

# Looking at You Looking at Me: An Autoethnographic Account of a Tattooed Female and (Re)appropriation of the Tourist Gaze

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## Abstract

As noted through Urry's (2002) work, the tourist gaze serves as a literal and metaphorical construct describing the process involved in viewing the interculturally different Other. However, traditional understandings of the tourist gaze do not account for the reciprocity involved in the gazing process. Through the use of autoethnography enhanced with visual ethnographic artifacts, this essay dissects the presumed linear nature of the gaze, asserting that certain subjects may become objects of a (re)appropriated gaze in travel encounters. As evidenced through descriptions of travel in Mexican and Central American cultures, the tattooed female tourist serves as such a subject. Illustrating the (re)appropriated and (re)allocated tourist gaze, she is postured as an exotic Other, becoming one vehicle through which a Central American native or local may assess both U.S. American and/or tattoo culture as a whole.

**Keywords:** tourist gaze, tattoo culture, Central America, visual ethnography, autoethnography

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## Introduction

To depart from an airport seems nothing short of ordinary in the modern moment. However, my June 2008 airport departure was anything but ordinary; this departure on a twenty-one day trip to Central America was extraordinary, nothing short of transformative.

Beyond the inherent anticipation for a trip of this caliber, I was acutely eager for this particular adventure to commence. Having grown weary of the monotony of everyday life, the homogeneity of my home state of Colorado intensified my desire to seek something else somewhere else – to find an Other and be an Other. I wanted to become, as Urry (1995) describes, "the modern subject on the move" (p. 141).

This desire for 'emancipation' stemmed largely from my easy acclimation into the social and cultural structures of my daily life. As a female, college instructor, I wear what would be considered extensive visible body art – a phenomena that many would assume should or might present great limitation in my social and professional navigations (see Figure 1.1). However, though the visible markers of my identity are a bit halting to some, many Colorado residents do not find it disturbing to see a young woman who is extensively tattooed, as tattoo culture is prevalent, respected, and often celebrated both in my home state and in growing momentum across the United States at large. This mentality is quite unlike the reception with which I would be met in other cultures where my visible appearance may immediately signify deviance (Fenske, 2007). A cultural challenge such as this was nothing short of compelling and intriguing, further intensifying my desire to board the plane. Thus, when I stepped off the plane in the first of my Central American destinations and was not greeted by a tenor of sweeping acceptance, I was, at last and ironically, quite satiated.

In this moment, any previously held romanticized travel tropes were shattered, and my touristic identity shifted as I was greeted by a series of stares from local Mexicans in the airport who knowingly understood I had just disembarked from a plane that originated in the United States. These gazes - some disapproving, others overtly curious, shifted the intercultural interactions of this seemingly ordinary travel routine. I was experiencing a "tension of globalization" wherein a common practice of U.S. American culture was clashing with norms of Mexican culture – all of this occurring inside a situation

which "...resurrected tales of discovery, first contact, and individual adventure in virgin landscapes" (Strain, 2003, p. 2). Suddenly, many of my Western travel mythologies became obsolete as I entered this new landscape, and my U.S. American cultural practice boldly declared me as "Other." Dissonance abounding, I felt my cultural identity becoming ascribed with each glance and stare, negotiating the penetrating gaze of the locals who were visually consuming my tattoos, and inside of this gaze I located an exhilarating tension.

### **Tattooing: A new artifact of "Americana"**

Emerging from a notably unsavory reputation, the population of U.S. Americans wearing body art has markedly increased (Cronin, 2001; De Mello, 1995). A 2006 study by the Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology noted that 24% of Americans between the ages of 18 and 50 are tattooed. Comprising nearly one in four citizens in a rather large cross-section of the adult population, tattoo culture becomes situated as relatively mainstream in U.S. American adult society. As a result of growing popularity, tattoo studios can be found in the smallest of rural U.S. American cities to the most crowded streets of the nation's largest urban centers. A 1997 article in *U.S. News & World Report* boasts of this growing precedent, stating that, at the time of publication, there were an estimated 15,000+ tattoo parlors operating in the United States. The article ranked tattooing as the sixth fastest growing retail venture of the 1990s, thus portraying U.S. American tattoo culture as more a norm – a new form of "Americana," a cultural artifact.

