Navigating Tattooed Women's Bodies

Intersections of Class and Gender

Charlotte Dann

EMERALD STUDIES IN POPULAR CULTURE AND GENDER

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Emerald Studies in Popular Culture and Gender

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Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2021

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83909-831-4 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-83909-830-7 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-83909-832-1 (Epub)

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Certificate Number 1985
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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

For Jellybean

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Chapter 1

Introduction

There are a few different ways in which we can unpack the contexts for the research that has been conducted on tattooed bodies up until this point. Firstly, we are looking at Western constructions of tattooed bodies. This is important because for other parts of the world, such as indigenous cultures, tattoos are a part of their culture, the journey to adulthood, and can signify the ageing process that is exclusively for and involving women in these tribes, and this positions tattoos in a different way to our Western understanding. To impose a Western lens of tattoos on other parts of the world would be problematic to say the least – there is enough nuance to consider within our Western (and here, specifically British) context. Whilst we do not have the same tribal significance in Britain, we most certainly have our own cultural norms that play a part in how we get, perceive and make sense of tattoos. We could argue that some of the designs and styles of tattoos that we see fall in and out of favour at particular time points, giving further support to the importance of context, and how this in turn impacts attitudes towards tattoos. Though it is not as easy as suggesting it is simply time, fashion or design that plays a part in attitudes towards tattoos – there is a complex web of issues involving points such as gender and social class that need to be accounted for, which will be explored throughout this book.

Author Standpoint

In its origin, this research centred on the bodies of tattooed women, with a want to explore the multiple ways that femininity can be performed. What actually emerged from this research is a more critical and feminist lens that did not just consider multiple enactments of femininity, but began to navigate societal, cultural and patriarchal norms, and has honed in on the ways that women negotiate their own positions according to the different contexts and the roles that we occupy. This research is not just about how shared narratives between women are important, but also about what the researcher is and *becomes* through the research. I am a tattooed woman myself, and my journey with tattoos has developed continually, from before the research started, to the present day.

The research discussed throughout this book initially aimed to look at how women constitute themselves as tattooed subjects, how social discourses are constructed around feminine tattooed bodies and the implications of these constructions of how women position themselves. But through the journey, it became

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doi:10.1108/978-1-83909-830-720210001

more about making an explicit feminist framework for research, with the researcher included in that narrative. Critical qualitative research gives us the space to consider voice, position, and power. To take a feminist stance, in this respect, is about the centring of women in their stories, and making visible the parts that are usually covered up. Throughout the book, conformity, resistance and regulation weave through the literature and the analytic work.

Bringing the Literature Together

There has been an exponential increase in tattoo studios on our high streets over the last 20 years, making tattoos more accessible to more people, and shifting perceptions of these spaces away from dark and dangerous studios into something more inviting to a broader group of people. Whilst tattoos are often considered a working-class emblem (Kosut, 2000), we should not ignore the gentrification of tattoos and tattoo spaces which have emerged through increasing accessibility and availability – something to be explored later in this book.

The accessibility of tattoos will not just be down to the increased studios on British high streets – we must also consider the role that digital spaces have played, specifically the role of social media platforms. Whereas tattoo artists may have previously got clientele through word of mouth, social media has afforded artists the opportunity to share their work with a broader group of people, on a global scale rather than a local one. The sharing of quality artwork has prompted more competitiveness, but also has enabled tattoo artists to focus on their niche style, allowing them to specialise in particular designs and styles. It could of course be argued that these styles are time and trend bound, as will be discussed in the media analysis chapter of this book.

In bringing together the Western (British) context for tattoos, we can then move on to consider how these contexts have informed the kinds of areas that academic research has focused on. Up until now, across disciplines from sociology, psychology, marketing and beyond, research on tattoos has focused on *perceptions and assumptions* towards the tattooed body. Without going into too much of the history of tattoos in a Western context, a prevailing idea throughout time is how tattoos go against cultural norms (women being tattooed), traditions (on femininity) and expectations (being ladylike), and create 'noise' (Hebdige, 1979). Once recognisable as markers of subculture, tattoos have expanded into more mainstream cultures, though still understood in different ways, especially when issues such as gender, class and age are thrown into the mix.

