization and inter-group identification. This new signification turned into an active factor, a kind of avatar-actant of the transfigured subject. Consequentially, the semantically renewed actant-mark repositioned the ‘tattooed body/person’ unit in the society so as to proactively subvert the stigmatizing sign that was originally marked on the dermic surface of the individual, treated during its application as a passive recipient.

On the other hand, in many societies, guilds of bandits, pirates, despised and oppressed people— often tattooed because they were scorned, and held as subaltern because they were tattooed— had the strength to become models of autonomy and courage to stand up against oppressive power, becoming icons of intriguing and bewitching exoticism. This trend took hold to such an extent that in many countries the most intellectually advanced, wealthy and progressive fringes of society, following their longing to differentiate themselves, appropriated the practice of tattooing. Japanese history (precisely, the seventeenth century C.E.) proffers a very paradigmatic example of such a process of interclass tattoo transmigration.²⁵ But interclass transmigration also involves a trans-categorical migration. For this reason, tattoos undergo categorical fluctuations and shift from both the cognitive and social point of view, despite the material fixity of their figurations.

Actually, people use tattoos to alter their social categorization and classification, or those that they feel put in by others. After getting a tattoo, many individuals avow that they would not feel dressed without it. Taking such assertions seriously would prove tattoos to be a habit in the same sense Carlyle described.²⁶ Just like *Sartor Resartus* habits, tattoos shift and refocus the categorical core everyone uses to self-represent. What changes, in other words, are the connotative coordinates inherent in the model on which the individual gauges their identity. In this regard, however, it is crucial to observe that people’s social identity—beyond the culturalist rhetoric—is not always appreciated by those who ‘wear’ it. Conversely, many would like to wriggle free from their identity, or at least the caging identity wrought by their social life context. Analyzing tattooing is conducive in this

²⁴ Caplan (2000: XIV)

²⁵ See Kitamura (2003), Taliaferro, Odden (2012: 763-780 kindle ed.).

²⁶ Carlyle (2008, or. 1833)

direction, as well. It shows us that people also get tattoos in an attempt to re-write their social character and re-invent the model with which they identify or yearn to identify. Within this framework, the tattooed image works as a supplementary qualification, adding to both the absolute metaphor of the 'I' and its endless connotative list, and predominantly remolding it. This is because the image not only impacts the outside of the 'I' and its connotative system, but little by little comes closer to its center through gradual alliterations and metaphorical or analogical conjunctions/overlapping.²⁷ Actually, when individuals choose to get a tattoo, they tend to put the psychologically pivotal connotation of the tattooed image at the center of both their inner and social 'I'. For this purpose, people position it precisely where they believe the motor of their behavioral and environmental action to be. To put it roughly, the psycho-behavioral attitude goes something like this: *'Since I have tattooed a snake on my body, then I have become (like) a snake and will interpret in my own way the nature of a snake in all of my actions. I will embody its features, or at least the ones which I find desirable. People will go on thinking they see me but instead they will see a snake-man. They will not be able to deny this reality with their eyes or their mind because the tattoo is written on my body, and by being written on/in my flesh and blood it has re-made my Self.'*²⁸

When analyzing the contemporary diffusion of tattoos, one wonders if their proactive remaking of people's identity can have actual consequences on the social environment and order. In traditional communities such remaking often accompanied the so-called rites of passages. The connotative re-focusing aimed to place the subject within a somehow preexisting and divinely granted social frame or script. As noted above, today tattoos have an emancipatory and proactive signification, which could pave the way to some sort of latent and pervasive dissent or skepticism about the socially dominant

