

**Tattooed by Savages: The Development of the American Discourse on Tattooing.**

The topic of my proposed thesis is the development of a prevalent discourse regarding tattooing in popular American culture. I will be specifically focusing on how popular institutions, such as the circus and the theater, and popular literary trends, namely captivity narratives, effectively shaped the way tattoos were discussed by Americans since its inception into the American consciousness. My project will include various sub-topics including eighteenth century travel journals, colonialism, anthropology, the American theater, the American circus, women in popular American culture, representations of Native Americans, and literary captivity narratives in order to strongly support my overall arguments.

The time period of the project will be roughly the eighteen fifties through the eighteen nineties as this is when the tattoo was most clearly introduced into American popular culture, but the background and development of the arguments will also include a discussion of materials dating back to the mid-eighteenth century as events took place during this time period that will serve to contextualize my arguments. I will also be discussing scholarship from the early twentieth century in order to argue that the way tattooing was introduced to Americans subsequently shaped the ways tattooing was discussed in later academic works on the subject.

The project will discuss tattooing in America at large, but there will be a more detailed focus on New York as that is where tattooing most clearly enters popular American culture. The Polynesian islands will also be discussed as the “discovery” of tattooed men and women took place when European voyagers traveled to these islands and reported what they had come

across. England will also be discussed because early in the history of tattooing in Western culture men were traveling around England showing off their tattoos to crowds of people as a form of entertainment; this performance would later become a staple of popular entertainment in the United States. The American Southwest will also be an important region to acknowledge because I will be drawing a link between contemporary captivity narratives from the region and the presentation of tattooing by tattooed sideshows. In order to best establish this concept, it will be important to properly discuss captivity of white European-Americans by Native Americans thereby establishing the historical realities of this practice and juxtapose these realities with their use as propaganda in American captivity narratives that would eventually influence how tattoos were presented in circus sideshows.

I am planning on completing this project with a traditional thesis. With a longer thesis project I hope to be able to develop a sufficiently contextualized argument that would not be possible with the shorter digital project. I plan on producing a thesis with four chapters: an introduction, chapter 1 will discuss the eighteenth century travel journals of Captain James Cook that established early examples of the language and imagery that characterize American's "introduction" to tattooing, chapter 2 will discuss the development of the American theater as a popular form of working class entertainment and captivity narratives as a popular form of American literature, chapter 3 will discuss tattooing in circus sideshows and the language that became commonly associated with tattooing in American newspapers, and chapter 4 will discuss the scholarly discourse regarding tattooing from the early twentieth century.

My tentative thesis is as follows: the American discourse regarding tattooing as a negative act undertaken by criminals and savages is a direct result of tattooed sideshows'

appropriation of anti-Native American propaganda in order to dramatize their spectacle. The tattoo entered the American consciousness at a time when the theater and the circus were both becoming vastly popular forms of working-class entertainment, thereby providing a platform for tattooed men to spread their fantasies of captivity and torture among the “savages.” Stories of captivity are as old as European colonization of the Americas, but these stories were particularly popular in the mid-nineteenth century due to Euro-Americans need to validate their brutal theft of Indigenous lands. These factors led to a popularization of the idea that tattooing was a form of “savage” torture. This idea clearly shows up in news sources at the time and is repeated in the early twentieth century when anthropologists begin studying the ancient art form. Thus, the association between captivity, torture, and tattooing made by circus sideshows effectively shaped the American discourse on tattooing. The larger research question this project answers is why tattoos are associated with sailors, criminals, and other unsavory characters.

One of the earliest scholarly works that examined the subject of tattooing is Cesare Lombroso’s *Criminal Man*, published in 1911. Lombroso was a scholar during a major boom in the field of anthropology and the academic study of “other” cultures and is credited with founding the field of criminology. Although *Criminal Man* specifically seeks to present the major characteristics of criminals, Lombroso presents the foundational discourse about tattooing and its link to criminality among Western Europeans. For Lombroso, tattooing was an act of “primitive man;” a subset of human beings that had not evolved yet to the level of “civilized” westerners. His theory relies on the idea that some peoples were biologically unevolved and unable to conform to society, and it is from these groups that criminals are most

commonly found. Lombroso's argument follows that criminals tattooed themselves because they shared characteristics with biologically unevolved "savages." Lombroso does not attempt to discuss why tattooing became associated with criminals, but his work is a foundational piece of scholarship that draws this connection that would inform much of the scholarship that would follow *Criminal Man*.

The subject of tattooing among Western Europeans and Americans was approached by myriad scholars during the twentieth century, with each developing various perspectives regarding *why* people tattoo themselves. These works served to build upon foundational ideas connect tattooing to mental disorders and criminality, however, the argument noting *how* tattooing became understood as a negative act by Western society was first approached by Historian/Anthropologist Greg Dening in his work *Islands and Beaches: Discourses of a Silent Land*, published in 1980. Dening argues that early sailors received tattoos as a way to assimilate or communicate peace with the Native peoples of the Polynesian islands, however, when they returned home the tattoo communicated something different: the men returning home with tattoos brought with them a permanent example of a white man accepting a "savage" culture. Thus, Dening argues, many of the men made up stories about being tattooed against their will in order to escape the embarrassment of admitting that they had "gone native." Unlike earlier scholars, Dening notes possible reasons for the creation of captivity and torture stories and makes the logical assumption that tattooing became associated with otherness because they communicated that the individual with tattoos was different than what was acceptable to contemporary American standards.

