

Introduction

Becoming Covered

Genesis

Right hip. My first tattoo was nothing special; it was regrettable, even. I was seventeen years old and attending Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle. Somehow, I had become consumed by a destructive relationship. He owned a coffee shop across the street from a tattoo studio owned by Vyvyn Lazonga—one of the most prominent female tattoo artists in the nation. I did not know Vyvyn was famous at the time. I didn't even know the difference between a good tattoo and a bad tattoo. But somehow, we mutually agreed to the unfortunate plan of getting a tattoo to commemorate our unstable relationship. It was matching, of course, combining his zodiac sign Leo and a women's symbol, representing my budding feminism. The tattooist, Tina Bafaro, luckily talked us out of getting "his/her name forever" scripted beneath the symbol. She said many people who got relationship tattoos broke up. She had accurately predicted our future ending. While this first tattoo was based on an unfortunate decision, I had been lucky enough to end up in one of the best studios, filled with amazing women artists. That left an impression on me.

Left upper arm. When I got my second tattoo—the word "feminist" scripted on my outer left arm—I returned to Tina. I felt so strongly about my developing political consciousness that I wanted the identifier branded on my arm permanently. I wanted the cursive script to be in rainbow colors, one color for each letter. Tina pointed out that different colors would be more visible than others and fade at different rates, making the word illegible. The script needed to be solid black ink. Two symbolic snakes wrapped around the back of the arm, illustrated with a few different colors, creating a band with the scripted word. I learned

to trust the tattooist with the visual representation—she was the professional artist and I was not. I was quickly realizing this while attending art school. I could not draw, it turns out. But I gained an immense respect for the talent it took to be able to render an idea visually. The tattoo was the perfect symbol of my commitment to my awakening political identity.

Right shoulder. At nineteen, I was back in Spokane, my hometown, spending my days doing undergraduate course work in Charissa Vanderbrood's tattoo shop while she tattooed. We would team up and talk to the customers about their tattoo ideas. I couldn't help but collect several tattoos from her during this time idling in the shop, in exchange for mixed tapes and a few \$20 bills that I begged off my father. I was back living in my dad's house while finishing my last year of college. During study breaks, I planned out tattoo designs with Charissa. The first tattoo she did on me was the character Hothead, from the graphic novel *Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist*.¹ This comic followed the misadventures of the anti-hero Hothead, a scrawny, androgynous, pissed-off dyke, constantly confronting misogynist culture. But she was not beat down by the daily humiliations. She had weapons. To me, this comic was an outlet for the anger I felt at the discrimination I endured based on gender and race. I felt powerless to fight back in my real life. I selected an iconic image of Hothead, her face scrunched up, disgusted with the world. Two "ai-ai" little girls, one with a gun, the other with a knife, were in the background. Hothead's pet cat Chicken, always providing the calming voice of reason against Hothead's destructive impulses, was on the back of my shoulder. We didn't start this tattoo until eleven o'clock at night. Tattooing is an intimate, embodied act, and the relationship between the individuals affects the interaction. All day, Charissa had been tattooing people she would have rather not. But between friends, it was a special, bonding event.

Right arm. The next tattoo I received from Charissa, a band on the same arm as my Hothead tattoo, was all about our friendship, and again, feminist politics. I didn't even know what I wanted image-wise; I just wanted her to tattoo me again. "You design it," I offered. "Just make it about women's empowerment, somehow." She drew three different stylized goddesses with colorful patterns in the background. At first, we couldn't decide on the colors. For weeks, she would color in the tattoo

outline with Sharpie pens to try out the different color variations. We worked slowly. The tattoo took nearly eight months, as we worked on it in short spurts. Looking back, I prefer to have tattoo designs planned out long before I acquire them. But this one was spontaneous. And lacking such planning, in the end, I had trouble accepting the design. This band was the most visible tattoo I had, nestled right above my elbow and the “ditch,” as tattooists call it, or the bend of my arm. With this more prominent tattoo, I was starting to attract more attention, of both the wanted and unwanted kinds. Strangers on the street, in stores, or at school would stare at the ink on my arms and ask all kinds of questions about the process of tattooing. They would ask silly and uninformed questions, with “Did that hurt?” or “What does that mean?” being among the more common inquiries. Sometimes they would be belligerent and rude. They would touch the tattoo, and I would recoil in shock. Or they would say that they loved the tattoos, but often used awkward phrases that would leave me uneasy: “Nice tats,” which sounded too close to “Nice tits,” and “Love the ink,” which was just so impersonal and insincere. “What does that mean?” was too personally invasive and left me at a loss for what to say without having to reveal the intimate details of my life and ideological orientation.

