Are Tattoos Symbols of Transformation?
An Intuitive Inquiry into the Deeper Possibilities of an Ancient and Modern Form of Ornamentation

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This research was motivated by the exponential interest in tattoos over the past four decades, which led to my research question: “Are tattoos symbols of transformation?” An examination of both current and historical literature generated an understanding of the tattoo process as a rite of passage, which considers the possibility of tattoos as transformative symbols between the mundane and transpersonal realms of existence. This generated a deeper understanding of tattoos from the essence of indigenous knowledge and why its revival is important in our current world context. The qualitative approach of intuitive inquiry was chosen for its creative and intuitive alignment with the subject of tattooing. The five hermeneutical cycles of intuitive inquiry aligned with the five stages of tattooing. Ten participants with personally meaningful tattoos were interviewed. Thematic analysis was applied to the data and five themes emerged: Ritual, symbol / non-verbal communication, pain, altered state / sacred dimension, and transformation. These themes were explored, revealing altered states of consciousness and embodiment, resulting in personal growth and an expansion in worldview. This research suggests that tattoos can be cultural and natural symbols carrying our stories and meaning through time, while restoring relationship to ourselves and a unified consciousness.

Keywords: tattoo, ritual, symbol, pain, altered states, transformation, embodiment
The spectrum of literature on tattooing is kaleidoscopic. Perspectives range from beautification (Alter-Muri, 2020), to memorialisation (Buckle & Dwyer, 2019), to hierarchical identity in prison systems (Batrićević & Kubiček, 2020), religious protection (Vandenbeusch & Antoine, 2015), archetypes (Jung, 1981; Moore, 2001), and symbolic representation of the Self (de Meola, 2014). The medical model views tattooing as pathological, requiring medical intervention (Islam et al., 2016; Quaranta et al., 2011). The sociological perspective of Follett’s (2009) communications theory describes tattoos as a means of communication both to the outside world and the Self. Tattoos can be considered as a symbol of permanence in a constantly changing world.

Tattoos have existed from the beginning of recorded time (Krutak & Deter-Wolf, 2017). Lars Krutak, archaeologist and anthropologist, who has researched tattoos across the world in many indigenous cultures, underlines their significance:

> No matter the culture or time period, I believe tattooing expresses what it means to be human. I feel that tattoos make the people who wear them, because they transmit information about where a person comes from, their beliefs, desires and fears and who they want to be throughout life, and into old age (Krutak in Morrow, 2018)

The oldest evidence of tattoos is Neolithic (3370-3310 BC) on “Otzi the ice man”, discovered in the Swiss Alps as well as in Egypt, Northern Chile, China and other ancient cultures (Dieter-Wolf et al., 2015). Tattoos were also recorded during the Middle Ages in different cultures across Europe (Friedman, 2015).

Colonisation in North America (1492- late 18th century), South America (1492-1600’s) and Africa (1652-mid 20th century) imposed federal laws that inhibited indigenous people from practicing their rituals and tribal practices such as tattooing, thus robbing them of their identity, their cultural history and their role of custodians of indigenous knowledge. Indigenous communities were oral traditions. Tattoos were a means of passing their story from generation to generation, in symbolic and material form. Colonisers often forced indigenous peoples to engage with imposed belief systems, turning tattoo into taboo (Kaszas, 2018). Although tattooing was absent in history books, it was an ongoing ancient practice that combined social organisation with spiritual engagement (Krutak, 2014). This history was almost obliterated until tattoos regained popularity in the past thirty years (Krutak, 2013). Tattoos are related to almost every aspect of culture in indigenous societies, including language, religious practice, medicine and fertility (Krutak, 2013).

In its inception tattooing was done as a ritual. Somé (1998), an indigenous healer and psychologist, writes that in indigenous cultures ritual is used for healing. This is done through connecting with unseen aspects of the natural world “because the wisdom of the universe is within the invisible” (p. 22). Somé believes that indigenous cultures offer a deeper form of ritual than mainstream religious practices through direct experience. Like Jung (1991), he observes that the loss of ritual globally may contribute towards the
lack of community and isolation so commonly experienced today. In indigenous healing, ritual is the “crucible of transformation” (Somé, 1994, p. 30) and enables our connection with the spirit world. Within ritual, symbols are the representative connection to Spirit, beyond the material world. They encapsulate the ritual experience and meaning, and serve as a reminder of the experience.

