

8 Facial Scripts¹

The Semiotic Journey of Māori Tattoos from Colonial Gaze to Cultural Revival

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They call stigmata things inscribed on the face or some other part of the body [...].

(Aetius Amidenus, *Tetrabiblon* 8, 12)

Facial Misperceptions

‘I was all eagerness to see his face, but he kept it averted for some time while employed in unlacing the bag’s mouth’ (Melville 1851; ch. 3: ‘The Spouter-Inn’)²: In a renowned passage excerpted from Hermann Melville’s timeless novel, *Moby-Dick*, the impending unveiling of the features belonging to the ‘barbaric’ harpooner, Queequeg, serves as the locus of tension within the narrative. The focal point resides in the apprehensive anticipation experienced by Ishmael, the concerned protagonist, who finds himself eager to witness the countenance of his unfamiliar roommate at the Spouter-Inn. A nuanced semantic interplay, however, engenders an intensification of suspense. While Ishmael patiently awaits the revelation of Queequeg’s still-concealed face, the harpooner, in a peculiar twist, directs his attention toward the act of unlatching the mouth of his own purse. Strikingly, in the very instant that Queequeg exposes the contents of his bag, the enigma surrounding his visage is simultaneously unraveled before the astonished gaze of Ishmael: ‘This accomplished, however, he turned round – when, good heavens! What a sight! Such a face! It was of a dark, purplish, yellow color, here and there stuck over with large, blackish looking squares’ (*ibidem*).

The exclamation that escapes Ishmael’s lips encapsulates his profound dismay upon confronting the countenance he ardently sought to decipher. Ishmael’s eagerness to ‘read’ the face stems from his desire to discern the individual with whom he would be sharing lodgings and spending the night. Implicit in this endeavor is the expectation of encountering a

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spontaneous and genuine manifestation of character and intentions. Nevertheless, the moment the visage is unveiled, it immediately captivates the viewer with features that semiotics would categorize as ‘plastic’ in nature. First and foremost, the face exhibits a color distinct from that attributed to the ‘white race’. Additionally, conspicuous dark squares occupy prominent positions on the countenance. Both these features evoke a foreboding sense, serving as ominous portents of future events: ‘Yes, it’s just as I thought, he’s a terrible bedfellow; he’s been in a fight, got dreadfully cut, and here he is, just from the surgeon’ (*ibidem*).

In this instance, Melville — whether consciously or unconsciously — astutely extracts an inference from a longstanding visual imaginary which encompasses a semiotic framework pervading human cultures throughout history. The foundation of this framework revolves around what semioticians classify as a ‘semi-symbolic system’ (Leone 2004). The system comprises two contrasting elements: The unblemished, smooth skin, particularly that which adorns the face; and the marked, branded skin, characterized by incisions and cuts. The dichotomy between smoothness and striations often assumes a moral connotation, with an unscathed facial skin connoting goodness, while the presence of incisions signifies evil and violence. In this context, Ishmael instinctively interprets the prominent black squares on Queequeg’s face as indicators of a dreadful roommate, hinting at his involvement in altercations and the reception of stab wounds, possibly in the recent past. Furthermore, the visage bears a striking resemblance to that of a person emerging from an operating room, prompting Ishmael to speculate on the timeline of these events. Yet this initial interpretation, influenced by the facial stereotypes ingrained in the broader culture, is soon superseded by a more meticulous scrutiny, as we shall explore in greater detail: ‘But at that moment he chanced to turn his face so towards the light, that I plainly saw they could not be sticking-pasters at all, those black squares on his cheeks. They were stains of some sort or other’ (*ibidem*).

Melville craftly portrays the gradual process by which Ishmael’s gaze meticulously examines and unravels the enigmatic countenance of Queequeg. Initially, the conspicuous black squares are not immediately identified as scars; instead, they are considered to be potentially spontaneous stains. As the illumination intensifies and the object of Ishmael’s gaze absorbs the augmented light, however, a subsequent interpretation unfolds. These markings are recognized not as inadvertent stains, but rather as deliberate and purposeful imprints. Intriguingly, they do not bear the characteristics of knife or scalpel incisions but rather resemble inked marks, suggesting a connection to a deliberate act of inscription: ‘At first I knew not what to make of this; but soon an inkling of the truth occurred to me’ (*ibidem*).

Melville’s deft choice of the term ‘inkling’ holds profound significance within its usage. This word conveys not only an idea or a tentative

hypothesis, akin to what Peirce would describe as an abduction; it also encompasses the concept and etymology of dye. Thus, what initially appeared as scars or stains is revealed to be the remnants of written expression. Consequently, the recognition of the written traces swiftly triggers a recollection within Ishmael's memory, invoking a process of reading and interpretation.

I remembered a story of a white man – a whaleman too – who, falling among the cannibals, had been tattooed by them. I concluded that this harpooneer, in the course of his distant voyages, must have met with a similar adventure. And what is it, thought I, after all! It's only his outside; a man can be honest in any sort of skin.

