INKING THE BODY: PERSPECTIVES ON TATTOOING IN TURKEY'S QUEER COMMUNITIES

by
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INKING THE BODY: PERSPECTIVES ON TATTOOING IN TURKEY'S QUEER COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis aims to explore the narratives of tattooed LGBTQ+ individuals in Turkey, examining their experiences of embodiment and queerness through the lens of their body art. It attempts to reveal the transformative capacity of tattooing as a uniquely fluid practice, from the initial creation of the tattoo to the experience of daily life in a tattooed body. Despite the context in which both queerness and tattooing face significant stigmatization within hegemonic power systems, tattoos can open opportunities for individual self-making and imagining queer futurity. The research is based on six in-depth interviews with tattooed, self-identified queer people, two visits to tattoo studios in Istanbul as an observer, and extensive academic review. The tattoo studio is examined as a place of both harm and healing with the goal of making sense of the conflicting encounters that may occur in these localities and how these encounters are understood by my participants. Analyzing the symbols and meanings attached to tattoos, the thesis presents some of the ways people employ tattooing to affirm their queerness, including the under-studied idea of tattoos without narratives. Lastly, I consider the ways tattoos interact with conceptualizations of flexible temporality and aging as a queer person. This thesis ultimately aims to present diverse experiences of queer embodiment and demonstrate how tattoos create new possibilities for each queer existence.

ÖZET

TÜRKİYE'NİN KUİR TOPLULUKLARINDA DÖVMEYE İLİŞKİN PERSPEKTİFLER

EMILY ROSE JOSEPH

KÜLTÜREL ÇALIŞMALAR YÜKSEK LİSANS TEZİ, AUGUSTOS 2023

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Bu tez, Türkiye'deki dövmeli LGBTQ+ bireylerin hikayelerini, beden sanatlarının merceğinden bedenlenme ve kuir olma deneyimlerini inceleyerek keşfetmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Dövmenin ilk yaratımından dövmeli bir bedende gündelik yaşam deneyimine kadar, dövmenin benzersiz derecede akışkan bir uygulama olarak dönüştürücü kabiliyetini ortaya çıkarmaya çalışmaktadır. Hem kuir olmanın hem de dövmenin hegemonik güç sistemleri içinde önemli ölçüde damgalanmaya maruz kaldığı bağlama rağmen, dövmeler bireysel kendini yaratma ve kuir bir geleceği hayal etme fırsatları yaratabilir. Araştırma, dövmeli, kendini kuir olarak tanımlayan kişilerle yapılan altı derinlemesine görüşmeye, İstanbul'daki dövme stüdyolarına gözlemci olarak yapılan iki ziyarete ve kapsamlı akademik incelemeye dayanmaktadır. Dövme stüdyosu, bu mekânlarda meydana gelebilecek çelişkili karşılaşmaları ve bu karşılaşmaların katılımcılar tarafından nasıl anlaşıldığını anlamlandırmak amacıyla hem zarar hem de şifa veren bir yer olarak incelenmiştir. Dövmelere atfedilen sembolleri ve anlamları analiz eden tez, insanların kuir olduklarını onaylamak için dövme yaptırma şekillerinden bazılarını, üzerinde pek çalışılmamış olan hikayesiz dövme fikrini de içerecek şekilde sunmaktadır. Son olarak, dövmelerin esnek zamansallık ve kuir bir kişi olarak yaşlanma kavramlarıyla nasıl etkileşime girdiğini ele almaktayım. Bu tez sonuç olarak kuir bedenlenmenin çeşitli deneyimlerini sunmayı ve dövmelerin her kuir varoluş için nasıl yeni olasılıklar yarattığını göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır.

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for the bodies that were, bodies that are,
and bodies that have not yet come to pass

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the 1998 anthology Looking Queer: Body Image and Identity in Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, and Transgender Communities, author Catherine Lundoff writes that her tattoos "place me in my body, some place that I have often not wanted to be, and let me be strong and powerful in that body. They are outward manifestations of how I feel about myself, reclaiming my body for me the way I want to" (Lundoff, 1998, p. 127). Tattooing, as Lundoff discusses, has the potential to be immensely powerful, full of intention to assert control over and ownership of one's body. Tattoos can also be frivolous, mournful, or even comedic. They can function as a reminder of a deeply personal life event, represent a shared group identity, or can be done on a whim as a joke. The visceral, embodied nature of tattooing and the way a tattoo permanently alters one's physical being makes tattooing a very nuanced subject. The act of putting ink into skin is a deeply complicated practice, full of various, often conflicting meanings and implications for each tattooed individual. Despite this complexity, in much of the world, tattooing has also been stigmatized and associated with criminalized behaviors. In the twenty-first century, as taboos around tattoos fade and tattoos become increasingly common, these conflicting meanings proliferate.

This global trend is also visible in urban centers in Turkey, particularly in wealthy, socially liberal, highly educated neighborhoods. Tattoo studios are plentiful, and tattoos can be seen on people in many areas of public life, from coffee shop baristas to office workers to elementary school teachers. Tattoos are likewise common in Turkey's queer communities and often visible in queer spaces. In a time when sexual/gender nonconforming individuals are often targeted by the Turkish government and face stigmatization, asserting agency over one's body and identity carries significant power. Despite the clear prevalence of tattooing in these communities, there is a lack of research on the factors driving this popularity. What motivates queer-identifying individuals to get tattoos? How do various queer folks experience the act of receiving a tattoo? How do they negotiate visibility - both of their tattoos

and of their queerness - in a time when both face censorship? What meanings do they assign to their body art, and how does gender identity interact with tattooing practices? How do they think about temporality vis-a-vis their tattoos? What is the relationship between queerness and this particular approach to embodiment in this specific time and place? This thesis aims to explore these questions and more, contributing to our knowledge of embodiment and aesthetic practices in queer communities in Turkey today.

1.1 Stigmatized Histories

Despite their thousands of years of history and their diverse affirmative potentials, tattoos still face stigmatization or elicit disapproval in much of the world. In the Global North, tattooing has been associated with low-income professions and "deviant" or criminalized behaviors for the last four hundred years (Thompson, 2015, p. 34). The English word "tattoo" comes from the Samoan word tatau and was brought into the lexicon in the 17th and 18th centuries by European sailors who had traveled to Polynesia and received tattoos from the islands' indigenous peoples. In this time period, tattooing in Europe and the United States was largely limited to sailors, people who made a living as sideshow exhibits (Vale & Juno, 1989, p. 119), and later, criminal gangs (Breathnach & Farrell, 2015; Thompson, 2015, p. 26). The risk of bloodborne illnesses, such as hepatitis or HIV, due to the use of unsanitized needles further contributed to the aura of danger around tattooing. Although many of the historical, economic, and cultural conditions which created this stigma have faded, the social perception of tattooing as a deviant behavior has lingered. Research has shown that tattooed individuals are still often assumed to be more impulsive, less intelligent, or less trustworthy than non-tattooed people, especially by older generations (Ekinci et al., 2012; Broussard & Harton, 2017; Dean, 2010; Ruffle & Wilson, 2019).

This stigma is also present in Turkey, despite (or perhaps, connected to) the notable history of traditional tattooing in the eastern part of the country, particularly within marginalized Kurdish and Arab communities (Durmaz, 2022; Taşğın & Mollica, 2016). The state-sponsored stigmatization of tattooing includes Diyanet, the Turkish government's religious body, issuing a statement calling for all Muslims to remove their tattoos. Tattoos are often perceived impure or unclean and prohibitive of traditional Islamic cleaning practices, known as abdest in Turkish, although the accuracy of this perception has been debated by Islamic scholars (Bedeninde Dövme

Bulunan Kişinin Namazı Geçerli Olur Mu?, 2019). Visible tattoos are prohibited in some professions, such as the police force (Polis Olmanın Şartları Değişti, 2018). Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has publicly spoken against tattooing by admonishing a Galatasaray football player for his visible tattoos, asking him, "why are you harming your body in this way?" (Altuncu, 2017). As in other areas of the world, older generations in particular are expected to maintain unfavorable views of tattoos. A number of my participants mentioned their concern over their families' disapproval of tattoos, leading them to hide their tattoos for a period. One of my participants, Murat, for example, said he did not tell his parents when he got his first tattoo, because he feared that his family "will get angry or will be bothered." Gül Özyeğin has argued that Suad Joseph's notion of the connective self, in which people understand themselves in relation to their communities rather than as entirely autonomous, independent individuals, is applicable in the Turkish context. Özyeğin claims that connectivity is "produced and pursued in interrelated institutional, affective, and psychological domains" (Özyeğin, 2015, p. 23). Given this emphasis on community bonds, the persistent prejudice against tattoos naturally has an impact on people's decision-making processes regarding whether or not to get tattooed, reinforcing the existing taboo against tattoos.

However, since the late 20th century, several factors have coincided to contribute to tattooing's rise in global popularity. For one, knowledge around proper sterilization procedures has become more widely disseminated, and many governments have begun to regulate the tattoo industry, requiring standardized safety education (Santibanez, 2020, p. 69). Additionally, and crucially, the tools required for tattooing have become markedly more accessible and more refined (Walker & Davies, 2022; Vale & Juno, 1989, p. 65). Whereas historically tattoo machines were often both expensive and crude, modern tattoo machines have become cheaper, lowering the financial barrier to entry into the field, and better, improving the quality of the tattoos that may be produced. The quality and range of color of inks used in tattooing have increased – in the mid-20th century, artists were limited to basic black, turquoise, and red, whereas today artists can work with a full spectrum of colorful inks (Vale & Juno, 1989, p. 125). Learning to tattoo used to require an apprenticeship in a tattoo studio because the companies that produced tattoo machines would not sell to unaffiliated individuals. An artist could not even begin to learn how to tattoo without the sponsorship of a studio and a mentor artist. This made tattoo studios small, deeply insular communities and added to the sense of tattooing as a subcultural phenomenon.

Now, though, tattoo machines are easily purchasable from many online retailers, including Amazon in the United States and Hepsiburada in Turkey. Would-be tat-

too artists can, and often do, buy a cheap machine and begin to learn by doing rudimentary designs on themselves and their friends at home. There are multiple Turkish-language tutorial videos on Youtube on how to tattoo. One of my subjects, who studied Art and Design, suggested that he was considering buying a machine to learn to tattoo himself. The proliferation of tattoo studios has also opened up more opportunities for professional apprenticeships. The increasing accessibility of tattooing "has saturated mainstream society," which has corresponded to some loosening of stigma (Thompson, 2015, p. 17). The history of stigmatization still lingers in the minds of many of my participants - most mentioned that, after getting their first visible tattoos, they feared discrimination in their professional pursuits. However, most reported that, despite their initial concern, they received very little negative feedback on their body ink. Tattooing in Turkey is now so common that some of my participants even had parents or older relatives with tattoos.

In the Turkish context, queerness has also faced significant stigmatization in recent decades. Kaos GL, one of the largest LGBTQIA+ rights organizations in Turkey, reported that they had recorded at least eight homophobic/transphobic-related murders in 2021 but believe there may have been more which "were not reflected in the press" (Koçak, 2022). In their 2023 report, the International Gay, Lesbian, Trans, and Intersex Associate (IGLA) gave Turkey a 4 percent score on their evaluation of LGBTQIA+ human rights within the country, noting the prevalence of bias-motivated speech and the lack of legal protections (Annual Review, 2023). There are a number of large queer social and political associations, including Kaos Gl, that organize in the face of this opposition to support Turkey's dynamic queer communities; simultaneously, there have been increasing incidents of state-sanctioned homophobia (Savcı, 2021). The legal rights and visibility of queer communities are often contested in public discourse, to the extent that they were frequently employed in the recent election (Kayaoğlu, 2023; Wilks, 2023). During a political meeting at the beginning of May, President Erdoğan stated, "L.G.B.T. is a poison injected into the institution of the family. It is not possible for us to accept that poison as a country whose people are 99 percent Muslim" (Hubbard et al., 2023). By referring to queer people as a "poison," he both dehumanizes and pathologizes them, depicting them as a toxin. This aggressive rhetoric equates queerness with an intolerable danger that targets healthy family structures. It also functions to obscure factors that concretely demonstrate the issues facing families in Turkey today, such as the high rates of divorce, prevalence of domestic violence, and femicide (Kavaklı, 2022). In a materialization of this rhetorical vein, police raided the office of a LGBTI+ student club at Boğaziçi University, one of the region's top universities, and confiscated a ubiquitous rainbow pride flag; the university's government-appointed rector

later effectively forced the club to close (Özbay, 2022). Formal queer associations like this club have become a popular target for state surveillance and violence.

Beyond this discriminatory discourse in the public sphere, extensive research has also examined how, within the private sphere, the concept of "coming out" and disclosing one's LGBTQ+ identity to family or friends remains fraught for most individuals and "decisively structures gay life/identity" (Özyeğin, 2015, p. 265). The general attitude towards queer individuals is that of "don't ask, don't tell;" that is, queerness can be ignored if it happens behind closed doors but public displays of queerness (e.g., queer-presenting partners kissing on the lips, or an individual dressing in a gender nonconforming way) are not permissible and elicit recrimination. Returning to Suad Joseph's idea of connectivity, as employed by Özyeğin, community bonds constitute "an important site for constructions of sexual selves" and thus family/community opinion impacts how queer individuals conduct themselves in all areas of life (Özyeğin, 2015, p. 23).

Although there are many differences in the levels of stigmatization and the potential for violence faced for being queer versus being tattooed, there is a small parallel here to attitudes towards tattoos. People with small, concealable tattoos are less likely to face discrimination than those with large, visible tattoos. Similarly, queer people who are capable of "passing" as straight and refrain from public displays of nonheterosexuality are perceived as less of a threat to the normative gender/sexual hierarchies supported by the Turkish state. The private versus public binary is significantly influential in how individuals in Turkey shape their embodied identities.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

For the purpose of this thesis, I am largely operating off of the broad definition of queer that is typical within the field of queer studies. Jack Halberstam defines "queer" as "nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time" (Halberstam, 2005). Or, in the words of bell hooks, I am talking about "'queer' not as being about who you're having sex with, though that can be a dimension of it, but 'queer' as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live" (hooks, 2014). As both definitions indicate, this understanding of "queer" is not strictly limited to sexual and gender identities but more expansively related to an oppositional stance to the larger hegemonic systems of gender and sexuality operating in the contemporary world. "Queer" suggests

the blurring of boundaries, the destabilization of binary systems, the unfolding of unforeseen/unforeseeable futures. Furthermore, the notion of "queer" employed in my work is informed by the work of non-Western scholars including Evren Savcı and Duygu Ula, who speaks of "queer" "not as a blanket term that travels without issues, but rather as an indeterminate oppositional force whose definition can be molded and multiplied in productive ways the more it travels" (Ula, 2019). The academic field of queer studies historically has deep roots in North American/Western European academic traditions and thus often carries the biases that operate in those spaces; as this thesis is about communities outside of those regions, it is essential to identify and acknowledge that this work stems from a separate (but still deeply entangled) perspective.

