

Book Review

Covered in Ink: Tattoos, Women, and the Politics of the Body

Beverly Yuen Thompson, 2015

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Beverly Yuen Thompson's ethnographic study, *Covered in Ink: Tattoos, Women, and the Politics of the Body*, is a welcome contribution to the surprisingly sparse feminist literature on women with tattoos. Since the reality television show *Miami Ink* launched at least a dozen more tattoo shows over the last decade (Sonia Saraiya 2014), tattoos have become mainstream in the United States. They are now collected more frequently by women than men; in fact, Thompson says tattoos are not gender transgressive, as long as they remain small, cute, and easily hidden. Her study reveals that tattooed women still experience stigma and social sanctions if their tattoos violate expectations of ladylike tattoos by being large, visible, and gruesome.

Covered in Ink is organized into six chapters, around several themes revealed in Thompson's interviews: history of tattoo stigma, history of heavily tattooed women, family responses to women's tattoos, tattoos and the workplace, experiences of women tattoo artists, and tattoo etiquette, plus introductory and concluding chapters. Each chapter opens with a snapshot of Thompson's own experience as a heavily tattooed, ethnic Asian, professional woman in the United States. As a reader, I appreciate and enjoy these personalizations and how they contextualize her findings. She does not generalize from her own experience, but allows it to add depth and interest to each chapter's theme. For some readers, it will also add to her credibility on the subject, as it surely did for her participants.

Those with a longstanding interest in the subject will recognize her name, as Beverly Yuen Thompson is the producer and director of a well-received film about heavily tattooed women, *Covered*, released in 2010. This new study is based on the same pool of participants, supplemented with examples from other published studies of tattooed women, and is an excellent companion piece. The book includes new material and addresses topics not included in the film, and should not be seen as a print equivalent or substitute for the movie. *Covered in Ink* makes its own unique contribution to the scholarship of women, feminism, and body art.

Thompson starts from the well-trod ground that the body is a text, and brings a new perspective to how tattoos inscribe the feminine body in early twenty-first century North America. She makes a distinction between women who are "heavily tattooed" and "lightly tattooed," as most tattoo research only distinguishes among the tattooed and the untattooed. As she explains,

[a]s tattooing soars in popularity, it is not transgressive for women to have one, or even four, small tattoos hidden somewhere or on their body, or perhaps even

publicly visible, as long as it has at least two of the three categorizations in the mantra “small, cute, and hidden.” (p. 45)

But when women begin to collect tattoos that are “large, ugly, or public,” they also begin to encounter prejudice and social sanctions as they cross the line from tattooed to heavily tattooed. Being tattooed becomes part of who they are, and importantly, affects their social relationships as well, as they incorporate their newly inscribed unfeminine, inked body into their self-concept.

The examination of how identity as a heavily tattooed woman affects one’s relationships is the strength of this study. For all the pop culture jokes in the United States about “I ♥ Mom” tattoos, Thompson’s findings suggest we don’t much care for tattooed mothers. Mothers of young children spoke with Beverly about concealing their tattoos from mothers of their children’s friends and their schools, and the cold shoulders they received when inadvertently outed. One mother who home-schooled her son reported being ostracized from the other parents in a tutoring center when her identity as a tattoo artist was revealed. Interviews also found moms who experienced great distress at the discovery of extensive tattoos on their adult daughters, although this was more commonly seen in families of color.

With her informants, Thompson also addresses sexual harassment of tattooed women and “tattoo etiquette,” and two chapters address issues around heavily tattooed women in the workplace: one from the perspective of women tattoo artists, and another deals with questions regarding discrimination against the heavily tattooed. The latter chapter would have benefitted from more careful review by an attorney with expertise in employment law, as there is some misunderstanding about applicability of First Amendment law. Given the variation of state and municipal laws in the United States, however, it is difficult to generalize about legal issues.

The discussion and analysis of experiences and perspectives of women working in the tattoo industry is another unique contribution of this study: just under half of the women interviewed are tattoo artists, apprentices, or shop managers. Like women in other male-dominated professions, female tattoo artists are subject to sexual harassment and stereotypes. Tales of being the only female tattoo artist in the shop are common, as are stories of customers who “would never let a girl tattoo them” (p. 137). At the same time, women tattooists exploit stereotypes to their benefit when customers believe they will have a gentler touch or when possessive boyfriends and husbands prefer that a woman work on their female partner. Those stereotypes don’t help women get a leg up in the industry, though, as apprenticeships are hard to come by. Most women in this study were apprenticed by husbands or boyfriends, or occasionally by other family members.

Thompson acknowledges that this study is limited by small size (sixty-five participants), and by her failure to explore questions of sexuality and sexual orientation with participants. This is a surprising gap, given her focus on gender transgression. She also points to the heavy bias toward the tattoo industry as a limitation, but given how under-examined this population is, I’m less concerned.

I would have liked to see more detail about the interviews, both how they were conducted and how participants were recruited. While this is addressed briefly in the introduction, I’d like to see a more fully developed methods section, as an appendix, that clarifies recruitment processes and interview protocols. But this omission does not stop me from whole-heartedly recommending *Covered in Ink* to anyone with more than a passing interest in tattoos. As I’ve implied above, it will be a valuable addition in any

course that uses Thompson's film, and students will find it an engaging, accessible addition to courses on feminism and body politics in Women's and Gender Studies, Cultural Studies, Sociology, Anthropology, and related fields.

REFERENCES

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