

The New Tattooed Lady: A Social and Sexual Analysis of Kat Von D and Megan Massacre

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Tattooing, a body adornment practice that has become popular in contemporary culture, has a very fraught social history in the United States. This is especially true of the heavily tattooed female body, which has heretofore existed in marginal subcultures like freak shows and circuses; however it is the current representation of this body that I will explore in this paper. Reality television shows such as the TLC Network's *LA Ink* and *NY Ink*, which take place in tattoo shops, have had a profound effect in shaping contemporary attitudes about tattooing and the people who engage in this subculture. As Margot Mifflin notes in the third edition of her book *Bodies of Subversion: The Secret History of Women and Tattoo*: "Reality TV shows brought tattooing into middle class living rooms and showcased many quality women artists starting with the game changing Kat Von D" (101). However, these shows have also assisted in the fetishization of the heavily tattooed body. Kat Von D, an internationally known tattoo artist and star of *LA Ink*, has become the modern day equivalent of the tattooed lady. While Von D has branded herself through the show and has developed her own line of products from it, there is a specific way in which her body is perceived. Like Von D, Megan Massacre is a tattoo artist and reality television star, on the TLC show *NY Ink*. Massacre has come to be viewed in a similar way. Through the lens of queer, gender, performance and disability studies I will analyze how the heavily tattooed female body has reached a new level of hypervisibility within popular culture using Kat Von D and Megan Massacre as case studies.

Through these contemporary examples, I will analyze the ways in which the social history surrounding the heavily tattooed female body has contributed to current social attitudes. I will be defining queer as Mel Chen does in her 2012 book *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering and Queer Affect*. According to Chen, “my core sense of 'queer' refers, as might be expected, to exceptions to the conventional ordering of sex, reproduction, and intimacy, though it at times also refers to animacy's veering away from dominate ontologies and the normativities they promulgate” (11). It is this “veering away from dominate ontologies” that I wish to explore in relationship the heavily tattooed female body. I posit that the heavily tattooed female body on several levels is operating within a queer social space. It is a body that is challenging societal and aesthetics norms while also attempting to create an alternative social space that fits into this larger definition of queer.

Through the creation of a queer alternative space, there is a larger history which also must be acknowledged that affects the ways in which this body is viewed. When thinking about how memory and perception are formed within a larger historical and social consciousness, the work of French philosopher Henri Bergson, who introduced a revolutionary concept of multiplicity, becomes useful to consider. Within his 1896 book, *Matter and Memory*, Bergson attempts to define memory and the ways in which it functions inside and outside of the body. According to Bergson:

With the immediate and present data of our sense we mingle a thousand details out of our past experience. In most cases these memories supplant our actual perceptions of which we then retain only a few hints, thus using them merely as 'signs' that recall to us former images. The convenience and rapidity of perception are bought at this price; but hence also springs every kind of illusion. (41)

Bergson's notion of "present data" offers a helpful framework through which to think about the heavily tattooed female body. The present data in today's popular culture that directly relates to the heavily tattooed female body is centered on reality television and the internet. However it is within these representations, perhaps the "signs" that Bergson references, that bring us closer to the "former images" (41). In that passage there seems to be an acknowledgment and awareness of the ways in which memories supplement our perceptions and the ways in which history informs this. It is the history of a specific body, group of people, social movement or object which informs the way it operates in the world. By taking up this Bergsonian notion of how memory is formed, I will discuss the ways in which the fetishized notion of the heavily tattooed woman has come into being.

By using Chen's definition of queer and Bergson's theory surrounding memory formation, I am making a larger argument surrounding the social history of tattooing in America and women's roles within this. It is through the creation of an alternative social space and the attached memories and bodies that a substitute reading of history can also begin to emerge. According to Saidiya Hartman in her 2008 article "Venus in Two Acts,"

As I understand it, a history of the present strives to illuminate the intimacy of our experience with the lives of the dead, to write our now as it is interrupted by this past, and to imagine a free state, not as the time before captivity or slavery but rather as the anticipated future of this writing. The writing is personal because this history has engendered me because 'the knowledge of the other marks me' because of the pain experienced in my encounter with the scraps of the archive. (5)

Here Hartman is speaking specifically about the ways in which alternative readings of history and how the archive can occur both in terms of our experience and the dead. While the scope of this article and Hartman's larger scholarship is looking at the ways in which slavery has

come to be understood and represented she is also looking at the ways in which specific narratives have not been included in history. Hartman is trying to excavate untold stories, in an attempt to both recuperate and rewrite the history of slavery. While I am not working within the same subject matter as Hartman, I feel that her methodological approaches can be used to unearth other untold histories. It is in the “scraps of the archive” where we as scholars begin to pose larger questions surrounding the formation of history and how certain narratives have been included and excluded.

