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Queer Embodiment and Semiotics: Reclamation in LGBTQ+ Adult Community by Designing and Wearing Temporary Tattoos

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Abstract

This paper presents a new approach that centers on supporting and bringing forth the embodied narratives of LGBTQ+ adults through designing and wearing temporary tattoos. The researcher synthesizes literature in regards to notable historical symbols of queer visibility, tattooing as a social work adjacent practice, and previous interventions that have been conducted with the LGBTQ+ community. The researcher also provides a focus on how temporary tattoos have been utilized in past expressive art therapy methods. The majority of preexisting research within the intersections of queerness, tattoos, and art therapy techniques are often rooted in themes related to self-perception, community connection, and the body as a living document. With this considered, this work investigates how creating and physically exhibiting personalized temporary tattoos could potentially assist with reclaiming and affirming queerness in LGBTQ+ adults. The researcher was also concerned with how temporary tattoos could contribute to collective memory, serve as a temporary memorial, and assert queer incarnation. In part of the completion of a community-based project, several individual sessions and one group session were conducted with greater Boston area based LGBTQ+ identifying adult participants. The results displayed here indicate that through the process of customizing and wearing temporary tattoos, queer individuals can experience feeling valid in their identity and a sense of connection with others that share and witness their identity.

Keywords: LGBTQ+, temporary tattoos, tattoos, queer, queer coding, queer adults, embodiment, expressive art therapy, semiotics

Dedication

For M- for letting me see you, for holding up a mirror so I could more clearly see myself.
For Maria- for knowing I had it in me all along, for catching the pieces that spill over.
For 33B- for being home, for being the place where I could become.

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> Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights; the accumulations of a lifetime gather there. In places the palimpsest is so heavily worked that the letters feel like Braille. I like to keep my body rolled up away from prying eyes. Never unfold too much, tell the whole story.
>
> —Jeanette Winterson, *Written on the Body*

Introduction

The following is as much a thesis as it is a love letter to my younger, closeted self. This writing poses the idea that the queer body is an archive; that the queer experience can be affirmed through construction of a shared, assembled visibility. It is through collective body stories that we are able to be brought back to ourselves; it is through assigning meaning to visual and material elements that we are able to grow fluent in coded communication (Pandjiris, 2019) This work is setting out to show that through engagement with expressive arts, the narratives LGBTQ+ people were force-fed about their sexual and gender identities can be recovered and rewritten. Within this thesis I aspire to affirm, reclaim, and investigate the body as a living document by designing and wearing temporary tattoos with adults in the LGBTQ+ community.

It is most imperative to examine the origins of this concept; it is my belief that queerness by nature finds itself cast under the gaze of a critical microscope. Aligned with the suspected necessity of invention, the idea for this thesis arrived as a means to a personal solution for a personal problem. For context, it was June 2020, and along with many I was waiting in the syrupy-thick limbo of a global pandemic and civic unrest. With each passing day, week, and month, I was feeling more near irrevocably stuck in my home, brain, and body. The restlessness only amplified as I tried to avoid thinking about what this month signified to me, to many.

Beyond just another month pacing the floor plan of my home, notably, June is Pride month. It would have been my very first. In the wake of its imminent cancelation, I frequently found myself reflecting on the taut juxtaposition between Covid-19 and the AIDS/HIV epidemic; I began wondering if the queer communities who had lived through both would experience some form of retraumatization by proxy. Simultaneously, I kept catching myself ruminating on the considerable amount of time and therapy I had dedicated towards building up my courage to attend Pride at all—a symbolic milestone in my own queer visibility. With the safety regulations in place, a public gathering like Pride would not be able to happen, at least not in its usual way.

In order to combat an all-consuming sense of mourning, feeling unseen, and feeling robbed of the very experience I had built myself up to attend, I turned to an arts and body centered approach of coping. Envelopes and stamps scattered across my bedroom floor, I prepared to mail the very first round of folks I came out to a selection of rainbow temporary tattoos. If we couldn't be together in person, this felt like a way to at least feel close at a distance—for me to feel seen, to feel valid, even at a distance.

The bulk of us were scattered around different sectors of New England, while others were as far as the West Coast. We selected a date and a time, and applied our temporary tattoos at our respective kitchen sinks. One by one, my phone become illuminated with notifications as siblings, friends, and my therapist messaged me a picture of the vibrant rainbow that now stained their limbs. By the end of the day, even the soft, expansive pink of my dog's belly was adorned with this symbol. My intention was to try and force myself to celebrate the identity I had fought to recognize, to acknowledge this insistent progress in my own queer visibility. I did not intend for it to mean as much as it did to me, to impact me so significantly. Seeing the rainbow across my own skin translated into one thing, but to see it intentionally emblazed on the bodies of the

people I love, mirroring the image I was wearing back to me, harbored an entirely different but powerful gravity.

