

## Under the Skin: Negotiating the Affect of Tattoo Removal

Fraser Kendrick GermAnn

*The University of British Columbia*

**ABSTRACT:** This autoethnography analyses the construction of personhood in relation to tattoos and their removal by exploring the affective response the author had during his first tattoo removal experience. Influenced by Renato Rosaldo's imperialist nostalgia, the paper explores how this response was negotiated through the memories of a younger self in conjunction with present circumstances as a graduate student. In doing so, the paper reflects on the ever-changing relationship between the author and the tattoo and the role this connection has played and continues to play within the constitution of the author's subjectivity.

**KEY WORDS:** tattoo removal, effacement, materiality, affect, personhood, subjectivity

### *In the Papua New Guinean Highlands:*

The sun set over the forest canopy and cast orange light over the darkening leaves, and high up in a tree Waniol's clothes hung in a silhouette. They had swayed there for months, each day looking a little more faded, a little more tattered by the sun, and the rain, and the wind. The child died months ago, and the clothes were Wani's doing: a father's tribute to a lost son, a reminder of his boy. The day he hung them Wani made a pledge: only when the elements claimed the clothing, reducing them to nothing, would he let himself move on without Waniol.

Hanging clothes to grieve was not a traditional Asabano practice. This was Wani's way, yet it resonated with the views and beliefs that underlined the practices he grew up with. Namely, that objects carry the memory of those who have used them previously; that they stand in for people in their absence; that they are the repositories for social

relationships; and that curating such objects was tantamount to the maintenance of the relationships imbued within them. Continuity, here, underlined seeming difference, and as Waniol's clothes deteriorated, high up in the branches, so too did Wani's connection to Waniol as a father.<sup>1</sup>

### *In the Canadian Prairies:*

When 'Mr. Leadfingers' jabbed his needle into my shoulder the first time I remembered saying some-

---

1 The story of Wani and Waniol comes from Roger Lohman's (2010) work, which focuses on memento practices in Asabano society. Personal relationships in Asabano society, he contends, are sustained through memories, embodied within objects that stand for an individual who is not present to the beholder of the object. How well one preserves a memento relates to their ability to maintain the relationship it represents. In mortuary contexts, he notes, normal life is ruptured and memento practices become ways of responding to this rupture. The preoccupation with the curation (to remember) and/or dissolution (to forget) of mementos reveals how one deals emotionally with the memory of the deceased. His discussion on the maintenance of mementos, in Asabano society, provided me with an interesting lens to see my tattoo through.



my shoulder, which returned to normal, this feeling lingered in a swollen state, deep down in my stomach. It is the reason why I write this now: to understand how I have come to mourn the very thing I aimed to efface.<sup>2</sup>

Laser tattoo removal works by penetrating the top layers of skin with a concentrated light beam designed to disrupt the dormant state tattoos reside in, breaking up their pigments into small particles the body can flush away. Several treatments are necessary, punctuated by six to eight weeks in between them for the skin to re-heal and for the body to purge the broken down particles.

Each time I look into the mirror the tattoo feels a little less than what it was the day before. I'm reminded of Wani, watching his son's clothes flutter in the evening breeze, withering away and allowing his role as a father to flicker towards its end too. Wani's grief was palpable, and it was clear what was at stake when the elements finally came to claim the remnants of Waniol's clothes – but what about me? What was I watching fade in the mirror? What role, what piece of my identity, was being carried off bit-by-bit, and what would be left when that last particle departed?

2 The central focus in this paper has been largely influenced by Renato Rosaldo's (1993) concept of imperialist nostalgia: a paradox predicated on 'killing' an entity and mourning its 'death,' which in turn buffers people from the reality of their actions, and hides the processes of (often violent) change effected by the mourners, who veil themselves under the cloak of an 'innocent yearning' for the way things used to be. Moreover, nostalgia invokes pleasant memories and occludes the ugly side of history, reinforcing innocent views of an imperialist past while hiding its brutality. To demystify this process scholars have assumed that ideologies, employed in imperialist nostalgia, are of a fictional nature built to deceive people of what is actually going on. Consequently, they rush to show what is 'actually' going on. For Rosaldo this is too simplistic; it short-circuits the analyses, because it fails to illustrate how people are convinced to believe these ideologies in the first place. If we can see through these guises, he asks, then why not study the actual interest that has been concealed, rather than just pointing it out? Demystifying ideologies, he maintains, runs the risk of perpetuating other ideologies. He suggests a process of dismantlement instead, where the ideology's voice is allowed to play out and collapse through exposing its compelling but ultimately contradictory and pernicious qualities. Though I cannot say I followed Rosaldo's words to a 'T' I did try to let the 'voices' play themselves out to better understand how I came to feel the way I did in that moment. That interest also led me to Kathleen Stewart's (2007) work on affect and her understanding that affects exist in a pre-representational world, full of potential. Consequently, from the moment an affective surge takes place, there is no telling where it may lead. To that tune I followed my thoughts and reflections, regarding my affective moment in the mirror, to see where these introspections led me as I wrote this paper.

