



Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community

Margo Demello , Gayle S. Rubin

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Since the 1980s, tattooing has emerged anew in the United States as a widely appealing cultural, artistic, and social form. In *Bodies of Inscription* Margo DeMello explains how elite tattooists, magazine editors, and leaders of tattoo organizations have downplayed the working-class roots of tattooing in order to make it more palatable for middle-class consumption. She shows how a completely new set of meanings derived primarily from non-Western cultures has been created to give tattoos an exotic, primitive flavor.

Community publications, tattoo conventions, articles in popular magazines, and DeMello's numerous interviews illustrate the interplay between class, culture, and history that orchestrated a shift from traditional Americana and biker tattoos to new forms using Celtic, tribal, and Japanese images. DeMello's extensive interviews reveal the divergent yet overlapping communities formed by this class-based, American-style repackaging of the tattoo. After describing how the tattoo has moved from a mark of patriotism or rebellion to a symbol of exploration and status, the author returns to the predominantly middle-class movement that celebrates its skin art as spiritual, poetic, and self-empowering. Recognizing that the term "community" cannot capture the variations and class conflict that continue to thrive within the larger tattoo culture, DeMello finds in the discourse of tattooed people and their artists a new and particular sense of community and explores the unexpected relationship between this discourse and that of other social movements.

This ethnography of tattooing in America makes a substantive contribution to the history of tattooing in addition to relating how communities form around particular traditions and how the traditions themselves change with the introduction of new participants. *Bodies of Inscription* will have broad appeal and will be enjoyed by readers interested in cultural studies, American studies, sociology, popular culture, and body art.

Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community Details

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From Reader Review *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community* for online ebook

Rebecca says

A bit outdated, (it was published in 2000), but I enjoyed how many of the same questions and feelings I've had since I've gotten tattooed are abundantly universal. Also, I find it so interesting how tattooing has evolved in North America and that many different cultures have added to that evolution. A quick, novice read for myself, a tattoo noob.

Melanie says

Although this book was published in 2000, anyone who's seen an episode or two of *Miami Ink* or *LA Ink* can tell you that what DeMello writes about hasn't changed in the past decade: with middle-class respectability comes middle-class constructions of tattooing, the body, and the self. DeMello showcases a number of these "tattoo narratives," almost all of which highlight:

1. the tattooed person's difference from "the type of person who usually gets tattooed" (inmates, sailors, bikers, gang members, etc.--basically, coded ways of talking about lower socioeconomic classes),
2. the amount of thought and consideration that went into choosing a design (reflecting middle-class values of independence and discipline, and the idea of the body as a temple that should be decorated thoughtfully, not desecrated with something lame like Yosemite Sam or Calvin peeing on a Ford logo), and
3. personally symbolic, often spirituality-inflected, readings of the tattoo itself (often involving something about a personal struggle or crisis, or imbued with other meanings that seem, whether or not the tattooed person is aware of it, to be taken from various self-help movements from the '70s and '80s).

I got a tattoo over the summer, and I will confess that I'm totally guilty of creating this kind of narrative. Reading DeMello's book, I felt a bit sheepish, to say the least, when I started thinking about how my narrative--while completely in keeping with the ones we've all come to expect from TV, the mainstream (and even niche, pro-tattoo) media, etc.--is inherently classist, inherently oppositional, and...well, kind of stupid. When I was getting my tattoo, gawkers in the shop would come over to the counter and ask, "What does your tattoo mean?" and at the time all I could think was, "Dudes, this is not *Miami Ink* or my therapist's office; I am not interesting in sharing with you." But what I was seeing as an unfortunate side effect of reality TV may actually have roots deeper in middle class American culture: "What does your tattoo mean?" could also have meant, "Tell us why *someone like you* would choose to get a tattoo."

There's more to the book than my own feelings of class guilt, obviously. DeMello does a solid job of grounding her study in scholarship about class and the body, and this is interesting both as a history of tattooing in the West (primarily in the U.S.) and as an anthropological study of contemporary American tattoo culture, the tensions within it, and how that plays out in stories and on skin.

Annie says

Sociological discussions of tattooing are really not my thing.

Carey Gibbons says

I enjoyed this book quite a bit. I read it for a semester long project that studies the tattoo enthusiast information community and this gave me a lot to think about.

Willa Grant says

My favorite book looking at tattoo from a current anthropological perspective.

Mina MacGabhann says

this book reads like a high school essay.

Super repetitive, almost like she had a word count to meet, and thought no one would notice if she repeated herself several times.

Body shaming (I can't find the quote, but she was "horrified" to watch contestants disrobe for competition)

Big nope. It was boring, dry, and not informative at all.

BonB says

This reads strongly like a qualitative master's thesis...interesting but regrettably shallow. Demello uses a great deal of space stating the same thing over and over....and over and over again. Yes, there is sort of a tattoo community; yes, they sort of agree on things; yes, there is a biker community and a middle-class community and no, they don't have much common ground.

GAH!! We couldn't have figured that out on our own?? Though the author invokes Bourdieu several times, theory is not treated in detail (which would have provided a solid structural underpinning for the rest of the work) and we are left with a great deal of repetitive storytelling that goes essentially nowhere.

A dearth of images rounds out the disappointment. This poor book is an interesting idea that unfortunately remains just that.

Hannah says

A great resource!
