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Tattoo Narratives: Insights Into Multispecies Kinship and Griefwork

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ABSTRACT This paper explores multispecies families and nonhuman kinship through the lens of tattoo narratives, namely those that accompany designs dedicated to a companion animal. Although some tattoos are purely aesthetic, many embody deep personal meanings. Humans use narrative as a tool to endow meaning to experience, and the visual nature of a tattoo invites the telling of a story. Participants in this study were compelled to commemorate a special bond shared with their companion animal in the form of a tattoo. A discourse analysis approach was applied to examine narratives under the framework of “nurture kinship” and the theory of kinship as “mutuality of being,” as well as the role of memorial tattoos in griefwork and the theory of “continuing bonds.” Through embodied story-telling, tattoos can help the bereaved maintain an absent presence with the deceased. This study supports the conclusion that humans can and do form kinship bonds with other animals and that memorial tattoos serve similar functions, regardless of the species of the deceased loved one.

Keywords: continuing bonds, griefwork, human–animal interaction, kinship, multispecies families, tattoo narratives



People living with companion animals typically describe them as part of the family (Charles, 2014; Charles & Davies, 2008; Finka, Ward, Farnworth, & Mills, 2019; Owens & Grauerholz, 2019).

Despite this, large numbers of companion animals are relinquished to shelters each year (Coe et al., 2014). If they are so easily disposed, are nonhumans ever really part of what we consider family? Shir-Vertesh (2012) describes companion animals as being “flexible persons” or “emotional commodities” because of how they are loved and incorporated into the family, but at any moment may be demoted or rehomed. However, the increasing popularity of commemorative tattoos represent permanent and personal declarations of love and devotion (Quan-Haase, 2017). This paper examines nonhuman kinship through the lens of narratives accompanying tattoos dedicated to companion animals.

Kinship systems represent a fundamental, cohesive social institution, but a cross-cultural explanation of what constitutes kinship is less straightforward. Nineteenth-century anthropologists conceptualized kinship “as a way in which people everywhere cope culturally with the universal natural processes of procreation” (Holy, 1996, p. 3). The “procreation model” began losing favor as kinship studies instead turned to specific cultural conceptualizations of kinship (Holy, 1996; Read, 2007; Schneider & Shimizu, 1992). This shift was led by Schneider (1984), who is critical of the ethnocentric view and argues that kinship can only be understood from the perspective of a given culture. Schneider’s constructionist position forms the basis for “new kinship studies,” which challenges the various notions of procreation being the natural foundations of kinship. New kinship studies examine it in the context of families built around LGBT relationships (Weston, 1991), adoption (Logan, 2013), and reproductive technologies (Clark, 2015), and argues that such connections are not substitutes for biological bonds but are kinships in their own right. Nelson (2013) describes kinship as something more than friendship or acquaintanceship, whereby a person is “treated as if they were family” (p. 263). Essentially, the act of treating each other as kin gives rise to kinship. This idea of kinship being actively produced is echoed in the words of Haraway (2015) in her slogan “make kin, not babies! It matters how kin generate kin” (p. 162), meaning that reproduction is not necessarily a “stronger” form of kinship or that kinship is confined to humans. Indeed, it may be more useful to consider kinship in terms of emotional attachments and nurturement. The concept of “nurture kinship” describes how kinships are formed through acts of nurture between individuals (Holland, 2012). Sahlins (2011a) proposes kinship as “mutuality of being,” meaning “people who are intrinsic to one another’s existence are thus mutual person(s)” (p. 2). Mutuality of being is a “conjoined existence” that includes taking responsibility for the wrongful acts of relatives, as well as sharing in their joys, sorrows, and successes (Sahlins, 2011b). This definition applies regardless of whether kinship emerged from procreation or social construction. Although procreation is a strong biological driver in the formation of kinship, it is not essential. Nor, based on the ethnographic record, is it inevitable that the kinship that emerges from procreation is essentially different from relationships created postnatally (Sahlins, 2011a).

Kinship studies have recently been extended to include animal others (Charles, 2014; Charles & Davies, 2008; Haraway, 2003, 2006, 2016; Owens & Grauerholz, 2019; Shir-Vertesh, 2012). Charles (2014) argues that nonhuman animals have always been “part of the social groups that we refer to as families” (p. 727), but close affinities with other animals have been hidden by the species barrier. Sociologists and anthropologists invariably focused on human–human kinship bonds, and only recently has the animal other received academic attention (Hurn, 2012). Just as Schneider (1984) challenged the ethnocentric view of kinship, anthropozoologists should now challenge the anthropocentric view. From a practical perspective, recognition of these interspecies kinship bonds is prerequisite for building social support and initiatives aimed at keeping multispecies families together during times of hardship. There are many actions that could be viewed as making, reaffirming, or celebrating kinship (Holland, 2012; Sahlins, 2011a, b). One potential indicator is that a person is compelled to commemorate that relationship in the form of a tattoo.

