

The Depth Inscribed on Surfaces

Beth Seaton

If the law of thought is that it should seek out profundity, whether it extends upwards or downwards, then it seems excessively illogical to me that men should not discover depths of a kind on the "surface," that vital borderline that endorses our separateness and our form, dividing our exterior from our interior. Why should they not be attracted to the profundity of the surface itself?¹

— Yukio Mishima

There was a time when tattoos were read as marks of distinction, as inauspicious emblems of cultural entitlement. Like the skin upon which they were inscribed, the function of these epidermal designs was understood to separate and to protect. Seen as an expressive means of articulating difference, tattooing's privileged ties to resistance, marginality and refusal were viewed to be highly dependent upon the social position of just who it was that bore its burden. Its representational value was perceived to both discriminate and to incriminate: to demarcate a coherent and stigmatic identity for the body, while damning this body to precisely those limits.

Nowadays, as ever, things have changed. We may all now play at being bad girls or black-leathered bullies reeking of sour-mash sweat. Tattoos have become trendy; the designer labels of wannabe risk-takers and faux rebels. What was once a brand of banishment to the margins is now a means of elevating cultural status. Hollywood celebrities have tattoos, rock stars have tattoos, and former Secretary of State George Schultz proudly brags of the Princeton tiger on his butt. Tattoos now just seem another form of corporeal style, another fashionable fascination and fear of the dangerous and the taboo. (What else is the current fashion of collagen-injected lips, but this desire and fear, literally blown-up on the mouths of models?) In this light, tattoos may now strike one as simply a radicalism

of pose rather than of purpose: a stylish means of showing off a risky encounter with difference, without entailing the risks that difference once made.

Such disparagements about the purification of a once “impure” practice tend to rest upon a nostalgic lament for the “authentic” or “genuine.” Within North American society, breaking skin has long been associated with a rebellious breaking of the rules. Yet, there exists a sense that this cultural logic of transgression no longer genuinely applies when the law is broken by those not already socially marked as rebels and reprobates. The hard virility of tattooing thus turns to enervated soft-tissue. Interestingly, this requiem of despair over the domestication and demise of a once “impure” practice, must also lean upon a notion of a “pure” or natural body outside of culture for its very conditions of lament. It calls upon and reinforces a set of conventional oppositions in which the differences between the marked and the unmarked also slide onto binarisms of the cultural and the natural, the public and the private, the outside and the inside.

In one, perhaps obvious sense, the crisis of confidence voiced here is concerned with the increasing malleability of corporeal boundaries. After all, in this age of the cyborgian body – where bodies are made-over by hair and lens implants, gene therapy, or the sucking and tucking of flesh – it has become hard to say what is exactly inside or out. But it also relates to a disturbance in propriety, an anxiety that certain people are appropriating the tattoo for insincere or ungentle ends. And this disdain also sets its judgments along binaristic lines, for the tattoo is thought to be foremost a cultural mark. Its strength or potency as surface inscription is closely connected with its ability to ascend to a public realm of the semiotic, to separate itself from and thus take control of the body. What happens then to the tattoo when it is worn by those who are not properly enculturated, whose possibilities for dis-embodiment are socially limited? As women are condemned to the body, to physicality, their tattooing may be felt always to fail – to be a scandalous derivation of the authentic, a bad copy of the genuine.

I want to explore these presumptions of meaning and belonging and proper practices which have historically drawn the tattoo upon a figure of gender. And yet, in so doing, my intention is not necessarily to rectify or to locate a suitable place for or meaning of the practice of tattooing for women. I wish to discern the ways in which the tattoo has been mobilized and limited for particular knowledges and understandings, and how those “authenticities” and permanences which bind the tattoo to particular communities, genders and powers are themselves constructed. And yet, while locating the tattoo within historical structures of signification and representation, I also want ultimately to move away from this interpretive model. My intent is rather to emphasize the spaces and sensibilities

where the tattoo no longer becomes a matter of a mark whose role is to signify, where it ceases to tend toward or to refer to anything outside of its own corporeal affectivity. Thus, my interest is directed toward the ways in which the tattoo extends the space of expression – the ways in which it goes too far.