Looking at my younger self, I searched my past for answers to these questions and in my hunt I recalled a moment of panic I had, shortly after I had booked the tattoo appointment, which prompted me to look to my future self for advice. *How would I feel about the tattoo in the years to come?* – I asked my future self, but of course, he never responded. I could only speculate what he might say and speculate I did.

Walter Benjamin (2007) once described the figure of history as an angel looking upon all that has happened. With his wings extended he catches the gusts of time, which incessantly propel him forward. His position, however, comes with a price: he sees all that has happened – but nothing more – for his back is turned towards the future, where it remains out of sight and unknown to him. Looking back I see a much younger self, deliberating the tattoo, desperately trying to peer into the future to see how he might feel about it when he was older. I see how he convinced himself to go through with it by reassuring himself that he was banking on a sure thing for a tattoo. It was something permanent, he thought, something that would always be true and integral to his sense of self. He made a bold declaration, choosing that tattoo; however, like the angel of history, his view of the future was opaque. He could never truly imagine what I feel now, nor what the tattoo would come to mean to me.

Such boldness is something I find so characteristic of him, and as admirable as I would like to see this quality, I cannot help but see it as consisting of a naivety, tempered by a stubborn pride that sometimes bordered on arrogance. How could I really know what my future self would think, and how could I ever think that the tattoo I chose was timeless, in any sense of that word?

It is hard to answer these questions too, because unlike the angel of history, when I look back through time I do not have a clear vantage point to objectively assess that younger, scrawny self and what the tattoo actually meant to him. I can only recall instances and fragments, partial moments that reveal what it meant to him or at least what I think it might have meant to him. Ten years have passed and ironically I find myself still speculating, this time in the other direction.

What I do know, however, is that at one time my past self looked into the opaque future to seek out an older self and his guidance, and now I'm peering back, attempting to seek out that younger self and his rational. A decade separates us, and though he fails in his attempts to see through it to find me, I, on the other hand, can see him. Yet to do so, I realize I must peer through that decade, which has shaped both of us in ways that neither of us could have imagined; ways which have altered how I now understand him and myself; ways which are invariably different from how he would have understood himself. As such, I have to take into consideration that meaning is made in the present, and my present has a ten-year thick lens to peer through – a filter for meaning whose screen has my present circumstances in interest – when I look at this younger self. Minding the gap means realizing that what I see of him is not actually him, the way he truly was, but rather the way I have come to remember him, given my current circumstances as a graduate student.<sup>3</sup>

Through the lens, I see myself in an indoor soccer match, just hours after sitting stiffed and Disney-eyed in Mr. Leadfinger's chair. The pitch is shaped like a hockey arena, its walls adorned with white puck board and two closet-shaped cutouts, lined with dark blue tarps, stand at either end for nets. I see a ball lobbed towards centre court and I am rushing to it, striking it like a freight train would a golf cart in a game of chicken before it could pounce the green plastic turf and bounce over me. I felt the ball mold to my foot upon impact and then it was gone.

I never saw the goal, no one did, but we heard its sound when it careened the top left corner of the net. It was plane crash loud, and the goalie stood stiff with his hands halfway up in the air, his eyes the size of cantaloupes, like mine were only a few hours before. The ball was already bouncing and rolling its way to a stop at the other side of the blue net by the time he winced up over his right shoulder to inspect the corner. His defensemen shared the same Disney

look, dumbfounded and startled by the bang, they gawked for answers and they eventually turned to me. No one expected a goal to be made from the centreline, nor the sound this one made. Even my forwards stared at me with the same look, everyone did, and for a moment it felt as if I had made some sort of egregious error, like I had violated some sort of taboo worse than incest. All those on the court stood stiff, frozen, as if ordered so by a cop, and when the goal's echo faded there was a silence more disconcerting to me than the boom itself.

