Tattooing Identity: An analysis of historical and contemporary tattooing practices among members of the military community

AN HONORS THESIS

Presented to

The Department of Anthropology

The Colorado College

By

Victoria Frecentese

May 2013

Approved: _____________________
Date: _________________________
ON MY HONOR I HAVE NEITHER GIVEN NOR RECEIVED UNAUTHORIZED AID ON THIS SENIOR THESIS

____________________________________

Victoria Frecentese
Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ......................................................................................... iv

Abstract ............................................................................................................. v

Introduction ....................................................................................................... 1
  Evidence of Historical Body Modifications .................................................. 1
  Table 1: Timeline of major event in tattooing history ................................. 2
  Figure 1: Diagram of tattoos found on Bronze Age mummy, Ötzi .......... 4
  Figure 2: Configuration of tattoos found on second mummy ................. 5
  Figure 3: Depictions of the god Bes as evident in Egyptian tattoos ....... 7
  Figure 4: Depictions of fantastical beasts found on the Pazyryk warrior .......................................................... 8

Contemporary Culture and Theory ................................................................. 15
  Figure 5: Engraving of the New Zealand moko ........................................ 17
  Figure 6: Diagram of the original tattaugraph machine ......................... 23
  Figure 7: Original tattoo flash images from 1940 ..................................... 26

Methodology ..................................................................................................... 37

Results ............................................................................................................... 40
  Table 2: General demographics of participants ...................................... 41
  Tattoos by Number ......................................................................................... 41
  Figure 8: Number of tattoos by region of the body .................................. 43
  Table 3: Tattoos of the arm differentiated by surface covered .............. 43
  Tattoos by Image ........................................................................................... 44
  Table 4: Analysis of level of military association in tattoo images ...... 45
  Tattoos by Motivation ................................................................................... 46

Discussion ......................................................................................................... 49
  Identity through Group Cohesion ................................................................. 50
  Image of the Warrior and Asserting Individuality .................................... 54
  The Trend of Individuality ............................................................................ 56

Potential Error Sources .................................................................................. 59

Conclusion ....................................................................................................... 60

References ....................................................................................................... 63

Appendixes
  A: Informed Consent Form ......................................................................... 66
  B: Email Interview Questionnaire ............................................................... 67
  C: Interview Questions for Tattooed Members of the Military .............. 68
Acknowledgements

I would like to give a special thanks to Dr. Krista Fish for her unwavering dedication in assisting me throughout this process. Her guidance and understanding made this senior thesis possible. I would also like to thank Dr. Sarah Hautzinger for helping me make sense of my ethnographic data with her thoughtful critiques. I also thank all the tattoo artists and studios in the area that welcomed me into their space and patiently answered all my questions. Finally, thanks to my parents for their unconditional support of my academic and personal ambitions.
Abstract

Tattooing as a cultural practice has existed definitively in the archaeological record since the Bronze Age and continues in a diverse array of contemporary cultures. Throughout its extensive history, tattooing has often been closely tied to the military community, as either a mark of prestige or punishment, or through the military's ability to transfer the practice between cultures. This study investigates tattooing among the contemporary military community in terms of image, location, motivation, and meaning in order to better understand influences of tattooing on identity formation. Quantitative and qualitative data collected through interviews in several tattoo parlors in the Colorado Springs area revealed that 71% of the tattoos observed had no military association in imagery or motivation, compared to 12% with direct military association. The results, when coupled with military tattoo history, indicated a higher level of personal identity assertion than anticipated. This study investigates this phenomenon further and formulates a new hypothesis on tattooing among the military community: the trend of individuality.
**Introduction**

Body modifications as a cultural practice have spanned the ages, the globe, and deftly permeated numerous cultural boundaries. Tattooing specifically has a rich and diverse historical past and a distinct and noteworthy present, where meanings and cultural significance are many and varied. Throughout its extensive history, tattooing has been closely tied to the military community as an indicator of status, and through the military's propensity for cultural transference of the practice. This study will investigate tattooing practices among the contemporary military community through an integration of tattooing history and present theories on identity creation. Based on these two separate information sources, I hypothesized that military members belonged to a distinct sub-culture within the greater tattoo population, one defined by a few specific expectations:

1. Members of the military would show a high incidence of tattoos associated with the military, either through design or motivation, in comparison to tattoos not associated with the military.

2. Members of the military would have a few tattoos of badge-like designs that could be easily concealed under all forms of formal dress.

3. A large amount of repetition of design, style, and image would be seen throughout the sample, specifically in relation to memorial and patriotic tattoos.

**Evidence of Historical Body Modifications**

Due to the temporality of dermal and epidermal body modifications, there exists a limited body of historical evidence from which to draw conclusions on the evolution and cultural significance of body modifications. Nevertheless, tattooing as a common body modification practice has been preserved in a surprising number of ancient cultures, either through mummified remains, literary evidence, or
archaeological artifacts. The prevalence of tattooing in geographically diverse areas has led academics to suggest that the practices developed independently, in several place simultaneously, and many times over (Green 2003). In the following sections I will review the archaeological and literary evidence of body modifications from their earliest occurrence to the dawn of contemporary practices (Table 1). In particular, I will highlight the association between tattooing and military communities through time.

Table 1: Timeline of the major events in tattooing history and their associated date of occurrence (dates of ages based on the European emergence of the appropriate materials due to the majority of sites being centered in this area).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stone Age</th>
<th>2.6 mya</th>
<th>clay and red ochre disks possibly associated with tattooing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5000 BCE</td>
<td>Possible beginning of decorative tattooing in Japan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronze Age</td>
<td>3750 BCE</td>
<td>Otzi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3300 BCE</td>
<td>11th Egyptian Dynasty, produced three well known tattooed mummified remains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2160 - 1994 BCE</td>
<td>First images used in decorative Egyptian tattooing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iron Age</td>
<td>1200 BCE</td>
<td>Possible beginning of decorative tattooing in Polynesia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>400 BCE</td>
<td>Pazyryk warrior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>247 BCE</td>
<td>First recorded use of tattoos in Japan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>27 BCE</td>
<td>Approximate beginning of the Roman empire and punitive tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>300 - 500 CE</td>
<td>St. Lawrence Island remains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1769 CE</td>
<td>Voyage of Captain Cook to the Polynesian Islands</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Archaeological Artifacts of the Upper Paleolithic and Bronze Ages

The earliest artifacts with a potential link to tattooing are dated to the Upper Paleolithic era. Clay and red ochre disks accompanied by sharp bone implements have been interpreted as pigment reservoirs and tools for puncturing the skin to insert dye (Cains and Byard 2008; Gilbert 2000; Green 2003). The Upper Paleolithic is commonly thought to mark the appearance of artistic representation, so it is not unrealistic to assume that these artifacts were used in a culturally supplementary practice such as tattooing. In tandem with potential needles and reservoirs, small clay and stone figures were found engraved with patterns that may represent tattoos (Cains and Byard 2008; Green 2003). The figures were decorated with geometric designs, comprised primarily of lines and dots, which mirror the first tattoos seen on mummified remains. The evidence from the Upper Paleolithic is not conclusive, but strongly indicates a genesis of body modification conceptualization.

A set of mummified remains dating to 3300 BCE marked the first concrete evidence of tattooing. The Bronze Age mummy was found preserved in the glacial regions of the Alps and later identified as a warrior (Green 2003). Known as Ötzi, the preserved skin of his remains shows evidence of blue tattoos in several places, including several parallel lines along the lumbar spine and ankles, and a cross on the posterior of one knee (Figure 1). The cultural implications of these tattoos are unknown, though ideas include therapy for physical ailments, ethnic markers, or identification (Cains and Byard 2008). To the extent that military members are a subset of the larger category of warrior, the tattoos on Ötzi also mark the beginning of the military tattooing connection.
Egypt

Figurines similar to those of the Upper Paleolithic were discovered in Egypt dating to the beginning of the Bronze Age (Bianchi 1998). The small female figures were decorated with geometric patterns in several colors, in designs that could be representative of either tattoos or clothing (Bianchi 1998). These statuettes foreshadowed the tattooing practices that were preserved in the mummified remains of several females from the 11th Dynasty of Egypt, roughly 2160-1994 BCE (Bianchi 1988; Sperry 1991). The most notable of the mummies is that of Amunet, a priestess of the goddess Hathor (Bianchi 1988; Gilbert 2000; Tassie 2003). The
preserved tattoos were primarily dotted, parallel lines that wrapped around the upper arms and thighs, and a series of curved elliptical lines below the navel (Bianchi 1988; Gilbert 2000; Tassie 2003).

Two additional female mummies were discovered around the same time, both displaying similar, though not identical, tattoos to Amunet. The second mummy had supplementary diamond shaped patterns on her upper arms and chest, as well as a cicatrix, a mass of tissue forming a permanent scar, on her lower abdomen (Figure 2) (Bianchi 1988). This scaring could not have been the product of a surgery as the scar tissue and therefore the initial incision does not exceed the muscles of the abdominal wall (Bianchi 1988). It is therefore assumed that the scars were intentionally created as an addition to the tattoos. The only description available for the final set of mummified remains is that the tattoos “are similar” to the other remains (Bianchi 1988:22).

Figure 2: Configuration of tattoos found on second mummy, similar to those found on Amunet and third mummy (Bianchi 1988:22)
Evidence of the continuation of the statuette tradition is found in the tombs of mummified males. These “Brides of the Dead” exhibited similar markings to those found on Amunet, primarily geometric and linear designs (Bianchi 1988:22; Gilbert 2000:11). Though mummified evidence and archaeological artifacts suggests that only females were tattooed, painting and hieroglyphics also found in the tombs show pharaohs and other high-ranking men with tattoos (Gilbert 2000).

There existed no word for tattooing in the Egyptian language, indicating perhaps that it was not a native custom. Archaeological evidence suggests that body modification practices were imported into Egypt from Nubian culture, where two mummified remains show patterns that correspond to the Egyptian mummies (Tassie 2003). Once a part of the culture however, the glyph “mentenu”, meaning “inscribed”, “etched”, or “engraved” is believed to have been adapted to reference body modifications (Bianchi 1988:27; Gilbert 2000:13). The glyph has been found in the context of inscribing the name of the gods on one’s arm, but the means of inscription were not specified, leaving the exact method of modification and meaning of the glyph unknown (Gilbert 2000).

By the 1500s BCE, tattooing was firmly established in Egyptian culture, but the imagery did not remain constant through time. In addition to the previous geometric and linear designs, Egyptians are the first culture to depict representational images on the skin, the first of which being the likeness of the god Bes (Figure 3). Deity of revelry, orgies, dancing girls, and musicians, Bes is depicted on the thigh of several mummified remains of female dancers (Bianchi 1988; Gilbert 2000).
Figure 3: Depictions of the god Bes as evident in Egyptian tattoos (Gilbert 2000:13)

The body of archaeological evidence of tattooing in Egypt is rich with preserved tattoos and contextual glyphic evidence. It shows a diverse and varied history with assimilation, adaptation, and growth. However, the precise cultural connotations of tattooing or other body modifications remain unknown without corresponding literary evidence.

