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The surface of the body, as the common frontier of society, the social self, and the psycho-biological individual; becomes the stage upon which the drama of socialization is enacted, and bodily adornment (in all its culturally multifarious forms, from body painting to clothing and from feather head-dresses to cosmetics) becomes the language through which it is expressed.

—Terry Turner, “The Social Skin.”

Body modifications, then, are always symbolic. That is to say, they stand for something beyond themselves…. The tattoo is not strictly itself, the ink under the skin …. [It is] a door that opens to a wonderland of ideas and memories, regrets and successes, and all the fear, hate, guilt, sin, love, sensitivity contained within.

—John A. Rush, *Spiritual Tattoo*
Introduction: Whither Lydia?

Over the last few decades, tattoos have become ubiquitous. Once the exclusive provenance of sailors, bikers, convicts, strippers, and sideshow performers, they now adorn our athletes, pop stars, celebrity chefs, and artists. Despite the social prevalence of tattoos—a recent Harris Interactive survey places the number of Americans over age 18 with tattoos at 1 in 5, or roughly 20 percent of the adult population—they are still generally read as indicators of deviance. The same survey reports that the non-tattooed are more likely than those with tattoos to have negative perceptions of those with ink, considering them more unstable and irresponsible. Glossy magazines devoted to the art have been in circulation since the 1970s, now supplemented by dedicated blogs and Tumblr accounts; these, along with television programs such as *LA Ink* and *Miami Ink*, showcase designs of varying quality, origins, and style. Online, user-submitted content is increasingly the norm; individuals are defined by the act of framing, in choosing what to reveal and what to conceal and how much personal information to disclose. Yet they cannot control the ways these images may spread and multiply. A picture posted on a niche Tumblr account may end up on BuzzFeed, a platform known for disseminating viral content. Such is the mimetic and meme-driven nature of the Internet. Pictures of tattoos adorning the bodies of regular people, not only celebrities, in this way circulate throughout the modern cultural landscape.

Though tattoos have been addressed in scholarship, especially in historical and anthropological literature, it is only in the last few decades that they have been seriously studied as part of an emergent Western tradition. The genealogy of tattooing, in various eras and many cultures, points up the association with pathology: tattoos have been markers of

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* Magazines currently in circulation include *Skin Art, Inked, Tattoo Revue, Tattoo Flash, Skin & Ink, TATTOO, Inked, UrbanInk*, and a slew of trade publications. Tattoo conventions are also critical in the formation of the tattoo community. Online, the discourse and images proliferate still further. A search for “tattoo Tumblr” will turn up hundreds of unique blogs: those dedicated to tattoos worn by types of people—women, parents, hipsters, or people of color; to defining characteristics: “bad” ink, “quality” ink, traditional styles; and even to profession, such as the “Tattooed Librarians and Archivists” Tumblr (http://tattooedlibrariansandarchivists.tumblr.com), with an About banner that reads: “Hidden by white gloves, camouflaged by cardigans, or somewhere above sensible shoes is the tattooed librarian, archivist, or curator. Submit your ink today!”
deviance (as in subcultural or gang affiliation) or stigma (forms of marking *qua* social control, where the body bears witness to a criminal past or prison stint) or signs of class (indicating abjection or certain labor practices).† Whenever the body can be “read” as a text of culture, nonnormative body projects like tattoos take on heightened import. From where we now stand, tattoos are paradoxically more mainstream while still carrying a great deal of negative weight and semiotic baggage.‡ The relative acceptability of tattoos is the result of a long discursive process whereby formerly deviant working-class practices have been appropriated and reclassified as “fine art.”§

**Scope Note: Method and Madness**

In undertaking this project, I designed a survey with the specific intent of capturing narratively rich material coupled with basic demographic data. The survey instrument consisted of multiple-choice and open-ended questions and was an attempt to capture a snapshot of a population that is often speculated about (i.e., “tattooed librarians”) but has not been interrogated directly. Obviously, the scope was limited from the outset, as I solicited the participation only of individuals who fit both the criteria of having tattoos and considering themselves librarians. The aims here were threefold: first, demographic, so as to gather concrete information about this population, rather than simply using available online images and commentary; second, semiotic, to elicit talk about particular signifiers that might or might not have bearing on professional personae; and


‡ In the project at hand, respondents posed similar questions. Why, they asked, should tattoos warrant such interest within the library profession when they are quite widespread in the populace as a whole?

§ Consider, for instance, the way many elite tattoo artists look down on “flash” (standardized designs that adorn walls of tattoo parlors, from which customers can choose) and prefer to work with a client to design a custom piece. Custom work is as much a badge of uniqueness for the working artist as it is for the person whose body it will come to decorate.
third, discursive, in order to capture a particular sociohistoric moment in all its messy complexity. This analysis draws on my own theoretical background in linguistic anthropology and thus takes into account the self-perceptions of tattooed librarians, the discursive figurations they use to talk about themselves as subjects, and the ways in which they position others as social imaginaries. More broadly, the project aims to situate the ways that seemingly frivolous conversations about tattooed librarians are actually part of a larger discourse about labor, gender, and subjectivity under late capitalism.

