

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63332/joph.v5i7.2913>

Ink and Flesh: Tattoos as Collaborative Palimpsests of Trauma and Posthuman Literacy

Tori K. Flint¹, Heather N. Stone², Richard Davis³

Abstract

This paper explores tattooing as a collaborative, restorative, and posthuman literacy practice. Through an in-depth interview with a tattoo artist, we examine how tattoos function as layered texts that transform scars into narrative foundations, inscribe memory and identity onto skin, and foster healing through relational care. Drawing on frameworks of restorative literacies and posthuman theory, the findings reveal that tattooing is not merely decorative, but a process wherein pain, agency, and meaning are negotiated and co-created by bodies, tools, and stories. The study highlights how a tattoo studio became a liminal space for rewriting trauma, reclaiming agency, and making visible the entanglement of human and more-than-human actors in the ongoing work of healing and becoming.

Keywords: Embodied, Posthuman, Restorative Literacies, Tattoos, Trauma.

Introduction

Trigger Warning: Domestic violence; graphic descriptions; reference to physical, mental, and sexual violence

Tracing Pain, Layering Meaning: An Embodied Introduction

The tattoo studio is quiet when I (Tori, Author 1) arrive, the familiar scent of antiseptic and ink settling around me like a warm blanket. I take off my hoodie, exposing the back of my left arm where, years ago, I came to Rich (Author 3), a tattoo artist, to cover a scar left by domestic violence.

I was pushed through a window. The glass, breaking into shards and ripping through my flesh as I tried to catch myself. I remember looking at my arm and thinking, “this can’t be real...everything is fine,” before I saw the blood start to flow past yellow ribbons of fat and layers of ripped skin. I lost count of how many stitches it took to close the wound, but the scar is a constant reminder that it was real...and that it was not fine.

That initial tattoo was not just a scar cover-up, but a reclamation—a deliberate act to transform my past pain into something I could claim as my own (Khattak et al., 2021). A crow on a branch. A bird...perched, yet free to fly away from its troubles. On this visit, I’m here to layer fresh imagery and meaning onto the ink that already overlays the scar. To create a new story. As Rich

¹ Associate Professor of Literacy & Early Childhood Education at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Email: tori.flint@louisiana.edu, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3523-7844>.

² Associate Professor of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Email: heather.stone@louisiana.edu, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0462-6030>

³ Kreative Ink Tattoo Studio in Lafayette, Louisiana.



prepares his tools, I trace the lines of the old tattoo with my fingers, feeling the raised scar tissue beneath and the smoothness of the healed ink above.

I had previously come to Rich to do another piece on the back of my right arm. A beautifully haunting image of a large tree and the silhouette of a young girl on a swing, hanging from its branches (see Image 1). This piece doesn't cover any physical scars but symbolizes an escape from and a remembrance of the physical, mental, and sexual violence I endured in my youth. This image is larger than the crow on the branch, taking up more space on my skin. An apt metaphor for the immensity of it all.



Image 1. Tattoo of a Young Girl on A Swing.

Today, Rich and I discuss enhancing the current tattoo (see Image 2). Simple. Small. Unfinished. It needs more, to balance it with the tattoo on my other arm. We agree...the crow needs a tree,

a moon...a world to inhabit (see Image 3). The process of adding to this tattoo isn't about erasure but about building on what's already there. As Rich expertly and artfully draws the image in sharpie and then etches it into my skin with needle and ink, each new line becomes a negotiation between past and present, flesh and memory, pain and possibility.



Image 2. Tori's Previous Tattoo.



Image 3. The New Tattoo.

This act—of returning to the tattoo studio, of choosing to inscribe new meaning over old images and wounds, of letting my skin speak its truths—serves as a frame for this paper.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

In our work here, we propose that scars, ink, and the collaborative process of tattooing intra-act (Barad, 2007) to transform trauma into (re)storied narratives inscribed in the flesh. We suggest that this transformation operates through interconnected frameworks of embodied, multimodal, and posthuman literacies, as outlined below.

