

Inked Women: Narratives at the Intersection of Tattoos, Childhood Sexual Abuse,
Gender and the Tattoo Renaissance

by

Ana-Elisa Armstrong de Almeida
BA, University of Victoria, 2005

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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This study explores how heavily tattooed women with a history of childhood sexual abuse give meaning to their tattooing practices in view of the recent appropriation of tattooing by the mainstream. Embodied feminist poststructuralist theory revealed the ways that dominant discourses on gender, beauty, painful body modifications, and childhood sexual abuse intersect and interact in attempts to shape the identities of the participants. These intersections also reveal the participants' resistance strategies and the process of identity transformation they engage in as they get tattoos. The constitution of identities through discourses offers alternative ways of seeing this population, challenging dominant discourses regarding female survivors of childhood sexual abuse tattooing practices. The research methodology used was a qualitative approach based on 'interpretive interactionism.' This approach makes visible and accessible to the reader, the problematic lived experiences of the participants through their narratives. The research methods involved several in-depth interviews with three heavily tattooed women who were survivors of childhood sexual abuse. The analysis involved interpreting the meanings participants gave to their tattooing practices in relation to how they construct their identities as they negotiate gender ideology, the tattoo renaissance, self-injury practices as related to tattooing, healing from childhood sexual abuse and oppressive beauty ideals. This study unearthed alternative ways of conceptualizing painful practices, female aesthetics, tattooing, women's body reclamation projects, emotional trauma release, embodied domination, and bodily learning. It also offered insights into how the participants fragment their subjectivities and actively take over the authorship of their identities as they also try to positively influence their environments, challenge beauty norms and seek healing outside of traditional therapeutic environments.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all the strong women, survivors of sexualized violence or not, who had the courage to stand tall and speak out. Your determination has opened pathways for other women to learn from your example and follow in your footsteps. Without you by my side this path would have been much harder to walk.

A Pause Before Starting

I am the sign painters' granddaughter
I really shouldn't claim title
there are many of us.
as history will tell
just look around
we are everywhere
many faces painted to look as we should reflect
what do you see?
I see you

~ Anonymous (2000)

Terra, in Portuguese, means both the planet and soil
cio da terra, quite literally, the earth in oestrus,
promiscuous and divine, celebrated mother nature,
the dirt(y) whore of fertile soil to be sowed.
Semen in the dirt by the side of the road bore
fruit to feed hungry mouths, picked green and ripe,
innocent and knowing between gasps and silences.

~ Ana-Elisa Armstrong de Almeida (2008)

CHAPTER 1 – Introduction

This study explores how heavily tattooed women with a history of childhood sexual abuse give meaning to their tattooing practices in view of the recent shift in societal attitudes from the marginalization of tattooed persons towards the appropriation of tattooing by the mainstream—a phenomenon called the ‘tattoo renaissance’¹ (Atkinson, 2003a, 2004a, 2004b; Hardy, 1995; Pitts, 1998). This study, informed by embodied feminist poststructuralist theory, reveals the ways that dominant discourses on gender, beauty, body modifications, self-injury practices, and childhood sexual abuse survivors intersect and interact in attempts to shape the identities of the participants. These intersections also reveal the participants’ resistance strategies and the process of identity transformation they engage in as they practice tattooing.

The constitution of identities through discourses offers alternative ways of seeing this population, challenging the two dominant discourses regarding women’s tattooing practices.² The first, a self-mutilation discourse, is found primarily in mental health literature and views all tattooing practices as signs of psychological distress (Atkinson, 2004b; Sullivan, 2001, 2002; Pitts, 2003; Vail, 1999). Typically, it portrays this population as deviant (Vail, 1999) or in need of psychiatric intervention (Dinesh, 1993; Romans, Martin, Morris & Harrison, 1998). The second, a body reclamation discourse, is present in most of the feminist literature and constructs these women as using tattooing to ‘reclaim their bodies’ from the oppression they feel in a patriarchal society; thus, their tattooing is constructed as a resistance strategy (Atkinson, 2002; DeMello, 1995; Pitts,

¹ For a review of the revitalization of tattooing from a post-modernist perspective, see: Taylor, M. (1995). *Skinscapes*. In D. E. Hardy (Ed.), *Pierced hearts and true love* (pp. 29-45). Honolulu, HI: Hardy Marks Publications.

² Both discourses treat culturally based tattooing as a separate phenomenon.

1998, 2003). Both discourses mask the complexity existing in women's lives and lack in depth given the recent changes in societal attitudes towards tattooing.

Background for the Study

Research shows that survivors of childhood sexual abuse have higher than normal rates of depression, anxiety, fear and post-traumatic stress disorder, and that the effects of the abuse can last well into adulthood (American Psychological Association [APA], 2001). How an adult deals with the effects of childhood sexual abuse varies according to that individual's context (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985; Horwitz, Widom, McLaughlin & White, 2001; Kessler, Gillis-Light, Magee, Kendler & Eaves, 1997; Kristensen & Lau, 2007).

Studies conducted by feminist researchers suggest that female childhood sexual abuse survivors who use non-conventional body modifications³ such as tattooing are attempting to reclaim their bodies from the abuse they suffered by re-scripting their bodies (Atkinson, 2002; DeMello, 1995; Pitts, 1998, 2003). Most feminists claim that body modification practices and body reclamation discourses are linked within a therapeutic process outside the realm of helping professions such as social work, psychology, psychiatry, and child and youth care (CYC) (Atkinson, 2002; Pitts, 1998, 2003). On a similar note, many tattoo artists⁴ speak of the healing they witness in their

³ In this text, *body modification* is used to indicate all radical and voluntary practices of changing the appearance of the body such as, but not limited to, tattooing, piercing, branding, scarification and ritual cutting. Many argue that body modification refers to all attempts to change the body's appearance; therefore, plastic surgery and dieting are forms of body modification (Atkinson, 2003; Pitts, 2003). While I agree with this definition, for the purpose of simplicity and clarity I will use body modification in this text to signify body practices that are seen as socially questionable in today's mainstream society.

⁴ I have chosen to use the term 'tattoo artist' instead of the older term 'tattooist' or 'tattooer' in keeping with the terminology used today in tattoo circles. In older times, persons who tattooed for a living called themselves tattooists or tattooers. It is possible that the newer term, tattoo artist, reflects a move and a preoccupation, within this subculture with shifting towards more respect in the mainstream (and more

female clients who have suffered emotionally, be it from sexualized violence, illness or the loss of a loved one (Chinchilla, 1997, 2003). Some women engage in body modification projects with the explicit intent of seeking therapeutic healing, as in the case of breast cancer survivors having tattoos put over their mastectomy scars; others have discovered a healing ritual, a change in self-image, and a deeper understanding of the self as capable of healing emotional pain through painful body modifications (Chinchilla, 1997, 2003; DeMello, 1995, 2000; Mortensen, 2005; Pitts, 2003). Both types of reclamation experiences are usually situated within a feminist discourse of challenging patriarchy by marking women's bodies in defiance of the dominant beauty ideals for a woman's body—young, pure, white, unmarked, passive and docile. Some feminists say the body reclamation discourse is common among women, regardless of experiences of trauma, and that it is a sign of resistance taken up against the oppression all women feel in patriarchy (Atkinson, 2003b; Pitts, 2003).

The mental health discourse, present in much of the non-feminist research, views all kinds of body modifications as self-mutilations and signs of mental instability (Sullivan, 2001, 2002; Pitts, 2003; Vail, 1999), and is characterized by the notion that the skin serves as a “communicative border between inside and outside, on which psychological themes are portrayed” (Sullivan, 2002, p. 12). This pathologizing discourse is often used to label and further victimize women who suffered sexualized violence and who engage in body modifications. As tattooing is moving from marginality towards social acceptability and the number of women getting tattoos is rising, the view of tattooing as either self-mutilation or body reclamation seems overly simplistic.

commercial appeal as an artist). This terminology is not without contestation; old timers prefer to be called tattooists or tattooers, while the younger generation of tattoo artists insist on the new term.

In the past decade tattooing has undergone a renaissance and is steadily gaining entrance into the mainstream (Atkinson, 2003a, 2004a, 2004b; Hardy, 1995; Pitts, 1998). Today, men and women from a wide variety of ages, occupations and socioeconomic groups are getting tattoos (Greif, Hewitt & Armstrong, 1999). As tattooing moves from marginality towards social acceptability, it is being appropriated by the middle classes (DeMello, 2000; Irwin, 2001) and used as a fashion statement among ordinary people and celebrities alike (Atkinson, 2002; Beeler, 2006; Hayt, 2002).

Evidence of tattooing entering the mainstream can be seen in young girls' lives as well. Temporary tattoos for children are now commonplace as a 'fun thing to do' and are often used as advertising in community events. Even Barbie got a tattoo (Irwin, 2001). In 1999, Mattel launched Butterfly Art Barbie. The doll had a butterfly tattoo on her stomach and the package had temporary tattoos so that children could play by placing similar tattoos on their doll or on themselves. This Barbie was part of a line called Generation Girl Barbie that included a Butterfly Art Ken doll and new friend for Barbie, a doll with a nose ring. The tattooed Barbie became a novelty due to the fact that Mattel cancelled their plans for the rest of the line after some parents complained; these parents were worried that tattooed dolls might influence children to want tattoos. Butterfly Art Barbie was not recalled, but production was stopped and this doll is now a collector's item (Van Patten, 1999). Not all parents shared this concern over a tattooed Barbie. Some were very sad to see it discontinued and said it was difficult to know who liked it more, them or their children (Wright, 2000). It is ironic to me that the very girls whose parents were trying to 'protect' in 1999 are now in an age group where it is commonplace to have a tattoo on the lower back (Hayt, 2002). In fact, the lower back tattoo became so popular

among young women that it is now widely ridiculed in popular culture,⁵ and is known as, among many other derogatory nicknames, the ‘tramp stamp.’

Historically, tattooing has been a predominantly masculine area, but recently women have been carving out positions for themselves both as tattoo artists and as tattooed persons (Chinchilla, 1997, 2003; Hayt, 2002; Mifflin, 1997; Pitts, 2003). In view of these changes, it is possible that women with a history of childhood sexual abuse now view tattoos differently than other body modifications as a tool for resistance, body reclamation and/or another mode of self-expression. For this reason the participants recruited for this study were female childhood sexual abuse survivors with extensive tattooing rather than other radical body modifications.⁶

Other possibilities must be considered in conjunction with the influences of the tattoo renaissance and the many discourses regarding tattooed women. Most research into tattooing in Canada has been conducted using traditional sociological theories and focused primarily on men, which has led to a highly masculinist perspective (Atkinson, 2002). While there are vast theoretical resources on the body to be used in feminist or process sociological research, very few researchers have accessed this and almost no research has been done into the ways women negotiate “established gender ideologies and codes of physical display” (Atkinson, 2002, p. 222) as they engage in body modifications.

⁵ For a funny example of this, see:

http://www.zanyvideos.com/videos/how_to_remove_lower_back_tattoo_for_girls

⁶ It is probable that other forms of ‘radical’ body modification will follow in the wake of the tattoo renaissance and move towards mainstream acceptability. It is already happening in the case of facial piercings, in particular nose, eyebrow, and multiple ear piercings.

It was in light of the dichotomy of body reclamation and self-mutilation discourses, the tattoo renaissance, and the complexity alluded to in the literature, that I proposed to explore the meanings that heavily tattooed women with a history of childhood sexual abuse give to their tattoo practices. I remained open to the possibility of discovering many other discourses not yet documented. I sought to understand the participants' points of view on their practices and to investigate how they construct their gendered identities in the context of the tattoo renaissance. I paid attention to the participants' narratives about and surrounding their tattoos and how they shape, and are in turn shaped by, the meaning they give to dominant gender ideologies of female aesthetics, the changing social climate for tattooed women, the childhood sexual abuse they suffered and the tattoo renaissance,.

Objectives

The study's objectives were as follows:

1. To explore how the participants construct a sense of self as heavily tattooed women with a history of childhood sexual abuse;
2. To document if the participants comply to, negotiate with and/or resist dominant ideologies about tattooing, female aesthetics, gender identity within the context of the tattoo renaissance;
3. To understand how the tattoo renaissance affects or does not affect the participants' constructs of tattooing practices;
4. To document my own engagement, exploration and processes as a researcher in the project and the results of this on my self-awareness and professional practice.

Questions to Support the Exploration

- Do you make linkages between childhood sexual abuse and your tattooing practices?
- As a heavily tattooed woman, do you reflect on and/or (re)negotiate your identity as you come in contact with the view of society's dominant gender ideologies?
- How do you utilize tattooing to insert yourself, or make yourself visible, in the flow of information that marks the bodies of women?
- What do you think of the tattoo renaissance? Has it affected your tattooing practices?
- Have the original meanings given to your experiences diluted or solidified as tattooing moves from the margins towards the mainstream?

Significance

Personal significance.

I am a survivor of incest. In my twenties I only attended therapy a few times but never found a counsellor I felt comfortable with or could afford. I knew that I needed to heal from the abuse but did not know how. I wrote volumes of journals, travelled, cried and stayed busy enough to pretend the past did not matter. As I began to get tattoos, unexpectedly, I found healing and strength in them.

My first tattoo gave me the strength to leave an abusive marriage. It was a phoenix because I needed to remind myself that I had survived many 'fires' and had always emerged stronger from the ashes. I discovered that the phoenix reminded me that I was strong. As I got more tattoos the images I chose were visual representations of the negotiations I undertook on a daily basis between who I was and who I wanted to become. My tattoos were about my fears and hopes. It came to me as a surprise when,

during one long and painful tattooing session, I went into a deep meditative state and heard my voice aloud in my mind: *No one can hurt me anymore. I control my pain.*

Controlling physical pain during a tattooing session took me to a different understanding of emotional pain; it helped me shift my self-image from victim to survivor. Over the years I talked to other heavily tattooed men and women who suffered trauma in their childhoods and found out that they too found healing through tattooing. Naïvely, I thought that that was all there was to it. I had never read anything about self-injury practices, nor did I know anyone who admitted to doing it. I did not know that this theme—of discharging emotional pain through physical pain—was very common among people who practice self-injury rituals and this behaviour is very common among youth who have trauma history (Sutton, 2007). When I began my BA and had access to academic literature on tattooing practices, self-injury, childhood sexual abuse, and feminist theory I began to question the simplicity of my earlier assumptions.

Many years before conducting the literature review for this study I realised that none of the discourses about women's tattooing I encountered in the literature fit with my experiences. Indubitably, at first I was engaging in a body reclamation project, even though I was not conscious of it at the time. Yet my notions of aesthetics, female beauty ideals and the burgeoning tattoo renaissance heavily influenced all my tattoos and their placement on my body. Thus I came to reflect over this contradiction in my behaviour: Inasmuch as I would like to describe my tattooing practices as pure resistance strategies, I have to admit to being influenced by the very gender ideology that I was supposedly resisting. Another point of tension for me was the resemblance that my epiphany about emotional pain during tattooing had with descriptions that people who engage in self-

injury practices gave of their experiences. Instead of being disturbed by this resemblance—I have no self-injury tendencies and find the idea of cutting myself to be terrifying—I became deeply curious. These points of tension stayed with me during the exploration phase of my research question. I did not assume that my study would produce a universal answer for why women who experienced trauma in their childhoods sometimes seek tattooing as a therapeutic tool, but I hoped to open up a space for discussion and contemplation that was more reflective of heavily tattooed women's voices. Beyond my own curiosity and personal interest, I believed that an exploration of this topic would be valuable given the rapid shift in societal attitudes towards tattooing and the changing contexts into which heavily tattooed women and youth are inserting themselves.

Significance of this study to the participants.

For the women who participated in this study there was the potential of curative effects resulting from the interview process. The nature of feminist research methods, such as collaborative and narrative style interviews, allows a participant to feel heard, without judgement or criticism (Naples, 2003). In their narratives the participants had the chance to voice what might have been silenced by the trauma and to feel empowered by the telling of their stories (Naples, 2003; Rosenthal, 2003). In the narration of their stories, the participants reached a deeper level of self-understanding and the effect that certain events have had on their lives (Rosenthal, 2003). A detailed description of this process is offered in Chapters 4 and 5.

Significance of this study to the field of Child and Youth Care.

Gaining more understanding about how heavily tattooed women with a history of childhood sexual abuse attribute meaning to their tattoo practices and how they are influenced by today's socio-political context can improve our practice with tattooed women and youth accessing our services across the varied settings of CYC practice. We also need to try to understand the impact of both individual selves and the larger politics of the body with which they engage (Pitts, 2003). Given the rise in the acceptability and fashionability of body modifications, especially tattooing, and the high incidence of persons with a history of childhood sexual abuse engaging in body modification projects (Jeffreys, 2000; Pitts, 2003) it is important that we understand this phenomena and the reasons why women engage in these practices so that we can counteract the pathologizing self-mutilation discourse used by mental health professionals (Pitts, 2003) with a much more flexible and respectful understanding of the diversity of meaning-making processes that human beings engage with in their lives.

This study is an important addition to the CYC literature because it challenges the static model of two 'truths' posed by the dominant discourses of self mutilation and body reclamation, and it adds alternate readings to tattooing practices among female survivors of childhood sexual abuse. This may help us to better serve children, youth and their families. These alternate readings can help us practice from a "model of social competence rather than a pathology-based orientation to child development" (School of Child and Youth Care [SCYC], para. 4, 2008a). This study also increases the amount of information available to CYC practitioners with which to inform the planning of interventions. This is an important addition to the CYC literature as practising from a

model of social competence, and using culturally sensitive research-based data to inform interventions, practice and policy are both essential elements of our profession, and are a vital part of CYC ethical practice (Mattingly & Stuart, 2002). A focus on strengths and the client's voice, as advocated in the results of this study, is extremely important as building therapeutic relationships is one of the central tenets of CYC practice, and advocacy is a part of many of our professional practices (SCYC, 2008b). In addition, this study has the potential to inform other helping professions such as counselling and social work as they too practice from a strengths-based stance, respect the inherent diversity in client's lives and respect clients' right to self-determination (Canadian Counselling Association, 2007; Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2005). Research shows that women with extensive body modifications encounter more discrimination than men (Hawkes, Senn & Thorn, 2004), are presupposed to be engaging in illegal and deviant behaviour (Deschesnes, Finès & Demers, 2006), and are perceived negatively by health care providers (Stuppy, Armstrong & Casals-Ariet, 1998). These attitudes negatively affect the interventions and care that tattooed youth and women receive (Carroll, Riffenburgh, Roberts & Myhre, 2002; Stuppy et al., 1998). There is also discrimination on an academic level where the mental health discourse is pervasive, as sociologist Victoria Pitts found out when she applied for her doctoral dissertation ethics review. The objections to her study were that:

Body modifiers were perceived as sick people in need of psychiatric, not sociological, attention. (...) My first application (...) was rejected for precisely this reason: body modifiers (...) needed to be studied by mental health professionals rather than sociologists. (Pitts, 2004, p. 380)

Another aspect that was taken into consideration in this study is that it is important to explore the ways that consumer society re-packages resistance sub-cultures and uses them to encourage conformity to normative gender ideals (Atkinson, 2002). The insights gained from this study may lead us closer to a better understanding of the effects of consumerism on our clients. This is important because in an effort to increase profits business repackage adult culture and behaviour so they can sell it to children and young teens. This marketing takes many forms from adult make-up marketed to girls⁷ to the music of overtly sexualized pop singers like Britney Spears (who is also tattooed).

Outline of the Thesis

In Chapter 2, I provide a literature review on the topics of childhood sexual abuse, the history of tattooing, the tattoo renaissance, tattooed women, tattooed survivors of childhood sexual abuse, and other readings of tattooed women's practices.

In Chapter 3, I describe the theoretical framework of this study and my rationale for using 'embodied' feminist poststructuralist theory. This framework allows me to critique the dominant discourses on gender roles for women, female beauty ideals, normative therapeutic approaches to healing, and survivors of sexualized violence, and to explore resistance practices aimed at appropriating and re-defining the meanings attached to heavily tattooed female survivors of childhood sexual abuse's subject positions.

In Chapter 4, I present the methodology of this qualitative study, interpretive interactionism, as informed by embodied feminist poststructuralist theory. The methods

⁷ See this page on Amazon.com for an example of children's make-up. Note the section 'Customers who bought items like this also bought' has items such as the 'Barbie Beauty Box Make Up Set'. <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Large-Make-Compact-Case-Cosmetics/dp/B000N6OLWO>. As well, see <http://bellasugar.com/312372> for an example of how Mattel joins with cosmetics lines (MAC and Bonne Bell) to market make-up for girls.

of the study are described, followed by a brief discussion on the participants. An exploration of my location in this study, as an insider and as an outsider is included and a review of ethical considerations closes the chapter.

In Chapter 5, I present the participants' narratives regarding their tattooing practices, and how they construct their identities as they negotiate gender ideology, the tattoo renaissance, self-injury practices as related to tattooing, healing from childhood sexual abuse and the oppressive effects of dominant beauty ideals in the format of a layered account. This format layers findings, analysis and alternate readings.

In Chapter 6, I offer a summary of the results of the study in relation to the theoretical framework and the literature review. I also offer a discussion on the limitations of the study and areas for further research, implications for research, practice and policy making.

CHAPTER 2 –Tattoos, Tattooed Women, and Childhood Sexual Abuse:

A Literature Review

A Brief History of Tattooing

Tattooing has been practised in almost every culture in the world for millennia (Greif et al., 1999). In looking at the history of tattooing I found that it has been regarded as a practice reserved for the socially privileged, as a cultural marker, as art, an expression of the self, a sign of virility and strength on men, as a sign of femininity and fertility on women. In contrast, it has also been seen as a sign of mental instability, deviant behaviour and criminality, and finally as a symbol of resistance from the margins of society (Atkinson, 2003a; Chinchilla, 1997; DeMello, 1995, 2000; Gilbert, 2000; Greif et al., 1999; Hardy, 1995; Mifflin, 1997; Taylor, 1995). There may be many other ways in which tattooing has been viewed over time that are not evident in the literature I reviewed. The point I want to stress here is that attitudes towards tattooing have shifted continually throughout recorded history. The evaluation, whether critical or appreciative, has depended on who observed, who was being observed, and on the time period of that observation. To demonstrate this, I will briefly outline the history of tattooing in Europe, and how it influenced tattooing in North America.⁸

In October of 1991 the discovery of ‘The Iceman,’ a five thousand year old frozen tattooed male mummy from the Bronze Age, in the mountains between Austria and Italy made headlines all over the world. Debates abound on who he was, how he died and the

⁸ For an excellent review of the recorded history of tattooing throughout the world, see Gilbert, S. (2000). *Tattoo history: A source book: An anthology of historical records of tattooing throughout the world*. New York and Berkeley, CA: Juno Books, or for a critical examination of the history of the complex relationship between power, the body, and tattooing in the late capitalist states of Western civilization see Fisher, J. (2002). Tattooing the body, marking culture. *Body Society*, 8, 91-107.

significance of his tattoos (Gilbert, 2000; Seenan, 1999). The Iceman has fifty-seven tattoos: a series of small lines and crosses tattooed on the ankles, legs and over the lower back. It is thought that his tattoos were therapeutic, applied as ‘medicine’ or as a form of acupuncture since x-rays have shown that he probably had arthritis in the tattooed areas (Gilbert, 2000; Seenan, 1999). The Iceman is the oldest tattooed body found thus far (Gilbert, 2000). In addition, there are other findings that suggest the practice of tattooing in European prehistory. Figurines with engravings that could be a sign of tattoos from the Upper Palaeolithic period (10,000 BC – 38,000 BC) have been found all over Europe. Greek and Roman historians left many documents detailing the tattooing practices of the Britons, Gauls, Scots, Iberians, Goths, Teutons and Picts. Among these European tribes, tattooing was used to show membership, and in some cases to make warriors look menacing to others. Roman and Greek historians depicted European tribes as barbarians; tattooing was seen as proof of their lack of culture (Gilbert, 2000). Both Romans and Greeks used tattooing to mark criminals and slaves as a form of state control, their bodies “act[ing] as agents of the state emitting a visible sign of their social role” (Fisher, 2002, p. 92). The negative connotations associated with tattoos within Greek and Roman societies were so strong that tattoos were often inflicted on people as a means of punishment or torture, and the Greek word for tattoos was *stigmata*, which gave origin to the word *stigma*⁹ (Fisher, 2002). The Roman emperor Caligula and the Greek emperor Theophilus amused themselves by ordering the tattooing of members of their courts who displeased them (Gilbert, 2000). As Christianity gained converts in the Roman Empire, tattooing gradually stopped being a form of punishment. Tattoos began to be

⁹ The root of the word *stigmata*, *stig-*, means ‘to prick’

differentiated between ‘good,’ as in tattoos of the cross, Christ’s name, a fish or a lamb, or ‘heathen’ as in all else usually associated with pagan tribes’ tattooing. Later this differentiation ceased as Pope Hadrian outlawed tattooing in 787 AD. The following popes maintained this prohibition and by the 18th century, tattooing was almost unknown in the Christian world.

Tattoos were reintroduced to Europe at the end of the 1700s. Captain Cook ventured into the South Pacific and came home with stories of tattooed people. Many officers and sailors from his ships were the first Europeans in centuries to get tattoos. Some of these sailors learned how to tattoo from Polynesians and when they retired from seafaring, opened their own tattoo shops in various port cities in Europe. Soon tattooing became a cultural marker of sailors and all those who interacted with them, such as prostitutes and criminals in seedy port areas. However, tattooing gained respectability once more when, in 1862, the Prince of Wales, Edward VIII, visited Israel and came back with a tattoo of a cross. He and his sons were to get many more tattoos over the course of their lives. Tattoos then became the rage among young British noblemen, rich members of high society and most of the Royal houses of Europe (Gilbert, 2000; Voost, 2004). The practice crossed the Atlantic and soon rich Americans were getting tattooed. Tattooing was even encouraged among officers of the British army and navy; many officers had tattoos of their regimental crest to show allegiance and membership (Gilbert, 2000).

