The illusory infrastructure of ink: Machinic bodies and epidermic affects in Singapore

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Abstract: This paper advances recent theorisations of the body-as-infrastructure by exploring the premise that there are multiple bodily infrastructures at play at any one time. It focusses on three infrastructural formations – the body, the skin that encases the body, and tattoos as visual inscriptions on the skin – that jostle against each other for representational primacy. The layering of infrastructure-upon-infrastructure leads to understandings of the self that exist in a state of tension with societal norms and the illusions of self-representation. Indeed, it is the intersecting gazes of society and the self that cause these infrastructures to become disaggregated, and representational politics to emerge. I illustrate these ideas through an empirical examination of tattooed bodies in Singapore. Singapore is a socially conservative city-state in which the body is implicated in the capitalist logics of development, and the aesthetic-aspirational logics of the Singaporean family. Tattooed Singaporeans must constantly negotiate these infrastructural overlaps and divergences amidst the growing trend towards more individualistic forms of self-expression and realisation. I argue that whilst the infrastructure of ink might be considered illusory, so too does it help to stabilise the self during times of uncertainty.

Keywords: Infrastructures of ink, machinic bodies, epidermic affects, illusion, Singapore

Introduction

Bodies are multiply positioned constructs that serve to realise the self in manifold ways. Building on Grosz's (1994: x) assertion that bodies are not 'ahistorical, precultural, or natural objects' but are 'inscribed, marked, engraved by social pressures external to them', scholarship has sought to understand how the body is implicated in various processes of reproduction (Woods, 2023b, Woods, 2023c). In this vein, the body has been conceptualised as "infrastructure" that functions according – and in response – to the differentiating formations of socio-cultural life (Andueza et al., 2021). Through this theorisation, the aim is to move beyond a Marxist schema that 'reduce [s] human bodies' to 'simple technologies of circulation' that are subject to the 'violence of capitalist abstraction' (Andueza et al., 2021: 800). These abstractions view the body as a means – an infrastructure – by which inputs are translated into outputs from which value can be extracted. Important, however, is the idea that 'abstraction is also a process of mystification' (Andueza et al., 2021: 800) in which the potential for value – in all its various guises – to become a differentiating construct is amplified. This guiding logic is particularly pronounced given contemporary media culture, in which the embodied self becomes a more entrepreneurial and thus agentic construct. As Abidin and Gwynne (2017: 387) explain, 'within the cultural logic of neoliberalism individual success or failure is … interpreted in terms of entrepreneurial virtues or personal inadequacy'. The "virtues" and "inadequacies" that are evoked here can take on various forms, which include the morphology of the body, the skin that contains it, the clothes that adorn it, and the socio-spatial contexts in which it is situated. The multi-modality of the body thus causes it to be implicated in various structures of value creation, circulation, and contestation.

My argument is that the body encapsulates a plurality of infrastructures that all jostle for representational (and other forms of) primacy. This paper focusses on three infrastructural formations: the body, the skin that encases the body, and ink (tattoos) as a literal inscription on the skin. Conceptually speaking, these infrastructures are layered insofar as the skin, and especially ink, are infrastructures-upon-infrastructures. Layering contributes to an understanding of the self – whether as the laboured, gendered, sexed, (dis)abled or otherwise "othered" body, the racialised skin, or the representational autonomy and agency that is often associated with ink – which can exist in a state of tension with social norms. Indeed, the intersecting gazes of society and the self can cause these infrastructures to become disaggregated, and representational politics to emerge (Woods, 2023a). In this vein, as much as the skin might imply the boundary of the body (Ahmed, 1998; Colls and Fannin, 2013), or a metaphor that is 'open to interpretation'

(Adams-Hutcheson, 2017: 107; see also Lafrance, 2009; Botz-Bornstein, 2013), or, more provocatively, as something that 'does not convey meaning; [but] stands in the place of meaning' (Botz-Bornstein, 2015: xii; after Lacan, 1990), so too is it a social signifier that is readily destabilised through ink. These destabilisations underpin ink being what I term an *illusory* infrastructure. It is one that often assumes the forging of new forms of self-representation, but also one that can be unpredictable in its meanings and affects. Layering infrastructure in this way lends new insight into the question of 'how skin becomes, rather than simply is meaningful' and how different interpretations of infrastructure – whether body, skin, or ink – can be used to read the self in 'specific and determinate ways' (Ahmed and Stacey, 2001: 1).

With these arguments in mind, the contributions of this paper are threefold. One, by advancing the idea that ink constitutes an "illusory" infrastructure that intersects with the skin and the body, it offers a more contingent and partial view of the self. This is a view that recognises that the 'spatialization of the body through tattoos has unexpected consequences' (Botz-Bornstein, 2015: 138) that can be indexed to the affective qualities of the skin. The visceral nature of these "epidermic affects" can reveal the 'subject's discontinuity with itself, a discontinuity of the subject's conscious experience with the non-intentionality of emotion and affect' (Clough, 2008: 1; after Massumi, 2002). The metabolics of infrastructure as an analytic help to reveal not only 'what the body *can* do' but also 'what bodies can be *made* to do' (Clough, 2008: 5, emphasis added). The illusory infrastructure of ink, vis-à-vis the skin and the body, can stabilise the self, rendering it authentic. However, so too can they create self-society cleavages that must be negotiated and reconciled (after Botz-Bornstein, 2013, 2015). Two, in a broader schema, through the theoretical framing of infrastructure-upon-infrastructure, this paper contributes to the feminist project of 'taking bodies seriously as both the subject and object of thinking' (Ahmed and Stacey, 2001: 3). The subjectivity of the self is moderated by the objectivity of ink, the (ir) reconciliation of which can be parsed by recognising the multiple, and oft-disaggregated, infrastructures of the self. Three, by focussing empirically on Singapore, I consider how rigid socio-familial structures place clear expectations on the alignment of the body, the skin, and the self. Ink disrupts these alignments, leading to infrastructural disaggregation, and thus moving the analysis beyond an implicitly western framing of the body (Lafrance, 2009).