Wilber (1977/1993) describes two different types of symbols: language, and imaginative symbolic explication which employs pictures and resonance to be understood. They are present in archetypes, dreams, mythology, art and poetry. These symbols describe the ineffable and understanding their significance is essential to understanding tattoos as symbols.

A range of Jungian and transpersonal themes have been explored in the literature on tattoo. The Jungian literature supports the view that tattoos can be symbols. Buss and Hodges (2017) discuss the history of tattoos as cultural symbols integrated into social settings. They consider the demonisation of tattoos through the rise of organised religion and nation-states, to the resurgence of tattoos today. They examine the process of getting tattooed from the artist’s perspective and the imagery chosen from the motivation and wearing of tattoos as embodied psyche. They conclude that tattoos should be approached in the same way as Jung approaches dreams.

In her doctoral dissertation, using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, Cortez (2013), focused her research on Chicana students (Mexican students studying in America), who have been exposed to trauma through racism, sexism and discrimination. Cortez described the sense of living within Mexican familial culture and studying within American value-based society, as the borderlands, resulting in trauma and fragmentation. She investigated how tattoo accesses mind/brain/body interconnectedness allowing participants to reconstruct traumatic events through re-identifying themselves and transforming their self-body relationship by taking ownership of their bodies. Cortez found that tattoo acts as a means of “dismembering, re-visioning and re-membering” (p. 355) for Chicana students who seek healing through self-invention and self-acceptance, living in multiple worlds.

Alter-Muri (2020), researched tattoos within the context of art therapy. In her dissertation, she found that working with internal and external images of self-identity to produce a symbol of self can be healing. Working with memorial tattoos was another effective method of processing grief. Alter-Muri also discovered that some participants found tattooing as an alternative to self-harming. She suggests that the process of art therapy can facilitate emotional healing through visual narratives. Through researching the current literature, there was a gap for researching tattoos as transformative symbols. This research, by connecting current popularity in tattooing to its origins, aims to explain the essence of the tattooing process from a transpersonal perspective, and how it can be transformative.
Method

Qualitative research was chosen for the study because the research topic of tattooing concerns both human experiences and transpersonal experiences that could be transformative. Anderson’s (2004, 2011) intuitive inquiry is a transpersonal research method created to study transformative human experiences. Anderson (2004) describes intuition as a direct experience sensed “through tapping into a collective or unconscious source of understanding beyond ordinary sense perception” (p. 6). She calls intuition a non-rational process where knowledge is accessed through dreams, a felt sense through the body and our personal wounding.

The first two cycles of intuitive inquiry (Table 1), called the “forward arc”, establish a perspective with which to approach the chosen research. The final three stages, the ‘return arc’, evaluate and engage with the research in increasingly refined ways, to explore “the farther reaches of human nature” (Maslow, 1971/1993).

Table 1
The Five Cycles of Intuitive Inquiry through the Research Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cycle</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Refining research topic by engaging with selected text via imaginal dialogue. This process engages intuition in selecting the most relevant texts to the research inquiry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Based on initial understanding of the topic, after reflecting on relevant texts, the researcher records a list of preliminary interpretive lenses.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>After gathering original data, the researcher presents results in descriptive form.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Final interpretive lenses presented from comparing Cycle 2 and Cycle 4 lenses to establish what was learnt through the research process and what was discovered as new knowledge.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The discussion brings the results and refined lenses back into relationship with the existing literature.</td>
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</table>

Intuitive inquiry was the perfect framework for this research topic because the five iterative cycles of inquiry correspond to the five stages of the tattooing process (Table 2). The creative freedom of intuitive inquiry allowed a study that reflected the creative nature of the research topic.

Participant Protocol
Participants were selected on the basis of having a meaningful tattoo, and a willingness to talk about their experiences. Ten participants were chosen for greater variety of experience. Participants were located in South Africa, which allowed access to diversity of race, culture, age, and gender. In contrast to South Africa’s history, which had oppressed non-white cultures, I wanted to honour the rich possibilities of cultural diversity in this research.
Participants came from diverse racial backgrounds and life paths (Table 3). Of the ten, a male and female tattoo artist were interviewed, to enrich perspectives from the artist’s perception. Artists engage with their clients from conception of their image to creating the artwork, to holding that person through the process and delivering a permanent expression of the client’s imagination.

