



# **Tattooing and the Gender Turn**

**Labour, Resistance and Activism  
in a Male-Dominated Industry**

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**Emma Beckett**

*EMERALD STUDIES IN POPULAR CULTURE AND GENDER*

# **Tattooing and the Gender Turn**

# Emerald Studies in Popular Culture and Gender

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# **Tattooing and the Gender Turn: Labour, Resistance and Activism in a Male-Dominated Industry**

BY

**EMMA BECKETT**

*University of Warwick, UK*



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*For Sid and Woodrow –  
may you grow into fierce feminist allies.*

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## About the Author

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## Chapter 1

# From Freak Shows to Feminism

### Introduction

I grew up surrounded by tattoos; my dad, uncles and grandads were all tattooed. As a little girl growing up in a working-class family in 1980s Britain, being surrounded by tattooed family was normal, and not something I ever remember questioning and yet I always attribute my love of tattoos and body modification to my affiliation with alternative subcultures and music. The tattoos I saw on my family felt very different to the world of tattooing I would become so familiar with years later, but the normalising of body modification amongst my family must have had an impact upon the way I thought about tattoos from a very early age – even if I didn't know it at the time.

When, aged 18, I walked into a tattoo studio ready to get tattooed for the first time, I felt like I was entering a different world. A world that I had been peering into from afar until that moment – reading magazines, studying the tattoos of my musician idols, planning and drawing designs on myself with a pen. When I stood outside the studio with the tattooist, post-tattoo, I felt like I'd finally made it into 'the club'. I couldn't wait to show my tattoo off, further declaring my 'difference' to the mainstream along with my developing love of subcultures. As my tattoo collection grew, and my affiliation with the world of tattooing developed, the feeling of belonging to *something bigger than myself* was amplified. I was also developing a connection with alternative music, specifically grunge, punk and subsequently, riot grrrl culture. I was experiencing first-hand, the emotions of being on the peripheries of the mainstream and at the same time, a sense of belonging to something offering an alternative.

When I returned to the same studio to get my second tattoo, not long after my first, I was told that the artist, whom I met previously, had been asked to leave – he had exposed himself to a customer. I was 19 years old, being told about a man much older than myself, exposing himself to someone who had presumably trusted him, and weirdly, I don't remember being shocked by this. Was this just *something that happened* in tattoo studios?

From my experience of being tattooed, and spending time in studios, I became all-too aware that tattooed women experience the community, and wider society, very differently to tattooed men. I was also aware, therefore, that women tattoo artists, queer artists and/or artists of colour were likely to experience the industry

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in a very different way to their straight, white, male colleagues. I knew that the industry had been a very male-dominated field for a long time. I have visited enough studios – heavily male-dominated studios – to have been privy to the ‘banter’ clients endure whilst getting tattooed and have experienced this whilst getting tattooed myself. Sexist jokes, sexualised comments and innuendos are not uncommon in male-dominated spaces and tattoo studios are certainly no exception. The term *banter* does not always sit comfortably with me as it is often used to excuse offensive comments and teasing behaviour not enjoyed by the recipient. By labelling comments as ‘harmless banter’, (predominantly) men expect to be excused of their inappropriate and unwanted comments and behaviour. Sometimes these exchanges are equal and welcomed, and sometimes they are not. For me, these experiences happened a long time ago, but reflecting on them now, I realise how masculine that environment was and how intimidating it may have been for some clients (especially women, or those who did not ‘fit’ with the hegemonic masculine ideal). This led me to consider if women clients, or *tattooees*, were experiencing this, then what were the women *tattooers* experiencing in this same environment?

Although research on tattoo and gender has been approached in terms of tattooed women as consumers, there is a notable lack of focus upon women tattooers – placing women in a position of passive consumer rather than active producer. Research has also neglected to explore how women and gender relations have influenced the tattoo industry. Although the complexities of the industry in terms of internal relations and dynamics have been, in some ways, investigated in terms of hierarchies, this is often not through a gendered lens. I anticipated that using gender as a lens through which to explore the tattoo industry would offer a valuable insight into a heavily masculinised culture and how women and queer artists manage, negotiate and resist this. I have also become increasingly aware – and in awe – of the changes women and queer artists are making to the industry, and I wanted to explore, document and celebrate these changes throughout this book.

