

EMBODYING IDENTITY THROUGH TATTOOING: AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY AND THE BODYSCAPE

Dr. Dave Snell (Wintec)

Prof. Darrin Hodgetts (University of Waikato)

Dr. Colin McLeay (University of Waikato)



THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

INTRODUCTION

Identity and community are not limited to thoughts in heads or personalities to be measured. They are also material, embodied, situated processes. As such, they rely heavily on objects, other people, and places.

MY COMMUNITY – WELCOME TO THE NEIGHBOURHOOD!

- Doctoral research in the area of identity, community, and Heavy Metal fans (Bogans).
 - Auto-ethnography – In the sense that I am a community member conducting research with my community. Still maintained some sense of critical distance in my writing – despite being tattooed and a Bogan myself, I didn't want to overshadow my participants by talking about me.
 - Tattoos were an aspect of embodiment I felt particularly interested in, posed some interesting questions and interactions in relation to identity and embodiment.
 - Article co-wrote with supervisors that was about one participant affectionately referred to as “Chopper”
-

TATTOOS AND BOGANS

- European cultures have utilised tattoos as a way of ‘marking oneself as different’ (Te Awekotuku, 2004). Gradually shifted from being associated with bikers and gang members to being more widely considered as an art form.
- The use of tattoos by European cultures has not detracted from their use by indigenous cultures as a way of representing community affiliations and of drawing together people, places, and events permanently on the skin. Tattoos are a way of representing social identities, relationships and communities (Nikora et al., 2007).
- One group that also uses tattoos in this way are Bogans, who use ‘alternative’ (and sometimes unsavoury) markings as a way of expressing these social processes. Examples include skulls, demons, and the confederate flag.

METONYM

- This concept of metonym describes a situation where one particular object or name is used to represent something to which it is closely associated culturally and/or spatially (Brown, 2006).
- Metonym defines a situation where a tattoo comes to represent a wider community. Through talk about tattoos, the practices and events associated with this group are articulated into view and rendered intelligible.
- Tattoos can stand for what lies beyond them (Selden & Widdowson, 1993).

BODYSCAPE

- Originally used in art history (e.g. Mirzoeff, 1995) to investigate how portrait paintings not only represent the subject being painted, but also the social relationships and “things that they stand for”. For example, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr and the civil rights movement, or the Mona Lisa and people that smile funny.
- We combine this use of the term with geographical concepts of the social aspects of landscapes to denote bodies that are altered to reflect social interactions, relationships, and community affiliations. A form of embodiment that shapes and is shaped by the social environment.
- The body is a site for community and as such it is a:
“surface to be mapped, a surface for inscription, as a boundary between the individual subject and that which is Other to it, as the container of individual identity, but also as a permeable boundary which leaks and bleeds and is penetrable (McDowell & Sharp 1997, p. 3).”

THREE CHOPPERS AND A POWERPOINT PRESENTATION

CHOPPER'S RIGHT ARM

THE TOUR

- In taking us on a tour of his right arm, Chopper is identifying landmarks on the bodyscape – identifying key monuments that play a significant part in the story of his identity and world view as a Metaller. Examples of monuments include commemorating Dimebag's death and Chopper's meetings with Zakk Wylde and Vinnie Paul.
- Through sharing his experiences, Chopper is personalising the images by sharing his interpretation and in doing so portrays Dimebag as a fallen comrade.
- He also attempts to 'educate' the observer, decyphering the meanings and explaining their metonymic representations. He communicates that these tattoos are not only about having a cool picture of a celebrity, but also about brotherhood and a shared social identity.
- In taking us on a tour, Chopper metonymically draws together people, places and events that he has chosen to represent through having them permanently carved into his arm.

THE BODYSCAPE IN ACTION

- Such meanings are also co-constructed with the listener – this is particularly the case when we talk about the death of a celebrity, as people share where they were when they heard the news and what the person meant to them (for example when we discussed Dimebag's death I shared my story of hearing about it on my birthday as this was the day he was killed).
- These 'monuments' then transport both parties back in time and space to the events that they represent. In doing so people construct and reaffirm their identities through language and social interaction. Such ideas have been discussed in geography for some time:

“[L]andscape becomes a locus of identity formation by virtue of how it was read about, toured through, experienced, viewed physically or in print, spoken about and painted. Here it is not the biography of the monument that provides the lure, but the historical constructs of significance of 'place' that are cultivated by people, and emotional and affective experiences that are encountered at these 'places'” (Nesbitt & Tolia-Kelly, 2009, p. 382).
- Here we utilise this concept and combine it with notions of embodiment to discuss the human body and how it is constructed and developed through processes of identity and community.

HARVEST

BODYSCAPES IN ACTION

- Identity construction and community interaction not only about symbolic interactions but physical interactions.
- In this instance Chopper is not just educating others, but is sharing community affiliations with others. While he states that it is not his intention, he is also establishing status within the community through discussing meeting 'community figureheads' and also by having the tattoos.
- The tattoos now become a focal point for community discussions and connections.
- Metonymic representations are now used to not only present but also to position social identities to others.
- Provide opportunities to find like minded community memberships in order to experience belonging and various other elements of community (*cf.* McMillan & Chavis, 1986).



BEYOND THE BODY

- Further, Chopper's identity, community affiliations, and connections are not only expressed on his body but also the things he owns.
- Through establishing a collection of Pantera and Dimebag memorabilia, Chopper further strengthens his identity, provides more opportunities for social interactions, and positions himself as a dedicated community member.
- The social aspects of things and collections (Appadurai, 1988; Noble, 2004).
- Chopper's possessions further connect his bodyscape to the world around him, further presenting his body as a permeable boundary where identity is made tangible and the external world is embodied. Blurs the notion that the skin is the boundary between some sort of internal personality and a physical external world.

TATTOOS AND THE BODYSCAPE

- Tattoos then are a way of not only making the internal visible but of picturing the world on our bodies (Back, 2004).
- Our identities are not just measurable things in our heads but are also the world around us. Tattoos are a way of not only making our identities visible but are also a way of picturing our communities and carrying them with us – literally on our backs.
- Social interactions, and ‘tours’, become a way of deciphering meanings to others, while further developing those meanings as they adapt to the changing environments that we move through.
- I’ve mainly spoken about the positive interactions that can shape identity, but through negative reactions to such representations we also construct and develop who we are (e.g. othering). Tattooing isn’t always acceptable to some people.
- The bodyscape is more than just the pictures or the symbolic, but also the meanings that lay beyond the images.

DAVE.SNELL@WINTEC.AC.NZ