1.1. *The illusory infrastructure of ink*

Our bodies are not passive substrates that are acted upon. Rather, they are the engines of self-definition. Bodies 'narrate' (Lemma, 2010: 1) stories to ourselves and to others, causing these stories to become more or less sedimented and entrenched. From the perspective of psychoanalysis, these stories are believed to be manifestations of the ego insofar as 'the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but is of itself the projection of a surface' (Freud, 1923: 26). Understandings of the body have since cleaved into more gender-defined perspectives. A dominant masculinist gaze has caused "disembodying' models of power and subjectivity [to be] brought centre-stage' (Ahmed and Stacey, 2001: 4), whilst feminist approaches tend to start from the position of situated embodiment, wherein the agency of the body enables the performance of multiple femininities (Dann and Callaghan, 2019; Dann, 2021). Things are, however, changing. Over the past decade, a flurry of scholarship has embraced the idea that 'we are beings in a body and we are the subject of the other's gaze' (Lemma, 2010: 3) by exploring the manifold processes that lead to a sense of embodi*ment* (Macpherson, 2010). These processes are intimately linked to identity becoming a more reflexive construct that is leveraged as a way of 'managing the complexities of everyday existence [that] rest on the enterprising self and the privatised, informed citizen who holds the agency to render judicious consumer and lifestyle choices' (Abidin and Gwynne, 2017: 386). These choices refer not just to how the body is clothed, made-up, or sculpted through exercise, but also how it is more permanently modified through tattoos, piercings, plastic surgery, and more. In turn, these choices not only tap into the 'fantasy of being one's own creator' but can also reveal 'how compelling the underlying phantasy has become' (Lemma, 2010: 5).

It is at this juncture that understanding the body as infrastructure, and my argument that the body contains a plurality of infrastructures, becomes salient. As infrastructure, the body enables the self to manifest. Its plurality of infrastructures, however, can also foreground the manifestation of a plurality of selves, some of which are more "phantastic" than others, and some of which are more integrative, and thus aligned, than others. In contrast, non-integration, or non-alignment, can cause the infrastructure to become illusory. Below I examine two infrastructural formations – ink and the skin – that are dependent upon, and which might complement or not, the body.

1.2. *Understanding ink-as-infrastructure*

Interpreting the body as infrastructure – as *any* modality of infrastructure – is to foreground both its reproductive and consumptive capacity. It is to recognise that 'social processes take place through – and are enabled by – human bodies' (Andueza et al., 2021: 799). The body renders the self an economically viable construct, and thus something that is worthy of sociality. It imbues the self with a degree of independence and autonomy that drives the ongoing reproduction of society through its labour, its circulation of value, and its social reproduction. As Abidin and Gwynne (2017: 386) put it, the 'economic viability' of the body is 'understood as no more predicated on citizens' capacity for production than their capacity to consume'. And yet, as much as economic logics like these might be seen to underpin the infrastructuralisation of the body, so too can they stand in the way of pursuing these logics to the productive extreme. Andueza et al. (2021: 800) explain this apparent paradox:

> Bodies facilitate the smooth functioning of capitalism through the production of commodities and circulation of goods. And bodies also pose a threat, a disruptive influence, to such flows, simultaneously opening up the possibility for an expansion of emotion, sociality, care and ways of being.

This paradox underpins the need to understand the infrastructuralised body as a differentiated – and differentia*ting* – construct. Whilst the body itself – and its capacity to labour – might be implicated in the functioning of capitalism, other infrastructural formations like the skin, the psyche, or ink, might obstruct such functioning. In many respects, these obstructions are an effect of late modernity, in that the infrastructures of the body have become increasingly disaggregated and the self increasingly fragmented according to the extent of infrastructural divergence. Abidin and Gwynne (2017: 386) terms these the 'individualising mechanisms of late modernity' in which 'gendered socio-economic transitions, such as higher levels of educational attainment, labour market participation, delayed marriage and non-marriage, the feminisation of migration and declining rates of fertility' have all worked to speed up such the process of disaggregation. In many respects tattoos represent this paradox in visual form, which is especially apparent amongst tattooed women. For women, neoliberal culture has been shown to ascribe the complexities of class and gender onto the tattooed body, with tattoos assuming a weakening of more traditional understandings of femininity, and revealing the trade-offs and compromises that exist at the intersections of conformity, resistance, and regulated choice (Thompson, 2015; Dann and Callaghan, 2019; Dann, 2021). Emblematic of the 'neoliberal "do-it-yourself" life projects' (Abidin and Gwynne, 2017: 386) that have become a defining feature of late capitalism, the infrastructures of ink are centrally implicated in the reproduction of this paradox. They are an infrastructure of self-representation – a way of being in the world – and yet in the same breath they can also be seen to place the subject in a marginal position vis-à-vis the surveillant norms and expectations of society

(Botz-Bornstein, 2015; Leader, 2017).

