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The body as a place: Enacting utopias through tattoo consumption

Abstract

Previous research has examined tattooing as a consumption practice that participates in body adornment and identity construction. However, the focal point from which these transformations occur, i.e. the body as a place in which one is confined, has been overlooked. This paper thus theorizes the body as a topos (a place) from which various utopias originate, thus making the body an “other space” (a heterotopia) that it is transformed, magnified and appropriated by tattooing. Using a multi-method qualitative study conducted with tattooees and tattooists, the findings show the tension that articulates “being here” / “being elsewhere” and demonstrate how tattooing is used as a means to escape, deny, transcend or embrace one’s human spatialized condition.

Keywords: body, identity project, tattoo consumption, place, heterotopia

Introduction

Research dedicated to various forms of body modifications (Schouten 1991; Le Breton, 2006, 2011, 2014) such as cosmetic surgery (Schouten, 1991), dieting (Moisio and Beruchashvili 2010), and bodybuilding (Smith and Stewart 2012), considers the body as a medium for expression of personal identity. In the same way, tattooing has been examined within the lens of self-construction (Patterson and Schroeder 2010; Pentina, Spears, and Sager 2007; Sanders and Vail 2008; Watson 1998), identity process (Goulding et al. 2004), negotiation of personal myths (Velliquette, Murray, and Evers 2006), and resistance (Fischer 2002). Considering its inclusion within consumption trends, tattooing has also been theorized as a new consumption practice that helps people to stand out from the crowd (Goulding and Follett 2002), while at the same time embodying fashion discourses (Kjeldgaard and Bengtsson 2005), commodification (Bengtsson et al. 2005; Kosut 2006), “Artification” (Kosut 2013), and exchange value (Featherstone, 1991; Orend and Gagné 2009; Turner 1999).

However, by emphasizing the market-mediated dimension of tattooing, all these approaches have overshadowed the focal point, i.e. the body, from which the need for transformation originates. In other words, they tend to view it as a component of the “material self” (James 1910), which, as an object, can be altered and transformed freely, rather than considering its spatial reality as a primary condition of experience. This view inherits the modern mind-body split that better accounts for the idea of ‘having a body’ instead of ‘being a body’ (Le Breton 2008; James 1910), and thus overlooks his situated relationship to the world (Clark 2004).

Breaking with previous Cartesian perspective, we approach the spatial dimension of the body in tattoo consumption and view the latter as one of many body modifications such as cosmetic surgery, dieting, and body building that result from and contribute to the negotiation of the body

as a place. In line with Foucault's (2006) conceptualization, we first consider the body as a topos, i.e. a physical and inescapable reality, a "pitiless place...here, irreparably...never elsewhere" (Foucault 2006: 229). Differently from Patterson and Schroeder's (2010) who have analyzed the skin as container, projection surface, and cover to be modified, we here highlight the phenomenological experience of being assigned a fixed place from which no physical escape is possible. Considering the body as place without recourse helps to illuminate how the articulation between individuals' "inner selves" (Velliquette, Murray, and Creyer 1998) and externally visible outcomes of their body transformations finds its focal point in the unavoidable character of the bodily envelope they must inhabit. Though transhumanists challenge the idea of a permanent or irrevocable body (e.g. Rothman and Steadman 2015), and regardless of the way it may be extended, enhanced or modified in the future, we suggest that individuals must cope with their body as a little fragment of space they are condemned to live in and to move with. But precisely because the body is a topos, Foucault (2006) argues, it serves as a reservoir for utopias. These are "places without places" that enable individuals to extract themselves from their physical heaviness. Masks, tattoos, and make-up, are instances of pursuing such utopias in which the body is torn away from its proper space and projected into the world to communicate with secret powers and invisible forces (Foucault 2006). Hence, not only is the body a topos—and for this reason the locus in which utopias come into being—but it is also a heterotopia, namely a place where these utopias are "effectively enacted" (Foucault 1986: 24). Body modifications—e.g. tattooing—perform a mediation by which the body (a topos: "here and now") becomes the actual site for expression of utopias (a heterotopia: "elsewhere and otherwise"). Heterotopia either serves to reproduce the reality in order to show it as illusory or compensate for its flaws and deficiencies (Foucault 2006: 27). Following Foucault's (2006) perspective, we thus

