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21st century *Suikoden*: Tattoo reinterpretations of the ‘Water Margin’ as racialized resistance in Chicano Los Angeles

Todd Honma^a and Anthony Francoso^b

^aIntercollegiate Department of Asian American Studies, Pitzer College, Claremont, CA, USA; ^bDepartment of Sociology, Pasadena City College, Pasadena, CA, USA

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on tattoo artist Chris Brand’s recent project, *108 Heroes of Los Angeles*, as a way to understand how experiences of minoritization are narrated through the racialized geographies and historical specificities of global Los Angeles. Basing his work on the woodblock prints of nineteenth century artist Kuniyoshi, Brand reinvents the heroic figures of the fourteenth century Chinese novel ‘Water Margin’, or *Suikoden*, in Japanese, by inserting in their place Chicano heroes in the context of 1980s Los Angeles. Brand’s personal and professional experiences have enabled him to develop a visual aesthetics that reflects a particular Angeleno perspective. By combining Chicano black and grey tattooing with Japanese tattooing, Brand’s work highlights the ways in which the *Suikoden*’s transculturation across space and time function to redefine our understanding of urban topographies of race, the narration of marginality, and the circulating aesthetics of resistance that converge at the intimate scale of the body.

In 2005 Los Angeles-based tattoo artist Chris Brand embarked on an ambitious new tattoo project reinterpreting the famous tale of the *Suikoden* into a 1980s Los Angeles context. The *Suikoden*, known as *Shui Hu Zhuan* in Chinese, or ‘Water Margin’ in English, is a fourteenth century Chinese tale about 108 outlaw warriors who battle against government corruption during the Song Dynasty. The text grew immensely popular in Edo Period Japan, especially after the artist Kuniyoshi depicted the various heroes using single sheet colour prints, ushering in a ‘*Suikoden* craze’ which inspired much visual culture during this period (Klomp makers 2003). This included the incorporation of Kuniyoshi’s motifs into the lexicon of Japanese tattooing, historically a practice popular among the lower classes and which signalled one’s occupation (such as firemen, palanquin carriers, labourers, artisans, etc.) The body suit tattoos depicted in Kuniyoshi’s prints are also said to have inspired the growth and innovation in Japanese tattooing as a particular aesthetic form.¹ The *Suikoden*’s popularity among the masses could be attributed to the relatability of the central themes of the novel, such as government corruption and exploitation of poor people, which echoed the lives of many who struggled to survive under the oppressive rule of the Tokugawa shogunate (Klomp makers 2003).

Chris Brand considers the qualities displayed in the *Suikoden* tale to be universal since they represent attributes and aspirations that continue to resonate today: the struggle against authority and domination, the underdog status of the lower classes, resistance, and loyalty. Brand’s version, entitled *108 Heroes of Los Angeles*, re-envision the *Suikoden* through a series of back pieces that combines traditional

Japanese tattooing, woodblock prints, and Chicano black and grey style tattooing. According to the artist, the project was about taking 'two powerful cultural art forms and trying to see how similar they are' (Brand 2015). One of the key similarities between these two traditions is that tattooing in both of these cultures is bound up with the figure of the outlaw. Brand's work acts as a bridge between two different outlaw aesthetics. Brand writes,

By continuing the story here in the U.S.A. through the Chicano context, it is changed into something very American. In the same way that the Japanese continued the Chinese storytelling tradition and made it their own in the *Suikoden*, my '108 Heroes of Los Angeles' continues the Japanese stories and legends in the context of Chicano Tattoo Culture. (Brand 2013, 167)

Brand's cross-cultural recontextualization of the *Suikoden* story into a Los Angeles context can be framed within what Ortiz ([1947] 1995) refers to as the process of transculturation, or the mixing, blending, and borrowing of racial and ethnic cultures. For Ortiz, transculturation is a mixture of deculturation and acculturation: that is, the loss or destruction of culture due to colonization and genocide, and the acquisition of traits from another culture. This process gives rise to neoculturation, or the creation of new cultural realities due to the intermixing of multiple cultural histories and traits, all within the context of a racialized society structured in dominance (Hall 1996; Stannard 1993; Wilson 2005). The diverse multiracial context of Los Angeles gives rise to many examples of such transcultural mixing, including Roy Choi's new food styles (Wang 2013), the music and dance of FandangObon (Miyamoto 2016), and visual cultures such as Chaz Bojorquez' graffiti (Klefsch and Scabbia 2009). Brand's *108 Heroes* project contributes to such transcultural practices by creating linkages between two historically and geographically distinct cultures, while also focusing on the domination of the lower classes and their resistance to authority.