To fully appreciate the significance of the tattoo narratives examined in this study requires positioning the practice of tattooing within the broader cultural context. The term “Western” is used throughout to refer to contemporary cultures born out of civilizations that were historically dominated by the hegemonic fluence of Judaeo-Christian doctrine and entrenched in European colonialism (Birken, 1992; Hurn, 2012). In eighteenth-century Europe, tattooing was

perceived as a practice of “primitives” (native peoples of Africa, Asia, and the Americas) who were opposed to colonization (Fisher, 2002). This demeaning attitude persisted, and until recent decades, tattoos predominantly belonged to marginalized groups, such as criminals, gang members, bikers, as well as sailors, working-class males, and more recently, youth-led countercultures (Caplan, 1997; DeMello, 2000; Gilman & Caplan, 2001; Govenar, 1981). By the late 1990s tattoos were increasingly being embraced as a form of expression among the middle classes (DeMello, 1995, 2000; Irwin, 2001). The media were instrumental in rendering tattoos “mainstream” by positively portraying tattooed actors, musicians, and athletes (Kosut, 2006; Roberts, 2012). The popularity of tattooing is both reflected and further popularized by various reality-TV-style shows that highlight the self-storying aspect of tattooing (Hennessy, 2011; Woodstock, 2014).

Despite the growing acceptance of tattoos by mainstream society, tattoos continued to be “perceived as a social marking that, if not inscribed on the bodies of deviants, then constitutes a deviant practice on the bodies of individuals” (Fisher, 2002, p. 97). Correlations have been reported between having a tattoo(s) and lack of religious affiliation, lower academic qualifications, extended jail time, excessive drinking, recreational drug use, and risk-taking behaviors (Greif, Hewitt, & Armstrong, 1999; Heywood et al., 2012; Laumann & Derick, 2006; Silver, VanEseltine, & Silver, 2009). Survey-based studies suggest a connection between tattooing and a tendency toward self-harm, suicide, eating disorders, and reduced mental health (Birmingham, Mason, & Grubin, 1999; Dhossche, Snell, & Larder, 2000; Stirn & Hinz, 2008; Stirn, Hinz, & Braehler, 2006). However, critiques of quantitative-based studies point out how they fail to capture “the more nuanced reasons that individuals get tattooed as well as the more diverse personalities that undergo the process” (Strohecker, 2011, p. 11). Associations between tattoos and deviance or mental illness may not be symptomatic but rather a mechanism for coping by marking significant life events or transformations, such as overcoming addiction or coping with illness (Claes, Vandereycken, & Vertommen, 2005; Preti et al., 2006; Strubel & Jones, 2017). Strohecker (2011) argues that qualitative research “provides a much more nuanced look at the practice of contemporary tattooing” (p. 14) than quantitative studies, which lack depth and context. Contemporary psychology now largely rejects the notion that tattoos should be viewed as a sign of pathology or deviance but instead advocate embracing them as opportunities to explore core aspects of self-identity (Preti et al., 2006; Roggenkamp, Nicholls, & Pierre, 2017).

“Commemorative tattoo” is a broad term encompassing tattoos dedicated to deceased persons, special relationships, meaningful locations, precious memories, or life-changing events (Quan-Haase, 2017). What I call “commitment tattoos” mark a presumed permanent bond to another. These include tattoos honoring the birth of a child, the traditional “I love Mum” tattoos, spousal or sweetheart tattoos, as well as tattoos celebrating a close connection to a companion animal. A memorial tattoo is one dedicated to a person, human or nonhuman, after they have died. Here I explore how commemorative tattoo narratives might be indicative of “nurture kinship” and fit the criteria of kinship as “mutuality of being” (Holland, 2012; Sahlin, 2011a, b). I address the role of memorial tattoos in grieving for nonhuman kin, focusing on the “continuing bonds” theory of griefwork (Davidson, 2017; Letherby & Davidson, 2015; Packman, Horsley, Davies, & Kramer, 2006).

Methods

Ethics approval for this research was granted by the University of Exeter College of Social Science and International Studies (SSIS) Ethics Committee. Data collection (interviews) took

place between March and June 2018, and recruitment of participants ran concurrently from March 2018 until the final interview took place. Visual data includes photographs shared (with permission) by participants, who were recruited via social media and from leads obtained while informally discussing my research. Social media recruitment consisted of open posts on Facebook and Twitter (using accounts specifically used for academic purposes and identifying myself as a research student) that provided a short explanation of my research interest, followed by an invitation for potential participants to volunteer themselves. My networks were predominantly comprised of individuals with animal and tattoo interests, as well as other academic human–animal studies accounts. Upon request, my posts were subsequently shared with their audiences and beyond until I had sufficient volunteers. This snow-ball sampling generated self-selecting individuals who were all from English-speaking nations (Table 1). I specifically sought individuals who had tattoos dedicated to an animal companion. Thus, I created a bias toward those with “a story to tell,” as opposed to individuals who considered their body-art predominantly aesthetic. Four of the participants were academics, thus some of the discussions may be more informed and reflexive than the general population. Unstructured interviews were performed in-person or using video Skype, and prolonged written exchanges were via Email or Facebook Messenger. Prior to interviewing a list of key points was devised (Table 2), and although these were not asked directly as questions, I guided the conversations to ensure that they could be answered during analysis. I avoided asking explicit questions, such as “do you consider your dog a family member?” and instead encouraged participants to explain why, for example, they chose to dedicate a tattoo to their dog. As much as possible I allowed participants to lead, only intervening if the conversation dried up or went too off-topic. Where relevant I shared personal details and experiences because the goal was to recreate as much as possible an organic conversation that encouraged the participant to share their own narratives.

The term “*homo narrans*” has been used to emphasize the universal importance of narrative to individual humans and societies because storytelling is quintessentially human (Czarniawska, 2004; Fisher, 1984; Gottschall, 2012; Irvine, 2012). Humans use narrative as a tool to endow meaning to experience, and as Woodstock (2014) noted, tattoos are not simply

Table 1. Participants in this study as they first appear in the text.