Whilst these assertions are not necessarily new, the idea that the ink by which tattoos come into being is a form of infrastructure *is*. The permanence of tattoo ink stabilises and thus normalises self-assertions. In other words, in a postmodern world of nonfixity and blurred meanings, it can '*reestablish* the body as a concrete, stable, and reassuring human condition and provide authenticity where identities become increasingly disposable' (Botz-Bornstein, 2015: 143, emphasis added). Important to note is that the infrastructure of ink is dependent on the body – and the skin – to bring it into being. As much as the body is recognised as in-process, so too do tattoos render it process*ed*. That is, they are an endpoint, a permanent realisation of who you are, or want to be. Yet, getting tattooed also means 'cutting into nature to create a living, breathing autobiography' (Mifflin, 1997: 178) whilst simultaneously 'letting go of social expectations of normalcy in appearance' (Thompson, 2015: 53). In this vein, the communicative value of tattoos is that they can help reframe the discourse of deviance by giving people the chance to 'consciously … control the image they convey to others to cultivate a desired impression' (Doss and Hubbard 2009, 63). The infrastructure of ink is thus designed to have a positioning effect. It marks the tattooed body as different, unique, and autonomous in its becomings. By both positioning the subject *in* social space, but also *creating* a space of self-representation, the infrastructure of ink 'becomes a wall on which multiple desires are projected' (Botz-Bornstein, 2015: 120). The multiplicity of desire evoked here is symptomatic of the multiplicity of infrastructures within which the self is implicated. This leads, in turn, to the creation of a "social game" that is tied to the choraic space created by the tattoo: a 'creative matrix in which things arise' (Botz-Bornstein, 2013: 236) in ways that transcend the limits imposed by others. That said, the affective illusions of the skin can cause ink itself to be limited in its representational power.

1.3. The affective illusions of the skin

The skin is an infrastructural layer that connects those of the body and ink. Tattoos would not be tattoos if there was no skin on which they could be etched, just as bodies would not be bodies if they were not contained by the dermis. The past two decades or so have witnessed a scholarly embrace of the skin, with the idea of "dermographia" encapsulating the idea that skins are inscribed with meanings: both literal (in terms of tattoos), but also symbolic (in terms of racialisation and cultural norms). The point is that 'the skin matters as matter: it is a substantial, tactile covering that bears the weight of the body' (Ahmed and Stacey, 2001: 15), and indeed the meanings inscribed on it. Pigmentation is revealed through the epidermis, which implicates the subject in a racial economy of desire or abjection (see Hall 2018). It is, however, the fact that the skin positions the subject within the representational matrix that causes it to be understood as illusory. Being 'both ordinary and extraordinary, placed and placeless, folding together multiple and contradictory meanings … [the] skin is a site of cultural inscription *and* it holds agentic potential' (Adams-Hutcheson, 2017: 107, original emphasis). It is the most volatile of infrastructures, as it is constantly being produced and reproduced by the normative gaze of society and the more autonomous realisations of the self. Autonomy is reflected in Lafrance's (2009: 20; see also Reynolds, 2009) assertion that 'we all search for second skins when we feel either our physical or mental boundaries require reinforcement', with the infrastructure of ink being self-directed assertions of epidermal primacy over what might lie beneath, and beyond.

It is the skin's volatility that renders it so affectively charged. Through touch – and the associated feelings of pleasure, pain, (dis) comfort, and more – the skin reveals a 'dynamism immanent to bodily matter and matter generally' (Clough, 2008: 1) that can open us up or close us down to the potential of being with others. In many respects, it is affect that brings the "second skin" into being, as it is a 'harbinger of and a discursive accompaniment to the forging of a *new* body' (Clough, 2008: 2, emphasis added). Indeed, representational slippages between the "first" and "second" skins can cause the skin-as-infrastructure to become illusory. Without alignment, affect can confuse as much as it can enchant. Moreover, these slippages reveal the reproductive value of an infrastructural perspective, as

> the circuit from affect to emotion is attached to a circulation of images meant to simulate desire-already-satisfied, demand-already-met, as capital extracts value from affect – around consumer confidence, political fears, etc., such that the difference between commodification and labour, production and reproduction, are collapsed into the modulation of the capacity to circulate affect (Clough, 2008: 16).

This "capacity" can be strengthened through infrastructural alignment or weakened by divergence. It causes signals to become scrambled and confused, and self-realisation to become elusive. Thus, as much as emotions might play an important role in the '"surfacing" of individual and collective bodies through the way in which emotions circulate between bodies and signs' (Ahmed, 2004: 117), so too must these infrastructures be aligned if the emotion is to be generative. The generative nature of emotions is rooted in their economic valence. Affective economies have been shown to 'align individuals with communities – or bodily space with social space – through the very intensity of their attachments' (Ahmed, 2004: 119). Or, importantly, their non-attachments. The politics of a mixed-race couple, for example, is encapsulated in the 'danger of impurity … [It] threaten [s] to violate the pure bodies; such bodies can only be imagined as pure by the perpetual restaging of this fantasy of violation' (Ahmed, 2004: 188). In the terms of this paper, what Ahmed describes is a situation of infrastructural misalignment. When two phenotypical infrastructures mix, the mixed-race couple becomes an affront to the assumption of purity that defines much normative thought. Whilst the mixed-race couple might be construed as "impure" in an inter-subjective sense, the tattooed subject is "impure" in an *intra*-subjective sense. The infrastructure of ink pollutes that of the skin, creating a social reality that takes time and effort to reconcile. It takes time for non-attachments to become attachments; for infrastructural divergences to converge; for illusions to become demystified; for the embodied self to align with the tattooed representation of who it *wants* to be. In its circulations, affect can therefore be seen to strengthen, or to forge new becomings (Ahmed, 2004; Ho, 2017).