According to rumour, both Queen Victoria and her husband Prince Albert¹⁰ had intimately placed tattoos (Greif et al., 1999; Mifflin, 1997). Around this time, in America,

¹⁰ A popular rumour in the world of body modifications is that Prince Albert was a fan of genital piercing as well. One of the most common male genital piercings, a ring through the tip of the penis, is named after him. It was supposed to enhance sexual pleasure for Queen Victoria and it allowed him to strap his penis to his thigh, thus avoiding a ‘bulge’ in the front of his trousers and maintaining a smooth line in his trousers (NationMaster.com, n.d.).

there was also an increase in the popularity of circus shows, carnival side shows, or ‘freak shows’ (Fisher, 2002). The first heavily tattooed woman to work in a freak show was Nora Hildebrandt in 1882. Within a short time, a few more women became heavily tattooed and joined freak shows. They were immensely popular as they wore less clothing than other women so they could display their tattooed skin and because the stories they gave as explanations for their tattoos were usually of being kidnapped and tattooed by American Indians, basically “tattoo rape” (Braunberger, 2000, p. 9). In Nora Hildebrandt’s version, the story was slightly different. As her father owned the first tattoo shop in America, they said Sitting Bull kidnapped them both and then forced the father to tattoo the daughter for an entire year until she was covered (Braunberger, 2000; Mifflin, 1997). In reality, becoming heavily tattooed and working in a freak show was an alternative job to the very limited options available to women in that era. The drawback of this surge in popularity of tattooed women in freak shows was that as increasing numbers of men and women began to get tattoos, tattooing became associated once more with vulgarity and deviance. The growing number of people getting tattoos so they could earn a living at a freak show meant that the original performers were forced to get diverse tattoos and to wear even less clothing in order to display all of their tattooed flesh (Fisher, 2002). This change led some to describe freak shows as being disguised as peepshows (Mifflin, 1997). In the following century tattooing began to lose acceptance as an upper class practice and became associated primarily with sailors, criminals, prostitutes, gang members and freak shows (Chinchilla, 1997; DeMello, 1995, 2000; Hardy, 1995; Mifflin, 1997). There is speculation that such changes in attitude happened because of increasingly stricter rules of conduct in the Victorian Era (Gilbert, 2000). By the mid-

twentieth century, the tattooed performer of freak shows no longer drew crowds. Tattoos were still considered vulgar but seeing a tattooed body was no longer a novelty (Fisher, 2002). Later, in Europe, tattooing was to be used as a social control tool. Marking a sinister shift in social ideology during the 1930s, Nazi Germany used tattoos to control and stigmatize the bodies of Jews, Gypsies, and homosexuals (Fisher, 2002; MacCormack, 2006).

Such social marginalisation only began to decrease at the end of the 20th century. Since then tattooing has gradually re-gained social acceptance (Atkinson, 2003a; Chinchilla, 1997; DeMello, 1995, 2000; Fisher, 2002; Hardy, 1995; Mifflin, 1997; Taylor, 1995). By using a broad historic overview we see attitudes towards tattooing continually shifting back and forth across a continuum of negative and positive appraisals. Thus, the tattoo renaissance of today is not an isolated phenomenon in history. Still, it is important to note that in Western society women have always been judged more harshly than men if they have a tattoo (Sanders, 1994) and even in these times of tattoo fashionability for both genders (MacCormack, 2006), there is still a double standard for tattooed women. I was reminded of this when I overheard a conversation on the bus early in this study. A woman and man in their early twenties were sitting close to me, talking loudly about their assignments and gossiping about their friends in university. As the bus went by a tattoo shop, they noticed it and their conversation shifted to the subject of tattoos.

Young Man: Hey, there's a new tattoo shop there. I'm thinking of getting one, it'd be really cool.

Young Woman: Yeah? I used to think tattoos were ugly but now I see a guy with them and I think “yum, sexy!”

The young man laughs loudly

Young Woman: But not on girls, I think it’s gross, skanky, slutty!

Young Man: Yeah! [he continues laughing]

As I travelled the last few blocks to my destination I wondered if the tattoo renaissance has made much of a difference in the lives of heavily tattooed women.

The Tattoo Renaissance: Consumerism and Tattooing

The current tattoo renaissance can be traced back to the late 1960s as the Hippy movement and rock culture became stronger. It has had its ups and downs since then but has consistently gained momentum (Fisher, 2002). When looking at the tattoo renaissance, I find important to note here that, like the Hippy movement, what many thought of as a movement that rebelled against staunch rules of fashion, style and behaviour towards a more tolerant and accepting view of individual rights to self-determine their lifestyle did not “signify anything as dramatic as the implosion of the social space but should be regarded as merely a new move within it” (Featherstone, 2000, p. 93). I have heard many people say that tattooing is more acceptable today due to increased social tolerance for diversity. Perhaps not as Halnon and Cohen (2006) state that tattooing has been gentrified, and MacCormack (2006) and Pitts (1998) aver that tattooing is another subculture infiltrated by consumerism.

Klesse (1999) claims the body, and the manner in which it is displayed, is a source of identity within consumerist culture. Self-identity in this new context alludes to a “*strong sexualisation of the body*. Consumer culture reinforces the notion that the body

is a vehicle of pleasure and self-expression” (emphasis in original, Klesse, 1999, p. 21). Within consumerist culture tattoos, like clothing and grooming, extend and solidify the wearer’s social identity (Belk, 1988; Sanders, 1994). In the past tattooing served as a strategy to differentiate oneself from mainstream society and to associate with the tattoo community (Sanders, 1988). Today, some say that at a time when post-modernists argue the body is becoming irrelevant, the tattoo renaissance and inherent commercialization of its practices imply that “tattooing represents the effort to mark the body at the very moment it is disappearing” (Hardy, 1995, p. 41) and make it a marketable commodity. The tattoo studio has become a retail outlet for consumer culture (MacCormack, 2006; Pitts, 1998) and famous tattoo artists are branching out into furniture, clothing, and car interior design (Kingston, 2008). Pitts (2003, 2005) also highlights the influence of upper class access to technology and the resulting social stratification of such technological resources. Halnon and Cohen (2006) have called this process the gentrification of tattooing. As tattoos have become increasingly popular with the upper classes, the prices of tattoos and the status of tattoo artists have increased. Indeed, some tattoo artists’ hourly rates are as high as lawyers’ fees (Beeler, 2006). The appropriation of tattooing by the mainstream can be seen in retail and media as well. Tattoo artist Ed Hardy’s line of clothing, the extremely expensive and popular Sailor Jerry brand¹¹ has made millions (Kingston, 2008) while Discovery Channel’s reality TV show *Miami Ink*, featuring tattoo artists and people getting tattoos, has been immensely successful from the moment the first episode aired (Halnon & Cohen, 2006).

¹¹ Sailor Jerry brand extends to clothing, house wares, accessories and rum, with designs based on a legendary tattoo artist Norman Collins’ art from the 40s and 50s.

Tattoos and Women

Since the time when tattooing was reintroduced to Europe by Captain Cook and his sailors, upper-class women copied the practice of tattooing from “two ignoble positions, the primitive *other* and the working class” (emphasis in original, Braunberger, 2000, p. 5). It is important to highlight the class issue in the tattoo renaissance today as it relates to working class women having more freedom and experience in using their bodily practices to subvert dominant gender ideologies (Braunberger, 2000.) Working class women are more resistant to the “idea of the quiet, pale, and bounded female body, and tattoos have long since been a sign of that resistance” (DeMello, 1995, p. 74).

While cultural, anthropological and sociological accounts of the history of tattooing among men and women exist, there is scant empirical research on women, tattoos and gender issues (Atkinson, 2002; Hawkes et al., 2004). Considering the popularity of tattooing among young people today, this seems to be a gap in the literature on the body and youth practices (Atkinson, 2002). I suspect the majority of the published research was conducted before or in the earlier stages of the tattoo renaissance and agree with Atkinson (2002) when he says that the current published research does not reflect the experiences and attitudes towards tattooing of the newest practitioners of this form of body modification, especially among women. This gap becomes more visible if one considers the fact that tattooing is shifting from being predominantly done by men on men towards an increasing number of female tattoo artists and a clientele that is 60% female (Mifflin, 1997). Commenting on this trend, Fisher (2002) hypothesizes “it seems that it may not be so much that women are reversing the stereotype, but rather that

tattooing is equalizing between the sexes” (p. 100).¹² As previously stated, this lack of updated research is compounded by the lack of attention to feminist and sociological theories of the body (Atkinson, 2002; Beeler, 2006).

Beeler (2006) suggests a feminist exploration into the various tattoo narratives to investigate the “links between tattoos, desire, violence or violation, and gender identity (...) or gender relations” (p. 196). Looking at the relationship between women and their bodies as a site of control and oppression we see that “women have been objectified and alienated as social subjects partly through the denigration and containment of the female body” (Grosz, 1994, p. xiv). The growing numbers of women participating in tattooing practices might be representative of women’s tattooing practices as a way to resist control and oppression; however, another feminist reading posits the idea that women are being further objectified and alienated by the tattooing renaissance, a phenomenon that may be turning a resistance practice into a hyperacceptance of patriarchal gender ideology (Atkinson, 2002).

There is an absolute lack of empirical research conducted on how Canadian women experience and construct their tattoo practices, except for a partial analysis done in one of Atkinson’s (2002) studies. From this small analysis, Atkinson found that not all women getting tattooed are doing this to resist patriarchy. He contends that while some women are consciously subverting gender ideals for women with the size and placement

¹² Nevertheless, the location chosen for the tattoos is still divided along sex lines: men prefer locations that reveal their tattoos, while women prefer tattoos in locations that are easy to hide (Fisher, 2002; MacCormack, 2006; Sanders, 1994). My conversations with tattoo artists and observations in tattoo studios confirm this.

of their tattoos (a ‘full sleeve’¹³), others get tattoos to further ‘feminize’ and sexualize their bodies.¹⁴ Most young women I have spoken to informally about tattoos or observed at a tattoo studio talked about the intended tattoo as a decoration meant to further sexualize their bodies. Nevertheless, I also observed many women who did not fit into mainstream beauty standards getting a tattoo to enhance a particular body part. They said that the tattoo was a way of raising their self-esteem and that getting a tattoo made them feel beautiful and confident.

Childhood Sexual Abuse

The strong relationship between childhood sexual abuse and psychological distress in adulthood is well documented (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985; Horwitz et al., 2001; Kessler et al., 1997; Kristensen & Lau, 2007). One of the main problems is that childhood sexual abuse alters a child’s “cognitive and emotional orientation to the world, (...) distorting children’s self-concept, world view, and affective capacities” (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985, p. 531). The abuse also leads to inappropriate sexual and emotive behaviours resulting from “confusions and misconceptions about their sexual self-concepts, and (...) unusual emotional associations to sexual activities” (p. 531). In addition, most sexually abused children suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which can lead to low self-esteem, depression, anxiety disorders, guilt, fear, and withdrawal (Morissette, 1999). The effects are wide ranging, depending on the severity and length of the abuse, and can be long-lasting and follow the victim well into

¹³ A ‘full sleeve’ refers to a tattoo that covers the arm from shoulder to wrist. A ‘half sleeve’ is a tattoo from the shoulder to the elbow. Usually a design is created and this work is done over a length of time, rather than single tattoos being placed piecemeal.

¹⁴ One respondent in his study said she got a string of roses placed around her hips because she had a flat stomach and she knew the tattoo would draw attention from men when she wore low-cut pants.

adulthood. It is common for adult survivors to experience depression, high levels of anxiety, sexual dysfunction, and self-destructive behaviour such as substance misuse, anxiety disorders, insomnia and problematic romantic and intimate relationships (APA, 2001).

In comparison with women who were not abused as children, women with a history of childhood sexual abuse tend to be disadvantaged in the areas of education, finance and housing (Kristensen & Lau, 2007). In Kristensen and Lau's study, their literature review found that the majority of sexual abuse happens to girls, and that as adults they are usually socially impaired. The impairment is in regard to having fewer friends and social contacts, and more "social adjustment problems" (p. 116). They also found that the rate of decrease in socioeconomic status after the abuse was more than double following the abuse and more than quadruple when the abuser had penetrated the child. As adults, the rates for marital and relationship problems tripled. A study of women treated for depression and/or anxiety showed in the samples' portion of those who were unemployed or on pensions that 47% of them had a history of childhood sexual abuse (Kristensen & Lau, 2007).

Tattooed Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse

The relationship between body modifications and childhood sexual abuse is not clear nor without contestation. Both childhood sexual abuse and tattooing have been researched extensively but separately.¹⁵ The few texts I found that spoke specifically of

¹⁵ For some examples of research on childhood sexual abuse see: Finkelhor & Browne, 1985; Horwitz et al., 2001; Kessler et al., 1997; Kristensen & Lau, 2007; Morissette, 1999; Rambo Ronai, 1995. For examples of research on tattooing see: Atkinson, 2002, 2003a, 2004a, 2004b, 2006; Beeler, 2006; Bell, 1999; Braunberger, 2000; Hawkes, Senn & Thorn, 2004; Mortensen, 2005; Pitts, 1998, 2003, 2005; Sullivan, 2002; Sweetman, 1999; Vail, 1999.

the combination of both were written in a judgemental manner, portraying sexual abuse survivors as victims unable to think critically about their own choices (Jeffreys, 2000), were discussed solely in conjunction with psychiatric and personality disorders (Dinesh, 1993; Romans, et al., 1998; Vail, 1999), or spoke of the difficulties in getting academic audiences to let go of discriminatory attitudes towards body modifications (Mortensen, 2005; Pitts, 2004).

Jeffreys (2000) states the body modification industry is preying on marginalized groups, such as women who have suffered sexual abuse in childhood, by re-packaging “harmful cultural practices that include self-mutilation in private, transsexual surgery, [and] cosmetic surgery” (p. 409) as a practice that is spiritual, transgressive, and that reclaims the body from patriarchy. She bluntly categorizes all forms of body modification—from pierced ears to voluntary finger amputation—as harmful self-mutilation practices that place women in a position of reliving and perpetuating the abuse they experience at the hands of men, and of further objectification for the male gaze (Riley, 2002). Dinesh (1993) reveals that in a literature review conducted one study found that in all their cases of tattooed female psychiatric patients (a total of four) the “tattoos were a stigma of sexual abuse” (p. 852) because the women disclosed they had been sexually abused. Dinesh (1993) cautions that tattoos cannot be associated with the sexual abuse alone because all of the women had mental health and substance misuse problems. Romans et al. (1998) assert that tattooed women are more likely to misuse substances, have personality disorders and to disclose histories of childhood sexual abuse. Vail (1999) labels heavily tattooed men and women as ‘collectors,’ and describes them as unable to resist the urge to mark their skin, calling them deviants who learn how

to attribute meaning to their practices in the same manner that “professional thieves learn their trade from other professional thieves, marijuana users learn how to smoke marijuana and to interpret the drug’s effects from other marijuana users” (p. 254). With regard to academic bias and other obstacles to research, Pitts (2004) found it difficult to have her research approved by her university’s ethics review board and Mortensen (2005) speaks of the difficulties in getting an academic audience to look beyond the body modifications of her subjects and see the healing they experience as they engage in these rituals. Riley (2002) reminds us of the pathologizing approach of the self-mutilation discourse when she says that this academic point of view of body modifications is oppressive. It “has approached the subject not with the question ‘What does body art mean for the people involved?’ but with the question ‘What particular pathologies do these people have?’” (p. 542). Consistent with this discourse is the fact that studies about tattooing rarely take into account the possibility of tattooing practices having a normative effect; rather, “both the pathology of the act and actor is assumed” (Atkinson, 2004b, p. 128). The root of the judgemental attitude present in the literature reviewed may be the stigma of tattooing and body modifications for women in most of recent Western history (Beeler, 2006; DeMello, 1995, 2000; Mifflin, 1997; Pitts, 1998).

As noted before, most of the feminist analysis of women who engage in body projects focuses on the body as a site where women practice resistance strategies against patriarchy (Atkinson, 2003b; Pitts, 2003). However, there is some dissent among feminists on how to theorize the practices of women who engage in body modification projects (Pitts, 2005). To some feminists, body modification *is* self-mutilation. In this stance, people who practice body modification do so because they occupy a “despised

social status under male dominance” (Jeffreys, 2000, p. 410; see also MacCormack, 2006). Jeffreys (2000) maintains that

the despised social groups under male dominance with a tendency to self-mutilate are women and girls (who are still reared to hate their bodies or mould them to the requirements of male sexual culture), young lesbians and gay men who suffer severe damage to their self-esteem from the discrimination and abuse suffered in a heteropatriarchal culture, and those, mostly women but including men, who have suffered male sexual violence in childhood or adulthood. (p. 410)

In her view, the emotional pain of childhood sexual abuse leads the person to self-mutilate through body modifications, and to attempt to further objectify oneself for a dominant male’s pleasure (Jeffreys, 2000). This perspective leaves no room for the stories of healing and transformation I have often heard from tattooed persons and have read in feminist literature. Riley (2002) adds two very important points in her critique of this article: while she agrees with Jeffreys that self-mutilation and self-objectification is a part of body modification practices,¹⁶ she criticizes Jeffreys for not indicating that there are very different social and cultural meanings attached to body modifications such as ear and nose piercings and practices such as foot binding and finger removal, and for not “address[ing] the plurality of our relationships with [our] bodies and, hence, the utility of postmodern-influenced analyses of power” (p. 541).

Some authors claim that women with a history of childhood sexual abuse and other forms of sexualized violence are over-represented in the body modification

¹⁶ See Riley, S. (2002). A Feminist construction of body art as a harmful cultural practice: A response to Jeffreys. *Feminism Psychology*, 12(4), 540-545, and Riley, S., & Cahill, S. (2005). Managing meaning and belonging: Young women's negotiation of authenticity in body art. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 8(3), 261-279, for a review of this perspective.

community (Jeffreys, 2000; Pitts, 2003). My conversations with heavily tattooed people support these claims. Most heavily tattooed people I know have had suffered some form of abuse, neglect and/or violence as a child.

Other Readings

Other readings of women's tattooing practices stand in stark contrast to the literature reviewed thus far. Braunberger (2000) talks of "monster beauty" (p. 2) and Atkinson (2002, 2003b, 2006) proposes a 'hyperacceptance' of gender ideology to explain why some women get tattoos. While these perspectives on women's motivations for tattooing themselves do not make any linkages between childhood sexual abuse and tattooing practices they do offer interesting alternatives to the dichotomous discourses of mental health/self-mutilation and feminist/body reclamation.

Monster beauty.

Braunberger (2000) says "tattoos (...) complicate the two distinct positions feminist theory has negotiated in order to speak the written body" (p. 2). She exposes the limitations of feminist analysis of tattoos so far by showing that most of them either look at the tattooed female body as symbolic and as such we are categorized as "obscure Madonnas forever in a game of dress-up" (p. 2), or they aim to protest and "get the make-up off" (p. 2). She proposes that we look at heavily tattooed women as a call for a "revolutionary feminist aesthetic" (Bartky, 1990, p. 42) that embraces female expressions of beauty and desire and works towards eliminating internalized oppressive embodied practices that are damaging to women's self-image. "Women need to be able to make the double move of decolonizing the 'fashion-beauty complex' from our minds, while

allowing for the joy and exploration in the body play of masquerade and performance” (Braunberger, 2000, p. 2).

This stance opens up the feminist discussion to the insertion of an alternative female aesthetic, what Braunberger (2000) calls “monster beauty” (p. 2), in which women are creating new possibilities for female body aesthetics that both encompass and stretch the limitations of former female beauty ideals. DeMello (1995) alludes to this when she says “tattooed women make a statement about aesthetics” (p. 79). She argues that art in Western society has always been a privilege of the elite, thus its manifestations—opera, ballet and painting among others—are seen as ‘high art’, both purer and more sophisticated than the ‘low art’ of the lower and middle classes, such as tattooing and graffiti. She points out women are defined more by their associations with men than with culture and are expected to be pure, refined, slender, hairless and unmarked. Therefore, tattooed women are a “greater affront to bourgeois artistic sensibilities than tattooed men, since we are expected to be ‘above that sort of thing’” (p. 79). DeMello (1995) asserts that women are forcing their body art into the mainstream and into high art through an appropriation of tattooing. She argues that this shift towards tattooing as high art, as seen in the inclusion of tattoo art in museum and art gallery shows, is signalling the creation of an alternative notion of the female body, much like monster beauty. Irwin (2001) notes that in her study most women she interviewed “saw tattoos as a sign of liberation and freedom and became tattooed to construct a sense of self outside of conventional ideals of femininity and female beauty” (p. 55). She found that these women mixed body reclamation discourses with the idea of creating alternative ideas of beauty for themselves. For these women, getting tattooed—and thus creating

their own sense of beauty—was an act of empowerment; they were primarily interested in conveying images of strength, power and control over their own lives (Irwin, 2001).

Pretty in ink: The hyperacceptance of gender norms and civilizing behaviours.

Michael Atkinson (2002, 2003b, 2004b, 2006) suggests there is a move towards using subversive practices such as tattooing to effect conformity and civil behaviour among the mainstream. Most studies on tattooing that Atkinson (2004b) reviewed focused on either the pathological view of tattooing or tattooing as an expression of individuality. However, few studies looked at how a person's sense of individuality is constructed within cultural membership and socio-economic status. To theorize tattoo practices from this perspective he uses Norbert Elias' concept of 'civilizing change of behaviour' in regards to the tattooing renaissance to show how some groups are using tattooing to enact conformity rather than rebellion towards the mainstream (Atkinson, 2004b, 2006). Elias (as cited in Atkinson, 2003b) writes:

the closer the web of interdependencies become in which the individual is enmeshed with the advancing division of functions, the larger the social spaces over which this network extends and which become integrated into functional or institutional units—the more threatened is the social existence of the individual who gives way to spontaneous impulses and emotions, the greater is the social advantage of those able to moderate their affects, and the more strongly is each individual constrained from and early age to take account of the effects of his or others people's actions on a whole series of links in the social chain. (...) It is a "civilizing" change of behavior. (p. 448)

In his review of the existing research conducted about tattooed women he found that many authors believe tattooing among women is being used as a ritual practice to reclaim their bodies from abuse and emotional pain “*precisely* because radically marked bodies tend to subvert hegemonic ideologies about femininity—especially images of the weak, sexually objectified, or otherwise submissive woman, to subvert mainstream ideals of beauty” (Atkinson, 2002, emphasis in original, p. 220). He calls this the meta-narrative of tattoo research as most authors are saying “tattooing is intentionally structured by North American women as political resistance against misogynist ideologies and social structures of oppression” (p. 220). Yet, in his research he found that 62% of his female participants conformed to established constructions of femininity through their tattooing projects and only a small portion of the female participants used body reclamation discourses to give meaning to their tattooing practices. Because of these findings Atkinson (2002) states that a growing number of young women are getting tattooed in order to conform to current hypersexualized beauty ideals. He argues that the meta-narratives of body reclamation are masking reality by creating a singular discourse on tattooing practices among women. He states that research so far has not touched upon the “largely hidden, private, or *negotiated* nature” (emphasis in original, p. 220) of these body reclamation discourses. In addition, he says researchers are ignoring the ways in which the tattooing practices of women in North America reveal consent to “hegemonic masculine constructions of femininity” (p. 220). He looked at tattoos among women as embodied expressions of normative gender ideologies and found “*that women’s tattoos are layered with culturally established, resistant, and negotiated images of femininity*” (emphasis in original, Atkinson, 2002, p. 220). This view is echoed in DeMello’s (1995)

work as she says most women get “obviously ‘female’ tattoos so that their femininity (or heterosexuality) is not at risk” (p. 77). When looking at women’s tattoos through this last lens I cannot help but think of Langman’s (2003) words: “structures of domination foster resistance. But domination is often cloaked so that effective counter-strategies may be shunted to realms where they are neutralized” (p. 226).

In short, the literature review identified several gaps: the lack of research conducted into the reasons why women practice tattooing, the lack of research conducted from a feminist perspective, and the lack of studies done on tattooed women survivors of childhood sexual abuse. It also uncovered alternative discourses such as monster beauty and the hyper acceptance of gender norms; both discourses that stand in contrast with the dominant discourses of body reclamation and self-mutilation. These gaps and possibilities open ample ground for this study to explore.

CHAPTER 3 – An ‘Embodied’ Feminist Poststructural Theoretical Framework

“Theories are stories we tell to make sense of our world.”

(E. Elliott, personal communication, May 15, 2007)

In this chapter I describe the theoretical framework of this study and my rationale for using an ‘embodied’ feminist poststructuralist approach.¹⁷ This embodied feminist poststructuralist framework is guided by feminist body theory and feminist poststructuralist theory to describe the discursive relationship between the body and the self. I added the lens of embodiment, that is, bodily sensations and body-knowledge (Csordas, 1993), as a way to explicitly acknowledge and include the relationship and the knowledge exchanges between the self and the representational body as a methodological field.

However, before discussing what an embodied feminist poststructuralist framework is and how it informs this study, I believe it would be useful to first discuss the constructs of gender, self-injury practices, the damaged goods label for survivors of sexual violence, and beauty ideals as they inform and shape the identities of women and girls in our society.

¹⁷ In adding a ‘new’ term to an already existing theoretical framework I have run the risk of giving the impression that I have created an original theoretical framework. Nothing could be further from the truth as the framework I describe exists in the work of the theorists I have chosen to guide my thinking in this study. However, I have not yet seen it named as such. What I encountered often were descriptions of my chosen authors as feminist theorists that ‘do’ body theory. I added the term *embodied* to a feminist poststructuralist framework in an attempt to distinguish this framework from feminist poststructuralist theory on the body in general, which is full of contradictory and conflicting views on how to theorize the body. This framework incorporates the work of feminist theorists, poststructuralists and others, who theorize the body as being an active and contributing member of a process that includes the mind and the environment, and that can sometimes defy definition.

Constructs: “Is this what I’m supposed to be?”

Gender: An embodied subjectivity.

“It is not enough to have a woman’s body... to be a ‘true woman.’”

