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Thick Skin: The History of the Black Tattoo Community in Atlanta

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by

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ABSTRACT

As a rapidly growing, multibillion dollar industry, tattooing is quickly becoming a mainstream art form and commodity. Although the ancient art form, originates from civilizations all over the world, the modern history in the United States has largely limited Black individuals from receiving the recommended training (apprenticeship) until about the last twenty-five years. The purpose of this study is to explore the history of the Black Tattoo Community in Atlanta. The following questions will guide the study: What is the history behind the Black Tattoo Community in the Atlanta area? What are the experiences of Black artists apprenticing and learning to tattoo? What are the differences, if any, when tattooing people of color? What impact has television, the internet, and social media had on the tattoo industry, and in particular on Black tattoo artists? This study utilizes an oral historical interview method to answer these questions.

INDEX WORDS: Tattoo, Black Artists, Tattoo Culture, Atlanta, Tattoo History, Black Tattoo Community

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to the Tattoo Community, amongst whom I have finally found my home.

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First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge my grandmother, Thelma Mulick. Although she left this life during my first semester, she has invaluably provided me with a peaceful home to live in throughout my career as a graduate student.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Grossing over 2.3 billion dollars annually, the tattoo industry is growing at a rapid rate in the United States and providing artists with an opportunity to make a living creating art.[1] Although it is an ancient art form, originating from civilizations all over the world, including Africa, the modern history in the United States has largely restricted Black artists from apprenticing until about the last twenty years due to racial prejudices. As the industry changes and grows, it offers a greater opportunity for Black artists to enter, make a living, and even own their own shops. Exploration of this subject is significant as it is a multibillion dollar industry, quickly growing in popularity, and becoming recognized as a fine art form.[2] This study seeks to provide a voice and a history for a few individuals, allowing them the opportunity to share their experiences in the industry as a Black artist. Furthermore, this research attempts to offer a written history of the tattoo industry with a specific focus on the history of the Black Tattoo Community in Atlanta, Georgia.

1.1 Purpose of Study and Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following questions about the Black Tattoo Community and its history in the greater Atlanta area:

1. What is the history behind the Black Tattoo Community in the Atlanta area?
    a) How does this history situate itself within the Black Mecca schema?
2. What are the experiences of Black artists apprenticing and learning to tattoo?
    a) How does the intersection of race and gender impact Black women in the industry?
    b) Have the experiences of these artists impacted their decision to mentor other artists?
3. What are the differences, if any, when tattooing people of color?

4. What impact has television, the internet, and social media had on the tattoo industry, and in particular on Black tattoo artists?

    a) How has Black popular culture impacted the tattoo industry?

1.2 Key Terms Defined

Apprenticeship: The term apprenticeship references the traditional process of an artist learning to tattoo from an experienced tattoo artist. Though traditional and respected amongst the tattoo community, apprenticeships are not legally required in order to obtain a license as a tattoo artist. However, most reputable tattoo shops/studios do not employ tattoo artists that have not completed an apprenticeship.

Scratcher: A scratcher is the term generally given to artists who are untrained or who have not completed a formal apprenticeship. This term is associated with a negative connotation and is generally looked down upon within the tattoo community. This is because "scratchers" typically lack the knowledge and equipment to tattoo in sanitary conditions and in some circumstances disobey age restriction laws.

Tattooist v. Tattoer v. Tattoo Artist: While some individuals may feel that the terms differentiate between someone skilled in the trade of tattooing and someone who considers themselves to be an artist, there is no definitive definition to differentiate the terms. For the purpose of this study, these descriptors may be used interchangeably and considered to be synonymous of one another.

Black artist: For the purposes of this study, the term Black artist will refer to individuals who self-identify as Black or African-American and also consider themselves to be artists of some form (e.g. drawing, painting, tattooing, etc.). This term does not refer to, unless otherwise mentioned, the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s.

Tattoo Community: For the purposes of this study, the broad definition of the term tattoo community will be defined according to Margo DeMello, the author of *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community*. DeMello states that the tattoo community "may refer to any and all tattooed people" as well as "those individuals who actively embrace the notion of community and who pursue community-oriented activities" (e.g. tattoo conventions).[3] The term also acknowledges that within the larger "community" there are "broadly defined class groups, and within each larger group there are also numerous subcommunities."[4]

Black Tattoo Community: The Black Tattoo Community refers to the subcommunity of individuals within the tattoo community that self-identify as Black or African-American and/or those who tattoo or get tattooed by Black/African-American individuals and/or work in and/or support Black-owned tattoo shops.

1.3 Significance of Study

This study is significant to the academic community and to the Black community for numerous reasons. To begin, there is limited scholarly research around the present history of the art of tattooing or the culture of the tattoo community. Furthermore, Black artists in the United States have historically been prevented from acquiring the necessary apprenticeships to grant them notoriety and licensure as tattoo artists. As previously mentioned, tattooing is a multibillion dollar industry and constantly growing. This makes tattooing economically significant to the Black community, as well as significant from a creative and expressive standpoint. This study provides a voice for Black tattoo artists in and around Atlanta as well as an understanding of their unique history. Furthermore, this study gives tattoo patrons and the rest of society a better understanding of tattooing as an art form.

1.4 Methodology

Oral history is the predominate method of research. The decision to do so is based on the limited written information available on the subject.

Participants

Seven individuals were interviewed. The interviews lasted anywhere from one to three hours. Further information about the participants is included in **Error! Reference source not found.** below. For the purposes of this study the participants selected met the following criteria:

1. Must be currently or previously working in the tattoo industry as a fulltime (meaning that tattooing affords them the necessary income to provide for themselves) artist for 3 or more years.
2. Must currently or previously have worked in the tattoo industry in the greater Atlanta area.
3. Must self-identify as Black/African-American or have experience tattooing on Black clientele.

The focus of the research for this study is on the Black Tattoo Community in Atlanta. The other selection criteria determined whether or not the individuals have the lived experiences necessary to answer the research questions.

Participant recruitment was largely done through connections that already existed with the researcher and using the snowball method of recruitment. Once participants that met the criteria were selected, they were asked to sign a consent form. The consent form offered them the option to use their name or choose to remain anonymous, in which case they were assigned a pseudonym. Following this, the interviews were scheduled with the participants.

Table 1 Participants

	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5	Participant 6	Participant 7
Name/ Pseudonym	"Dad Bod"	Kenneth "Kenny Da Kydd" Ekhibise	Jaleel "Memphis" Owens	"The Rose Guy"	Charity "Cake" Hamidullah	Chavonna "Bang" Rhodes	Tyrone "Red" Cooley
Gender	Male	Male	Male	Male	Female	Female	Male
Race	White/ Caucasian	Black/ African-American	Black/ African-American	Black/ African-American	Black/ African-American	Black/ African-American	Black/ African-American
Age	32	32	25	29	26	25	46
Years Tattooing	9 years	7 years	5 years	6.5 years	8 years	3 years	21 years
Completed a Formal Apprentice ship	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Length of Apprentice ship	1.5 years	2 years	7-8 months	2 years	N/A	3 years	3 years
Owns Their Own Shop	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
Works in a Black-Owned Shop	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Name of Shop	Choosing to Remain Anonymous	Camp Creek Body Art & Tattoo Removal	Camp Creek Body Art & Tattoo Removal	Choosing to Remain Anonymous	Black Owl Tattoo & Art Gallery	Tri-Cities Tattoo Company	Tri-Cities Tattoo Company

Data Collection Techniques

The data collection techniques used for this included a preliminary questionnaire and interviews. The data was transcribed and coded from the audio taped semi-structured interviews. Following transcription and coding, a small group of peers (other graduate students) were asked to review all coding in order to further ensure the validity of the research.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consists of questions about whether or not the participant meets the selection criteria for the study (Appendix B). If participants met the criteria, further demographic and background information was collected.

Interview Procedure

The interview procedure was as follows:

1. Contact the potential participants to determine if they are interested in participating in the study.
2. The participants read and sign the informed consent forms.
3. A time was scheduled for the interview with each participant.
4. Questionnaire was completed by the participants (Appendix B).
5. An interview guide was used to facilitate the interview (Appendix C).
6. The interviews were audio recorded.
7. Participants were asked if they knew anyone who would be a valuable participant to the study (Snowball Method of participant recruitment).
8. The interviews were transcribed and coded.
9. A small group of peers reviewed coding to ensure reliability/validity.

Reliability/Validity

In order to address reliability and validity, the interview questions sought to ask vital questions in various ways in order to receive the information needed to create the narrative. A small group of peers (other graduate students) were asked to review all coding in order to further

ensure the validity of the research. While it must be acknowledged that oral interviews are not always the most reliable source of data, outside documentation and resources, (e.g. business registration, etc.) were used to corroborate the information collected from interviewees.

Limitations of the Study

In order to reduce limitations brought forth by any preconceived observations as the researcher, it is important to choose questions that are open-ended and do not lead the participants in a particular direction. One limitation of this study is that it does not lead to generalizable information. However, the intentions of this study are not to create generalizable or replicable information, but rather to explore the lives, experiences, and history of the Black Tattoo Community in the greater Atlanta area. Finally, this study will hopefully begin a richer conversation in the scholarship around Black tattoo artists and tattooing on people of color.

1.5 The Researcher

As an artist myself, I have found interest in tattooing for many years, even before I really understood it or the community. In the midst of some soul searching, it suddenly made sense to me to let go of any fear of judgement, and commit to becoming a tattoo artist. Being in graduate school does not allow for the time needed to apprentice, and so my apprenticeship will have to wait. In the meantime, I have chosen to immerse myself, in whatever way possible, in the culture and community. While watching an episode of *Ink Master*, I heard Craig Foster mention the struggle he had finding an apprenticeship in the 1990s, in part, because of his race. Immediately this intrigued me, and I decided to do more research. I quickly came across Miya Bailey's documentary and watched it in its entirety. However, after the documentary ended, I struggled to find any more information on the topic. It occurred to me that this was the perfect way to bring together my passion and my thesis, while subsequently providing Black tattoo

artists with a voice in the literature that does not seem to exist. Being from Atlanta presents an opportunity to focus specifically on artists here. After watching Bailey's documentary, it became clear to me that Atlanta was important for Black tattoo artists and had a unique history.

As a White student in African-American Studies, I am accustomed to feeling like an outsider sometimes. However, walking into a tattoo studio and asking people who do not know me to let me interview them was incredibly intimidating at times. Nevertheless, this research provided me with an opportunity to further get to know those artists that I already had contact with, and to develop a relationship with those I had never met. I am grateful for that opportunity, and hope that my research accurately tells their stories.

1.6 Chapter Synopsis

The historical overview of tattooing examines a brief world history of body modification and tattooing. Chapter Two offers insight on the ancient history around body art and body modification, including information from ancient Africa, Japan, the Polynesian Islands, and Russian Prison culture. This chapter also examines the history of tattooing in the United States from the 1800s through the present. Using existing literature, I provide insight on the "tattoo community," the culture of tattooing amongst both tattoo patrons and the artists themselves, and tattoo apprenticeships. Additionally, I explore the normalization of a deviant art form. Throughout history, negative perceptions of tattoo adorners plagued the mainstream across many cultures. Adorners were thought only to have served time in prison, belonged to a gang, or fought in a war. However, an examination of the mainstreaming and popularity of tattooing in contemporary times are discussed here.

Finally, this chapter summarizes the documentary *Coloring Outside the Lines (2012)*, by Miya Bailey and briefly discusses Black tattoo artists. This documentary contains interviews with Black artists from all over the United States, providing historical insight, for both the local (Atlanta) and national history, of Black tattoo artists. In this way, this documentary offers an excellent base from which to begin the study. Overall, this chapter seeks to deliver a historical understanding of the marginalization of Black artists in the industry. This section concludes with a discussion of the gaps that exist within current literature.

Chapter Three, A History of the Black Tattoo Community in Atlanta, I use the Black Mecca schema to explain why Atlanta arose in the mid-1990s as a major hub for Black tattoo artists to find valuable apprenticeships and work in the industry. West End Tattoo played a major role in this process. Finally, I provide an overview of the genealogy of some of the most professional and well-known Black tattoo artists and Black-owned tattoo shops in the Atlanta area.

In Chapter Four, Apprenticing and Learning to Tattoo as a Black Artist, I utilize interviews from participants and other data to explore how Black artists currently working in the Atlanta area have attained apprenticeships and learned to tattoo. First, this chapter will present the apprenticeship experiences of participants. Secondly, I uncover how the older generation of tattoo artists, behaving as gatekeepers to the industry, have helped to provide a greater space for younger Black tattoo artists. Third, the experiences that Black tattoo artists in the Atlanta area have had in the industry are used to offer some understanding of where and how Black tattoo artists feel they fit into the tattoo community. Furthermore, the intersection of race and gender and the resulting impact on Black women in the tattoo industry is discussed. Finally, this chapter examines how artists feel about mentoring artists looking to break into the industry.

Chapter Five, titled, Tattooing People of Color, begins by explaining the science behind tattooing. This provides an understanding of why tattoos are permanent and why the shade of a person's skin might impact how a tattoo looks after it has healed. I employ interviews from participants and other data to examine the differences between tattooing on different skin tones. Additionally, I attempt to debunk misunderstandings in the industry and amongst patrons about tattoos and dark skin. The use of color, contrast and composition may need to vary depending on each client's skin tone. Finally, this chapter will discuss some of the artists, particularly those in Atlanta, who have revolutionized techniques for tattooing on people of color, challenging previous beliefs and limitations.

Chapter Six, Tattooing, the Media and Black Popular Culture, explores how the media, particularly television, the internet and social media, have impacted the tattoo industry on a global level. Throughout each section, I discuss the impact that these media outlets have had on tattoo artists and in particular, Black tattoo artists. This chapter provides insight on the changes that have occurred in the industry since the creation of tattoo based reality-TV and competition shows. Furthermore, I examine the influence of Hip-Hop culture on the tattoo industry, with a particular focus on Atlanta. I also discuss how the media may be contributing to the number of scratchers tattooing people and the impact that this has on the industry. Finally, this chapter explores the employment of social media and the internet as a primary source for tattoo artists and patrons to promote, research, and share with one another.

Chapter Seven concludes this study, taking another look at the research questions and to briefly demonstrate how the previous chapters answer these questions. Furthermore, I discuss the limitations of this study, any possible areas for related further research, and conclude with the implications of the study.

[1] Bruce Kennedy, "In Tattoo Business, Profits are Hardly Skin Deep: Quintessential Experience Keeps Customers Coming and Operators Plugging Along*." NBC News*, last modified October 15, 2010, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/39641413/ns/business-us_business/t/tattoo-business-profits-are-hardly-skin-deep/#.Vu9QufkrLIV.

[2] Helen Lewis, "Will A Tattoo Ever Hang in the Louvre?" *New Statesman.* (2013) : 32-37. Accessed March 22, 2016.

[3] Margo DeMello, *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community.* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 3.

[4] Ibid.

2 A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF TATTOOING

This chapter delivers a historical overview of tattooing and insight on how and why Black artists have been marginalized in the industry. I examine a brief world history of body modification and tattooing, and offers insight on the ancient history around body art and body modification. This section includes information from ancient Africa, Japan, the Polynesian Islands, and Russian Prison culture. Additionally, the history of tattooing in the United States from the 1800s through the present is examined. I also explore the criminalization and waves of popularity of tattoos and the development and impact of the tattoo machine. This chapter provides insight on the "tattoo community," the culture of tattooing amongst both tattoo patrons and the artists themselves, and tattoo apprenticeships. Additionally, the normalization of a deviant art form is explored. Throughout history, negative perceptions of tattoo adorners plagued the mainstream across many cultures. Adorners were thought only to have served time in prison, belonged to a gang, or fought in a war. However, this section examines how tattoos have become more mainstream and popular in present times.

Finally, this chapter summarizes the documentary *Coloring Outside the Lines (2012)*, by Miya Bailey and briefly discusses Black tattoo artists. This documentary contains interviews with Black artists from all over the United States, offering historical insight for both the local (Atlanta) and national history of Black tattoo artists. In this way, this documentary provides an excellent base from which to begin the study. This chapter concludes with a discussion of gaps that exist in the current literature around tattooing.

2.1 A Brief World History of Body Modification and Tattooing

Archeological remains reveal instruments of tattooing dating back to somewhere between 10,000 and 38,000 B.C.E. Furthermore, mummified bodies adorning tattoos have been identified all over the world, including, but not limited to remains from ancient Kemet, South America, and Russia.[1] It is estimated that ritual practices of tattooing and scarification in humans may date back as far as 200,000 years ago.[2] Evidence demonstrates that tattooing was widely practiced and respected as an art form in many ancient cultures. In fact, John A. Rush, author of, *Spiritual Tattoo: A History of Tattooing, Piercing, Scarification, Branding, and Implants*, argues that "almost all cultures at one time or another practiced tattooing" and therefore, arguably, some form or another of body modification.[3] Rush further posits that body modification has ranged from tattooing and piercings to modifications of the teeth, breast implants, facial reconstruction, etc.[4] While it appears that many ancient cultures including those located in South America, North America, Africa, Europe, and various parts of Asia practiced some form of tattooing and/or body modification at one time, Europeans appear to be the first to lawfully prohibit the practice.