²⁷ Even if only analogically, Quine's (1951: 41-42) concept of the field of knowledge and its transformations is germane: "The totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs, from the most casual matters of geography and history to the profoundest laws of atomic physics or even of pure mathematics and logic, is a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edges. Or, to change the figure, total science is like a field of force whose boundary conditions are experience. A conflict with experience at the periphery occasions readjustments in the interior of the field. Truth values have to be redistributed over some of our statements. Re-evaluation of some statements entails re-evaluation of others, because of their logical interconnections; the logical laws being in turn simply certain further statements of the system, certain further elements of the field. Having re-evaluated one statement we must re-evaluate some others, whether they be statements logically connected with the first or whether they be the statements of logical connections themselves. But the total field is so undetermined by its boundary conditions, experience, that there is much latitude of choice as to what statements to re-evaluate in the light of any single contrary experience. No particular experiences are linked with any particular statements in the interior of the field, except indirectly through considerations of equilibrium affecting the field as a whole.

If this view is right, it is misleading to speak of the empirical content of an individual statement, especially if it be a statement at all remote from the experiential periphery of the field. Furthermore it becomes folly to seek a boundary between synthetic statements, which hold contingently on experience, and analytic statements which hold come what may. Any statement can be held true come what may, if we make drastic enough adjustments elsewhere in the system. Even a statement very close to the periphery can be held true in the face of recalcitrant experience by pleading hallucination or by amending certain statements of the kind called logical laws. Conversely, by the same token, no statement is immune to revision. Revision even of the logical law of the excluded middle has been proposed as a means of simplifying quantum mechanics; and what difference is there in principle between such a shift and the shift whereby Kepler superseded Ptolemy, or Einstein Newton, or Darwin Aristotle?"

²⁸ For very similar claims see, for example, Klesse (2000: 20).

values.²⁹ Since tattooing embodies a pro-active schema or pattern (as people seem to believe), it might produce, as its epiphenomenon, a disembodiment of the social habits that tattooed people had previously learned from their groups of belonging. Such a phenomenon might also trigger bottom-up political effects. Moreover, it cannot even be ruled out that the tattoo trend gradually goes so far as to impinge on the efficaciousness of law.

I am cognizant that this assertion could sound like an overstatement. Nonetheless, it should be considered that most legal rules rely on an implicit introjection in individual behavioral patterns for their efficacy. The imperative component of the rules transforms, in this way, into patterns of knowing-to-do acted as cognitive habits that connect individuals with their social (and natural) environment. Therefore, insofar as tattoos pro-actively re-write the pre-existing connotative lexicon of the body and the related patterns of relationship with the world, their emancipatory and dissenting signification could divest law provisions of the people's tendency to spontaneously and somehow unwittingly obey them. In the same vein, the schemas of coexistence provided by legal rules could undergo a process of disembodiment, so that people would wind up realizing all the hetero-determined connotation of law's provisions to be obeyed in everyday life.

Moreover, as concerns tattoo practice, the idiomatic convergence of 'longing to be' and 'ought,' 'self-fulfillment' and 'juridification of the body' should be attentively examined. As already shown, getting a tattoo comprises a 'longing-to-be' in another world or an active partaking in it. Once the figurations have been completed, and by virtue of the performative/proactive capacity that people see in their being written *in the skin*, they also imply something as an 'ought to be.' Regardless of the ontological generative power of tattoos, they urge the tattooed individual to follow specific codes of conduct. The subject should be loyal and committed to her/his tattoo. This duty of consistency is a form of 'ought,' more precisely the 'ought to be' respectful of the choice to become a specific being, connoted by certain features. The tattooed individual cannot betray his/her tattoos. In this sense, I would suggest that tattooing gives course to a creative transit from 'is' to 'ought', and vice versa: whereas the 'is' comprises, in turn, the proactive actualization of the 'longing to be' constitutively inherent in the tattoo's basic signification. This alleged performative and simultaneously creative force likely constitutes another source of contention between the practice of tattooing and the monotheistic religions. The 'legislating' coterminous with all tattoos is nothing but the individual embodiment of a creational will, an ability to innovatively mold what exists: the same 'Will' and 'Power' that the monotheistic religions integrally, all-comprehensively and exclusively reserve to God. Tattooing, it would seem, oscillates between magic and the sacred, a cosmo-poietic attitude and a sorcerous power, so as to engender—as noted above—a juridification of the body. This is an existential juridification, which is as powerful as the divine will and can be more efficacious for communitarian or institutional imperatives; these, however, have no capacity to change the essence of the individual other than through acts imbued with sacred and (supposedly) performative flavor, like baptism, sacred and civil oaths, rites celebrating the ethno-political belonging, and so on.