Iron Age

Mummified remains from the Iron Age synthesize the traditions of the Upper Paleolithic and Egypt through a continuation of the use of imagery and therapeutic tattooing. The remains were found in 1948 by Russian Anthropologist Sergei Ivanovich Rudenko, in the Altai Mountains in Siberia, a steppe region inhabited by the Pazyryk culture of nomadic horsemen, hunters, and warriors from the sixth through second centuries BCE (Carr 2005; Gilbert 2000; Poli, et al. 2012). The remains are said to have belonged to a “man characterized as chief” based on the grave goods found accompanying the remains and dated to approximately 400 BCE (Cains and Byard 2008; Green 2003:ix; Poli, et al. 2012; Rudenko 1970). The man was thoroughly decorated with tattoos on his torso and all four limbs, primarily with stylized depictions of animals found in that region. Donkeys, ram, deer, fish,
and goats covered his arms and right leg (Gilbert 2000). In addition, fantastical animals such as griffins and unidentifiable carnivores were also found on his body (Figure 4) (Gilbert 2000). Finally, a set of small circles follow the lumbar region of the spinal column, which may have been used for therapeutic purposes, similar to Ötzi. The mummified chieftain of the Iron Age exhibits tattoos based on imagery from his environment, as well as the possibility of therapeutic tattooing, illustrating the continued presence and evolution of tattooing in ancient civilizations. In addition, the Pazyryk warrior indicates a continuation of the military tattooing connection since the time of Ötzi, with extensive tattooing on the remains of a “man characterized as chief” of a warrior culture (Green 2003.ix).

![Figure 4: Depictions of fantastical beasts found on the Pazyryk warrior (Gilbert 2000:14)](image)

Japan

Japan has a rich history of tattooing, possibly dating back to 5000 BCE (Gilbert 2000). The first evidence of tattooing in Japan is similar to Egypt, figurines displaying markings that could be interpreted as evidence of tattoos. In contrast to
the Egyptian statuettes however, the Japanese figures had markings primarily on
the face rather than the torso and limbs (Gilbert 2000; Poli, et al. 2012). From this
vague reference of tattooing, Japanese tattoos grew into a culturally entrenched
practice that would undergo several transformations through time.

The first confirmed documentation of decorative tattooing in Japan dates to
247 BCE (Gilbert 2000; Poli, et al. 2012). According to Chinese historical text,
Japanese “men young and old, all tattoo their faces and decorate their bodies with
designs” (Gilbert 2000:77). Tattooing quickly fell from grace as Japanese dynasties
adopted Chinese attitudes towards tattooing as barbaric (Gilbert 2000). From the
7th till 17th centuries, tattooing was used as a punishment and marked the outcasts
of society (Gilbert 2000). However, as penal tattooing was replaced with other
forms of punishment, tattooing grew in popularity and began to flourish again as a
decorative style (Gilbert 2000).

Decorative Japanese tattooing is characterized by the practice of irezumi, or
“the clothing tattoo” (Brain 1979:64). An individual with a full irezumi was
completely covered from elbows to thighs, leaving only a small strip on the chest
untouched (Brain 1979). The intent was to transform a naked being into one clothed
in decorative images (Brain 1979). Imagery was based on persons from oral
traditions including heroes, sages, deities and famous lovers, or images based on the
works of famous artists, including landscapes, floral patterns, dragons, snakes, and
carp (Brain 1979).

By the 19th century, decorative tattooing diminished and Japanese tattooing
was again associated with societal outcasts. Members of the Japanese Mafia known
as Yakuza, took up the practice of irezumi, thus cementing the practice as a mark of the outcast in Japanese culture (Cains and Byard 2008). Though the artistic style of Japanese tattooing has not undergone considerable alteration through time, the cultural significance of irezumi has experienced a history of turbulent societal perception.

*Greece and Rome*

The history of tattooing in the ancient Mediterranean is noteworthy due to the clear illustration of cultural transference of body modification practices. Throughout the region, the primary sources of evidence of tattooing are the texts of some of the greatest philosophers and historians of the time, including Herodotus, Plutarch, Plato, Galen, Seneca, Aristophanes, and Pliny the Elder, who documented a fairly comprehensive evolution (Gilbert 2000). Beginning in Persian culture, tattooing practices traveled through Greece and into the Roman Empire, retaining much of the same procedures and cultural implications (Gilbert 2000; Jones 1987).

Unlike the traditions discussed previously, as well as many that follow later in history, tattoos in Greece and Rome were used exclusively for practical, rather than decoration or therapeutic reasons. Tattoos were used primarily for identification purposes, to differentiate slaves, criminals, prisoners, and soldiers from the remainder of the population (Gilbert 2000; Jones 1987). The utilitarian practice served as a form of public degradation, punishing the recipient with a permanent mark of their disgrace or low social status (Gilbert 2000; Jones 1987).

Tattooing within the Roman military is the first instance of military tattooing as understood in the contemporary sense. In the late Roman and early Byzantine
periods, in addition to prisoners and criminals receiving tattoos, “soldiers and military workers were marked for life with the insignia of their professions” (Caplan 1997:115). According to legal sources, after a short amount of time in training and service, soldiers were marked with “permanent dots in the flesh” on their arms, hands, or ankles, apparently marking their military units (Jones 1987:149). In addition, the marks were used to identify and capture deserting members (Cains and Byard 2008; Jones 1987).

The etymology of “tattoo” in the Mediterranean accurately reflects the intention and mode of the practice. In Greek, the word used to denote tattooing practice is translated as to “prick,” “sting,” “stitch,” “puncture,” “embroider,” “dot,” “mark,” or “welt” which mimics the tattooing procedures used (Jones 1987:142). In both Greece and Rome, the skin would either be punctured and dye inserted, or dye would be threaded through using needle and string (Gilbert 2000; Jones 1987). In Latin, the word stigma refers to any mark on the skin and was used in reference to tattoos (Gilbert 2000; Jones 1987). In a modern translation it would follow logically that the use of the word stigma would further supporting the degradation of the recipient, however, it is also used in non-derogatory cases such as Jesus’ stigmata (Jones 1987).

Outside of the Roman Empire, the Britons, Iberians, Gauls, Goths, Teutons, Picts, Scots, Scythians, Celts, and Germans engaged in several body modification practices, which led in part to their “barbaric” status in Roman culture (Caplan 1997; Gilbert 2000; Sperry 1991:314). In light of the derogatory nature of tattoos in Rome, the pride that the cultures outside of Rome took in their decorations was
viewed as proof of their inferiority. Some identified so heavily with the marks, that they named themselves after their respective words for tattooing, including the Picts, Britons, and Scots (Brain 1979; Gilbert 2000). Processes of modification varied from inserting herb juices through punctures to the skin (Brain 1979), to “pricking with iron needles with ink on them” (Gilbert 2000:16), to an inadvertent coloring due to antiseptic being placed in an unhealed wound (Carr 2005). Due to the cultural stigma, historians of the day had a tendency to exaggerate the “barbarianism” of the practice, possibly yielding biased literary accounts of body modification practices outside of the Roman Empire. However, archaeological evidence, including coins showing depictions of facial tattoos, confirms the presence of some type of tattooing practice in this region (Carr 2005).

*Early Americans*

Mummified remains from the Americas demonstrate the global reach of ancient tattooing customs. The naturally mummified remains of a woman were discovered on the beachfront of St. Lawrence Island, Alaska, with substantial evidence of tattoos on her arms and hands (Smith and Zimmerman 1975; Sperry 1991). Tattoos were analyzed using infrared photography and included designs such as a “flanged heart” attached to horizontal lines and dots across the second and third fingers on the right hand, a succession of dots and lines on the right forearm, and additional “flanged hearts” with ovals, dots, and lines on the left arm (Smith and Zimmerman 1975:434). Using remaining dentition, the remains were aged at roughly 50 years old at the time of death (Smith and Zimmerman 1975). The remains were radio-carbon dated to between 300-500 CE and as tattooing practices
in the St. Lawrence region were still carried out as of the time of discovery, the remains and community show a long term continuance of tattooing tradition (Smith and Zimmerman 1975). The endurance of tattooing through time, points to tattooing as an integrated practice in their community.

*Polynesian Islands*

The fame of the Polynesian tattooing grew from the “discovery” of tattooing made by Capitan James Cook in 1769, but the area has an expressive history of body modifications dating back to roughly 1200 BCE (Poli, et al. 2012). This geographically and culturally distinct area was able to develop a complex social structure due to the abundance of natural resources that made subsistence relatively simple (Gilbert 2000). Excess time was devoted to culturally formative practices including tattooing, which played a key role in social identity formation and portrayal (Gilbert 2000). A large body of information pertaining to the methods and designs of several of the Polynesian Islands exists in literature, though the evidence is tainted by the cultural biases of the European explorers and colonizers.

New Zealand was not the first island on which Cook encountered tattooing, but it is the most well known due to the Maori people engaging in the practice of tattooing the face with distinctive and individualized patterns, known as the *moko*. These tattoos followed the natural contours of the face and extended from hairline to throat (Brain 1979). Each *moko* told a story of the individual’s rank and status, and was reserved for the warriors and chiefs who comprised the upper class (Caines and Byard 2008). The tattoos were created through a process of making incisions
into which dye was placed, resulting in a raised and colored scar that was a mixture of tattooing and cicatization (Brain 1979).

In addition to New Zealand, several other Polynesian Islands had their own distinct tattooing traditions. Tahiti was the first island on which Cook encounter tattooing. The tattoo designs mirrored the images seen on the Lapita pottery sherds that have been utilized by archaeologist to trace migration patterns across the Polynesian Islands, with V-shaped patterns and interlocking geometry (Gilbert 2000). In Tongan culture, tattoos held a high social and cultural significance similar to New Zealand. Only high-ranking priests trained in the art of tattooing were allowed to perform the ceremonies, emphasizing the importance of the practice (Gilbert 2000). Warriors specifically were tattooed from the waist to above the knee as a sign of social prominence (Gilbert 2000). In Samoa, tattooing was tied with the practice of ritualized warfare and religion, with the images themselves extending from the waist to below the knee (Gilbert 2000). The similarities in the designs and significance of tattoos in the Polynesian Islands could be due in part to the migration of the practice over time. Tattooing is the temporal counterpart to Lapita pottery imagery, which could be another way for archaeologists to track the spread of populations through the islands.

