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In between Birth and Death, Past and Future, the Self and the Others: An Anthropological Insight on Commemorative and Celebrative Tattoos in Central Italy

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Abstract: European society has been described more than once as poor in shared rites of passage. The manipulation of skin seems to be an increasingly popular solution to fulfil perceived cultural gaps. Can contemporary tattoos be interpreted as tools of commemorating life events, especially in the occasion of births and deaths? This article analyses meanings associated with tattoos collected during two ethnographies in central Italy. Based on qualitative interviews and participant observation, the first fieldwork focuses on death-commemorative tattoos, while a 2020 (n)ethnography investigates birth-celebrative tattoos. Data confirm that the body is the mirror of the self and the skin works as the plastic stage where the embodiment of mourning and other emotions meets the social world. Tattoos are attempts of personalized spiritualities, where births and deaths become key-moments of existence that are elected pillars of the self. However, they are not (only) a private affair. This paper addresses the intersubjective valence of tattoos and their communicative purpose. In parallel with references related to both the self and the others, ethnographical data support an interpretation of tattoos as modern self-making strategies, applied to re-ordinate the past and to project a suitable self for the future.

Keywords: tattoo; body-modification; rite of passage; embodiment; identity; self-construction



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1. Introduction

In an anthropological perspective, societies elaborate cultural models to face sensible changes in the life path of individuals. Rituals are collective moments of attention, providing perspectives and specific rules to think and process crucial passages which have been theorized by Arnold Van Gennep ([1909] 2012) in terms of rites of passage. The beginning of adulthood or gender identities are examples of thresholds traditionally recognized and generally corresponding to new rights and obligations (V. Turner [1967] 2001; Allovio 2014; Mead [1935] 2003; Busoni 2000; Forni et al. 2006), sometimes visualised with body-decorations or dress-codes that officially move the individual in a new stage of life noticed by the community.

Rites of passage have a collective matrix. Therefore, symbols and values connected to them are accessible by the other members of the group. For instance, as the work of Chiara Pussetti (2005) shows, the *ekentro* is chest-scarification performed by male Bijagó of the Guinea Bissau, and is an occasion to demonstrate courage and acceptance of the *manras*, the law, and all of the obligations related to the rules of the community. When a man can flaunt the *ekentro*, his community knows he has been initiated to new life phases that progressively allow him to access to marriage and exercise property's rights.

Anthropologists also started to look at everyday life activities in a ritual approach, such as taking a flight, riding the subway, or surfing (Pitt-Rivers 1986; Augé 2010; Nardini 2021), and exploring embodied methods of qualitative research, as performed by Loïc Wacquant with his fieldwork in a boxing gym in the North American city of Chicago. Sharing hours of sweaty training and painful blue ecchymosis have been interpreted as a

key ethnographical experience to access to the meanings of the gym culture, inaugurating what he called a *carnal* approach (Wacquant 2000).

Bodies work excellently to manifest cultural values, social status, or other messages readable by those who share a common cultural background and are aware of their meanings, as also confirmed by subcultural studies in reference to hairstyles or clothing (Hebdige 1979; Thornton 2013). Beyond a communicative purpose, rites involving body modification ontologically shape the individual and what is considered a proper human being, an adult, a marriable individual, or a legitimate progeny, depending on the purpose of the intervention. The Italian cultural anthropologist Francesco Remotti (1996), with the theory of the *anthropo-poiesis* (from the classic Greek *poiein*), highlights the fabrication of human beings through the intervention cultures. The constructionist process is particularly visible when rituals involve body manipulations that leave long-term marks on the skin. The humanity is not surrendered decisively: the biological incompleteness requires cultural interventions (Geertz 1998), moulding both the flesh and the cultural idea of personhood.

Rituals, and especially their meanings, are, therefore, (re)produced not only through traditional dances, songs, or coded succession of actions during ceremonies, but also on bodies. Body marks encapsulate selected experiences lived by the people who carry them, elected to be *enfleshed* (Sobchack 2004) according to the importance such episodes signify in the lifespan. They are transmitted across generations, with consequential effects on a person's sense of identity and affiliation to a group.