Now, I can imagine the reader provocatively considering how many silly young and old people s/he knows with their bodies 'punctuated or infested' by tattoos and, at the same time, the complete unawareness they have of the above jural significance and effects of their bodily figurations. I have

²⁹ Pitts (2003)

nothing much to say against such a remark except that human action and the meaning it produces are not always led by awareness. Perception of the compelling force of tattoos is not at all alien to 'common people.' Otherwise it would be truly inexplicable why tattooed individuals make so many efforts, facing conspicuous expenditure and painful practices, to erase/unwrite or somehow change the bodily figurations that they previously wanted inscribed on/in their body.

Juridification and de-categorization/re-categorization are, on the other hand, two complementary sides of tattoos. Even Cain's mark suggests their ancestral categorizing function. The power of tattoos to de- or re-categorize urges the observer to make an effort to understand who and what the tattooed person is. The tattooed person is no longer only one of many. She/he is someone/something else, even if not completely other. Such ambiguity has a crippling effect on the competitive impulse. In a sense, the tattooed individual is a hybrid, a sort of *monstrum*, precisely because s/he has migrated into another specific category. Cain belongs, by virtue of his mark, to a different category from the original humankind, one nevertheless forged directly by God. That is why he cannot be considered an equal, nor can he be considered entirely different. Cain has been marked for a special mission. It is impossible to compete against him for space relying on one's own identity. His special mission is anchored to something endowed with the unfathomable source of his cathartic differentiation.

In an interesting essay, Juniper Ellis addresses the differentiating psycho-existential function of tattoos.³⁰ She refers back to a thesis by Lacan,³¹ who argued that by means of tattooing, the subject 'takes the floor,' talks about and defines her/himself, but in so doing, s/he also simultaneously differentiates her/himself from the tattoo s/he is getting. Subjectivity would lie, therefore, outside the tattoo. I think, however, that this dialectic representation is somehow a descendent of Cartesian dualism as well as the psychoanalytical divide between the conscious and the unconscious. Conversely, I hold that tattoos, especially if biographical, relate to the advent of subjectivity, namely the 'I', in the past, and thereby are about a plan of action that has already been accomplished. These kinds of tattoos evidence how that plan, namely the subject, has become 'world.' Precisely this 'becoming world' transpires something magical and coincides with the substitution (or the supervenient coincidence) of symbolic figuration with the represented reality: almost as if the signifier were already the final meaning and the effectuality of the signified subjectivity were immanent in the symbolic representation.³² To put it diversely, tattoos no longer include the subject-world divide; at least in the aspirations of tattooed individuals, this divide vanishes. In any case, the tragic split between the hope for transformation (by virtue of tattooing) and the transformation itself no longer pertains to the subjectivity epitomized and simultaneously prophesied in and through the tattoo. The tattooed image, precisely because it is inscribed in the skin, is already 'world,' that is to say, a synthesis

³⁰ Ellis (2012: 935-944 Kindle Edition).

³¹ Lacan (1998: 141-142).

