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PANEL: Moving Bodies: Autoethnographies of Transition

"The body" has increasingly been acknowledged as "a metaphor for the social under late capitalism" (Denzin, 2006, p. 385). While we also acknowledge the body as being disciplined by neo-liberal forces, in this session we provide performance texts that not only provide critical readings of the body, but create new lines of flight for bodies to interrupt/transgress/redirect our current cultural condition. As academics involved with both the theory and practice of moving bodies, we engage with autoethnographic texts to examine what bodies can do to create positive social change,

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"Does it mean anything?" and other insults: Dreadlocks, tattoos and feminism.

Karen Barbour

Drawing on feminist theorizing, phenomenological investigation of lived experience, and embodied ways of knowing, I interrogate my own creative and political acts moving in the world. As a dancer, my understandings of movement as epistemologically significant provide the basis for my re-creations of self, and for my play with the markings of gender, identity and culture. While dance performances provide a means for personal embodied theatrical engagement in issues of gender, culture and identity, my everyday encounters with others are also a rich context for interpretation, re-creation and play, In particular, my manner of dress, dreadlocks and tattoos provide markings of gender, culture and identity that seemingly confront others' stereotypes and generate encounters that can be either positive or negative. This presentation, utilizing personal experience narratives or autoethnographies, provides a context for personal reflection, interrogation and interpretation, moving towards more politicized embodied understandings.

first slide

Prelude

The warm wooden boards beneath my shins and palms feel comfortingly familiar as T stretch in the fresh air outside the dance studio, Sunlight seeps generously into my lower back. Residual sensations from the morning's dance warm up resound through my flesh even in stillness now. Snippets of conversation and the vibrations of others moving about inside the dance studio provide a background to my quiet stretching ritual. Footfalls sound closer to me, and r am interrupted…

"Umm, excuse me,] just noticed your cool tattoo. Does it mean anything? Can] just take a photo ofyour back and your tattoo?"

"No!" Rolling away, hiding from prying eyes.

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That evening after a day of dancing, I'm lying stretched out on the bed with the phone clutched to my ear, recounting my experiences to my partner.

'This is the same woman Arana, who, before] even met her, was asking me who did my tattoo and when] had it done? ' Trelate.

r hear a sharp intake of breath from my partner and he replied *'Well, it's not her business, you don't have to tell her ifyou don't want to. '*

'] *know,*] *know!'* I exclaim. *'But why do people think it is alright to ask these very personal questions or take photos? "Does it mean anything?" - what sort of question is that - like I would endure the pain and change my bodyforever without any thought about what I was doing! And this was even here at home in Aotearoa! I mean, I can understand that I seem a bit odd in the States, but here... remember I told you about standing in line to board the plane in Arizona and realizing the person behind me in the queue was plucking at my t-shirt to look at my tattoo!*

How rude! Do people just think that tattooing is a sign that my body is publicly accessible? And if that's is not enough, random people still walk up and lecture me about how if you don't wash your hair it goes like this!'

The frustration of the last few months of traveling and the pressure of these invasive gazes and assumptions almost spills over.

'Karen you're ranting. Calm down honey. You know I know what you mean. '

Gulping, I grapple with my sticky dance clothes, pulling them away from my neck. I wish we were lying together on the couch at home rather than in separate cities right now. I try to tune into my partner's quiet voice.

'You have to admit that you do look different and people are just going to be curious. And underneath it all, maybe you even want that attention. Why is it that we mark our bodies anyway, if we don't accept it will draw attention?' he asks gently.

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Arana too is a tattooed person[1], a wearer of moko, the traditional tattooing form of his ancestors and he is aware of the attention he receives from others for his marked skin. However, as a tall Maori man, his tattooing seems to be more socially acceptable, both to other Maori (indigenous New Zealanders) and to Pakeha (New Zealanders originally of European descent) (Cairns, 2002; Nikora & Te Awekotuku, 2002; Nikora, Rua & Te Awekotuku, 2005). Or maybe he just doesn't appear as approachable as I do, to those who want to ask curious questions. Rolling to sit on the edge of the bed and sighing, I respond to my partner's comments,

"It gets hard sometimes, to cope with people's interest. I guess that woman today in the dance studio was just interested in me. But you know, if she was a friend, if she really knew me, she wouldn't have look at, or to ask about the meaning of my tattoos. Because she'd know who I am and what my commitments were already. "