Brand's renarration of the *Suikoden* draws upon the intersection of race and class at both the historical and contemporary level. In particular, race becomes a central motif for analysis within his work since primary focus is given to the way in which the *Suikoden* story maps onto narratives of oppression and resistance within a Chicano Los Angeles context. At the same time, Brand's own positionality as an artist and as a resident of Los Angeles is important to note.² He states,

I'm not originally from L.A. I moved here in '86/87, so I have lived most of life here, but no matter what, I am not Chicano, I am not Mexican, I am not Salvadoran, I am not anything but a standard white dude from Massachusetts. (Brand 2015)

Given the pervasiveness of racial politics (Kivel 2016), and the intense racialization of tattoo culture, Brand's whiteness may appear suspect considering his work relies so heavily on non-white narratives and aesthetic forms. However, we argue that, through the renarration of the *Suikoden*, Brand is facilitating the decentring of whiteness. The artistic perspective and vision that defines this practice, mixed with the subjective realities of the body of the tattooed, reflects a predominant person of colour positionality, one that reflects the multiple cultural realities of Los Angeles and beyond.³

Tattooing is an inherently collaborative process that requires the imagination, energies, and labour of multiple actors, not simply the artist. For the *108 Heroes* project, Brand not only brings his perspective of Los Angeles and his training in multiple aesthetic traditions (Chicano black and grey, as well as Japanese tattooing), but he is also working alongside people of colour who help to construct the narrative and on whose bodies those very narratives take place.⁴ In this sense, the situated knowledge (Anzaldúa 1987; Collins 2000; Davis 1999) of the tattooed becomes integral in the renarration of the *Suikoden* since it is also the lived experience of the tattooed that is being retold, a retelling that focuses on structural oppression of those living in a white-dominated society. This unique narrative co-construction reflects the viewpoints of both the tattooer and the tattooed rather than a single author or individual. Framed in this way, Brand's project disrupts hegemonic understandings of sole authored works of cultural production that prioritize the myth of a lone 'artistic genius' working in creative seclusion rather than as part of a broader community (Kelley 2009); instead, Brand is actively working in creative solidarity with people of colour in the retelling of their racialized experiences, decentring perspectives that uphold the centrality of Whiteness and opening up alternative political visions for social change.



Figure 1. Kuniyoshi's depiction of Rorihakucho Chojun from the *Suikoden*. Source: Authors.

Hence, in our discussion of Brand's work, we consider the role of the tattoo artist as a creative producer who highlights the narratives of marginalized groups and contributes to our understanding of how minor culture is created, inhabited, and transformed. We approach the study of minor culture as that which emerges from marginalized communities 'who exist politically, socially, or economically 'outside' of dominant norms and institutions' (Cohen 1999, 37). In particular, minoritarianism is narrated through a collaborative process between tattoo artist and tattooed subject, a narrative that is filtered through the specific racialized geographies and historical specificities of global Los Angeles. In the case studies that follow, we examine how Chris Brand's work arises from a particularly Angeleno perspective that lays the foundation for an understanding of Los Angeles as a space of outlaw culture: where racialized violence and oppression also creates a space of creative possibilities and minoritarian resistance. In order to accomplish such an analysis, we undertake close visual readings of two of Brand's *108 Heroes* backpieces and also draw upon insights from our interview with Brand himself. In so doing,



Figure 2. Big Guero from the *108 Heroes of Los Angeles* project. Source: Photographer: Kip Fulbeck. Courtesy of Chris Brand.

we emphasize the ways in which minoritarianism is embodied through Brand's work by examining how the body functions as a site through which the ontological and epistemological facets of race and racial experiences are creatively expressed and represented (Omi and Winant 1994), and where the possibilities for transcultural reinvention can be brought into being through corporeal modification.⁵

Big Guero and genealogies of L.A. tattooing

The first character that Brand reinterpreted for his *108 Heroes* project is the warrior Rorihakucho Chojun, one of the most famous and popularly depicted figures from the *Suikoden*. Brand himself considers Chojun the epitome of the *Suikoden*. According to Brand (2015),



Figure 3. Cat head drainage covers at Los Angeles River. Courtesy of Chris Brand.

