

# Stories in the flesh: Women in higher education share their tattoos of crucial events, overcoming challenges, and hope

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## ABSTRACT

Four women in higher education collaborated to share their tattoo stories. In this article of our qualitative research, we use individual journaling and reflections on our tattoo stories, which represent crucial and highly significant experiences. We critically center on findings that emerged from analyzing our stories through the lenses of narrative, intersectionality, attachment theory, continuing bonds, and the exploration of social issues that lie beneath the motives of women permanently memorializing and inking their bodies. Findings relate to tattoo-specific language that reveals cultural and contextual identities related to traumas from our lives.

**Keywords:** Embodiment, Storytelling, Tattoos, Traumas.

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### Highlights of this paper

- Include the focus on women's storytelling regarding their crucial experiences.
- The storytelling is mediated through individual tattoos, which symbolize the knowledge and resilience of each woman's identity and experiences.
- Each tattoo story is analyzed through a different lens, allowing for freedom of expression and discovery.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Four women in higher education from the fields of Education, Psychology, and Radiologic Technology from one university collaborated to share the stories of our tattoos. We use this article as a space to illuminate the colors of our crucial and highly significant experiences. Our hope is to address and transcend the aesthetic presence of our tattoos and to look beyond their visual margins into the deeper symbolic meanings of tattoo stories.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In our writing, our tattoos, as transportable artifacts (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010), become entry points for storytelling and honoring our experiences. First, we present our stories and then develop these through re-storied narratives. To do this, we use Artifactual Literacies as a theoretical ray of light to illuminate tattoos—artifacts of the flesh—as artifactually dynamic (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010). We use Women's Ways of Knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986) as a theoretical foundation and a way to address physical and/or symbolic silencing of our voices and experiences, and to address Sacred Literacies and story silencing in women's lives (Ivanova, 2014; Romero-Ivanova, 2020). Women's storytelling of their lived experiences can be considered a sacred or highly significant literacy practice that defies others' intentional and unintentional ways of silencing women's stories.

### 2.1. Tattoos, Historically

Perceptions of tattoos in the United States have shifted from earlier views of tattoos on women's bodies as deviant to current views of tattoos being powerful visual mediators of individuals' experiences. Tattoos are now socially accepted for all genders and a wide range of ages and are widely adopted by individuals of diverse identities and social classes (Fisher, 2002; Horne, Knox, Zusman, & Zusman, 2007) and are now a practice encompassed by modern standards of beauty. Among the variety of reasons why individuals may tattoo their bodies (Horne et al., 2007; Schildkrout, 2004; Wohlrab, Stahl, & Kappeler, 2007) such as resistance, spirituality, cultural traditions, addiction, and sexual motivation, individuals may inscribe their bodies as a way of narrating their lives (Fisher, 2002; Wohlrab et al., 2007). The practice of wearing a tattoo as a "second skin" (Schildkrout, 2004) can communicate that an event has profoundly affected an individual's life.

### 2.2. Our Methods

For this article, each author added her story onto a shared Google Doc and then restored a summary of it. Using in vivo coding (the authors' own words as codes) first and then a second layer of narrative coding, emerging themes were categorized.

### 2.3. Our Stories

#### 2.3.1. Christina's Story: *Wishberries to Blackbirds: Trauma to Freedom*

Freedom has always been something I have longed for in my life. From a very young age, I craved it. The dandelion, or "wish berry" (as my daughters and I have called it), outlined in black upon my left forearm, opens in

teal, and as it turns, releases spindles of seedlings that soar further up toward my elbow and transform into blackbirds hued with purple.



**Figure 1.** *Wishberries to blackbirds: Trauma to freedom. Christina.*

Figure 1 illustrates a dandelion's flurries transforming into blackbirds in the freedom of flight. The teal and purple colors upon my skin symbolize the permanent and silencing stains of trauma that once physically marked my body and still emotionally scar my mind. An excerpt from a poem I wrote recently that is currently in press evidences the trauma I experienced as a child.

