Review: The Skin We Live In: Explorations of Body Modification, Sexuality, and Citizenship

Reviews of The Sexual Citizen: Queer Politics and Beyond by David Bell and Jon Binnie; In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body by Victoria Pitts; and Tattooed: The Sociogenesis of a Body Art by Michael Atkinson

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In the past ten to fifteen years, feminist and queer theorists have taken a particular interest in the body as a topic for social theory. Much of this work has brought to the forefront the notion of the body as a site on which social, political, and cultural ideas are inscribed. The body is theorized as a cultural construct, and emphasis is placed on the body’s locatedness and differentiation and the relationship between identity and particular forms of embodiment. Amid all this theorizing, however, qualitative research about lived corporeality—how embodiment is experienced in the everyday world—is in short supply. This essay reviews three books—two ethnographic works on body modification and one deep analysis of theoretical and public debates about the question of sexual citizenship—that attempt to illuminate how competing discourses shape the subjective experiences of embodiment. These are timely books; sexual citizenship, or the question of who will and who will not be...
granted full citizen status based on their sexuality, is a hot political topic, particularly this election year. Similarly, various practices of alternative body modification, such as tattooing, are experiencing rates of participation like never before (Atkinson 2003; Pitts 2003). All three books discuss questions of national origin, body politics, globalization, technology, and the privileges of consumer power. Moreover, all offer valuable insights about the politics of embodiment, or how the body—the skin we live in—is simultaneously read and produced within complex relations of power. The two ethnographies more closely resemble each other, but the authors take very different approaches to their investigations of body modification. In this review, then, I begin with David Bell and Jon Binnie’s *The Sexual Citizen* and then shift the discussion to Victoria Pitts’s *In the Flesh* and highlight the authors’ similar approaches to two seemingly different topics. I conclude with Michael Atkinson’s *Tattooed* and discuss his examination of Canadian tattoo enthusiasts.

Current debates over sexual citizenship focus on dissident sexualities. Bell and Binnie argue, however, that “all citizenship is sexual citizenship, in that foundational tenets of being a citizen are all inflected by sexualities” (2000:10). Focusing on the United States and the United Kingdom, the authors seek to answer the question, “how can rights claims based on citizenship status from sexual minorities be made to work other than by replicating heterosexualized articulations of the ‘good citizen?’” and critically to interrogate the heterosexualization of citizenship and the dominant discourse on family (2000:30). They examine two divergent approaches to sexual citizenship: first, the rights-based claims of the gay and lesbian movement that argue for inclusion in definitions of citizenship and family; second, queer political strategies that reject heteronormative and narrow notions of sexual citizenship entirely. In favor of a queer approach to the investigation of citizenship, they argue that the national body itself is heteronormative and framed within a discourse on the family that makes citizenship for sexual dissidents unattainable. Therefore, in their examination of rights based claims, Bell and Binnie ask, is it a good strategy to fight for rights simply because they are denied? Moreover, who is to benefit from the rights that are gained?

To tease out the tensions Bell and Binnie see between mainstream gay and lesbian politics and queer politics, they look at the issues of same-sex marriage and gays in the military, as they are the battlegrounds on which the topic of sexuality and citizenship are most visibly contested. They use same-sex marriage and homosexuality in the military to illustrate the arguments of the differing political positions and reflect on the possible outcomes of each. In terms of the same-sex marriage debate, Bell and Binnie assert that rights-based claims set up a model of the “good gay citizen” that reflects the values of the white, middle-class culture and co-opts a heteronormative family model as an assertion of sameness. The appropriation of the family model is crucial, as the family is the central place where sexual citizenship is affirmed. In contrast, a queer political strategy, born out of queer and AIDS activism of the 1980s, challenges the heterocentric model altogether. This model prescribes one form of desire and coupling and excludes a wide range of experi-
ences and desires that do not fit within the narrow bounds of a heterocentric family framework. Bell and Binnie (2000:143) write, “Being a good sexual citizen can never be a queer strategy.” Thus they suggest a revival of 1980s queer politics because it is a queer strategy that will challenge dominant notions of citizenship rather than rights claims that focus on the sharing of rights and privileges.