Despite its popularity and presence in many striations of U.S. American culture, tattoos, especially of the purely non-cultural, aesthetic nature, still remain a novelty and curiosity for people in many other cultures (Cheng, 2003; Vale & Juno, 1989; Sanders, 1998, 1999). It is this curiosity that has led anthropologists, psychologists and sociologists to study tattooing culture extensively (Doss & Hubbard, 2009; see also DeMello, 1995; Varma & Lanigan, 1999). Most scholars agree that tattoos serve as an embodied site of performed identity because tattoos act nonverbally to reveal messages about the tattooed and his/her personality, standpoints, identity, and worldviews (Vevea, 2008; Cheng, 2003; Aguilar, 2007; Bauman, 2008). However, these assertions encourage a revisiting of tattoo culture, as the study of tattoos when recognized as a cultural phenomenon and viewed through an intercultural communication paradigm, also broaden understanding of impression management, cultural ascription, and identity formation as it relates to particular cultures (Doss & Hubbard, 2009; Cronin, 2001; DeMello, 1995).

One such way this revisiting may occur is through the theoretical lens of the tourist gaze, a theory which specifically explores the Other's practices in a non-native culture. The construct of the "tourist gaze" initially gained academic capital with the publication of John Urry's 1990 sociological text *The Tourist Gaze* (Strain, 2003). Interested in the cultural, sociological, and economical implications of tourism and travel, Urry defines the tourist gaze as tourists' practice of visually consuming objects, peoples and places in a "socially organized and systematized" way (Urry, 1992). Though Urry's definition and study of tourism proved valuable, his definitions have not moved beyond tourism itself to study the gaze's social organization and implication for intercultural exchanges. What happens in those moments when linear gazing is not the only interaction between tourist and native? Furthermore, what are the cultural implications, ramifications, and/or indications of the gaze?

As noted, traditional understandings of the tourist gaze do not account for the reciprocity involved in the gazing process. Wherein tourists gaze into other cultures to make meaning and search for the "authentic," thereby ascribing identities to members of those cultures, I propose, as evidenced through my travels in Mexican and Central American cultures, that the tourist gaze also becomes re-appropriated and reallocated as a tool used by locals to gaze back upon tourists, especially those who are so visually marked as "Other" as a heavily tattooed woman. This "reversal" of tourist gaze theory may be applied to many aspects of tourist identity – especially those identities that are more visibly "exotic" – the heavily tattooed, non-native female, for example. Just as the tourist gaze allows the tourist to exoticize a people's occupation of a landscape, their material culture, behavioral modes, and the particularities of their racial/ethnic type, the native gazes back, and thus, the tattooed female tourist becomes "exoticized" through the active process of seeking out, recognizing and fetishizing difference.

This study seeks then to utilize the gazed upon tattooed female tourist as one example of the (re)allocation of the tourist gaze by autoethnographically tracking her experiences throughout a journey in Central American culture. By evaluating her role as a representative of U.S. American culture and as a representative of tattoo culture, and supplementing this evaluation with the use of visual ethnographic techniques, instances of "visuality" (Rose, 2001) are highlighted demonstrating the re-appropriation of the tourist gaze and the resulting cultural admiration, cultural assumption, and cultural rejection that accompanies the re(appropriated) gaze. Viewed through this theoretical lens, the tattooed female tourist is gazed upon and postured as an exotic Other, becoming one vehicle through which a native may assess both tattoo and U.S. American culture.

### Theoretical Underpinnings of the Tourist Gaze

As international mobility increases, Americans continue to be "captivated by the idea that somewhere on the highest mountain or in the densest jungle the triumphant traveler, through her perseverance, can stumble upon a political blank slate where it is possible to step outside the burdens of national identity to forge contact across cultural divides" (Strain, 2003, p. 1). The tourist gaze serves as one vehicle through which this type of contact is possible. Characterized by the constant push and pull of distanced immersion, the tourist gaze allows a tourist to be both literally and figuratively distanced from the scene in order to occupy a comfortable viewing position (Strain, 2003, p. 27) while also enjoying the immediate experience of the authenticity of another culture (MacCannell, 1976). In this way, tourism can be paradoxically seen as a last frontier of authenticity and the gazes that accompany tourist practices become systematic ways tourists interpellate the "authentic" identities of other cultures and its members.