Embodied, Multimodal, and Posthuman Literacies

Tattoos function as powerful, embodied literacy practices that challenge conventional, print-centric models of literacy and education (Kuby et al., 2019). As demonstrated in Kirkland's insightful work, *The Skin We Ink* (2009), tattoos are not merely decorative but serve as literacy artifacts that allow individuals to inscribe their lived stories, struggles, and identities onto their bodies. For example, Kirkland (2009) discusses a young Black man's tattoos—a cross, an eagle, and 'R.I.P. Clarence'—as (re)materializing grief and resistance into anti-Black violence, transforming his body into an archive of survival. This process extends meaning making, transforming the skin into a living, embodied text that negotiates identity, trauma, and social worlds through the visceral language of ink and flesh (Kirkland, 2009).

To deepen this understanding, we draw upon Kuby et al.'s (2019) multimodal conception of polylinguaging. Polylinguaging describes how individuals fluidly draw on multiple languages and semiotic resources (e.g., visual imagery, tactile sensation, affective resonance) to create meaning. Tattoos blend these modes, challenging print-centric hierarchies and foregrounding bodies as dynamic sites of literacy (Kuby et al., 2019; Mora et al., 2016). The imagery, bodily sensations, and affective resonance of tattooing—how emotions and connections circulate and intensify before, during, and after the tattooing process—shape meaning making as a multifaceted, social act (Leander & Ehret, 2019). This multimodal framework positions tattoos as legitimate literacy practices capable of expressing counter-narratives that resist dominant discourses about race, gender, and belonging (Flint, 2020; Kirkland, 2009; Mora et al., 2016; Toliver, 2020).

Tattooing further emerges as a (re)storying practice, offering people the chance to write themselves and their lives into existence in a variety of ways, allowing individuals to (re)claim, (re)frame, and (re)narrate their stories, and to heal trauma (Flint et al., 2020; Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016). For instance, memorial pieces like the "R.I.P. Clarence" tattoo externalize grief into shared narratives, serving as visual reminders of the departed as long as the one wearing the tattoo lives (Kirkland, 2009). The process of designing and inscribing a tattoo of this type can symbolize private pain and transform it into a visible, public text, supporting healing and identity formation, and fostering connection and transformation (Hall, 2025; Peña Uribarri, 2022). For many, such tattoos mark survival and resilience, transforming pain into embodied sites of agency and resistance.

Research suggests that tattoo narratives such as these are key means through which individuals can construct and express narrative identity (McCarty, 2019). Tattoo narratives can reveal how individuals make sense of the past, anticipate the future, and communicate their views of self, others, and the world (McCarty et al., 2023). This work demonstrates that people often use

tattoos to privilege important, self-defining experiences and integrate them into their evolving sense of self. Tattoos, therefore, are not only personal artifacts but also outward statements of identity, resilience, and meaning making.

Recent posthumanist scholarship further emphasizes that meaning making is not solely a human endeavor, but emerges through the entanglement of bodies, objects, and materials. Franklin-Phipps and Varga (2024) argue that objects and materials possess agency and actively participate in the production of narrative and affect. Drawing on Barad's (2007) concept of intra-action, they contend that agency is not an attribute held by individuals but is enacted through the dynamic encounter of bodies and materials. By highlighting the agency of objects and materials, posthuman theory expands literacy to include the 'vibrancy and affective power' of matter itself (Bennett, 2009; Franklin-Phipps & Varga, 2024). This perspective reframes tattoos as more-than-human texts, with trauma collaboratively (re)storied by human and more-than-human actors (Franklin-Phipps & Varga, 2024).