Ethically, participants were informed about the purpose and content of the research, and that their participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn. Participant information forms and consent forms were sent, expressing the confidentiality I was committed to. This was re-iterated before the interview began. Each participant created a pseudonym which was used throughout the research process. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person and online. Interviews lasted up to an hour and a half. Interviews were recorded on computer and phones. Participant tattoos were photographed. Participants interviewed online sent pictures of their tattoos. The interviews were transcribed and returned to participants to verify. Ethically my intention was to set up the container carefully and thoroughly. The most important ethical issue was the diversity of my sample and to show respect to each person’s experience, knowledge and cultural beliefs around tattoo.

Participants were enthusiastic to talk about their tattoo experiences. These interviews allowed an understanding of participants’ experience through listening compassionately, imagining, interpreting and perceiving through embodied wisdom. I immersed myself in the data and began to decipher and understand from a deeply embodied place, that tattoos were offering much more than body art.

After contemplating the initial lenses, a mind map was drawn, noticing connecting themes. On the basis of this thematic contemplation, a questionnaire with twenty questions was composed. The twenty, open-ended questions allowed participants to talk about their lives, their influences and the context of their decision to have a tattoo. The questions were intended to create an understanding of the relationship between tattoo

Table 2
The Five Stages of Intuitive Inquiry and Tattooing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research stage</th>
<th>Tattoo stage</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Clarifying the research topic</td>
<td>Deciding to have a tattoo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Identifying preliminary lenses. Reviewing relevant literature</td>
<td>Identifying a symbol/or piece of art to represent an individual expression of Self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Collecting original data and analysis</td>
<td>Locating and working with a tattoo artist who creates the image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Comparison of Cycle 2 &amp; 4 lenses. Transforming and refining lenses</td>
<td>Having the tattoo applied to the skin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Integration of findings and literature review</td>
<td>Integrating the tattoo and tattoo process</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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Thematic Analysis

Summary reports of the interviews were made to appreciate what was emerging. Applying Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the transcriptions were coded using colour marker pens. Relevant descriptions were highlighted and emerging meaning units identified. Each unit was grouped with similar units. Highlighted meaning units were coded, maintaining a connection between the meaning unit and its source. Similar meaning units were grouped together and coded. Some similar groups were collapsed. These groups were aggregated and meaning units grouped together into themes. Quotes were extracted from each interview and organised under the relevant theme.

From there, the essence of what each participant had expressed about each theme was listed by hand, in ink, and distilled. A rich and fascinating model of individual and common experiences began to emerge. As I “indwelt” with this information, “gazing unwaveringly” into its depth and hidden layers, intuitions began to filter through and the richness in this subject revealed itself through creative synthesis (Moustakas, 1990). An understanding of what Anderson (2004) meant by approaching the material with compassion and a loving approach unfolded.

A mind map of the emerging themes was made, connecting common themes to establish the relationship between them, until there was a sense of the data intellectually,
emotionally and intuitively. From those themes, lists with all the possible applications were made, to establish which themes expressed the essence of the research question.

Results

The themes that explicitly answered the question “Are tattoos symbols of transformation?” were: Ritual, Symbol, Pain, Altered State, Sacred Dimension, Non-verbal Communication, and Transformation. Subsequently, Non-Verbal Communication was merged with Symbol, and Altered State and Sacred Dimension were combined.

Ritual

Ritual emerged as an overarching theme that contained all the other themes. Ritual is contained within the word “spiritual”. Tattoo artist Baked, explained tattooing as:

It’s like this timeless ritual that we go through to make us more ourselves... Strip away the layers that society has pinned on us, family, religion, all that bullshit. I think it’s a way of claiming yourself, your identity in the world. So to me, my first tattoo was very much that, it was like my renaissance, you know, it was my rebirth. It was dismissing what didn’t serve me anymore and claiming my authentic place in the world.

All participants agreed that tattooing is a ritual: A five-part ritual that involves the use of a symbol, in the form of a tattoo, as well as intention, pain, blood, courage and commitment.

Eighty percent of my participants said their tattoos were initiated to mark periods of transition. James proposed that those who go through this ritual with intention, “are seeking something esoteric, that encapsulates a personal meaningful, feeling or experience”. KB perceived that “the exchange of blood is a spiritual exchange and a ritual in itself”.