³² See Ellis (2012: 1126 Kindle Edition), where, regarding the nineteenth century tattoo struggles between missionaries and Pacific natives, she concludes that Westerners failed to understand the basic Tongan indigenous axiom according to which "I tattoo, therefore I am," or more simply, "Tattoo I am." If this experience tells us something that can be universalized, then there is only a part of tattoos' significance in the following assertion by Fruh and Thomas (2012: 2335-2336 Kindle Edition): "*People regularly use tattoos to externalize some aspect of their inner lives, or as a way of marking or remembering significant events in their life histories.*" Fruh and Thomas's entire essay is truly a worthwhile read, for it is brimming with insightful arguments about the life and phenomenology of tattoos.

of individual plans and reality, the tattoo-signifier and the 'signified-future-subject.' If such an ontological and pragmatic coincidence does *not* take place, this has to do with the subsequent transformations of subjectivity from which no tattoo can shield a person or even itself. Tattoos cannot avoid transmuting their significance because they always maintain their nature as signs. Almost paradoxically, any tattoo transforms by remaining itself, and can remain what it is and signifies precisely through its transformations.

4. Conclusion: Pain, the Caress and the Price of Negotiating with the Cosmos

I would like to conclude this essay with an examination of an ineludible processive byproduct of tattooing: pain. Getting a tattoo is a painful affair. I refer, of course, to permanent tattoos, since henna or stencil tattoos are neither invasive nor painful. Permanent tattoo figurations, on the other hand, depending on the technique employed, can require several sessions precisely because of the sharp pain that the individual to be tattooed must endure. Why do people put themselves through this physical suffering? And is it only a secondary byproduct of tattooing or does it play a meaningful role in the overall process of writing/renewing one's own skin?

As previously observed, tattooing and tattoo figurations hold an inner normativity that somehow overdetermines both the individual will and the unfolding of individual life in the world. It may be possible to sketch out an answer to the above questions by focusing on the inside/outside connection that makes the tattoo a device of attunement between the individual dimension and the cosmic or natural order.

I think that the pain is perceived by tattooed people as a sort of counter-value, a price to be paid for the possibility to attune one's own existence with the cosmic order and, in this way, influence the unfolding of her/his individual life. However superstitious such a view may seem, it is very close to a sort of cognitive/transactional act. In order to support this assertion, I would like to propose an inferential argument. For this purpose, consider that the choice of specific tattooed figurations depends on the (alleged) proactive significance they enshrine, that is, their inner capacity to forge the course of events. Consequentially, knowing this power and embodying it through the etching of one's own derma equals a sort of skillful play with the cosmic codes and the implicit language in which their order is written. The pain suffered in getting a tattoo is thus assumed as a cognitive effort by means of which the individual gets the chance to control her/his own future existence. Bearing the present pain of getting the tattoo is considered a means to avert the undesirable or feared events that the present or future could have in store for each individual. Pain is the currency in which the vulnerable subject gains her/his aimed, hoped for and appropriate position in the cosmic order.

Even the Christian tradition includes something similar to this kind of existential transaction. Consider the following passage from St. Paul's Letter to Galatians:

Galatians, 6:17:

"From henceforth let no man trouble me: for I bear the marks of Jesus on my body."

The marks Saint Paul refers to are *stigmata*, that is, the sign of Christ's suffering on the holy cross. In the Christian tradition, *stigmata* have a physical correspondence with specific wounds on the

believer's hands and feet mirroring those inflicted on Jesus when he was crucified. However, *stigmata* also have a more general significance related to a condition of disgrace or social shame typical of marginalized, persecuted or oppressed people. Bearing *stigmata* is a cognitive device that transforms the current sources of pain into what believers know will become blessing and grace in Heaven. But since for the Christian the 'other life' is the true life, what is perceived as present suffering is already ontologically a condition of grace lived in Jesus Christ—as Saint Paul explains in his Second Letter to Corinthians:

(II Corinthians 12, 7-10):

“And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. [8] For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. [9] And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. [10] Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.”

Although Christianity considered the tattoo art practiced by peoples of other faiths to be idolatrous and superstitious, it is possible to find in St. Paul's interpretation of *stigmata* something resembling the meaning that pain holds in the permanent tattooing experience. Obviously, the magic connotation underlying the desire to control the world through tattoos is exactly what Christianity condemns as an offense to God's omnipotence. Nonetheless, the cognitive side of the inevitable pain caused by tattooing demonstrate that the power over the world obtained by tattoos must respect a cosmic and somehow heteronomous order. Bearing the pain is, therefore, an act of knowledge and recognition of this order. In many cases, I think, it was the inability or even the silent refusal of Christians to understand the Others' cultures that led them to see in tattoos something utterly incommensurable to their *stigmata*.