In response, then, to those who would bemoan the elevation of indecency into style, I would answer that the tattoo has never needed to refer to an unshakable certitude, a proper place, in order to be believed. In fact, the presence of the tattoo, its believability or affectivity, is achieved in part through a repudiation of the perceived. Like the infamous prison inscriptions of Love and Hate worn on either hand, the truth and the lie are made to fold back upon one another, each term at once asserting significance on the skin if only to deny it. In this respect, it becomes difficult to determine strictly the “relevance” of the tattoo in terms of a prescribed place of gendered identities, to resolutely elect tattoos on women as either the stamps of masculine possession or signs of feminine self-possession. For the meaning of a tattoo may never be guaranteed in advance – even if it is permanently inscribed and held in place. It cannot be offered as a positive presence, as if the outward appearance of a tattoo reflects a hidden existence dwelling in the interiority of the body. Nor does it solely exist as the damning marks of a disciplinary society which have worked their way into the skins of offending subjects. At end, the designs which are mapped on skin offer numerous exits and numerous entries. The tattoo does not just lead, or come back to, any pre-established point on a map.

While tattoos do entail points of attachment to specific social identities, ideologies or institutional practices, they also exceed such social systems of identity and difference. And while tattoos certainly may represent or speak for identifiable meanings, images and memories, they also cannot be held within the structuring terms of signification and representation. In effect, the tattoo cannot be reduced to communication or mediation, for its designs never quite correspond to just images, subjectivities or ideological depths. The tattoo never promises the reward of rest, for it moves along a mobius strip in which all depths are brought to the surface and all surfaces fall to depths.

The tattoo's restlessness necessitates that one move across and through the space of the body – not only to note the places where the permanences of the tattoo take hold of meaning, but also to trace the ways in which the tattoo distends itself across surfaces, and thus exceeds that representational frame which announces the separateness of an image from the world at large. The skin of the body moves, swells, shrinks and quivers, destabilizing any sense of frame or boundary and curtailing the visual distance usually demanded by a normal perspective. The membrane of the living body fuses the subject with the

object, grounding the image with the spatial and temporal moment of its sight and site. To look at a tattoo you need to get up close, to be in the presence of flesh.

TEETH MARKS

In New Guinea the Roro people, who tattoo themselves extensively, describe the un-tattooed person as "raw," comparing him to uncooked meat . . . The Roro see the tattooed man as "cooked meat," transformed by a human process and thus given a social identity. Therein lies the distinction between a social being and a biological entity.²

— Victoria Ebin

The tattoo of course has always been commonly discerned as making meaning. Those who have studied the body marks of so-called "primitive" peoples tell us that the primary purpose of these inscriptions is one of differentiation. These marks assert the difference between what the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss (like the Roro) also names "the raw and the cooked": the difference between nature and culture, between animal life and human life. They also act to discriminate and characterize the uniqueness of one culture from another, and within each culture, one individual from another. These marks are individualist expressions – of community, of age, of sex, of status – but they are also the differential marks of society's law set upon the body. The societal order, its meanings and its structure, is inscribed upon the epidermis, linking it permanently, physically and visibly to that which must be felt and obeyed. In this way, the body politic is made both internal to the individual and co-extensive to the social group. It is a collective medium of human thought and human flesh.

In constructing its identity in opposition to the "primitive," "modern" society is thought to mediate its symbolic order in a space external to the individual and to codify this order anonymously. The law of "civilized" society ceases to be publicly and crudely figured upon individual bodies; instead, it is transcribed upon the sophisticated parchments of video tape, radio waves and newsprint, and their codification and creation calls upon the subjects of consciousness. These then are the incognito inscriptions of ideology; the benevolent means by which normative values, behaviors and reasons subtly take hold within the psychic life of the individual. The living body is thought to remain untouched, to stay safely within the sanctuary of the pre-social.

Franz Kafka's story *In the Penal Colony*, however, is an expressive portrait of the brutality with which a "civilized" codification of the law is written upon the body. The device

which the officer of the penal colony proudly shows the traveller is a particularly horrific “drawing machine,” within whose mouth full of shiny needles a convict is laid. The purpose of this machine is to inscribe into the convict’s body the law which he has broken, driving it deeper and deeper into the skin for a tortuous six hours. The convict knows not what is being written; he knows not what his sentence is. The needles strike into his body in such a complicated way that they are impossible to decipher. “‘Read it’, said the officer. ‘I can’t’, said the traveller.” Only at the last moment of life, at the last minute of the sixth hour when the pain has left his body, can the convict read the law in his own dying flesh.