The techniques here are those of the qualitative social scientist and humanities scholar, involving close reading of a small corpus of materials. Data for this project was gathered through a short survey designed with SurveyMonkey, which was then disseminated through the ALA Think Tank Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/groups/ALAthinkTANK) and the Librarian Wardrobe Tumblr account (http://librarianwardrobe.com). These two avenues of distribution proved more than adequate for the purposes of this project, given that its aim was (preliminary) qualitative rather than (definitive) quantitative analysis. In total, 184 responses were received. In no manner does this study purport to be


† There is much to be said about the ways librarianship, as a heavily gendered vocational “calling,” is complicit in the double bind of neoliberal personhood. For a more thorough analytic framework than I can provide here, see Maura Seale, “The Neoliberal Library,” in *Information Literacy and Social Justice*, ed. Lua Gregory and Shana Higgins, 39-61 (Duluth, MN: Library Juice, 2013). It is worth noting many analyses rely on ontologies that treat gender as a given rather than taking it to be a socially constructed, ongoing, and performative facet that does not exhaust or define the subject. When I talk about “doing gender,” it should be clear that the former belief is the commonly held cultural one, and the latter the one to which I hew. In the same vein, the concept of the social imaginary, in its historical specificity and broad application within social science, is teased out in the essays in Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar and Benjamin Lee, eds., “New Imaginaries,” special issue. *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002).

‡ The bulk of the responses came within the first hour of posting. This was incredibly surprising, as I expected fewer than 50 people to respond in total, and also serves as a partial explanation as to why no other avenues (such as e-mail lists) were explored.
exhaustive in either scope or findings. Certainly the very social media vehicles used for distribution circumscribe the kind of respondents reached. By the same token, it would be methodologically naïve to assume that the experiences of 184 discrete respondents can stand in for a profession a thousand times larger than the sample size. Future work should and will interrogate intersections of class, sexuality, geography, and especially race in a more robust manner.

Ten questions comprised the survey material that undergirds this analysis, the first six of which gathered basic demographic information about age, gender, level of education, type of workplace, number of tattoos, and the age at which the respondent acquired their first tattoo. The final four questions were open-ended, asking respondents to describe their tattoos in terms of placement and design, what their tattoos meant to them, the reactions to their tattoos by others, and whether they considered “tattooed librarians” to be special.

**Survey for Librarian Wardrobe**

1. What is your gender?
   - Female
   - Male
   - Other (please specify)

2. What is your age?
   - 18 to 24
   - 25 to 34
   - 35 to 44
   - 45 to 54
   - 55 to 64
   - 65 to 74
   - 75 or older

3. What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?
   - Less than high school degree
   - High school degree or equivalent (e.g., GED)
   - Some college but no degree
• Associate degree
• Bachelor degree
• Graduate degree
• PhD
• Other (please specify)

4. What type of library do you work in?
• K-12
• Public
• Academic
• Other (please specify)

5. How many tattoos do you have?
• 1
• 2
• 3
• 4
• 5
• More than 5

6. At what age did you get your first tattoo?

7. Describe your tattoos physically. (Placement, design, etc.)

8. Describe what your tattoos mean to you. (Meaning, significance, etc.)

9. How do others respond to your tattoos?

10. Is there something special about being a tattooed librarian?

The category of “librarian” was left purposefully underdetermined and kept separate from the degree obtained. In other words, librarian status was meant to be interpreted by the respondent rather than imposed by the categories of the survey. In other words, librarian status was meant to be interpreted by the respondent rather than imposed by the categories of the survey because the distinction between professional and paraprofessional staff, while important behind the scenes, does not typically enter into public perception. This divide also speaks to a larger debate about expert knowledge and the ways expertise is imagined, enacted, and per-
Regardless of this lack of distinction, an overwhelming majority of the self-defined “librarian” respondents were also holders of master’s and professional degrees: 87 percent of those surveyed held a master’s. With regard to demographics, the respondents to this survey were also majority female, tended to work in academic or public libraries, and were predominantly between the ages of 25 and 44. The demographic information obtained correlates with information disseminated by ALA about the profession, though here a slightly higher percentage of respondents were female than in the profession overall (5 percent greater), and respondents tended to be younger than the identified mean age of 48.*

Of 184 respondents, 162 identified as female (88 percent), 21 as male (11.4 percent), and 1 as other (.6 percent, response given: “gender-queer”). The bulk of the respondents were between the ages of 25 and 34 (53 percent), with a slightly smaller grouping of 35-to-44-year-olds (32 percent). Those under the age of 25 (5.4 percent) and over the age of 45 (10 percent) made up the rest. The next question, answered by 182 of the respondents, concerned the number of tattoos that each individual had. By far, the highest concentration was for having a single tattoo: 56 respondents (31 percent) had only one; 46 respondents (25 percent) had two; 27 respondents (15 percent) had three; 11 respondents (6 percent), four; 6 respondents, (3 percent) five.