Ancient Africa

According to Rush, ancient Kemet provides the first written documentation of tattooing.[5] In the, "Ancient Tattoos," by Jarrett A. Lobell and Eric A. Powell, ancient Kemetians appear to be one of the only known ancient cultures where tattoos were solely done on women. Furthermore, Lobell and Powell argue that enough evidence suggests that in ancient Kemet, tattoos may have been "considered one element of a woman's sexuality."[6] The first known mummified example of tattooing is Amunet.[7] Further examination of Amunet also demonstrated

examples of scarfication on parts of her body.[8] Scarification is another form of body modification that involved either branding or cutting, and is more common amongst cultures of African descent because the skin is more likely to keloid.[9] It should also be noted that scarification practices were commonly found amongst peoples found in modern day Sudan.[10]

Japan

Evidence of tattooing in Japan dates back to prior to 5000 BC. Similar to Europe, tattooing in Japan became a social taboo after contact with the Chinese in the 700s. Around this time, the Japanese began using tattoos as a form of punishment, used to identify criminals and other outcasts of society.[11] Although tattooing resurfaced in popularity amongst members of the underclass, it was banned as a "threat to the established order" during the Tokugawa Regime (1603-1867). Despite the strict government ban on tattooing, members of underclass (labor workers, criminals, members of the *Yakuza* (an organized crime unit), lower-class individuals) continued to get tattooed, viewing tattooing as a sign of courage and loyalty.[12] During the late 1800s, though still illegal, Japanese tattooing attracted attention from European and American sailors and travelers. While Japan's laws against tattooing changed following World War II, it was the interest of Europeans and Americans that reinvigorated interest in traditional Japanese tattooing. This was likely due to the past criminalization and subversive nature of tattooing in Japanese culture.[13]

Traditional Japanese tattooing consists of a series of "specific designs representing legendary heroes and religious motifs" in conjunction with symbolic elements of nature (e.g. certain kinds of flowers, waves, clouds, and certain animals).[14] A few popular examples of traditional Japanese tattoos include dragons, koi fish, tigers, samurai, wind bars, cherry blossoms, peonies, geisha, Hanya masks, foo dogs, chrysanthemums, etc. Traditional Japanese

tattooing is also different form Western tattooing in that Japanese tattoos usually consist of one large design that covers the entire body.[15] Japanese becomes relevant to this study because it offers insight on the criminalization of tattooing and because Japanese style tattooing is now extremely popular world-wide, including amongst the Black Tattoo Community, and still consists of the same designs, images, and elements.

Polynesian Islands

Of the ancient cultures that practiced tattooing, Polynesian cultures arguably created and ordained some of the most detailed, creative and complex tattoos.[16] Ancient legend suggests that two women tattooists from Fiji brought the art of tattooing to Tonga and Samoa. In ancient Tonga, warriors were covered in intricate geometric patterned tattoos from their waist to their knees that were created by well-trained priests.[17] Similarly, in ancient Samoa, tattooing played an important cultural role. Overtime, voyagers and warriors of Samoa and Tonga traveled to and settled in other islands in the Pacific, such as the Marquesas and Hawaii, spreading their language, art, culture, and tattooing. During the 1700s, Captain James Cook of the British Navy, began traveling throughout the Polynesian Islands, and his naturalist, Joseph Banks, began the first written account of Polynesian tattoos. According to Banks, the ink for tattoos in Tahiti was created from the smoke of the candlenut mixed with water in coconut shells. The instruments used for embedding the ink into the skin consisted of pieces of bone and shell that were sharpened into various sizes and attached to a handle for use. The handle was then "struck" with "sharp blows" from a stick to drive the ink deep into the skin.[18]

Although some Europeans took interest in Polynesian art and tattooing, the later groups of missionaries that began settling the islands did not approve of tattooing and their colonial regimes began outlawing the practice on many islands. However, those Europeans that had

previously taken interest both got tattooed and learned to tattoo in the Polynesian islands, bringing the art and skill back to the United States and Europe.[19] Understanding this history is pertinent to this study because tattooing in the United States directly results from the exploration and colonization of the Polynesian Islands and the appropriation of their tattooing culture.

Russian Prison Tattoos

Though existing in a much more modern history, the culture of tattooing in Russian prisons is equally relevant. Beginning in 1846, criminals in Russia were branded on their face with the word "KAT," meaning "hard labor criminal."[20] However, despite the negative connotations, overtime, convicts became proud of their markings. By the 1900s, prisoners began marking themselves and often used portraits of Joseph Stalin and Lenin, believing that the images would protect them from being killed by prison guards.[21]

According to the documentary, *Marked: Pure Evil*, criminal activity in Moscow leaves "Russia ranked second, only to the U.S., in the number of prisoners per capita."[22] However, prisons in Russia are often far more crowded and dangerous than those in the United States. As a result, the criminal organization known as Thieves in Law created a complex hierarchal system within the prison system, and tattoos are used to convey rank and demonstrate status. Placement is as important as the image depicted and is also used to convey rank. For example, one of the most important symbols, stars, when worn on the knees, implies that the convict commands respect, while wearing stars on the chest can only be worn by those of the highest ranks. Individuals who entered prison for the first time with tattoos, particularly those with stars, would be severely punished and often killed. Other important symbols included epaulets (symbolizing rank), snarling tigers, leopards, or wolves (Oskals demonstrate "hostility towards authority"), spiders (symbolizing a thief), and various religious iconography. Tattoos were sometimes made

with a sewing needle, thread and ink, however, others created homemade tattoo machines from materials that could be gathered in the prison (e.g. toothbrush, pen caps, guitar string, etc.). Women's prisons had a similar hierarchal system with tattoos.[23]

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, prisons are no longer ruled by the Thieves in Law and prisoners now tattoo whatever images they want. Many of the more modern day prison tattoos in Russia consist of satanic images or representations. While it is now common for Russian civilians to get tattooed, their tattoos differ greatly from those of convicts.[24] The relevance of Russian prison tattoos to this study is in the criminalization of tattooing. Starting in the 1800s, tattooing/branding was utilized as a method of permanently branding convicts as outcasts of society. The result is the branding of tattooing as a deviant activity across many cultures and societies. The resulting perception has only begun to change in the past twenty-five or so years.

2.2 HISTORY OF TATTOOING IN THE UNITED STATES

Polynesian Influence

Early tattooing amongst Americans was done almost strictly by sailors, who traveled looking for customers.[25] The predecessors of North American tattooing are argued to be Pacific Island Cultures, such as those from "Tahiti, Samoa, and Hawaii."[26] Although, as previously discussed, Europeans practiced tattooing long before the United States was colonized, tattooing in the United States is the result of travel to the Polynesian Islands in the 1700s.[27] In 1769, Captain James Cook, of the British navy, recorded the "first accounts of Polynesian tattooing" in Tahiti and again in 1778 in Hawaii.[28] Sailors began getting tattooed overseas in the 1780s,[29] and subsequently brought the practices and methods back to the United States with them.[30]

In 1846, Martin Hildebrandt became the "first known professional tattoo artist in the United States," working predominately on sailors and later, on Civil War soldiers.[31] It appears

that during the American Civil War, tattooing became acceptable for soldiers, and often projected their political allegiance.[32] During the 1880s, the main patrons of tattoos in the United States included criminals, sailors, and the working lower-class; however, tattooing experienced an increase in popularity amongst the upper classes during the late 1880s. During this time, all tattoos were created by hand, as learned and appropriated from Polynesian cultures.[33]

The Invention of the Tattoo Machine

Likely as a result of the increase in popularity, in 1891, Samuel O'Reilly, a New Yorker, patented the first tattoo machine that would move the needles up and down automatically, speeding up the tattooing process and improving the quality of tattoos.[34] This invention increased the access of tattoos to the greater public, and tattooists began frequenting circuses and carnivals.[35] Furthermore, the "true Americana style of tattooing was born" from this development and consisted of bold black outlines, thick black shading, and minimal color (black, red, green, and blue).[36] O'Reilly is also credited for having been the first tattoo artist to popularize the Japanese style of tattooing in America, which is still popular today.[37]

The Golden Age of Tattooing

According to Jill A. Fisher in "Tattooing the Body, Marking Culture," during the following few decades there was a class divide amongst tattoo patrons. The upper-class intended their tattoos to impress and demonstrate affluence, while the lower class patrons got their tattoos as a means of self or political expression.[38] DeMello considers the time between World War I and World War II the "Golden Age of Tattooing," because tattooing had "perhaps the highest level of social approval due to its link with patriotism."[39] As previously mentioned, tattoos during this time consisted of bold black lines, minimal color, and heavy shading. Tattoos were also readable and typically consisted of basic patriotic imagery such as eagles, or anchors, names (typically of mom or wife), etc.[40] Most people at the time picked their tattoos from "flash," which is predesigned artwork that is typically displayed in the front of tattoo shops.[41]

Post World War II

Nevertheless, following World War II, tattooing became increasingly taboo again as a result of the lack of sanitary conditions and regret from tattooed veterans.[42] Specifically, in 1944, Charlie Wagner, of New York City, was the first tattooist to be fined for not sterilizing his needles.[43] At this time, health and age regulations were developed and enforced and tattooing was even banned in some cities. It has also been suggested by Govenar that "knowledge about the Nazi practice of tattooing Jews in concentration camps" may have, in part, "contributed to tattooing's downfall in the United States.[44] During the 1940s through the early 1960s, tattoo shops were "often situated in "bad" neighborhoods near bus depots, train stations, and lower class communities."[45] Due to this transition, the connotations around tattoos in America became greatly linked with the likes of sailors, bikers, gang affiliates, convicts, the working lower-class, and carnival goers.[46] According to DeMello, during this time, "tattooed outlaw bikers emerging

as a subcultural group viewed with fear by the middle class in the late forties" and "convicts and Chicano gang members" who were "practicing homemade tattooing, moved into the public eye."[47] This perpetuated to the progressively taboo image of tattooing as well as the "splintering" of the culture into subcultures.[48] Finally, supposedly scientific studies done on tattooing served to further solidify the connection between tattooing and deviance.[49]

During the 1960s, bikers became the predominate group associated with tattooing in the United States. Unlike American Traditional tattoos, biker tattoos did not deliver patriotic or military themes, but were rather anti-establishment in nature, consisting of motorcycles, swastikas, skulls, "club" logos and phrases, marijuana leaves, and were typically more dense and located in more publically viewable areas.[50]

Ushering in the Tattoo Renaissance

It was during the late 1960s that the "West Coast had established itself as a new center of tattooing" and California was amongst the first states to issue licensure to tattoo artists.[51] Many of the existing tattoo scholars refer to this time period as The Tattoo Renaissance. According to the article "Culture in Transition: The Recent Growth of Tattooing in America," written in 1981 by Alan B. Govenar, a great portion of the rise in popularity in tattooing in the 1970s and 1980s is attributed to Sailor Jerry, Ed Hardy and related artists in the California area[52], as well as the "hippie and rock star subcultures."[53] Hardy was a well-respected tattoo artist, who studied under many "Old School masters" including, Sailor Jerry, Phil Sparrow, Doc Webb, and Paul Rogers, as well as with Hory Hide, a Japanese tattoo artist.[54] Hardy was known for reinventing and popularizing American traditional and Japanese traditional styles of tattooing.[55] In addition, in 1982, Hardy started the first tattoo magazine designed for a middle-class audience, called *Tattoo Time*.[56] Lyle Tuttle was also amongst the most well-known and respected Californian

tattoo artists of that time.[57] Tuttle tattooed many celebrities and utilized this exposure to increase media interest and public exposure to tattoos.[58] According to Govenar, tattoo patronage during the late 1960s through the 1970s can be attributed to the cultural emphasis on "individuality in dress, sexuality, art, and religion" seen amongst hippies, rock stars, motorcyclists, etc.[59] Furthermore, a "counterculture" developed during this time in "resistance to heterosexual, white, middle-class values," and tattoos, particularly in styles appropriated from "exotic cultures" became appealing to this new audience.[60] In particular, DeMello argues, that the rise in popularity of the aesthetic of traditional Japanese style of full-body tattooing may have helped to "sustain" the interest of middle-class Americans in tattooing.[61] The rising popularity of tattoos at this time may also be attributed, in part, to artists opening shops in local business districts of major cities.[62] Finally, scholars may also refer to this time as a renaissance due to the increase in the number of tattooists with artistic backgrounds and the rise in popularity of custom artistic designed tattoos.[63]

Due to the previously discussed factors impacting the gradual acceptance of tattooing, and the cultural influences of tattoos from other parts of the world, the art of tattooing has changed greatly. While randomly placed "flash" work used to dominate tattooing, custom artwork and collaborations are now sought after amongst tattoo collectors.[64] Much more attention to placement, design, style, and composition now exists as well. Furthermore, DeMello argues that tattooing has greatly transformed since the 1980s.[65] She suggests that during the 1980s tattooing moved from a predominately working-class to a predominately middle-class community, and therefore, the culture changed to appease middle-class sensibilities.[66]

2.3 The Tattoo Community, Culture of Tattooing, and Apprenticeships

The Tattoo Community

As previously mentioned, Margo DeMello defines the tattoo community as "any and all tattooed people" and also those who "embrace" and participate in "community-oriented activities" (e.g. attending tattoo conventions).[67] DeMello further explains that the tattoo community is broken up into larger groups that contain sub-groups within them.[68] Furthermore, she describes the community as being subject to an "oppressive class system."[69] Terms such as "biker" and "scratcher" are used to describe and differentiate from those who are considered a part of the "professional" or "fine art" class.[70] In addition to the class system, DeMello posits that status within the community may be dictated by "the type of one's tattoos (custom or flash); who created one's tattoos (i.e., the status of the artist); the number of tattoos one has; how much media coverage one has received (in the tattoo magazines); and what kinds of links one has to high-status tattooists."[71] Finally, the status of tattoo artists is also differentiated based on "artistic credentials (including training, skill, and degree of innovation); professional credentials (who was the artist's mentor; whether one runs a custom shop or a street shop); shop locale (urban or rural, West Coast versus East Coast); and relationships with the factions that develop around certain tattooists and tattoo organizations."[72]

While men who had been a part of the military or were involved with biker gangs historically made up the majority of Americans with tattoos, a shift has occurred where women now make up a greater percentage of tattoo patrons. Tattooing has proven itself to frequently be a peer activity, and has also been linked to impulsive decision making and rebellious behavior. Scholars have acknowledged four primary functions of the tattoo for patrons: ritual, identification, protection, and decoration.[73]

Tattoo Culture

David Wicks and Gina Grandy attempted to create a framework for the cultures that exist amongst Canadian tattoo artists in their article, "What Cultures Exist in the Tattooing Collectivity? Ambiguity, Membership and Participation."[74] According to their work, there appears to be a culture around apprenticed tattoo artists that embodies "professionalism, tradition/respect, and sacrifice."[75] Although apprenticeships vary in length and experiences, many people consider only the apprenticed tattoo artist to truly be a professional. Furthermore, the tattoo artists that have gone through formal apprenticeships are often perceived by their peers as deserving respect.[76] Finally, having completed an apprenticeship appears to be a sign of great sacrifice amongst tattoo artists. According to The Alliance of Professional Tattooists, the industry "places heavy emphasis on respect; respect for the history and traditions and for those that have come before."[77] Clearly, then the professionalism, respect, tradition, and sacrifice of having gone through a formal apprenticeship is sought after and valued by many tattoo artists in the industry.

Apprenticeships

During the mid-1900s, tattooists, mostly consisting of working-class men, could learn to tattoo by attending tattooing schools, paying a seasoned tattooist to train them, or by apprenticing under a reputable tattooist. At the time, most tattooists were not great artists, and most tattoos were selected from flash designs that were already created and could be selected from the walls of the tattoo shop.[78] In the last thirty or so years, more and more tattooists with fine arts training have emerged.

Finding an apprenticeship as a tattoo artist can be a competitive and nearly impossible task. Because a tattoo master is essentially training his/her competition during an apprenticeship, many tattoo artists are exceedingly particular about who they are willing to apprentice, if they apprentice any other artists at all.[79] Many artists even require apprentices to be in his/her employment for a set number of years following the apprenticeship and/or ask his/her apprentices to sign a non-compete clause.[80] During the early 2000s, it was estimated that 85 percent of tattoo artists were men. This is in part due to the nature of tattooing as a traditionally apprentice-based craft, because women are often subjected to more rejection from potential tattoo masters.[81] It would seem reasonable to conclude that those individuals from other marginalized groups, such as Black Americans, might experience similar rejection.

In Miya Bailey's film, *Coloring Outside the Lines: A Tattoo Documentary (2012)*, one tattoo veteran of 20+ years, Roni Zulu, of Zulu Tattoo in Austin, Texas, states, "When I first started tattooing it was pretty rough. Being a Black tattooist I couldn't find an apprenticeship, no one would teach me. I actually got laughed at when I walked into certain shops, here, of all places, Southern California, I'm not talking about the Deep South."[82] The film will be further discussed in a later section, but the aforementioned example demonstrates some of the difficulty and rejection that Black tattoo artists faced in trying to break through into the tattoo culture in the United States.

