

Permanent Gestures

Primitive Whiteness in the (Queer) Tattoo Shop

Meredith Lee



The basic schema of tattooing is thus definable as the exteriorization of the interior, which is simultaneously the interiorization of the exterior.

—Alfred Gell (1993:38–39)

In 2011 I received a tattoo of sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld on my inner thigh. I was captivated with Hirschfeld at the time because he founded the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee in Germany in 1897—considered by many historians to be the first gay rights organization—and in 1919 opened the Institute of Sexual Research in Berlin, which was destroyed by the Nazis in May 1933. Like Hirschfeld, I have spent much of my life researching sex and gender. One way this research manifests is through the act of tattooing my body, connecting me to an underground community and genealogy of queers, criminals, and other deviants.

The shop I chose for my Hirschfeld tattoo is located in Columbus, Ohio, and is known for traditional tattooing—my chosen style—and the artist I selected is particularly good at traditional Americana tattooing. Like many tattoo shops, all the artists there are white, cis-gender, heterosexual men. As a white trans/butch lesbian, sitting in my underwear in the tattoo shop, I felt intensely uncomfortable. The white tattooist working on me began chatting with some other white artists in the shop. They discussed the white boys that sometimes came in and asked for white supremacist tattoos, especially swastikas. My tattooist mentioned one tattoo he put on a white supremacist's chest that depicted a group of white men heiling Hitler. The artist working on me said that he “respected anyone who truly believed in something” and most of the other guys nodded their heads in agreement. While they were having this discussion, a documentary on the infamous tattooist Ed Hardy was playing on the television in the background. Ed Hardy was trained by Phil Sparrow (also known as Samuel Steward), an important gay tattoo artist, ex-professor, and erotica writer who was born in California in 1945 and died in 1993. No doubt the tattoo artists in the shop could not make the connections between my tattoo, the documentary playing in the background, and their conversation, as their relationship to white supremacy disavowed the queerness of this assemblage. Nonetheless, a theoretical framework began to take shape in my mind from this primal scene of sexual and racial inscription—a method of connecting skin and ink, body and race—to analyze how sex is a strange matter that mediates these practices of corporeal inscription.

As tattoo needles pierced and stained my skin, I was further struck with an apprehensive feeling because even though I have a profound respect for Magnus Hirschfeld, he was also an avowed eugenicist who believed in Ernst Haeckel's theory of recapitulation—the belief that ontogeny (the growth of an individual organism) recapitulates phylogeny (the evolutionary history of a species)—which in turn reinforced Social Darwinism and eventually contributed to Hitler's ideas about racial purification.¹ Although Hirschfeld has been idealized in popular culture, for example through his representation on the Amazon television series *Transparent*, I want to *deidealize* and reconsider this figure following Kadji Amin's provocative argument about Jean Genet and idealization. As Amin writes:

Deidealization is not the wholesale destruction of cherished ideals, but a form of the reparative that acknowledges messiness and damage, refuses the repudiating operations of idealization, and acknowledges the ways in which complicity is sometimes necessary for survival. (2017:11)

While I am not excusing Hirschfeld for his racist beliefs, I agree with Amin that one should deidealize a subject through recognizing their “messiness and damage” as well as their “complicity” as a means of survival. In the case of Hirschfeld, this deidealization means considering how he utilized racist methods and theories at the turn of the 20th century in order to work towards the legalization of homosexuality. Yet, the temporal dynamics of Hirschfeld's racist, and even transphobic, thought

Figure 1. (previous page) Julie Tolentino, 2019. (Photo courtesy of Julie Tolentino)

Meredith Lee (Indiana University) is Assistant Professor of Gender Studies and Research Associate at the Kinsey Institute. Their research traces the labor of Blackness and race through “radical” formations of transness and marginality within civil society and the law. Their first book manuscript utilizes a Black feminist lens to interrogate the genealogical formation of the wrong body narrative within medico-scientific discourse of transsexuality. A second book in process maps the underground formation of queer tattooing in the hemispheric Americas since the 1940s. leemer@iu.edu

1. For a nuanced reading of Hirschfeld's life and death, see Heike Bauer (2017). For more information on Haeckel and recapitulation theory, see Stephen Jay Gould (1977:76–78).



Figure 2. The author's Magnus Hirschfeld tattoo. (Photo courtesy of Meredith Lee)

are negated for the sake of queer liberatory politics. This temporal tension is the crux of the layered and looping time of my inaugural scene in the tattoo shop. I was getting this tattoo while the tattoo artist talked about how he tattoos white supremacists. Yet I'm queer, and queerness filled the room through the image of Hirschfeld who identified as a sexual invert and the documentary that showed Sparrow who was a homosexual. I experienced a moment of abjection where an assemblage formed that could not be ignored—one that gestured toward the notion of whiteness as primitive within the space and time of the tattoo shop.

Primitive whiteness emerged here as a concept for me that imposes the atavistic and colonial violence of the historical appropriation of tattooing as well as inscribes the radically political deviancy of the tattooist and their canvas within queer forms of pathologized identities. Put differently, primitive whiteness libidinally and literally connects the “atavistic” act of tattooing with queer forms of deviancy like criminality, prostitution, and homosexuality. Tattooing has been understood, for much of its history, as an exteriorization of the interior—and hence of one's “inherent” deviance and/or perversion as inscribed on the skin. Yet, this

scene in the tattoo shop also suggests a fundamental contradiction, even antagonism, inherent to the space and time of tattoo shops in general. Ultimately my queerness and transness in this scene didn't matter because my whiteness erases all other differences.

In interrogating the role of primitive whiteness in the tattoo shop and revealing how white supremacy ultimately works to disavow the queerness of tattoo history, I do not mean to disregard tattoo artists of color, especially contemporary queer ones. But I'm most interested in the ways that whiteness has been utilized to structure the dominant schema of tattooing in the West. I am telling a specific history here that focuses on white masculine queerness and, also, the disavowal of such an identity in the tattoo shop. My own positionality within the tattoo shop signifies a contradictory formation of white supremacy that allows for the deracination of my own trans/queer subjectivity.