The residual effect of this experience—what now feels like a hiccup in the void during a purgatory of a summer, has led me to the crux of this thesis. This thesis is curious if my experience can be recreated and evoke something similar, be it connection or reaffirmation of narrative, for other adult members of the LGBTQ+ community. Inspection of this concept is paramount, as it could have the potential to be a future resource for LGBTQ+ folks. With art therapy being often grounded in the process of being witnessed, this field has much to offer to queer folks looking to achieve a sense of visibility. My focus in this community-based capstone project is to explore how LGBTQ+ adults are able to utilize creative arts therapy as it relates to cultivating connection, affirmation, and visibility—to our community, our bodies, and our stories.

Literature Review

When looking into existing research in the area of queerness and tattooing, it became evident that many peer-reviewed studies were conducted for purposes that did not encompass the entirety of my interests. Some studies that intersected with my inquiry addressed the perception of folks with tattoos, factors in displaying queerness, the history of LGBTQ+ semiotics, and how physical modification affects self-esteem. This review provides an abundant focus on LGBTQ+ adults, queer visibility, and queer symbols throughout history, as well as insights from self-identified trauma-informed queer tattoo artists. This review aims to establish a base of research that bridges existing literature that delves into queerness, tattoos, and art therapy.

Prelude to this review, I will state that I have been mindful and meticulous in my literature selection. I have included several peer-reviewed sources, but also have found it to be

urgent to additionally supply information that speaks to the lived experiences of queer tattoo artists and a queer clinician/podcaster. While the insights provided from queer tattoo artists and a queer clinician/podcaster falls outside of the parameters of peer-reviewed criteria, they offer a foundation that I believe to be necessary in unpacking this work. This curated collection of literature directly nods at what I believe is an elitist hierarchical value in academia, and in doing so comments on the outstandingly White, cis-herteronormative, and problematic history of psychology's understructure.

Coded Communication

In a 2017 study, Bergh et al. (2017) set out to better comprehend how tattoos aid in the expression of individual identity in colleges students. They define the function of tattooing to primarily serve as means for individual or group identification, ritual, or decorative purposes. Within the structure of this project, social media is framed as a vehicle for individuals to virtually connect and share their tattoos. Through the lens of social media platforms, Bergh et al. inquired about the function of tattoos in regards to both its public and private nature. While they compare tattoos to the likes of clothing choice and cosmetics as forms of identity presentation, tattoos are determined to be a "permanent declaration of the self" (Bergh et al., 2017, p. 4).

Bergh et al. (2017) state that visible visual/physical identifiers, namely tattoos, are a means of nonverbal communication with others. This claim overlaps with the concept of subcultural semiotics, introduced by Pandjiris (2019), on their podcast*, Living in This Queer Body*. Subcultural semiotics accounts for the meaning that a population assigns to materials with the purpose of coded communication (Pandjiris, 2019). Pandjiris emphasizes that "probing the weight objects hold as symbols and the way in which style based cultural signifiers function are short hand for coded communication" (3:34).

This particular idea in regards to symbol and meaning is reiterated by Elliot Gaines (2006): "Communication is the representation of objects and ideas originally perceived in a spatial relationship with the world, but remembered or identified with a particular time when something became meaningful" (p. 3). The comprehension and deconstruction of semiotics is further supported by Wolowic (2017), who states, "Semiotics investigates how shared meanings are created and applied to symbols" (p. 2) They go on to use this understanding of semiotics to examine the rainbow flag as a signifier of connoted meanings for LGBT+ communities. "Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer communities, for example, have a long tradition of using innocuous objects such as the placement of ear piercings, the colour and placement of handkerchiefs and hair styles to signal identity and community" (p. 2).

This concept, when applied to tattoos, is further echoed in the writing of Tamara Santibañez (2021). In their book, *Could This Be Magic? Tattooing As Liberation Work.* Santibañez (2021), a queer tattooer, artist, and author details a foundation for trauma-informed tattooing practices. Within their writing they go on to say,

> Tattooing is a visual way to create your own personhood. It's an ongoing creative project, a visual language that interfaces with the world around you to project what you want to project. Tattooing is unparalleled as a medium for bodily communication and is limitless in its stylistic potential. (p. 18)

Santibañez (2021) conveys several other profound points in this body of writing, touching on the parallels between tattooing and social work. The act of tattooing conjures both intimacy and violence; much like social work, emotional support and processing is a necessity in creating a safe environment for a tattooing experience. Another similarity between the

professions is seen in how both "affirm people's 'identity stories', and to help them reclaim their full selves" (p. 18)

Navigating Self/Reclaiming Body

Another element discussed within this text is the radical potential of tattooing. Santibañez (2021) makes the claim

> Tattooing is a way for those of us who have experienced a loss of control over our bodies, whether that be through life events or because of systematic oppression working against us, to reinstate ourselves as authorities of our own selves. (p. 11)

This sentiment very much reinforces the thoughts of queer author, Roxane Gay (2018). In her memoir, *Hunger*, she makes the case for tattoos as a coping mechanism and practice of reclamation after bodily violation. "With my tattoos, I get to say, these are choices I make for my body, with full-throated consent. This is how I mark myself. This is how I take my body back" (Gay, 2018, p. 184). Gay proceeds to say (about the experience of being tattooed), "You have chosen this suffering, and at the end of it, your body will be different. Maybe your body will feel more like yours" (p. 186). This point juxtaposes Santibañez's (2021) voice, as they challenge the reader to view tattooing as a form of metamorphosis where the experience of deliberate pain and marking, and consequently healing, can be transformative for the client.