Nothing else happens; the man is simply beginning to decipher the text, pursing his lips as though listening, it’s not easy, as you saw, to decipher the text when looking at it; our man, remember, is doing it with his wounds.³

Like Kafka’s drawing machine, the mechanisms of society work with an illegible grace, its needles extending and permeating invisibly across the social body. Michel Foucault has observed that “the law averts its face and returns to the shadows the instant one looks at it; when one tries to hear its words, what one catches is a song that is no more than the fatal promise of a future song.”⁴ The law is felt and obeyed: with the economy of power it works its way invisibly into the skins of its subjects. Yet it is never seen, until it is felt, fatally, (to be) too late. It is only at this point that the graceful synchronicity of society’s disciplinary mechanisms make themselves and the offending bodies visible: marking them with batons, cattle prods and fire hoses; marking them into police blotters, data banks and video clips.

Since Foucault, we have been led to think of the modern body as that which is indelibly marked and re-marked upon by culture. Described as “the inscribed surface of events,”⁵ the body may be read as a corporeal archive of sorts, upon which the histories of powers, identities and discourses are imprinted. It has been spoken of as “the word made flesh”; a *corpus delicti* upon which the evidences of gender, class or criminality are lived and recreated and thus can be tangibly found.

There arises a point, however, when it becomes less useful, distracting even, to describe the body in terms of a surface which is “marked” or “written upon” by culture. The notion of a body deeply and hostilely impressed upon by culture may slide too easily toward the presumption that something of this body “naturally” exists prior to or below the surface of inscription. Moreover, and in line with such dualistic distinctions, it may also presume power to necessarily exist “outside” of bodies, as that which – being written upon bodies – is written by a hand from above.

Most importantly, such metaphors of inscription may tend too readily toward a notion of the sexed body as the anatomical or factual ground upon which gender, as ideological

or cultural value, is then inscribed. In sum, such notions of bodily surface – which act to reduce powers and bodies to opposite sides of a culture/nature divide – miss seeing the body as cultural embodiment itself, whose very materiality is invested and embedded within social systems of power and discourse. Insofar as bodies are sexually differentiated at all, insofar as they are granted a history as male or female and endowed with the particular capacities and activities deemed proper to these histories, then they are constituted and constructed by power: produced, as Foucault has stated, by “the modern technologies of power which take life as their objective.”⁶

MARKED MEN IN AMERICA

Did you know that the word “stigma” specifically applies to breaking the skin – the word generally applies to anyone strange or unusual. It’s from the Greek; the term referred to bodily designs designed to expose something unusual, or the moral status of the signifier. The signs were cut or burned into the body and advertised that that wearer was a slave, a criminal, or a traitor; a blemished person, ritually polluted, to be avoided especially in public places.⁷

— *Captain Don Leslie: Sword swallower, fire-eater, and heavily tattooed man.*

Why then, when bodies are always already invisibly marked – “already,” as Michel Thevoz has put it, “vampirized by their normative image”⁸ – would one further mortify the body through the visible marks of the tattoo? Why especially, when the practice of tattooing is formally undertaken by those who have already been written off by society, by those who inhabit its margins (bikers, convicts, criminals) or leave its civilized shores (sailors and soldiers)? Do these scripto-visual forms on flesh only act to make visible the social powers within which the body is held? Or do they not also use the body as palimpsest: a counter-writing to that which has already been inscribed?

Again, such questions (and their possible answers) tend to be premised upon the social position of just *who* it is that wears the tattoo. It is difficult to lose sight of tattooing as a gender, class, and race-specific use of the body. Taken to be a partisan badge worn by cultures of the white, working-class male, the tattoo has a deeply entrenched association with bikers, prisoners, soldiers, sailors, and more recently, skinheads. These are highly masculine cultures which are known for their institutionalized spaces (the “clubhouse,” the prison, the ship), hierarchized order (the “inmate code,” “honour”), and ritualized performances. They are fraternities which for the most part are extremely rigid in their composition. They are conservative cultures whose socially and self-imposed boundaries

serve both to isolate them and to make them highly visible. The interpretation of the value and significance of the tattoo thus tends to be sought within the confines of identifiable places and identifiable social groups, those places where culture and its signifying systems most visibly and intensively writes itself upon bodies as both its employers and its effects.