To think between skin, desire, and economy requires a theoretical framework that is capacious enough to address how the tattooed sailor and criminal historically came to be considered interchangeable with the tattooed “native.” How did this interchange in turn produce what I am calling a form of primitive whiteness within the antiblack and colonial legacies of tattooing in the US? Tattooing binds deviance to whiteness, and tattooing came to be understood as an exterior symbol for the unconscious desire for Otherness; the primitive whiteness of tattooing has been understood in terms of a kind of libidinal economy. What happens when this primitive whiteness, which is so intertwined with white heterosexual masculinity, is in fact queer? What are the racialized libidinal implications of queerness and tattooing?

Into the Libidinal Flesh

The concept of the libidinal economy plays an important role in illuminating what might be called the primitive whiteness of the tattoo world, which has since the early 20th century been frequently associated with sexual perversion, using the language of psychoanalysis. For Freud, the libido connects to the ego, which he defined as the “intermediary between the id and the external world” ([1940] 1949:15). In doing so, the ego is primarily determined by an individual’s own experience while the libido is the drive or instinct that places somatic demands onto mental or psychological life (23). Freud argued that there are in fact stages of development for the libido. While the libido has been conflated with sex drive in other contexts, Freud used it in a much broader way to include all human behavior. This is crucial when thinking about libidinal economy.

Freud understood the libido in economic terms—and subsequent theorists have reconceptualized the libidinal economy to represent the complex relationship between sexuality and the unconscious. Jean-Francois Lyotard’s *Libidinal Economy* provides a helpful theoretical framework for understanding and dissecting how the tattoo world constructs a white heterosexual imaginary of tattoo history and erases this history’s queerness. Lyotard argues that political economy cannot exist without libidinal economy:

There is no need to begin with transgression, we must go immediately to the very limits of cruelty, perform the dissection of polymorphous perversion, spread out the immense membrane of the libidinal “body” which is quite different to frame. It is made from the most heterogeneous textures, bone, epithelium, sheets to write on, charged atmospheres, swords, glass cases, peoples, grasses, canvases to paint. All these zones are joined end to end in a band which has no back to it, a Moebius band which interests us not because it is closed, but because it is one-sided [...]. ([1974] 1993:2)

When one focuses solely on political economy, the exteriorization of bodies is always central to analysis because the structure of political economy depends on the biological hold of the body as natural, as one-sided. In other words, representation as produced through political economy is determined by the supposed unity of the organic body, what Sylvia Wynter calls “the-model-of-a-natural-organism” (2015:21), and its transgression.² Lyotard expounds upon a perverse description of a little girl’s vaginal fold and how this can be substituted or displaced by the fold in her armpit to show the absurdity of this bodily unity. The notion of bodily transgression depends on a prior conception of corporeal unity. But in starting with the limits of cruelty (the cold indifference to causing pain and suffering) and the dissection of polymorphous perversion (the libidinal body in all its complexity), libidinal economy can become a framework for analyzing the cultural unconscious and the individual’s desires within such an economy. Lyotard conceptualizes the libidinal as a Moebius strip, which he calls the libidinal band, that twists and turns but ultimately remains one-sided, i.e., the exterior. Although this band is rapidly moving with one’s psychic and emotional life, representation occurs when one’s desire stops the band at random points. What becomes hegemonic depends on the current structures of political economy and these structures are unconsciously shaped by the libidinal economy of the time (the cultural unconscious desire).

No doubt, it is this one-sided Moebius band that places queerness and white supremacy on the same plane of analysis in the tattoo shop. Much like tattoos, especially in the 1950s, this exterior becomes the condition for understanding the interior. As such, these random points, these *pressure points* that stop the band, are inscribed in the ongoing political, economic, and cultural emergencies

2. Wynter states: “This is the version in whose terms the human has now been redefined, since the nineteenth century, on the natural scientific model of a natural organism. This is a model that supposedly preexists—rather than coexists with—all the models of other human societies and their religions/cultures. That is, all human societies have their ostensibly natural scientific organic basis, with their religions/cultures being merely superstructural. All the peoples of the world, whatever their religions/cultures, are drawn into the homogenizing global structures that are based on the-model-of-a-natural-organism world-systemic order” (2015:21).

of this space and time. The labor of pressure points is two-fold: first, there are various points in time when desire for the Other is pressured by a closeness to death (such as getting a tattoo when one's mother dies); and second, the pressure point of a tattoo needle pricking the flesh.

Libidinal economy provides one way to decipher these pressure points and linger in the libidinal (unconscious and preconscious) contours of such points. These pressure points are imprinted onto our bodies, and thereby, our psyches, making a space to cut into "the most heterogeneous textures, bone, epithelium" where the libidinal labors, rendering the body broken up by deliberate inscription. Importantly, the libidinal is neither ahistorical nor apolitical. Lyotard signals the ways violence and trauma are in fact historically enfolded in the body, and this moves the unconscious out of the precious hold of the individual and into a larger terrain of historical and political terms. Put another way, tattoos bring "the limits of cruelty" to the surface. Within the libidinal economy of the mid-20th-century US, during the moment when psychoanalytic theories were in their cultural ascendance, tattoos came to be associated with the sexually "primitive" and hence this act of tattooing the body came to be indelibly associated with other forms of deviancy.

