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Visual optics: interpreting body art, three ways

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ABSTRACT
Research methodology using visual narrative techniques opens up conceptual views for interpreting a wide range of visuals. In this article, the authors analyse tattoos on a subject’s body and approach the task from what they term three ‘optics’: social semiotics; sedimented identity in texts; and New Literacy Studies in relation to multimodality, drawing on ethnographic perspectives. Each optic illustrates how a woman constructs her identity through her body art. The article serves to illustrate that, whilst the use of visual methods in a small-scale study does not aim to be generalizable, the contribution to visual methodology has to do more with how varied conceptual views can work in conjunction to excavate deeper, more textured meanings in visual narratives.

KEYWORDS
anthropology • ethnography • mediating identity • methodologies • multimodality • New Literacy Studies • social semiotics • timescales • visual tattoos

I got this tattoo on my inner arm – it says, ‘deus providet’, it was like ‘God provides’, or ‘God will provide’, in Latin – not so much as, like a religious thing. Just more of an idea that things take care of themselves. (Jade, 25 April 2010)
INTRODUCTION

Reflecting on a Latin proverb imprinted on her arm, Jade spoke with us about key moments in her life through the stories of her tattoos. Large portions of Jade’s body have been transformed into a multi-coloured canvas of body that gives a history of her life. Through illustration styles, colour, symbols and printed text, tattoos function for Jade as markers of self. Used for centuries to depict rites of passage, tattoos have become a fashion accessory. Tattooing is not a new but rediscovered mode of human decoration. Whether they are aesthetic or therapeutic, tattoos record life stories, and their look and placement is an expression of self. The fields of visual methodologies and visual culture have examined body art for some time and this article is an effort to situate analyses of body art within literacy education.

The article begins by considering visual methodologies and extant literature on body art; we then present the history of Jade’s tattoos followed by three distinct optics on their underlying meanings; finally, we examine what implications these optics have for visual work in education. The broader aim of the article is to reconcile interpretative frames for the visual. If we accept that there is a privileging of the visual in communication and new media, what comes with this acceptance is an urgency to devise fine-tuned descriptions and frameworks for the visual that can be complementary and ideally interdisciplinary. Working within the field of education, we have found that the visual and visual interpretations are under-represented in the literature. Taking different conceptual views on common visual data may not be novel or innovative within fields that are centrally concerned with visual communication such as communications, rhetoric and design but, within literacy education, it is fairly novel to adopt a visual approach to forms of meaning-making.

To conduct the research, one author interviewed Jade about her tattoos and each author adopted different methodological frameworks for analysing visual and interview data. Each perspective is a heuristic: one is social semiotic with an account of how Jade mediates identity through and within her sign-making; the second analyses how Jade embeds parts of self in each tattoo; and the third links an understanding of multimodality with New Literacy Studies (NLS), adopting an ethnographic perspective from which we draw out larger implications pertaining to culture and social practice. Our hope is that the article is a thinking piece for other work in education that interrogates the visual. We see body art as what Dorothy Holland and her colleagues (1998) call ‘artifacts of identity’. Viewing tattoos as artifactual makes them material, carried through time, and obviously carrying memories. Tattoos actively construct identity, materializing parts of self that signal histories, rites of passage, ideas, and values privileged by the tattooed. Tattoos resurrect what Holland et al. (1998: 6) describe as figured worlds, ‘contexts of meaning for actions, cultural production, performances, disputes, for the understandings that people
come to make for themselves, and for the capabilities that people develop to
direct their own behaviour in these worlds’.

For Jade, her figured worlds materialized on her body through tattoos.
Throughout the interview, Jade talked about moving in and out of a variety of
figured worlds in New Jersey (her adult home) and Pennsylvania (her child-
hood home). Figured worlds appear as Jade reflects on the history of signage
on her body.

This article attempts to redress a gap in the literature within visual
communication broadly and visual approaches in literacy education specifi-
cally that argues for the visual as a discipline rather than an interdisciplin-
ary movement. We have come together to combine different approaches to
the visual to lay bare deeper issues about identity mediation and the efficacy
of interdisciplinary approaches to the visual. Mieke Bal (2003: 56) presents a
similar position when she claims, ‘visual culture as I conceive it badly needs to
draw upon several other disciplines: well-established ones like anthropology,
psychology and sociology, or ones that are themselves relatively new like film
and media studies.’ Bal suggests that the term ‘visual culture’ is subject to a
form of visual essentialism or reification. In her work, Bal considers the effect
of materiality in visuals. She claims that ‘the object of visual culture studies
can be distinguished from object-defined disciplines such as art history and
film studies, through the centrality of visuals as the “new” object’ (p. 9). As we
see it, Bal’s main argument is that art history, film studies, etc. do not neces-
sarily have the visual as a central focus. In her 2003 article, Bal debates whether
visual culture is a discipline or an interdisciplinary movement. We argue that
visual analysis can be strengthened by an interdisciplinary approach and that
layered, complementary conceptual lenses excavate more meanings. As Bal
eloquently affirms:

Visual culture studies should take as its primary objects of critical
analysis the master narratives that are presented as natural, universal,
true and investable and dislodge them so that alternative narratives can
become visible. (p. 22)

ADOPTING VISUAL METHODS

Taken from the work of Gillian Rose (2000), our visual analyses rely on
semiology as an analytic vocabulary for describing how signs make sense.
Semiology as a visual approach carries the strength of laying bare or exposing
ideologies that work at the level of subjectivity. For example, in our analy-
yses of Jade’s story, Kress’s extrapolation of social semiotics gave our argu-
ment the discourse to describe the multimodal landscape of the tattoos; then
Rowsell brings time into the argument to pull out the unfolding of time and
the creation of deeper, perhaps more meaningful identity-infused signs with
the passage of time; finally, Street situates Jade’s tattoos within multimodality
Collectively these multiple readings allowed us to understand more deeply Jade’s shifts in identity and her epiphanies about these shifts through tattoos, her embodied diary. Rose emphasizes the compositional modalities of signs when adopting a semiotic approach to visual analysis. Like Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) and other visual analysts, Rose combines a look at the material qualities of a sign such as a tattoo with the social effects of the visual. Hodge and Kress (1988) developed ‘social semiotics’ as a way of emphasizing the social map or social modality of sites of meaning-making.