2.4 The Normalization and Popularization of a Deviant Art Form

The Criminalization of Tattooing

Historically, tattoos have been considered taboo and morally unacceptable amongst Americans, Europeans, and throughout many other parts of the world the world. However, as previously discussed, in ancient civilizations, tattooing was often associated with religious

rituals, health treatments, and adornment. How then has tattooing become a socially forbidden art form? Ancient civilizations such as Greece and Rome, who had previously valorized religious tattoos, began tattooing criminals and slaves in an effort to brand and "[stigmatize] them."[83] Furthermore, frequently referenced in the Old Testament is the scripture in Leviticus 19:28: "You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh on account of the dead or tattoo any marks upon you."[84] Even though there are other vague and accepting references to tattooing in the Bible, tattooing frequently became associated with idolatry amongst the Judeo-Christian religions. Additionally, in 325 A.D. Constantine banned facial tattooing within the Holy Roman Empire because it "disfigured that which was fashioned in "God's image."[85] Finally, in 487 A.D., the Empire strictly prohibited tattoos of any kind. Even though many other cultures were still using tattoos for religious ritual and rites of passage at this time, as the West began colonizing and converting other cultures to Christianity, they fought to stop the tradition in indigenous populations.[86]

As discussed previously, tattooing was an important practice amongst countercultures across the world, including the *Yakuza* in Japan, Thieves in Law in Russia, and the sailors and biker gangs in the United States. This contributed to the perspective of "deviance" associated with tattooing within mainstream cultures across the world. Although tattooing had been outlawed and used as punishment in many societies, these countercultures embraced tattooing. Only in the last forty or so years has this begun to really change.

From a Taboo Craft to the Mainstream

Although tattoos were considered taboo for the better part of the twentieth century, the tattooed community now "transcends age, class, and ethnic boundaries."[87] Researcher, Mary Kosut, suggests that the normalization of tattooing in mainstream United States culture can be

observed by examining the popularity amongst actors, musicians, athletes, and the use of tattooed individuals in advertisements.[88] The rise of reality television and social media as stages for tattoo artists has also greatly contributed to the growing popularity of tattooing.[89] These platforms have not only contributed to the growing demand for ink in the United States, but globally.

As tattoos become more acceptable in the mainstream, research estimates that nearly 40% of young adults now wear tattoos. However, it appears that 70% of individuals with tattoos get them in places that can be hidden by clothing.[90] Although the general public still appears to perceive tattooed individuals stereotypically, researchers have found that there are no significant differences in the grade point averages of university students with tattoos and those without them. Much of these negative perceptions of tattooed individuals appear to be held by those of older generations, particularly those with higher incomes.[91] This is likely due to the aforementioned popular beliefs about tattooing that existed in the couple of decades post World War II.

DeMello explains that the mainstream media, tattoo magazines and tattoo organizations have the greatest impacts on the industry.[92] She further illuminates the influence that tattoo magazines have on the tattoo community and the ways in which they perpetuate the aforementioned caste system that exists. DeMello divides tattoo magazines into two major categories "biker and nonbiker" or "lowbrow and highbrow."[93] The categories are distinguished based on "editorial content" and the publisher, rather than on patronage.[94] The "highbrow" magazines, such as Ed Hardy's previously mentioned, *Tattoo Time*, ultimately seek to situate tattooing as a professional industry and often include more references to fine art and "academic"

articles. Furthermore, tattoo suppliers are not allowed to advertise in these magazines in an effort to discourage "scratchers" or untrained tattooists from purchasing tattoo supplies.[95]

Trade or Fine Art Form

Despite the decriminalization and increase in popularity of tattoos that has occurred over the last 50 or so years, there still remains ambiguity around tattooing as an art form versus tattooing as a commodity. As one artist explains in an interview, many people observe athletes, musicians, and actors with tattoos, and automatically want to get tattooed. For these people, the artist states, "tattoo is an object of consumption and has nothing to do with art."[96] Another artist and tattoo historian states that she is inclined to view tattooists as tradesmen and women, rather than artists, because they are "constrained by their client's choices and that even the most successful ones rarely get full creative control over their work."[97] However, as the popularity of tattooing rises, and more and more tattooists have educational backgrounds in the fine arts, there remains a debate around the topic.

2.5 Documentary: *Coloring Outside the Lines* and Related Black Tattoo Artists

Color Outside the Lines: A Tattoo Documentary (2012), the documentary, conceived and produced by Miya Bailey, includes interviews from artists all over the country and world discussing their experiences in the tattoo industry. The film opens with veteran tattoo artist, Zulu, stating,

> I actually find it strange that during our current day and age that people find it fascinating that so many Black people are tattooing and getting tattooed, when in fact it's one of the most ancient parts of what we've always done. Black people have always marked their bodies to associate themselves with their tribes and their Gods. These markings had to do with life, death, rites of passage—it's who we are, it's always been who we are and these new Black tattooists are reaching into the past and bringing this into our current future. They think it's quite new in our culture, when in fact this isn't something new with Black people. This is part of who we are and who we've always been and I have no problem stating that many

> other cultures have learned from what we've done in our culture and unfortunately so many times that has been stolen from us and been acquired and represented in other cultures as if it's theirs when in fact it came out of the roots of who we were.[98]

While this was the only time in the documentary that the ancient history of tattoos was mentioned, Zulu brings home a valuable point. While the modern history of tattooing in the United States has been laced with racism, people of color, from Africa and around the world, have contributed to the development and various styles of tattooing since ancient times. This film is a great resource and provides interviews from Black tattoo artists across the United States. Furthermore, this film offers insight on the marginalization of Black tattoo artists from the tattoo industry.

One of the most important artists in the film, Jacci Gresham, is credited for being the first Black tattoo artist in the United States. She was born in Flint, Michigan and she studied architecture and engineering, putting her drawing skills to use.[99] She states in the film that a white Englishman taught her how to tattoo.[100] Eventually, Gresham moved to New Orleans and opened a tattoo shop in 1976. At the time, there were only five female tattoo artists in the country.[101] When asked what made her want to get into tattooing, she said "'cause it's fun!"[102] She also explains that her inability to get a job in the field of architecture and engineering because of her race and gender led her to tattooing.[103]

A few standout references were made in the documentary about the history of tattooing in the United States prior to the mid-1990s. Christopher "Duel" Hall, an artist working in Atlanta, Georgia, said, "In the '80s, there was no Black tattoo artists."[104] Duel also makes reference to Jacci Gresham and Ed Hardy, arguing that any tattoo artist should know "the oral history of what electric tattooing means" and how these important artists have influenced the styles.[105] Damon Conklin, Owner of Super Genius Tattoo in Seattle, Washington, posits that during the 1990s

there was a "huge art explosion" that became known as "New School," but he explains that this style was "just a new generation of artists."[106] Conklin also explains that most American tattoos prior to this time period were a biker style or the styles brought from other countries, like Ed Hardy and traditional Japanese work. Another artist, Twig Sparks, of Hart and Huntington Tattoo in Orlando, Florida, refers to tattooing as having gone from "a street shop, biker gang type situation, to a universal" and mainstream industry.[107] These references to biker gangs makes sense considering the previously discussed history that shows that most tattooing between the 1940s until the late 1960s was practiced almost exclusively by white members of the American underclass (sailors, bikers, gang affiliates, convicts, the working lower-class, and carnival goers).[108]

It is important to note that many of the artists interviewed in this documentary own their own shops. Tyrone "Red" Cooley owner of West End Tattoo (now Tri-Cities Tattoo Company) in Atlanta, Georgia discusses how Black-owned tattoo shops are still far from the norm. He explains that people often question him and have gone as far as asking him if his shop is "a reputable business."[109] Red bought West End Tattoo from its original owner, Julia Alphonso, a White woman with 40+ years of tattooing experience. Alphonso's shop was known in the 1990s for being one of the only places that would apprentice and hire Black tattoo artists. Alphonso hired and apprenticed many, including the shop's last owner, Red, as well as Miya Bailey, the film's producer, and Tuki Carter, Bailey's business partner at City of Ink in Atlanta, Georgia.[110]

A few important things can be gathered from Bailey's film. First, with the exception of Gresham, most of the aforementioned artists got into tattooing within the last twenty-five years (or less). This indicates that it was around the mid-1990s when Black artists first seemed to be able to find apprenticeships in the United States. Second, the video addresses some important

differences between working on dark and light skin. Thirdly, the video addresses the concept of scratchers. Many of the artists in the video started out scratching, but eventually underwent a full apprenticeship. As a result, most artists explained the importance of apprenticing and the downfalls of scratching without any training or progression. The film also briefly demonstrated some of the inappropriate behavior and poor technique that occurs when a tattooist is not properly trained. It also explains why paying for a highly-trained and skilled tattoo artist is a better decision than going to a scratcher. Fourthly, the film echoes some of the same themes that were indicated as part of tattoo culture in the Canadian study done by Wicks and Grandy.[111] The collective sentiment appears to be that being a fully-apprenticed tattoo artist is a career that requires great *sacrifice,* but that sacrifice is rewarded with respect and the unique experiences and travel that come as a skilled artist. Finally, the film emphatically demonstrates that tattooing is a highly-skilled art form that requires great sacrifice, time, effort, and natural talent to be successful. The film will further be used within this study to discuss the history of Black tattoo artists in Atlanta, apprenticeships, and the differences between working on black and white skin. Information from the film will be corroborated with my interviews, interviews conducted by others for online magazines, and data from the Georgia Corporations Division in order to provide better reliability.

2.6 Gaps

According to David C. Lane at the University of South Dakota, "the emphasis in the majority of accumulated literature has been on the consumers of tattoos rather than the producers."[112] He further explains that many researchers have spent time examining the purpose and meaning of tattoos by the wearer and even the psychological and social reasons for getting tattooed.[113] Despite growing mainstream intrigue and artistic recognition, very little academic

literature discusses the various and distinct styles of tattooing.[114] Because people of color and women having historically had limited access to tattoo apprenticeships in the United States, their voice in relevant scholarship and in mainstream media has also been limited. This research aims to provide a voice and history in the literature for Black tattoo artists, particularly those working in the greater Atlanta area.

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[97] Lewis, "Will A Tattoo Ever Hang in the Louvre," 36.

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3 THE HISTORY OF BLACK TATTOO ARTISTS IN ATLANTA

This chapter provides a detailed history of the lives and experiences of some of the Black tattoo artists who have emerged and/or currently work in the Atlanta area. I use the Black Mecca schema to explain why Atlanta emerged in the mid-1990s as a major hub for Black tattoo artists to find valuable apprenticeships and work in the industry. This section focuses on the impact that West End Tattoo has had on Atlanta and on Black tattoo artists in the industry. Finally, I provide a genealogy of a few of the most professional and well-known Black tattoo artists and Black-owned tattoo shops in the Atlanta area.

3.1 The Black Mecca

According to Maurice Hobson, the Black elite, following the end of the American Civil War, began building their own institutions and business in an effort to assert their independence.[1] This, in addition to hosting several Black colleges and universities, he explains, is how the idea of Atlanta as the Black Mecca came about at the end of the 1800s. Later, in the 1970s, Mayor Maynard Jackson created the City of Atlanta's Bureau of Cultural Affairs, with the intention of providing support to the city's artists and art organizations. The Bureau offered grants and funded many artists and art organizations in an effort to allow Atlanta's art scene to grow and thrive. The determinations of the Bureau, Hobson posits, allowed Atlanta to flourish with regards to popular culture, and perhaps in particular, Black popular culture.[2] Atlanta has developed into a hub for many creative scenes, such as music, film, fine art, etc. Perhaps, as arguably a form of expressive art, the tattoo industry in Atlanta may be thriving now, in part, due to the residual effects of the Bureau.

Atlanta is a hub for Hip-Hop culture and this has also played a role in the creation of Atlanta as the "Black Mecca" for the Black Tattoo Community in the tattoo industry. Miya

Bailey, co-owner of City of Ink in Atlanta, Georgia and the producer of *Coloring Outside the Lines,* feels that Hip-Hop culture and television have both played a pivotal role in the progression of tattoo culture. With respect to the Black Tattoo Community, Bailey says, "We've been around since the 90's cultivating this culture in Atlanta."[3] This culture is not limited strictly to tattooing, but encompasses various kinds of creative expression including painting, drawing, film, and music. Many tattoo shops host art shows, including City of Ink, Tri-Cities Tattoo Company, and Black Owl Tattoo & Art Gallery.

Tyrone "Red" Cooley, owner of Tri-Cities Tattoo Company (formerly West End Tattoo) posited in his interview that, "I would say it's [West End Tattoo] the hub of all Black professionalism as far as tattooing is concerned."[4] West End Tattoo will be talked about in detail in the next section, however, it is important to note the impact that it has had on tattooing in Atlanta as well. Many of the people, who will be discussed, who learned and/or were able to find work at West End Tattoo have gone on to open their own shops and/or teach other Black artists how to tattoo. As explained by Bailey above, these artists have intentionally cultivated the Black Tattoo Community in Atlanta.[5] The result is a city where many young Black artists and/or tattoo artists come to find apprenticeships or work. Furthermore, as will be further discussed in a later chapter, television, Hip-Hop culture and celebrity tattoos, and social media and the internet, people are now willing to travel across a state, the country, and even the world to get to tattoo artists that they find on the internet and/or television. This has only further helped to promote Atlanta as the Mecca of Black tattooing.

3.2 West End Tattoo and the Rise of Atlanta as a Mecca for Black Tattoo Artists

West End Tattoo was opened in 1995[6] by Julia Alphonso, a White biker and member of the Outcast Motorcycle Club.[7] Alphonso opened the shop in the West End of Atlanta, Georgia, a

predominately Black neighborhood. The shop catered to the Black community. When asked about West End Tattoo, Red, said that Alphonso's "direct intention was to open a tattoo shop in the West End and teach people from that community how to tattoo, which she did, and she did a great job of it. And through that, you know, a lot of people have come through there and learned and opened up shops of their own."[8] Alphonso explains, "When I opened West End Tattoo it was kind of scary, I had no idea what kind of reception I was going to get from either the White Community who pretty much felt I was a traitor, or the Black Community who felt pretty much that I was an outsider."[9]

Alphonso is now considered "one of the mothers of black tattoo culture."[10] She states that to work at her shop you "had to be Black, you had to be able to draw, you had to be drug-free, and you had to want a job."[11] Phil Colvin, owner of Memorial Tattoo in Atlanta, Georgia, comments that West End Tattoo was the first time he had heard about any Black tattooers in Atlanta. Furthermore, when asked why he chose to apprentice at West End Tattoo, Miya Bailey said, "I wasn't choosing it. I went down the phone book in alphabetical order and was denied down to the W's."[12] This shows how revolutionary Alphonso was, and how important she is to the history of Black tattoo artists in the Atlanta area. Alphonso says, "I always told the kids, "You are the first – you are the first Black tattooers, you have to do it right, you can't do it like that! No mistakes in West End!" It's got to be on the money, and I was on the kids all the time, which they didn't really understand. It was like, "Man! Cut me some slack, woman."[13] Alphonso's remarks mimic the commonly spouted feeling that in order to be considered an expert in any field in America as a person of color, you must be twice as good and work twice as hard.

Upon reflecting on the time, Alphonso states that there was "a tremendous amount of racism" at the White-owned shop that she worked in when she first moved to Georgia.[14] During the film, Red comments that West End Tattoo was the only tattoo shop in the West End at the time and that if Alphonso had not been apprenticing and hiring Black artists in the West End, many of the Black artists, himself included, working in Atlanta today would have never been able to break into the industry. He explains that he went to several shops around Atlanta looking for a job and while all of the shop owners were kind and told him his work was good, they all told him to "go to West End."[15] Besides himself, Lord Yatta, Dan "Dan the Man" "Da Creative Genius" Florez, Miya Bailey, Tuki Carter, Bash, Frank Lee, and Chris Nunez (one of the judges on *Ink Master)* were just a few of the artists that Red mentioned worked at West End Tattoo at one time or another.[16]

During the mid to late 1990s, Alphonso says that many artists were using small script on Black womens' skin that was largely illegible. She taught her apprentices and employees that an "appropriate design on a dark person" has to be "large, it has to have space between the lines, it has to be thick, bold, it has to suit that person."[17] In the film, Tuki Carter says that they mostly only used basic colors (black, red, green and sometimes yellow) on light skinned individuals only. He further explains that after seeing tattoos in ink magazines and at tattoo conventions he started buying different colors and began experimenting with using them on brown skin. Alphonso had instructed him not to do this, which, Carter posits was her way of protecting them. Despite Alphonso's strict rules about limiting the use of color, she managed to hire and train several revolutionary artists. Julia Alphonso hired Miya Bailey first, and later Bailey brought Tuki Carter in to get a job as well. She emphatically expresses how impressed she is with the artistic and creative skills of Bailey and Carter.[18] As will be further discussed in a later chapter,

from their many years of experiments, Bailey and Carter developed techniques for making color stand out on Black skin.

During the interview for this study, Red mentioned that he had worked at one shop in Decatur for a few months before getting a job from Alphonso. His experience at that shop, which was owned by a male biker, was so negative that he chooses not to share the name of the owner or the shop. He went to work for Alphonso in 1997. Eventually, in 2000, she retired, moving to Austell, Georgia, and sold the shop to Red. Although West End Tattoo closed in 2015, Red relocated his shop to East Point in Atlanta, Georgia, renaming it Tri-Cities Tattoo. When asked why he chose to move his shop from the West End and change the name he replied,

> One of the biggest [reasons] is the seemingly lack of growth that the neighborhood was presenting to us. And the landlords. And the building. We were having issues getting approvements [sic] on the windows and the things that I was thinking would bring the shop of to a higher standard that I wanted. I had issues getting the roof fixed, it was leaking, and every time they fixed it, it would never stop. So there's the building and the neighborhood. For years, you know, I was hoping that there would be something else that would open in the neighborhood that would bring more people to the area. When you're the only business in an area that brings people to that area, that doesn't really help you as far as growth. You understand? Because you're mostly just tattooing people that are either know where you are or live in that area. But you're not getting any new people to come to that area. Especially if it's perceived as being "sketchy." So, because I wanted somewhere, where, you know, if young artists getting into it, the business for the first time [pointed to Bang], I want her to be in a place to where she's accessible to things that are gonna help her in her career. I want that for myself. I want that for everybody that works here. So, when I got to a point where I felt like that wasn't going to happen, or it didn't seem like it was going to happen, I just made the move.[19]

He said that even though West End Tattoo had the "legacy" and "reputation" there was not enough room for potential growth.[20] His shop, Tri-Cities Tattoo Company, now employs Chavonna "Bang" Rhodes (who participated in this study), Lord Yatta, and a man by the name of "Danger" Dave Morris.