The moment lingered until a friend from the bench broke the spell by standing up, thrusting his fist in the air, and shouting "Yeah!" With the silence punctured the rest of my teammates erupted with shouts of their own, and the audience, up in the bleachers, clapped and whistled, and so, too, did the other team. The accolades swelled the pitch as an opponent walked past, clapping and nodding his head, his face still startled. Our eyes locked. He looked at me as if I were an alien or a horror of some other sort, to be revered and/or feared. I gave him a small nod and smiled back, but in a way that encouraged the idea that I wielded some sort of a thunderous wrath, which ought not be trifled with. Underneath my seeming magnanimity, though, I remarked how a second ago I wore the same face – Disney-eyed and shell shocked – and I wondered if he had seen that.

My startle, however, was momentary at best, although with the silence and the pause before the accolades it felt like a decade. But even that pause and that silence added to my pride, for within the goal, and the reaction to it, there was a feeling of intention and control, and it felt like it was backed by a surfeit of power and strength that shocked and awed – and it was all mine. I was a force to be reckoned with in that moment, and that feeling – that boldness – was what I associated with the tattoo, bandaged underneath my jersey. Yet the goal was not solely responsible for that feeling and its association. For some time I had felt that boldness, albeit far less intensely, on the pitch (and off it) amidst opponents and teammates, most of whom were just a year or so younger than me, still in high school, not yet working in the real world, like I was – getting stronger everyday from hard physical labor. If I was a man, they were just boys, and the

<sup>3</sup> Victor Turner (1974, 1980) applies a performative lens to meaning making in social dramas, stating that the narratives of these dramas unfold in the present and reorder the events of the past in ways that fit the present circumstances of the ensuing drama. Culture is processual, he would say. I used this idea to understand how meaning is constructed in the present

tattoo further signified that distinction: an outward manifestation of what I had long felt deep under the skin. But the tattoo was more than just emblematic of manhood; it constituted manliness through the pain. Consider Mr. Leadfingers's gouging: I did not yield, nor shy from his needle, I took it stiffly, and though I wished it would stop, I endured. The tattoo was a rite of passage, whose transformative capacity was engendered through its pain, marking my ability to handle such discomfort (like a man) and making me all the more tougher (like a man, as well) in the process. In turn, the passage made me feel bolder and it led me to act and think as such.<sup>4</sup>

I wore that sentiment on my shoulder – a badge of honour, which declared that the boldness of the tattoo paralleled the boldness of my thoughts and actions. I took pride in that parallel and gladly flashed my colours whenever the opportunity arose, especially during the summer or travelling abroad, when I could wear muscle shirts.

I still think of that goal: the freight train kick, the thunderous boom, the shell shocked looks, and the cheers that followed, but in these reflections I see myself as a boy, not a man. Some time ago the parallel, between the tattoo and my thoughts and actions, buckled. When I see the tattoo from the corner of my eye, or catch it in the mirror, I recall the boy who commissioned it and the startled-ness that too often lurked beneath his confidence, like that split second after the goal before the pride sunk in. The boldness he projected now seems more like a boyish bluff, rather than communicating and constituting any actual power and strength he may have had. The bold veneer had cracked and through the fissures stood a reflection of a younger self, enthralled by a blunt stubbornness and a general lack of awareness as to how to approach and make sense of the world. I now pair the muscle shirts, I have left, with pyjama pants – my Netflix outfit; they never leave my apartment, nor do they ever see the light of day, and by extension, neither does the tattoo.

My shifting relationship to the tattoo leads me again to Wani and his choice to hang his son's clothes in a tree. If Waniol had not died he would have

eventually worn and/or grown out of those clothes. They would have been replaced, likely, without much thought, and there, likely, would not have been a marked change in Wani's identity as a father when the clothes were discarded in favour of new ones. But Waniol did die, and when Wani returned to the village, upon hearing of his son's death, the village was no longer the same to him, for all he could see were the places Waniol used to play – the grief so sharp, it forced him to leave the village for a time, after the funeral, to ease his pain.