Most commonly, research exploring tattoos has focused on younger tattooed bodies, whereby terms such as 'irresponsible' and 'reckless' are often floated about (Foulke & Romo, 2020). As will be discussed later in the book, there does not seem to be an age whereby tattoos are not considered an issue – young or old, assumptions are still made that bring age and tattoos together. The ways that we talk about ageing bodies shape the ways that tattoos are performed by the wearer, as well as how they are read by the observer. Tattoos are a symbol of rebellion. When you tie this in with age, you start to see some of the ways tattoos intersect

with other factors in society. We understand that in Western society, there is a strong discourse that suggests it is not good for a woman to show her age – youth is synonymous with beauty (Wolf, 1991). However, when you combine youth with tattoos, you get irresponsibility, recklessness and rebellion (Dickson, Dukes, Smith, & Strapko, 2014; Dukes & Stein, 2011). Being older does not remove you from expectations around what you should and should not do with your body – tattoos at an older age might be considered as part of a mid-life crisis, or seen as resisting the 'growing old gracefully' discourse (Jankowski, Diedrichs, Williamson, Christopher, & Harcourt, 2014). In short, our society holds regulative practices around age, and tattoos provide a new angle to consider that from.

Now to address the proverbial elephant in the room – this book does not aim to explore the perceptions of tattoos more generally – the main focus here, as combined with other key intersectional issues, is that of gender. This book is based on research that specifically focused on women, and understandings of femininity, because by only focusing on tattoos more broadly, you lose the nuances that are evident when paying attention to gender. And this is one of the issues with academic research on tattoos – the gendered nature of the body is ignored. The gendered difference in understanding tattooed bodies acts as the foundation for considering many more intersectional issues, such as motherhood, employment, class, age and identity. Where research has been conducted that focuses exclusively on perceptions of women's tattooed bodies, it highlights just how gendered the perceptions are – descriptors such as unattractive, uncaring, angry, heavy drinkers and promiscuous (Swami, 2012; Swami & Furnham, 2007; Swami et al., 2015) – all examples of words that sit within the 'other' category when it comes to ideal productions of femininity, regardless of any other trait descriptor.

Thankfully, this is not the only research that has explored tattooed women – there are a few good examples of research that involved the tattooed women themselves in understanding tattoos, and this view enables us to see their perspective, rather than solely the judgement of others as the basis for research. Belonging is a central theme that emerges through the research (DeMello, 2000), with women commenting on how being tattooed enables them to feel like they belong to a community. In addition to their communities, research that focuses on women's bodies also allows us to consider family dynamics, caring responsibilities and also explores motherhood in tattoos themselves (see Thompson, 2015). This is not to say that these roles are purely for women, or that they should be understood as such, but their perspectives do warrant their own consideration. The rest of the book is predicated on women as the core to the other issues that are explored.

What I have always found interesting in delving into tattoo research literature, is the lack of focus on a few key areas – visibility, size and location. Research that talks about stigmatised views towards tattoos might give examples of body placements – arms, legs, some visible spots – but what about the tattoos that cannot be seen when we are clothed? If assumptions are being made about *visibly* tattooed bodies (Resenhoeft, Villa, & Wiseman, 2008), we have a group of people who do not encounter such negative stereotypes purely because their tattoos are not visible to others on a general day-to-day basis. As an example, the difference between a tattoo on the face, and a tattoo on the hip, is huge – whilst this may

present as an extreme example (especially given stronger negative attitudes towards facial tattoos, see Zestcott, Bean, and Stone, 2017) the key is still visibility to others. A tattoo on the hip is most likely to only be seen by those who are intimate with the wearer, or on specific trips to the beach – not in everyday trips to the supermarket, to work, or to the school gates. Research that does consider tattoo visibility mostly sits within employment literature (Timming, 2015; Williams, Thomas, & Christensen, 2014), and this tells us just how significant our jobs (read: our 'profession') are in our identities.