Discovery and colonization of the Polynesian Islands had a dual impact on the traditions of tattooing. The initial explorers were able to document the practices in a way that had been previously unachievable. However, this documentation occurred through a colonial lens that resulted in many gaps in analyses, including the precise cultural messages portrayed in tattoos. The initial shock of encounters
with exotic practices stunned explorers who could then only record the physical, not cultural, evidence. After the shock wore off, colonial authorities banned the display or continuance of tattooing practice as it was seen as a form of resistance to colonial aims (Gilbert 2000). Tattooing was innately connected to what the colonizers labeled the “native way of life” and was therefore outlawed (Gilbert 2000:23). The depth and complexity of Polynesian tattooing was lost at the hands Western colonizers, but it served as the birthplace for the new wave of Western tattooing.

The warrior connection carries through time from Ötzi to the Polynesian Islands. The Maori, Tahitian, and Tongan cultures all show evidence of tattooing centralized in the upper class, which was comprised of warriors and chiefs (Gilbert 2000). In addition, the Germanic tribes in the time of the Roman Empire exhibited a wide variety of tattoo practices. Roman historians documented the tattoos of adversaries such as the Picts, Britons, and Gauls as they met the Roman Empire in battle (Carr 2005). Thus, the warrior connection to tattooing reaches from the Bronze Age to Late Middle Ages, after which the practice becomes directly connected to a more traditional interpretation of military member.

**Contemporary Culture and Theory**

**Contemporary Culture**

In this section I will investigate contemporary tattooing culture in the West through an analysis of recent history. Contemporary tattooing follows a path with several distinct sub-movements, from re-introduction into European culture, to the rise in popularity and subsequent migration to America, to the association with deviant cultures and the fall from popularity, to the tattooing renaissance and the
present trend of tattooing as a distinct art form. Each stage in the evolution of
tattooing informs the understanding of tattooing in the present, which will aid in the
analysis of contemporary tattooing among military members in the subsequent
sections.

Re-Introduction

Tattooing culture as it has manifested in the West began with the re-
introduction of traditional practices into European culture by Captain James Cook.
In 1769, Captain Cook sailed the crew of the Endeavor through the Polynesian
Islands on exploratory voyages for the British Navy (Brain 1979; DeMello 2000;
Gilbert 2000; Hudson 2009; Sanders and Vail 2008). It was in Tahiti that the ship’s
naturalist Joseph Banks, along with his scientific illustrator Sydney Parkinson, first
documented the practice of tattooing (Brain 1979; DeMello 2000; Gilbert 2000). The
crew of the Endeavor discovered similar practices later that year in New Zealand
which Banks and Parkinson were able to describe and illustrate (Figure 5) (DeMello
2000; Gilbert 2000). The images created by Parkinson are some of the most
thorough and accurate descriptions available of historical Polynesian tattooing.
It is from these interactions that the word “tattoo” was introduced into the Western vocabulary. Prior to this time, the act of tattooing had been referred to as “pricking,” referring to the tapping method of tattooing that punctured the skin to insert pigment (Sanders and Vail 2008:14). However, after encountering the practice in Tahiti, Cook and Banks recorded it as “ta-tu,” “tatau,” “tattaw,” or “tattow,” taken from the Tahitian words meaning to “knock, strike, prick or mark” (Bell 1999:53; Brain 1979:58; DeMello 2000:45; Gilbert 2000:33; Tassie 2003). In
the Tahitian language, the words themselves are said to mimic the sound of the tapping of the tattooing instruments (Bell 1999; Sanders and Vail 2008). In his journal, Banks recorded both the linguistic origins of the word “tattoo” as well as the differentiation of images and meanings:

I shall now mention their method of painting their bodies or “tattow” as it is called in their language. This they do by inlaying the color black under their skins in such a manner as to be indelible; everyone is marked thus in different parts of his body according maybe to his humor or different circumstances of his life. Some have ill-designed figures of men, birds or dogs, but they generally have this figure “Z” either simply, as the women are generally marked with it, on every joint of their fingers and toes and often round the outside of their feet, or in different figures of it as squares, circles, crescents, etc., which both sexes have on their arms and legs. In short they have an infinite diversity of figures in which they place this mark and some of them, we are told, had significations but this we never learnt to our satisfaction (from Gilbert 2000:36).

Cook made several more exploratory expeditions to the Polynesian Islands, and it was the product of these later trips that culminated in the transmission of tattooing practices to Europe. On his return to England after his second voyage, Cook brought with him Prince Omai, a heavily tattooed Tahitian Islander. Prince Omai was placed on display for the European upper class, to which he was “a great curiosity” (Sanders and Vail 2008:15). Though he was not the first tattooed individual to be exhibited in Europe, Prince Omai marks the beginning of the real interest taken in tattooing images and practices.

In addition, the first recorded instance of sailors being tattooed by native Islanders occurred in 1784, though this tradition could have started much earlier (Sanders and Vail 2008). Initially, sailors were tattooed with the traditional geometric, linear, and animal designs of the Island cultures. However over time,
there is evidence of a cultural transference, as both sailors and Islanders broadened the image vocabulary to include distinctly Western influence, including rifles, cannons, dates and English words (Caplan 1997; DeMello 2000; Gilbert 2000). Military connection to tattooing was revived with the re-introduction of tattooing practices to Europe. Captain Cook and his crew from the British Royal Navy embraced the Polynesian tattoos and returned to Europe with processes and physical evidence. From that moment, the connection between sailors and tattooing grew and solidified as tattooing spread across the world.

   Popularity of tattoo rapidly spread from sailors to the larger body of military members. Immediately following the re-introduction, soldier and sailors were among the groups most attracted to tattooing in Europe (Caplan 1997). In 1852, a study on the permanence of tattoos conducted by Johann Ludwig Casper found that 36 army veterans in a veteran’s hospital had acquired tattoos between 1798 and 1845 (Caplan 1997). The following year, another study concluded that 506 of 3000 veterans had received tattoos in their early 20’s (Caplan 1997). Both studies support the claim that significant portions of military personnel were receiving tattoos around the time of re-integration.

   The transfer of tattooing tradition to the West grew out of the re-introduction process in Europe. The travels and journals of Cook, Banks, and Parkinson, tattooed islanders placed on display, and the newly created tradition of tattooing among sailors, spurred the transition westward. The growth of tattooing would remain slow but steady until the middle of the 19th century, at which point the interest of the upper class would spark a tattooing craze across Europe.
“Tattoo Rage”

In the mid- to late-19th century tattooing became increasingly popular among the upper class due to the import and display of the exotic tattooed bodies. Simultaneously, returning sailors spread the practice among other military branches and working classes. The “Tattoo Rage” was a product of the increased frequency of tattooing among the upper and working classes, but almost entirely excluded the middle class due to differing cultural contexts surrounding each class’s practice.

The upper class was first exposed to tattooing through the exhibit of native tattooed individuals. These exhibits were generally limited admittance, marking it as a luxury of the elite. In addition, Europeans claiming fanciful stories of capture and forcible tattooing began to appear and exhibit their extensive tattoos (Sanders and Vail 2008). These individuals sparked the tattooing fad among the elite of Europe including prominent figures in the British royal family and nobility such as Czar Nicholas II of Russia, King George of Greece, Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany, and King Oscar of Sweden, all of whom received tattoos during their travels (Sanders and Vail 2008). Tattooed imagery included religious symbols, political allegiances, and love vows (Sanders and Vail 2008). Due to association with the exotic, and the exclusionary nature of native viewing, the tattooing among upper class practice grew under the guise of being an elitist practice.

In reality, tattooing was growing just as rapidly among the lower class. Sailors continued to get tattoos in their ports of call to commemorate their journeys or for the sake of experience. They also began learning the traditional tattoo
techniques, which were used both on ships to tattoo fellow crewmembers and upon on return to Europe (Sanders and Vail 2008). Other military branches, as well as dock and manual laborers, picked up the practice as sailors began returning with their new skills. Imagery among this population was based on common identification marks such as nautical images, and military or guild insignia (Sanders and Vail 2008).

The significance of the “Tattoo Rage” in Europe was to facilitate the spread of the practice across the Atlantic to the Americas (Sanders and Vail 2008). Though tattooing had existed here previously, contemporary tattooing grew out of the re-introduction from the newly created European tradition. American elites strove to mimic their European counterparts while sailors shared imagery and techniques with the lower class. From this point of re-introduction grew the distinct American contemporary tattooing culture that now typifies Western tattooing.

*American Tattooing Tradition: Introduction and Golden Age*

The establishment and transformation of tattooing in the United States is marked by a succession of notable artists and contributors. These individuals shaped the path of tattooing through their artistic and technical innovations, as well as their community and collaboration.

Martin Hildebrandt was the first professional tattooist in the United States. In 1846 he established the first parlor in North America, within the Bowery district of New York, from which he tattooed using a traditional hand method (DeMello 2000). The Bowery became a stronghold for tattooists and the center of much of the tattooing innovation of the 19th century. In addition, Hildebrandt is famed for
tattooing soldiers on both sides of the American Civil War, and is responsible for re-establishing the connection between tattooing and the military (DeMello 2000).

Lew “The Jew” Alberts, a contemporary of Hildebrandt and former wallpaper designer, was known for creating the standardized images that would become available in every parlor. Called “flash”, these formulaic images included “pin-up girls, military insignia, ships, jokes, cartoons, fierce animals, knives, and skulls” (DeMello 2007:52). Images are often badge-like designs and come in sheets that could be seen hanging on the walls of tattoo shops with only slight variations. Though based on one original set created by Alberts, the evolution of flash is difficult to trace, as tattooists would often copy images from the bodies of clients, alter them slightly and add their own signature.

In 1891, tattooing methods experienced a major breakthrough at the hands of Samuel O’Reilly. By adapting the perforating pen machine created by Thomas Edison, designed initially to assist in embroidering tough fabrics, O’Reilly patented the first electric tattooing machine (DeMello 2000; Sander and Vail 2008; Sperry 1991). Originally called the tattaugraph, this rotary tattoo machine moved the needle rapidly at the end of a fixed shaft, which was able to decrease cost and increase efficiency for each tattoo (Figure 6) (Sperry 1991). The increase in productivity and ease of tattooing had lasting effects on the demographic of tattoo clients. Among the elite, tattooing lost its appeal as a semi-exclusionary practice as it became affordable and available to both the middle and lower classes.
Figure 6: Diagram of the original tattaugraph machine, patented by Samuel O'Reilly (Gilbert 2000:126)

Though the tattaugraph revolutionized the technique of tattooing in the electrical age, it was not until the invention of the electromagnetic coil machine that electric tattooing became a widespread practice in the West. In 1904, “Professor” Charlie Wagner improved on the previous patent by altering the body design of the machine with “two electromagnetic coils set transversely to the tube and needle assembly” (Sanders and Vail 2008:17). Both the rotary machine and the electromagnetic coil machines greatly increased accessibility and allowed for the rapid diffusion of tattooing among the lower and middle classes. The tattoo machine designed by Wagner is the machine still used in contemporary tattooing (Sperry 1991).
The innovations of the Bowery tattooists spurred the growth in popularity of tattooing in American culture, which reached its peak during the “Golden Age”. Between the first and second World War, tattooing experienced its height of acclaim and highest level of social approval due to its association to patriotism and because of returning soldiers (DeMello 2000). Patriotism drove many individuals, both military and non-military, to receive patriotic-inspired badge-like imagery (DeMello 2000). As rapidly as tattooing rose in popularity, it quickly fell from grace following World War II, due to another shift in the demographic of tattooed individuals.