As Rose (2003: 79) sees ‘the sign [as] the fundamental unit of semiology’, Gillian Dyer (in Rose, 2003: 70) extends such work by considering what signs might symbolize, such as: representations of the body (none could be as connected to this category as tattoos?); representations of manner; representations of activity; and props and settings. Semiology focuses on the site of the image and its social and compositional modalities. The focus of our analysis has been on anchoring visuals on Jade’s body within her lived history. Clearly, there is a mixing and melding of methodologies in the article that combines social semiotics with time–space theory with a social practice and semiotic perspective. Admittedly, we do not conduct a detailed visual analysis of each tattoo because the ‘so what’ of the article is to demonstrate the efficacy of combining multiple methodological readings on the same set of images. Although rooted in literacy education, each reading is located in different fields of literacy – social semiotics, time–space work, and NLS, respectively. Taking up Bal’s (2003) challenge to visual methodologists, we present the article as a way of breaking down disciplinary silos to focus on visual work and visual meaning-making.

**LITERATURE ON BODY ART**

The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the etymology of tattoo as ‘In 18th c. tattaow, tattow. From Polynesian tatau. In Tahitian, tatu. ’ The word ‘tatau’ was introduced as a loan word into English, the pronunciation being changed to conform to English phonology as ‘tattoo’ . Sailors on later voyages introduced both the word and reintroduced the concept of tattooing to Europe seeking identity-constituting practices (Wikipedia, 18 June 2010). From an anthropological perspective:

Tattoos have served as rites of passage, marks of status and rank, symbols of religious and spiritual devotion, decorations for bravery, sexual lures and marks of fertility, pledges of love, punishment, amulets and talismans, protection, and as the marks of outcasts, slaves and convicts. The symbolism and impact of tattoos varies in different places and cultures. Tattoos may show how a person feels about a relative (commonly mother/father or daughter/son) or about an unrelated person. (Wikipedia, 4 May 2011).

There is extant work on tattoos and body art. The most helpful collection for us has been an edited volume entitled, *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History* (Caplan, 2000). Chapters in the edited volume explore the
history, representation and interpretation of body art from antiquity to 2000. As unravelled in Street’s optic, tattoos have a long, rather ambiguous status across cultures. As Kress notes in his optic, there is an internal–external quality to tattoos that makes them distinct from other visuals. Throughout history, tattoos have been inked marks on the skin that simultaneously signal outer and inner surface of self. Historically, tattoos have been ‘indexical’ or, as Caplan expresses it, ‘boundary status on the skin’ that indexes ‘inclusion and exclusion’ (p. xiv).

Jones (2000) has examined the role of tattoos and body art before and during the dawn of Greek culture and provides the following details: tattoos were first found on ‘mummies of the Eleventh Dynasty, about 2100 BC; the colour used was a ‘dark, blackish-blue pigment applied with a pricking instrument’ (p. 2). He explains that tattoos were used during this period of history to stigmatize individuals. As a status-marker, females were the main carriers of tattoos among the Thracians within Greek culture (p. 5). It is told that, during the Greek renaissance, tattoos were used as inscriptions on slaves to prevent them escaping; as Jones claims, ‘runaway slaves were “inscribed” on the forehead with the words, “Stop me, I’m a run-away”’ (p. 9). Both the classical Greeks and Romans used what has been called ‘penal tattooing’ as a way of differentiating slaves and prisoners from everyone else.

Moving to the 16th and 17th centuries, tattooing became associated with magic and religious practices (Rosecrans, 2000: 49). Markings on the body served as a protective force known as ‘inscriptive medicine’ (p. 56). Like terrestrial and celestial magic, medical wizards scribed remedies on specific parts of the body to heal the sick. According to Rosecrans, ‘medicinal corporal inscriptions were not tattoos – they were not permanent and they did not penetrate the flesh’ (p. 58). In the transition from medieval to renaissance times, tattoos became adornments to appreciate; it was at this time that tattoos became gentrified (Fleming, 2000). Fleming talks about how tattoos were a marker of ‘unconventional, individualistic values’ (p. 62) during renaissance times. They began to represent the interior of the psyche. In addition, tattooing proclaimed religious fervour; there was even a practice of branding or tattooing for Jesus (p. 78). In Victorian England, tattoos became a trope for the sea and sailors (Bradley, 2000: 142). Tattooing and body art formed part of the shipboard experience and, belatedly, part of a soldier’s existence. Some have associated the connections between tattoos and sailors with increased voyages to Polynesia (Benson, 2000: 238). But there seemed to be a shift in body art around the 1880s: ‘At some time around the late 1880s fashionable society was gripped by a tattoo craze’ (Bradley, 2000: 145–146). Tattoos entered the mainstream at this point and became decorous for middle and upper classes. Moving to the present day, tattoos hark back to their early roots because they often exist on the flesh and are seen by others as an oppositional practice. Bradley (2000: 244) argues: ‘the first and foremost point to be made is the way in which tattooing and piercing are read explicitly as statements of the self’. Bradley is one of the only authors in the collection to go into detail about how integral the process of tattooing is to the tattoo itself:
... the piercing of the skin; the flow of the blood and the infliction of pain; the healing of the wound; and the visible trace of this process of penetration and closure. In their capacity to enact the interiorizing of exteriority and the exteriorizing of interiority – and to fix this mediation in the form of corporeal transformation – these are symbolic practices of great power, permitting a rich and complex mediation on issues of agency, autonomy and control. (p. 245)

Hence, the process of imprinting and inscribing visuals on the flesh is as important as the visual itself. Such processes of inscription imbue power and strength into the wearer. The body as diary is one metaphor that scholars have used to describe tattooed individuals such as our focal case study, Jade.

AN ILLUSTRATED WOMAN: A HISTORY OF JADE'S TATTOOS

Turning to our case study, Jade is a 32-year-old mother of two sons, aged 9 and 3. She is an artist and an at-home Mom, who lives in a university town in central New Jersey. Jade has 10 tattoos on her body and she became particularly interested and invested in body art when she was 21. She offered to share images of her tattoos with us and provide the story of each one during an interview with one of the researchers. In this article, we focus primarily on two tattoos along with stories of other tattoos on Jade's body. During the interview, she explained the history of the following tattoos: a person's name; a composite of different symbols; a Latin proverb; an illustration; and a cultural icon. Each tattoo visualizes memories, people and emotions that they evoke. Her account of acquiring each one helped us to piece together her life history.