explore tattoo consumption as a form of conversation and expressive mediation individuals engage with their body *as a place*. We see this conversation and mediation as tangibilized through the figurative language of tattoos and their ability to express various utopian meanings. Paradoxically, not much has been said in the CCT literature about designs that people choose to ink onto their skin (Fisher, 2002; Sanders 1988). While Watson (1998) examines possible quantitative associations of symbols and their actual location with sex, gender identity, materialism, belongingness, and self-control, he does not discuss how and why people choose a particular design. For his part, Sanders (1988) distinguishes four functions of tattooing, namely “vow”, commemoration, group affiliation (versus exclusion) and symbols, but his classification does not address the utopian dimension that makes the body the locus where imaginary projects are inscribed. Hence, we suggest that the meanings tattooees give to their marks also illustrate how they as individuals negotiate “this place without recourse” (Foucault, 2006) and the nature of utopia they attempt to materialize between “here” and “elsewhere.”

Anthropological and contemporary functions of tattoos

Anthropologically speaking, body modifications function as universal “*Marks of Civilizations*” (Rubin 1988) and express signs “of culture and of humanity” (DeMello 2007: xviii). As such, tattoos remain strongly attached to traditions and contexts (Askegaard and Linnet 2011), but historical perspectives on tattooing testify to three structural functions that can be found across societies and ages. As analyzed by Renaut (2014), “customary tattooing” first expresses group membership or tribal affiliation and persists in contexts where containment, idleness as well as strong social affiliation encourage the adoption within particular populations—e.g., bikers (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), sailors, prisoners, or gangs (Sanders 1989)—of a very basic

and pictorial in-house language. Within radically dissimilar contexts and following very different purposes, Renaut (2014) shows, secondly, that “elite tattooing” can be encountered in the upper strata of chiefs and warriors in semi-nomadic societies, but also in the European high society of the 19th century, including royalty. Finally, this author refers to “punitive tattooing” as the marking of specific populations like slaves and prisoners in concentration camps, thus reflecting a “denial of personhood” by invoking animal branding (Schildkrout 2004: 323). Considering these different historical practices and functions of tattooing over time, it appears that voluntary as well as imposed marks on the skin result from highly ritualized social activities, where the body acts as a junction point between nature and culture (Descola 2005). Overall, these three types of uses reflect utopias of inclusion/exclusion, distinction, or ownership that societies enact through individual and collective figurations.

Contemporary uses of tattooing in western societies, however, present a more complex and contrasting picture (DeMello 2000). Modern societies, Le Breton (1999) explains, have increasingly made the body a self-commodified object. They inherit from the Cartesian 'Cogito ergo sum' a mind/body separation and detachment of man from himself, others and the cosmos. Modernity has also untied the individual from his moral allegiance to social norms, thus transforming the body into an “accessory” we invest to live in (Le Breton 1999). The body results in fragmented and postmodern assemblages of meanings (Neville 2005), without having erased individuals' tensions, uncertainty, and anxieties (Benson 2000).

Regarding tattoos, not all decisions to transform one's body are motivated by authentic and thoughtful projects. As fashion and mediatization have taken hold of tattoo consumption, it becomes so commonplace in certain milieus to get inked that not to have a tattoo might be the way to assert one's difference. As an evidence of this, a quick comparison of the number of

queries about “tattooing” and “tattoo removal” on Google Trends demonstrates that the former has surpassed the latter since March 2007. Beyond rash decisions about getting a tattoo, the choice of tattoo designs is not necessarily inspired by a deep knowledge of what they mean, especially when these are borrowed from remote cultures about which individuals know little or nothing (Ankirskiy, 2014). The mass-mediatization of tattooing has commodified meanings – and also time to get educated about iconographies, motifs, and styles (Vail 1999) – up to the point that these meanings are lost or remain unknown when getting a tattoo. This, for example, is testified by the emergence of discussion threads about the most fashionable designs that are popularized by sport, music, or movie stars, which ordinary people tend to imitate. The occurrence of brand logo tattoos that people now want to have is another symptom of this mass-commodification phenomenon in tattoo consumption (Bengtsson, Östberg and Kjeldgaard 2005; Bjerrisgaard, Kjeldgaard, and Bengtsson 2013).