[Chojun] is the most powerful, it's the absolute when it comes to depicting the struggle of an outlaw. Because he is getting killed in this depiction. So anytime you are seeing this image, you are seeing this dude on his last breath, he's getting shot down but still going forward, and that's as outlaw as it gets when it comes to a lot of people's lifestyles.

Kuniyoshi depicts Chojun in front of a water gate, arrows darting toward him, and a sword gripped between his teeth. His body is covered with what is now considered traditional Japanese tattoos, including a large snake, flowers, waves, and wind scrolls (see Figure 1). Kuniyoshi's reinterpretation is unique to the Chinese *Shuihu zhuan*, since the original text does not mention any tattoos on Chojun's body. Brand was particularly attracted to this image because 'you got these wonderful tattoos on him, this beautiful positioning, this wonderful shishi [lion] in the upper part that stares down at you the same way his eyes are staring at you. It's a beautiful, beautiful image' (Brand 2015).

Exploring a close reading of the transformation of Chojun into Big Guero provides insight into how Brand re-narrates the *Suikoden* into a specifically Los Angeles-based visual tale. Brand's intensive process of rewriting the *Suikoden* is not a simple find-and-replace type of project; instead, his work is a thoughtful re-imagining and reinterpretation of the Suikoden tale filtered through his visual aesthetics and Angeleno experience. Brand characterizes this process as a 'constant circular rereading, and rethinking and rethinking,' running through various questions to figure out how to recontextualize the centuries old tale to a modern context:

How specific are these attributes? How specific is this weaponry? How specific is their attitude and their way of carrying themselves? Now how does that get retold? What does that have to do with anything that happens in this day and age? And just on and on and on. (Brand 2015)

Like Kuniyoshi and other *Suikoden* interpreters before him, Brand allows himself creative liberties when necessary in order to fit or enhance the story for the Los Angeles context. Ultimately, what is at stake for Brand is a reconceptualization of the power dynamics that underscore the outlaw culture depicted in the Suikoden and how he can convey this legacy for a contemporary audience. He states,

All these different things that I am trying to consider [are important] 'cause to me it's a powerful story and powerful tradition. But how do I add on to that? How do I give it something that is very Los Angeles? (Brand 2015)

Comparing Kuniyoshi's and Brand's versions of *Suikoden* helps us to realize how the piece is transformed into a L.A. specific project through both local characterization and contextualization. The inscription on Kuniyoshi's print reads,

He [Chojun] is exceptionally brave, has a body whiter than snow and is easily capable of floating in the water for forty or fifty ri [one ri is about 2.44 miles or 3.9 km]. Furthermore, he is able to stay underwater for seven days and nights without difficulty. (Klompmakers 2003, 172)

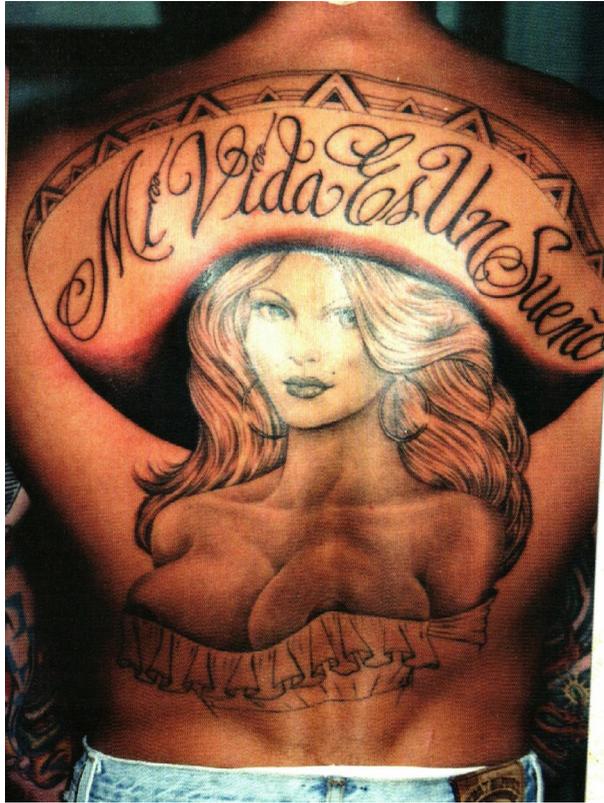


Figure 4. Back piece by tattoo artist Jack Rudy. Courtesy of Jack Rudy.