My own investigations into tattooing among male prisoners were similarly situated within an enclosed locale whose operations of segregation, classification and surveillance are closely targeted upon the body.⁹ Placed within a whole series of graduate arrangements (ranging from minimum security work camps to the Special Handling Units inside a “Super Max”), prisoners are also, within each of these locations, individually emplaced: hierarchically described, judged, measured and compared with others. Made visible, they are thus made subject to the disciplinary powers of classificatory knowledges. And yet, prisoners, or more specifically, prisoners’ bodies, are also made absent – positioned as a lacunae – within the language and discourses of the carceral system. This is in fact part of society’s general strategy to colonize the non-instrumental, to remove disturbances from view, and is part of a more particular carceral strategy which attempts to downplay the punitive powers of the prison by directing attention away from the body. It was against these disciplinary practices that I found tattoos to enact a corporeal conduct which renders the prisoner both absolutely identifiable and yet imperceptible. The singularity and uniformity of the prisoner as deviant – as an image of deviancy – is both contested and confirmed by the tattoo, a deviant image which at once identifies and conceals. Most importantly, tattoos entail a recursive use of the body, allowing the body to recoil upon itself, to make itself its own object by making manifest those processes under which its social identity has been produced.

There are tattoos which are highly specific not only to the carceral site of the prison, but to certain corporeal sites of the body. Such tattoos heighten the tensions and complex relations between body form and surface inscription. The tattoo of Love and Hate worn on either hand – worn by old-timers, worn by Robert Mitchum in *The Night of the Hunter* – accentuates the ambiguity of language. In drawing the spectator into an Epimenides circle, it draws out the caprice with which culture distinguishes the truth from the lie, the right hand from the left. And there are prison tattoos which make use of the body by making it more blatantly into something else. The man with the garden inscribed on his face horrifies in his refusal of the body as a stable ground for identity. The hearts engraved on his cheek, the tendrils of roses which descend from his crown, shielding his eyes, his mouth – the readable features by which one could normally judge expression – act to heighten and emphasize the signifiers within which he is ensnared. By allowing these

inscribed images to completely overwhelm his face, he makes it clear that his stigmatic image precedes him.

Taken for a “true likeness,” the face is believed to be a physiognomic portrait: a facade upon which clues of character, capability and intention may be publicly traced. To transfigure this expressive lineament with the linework of roses is to extend expression too far. It’s an extreme act which condemns the body in perpetuity to the social extremities of prison, freak show or unemployment line. Many states in fact outlaw the practice, and even where it is legal, many tattooists simply refuse to bring their needles to touch the face. The finality and weight of such an event, upon such a place, is just too great to bear.

Walk into any street shop however, and there is a plethora of standardized images available for inscription. Everywhere on the walls (even the ceiling), there are countless biker types: Harley logos, skulls, “born to die,” death rides a bike, and doberman pinchers with drooling fangs. There are va-va-va-voom chicks, dark-eyed ladies, and viking women in bondage, à la the sinewy Red Sonja. There are even a few available for those pimply neo-fascists occupying the store-front across the street: swastikas, civil war flags (somehow both fitting and incongruous in the northern nation of Quebec), and tiny Doc Marten boots which look more cutely benign than threatening. Such tattoos are more properly restricted to those parts of the body befitting the male form: the hard places of forearm, bicep, or back. And then there are the “property of . . .” tattoos – stamps of possession to be strategically applied near the genitals or buttocks of girlfriends.