*American Tattooing Tradition: Fall and Renaissance*

By the mid–20th century the societal tolerance of the Golden Age had diminished as wartime patriotism decreased and demographics of tattooed individuals changed. With the invention of the electromagnetic tattooing machine, the practice became widely accessible to the general public, and therefore no longer a status symbol among the elite. As the upper class drifted away from tattooing, it became increasingly associated with society’s disenfranchised social groups who now frequented the Bowery (Roberts 2012). Bikers, Chicanos, criminals, and carnival workers including freak show attractions, became the most visible and prominent tattooed individuals, and were often tattooed to express social rebellion and disassociation (Sanders and Vail 2008). As the demographic shifted, tattooing became increasingly correlated to crime and general social deviance.

Despite the fall in popularity during the 20th century, tattoos remained prevalent among military members (Sanders and Vail 2008). The connection between the military and tattoos was so strong that a man with tattoos was
assumed to have served, or be serving, in the armed forces (DeMello 2000). As one of the most heavily tattooed populations, military personnel are responsible for setting trends in imagery and style that continue today. Such imagery included “regimental, battalion or company insignia, name and date of birth, previous occupation, name of garrison town, date of their conscription or a battle” (Caplan 1997:124).

In addition, unhygienic practices of tattoo parlors led to a rejection of tattooing as unsanitary and beneath the upper class. Tattooists were accustomed to working with a single needle on several clients successively, until the needle became too sharp and would slice through the skin, after which point the needle was changed (DeMello 2000). In addition, communal buckets of water were used to clean the needle between passes, and several artists dipped into communal inkwells simultaneously (DeMello 2000). These practices were blamed for a Hepatitis B outbreak after which the New York legislature began implementing tattooing regulations (Hudson 2009). Regulations and sanitation practices would not be wholly implemented or followed until the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s when tattooing underwent a renaissance of practice, aesthetic, and demographic of both tattooist and client.

The 1960s and 1970s saw yet another, and perhaps the final, dramatic shift in the culture and social condition of tattooing. Previously, tattooing had consisted primarily of badge-like flash images with heavy outlines and very few cohesive threads (Figure 7). Those who tattooed were termed “tattooists” in a professional setting. The Tattoo Renaissance is defined by the move to recognize tattooing as a
temporal but legitimate art form. Individuals entering the field took up the mantle of “tattoo artist” rather than tattooist, and many entered apprenticeships with university or art school degrees, or owned the term “self-taught” with a new and positive connotation (DeMello 2000; Sanders and Vail 2008). The movement emphasized artistic creativity over economic gains of mass reproduction of images, and therefore saw a move towards custom pieces as opposed to flash designs (Bell 1999). As a whole, the tattooing community “attempted to reintegrate tattooing into the mainstream culture by linking it to culturally positive meanings” and break the bonds to deviance that had been established in the 1940s and 50s (DeMello 2000).

As with the early development of tattooing in the United States, the Tattooing Renaissance is marked by influential individual artists who collaboratively altered the paradigm of American tattooing.

Figure 7: Original tattoo flash images from 1940 (Wikimedia Commons).
On October 1, 1970, San Franciscan tattoo artist Lyle Tuttle appeared on the inside cover of the *Rolling Stone* magazine. The accompanying article, titled “Tattoo Renaissance,” served as the foundation for the creation of a new positive image of tattooing, as well as to establish Tuttle as the unofficial spokesperson for tattooing (Hudson 2009). His talent for handling the media in a dramatic but believable manner allowed him not only to portray tattooing in a new light, but also to have a defining role in the creation of new health regulations. He focused on creating practices that were simple enough to ensure artist participation, while guaranteeing that sanitation requirements were met to avoid another epidemic (Hudson 2009). The push to recognize tattooing as an art form as well as the new sanitation regulations increased the clientele base to again including the middle and upper classes (DeMello 2000).

While Tuttle was reinventing the public image of the tattoo culture, several artists were working to reinvent the American tattooing aesthetic. Sailor Jerry Collins drew from oriental tattooing style to improve the already distinctive American style. While serving as a Merchant Marine in World War II, Collins was introduced to Japanese imagery and artistic styling. In the post-war period, Collins established a trade relationship with several prominent Japanese artists including Horihide, Horiyoshi II, Horisada, and Pinky Yun, where he offered raw materials in return for mentorship or design ideas (DeMello 2000). It was through these relationships that Collins was able to incorporate elements of Japanese tattooing, namely color, shading, and background images such as waves and scenery, into his art. Collins sought to incorporate the Japanese elements, but in such a way as to
“beat them at their own game” (DeMello 2000:74). He wanted to create a distinct and unified American aesthetic that utilized the entire body as a canvas, in a way similar to the Japanese, but through the use of specific Western imagery (DeMello 2000). Sailor Jerry Collins began what would become a trend throughout the Renaissance: the integration of cultural aesthetics from historical tattooing cultures in an effort to re-create the American aesthetic.

Through the sponsorship of artists with specific cultural influences and establishing the first custom-only parlor, Don Ed Hardy played a crucial role in shaping the direction of American tattooing. Taking an early interest in tattooing, Hardy graduated from San Francisco Art Institute with a B.F.A. in printmaking. While apprenticed to Phil Sparrow, Hardy was exposed to the Japanese style, in which his first studio specialized (DeMello 2000). In 1974, Hardy opened the first ever custom-only tattoo parlor after returning from an apprenticeship in Japan. Located in San Francisco, Realistic Tattoo served as a model for many contemporary tattooing establishments. In addition, Hardy cultivated connections with almost every other prominent artist of the time, including Phil Sparrow, Zeke Owens, Doc Webb, Sailor Jerry, Don Nolan, and Kazuo Oguri, through apprenticeships or sponsorships (DeMello 2000). It was through these connections that Hardy came into contact with new aesthetics or cultural revivals, such as tribalism and Chicano street style. The support of Hardy jumpstarted many tattooing careers and created a diverse body of new artists. Hardy’s final contribution was the creation of *TattooTime*, the first tattooing magazine published to document and promote
tattooing (DeMello 2000). Aimed at the middle class, the magazine was intended to further increase the acceptance of tattooing as a viable and acceptable art form.

By the end of the Tattoo Renaissance, the public image of tattooing shifted slightly away from an association with deviance towards mild acceptance of tattooing as an art form, due to the innovations of many artists including Collins, Tuttle, and Hardy. According to poll taken in 1989, roughly 3% of the general population had tattoos, and this number has increased to 10-20% in recent years (Roberts 2012). Subsequent polls have estimated roughly 16% prevalence among US adults (Sever 2003) with a higher prevalence among certain subgroups including college students (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2006) and military recruits (Armstrong et al. 2000). The dramatic upswing of tattooing participants points to a decrease in public disapproval. Contemporary body theory attempts to address the reasons, motivations, and meanings behind tattooing in the modern cultural context.

Theory

In contemporary academia, the analysis of tattooing and tattoos draws largely from social theories of the body. The physical body itself holds an imposing weight in society as the creator, communicator, and identifier of self. Any way the body is consciously modified then becomes an important addition to the understanding of social interactions. Therefore, tattooing is an indelible link to body theory, as the ink of the tattoo itself is linked to the flesh.

In the following sections I will discuss theories of the body as a socially constructed entity, as a factor in the creation of self, as a key to personal identity
creation, and as a means of social communication. These contemporary theories influence the understanding of tattooing in the modern context as tattoos are intrinsically linked to the physical appearance of the body and the conscious communication and formation of an individual’s identity.

*The Body as a Social Construct*

An understanding of tattoos in a modern context must start with an understanding of the body as a social construct. The body exists within the sphere of modern culture, and is therefore sculpted daily by forces that impact human interaction. In much the same way as actions are shaped by unwritten and often unidentifiable codes of conduct, so too do external forces create the body. In this way the body is a product of the individual’s immediate environment from which it absorbs meaning (Synnott 1993). The imported aspects of cultural meaning are then portrayed through the body to define the place, role, and interactions of that body to the less immediate societal environment (Synnott 1993). The body is not a passive entity in the cultural context, but it is influenced in ineludible ways that must be taken into account when attempting to understand a body.

Tattoos are inscribed onto a body of which they become an inseparable part. Just as a body cannot be separated from its cultural context, neither can the tattoos that have become a part of that body be separated from that same context. The meaning or implication of tattoos always exists within the cultural context from which the body was created. Moreover, the body and tattoos must also be interpreted, taking into account the “dominant system’s mode of intelligibility,” as this is the lens through which tattoos are most often viewed and interpreted.
The factors affecting the body and its interpretation are many more than just the immediate and dominant cultural context, but in terms of understanding tattoos, these two separate environments must be taken into account when attempting to understand or study a tattoo.

Anthony Synnott called the body both a “prime determination” and “prime symbol of the self” (1993:2). The body is determined through social construction, but Synnott also suggests that it can in turn determine the self. Due to, or perhaps in spite of, the impacts of social construction, the body becomes a physical representation of the “self”. Existing within a cultural context, the body comes to portray external factors that shape self-creation and understanding. Those external factors become internalized and integral aspects of self-creation. The physical body is molded through social construct, causing the internal conceptualization of self to be derived from the same factors. Self is linked to a body created by cultural factors in a process that tangles identity, self, and society in a binding web.

Identity Creation through the Body and “Self”

Frédérique de Vignemont raises the question “What is the body for the self?” (2011:231). Another way to phrase his question would be: What is the body’s relationship to the “self,” or identity, of an individual? De Vignemont investigates this notion of the relationship between the physical body and internal self through an analysis of external and internal experiences of the body. External experiences are dependent upon the five senses, but internal experiences rely on what he terms “body senses,” feelings compatible with “bodily sensations” specific to each individual (2011:234). It is through the interactions of the internal and external
senses that de Vignemont proposes self and identity are created. Through its sensory experiences, the “body grounds the self through time, thus guaranteeing personal identity” (de Vignemont 2011:231). The body acts to anchor the self in the face of time and, it can be assumed, other peripheral influences as well. So, what is the body to the self? According to de Vignemont, it is the cornerstone upon which personal identity is built. But since the body is experienced in two ways, internally and externally, identity is subject to these dual experiences as well.

The body acts as a determinant of self in two ways: primarily as a predetermined context of social construction, but also as a place of self-creation. Characteristics outside the control of an individual, those constructed by society, include race, sex, age markers, ethnicity, and indicators of social status (MacCormack 2006). But the body is not a passive entity in society and the self can act upon the body to alter its physical appearance. In order to facilitate this self-creation through the body, there have to be means through which conscious transformation can occur. Body modification is one approach that helps to facilitate conscious identity creation.