Brand has interpreted this ‘whiter than snow’ body into the character Big Guero, ‘guero’ being a term used to describe someone with pale skin. Brand explains his reworking of the scene:

In this depiction, it’s the same basic situation, but it happens to take place not at a castle, but down near the [L.A.] river. He tries to do some dirty deeds, gets caught by the cops, they chase him down to the river, so you see the bullets shooting him at the river instead of the arrows. (Brand 2015, see Figure 2)

Brand portrays a context that is distinctively Los Angeles, set off by visual cues that point to its specificity, such as the cat head drainage covers and the tattoos found on the body of the Big Guero character. This reconceptualization is informed by Brand’s own personal involvement in researching and rendering Los Angeles as an artistic subject.

Brand’s passion for aesthetic possibilities present in Los Angeles, as well as his interest in the local topographies and landscape of the region, led him to pursue a project documenting the Los Angeles River. He co-authored a book entitled *The Ulysses Guide to the Los Angeles River*, which examines in detail the history, ecology, and biology of the river, as well as telling unique stories of the river through outsider art forms such as graffiti, hobo tags, street paintings, and tattooing. The culmination of the Los Angeles River book project was an exhibition of the artwork at the Pasadena Museum of California Art. While working on the book, Brand, influenced by his experiences in the tattoo profession as well as his interest in Chicano and Japanese cultural history and art, started finding similar imagery and cultural connections between these two cultures. Brand explains, ‘this image of Rorihakucho Chojun of the *Suikoden*, he is at a watergate with karashishi [lions]; and the water gate, that to me really sang true to these water drainage portals that have cat heads on them’ (Brand 2015). The cat heads Brand is referring to are drainage portals along the L.A. River in Atwater Village (see Figure 3) which, in Brand’s retelling, is painted in a Japanese style. Yet while the form is Japanese, the content reflects the art and

graffiti culture of Chicano Los Angeles. This cultural amalgamation illustrates the way in which Brand's work emerges as the product of the L.A. landscape, the local colour shaping the types of tattoo motifs that he incorporates into his work.

Another example of how Los Angeles manifests itself in Brand's reconceptualization of the *Suikoden* is the body of the character Big Guero itself. The tattoos that cover Big Guero's body are distinctively characteristic of Chicano Los Angeles: the black and grey style that includes figures such as realistic portraiture, the Virgin of Guadalupe, and the pachuco cross. Black and grey tattooing as a distinctive aesthetic form originated in the barrios of East Los Angeles (Govenar 1988). Brand's trajectory within the profession of tattooing is the result of this development. Brand started apprentice tattooing at In the Skin, a street shop in Pasadena that employed a number of influential black and grey tattoo artists such as Mark Mahoney, Tom Tilden, Mike Brown, and Rob Dringenberg. Mahoney and Dringenberg also worked at the famous Good Time Charlie's Tattoland, and it was Dringenberg who encouraged Brand to challenge himself and push his artistry to the next level by joining the highly influential Good Time Charlie's Tattoland shop.

After this initial discussion with Dringenberg, Brand interviewed with Jack Rudy and was offered a part time job at Good Time Charlie's Tattoland in 2000. Brand worked parttime at Good Time Charlie's Tattoland for six months before being offered a full time job. This was a critical moment for Brand's career since Good Time Charlie's Tattoland is one of the most influential tattoo shops in the nation. Good Time Charlie's Tattoland was established in East Los Angeles in 1975 by Charlie Cartwright who started tattooing in the 1950s, and with Jack Rudy as his apprentice, the shop quickly became a forerunner in single needle and portraiture style black and grey tattooing. Since the primarily Chicano clientele was asking for 'thinner and thinner lines that could mimic prison style, or home style tattooing', the shop became the pioneer in single needle tattooing which allows for very thin fine line realistic tattoo work. For Brand, the historical legacy of the shop, including the specific cultural history of the clientele, had tremendous influence on his artistic tattoo style. Brand (2015) states,

As an artist I love subtle detailed black and grey work, realism, things like that, in drawing, painting, sculpting, and whatever, so for tattooing, that is the home base of realism and subtlety because it doesn't get any thinner than a single needle.