Tattoos as Palimpsests

Central to understanding tattoos as embodied, multimodal, and posthuman is the concept of the *palimpsest*. In literacy studies, a palimpsest refers to a text or surface where new inscriptions are layered over older ones, with traces of the earlier writing remaining visible and meaningful—serving as a metaphor for how meaning is continually rewritten, layered, and negotiated (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010). For tattoos, the palimpsest is a powerful metaphor for layered, evolving texts—wherein new images do not erase the old, but build upon and reinterpret them, creating a visible archive of personal and social transformation (Kirkland, 2009). When considering their roles in (re)storying processes and practices, we suggest that tattoos are inherently palimpsestic, as each layer of ink collaborates with previous experiences to remember, recall, and rewrite histories.

Drawing from and building on this metaphor, we suggest that tattooing is a collaborative intra-action (Barad, 2007) wherein bodies, ink, tools, and scars co-author and (re)story meaning (Lenters & McDermott, 2020; Varga et al., 2023). Old wounds and stories are not covered up or erased, but reinterpreted and reimaged (Kirkland, 2009). For instance, Kirkland (2009) discusses a "Live or Die" tattoo in relation to how it intra-acts with Frederick Douglass's ethos of struggle and the materiality of ink to transform systemic violence into a 'manifesto' of Black survival (Barad, 2007; Kirkland, 2009). This process highlights the agency of matter itself, as ink and flesh together produce meaning that is always in flux, negotiated through social and material forces (Dernikos et al., 2023). Work by McCarty (2019) and McCarty et al. (2023) further supports this palimpsest metaphor, demonstrating that tattoos can help individuals integrate past trauma and pivotal memories into evolving life stories, rather than erasing or masking them. Tattoos thus become living archives—palimpsests—wherein new meaning is continually negotiated and inscribed over time. The tattoo studio thus becomes a liminal space where artists translate clients' stories into visual metaphors, intra-acting with flesh to collaboratively (re)story lived experiences.

Research in posthuman and speculative literacies further deepens the metaphor of tattoos as palimpsests. Kuby et al. (2019) and Varga et al., (2023) both argue that posthumanism in literacy education foregrounds the agency and relationality of more-than-human actors in the creation of meaning and social change, demonstrating how tattoos can disrupt normative binaries and hierarchies by centering the entangled material-discursive processes that co-author trauma,

memory, and resistance (Kuby et al., 2019; Varga et al., 2023). Similarly, Kuby and Vaughn (2015) demonstrate how posthuman literacies emerge through ‘ongoing relational encounters’ with materials, bodies, and environments, supporting the view that tattoos, as dynamic assemblages, are sites wherein meaning is continually negotiated and reimagined. This aligns with the work of Varga and Adams (2022), who further explore how speculative literacies and hybrid assemblages blur boundaries between the human and more-than-human, inviting us to consider how bodies, artifacts, and narratives intra-act in various ways to generate new forms of literacy and dreaming (Barad, 2007; Toliver, 2020).

Collectively, these perspectives urge educators and researchers to recognize tattoos as critical literacy practices that validate non-alphabetic, corporeal ways of knowing and being. By theorizing tattoos as collaborative palimpsests, literacy studies can expand to foreground the posthuman entanglement of matter, memory, and meaning making, bridging critical, multimodal, and embodied literacies with important (re)storying practices (Kuby et al., 2019; Kuby & Vaughn, 2015; Varga et al., 2023; Varga & Adams, 2022). Understanding tattoos through these intertwined frameworks not only challenges traditional definitions of literacy, but also illuminates how bodies, materials, and stories are dynamically co-authored and (re)storied in acts of healing, resistance, and transformation (McCarty, 2019; McCarty et al., 2023). This posthuman lens compels us to recognize that meaning is never fixed, but always in motion—layered, lived, and continually rewritten on the skin and beyond.

Method

In this study, Tori (Author 1) visits Rich (Author 3), a tattoo artist with approximately 16 years of experience, at his studio. Rich previously tattooed Tori on two other occasions and agreed to take part in a future interview wherein he would simultaneously expand and enhance her tattoo. She returned to him for this new piece because she trusts him, not only with her skin, but with the kind of conversation that she anticipates might unfold during the intimate act of tattooing. As Rich suggests, noting the general relationship between tattoo artist and client, “*A lot of the times it's just like they have to trust you. That's a big thing.*” This trust has been built over the past few years of Tori and Rich’s relationship, leading her to seek his participation in this study.