Symbol / Non-verbal communication

Rituals need symbols to carry the energy of change. In the case of tattooing, the symbol comes in the form of a picture or words but represents a unique personal expression, often of the ineffable. The image itself can be intuited, dreamt about or resonated with in nature, through art, or another tattoo:

I saw on a woman’s arm this beautiful, snake dragon. And what was so beautiful for me was, it was almost like this slightly mythical creature was in the amniotic fluid of all that life originated in, the ocean. So much of the work I’m doing in the climate change space is around the need for us to move beyond this predatory capitalist modality, which has absolutely trashed the planet. So much of the conversations around how we salvage ourselves from climate collapse is the need to draw on indigenous cosmologies that put us back in connection with nature (Dragon Tattoo).
Symbols are personal and part of choosing a tattoo is to find individual expression of uniqueness and identity. Isabeau explained how she understands the importance of expressing personal individuality through the symbol of tattoo:

I think the world is seeing a revolution in terms of spirituality. And people standing up and saying “I am not a part of your idea of what you think society should be, it’s so much more” ... and expression—self-expression is blossoming beautifully.

Tattoos are a form of non-verbal communication both in their original conception and as communication, both to the self and to others. Andromeda explained that through non-verbal communication, tattoos connect us to our origins, our authentic selves and indigenous cultures where they began. She said: “It makes me feel connected to something bigger than me and my body, and you know it’s like connecting to a deeper sense of spiritual identity”. Shooting Star tattooed swallows across his chest as a reminder of their ability to communicate non-verbally, which ignited an understanding that “we as humans have almost forgotten that intuitive ability in ourselves” (see Figure 1F).

**Pain**

Pain is an accepted factor in the tattoo ritual, both for participants and tattoo artist. Sacred Tattoo suggests that pain is “integral to the whole process” because it causes electro-chemical changes in the body and is against using any pain reduction, because “it’s putting us in a liminal area where we are in the process of changing”. Baked explained that enduring pain is a way of knowing yourself better, physically, mentally and spiritually. In this state, where defenses become background observers, the possibility of reaching beyond the self into a greater sense of Being are opened up. Baked explicated: “The way I refer to it is, you get to go under the hood of yourself and work on your inner circuitry, because you can’t be anywhere else, but in that moment”.

**Altered state / Sacred dimension**

Altered states can be evoked in many different ways, including through intense and extended pain. James explained the relationship between pain and altered states: “When you’re experiencing pain, there’s almost like a nook or a place that you can go in that pain that I would ascribe to being almost a spiritual or an altered state”. Seventy percent of my participants said that their tattoos evoked an altered state through surrendering to pain. Isabeau compared tattooing to states of meditation. Baked spoke about the similarity to journeying on psychedelics, both from the psychodynamic and higher knowledge perspective. He affirmed that tattoo artists are “definitely creating an environment conducive to altered states”. Baked described his own experience of altered states evoked by tattooing:

You kind of surrender and once you surrender and accept the process, it becomes, like mystical meditation, meditative experiences. You go somewhere else, I literally had moments of pure bliss. Like connected to everything, to oneness, to what people talk about in religion and spirituality. I’ve had that experience through pain.
Tattooing, through accessing an altered state by surrendering to pain, can result in greater spiritual identity and awareness. KB experienced tattooing as “the seat of transformation, rebirth, spiritual connection, and healing, a route to self-knowledge.” Andromeda said the process facilitates “stepping into my brightest light”, and “aligning with my truest potential”, as well as “transforming how I feel about myself”. Seventy percent of my participants felt that tattooing opens a portal to a sacred dimension which results in greater sensitivity, heightened awareness, compassion, presence and transformation. Isabeau felt it accesses an expanded state of being which connects us with deeper meaning in love and life.