The gaze shares with other cultural formations a series of social, historical, and economic determinants. The gaze is constructed through the viewing of difference and is predicated upon notions of contrast wherein the tourist's practice of departure from her everyday life allows the senses to engage in a set of stimuli that "contrast it with the everyday" (Urry, 2002, pp. 2, 3). Constructed in varying forms, the tourist gaze is concerned with visual consumption of the environment and its components, attempting corroboration with the 'authentic' that is to be located within a particular [new] culture (Urry, 1992). A complex construct, the gaze serves as both a literal and metaphorical tool to describe the process of viewing the different Other in order to confirm beliefs, find pleasure, and make sense of that which seems out of the ordinary (Leighton, 2008; see also Urry, 1992).

In "Tourist Agency," MacCannell argues that within tourism, distinction can be made between two gazes (Shaffer, 2004). The first gaze, an elaboration of the Foucaultian explanation of power, has power "over and interprets that which is gazed upon in the service of the self" (Schaffer, 2004, p. 153). As MacCannell notes, "The powerful subject possesses the gaze while the powerless other is completely defined by its status as the object of the gaze" (2001, p. 29). Drawing from the theories of Jacques Lacan to formulate a second definition of the tourist gaze, MacCannell concludes "it is the viewing subject, not the object of the gaze, that is caught, manipulated, captured in the field of vision" (2001, p. 30; as cited in Schaffer, 2004, p. 153). In both of these descriptions, it becomes clear how the construct of "tourist gaze" can be re-evaluated and shifted to account for the ways a member of an in-group or dominant culture may seek to "gaze" on the "outsider" or in the spirit of this investigation, the tourist. The process of consumption as evidenced by the tourist gaze reveals that the gaze heightens elements of an experience, particularly the sensual, and that many of the same purposes, practices, and consequences of the tourist gaze are applicable when viewed through a "reversed" or (re)appropriated paradigm such as the one I have proposed (Urry, 1995).

Further support of the need to examine the (re)appropriation of the tourist gaze is found in the licentious nature of gazing practices (Strain, 2003). Touristic and native perception quickly flitter across boundaries, drawing attention to the tourist gaze's flouting of conventional borders. This theoretical and discursive jump, labeled as "promiscuous" by Strain describes the tourist gaze's ability to resurface in diverse cultural practices and multiple social phenomena. It is fitting, then, to draw attention to the ways exoticizing occurs reciprocally as a result of gazing. Even more fitting is the ironic way in which the practice of exoticizing is, essentially, a tool used to seek out authenticity – or the "norms" of a particular culture. In short, these are the problems of veridicality – of matching the qualities of some reproduction with some original object or criterion of truth (Schiebe, 2000). Postmodern mentalities would urge us to forget about seeking such authenticity, for this search "smacks of essentialism" (Schiebe, 2000, p. 226),

however, the tourist's relationship with authenticity mirrors the paradox of the gaze I have proposed: we tourists look in from a distance to ascertain what is an authentic "representation," while the native looks back to ascertain if we are authentic "representations."

### **Methods of 'Seeing': The Gaze *in situ***

In order to uncover this phenomena and reveal the ways the tourist gaze is (re)allocated to negotiate and ascribe identity in intercultural interactions, the method of autoethnography serves as a critical tool for unpacking and revealing moments *in situ* that contribute to the (re)framing of the tourist gaze. By utilizing the "self-narrative or autobiographical voice" (Gergen & Gergen, 1997) to share the personal stories of being gazed upon, a reframing of the tourist gaze becomes possible because the autoethnographic approach "entails an "ethnographic gaze, inward on the self (auto), while maintaining the outward gaze...looking at the larger context where self experiences occur" (Denzin, 1997, p. 277). It provides a "rich space for exploring the individual's experiences in conjunction with sociocultural issues" (Young, 2009, p. 277). Crawford (1996) further touts the requisite nature of autoethnography arguing that the ethnographer is "unavoidably in the ethnography one way or another, manifest in the text, however subtly or obviously" (p. 158).

