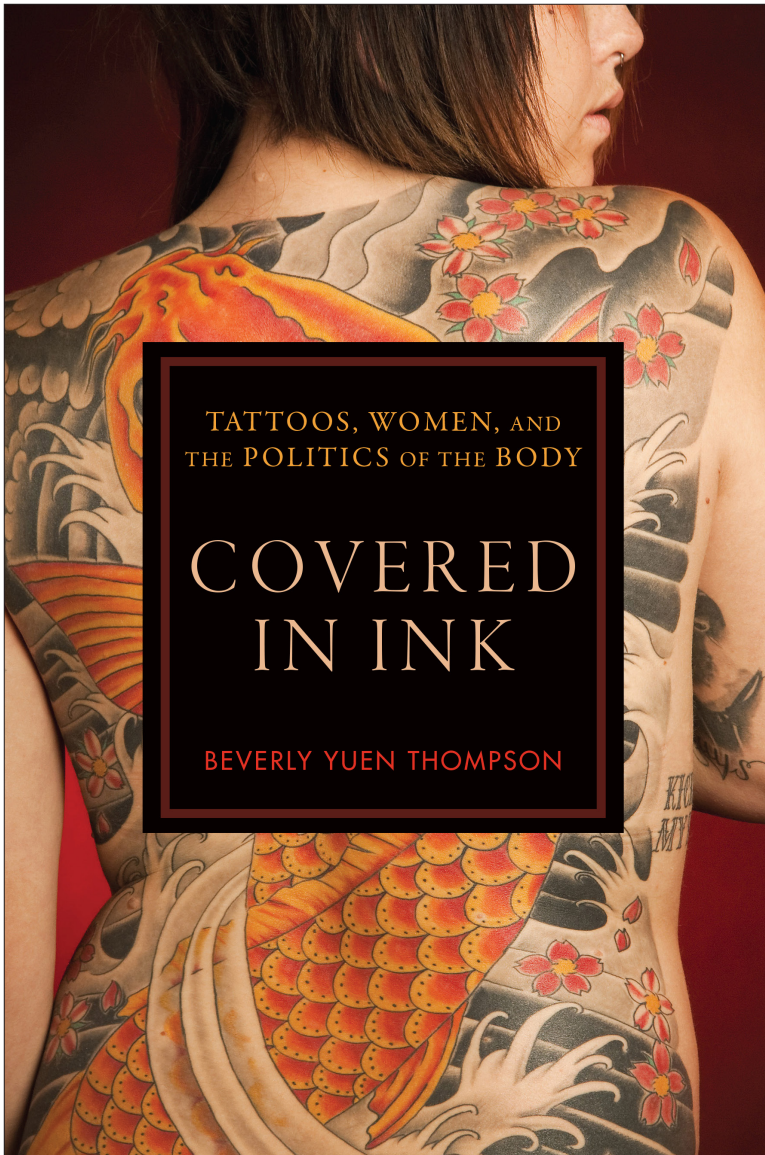


COVERED IN INK

INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE



TATTOOS, WOMEN, AND
THE POLITICS OF THE BODY

COVERED IN INK

BEVERLY YUEN THOMPSON

A small dolphin on the ankle, a black line on the lower back, a flower on the hip, or a child's name on the shoulder blade—among the women who make up the twenty percent of all adults in the USA who have tattoos, these are by far the most popular choices. Tattoos like these are cute, small, and can be easily hidden, and they fit right in with society's pre-conceived notions about what is 'gender appropriate' for women. But what about women who are heavily tattooed? Or women who visibly wear imagery, like skulls, that can be perceived as masculine or ugly when inked on their skin?

Drawing on autoethnography, and extensive interviews with heavily tattooed women, *Covered in Ink* provides insight into the increasingly visible subculture of women with tattoos. Author Beverly Thompson visits tattoos parlors, talking to female tattoo artists and the women they ink, and she attends tattoo conventions and Miss Tattoo pageants where heavily tattooed women congregate to share their mutual love for the art form. Along the way, she brings to life women's love of ink, their very personal choices of tattoo art, and the meaning tattooing has come to carry in their lives, as well as their struggles with gender norms, employment discrimination, and family rejection. Thompson finds that, despite the stigma and social opposition heavily tattooed women face, many feel empowered by their tattoos and strongly believe they are creating a space for self-expression that also presents a positive body image. A riveting and unique study, *Covered in Ink* provides important insight into the often unseen world of women and tattooing.