- Simone de Beauvoir (Grosholz, 2004, p. 59)

Gender is an artificial construct created through careful moulding of the desired ideals within a culture. While we are usually born into one of two categories, male or female, what constitutes masculine or feminine is determined by society. Our society does not tolerate well any signs of sexual ambiguity. One example of this is the pressure that parents of intersexed infants face to chose a ‘sex’ for their child, often through surgery and/or treating the child as the chosen gender. A more mundane example of this is seen in how men’s and women’s bodies are used as one of the main modes of display of gender ideology through dress and behaviour (Bartky, 1990), and normative body modifications¹⁸ (Pitts, 2003). In general though, women’s bodies are much more controlled than men’s through rules regarding desirable femininity practices; for example, the use of cosmetics and body hair removal techniques are generally expected of women but not of men¹⁹ (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 2003).

There are also considerable differences in men and women’s general bodily behaviour. In general, women are much more restricted in their movements and the amount of space they occupy. In public spaces women “make themselves small and narrow, harmless; they seem tense; they take up little space” (Bartky, 1990, p. 68), they

¹⁸ By this I mean temporary body modifications such as high heels, corsets and make-up, and permanent body modifications such as plastic surgery, dental braces and ear piercing.

¹⁹ Although this preoccupation with maintaining a perfect body/beauty is starting to equalize across the sexes as seen in the case of the new metrosexual, a man that devotes as much time and money as women in caring for his body and looks.

sit with their legs tightly closed and arms close to the body with hands folded neatly in their laps, while men are relaxed and occupy or take the space needed for them to sit at ease (Bartky, 1990; Davies, 2000a). A woman experiences the space around her body as an area within which she positions and confines herself, rather than an area in which she can move with intention and freedom (Bartky, 1990). This manner of controlling one's bodily display—is taught to young girls and women, and reinforced throughout a woman's lifespan by means of discourses flowing freely in mainstream society (Davies, 2000a). This makes the female body much more conscious of embodiment (Bordo, 2003; Budgeon, 2003). I remember many of these discourses from my own childhood, only three decades ago: Nice girls avoid eye contact with men, sit with their legs tightly pressed together, keep their bodies pure and are always pleasant, are always well groomed, clean, and pretty. Those societal discourses informed me that the 'ideal' woman was an object and that her worth was determined by male appraisal. The ultimate goal of this sort of femininity was to be wanted by a man—any man. While the discourses of femininity aimed at women today are different they are in no way less restricting. A look at the media and celebrity role models of today shows the ideal woman is extremely sexualized—a discourse that is still shaping women for male appraisal. Hence, women live their lives and experience their bodies as continually under the surveillance of the “anonymous patriarchal Other” (Bartky, 1990, p. 72) at the same time that all of their efforts to be 'feminine' are trivialized (Wesely, 2003). In order to maintain this state of insecurity among women, media bombards society with images of femininity that are impossible to achieve, thus setting up women for an insidious self-image of deficiency and inferiority (Bartky, 1990; Wesely, 2003).

Women resist normative beauty ideals in many ways, some of which are self-injurious body practices such as self-injury (cutting, burning and scratching the skin) (Pitts, 2003) and disordered eating (Bordo, 2003). Since the mental health discourse often considers tattooing to be a form of self-injury (Sutton, 2007; Pitts, 2003) it is helpful to explore how self-injury is viewed.

Self-injury: Turning away from the mental health lens

The medical and/or mental health discourse has overwritten and pathologized much of what are normal and ordinary female states of embodiment, such as menstrual cycles and pregnancy (Somerville, 2004). Brickman (2004) conducted a feminist analysis of the mental health discourse in several studies on self-injury. She found that self-cutting is labelled as ‘delicate’ self-mutilation and as a “demi-aggressive act (only turned on oneself and generally feared) of a passive individual – the position most often presumed for the female in our society” (p. 96). This normalizing view of femininity as masochistic and passive makes self-injury a ‘natural’ feminine act in response to the “frustrations, disappointments and terrors of life – parental deprivation, childhood illness, castration and penis envy and hormonal surges” (p. 96). Self-injury is also seen as an act that comes out of a developmental regression by young women that either cannot communicate in acceptable terms (such as appropriate verbal language) or who deny the responsibilities of growing up. The terms used to describe ‘delicate’ self-cutters are synonymous with femininity in a dominant patriarchal society; the delicate self-cutter enjoys pain, is passive and irresponsible, is an ineffective communicator, is childish, and as female, is more embodied than males. Brickman gives us the insight that “the claims in these studies deny any other possibility: cutting is performed by females because femininity

and cutting are nearly identical” (p. 97). She also states that most of the studies were published between 1960 and 1979, a time when North American women’s movements were very active in advocating for women’s rights. She proposes that the mental health discourse of self-mutilation as gendered “reflects, counters and often seeks to undermine the changes sought by the women’s rights movement” (p. 98). These studies often find the cause of self-injury in the young woman’s childhood: a dominating mother, a submissive father, and the child’s sexual identity confusion.

The reason I chose to explore the roots of this pathologizing discourse is that its legacy is still very much alive. These foundational studies, with their suspect sampling techniques, a disturbing interest in the attractiveness of the subjects, and their “highly suspect explanations” (Brickman, 2004, p. 100) for gendered illness are still informing today’s medical, academic and popular texts. While self-injury is still a mental health concern, it must not be studied outside the context of dominant societal ideology.

Damaged goods.

To better understand the narratives that survivors of sexual abuse give about the formation of their identities it is useful to understand the context in which childhood sexual abuse happens and what it does to the victim’s self-identity. The majority of sexual abuse victims are girls and the majority of abusers are men (Rambo Ronai, 1995; Wolf, 1990). It has been suggested that “the incest family is a microcosm of the rape ideology that operates in the macrocosm of society” (Ward, as cited in Rambo Ronai, 1995, p. 406). It is possible that if male supremacy and patriarchy were eradicated, then all forms of sexual abuse would disappear (Brownmiller, 1975).

This context of male supremacy affects children because they learn how to place themselves in the world according to the discourses in the social groups around them (Davies, 2000a). Davies (2000a) posits that

this is not simply a cognitive process of language learning, but also an ability to read and interpret the landscape of the social world, and to embody, to live, to experience, to know, to desire as one's own, to take pleasure in the world, as it is made knowable through the available practices, and in particular the discursive practices, the patterns of power and powerlessness and one's positioning within them. (p. 22)

When a child is sexually abused a pattern of power and powerlessness defines how she sees herself. Discourses of purity for women abound in patriarchal society; therefore the sexually abused child surmises she is used, guilty, dirty, and shameful (Berger, 1977). This sets up an irresolvable conflict within a child for in order for her to be socially competent she must try to pass as 'normal' according to the dominant discourses in her society (Davies, 2000a). In her efforts to pass as 'normal,' that is, pure, innocent and untouched, she is reminded frequently that she is not 'normal' as female victims of sexualized violence are often labelled as damaged goods, among other derogatory terms (Berger, 1977).

Society frequently attaches stigma to victims of crime; for complicated psychic reasons, some people avoid "losers" as though in fear of mortal contagion. The target of rape suffers an extreme decrease in status. Widely regarded as "damaged goods," characterized as "de-spoiled" or "ravaged," uniquely styled the "prosecutrix" in court proceedings (as though redress were her private business,

not the state's), the woman may come to view herself as a social leper. Not surprisingly, until recently rape was largely a dirty secret: a skeleton in the woman's closet, whose bones she rattled at her peril. (Berger, 1977, p. 23)

One does not have to look far to find examples of blatant misogyny in the discourses regarding survivors of childhood sexual abuse. In 1990, two judges in separate incest cases ruled that the child victims (a three year old girl and a twelve year old girl who had been sexually abused since infancy) were partially responsible for their sexual abuse because they seduced their abusers (Poff, 1990). Here in Canada, BC, another judge stated that a three-year old girl who had been sexually assaulted was sexually aggressive (Poff, 1990) and, in 2007, a British judge incurred public outrage after he said a 10-year old girl provoked her rapist by dressing provocatively (The Herald Sun, 2007). In all these cases the judges were male. One could argue that most of these cases happened almost 20 years ago. Yet in the recent data collection phase of this study, during an internship as a child and family therapist with a local agency that provides counselling and support services for victims of child sexual abuse and their families, I learned that if a child sexual abuse case is brought to court at all, it is most likely that the alleged abuser will be found not guilty or will get a very light sentence.²⁰ This leads me to believe that the legal system is still structured according to misogynistic lines. In view of the apparent worth of the abuser (male) and the victim (female), and the fact that victims of childhood sexual abuse learn to link sex with violence at a very young age, resulting in low self-esteem, or a sense of worthlessness (Rambo Ronai, 1995; Wolf,

²⁰ This internship was unrelated to this study.

1990), it is not surprising that the ‘damaged goods’ identity is so pervasive among victims of childhood sexual abuse (Green, 1993).

Beauty ideals and resistance.

Females are raised in a hierarchy that places them, not only as inferior in value to males, but also in constant self-regulation to attain gender ideals of purity, slenderness, beauty and behaviour that are ephemeral and illusive (Wolf, 1990). This constant struggle to fit a mould that is impossible to achieve and maintain has led to a pervasive feeling of deficiency among women (Bordo, 2003). One of the ways that women are controlled is by being kept insecure about their place in society and in constant competition amongst themselves (Wolf, 1990). This inaccessible but desired state of beauty is created and maintained by the beauty myth that “the quality called ‘beauty’ objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it” (Wolf, 1990, p. 12). The logic behind the myth is that beauty is a natural measure of fertility and thus men compete for the most beautiful/fertile women to ensure the survival of the species. This belief is absolutely unfounded but the beauty myth remains as the most powerful expression of the “power relations in which women must unnaturally compete for resources that men have appropriated for themselves” (Wolf, 1990, p. 12). The truth about beauty ideals is that they vary immensely between cultures and historical periods (Wolf, 1990).²¹

²¹ An example of how beauty ideals shift is the shrinking size of female celebrities today. Not so long ago Marilyn Monroe was considered one of the most desirable women in the world. One night watching *Some like it Hot* I was surprised to discover that she was quite curvy, actually overweight by today’s standards of beauty.

The Embodied Feminist Poststructuralist Theoretical Framework: What is it?

To follow an embodied feminist poststructuralist framework, I have used the work of feminist and feminist poststructuralist philosophers who conceptualize the body and mind as within an interactive and interrelated relationship. These theorists, Susan Bordo (1986, 1992, 2003), Bronwyn Davies (2000a, 2000b), Elizabeth Grosz (1994, 1995, 2005), and Victoria Pitts (1998, 2003, 2004, 2005), align themselves with the notion that “the mind is no more than an idea of the body—albeit a very powerful idea with material effects” (Davies, 2000b, p. 19). This framework is heavily based on Davies’ (2000a) and Grosz’ (1994) idea that bodies and minds are in continual relationship with their environments, simultaneously shaping and being shaped by this relationship. I added the term ‘embodied’ as a way of explicitly acknowledging the experiential aspect of this relationship between body, mind and environment as a methodological field within a feminist poststructural framework. In the following sections I will explore the historical influences that have led to this way of theorizing the body and how the theoretical stances of feminist poststructuralism and feminist body theory converge into what I have called an embodied feminist poststructuralist theoretical framework.

Historical Influences

The reason I chose this theoretical stance is that it moves beyond the Cartesian mind/body dichotomy that has typically dominated theoretical approaches to women’s bodies (Bordo, 1986, 1992, 2003; Grosz, 1995) and it works towards the notion of an embodied self that “exceeds representation” (Budgeon, 2003, p. 50). This way of conceptualizing the body and mind is relatively new and is a marked departure from the dominant Cartesian view of the body and mind as separate entities (Bordo, 1986). Some

have called Cartesian rationalism a “super masculinisation of thought” (Harding, as cited in Bordo, 1986, p. 441); thus, a look at the history of this dominant model of knowledge is necessary in order to better understand the feminist push for a female and/or alternate model of knowledge on the body and mind.

In the early 1700s Descartes created a model of knowledge that valued clarity, detachment and rational thought. He became the father figure in that century’s rationalist project and his model profoundly shaped intellectual pursuits for centuries to come (Bordo, 1986). His model, where the mind was considered a higher, more valued source of knowledge, and the body became considered the lower, less valued member of this dichotomy, revolutionized the philosophy of knowledge at the time because, up to that point, man did not think of himself as separate from his environment. Descartes was the first to introduce the idea of the mind as a powerful entity that is capable of thinking of itself disconnected from its environment, in other words, as an entity capable of perspective. He introduced the idea of consciousness, an idea that today is held as logical and veritable. One can only imagine the impact the idea of consciousness had at that time as “in relation to his environment, the man of the middle ages was rather less like an island, rather more like an embryo” (Toulmin, as cited in Bordo, 1986, p. 442).

This idea of consciousness became a central tenet of the Renaissance, and European culture became focused on the interior life and its meaning in both science and the arts. Categories of inner self and outer world, human being and nature became opposing rigid dualisms that set the path for a view of the body as “the source of all obscurity and confusion in our thinking” (Bordo, 1986, p. 448), and of the mind as the superior, rational, pure and trustworthy member of this dualism. From there, other

associations were soon to follow. The body and its lower status became the realm of women's knowledge while the mind was the realm of male, and superior, knowledge. This dualism in thought also justified the construction of children, women, Indigenous Peoples, the poor, and youth as the 'other' in relation to middle-class white men. This construction led to theories of development that put all 'others' on one end of the development scale—undeveloped, deviant, inferior, unfinished—and put white middle-class men on the opposite end of the scale—developed, moral, superior (Lesko, 1996).

Feminist Critique

The feminist critique of the Cartesian mind/body dualism is that this line of thinking creates a hierarchy with an assumption of the mind in a higher position and with control over the body (Budgeon, 2003; Grosz, 1995; Morgan, 2005). This is of special concern to feminists as historically the body has been associated with nature, women and femininity, while the mind, as the 'superior' member of the dualism, has been associated with rationality, men and masculinity (Bordo, 1986, 1992, 2003; Grosz, 1995). This dualism has led to gendered dichotomies such as active/male and passive/female, and active mind/passive body (Bordo, 1986). Bordo (2003) states that the construction of the female body as passive "has been one of the most historically powerful of the dualities" (p. 11) that are at the core of Patriarchal ideologies of gender. Hence, this study's theoretical framework embraces Bordo's (1986) stance that embodiment perspectives are culturally based and differ greatly between men and women.

Feminist body theorist Elizabeth Grosz (1995) states that in order to transform the assumptions underlining patriarchal knowledges we must question and problematize not only dualisms but also the phallogocentric thought that originated them in the first place.

Feminist poststructuralist Bronwyn Davies (2000a) encourages us to question the hierarchy in the mind/body dualism but cautions us not to create our own dualisms by reversing this dualism so that the body's knowledge becomes superior to the mind's knowledge; instead, she advocates for theorizing the body and mind as joined in a relationship within the space of the environment one occupies, continually learning from each other and adjusting itself as it engages with the environment.

Feminist Body Theory

Throughout recorded history women's bodies have been objectified and controlled in subtle and not so subtle ways by women themselves and by men (Bartky, 1990). However, Bartky (1990) states that in the last four decades, women have significantly increased the amount of time they devote to the management and discipline of their bodies in trying to achieve an unattainable version of femininity endorsed in Western society (Bartky, 1990). This pursuit has turned women into exemplary 'docile bodies,' a term Foucault used to signify "bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, 'improvement'" (emphasis in original, Bordo, 1989, p. 14). Since women's bodies are the main sites of this control, feminist theory views women's bodies as a rich source of theory and research. One example of how feminist theory sees women's relationship with their bodies is that they contend that the sexual objectification of women contributes to women's identities at the same time that it oppresses them (Bartky, 1990; Wesely, 2006), and that a "multiplicity of meanings (...) can be read in every cultural act and practice" (Bordo, 2003, p. 23). This interest in women's bodily experiences surfaced as a reaction to the essentialist view that men and

women's bodies were only biologically different (Somerville, 2004) and to the gendered mind/body dualism of Cartesian philosophy (Bordo, 2003; Morgan, 2005).

In attempting to theorize the body in an anti-essentialist manner, feminists have focused mainly on discourses that allow the complexity in women's relationships with their bodies to arise (Somerville, 2004). Still, there is a divide between feminist body theorists, those who focus on the body as completely shaped by discourse and those who treat the body as prediscursive in nature. This divide, for the most part, ignores embodiment as a valid source of knowledge (Budgeon, 2003; Davies, 2000a; Morgan, 2005). This problem is summarized well by Kirby (as cited in Somerville, 2004).

Feminism could be described as a discourse that negotiates corporeality, what a body is and what a body can do. Nevertheless, the spectre of essentialism means that the biological or anatomical body, the body that is commonly understood to be the 'real' body, is often excluded from this investigation. The increasingly sterile debate between essentialism and antiessentialism has inadvertently encouraged this somatophobia. (p. 48)

Perhaps, one aspect that has contributed to this somatophobia is that it is challenging to research and write about the corporeal body since "while the 'biological' and 'anatomical' body is a way of referring to corporeality, biology and anatomy are already discursive regimes that constitute the body in culturally inflicted ways" (Somerville, 2004, p. 48). In this regard, feminist poststructural theory may help overcome this obstacle because of its focus on the ways power and knowledge produce discursive regimes (MacLaren, 2002).

Feminist Poststructural Theory

Feminist poststructuralist theory views women's bodies as sites for inscription, regulation and control in a patriarchal society (Bartky, 1990). It also views women's stories as gendered rather than incorporating them "under a falsely universalized rubric" (Wesely, 2006, p. 147). This perspective produces new readings and meanings, and disturbs monolithic ideas about women in their socio-cultural-political locations (Olesen, 2003). Many feminists have embraced poststructuralism because

poststructuralism's suspicion of totalizing theories and expert prescriptions seems well-taken as we attempt to generate ways of knowing that can take us beyond ourselves. ... Feminism's grassroots, 'no more experts' credo is premised on the sturdy sureness that, given enabling conditions, every woman has something important to say about the disjunctures in her own life and the means necessary for change. (Lather, 1991, p. xviii)

The focus of feminist poststructuralist theory is on "processes of gendered *subjectification*" (emphasis in original, Davies & Gannon, 2005, p. 318). Subjectification is the process whereby a person is "subjected to the discursive regimes and regulatory frameworks through which gendered individuals and their social contexts are also, and through the same processes, constructed" (p. 318). Resulting discourses are "filled with contradictory possibilities" (p. 318). The exploration of these contradictions is one of the means to understanding the ways in which women are subjectified (Davies, 2000a).

However, this focus on discourses and their constitutive power can lead feminist poststructuralists to "privilege representational practices in the constitution of the body" (Budgeon, 2003, p. 51; see also Csordas, 1993). Inadvertently, and in spite of the feminist

value of questioning Patriarchal knowledges, this feminist poststructuralist focus on the representational body has reinforced and recreated the Cartesian masculine dualism by continuing to view the body as passive and controlled by the active mind. The active and lived body, the embodied self that defies definition, the body that interacts with its environment and is knowledgeable, is notably absent (Budgeon, 2003). Recently though, many feminist poststructuralist and feminist body theorists are urging a shift away from these dualisms that abstract the lived body experience because, as they point out, dualisms limit our understanding of bodies. These theorists advocate for the change in perspective that allows us to see the process of interaction and interrelationship between body, mind and environment, a process that produces more than the sum of its parts (Bordo, 2003; Budgeon, 2003; Davies, 2000a, 2000b; Grosz, 1994, 1995; Morgan, 2005).

Feminist poststructuralist theorist Bronwyn Davies (2000b) has put forth a theory of body/landscape relations that aims to change the perspective of dualism and views bodies as existing materially “within landscapes, and as landscapes” (p. 11). This theory of body/landscape attempts to make visible the contradictory and complex relationships between gender, women’s bodies, and the contexts in which they experience their bodies/subjectivities. Davies (2000b) articulates this theory by explaining that the concept of inscription is

developed as texts written on the deep/surfaces of the body/landscape, not in the sense of scarifying but in the sense of bringing the subject into being. That being is understood in terms of process rather than in terms of essence, and as such is motile, fluid, open to change. The dominant means through which we know

body/landscapes is discourse—this does not deny the materiality of bodies, it simply recognizes that unmediated access to the material body is rare. (p. 11)

She encourages us to ‘trouble’ rather than to ‘deconstruct,’ a term favoured in poststructuralism, because too often deconstruction is interpreted as being the path towards the destruction of dualisms and boundaries. This is problematic because dualisms “are not so easily dismantled, and deconstructive work often can do no more than draw attention to the binaries and their constitutive force” (Davies, 2000b, p. 14). Although I like the term ‘troubling’ as an alternative to ‘deconstruction,’ in this text I chose to use the two interchangeably. I ask the reader to keep in mind that deconstruction does not have to follow the literal meaning of the term, and that it can also mean to disrupt accepted truths, to introduce uncertainty into certainties, and that it is in the confusion of ambiguity that we often allow alternatives to emerge (Denzin, 2001). When I use the term deconstruction I am actively invoking the ability to introduce and tolerate ambiguity in a reading of a text.

Troubling, or deconstructing, the boundaries between body, landscape, and mind, exposes the ways in which explicit practices of controlling bodies, such as dieting, plastic surgery, and body modifications, are ways in which bodies are inscribed. This troubling also renders how implicit norms and values in society shape bodies, and in turn, create subjectivities (Davies, 2000b). Through this perspective, the reading and writing of the inscribed body allows us to see how language shapes and is shaped by our reading and writing of bodies. In this cycle of inscription and re-inscription, the texts produced, i.e. bodies, are “volatile, liable to change and movement, capable of action, capable of rupture and disruption, even of themselves” (p. 16). Considering that the women in this

study have chosen to tattoo, that is inscribe, themselves extensively, this theoretical lens allowed me to see the inscriptions on their bodies not as static but as volatile, changing, in movement, active and capable of rupturing discourses and of challenging their own subversive discourses.

The Embodied Feminist Poststructuralist Lens

Somerville (2004) advocates for a model that mixes feminist body theory— inclusive of embodiment as a methodological field, with feminist poststructuralism. The added focus on embodiment does not imply that women’s lives are shaped, ruled, or structured solely by their bodily experiences; rather it views the lived body experience as “the starting point for analyzing human participation in a cultural world” (Csordas, 1993, p. 135). Somerville (2004) states that the juncture of three concepts: a) embodiment as a methodological field, b) feminist body theorist’s refusal to work with the mind/body dualism, and c) feminist poststructuralists’ focus on inscriptive processes results in methodological strategies such as Bronwyn Davies’ (2000b) theory of body/landscape relations. This kind of approach allows the researcher to include bodily experiences and to acknowledge the ways in which we feel and know our bodies, while at the same time it allows the researcher to deconstruct and analyse that experience (Somerville, 2004). Bordo (2003) offers some insight into what this juncture would entail in methodological tools. She suggests that the work of Foucault, the main influence in poststructuralist thought, is better “understood as offering interpretive *tools* and *historical critique*” (emphasis in original, p. 336) rather than being used strictly to deconstruct the mind/body dualism. She adds that poststructuralist approaches to the body are useful because of two important points:

First, in its more Foucauldian manifestations, poststructuralism has encouraged recognition of the fact that prevailing configurations of power, no matter how dominant, are never seamless but are always spawning new forms of subjectivity, new contexts for resistance to and transformation of existing relations. Second, in its more Derridean manifestations, poststructuralism has encouraged us to recognize that the body is not only materially acculturated (e.g., as it conforms to social norms and habitual practices of "femininity" and "masculinity"), but it is also mediated by language: by metaphors (e.g., microbes as "invading," egg as "waiting" for sperm) and semantical grids (e.g., binary oppositions such as male/female, inner/outer) that organize and animate our perception and experience. We thus have no "direct," innocent, or unconstructed knowledge of our bodies; rather we are always "reading" our bodies through various interpretive schemes. (Bordo, 1992, para. 18)

Davies (2000b) speaks of lived body experience as an aspect of our living in a landscape that makes embodiment taken-for-granted unless we “find a way to trouble the obviousness, the taken-for-grantedness, and the general invisibility of body/landscape relations” (p. 15). Embodiment is an important methodological field in this study because tattooing is done to the body, and displayed on the body that interacts with the formation of subjectivity (Pitts, 2003), gender performance is displayed on and felt by the body (Bordo, 2003; Davies, 2000a), and childhood sexual abuse is an embodied experience, albeit one that traumatizes the body leading the victim to separate, compartmentalize, or separate bodily sensations from their stream of consciousness (Hoppen, 1994; Sutton, 2007).

Informed by Davies' (2000b) body/landscapes theory, the embodied feminist poststructuralist framework allowed me to read, that is look for, in the participants' narratives evidence of the rich dialectic exchange between their bodies, minds and landscapes, as this exchange shaped and shifted the processes of transformation they were engaged in. I found evidence of this dialectic exchange in their narratives, in the ways their narratives told the story(ies) of their relationship with their bodies, as women, as tattooed persons, as survivors of sexual abuse, and as individuals trying to understand how the many aspects of their lives continually come together to influence their identities, and in turn how this shapes their environments and their actions within their environments. It also encouraged me to remain open to unexpected influences, meanings and readings of their embodied practices and of the discourses of the women in my study as they shaped their relationship with their bodies, and in turn (re)shaped their discourses and embodied practices. This framework also allowed me to include my own experiences as a researcher, noting, or attempting to note, how my own discourses, bodily experiences and values influenced and were influenced by the study, and how this may have shaped the resulting thesis. A discussion of how this analysis was done is presented in Chapter 4 – A Qualitative Approach to Research.

In this chapter, I have discussed how the constructs of gender, self-injury practices, the damaged goods label for survivors of sexual violence, and beauty ideals inform and shape the identities of women and girls in our society. In collusion with normative gender ideals, mainstream society labels young women's resistance strategies as deviant and as mental instability in the case of self-injury, or deviant and unfeminine in the case of extensive tattooing. Next, I introduced the embodied feminist

poststructuralist framework by presenting the historical influences on the formation of the mind/body dualism, offering the feminist critique of this dualism, discussing feminist body theory and feminist poststructuralist theory as they relate to women's bodies and the mind/body dualism, and explored how an embodied feminist poststructuralist framework incorporates aspects of both aforementioned theories to create a theoretical framework that allows for embodiment as a methodological field, and that pushes the boundaries of dualistic thinking towards an understanding of women's bodies and identities as being *in* relationship within time and space.