Whenever non-tattooed people discuss the tattoo of another, they ask about the pain with which it was acquired. These marks must really count for something, they seem to feel, because they hurt. Even after the moment of inscription itself, these marks still harken back to the discomfort with which their designs were amassed. The judging eye, the public eye, must wince, imagining the agony in which this litmus test was passed, the hurt that works its way across the skin.¹⁰

Tattoos are animated not merely by the movement of skin and the tension of contradictions which they embody, but by a spectator’s gaze – a gaze which not only passively receives that which is projected, but which actively contributes to that which is felt to be already there. These street-shop tattoos, with their broadly worked designs of misogyny, racism, and a violent machismo, are meant to signify fear. Their images of communion (or less religiously, comradeship) carry the threat of possible pain should the propriety of the male body be mis-handled. Supposedly, they identify the wearer as a man to be wary of – and these identifications, of course, should be taken for real. Yet, the power of these sexist

and masculinist images also indubitably mask a fear, a fear of society's enervating hold upon the soft tissue beneath the surface of virility. As Valerie Walkerdine has observed, "The working class male body is a site of struggle and anxiety, as well as pleasure." And the "power" of these significant images, "in [their] manifest content, covers over a terror of powerlessness, an anxiety beneath the pleasure."¹¹ The tattoo thus recursively turns upon the body of its bearer. It not only displaces but redeploys those social systems within which the body is embedded, born, and condemned to die. The use of the tattoo thus comes at a price; and, as women well know, the cost of this anxiety is usually borne by them – marked discretely on their buttocks and between their legs.

MUSTANG SALLY GOES DRAG RACING

Thus far I have attempted to demonstrate the productivities of the tattoo within certain ontological and epistemological places: the ways in which it is decisively inscribed upon the sexed muscles of men and pinioned to corporeal objects of knowledge and power. And yet, while emphasizing some of the thick description which encases the tattoo, my arguments nonetheless are in danger of becoming too burdened by generality. Focused as they are upon the visibilities of power, knowledge, and the structural workings of sexual difference, arguments tend to miss seeing the exactness of the tattoo which surpasses the limits of this logic. To be a bit more precise, they do not tell us much about the particularity of the tattoo, much less its particularity for women. For at end, such reasoning is limited to discerning the tattoo in terms of permanences, properties, and proper conduct; thus, it too often ends at the touchstone of the masculine for its measurements. In effect, the pull of these fixed places consign the interpretation of the tattoo to a limited social composition of gendered hierarchies. What *can* we see when we see that snake permanently sliding down her too-skinny arm?

We are largely left with a dualistic sight through which we may see only out of one eye or the other. We may see this tattoo as the scandalous stamp of another's possession: the maker's mark which verifies a permanent commitment to a masculine order, or a life-long fidelity to patriarchal law. Or we may see this tattoo as a sign of self-possession: a means of subverting the dominance of the masculine while subtending it, a warding off of danger by cultivating a masculine threat. We would see this tattoo as scandalous, not because it exists outside of that societal arrangement to which all good girls should comply, but because it precisely moves within and marks the instability of this societal composition. We would note its duplicitous standing: the way it both apes and splits open the

effaced seams of a gendered hierarchy which aligns the masculine with the written and the feminine with the blank slate.

Both of these perspectives, these ways of seeing, are equally valid in their vision, as both perceive possible and probable truths. For tattoos on women, as the female appropriation of a practice normally only valued within the domain of men, act to critically challenge, as they confirm, society's delegations of sexual difference. And yet, either way, with either look, we are remanded to reading tattoos on women as "stolen property" even while we know that the positive value of such inscriptions is contentless without femininity; even while we know that tattoos on women are copies of an original which is itself only a copy of what has already been inscribed.

I want to examine the particularity of tattooing for women without asserting this particularity as nothing more than difference; that is, as nothing more than the choices of bad copy, bad girl, or good. Such choices are, as Foucault has observed, "always the same choice, for the side of power, for what power says or of what it causes to be said."¹² In order to address the exactness of these corporeal marks (and their relations to corporeal specificity), I want to step aside from generalities of sexual difference which bind the tattoo to the hide-bound powers of a gendered morphology. This, then, is to behold tattoos on women not as a strange type of wedding present – as a conjugal gift given upon entrance into masculine propriety – but as a wedding of presents, as that which both inhabits and produces the conjunctural moments and changing dimensions of space. I want to thus push the tattoo beyond historical places of permanence and possession to examine its affective movement within a shifting space of contingent relations. For the tattoo is itself a "shape shifter," a figure beholden to no one proper form, but constantly moving and changing its shape as it drags and races across the space of the skin.