Investing the body as a place

The body is a place where we are physically confined, a little portion of space with which we are (and must be) literally one. And because human beings are trapped into their bodies, they may attempt to create utopias as means to erase or to cope with their imprisoned and embodied condition. Utopias transform the body into something that may be light, transparent, powerful, limitless, protected, but always transfigured – that is modified and magnified. Foucault (2006) suggests that utopias tend to erase the body as the evidence of our mortal and suffering earthly condition and to produce an “uncorporeal” body that can be detached from itself. He alludes to the great Western myth of the soul as the means of embodying and escaping this space we are

living in, thus echoing the Cartesian 'Cogito ergo sum', which has contributed to disseminating the mind/body dualism Descartes proposed (Le Breton 2006).

But our body, Foucault (2006) says, has its own resources and mysteries that the mind cannot fully grasp. For example, no one can directly see the back of his neck. No one can perfectly control how the body feels and reacts. As a result, utopias (as well as dystopias) result from being and having a body. They can be enacted through various means such as tattoos, masks and make-up that mediate between corporeality and spirituality. Whether conveying a desire for protection, immortality, sacredness, adornment, power, identification, or connection with the dead (Fischer 2002; Sanders 1988), through these practices the “interiority” and the “physicality” of human beings are in a constant interplay (Descola 2005). Body markings testify to this internal dialogue (Gell 1993) as well as initiate an ongoing conversation “between persons, the sacred, and the present and the past” (Schildkrout 2004, 321). Inked onto the skin, tattoos make the body a “projection surface” and “a cover to be modified” (Patterson and Schroeder 2010) where imaginary productions are tangibilized. We now further explore what meanings designs convey about their owners’ utopian projects.

Context and Methods

A three-year multi-method qualitative study was conducted in France based on a collection of primary and secondary data. Since the 1990s, tattooing has become commonplace throughout the country. This is attested by the proliferation of tattoo parlors in city centres (for example, fifteen of them have been found in Nantes, the sixth biggest French town and one where part of the data collection took place). Beyond their growing number, their similarity to conventional shops also demonstrates that tattoo parlors have lost their marginal and heterotopic character (Author 2014).

Tattooing has been popularized by the fashion industry (Bengtsson, Östberg, & Kjeldgaard 2005), thus appearing more and more desirable, especially in the eyes of new female and young segments (Mifflin 2013).

In this study, we used four data sources. First, in-depth interviews were conducted with two male and three female professional tattooists in Nantes, as part of a prolonged observation of two tattoo parlors for three years. These interviews helped to gain a deep account of how customer expectations are formulated through what they expect from the tattooist, and how professionals translate these expectations. The interviews brought to light what the tattooists themselves observe in their daily practices and how they deal with customers' requests, e.g. types of design, location on the body, and underlying personal motivations.

The second data set consisted of non-participant observations that were conducted during two tattoo conventions: the Paris World Tattoo convention (*Mondial du tatouage*) from March 6 to 8, 2015 and the Girl Ink Tattoo Show on March, 21-22, 2015 in Brie-Comte-Robert, a small town in the Parisian suburb. During the first event, observations were made of types of tattoo designs, styles and the variety of iconic representations presented by about 340 tattooists from 30 countries. In the second event, five interviews were conducted with participants who were walking around or choosing a flash (design) they wanted to ink during the day.