This qualitative inquiry was conducted with University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, ensuring ethical standards were followed throughout the interview and documentation process. Rich chose to use his real name for this paper. The semi-structured interview/tattoo session, which lasted approximately 3 hours, flowed with some loosely prepared questions and various unprepared questions and responses that arose while Tori and Rich talked. The session was recorded on a laptop using the Zoom app and was subsequently transcribed by an outside service.

While getting the tattoo, Tori simultaneously occupied dual roles: as a participant, actively receiving a new tattoo and engaging in friendly discussion, and as an interviewer-observer of the tattooing process. Correspondingly, Rich held the roles of tattoo artist and interviewee. Although she did not participate in the interview or tattoo process, Heather (Author 2) was instrumental in analyzing data and writing the paper.

In addition to the recorded interview and its transcription, this study includes autoethnographic reflections from Tori’s life and tattoo experiences, which provide personal context and emotional

texture to the themes raised in conversation with Rich. Photographs of the tattoos accompany the narrative to complement it and to show the layered, living nature of the skin and the evolution of the tattoo and its story.

Throughout the tattoo process, we (Authors 1 and 2) sought to understand how tattoos function as layered, meaningful, collaborative texts that interweave personal identity, artistic expression, and embodied experience(s). In doing so, we examined the connections between the relational dynamics of tattooing and trauma. Our methodological approach—blending interview, observation, participation, and personal reflection—highlights our interest in how knowledge is produced through participatory experience. Accordingly, this study inquires into the meaning making practices surrounding tattooing, especially when viewed through deeply personal and interconnected lenses.

Analysis

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in thematic analysis. This approach is suited for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within rich, descriptive data (Braun & Clark, 2006). Thinking with(in) and through theory (Jackson & Mazzei, 2011), we viewed and analyzed data through the lenses of embodied literacies, which demonstrate how the body is a site of knowledge production (Kirkland, 2009), multimodal literacies which suggest that meaning is made across/through various modes (Kuby et al., 2019), posthuman literacies which suggest that human identity and meaning making can be extended beyond the individual to include materials and environments (Franklin-Phipps & Varga, 2024), as well as the concept of tattoos as palimpsests, which highlight how tattoos layer time, memory and identity (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010).

We followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis process during transcript review. We began with 'familiarization,' reading the transcripts multiple times so as to become very familiar with the data. This was followed by 'initial coding,' during which conceptual tags were developed to capture key ideas found in the data. While searching for themes, we identified broad patterns related to artistic expression, personal narratives, and healing. During the following 'defining and naming themes' stage, we worked to revise, narrow, and ground the themes in the literature. This in-depth analysis revealed three final themes, which are discussed in the following section.

Findings and Discussion

The stories and conversations that unfold in Rich's studio reveal that tattoos are never just about ink or images—they carry various layers of meaning. Woven through these experiences are three entangled themes: 1) Scars as foundations for new stories; 2) Tattoos as ways to map identity and memory onto the skin; and 3) Tattoos as restorative intra-action. These findings demonstrate how tattooing is a collaborative, evolving practice—one where pain, artistry, and trust come together to transform both body and self.

Scars as Narrative Foundations

Sitting in Rich's studio, the conversation evolves into more than just a discussion of the new tattoo. As we talk about expanding the previous image, Rich doesn't treat it like a simple cover-up. He says, "*You can tattoo over the scars, you just have to be very cautious on...how old the scar is. And you really have to consider...as an artist...where to go with it. You know? You can't*

just...tattoo it and just rock and roll, you got to figure out some kind of path for it." That kind of care matters to me (Tori), because the scar on my arm isn't just a mark—it's a story from my life, an experience that shapes how I see myself and want to be seen, deserving of a careful and thoughtful path (McCarty et al., 2023).