Identity is the narrative of self that tells of one’s history: who they are, where they came from and what makes them distinct (Langman 2003). The past, locations, and general characteristics are inscribed in the social construction of the body as predetermined indicators. What makes a body distinct though, can be a conscious choice of the individual, in some way setting their body apart from the immediate culture. This can include temporary modifications such as clothing, makeup, hairstyles or dyes, and body painting, or permanent modifications like piercings,
tattoos, scars, brands, or stretching. In both cases the individual exercises conscious choice in the distinction, except in such cases where the modifications are encultured, where conscious choice may not be exercised. Identity is linked to a person’s physical appearance in such a way that it affects his or her self-definition and interactions with others (Sanders and Vail 2008). Decorations of the body are utilized as a template on which both aesthetic preferences and identity are articulated (Langman 2005). The physical alterations of the body make it distinct and create a personal identity through its distinct-ness.

Tattoos specifically can be viewed as fulfilling a three-part role in identity creation as “modes of self-expression and/or self-(trans)formation” (Sullivan 2009:130). It becomes difficult to firmly separate the three modes as one attempts to analyze the distinctions. Self-expression, which can be readily achieved in any ornamentation of the body, often draws from aesthetics or cultures to which an individual identifies. Self-formation can be reliant upon self-expression in that it becomes the means for promoting identity. Self-transformation is the changing of the self through conscious choice in self-formation. Though the modes are difficult to differentiate, the common theme of identity creation through aesthetic representation and portrayal is evident. The body acts as a canvas upon which permanent reminders of “one’s true identity in an ever changing world” can be inscribed and displayed (Roberts 2012:154). This permanent display returns the analysis to the body acting as an anchor for self-identity, as the permanency of tattoos can speak to constant characteristics of identity. Tattooing acts as an outlet for symbolic creativity in the creation of personal identity (Bell 1999).
Social Communication

The role and significance of tattoos in contemporary society is not limited to aiding in identity formation, but also serves as a medium of communicating that identity. Tattooing “effectively communicates a wealth of information that shapes the social situation in which interaction takes place” (Sanders and Vail 2008:2). That wealth of information adds to the predetermined indicators from social construction to create a walking advertisement of an individual’s past and present ideals, characteristics, and identity.

The skin is the most accessible textual surface of communication (MacCormack 2006). The immediate nature of the skin makes the messages inscribed in the flesh of the body instantaneously evident to an observer. Through the skin, the social construction and conscious choice of identity are communicated in two ways. First, the body is read for “significance,” what each element of the skin means (MacCormack 2006:63). This includes both the predetermined socially constructed elements of race, ethnicity, sex, gender, age, and social strata, as well as the conscious identification with specific cultures or elements of self. Second, the significant elements are analyzed and placed into categories of meaning that define the individual, in “subjectification” (MacCormack 2006:63). Significance and subjectification combine to create a single being that exists and is interpreted within the dominant culture.

The interaction between the skin and the external world is a reciprocal relationship (MacCormack 2006). The skin is the shared space between the internal and the external and the forces of pressure exerted by both demand dual
acknowledgement. It is through the skin that the self interacts with the external world; the “site of encounter between the enfleshed self and society” (MacCormack 2006:59). The self is able to impose its desires upon society by altering the physical body and society then interacts with the self by using those alterations to define the body and the self.

External social environments use physical appearance as the primary criteria for placement of individuals into social categories. Jane Caplan states, “Appearance conveys messages about individual status and group identity as well as decorative or aesthetic standards, and it may simultaneously encode principles of social and political organization and belief” (1997:112). This categorization furthers the social construction of a body, as it aids in the anticipation and interpretation of behaviors and ideals and assists in social decision-making, both on the part of the individual and the external parties. Thus the categorization occurs on both an individual and group level (Sanders and Vail 2008). Personal identity is analyzed in terms of the skin itself, but also in relation to the group affiliation communicated through the body and its modifications. Categorization of the body through its physical appearance is the most prevalent outcome of the skin as a medium of social communication. The unavoidable presence of the skin in the social context elevates its importance as a tool of communication.

When inscribing or altering the skin, the significance of the message conveyed is increased due to conscious choice on the part of the individual. Tattooing then becomes the mindful communication of a specific element of the self. The optional addition of a tattoo symbolizes the internalization of culture and the
externalization of self “where the self enters the world and the world enters the self” (MacCormack 2006:59). Due to the permanent nature of tattoos, they communicate permanent status or affiliation to a group, life-long social connections or consistent concepts of aesthetic beauty (Sanders and Vail 2008). Tattoos have the potency to denote culturally universal concepts such as the bearer’s status within their social group, their own personal identity, their identity within the group, or more culturally specific implications such as bravery or completion of a rite of passage (Sanders and Vail 2008). Whichever the case, a tattoo communicates a message in the subjectification of the body. Whether the message is entirely intentional is irrelevant as the communication and subsequent categorization is inevitable, especially for the tattooed body.

The body, the self, and the importance of tattoos in the creation of both are interpreted within a complex web of contemporary theory, in which each concept relies on and builds upon the surrounding ideas. Self-creation and identity are reliant upon the body that has already been shaped by social construction and both are effectively and efficiently communicated through the medium of the skin. Tattooing and other body modifications then become additional layers of messages to be read and interpreted. They hold an elevated level of importance in the determination of personal identity, as these alterations are conscious choices rather than predetermined characteristics. As an illustration of the inter-connectedness of the above stated theories, the following passage combines them in two concise sentences:

Significance and subjectification are phenomena of the flesh (inextricable from the psyche within it) but because they exist as an interface between
experiencing the flesh of another and the self in the world they are both linguistic and corporeal. Significance and subjectification give the body a function, purpose and meaning in the world and give the world meaning, function and purpose to the body (MacCormack 2006:63).

This passage discusses categorization as a “phenomena of the flesh” which is in turned linked to the “psyche,” or self. The relationship between the body and society give both meaning and significance to the other. Specifically related to tattooing, these theories remain as inter-reliant as before; “The tattooed skin offered itself as a mouthpiece for species of language, in a double sense; it was both a system of communication...and a signature of individual social identity or psychological state” (Caplan 1997:133).

Tattoos have served as a physical mark of status and group connection throughout history. Whether the connection is positive, such as the Maori status symbol, or negative, such as the Roman and Japanese criminals, there remains a link between tattoos and group identities. Tattoos can be used to send a message of group affiliation, but as contemporary theory states, they can also be used to create and assert the self in a public setting. The remainder of this paper will investigate the use of tattoos as tools to create identity and to promote group cohesion and self among members of the military.

**Methodology**

This study was conducted using a multi-faceted ethnographic approach, including formal and informal interviews, participant observation, and an in-depth literature review. The primarily qualitative approach to data collection was developed based on previous research experience of tattooing culture (Frecentese 2012).
Fieldwork was conducted between October of 2012 and January of 2013 in the Colorado Springs area. Situated between the Air Force Academy and Buckley Air Force base to the north, Peterson and Schriever Air Force bases to the east, and Fort Carson Army installation to the south, this community is composed of approximately 26,000 military members and 39,500 family members (Colorado Springs Chamber of Commerce 2011). The military establishments in the area have become an integral component of the Colorado Springs community identity, as community and base interact in both positive and negative ways. In this setting, an investigation of military culture is both easily accessible and well received by community members.

Operating under the participant observation paradigm, formal and informal interviews were conducted in tattoo parlors in the Colorado Springs area. Upon entering a parlor, I would first explain my project and interview artists to establish rapport. Artists then suggested clients fitting my criteria, who were subsequently asked for their participation. In each case participants either signed an Informed Consent Form (Appendix A) or gave verbal consent in cases where they preferred to not have their name recorded. In accordance with the Informed Consent Form and Institutional Review Board’s guidelines, all participants’ identities have been concealed. The names of participants in text are pseudonyms assigned to differentiate between sources of information while maintaining confidentiality.

In the initial canvassing of tattoo parlors with in the Colorado Springs area, seven tattoo parlors were visited, but based upon receptiveness of owners and artists many tattoo parlors were not available to assist in this study. The majority of
research was conducted from a single parlor, where artists were invested in the study topic and eager to assist in the participant search.

Participants were selected based solely on their membership to the United States Military, as either active duty or separated members. Interviews were primarily conducted in tattoo parlors while participants were receiving a tattoo. Additionally, interviews were conducted through email for participants who were either deployed or otherwise unable to be reached in person (Appendix B). Finally, a few interviews were conducted at public establishments in the area. Participants primarily dictated the structure of the interviews. The environment of a tattoo parlor is both loose and informal, therefore the rigidity of a formally structured interview was anticipated to be less effective than a conversation-style interview. Participants were initially encouraged to share their personal experience with tattooing by describing their designs and the motivations for those tattoos, and were then prompted to elaborate specifically on the tattooing culture in the military. I used a set of interview questions to ensure that I gathered adequate information (Appendix C). I was unable to use a voice recorder for interviews in parlors as the noise of the tattoo machines interfered with the recording. Therefore, in order to remain consistent, I recorded answers by hand during all face-to-face interviews.

Based on definitions described by Raymond Gold (1958), this field study and interview process was undertaken utilizing both a participant-as-observer and observer-as-participant approach. In the participant-as-observer paradigm, both the field worker and interviewee are aware of the study, but the field researcher embraces the culture and plays the role of participant as much as possible (Gold
1958). This relationship is forged over time through both informal and formal observation settings, and best exemplifies the relationships created between myself and the tattoo artists (Gold 1958). Except in a few cases, participants were interviewed during a single meeting under a structured guise. This relationship typifies the observer-as-participant approach (Gold 1958). In both cases, I became a participant through my interest in the culture and presence in the tattoo parlor. The participant-as-observer relationships allowed for a comfortable exchange of information and ideas, whereas the more structured format of the observer-as-participant interviews yielded concise and consistently applicable data.

**Results**

A total of fourteen individuals were interviewed over the course of this study. Seven individuals were interviewed in person, while seven individuals were interview via email. The demographic information of the individuals interviewed is as varied as the tattooed images on their bodies (Table 1). The sample consisted overwhelmingly of enlisted males. Of the four branches of the United States military, Army and Air Force were primarily and fairly evenly represented, Navy was represented to a lesser degree, and Marines were not represented. In addition to the branch of the military, interviewees were further differentiated by service status and career. The sample was split almost evenly between active duty and discharged individuals.
Table 1: General demographics of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-29</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-49</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 +</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declined answering</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Branch of the Military</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Army</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navy</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Air Force</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marines</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Service Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active Duty</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discharged</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academy Student</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Military Career</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enlisted</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Officer</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Tattoos</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 or less</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3–6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7–10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11–16</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17–21</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Excluding those who declined to answer the question of age, a majority of the individuals in the sample belong to the middle age bracket. Age becomes relevant to this study in that individuals in the younger age bracket have had less time to receive tattoos than those in the middle or older age brackets. Therefore, age could affect the total number of tattoos received.