Interestingly, the numbers also clustered at the other end, given that 36 respondents (20 percent of the total) had more than five tattoos. Even this seemingly simple quantitative question invited commentary. Speaking through the comments and the expanded response sections, some people were unsure how to precisely quantify their tattoos—such as the 16 respondents with full or partial sleeves on their arms. Sleeves are intricate designs that can be expanded outward, covering ever-larger expanses of skin. Should this count as one big tattoo or many small ones? When visible, such designs clearly carry more communicative weight and visual impact than small black-ink tattoos that can be readily concealed.

* Note that the last large-scale survey conducted by ALA was in 1999. The profession reflected in my numbers is younger overall, though the profession at large may also be less gray than it was 15 years ago (Mary Jo Lynch “Age of Librarians,” American Library Association, accessed October 15, 2013, www.ala.org/research/librarystaffstats/librarystaffstudies/ageoflibrarians).
In terms of age, the bulk of the respondents acquired their first tattoo prior to or during their early 20s. Breaking down the 180 responses received to that question by age bracket: 10 (5 percent) got their first tattoo before turning 18; 108 (60 percent) when they were between the ages of 18 and 23; 38 (21 percent) between the ages of 24 and 29; 13 (7 percent) between ages 30 and 35, 7 (3.8 percent) between ages 36 and 41; 3 (2 percent) between ages 42 and 47, and 3 (2 percent) after the age of 48. Looking at an even more granular level, the most prevalent age to get tattooed was 18, with 33 respondents (18 percent) reporting getting their first tattoo upon reaching the age when one may do so legally in the United States.* A few tentative conclusions can be drawn from this information. First, as this data set makes clear, the age when people got their first tattoo clearly falls at the younger end of the spectrum. Taken together, 65 percent of respondents were inked prior to the age of 24, which is prior to the onset of postgraduate study and subsequent professionalization. Taken as individuals, the librarians in this survey do not vastly differ from the broader demographic trend of North America, where approximately 20 percent of the adult population is tattooed. But as noted above, many respondents did not stop at just one tattoo, so at least some of these designs were undertaken as the respondent developed a professional role.

**Bodies at Work**

Communicative practice lies at the heart of tattooing, even if the tattoo is intended only as a message to oneself. Tattoos, however, carry different meanings for wearers and audiences. What role, if any, can tattoos play in the construction or dissemination of a professional persona? Given that the precepts of professionalism redirect focus away from the body as a source of labor, tattoos draw constant attention to the embodied self by being literally written on the skin. In the professional workplace, tattoos can impact relationships, perceptions, and paths to advancement. While generally outside the scope of this paper, a sizeable literature exists in the

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* Geographic location was not part of the survey material. Despite using social media as the primary avenue of distribution, it seems reasonable to assume that most respondents are from the United States or, possibly, Canada.
field of human resources management about the practical implications of hiring individuals with tattoos. For the employee, especially in the library field, guidebooks and manuals for the young professional can include tattoos in their purview: whether to have them, whether to hide them, and how they can impact working conditions and social relationships. Even though tattoos are a by-now-prevalent middle-class practice, their relationship to particular forms of labor—gendered, embodied, and professional—is altogether less transparent, and, likewise, undertheorized.

This subject may be familiar to those who follow professional e-mail lists, Facebook groups, opinion pieces, and blogs. In these places, discussions of what it means to be a librarian with tattoos, or the impacts and effects of tattooing on one’s career, have been ongoing, with varying degrees of investment and interest. Still others express bafflement: why have tattoos, among all possible forms of body modification, become such a hot-button topic? The survey that forms the basis for this paper elicited similar responses. As one respondent put it, “No; I think it’s ridiculous that it’s become such a topic of interest. Is it a frenzied issue for those in other professions?” While forums do exist for talking about the acceptability of tattoos in other female-dominated professions, such as nursing, education, and social work, they appear less concerned with stereotypes per se and more caught up with the practical implications of visible ink on their job prospects.

As body modification, tattoos are unique because they are multivalent signs in ways that blue hair, a lip ring, or breast implants cannot be. While any of these may have personal import or provoke a response, tattoos invite complex semiotic readings that draw on pre-existing forms of iconography, narrative, and design. Tattoos can have multiple—simultaneously contradictory—meanings, depending on who is doing the interpreting. Thus while tattoos are “worn to be timeless and stable,” they are still “sub-

† For more on the (gendered) body as a site of inscription, see Pippa Brush, “Metaphors of Inscripton: Discipline, Plasticity, and the Rhetoric of Choice,” Feminist Review 58 (Spring 1998): 22–43.