1.4. Empirical context and methodology

Singapore is a conservative Asian city-state in which the body is disciplined by society and the state as a racialised tool of capitalist reproduction. Singapore is home to three main, and racially distinguishable, ethnic groups – a majority Chinese population, with significant Malay and Indian minorities – and, since the establishment of the Republic in 1965, has experienced rapid economic development. As a country with no natural resources to speak of, such development has commonly been attributed to visionary and transparent political leadership, and a well-educated and highly skilled workforce. Accordingly, the Singaporean body tends, at the most generalisable level possible, to be positioned in-between the productive logics of capitalist accumulation, and the racial logics that underpin ethno-cultural understandings of beauty and deviance (Woods, 2021a, b, c). Whilst 'corporeality has become the primary site of aspiration consumption', which in turn has become an important means of 'empowerment, self-actualisation and individualisation' (Abidin and Gwynne, 2017: 390), it is a type of consumption that is focussed on reproducing, rather than subverting, aspirational understanding of aesthetics and success. These understandings are typically hierarchical and are formed by the state and reproduced through familial and social structures. For example, in 2002 the government attempted to nudge Singaporeans to 'develop new mindsets' (Ong, 2006: 194) that are more entrepreneurial, creative, and in-line with the government's 'vision for a new Singapore for the 21st

Century where aesthetic expression becomes a conduit for creating a competitive economy' (Abidin and Gwynne, 2017: 389). This vision, which was enshrined in a document titled "Renaissance Singapore: Culture and the Arts in Renaissance Singapore" directly linked economic competitiveness to a form of aesthetic expression that would complement the logics of state, society, and industry. It was a call for individualism, albeit on the state's terms.

Against this backdrop, tattooing has, for many years, occupied a marginal and subversive socio-cultural niche in Singapore. Long associated with gang activity, it is only relatively recently that tattoos have started to attract mainstream appeal amongst the younger generations. At the turn of the century, tattooing was still considered a foreign indulgence, with the country's largest, and state-owned, newspaper – The Straits Times (18.01.99) – asking its readers: "aren't Singaporeans supposed to be smarter than mindlessly picking up foreign diversions [i.e., tattoos]?" Since then, the Ministry of Social and Family Development has been reported to offer former female young offenders and residents of the Singapore Girls' Home the opportunity remove their tattoos for free, in recognition of their still deviant, and often gang-related, associations (The Straits Times, 24.08.18). Tattoos also contravene some religio-cultural ideals. For example, The Straits Times (08.09.06) publicly declared that Malay-Muslims are to "avoid being tattooed, or to have them erased, because the body art is considered sinful". Whilst the implication here is that tattoos are a sign of "sin", the idea of impurity echoes throughout the majority Chinese community as well. It is these ideas and associations that cause the infrastructure of ink in Singapore to be intimately associated with, yet to also exist in a state of tension with, the infrastructure of racialised skin. Compounding this tension is the infrastructure of the body, and its embedding within the developmentalist logics of the state, and the aesthetic-aspirational logics of the Singaporean family. Tattooed Singaporeans must constantly negotiate these infrastructural overlaps and divergences amidst the growing trend towards more individualistic forms of self-expression and self-realisation. It is at this point that the illusory infrastructure of ink becomes apparent, and is explicated in the empirical section below.

Between late-2020 and early-2021, seventeen in-depth interviews were conducted amongst tattooed Singaporeans and Singaporean tattoo artists. Amongst the sample, the extent of tattooing varied considerably. Some participants had small, inconspicuous designs that could easily be hidden. Others had full sleeves, or full back and leg pieces that could not easily be covered. Of the seventeen participants, thirteen were Chinese, two were Eurasian, one was Malay, and one was Indian. The Chinese, Eurasians and Malay had lighter complexions, meaning their tattoos were prominent on the skin; the Indian had much darker pigmentation, meaning her ink infrastructure was – visually at least – more integrated with that of her skin. The ethnicity of all *non*-Chinese participants is identified in the analysis that follows. Interestingly, eleven participants identified as female, whilst only six identified as male, meaning the sample is skewed towards those who are, for various social and cultural reasons, the least likely to be aligned with tattooing subcultures (and, conversely, more likely to be implicated in racialised expectations of beauty and aesthetic norms). Included in the sample are six tattoo artists (of which four were female). They ranged from established and well-known tattoo artists to more embryonic artists trying to make a name for themselves by filling a niche in Singapore's burgeoning tattoo marketplace. Reflecting this demographic spread, participants ranged from their early-20s to mid-40s. Interviews lasted from approximately 45 min to 2 h and were either conducted by the author and/or a research assistant in English. All were audio recorded and transcribed upon completion. An interpretive framework was used for both data collection and analysis, meaning interviews were mostly open-ended and structured loosely by key topics of interest. These included the motivations for getting tattooed, socio-familial responses to tattoos, and the negotiations that emerge as a result. Data were analysed following a non-linear process that contained elements of open, axial, and selective coding (after Williams and Moser, 2019). This enabled the creation of an evolving data "loop" that enabled me to constantly compare, reduce and consolidate data according to emergent themes and their relevance to the literature. In the presentation of data that follows, all names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

