

CHALLENGING AND DISMANTLING CULTURAL APPROPRIATION IN THE TATTOO INDUSTRY:

an invitation to dialogue

*by Tattoo Circus
Helsinki collective*





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1. Introduction / invitation

Over the last years, we, the organising collective of Tattoo Circus Helsinki, began having conversations about cultural appropriation in Euro-American/Western tattoo cultures. The discussions came up over time as we asked ourselves concrete questions related to our event planning. What kind of scene or industry are we participating in by organising a tattooing event? What kind of visual culture do we want to showcase?

We are still asking these questions and learning from those who have raised this question before us. This written account is an invitation to engage with and learn about this topic together. While our writing is focused on tattooing as a craft and skin marking practice, the points discussed here can easily be applied, and the discussion extended to other forms of body modification, visual arts, and cultural practices where appropriation of colonized cultures is often widespread.

With this in mind, we are writing and publishing this zine to help both ourselves and others better understand cultural appropriation as a continuing legacy of colonisation. We acknowledge that our awareness on and contribution to this topic is incomplete, with much room for growing.

Thus, we encourage the reader to regard this zine as the first printed edition of a conversation that has by no means ended. Hopefully this transparency around our unfinished process will inspire others to engage with the topic and to think alongside this text in whatever contexts feel most personal or significant. Since we wish this conversation to continue and evolve, you are most welcome to copy, share,

and spread this zine, and use it as a discussion opener amongst your fellow tattooers, tattoo lovers, and anti-authoritarian organisers.

In the next chapter, we introduce the work and mission of our collective. We then discuss the history of colonialism and how, from the beginning, cultural oppression has been a central part of its genocidal and extractivist operation. In chapter 4, we define cultural appropriation and describe its ties to continued colonialism, and then, in chapter 5, dive into the colonial histories and present practices of indigenous and white/western tattoo cultures. Chapter 6 consists of some open-ended questions about how to go on putting ink in our skin with more understanding and consideration for the diverse histories. The last chapter concludes the zine with some suggestions for how to go forward.

The conversation on cultural appropriation involves a multitude of cultural “others”: racialised, exoticised and invisibilised groups. Becoming familiar with their perspectives and lived experiences will add nuance and context to this writing, so we strongly encourage learning from other texts/sources alongside this one. Ideas for reading and other resources are included at the end of this zine.

*With solidarity,
Tattoo Circus Helsinki collective,
in May 2025.*



2. *Who we are and what we do*

Tattoo Circus Helsinki is an abolitionist solidarity event for political prisoners. Unlike large commercial tattoo fairs, Tattoo Circus Helsinki is a political community event with a diverse and playful program including performance and visual arts, distros, food, and fundraising as well as anti-repression news and political discussion. The event strives to bring together groups and individuals organising against the prison-industrial-complex, border control, and all other forms of state repression. Furthermore, our vision for Tattoo Circus Helsinki is a space where participants, informed and inspired by these struggles, can begin to dream, organise, and work towards a world without prisons and police.

All the fundraising from the event goes to support political prisoners and anti-repression campaigns around the world, from Earth liberation prisoners to jailed antifascists, and from the Kurdish liberation movement to indigenous struggles in the so-called Americas.

The event is organised approximately once a year by the Tattoo Circus Helsinki collective, a small group of anarchist organisers. Tattooers who participate in the event are skilled professionals who gift their time and artistic work to support the cause. In addition, the event is made possible by performance and visual artists, kitchen crews, workshop holders, and many other volunteers. Local anti-authoritarian groups host talks, distros and other program, connecting this small event to a larger movement and network of anti-authoritarian action.

We write this text as a majority white group of people. Some of us are professional tattoo artists, some are self-taught in more recreational hand-poke tattooing, and

others are just into having tattoos on their skin. While we put a lot of thought and work into making Tattoo Circus happen, we do not use professional cultural-industry terms like “curating” or “producing” to describe our organising. As an anti-hierarchical and self-learned group of organisers, terms like DIY / do-it-yourself (or DIT, do it together) feel much more fitting. This means that the work we do (including thought processes) happens slowly and sporadically, but then again, it is free from institutional hierarchies, restrictions, and prestige.