Right upper arm. Years later, while attending graduate school at the New School for Social Research in New York, the desire for a tattoo hit again. I wanted a big colorful snake on my right arm. It would twist and turn its way underneath the armband and past Hothead, ending right above the cat named Chicken. I found the tattooist Emma Porcupine (now Emma Griffiths) because she was known for tattooing the feminist folk singer Ani DiFranco as well as the author of the *Bamboo Girl* zine, Sabrina Margarita Alcantara. Over three sessions at her studio on the Lower East Side, Emma tattooed a vivid green snake twisting its way from my elbow to over my shoulder. Later, we added gray shading of Japanese-like waves in the background, completing a solid half sleeve on my right arm. Now I had really crossed the line for appropriate tattoos for women. I had started to wear clothing to cover up the tattoo in various settings. I was becoming increasingly sensitive to the attention that my tattoos attracted. In my graduate classes, if I exposed my tattoos, I felt that my professors were judging me. I was introverted and never spoke in class; they didn't have much on which to base their opinion

of me otherwise. I felt that my tattoos were beautiful and reflective of my inner self, yet I feared misunderstanding from the general public. This discrepancy between my self-expression and public perception became more of a factor in my daily life. The snake's head slithered its way past my elbow and onto my forearm, its tongue exploring the territory. What would I wear today? Living in Manhattan's Chinatown, I feared the intense scowls of the older Chinese women as they passed me on the streets. I would wear a sweater in the middle of steamy summers, just to avoid their socially sanctioning glares.

Left shoulder. In graduate school, I had written my dissertation on the "anti-corporate globalization" movement, as it was crudely labeled at the time by the corporate media. I had been swept up in the excitement of a vibrant social movement emerging so suddenly with the World Trade Organization protests in Seattle during December 1999. It consumed me for years. However, the beginning of the war in Afghanistan, and then in Iraq, quickly shifted the anti-corporate globalization movement into an anti-war movement. While writing my dissertation, I got another tattoo. It was an antique scroll with the First Amendment scripted within, placed on my left shoulder. Since then, I joke that it is a historical document, a reminder of liberties once granted. The "feminist" armband capped off the First Amendment scroll, appropriately enough. These tattoos show that I am someone who wears her politics on her sleeve.

My story exemplifies many typical qualities of a tattoo collector. First tattoos are often less thoughtful than subsequent designs and can be rushed into to mark adulthood or permanently emblaze a passing fancy. However rudimentary, tattoos often symbolize something that the wearer has a strong emotional attachment to, be it a pop cultural reference, a hobby, a relationship, a life event, or a material item. Most people stop after receiving one, two, or three tattoos and therefore do not become involved in the subcultural world of tattooing. People with a few small tattoos can be referred to as "lightly tattooed." While tattoos were historically considered a masculine domain, often associated with hyper-masculine subcultures such as the military or criminal cultures, women have had different experiences with tattoos. While men can collect many tattoos, which serve to strengthen their masculine identity, women's tattoo collections can threaten their feminine identity—unless

they specifically choose feminine tattoos. Women are socially pressured to keep their tattoos feminine in design (flowers, dolphins, fairies), placed in a few areas (hip, breast, ankle), and small in size. When women cross these permissible designations and collect tattoos that are of so-called masculine design (snakes, skulls, zombies), visibly placed (forearm, leg), and large in size, they begin to receive social sanctions that reinforce the deviant-ness of tattooing, as well as the gender transgression of the design. By crossing these lines, a collector becomes “heavily tattooed.” This book is about heavily tattooed women and their related social interactions. While most lightly tattooed individuals usually do not have a strong connection to the tattoo subculture, those who become heavily tattooed are more likely to have such an association. By spending time in tattoo shops and at conventions, reading tattoo magazines, and watching tattoo television shows, one becomes more immersed in the culture and, often, becomes more heavily tattooed. This affects one’s future tattoo collection with regard to design and volume. Just as the sociologist Howard Becker explored the career of the “marihuana user,” who learns the rituals of the practice, so too do I explore heavily tattooed collectors and their social practices as they learn to live up to the norms of the subculture and to adopt mechanisms to mitigate mainstream sanctions against tattooing.²

My tattoos got me in trouble. Viewer impression management became a part of my daily life process. I was attracted to the power of tattooing because it provided me with a way to alter my body and express my personality. As a mixed-race Chinese/White and petite woman, I face stereotyping. Tattoos helped me counteract my immutable, embodied characteristics. But this bodily alteration brought me unexpected—and unwanted—attention. It also brought unexpected touching from strangers, as if tattooed skin would feel different. Tattooed people cannot guarantee that the message they are trying to express is actually the one received. Often, there is miscommunication.