2. Machinic bodies and epidermic affects in Singapore

The body is a uniquely insightful object of social analysis because of its machinic qualities. This is particularly true in Singapore. Being an island city-state with no natural resources, a common refrain is that Singapore's *people* are the only resource the country has. People and their bodies thus play a machinic role in Singapore's social reproduction and economic development. By "machinic" I mean they are treated – and indeed have come to treat themselves – as technologies of production, of governance, and even of cultural stability. The body is a socio-technical construct that is imbued with, and cannot escape, a politics of performative expectation. To meet these expectations, the body is a treated as an infrastructure responsible for the ongoing circulation of economic, social and cultural capital. Problematic are alternative infrastructural formations – such as ink – that compete with the machinic body for representational autonomy and primacy. These are processes that are relatively new to Singapore, and are still being worked through by many tattooed Singaporean youths. Accordingly, the three subsections that follow are intended to illustrate these processes, and the paradoxes and affects they give rise to. They explore the body as an alienating infrastructure, the navigation of surveilled spaces and epidermic affects, and the infrastructural layerings that give rise to an illusive sense of self.

2.1. The body as an infrastructure of alienation

The body is an inherently contested infrastructure. Whilst it is an intimate, personal, and resolutely *felt* infrastructure of the subject, it is not necessarily sovereign. Often, it is claimed by others, including parents, families, friends, socio-cultural groups, and even the state. Processes of claiming are acutely felt between the mother and child, in which case 'the body is testament to our interrelatedness. The shared corporeality of the mother and baby, from which we all emerge, is the physical prototype of psychic dependency' causing the child's body to be 'indelibly inscribed with the imprint of the (m)other' (Lemma, 2010: 2). The mother provides a mirror in which she sees herself, but also projects her desires onto the child. In this sense, when the child gets a tattoo, it is like they have tattooed the mother against her will as well. This conjoining elicited various negative reactions. For example, Eve, a tattoo artist in her late-20s, recalled how when she got her first tattoo, her mother exclaimed "you're ruining the body I gave you!", whilst Andrew, an engineer in his early-30s recalled how his mother exclaimed that "I've given birth to a very nice boy and yet you stained yourself!". Both excerpts reveal the extent to which mothers might claim their child's bodies as their own. The body, then, is a connective infrastructure that provide the basic building block of the family, and which is, therefore, the property of the family. Getting a tattoo implies – to some degree – a severance of these connections, which caused the mother of Zach – a tattoo artist in his mid-30s – to lock herself in her room for two days, and Amber – a tattoo artist in her late-20s – to admit just how "scared" she is of her mother, as she has "given me everything".

Tattoos render the body disjunctive, setting it apart from the expectations of its owner-once-removed: the mother. The infrastructure of ink disconnects the self from the connective infrastructure of the socialised body. According to Lemma (2010: 58) a process of alienation begins at birth, as 'because the child takes as its own image that is 'other' [i.e., the mother] … [it] lays the foundations internally of an alienating structure … the body is forever a reminder of, and potentially a substitute for, the loss of a fused state with the mother'. In another perspective, tattoos can be seen an as a tangible strategy of bodily reclamation or autonomy, and to solidify the child's independence from the mother. Choices like these would often be met with incredulity by

Singaporean parents. For example, the father of Alice – a tattoo artist in her early-30s – "can't believe people will pay money to disfigure them permanently", which reveals the assumption that "if you have a tattoo it reflects on your character or your moral values in some ways". Sentiment like this reflects the longstanding view that the 'most important human qualities are supposed to be inscribed *in* the body: they should not be written or worn on its surface' (Botz-Bornstein, 2015: 145, original emphasis) and that any sort of permanent inscription can have a polluting or de-naturalising effect. Val, a tattoo artist in her early-30s, echoed this sentiment when she shared how her mother questioned that the reason she decided to get tattoos – and indeed to forge a career as a tattoo artist – could be "because I don't love you enough? Is it because I didn't give you enough attention? Is it because I never teach you properly?"

As much as the infrastructure of ink can be seen to alienate the self from the connective infrastructure of the body, so too can such alienation be a source of empowerment. Often, empowerment stemmed from the ability to take control of one's self-representation. Expressions of agency like these have often been studied as binary constructs that reflect or challenge a moralising good/bad dichotomy. In this vein, tattoos might either 'construct a sense of self that is "good"' (Dann and Callaghan, 2019: 3) through, for example, demonstrating a sense of belonging and community, or be used to signal deviance and perhaps contribute to the strengthening of discriminatory stereotypes (Broussard and Harton, 2018). Amongst my interviewees, however, tattooing appeared to be a more personal project of introspection. Whilst these issues might arise from the body, so too were they just as likely to stem from how one related to their skin. For example, Perry – a music teacher in his late-20s – recalled how "since I was young, I always have body image issues, and I hated seeing my skin … I want to cover my body as much as possible", which galvanised him to have a large number of highly visible tattoos. For Sam, a Malay pre-school teacher in her late-20s, the sentiment was similar, but unlike Perry her job meant she had to limit the size and position of her tattoos so that they could be easily covered when at work. She lamented that "sometimes I feel that my skin is too plain" before going on to speculate that "if I were to tattoo my whole body, I would want to keep my right side clean so I would know how my normal skin looks like". The negativity associated with the words "plain", "clean" and "normal" indicate the alienating effect of tattoos – which might, in Sam's terms, be interpreted as "interesting", "dirty" and "abnormal" – albeit in a positive way. As Sam went on to explain, she liked how her tattoos "framed" her body, giving it a structure and image that she could call her own. Ink helps individuals overcome the violence of normalcy; the violence of fitting in and being like everyone else. They reflect the 'desire to establish greater control over the self with a focus on self-reflection' (Strübel and Jones, 2017: 1231), causing the autonomy of ink to become increasingly removed from the connectedness of the body.

