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Sinah Theres Kloß, ed., *Tattoo Histories: Transcultural Perspectives on the Narratives, Practices, and Representations of Tattooing* (Routledge: New York, 2020). Ebook \$68.99 (print, 336 pp., \$252.00), ISBN: 9780429319228.

R e v i e w

Many of the seminal tattoo studies of the last generation have opened with a description of what tattooing is, but given the increasing ubiquity of tattoos within modern culture, it is unlikely that many readers still need to have this described for them. However, Sinah Theres Kloß, in her Introduction, immediately takes something that most people think of as being a key characteristic of a tattoo – permanence – and challenges it, stating that '[t]attoos are impermanent, fluid, and volatile. They change and disappear when people die. They are transformed in shape and intensity on human bodies over time ... and are frequently reworked, removed, covered, or extended'. (p.3) This paradox, furthermore, is not just a modern phenomenon but one which can be seen throughout history, both physically and through evolving attitudes within and across cultures. This transcultural approach across both space and time is evident throughout all the contributions.

Tattoo Histories is divided into four parts, taking neither a geographical nor a chronological approach to compartmentalising the chapters: this volume does not seek to impose a uniform or linear History upon the subject matter, allowing instead for a multiplicity of perspectives and histories to be discussed. Part one, 'Tattoos as Individual or Communal Body Projects', examines issues of gender, sexuality, identity construction, ethnicity, and class within contemporary tattooing culture through an analysis of the reality program *Miami Ink* (Verena Hutter), and extensive interviews with the Italian LGBTQ+ (Alessandra Castellani) and American Latinx (Beverley Yuen Thompson) communities. Part two, 'Tattoos and Othering', examines how tattoos have been used to 'other' individuals and whole communities within very different

historical and fictional contexts: ancient Mediterranean and near-eastern cultures (Martin T. Dinter and Astrid Khoo), revolutionary-era France (Victoria N Meyer), nineteenth-century America (Amelia Klem Osterud), and the fictional supernatural horror TV series *Salem* (Stephanie Weber). Part three, '(De-)Colonisation, Revitalization, and Cultural Appropriation', contains the greatest number of contributions, with five chapters to discuss different aspects of colonisation, decolonisation, and revitalisation within the indigenous societies that tattooed historically in North America (Pauline Alvarez), North-Western India and neighbouring Myanmar (Ata Mallick, Lars Krutak), as well as cultural appropriation through Westerners having Chinese language tattoos (Guy Almog) and the acquisition by tourists in East Africa souvenir tattoos (Nico Nassenstein and Maren Rüschi). Lastly, part four, 'Tattoo as Embodied Art', explores tattoos primarily in an art historical, rather than cultural or historical, context through ancient Thracian tattooing as depicted in ancient Greek art (Owen Rees), a Damien Hirst artwork, *butterfly, divided*, of a butterfly tattooed upon a woman's vulva (Ole Wittmann), and a novel, *The Garden of Evening Mists*, whose main protagonists, a Malaysian war victim and her Japanese lover find mutual catharsis through the long process of tattooing her back with an artistic *horimono* tattoo (Hannah M.Y. Ho).

At first glance, the contributions to *Tattoo Histories* may seem to be rather loosely connected and eclectic; but upon closer reading, there are, in fact, several clear themes that emerge through the approach of the various authors as well as the overall editorial continuity. Each of the chapters within the four parts complements and contrasts each other exceptionally well, and the way that Kloß contextualises each part with its own literature review aids in this impression of connectivity.

One of the striking themes throughout *Tattoo Histories* is the blurred line between fiction and reality. Ho and Weber analyse fictional sources which use real tattooing motifs and motivations within mostly plausible historical settings, and Meyer examines political propaganda in the fictional (though plausible) caricature *Republican Discipline*. Osterud provides an excellent discussion of nineteenth-century

heavily tattooed 'freak show' performers with real tattooed bodies and fictional personal histories. Their popular captivity narratives, designed to be shocking and titillating, played upon society's fears and preconceptions of the exotic, deliberately blurring the history of the individual to fit into the trope, with varying degrees of fictionalised narratives being built upon a base of truth. But playing with the truth is not just confined to historical tattooing, as Nassenstein and Rüsç note in the context of (post-)colonial tourism that people "tend to display souvenirs that reflect their *ideal* self-image as opposed to their *real* self-image" (p.238). Aside from the small inconvenience that almost all of the nineteenth-century performers' tattoos were quite obviously of Western design and technique, it is ironic that such narratives framed these individuals as being forcibly tattooed in order to culturally assimilate into their captors' society. Actually, the converse was the case historically with Indigenous people around the globe being forced to relinquish their tattooing traditions in order to be deemed successfully assimilated into their colonisers' societies, as discussed by Alvarez, Mallick, and Krutak.