### **Ladies Who Tattoo: A Potted History**

The historical narrative of tattooing in the West is anchored in well-rehearsed and somewhat over-used rhetoric surrounding romanticised tales of sailors and criminals. Women have been largely written out of tattooing history, despite their integral role in the cultural development of tattooing in the West (Braunberger, 2000:4). Although I do not aim to offer a full history of women tattoo artists here, I want to not only contextualise and situate this book but offer space and respect to the women who paved the way for so many others. By considering a selection of artists and their experiences, we can begin to explore and highlight the (in)consistencies between women tattoo artists’ experiences of the past and of their experiences today.

Women like Betty Broadbent and Artoria Gibbons are notorious in tattoo history for their connections with travelling circuses and carnivals of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. The carnivals often featured

'freak shows' and side-shows, showcasing individuals thought of as 'oddities' at the time, including heavily tattooed men and women (Thompson, 2015:23). By the 1920s, hundreds of tattooed men and women were employed in circus side-shows, although the women performers proved more popular than their male colleagues, with their revealing clothing and their often 'exotic' and erotised stories of how they came to be so heavily tattooed (Thompson 2015:24–25). Stories were fantastical, often centring around the tattooed female body of the reprimanded woman who once enjoyed 'too much' freedom and paid the price for it (Braunberger, 2000:9). Interestingly, however, these stories did not reflect the reality of these women's lives. Women lived off money earned through their tattooed bodies, and this often-meant increased independence and money, as well as more opportunity for travel than would have been the norm for women of this time (Braunberger, 2000:10). For the women watching in the audience, these 'tattooed ladies' represented a fantasy of freedom that they themselves perhaps never fulfilled – the freedom to choose their own pathways in life and to have autonomy over their bodies (Thompson, 2015:25).

The first reported woman tattoo artist was Maud Stevens, a circus performer in the United States, who became Maud Wagner after marrying her tattooist husband, Gus Wagner, in the early 1900s (Mifflin, 2013:31). Maud and Gus worked together for years, although Maud was listed in advertisements as 'M. Stevens. Wagner', to appease those clients who were not happy to be tattooed by a woman (Osterud, 2009:26). Britain's first woman tattooist was Jessie Knight, who began tattooing in 1921 and remained Britain's only female tattooist for decades (Mifflin, 2013:36). In 1955, Knight came second in the 'Champion Tattoo Artist of All England' contest (Iqbal, 2017) and her family believed that it was being a woman that prevented her from being awarded first place.

By the 1970s, the number of women tattooists had not increased significantly, although the number of women getting tattooed had started to rise. Sheila May, who worked in her husband's shop in 1966, only knew of one other woman artist, and said that it took over 10 years to hear about other women in the trade (Mifflin, 2013:55). In 1972, Vyvyn Lazonga began an apprenticeship in the United States with Danny Danzi and eventually became an influential woman in the field – not only for her artistry but for her status as a heavily tattooed woman. She had full sleeves in the early 1970s, which was unusual at the time, especially for a woman, and she won 'Most beautifully tattooed woman in the world' at the 1978 World Tattoo Convention (Mifflin, 2013:57). Despite her prestige, however, Lazonga still endured prejudice from male artists, who disregarded her at conventions on the premise that women should not be *that* tattooed. This is an early illustration of the double standards women had to, and still must, endure: gaining respect and prestige for being tattooed, but so easily crossing the line of what is deemed acceptable by both the mainstream and the subculture. Lazonga resisted the criticism; she opened her own shop in 1979 and is still a renowned artist in the field today.