Within the larger social history surrounding the heavily tattooed female body the spaces of freak/side shows and dime museums were used to put human bodies on display. This practice was most active during the late 1800's through the turn of the twentieth century. The kinds of non-normative bodies at this time included: dwarfs, people with deformities, foreign or racialized bodies and people with tattoos (30). Due to the fact that specific bodies were exhibited during this time period, there also seems to be a hierarchy that existed in terms of the venues in which they were seen. It was the transition from side show to dime museums that was significant (30). According to Robert Bogdan, in his 1990 book, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*, “Prior to their absorption by museums human curiosities floated precariously, without roots. Moreover as long as each exhibit remained independent and had only limited contact with other freaks, no community or culture of show people could develop” (30). It is this transition from dime museums to side shows which led to the development of the popular amusement industry. In many ways this not only created a new enterprise but also an alternative space for people who were otherwise deemed as non-normative to exist within

When contextualizing the popular amusement industry at the turn of the twentieth century and the way in which it categorizes normative and non-normative bodies it is vital to keep in mind the ways in which these bodies socially functioned. Susan Schweik's book *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* addresses several legal issues surrounding the history of disability in the United States, but it also discusses the ways in which notions of aesthetics surrounding normative and non-normative bodies were policed. According to Schweik, "And the politics of fear and aversion that underpin all forms of the ugly laws again motivate a normative gaze that seeks to contain and institutionalize forms of human difference that lie at the intersection of disability and poverty" (33). Here Schweik is making a link between the gaze and the "intersection of disability and poverty". While there is a direct connection between disability and poverty within the context of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when these laws were primarily on the books, the politics of fear and aversion are still elements that affect the ways in which non-normative bodies were historically viewed and, in some instances still are.

By using Schweik as a foundation, an argument can be made surrounding the concept of normative and non-normative in relationship to the heavily tattooed body. Schweick also explores the terms "sightly and unsightly." She concludes that there is ultimately an element of spectacle tied to the unsightly body; this would also be considered a non-normative body versus a sightly body, which would be seen as a normative body.

Thinking about the tattooed female body the way that Schweik uses to define the ugly laws and disabled bodies creates a space to think through the ways in which tattoos came to be viewed as normative. The history behind this body within American culture has come to exist within a similar social context to the disabled body. According to Schweik, like a disabled

body, the heavily tattooed body is also considered unsightly. The heavily tattooed body, regardless of gender, also socially policed, like disabled bodies of this time period, and was forced to exist within specific social contexts that were deemed to be appropriate. The heavily tattooed body was restricted to circus and freak shows, in which they were put on full view for paying spectators. The spectacle of human oddities within the freak show context functioned similarly to disabled bodies. Schweik states “a maimed body might be an explicit body, but someone else had to write its meaning upon it; and most importantly the unsightly body in deformance would invite only certain kinds of audience response” (47). Like a maimed body, a body with physical disfigurements, tattoos at the turn of the twentieth century operated in a similar fashion. Both tattoos and physical disfigurements existed within the same social context, and created an aesthetic measure of what a non-normative body looked like. During this time period, tattoos also became a marker of an aesthetic disfigurement and a form of entertainment.

On many levels freak show culture was the advent of the popular amusement industry. This industry is still alive and well today but is occurring within the realm of popular culture. Like freak shows at the turn of the twentieth century, reality television has come to light in almost the same way. Human oddities which served as a form of entertainment during the 1900's, have become reappropriated into a present day equivalent , in contemporary culture it is occurring through reality television. The fat lady has been replaced with shows like *The Biggest Loser*. *Hoarders* frequently features people with obsessive compulsive disorder. And the tattooed lady lives on within the context of *LA Ink*, *NY Ink* and AMC's latest television venture, *Freak Show*.