As much as the infrastructure of the body can be seen as alienating, so too can ink provide a source of socio-familial transcendence. It enables individuals to reclaim their body from their parents, families, and society writ large, and to shape their own sense of self. The language of "reclamation" was common amongst participants. For example, Maria – a Eurasian bar tender in her early-20s who was sexually assaulted when she was younger – claimed that tattoos enabled her to "slowly reclaim each part of my skin. Because what was there before was really, really ugly memories, so I was slowly taking over my own body in my own skin". For Maria, "reclaiming" her skin can be interpreted as a first step towards reclaiming a sense of agency and control over her body and her female self, and, in doing so, to overcome the sense of vulnerability that originated from her being a victim of abuse. Jack, a Eurasian bar manager in his mid-30s, offered a different understanding of the compulsion that led him to get more and more tattoos. Rather than reclaiming agency, for him the desire is to imbue his skin with a sense of agency:

> Once you get one, you feel like it's not enough. It's like, for example, you get [one on] your hand, then you realise, hey, my arms are empty, so you put something there. So, then you feel that, hey, why is my other side empty? And you will start having more … [It's like] filling up empty space.

Speaking of the body as an "empty space" that needs to be "filled" reveals the extent to which the tattooed subject desires to replace the racialised infrastructure of the skin with a new infrastructure of ink. The infrastructure of ink can be seen to provide a *new* phenotype through which the self can be forged. When asked what an "ideal version" of himself might look like, Harry, a media executive in his late-20s, explained that he would "turn back the clock, wash up and clean [his body], and do a full suit. I will do one full body suit … Rather than just one patch and another patch, like a jigsaw, [I want] just one full piece". Whilst Harry wants to, as far as possible, *replace* his skin with that of ink, he wants to do so in a coherent way. Rather than looking like a "jigsaw", or a mosaic of different tattoos, he wants an integrative and cohesive design that will render the sense of representational detachment from his body complete. Sentiment like this reflects an inversion of the idea that tattoos 'interfere with the body's purity' (Botz-Bornstein, 2013: 239) by suggesting that a greater sense of purity – a purity *of* the self – can be forged by supplanting the skin with ink. Perry, introduced above, echoed this sentiment but in a different way. For him, "I don't like to see my skin" because "it looks very plain" meaning "I want to cover all of my skin if possible". However, whilst the complete subsummation of the body to ink is claimed to be a desire, so too does Perry realise that it is an unworkable fantasy as "society is not ready for it". This suggests that he is not ready to accept the knock-on effects that might stem from completely disconnecting from his body.

2.2. Navigating surveilled spaces and epidermic affects

Perry's comments reveal the constant struggle he faces between realising a disembodied sense of self through ink, whilst simultaneously pandering to the limits and thresholds of social tolerance. This struggle stems from the fact that the skin is at once a surveilled space, but so too is it an affective space that evolves from the premise that 'the eyes themselves function like organs of touch' (Marks, 2000: 162). Considering this surveillance-affect dialectic, the infrastructure of ink causes the individual to become acutely aware of their social (re)positioning; of where they do and do not belong. This awareness starts from the relationships that are forged between tattoo artists and their clients. Indeed, this is a relationship that is based on the critical surveillance of the skin, the assessment of its affective potential, and the building of trust. It is also a relationship built on vulnerability: a defining trope that might predate one's first tattoo (think of Perry and Sam's critiques of their bodies, or Maria's sexual assault), but evolve in new directions as the infrastructure of ink replaces that of the body, leading to socio-familial disconnection. As Alice put it: "you're in a vulnerable position, and then there's an added layer of vulnerability when you have your clothes off and you're lying on the bed". For Maria, embracing this sense of vulnerability enabled her to overcome the trauma of her sexual abuse. She initially remarked that "it's a very intimate bond to be tattooed by someone, have someone's artwork on you", before being more candid in her admission that her relationship with her tattoo artists is

> a bit like the king community – being submissive in the king's context, letting go of control over something being done to you feels liberating and cathartic. For some people, they literally give the artists full freedom to do whatever they want to do. They go in and say 'whatever you want to do, just do'.

As much as the infrastructure of ink can be seen to disconnect the individual from the bonds, claims and expectations of parents, family, and society, so too can it lead to the creation of new bonds with others that are plugged into the infrastructure. Maria, and to a certain extent

Alice too, finds "liberation" and "catharsis" in making herself vulnerable at the hand of her tattooist. It is not a stretch to suggest that tattooing is about recreating the powerlessness she felt through assault, albeit on her own terms. For both Maria and Alice, being tattooed enables them to reproduce a stereotype of female vulnerability, albeit on their own terms. In doing so, they are also to subvert, but also take control of the narrative of dominance. For them, ink enables the body to be reimagined and reclaimed, and its affective power to be recalibrated through the gaze – artistic, judgemental, or otherwise – of others. Tattoos, then, become epidermic symbols that cause the subject to become implicated in an 'interactive game that does not only *take place* within social space but that also *creates* [new] social space [s]. Those symbols are active and not passive containers of meaning' (Botz-Bornstein, 2015: 130, original emphasis). This is a game that originates materially in the tattoo studio, but then is played out through the surveillant spaces of everyday life.