Libidinal Economy as Primitive Whiteness

The social, cultural, and historical pressure points of tattooing have often been theorized in sexually pathologizing terms, especially prior to the 1980s in the West. Amelia Jones's conceptual frame of body art conceives a "set of performative practices that, through such intersubjective engagement, instantiate the dislocation or decentering of the Cartesian subject of modernism" (1998:1). This means that the pressure points of tattooing, as performative practice, yields a reconfiguration of identity where its being is "always elsewhere" (14). Tattoos dislocate the Cartesian subject by permanently marking one's exterior with their interior desires. Tattoos are pathologized by libidinally connecting the practice to primitiveness, which in turn constructs a kind of primitive whiteness within the schema of tattooing. The desire for the primitive is entangled in the origins of tattooing in the West, which appropriated indigenous African and Polynesian cultural traditions of bodily adornment. This is seen through the popular historical narratives about Captain James Cook's voyages to the South Pacific in the 1770s, when the word tattoo (*tatau*) was first introduced into Western discourse. Cook's crew received tattoos from natives as exotic souvenirs to bring home, which started the tradition of sailors permanently marking their bodies with symbols of their voyages—making a passport of the skin. By the late 19th century, tattooing had become a popular practice for socially marginalized communities such as criminals and prostitutes.

This telling of the history of modern Western tattooing not only fetishizes the racialized other through the sexual(ized) act of tattooing, but also links tattoos to other forms of performative bodily practices that have historically been designated as "perversions." Albert Parry noted in his pioneering study *Tattoo: Secrets of a Strange Art as Practised Among the Natives of the United States* (1933) that tattooing is always already sexualized. Parry takes a Freudian approach to interpreting the practice of tattooing and emphasizes a strong similarity between sex and tattooing. Parry writes that the process of tattooing is fundamentally sexual because "[t]here are the long, sharp needles. There is the liquid poured into the pricked skin. There are the two participants of the act, one active, the other passive. There is the curious marriage of pleasure and pain" ([1933] 2006:4). The passive recipient endures the pain of the pricked skin, much like the act of sexual penetration involves painful pleasures and pleasurable pain; in this way, tattooing resembles other "perverse" forms of sexual expression such as kink and pain play. Indeed, Parry's own libidinal economy emerges in the numerous places in his writing that explicitly link tattooing to sexual perversion. In his short article, bluntly titled "Tattooing Among Prostitutes and Perverts," Parry writes:

But tattoos openly admitting and even extolling their perversion are more frequent among male homosexuals. Thus, an American sailor had a tattooed arrow on his back, along the spine, pointing to the anus, an accompanying inscription reading: "For Men Only." Another man, who pandered to pederasts, had on his buttocks two inscriptions: "Open All Night" and "Pay as You Enter." (1934:479)

According to Parry, these tattoos explicitly mark the male homosexual's perversion; they stain the skin in ways that bring to the surface his inverted desire. His libido fixates on this perversion that manifests as a permanent gesture from pricking the skin with ink. Parry's analysis of these permanent gestures leads him to put forth a universal of tattooing: "Man's dreams are his leaps back to the primitive, to his childhood, to his past of untold ages. Tattooing is mostly about the recording of dreams, whether or not the tattooed are consciously aware of it" ([1933] 2006:1–2). Parry here crudely summons Freud's theory of dreaming as a form of wish fulfillment for the unconscious, which is created in childhood and dependent on repression that, as John Kihlstrom writes, "operates specifically to deny conscious representation to primal sexual and aggressive instincts and their derivatives" (2015:5). Parry depends on dreaming as the marker for the reproduction of repressed desire through tattooing. Significantly, Kihlstrom uses the term "primal," which could be read as synonymous with primitive—one's primitive or primal sexual and aggressive instincts are part of one's libidinal economy.

For Freudian psychoanalysis, such primitive instincts lead to perverted forms of sexuality. Freud states that homosexuality is "a predominance of archaic constitutions and primitive psychical mechanisms" ([1905] 1949:146). Lyotard employs Freud's term "polymorphous perversion" to index Freud's proposed stages of the erotogenic zone in relation to the libidinal demands that drive the mind ([1940] 1949:28). This perversion constructs one notion of primitive whiteness. The first stage of libidinal development focuses on the mouth, then progresses to the anal phase, the phallic phase, the latent phase, and finally the genital phase, ordering the polymorphously perverse to concentrate on a genitally "aligned" pleasure that results in heterosexual intercourse. These phases culminate not unlike a bildungsroman, in which the child matures genitally through puberty into adulthood. To be normal (heterosexual) an individual must advance through all five stages. Freud argues that a boy or man who remains stuck in the anal or phallic phase experiences latent sexuality linked directly to the primitive past. In Freud's schematic, the subject's "perversions" are connected through a primitive libido, arguing that race and climate are the two key factors for influencing the prevalence of inversion, i.e., homosexuality (1905:139).³

Another pressure point of the libidinal economy of tattooing concerns how permanently marking the skin can be understood as the manifestation of the unconscious desire for Otherness. In *Wrapping in Images: Tattooing in Polynesia*, anthropologist Alfred Gell writes:

Tattooing, as it is now practiced in Western countries, originated as a consequence of European expansion into the Pacific, as is witnessed by the Polynesian origins of the word "tattoo." It is consequently impossible to make any clear distinction between Western ideas about tattooing which derive from educated perceptions of the practice as characteristic of the "ethnic Other"—the tattooed native—versus perceptions of tattooing as a stigma of the "class Other"—i.e., the tattooed sailor or the tattooed criminal. (1993:10)

Gell argues that the Western white understanding of tattooing comes from both the ethnic Other and the classed Other, as determined by Western universal whiteness, and that the Others are conflated, or collapsed, as the same. The tattooed native and the tattooed sailor or criminal represented the same atavistic deviancy through a Westernized lens. Furthermore, the tattooed sailor came to represent the subjugation of the primitive Other during the height of US imperialism because sailors' tattoos signified the cultures where the practice of tattooing is indigenous.