Participant*	Nationality (all she/her)	Species, Status, Pronouns	Name*	Tattoo(s)
Debbie	British	Dog, living (she/her)	Foxy	Stylized caricature
Mary	American	Rodents (multiple)	—	Cartoon rat
Charlotte	South African (living in UK)	Dog, living (he/him)	Mack	Outline
Victoria	British	Cat, deceased (he/him)	Cole	Outlines, cat eye
Simona	British	Dog, living (she/her)	Poppy	Stylized caricature
Constance	Australian	Dog, deceased (he/him) Dog, deceased (he/him)	Boo Bailey	Paw print Paw print
Anna	British	Dog, deceased (he/him) Horse, living (he/him)	Petey Shamus	Line drawing Line drawing
Sandra	British (friend of Anna)	Dog, deceased (he/him)	Petey	Dog bone
Joanna	British	Cat, deceased (she/her)	Marmalade	Portrait

*Names of participants and their companion animals have been changed.

Table 2. Checklist used by interviewer to ensure sufficient coverage of key information.

Checklist of Points to Cover	
	Establish if the tattoo is a memorial tattoo or not, and if the subject of the tattoo is living or deceased.
	Who is the subject of the tattoo? Encourage narratives about that tattoo subject as an individual, their history, and the relationship.
	How old is the tattoo?
	What was the motivation behind the tattoo?
	What was the thought process behind the chosen design?
	Where is the tattoo located on the body, and why was this location chosen?
	Do they have other tattoos? And if so, did these come before/after the dedication tattoo?
	What sort of reactions towards the tattoo do they encounter (positive, negative, or neutral)?
	How do they relate to non-humans, particularly the tattoo subject, in relation to family dynamics?
	How do they generally feel talking about the tattoo and its significance?
	For memorial tattoos: What role did the tattoo play during grieving process?
	For memorial tattoos: Were there other forms of memorial?

“visual shorthand” but invite the telling of a story. A number of researchers have explored the significance of tattoos in relation to the process of identity construction by examining how people talk about their tattoos (Bell, 1999; Dey & Das, 2017; Hennessy, 2011; Kosut, 2000, 2006; Oksanen & Turtiainen, 2005; Sims, 2018; Sweetman, 1999; Woodstock, 2014). In this study I explored narratives constructed around tattoos that signify a personal relationship with a companion animal. A form of “discourse analysis” was applied to the tattoo narratives as a methodological tool to examine language usage and context. The relationship between language and the context is fundamental to discourse analysis, which is concerned with language use beyond the boundaries of a sentence structure, the interrelationships between language and society, and the interactive or dialogue properties of communication (Fairclough, 2003; Gee, 1999; Philips, 2013; Ruiz-Ruiz, 2009). Essentially, discourse analysis is interested in what the person really means, rather than what they actually say. Thus, in addition to information regarding the context in which a discourse takes place, the cultural background, emotional state, and the personality of the various participants needs to be taken into consideration. Ruiz-Ruiz (2009) believes that to understand discourse from a sociological perspective requires analysis of both textual content and contextual information, followed by interpretation, an approach I chose to adapt to study tattoo narratives. The contextual information extends to the tattoo itself, as well as the person to which the design alludes and broader social interactions that may have shaped the narrative. The narratives were interpreted under the framework of new kinship theory, specifically “nurture kinship” (Holland, 2012) and “mutuality of being” (Sahlins, 2011a, b), and/or the concept of “continuing bonds” as tools for navigating grief (Davidson, 2017; Letherby & Davidson, 2015; Packman et al., 2006).

Results: Companion Animal Tattoo Narratives

Debbie told me she loves her dog Foxy so much she felt compelled to have her immortalized on her skin, an unprompted sentiment shared by all my participants. The question of whether

or not they considered themselves “pet parents” or simply “parents” in the conventional sense was less straightforward. Defining a relationship with a nonhuman as being similar to, if not exactly like, that of a child–parent is not uncommon, and the term “fur baby” has grown in popularity (Bradshaw, 2017; Greenebaum, 2004; Owens & Grauerholz, 2019; Schaffer, 2009). Several of my participants used the words “baby” or “fur baby” and described themselves in a nurturing role. Mary had kept rats all of her adult life, including rescue lab rats. She said of her rat-dedication tattoo, “I am currently mum of four fur babies, so this is a memory for all of them.” However, usage of terms like “mum” or “child” does not necessarily mean the relationship is synonymous with human parent–child relations (biological or adopted) (Shir-Vertesh, 2012). In a study of interspecies families, Owens and Grauerholz (2019) found that not everyone who included nonhumans in their description of “family” considered themselves “pet parents.” Of the self-identified “pet parents,” those without human children drew heavily from larger cultural narratives surrounding parenting to construct their relationship, and while those with older or grownup children emphasized similarities, those with younger children talked primarily from a place of difference (Owens & Grauerholz, 2019).