Stronger and weaker tattoos

During the interview, Jade talked through her tattoos chronologically. As part of her account, she reflected on the strength and weakness of tattoos as signifiers of self. For instance, when Jade was 21, she felt that the two most powerful influences in her life were her Mom and her best friend and she wanted to acknowledge and honour their presence in her life. A tattoo seemed to be the best tribute. A commonality between her Mom and best friend is that they are both Scorpios in horoscope terms, so the image of a scorpion seemed like a natural choice to commemorate them. With time, Jade appreciated the rhetorical power of tattoos and viewed the scorpion as a weaker tattoo. Shortly after getting the scorpion, Jade, impromptu, had an angler fish imprinted on the inside of her left leg while visiting Pittsburgh, but she did not have a felt connection with that tattoo because, as she said, 'doing something quickly is not really the way you should be getting something permanently put on your body.' She regarded both the scorpion and the anglerfish as weaker signifiers of self.

In contrast, a more ideologically layered tattoo on Jade's body is her Deus providet tattoo on her left arm. Shortly after giving birth to Joshua (her first son), Jade had this Latin proverb meaning, 'God will provide' imprinted on
her arm. At the time of the imprint, Jade was struggling in her first marriage or, as she described during our interview, she was ‘not in a good place’. Knowing full well the golden rule of tattooing that emblazoning someone’s name on your body is a sure sign of break-up, she felt at the time, ‘I’m kind of on the fence so if it breaks us up, it might be a good thing.’ And, after getting the tattoo, the relationship dissolved. A few years later, Jade revisited the tattoo. Given that the inspiration of the tattoo was drawn from her first marriage and she was now in a much happier relationship, Jade decided to rework the tattoo in light of her new situation. To remediate the tattoo based on the present, Jade transformed the tattoo into a tribute to Joshua; rather than signifying the struggles and angst that she felt with her first husband, she transformed the imprint into a celebration of her relationship with her son. The reconfigured tattoo still appears on her left arm, but the transformed tattoo is a tree with roots resembling an anchor that symbolizes how deeply rooted Joshua is in her life.

After the experience of transforming a tattoo into a different sign, Jade chose another tattoo for meaning and aesthetics: a large, colourful Octopus on her right calf as seen in Figure 1.

As a motivated sign (Kress, 1997), the octopus fulfils something for Jade that she describes in the interview excerpt.

I chose an octopus because they’re a kind of animal that people don’t know that much about, but if you really, like look into them, they’re really cool. Like, they can change colours depending on their mood, depending on their surroundings … They can recognize people, like different divers, they recognize them. They can show emotion. They can squeeze into teeny little spaces …. I wanted one as big as my hand, like on my leg, and the guy who was doing my tattoo said, “If you’re gonna do it, do it big. Don’t waste your time with a smaller image.” 4/25/10

Figure 1. Octopus tattoo.
She finds an octopus a powerful image of a misunderstood and still quite mysterious animal that captures her imagination. Jade was the most animated when she talked about her octopus. Something about the tattoo projects parts of her identity and her figured worlds in a natural, felt way. She loves the fact that an octopus can change colours, that it can move into small spaces and that it can recognize divers. It is a semiotically meaningful part of her body deriving from her passion for ocean life and her desire for colour.

As a preface to the article, we offered a quote from the interview with Jade in which she talks about a tattoo that served a therapeutic function for her during a low point in her life. The Latin proverb, *Deus providet* means ‘God provides’. The choice of this phrase does not rest on staunch religious beliefs in a god per se, but instead on a hope that if she focuses on what is important, then the universe will provide what she needs. The proverb tattoo led to one of the most significant tattoos on Jade’s body, which is a large tattoo on her left arm that depicts a pre-Columbian, Aztec female goddess of sex and fertility named Tlazolteotl (see Figure 2).

During the interview, Jade went into great detail about locating and designing the image as a tattoo. The image resurrects deep, felt feelings that Jade experienced when she met Jose and after they had their child together. There is a layered
quality to the tattoo that does not seem as present or visceral as her earlier tattoos. Jade found the image of childbirth moving and she felt a strong connection between the crouching goddess and her second husband, with whom she had her second child. Though not Guatemalan, the image ‘symbolizes Jose and me’. The tattoo took several months to render, until they devised the final product in Figure 3.

The image is so distinct and it is one of the first things that you see when Jade wears a tank top or t-shirt. Jade’s latest tattoo is a timeline of her life, depicting ‘some of the bad things’ and ‘things I remember and milestones in my life’. In the timeline, Jade depicts places where she has lived and her childhood in Pennsylvania that she wants to celebrate. It is a work-in-progress and she plans to add images as her life unfolds.

**Conflicting emotions about her tattoos**

As passionate as Jade is about her tattoos, she often feels shy, even insecure about their appearance in special situations. There are times when she is with her sons and it is hot weather yet she still wears long sleeves because her tattoos make her stand out so much and she ‘just wants to blend in and look like everybody else’. At times, Jade wishes that she could erase them. When she visits Jose’s family in Guatemala, very few people have tattoos (especially women) and she feels modest about her body art. During our interview, Jade

![Figure 3](image.jpg)

**Figure 3** Jade’s tattoo.
recalled a particular moment when a waitress at a restaurant made a comment about her tattoos and she felt embarrassed about them. At another moment in the interview, Jade reveals that she was teased when she was younger because she was so pale and white and, as an adult, she has found that tattoos infuse colour and dynamism into her life: ‘So I just hated being so white, so I felt like I want coloured tattoos on me. I wanted cool colours because I felt like I didn’t want to be white anymore.’ In this way, Jade tells the story of her life through visuals on her body.

**VISUAL OPTICS: SOME BACKGROUND**

We will now present our three readings, or optics, of Jade’s tattoos. To collect the data, one researcher interviewed Jade in her home. Jade then took photographs of a select number of tattoos that she felt comfortable sharing. We regard each visual analyzed in the article as a case study. There are three tattoos interpreted as case studies in our article. Jade is the research participant and the data supporting our respective interpretations are visuals or photographs of tattoos and interview data. To analyze the visual data, we interpreted tattoos in conjunction with interview talk so that Jade’s story and her reflexivity play a role in our analyses. According to Yin (2009: 18), ‘a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.’ Our research questions align with the purposes and uses of the case study method:

How and Why questions are more explanatory and likely to lead to the use of case studies … This is because such questions deal with operational links needed to be traced over time, rather than mere frequencies or incidence. (p. 9)

In the research study, we ask such questions as: How do different conceptual views impact interpretations of the same image? How and why can images be seen in different ways? How does Jade describe her tattoos? Why do tattoos act as a form of identity mediation? Do our analyses run parallel rather than against each other? In addition, the case study method has an advantage when a ‘how’ or ‘why’ question is being asked about a contemporary event over which the researcher has little or no control (p. 13). That is, given that we know Jade’s story and her telling of the story, we have greater insight into the hidden and embedded meanings within each tattoo.

