Reflect & Write: The Mainstreaming of Tattoo Culture


Envision Connection: Use in connection with Chapter 12, especially with Chris Rainer and Josie Appleton.

Background: Margo DeMello published this article while in the Department of Anthropology at San Francisco State University. She is the author of Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community (Duke University Press, 2000). She has also edited a collection entitled Pierced Hearts and True Love: A Century of Drawings for Tattoos (Hardy Marks, 1996). Currently, DeMello is the president and executive director of House Rabbit Society, the only nonprofit rabbit rescue organization, based in Richmond, California.

Reflect & Write:

• This article opens with an examination of some of the persuasive messages reflected by bodies marked with tattoos: “self control, empowerment, and a means of creating a sense of self.” Do such messages, sported by the new professional class of tattoo bearers who prefer “fine art” over “primitive” designs, actually pose a challenge to “biker, sailor, or convict” tattoos? Or can you see a connection between such seemingly distinct groups of people?

• Margo DeMello wrote this article as a contribution to the field of cultural anthropology. How does she establish her own authorial stance in the first four pages? How does she insert her “I” into this argument and is this an effective tool of persuasion for her piece?

• How does DeMello make her concluding question—whether tattooing has shifted from stigma to status symbol or from subversive message to sign of conformity—part of a larger argument about the role of the media in shaping our opinions about the visual world?

• Write: Locate a variety of tattoos both in magazines and on the Internet. Following DeMello’s example, conduct a rhetorical analysis and compare three of them to compose your own argument about class and meaning.