In his rendering of the tattooed body of Big Guero, Brand incorporates a tattoo piece by Jack Rudy himself, one of the leading figures in the development of Chicano black and grey tattooing. Located on the lower ribcage/abdomen area of Big Guero's body is a quintessentially Chicano black and grey motif of a woman in a sombrero, for which Jack Rudy is famous (see Figure 4). Not only does this motif signal the localization of the story but it allows Brand to pay homage to his artistic predecessors.

The importance of Good Time Charlie's Tattoland and the establishment of what is now globally known as black and grey tattooing cannot be overstated. For Brand, the time he spent working in Good Time Charlie's Tattoland cemented his commitment to L.A. style. He notes,

If I am part of any particular culture, it's the culture of Good Time Charlie's Tattoland, and that's got a particular history and particular legacy that I try to uphold and try to understand whenever I am there, or whenever I am thinking about that particular place. (Brand 2015)

The emphasis on the importance of history highlights how his work is not simply about just the place-based connections, but also the temporal. When asked about why he chose the 1980s as the context for his *Suikoden* reinterpretation, Brand (2015) explains:

[Nowadays] I think a lot of people just want to look like the outlaw. But at the time [1980s], it was gangsters getting gang stuff tattooed on them, it was bikers getting biker stuff tattooed on them, and many times, regular people just getting regular stuff tattooed on them. But a fair portion, if not a large portion of people getting their work done at Good Time Charlie's Tattoland were trying to step their artwork game up a little bit, but they were still very related to their lifestyle.

For Brand, the 1980s were a specific time when aesthetics and experiences converged to create a style of tattooing that was not yet divorced from cultures of origination and also embraced a spirit of innovation that was emblematic of a burgeoning artistic movement, which Arnold Rubin (1988) has called the 'Tattoo Renaissance'.



Figure 5. Kuniyoshi's depiction of Ichijosei Kosanjo from the *Suikoden*. Source: Authors.

Since the 1980s, this Renaissance has been about challenging the norms, establishing one's personal style, and contributing to the aesthetic innovations that make this tattoo culture increasingly global, while also recognizing one's indebtedness to the past. Brand's work accomplishes exactly that. He explains,

[The *108 Heroes* project] is more related to the nostalgia of and the legacy of the shop I am from, but also to point out that we are currently in the 21st Century, let me tell this 20th Century story that is based in the Edo period that is based in the 14th century. So it's really just stringing along as many different time lines as possible to get people to understand that this is not a problem that has just occurred, and not a problem that only happened then, this is stuff that just keeps going on.

Brand's work reflects a global and local amalgamation, crossing and merging different cultures, epochs, and historical locations. The Tattoo Renaissance of the 1980s can now be examined as a form of transculturation portraying the experiences of multiple marginalized communities.



Figure 6. Pistolera from the *108 Heroes of Los Angeles* project. Source: Photographer: Kip Fulbeck. Courtesy of Chris Brand.

Pistolera and processes of transculturation

Chris Brand has reinterpreted a number of the 108 heroes. The tattooed depiction of Pistolera, a Chicana gunslinger, is another example of Brand's process. Pistolera is based on Ichijosei Kosanjo, the daughter of a general, who is a skilled warrior and has killed many men. In the Kuniyoshi version, Ichijosei Kosanjo is seen wielding her characteristic two swords, her body twisted backwards in order to dodge flying arrows (see Figure 5). Brand (2015) praises Kuniyoshi's depiction of the warrior: 'She's got this amazing outfit on, she is just cranking her whole body all the way. She is as warrior as it gets'. Brand reinterprets Kosanjo as a chola aptly named Pistolera who is the 'bad ass leader of the neighborhood'. Instead of her iconic twin swords, Pistolera is holding two smoking guns, and her beautiful ornate robe is replaced with oversized flannel, baggy jeans, and chanklas/sandals to reflect the new context. However, Brand's tattoo maintains close attention to sartorial detail, in the way he embellishes Pistolera with intricate patterns in the bandana, the cigarette tucked behind her ear, the flowers of Kosanjo, the rose tattoo on her forearm, razor blades in her hair, and typical Chicana accoutrements such as woven jelly bracelets on her wrist, large hoop earrings, feathered hair, thin eyebrows, dark lipstick, heavy eyeshadow, and her name sprawled across her chest so everyone knows who she is (see Figure 6). Yet this representation of