Facing dramatic life changes in a collective dimension offers the occasion to elaborate upon potentially upsetting events, breaking the fear of the unknown and the isolation of those that are more affected by the event. During funerals in Western societies¹, for example, a traditional formula of condolences express closeness and empathy, letting a widower recognize the emotional support of these connections through symbols such as flowers and black cloths (Sozzi 2009). Death is debatably one of the most important and painful life-event individuals are called to face, and cultures have to provide tools to think and manage what occurred: the tragedy of a loss demands cultural strategies to “domesticate” death, turning the unknown in something more human (Gorer 1967).

Cultures try to heal from death, as noted by Ernesto De Martino (1958), re-incorporating sufferers into community social life with sets of rules, ceremonies, and other coded actions aiming to restore the order challenged by death. Sometimes even the online space can support the griever, as reported by Davide Sisto, who explored death announcements, anniversaries, and mourning on social media platforms such as Facebook (Sisto 2018).

Tattoos, piercings, implants, scarification, and other body modification performed in Europe and North America in contemporary time seems to similarly work as devices to manage crucial life changes, also defined as crises.

“Each transition tends to become an identity crisis (. . .). The lifespan, in fact, is constructed in terms of the anticipated need to confront and resolve such crisis phases, at least where an individual's reflexive awareness is highly developed”. (Giddens 1991, p. 148)

“The transformative power of tattoo is especially useful for individuals experiencing crisis in their lives. Women, especially, speak of situations involving domestic abuse, the breakup of primary relationships, or serious illness. These women see in the tattoo the power to handle such crisis”. (DeMello 2000, pp. 166–67)

Beside an aesthetic valence, tattoos can safeguard personal meanings, such as memories of crucial events or meetings that an individual elects as pillar of the personality, or “knot of the existence” in Victor Sergio Ferreira's terms (Ferreira 2011). A sexual abuse, being fired, or a divorce have been defined as crucial changes which the individual can elaborate as being a defining moment in their life. The existential valence of body modification has been largely witnessed by social scientists (Le Breton [2003] 2005, Le Breton [1995] 2007; Sweetman 2000; Featherstone et al. 1991; Featherstone 2000; DeMello 2000; Fusaschi

2013), and their popularization inspired Carlos Trosman in indicating the human skin as the “cartography” of our relationship with the world (Trosman 2013).

But what happens when a society is poor of rites of passage? In other words, what happens when members of a group do not possess cultural tools (or tools perceived as appropriated) in order to think, deal and process crucial life changes? Are body modifications attempts to re-place cultural gaps to elaborate important episodes?

Modern times are characterized by an increasing interest of social researchers on personalized, new, or intimate rites of passage, especially in Western societies. They are usually connected to a supposed lack or inefficiency of traditional and collective rituals: they do not fulfil the purpose of supporter in the transition of the liminality (V. Turner [1967] 2001) and a consequential raising of individualistic “do-it-yourself” rituals have been noticed (Segalen [1998] 2002; Le Breton 2005; Han 2021). For instance, Brenda Mathijssen describes contemporary tattoos in the Netherlands: they are created by mixing the ink with the ashes from the cremation of a relative, an emotional process to elaborate the mourning (Mathijssen 2017) seen as an extreme attempt of embodiment of the departed person that is not learnt from the parent generation. The initiative is not inscribable in the set of the local traditions, challenging researchers to theorize new tanks or sources for modern intimate rituals.

Questioning the balance in between subjectivity and communal body projects, tattoos and tattooing have been analysed focusing on their transformative capacity (Kloss 2020), highlighting traces of the technique in different cultures and historical times (Castellani 1995). The diffusion of tattoos did not prevent a stigmatisation of bearers (Caplan 2000; Kosut 2006), showing heterogeneous significations, from deviancy to art-piece. In the case of the memorial tattoo, it is interpreted as *embodied grief* by the research team of the Tattoo Project, a qualitative investigation involving the creation of an online archive of visual material as complementary method (Davidson 2017). Tattoos are visual representations of the change in bearer’s identity, also defined as “adjustment” in reference to their valance as emotional supporter in processing the loss.