While criminality and deviance took to ink in the West, so too did those who are at the frontlines of colonial and imperial war. In "Sutures of Ink," Christine Braunberger discusses the connection between tattoos and the military. She maintains that even if sailors got tattoos that were not explicitly sexual, those tattoos still further eroticized the military body: "War and its attendant possibilities become the neurosis, the military body is the fetish, and the stain is again the tattoo that marks the

3. When discussing degeneracy, Freud writes, "It is remarkably widespread among many savage and primitive races, whereas the concept of degeneracy is usually restricted to states of high civilization (cf. Bloch); and, even amongst the civilized peoples of Europe, climate and race exercise the most powerful influence on the prevalence of inversion and upon the attitude adopted towards it" (1905:138).

body with the disturbances of military experience” (2000:44). The soldier or sailor’s tattooed body, always classed, was pathologized and placed under the umbrella of abnormality in a similar way to the homosexual or criminal body.

One way this conflation occurred was through the methods of scientific racism. The Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso (1835–1909) was determined to prove that the criminal’s body was somehow hiding the truth of the criminal’s pathology and believed that pain connected the exterior of the body to the interior of the self. By the middle of the 19th century, physical pain became associated with psychic pain and even madness through the figurations of tattooed criminals, savages, and prostitutes. As Lombroso wrote, “To us [tattoos] serve a psychological purpose, in enabling us to discern the obscure sides of the criminal’s soul, his remarkable vanity, his thirst for vengeance, and his atavistic character, even in his writing” (1896:803). Put differently, according to Lombroso’s false analogy at the turn of the 20th century, tattoos were a physical manifestation of the criminal’s or savage’s pathological deviancy. In *The Criminal* (1890), English sexologist Havelock Ellis argues that vanity and erotic passion are the main reasons criminals get tattooed: “[I]t usually serves as an indication of mental abnormality, of indiscipline, of the tendency to vice [for criminals]” (1890:199). Both Ellis and Lombroso believed the practice of tattooing is atavistic because it is a tradition that is only “normal” among “primitive savages.” They conflated the pathology of the ethnic Other with the pathology of the criminal Other and constructed a kind of degenerated primitive whiteness.

As tattoos became a part of European culture during the height of the Enlightenment, they primarily came to be seen as an expression of pathology rather than a symbol of the erotic Other. As criminologists “illuminated,” tattoos were in fact one way to read a deviant’s internal pathology. This is one of the main ways that tattooing became associated with atavistic identities like criminals, and “savages” that then became associated with homosexuals.

Queering Tattoo History

The life and work of Samuel Steward (1909–1993), also known as Phil Sparrow (when tattooing), provides a fascinating example of how the larger medico-scientific discourse of early to mid-20th-century psychoanalysis and psychiatry informed a nascent underground gay tattoo culture. Indeed, Steward believed that the tattoos he put on his body libidinally connected him to the “toughs,” the criminal, and the lower/working class as well as the colonized, ethnic Other—and thereby, I suggest, his tattooing could be understood as a practice of primitively “whitening” himself. Prior to the publication of Justin Spring’s 2010 critical biography, *Secret Historian: The Life and Times of Samuel Steward, Professor, Tattoo Artist, and Sexual Renegade*, only a few select “insiders” were aware that Steward, who also sometimes went by the name Phil Sparrow, was a gay renegade who had been a crucial figure within American tattooing’s modern historical emergence. In other words, prior to Spring’s book, the history of Steward/Sparrow was not recorded in tattoo history. Tattoo history in itself has never been queered. Samuel Steward and his vast archive are vital for thinking about primitive whiteness as an analytic for queering the tattoo shop itself.

Steward was an English professor, tattoo artist (as Phil Sparrow), erotica writer (published under the name Phil Andros), and sex researcher for Alfred Kinsey. Steward, whom I will henceforth call Phil Sparrow here because of my focus on his tattooing work, began his tattoo career in Chicago in the 1950s and eventually opened up shop in Oakland, California, in the 1960s. Sparrow’s first career was as a college professor, armed with a PhD from Ohio State University. He eventually left the academy to pursue full-time tattooing. Significantly, he got his first tattoo at a time in his life when his masochistic homosexual fantasies heightened. Shortly after receiving his first tattoo, he became consumed with both getting tattooed and becoming a tattooist—both of which were highly erotic for Sparrow (Spring 2010:187). He initially developed an interest in tattoos because of his attraction to the kinds of masculinity he saw in criminals, hustlers, bikers, sailors, and other working-class men. By the spring of 1954, Sparrow started to tattoo out of his apartment—which was adorned with homosexual pornographic pictures—viewable by appointment as a way to not only build a small business, but also to seduce men (191). As a professor, Sparrow had no easy access to these types of men, but as a tattooist, he was at the center of this “primitive” white masculine world.

