Inking Immortality: Exploring the Relations Between (Tattooed) Bodies, Time, and the Permanence/Change Dialectic

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We explore the relations between bodies and time within the context of tattooing. Our informants’ bodies were experienced as out of control, or used to negotiate control over the permanence/change dialectic by crafting symbolic legacies for the self/others. We contribute embodied understandings of time, and insights into (im)permanence and consumption.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction
Time and bodies are intertwined. Our everyday embodied lives are shaped by temporal frameworks, such as the modern idea of linear clock time (Adam 1995). We experience internal bodily rhythms like the beating heart (Birth 2012), and we carry time on our bodies when we wear wedding rings. The body’s surface also captures multiple marks of time, including unintentional temporal indicators such as wrinkles, alongside intentional temporal inscriptions like tattoos (Velliquette, Murray, and Evers 2006). Due to this embodied and temporal existence we are ultimately beings-toward-death (Heidegger 1927/2010). Within many cultures it is understood that time flows forwards from birth to death, and thus that we have a finite lifespan. Throughout history persons have striven to transcend their temporal boundaries and attain permanence for the self/others through various means, such as via placing their faith in religious belief systems, maintaining healthy bodies, and creating symbolic legacies (Bauman 1992; Cave 2012). Yet, the links between bodies and time remain underexplored, particularly from a consumption perspective, as is human (im)mortality. We thus explore the following research questions within the context of tattoo consumption: First, does permanence still matter to people in a transient world? And second, how and why might people endeavour to attain a sense of permanence for themselves/others via tattooing the impermanent body?

Research Design
An ethnographic research design was employed. The first author conducted participant observation at three tattoo studios (Alfie’s Tattoos; North West Tattooing; and MI Tattoos); two tattoo conventions (Manchester Tattoo Show; Liverpool Tattoo Convention); and three museum/art exhibitions (Body Worlds, Amsterdam; death: the human experience, Bristol; Time: Tattoo Art Today, London). Multiple biographical/elicitative style interviews (Wengraf 2001) were also conducted with 18 tattoo consumers (Appendix 1). The first interview involved participants telling an uninterrupted story of their life followed by prompting for further narratives about their key life events. The second interview involved participants telling the story of their tattoos, with subsequent questions concerning tattooing the past, future tattoo plans, permanence, memory, and ageing. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Photographs of participants’ tattoos were taken with their permission, and they chose their own pseudonyms. The first author also kept an ongoing tattoo consumption diary which thus incorporates an introspective element (Gould 2012).

Data was analysed/interpreted using a hermeneutic approach (Arnold and Fischer 1994). Each interview was read through and initial interpretations were noted. Next, each transcription was uploaded onto NVivo software and categorised into inductively generated themes (Braun and Clarke 2006) which were related to the cultural context, including cultural notions of time. Narrative analysis was also employed (Sparkes 1999), whereby key narrative features such as plot; sequence; characters; temporal modes; and key life events and turning points were identified within participants’ narratives. Fieldnotes were also analysed using a thematic approach and related to interview themes and the cultural context.

Key Findings
Participants often experienced their bodies as what we term autobodographies (Appendix 2). Namely, supporting extant research (e.g. Shelton and Peters 2006; Velliquette et al. 2006), despite their fragmented lives they often used tattoos to create a sense of temporal linearity on their skin by threading together their past, present, and anticipated future. Their bodies narrated partial and fluid accounts of their biographies, and the dynamic contexts in which they are entangled. Participants were thus seemingly creating a personal symbolic legacy on their skin. The concept of a symbolic legacy stems from the Ancient Greeks, who held the dualistic belief that culture did not suffer the same decay as nature (Bauman 1992; Cave 2012). Hence, in contrast to the mortal body, the cultural realm is often considered as an enduring space in which to transcend one’s temporal boundaries and attain immortality (ibid).

Likewise, participants frequently acquired memorial tattoos to create a symbolic legacy for others on their bodies following their physical deaths, and thus to transport that person through time into the future to engender continuing bonds (see Turley and O’Donohoe 2012). Given the transient body represents the locus of our physical mortality (Bauman 1992; Cave 2012), this creation of symbolic legacies for self/others on the skin appears rather paradoxical. However, in the backdrop of a seemingly ‘accelerated’ and ephemeral cultural world (Bauman 2000; Giddens 1999), perhaps the body provides people with an apparently more predictable, stable, and safer surface on which to attain a sense of permanence for self/others today. Indeed, akin to the practice of refreshing family heirlooms (Türe and Ger 2016), participants also engaged in ongoing tattoo maintenance and repair work (Graham and Thrift 2007), such as regularly moisturising their tattooed skin, to protect their tattoos from the ravages of time and preserve their permanence. This finding indicates the desirability of permanence for many of our participants.

Conclusions
Existing literature observes that we are living within an accelerated and transient world (Bauman 2000; Giddens 1999). It has been suggested that people continuously re/deconstruct multiple identities (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Gergen 1991); persons partake in ephemeral consumer tribes (Cova and Cova 2001; Maffesoli 1996); and that we have increasingly transient relationships with our possessions in a globalised world (Bardhi, Eckhardt, and Arnould 2012; Figueiredo and Uncles 2015). However, our participants used tattoos to craft symbolic legacies for the self and others on their temporal bodies, and thus to create a sense of symbolic immortality. This paper, therefore, challenges this literature by indicating how permanence, durability, and a sense of temporal continuity remain important for persons living within a seemingly accelerated and transient world. It also contributes to the slowly growing, yet somewhat sparse, literature concerning bodies and time, in addition to death and consumption, within consumer research, thus responding to calls for a more embodied appreciation of time (Toyoki, Schwob, Hietanen, and Johnsen 2013). Future research could further investigate how multiple marks
of time intermingle on the body in narrating people’s biographies by drawing on multiple contexts, for example anti-ageing surgeries and scarification. Moreover, future research could further explore death and consumption within diverse contexts, such as health crazes and religion, to importantly engender a more open discussion about this often sequestered feature of the human condition.

REFERENCES