Another tattoo artist, Noelle Longhaul (Tsjeng, 2016), discusses identity as it pertains to being queer and being tattooed. In a *Vice* article featuring their practice, they are quoted as saying that tattooing has been a means of having a relationship with their identity and body on their terms—the process of learning to tattoo mimicked the process of learning what being trans meant for them (Tsjeng, 2016). For Longhaul, building a practice in tattooing has been a way of marking out what they would now call "ritual space with people who were trying to find ways of

helping each other, tell each other's stories, and inhabit each other's bodies" (Tsjeng, 2016, p. 1). They state,

> other people seeing my tattoos first before they see my gender is a practical, material reason—I've always jumped towards wanting to be heavily tattooed [and] not having my gender being one of the first things that people see and process. (p. 1)

Queer Visibility/Disruptive Symbols

Based on these aforementioned beliefs and that identity practices are made up of symbolic markers (Pitts, 2000), it was my anticipation that visible tattoos may provide opportunities for aspects of a person's queer identities to feel witnessed by their community while simultaneously conveying information to their community. Queer body modification, much like a uniform, holds the potential to explore possibilities and limitations of agency in body-based practices (Pitts, 2000). Research has reflected that visibly presenting qualities of an individual's identity, particularly through tattooing, serves as a means of communication and evidence of lived experience (Sundberg & Kjellman, 2018). When elements of queer identity manifest physically, individuals are "more likely to feel connected with the LGB community and more likely to be affirming of their identity" (Davila et al., 2019, p. 10). This belief is further emphasized in Hayfield et al.'s (2013) article, "Visible Lesbians and Invisible Bisexuals: Appearance and Visual Identities Among Bisexual Women." Within this text Hayfield et. al expand upon the idea that

> Lesbians have made use of the semiotic codes woven into clothing and adornment to articulate their identities and desires to the wider world, to resist hetero-normative constructions of sexuality and gender, to pass as heterosexual, to create communities, and to produce the clothed body as a site of political action and resistance. (p. 3)

These premises assisted in guiding me towards my own inquiry, as I was curious to learn how presentation of temporary tattoos could translate specifically for the LGBTQ+ community.

Tattoos have the ability to be a document that allows for active construction and reflection of an individual's identity, experience, actions, and status (Sundberg, 2018). How this construction is understood and upheld is conditioned by the individual's communicative community. In Sundberg's (2018) writing, "The Tattoo as a Document," the study conducted intended to research how tattoos on a human body function as a, "both abstract and tangible archive, a composition of memories and evidence relating to events, actions and motives" (p. 3). This work investigates how meaning making is applied to the events, actions, and memories that are woven into tattoos, and are, "to a large degree built within a specific context to which the individual is bound" (p. 3). The body is utilized and viewed in this study as both "the medium and the storage facility of the tattoos; they exist upon, within and outside the individual body" (p. 3).

In another quantitative study, Ball and Elsner (2019) measure the self-esteem of college students before and after a 2-week duration of wearing a visible temporary tattoo. Through the completion of a State Self-Esteem Scale, the self-esteem of a sample of college student participants was compared to their previously non-modified selves. After this 2-week period, results demonstrated that there was an overall increase in self-esteem (Ball & Elsner, 2019). It should be noted that this assessment did not consider whether this increase only occurred due to the inconsequential nature of temporary tattoos, thus not accurately measuring the effects of permanent body alteration. However because my interest is in working with temporary body alteration, this study shows potential in supporting my purposes.

My interest in temporary visual bodily modification as it relates to reclaiming LGBTQ+ identity-based narratives is not directly addressed in the Ball and Elsner (2019) study. This study did not account for the gender identity and sexual orientation of participants, leaving a gap for me to inspect. From this study alone, it is unknown if queerness and queer bodies factor in with the desire for visual marking. With queer coding often directly intersecting with an individual's physical presentation, my works begs to know where temporary tattoos could aptly factor in.

In another article, Davila et al. (2019) ask and unpack how bisexual individuals attempt to make their sexual orientation apparent through physical signifiers. Davila et al. constructed a study to better understand whether bisexual identifying folks intentionally sought ways to achieve bi+ visibility, and how this queer expression might be accomplished. The results showed that over half the participants do in fact make efforts to appear queer, most frequently via physical, visual displays. These visual clues included style of dress, LGBTQ+/Pride decoration, hairstyles, piercings, and tattoos (Davila et al., 2019). It was found that,

> Compared to people who did not attempt to make their bisexual+ identity visible, those who did were more likely to feel connected with the LGB community, more likely to be affirming of their identity, and less likely to view bisexuality as illegitimate. This type of pride and community connection is consistent with wanting to be visible. (p. 10).