Waniol's passing ruptured the mundane meanings imbued within the places and things that made up Wani's everyday life, causing him to re-signify his world in response, including the clothes. The process gave the clothes heavier meanings, it imbued them with pain, and grief, and the brunt of the father-son relationship; they no longer held their previous meanings in the same way they used to, prior to the rupture. Though the sun bleached the colours of Waniol's clothes while they hanged, the meanings they held before his death had faded well before they were even hung; their past lustre evermore difficult to see under the light of the present.

Waniol's death was life altering for Wani, the trauma causing him to radically reshuffle the fundamental meanings of his everyday life in ways that partially foreclosed the older meanings it once held. Such events force us to renegotiate our relationships to the things, places, and people that make up our lives, and such negotiations are ongoing. They forge, break, and remold these relationships, shed new light on them, and make us see them differently through each successive event, one after another, continually impacting our lives, like incessant waves.

A major event in my life has been graduate school – a trauma of another sort – and though it is not the only event in my life that has caused me to renegotiate my relationship to the tattoo, it is the most recent, and therefore, the brightest light under which I see it.<sup>5</sup>

4 For more on the transformative qualities of rituals and rites of passages see Victor Turner's (1974) work on these topics.

5 Again I could invoke Victor Turner's (1974, 1980) performative lens to make sense of these re-significations through present circumstances, but when I wrote this section I was thinking more of Nancy Ries' (2002) use of a Marxist perspective on trauma and terror. From her standpoint she holds that 'the base' gives meanings to 'the superstructure' and if the base is affronted by violence, the effects of this assault

In grad school, there is the demoralization that capsizes you after you have strained through another week's dense readings and the professor's interpretation nullifies your efforts to understand it; there is the incessant current of work – the books, the articles, the responses, the presentations, the essays – and the sense of inadequacy, as if everyone is smarter than you; there is the feeling that you have slipped into graduate school, they made a mistake and it will only be a matter of time before they realize it, and each time you submit a paper or speak up in class you think this could be it, your time is up: *did you see how they looked at you after you talked about Mondzain?!*; there's the feeling that your faults shine brighter than a lighthouse and everyone can see them; there is the staying up all night, reading till your eyes want to bleed – the week has only just started, but you feel like you are already behind, again; there's the push to be more critical, to write faster, to think faster, to analyze as if it were second nature and to continue pushing until it is second nature; there's the feeling that you don't know how to be critical enough; there is the guilt in going out for drinks once a month when you could be doing more work, because there's always more to be done and the feeling that you're not doing enough as is – *forget taking a day off*; there's the misgivings that even if you survive till graduation there won't be a future for you with this degree anyways: *you may be treading tribulation for nothing!*; there's the feeling of being stretched thin, drained and breathless, but you have to keep kicking your legs: your face bobs the water's surface as you look skywards, still kicking, hoping to find solid ground soon; there's the feeling of no longer recognizing the person you were before you entered grad school: the mirror's image speaks not of this past self, but of sleepless nights and strain – the waves you've endured so far and the ones still to come: the next reading, assignment, presentation, the next paper – each of them crashing and swirling you below, towards the undertow that draws you further away from the shore of who you once were.

Grad school breaks you down. And in your bro-

---

can reverberate through the entire system and radically alter the meanings found within the superstructure, like the way Waniol's clothing changed meaning for Wani after Waniol's death.

ken state it alters you under the pretences of personal development; from the ashes rises the phoenix. It churns you, swirls you, and spits you out anew, for better or worse, onto new coastlines. Your eyes may sting with the water's salt, but they're daggers now, sharp enough to pierce reality with penetrating insight. But such transformations, however, come with a cost: to move forward in the name of progress means to leave something behind.<sup>6</sup>

My years before university, and more so before I became a graduate student, feel like my *Jahilyyya*, a term that references the pre-Islamic era in Islam prior to when God spoke to Muhammad, through the angel Gabriel. *Jahilyyya* translates loosely as an unknowingness of God's way, an era of ignorance, and for some time I have felt that the existence of my *Jahilyyya* has been emblazoned on my shoulder. The tattoo is a remnant, a survival from a previous era serving no real purpose to me in the present other than as a humiliating connection to the boy I once was and how I perceive him to be steeped in a naiveté that he overcompensated for by pretending to be bold. The ink reminds me of all the matters I fumbled during this time, those painful moments in life I could have handled better if it were not for this overcompensating bluntness that was meant to assuage my ignorance. Graduate school has been about leaving this 'bold' boy behind, breaking through this veneer in search of real strength below it, under the skin. It has been about confronting personal insecurities and limitations and to move past them, or learning to work with them, rather than hiding them under a tough – superficial – exterior.<sup>7</sup>