*Tattoos by Number*

The number of tattoos on a given individual ranged from two to over twenty-one, with three fairly distinct brackets (Table 2). The categories were based upon the clustering of data in these brackets and upon personal observations of the visual
prevalence of an individual’s tattoos. The lowest bracket contained two individuals with two or less tattoos, both of whom expressed interest in receiving more tattoos. The middle bracket consisted of five individuals with between seven and ten tattoos. Individuals within this bracket usually had badge-like designs (refer to Figure 7) that could be partially or completely concealed by casual attire. The final category is the heavily tattooed individuals with over seventeen tattoos. These individuals tend to have either a compilation of badge-like designs or more continuous designs that covered entire segments of the body. At this point, it becomes difficult to differentiate single tattoos and therefore determine a precise number of tattoos per individual. The numbers for this category were determine by best estimate of the tattoos describe during interviews.

Tattoos were further analyzed by location (Figure 8). Tattoos on the arms tend to combine into a single, continuous design as more tattoos are accumulated and therefore cannot be quantified in the same manner as the rest of the body (Table 3). A substantial portion of tattoos can be concealed under normal athletic clothing. However, there is a sizeable portion of participants with densely covered arms, where long sleeves would be necessary to fully conceal the tattoos. Two participants had tattoos that could not be concealed, including those on the neck and hands.
Figure 8: Number of tattoos by region of the body

Table 3: Tattoos on the arm differentiated by surface covered

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Portion of Arm Covered</th>
<th>Number of Individuals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full sleeve</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Half Sleeves</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One Half Sleeve</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shoulders</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forearms</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner Arm</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As to the prevalence of tattoos among military personnel, participants of this study deemed the presence of tattoos a standard trend. “Almost everyone who has served has at least one tattoo,” said Daniel, a thought that was echoed later by
Rachel: “I've rarely met a military member that did not have tattoos.” She went on to say, “Yes they are very common. It’s actually kind of interesting/strange when I run into any individual that doesn’t have one, whether military or not.” According to the interviews, tattooing is a common trend among members of the military.

**Tattoo by Image**

The imagery and content of the tattoos observed was further analyzed to illustrate prevalence of military influence (Table 4). Tattoos were divided into three categories based on the direct imagery observed, as well as descriptions and motivations offered by the participants. The categories represent the level of military association in each of an individual’s tattoos. At one end are the images with direct military association, including the bald eagle, American flag, a unit badge, or a memorial. The opposite end contains tattoos with no military affiliation, and could include depictions of Father Time (Paul), sugar skulls (David, John, Nicole), or Japanese dragons (Daniel, Eric, James, Mark, Rachel) among other examples. In the middle are images that combine some aspects of patriotism or military connection but lack direct military association. This category includes images consciously chosen to commemorate a military event or memory, as well as the imagery with a documented military history that may or may not have been chosen for that reason. Images include tattoos marking a significant military event such as a deployment or homecoming, nicknames received while in service, images in the traditional Sailor Jerry style from pinups to nautical stars, tattoos received during deployment, tattoos that have military family history, as well as those where the participant stated expressly that the image was a tribute in some way to their military career. In each
of these categories, tattoos could be from any of the predominant tattooing styles including Old School, New School, fine line black and grey, tribal, Asian, Celtic, biomechanical, and foreign characters. Each style was observed during this study.

Table 4: Analysis of level of military association in tattoo images

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Direct Military Association</th>
<th>Indirect Military Association</th>
<th>No Military Association</th>
<th>Unknown</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Tattoos</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Total Tattoos Observed</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
<td>71.6%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority of Tattoos within a Category</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the total number of tattoos observed, the smallest portion had a direct military association (12%). Indirectly associated tattoos held a slightly larger percentage of the tattoos (16%). Tattoos with no military association made up the largest proportion (71%).

In addition, the tattoos of each individual were analyzed independently to determine which category a majority of their tattoos belonged. Nine of the fourteen participants had a majority of tattoos with no military association, with only one participant having a majority with an indirect association. The four individuals in the unknown category had an equal amount of tattoos in two of the three categories and could not be placed.

The combination of the final two analyses clearly indicates the prevalence of non-military associated tattoos among the military population in this study. A majority of individual tattoos exhibit no military association in either image or description. In addition, a majority of individual’s tattoos taken as a whole entity
display no military association. A substantial majority of tattoos received by
members of the military community, both individual images and the sum of all parts,
bear no relation to their military membership.

*Tattoo by Motivation*

One participant summarized the likely motivations for receiving tattoos:

I can’t really say what motivates anyone to get tattoos. Even the
reasons I have gotten them are varied. Some do it just to get
something cool, others to commemorate an event. Some spark a
memory, inspire a smile, show love, look like a bad ass... *The reasons
for tattoos are as varied as the individuals who get them and the tattoos
they get* (Emphasis added, Eric).

Tattooing is a highly personal and individualized process, making it difficult to draw
definitive categories around what serves as the impetus for a tattoo design. That
being said, several broad trends emerged when participants were asked for the
reasons or motivations for their tattoos.

A major trend among participants were tattoos that reflected familial
connections. This is expressed as images that tie to their immediate family such as
names of spouses or children (Andrea, Andrew, Eric, James, John, Nicole) or to
baby’s hand prints (James), or draw a connection to ancient ancestry, as in family
crests or imagery linked to other nationalities (David, Mark). Andrea, who has at
least two family-connected tattoos herself, explained this trend saying, “As a rule,
military members spend quite a bit of time away from family and friends.
Sometimes for a brief time (as in deployments) or sometimes in death (loss of a
good friend to an IED, bullet, or some war related death). The tattoo is a way to keep
them close and remember them.” The trend of familial tattoos is a way for keeping
reminders of family on hand when military members are physically far removed.
Familial motivation appeared to be the predominant impetus for receiving tattoos among the sample population.

Another trend was the achievement tattoo, a tattoo that marked a significant moment or achievement in an individual’s life. Several examples of this include commencement or completion of basic training (David, Eric, Paul, Rachel) or additional training (Eric, James), returning from deployment (Andrew, Chris, Eric, James, Mark, Rachel), or completing a marathon (Andrew, Eric). Tattoos marked major milestones in a person’s life, in both a military and civilian capacity. Speaking specifically of achievement tattoos with military themes, Andrew attested that a “major reason military members (predominantly enlisted members) get tattoos is to commemorate their experiences.” Another participant, Chris, physically supports this statement with the tattoo of a Spartan warrior he received immediately after returning from his first deployment. Eric specifically referenced the use of his tattoos as a permanent marker: “I got it to mark another milestone in my military career and show off my pride in my job.” The achievement marker tattoo was the second most common motivation for tattooing in this sample population.

Pride in the military was another oft seen trend, though it was not as prevalent as either of the aforementioned categories. Several participants stated outright that “I got this tattoo to show my pride for being a member of the Air Force” (Eric) or other military branch. When asked to explain why he chose to place an American Flag on his forearm, James went so far as to say, “Fucking America! That’s all I have to say... I’ve been in the military active duty since ’98, that’s all I know. That’s all I know, doing stuff for the country.” Others were not quite as profane but
still forthright in describing what transpired to prompt their patriotic tattoo, whether it be the American Flag (James, Paul), a traditional screaming eagle (Andrea, Eric), a representation of the Statue of Liberty (David), insignia of their rank (Eric, Mark, Paul), or a memorial tattoo (Chris, Nicole, Paul, Rachel). Jason spoke of memorial tattoos specifically saying that though “pride and honor” are the among the main motivators for tattooing, the recent military activity has caused an increase in memorial tattoos, “These deployments have caused a drastic rise in military personnel being killed or seriously injured in action. Unit members will often express their love for their lost brothers in arms in way of permanently commemorating their names, unit designators, or other momentous symbols on their bodies.” James reiterated this by asserting that there was no specific theme in military tattoos, but memorials were popular.

Due to the perceived aims of my study, participants seemed more prone to emphasize their explanation of tattoos with military associations over others. However, due to the overwhelming majority of tattoos with no military association opposed to those with a military association, I believe that the prevalence of military pride as a motivation for tattoos is over represented in this study. That is not to say that pride and military associated tattoos lack merit or incidence, merely that it may not be as widespread a theme in light of the wealth of other tattoos.

All the above trends, as well as a remaining majority of tattoos observed, fall under the umbrella category of identity creator. This category was initially difficult to distinguish due to the differentiation of language that ultimately related to the same trend. In many interviews, participants used the word “favorite” or phrase “I
could relate to” in order to describe the inspiration for their design. These tattoos represent some aspect of the individual’s self, and how they choose to present it to the world. In addition, there was a significant amount of images and text that served as a personal reminder. From quotes encouraging good life (Chris, John, Nicole, Paul, Rachel) to roses with thorns as a reminder of tough love (Rachel), personal reminders acted as a way to maintain and preserve the self in the face of adversity.

As stated by Eric at the opening of this section, the motivations for tattoos are as individual as the images themselves and the people who chose them. The trends present here in no way reflect the diversity of motivations that people gave for their tattoos. In addition to the trends already presented, tattoos offered protection, became a statement of rebellion, prophesied good death, or looked “fucking bad-ass” (John). The most concise statement on the central themes consistent throughout military tattoos came from a fully tattooed individual, David: “For the most part, its personal connections, stories, or something you really like.” Personal connections, achievement markers and an image that correlates strongly to the self were the central themes of tattooing, among a melee of additional motivations.

**Discussion**

This study revealed features of the culture and mentality of military tattooing that have thus far been undocumented in an academic context. The results of this study differed from my expectations, and diverge from the literature specific to tattoos within the military. I hypothesized that military members would have a higher prevalence of military associated tattoos in comparison to those with no
military connection. These data refuted this anticipated outcome by showing a far
greater proportion of tattoos with no military connection. I also expected to see few
tattoos on military members, most of which being easily concealed, but data suggest
a tendency for multiple tattoos that can be only partially concealed. In addition, I
hypothesized that there would be a large degree of repetition in design, style and
imagery. Instead, these data indicate a great variety in imagery and tattooing style
among military members. The following analysis explores the theories of military
identity and group cohesion and how my findings can inform these theories. In
addition, it examines the areas in which my data differ from my hypotheses and the
implications of these deviations.

*Identity Creation through Group Cohesion*

As stated previously in the introduction, the environment surrounding a
body shapes its identity; therefore, membership to the military will greatly inform
the identity of an individual. However, contrary to the previous discussion of
identity, identity within the military may be more closely linked to group cohesion
than to individual ideals. The creation of identity still stems from the culture
surrounding an individual (Synnott 1993), but the military culture is distinct from
civilian culture, therefore the resulting identities are different as well. An
understanding of the military identity creation process and resulting identity is
necessary to understand the implications of this study, for just as tattoos
communicate identity in civilian culture, so too do they communicate identity within
the military. Understanding identity as it relates to the military is necessary to
understand the implications of tattooing within the military complex.
Military identity creation begins at the same place as creation of any identity: with the immediate culture. In an article titled, “Identity in the Profession of Arms,” Vice Admiral Ann Rondeau notes the connection between culture and identity in a military context:

When we think about the nature of our profession and about ourselves as individual members of that profession, there are aspects that surround us as military professionals, and there are aspects that are inside us as individual military professionals. The former include ethos, cultures, and meaning; the latter center on identity. What surrounds us transforms what is in us. Thus, ethos, culture and meaning give us our identity (2011:10).