With this in mind, we do not claim to be experts on the subject but merely a group of individuals who share a passion for tattoos and an abolitionist political vision. Our critique is based on what we have learned in many years of following the predominantly white tattoo culture around us, in Helsinki and elsewhere.

We acknowledge that those of us who are white have a less profound understanding of the harm that cultural appropriation causes than those who are BIPOC and have direct and lived experiences of racism. Furthermore, local tattooers as well as many anti-authoritarian groups organise and operate in white-dominated spaces, so white privilege and structural racism are less likely to be confronted and challenged.

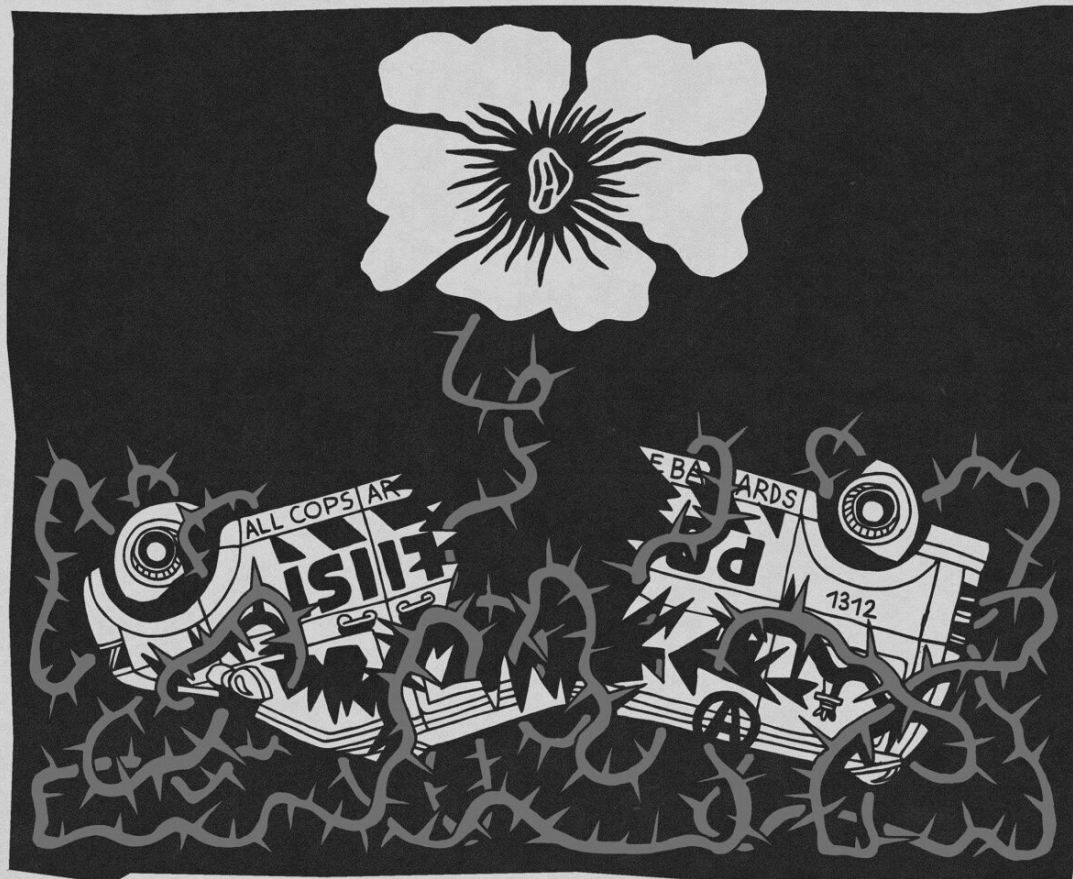
The aim of this writing is, among other things, to challenge ourselves to engage with these topics, to learn, and to think of them more deeply as we continue to organise solidarity events and thus participate in the local tattoo culture.

We acknowledge that education on the subject is not accessible in many languages (due to political censorship, for example). Knowledge about these topics is suppressed and unfamiliar to many, so we hope to be able to strengthen the discourse and invite more people into it.