(*ibidem*)

The human skin merely constitutes the outermost layer of an individual, while the true essence of a person's honesty transcends superficial appearances. Melville's enduring message continues to reverberate throughout the ages, anchored in the reality that the story in question had indeed been told, albeit in a reformulated literary form. Notably, in 2011, the comparative scholar Geoffrey D. Sanborn, formerly affiliated with Bard College and presently associated with Amherst, published the seminal work titled *Whipscars and Tattoos: The Last of the Mohicans, Moby-Dick, and the Maori*. Within this volume, Sanborn convincingly asserts the hypothesis that Melville's characterization of Queequeg draws inspiration from the biography of Te Pēhi Kupe, a historical figure featured in George Lillie Craik's³ *The New Zealanders* (1830). Craik, a Scottish author who received his education at the University of St. Andrews and later, from 1849, served as a professor of English Literature and History at the University of Belfast, extensively contributed to the London-based Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. In 1830, although he had never set foot in New Zealand, Craik published *The New Zealanders*, a comprehensive account of the journey to Britain undertaken by Te Pēhi Kupe, a prominent Māori tribal leader, (Cope 1956; Ellis 2015; Haywood 2006; Sanborn 2005).

Te Pēhi Kupe⁴ emerges as a prominent figure in Māori history, embodying the esteemed positions of both *rangatira* (chief) and military leader within the Ngāti Toa tribe (Klein and Mackenthun 2004; White 2011). His significant involvement in the Musket Wars, a sequence of intergroup conflicts spanning from 1807 to 1837 in what is now known as New Zealand, positions him as a central figure during this tumultuous era. A notable episode in Te Pēhi Kupe's life occurred in 1824, when he fearlessly secured passage on a ship bound for England. During his time there, he had the distinct privilege of being introduced to George IV, acquiring equestrian skills, designing his own *moko* (a traditional Māori facial tattoo), and having his portrait captured in paint, thus immortalizing his

visage for posterity. Here is what George Lillie Craik wrote about it in *The New Zealanders*, which was later Melville's inspiration:

Some very curious information was accidentally obtained from Tupai on the subject of the amoco. The sketch of his head from which the accompanying engraving is copied, was taken while he was at Liverpool, by his acquaintance Mr. John Sylvester; and Tupai took the greatest interest in the progress of the performance. But he was above all solicitous that the marks upon his face should be accurately copied in the drawing.

Craik (1830, 330)

The meticulous sketch referenced by Craik resulted into an exotic watercolor representation, currently housed within the collection of the National Library of Australia.⁵ Executed around 1826 by the skilled artist John Henry Sylvester, this artwork masterfully captures the facial expression and upper body of Te Pēhi Kupe, lavishly adorned in the fashionable garments of the era. The depiction unveils Te Pēhi Kupe draped in elegant British attire that was characteristic of the time. Noteworthy attention to detail within the watercolor composition highlights Te Pēhi Kupe's selection of a distinguished black girdle, reminiscent of the middle-class gentlemen's fashion choices aimed at projecting an elevated social status through sartorial expression. Such endeavors often resulted in the emergence of the dandy archetype. Te Pēhi Kupe's ensemble further comprises a cotton shirt with a tall and erect collar, exuding an aura of sophistication. This is accompanied by a broad cravat, tastefully tied in a gentle bow, lending an additional touch of elegance to his ensemble. The coat he dons showcases padded sections at the chest and waist, while its high collar cascades in a shawl-like fashion, beautifully framing his face. Curly hair was highly fashionable during this period, and Te Pēhi Kupe's perfectly arranged chevelure reflects the use of grooming products such as pomade for smoothness and hold, as well as curling tongs, papers, and cloths to achieve the desired curls. The conventional and fashionable nature of the attire starkly contrasts with the exoticism of Te Pēhi Kupe's countenance. The composition harmoniously combines a traditionally posed figure with distinct New Zealander physical features, most notably exemplified by the exact rendering of his facial *moko*, or ethnic facial tattoo.

According to Craik, who describes the portrait séance in his book, Te Pēhi Kupe himself presided over the correctness of the painterly reproduction of his countenance: '[...] the figure, he explained, not being by any means a mere work of fancy, [but] formed according to certain rules of art, which determined the direction of every line. It constituted, in fact, the distinctive mark of the individual' (*ibidem*: 331). During that

period, it was widely recognized among the Māori that the facial *moko* held a significance beyond mere decoration; it served as a means of etching individuality onto one's visage (Howarth 2019; Te Awekotuku et al. 2007; Thomas, Cole, and Douglas 2005). From a contemporary semiotic standpoint, one could argue that, while British portraiture represented the face as a proclamation of uniqueness, the Māori perspective considered the face as a physical canvas for an enduring inscription of that very singularity. Whereas the British elevated prominent figures by immortalizing their faces on canvas, the Māori transformed notable countenances into intricate self-portraits, using their faces as living diagrams. Moreover, Craik's account of the meticulousness of Te Pēhi Kupe – whom the author calls 'Tupai' – in front of his own portrait is even more pronounced, focusing on one area of the image in particular: 'and one part, indeed, of that on his own, face, the mark just over the upper part of his nose, Tupai constantly called his name; saying, "Europee man write with pen his name, Tupai's name is here", pointing to his forehead' (*ibidem*).