‡ For the purposes of this paper, I use the terms tattooed librarian and librarian with tattoos interchangeably. This heuristic helps simplify the analysis rather than the reality: not all who have tattoos have more than one, for instance, not all identify as librarians, and some may be engaged in different forms of labor but self-identify as librarians.
ject to extensive social, cultural, and individual polysemic and deconstructive readings that circumnavigate the wearer’s intent with the choice of a design.”9 Tattoos are part of a broader class of signs with the potential for shifting signification: signs “which mean one thing to one group” can very easily “mean something else to another group, the same category being designated but differently characterized.”10 Owing to this semiotic richness, tattoos contain the fullest set of possibilities for (mis)interpretation. As with any form of adornment or decoration, tattoos have import beyond what a reductionist view implies.

Theorists have argued that in middle-class, postindustrial North America, tattoos are one of the ways in which individuals demarcate significant moments in their lives. Atkinson, for example, suggests that tattoos can harness the transformative power of rituals, that they “symbolically mark the passage from one self to another.” Thus the tattoo is a “lasting reminder of the transition, and the manner in which the transition may be publicly communicated to others through bodily display.”11 Given the absence of socially pervasive rites of passage signifying the end of adolescence, individuals thus find their own way of marking their symbolic entry into adult society. Tattoos, being an increasingly common type of demarcation, can thus function as modern rites of passage. As the open-ended responses to this survey indicate, many respondents linked their tattoos to significant moments in their lives. The data about age strongly indicates that tattoos acquired in early adulthood might fulfill this role. More broadly, and as I explore more fully below, marking time and self in this manner crystallizes a type of highly individuated subject, one divorced from history, circumstance, and consequences, that both depends on and reinforces a neoliberal form of personhood. Whether this can be classed as articulable desire on the part of the individual at the time, however, matters less than the way significant moments are taken up and incorporated into narrative trajectories that outline the self, foreground agency, and treat choices as purely a matter of individual will and desire.

* For purposes of this analysis, neoliberalism does not refer to the political economy of late capitalism per se, but rather denotes a kind of highly individuated subjectivity, one which exists apart from (and indeed, in spite of) the macro-level constraints of history, context, or society, albeit one that is made possible only under the conditions of late capitalism.
When asked how people responded to their tattoos, the answers were varied. Some took this as an opportunity to reinforce the distinction between the “work self” and the “real self.” As Goffman points out in *Frame Analysis*, the ideas of self, stage, and role are themselves context-dependent:

There is a relation between persons and role. But the relationship answers to the interactive system—to the frame—in which the role is performed and the self of the performer is glimpsed. Self, then, is not an entity half-concealed behind events, but a changeable formula for managing oneself during them. Just as the current situation prescribes the official guise behind which we will conceal ourselves, so it provides where and how we will show through, the culture itself prescribing what sort of entity we must believe ourselves to be in order to have something to show through in this manner.¹²

In these cases, the responses of patrons or coworkers were emphasized more strongly if those people saw the tattoos at all. A common practice was keeping the tattoo covered when in a professional setting or when the respondent did not want to engage in conversations about it. Indifference or disinterest were also common reactions, contrasting strongly with the narrative expectations of others. Other respondents mentioned the reaction of people in their lives to their ink. Parents and in-laws, especially, figured highly in these stories. Still others spoke explicitly about the ways patrons regarded their tattoos. In several cases, these interactions involved uninvited and unwanted commentary from (older, often male) patrons about the body of the (generally younger, female) librarian. A second trend, however, saw younger patrons responding positively to the body art of librarians, perhaps accompanied by verbal commentary signaling that individual’s uniqueness compared to a (perceived) contrast set, i.e. “those other people who work here”:

Others respond pretty well. Sometimes people are very interested and complimentary, but of course, there are always people who do not like them. Sometimes at work I wear cardigans that cover my sleeve if I’m in a mood where I don’t want to talk to someone about them. Yesterday I had a library patron ask to
see my arm and then he grabbed my wrist and flipped my arm around to see the other side. I don’t really like it when people just take the initiative to grab me (it’s art, but it’s still attached to my body)! I just started library school at University of Wisconsin-Madison and the Director seemed very intrigued by all the tattoos in my incoming class. She seemed generally interested in tattoos and intrigued by them.

* * *

Living in a pretty conservative part of the country (southwest Missouri), people feel that they have the right to comment on my body and tattoos fairly often. Usually it’s something like, “What’s THAT supposed to be?”, “Did that hurt?”, or “Do you regret getting those?” Once while working with long sleeves (so my tattoos weren’t visible) an older woman came up, gestured to a heavily tattooed teenager at the public computer, and loudly said, “Ugh, what would you do if that was your daughter?”.