Table 4 presents a comparison between what was initially known about tattoos to the researcher (primary lenses) to a more informed perspective (expanded lenses) through the research process. Seed lenses, presented in Table 5, represent new understandings from analyzing the data.
### Table 4
Comparison between Primary and Expanded Lenses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary lenses</th>
<th>Expanded lenses</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Tattoos developed in indigenous cultures in different parts of the world.</td>
<td>1. Tattoos existed in many human cultures across the world dating back to the Neolithic period.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Tattoos became taboo in many cultures when Christian pilgrims and European conquersors, imposing their belief systems, deemed them sacrilegious and primitive.</td>
<td>2. Tattoos have been used as symbols of devotion in all five major religions and predate them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Tattoos are a form of self-expression.</td>
<td>3. Tattoos are an external picture of an individual’s inner world and communicate meaningful messages both to their internal and external worlds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Tattoos are a form of rebellion.</td>
<td>4. Tattoos can become symbols when there is an intention with meaning behind them, to express something more than the image.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Tattoos are a form of communication.</td>
<td>5. This five-part process can be sacralised as a ritual with intention and reflection, or it can be simply a process. When used ritually, it’s seen as a rite of passage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Besides body adornment, tattoos can have a deeper meaning.</td>
<td>6. Tattoos are often painful, depending on their placement on the body, length of the tattoo and individual pain thresholds. Pain can lead to altered states or complete presence in the body, which can manifest embodied knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Tattoos are symbols.</td>
<td>7. People get addicted to their experiences in an altered state which they experience as ecstatic, heart-opening, releasing and renewing, when they surrender to pain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. The tattoo process is a five-part ritual.</td>
<td>8. Tattoos can release trauma both physically and emotionally and can be effective in replacing various forms of self-harming, e.g. “cutting”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Tattoos are painful and pain may lead to altered states.</td>
<td>9. Tattoos can lead to greater self-acceptance through changed perception of psychodynamic experiences and life attitudes, or engagement with the sacred, during altered states. Perception of an “ugly” body can change to one of “beauty”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. People get addicted to the pain.</td>
<td>10. Tattoos can be transformative when thought and intention are applied to creating meaning of the tattoo ritual which can open a portal to transpersonal experiences and a more authentic self.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Tattoos can release trauma.</td>
<td>11. Tattoos have become acceptable in parts of populations globally, initially by imitating pop idols’ use of them, but far more rapidly through the “global brain” of the internet, as new acceptable social forms of individual expression, more in tune with the ever-evolving creative nature of the universe.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Tattoos can lead to better relationship with individual physicality and self-acceptance.</td>
<td>12. Tattoos have a dark expression in the form of branding of slaves as marks of ownership; domination and isolation of minority groups; as gang identity, and pain for pleasure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Tattoos can be transformative.</td>
<td>13. Tattoos have a shadow side. Tattoos have a dark expression in the form of branding of slaves as marks of ownership; domination and isolation of minority groups; as gang identity, and pain for pleasure.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Transformation**

My participants described tattooing as a holistic process that is transformative physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. It boosted their self-confidence and transformed their relationships to themselves and others. James believed that tattoo brings congruence to his values and serves as a reminder of who he really is in the world. During a crisis in his life when he was struggling with self-identity and purpose, his most significant tattoo answered these questions for him: “Who am I?”...”Where am I?”...”What am I meant to be doing?” (see Figure 1B).

All my participants said that for them, the tattoo process had been transformative. KB, who has struggled with depression resulting from early childhood abuse, used “to cut” as a release. She explained that tattooing helps transform emotional pain through enduring the physical pain, which evokes past trauma. In an altered state, with more open perception, trauma from past experience can transmute to one of deeper understanding. Applying beautiful images to the body can help stop self-harming and self-destructive behaviour.

Some participants spoke about feeling rebirthed through the tattoo process, comparable to an alchemical transformation. Baked referred to the transformative effect of tattooing as:

> You really don’t notice it because, you’ve become more yourself... It’s like, does a caterpillar notice that it’s a butterfly? And does a butterfly realise that it’s a butterfly? That’s what tattooing is like, you just become more yourself.

**Table 5**

*Seed Lenses – New Knowledge*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seed lenses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Tattoos exist in numerous indigenous creative myths (Kaszas, 2018), suggesting that they are keys to essential truths about our human story (Von Franz, 2017). They carry our stories forward in time towards eternity, which is why they need to be permanent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The experience of being tattooed connects indigenous people with their ancestors both in the past and in the afterlife.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Tattoos can lead to renewed relationships with the body, a more authentic existence of self and a greater spiritual identity, through the body.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Some people like the permanence of tattoos in a world where there are few constants.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Skin is the mediator between the everyday lived experience and the inner world of the greater Self.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Tattooing, through surrendering to pain, can be similar to other altered states of consciousness accessed through psychedelics, meditation, singing, play and dance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Tattoo artists are integral to the process. They interpret the inner experience into symbolic interpretation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

Tattoo culture has provided a means of creating individual identity through personal symbols while simultaneously offering community and belonging. Krutak and Dieter-Wolf (2017) provide evidence that tattooing is an ancient art form that relates to all aspects of humanity, with many others substantiating this (e.g. DeMello, 2000; Friedman, 2015).