Thus, with this definition of "queer" in mind, what then is the "queer body"? If we take Halberstam's definition, queer embodiment is "nonnormative;" that is, apart from the cisheteronormative expectations of a stable, fixed, linear embodied existence. After Halberstam personally underwent top surgery, also known as a double mastectomy, they discussed experiencing a "shift from the idea of embodiment as being housed in one's flesh to embodiment as a more fluid architectural project" (Halberstam, 2018, p. 24). There is a striking similarity here to hooks's definition of queerness: the queer body is closely tied to invention and creation. In her research on tattooing among Italian lesbians, Castellani claims that "queering the body cuts ties with the past" (2020, p. 63). I suggest we problematize this idea by considering how the queer body is also a part of the natural and historical diversity of physical human forms. Bodies have been intentionally altered throughout the course of human existence across many communities; queer bodies are another piece of this long story. For many individuals, queering the body can in fact be a method of connecting with the past by carrying on the traditions of their ancestral communities or fulfilling the wishes of their younger selves (Alvarez, 2020). Thus, the queer body is an ongoing project, in continuity with the past, which embraces the potential for change and augmentation in the future.

There is another side to this idea of the queer body project, however. Research has suggested that people who identify within the LBGTQ+ spectrum are more likely to struggle with body image issues, including disordered eating practices (Calzo et al., 2017; Convertino et al., 2022; Goldhammer et al., 2019). Although queer people may be stereotypically expected to support the deconstruction of traditional beauty expectations, the mere effect of having been raised within cis-heternormativity can leach into one's self-image. Furthermore, queer communities often create and police their own beauty norms, which may feel "just as restrictive" as traditional norms (Meyers et al., 1998, p. 24). There are a number of subcategories within queer

aesthetic presentation that have their own rigid norms - from “twink” gay men who are expected to maintain a slim physique, to butch lesbians who are expected to have short hair and muscular arms, to nonbinary individuals who are expected to present androgynously and avoid traditionally-gendered clothing. When the oppositionality in queerness is reflected back on the self, queer individuals may feel at odds with their body. Indeed, incongruity between one’s sense of self and one’s bodily features is often a major trait of trans* experiences (using the asterisk per Halberstam to indicate the indeterminateness of gender nonconformity). A deep desire to surgically alter one’s corporeal form remains widespread within trans* communities, as shown by the prevalence of gender affirmation surgeries (Canner et al., 2018).

Yet, the idea of being born in a “wrong body” is rightfully considered outdated, and dysphoria is no longer understood as an essential part of trans* identities. The “wrong body” narrative suggests that gender nonconforming bodies are naturally suffering and demand to be altered, because they are fundamentally “a conflictual, underprivileged and ill site of broken promises” (Nirta, 2021). This discourse implies that queer bodies are compelled or required to undergo surgical alteration because they are “wrong,” not freely electing to change out of a desire for expression. It also reflects the historic medicalization of queer gender and sexualities, in which a trans body has an illness that can be “cured,” if they can only afford to undergo the right procedure. Indeed, although the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) removed its classification of homosexuality as a mental disorder in 1973, “gender identity disorder” (GID) remained in the manual until 2013 (Russo, 2017). GID was replaced with “gender dysmorphia,” to acknowledge that gender nonconformity is not inherently pathological and focus on addressing the internal distress felt by many (but not all) trans people.

Instead of this conceptualization of queer bodies as wrong or ill, there has been a shift in queer theory that proposes reading the compulsion for alteration as “an ethics committed to corporeal joy and to the celebration of what the body can reach, its potentialities, its ability to evolve into other, into the new” (Nitra, 2021). With this being said, it bears mentioning that this celebration of change is markedly not a search for some ultimate final form - as noted by Dean Kiley and many others, there is a risk of viewing the queer body as “the ultimate postmodern product, never perfect but always about to be perfected” (Kiley, 1998, p. 336). Crucially, as I will discuss in the coming chapters, this is an understanding of the queer body as an archive, not “a final resting place of selfhood” but rather a body with an “ability to change, move, and be constantly erased and supplemented” (Crawford, 2010). Instead of a venture seeking some ultimate, ideal, static form, the queer body is a continuous, open-ended project of creation.

Perhaps, then, we can easily see how tattooing came to be such a common piece of the queer embodied experience. Though tattoos are not typically cheap or painless, they are far cheaper and less painful than gender affirmation surgeries. And for cisgender queers, tattooing may function as a way of individuating one's embodiment, marking one's separation from the norm. Tattoos are creative and flexible, and despite their reputation for permanence, they can be covered with clothing, modified with further tattooing, or even erased. They are popular within the queer community and can be seen as contributing to a general queer aesthetic. In the words of queer comedian Emily Gracin: "I love when people ask me what my tattoos mean. I am literally just a gay person, they mean I'm gay" (Gracin, 2023). Tattoos can reinforce a sense of the body as an archive, by marking certain moments in time and then forcefully carrying them into the future. They can also be gender-affirming in their own way, as I will discuss in Chapter 2, even for people who identify with their sex assigned at birth.

1.3 Methodology

To investigate these questions, I spoke with six queer-identifying individuals who grew up in Turkey and reside in Istanbul. My participants consisted of one sexually-fluid cisgender woman, two bisexual cisgender women, and three gay cisgender men. These subjects were found using the snowball sampling method, selected from my pre-existing contacts within Istanbul's queer communities. I met with each participant individually at cafes around Istanbul, locations all chosen by my participants. Our conversations lasted between 45 to 90 minutes and were loosely structured as to allow the participants to linger on the topics they had the most thoughts on. We generally focused on three subjects, which will be covered in the coming chapters: their experiences in the tattoo studio/with the artist, the imagery of their tattoos and the meanings they have assigned to them, and their reflections on temporality and aging with tattoos. Their names have all been changed to protect their privacy, particularly because I will be discussing the content of their tattoos which could be used to identify them.

Additionally, between the spring of 2022 and spring of 2023, I visited two separate tattoo studios in Istanbul to accompany a friend who was getting her own tattoos. My friend is a queer woman, and her tattoo artists were both women as well. During these trips, which took approximately five to six hours each, the tattoo artists explained their training and tattoo philosophies to us while tattooing my friend. I

took notes while in the studio regarding the atmosphere of the studio, the process of designing and implementing the tattoo, the artists' demeanors, etc. Afterwards, my friend and I conducted an informal discussion to review her perspective on the experience. My own tattoo was also done in Ankara in 2019, and my personal observations from that encounter, and my relationship to my tattoo in the ensuing years, have further contributed to this study. This thesis is not an autoethnography, but my positionality as a tattooed bisexual American ciswoman who has spent 4+ years involved in queer communities in Turkey undoubtedly colors this research.

In preparation for these interviews and site visits, I engaged in an extensive review of both academic work and popular media on tattooing in Turkey and elsewhere. In part due to the dearth of formal research on tattooing in Turkey, I turned to websites like YouTube and Instagram to gain a better understanding of the local context. YouTube videos like those by İzmir-based tattoo artist Betül Kübra Taşçı and Bursa-based Uğur Bölükbaşı were invaluable in this process as they share insights into contemporary perspectives in Turkey's growing tattoo industry. Although there is very little research, quantitative or qualitative, on tattooing in this location, many of my participants observed that tattooing seems to be ubiquitous now in certain areas of the country; this field certainly would benefit from further research.

There are some obvious limitations of my research. Because of my sampling method, all of my participants are at minimum solidly middle class and highly educated - 4 out of the 6 have or are in the process of pursuing Master's degrees or Doctorates. They have all spent at least six years living in major urban centers, which influences their relationships to tattooing and to queerness. In addition, they also all speak at least intermediate English; my ability to understand Turkish did permit our discussions to occasionally veer into Turkish when my participants could not find the right words in English, but we mainly communicated in English. Speaking in a foreign language, even when fluent, tends to have the impact of creating a filter which likely tinted our conversations (Welch & Piekkari, 2006). Furthermore, my participants' English abilities are reflective of their exposure to diverse perspectives. These limitations reflect my own background and social circle as an American graduate student in Istanbul. Future research is required to examine the issues raised in this thesis from more diverse perspectives - including but not limited to how queer people outside of urban centers in Turkey think about aesthetics and visibility, how tattooing is perceived in different rural areas of the country, how queers from lower-class backgrounds or non-English speaking queers conceive of tattooing, how trans or nonbinary people think about the tattooing vis-a-vis the body project, and more.

1.4 Thesis Outline

In Chapter 1, I will be exploring how positive and less-than-positive experiences with tattoo artists and in the tattoo studio impact queer individuals and contribute to the desire to get tattooed. The moment of receiving a tattoo is often both a physically and emotionally vulnerable one for clients of all identities. When done in the right conditions, the experience of being tattooed has the potential to be a healing one. Tattoo artist and oral historian Tamara Santibañez has written a guidebook for tattoo artists titled Tattooing as Liberation Work, in which they write at length about the revolutionary capacity of tattooing. In summary, they claim that "tattooing can be a powerful form of metamorphosis. [...] In providing an experience where a client is affirmed and treated with respect, we can interrupt the cycles of trauma that they live through in the world at large and work towards collective justice" (2020). The opposite is also true - people can come away from the tattoo studio feeling disrespected, disappointed, or distressed. Working with this conceptualization of tattooing as both healing and harm, Chapter 1 will examine how my queer subjects narrate their experiences in the tattoo studio and with tattoo artists. These narratives will be placed into conversation with theories on body work and queer space.

In Chapter 2, I will be looking at the symbols and various meanings assigned to tattoos by my informants. The specific content of a tattoo, whether script or imagery, can carry exceptional significance for some people, whereas others prefer to maintain more indeterminate relationships with their tattoos. Some tattoos that reference queer themes, such as rainbows, may be quite popular and be inked on multiple people; other tattoos are uniquely created for individual clients. Beyond the tattoos' contents, tattoos also are often assigned gendered connotations both by their wearers and by society at large. Conventionally, tattooing has been associated with masculinity and aggression, although there are certain designs that are now considered sufficiently feminine (Thompson, 2015; Tonkiss, 2023). A number of my participants discussed the gendered aesthetics of their tattoos and how tattooing contributes to their preferred aesthetic presentation. The second chapter of this thesis will investigate how queer-identifying individuals conceptualize and negotiate these meanings, symbols, and gendered aspects of tattooing.

Lastly, using Halberstam's notion of queer time, the third chapter will explore how tattooing contributes to queer imaginings of temporality and the embodied process of aging. Tattoos are typically understood as permanent, and thus perspectives on tattooing may hold key insights into the ways in which queer individuals conceive

of their futures. As discussed above, past research around tattooed individuals suggests that they are more likely to be "impulsive" or have poor time management skills as framed within the hegemonic framework of linear temporality and capitalist expectations of productivity (Madfis & Arford, 2013; Ruffle & Wilson, 2019). I suggest an alternative reading in which tattoos have the potential to contribute to self-making processes that continue across time and build resilience to the stigmatization of aging.

Ultimately, this thesis is an exploration of perspectives on embodiment and aesthetics among tattooed queer individuals in Turkey today. In the research and writing process, I have been asked by many what the relationship is between queerness and tattooing, because, they correctly observe, tattooing is popular with people of all identities. I do not claim that contemporary tattooing practices are unique to queers, of course. Tattooing is popular across many sections of society; by one estimate, today nearly 30 percent of Turkish residents have a tattoo (BasNews, 2018). However, tattooing seems especially popular amongst queer communities, including those in urban Turkey, despite the lack of quantitative data on the subject. Queer people have long been the vanguard of challenging normative body expectations and expanding the possibilities of embodiment. In an anti-queer, repressive environment, tattooing can function as a form of affirmation, resistance, or even potentially liberation. Even in spaces where individuals are expected to "act straight" or blend in with their heteronormative surroundings, their tattoos can serve as personal reminders of their oppositional selfhoods. Tattoos also have the ability to push against the contemporary hegemonic expectations of embodiment, gender, and beauty (Thompson, 2015). Rather than defining embodiment as a struggle for survival or productivity, tattooing can open fleeting opportunities for engaging with the fundamental pleasure of having a body, of experiencing life in flesh, and of creating and appreciating aesthetic beauty. This thesis will examine the motivations and experiences of queer people in Turkey who get tattooed and explore how tattooing contributes to or engages with the queer body project.

2. TATTOO STUDIOS AND QUEER SPACE

In this chapter, I will be exploring the experiences of queer people in Turkey getting tattoos in studios, including a discussion of the nuanced relationships between tattoo artists and their clientele. This chapter will begin with a brief review of tattooing practices in diverse indigenous communities to connect the contemporary tattooing experience of my participants in a studio to alternate narratives with deep historical roots. Next, I will engage with the concept of body work to explain the theoretical background for studying this field. The last two sections of the chapter will present and analyze my subjects' experiences in studios and with tattoo artists, detailing the characteristics of tattoo studios which make them such suitable localities for furthering the queer body project.

When I first began this research, I was hesitant to focus on the experience of receiving a tattoo because my own experience getting tattooed, as I will explain later, was so banal. A tattoo lasts the lifetime of the body carrying it; for me, those first hours of creation seemed unimportant in comparison to the following decades of living with a tattoo. My initial perspective echoed that of Rachel Falkenstern: "it is not the one-time experience of getting a tattoo that is significant, but the wider experience of the processes surrounding the choice to get and then bear a tattoo, and the resulting relationship between subject and object – that is, between the bearer and the artwork" (2012, p. 105). However, within my first two interviews, my participants made clear that their time in tattoo studios and relationships with the tattoo artists are an essential part of the appeal of getting tattooed. Their comments influenced the direction of this research and my fundamental understanding of tattooing. They also compelled me to look more deeply into the diverse practices and functions of tattooing, which indeed resonate with my interlocutor's experiences. Various indigenous communities across the globe, from Pacific islands to North America to Anatolia, have used tattooing for diverse purposes for centuries, including for healing, marking major life moments, and transmitting cultural epistemologies (Alvarez, 2020; Durmaz, 2022; Thompson, 2015). These traditional tattooing practices are

more generally more labor-intensive and painful than today's electric tattoo guns due to the slow, manual nature of the application. To carefully tap the designs into the recipient's skin, Pacific islanders use turtle shell and boar tusks, and Kurdish women use sewing needles (Makuati-Afitu, 2021; Durmaz, 2022). Many of these traditions are centered around the communal role of the tattooist and the recipient's experience of getting the tattoo. In Samoa, receiving a pe'a tattoo is a rite of passage marking coming of age and tribal membership; Iefata Moe reported that the process of applying his pe'a took five days and the pain made him physically ill, but he wrote that it was "the only way for me to show that I am a Samoan" (Moe, 1989, p. 119). Enduring the pain of tattooing can be as meaningful as wearing the tattoo itself (Yarwood, 2018). Samoan tufuga, or tattoo masters, are highly important members of their communities, and are granted permission to practice tattooing in an exclusive ceremony (Makuati-Afitu, 2021). The Kurdish practice of tattooing bears similarities to the Samoan context. Kurdish women have been applying small tattoos called deq for centuries, with the understanding that certain symbols have the ability to bring "health, happiness, fortune, money, and strength" (Durmaz, 2022). Akin to the Samoan context, the tattooist is understood as an essential part of the community and bound by a number of rules passed down between generations; they are seen as a person with the ability to generate new futures for the bodies they work with (DeMello, 2014, p. 347). Across many geographies and times, the physical practice of tattooing has been understood as a valuable, transformative experience, carrying meaning both for the tattooer and the tattooed. In light of this, my participants' enthusiasm for discussing their favorite tattoo artists and memorable tattooing experiences fits within the long global history of tattooing.