Through these modern day archetypes of the freak show, new audiences are introduced to bodies which are being deemed “non-normative.” These same issues have carried over into the portrayal of Kat Von D and Megan Massacre which have perpetuated the fetishistic attitudes surrounding the heavily tattooed female body. The new “freak show” is the tattoo shop and the people who work there. To date, TLC (The Learning Channel) has produced three major tattoo reality shows: *Miami Ink*, *LA Ink* and *NY Ink*. TLC was the first major television network to invest in and also popularize what would become tattoo reality television. Each show follows a predictable and easy to watch format which documents the owner of the specific tattoo shop and the staff that works there. Each of these shows chronicles the day to day activities of a typical tattoo shop, the staff and the patrons who come there. It is interesting to note that Von D is the only female owner of a tattoo shop within this TLC franchise. The popularity of her show *LA Ink*, which aired for four seasons, fueled her stardom. Von D's first television appearance was in 2005 on the tattoo reality television show, *Miami Ink*.

It was Von D's initial exposure on *Miami Ink*, which led to the filming of *LA Ink*. In addition to her reality television career Von D has two *New York Times* bestselling books, a Sephora makeup line and a clothing line. Von D, who has been a pop culture presence since the mid 2000's, is also actively producing both a brand and alternative reading of herself. Von D is a savvy business woman who is also attempting to redefine the way in which beauty has been constructed within American culture through tattooing. However, after four seasons, *LA Ink* was cancelled in October, 2011. The show averaged 1.4 million viewers per episode) and was one of TLC's most popular shows of that time. *LA Ink* was the most watched series premiere in the time slot it was on and consistently had high ratings within its four year run on

TLC. While filming the first season of *LA Ink* in 2007, Von D recorded an episode in which she broke the Guinness Book world record for tattooing the most people in a twenty four hour period. This was captured in an episode of *LA Ink* entitled "Kat's World Record" which aired on February 19, 2008 and featured Von D tattooing 400 people within a 24 hour time frame (Keller, 2010).

. While Kat Von D gained international notoriety through the success of *LA Ink*, she was widely known throughout the tattoo world prior to the show. The reading of Kat Von D's body is very different compared to Megan Massacre of *NY Ink*, who is the only other female tattooer featured on the TLC series. Massacre, like Von D, received national success as a result of her appearance on *NY Ink*; however Massacre is still in the beginning stages of her career. Although both women are heavily tattooed and work within the tattoo industry, there are several major differences between the two. Von D built a brand around herself which includes cosmetics, perfume, books, clothes, and, of course, tattoos. Massacre, on the other hand, is early in her career and is still developing her style of tattooing while also perusing an alternative modeling and music career which has been featured on *NY Ink*.

In many ways, when considering the representation of both women on these shows, it becomes important to think about the role of commodity and the ways in which it functions in terms of Massacre and Von D. It can also be seen in the brand that Von D has developed for herself. Within the shows' depiction of these two tattooers there seems to be a packaging of a certain lifestyle that has come to be associated with being a tattoo artist. However Von D and Massacre are still portrayed as having a non-normative lifestyle. Although the aim of *LA Ink* and *NY Ink* is to normalize a non-normative mode of living it is in many ways performing the same social functions that freak shows did at the turn of the twentieth century. It is using

elements of fetishism, spectacle, and theatricality through the lens of reality television to depict how a “real tattoo artist lives” and also the ways in which “a real tattoo shop is run.” While both shows were filmed on site at two fully functioning tattoo shops, there are also manipulated story lines within each episode, and the role of the camera and the performance of self must also be taken into consideration when thinking about the ways in which Massacre and Von D are being depicted. Reality television is creating almost the same social climate that freak shows at the turn of the twentieth century were producing.

According to Amelia Klem Osterud within her 2009 book *The Tattooed Lady: A History*, “Sideshowes helped audiences to define themselves and their own humanity in relation to the performer's inhumanity. Despite the fact that most sideshow performers, especially tattooed ladies, relied on fictional accounts of their lives to impress audiences these audiences paid to be reassured that they themselves were normal” (84). What is interesting to consider in terms of Klem Osterud's assessment is the role of the performer, specifically tattooed ladies, actively creating a new social narrative, and the way in which freak shows created a sense of normalcy in an otherwise non-normative situation. By spectators paying to see non-normative bodies in a freak show or side show context which is deemed a form of entertainment, they were able to confirm their normative status by looking at non-normative bodies.