Bell and Binnie also consistently address the troubling alignment of sexual politics with consumer citizenship, arguing that the good citizen and the good consumer are synonymous identities in a consumer capitalist culture. Accordingly, they caution that what becomes silenced in the rights claims of the gay and lesbian movement is a consideration of class. I found this part of their book most compelling because the authors were able to ground the complexities of sexuality, class, and citizenship in lived experience. For example, gay and lesbian activists’ relative agreement with the military’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy, Bell and Binnie claim, is devoid of any consideration of class. A class analysis of these types of debates, they argue, would better answer the question of who loses and who wins in rights claims. The authors write, “We should remember yet again that there is also a material dimension to consider. . . . [F]or many working-class queers, the military has long been the only available way of escaping an oppressive home life [and] receiv[ing] the educational benefits otherwise denied them” (2000:65). Because rights-based claims are often voiced by a more affluent class who have consumer power and economic mobility, the relationship between good citizen and consumer citizen continues to strengthen. This being so, Bell and Binnie ask, what then does citizenship look like for those with fewer material resources? They urge that any discussion of citizenship must take up the question of class to ensure full citizen status for all sexual dissidents.

Reading Bell and Binnie’s book, I could not help but think of the rising popularity of the television program Queer Eye for the Straight Guy. While some argue that the program’s popularity is a mark of wider national acceptance of gay men, perhaps Bell and Binnie would argue that its popularity is more about class power and the ability to consume than it is a measure of acceptance of homosexuality. The “Fab 5” represent “good” gay citizens and further entrench what Bell and Binnie call the “myth of the pink economy” where queers are represented as “economic angels, blessing the economy with miracles of unlimited spending” (2000:97). The authors’ survey of the debates over sexuality and citizenship and their application to the world of lived experience make this book an important contribution. It is important not only to the question of sexual citizenship but also as a model for demonstrating how direct connections between theory and lived experience can and should be made.

Similarly, Pitts’s In the Flesh is exemplary ethnographic research that grounds a variety of theoretical debates in the lived experiences of embodiment. Exploring body modification practices such as tattooing, piercing, scarring, branding, and flesh hooks, Pitts uses qualitative interviews and interpretive analysis to investigate various forms of body modification practices. She offers a deep contextualization of the subject positions in which body projects are achieved. This book skillfully brings together many of the new theories on the body with her empirical data on how
individuals experience their modified bodies within relations of power. Pitts begins with an interrogation of the discourses that shape dominant cultural understandings of body art in the Western world. Historically, body modification such as tattooing has been understood within a psychiatric model that interprets it as a signifier of mental illness, self-hatred, and self-mutilation. She argues that this psychiatric discourse relies on dominant cultural notions of the “natural” body as pristine and unchanging, along with the supposition that the body is an expression of the rational self. Feminist and poststructuralist theories on the body challenge these essentialist claims about the body and the self and argue that there is no essential, ideal body or fixed core self. To situate competing discourses of the body in a political and cultural context, Pitts explores body modification in the different settings of modern primitivism, cyberpunks, body modification by women, and queer culture. In this process, she “attend[s] to questions of self-definition, to the powerful forces that may territorialize and reterritorialize the body, and also to the historicity of the social and material technologies used in body projects” (2003:48).

Pitts also challenges the postmodern reading of body modification as an act of self-narration. All narrative acts, she claims, are embedded in a historical, political, and social context such that “fashioning the body is always a social and political process, rather than one of individual choice and persona” (2003:192). What new theories on the body can teach us is that bodies are already marked by power relations; that is, there is no “real” self-narration but rather “complex performances that negotiate between the self and the social” (2003:92). To illustrate this, she explores women’s “reclaiming stories” whereby women use body modification to “reclaim” their bodies from rape and harassment. She similarly examines the use of body art by radical queers (or, as one participant said, “queer of the queers”) as a marker of the political struggles over sexuality. Through a critical analysis of her interviews with women and queer body modifiers, she illustrates the complex tension between the experience of self-narration, or the re-creation of a new self, and a critical examination of the systems of power in which the body project itself is alternately performed and read. Pitts argues that reclaiming body projects and queer body modification practices gain meaning through intersubjective processes in which writing and reading take place all at once. “Reclaiming body projects do not return the body-self to any pre-victimized state of body or selfhood,” she writes. “[T]he ‘reclaimed’ body has to be understood as actually produced rather than recovered” (2003:85). Similarly, for gay, lesbian, and transgendered (LGBT) body modifiers, just as their body practices expose moments of agency and the body as a contested space, they also reveal their political limitations, which affirms Pitts’s argument that bodies are always marked by power relations and symbolic meanings.

