

Stories of the Skin: Exploring Women's Skin through Oral History

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Introduction

The purpose of this oral history thesis is to examine women's relationship with their skin, focusing on tattoos and scars that tell stories that are considered essential to a narrator's identity. My initial research demonstrated that skin is inherently linked with the idea of self and the presentation of self to the outside world. I began this project with an interest in exploring the skin's potential as a permanent physical archive, canvas, protective barrier and more. In order to do so, and to build on my academic research, it seemed obvious that oral history was an ideal vehicle because it would allow me to insert actual women's voices into the conversation. While every narrator would have an individual story to tell, living with and interpreting the stories of our skin is a universal experience. The concentration on scars and tattoos (explained in greater detail below) would serve to narrow the focus. The project would be an attempt to give voice and agency to women who have something to say about what their skin says about them.

My original interest in skin and tattoos and scars came about organically, from conversations about my own tattoos, entertaining story swapping about "battle scars", and an extremely compelling article from the *New York Times* about young Israelis getting tattoos to match their grandparents' Holocaust tattoos.¹ The article struck me especially, because of the diverse reactions and charged conversations that the tattoos inspired. It left me thinking about tattoos and scars, and tattoos *as* scars, and what it means to have these memories permanently marked on our bodies. As I began my oral history work I was motivated by the potential that oral history had to bring these stories

¹ Rudoren, Jodi. "Proudly Bearing Elders' Scars, Their Skin Says 'Never Forget'." *New York Times*. 30 September 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/01/world/middleeast/with-tattoos-young-israelis-bear-holocaust-scars-of-relatives.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&

and themes to light and now I am excited to present them publicly through the project website (www.storiesoftheskin.com) and to start a larger conversation about skin and embodiment.

The Research

The History of Skin

What we can know for certain about the evolutionary biological history of skin is limited. As Nina Jablonski points out in her book *Skin: A Natural History*, “How can we investigate the evolutionary history of a part of the body that is almost never preserved in the fossil record? Like other soft tissues of the body, skin generally does not last long after death.”² The marks on the body are only permanent as long as the body is alive.

While it is difficult to study the physical specimen, we can investigate the traditions and meanings surrounding skin in times past and in various cultures through other sources. In terms of how we treat and manipulate our skin, according to Jablonski, “Humans have been deliberately altering the appearance of their skin for tens of thousands of years, possibly longer.”³ Thus humans have been using their skin as a means of expression for almost the entirety of known human history.⁴ It is well known that cultures world-round have traditions of tattooing and practicing ritual scarification. Yet it is only recently, and within Western civilization, that much of the body modification that takes place is not done to signify membership or as a traditional rite of passage. In fact

² Jablonski, Nina, *Skin: A Natural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 22

³ *Ibid.*, 142

⁴ “Dating back to Neolithic times, tattooing may represent the oldest form of irreversible body decoration. The oldest known tattoos are those of Otzi, the late Neolithic Iceman. . . whose frozen body was found in an alpine glacier. His preserved skin, nearly 5,000 years old, bore fourteen sets of permanent marks believed to be tattoos – mostly short, parallel black lines found on his ankles and back, which seem to have been produced by rubbing soot onto the skin and then puncturing skin and pushing the dark residue into the holes.” (Jablonski, 148-149)

the opposite it true – most body modification done today in the Western world is done with the intention of making the individual stand out, to signify uniqueness.

We can also study the evolution of the understanding (or mystery) of skin. With her book, *Skin: On the Cultural Border Between Self and the World*, Claudia Benthien sets forth an exhaustive look at the historical and cultural significances of human skin:

*From the Renaissance onward [the skin] has been considered the mirror of the soul and the projecting surface of the invisible inside. But the history of Western culture reveals that the relationship between the internal and the external has become increasingly problematic and confusing over the centuries. As a reflection of the inside, a canvas of psychological, emotional, or cognitive processes, the skin has for some time now been in a crisis.*⁵

Benthien’s work discusses the evolution of the symbolic and figurative skin throughout human history. One of the most poignant topics of her work is her attention to the medical significance that skin held in the past. For centuries it was commonly believed that an individual’s external, bodily symptoms of illness or disease was a reflection of their evil insides – either a moral or physical illness. Methods were developed to draw out illness or effects of injury through the skin with the purpose of stimulating the skin “as a way of exerting a positive influence on internal ailments.”⁶ Benthien attributes the shift away from medical methods that potentially scar and damage the skin to a cultural shift – the idolization of unmarred skin.⁷ This is a controversial argument because it is likely that many other factors were present in the move towards oral medicines and other treatments that left the skin unpenetrated. However, Benthien’s