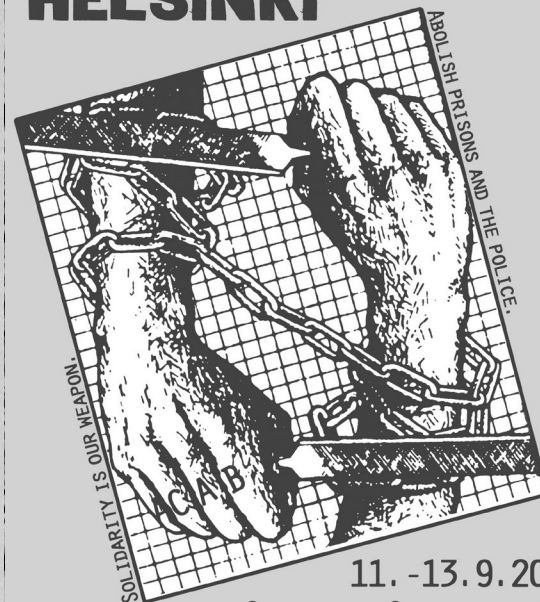
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SUUVILAHTI - RAKENNUKSEN
TATTOOCIRCUSHKI.NOBLOGS.ORG

TATTOO CIRCUS

HELSINKI 11-13.11.2022



TATTOO CIRCUS HELSINKI

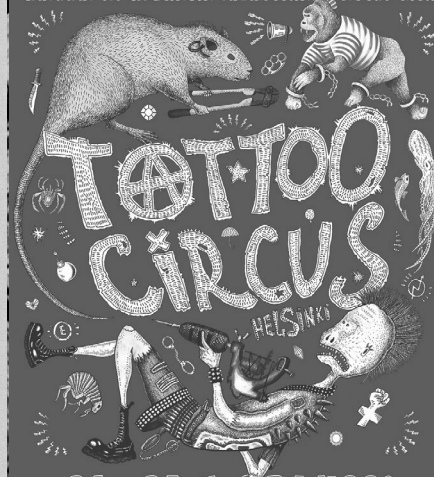


11.-13.9.20

ORANSSI, SUUVILAHTI

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VANTAAN JA HELSINGIN ANARKISTINEN MUSTA RISTI



21.-23.4 ORANSSI

KAASUTEHTAANKATU 1, SUUVILAHTI

TATTOOITEJA - KESKUSTELUJA - MUSIKKIA - MYRKKYÄ - BURLESKIA -
TAROT-KORTTEJA - TULE TATTOO CIRCUSSEEN, TUE VANGITTUJA & OTA TATSKA!

OTA TATTOOINTI POLIITISTEN VANKIEN HYVÄKSI, LISÄÄ INFOA & AJANVARAUS:
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3. Ongoing history of colonization

Colonialism is a racist, patriarchal project of exploiting lands and people for the profit of colonial regimes (colonial states and also state-run and multinational companies). Historical colonialism grew out of European empires, which, following forced enclosures of commons (a form of locally governed, shared land use) inside their empires, went on a quest to invade land around the globe from the 15th century onwards.

The colonial rule over land peaked at 84% of all land on Earth at the beginning of World War I. In the following decades, large parts of the colonial empires around the world collapsed under pressure or gave in to the resistance of anti-colonial resistance movements. The era following this history is sometimes called 'postcolonial' – the word quite misleading, as, considering that many lands and regions were never liberated from colonial state occupation and globalized, capitalist extraction of lands and livelihoods still continues in others.

The brutal physical violence and the stealing of land that mark the waves of globalization were followed by dehumanizing and punishing indigenous people for practising and preserving their culture. Segregating cultural and environmental implications of this (or mind from matter, a typical Christian, patriarchal binary) would thus be an arbitrary division, as indigenous culture evolves in relationship to the environment. Additionally, the colonial project has always been a combination of violence done to people's bodies, to their cultures, and to the lands they inhabit.

Another aspect of colonial violence which makes it so total and genocidal is the overlapping forces of extractivism and settler ideology. Typically, colonizers settle on stolen lands,

which they exploit for natural resources that are shipped around the world for the profit of the empire. One colonized community is driven from their lands in one place, while another is enslaved or exploited as a workforce elsewhere.