Singapore's public spaces are those in which visible tattoos mark the body as intentionally other; as a subject that has supplanted the infrastructures of the body and the skin with that of ink. Accordingly, tattoos trigger a range of reactions from Singapore society. Both Maria and Shania, an Indian sales executive in her mid-20s, remarked separately that Singaporeans "fetishize" tattoos, with Maria remarking that they are "appealing to people because they are intimidated by it, they are scared of it" and Shania that "some people are just straight off the bat, 'oh my goodness I love your ink! I love inked girls!'". Each comment reveals different forms of fetishization that ranges from fear and intimidation to desire and the ongoing sexual objectification of the tattooed woman. This range is important to note as it signals the emergence of what Botz-Bornstein (2015: 128, original emphasis) calls a 'new tattoo space' in which the 'skin does not wear the stigmatic *mark*, nor does it function as a screen of male desire, but it becomes a wall on which multiple desires are projected'. It is from this point of openness that the game of surveillance-affect is played. Viewing the infrastructure of ink can cause people to react in uncharacteristic ways, which itself is testament to the affective power the inked epidermis. Often, these affects are negative, and lead to the reification of the epidermal other. Val, for example, shared how a father did not allow his young child to sit next to her on a busy bus, whilst Perry recalled how whenever he went swimming in the pool at his condominium, parents would ask their children to get out. Both excerpts gesture to the affective power of ink, wherein its associations with impurity and deviance spread beyond the skin and into public space.

This radiation of affect goes both outwards and inwards. The anecdotes shared by Val and Perry reveal a concern that ink – as a connective infrastructure – will somehow traverse the tattooed subject and pollute those with whom space is shared. The point is that as much as 'the movement between signs converts into affect' (Ahmed, 2004: 120), so too does that movement affect the signifier – the self – as well. Marvin put it well when he opined that "tattoos themselves influence people". We have seen above how this influence extends outwards to society, but so too can it influence self-perception through the changing norms of self-representation that tattoos trigger. Shania narrated this transition in her observation that "last time I used to be more conscious, but slowly I feel like I don't really feel that people are staring at it [her tattoo]. You kind of grow into your skin. Sometimes I wake up, it feels like this is your skin". Interesting here is that the infrastructure of ink *becomes* her skin; she grows into it to the extent that the distinction between her skin and her ink is indistinguishable – her tattoo *is her*. Whilst this reveals the power of ink's epidermic affects, so too does it reveal the sense of agency that emerges from claiming the skin as one's own. It encourages the subject to recalibrate who they are to the extent that they *become* their tattoos. Zach corroborated this sentiment, stating that "it sounds a bit dumb, but I feel more like myself [with tattoos]". There are, of course, limits to this sense of becoming. Embracing these limits, we can appreciate the extent to which ink is an affective infrastructure as much as it is an illusory one.

2.3. Layering the illusive self

The infrastructure of ink is layered onto the infrastructures of the skin and the body. Sometimes these layers might become integrated to the extent that they become indistinguishable – as in Shania's case – whilst other times they might remain distinct. Distinction foregrounds a sense of infrastructural slippage through which ink's illusory nature manifests. In other words, when the self does not align with the infrastructure of ink through which it is represented to the world, then the infrastructure itself can be understood as illusory. It does not contribute in any meaningful way to the recalibration of the self. In this respect, tattoos can be seen as the projection of an *illusion* of the self. For example, when Sam was asked *why* she got a tattoo, she remarked "I just feel like it gives [me] personality", whilst, when asked the same question, Val remarked that "the best way to stand out from other people, obviously, is to have a tattoo!" Both Sam and Val gesture here to the idea that the value of ink is that is positions the wearer outside of societal norms and structures, thus attributing them with personality and distinction respectively. The fact that both are female – meaning the expectation for them to conform to societal norms is arguably greater than for their male counterparts – exacerbates this dynamic. Whether or not it does is, of course, a matter of individual interpretation. The point is that it gives the wearer the illusion of distinction, of being *more* than their bodily infrastructures allude to. Zach was more specific in his recollection that he chose his first tattoo – of a swallow – because "that time I was trying to be deep and insightful … But the real truth is, like, I want to look cool". Association like these – of coolness, personality, or just distinction – reveal the extent to which

> tattoos transgress merely symbolizing function[s] as they allow for the emergence of an alternative space in which not only right and wrong, but also purity, desire, and the self adopt a new, ambiguous status. In other words, what is in question is no longer the provocative or demarcating affirmation of a position *within* a given social space, but the *choraic* creation of a space (Botz-Bornstein, 2015: 127, original emphasis).