224 PAGES • 14 B/W HALFTONES
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BECOMING COVERED

SUMMARY

The story of *Covered in Ink* begins with the author's own tattoo collection, where she describes each of her own tattoos in terms of body placement and imagery: for example, "Right hip. A symbol that is a cross between the Leo sign and a women's symbol." These tattoo narratives describe many important milestones in her life, flesh out her identity as a person, and represent the way in which she shares these stories with the public at large. From there, she describes tattoo ethnographies by other sociologists who also sport their own collections of tattoos. While these other ethnographies focus on anyone who has one or more tattoos, *Covered in Ink* is unique because it focuses on women only, and those who are heavily tattooed at that. "Heavily tattooed" is defined in contrast to "lightly tattooed," or someone who has one or just a few tattoos. For women, they are socially pressured to keep their tattoos "small, cute, and hidden." When their tattoos go beyond these boundaries, they begin to invoke social sanctions against their visible showing of tattoo art. After presenting the other tattoo ethnographies and their methodologies, she delves into the methodological strategy of this study, which was based on participant observation of the tattoo community in the United States at tattoo conventions and studios. Additionally, she interviewed sixty-five participants who were either tattoo artists, collectors, or both. The author also completed a documentary film called *Covered*, which parallels *Covered in Ink*. Clips from the documentary are provided to partner with this guide.

TO WATCH COVERED, VISIT:

<https://vimeo.com/94019352>

View *Covered* from minute 25:02 to 27:05 (Ethnic Identity Tattoos)
 40:00 to 42:28 (Music Themed Tattoos)
 1:52 to 3:11 (Tattoo Themes)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Come up with some examples of other ways in which people express their identities through their body art or fashion. What stories have you heard from tattooed people in your life or in the media?
- How does the author understand her tattoos as being feminist? Are tattoos empowering to women? What does it mean, in a social context, to alter one's female body in such a manner?
- What are the common sociological themes mentioned in *Covered in Ink* and the other tattoo ethnographies?
- How does getting a tattoo alter one's social life? Social roles?

SAILORS, CRIMINALS, AND PROSTITUTES: THE HISTORY OF A LINGERING TATTOO STIGMA

SUMMARY

It is undeniable that tattoos are associated with criminal behavior. The more tattoos a person has, the more they are associated with gang membership, imprisonment, and, for women, sexual deviance. Where did these associations develop? Often the stereotypes that tattooed individuals encounter today are based on outdated and irrelevant associations: sailors, gang members, criminals, the mentally ill, and sexually deviant women. This chapter outlines the history of early tattooing: the encounters between sailors and tattooed indigenous people, the first coastal tattoo shops, sideshow performers, the adoption of tattooing by criminals, and the association of women with criminal men and/or sexual deviance. This chapter emphasizes the association of criminality with tattooing by incorporating theories of critical criminology as well as labeling theories. A great deal of literature has focused upon the tattooing practices of gang members, criminals, and inmates. This chapter briefly examines the ways in which these subcultures have utilized body markings to signify their affiliations and rebuff of prison rules against tattooing. This chapter also examines the literature that connects tattooing with mentally ill populations that are labeled as violent or criminal. As a result of public health scares associating tattooing with hepatitis during the 1940s and 1950s, many states and cities criminalized tattooing, which further stigmatized the practice. The practice of tattooing was limited before the 1950s, but the social movements and cultural revolutions of the 1960s connected counterculture with personal expression through body art. Women began to tattoo themselves in larger numbers as a means of expressing their identity. By the 1980s and 1990s, tattooing became mainstream and there was an explosion of tattoo shops nationwide. By 2000, a substantial portion of our society had become tattooed, including college students, mothers, and professionals. While the practice of tattooing has saturated mainstream culture, these historical associations with criminality continue to be imposed upon heavily tattooed people by moral crusaders.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How does the historic association between criminality and tattooing play out today? What are the social impacts of this association? How is this association reinforced in the media?
- How does the historical association between mental illness and tattooing manifest itself?
- What are some contemporary examples of public health scares over tattooing?

“I WANT TO BE COVERED”: HEAVILY TATTOOED WOMEN CHALLENGE THE DOMINANT BEAUTY CULTURE

SUMMARY

Feminist theories have been instrumental in bringing the materiality of the body into focus. This chapter draws upon the growing literature in embodiment theory to understand how women are positioned within beauty culture. Body modifications such as plastic surgery and extreme dieting are socially acceptable, so long as they aim towards the achievement of beauty ideals. When women become heavily tattooed, it is considered masculine, ugly, and a betrayal of the beauty culture. These women encounter comments that reinforce these ideas, such as: “You’re such a pretty girl, why would you do that to yourself?” However, when women prescribe to beauty culture ideals, the goal always becomes more elusive, and they must undergo extensive and ongoing bodily discipline. Eating disorders and dangerous plastic surgery are the result of beauty culture. For heavily tattooed women, they take an alternative path, and define their own beauty. In this way, they create a non-normative body project that promotes self-expression and self-acceptance. All of the participants expressed increased self-esteem through the process of their body modifications. However, they face social challenges to their decision from a society that expects women to aspire towards beauty culture ideals. In this chapter, the participants discussed their initial attraction to tattooing, what their tattoos mean to them, how they navigate social pressures to conform to ideal femininity, and ultimately how they choose their own pathway for self-expression. The participants find tattoos to be artwork that beautifies the body, expresses their personality, and completes their sense of self. The participants also address social questions that stigmatize their choices, such as “What about when you’re 80?” Through the aging process, women become less visible socially and considered less attractive in our youth-obsessed media culture. It is assumed that tattoos will eventually prove themselves to be unattractive on an aged body, and that women will regret their decisions to alter their body. However, none of the participants share this fear, but rather, they look forward to becoming a different type of older woman.