The cruelty and indifference regarding the lives of the colonized, which resulted in widespread genocides of indigenous and enslaved people, has always been followed by violent policing and suppression of indigenous cultural practices, from spiritual traditions to gender, sexuality, and the social organisation of communities.

Christianization, forced assimilation to patriarchal and state institutions, erasure of traditions, banning of languages, and enclosing lands and waters used for hunting, fishing, herding, and foraging should be understood as slow, intergenerational attempts at cultural genocide.

Maori researcher Linda Tuhiwai Smith describes colonialism and imperialism as a violent redistribution of bodies, species, and thoughts. This system both pushed people,

material and ideas from the center of the empire towards its edges as well as exploited its edges by pulling resources, species, ideas, and knowledge from the peripheries towards the center. Traditional knowledge was disciplined out of colonized communities with systematic violence; this erasure and separation were then followed by imported colonial education.

Taking Sámi children from their families and placing them in Christian, Finnish-speaking residential schools is the local example of cultural erasure and repression, which went hand in hand with other forms of colonial state violence, such as nationalizing and privatizing the reindeer-herding lands shared and managed by Sámi communities.

Indigenous cultures today are the living legacy that persist and survive despite colonial powers that have sought to drive them to extinction, in some parts of the world for over 500 years. Their survival is not a result of passive existence but collective resilience and active resistance, which continues today in the front line struggles against invasions, stealing of land, and destruction campaigns (think pipelines, ski resorts, mining), but also wherever traditional environmental knowledge and cultural practices are passed on and revived.

4. Defining cultural appropriation

The common definition of cultural appropriation is the adoption of an element of one (often marginalized) culture or identity by members of another (usually dominant) culture or identity, without consideration and understanding of its original cultural significance.

Of course, cultures are not insulated containers with rigid borders and copyrights, and we don't wish them to be so. Cultural practices are living and evolving, some deeply location-specific and others diasporic. Cultural traditions move, evolve, and cross-pollinate with the migration of people and ideas - the movement that, ideally, wouldn't be policed and controlled by nation states and borders. True cultural diversity thrives when power dynamics are levelled through mutuality, respect, and the dominant groups accommodating those marginalized, so that no identities, integrity or livelihoods are lost and suffocated as a result of their intermingling and coexistence. Cultural appropriation is a form of consumption, erasure and distortion which does the opposite of this.

Visual symbols that are more widely recognized as racist and inappropriate by white-dominated liberal discourse are more often denounced. Meanwhile, a lot of cultural appropriation remains invisible to the white majority culture, or is ignored as harmless and acceptable. Therefore, those who appropriate ideas, images or tokens from marginalized cultures are often oblivious to the harm which appropriation can cause to the people and cultures they originally belong to. Meanwhile, marginalized communities suffer

from discrimination at the same time as they witness the appropriation of their own culture and the erasure of its meanings by the dominant society and the capitalist market.

Lack of understanding regarding appropriation of Black, Brown and Indigenous cultural symbols is a common and normalized part of white-dominant cultural discourse. This ignorance around the subject is rooted in the long history of colonialism and capitalist extractivism, which seek to simultaneously both erase and exoticize the marginalized cultures which they exploit. This is why cultural appropriation so often replicates racist power dynamics and consumer chains of global capitalist exploitation so faithfully and with little effort. Discussion and awareness are necessary to make it clear that when we talk about appropriation, we do not mean malicious intentions: it is about exploitation that remains subtle and invisible as long as it is normalized.

Similar patterns of extraction and accumulation of profit are visible in the gentrification of queer subcultures (commodified by corporate pinkwashing, straight culture and the fashion industry) and working class cultures and neighbourhoods (by yuppies and real estate investors of the upper and middle classes). Nonetheless, the focus of this text is on dominant white cultures appropriating elements from Black, indigenous and other racialized cultures.

In the context of fashion, a driving force in the capitalist market, “exotic” cultures have always been mined for symbols and visual references that become resources for new designs, just like the material resources used in the production of fast fashion have been produced by exploiting colonized land for resources (textiles, dye, rubber, and so on) and colonized people for their labour.

Examples of cultural appropriation can be found in the use of protective hairstyles (braids, locks, Bantu knots) in fashion shows and visual culture, where they are praised as hip, alternative or “innovative” when worn by white people but deemed unacceptable and non-professional when worn by their BIPOC originators.