2.1 Tattooing as Body Work

Outside of communities where traditional tattooing practices have been maintained, contemporary tattooing has become a very different practice, both in the practical reality of the work and the social meaning of it. Rather than being tattooed to represent membership in a group, literature on contemporary tattooing suggests that, excluding certain tattoo motifs like gang tattoos, most people tend to get tattooed to individuate themselves from others in their environment (Dadlez, 2015; Sweetman, 1999). The tattooist remains a key figure within the practice, ushering clients through the experience of changing their bodies. The work of tattooing falls within the loose professional category of "body work." Body workers are defined by Carol Wolkowitz as "those whose paid work involves the care, adornment, pleasure, dis-

cipline and cure of others' bodies," and she includes "tattooists" alongside doctors, dentists, hairdressers, and sex workers in her expansive list of body work professions (2002, p. 497). Body workers may exhibit a heightened tendency to objectify bodies; because they work with so many types of bodies regularly, the body becomes a mere object. This can have positive effects, like desensitizing body workers to natural body features that are stigmatized elsewhere, like fat, body hair, or scars, and making them more accepting or welcoming of diverse bodies. Simultaneously, it can also negatively lead body workers to dehumanize the bodies they work with.

In the tattoo studio, the human body's inherent nature as a physical object is especially apparent - both the body of the client and the body of the artist. The person being tattooed must be as motionless as possible for the duration of the process despite the physical pain; any unanticipated twitch could create a mistake in the final product. For larger tattoos, the artist also may have to sit twisted in uncomfortable positions for many hours to tattoo different parts of the body. It is not uncommon for long tattooing sessions (over 2 hours, say) to include multiple breaks, because the application of a tattoo is a physically demanding experience for both parties. The tattoo artist is typically in physical contact (while wearing gloves for sanitation) with the client for the duration of the process. This time in which the two bodies are touching can be profoundly affective for some, as touch create a sense of mutuality, a shared awareness of another's being (Paterson, 2005). The encounter during a tattooing session highlights the raw materiality of the human body - the muscles, the blood, the skin, the nerves.

At the same time, the interiority of the client as an individual is also foregrounded, as their unique aesthetic preferences are the basis of the encounter. Wolkowitz has discussed this "tension between processing the body as an object and interacting with the body as a materialization of personhood" as an essential conundrum of body work (2002, p. 505). And tattooing, perhaps more than many other forms of body work, compels those involved to hold both realities (body as object, body as person) simultaneously. This is because the imagery or text of the tattoo being applied often comes with some personal meaning, which may be discussed during the tattooing session. Whereas massage therapists, yoga instructors, and aestheticians may not engage in much personal conversation with their clientele, tattooists often find themselves having extended, deeply intimate discussions with their clients. In Tamara Santibañez's guidebook written for fellow tattoo artists, they explain that the "jobs [of tattoo artists] require us not only to often fulfill a therapeutic role, but also to inflict sometimes profound physical pain and to guide people through the experience of it" (2020, p. 11). For some clients, the act of being tattooed may bring up personal traumas, some of which may include physical violence. Santibañez's

book includes the story of a client who wanted to get a tattoo on her back; the client was assaulted from behind when she was younger, though, and the tattooing session was unexpectedly triggering for her, because the position of the artist behind her and pain of the tattoo brought up these memories (2020, p. 45). Despite her positive relationship with the artist, who comforted the client and stopped the session when the client began crying, this client found herself afraid to get any further tattoos, fearing she would be triggered again. The body's ability to store trauma and stress is well documented (Mate, 2003). As illustrated by this story, the pain of tattooing can surface these latent emotions. Although this specific client found the experience so upsetting that she chose to stop getting tattooed, others find the tattoo studio an ideal setting to process physical traumas, as studios can be neutral spaces, apart from potentially triggering medical institutions. Tattooing can be an exceptionally vulnerable moment in which the body's dual nature as both material object and human person is particularly salient.

Naturally, other clients like myself may find the tattooing experience unremarkable. Everyone approaches the tattoo studio with different desires and expectations. Indigenous people, like Greenland's Kalaallit citizens, may get tattooed as an affirmation of their connection with their ancestry (Jensen Hansen, 2022). Some people intentionally seek out a therapeutic experience, looking for an artist who creates a safe, comforting environment, whose temperament seems to complement their own. Others prioritize the skilled craftsmanship of the artist and thus work with an artist whose personality they may dislike. Not infrequently, people go to a random artist with friends, doing little or no research beforehand and then having very little personal interaction with the artist. One individual may have separate desires for separate tattooing sessions based on prior experience, social context, tattoo content, etc. In this section, I am focusing on experiences in professional tattoo spaces and excluding the narratives of those who are tattooed by friends in informal settings. A few of my subjects have rudimentary tattoos done for free by friends at parties; these are certainly interesting and important experiences, but they lie beyond the scope of this work. All of my participants have received tattoos in professional contexts, and it is these experiences that I will be discussing. Within this chapter, I will outline the diverse ways in which different queer individuals in Turkey think about tattoo studios and shape their relationships with tattoo artists. How are the functions of contemporary tattoo studios in Turkey similar to or different from the traditional ones chronicled above? What motivates queer people to enter the tattoo studio, and how do they conceptualize their varied experiences in these spaces of embodied creation? Lastly, how do these experiences engage with the queer body project?

2.2 Inside the Tattoo Shop

Although not all tattoo studios are friendly to LGBTQ+ individuals, in this section I will be arguing that, under certain conditions, for certain queer people, the essential components of tattoo studios mean that they are uniquely positioned to function as queer spaces. In a tattoo studio, each individual body becomes a non-normative entity as it becomes individuated from its prior form (Castellani, 2020). As ink is injected or tapped into skin, numerous boundaries are blurred: those around self and other, human and object, artist and medical practitioner, professional and personal, private and public, pain and pleasure. Queerness is deeply invested in such blurring of boundaries. Halberstam defines queer space as "place-making practices within postmodernism in which queer people engage," elaborating that they are employing Fredric Jameson's conceptualization of postmodernism as both "a crisis in the stability of form and meaning, and an opportunity to rethink the practice of cultural production, its hierarchies and power dynamics, its tendency to resist or capitulate" (2005, p. 19). When engaged with/occupied by queer people, the multifaceted nature of tattoo studios makes them especially suitable to function as such queer spaces. They are ideal locations to interrogate and destabilize hegemonic power dynamics, particularly those that regulate and shape bodies, as they are accessible places of creativity and invention. While some tattoo studios can perpetuate harm against queer individuals, a particular type of tattoo studio can instead serve as a space for furthering the queer body project and affirming queer identities.

Generally, I suggest tattoo studios have this unique ability because of the way they straddle the line between multiple practices - that is, they are particularly flexible spaces. They are more clinical than other aesthetic businesses such as hair salons: to prevent bloodborne illnesses, tattooists wear medical gloves and are frequently sanitizing the surfaces and tools they touch, leading tattoo studios to often smell of cleaning products. However, they are also not explicitly medical or clinical spaces, and therefore they are not beholden to the legal and institutional regulations that restrict medical systems in providing care to queer people (Warner & Mehta, 2021). Transphobia and homophobia in health care settings has been well-documented and consistently presents as a barrier to care (Sell & Krims, 2021; Stroumsa et al., 2019). Furthermore, healthcare's reputation of hostility to queer individuals has become a psychological barrier for many queer people, who hesitate to seek medical care out of fear of facing discrimination (Miller et al., 2023). These trends have been found in Turkey as well (Alpalı et al., 2021; Çakır & Hamancı Seren, 2020; Zengin, 2014). This is not to say that tattoo studios are free of discrimination against queer

communities - on the contrary, some studios are notably hostile places and can cause major harm, as I will explore in the coming pages. However, when studios are welcoming to queer people, or when they are operated by queer people, tattoo studios have the ability to play a significant role in healing from various traumas in ways different from traditional medical institutions.

In connection to this point, tattoo studios are also localities where agency and control over the body is a central focus. People often go to medical facilities when they are in some way unable to exert control over their bodies. Gender affirmation surgeries and elective plastic surgeries are among the rare exceptions, and even these procedures are full of disempowering moments, like waiting for insurance coverage, approval from psychologists, etc. Tattoo studios, in contrast, are places where people go to explicitly, intentionally, and immediately assert agency over their bodies. There has been extensive research in recent years on the role of agency in tattoo motivations (Buckle & Corbin Dwyer, 2021; MacCormack, 2006; Thompson, 2015; Tonkiss, 2023). It is increasingly common for people to turn to tattooing after undergoing diverse traumatic, disempowering physical experiences, from cancer treatment to mandatory military service (Allen, 2017; Dyvik & Welland, 2018). After experiencing a particularly discomforting fertility-related treatment, one of Kate Tonkiss's participants, "Emma," stated that she was avoiding further gynecological appointments because she did not want medical personnel near her body. Emma compared this with her tattoo appointment after the treatment, where she was comfortable with the artist touching her because of "the choice and control that she felt able to exert over the process" (2023, p. 5). Tattooing presented an opportunity for Emma to feel empowered in her skin and in how body work professionals approached her.

Even beyond traumatic medical encounters, the body is inherently in a constant state of flux, always changing, growing, shrinking, aging, getting bruised or scarred or freckled. These changes, natural and otherwise, are beyond our control. Tattoos, on the other hand, are within our control, and this idea of being able to make permanent, voluntary changes to one's body is one of the major appeals of tattooing. Tattoo studios are the location of this change. Furthermore, ethically-managed tattoo studios are exceptionally sensitive to the importance of client choice. There are situations in which people may want to get a tattoo but be unable to properly consent (e.g., after a night of heavy drinking) or may be coerced into getting tattooed (e.g., by an abusive partner); thus, tattoo artists are compelled to act as referees, carefully assessing the presence of informed consent (Santibañez, 2020, p. 35). The modern queer experience is often marked by a search for agency, particularly for genderqueer individuals who must apply to institutional authorities "for hormones, surgery, employment protection, name change, and so on, and if they cannot afford

to do so, they become illegible and therefore dangerous within the systems charged with surveying, managing, and controlling those populations" (Halberstam, 2018, p. 49). Tattoo studios are accessible, (relatively) affordable, and immediately create a permanent product. In a world where much feels unstable and uncertain, even one's own body, the tattoo studio's ability to give clients a sense of control over their bodies and create permanence is a key appeal of the experience of getting tattooed.

Lastly, the heavily-tattooed workers in tattoo studios have often experienced otherization under traditional social norms, and therefore may be more likely to be empathetic to the queer experience. This was emphasized by a participant, Atakan, who stated that he has found most tattoo artists are "more welcoming" than other types of body workers he has interacted with, because tattoo artists also know "how it feels to be the other." Whereas barbers have freely criticized Atakan for having long hair and refusing to comply with social expectations of masculinity, he has not faced open recrimination in the tattoo studio. For the last two centuries, tattoo studios have been seen as localities inhabited by outcasts and rebels, associated with underground and punk cultures (Simpson & Pullen, 2018). The stigma against tattooed individuals is paralleled by a stigma against tattoo parlors; they were, and still often are, found in densely-populated neighborhoods where rent is cheap (Thompson, 2015). Traditional tattoo studios tend to be clustered around popular business and shopping areas; a review of the online listings for tattoo studios in Istanbul shows relatively few options in historical tourist districts, like Fatih, or in residential suburbs like Sultanbeyli. In bustling central areas, like Taksim and Kadıköy, however, there are seemingly endless options that are advertised online. The areas where tattoo studios are found, including Taksim and Kadıköy, also often are associated with stigmatized low-income populations. To the uninitiated, they may seem to be deviant, chaotic, disordered spaces. Indeed, many of my subjects mentioned feeling a sense of intimidation before their first visit to a tattoo shop but then also reported that they found that their fear was unwarranted. Of course there are myriad reasons that may prevent tattoo artists from criticizing their clients, including most notably, the financial incentive to retain a customer. As body workers, though, tattooists are likely to have encountered many shapes and types of bodies, and like masseurs or nail technicians, are unlikely to be fazed or disgusted by any variety of things perceived as imperfections within hegemonic body norms (Wolkowitz, 2004, p. 504). In an interesting, converse way, the idea of tattoo shops as tough, stigmatized places may have made some of their occupants more sensitive to the ostracization of others; this may contribute to the sense reported by my participants that some tattoo studios may be more welcoming to queer bodies than other service businesses.

These factors which define the tattoo studio space - their categorical fluidity, their exemption from rules restricting LGBTQ+ healthcare, their emphasis on agency, and their experiences of social stigmatization - make tattoo studios well-suited for facilitating embodied queer self-making. As long as those within the studios (the artists, owners, and regular customers) remain committed to maintaining a safe environment, tattoo studios can act as "an important and magical site of community building and transformation" as Santibañez imagines (2020, p. 21). They can be places where individuals come to exert control over their bodies and affirm their inner senses of self, transforming their skin and making them feel more themselves (Dadlez, 2015). There are certainly negative, unsafe tattooing spaces which can cause harm to their clients, but the right tattooing space can be a space of liberation for queer individuals.

Next, I will explain the historical template for a tattoo studio in the Global North and the studio's potential for creating harm. In connection to tattooing's historic ties to crime and deviance, the stereotypical image of a tattoo shop is "a rough, masculine environment" (Thompson, 2015, p. 128). Think of the tattoo shops advertised with bright fluorescent signs found in most crowded city centers: the interior of the shop has stark lighting, dark walls covered with sheets of low-quality tattoos templates, rows of weathered black vinyl chairs, cluttered workspaces, full of the sounds of buzzing tattoo machines, loud music, and occupied by macho male tattoo artists, wiping blood from the skin of customers. The vintage tattoo templates displayed on the walls might be sexually-graphic in nature, depicting women in various states of undress or even violence against women (Santibañez, 2020, p. 21). The clientele are more likely to have come in without an appointment and to request simple, popular imagery or script tattoos rather than intricate, individualized designs. Because of their use of flash tattoos (pre-made tattoo templates which are reproduced on many clients), they can apply many tattoos in a short period of time and are known for producing work at a cheaper cost. These studios are often called "street shops," a reference to the clients who walk in "off the street" without an appointment (Larkin, 2019). Santibañez, who has been working in tattoo studios for over 10 years, speaks of the pressure to assimilate into macho tattoo culture, saying that traditional studios are a space where tattoo artists can "engage with this mythological manhood" (Andrews & Santibañez, 2021). Tattoo artists may attempt to perform a toughened version of masculinity, competing to show who can bear the most physical pain, who has the most endurance. As a nonbinary person who was assigned female at birth, Santibañez describes themself as having felt comfortable in street shops because they were spaces where Santibañez was free to explore their masculinity without censorship or expectation of femininity. However, as many of

my participants discussed, this masculine aura that puts Santibañez at ease can also be unsettling or discomforting for other queer individuals.

Nearly all my participants reported having received a tattoo in a street shop. Indeed, my first tattoo was done in an environment similar to this - I walked in off the street in Ankara's busy Kızılay district with no appointment, encouraged and accompanied by a friend. I spoke with a random male artist, and within two hours had my tattoo designed, traced, and inked. Although the image was not a flash tattoo, it was relatively simple and quick to design. The artist was polite and professional, and his arms were wrapped in thick black tattoos. Other male tattoo artists milled about, loudly joking with each other as they waited for clients. Especially in a shared tattoo shop, the process of applying the image invites extensive commentary from others in the space. Other tattoo artists are liable to enter the studio to evaluate the work as it is being done, asking questions to the artist and remarking the craftsmanship. Sometimes the artists may speak casually with each other as if the client was not even in the room.

