

Tattoo Narratives Behind Bars

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In the confines of prison, the body becomes an ultimate refuge; and in this sense, I approach the skin as a surface of text for self-expression and self-construction. The following study will explore the (re)construction of identity at female prisoners in Romania. By focusing on a small pool of subjects, I hope to offer a more in-depth analysis of the tattoo narrative as a personal process of identity negotiation.

According to a survey conducted by the NAP (National Association of Prisons) from 2007, 57% of the men and 56% of the women from Romanian prisons are tattooed. While a 2009 survey shows that 48% of male and 16% of female prisoners are tattooed during their incarceration (Kalambayi, Jderu, 2010). While there is considerable raw data on the subject, it is yet to be processed.

One important aspect of this study is that it follows only representatives of the female gender, thus hoping to add a small contribution to filling a gap in a male dominated research area. This disequilibrium has considerable repercussions in the academic sphere, the limitations thus imposed on the generalization of the results being one of the more important ones. Therefore, by narrowing down the subject pool, we explore a previously uncharted territory. The objective of this study is to follow the (re)construction of identity through tattoo narratives in female prisoners. In a setting where the body becomes the last place of refuge for an identity threatened by reform, markings of the body can serve as anchors to a former or a new self. Thus, we will follow if the identity narrated by ink is associated to the life before or after incarceration. In the process we hope to help answer the following main research question: How is identity (re)constructed through the tattoo narrative?

Theoretical framework

Starting with the 19th century, the research dedicated to the practice of tattooing passes through several stages: it begins in the field of anthropology (Forster, 1777; Handy, 2016; Stewart, 1831), after which it became an object of curiosity for legal medicine (Lombroso, 2006; Minovici, 2007), while finally it entered into the field of psychology and sociology (Sanders, Vail, 2008; Copes, Forsyth, 1993; Atkinson, 2003). Only a few studies have dealt with this subject in Romania (Minovici, 2007; Kalambayi, Jderu, 2010), so it is safe to say that there is still a lot left to be uncovered. The first of these studies was done by Nicolae Minovici (2007) at the end of the 20th century. While the main perspective is that of forensic medicine, there are a couple of important observations that can be extrapolated to different fields. He observed that tattoos are most wide-spread amongst convicts¹; however, he still believed that this should not be

¹ It is worth mentioning that from a sample of 116 tattooed individuals, 85 were convicts, thus composing the majority of the subjects.

considered an index for criminality². He further created a list of characteristics of foreign and autochthonous delinquents, out of which certain elements could be linked to the (re)construction of identity³.

Prison, as a total institution, implements techniques of systematical deconstruction of the inmate's identity and its reconstruction as part of an institutional collective (Goffman, 1958). Immediately after the individual enters the system, he is exposed to the mortification of the self. This process follows a strict script: the name is replaced by a number, all personal belongings are taken away, an intrusive body search is made, the inmate is dressed in the institutional uniform. However, the individual does not remain passive to all these changes, he adapts to the new setting. Goffman (1958) specifies the following adaptation styles: situational withdrawal (perceiving and reacting only to the immediate stimuli), rebellion (opposition to the system, refusal to cooperate), colonization (preferring the prison setting to the outside world), and conversion (the inmate internalizes the staff's vision of himself, strives to become a model inmate). In this context, it would be worth following how the tattoo narrative of identity is represented in relation to the above mentioned adaptation styles to the prison setting.

A masculine system by excellence, the prison system for women is characterized by conventionalizing femininity (Wahidin, Tate, 2005). This trend originates in the predominant ideas of the 19th century about the purity and vulnerability of the woman (Heidensohn, 1994). In this view, the female criminal is represented as a failed specimen, one who does not fulfill her biological and social destiny. But shortly, as an ideological response, a feminist perspective takes root and will continue to reappear throughout the years in waves⁴. Gender is an important factor regarding social perception of the tattooed individual, studies reveal that women are more prone to criticism and stigmatization (Swami, Furnham, 2007; Tyler, 2008). An attitude which also transpired in some of the early research dedicated to the topic. Thus, Gray (1994) sees tattooed women as being "fallen". Shortly after follows a feminist current, here the liberation effect of this body modification gains center stage (Vale & Juno, 1989; Mifflin, 1997; Pitts, 1998; DeMello, 2000). While these two perspectives are united by associating tattoos to social deviance, as far as overstepping social norms of the female body, they differ regarding the value attributed to this action.

The above mentioned second perspective places the female body under the all encompassing gaze of masculinity (heavily draws on Foucault, 1979, 1980), the female form is socially constructed in accordance with an ideal outlined by the other gender. A central role in this literature is dedicated to the relationship between body modification techniques and power

² Others who shared this believe are: Abraham Baer, *Der Verbrecher*, in antropologischer Beziehung, 1893; F. Leppmann, *Die criminalpsychologische und criminalpraktische Bedeutung des Tätowirens bei Verbrechern*, Vierteljahrsschrift für gerichtliche Medizin 8, 1894: 193-218 (Minovici, 2007).

³ Minovici's characteristics of convict tattoos: revenge, cynicism, obscenity, multiplicity, precocity, association (Minovici, 2007).

⁴ The first wave dealt with two main issues: gender ratio (in crime), the issue of generalization (examines if the same theories can apply for both genders) (Daly, Chesney-Lind, 1988). The second wave is fractured in five directions: liberal feminism, radical feminism, Marxist feminism, socialist feminism, postmodern feminism (Kruttschnitt, 2013). While the third wave places more importance on situational variables of criminality and explores social stratification in the study of gender intersections (Burgess-Proctor, 2006, 2013; Miller, Mullins, 2006, apud Kruttschnitt, 2013).

relations. Atkinson (2002) however comes with a new proposition, uniting the two perspectives. He claims that both are right, in the sense that some women indeed use tattoos as a form of political manifesto, while others use them as a means to reiterate the dominant social constructs. His focus lies on the role of private negotiation conducted by the individual regarding the personal meaning associated with the practice. Women's body is at the intersection of opposing forces, on one hand there is the pressure to uniformity exercised by the prison system, on the other hand there are the social norms regarding the construction of femininity. Thus, tattoo narratives serve as a means to negotiate the positioning of identity in this complex web of institutional and personal discourses.

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