I had questions about this subculture I had inadvertently entered: Did other tattooed women have similar experiences? What were the stories behind other people’s tattoos? Why were they drawn to them as a form of self-expression? For others, was recounting their tattoo narratives also like reading from a journal of their lives? Did they receive the same kinds of public attention? What were the responses from family,

employers, and acquaintances? Since women artists had done all of my tattoos, I wondered about their position within the industry. Tattooing remains male dominated but is less so each year, as more women enter the profession and secure a place within the industry.

This book is an ethnographic exploration of the social worlds of heavily tattooed women and women tattooists working in the industry. When tattoo collectors begin to modify their bodies with tattoo art, social relationships are transformed as well: Family members may scoff, employment opportunities may shrink, and strangers may stare. For women, this attention also holds a gender component, as they are considered gender transgressive, challenging the ideal of “beauty” to which women are supposed to aspire. For many women, tattoos symbolize a reclaiming of their bodies and a form of resistance to normative femininity, or at least an alternative to it. This research was conducted between 2007 and 2010 and includes participant observation and in-depth interviews with seventy women (and a few men) who are either heavily tattooed or tattoo artists, or both. Participant observation took place at tattoo conventions and tattoo studios across the nation. Some of the primary research cities include Spokane, Washington; Miami; Orlando; Houston; Long Beach, California; and Seattle. With this research, we can look at contemporary ethnographies of tattooed bodies (and other deviant styles) and understand what a sociological perspective, in particular, has to offer. *Covered in Ink* fits within this context of ethnographies of deviant groups.

Sociological Ethnographies of Deviant Styles

Historically, written accounts of tattoo collectors have focused on men in prisons or psychiatric hospitals.³ These captive bodies were accessible for some researchers and provided the most compelling stereotype of the tattooed body. Tattooing was a popular practice with gangs and in male prisons; therefore tattoos came to be associated with criminality. Researchers—usually psychologists or criminologists—often went inside these human laboratories to conduct further research on tattoos and generalized their findings to people outside of the prison walls. This criminality was particularly male in nature, yet tattooed females were also stigmatized with the tint of criminality. Because criminality

and deviance for women are often represented in a sexually objectifying manner, women's tattoos came to signify female criminality, often prostitution, or as markers of sexual property by bikers and gang members. However, the criminality associated with tattooing historically affects men and women differently. While men appear more masculine, tough, and potentially criminal with their extensive tattooing, tattooed women report being treated like prostitutes or as sexually adventurous women by strangers. While this historical stigmatizing research was often conducted by medical researchers (physicians, nurses, and psychologists), for the purposes of this book, I want to consider what sociology—in particular, the tradition of sociology that is called “symbolic interaction”—can offer to our understanding of deviant style. Symbolic interaction focuses on the microinteractions that take place in daily life to reinforce social structures and belief systems. For example, a stranger reacting with curiosity or hostility toward a woman's tattoos reinforces the ideology that tattoos are deviant. What are described as “gender role scripts” are played out in microinteractions through language and behavior.

In *Crimes of Style*, the criminologist Jeff Ferrell demonstrates the connection between dress style and presumed criminality.⁴ For the subjects in the book, their self-presentation or appearance itself attracts the attention (and harassment) of the authorities and moral crusaders, who perceive these deviant styles as indicators of criminality. These styles can include tattoos and body modifications, as well as baggy or sagging pants, graffiti-style clothing, gang colors (blue and red), or shaved heads. These topics are also explored in Robert Garot's book *Who You Claim*, in which he breaks down the symbolism of performing such an identity that goes far beyond any clothing signifiers.⁵ In *Cultural Criminology*, Jeff Ferrell and Clinton R. Sanders examine the intersection of criminality and style. Ferrell writes of

that most delicate but resilient of connecting tissues between cultural and criminal practices: style. As will be seen, *style* is considered here not as a vague abstraction denoting form or fashion, but as a concrete element of personal and group identity, grounded in the everyday practices of social life. . . . More broadly, a focus on style begins to expose the lived dynamics of inequality and injustice, the ongoing social process by which

discriminatory legal practices and emerging criminal identities are constructed and continued in the situations of daily life.⁶

Ferrell's work provides an important insight for our understanding of how a heavily tattooed appearance is perceived by the public. This connection—however historic—between criminality, gangs, and prisons and tattooing continues to be made by the viewer. This background can help us understand how the stigma of tattooing persists—even as it is lessening. This topic will be explored in depth in the next chapter.