Klem Osterud's notion of the normalizing of non-normative bodies within the context of the freak show becomes a very useful point when thinking through the ways in which Kat Von D and Megan Massacre are portrayed within popular culture. Like the tattooed ladies who came before them, Von D and Massacre are actively creating their non-normative sense of celebrity self. . Shows like *LA Ink* and *NY Ink* which showcase contemporary tattoo culture are doing so through the lens of a camera and are offering viewers of these shows a

contemporary representation of what a current freak show might look like. Von D and Massacre are putting themselves in front of the camera, and are attempting to demystify the life of a tattooer and what happens behind the scenes. However through this attempt at normalizing this practice, they are inherently isolating themselves within pop culture at large while also adding to the historically fetishistic views surrounding the heavily tattooed female body.

While the presence of tattoos within popular culture may be more visible within today's society there are lingering stereotypes that still exist. According to Mindy Fenske in her 2007 book *Tattoos in American Visual Culture*:

Tattooed bodies ultimately, therefore, force a visual recognition of the classed performativity of the body. Unlike other forms of social inscription that can be hidden because they have become naturalized (the codes have become invisible) or altered because they are temporary, tattoos constantly confront naturalization because they signify a permanent decision to mar the pure surface of the body. Metaphorically and literally, tattoos illustrate the inscription of social norms and codes upon the body. (40).

Although there is a relationship between class distinctions and tattoos which can be taken from this passage, the role of gender and the ways in which specific tattooed bodies are seen within different contexts have yet to be addressed on a larger scale. Perhaps it is the larger cultural inscriptions that tattoos create on a body which tie it to a larger social history. As Fenske is pointing out tattoos seem to socially function as a disavowal which ultimately challenges normative aspects of everyday life.

In the same way that Fenske is pointing to the social inscription that happens within the large cultural reading of tattoos, a similar element is occurring through the commodification of

them. Commodity is an element that is ever present in the way Von D and Massacre are actively engaging in their creation of celebrity self. This bleeds into the way in which designer tattoos have also become a part of the tattoo industry. There are many people who specifically come to High Voltage, Von D's tattoo shop in LA, or the Wooster Street Social Club, in New York City's trendy SoHo neighborhood, where Massacre works, to get tattooed. Due to the fact that both women are famous and are making a name for themselves within the tattooing industry, the price for getting tattooed by them increases both in monetary and cultural value. Von D is an internationally known tattoo artist who also has many other products available on the market as an outgrowth of the show *Massacre* who has involved herself in several side projects in the past has not reached the same level of celebrity status as Von D.

In many ways *NY Ink* and *LA Ink* are creating a social narrative in which there is a fetishistic portrayal of the heavily tattooed female body. Since Massacre is still in the process of both building up her fan base and clientele, her image as a reality star is undeveloped. Massacre is also presenting a more sexually charged media image, perhaps because she is still a newcomer both within the world of tattooing and reality television and because she is pursuing a career in alternative modeling industry. An August 2011 photo-shoot from *Inked* magazine which featured Massacre included several provocative photographs (Ineson, 2011). One of the images from the photo-shoot showcased Massacre laying on the a white floor with her left arm pointed over her head, hips turned outward wearing black heels and in a tiny black bra and underwear with lace accents. Shot in a style similar to 1950's pinup girls, Massacre's splayed out body showcases all of her tattoos—arms, hands chest, stomach,

thigh, legs, feet. Her face is arched toward the camera with her lips pursed together while her right elbow is placed over her long black hair.

In yet another image from the same August 2011 photo-shoot Massacre is standing with her back facing the camera in a different black bra and underwear set. However this pair of underwear is sheer and features a kind of garter inspired straps that hang down her thigh and loop over the back of her buttocks. The straps of Massacre's black heels seem to mimic the straps of her undergarments. Massacre is looking away from the camera, and only the side of her face is exposed. Her right hand is covering her mouth again exposing her tattoos but this time from a different angle. What is interesting to note about these images is both how sexually charged they are and also the timing of them. *NY Ink* premiered in June of 2011, and these images appeared in an August 2011 magazine. On multiple levels the aim of these photographs was to promote both Massacre and the show; however they seem to only perpetuate the stereotypes surrounding the heavily tattooed woman which have existed for generations. These images are similar to other photographs of Massacre that were featured on *NY Ink* which were produced through alternative modeling gigs she was hired for. On an early episode of *NY Ink* Massacre admits to posing nude which creates a buzz among the Wooster Social Street staff

In contrast to Massacre's highly charged sexually images, Von D also produced a series of promotional shots for *LA Ink* in 2007, ("LA Ink and Tattoo Finder"). Shot in almost the same poses as the first Massacre image from the *Inked* photo shoot, Von D is lying against a bright yellow back drop. Her body is spread out on the yellow floor and she is wearing red platform sandals, a red tankini swimsuit with a ruffled miniskirt bottom, and her nails are painted red to match. Von D's hair is crimped in a what seems to be a 1930's inspired hairdo

and two blonde streaks accent her otherwise jet black hair. One of Von D's arms is bent in front of her as her other arm rests on her upper thigh. While many of Von D's tattoos are visible and her body language is relaxed and she is looking directly into the camera, the overall feel of this image is less sexual than Massacre's photographs.