Removing the tattoo was part of removing that exterior, to push forward without being tied to this younger self. Good riddance, I thought to myself when I began thinking of laser removal, and that is why, as I looked in the mirror after that first treatment, it struck me as odd when I felt anything but good. The questions – *What am I doing!?* *What have I*

---

6 When I wrote this section I had Donna Haraway's (1988) notion of situated knowledges in mind, which in short, states that from different perspectives one gleans different types of insights and ways of knowing the world.

7 With respect to cultural survivals see E.B. Tylor's (2012) work. With respect to Jahilyyya and Gabriel approaching Muhammad see Subodh Kapoor's (2004) and Karen Armstrong's (2007) work, respectively.

*just erased? What am I leaving behind, who am I leaving behind?* – combined with a swelling sadness shook me with overwhelming loss. In the mirror’s moment, the violence of effacement confronted and forced me to look at the tattoo differently. It was another life event, carrying a trauma of its own, sharp enough to rupture the meanings the previous wave (grad school) had swirled and shaped. It caused me to rethink the younger self I saw anchored to the tattoo, whom I had just begun to sever ties to. Looking in the mirror, I could not articulate who that boy was – that younger self; I only felt the guilt of betraying him, whoever he was.

The image of this boy came to me, weeks later, while studying with my friend, April, in a downtown coffee shop. Earlier that week I presented the anecdote of getting and removing the tattoo to my graduate cohort. I had an idea as to the direction I wanted to take within this paper and it was time to flesh it out.

We sat in the corner of the café, with our backs to the wall. I surveyed the patrons sitting before us and tapped my pen on a blank page in my notebook. Road blocked. *How can I flesh out this paper when I can’t articulate who this boy is?* I began to think about my younger years, the travelling I did – all those places and all those mishaps and gong shows. There was the time I got deported from Brazil, another time when I was involved in a high-speed chase in Bali. I thought of the work I did in the oilfields back in Alberta – the long hours, the hard work, the thick skin you needed for the elements and the abusive work relationships. I thought of my circle of friends, the way we were before I went to university and before they started having kids. I recalled the cigarette-hazed garage we spent our nights in and how we used to laugh.

April looked over and smirked at my crooked head, navel-gazing the blue tiled ceiling above the espresso machine. I told her of my quandary and handed over the anecdote I presented in class. The two paragraphs are personal and private, I am not used to sharing such thoughts and feelings, and it made me feel exposed, sitting there, watching her peering into me through my self-portrait.

“You were really hard on yourself weren’t you?” she said, handing back the pages. I could not tell

if she liked it or not, but I expected the worse and felt all the more embarrassed for sharing the story. She pointed to my use of ‘Jackass’ within the first paragraph: a pseudonym I often used for myself in my internal monologue, back then. I jumped to my own defense: I did not always use the term in a pejorative sense, the way she saw it. ‘Jackass’ was more a comedic term of endearment to me, used often in awkward instances, including those times where I was deported from Brazil and chased in Bali. Such stories were prized mini-dramas I enjoyed retelling and told often, laughing and joking, always emphasizing myself as the butt end of the joke – the Jackass.

These were moments of humility, but cherished moments all the more, for each of them revealed a boy who boldly stuck his neck out and was capable of laughing at his failures when things soured. Feeling shameful or sheepish within a situation made the event worth going through, just for the story itself, and knowing that made dealing with those moments of humility all the more amenable to a positive outlook, during its unfolding and afterwards. I used to love that aspect of myself – the boldness to laugh off my shortcomings and misfortunes – but it has been a while since I have been able to laugh that way. Somewhere between my last trip abroad and grad school it fell to the wayside, and it was April who led me back to it and to the boy, I realize, I have been mourning all this time.

Upon entering grad school, the stakes felt higher, and it became harder to laugh under the constant pressure of trying to stay afloat amidst the cresting waves of essays, readings, and presentations. It is hard to laugh off even the little things, like a bunk grade when it can carry so much weight while you tread a sea of insecurity. A plus or a minus could be all the difference in feeling like you belong in a program, especially one you think you have been mistakenly accepted into; it is the difference that tells you whether or not what you say and write has a place amongst your peer’s comments and work. Conversely, a plus or a minus can make all the difference for getting that grant, scholarship, or any other recognition that could set you apart – from your peers – within an extremely competitive world.