* * *

It varies. Mostly I get compliments. One coworker asked me (rather pointedly) if I regret my tattoos. Sometimes older male patrons make rude comments, but they also make rude comments about my age and hair, so they would probably be rude even if I didn’t have tattoos.

* * *

 Mostly people are curious, they ask if they hurt, why did I get them, what they mean. I’ve not had any negative responses. During my interview for my current library job, the assistant director said she thought my reader tattoo was awesome.

Responses to tattoos vary widely and depend on multiple contextual frames for their significance. In many cases, the person wearing the ink possesses the means to cover or conceal it, whether to discourage com-
mentary, discussion, or debate, or simply express a preference for keeping the intimate self tucked away. These practices suggest that reactions and responses are dependent on multiple kinds of contexts: home and work; public and private; proximal and distal.

**Making Narratives, Enacting Agency**

For this project, a short survey seemed like a reasonable way of gathering information from far-flung individuals. It bears a superficial resemblance to ethnographies of virtual communities insofar as the informants are not co-located in space. The method, however, creates the appearance of community where none actually exists. Whereas blog commenters or e-mail list subscribers actively create communities of practice by way of regular, ongoing, and sustained interactions, that is not the case here. Ethnographies of tattooing have addressed this issue much more elegantly, in no small part by looking at the ways tattoo and community continually intersect and are re-created anew in physical and virtual spaces. In contrast, there is no “librarian tattoo community” to interrogate here. Its creation is merely an artifactual byproduct of the method, just as the “tattooed librarian” is much more a product of circulating discourses than it is a social reality.

Taking advantage of the open-ended questions, some respondents spelled out this distinction in more detail. When asked if there was anything special about being a tattooed librarian (Q10), the 171 responses were divided: 48 (28 percent) said “yes” agreed, 119 (79 percent) said “no,” and 4 (2 percent) of the answers were ambiguous.* Approximately a third of the respondents saw a linkage between their profession and their tattoos, while the rest denied such an association. In the group that thought tattooed librarians were special, stereotypes were mentioned twice as often as in the second group. Those who didn’t regard tattooed librarians as

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* Looking at the data in retrospect, a forced choice between “yes” and “no” combined with space for an open-ended answer would have made the categorization much more straightforward. Were I to repeat this survey, I would also replace the word *special* with *interesting*, as the word invited antagonistic responses and made classification of the answers more difficult. The ambiguous answers were “Intrigue”; “researching for your next one is easier”; “never really thought about it”; and “lol.”
special were also more likely to talk about their tattoos as having personal value—being “for the self”—rather than something to be shared with colleagues, coworkers, and patrons.

Several such respondents specifically mentioned that the decision to become a librarian was totally separate from their drive to get tattooed. Yet in the retelling, both of these decisions are framed by the rhetoric of individuation and personal choice:

I don’t know if it has so much to do with being a librarian. Although, I am a librarian and I love what I do, and most of them have root in literature of one form or another and history (not the dragon though, I just really wanted a big bad-ass dragon when I was 18). But my tattoos have been my shepherd through difficult times. So in a way, they helped to show me the way to myself. And somewhere in the middle of them I went to get my MLS and found what I was meant to do with my life. I’ve been trying to think of another tattoo that I might want for some time, but nothing has come to mind. Maybe I’ve found some peace through them, or maybe I’ll wait until whatever comes next.

* * *

Not really, maybe that’s because I got my sleeve before I ever worked for the library. I knew it was something I always wanted and was intrigued by. I think if there’s anything special about being a tattooed librarian it would be that we are breaking the old stereotypes of what a librarian should look like. In a broader sense, from a feminist perspective, I think being a tattooed woman is special and breaks stereotypes of traditional beauty, or what is beautiful in the eyes of the media. Last, I think libraries are so forward moving, and it works great to have a younger generation of librarians (tattoos or not) to be the advocates of what is to come.

* * *
Being tattooed is not related to my job as a librarian. I became a librarian to help people. When I am working with patrons I try to make sure I am always focused on the needs of the individual. I almost need to let my individuality fade away and just put myself in the patron’s shoes. It’s not about me, it’s about them. That being said if a member has a question about tattoos I’ll be glad to help them with any information I may have in the same way I would with music, gardening, raising ducks or any of my other interests.

* * *

I like to think that a tattoo is a long-term personal choice like getting married, having a child or adoption of a set of religious beliefs. All of these choices are special to the one choosing them, but I don’t believe that a librarian with tattoos (or wearing a Star of David or a wedding ring) is any more or less special than one without.

* * *

Was tattooed long before being a librarian.—The tattoos are for myself, and not the general public. Mostly no-one sees them (and I don’t have to explain)—I guess it’s cool—but then it’s cooler riding up to the library on my Ducati.