Bearing the pain of the tattoo's creation is an approximating of the cosmos' inner codes that transmutes the skin and the whole body into a kind of cosmic key. Through her/his pain, the subject being tattooed does not completely achieve her/his control, her/his grip on the world. Rather, s/he takes on the necessary burden of understanding and harmonizing her/himself, her/his inside, with the invisible cosmic order. This approach is both pro-active and circumlocutory: it cannot avoid the transformativity inherent in the production of experience and meaning, namely semiosis. It is precisely for this reason that all tattoos maintain their nature as signs and project themselves across time according to the rhythm of an open process of signification. The self-understanding and pain they involve is not a kind of knowledge that captures reality once and for all. Because the skin works as a signical interface between the inside and the outside, tattoos co-produce the world and the relationships among its components, both spiritual and material. Tattoos do not embody or represent fixed categorizations or results, but rather tirelessly substantiate the reproduction and the renewing of the previous steps in an endless process of existence and knowledge.

All this being said, I think that it is not entirely inappropriate to liken tattooing and its dermic pain to the caress, and its idiomatic rhythmic stimulation of the skin. Just like tattoos, the caress gives

rise to an inherently incomplete act of knowledge and open categorization.³³ The particular pleasure of caresses comes from their being always on the edge of a definitive and recognizable touch without ever reaching it. Caressing stimulates a never definitive categorization about the nature and significance of touching and, at the same time, its continued stimulation. It dwells at the creative interface of a structurally unfinished relationship of knowledge.

Lévinas has proffered evocative and insightful remarks about the cognitive properties of caresses. Icastically, he argued that:

“The caress, like contact, is sensibility. But the caress transcends the sensible. [...] The caress consists in seizing upon nothing, in soliciting what caresslessly [sic] escapes its form toward a future never future enough, in soliciting what slips away as though it *were not yet*. It searches, it forages. It is not an intentionality of disclosure but of search: a movement unto the invisible.”³⁴

The pain involved in tattooing includes the same kind of cognitive pleasure. It is a way to know and achieve something that is not yet reached and remains hovering in the horizon. The road to grasp that knowledge and its pragmatic implementation coincides with, and is to be reserved to, the future life path. The *uncertain certainty* of the immanent reality of the tattooed figuration and its significance is the secret, deep source of the tattoos’ fascination. But it is nothing but the magical mystique of the writing itself, and the promise of material effectiveness that analogically emanates from the very fact that it unfolds *by hand*, an ongoing modification of matter. This sort of inherent prophetic aura inhabits the materiality of written signs and has haunted the human imaginary from the invention of pictorial representation in prehistoric caves to writing. Perhaps it is only a superstition, like drawing