⁵ Benthien, Claudia. *Skin: On the Cultural Border between Self and the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), ix

⁶ “In accordance with the doctrine of humoral pathology, manifestations on the skin were not regarded as independent illnesses but as signs and indications of internal disturbances.” Benthien, 40

⁷ “At some point, then, a radical shift eliminated the skin as a therapeutic organ. This development was based on a fundamentally changed picture of the body.” Ibid.

point is valid – in recent cultural history we have begun to have greater respect for the skin and its appearance and the desire to keep it as flawless as possible.

While we have moved away from this manner of thinking of the skin as a reflection of ailments of the internal anatomy and as an exit point for pain and illness⁸, my thesis proposes a new, but somewhat similar, concept - the skin as a reflection not of a physical ailment or of a sick soul, but of an emotional affect that manifests itself physically, sometimes consciously but often unconsciously. The important difference here is that, in the theory that I am proposing, the power is not in the hands of a physician or other professional who is responsible for telling someone what their body is saying and what their body needs, but rather in the hands of the individual. In the examples from my work, the power is in the hands of the woman who is experiencing something internally and makes choices that result in a physical, permanent mark on the skin. This power engenders agency, both in terms of their bodies and in terms of their narratives.

Psychoanalysis: The Skin Ego

In his book, *The Skin Ego*, Didier Anzieu⁹ considers the skin as, among other things, “...both a system for protecting our individuality and a first instrument and site of interaction with others...”.¹⁰ Anzieu takes a psychoanalytical approach to studying the skin, asserting that the Skin Ego is a broad metaphor for what he often also calls the narcissistic envelope. Anzieu’s idea is that an individual’s psyche is equally dependent on

⁸ Although, the practice of acupuncture must be given consideration here.

⁹ Much of Anzieu’s work, and that of other psychoanalysts and psychologists working with the concept of the skin ego, focuses on early-development, specifically the infant/child’s relationship with its mother’s skin and the process of learning the boundaries of the individual body.

¹⁰ Anzieu, Didier. *The Skin Ego* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 3

the biological body and the social body. Therefore, it makes sense that both these entities should be explored at length in order to obtain a better understanding of the psyche and how it functions. Anzieu's focus on the skin is founded on the idea that the skin is the organism in which both of these entities meet and interact. Our skins protect our selves from others, acting as a barrier to the outside world; but the skin is also a way in which we communicate with the outside world through touch and through the way our skin appears to (or is hidden from) others.

According to Anzieu, the skin serves three functions:

The primary functions of the skin is as the sac which contains and retains inside it the goodness and fullness accumulating there through feeding, care and bathing in words. Its second function is as the interface which marks the boundary with the outside and keeps the outside out; it is the barrier which protects against penetration by the aggression and greed emanating from others, whether people or objects. Finally, the third function – which the skin shares with the mouth and which is performs at least as often – is as a site and a primary means of communicating with others, of establishing signifying relations; it is, moreover, an “inscribing surface” for the marks left by others.¹¹

I consider Anzieu's analysis to be fascinating but it is the last function of the skin that I am particularly interested in for this thesis – the skin as a means of communication.

However, the notion that the skin serves as an inscribing surface for others is one I would like to challenge. Although it is true that others can leave marks on us – both physiological and psychological – I would argue that our interpretation of them is what matters. The skin may be inscribed on by others, but the bearer of the skin gets to decide how the inscribing is read, as is illustrate by the narrators of this oral history project who determined how to interpret the stories of their scars and tattoos.

¹¹ Ibid., 40

In her paper regarding the role of skin in psychological development, Barrie Biven extrapolates on this concept of the skin as a communicator. Noting that “the skin virtually covers the whole body and is therefore eminently noticeable”, Biven goes on to state, “Because of this the skin is one of the major means of expression and communication. Such communications cover a vast range of human behavior. When we talk of such communications we mean the negative and positive valuations of the skin, of self, and the skin of the subject.”¹² Regardless of how often we consider our skin, it is the inarguably the most extensive part of our physical selves that others see and therefore will necessarily transmit messages about ourselves to others.