In Ferrell's books, the criminality and styles discussed are within an overwhelmingly masculine arena. Our social understandings of crime, gangs, and prisons are usually focused on the male experience. Are tattoos even associated with women in prison? How are deviant styles different for women? As we can imagine, women are more often sexualized in their deviance, and if they are viewed as criminal, it is often crimes of a sexual nature that are emphasized, prostitution in particular. Those women who engage in transgressive styles are often labeled "sluts." Lauraine Leblanc conducted participant observation from 1993 to 1995 in punk subcultures in four North American cities and interviewed forty girls for her book *Pretty in Punk*.⁷ This book shows a community of women whose primary deviance is one of style and not one of criminal participation (except for low-level loitering, underage drinking, and possible drug consumption). These girls may or may not have tattoos, as many are still legal minors; however, they receive extreme social and personal harassment directed at their manner of style: punk hairstyles (shaved heads, mohawks, spikes, unnatural colors, and dreads), dress (black clothing, punk band shirts, ripped fishnet stocking, combat boots, short skirts, excessive makeup, and mixing both feminine and masculine attire), and, possibly, aggressive public behavior, as well as panhandling. Leblanc's research demonstrates that women's stylistic deviance often provokes gender-specific harassment (e.g., slut shaming).

A few notable ethnographies focusing on tattoos, in particular, have recently been published that represent an empathetic turn, away from the more historical, stigmatizing medical literature.⁸ In *Customizing the Body*, Clinton R. Sanders conducted participant observation in four tattoo studios on the East Coast, spanning seven years during the 1980s. Sanders's research was based on over 160 questionnaires and

tape-recorded interviews with participants (68 percent were men, and 32 percent were women).⁹ The women he interviewed primarily collected small, gender appropriate tattoos:

The six women interviewees possessed eight tattoos—three on the back or the shoulder area, three on the breast, one on an arm, and one on the lower back. Thirty-five percent of female questionnaire respondents received their first tattoo on the breast, 13 percent on the back or shoulder, and 10 percent on the hip.¹⁰

Sanders's female participants demonstrate how gender-appropriate tattoos for women were more popular in the 1980s. While Sanders conducted his seven years of fieldwork in tattoo studios, he also began getting tattooed himself, a personal collection of body art that became quite extensive over the years.

Margo DeMello states in the introduction to her book *Bodies of Inscription* that she “defines herself as both insider and outsider to the tattoo community” and does not offer “an ‘objective’ account of tattooing.”¹¹ She describes her previous involvement in the community as such:

I have been getting tattooed since 1987 and have defined myself as a member of the tattoo community since 1988 when I began attending tattoo conventions and reading tattoo magazines, as well as collecting more extensive tattoos. . . . [I am] married to a brand-new tattooist.¹²

DeMello's aim was to “explore the current middle-class repackaging of the tattoo” and how its members constitute the “tattoo community.” In contrast to Sanders' study, DeMello states that she “spoke with many more women than I did men . . . [and] my informant base was heavily skewed toward the middle class.”¹³ Since DeMello primarily found her participants at tattoo conventions and online forums, the women with whom she spoke most likely had more than one tattoo, since active community membership implies a dedication to the art. Thus DeMello's study provides insight into the experience of heavily tattooed women and demonstrates how women began to collect more extensively over time.

Michael Atkinson's book *Tattooed* attempts to "explain why a noticeable number of Canadians are tattooing their bodies at this juncture in our cultural history."¹⁴ He spent a few years conducting participant observation at tattoo studios in Calgary and Toronto, thus providing an international comparison. Atkinson had easy access to the tattoo community because he was already an avid tattoo collector.¹⁵ He interviewed a total of ninety-two individuals, forty-four of whom were women. Out of the twenty-seven tattoo artists he interviewed, only four were women. By publication in 2003, he said, "To date, I have only met two female tattoo artists in Canada."¹⁶ And again, the majority of his female participants were lightly tattooed.