CHAPTER 4 – A Qualitative Approach to Research: Interpretive Interactionism

I used qualitative research methods to inform my study because I found myself naturally drawn to them and believe that qualitative methods would allow me to collect in-depth, personal narratives suitable for an analysis using an embodied feminist poststructuralist framework. The specific qualitative research tool I chose to guide me was Interpretive Interactionism (Denzin, 2001) because it allows for the fusion of “traditional symbolic interactionism with critical forms of interpretive inquiry” (p. xi). This method fits well with my theoretical framework as it uses feminist critiques of positivism as its foundation and pays attention to “the social construction of gender, power, knowledge, history, and emotion” (p. 39). Interpretive Interactionism can use many different types of research methods. The ones used in this study were reflexive participant observation (including my notes on the participants as data and being reflexive about how and why I did this), feminist poststructuralist theory (as discussed in the previous chapter), creative and active interviewing (in this study that meant encouraging the participants to contribute to the direction of the interview and not following a strict set of questions), deconstruction/troubling as an analysis tool, including researcher and participant reflexivity as part of the methodological field explored, and embodiment (incorporating lived body experiences into the process of data collection and analysis). I hope that in using Interpretive Interactionism as a guide I can

make the meanings that circulate in the world of lived experience accessible to the reader. [Interpretive Interactionism] endeavors to capture and represent the voices, emotions, and actions of those studied. The focus of interpretive research

is on those life experiences that radically alter and shape the meanings persons give to themselves and their experiences. (Denzin, 2001, p. 1)

Denzin (2001) affirms that the “self is a narrative production” and “there is no separation between self and society” (p. 58) and Pillay (2005) states “that narrative style cannot be separated from the self and the inscriptions of the text” (p. 539). The simple act of narration affects the narrator’s life, and therefore the self, because “people change their lives through telling them in narratives” (Frank, 1993, p. 42). In this view, discourses, context, and narratives all contribute to the formation of the self in its multiple manifestations (Denzin, 2001). Denzin (2001) states that this is the reason why narrative is privileged today in the social sciences as a research method that increases knowledge about society. Many authors agree with Denzin and attest to the rise of narrative as a research method (Chase, 2005; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Frank, 1993, Pillay, 2005). Denzin (2001) suggests that if we want to understand human experience, then we must study its representations in the stories and narratives we are told. He distinguishes between story and narrative by stating that stories have sequence and basic structural features such as plot and characters, while narratives are the telling, the event or process of telling the story (Denzin, 2001).

It is important to remember that narratives of the self are created in space and time; they are situated, like the self, on shifting points or locations, within local institutional cultures and their practices (Pitts, 2003). These practices help construct how the self is storied. In keeping with feminist poststructuralist’s analysis of power and resistance, it is critical to remember that the persons telling stories have agency and are self-aware beings, thus they are just as much shaping the stories they choose to tell as

they are 'storied' by their locations in time and space. Another way of understanding power and resistance is that "powerlessness is painful and people defend against it by behaviour that brings them a sense of power" (Pinderhughes, 1989, p. 110).

I have chosen to collect narratives for this study because narratives serve as a reflection of the world as it is at the time of the telling (Denzin, 2001), thus making narrative analysis an important tool because of my focus on exploring the meanings of tattoo practices among sexually abused women in view of the tattoo renaissance. Denzin (2001) also suggests that stories serve as definition and connection points between lives in communities as well as across time and space. He advises the researcher to bring in context, history and the relationship of the participant with his or hers environment into the analysis and writing. This process, in turn, gives value to the descriptions and interpretations offered by the participants as captured in data collection by recording them in the text. Denzin (2001) claims that this process allows us to "unravel and record these multiple meaning structures that flow from interactional experience" (p. 117). This analytical stance is highly compatible with an embodied feminist poststructuralist framework as it allows the researcher to uncover and record the multiplicity of meanings and the complexity in the participants' experiences. As well, it can be very meaningful for a study's participants as it attempts to truly reflect their experiences and this is compatible with feminist theory's aim of research that is meaningful for the persons studied (Burns & Walker, 2005).

Denzin (2001) states that 'doing' Interpretive Interactionism involves six steps. I outline them below and show how they have guided the methodology of this study:

1. Framing the research question.

Denzin (2001) lists a few steps that a researcher should take in order to frame the research question. First, he encourages the researcher to pay attention to her or his personal history and to find within it the “problematic biographical experience to be studied” (p. 71). The second step is to uncover how this private problem is manifested in the public sphere, how it affects others’ lives and community institutions. The third step is to find the institutions or places where people with these problems gather. The fourth step is to “ask not why but how” (p. 71) these problematic experiences happen. The last step is to synthesize the research questions at this point into one statement. In this study this process is made explicit throughout the text. The resulting research question is my statement of intention to explore how heavily tattooed women with a history of childhood sexual abuse attribute meaning to their tattooing practices in view of the tattoo renaissance.

2. Critically deconstructing and analyzing prior conceptions of the phenomenon.

This step involves doing “a deconstructive reading” (Denzin, 2001, p. 72) of the existing literature and research on my topic. According to Denzin (2001), a deconstructive reading and the ensuing analysis entails showing the previous definitions, conceptions, and prejudices in previous studies. This step shows the reader the way that previous definitions and conceptions of a topic are or have been researched, analyzed and constructed. This step entails being critical of the relevance of this foundational literature in today’s context, and analysing the influence that the ‘truths’ implied in the literature have on the problem being studied. This step is evident in the literature review, and in the section on constructs, within the theory chapter.

3. Capturing the phenomenon.

Capturing the phenomenon is essentially data collection located in the context of the lives of the participants (Denzin, 2001). This step required participant recruitment, followed by “locating the crises and epiphanies of the lives of the persons being studied” (p. 74), and collecting rich narratives about the topic from the participants. To locate the problem and epiphanies in the lives of the participants I utilized my familiarity with Victoria’s tattoo community to access as much of the context of their lives within this community as possible. To collect the rich narratives and background information needed I conducted in-depth interviews with the participants, had informal conversations with tattoo artists, ‘hung out’ at a tattoo studio, got tattooed, joined internet networking sites for tattoo enthusiasts, and critically reflected on my own role as a researcher and insider. In doing this I attempted to be present with the women I interviewed, as a researcher, as a fellow tattoo enthusiast, as a survivor of sexual abuse, as a woman, and as a critical observer.

During most of the data collection and analysis of this study I was an intern student at an agency that provides counselling for children who have suffered sexual abuse and their families. While I did not anticipate that there would be any similarities between the children I treated and the women who participated in my study—above and beyond the sexual abuse—I was surprised to find myself ‘connecting the dots’ in regards to the role of art in discharging the trauma of sexual abuse. These incidents added another layer of insight into the phenomenon being studied in spite of the fact that the internship at this agency was not used as a site for data collection for this study.

One of the layers of insight included in the data gathering, and later, the analysis, is my own experiences as a researcher who is a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. I

hesitated considerably before including this layer as, honestly, I feared for my academic credibility in the future. Carol Rambo Ronai (1995) faced a similar challenge; she was actively discouraged from using her own experiences as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse as a research topic. She was advised to hide her story in the data or to avoid it altogether. She asks: “Does this imply that there is something inherently wrong with me because of this experience? Should I hide it” (p. 402)? I do not believe that her advisors thought of her as defective or less capable, and I believe that these warnings were signs of genuine concern based on the reality of academic life; however, I do think that this worry is reflective of the prevalent societal fear of talking about childhood sexual abuse on a personal and intimate level. As a novice academic, I find these warnings to be reminiscent of the uncomfortable looks on people’s faces when they hear me say I was sexually abused. It seems it is only permissible to get personal about childhood sexual abuse within the four walls of a counsellor’s office. Thus, as a feminist, I am taking a stand by being open with my personal involvement in this topic. The personal *is* political. Not only so we can create the spaces needed to engage in conversations about childhood sexual abuse, but perhaps more importantly, to dispel the myth of the sexual abuse survivor as broken, deficient, and forever burdened by childhood trauma.

My experience as an insider also gives me the body knowledge with which to understand my participants’ interviews. My body remembers well the emotions and sensations of childhood sexual abuse and of tattooing. I have a “sense of place” (Somerville, 2004, p. 59) that comes from my bodily presence in the events that they described. This sense of place, along with the time spent with other tattoo enthusiasts and artists in the field, helped me “enter the emotional experiences of the persons being

studied” (Denzin, 2001, p. 140), and to hopefully, create a document that “makes the invisible more visible to others” (p. 155) and that “represent[s], and perform[s] the many different ways in which humans make and inscribe history, but not under circumstances of their choosing” (p. 155).

4. Bracketing the phenomenon.

Bracketing is accomplished by uncovering and deconstructing the phenomenon, but not according to the existing literature. The researcher attempts to isolate the preconceptions and biases identified in the deconstruction step (the literature review) and “confronts the subject matter, as much as possible, on its own terms” (Denzin, 2001, p. 76). This means the researcher does not attempt to interpret the problem according to the mainstream ‘readings’ identified in the literature review, but rather, attempts to see the problem on its own, allowing for different possibilities of interpretation to emerge. This attempt to see the problem on its own, apart from previous definitions, entails a high level of researcher self-awareness and reflexivity; it is a process that involves trying to keep values, understandings, and assumptions from shaping data collection and analysis while concurrently embracing subjective awareness as a useful tool in qualitative research. “Paradoxically, preconceptions actually enable identification of issues and situations because they enable researchers to be alert to themes in common with the broader human experience” (Ahern, 1999, p. 408). Reflexivity means realizing and accepting the fact that researchers are part of the world they study whilst observing the ways in which they shape and are shaped by their research. To facilitate my reflexivity I used “systematic sociological introspection” and “emotional recall” (Ellis, 2003, p. xvii). Systematic sociological introspection demanded that I, as a researcher, start with personal

introspection and “pay attention to my physical feelings, thoughts, and emotions” (Ellis, 2003, p. xvii). This introspection allowed me to reflexively analyse the ways in which my personal experiences affected and were affected by the research. In particular, I paid special attention to my embodied experiences, reflecting upon them in an attempt to understand the connection between my lived body and the theories on the body I was reading. I used Ellis’ (2004) tool of emotional recall several times during journal writing, note taking and the writing of the analysis chapter. Emotional recall is a writing aid that involves imagining being back in the situation and trying to ‘feel’ the emotions and physical sensations of that event. This experience often led to remembering other details and to added insight into the instance being recalled. Ellis (2004) recommends revisiting the event emotionally immediately after the event and after you have gained some distance from it as both of these processes, what she calls “moving in and moving out” (p. 118), are needed to produce a good autobiographical narrative and a truly reflexive account of the researcher’s experience. These tools were invaluable in helping me gain some perspective on the experiences I had during the research.

Gaining perspective was an important self-care strategy because of my insider status in this study. Since I have an explicit relationship to the narratives and experiences I explored, the study affected me intensely, intellectually, emotionally, and physically, often blurring the lines I thought existed between my participants’ experiences and my own. During this study, my body communicated with me in dreams, stomach aches, anxiety, restlessness, and at times, uncontrollable rushes of somatic knowledge²²—a

²² Siegesmund (2004) defines somatic knowledge as “a felt reaction of rightness within an experience. Qualitative reasoning is the ordering of relationships of qualities. Qualitative reasoning produces somatic knowledge” (p. 81).

dizzying, giddy, surreal and physical feeling of ‘rightness’ and identification. At first I tried to dismiss these somatic knowledges but as I read about embodiment as a methodological field I began to pay attention to them and incorporated them into my process of reflexivity and deconstruction. This step is demonstrated in the analysis chapter of this text where I offer parts of the participants’ narratives and my observations in relation to the study’s objectives.

5. Constructing the phenomenon.

While bracketing disassembles a phenomenon, construction reassembles it into a holistic view that presents the interconnections of the parts (Denzin, 2001). This is demonstrated within the analysis and summary chapters as the aspects of each woman’s experiences come together to demonstrate the common elements of “conduct, experience, and meaning in all of them” (p. 79).

6. Contextualizing the phenomenon.

Contextualization takes the themes discovered in the bracketing and deconstruction steps, and gives them meaning by locating them back in the context of the participants’ lives. I do this by presenting the phenomenon in the participants’ words, showing the conflicts and contrasts within the stories to “illuminate variations on the stages and forms of the process” (Denzin, 2001, p. 79), offering interpretations of how the participants’ lived experiences influence the process, and by bringing together the main themes of their stories so that the whole picture, with its conflicts and points of tension, presents a “reformulated” (p. 79) account of the process. The goal of this step is to “show how lived experience alters and shapes the phenomenon. The structures of any experience are altered and shaped as they are given meaning by interacting individuals.

Contextualization documents how this occurs” (p. 80). In order to make this process accessible to the reader and bring her/him into an emotional understanding of the phenomenon I used autoethnographic methods, layered accounts, and poetic ethnography to “write under erasure.” Lather (1991) describes writing under erasure as “to write postmodern is to write ‘paradoxically’ aware of one’s own complicity in that which one critiques. Such a movement of reflexivity and historicity at once inscribes and subverts” (p. 10).

Using the methodologies discussed above has produced a document that is not linear or unified in its interpretations of the resulting data. It was not my intention to present a ‘tidy’ thesis that conforms to traditional methods of reporting ‘findings’ in research. Markham (2005) describes the need for fragmented narratives well when she says

the mind does not always come to understand a concept or a culture in a straightforward fashion. We comprehend the world in moments, fragments, glimpses. I might see something one way one day and completely revise my understanding of it another day based on any number of things that happen

We know, in this postmodern and media-saturated era, that thoughts do not come prepackaged and linear, yet there is much persistence in presenting social research to the contrary. I am not the first to notice this, by far. I just want to add another example of the messiness of actuality in the process of interpreting. (p. 829)

This resulting fragmented narrative is not only a method of reporting; it became a necessity as writing about the embodied processes of transformation of my participants (and my own) was not a task I approached without self-doubt. Somerville (2004) asked

how one bridges the semiotic world of images and world of verbal symbols “to give the images words” (p. 53)? I do not have the answer to that question, but I believe it is in the struggle to answer it that we, postmodern writers, might produce unsettled works that more closely resemble the lived realities of our subjects of study.

Finding the Participants

A Human Ethics Review was approved by the University of Victoria. Due to the sensitive nature of childhood sexual abuse, recruitment took place in as tactful and cautious a manner as possible in order to allow participants to contact me at their own discretion. I sent out letters of information about the study through several of the university’s departmental listservs and put posters in two tattoo enthusiasts’ internet sites, and two tattoo shops in Victoria. Two acquaintances in the tattoo community passed on my contact information to women they thought were suitable for the study. As a result, I received several inquiries. After answering questions and screening for suitability, I chose three participants: Mary, Rebecca and Michelle.²³ They chose the location of the interviews, either in their own homes or at mine.

As the tattoo community in Victoria is small there was a strong chance I would know some or all of the participants. Two of the participants, Rebecca and Michelle, were women I had known informally for many years and who knew each other but were not close friends. I did not know Mary, nor did she know the other participants. The participants were fully informed of everything that was required of them, were given time to review the consent form, and to ask any questions prior to the start of their interviews. The interviews ranged from 2.5 to 4 hours each and were audio recorded. All additional

²³ Not their real names.

contact with them, such as phone calls and informal coffee shop meetings, was written up as field notes.

The Interviews

Even though Rebecca and Michelle were casual acquaintances of mine, not close friends, I still found this affected how I approached their interviews. I was much more at ease with them than I was with Mary at first. I was very nervous before the first interview with Mary; however, spending the first hour of the interview chatting over coffee, snacks and artwork, and her friendliness and willingness to engage in discussion helped us gain the rapport needed for the interview. With Rebecca and Michelle the process was faster as we already knew each other enough to have the initial rapport taken for granted.

I started Mary and Michelle's first interviews with an art exercise. The drawings could be realistic, abstract or whatever came to mind when they thought about their tattoos (Rebecca and I decided not to do this exercise as she felt comfortable starting right away). I anticipated that doing this exercise would be useful as an icebreaker and relationship builder considering we are women who chose tattoos as a mode of expression. I did not anticipate, however, that it would increase feelings of safety during the interview because it allowed us to talk about our tattoos without disrobing, without showing skin. As a survivor of sexual abuse I am in constant negotiation with how much of my skin I show and to whom. Being heavily tattooed adds another layer to that negotiation as often people treat my skin as if it were public property.²⁴ Thus, using art

²⁴ I have had people come up to me on the street and pull at my clothes to see my tattoos. Most of them seemed genuinely surprised that I objected to a stranger's touch.

helped us ease into the interview by providing a comfortable focus for our eyes, an activity for our hands and allowed us to feel safe in each other's presence.²⁵

All interviews were conducted according to reflexive dyadic (Ellis, 2003) and interactive interviewing principles (Ellis, Kiesinger & Tillman-Healy, 1997) to elicit rich, in-depth, and intimate narratives surrounding the participants' experiences with tattooing. Reflexive dyadic interviewing closely resembles a conversation because the interviewer pays attention to the meanings and emotions emerging throughout the course of the interview. The participants' narrative is the focus of the interview, but the interviewer's participation, emotions, and responses, are also taken into consideration. The interview might include information about the interviewer and how he or she came to be in that position. This knowledge of the self of the interviewer is an added perspective in the interview and adds understanding, context and complexity to the narrative (Ellis, 2004). Interactive interviewing allows space for the participant to be active in the interview as more than a subject of questioning; rather, the setting is informal, and the researcher and participant "engage in a joint sense-making endeavour" (Ellis et. al, 1997, p. 121). In many aspects, this style of interviewing resembles a dialogical conversation as the focus is on the sharing of stories and in exploring issues as they arise in the interview (Ellis, 2003). In this style of interviewing the researcher's disclosures are not meant as a strategy to make the participant more at ease; instead, they are part of the process of sharing and are just as important to the "interactive encounter" (Ellis et. al, 1997, p. 121) as the participants' responses. I used open-ended questions to elicit rich descriptive narratives from the participants (Denzin, 2001). Occasionally I used probes such as "How

²⁵ A grateful thanks-you to John Hart for the suggestion of using art therapy exercises in my interviews.

did that feel?” or “Do you see any links between those two issues you just told me about?” to deepen their responses or to clarify an answer.

The interviews changed as we interacted, developed relationships, and learned from each other. The first interviews were intellectual, lively, and punctuated by laughter or pensive moments. Rebecca decided not to do a second interview. Mary and Michelle’s second interviews were emotionally charged, intense and cathartic. Mary experienced some relief from an emotional crisis as a result of our interaction that day, while Michelle experienced an epiphany that resulted in better self-understanding. Both instances are explored in more detail in chapter 5. I had expected that the interviews might cause emotional distress for a participant. To ensure that my participants were supported during and after the interviews I made arrangements with the Victoria Women’s Sexual Assault Centre (VWSAC) to refer a participant for crisis counselling if necessary. As it turned out, two of my participants were in regular counselling, and another was comfortable accessing VWSAC’s services on her own as she had used them before. During and after the interviews I checked in several times with the participants to see if they wanted to stop the interview, needed support, or wanted to seek counselling. Even though the second interviews were emotionally charged I believe both the participants and I were able to stay present with the emotions that surfaced—tears, laughter, anger—and were able to experience some degree of resolution and to share personal understandings as they arose in the moment.

The Interview: A Therapeutic Space

One way of understanding what happened in these second interviews is that the nature of narrative style interviews allows for safe spaces where the interviewee can deal

with painful issues and experience some measure of healing. This notion of the interview as a therapeutic space runs counter to the common thought among social researchers that the qualitative or open ended research interview cannot—and dare not—cross-over into the sphere of therapy, and thus, encourage processes of change in participants of research projects (Rosenthal, 2003). This notion of the interview as a place where ‘too much’ emotion is dangerous is echoed in Kvale’s (1996) foundational text on qualitative interviews, *InterViews*:

In a research setting it is up to the interviewer to create in a short time a contact that allows the interaction to get beyond merely a polite conversation or exchange of ideas. (...) Thus, at the same time that personal expressions and emotions are encouraged, the interviewer must avoid allowing the interview to turn into a therapeutic situation, which he or she may not be able to handle. (p. 125)

Rosenthal (2003) however states that this notion of research and therapy as mutually exclusive realms hides the nuances existing in relationships between researcher and participant, blinds researchers from seeing the interview as a relationship-building process wherein safe spaces for reflection and change for both interviewer and participant can happen, and exempts the researcher from their responsibility towards the participant. She describes this attitude as

not only thoroughly naïve, but it also shows a really comfortable position and a lack of sensitivity for the processes in an interview with an open method for guiding a conversation. With this position, the social researcher is not called to reflect on what his or her conversations can bring about and to thereby also see to

it that the conversations he or she is guiding are supportive rather than burdensome for the interviewees. (p. 915)

Rosenthal warns that as a researcher it is difficult to support participants' narratives about traumatizing events and at the same time maintain some distance from the suffering in the narrative so that the participant does not become overwhelmed by the memories. In her research using biographical narratives she has found that there are curative effects that start in the interview process and that extend into the participants' lives outside the research project. These curative effects start when participants are asked to narrate a traumatic experience and/or life phase (Rosenthal, 2003). She describes the resulting benefits to the participant:

Being asked to narrate particular difficult or even traumatic experiences and life phases gives the [participants] the feeling that we listeners recognize them in their suffering. ... How contrary to their fears, what cannot be openly talked about can be put into language and thereby becomes communicable and above all, at the same time, real. ... The narration [is] a way to transform the foreign into the familiar, where through the act of narrating, the unknown is made known and understandable to both the narrator himself or herself and the listener. If people cannot tell their traumatic experiences, then they cannot share what they have experienced with others, and they experience themselves at a distance as well as a relationship of being excluded in relation to those who themselves did not experience something similar. (p. 924)

Keeping Rosenthal's findings in mind, I handled the interviews as therapeutic spaces by using my counselling skills to listen to their narratives with empathy and

unconditional regard, and to be aware of when the narratives became too stressful for them. I was prepared to do counselling work, as in helping them regulate emotions and reduce anxiety, if the need arose. Because these interview processes cannot take the place of long-term therapy (Rosenthal, 2003), after the interviews I contacted the participants a few times to ensure that they were doing well and that they had access to counselling services if needed.

Participant Involvement in Analysis

After the first interviews, I hired a person to transcribe the recordings and gave the resulting transcripts back to the participants. I asked them to reflect on the interview, read their transcript, make any corrections or changes to it, and see if any themes, points of interest or tension arose. Mary and Michelle brought their observations to their second interviews. Rebecca was happy with the transcript of her interview and did not want to change anything. I listened to the second interviews several times and transcribed the parts that stood out as important. Shortly after conducting the second interview with Mary, I presented my first impressions of the study at a conference. Mary was in the audience. I was concerned about her reaction to the presentation for two reasons: first, I know it can be jarring to see your words as part of a presentation in the public sphere, and second, because at that point I had only had the opportunity to share the preliminary analysis with Michelle. I felt the weight of the responsibility to portray their voices in a truthful and respectful manner while still being critical. At the end of the presentation Mary approached me. When I asked how it was for her to be there she said she felt strange at first but that as the presentation went on she felt heard. She hugged me and said she liked it. She said she would attend my oral defense and that she would like to read the

thesis. I sent the first draft of the thesis to Mary and Rebecca by e-mail. Neither one of them responded to it.²⁶ Some months later I ran into Rebecca on the street and she said she had not received that e-mail but that she did not wish to alter anything in my thesis. She said she was thinking of attending my oral defense and that would be enough for her. After Michelle's second interview, we talked on the phone many times. Michelle shared her insights on her deepening self-understanding as a result of participating in the study. We met for coffee and I showed her the preliminary analysis. She took notes and called me a few days later to offer her thoughts. She chose not to read the thesis drafts nor to attend my oral defense as she felt she had gotten what she wanted out of this process.

Locating Myself in the Research: Where do I Fit?

The Beginning

The first steps towards this study came out of a paper I wrote on girls and women's gender identity development. It was a difficult paper to write as it was the first time I challenged myself to write using my own life as a source for critical analysis of theories of gender identity development. A colleague read that paper and said "The tattoo part was fascinating! You should write more about that!" The thought of exploring something so personal both excited and terrified me. I began to write about my experiences and reflect upon them.

Part of this reflection involved re-reading my writing about tattooing many times. I looked for the ways in which I had opened myself to the reader, the ways in which I had

²⁶ After the recruitment and data collection phase of the study I was extremely cautious not to contact my participants more than absolutely necessary and/or only when they had initiated contact with me. I did this for two reasons: first, I did not want them to feel pressured in any way to participate more than they were comfortable, and second, I was very aware of the unethical aspects of crossing over from our researcher/participant relationship into a friendly and/or social-type relationship while I was working on the study.

allowed the reader to view aspects of my identity development as a tattooed woman and as a survivor of sexual abuse. I began to wonder if other women in similar contexts had the same experiences as mine. Had they found healing from emotional trauma in tattooing? Had it been the beginning of a healing journey, or the end? Had they ‘figured it out’ through tattooing? *Was I still trying to?* If I dared ask these questions, was I open to their answers? I was not so much worried about whether or not I fit in within a particular phenomenon, whether or not my experiences of healing through tattooing were common or not. In hindsight, I think I hesitated because I wondered if I dared to question the story I had written of myself, if I dared to look beyond the stories I had on my skin. I had no idea what the results of this study would be and that scared me because I sensed that this study might set in motion a change in my own carefully constructed story of self and healing. Eventually curiosity outweighed fear and I decided to do this study.

Interpretive Interactionism and the Researcher

Interpretive Interactionism asks me, the researcher, to locate the research question within my own personal history (Denzin, 2001), but the reality of engaging in research born out of my personal history was more difficult than I expected. I knew that the participants’ stories would trigger painful memories for me and I prepared for this by meditating, reaching out for support from trusted friends and family, attending counselling regularly, and taking care of my body by exercising, eating well, and getting lots of sleep. But in spite of my preparations, I was still surprised by the way this study and my interactions with the participants affected me. I was not prepared for the dreams, nightmares, anxiety attacks, depression and, at times, overwhelming pain and rage that came as I confronted my own ‘demons.’ I had thought of myself as being ‘healed,’ ready

and willing to engage in this study from the safety of my position as a researcher. Instead, I found that in every interaction with a participant, be it in person or by listening to their interviews, small aspects of my self-understanding shifted and/or became clearer. I have known for a long time that 'healing' from childhood sexual abuse is never completely done. The past cannot be changed. My healing journey cycles, over and over, and each time I gain a little more understanding and strength. These cycles get a little easier to recognize and faster to engage with. They have become familiar, habitual... but no less painful.

