
Article:
Banwell, J. (2018) Ink and Identities: The politics of bodies and borders in 'Sin nombre'. Hispanic Research Journal, 19 (1). pp. 3-13. ISSN 1745-820X

https://doi.org/10.1080/14682737.2018.1418972

Ink and Identities: The Politics of Bodies and Borders in *Sin nombre*

Sin nombre ('Nameless'), released in 2009, presents director Cary Fukunaga's view of the migrant experience, taking the viewer on a journey from Honduras through Mexico and finally to the Mexico-U.S. border. Against this backdrop, the human drama of an unrequited love story unfolds between the two protagonists around whom the film's plot revolves.

The principal theme of the story is the experience of people migrating north from Central America and Mexico, with the aim of crossing the border into the United States. Sayra is a young woman who undertakes her journey north from the capital city of Honduras, Tegucigalpa, with her father (who has been deported from the U.S. and is travelling north to attempt to re-enter the country), and her uncle. Casper, a young man living in the south of Mexico, is a member of the Mara Salvatrucha, a notoriously violent gang whose lifestyle is another of the film's central concerns. Casper (known outside the gang as 'Willy') begins travelling to escape from the gang after he kills its leader. He meets Sayra atop a train crowded with people travelling north, and the formidable machine becomes the backdrop to the formation of their unlikely and initially uneasy friendship and the dangers they face along the way. The film interweaves multiple cinematic genres: the dangerous and hopeful journeys of classic Westerns; social documentary with a nod to Neorealism's concern with verisimilitude; and the potential and optimism of the rite-of-passage road trip.

Borders are not simply lines on maps that demarcate and separate distinct territories, nor do they mark in more symbolic terms clear bodily, cultural, or linguistic distinctions, whether tangible or symbolic. Instead, they tend to be conceptualized in terms of negotiation. Borders and boundaries take multiple forms in *Sin nombre* and are negotiated on national, territorial, (sub)cultural, and individual levels. The story traces the journeys of the characters and transports viewers across the Guatemala-Mexico, and the Mexico-U.S. national borders, and also engages in smaller-scale crossings and negotiations in the form of names used by certain characters in different contexts and spaces, body language, and (in some cases, heavy and highly visible) tattoos.

This paper will explore the representation of boundary crossings undertaken by bodies. Firstly, attention will be given to the symbolism of water at the two border crossings. Then, discussion will move on to address the role of tattoos and tattooing.

According to Gustafson (2000), 'Tattoos have a strange double nature. At the same time that tattoos have this uncanny power to affront, they can also attract and exert an almost irresistible fascination.' (17)

Tattooed bodies are certainly striking on screen, and their prevalence in the gang subculture whose lifestyle is represented in *Sin nombre* is the most visually arresting aspect of the film's aesthetic. However, much of the discussion around this film in the critical and scholarly literature has focused on its portrayal of the experience of migration from Central America and Mexico to the United States, and also on the ways in which the film deals with masculinity and violence in the subculture of the Mara Salvatrucha gang, of which the male protagonist Casper (also known as Willy) is a member.

The questions of migration and of the crossing of cartographical and territorial borders, in this case those that mark the boundaries between Guatemala and Mexico, and Mexico and the U.S., are unavoidably prominent given the film's subject matter, but there are other borders and boundaries of interest in this text that have not received so much attention. Whilst the migrant journey is concerned with the movement of bodies across and between contested national territories, these liminal border zones also bear witness to changes in the bodies themselves. Border crossings in this film are consequently far from being simply geographical. Boundary transgressions are enacted upon the body by inscription, marking, wounding, and in extreme cases the crossing from life to death. Bodies and borders are marked and regulated; the violation of codes and territories has fatal repercussions.