Women and their skin

*The body remains a central concern, this time, however, as a text upon which culture writes its meanings. Following Foucault, the female body is portrayed as an imaginary site, always available to be inscribed.*¹³

Here again we find the notion of skin as a surface to be inscribed on from without. A woman’s skin has the distinction of being even more complicated than that of her male counterpart. Though we (many of us at least) currently live in a world where gender lines are blurring and equality between the sexes is increasingly demanded, the Western world has not given up its grip on the idolization of the female body. Thus it would seem to follow that outside authorities are the ones who are responsible for determining what a woman’s skin says.

¹² Biven, Barrie M. “The Role of Skin in Normal and Abnormal Development with a Note on the Poet Sylvia Plath,” *The International Review of Psycho-Analysis* ix (1982): 205-230

¹³ Davis, Kathy. *Reshaping the Female Body: The Dilemma of Cosmetic Surgery* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 50

Speaking on the emergence of “personal politics” in philosophy and feminism, Susan Bordo writes,

*What after all is more personal than the body? And for women, associated with the body and largely confined to a life centered on the body (both the beautification of one’s own body and the reproduction, care and maintenance of the bodies of others), culture’s grip on the body is a constant, intimate fact of everyday life.*¹⁴

The ways in which a woman’s body is considered (as an object to possess, as a conveyor of beauty, as a temptation, to name a few) can be applied specifically to the skin as well. For example, Benthien considers the symbolism of the skin from many angles and dedicates a chapter of her book to the discussion of flayed skin, either actual or the depiction of. Benthien writes, “The female skin is understood as a concealing veil. Undressing a woman of her skin would fundamentally destroy the myth of her being other.”¹⁵ And later in her text, speaking of the figurative use of skin in literature, “Female writers...by contrast, tend to speak of a passive captivity in on one’s own skin, which is often experienced as stigmatized. Fantasies of overcoming and modifying the body surface by the protagonists in these works are marked by violence, pain, and anxieties over identity.”¹⁶ The metaphors of captivity and prison are used often in discussing women and their skin. There are myriad writings in feminist literature about trying to escape or erase this prison of the body, urging women to liberate themselves from the gendered stereotypes. In reality, we can’t escape our skin but we *can* change the way we think about bodies, our own and others, men’s and women’s. We can also make decisions about the way we adorn and treat the physical skin.

¹⁴ Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 17

¹⁵ Benthien, *Skin: On the Cultural Border*, 86

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 237

Throughout this project I was intent on learning how women related to their skin and related their skin to others. Although today women are more likely to be tattooed than men¹⁷ the stigma of being tattooed is still much greater for women. In the past, tattooed women were cultural oddities put on display at carnivals and fairs. In the early part of the century, most women were tattooed as a part of their, or their husband's, professions. It was not until the sexual revolution of the 1960s that women started getting tattoos for themselves, as a means of personal and artistic expression. Over the decades it has become more and more acceptable for women to get tattoos. However, this "acceptance" is not without consequences, as Margot Mifflin points out in her book *Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo*: "If the evolution of tattooing by and for women over the last decade is largely a story of new freedoms and discarded inhibitions, of expanding imagery and an exploding female demographic, it's also deeply entwined with a less liberating development: the relentless conflation of femininity and sexuality in pop culture."¹⁸ A quick Google image search of women with tattoos will affirm that tattooed women are close to having come full circle from the days of tattoo exhibitionism. Tattooed women today are pressured to pose provocatively and to look like tattooed celebrities such as Kat Von D or Angelina Jolie. The art of the tattoo often gets lost in the expectations for a woman to flaunt her body, and thus it is not the tattoo that is the object of attention but the female body.