According to Rondeau, the culture of the military informs the identities of the individuals of which it is comprised. The relationship between the military organization and the individual is the nexus of identity formation (Rondeau 2011). These points echo the statements of contemporary academics reviewed previously, of the body as a socially constructed entity that must be viewed through the lens of the primary system of interpretations (Synnott 1993; MacCormack 2006). In the case of military identity, the primary system is the military complex, and it is at this point that military identity diverges from the civilian identity, as the ethos of each group diverges.

Within the military complex, the extent of group cohesion is almost unparalleled, as it is based upon a high level of mutual dependence in order to promote survival in combat environments. In a study dedicated to unraveling the processes behind creation of group cohesion in the military, Anthony King states:

Military institutions depend on a level of social cohesion that is matched in few other social groups. In combat, the armed forces are able to sustain themselves only so long as individual members commit themselves to collective goals even at the cost of personal injury or death (King 2006:493).
According to King, the commitment of individuals to group goals ultimately form the bonds of cohesion that are so absolute as to demand a personal life for the survival of the group. John echoes King’s claims of commitment to a group goal by stating, “The object is to know what the other guy is thinking.” Military groups must create such a high level of cohesion, that an understanding of the intentions and aims of one member becomes second nature to another. The extreme cohesion is a hallmark of the military complex, so much so as to provoke the study by King to understand these processes.

Harking back to Rondeau, it is then from this ethos, the culture of exceptional group cohesion, that members of the military derive their identity. With such a strong link between group and individual, a single member’s identity can be partially relinquished to that of the group. That is to say that the ethos of the military creates an environment where survival of the group depends on a surrendering of personal identity. But an individual cannot exist without an identity, causing members of the military to assume the identity of the group as their own. Personal identity becomes intrinsically tied to group identity as a necessity for survival and efficiency in the field. The union between group identity and personal identity can potentially become so absolute that individuality can be yielded in the face of commitment to the group.

Several interviewees made express mention of group commitment and cohesion in relation to identity and individualism. As a foundation for our discussion of his tattoos, Mark equated the separate branches of the military and the units and groups within those branches to football teams. Group pride and belonging fostered
a fierce honor and commitment to whichever group you belonged. Building upon the notions of pride within groups, John asserted, “In the military, you have to rely on everyone around you. You can’t question.” Here he references both the belonging to and dependence on members of one’s respective groups. In addition, he makes note of the almost blind following that accompanies these groups. Finally, Paul completed the association when he said, “Individualism is not a desired trait in the military. You are a team. You eat together, you sleep together. The object is to try to know what the other guy is thinking.” Paul explicitly references the loss of individuality for the sake of the group: “Individualism is not a desired trait.” Through the statements of interviewees, the theory of personal identity loss due to high levels of commitment, that is personal identity succumbing to group identity, is supported by findings of this study in addition to the academic texts referenced above.

Moreover, Max Sugar posits that identities are given rather than created within military cultures (2006). Many enlistees approach the military without having “attained intimacy; a time perspective; or a sense of identity or harmony between, ego, superego, and id. Neither have they achieved consolidation of personality or character or a sense of independence of autonomy” (Sugar 2006). The weak construction of identity and personality are easily replaced by a pre-developed identity given to them by the military. The acceptance or denial of the given identity will result in a good or bad warrior, respectively (Sugar 2006). In combination with King’s theories, a good soldier is an individual who accepts the group identity given to them, in place of his or her own weak personal identity.
Image of a Warrior and Asserting Individuality

The practice of tattooing exists both within and outside of the structure of military cohesion and group identity. Tattooing has been established as a military practice since the Bronze Age and the discovery of Ötzi, maintained throughout the Roman Empire, and reinvigorated in 1769 with the exploratory voyages of Capitan James Cook (Brain 1979; Gilbert 2000: Green 2003). Members of the military drove the expansion of tattooing throughout lower class cultural groups in both Europe and America. Their continued presence in tattooing culture helped to spur the development of alternative artistic styles as well as the installation of hygiene laws and regulations. In this way, tattooing exists very much within the military complex, as part of its rich cultural history.

However, the byproduct of tattooing as a means of identity creation is well outside the bounds of the military objectives. Previous sections have emphasized the use and importance of tattooing as a method of creating personal identity through conscious alteration of the body (Bell 1999). Within the military, “Individualism is not a desired trait” as pointed out by Paul, and therefore the high rate of tattooing among military personnel appears contradictory. The conscious creation of a personal identity is contrary to the necessity of creating group identity.

Nevertheless, because tattooing has an ingrained history within the military, the tattoo itself has become a central piece of the image of a warrior, and therefore an element of group identity. From the Roman Empire onward, tattoos have been used as some sort of military identification. Initially used to identify deserters, now tattoos serve as a mark of the warriors themselves. Tattoos help to create the
external image of the warrior as a supplement to the internal identity created through group cohesion.

Interviews highlighted the prevalence of tattoos as well as their integration into the military complex and use as a cohesive element. “I've rarely met a military member that did not have tattoos” Rachel attested, validating the prevalence of the practice within the military. Because it is a widespread practice among a community that defines itself by group cohesion, the similarity in the image of the military personnel becomes an additional layer of group identity. Jason echoed Rachel, “It has become the norm to see military members with more tattoo work and is generally acceptable by the public,” and carried this thought further saying, “Tattoos are very peer driven in the military. Even in the social circles which don’t get military symbols or unit designators are encouraged to get a tattoo of some kind.” Paul finished the discussion when he claimed that tattoos today are the “same shit, they are trying to exhibit a similarity, a cohesive bond in their tattoos.” Group cohesion is furthered by the image of the warrior, an aspect of which is the tattooed individual, making the practice one that exists within the military complex.

Therefore, tattooing as a practice exists within and outside of the mechanisms that create a military identity. Due to its ingrained historical lineage, tattooing is a significant aspect of creating the warrior image, making it a part of the total complex surrounding military identity. But tattoos also have the ability to create and assert individuality, which is contrary to the necessary aims of group cohesion within the military. Tattooing, as an aspect of individual identity creation and group identity cohesions, both supports and subverts military identity creation.
The Trend of Individuality

The findings of this study offer an interesting commentary on the role tattoos play in the intercourse between military identity and personal identity. My expectations for this study were driven by an anticipation of high rates of cohesion within this community, which would manifest in retention of historical practices as well as a similarity in imagery seen throughout military tattoos. However, the data defied my expectations, and pointed to an unanticipated trend in contemporary military tattooing: the trend of individuality. Based upon the quantitative and qualitative data collected through interviews, I believe that tattooing among this sample population of the military community is used as a means of asserting identity that still resides within the acceptable boundaries of practices that support group cohesion.

The high incidence of tattoos with no military association opposed to low incidence of tattoos with a direct or indirect association indicates that elements of individuality are experienced and expressed by members of the military. These data presented clearly denote a wide variability of design, placement, number, and motivation of tattoos within the military. This variability is the crux of the trend of individuality. Full cohesion of tattooing would result in similarity of themes and repetition of images. Instead, though there is repetition of the practice of tattooing itself, there is evident divergence of images and motivations for tattoos. Therefore tattooing is a means through which individuality is expressed within the military complex.
Members of the military are taking an accepted practice, which has been used in the past to create a cohesive image, and adapting it to their own aims, that is asserting individuality within the military complex. The historical nature of tattooing allows the practice to be accepted within the military complex and group cohesion, while the expressive nature of tattooing allows for it to be used as a means of asserting individuality.

In interviews, many participants mentioned tattoos as a means of self-expression, especially in relation to the military. Nicole explained,

> Tattoos are very common among military members. I think [it] is because we are forced to conform and look professional while in uniform. We are held to a higher standard while on duty, but when we are off duty we are allowed to express ourselves and show off tattoos and other things not allowed in uniform. Tattoos allow us to be individuals and express what we can’t in uniform.

In addition, Daniel stated, “Tattoos are a way for military members to express themselves and show respect for the fallen.” Furthermore, Andrew eloquently affirmed, “I decided that not using my skin to advertise who I am and what’s important to me is like a painter walking through life with an empty canvas or a runner never completing a race.” In each of these cases, the participant references the need for self-expression and tattoos as a means for achieving those needs. “In peer groups in the military, in most branches, there has been a strong desire to express one’s self through tattooing that has a long history in the service.” Here Jason brings together two of the main points of this analysis: that tattooing has a long history within the military, and that it is currently used by members of the military groups to “express one’s self.”
These data as well as statements from interviews clearly illustrate the trend of individuality, or self-expression, that is present in the contemporary culture of tattooing among military personnel. In a study geared toward determining incidence and risk of tattooing to Army soldiers, general questions pertaining to the reasons for getting a tattooed were asked (Armstrong 2000). According to this study, “the major reason cited for obtaining the tattoos was “just wanted one” (54%), followed by “to express myself” (16%)” (Armstrong 2000:138). However, the study goes on to state, “Self-Identity seemed to be the major reason for getting the tattoo. The respondents’ strong agreement with the reason 'Be myself. I don’t need to impress anyone anymore’... respondents obtained the tattoos for themselves, that it was their idea and decision” (Armstrong 2000:139). The results of this study support the general tenet of this analysis, that tattooing is used as a means of asserting identity in a military context.

However, the study makes no mention of military identity within the group cohesion context, therefore, it lacks a deeper understanding of the significance of tattoos within this community. My analysis furthers that of Armstrong through the additional examination of group dynamics and identity formation. The importance of tattooing to identity creation is heightened with the acknowledgement of group cohesion practices as a major component of group military identity. Belonging and subscribing to the military complex is compulsory for all members of the community, shaping identity as one of the group above the individual. Within this context the desire to assert personal identity is potentially stronger due to the very fact that it is not encouraged, but a means of asserting this identity in acceptable
ways is vital to the maintenance of the group identity. Tattooing within the military complex cannot therefore be understood purely as a means of asserting personal identity, but also as a method of doing so while maintaining group cohesion and operating to fulfill the image of a warrior. Tattooing simultaneously fulfills the requirements of group and individual identity in a way that maintains and fortifies both, allowing group identity to provide a necessary framework for combat while preserving individual identity.

**Potential Error Sources**

In a study where data collection is predicated on personal interviews, there are several opportunities for error. The primary source of error is the small sample size and a lack of diversity of participants. The study sample consisted overwhelmingly of enlisted males, and contained neither female officers nor any members of the Marines. The lack of diversity in the study sample potentially swayed the data toward more heavily tattooed individuals.