According to Bryan S. Turner (2000) body marks as tattoos have significative differences when they are realized in post-modern or traditional societies. In his approach, the latter are characterized by thick internal relationships marked by solidarity, while western tattoos would have been transformed in *cold* societies due to urbanization and industrialization, with weak emotional connections among members. The classification is an ideal-typical exercise. It evokes the nostalgic memory of the myth of the ‘noble savage’, where the Others are idealized and primitivized in a post-colonial approach as an example of a better version of humanity. On the other hand, modernity becomes a corrupter of citizens who regret their past, still visible looking at the Others. This approach implies a way to think of cultures as on a scale of development, rejecting multiple paths of evolution. Post-modern individuals are defined as post-emotional by Turner, and tattoos are limited to cosmetic purposes, superficial decorations on marketable bodies, and far removed from meanings of solidarity or emotional connections that are indicative of the tattoos of traditional societies.

Taking distance from a romanticization of times and emotional scale to look at societies, the present article presents a reflection on Western tattoos interpreted as intersubjective devices able to represent, (re)produce, and visualize relationships in emotional terms, going beyond an ego-centric, post-emotional, or superficial approach of body marks. This is especially evident in the case of death and birth tattoos, corresponding to personalized rites of passage where symbols arbitrarily chosen and the events are embodied. Body signs are not alternative strategies to create a contact with spirituality: they coexist with traditional forms of religiosity enhancing the agency of the individual in commemorating what deserves to be re-marked.

The analysis is based on the examinations of two sets of data originated by two field-work experiences that have been developed in the same geographical area but on different occasions. Both research projects adopted a qualitative approach, based especially on quali-

tative semi-structured interviews to a similar sample of selected informers, diversified in terms of gender, academic qualification, and social origin, and comparable for the purpose of the present reflection.

2. Between the Self and the Others

Almost a decade ago, this author explored meanings associated to commemorative tattoos in central Italy (Manfredi 2015), interviewing a sample of 12 men and women, aged between 22 and 56 years old who were joined by the decision to tattoo an image explicitly dedicated to a deceased loved one. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face, along with 18 sessions of participative observation in four tattoo-studios in the Rome district from April 2011 to September 2012. Tattooists were included as selected informers, especially in reference to their professional experience as creators of commemorative tattoos. They were the only people wearing protective masks, in a pre-COVID time. In this paper, I will re-address that ethnographical data, dedicating special attention to the social dimensions of commemorative tattoos which emerged after the second ethnographic experience that the next session will explore.

The initial research showed that tattoos were interpretable as attempts to elaborate the tragedy of death: the images included the desire to express and to socialize the loss. The bodywork is more than cosmetic decoration: it is the attempt to process the pain of the loss, creating a permanent space ready to share memories about the dead person, as Carlo's episode is going to highlight.

Carlo is the fictionalized name² of a father who lost his daughter in early 2000. He decided to get a tattoo of her portrait on his internal forearm, with the upper side of the image close to his elbow and the lower one near the wrist. When I met him, I was surprised by the position of the portrait since I could perfectly admire it standing in front of the man, while he had an up-side-down vision.

I decided to get this tattoo a few months after the funeral, and it's the first and only one I have. I do not have other tattoos although I have a lot of friends who had tattoos during the army or for Totti [football player]. I do not want other tattoos, especially now: she is the only thing that matters. Any other topic or image would be useless compared to this. My wife did not tattoo herself like me, she hates needles. But we are very different people. Maybe I needed this tattoo and the pain that came with ... I don't know. This part of the body is nice because it is exposed and immediately visible. I see it [the tattoo] every day, I see her every day, and everyone can see it. She is always here, with me, looking at me and being here. When someone asks me about the tattoo, it's like if she was close to me while I talk... I can see her when she was playing at the park or when we were walking in the street, holding her hand in mine. You know, people say we never leave our beloved until we hold them in our heart and talking about my daughter is a way to keep her memory alive. My wife was upset when I decided to get the tattoo, she was not happy at all. Seeing her face all the time, you know, it's hard for a mother, even if we have pictures of her all around at home. Anyway, she was worried I could stay too attached in the dark, you know the painful part of thinking about her. Interview with Carlo, May 2012

Carlo's tattoo became a break in the taboo of death (Gorer 1967; Davidson 2017), offering him the occasion to talk and socialize private memories of his daughter. The remotion of death in Western societies is a phenomenon that has been analysed by several scholars (Ariès 1985; Thomas 1991; Baudrillard 1993; Sozzi 2014), underlining the paucity and the progressive disappearance of collective rituals that were supposed to guide in mourning.