"You expect a lot of others Karen" Arana replies. *And what do you offer back to people who are curious? Do you think it's okay to walk around confronting people's expectations, albeit with political or feminist or however it* is *you call your agendas, and then not engage with them? That's not like you!"*

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Lying alone in the hot summer night, I throw off the bed sheet and roll over again. No position seems to encourage sleep tonight. My thoughts keep returning to the woman who asked about my tattoo today. During the lunch break she had come to sit cross-legged beside me in the sun, and as we chatted about dancing she massaged her feet gently. I noticed a delicate rose tattoo on her ankle[2] and realized she must have felt a connection to me because of having a tattoo herself. As we talked I discovered that she was quite genuine and nice actually. She asked how long I'd had my dreadlocks and why, something I get asked often. I related my standard answers to her and she seemed satisfied. After lunch we began the next dance activity together, but I carefully tied my t-shirt around my waist, deliberately hiding my back where some of my tattoo is visible.

Restless in the hot night, something that had been niggling at me surfaces into a question: how can I, as a feminist, artist and educator, ignore the opportunity to engage in discussion and provide alternative perspectives about tattooing? Do I need to feel insulted by questions like "Does it mean anything?" Maybe I could see this as a positive beginning for change instead? Perhaps I need some other strategies for dealing with the way in which my personal choice to be a tattooed person seems to become a public statement.

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Being a tattooed person in Aotearoa

A friend of ours and colleague in the department of psychology, Mohi Rua, has been researching the experiences of wearers of traditional Maori facial moko. Mohi discovered that the men and women he interviewed with facial moko, (far more visible than my own tattoo of course) developed a range of coping strategies to deal with the varied responses of others (Nikora, Rua & Te Awekotuku, 2005; Rua, 2003). While generally experiencing positive affirmation for their marked faces, most also had some experiences of negative judgment or ignorance. If they anticipated negative judgments, some wearers would chose to avoid public settings. But more often they directly confronted curious questions, attempting to modify attitudes through discussion and promoting alternative perspectives (Rua, 2003). Most often they insisted that "the decision to take the marking [was] about continuing affirmation, identity and commitment" (Nikora, Rua & Te Awekotuku, 2007, p.203). Thus, many wearers acknowledged moko as a reclamation of cultural identity and celebrated the survival of Maori aesthetics, values and design (Nikora, Rua & Te Awekotuku, 2007; Prtichard, 2001; Rua, 2003).

Clearly, moko is something different to Western forms of tattooing; moko being an unbroken Polynesian tradition. When my partner Arana undertook moko, he discussed why knowledge of his own genealogy, and of Maori language and customs were integral to wearing moko. We've had many conversations about other people's responses and our own growth as a result of being tattooed people. As youngsters, we had both read about moko, viewing paintings (Blakely & Bateman, 1997; Te Awekotuku, 1997) and photographs (King, 1992) of elders with moko. We were both excited by the designs, and while I understood that moko was not something I could wear, Arana knew that it was a potential choice for him.

There were some Pakeha people with tattoos around me when I was a child, including a schoolteacher who rode motorbikes, an old sailor and some women with bracelet tattoos or secretive roses. Historically, there certainly was a tradition of European settlers becoming tattooed as a result of engaging with Maori communities. There were many different cross-cultural exchanges, over land and under the covers, and for some,

> becoming tattooed in indigenous fashion was a fundamental outcome of their residence in Pacific communities, a product of the social relationships that were established, or which individuals attempted to forge in order to come assimilated. The permanent markers that ensued from these relationships became a source of spectacle in non-Pacific contexts. (White, 2005, p.88-89).

However, what I mostly I remember about Western tattooing from my childhood, was the skit my Mum and her friend did in a local theatre evening. Singing 'Lydia the tattooed lady', they painted their skin for performance. As the song goes, 'Lydia' had historical scenes, such as the Battle of Waterloo, depicted on her back (Groucho Marx, 1939, cited in Braunberger, 2000, p.8). I didn't know about these historical events at the time, but I loved watching my Mum, seeing her very differently with her painted body. Reading an article recently by Christine Braunberger (2000), I realized that in the past tattooed women toured around the US with the circus, exhibiting themselves as 'freaks'. Analyzing Western tattooed women like 'Lydia' as "bodies in revolt", Braunberger commented that such women "complicate recent body theory by staging an aesthetic revolution in "feminine" beauty" (2000, p.1; Mifflin, 1997). "As symbols demanding to be read, tattoos on women produce anxieties of misrecognition" (Braunberger, 2000, p.1), a statement that resonated with my experiences.

