“My first tattoo was the chaos symbol. I had left a really bad domestic violence relationship, and that was my way of celebrating leaving the chaos” (p. 55). For some women, tattoos are explained in terms of healing and empowerment. Today, more women have a tattoo than men. And overall, 35 percent of the American population has a tattoo. Why do women get tattoos? How does historical stereotyping explain revulsion to certain types of tattoos? How does popular culture transpose those ideals? These are the essential questions Beverly Yuen Thompson addresses in Covered in Ink: Tattoos, Women, and the Politics of the Body.

There is an emerging concept in the tattoo industry that recognizes tattooing as a fine art. Thompson relies on sociologist Howard Becker to make this distinction for us. A growing number of women are acquiring a college degree in art. Museums and books are more frequently presenting tattoo art in exhibitions and through photographic renderings of body art. More women are becoming tattooed, and more women are becoming tattoo artists and owning their own shops. Additionally, mainstream acceptance of heavily tattooed people has seen rapid growth. Thompson self-identifies as a heavily tattooed woman. She utilizes an autoethnographic approach and in-depth interviews to reveal how heavily tattooed people have seen enforced ethnocentric Christian beliefs: “You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you” (p. 22). The Alaskan Eskimos nearly lost their tattooing and piercing culture. During the late twentieth century, a resurgence of indigenous pride has resulted in a revitalization of tattoo art.

Questioning research bias is essential to unraveling erroneous conclusions. Biased research sample populations occur when tattoo studies are conducted from prisons and mental health hospitals, justifying theories of criminality and mental illness. Sociological attempts to explore the sub-culture of heavily tattooed women have been abandoned because of IRB rejection. “‘Body modifiers, said the IRB, needed to be studied by mental health professionals rather than sociologists’” (p. 28).

When it comes to social acceptance of women and tattoos, small, cute, and hidden tattoos are acceptable. The ubiquitous social restrictions placed on heavily tattooed women take an emotional toll. Normative beauty standards are projected by mainstream media. Men’s power emanates from prestigious employment and financial status. Women’s power comes from their beauty and physical appearance. Women should desire longer hair, whiter teeth, larger breasts, and slimmer hips. 50 percent of Americans approve of elective plastic surgery. Rejecting beauty culture and reclaiming their bodies heightens self-confidence for heavily tattooed women. Bernadette Martinez, a research participant, revealed "I work out a lot more, because I have this beautiful tattoo, I don’t want my arms to be flabby. . . . I eat healthy, and I take care of myself a lot more” (p. 51).

When Tennessee Williams’ stage play, The Rose Tattoo, became popular in the 1950s, women came seeking a tiny rose tattoo on their breasts. Popular culture was beginning to influence what was acceptable for women in society. A tiny rose is permissible. Large, ugly, or public displays of tattoos are subjected to social sanctions from family, community, and employers. Not surprisingly, Thompson’s research indicated grandparents were the least approving. One respondent explicated her grandmother’s position on the subject: “‘So when I see her, she does the typical Catholic thing: rubbing
holy water and praying to Jesus that he takes away my Satan tattoos’’ (p. 79).

Parental perceptions generally fell into two categories. Parents that were loving and emotionally close to their daughters were more supportive. Heavily tattooed women that grew up with rigid or authoritarian parents were less likely to enjoy parental approval. One participant admitted she eventually disclosed three things at once. She was dropping out of college, she was a lesbian, and she was a tattoo artist. “‘My mom cried for at least a year—she seriously just cried. And she didn’t know which one was the worst of them all. . . . In the end it actually made us closer because I did not have to lie anymore’’’ (p. 75). Other daughters found gender-specific discrimination from parents. Tattoos were tolerable for sons, but not for daughters.

Heavily tattooed mothers experienced distinctive situations in connection with child rearing. Besides individual discrimination, institutional discrimination was evident within the schools. Parents were ostracized from PTA, tutoring, and soccer-mom cliques. Children of heavily tattooed parents were victimized by teachers and the parents of other children.

Covered in Ink provides a well-situated discussion on the employment rights of heavily tattooed persons. Thompson takes the opportunity to explain selected legal cases where tattooing or style of dress is based upon a connection to a protected class—religion or ethnic identity. Perhaps most thought-provoking part of the book is when the author asks us to consider “What if a man were forced to wear a dress? What if a conventional woman was forced to wear overalls and no make-up? The ultimate question is, What if one were forced to conform to a style of dress and appearance that was very uncomfortable for them?” (p. 110).

Thompson is correct in her analysis that while dress codes serve a purpose of power and control, they certainly alienate a percentage of potentially available workers who refuse to submit to a standard that is unacceptable to them. “One of the large costs of discrimination is the emotional toll of needing to cover one’s authentic self, to appear to be someone he or she is not” (p. 112). Some employers argue it is the customers that demand a particular style of clean-cut employee. This argument was lost when airlines were forced to adapt employment criteria for flight attendants. “Even if customers are unaccustomed to tattoos, they will get used to them, just as they have adjusted to change in the past. . . . Law can set the progressive standard to which the public must eventually conform”” (p. 116).

Thompson acknowledges research opportunities exist for additional scholarly inquiry. Areas for future research include the foundations of racial segregation quite evident in the tattoo profession; whether gender identity is positively or negatively associated with non-gender normative tattooing; and the history of women and tattoo cultures from global perspectives. Thompson’s book helped me understand that tattoos symbolize a strong emotional attachment for the bearer. Her introspective nature was evident but was well balanced with in-depth interviews that allow the reader to gain a deeper understanding of perceptions and beliefs related to heavily tattooed women. I would recommend Covered in Ink to anyone that is interested in learning how sub-cultures evolve over time or about the societal politics specifically related to women and tattoos.


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Berna Turam’s Gaining Freedoms uses three cases of contested urban space—two neighborhoods in Istanbul and Berlin and a university campus in Istanbul—to broaden the analysis of urban spaces beyond the literature’s more typical focus on the impact of global neoliberal economics and gentrification. Instead, Turam analyzes urban spaces as sites for understanding how democratic contestation emerges, how freedoms and rights are defended, and how political alliances form across traditional divides.

The book’s introduction opens with a description of the Gezi Park protests in

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