¹⁷ 23% of women are tattooed, versus 19% of men, according to a 2012 Harris Poll. Source: Garner, Dwight. "Our Bodies, Our Ink 'Bodies of Subversion' Explores Women's Tattoos." *New York Times*, 3 July 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/04/books/bodies-of-subversion-explores-womens-tattoos.html?_r=0

¹⁸ Mifflin, Margot. *Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo* (Brooklyn, NY: powerHouse Books, 2013), 130

While tattoos are often considered body enhancement, scars do not have this elevated status. A scar is often considered a blemish; something that mars the canvas. On top of the general ideal of a woman with unmarked skin, medical issues such as mastectomies, C-sections and cosmetic surgery make for emotionally charged, gendered scar stories. Given all the history of women and skin, and even current trends in body culture studies, I was slightly surprised that my findings based on the interviews I conducted were not as complicated as I expected. What I can infer from the interviews is that tattoos and scars (and their accompanying narratives) can be a reaction to (and often rejection of) the idyllic flawless female. My narrators, for the most part, shrug off the idea of the unmarred woman and wear their tattoos and scars proudly.¹⁹ If women are captured in their own skin, why not embrace that skin by decorating it, celebrating its flaws and using it to tell stories. By doing so, a woman becomes capable of turning a prison into a sanctuary – her skin becomes a place where she can reside with confidence and security, a place that reflects her insides and her individuality, a place where she can inscribe her own story.

¹⁹ See Appendix A for excerpts from interviews that demonstrate this point.

Methodology

Why Scars and Tattoos

Scars are by their very nature inextricably linked to an event: an operation, an accident, an attack, a rite of passage. They mark a specific point in time. They may attest to our courage, our stupidity, our clumsiness, our unhappiness, our lucklessness, or to a fortunate escape.²⁰

In an increasingly globalized world of look-alike clothing, cosmetics and hairstyles, tattoos are permanent reflections of personality, carefully calculated representations of core beliefs and sentiments that can make a uniquely powerful statement of individuality.²¹

My aim in this thesis was to explore the role of skin as communicator of that which is internal. If skin, as Claudia Benthien asserts, “is the place where identity is formed and assigned”,²² does it follow that that identity is transmitted through the skin to others? And if so, how? Skin occasionally betrays our emotions without our permission in the form of biological reactions such as blushing and sweating. All humans communicate through the sense of touch. But focusing on scars and tattoos enabled me to concentrate on the choices a woman makes about her own skin, and in a broader sense, about her own life. We are born with particular skin colors, conditions, freckles, moles, birthmarks, etc. Many people become attached to these natural skin characteristics and they have been studied and analyzed by medical professionals, psychoanalysts and anthropologists. My curiosity led me to contemplate not the skin we are born with, but

²⁰ Cuskelly, Maryrose. *Original Skin: Exploring the Marvels of the Human Hide* (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2011), 62

²¹ Jablonski, *Skin: A Natural History*, 151

²² Benthien, 1

the skin we invent. The skin we choose to interpret and present to the world, whether with or without awareness. How do women use their skin to claim their identity, and to portray that identity to themselves and to the world? In order to begin exploring this question I interviewed multiple women of diverse backgrounds and asked them about who they are and what their scars and/or tattoos say about them.

However, identity is a fluid, and sometimes murky, concept. One common theme I found in all of the interviews I collected was the concept of scars and tattoos as a physical manifestation of something internal, often a raw and deep emotion that my narrators feel or felt that was so strong that it needed an external expression. Some of these manifestations are obvious and deliberate while others are subtle and unintentional; some fall somewhere in between. Some of the emotions and complexities that the scars and tattoos represent were fleeting, some are (like their physical counterparts) seemingly permanent. If our skin is a representation of our identity, then identity, it seems, is not the carefully crafted construct that we often think (or hope) it to be. There are some aspects of our identity that we control, and there are some that control us. All of the women that I interviewed seem to have embraced this dynamic. They claim their scars and tattoos, just as their skin claims their selfhood. It is this relationship between the skin and the self that I find so fascinating and that I attempted to explore through the stories of these women.

Oral history

Why conduct oral histories as a primary means to explore this topic? Although collecting literature and data gave me insight to this subject, these methods of research

are insufficient when attempting to get to the heart of the matter. As with most subjects, academics can theorize and discuss about the nuances of a woman's skin, but until we sit down with real women and ask them to tell their skin narratives the conversation hasn't truly begun. One-on-one oral history interviews, in which narrators often gave in-depth life histories and then discussed the hows, whens, and whys of their tattoos and scars, were conducted as a means of testing the validity of the theories I have researched. However, the oral histories were more than tests run to prove a hypothesis. They were an opportunity for each narrator to explore their own story, with a focus on the scars and tattoos that mark their skin. The hope is that these narratives will encourage other women to consider their own skin narratives and inspire them to feel confident in their own skin. And, naturally, as a primary theme of this thesis is communication, it is my hope that these oral histories will cultivate a larger conversation on body culture and embodiment, a frontier that oral history has yet to sufficiently explore.