**SOCIAL SEMIOTICS AND JADE’S TATTOOS (KRESS OPTIC)**

Multimodality assumes that the field of meaning is defined by many ways of making meaning, speech and writing being but two – and not necessarily the
central two. In itself, that assumption has profound ontological impact for those societies whose cultures have rested on a taken-for-granted assumption that it is ‘language’ which is central, which provides a comprehensive means for communicating, which guarantees ‘rationality’ and thus defines what it is to be human. Yet by itself, multimodality is not a theory: it maps a field for attention for those who have an interest in meaning in some way: for the archaeologist who uncovers the traces of a past layered in the ground; for a psychologist interested in means whereby attention may be gained and recall of ‘information’ enhanced; for the historically oriented sociologist who uncovers a history of the social practices of surgery as much in the changes in the naming of the instruments of surgery as in their shape. In other words, a theoretical framing, something that can and does pose a question, is needed: a theory in which questions around effects of difference in mode become significant. For me, that question is ‘How do I make meaning in that which I take to be my world?’

The approach that best answers that question for me is Social Semiotics. Its central entity is the sign. In a social account of sign-making – in contrast to sign-use – the semiotic work of the sign-makers, their agency, is at the centre. In this approach, sign-makers choose a form (a signifier) which, in its material characteristics and as the result of shaping in often long histories of social and semiotic ‘work’, in different social places, bears the potential to express most aptly that which I wish ‘to mean’ at this moment here, now. In this moment, a micro-unit of social time, a plethora of phenomena are compressed in an instantaneous focus which constitutes the sign-makers’ interest: their social histories, their social formation, their assessment of the social environment in which they are now active, their framing of some aspect of the social environment as a prompt which asks for their response, here, now. A moment later – that ‘moment’ may be another micro-moment of normal social interaction or a much extended ‘moment’ of a life in its social and affective move through time – in response to another prompt, that interest will be differently configured, differently expressed: never anarchically so, never without its links back to the always temporary, provisional yet sufficiently stable coherence made of ‘self’ as subjectivity, and displayed as identity, for the time being.

Our example here is tattoos inscribed – over some 12 years – on the body of a young woman, who sees herself as an artist. In the complex of subjectivity and identity, of a life in social time always shaped by (the itself socially and affectively shaped) personal interest, of the ceaseless flow of meaning-making, of semiosis punctuated and framed now and then and only ever for a moment, and fixed by means of complex signs inscribed and displayed on the body – in our example here, all the issues which are at the core of Social Semiotic Multimodality can be seen to be at work and in process.

At the same time, the squishy boundaries of this approach are evident: a squishy-ness of boundaries that marks all approaches/theories/disciplines, which deal with humans in their social lives. These boundaries are
wonderfully demonstrable here, as is the need for other tools. For instance, to get an insight into Jade’s momentary punctuations of semiosis, we need an ‘ethnography of personal history’: so, for instance, to understand the ‘why’ of how tattoo and clothes, speech and posture, location and movement, come to form an ensemble – the tattoo with the tank-top which is ok in New York and not ok in Guatemala (whether rural or urban, though differently so, no doubt), just as much as we need an ethnography of social place: the display of body and tattoo on the beach; in the US or in Guatemala; with friends and relatives in the US as against being with newly ‘acquired’ relatives in Guatemala. Behind an account of what produces ‘personal modesty’, lies a complex of ‘otherness’, of ‘outsiderness’ and the understanding of a resultant shame cannot be provided by one approach alone. And that, in its way, illustrates a crucial contemporary issue to which this presentation is one contribution: can the disciplines of yore furnish forth the tools needed to provide understandings of the central social issues of now?

In other words, in a social semiotic and multimodal account there is a division of labour. First, there are those things that it is best to leave to an approach that brings these other insights that are needed more effectively than this approach could do it. Second, there is a division of labour within the approach: a focus on the processes and the resources involved in sign-making as meaning-making and a focus on the affordances of the modes which appear in the phenomenon that we wish to explain: what modes are present; what are the affordances of each; what ‘social work’ has led to and is evident in this community here, of the potentials and limitations of this mode or that mode and all the other modes available as resources? What is the origin, the provenance of the affordances of this mode or of this genre – in the case here, the mode of image and the genre of tattoo? And what are the sites of display and their potentials for meaning?

And there is a question at the squishy boundaries of ethnography, of cultural studies, of anthropology, of social history and of social semiotics: what are the histories of the emergence and use of this genre in this social place and by this social group at this time. Tattoos – whether as signs or as social practices with their enormously complex historical and geographical and social ‘paths’, or as phenomena of identity-marking and ‘production’ – turn out to be a rich field for developing practical understanding as much as for theoretical development.

More concretely, what are the resources available here for making signs in order to give meaning a material form? The social semiotic aspect of that task asks about the resources which are available. It deals with the question: what does the agent do, here, now, in this social environment, and with what resources? It provides the wider social frame of rhetoric as the politics of communication and of design as the attempt to shape the complex sign-as-message in such a way that it will project the rhetor’s intent in the most effective manner – taking account of the characteristics of the audience, the availability and
aptness of resources, and of the sign-as-message to be designed. The multimodal aspect of that task focuses on questions about the modes that are available in this community, about their potentials and limitations as they are seen here, and about the arrangements and orchestration of these modes in specific ensembles. In the case of Jade’s tattoos, multimodality would ask about the mode of dress, the mode of image, the mode of speech; it would ask about the body both as mode and as site of display, and it would ask about the modes of posture and movement.

In our example, Jade is rhetor of her own interest. She has, from the perspective of rhetoric and design, a set of identities that play a role in these inscriptions: she has been a partner of two husbands; she is a mother; and she is an artist. In each of these roles, the signs made take on a different aspect. As an artist, she may see her body becoming a work of art. As the partner of a new husband, the signifiers are linked with other signifieds.