The tattoo appears as Carlo's strategy to evade from the silence, an attempt to insert the private pain in a collective dimension. Even if a traditional funeral took place for the girl, it was not enough. To be supported in the loss, he decided to realize the daughter's portrait a few months later. The decision was not shared by the mother of the girl, but Carlo's signified the pain of the tattooing as an instrument of a sensitive plan to process his emotions. The action was not finalized to forget, on the contrary: the embodiment aimed to

process the pain of the loss, bringing it in the social dimension through something Carlo never left: his forearm.

The presence of the memorial tattoos, something that is tactile and visual for the individual, is counterposed with the absence of the dead person (Kloss 2020), indicating a valence of the body sign as a continuity bond between the bearer and the person who was passed away (Davidson 2017). Nevertheless, griever and dead person are not the only actors involved. The position of the tattoo, oriented to a frontal observer, highlights the social purpose of the bodywork, addressed to the other people connected to Carlo's life. He preferred to sacrifice his point of view, the eye-perspective on his own arm, to privilege the onlookers of the tattoo. In other words, the tattoo project included an estimation of the perception of the mark besides the bearer, thinking about its impact on a public, as every social performance must do (V. Turner [1986] 1993).

Terence Turner coined the expression *social skin* (T. S. Turner 1980) to emphasize the intersubjective valence of body marks and the penetration of the social structure in the individual through the embodiment of cultural value. Even if the scholar refers to the Kayapò of Brazil, the terminology applies to Carlo's tattoo since the skin is confirmed as "the symbolic stage upon which the drama of socialization is enacted" (ibid., p. 112). If the author recognizes the influence of the community in body-signs among Kayapòs, the central Italy research offered the occasion to note the need of the community behind images that the individual decided to realize on the skin.

If some interlocutors showed large portions of skin dedicated to memorial tattoos (Figure 1), with names, date, and portraits that have a more explicit commemorative purpose, others interviewees chose to be tattooed with butterflies and stars that an outsider can easily interpret as general decorations. The bearer is in charge to decide what and how much to share about the meaning of his mark: "Sometimes I just say that the butterfly is for my love of nature, or because I like the bugs. Only if I am in the mood I start to talk about my father, but sometimes I just say that it is for a special person, not even mentioning his death", as Adelia said caressing her blue mark (Figure 2).



Figure 1. Chest commemorative tattoo. Picture by the author.



Figure 2. Adelia's commemorative tattoo. Picture on courtesy of the interviewee.

The tattooed symbol, in virtue of the polysemic valence of images, can be adapted to different self-narratives according to the audience, the emotional state of the tattooed person or the social occasion, just to mention a few variables. The privacy of a loss can also be safe-guarded choosing a body's part generally covered by clothes, as Riccardo and Francesca stated. The siblings tattooed the same image in the memory of their mother, a verse of a poem that the woman was used to tell them during childhood, and they both positioned the tattoos on their left ribs, close to the heart, since ... "We didn't want to have it always under the eyes or to have to explain it to everyone". Additional to memorial meaning, Riccardo and Francesca signified the two identical marks as a visual representation of the brotherhood, even stronger with the orphanage.

Commemorative tattoos do not only have a communicative purpose: they ontologically mould the person who carries them. Following the anthropo-poietical perspective, the tattooed people (re)produces themselves, electing the death of the beloved ones as knot of their existence, as one of the major events of the life that shaped who they are. The body is hence confirmed as the mirror of the self, and modifications correspond to intentions in the production of a specific desired self (Shilling 1993; Giddens 1991). The individual addresses his corporality as a project able to host actions directed to define who they want to be, in a constructionist and individualist approach.

In Carlo's case, the commemorative tattoo celebrates not only his daughter and the pain of her death, but also Carlo himself, as a mourning father. The departure of a close person causes grief not only for the separation from the dead, but also because a portion of ourself dies too. When a beloved person passes away, we must separate also from the part of our identity that we experienced in the relationship. In this sense each mourning corresponds to a double separation to emotionally deal with and commemorative tattoos are linked to both: the one who left this world and the self who fights to survive, linking them despite the imposed separation. Creating a memorial tattoo can hence be interpreted as an act aiming to anchor the self against the aftermaths of a dramatic event.