Ruth Marten, a New-York based self-taught artist who began tattooing in 1972, avoided much of the sexism experienced by Lazonga by working from a private studio at home. Tattooing had been illegal in New York since 1961, and

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so a private studio was also crucial in avoiding prosecution. In 1977, Marten completed art school before becoming a tattooist, which was unusual at the time (Osterud, 2009:30). She had planned a project to bridge the gap between fine art and tattooing, by tattooing famous pieces of art onto art collectors' skin (Mifflin, 2013:60). This was an innovative idea, and although it did not take off at the time, it is not as unusual in today's tattoo culture, and maps the beginnings of tattoos association with the world of fine art.

Jacci Gresham, another important woman in tattoo history, was the first well-known African-American artist in 1976 and remained the only prominent woman of colour artist, reporting that she did not meet any other women of colour in the industry until the 1990s. Gresham's tattooist husband taught her how to tattoo, although ironically (and further to Lazonga's experiences), he imposed a ban on tattooing women in their shop due to the social unacceptability of tattooed women. Gresham, however, abolished the ban and continued to tattoo women (Mifflin, 2013:66).

It is important to acknowledge this vast historical background of women in tattoos, and to challenge the notion that tattooing has and was something done by men, to men. Although centuries apart, parallels can be drawn between the tattooed ladies of the circus side-shows, and the women tattooers of today. The negotiation of femininities and challenging the boundaries of social acceptability, at the same time as using tattoo as a vehicle for independence, can be mapped throughout the history of women and tattoos from the nineteenth century to the present, highlighting frequently occurring issues surrounding sexism, prejudice and male dominance, which brings us to the point at which my research began. Mifflin suggests, 'For a new generation, the barriers to the profession have been cleared' (2013:107), but is this really the case?

#### ***Women Who Tattoo: My Research***

There has been a sharp rise in women tattoo artists (and women tattoo consumers) since the 2000s, and the visibility on social media (such as Instagram) suggests that in terms of numbers of women artists, the field *appears* more equal. I want to explore whether the actual experiences of women artists correspond with the suggested shift in the composition of the industry. Women appear to be represented in terms of numbers, but how is the industry responding to this change? How also, are women attempting to change the industry, and perhaps offer something different to what the tattoo community has been accustomed to. Much of these changes have been the result of negotiations made by artists in their attempt to find space within the industry, and these negotiations were a central theme in the artists' narratives.

Domination explains the ways in which women are oppressed and either accommodate or resist, while negotiation describes the ways women and men bargain for privileges and resources.

(Gerson and Peiss, 1985:322)

As this quote illustrates, negotiation entails a set of interrelated discussions or subtle and often invisible compromises. My research exposes these, along with the conflict and contradiction that often comes with negotiation. I explore what these negotiations mean for the women on a day-to-day basis, and the paradox, complexity and ambivalence that accompany these day-to-day experiences.

Thompson (2015) states that ‘The experiences of women within the industry are important to consider, as they will be at the forefront of changes within it’ (2015:123), and, therefore, this book focuses on the *effect* women and queer artists have and are having on the industry, as well as their experiences of it – through interviews and conversations with artists, I not only explore tattooists as producers of sub-cultural artefacts and alternative art, but as producers, activists and agents of change and progress. DeMello described the tattoo community as having undergone a ‘middle-class turn’ (DeMello, 2000:43). I argue now that tattooing has been undergoing another cultural shift – not only effected by the shift in class but also by the shift in gendered influence within the community – a *gender turn* – and this turn sees women, non-binary and queer artists intervening, interrupting and disrupting the traditionally masculine tattoo culture.

My research sits within the field of subcultural studies, whilst contributing to discussions surrounding alternative femininities, emotional and aesthetic labour, conformity and resistance. Although tattooing in the West, as a trade, has its roots within and across subcultures, the level of professionalism required means that this subcultural practice intersects the mainstream field of bodywork and employment, which offers another alternative lens through which to consider subcultural traditions and leads to my exploration of the *sub-cultural* space as a *workspace* and place of employment.