An aspect of *Sin nombre* highlighted for discussion by critics, is that the fact that the issue of south-north border crossing is so intensely politicised is arguably at odds with the avowedly apolitical nature of the film. As Joseph Nevins has indicated, the director has stated clearly that the aim of the film was not political, and Nevins cites Fukunaga as refuting Focus Features CEO James Shamus' assertion that the film is overtly political:

> "I didn't write it as a political film", the filmmaker asserted. "I wasn't trying to change anyone's mind." Instead, he stated that he wanted viewers to have an "experience" and to "make up their own minds." (Nevins 2009a: 2)

Nevins, and Shaw (2012) both give attention to the market and commercial concerns of filmmaking, which can compromise a radical political message. Following this line of argument, it could be posited in this case that the highly politicised nature of the

subject matter has been either compromised by concessions to marketability of the film, or deliberately downplayed in order to foreground the human drama aspect of the story and the focus on gang culture - which, however, is another highly politically charged issue in itself. Nevins also rightly points out that the film's rather one-dimensional portrayal of Mexico as a dangerous, lawless place and Mexican men and masculinity as dysfunctional, misogynistic and violent in fact plays to and reiterates prejudices against Mexico and Mexicans, and rather than eliciting compassion on the part of the viewer may in fact serve rather to further entrench negative cultural stereotypes and prejudice towards migrants.

Casper / Willy as the film's male protagonist is not portrayed in such a one-dimensional way, but the other male gang members undoubtedly are, despite their strong sense of community and loyalty. The alternative family of the gang is protective but heavily dysfunctional, with cohesion achieved through intimidation and fear of extreme punishment for any transgression of its codes. There are women in the gang, but they are barely visible in the background. The two female characters who feature the most, neither of whom are members of the gang, are Martha Marlene (Casper's girlfriend, who is murdered) and the protagonist Sayra. They tend to defer to Willy / Casper, except during certain moments in the narrative. When Martha Marlene dares to try to find out more about where her boyfriend goes when he is away from her, she receives the most extreme punishment, paying for her transgression with her life at the hands of Mago. Sayra, against the wishes of her travelling companions (two older male relatives), decides to follow Casper, but despite this decision putting her in more immediate danger, she is the only one to succeed in crossing the border into the U.S., her moment of redemption and the validation of all the decisions she has taken during her journey.

The two national borders that feature in *Sin nombre* are marked by bodies of water, in both cases rivers. These crossings constitute symbolic rites of passage in the film, reminiscent of baptism and its symbolism of rebirth, especially in the second example since travellers have to immerse themselves physically in the water. The rivers are liminal spaces, and both are sites of danger for the inexperienced, hence the need to be guided across.

At the Guatemala-Mexico crossing, rafts carry travellers, and at the Mexico-U.S. crossing, assistance comes from a *pollero*, a man who makes money helping people to cross the river by floating them across using an inflated tyre inner tube.

The *pollero* is paid using Casper's digital camera, which contains the images that are his last remaining keepsake of his murdered girlfriend. He sacrifices this valued object in order to buy safe passage for Sayra. This could be seen as an act of contrition, where he makes amends for past wrongs. But does this buy him his own symbolic passage to peace and redemption? Shortly afterwards he is shot dead in a gratuitous, posturing display of firepower initiated by Casper's former protégé, the child gangster Smiley. The vengeful act cements the boy's position as a fully-fledged gang member despite his young age. In killing Casper he has proved his worth; grown up.

To briefly elaborate on the notion of atonement and its relationship to the cycle of deaths in the film, Casper's killing of Mago was in large part vengeance for Mago's killing of Martha Marlene, so could in fact be viewed as an act of justice and re-balancing rather than as severe trespass deserving of death: the elimination of the predatory misogynist Mago may be seen as a liberation of others from his tyranny. However, the destruction of Mago has no effect on the strength of the gang or its commitment to violence; it is no more than a personal vendetta of Casper's. This killing is therefore driven by motives contradictorily petty and noble.

For Sayra, however, the crossing of this river is a rebirth. She immerses herself in the water, survives the dangerous crossing and emerges into a new life. She has survived the humiliation of the crossing into Mexico, run the gauntlet of the immigration authorities' patrols, and separated herself from her father and uncle, both of whom fail in their attempt to get to the Mexico-U.S. border. In contrast, Casper's journey ends in death; he crosses an altogether different boundary.

At both territorial border crossings shown in the film, the migrants have to undress. At the Guatemala-Mexico border, Sayra and her two relatives are immediately caught by the Mexican immigration authorities and made to remove their clothes. They are corralled with other migrants in a dark, enclosed space, and commanded by uniformed men to empty their pockets of money and valuables and then undress, beginning with their shoes. Presumably, this is for pragmatic reasons in that it will make it easier for trousers to be removed, but it will also make it more difficult to run on hard surfaces, and enough time travelling in socks or barefoot on any surface will certainly result in injury and therefore hinder progress. Clothing is seen as an expression of individual identity as well as a practical covering for the body, and having to remove it against one's will in a situation such as this is an act of

humiliation and subjugation. This is a mechanism of enforcement of power, with the body of the Other as the site of enactment.