It is also hard to laugh off bungled first impres-

sions, when there is always the imperative to advance your prospects through social networking, building those important relationships with professors and colleagues. The right relationships with the right people can open up whole other worlds, which grades alone cannot do. There is always the pressure to meet, and to speak, and to make good with those who can lead you to these worlds.

When the stakes appear high these little things – the pluses and the minuses, the handshakes – feel as if they can elevate or relegate you in ways you had not thought of before you became a grad student. It is hard to laugh at your failures when you feel this way.

April's comments prompted me to think more about my misplaced boldness, which would have laughed off at least some of these failings and feelings of inadequacy. I began looking at old travel photo albums, from my *Jabilyya*, and remembered the boy who spent years on his own, travelling the world. He would have laughed at my grad school apprehensions; he probably would have called me a Jackass (in the endearing sense of the word, of course) for fretting over such small things. Each album brought back little memories and sensations, reminding me of long lost moments abroad. I recalled his insecurities as a young traveller in his early twenties, I recalled his naivety too, but I remembered how he grew through each travel experience, always pushing beyond his limitations, in far off places like Egypt, Thailand, India, Costa Rica, Australia, Ethiopia, Brazil, Israel and others. I remembered his strength. And then a strange wave of forgotten passion hit me: I remembered my love for travelling and the reasons why I entered university in the first place.

The wave struck with the desire to realign myself with those reasons, and also with the realization that the fading tattoo, I see in the mirror, marked the boldness (to laugh) I fear is lacking within this era. It struck with irony, for that same boldness was the very thing I wished to efface and forget from the outset of the tattoo's removal. Staring in the mirror, the pallid tattoo speaks of the boy who led me to where I am today. Without his boldness I would have never travelled the world on my own, nor would I have ever entered university to eventually become the PhD student I am now. I am grateful for his

efforts, even his fumbles, and more so than ever for his boldness, now that I see it under this light, and so, in erasing the tattoo it feels like I have reneged on this gratefulness, like I am betraying him, turning my back on him once and for all, despite all he has done, as the ink fades to nothing. This epiphany made me realize that the tattoo's dissolution felt like I was giving up on those aspects that I needed and ought to have in my life, and these feelings led me to another roadblock, for if I truly felt this way, how could I carry on erasing the tattoo?

The answer to this quandary came at the most unexpected time, in the middle of a date:

The lighting was dim and the loud music and chatter around us dulled our chances of hearing each other. She sat on the edge of her seat and leaned towards me, just to hear me, the candlelight illuminating the right side of her smile. "Tell me, do you have any crazy stories of your own?" she asked. I had only known her for four fifths of a pint and already I had been wondering if there would be a second date. But I had to pause that thought, realizing through the humdrum of sound that she had asked a question, one that I did not really want to respond to.

*What kind of crazy stories do I have to tell as a grad student? My life is blander than oatmeal right now.* Stories about grad life – the stress over a paper, a reading, a presentation – do not exactly attract prospective partners, so I opted out of wooing her with a tale of pity and searched for something else, when my chase in Bali and my deportation from Brazil sprung to mind. The stories were there mainly because I wrote about them in this paper, the day before. *Who knew this paper could help me in other affairs!* I chose the deportation, since the chase was too long and perhaps too scandalous for even a third date, let alone a first. My only problem with the deportation story was that it takes a particular finesse to make it humorous and worthwhile telling. And so, though the story and the skills to tell it were old and rusty I nevertheless pushed forward, bracing myself as I leaned in for the woo.

The story poured out of me like rotten milk – chunky, anything but smooth. *Oh Christ! This isn't going so well.* It lacked rhythm – all those pauses in the right spots for dramatic effect – and intensity – all



those vocal fluctuations in the right spots for plot progression and more dramatic effect. I used to be good at both. Several stutters and pauses (at all the wrong spots) later I realized that I started the story at the wrong moment, effectively killing any build up to the punch line at the end. And: *Wait, what the hell was the punch line?!* Then it dawned on me, her eyes glazed over in a fake smile, I needed to abort. I used the surrounding loudness to fade out the story and finished off my pint before sinking back into my chair. *You're fucking oatmeal – you Jackass!* Her glazed look changed to a puzzled one as I slunk back and began to chuckle, looking at the foam lines caked to the sides of my emptied pint, picturing the prospect of a second date drifting further and further away from the candlelight glow of our table.