Related to the visibility of the tattoo is the size of the tattoo. In previous work, I have reflected on the different perceptions towards small, dainty and feminine tattoos as opposed to larger, more colourful and more space-occupying tattoos (Dann, Callaghan, & Fellin, 2016). To pick up another example – a small flower on the inside of your wrist is not viewed or understood in the same way as a large, colourful flower that takes up the whole of your upper arm. This is especially true for women, where larger, bolder tattoos are not seen as the 'right' way to do tattoos. The idea of 'right' and 'wrong' is threaded throughout the discussions on size, placement, visibility, gender, age – the list could go on. This boils down to the norms we have in our society about what we expect to see, how we are expected to behave and how we compare to others. This regulation of the body is heavily classed, and here we see the first explicit link made to social class through tattoos. Tattoo size is one of the more complicated factors in tattooed bodies, and warrants its own exploration. If we take a step back and look at research already discussed here around negative perceptions and gendered readings of tattooed bodies, we find a similar tattoo size presented – there is little to no nuance in respect to these differences (again – employment-based literature provides some offering here, to be explored in more detail later in the book).

Linking both tattoo visibility and size is the location of the tattoo on the body. Out of these three points for making sense of tattooed bodies, location is the example that contains specifically gendered encoding. Let us start with the best example I can offer to you here, in the form of the 'tramp stamp'. This term is given to tattoos on the lower back of a woman (and women only) and emerged in the late 1990s/early 2000s as a phrase linking the tattoo to being a symbol of promiscuity. There is no such derogatory term placed on a man's body for their tattoo, as there is for a woman and this tattoo on her lower back. Tattoos on other parts of the body, such as the hip or on the ankle, are perceived as more acceptable, but tattoos on the face, or on the hands, leave you open to judgement. What all of these examples show is that it is too simplified to think about 'tattoos' in and of themselves. There are more complexities that overlap, different to each person, that show why we should take a closer look at individual stories and circumstances if we really want to make sense of women's tattooed bodies.

Theorising Femininity

Before we start to fully consider how tattoos are discussed or perceived on ourselves and by others, we need to take a step back. To fully understand why tattoos

on women's bodies are in need of attention, we need to unpack what it means to be a woman, or more specifically, to be feminine. The origins of tattoos (in Western society) might have been attributed to sailors, and to criminals (and therefore, inherently masculine), but this does not mean these are the only bodies they appeared on.

This binary-esque distinction between men and women, and by extension, masculinity and femininity, is where we start our journey. This book will not focus on masculinity, as this deserves exploration in its own right. It must also be acknowledged that gender does sit on a spectrum, with much more space between this masculine and feminine binary, but this book cannot do a service to non-binary understandings of tattooed bodies, as the focus has been on women throughout. To not include these here is not to say that masculinity or non-binary identities are not important, but it is to say that the ways that gender is constructed needs closer examination than considering them altogether. It is societal, historical and cultural expectations of femininity that we need to understand in making sense about tattoos on women's bodies.

Though our understanding of what it means to be feminine today has expanded (Gill & Arthurs, 2006), the roots of femininity are steeped in patriarchy, middle-class tradition and whiteness (Francombe-Webb & Silk, 2016), with associated words of dainty, passive, gentile and ladylike. It is important to note the class-based and racialised roots of this understanding of femininity, so we are clear how the concepts of 'right' and 'other' are constructed within discourse. For example, consider how we speak about mothering practices – discourses of motherhood are highly regulated, and where parents are discussed, oftentimes the focus rests solely on mothers. In addition, you might think job roles that are traditionally seen as feminine (such as nursing), and perhaps most prevalent, the roles that women occupy as caregivers for friends and family.

So if you are not dainty, gentle and ladylike, then what does this make you? There are many ways that we can experience femininity, so it does not seem appropriate to render the opposite of the above as 'unfeminine'. To not be seen as traditionally feminine is to be read in many other ways, but all still under the category of 'other'. To be 'other' encompasses all that is not the traditional, narrow view of what femininity is. It is to not fit in, where fitting in requires adherence to ever-changing and strict rules imposed on women (see the early 2020 'Be a Lady They Said' video released by Girls Girls Girls Magazine; Finnigan, 2020). And this is the thing – we *know* what the stereotypes and outdated societal norms are. There is push back against this traditional view of femininity and the expectations of it, but this is still what we are rooted in.