A key characteristic of national borders is that they are often delineated following a military conflict. The victorious party exercises dominance by imposing such territorial markers upon the vanquished, to which end 'national territories intrinsically reflect the domination and subordination of peoples excluded and bound by the powerful' (Spener and Staudt 1998: 13). It is crucial to acknowledge that there may be a chain of imposition of power, so that one nation who has a border imposed upon it by a dominant neighbour, may in turn impose a border upon another neighbour who is militarily subordinate to them. In the case of Mexico, the U.S. has demarcated the northern border, but Mexico controls the border with Guatemala and so exerts dominance over more southerly nations. As Spener and Staudt point out, this means that:

> Although Mexico's northern border was imposed upon it by the United States and Mexicans are confined by the armed might of their northern neighbors, the Mexican state itself plays a subordinating role with respect to Guatemala, such that its own southern border policies restrict the movement and residence of Central Americans. (Spener and Staudt 1998: 14)

This, as stated, is partly a symptom of the reach of U.S. border policing, but is also a means by which Mexico may dominate over its southern neighbour. This is echoed in the film, as the only place the dominating role of the Mexican authorities is foregrounded is at the Guatemala-Mexico border crossing, as detailed above.

At the Mexico-U.S. border, undressing is done with individual agency and for a practical reason, to avoid getting one’s clothes wet in the river and also, presumably, to avoid attracting the attention of the U.S. immigration authorities (who are fortuitously absent during Sayra's crossing of this river). Having witnessed the revenge killing of Casper, Sayra is emotionally upset and sits in the water for a while, hugging her knees to her chest and crying. She is then shown in a low-angle shot having changed into a fresh set of clothes, and she walks away into her new life. In the second shot, Sayra looks defiant, and she stands straight-backed in contrast to the hunched shoulders of the previous scene. The clean new clothing is a symbol of her metaphorical shedding of the past and her journey to transformation. She is now reborn, having survived a dangerous journey and witnessed death. However, she is still not safe. As she goes in search of a telephone box from where she can call her

relatives in New Jersey, she walks past a high metal fence, on the other side of which a patrol car passes. This is a reminder that although she has successfully crossed the border, she still has a long way to go.

Most importantly, though, Sayra is the only character to succeed in surviving the journey and its perils, and the only one to cross the border and realize the principal objective of the story. Her journey ends conversely to that of Casper, whose shot and bleeding body is left bobbing face-down in the water at the shore of the river on its Mexican side. Bullets have transgressed the boundary of his skin, causing fatal wounds. The blood seeps into the water as evidence of his betrayal, and the impossibility of escape. Once a part of the gang, he was branded, permanently marked. For the willing initiate, this marking provides security and a ready-made family comprising many members: as the paternal Mago points out to comfort the recently-initiated Smiley (formerly known as Benito), who is sobbing after his execution of a rival gang member, 'now you belong to a family with thousands of brothers'.

Smiley receives his first tattoo following the murder of Casper, and the first of the many shots fired were by him. Earlier in the film, when Smiley is leading the hunt for the insubordinate Casper, he travels to enlist the help of another chapter of the gang. He introduces himself by name and clique affiliation, and the first question he is asked is whether he has any tattoos.

Tattooing is a way of marking identity: belonging, difference, cohesion - at least, for as long as the wearer continues to be a gang member. Tattoos display signs of connection and separation, depending on which side of the border between social groups an individual is located. They are ubiquitous in the film: located on the torsos, arms, and sometimes the faces and hands of gang members, and in combination with the clique's heavily coded system of speech and hand signals, they render the gang impenetrable to outsiders. The visible displays of ink and body language therefore function as corporeal and communicative boundaries, including members by association with shared symbols and meanings, and excluding outsiders.

Outsiders may be members of other gangs whose tattoos and body language function by means of a different set of shared codes, or members of mainstream society to whom the gang subcultures are inaccessible. Ink is such a powerful visual signifier of gang membership, that it betrays those trying to escape or pass un-noticed, from the ex-member of a rival gang whose execution is a rite of initiation for the child gangster

Smiley, to Casper who goes on the run having violated the gang's strict code of authority and fealty. Bodies and borders occupy multiple, shifting positions in this film, but once marked, they cannot be un-marked.