Pistolera departs from what can be seen as standard black and grey tattooing in significant ways. Namely, instead of fine line portraiture or realism, Brand's strategy takes the Chicana content and translates it into a Japanese tattooing sensibility in its formal qualities. This includes smoke coming from the guns that resemble Japanese clouds, heavy lines of the clothing that fold stylistically like a robe or kimono, and the formalized facial features comprised of simple line work similar to those found in ukiyo-e prints. These qualities display Brand's characteristic hybrid style, melding Chicano and Japanese traditions.

The creation and development of overlapping aesthetic convergences between Japanese and Chicano cultural characteristics come together through the process of transculturation. The term transculturation was originally developed by Fernando Ortiz to mean 'the reciprocal process by which two cultures, upon contact, engage in a system of give and take and adaptation to each other's ways, though often not in an equal manner, resulting in the emergence of a new cultural reality' (Ortiz [1947] 1995). This cultural intermixing is evident throughout Southern California history with Japanese and Chicano realities interweaving between 1900 and 1950 in the agricultural fields of Oxnard (Almaguer 2008; Barajas 2012), as well as the front lawns of Southern California homes within the gardening industry (Tsuchida 1984). In characterizing Brand's work as a process of transculturation, we extend Ortiz's definition in a similar manner to Hermann 'to mean the adoption of cultural practices and their socio-cultural contextualization' (2007, 257). In this way, transculturation can be thought of as both a 'borrowing and lending between cultures' (Rosado 1997). This process of blending cultures due to past intercultural experiences and histories, allows for Brand to piece together the common histories of Japanese and Chicano cultures, and their place within historical and contemporary Los Angeles contexts.

The location of Los Angeles as a coastal city and its long history of tattooing as part of the Pacific World (Honma 2015; Rubin 1988) has provided Brand the opportunity to pursue multiple styles of tattooing. In particular, California has been the site of global connections between tattoo artists and aesthetics during the 1970s and 1980s. As previously noted, the Tattoo Renaissance ushered in an international perspective to the art and aesthetics of tattooing, in which California arose as the epicentre for global intermingling of styles and designs. One of the most influential aesthetic traditions to cross into California was Japanese tattooing (Hardy 2014). Since Brand's childhood, Japanese artistic cultures, including paintings, drawing, comic books and animation, have been heavily influential to his artistic development. He states, 'with an in-depth history and massive amounts of legacy, over the years I have slowly been trying to develop an understanding of Japanese tattooing; it's a pretty heavy language visually to understand' (Brand 2015). Brand credits his connection to two highly influential tattoo studios, Diamond Club in San Francisco and State of Grace in San Jose, for his education in Japanese tattoo culture and history. In addition, he has also hosted Japanese tattoo artists Miyazo and Yebis of Osaka for the past 5 years and has travelled many times to various parts of Japan to get tattooed and study Japanese tattooing and culture (Brand 2015).⁶

As a result of his training within multiple stylistic registers, Brand is able to seamlessly blend Japanese and Chicano black and grey tattooing to create a unique visual language, emboldened by the gripping heroic narratives that serve as the source materials for the content of his tattoos. For example, in the Pistolera piece, we experience the tension between a beautifully harmonious tattoo representation that melds different cultural traditions while witnessing a potentially horrific scene depicting a woman of colour getting shot at while being both the hunter and hunted. This internal contradiction is a central component in understanding the significance of Brand's work and its relationship to the retelling of minoritarian narratives. Furthermore, it is important to understand the significance that the 1980s L.A. context plays in constructing such a narrative. While Brand specifically chose the 1980s because of the legacy of the Tattoo Renaissance, for those viewing the tattoo, the 1980s context provides valuable insight into how we can interpret these works as part of a history of visual culture addressing the struggles of marginalized groups in Los Angeles. While the Tattoo Renaissance comprised of an artistic community that thrived on the shared visions and potentials brought about through cultural mixing and collaboration, Los Angeles continued to be a highly divided city along race and class lines through structural forces such as residential segregation, income inequality, and the reduction of social services (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996). Thus, there is a stark contrast between artistic form and the social

conditions from which they emerge. In its stirring depiction of both beauty and violence, Brand's work asks us to reflect critically on such tensions.