WATCH COVERED:

<https://vimeo.com/94019352>

View *Covered* from minute 0:00 to 3:11 (Women’s Tattoos)

“I WANT TO BE COVERED”: HEAVILY TATTOOED WOMEN CHALLENGE THE DOMINANT BEAUTY CULTURE

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Why are tattoos considered “ugly” for women, but not for men?
- How does the author use her tattoos in a gendered manner?
- Does the author feel that tattoos empower women? How, or how don’t they, specifically?
- How are tattooed women represented in a particularly gendered manner in mainstream media?
- How do women keep their tattoos within the realm of mainstream “femininity”?

“I HEART MOM”: FAMILY RESPONSES TOWARD TATTOOED WOMEN

SUMMARY

Chapter Three explores the reactions to tattoos that participants have experienced with family members: parents, grandparents, lovers, children, and extended family. Many of the participants started collecting tattoos at an early age. Eighteen is a popular age because it provides the first legitimate opportunity to purchase a tattoo. At this age, the participants are most concerned with the reaction of parents, who they often live with. Parents are usually not happy with the decision, but most eventually come to accept, and even admire, the tattoos. Grandparents, on the other hand, are typically the least accepting of the practice. This points to a definite generational bias against tattooing, which reflects the prevalence of tattooing during different eras. Those that came of age before the 1960s saw few tattoos. Subsequent generations saw an increased amount of tattoos among their acquaintances and are therefore more accepting. The participants' own families, their partners, and children had the least problems with their body art. Children do not know any differently and love their parents' tattoos. But what are the ramifications for these negative reactions within families? The chapter includes literature that examines family dynamics in general and the author applies them to this particular family experience. In various stressful family situations, families that are open-minded and accepting always fare better than rigid or ideological families. This chapter shows that families that are accepting of their child's decisions in life maintain better relationships than those that reject their family member for deviating from behavioral expectations regarding tattooing.

WATCH COVERED:

<https://vimeo.com/94019352>

View *Covered* from minute 6:33 to 14:55 (Families)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Describe the generational associations with tattooing that create the different perspective between different generations.
- What are the ways in which parents react to their children's tattoos? Which reaction is the healthiest for families?
- What are the gender and racial differences between family reactions to tattoos?
- How do parents' tattoos impact their child at school?

“COVERING” WORK: DRESS CODE POLICIES, TATTOOS, AND THE LAW

SUMMARY

A workplace policy that bans the display of body modifications, such as tattoos and piercings, is both legal and routine. Employers want to present a clean cut image to their customers; therefore, they often do not hire people with visible tattoos. However, by discriminating against heavily tattooed individuals, employers reinforce stereotypes. Therefore, employment discrimination is a critical concern for heavily tattooed women. This chapter provides an overview of different workplace policies towards tattooing by examining the military, blue collar, professional, and service work sectors. The participants describe their experiences with workplace body art policies, discrimination, and acceptance. This chapter also incorporates literature on employment discrimination in a broader sense. It is estimated that one in every three to five people in the United States sports at least one tattoo. With an ever-increasing number of people being tattooed, heavily tattooed women pave the way for new understandings of workplace appearance.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What school or workplace policy have you encountered in regards to dress code and body modification?
- What is the rationale for prohibiting tattoos in the workplace?
- What arguments do tattooed workers provide about their right to display tattoos in the workplace?
- How do workplace policies reflect larger power structures between workers and businesses? If the power structures were altered, how would this impact these policies?
- What are the parameters of the federal policies on discrimination and how are tattoos included or not included? What arguments have been given in order to legitimize tattoos in the workplace under protected status? How are these arguments undermined by the courts?

“IS THE TATTOO GUY HERE?”: WOMEN TATTOO ARTISTS’ EXPERIENCES WORKING IN A MALE-DOMINATED PROFESSION

SUMMARY

Women tattoo artists have faced occupational stigma: rejection from tattoo shop owners for apprenticeships, rejection from clients who do not want to be “tattooed by a girl,” and invisibility in the representation of the profession. Similar to women in other non-traditional professions, women face both barriers and opportunities, as they enter such professions. The literature on women in blue-collar industries, which focuses on individual professions, can provide insight into the various ways women encounter obstacles in their professions. But women working in the tattoo industry have not been examined within this body of literature. The experiences of women included in this chapter can provide insight into the larger realm of women and non-traditional employment. While women are not yet employed in equal numbers in this industry, their impact within it has been striking in just the last several decades.