The post-modern identity has been examined as a process in continuous construction (Baumann 1999; Giddens 1991), a responsibility of the individuals who need to constantly perform the best version of themselves as authentic, unique, competitive, and possibly young, beautiful, and healthy (Jarrin and Pussetti 2021). The identity is a product influenced by the values of the society where we live, those that we learnt in the family context and during the lifespan. Therefore, several factors shape how a person perceives themselves,

including the specific effort people dedicate towards how they are perceived by others. In this sense, it's interesting to remember Carlo's tattoo position, explicitly oriented to his interlocutors: he presents himself through the image of his departed daughter, being the forearm a well visible body part for much of the year in the warm weather of Central Italy.

Commemorative tattoos do not inform only about a person who died, but also narrate about the individual who survives and about how the person aims to be perceived, in relation to that particular life-event. The identity is a process involving others as much as the individual; a commemorative tattoo is a performance acted on the social skin to construct an identity facet deeply influenced by the selected episode. The collective and individual dimensions are so deeply connected in commemorative tattoos, where multiple selves try to be combined, saved, and processed.

3. Between the Life and Death

In 2020, the occasion to re-examine findings related to commemorative tattoos arrived. A relevant portion of new contacts, met during my ongoing doctoral project, mentioned body-marks dedicated to both mourning episodes and new births. The doctoral project "Learning to Fly", in course of development at the Institute of Social Sciences at the University of Lisbon, investigates body suspensions in Europe: the social practice involves the insertion of metal hooks in the skin as temporary piercing; hooks are connected to ropes and to an above scaffolding, and (pulling the main rope) a person is elevated for as long as wished.

Body suspension practitioners are extensively modified with a wide range of techniques, highlighting the continuity of suspensions with other forms of body manipulations, especially tattoos. Preliminary results show that suspensions are inserted in a life-long path where bodies are approached as an identity's map, where each mark is connected to a relevant episode that the person recognizes as influence in the making of the self. In other words, the body intervention celebrates the arbitrary selection of a moment, or a meeting, as crucial for the definition of the personality in a self-reflexive perspective (Giddens 1991).

During interviews exploring meanings related to body suspensions, research-partners were used to narrate their life story, caressing their tattoos as emotional switches able to re-activate intimate memories: many skin-signs were dedicated to the death of important people, relatives, or friends, while tattoos connected to children were not rare for those who were parents.

At the beginning of the pandemic, when Italy was just at the end of the first lockdown to contain COVID-19's spread in 2020, I extended my doctoral sample exploring meanings of birth-tattoos performed by people not extensively modified; the aim was to create a pole of comparison for the data collected among body suspension practitioners. This article's session focuses on findings originated by the mentioned segment of the doctoral fieldwork, from May 2020 to the summer of the same year, in a comparative exercise with findings on commemorative death tattoos previously presented.

Members of the two samples have in common the geographical localization (the Rome district), the age-range, and being clients of the same tattoo-studios. The presence of tattoos on their bodies is not extended as suspension practitioners and are not located on the face or hands, resulting in body-marks that can be covered by clothing.

Due to lockdown conditions, many of the research-settings characterizing the former research were not repeatable, such as the participative observation. I maintained the qualitative methodology with semi-structured interviews, this time mainly performed by phone and text-messages, with a few of face-to-face interviews in late 2020. The sample of four men and six women was recruited from a Facebook group of parents based in the town where the former research was conducted and with a snowball effect. I posted a call for interviewees in the bulletin board (Figure 3) informing about the purpose of the research, presenting myself as mother and anthropologist, and providing following details for informed consent in the first contacts we had in private, usually through the platform of Messenger. A group of 22 people reacted to the call, mainly with private messages that

migrated from the group discussion. Excluded people did not correspond to the criteria of the study or they withdrew their availability during the research, while other selected informers have been recruited from personal contacts.



Figure 3. Post from Facebook’s group recruiting interviewees³.

The ethical choices related to the online investigation correspond to those adopted in the doctoral research, and they have been positively valued by the Ethics Board of the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon.