Within the intricate diagram of the *moko*, the ethnic facial tattoo, resides an inscription that surpasses mere group membership or individuality, extending into a realm of indexicality that transcends comparisons to the iconicity of portraiture. In particular, the elaborate pattern of tattooed lines positioned on the forehead, just above the nose, assumes the role of a signature. Te Pēhi Kupe contends that this marking affirms not only the individual's uniqueness but also their spatial and temporal presence. It serves as a sign, asserting the social and physical existence of the individual before their interlocutors and community. It is conceivable that Te Pēhi Kupe remained unaware of the fact that the Greek term for face, '*prosopon*', along with numerous Indo-European linguistic expressions denoting the same facial region, precisely designate it as something exposed to the gaze of others, a '*visus*', as the Latins would have described it (Leone 2022). Moreover, this area between the forehead and nose assumes delicate and central significance within many cultures, contributing to the construction of singularity and establishing a connection with what would later be referred to in Europe as the 'self'.

In Craik's narrative, Te Pēhi Kupe's interaction with Sylvester's portrait extends beyond a mere inspection. Rather, Te Pēhi Kupe assumes an active role by offering himself as a model, painstakingly reproducing on paper the intricate web of lines that adorn the faces of his immediate kin. Through this act, he emphasizes the scriptural divergences that set these representations apart from the likeness captured in his own visage:

Still further to illustrate his meaning, he would delineate on paper, with a pen or pencil, the corresponding marks in the amocos of his brother and his son, and point out the difference between these and

his own. But it was not only the portion of the decoration which he called his name with which Tupai was familiar; every line, both on his face and on the other parts of his body, was permanently registered in his memory.

(*Ibidem*: 331–2)

Te Pēhi Kupe demonstrates a remarkable capacity to recall every intricate detail of the tattoos that symbolize and simultaneously announce the presence of his beloved family members to the world. By committing these embodied facial diagrams to memory, he engages in an act akin to communing with his loved ones in absentia. While the renowned fable recounted by Pliny (*Naturalis Historia*, XXXV) traces the origin of portraiture in Greek culture as an iconic and visual response to the fear of death and the loss of the cherished countenance, the *moko*, or ‘*amoko*’, functions as a mnemonic device in its own right. Yet, in the case of the *moko*, the semiotic gap between the signifier and the signified, the medium and the inscription, the expressive matter and the substantive content, in the terms of L.T. Hjelmslev, is considerably reduced. Whereas a portrait represents a beloved face, the *moko* re-presents or even presents it, as it becomes an inseparable part of the flesh that bears it. It is important to note that Te Pēhi Kupe reproduces the design of his own facial tattoo for the sake of European comprehension, as those within the Māori community and culture view the *moko* as indistinguishable from the very face it adorns. Indeed, Craik aptly adds: “We have already given a cut of the amoco of another New Zealand chief, as drawn by himself; and here is a delineation which Tupai made, without the aid of a glass, of the stains on his own face” (*ibidem*: 332).

It is at this juncture, within the pages of Craik’s *The New Zealanders*, that an illustration emerges, likely observed by Melville and igniting his vibrant imagination, serving as a wellspring for the creation of Queequeg’s character and visage (Figure 8.1).

The symmetrical arrangement of lines that encase the Māori’s countenance may have been perceived by contemporary observers as mere adornments. These patterns, delineated in black on white and ink on face, appear to embody that ‘sense of order’ ascribed by Gombrich (1979) to the ultimate significance and evolutionary function of decoration in Western figurative culture. Decoration, according to Gombrich, serves as a visual medium to capture any deviance from the norm. In the case of facial *moko*, this anthropological function finds expression in capturing both individuality and the interplay of familial and communal bonds within a graphic configuration.

The distinction between European decoration and Māori *moko* becomes apparent when viewed through the lens of British observers, who often failed to recognize its significance. Reproducing the facial tattoo on paper, as Te Pēhi Kupe did, would mislead his British contemporaries, as



Figure 8.1 Self-portrait of Te Pēhi Kupe as reproduced by George Lillie Craik's *The New Zealanders* (1830, 332); image in the public domain.

it divorced the *moko* from its embodiment, negating its distinction from portraiture and decoration. The *moko* occupies a unique position, existing neither as pure decoration nor strictly as a portrait. Instead, it serves as a form of decoration that simultaneously portrays and expresses the singularity of one's self. Operating as a plastic layer, it articulates identity, akin to the figurative layer within European visual culture.

While the British would inscribe visual singularity through the figurative realm, employing iconicity, the Māori would capture it within the plastic realm, utilizing a reference that, although symbolic, derives its semiotic power not from similarity but from contiguity. Indeed, the inseparability of face and facial writing underpins the semiotic force of the *moko*. The written elements are undoubtedly arbitrary, as Saussure would contend, given that there appears to be no discernible reason why a particular arrangement of curves on the forehead designates a family group or an individual. Nevertheless, it is precisely due to this arbitrariness that the conventional meaning of this reference is motivated through the techniques of writing and its incorporation into the tattoo.

Moreover, it is precisely because of the seemingly conventional nature of this diagrammatic portrayal that Te Pēhi Kupe astonished his British hosts by flawlessly reproducing his self-portrait without the aid of a mirror – the quintessential tool of European self-portraiture. This mastery of recall would allow him to render the lines of his *moko* on paper. Notably, Kraig employs the term ‘stains’ to describe this process, a term that resurfaced later, as we have previously discussed, in Melville’s narrative.