The topic of tattooing among the Polynesian people was revolutionized in 1993 with Alfred Gell's *Wrapping in Images*. In *Wrapping in Images*, Gell deeply explores the meaning of tattoos in the socio-political-religious institutions of Polynesian society at the time of contact between the Polynesian Islands and the Western voyagers. However, Gell contextualizes his study by discussing why he thinks that the tattoo got such a bad connotation in American society during the twentieth century. For Gell, early-twentieth century scholarship's connection between criminality and tattooing was the main factor in American perceptions of tattooing. Gell admits that these works were remarking on a correlation that was undeniable, criminals are often tattooed, but Gell argues that these connections were overstating bad science as fact. Gell offers more context and nuance with regard to tattooing in Western society, arguing that the negative connotation surrounding tattooing was a result of class politics in which the lower class was more likely to be tattooed, and, thus, it was seen as something "civilized" people did not do.

A different approach to the history of tattooing was undertaken by author Margot Mifflin in her 1997 publication *Bodies of Subversion*. Mifflin, who also wrote a book on Olive Oatman (America's first tattooed captive), takes a feminist approach to the history of tattooing as she focuses on tattooed women in the late nineteenth century. Mifflin's work argues that trailblazing women in the late nineteenth century subverted the masculine art of tattoo and made their way in the man's world of tattooed sideshows. For Mifflin, the tattoo got its masculine reputation through its prevalence among sailors and sideshow men, thereby adhering to the most common narrative established by scholarly works on the subject. However, her work is invaluable in its focus on the social mores and cultural meaning that

women had to overcome in order to normalize tattooing among women. It is these very social and cultural meanings that will be discussed in my work.

The most direct discussion regarding how tattooing became associated with negative acts undertaken by sailors and criminals was Margo DeMello's *Bodies of Inscription*, published in 2000. DeMello's work follows the American discourse regarding tattooing from its beginnings in the nineteenth century up to the nineteen nineties. Throughout her work, DeMello traces the various iterations that caused changes in the way tattoos were perceived by American society throughout the twentieth century. *Bodies of Inscription* is a convincing piece of scholarship in which DeMello's argues that tattooing was first an act of inclusion among sailors and military personnel, but over time the practice was appropriated by criminals for similar reasons: inclusion into a group. DeMello's arguments are much in line with the points I will be making, however, her work does not focus on major institutions that facilitated tattooing's reputation American popular culture, nor does she discuss how tattooing originally gained its unsavory reputation.

What my work plans to do is to offer another explanation for the *foundational period* in American public perceptions of tattooing. Although the topic is quickly discussed by Dening, Gell, and DeMello it has not been given proper attention. I will argue that these works miss the larger context in which tattooing became popular in American history. For previous scholars, the history of tattooing has been somewhat simple: voyagers got tattooed, came home and lied about how they got tattooed, then the action was taken up by criminals and sailors who were both seen as unsavory characters in American society. My work will serve to place the discourse regarding tattooing in relation to major influences on its development. Where the

previous authors have treated tattooing as a subject in relation to travel, I will treat tattooing as a result of a phenomenon in which popular entertainment merged with American propaganda. I see the development of the discourse about tattooing not as a result of some sailors lying, but as a result of intelligent showmen realizing the monetary potential of appropriating previously established, racist narratives in order to sensationalize their spectacle.

The primary sources that I will be using include travel journals, captivity narratives and artwork that depicts captivity, newspaper articles, advertisements for circus sideshows, and early-twentieth century historical/anthropological works on tattooing. The travel journals of James Cook and others from the eighteenth century establish the foundational language that was used to describe the ancient art of tattooing. These journals also include some of the earliest artwork that depicts tattooing which shows how tattooing was originally presented to the American public. Captivity narratives are especially important to my work as they establish the common style and tone about captivity that would later be employed by tattooed men in the circus sideshows. Further, images and artwork that depict captivity will provide examples of how captivity narratives were dramatized to present Native Americans in the worst possible light. This strategy, and artistic style is comparable to many of the images included in advertisements for the circus tattooed men. The newspaper articles that I have compiled provide primary documentation of how the media discussed tattooing in popular media sources. Historical and anthropological works from the early-twentieth century include language and assessments of tattooing that were common in the post-circus newspaper sources. Thus, their content provides support for my discussion of discourse.

All of these sources are easily found on the internet through database archives such as the Library of Congress website, The New York Times archive, and archive.org. Many of the images that will be assessed can be found in various internet archives, but the scholarly works and the captivity narratives are all available through the CSUSM library.

Much of the necessary research for this project has already been done as I have had this topic in mind for the past few years. I have read primary and secondary sources that cover topics relevant to my thesis. I have also written a research paper connecting the American discourse surrounding tattooing to certain parameters set by Edward Said's *Orientalism*, I have completed an independent study with Dr. Hajar focusing on the development of the American theater during the nineteenth century, and my History 502 project was an assessment of how women in captivity narratives reflected the relationship between European colonizers and Native Americans during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

I plan on completing my project by the middle of spring semester, a plan that is ambitious, yet I believe it is plausible as I have already compiled the works that are relevant to my topic and, and I have a good idea as to what it is I am trying to say. My plan is to turn in my proposal and then begin working on my introduction. As soon as my proposal is accepted, then I will turn in my introduction and begin working on my first chapter, and so on until my thesis is ready for defense.



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