One participant, Atakan, is a self-described effeminate gay man who is studying for his PhD in an arts-related field at a major university in Istanbul. He described the street shop where he got his thigh tattoo by saying that "it felt crowded even when it wasn't." The environment of the shop "didn't seem that reassuring" and made him "feel a little bit put off," he said, noting that it exuded a "masculine energy." Furthermore, he explained that the street on which it was located, in the Taksim neighborhood of Istanbul, felt hostile and unsafe. This sense of insecurity is particularly unsettling in the moment of receiving a tattoo, in part because of the permanence of the procedure. As an effeminate-presenting, eyeliner-wearing gay man, Atakan explained that he immediately felt uneasy in the atmosphere of the shop and its surrounding geography. Nonetheless, despite his feeling of unease, Atakan said that no one in the tattoo shop "expressed any hostility" towards him; he claimed that it was just his own "outlook" that led him to anticipate prejudice. Eren, a middle-aged white-collar professional who works in the fashion industry, similarly got his first tattoo at an "old-fashioned" studio, decorated in a "dark old style" and run by "old motorcycle guys with beards." He went with his long-term partner and got an image he describes as "not masculine," so he assumes the artist was aware that Eren is gay. When asked to describe the attitude of the artist, Eren says the man treated him like a "little gay guy," or was generally dismissive and aloof towards Eren and his partner. There was a female trainee who was more friendly, but the artist himself was noticeably reticent. Eren actually got a number of tattoos done at this studio on separate occasions, but his relationship with the artist remained professionally distant. Like Atakan's experience, although the artist

was professional and did not make any openly negative comments towards Eren, his demeanor was not particularly friendly or comforting. Eren felt that his performance of masculinity was being evaluated within the boundaries of the street shop and judged as insufficient.

Beyond this sense of general discomfort, sometimes clients can be exposed to specific, targeted microaggressions in tattoo parlors. While this potential for harm is present in all types of tattoo studios, it may be more common in street shops where artists are less likely to prioritize the longevity of their relationships with clients. In custom tattoo studios, artists often must maintain relationships with clients, meeting repeatedly to perfect the design and application of the tattoo, and potentially creating multiple tattoos for single clients. In street shops, though, artists may be more liable to be dismissive of or rude towards their clientele. Elena is a white-collar office worker who attended one of Turkey's elite universities. Raised in Istanbul by her Bulgarian mother, a woman who she describes as very independent, Elena is animated and forthcoming in our interview. She told me about her first tattoo experience - she wanted to get a small tattoo of a chair that her friend had drawn for her as a gift. It is a simple, sketchy image, not particularly elegant or refined, but the fact that a friend had drawn it for her carried importance. The first studio she visited was a street shop in Kadıköy, with "cool guys inside" and "fancy window displays." The attractive exterior of the shop drew her in and led her to assume it was a reliable establishment. However, when she showed the image to one of the artists and explained the story of her friend drawing it for her, Elena said the man sneered at her, saying "I can draw a better chair." This interaction felt very rude to Elena, so she decided to walk away from the studio and seek out a tattoo artist who would treat her and her aesthetic wishes with respect. Eventually she got the tattoo done at "tiny, very trashy-looking place with a woman inside," who complimented the drawing and did not question Elena's preferences. These anecdotes highlight a perhaps obvious but important point: the physical structure or interior design of a tattoo studio does not indicate the quality of the service provided. It may be an indicator of the priorities of the management (the presence of sexually explicit imagery on the walls, for example, may be a useful hint), but spaces that appeal to more educated/upper-class tastes are not necessarily more welcoming (Santibañez, 2020, p. 26). When we consider the divide between street shops and independent tattoo studios, spatiality is just one of the factors impacting the experiences of queer individuals.

Another example of the capacity for harm was presented to me by Arzu, a social sciences graduate student who was grew up in a small Anatolian town. Arzu is active in multiple queer and feminist civil society organizations around Istanbul. She also

told the story of her first tattoo, which was done at a street shop in Taksim. She went spontaneously after a night out with a group of cisgendered female friends. They all got tattoos, but one of her friends, who Arzu described as having light features, was complimented by an aggressively flirtatious tattoo artist, who told the friend that her pale skin was perfect for absorbing the tattoo ink. Meanwhile, Arzu's tattoo artist claimed in a tone that Arzu found demeaning that Arzu's darker skin was "thick" and poor for tattooing; he then asked her if she was from the east of Turkey. Arzu's family is indeed from the northeastern edge of the country, but Arzu found this comment unsettling: "It was a weird moment, and it was kind of racist." Because the tattooist was actively tattooing her when he made the comment, she felt she was in a "vulnerable position" and thus elected to not respond to him to avoid further conflict. The vulnerability of clients is key here - once the tattoo artist has begun to apply the image, any disturbance or disagreement could leave the client with an incomplete or unsatisfactory tattoo, which they will have to carry on their bodies indefinitely. Racial commentary and discrimination is not uncommon in tattoo shops, as Thompson has also noted (2015, p. 15, 184). In the United States, Black individuals often report feeling tension or disregard from white tattoo artists, being told that their skin is unsuitable for tattooing. Although tattooing is both possible and prevalent on all shades of skin, tattoo artists who do not have experience in tattooing on a range of skin colors often deflect their lack of knowledge by making denigrating comments towards clients with darker skin.

A noteworthy pattern surfaces in these four stories of negative tattoo experiences. The two mildly negative experiences, in which my participants felt vaguely uncomfortable but not personally targeted, were shared with me by cisgender queer men, whereas the two overtly negative experiences were from women. Though the sample size is quite small, this seems to echo the street shops' reputation of being a masculine space that is hostile to women and feminine-presenting people. Historically, some street shops would refuse to work with women outright (Thompson, 2015, p. 128). For a new artist to be taken seriously, to be treated with respect by their coworkers, they are expected to assimilate to the shop's culture. The apprenticeship model of training tattoo artists means that many cultural features of tattoo shops are able to persist across time despite wider cultural change outside of the shop. Although such blatant discrimination is no longer commonplace, many macho male tattoo artists still feel especially emboldened to enforce symbolic boundaries with female clients by belittling their aesthetic preferences, making inappropriate sexual comments, and policing women's desires to get tattooed.

Given this image of the traditional, hyper-masculine tattoo shop, it may be surprising to imagine a tattoo studio as a space that could be explicitly friendly or

affirming to queer people. However, in recent years, accompanying the increase in numbers of tattoo shops, there has also been an increase in the diversity of types of shops. One outcome of the hostile macho behavior explained above is that many female clients prefer to work with female tattoo artists, and female tattoo artists have begun opening their own spaces. It is now relatively easy to find queer/women tattoo artists and queer/women-owned tattoo studios in most urban areas. Santibañez, working in New York City, has described a "schism" between the old-style traditional street shops and new-style private studios, which tend to have younger and more diverse artists (2020, p. 22). In Istanbul, there are even a few artists who exclusively work with women or queer-identifying clients. Within the street shop business model, there is typically a shop owner who rents the studio's chairs to individual tattoo artists, who then have to work a certain number of hours per week in order to pay their chair rent and thus need to complete a quantity of tattoos per week. The artist of one of my subjects, Arzu, explained this to her:

> "[The artist] started [working in] the tattoo studios and she told me, like, she can't really earn money in tattoo studios because the owner of the studio gets the most profit, [so] she just use it to get her own network."

After building her portfolio and creating a positive reputation among her clients, Arzu's artist chose to leave the traditional tattoo studio business. In opposition to the conventional model, many of these queer/women tattoo artists like Arzu's have begun to open their own independent shops and only work with clients by appointment. Some work out of their homes, while others rent a separate space to operate as their own tattoo studio, uniting with other like-minded tattoo artists. Perhaps unsurprisingly, such independent tattoo studios have been described as more welcoming by my queer participants.

In my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to join a friend during her appointments to get tattooed twice; first, with an artist who worked out of a small home studio, and then later with a different artist who worked in an independent studio space shared with five other artists. Both artists were cisgendered women and both had young female apprentices assisting them. The professional studio we visited in Istanbul's Galata neighborhood was almost spa-like in its atmosphere; in Thompson's research on tattooing in the U.S., she compares these new luxury studios to "high-end hair saloons" (2015, p. 122). As opposed to a street shop, this studio is not open to walk-ins and therefore the main door is locked. We rang the bell and were buzzed into a small, cozy, warmly lit reception area with white brick walls, decorated with framed art, comfortable couches, and a coffee table displaying art books and binders of the

artists' work. Soft ambient music played in the background as a receptionist offered us tea or coffee while we waited for the artist to finish with her previous client. Once the artist was ready, we were ushered upstairs into a stylish high-ceilinged studio with worn wood floors. The room was decorated with large plants, art posters, and full-sized antique-style mirrors. The artist working on my friend, Beril, was warm and patient, adjusting the location of the tattoo three times to make sure it was exactly where my friend wanted it. My friend was getting a thigh tattoo, so she had to remove her pants and spend the majority of the session in her underwear. Even in this state of undress, the environment seems to have been designed to put someone like her - a queer, middle-class woman - at ease. While large street shops may have six to ten tattooing chairs in one room, with little to no privacy for each customer, in this studio there were many small separate rooms. The room we were in only had two chairs for clients, with a large divider separating them and a big squishy couch for guests. Other artists knocked before entering. This layout also has the benefit of reducing the amount of noise in the space, as only one or two tattoo guns are buzzing at a time. Overall, the atmosphere of this studio was significantly calmer and more reassuring than that of the street shop where I got my first tattoo.

My most-tattooed subject, Elena, also had a large leg tattoo that required her to undress, as the tattoo wraps from her hip down to her calf. She has approximately nineteen tattoos (she lost count, and said it depends on what is identified as separate tattoos) and clearly explained how she approaches different tattoo experiences. For this specific tattoo, she says she intentionally sought out a space and artist that made her feel comfortable exposing so much skin - she knew the artist was "gonna see [her] butt" so she wanted a private space that would not be open to other clients/artists, and an artist who would be professional and respectful. On her first appointment with him, she just got a small, minimal tattoo, to ensure his demeanor and skill were satisfactory. The artist worked out of his home, so there were no other artists milling about and no other clients getting work done in the same room. Afterwards, she asked if he would be willing to do a larger piece for her at another date. Because it was his private studio, Elena was allowed to bring her dog for companionship. The tattooing space was decorated in a minimal but warm, homey style, perhaps reflective of the fact that he also lived in the bedroom next door. The big leg piece took eight hours, and she says she cried the last four hours, because it hurt so badly. Yet, the atmosphere of the studio and artist's demeanor gave her the strength to endure the extreme pain. For Elena, this studio was a space where she felt safe and secure.

It bears noting that each individual's desired tattooing experience may change according to various needs or desires. For example, Elena was so cautious about

finding the right space and artist for her leg tattoo, but she got her most recent tattoo spontaneously after work one day. She and seven of her coworkers went to Kadıköy's Kadife Street, also known as Bar Street, and went to a random studio with no appointment. The experience was less intimate than the one she had getting her leg tattoo, but this does not have an impact on her enjoyment of the tattoo. Her criteria for a studio is relative to the complexity and size of the intended tattoo: she does not particularly care about the friendliness of the artist when she wants a small, simple design, but for larger work, she is more careful. When asked about their plans for future tattoos, my interviewees with less tattoos did often state a preference for working with independent artists, but they were all open to the possibility of getting work done at street shops as well. As Elena shows, there is not a clear linear progression from random studios to researched ones or from street shops to independent studios.

2.3 The Relationship with the Artist

Beyond the physical space of the studio, a crucial part of the tattoo experience is of course the relationship between the client and the artist. The relationship between tattoo artists and their clients is a unique one; though they are typically only in contact for a few hours, the evidence of the artist's existence in the client's life is visible and permanent for the duration of their body. Tattoo artists do not sign their work, as an oil painter would, but having someone inscribe their art into your skin can be an intimate act (Sizer, 2020). To some extent, being tattooed creates an "a unique signature and authorship of the body that indicates a form of ownership as well as an intimate connection" - authorship which may be understood as being shared between the individual and the artist (Simpson & Pullen, 2018). As explained above, in street shops, there is generally minimal emphasis on client/artist interaction, but independent artists are more likely to encourage and foster positive relationships with customers. Especially when they are creating a unique design for a client, independent artists may spend more time getting to know their clients, asking about their aesthetic preferences and their personal motivations for getting tattooed (Sweetman, 1999). Conversation is also likely to occur in long tattoo sessions for larger pieces, when the artist and client may be in physical contact for multiple hours. Most independent studios prioritize creating a professional, reassuring atmosphere, which was discussed by a number of my subjects (Simpson & Pullen, 2018). In addition, some artists supersede the traditional boundaries of professionalism and create close, personal relationships with their clients, becoming

friends or pseudo-therapists in the process of tattooing. Relationship building is not typically part of the artist training experience, where artists learn how to use tattoo machines and which inks work best and what sanitation processes must be followed (Santibañez, 2020). In opposition to many Indigenous tattooing practices, the tattooist/tattooee relationship seems to be an incidental byproduct in most contemporary tattoo spaces. Yet, despite being generally neglected, the power of the relationship persists. A combination of factors seems to create this close emotional bond between certain tattoo artists and their clients, including but not limited to the hours of close physical contact, the pain of the application, the shared personal aesthetic preferences, and trust required to get this permanent procedure. An essential component of the tattooing process is that the artist is causing actual physical harm to the body, repeatedly puncturing the skin with the tattoo needle. As the person who causes that harm, the artist assumes an uncommon position in their clients' lives. For queer clients particularly, a positive relationship with a tattoo artist can become therapeutic in a unique way.

The notion of professionalism in tattooing was brought up by most of my subjects. Simpson and Pullen have studied how Australian tattoo artists conceptualize their field and their responsibility to clients, exploring the cultural divide between street shops and independent studios (2018). They found that independent studios tend to pride themselves on their professionalism, defined as their depth of knowledge about the technical process of tattooing, the related sanitation processes, and the ability to convey this professionalism to their clientele. Both Eren and Arzu received their first tattoos in street shops and then later got work done in independent studios and commented on the contrast between their experiences with each artist, with the independent artists perceived as more knowledgeable by Eren and Arzu. Eren elaborated on how this artist made him feel safer than the artist in the street shop by clearly informing Eren about the process of tattooing throughout their session:

> "He was explaining like, you know, we will start like this. I will put red on this. It'll take, I don't know, one, two hours. The pain will be like this. He was more into explaining the details. [...] He was super, super kind."

Whereas the street shop's artist was mostly silent, this independent artist prioritized communication, which made Eren feel more comfortable throughout the process. His artist also shared his professional credentials with Eren, informing him that he studied at the prestigious Mimar Sinan Fine Art University. Eren's trust in this artist also created mental space for him to appreciate the experience as it happened,

instead of being preoccupied with concerns about the artist's skill or the judgements he was facing in the shop. He shared his reflections on the experience, saying,

> "I feel anxious, you know, like I get nervous generally, like [...], I know that it's going to hurt, but I like it anyway. Okay, so, I like that feeling. And also that's something that you are going to make to your body that will last forever. Which is, you know, totally against all my family, my religious upbringing, you know? Like, I'm not religious, but everything that the straight community insists on. It's kind of rebellious. So I like this feeling also."

Because he was confident in the artist's professional abilities, he had the ability to reflect on the personal meaning of tattooing throughout the session.