However, the potential for a revolutionary feminine aesthetics may always be unrealized, Braunberger commented, because "It would seem that whatever manifold meanings women attach to their tattoos are culturally written over to simply and only punctuate meanings already attached to their bodies within a larger cultural domain" (Braunberger, 2000, p.2). Whether or not women personally felt they could "configure radical difference in rewarding, self-confirming ways" through tattooing, (Braunberger, 2000, p.3), the risk is that you simply remain an object of public curiosity, speculation and judgment. This is a very different experience from the cloak of affirmation that is usually placed on the shoulders of Maori moko wearers. I'm inclined to both believe in the personal transformative power of tattooing, and simultaneously (though reluctantly) to acknowledge that public fascination also results in me being viewed as an oddity.

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Feminism and embodiment

I began writing to understand my experiences, remembering that it was during my doctoral research that my interest in tattooing began to resolve into action. My feminist convictions had gained clarity through research and my embodied commitments found expression in solo dance performance (Barbour, 2002). It was through moving and performing that I came to appreciate how knowledge is developed from actually experiencing knowledge as constructed, contextual and embodied (Barbour, 2006). Such embodied knowledges arose in the dance studio as I experimented with different movements, engaged in 'combinatory play' (Einstein 1952), resolved challenges and tensions, and danced out the possibilities (Barbour, 2002, 2004, 2006). I understood more clearly how I lived creatively, through articulating embodied ways of knowing as an epistemological strategy (Barbour,

2006). So, my feminist choreographic research helped me focus on my embodied convictions, adding momentum to my interest in becoming tattooed.

Reading feminist theory supported my rejection of the 'beauty myth', leading me to submit to my hair's natural predisposition to unify in dreadlocks (Greer, 1999). My interest in tattooing gained momentum, but feminine 'pretty in ink' designs held no interest for me (Atkinson, 2002), and I was no 'Lydia' either.

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And so it was that I found myself one afternoon gazing at photographs of skin resplendent in moko displayed in a local shop window. Lingering outside the shop, I glanced down, unfolding and refolding my paper on which I had sketched ideas. Realizing that the simple markings on paper were becoming blurred by sweat, I thrust my hands in my pants pockets and tried to innocuously wander into the shop. There was a longhaired man working at a computer and a couple of people talking quietly, uninterested, I hoped, in me. Surreptitiously I studied the images framed on the walls. I could see fresh swelling welts around the incised black edges of the curving patterns. The bare unmarked skin of the people photographed seemed as integral to the design as the shaded black areas. Unlike the Western tattoo style of rendering a picture on the skin, moko is design based, and created for individual people and for the specifics of their embodiment. Patterns followed the curves of muscle and bone, and the lines and textures of the skin. Fascinated, I battled internally with the desire to look closer, held back by the awareness that I was looking at someone's actual back or leg or face. This was no book of 'flash', standard images that I could or would chose from. I was looking at representations

of each person's genealogy and tribal affiliations, and as Pakeha I clearly did not trace my genealogy this way.

Standing by the photos, I suddenly became aware of a discussion behind me. A girl was arguing in whispers with a man, her boyfriend I guessed, emphatic that she wanted a Maori tattoo on her back as a souvenir of her New Zealand trip, I listened to her accent, German I thought, and eavesdropped as the man replied 'Darling, think what your parents will say. Why don't you just get something sexy on your arm like Kathrin has?,3 Listening in, I was reminded of the public debate that raged in the media over a respected ta moko artist who agreed to give the British pop music star Robbie Williams a moko, Summarizing the concerns

> It is undoubtedly the case that many in America and Europe who acquire pseudo-Oceanic or for that matter pseudo-Celtic designs in tattoo studios are influenced by naive and one-dimensional New Age romanticization of indigenous culture and spirituality. It may be argued also that such people appropriate elements of living indigenous cultures, ignorant and indifferent to indigenous notions of cultural property, Just as tattoo transactions have in fact proceeded for a long time, debates about what should be transacted and who are appropriate recipients will inevitably carry on as contentiously as they do now. (Thomas, 2005, p,29),

Although I was curious to hear whether the German girl's request for a 'Maori tattoo' would be granted, I remember suddenly doubting that I should actually be in the shop myself, Was I being a 'tourist' in the ta moko studio too, and even if I wasn't asking for moko, was I guilty of appropriating? I started to leave, but a deep voice stopped me: "Kia ora e hoa, can I help? Are you interested in a tattoo?' The longhaired ta moko artist stood beside me. I mumbled about loving the photographs. He waited patiently as I wrestled internally.