### ***Feminist Methodologies: My Methodologies – Or What I Did and Why***

Although debates about what constitutes feminist research are varied and vast, feminist researchers begin with a political commitment to ‘produc[ing] useful knowledge that will make a difference to women’s lives through social and individual change’ (Letherby, 2003:4). ‘Feminist research practice’ is recognised as distinguishable from other forms of research, with focus on the questions asked, the position of the researcher within the process of the research, the intended purpose of the work produced and the political and ethical issues raised throughout the research process (Letherby, 2003:5; Maynard, 1994:14). Influential factors and key characteristics of feminist research include: women’s voices to be brought to the forefront; reducing or eliminating exploitation; women not being treated as objects for the benefit of the research; and that the research contributes towards reducing the conditions of oppression (Letherby, 2003; Maynard, 1994; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002; Skeggs, 2001). The political nature of feminist research, and its potential to bring about change, is, however, potentially problematic – is research that does not bring about political change, therefore, not feminist? (Glucksmann, 1994). And how as researchers, do we know if the research has brought about change, especially for the individuals

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involved in the research? Feminist research enables us to ‘reflect on and attend to dynamics of power, knowledge, relationships, and context throughout the research process’ (Ackerly and True, 2020:2) and as a feminist, it is important for me to acknowledge my attempts to adhere to this research ethic.

I wanted my research to focus upon women’s experiences and how women make sense of these experiences. I do not strive to expose the ‘reality’ of the tattoo industry, and this is not something I would claim possible for this book. Instead, I centre the experiences of the participants (who often have their experiences decentred by the industry they work in), whilst exploring and interrogating the differences and ambivalence in the narratives. These contradictions can become an integral part of the research and should not be considered a drawback or potential problem. I value and appreciate the subjective experiences of the participants, and their accounts of these experiences, and hope that my discussions reflect this. I cannot and would not speak for all women, all women tattoo artists or all of my participants and understand that this research is a brief glimpse into the experiences of a very small proportion of women, non-binary and queer people in the industry. As Holland (2004) suggests, rather than creating and constructing a universal body of truth, research provides an opportunity to discover what is important to the people interviewed (2004:4–5). All too often, women’s voices, opinions and experiences are devalued and belittled, leaving many people feeling as though they are alone in many of their experiences. By collating these voices, feminist research can, in some ways, validate individual experiences and go some way to assure women and queer folk that they are, in fact, not alone and their experiences matter. My research offers an invaluable snapshot of an industry grappling with contemporary issues surrounding gender, identity and the role of work in shaping and understanding the lives of the people at the heart of the sub-culture.

### ***Reflexivity and Theorised Subjectivity: Making the Researcher Visible***

It is important for feminist researchers to place ourselves within the research, acknowledging what we bring to the research and the effect we have upon it. Knowledge production is not a one-way street, and it is, therefore, also important to acknowledge the impact that conducting research has *upon us*. During the research, I became increasingly aware of the prejudices I had been socialised into throughout my involvement with the tattoo industry. Spending time in traditional, male-run studios meant my knowledge of the tattoo industry was shaped by ‘old-school’ male tattooers who favoured apprenticeships as a way of learning the trade, and consistently conjured a ‘good’ vs ‘bad’ tattoo binary. As I became more involved in my research, I could recognise my own personal bias and prejudice with regard to what constitutes a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ tattoo and artist, and now my views have changed significantly, and I have the research participants to thank for this. This illustrates not only the importance of reflecting upon the research process, but it also provides insight into the perils of being an insider in

the research field. My initial views were very much influenced by me being involved in tattoo culture, and this was a challenge for me as a researcher.

Reflexivity is an important aspect of feminist research – being open about why and how we do research, our bias, and the effect this has upon the knowledge produced, allows others who read the work to understand the circumstances in which the research was conducted and produced. Holland (2018) talks about the presence of love within her research, and I too would like to acknowledge this here. Academic work doesn't often discuss the love and emotion that may have driven it, and yet so often a love for what we are writing about is a strong motivator behind what we do (Holland, 2018:11). As Holland (2018) suggests, 'emotion is missing generally in accounts of sociological research' (2018:80), and I believe there is value in acknowledging the emotional attachment and response we, as researchers, will feel throughout the research process. Participants are also likely to have an emotional involvement in, or attachment to, the research, and thus construct their own ideas about the researcher and the purpose of the research, and this will shape how they present themselves and their narratives. The artists' love for tattoo and tattooing was evident throughout the interviews, and this was not only interesting to hear but humbling to witness and an important part of the research. By providing an insight into our personal investment and motives behind the research – for both the reader and the participants – we can work towards developing and embracing a feminist methodology.