Blurring the lines: Where do I begin, Where do I stop?

Being an insider.

In addition to being a heavily tattooed woman and a survivor of incest, I have friends and acquaintances that are tattoo artists and/or heavily tattooed. In my years 'hanging out' at friends' tattoo shops, observing and getting tattooed, and attending social events, have provided me with informal links into the tattoo community that allowed me to enter the field as an insider. This insider status has offered me access to the field in ways that a non-tattooed researcher might have not been able to. I believe this is because of the innate suspicion heavily tattooed people have of non-tattooed people's curiosity (Sanders, 1994). Having been gawked at, touched by strangers, called names, and endured other such undesirable behaviours I understand why some heavily tattooed people can act dismissively towards persons asking questions about their tattoos. There is a comradeship among tattoo enthusiasts that cannot be infiltrated by a non-tattooed researcher, at least not quickly, and maybe never completely. Many tattooed authors have

commented on how as their own body art progressed they found increased acceptance and willingness to share among tattoo enthusiasts (Sanders, 1994).

Being an outsider.

No matter how much I may feel like an insider, the end result of this study benefits me first and foremost. I can only hope that I have been responsible and caring enough to repay my participants' trust in me. I truly hope that this thesis benefits the participants and the field of CYC, and other helping professions, and indeed, I have written this text with that intention. But I am aware that whether or not someone reads this text after my oral defense, and what they 'read' into it is beyond my control. This awareness weighed heavily on me during the data collection phase. No matter how much I reminded myself that I know what it is like to be a heavily tattooed woman and to survive childhood sexual abuse, my first role was always of the researcher—the outsider. I tried to counteract this inherent power imbalance by informing the participants of everything that was required of them prior to the start of the interviews, as well as, by conducting this study in a transparent manner. I told the participants they were welcome to see my notes and offered them final say on all transcriptions and on written materials that represented their voices in the thesis. As well, I invited them to all presentations on the results of the study.

An important note to be made regarding the safety of the participants is that there was no conflict of interest or power-over between myself and the participants other than the power imbalance discussed above. I do not maintain formal ties with any of the tattoo studios or community services that are used (or may be used) by these participants;

therefore there was no possibility of their involvement²⁷ in the study resulting in loss or change of services offered to them in the community.

Negotiating greyness.

Luce Irigaray (as cited in Lather, 1991, p. 9) questions “how to master those devilries, those moving phantoms of the unconscious, when a long history has taught you to seek out and desire only clarity, the clear perception of (fixed) ideas?” In other words, she helps us to recognize what my research participants and I termed ‘greyness,’ that is, the blurred lines in our lives, in our identities, and how society in general seems very uncomfortable with the undefined spaces we sometime occupy, hence the tendency to stereotype us as tattooed women and as incest survivors. One of the ways I am attempting to portraying greyness in this text is by “incorporat[ing] various realities into my own sense of self” (Wesely, 2006, p. 161) and by attempting to convey that to the reader.

I integrated various realities into my own sense of self during the counselling internship I did while conducting this study. Although I expected there to be many instances of transference and counter-transference during my work with the children and youth, I did not expect that the shift in my professional self-image from student to novice counsellor would prompt much self-reflection on how I saw my research, and most importantly, how I saw what the resulting thesis would mean to me. This reflection resulted in spending much of my time in an uncomfortable space, in a struggle to find that place where learner, researcher, incest survivor and emerging professional could co-exist without giving supremacy of one over another. Thus I ended up wrestling with an ‘I’ that was much more intense and dissonant than before the study.

²⁷ They were also free to quit the study anytime as in Rebecca’s case when she declined to do a second interview.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics of Interpretive Interactionism

In addition to the human ethics review undertaken by the university, I found it important to think about my own ethical stance as I engaged with this study and the participants. Denzin (2001) states “criteria for evaluating critical qualitative work are moral and political” (p. 4). One of the reasons I chose Interpretive Interactionism as my guide for this process is that the ethical position he outlines in his work aligns with my own. The following ‘understandings’ from Interpretive Interactionism were intrinsically relevant in this study:

- Aesthetics, ethics, and epistemologies are merged into a position from which I hold and seek knowledge. This is a position of power because I decide what will be shown and in what light.
- “All aesthetics and standards of judgement are based on particular moral standpoints. There is no objective, morally neutral standpoint” (p. 4).
- This research is grounded in a “dialogical epistemology and aesthetic. It involves a give-and-take and ongoing moral dialogue among persons” (p. 4).
- I abide by the presumed moral community value that “all persons deserve dignity and a sacred status in the world. It stresses the value of human life, truth telling, and non-violence” (p. 5).
- The research was grounded in ethics of care and shared governance, and remained open to the various ways in which this could have unfolded.

- My role as a moral ethnographer is to “take on the identities of advocate and cultural critic” (p. 5). I do this by offering this text to the reader with the aim of presenting “the foundations for social criticism and action” (p. 5).

The Participants

Voyeurism: Presenting the Tattooed Body to the Reader

Voyeurism: voyeur – voy-eur [voy yúr, vwaàyúr] (plural voy-eurs)

Noun – Definition: Persistent observer of misery or scandal: a fascinated observer of distressing, sordid, or scandalous events. (Encarta Dictionary, 2008)

When I first started talking about this study with friends and colleagues inevitably I would be asked if I was going to include photographs of the tattoos in the resulting thesis and presentations. My answer was that tattoos are usually very unique, making it possible to identify the subject, thus I would not include photos. Nevertheless, a point of tension arose in me every time I heard that question. While the askers were only interested in my study, and often admitted to being fascinated by tattoos, there was something in that question that made me uncomfortable. It brought up similar feelings as in times when strangers treated me like a tattooed object; perhaps I am overly sensitive to the appraising gaze. When I discussed this with a mentor he immediately named the reason for my discomfort: Voyeurism. I felt uncomfortable with the idea of exposing my participants to being the objects of voyeurism within my thesis, regardless of how innocent or well-meaning the voyeurs might be.

The irony is that tattoos tell a story. To not include the images of them in this thesis is presenting only one side of the story—and my own interpretation at that. But as with any form of art, the viewer ‘reads’ the image with their own lens and takes away

from that reading something unique to that person, regardless of how the image is presented. After discussing this with the participants and getting their permission, I opted to present interview material without any descriptions that might “exploit the ‘differences’ of their marked bodies” (Pitts, 2003, p. 201). I will tell the reader nothing more about Mary, Rebecca and Michelle than already has been revealed. They share many things in common but the ones that are relevant to this study are: they are women, they are heavily tattooed, and they were sexually abused as children. This thesis explores a small angle of the prisms that are their lives. There are a myriad of perspectives from which one could view them. This is but one.

CHAPTER 5 – A Layered Account – Findings, Analysis, and Alternate Readings: The Transformation from ‘Damaged Goods’ to ‘Monster Beauty’

“Ultimately, lived experience, identity, and writing can be seen as simultaneous processes of destruction and creation” (Rambo Ronai, 1999, p. 114).

At first, three themes emerged from the participants’ narratives. I understood the first two themes as processes of transformation. The first one was a symbolic re-scripting of the participants’ identities from ‘damaged goods’ to ‘strong and in control’ and then to ‘monster beauty.’ The second one was an embodied healing ritual in which the participants spoke about submitting to the pain of tattooing as a way to release emotional pain and to learn how to be present in their bodies. I categorized the third theme as a discourse of resistance that shaped the way in which they negotiated their subjectivity in the varying socio-political contexts of their lives. But there was something missing that I could not put into words.

One night I dreamt about the analysis and saw my mistake. In separating the themes into categories for analysis I was re-creating the mind/body dualism. I was simplifying the data instead of showing its complexity. This insight woke me up and I scribbled some notes on a notepad beside my bed. In the morning I reread the notes and thought about how powerful habits and training are. I realised that as I immersed myself in the data analysis and the conceptualization of this thesis I forgot that “understanding is more than visual knowledge. Understanding is visceral” (Denzin, 1997, p. 46). I had not listened to my body’s knowledge, to that unsettled feeling that kept me spinning my wheels in reams of written ramblings, and late night reading, trying to ‘know’ enough about theory to dispel the restlessness I felt. Once I began to listen to my body the anxiety

subsided. I began to see the individual parts coming back together into a textual mosaic of knowledges, narratives, discourses, and analysis, combining to form a larger image.

Yet, I still had a problem. Using Davies' (2000b) theory of body/landscape relations was helpful but how could I put into words the contradictory and complex relationships between gender, childhood sexual abuse, women's bodies, tattooing, and the contexts in which they experienced their bodies/subjectivities when this process exceeds written representation? The only answer that came to mind was that fragmented narratives are illustrative of the thinking processes we engage in (Markham, 2005). Therefore, a fragmented narrative offers the closest written representation of the processes the participants engaged in as they made sense of their lives and experiences, and of the processes I engaged in as a researcher during the analysis of the findings. I argue that it is valid to write about the findings and analysis together within a fragmented narrative that attempts to mirror my thinking processes as reading and writing are frequently conceptualized as thinking processes.²⁸ I do this by presenting the findings, by interpreting them according to embodied feminist poststructuralist theory, and by re-analyzing them according to other theoretical frameworks and/or other lenses that filtered in and out of my mind, with results that sometimes conflicted with my first analysis, and sometimes supported it. In using this method of presenting the findings and analysis I also hope to encourage the reader to engage in his or her own analysis of the findings. This written fragmented narrative has been constructed within a layered account.²⁹

²⁸ I would like to challenge those assumptions but such a challenge falls outside the scope of this thesis. For the time being, I ask the reader to consider 'listening' to your bodily reactions while reading this text and reflect on this question: Does your body's message change your 'reading' of this text?

²⁹ I am aware of the irony in presenting a written analysis for an embodied process. I suggest that the addition of a sensory, material and active component to this chapter would better approximate the delivery of an

The Layered Account Format

The layered account is one of many postmodern ethnographic reporting techniques that use a theory of consciousness and traditional methods of reporting, challenging and de-centering the authority of science, technology and tradition (Rambo Ronai, 1995). In using this writing format I access “many points of view and present them to the reader as representations of lived experience” (p. 396). In this text, the participants’ narratives are interspersed with analysis in layers, separated by asterisks, that are offered as possible readings, often contradictory of each other, and are meant to be worthy of equal consideration, as “all accounts are simultaneously lived experiences at the time of their production and ungraspable moments of reflection that escape before they are written” (Rambo Ronai, 1995, p. 398). Offering layers of findings and analysis blended with alternate readings allows the reader to interpret and reconstruct the subject according to his or her own perspective, incorporating their own personal experience in the reading and making it a more valuable experience. In this format my experiences as a researcher and as an insider are included as a valid source of knowledge (Davies, 2003; Denzin, 2001; Rambo Ronai, 1995). Other knowledges included and validated through this layered account were emotions, poems, thoughts, and bodily experiences, all aspects of a subject which a traditional academic format would usually exclude (Ellis, 2003; Rambo Ronai, 1995). This writing technique attempts to represent and produce for the reader “a continuous dialectic of experience, emerging from the multitude of reflexive voices that simultaneously produce and interpret a text” (Rambo Ronai, 1995, p. 396). This format suited the participants’ stories better too, as they often referred to their

analysis of an embodied process; however, again, that falls outside the scope of this thesis so I beg pardon of the reader for leaving you stuck with my words.

conscious and continual effort to blur categories and boundaries and to stay in the uncomfortable 'greyness' of multiplicity. Mary expressed,

I'm always trying to point out... between the lines, the grey... what I'm realizing is most people don't want to have to think about anything that takes a little bit effort to understand, something that doesn't fit into one of their schemas.

This format is compatible with an embodied feminist poststructuralist framework as it encourages me, the researcher, to acknowledge the influence of my experience on the study. This act influences and enriches the narrative by offering the researcher's own story, told and re-told as a result of the study (Davies, 2000b; Grosz, 1994; Wesely, 2006). Hence, I am attempting to lay bare my naïveté and assumptions, and the resulting thoughts, reactions, insights to my participants' stories as I offer them up to the reader. As a researcher and writer, I am also aware of the fallibility of language to convey the whole meaning of an event (Lather, 1991). Also, what I expose and what I leave unsaid in my writing is the result of my biases and self-awareness.

A layered account does not have to follow any particular format, although a reading of layered accounts written by Carol Rambo (Rambo Ronai, 1995, 1992; Rambo, 2005) and other similar fragmented narratives (Berikoff, 2006; Markham, 2005; Szabo, 2005; Wesely, 2006,) shows that often an author chooses to present findings (or autobiographical sources of knowledge such as autoethnography), followed by analysis according to a chosen theoretical framework, and sometimes another analysis according to a different theoretical lens, be it an opposing theoretical framework or an unconventional source of knowledge such as poetry, music, autobiographical accounts and analysis by other authors, or accounts of the said phenomena in alternative literature,

such as fiction. In many ways, a layered account most closely resembles a rhizomatic analysis of a theme, invoking a non-linear examination for the writer and the reader. This format is also particularly suited to this study as the use of a layered account allows me to show “identity as an emergent process, rather than focusing on a singular dimension or aspect of identity” (Rambo, 2005, p. 583).

Findings, Analysis and Alternative Readings

The first aspect of the participants’ narratives that stood out was the link between their tattoos and their self-identities. Their tattoos were symbols of identity, current and desired, and helped them to transform themselves. Mary noted that:

My first tattoo was an image from one of the story books that I had as a child.

When I first started thinking of wanting a tattoo, I was probably 14, and it was a

____. I got it when I turned 17, it was also an issue of money, I was finally

financially independent. I grew up in the woods, we were pretty isolated and I was

into mystical and magical storybooks. They were kind of my fairy tales I guess...

The ____ means transformation, magic and mystery... the unknown.

She then went on to explain that as well as finding the experience helpful with regard to articulating her identity, she also found that it helped her with taking control of her life.

I had just really taken control of most of my life and moved out permanently. I

guess I wanted to... mark my passage, my transformation, and also the fact that I

identified with the _____ as my spirit animal... It made me feel strong... liberated.

Somehow it made me feel like more in control of myself... it was something

definitive, something that people could see... I think that’s a really valid thing to

do, lots of cultures have rituals where they mark people at times of change, transition, rites of passage and such... It felt like a kind of rite of passage that I was doing because the ____ meant so much to me...

Michelle also spoke about the importance of tattooing in changing how she thought about herself and in becoming strong.

My whole life was a mess so it wasn't just about the sexual abuse. It was more about changing patterns and getting out of a bad situation. I had an idea that the abuse was the reason why I was such a mess but I think I was too busy just trying to survive to really give it much thought... So my first tattoo was very symbolic of wanting to change all of that. I had to change if I ever wanted to be happy, I had to learn how to respect and love myself, to connect with myself, respect myself so that I could stop being a victim and be strong. I knew that strength was somewhere inside of me and that I needed something to help me tap into that strength. Getting the _____ tattooed, it helped me remember that I was strong enough to start again.

Rebecca added the notion of rite of passage and a sense of excitement to the experience of getting tattooed.

It was really fun because that was my first experience in a tattoo parlour and... it felt like sort of like an initiation, excitement and the noise of the machine... Quite quickly after that I realised I liked it. It was kind of exciting...It was very interesting because it was the first time I thought about how my body reacted to that pain. I liked that I felt really light and kind of free after that... Yeah, that tattoo was a really big one. It was for a birthday 'cause it was going to be like a

badge... Well, I think I'd felt like I'd gone through a lot in the last couple of years, a lot of drinking and a lot of drugs and bad stuff like that... I feel that in a lot of ways my earlier tattoos definitely re-scripted me because once it was out and on my skin I didn't think about it anymore. So it was like carrying my burdens on the outside so that they weren't internalized any more.

Women often see tattooing as a sign of freedom and emancipation from oppressive conditions as it allows them to construct an identity outside of traditional ideals of femininity and beauty. They often describe getting tattooed as a strengthening act, of taking control of their lives, of defying the traditional female roles of being weak, delicate and helpless (Irwin, 2001; DeMello, 1995; Mifflin, 1997). This discourse is very common among women who feel traditional female social roles and opportunities are restricting. The theme of marking a passage in life is also common, usually from a repressive to a liberating phase, such as leaving a bad relationship. For many women, getting a tattoo also involves reclaiming their bodies from male control, be that of an ex-partner or because of sexualized violence (Irwin, 2001).

My participants' narratives about their first tattoos are not only "private expressions of the need to 'write oneself'—but they express the need for others to read them in a certain way as well" (DeMello, 2000, as cited in Pitts, 2002, p. 137). This creates a message to the self but also to others, making the symbol chosen for the tattoo very important as a means of communication. Images are powerful because they tap into our culture and subconscious. What "we see in our art and the vernacular forms of our culture—our manners, architecture, dress, rituals, and ceremonies—provide the

prototypes through which we clarify, compare, and appraise the qualities of the world we encounter” (Eisner, 1988, p. 16).

Pitts (1998) states that body modifications serve as rites of passage on the way towards reclaiming the oppressed body. In addition to that perspective, rites of passage serve a universal human function because they help place an individual in his or her culture, be that as an ‘in-member’, or as in the case of body modifications, as an ‘out-member’ (Langman, 2003). Langman says that body modifications are an integral element in “lifestyles of resistance” (p. 239) and serve to initiate the individual into a “community of meaning in a globalized world where social ties and shared values are becoming ever more problematic” (p. 239).

The embodied experiences of the participants and my own were “ones of constant negotiation” (Wesely, 2006, p. 148) as my experiences and identity were influenced by theirs as the study developed. I understood that my identity was being “erased, adjusted, and readjusted, to fit the emerging picture of social life that one constructs for oneself” (Rambo Ronai, 1999, p. 126). Weary tiredness dogged me as I faced a new cycle of healing and self-understanding brought on by my immersion in the study, excitement and pride rose up upon realizing my self-identity was shifting towards one of professionalism and confidence, grief emerged as I dealt with family losses that made me re-evaluate who I was and what I expected of myself. And now, anxiety bordering on panic sets in as I worry about how much of myself I am exposing to the reader and the effect this could have on my academic credibility. I try hard to remember that this process of

deconstruction and reconstruction of my identity is normal, desired even, for after destruction there is rebirth and fertility overcoming the finality of death (Rambo Ronai, 1999).

Mary: Tattooing is like intensely marking my past on me. I was thinking about ideas of purity and virginity and what if I went through some sort of spiritual awakening and thought "Oh, I'm reborn!" [laughs] Tabula rasa! Then I wouldn't be able to shed this [gesturing to her tattoos] and my old life would be stuck on me... so sometimes I think of it in that way too, I'm actually chaining myself to those experiences... it's both, it's a way of feeling like you're in control of your past and at the same time linking you forever to it. [sighs] But also... when I'm honest with myself I feel broken, I feel like I'm damaged goods. I've always felt that way, maybe because of ideas about virginity. He took something from me I didn't even know I had. He took it from me before I even knew who I was, it's gone. I never had the chance to feel that, I never had the chance to feel innocent in sex.

“I knew too, though, that I had to stop seeing myself as damaged goods. I was damaged, but my goodness was the same. I had goodness; I had heart. I had somehow salvaged heart” (Hoppen, 1994, p. 395).

“If the skin were parchment and the blows you gave me were ink...”

—William Shakespeare, *The Comedy of Errors* (p. 172).

Rebecca spoke of using tattoos as filters and as a way to label herself as dangerous:

For quite a few years that's what my tattoos were all about, after all that I had gone through... I definitely wanted people to stay away and the tattoos served as a filter, a way of dealing with people, of putting my demons on the outside, warning them, keeping them at a distance. The thing is... a tattoo is a safe way of telling your pain but it's also another way to punish yourself. So you're affirming all of the feelings that you have about yourself...

Michelle expanded on this theme when she noted that:

I really felt like I was damaged goods. In a weird way, getting tattooed was a shield but it was also showing the world I was damaged goods 'cause I didn't want the world to look at me and go, "Here's this perfect little person who has had this perfect little life, and will be the perfect little wife..." [laughs] 'cause I felt that was what people wanted to me to be, but if I'm tattooed then I'm breaking that image, I'm breaking that assumption.

Women's practices of body reclamation begin with their understanding of "the ways the body has already been inscribed for them without their consent, often through violence" (Pitts, 2003, p. 81). This awareness does not assure success or failure in their reclamation projects, but it does hint at a twisting of the meanings in women's bodily experiences against the norm, a twisting that could "challenge the silencing and normalizing pressures women face, especially in relation to victimization" (p. 81).

‘Owning’ the identity of damaged goods is transgressive; it shocks and disturbs the confines of patriarchy by transforming the victim position into one of rage and power. Embodying this identity through tattooing rattles the boundaries of feminism and of healing professionals by creating a new space for dealing with trauma and victimization that is outside of traditional therapeutic settings (Pitts, 2003). These acts take away our expert positions.

Pitts (2003) critiques the body reclamation discourse by pointing out that the meanings women give to their body projects are intrinsically connected to the processes of reading and writing the body from dominant and marginalized perspectives. The process of meaning making of tattooed bodies is linked with the lived body experience, of being a woman, of being tattooed, and of the act of tattooing, of the personal and impersonal interpretations of these meanings, and of the reflexive aspect of meaning making. As a result, Pitts states, a ‘reclaimed body’ is a misnomer; there is no such thing as returning to a state previous to the trauma, it is impossible to recover the unaffected body.³⁰ Body projects are about appropriating and corrupting the male language of tattooing (Braunberger, 2000). It is from this newly corrupted set of meanings that a woman constructs the meanings of her body project.

³⁰ There is research that proves the body is not material in the permanent sense. All atoms in our body are dynamic, some more than others, in fact, 98% of the atoms in our bodies are renewed yearly (“The fleeting flesh,” 1954). Thus the idea of the body as a stable entity that can be reclaimed or owned is impossible. According to this article (“The fleeting flesh,” 1954) the body functions as a loosely organized formation. The roles and rules for each section are clear and stable yet the atoms forming those parts are in perpetual movement. This means the body is a mass of atoms that are continually being exchanged with atoms in our environment. It is interesting to think that the same molecules that once formed Christopher Columbus’ and Marilyn Monroe’s bodies are still here and could be in you or me.

The theme of armouring, shielding oneself and gaining strength through tattooing was present throughout the interviews. The participants spoke of their tattoos in metaphors of donning body armour so they could be stronger, protected from others who might hurt them, and in a sense, teaching their bodies how to ‘walk the talk’ of strength. Michelle began her interview by describing her fist tattoo as a shield.

When I got my first tattoo I really thought of it as a kind of shield... It created an aura around me because it reminded me that I was strong. As I got more tattoos it was totally about marking and strengthening myself. It was a way of saying “Don’t mess with me.” So even though I wasn’t strong enough to say it, my tattoos were saying it for me.

Mary did not speak of it at first but by our second interview she told me she had an insight to share with me.

I’ve been thinking about this a lot lately. My tattoos make me feel a lot stronger. It’s like having body armour. I love having it on my shoulders and my arms because it... It’s almost like if you were fighting a battle that’s where you would have your shields... and it makes me feel stronger, tougher, safer and not afraid of people. It keeps people out. It creates a distance. If it’s intimidating then it’s about creating space, creating hesitation in people so they won’t just approach you... The idea of armour... almost something that I’m wielding, like a weapon, it makes me feel armed. If you forget, you look in the mirror and you can’t wimp out, you are presenting as that and you can’t back out, it’s this challenge to always be strong, to be tough, to live up to what you’re representing... and yet that being said, there’s something else, I sometimes have fun being really silly and

dorky and childish and vulnerable and exposing my tattoos at the same time and the dissonance of that. I was wondering... Am I diminishing the power of them by allowing people to see the girly vulnerability and the strength of the tattoos at the same time? And it's challenging that thought, why do I have to be tough because I have tattoos? [Laughs] In a way that's another way of being: "Aha! You can't pin me down, you can't define me, I'm a paradox, I'm a contradiction, I have tattoos and I'm crying in public!" Whatever you might think, whatever ideas you've got, they're wrong! [laughs]

At first Rebecca had said her tattoos were not connected to the sexual abuse she suffered. However, she still spoke of her tattoos as armour. When I asked her if there was a relationship between her previously stated need to protect herself because she did not trust others as a result of the sexual abuse and her use of tattoos as armour she suddenly saw the underlying reason for armouring herself:

Yeah... You're right, they're connected. For quite a few years that's what my tattoos were all about, after all that I had gone through, I needed to keep people out so I could feel safe, strong, in control...

Teaching the body a new skill is not as simple as reading instructions and acting upon them. Any new skill, such as projecting strength in the case of the participants, requires repetition until it becomes 'second nature.' Every time our bodies incorporate a new skill they "act from not just (our) present organs, but from a bodily past that tacitly structures (our) responses" (Leder, 1990, p. 32). Once the participants donned their tattoo armour, is it possible that their bodies were sending the message that they were no longer

victims? Is it possible that the change in how others perceived them as a result of their tattoos and their conscious or unconscious adjustment to their tattooed selves resulted in a “rich dialectic” (Leder, 1990, p. 34) between their bodies and their environments, transforming both in the process?

Michelle and Mary said their tattoos spoke for them at times when they could not speak for themselves. In a safe environment the things we can speak of or do are very different than how our bodies react in an unsafe environment or an environment we have been conditioned to be silent in. This is because our bodies act as a medium through which we experience life and “the dominant values of our culture insinuate their ways into our neuromuscular responses, shaping our perceptions of the world” (Johnson, as cited in Crowdes, 2000, p. 25). In spite of being a restricted means of expression, the body is a very impressionable yet powerful intermediate for human consciousness. Even though Mary and Michelle are well versed in feminist theory and can critically analyse the effect childhood sexual abuse had on them, when they are in a sexualized moment, embodied patriarchal rules of gender performance for women and their lived body experiences of being dominated by men take precedence. The physical manifestation of this is seen in their paralyzed bodies, in their inability to say no regardless of their convictions or needs (Crowdes, 2000), in their need for their tattoos to speak for them.