Bailey and Carter left West End Tattoo eventually. Bailey briefly moved back to his hometown of Asheville, North Carolina, before returning to Atlanta and opening his first shop, called Prophet Art, which did not last. In 2007, Bailey and Carter opened up City of Ink. Charity "Cake" Hamidullah (participant in this study) kicked off her tattooing career at City of Ink, starting there in 2011 after hearing about them and subsequently moving from Rochester, New York down to Atlanta.[21] Carter is now less involved with City of Ink in an effort to focus on his music career. Corey Davis, one of Bailey's apprentices, is now a co-owner of the shop.[22] Again, City of Ink employs several talented young Black tattoo artists.

Another important Black tattoo artist in the tattoo industry in Atlanta, though entirely unrelated to West End Tattoo, is Craig Foster. Craig Foster started tattooing in 1995, apprenticing under a White man named Miami Burgess. The two allegedly met in jail and Burgess agreed to teach him how to tattoo.[23] His story reads similar to Red's because he was able to find access into the industry through a close personal friendship. By 1996, Foster was employed at Psycho Tattoo, a shop in Atlanta, Georgia for about six years before going to work at Timeless Tattoo. Timeless Tattoo is one of the oldest shops in Atlanta, and Foster worked there for a few years before leaving to start his own shop, Skinwerks Tattoo & Design, in 2004.[24] Foster competed on Seasons 3 and 6 of *Ink Master*, and is known for doing new school tattoos, which are cartoon-like tattoos with bright, saturated color. His mentor, Burgess, competed against him in Season 6. Those who know Foster speak highly of him and his work and cannot express enough his humility.

3.3 The Present

Many of the artists interviewed, including Cake, Memphis, Kenny Da Kydd, and "The Rose Guy" moved to Atlanta specifically seeking the opportunity they felt existed here for Black tattoo artists. As mentioned above, likely as the result directly and/or indirectly of a combination of the political efforts mentioned by Hobson, West End Tattoo and its "graduates," Hip-Hop culture, and the internet/social media, Atlanta has become a Mecca for Black tattoo culture. Furthermore, Bailey explains, "There aren't a lot of black artists that get apprenticeships. It's a family tree, a small community," and a large part of that family tree has grown out of West End Tattoo.[25]

Currently, there are a handful of standout Black-owned tattoo shops in the greater Atlanta area. Tri-Cities Tattoo Company, owned by Red, is amongst them. Red recently opened this shop, in 2015 and they just celebrated its one year anniversary. City of Ink, now co-owned by Miya Bailey and Corey Davis has a great reputation and employs several young, talented Black tattoo artists and piercers. Miya Bailey and Tuki Carter opened City of Ink together in February of 2007.[26] Black Owl Tattoo & Art Gallery, owned by Cake and Roger Parrilla, while new, seems to be doing well and building a great reputation. Cake and Parrilla opened the shop in 2013, after leaving City of Ink.[27] Finally, Skinwerks Tattoo & Design, owned by Craig Foster in Carrolton, Georgia, particularly in the aftermath of his time spent on *Ink Master*, has created a strong reputation. Craig opened his shop in September of 2004.[28] These are only a few of the most well-known Black-owned tattoo shops in the greater Atlanta area.

Atlanta hosts a large amount of tattoo shops in comparison to most other cities, 154 to be exact. The only cities in the United States with more shops are Los Angeles, California, Denver, Colorado, Phoenix, Arizona, San Diego, California, Las Vegas, Nevada, and New York City,

New York.[29] As a result, Atlanta offers a great opportunity for tattoo artists in general. Kenneth "Kenny Da Kydd" Owens of Camp Creek Body Art & Tattoo Removal, a participant who apprenticed in Boston, Massachusetts, said that this was "part of the reason [he] moved down here."[30] He further explains that while he did feel as if his race impacted his clientele in Boston, being in a predominately Black area, he does not feel it has had as big of an impact in Atlanta.[31] Bang also felt that perhaps her race had less of an impact because of Atlanta's diverse population.[32] Additionally, Cake and "The Rose Guy," a Black tattoo artist in Atlanta who wishes to remain anonymous, both moved to Atlanta because of the opportunity it provides for tattoo artists, and in particular, Black tattoo artists.[33] Miya Bailey explains, "We [Atlanta] *are* the black tattoo scene, period. We got a couple of artists, but they all started from one shop. The Atlanta tattoo culture started in West End…It's changing now, but in the early 90's, there were no other black shops in Atlanta."[34] Collectively, these artists demonstrate how the Black Tattoo Community has developed, drawn in tattoo artists from across the country, and begun to thrive in Atlanta.[35]

Although Atlanta presents itself as a great place for tattoo artists and the tattoo culture, it is not without its problems, aside from race and gender. Many of the artists complained about the lack of support from other tattoo artists and tattoo shops in the area.[36] Perhaps this is a problem everywhere, but some of the artists felt like this problem was exacerbated here. Bang stated that she felt "people not supporting each other" was a definite problem in the industry.[37] Tri-Cities Tattoo Company hosts art shows, similarly to many other tattoo shops. She said that while they [those who work at Tri-Cities] try to attend shows at other shops, other shops are not always as supportive of them.[38] Nevertheless, it is evident that Atlanta's history in the tattoo industry, and specifically amongst Black tattoo culture is unique and thriving.

3.4 Summary

This chapter has hopefully given a thorough history of the lives and experiences of some of the Black tattoo artists who have emerged and/or currently work in the Atlanta area. Using the Black Mecca schema, I have given an explanation as to why Atlanta emerged in the mid-1990s as a major hub for Black tattoo artists to find valuable apprenticeships and work in the industry. Clearly, West End Tattoo played a pivotal role in this process and was the home to many artists that have successfully gone on to develop new tattooing techniques and/or open their own studios. Finally, I have delivered a genealogy of the most professional and well-known Black tattoo artists and Black-owned tattoo shops in the Atlanta area.

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[1] Maurice J. Hobson, interview conducted by Danielle Rosenthal, June 27, 2016, Atlanta, Georgia.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Taylor Josey, "More Than Just a Tattoo Shop, City of Ink Aims to Get Back to African Roots," *The Signal*, February 25, 2015, retrieved from http://georgiastatesignal.com/more-than-just-a-tattoo-shop-city-of-ink-aims-to-get-back-to-african-roots/.

[4] Tyrone "Red" Cooley, interview conducted by Danielle Rosenthal, May 28, 2016, Atlanta, Georgia.

[5] Josey, "More Than Just A Tattoo Shop."

[6] Georgia Corporations Divisions, West End Tattoo, Inc., accessed June 24, 2016, https://ecorp.sos.ga.gov/BusinessSearch/BusinessInformation?businessId=940564&businessType=Domestic%20Profit%20Corporation. The years 1993 and 1994 have also been stated from Miya Bailey and his documentary, but since Julia Alphonso's whereabouts are currently unknown, the date used is based on the date the business was registered with the state of Georgia.

[7] Cooley, interview with author.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Bailey, *Coloring Outside the Lines*.

[10] Rodney Carmichael, "Miya Bailey and City of ink continue to 'Color Outside the Lines,'" *Creative Loafing*, February 5, 2013, retrieved from http://clatl.com/atlanta/miya-bailey-and-city-of-ink-continue-to-color-outside-the-lines/Content?oid=7478468&showFullText=true.

[11] Bailey, *Coloring Outside the Lines*.

[12] Miguel Collins, "Artist Profile: Miya Bailey," *Needles and Sins,* July 30, 2009, retrieved from http://www.needlesandsins.com/2009/07/miya-bailey-interview.html.

[13] Bailey, *Coloring Outside the Lines*.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Bailey, *Coloring Outside the Lines.*

[18] Ibid.

[19] Cooley, interview with author.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Charity "Cake" Hamidullah, interview conducted by Danielle Rosenthal, May 28, 2016, Atlanta, Georgia.

[22] Carmichael, "Miya Bailey and City of Ink."

[23] Rodney Ho, "Two Carrollton Tattoo Artists Battle in Spike's 'Ink Master' Season 6 June 23," *The Atlanta Journal Constitution,* June 19, 2015, Retrieved from http://radiotvtalk.blog.ajc.com/2015/06/19/two-carrollton-tattoo-artists-battle-in-spikes-ink-master-season-6-june-23/.

[24] Skinwerks Tattoo, "Craig Foster," accessed July 2, 2016, retrieved from http://www.skinwerks.com/skinwerks-craig-foster.html

[25] Ross Scarano, "Coloring Outside the Lines: City of Ink's Miya Bailey on Race and Tattoos," *Complex Magazine,* April 12, 2011, retrieved from http://www.complex.com/pop-culture/2011/04/coloring-outside-the-lines-city-of-inks-miya-bailey-on-race-and-tattoos.

[26] Carmichael, "Miya Bailey and City of Ink."

[27] Georgia Corporations Divisions, Black Owl Tattoo & Art Gallery, LLC., accessed June 24, 2016, https://ecorp.sos.ga.gov/BusinessSearch/BusinessInformation?businessId=940564&businessType=Domestic%20Profit%20Corporation.

[28] Skinwerks Tattoo, "Craig Foster."

[29] Kovats, Kristie. "The 15 Top Tattooed Cities in the US." *Inked Magazine.* September 25, 2014. Retrieved from http://www.inkedmag.com/15-top-tattooed-cities-us/12/.

[30] Kenneth "Kenny Da Kydd" Ekhibise, interview conducted by Danielle Rosenthal, May 7, 2016, Atlanta, Georgia.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Chavonna "Bang" Rhodes, interview conducted by Danielle Rosenthal, May 28, 2016, Atlanta, Georgia.

[33] Hamidullah, interview with author; Anonymous Participant 4 "The Rose Guy," interview conducted by Danielle Rosenthal, May 14, 2016, Atlanta, Georgia.

[34] Collins, "Artist Profile: Miya Bailey."

[35] Ekhibise, interview with author; Rhodes, interview with author; Hamidullah, interview with author; "The Rose Guy," interview with author; Collins, "Artist Profile: Miya Bailey."

[36] Anonymous Participant 1 “Dad Bod,” interview conducted by Danielle Rosenthal, May 1, 2016, Atlanta, Georgia; Hamidullah, interview with author; Rhodes, interview with author.

[37] Rhodes, interview with author.

[38] Ibid.

4 APPRENTICING AND LEARNING TO TATTOO AS A BLACK ARTIST

This chapter employs interviews from participants and other data to explore how Black artists currently working in the Atlanta area have attained apprenticeships and learned to tattoo, beginning by delving into apprenticeship experiences. In particular, I seek to unravel how the older generation of tattoo artists behave as gatekeepers to the industry and have helped to provide a greater space for younger Black tattoo artists. Furthermore, this section shares the experiences that Black tattoo artists, working in Atlanta, have had in the industry and attempts to offer an understanding of where and how Black tattoo artists feel they fit into the tattoo community. Additionally, I discuss the intersection of race and gender and the resulting impact on Black women in the tattoo industry. Finally, I conclude discussing how artists feel about mentoring newcomers in the industry.

4.1 Apprenticeships

As mentioned in chapter two, sometime during the mid-1900s apprenticeships became the predominate method of learning to tattoo, and the most respected. Tattoo artists are, therefore, the gatekeepers to their profession, because through an already trained professional artist is almost the only way one can respectfully learn the craft. Because apprenticing someone essentially requires training one's competition, most tattoo artists are very selective about who they choose to apprentice, if they are willing to do so at all. During the early 2000s, it was estimated that 85 percent of tattoo artists were men.[1] Red estimated that Black artists only represented between one and three percent of the tattoo artists in the United States and Bailey provides a similar figure, stating that "[o]nly 1% of the professional tattoo industry is black."[2] If this statistic is accurate, that is a much smaller percentage than the approximate 13.3 percent of Black Americans who live in the United States presently.[3]

During the interview with "Dad Bod," a White tattoo artist working at a shop in Atlanta, Georgia, who wishes to remain anonymous, he was asked if he felt that race or gender might impact someone's ability to get an apprenticeship or a job. His response was as follows, "I know there's probably an equal amount, if not more people who would discriminate for an apprenticeship or a job as a tattoo artist…[because of] race or gender."[4] "Dad Bod" did not feel this was specific to the industry, as much as the result of personal prejudices or beliefs of any given individual and/or possibly because of the style of art that he/she does.[5] To perhaps provide an elucidation for this phenomenon, most of the interviewees mentioned how bikers and biker gangs ruled the tattoo industry, particularly prior to the 2000s. Red gave the most thorough explanation for this, positing that,

> The only people that used to get tattoos in the early days were soldiers and sailors. After soldiers and sailors, it was ex-cons. And then bikers. And all bikers were, were old guys that came back from the war, you know. That's where all the old bike gangs come from, those are old guys that served in the military and came home and still wanted some of that comradery. Some of that fellowship that they had in the military. We're talking about the early '50s. So when these guys came home, of course they had gotten tattooed in the South China Sea, probably Japan. They had gotten tattoos when they were stationed in Hawaii. Sailor Jerry, guys like that. So they brought all of that sense of wanting to have comradery, that loner-ship that comes from serving in the military and going through, you know, PTSD wasn't a thing back then…you just endured a bunch of shit and got on with it. Now there is a name for it. Back then, I would imagine, as someone who was in the military, and that does tattoos, that once you came back from the horrors of war that you needed some kind of support system to kinda help you deal with it all. I can see how biker gangs and things of that nature came about. So, the counterculture of tattooing kind of came with that…naturally businesses are gonna sprout out of those institutions [motorcycle gangs]. That's pretty much how tattooing kind of incubated in America after World War II…from those clubs and connections, tattoo shops sprung up out of that. So that's why they were mostly owned by bikers.[6]

When further asked if he felt that this comradery, in addition to White supremacy, was perhaps the reason that many tattoo artists are so exclusive about who they apprentice and employ, he said,

> Yeah, sure. The exclusivity definitely comes from a tier of social influences. The main one obviously being racism. The secondary ones are things like, you know, being in a biker gang, or a soldier, or a veteran, or a sailor…And exclusivity definitely comes from the biker culture for sure. You know, you don't just let anybody into your organization. You don't just get to walk up to The Hells Angels or Outcast Motorcycle Club and say, "I wanna be in your club."…you're gonna pay some dues…and they're gonna put you through the hazing process that comes from the military.[7]

While Red learned to tattoo from a White man, he feels that he "got in just because he happened to be really good friends with somebody."[8] With the exception of those outliers such as Red's mentor and Julia Alphonso, Black artists have historically struggled to find legitimate apprenticeships.

Red learned to tattoo from a White man by the name of Bobby Love at Electric Ladyland Tattoo in New Orleans, Louisiana. When asked how long it took him to find his apprenticeship he said, "I was lucky. Me and Bob knew each other from the military and we used to live together. And one of those days I came home smelling like chicken blood and he was like, "Dude, what are you doing? You're an artist. You ever think about doing tattoos?" And that's how it happened."[9] Prior to Love taking on Red as his apprentice, Red worked in a chicken factory. Red began his three-year apprenticeship in 1992, but says that he "couldn't call himself a professional until like '96/'97."[10] He said that at the time "there was only one other Black person that I knew of that did tattoos in the whole state of Louisiana, and that was Jacci Gresham…if you were Black and wanted to get an apprenticeship you went to Jacci."[11] Zulu comments that hearing about Gresham gave him hope and the comfort of knowing that he was

not "alone in this struggle."[12] As presented in chapter two, Gresham is credited as being the first Black tattoo artist in the United States and has been tattooing for about forty years now.

While apprenticeships vary greatly in length, structure, and experience, there are some common "tasks" that people are required to do. While most apprenticeships are free [some cost thousands of dollars], apprentices are typically expected to open and close the shop, answer phones, clean tubes, set up stations, clean and mop the shop, take out the trash, represent the shop at conventions, and shadow the trained artists. When asked about his apprenticeship, Red said,

> He didn't make it too hard on me. I mean, I still had to do the usual bullshit, you know like scrub all his tubes and mop the floor every night and take out the trash. You know, all the apprentice shit… Even had to do some knuckle pushups when I didn't make the needles right or somethin' like that. But he wasn't too bad. It wasn't as bad as some of the other stories that I heard people went through. But I think that's 'cause we're good friends.[13]

With the exception of perhaps one out of the six participants who had formal apprenticeships, all of the apprenticed artists had similar experiences. Again, during an apprenticeship, a (hopefully) respected artist is taking the time to teach a newcomer everything he/she knows about tattooing and the tattooing business. Therefore, in exchange, labor is typically expected throughout the course of an apprenticeship. Cake commented, "I definitely feel like you need to sacrifice, work hard. Like I laugh at our apprentice now 'cause he wants days off and shit like that; we don't have no days off."[14]

The five Black participants who did complete apprenticeships did not feel that their race impacted their ability to find an apprenticeship.[15] In fact, most of them were able to find a mentor relatively quickly. Cake was the only artist interviewed who felt that she had not completed a formal apprenticeship. However, after beginning her journey as a tattooer in

Rochester, New York, she moved to Atlanta soon following hearing about City of Ink. The environment at City of Ink allowed for Cake, and other artists to share ideas and learn from one another.[16] During Cake's interview, she encouraged those interested in tattooing not to give up. She explained that many young Black artists came into City of Ink looking for apprenticeships, but gave up after being turned down by a couple of Black-owned tattoo shops.[17] The commonly held belief amongst all of the artists interviewed was that, while there may be a challenge to finding an apprenticeship, if someone is passionate and talented artistically, they will find one eventually.