To get a deeper and more thorough understanding of what iconic choices of designs tell about their owner's representations and fantasises, 12 in-depth interviews were finally conducted with tattooees about their past and/or planned future projects. The sample consisted of 6 women and 6 men aged between 22 and 48 (average 30). The female researcher, in her fifties, was an "outsider" (Rubin, 1988) with no experience of the practice itself, who however had close acquaintances in the world of tattooing that provided her with contacts and "information-rich

cases” (Patton 1990). Informants were asked to describe the pattern of their tattoo, how and why they chose its location on the body, and the symbolic meaning it was supposed to convey. All the interviews took place in informants’ homes, and were audio-recorded and transcribed.

The last data set consisted of seven netnographic accounts that were collected on a very well-known medical website—Doctissimo—that provides a discussion forum “dedicated to tattooing, piercing, body art and branding.” Choosing this data source was firstly motivated because many of these discussions are now found on the Internet and elicit suggestions, tips, advice and questions about getting a tattoo and choosing a specific design. Secondly, anonymous conversations offered the advantage of providing a spontaneous content that was not influenced by the researcher. Repeated and thorough readings of the transcripts were followed by open, axial, and selective coding (Spiggle 1994) to iteratively reveal the underlying themes in the data. Through this inductive approach, the various forms of figuration chosen by informants revealed a fundamental semantic axis—“being here” / “being elsewhere”—that reveals the body as a locus for spatial and temporal negotiations with reality and tattooing a means to escape, deny, transcend or embrace the reality.

Articulating the body as a topos and a heterotopia through tattooing

Getting a tattoo can be a way of “being elsewhere” in the mode of imaginary projection into the real world, just as tourist souvenirs can be (Masset and Decrop 2016). Tattoos also help some informants “not to be here and now” and nurture their desire to escape a past or present painful situation such as a troubled childhood or a death. For others, tattooing is precisely a way of “being here and now” and reinvesting the present through a process of reconciliation with the reality. Finally, getting a tattoo can be a way “to be here,” often anchored in an actual or

aspirational reference group whose meaningful elements of identity are duplicated on the skin. In this sense it can be a way of claiming one's body and making it less ephemeral, in the same sense that marking geographic space by planting a flag or marker stakes a claim on territory.

Being elsewhere: the "Travel issue" and the tattoo-souvenir

One theme emerging from our data attests to the utopian character of tegumentary inscriptions. I met Clement at the Girl Ink Tattoo Show. His arms were entirely covered with large tattoos of emblematic monuments of Rome and Italian culture. His right arm was decorated with a very realistic representation of the Colosseum and a Venetian mask while his left arm was dominated by a Roman gladiator. When I asked him about the choice of this particularly focused set of images, Clement said that his family was born in Rome, a town that he visited only recently and liked a lot. He wanted to keep on him these symbols of his family cradle. Regarding the location of his tattoos, Clement argued that he wanted most of them on the right arm, because "it is the one with which I work." Asked about his profession, Clement told me he was a tattooist himself. By placing the iconic representations of his identity in a strategic location, he can now contemplate, while working—the arm also participates in transforming other's skin. In a different sense, Vincent's discourse is fully articulated by the "travel issue" popularized by French poet Charles Baudelaire. This heavily tattooed young man resembles a world map. Vincent's first tattoo – an Irish harp – was made after a trip to Ireland when he was younger. As it was his first trip as an emancipated young adult, he wanted to keep a trace of this memorable experience:

“This is a country that I really loved. Plus it was my first trip and I paid it with my own money. It was a kind of adventure that I shared with my best friend at that time. We travelled one week with our backpacks, and I wanted to keep this experience in mind”.