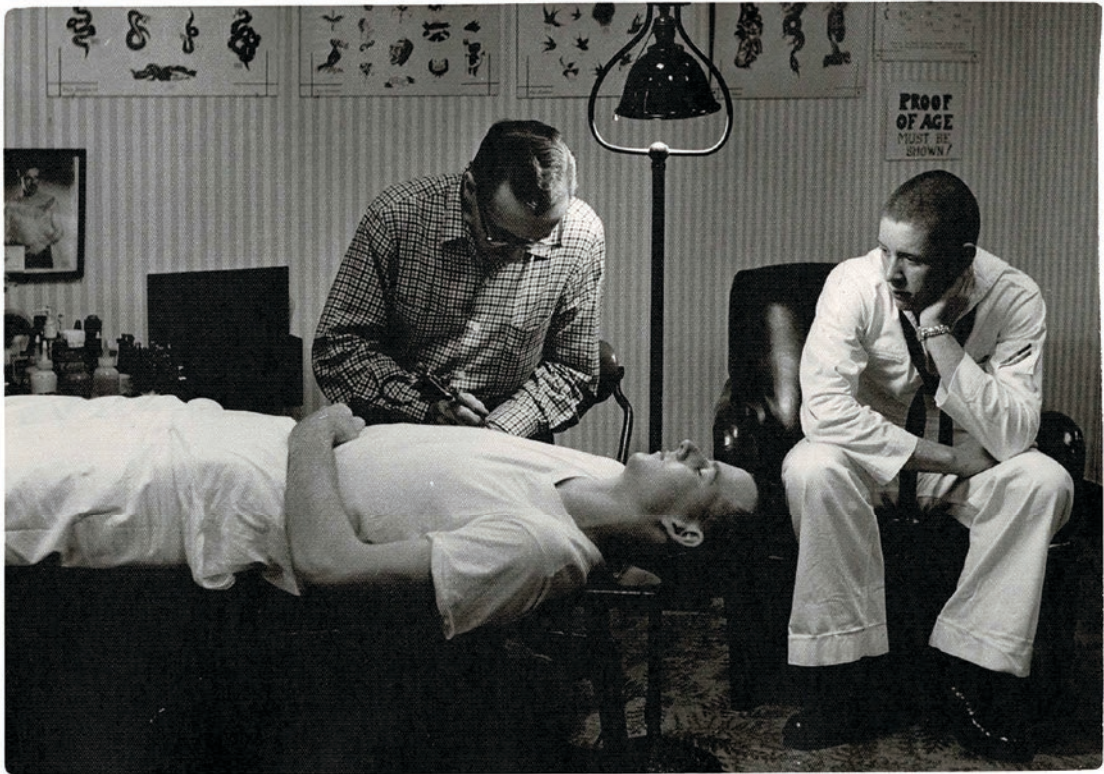


Figure 3. Phil Sparrow tattooing on the last day at Anchor Tattoo in Milwaukee in the 1960s. (Photo by Chuck Renslow; courtesy of Nick Colella and Great Lakes Tattoo)

In the US of the 1950s, Sparrow was still considered a criminal as a homosexual man, not only by social and legal definitions but also in his own understanding of himself. He spent much of his life fascinated with Jean Genet's 1953 novel *Querelle de Brest*. The novel takes place in Brest, France, and centers on George Querelle, a (homosexual) sailor, prostitute, and serial killer. Querelle's sex acts reenact his sadomasochistic desires of power and punishment. Sparrow loved the novel because of the sexual glorification of sailors and the depictions of rough sex between working-class "heterosexual" men. As Spring notes:

The novel also spoke to Steward's [Sparrow's] own troubled perception of his sexual nature, for Genet equates homosexual acts with criminal acts throughout the novel, and Genet's perception of homosexual identity [...] is always of something monstrous and criminal. And indeed the pleasure Steward took in his own sexual adventures seems to have been darkened and intensified, throughout his life, by a similar psychic conflict. (135)

Genet's novel was not simply fantasy for Sparrow, but a powerful picture of the secret, painful, sexual world that Sparrow experienced for most of his life. Sparrow identified with Genet's sadomasochistic sexual fantasies involving sailors and criminals, which he played out in the tattoo shop. Sparrow's shop, especially in Chicago, became the site of his sexual escapades with sailors and hustlers—intimacies that transcended heteronormative understandings of monogamy and domesticity characterizing the otherwise sexually conservative mores of 1950s America.

Sparrow's shop in Chicago in the 1950s became a zone of "criminal intimacy" in a backroom (which was twice as big as the front), a space entirely devoted to sex. His back room even included a glory hole, a hole in the wall for those who wanted anonymous, nearly disembodied sex. Criminal intimacies,



Figure 4. Cliff Raven tattooing on the last day at Anchor Tattoo in Milwaukee in the 1960s. (Photo by Chuck Renslow; courtesy of Nick Colella and Great Lakes Tattoo)

according to Shane Vogel, are associations and social narratives that are not intelligible or acknowledged as legitimate by dominant discourses and cultural institutions (2009). These relations are not contingent on normative understandings of intimacy, such as monogamy, domesticity, property ownership, and kinship. For Vogel the phrase “criminal intimacies” evokes “the long history of the criminalization of homosexuality, [...] the policing of minoritarian space, and the discursive maintenance of social pathology” (2009:23).

Sparrow’s sphere of criminal intimacies expanded when he met Cliff Ingram (Cliff Raven) through Chuck Renslow in 1958. At the time, Renslow was running a pornographic photography studio and a gym to which he gave his most attractive and sexually compliant models free membership. Renslow’s gym was a space for men to cruise and patronize male hustlers, which Sparrow did quite often. Sparrow and Renslow were closely connected to the underground world of hustlers, criminals, and sailors through their tattoo shop, gym, and photography businesses. Together, along with Renslow’s long-term lover Dom Orejudos (pen name Etienne) and Cliff Raven, one of his “sex slaves,” they constructed an underground world of criminal intimacies, on both a metaphorical and literal level. Also, Renslow opened the first gay leather bar, the Gold Coast, in Chicago in 1960.

Cliff Raven (who at the time was called Cliff Ingram) had a room above the gym.⁴ Raven had studied art at Indiana University and wanted to get tattooed by Sparrow (Baim and Keehnen 2011:269). Drawn to the tattoo world, Renslow began to get lessons from Sparrow in exchange

4. As Chuck Renslow states, “My saying is, boys and dogs should be obedient. And it’s true. I don’t ask much from a lover—my one requirement is absolute obedience” (in Baim and Keehnen 2011:76–77).

for handing out Sparrow's business cards at the North Station in Chicago to the sailors from the Great Lake Naval Training Station (77). Renslow taught Raven what he learned from Sparrow. Eventually they all worked together in Milwaukee for two years before Sparrow moved to California.

Sparrow was also connected with the underground filmmaker Kenneth Anger. Sparrow tattooed "Lucifer" in Old English script across Anger's chest. He gave a similar tattoo to Bobby Beausoleil, the star of Anger's 1967 film *Lucifer Rising* (Baim and Keehnen 2011:332) and an associate of Charles Manson, who in 1968 committed the first murder associated with the Manson "family," that of Gary Hinman. The act of tattooing one's chest with "Lucifer" conjures a kind of biblical desire to inscribe the body with a theological-cosmological form of sinfulness or criminality. It suggests the formation of criminal intimacies in a kind of queer hell. These criminal desires shaped the ways that gay men of that milieu created their own forms of community, disidentifying from the criminality inscribed onto them by civil society and moral panic. In so doing, they fashioned another form of criminality that emerged out of their primitive whiteness.