Facial Misreadings

As scholars of European encounters with the indigenous peoples of what is now known as New Zealand have documented, facial tattooing immediately sparked the curiosity of early explorers. It is worth noting, however, that when the Dutch navigator Abel Janszoon Tasman⁶ made the first recorded landing near the island on 13 December 1642 aboard the war yacht *Heemskerck*, his ship’s artist and draughtsman, Isaack Gilsemans,⁷ depicted the Māori in his drawing without any indication of tattoos, despite their hostile encounter with the vessel. This initial representation can be found in the collection of the Alexander Turnbull Library, now part of the New Zealand National Library.⁸ Similarly, Tasman himself, in his logbook housed in the Dutch National Archives, makes no mention of tattoos.

It was not until over a century later, in 1769, that the subject of Māori facial tattoos caught the attention of the second European explorer to revisit the island, Captain Cook.⁹ Upon the return of Cook’s ship, the *Endeavour*, to England in 1771, the phenomenon of Māori facial tattoos began to be enthusiastically discussed throughout Europe (Thomas *et al.* 2016). Various speculations have emerged regarding the reasons behind the emergence of facial tattooing among the Māori between 1642 and 1769, with the prevailing hypothesis suggesting a prolonged period of inter-group conflict within the island as a possible catalyst. In Captain Cook’s logbook, the original of which is in the National Museum of Australia,¹⁰ Māori facial tattoos are mentioned several times, beginning on October 8, 1769: ‘The bodies and faces are marked with black stains they call amoco – broad spirals on each buttock – the thighs of many were almost entirely black, the faces of the old men are almost covered. By adding to the tattooing they grow old and honourable at the same time’.

Thus, the impression that the tattoos are ‘stains’ returns, probably also because they were observed from a distance, but perhaps and especially because a centuries-old prejudice weighed on their observation, as we shall see. The perception of spiral writing also returns, as well as some notes on where these tattoos are concentrated, the buttocks, the thighs, the faces in the case of the elderly, as well as observations that must have been derived from contact with the natives, for example, the knowledge that

this writing appeared as a sign both of advanced age and of honorability. But in another passage in the same journal, Cook's pen does justice to the elegance and meticulousness of facial tattoos, wittily comparing them to known decorative forms of Western art:

The marks in general are spirals drawn with great nicety and even elegance. One side corresponds with the other. The marks in the body resemble the foliage in old chased ornaments, convolutions of filigree work, but in these they have such a luxury of forms that of a hundred which at first appeared exactly the same no two were formed alike on close examination.

(*Ibidem*)

Striking in this note is the reference to the European ornaments in vogue at that epoch, and in particular to foliage in chiseled decorations and filigree convolutions; remarkable is also the emphasis placed not only on the symmetry of these facial patterns, but also on the fact that, in spite of first impressions, they are in fact all different from one another. Cook's journal also contains some drawings – the first ever produced by a European hand – of such tattoos. They attempt to render the impression of the Māori *moko*, depicting it as a kind of ink beard on a native face, whose features, however, are strongly Europeanized. Great is the difference between this depiction of Cook and the self-portrait of his own facial tattoo that Māori Pēhi Kupe will leave instead in London. It is perhaps interesting to note that this is an attempt to translate, by European means, the facial writing of the Māori, inevitably misrepresenting it but nevertheless managing to give a visual impression of it, just as on the written page a verbal ecphrasis is sought. As Eco will abundantly explain in *Kant and the Platypus* (1997), Europeans see what they know, and they draw what they see, sprinkling the faces of the Māori faces in their drawings with watermark spots. The draughtsman who accompanied Cook, Sydney Parkinson,¹¹ evidently had a more honed and technically alert eye, so that, in commenting one of the earliest visual representations of *moko* by European artists, he reports that 'as to the tattooing, it is done very curiously in spiral and other figures; and in many places indented into their skins which looks like carving, though at a distance it appears as if it had been only smeared with a black paint' (*ibidem*).

The notion of the spiral resurfaces, accompanied by the realization that these facial markings, are not mere drawings but rather engraved symbols, thus inviting a comparison with the art of engraving as a medium of visual representation also familiar in European contexts. In fact, according to Kraig's account, when Te Pēhi Kupe drew a parallel between his facial tattooing and writing, this comparison likely emerged from the intersection of Māori culture and European practices of identification through written



Figure 8.2 An autograph in the form of a reproduction of a facial tattoo, created by the Māori chief Themoranga using a pen aboard the ship *Active* on 9 March 1815; included in Robley (1896); image in the public domain.

means. An example of it is an autograph in the form of a reproduction of a facial tattoo, created by the Māori chief Themoranga using a pen aboard a ship named *Active* on March 9, 1815 (Figure 8.2).

Serving as even more compelling evidence of the encounter and syncretism of scriptural traditions are the contracts signed by Māori chiefs and Western settlers during those years (Figure 8.3).

Remarkably, these agreements were authenticated by the reproduction of the chief's facial tattoo on paper, serving as a signature or rather a stamp or seal. Edward Gibbon Wakefield,¹² one of the theorists of colonization and the protagonist of the systematic conquest of New Zealand territory by the British colonizers, mentioned and criticized by Marx in the first volume, chapter 33 of *Das Kapital*, recalls in his book *A View of the Art of Colonization*, published in 1849, that in the purchase of a territory near the Bay of Islands by missionary Samuel Marsden, contracts were signed not with a signature but with reproductions of the sellers' *moko*.