More recently, Victoria Pitts researched dozens of body modifiers at public events between 1996 and 2000 for *In the Flesh*.¹⁷ While the previous ethnographies focused on (mostly lightly tattooed) mainstream tattoo collectors, Pitts's study focused on "modern primitives," or those more extreme in their body adornments, with extensive piercing, tattooing, scarification, branding, and so on. Pitts's primary objective was to examine

the ethnic and racial coding of body practices by white, largely middle-class Westerners, which I believe is an extremely important issue raised by the body modification movement. I place this issue in a postcolonial theoretical context.¹⁸

While Pitts's research has primarily White participants, like the other studies, she introduces a racialized perspective into her work—in particular, she examines the ways in which White middle-class Americans articulate their adoption of indigenous practices from other countries and contexts. Additionally, her women interviewees were more extensive and transgressive in their body modifications, providing more nuanced insight into gender transgression. While most of the authors include men and women with one or more tattoos, Pitts's interviewees have extensive body art (including piercings, tattoos, scarification, and brandings). For women, having one tattoo is not gender transgressive, as it has become widespread for them to have small, cute, and hidden tattoos; however, having large, public, and gruesome tattoos (zombies, skulls, snakes) invokes social sanctions along gender expectations.

These sociological ethnographies, which have focused on deviant styles and tattoo collecting, provide a foundation for *Covered in Ink*. From these studies we learn that women recently began to collect more visible tattoos. Transgressive styles of tattooing have different implications for men and women. While the participants of Ferrell and Garot's studies—often men of color or poor Whites—face profiling by authorities, White women who transgress femininity are targeted with more interpersonal social sanctions in public, as I explore in the following chapters. Women of color, however, may encounter more of the criminological gaze than White women, who have a wider arena of self-expression. There are other racial differences in how women experience their tattooing practices as well as the social interactions responding to such, yet unfortunately, those nuances are not more fully teased out in this book, and I hope other scholars will contribute to this discussion. What follows is a brief methodological overview for and outline of *Covered in Ink*. While many of these chapter topics are mentioned briefly in the previous ethnographies, *Covered in Ink* gives particular attention to interactions in different institutions and the impact of the interactions on the participants.

Finding Participants

Recently, a student living in Chicago emailed me, looking for advice on making her own short documentary about tattooed women and society's perceptions of them. She sounded excited about her project and was seeking advice on how to get started. She had only one semester to complete the entire project; luckily, she was blissfully unaware of how much work she needed to do. Her second email was less enthusiastic. Reality, it seemed, was dawning. She wanted to find a diverse group of tattooed women to interview for her project; however, she was already getting negative feedback during her attempts to find participants. She was having trouble finding any participants at all, let alone diverse ones. Perhaps she would just make an "audio documentary" she wrote to me in frustration, "it is too late to select another topic for my project." When she approached tattoo shops, she was put off with comments such as "I'm camera shy," and "I would do it, but something just came up." Other folks would not return her calls or emails. "I've hit a

rough patch for now,” she wrote in exasperation. In the end, she finally started to make a few connections. Two tattoo shops finally agreed to do interviews, and she found two tattooed classmates, as well as some co-workers, willing to go before her camera. Ultimately, she wrote, “Perhaps I spoke too soon and felt a little discouraged.” Non-tattooed, her knowledge about the culture was lacking, and this came through in her approach. She hadn’t done her research. For a while, it didn’t occur to her to find tattooed people in tattoo studios, until her professor suggested such a strategy.

Why should anyone participate in a research study, especially members of marginalized communities, who are accustomed to being distorted and stigmatized in official research? Institutional review boards (IRBs) at universities specifically require researchers to write a statement on this very topic. Usually researchers write something vague, like “So participants can contribute to the academic knowledge written about this particular subculture.”

Institutional review boards are based upon a medical research model and are thus an awkward fit for gatekeeping qualitative social science. They are obligated to ensure the confidentiality of research participation. Traditional qualitative research often assumes anonymity. But the tattoo artists I interviewed were completely open about their identities. Indeed, it was good for business. What happens when research overseers support anonymity but participants are more than happy to be named? And what if participants’ faces are shown on video, as they are in the documentary I produced? In the end, I allowed the interviewed women to select the name they wished to use in print, and they consented to their participation in the video documentary. The resulting documentary, *Covered* (2010), provided the visual representation so important for understanding body art, and it was screened at film festivals, universities, and community spaces.¹⁹

After gaining IRB approval in 2007 from Florida International University, I began my search for participants in earnest. My first stop was the annual Marked for Life Tattoo Convention in Orlando, Florida—a convention dedicated to women artists (and a few good men dressed in drag were permitted by the organizer Deanna Lippens). Marked for Life was small and intimate, lacking the crowds of other regional

conventions; thus the women artists were easy to approach. I couldn't have picked a better convention to find participants. I would return to *Marked for Life* for the next five years as my research progressed, continuing to collect narratives from the artists and build relationships.