She knows how she wishes to shape/decorate/inscribe her body in accord with her interest (I avoid the term desire) and at the same time she has in mind a sign as a message for specific audiences. Audience is crucial; and both placement of the tattoo-sign on the body and the framing provided by clothes – the revealing tank top or t-shirt versus the long-sleeved top; the revealing bikini or shorts or short skirt versus the long skirt or leggings or jeans as concealment – are means of addressing or not addressing an audience: as much as they are means for presenting a different identity to the world. She is also the designer of her body: she chooses the sign to be inscribed on her body, and the site of display. In terms of design and sign-making we can see the complexity about notions of making: Jade chooses the tattoo of the octopus. In (social) semiotic terms she chooses the signifier/form for the signified/meaning which she has in mind – the octopus as much more complex than usually assumed, as secretive, emotional, intelligent, shy. As she says:

Like, they can change colours depending on their mood, depending on their surroundings … They can recognize people, like different divers, they recognize them. They can show emotion. They can squeeze into teeny little spaces … I wanted one as big as my hand, like on my leg, and the guy who was doing my tattoo said, ‘If you’re gonna do it, do it big. Don’t waste your time with a smaller image.’

But, as she points out, her wish to have a small tattoo, to signify the ‘teeny little spaces’ into which it can squeeze, was overridden by the much more expansive – or insensitive or differently sensitive – attitude of the tattooist. This is an instance of the shaping and reshaping of interest, and its consequence on signs, maybe in a micro-sequence (from the data we can’t tell whether there was no debate, or a long debate, a kind of ‘look. I’ll have to think about that’). There is another issue here: did Jade choose the signifier? There was
something she wanted to mean – a signified; and she imagined for that a signifier – an octopus, with the attributes that she describes. (That itself may have been a signifier of another signified, ‘who am I, at this point?’).

With that idea, she visits the tattooist. He has one or maybe more templates for an octopus; she may have had a choice or not of what specific octopus-signifier would be most apt for her, here, now. This is much like selecting from a range of postcards: seemingly ready-made signs, though in fact signifiers waiting for me to select one as the form apt to express my meaning, and becoming my sign in my addition of my signified – whether ‘romantic’, ‘ironic’ or ‘joking’. Then the tattooist, for reasons we cannot know, suggests the size of the tattoos: ‘If you’re gonna do it, do it big. Don’t waste your time with a smaller image.’ We might say that this is a signifier of quite another signified: macho, maybe commercially driven – the price of the tattoo increasing with size. And so a signified of central importance for Jade, as it happens, ‘tinyness’, ‘being able to squeeze into tiny spaces’, is remade by another rhetor/designer/producer in terms of his different discursive position, his habitus, his subjectivity, his identity.

The sign, once made, even when inscribed on the body, is subject to constant transformation: it remains in the bearer’s social and affective life, it is a history that not only can be but is constantly reshaped. Jade has already had one tattoo reshaped fundamentally. Yet there are constant small, banal acts of reshaping: hiding the tattoo or framing it ostentatiously through clothing or revealing it teasingly, partially, are constant acts of transformation. What the tattoo is as a sign is subject to constant re-making. As signifier it seems constant, always the same; as sign it is constantly remade, both by the person who bears the sign and by those who view the sign; who make meaning from the site of inscription on the body; from the depiction itself; from the social place where it is viewed – in a social space where those who inhabit that space with its cultural resources have their specific valuations of what tattoos ‘are’, what they signify.

Jade has 10 tattoos on her body. They come from different periods in her life; in that way they can act for her as a kind of diary in depiction. As mentioned, the ‘sense’ of that history is constantly remade by her: more so in some cases and less, no doubt, in others. The early tattoo of the name of the first husband, for instance, is subject to a far-reaching transformation when the second husband comes on the scene. For the audience of ‘others’, not all the tattoos are visible at one time and so the tattoos cannot form an account of Jade’s history for ‘others’: quite apart from the fact that the bodily sites of display are not ordered according to principles which could be readily deduced by an outsider. They are not sequenced in a linear or other form, nor is their order seemingly accessible by using the body as spatial frame or spatial site of display. That history is not available to outsiders other than through a spoken account by Jade. Yet in such an account – the combination of photo and box of written text may stand in as a metaphor here – there is a spoken account for
one specific listener, which is then turned by that listener at a later time into a
new sign in relation to the researcher’s agenda.

For the ‘external’ viewer, the ensemble of modes varies: in one site, some
of the tattoos are covered; in another many are visible and even – seemingly
with intent and pleasure – ostentatiously, provocatively displayed. In each case
this happens as differently constituted ensembles. In the photo on the beach,
it is the photographer’s framing which shapes the ensemble – mainly of skin
and image, though with a posture that enables the tattoo to be the central ele-
ment in the photographic and semiotic frame. This optic offered a frame for
thinking about the semiotics of Jade’s tattoos in conjunction with her own
reflexivity about their production.

SEDIMENTING TIMESCALES IN TATTOOS
(ROWSSELL OPTIC)

Building on Kress’s reference to an ‘external’ viewer, the reader or interpreter
of the text, this section focuses on the internal viewer, the sign-maker of the
text. Considering each tattoo from Jade’s perspective, each one sediments
(Rowsell and Pahl, 2007) moments in time. An event, an emotion, or a person
inspires the creation of a text which sediments Jade’s identity on a part
of her body. Given that some tattoos depict a moments in time, while other
tattoos depict more extended periods of time, Lemke’s (2000) notion of tim-
escale has helped to excavate the significance of meanings in tattoos. Lemke
argues that the semiotic potential of an artifact or object is linked to its
timescale. For example, a Samurai sword carries longer and deeper meaning
potential than an ordinary household knife due to its deeper and richer tim-
escale. Based on conceptual work with Kate Pahl (Pahl and Rowsell, 2010;
Rowsell and Pahl, 2007), we have found ‘sedimented identity’ is a produc-
tive way to interpret sign-makers’ investments and pathway into meaning-
making. To sediment identity into a text is to freeze, fossilize, imprint and
etch aspects of identity to make it meaningful for a sign-maker. For Jade,
there is something cathartic about imprinting a tattoo on her body: the pro-
cess of choosing, designing, negotiating the image with the artist and tattoo
creation helped her to move through periods of her life which eventually
imbued an ability to look at her tattoos as artifacts of self (Holland et al.,
1998). What I have found as a researcher in this study – as with other stud-
ies that interrogate the meaning-maker about their produced sign (Rowsell
and Pahl, 2007; Sheridan and Rowsell, 2010) is that reflecting on a sign with
the sign-maker loosens and lifts out the story of sedimentation. It is a subtle
difference between the former section on semiosis and this section that picks
apart the process of making a sign. The difference is extrapolating the pro-
duction process as inextricably linked to the materiality of the sign (and
how the sign materializes the subjectivities of the producer). Talking about
the process of text-making recreates an agentive mapping of meaning for
Jade, therein lifting out the role of beliefs, values, philosophies in rendering
the image and also, the role of semiotic resources in capturing an image. Using sedimented identity coupled with timescales to analyze both visual and interview data with the sign-maker offered me a robust visual optic to understand visuals as meaningful inscriptions.