In the volume *Te Ika a Maui, or New Zealand and its Inhabitants*, published in 1855 by Richard Taylor, reverend of the Church Missionary

and not European, and by the tobacco that it represented smoke; the other chief, on receiving the missive, roasted the one (the potato) and ate it, and smoked the other (the tobacco) to show he accepted the invitation and would join him with his guns and powder.

Taylor (1855, ch. I)

In the same book, after sketching a general anthropology of adornment, the Reverend emphasizes the negatively marked character of the tattoo-free face in Māori society: “But the grand ornament of all was the *moko* or tattoo; this was of general use. All ranks were thus ornamented; a *papatea*, or plain face, was a term of reproach” (*ibidem*).

Facial Stigmatizations

What a difference, then, with the connotation of tattoos in the coeval European cultures! Here tattoos were already known, to the inclusion of those on the face, but not in the same guise as in New Zealand. The first European author to mention tattoos is probably Herodotus himself in Book IV of the *Histories* (4.71.2), when he tells of the customs of the Scythians (Caplan 2000; Hambly 1925):

Then those who receive the dead man on his arrival do the same as do the Royal Scythians: that is, they cut off a part of their ears, shave their heads, make cuts around their arms, tear their foreheads and noses, and pierce their left hands with arrows.

In this as in other passages by classical authors, both Greek and Latin, the incision of the skin, and in particular of the face, is usually associated with practices of self-mutilation – as we would say today – at funerary events as a spontaneous or ritual expression of participation in mourning. In order to fully understand the terror of Ishmael – whose name refers to the biblical and Jewish cultural context – in the face of the tattooed countenance of the Māori Queequeg, one must in fact go back to a cultural crossroads, both anthropological and semiotic, in the history of Mediterranean cultures, one in which the Jewish tradition, surrounded by peoples who would mark their bodies with cuts, tattoos, and other signs, differentiated itself from them, declaring them illegitimate and in fact connoting them as a symbolic attack on that notion of writing which, instead, founds the deepest sense of Jewish religiosity.

As is well known, the most preemptory condemnation of tattoos goes back to Leviticus 19:28, in that third book of the Pentateuch that the Jews call ‘וַיִּקְרָא’, “Vayyīqrā”, ‘And He called’. In the King James Bible, the passage is translated as follows: ‘Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh

for the dead, nor print any marks upon you: I am the LORD'; yet more recent translations, and thus subsequent to the introduction of the term 'tattoo' in the English language, explicitly mention it, such as the New King James Bible, published in 1982, which renders the passage as follows: 'You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor tattoo any marks on you: I am the LORD'.

The term 'tattoo', or 'tattoo', as it was referred to in the 18th century, derives from the Samoan word 'tatau', which conveys the meaning of 'to strike'. This linguistic borrowing originated from the Proto-Oceanic *sau₃, which specifically denoted a wing bone sourced from a flying fox and employed as an instrument during the tattooing process. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the etymology of the word "tattoo" can be traced back to Polynesian languages such as Samoan, Tahitian, and Tongan, with a corresponding term found in Marquesan as 'tatu'. Prior to the incorporation of the Polynesian word into the English language, the act of tattooing had been described in Western discourse using terms like 'painting', 'scarring', or 'staining'. The introduction of the Samoan word 'tatau' facilitated a more precise and culturally resonant designation for this practice, transcending the previous inadequate descriptors.

The Greeks would not have a specific word for tattooing. In the *Septuaginta*, the passage of the Leviticus is translated as follows: 'καὶ ἐντομίδας ἐπὶ ψυχῆ ἢ οὐ ποιήσετε ἐν τῷ σώματι ὑμῶν καὶ γράμματα στικτὰ οὐ ποιήσετε ἐν ὑμῖν ἐγὼ εἰμι κύριος ὁ θεὸς ὑμῶν'. Neither did the Romans. The Vulgate then translates into Latin 'γράμματα στικτὰ' as 'stigmata': '*et super mortuo non incidetis carnem vestram neque figuras aliquas et stigmata facietis vobis ego Dominus*'. The Hebrew original, 'קָטַעַתְּ בְּשָׂרְךָ וְלֹא תִסְמָךְ', appears only once in the biblical text, in this very verse, but it would be etymologically related to the term 'קָוָה', *ko'-ah*, also designating the cut, but in the sense of geographic separation, referring to Koa, a region of Babylon.

Indeed, in the Leviticus verse, the reference to cuts on the body, tattoo marks, and separation converge to intimate to the Jews that if they intend to respect their God, they should not draw marks on their bodies, not even and indeed especially on the occasion of a mourning or funeral ritual. Commentaries on the verse are innumerable; referring to them all here would be impossible. One aspect of them must be emphasized, though. Those that precede Cook's return to Europe do not mention the practice of tattooing but rather the ancient custom of marking one's skin at mourning, common among many people of antiquity. Thus, the nonconformist British minister Matthew Henry,¹³ of Calvinist theological observance, in his *Concise Commentary* (1706), writes:¹⁴

There are some ceremonial precepts in this chapter, but most of these precepts are binding on us, for they are explanations of the ten

commandments. It is required that Israel be a holy people, because the God of Israel is a holy God, ver. 2. To teach real separation from the world and the flesh, and entire devotedness to God.