These responses create narratives that hinge on ideas of skin-bound personhood: tattoos are part of the individual’s biography and body, but are not necessarily linked to their career. More than that, the tattoos have no other intended audience than the self; others who see them are merely incidental. A more subtle argument could be made for the highly individuated body as a site of inscription as a way of differentiating the “true self” from the “mass subject” prescribed by neoliberalism; yet, paradoxically, one can inhabit this position of subjectivity only within the precepts of neoliberalism.13

For the respondents who did find something special in being a tattooed librarian, the negation of stereotypes was a more common and explicit
theme. Specifically, gendered stereotypes came under particular scrutiny. Some individuals inflected the gender distinction still further through the lenses of age, morality, or attitude. Though stereotypes were mentioned by both those who thought tattooed librarians were special and those who did not, those who found something special about the co-presence of tattoos and librarians were about twice as likely to mention them:

I think it’s unexpected, although three of my co-workers (all female librarians) also have tattoos, some of which are very elaborate and visible. It makes me laugh when I think about what a dichotomy there is between the more stereotypical image of [what] a librarian is and the one of a tattooed librarian. I think tattoos are becoming more culturally acceptable, but my colleagues and I all have ones that can easily be covered up if we are in a situation where they would be perceived as inappropriate or where we wouldn’t want to be judged solely on the basis of our ink.

* * *

There is, in the sense that it shows that not all librarians are stuffy old ladies who aren’t up [to] date in the world. It gives us a different way to interact with patrons, and lets them know that we too have lives and interests and are progressive

* * *

I like to think it makes me seem a little less like the stereotypical conservative, boring, no-fun librarian (I’ve been told I’m “too cool”/”too fun” to be a librarian, so that stereotype is definitely still alive and well).

* * *

Tattooed librarians are a rebellion against the stereotypes of our profession. The epitomical image of a librarian is a sour-faced woman donning a severe bun and a cardigan. When people meet a tattooed librarian, it forces them to not only reconsider
their assumptions about the person, but about the library as an institution as well.

* * *

Being a tattooed librarian is awesome. I think it shows people that librarians can be more than just frumpy old ladies that remind you of your grandmother. It shows that librarians are a diverse and really interesting group of people!

* * *

I think there is something special about being a tattooed librarian, because they help break the mold or stereotypes people have about librarians, libraries, and even reading in general. I think it helps new generation relate to me in a different way than they may more conservative or traditional librarians.

* * *

Yes. It lends a sense of personal style & sense of individuality. It breaks with stereotypes of the “old fashioned” librarian.

Note that here the contrast set is between the speaking individual and the imagined figure of the “other,” who is almost always described an older, uptight, sexless spinster. Once more, gender plays a paramount role in both the sides of this contrast set. The qualities of youthfulness, newness, and (presumably) self-determined sexuality are ascribed to the wearer of tattoos, who is a creature completely unlike the old-fashioned stereotype of the profession.

The language of these responses creates a narrative opposition between two kinds of librarians: “traditional” and “tattooed,” which may simply be an echo of the current library discourse.* Origins aside, two different conceptual alignments emerge from these narrative responses. The first—around which clusters stronger language of selfhood, memory, and

* This argument is about narratives rather than practices; I am not imputing motives for tattooing.
identity—takes society at large as its frame of reference. Thus, librarians are not the contrast set: everyone is. And in the adult population at large, it would seem like “everyone has tattoos”:

No—a lot of people have tattoos. Also, I think people get overly excited about subverting the sexy-librarian stereotype. You have a tattoo—so does my grandfather—get over it.

* * *

no more so than being a tattooed anything else! I don’t really see how they intersect at all, except that “I have a tattoo” and “I am a librarian” are both true statements.

* * *

Not particularly. I think it’s special only because there are so many stereotypes about librarians and they tend to be rather feminine, and (traditionally) tattoos aren’t feminine, at least in Western culture. However, I’ve never been particularly feminine, so I don’t feel like there is a “stigma” to being tattooed. I dress rather conservatively, it’s just who I am, not because I’m a librarian, so I think it’s funny when people are shocked when I reveal my tattoos. But I feel like tats are becoming more and more common—or at least, more and more visibly common—and as we’re part of the population, it’s only natural that we would represent as much as any other profession.

* * *

Not particularly! I think that it’s probably quite common in the profession (and it’s getting increasingly common in general anyway so I’m not sure that it’s representative of anything more than that).

* * *
We are just like any other tattooed people, so no, I don’t think so. Unless it shatters librarian stereotypes for someone, I don’t find it to be a big deal. We are surrounded by tattooed people these days.

* * *

Lots of people have tattoos. Librarians still are seen in some areas of our culture as boring, staid, and not very interesting. Being tattooed makes me happy and being a librarian makes me happy and both make sense in my life.