An additional error source is personal biases, both on my part and on the part of participants. Though the focus of the study was on tattoos among the military, it was often interpreted as “military tattoos” which had the potential to affect the explanations given to me. Participants may have been more apt to explain the tattoos they deemed “military associated” rather than give a full account of each tattoo. My personal bias altered the way in which I asked questions and recorded data, though I endeavored to record as close to verbatim as possible.

This study would have also benefited greatly from a survey of non-tattooed military personnel who could have served as a control group. In addition, a survey
of both tattooed and non-tattooed civilian individuals would have been advantageous, as it would have aided in determining prevalence of tattooing among military versus civilian sub-cultures.

**Conclusion**

Tattooing as a cultural practice has an extensive history that began in the archaeological record and extends to the living record of contemporary human skin. Existing definitively since the Bronze Age (Cains and Byard 2008; Green 2003), body modification practices have circumnavigated the globe and its diverse array of cultures, from Ancient Egypt (Bianchi 1998; Sperry 1991), to Siberia (Carr 2005; Gilbert 2000; Poli, et al. 2012; Rudenko 1970), Japan (Gilbert 2000; Poli, et al. 2012), Ancient Greece and Rome (Gilbert 2000; Jones 1987), the Americas (Smith and Zimmerman 1975; Sperry 1991), and the Polynesian Islands (Brain 1979; Caines and Byard 2008; Gilbert 2000). Continuing from the time of re-discovery (Brain 1979; DeMello 2000; Gilbert 2000; Hudson 2009; Sanders and Vail 2008), tattooing has since become entrenched in profound meaning to the body and identity among contemporary cultural groups (Bell 1999; Caplan 1997; Langman 2003; MacCormack 2006; Roberts 2012; Sanders and Vail 2008; Sullivan 2009; Synnott 1993; de Vignemont 2011). Warriors and members of the military have been a principal community partaking in the practice of tattooing since its initial conception (Cains and Byard 2008; Caplan 1997; Carr 2005; DeMello 2000; Gilbert 2000; Hudson 2009; Green 2003; Jones 1987; Sanders and Vail 2008).

The results of this study contradicted my initial expectations in a way that indicated a higher degree of individuality and identity assertion than anticipated.
The tattoos of the study populations exhibited a low degree of military association in images and little repetition in designs, in addition to a substantial portion of tattoos that could not be easily concealed. The results aligned with the study conducted by Armstrong (2000), which cited self-expression as the primary reason for tattooing, but failed to take the military complex and its effects on identity creation into account. In light of the results of previous studies and the results of this study, I formulated a theory which I called the trend of individuality that I believe is present in the participant population.

Tattooing serves as a medium for identity creation that simultaneously allows for personal identity assertion and maintenance of military group cohesion. The practice of tattooing has been an integral aspect of the creation of the identity of a warrior that now comprises, in part, the physical image of a warrior. In this way, tattooing exists to support military identity. Conversely, tattooing is acknowledged in academia as a means of conscious identity creation, which exists well outside of the aims of military group cohesion.

Tattooing occupies a contentious and precarious place within the military community, one of simultaneously supporting and subverting military identity creation. Although tattooing is only a small aspect of the plethora of elements that influence identity, an understanding of its importance as an integrated aspect of military history is necessary to be able to understand contemporary trends and meaning in military tattoos. This study provides an additional lens through which to understand and interpret tattooing among the military community. The controversial social nature of tattooing in contemporary society often results in a
writing off of the importance of tattooing to individuality and identity, but this practice, with its long integrated military history, is a vital and vibrant aspect of what it means to be, and look like, a warrior.
References


Appendix A

Military Tattooing Thesis Consent Form
Victoria Frecentese
Supervisor: Krista Fish
Colorado College Department of Anthropology
(719) 389-6358
Victoria.Frecentese@coloradocollege.edu

You are invited to take part in a research study of contemporary trends in tattooing among the military community of Colorado Springs, CO.

What the study is about: Military tattooing has a long and colorful history, as service men were among the first sub-culture to fully embrace this form of body modification. In the past, military tattoos followed a basic motif structure and could be identified by commonalities in placement and style. However, as with the greater tattoo culture, military tattoo culture has shifted. Tattoos now reflect a more individualistic component, but in many cases can still be identified as having a militaristic origin. Tattoos can be used as preparation for deployment, identification, or as a commemorative token of service. I wish to study why peoples in the military are choosing to receive tattoos, and understand the underlying motivations and symbolism of individual tattoos as well as the tattooing culture as a whole.

What you will be asked to do: You will be asked to participate in an interview lasting approximately 1 hour. You will be asked to explain about the design, location, and motivations behind your tattoo, as well as place them in a timeline related to any deployments or other military activity.

Risks and benefits: There are no anticipated risks to you if you participate in this study, beyond those encountered in everyday life. There are no anticipated benefits to you, but your participation will likely serve to provide information to the understudied area of military tattooing.

Taking part is voluntary: Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose to be in the study you can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. [Indicate that participants can choose to skip any question, participate in only some tasks, etc. as appropriate to the study.] Participating in this study does not mean that you are giving up any of your legal rights.

Your answers will be confidential: The records of this study will be kept private. The nature of this research is confidential, meaning that the information you give me will not be shared with anyone else. Your personal name will be kept private and any information used in the final report will be used under a pseudonym. Only I will know which pseudonym will be attached to your name.

If you have questions or want a copy or summary of the study results: Contact the researcher at the email address or phone number above. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records. If you have any questions about whether you have been treated in an illegal or unethical way, contact the Colorado College Institutional Research Board chair, Amanda Udis-Kessler at 719-227-8177 or audiskessler@coloradocollege.edu.

Statement of Consent: I have read the above information, and have received answers to any questions. I consent to take part in the research study of contemporary trends in tattooing among the military community in Colorado Springs, CO.

__________________________________________  __________
Participant’s Signature                      Date

Appendix A

Military Tattooing Thesis Consent Form
Victoria Frecentese
Supervisor: Krista Fish
Colorado College Department of Anthropology
(719) 389-6358
Victoria.Frecentese@coloradocollege.edu

You are invited to take part in a research study of contemporary trends in tattooing among the military community of Colorado Springs, CO.

What the study is about: Military tattooing has a long and colorful history, as service men were among the first sub-culture to fully embrace this form of body modification. In the past, military tattoos followed a basic motif structure and could be identified by commonalities in placement and style. However, as with the greater tattoo culture, military tattoo culture has shifted. Tattoos now reflect a more individualistic component, but in many cases can still be identified as having a militaristic origin. Tattoos can be used as preparation for deployment, identification, or as a commemorative token of service. I wish to study why peoples in the military are choosing to receive tattoos, and understand the underlying motivations and symbolism of individual tattoos as well as the tattooing culture as a whole.

What you will be asked to do: You will be asked to participate in an interview lasting approximately 1 hour. You will be asked to explain about the design, location, and motivations behind your tattoo, as well as place them in a timeline related to any deployments or other military activity.

Risks and benefits: There are no anticipated risks to you if you participate in this study, beyond those encountered in everyday life. There are no anticipated benefits to you, but your participation will likely serve to provide information to the understudied area of military tattooing.

Taking part is voluntary: Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose to be in the study you can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. [Indicate that participants can choose to skip any question, participate in only some tasks, etc. as appropriate to the study.] Participating in this study does not mean that you are giving up any of your legal rights.

Your answers will be confidential: The records of this study will be kept private. The nature of this research is confidential, meaning that the information you give me will not be shared with anyone else. Your personal name will be kept private and any information used in the final report will be used under a pseudonym. Only I will know which pseudonym will be attached to your name.

If you have questions or want a copy or summary of the study results: Contact the researcher at the email address or phone number above. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records. If you have any questions about whether you have been treated in an illegal or unethical way, contact the Colorado College Institutional Research Board chair, Amanda Udis-Kessler at 719-227-8177 or audiskessler@coloradocollege.edu.

Statement of Consent: I have read the above information, and have received answers to any questions. I consent to take part in the research study of contemporary trends in tattooing among the military community in Colorado Springs, CO.

__________________________________________  __________
Participant’s Signature                      Date
Appendix B

Interview Questions for Tattooed members of the Military Community

General
1. Please state your name, age, and gender.
2. Would you identify as a member of the military community?
   a. Branch, unit, rank?

Personal Tattoo Experience (Present)
1. How did you go about deciding on this particular tattoo?
2. Does it hold any particular significance to you?

Personal Tattoo Experience (Past)
1. Do you have any other tattoos?
   a. How many tattoos do you have total?
   b. When did you get them?
   c. How did you go about deciding on these tattoos?
   d. What would you say was the major motivation for deciding to get these tattoos?
2. When did you get your first tattoo? Can you describe the design? Do you remember the reasons/motivations for getting your first tattoo?
3. What was the decision making process like for your first tattoo? How did you settle on that specific design?

Personal Tattooing Experience (Future)
1. Do you plan on getting any more tattoos?
   a. Do you have a specific plan or goal of how many you would like to receive?
2. How will you decided on your future tattoos?

The Military Community and Tattoos
1. Did the military community to which you belong have an influence on your decision to get this tattoo?
   a. If so, in what way?
2. What would you say is the major reason military members get tattoos?
   a. Does this differ from your reason to get a tattoo?
3. What are your general perceptions of tattoos among members of the military?
4. Are tattoos common among members of the military?
   a. If yes or no, why do you think that is?
   b. Of your group of closest friends, how many would you say have tattoos?
5. What would you say are the main motivations or reasons that military members get tattoos?
   a. Group pressure, bonding, badges of courage, memorials?
Appendix C

Military Tattooing Thesis Email Questionnaire
Victoria Frecentese
Supervisor: Krista Fish
Colorado College Department of Anthropology
(719) 389-6358
Victoria.Frecentese@coloradocollege.edu

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability. If you have any further questions or comments, please feel free to contact the researcher at the email address above.

1. Please state your name, age, and gender.
2. With which branch of the military do you identify? Please describe your specific job and rank.
3. Describe the design and placement of your current tattoos.
   a. What motivated you to get each tattoo?
   b. Why did you choose that particular design and placement?
   c. What does your tattoo/tattoos mean to you?
4. Do you plan on receiving any more tattoos?
   a. If so, do you have a design in mind?
   b. If so, why that specific design?
5. Were any of your relatives in the military?
   a. If so, did they have tattoos?
6. Did the military community to which you belong have an influence on your decision to get your tattoo(s)?
   a. If so, in what way?
7. What are your general perceptions of tattoos among members of the military?
8. In your experience, are tattoos common among members of the military?
   a. If yes or no, why do you think that is?
   b. Of your group of closest friends, how many would you say have tattoos?
9. What would you say are the main motivations or reasons that military members get tattoos?
10. If there is anything else that you believe would be relevant to my study or to a complete understanding of your tattoos, please feel free to add anything you wish.