In 'Across the scales of time', Lemke (2000) offers a more dynamic concept of time with the notion of 'timescales'. In his seminal article, Lemke talks about objects that carry shorter and longer timescales. An everyday object, like a household knife, does not carry the longer timescale and power that a samurai sword carries because the samurai sword has a much longer history and heritage. Lemke elaborates on his use of the terms, 'heterochrony' and 'semiotic mediation', to tease out the concept of timescales. To illustrate, a combined process of heterochrony when a long timescale process produces an effect in a much shorter timescale activity and semiotic mediation when this heterochronic process involves a material object, Lemke offers the history of the samurai sword to illustrate his theory. Lemke recounts the history of feudal Japan when the samurai warrior clan had the duty of avenging wrongdoings to their clan by beheading an offending commoner (p. 280). Instead of wielding a battle sword, samurai warriors used an heirloom sword that was not as sharp or as well balanced but its materiality, meaning and history carried its power. As he describes it, ‘the material characteristics of the object also function as signs for an interpreting system of meanings that belong to processes on a very different timescale than that of the event in which the interpreting process is taking place’ (p. 281, emphasis in original). At a certain point in the article, Lemke refers directly to tattoos as material objects that carry timescales: ‘The student is also a material object, a body on and in which can be inscribed – as clothing, tattoos, neuromuscular habit patterns, verbal memories – meaningful signs’ (p. 282). In this way, the body becomes a material–semiotic object, which is a product of shorter and longer timescales. Jade sedimented timescales onto her body either literally with a historical timeline ‘of good and bad periods of her life’ and also, figuratively by remediating a name into a symbol to shorten its timescale. Perhaps it could also be argued that, as the name is still there, inscribed on her skin in ink and now covered over, that its timescale has been extended. Her desire to cover the tattoo might even give it more significance as a mark that remains on her body nonetheless.

Applying a timescale lens to the visual exposes parts of identity and trajectories for research participants. Coupled with sedimented identity, the act of sedimenting parts of identity into semiosis, the optic locates Jade in her text-making. What is the longest timescale tattoo on Jade’s body? What kinds of changes are highlighted and do they carry a long timescale? Can she identify people in her timescales? Can her varied tattoos identify short-lived versus lasting beliefs? What values and beliefs have changed based on the depiction of timescales in tattoos? For Jade, tattoos have functioned as expressions of self. The tattoos on Jade’s body serve as mediating artifacts that sometimes carry a shorter, less meaningful timescale but, at other times, carry a longer, more
meaningful timescale, although as Kress points out, the body itself does not necessarily indicate such timescales to the observer:

… the bodily sites of display are not ordered according to principles which could be readily deduced by an outsider. They are not sequenced in a linear or other form, nor is their order seemingly accessible by using the body as spatial frame or spatial site of display. That history is not available to outsiders other than through a spoken account by Jade.

Drawing on Jade’s account in the interview, we could see an altered tattoo as one that sediments a shorter timescale and that is associated with a relatively shorter life event. Jade’s marriage to her first husband materialized as his name imprinted on her skin but in semiotically mediating and altering its message, Jade disrupts a timescale. By altering its materiality and moving a sign from one signifier to a new signified, Jade limits its power, its permanence and its influence on her. The very act of altering the original sign is a form of transformation (Kress, 1997). Jade uses this opportunity to actively sediment identity to improvise on her own convictions, beliefs and desires during text-making. Lemke talks about working within multiple timescales and the example of Jade rendering a tattoo into something quite different is an example of the ebb and flow of shorter and longer-term timescales in life histories; as depicted in the following quote from Lemke (2000: 286):

There are longer-term Selves already engaged in ongoing longer-term projects and activities and the shorter-term Selves of current activities, some of which contribute to longer-term projects and some of which may not. As we interact socially at the human event scale, we ‘identify,’ if not with the Other as such, at least with our agency and participation in each emergent new activity whole, always taking place in a larger-scale system than the former, or more isolated Self.

Agency works on longer and shorter-term projects, tied to degrees of participation. With Jade’s remediated tattoo in mind, she shortens her participation and identity investment in her first marriage by altering the tattoo, therein changing it into a longer-term project of her son. In other words, she moves what could have been a longer-term self materialized in a semiotic artifact into a shorter-term one that ends up being something quite different, with a far longer timescale.

Later in his article, Lemke reflects on his own timescales when he speaks of an ‘identity-constituting process going on a longer timescale and across a range of settings and participants’ (p. 286). He claims that he often works to recreate activities and senses of self that are basic to his identity for the very reason that he is seeking identity-constituting practices (p. 286). Similarly, Jade’s octopus tattoo signals what I think of as her habitus: her childhood, her everyday, her aesthetic within the symbol of the octopus. What I am
referring to resembles what Bourdieu (1990: 74) described in his ethnographies in Algeria. When he went to the homes in Kabyle he watched the way that children played, their lives and the way that they experienced their games, toys and everyday practice. He observed that:

> Whether in verbal products such as proverbs, sayings, gnomic poems, songs or riddles or in objects such as tools, the house or the village, or in practices such as games, contexts of honour, gift exchange or rites, the material that the Kabyle child has to learn is the product of the systematic application of a small number of principles coherent in practice.