* * *

I’ve never actually thought of myself as a tattooed librarian. I kind of always just thought that I’m [a] librarian who happens to have a few tattoos. I feel like it’s more rare nowadays to not have tattoos so I don’t see this as anything that special.

* * *

I think that we have to answer even more questions than non-tattooed librarians. But honestly, there are so many people with tattoos that it’s hard to tie them all together by any one attribute.

The emergent subset in this case is not one of profession, but one of “regular people” who happen to have tattoos, which are themselves increasingly regular. This particular reading of body modification accomplishes two things. On the one hand, it points up individuality, where the skin-bound self makes choices for the self alone. And as socially acceptable, racially unmarked, middle-class practices, these choices are not understood as being constrained in any way.* At the same time, it implicitly acknowledges the capacity of other persons—other selves—to engage in the same kind

* The category of race was not addressed by the survey questions but would most likely prove fertile ground for future investigation.
of self-expression through ink. The person and the professional persona overlap only marginally.

**Signs, Everywhere**

Yet in practice, a few respondents noticed that the seemingly subversive image of the tattooed librarian was, in and of itself, becoming increasingly common. A few explicitly cautioned against what they saw as a prescriptive drive to dictate the appearances of others, as well as awareness that body policing goes both ways.

No. I think it’s dangerous to build a conception of what a librarian should look like, as if “real” librarians have certain characteristics, or “hip” librarians should look a certain way. I don’t like to tie my own personal identity with my professional career.

* * *

I really want a lit tattoo—I think I will “fit in” more with the scene with that ;)

* * *

I don’t think we are any different from non-tattooed librarians. I think what is really special is that tattoos almost make us not special—we’re regular people just like tattooed doctors and gas station attendants and the ladies who sell things on QVC are regular people. Librarians have historically been perceived as shushing uptight bun heads, and tattoos may help distance ourselves from that image. Uptight people can’t have tattoos, right? Also, I think a tattooed librarian may start to become the new stereotype, but at least that one sounds a little more fun.

* * *

The one tattoo I have, and the others that I plan to get, are literary references. They obviously represent a love of and respect for
books and the written word. That is a big part of what made me want to be a public librarian in the first place.

Given that the types of tattoos were incredibly varied, only a small percentage of them could be immediately classified as being about librarianship, literature, or, more broadly, information. Some common themes do emerge, which align rather neatly with tattooing trends over the last few decades, among them: tribal designs; Celtic knotwork; Chinese or Japanese characters; nature imagery in the forms of stars, plants, flowers, and animals; names of people with significance to the wearer; calendar dates; and punctuation marks.

Singling out tattoos that could broadly be considered under the semantic cluster of literature-library-information-knowledge, a few of which are reproduced below, provides a small but interesting corpus. Among these, common themes were Dewey, Library of Congress, and Cutter numbers, books, and quotations:

Inside right index finger S-h-h-h Right ankle beaded ankle bracelet with dropped zodiac signs of children and grandchildren.

* * *

Script tattoo (book quote) that stretches between shoulder blades. Entirely black ink. Visible in shirts or dresses that have gently scooped necklines.

* * *

Logo of favorite band on lower back. Video game character on lower stomach. Eagle on back of neck. Library symbol and dewey decimal numbers on inner wrist.

* * *

Tiny Dewey decimal number at top center of back. Large piece covering entire upper left arm - black and white architectural.
Flurry of snowflakes: based on the photographs by Kenneth Libbrecht, start at shoulder cap and go down back/side, ending at upper thigh. Scandinavian-inspired knotwork puffin: outline of puffin body in knotwork, realistic puffin head, Iron Age shears and skeleton keys incorporated into design, located on upper back in the “between tank top straps” area. Library of Congress call number: lower abdomen.

* * *

On the whole, it would seem that the content of “librarian tattoos” does not skew heavily toward the literary. What is perhaps more important than the (iconic, indexical, denotative) sign of the tattoo, then, is the body it adorns and the framing social context of interpersonal interaction and visibility. Lena Dunham, writer and star of the HBO series *Girls*, has tattoos from the children’s book *Eloise*; the singer Rihanna has a “S-h-h-h” finger tattoo. Both of these women, however, are patently not librarians. If they were, then the professional role might provide an additional lens through which to view their ink, another layer of implied meaning or significance. Laying aside these hypothetical projections, it should be clear that context, situation, and participant frameworks all contribute to the ways such tattoos can be understood.

Nor would it be fair to assume a one-to-one correlation between a love of reading and an attraction to library work, though many respondents to this survey spoke of librarianship as a calling or vocation.* A quote can mean plenty of things. Does it signify a love of books, echo a sentiment that the wearer holds dear, or serve a purely ornamental purpose? In much the same way, does a Harry Potter tattoo foreground reading, fandom, a belief in magic, the power of imagination, or something entirely different? What tattoos need to make sense, then, is not entirely circumscribed by the choice of design. They demand both audience and context. Even more to the point, they have to be anchored in a narrative where the audience, specifically a person other than the self, is given narrative exposition for the context. This connects to the idea of rites of passage, where tattoos are memoirs of inscription for moments of personal significance.