A genealogy of survival formed among these gay men at a time when homosexuals were being arrested and imprisoned. But this mode of survival also involved the eroticization and exploitation of working-class men within the space of the tattoo shop. As Amin writes:

Queer intimacies, taxed with the burdens of pathologization, criminalization, and social abjection and with the precarity and psychic duress these conditions engender, are as likely to produce abuse, exploitation and the renunciation of care as more loving, sexually liberated, and just alternatives to heteronormative social forms. (2017:7)

If we follow Amin's argument, the gay tattoo BDSM leather community that Sparrow, Renslow, and Raven participated in created physical manifestations of intimacy outside of a heteronormative model. But these intimacies were arguably as abusive and exploitative as they were sexually liberating and loving. Still, prior to an actual meeting place (the Gold Coast), these men depended on each other, forming a network developed out of necessity. Prior to these networks, a man could not be sure when meeting a stranger in a dark alley or under a dock, if he would make it out alive (Baim and Keehnen 2011:75). This precarity also followed these men into their sexual encounters, where the sex would sometimes be loving and sometimes not, depending on the survival mode of that day.

Mainstream tattoo history often erases such criminal intimacies, especially the sordid details of Sparrow, Renslow, and Raven's sexuality. Hardly anything has been written about Cliff Raven and his sexuality in relation to his career as a tattoo artist. The most I have found (other than the *Leatherman* biography of Renslow) is one sentence from Hardy: "Raven, an out-of-the-closet gay man, was the only other guy besides me who Phil Sparrow taught to tattoo" (2013:163). While it is reasonable to imagine that Raven would not reveal his libidinal drives or his sexual exploits to mainstream writers, the complete absence of his sexuality in these writings makes me wonder if the editors and authors erased certain facts in order to present tattoo history as consistent with the values of white heteronormativity. For example, in "Cliff Raven: The Final Interview," Raven discusses his first tattoo joint, which was in Rantoul, Illinois. According to the interview, Raven got the gig alone and received help from Milton Zeis, one of the most prominent tattoo artists of the time (Eldridge 2003:59). Yet, in *Leatherman*, Renslow is said to have opened the shop with Raven along with his partner Dom Orejudo. Orejudo would draw the tattoos and Raven and Renslow would tattoo them. Read from the lens of primitive whiteness, this history is erased and the criminal intimacies disavowed the characterization of that tattoo shop through the white supremacist imaginary.

Nevertheless, the criminal intimacies of queer tattoo history had indeed been recorded at the request of sexologist Alfred Kinsey. Sparrow kept a journal of his experience tattooing and the sexual encounters he had with his clients. Parts of this journal were eventually published as *Bad Boys and Tough Tattoos* (1990) under his given name Samuel Steward. Sparrow discovered

that boys typically did four things after getting their first tattoo: “They either get drunk or get in a fight, or get a piece of ass, or go home and stand in front of a mirror and jack off” (1990:40). This correlates with much of the psychoanalytic research that had been done on tattooing in the 1930s and 1940s, which Sparrow references in his book. Steward/Sparrow agreed with Parry’s sentiments about the sexual motivations behind tattooing and writes, “The fact remains that time has proved a large number of Parry’s conclusions to be sound, and his book remains a milestone in the general literature of tattooing” (94). For example, according to Sparrow, ex-cons, sailors, and soldiers who received bad conduct discharges would often come into his shop to get the phrase “Death before Dishonor” tattooed on their bodies. But when a civilian got this same tattoo, Sparrow would ask “What does that really mean to you? Does it mean that you would rather be killed than fucked in the ass?” (74). Most of them were alarmed to realize this might be the actual meaning behind this tattoo.

Through his years of tattooing Sparrow discovered that working-class and under-class US American men had very different sexual lives compared to the middle- and upper-class men Sparrow was used to dealing with in academia. He found that working-class men held very different attitudes—more open-minded attitudes—toward prostitution, homosexuality, and premarital sex (Spring 2010:221). Sparrow eroticized these men for their working-class attitudes towards sexuality. He created an infamous “Stud File,” a small filing cabinet cataloging every one of his sexual conquests. After he entered the rough and dangerous tattoo world, the index cards multiplied rapidly. For Sparrow, tattooing marked the “erotic other” through the fetishization of sailors and hustlers. In his journal, Sparrow wrote that the sailor’s uniform “represents a way of life that most of us can never know. [...] The uniform is the psychic link—the gazing-glass through which we look into another world” (Steward 1990:82).

Significantly, Sparrow acted as the sexologist in his shop rather than the object of study. Sparrow had a unique relationship with Kinsey because they were friends, as well as colleagues. During the 1940s and 1950s, sex researchers generally pathologized homosexuals and obtained their statistical samplings from mental institutions or prisons rather than from free homosexuals. But Kinsey recognized Sparrow’s intelligence and granted him a form of autonomy to interpret his own homosexual desire; Sparrow’s collection is the largest single contribution to the Kinsey Institute at Indiana University in Bloomington.

Sparrow eroticized the sailor’s body as the “exotic other” in a similar way that sexologists and scientific racists sexualized and pathologized the “primitive” body. Read through the idea of primitive whiteness, Sparrow becomes a complicated figure entrenched within a white supremacist version of tattoo history that refuses to recognize the ways he produced a genealogy of criminal intimacy in the tattoo shop. Under the name Samuel Steward, the Kinsey Institute essentially melded the seemingly distinct figurations of Sparrow as tattooist and Steward as professor. This makes the archive the point of encounter for queerness, tattooing, and a foundational, if silent, absence: white supremacy. These three terms undergird Kinsey’s archive of sexology.