The purpose of the study was to investigate if tattoos were suitable tools to celebrate life events usually defined as opposite to death—the births—and if similar meanings and characters were involved, compared to commemorative tattoos. Curiously, data showed that those who realized tattoos to celebrate the birth of their children had commemorative tattoos too, as in the case of Isabella, a schoolteacher in her early 30s. She decided to tattoo the name of her son on her wrist as soon as the breast-feeding was concluded. This precaution was not motivated by local regulations, but Isabella was concerned for possible allergic reactions or skin infections that would require antibiotic treatments or other medicament assumptions that could compromise breast-feeding. Another source of concern was the contraction of blood infections, a sufficient motivation to wait few extra months before arranging the tattoo appointment.

The decision to celebrate a baby’s arrival with a tattoo has often been narrated as a desire started during the pregnancy, especially in case of parents with one or two antecedent tattoos. The long-term project, elaborated during the baby’s gestation and the breast-feeding, shows that the decision is not impulsive and requires, on the contrary, a long period of premeditation. Investigating the existence and meanings of Isabella’s previous tattoos, she mentioned a first one when she turned 18 years old, with a decorative purpose that probably today she would not do again. The second tattoo, the one preceding the celebrative one, was instead dedicated to the voluntary interruption of a pregnancy she experienced seven years before.

“It’s on one of my feet, little and discreet. I did it when I voluntary interrupted a pregnancy that I was not able to face. It was voluntary but it was a sufferance anyway. It was a very difficult moment, but I had to do that. I did not want to forget that moment, even if it was very painful, and so I decided to make this tattoo. When I went to the tattooist, I was accompanied by a person who didn’t know the meaning of the tattoo. It was important for me to be with someone, but I was not ready to share all the emotions behind that mark. There are very few people who still know about it today”. Interview with Isabella, May 2020

Isabella recognises in the tattoo a difficult decision she had to take, but also her capacity to survive the emotions connected to the abortion. Even if unpleasant, the episode is embodied, engraved in the memory and in the flesh, and the permanence of the mark subtracts the episode from the obliviousness of the time. Death and birth find their space and co-exist in Isabella’s body, as well as in the story of her life. Both are perceived as key-moments of her lifespan; they are experiences defining who she is today.

Paul Sweetman notices that body-marks can be understood as strategy to anchor the self (Sweetman 2000), or to stabilize how the person perceives themselves: the identity is not a fixed entity but something incessantly in motion and influenced by meetings, conversations, and discoveries we made or, more generally, by our experiences. Every day, we are a little different from who we were yesterday, and Antony Giddens, inspired by Bourdieu's studies (Bourdieu 1995), writes about the exigence of the individuals in highlighting the continuity of the self-versions through time to maintain a sense of continuity (Giddens 1991). Francesco Remotti evidenced efforts made to construct immutable identities, also named as "identity obsessions" (Remotti 2010), exasperated during dictatorships or when the definition of a common enemy was based on the counter-position of national or racial based identities.

The concept of crisis can hence be extended and reflexively applied to any event perceived as connected to the sense of identity, including positive changes, such as births or life-lessons, and occasions of personal growth.

"A 'crisis' exists whenever activities concerned with important goals in the life of an individual or a collectivity suddenly appear inadequate". (Giddens 1991, p. 186)

4. Between Past and Future

Stabilizing the self with a tattoo can be analysed as a strategy to deal with the precariousness of human life, a reaction against the precarity of living in a *liquid society* (Baumann 1999). The action, even if a palliative solution, relieves from the incessant flow of events characterizing life and it creates a safe-port that will persist independently of future new changes. A baby's birth deserves to be positively celebrated as a fundamental life change. Sometimes the body project is performed by the parents together, with the same image or selecting the same body part for the mark, similarly to what Riccardo and Francesca did when the mother passed away.

Stefano and his wife are the parents of a little boy and they both have tattoos celebrating his arrival, but with different images and positions. Despite differences in body marks, they both feel that the tattoo of the partner is connected to themselves since they share the parenting experience. Whilst the mother preferred the shoulder, the father chose that the entire forearm would be the suitable place for the name of the son in italic (Figure 4). The writing is decorated with rolling dice since: "It was my best lucky-strike", as Stefano said. The couple want to have more children and Stefano is already planning a second tattoo on the left forearm when a little sister or brother arrives.