In the *Complete Commentary* (1706), the same author specifies: ‘Those whom the God of Israel had set apart for himself must not receive the image and superscription of these dunghill deities’. On the contrary, Charles John Ellicott,¹⁵ a British Anglican pastor of Arminianist theological observance, in his *Old Testament Commentary for English Readers*, published in 1897, shows that he was already aware of the practices of tattooing, certainly widespread throughout Europe from ancient times, but brought back into vogue precisely by the encounter of the English colonists with the indigenous peoples of New Zealand. Ellicott’s commentary on the above verse reads:

This, according to the ancient authorities, was effected by making punctures in the skin to impress certain figures or words, and then filling the cut places with stibium, ink, or some other colour. The practice of tattooing prevailed among all nations of antiquity, both among savages and civilised nations. The slave had impressed upon his body the initials of his master, the soldier those of his general, and the worshipper the image of his tutelar deity. To obviate this disfiguration of the body which bore the impress of God’s image, and yet to exhibit the emblem of his creed, the Mosaic Law enacted that the Hebrew should have phylacteries which he is to bind as “a sign” upon his hand, and as “a memorial” between his eyes “that the Lord’s law may be in his mouth.”

(Ellicott 1897: Lev 19:28)

Remarkably, the act of inscribing writing on the body through incisions is associated with the realm of idolatry, leading to an interpretation that views the use of phylacteries as an endeavor to reconcile the desire to inscribe religious affiliation on the body with the imperative to avoid transforming the body itself into a medium of writing. In this theological and anthropological context, a pivotal issue arises: The body should not serve as the locus for writing, as the domain of writing is intended to reside outside the corporeal realm, specifically within the sacred embodiment of the Torah.

As stated before, it is impossible here to make a list of all commentaries on this Biblical passage. At least one Catholic commentator, however, must be mentioned, to underline how the exegesis of the prohibition of marking the flesh would take a different direction depending on the semiotic

ideology that was inspiring the commentary. *Haydock's Catholic Bible Commentary*, originally compiled by Catholic priest and biblical scholar Reverend George Leo Haydock¹⁶ in 1811, to accompany the publication of the Douay-Rheims Bible text, comments on the passage as follows:

Marks, made with a hot iron, representing false gods, as if to declare that they would serve them forever. (Philo) – The Assyrians had generally such characters upon their bodies. Philopator ordered the converts from the Jewish religion to be marked with ivy, in honour of Bacchus. (3 Macchabees) Theodoret (q. 18) mentions, that the pagans were accustomed to cut their cheeks, and to prick themselves with needles, infusing some black matter, out of respect for the dead, and for demons. Allusion is made to these customs, Apocalypse xiii. 16, and Isaias xlix. 15.

So far, Haydock lists the practices of marking the skin that were common in antiquity among pagans; but then he also allows himself to enumerate ways in which Christians themselves adopted similar techniques:

Christians have sometimes marked their arms with the cross, or name of Jesus. (Procopius in Isai. xlv. 5.) (Calmet)—As St. Jane Frances de Chantal did her breast. (Breviary, August 21.) *Nomen pectori insculpsit*. St. Paul says, *I bear the marks of the Lord Jesus in my body*, Galatians vi. 17. The Church historians relate, that St. Francis and St. Catharine received miraculously the prints of his wounds.

The distinction between these perspectives is not merely a matter of divergent intertextual paradigms of reference; it reflects an underlying semiotic ideology. Within Judaism, the sacred locus of God's Scripture resides in the text, specifically the Torah. Thus, any attempt to establish an alternative sacred scripture, one not contained within the text or engraved in memory but rather carved onto the skin and flesh, is viewed as an act of idolatry.

Christianity, on the other hand, encounters its distinction from Judaism primarily through the concept and doctrine of incarnation, wherein the divine word becomes flesh. This theological and semiotic ideology embraces the notion that the body can serve as a testimony to the divine word, as long as the signifier does not supplant the signified in idolatry. Consequently, the tattoos that Christians bear on their skin to express their faith are not inherently blasphemous, as they do not present themselves as writing per se, but rather as an embodied trace of the divine word and their unwavering faith in it.

This alternative semiotic and theological ideology also allows for a paradoxical variant, exemplified by the stigmata – a divine scripture directly

manifested upon the extraordinary body of the saint. In this remarkable signification, the boundaries between the corporeal and the divine converge, offering a profound testament to the interplay between the body, scripture, and the sacred.

Protestant commentaries therefore express a semiotic and theological sensibility that advocates, instead, a return to the Hebrew purity of divine scripture alone, in which revelation is manifested in the text and in its interpretation, while any surfacing of it on the skin is a form of idolatry comparable to that of sacred images or relics, and to be relegated, therefore to the chronological and geographical peripheries of the sacred, in the idolatrous practices of ancient pagans in remote times or in the barbaric customs of indigenous peoples of distant worlds.