Charlotte’s first tattoo is a minimalistic-style drawing of her dog Mack (Figure 1). In contrast to a portrait, which can fade with age, an outline is sharp and can be redone. Her design choice was symbolic, and she explained she never wants her connection with Mack to fade. When Charlotte first scheduled an appointment with a tattoo artist she had in mind “something fierce like a lion or a cheetah,” which was a deliberate move against being “predictable and cutesy.” However, during the interim she came across a line drawing of a dog on Pinterest and felt compelled to instead get a design dedicated to her beloved Mack. The artist was surprised because this was so different from her original big cat idea but helped her modify the design to capture the personality of Mack. Now in his late teens, Mack was adopted just after Charlotte had gotten married. Several years later, following a rough divorce, the ex-husband got everything else and Charlotte kept Mack (which she said is all she really wanted). Charlotte described Mack as her “child and best friend.” She said he is her “most favorite person,” and after looking around to check her partner was out of hearing range, told me she would choose him over anyone. Her current partner has two human children, but Charlotte said “Mack is my child, and I do not want human children.”



Figure 1. Charlotte’s tattoo of Mack.

Photo and permission to publish in *Anthrozoös* provided by the owner of tattoo.

Victoria has several tattoos dedicated to the memory of her beloved Cole but also talked about the cats she adopted after his death. She struggled to define exactly how the relationships she shares with her cats fits into the concept of “family.” Victoria described them as being “a special kind of family,” saying “I’m by no means their parent, but the bond is stronger than with friends and involves a caring aspect that goes beyond what I’ve experienced in human friendships.” Although Victoria was not framing herself as a parent, she did identify as a caregiver. She appreciated them for their individuality and friendship, but acknowledged this is complicated by the power balance of the caregiver-dependent dynamic. Fox (2006) recognized that the human–companion animal relationship “inevitably involves some forms of restriction, power and control and a certain degree of guilt, worry or uncertainty about what the animal is thinking or feeling” (p. 529). This is reflected in how Victoria talked about the health issues one of her cats was experiencing: “I feel the great burden of giving her the best vet care possible and making the right decisions for her life because she can’t make them herself.”

Simona has a tattoo depicting her dog Poppy curled up on a bed of wild flowers. She described Poppy as her “travelling partner” and told me how they have lived in several different countries together. Simona explained Poppy is a rescue dog, but said “really she rescued me.” Following an abusive relationship, this dog provided unconditional love. Haraway (2003) is contentious of the notion that dogs love unconditionally, but the devotion and affection bestowed on the human by certain companion animals is undeniably comforting. Although Simona is responsible for the care of Poppy, she described herself as more of a care-receiver, at least in terms of emotional support. This type of relationship often forms between a child and a companion animal, where the animal other provides a source of comfort and stability (Bryant, 1990). A common motivation for tattooing is to embrace a personal narrative, which can be an expression of personal values and experiences (Wohlrab, Stahl, & Kappeler, 2007). Simona proclaimed, “home is where my dog is” and her tattoo reaffirms the significance of her relationship with Poppy and their shared experiences. This narrative, similar to others described here, fits into the framework of kinship being a state of “mutuality of being,” where kin are produced through shared experiences, memories, and cohabitation (Sahlins, 2011a).

Central to the theory of “nurture kinship” is the idea that the making of kin is an active process, fostered by nurture and “treating kin as kin” (Holland, 2012; Nelson, 2013). Essentially, by welcoming someone into your family they can become kin. Anna described her animals as being “family by choice,” but stressed that she had a “good human family,” and used the term “multispecies family” to incorporate the nonhumans into her narrative. The deliberate use of these terms supports the notion that companion animals are not necessarily substitutes for human friends or family. Furthermore, even though Anna was familiar with terms such as “multispecies family,” she still failed to define a specific role, like “mother,” “sibling,” or “child” that would describe how she related to all her nonhuman family members.

Without prompting, all participants referred to their nonhuman household members as “family.” But what exactly is family, and how do nonhumans fit into the framework of “family”? As a child, Constance said she believed Boo was her “guardian angel in dog form.” She described him as “a part of me, a soulmate but without the romantic love part.” Her connection to Bailey she likened to an older family member because “he was strong and there for me when I began a new life pathway.” Constance acknowledged her relationships with nonhuman family members were not all the same, “just like you have a different relationship with a sister compared to your dad.”

The true significance of what Victoria attempted to articulate as a “special kind of family” is borne out by her burial plans. She told me she keeps the ashes of her beloved cat Cole in an urn, rather burying him, because she could not bear to leave him behind when she inevitably moves. Victoria plans to ultimately have Cole’s ashes buried alongside her own. However, she was clearly conflicted when she considered the two cats she adopted after Cole died. She said “Cole was something special,” but then paused before saying “although I do feel the same way about the two I have now.” Together with friends and family, Anna held a burial ceremony for Petey before interring his remains in a public cemetery, a practice that has become increasingly more common and elaborate in recent decades (Brandes, 2009; Collier, 2016; Pregowski, 2016; Redmalm, 2015; Veldkamp, 2009). Burials, burial-related rituals, and grave markers have long been part process of grieving for humans and nonhumans, and recently there has been a boom in dedicated cemeteries (Brandes, 2009). This may in part be driven by the nature of modern life, which frequently involves moving house, area, or even country. Constance became quite upset when her parents sold her childhood home because Boo was buried in the garden there. Charlotte had also contemplated how she would cope when Mack dies, especially as she recognized he may not have much longer. She said she did not want to bury him as they too would likely move. Other memorial options include having a diamond made from cremation ashes or a piece of jewelry containing fur, but as Charlotte pointed out, these bring the dread of losing something so special. Unlike a ring or an urn, a tattoo is hard to lose.