During the first summer of research, I headed to Spokane, Washington, my hometown, to spend time at Constant Creations Tattoo Studio, as I had during those undergraduate college days. Charissa was excited to participate in my research, and it brought back memories of working on creative projects together. Twenty of her customers made their way through the makeshift interviewing studio, set up in the unused piercing room next to the tattoo booths, where I conducted video-taped interviews.

I made two other connections with tattoo industry women via *Myspace.com*, a social networking site popular in the early 2000s, before Facebook dominated the landscape. Jennifer Wilder was a shop manager and tattoo apprentice at Abstract Art in Webster, Texas. I interviewed twelve women at the shop she managed over the next several days. There were four male tattooists working in the shop, besides the shop manager. The tattooists called upon their partners and female clients to participate. Another group of around ten to twelve women participated in Webster. Through *Myspace.com*, I was put in touch with Tiffany Garcia, a tattooist at Outer Limits Tattoo and Body Piercing. This shop was one of four owned by Kari Barba, a pioneer female tattooist. Barba had purchased and restored this historic tattoo studio, previously owned by Bert Grimm, a prominent tattooist in the early days of tattooing, and part of Long Beach, California's navy history. She had refashioned the studio as part tattoo museum, with historic photographs of legendary artists and images of the transformation of the shop. It is the only business from the original Pike amusement zone still operating. Barba employs many women at her four studios, nearly all of whom I was able to interview.

I returned to Vyvyn Lazonga's shop on the Seattle waterfront—the place where I was first tattooed. Jacqueline Beach was now my primary contact at this all-female shop, as Tina Bafaro had moved on to open her own place. Vyvyn prepared for a tattoo over a mastectomy scar, one of her specializations, as I interviewed her about her extensive career. In



Figure 1.2. Kari Barba (center) is a tattooist with nearly thirty years of experience. She has apprenticed many female artists out of her four shops in Southern California. On the left is tattooist Chrystal Puckett, and to the right is Yvonne La, both of whom work out of the Outer Limits Tattoo Studio.

the end, I was able to interview most of the women in the shop, including her apprentice, Suzy Todd. Overall, I was able to find many of the women I interviewed through my personal contacts. From there, social networking sites like *Myspace.com* provided a connection with most of the remaining participants. Finally, these connections were able to invite their friends and clientele to the interview spaces I created in artist's shops, for days on end.

Participant Demographics

In total, I was able to interview sixty-five participants. In terms of age, the women I interviewed were somewhat younger than the tattooed population at large. Most of the tattooed are in their thirties and forties, a demographic that has had time to acquire tattoos and that has lived during a decade in which it was most popular. Eighteen- to twenty-five-year-olds have fewer tattoos than those in the older age group, and tattooing is slightly less popular with them. Yet my sample has the highest number of participants in the eighteen- to thirty-year-old age range, with thirty-five participants. The other age groups are as follows: for thirty- to forty-year-olds there were eighteen participants; for forty- to fifty-year-olds there were five participants; for fifty- to sixty-five-year-olds there were six participants; and for participants over sixty-five there was one participant.

The study was fairly inclusive of people of color, with Black and Native American participants underrepresented. The participants' racial demographics were as follows: there were forty-nine Whites, nine Latinas, three Asian Americans, one Black, five mixed race, and no Native Americans. Throughout the research, I found very few African Americans at the shops and tattoo conventions that I attended. At a typical tattoo convention, I would often see only one African American male tattooist, if any. Yet it is apparent that African Americans do get tattooed in significant numbers. Therefore I suspect that there is a good deal of segregation in the tattoo world, with African American's getting a lot of their work from African American-owned shops. This segregation stems historically from the overlap between tattoo shops and bikers or motorcycle clubs, which did not hide their racist sentiments. One racial issue I have observed is that some White tattooists will comment on Black skin being texturally "tougher," as well as darker, obscuring some color inks.²⁰ Yet others tattooists specialize in darker skin. I have also heard some African American tattoo collectors state that they prefer getting tattooed from African American tattooists, who will give them color tattoos without arguing that their skin is too dark for color. I have talked to one mother of a Black male tattooist who told me stories of the racist treatment that her son endured during his tenure at one shop.

I also imagine that there is significant segregation of White and Chicano tattooing in the Southwest as well. This racial segregation in the tattoo world should be a topic for further study.