As is often the case, the Jewish exegesis had already been reflecting on the issue, considering with a multi-voiced conversation the full range of alternative semiotic ideologies with which to interpret the issue of marks on the skin. As is well known, *Makkot* (in Hebrew: מכות) (in English: ‘Lashes’) is a tractate of the Mishnah and Talmud. It is the fifth volume of the order of Nezikin. *Makkot* deals primarily with laws of the Jewish courts (“beis din”) and the punishments which they may administer. It may be regarded as a continuation of the tractate of Sanhedrin, of which it originally formed part. Section 21a of *Makkot* reads:

R. Jose takes [the two terms used] – Seritah and Gedidah as having the same import, and in the case of the latter it is said “for the dead”. Samuel said: One who cuts himself with an instrument is liable. An objection [against this] was raised from the following: Seritah and Gedidah are one [and the same] thing, save that Seritah is done with the hand, while Gedidah is done with an instrument!— He [Samuel] shares the view of R. Jose. A Tanna recited in the presence of R. Johanan: [One who cuts himself] for the dead, whether with the hand or with instrument, is liable [to a flogging]; [if he does so] as an idolatrous practice, if with hand he is liable, if with instrument, he is exempt. But, is it not written [of the priests of Baal] the other way about, and they cut themselves after their manner with swords and lances? – But rather say, “If with the hand, he is exempt, if with an instrument, he is liable”.

Then an intricate discussion about the incisions on the skin is quoted from the Mishnah, the first major written collection of the Jewish oral traditions that are known as the Oral Torah:

Mishnah. He who writes an ‘incised imprint [in his flesh, is flogged]. If he writes [on his flesh] without incising, or incises [his flesh]

without imprinting, he is not liable: [he is] not liable until he writes and imprints the incision with ink, eye-paint or anything that marks. R. Simeno B. Judah says in the name of R. Simeon [B. Yohai] that he is not liable until he has written there the name, as it is said: nor put on you any written-imprint, I am the lord.

Then the Gemara is quoted; as is known, the Gemara is an essential component of the Talmud, comprising a collection of rabbinical analyses and commentaries on the Mishnah and presented in 63 books:

Said R. Aha the son of Raba to R. Ashi: [Does it mean, not] until he has actually inscribed the words, I am the Lord? – No, replied he, it means, as Bar Kappara taught, [viz.:] He is not liable [to a flogging] until he inscribed the name of some profane deity, as it is said: Nor put on you any written-imprint, I am the Lord, [that is,] “I am the Lord” and no other. R. Malkiah, as citing R. Adda b. Ahabah, said: It is prohibited to powder one’s wound with burnt wood ash, because it gives the appearance of an incised imprint.

[...] One who incises a tattoo [receives lashes]: If he inscribed the pigment but did not puncture [the skin], or [if he] punctured [the skin], but did not insert the pigment [into the incision], he is not liable until he inserts the pigment and punctures [the skin, and the pigment must be] with ink, or with kohl, or with anything that leaves a [permanent] mark. Rabbi Shimon ben Yehudah says in the name of Rabbi Shimon [bar Yohai]: He is not liable until he writes a name [of idolatry], as it says: “You shall not make any tattoo on yourselves, I am the Lord” [taken to mean that he tattooed the name of idolatry. The halachah does not follow Rabbi Shimon]

The subtlety with which rabbinic sources discuss legal issues is always surprising, but the substance of the dispute is basically semiotic: There is disagreement over what and how many marks must be placed on the skin in order for one to contravene the prohibition of Leviticus; at one extreme, there is the position of those, like R. Adda b. Ahabah in the Gemara, for whom an attempt to heal a wound with burnt powder is sufficient to give a glimpse of wrongdoing, since this procedure would result in an impression of writing; at the other end of the spectrum, however, there are those, much more permissive, who argue that idolatry takes place only when someone intentionally tattoos the name of another deity on himself (but the Gemara is careful to point out that the Halakkah does not follow this interpretation, which is evidently too loose).

Conclusion: Facial Reappropriations

As scholars of tattoo sociology have noted, the biblical prohibition against tattoos appears to have significantly diminished in contemporary societies. Today, it is often the unmarked body, rather than the tattooed one, that stands out as unusual or unconventional. Yet, while the taboo surrounding tattoos has become more nuanced, the restriction on facial tattoos continues to persist. It is as if the face, more than any other part of the body, carries the weight of a longstanding semiotic legacy that warns against inscribing writing on the human body, lest it become a vessel for sacrilegious idolatry.

Although the association of the face with the dignity of the creator has been weakened in secular or post-secular societies, there remains a prevailing sense of sacredness, even within a secular context, that is intertwined with the face as a symbol of individuality. While writing on the face may no longer directly contradict the prohibition of placing the name of God or the sacred in any other space besides Scripture, it still appears to challenge the sanctity of the boundary where Western cultures traditionally locate uniqueness and individuality. Ancient biblical prohibitions, modernity's projections to an exotic and wild elsewhere, as well as the eternal discourse of discrimination and racism intertwine, then, in the modern affair of the *moko*, which oscillates between recognition, hostility, and commercialization.

As regards this last phenomenon, the exploitation of Māori facial writing has ancient roots. Already, Kraig in his book indicates that the Liverpool acquaintances of Pēhi Kupe were enthusiastic about his drawing: 'for a fortnight a great part of his time was occupied in manufacturing these pictures of the scars with which his face was impressed'. But already, in this first instance of diffusion of Māori facial diagrams, Te Pēhi Kupe was preoccupied with clarifying that, as Kraig writes, 'the depth and profusion of the tattooing, he stated, indicated the dignity of the individual'; during one of the exhibitions he performed for the enthusiasts of Liverpool, Kraig

drew for Dr. Traill the amocos of his brother and of his eldest son, the youth whom, as has been already mentioned, he had left to command his tribe till his return. On finishing the latter, he held it up, gazed at it with a murmur of affectionate delight, kissed it many times, and, as he presented it, burst into tears.