The act of getting tattooed has only very recently been depathologized. Nowadays, everyone from a soccer mom in New Jersey to her white male church pastor seems to have a tattoo. Yet, the primitive white deviancy historically ascribed to tattoo culture continued to inflect the way tattooing was understood at least through the early 2000s. Permanently marking the body with tattoos was a way for queers, punks, and other deviant subjects to signal their outsider status in the 1980s and ’90s. A key figure from this time and milieu is Ron Athey, a Los Angeles-based, HIV+, tattooed performance artist. Starting in the 1980s, Athey focused on his tattooed body to create performances that riffed on martyrdom—a martyrdom that insisted on placing his own and other queer and HIV+ bodies and desires within the realm of grieving as part of the AIDS epidemic. In these performances, queerness and religiosity were inextricably bound through the pressure points that pierced Athey’s body—his pains for our sins.



Figure 5. Ron Athey's back. Performance of Our Lady of the Spasm during his residency at Coaxial Arts in September 2022. (Photo by Amina Cruz)

When I asked Athey about his experience with the tattoo world in the 1980s and '90s, he noted:

I worked at Poseur, a punk store; I was in a very public job selling clothes and boots and band merch. I could hold my own, was mouthy, didn't put up with dumb homophobia. But I also ran around with a clique that included a lot of female sex workers and was more bisexual at this time. It wasn't so different than the punk scene, you didn't need everyone to get you. A bit of rough made it a game. (2020)

Athey went on to explain how he participated in tattoo conventions and was part of the opening of Jack Rudy's tattoo shop in East Los Angeles (Rudy was a key figure in the tattoo world who reinvented the "black and grey" method of tattooing). As Athey noted, his roughness protected his queerness in the tattoo shop where play, parody, and precarity became interchangeable. New forms of criminal intimacies with femme sex workers and punks arose where gender played a role in the queerness of the tattoo world.

In fact, Athey was Bob Roberts's first client at Spotlight Tattoo, Roberts's famous shop in Los Angeles. Athey once asked Cliff Raven to tattoo a black widow spider on his face and Raven refused because Athey had no tattoos yet. As Athey states, "It was a big part of marking the tribe, of separating gay capitalists by having a tattooed face" (2020). At that point, Cliff Raven would have been in his 60s or 70s. This odd encounter highlighted a generational antagonism. Luckily Roberts said yes to tattooing Athey: "Bob Roberts said he had just killed black widows before painting and getting all the flash and ephemera on the wall. He designed it, and I think my \$5 tip is still on the wall" (2020).

In the 1990s, a sign was posted that said "No AIDS" on the door of Spotlight. The '90s saw the transformation of the tattoo shop into a space inscribed by the ideological regulations of the white heterosexual nuclear family and civil society. Tattoo shops and tattooists closed their doors to HIV+ people because of the fear of infection fueled by the biopolitical insurgency against nonnormative sexuality and the politicization of HIV/AIDS as a morally deviant disease. As such, Athey and his crew's criminal intimacy moved from working-class men, bikers, and hustlers to maneuvering the ways their bodies were inscribed by disease and death even within the supposed radicality of the tattoo shop. As Athey recalls:

I would tattoo a lover's name, and then the tears [when they died]. Marks of harshness. I think the '80s/'90s queer had to toughen up to live through that time. Also, tattoos became more important in the time of AIDS, an affirmation that it was worth it to keep adorning and marking in the face of death. That was the clincher at Spotlight. I could understand being afraid of the virus in the '80s to mid '90s even. But not posting a sign. Nonetheless, the only person who would tattoo me for some years was Jill Jordan, and she tattooed me in Spotlight. No one ever confronted us. (2020)

Athey then moved on to tattooist Alex Binnie who originated and popularized the use of large-scale tribal designs: non-Western, often Polynesian, and often involving elements of fusion across regional boundaries and traditions in the West. Athey was tattooed by the artist Binnie from then on, in either New York City or in London (2020).

This genealogy of tattooing as a kind of performance of libidinal play engaged in by gay men from the 1950s into the 1990s suggests a counter-history to the traditional narrative of white, heteronormative tattoo history. Athey and his community ushered in a new era of tattoo history as performative modes of survivability were carved and imprinted on the flesh. As Athey states, "marks of harshness" carried this community and allowed them to cultivate novel ways of living and dying.

Rupturing White Primitivism

Toward an Opening

While the history provided here is specific to gay and queer white masculinity, queer-of-color tattooists have always existed at the margins of the mainstream tattoo world. What would it mean to decolonize the structure of primitive whiteness that has shaped tattoo history? To decolonize

the tattoo through a queer-of-color genealogy of the tattoo's relationship to white primitivism can illuminate how race is the blueprint that underpins the ostensibly radical and transgressive dimensions of tattooing in the first instance. Such a decolonizing move can be seen in the work of contemporary queer-of-color tattoo artists such as Ciara Havishya at Sticks and Stones Co. in Vancouver, Tamara Santibañez at Saved Tattoo in Brooklyn, and Sema Graham at Time Being in Chicago. Santibañez, a Chicana tattoo artist, draws from queer fetish and BDSM imagery while combining West Coast fine-line black-and-grey (Baritoux 2018). These tattoo artists, along with their clients, have begun to resignify the pressure points of tattooing by turning the racialization of the criminal and other deviant subjectivities into an artform.