THE SPACE OF SKIN

Odd to think that the piece of you I know best is already dead. . . . The dead you is constantly being rubbed away by the dead me. Your cells fall and flake away, fodder to dust mites and bed bugs. Your droppings support colonies of life that graze on skin and hair no longer wanted. You don't feel a thing. How could you? All your sensation comes from deeper down, the live places where the dermis is renewing itself, making another armadillo layer.¹³

—Jeanette Winterson

Somewhere between my shoulder-blade and spine, there is a large seashell, its subtle details

of shading intricately etched in a pointillist line of blue ink. And I must say, without wanting to make too much of a bad pun, that this tattoo is very much a part of me. After all, unless removed at further expense and pain, it will stay where it is, deeply impressed upon my flesh in perpetuity, to outlast even my life (although not the life of my corpse). But this tattoo is also a part of me because of some imagined intentionality on the part of my self. Thus, when pressed by friends as to why I had this beautiful nautilus inscribed on my back (this being the second question after the subject of pain), I tell them it's because I miss the ocean to such a painful extent that I decided to wear it on my skin. Indeed, I might even go so far as to say that this tattoo is only the first of many in a grand design to engrave an entire beach on my back.

Nothing is patently false about these answers. Having lived most of my life on the shores of the Pacific, having spent hours, days and years silently watching the tide-pools of Monterey Bay, having been the fourth generation to emerge from the sea-fogs of San Francisco, the absence of the ocean here in Montreal does indeed pull painfully. And yet, this reason for inscription, though romantic, is only ambivalently told; and, in truth, each telling is spoken reluctantly. I feel beholden to justify some intentionality behind this inscription, when in fact, there really is none. In truth, I got this tattoo because I wanted it: full stop. There are no romantic designs of intent behind its images. And if in fact I extend this design across my back, it will not be due to a drawn out historical inscription of loss, but simply because I want to feel the needles again, or less masochistically, their intensity of touch.

There is a sign on the wall of his tattoo studio which reads: WARNING: TATTOOS HAVE BEEN KNOWN TO BE ADDICTIVE. It's a joke which, like most successful ones, carries more than an element of common sense. Yet the effectivity of its humour rests not with the tattoo's association with needles, but with touch. There is pleasure taken in the anticipation of the joy to the eye which the needles will impart. And yet, pleasure is also taken in the sensation of the needles themselves: the constant tapping, the pressure and pain upon the skin, intermittently broken by the soothing swipe of an antiseptic tissue. Tattoos are addictive not only in terms of what is tangibly inscribed – the final effect of representation – but also in the way they are impressed upon you, in the reassuring feeling of a constant flow and pressure upon skin.

The skin tracks our senses. Certain people may be described as "thick-skinned" (meaning that emotional pains don't bother them much), or, alternatively, as having "skin to thin" (meaning that they are unusually susceptible to hurt feelings). These metaphors of epidermal emotion are felt to be measurements of the depth of feeling: a hierarchy which

extends from the densities of pain, compassion and love, to the imperviousness of indifference. To speak of “feeling” in this way, however, implies that there is some form of meaningful intention at work here: some sort of original depth to which these feelings must be held. And yet, while we may speak derisively of someone’s feelings being only skin-deep, what other depth is there? It is the surface of the body which harbors intensities, irritations and memories. It is the surface which contains and consigns the depth of feeling.

Who can say where the dead skin stops and the live sensations of the body begin? Where are these ideological or subjective depths which the ink of the tattoo is said always to run to? The needles bring substance and depth to the surface of skin; and yet, this depth cannot be excavated to reveal a fixed state or stable identity, for there is nothing which pre-exists its inscription. It is, rather, a density of emotion or affect whose different intensities and commitments of mood shifts and swings, given the changing path and social terrain of the body. Certainly these marks are permanently inscribed; and yet, they can never be permanently held to anything, for they are more situational than structural. Just as Larry Grossberg writes that affect “can never be satisfied . . . only realized . . . and [it] always exists on the surface,”¹⁴ so too do these marks get carried away in their possibilities – in making things matter – as they are carried on a surface which is itself always mobile and moving.