Similarly, prestigious art institutions still define and rank culture and arts based on white hegemonic ideas of what is ‘artistic’, who art is for, and who gets to be a professional artist. At the same time, state-sponsored museums in Western Europe, Scandinavia, and elsewhere hold onto collections of “artefacts” stolen from colonized people and displayed as historical relics, against the consent of living descendants of their makers.

These patterns also show up in the choices of contemporary tattoo artists and their clients, in ways we will explore in the following chapter.

5. *What's tattooing got to do with it?*

To better understand what appropriation means in the context of tattooing, it is necessary to look into the history of different and diverse tattoo cultures. Just like the previous chapter on colonization and its effect on indigenous lands and peoples, this brief history of tattooing cultures is merely a short and incomplete summary.

A few anecdotes are included, not to provide an overview of the topic but to give some concrete examples of what all of this means. That said, this chapter should not be read as an introduction to the huge diversity of cultural practices and meanings behind tattooing and skin marking traditions, historically nor today. For a deeper dive into the indigenous tattoo cultures around the world, some resources are listed at the end of this zine.

The most important takeaway from this chapter is, perhaps, that some tattoo cultures were inspired by and born out of colonization and the migration of cultural motifs that followed, while others, which existed long before colonization have either disappeared or only just survived it. We wish learning about the historical context of tattoos and taking it into consideration will help with beginning a long overdue discussion on the topic.

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Diverse skin marking practices have been documented around the world, going back thousands of years. At some point in history, tattooing practices disappeared or were eradicated from Europe, where they were reintroduced again by colonizers who returned from their maritime exploration of “unknown” lands. To give an example, extensive written records describe how sailors on James

Cook’s “expeditions” encountered, were inspired by and appropriated Polynesian tattoo practices in the 1700’s.

In other words, tattoos were a part of the flow of goods and ideas (gold and other metals, crops, crafts, social concepts, stories and world views) that Europeans took and brought home from colonized lands. The reason why western tattoo culture is historically tied to sailors is precisely that sailors were the first white people to encounter indigenous tattoo practices and bring them home from their travels.

Common motifs related to seafaring (such as anchors, ship’s wheels, and mermaids and travel) and travel (migratory birds) are a visual legacy of sailors beginning to create their tattooing methods and illustrations, as well as a trace of the colonial roots of European tattoo cultures. The style that most directly followed this history is, ironically, called ‘traditional’.

The acceptance of tattoos in Europe was somewhat divided along class lines, tattoos being more common in the lower class and subcultural margins of white European societies.

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Nevertheless, tattoos grew in popularity over centuries, making them normalized, a part of visual culture and consumer choices, which they are today.

Just like other forms of arts, crafts and design, contemporary western tattoo culture has long been on a quest for cultural shopping around the globe. While the majority of customers and professionals in the trade are white folks of European descent, with a passion for skin ink and edgy illustrations, tattooed symbols and motifs are a mixed compilation of inspirations near and far. Tattooers who learn and pass on their skills in the trade through apprentice culture usually have little if any understanding of their

origin, and the same goes for customers who pay for and carry these images.

The mainstream tattoo industry has plenty of examples of this kind of culture shopping. Vague interpretations of Polynesian and Maori cultural symbols are sold as “tribal style” tattoos, and sexualized images of the “hula girl” are the western tattoo industry’s version of exotifying ‘tiki bars’.

These trends alternate with Celtic, Iban, Mayan, or Aztec motifs, commodified and removed from their spiritual context. Native American and other First Nations’ symbolism has also found its way to white new age and hippie iconography, making tattoos of dream catchers, ritual feather headdresses or spiritual animals commonplace.

And neither are white instagram yogis in expensive lycra the only people keeping orientalism alive: millions of westerners sport spiritual symbols of Buddhist and Hindu traditions on their skin.

The exotified “gypsy woman” is a common character in European old school tattoo styles. The mystified image is rooted in old folk stereotypes from times of vagrancy laws that were used to oppress, push around and persecute the racialized Romani communities in Finland and elsewhere. Romanticizing of voluntary nomadism by lifestyle minimalists working in digitized white collar jobs is a grotesque, yet seldom acknowledged contrast to conditions of the displaced Roma diaspora, whose lives are marked by precarity, poverty, state violence, racism and continuing racism.