The Mara Salvatrucha gang has its origins in Los Angeles, where it grew among El Salvadorans who had moved to the U.S. in the 1980s to escape the country's civil war in which an estimated 80,000 people were killed and one fifth of the population left the country, moving predominantly to the United States. The gang was established in order to protect its members from other gangs of differing cultural backgrounds, such as Mexican American gangs. Many Maras were later deported from the U.S., which had the result of internationalising the gang. The Mara Salvatrucha is now firmly established across Central America, the U.S. and Mexico.

Sin nombre was generally well received, though it has been criticised for painting a less-than-flattering view of Mexico through its focus on gang violence and hyperviolent masculinity and also for downplaying the culpability of the United States in the internationalisation of the Mara Salvatrucha. Deborah Shaw points out that the film's focus on the emotional journeys of the characters and the consequent effacing of political commentary, 'renders invisible the responsiblity of the United States in creating the conditions of migration and the dangers of the journeys themselves' (Shaw 2012: 238). The part the U.S. government has played in enabling the expansion of the Mara Salvatrucha has undoubtedly exacerbated the dangers present in Mexico for migrants passing through the country en route to its northern border, but this contextual information is excluded from the film so as to have effectively absolved the U.S. of responsibility for the internationalisation of the gang.

The function of tattoos is to express the social position a body occupies. In this way, as Schildkrout puts it, 'tattooed skin negotiate[s] between the individual and society and between different social groups' (Schildkrout 2004: 321). The gang tattoos in *Sin nombre* indicate a repudiation of the codes of mainstream society and serve as markers of belonging to the gang's alternative (albeit dysfunctional) family. They transgress the boundary between what mainstream society deems acceptable, and a state of being or lifestyle that has its own hermetic set of values, for example the initiation ritual of 'jumping in', where an initiate is subjected to a beating timed for 13 seconds (Smiley is subjected to this early in the narrative), or for the meting out of a 13-second beating as a punishment (Casper receives this treatment for his activities outside the gang's territory). Such rituals uphold the gang's hierarchical power

structure and reinforce the cohesion of the group, aiming to minimize the risk of transgression. The tattoo needle transgresses the body's physical boundary, the skin, a boundary also crossed by acts of violence that cause wounds, leave scars, let blood, and sometimes, kill.

This impenetrable world is a source of mysterious appeal for some, hence the fetishization of its violence and hypermasculinity. In the film, Casper attempts to shock Sayra out of her naïve dependence on him by showing her the scars on his body, which he has acquired through his involvement in the violent life of the gang. The foregrounding of tattooed bodies aestheticizes their difference. Ink is a visible way for the gang to mark its separateness from mainstream society, and for members to recognize one another and cement their belonging by physically inscribing identity. The lack of contextual information given in the film about the gang, however, removes some of the depth of the symbolism of the tattoos themselves; consequently the film edges uncomfortably close to superficiality. Tattooed bodies are fetishized, presented as Other, an effect enhanced by their partial nudity, which also conveniently shows off the ink on various parts of the torso. This lends an element of sexualization to the on-screen bodies being shown as spectacle as well as visually reinforcing the cohesion of the group. Tattoos send messages to insiders and outsiders, but they are only designed to include the former. For the outsider, they both repel and mystify. The fact that the meanings of the visual codes transmitted by the language of the gang members' tattoos are not all explained is therefore effective, because the gang does not want to be easily decipherable. We as viewers are positioned as outsiders, and constantly reminded of our place as such. So, while the film inspires empathy for some (especially Sayra, and to a lesser degree Casper), this is contrasted with the alienating effect of exclusion from the world of the Mara. Their violence is shocking, and also incomprehensible.

The tattoos worn by the Mara are different from those worn by other criminal subcultures, for example Russian gangs. The highly organized Russian gangs use tattooing of certain symbols in certain locations on the body (for example, two stars on the chest) to indicate that a gang member has carried out a significant act and successfully completed a rite of passage. In the Mara as they are depicted here, there is notable variation in the location and imagery of the tattoos, though there are common themes. The most prevalent are the 'MS' or 'MS-13' acronyms, and devil horns, which is also a hand signal the gang uses that it has appropriated from the

heavy metal subculture. For example, Mago, the leader of the clique, has ‘MS13’ tattooed across his face. He also has devil horns on his forehead, gravestones on his left upper arm, and a skull on his chest, among many other things.