Autoethnography epitomizes the reflexive turn of fieldwork by "(re)positioning the researcher as an object of inquiry who depicts a site of interest in terms of personal awareness and experience" (Crawford, 1996, p. 167). Appropriating one's lived experience, autoethnography orchestrates fragments of awareness with the subjective self (Gottschalk, 1995) as a valid source of study. Translating this form of study into cultural contexts, through immersion in one's own lived experience within another culture, the researcher hopes to undergo some kind of transformation that will place her in the position of the indigene, from where she may experience the world as the indigene does. Geertz suggests that this type of direct experience is a legacy of Bronislaw Malinowski who espoused the belief that "one grasps the exotic not by drawing back from the immediacies of encounter, [but] by losing oneself, one's soul maybe, in those immediacies" (1988, p. 77).

To complement the immediacies of the autoethnographic method, I additionally opt to present a series of photographs to exemplify instances of the reciprocated tourist gaze in practice. This modified version of visual ethnography – the practice of recording a culture through image – allows for the addressing and extending of sensory experience, while giving form to cultural knowledge (Paakspuu, 2009). Davis (1992) further situates the validity and utility of photographs, citing that ethnographers rely on the authenticity and authority of the image. Though anthropologists and sociologists argue that no image or photographic practice is essentially "ethnographic" by nature, Pink (2001) asserts that any photograph can have "ethnographic interest, significance, or meaning at a particular time for a specific reason" (p. 51). For these reasons, this autoethnographic account is further supplemented with a series of images of my tattooed body located in other cultures, capturing moments where those of other cultures gaze upon me, the tourist.

Some of the included photographs were taken outside the realm of this study, serving as the initial fodder for the development of my observation; it was through the systematic viewing of photographs from my travels that I began to see (literally) the ways others were seeing me. The production and discussion of these visual texts then served to become part of my "ethnographic knowledge" (Pink, 2001, p. 18). As this knowledge increased, I began asking my traveling companions to serve as my eyes when we were abroad in other cultures and capture instances where they noticed others gazing on me. Now, these photographs serve as a hypertext through which the (re)appropriated tourist gaze can be, ironically, gazed upon. In this sense, a photograph becomes an "encounter with an 'other,' with sites of recognition... involving active and passive components of agency and identity" (Paakspuu, 2009, p. 190; see also Devereaux, 1995, p. 67). The photograph's hypertext exists to create an interactive space of knowing through ascriptive practices and memory. These mixed "ethnomethodologies" explore the touristic consciousness of Otherness (MacCannell, 1976, p. 176) and the ways tourists and locals negotiate the pursuit of the exotic in our highly mobile, portable, and culturally 'promiscuous' modern moment.

### **"Now Departing...All Tattooed Females": An Autoethnographic Account of the Tourist Gaze**

As MacCannell (1976) notes, "everywhere on the face of the earth, there are "patches of social reality growing out of the collective experiences of tourists" ( p. 142). My tattoos exemplify this phenomenon,

as they have become points of both cultural convergence and divergence – drawing positive interest and admiration during international travel, while simultaneously serving as a point of cultural discrepancy. Bearing a strong representation of a strand of U.S. American culture, when I step foot outside of my country and into other countries where tattoo culture is not nearly as prevalent, if in existence at all, my obvious body art immediately marks me as a cultural "Other." This deems my encounters as intercultural on both an ethnic/national level, and on a co-cultural level as I represent a facet of U.S. American culture and the co-culture of tattooing in general. As a result, my intercultural experiences surrounding my tattoos survey a spectrum of reactions ranging from a local's humble request for a photograph to the more difficult moments of being stopped, questioned, and even turned away from many establishments on account of my body art.

Though I have traveled extensively (23 times, no less in the past decade) throughout Central America and Mexico, I choose to focus the lens of this study on my aforementioned twenty-one day foray in Central America. This trip serves as a valid entrée into the investigation of (re)framed tourist gazes as it is not only relatively recent, but extensive in terms of countries visited and my pre-existing familiarity with the cultural norms of these countries. These factors enable me to justify my experiences as being more than coincidental or accidental, but rather, as cognizant, patternistic, intercultural experiences of viewing and being viewed that I have encountered and confirmed on a repeated basis. Specifically, I recall and illumine the following moments of "visuality" (Rose, 2001) to highlight ways I became gazed upon: gazing as a form of admired identity ascription, gazing as form of cultural assumption, and gazing as a form of cultural rejection.