To conclude, caricatures of indigenous, Black, Romani, Polynesian, East Asian and Southeast Asian cultures,

among others, are widespread in contemporary globalized visual culture. Some examples are explicitly and unashamedly racist and degrading, while others carry more subtle messages that exoticise, devalue and decontextualize indigenous cultural legacies for aesthetic pleasure or profit.

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Meanwhile, traces of cultural tattoo tradition are visible on the bodies of elders who had to hide their tattoos for most of their lives or face punishments for carrying them. In some cases, the only surviving references to traditional indigenous skin marking are found in artefacts and images that were stolen or documented by white colonialists and stashed away in European art collections and museums.

While colonizers sailing around the world, drawing maps, found indigenous traditional tattoos exotic and inspiring, indigenous people were often shamed for having them. Tattoos were frowned upon or banned, and their cultural significance was labelled as ‘savage’ by settlers and settler institutions like churches, schools, social welfare and custody programs, and other government authorities.

On Turtle Island / North America, for example, traditional tattooing and body modification were used by different nations to express things such as a person’s lineage, social belonging or rank, relationship to territory, and right to hunting and fishing. These tattoo practices were suppressed and nearly wiped out by European settlers. Karonhiarokwas Roxann Whitebean, a filmmaker from the Mohawk Territory of Kahnawake, describes her interest in indigenous tattoo culture as a part of decolonization and cultural revival:

If you look at paintings of warriors, they were highly decorated with tattoos, but they didn't just get them because they wanted to have something nice on the body, they had to earn these tattoos.

Around the world today, traditional tattooing and skin marking practices that were subject to erasure for decades and centuries are a part of preserving and reviving cultural traditions, and one crucial aspect of indigenous resistance.

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It is obvious how these tattoo practices differ from each other in their purpose and meaning. While white consumer culture has developed an easygoing relationship to tattoos, regarding it as one beauty and lifestyle choice among others, racialized and marginalized people's relationship to tattooing often comes with a more complex baggage of meaning and affect.

This relationship is further complicated by white beauty norms and racist attitudes within the white-dominated tattoo industry. White skin is a seldom-challenged norm in western tattoo culture, where harmful myths and prejudices about tattooing darker skin being 'hard' still circulate.

Representations of black and brown people with tattoos are scarce to begin with, compared to the endless imagery of cool tattoos in diverse styles shown on white skin. In addition, photoshopping images of tattoos with desaturation filters is effortless in today's digitised visual culture, making whitewashing and erasing Blackness easy for tattooers who comply with the racist and warped aesthetics of the industry.

Social media platforms further reproduce and amplify this white gaze with algorithms that prioritise skinny,