That the British hosts and acquaintances of Pēhi Kupe were surprised with the emotional display was the consequence of a long history of divergence and also clash of semiotic ideologies, during which the Westerners had forgotten that images could not only signify and represent but also incarnate and embody, and that the facial diagram of a distant brother

could be revered in the same guise as Catholics would cherish their relics, or the idolaters condemned by Leviticus would inscribe in their flesh the names of the dead.

On the other hand, the post-colonial history of the *moko* has seen its progressive transformation into a feature of cultural belonging and revindication, appropriated as such by the later generations and also defended from episodes of commercial appropriation, including the artistic one. To mark a new conquest in the national legitimization of the Māori heritage, with the inclusion of the facial tattoo, in 2016 Nanaia Cybelle Mahuta became the first Māori woman to display a *moko kauae* in parliament and was subsequently promoted from associate minister of housing and Māori affairs to one of the highest ministerial portfolios, that of Foreign Affairs, a charge that she has been holding until the time this essay is written. ‘Moko is a statement of identity, like a passport’, Mahuta, from the Waikato-Maniapoto tribe, told the *Guardian* in 2016. ‘I am at a time in my life where I am ready to make a clear statement that this is who I am, and this is my position in New Zealand’.¹⁷

Notes

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- 2 English text from the Norton Critical Edition, ed. Hershel Parker, 3rd edition. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002; digital version.
- 3 1798, Kennoway, United Kingdom – 1866, Botanic Avenue, Belfast, United Kingdom.
- 4 Ca. 1795–1828.
- 5 John Henry Sylvester. C. 1826. *Portrait of the Maori Chief Te Pehi Kupe*; watercolor; 21.1 x 15.8 cm. Canberra: National Library of Australia; available at <https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/catalog/891037> (last access: 9 September 2023).
- 6 Lutjegast, Dutch Republic, 1603 - Batavia, Dutch East Indies, 10 October 1659.
- 7 Rotterdam, ca. 1606 – Batavia, Dutch East Indies, 1646.
- 8 Isaack Gilsemans. 1642. *A View of the Murderers’ Bay*; photolithograph; 29 x 43,5 cm. Auckland, NZ: Alexander Turnbull Library; available at <https://natlib.govt.nz/records/23220299> (last access 9 September 2023).
- 9 Marton, Yorkshire, Kingdom of Great Britain, 7 November 1728 – Kealakekua Bay in present-day Hawaii, U.S., 14 February 1779.
- 10 Available at <https://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/endeavour-voyage/cooks-journal> (last access 9 September 2023).
- 11 Edinburgh, 1745 – Batavia, 26 January 1771.
- 12 London, 20 March 1796 – Wellington, New Zealand, 16 May 1862.
- 13 Flintshire, Wales, 18 October 1662 – Nantwich, Cheshire, 22 June 1714.

- 14 This and the following excerpts all refer to Leviticus 19:28.
 15 Whitwell, Rutland, England, 25 April 1819 – Birchington-on-Sea, Kent, England, 15 October 1905.
 16 Lea Town, UK, 11 April 1774 – Penrith, UK, 1849.
 17 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/11/first-woman-mp-maori-facial-tattoo-nz-parliament-moko-kauae>

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IMAGINATION, PERCEPTION,
LANGUAGE AND WRITING
A Semiotic Perspective
CLAUDIO PAOLUCCI

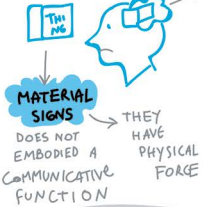


IN THE PASSAGE
TO ICON
WE LOSE
THE OBJECT
IT IS A **PROJECTION**
NOT A **REPRESENTATION**

**LOGICAL
IMAGE**
PASSING FROM ONE
UNIVERSE TO
ANOTHER

A MENTAL REPRESENTATION
OF A NON-PRESENT OBJECT

HOW THINGS
SHAPE
THE MIND



**DIAGRAMMATIC
THINKING**



**PROJECTION
IS A SPECIAL
HUMAN
CAPACITY**

SECONDARY
IS REPRESENTATIVE

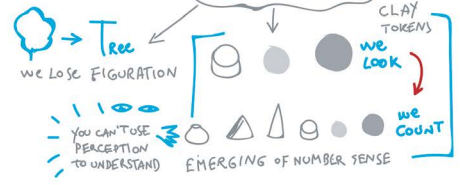


**DENOTATIVE
SIGN** VS **EXPRESSIVE
SIGN**

**RATIO
FACILIS** VS **RATIO
DIFFICILIS**



**LANGUAGE IS
AN EXCEPTION**



PROCESS OF COUNTING IS MEANINGFUL

INTEGRATION
OF PHYSICAL
AND MATERIAL
SPACES

CONCEPTUAL AND
MATERIAL STRUCTURE
IS INTEGRATED IN
MATERIAL OBJECTS