### **Admired Cultural Identity Ascription: 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue and the Boys of Senor Frogs**

The itinerary was a daring attempt to see seven countries in three weeks – beginning first in the comforts of the Yucatan Peninsula in southeastern Mexico. A common vacation destination for many U.S. Americans, Cancun seems much a Las Vegas on the beach, and the once quiet and small neighboring cities of the Mayan Riviera are now bustling communities catering to time share-seeking European and American tourists eager for fine dining, shopping, and extravagant nightlife.

Of these cities, Playa del Carmen boasts the most recent surge in tourism as its beaches were not damaged by hurricanes in the same manner as its neighboring city of Cancun. Thus, droves of tourists flock to the white sands and cobblestone streets of Playa del Carmen year-round. With beautiful, sun-kissed, well-dressed people on every corner and a pleasant mix of small, locally-owned hotels juxtaposed next to sprawling lavish resorts, Playa del Carmen is a cosmopolitan hub for the Yucatan and the place many young Mexicans dream of establishing their careers as entertainers and entrepreneurs.

A local resident's spotting of a tattooed woman is not abnormal in Playa, as the exposure to tourists is high and many locals are used to the sight of a young woman [typically a "spring breaker"] with a small tattoo, carefully peeking out from the top of her bikini bottom or inconspicuously resting above her ankle. However, to be a Caucasian woman with large, obvious, and colorful tattoos in Playa del Carmen is to invite heightened visual consumption.

One afternoon, as I often did when the sun and heat of the beach was too much to bear, I leisurely strolled the old stone streets of Playa's famous 5<sup>th</sup> avenue in my swimwear and a modest sundress of sorts. Draped in palm trees, the twelve or so blocks boast a collection of shops, hotels, restaurants and bars, littered with workers who lounge the afternoons away in the sun, preparing to cajole and harangue tourists by evening, luring them to view their products or try their foods. Only a few steps into the journey, it became nearly impossible to pass more than five feet before the first of many Mexican shop owners yelled, "Lady – I like your tatuajes," or "Lady, lemme see those tattoos." For those I decided to entertain, they hurried to me, abandoning their shops, to gaze at, touch, caress, and discuss my tattoos, looking to me after a few moments with a satisfied expression, claiming, "Es muy bonita – they are very beautiful." As each block passed, more and more and more called out to me and the few daring local tattoo shop owners along 5<sup>th</sup> avenue, approached, asking me where I had obtained such large and colorful pieces – many asking for a photograph with me (see Figure 1.2). I was nothing short of a spectacle, but the reception was nothing short of admiration.

Upon reaching the end of the street, the tourist usually opts to either take the ferry across the sea to the island of Cozumel, or to stop at one of the most popular of all tourist destinations on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue – Senior Frogs. A quaint outdoor bar complete with rope swings, a stage for dancing, and a bevy of attractive young Mexican waiters, Senior Frogs is a partier's haven, and a tourist trap for the open wallet.

On this particularly hot day, my friends and I gathered at a table overlooking the ocean. After ordering margaritas, within moments we were not surprised to find our table swarmed by a collection of waiters – any table of women is fair game at Senior Frogs. However, in this instance, there was none of the typical pressure to buy food, indulge in over-priced shots, or participate in the bar's games and contests. Instead, much like the parade on the street, each waiter curiously surrounded me – asking to see my tattoos. Like a game of telephone, word spread across the bar as waiters jockeyed for a position to first look at me, and second, share stories of the small tattoo each of them had – several opting to unbutton a shirt and show me (see Figure 1.3). A few withdrew their cell phones from the pocket of their jeans and asked to take a picture with me. Each young man evaluated me and consumed my tattoos through their stares, touches, and pictures, all with a dreamlike trance in their eyes, asking question after question as if the answers would provide some larger clue as to how my appearance coalesced with my cultural identity: "Where do you work with those showing?," "What do you wear to work?," "How long have you had those?," "Who did that to you and made it look so large and so colorful?" Through this alternate process of looking, touching, and asking, their gazes served as both a literal and metaphorical tool to view the different Other [me] in order to better situate their understanding about American women, to find pleasure in the sight of me and the related images it conjured in their minds, and to make sense of that which seemed visually out of the ordinary in their culture (Leighton, 2008; see also Urry, 1992). Though their experiences with women from the United States were plentiful due to their frequent interactions with tourists, the process of decoding the meaning behind my tattoos enabled them to (re)iterate narratives about who U.S. American women "might be" or "really" are. Their ideological concept of authenticity as it related to the "American woman" was confirmed through the viewable performance of my avowed "exotic" identity (Auslander, 1999). The sight of my tattoos conjured and/or confirmed images of "American woman" and what they had mythologized her to be, and now – here I was, able to be gazed upon, able to reify many of the assumptions and ideologies these young men possessed about who an American woman is – all of this possible as the medium of my tattoos allowed for a new "vision," confirming the identity they believed me, and by default, many American women, to possess. Exoticized through their gazes, I was the Other, the representation of mythologized "American woman."