Keeping these internal contradictions in mind, Brand's representational choices for the Pistolera piece (and by extension, all his 108 Heroes) convey as much symbolically as it does formally. For instance, the black and grey style connotes an East L.A. aesthetic while symbolically highlighting the problems that he refers to, such as government abuses, corruption, domination, and the forms of resistance they engender. These practices specifically target those who occupy marginalized status and can be understood as institutionalized forms of oppression and disenfranchisement that occur in Chicano Los Angeles (Ochoa and Ochoa 2005). Pistolera's pose echoes Kosanjo's twisted shape, as she contorts her body to escape the bullets heading in her direction. The bullets Pistolera is evading can potentially represent multiple realities. The bullets can be coming from police officers, or even a rival gang. The police in this case represent a very specific danger, where gang affiliated youth of colour are targeted by police officers who have adopted military style tactics (Parenti 2008) while occupying 'gang infested' territories. In this sense, communities of colour become battlegrounds between youth who are being harassed, arrested, and even shot and killed by police (Kilgore 2015). Youth in these communities also have to evade rival gangs and their territories. Again, multiple contradictions emerge for youth of colour in working class barrios who have to keep 'trucha' (alert) due to threats of violence coming from police and rival gangs (Fremon 2008), while also creating safe spaces in their communities allowing for their fellow gang members, affiliates, and families the ability to roam freely within their given territories. Brand's depiction of Pistolera is the epitome of contradiction, where the artistry of the image is mixed with acts of violence and potential death. In this way the image symbolically represents beauty in struggle.

Conclusion: the minor within

The recent surge in popularity of tattooing means that once minor cultural forms have successfully infiltrated the mainstream. Yet Brand's work asks us to recognize the outlaw origins of tattooing and its roots within marginalized and oppressed communities, particularly communities of colour. Even though tattooing is experiencing global popularity, Brand's artistic endeavour is to make visible the legacy of minor cultural history and the experiences of marginalized communities. In other words, the political aspects of aesthetics are always already embedded within this 'outlaw culture' that disturbs conventional politics of representation (hooks 1994) and forces a recognition of the tensions and contradictions of living within a society organized around racial oppression. Rather than seeing the popularity of tattooing as a depoliticized aestheticizing of difference, or the cooptation of minoritarian culture, we can interpret the increased visibility of tattooing as drawing attention to the narratives of oppression and struggles within marginalized communities, written directly on the body of the minor subject. To further push this specific narrative, future topics Brand plans to tackle include Mexican narcotics culture, drug trafficking and police brutality. It is also important to note that as his work circulates within the public sphere through magazines, art exhibits, and the Internet, more attention to tattooing as a way of communicating the struggles of marginalized communities becomes more acceptable.

With its many layers of meaning and influences, Brand's work illustrates the ways in which transcultural forms of visual expression can meld both creative innovation and political expression. As Lowe (1996) points out, hybridization, in imagining different cultural alternatives, possesses the material traces of history. More specifically, in translating minoritarian narratives into a twenty-first century *Suikoden*, Brand both forwards a new visual lexicon of aesthetic invention while at the same time exposing the histories of criminality from which the different aesthetics emerge. Yet those very histories continue to reverberate to this day, which makes Brand's work all the more impactful and insightful regarding this particular contemporary moment. Japan continues to criminalize tattooing, as seen in the recent controversy surrounding the persecution of tattooists in Osaka (Otake 2015). The state of California continues to lead the nation in prison building, the very site from which black and grey tattooing first emerged (Camp 2016; DeMello 1993; Gilmore 2006). We are living in a time in which walls continue to be erected to separate and enclose ourselves from one another; walls of prisons, detention centres,

borders, residential communities, and the ever-increasing privatization of space. In such a world, bodies become a site of public culture to express our dissent. The tattooed bodies inscribed by Chris Brand show us how aesthetics function as a space of possibility to reimagine commonality and cooperation in the face of deep structural forms of political, racial, and economic division. Culture, even as it moves from minoritarian communities to the majoritarian mainstream, continues to be a site of struggle and resistance. Taking a cue from the creative impulse that drives Brand's work, perhaps we can be cautiously optimistic about the possibility for this movement to result not just in aesthetic transformations, but wider transformation against marginalization and oppression.