This study was skewed toward women employed in the tattoo industry, with thirty-one out of sixty-five being tattooists, apprentices, or shop managers. Out of the remaining participants, eight were students, five worked in retail, four were teachers, one worked in a warehouse, one was a security guard, one worked in an office, and nine participants' occupations were unknown.

I did not specifically ask about sexual orientation, but I would estimate that 20 percent of the participants were bisexual or lesbian, a higher rate than in the general population, but certainly a minority of participants. This topic was discussed only incidentally, but in retrospect, I should have included more discussion about the connections between sexual and gender identity and tattoo collecting. Some participants had pride tattoos, such as rainbow flags, pink triangles, or other related imagery. Others had tattoos that represented pride, but less obviously so. Some heterosexual women said that they are assumed to be lesbian by the public because of their extensive tattoo collection or because of particular images. For example, Hispanic Panic (her Roller Derby name), has a Rosie the Riveter tattoo, for which she received anti-lesbian slurs. My feminist armband with "woman-power" images has also made some assume that I am a lesbian, as one woman in public said, "No straight girl would have a tattoo like that." I personally identify as bisexual, so her comment was not entirely off base. My previous research has focused on the social construction of bisexual and mixed-race identity of women in the United States, and this research background on sexual and racial identity could have been brought into this work in a more consistent manner to explore the overlap of these identities with tattoo collections.²¹ Are lesbian, bisexual, or queer-identified women more open to acquiring non-gender normative tattooing? Or are they less so because of further stigma? How do non-gender normative tattoo collections overlap with gender identity, such as for those that identify as androgynous, gender-queer, or transgender? Are tattoos used as part of a gender identity body project in order to present oneself in a particularly gendered manner? Such topics would be excellent for further studies.

Overview

In chapter 1, “Sailors, Criminals, and Prostitutes: The History of a Lingering Tattoo Stigma,” I show that tattoos have undeniably had a historical association with criminal behavior. Even now, the more tattoos a person has, the more he or she is associated with gang membership, imprisonment, or sexual deviance for women. Why did these associations develop? The stereotypes that tattooed individuals encounter today are based on outdated and irrelevant associations (often based on research bias): sailors, gang members, criminals, the mentally ill, and sexually deviant women. This chapter outlines the history of early tattooing: from the encounters between sailors and global indigenous people, the emergence of coastal tattoo shops, early sideshow performers, outlaw tattooing, and the association of women with criminal men and/or sexual deviance. While tattooing was not widespread before the 1950s, the social movements and cultural revolutions of the 1960s began connecting the counterculture with body modification practices. Women began to collect tattoos in larger numbers. By the 1980s and the 1990s, tattooing was becoming mainstream, with an explosion of tattoo shops springing up across the nation. By 2000, a substantial portion of our society had become tattooed: college students, mothers, and white-collar professionals. While the practice of tattooing has saturated mainstream society, these historical associations with criminality continue to linger.

In chapter 2, “‘I Want to Be Covered’: Heavily Tattooed Women Challenge the Dominant Beauty Culture,” I show that feminist theories have been instrumental in bringing the materiality of the body into social theories. This chapter draws upon theories of embodiment to understand how women are positioned in relation to the beauty culture. Body modifications such as plastic surgery and dieting are more socially acceptable than other body modifications, as they are oriented toward the achievement of beauty ideals. Women are supposed to desire beauty—simply observe the messages of advertisements aimed at them. When women become heavily tattooed (going beyond the small, cute, and hidden design), it is considered masculine, ugly, and a betrayal of the beauty culture. This betrayal is captured in the popular insult, “You’re such a pretty girl, why would you do that to yourself?” In this

chapter, the participants discuss their initial attraction to tattooing, what their tattoos means to them, how they navigate social pressures to conform to ideal femininity, and ultimately, how they choose their own pathway for embodied self-expression. The participants struggle with beauty culture and self-perception, like most women. However, the participants redefine the practice of tattooing as a beauty practice. Even when they are collecting snakes, skulls, and zombie imagery on their bodies, they feel beautiful in their ability to express themselves in their own, alternative manner.