Another significant figure in the queer-of-color tattoo world is Julie Tolentino, a renowned Filipina-Salvadorian American conceptual and performance artist. With the support of an Art Matters fellowship, Tolentino and her partner Pig Pen (Stosh Fila) traveled to the Philippines in January 2012. On their journey, they sought out 91-year-old Whang Od, “the eldest female keeper and practitioner of the rare traditional Batok tattooing in Northern Luzon” (Tamez 2012). The geopolitical history of the Philippines marked Tolentino's skin with the doubling pressure points of physical and psychic colonization. Tolentino sutured an “outer-world” through “being tattooed with a lime thorn and the soot of a boiling rice pot” in the mountains of the Philippines. The space is signified on the skin, especially through Whang Od. When I asked about her experience as being a queer, tattooed, woman of color, Tolentino wrote:

To think back, I know that there is a connection to being Mestiza—a kind of skin marking that depending on one's pigmentation, marks you as light-to-dark and often hard-to-read as a raced subject. I remember being young and feeling like tattooing was a method of marking difference in a way that I could not as a person of color, and that this marking, especially in the '90s, also created a linkage amongst tattooed queer folks—something that would in its early wave, shape me as a queer person. For a short time, it felt like a code or a recognition/gesture towards marking queerness in a somewhat pedantic way (in retrospect). (Tolentino 2020)

Tolentino gestures toward her own raced embodiment as formulating a kind of geopolitical and phenotypical connection to what Allan Punzalan Isaac calls the “American Tropics” (2006)—the nonincorporated Caribbean and Pacific islands that formed the archipelago of the US's colonial history—by describing herself as a mestiza object of colonial discourse (Tolentino 2020). Yet, this nonincorporation provoked Tolentino's journey to Northern Luzon where she explored the aesthetic possibilities of non-Western tattooing, and prompted her to notice the ways that tattooing performed the queerness of community during the 1990s AIDS crisis. For Tolentino, the form of queer belonging invoked by tattooing constructed intimate attachments to her own critical genealogy, assembled from battling the AIDS genocide, colonialism, and racism. Tolentino pierces new pressure points into primitive white tattoo history.

Primitive whiteness, as a racist and colonial concept as well as a corporeal analytic of deviancy, can reveal the counternarratives undergirding tattoos as a way of being and knowing racialized, gendered, and sexual deviancy. As a historical and theoretical framework, tattooing illuminates how racial and sexual desire are literally written on the body. Racial and sexual dissidence ruptures the space of the tattoo shop. Which brings us back to Magnus Hirschfeld and the formation of a queer, white supremacist assemblage at a tattoo shop in Columbus, Ohio, as staining one's skin becomes libidinally inflected with radical possibility.

References

- Amin, Kadji. 2017. *Disturbing Attachments: Genet, Modern Pederasty, and Queer History*. Duke University Press.
- Athey, Ron. 2020. Personal correspondence with author, 28 January.
- Baim, Tracy, and Owen Keehnen. 2011. *Leatherman: The Legend of Chuck Renslow*. Prairie Avenue Productions.
- Baritoux, Zio. 2018. “11 queer poc tattoo artists to follow now.” *i-D.vice*, 8 August. https://i-d.vice.com/en_us/article/7xqdpq/11-queer-poc-tattoo-artists-to-follow-now

- Bauer, Heike. 2017. *The Hirschfeld Archives: Violence, Death, and Modern Queer Culture*. Temple University Press.
- Braunberger, Christine. 2000. "Sutures of Ink: National (Dis)Identification and the Seaman's Tattoo." *Genders* 31. www.colorado.edu/gendersarchive1998-2013/2000/02/01/sutures-ink-national-disidentification-and-seamans-tattoo
- Eldridge, C.W. 2003. "Cliff Raven: The Final Interview." *Skin & Ink*, January:58–67.
- Ellis, Havelock. 1890. *The Criminal*. Scribner and Welford.
- Freud, Sigmund. (1905) 1949. *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Trans. James Strachey. Imago.
- Freud, Sigmund. (1940) 1949. *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*. Ed. and trans. James Strachey. W.W. Norton and Company.
- Gell, Alfred. 1993. *Wrapping in Images: Tattooing in Polynesia*. Clarendon Press.
- Gould, Stephen Jay. 1977. *Ontogeny and Phylogeny*. Harvard University Press.
- Hardy, Ed, with Joel Selvin. 2013. *Wear Your Dreams: My Life in Tattoos*. Thomas Dunne Books.
- Isaac, Allan Punzalan. 2006. *American Tropics: Articulating Filipino America*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Jones, Amelia. 1998. *Body Art/Performing the Subject*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Kihlstrom, John F. 2015. "Dynamic versus Cognitive Unconscious." In *The Encyclopedia of Clinical Psychology*, ed. Robin L. Cautin and Scott O. Lilienfeld, 1–8. John Wiley & Sons. doi.org/10.1002/9781118625392.wbecp275
- Lombroso, Cesare. 1896. "The Savage Origin of Tattooing." *Popular Science Monthly* 48. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Popular_Science_Monthly/Volume_48/April_1896/The_Savage_Origin_of_Tattooing
- Lytard, Jean Francois. (1974) 1993. *Libidinal Economy*. Trans. Iain Hamilton Grant. Indiana University Press.
- Parry, Albert. (1933) 2006. *Tattoo: Secrets of a Strange Art*. Dover Publications.
- Parry, Albert. 1934. "Tattooing Among Prostitutes and Perverts." *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 3, 3:476–82.
- Spring, Justin. 2010. *Secret Historian: The Life and Times of Samuel Steward, Professor, Tattoo Artist, and Sexual Renegade*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Steward, Samuel M. 1990. *Bad Boys and Tough Tattoos: A Social History of the Tattoo with Gangs, Sailors, and Street-Corner Punks, 1950–1965*. Harrington Park Press.
- Tamez, Stephanie. 2012. "Julie Tolentino & Batok Tattoo." *Nomad-Chic*, 7 February. www.nomad-chic.com/julie-tolentino-batok-tattoo-by-stephanie-tamez.html
- Tolentino, Julie. 2020. Personal correspondence with author, 14 January.
- Vogel, Shane. 2009. *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance*. University of Chicago Press.
- Wynter, Sylvia, and Katherine McKittrick. 2015. "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations." In *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick, 9–89. Duke University Press.

TDRreading

- Jones, Amelia. 2006. "Holy Body: Erotic Ethics in Ron Athey and Juliana Snapper's Judas Cradle." *TDR* 50, 1 (T189):159–69. doi.org/10.1162/dram.2006.50.1.159