In my analysis of these images the time line and clothing used become key elements to consider when thinking about the emotion these photographs produce. I specifically chose images that were used to promote the shows both Massacre and Von D were featured in. I was also deliberate in picking images that were used early on in their careers as reality television stars. All three images are from season one of *NY Ink* and season one of *LA Ink*, however Massacre's images are more highly sexualized than Von D's. These images seem to be straddling a line between promoting the shows they represent but also producing sexual imagery that may increase their popularity. These photographs are in larger social and cultural dialogue with trend of pornography that became popular during the early 2000's, depicting women who had undergone a variety of body modifications including piercings and tattoos. Some websites where similar imagery of other tattooed women can be seen include (caution, these are adult sites): *Suicide Girls* (www.suicidegirls.com), *Burning Angels* (www.burningangel.com), and *God's Girls* (www.godsgirls.com). These websites also are also using a normal/familiar format to show an otherwise non-normative body in a sexualized way which lends itself to the larger fetishistic attitude surrounding the heavily tattooed female body.

The images of Von D, Massacre and the pornographic websites that depict women who engage in body modification in a sexually charged way is speaking to Bergson's concept of memory formation. These images have cultural significance and are operating within a

larger visual world. When viewing these images the larger social history that they are tied to is extremely evident. The promotional photographs for *LA Ink* and *NY Ink* echo many of the early poster advertisements used for the circus and freak shows. Circus posters of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries depicting tattooed ladies were also extremely sexually charged. These posters often featured women laying in similarly provocative poses with their tattoos exposed and wearing costumes that were equally scandalous for the time period. In a 1910 circus poster of tattooed lady Ruth Sylvia, Sylvia is captured in an almost identical pose as Massacre and Von D ("Item 5340"). Sylvia is shown lying on a red couch in a revealing one piece garment. The bodice has a pearl embellishment which can be seen on the breast portion of it with royal blue fabric peeking through. The waist line of the outfit has an intricate design that is yellow and is attached to a larger piece of fabric that Sylvia is laying on. Sylvia, like Von D and Massacre is also shown lying on her side with one arm propped up on a pillow holding a mirror and her arm appears to be fixing the ornate head piece she is wearing. Sylvia is looking into the mirror and looks as if she is getting ready to go on stage. Many of her tattoos are exposed except for her torso and stomach area which is obstructed because of the one piece garment she is wearing. While this image does not appear to be overtly sexual within today's context, it was very sexual for the time period. Mifflin's *Bodies of Subversion* presents two similar images, one of an unknown tattooed lady from the 1920's (pp. 28-29) and Lady Viola (pp. 18-19; this image also available at http://www.tattooarchive.com/tattoo_history/lady_viola.html) There is also a different in the amount of information publicly available on these women.. Hardly any information about Sylvia, Lady Viola, and countless other women and men who worked within the confines of freak show is known today, in stark contrast to Von D and Massacre. Both women are actively

engaged in creating the next chapter in American tattoo culture while there is very little known about its past.

Within alternative and queer formations of history and the archive it becomes crucial to consider the ways in which specific bodies have come to be socially regarded. Through the lens of reality television and a popularization of tattoo culture at this point in American popular culture, Kat Von D and Massacre are both challenging cultural standards of beauty and power by being heavily tattooed. It is through Von D's and Massacre's queering of both their success and their bodies where this alternative formation of the history of the heavily tattooed female body can begin to emerge. However this alternative formation of history must also involve a recuperative effort to look at the tattooed women who have come before Von D and Massacre. While Kat Von D and Megan Massacre are America's tattooing future there is a far larger story behind them that is not known. By recovering these stories, and being mindful of the larger social history they fall under, perhaps one day the fetishization of the tattooed female body may not exist and a queer reading of this history can emerge.

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