Within these considerations of fictional narratives, the theme of 'authenticity' is closely interwoven, and how tattoos have a multiplicity of meanings for different audiences. Contemporary culture, being centred on the experiences of the individual, highly values tattoos which are unique, individual, and often meaningful as a memento of a person, place or time, as detailed by Castellani, Thompson, Nassenstein and Rüsç, and Wittmann. This is of course completely different to historical and contemporary indigenous tattooing traditions which value the communal, with design choice, placement, and meaning taken from a small cultural cache.

The last recurring theme I want to highlight is that of power and authority, which can manifest either overtly or covertly or be subverted from within. Most obviously, punitive tattooing is about overt displays of power and subjugation, and this is seen in Meyer's analysis of late eighteenth-century political propaganda, as well as in both Rees's and Dinter and Khoo's examination of ancient European tattooing which details the identification of tattooing with criminality and servility in the

Graeco-Roman world. Both essays provide a cultural contrast to this with, respectively, a discussion of Thracian and early Christian tattooing traditions which subverted Graeco-Roman narratives of authority.

Equally overt as punitive tattooing are edicts that forbid the practice of tattooing as seen within the history of white settler colonialism, especially when coupled with evangelical Christianity. Other, more subtle, expressions of power are in acts which can be argued as cultural appropriation as with souvenirs and Chinese language tattooing. Or in the way that traditional gender roles and stereotypes affect how and where people, usually women, get tattooed. But power is not at all one-sided, since being *empowered* is often the emotional meaning that many people attach to their tattoos, whether they are reclaiming their indigenous heritage, or seeing their tattoo art as manifesting their evolving identity.

It is also important to note that many of the tattooed performers discussed by Osterud were women, from a non-white or lower-class background, or (shamefully at the time) were considered to be intellectually disabled due to their physical 'deformities' or their race. As such, she notes that most had their narratives ghost-written for them by a white adult male. A less overt version of this patronising, objectifying, and de-humanising approach still can be seen to persist within mainstream society within the context of tattooing, as Hutter shows in her analysis of how contemporary women's tattoos are deemed culturally acceptable when kept within a standardised set of motivations, designs, reactions, and interactions. 'Small, cute, and hidden' (pp.36, 44, 52) is what women's tattoos are expected to be, and when women transgress this expectation, they are treated differently both within tattooing communities and without, as discussed separately by Hutter, Castellani, and Thompson.

The tattoo at the centre of Wittmann's essay similarly plays on these very expectations, being relatively small, artistically executed, and ordinarily hidden, before subverting this trope. Wittmann contextualises the artwork (which consists of both the actual tattoo as well as the art photograph of the tattoo) within Hirst's *oeuvre*:

the vertical axis of this piece is provided by the model's pudendal cleft rather than literal dissection as with some of his other pieces involving animals in general, making *butterfly, divided* one of his most ethical artworks given the clear and informed consent shown by all participants both before and after the process, as well as the lack of direct animal deaths involved in its creation. The choice of motif is highly significant, connecting other Hirst works involving the same butterfly species (*Morpho cypris*), but also referencing one of Aphrodite's epithets: *Kýpris* – the 'Cypriot'. Multiple strands of meaning overlap, with the location of the tattoo being the 'mount of Venus', famously depicted by Botticelli when Aphrodite covers her vulva in *The Birth of Venus*, itself linked to other famous art such as *The Origin of the World*. Adding another layer of complexity, female wearers of butterfly-tattoos have, especially until the late twentieth century, been strongly associated with low social status, promiscuity, and even criminality, and other commentators have noted the traditional gender authority relationship implied by the male tattooist and male artist creating such a personal piece. However, Shauna Taylor, the woman who underwent this most painful process and whose genitalia is in a sense no longer private any longer, has elsewhere attested how the artwork placement and design have, in fact, personally empowered her. In contrast to the 'Shame Laid Bare' of the title, Taylor's attitude proves that shame is in the eyes of the beholder, not the bearer.

Throughout all the contributions, *Tattoo Histories* successfully examines how practices marginalised for millennia have persisted, been subverted, and ultimately transformed at various times and places in history. Voices that have traditionally been marginalised within societies that devalue tattooing – female, queer, indigenous, and radical narratives – can all be heard quite clearly within these chapters, offering important perspectives on issues of representation and identity from the communal to the personal level. This work is an accomplished collection of essays which sits comfortably alongside other important works from the last twenty years, such as those edited by Jane Caplan, Margot DeMello, Aaron Deter-Wolf, Lars Krutak, and Ben

Lester. It will appeal to both students and academics in the field and will surely be considered as a seminal work in years to come.

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