Notes

1. One theory of how the Japanese body suit developed was that the large pictorial pieces were an elaborate way of covering up criminal tattooing, which were often individual marks on the skin.
2. The term 'positionality' emerges from feminist theories that explore the situated nature of knowledge production. To quote Maher and Tetreault (1993), 'By positionality we mean ... that gender, race, class and other aspects of our identities are markers of relational *positions* rather than essential qualities. Knowledge is valid when it includes an acknowledgment of the knower's specific position in any context, because changing contextual and relational factors are crucial for defining identities and our knowledge in any given situation' (118). We use the term 'positionality' to indicate the ways in which Brand's life experiences are situated within particular social and political contexts that, in turn, have contributed to his knowledge and practice of different cultural aesthetics.
3. Our usage of the term 'people of colour' is framed within a U.S.-based racial discourse to describe non-white groups and their shared experiences of systemic racism. Robin D.G. Kelley defines 'people of colour' as a 'relationship defined by racism, dispossession and imperialism' and which enables the creation of new identities, new relationships and new ways of learning from each other for the purposes of revolutionary struggle (Imarisha, Kelley, and Horstmann 2016). For the purposes of our analysis, invoking 'people of colour' as a particular form of positionality allows us to draw linkages between how different aesthetic traditions emerge from histories of oppression and struggle. These commonalities open up creative ways that they can be brought together through the process of transculturation.
4. According to Brand (2015), for the *108 Heroes* project, half of the bodies are Chicano; all of them have some relationship to Los Angeles. More specifically, when conceptualizing how the tattoo narrative will take shape, the process is intimately collaborative. Brand states, 'The tattoo is not just about me saying my thing. It's a team effort. So if they [clients] have preferences, I want to know what those preferences are. I want to be able to figure that out with them. I show them the books, they see something visually that impacts them, I then ask whether the character has anything in relation to their personal history'. To date, the bodies who represent Brand's renarration of the Suikoden have numerous similarities to the characters portrayed on their body 'The whole line up of people you see [with the *108 Heroes* tattoos], they're absolute reflections of them [the characters] in an almost eerie way'.
5. Our approach to analysing embodied forms of visual culture is informed by recent theories of new materialism and its relationship to artistic transformations of the body. New materialism can help explain the process of artistic creation that empowers multiple racialized subjective realities. In this way, new materialism allows for the embodiment of humanity through the consumption of our material world. More specifically, artists can consume, shape, alter, and expand our notions of reality and agency through the process of creation, or the materialization of objects and bodies (Dolphijn and Der Tuin 2012).
6. After many years of tattooing, Brand was given the title Horishiki by his mentor, Horitomo (Kazuaki Kitamura). Normally, within the traditional practice of Japanese tattooing, when tattoo artists are given titles, it is assumed they have become a part of a hierarchical family structure, and the tattoo artist must remain loyal and work under their new 'masters'. But nowadays, certain segments of Japanese tattoo culture have become increasingly influenced by Western practices, in which it is not uncommon to follow different sets of protocols for naming and its associated obligations. For Brand, his title did not come with any specific requirements or loyalties. Instead, his mentor bestowed the title as a way to recognize his work and his contributions to Japanese tattooing.

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Notes on contributors

Todd Honma (PhD American Studies and Ethnicity) is assistant professor of Asian American Studies at Pitzer College. His research and teaching focuses on Asian American cultural politics, aesthetics of embodiment within tattooing and body modification subcultures, zines and independent media, and community-based science and technology.

Anthony Francoso (PhD Sociology) is assistant professor of Sociology at Pasadena City College. His research and teaching focuses on Race, Ethnicity and Nation, Chicana sociology, critical criminology, as well as social movements and oppositional consciousness.

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