

Awareness Harmony Acceptance
Advocates



AHA Advocate Talk: Margot Mifflin



Samantha Ellison: Could you tell us about **Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo?**

Margot Mifflin: The first edition of *Bodies of Subversion* came out in 1997, and I updated the introduction for a new edition in 2001. I recently decided to update and expand it in a third edition because so much has happened for women in tattooing over

the past decade both in terms of artistic advancement and the number of women tattooed: for the first time in history, more women are tattooed in the U.S. than men. My interest was in writing a cultural history documenting the ways tattooing reflects western women's changing culture and self-presentation over the past 150 years, how the public has reacted to it, how it relates to other disciplines like fashion, visual art, and performance art.

SE: Where did your inspiration come from when writing *Bodies of Subversion*?

MM: I had been writing about women's issues and visual art, and noticed a fascinating overlap between the two in the growing popularity of tattoos for women in the 90s.

SE: Why did you feel that it was important to write *Bodies of Subversion*?

MM: There are many reasons, but a primary one was that it's a technically difficult and sociologically revealing art form that mainstream art venues have largely been indifferent to if not contemptuous of. As someone interested in visual art, I've always been confounded that visually literate people who appreciate design, fine art and fashion had no interest in exploring or understanding tattooing whatsoever. I was also fascinated by the evolution of tattoo culture over the past century and how it reflects women's changing relationship to their bodies and changing modes of self-representation, especially as they reflect particular political and sociological changes for women, from the Victorian era to the 1960s.

SE: Why is tattooing such a taboo topic, especially when it comes to women?

MM: The permanence makes it controversial, plus it's only now recovering from the turn it took into lower class culture around midcentury. And of course western women have a long history of imposed standards of purity that tattooing dramatically violates.

SE: For many people tattoos are a form of expression, but tattoos seem to come at a cost of societal approval? Could you talk about the stereotypes that come along with people getting tattoos? It seems that these stereotypes often increase when members of minority groups have tattoos, what can people do to combat these stereotypes in a society that is constructs people to hide or not get tattoos?

MM: For women, the stereotype has historically (in the 20th century) been linked to sexual promiscuity: if you decorate your body so conspicuously and intimately, you must be loose. But that has changed a lot even since I wrote the first edition of my book. There is certainly a sexual association (which some women embrace) but the blanket stereotype is less stubborn now. However, it does divide along class lines: upper class women like the heavily tattooed obstetrician quoted in my book face less discrimination because they are already in positions of power. The stigma works against women in lower status positions, like waitresses and secretaries. I'm not sure it breaks down

differently for minorities—the divide seems more dramatic along class lines. I can't speak about what people can do to battle this—tattooing is really an individual choice, and my interest in it is as a critic, not an advocate.

SE: What recent news article has made you squirm or get angry?

MM: I found this story (<http://www.needlesandsins.com/2013/01/lesyas-extreme-facial-tattoo.html>) about a woman who let her tattooist boyfriend tattoo his name on her face weeks after meeting him very disturbing. It's wrong on so many levels, from a young woman disfiguring herself for life to a man putting his "mark" on her supposedly out of love (and where is his public permanent mark?). For me it also resonates a bit with the rapidly growing number of women—including professional women--taking their husband's names in marriage, and Beyoncé naming her next tour the "Mrs. Carter" tour. Why do modern independent women still want to be identified by their partners? The tattoo also ties into a whole history of women submitting to being permanently marked by men, which I address in my book. If you read the article comment thread, you'll see long discussions about it. For me there is very little to discuss. It's nuts.

SE: If you could sit down with any activist, alive or passed away, who would it be and why?

MM: That's a tough one—the list could be long. But for today, on the eve of women's history month, I'd say Victoria Woodhull: 19th century feminist, first female stockbroker, advocate of legalized prostitution, free lover, and the first female candidate for president of the U.S. She was way ahead of her time, and in some ways, still is!