### **Cultural Assumption: Hollywood Meets Guatemala**

From the admiration on the streets of Playa del Carmen, our journey drove us further south. Stopping along the cities of the Yucatan, time and time again, we were met with the phenomena of people staring at me – sometimes I felt their gaze, and at other moments, I knew nothing of it (see Figure 1.4). As we moved deeper and deeper into various countries, cultural difference penetrated our awareness. Clothing styles, food, socio-economic conditions, and linguistic patterns varied slightly through each border we crossed, as did the way the gazes grew increasingly more complex.

My tourist identity was tangible in one such moment upon our entrance into the mystical land of Guatemala. Deciding to proceed into the country on foot through the pedestrian crossing from Belize, we hired a local Belizean man to help us navigate the border and explore the northeastern and central portions of the country. It is not surprising to assume that all members of my traveling cadre were examined with visual scrutiny as we tromped across the heavily guarded bridge connecting Belize to Guatemala. We were, in truth, the only visibly Caucasian people to be seen anywhere, and though we had dressed subtly, nothing about us was subtle when compared to the meagerly attired, barefooted locals who carried heavy baskets upon their heads through the humid jungle air.

The memories of that crossing are forever with me – a surreal set of moments couched in a mixture of fear and adventure. One false move, one wrong word, and our hired guide would not be able to accompany us as we may be detained by Guatemalan officials. From the light and magical land of Belize into the armed and militant land of Guatemala, we were "welcomed" by a sternness and hesitancy I could only liken to that of a war scene.

After surviving the passage through the pedestrian crossing, we were again reunited with our driver who, with shaking hands, drove us deeper into the Guatemalan countryside. Our goal was ambitious: to reach the ruins of Tikal National Monument by afternoon, a site most tourists normally acquired via airplane from Flores, Guatemala. The highest known ruins in all of Central America, Tikal stands proudly in the middle of a dense rainforest. After a nauseating three-hour drive on windy, gravel roads from the border, we arrived midday and prepared to hike several miles through buggy, wet terrain, determined to reach the ruins. Layer upon layer of clothing was removed, as we hiked and struggled, sweat, and battled insect bites, bee stings, scrapes from exposed tree roots, and lack of any modern facilities or potable drinking water.

As we finally converged upon the viewing area of the ruins, hundreds of people emerged who had made the trek much earlier in the day when temperatures were not so fierce. School groups, families, and a handful of American and European tourists marveled at the majestic ruins. Though we were a visual mess of sweat and dirt, we did not hesitate to begin the process of climbing ruins and taking pictures and videos to capture each moment. After a few moments, however, we realized that we were being followed.

I stopped and turned to note that multiple families were walking closely behind us, several with cameras and cell phones in tow. Suspiciously, I asked our driver to speak to them. After a brief conversation he turned to me, chuckling and said in his Belizean creole, "They want to know if they can take your picture."

Baffled, I replied, "What? Why? I look disgusting. They don't even know me."

He smiled and said, "They think you're famous."

I shook my head in disbelief. What could possibly cause a group of Guatemalans to approach me in the middle of a national monument under the scorching heat of the jungle sun?

He continued, "They think you are like Angelina Jolie. You know who she is, right – the American actress with all the tattoos?" At that, one by one, each family approached me and sent their children to be photographed next to me. (See figure 1.5) I smiled, dumbfounded. My resemblance bore very minimal similarities to Angelina Jolie; our most prominent commonality regarded our shared affinity for displaying prominent tattoos all over our bodies. However, in this moment, the gaze that would normally project from me onto them – the curious gaze of the tourist who wanted to know what a "real" Guatemalan was like, was reversed. Instead, they gazed at me, and in doing so, made cultural assumptions about who and what I could or may be.