As we plan the new work together, our back-and-forth becomes its own kind of layered narrative. Rich suggests that because the old tattoo of the bird is on a branch, "*having trees*" and expanding the branches makes sense. Referring back to my previous tattoo visit when we discussed this cover-up, I recall, "*And then you said like a moon or something?*" Rich is all in, "*Definitely a moon in the back. I think that would be very appropriate.*" I point out the old branch, "*That's where the scar is,*" and he reassures me, "*Yeah, I'll go over it. It's going to look so fucking good though, both of them [the tree and the moon] being there.*"

This collaborative process isn't about hiding my scar or erasing the old tattoo; it's about letting the old and new coexist, creating something that, according to Rich, "*just overall is going to balance.*" I joke that with a tree on my other arm, and now a fuller tree on this arm that "*I'll just be a forest.*" Rich laughs as he outlines the image onto my arm and muses "*...Fuck yeah, that looks rad.*"

In these moments, the scar becomes more than just a physical trace of violence—it becomes a narrative foundation. The layering of ink over the previous tattoo and over scar tissue is a negotiation between what happened and what I want to become. The tattoo is not a mask, but a palimpsest—a layered text where traces of the old remain visible beneath the new. Each new line is a decision to let the past and present sit together, to let pain and possibility share the same space. This process reflects how the new tattoo serves as an embodied story, allowing me to privilege a pivotal, yet horrible life experience and integrate it into my evolving identity in a positive way (McCarty et al., 2023). As I watch Rich draw and tattoo, I feel the scar shifting from a silent reminder of trauma to an opportunity for new meaning making (Kirkland, 2009).

Rich's approach is deeply collaborative and attuned to the story the scar carries. He tells me, "*With tattoos you have to be very moldable...It's more...about the person, and what they're aiming for.*" He explains that some artists "*just want the money,*" but for him "*the main important thing about tattooing is the illustration...and flow.*" This allows him to attend to the image he is creating, but also the way it flows with the skin and tells a story.

The process becomes a living conversation between me, Rich, and my skin. The scar, previously a reminder of my trauma, has become a foundation for my new story. As Rich tattoos the tree and the moon, integrating, layering, and reimagining the previous tattoo, the image emerges as both memory and new possibility. The tattoo over my scar is not just art; it is a rewritten chapter—a narrative I get to shape and share, with Rich's help (Kirkland, 2009; Kuby et al., 2019; Pahl & Rowsell, 2010).

Flesh-Writing and The Entangled Self

I think tattoos are "*like a story map of your life,*" I say, and Rich immediately agrees. "*Exactly.*" We both see them as more than *just* tattoos—they're diary entries in flesh, each one tracing back to a time, a feeling, or a shift in who we are. Our conversation moves fluidly between art, pain, and memory. Rich reflects, "*I have some [tattoos]. As I get older, I start to consider things a little bit more. I think at the time, it's just kind of like more about what I'm going through and*

this would be cool... But in the past, it's something special to me though, like it means something to me. So, I go back and I kind of think about things. Like when I was young, like wow, I was into some weird stuff, but it teaches me how to look at aesthetics a different way." For both of us, the images on our skin aren't static—they evolve, accrue new meanings, and sometimes even become strange artifacts of who we used to be.

The process of tattooing itself becomes a form of 'flesh-writing', not just as a metaphor, but as a literal and material practice where ink, skin, and pain intra-act to produce meaning (Falk, 1995; Neef, 2006; Kuby et al., 2019). As Rich tattoos my arm, the needle, the machine, and the sensation of pain all participate in the creation of the story. Rich notes that as he tattoos "*...the more and more you get into it, the more...you're like, 'Okay, I got a rhythm here.'*" This rhythm isn't only human; it's a choreography of tools, and materials, entangled with my intentions, my body...and Rich's art (Barad, 2007; Franklin-Phipps & Varga, 2024).