Inside his left biceps, Vincent has also inked all the geographical coordinates of the places that he visited abroad: “It's my little personal log book”, he says. The imaginary icons associated with travelling have also led him to get various tattoos such as a boat with an anchor on the left thigh, and a nautical star, known to be the sailors' lucky charm, on the right forearm. These references to the nautical world derive from the frequent boat trips he made with his father when he was younger. Not only are real experiences represented on Vincent's body, but also desired journeys that he plans for the future. For example, he has tattooed a Mexican sugar skull, which symbolizes Mexican pastries which are painted, decorated and placed on the grave stone on the Day of the Dead. He says: “I have never been able to go to Mexico, so I told myself that I was going to get a tattoo before flying there. That gives me a good urge to go.” Overall, most of Vincent's tattoos are related to symbolic forms of journeys, or “elsewhere”, in real or imagined places. It echoes Masset and Decrop's (2016: 100) tourist souvenirs that people bring back from trips around the world, except that in their case the objects are detached from the body and carefully displayed within the home until they lose their meanings and are discarded. Tattoos may also lose their emotional salience, but are not easily discarded. Overall, Vincent describes himself as often floating off in his own thoughts, a symbol that he has also inked on his body in the shape of “a head in the clouds.” Vincent's body thus appears as a spatial metaphor of the world he travels through in the reality and in his dreams.

While these types of designs help their bearers to be transported in utopian spaces, other informants testify to their need to escape from a past or present reality. In such cases, tattoos help them to be elsewhere or flee a painful situation.

Not being here and now: tattoos as amulets for conjuring rituals

Many instances of plans for a new tattoo allude to the utopian project to be protected against a bad fate, erase traumatic events, and make a distressful reality disappear in favor of an idealized past or future. Tattoos are thus envisioned as a magical wand that will help informants to wipe painful episodes away. In the following post on Doctissimo, a young woman seeks advice about the design that could accurately symbolize her liberation from her father's violence:

“When I was little (and until my adolescence), my father used to strike me, to stop me from going out or dating. He had found the passwords of any Internet website I was browsing. He also took my cell phone and read all my messages, sms, and mails, and watched each of my photos. I had no privacy. Marks on my body even alerted some people. I always refused to be considered as “beaten” and it is still so today. We are not here to talk about that, but I would like a tattoo that covers this period of my life, discreet enough. Any idea? Whether it be a symbol against violence, a sentence..., etc. Thank you for your help” (Oseane, posted on 04-17-2014 at 9:31:30 p.m.)

In the above excerpt, the term “covers” is particularly significant as it refers to the idea of putting a blanket or mask over the past and making it disappear. But the word also borrows the notion of redesigning an old or poorly done tattoo from the language tattooists themselves use.

Covering the past was also Steeve's hope when he got a tattoo shortly after the death of a friend who died in very tragic circumstances. He chose to ink his friend's portrait inside his right arm,

making the tattoo a kind of amulet. By looking at his friend's face on his right arm, Steeve is now able to prolong, in a quite intensive and vivid way, the illusion of his friend's presence in the world. By denying death, the tattoo helps him to face a difficult moment of grief.

This type of conjuring ritual is also exemplified by Skyz0tek, a girl who was looking on the Internet for some ideas that could symbolize her recently deceased grandmother:

“My grandma died on May 13, and she was absolutely everything to me, really. I want to get a tattoo, but something really discreet, which is not visible or conspicuous [I mean that I do not want to get a huge “Mamie” tattooed in the middle of the arm, for example]. I want something that reflects the infinite nature of my love for her. This tattoo is really important to me. It will never fill the void left by her absence, for sure, but that's part of me and this tattoo will be a means to express it” (Skyz0tek, posted on 05-22-2012 at 6:21:57 p.m.).

Getting a tattoo again in such circumstances appears as a way to ward off a distressing reality. In Though “filling the void” is not fully reachable, the tattoo helps informants to revitalize a period when they were happy and the beloved one as alive as they are through portraits and symbols they ink on their body. Tattoos thus act both as remembrance and escape from a painful present, which is temporarily too difficult to face. They recreate happy and idealized moments while giving the illusion that suffering and death are kept at a certain distance from the present.

Coping with the present: tattoos as a means to transcend reality

Conversely, for some informants, tattoos are a way to move on, to turn a page, and to cope with the present in a more pacified manner. Alice, a 23-year old tattooist, recounts an episode where a young girl who had just turned 18, came to her to get a tattoo of a butterfly with a ribbon. She explains:

“The butterfly is a symbol of flight and lightness. And the girl said to me: ‘I want this butterfly because my life’s been crappy. For the last years a lot of problems have happened to me and I’m having this tattoo as a rebirth, because it represents the end of this chaotic life so that a new period begins.’ At the end, I said to her, ‘I hope this tattoo brings you luck’.”