For a more detailed discussion on the particular oral history processes used in this thesis, along with an analysis of the strengths and weakness of the process, See Appendix B.

Curation (Why a Website?)

When I began to conceptualize this thesis I was determined to display a finished product in a public exhibit. My original plan was to curate an exhibit that included photography, audio and text in a temporary, physical space. It's unnecessary to detail the difficulties of making this idea a reality, suffice it to say, getting access to a public,

physical space for my project was not possible given my budget and time restrictions and my lack of connections to these types of spaces. However, I had always planned to include a web component for the project, a site that would serve as a supplement to the physical exhibit. As my work progressed, I began to see the website taking shape as my primary final product and the successful creation of the site has been a welcome learning experience.

But why a public exhibit of any kind, physical or virtual? My passion is public history. I believe in making history as democratic and as accessible as possible. Democratization, a multiplicity of perspectives and voices, is at the heart of all oral history work; but what good do those voices do if they are simply stored in an archive or used for an academic paper that the public does not have access to? It is through the website that I hope to generate dialogue, with anyone and everyone. The ‘Comments’ page on the website will be one means of facilitating this dialogue but I also believe that it is difficult to measure the take-away from any exhibit with any certainty. A good public history project gives an audience something to mull over, discuss with their peers and colleagues, and perhaps, changes the way some individuals think about a certain subject.

Obviously public history, and specifically cyber public history, comes with its set of challenges, primarily those of privacy and security. What I put on the site was first and foremost motivated by a responsibility to my narrators. I was wary of sharing pieces of the narrative that were very personal or taking any sound bytes or transcript excerpts out of context. I gave all of my narrators access to the protected website as it developed and continuously invited them to share suggestions and concerns with me. Another motivation in creating the site was the desire to make it appealing to the broad public. If

this *was* a physical exhibit, I would want the visitors to stop and linger in it, not to simply pass through on the way to somewhere else. Making content available on the Internet means that it is difficult to predict exactly who your audience will be, and thus difficult to determine what tactics to use to engage visitors. I worried a lot about how long my clips should be, how in-depth my analysis should be, how present my own voice should be. Was the content too much or not enough? Would people relate to my narrators? Would anyone besides my mother and my classmates visit the site?

What I learned is that there are no clear answers about the right and wrong way to curate an oral history-based website. Yes, there are privacy issues to consider. Yes, there is a good chance that many visitors to the site are going to have short attentions spans and navigate away from the site without feeling its impact. But I received a lot of positive feedback about my project and so I pushed ahead and figured the details out as I moved along. In the end, my primary motivation was to make a final product that my narrators would be proud of and happy to be involved in. Only they can really say if I achieved that aim.

Conclusion

To bring the conversation back to what Freud had to say about the skin and the self, interpreted by Anzieu,

*The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface (Freud, 1923: 25–6). I.e. the ego is ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly from those springing from the surface of the body. It may thus be regarded as a mental projection of the surface of the body, besides, as we have seen above, representing the superficies of the mental apparatus.*²³

My thesis proposes that, in some cases, these mental projections of the Ego that Freud and Anzieu described have the potential to turn around and become physical embodiments. If the self is a reflection of what goes on around it, it can also be said that the skin can serve as window to that inner self; a way in which we let others know how we think, feel and envision our selves. I found evidence of this idea, the skin as a transmitter of the experiences of the inner self, in the majority of my interviews and I attempted to highlight this concept in each of the narratives presented on the project's website.

Of course, the way we interpret and share our skin narratives changes, based on a number of factors. For one, who we are talking to has bearing on what we say, in all contexts. I am a woman who also has tattoos and scars and personal narratives that go along with them. Perhaps that made it easier for my narrators to open up to me. But the fact that my narrators gave me permission to share their narratives with a larger public

²³ Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*, 85

indicates that any perceived intimacy between myself and my narrators does not necessarily need to be considered an essential factor; they told the stories to me but they are comfortable sharing them with a larger audience. In addition, I don't know most of my narrators well outside of the interview and so there is no way for me to know if I am getting the "full" story, or if my narrators omitted elements from their narratives. I am comfortable with this "flaw" in oral history, with letting the narrators tell whatever story they feel like telling in the moment. We can see each others skin, we can hear each others stories, but we have to understand that these narratives are always an interpretation, that there are innumerable "real" stories.