Arzu's artist, coincidentally, also studied at Mimar Sinan. Arzu similarly noted that the independent artist she worked with seemed more informed about the technicalities of tattooing and the healing process. This artist gave her specific instructions on how to apply cream while the tattoo was healing, instructions which contradicted those given by her previous street-shop–based tattoo artists. Arzu believes that the independent artist's directions were better, because the artist gave more details and presented more professionally than the others. The healing process of a tattoo is essential - the first three months impact how the tattoo will settle into the skin and how it will appear in the coming years, and poor aftercare can result in a blurry, messy image. Therefore, trusting that the artist knows proper aftercare and following their directions is highly important. The independent artists that Arzu and Eren worked with both made explicit efforts to build trust with their clients by sharing their backgrounds and maintaining open communication throughout the process of designing and applying the tattoos. The result of this trust-building is that Arzu and Eren both expressed that they found the overall experience more relaxing than those they had in street shops, allowing them to actually enjoy the process of getting tattooed. Furthermore, they also both expressed a desire to get more work done by their respective artists.

In contrast to this formal, professional interaction, two of my participants, Murat and Pelin, described a close personal relationship with one of their tattoo artists. They worked with the same artist in Ankara, a cisgender woman named Mine, who works at a well-respected independent studio in the upper-middle class Ayrancı neighborhood. Murat has four tattoos done by Mine, and Pelin has two. At least two other individuals in their friend group, who I did not have the opportunity to interview, were also tattooed by her. Murat and Pelin expressed great respect and

personal affection for Mine; though they have both relocated to Istanbul, they talked about wanting to return to Ankara specifically to get more work done by Mine. Pelin chose to work with Mine after accompanying Murat to one of his appointments. Since childhood, Pelin had been planning to get tattooed, but she was waiting to find an artist she trusted. Pelin described herself as a "perfectionist," and thus she was concerned about her tattoos having any sort of error or imperfection, saying: "I notice the slightest skew right away and I get annoyed. But Mine's tattoos are very elaborate and fine-lined. [...] She's also a perfectionist. I like this so much." However, Mine's craftsmanship is not the only reason Pelin chose her; there are many talented tattoo artists in Ankara. Mine's warm, easy-going nature, which was attested to by Pelin's friends, was the deciding factor for her: "she was also very sweet and kind in person." After seeing Mine's tattoos on her friends and meeting Mine herself, Pelin felt confident that Mine was the tattoo artist she wanted to work with. Their complementary personalities were essential to Pelin's decision.

As much as Pelin enjoyed working with Mine, Murat was even more specific about his appreciation of the time he spent with her. He called this time in the studio, chatting with Mine, sitting patiently while she inked the images in his skin, "the most precious time of the tattoo." Though he continues to enjoy his tattoos today, the day of the tattoo appointment and the process of getting the work done is highly significant for him. He spoke of the personal conversations they would have while in the studio, in which they would talk about everything from music and literature to families and romantic partners: "Last time I went there, for this tattoo, she told me very personal stories about her marriage stuff as well. She even showed me her wedding dress." They have never met outside of the studio, but Mine and Murat know more about each other than most professional acquaintances. Off the top of his head, Murat was able to recount Mine's taste in music, her academic background, her extended family, and even her dreams for the future. Though he is unsure if Mine identifies as queer herself (she is married to man), she made him feel comfortable enough to speak about his own queer romantic relationships, even encouraging him to "talk about boys." After a particularly difficult breakup, Murat went to Mine for a tattoo and found the experience restorative. He describes himself as shy and introverted, and as demonstrated in the introduction, queerness can be a taboo subject in Turkey and is not typically discussed with strangers. It is telling that this soft-spoken individual found himself talking openly about his queerness with this person he has only known in this unique context. Speaking on his ability to open up to Mine, Murat said: "She is also seems like introvert person, but I don't know, we have some kind of chemistry going on, so I was, like, much more confident than I expected." In comparison to Eren's experience in a street shop, where Eren

was accompanied by his romantic partner and yet the subject of his personal life was never broached, Murat's relationship with Mine is much more intimate. He has not gotten any new tattoos in the two years since he has moved to Istanbul for a number of reasons, including financial ones, but a major factor is that, after his time with Mine, he prefers to wait to find an artist he can feel similarly safe with. Murat's close personal connection to Mine is illustrative of the liberatory capacity of the tattooing experience for individuals: the studio functioned as a place where he felt especially confident in himself, a place where he was safe to process his emotions, to create new embodied versions of himself with gentle encouragement from an artist. Now, each of his tattoos from Mine is a reminder of this uniquely revitalizing period.

As demonstrated by the stories of Murat, Pelin, Arzu, and Eren, it is possible to have restorative tattooing experiences that leave clients feeling a sense of trust in their artist and also empowered in their own choices around their bodies. When artists are communicative, knowledgeable, and welcoming to their clients, they can create an opportunity for clients to reconnect with their bodies in a significant way, to feel and process and even find pleasure in pain. Today's tattoo studios differ greatly from the traditional settings in which diverse Indigenous communities have practiced tattooing, but the importance of the process seems to be consistent across time and space, from Indigenous practices to the contemporary narratives of my participants.

This chapter has explored the positive and less-than-positive experiences of queer individuals in tattoo studios in Turkey. Tattoo studios are particularly destabilizing spaces in which bodies, and thus daily lived realities, are altered and transformed. I argue that the tattoo studio functions as a unique space that is especially productive for furthering the queer body project because of its fluid categorical nature, externality to formal hegemonic institutions, spotlight on agency over individual embodiment, and proximity to stigmatization. Some studios perpetuate harm against their clients by employing gendered and racialized narratives, whereas others create moments for trust, healing, and physical pleasure.

3. SYMBOLS, MEANINGS, AND LACK THEREOF: QUEER TATTOOS

The meaningfulness of tattoo content, whether image or script, is one of the most-discussed aspects of tattooing. Tattoos may be done to represent lost loved ones, past trauma, personal healing, beloved media, or sweeping life mottos. In a sample of tattooed university students in Massachusetts, 97 percent of participants responded that their tattoos had "symbolic meanings" (Alter-Muri, 2019). Brouwer and Horwitz, for instance, have written about descendants of Auschwitz survivors who get tattooed with the numbers that were tattooed on their relatives in the camp as a way to physically carry on the legacy of Holocaust survivors (2015). Buckle and Corbin Dwyer have looked into how memorial tattoos received after the death of a loved one help their bearers live with their grief through embodied meaning-making after loss (2021). The topic of tattooing in the military has been explored by Dyvik and Welland, based on a website that archives the tattoos of American veterans (2018). Tattoo artist David Allen has written about his ten years of experience in tattooing people after they have had a mastectomy due to breast cancer, helping them make meaning out of the painful experience and regain a sense of control over their bodies (2017). This is only a small sample of the many ways the meaningfulness of tattooing has been explored in academic literature in recent years. This tendency to assign meaning to tattoos is also visible in queer communities; LGBTQ+ individuals may get queer-themed tattoos to celebrate their membership in the community, to commemorate their personal journeys of self-discovery, to show off their queer desires, or to affirm their queer senses of gender (Castellani, 2020).

In this chapter, I will be discussing three different features of tattoo imagery that surfaced in my interviews: the tattoos that are narrated as queer by my participants, the gendered connotations of tattooing/specific tattoo imagery, and the growing popularity of resisting the pressure to assign narrativity/meaning to tattoo content. How do queer people in Turkey narrate their tattoos with consideration for gender and aesthetics? How do they negotiate visibility and public perceptions of their

queerness via tattooing? How does this community assign meaning to or make meaning out of their experiences of embodiment? Working with a post-structuralist framework as suggested by Eric Madfis and Tammi Arford, this chapter will examine the unstable, malleable meanings of the symbols employed in tattooing by the queer individuals (2013).

3.1 Queer-themed Tattoos

None of my participants have tattoos that are immediately visually-recognizable as related to their LGBTQIA+ identities, such as tattoos of pride flags or homosexual symbols. However, such tattoos can be found in Turkey - my participant Atakan noted that there was a brief trend of queer people in his social circle getting a tattoo of a minimalist interpretation of the pride flag, with six small dots each in a different color of the rainbow. The subtlety of even this explicitly queer image is noteworthy, if unsurprising. It may be considered dangerous or unwise to have a tattoo that visibly "outs" one to strangers given the global ubiquity of homophobia. Fearing discrimination or homophobic violence, many queer individuals try to maintain an embodied sense of plausible deniability, being able to determine who knows/does not know about their queer identities. Castellani has explored this phenomenon amongst queer women in the Italian context, writing that "tattooed lesbians face multiple forms of discrimination, as women, as tattooed individuals, as homosexuals. For these reasons, some gay women prefer to stay invisible" (2020, p. 54). This idea of negotiating presentation can be extended to other members of the LGBTQIA+ community, such as gay men who may become vigilant about the sound of their voices to avoid stigmatization in unfamiliar settings (Fasoli et al., 2021). Today, the widespread popularity of tattooing with diverse segments of society permits tattooed queer people to maintain and negotiate an ambiguous visibility. Aligning with the post-structuralist understanding of symbols as "open to myriad interpretations," tattoos can be read as queer for those who are familiar with queer aesthetics but simultaneously can be interpreted in entirely different ways, obscure and unknowable by those outside of the community (Madfis & Arford, 2013, p. 555).

While my subjects did not have explicitly queer tattoos, many did have tattoos they identified or narrated as queer for a variety of reasons. One example of this semantic flexibility was presented to me by Atakan. He shared the story of his friend, a musician who is gay and has a tattoo of a large microphone on his forearm, "because he was into singing, but it also looked like a penis." Microphones are phallic

shapes, and Atakan's friend apparently took advantage of that. He reportedly told Atakan, "they both go to the same place: my mouth. I love how it represents many different things about me." Rather than getting an explicitly gay tattoo, like a penis or the gay love symbol, this individual got a tattoo which he is able to narrate in a variety of ways depending on his audience. It affirms his queerness for himself and reminds him of his multiple identities, but it does not "out" him to strangers.

Atakan himself also has a covertly gay tattoo which he confidently referred to as his "gayest" tattoo. It was his first tattoo and stretches across the knuckles of his right hand, spelling out the Turkish word "sus." In our interview, he translated this word as "hush," but it can also be translated as the more aggressive "shut up." The tattoo is written in a Gothic typeface, with one large black letter each on his ring, middle, and index fingers. Atakan occasionally wears large rings which cover one or more of the letters. Because it is on his hand, it is very visible throughout our discussion, as he often waves his hands while he speaks. For those who are not familiar with Atakan's story, the word "sus" across the knuckles could certainly be read as aggressive or hyper-masculine; indeed, he was once questioned about the tattoo during a job interview, because the interviewers found it discomforting. Expanding on why he identifies this tattoo as gay, though, he shared the mindset he was in when he got it done:

> "I was in this toxic, abusive relationship. I was struggling with my work back then [...]. I was working in another university and I was struggling with everything. And I came to notice, I mean, I came to realize that I am overexpressing myself. I am like, especially my emotions, I'm a sentimental person. [...] *I felt misunderstood or not even understood at all back then. And I was like, okay, stop.* Like, stop. You can't make them understand. You have to accept this and you have to learn to be silent. Remind yourself that. That's why I got my first tattoo. [...]
>
> That's why sometimes I should remain silent in professional environments. I don't know, in family, in a religious community, around Erdoğan supporters. *In order to survive, I had to remind myself that.* The tattoo grew on me and I am aware this kind of contradicts my previous statement that I am usually outspoken and not afraid of expressing myself. But on the other hand, I'm not dumb. I mean, I used to be dumb. I used to fight everyone. But no, no, no, no. It's not worth that. So, yeah, *this is probably why it's my gayest tattoo, because while resisting power and authority, this tattoo reminds me to pick my battles.*"
>
> (emphasis mine)

In these lines, Atakan seems to be employing a more expansive definition of "gay," akin to the definition of queer employed in this thesis, in reference to a sense of general oppositionality rather than just who he has sex with. Growing up in Trabzon, a conservative stronghold, Atakan describes a childhood spent consumed with fear about how he was perceived. He is naturally effeminate, his voice is high and soft, and he has a slight build. In high school, he was bullied for his nonconforming masculinity. This aligns with the findings of research which indicates that individuals who are visibly queer - that is, recognizable as queer by strangers due to various auditory/visual cues - are more likely to face discrimination (Fasoli et al., 2021). For Atakan, this tattoo is a tribute to his endurance when facing struggles as a gay man, of the battles he has fought for recognition, to feel understood and seen in his communities. He now carries this tattoo on his hand so that he can always see and be reminded of his responsibility to honor himself, to prioritize his own health and wellbeing when dealing with oppressive forces. Because it signifies resistance, he feels that it is a queer tattoo. It could be argued that the tattoo has actually created additional stigmatization, as it has caused others to question his judgment, such as in that professional interview. This concern about tattoos impacting job prospects has been well-documented (Thompson, 2015, p. 99). However, despite the opposition he has faced, Atakan is vocally proud of the tattoo and what it represents for him. Like the microphone tattoo discussed above, Atakan's sus tattoo is a flexible tattoo, as it can be interpreted in numerous, conflicting ways.

Elena also has a tattoo that she calls "gay," which is located on her mons pubis and therefore is much more private than Atakan's hand tattoo. This "gay" tattoo is in Farsi, spelling out "you and me," the title of a poem by the 13th century Sufi poet, Rumi. She does not know Farsi herself, but Elena chose the poem because she said it is "very erotic and kind of gay," referencing the close relationship between Rumi and his companion, Shams Tabrizi. Though the nature of the relationship between Shams and Rumi is described as platonic by most academics, Rumi did leave his family to follow the nomadic Shams for many years, and a notable "homoerotic strand" runs through the poetry they addressed to each other (Pierce, 2009). Rumi is globally popular with people from all backgrounds, but many members of the queer community perceive and identify with a sense of homoeroticism with the poems he wrote for Shams. Elena chose to get this tattoo because it resonates with her deep appreciation for the erotic, particularly the queer erotic. She also noted the potentially fraught nature of having a tattoo in the Arabic script, saying that the tattoo is "hidden because it's Persian, and people are Islamophobic, and when they see that kind of lettering, they instantly think it's some kind of propaganda, or ideological thing, whereas it's a gay poem." Again, this poem is not immediately

recognizable as queer, even for those who can read the Arabic script and are familiar with Rumi's work. To understand the queer intentionality of the tattoo, the viewer has to speak with Elena and hear her personal approach to the work.

Arzu has two queer-coded tattoos on her right arm. The largest, on her inner bicep, features an interpretation of a painting by Aya Takano, with a thin, androgynous body bent backwards and flowering branches sprouting out of its back. Arzu is passionate about visual art generally, and is especially fond of Japanese media, having collected manga (Japanese-style graphic novels) since high school. She explains why she chose to adapt this painting into a tattoo, saying, "the painting is a very nonbinary body. [...] I felt like it took the manga into a queer place, which I like because you can't really tell whether it's like [a] woman or not." The tattoo reflects both her interest in manga and her queer identity. It bears noting that there is a difference between androgynous presentation and nonbinary identities - it is likely that Arzu mixed up the two terms because English is her third language. Any body can be a nonbinary body, as nonbinary is more of an internal identity rather than a physical presentation. Many nonbinary individuals prefer or aim for an androgynous physical presentation, but it is "important to not conflate androgynous bodies with nonbinary identities" (Galupo et al. 2021). Another one of Arzu's tattoos also features another androgynous body, based on Keith Haring's painting "Radiant Baby." This one is one her right wrist and is therefore very visible. Haring is one of the most recognizable gay artists in the world, well-known for his politically-inspired pieces using themes of queerness, safe sex, and AIDS awareness. His style famously features indistinct, blob-like bodies which have no clear gender markers. Arzu appreciates Haring's political activism and his dedication to spotlighting queer issues and narratives, but more importantly, she likes the androgynous aesthetics of his work. Furthermore, the view of the tattoo has to be familiar with Haring's oeuvre to understand the queer meaning of it. Both of the androgynous bodies that she has tattooed on her arm reflect her identification with queer aesthetics.

