

Deborah Davidson (ed.). *The Tattoo Project: Commemorative Tattoos, Visual Culture, and the Digital Archive*. (Toronto, ON: 2017, Canadian Scholars' Press Inc. Pp. 222, ISBN 978-1551309453.)

Ceallaigh S. MacCath-Moran

Volume 37, Number 2, 2015

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1041496ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1041496ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

MacCath-Moran, C. S. (2015). Review of [Deborah Davidson (ed.). *The Tattoo Project: Commemorative Tattoos, Visual Culture, and the Digital Archive*. (Toronto, ON: 2017, Canadian Scholars' Press Inc. Pp. 222, ISBN 978-1551309453.)]. *Ethnologies*, 37(2), 212–214.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1041496ar>

Families, community leaders, and Elders are the carriers of treaty knowledge and they have been able to successfully pass this knowledge along despite many hardships. All of the voices in the book are interconnected through their experiences *living treaties* and navigating the complexities of justice for the Mi'kmaw Nation. I found that the chapters written by Daniel N. Paul and Naomi Metallic did not match the tone of the book as well as others because they were recounting past work. Nevertheless, non-indigenous readers will gain a better understanding of what it means to be a treaty partner and the importance of reconciliation moving forward.

Katie K. MacLeod
Dalhousie University

Deborah Davidson (ed.). *The Tattoo Project: Commemorative Tattoos, Visual Culture, and the Digital Archive*. (Toronto, ON: 2017, Canadian Scholars' Press Inc. Pp. 222, ISBN 978-1551309453.)

The Tattoo Project: Commemorative Tattoos, Visual Culture, and the Digital Archive is a multidisciplinary, methods-based text edited by Deborah Davidson and published by Canadian Scholars' Press. Davidson is an Associate Professor of Sociology at York University who specializes in qualitative research of bereavement and commemoration. Her work on both this text and its digital counterpart at thetattooproject.info reflects a commitment to three key principles. First, both she and several other contributors situate themselves in the scholarship they present, thereby acknowledging the co-creative agency of self and subject. Second, the text and archive are collaborative endeavors involving academics of many backgrounds, tattoo artists, tattooed persons, and others whose diverse perspectives result in a multifaceted and egalitarian exploration of the topic. Third, the concurrent production of both a text and digital archive encourages what contributor Krista Jensen identifies as knowledge mobilization, which “gets research out of academic journals, out of the ivory tower, and into the hands of people” (191).

Contributor Andreas Kitzmann writes that “commemorative tattoos occupy a type of liminal space between the interiority of the mind and

the exterior yet highly personal space of the body” (41). Various academic contributions explore this liminality to good effect. For example, Kitzmann’s own discussion of loss and trauma highlights the narrative functions of tattoos to tattooed persons, both as a means to reflect upon a tragedy and as a means to discuss it with interested others. Kay Inckle argues that both tattoos and intentional scars can be seen as “embodied processes of mourning” (117), thereby critiquing the philosophy of mind-body dualism, where the body is a passive object the mind acts upon. And in a notable departure from the study of tattoos as representations of loss, trauma, and mourning, Gina Snooks addresses the connections between mind, body, and spirit created by women who “manifest sacredness by inking their flesh” (125) with images meaningful to their spiritual lives.

Autoethnographic contributions further explore this liminality in the lived experiences of writers like Siphwe Ignatius Dube, whose tattooed cheetah spots invite conversation about the ways he encounters the world as a person of colour, an African male, and a gender scholar (142). Likewise, Stephanie Pangowish writes that her eighteen tattoos express indigeneity, connection to family, hope for the future, and the importance of women in indigenous communities (145). There are several such personal narratives in the text; some are the standalone contributions of tattooed persons, and others may be found in the accounts of interviewees. These are both compelling and necessary to the collection because they provide contextual links between the study of commemorative tattoos and the process of selecting, inking, and living with them.

Theoretical contributions include Letherby and Davidson’s discussion of creative methodologies as emotional, embodied, involving, evolving, and reflexive practices that endeavor to engage audiences within and beyond the academy (49) and their subsequent discussion of (auto)biographical method and practice, which acknowledges the intersections between self and society in qualitative knowledge production. These are useful touchstones to research principles employed in the project, but they are also somewhat abstract and might have been more effective if the topic of the text and digital archive had been more thoroughly integrated into the two discussions, especially in the first case. Moreover, these chapters and the one that follows them might also have been placed directly after the introduction in order to ground the reader in relevant theory before presenting the work it informs.

Other contributions explore a variety of topics related to commemorative tattoos including Margo DeMello’s condensed but valuable cultural history

of tattooing and Arthur McLuhan's analysis of the artist-client relationship via his interview with Canadian tattoo artist Wayne Galbraith. McLuhan's rich and informative work is a seamless blending of scholarship with the voice of an experienced industry professional, which describes several types of commemorative tattoos and details the consultation, design, and inking processes. And in a postmodern approach to the topic, Priscilla Uppal's poem "Not a Cliché" engages with grief itself by inviting the reader to think of sunrises without light, breath without oxygen, fire without heat, and other unfathomable voids. The relentless rhythm of her stanzas is punctuated by "The fact that you are gone is not factual," or "You are not a cliché," poignant recreations in words of the disbelieving mind mourning the loss of a loved one.

The final chapters in the collection are devoted to an exploration of issues relevant to the construction and maintenance of a community-driven digital archive. Of note, Hanemaayer and Schneider contend that digital spaces facilitate the co-production of knowledge in non-hierarchical ways, while Anabel Quan-Haase investigates the role of virtual communities in helping people cope with grief and loss. Further, Melanie Balkjo's explanation of the computational components underpinning the digital archive is accessible to technologists and non-technologists alike, while the open source software she describes is a logical fit for the collaborative nature of the project. As with Section I of the text, these final chapters might have been re-ordered to facilitate a smoother transition between ideas. For example, Lisa Darms' discussion of archival practices would have been well-paired with Melanie Balkjo's work, which is largely concerned with digital objects, assets, and archives. However, this does not diminish the value of the individual contributions, which are varied and insightful.

Overall, *The Tattoo Project* is an ambitious contribution to scholarship that features an inclusive multiplicity of perspectives. It might have benefitted from stronger editorial organization and a more prominent reference to the digital archive's web site address, which is only mentioned once near the end of Section IV. Even so, these concerns do not detract from the commendable substance of the text.

Ceallaigh S. MacCath-Moran
Memorial University of Newfoundland