Secondly, our narratives change based on how our relationships with the stories of our scars and tattoos evolves. Some day in the future one of my narrators may grow tired of her tattoo and decide to cover it up or remove it. A woman who is ashamed of her mastectomy scar may one day choose to embrace and celebrate it. Like our bodies themselves, our relationship to our bodies is constantly changing. But even as one interpretation replaces another, the mark remains as an archive of all of those narratives.

And finally, after all of the above research and theorizing, what this project comes down to is letting the narrator's speak from themselves, and for their skin.

www.storiesoftheskin.com

Appendix A: Why Women?

"I always look for a woman who has a tattoo. I see a woman with a tattoo, and I'm thinking, okay, here's a gal who's capable of making a decision she'll regret in the future." ~ Richard Jeni, Comedian

When I started this thesis one theme I wanted to explore was the nature of woman's relationship to her skin. In truth, I expected to find a degree of conflict along with meditations on the negative stigma surrounding a woman's "marred" body. Instead, what I got were narratives from women who are proud of their scars and tattoos, excited by the stories their skin has to tell and relatively indifferent towards social pressures or expectations surrounding a woman's skin.

Here are some examples from interviews that illustrate this point:

Sonny

Interviewer: But in terms of - just the general stigma of women getting tattoos...and like, marring their bodies, any... reactions? No?

Sonny: I never really thought about that. As much. I - like, I didn't really think about it at all - I didn't really care as much. Um - I guess I like - my mom wasn't incredibly supportive until afterward when I got it and she was like "you could've gotten more" and I'm like "Jesus Christ, like, seriously? Why didn't you come with me then?!" and so - now she loves it. So. I didn't really - I think they're mainly turned off because - well she definitely doesn't like the idea of putting things into your body or what not, like that but - and my brother got his in Mexico. So that wasn't really a smart idea. So this was like a very clean process. But yeah, when she said that I was just like "ok, sure, I'll get another little flower, whadya you want me to do?" like. But she loves it now. Yeah I never really thought about any - what anyone else would think though. I didn't care that much.

Amy

Interviewer: Yeah. Um, so, you said before, like, you've s- mentioned a few times that you didn't really care, like, if people saw or how people reacted but, do you - I feel like there's always been a stigma, um, against people with tattoos, especially women.

So I'm wondering, like, if you've seen that changing and if you can talk a little bit about, like, going from being 16 and tattooed to being 40 and tattooed, and like...

Amy: [laughs] Sure ... I have noticed that for me I - you know I start out maybe a step behind other people because people make assumptions, um, but, I mean I don't feel like I'm tooting my horn to say that it doesn't take long to see that I'm articulate and I'm intelligent and, that I am not, necessarily what I appear to be [laughs].

And I've come to a place where I think that I'm well-groomed and, you know, I - I dress professionally and all of those things, while maintaining a sense of independence and individuality and, you know, you can tell that I'm not, like, you know, I don't necessarily look like everybody else. So, I struggle with it still but, but less.

Tiara

Interviewer: So, again, I think I know the answer to this but to talk about a little bit, uh, like, the idea that, like, women shouldn't be, shouldn't kind of be rough housing...shouldn't be, like, you know, putting themselves in positions to put marks on their bodies, does any of that ever concerned you at all?

Tiara: Um...yeah, like, I mean, I know when I first got the scar on my ankle I was just like, "Oh man, that was stupid. And now I'm gonna have to live with this scar and I'm gonna have an ugly ankle." And, like, "Women are supposed to have, like, pretty ankles". Even thought it's like, that's not the exact thought that comes up, but you know, there are like, like I told you about my Audrey Hepburn obsession when I was younger, and you just always like, always have this idea of

like, "Oh pretty crossed ankles". And I was just like "Oh, that sucks, now I'm gonna have this [laughs] this silly scar there." Um. So yeah, no, I totally think - and, I mean, you look at, people, like, you look in magazines and everyone is so airbrushed and things like that. Um. So, I mean, yeah. I th- the ankle scar I think was the one that bothered me the most. Even though it's like an ankle. But it wasn't, like, it was mostly the story I think that bothers me. Like how [laughing] I got it. Cause it was just stupid.