In this powerful exchange, it became clear that natives may ascribe tourists' identities based on the visual consumption of visible identity markers that corroborate with a native's cultural knowledge of a tourist's home culture. The native's knowledge is often acquired through mediums such as media, a powerful vehicle which undoubtedly shapes the worldviews of natives who couple the meta-messages of the media with [sometimes] limited cultural face time, thereby creating images of the identities of specific cultural members. This is exemplified in my brief exchange at the Guatemalan national park. Without knowing me, without talking to me, without interaction, these natives determined, simply by gazing, that I was someone else – that I was an Other, ironically, an Other they thought they already knew.

The permeation of U.S. American popular culture and the widespread influence it has may cause natives of other cultures to transfer representations of what is portrayed in the media and similar communicative vehicles onto the tourists they encounter. By re-appropriating the macro-information learned about a culture onto its specific members, tourists who are gazed upon become locations of cultural assumption. The utility of the tourist gaze is then reallocated so that natives can match the qualities of a reproduction [tourist] with some original object or criterion of truth (Schiebe, 2000). In this sense, my tattooed body became both cultural phenomena and cultural artifact, linking me to another cultural artifact [Jolie] with which many Guatemalans were familiar.

### **Cultural Rejection: "I'm sorry. She cannot come in here."**

The final days of our Central American journey were spent in a frustrating cycle of delays and unraveling plans. Political unrest in the country of Honduras derailed our itinerary, leaving us subject to spending

two days stranded in a heavily guarded hotel in the middle of Tegucigalpa, Honduras. Placed there by airline officials who were trying to pacify us, we waited out a military coup that was destroying the presidency of Honduras in the 'safe' confines of the Intercontinental Hotel – a towering high rise that mockingly prevailed the skyline over the poor tin shacks of the city.

A disrupting and startling difference from our planned tour of mission sites, churches, and a trip to the island dive haven of Roatan, being crammed inside a hotel of anxious internationals proved challenging. Our desires to see "real" Honduras was instead replaced by a showcasing of the country's most lavish facility – a place, we were told, that political guests and royalty were typically housed. Sitting in contrast to the neighboring shantytowns of Tegucigalpa, this facility boasted marble floors, granite countertops, crystal chandeliers, expansive guest rooms, meticulously manicured poolside patios, fine dining, and well-dressed, multi-lingual staff members.

On our first evening at the hotel, we were disoriented, exhausted, and hungry. Deciding to utilize the free meal vouchers afforded us by our airline, my traveling companions and I changed into casual dresses and proceeded to the semi-formal buffet restaurant which we were informed was the "only restaurant we were allowed to eat in using airline meal vouchers" as the other restaurants on property were "too expensive" for our vouchers. Upon entering the modest room, my two friends passed ahead, negotiating our table in broken Spanish with the host. Just as I was ready to pass, the host stepped in front of me, stopped, and proceeded to look at me. Up. Down. Up – pause – down. Though I was the more fluent member of the group, words need not convey the meaning of those glances; I was not welcome.

He looked, looked again, and then called a colleague over to the host stand. The colleague proceeded once more to stare at me – scrutinizing me, his eyes returning time and time again to my tattooed arm. Oblivious, my friends continued to proceed to our table, as I stood trapped – a tourist being gazed upon. The host never said a word; he did not need to. I understood clearly. My practice of wearing visible body art lay in conflict with the accepted norms of this exclusive hotel facility. Though this incident may seem less culturally affiliated and more situational in nature, no clarification was needed. Proving myself capable in the native language, I attempted to politely inquire as to why I was not being admitted; in this sense, nonverbal and/or verbal communication practices were not misinterpreted. Though we stood in the middle of a developing country, the alternate reality of this hotel and the expectations of the cultural interactions that were to occur inside left no room for the identity being ascribed to me through each stare. He looked, and in looking, he rejected me. No words of explanation were offered, as they may have been in an alternate setting, even in my home country. For the two days that followed, if I desired to eat with my friends, I did so in long-sleeved shirts – a solution to the problem I quickly developed without receiving any confirmation other than my eased entrance into the same restaurant moments later upon donning a sweater and no visible art. His gaze had "spoken," and through his viewing, my Otherness was not welcome.