This surface is expansive. As Diane Ackerman tells us in her book, *A Natural History of the Senses*,¹⁵ the skin is the body’s largest organ. It is also perhaps the most crucial for the body’s survival. The two square yards of thin epidermis holds in and contours the ooze of flesh, fluid and membrane; it gives the body distinctiveness in shape; it shields the body from germs and dirt; and it insulates the body from heat and cold. It is waterproof, pliable and very much alive. Cut it, and it grows back together. Burn it, and it can be grafted – one piece cultured onto another. Skin is perhaps the only human organ which can be grown.

Just as this expansive surface limits the space of the body – distributing the ooze of flesh into a discernible shape – so too is its malleability beheld to the body, for skin has no life unless it is stretched across and moved by a corporeal form. (Thus, those tattooed human skins which hang in the museums of Japan can no longer be realized as skin, but only as stiff, epidermal canvas.) The body and skin are co-extensive: each folds into the space of the other. Skin cannot be separated from the body any more than the body can be separated from the social spaces within which it is mobilized and emplaced: the spatial powers which curve and flow around moving bodies, and which contingently compose their survival and their identifiable shapes.

Thus, while the tattoo cannot be held to any origin of identity or intent, its affective lines of flight are always situated within a conjuncture of corporeal and colloquial spaces.

The mobility of the tattoo – its flows of intensity and investment, its shifting of the shape of possibility – is highly situational; it is, to use a term of Larry Grossberg’s, a “structured mobility.”¹⁶ To recognize the tattoo in its structured mobilities is thus to trace its actualities within the sexual specificities of social space and those bodies who may move within it, it is to recognize the differences between being totally at ease on the streets and being totally assailable and exposed – the differences between being a mobile flaneur and being a largely demobilized object who is both advertisement and commodity in one.¹⁷ And it is to recognize the surface of skin as a prohibited space for the public inscriptions of women. For women are warned never to wear their hearts on their sleeve, lest they partake in a shameful act of public exposure. Female skin must be clear and unmarked, free from earthly or emotional contusions.

We must thus think of the affectivities of the tattoo in terms of proximities and approximations: the ways in which it is simultaneously held to, and makes, space. The very content and expressiveness of the tattoo is based upon how it is historically discerned within a Euclidean visual space, which Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari describe as a “*striated* space: a space which is counted in order to be occupied.”¹⁸ Thus, it is here that tattoos on women are undoubtedly beheld to the normative configurations of corporeal and sexual spaces. And yet, the tattoo is also space in the making. Its affective lines of flight and intensities of attachment are always in the process of becoming *chaos* (which, as Aristotle suggests, is one of the earliest Greek designations for space). The affective latitudes of the tattoo extend across a *smooth space*, a topological space which “is occupied without being counted.” It is a “space of contact” and of proximate points, but where the linking of proximities, materialities and other matters “is effected independently of any determined path.”¹⁹ Surely the tattoo “counts,” but in an incalculable way, for its immediacies are always *becoming* (to the body, to the self, and to the social space in which the body finds itself). Just as a remembered sadness becomes less sharp, its edges smoothed over time, so too do the affectual lines of the tattoo disperse and spread as they take flight. And the body ages, sags, swells and slackens; and the nautilus moves, forever becoming another astonishing inscription.

It is in elaborating the tattoo in such a way that we may extend it, in Foucault’s words, to “the space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and knaws at us . . .”²⁰ It is here, within this fecund space of actuality, that we may move away from those guarded places of propriety to which the tattoo has been so historically inscribed. Most importantly, we may step aside from a model of identity which has limited the tattoo to a logic of

difference and negativity. As Stuart Hall says, "Identity is a structured representation which only achieves its positive through the narrow eye of the negative";²¹ and it is through this dualistic sight that tattoos on women are seen to trespass upon images and identities held to be the rightful property of men. In viewing tattoos spatially, rather than within the structuring terms of signification and representation, we may begin to broach broader questions about particularities rather than hard-set places, mobilities rather than meanings. We are thus enabled to consider the ways in which tattoos on women bring possibilities into proximity, the ways in which they make chaos by crashing familiar spaces with an inventory of alien presences: animating flesh and skin with the dismembered eyes and limbs of beasts, beauties and demons. We may thus begin to follow the tattoo as, in Larry Grossberg's words, "a matter of orientation and directions, of entries and exits, rather than beginnings and ends."²²