Gustafson says of the face as a location for a tattoo, that:

> Not only does it defy most attempts at concealment, but the face is also commonly viewed as the reflection of one's person, of the self, of the soul. One's own face is so deeply internalized and yet, at the same time, also dependent on mediation, either through a mirror or through the eyes of others. The gaze of the onlooker is virtually inescapable; there is little defence against it. (2000: 24)

Casper has the ‘MS’ acronym on his back and a teardrop tattooed beneath his eye (a typical theme in prison tattoo art). At the end of the film, Smiley has completed his initiation and receives a tattoo inside his bottom lip. The tattooist's ungloved ink-stained hand is visible in the scene, in contrast with the other, cleaner hand holding the boy's lip steady while the work is being done. There is blood on Smiley's lip from the tattooing process. The hand of a female gang member is seen maternally stroking the boy's hair.

Religious iconography is also prevalent, mostly in the form of crosses, with Casper having a rosary tattooed on his left wrist and hand.

Bazan, Harris and Lorentzen, for an article published in 2002, interviewed former members of migrant gangs in San Francisco where a tattoo removal programme at the city’s general hospital gives laser treatments to individuals who want to have these identifiers erased. They asked about tattoo iconography, and many gang members they spoke to who had previously had religious tattoos, evidently saw them more as identifiers of cultural and national provenance than as declarations of religious faith. The authors say:

> Most of the gang members we interviewed said that their religious tattoos didn’t really have religious meanings for them. They didn’t necessarily know what the symbols meant, just that a cross for example, meant that they belong to the Pachucos, and the Virgin of Guadalupe signified Mexico or Mexican Americans … Cesar [an interviewee] says, “I tease with the kids that are gang members, they have like Jesucristo, la Virgen o la cruz, Sagrado Corazón, muy religioso cabrón, pero andas matando a tu gente, ay sí muy religioso.”

(Bazan et al 2002: 382) [my translation of the final line: ...very religious, man, but you go around killing your own people, yeah very religious.]

Tattoos are consistently impactful visual signals throughout the film, functioning as unmistakeable identifiers of bodies and the groups to which they belong. Casper is therefore instantly recognisable to outsiders as well as to other gang members, which makes him easier to hunt for the Maras he has betrayed and is trying to escape and also a target for hostility from both other gangs and civilians. The man executed as part of Smiley's initiation is marked as a rival gang member by the tattoo on his stomach, which seals his fate even though he claims to no longer be involved in the gang. He had been picked up by Mago as he travelled with a group of migrants through Mara territory. In both cases, it is a tattoo that seals the fate of its wearer and negates any possiblity of them escaping to life outside the authoritarian family of the gang. Both men had opted out: the rival gang member by making the decision to travel north, and Casper by committing the ultimate sin in his killing of Mago. Both pay with their lives.

Casper tries to remove the teardrop tattoo below his right eye due to its visibility: a facial tattoo is very difficult to conceal, and even when small as this one is they are highly noticeable. He scratches at the skin, unrealistic perhaps as it is unlikely to remove the tattoo ink, and also will leave at least a scab for a while that will cover more than the area of the tattoo itself - so would still be visible. He is irrevocably marked, permanently branded, whatever he does.

Fukunaga has talked of his fascination with gang tattoo culture (see Powers 2009), and he is not unique in this perspective: in 2008, an exhibition in Mexico City (see Bonello 2008) showed photographs of Mara gang members taken by Spanish photographer Isabel Muñoz, that document their tattooed bodies. The subjects are shown bare-chested and defiantly meeting the camera’s gaze, playing into, perhaps, the stereotypical image of bravado and machismo associated with such individuals. As a result of the visibility of these bodies, the imagery in their tattoos is recognisable, even familiar, and easy to replicate for the purpose of a well-researched fictional representation.

