

Comment on Margot Mifflin's *Bodies of Subversion*

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Tattoo artistry is an endlessly fascinating subject for those interested in cultural studies of the body. Nonetheless, few, if any, commentaries have chronicled the history of Western tattoo practices and/on the *corps exterior de femmes*. In *Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoos*, Margot Mifflin provides the reader with a fascinating cortege of photographs alongside an informative monograph on tattoos and tattooing, from the nineteenth century onwards, as this cultural practice relates to women. The author aspires to 'compose a secret history of women grappling with body politics from the Gilded Age to the present - women whose intensely personal yet provocatively public art poses a complicated challenge to the meaning of feminine beauty on the eve of the millennium' (1997: 178). Through a broadloom of new imagery and female-specific practices' the author aims to present contemporary tattoo art as it manifests in a 'distinctly '90s sense of pluralism - one that dispels the idea of feminism as a unified socio-political movement with a single public face and dominant guiding philosophy' (1997: 177), and provides a 'journey through the art, history, and folkways' of the renegades of the flesh (1997: 9).

The primary aims of the text can be summed up by the three following themes: 1) challenging traditional popular and political discourses on womanhood and body art by means of a contemporary analysis of tattooed skin as expressive action; 2) interrogating professional male dominance in the tattoo industry by emphasizing the experiences, struggles and successes of female tattoo artists; and 3) providing a forum and space in which tattooed women and artists can communicate their social experiences as having tattooed bodies and the cultural or personal dilemmas and/or victories they have undergone as a result of defying the traditionally prescribed model of normative female body/flesh.

Providing a discursive space in which women express personal narratives on how their tattoos have been adorned as 'an outward expression of their inner being' expressions denied by traditional accounts, Mifflin argues that 'tattooing is a way of cutting into nature to create a living breathing autobiography' (1997: 178). These poignant mini-biographies often make visible the ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning invested in women's choices and purposes for adorning body art. Mifflin offers keen insights into the 'stigma of the marked woman, which only the rich had ever truly surmounted' (1997: 39) and explores how women have, and continue to engage in 'rewriting accepted notions of feminine beauty and self-expression' (1997: 9) through creative body art. She thus highlights the contested cultural domains of body politics, sexuality, conceptions of femininity, and the stigmata tattooed women are forced to deal with as a result of transgressing cultural codes of the body.

At the same time, Mifflin alludes to the social underpinnings of the tattooed female body unlike those more conservative readings of tattooing. Rather than evaluating body art as an act of self-mutilation as some have done (Hewitt 1997) or in a psychoanalytic vein - that women sub-consciously desire the squirting of ink into one's body - Mifflin provides a broad framework in which the skin art of women can be understood as political and personal forms of expression, as an avenue for communicative action with one's self and the world. The author elegantly illustrates the panoply of reasons why women have historically chosen to adorn the art of ornamental flesh as a media for decorative, political, or therapeutic self-stylization. She explains, for example, that breast cancer survivors have used tattoos as solutions for transforming grievous mastectomy scars into meaningful personal symbols. As an alternative to prostheses or reconstructive surgery, Mifflin demonstrates that for some women tattooing the body can provide a kind of healing process through an exterior recreation and re-definition of the self.

Mifflin also dedicates a substantial portion of her text to discussing how women's aesthetic stylizations of the body have acted for some as a form of resisting prevalent gender, sexual, and racial oppressions. Tattoos, she writes: 'appeal to the contemporary women as both emblems of empowerment in an era of feminist gains and as badges of self-determination at a time when controversy about date rape, abortion rights, and sexual harassment have many women thinking hard about who controls their bodies — and why' (1997: 7).

There is much in this popular account that commands strong praise. Most notably, Margot Mifflin's absorbing assemblage of the visual - her photographic realism - is reason enough to recommend this book. One of her most fascinating and surprising findings is that nineteenth century society women collected tattoos as custom couture. 'Tattooing became vogueish among Europe's upper classes; . . . tattoos [were] worn by German, Danish, English and Greek royalty, and Winston Churchill's mother' (1997: 33). Her text is also to be commended for cutting through the weald of historiography on this subject and getting to the core: customized female flesh 'stabs at permanence in an age of transience and marks of individualism in a culture of mass production' (1997: 178). And just as significantly, her presentations and claims challenge any homogenous or universal assumptions about why some women — ranging from nineteenth century sideshow performers, bourgeois ladies and the liberated woman of the sexual revolution to professional women and celebrities at the turn of the twentieth century — decide to tattoo their bodies as indicative of changing public perceptions and social roles. Overall, Mifflin offers a magnificent collection of photographs in a well-written, intriguing and informative book on the advent of women's tattoo practices and its captivating and dynamic history in the West.

It is with some regret, therefore, that I must suggest readers approach Mifflin's narrative with caution. The strength of her account - the way she systematically highlights women's personal perspectives and experiences - is also the source of the book's most significant limitations. Her qualitative method which assumes overarching social problematics that Mifflin raises to such good effect simply cannot be answered here. The project begins in an uphill battle, using what are

in essence *a priori* categorical assumptions about nature/culture, feminine/masculine, the female body and the social world and thus falls prey to an approach which can be considered, at times, to be motivated by an uncritical definition of social power which tends to normalize an androcentric view of authority.

More significant problems arise, however, from Mifflin's lack of historical rigour. Her use of archival sources and documentation is limited and inefficient - making this text more of a perfunctory commentary rather than a sustain(ed)(able) historical analysis of subversive female bodies. Other important considerations could have strengthened her perspective and line of argumentation, such as a cross-cultural comparison of tattooing practices and female bodies through an ethnographical analysis. Also, other sustained social historical discussions such as how public sentiments came to place stock in the purity of the female flesh as a corporeal marker of moral character, for example, would have proven valuable to examining and discussing *how* the tattooed female body came to be defined as subversive in the Western world.

Further, the book raised significant analytical questions which went frustratingly unanswered. Because Mifflin places too heavy an emphasis on 'personal' experiences she fails at situating her subject within wider social, cultural and political forces and effects. Therefore, those readers interested in a more critically engaged theorization on the relationship between the female body, power, culture, and tattoos will be sorely disappointed. Any theoretical discussion on the body is conspicuously absent and forms the book's greatest weakness. The author reduces her research subject - the tattooed woman - to an empirically and positivistically observable social object as though social meanings were intrinsic and factual rather than effects of discursive and institutional power.

Regardless of the criticisms presented here, Mifflin does succeed in inciting the reader to reassess conventional understandings of gender, tattoos, and the pristine body. At the same time, her work illustrates that the tattooed female body offers an especially rich and open field of cultural inquiry to researchers particularly, as well as a seductive narrative and pictoriography to interested voyeurs and experientially-similar tattooed others. While Mifflin deserves to be applauded for delving into uncharted territories with this fascinating pictorial text, the descriptive cultural account she largely provides was written for a wide audience - that much is clear - and as a result, falls short of reaching its full critical potential.

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References

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