The majority of participants entered the business through their husbands or boyfriends who were already established as artists. These relationships provided them with some shelter from discrimination and harassment from other artists, as well as clients. Others entered the profession through the apprenticeship process, which can provide additional barriers as individual shop owners’ operate as gatekeepers. Some shop owners may be more supportive of men in the industry. Others may harass women apprentices. Supportive shop owners may provide a refuge for women. Further, the structure of apprenticeships may disadvantage women more than men, as they are either unpaid or may cost thousands of dollars and could require to a time commitment of two or more years. However, if they have financially supportive partners, some women may be able to take advantage of these training opportunities. When women find themselves in the tattoo studio, many customers may assume that they are girlfriends or counter assistants. Customers may ask the women if “the tattoo guy is around.” Many female tattooists prefer to let their artwork speak for itself in their displayed portfolios. But some artists have reported that their gender is a negative surprise to customers who expect a man to perform the work. Other clients, however, prefer women artist because they are more comfortable working with them. Those that entered the profession in the 1970s and 1980s report more harassment in their early careers than those that entered the profession in the 1990s or the 2000s. This demonstrates not only an increased tolerance, but also a growing desire, for women to hold a significant position in the industry.

“IS THE TATTOO GUY HERE?”: WOMEN TATTOO ARTISTS’ EXPERIENCES WORKING IN A MALE-DOMINATED PROFESSION

WATCH COVERED:

<https://vimeo.com/94019352>

View *Covered* from minute 15:47 to 24:57 (Apprentices)
27:07 to 40:00 (Lady Tattooists)
42:35 to 48:48 (Conventions)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How is the tattoo industry similar to other male dominated industries?
- What are some similarities between the experiences of women working in the tattoo industry, compared to that of women working in other male dominated industries?
- How does one become a tattoo artist? And how does this process impact women’s entry into the field? What are the advantages and disadvantages?

TATTOOS ARE NOT FOR TOUCHING: PUBLIC SPACE, STRANGERS, AND SOCIAL SANCTIONS

SUMMARY

Heavily tattooed women are often touched by strangers in public spaces. The strangers try to pull back clothing items in order to see a tattoo more completely, often without asking. They approach the tattooed person and ask invasive personal questions about “what the tattoo means.” All of the participants had had this experience and they found the behavior unacceptable. This chapter was couched in the framework of symbolic interactionist theories, such as Erving Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. In this book, Goffman covers the unspoken social rules of appropriate public behavior (i.e. studied indifference)—precisely the rules that are often broken when the public encounters a heavily tattooed woman. How and why does the public come to interact with tattooed women in this way? What would be some more appropriate ways to interact with and discuss tattoo work in public spaces? How can we develop a “tattoo etiquette” of appropriate behavior that reduces the stigmatization of the tattoo collector. This chapter examines the experiences of the participants with public reactions to their ink work. Participants also provide a framework for developing a tattoo etiquette that promotes respectful interactions and mutual understanding.

WATCH COVERED:

<https://vimeo.com/94019352>

View *Covered* from minute 3:09 to 6:33 (Reactions)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What are some of the public responses to visible tattoos described by the participants?
- How do the tattooed women address these public responses?
- What is the tattoo etiquette that the author proposes?
- How are the public responses to tattoos gendered? Do men and women receive different public reactions to their tattoo art?

SUMMARY

The American history of heavily tattooed women began in the circus sideshow, a place where women quickly outshone men with their double allure of tattoos and revealing flesh. Tattooing has always been considered culturally deviant. When women cross the line into heavy tattooing, they face heavy social sanctions. However, many women are drawn to heavy tattoos as part of their self-expression. Tattooing can represent resistance to gender norms and an oppressive beauty culture. However, once women start collecting publicly visible tattoos, they often encounter resistance from their families, employers and strangers. Employment discrimination is a prevalent issue for the participants, and they devise strategies to reconcile their love of body art with social norms. How do these media images affect the participants? Heavily tattooed women provide a different perspective on feminism, theories of the body, and the postmodern condition. While tattooing culture has long been androcentric in focus, *Covered in Ink* provides a much needed balance with women's perspectives on the practice.

WATCH COVERED:

<https://vimeo.com/94019352>

View *Covered* from minute 54:01 to 55:19 (Future Tattoos)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What have you learned about tattoo culture that you did not know?
- How should one behave when following "tattoo etiquette"?
- How do the tattooed women want the public to react to their tattoos?
- How do the women feel about their lives as tattooed women?
- Have you seen any changes in public attitudes between what is expressed here and in contemporary society?
- If you were going to get a tattoo, what kind would you get? Why?