Tattoos thus help informants not to escape reality, but to face it and overcome difficulties. For example, Clara has inked the title of the Monty Python's Life of Brian comedy song “Always look on the bright side of life.” This tattoo nearly occupies all her left forearm. She says she chose this sentence because she is a true fan of Monty Python, and also because people call her Python, a nickname that was given to her long ago by her sister. But more fundamentally, this choice was motivated by the personal and intimate difficult conditions she was facing at that time. She explains:

“I told to myself: ‘Hey, stop moping! Try to recover your black humor!’ So I went to get this tattoo. It served as a therapy so to speak. Indeed, during the year I got this tattoo, I faced a lot of other problems and each time, I had friends who were very quick to tell me: ‘Read what you wrote on your forearm’. So, one can say this tattoo has played an important role in my life”.

Another way to cope with the present is also exemplified by informants who use tattoos to struggle against aging and retain the spirit of childhood. Clemence, a 24-year old tattoo artist says that women in their fifties often want tattoos as a way to rejuvenate and to accept their own body. Other informants illustrate their attempts to disguise or “dress up” their body to cope with it or parts of it that they do not like, in the same way Foucault (2006) himself was dreaming of a

more pleasant appearance. Chris, a 32-year old tattoo artist, says that many overweight people get very large tattoos because these help them regain confidence. He says:

“Afterwards, they appear better, even if they have fat, they have something beautiful to show. Fully tattooed people even look totally dressed in fact. It's like a garment, like a second skin because the original skin, you can not see it any more.”

The above excerpt echoes extraordinary instances of heavily or even fully tattooed bodies like Pascal Tourain (in France) or Zombie Boy (in Canada), whose stories illustrate their difficulties in being accepted by society still being as they were in the past. As any escape from their body was impossible, they have both chosen to use it as a tool, and tattoos become a language. In so doing, they have changed their relationship with their own bodies as well as altered people's gaze on them. As expressed by Pascal Tourain in his one man show (*The Tattooed Man*):

“[Tattooists] have eroticized me in an extraordinary way! I am trans-corporeal. How I feel good in my new skin! It's kind of a way to defy death, to feel alive, and to bare my soul!”

For Pascal Tourain, acquiring tattoos has acted as a rite of passage between a former unpleasant life and a reappropriation of a new magnified body (Schouten 1991; van Gennepe 1960).

Investing in the present here and now: tattoos as a sign of belonging

Finally, tattoos are also a way to express informants' symbiosis with things or beings that they feel they embody. They help them to concretely enact on their bodies all the beliefs, hopes and utopian projects they wish to pursue. For example, Aurore, a young designer who engaged in a shamanism course for nearly two years, decided to get a tattoo representing a fox on her right shoulder. She has done several week-end retreats with a Master who teaches techniques of

meditation and mediation with natural and/or human spirits and she claims that the fox represents both her body and soul:

“Everyone tells me: ‘you’ve red hair, you’re a fox’. Because the fox has red fur, because I feel close this animal, I know it’s me. It’s my totem. This is my first tattoo. Normally, in the Japanese tradition, the fox has nine tails. For now, I have only tattooed two, because he is young. But in the future, I will add others gradually, because the nine tails signify wisdom”.

In line with a totemic thought (Descola 2005), Aurore does not feel any discontinuity between the physicality of the fox and her own interiority. She embodies her power animal as a way to express her deep engagement into shamanism, a practice that enables her through tattooing, to “communicate with the universe of divinities” (Foucault 2006: 232).