Memorial tattoos are often first conceived as the companion animal ages, and like Charlotte’s tattoo of Mack, sometimes leads to a design honoring a lifelong bond. Melanie, who participated in a broader study on animal-themed tattoos mentioned “I intend to get a piece modelled after my Pekingese one day, as he has been with me through my entire adult life” (Hill, 2018, 2019). Although a number of persons I spoke to, myself included, plan to get a tattoo honoring a special nonhuman animal(s), there is often no sense of urgency and an extra significance placed on getting it right. When a companion animal dies, the significance of a tattoo goes beyond commemorating a shared bond and can function as a means of adjusting to loss. Davidson (2007, 2008) developed a concept of griefwork as “shared labour” that is negotiated by grieving persons and others and recognizes the importance of continuing bonds. Rather than attempting to move beyond grief by “letting go,” the “continuing bonds theory” recognizes and supports a bereaved person in maintaining an ongoing relationship with the deceased (Letherby & Davidson, 2015; Packman et al., 2006). The deceased is ever present for the bereaved, while for others they are the “elephant in the room” that no-one talks about. Memorial tattoos can be important tools for maintaining an “absence presence” by opening dialog through embodied storytelling (Letherby & Davidson, 2015). Using interview and focus group data, Davidson (2017) studied the meanings behind memorial tattoos and found five central features: permanence, continuation of bonds, adjustment to loss, an opening of dialogue, and visual representations of change. In this study I wanted to understand how similar memorial tattoos dedicated to animal others are to those honoring human loved-ones.

Constance has two memorial tattoos, one in honor of Boo, an Italian Greyhound cross who she called her “first love,” and another for her greyhound, Bailey (Figure 2). Both tattoos are pawprint replicas from Boo and Bailey, done in watercolor. Boo was given to her as a child and died when Constance was a young adult. Bailey lived with Constance for 12 years and died a year prior to our interview. Constance believes her tattoos helped her deal with the pain of loss by serving as a physical mark and continued presence. Boo had a long illness, and prior to being euthanized he and Constance spent a final weekend together. During this time, she

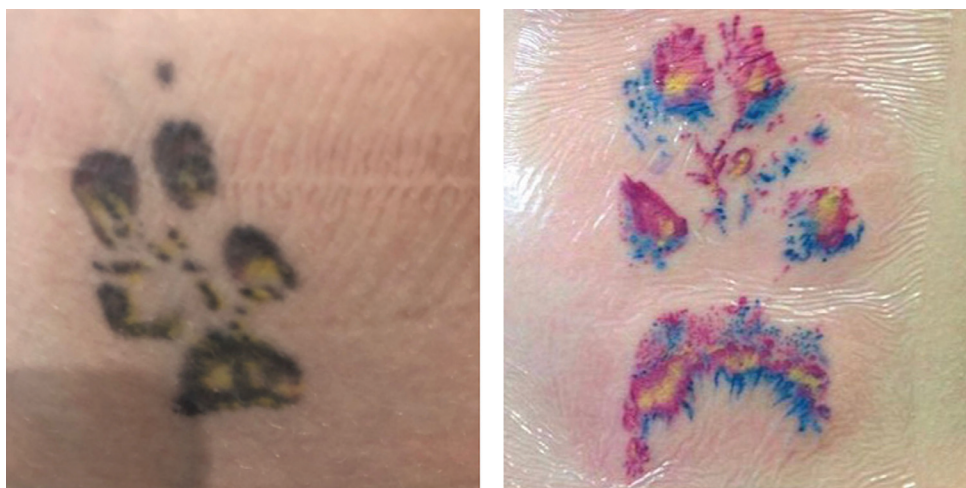


Figure 2. Paw print tattoos for Boo (left) and Bailey (right).

Photo and permission to publish in *Anthrozoös* provided by the owner of the tattoos.

painted his paw and made a print. Because Bailey was older when he died, Constance felt she had time to prepare and had even considered a tattoo while he was still alive. In the end he only suffered a short illness and died within a week. As with Boo, Constance wanted his paw-print as a tattoo and not a stylized version. She visited several local tattoo artists, one of whom recognized the emotional investment and confessed to being too nervous of getting it wrong. The investment in time and thought that went into the designs perhaps helped by providing some structure to dealing with the emotional pain of loss. Schiffirin (2009) recognized that people often “experience their memorial tattoos as offering structure to an experience of grief that can be characterized as overwhelming, disempowering, and chaotic” (p. 38).

Constance’s tattoos provide a means of “continuing bonds” with Boo and Bailey. The end of a life is not necessarily the end of a relationship, and through the process of continuing bonds “the bereaved remains involved and connected to the deceased and can be emotionally sustained” (Packman et al., 2006, p. 817). Through the tattoos, Constance is able to maintain a connection and derive strength and comfort from that connection. During his lifetime, Boo helped Constance get through a lot of pain and trauma, and she says “sometimes I touch my hip and feel like he is still with me.” Constance was diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) and started self-harming at a young age. However, she told me she did not self-harm after Boo’s death and partly attributes this to the tattoo: “I can be on the verge and look at the paws and gain strength not to do that because Boo, and now Bailey, would be unhappy.” A number of studies found positive correlations between mental illness and tattooing (Birmingham et al., 1999; Dhossche et al., 2000; Stirn et al., 2006), including an association with self-harm (Stirn & Hinz, 2008). However, the correlation need not be symptomatic but rather a mechanism for coping. Davidson (2017) reported a narrative similar to that of Constance, from a participant whose tattoo, dedicated to her late father, provides her the strength to overcome the urge to self-harm. In support of this therapeutic role, a study of patients struggling with eating disorders concluded that tattooing may be symbolic of “self-care” and an antidote to the urge to self-harm (Claes et al., 2005). The process of acquiring the tattoos may help with the immediate grief and emotional pain. Constance said “the pain of getting tattooed helped ease