Natalie

Interviewer: And the - and in terms of placement you mentioned that you wanted it to be somewhere that was kinda personal...and somewhere only people who you wanted to see, uh...to see it. Um, was that - was any of that because you were a little bit nervous about negative stigma for tattoos or getting jobs or...attracting people, or...?

Natalie: Um, no. I mean, I honestly - no. I can honestly say not. I think that it's very - it fits in also very well with my personality, I'm not a very sh - I'm not a very, like, showy person. Or I'm not a very, um, I - I like muted colors and I'm not very, - I like clothes and shoes and things like that but I'm always gonna be a little bit, um, less, maybe...I guess or - I don't even wanna say ornate. But I mean, it's just having it in a place that it wouldn't be - draw a lot of attention to myself. And I don't care about the negative attention. Um, but just attention in general. I've always been very happy to kind of be, you know, just you know, I'm just, mm. So it's like getting the tattoo was a big decision but then putting it in a place that was a little bit more quiet that also fits my - my personality. So, it was kind of, yeah. I wasn't worried about um, I wasn't worried about any, you know, any negative reaction from anyone.

Unfortunately the sense of empowerment and agency that I found in my narrators' stories does not apply to all women. For one thing, my narrators were predominately self-selected, meaning they came forward of their own volition to share their stories. Some of these stories were sensitive but it was (and always is, when dealing with oral history) completely the narrator's choice about what and how much to share. All of the narrators included in the project have signed legal releases and have been made aware that the final product, the website, would be shared with a greater public.

I know that, had I had the opportunity to interview more women, had I actively sought out women who felt ashamed or embarrassed by their scars I would have gotten a different, perhaps more dramatic narrative. These are important stories that need to be told so that a discussion can begin and society can consider re-working the concept of what is and isn't feminine in terms of the skin - just one small but significant aspect of the conversation about gendered body culture.²⁴ Yet the stories of my narrators, empowered women who have experienced living and who's bodies bear the marks to prove it, are important too. Regardless of the degree to which we struggle with our skin narratives, each woman needs to be a part of the conversation.

²⁴ This conversation is being had, on some level, with the help of a few other projects and publications, many of which I list on the page of the website titled, "More Skin Speak".

Appendix B: The Oral History Process

“A recorded oral history is more than just a quote on a page in a book. It is a meaningful story expressed by the person who owns that story.” ~ Doug Boyd, oral historian

No matter how academically rigorous a researcher is, there is much that cannot be learned through "traditional" texts and resources. This is especially true when it comes to investigating something as personal and variable as woman's relationship with her body. Reading case studies and feminist literature and cultural histories of the skin set a foundation for considering my thesis. But my project didn't really begin until I sat down with women and started listening to what they had to say about the stories their scars and tattoos told.

First, in order to find narrators for the project I employed several methods. I reached out through different modes of social media, namely Listservs and Facebook. The majority of my narrators ended up being women who had seen my call for narrators in one particular Listserv message and who reached out to me to let me know they were interested in being involved in the project. A couple of my narrators I know personally and so I approached them and asked them to be involved and they were gracious enough to agree. I did make some attempts at reaching out to particular populations (breast cancer survivors, veterans, etc.), but I was unable to forge relationships with women in these specific communities with the time and resources available to me. I can theorize how my project may have been different if I had been able to include these dramatic narratives in my thesis; I know that there are a lot of stories that this project does not tell. But in the end, I was fascinated with the prospect of presenting the stories of the “regular” woman.

In order to present these stories in their fullest, after communicating predominately through email, I set up appointments to interview each narrator. Interviews were conducted at the narrator's home when possible, or occasionally at my home or at the library at Columbia. With some narrators I conducted two interviews, the first being a life-history interview and the second being a focused interview in which we talked about their scars and tattoos. Time constraints did not allow me to do this with all interviews but regardless, I insisted on including at least a partial life-history segment in each interview. My thinking behind this was that the details of a narrator's past might be extremely relevant when we start the conversation about the present. It would also help place the scars and/or tattoos into the context of the narrator's timeline. These life-histories allowed me to compose a more complete representation of each narrator as I worked on their separate pages on the website.