Women have long struggled with how to express the true needs and nature of the female body in a patriarchy. Virginia Woolf (1942) expressed this well when she wrote:

Telling the truth about my own experiences as a body, I do not think I have solved. I doubt that any woman has solved it yet. The obstacles against her are still immensely powerful—and yet they are very difficult to define. (...)

Outwardly, what obstacles are there for a woman rather than for a man? Inwardly, I think, the case is very different; she has still many ghosts to fight, many prejudices to overcome. (p. 240-241)

There are some main overlapping themes in the functions of tattoos and other body modifications: Rite, identification, protection, and decoration (Fisher, 2002), as well as individuality, personal narrative, physical endurance, resistance, spiritual/cultural, addiction, and sexual motivation (Wohlrab, Stahl & Kappeler, 2007).³¹ In Western society there is an increasing feeling of alienation among the middle and upper classes (Riley, 2002). There are few rituals or rites of passage other than religious ones (Fisher, 2002). The protective function of tattooing is obvious in the participants' first tattoos. The decorative aspect is apparent in the planning of their tattoos as all three of them referred to incorporating their sense of aesthetics into their tattoos.

One or two tattoos can serve many of the primary functions of a tattoo. But what happens when as a person becomes heavily tattooed? Does the combination of several tattoos, each with its own meaning, mesh towards a coherent whole, as in a body suit? Does it remain a fragmented narrative of sorts, with pieces that are separate yet tell a story? Or do the tattoos settle into keeping their separate meanings and refusing to form a coherent whole?

³¹ These studies do not differentiate between men and women's reasons for getting tattoos.

The metaphor of their tattoos forming a storybook or map of their identity emerged often:

Mary: If your tattoos are connected to some part of yourself, part of your life, your experience, your history, then, because you never leave, you always have this ongoing relationship to your past so you always have an ongoing relationship with your tattoos. It's like a living memory or like having a map or a book on your skin.

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*Michelle: The meanings of my tattoos are the same but they have grown. There's fundamental meaning in each of my tattoos that is relevant to me. I was creating a sort of a path, a map that would help me get through life and be OK again. The way I feel about them now is different though because now I feel that I'm strong, instead of it being a map of who I wanted to be, now it's the story of who I am.*

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Even though Michelle talked about her tattoos as symbols, she did not see them as symbols *on* her skin.

*Most people look at me and think I'm heavily tattooed but I don't think so. So do I view myself as a heavily tattooed woman? hum... I think that's a label that society puts on me. Where my tattoos begin and end, and where I begin and end...*

*There's no separation.*

Once Michelle had the tattoo inked *into* her skin she incorporated those symbols into her identity, and they became part of her, physically and metaphorically. This incorporation of symbols into her body/identity can be understood as inscription (Davies,

2000b). Bodies and the environments they inhabit are shaped by language and our readings/writings of both, but language is also unstable, fluid and “capable of action, capable of rupture and disruption” (Davies, 2000b, p. 16).

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Claiming the full range of memory of a traumatic event may serve to help survivors of childhood sexual abuse to better deal with the effects of the abuse. Perhaps marking their bodies with symbols associated with the pain, strength and pride in overcoming the abuse helps them explore those memories in a therapeutic manner. This exploration of memories may be helpful because, as Reavey and Brown (2006) say,

memories can also serve as active resources for expressions of agency and defiance; (...) they may contain multiple layers of explanation (Haaken, 1998; Ronai, 1995). Such ‘layers’ may hold within them testimonies of both pleasure and rebellion, as well as pain, feelings of love and hate towards an abuser and other such ambivalent emotions and destructive forces. In this way adult survivors may be seen to actively construct meaning from their past experience in order to make sense of their present identity. (p. 180)

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The participants often referred to their identities being written by their tattoos at the same time that the tattoos were representative of their identities, in a continuous and reciprocal web of influence over which they did not always have control. Michelle used this process as an opportunity for self-reflection.

*I think about people’s interpretation of me because of my tattoos. I try to see if there’s something in that judgement that I can learn from or if I’m going to reject*

*it. Sometimes that happens without me noticing it, I only catch it when I'm in a situation and I react differently to it than I would've before. Then I stop to reflect on what I'm accepting and what I'm rejecting of other people's ideas.*

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The reclamation of the body happens through 'self-writing' of a body part that was once possessed by men in childhood sexual abuse or sexualized violence, then further possessed by men in the form of sexual harassment (Pitts, 1998). Tattooing, a permanent form of self-writing, represents the taking back of a body part or the whole body. These 'recovered' body parts are marked, mutilated, made strange and grotesque, through tattooing. When I think of my body before I started getting tattoos, I realize that I thought of my body as internally mutilated, and made a stranger to me by the sexual abuse. Tattooing became my stylus, it gave me control over my body and it put my strangeness on the outside, making my outside coherent with my inside. My tattooed body made others avert their eyes, repulsed yet fascinated by my grotesque and permanent markings. My stance in the world changed as I transfigured from a sexualized victimized body to a sensually fierce self-written survivor body. Through this inscription of my body and the unsettling of others' confident gaze, my body became mine again. In doing this to myself, I have "rather explicitly suggest[ed] an awareness of body norms as negotiable social constructs" (Pitts, 2003, p. 75). Thus my tattooed body *is* 'I' because I shape it at the same time that I am shaped by the interaction of my tattooed self and the landscapes I inhabit.

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Another theme that was prominent in the interviews was pain as a therapeutic tool and the process of self-inflicting pain through tattooing. This theme was fraught with associations and references to the mental health discourse of body modifications as self-mutilations. It is understandable why the view of body modifications as self-mutilations is so pervasive. After all, pain, blood and incisions arouse suspicion and have implicit associations with illness and death (Leder, 1990; Pitts, 1998). The participants' narratives about pain opened up spaces for contesting the mental health discourse of self-inflicted pain as pathological and raised questions about how helping professionals, society, friends and family view pain within the contexts into which women insert themselves.

Before reading the participants' narratives of pain, it is useful to add here that a common result of childhood sexual abuse is a feeling of dissociation from the body (Hoppen, 1994; Sutton, 2007); in particular, the sexualized body parts (Pitts, 2003). Dissociation is "the separation of an idea or thought process from the main stream of consciousness" (Braun, as cited in Sutton, 2007, p. 200). This self-protective coping mechanism develops as the child repeats to herself over and over again "I am not here; this is not happening to me; I am not in this body" (Mollon, as cited in Sutton, 2007, p. 213.) This "hypnotic assertion" (Sutton, 2007, p. 200) helps the child 'forget' the traumatic event by splitting it off from consciousness. Often dissociation from the violated body allows children to survive childhood sexual abuse (Pitts, 2003).

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*Rebecca: Before I discovered tattooing I used to cut myself. This tattoo was to cover-up a cutting scar. [The tattoo] was given to me as a gift. There was no decision making, it had to go over the mark on my body that I had made before...*

*That was like opening a can of worms, I was 22, and at the time that I got it done I had never seen any other girls with a large \_\_\_\_\_. I didn't really know why I felt like bigger was better; it was just... if I was going to go through the pain of the tattoo then... I was surprised that once I discovered tattooing I stopped cutting myself. It gave me the same gratification, the same... Well, at first it was I was getting tattooed because I needed to feel present in my body, I guess it was dissociation and need, I'd been so in my head and intellectual and friendly and everything like that but if somebody hugged me it would feel uncomfortable, it was like... [she makes her body tense and rigid to show me what it was like to be hugged] For awhile [tattooing] was about feeling my body, feeling that pain and being comfortable with the part of my body that was tattooed. Afterwards it was about getting out of my body because the night after I'd get a tattoo was the best sleep I'd ever had... Looking back now I realize the reason why I was afraid is because a lot of my tattoos are strong emotional reactions to things in my life. I've been a really emotional person most of my life but sometimes the emotion was way stronger than me and that's what I was doing, what was happening is I was flipping out and getting a tattoo to deal with the emotion. Every time I think about why I did something or was acting promiscuously or drinking a lot, all that stuff was side effects of the trauma. It wasn't any personality flaw. I was reacting to something very powerful... In a lot of ways I thank my tattoos because I don't know where I would be today if I couldn't have gone, made an appointment and reached that place to find out: "Oh, it's directly related to where the memory is! OK, [laughs] there's something going on that's deeper than just outside rules!"*

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I was trying to return to my body. I am a survivor of childhood sex abuse, and my body to me had been a machine I didn't want to live within. An out-of-the-body experience I couldn't control. Couldn't. Wouldn't. Who knows? I don't know. But I wanted to return, although I wasn't thoroughly convinced I wasn't here all along. I couldn't recall being any other way. I knew no other way. And I wanted to see, to find out if perhaps I wasn't wholly in myself. (Hoppen, 1994, p. 392)

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During our second interview, Michelle spoke of bodily dissociation and the role of tattooing in helping her feel comfortable with intimacy.

*It's hard for me to be present in my body. When I discovered that getting tattooed was a way of dealing with the pain from the abuse, wow, everything changed! I already had two tattoos but from there on it was a conscious decision to get tattoos to heal the emotional pain. Tattooing helped me get in touch with my body, to be OK with someone else touching me. My body used to be an object, it was for sex. So tattooing was a huge shift for me because it was completely consensual, like sex had never been. So being able to go to a tattoo artist, all of my tattoos were done by men and to be able to ask for something and be in control...*

[Michelle began to talk very fast and seemed very agitated. I asked her if she wanted me to turn off the recorder and she said yes. She cried a little. After a few minutes of quiet breathing she turned the recorder back on.]

*Sex was never fully consensual for me because I never felt I could say no. I'm not saying that I was raped every time I had sex, it's more that I never felt like I had*

*rights during sex, if I changed my mind or if it hurt I couldn't say "No, stop, I don't like this." I used to just pretend I liked it and wait for it to be over. [I just realized that] getting tattooed was probably the first truly consensual intimacy I ever had with a man because I knew I could walk away, say yes or no, and say how long it was going to last. It's a very empowering place for a woman who has been abused.*

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At the centre of many of these narratives are epiphanies. Denzin (2001) defines epiphanies as “those interactional moments that leave marks on people’s lives (...). In these moments, personal character is manifested and made apparent” (p. 34). Epiphanies are also opportunities as “people change their lives through telling them in narratives” (Frank, 1993, p. 42). To be able to narrate your identity “you must change your life” (Frank, 1993, p. 42), and thus all epiphanies are, in a sense, a re-birth, a shift in identity. In Rebecca’s words we see an epiphany that occurred as a result of her conscious decision to submit to pain in order to gain insight into emotional pain. In Michelle’s words we see a “cumulative epiphany” (Denzin, 2001, p. 145); an epiphany that comes from years of reflection on the abuse and results in the recognition that the self she is has been formed through childhood sexual abuse. In that moment Michelle discovered that the trauma “has *always* been the *medium* of the self” (emphasis in original, Frank, 1993, p. 46). She saw that which she has always been but had not known herself to be. There is no new territory to be created, no new narratives are constructed in that moment, but her added understanding of herself adds another dimension to her future narratives (Denzin, 2001). As a researcher during the interviews I allowed the participants’ thoughts and

emotions to influence the direction the interview went in; this often resulted in a space in which epiphanies occurred out of the act of narration. As a researcher conducting an analysis of their narratives I tried to remember that all “epiphanies occur within the larger historical, institutional, and cultural arenas that surround an individual’s life. The interpretive scholar (...) must connect personal problems and personal troubles to larger social, public issues” (p. 37).

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*Mary: I used to do a lot of self-mutilation when I was younger. It’s connected to the abuse. But the other thing with the tattooing is that I find the experience of being tattooed pleasurable. I enjoy it, six hours of getting tattooed and I’m almost getting off on it! [laughs] Being the one in control of the experience of pain, as well as having something visible, tangible to associate the pain with... maybe you don’t even understand why, maybe especially if you don’t feel like you are allowed to feel the pain from the abuse...if your pain is not validated or acknowledged then it doesn’t exist, it gets suppressed. The catch is, if it doesn’t exist then why am I in so much pain?*

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Self-injury is an “effective tool for managing dissociation in both directions – to facilitate it when emotions are overwhelming, as well as to diminish it when one feels too disconnected from oneself and the world” (Mazelis, as cited in Sutton, 2007, p. 221). The participants’ narratives of dissociation and of finding a way to re-connect with the body through tattooing are not uncommon and the line between self-injury and tattooing is very tenuous (Sutton, 2007). Using tattooing as a way to learn embodiment is not a

process without dangers however, as Rebecca noted, tattooing is empowering but it is also a form of punishment with an element of ‘illness’ in the theme of marking oneself as damaged goods.

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Women, anorexia and power. Women, tattooing and power. The similarities are disturbing. Do I dare? Will my view of my participants change if I include this reading? How much of the mental health discourse do I allow myself to take on without losing the multiplicity of discourses in their narratives? Will I forgive myself? Will they? Can I close Pandora’s Box once I’ve looked inside?

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Bordo (2003, 1989) gives accounts that construct the practice of anorexia from a feminist perspective and are quite different than the constructions of disordered eating usually offered by the mental health perspective.

The young woman discovers what it feels like to crave and want and need and yet, through the exercise of her own will, to triumph over that need. In the process, a new realm of meanings is discovered, a range of values and possibilities that Western culture has traditionally coded as “male” and rarely made available to women: an ethic and aesthetic of self-mastery and self-transcendence, expertise, and power over others through the example of superior will and control. The experience is intoxicating, habit-forming. (Bordo, 2003, p. 178)

The bodies of disordered women (...) offer themselves as an aggressively graphic text for the interpreter—a text that insists, actually demands, it be read as a cultural statement, a statement about gender (Bordo, 1989, p. 16). (...) The

woman's body may thus be viewed as a surface on which conventional constructions of femininity are exposed starkly to view, through their inscription in extreme or hyperliteral form. They are also written, of course, in languages of horrible suffering. It is as though those bodies are speaking to us of the pathology and violence that lurks just around the edge, waiting at the horizon of "normal" femininity. It is no wonder, then, that a steady motif in the feminist literature on female disorder is that of pathology as embodied protest—unconscious, inchoate, and counterproductive protest without an effective language, voice, or politics—but protest nonetheless. (emphasis in original, Bordo, 1989, p. 20)

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In reading Bordo's (2003, 1989) descriptions of how a young woman feels powerful through the practice of anorexia I could not help but see some similarities to my participants' narratives and my own experiences. This disturbed me. I hesitated to include it here because, as an insider and a feminist, I would rather show tattooed women's practices as empowered subversive resistance strategies, full of agency and courage. I did not want to give the impression that I agree with the negative perspective of the mental health discourse, nor did I want to add any validity to that discourse. The view of body modifiers as mentally ill and in need of medical intervention is already prevalent in the media and mainstream society (MacCormack, 2006; Pitts, 1999). Mainstream media tends to privilege mental health workers as experts on the subject of body modifications, and these 'experts' use terms like "anorectics, (self-) hatred, self-mutilation, anger, counsel(ing), psychologists, overwhelming anxiety, clinic, psychiatric facility, habitual

(arm) slicing, psychological impulses, self-injury, suffering, (bad) home lives and internal motivations (..) as relevant to discussions of body modification” (Pitts, 1999, p. 295).

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*Mary: I wonder if in some ways that's why I find it so erotic... Because it is an invited touch when so often it isn't... I never go into to the experience thinking I'm going to enjoy the pain. I'm still surprised every time. The first time I got tattooed by a woman I realized that maybe I'm attracted to women 'cause it was an erotic experience for me. I was looking at her and thinking: "Am I attracted to you?" [laughs] That was the first time I considered being sexually attracted to another woman. The next time I was kind of laughing to myself, there is something in the pain or owning the pain that just feels so good, so good that it's erotic... 'cause I could feel the switch in my mind, from being "Owww, this hurts" to "I'm in a state of bliss..." So I was curious about it and I asked the tattoo artist: "Do you ever tattoo people who enjoyed it so much?" It seems kind of weird, I wanted to know if there were other people who had that experience, am I the only one? [laughs] Am I a freak, am I a weirdo, am I some kind of masochist? [laughs] I've been thinking a lot about my relationship to pain as cathartic. Feminists say that sadomasochism is so anti-woman, but I don't feel it's unhealthy.*

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Poststructuralist theory situates pleasure alongside resistance, opposed to law and power, “as a point beyond or perhaps before the impact and force of the law” (Grosz, 2005, p. 192). The role of pleasure can be force or counterforce. In its most common manifestation, force, it is an unbound energy that can be harnessed into the disciplined

practices that make up a 'docile body.' However, infrequently and under certain conditions, it becomes a counterforce. As such, pleasure can corrupt docile bodies, unleash rebellion, transform and become a deviant practice controlled by the deviant (Grosz, 2005).

If we are to improve our practice with sexual abuse survivors, we must transform the way we understand pleasure and subjectivity. We need to move away from the model of the oppressed female, shaped by oppression, and in need of liberation to a model that allows the child, youth or woman to be seen as a subject in an environment that is "a play of forces which are themselves what constitute the ever shifting and uncontrollable terrain of politics and identities" (Grosz, 2005, p. 193).

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*Michelle:* If your body can heal, then your heart can heal.

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I told her that I was noticing for the first time when I was hurting myself. I have a high threshold of pain. I'd run into things, bounce off, keep walking. At some point I'd notice a bruise and wonder how I got it. I never noticed before, I said, or felt it. Why would you? she asked, You've only been in your body from the neck up. (Hoppen, 1994, p. 392)

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Rebecca and Michelle spoke of their relationship with pain changing over time. Once they had overcome bodily dissociation the pain of tattooing became uncomfortable.

*Rebecca: The thing for me now is I'm more present in my body and centred in it. I don't know when exactly that happened... but I haven't gotten a tattoo for a long time. For awhile I was going every six months. Oh, it hurts more now! I don't want to have to be there for the time it takes to get the tattoo! [laughs]*

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Michelle: Getting a tattoo now isn't the same for me anymore. The last couple of tattoos I got [the release] didn't happen and I was almost disappointed! It just hurt, I was soooo uncomfortable! [laughs] I think it's changed 'cause I've been going to therapy for a while now. I've learned how to express my hurt instead of keeping it inside. So when I realized that tattooing wasn't my healer anymore, it was a bit bittersweet. It's good but it was like realizing I'd lost a dear old friend. [laughs]

Mary added her perspective on the experience of submitting to pain and reflecting on it.

I think those moments [of acknowledging and submitting to the pain] are all linked in the moment of allowing it to be. You're silent and you give yourself the acceptance and acknowledgment and validation that you didn't get, that you deserve, that you should have gotten. So in every moment like that I think the physical manifestations of pain are a way of channelling into something else...

As a CYC practitioner I was particularly concerned when Mary spoke of the difficulties she faces explaining to others the complex relationship she has with pain and the place it has in her healing. It was difficult to sit and listen. My thoughts raced as she spoke.

Mary: I would approach this idea of pain as a healing process and people would react: "Oh that must be bad, we need to fix you". [laughs] Well, people don't realize that if there was nothing, if I had never experienced a day of pain in my life and I was inflicting pain on myself then I might think that's something that we need to monitor.

There's so much judgement when it comes to self-inflicted pain...

Ana-Elisa: Is pain is a useful tool? Do you need to feel pain to know what lack of pain is?

Mary: Well that's it, isn't it? [laughs] That's a strong form of the argument. That's what I would try to suggest to people but it's tricky 'cause when you go to counselling or doctors you can't be fully honest with them because they are automatically going to negate the validity of whatever strategy or technique or coping method you have... which is really frustrating as somebody who is trying to heal and go through those processes because I know that what I'm doing is helping me but it's all contextual, right?

But is it under control? She seems so fragile at times...

How far does my responsibility as a CYC practitioner and a researcher extend

here?

I worry that she needs a safe place to explore this.

Ana-Elisa: In your life right now it fits...

Mary: It's related, it's my specific experience, my place... In the context of my life right now this is having a positive effect and maybe that will change with time, maybe that change is a natural process. But I wish that it wasn't so stigmatized and that I didn't have to be ashamed 'cause then it's really confusing. I'm doing this but I can't express it or discuss it. I have to hide it and be ashamed of it and it's a very confusing place to be because if you are seeking help you're trying to listen to what people are saying, you really want to get better, you're listening, so when somebody tells you that something's bad you really consider it pretty seriously and you're very vulnerable to other people's thoughts... At this point in my life I'm not in therapy. My counsellor said that it comes in waves, you unpack stuff, deal with it and re-pack it, go away and come back, again and again. Now I feel like I'm coming back to it from a different angle which is my own, it's exploring given the tools that I've gained. I think that the therapeutic process [of pain] is really valuable and I've learned to get back inside myself. I think context is so important. You can't take it out of context and say "pain is always bad." No, there are times that it isn't... things in relation to other things are completely different from when they are isolated and being judged on their own.

We talk so much about practicing from a client centred perspective

but do we really do it?

If we did we might remember that the client's interpretation of an event

influences every behaviour, every meaning

Mary: It's not ideal for me to heal and feel good by hurting myself but idealism is an illusion. This is reality, and nothing is fixed, things aren't black and white.

There aren't universals. It's all greyness and ambiguity. One person's poison is another's medicine.

Mary's argument of needing to know what pain is so that she can learn how to heal her emotional pain is very reasonable if we consider the emotional pain from trauma to be a result of oppression *and* oppressive in and of itself. Poststructuralist theory posits that to move from a position of 'oppressed' towards freedom and choice, a subject needs to understand that which is oppressive before moving towards the dismantling of that oppressive system (Morgan, 2005). From an embodied perspective, if we want to reclaim our bodies for ourselves, to free them from an 'embodied domination,' we need to start by "remembering the practices and effects of domination we wish to lose" (Morgan, 2005, p. 358). Morgan argues that in remembering the embodied past we find the "possibility for articulating lived experience of embodied domination" (p. 360). This process of articulating past (and present) embodied domination is in essence a self-narration produced from the point of view that embodiment and an awareness of the landscape one inhabits are bound and inseparable. The self-narration then becomes a text that can corrupt and distort the boundaries between the embodied self and the multiple locations we inhabit in our socio-cultural-political landscapes (Morgan, 2005).

Pain, tattooing and body modifications... Who are we to tell someone they have no right to enjoy it? I agree with Riley (2002) when she questions our right to tell a woman that the power she feels in marking her body is actually a hyper-compliance to patriarchal oppressive roles for women, a reflection of women's deeply ingrained self-hatred, and proof of her inability to accept her 'natural' body. Pinderhughes (1989) says that "empowerment requires the use of strategies that enable clients to experience themselves as competent, valuable, and worthwhile both as individuals and as members of their cultural group" (p. 111). Within their cultural groups, Mary, Rebecca and Michelle are regarded as competent, valuable and worthwhile members. Should we dispute how their empowerment takes place? If we do, are we taking the role of experts and denying these women any voice? I would rather align myself with the idea that there is a multiplicity of ways of experiencing power relations, some contradictory, some even paradoxical (Riley, 2002). This seems to me the only way to work ethically with young people and to engage with them as valuable sources of knowledge.

According to Bordo (1989) anorexia develops out of the feminine practice of dieting.³² In comparison, Braunberger (2000) states that extensive tattooing develops out of a desire to subvert dominant feminine beauty practices. Anorexia, like other gendered 'illnesses,' is a form of protest in which the woman assumes the position of victim (Davis, 1997); the difference is that heavily tattooed women assume a position of feminist understanding of the effects of their body projects (Pitts, 2003).

³² Not all authors agree with Bordo on this point. In her book *Hunger Strike*, Susie Orbach (1986) sees anorexia as a form of political protest and social resistance that is not necessarily articulate, but is nevertheless an instinctive resistance.

Pitts (2003) says that “although feminists have largely agreed that the disciplining and normalization of the female body through sexualized, normalized beauty ideals has been damaging to women, we have famously disagreed over how women can assert control over their own bodies” (p. 53). Radical feminists have declared all types of body modifications, from dieting and plastic surgery to ‘deviant’ modifications like tattooing, to be tools of patriarchy to produce docile bodies and to be symptoms of the self-loathing that women feel under patriarchal oppression; hence Mary’s conflicted feelings about prevalent attitudes in radical feminist circles. In contrast, poststructuralist feminists tend to see body modifications as heterogeneous, varied and mixed practices that can sometimes, especially in the case of subcultural practices, be used to subvert and resist normative gender ideals. This debate has extended itself to sadomasochism and other painful practices such as tattooing, branding and scarification, in relation to women’s sexuality (Pitts, 2003).

Poststructuralist feminists are presenting interesting alternative views to the radical feminist stance. One argument is that while body modifications that conform to normative beauty ideals are “deeply problematic” (Pitts, 2003, p. 54), body modifications that resist and subvert those ideals are seen as women’s agency and control over their bodies. Like Mary, Rebecca and Michelle, women who engage in these transgressive body practices are fully aware of what they are doing. They know normative body modifications, like plastic surgery and dieting, regulate women’s bodies to serve patriarchy; it is through this awareness that their resistance manifests itself in the intentional reclaiming and re-scripting of their bodies by twisting and creating new versions of femininity (Pitts, 2003). These subversive painful practices defy normative

gender roles, allow women to explore their bodies through forbidden rites of pain and pleasure, and demand attention to these violations in ways that disrupt the social pattern of communication between vulnerable women and mainstream society.

Mary: It relates to being physically marked for me. That maybe people can just tell, if I have certain kinds of marks, then they'll just know, I won't have to explain it to them, won't have to talk about it, and maybe they won't expect certain things from me or... treat me certain ways... in a way it's like being damaged, I'm damaged, I'm broken...

Ana-Elisa: It's putting on your skin what you feel inside?

Mary: Yeah, but it's not the images themselves, it's the act of being tattooed, of having tattoos, that whole social stigma of tattoos being associated with being a 'bad ass' [laughs] so it's putting yourself in that category "I'm one of those people.. I'm one of those troubled people."

I would (...) describe agency in these instances as the practice of commanding the social gaze, including the clinical gaze, such that the insertion of women's own meanings of surviving victimization usurp, at least temporarily, the expert's role in naming women's bodies—as in defining beauty, or diagnosing and treating victims. (Pitts, 2003, p. 193)

One of the things that stood out for me was how the participants twisted culturally dominant images and transformed their meanings. For instance, one of Mary's tattoos is

of a Christian symbol that is usually associated with the loss of child-like innocence because of an act of disobedience to a father figure.³³ Her reinterpretation of its meaning is empowering to her.