the emotional pain and it did not hurt as much as I imaged it would—like people say it does with the ribs.” This is interesting because people often claim the ribs are the most painful, including several participants in my wider study of animal species-themed tattoos (Hill, 2018, 2019). However, like Constance, I would describe my ribcage tattoo as being the least painful, perhaps because the whole process was about embracing the scars of surgery and letting go of emotional pain. I would describe the experience as a “worthwhile pain,” not unlike struggling through the final miles of a marathon. Indeed, the practice of tattooing has been likened to transformative pilgrimages because “subjects who experience pain pass through various kinds of ritual death and rebirth, and redefine the relationship between the self and society through the skin” (Schildkrout, 2004, p. 320). In “non-Western” cultures tattooing is often a rite of passage, and the pain and suffering experienced is a necessary element of the transformation (Rush, 2005). “Pain alters awareness; it is a focal point that turns us inward, into the psyche” (ibid, p. 178), thus the process of getting a tattoo can be transformative.

Memorial tattoos can also function as a means of opening up dialogue (Davidson, 2017; Letherby & Davidson, 2015), and Constance stated she likes her tattoos to be visible and to talk about Boo and Bailey. However, like other participants, she has experienced the occasional negative response. For example, the mother of a friend told Constance her pawprint tattoo was “stupid,” even knowing what it represented. A general disregard and trivialization of grief for nonhuman animals is unfortunately not uncommon (Chur-Hansen, 2010; Packman et al., 2014). Although grieving for companion animals is a widespread phenomenon that is recognized in “Western” societies and provided for by counselling services, books, funeral services, and online support groups, there still exists a reluctance to grieve openly (Demello, 2016; Eason, 2019; Redmalm, 2015). There are people who feel no particular affinity for animals, and this failure to appreciate the connection others may have can result in a lack of compassion toward those grieving companion animals (Chur-Hansen, 2010; Packman et al., 2014; Serpell, 2004). When someone trivializes a loss by saying “it’s just a dog, you can get another,” it is not only cruel to the grief-stricken individual but also perpetuates a narrative that renders a dog’s life meaningless (Eason, 2019). Thus, grief is suppressed and a narrative of death emerges that renders that life less worthy.

In Australia, many more men than women have tattoos, but the highest rates of tattooing are among young women (Heywood et al., 2012); Constance said she feels a connection to that “tattoo community.” She described her father as being from a working-class background that embraces tattoos, but only in men. Her mother does not like tattoos on women either, but seemed to accept the Boo pawprint, perhaps because she understood it was so personal. However, her mother did not approve of the cartoon character tattoo Constance had done later. But again, her mother said nothing negative about the second pawprint. Constance’s mother recognized the significance of the pawprint tattoos in the grieving and was able to detach from her disapproval of tattoos on females. This suggests the tattoos are effectively facilitating “griefwork as groupwork” (Davidson, 2017; Letherby & Davidson, 2015), by demonstrating the significance of relationship and the loss.

Anna has a tattoo of Shamus and Petey. Done in the style of a prehistoric cave painting it signifies “forever” and “running free” (Figure 3). Shamus is the horse, and although Anna has other horses, who she says are all special, he was her first and has been with her since foalhood. Anna had been planning to have the horse part of the tattoo done for some time. However, when Petey died unexpectedly, she had the design done one week later to including Petey running alongside. Anna explained that the horses were a big part of his freedom,



Figure 3. Petey and Shamus “running free.”

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which he first experienced in a horse field. Petey had been badly abused, and Anna described him as “a brave little dog who was all about overcoming adversity.” I asked Anna if she believed the tattoo helped in the grieving process. She was not sure if it did but felt she “needed to do it for him.” The need to mark a death is a reoccurring theme, also reported for memorial tattoos dedicated to human loved-ones (Davidson, 2017; Letherby & Davidson, 2015; Schiffrin, 2009). Although Anna was not convinced the tattoo helped with the grieving process, she did like to talk about Petey. In this respect the tattoo functions as a means of opening of dialogue. Unlike some of the other participants, Anna had experienced no negative reactions expressed either toward her tattoo or the subject. This is perhaps because she told me tattooing is relatively common in her family and immediate community.

Sandra, a friend of Anna’s, also has a tattoo in remembrance of Petey. She told me she is a big fan of tattoos, and chooses designs to represent the things she loves. For Petey she had a bone motif to represent a favorite plaything of his. She said that “even though he wasn’t mine,” Petey was “a boy that I generally loved and when he died it was so horrible and upsetting for everyone because he was a family member.” Sandra acknowledged her position as a close family friend, and the description of Petey as a “family member” was unprompted. It is interesting that Sandra used the phrase “he wasn’t mine,” as she seemed to be using it in the same context as one might say “he wasn’t my brother.” Sandra said talking about Petey was not painful, but more like a celebration of who he was. She said she loves talking about the tattoo because it is “a way to make sure I remember how great Petey was and to tell other people about him.” Sandra told me how Petey was “very inspiring because he had a horrible start, but learned to trust again and really grew as an individual.” This narrative is not dissimilar from that of a participant in my broader study (Hill, 2018, 2019), who talked about a tattoo dedicated to a deceased human friend. Furthermore, it highlights how bonds with nonhumans can form that are not necessarily kinship but are none-the-less meaningful. Just as we have human friends and family, we can also have other animal friends along with our nonhuman kin.