In contrast to the theme of attempts at intentional queer visibility in Davila et al.'s (2019) article, we are presented with a cautious perspective in Rorholm and Gambrell's (2019) article, "The Pink Triangle as an Interruptive Symbol." While I am interested in exploring potential semiotics of queer identity in present day adults, it is imperative to discuss the heavy history that is embedded in visibility with the LGBTQ+ community.

Rorholm and Gambrell (2019) uncover the gravity of visual signifiers. Pink triangles were stitched into the clothes of queer folks during Nazi Germany, exposing and endangering them, and ultimately resulting in mass murder. The LGBTQ+ community has since re-appropriated the pink triangle, reestablishing autonomy over their narrative while simultaneously honoring the queer lives that were oppressed and lost. Better understanding the transformative power of ownership over embodied symbolism is an avenue that I wanted to address in execution of this community-based project. Something as simple and direct as a pink triangle is able to convey an entire history of a community through the combination of a specific shape and color. The pink triangle has inspired this project because of its ability to say so much by deconstructing something into its physical properties.

Rorholm and Gambrell's (2019) qualitative study investigates the nature of interruptive symbols while thinking about utilizing pre-existing imagery for evoking social justice. This article spends several sections providing education around the historical context of the pink triangle and then proceeds to break down how the queer community has since reclaimed it. Through a phenomenological approach, Rorholm and Gambrell complete on-site memorial observations and interviews with memorial visitors. Unfortunately, this procedure only included six participants, giving a very limited insight to how the memorial was perceived.

Temporary Tattoos in Current Art Therapy Methods

While much research within the realm of this body alteration centers on permanent pre-existing tattoos and self-perception, there have recently been studies completed utilizing materials for the creation of temporary tattoos. In "Temporary Tattoos: Alternative to Adolescent Self-Harm?," Masters (2011) tests if the application of temporary tattoos can assist adolescents to shift self-harm behaviors and disrupt feelings related to negative body image. Masters

anticipated that temporary tattoo application could be utilized as an alternative technique for managing urges of self-injurious behavior and reframe thoughts pertaining to body image. Though my inquiry does not center on self-harm in adolescents, it is interested in physical presentations in identity, which adjacently intersects with perceptions of body image.

To execute this study, participants were directed to draw on themselves with a design of their choosing (Masters, 2011, p. 89). In some cases, participants drew on other involved participants with the supervision of a therapist. It is unclear to me what materials were used for this application process, and it is not clear if pre-existing temporary tattoos were actually used in this procedure. I would be curious to learn what materials were applied, as I highly anticipate sensation could be a significant factor in this process. I am also curious to what designs and symbols might be used for a temporary tattoo. Master's (2011) method used the following pre-existing designs: flowers/vines/roses, patients' psychological issues, two faces for a patient dealing with internal and external relationship conflicts, two flags to represent melding different cultures, two hearts fused to represent issues with the intensities of love, foreign words to indicate secrecy, and alienation fantasy daydreams reflected as unicorns and dolphins (p. 89). Masters does not address if she believes that it is the application process, the resulting visual design, or a combination of both that yielded successful results with her participants.

Masters' (2011) results demonstrate that the practice of temporary tattooing is a successful distraction when resisting self-injurious behavior and aided the participants with reframing feelings towards body image. This study, though limited in its actual write-up, is incredibly useful and relevant to my interests. This is one of the few studies that I have located that is designed using temporary tattoos and discusses their potential utilization as a somatic strategy. Much of my previous research has examined individuals with real pre-existing tattoos.

While the sample demographic selected in this article is adolescence and their sexual orientation is unclear to the reader, the study itself feels as though it would be straight forward in its replication if used with a my desired population of queer identifying adults. While my focus is not related to decreasing self-harm or countering feelings of negative body image, these areas feel adjacent to affirmation in identity through physical presentation.

Queer Bodies as Ephemera and Archive

Before concluding this review, it is crucial to address the overlapping ephemeral nature of temporary tattoos and what qualifies as surviving documentations of queerness. As emphasized in Rosenberg (2018),

> Tattoos traditionally manifest within a material ephemerality, existing within the consistently decaying format of the human body. In this way, they exist within material spaces that are physically accessible yet fragile, liminal and often time-limited. They also facilitate a distinct set of affects for the people who experience them (the boldness and confusion, which comes from concrete identity exploration); an un/knowing of queerness that may be simultaneously visible yet hidden when experienced through these methods; and the un/safety that comes with finding other members of this community through often-public means of communication. (p. 7)

According to Santibañez (2021), tattoos can create a permanent record of where you've been, who you are, and what you've done in your life. Tattoos play a significant part in the role of the body as archive. As informed from the literature I have reviewed, I feel as though queer individuals in particular rely on their bodies as testament of lived experience. Tyburczy (2015) elaborates, "Ephemera, like queerness, are elusive and indefinable, gritty and fragmented. So often policed into silence and shadows, queerness has historically shared with ephemera a

marginalized relationship to the archive" (p. 3). For those seeking tangible evidence of queer histories, "ephemera's evocative relationship to remains and traces mirrors the ongoing struggle to cope with the loss and mourning that characterized the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis" (p. 1).