To me it's about free will and being able to determine for yourself what's right and wrong. It's normally seen as bad but to me it's an empowering thing. Knowing right from wrong, being able to make those decisions for yourself, controlling your destiny.

The meaning of Mary's tattoo and its role in her identity becomes more complex when we attempt to see it through her lens as it "confounds the function of fulfilling an expected and pre-formed symbolism. The image asks a question, it both resonates with and twists a religious or symbolic belief" (MacCormack, 2006, p. 69). The observer's gaze is then confronted with symbols that are supposed to mean one thing but that in the context of her tattooed body could mean something else. That something else is not obvious, and its myriad possible meanings can be disconcerting to the observer trying to locate and define Mary.

The participants' ability to appropriate the damaged goods identity and turn it on its head, to make it into something to be feared rather than pitied, and out of that

³³ I realize that by refusing to name describe what this image actually is I am de-contextualizing it. This can make it difficult to imagine how her reinterpretation of it might function. I will not name the image as this might lead to her being identified through her tattoo. However, a fictitious example I can give is an image of a dead infant. Most people would be shocked and disgusted by that image and interpret it to mean the young woman wearing it is mentally unstable. That However, that young woman might attribute a different meaning to that image. To her it could mean that life is not perfect, that there is pain and evil all around you, and that you have to always search for the beauty in life or you succumb to pain and evil. For her that image would be powerfully positive and subversive in that it challenges ideas of what is an appropriate subject matter for a young woman to think about, let alone to mark her body with.

transformation, to re-script their worth as strong and fierce women was central to their identity and healing.

Michelle: I wanted men to think twice before trying to use me. It was a warning to anyone that got close. So being damaged goods was both negative and positive. [laughs] I know, it sounds fucked up [laughs] but it was liberating to not have to pretend to be pure anymore. Having that shield of tattoos made people a little uneasy and their perception of me as a bad girl protected me from their assumptions that they could use me. As well, I felt different because of the abuse, I felt that if I pretended to be what I thought society wanted me to be, you know, nice, I felt that was a lie, that I would be siding with my abuser because I'd be saying that what he did to me didn't damage me. My tattoos made my outside match my inside. They screamed my pain for me, they got my anger out and that made me feel truly powerful for the first time in my life.

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*Mary: The thing I like about tattoos is that you can cover or uncover them. Sometimes I don't want people to be intimidated by me, sometimes I want to get to know them and get close, so it's sort of like I can retract my fangs [laughs] by putting on a long sleeve shirt, but by taking off the shirt it's like I'm showing my claws, which is contradictory because nakedness then becomes your claws out...It's about turning a vulnerability into something fierce and aggressive, something offensive rather than defensive, something that can attack...*

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Another aspect of this corruption of meanings can be seen in the participants' conscious attempts to change negative stereotypes of heavily tattooed women. All three of them were very aware of the stigma that heavily tattooed women face and set out to challenge the stereotypes about them.

*Rebecca: One of the things that I like about being very heavily tattooed is that it opens up conversations. If I'm going to go out to an event and I know I'm going to be doing a presentation, then I make sure I'm wearing clothing that shows my tattoos. I find that then people want to talk to you, and when they do, they inevitably change their ideas on what a tattoo is about. I just know that I change people's minds, if they are open.*

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Mary: It's like crossing boundaries, mixing... there's these little compartments, it's a way of sort of poking holes in borders and getting different things mixed, stirred and... like mixing colors. Generally I dress fairly classy, I don't present myself as punk hard-core. I don't wear studs and black leather, and sometimes it's quite a paradox...

A subject recognizes herself, or is identified as a subject in a particular instance (mother, co-worker, student, etc) when she shares some "obviousnesses" (Davies, 2000a, p. 30) regarding human nature and human interactions with other subjects. For example, someone must be a daughter (however that might be categorized in her culture) in order to be able to think of herself as daughter and to respond to others from the position of daughter. So that a daughter might speak of herself as such, she needs to have a mental

image of herself as daughter, and this image is created through self-narration, discourses, and the narration and discourses of others in relation to her subject position. In every word that is said our subjectivity is shaped forcefully and freely, through oppressive discourses but also as we speak and “reinvent ourselves inside the male/female dualism, socially, psychically, and physically” (Davies, 2000a, p. 85).

This view of subjectivity as influenced by *and* influencing these sets of obviousnesses is one that allows us to see how Mary, Rebecca and Michelle are reinscribing, disrupting, corrupting and fragmenting old discourses every time they wilfully insert themselves in situations where they can agitate the stereotypes about heavily tattooed women. Davies (2000a) describes this view of the woman-subject beautifully:

Woman can be a subject who realizes, speaks, writes her subjected condition, and searches out the ways in which the pattern holding that subjection can be subverted, turned to her own ends. She can begin to reclaim herself as whole, entire, capable of loving not from the lack of need, but from a desire located in the whole of her embodied being. (p. 48)

There are limitations to how much a heavily tattooed woman can blur the lines of categories set out by dominant discourses because she cannot control the interpretations of others. While she can participate in the meanings of her body, she cannot do it alone (Pitts, 2003). Rebecca, Michelle and Mary can willingly try to cross boundaries and forge new readings of their bodies with people that are open minded but they are limited in how they affect larger society. One of the limitations imposed by society is the commodification of woman as sexual objects. The tattoo subculture is not immune to this

commodification; in fact, most of the media that caters to it are filled with advertisements for pornography and use highly eroticized images of heavily tattooed women to sell products (Pitts, 2003). In addition to the hyper-sexualized exoticification of heavily tattooed women both inside and outside tattoo culture, many people will openly admit to thinking of prostitutes, biker chicks, and freak shows when they see a heavily tattooed woman (Braunberger, 2000). People who transgress against the norm of unmarked white skin³⁴ are usually seen as deviant, monstrous and untrustworthy. For heavily tattooed women the treatment is worse as they are also disobeying female beauty norms (Irwin, 2003). If we are to understand women's attempts to reclaim and re-script their bodies we need to pay more attention to the potential traps and unreliable results that these attempts can produce, and the effects this can have on this process of reclaiming the victimized body (Braunberger, 2000; Pitts, 2003).

In the early 1990s, young North American feminists started to use tattooing as a way to subvert traditional beauty ideals. Because radical body modifications go against Western beauty ideals these practices are examples of mischievous rebellion and reveal women's declarations of ownership over their own bodies (Pitts, 2003).

Mary: I think in some ways tattoos excuse me from the whole concept of beauty. It almost lets me off the hook of what being a beautiful girl is, the pressure of people's expectations, so having tattoos is like saying "Fuck you! I can't be evaluated by those beauty standards because I'm this grotesque thing." Tattoos...

³⁴ I argue the same can be said of racist thought towards people of colour, especially women of colour. They are often portrayed as ugly and slutty in comparison to the pure and desirable unmarked white skin of the white woman.

They deflate the beauty requirement and let you step out of that realm, that whole glamour trip just doesn't apply to me, and I don't even care if you like my tattoos or not, I don't give a shit! [laughs] I'm marked... I'm something other than this [pointing at herself], beauty is irrelevant. Tattoos... are about other things, like strength and capability, independence. In some ways they are masculine, and so they say I'm independent, strong and I don't need anybody.

The meanings that tattooed women give to their tattoos are inevitably overwritten by larger cultural discourses, resulting in women's creation of meanings only "punctuat[ing] the meanings already attached to their bodies within a larger cultural domain" (Braunberger, 2000, p. 2). Because tattoos are visual symbols they beg to be read and they are read according to dominant discourse. On women these readings do not match women's stories.

In a culture built on women's silence and bent on maintaining silence as a primary part of the relationship between women's bodies and cultural writing, the rules have been simple. The written body may only speak from a patriarchal script that tries to limit women's voices and bodies to supporting roles and scenery. So on a woman's body any tattoo becomes the symbol of bodily excess. When a woman's body is a sex object, a tattooed woman's body is a lascivious sex object; when a woman's body is nature, a tattooed woman's body is primitive; when a woman's body is spectacle, a tattooed woman's body is a show. (Braunberger, 2000, p. 1-2)

Michelle: Beauty... Sometimes I wish I had been born average. The attention I get because I'm attractive is empty, it's about a thing that men want to possess. I'd like to be able to take pleasure in my looks, and sometimes I do but I still feel conflicted because if I admit that I enjoy looking the way I do then it's like I have to enjoy men seeing me as an object... I know that beauty is an advantage, I just don't want it to be the only currency at my disposal... So getting tattooed is a bit like forcing people to re-think what beautiful is but it's also... Well, I have the luxury of covering them up, don't I? I can pass for normal when I dress the part, so I guess I'm not 'really' subverting beauty ideals... The irony is that a tattooed woman is considered super sexy. So I can't say that I'm changing anything by getting tattooed because I'm boxing myself further into the stereotype of the sexy babe...

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*Mary: Sometimes I would wear really grungy clothes and let my hair get all scraggly and it amazes me how if I go out dressed that way I'm invisible, people don't see me but if I go out dressed like this [form fitting t-shirt, long skirt, hair pulled back from her face] I become visible, people hold doors for me, there's all this attention. Both arguments are valid. Becoming invisible is freedom but it's also empowering to feel desired and to be proud of your body.*

*Ana-Elisa: Earlier we talked about the fetish aspect of being tattooed. So how do we as tattooed women who were sexually abused as children, and sexuality is a point of tension for us, how do we then deal with the view of tattooed women as sexy and easy?*

*Mary: Fuck, you get out from under the rock and they move the rock! [we both laugh heartily]*

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A memory surfaces... I am working with a young child and she asks me:

*Why do people say I'm beautiful? I'm not beautiful. Momma and Poppa say I'm beautiful all the time. I'm normal, not beautiful. But everyone says I'm beautiful. Why beautiful? I don't understand...*

She's looking at me, waiting for an answer and all of a sudden I feel sad and tired. In that moment I feel the weight of 'beauty' and all that it means to girls and women, and I wish I could have spared her this for a little while longer. I ask her:

*Did he use to tell you "you're beautiful?"*

She nods her head in agreement.

*Do you think he touched you because you're beautiful?*

She nods her head again and looks away embarrassed.

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*Rebecca: I get flack from other women for having an entire chest piece. They say that it draws the eye to my breasts but I never even thought about that. Honestly, I didn't think about the fact that something huge on my chest will draw men's eyes to my cleavage! Also... I'd say in the past three years my tattoos have all been about art so it's changed... I find myself really attracted to feminine images... Oh, I love my flowers, they are so pretty! [pointing at tattoos of flowers on her body]. So, there you are... there is that in between... It's not for men, but it's feminine.*

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Michelle: I've always planned my tattoos thinking of aesthetics, how a new tattoo is going to look with the others, what it will look like on that body part, how it moves with my body... What has changed is that the images I chose before were about healing and now they are about honouring loved ones and about decorating myself with art that I like, that I find aesthetically pleasing on the female body.

Heavily tattooed women are creating new latitudes for female body aesthetics upon the weaknesses of the mainstream beauty myth. This new female aesthetic is a contradiction; it is mixture of beauty as defined by women and anger towards restrictive beauty ideals. This performative and political reclamation of beauty is sometimes referred to as monster beauty or monstrification (Braunberger, 2000). Women who dare to become heavily tattooed are creating monster beauty by stealing and corrupting a masculine language (Braunberger, 2000). This practice is like a double edged sword, one edge cuts away at gender ideology, and the other cuts monstrified women by turning them into the erotic 'bad girl.' Monster beauties are ostracized to the margins of society; nonetheless, this marginality has the power to critique mainstream beauty ideals precisely because it is situated outside the mainstream (Pitts, 1998).

Marginality provides a good viewpoint from which to expose the limitations of the values and practices of the mainstream. When monster beauties reclaim female beauty for themselves, they introduce incoherence into the patriarchal discourse of a unified subjective female experience; Monster beauty refutes the 'truth' of measurable female beauty. They are heterogeneous subjects, full of paradox and irony. They claim

the freedom to self-create. In the process they fragment their own subjectivity (Pitts, 1998). In doing this, a monster beauty is using her body “as a site for action and protest rather than as an object of discipline and normalization” (Davis, 1997, p. 33).

While the resistance strategy of monster beauty is founded on creating a fluid and indefinable anomalous body, in order to truly become subversive, women’s body projects must stop (Bordo, 1990; Pitts, 1998). If they do not *finalize* their body projects then the symbolic effects of modifying a body to create monster beauty become processes done in vain without ever achieving the intended result (Bordo, 1990). If the body project never ends, then Mary will always need armour, Michelle’s tattoos will continue speaking for her, and Rebecca might find there are always demons to be exorcized. Thus, reclaiming their bodies through tattooing might never alleviate their feelings of powerlessness and objectification because without an end to the process the “reclamation offers nothing beyond itself to do the job” (Pitts, 1998, p. 82). Nevertheless, being that monster beauty as a resistance strategy is “symbolic and communicative (...) the efficacy of the claim of reclaiming is of course immeasurable” (Pitts, 1998, p. 82).

It can also be argued that tattooing only addresses the immediate self-body relationship and while this is an important site of communication, it is also often kept hidden under clothing and the power of such communication is lessened. Tattooing-as-resistance is another paradox because it “simultaneously politicizes (makes louder by marking) and depoliticizes (makes silent by hiding) the project of reappropriating” (Pitts, 1998, p. 82). Finally, women do not escape the pressures of consumerism and objectification even if they are visibly resisting. When a woman ‘reclaims’ her body, she

does so only for herself, and perhaps, only temporarily. Her monster beauty does not topple patriarchy; it cannot erase past victimization or prevent future sexual violence.

Yet, monster beauty is very appealing to some women. As embodied practices these body projects are both powerful and powerless (Pitts, 1998). It may be precisely because of that paradox that monster beauty is so appealing to Rebecca, Mary and Michelle. The paradox of power and powerlessness mimics their own survivor positions, both powerful because of their strength to transform themselves from victim into survivors and yet powerless because the process of transformation can further alienate them from mainstream society. Perhaps this is why women who become monster beauties are so threatening to mainstream society; because they cannot be categorized and this kind of beauty belongs to the woman defining its meaning.

Our conversations turned to the tattoo renaissance.

Mary: I see the tattoo renaissance as a process, the meanings are not static, it's always changing, it sort of disassociates me from whatever people may think.

You're still a person with this ball spinning around you, and I'm here with my relationship to my tattoos and what they mean to me, and that's what matters.

That's what's consistent, reliable, and true to me. People's reactions are changing because of the renaissance but I'm almost desensitized to people's reactions one way or the other, it no longer matters "OK, so you like tattoos, good for you" or "OK, so you don't like tattoos, good for you" [laughs]. Because neither is consistent and dominant in it's meaning. This means that the aspect of trying to communicate with the world through your tattoos, as being this intimidating

force, no longer applies. It diffuses that, it renders that aspect of it impotent, which is interesting. But there's still the internal relationship even if the tattoos lose the external one. When I look in the mirror, when I see them on my body it makes me feel a certain way and no one can take that away.

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*Rebecca: I've been so focused on my therapy and getting healthier that sometimes I just forget that I have tattoos. They are always there but I think... Well maybe, it's just that I've started to care less what people think. I get the same reaction from people as I did before even if tattooing is more common. For me personally, it hasn't changed in any way except that a lot of people comment on the beauty of my tattoos "Oh, they are flowers, I thought when a person had lots of tattoos it would be like skulls and death..." [laughs] It doesn't matter. The extent of my tattooing cancels out any acceptance for tattoos now. I think that I went so far so fast that I almost don't remember now what it's like to not be tattooed and perceived as different...*

While Mary and Rebecca did not have strong feelings about the tattoo renaissance, Michelle described what she saw as the commodification of tattooing as a way to control a marginal subculture

*I see so many young women getting tattoos just because it's the thing to do now. It seems really superficial and shallow... Then there's also the fact that good tattoos are expensive. I guarantee you that most people will still discriminate against a woman who got her tattoos in prison, but a slim and pretty 25 year old with a half-sleeve is 'cool.' So I'm cynical. To me it's about people with money getting*

*tattooed. Tattoos still label you. A prison tattoo labels you as a criminal, but a good sleeve done by a famous tattooist labels you as someone who has disposable income and options, because you can afford not only to pay for the tattoo but also not to have to worry about work.*

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Capitalism has commodified the body, demanding that it become fluid and available to the temporary and ever changing demands of fashion. The fashionable body is never committed to any one thing; it is always longing for a make-over, and is constantly modifying itself temporarily through haircuts, manicures and such. Fashion abhors permanence. Permanence does not encourage consumption beyond the first purchase, and permanence implies satisfaction, confidence, self-sufficiency. Thus, permanent body modifications are vilified and persecuted because they are a threat to capitalism and consumption (Fisher, 2002). There is much irony in the fact that tattoos are fashionable now and that tattoos are being ‘packaged’ as a new resistance to capitalism.

The tattoo renaissance has not affected heavily tattooed women or men very much because the fashionability of tattooing extends itself to body modifications only as practiced by the middle and upper classes (Pitts, 1998). Heavily tattooed people end up staying within their own subcultural group and other marginal cultures as “no matter how popular having one or two small tattoos becomes, many people continue to see the heavily tattooed as freaks and spectacles” (Irwin, 2003, p. 40). Mainstream media also reinforce this view by reporting on tattooing and body piercing as youth and celebrity

fashions, but showcasing women's large prominent tattooing and other radical body modifications as self-mutilations (Pitts, 1998, 1999).

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“The story of who we take ourselves to be can never be concluded. The story of who we are can never be fully told” (Davies, 2000a, p. 27).

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Interpretive interactionism gave me the qualitative framework from which to analyze the participants' narratives. An embodied feminist poststructuralist lens allowed me to interpret the meanings they gave to their tattooing practices in the context of their past experiences and their socio-political context. The layered account of knowledges and analysis attempted to reveal the ways in which these women are constructing an identity of beautiful, empowered, strong, and healthy through tattooing, self-inscription and self-narration to resist oppressive patriarchal scripts for gender, female beauty, sexual purity, and behaviour. I have shown how the participants reconstruct a sense of self by appropriating derogatory labels and twisting them into meanings that are threatening to social order and control. Even though the amount of agency they have is limited because they cannot control the reader's gaze upon their bodies, they are agitating and disrupting the boundaries of mainstream gender roles for women by forcing their 'damaged' identities into public spaces and with this political act are demanding the respect and voice that was denied to them as children. In this context, a heavily tattooed woman who was sexually abused

takes up the act of authorship, of speaking and writing in ways that are disruptive of current discourses, that invert, invent, and break old bonds, that create new

subject positions that do not take their meaning from their genitalia and what they have come to signify. (emphasis in original, Davies, 2000a, p. 66).

This agent is an embodied speaker, and in the case of my participants, more so because childhood sexual abuse and extensive tattooing are both identity forming events that are experienced by the body. In taking the stance of agent through tattooing a woman runs the risk of being dismissed because of the radical connotation attributed to extensive body modifications. Yet, it is possible that the tattoo renaissance will eventually change the landscape of social tolerance towards tattooing, thus rendering these acts of resistance powerful beyond the individual and her immediate community. Rebecca, Mary and Michelle have gone against the dominant discourse of damaged goods for survivors of sexualized violence by consciously seeking healing and by reflecting on their healing processes, both in and outside of formal counselling. For survivors of sexualized violence this awareness of the ability to heal oneself is very powerful.

## CHAPTER 6 – Summary: Alternative Discourses

*“No one narrative alone can tell the story of the other” (Eisner, 1988, p. 18).*

The goal of this study was to explore how heavily tattooed women with a history of childhood sexual abuse attribute meaning to their tattooing practices vis-à-vis today’s socio-political context of the tattooing renaissance. Using embodied feminist poststructuralist theory, I illustrated the ways in which Mary, Michelle and Rebecca were influenced by and attempted to influence dominant discourses on gender, beauty, painful body modifications, self-injury practices, and childhood sexual abuse survivors. These women’s resistance strategies were revealed in their narratives about their embodied gendered subjectivities. Tattooing, the main vehicle for their resistance strategy, allowed them to take over and to corrupt dominant images and discourses of damaged goods and beauty ideals. This resistance strategy is also part of a transformation process that resulted from the rich dialectic exchange between their bodies, minds and landscapes across the shifting terrains of today’s socio-political context.

*Findings from the Literature*

The literature review offered an examination of the topics of childhood sexual abuse, the history of tattooing and its current revitalization, tattooed women, tattooed survivors of childhood sexual abuse as well as alternative readings of tattooed women’s practices, namely monster beauty and a hyperacceptance of gender ideology. This review also showed how heavily tattooed women with a history of childhood sexual abuse are viewed by the two dominant discourses of body reclamation and self-mutilation. Additionally, it explored the dissonant voices within feminist literature regarding women’s tattooing practices.

The self-mutilation discourse pathologizes all tattooing practices as signs of mental instability (Atkinson, 2004b; Dinesh, 1993; Romans et al., 1998; Sullivan, 2001, 2002; Pitts, 2003) and deviancy (Vail, 1999). The body reclamation discourse is present in most of the feminist literature and it positions women's tattooing as a resistance strategy, one of many ways in which a woman reclaims her body for herself, according to her ideas about gender and beauty (Atkinson, 2002; DeMello, 1995; Pitts, 1998, 2003). Both of these discourses are simplistic given the complexity of lived experience.

Atkinson (2002) identified a noticeable gap in the literature as most studies in tattooing do not focus on women nor avail themselves of feminist and sociological theories of the body. The aim of this thesis was to add an original contribution to this gap in the literature. This thesis differs from the reviewed published research with this population because it uses embodied feminist poststructuralist theory and views the body, mind and landscape relationship as being in a rich dialectic exchange that shaped the processes of transformation these women engaged in.

### *Findings from the Study*

This study showed how the participants used the painful embodied practice of tattooing to achieve therapeutic effects and to construct positive identities. As well, this study unearthed alternative ways of conceptualizing painful embodied practices, monster beauty, tattooing, women's body reclamation projects, emotional trauma release, embodied domination, and bodily learning. It also offered insights into how the participants fragmented their subjectivities and actively took over the authorship of their identities; they also tried to positively influence their environments, challenge beauty norms and seek healing both in and outside of traditional therapeutic environments.

These findings and the alternative readings offered in this thesis are important to consider when working with this population because dominant patriarchal gender ideology tries to control women's bodies and behaviour (Bordo, 2003; Pitts, 2003). However, the participants were very aware of their subject positions and locations in their socio-political contexts and used this awareness to inform their actions (Pitts, 1998). Mary illustrated this when she said:

*If we didn't live in a sexist society we wouldn't need to have feminism. If we didn't live in a racist society we wouldn't need to call it racism. But we do live in a sexist and racist society, so having tattoos as a way to get respect is a legitimate stance. It's not ideal but we don't live in an ideal world.*

Women's practices of body reclamation begin with their understanding of "the ways the body has already been inscribed for them without their consent, often through violence" (Pitts, 2003, p. 81). This awareness does not assure success or failure in their reclamation projects, but it does hint at a twisting of the meanings in women's bodily experiences against the norm, a twisting that could "challenge the silencing and normalizing pressures women face, especially in relation to victimization" (p. 81). For these women 'owning' the identity of damaged goods through tattooing their bodies with images that soothe them, challenge mainstream beauty ideals, and transform their bodies into monster beauties is powerfully transgressive; it shocks and disturbs the confines of patriarchy by transforming the victim position into one of rage, power and beauty as defined by the individual woman. In addition, embodying this new and powerful identity through tattooing interrupts the boundaries of healing professions by creating a new space

for dealing with trauma and victimization that is outside of traditional therapeutic settings (Pitts, 2003). These acts take away our expert positions.

The participants are aware of the limitations of their body projects due to societal discrimination against heavily tattooed women. They know that society sees them as deviant and ugly, *and* as hypersexualized women, but they make use of opportunities to challenge these stereotypes by consciously managing their appearance and behaviour in mainstream settings in a way that opens spaces for discussion.

While Michelle and Rebecca engaged in a process of transformation that led them to overcome embodied memories of trauma and to redefine their sense of worth as survivors of sexual abuse, this thesis does not mean to imply that Mary will eventually reach the same place in her healing, nor does it imply that all other women who have experienced childhood trauma will choose this healing process and, if they do, will benefit from it. What is important to highlight here is that this study demonstrates that painful practices of tattooing can be used in positive ways by young people and that our failure to remain open to their interpretations of pain as healing is tantamount to silencing them and to denying their role as co-constructors of the meanings of their lives.

These findings do not disprove the two dominant theories but they do show that the participants' experiences are complex and that dominant discourses fall short of explaining the practices of heavily tattooed female survivors of childhood sexual abuse. These findings point to the necessity for us to remain open to other possibilities, especially ones we are not familiar with, and with this attitude of staying open we can truly practice from a perspective of multiplicity of meanings and from a child/youth centred perspective. It is not the intention of this study to invalidate the dominant

discourses. As the analysis has shown, there are elements of both in what the participants described, but there are also many more discourses that merit attention and respect.

My experiences during this study have led me to a deeper understanding of the ways in which some women are dealing with the trauma of childhood sexual abuse. The original curiosity that prompted this study has been satisfied. As a result of my interactions with the participants and their stories my understanding of my own healing processes was challenged. The process of analyzing the data and writing this text has been difficult but extremely rewarding. This study has given me the chance to ‘destroy’ myself (Rambo Ronai, 1999). In every emerging contradiction and negotiation of greyness I found myself to be stuck in rhythms that fell short of helping me deal with those ambiguities. I had to unlearn and destroy those rhythms, and in the process, questioned much of the self I had carefully constructed over the last couple of decades. Reading Rambo Ronai’s work helped me deal with this.