Victoria has several tattoos dedicated to her Cole, who as was with her from kittenhood and lived to be 21 years of age. When he died Victoria was devastated, and a month after his death she got her first tattoo in his memory—an outline of a black cat (Figure 4). However, she

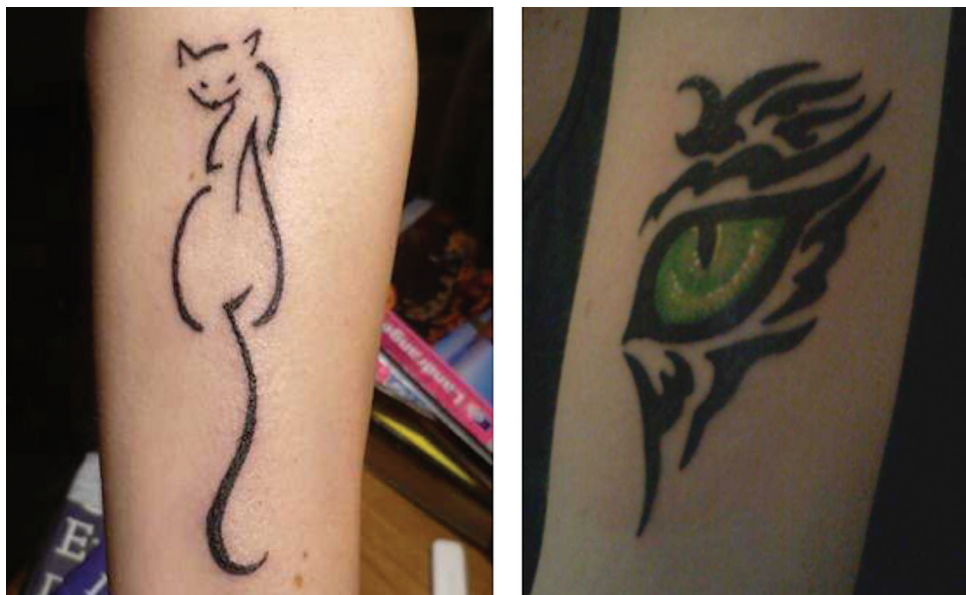


Figure 4. Victoria's tattoos dedicated to Cole.

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explained that this was not enough and next came the cat eye, followed by other “black cat” designs. Cole’s death was traumatic for Victoria. Cole was dying from kidney failure, and when he became dehydrated Victoria took him to the vet hoping they could stabilize him so he could come home to die with her by his side. However, she was at work when the vet called and Cole died before she arrived. Victoria’s narrative suggests her tattoos are visual representations of change and an adjustment to loss, two themes identified by (Davidson, 2017). Victoria felt like she betrayed Cole because she had promised to be with him at the end, and the tattoos may represent an attempt to make amends. Some of her tattoos are often visible. However, unlike other participants, Victoria said she is less keen to talk about Cole, and now finds it painful.

Schiffrin (2009) reported almost all her participants described a change in their relationship to their memorial tattoo as their grief became less acute, albeit to becoming more comfortable talking. For Victoria, the memorial tattoos became more emotionally private, and she is not engaging in griefwork as groupwork (Davidson, 2008, 2017; Letherby & Davidson, 2015). This reflects the unique and individual experiences of loss and grief, and her journey may or may not lead her to being more open to dialog in the future. Regardless, the significance of her bond with Cole is unlikely to change. Victoria said the first tattoo she got is most significant, and she often looks at it and thinks of him: “like a part of him will always be with me.”

Joanna has a portrait of her cat Marmalade tattooed on her back (Figure 5). Joanna was five years old when Marmalade first came into her life, and died when Joanna was in her late teens. This is her first tattoo, which she got a few years after Marmalade died because she wanted her to always be with her. A visible tattoo like Joanna’s boldly asserts the significance of the relationship she had with Marmalade, and at the same time embodies the assertiveness and confidence Joanna strives toward. Joanna described Marmalade as “a very sassy cat” and felt she “needed to take on some of her [Marmalade’s] characteristics into my own life.” Joanna described Marmalade’s bold and “bossy” personality as being the opposite of her own shy and

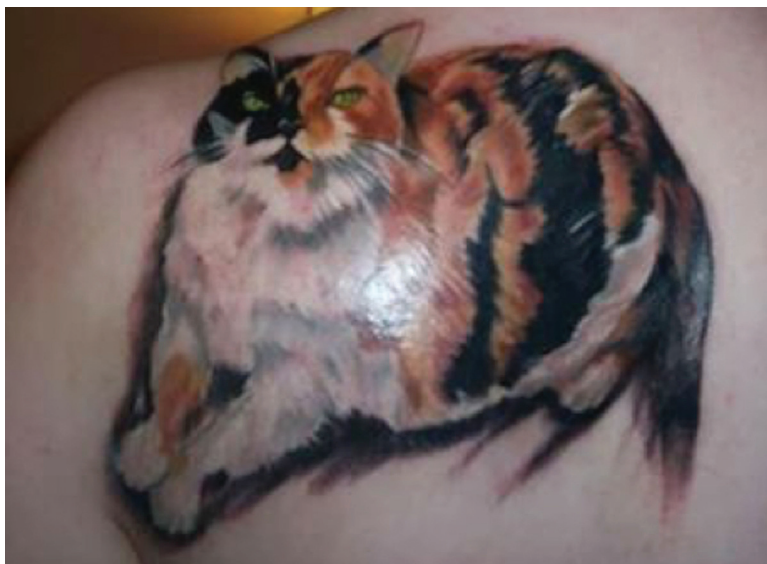


Figure 5. Joanna's cat Marmalade.

