

On the chin

In 1851, Olive Oatman was a fourteen-year-old Mormon heading west with her family to California. Five years later, as a Mohave woman bearing a tribal chin tattoo, she wept in protest when ransomed from captivity. By 1859 she was a celebrity, performing in the persona of "Indian hater", the first tattooed woman to go on stage in the US. She ended her life as the reclusive wife of a Texan banker, veiling her face in public. In *The Blue Tattoo*, Margot Mifflin traces this journey with deep research and profound humanity, bringing to life not only one woman's trauma but the complexities of the cultures through which she passed. Most of the Oatman family was bludgeoned to death by Yavapais in what is now south-western Arizona, at the tail end of their long trek from Illinois. The Yavapais took Olive and her sister Mary Ann into captivity, subjecting them to a brutal year of slavery. The women in particular, Olive wrote, "took unwarranted delight in whipping us on beyond our strength". Eventually the Yavapais traded both girls to the Mohaves, who removed them to their village on the Colorado River.

Judging by the evidence pieced together by Mifflin, from early ethnographies, Olive's accounts, correspondence, diaries, military records, newspapers, and interviews with contemporary Mohaves, the girls were happy there (unfortunately Mary Ann did not survive the drought of 1855). Mohaves were physically striking and notably demonstrative, especially towards children. On first encountering Topeka, whose family adopted the sisters, Olive declared that her conduct bespoke "tutoring, and intelligence, and sweetness of disposition". The sisters accustomed themselves to Mohave farming methods, beliefs, and perhaps sexual practices. They voluntarily underwent the ritual tattooing which provided women with "a passport to the afterlife". Olive received a vertical band on her upper arms and five thick vertical lines from mouth to jaw with horizontal cones on each side.

One of the beauties of this account is the clarity with which the reader feels the differences among tribal groups. It would be difficult to conflate the stoical, hunter-gatherer Yavapais or their Apache allies with the charismatic Mohaves. "For Olive and Mary Ann, the handsome Mohaves and their verdant homeland presented a mighty contrast to mountain life and famine among the Yavapais." Olive's contribution to the myth of "generic Indians" began soon after the military ransomed her in 1856 (with two horses, blankets and some beads). As she struggled to re-assimilate into white American culture, she came under the influence of a Methodist minister, Royal B. Stratton, who recognized her commercial potential. In 1857, Olive and her brother Lorenzo put their names to Stratton's ghostwritten account, *Life Among the Indians*, a sensational distortion – "at once pious and titillating" – which became a best-seller. Stratton and Olive went on the lecture circuit, where she dramatized her "horrid and merciless captivity", demonizing Yavapais and Mohaves alike as "lumps of degraded humanity . . . untutored and demoralized".

CHRISTINE BOLD

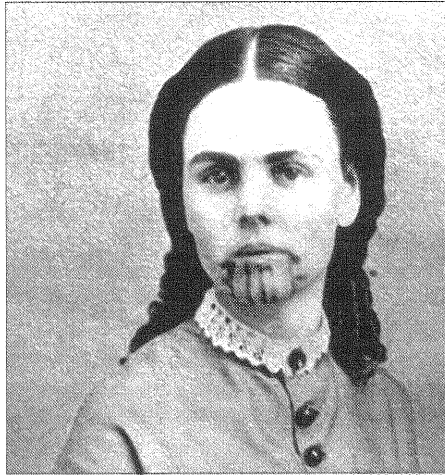
Margot Mifflin

THE BLUE TATTOO

The Life of Olive Oatman

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Olive Oatman, c1860

She learned to exploit her chin tattoo – which she claimed was a mark of enslavement – for its voyeuristic thrill. While Oatman was peddling this image of the savage Indian in the East, Mohave life in the West gradually crumbled, as the tribe became hemmed in by whites and divided over how to deal with the threat – a division which lasts to this day.

The contradictions in Olive's situation overwhelmed her with what Mifflin diagnoses as post-traumatic stress, the result of "a life of compound emotional fractures". In 1865, she escaped again, marrying a Michigan farmer, who burned every copy of her book that he could find. They moved to Texas, where he made a fortune in banking and she lived out her days unobtrusively with husband and daughter, though she was dogged by depression until her death in 1903. The popularization of her story continued (including a 1965 episode of the television series *Death Valley Days*, starring Ronald Reagan).

Mifflin includes many fascinating secondary stories and characters. She shows us Brewsterites (the non-polygamous Mormon sect to which the Oatmans belonged) quarrelling along the California trail; Sarah Bowman, "a towering, pistol-packing madam", who smooths Olive's transition to "civilization"; and the Reverend Stratton spiralling into madness in an asylum. Lorenzo Oatman is one kind of hero. After surviving the massacre against all odds, he launched a letter-writing campaign for his sisters' return which, despite his minimal literacy – "I cannot read my one writing it is spelt so bad and unpraper" – went all the way to the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The Mohave leader Irataba, who competed with Olive on the lecture circuit, is another. Mifflin has written an important, engrossing book, which reveals as much about the appetites and formulas of emerging mass culture as it does about tribal cultures in nineteenth-century America. She has rescued Olive Oatman once more, this time from sensationalist popularizers, and reconstructed a human and haunting figure.

TLS

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