The interest in my selection of this literature was largely influenced by the idea that to name is to exert empowerment—to give permission for earnest, authentic queer embodiment. I sought out writing that could expand upon my inquiry that tattooing, in this way, is an insistence on being seen, on being witnessed. With this in mind, I believe a therapeutic art practice that mimics the visual bodily elements of tattooing in a temporary format could be utilized in identity expression. When individuals harbor and engage with identities that are "tenuous, unstable, and impermanent, realized in disappearal" (Blocker, 2012). I am able to view skin as container for lived truths and a surface on which to write and share stories.

Method

When beginning this procedure, I first familiarized myself with the specific sanctions that are involved with the community engagement capstone option. After becoming versed with these particular guidelines, I began the process of gathering my participants. The requirements I had in place for participant selection were that the individuals were 18 years or older, located within the greater Boston area, and identified as LGBTQ+. There were no prerequisites for those participating in regards to mental health diagnosis, race, socio-economic situation, or religion just so long as they met the aforementioned criteria. I specifically sought folks of this particular age, demographic, and location, as to remain consistent with my own personal exploration with temporary tattoos, which resulted in directly inspiring this thesis. It should be noted that my reasoning for requiring participants to be located within the greater Boston area was so I would

be able to deliver art supplies and so coordination of meetings would be streamlined for Eastern Standard Time.

My initial source of contact and correspondence with potential participants occurred via a social media app, Lex (2019). Lex is a text-based social media app intended for lesbian, bisexual, asexual, trans, gender queer, intersex, two spirit, and non-binary people. This app differs from many social media platforms, in that it does not include any photographs of its users. A limitation within my utilization of this app is that it is not inclusive to cis-gender men. Lex was launched and has been an active social media app available for smart phone download since 2019. Prior to 2019, Lex formerly existed as an Instagram page under the name, *Personals*. The mission of Lex, and previously Personals, is to digitally connect queer folks across the world. The inspiration for the premise of this social media stemmed from personal ads placed in *On Our Backs* magazine during the 1980's.

Users active on Lex are able to partake in five possible functions. The first function is to compose a general ad. General ads are typically placed to seek romance, physical intimacy, friendship, community, housing, jobs, mutual aid, or other forms of connection. The second function is to post a Missed Connection. A missed connection is utilized when a user is posting a specific ad for a person that they have already crossed paths with in the real world. The third function of Lex is to message users that have posted either a general ad or a missed connection. The fourth function of this app is to *like* or *react* to ads that have been posted. The fifth function is to *save* ads that have been posted so a user can easily locate them at a later time. Each user is able to post up to six ads per month, and can respond or react to the ads that are posted. All ads expire after 30 days, meaning they are no longer actively visible to other users after the span of 1 month.

It should be noted that Lex permits their users to control their individualized settings. These settings have a variety of filtering functions that will dictate the personalized experience of each user. One setting allows individuals to search for key words and usernames. Another setting allows users to manage the age range of people whose posts will be displayed on their main page. Users are also able to filter the maximum distance of the people whose posts will appear on their main page. With this information in mind, the users who were able to view my ad would need to have their age range set to include 28 years old, and I would need to fall within the radius of their set maximum distance limitations. Users would also only be able to view my ad for the duration of 30 days before reaching its expiration, and no longer immediately displayed on the main page.

In my Lex ad I posted a headline indicating that I was currently in search of participants for an art therapy master's thesis. The ad inquired LGBTQ+ adults who reside in the greater Boston area to directly contact me through the messenger feature if they were interested in learning about and potentially participating in a thesis that explores the concept of the queer body and queer experience as a document and archive. After constructing and posting this ad I received 24 *like* reactions from Lex users. Eight of these Lex users went on to contact me via the messaging function of the app. While I did correspond with all eight individuals that expressed interest, six were located in zip codes that landed too far outside of the greater Boston area. These locations included: Brooklyn, New York; Farmington, Maine; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Tavares, Florida; Austin, Texas; and Sandy, Utah. Due to this distance, I would not be able to deliver the materials necessary for the group meeting. The two users who were based within the greater Boston area were not able to commit to the three separate sessions required to complete

this project. These individuals were given permission to share my ad with others in their community, should they be of interest.

To further promote my search for participants I screen shot the post I had made on the Lex app. By using my smart phone I uploaded this screen shot to the *Stories* section of Instagram. Because I follow and am followed by a considerable number of LGBTQ+ Instagram users that reside local to Boston, many of whom I know personally, I anticipated having more successful interaction with individuals via this platform. I posted this specific ad to the Stories section of Instagram on three separate occasions during the month of February 2021. My Instagram account is adjusted to a private setting, so only those that I have approved to follow me via this platform would have the ability to view and interact with the advertisement. A total of six individuals replied to this ad posted via Instagram.