Figure 4. Celebrative birth-tattoo. Picture on courtesy of the interviewee.

"He is the best thing I did in my life, the biggest joy I experience every day except the love for his mother. I feel I'm really a lucky man and the tattoo reminds me that, every time that I need it". Interview with Stefano, June 2020

The parents do not self-define as “proper people of church”, as they assert, since “we do not attend the Mass every single Sunday morning, but we try to do our best to be good people” (from fieldwork notes, June 2020). In this sense they signify the choice to organize the Christian ceremony for the sacrament of the baptism in the first year of life of their child. After the religious rite, the parents organized a party inviting all family members. The celebrative tattoos are not linked as connected to the religious ceremony, neither an alternative strategy to fulfil the entrance of the baby in his community. They are a personal and intimate act of devotion to mark a life episode that was perceived as exceptional and life changing, probably more connected to the person who carries the tattoos rather than to the child.

The tattoo is a celebration of a new life, that of the baby, but also a praise for the beginning of a new life section for Stefano: the paternity. The tattoo tells the story to those who want to hear that: Stefano, his wife and all of the people that will look at his arm in the future. Several audiences are hence involved. As noted by Jerome Bruner (2015), the self-construction is a process that is developed through the narration and research findings demonstrating that tattoos work in this direction. The storytelling can be an opportunity to create order, to overcome a crisis since it organizes the past, stabilizing versions of the self in accordance with the present one and those of the future. The individuals directly create themselves, portraying the episodes that shaped them, moulding the flesh as direct evidence of their influence. The operation is an arbitrary selection in balance between the memory and the imagination for the wished self that, in the reported case of study, involves the paternity.

Birth-tattoos, as death-ones, are connected to the exigence to remember and experience the meaning of the body mark in everyday life, not necessarily in a private way. As Stefano said, the tattoo functions to *remind*, or to anchor a facet of the identity potentially destabilized by the flow of the time. The ink under the skin saves the event and the self who experienced it, protecting them. The meaning is safeguarded in the future of the person, especially the awareness of them, and the skin acquires the responsibility to maintain such progression in the personal life-journey. The pain is not signified in cathartic ways as it was for commemorative tattoos; in a few cases the painful process for the creation of the tattoo was expressed as the demonstration of the commitment for being a good parent for the baby, a proof of dedication, but generally it did not host relevant meanings.

The position of birth-tattoos is variable but ethnographical data shows that the choice of visible body parts is connected to projects of socialization of tattoo's meanings, similarly to findings exposed for commemorative body-marks. The hair stylist Laura had her two children when she was 21 and 25 years old, and today each one has a tattoo dedicated on her skin; she chooses the images of two Disney characters, which correspond to the theme of the baptism she organized. At the time of the interview, she was pregnant and was already planning the topic and the position for the next birth-tattoo of her upcoming third child. Before those marks, she embodied other important relationships related to two members of her family, tattooing the initial latter of her husband's name and a little butterfly when her mother was in coma. Laura's tattoos are all realized on her feet or the internal-upper part of her arms, since: “I can easily cover them when I work, but they are also well visible when I'm at the beach or when I can informally dress myself, when I am with my friends and I can show the tattoos without worries” (Interview with Laura, April 2020).

Preoccupations concerning the exposition of tattoos to selected audiences are connected to preventive strategies to face stigmatization processes (Kosut 2006), as well as the indication that not anyone is able to have publicly visible tattoos, or share its meaning. More than one version of the self needs to be promoted, both the proud mother and the professional. The latter would be compromised with visible tattoos. Therefore, the decision to be tattooed, as well as the dimension and the position of the marks, are aspects involved in the projects of the corporality and on plans of enhancement of the self toward the community where the social actor lives.

When I asked Laura why she got her tattoos, she did not fully understand: “They are a clear expression of my joy in being a parent, don’t you see?”. The expression of emotions, especially the pride of parenting, was a common trait in data collected. Elisa’s case was an exception: she always wanted a tattoo, but she never felt sure enough about an image to think she would never stop to love to have it on her body for the rest of her life. This thought changed when her little girl was born.