4.2 Tattooing as a Black Artist

Although the majority of the artists who participated did not personally experience racism when searching for apprenticeships, the majority of them felt that racism and sexism were still plaguing the industry. When asked if the tattoo community was a singular culture or divided into different cultures, Cake stated, "I think there's definitely, like, different sectors. And people can say what they wanna say, but I feel like the tattoo community is just like how sometime we're racially divided, and so is the tattoo community."[18] When asked how being Black has impacted her experience in that tattoo industry, Cake responded,

> Down here [Atlanta], I think it's helped me out. Like I feel like I have the perfect situation. When I went to City of Ink, it was just great for me. But I feel like as far as now, and even back then, I always wanted to learn more and know more, but it does feel, like really uncomfortable when you walk into conventions or you just walk into shops and they're sort of like, "Who are you?"…you feel like the elephant in the room.[19]

Despite the fact that the majority of the artists interviewed did not struggle to find apprenticeships, they did feel like their race impacted them in other ways. Many of them mentioned feeling like outcasts at tattoo conventions. Cake recalls going to a tattoo convention in

Atlanta with her coworkers when she worked at City of Ink. She commented that though Black tattoo artists and clientele have respect for the artists at City of Ink and her current shop, Black Owl Tattoo & Art Gallery, the "White Tattooers; I feel like they look at us as a joke."[20] She further explained that she feels like Black artists are "subliminally excluded, like we just all have our own shops. We don't really work in shops as a whole. So we have to create our own shop and our own way. And I feel like we've separated ourselves. Like sometimes we just separate ourselves in multiple ways. And I feel like it's a lot 'cause we're not really ever accepted."[21] She further explains that most of the well-known Black tattoo artists own their own shops, rather than working out of someone else's. During the interview with "The Rose Guy" said that he feels that because of his race, "some people look at [his] portfolio and don't believe that [he] did it."[22] To clarify, the assumption being that either the quality or the style of tattooing that he presents is not expected from a Black tattoo artist because of prejudices from both other tattoo artists, and from potential customers, both Black and White.

As discussed in the previous section, Red learned to tattoo from a close friend, and therefore, did not find difficulty getting an apprenticeship at all. However, during his interview he stated, "It really didn't dawn upon me how difficult it was gonna be to stay in this industry and move forward in this industry until I came to Atlanta and looked for a job in a tattoo shop, oddly enough. 'Cause when I came here and walked around, talked to different tattoo shops and tried to get a job, is when I understood fully what it was gonna be like working in this industry as a Black man."[23] Red moved to Atlanta in the mid-1990s. He further elucidated,

> Again, as with any other profession, when you're brown and you do something, it's not just good enough to be good, right? And I've never considered myself to be the best tattoo artist in the world. You know what I'm saying? I consider myself an average tattoo artist. Confident. Professional. I don't think, by any stretch of the imagination, that people are gonna write songs about me and what I

> do. So, it could very well be that, "Oh, this guy knows what he's doing, but he's not killing it." So maybe I would have got a job if I was, you know, three times better than everybody else in the shop.[24]

To clarify, finding employment in a professional tattoo shop as a Black artist in the 1990s was largely impossible.

Despite the obvious issues within the industry, all of the artists felt like there was currently adequate space in the industry for Black artists. Particularly as many of the veteran Black tattoo artists, (Miya Bailey, Zulu, Damon Conklin, Tuki Carter, Red, Jacci Gresham, Lord Yatta, Craig Foster, etc.) branch out and open their own shops, there are more Black-owned shops available for young Black artists to seek apprenticeships. Kenny Da Kydd stated that he felt there was adequate space for Black tattoo artists in the industry, commenting, "There's plenty of skin to go around!"[25] Despite the fear that many tattoo artists have over the influx of artists in the industry, with more and more people getting tattooed, finding clientele should not, in theory, be a challenge.

One of the noticeable differences between the interviews done by Miya Bailey and those conducted for the purpose of this study was the difference in age and experience. It seemed clear that those in the younger generation, who have been tattooing for less than ten or fifteen years may not have faced some of the same hardships as those who started tattooing in the 1990s or earlier. Perhaps this could, in part, be contributed to the fact that these older artists, acting as gatekeepers, have made certain to apprentice and mentor the younger generations of Black artists.

4.3 The Interesection of Race and Gender

As mentioned in chapter two, the tattoo industry is still exceedingly male dominated. As tattooing can be seen as a reflection of society in many ways, there is no surprise that the

intersection of race and gender greatly impacts Black women in the industry. During the course of this study, only two out of the seven artists interviewed were with women, Cake and Bang. Many of the artists expressed that sexism was a problem in the industry more so than race at this point in time. For example, Jaleel "Memphis" Owens, of Camp Creek Body Art & Tattoo Removal stated that the only time he has "heard about it being difficult [to find an apprenticeship] is when you're a female…it's dominated by guys, so it's hard for women to just, you know get respect in the tattoo game, mainly because tattoos show how tough you are, like women, that's not for women. We don't look for women to show how tough they are."[26] When asked if he had heard any particular stories from female artists he said, "I've heard a lot of stories from female artists who, they got in the shop and the owner or somethin' tried to talk to 'em."[27] Similarly, Bang, who completed her apprenticeship under Red at West End Tattoo, started an apprenticeship at a shop off of Martin Luther King Boulevard in Atlanta, Georgia. She explained that she left that apprenticeship after two months because, "I wasn't learning anything and I kept getting hit on by, like, all the guys that were there."[28] According to many of the artists interviewed, this appears to be a common phenomenon.

When asked about being Black and being a woman in the tattoo industry, Cake replied,

> We're just like a unicorn. We… that shit ain't really seen like that. Especially, like, if you actually know what you're talking about or you're really trying to learn…so yeah, I feel like it's just a little bit harder for us, especially when we're on TV and it's all about, "How does she look?" Not like, "How does she tattoo?" And then there's really just no huge female artist, like that are, Black female artists that are out in the tattoo community doing all the convention circuits and all that kind of stuff. There's not a lot, if any, Black female tattooers that are really like, have a name or anything like that.[29]

Similarly, Bang said, "I think there's space, but I think it's more--harder, like we have to prove ourselves a little more than a guy. And I think that's just in anything. That's just in life."[30]

Furthermore, when asked what prejudices or problems she sees in the industry she stated, "Just being a female."[31] She explained that she felt that her gender impacts her in the industry more than her race, asserting, "The majority of Atlanta is, like, predominately Black anyways. I don't feel like race plays a major role."[32] However, she did say that perhaps her race would present more of a problem for her in the industry if she worked elsewhere.[33]

The experiences between the two women, with regard to clientele seemed to vary a bit. When asked if her gender impacted the clientele she sees, Cake replied, "Definitely! Especially with like, it's surprising but like, I think men are more open for me to tattoo them. But women really just want, like, a man to touch them while they're getting tattooed, surprisingly…I just mean, like, I thought that the women when I first started tattooing, even now, I thought I would be, I would have the women all on my side. And you know, girl power! But, nah, sometimes."[34] In contrast, Bang stated that she tattoos more women than men. She also felt that her gender and race may not be as impactful on the type of clientele she sees as is the location of the shop, and perhaps the fact that the shop is Black-owned. However, she did tell a story in which a man came into the shop looking to get tattooed. She said,

> I was working at the front desk at the time. Red was up there with me. He [customer] goes, "Oh, I wanna get this tattoo." He [Red] said, "Okay, what do you wanna get?" So he [customer] said what he wanted to get. And then he [Red] goes, "Okay, this is gonna be your tattoo artist," and pointed to me. And he [customer] was like, "Oh, a female?" Like he started to question me. Like he kinda doubted me…like really? What the hell? What's wrong with a female?[35]

Bang did end up tattooing the man and he was pleasantly surprised by the results. She could not remember what she tattooed on him, but she supposed, "It was probably something simple. He was a simple person anyways."[36]

Both of these artists' experiences being Black women, in one way or another, indicated that their gender had created difficulties for them within the industry.[37] The fact that there were so few Black women tattooing in Atlanta available to be interviewed also speaks to the impact of the intersection of race and gender.

4.4 Mentoring Other Artists

A distinguishable difference appeared when asking participants about mentoring other artists looking to get into tattooing. Only two or three of the artists interviewed had ever apprenticed or mentored another artist.[38] This is because most artists will not take an apprentice before they themselves have between 10 and 20 years of professional experience. Every artist was asked if race or gender would impact their decision when choosing an apprentice. All of the younger artists stated that when picking an apprentice, the main qualities they would look for would be artistic talent, the drive to work hard, and a passion for the craft and that race and gender would have no impact whatsoever.[39] However, the one more experienced artist interviewed, Red, explained that while in a perfect world it might not make a difference, due to his own experiences and those of his peers, race does impact his choice. When asked if race impacted who he chooses to apprentice, he replied,

> I'd like to say that it doesn't, but honestly it does! And for the reasons –you can kind of use the Affirmative Action model, because Black artists are not going to find it easy to get into this business. If you're white, you're gonna find it pretty easy to get into the business, so, being that I'm a gatekeeper, I choose to teach Black artists. Because there's so few opportunities for Black artists. So to me, it's not reverse racism. One, because it doesn't exist….but again, if I don't teach, If I don't, then who will? The odds are even smaller.[40]

He continues on,

> I realize that [he and his peers were taught by White artists], but this is important, and these are the reasons why it's important. Because our accessibility is already so very limited in the first place, so if I don't do it, or Miya doesn't do it, then it

> just makes those opportunities even smaller. And we can't afford that. Especially if what we want for the future is more competent, professional people of color tattooing. That's what we have to do, we have to do it that way. Again, it's because of White supremacy.[41]

Red's awareness of the difficulty young Black artists are up against getting into and succeeding in the industry has led him to apprentice five different artists, thus far. He says that he has been "very open to teaching" as a result of this and he does his best to "make sure that whoever [he] does teach is able to add something to the culture and represent themselves as a confident professional tattooer that just happens to be Black."[42] This attitude demonstrates how Red and artists like Bailey and Carter have personally made an effort to expand the professional Black Tattoo Community by mentoring other artists.

Although Red's response differed from those younger artists in his consideration of race, he still stated that talent, drive, passion, and honesty were similarly, the same qualities he looks for in an apprentice. It is important to recognize as well that Red's perspective, likely held by some of the other aforementioned Black veteran tattoo artists, is likely the reason why the majority of these artists did not have to feel that their race impacted their ability to find an apprenticeship.

4.5 Summary

This chapter presented some of the experiences of Black tattoo artists in the Atlanta area have had in the industry. Although none of the artists interviewed felt like his/her race directly impacted his/her ability to find an apprenticeship, they all acknowledged that race and/or gender could impact one's ability to get an apprenticeship or find work in the industry. Most of the artists had heard of, or knew personally, someone who had been affected in this way. In addition to providing a discussion around apprenticeships, I hopefully have explained how some of the

more experienced Black tattoo artists in Atlanta, behaving as gatekeepers to the industry, have helped to mentor younger Black tattoo artists. This section also shed light on the experiences that Black tattoo artists have had in the industry, while working in Atlanta, and how and where they feel they fit into the tattoo community. Furthermore, I have brought to light the discussion of the intersection of race and gender with respect to Black women in the tattoo industry. Finally, this chapter explained how artists feel about mentoring artists looking to break into the industry and what they look for in an apprentice. All of the artists felt that when choosing an apprentice, artistic talent, work ethic, and passion were the most important qualities.

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[1] Fisher, "Tattooing the Body, Marking Culture," 97.

[2] Cooley, interview with author; Scarano, "Coloring Outside the Lines: City of Ink's Miya Bailey on Race and Tattoos."

[3] Quick Facts, *Census*, July 1, 2015, retrieved from https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/00.

[4] "Dad Bod," interview with author.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Cooley, interview with author.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Cooley, interview with author.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Bailey, *Coloring Outside the Lines*.

[13] Cooley, interview with author.

[14] Hamidullah, interview with author.

[15] Cooley, interview with author; "The Rose Guy," interview with author; Ekhibise, interview with author; Rhodes, interview with author; Jaleel "Memphis" Owens, interview conducted by Danielle Rosenthal, May 7, 2016, Atlanta, Georgia.

[16] Hamidullah, interview with author.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Hamidullah, interview with author.

[21] Ibid.

[22] “The Rose Guy,” interview with author.

[23] Cooley, interview with author.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ekhibise, interview with author.

[26] Owens, interview with author.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Rhodes, interview with author.

[29] Hamidullah, interview with author.

[30] Rhodes, interview with author.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Hamidullah, interview with author.

[35] Rhodes, interview with author.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Hamidullah, interview with author; Rhodes, interview with author.

[38] Cooley, interview with author; Hamidullah, interview with author; “The Rose Guy,” interview with author.

[39] Rhodes, interview with author; Hamidullah, interview with author; “The Rose Guy,” interview with author;
Ekhibise, interview with author; “Dad Bod,” interview with author; Owens, interview with author.

[40] Cooley, interview with author.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid.

5 TATTOOING PEOPLE OF COLOR

This chapter begins by illuminating the science behind tattooing, imparting an understanding of why tattoos are permanent and why the shade of a person's skin might impact how a tattoo looks after it has healed. I use interviews from participants and other data to examine the differences between tattooing on different skin tones. Additionally, this section attempts to debunk misunderstandings in the industry and amongst patrons about tattoos and dark skin. The use of color, contrast and composition may need to vary depending on the shade of a client's skin. While there is no empirical data that demonstrates that Black tattoo artists are more likely to both have Black clientele and have more knowledge about working on different skin tones, five out of the seven artists interviewed worked in Black-owned tattoo shops and stated that they had a diverse group of clients, the majority of whom were Black. The remaining two artists who did not work in a Black-owned tattoo shop both had significant experience working on a diverse group of clientele.[1] Given the experience of these artists, in conjunction with information gathered, some conclusions can be drawn about working on dark skinned clients. Finally, this chapter will discuss some of the artists, particularly those in Atlanta, who have revolutionized techniques for tattooing on people of color, challenging previous beliefs and limitations.

There are varying opinions about tattooing on individuals with dark skin. The irony, presented in chapter two, is that people of color have been tattooing and getting tattooed across cultures for thousands of years. Nevertheless, some key areas appeared to repeatedly be addressed by the interviewed artists. The majority of tattoo artists interviewed concluded that tattooing on different shades of skin may present different challenges. Dark skin, whether belonging to someone of African, Caucasian, Hispanic, Native American, or Asian descent,

according to these artists, tends to be more sensitive and the rules of color and composition must be altered to some extent. The commonly held belief of the artists interviewed was that they did not feel that someone's ethnicity determined any difference in sensitivity, but rather how melanated one's skin is, may make a difference. Red explains, "Lighter skin is a lot more forgiving than darker skin…When you tattoo someone of color, you can't go over that skin as many times. You can't pound that color in as many times, because it's less forgiving…there will be scarring. So that's what I mean. Like lighter skin, you can pound in more color, you can go over it more times, because it's more forgiving. Right? Brown skin, is less forgiving."[2] When asked why that is, he further elucidates, "It's melanin. It's the properties of melanin in the skin and how our bodies heal through melanin, right? And it has to do with the amount of cells that are sent to an area of trauma to close a wound or heal that area."[3] He also explained that more melanated skin may be prone to keloids or scarring.[4]

Some people, genetically, may have more sensitive skin, however, this did not seem correlated directly with race. The greater issue, according to the participants, is knowing how to address different kinds of skin (dark, light, dry, etc.) in order to avoid causing too much trauma to the skin. Too much trauma can cause scarring, which is not good. In an interview with *Complex* Magazine, Miya Bailey explains that he utilizes a method that he calls "relaxed tattooing" that reduces "trauma to the skin."[5] Bailey states that he "Learned [the method] from trying to do colors in black skin."[6]

Nevertheless, there may be marked differences when working on clientele with different skin tones. In Bailey's documentary, Russ Abbott, owner of Ink & Dagger in Roswell, Georgia, remarks that every client is different and you have to "tailor your approach" to them.[7] Abbott, a renowned tattoo artist, even admits that, "When I first started tattooing, about a year into it, I did

a design on a really dark skinned guy. Took it right off the wall, he picked it out. When I got done with it, I couldn't even see what it was. It was a failure, ya know. I felt like man, I really just kinda screwed this guy.[8] Brandon Bond, owner of All or Nothing Tattoo in Atlanta, Georgia states that "The honest truth is 90% of White tattooers do not take the time and effort to figure out how to tattoo dark skin."[9] He further expounds, "Let's not mince words, it is totally fucking different tattooing Black skin than it is White skin. And that's why you see so many fucked up tattoos on Black skin. Because if I sit down and do the exact same shit, with the exact same needle groupings on you that I'd do on me, it's not gonna look the same."[10] Zulu suggests that, as with any kind of tattoo specialization, an individual with dark or very dark skin should look for a tattoo artist with a portfolio full of successful work on dark skinned individuals, in order to ensure that he/she gets the best quality tattoo possible.[11]

5.1 Understanding the Science

As discussed in chapter two, the first tattoo machine was not created until the late 1800s, by a man named Samuel O'Reilly. The tattoo machines today include a needle or grouping of needles. During the tattoo process, the machine "insert[s] tiny needles, covered with dye into the skin at a frequency of 50 to 3000 times per minute."[12] The ideal tattoo posits ink into the second layer of skin, the dermis. As the needle(s) puncture the skin, the body's inflammatory response naturally sets in, "sending white blood cells," or macrophages to "absorb foreign particles [of ink] and dispose of them in the blood stream."[13] The pigment that lasts in the dermis is there because the "pigment particles are too big to be eaten by the white blood cells," and as a result, they remain in place.[14] Of course, during the process, ink will also be left in the first layer of skin, the epidermis. Zulu explains, "When a tattoo has just been finished, all the layers [epidermis and dermis], including the top layer hold the ink. That's why the colors are so vivid

when fresh, even on dark skin. But that's not how a healed tattoo will look."[15] As the tattoo heals, the top layer (dermis) of skin exfoliates or peels, leaving the ink only in the second layer (if done properly).[16] It is possible for ink to reach the third layer of skin, the subcutaneous layer. This is less than ideal, as it can lead to blurring and scarring.[17]

After the tattoo is healed, leaving ink only in the second layer of skin (epidermis), what is visible to the naked eye is what can be seen through the first layer of skin (dermis). Zulu states,

> Light skin tones are basically transparent. You can see through them, like a clear window. So, when light skin grows back over the top of your tattoo, it's still clearly visible and the colors remain vivid. If dark skin tones grow back over the healed tattoo, it's like putting a tinted filter on top of the tattoo. The colors will not be as vivid as the lighter skin tone. Therefore, the darker your skin tone, the more muted the healed colors in the tattoo will be. This is why many with very dark skin choose tattoos done with black ink only.[18]

To further explain, once the tattoo has healed and the ink remains solely in the second layer of skin, the tattoo that is observed is seen through the top layer of skin. While the top layer on a light skinned person is translucent, the top layer on a dark skinned person is melanated, and therefore, may impact how the tattoo looks to the naked eye.