How this sense of illusion – and the choraic space it gives rise to – maps onto the self is often incoherent, and societal perceptions are often misaligned with those of the tattooed self. In this vein, Val was candid in her admission that "I still feel like tattoos make me look fierce, but I am not actually fierce … I think I am quite a soft person, but tattoos make me look hard". After recognising this disjuncture between the representation and the self, Val went on to lament: "why can't you look past my skin and see that I am actually a normal person? I still wake up and go to work, you know? I still pay my tax. I still earn an income!" Val's rhetorical questioning – and apparent confusion – reveals her arbitraging the space created by her trying to stand out, but also to be seen as a "normal" person and that a "soft" female exists beneath the "hard" representation inscribed on her skin. She wishes to normalise the illusion of her ink, to create a space through which she can forge an alternative identity. Practices like these evoke Ho's (2017: 49) study of Japanese women's wearing of blackface, which creates 'affective spaces for consumers to negotiate their racial, gender, and national identities' by 'alter [ing] women's relationships to their bodies and allow [ing] them to experiment with racial otherness and alternative femininities'. The parallels are clear, although the obvious distinction comes with the permanence of tattoos, which imbue them with the value that is indexed to the extent to which the wearer is representationally investing in an indeterminate future. The desire is to affirm a new vision of the self (Leader, 2017), although failure to do, or perhaps realisation of the 'multiplicity of meanings' (Dann and Callaghan, 2019: 5) that can be attributed to tattoos across the space-times of representational praxis, can render the infrastructure of ink illusory.

For many, the illusion created by tattoos was embraced to fulfil a perceived deficiency in one's character. Tattoos were typically associated with confidence on behalf of the wearer: the confidence to break

away from the normalised infrastructure of the body, or the confidence to know who they are, and to express the self in an unambiguous way. Echoing this sentiment, Emily, a pre-school teacher in her early-20s, believed that people with tattoos "kind of know who they are and what they want". Nick, an undergraduate also in his early-20s, shared how he thought people with tattoos are "naturally confident, really, like they don't care about what other people perceive of them". The idea behind both assertion is that tattoos direct one's interpretation of the self in a certain way. By covering the skin, they become a 'device that displaces and destroys the item it covers' (Botz-Bornstein, 2015: xi). Yet, it is not as straightforward as mere replacement, or the layering of confidence onto the less-confident self. For many, the illusions of ink manifest in various ways. For example, Jack first asserted that "only you can know what you want to be. Basically, you are your own carpenter, and you mould yourself" before contradicting himself by admitting that "I always steal ideas from them [the people he follows on Instagram] … they always have these sharp drawings and full sleeves and stuff, and I'm like 'damn! I want to be like that!'". What Jack reveals is a desire to stand out by fitting in; to positioning himself as apart from Singapore society – as more distinct, interesting, and confident than his non-tattooed counterparts – whilst also striving to be as creative and well-represented as his tattooed peers. Val helped to explain this dynamic:

> it's a kind of impression and expression, right? You cannot have the same expression as someone else. You will not have it! Maybe you will feel good, but I will not feel good! Maybe I feel good, but you cannot feel how good I feel, right?

Cues are taken from others, nudging the individual in different aesthetic directions, whilst simultaneously moving them further away from the infrastructure of the body. This is an illusory process, but so too is it a process dedicated to realising the illusion. Sam evoked this sentiment in her use of metaphor to explain how "I am more concerned about building my own box. Like, you're a box, and you colour your box, and everybody likes different colours, and likes it in a different way, so it's my own box". Treating the body as a box and ink as the colour that brings it to life indicates the dialectic of sameness (every *body* is a box) but also difference (through colour/ink), alongside the desire for some sort of permanence. Or something the self can claim as *theirs.* This desire for permanence helps situate the individual within Singapore's logic of rapid change, developmentalism, and uncertainty. Tattoos render the subject marginal, but, at the same time, stable. To this end, many spoke of the permanence of tattoos as having an anchoring effect of the self in/and society: "tattoos stay there forever" (Marvin), "only this kind of art form can be forever, whether you like it or not" (Val), "I like that there are things that are *mine*. Technically it's mine, unless you want to cut off my skin and put it on yours, nobody is going to take it from you: that's what I like" (Sam). Read in conjunction with the prior analysis, tattoos are inherently illusory, but that does not necessarily matter because it is a permanent illusion. Whether or not they remain illusory over time is irrelevant. What matters is that in a world in which the infrastructure of the body is under an increasingly complex range of pressures to conform and perform (Dann and Callaghan, 2019), the infrastructure of ink provides an illusion of a more complete version of the self that holds a permanence that the real world never will.

3. Conclusions

In a world of change and nonfixity, in which the infrastructure of the body is subject to multiple pressures and expectations, ink can be seen as a method of coping by which a more stable, coherent and emancipatory self can be forged. It is, in other words, a coping mechanism that positions the individual in a paradoxical state of in-betweenness: between who they are and who they want to be, between fixity and change, and between autonomy and conformity. As much as the infrastructure of ink can be seen as illusory, so too does it present an illusion that is permanent, stable, and therefore stabilis*ing*. Acknowledging these characteristics is to acknowledge the fact that ink establishes a benchmark against which the self can be defined in relation to an assumed idea/l. Often, this idea/l exists in opposition to the normative expectations of society and culture, and thus provides an avenue through which a more autonomous self-image can be pursued. In other words, ink provides an infrastructural platform or "fix" from which new forms of socio-representational futurity might unfold. Given that 'our relationship to our body is probably the most concrete marker we have of how we feel about ourselves and others', and that it is the 'most pliable medium at our disposal for displaying or communicating our internal states of mind' (Lemma, 2010: 7), such infrastructural fixes can be interpreted as attempts to gain control over our feelings, subjectivities, and places in the world (Woods, 2023d). Amongst my female participants in particular, these feelings of control are noticeable, and reveal the negotiation of identity and representation within the gender-conservative context of Singapore and Asia. Whilst the infrastructural value of ink is its relative permanence, how other, less permanent infrastructural "fixes", like dress, make-up, or muscle, and their gendered manifestations, all provide important directions for further research.

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