In terms of how to focus the second part of the interview with the concentration on scars and tattoos I initially took guidance from my research. For example, Anzieu asserts, "Mutilations of the skin – sometimes real, but more often imaginary – are dramatic attempts to maintain the boundaries of the body and the Ego and to re-establish a sense of being intact and self-cohesive."²⁵ This is one of the theories that I had in mind when conducting my interviews and piecing together the project: why do we tattoo ourselves? Why do we enjoy sharing the stories of our scars? Are tattoos a way of reinforcing the bodies natural barriers? Do we tell the stories behind our scars to prove to others how resilient we are? These questions, among others, initially directed my

²⁵ Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*, 20

approach to the interviews. The WHY question is often the most appealing – to be able to answer the WHY question is something we all aspire to do.

However, I quickly discovered that the trouble is that the WHY isn't always known to us, or, if it is, it isn't easily related to others. The question, "Why did you get a tattoo?" won't get you very far with most individuals. "Why do you have a scar?" is not the most sensitive way of engaging someone. Instead of asking narrators to analyze their skin in order to answer the WHY, I quickly changed my tactics and focused on the HOW. How did you make that decision? How did you find yourself in that situation? I've found that HOW leaves more room for flexibility and narrative flow. HOW also aids in the creation of a stronger bridge to the past when narrating a story, which for me, looking at the interviews with a historian's perspective, is key. I think this is a good practice not only in my project or projects like it, but in oral history in general. The focus on HOW will be reflected in the stories that I share on the project website.

The interviews were completed over a five-month time period (February to July 2013). I transcribed the interviews as efficiently as possible over the spring and summer of this year. When a transcription was complete I emailed a copy to the narrator and let them know that they had the opportunity to edit the transcript (correct any mistakes, omit portions of the text, etc). None of my narrators opted to edit out portions of the conversation, although some did send me corrections on spellings or facts. Because portions of the interviews, along with photos, would be made available online I made the decision to use only my narrators' first names on the website so that they could be relatively anonymous. I also gave my narrators the option to use just their first initial or have the spelling of their name changed. Two of my narrators opted for this security

measure. All of my narrators signed legal releases that gave me permission to use their oral histories and any supplementary material (i.e. photos) in any way that I choose, including online. The legal release also clarified that narrators had the right to request information about the progress of the project at any time. My post-interview objective was to fulfill all of the necessary, practical requirements but to still leave room for conversation and collaboration.

One challenge in conducting oral history interviews for a project is that, as you move along from narrator to narrator, you learn a lot about how to word questions and direct the conversation. This is a good thing but it can also be problematic. I think my initial interviews went well – but I would have loved to have been able to apply what I learned in subsequent interviews to those first few interviews. By the time I got to my final interviews I felt like I was in a completely different space with the project than when I had started. This challenge can make looking for patterns among interviews difficult, but it is my job as interviewer to recognize this challenge and work within its bounds. There will never be perfect cohesion between all interviews. Relatedly, it was difficult to know when to stop the interview process. As I've noted, there are angles I did not explore and larger stories that my project will not include. Logistical restraints, strict for this particular project but present in any project, limited the process. However, since my topic is broad there was a need for limitations in order to make the thesis feasible. I can attest to being content with my group of narrators and their stories as I think they offer an amazing sample of the tattoo and scar stories that exist in our society.

The most successful part of this entire thesis was my collaboration with my narrators. When I ran into academic snags and technological difficulties, the enthusiasm

and cooperation of my narrators kept the project afloat. I was able to meet with all of them, but one, more recently this summer in order to take photographs (taken by a fellow narrator who was also a classmate) that would be included on my website. It was truly lovely to see them all again, to catch up on things and to inform them of the process of the project. The fact that they all made time to be a part of the project was very inspiring. My main objective for this project has been to produce a final product that all my narrators would be proud to be involved in.

Using oral history as the primary method to explore a subject offers many rewards and challenges. I found that the outcomes of the interviews done for this project significantly complicated the way I thought about the themes and ideas I was attempting to investigate. Oral history interviews are wonderful and frustrating in that they very rarely harmonize with the traditional sources. I struggled with reconciling the interviews with the research; it wouldn't be too difficult a task to bend the interview content to support an academic theory. But in order to make a coherent product I made the decision to defer to the oral history interviews; if this decision makes it more difficult to prove a hypothesis or write a solid research paper, so be it. It is the interviews, not my supplementary research that guides visitors as they navigate the website. It is the voices of the narrators, not my voice or the voice of the academy, which is heard. In the end, the website is about shared authority just as much as it is about skin and scars and tattoos. I am content in my role to get these stories heard.

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