Pain is an important part of this narrative. As Rich works, I notice how the sensation makes me reflective—perhaps even confessional, as I share stories from my past. Rich suggests that the pain often opens up space for stories to surface, for memories to be externalized and fixed upon the skin. He notes that clients often "*...need to express things,*" and that they share stories with him that they might not tell anyone else. The pain of the tattoo becomes a kind of portal, connecting the physical sensation with the emotional ache of memory. As Rich puts it, "*the pain kind of triggers ideas...like a release,*" making it possible to confront and reshape hurtful memories into something new.

Posthuman theory helps illuminate how tattoos are not just personal narratives but collaborative, more-than-human texts. The agency in flesh-writing is distributed—the machine hums, the ink seeps, the skin swells and heals, and the story emerges from this entanglement (Barad, 2007; Franklin-Phipps & Varga, 2024). As posthuman scholarship argues, tattooed bodies are always in exchange with their environment, technologies, and materials. The tattoo is not simply written on the body; it is co-produced by the body, the artist, the tools, the pain, and the substances that flow into and through the skin (Neef, 2006; Kuby et al., 2019).

As we talk, it becomes clear that tattoos are a way of making sense of the past and anticipating the future, for me and for Rich. He notes, "*I think with me it's a little bit deeper, I kind of find myself to be a little bit more poetic than that. I like to really interpret...people's thoughts. And I think that's what I ultimately try to do, instead of just like, this is a cool traditional eagle or...this looks 'cool'. I'm just not into the 'cool' thing, but this can be cool. Because this person had this moment in time in life that really triggered these emotions, and I think that's what makes it cool. It's like, oh wow, there's a story behind [it], and it's not just a 'cool' tattoo. That makes it cool.*" During our discussion, Rich similarly references the poet William Blake, highlighting his belief that art and poetry can illuminate the intersection between humanity and the spiritual realm. In doing so, Rich positions tattoos as living canvases that hold memory and meaning...as visual poetry.

My skin becomes a living document, a visible story map of my shifting self, but also a site of ongoing entanglement. The tattoo becomes a way to externalize and attach memory and a point of reference that reinforces my self, history, and future (Neef, 2006; Mifflin, 2013; Kuby et al., 2019). The process of flesh-writing is both personal and posthuman, a co-authored practice that transforms pain, memory, and identity into something tangible, shareable...cool, and poetic

(Barad, 2007; Franklin-Phipps & Varga, 2024).

Restorative Intra-Actions

As Rich continues to tattoo, I ask him if people “*just come and unleash all their sad stories*” on him. He laughs and says, “*Sometimes. They say that I’m their therapist.*” I nod and think, that’s exactly how it feels. The pain, the vulnerability, and the act of choosing what goes on my skin all add up to a kind of agency. I get to decide how my story is told, and the studio becomes aspace where I can process, reflect, and even heal, with Rich as my artist and therapist. He puts it simply, “*Sometimes they [clients] need to express things, and I think... we’re healers.*” For me, that’s what makes tattooing restorative. It lets me rewrite my history on my own terms, transforming trauma into healing (Kirkland, 2009).

Restorative literacies are practices that center healing, voice, and agency, allowing people to narrate, reframe, and reclaim their stories in ways that foster dignity, connection, and transformation (Wolter, 2021, 2024). In the tattoo studio, this restorative work happens not in isolation, but through a deeply collaborative process. As I share my story, Rich listens, adapts, and helps shape how that story is inscribed on my skin. The act of tattooing becomes a way to repair harm, restore my sense of self, and create new meaning from old wounds.