Positionality and recognition of this is key in any feminist research project (Deutsch, 2004; Dinçer, 2019), and as a cis white woman I experience the privileges that come with this, which is important to acknowledge. I wanted my research to be as intersectional as possible, acknowledging the important interplay between gender and other identity factors such as race, sexuality and class. And although I have focused upon the relationship between gender and tattooing by interviewing women, non-binary and queer artists, I had hoped that my sample of participants would be more diverse in terms of race and ethnicity. However, having relied on artists coming to me voluntarily in the first phase of interviews, I had no control over who would or would not volunteer – most of the artists who volunteered were white, with the exception of LC.

LC was the only person in the first phase of interviews to mention race and tattooing; interestingly more of the participants spoke about race in the second phase of interviews – perhaps indicating that, years later, the industry is getting better at recognising the problem of racial inequalities within it. The fact that race was not an initial recurring theme within the data tells us something important about tattoo culture and illustrates the overarching whiteness of the tattoo industry – something that requires further academic attention. It also illustrates that as a researcher it is important to note what is not said, as well as what is. Sometimes, non-recurring themes are just as relevant and important as those that are recurring. LC was surprised when I told her she was the only interviewee to talk about race (in the first phase of interviews), which illustrates the need for a more diverse research sample. I was torn between interviewing the women who came to me voluntarily, whoever they might be, or purposefully seeking out

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possible participants because they were women of colour. My decision to focus on the women who volunteered means my sample was narrower than I had hoped. Research carried out by a woman of colour may have attracted a more diverse set of participants and I would be very excited to read any research that built upon my own! For the second phase of interviews, I did contact several artists of colour, but they either did not respond, or didn't want to take part. Talking to more women of colour would have, I am sure, identified further underlying issues within the industry – specifically surrounding how women of colour experience the hegemonic masculinity and inherent whiteness of the industry. Although there are relatively high numbers of Black Women getting tattooed, these numbers are not matched with Black Women becoming artists (Mifflin, 2013:120) and often leaves women of colour feeling like 'outsiders in an industry comprised of outsiders' (Mifflin, 2013:120). Artists already established in the community speak of the lack of Black Women in the industry and the difficulties they have had in finding apprenticeships and studios to employ them (Mifflin, 2013:120–1). Although Mifflin's research offers a brief look at the barriers faced by women of colour in the industry, it is not an in-depth exploration of the racial inequalities within tattoo culture, and this, it appears, is something lacking within academic research on tattoos and tattooing. Other research on race and racism in tattooing includes work focusing on the appropriation of tribal bodily practices by contemporary Western culture (Pitts, 2003), and although there have been an increasing number of media articles focusing upon cultural appropriation of *tattoo imagery* (Coles, 2016; Richards, 2015), academic research is yet to fully address current discussions. This opens opportunities for further research, and I feel research on the intersectional inequalities of tattoo culture would be a relevant and important extension of this project.

### *My Methods*

I spoke to 20 artists in total, 18 of whom identified as women, one identified as non-binary and one as gender-queer. I wanted the interviews to be semi-structured, utilising a more conversational exchange, and initiated this by using three open-ended questions:

- (1) Why tattooing?
- (2) What are your experiences of being a woman, non-binary and/or queer in the industry and the tattoo subculture?
- (3) What are your experiences of being tattooed? Both inside and outside of the sub-culture.

I conducted the interviews in two phases – most of the interviews were conducted in the first phase; the second phase of interviews happened 5 years after the first and enabled me to re-interview two of the original participants, but also focus on artists involved in the #tattoometoo movement which had occurred since I conducted the first interviews.