Coincidentally, Eren also has a Keith Haring tattoo. His is located on his calf and depicts two blob-bodies holding a large heart. He got it as a birthday gift from his long-term partner, who paid for the tattoo, and Eren explains the image as representing him, his partner, and their commitment to each other. Unlike Arzu, Eren does not mention or engage with the idea of the bodies being androgynous. Instead, for Eren, this tattoo is highly romantic, as it reminds him of his relationship. Eren has another queer-related tattoo which also echoes a tattoo of another participant, Elena. Like Elena, Eren has a tattoo of a poem in a foreign language; his is on his rib cage and contains a French poem. This poem is "not romantic, but it is a bit naughty," he says. It does not include explicitly gay lines, so if one were to read the

poem in a book or online, it would not necessarily be read as queer, akin to Rumi's work. However, the poem's sexual nature transcribed on his gay self is transformed into a gay poem, expressing his queer desires.

As shown here, although some of the images in these tattoos may not be immediately visually recognizable as queer, many members of Turkey's queer community have tattoos that reflect or represent their queer identities. This is cohesive within other research on tattooing that demonstrates how many individuals get tattoos to display their personal values and identities. Additionally, employing a post-structuralist framework, the total subjectivity of these interpretations becomes apparent. Theorist Levi Strauss uses the term "floating signifiers" to indicate symbols that lack inherent meaning and therefore can be ascribed any number of conflicting meanings by various interpreters (1987, p. 63). Although not all tattoos are perfect floating signifiers, it seems that many of my participants' tattoos are suitable for identification as such. Lastly, the preference for this flexible imagery is perhaps reflective of the desire to be able to negotiate visibility that is common within queer community,

3.2 Gender and Tattooing

> "Women are socially pressured to keep their tattoos feminine in design (flowers, dolphins, fairies), placed in a few areas (hip, breast, ankle), and small in size. When women cross these permissible designations and collect tattoos that are of so-called masculine design (snakes, skulls, zombies), visibly placed (forearm, leg), and large in size, they begin to receive social sanctions that reinforce the deviant-ness of tattooing, as well as the gender transgression of the design" (Thompson, 2015, p. 5)

As illustrated by this quote from Thompson's book on heavily-tattooed women in the United States, all tattoo imagery/positioning is not gendered equally. Contemporary tattooing has a general association with masculinity, but there are certain methods that can be used to negotiate this gendered connotation. Katie Tonkiss has also written on the importance of gender in symbols in her research on tattooing among women who have experienced infertility and pregnancy loss. Tonkiss notes that all her participants, including herself, chose imagery defined as feminine per Thompson, like flowers, hearts, and birds: "By choosing traditional feminine symbols, tattoos are ameliorated into notions of good femininity associated with the potentially good mother, thus reducing their subversive quality" (Tonkiss, 2023). Tonkiss suggests

that her participants, who are dealing with social expectations around appropriate femininity and motherhood, manage to maintain an appearance of femininity by tattooing "feminine" imagery which minimizes the taboo transgression of getting tattooed in the first place. Negotiating gendered imagery in tattooing carries its own ramifications, though. Queer people, including cisgender queers, often have complex relationships with their gender presentation, complicated by society's assumptions of gender performance, by old stereotypes about queer appearances, and furthermore, and by the perception of gender as a static and settled identity. For this section, I will be examining how my subjects narrate their own gender presentations vis-a-vis tattooing, mediating between their understanding of external social perceptions of their gender and their own personal preferences. Whether they get "masculine" or "feminine" imagery impacts how they feel about themselves and how they expect others will perceive them, and thus behave towards them, in the future.

Arzu, for example, told me about her experiences of gender from her teen years into her young adulthood. While she identifies as a cisgender woman and describes her current aesthetic presentation as feminine, she said that in her middle and high school years she was "really masculine" and actively resisted her mother's attempts to encourage her to wear traditionally feminine clothing like skirts. She studied abroad for a year in Europe during her undergraduate university education, which exposed her to feminist theory and made her more comfortable defying feminine expectations. Upon her return to Turkey, she cut her long dark hair into a short bob and got her first tattoo - a cartoon bunny on her right bicep inspired by Jean-Michel Basquiat's 1982 "Red Rabbit" painting. Today, she feels more comfortable expressing femininity; her hair has grown out in the ensuing years, and she even wears skirts on rare occasions. Arzu now describes herself as "playing with" her gender presentation - she says that she likes an androgynous, "non-binary lesbian butch" aesthetic and mentions the nonbinary comedian Mae Martin, but she also might present more femininely some days. Her tattoos contribute to this sense of aesthetic presentation - she notes that her tattoos make her feel more masculine, a permanent counterweight to her currently more feminine presentation. Her newest tattoo, which is on her inner bicep, particularly contributes to her sense of genderqueerness; she says that with "the last one I feel like I am more embodying masculinity." When she wears a t-shirt, this tattoo is visible, highlighting the muscle in her arm. The specific imagery of her tattoos also corresponds to her sense of queerness - in addition to the rabbit, she has the two nonbinary figures based off of Keith Haring and Aya Takano paintings discussed above. Arzu explained that up to this point, she has avoided imagery she perceives as "too feminine," like raspberries or flowers, because it feels discordant with her sense of self. However, she is currently consid-

ering getting a flower tattooed, a black rose to represent her love of the rock band Depeche Mode. Her choice of tattoos thus seems to mirror her relationship with her gender presentation: initially, she exhibited a preference for androgyny or more masculine presentation, but over time, she has become more open to engaging with symbols traditionally understood as feminine, ultimately shaping a personal form of embodied queer gender that feels appropriate for her sense of self.

This consideration of certain gendered imagery was also reflected in my conversation with Atakan. The majority of his tattoos are connected to Greek mythology, which is a passion of his. He has a symbol of Hecate on his knuckles, who he describes as the "goddess of witchcraft, wisdom, darkness, crossroads, and, also different [stages] of life." On his thigh, he has a tattoo referencing the god Pan, a horned skull with a snake emerging from its mouth, with various meaningful necklaces and charms hanging from the horns. In addition to his interest in Greek mythology, though, Atakan explained that he also enjoys learning about Norse or Viking mythology and has toyed with the idea of getting a tattoo of Norse runes to reflect this. However, he has decided against getting such a tattoo, elaborating: "To me, it looks too masculine sometimes, too aggressive. I [would] fancy someone who would have that kind of tattoos, you know? But not for myself." Although Atakan finds these symbols personally meaningful, their cultural reputation as aggressive or masculine is in conflict with his sense of self as a more androgynous or effeminate gay man. He would be attracted to a man with these symbols but does not want to get them tattooed on himself. Interestingly, his definition of masculinity seems to be heavily rooted in his gendered perceptions of these other mythologies - Norse runes are too masculine, but his horned skull is acceptably androgynous, perhaps because he believes an interest in Greek mythology is coded as feminine (Bennett & Wilkins, 2020). He also added that some other imagery was "too feminine" for him, like flowers. At the end of this discussion, he laughed and joked that all this gender-talk may be seen as passé in current popular discourse: "Shame on me. But yes, I'm assigning gender to certain symbols." Arguably, though, Atakan is not just assigning gender to symbols himself but rather attempting to interpret how others will assign gender to symbols, and in the process of this interpretation, he is recreating/reinforcing these larger cultural associations. He likes Norse mythology himself, but he fears that others will perceive him as masculine if he incorporates Norse runes into his embodied presentation. Atakan's internal negotiations around gender and the imagery of his tattoo resonates with Santibañez's observation that queer men "can turn to tattooing to reclaim masculinity on their own terms" (2020). After growing up in a conservative religious community, Atakan employs tattooing to reinforce his personal sense of masculinity and attempt to moderate how others see him. Thus, when

choosing imagery for his tattoos, Atakan seems to seek out potentially androgynous imagery which affirms his self-image.

3.3 Tattoos Without Narratives

In the prior two sections, I have explored how my participants narrate their tattoos, connecting their tattoos to their queer identities and attributing gender to various tattoo imagery. However, three of my participants explicitly described the majority of their tattoos as "meaningless" and rejected any consideration of assigning gender or greater narrativity to their tattoos. Notably, these three subjects, Murat, Pelin, and Elena, are also all friends, having attended the same university for their undergraduate degrees. Their "meaningless" tattoos include their first tattoos, which is in contrast to past research that suggests first tattoos are more likely to be more meaningful (Alter-Muri, 2019). Arzu, for instance, aligns with Alter-Muri's findings, saying "when I first started, I was more insecure to get tattooed, I guess. If it's going to be [tattooed], it has to be special, and I still think it has to be special, but not for the other people, but just for me." Murat, Pelin, and Elena, on the other hand, all stated that they intentionally bypassed the creation of a narrative for their tattoos. Tattoos defined as meaningless by their bearers are particularly queer, as they obstinately defy traditional expectations of productivity. Unlike memorial tattoos, or tattoos intended to function as reminders or identifiers, meaningless tattoos explicitly reject functionality. In The Queer Art of Failure, Halberstam writes that "failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" (2011, p. 2) By "failing" to create a narrative or exceptional symbolic meaning, these tattoos open up new possibilities for our understanding of how tattooing reflects or engages with embodied meaning-making, particularly in queer communities. In this section, I will first briefly explore the existing research on assigning meaning to tattoos and then explain how my participants conceive of their tattoos alongside this history.

All three of these subjects expressed a sense of pride to have self-defined "meaningless" tattoos. Eric Madfis and Tammi Arford have written about the common social pressure for tattooed individuals to provide meaningful narratives for their body art, and how failure to create such narratives can manifest in regret. They argue that this norm "serves a boundary maintenance function wherein tattoos may be perceived as respectable and a legitimate artistic form of expression when and only when

they have deep semantic meaning for their wearer" (2013, p. 548, emphasis mine). In the Global North, tattooing has been historically associated with working-class masculinities. It has been argued that tattoos had less complex, personal meanings prior to the rise of custom tattoos; this is in part because most tattooists only did a small range of "flash" tattoos, stenciled images that they repeated on many clients, rather than doing unique, personalized pieces for each individual client (De Mello & Rubin, 2000, p. 137). Thus, tattoos were not expected to represent extensive personal meaning. The increasing popularity and acceptance of tattoos amongst the middle- and upper-classes has been accompanied by a social pressure which polices what tattoos are or are not permissible. Bourgeois values demand that art must have purpose, i.e., must be informative or emotionally resonant; tattoos without a narrative justification are subsequently dismissed as tacky or worthless. Per Madfis and Arford, those who cannot justify their tattoos may find themselves feeling uncomfortable with their tattoos and, to escape this stigma, may intend to cover up or remove their narrative-less tattoo(s).

In addition to the rise of custom tattooing, some attribute the popularity of creating grand narratives for individual tattoos to popular reality television shows about tattoo studios, such as Miami Ink which aired on the American network TLC from 2005 to 2008. Verena Hutter has explored the ways Miami Ink reinforced heteronormative gender roles and presented a "legitimization narrative of thoughtfulness and deeper meaning" for the tattooing industry (2020, p. 40). In this show, nearly every client explains a meaningful motivation for their tattoos, such as to honor a deceased family member or represent a major life moment. Sometimes the tattoo narratives become rather extensive or convoluted, such as a flower with six petals to represent the client's siblings, with two blades of grass to represent their parents, roots underneath to represent their grandparents, and a butterfly to represent their child, etc. Customers are rarely shown just getting a flower because they think it is aesthetically pleasing. Although the pressure to assign narrative is not often laid out in explicit terms, many tattooed individuals are at least subconsciously aware of this expectation, partially because "what does your tattoo mean?" is such a common question. This prevalent expectation of meaning may feel intrusive or oppressive to some tattooed people who get tattoos for aesthetic reasons. A Reddit thread on the r/tattoo page titled "meaningless tattoos" contains significant discourse on the topic, including opinions from people with both meaningful and meaningless tattoos: "Miami Ink and its various spin-offs have made everyone [...] decide that if you have a tattoo it must mean something extra-deep and be full of careful symbolism. Not, of course, saying that tattoos shouldn't be, but they sure don't have to be" (death-byokapi). The rejection of the expectation to assign meaning articulated by this

Reddit user was reflected in my conversations with Murat, Pelin, and Elena. They all explicitly reject any attempt to make a narrative meaning out of their tattoos and instead prioritize aesthetic appreciation and the experience of getting tattooed.

Based on our discussions, my participants with meaningless tattoos do not fit into the framework of class-based regret put forward by Madfis and Arford. The notion of narrativity as a class boundary maintenance mechanism was questioned by my participants, including Arzu, who was familiar with Madfis and Arford's work. Arzu commented that as a tattoo becomes "more abstract and hard to read in the sense of cultural capital, [it] becomes more sophisticated, like higher class, like referencing an artist. And if it's more concrete, it still has a function." She compared her tattoos, which are all interpretations of fine art, to her aunt's tattoos of her children's names. Her aunt was angry with Arzu for getting meaningless tattoos, but her aunt found her own tattoos legitimate because they had personal meaning. The research by Madfis and Arford was conducted in the northeastern United States, but it does seem to be applicable in Turkey among older generations, such as Arzu's aunt. In comparison, within her age group, Arzu suggested that her art tattoos are more highly prized than deeply meaningful tattoos. It seems that in this context, among educated upper-middle class young people in Turkey, it is actually seen as cooler or more acceptable to have meaningless tattoos. Meaningful tattoos may be dismissed as passé or cliche. The quality of the artwork and craftsmanship is prioritized over symbolic narration, and the importance of narrativity has been reduced. Therefore, the middle-class stigmatization of narrative-less tattoos described by Madfis and Arford does not appear to influence most of my participants who have meaningless tattoos, much less cause them to feel regret so significantly that they would consider removing their tattoos.

A contributing factor that motivated my subjects to define their tattoos as meaningless is their sense that there is a risk to getting a highly meaningful tattoo. This risk has been articulated by Patricia MacCormack, who writes that "meaning is inked into the flesh but the flesh resists it – like tattoos, the meaning bleeds over time, the wearer will always have a different relationship to the images inscribed" (2006, p. 77). That is, the relationship between the signifier and the signified will naturally slip and slide as time passes, transmogrifying into new and potentially undesirable territory. A timely example of this is that of individuals who received Harry Potter tattoos many years ago and now take offense to author J. K. Rowling's vocal transphobia. Many queer individuals got tattoos to represent the series' themes of friendship and defending the underdog. Now they feel targeted by Rowling's current politics; some have taken steps to get these tattoos covered up or removed (Jackson, 2020). There are also personal reasons that may cause an individual's relationship

with their tattoos to change - Eren, for example, got tattoos of his cats done on his forearm almost a decade ago, when the cats were young and healthy. Both cats have passed away in recent years, and now the tattoos are a daily reminder of his loss. He states that he does not regret getting the tattoos, but the visible location of them leads him to explain, "I don't feel super comfortable looking down right now. [...] I'm still missing them, so it's not easy to think about them." Eren's dilemma highlights a potential hazard of getting sentimental tattoos. Pelin elucidated this concern about applying meaning to her tattoos: "I am afraid of something that has meaning, the factors that created this meaning can be lost someday." This sensitivity to the durability of their tattoos reflects a deep thoughtfulness about temporality, which I will explore further in the third chapter.