Engraving one’s commitment through an irrevocable inscription also echoes Ines’s project. Having carefully considered her decision, Ines has chosen to write on the back of her neck: “fight until they are all free.” The meaning Ines gives to these words reflects her strong involvement against animal abuse. As a medical and psychological assistant, Ines wants to express how she cares for animal rights, and more broadly for all living beings that are deprived of the opportunity to defend themselves. Her decision to get a tattoo was meant to make her commitment “more credible.” especially in her parent’s eyes. She wanted to show them that fighting for animal rights was not transient and shallow – “something that’ll go away” – but a true part of her personality that defines her in life. The choice of location too was very symbolic:

“I placed the sentence at the back of my neck because if one day my neck is broken, then it will mean that I will not live anymore, so my fight will stop at the same time. As long as I’m alive, I will fight for this cause, and because I am fighting for it, I’m alive.”

While for these informants tattoos express deep singularization, they tangibilize for others the utopian project of being member of a group (Sanders 1988). Sonia for example describes a tattoo – a pair of Nike shoes – that one of her customers wanted to get:

“As a former shoe salesman, he really felt passionate about his work. Apparently he had, he said, about a hundred and fifty pairs at home. At first, he was pretty unbearable because he was quibbling for each millimetre! He wanted a specific famous model of Nike sneakers, I don't know the name anymore, but he said it was a legendary pair of shoes, so he wanted to have these shoes on his skin. At the end, he was really delighted.”

For Sonia, this sense of belonging to specific reference groups is testified by the number of recurring flash designs – stars, feathers, dream catchers, Roman numerals or infinity tattoos – that she is asked to execute because these have become permeated by the culture of consumption a new and “fashionable way of adorning the body” (Bengtsson, Östberg, & Kjeldgaard 2005: 263). Forms of mimicry are also frequent when customers want the same designs as those of pop stars or football players, not to mention brands that, as in the case above, some decide to ink indelibly.

Although they exemplify the same need for membership, other projects appear more personal.

Julien, a 32 year-old tattooist, tries to give meanings to some customers' requests, which consist of tattooing their children's face on their arms or their thighs:

“At first, I thought it was ridiculous, because the children are alive. They can contemplate them every morning. Why do they need to get their face inked on their body? Then, I gradually came to understand their rationales. They want to keep their children on them, to say: ‘I'm here or there but they're with me everywhere I go’”

As a possible explanation, Julien suggests that tattoos enable them to keep an everlasting representation of their beloved ones. At a time when rituals and signs of affiliation – such as emblems, coats of arms, community exchanges of blood – have gradually disappeared, tattoos serve as a means to physically enact group membership. In duplicating the reality onto their skin, tattooees pursue the utopian project of making close relatives present despite distance and forever (re)uniting them in their flesh (Sanders 1988).

Discussion

Our research has shown how tattooing illustrates various negotiations of the tension between “here” and “elsewhere” that are resolved by inscribing on the body various utopias. Findings show that these body transformations enact utopian projects that result in imaginary journeys, escapes from reality, reinvestments in the present, and expressions of the desire to assert affiliation and presence in the here and now. By using their skin as a “projection surface” (Patterson and Schroeder 2010) where utopias are effectively achieved, informants make their bodies heterotopias that mirror fragments of the reality, compensate for difficulties, and better realize their aspirations within the space where they live. Choosing a figurative inscription to be inked onto their bodies helps them to confirm or renegotiate their place in the world. Theorizing the body as the place following Foucault’s thinking on space (1986) and the body (2006) helps to view it as a topos we must cope with, the home of our dreams, and an “other space” we transform to better stick to the reality. This conceptualization adequately articulates the entanglement of the spatialized, carnal, and ideal anthropological human condition that is resolved in/on the body. The performative character of tattoos enables people to deal with their physical appearance and transform themselves so as to accept what/where they are (McCracken 2008). The vast

cosmogony from which tattoo designs are borrowed also shows that tattoo consumption does not oppose the physicality of things to the interiority of beings. Rather it illuminates how traditional and contemporary uses of tattooing overlap and interact in mixing rationality and magical thinking. Overall, the study exemplifies the anthropological coexistence of nature and culture and the fundamental interaction between signs and fetishes that serve to represent, express and protect the very substance of beings (Descola 2005).

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