³³ Contemporary neurological research seems to corroborate the hypothesis that caressing triggers cognitive activity. Experiments indicate that the interpretation of a caress enacts a semantic process that modulates proprioception according to the categorical schemes that subjects hold based on their experiences. The experiments consist in preventing an individual from seeing who is caressing her or his leg by introducing a visual barrier between them. Then, the person being caressed is informed of the gender of the person doing the caressing. The experiments measure in real time the cerebral responses to the tactile perceptions triggered in the passive subject by the knowledge of the gender of the caresser. What is interesting is the crucial role played by the information given to the person being caressed. The materiality of the touch proves to be completely overshadowed by the information given to the passive subject of caressing in advance. More explicitly, the reactions of the passive subject were mainly determined by what this subject believed about the gender of the caresser regardless of her/his actual gender. The passive subjects who participated in the experiments were eighteen heterosexual male volunteers. Their reactions varied radically according to their beliefs—not always corresponding to reality and indeed expressly misled by the researchers—about the gender of the active caressing subjects. This experiment seems to prove that proprioception and physical reaction to touch are not immune to individuals’ semantic assumptions. The skin works as a semantic interface that immediately forges the unfolding of the relationships between the self-perceived body and the external world. The experience of touch is not merely interpreted by the brain after the inception of physical stimuli. Interpretation and experience are instead simultaneous, and share the construction of experience, either consciously or unconsciously. In short, the experience of touch, of receiving a caress, does not *happen* to the body/mind unit but rather *is produced* by the interaction of its components and stimuli coming from the external world. Analogically, a specific tattoo and its significance *make sense* of the body and its life in the world. Therefore, it is not without reason that native people and contemporary Western tattooed individuals alike assert, “Tattoo I am.” As for the experiments on the cerebral elaboration of caresses, see Gazzola, Spezio, Etsel, Castelli, Adolphs, and Keysers (2012). For a general analysis of touch and its properties, see Gallace, Spence (2008, 2014: especially, chapter 7); McGlone, Wessberg, Olausson (2014).

³⁴ Lévinas (1979: 257-258, and ff.); but see also Id. (1991: 89-90) and Bonicalzi (2014).

constellations and believing that human inner worlds and individual terrestrial destinies are, at least, tunable with the luminous geometries of sidereal spaces. The mysterious perception that the grammatology of both the universe and our insides are encoded in chains of signs isomorphic to those used in human writing and symbolic representation is deeply rooted in our (perhaps) still too naïve minds. However immature and nonsensical this faith in the cognitive and pro-active power of writing may appear, I would like to end this essay by recalling two texts. The first, Peirce's classic essay titled 'Man's Glassy Essence,' offers a visionary and pioneering view of the cosmic and chorological (in a Platonic sense)³⁵ correspondence between mind and matter, categories and spaces, because of their partaking in an inclusive universe of signs. The second is a short piece by the Italian writer Dino Buzzati, titled 'The Salvation'. It reads as follows:

Write, I beg you. Only two lines, at least, even when your soul is upset and your nerves out of control. But do it every day. Through gritted teeth, even nonsensical sentences, but write. Writing is one of the most ridiculous and pathetic of our illusions. We imagine we do something important by drawing some twisted black lines on white paper. Nonetheless, this is your calling, which you have not chosen but was chosen for you, your fate. This is, however, the only door through which, if through anything, you can find a way out. Write, write. At the end, among the hulking mass of paper to be thrown away, one line can be saved. (Maybe).³⁶

Writing as well as tattooing enfold and produce meaning in and through a continuous present, the same which hosts their presumptive grip on the future world of events. What is written and tattooed somehow already is, has been, and will be. The question remains: do people understand what they are doing when writing their skin, getting a tattoo? My half sincerely dispirited, half irrefutably skeptical answer is: only a few. However, I also believe that most likely this is because our human brains are far smarter than us. Our brains know many things we ignore. But knowing what we know is abysmally arduous. Most likely, this is also the underlying reason why in contemporary tattoos emancipatory dissent and psycho-social alienation run together.

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³⁵ See Sallis (1997).

³⁶ (My translation). Buzzati (2017: 136). The original text is as follows: “La salvezza. Scrivi, ti prego. Due righe sole, almeno, anche se l'animo è sconvolto e i nervi non tengono più. Ma ogni giorno. A denti stretti, magari delle cretinate senza senso, ma scrivi. Lo scrivere è una delle più ridicole e patetiche nostre illusioni. Crediamo di fare cosa importante tracciando delle contorte linee nere sopra la carta bianca. Comunque, questo è il tuo mestiere, che non ti sei scelto tu ma ti è venuto dalla sorte, solo questa è la porta da cui, se mai, potrai trovare scampo. Scrivi, scrivi. Alla fine, fra tonnellate di carta da buttare via, una riga si potrà salvare. (Forse.)”

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