These participants enjoy their tattoos and embrace the meaninglessness, focusing instead on their appreciation of the art in our discussions. Being decorated with images that they find beautiful is pleasurable for them, and that pleasure is sufficient justification to undergo the process of getting tattooed. Indeed, Madfis and Arford acknowledge that such a perspective is a possible avenue to avoid tattoo regret: "Some people are able to transcend these dilemmas by placing value on [a]esthetic beauty over concrete symbolic meaning and, whenever possible, understanding tattoos as markers of the past rather than indicators of stable identity" (2013, p. 555). Murat, Pelin, and Elena seem to have successfully circumvented the pressure to apply narratives to their tattoos by doing just what Madfis and Arford discuss, cherishing their aesthetic appearance, valuing the memory of getting the tattoo done, and furthermore, embracing the possibility of the meaning changing over time.

Of all my subjects, Elena has the most tattoos by far and has spent lots of time considering her general philosophy towards tattooing and embodiment. She says her Rumi tattoo on her mons pubis is her most meaningful tattoo, but otherwise, none of her tattoos have any larger narrative. She does some minimal research before getting a new tattoo to mitigate the risk of accidentally getting an offensive image, but she does not choose her tattoos based on the symbolism or meaning. Her current stance is very firmly opposed to applying narrative to her tattoos: "I don't think [tattoos] should have meaning. If you put a meaning on it, you again restrict it, like your identity. It's just an image, it's like, does your piercing have a meaning?" There is a strong parallel between Elena's queer identity and her tattoos. In the past, she has called herself bisexual, then pansexual, but now she simply says she is sexually fluid:

> "The thing with identifying is, I feel like if you put a label on yourself, you kind of prohibit change. So I've never bothered to say I identify, I mean, I tried, I called myself bisexual for a while, then I got confused."

Even though the majority of her tattoos are feminine per the criteria of Thompson (flowers, birds, etc.), Elena says she never considers how her gender interacts with her tattoos. Elena is opposed to any form of restricting her identity, because she feels very consciously that she will change in the future. This may seem to contradict her passion for tattoos, a famously permanent body modification; however, her tattoos' firm lack of narrativity permits her to maintain a flexible understanding of them. Elena's approach to tattooing is similar to MacCormack's theoretical writing on the value of semantically flexible tattooing:

> "The permanence of tattooing comes into question when the meanings ascribed to an image are not fixed. Meaning must be mobile in order for the body to be thought as transformative. Images should not be colonized by meaning, that is, seen as representing a thing, but should be taken as durational phenomena, like the rest of the body, renewed innumerable times." (2006, p. 74).

Elena, as MacCormack suggests, prefers to keep the meaning of her tattoos mobile so that they can remain pleasurable to her as she ages and changes. Rather than getting tattoos to affirm a stable identity or create a sense of embodied permanence, Elena gets tattoos because she has a strong appreciation for the aesthetic appearance. She likes being in a tattooed body, and she likes people perceiving her as a tattooed person:

> "I want to be seen as a person with tattoos, so I like wearing tank tops or something that provokes attention. [People] being like, oh, she has tattoos. Oh, she isn't normal. That's the point for me. I like being seen as edgy, I think. [...] I like intimidating people."

Thus, for Elena, the purpose of her tattoos is not to represent some deep personal meaning but instead just to be tattooed in and of itself. Tattooing is an aesthetic choice for her, a practice that brings her joy and also a tool to mediate how she is viewed and treated in public. Elena's perspective resembles that of Thompson, who has meaningful tattoos but also adds that, as a petite mixed-race woman, her tattoos help her counterbalance her "immutable, embodied characteristics" (2015, p.

5). Elena is a curvy, bubbly young woman with a strong personality. She feels that untattooed body was perceived as vulnerable and approachable; getting tattoos has helped her manage the impression she has on strangers. Her tattoos do not have specific symbolic meanings, but they do allow her to feel more in control of how others see and treat her.

While Murat, Pelin, and Elena describe their tattoos as meaningless, and decline to apply meaning to the images for themselves, they all discussed how meaning has been applied by other people at various times. Murat mentioned that his artist, Mine, asked him what his tattoo meant for him while she was actively tattooing him; he answered that he simply liked the artwork and it bore no personal meaning. In response, Mine explained that for her, the image (a simple chair) "reminds [her] of home." In this case, the artist imposed more meaning on the tattoo than the tattoo's actual bearer. Her interpretation of the image did not change Murat's approach, however; he maintains that it is meaningless for him. Pelin similarly noted that her friends have begun to create meaning for her tattoo (an interpretation of Grant Wood's "American Gothic"), because they now think of her whenever they see the original painting. She explained that, while she likes the image, "American Gothic" is not her favorite painting by any means and does not have personal meaning for her. However, being thought of by her friends and being associated with this classic piece of art brings her joy. In her words, the tattooed rendition of it is "a meaningless tattoo that has gained meaning on my arm and continues to do so." This created meaning is not static or definite. Like Murat, she still describes the image as largely meaningless for her, but she is open to the idea that its meaninglessness is in flux and is relative to the viewer. Elena also has one tattoo that has become more meaningful in relation to an external viewer, a tattoo of a simple heart that says "canım anam" or "my dear mom" on her ribs. This may immediately seem like a sentimental tattoo, but she asserts that she got it as an ironic joke, because it's a "a traditional trashy, sort of like cheap, street, or even prison [tattoo]." One of the reasons she had it done on her ribs, or in her words,"hidden in a safe place," is so that strangers do not see it and assume it is meaningful. When Elena's mother first saw the tattoo, though, she naturally assumed it was intended to honor her and became very emotional. Now Elena sees the tattoo as simultaneously meaningless and meaningful:

> "It's a meme, so, like it takes the meaning out of it, so I'm more comfortable with it. But my mother is also a mother that deserves it, so I'm fine with it as well. [...] It's meaningful. But I didn't get it because of the meaning."

Despite this apparent openness to flexible interpretations, my informants actually said that they prefer not to be asked about the meaning of their tattoos. They expressed that they were happy to talk to me, because they were comfortable within the bounds of the research, but from strangers or even casual acquaintances, they described such questions as invasive or irksome. When asked if she knows other people with meaningless tattoos, Pelin laughingly responded that she does not ask people about their tattoos: "I hate this question." Murat responded to the same question by saying that "asking 'is it a meaningful tattoo' can be rude." Many people in their social circles have tattoos, but they cannot definitively say whether or not their friends' tattoos are meaningless because they refrain from asking unless the subject surfaces naturally. It is noteworthy that this lack of knowledge means that they do not seem to intentionally belong to a community of people with meaningless tattoos - though Murat influenced Pelin's decision to get her first tattoo by introducing her to Mine, Pelin's decision to decline to assign symbolism to the tattoo was made independently. They conceive of these internal processes as deeply private and thus avoid asking others.

As demonstrated in this chapter, there is a vast variety of symbols employed by queer people in their tattooing in Turkey. Notions around visibility were prevalent; especially considering the risk of anti-queer violence, my participants often expressed a desire to maintain boundaries around who is aware of their LGBTQIA+ identities. For some, like Atakan and Eren, personal and spiritual meaning take precedence when deciding what images to get tattooed. Others, like Arzu, minimize symbolic narrativity and instead use tattooing to further the queering of their body projects, to challenge and play with expectations of feminine and masculine presentation. Lastly, some of my participants decline to apply any narrativity or meaning at all to their tattoos, preferring to embrace semantic flexibility and redefine their tattoos as they age.

4. QUEER TIME, TEMPORAL FLUIDITY, AND INK ON THE BODY

> "We have limited control over how our bodies change (though at the time of writing the costs and risks of surgeries and other procedures are rapidly declining), and we watch our tattoos change along with the rest of ourselves. Yet, changes also work 'from the inside out,' and a tattoo is not an accident or a natural mark on one's body but a result of a choice made at a certain point in time. My tattoos are mementos of past experiences, including the experience of getting tattooed and the surrounding circumstances, and they also remind me of how I have changed since then. Thus, their permanence acts as a marker of the passage of time." (Falkenstern, 2012, p. 100)

Tattooing is a remarkably temporal phenomenon, as discussed above by Falkenstern. Tattoos are explicitly intended to persist for the lifetime of the skin that bears them. Unlike other aesthetic practices which mark the skin, such as cosmetic makeup or henna, the permanency of tattooing is foundational to the practice, a significant contributor to why people get tattooed and also why they don't. The meaning of the tattoo may change over time. The image itself may change, as the skin ages and the pigments inevitably fade and blur (Sizer, 2020). But still, some trace of the mark will remain. In this last chapter, I will be examining perspectives on aging and embodiment amongst my participants through the lens of their tattoos. Working with Halberstam's concept of "queer time," I argue that tattoos demonstrate an embodiment of nonnormative temporalities, collapsing a sense of linear time and dragging the past into the present while also creating a picture of the future; furthermore, I explore how tattooing engages with Halberstam's critique of the adolescence/adulthood binary. Particularly for queer individuals, who often lack cultural examples of what it looks like to grow old in a queer body, tattooing can present an opportunity to claim the flesh and imagine new possibilities for elder queer embodiment. Tattoos can both be indicative of and compel the creation of a self-reflective, affirmative approach to time and growing old. As opposed to

past literature which suggests tattooing demonstrates thoughtlessness or poor time management skills, this chapter proposes that we replace notions of productivity and temporal linearity with an understanding of tattoos as creating new, elastic possibilities for embodiment (Dean, 2010; Madfis & Arford, 2013; Ruffle & Wilson, 2019). Ultimately, I suggest that tattooing has an ability to settle individuals in their bodies and make them more resilient against the stigmatization of aging.

Despite the reality that aging is essentially inevitable, there is a well-documented fear of growing old in a number of contemporary global contexts (Chonody & Teater, 2015; Rupprecht et al., 2021). Many factors contribute to this stigma, including fear of illness, fear of death, and hegemonic beauty norms. The fear of aging has become so normalized that people often joke about disliking their birthdays or lying about their ages; aging has become something to dread rather than celebrate. Although Turkish culture generally expects displays of respect towards elders, research has found that individuals in Turkey are still "psychologically concerned" about growing older, perhaps in relation to worries about economic instability and quality of life issues (McConatha et al., 2004). Within a system of capitalist productivity, in which individual worth is measured by potential economic output, old age is seen as an adverse state that must be delayed as long as possible. The elderly generally stop producing financial value, and on top of that, their healthcare needs and costs increase. Thus, given that a plurality of power systems actively stigmatize aging, it is understandable younger individuals are concerned about the reality of getting older. People, particularly women, are expected to become less publicly visible and less active as they grow older, as well as more socially conservative.

Furthermore, the idea that tattoos are a burden in the aging process is not uncommon; most tattooed people have received unsolicited comments about how their tattoos will look bad or incongruent in old age. (Thompson, 2015, p. 62). There seems to be a sizable gap in the academic literature regarding the perspectives of elderly individuals on their own tattoos and how tattooing has contributed to their selfhood as they age. In the coming pages, I will address the ways in which my participants have changed their relationships to their tattoos over time and how they imagine the future bodies with their tattoos. However, those I interviewed had gotten their first tattoos four to ten years ago and thus have not yet experienced significant aging with their tattoos. The reflections of individuals who have lived in tattooed bodies for many decades would be a productive avenue for further research, potentially highlighting how tattooing interacts with the contemporary aging process.

4.1 Queer Time and the Body

In connection to the changing attitudes towards tattooing described in the introduction to this thesis, currently tattoos are often associated with youth and adolescence. This is partially attributable to the prevalent stigma around tattoos that existed in prior decades and is maintained by older generations. Most of my participants got their first tattoo in their late teens or early twenties; narratives of people getting their first tattoos later in adulthood exist but remain rare (Saner, 2021). Tattooing is thus often seen as a practice of rebellious youth. Tonkiss, for example, notes that, at the age of forty, she was personally concerned about being "too old" to get a new tattoo (2023, p. 6). The permanence of tattooing marks it apart from other aesthetic decisions which are associated with adolescence, however. Punk clothing can be changed, colorful hair dye will fade, and facial piercings can be removed, essentially erasing visible traces of engagement with "deviant" subcultures. In contrast, visible tattoos cannot (easily) be removed and will accompany their bearers to the end of their lives. Tattoos, and their connection to deviance or nonconformity, present as a visual contradiction to the traditional expectation of a conservative, reserved elderhood. Blurry or aged tattoos affix to the body and connect the past self to the present, bridging many versions of the self that may potentially identify in exceptionally different ways. The tattoo someone got on a dare, or as a joke, at the age of twenty is still on their body when they are sixty, even if the individual has become more conservative in their aesthetic choices. Tattooing therefore physically entangles the split between adolescence and adulthood, challenging "conventional binary formulation of a life narrative divided by a clear break between youth and adulthood" (Halberstam, 2005, p. 194).

Tattoos also have a strong connection to memory. Of course, there are memorial tattoos which are explicitly intended to act as reminders of lost loved ones (Buckle & Corbin Dwyer, 2021), but even non-memorial tattoos often are associated with specific memories. A number of my participants mentioned that looking at their tattoos reminds them of the context in which the tattoos were done - the tattoo shop or the friend's couch, the artist, the friends who accompanied them, the discussions they had. Even elderly individuals who struggle with memory loss may recall the day of getting tattooed fifty-plus years later, demonstrated by the case of Alvarez's maternal grandmother (2020). During her time as a teenager at a boarding school for Indigenous children in California the 1950's, Alvarez's eñ-hu'ul got tattooed with a bundle of cactus spines on a visit to her home on the Tohono O'odham Reservation. The tattoo does not depict specific O'odham imagery, but Alvarez argues that they

"(re)inscribe" cultural knowledge because of her grandmother's powerful memory of the traditional tattoo techniques used (2020, p.166). Thus, considering the tattoo, for the bearer, becomes a sort of embodied memory trigger, able to bring up highly specific memories years after the fact. Other artifacts may similarly carry memory, like smells or clothing, but the embodied nature of a tattoo means that the memory is almost constantly available for resurfacing. It is interesting to note that every one of my participants also said that they feel their tattoos become naturalized over time, meaning that they slowly stop actively perceiving their tattoos after the initial healing period. It takes conscious effort for the bearer to actually see and engage with the tattoo, even if one "sees" it every day. This means there is some element of choice or control for the tattooed individual, so tattoos do not force their bearers to engage with the memories unless the bearer chooses to, but they do seem to fundamentally be strongly attached to memories.

Because of this strange, unsettled relationship to time and memory, I argue that tattoos conceptually function to queer the body, exist on queer time, and compel their bearers to think about time in unstable ways. Their inability to be reproduced or inherited contributes to this sense of challenging linearity - the same template can be done on a separate body, but the individual physical traits which inherently contribute to the tattoo, such as skin color, texture, and muscle, cannot be reproduced. They can be, and often are, copied, but each tattoo is unique. My grandfather had a large, black tattoo on his forearm; after he passed, my cousin got a reproduction of the tattoo on himself as a tribute to our grandfather. Despite the artist's talent, the tattoo itself cannot be the same, as it lacks our grandfather's freckles and the fifty-plus years of settling into his skin. The affect is unique, as it has gained new emotional resonance on a new body. Looking at my cousin's tattoo, as a family member familiar with the tattoo's previous version, we experience the sensation of a collapsing of time and connecting of bodies: our grandfather is gone but he is physically carried on, warping his passing and bringing his body into the present through a recreation on my cousin's skin. Although neither my grandfather nor my cousin is LGBTQ+, the tattoo(s) have the impact of queering their bodies, making them nonnormative, and furthermore, queering the experience of time for them and those around them.