Beyond the artistic aspect of creating a tattoo for individuals with darker skin, and perhaps the awareness for different skin types and sensitives, the procedural aspects of tattooing people with dark skin should be no different than tattooing individuals with lighter skin. It seems reasonable to conclude that the differences that exist when working on people of color, and in particular those with dark or vary dark skin are mostly aesthetic, rather than technical/application differences.

5.2 Color

As discussed in chapter two, the color palette of tattoo ink has exploded with possibilities over the last two or three decades. Prior to this, the color palette was largely limited to a small spectrum of colors. The commonly held belief amongst tattooers has been that color palette may be even further limited by the color of someone's skin. Jacci Gresham states that when she got into tattooing there was very limited use of color, "two to three colors, max."[19] In the present, with hundreds of colors of ink to choose from, artists inexperienced in working on Black clients may argue that color should be extremely limited or altogether eliminated on Black clients, those with greater experience might argue otherwise. While the amount of melanin in an individual's skin may impact the way in which a color shows through after healing, certain colors are generally going to work. Most artists suggested that reds, greens and blues are amongst the best choices of colors for darker skinned individuals.[20] The artists generally felt that purples, yellows and oranges may not show as well, depending on the individual's skin tone.[21] To further elucidate the best color choices, Zulu suggests that "bright and lighter colors, such as yellow, pink, and white are usually not visible at all and other colors will be very muted and dull. This effect may increase overtime and your tattoo may appear increasingly dull as the years pass. Choosing mid-ranged colors [such as reds, blues, and greens] and implementing plenty of negative space, avoiding clutter, is the best way to design for those with very dark skin."[22] "Dad Bod" echoed this, saying, "The friendliest two colors are reds and greens. They will show more than any other color."[23]

Certain artists in particular are known for being able to make their colors pop on Black skin. In particular, Miya Bailey, Tuki Carter and the City of Ink crew specialize in using color on Black clientele. Bailey says that he and Tuki Carter "experimented making our own colors"

in an effort to "make colors that would really pop on black skin, but it took years and years to perfect."[24] Red also mentioned Roger Parilla, Cake's business partner, as an artist who has also revolutionized putting color in dark skin.[25]

When asked about this topic, Cake responded,

> I think people sort of laugh at what City of Ink has done sometimes... I mean, I don't think it's like "Oh, they're doing amazing things," 'cause a lot of White tattooers don't see any purpose in tattooing people with darker skin. Like really, if you really talk to them. Like, they feel like it's a waste. So like, I feel like Miya just showed people that it wasn't a waste. He really does an amazing job with what he does. But then there's other tattooers that do just as good. Like I see Roger, my partner [at Black Owl Tattoo & Art Gallery]," he puts in color all the time on darker skin and it looks awesome. We do this all the time. But I think Miya brought that to the surface.[26]

Through the innovation of Bailey, Carter, Parrilla and others, tattoo artists are now able to utilize more color on darker skinned individuals. However, there are still complications. In her interview, Cake elucidates,

> I think tone definitely plays a factor. Because I like to give people the analogy that if you put red or yellow on a white piece of paper it's going to give off a different vibrance [sic] than if you put it on a brown or tan piece of paper. It's not to say whose better. I think the tattoo community has made like this, "oh if it's not bright, if it's not its true color when it heals into the skin, then it's not even worth being looked at as a tattoo." And I don't feel like that happens. I feel like everything takes on its true form and I think that's like beautiful.[27]

Perhaps her perspective presents a more holistic way of approaching the use of color. Zulu echoes similar sentiments explaining, "Color can be used on dark skin with a few considerations. If you have very dark skin and choose to get a color tattoo, it can't be compared to pictures that you see of tattoos on light skin. Your tattoo will never appear as vivid. The color is still there, the same as lighter skin. It's just less visible."[28] Rather than presuming that if a color does not show the same as it does in the bottle, it can still be beautiful.

As a whole, it appears that there may be misinformation amongst tattooers less familiar with working on people of color. Perhaps this is from lack of experience. On the other hand, as stated by two White veteran artists with 20+ years of experience each, Abbot and Bond, it is important to always tailor your approach to each individual client, even if that means taking the time to learn what might work best based on the color of that client's skin.

5.3 Contrast and Composition

After interviewing the participants and gathering information from the documentary, composition and contrast are arguably the most important elements to be considered when working on clients with different shades of skin. Contrast in a tattoo is the juxtaposition of light and dark, or varying colors that makes the image pop off the skin. Composition is the arrangement of elements or design of a tattoo. Larger, bolder images should be done on darker skinned clients, and too much fine-line detail may be lost instantaneously, if not over time. It is important to note that as a tattoo ages, lines tend to blur, particularly with exposure to the sun. Too much fine-line detail, particularly on someone with darker skin may be all together lost overtime, and the image may become indistinguishable.

Contrast

Perhaps the most distinct difference that was repeatedly stated amongst interviewed artists was the element of contrast.[29] In order to create a lasting tattoo, contrast is always an important element. Red says, "That's the biggest difference, contrast."[30] Working on a darker individual would, of course, present a challenge in creating greater contrast. Zulu further clarifies that utilizing negative space to "[insure] that the contrast between the ink and the bare skin will make the tattoo legible."[31] All of the artists interviewed explained that when creating a black and gray piece on a client with darker skin, fewer shades of gray should be used because the

differentiation between colors will likely be lost.[32] Cake stated, "You don't wanna create like a really dark tattoo. So even when you're doing black and grey shading, you don't wanna make it too dark. When it heals out, you don't want it to look dark in contrast to the skin."[33] Again, making sure that there is contrast between the skin and the design is imperative to creating a tattoo that will pop of the skin and be visible from a great distance.

Composition

Another important distinction is in the composition an artist might choose based on a client's skin tone. According to the artists interviewed and information gathered from Bailey's documentary, on darker skin, lines need to be bolder, composition needs to be larger, and fine details are generally not a great idea. Gresham says that many artists "put way too much detail in there."[34] "The Rose Guy" also stated that, "Something that's way too detailed is not gonna translate well on darker skin."[35] In order to address this, he said that he would "make the piece bigger" and "a lot more open," and use "bolder lines and heavy black."[36] Bond tells how he addresses compositional differences working on darker skin and how it has impacted his overall style overtime,

> If I'm gonna tattoo dark skin the first thing I'm going to do is adjust the composition, right off the bat. In other words, I'm not gonna put a whole bunch of little gay detail all piled on top of itself, in the way that a lot of White people would want me to. I'm gonna simplify, zoom in, on the most significant—which by the way, is a lot of what you see in our style that we do on White folks. Which, I got that from tattooing Black people. So, a lot of the stuff that I'm known for, that is our style of work is over-exaggerated imagery, zoomed in, hyper focused, and simplified, with gigantic loads of contrast. Where the fuck did I come up with that from? I came up with that from tattooing Black skin! Because if you then apply that back onto White skin, imagine what happens! It's fucking brilliant! It screams, like it will blind children from across the parking lot.[37]

To summarize, a less detailed, more focused composition with bold lines is going to be the best option for creating a lasting piece of art on someone with dark or very dark skin.

5.4 Summary

This chapter has explained the science behind tattooing in an effort to provide an understanding of why tattoos are permanent and why the shade of a person's skin might impact how a tattoo looks after it has healed. From the experience of the artists interviewed, and other information gathered, differences between tattooing on different skin tones have been explained. Additionally, I have hopefully debunked some of the myths in the industry and amongst patrons about tattoos and dark skin. The use of color, contrast and composition, may need to vary depending on the shade of a client's skin. The most important of these differences appears to be in the contrast and composition of the tattoo. Finally, this section has provided information on a few artists in Atlanta, who have revolutionized techniques for tattooing on people of color, challenging previous beliefs and limitations.

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[1] "Dad Bod," interview with author; "The Rose Guy," interview with author.

[2] Cooley, interview with author.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Nick Schonberger, "Interview: Miya Bailey Talks City of Ink And Classic Hip-Hop Tattoos," *Complex Magazine*, May 4, 2012, retrieved from http://www.complex.com/style/2012/05/interview-miya-bailey-talks-city-of-ink-and-classic-hip-hop-tattoos/.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Bailey, *Coloring Outside the Lines.*

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Roni Zulu, *Tattooing Dark Skin Part 1*, Zulu FYI, YouTube video, accessed July 2, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=chc_2IkgGXQ

[12] Claudia Aguirre, *What makes tattoos permanent,* Ted-Ed, YouTube video, accessed July 2, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DMuBif1mJz0.

[13] Carley Lintz, "FYI: What Makes Tattoos Permanent?" *Popular Science*, June 13, 2013, retrieved from http://www.popsci.com/science/article/2013-06/fyi-what-makes-tattoos-permanent.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Zulu, *Tattooing Dark Skin Part 1.*

[16] Claudia Aguirre, *What makes tattoos permanent;* Carley Lintz, "FYI: What Makes Tattoos Permanent?"; Zulu, *Tattooing Dark Skin Part 1.*

[17] Claudia Aguirre, *What makes tattoos permanent;* Carley Lintz, "FYI: What Makes Tattoos Permanent?"; Zulu, *Tattooing Dark Skin Part 1.*

[18] Zulu, *Tattooing Dark Skin Part 1.*

[19] Bailey, *Coloring Outside the Lines*.

[20] "Dad Bod," interview with author; Ekhibise, interview with author; "The Rose Guy," interview with author; Hamidullah, interview with author; Cooley, interview with author; Rhodes, interview with author.

[21] "Dad Bod," interview with author; Hamidullah, interview with author; "The Rose Guy," interview with author; Ekhibise, interview with author; Rhodes, interview with author.

[22] Zulu, *Tattooing Dark Skin Part 1*.

[23] "Dad Bod," interview with author.

[24] Schonberger, "Interview: Miya Bailey Talks City of Ink."

[25] Cooley, interview with author.

[26] Hamidullah, interview with author.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Zulu, *Tattooing Dark Skin Part 1*.

[29] Cooley, interview with author; Zulu, *Tattooing Dark Skin Part 1;* Hamidullah, interview with author.

[30] Cooley, interview with author.

[31] Zulu, *Tattooing Dark Skin Part 1*.

[32] Cooley, interview with author; Hamidullah, interview with author; Ekhibise, interview with author; Owens, interview with author; "Dad Bod," interview with author; "The Rose Guy," interview with author; Rhodes; interview with author.

[33] Hamidullah, interview with author.

[34] Bailey, *Coloring Outside the Lines*.

[35] "The Rose Guy," interview with author.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Bailey, *Coloring Outside the Lines*.

6 TATTOOING, THE MEDIA AND BLACK POPULAR CULTURE

This chapter explores how the media, particularly television, the internet and social media, have impacted the tattoo industry on a global level. Throughout each section, I discuss the impact that these media outlets have had on Black tattoo artists in particular. This section offers insight on the changes that have occurred in the industry since the creation of tattoo based reality-TV and competition shows. It also deliberates on the impact of Hip-Hop culture on the tattoo industry, particularly in Atlanta. Furthermore, I discuss how the media may be contributing to the number of scratchers tattooing people and the impact that this has on the industry. Finally, the employment of social media and the internet as a primary source for tattoo artists and patrons to promote, research, and share with one another is discussed.

As mentioned in chapter two, the media has a major influence on the tattoo industry. DeMello argues that the mainstream media, tattoo magazines, and tattoo organizations have the most influence over the tattoo industry and the perceptions of tattooing by the middle-class. However, over the past fifteen or so years, this has arguably changed to some degree. While tattoo magazines and organizations are still relevant to the industry, television and social media have impacted the industry and perceptions of tattooing on a global scale.

6.1 Tattoos on Television

Miami Ink is recognized as the first television series about tattooing. The television series aired on the TLC network and started in 2005. After the success of the show, a series of spin-off shows followed, including *LA* Ink, *NY Ink,* and *London Ink.* Of course, these shows fall into the category of "reality-TV." Following these, are the reality-TV competition shows. Typically, the best of which is considered to be *Ink Master*. During the interview process, participants were asked about the impact of television on the tattoo industry as well as which shows they felt had

the most positive or negative impact. All of the artists resoundingly stated that television has had a major impact on the industry. Most of the artists felt that the impact was a "double-edged sword." Damon Conklin comments that

> Notoriously, tattoo artists bitch and cry and moan and wheeze about these damn TV shows. And how in the hell does someone color themselves up like this, get some weird hairdo and strange clothing and walk around and get mad 'cause someone's looking at "that guy." You know what I mean? They're mad 'cause this person's on TV, clearly, we all just are jealous. Like, we all wanna be noticed. We all wanna be weird, but we wanna be noticed and appreciated. We want people to say, "That weird is good."[1]

"The Rose Guy" described tattooing on television as "a gift and a curse."[2] He further elucidates, "It's a gift when you have certain jobs that's hiring, or you know, certain jobs that's accepting people with tattoos. They wouldn't accept them if it wasn't so mainstream and on TV and in certain magazines. It's a curse because, I can't fucking do a portrait in fifteen minutes…that's what TV shows you."[3] To further explain, one of the biggest complaints about tattoos on television is the unrealistic portrayal of the tattoo process. The process of creating a tattoo requires a great amount of preparation and time, something they seldom, if ever show on TV.

Ink Master

When asked which show he/she liked best or felt had the most positive impact, most of the participants answered *Miami Ink* or *Ink Master*.[4] As previously stated, *Miami Ink* was the first series to show tattooing in a reality-TV format. The impact of *Miami Ink*, was proving that it was possible to successfully show tattooing on television. With regards to *Ink Master*, most of the artists felt that it displays high-quality artists, high-quality work, and teaches viewers about the craft at the same time. *Ink Master* provides viewers with the opportunity to learn about important elements of tattooing, such as detail, composition, color, and contrast, as well as

varying popular style of tattooing, such as American Traditional, Traditional Japanese, fine-line black and gray, portraits, etc.

The common complaint from interviewees about *Ink Master* and similar shows, while they do educate people about tattoos, was that these shows make the "average joe" feel as if they are experts on tattooing. Furthermore, the not-so-realistic aspect of reality-TV makes some people believe that large scale tattoos, packed with color can be done in only a few hours. The other result of this is the tremendous amount of people want to become tattoo artists for frivolous reasons (e.g. money, fame, trend, etc.).

While a few Black tattoo artists have participated in every season of the seven seasons of the show, it was not until the most recent, seventh season that a Black artist finally won. Anthony Michaels of Metro Tattoo in Tucson, Arizona took home the title in May of 2016. However, other notable Black artists have participated and done well on the show. Craig Foster, owner of Skinwerks Tattoo & Design in Carrolton, Georgia was on the show in Seasons 3 and 6. "The Rose Guy" commented that, "It makes me feel good to see a guy like Craig Foster, you know, as a Black tattoo artist do dope ass work and it's being showcased."[5] City of Ink's Corey Davis also participated in the most recent, seventh season of the show. The show has yet to see a female artist win.