Rich’s reflections on his role as an artist reveal the ethical and relational dimensions of restorative practice. He notes, “*...that’s why I kind of enjoy their [the clients’] stories and stuff because I think there’s something special about what they’re trying to tell me. And if I just consider, a certain way to look at it, just a little, then I might have a different...approach on things...And I guess where I’ve grown myself to, it’s not so much of it like doing the design. Like yeah, I get stoked about that because it’s like we conceptualized something together...But it’s more about like, no, wait a minute, it might have like something really special to say, like there might be something about what they’re trying to tell me...and I need to consider those things, you know? And that gives me a sense of just being patient, and I think that’s really important as a tattoo artist, not just the art itself, it’s just really understanding that hey, maybe it’s okay to be patient for people.*”

This kind of patience, sensitivity, and openness is at the heart of restorative literacy practices. The tattooing process is a negotiation—of stories, images, boundaries, and emotions—where both Rich and I bring our knowledge, histories, and intentions. It is not just about inscribing a design, but about listening, responding, and co-creating meaning in real time (Wolter, 2021, 2024). The tools, ink, my skin, and even the atmosphere of the studio become active participants in this process, underscoring the posthuman insight that agency and meaning emerge from these types of entanglements (Barad, 2007; Franklin-Phipps & Varga, 2024).

Restorative tattooing is about re-authoring the body and narrative in the aftermath of trauma, illness, or social stigma (Kirkland, 2009; Mifflin, 2013). It is also about recognizing that this re-authoring is never done alone. The tattoo studio thus becomes a more-than-human space wherein restorative literacies are enacted through collaborative, embodied, and material practice. Each tattoo session is a living example of how healing and meaning making are inseparable. The act of choosing a design, collaborating with an artist, and enduring the process all contribute to a sense of agency and connection. In this way, tattooing is not just about art or ornamentation—it is a restorative practice, a way to reclaim stories, bodies, and futures within a web of human and

more-than-human relations (Barad, 2007; Franklin-Phipps & Varga, 2024; Wolter, 2021, 2024). Each tattoo session with Rich is more than just ink on my skin—it's a shared act of trust and creation, where we both bring our stories, our patience, and our care, layering new meaning together on the surface...and beneath.

Conclusion and Implications

Tattooing, as revealed through my session with Rich, emerges as a deeply layered practice—one that is as much about (re)writing and (re)claiming as it is about art. In the tattoo studio, scars are not erased but transformed, becoming the foundations for new stories and identities. The process of tattooing is not only personal but collaborative—meaning is shaped through conversation, trust, and the shared negotiation of pain, memory, and possibility. The session becomes a living dialogue between skin, ink, artist, and client, wherein agency and healing are continually (re)imagined.

These findings invite a broader understanding of literacy—one that moves beyond print and text to embrace the embodied, material, and relational. Tattoos, as 'flesh-writing,' demonstrate how people can inscribe their histories, hopes, and traumas onto the body, making meaning in ways that are both visible and felt. This work affirms what restorative literacy scholars have argued—healing and agency flourish in spaces where stories are honored, voices are centered, and new narratives can be co-created (Flint, 2016; Wolter, 2021; Peña Uribarri, 2022).

For literacy research, this study suggests the need to recognize and value nontraditional, multimodal forms of meaning making, especially those that arise in lived, communal, and embodied contexts. Tattoos are not just personal artifacts; they are social texts, shaped by culture, history, and the ongoing interplay of bodies, tools, and materials (Kirkland, 2009; Kuby et al., 2019). By attending to these practices, literacy scholars can better understand how people use creative, restorative acts to navigate trauma, (re)claim agency, and connect with others.

For posthuman research, the tattoo studio offers a vivid example of how agency and meaning emerge from entanglements of human and more-than-human actors. The process is never solitary: ink, skin, machines, pain, and atmosphere all participate in the making of story and self (Barad, 2007; Franklin-Phipps & Varga, 2024). This perspective challenges us to see literacy not as a purely human endeavor, but as something continually co-authored by bodies, materials, and environments.

Ultimately, this work reminds us that healing and becoming are ongoing, collaborative acts. Together, Rich and I layer new meaning over old wounds, trusting the process and each other. Tattooing, in this light, is not just about marking the body—it's about making space for transformation, connection, and the possibility of new stories, written together in flesh and ink.

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