The silver lining to this train wreck – the solution to my roadblock – came during my moment between the pint glass and me. It was the realization that I had just called myself a Jackass – that old term of endearment, which I had not used for some time, until now. She continued to stare, still puzzled, when I realized the young boy, so good at retelling those moments of humility, could not simply be invoked in those moments where I needed him to woo someone with a good story. He was gone and had been for some time now; asking him to reappear on a dime's notice was too much to ask. Yet those aspects of him I so cherished had somehow begun to resurface: the Jackass. Then I realized it: the tattoo may very well be a tombstone on my shoulder that commemorates the boy from my *Jahilyya*, but through its effacement, the shock it has stirred in me, and my reflections on this process, this boy has found new ink to live in – the ink that blackens these pages. The tattoo can fade now, for my connection to the boy has manifested, here, in this paper – a new memento, which stands in for his absence, just as the clothes, hanging in the tree, once stood for Waniol after his death. The boy is gone, but his memory lives on through these words, and these words are helping to reincorporate – unconsciously at first but now consciously – those once forgotten aspects back into my life. I called myself a jackass and laughed at a failure that day, perhaps I will (re)learn to laugh a little more in the failures to come, and perhaps one day I will be able to deliver

those stories the way I used to. Perhaps I will be bolder – the way he was – in the time to come, and perhaps, I hope, this boldness will compliment the eyes that I have been sharpening, from my time in grad school.<sup>8</sup>

I looked up from my pint glass and over to my date, smiled and shook my head with closed eyes and pursed lips. *She'll never understand.* My story's wreckage still smolders, and the night appears to take a turn for the worse, but instead of waiting to hear the sounds of an interruption – the smoke grenade of a SWAT team, the shrapnel of a plane crash, the troops of an Alien brigade – I only hear my internal laughter and the voice in my head: *I wonder if one day this'll make a good story to tell?*

---

8 My silver lining was influenced by Susan Harding's (1987) work on religious conversion. She notes that the initial point of conversion occurs unconsciously when potential converts begin to adopt the language of the converters to make sense of the world around them. In my case it was the use of the term 'Jackass' that made me cognizant of a potential (re)conversion of another sort that may be in play within my own thinking. Furthermore, Gaston Gordillo's (2014) idea that destruction is a generative process led me to thinking about how new relationships can arise even in the face of apparent obliteration. This line of thinking helped me realize how this text became a new repository for my relationship to my younger self as I negotiated the tattoo's effacement.

## References

- Armstrong, Karen  
 2007 *Muhammad: A Prophet For Our Time*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Benjamin, Walter  
 2007 *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Gaston, Gordillo R.  
 2014 *Rubble: The Afterlife of Destruction*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Haraway, Donna  
 1988 *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*. *Feminist Studies*. 14(3):575-599.
- Harding, Susan  
 1987 *Convicted by the Holy Spirit: The Rhetoric of Fundamentalist Baptist Conversion*. *American Ethnologist* 14:167-181.
- Kapoor, Subodh  
 2004 *Inheritance – Al-kimiya*. Volume 5, *The Muslims: Encyclopaedia of Islam*. New Dehli: Cosmo Publications.
- Lohmann, Roger  
 2010 *In The Company of Things Left Behind: Asabano Mementos*. *Anthropological Forum* 20 (3):291-303.
- Ries, Nancy  
 2002 *Anthropology and the Everyday, From Comfort to Terror*. *New Literary History*. 33(4): 25-742.
- Rosaldo, Renato  
 1993 *Imperialist Nostalgia*. *In Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*. Pp. 68-87. Beacon Press: Boston.
- Stewart, Kathleen  
 2007 *Ordinary Affects*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Turner, Victor  
 1974 *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.  
 1980 *Social Dramas and Stories About Them*. *Critical Inquiry* 7(1):141-168.
- Tylor, Edward Burnet  
 2012 *The Science of Culture*. *In Anthropological Theory: An Introductory History*. 5th edition. Jon McGee and Richard Warms, eds. Pp. 30-45. New York: McGraw Hill.