Black Ink Crew

When asked which show he/she liked the least or felt had had the most negative impact, many of the artists mentioned *Black Ink Crew*, a show that airs on the VH1 network and is currently in its fourth season.[6] *Black Ink Crew* features the shop Black Ink, owned by Ceaser, in Harlem, New York. The show presents much more drama than art, which was the biggest complaint from the interviewed tattoo artists. Cake stated, "With all this *Black Ink,* and stuff on

the TV, I feel like it portrays us in such a bad light. 'Cause I feel like there's a lot of good Black artists that are just now looked at for stuff on those shows, like, "Oh, we can't pay our bills."[7] In an interview, Bailey told staff at *Creative Loafing*, that when asked what he thought about the show, "I gave my opinion…that they could fit that much negative imagery in 60 minutes, it blew my mind."[8] He clarifies that he does not have "negative feelings for the members of Black Ink Gallery themselves, but for a system he feels is dead set on pimping and pandering to the lowest common denominator."[9] "The Rose Guy" feels that the show is "making Black artists look bad. And tattoo artists in general, 'cause this is our platform. This is the tattoo industry platform, period."[10] Collectively, the opinion of *Black Ink Crew* amongst the participants was that it reflects negatively on the Black Tattoo Community, and inaccurately portrays professional Black-owned tattoo shops.

A spin-off series, *Black Ink Crew: Chicago*, aired two years after the original, in 2015. The show features the shop, 9Mag Tattoo Study, in Chicago, Illinois, owned and operated by Ryan Henry. The artists that felt that *Black Ink Crew*, presented the Black Tattoo Community in a negative light, typically felt that the Chicago spin-off had a slightly better portrayal and featured more artwork, and a bit less drama.

As a whole, most of the tattoo artists had mixed feelings about tattooing on television. Memphis commented that TV shows have "opened peoples' eyes."[11] Perhaps the exposure from television, whether it be related to reality-TV, competition shows, athletes who have games aired on television, and even music videos, has in fact opened the eyes of the public to stop viewing tattoos as a marker of deviance. Nevertheless, as with most things, television does not always present the reality of tattooing.

6.2 Hip-Hop Culture

As a whole, many people are influenced by celebrities (actors, musicians, athletes, etc.), and tend to mimic what they see on TV, in magazines, movies, music videos, and on stage. The result with tattooing is that many people see their idols with a particular tattoo and decide that they want a similar, if not the same, tattoo. Tupac's "Thug Life" is a perfect example of an infamous tattoo that people flocked to get done on themselves. "Only God Can Judge Me" is another commonly mimicked Tupac lyric and tattoo. Bailey mentions Tupac's tattoo as well as Treach from Naughty By Nature's teddy bear in particular in an interview with *Complex* Magazine.[12] These are only a few examples of many. When asked what he contributed the increase in popularity of tattooing to, Kenny Da Kydd bluntly replied, "the media!"[13] When asked to elaborate he said,

> I mean, seeing athletes and rappers and everybody else on magazines, or whatever…music videos. Girl, I swear girls be seeing the Kardashians or Rihanna –Rihanna got you know, whatever she has, girls come in here flocking like I want what she has. I want what Rihanna got. Or Trey Songz. 'I want that…blah, blah, blah half chest.' You don't even know what it says and you want it to look like that. [14]

Again, it is quite common for people to be influenced by celebrity tattoos. Kenny Da Kydd was not the only artist to state that Rihanna had a big impact on the tattoos sought after by women in Atlanta. When asked about trends, Cake states,

> The Rihanna, all this, across here [pointed to underboob tattoo area]. She sparks trends all the time… When she did the 'Shhh..' tattoo, everybody wanted, 'Shhh…' on their finger. The one right here [pointed to underboob tattoo area], everybody wanted, if not the Isis, then something that looks similar to that…then she started getting that henna on her hand, so all the females wanted henna. She sparks a lot of trends. Stars on the neck, I think that was her too. For real, the star trail up to the ear, that was RiRi. (Laughs).[15]

"Dad Bod" also mentioned Rihanna, commenting that he has customers come in "like, 'Oh this celebrity or rapper has this tattoo, I wanna get somethin' like that.' Or, 'I wanna cover my body in that crap,' you know…all the time, freaking White girls that come in, like, 'Oh, Angelina Jolie has this cute tattoo or Rihanna, I want the Rihanna tattoo…' or 'Lil Wayne's got this bad ass tattoo.'"[16] All of these anecdotes indicate how many clients get celebrity inspired tattoos, and perhaps, in particular Rihanna.[17] The influence of celebrities and Hip-Hop culture on tattooing is apparent.

The phrase "tatted up" has been popularized in Hip-Hop culture and is subsequently detested by many of the interviewees of this study and likely other tattoo artists. Although being "tatted up" creates a demand for tattooing, the phrase has commercialized and commodified tattoos, cheapening the art form and promoting the idea that being covered in tattoos is more important than the quality of the work one adorns. When asked how the idea of being "tatted up" impacted tattoo culture, Memphis suggests that "it made the world more lenient on tattoos. Like my doctor has a half sleeve now. So it's like, if the business and professional world can have tatted sleeves now, then yeah it is acceptable."[18] In contrast, Bang exclaimed, "I don't like that word! 'Cause it implies, "tatted up," like you just got like simple ass tattoos that like—I don't wanna say they don't mean anything, but it's whack. Tatted up! (Laughs.) Yeah, I hate that word. And I hate like, "I'm trying to get tatted,"—Okay, I hate that, like that just means you just want to put anything on you. You don't care if it's good or bad."[19] Similarly, Cake stated, "That word just says it all. It put a bad light on the culture. Especially, like African-American people 'cause we're the ones that use that word frequently. People don't even care about the quality of their tattoo anymore, it's just about having tattoos from head to toe. They don't even care

anymore."[20] To summarize, being "tatted up" promotes coverage over quality, which belittles the art form.

Atlanta is now a major hub for Black popular culture, Hip-Hop, and arguably for Black tattoo artists. Many tattoo artists, such as Miya Bailey and in particular, Tuki Carter, are known for the work they have done on various Hip-Hop artists. Undoubtedly, tattoos worn by Hip-Hop artists (and other musicians and actors) will continue to influence trends in the tattoo industry.

6.3 Scratchers

One of the biggest negative impacts of the increase in popularity of getting tattooed as the result of media and popular culture, is that it increases the number of scratchers, or untrained artists. Ryan Henry explains,

> Right now, on TV, a lot of athletes and rappers are "tatted up" and they have that look. A lot of people want to have that look. So, you have so many scratchers out here, because it's in such a demand. Given the recession or whatever, people gonna always be broke and cheap, so there's a very high demand for tattoos, to look "tatted up," to have tattoos everywhere, good or bad. So you got a lot of scratchers out here, I mean a lot of 'em! Everybody picks up a tattoo machine and just start cutting.[21]

As mentioned in the previous section, the demand for celebrity tattoos is quite great. As a result, the idea of being "tatted up" or having large portions of the body covered in ink is prevalent. This leads many individuals to want to start tattooing, knowing that it can be profitable. However, due to the aforementioned difficulty of getting an apprenticeship, many people decide to teach themselves how to tattoo. While there are online sources and perhaps a few books that may help, it is important to note that these sources do not adequately teach someone how to tattoo. Tattooing is a craft that can take years to truly master, and if done improperly and/or without the appropriate sanitary precautions, can be extremely dangerous.

During the interviews, participants were asked about their feelings towards policy and licensure with regards to tattooing. Most of the participants felt that the policies in place with regards to sanitary conditions, health code regulations, and age minimum requirements were necessary in order to keep both tattooers and clients safe.[22] Part of the problem with scratchers is that they are typically operating out of a home or a location that would not meet the health code requirements and is likely not up to sanitation standards. Furthermore, given that an unlicensed tattoo artist is not operating under the law, they notoriously do not abide by the age minimum requirement, which in the state of Georgia is 18. [23] To further clarify, in order to become a licensed tattoo artist, one must simply apply and pass a tests (e.g. blood borne pathogens safety) and in some cases blood tests are required. Regulations vary across counties and states. However, apprenticeships are not a requirement for licensure. Many of the interviewed artists felt like this should change, however, they agreed that the apprenticeship experience should be left up to the mentoring artist.[24] In contrast, Red disagreed and felt that as gatekeepers to the community, they could regulate themselves.[25]

While many individuals labeled as "scratchers" may be truly passionate about tattooing, so much so that they do not feel they can wait for an apprenticeship to start, many others are in it for the money, according to the commonly held belief of participants. This is problematic because of the aforementioned sanitary dangers and due to potential regret if the resulting tattoo is of poor quality. Kenny Da Kydd explains that it's "not a way to earn respect in the tattoo industry."[26] Red felt similarly, expressing his dissention by saying, "It's disrespectful, you know, imagine me opening a restaurant down the street here and telling all my chef friends that I'm a chef…First of all, just properly doing a tattoo is incredibly difficult, INCREDIBLY difficult, doing a tattoo properly is incredibly difficult just off the top. And that's for people who

have been doing it for years. We make it look easy. But it's really, really, really not. To do properly."[27] He expressed that he does believe it is possible for scratchers to progress, and acknowledges that it is difficult to get into tattooing.[28] However, he does not feel like that this is adequate excuse.[29]

Although all of the tattoo artists found scratchers to be problematic, there was a certain understanding and level of encouragement from them. When asked about scratchers, Cake stated,

> Shit…I was once a scratcher. I just feel like its fucked up as a community, I feel like we push those people away. And before maybe I would have done the same thing, but the fact that I like came from that, I sorta sympathize with that. I don't feel like we should push those people away. If they really have an interest in tattooing we should see where their heart is at and try to help them out in any way that we can.[30]

Many of the artists indicated a similar feeling. Memphis said,

> I don't necessarily just call somebody who tattooing at home a scratcher, because I used to be at home tattooing. I know a lot of people who started at home, mainly everybody started at home…but I feel like if you go seek that proper training, then you on your way. But if you just tryna keep staying home…just doing it for the money, you're not really doing it to gain respect or learn how to critique your craft, then I feel like that's a scratcher.[31]

Similarly, Corey Davis, of City of Ink in Atlanta, Georgia and competitor on Season 7 of *Ink Master*, suggests,

> Scratchers out there really just, put your machine down and take your time. I even started as a scratcher, tattooing outside my mom's house. And now I'm tattooing in London, which is absolutely crazy…really just take the time and develop your craft. I don't know, it's like going to college all over again. Get that apprenticeship, get your feet wet. It sucked, 'cause I went from having a job and making money to having an apprenticeship—for—I don't know how long I didn't tat, six months to a year? Or something crazy. So, it's all about sacrifices. But in the end it's gonna be worth it.[32]

Davis explains that although apprenticing is a great sacrifice and requires a lot of hard work, it is worth the time and effort. Taking shortcuts will not get you far in the tattoo industry. Anthony Locke, tattoo artist at City of Ink in Atlanta, Georgia, creatively posits the metaphor,

> What's the difference between scratchers, tattooists, and tattoo artists? I think really, they all the same, they just like a worm! Like a little worm that cuddles into a cocoon. You know what I'm saying? Eventually, when it emerges from the cocoon it becomes a butterfly and it grows wings and flies away. I think that a scratcher is the little worm, you know what I'm saying? If he wanna stay at the bottom on the ground and crawl around on the ground so that the other little insects with eventually eat him, well that's what will happen with what we doing now, we eating 'em because we're grown. It's like they'll never get to the cocoon because they don't wanna progress. You see what I'm saying? So the tattooist becomes the cocoon…but the tattoo artist is the butterfly that emerges from the cocoon. So it's a stepping process, but you know, some people wanna stay dormant and some people wanna fly. I wanna fly, plus change colors and keep flying and probably evolve into something else and become something else, greater than what I was in the beginning.[33]

These comments from tattoo artists about scratchers all indicate that many tattoo artists begin their careers scratching, and understand the urge. However, it is important to take the time to grow and learn to tattoo from another tattooist who has experience. The biggest reason this is so vital, is because of the dangers of poor sanitation. Nevertheless, as these artists eloquently stated, as an artist it is important to grow and completing an apprenticeship yields respect from other artists.

While this study does not seek to offend anyone who may have started off "scratching" or is currently doing so, hoping to find an apprenticeship, understanding the importance of finding a good tattoo artist is essential. Most well-trained artists typically charge between 100 and 200 dollars per hour, often have a minimum, and may require a deposit be made at the time of booking an appointment. Price does not determine quality, but it is important to be aware that having something permanently inked into the skin is a decision worthy of spending money on a

reputable artist. "Dad Bod" clarifies, "This isn't like, you know, buying a handbag or a pair of shoes. This is something that's going to be on your body forever. We're performing a surgical procedure, and, at that, you can look at it like it's an original artwork. Your body's the canvas. If you buy an original painting from someone you're going to be spending hundreds, if not thousands of dollars."[34] Conclusively, it is imperative to do extensive research before picking a tattoo artist, and with the help of the internet and social media, this is easier than ever.

6.4 Tattooing, the Internet and Social Media

As with almost everything else, the internet and social media have impacted businesses and marketing on a global level. Being that tattooing is a visual business, having the internet and social media available to post portfolios and images has changed everything. Pinterest and Instagram, due to their visual nature, have perhaps had the greatest impact, but other social media sites like Facebook and Twitter still play a role. Many of the artists complained about having to do Pinterest tattoos. All of the tattooers interviewed perceived themselves as artists first and foremost. As a result, being asked to essentially 'copy and paste' something onto a customer is boring and perhaps offensive to some. As an industry moving away from Flash and towards custom art, wanting an image from the internet precisely mimicked onto the body does not afford these artists the ability to utilize their creativity. That being said, with the exception of only the most elite artists, most tattooers cannot afford to turn down work like this, even if they find it boring.

When asked about trends many of them would comment essentially, "Whatever is popular on Pinterest that day." Some common examples involve infinity symbols, Prince symbols (particularly given that the interviews were done within a month or so of his death), dandelions

with seeds that turn into birds flying away, and other small tattoos often inspired by celebrities. "The Rose Guy" claimed that Instagram has "made [him] a better artist. You can't just post anything."[35] Obviously, these social media sites are not just opportunities to market to potential customers, but also a site for networking with other tattoo artists in the industry.

Another result of the internet is an increase in the amount of people who will travel to be tattooed by a particular artist.[36] While serious tattoo collectors may have done this prior to the rise of the internet, the use of the internet and social media has made the portfolios of artists accessible from anywhere in the world. Red said, "The interneting of things has definitely impacted…obviously marketing is huge. You know, now, the more Instagram followers you have, the more tattoos you do, in most cases. The more Facebook followers you have, the more tattoos you do….Smoke and mirrors, or the more perceived hype you have, the more business you do."[37] While some older artists may be resistant to the change, it is evident that the internet is now a key part of the tattooing business and can make or break one's career.

6.5 Summary

This chapter has provided insight on how the media, particularly television, the internet and social media, have impacted the tattoo industry on a global level. Throughout each section the impact that these media outlets have had on Black tattoo artists has been presented wherever possible. I have discussed the impact of Hip-Hop culture on the tattoo industry, particularly in Atlanta. Additionally, this section presented how the media may be contributing to scratching and the impact that this has on the industry. Finally, I have offered insight on the changes that have occurred in the industry as a result of tattoo based reality-TV and competition shows and the use of social media and the internet as a method for tattoo artists and patrons to promote, research, and share with one another.

[1] Bailey, *Coloring Outside the Lines*.

[2] "The Rose Guy," interview with author.

[3] Ibid.

[4] "Dad Bod," interview with author; Hamidullah, interview with author; "The Rose Guy," interview with author; Rhodes, interview with author.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Hamidullah, interview with author; Carmichael, "Miya Bailey and City of Ink continue to 'Color Outside the Lines'"; Cooley, interview with author; "The Rose Guy," interview with author; Rhodes, interview with author.

[7] Hamidullah, interview with author.

[8] Carmichael, "Miya Bailey and City of Ink continue to 'Color Outside the Lines.'"

[9] Ibid.

[10] "The Rose Guy," interview with author.

[11] Owens, interview with author.

[12] Schonberger, "Interview: Miya Bailey Talks City of Ink."

[13] Ekhibise, interview with author.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Hamidullah, interview with author.

[16] "Dad Bod," interview with author.

[17] "Dad Bod," interview with author; Hamidullah, interview with author; Ekhibise, interview with author.

[18] Owens, interview with author.

[19] Rhodes, interview with author.

[20] Hamidullah, interview with author.

[21] Bailey, *Coloring Outside the Lines*.

[22] "Dad Bod," interview with author; "The Rose Guy," interview with author; Hamidullah, interview with author; Rhodes, interview with author.

[23] National Conference of State Legislature, "Tattooing and Body Piercings: State Laws, Statutes and Regulations," November 6, 2015, retrieved from http://www.ncsl.org/research/health/tattooing-and-body-piercing.aspx.

[24] "Dad Bod," interview with author; "The Rose Guy," interview with author; Hamidullah, interview with author; Rhodes, interview with author; Ekhibise, interview with author; Owens, interview with author.

[25] Cooley, interview with author.

[26] Ekhibise, interview with author.

[27] Cooley, interview with author.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Hamidullah, interview with author.

[31] Owens, interview with author.

[32] Bailey, *Coloring Outside the Lines*.

[33] Ibid.

[34] "Dad Bod," interview with author.

[35] "The Rose Guy," interview with the author.

[36] Walzer and Sanjurjo, "Media and Contemporary Tattoo," 73.

[37] Cooley, interview with author.