Here, the limitations of the virtual survey become readily apparent: if the import of a tattoo depends on how the wearer positions it in the narrative of selfhood, then a method that elicits biographical history would be preferable to a simple survey. It should be noted, however, that multiple respondents took full advantage of the open-ended questions and essentially combined the answers into their own story. Instead of breaking down

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* Tattoo statistics are based on sampling, and while numbers and demographics are easy to obtain, there do not seem to be ready statistics about what kinds of designs people choose.
the components of age, placement, design, and significance, they created narratives, which have a very recognizable structure. Narratives also foreground the self as an acting agent, determining the biographical course of an individual’s life. Put another way, tattoos can be a way of inscribing difference and taking note of oppositionality. For some respondents, there is a very clear contrast set: the public at large, the parent, the media. In almost all of these cases, the individual is acting upon the surface of the body as an act of reclaiming, of inscription, or of adornment.

**Conclusion: Images and Imaginaries**

Here, the figure of the tattooed librarian has served as a framing device through which to explore the experiences and self-perceptions of librarians who fit this criterion. Even within the field itself, the tattooed librarian is often a figure of speculation as much as one of directed ire or begrudging respect. Speaking more broadly, of course rampant stereotypy exists with regard to the profession, as has been a near-constant refrain in the library literature. Given the recent uptick of public interest in so-called “hipster” librarians, tattoos neatly demarcate a line of distinction between two stereotypes: old and new; sexless or sexualized; rigid or free. Whether in photo calendars produced by public libraries to raise funds, or as part of a project where inking en masse symbolizes an allegiance to freedom of information,


† Kara Jesella, “A Hipper Crowd of Shushers,” *New York Times*, July 8, 2007, <www.nytimes.com/2007/07/08/fashion/08librarian.html>. This is quite the performative moment for the profession, insofar as only when something is “discovered” by the Times can it be truly said to exist. The same could also be said for Brooklyn. As of this writing, both the Texas Library Association and the Rhode Island Library Association have produced print calendars featuring librarian ink. Another calendar, “Tattooed Librarians of the Pacific Northwest,” was a fundraiser by and for library students at Emporia State. The 8bit library blog was the impetus behind the “Project Brand Yourself a Librarian,” where participants got tattoos of library, literary, or personal significance as a group during 2010 ALA Annual Meeting (Justin Hoenke, “Project Brand Yourself a Librarian,” 8bitlibrary.com [blog], January 13, 2010, <http://blog.8bitlibrary.com/2010/01/13/project-brand-yourself-a-librarian>). Of the 10 tattoos on the “Project Brand Yourself a Librarian” Flickr page (www.flickr.com/groups/1376815@N23), two are Dewey numbers, four make use of the public library reading icon, one is of an open book, one is a Douglas Adams reference, one is a visual representation of steampunk gears, and one is an 8bit Nintendo graphic.
the two images of librarians are conceptually and visually opposed.‡

By way of these circulating images and the discourses about them, the body of the librarian becomes contested ground for working out anxieties about the profession, its perception, and its future trajectory. One side clamors for respectability, or at the least concealment, the other for freedom to adorn and display one’s body according to individual values and beliefs.¹⁴ We can thus situate the figure of the tattooed librarian within an ongoing conversation about the library profession and understandings of its practitioners. It matters less that these tropic figurations can be mapped onto “real persons” than the ways they communicate meaning about bodies, work, and subjectivity.¹⁵ Talking about the “nontraditional librarian,” whose alterity can be signified in a number of ways besides tattoos, invokes the opposing notion of tradition. By establishing a more robust analytic that takes perceptions and reality into account, we can begin to chip away at the sociodiscursive bedrock of these counterpoised stereotypes, and perhaps even begin to trace out their implications in workplace interactions.

Owing to its semiotic power and social history, the tattoo therefore distills anxieties about bodies—often highly gendered ones—enacting agency in a manner that gatekeepers may deem unacceptable. Through both the direct dissemination of images through social media and on-the-ground interactions with patrons, librarians with tattoos can act as representatives for the profession in ways that may not fit with established narratives or figurations. In doing so, they inhabit a mode of personhood that valorizes individual choice over convention and conformity, which may seem openly in opposition to avowed professional values of service, wherein the person is entirely subsumed to their role. This essay represents an initial foray into interrogating tattooed librarians, who hew to the same code of service as their forebears.

‡ Though both are likely to be bespectacled.
Notes

11. Atkinson, Tattooed, 158; see also Rush, Spiritual Tattoo.
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Manning, Paul. “Barista Rants about Stupid Customers at Starbucks: What Imaginary Conversa-