Ritual

Somé (1998) describes how ritual is used for personal and communal healing. In indigenous healing, ritual is the crucible of transformation, which opens us up to the spirit world. All my participants agreed that tattooing is a ritual. In indigenous communities, ritual is a way of being together and witnessing each other, resulting in better relationships and feeling embedded in a particular culture and community, whose belief and value systems are shared. Tattoo parlours and conventions are also communal spaces where people witness each other and form community through the common experience of tattoo. Taking tattoos back to disenfranchised indigenous people and reviving these motifs has revitalized these communities and rebirthed tattooing in the rest of the world. Morinis (1985), explores ritual in models of initiation into adulthood. He understands the role of pain in those rites of passage as an unforgettable experience, propelling the initiated into adulthood. Sims (2011), through his personal exploration argues that tattoo can be a rite of passage.

Symbol

Wilber’s (1977/1993) description of symbols as imaginative symbolic explication employing pictures and resonance to describe the ineffable is congruent with tattoos. Jung’s (1981) elucidation of cultural symbols carrying a transformative, psychic numinous energy, is consistent with participant transformative tattoo experiences. Kosut (2000) highlights that tattoos are a form of non-verbal communication, both to the self and others. Tattoos can also reflect a personal history of self-development and transition. Buss and Hodges (2017) discuss tattoos as embodied psyche. De Meola (2018) found that tattoos represented a snapshot of her psyche at a particular time, that propelled her towards a more integrated self.

Pain

Sacred Tattoo posited that pain is an integral part of the tattooing process because it induces electro-chemical changes in the body which release endorphins and alter our state. It induces a liminal state where changes in perception can occur. Baked concurred that pain is a way of knowing yourself better physically, mentally and spiritually. Rush (2005) proclaims that a spiritual life can only be engaged through the body and senses. He explains that tattooing is both a mind and body process, both internal and external. He proposes that rituals involving pain are analogues of nature’s ways and are designed through the healing power of symbols. Participant Ndlovu claimed that the physical endurance through the tattoo process creates courage and evokes a sense of pride. Sacred Tattoo explained that participants of tattoo are empowered, through taking control of their own bodies by allowing and managing pain. Schlitz et al. (2008) identify pain as the greatest portal to transformation.
Altered States of Consciousness (ASC)
Seventy percent of my participants said that their tattoos evoked an altered state through surrendering to pain. Tattoos were compared to other meditative states such as psychedelic plant medicines, meditation, and dancing, which were also routes to self-knowledge and self-compassion. Tart (1972) defines an ASC as a “qualitative alteration in the overall pattern of psychological functioning” which is different from ordinary states of functioning. Tart notes that knowledge is defined by science as “an immediacy given experiential feeling of congruence between two different kinds of experience” (p. 94). Tart explains that all knowledge is gained by personal experience, either internally or externally. He says that ASC satisfy us profoundly at a psychic level by reorganising its system of logic (Tart, 2008).

Transformation
Jung (1981) describes two types of archetype: those that appear in dreams as active personalities and archetypes of transformation. These are represented by familiar events and objects that symbolise the aspired transformation. Tattoos could be defined as archetypes of transformation. Tattoos can lead to renewed relationships with the body, a more authentic sense of self, and a greater spiritual identity. Alter-Muri (2020) found that participants in art therapy who used their tattoos to process their experiences found them to be healing and empowering. Thirty percent of my participants, who had previously self-harmed as a release for anxiety, found tattooing an effective replacement. Cortez (2013) found that tattooing acts as a means of “dismembering, re-visioning and re-membering” (p. 355) for Chicana students living in multiple worlds who seek healing through self-invention and self-acceptance.

Limitations
Due to COVID-19, seventy percent of my interviews were online. Although the interviews were satisfying and informative, I would have preferred all the interviews to be done in person as I found this enabled another layer of intimacy. There are multiple diverse research possibilities into understanding tattoo. This research concentrates primarily on the transpersonal perspective, through accessing altered states and embodiment, to gain both psychodynamic and transpersonal knowledge of a more holistic Self.

Conclusion
Tattoos can be used for beautification, for memorialisation, as a reminder and as a means of engaging with personal identity. They can be used for processing past experiences, for creating courage, for breaking socially accepted norms and for bringing more of ourselves into the present. This research is an example that tattoos can be transformative, when a symbol of meaning is created and applied to the body by a tattoo artist who holds the process. The tattoo becomes a symbol of inner identity that becomes explicate in the everyday lived experience. If tattoo artists explore the human psyche and consciousness in more depth, to enrich their capacity to hold people in this transformative process, they open the possibility of tattoos being a healing modality. All my participants said they experienced tattoos as a self-healing modality. There is a growing body of research to support the belief that tattoos can be healing and transformative at a personal level, as well as a healing treatment for trauma.
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References


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