7 CONCLUSION

7.1 Answering Research Questions

As presented in chapter one, the research questions for this study were as follows:

1. What is the history behind the Black Tattoo Community in the Atlanta area?
    a) How does this history situate itself within the Black Mecca schema?
2. What are the experiences of Black artists apprenticing and learning to tattoo?
    a) How does the intersection of race and gender impact Black women in the industry?
    b) Have the experiences of these artists impacted their decision to mentor other artists?
3. What are the differences, if any, when tattooing people of color?
4. What impact has television, the internet, and social media had on the tattoo industry, and in particular on Black tattoo artists?
    a) How has Black popular culture impacted the tattoo industry?

Atlanta has historically been labeled a Black Mecca. Maurice Hobson explains how the Bureau of Cultural Affairs that was established in the 1970s allowed for Black Popular Culture to flourish in Atlanta. With the rise of Hip-Hop culture, the culture of tattooing within the Black population, particularly in Atlanta, has also grown. West End Tattoo, a shop opened by a White woman, Julia Alphonso, in the mid-1990s, provided apprenticeships and employment for Black tattoo artists at a time where their options were limited if not altogether non-existent. Many well-known and revolutionary artists have "graduated" from West End Tattoo and gone on to own their own shops and create a name for themselves in the industry. As a result, these artists, acting as gatekeepers for the industry, have made an effort to encourage and mentor a younger generation of Black artists looking to make their way in an industry where racism and sexism still lingers.

During the course of this study, it became clear that the experiences of artists of the younger generation (those who have been tattooing for less than 10 years), greatly differ from those of the older generation (those who have been tattooing for more than 20 years). While the older Black artists, searching for apprenticeships and/or employment in the 1990's struggled to find shops that would take them on, the younger generations of Black artists have not typically experienced the same hardships. Nevertheless, most of the interviewed artists felt that their race impacted either their acceptance amongst White tattoo artists and/or their clientele. Another commonly held perspective was that these difficulties were exacerbated for women, and even more so for Black women in the industry. Another interesting finding was that while the older generation of artists implied that race does matter when he/she chooses an apprentice because of the racial issues that exist in the industry, the younger generation of artists all stated that artistic talent, passion and drive were the main factors that he/she would look at when picking an apprentice. Perhaps this is because of the difference in experiences noted amongst the two generations.

With regard to tattooing people of color, artists seem to have varying preferences and beliefs about limitations and technical differences. While skin sensitivity, the use of color, composition and contrast, and the needle size grouping of needles used may differ based on skin tone and the preference of each artist, a few commonalities did appear across all participants. Being aware of the sensitivity of each client and the trauma occurring to the skin is vital. Although sensitivity may or may not correlate with race or skin tone, all artists acknowledge that clients' with sensitive skin may experience more trauma, and therefore, the process and/or length of a time a client can be able to sit during a tattoo may vary. It is important to be aware of trauma in order to prevent scarring during the healing process.

Television, the internet and social media have all had an immense impact on the tattoo industry. While many artists feel that this is a double-edged sword, it is undeniable that the result is the move of a deviant art form into the mainstream. Similarly, the impact of Black popular culture, mainly Hip-Hop culture, presents a double-edged sword. While the increase in popularity and the economic growth of the industry is irrefutable, the commercialization of the craft and the goal of becoming "tatted-up" has created patronage that is less concerned with quality and inherently more concerned with being covered head-to-toe in tattoos. Furthermore, this has led to an increase in "scratchers," or untrained tattooists. This is problematic for a number of reasons, but most importantly because untrained tattooists are typically unfamiliar with sanitary practices that prevent the spread of disease and infection.

7.2 Limitations

One of the biggest limitations of this study is the limited female voice. Although an effort was made to provide a greater female voice in this study, only two of the seven people interviewed were women. Based on the information gathered from participants, this is the result of an industry that is dominated by men. While there are many women that have found success tattooing, the industry is still significantly male dominated. Furthermore, when this issue is intersected with race, even fewer Black women exist in the industry. The two women who participated in the study felt, in one way or another, that their gender impacted them within the industry and sometimes with getting clientele.

Ideally, this study would have included interviews with more tattoo artists, and in particular more of the artists that were around in the 1990s. Ideally, I would have liked to have included a few artists from City of Ink, including Miya Bailey. Unfortunately, many of tattoo artists are difficult to get ahold of, particularly the ones who have participated on tattoo

television shows. The time constraints of this project also presented a limitation in collecting more interviews. Also, regretfully, I was unable to attain an interview from Alphonso. Her whereabouts are currently unknown.

Finally, lack of secondary research on the topic is also a limitation. Having access to secondary research would provide an opportunity to corroborate more information. The result is reliance, almost solely on oral interviews for information. Utilizing oral interviews as the primary source of information does not always produce the best results. This is because oral interviews rely on the memory of participants, which may not be as accurate as written documentation. However, given the uniqueness of this project, it was the best option, due to the fact that there is very little written documentation on the topic. Wherever possible, I tried to corroborate information with other resources. Given the exclusive nature of the tattoo industry, other resources are somewhat limited.

7.3 Areas for Further Research

This study, primarily utilizing an oral historical method, provides a voice to a few tattoo artists in the Atlanta area. While a history of the Black Tattoo Community in Atlanta has been presented, more research is left to be done. Atlanta's history, as a Black Mecca certainly presents itself as unique and important for Black tattoo artists. However, other cities, such as Los Angeles, New Orleans, Chicago, New York City, etc., are home to many Black-owned tattoo shops.

Additionally, more research can be done on perhaps dermatological differences that might exist amongst more melanated individuals and how that may impact the techniques and methods necessary to provide the best quality of tattooing possible. Most of the efforts that are

made on improving techniques of tattooing people of color, come from the efforts of trial and error amongst tattoo artists. Undoubtedly, this is an area that can be further explored.

Another interesting finding that perhaps lends itself to further research, though unrelated to race or gender, is policy. Policies regulating the tattoo industry vary across state and county. Furthermore, the licensure for tattooing typically requires a blood-borne pathogens test and in some cases being tested for diseases and/or 20/20 vision. No requirements are in place with regards to training and/or apprenticeship. Opinions amongst participants varied about whether or not more policies and regulations should be put in place. While this definitely lends itself to further research, this study stands behind the fact that policy should be influenced by people in the industry and not from lobbyists of the medical, or any other unrelated field.

While some research does exist about the culture of tattooing, little research gets deeply into the racism and sexism that exists in the industry. Even less research exists in the intersection of racism and sexism within the tattoo industry. Perhaps further research here would provide a voice for Black women in the industry. Additionally, this topic could be explored amongst women of Asian, Hispanic, and Native American women who tattoo.

The tattooing community is part of a larger body modification community that exists. Further research could be conducted on various aspects of the body modification community including piercing, branding, scarification, and even plastic surgery. The aesthetics and culture around these other forms of body modification is worthy of further research.

All of the tattoo artists in this study considered themselves to be artists, first and foremost. They all worked in other mediums, to some extent, such as drawing, painting and even music. More and more tattoo artists are attending fine art schools prior to entering into the industry and the days where flash tattoos ruled over custom work are long gone. While there is

some conversation around tattooing and fine art, a greater conversation could be had on this topic.

Finally, in an age where television, the internet and social media rule the lives of most Americans, perhaps further writing intended to educate the public on tattooing would be useful. More specifically, explaining the importance of researching artists, being aware of sanitary conditions, and understanding the cost of tattooing would benefit both clients and tattoo artists.

7.4 Implications

As mentioned in chapter one, the significance of this study is grounded in the limited academic research around the present history on the art of tattooing and/or the culture of the tattoo community. Even further limited is the research on Black tattoo artists in the industry. With Black artists in the United States being historically prevented from acquiring the necessary apprenticeships to grant them notoriety and licensure as tattoo artists, it is only in the last twenty-five or thirty years that they have really been able to break into the industry. As previously mentioned, tattooing is a multibillion dollar industry and constantly growing in popularity and monetary potential. This makes tattooing economically significant to the Black community, as well as significant from a creative and expressive stand point. This study provides a voice for some Black tattoo artists in and around Atlanta as well as an understanding of their unique history. This study intends to ignite a greater conversation around Black tattoo artists, tattooing on people of color, and the racism and sexism that still infest a rapidly growing industry.

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APPENDECES

Appendix A: Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form
Georgia State University
Department of African American Studies
Informed Consent Form

THICK SKIN: THE HISTORY OF THE BLACK TATTOO COMMUNITY IN ATLANTA

Primary Investigator: Danielle Rosenthal

What is the Purpose of this Study?

You are being asked to take part in a research study. This form has important information about the reason for the study, what you will do, and the way we would like to use information about you if you choose to be in the study. You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to explore unique history of Black Tattoo Community in the Atlanta area.

What will I Do if I Choose to be in this Study?

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to fill out a basic questionnaire. Following completion of this questionnaire, an interview will be scheduled. The interview will be scheduled on a day of your choosing and will take no more than three total hours. Interviews may be conducted in person or over the phone and will be audio or video recorded. You have the right to choose if you would prefer your interview to be audio or video recorded.

_____ (initial) I prefer for my interview to be audio recorded.
_____ (initial) I prefer for my interview to be video recorded.

What are the Possible Risks or Discomforts?

There are only minor risks associated with this research study. It is possible that you may feel uncomfortable answering certain questions. If you feel uncomfortable with a question or procedure, you can skip that question/procedure or withdraw from the study altogether.

What are the Possible Benefits for Me or Others?

The possible benefits to you from this study include having the opportunity to share your story. This study will help researchers looking to do further scholarly research around Black tattoo artists, tattooing as an art form, and the modern history of tattooing.

What are my Rights as a Research Participant?

If you choose to be in this study, you have the right to be treated with respect, including respect for your decision whether or not you wish to continue or stop being in the study. You are free to stop being in the study at any time.

Choosing not to be in this study or to stop being in this study will not result in any penalty to you or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time.
You may choose not to answer particular questions if you do not want to.

What about my Confidentiality and Privacy Rights?

Participation in this research study may result in a loss of privacy, since persons other than the investigator(s) might view your study records. Due to the nature of this study, you have to option to have your identity remain confidential or to allow the use of your name in the study. Should you choose to have your identity remain confidential, unless required by law, only the study investigator, and the members of the investigator's staff have the right to view your records. They are required to maintain confidentiality regarding your identity. Results of this study may be used for teaching, research, publications, and professional meetings**.** If your individual results are discussed, your identity will be protected by using a pseudonym rather than your name or other identifying information.

_____ (initial) I want my name to remain confidential.
_____ (initial) I give you permission to use my name in this and any related academic publications.

Whom should I Call if I have Questions or Concerns about this Research Study?

If you have any questions during your time on this study, call us promptly. Danielle Rosenthal is the person in charge of this research study. You can call her at 678-595-2715 Monday-Friday 9 a.m -5 p.m or email at any time drosenthal3@student.gsu.edu.

Consent

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and will receive a copy of this consent form after I sign it.

Initial one of the following to indicate your choice:
_____ (initial) I agree to…
_____ (initial) I do not agree to…

_____ _____
Subject's Name (printed) and Signature Date

_____ _____

Appendix B: Questionnaire

Please respond to the following questions:

1. Do you classify yourself as Black or African American? Yes or No
2. Do you currently work as a tattoo artist? Yes or No
3. Do you now or have you ever worked as a tattoo artist in the Atlanta area? Yes or No
4. Are you experienced working on dark skin? Yes or No
5. Is this your full-time career (you make enough as an artist to provide for yourself?) Yes or No
6. Did you complete a full apprenticeship as a tattoo artist? Yes or No
7. What is your age? _____
8. Where were you born? _____
9. Gender? _____
10. How long have you been a tattoo artist? _____
11. How long was your apprenticeship (if applicable)? _____
12. Do you own your own shop/studio? Yes or No
13. Where do you currently work (Name of shop/studio and location) _____
14. What is your highest level of education attained:
    A. High School Diploma/GED
    B. Associate's Degree

C. Bachelor's Degree
D. Master's Degree
E. J.D./M.D./Ph.D.

Name:

Phone Number:

Email Address:

Any additional information that you would like to share:

Appendix C: Interview Guide

General Information:

1. Tell me a little about yourself (where you grew up, education, career, etc).
    a. Where did you grow up?
    b. Education?
    c. Career/s? Outside of tattooing?
    d. Favorite color?
    e. Favorite kind of music?
2. Are any other members of your family artists (of any kind)?
3. What sparked your interest in tattooing?
4. What was your first tattoo?
5. What is your favorite tattoo?
6. How long have you been tattooing?
7. What impact has tattooing had on your life?

Artistry:

1. What are your artistic influences (tattoo and otherwise)?
    a. Who are some of your favorite tattoo artists?
2. Do you work in any other medium/s? Elaborate.
3. What particular style of tattooing, if any, do you prefer to work in?
    a. What is your favorite subject matter to do?
4. What styles, if any, do you elect not do or prefer not to do and why?
    a. What is your least favorite subject matter to do?
5. What do you feel makes your art special and/or unique?
6. What are some common subjects that your clients choose to get?
7. What kind of impact, if any, do you intend your art to have?
8. What do you think about tattooing as an art form versus a trade/commodity?
    a. Tattooing in museums?

Shop/Studio:

1. Do you own your own shop/studio?
2. What is the name/location of the shop/studio you currently own and/or work at?
3. What do you charge per hour?
4. What kind of clientele do you typically see (age, gender, race, etc)?
5. Do you feel that your race impacts what type of clientele you see? Explain.
6. Is there a predominate style of art practiced in your studio? Elaborate.

7. Have you ever had a client ask you to tattoo racist or otherwise bigoted work on their body? Explain.
    a. If so, what was your response?

Apprenticeship:

1. Who did you apprentice (if applicable) under (and location)? Do you maintain contact with that person?
2. How long did it take you to find an apprenticeship?
3. Did you pay for your apprenticeship? If so, how much?
4. How would your mentor self-identify (racially)?
5. What style did your mentor predominately work in?
6. How long was your apprenticeship?
7. How long were you apprenticing before you were allowed to tattoo?
8. Did you find it was difficult to find an apprenticeship as a Black artist? Explain.
    a. OR did you find it was difficult to find an apprenticeship? Explain
        i. Have you heard any stories about difficulties finding apprenticeships as a Black artist or as a woman?
9. Tell me about some of your experiences (good and bad) as an apprentice?
10. What hardships, if any, did you face during your apprenticeship (and search for an apprenticeship) that you contribute to prejudice?

Tattoo Culture:

1. How would you define the "tattoo culture?"
    a. Is the tattoo culture a singular culture or are there different cultures amongst the tattoo community?
2. As a black artist how do you feel you fit into the tattoo culture?
3. Do you feel sacrifice and tradition are important elements of gaining respect from the tattoo community?
4. How do you feel the idea of being "tatted up" has impacted tattoo culture?

Scratching:

1. Can you define the term "scratching" for me?
2. How do you feel about scratching?
3. Do you feel there is a difference between being a tattooist and a tattoo artist? Explain.
4. Do shops allow "scratchers" to work out of them?

Tattooing on Dark Skin:

1. What differences are there (if any) between working on different skin tones?

    a. Does the skin react the same way?
    b. Is tattooing on a light skinned Black person similar to working on a light skinned Caucasian person? Explain.
    c. Is tattooing on a dark skinned Black person similar to working on a dark skinned Caucasian person? Explain.
2. Does the shade of someone's skin impact your color palate?
3. Does the shade of someone's skin impact your subject matter?
4. Does the shade of someone's skin impact your composition?

History:

1. What can you tell me about the history of tattooing in this country?
2. What can you tell me about the history of Black artists tattooing in this country?
3. What knowledge do you have about the history of tattooing in Atlanta?
    a. What about the history of tattooing in Atlanta as it pertains to Black artists?
    b. And to women?
4. Are you familiar with any artists that have revolutionized techniques used in tattooing Black patrons?
5. What trends have occurred amongst Black tattoo artists and/or patrons?
    a. What kind of styles/subject matter do you see most frequently with Black patrons?

The Industry:

1. How has being Black/African American impacted your experiences in the tattoo industry?
2. Historically, how and why do you feel that Black artists were excluded from the industry (if at all)?
3. Do you feel there currently is adequate space for Black artists in the industry? Explain.
    a. Women?
4. What prejudices and problems, if any, do you see in the industry (age, gender, racially, or otherwise)?
5. Do you feel that prejudices in the industry (if any) have changed since you first began tattooing? Explain.
6. What impact do you seek to have, if any, on the industry?
7. What impacts/influences do you feel have led you to a successful career in the industry?
8. Why do you think tattoos are becoming more mainstream/acceptable?
9. Do you feel that television shows about tattooing have impacted the industry? Explain.

   a. Specifically, have they had an impact on your experiences as a Black tattoo artist? Explain.
   b. Are there any tattoo based television shows that you particularly like or feel like have had a positive impact?
   c. Are there any tattoo based television shows that you particularly dislike or feel like have had a negative impact?
10. What changes might you like to see in the industry in the future (if any)?
   a. Policy changes? Apprenticeship requirements? Etc….
   b. Licensing?

Mentoring:

1. Have you mentored any other artists? If so, how many?
2. Does race impact your choice when choosing an apprentice? Explain.
3. What do you look for when choosing an apprentice?
4. As a mentor, what do you seek to instill in your apprentice/s?
5. What suggestions do you have for artists seeking to find an apprenticeship?
6. Would you apprentice someone who was already scratching? Why or why not?

Is there any other information you feel is pertinent or that you seek to share?