While I found her analyses of women and LGBT body modifiers interesting, her argument is best illustrated in her discussion of the modern primitivism movement and cyberpunks. Those two chapters clearly demonstrate how relations of power influence body modification projects. Like almost everything in the new millennium, body modification practices have been affected by the increased access to information
“Modern primitivism” is a subcultural movement that, on the one hand, uses information technology to learn about indigenous body rituals and, on the other, enacts indigenous body rituals as a form of resistance to modernism and body ideals in Western culture. Although modern primitives seek to align themselves with non-Western indigenous perspectives on the body, the movement’s appropriation of non-Western cultural and spiritual practices function to produce the ethnic Other. Ironically, Pitts argues, modern primitivism reinforces the binary categories of modern/primitive that they seek to disrupt by rendering the white body as “modern” and the tribal body as “primitive.” Here I am reminded of Bell and Binnie’s arguments about the privileges of consumption; ethnic identities become available for Western consumption in a globalized market. Modern primitivism serves to preserve the indigenous body as if locked in space and time, free from the atrocities of modern culture. Pitts reads this as a form of white Western privilege and argues that the ethnic Other is appropriated to promote new notions of identity and, ultimately, is yet again a form of colonization.

In the case of cyberpunks, however, appropriation works slightly differently; cyberpunks co-opt surgical and medical technologies to challenge the power elite and raise questions about who “owns” and controls these technologies that are often available to a privileged few. Cyberpunks take from their own cultural elites in order to engage in a continual process of customizing and “upgrading” the body. Using mechanical and medical technologies, cyberpunks seek to denaturalize the body and push the body past its human limits. Pitts’s examinations of the appropriation of non-Western body practices and cyberpunks’ use of medical technology are illustrative of the complexities of power relations in which these body practices take place. All the forms of body modification explored in Pitts’s book seek to denaturalize the body and challenge oppressive constructs of gender, sexuality, race, and class to offer new possibilities for identities and social change. However, the postmodern possibilities of identity must remain critical of the question of power so as not to slip into the abyss of the notion of a free fashioning of identities. “We need” suggests Pitts, “what I think of as an ‘ontological-epistemological humility,’ or an acknowledgement of the limits of our abilities to declare the truth and essence of our individual selves, whether they be based on nature or invention” (2003:184).

Attending to the natural and the inventive, Atkinson interrogates the relationship between body modification practices and the fashioning of new collective identities. Though he too explores the topic of body modification, his book is quite dissimilar from Pitts’s, as he makes use of different theories and questions to draw his conclusions. Atkinson employs the framework of Norbert Elias’s figurational sociology to explore the popularity of tattooing as a form of body modification among Canadians. Elias is interested in how life is experienced through interdependent social relations over time and how the body became a target of social control. According to Atkinson, figurational sociology’s central concern is on “long-term civilizing processes” that explain “how a series of shifts in social interdependencies (spanning several centuries) has had a cumulative impact on social behaviors and individual
personalities” (2003:7). Atkinson argues that tattoo enthusiasts in Canada are a figuration of individual agents connected in highly interdependent ways rather than a distinct subculture. In this way, he examines what he calls “sociogenic change” to understand tattooing as embedded in long-term social processes in Canada. From there, he examines psychogenesis, which he calls “the development of personality structures within specific figurations” (2003:8). Atkinson, like Pitts, locates his work in this postessentialist period during which there has been a tremendous challenge to the notion of the “natural” body. He argues that there is an apparent shortage of ethnographic work in the midst of all this theorizing and debate about the social construction of bodies. Therefore, his book explores how the actual lived body is experienced in everyday life.

Like Pitts, Atkinson argues that tattooing is not merely an act of self-expression and suggests that it should be understood as taking place in an intersubjective nexus to show how interdependencies influence body modification habits and shape meanings. He confronts the notion of individuality through body modification and asserts that to understand this practice outside of a collective context “prevents us from grasping how individuality is achieved and understood by actors involved in interaction and self-representation” (2003:22). Accordingly, Atkinson takes his reader through a wonderful examination of the history of tattooing in North America and illuminates the various sociopolitical shifts that have influenced its practice, particularly in Canada. Within this framework of figurational sociology, he offers insights into why people choose tattooing amid a wide range of body modification possibilities. Further, he demonstrates how interdependent webs of family, peers, culture, and figurations affect both the decision to become tattooed and the understandings of practitioners as tattooed persons.