Of the six individuals that replied to my Instagram ad, four met the criteria for my project. The other two, while adults identifying as LGBTQ+, reside in Western Massachusetts, and Phoenix Arizona, respectfully. I corresponded with the four qualifying individuals via Instagram's direct messaging feature. During each correspondence, I provided background information about my identity as a master's candidate in Lesley University's Art Therapy and Licensed Mental Health Counseling graduate program and as a queer adult. I used this time to elaborate on what I was interested in investigating through the virtual/in-person conduction of this thesis, and answered questions that individuals had about what would be asked of them for participation and time commitment.

After covering the aforementioned information, I exchanged email addresses and phone numbers with the four potential participants. I encouraged these individuals to spend a day considering the logistics of being involved with this community-based project before confirming

their ability to commit to the necessary number of meetings. After providing these four individuals with time to consider, three contacted me via Instagram's direct messaging feature to let me know they could commit. I followed up with the fourth person, who let me know they would not be available to continue with the process due to time constraints.

With my three confirmed participants in place, I emailed them a collective message to outline the logistics of next steps. This email included a recap of what I was interested in exploring through execution of this work, my contact information, and a digital sign-up sheet to inform me of availability for individual one-on-one sessions, availability for our group session, and availability for a general, individual post-group debrief. My participants responded within a 2-day period, allowing me to prepare for the individual meetings with each member of the group.

Prior to my first scheduled individual meetings with each of my three participants, I compiled a list of general questions for a jumping off point for our dialogue. I also wrote up a brief synopsis of the themes encompassed by my research thus far, and provided a handful of citations of the previous work I was referencing, should they wish to familiarize themselves with this content. I emailed this selected information to my participants so they could have time to review it prior to our first individualized meeting.

My first individual meeting with a participant occurred virtually via Zoom for a duration of an hour and 45 minutes. My second individual meeting with a participant happened in person, outdoors, and socially distanced for 2 hours and 15 minutes. My third individual meeting happened in-person, within a shared living space for the duration of an hour and 30 minutes. Each of these first initial, individual meetings involved a general question and answer session that opened up a more expansive dialogue. Within this space each participant articulated their lived experiences with queerness, tattoos, visibility, societal constraints, and mental health. We

also dedicated the span of this time frame to address what my research hoped to investigate, and how each participant defined queer embodiments.

While I facilitated a dialogue centered on the overlaps between bodily autonomy, agency over narrative, and what it personally means to present queer, I also used our meeting time in the individual session to cover how our group session would be conducted. Next, I spent time with each participant conversing about how we could utilize tattoo stencil transfer paper in the art-making portion of our group session.

After these series of initial individual meetings were completed, I delivered the necessary materials to partake in the arts-based component of this thesis, which would be completed during and after the group session. These materials consisted of pencils, erasers, tattoo transfer paper, and a clear gel deodorant that would be used to transfer the stencil created by each participant. While delivering the needed materials I checked in with each participant to assess their artistic comprehension of how to properly use the materials. I offered an in-person demonstration to those that vocalized wanting additional assistance with learning how to draw on and transfer the ink in the stencils.

Once all participants had acquired their materials, we met for our collective group meeting. Two of the participants met with me virtually via Zoom, while one participant was able to be present with me for the meeting in a shared living space. For the first portion of the group meeting we completed personal introductions, including our names, ages, pronouns, and what had drawn us to this community project. During the following hour and 15 minutes I facilitated a group conversation that elaborated on the following concepts and questions:

1. Do you have tattoos?

2. If yes, how many? Machine made/hand poked? General experiences with process of getting tattooed?
3. How old were you when you got your first tattoo?
4. Is there anything you want to share about any of your tattoos? (Story/meaning behind it, experience getting it, how your feelings have evolved in regards to your tattoo/s)
5. How do you define reclamation/affirmation for yourself? Are these concepts something that you practice in regards to your queerness/your body? How does it affect how you navigate your environment?
6. Beyond the pride flag/rainbows, is there imagery that you feel inherently signifies a queer identity?
7. Speak to queer symbols/icons/visuals, etc! What queer symbols are personal or historical- what codes as "queer" to you when you see it?
8. What does visibility look/feel like to you? How do you feel about it, in terms of safety and in terms of affirmation?
9. What elements (physical or otherwise) do you participate in/perform to signal your queerness?

After facilitating this dialogue with my participants, I guided them for the final art-making component of the group meeting. During this section participants were asked to reflect on what their *personal queer cannon symbol* would be. Participants were then instructed to use the tattoo transfer paper to illustrate this symbol, and any other symbols that felt appropriate to include with their understanding of queerness. While participants were given 20 minutes to work on drawing these symbols, they continued with an organic dialogue about what their personal

symbols signified for them. Within this discussion they addressed how it felt to have these symbols translate into what would become temporary tattoos.