And then I hesitantly extended my sketch, folded and sweaty though it was. 'Umm, I think I need something like this ... ' I said to him. He studied my sketch carefully, for rather too long I felt. I stretched my hand out, intending to grab it back and bolt out the door. .. but instead the man said simply, 'I think you need to talk with the woman who works here.'

That was the beginning of a yearlong process and collaboration with a Pakeha woman tattooist. It was a journey of personal discovery and reflection that took me into the murky, sometimes uncomfortable and always challenging, territory of personal and cultural identity, genealogical research, personal Imagmmg, reclamation and affirmation. Along the way I became substantially tattooed.

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Researching tattooing

In the years since my tattooing was completed, I have read through some of the literature on Western tattoo traditions. I discovered a range of interpretations of tattooed bodies in the West that pointed to very different values and experiences from those I understood related to moko (Atkinson, 2002; Braunberger, 2000; DeMello, 2000; Mascia-Lees & Sharpe, 1992; Rosenblatt, 1997; Sullivan, 2001). Some research suggested that wearing tattoos constituted an act of resistance against dominant Western culture, or revealed a desire for identification with so-called 'primitive' peoples (Atkinson, 200I; Howson, 2004; Klesse, 2000; Rosenblatt, 1997; Thomas, 2005; Turner, 2000). It was interesting to discover an argument that tattoos were markings of membership to alternative subcultures or non-mainstream contemporary 'tribes' (Falk, 1995; Irwin, 2001), and the less positive assumption that tattoos were simply markers of deviance, criminal

behavior and gang membership (Back, 2004; DeMello, 2001; Irwin, 2001). Although I did not agree personally, I was curious about the argument that tattooing was a bodily self-improvement project consistent with Western bodily ideals, rather than being a form of resistance (Atkinson, 2001, 2002, 2004), and I was not surprised to read narratives that described how tattoos were used to mark conventional achievements, pursuits and aesthetics (Irwin, 2001). More interesting to me were the researchers who argued that tattoos celebrated rites of passage in the establishment of identity and expression of agency (Atkinson, 2001; Bell, 1999; Brunt, 2005; Irwin, 2001; Kosut, 2006; Mascia-Lees & Sharpe, 1992; Mansfield, 1999; Pitts, 1998, 2003; Pritchard, 2001; Rosenblatt, 1997; Schildkrout, 2004; White, 2005). I was excited, but not totally convinced, by feminist arguments that women's tattooing was an expression of a new feminist aesthetic (Braunberger, 2000; DeMello, 2001; Mascia-Lees & Sharpe, 1992; Pitts, 1998, 2003). Each argument was socio-culturally contextual, and while I related to some aspects, I found that my experiences as a Pakeha feminist living in Aotearoa, sat uncomfortably with many of these Western understandings.

And thus the challenge remained for me to critique my own experiences and begin to articulate my embodied knowledges as a tattooed woman. I recognize that issues in understanding and interpreting the choices of tattooed people "can be adjudicated only by talking about which people, when, in the contexts of what cross-cultural dealings." (Thomas, 2005, p.226). I also acknowledge that understandings of tattooed peoples must be concerned "with the ways in which identity and difference are constituted in culturally and historically specific ways" (Sullivan, 2001, p.185), and at the same time, performatively affect the ways in which we come to understand embodied experiences through processes that provoke further discussion.

So, to answer the initial question I began this story with, yes, my tattoos do have significant meaning for me. Dealing consciously with public responses to my embodied commitments is an ongoing tension I must live with every day. Both dreadlocks and tattoos are embodied manifestations of my personal and cultural identity, and my attempt to affirm my feminist, political subjectivity in Aotearoa (Brunt, 2005). And so here I am.

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[1] Following Bell, 1999 and others, I distinguish between people who have tattoos that are discreet and able to be hidden, and tattooed people, who have more obvious, larger tattoos and are likely to face public curiosity or marginalization as a result.

[2] See Atkinson (2002,2004) for a discussion ofwomens' feminine tattoos.

[3] See Irwin (2001) for a discussion of first-time tattooes' behaviour.

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