Fukunaga talks in an interview about ‘tattooing’ the actors and the realism of the result:

> The [tattoos] on the hands and face had to be washed off the same day, you couldn't go home wearing those. There was one time when one of the actresses

> was having a cigarette off set when we were in Veracruz [...] and a local pulled up in a truck with a machete and got out in front of her - she quickly went back to the set! There's a lot of anger towards the gangs and if people see one by themselves they're like the sick animal of the herd. (Cronin 2009: 3)

The local man's reaction is mirrored in the film by Sayra having to protect Casper from the hostility of other migrants: he is in most danger when alone. They plot against him as he is falling asleep but Sayra intervenes by shouting a false alarm that she has sighted the immigration patrol, which wakes Casper and deters the plotters. The above anecdote also testifies to the convincing accuracy of the film's recreation of tattoos on the actors' bodies.

The clique's headquarters is called 'The Destroyer'. It is a heavily controlled, guarded space that serves as a safe location for the gang's extended family to dwell, eat, and socialize. This is also where gang members receive their tattoos.

The profession of tattooing is called a 'stigmatized occupational minority' (95) by Sanders. People who take up tattooing to make a living, do so for reasons including independence, artistic freedom, and mobility. Gang and prison tattoos retain an air of extra-legality and are more stigmatized because of the continuing association with criminality and the implicit (arguably also explicit) rejection of the behavioural codes of mainstream society. The wearing of tattoos has become far less stigmatized in the mainstream in recent years, and their visibility has increased, but symbols associated with gang tattoos carry strong connotations. There is class difference in tattooed bodies.

> For the mainstream tattooed, gang practices (tattoo or otherwise) violate comfort zones established within middle-class arenas. For them, class privilege equals squeaky clean environs of tattoo mediated through magazines, conventions and myriad tattoo parlors. Licensed tattoo machines (so-called 'tattoo guns') are sanctioned by the health department. (Phillips 2001: 364)

Given that tattoos are such an integral part of the gang's identity, the role of the tattoo artist himself is central. Sanders has stated of the relationship between the tattoo artist and their client, that

> Tattooing requires that the customer be present throughout the service delivery, entails a close personal involvement between the client and

> service worker, is a relatively non-standardized service, and is produced only upon request. (Sanders 2008: 118)

The Destroyer, however, is not the same as a mainstream tattoo studio. It is a restricted space to which few people have access, as opposed to being a place where you could drop in for a consultation with the tattoo artist whose style most closely resonates with the work you want to have done, or 'phone up to make an appointment. It must also be pointed out here that gang tattoos, along with tattoos made in prison, are not viewed in the same way as custom fine art pieces done for middle-class clients - though I have read (for example, in Phillips' 2001 essay on the former prison tattoo artist Gallo) that more affluent young people are emulating gang style tattoos to try and appropriate some of their connotation of danger. Effectively, such an action simply attempts to 'buy' the hypermasculinity of the gang's codes as an accessory in an attempt to radiate an air of toughness.

The act of tattooing is intimate. The needle pierces the flesh, and the artist and client have to be in close physical proximity to one another. In the film, physical intimacy is even closer as the tattooist does not wear gloves. The Destroyer, an unofficial space that is impenetrable from the outside world, is clearly not subject to the same standards of hygiene as a legitimate mainstream tattoo studio. Furthermore, the element of danger that comes from not ahdering to hygiene norms enhances the sense of hypermacho risk-taking within the gang subculture.

The tattoo needle has to penetrate to a sufficient depth to leave a permanent mark in the skin, which draws blood. Resistance to the pain of being tattooed is proof of commitment. In this context, it is proof of commitment to the gang, to adhering to its behavioural codes, and also to the proud display of its symbolism even though this can also bring danger (as indicated earlier, from rival gangs or hostile civilians). In the more mainstream context, too, resistance to pain marks the acquisition of tattoos as a rite of passage and garners respect, particularly on more reputedly painful areas of the body such as the buttocks, hands, back, elbows, armpits, side ribs (though these more sensitive areas vary between individuals). All tattoos are unavoidably painful to some degree and there is a persistent and widespread notion that they must be 'earned'.

The visibility of tattoos on oneself and others reinforces group solidarity, as a constant reminder of affiliation that is so permanent it cannot be easily discarded like an unwanted garment or accessory. The tattooist plays a key role in terms of the

cohesion of the gang, his work marking official acceptance once the initiation rituals are completed.

The tattoo is the permanent marker of achievement, that is only accessible to the fully initiated. It brings kudos, but also a stigma: it removes the possibility of operating in mainstream society. The wearer, through their tattoo[s], is forever associated with the gang, even if they want to leave it behind.

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