When this drawing period was finished, I told participants that they were encouraged to continue drawing, or draw more iterations of their chosen queer symbol, as they were provided with a full packet of transfer paper. Participants were informed of next steps, which included having more time to draw, and then transferring any of their homemade temporary tattoos onto themselves. They could expect to be contacted by me over the next few days for us to do a general debrief session, during which I would ask about the process of working with this material. During this debrief I also discussed any reflections with participants individually. Participants were invited to share any reflections and any art created they had within our group email chain.

Results

Three adult individuals participated in my community-based project, all of who identified as members of the LGBTQ+ community. Two of the participants were white, and one was a white passing Latinx. With this in mind, the results of this project potentially do not speak to the experiences of queer adults of color. All participants met with me individually to complete a private, initial discussion and then again, as one entire group.

During these individual meetings I observed a general openness and organic flow in our conversations. Prior to the individual sessions, I sent a synopsis that conveyed my personal investment in this project, and a list of general questions related to the theme of queer identity and tattoo/body as archive. The participants having familiarized themselves with the brief synopsis of research and my personal statement evidenced the eagerness I observed in my group members.

Our group meeting was a more expansive discussion of the preliminary individual conversations. During this group, the members talked about their experiences with queer visibility and how they perceive assumed-queerness in others. While participants discussed manner of fashion, how people physically carried themselves was another element in identifying queerness in others. It was during this conversation that one participant stated that they believe, "noticing queerness in others is survival mechanism that is developed over time."

This group dedicated time to discussing what each participant's *ultimate queer symbol* would be, on an individual basis. Symbols that were discussed were said to represent the ability to shift, change, be fluid, and exist in liminal space. These symbols were also said to signify invented homes. One participant said that they would select a frog to be their *ultimate queer symbol*. Their reasoning behind this was stated to be because "tadpoles always have the inherent potential to become frogs- they can adapt to their environment, shifting between water and land, displaying fluidity."

Another example of a symbol provided by a participant was Rubik's Cube. This participant went on to explain that while it takes some time to learn, once there is an understanding of how to solve a Rubik's Cube, similar to their experience with gender and sexuality, it isn't something that they can unlearn.

One outcome that surfaced over the unfolding of this work genuinely surprised me. This unpredicted result was uncovered over the course of my individual post-group session debriefs. This series of conversations happened 3 days after the group meeting, providing participants with time to engage with the art material and to reflect on our group session. During these individual debriefs it was learned that without my prompting, each participant had shared elements of this project with at least one person who had not been initially involved.

In one instance, a participant showed their stencil to their parent, peaking their curiosity in learning more about the community project. While the participant explained what this research was interested in discovering, they demonstrated to their parent how to create a stencil and do a transfer onto skin. In seeing this tutorial, it was reported to me that this parent then made their own design using the materials. This participant reported that they then made some stencils together, leading to a conversation where they talked about what their symbols represented for them.

Upon debrief with another participant I learned that they shared details of their group experience with their partner. Both this participant and their partner are a part of the LGBTQ+ community and fall on a gender variant scale. While sharing their illustrations with their partner and reflecting on the ideas they discussed during the group, this participant explained to their partner the specific tattoo placement that would affirm their gender. It was reported to me that they and their partner found their ideas of placement differed as it relates to gender affirmation.

In another debrief, it was reported that a participant shared their stencils with her partner, who is not apart of the LGBTQ+ community. While this participant's partner did not to draw on the stencils, it was reported that they verbalized enthusiasm in regards to getting to wear the participant's illustrations on their body. This participant also shared their tattoo transfer paper with their best friend, who is also a member of the LBGTQ+ community. It was reported that the participant and this other queer individual felt like having time to draw and wear their art, and assist each other with transferring the temporary tattoos onto each other's physical bodies, was *ritualistic*.

As a means of digesting the conversations and observations I witnessed through the orchestration of this project, I kept a reflexive art journal spanning from October 2020-April

2021. This reflexive journal includes free-writing, illustration with the tattoo transfer paper, photographs of the tattoo transfers on my body, and photographs of citrus I have tattooed by hand poke method over the semester. The collection of this making is my response to show my unpacking and absorption of the community-engagement project. Excerpts of this art-based processing are depicted through the images, in Figures 1-4, of an illustration on transfer tattoo paper before and after being applied to my skin.

Figure 1

Tracing of Illustration on Transfer Paper

Figure 2

Reduction imprint of ink-side of Transfer Paper

Figure 3

Ink Illustration on Transfer Paper Ready for Application

Figure 4

Temporary Tattoo Applied to Skin

Discussion

> Calling things by their right names is more than giving them an identity bracelet or a label, or a serial number. We summon a vision. Naming is power.
>
> —Jeanette Winterson, *Frankissstein*

In the following section I have addressed what has been observed with my implemented method of art therapy with queer identifying adults. This space is used to unpack where limitations arose within my applied approach and to acknowledge what elements felt successful. I have also reserved an area to address what indicates promise in my work, and what aspects could be explored in future research endeavors with the LBGTQ+ adult population.