It has been said that breaking through skin can be a way of breaking through an impasse, and I suppose that for many people the tattoo does serve as a rite of passage. It may suffice as a means to acknowledge and settle something with yourself, and with others. Yet, the affectivity of the tattoo is due to both its permanent inscription and its persistent motion as it constantly moves with the curvature of the body and the rise and fall of flesh in each breath taken. Things start to move forward with the tattoo. The tattoo may thus be understood only as a provisional place of closure. It underlines the paradoxical necessity of having to stay put, if just for a moment, in order to map a future journey. From that moment, the body can continue to walk on.

NOTES

1. Yukio Mishima, *Sun and Steel*, trans. John Bester (New York: Grove Press, 1970), 23.
2. Victoria Ebin, *The Body Decorated* (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1979).
3. Franz Kafka, "In the Penal Colony," *Franz Kafka: Stories 1904–1924*, trans. J. Underwood (New York: McDonald and Co., 1981), 224.
4. Michel Foucault, "Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside," *Foucault/Blanchot*, trans. J. Mehlman and B. Massumi (New York: Zone Books, 1987), 41.
5. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. R. Hurley (New York: Vintage Press, 1980), 148.
6. *Ibid.*, 152.
7. Captain Don Leslie, quoted in *Re/Search* 12 (1989): 74.
8. Michel Thevoz, *The Painted Body* (Geneva: Éditions d'art, Albert Skina, 1984), 62.

9. Elizabeth Seaton, "Profaned Bodies and Purloined Looks: The Prisoner's Tattoo and the Researcher's Gaze," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 11.2 (Summer 1987): 17-25.

10. There is, of course, a great deal of mythologization which accompanies the "pain" of the tattoo, particularly in terms of the sexes and spaces upon which it is inscribed. Tattooing in fact entails a variety of sensations of pain. With fine-line tattoos, the touch of the needle is very light. In contrast, large areas of deep color hurt, the needles agonizingly pressing and digging under the skin. The intensity of pain also depends upon where one is being tattooed: areas near the joints being particularly excruciating. (Thus, those "hard muscles of men" are some of the easier places for inscription). Most importantly, different people are susceptible to pain in diverse ways. Women, for instance, are said to have higher pain thresholds than men. This may be due to the fact that: (1) women deal with pain on a life-long basis in the form of pregnancy, monthly menstrual cramps, back-aches, etc.; and (2) they have more endorphins, naturally occurring opiates which kick in when pregnancy or other pains take place. Despite the nervousness provoked from the essentialism of this claim, it admittedly places more than a bit of irony upon the macho stereotype of the tattoo.

11. Valerie Walkerdine, "Video Replay: Families, Films and Fantasy," *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. V. Burgin, J. Donald and C. Kaplan (London: Methuen), 182.

12. Michel Foucault, "The Life of Infamous Men," *Power, Truth, Strategy*, ed. M. Morris and P. Patton (Sydney: Feral Publications, 1979), 80.

13. Jeanette Winterson, "The Cells, Tissues, Systems, and Cavities of the Body," *Granta* 39 (Spring 1992): 130.

14. Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out Of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 81.

15. Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses* (New York: Vintage Books 1991).

16. Lawrence Grossberg, "Cultural Studies in/and New Worlds," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 10 (March 1993): 1-22.

17. For a number of interesting investigations into the sexed specificities of social spaces, see Susan Buck-Morss, particularly her "The Flaneur, the Sandwichman and the Whore: The Politics of Loitering," *New German Critique* 39 (Fall 1986).

18. Gilles Deleuze Felix Guattari, *Nomadology: The War Machine*, trans. B. Massumi (New York: Semiotext(e), 1986), 18.

19. *Ibid.*, 18 and 34.

20. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* (Spring 1986): 23.

21. Stuart Hall, "The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity," ed. A.D. King, *Culture, Globalization and the World-System* (London: Macmillan, 1991), 21.

22. Grossberg, 7.