“Elisa: I was so worried I would get tired! I always wanted a tattoo, but every subject gave me the idea to be something ephemeral, that I would regret after a while. Years ago, I had an appointment in a tattoo-studio but then I had to postpone, and then the tattoo artist didn’t show up, so I took it as a sign of bad-luck, and I gave up. Then Aurora was born, and I understood that was the good moment. She is a love that I can’t get tired. Her name is simply perfect!”

Ethnographer: But this tattoo is more for her or for you?

Elisa: I never thought about it, but I believe it is for me. I spent years thinking about a good subject to tattoo and then she gave something so deep and immortal, deserving an indelible mark on my skin. Even my father has a tattoo about my daughter, but he is a tattoo-addicted [laughs]. He loves his grandchild and beside the tattoo he demonstrates it in a thousand of ways”. Interview with Elisa, July 2020

Elisa’s tattoo is dedicated to her child but in a different way from those previously exposed: the realization is based on a decorative interest and the experience of parenting legitimizes the irreversibility of the mark. Elisa’s assumption is based on a social construction of parenting that romanticized maternity as a never-ending love (Badinter 2012; D’Amelia 2005), so a solid concept that can protect the tattooed subjects against Elisa’s loss of conviction. Additionally, if carrying a tattoo can be a controversial choice since of risks of stigmatizations, a mark connected to a socially unblamed role guarantees more tolerance compared to tattoos which were chosen for solely their aesthetic purpose since they are perceived as superficial. The love of a parent for a new born and the pain of a griever are licit subjects elevating the person who carries them and enhancing the body performativity in a logic of excellence (Pussetti 2021).

5. Conclusions

This article exposed reflections on contemporary tattoos related to birth and death episodes, analysed in terms of intimate and self-centred acts, going beyond an aesthetic-decorative perception. The embodiment of relationships characterizes the meaning that the individual connects to the body-marks, offering the occasion to reflect on the skin as *social stage* (T. S. Turner 1980). The presence of the Others, and the intersubjective dimension, is taken into account in the strategies of positioning tattoos, as well as the desire to socialize the experiences and emotions that the individual symbolizes with the body-sign, operating on the continuity of the bond with the dead person and with social connections still around them. In a reflexive approach, the skin and its modifications are the tools enhancing the individual and their social performativity through the body, being tattoos as public demonstrations of the acceptance of legitimate emotions or new roles.

The body is constructed through the incision of the skin and the self, resulting in a product confirming the entrepreneurship of the self (Foucault 2005) in front of specific audiences: the body is subject of long-term investments, in a life-long commitment to self-development and respecting the logic of excellence. The projectivity of each mark is extended beyond the bearer’s skin and, in this sense, the collective and the individual dimensions are co-existing in meanings attributed to tattoos.

Ethnographical data supports an interpretation of contemporary tattoos investigated in Central Italy as strategies of self-narration: the body-sign stabilizes a life episode signified as crucial for the development of the person, namely a mourning or the birth of a child. Tattooing is an act that freezes time, the relationship with the subject-person but also the individual itself against the continuous flow of events. At the same time, the act projects

a suitable self in the future, revealing the constructionist process constituting it and the power, responsibility, and importance of individual choices in producing a specific form of self.

Finally, the comparative exercise in between two ethnographic experiences dedicated to the exploration of birth-celebrative and death-commemorative tattoos, revealed the complementation of personal rites of passage and traditional religious ceremonies, as well as a connected perception of new lives and deaths.

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Notes

- ¹ I use the term *Western* as it is understood by Pietro Scarducci (2003), who doesn't portray a homogeneous society placed in a misleading “West”, but identifies it as similar patterns and behaviours shared among European countries and North America, rather than with other areas of the world.
- ² Research-partners received the possibility to choose among different strategies of anonymity, discussing also the possibility to exhibit pictures and to quote excerpts of interviews. In my opinion, an imposed anonymity would assume to adopt a paternalistic position, implying to know what was better for the participants. At the contrary, a participatory approach was proposed and reformulated thanks to research partners contributions.
- ³ [Goodmorning mothers! I'm a mum-researcher and decided to start a new project in this period of stress and anxiety: can you help me? I look for parents with tattoos related to children (or piercing or other body modification) aiming to anonymously share (through facebook, whatsup, texts or vocal messages). It seems this is a popular way to celebrate parenthood and I would like to explore it as an anthropologist. Write me in private if you want to cooperate. Thanks!].

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