Though my practice of wearing visible body art may not fully classify me as "Other" in U.S. American culture, tattoo culture inarguably remains on the margins of many other societies (Aguilar, 2007). Standpoint theory explains this discrepancy: one's voice has its own authority, so those who choose to exert voice through a medium like visible body art are choosing to express something about their societal location. However, as Caplan (2000) indicates, tattoos are often metaphors for ambiguity. In cross-cultural interactions such as those I experienced in Honduras, ambiguity was not a favorable breeding point for the creative exploration of each other's cultures; it was grounds for the dismissal of my culture. It was, as Hancocks (2005) concludes, a "sticky situation" because the bearer cannot "be sure that the beautiful symbol actually conveys a greeting of harmony" (p. 357). Sadly, it is in encounters such as this that the re(appropriation) of the tourist gaze serves as a critical cultural vehicle that can either foster new understandings or close off opportunities for increased intercultural competency. Simply through a glance, large strains of cultural identity are rejected.

### **"Looking" Ahead**

Three weeks after an airport gate launched me on an incredibly journey, the same gate welcomed me back into the norms of the culture I called home. As I walked through the airport, though I did not look any different, I felt transformed. Oddly, this heightened feeling of transformation arose out of the recognition that I was no longer the object of anyone's gaze, as I had resumed my position within a

culture where my visual identity was more mainstream, an identity likely found and reproduced many times across the spaces of my homeland. No one stopped me, no one stared at me, and no one took my picture. No one welcomed me, no one admired me, and no one rejected me. I was no longer the exotic Other, no longer the tourist, no longer the female with the predominant tattoos. Now, the mobilization of my lived experience surged within me an awareness of the degree to which the expanding power of representations and images produce identities and shape the relationship between the self and culture (Giroux, 1994).

This autoethnographic and visual ethnographic journey has served, then, to offer (re)collections whereby I am able to critically and even visually analyze moments where I was critically and visually analyzed in other cultures. Through this process of reflexivity, it has been the goal of this piece to identify and concentrate on ways intercultural phenomena such as the tourist gaze (re)locate and (re)produce themselves. The extraction and evaluation of my intercultural exchanges in Central America provide meaningful additions to existing tourist gaze theory, as the utility of the gaze is further explored and applied to contemporary issues of identity and culture.

Though the medium of tattoos has served as the unifying signifier through which this (re)appropriation has been understood, I am certain other forms of identification could serve as equally valuable sites of study, just as I am willing to acknowledge that other dimensions of my visible identity may contribute to the way/s I am visually consumed. I also recognize that my membership in the tattoo culture in general may be as significant of a cultural variable as my "American-ism," so some of the assessments made in reciprocating the tourist gaze may be as linked to my popular culture membership as my national/ethnic cultural membership. Regardless of these acknowledgments, practices such as tattooing and the investigation of similar material aspects of appearance are some of many co-cultural phenomena that provide windows of understanding into larger cultural meta-themes such as cultural norms, gender norms, impression management, and identity formation. By viewing these themes through an intercultural paradigm, the study of tattoos and other appearance modifications are positioned as very current and vital ways through which we gain further understanding of cultural ascription. Additional understanding is then gleaned through the utility of constructs such as the tourist gaze, accounting for ways we seek to make meaning of difference as it relates to culture.

As such, we are left with new insights into the co-culture of tattooing, new models for the assessment of intercultural relations, and new perspectives of the ways the tourist gaze is utilized to ascribe identity. Re-appropriating the understanding of the tourist gaze as a dualistic, reciprocal process reveals the cultural tete-a-tete of which we are all a part, whether finding ourselves in our native land, or eagerly positioned as an Other awaiting departure into unknown lands.

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Figure 1.1 What may be considered "extensive" body art on a female



Figure 1.2 A local tattoo artist in Playa del Carmen asks to have his photograph taken with me



Figure 1.3 Local waiters examine my tattoos at Senor Frogs bar in Playa del Carmen



Figure 1.4 The unknowing gazes of a locals as I crossed the street in Tulum, Mexico and Zihuatenejo, Mexico





Figure 1.5 Children at Tikal National Monument mistake me for a Hollywood celebrity

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## About the Author

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