In implementing this community engagement project, I was seeking to expand my understanding on the agency of narrative in queer adults. It was my hope that facilitating a project like this would assist my long-term comprehension of informed use of queer embodiment. My clinical experience thus far has yet to put a focus primarily of queer adults, so I wanted to use the time dedicated to my thesis as a springboard to propel me towards being a resource for this demographic. Coming into this project I wanted to dissect the intersections between the queer community and tattooed community as it related to reclaiming and affirming. I set out to better my understanding of the queer adult community and the cost, or reward, of visibility.

Through my individual sessions, group sessions, and debrief conversations, I have been able to arrive at two main observations. My first take away is that so much of the queer experience is a nuanced one. While each participant I met with came from varied backgrounds, it became evident through our correspondence that each person navigated their queer identity as informed from the trajectory of their own lived experiences. This is further exemplified through

the content of each participant's art component, created during and after our group session. While there were no duplicate symbols designed by any of the participants, many of the drawings represented similar themes, such as agency, sacredness, power, and home.

My second take away addresses the observed therapeutic effects of the arts intervention I structured for the community group meeting. Working with the body and viewing storytelling through a creative based lens has proven to be powerful to those involved. This aspect was seen through the resulting facilitation of dialogue. This was also evident when all involved participants revealed during our post-group meeting debrief that they had shared, unprompted their art with others outside of this project. Something noticed throughout the process of working with temporary tattoos was that those who utilized this activity were allowed to play with narratives that intersect with aspects of identity, thus giving permission to have these evolutions of self be not only free of the linear, but also in a perpetual state of flux. In this, participants could experience a sense of freedom from the restrictions of the binary. From this I have gathered that to work with the temporary is negotiating the individual needs of the right now. Knowing that an illustration can be added to an existing temporary tattoo allows for flexibility and fluidity between all the selves that the participant could occupy.

Throughout the process of orchestrating this community engagement capstone I became aware of several limitations that impacted the overall outcome of this thesis. The most pressing, and perhaps obvious, limitations to occur over the course of this project were restrictions faced due to the effects of Covid-19. While the isolating safety regulations of the pandemic were what initially lead to the personal inspiration for my thesis, it ultimately influenced how I was able to collect participants, conduct my procedure, and all consequential interactions and observations. To start, Covid-19 was a factor that affected the number of participants I was able to include. My

process in recruiting was limited solely to promoting advertisements online. While I was able to reach individuals through two different social media platforms, not all who expressed interest met criteria for participation.

Covid-19 also led to the need to take myriad safety precautions while working with the participants I recruited. As stated in my Results section, I was not able to have all of my participants in one location at any point during the completion of this work. Not being able to have those involved with my thesis physically together within a singular environment affected not only our interactions with one another, but also how I was able to observe. Given the partially virtual set up, I was not actually able to view all my participants during the art-making process. With this considered, I need to acknowledge gaps in my understanding of how participants engaged with the arts material. Having to conduct some meetings virtually also speaks to the difficulty in having participants that were in settings that landed outside my control. Had it been possible to secure one location for our work, I would have been able to observe and account for outside factors such as noise distractions, location distractions, and technology related issues.

Another limitation that is important to mention is the finicky nature of the art materials that were utilized for this project. While I am versed in several art-based modalities, working with tattoo transfer paper is a still a recent medium for me. Tattoo transfer paper can be understood as an equivalent to layers of tracing paper that is fixated on top of a sheet of ink. It is incredibly thin; so while remaining transparent for stenciling purposes, it requires a delicate and precise hand to properly execute the artist's vision. The ink transfer process also requires deliberate, steady motor skill to complete successfully. I recognize this material may not be accessible in its use for folks with issues related to dexterity.

As someone with functioning motor skills, I found in my own practice that the transfer paper was captivating, but at times frustrating to navigate. Most surprisingly for me, I found this arts-based interaction to be particularly symbolic. Much like understanding my own queerness, it took practice and it took asking others for assistance. It involved some confusion, but when it translated through my hands, I no longer had to think about it. It was messy and took repetition, but when I finally *got* it, it was not something that I could not unlearn.

When taking into account feasible future research, I feel there are two apparent avenues worth scouting. The first avenue is to reach a wider audience, and not only in the confines of a virtual realm. I propose that further research include a larger sample of participants, especially of diverse cultural and gender-divergent foundations. Secondly, I suggest that further research be conducted in person, if the possibility were to safely arise. This is a therapeutic approach that could be applied not just with LGBTQ+ adults, but also with adolescents, and perhaps other developmental stages as well. From the outcomes presented, I can visualize my arts-based intervention being modified and availed with other demographics that experience oppression through societal constraints.

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THESIS APPROVAL FORM

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Title: Queer Embodiment and Semiotics: Reclamation in LGBTQ+ Adult Community by Designing and Wearing Temporary Tattoos

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In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

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