Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Master of Arts

of

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BSc (University of Victoria, 2010)

“(Im)Permanent Body Ink:
The Fluid Meanings of Tattoos, Deviance, and Normativity
In Twentieth-Century American Culture”

Department of History

Wednesday, August 23, 2017
10:00 A.M.
Clearihue Building
Room B215

Supervisory Committee:
Dr. Rachel Cleves, Department of History, University of Victoria (Co-Supervisor)
Dr. Steve Garlick, Department of Sociology, UVic (Co-Supervisor)
Dr. Greg Blue, Department of History, UVic (Unit Member)

External Examiner:
Dr. Lisa Mitchell, Department of Anthropology, UVic

Chair of Oral Examination:
Dr. Catherine Leger, Department of French, UVic

Dr. David Capson, Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies
Abstract

This thesis examines the symbiotic relationship between the meanings of tattoos and social norms through a comparative analysis of three distinct periods in twentieth-century American history. I use extensive archival material and an interdisciplinary approach to explain how the meanings of body ink shifted and to identify factors that influenced the public’s perceptions of tattoos as deviant or acceptable. In the 1920s and 1930s, tattooing practices among favored social groups, specifically military personnel, middle- and upper-class white men and women, and circus performers, generally received more positive reactions than those by lower-class and criminal subcultures. In the 1950s and 1960s, body ink became practiced primarily by marginalized individuals, such as criminals, bikers, and sex workers, and the general public’s understandings of tattoos as indicators of deviance and dangerous immorality strengthened. The new clientele and practitioners of the 1970s and 1980s mainly came from high socio-economic status and reframed their tattooing practices as artistic expressions of individuality. I argue that, although body ink aesthetic by and large supported American values of patriotism, heteronormativity, and racial advantage, tattooing practices among ‘respectable’ groups were more accepted than those by ‘deviant’ subcultures. My research shows that the American tattoo’s fluctuations between public rejection and favor in these periods rested principally on the appearance and function of the inked design and on the position of the tattooed body in the social hierarchy. This thesis demonstrates that tattooing practices created and perpetuated but also destabilized and influenced gender-, race-, and class-based American ideals, and my research exposes the nuanced connections of body ink with deviance and normativity, the malleability of social conventions, and a complex web of power relations constantly in flux.