As (...) selves are erased or destroyed, traces are left that influence the construction of new selves to meet the new needs of the moment. These selves are adjusted, erased, and drawn again (...) drawing on traces of the past that exist in our memories. (Rambo Ronai, 1999, p. 127)

#### *Limitations and Areas for Further Research*

This study is a small contribution to this field of helping professions. There are many unanswered questions and areas that beg to be explored. I hope that this study will provoke thought and encourage further research into the ways in which adult and youth<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Legally, youth need to be at least 18 years old to get a tattoo but 16-17 year olds can get a tattoo with parental consent. Many tattoo artists are trying to do away with parental consent for minors. A tattoo artist and shop owner I know argues that tattooing is an activity performed by adults on adults; thus, only adults

body modifications and childhood trauma intersect. Areas that have not been addressed in this study are race and ethnicity. All of the participants were White. My conversations with tattooed Aboriginal friends point to the need to include their voices in any further research. One Aboriginal friend told me that in her nation tattooing was a cultural practice that had been forbidden by colonial powers thus she hypothesized that tattooing practices in her community were related to reclaiming their body from colonial oppression in its entirety, not only the abuses they suffered in the residential school system (A. Sampson, personal communication, May 7, 2007). Since many Aboriginal women are survivors of childhood physical and sexual abuse suffered while attending residential schools (Fournier & Crey, 1997) and adult survivors of sexual exploitation in their adolescence (Save the Children Canada, 2002), their tattooing practices may also be used as healing tools, like the participants of this study. Future studies need to include Aboriginal women's perspectives and knowledge of Aboriginal discourses and ways of knowing as the Aboriginal population is overrepresented in foster care, youth criminal justice, and youth mental health among other areas of CYC practice (First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada, 2007). Another reason to include race and ethnicity in further studies is that dominant discourses of femininity, beauty ideals, and sexual objectification are compounded by racist discourses abounding in mainstream society. Racialized women are already constructed as primitive and hyper-sexualized *before* engaging in body modifications (Pitts, 2003). How does the addition of radical body modification practices construct these women and how do they resist these constructions? How does abuse affect identity formation in a racialized girl?

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should be allowed to engage in permanent body modifications. To illustrate his point he said "We don't let 16 year olds buy alcohol with parental consent. Why should tattooing be any different?"

As well, the focus of this study was restricted to childhood sexual abuse and tattooing. Most of the women who inquired about the study were survivors of physical, emotional, and psychological abuse and neglect. These women made links between tattooing and the trauma in their childhoods. Some heavily tattooed men inquired about the study and alluded to their tattooing practices being related to their childhood trauma. Hence, a study done from a broader perspective should include men and women who were abused or neglected as children in order to gain a better understanding of how all painful body modifications, including radical body modifications such as ritual scarification and branding, are being used by adult survivors of childhood abuse as healing tools. In addition, an exploration of the participants' backgrounds, socio-economic status, spiritual beliefs, sexuality, and other such facets of identity would further illuminate the construction of their identities in relation to body modifications and childhood trauma.

*Implications for Policy and Practice: Creating New Visions*

How do we generalize from the results of this study when the participants were adult women? I wanted my participants to have had the opportunity to reflect upon their tattooing practices and the childhood sexual abuse they suffered. If I had recruited tattooed teenagers they might not have had the time to reflect on their practices and the sexual abuse might have been very recent, quite possibly making them extremely vulnerable subjects. Thus, I recruited women aged 25-45, hoping that their reflections and insights gained would allow me to glimpse into the motivations and needs of youth who were sexually abused and are looking for ways to heal that fall outside of traditional therapeutic practices.

If we take into consideration the fact that none of my participants started therapy until they were already young adults then we see possible gaps in our services for children and youth. In addition, Mary and Michelle spoke of difficulties with professional helpers because they did not feel heard during the counselling process. As a teenager, Michelle was so disappointed with her experiences with counselling that she did not return to it until she was in her late 20s, after a failed suicide attempt.

The danger of accepting the mental health discourse without contestation is that when we only allow for restrictive interpretations of body modifications we eliminate any spaces for meaning-making that involve the client or research participant. The longer we collude with the construction of all body art, but especially female body art, as limited to being deviant and primitive, the longer we maintain the oppressive hierarchical structure of professional expertise that positions clients as broken, incapable of focused and intelligent acts of resistance, and devoid of knowledge and agency. We need to incorporate the analytic lens of plurality into our ontologies. Human beings are not homogeneous; therefore their activities should not be theorized as such (Riley, 2002).

Plural and contextual meanings of body art are part of a complex interaction of power relationships, in which, social structures both limit our experiences and provide avenues for resistance. People can only make sense of themselves through the discourses that are available in our society, but there are always competing accounts, and while dominant discourses tend to serve the interests of the relatively powerful, their existence produces the points of resistance. (Riley, 2002, p. 542)

Pitts (2003) suggests there needs to be a shift in how we ‘read’ body modification practices. Rather than asking ourselves if these practices are healthy, we should instead rethink “how ‘healthy’ and helpful are our *social, institutional* processes of dealing with the victimization of women’s selves, bodies, and sexuality under patriarchy and capitalism” (emphasis in original, p. 86).

I also want to draw attention to how our identities and body knowledge affect our work with clients. As CYC practitioners we have to be cautious that we do not assume that painful practices have no therapeutic effect, in spite of any aversion or discomfort we may feel around this topic. When Mary talked about her inability to discuss her relationship with pain with others much of that narrative centred on how judgement and disapproval can be oppressive especially when it is delivered in the well-meaning form of ‘care’ and ‘concern.’ This opened my eyes to how we can inadvertently silence young people with our concern for them. When we rush in to ‘care’ for young people we run the risk of our well intended expression of care being more about our fears that clients might hurt themselves seriously or attempt suicide, our need to feel useful and ‘fix’ our clients, and our inability to think of pain outside of the parameter of illness and death. It is useful to remember that as helping professionals we position ourselves according to our own scripts and identity. Thus if we are to work with marginalized young people in an ethical manner, not only do we need to listen to them but we also need “to see freshly the images and metaphors and storylines we have become and to learn to read them against the grain” (Davies, 2000a, p. 85). When we silence young people by not listening to them we fail to build relationships based on trust, but most importantly we are also forcing them to continue to live with secrets. Secrecy is the foundation of childhood sexual abuse; as

professional helpers we cannot risk replicating the very condition of silence that allows sexual abuse to continue and to marginalize its victims.

CYC practice aims to provide non-judgemental care, to promote diversity, and to include the client in the decision-making process (Mattingly & Stuart, 1995). We often talk about the need to work efficiently across cultures and to be open to views that differ from our own. Thus I call for CYC practitioners to don a lens of multiplicity in their approached to painful body modifications, one that would allow us to see the diversity of meanings that clients give to their practices and behaviours, one that would open up spaces for collaborative relationships and interventions based on strengths instead of pathologies. Such a lens of multiplicity would be a deeply political move, one that puts us in a position of advocating for a view of all bodies—female, vulnerable, young, old, differently abled, racialized, marginalized, different sexualities—as recognizable and interconnected across all sectors of society. Pitts (2003) articulates well this shift in practice and research by moving beyond dualisms towards a lens of multiplicity:

Although as a feminist I want to privilege notions of the body that offer possibilities of recognizing others and their relatedness to ourselves rather than those that do not recognize them, there are no fixed, guaranteed political meanings generated out of either conception. These notions of the body, as connected and isolated, located and dislocated, traffic across cultural sites in multiply significant ways, and I would argue that myths are operating on both ends. I hope that bodies-in-connection have the potential to produce a politics of recognition, such that technologies of the representation are linked to their larger historical, social, and/or political contexts. (Pitts, 2003, p. 195)

In taking up a political lens to view the practices of vulnerable bodies—marginalized women, children and youth—we can see the effects of these bodily practices in a way that encompasses “new experiences of subjectivity and the body, and a number of unintended political effects” (Pitts, 2003, p. 83). We cannot encourage painful body modifications but neither should we deride them. Rather, we can use the knowledge gained in this study to engage more critically with all discourses on the modified body, be it dominant or not, but especially the mental health discourse as it attempts to ‘fix’ marginalized women, children and youth (Pitts, 2003). Instead of asking ourselves how healthy our clients are, we can hold up all possibilities up while working with them. We need to ask ourselves what are our beliefs about healing and trauma? How do these beliefs affect the landscapes we travel in? How do the landscapes affect our beliefs about pain? I have found that trauma is universal yet individual. I would rather have the individual explore, find and define her own healing with my support rather than risk alienating her. One way of looking at this is the idea of joining young people in their journey so we can open up space for a more expanded space of healing to occur.<sup>36</sup> When we recognize the strengths inherent in small acts and resist the urge to normalize youth behaviour we move towards healthy, productive and connected therapeutic spaces in your work with young people.

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<sup>36</sup> I am greatly indebted to Carys Cragg for the thoughts and wording regarding taking the ability for self-care out of our client’s hands.

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## List of Appendices

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## Appendix A: Participant Letter or Information

### *Inked Women: Narratives at the Intersection of Tattoos, Childhood Sexual Abuse, Gender and the Tattoo Renaissance*

You are invited to participate in a research project called *Inked Women* that is being conducted by me, Ana-Elisa Armstrong de Almeida, a graduate student in the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria. You may contact me if you have any questions at (250) 384-8272 or [anaelisa@uvic.ca](mailto:anaelisa@uvic.ca). (All inquiries will remain confidential)

As a graduate student, I'm required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a Master's degree in Child and Youth Care. My supervisor is Dr. Sibylle Artz. If you have any questions you don't feel comfortable asking me you can contact her at (250) 721-6472 or [sartz@uvic.ca](mailto:sartz@uvic.ca).

The purpose of this research project is to explore the meanings that heavily tattooed women with a history of childhood sexual abuse give to their tattoos and tattooing experiences in view of the changes in attitudes towards tattooing in the last 10 years.

The objective of this research is to document this exploration in a manner that is collaborative between myself and you, and is respectful of you.

This research is important because there is very little known about how heavily tattooed women with a history of childhood sexual abuse give meaning to their tattoo practices and how they are influenced by society's attitudes towards tattooing. This knowledge is needed so that professionals in the helping professions can improve their practices with heavily tattooed women as they access therapeutic and mental health services. This is especially important because heavily tattooed women encounter more discrimination from mental health, counselling and other therapeutic professionals, and emergency medical services than tattooed men and non-tattooed men or women.

Participation in this research may cause some inconvenience to you, including the time you spend in the interview(s) and reading the transcripts. The number of hours you spend on this research is up to you. The first time we speak to determine if you'd like to participate will take 15-30 minutes. The first interview will take 2-3 hours; if you want to participate more it could take another 3-5 hours. Other possible inconveniences include the time getting to and from the interview(s) if you don't want to be interviewed at home,

and if you have children, finding child-care for the duration of the interview(s). In order to minimize these inconveniences to you I will arrange my schedule to suit yours and can give you bus tickets for your transportation to and from the location of the interview.

Unfortunately, I cannot offer you childcare as there is no budget available for that.

There are some potential risks to you if you participate in this research. You may feel some emotional discomfort and/or stress when talking about this topic. To prevent or to deal with this possibility we won't discuss the details of the childhood sexual abuse you suffered; rather we'll focus on your stories about your tattoos and tattooing experiences. I'm a trained counsellor and can support you emotionally in a therapeutic manner if you want and/or need emotional support. I'll follow-up with you after the interview(s) to make sure you're fine. I can refer to you to therapeutic services in the community in case you feel you need more support.

Potential benefits to you: This is an opportunity to share your story with others in an academic environment while maintaining control over how your voice is portrayed by me. I promise you that you will always have final say over how your information is presented in the results of this research.

Benefits to society and the state of knowledge: An exploration of this topic is valuable given the rapid change in society's attitudes towards heavily tattooed women and the changing contexts in which heavily tattooed women are living in. This exploration will add to the existing knowledge base available to professionals working with heavily tattooed women who have suffered sexualized violence.

Benefits to the field of Child and Youth Care: By understanding more about how heavily tattooed women with a history of childhood sexual abuse give meaning to their tattoo practices professional helpers can improve their practices with these women as they access therapeutic or mental health services. Given the change in how society sees tattooing today it's important that professional helpers understand why women with a history of childhood sexual abuse get tattoos so that they can better serve their clients.

If you agree to participate in this research, this will mean one or more interviews at the location of your preference. You decide how many interviews you want to participate in. I'll give you the transcript(s) of your interview(s) to read and you can add or change

anything you'd like. The interview(s) will be collaborative. This means that you're free to ask me any questions, free to refuse answering any question that you don't like and that you contribute to the direction of the interview. This is an informal, unstructured method of interviewing and is meant to feel more like a conversation than an interview. The interviews will be audio-recorded and I'll take notes. You're welcome to take notes as well and to see my notes anytime you want to. I'll share my writing and my thesis with you before I complete it to make sure that I'm representing your story according to your wishes.

You can change your mind and leave the research at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you leave this research, I'll only use your information if you consent to this. If you don't give me permission, I'll destroy all the information you've given me so far. Your decision to participate or not in this research will in no way affect the services or relationships you have in the community as I don't have any formal ties to any tattoo studio or community therapeutic services.

In terms of protecting your anonymity all information relevant to you or that could be used to identify you in the finished thesis will be changed. I'll assign a numeric code for of the information we record in your interview(s) and you may choose a code name for yourself in my finished thesis and any resulting articles or presentations. All information you share with me will only be discussed with my thesis supervisor, but anything that could identify you personally will be removed during those discussions and a confidentiality agreement will be signed by all persons viewing the information collected (the transcriptionist, my supervisor and such as the need arises). If you were referred to this study by someone else (such as a friend or a counsellor) there is a chance that you could be identified by that person.

Should you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you know that there are some limits to the confidentiality of your information because of the small size of the tattoo community in Victoria. One important thing to note is that you may know some of the other participants in this research. You may want to talk to other participants or to friends about your interviews and the research. This is an important issue to keep in mind because if you talk to others about your participation in the research might accidentally 'out' another participant. It is very important that you do not discuss your participation in

this study as this could affect other participants. At the bottom of the consent form there is a confidentiality agreement that I will ask you to sign that indicates your commitment to maintaining confidentiality in this study. We can discuss this issue more if you have any questions.

After completing my thesis I intend to use the information collected in the interviews to write articles for publication and to present at academic conferences.

**Where and How the Information Collected will be Kept:** All information collected during the interview(s) will be kept as password protected files on my laptop computer or in a locked filing cabinet at my home for a period of 5 years after the start of this research. After 5 years all information collected will be destroyed, electronic data will be erased and paper copies will be shredded unless you give me permission to continue using your information for other projects. I'll contact you for your continued consent. If I can't find you or you don't consent I'll destroy all of your information.

In addition to being able to contact me and my supervisor at the above phone numbers and e-mail addresses, you can verify the ethical approval of this research, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at [ethics@uvic.ca](mailto:ethics@uvic.ca)

## Appendix B: Participant Consent Form (Heavily Tattooed Women)

### *Inked Women: Narratives at the Intersection of Tattoos, Childhood Sexual Abuse, Gender and the Tattoo Renaissance*

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anything you'd like. The interview(s) will be collaborative. This means that you're free to ask me any questions, free to refuse answering any question that you don't like and that you contribute to the direction of the interview. This is an informal, unstructured method of interviewing and is meant to feel more like a conversation than an interview. The interviews will be audio-recorded and I'll take notes. You're welcome to take notes as well and to see my notes anytime you want to. I'll share my writing and my thesis with you before I complete it to make sure that I'm representing your story according to your wishes.

You can change your mind and leave the research at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you leave this research, I'll only use your information if you consent to this. If you don't give me permission, I'll destroy all the information you've given me so far. Your decision to participate or not in this research will in no way affect the services or relationships you have in the community as I don't have any formal ties to any tattoo studio or community therapeutic services.

In terms of protecting your anonymity all information relevant to you or that could be used to identify you in the finished thesis will be changed. I'll assign a numeric code for of the information we record in your interview(s) and you may choose a code name for yourself in my finished thesis and any resulting articles or presentations. All information you share with me will only be discussed with my thesis supervisor, but anything that could identify you personally will be removed during those discussions and a confidentiality agreement will be signed by all persons viewing the information collected (the transcriptionist, my supervisor and such as the need arises). If you were referred to this study by someone else (such as a friend or a counsellor) there is a chance that you could be identified by that person.

There are some limits to the confidentiality of your information because of the small size of the tattoo community in Victoria. One important thing to note is that you may know some of the other participants in this research. You may want to talk to other participants or to friends about your interviews and the research. This is an important issue to keep in mind because if you talk to others about your participation in the research might accidentally 'out' another participant. It is very important that you do not discuss your participation in this study as this could affect other participants. At the bottom of this

form there is a confidentiality agreement that I will ask you to sign that indicates your commitment to maintaining confidentiality in this study. We can discuss this issue more if you have any questions.

After completing my thesis I intend to use the information collected in the interviews to write articles for publication and to present at academic conferences.

Where and How the Information Collected will be Kept: All information collected during the interview(s) will be kept as password protected files on my laptop computer or in a locked filing cabinet at my home for a period of 5 years after the start of this research. After 5 years all information collected will be destroyed, electronic data will be erased and paper copies will be shredded unless you give me permission to continue using your information for other projects. I'll contact you for your continued consent. If I can't find you or you don't consent I'll destroy all of your information.

In addition to being able to contact me and my supervisor at the above phone numbers and e-mail addresses, you can verify the ethical approval of this research, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at [ethics@uvic.ca](mailto:ethics@uvic.ca)

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this research and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher.

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*Name of Participant*

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*Signature*

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*Date*

Your initial below indicates your ongoing consent for the subsequent interview(s)

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*Initial of Participant*

Your initial below indicates your consent to having the interview(s) audio-recorded

---

*Initial of Participant*

---

hereby

agrees not to discuss her involvement in the study or the content of her interviews with anyone other than the investigator, and other professionals bound by confidentiality agreements, such as but not limited by, mental health professionals.

With her signature, \_\_\_\_\_ shall hereby adhere to the terms of this agreement.

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature and Date

*A copy of this consent form will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.*

### Appendix C: Questions for Initial Collaborative Interview

- 1) Could you tell me about your tattoos and what they mean to you?
- 2) When and why did you decide to get your first tattoo?
- 3) Where the reasons different for your next tattoos?
  - a) If yes, how were they different? If no, in which ways are they the same reasons?
- 4) Have the meanings of your tattoos or the way you see your tattoos changed over time?
  - a) Could you tell me how they are different or the same?
- 5) What effect has the tattoo renaissance had on you?
  - a) Has this change in attitudes towards tattoos changed the way you think of them?
  - b) Has it changed the way you behave as a tattooed woman?
- 6) Do you see any connections between the sexual abuse you suffered and your tattoos?
- 7) What does being a heavily tattooed woman mean to you?
  - a) What thoughts came to mind when I said heavily tattooed woman?
- 8) Does mainstream society's view of heavily tattooed women influence your self-image?
  - b) If yes, how does it affect you? If no, how does it not affect you?
- 9) Are you making a statement when you get tattooed?
  - a) If yes, could you tell me about the meanings of that statement? How do you live this statement in your daily life?
- 10) Do you think other women are making statements about their bodies through tattooing?
  - a) If yes, how so?

### Sample Questions for Subsequent Collaborative Interview

- 1) After reading the transcript, what stood out for you?
- 2) Where there any points that surprised you or bothered you?
  - a) If yes, could you tell me more about this?
  - b) If yes, how do you feel about it now?
- 3) Would you like to change or add anything to your responses?

- 4) Have you changed as a result of this interview and/or reading the transcript?
  - a) If yes, could you tell me more about this?

## Appendix D: Participant Consent Form (Tattoo Artists)

*Inked Women: Narratives at the Intersection of Tattoos, Childhood Sexual Abuse, Gender and the Tattoo Renaissance*

You are invited to participate in a research project called *Inked Women* that is being conducted by me, Ana-Elisa Armstrong de Almeida, a graduate student in the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria. You may contact me if you have any questions at (250) 384-8272 or [anaelisa@uvic.ca](mailto:anaelisa@uvic.ca). (All inquiries will remain confidential)

As a graduate student, I'm required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a Master's degree in Child and Youth Care. My supervisor is Dr. Sibylle Artz. If you have any questions you don't feel comfortable asking me you can contact her at (250) 721-6472 or [sartz@uvic.ca](mailto:sartz@uvic.ca).

The purpose of this research project is to explore the meanings that heavily tattooed women with a history of childhood sexual abuse give to their tattoos and tattooing experiences in view of the changes in attitudes towards tattooing in the last 10 years.

The objective of this research is to document this exploration in a manner that is collaborative between myself and you, and is respectful of you.

This research is important because there is very little known about how heavily tattooed women with a history of childhood sexual abuse give meaning to their tattoo practices and how they are influenced by society's attitudes towards tattooing. This knowledge is needed so that professionals in the helping professions can improve their practices with heavily tattooed women as they access therapeutic and mental health services. This is especially important because heavily tattooed women encounter more discrimination from mental health, counselling and other therapeutic professionals, and emergency medical services than tattooed men and non-tattooed men or women.

The amount of time you spend on this research is up to you. The first time we speak to determine if you'd like to participate will take 15 minutes. The interview will take about one hour or less depending on how much time you want to devote to this.

There are no foreseeable risks to you if you participate in this research. I will not ask you any personal questions. Rather, the purpose of this interview is so that I can get some

first-hand background information on how the tattoo community sees heavily tattooed women.

**Benefits to society and the state of knowledge:** An exploration of this topic is valuable given the rapid change in society's attitudes towards heavily tattooed women and the changing contexts in which heavily tattooed women are living in. This exploration will add to the existing knowledge base available to professionals working with heavily tattooed women who have suffered sexualized violence.

**Benefits to the field of Child and Youth Care:** By understanding more about how heavily tattooed women with a history of childhood sexual abuse give meaning to their tattoo practices professional helpers can improve their practices with these women as they access therapeutic or mental health services. Given the change in how society sees tattooing today it's important that professional helpers understand why women with a history of childhood sexual abuse get tattoos so that they can better serve their clients.

If you agree to participate in this research, this will mean one interviews at the location of your preference. The interview will be informal and semi-structured. This means that I'll have 3 or 4 general questions that I will ask you and that you're free to ask me any questions, free to refuse answering any question that you don't like and to you contribute to the direction of the interview. This is an informal, unstructured method of interviewing and is meant to feel more like a conversation than an interview. The interviews will be audio-recorded and I'll take notes. You're welcome to take notes as well and to see my notes anytime you want to. If you want I'll share my writing and my thesis with you before I complete it to make sure that I'm representing your views according to your wishes.

You can change your mind and leave the research at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you leave this research, I'll only use your information if you consent to this. If you don't give me permission, I'll destroy all the information you've given me so far. Your decision to participate or not in this research will in no way affect the services or relationships you have in the community as I don't have any formal ties to any tattoo studio.

In terms of protecting your anonymity and confidentiality all information relevant to you or that could be used to identify you in the finished thesis will be changed. I'll assign a numeric code for of the information we record in your interview(s) and you may choose a code name for yourself in my finished thesis and any resulting articles or presentations. All information you share with me will only be discussed with my thesis supervisor, but anything that could identify you personally will be removed during those discussions and a confidentiality agreement will be signed by all persons viewing the information collected (the transcriptionist, my supervisor and such as the need arises). If you are interviewed in a group setting or in a public space there is a chance that you could be identified by others. We can discuss this issue more if you have any questions.

After completing my thesis I intend to use the information collected in the interviews to write articles for publication and to present at academic conferences.

**Where and How the Information Collected will be Kept:** All information collected during the interview will be kept as password protected files on my laptop computer or in a locked filing cabinet at my home for a period of 5 years after the start of this research. After 5 years all information collected will be destroyed, electronic data will be erased and paper copies will be shredded unless you give me permission to continue using your information for other projects. I'll contact you for your continued consent. If I can't find you or you don't consent I'll destroy all of your information.

In addition to being able to contact me and my supervisor at the above phone numbers and e-mail addresses, you can verify the ethical approval of this research, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at [ethics@uvic.ca](mailto:ethics@uvic.ca)

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this research and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher.

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*Name of Participant*

---

*Signature*

---

*Date*

*Your initial below indicates your consent to having the interview(s) audio-recorded*

---

*Initial of Participant*

*A copy of this consent form will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.*

## Appendix E: Sample Questions for Interview with Tattoo Artists

- 1) How do you think the tattoo community sees heavily tattooed women?
- 2) Has this changed in the last 10-15 years?
- 3) In your experiences, have you seen any differences in the ways that men and women refer to heavily tattooed women?
  - a) If yes, then how were they different? If no, then in which ways are they the same?

## Appendix F: Confidentiality Form

*Inked Women: Narratives at the Intersection of Tattoos, Childhood Sexual Abuse, Gender and the Tattoo Renaissance Project*

1. Confidential Information

The '*Inked Women: Narratives at the Intersection of Tattoos, Childhood Sexual Abuse, Gender and the Tattoo Renaissance*' Research Project hereby confirms that it will disclose certain of its confidential and proprietary information to their interview transcriptionist, \_\_\_\_\_.

*Confidential information* shall include all data, materials, products, technology, computer programs, specifications, manuals, software and other information disclosed or submitted, orally, in writing, or by any other media, to \_\_\_\_\_ by Ana-Elisa Armstrong de Almeida.

2. Obligations of Transcriptionist

A. \_\_\_\_\_ hereby agrees that the confidential '*Inked Women*' research study and is to be used solely for the purposes of said study. Said confidential information should only be disclosed to employees of said research study with a specific need to know. \_\_\_\_\_ hereby agrees not to disclose, publish or otherwise reveal any of the Confidential Information received from Ana-Elisa Armstrong de Almeida.

B. Materials containing confidential information must be stored in a safe location so as to avoid third persons unrelated to the project to access said materials. Confidential Information shall not be duplicated by \_\_\_\_\_ except for the purposes of this Agreement.

3. Completion of the Work

Upon the completion of the work and at the request of Ana-Elisa Armstrong de Almeida, \_\_\_\_\_ shall return all confidential information received in written or tangible form, including copies, or reproductions or other media containing such confidential information, within ten (10) days of such request.

Any copies of confidential documents or other media developed by \_\_\_\_\_ and remaining in her possession after the completion of his work need to be destroyed so

as to protect the confidentiality of said information. \_\_\_\_\_ shall provide a written certificate to Owner regarding destruction within ten (10) days thereafter.

With his/her signature, \_\_\_\_\_ shall hereby adhere to the terms of this agreement.

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Signature and Date