4.2 Tattoos, Spontaneous and Planned

Many of my participants did have at least one tattoo they had gotten spontaneously, often while out with friends. These experiences seem to be exemplary of the sort of thinking that stigmatizes tattooing: they are hasty, rash, and permanently scar the body on a whim. Lots of contemporary literature appears to write against these tattoos, trying to demonstrate that tattoos can also be thoughtful and planned and meaningful, as opposed to the historical idea of tattooing as deviant and thoughtless. This approach seems to be a legitimization strategy, attempting to destigmatize the practice by assimilating tattooing into normative expectations of respectability and thoughtfulness. However, although they were unplanned, these spontaneous tattoos were not necessarily described as narrative-less by my participants. Furthermore, in their reflections on these spontaneous tattoos, my participants demonstrated that such tattoos contributed to their self-making processes and reflected their wider attitudes towards temporality and embodiment.

In our conversations, it appeared that both meaningless and meaningful tattoos were often connected to careful reflection on temporality. Some had highly meaningful tattoos, like Atakan and his sus tattoo, and suggested that they would not "waste" money or body space getting a tattoo that lacks symbolic meaning. From this perspective, the permanence of the tattoo demands or warrants the creation of functionality. On the other hand, however, others were concerned about the effect of time on the meaning of the tattoo; rather than get a tattoo that may lose value over time, they elect to get a so-called meaningless tattoo that may grow with them as they change. Pelin, for example, explained that she "always knew" that she would get tattooed someday, but that in her teens, she had many "bad ideas" for tattoos that she now regards as cliched. She joked about once having considered a tattoo homage to the 2000s sitcom How I Met Your Mother. The idea of a meaningless tattoo presented itself as an appealing, more flexible alternative to getting a tattoo that represented her shifting values or tastes. This display of thoughtful awareness of temporality and the future is contrary to some literature of the subject. In research on time preferences in tattooed individuals, Bradley Ruffle and Anne Wilson have suggested that people with tattoos are more impulsive. Over one thousand people responded to their survey, the quantitative analysis of which supported their hypothesis that tattooed individuals would demonstrate more short-sighted behaviors. While explaining the potential relationship between the motives behind tattoos and their bearers' temporal short-sightedness, Ruffle and Wilson connected the descriptor "meaningful" with "carefully considered and forward-looking," implicitly

creating a correlation between meaningless tattoos and thoughtlessness or impulsivity (2019). In contrast, my participants with meaningless tattoos expressed a strong awareness of temporality, which seems to have driven their decisions to get meaningless tattoos. They mentioned a concern that the meaning of a meaningful tattoo would lose value or become painful over time. Murat articulated this, saying "I don't want to look at my tattoo and get sad." Tattoos that bear intimate meanings, such as a memorial tattoo, are seen as risky, because he is cognizant of the potential for growth or change over time. Meaninglessness becomes a tactic to evade an anticipated pitfall. Instead, he indicates a preference for neutral, pleasing images that are semantically flexible and perhaps can "grow" with him over time. He noted that he wanted "neutral" tattoos, as opposed to "nostalgic" ones, because meaningful tattoos could become volatile if the meaning shifted in the future. Imagining aging, he notes that "when I will turn 35, [the meaning] probably would change." Both of their meaningless tattoos are the result of reflective thinking about temporality. This is in direct opposition to the idea that tattooed individuals are more likely to be short-sighted; instead, at least within my sample, they seem to be engaged in careful consideration of the future.

4.3 Resilience and Visualizing the Future

Eren is the oldest of my participants at 42 years old. He began getting tattooed later than my other participants, when he was over the age of 30. Thinking about how his tattoos will look in the coming decades, Eren imagined that they may look "funny, somehow," his non-masculine tattoos incongruent on his older body. Then he amended this thought: "I wasn't super straight or masculine when I was 10, so why I should worry about being 80? Yeah, probably I would have more tattoos. And I'm glad that I have done that in some part of my life." Eren conjured up different images of his body across time, from childhood into late adulthood, and acknowledged an essential queerness in all versions of his being. Although he was obviously not tattooed as a 10-year-old, he was still queer and not masculine in the ways he was expected to be. He believes that he will not be particularly masculine as an 80-year-old, either and that his tattoos will continue to reinforce this sense of self. In addition, Eren predicted that his tattoos will bring him joy when he is older because they will carry on the memory of him at the ages he was when he got the tattoos. Through the lens of his tattoos, by reflecting on their contributions to his sense of self, Eren was able to create a cohesive but still flexible vision of himself and did not feel discomforted by the idea of his body aging.

Arzu was particularly articulate about the notion of aging in our discussion. She noted that she lacks a frame of reference for aging both as a queer person and as a body with tattoos. When she was younger, she says she feared getting old, and she feared living an unsatisfying life. She also initially was concerned about how aging would affect tattoos, believing that it would make the tattoos unsightly. After getting tattooed, though, she has come to approach aging from a more positive perspective:

> "Since I don't see many old people with tattoos, I'm like, I'm worried how it's gonna look when I'm like 60, 70 maybe, but also I feel like there are gonna be a bunch of people like me gonna have tattoos. And I think I just was considering being old as a bad thing for a long time because I feel like I still haven't lived my life yet. [...] I mean, it's also a privileged position, but I think I feel like I'm having more peace with it and I think it's how [the tattoo is] gonna look when it's loose. It's gonna be nice as well. I remember also when I was a kid, I was always playing with my grandmother's face, how [the skin was] loose. I think it's gonna look nice when it's gonna, you know, sag.
>
> [...] Yeah, but I'm thinking like, my perspective on being old is limited to my grandmother and my mother. So that's why I'm like, I can't think beyond that. I feel like I can't really imagine myself, but [...] I imagine myself, like my mother and stuff, so, so it's also kind of really limits me... "

In these lines, Arzu reflected on an example of aging that she has been able to personally witness, that of her grandmother. Using visceral language, she thinks about her elderly grandmother's "loose" skin and imagines her own skin sagging as well, with the addition of a tattoo decorating it. Instead of worrying about her wrinkled skin being ugly, this comparison to her grandmother brings her a sense of contentment. She does recognize, though, that her elderhood will be markedly different from that of her family as a queer individual. Even if she marries a man and has a family, she has exerted this specific agency to queer her body and in doing so, she has stepped into a new physical future that is different from those who raised her.

Interestingly, both Arzu and Eren's reflections on aging resemble those found in the sparse literature on tattooing and aging. It seems that, for people from many backgrounds, tattooing is often accompanied by a comfortable relationship with the idea of aging. Thompson, for example, suggests that her participants were not concerned about their tattoos distorting over time, as the distortions "simply

marked more of their life journey on their skin;" she concludes that tattoos "provide [her] participants with a positive outlook on the process of aging in general" (2015, p. 63). Braunberger's research on tattooed women similarly notes that she had a subject over the age of sixty who got the tattoo later in life to celebrate her journey into old age, defying the restrictive expectations of those in her social circle (2000). In a collection of stories from older individuals with tattoos, one woman stated that she feels even more confident about her tattoos in her old age, noting that her tattoos are part of the "freedom to be whoever you want to be" (Saner, 2021). Tattooing in contemporary culture goes against hegemonic beauty norms; it appears that something about the permanency of the deviation has a liberatory impact, encouraging these subjects to feel more comfortable crossing further boundaries such as aging.

This chapter has explored the complicated ways in which tattooed people thinking about time and aging vis-à-vis their tattoos. The embodied permanence of tattooing combined with the immediacy of the application makes it a temporally complex practice ripe for further research. Particularly from the perspective of queer time, tattoos demonstrate nonnormative ways to relate to the passage of time and imagine multiple versions of selfhood in a single body. They force us think in more nuanced ways about concepts around reproduction, the value of time, the sanctity of the body, and the possibilities for atypical elderhoods.

5. CONCLUSION

Returning to the primary question that drove this project, why do so many queer people in Turkey have tattoos? The answer is, naturally, nuanced and varies between individuals. Generally, though, tattooing seems to be a popular part of the queer body project because of its accessibility, permanency, and flexibility. The queer body is a theoretical concept that has been explored by numerous thinkers, including Halberstam, who speaks of the queer body as a nonnormative "fluid architectural project" that embraces the possibility of change and revision over time (Halberstam, 2018, p. 24). The queer body is also a lived reality for thousands of individuals, who often face formal barriers to achieving their desired physical appearance as well as social sanctions for their defiance of traditional expectations for embodiment. The accessibility of tattooing allows queer people to alter their bodies without engaging with formal medical institutions, at a lower financial cost and with minimal waiting time. As opposed to other easily accessible, identity-affirming, appearance-altering practices, like haircuts or nail polish, tattoos are permanent, a durable marker of embodied difference that one will wear throughout all stages of life. In addition, despite this permanence, tattoos are also (perhaps surprisingly) flexible in that their assigned meanings and even visible appearance can shift over time. Tattoos can be touched up, added on to, or covered with further tattooing. They can be accompanied by extensive, meaningful narratives, which can be changed over time. Tattoos allow for the theoretical fluidity associated with queerness while also representing a long-term commitment to oneself and one's continued presence in the body.

Furthermore, the very experience of getting tattooed appears to often be a notable life event. Tattoo shops are unique spaces of body work where a tattoo artist touches the skin of the client, creating a physical wound at their request. The physicality of the process puts clients in a particularly vulnerable position, which may bring up memories of trauma or difficult feelings around their bodies. Some tattoo studios perpetrate harm against queer communities by trafficking in negative gendered and

racialized stereotypes; however, in the right conditions, certain studios can become a space for reclaiming and reconnecting with one's body. Especially in the hands of an artist who establishes a sense of professionalism and trust with their clients, tattoo studios can function as ideal locations for healing, community building, and queer self-creation.

The symbols or text applied in tattooing appear to be highly flexible and often unknowable to external viewers. This unknowability is especially useful for queer people who may prefer to be able to negotiate the visibility of their queer identities. Some tattooed individuals construct complex narratives for their tattoos, imbibing their body art with profound personal meaning. For queer people, tattoos may serve as reminders of their personal strength in the face of homophobia or celebrations of queer eroticism. Tattooing may also engage with ideas of gender, challenging notions of binary femininity and masculinity while enhancing an individual's sense of queer gender performance. Others decline to assign meaning or gender to their tattoos at all, and instead elect to maintain an open-ended relationship to their body art. These "meaningless" tattoos are particularly semantically flexible and are often presented as an alternative to meaningful tattoos, which some perceive as risky due to the potential for meaning changing or being lost over time.

Lastly, tattoos contribute to resilience when approaching elderhood by rejecting oppressive beauty norms and creating a sense of individual self in the flesh. Within Turkey, as in many other places, old age is a period in which people are expected to reduce their public visibility, to become passive and peaceable. Elderly individuals are associated with a conservative, unremarkable appearance; visual signs of an unruly or nonconformist identity, such as colorful hair or large piercings, are seen as unusual and potentially indicative of an unstable mental state. Tattoos defy these constrictive expectations, functioning as a permanent reminder that there is a unique individual within each body. Furthermore, tattoos engage with queer temporalities, complicating the sense of linear time and blurring numerous temporal boundaries. In queer communities, which often lack prominent examples for growing old, tattooing provides an opportunity to imagine a futurity for body, affirming queer existence across time and space.

It bears noting that, despite all this discussion of tattooing as transformative and healing and beneficial, I do not claim that tattooing is inherently a radical act of resistance to hegemonic power structures. Tattooing can now be found on any imaginable body, including the bodies of people who uphold and extend the systems that oppress others. As an eminently accessible, highly popular practice, tattooing can no longer be considered purely a subcultural phenomenon. There are also ways in

which tattooing can function to perpetuate and police certain gendered appearance expectations, as seen with “feminine” or “masculine” tattooing. Similarly, the increasingly common pressure to apply symbolism to tattoos can become a class-based boundary, devaluing tattooed bodies that decline to provide meaning. Furthermore, this thesis does not include narratives of people who have had tattoos removed or covered, or who have felt consistent, heavy regret over their tattoos. For those who do not identify with the person they were when they got tattooed, tattoos can act as a barrier to healing; for example, some people have gotten tattooed while struggling with addiction, sometimes in the middle of a high, and then later find these tattoos resurface unpleasant memories (Madfis & Arford, 2013). There are as many diverse reasons to remove tattoos as there are to get them done. It would be naive to suggest that tattooing is fundamentally a liberating practice for people of any identity.

That being said - I do believe that in the right conditions, tattooing can provide an unusually embodied opportunity for self-making among the many people who engage with the practice, including queer ones. Inspired by the seeming omnipresence of tattoos within queer communities, the thesis is an attempt to explore how, when, why, and for whom tattooing can be liberating, through the study of this small, hyper-specific group of queer individuals in Turkey. In a place and time where queer communities are marginalized, tattooing can function as individual act of claiming selfhood, a reminder of one’s strength, and a permanent affirmation of an oppositional identity. By looking at the stories of these subjects, from the creation of their tattoos to their imagined futures, I hope to have opened a window into these unique experiences of embodiment and queerness.

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APPENDIX A

Participant Information

NAME	AGE	IDENTITY	No. OF TATTOOS
Murat	25	Cisgender gay man	5
Pelin	25	Cisgender bisexual woman	4
Elena	25	Cisgender sexually-fluid woman	19
Arzu	26	Cisgender bisexual woman	3
Atakan	30	Cisgender gay man	4
Eren	42	Cisgender gay man	6

APPENDIX B

Sample interview questions

- How many tattoos do you have?
- Could you describe some of your tattoos?
- Location on body? Level of visibility?
- Size, color, etc.?
- How did you get your tattoos?
- Where? When?
- How did you choose the tattoo artist?
- Please describe your interactions with the artist.
- What was the studio space like?
- Did you go alone, or with someone?
- How did you feel during the process of getting the tattoo?
- What are some of the factors that motivated you to get this tattoo?
- How would you define queerness for yourself?
- Can you share some thoughts on queer aesthetics, or "looking queer"? Is "looking queer" something you try to do, or something you avoid, or something in between?
- Do you feel like there is a relationship between your queer identity and your tattoos?
- How do you think other people perceive your tattoos?
- Does the perception of others factor into your decision to get a tattoo? To what degree?
- If you have both meaningful and meaningless tattoos - how do you distinguish between a meaningless and a meaningful tattoo?

- Which did you get first? Is there any pattern to the timing of your tattoos?
- Meaningful tattoos first and then transitioning into less meaningful? Or totally random?
- Is it important to you for your tattoos to have meaning? Why/why not?
- Do you know other people who have meaningless tattoos? Are tattoos a topic of conversation within your social group?
- Has your relationship to your tattoos changed over time? How?
- When you decide to get a tattoo, is temporality/the aging process a factor in your decision? Why or why not?
- When you reflect on the tattoos now, how do they make you feel?
- Do you think about your tattoos often, or do they fade from your awareness (/become naturalized)?
- If they become naturalized - can you reflect on that process?