Following from this traditional construction of femininity, we must also consider how social class plays a part. In Britain, whilst distinctions between class boundaries are not as clear as simply 'working/upper class', it could be more easily understood in relation to money and location (Connelly, Gayle, & Playford, 2020). To be working class is to live in built-up urban areas, to work a lot, and be around a community of similar people. To be upper class is to have expendable wealth, to not have to worry about money and perhaps to outsource work to others (usually the working class). Whilst there are more ways that class

could be broken down than these, the women who took part in this research positioned class in this binary manner, quite distinct from each other – they might not be perfect categorisations, but it does articulate two schools of clear thought in relation to both femininity and tattoos.

It is perhaps unsurprising that tattoos are working class at heart. Beverly Skeggs (1997) articulates how the body is classed, and specifically, how our bodies are the site upon which we make distinctions. Though the ways we make ourselves distinct could come from clothing, our actions, the way we walk and the way we talk, the tattoo, by its visibility, its permanence and its appearance, is in itself what creates a distinction from others. What we mean by distinction here, is literally a stamp of distinction between classes – to be tattooed heavily, visibly, colourfully, loudly – is to be rendered working class. To be working class is to be looked down upon, to not be considered good enough, in the eyes of the middle or upper class. You are relegated to remain within your working class, and it is difficult to transcend class boundaries. Class is not just about the body, but where you grew up, how you grow up, who you surround yourself with, your job and job prospects and how you dress. Whilst the level of education and the way you dress might be able to create opportunities for perceived movement within class boundaries, tattoos create a distinction about which group and which class you belong to. Though this is not to say that the upper class are not tattooed, it is to say that the way this happens and appears is very different. The gentrification of tattoos is discussed later in the book.

Gender, Performativity and Intersectionality

Judith Butler (1990) is well known for her work on women's bodies, and more specifically gender performativity. She famously quotes De Beauvoir, stating how 'one is not born, but becomes, a woman'. This is perhaps the most clearest of statements to show how we might be born as one sex, this is biology, but our gender is something that is socially constructed, produced through what we see and what we learn from others around us. And this is how rules around gender change, because it is fluid, though that fluidity is still encapsulated within normative cultural and societal boundaries.

Butler focuses not just on how gender is constructed, but importantly on how gender is performed – and this is where we come to the idea of gender performativity. From this perspective, we enact our gender – we literally perform it – through the way we walk, the way we dress, the way we talk and the way we behave. These ideas were also carried through by research from Iris Marion Young (2005) in her paper entitled 'Throwing Like a Girl'. In this paper, she articulates how girls perform their gender, but making clear how this is restrained through societal discourses of femininity (hence the 'throwing like a girl' example). She details how performing femininity is done so within the realms of how society views femininity. Girls do not use their full strength, they hesitate, because this is what is expected of girls.

We can take these understandings of gender performativity and apply it to femininity and tattoos, which shows a part of the issue. Under the traditional

feminine umbrella, tattoos do not fit – tattoos are, or were, associated with masculinity, and therefore just by having them, and them being visible, it displays something masculine, and renders the body as not-feminine. As hinted at in the previous sentence, part of the performance we enact for our genders concerns what we choose to display and not, something that is explored late in the book. But already here, we can understand the overlaps in the way we dress, how much skin/tattooed skin is on show and how the body is therefore read by others.

I must note here the pushback that we have seen in these old views of femininity and tattoos. This is not something that emerged within this research itself, but is still an area to think about, as it shows how these societal rules around gender performativity are challenged and reconstituted. The best example of this sits within 'alternative' 1950s pin-up trends for women. This style is hyper-feminised, with the cinched waists, full skirts and head ties. However, this alternative display flips that hyper-feminised, passive 1950s housewife with the heavy display of visibly, bold, colourful tattoos. The mix here between the hyper-feminised dress and the hyper-masculine tattoo display creates a new understanding of gender performativity, one that feels active rather than passive, in control and not dainty. Though, let's still acknowledge that it sits within an 'othered' bracket.