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anxious self, and said “the tattoo reminds me to be more like her,” as well as “helping me feel that she is with me.” Marmalade was a constant comfort during childhood, and Joanna described how she suffered from severe anxiety and couldn't bear the thought of Marmalade not being there. Similar to Constance's relationship with Boo, Joanna derived emotional support from Marmalade that seems to have had a positive impact on her mental health. The subject of “emotional support animals” has received a lot of attention recently, and the concept of assigning animals the job of emotionally supporting humans is controversial (Glenk, 2017). However, the benefits described by Constance and Joanna derive from the organic nature of the relationship itself—much like a close friend or family member provides support.

Joanna sometimes receives comments or questions asking if the tattoo was her cat or just a random picture; unfortunately, some people laugh and tell her it is a ridiculous idea for a tattoo. Disenfranchised grief is “the grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not, or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported” (Doka, 1989, p. 4). Disenfranchisement can result from unrecognized relationships or trivialized relationships. Not everyone experiences bonding with a nonhuman animal (Herzog, 2014; Jacobson et al., 2012; Serpell, 1996, 2004); consequently, people mourning the loss of a nonhuman companion are vulnerable to insensitive comments.

Discussion

Fox (2006) points out that “one of the major dilemmas posed by the pet–human relationship is the pet's dual status as both a ‘person’ and possession” (p. 528). The human is invariably the dominant partner, and even a service animal is governed by their human. An exception might be the relationship formed between human children and family “pets,” but even then, the nonhuman is not dominant. In this study some of the relationships were first established in childhood (Constance and Boo, Joanna and Marmalade), and these reflected a greater dependence on the nonhuman animal for emotional support. Conversely, those established

during adulthood tended to describe a role more like that of a parent or caregiver (Charlotte and Mack). The tattoo narratives examined in this study exhibit elements of child–parent, dependent–caregiver, friend, confidant, and soulmate-type relationships and support the idea that there is no single type of human–companion animal bond (Cain, 2016; Quackenbush, 1985; Walsh, 2009). Victoria’s intention to be ultimately buried with Cole’s ashes, something normally reserved for family members, implies a kinship bond. That participants who felt compelled to immortalize their living companion animal on their skin (Debbie and Foxy, Charlotte and Mach, Simona and Poppy) is counter to the notion of companion animals as being “flexible persons” or “emotional commodities” that at any moment may be demoted from their “family” status or rehomed (Shir-Vertesh, 2012).

Memorial tattoos dedicated to animal others seem to function in much the same way as those dedicated to humans (Davidson, 2017; Schiffrin, 2009). They may be particularly helpful in coping with disenfranchised grief. Davidson (2017) writes about her own suffering following the deaths of her prenatal children, which at the time were not fully acknowledged by either the medical profession or society. She recounts her personal experience of being told to “go home and have another one” and how she grieved alone because “others did not consider my babies part of my family” (Davidson, 2017, p. 38). Having her babies memorialized on her skin enabled Davidson to assert her identity as a bereaved mother, something she felt previously denied. People mourning the loss of a nonhuman companion often encounter insensitive comments. However, the grief experienced following the death of a beloved companion animal can be just as real and intense as that experienced in response to human death, particularly amongst lonely and socially isolated individuals (Eason, 2019; McCutcheon & Fleming, 2002; Redmalm, 2015; Wrobel & Dye, 2003). Eason (2019) explored how cyberspace provides a platform for enabling the validation of companion animal lives and community building, which can provide a lifeline to those suffering alone. Participants in my study had tattoos that, although sometimes concealed, were oftentimes part of the public-self (Bell, 1999; Roberts, 2012). Furthermore, many had shared their tattoos on private and public social media spaces, engaging with a wider community.

Concluding Remarks

The tattoo narratives presented here reveal strong emotional connections and shared experiences with nonhuman animals, which is unsurprising given my participants chose to immortalize these relationships on their skin. Are human–companion animal relationships distinct, similar, or identical to those you share with your mother, your offspring, your siblings, or your mother-in-law? The answer to this depends on who you ask, because there appears no one type of relationship (Cain, 2016; Quackenbush, 1985; Walsh, 2009). The nature of the human–companion animal bond is not so much determined by the species of either actor, although more often than not the assumed roles of caregiver and dependent renders it most similar to that of parent and child. Combined with the provision of care and dedication to their wellbeing, I argue that these are kinship bonds born out of nurturement, but none–theless exhibit the “mutuality of being” that Sahlin (2011a) posits to underpin all forms of kinship. This study supports the conclusion that humans can and do form kinship bonds with other animals, and memorial tattoos serve similar functions, regardless of the species of the loved one. Recognition of nonhuman kinship bonds by caregivers, professional counsellors, and society should facilitate better services and care for the bereaved (Eason, 2019; Gosse & Barnes, 1994; McCutcheon & Fleming, 2002; Wrobel & Dye, 2003).

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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