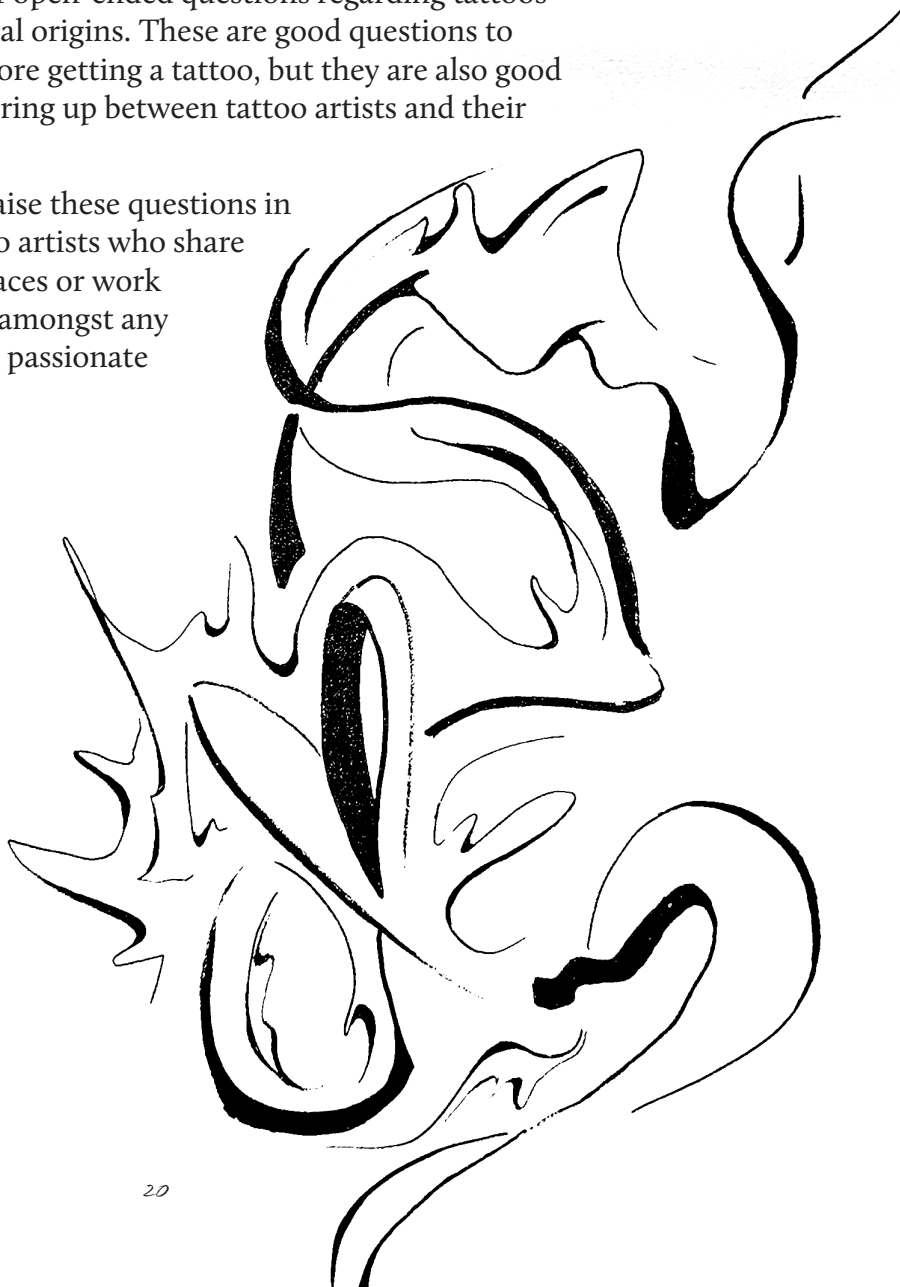
feminine-presenting white women showing their skin while labeling bare skin on black, brown or fat bodies as less attractive or even profane.

Racist image on the one hand, and missing representations on the other, lead to fewer BIPOC tattooers and customers, both of whom risk having a really bad time in the mainstream tattoo industry. This creates a snowball effect, resulting in a lack of skills and cultural sensitivity around tattooing non-white customers. Hence, the culture remains segregated and unwelcoming towards black and brown people. This cycle maintains the status quo where tattoos continue to be a whitewashed and appropriated cultural artefact while the industry keeps excluding BIPOC people, essentially making tattoos one more stolen medium of self-expression among many others.

6. Challenging cultural appropriation in the tattoo industry

Below is a list of open-ended questions regarding tattoos and their cultural origins. These are good questions to ask yourself before getting a tattoo, but they are also good discussions to bring up between tattoo artists and their customers.

Or, you could raise these questions in talks with tattoo artists who share skills, studio spaces or work experiences, or amongst any group of people passionate about tattoos.



- * Why do I desire to draw, tattoo, or be tattooed with a certain design, or in a certain style? What motivates and entitles me to choose a specific illustration?
- * What kind of story does the illustration tell? Who is the story about?
- * Am I the right person to tell that story behind the image? Could my wearing the image be harmful to someone else?
- * What research skills do I have and need to find out more about the meanings of symbols and motifs that inspire me? Is the information likely to be written from the perspective of the dominant culture, or does it include other truths and perspectives?
- * What do I know about the history and heritage of cultural symbols and images that I encounter?
- * What do I know of my own cultural heritage and history? If I know very little and constantly look for sources of inspiration, associating and resonance elsewhere, what kind of erasure and forgetting took place, which I am not even aware of?
- * What does/could cultural belonging look like in the so-called west, other than white nationalism?
- * Have some parts of my own cultural heritage been co-opted by nation states or white supremacists? If yes, how can I resist this appropriation and promote decolonization instead?
- * What kind of tattooers am I supporting, either by sharing my professional skills and resources or with my money as a customer?
- * Are the tattoo studios where I work / get tattooed inclusive towards BIPOC people, or would they feel unwelcome, either as co-workers or as customers?
- * What kind of images of tattoos do I share, publish, and look at? How do cultural and social norms impact what I consider to look aesthetic, cool, or attractive?