Coming back to Butler, those class-based identities cannot just be viewed from the perspective of class all by itself. It begins to get more complicated, but important for how class and gender intersect in this way. There are differences between being a working-class man and being a working-class woman. These relate to parenting, to the workplace, to expectations around family roles, to hobbies and to the display of tattoos. Whilst gender roles also transcend class boundaries, there are also rules that remain within them. To be a working-class woman is to be bolshy, to be loud and to embody that 'ladette' attitude (Smith, 2011); it is not viewed upon as ideal femininity – it is 'othered'. This in itself is the interesting point, as if working-class women are already viewed as other, just by being seen as working-class, you could argue that they have a freedom to explore what it means to embody an othered identity. This perhaps allows more scope for tattoos on the body.

The key thing to understand with this is that, unlike education or dress sense – things that can change – tattoos are permanent. Once obtained, it becomes difficult to transcend that class boundary, because you are visibly classed through your skin. And this is perhaps why tattoos hold such class-specific understandings, especially as they are also readable on the body, and the readability communicates a specific message. This kind of reading has not gone unnoticed between different class boundaries – the middle class have been able to gentrify tattoos in a way that works for them – they understand the 'rules' of what it means to have a tattoo on a working-class body, and have therefore flouted these rules to work for them. The rise in the smaller, daintier, pretty tattoo in specific locations has allowed them to be a part of the tattooed community, and use the mystery of a tattoo for their own aesthetic.

Bear in mind that at this point, we have not talked about the cost of tattoos in relation to class, because effectively it is not necessarily about the money. The

money spent on a tattoo is visible on the skin, it is visible to the viewer, through the quality of the tattoo. However, I would argue that this says something more about consumerist practices, and being able to be a 'good' consumer, more so than it says about social class. In reference to specific working-class discourses in Britain, 'chavs' were referred to in a derogatory way – working-class, bold, brassy, loud – but not necessarily short of spending money, as items such as Burberry label clothing, gold chains and high end trainers became synonymous symbols of being a 'chav' (Tyler, 2008). However, the commentary around money within this discourse focused on the money being spent in the 'right' way.

Social class will always be key to the arguments around tattoos, because even when it is not discussed explicitly, the undertones are there, through the history of tattoos, the cultural understandings of tattoos on different bodies, but also with how these intersect with different kinds of employment, belonging and other key societal roles. This is not a commentary focussed on social class being a negative thing, but it does explore how it is more complicated, in that there are more factors than social class that need navigating in understanding tattoos.

This brings us onto the key framework that has been hinted at already, through stating the intersecting nature of key issues such as gender and class alongside tattoos, and this framework is intersectionality. It must be acknowledged that the roots of intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), are rooted within black feminist movements, where Crenshaw argued for the understanding and acknowledgement of the increased oppression that black women faced, for example, in the courtroom. I appreciate that one of the key arguments around the use of intersectionality in recent times is that it should focus on multiple oppressions faced by women, and especially in concern of race, and I am under no illusion that tattoos are not in the same category of issues as gender, class, race, disability, sexuality, amongst others. Though, an intersectional framework does allow for an understanding of how different issues combine to create new understandings, rather than these issues being considered separately. Whilst intersectionality is not positioned as hierarchal in terms of the intersecting issues that are addressed, it would be foolish to consider tattoos as such, given the legal protections afforded to such protected characteristics. Tattoos are something we choose to have, not something we are born with, or cannot help. This is an argument that contributes to why we see less tolerance and acceptance in tattoos – in the majority of circumstances; this is seen as something you have done to yourself.

Intersectionality can be thought of as a web of things all weaved together, intrinsically linked, in multiple ways, rather than being seen as a stack of things working on top of one another, but considered separately. The analogy of the web allows for movement between issues, as well as seeing them altogether, rather than considering one as more important than the other. I've wrestled with the idea of tattoos being seen as the same level as these different elements, and that's the point, they're not – but they are a piece of the web.

What can be said for the intersectional framework in this instance though is that at its core it places the overlapping of these issues at the forefront, as the things we should pay attention to, to make sense of this particular issue. From this