A small number of principles coherent in practice are part of the everyday, generating dispositions and habitus. Bourdieu observed that habitus ‘is durable but not eternal’ and in his later work, he acknowledged that habitus could be transformed. In my work with Kate Pahl, we extend Bourdieu and Lemke’s concepts of identity-constituting practices by using the concept of habitus and how it is improvised during meaning-making. Where Lemke locates innate dispositions and the mediation of innate dispositions in semiotic artifacts, Bourdieu interprets the unfolding of dispositions, histories, the everyday in practice. By extension, habitus can be modified through text-making and that text-making, and the process of creating multimodal texts offers a space for improvisation of habitus. For Jade, the octopus on her leg reinforces such changing habitus, existing on her body as a longer timescale that is identity-constituting and part of the everyday. It is big and colourful, it resurrects the ocean and water and life that reminds her of her childhood. As a motivated sign (Kress, 1997), the octopus inspired the everyday and shifted Jade’s identity when it was completed. In this way, the octopus not only reinforces previous habitus, but also modifies or, in Bourdieu’s terms, ‘transforms’ her sense of self. At the beginning of our interview, Jade confessed that she did not feel at home in New Jersey because its lifestyle is so different from her hometown in Pennsylvania where she claims she ran wild in the creeks and in town. As Jade avowed during our conversation, something about the octopus and its associations with water imbued a greater sense of home, when she lives far away from home. The octopus resituated and reconstituted her identity in New Jersey. By the end of our interview, Jade spoke a great deal about investing her habitus (not her term) into the sign-making and, as a result, she felt more engaged in her new life and new roles. There is something about the octopus that sustains Jade across the scales of time.

**NEW LITERACY STUDIES AND MULTIMODALITY: APPROACHES TO JADE’S TATTOOS (STREET OPTIC)**

Drawing upon the rich accounts above, I will develop further a conceptual frame for linking multimodality and NLS, drawing on concepts and issues recently highlighted in both fields. I signal perspectives/claims I think we
should try to avoid (e.g. the autonomous model of multimodality and mode determinism and I indicate some concepts we could build upon in linking the two fields, e.g. an ideological model of multimodality). In setting out ways of combining the two fields, I draw upon statements from researchers in both of them. I then use these ideas from the two fields to add to Kress’s and Rowsell’s analyses of the uses of the tattoos; and, I consider this as a case study of the linking of the fields.

The Fields: (a) Multimodality (MM)

As we saw above, Kress and others have attempted to redress the emphasis on language as the salient mode of communication in favour of a recognition of how other modes – visual, gestural, kinaesthetic – are key communicative practices: they are developing a language of description for such modes that enables us to see their characteristic forms, their affordances and their distinctive links with each other. Key concepts here include the notion of mode: ‘a regularised organised set of resources for meaning-making’ (Street, 2009: 240); of semiotic resources: actions, materials, artifacts through which people communicate (e.g. image, gaze, gesture, movement, music, speech, writing, tables, gaze, gesture, positioning, sound; and of media (e.g. page, screen, websites, film). As we saw above, Kress drew upon the notions of mode, social semiotics and media to analyse Jade’s tattoos.

The Fields: (b) NLS

NLS have attempted to provide a new language of description for viewing literacy in its social context: again, wishing to change the emphasis of the past, especially in educational contexts, they describe multiple literacy practices that vary across cultures and contexts (Street, 1984). Key concepts include the notion of literacy as social practices of reading and/or writing. They also include literacy events and literacy practices, where researchers link the observable surface levels of reading and writing with deeper interpretations that they bring to bear in terms of social theory; the distinction between an autonomous model of literacy, which sees literacy in itself as leading to cognitive development, economic take-off, etc., autonomous of social context, versus an ideological model that recognizes not only the social and varied nature of literacy practices but also that such practices are always inscribed in relations of power – including the very power to name and define what counts as ‘literacy’ and to assert its effects as in the autonomous model; the autonomous model, then, is especially ideological in its workings, its claims, its attempts to hide and deny its own social and power base.

Combining MM and NLS

Kress and Street (2006: viii), in a joint contribution that attempted to understand the links between these two fields, conclude: ‘The key question … is how
these two fields of study can speak to each other, to find both correspondences and differences.’ Likewise, I have argued elsewhere that we need MM within NLS to understand texts as material objects and MM needs NLS because they tie representation to social practice (Street, 2001). Drawing on these insights and anticipating how the combination of the two fields might help us address the tattoos described above, I here indicate some of the correspondences and differences between the two fields. I begin by suggesting some concepts and approaches that the experience of NLS indicates we would be advised to avoid. For instance, the key assumption with which NLS has taken issue is that of ‘literacy’ as a kind of ‘technology’ with given consequences, as though in itself it will lead to social and cognitive developments. We see in many accounts of multimodality the danger of a similar ‘mode determinism’, as though a particular mode – visual, written, material – can be expected to have particular consequences.

Similarly, there has been a growing tendency to see a ‘great divide’ between the age of literacy and a supposedly ‘new’ age of visuality. Again, NLS has devoted some time to challenging a similar claim regarding the shift from an age of oral communication to one of written communication. For both fields, we would say that, whilst ‘new technologies do play a central role in how modes are made available, configured and accessed’, nevertheless ‘the texts that circulate in the world and interactions between people have always been multimodal, and the extent to which they have been extended by digital technologies is itself a research question and cannot be pre-supposed’. The ethnographic evidence suggests in both cases that we can no longer hold to the assumptions of the autonomous model and the great divide, either for literacy or for other modes – rather we need to recognize, as in the ideological model of literacy, that different modes and their enactment will play out differently according to a variety of cultural and social features, not just those of the given mode. We need, then, to avoid mode determinism and a great divide, just as NLS have learned to avoid the overstated claims for literacy.

What, then, might we build upon from the experience of NLS in now addressing MM? A key starting place is Jewitt’s (2009: 5) argument that ‘multimodal research is strongly underpinned by social and cultural theories of representation and communication’. I would also add, in light of the critiques of an autonomous model of literacy and of modality outlined above, that we need to move towards ‘an ideological model of multimodality’ (Street, 2008), in which we recognize, as with literacy practices, that multimodal practices are both socially embedded and also deeply infused with power relations.

How, then, might we apply these ideas to Jade and her tattoos? And conversely, how might we use Jade’s tattoos as a case study for exploring the relation between MM and NLS? We might easily jump into seeing the tattoo as a kind of ‘literacy’. However, I would take this as one of the perspectives ‘to avoid’: it would either reduce the visual text to traditional understandings of written language or it would use ‘literacy’ as a metaphor to describe the
‘skills’ that Jade is calling upon. Adopting the more sophisticated perspectives being developed by Rowsell and Kress above and by those attempting to link MM and NLS, might instead lead us to focus on the variety of modes being invoked in Jade’s meaning-making and on the social practices with which these particular events are associated. So, we might ask further, what resources is Jade calling upon in making these meanings? Obviously there is a visual dimension, with colour and layout; invoking Lemke, we can also look for connections to other such images across time and the meanings associated with them that Jade is calling upon here (the octopus with its hidden qualities, the Greek names with their associations of power and identity). But, from an NLS perspective, I would also look for social issues of power and identity. Jade spoke at various points in the interview about challenging norms and gender stereotypes. In this way, she can be seen as challenging some of the dominant ways provided for her in making her identity and is claiming the right to also inscribe on her body meanings that are ‘normally’ expressed in language. The fact that she occasionally feels nervous about this and may wear long sleeves to hide the images reinforces the power dimension in such use of modal resources for meaning-making and self expression; she is testing out the limits of mode mixing, both on herself and on those she encounters.