In chapter 3, “I ♥ Mom’: Family Responses toward Tattoo Women,” I explore the reactions that participants have received from family members (parents, grandparents, lovers, children, and extended family). Many of the participants started collecting tattoos at an early age. For many of them, their ink collection began while still living with parents. Parents overwhelmingly respond negatively to their children’s tattoo collections but slowly come around toward acceptance. Grandparents, however, are often the most unaccepting family members. This demonstrates the generational bias against tattooing. Those who came of age before the 1960s saw few tattoos in their social worlds. Subsequent generations were exposed to tattoos among their acquaintances or within popular culture and therefore had more references for understanding the practice. The participants’ own nuclear families—their partners and children—had the least problems with their body art. Children of tattooed parents were raised with the practice normalized. When individuals become tattooed, it affects not only their lives but also their family relationships. This chapter presents the impact of these relational outcomes.

In chapter 4, “‘Covering’ Work: Dress Code Policies, Tattoos, and the Law,” I examine workplace policies that ban the display of body modifications, such as tattoos and piercings, that are both legal and routine. Many companies desire to maintain a “clean-cut” image, via employee appearance, for the benefit of their customers (and financial bottom line). However, with these policies, companies reinforce the association of tattooing with deviance as well as discriminate against those with body modification. Employment discrimination is a serious threat for heavily tattooed women. They must often consider the employment policy when deciding upon their next tattoo or their next job. They may have

to be able to completely cover all their artwork with clothing. This chapter will examine various types of employment policies against tattooing. These employment sectors include: the military (with routinely shifting laws), blue-collar, white-collar, and service industries. This chapter places tattoo discrimination within the larger context of employment discrimination. It is estimated that one in every three to five people in the United States has at least one tattoo. With this large percentage of the population having tattoos, it is only a matter of time before employment policies become more tolerant. This chapter concludes with the argument that body modifications should not be grounds for termination.

In chapter 5, “‘Is the Tattoo Guy Here?’: Women Tattoo Artists’ Experience Working in a Male-Dominated Profession,” I focus on women tattoo artists who have often faced occupational stigma, discrimination, and invisibility. Like many women working in non-traditional professions, tattooists have faced many barriers, and also opportunities, as they have entered the tattoo industry. The literature on women’s employment often focuses on individual professions, yet the tattooing industry has not been highlighted for analysis. This is an important addition to the narrative of women in male-dominated professions, as women are a small, but quickly growing, minority of tattooists and, I argue, are having a profound impact on the industry.

In chapter 6, “Tattoos Are Not for Touching: Public Space, Stigma, and Social Sanctions,” I focus on how heavily tattooed women are often stared at, questioned, and touched by strangers in public spaces. Strangers may try to pull back clothing in order to see a tattoo more completely, often without warning or permission. Strangers may approach the tattooed person and ask invasive personal questions about “what the tattoo means.” All of the participants in this study have had this experience and found the intrusions offensive. Using Erving Goffman’s theories of behavior in public places, this chapter examines the interactions between strangers and the tattooed women in relation to their body modifications. By examining the perspective and desires of the participants in regards to public interactions, we can begin to formulate an outline of behavior for a “tattoo etiquette” that promotes respectful interactions and mutual understanding.

In the conclusion, I discuss how this book has demonstrated that the simple act of getting inked can change one’s social relationships

significantly. Based on historical associations of tattooing with criminality, tattooed individuals still suffer stigma and discrimination, though it has decreased significantly in recent decades. For the women in this book, they feel that the lingering stigma is inappropriate, as their behavior does not reinforce stereotypes. Instead, the participants suggest the development of a “tattoo etiquette” for public interactions, during which heavily tattooed people are treated no differently than the non-tattooed. By further toning down the public recognition of tattoos between strangers, we can begin to entertain what it would mean if heavily tattooed people no longer faced a social distinction, for better or worse, and were allowed to go through their day unmolested.

Covered in Ink explores the sociological issues related to being a heavily tattooed woman in contemporary American culture and as such is a sociological exploration of stigma, subculture, and gender. Historically, tattoos have constituted a subculture with its own norms, values, and social interactions. This subculture has been male dominated until recently, and women’s presence has been transformative for it. While women have been at the margins of the subculture, they are now more integrated than ever before, influencing the style of tattoo art, the health regulations, and the shop culture (and television culture of tattoo shows). The practice of tattooing has also had an impact on gender presentation. While women can permissibly have small, cute, and hidden tattoos, the women in this book go beyond these boundaries and have tattoos that are covering extensive amounts of skin, are publicly viewable, and often depict “grotesque” imagery (such as zombies, skulls, and snakes). In public, these women are reminded by strangers and friends that their ink is gender transgressive and goes beyond the bounds of appropriate body decoration for women; however, as I will show, the women themselves view their body art as beautiful, as making themselves more beautiful. This book explores that world of beauty.