Atkinson insightfully employs a multifaceted analysis to explain why people become and remain tattoo enthusiasts in Canada. However, his book would have benefited from critical analyses such as those presented by Bell and Binnie and Pitts that problematize questions of race, class, and gender. Such an approach would offer a deeper understanding of the ways in which the lived body is experienced. For example, Pitts offers an excellent analysis of the co-optation of non-Western body practices, the consumption of the ethnic Other that is a result of Western privileges to consume and appropriate non-Western cultural practices. Yet Atkinson reads the use of non-Western tattooing practices as a sign of Canadian tolerance and cultural pluralism via globalization. He writes, “When cultural borders are opened and individuals feel free to peruse a plethora of corporeal practices . . . increasing varieties of corporeal styles and performances are created” (2003:154). However, Pitts’s book teaches us that this is another form of colonization. The ability to co-opt the ethnic Other is one-directional. So though “borders are opened,” the questions remain, To whom are they open? And is crossing possible from each side of the border? Grappling with these questions, I believe, would add a necessary critical dimension to his analysis and perhaps offer a more complete picture of the Canadian tattoo enthusiast.
Throughout Atkinson’s book, there is an underlying essentialist tone about “human nature” that troubles me. This is confirmed in his conclusions: he argues that we reinsert biological components of bodies, “such as drives, impulses, and emotions” into sociological theory for a theoretical balance between biology and social construction. Though I would agree that new theories of the body need to engage more directly with questions of biology, a blanket acceptance of certain fixed human “natures” is troublesome if left without the types of analyses that Pitts and Bell and Binnie provide. Atkinson writes that “sociologists need to accept the idea that inborn drives and impulses are important to the social construction of bodies” (2003:240). Yet he does not explain what he understands those “inborn drives” to be, except to say that tattooing represents “a strong internal drive to modify the body.”

These kinds of assertions uncritically naturalize the body and fail to problematize the power relations within which the meanings of drives, impulses, and emotions are created, particularly across race, gender, sexuality, class, and national lines, to name a few. I would suggest that there is a way to bring the question of the lived body back into the debate in a way that is not neoessentialist but that acknowledges the materiality of the skin in which all human and nonhuman animals live.

What is so rewarding for the reader is Bell and Binnie’s and Pitt’s vigorous attempts to bring questions of race, class, gender, sexuality, national origin, and their intersections to the center, critically to analyze embodied experiences in a variety of contexts. Though Atkinson offers interesting insights into the practice of tattooing in Canada, throughout the book Canadian tattoo enthusiasts read as if they are a large homogeneous group, despite his argument in the beginning of the book that it is a heterogeneous collective. Of the eighty-two people he interviewed, seventy-seven are white, nine are Asian, and four are Afro-Canadian. Though 82 percent of his sample is white, he never contends with race, so that it appears that white persons’ representations of tattooing can stand in for nearly all Canadian tattoo enthusiasts. In addition, Atkinson’s lack of attention to power relations and their ability to shape meaning and mobility becomes glaring when he argues that “individuals with darker skin have lagged behind in the contemporary renaissance in tattooing because the inks used in the process do not appear as clearly or with as much depth as in people with lighter skin” (2003:243). This argument assumes a hierarchy of aesthetics and reinscribes the “lighter-skinned” body as the “pristine” canvas available to choose how it will be marked. This propagates historically racist notions of white corporeal superiority that the “dark-skinned” body cannot attain. His perception that “individuals with darker skin have lagged behind” indicates the lack of reflexivity about the racial makeup of his sample and its impacts on his findings. Finally, this line of thinking obscures the participation of people of color who are tattoo enthusiasts and artists who have been an integral part of the “tattoo renaissance.”

Theory and lived corporeality always inform each other, and Bell and Binnie and Pitts are gifted in their abilities clearly to demonstrate this connectedness. The rhythm of Pitts’s writing is gripping as she interweaves the words and stories of her participants with complex analyses that synthesize the empirical and the theoretical.
Similarly, Bell and Binnie skillfully synthesize two large bodies of literature on sexuality and citizenship to offer new approaches to the highly politicized issue of sexual citizenship. One of my critiques of Atkinson’s book is its discipline-centric approach to the study of modern body projects. Social theory about the body has a rich interdisciplinary history and is part of what makes the question of embodiment so compelling. Both Pitts’s and Bell and Binnie’s multidisciplinary approaches to the questions they raise remind us that holding tight to disciplinary boundaries serves only to limit our understanding. Finally, all three books contribute to what I hope is a trend in qualitative research about the subjective experience of embodiment.