Jade’s attempt to identify herself as different from her immediate New Jersey environment (maybe not unlike the ‘outcast’ tradition cited above), to clarify her relationship to her first husband, to bring colour into her life, all of these would fit with the wider cultural histories of tattooing and lead us to see beyond the immediate individualistic event to wider social practices – just as we would do in observing a literacy event and then attempting to locate it in wider literacy practices. As a rite of passage, one might interpret her developing use of tattoos as a way of moving from an earlier identity, perhaps one she feels was imposed on her, to a new one; but again, from a social practice perspective, we might acknowledge that the new identity is also ‘out there’, in Bourdieusian terms part of a ‘field’ and not just a personal creation, in the way that Rowsell sets out above, as a transforming of habitus in relation to field (see also Grenfell et al., 2011).

Such interpretations can also signal the importance of moving beyond narrow linguistic accounts of meaning-making and recognizing the mixing and overlapping of modes that characterize contemporary meaning-making. In this case, we realize that we cannot understand the tattoos simply by observing and describing their visual features. We need, as Rowsell has done, to invoke other modes, such as Jade’s own speech about the tattoos; and we need to locate them in larger social and historical practices, as I have done in calling upon written versions of the ‘tattoo’ found in encyclopaedias and in the anthropological literature. In my signalling of things to build on as we develop the relationship of MM and NLS, we might in this case particularly take account of how ‘people orchestrate meaning through their selection and configuration of modes’ and here Kress’s focus on ‘design’ can offer helpful insights. And in
my signalling of what ‘to avoid,’ I would be wary of overstating the apparent ‘affordances’ of the visual aspect of tattooing and instead make the link with other modes and with the historical context. Similarly, I would want to ‘avoid’ any suggestion that we have here a peculiarly ‘modern’ technology: as signalled above in the what ‘to build on’ section, ‘The visual turn refuses to confine visual and multimodality to the modern era; the texts that circulated in the world and interactions between people have always been multimodal’ (Kress and Street, 2006: vii). Looking at the historical and cross-cultural aspects of tattooing brings this home particularly strongly in this case, where the particular uses of this visual mode in contemporary New Jersey can be located in the longer timescales and spatial cross-cultural practices evident in the literature on tattoos.

A powerful example of this broader move can be identified in the case study outlined above of Jade’s tattoo of a pre-Columbian fertility goddess (Figure 2). The tattoo was intended, as explained earlier, to celebrate the birth of her second son with her Guatemalan husband Jose and the ‘image resurrects deep feelings that Jade experienced when she met Jose and after they had their child together’. This, as she states, is connected with her own deep experience of this childbirth but, calling upon the combined NLS and MM approach outlined above, we also signalled the value of adopting an ethnographic perspective that takes account of the participant’s view but also adds layers of analysis to them. In this case, then, we might recognize the need to move beyond the immediate participant’s surface view of such an image itself and to instead attempt to draw out and analyse the deeper meanings, including their association with social and cultural meanings. In this case, Jade felt a strong connection between the crouching goddess and her second husband, Jose. Both of them were from Latin America and although, as she recognizes, they were from different countries, this does give her the space to push beyond her own previous geographical and social location. She sees, then, the wider, cross-cultural issues raised by the image, in particular those associated with the kind of birth she had just experienced and with the moral associations of a second partner outside of marriage. She wants to credit the feelings and the moral good associated with her new relationship, so this ‘foreign’ image with its associated morality of fertility enables her to celebrate the second son without the guilt associated with her first religion. She also sees a broader political point associated with this pre-Columbian goddess – before the invasion of both north and south America by white Europeans, there were local beliefs and values which she would now like to resurrect to use in order to validate her new position. Such a perspective enables her to see beyond the narrow historical, ethnic and religious background that she had previously felt pinned down by and instead to be able to claim that the image ‘symbolizes Jose and me’.

In the account of NLS above, a key theoretical issue was seen as ‘the power to name and define’ – in that case this referred to what counts as ‘literacy’ and we broadened this out to recognize also the power to name and define multimodal images. This, then, is exactly what Jade can be seen to be doing
here – taking upon herself the power to use the visual image of the tattoo to move beyond her own early religious and social background and to instead name and (re)define her new situation, drawing upon both a visual image and the cultural historical associations of such an image. There is here a kind of freedom that Kress described in the ‘design’ work of the sign-maker and the kind of ideological move that Street identifies with literacy. As Rowsell argues, subjects can make use of modes such as literacy and the visual to sediment their own ideas and values. Such an approach, then, leads us to ‘re-read’ the tattoos described here and to see, with Jade, the wider and deeper meanings they evoke.

BREAKING DOWN SILOS FOR VISUAL METHODOLOGIES

In this article, Kress talked about the centrality of the sign and the semiotic work it takes to make a sign. Jade frames her signs around her histories and experiences and she compresses them in a tattoo. Rowsell has a different language for taking semiotic resources and using them to sediment an idea, a person, a value in a sign – materialized by substantial thought, innovation and creativity. Brian Street draws on the insights of NLS and ethnographic inquiry to visualize the emic. Peeling back cultural layer by cultural layer, Street looks back to explain why we adorn our flesh as a cultural practice, albeit for different reasons in different times.

These optics sharply remind us of a need for robust languages for the visual. Reaching beyond complacency with the word, visuals as still waters that run deep could serve as far more of a resource for learning, teaching and research. Visual methodologies cannot move forward without more of an intermingling of visual methods. Part of the solution lies in what this article illustrates, which is a breaking down of disciplinary silos to build on what other fields have offered as insights about the visual. A similar movement happened with the word when sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists united to explain how literacy is indeed more of a social practice than a unified, thing-like entity existing in our heads (Heath, 1984; Scribner and Cole, 1981; Street, 1984, 1993). The dominance of the visual demands a similar interpenetration of fields to see the visual as our contemporary inscription and for researchers to analyze and code the visual effectively.

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NOTES

1. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of participants.

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