7. Final words

In the first two chapters, we introduced our collective and our motivation for publishing this text. In chapter 3 we introduced the exploitation of globalized exploitation of labour and natural resources, colonialism is visible today in the commodification and objectification of cultures and bodies for western and white consumer interests.

We need a deeper understanding of the diverse historical, cultural, personal and too often ignored meanings behind tattoos: they are not merely commodities sold on the market, they also represent people's history, culture, heritage, and identity.

In chapter 4, we defined cultural appropriation and what it does to the cultures it exploits for fashion, symbols, arts, customs and other elements. In chapter 5 we looked into the diverse history of tattooing and its colonial context today, giving some examples of commonly appropriated cultural motifs in tattoos. The previous chapter consisted of open-ended questions related to these topics and how to go on from here.

Tattoo Circus Helsinki stands against racism and in solidarity with indigenous and anti-colonial resistance. We believe that a discussion on cultural appropriation is crucial as we witness appropriation of indigenous and other ethnic, traditional cultural symbols in tattoo culture all the time. The tattoo scene being so white-dominated and cultural appropriation so normalized, practices will not change without growing awareness and active, ongoing effort.

Some BICOP traditional tattoo artists choose to reserve their practice strictly for their own community. Others work with aspects of their tattoo tradition when they tattoo customers outside their community. This trade cannot be fully separated from capitalism, but it can give traditional tattooers the visibility they seek to have their work and culture to be seen and appreciated. In either case, listening to and supporting marginalised tattoo artists is central.

In the tattoo industry, which normalizes whiteness both amongst professionals and customers, BIPOC people will have a terrible time without peer support and solidarity from trustworthy accomplices.

Supporting can look like tattoo enthusiasts coming together to learn about the colonial history western tattooing and looking critically at where mainstream tattoo culture draws inspiration.

It can start from professional tattoo artists from all walks of life challenging the idea that, in tattooing, "traditional" or "old school" equals a relatively young western style of machine work, and becoming informed about the long and diverse histories of indigenous and other ancestral tattoo practices.

It can be challenging beauty norms which center whiteness and racist, patriarchal beauty ideals, and pushing your local tattoo scene to grow more inclusive, making marginalized professionals feel more welcome and the diversity of customers better represented.

We don't wish for anyone to be paralysed by this information and get stuck in cycles of white guilt. Instead, we believe that collective learning is the best path to accountability and change. This is especially the case since, living under capitalism, tattooers as well as other artists are easily isolated, subjected to competition and exploitation, and made precarious by the systems that oppress us and value profit over all else. Therefore, to grow deep roots and be sustainable, our analysis and actions need to be anti-capitalist and community-minded at heart.

Sources and further reading

On indigenous tattoo practices

“Freedom to wear your own culture on skin.” Natalia Fedosieva, Eastern Door newspaper, January 13, 2020. <https://eastern-door.com/article/freedom-to-wear-your-own-culture-on-skin>

skindigenous.tv

Skindigenous is a 13-part documentary series exploring Indigenous tattooing traditions around the world. Each episode dives into a unique Indigenous culture to discover the tools and techniques, the symbols and traditions that shape their tattooing art.

Transformative Marks podcast by Dion Kaszas.

<https://consumedbyink.com/podcast>

On indigenous struggles and colonialism

Klee Benally. No Spiritual Surrender: Indigenous Anarchy in Defense of the Sacred, 2023.

Eduardo Galeano. Memory of fire. Volume I: Genesis, Volume II: Faces and Masks, Volume III: Century of the Wind. Original trilogy by the author: Memoria del fuego, 1982–86.

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