*It edges closer, and I am frozen, eyelids squeezed.*

*Anxiety envelops my small body.*

*Its heartbeat becomes louder as bile moves up from my stomach to my throat. I swallow through clenched teeth as the blood from my tongue mixes, sour.*

*Trying to force volume from my lips, I whisper-scream, but nothing comes out.*

*Its large, rough tendrils extend to the only safe space that is my side of the bed and wrap tightly around my thighs: I am physically silenced.*

(Romero-Ivanova, 2021).

This excerpt from my poem "Body Duality" (Romero-Ivanova, 2021) is a flashback experienced during a consensual relationship, in which the woman in the poem dialogues with her lover about her trauma. This flashback is drawn from my own childhood experiences, during which I was made to spend the night with neighbors, both older males and alcoholics. I was forced to sleep with one of the men in a bed, while my brother was forced to sleep with the other. My younger self's imprisonment, as described in the poem, eventually dissipated, and the wishberry—a symbolic manifestation of myself—frees spinets that separate, drift up through the air, and become blackbirds that soar away. Each blackbird represents an identity of a rape and domestic abuse survivor. Just as I grew up able to escape my trauma-filled life, my daughter was able to grow through the trauma and become an advocate for herself, her voice, and for other survivors.

On my tattoo, the seedlings that transform into blackbirds represent the transformation of my former identity as a victim of rape and domestic violence into that of a survivor. I was recently asked about my tattoo and its meaning, and with tears in the corners of my eyes and in my throat, I pronounced, "the colors symbolize survival." I went on to describe the meaning and summarize my traumatic experiences from childhood. I asked the tattoo artist to

purposefully place the image on my left forearm in a transcending position so that others would notice it and ask about its background. For me, my tattoo is a dynamic mediator that allows me to testify to my strength and resilience.

### *2.3.2. A Narrative Intersectional Analysis*

Silencing, as a major theme in the tattoo upon my arm, emerged as a prominent motif represented in the colors of teal, symbolizing rape survival, and in purple, which represented domestic violence survival. Though this silencing was present in the tattoo, as it had prominently existed in my life, it was overpowered by the themes of freedom and resilience. The wishberry tenets that flutter and soar upward on my arm and transform into black birds illustrate the freedom from trauma.

I re-story my tattoo using the language of power, which involves words and phrases like “survivor,” “overcomer,” and “independent woman.” Recently, someone asked me to reveal my tattoo’s meaning. Unashamedly, which is my usual way of responding, I summarized the dandelion, colors, and black birds, along with the meanings that emerge from each of these symbols. There was silence, and then he responded, “Well, I guess I’ll learn not to ask about any more tattoos.” I quickly replied, “What, you don’t want to hear my truth? This tattoo is a part of me, a part of my life, and what I experienced.” As Kidd (2006) suggests, telling our stories helps us peel the layers of pain from our memories and begin the healing process: “Telling our story puts us in an inner room with our suffering and allows us to dialogue with it. We begin to see our difficulty in a new context and thereby find the comfort and courage to live it.” (p. 19)

### *2.3.3. Patricia’s Story: Undefined by a Disease*

I was 32 years old when I experienced right-hand numbness and severe sensitivity to hot and cold temperatures. My brain and cervical spine Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI), a non-invasive medical imaging procedure, showed a bright lesion in the dark spinal canal, indicative of an abnormality. I was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis (MS) in August 2011. Multiple Sclerosis is a disabling disease resulting from the body’s immune system attacking the central nervous system.

The term MS was not foreign to me. I had already learned about it when my aunt was diagnosed when I was a young girl. I spent much of my time helping her with daily tasks. My aunt could not walk, was incontinent, or able to use her right hand within ten years of her diagnosis. When people first heard I had MS, they automatically assumed I would end up just like my aunt. They had to learn that each person’s symptoms may be similar, but the journey can be very different. My MS “curse” includes left eye damage/blindness, numbness in my legs, headaches, and cognitive impairment. Advancements in MS research and medication have been significant. To people who do not know, I function normally.

My aunt died from an illness complicated by her MS two months after my diagnosis. In late spring 2012, I memorialized our journey with MS by getting a tattoo. The orange ribbon represents MS Awareness. The angel and halo remind me that God has a plan and will always take care of my needs. My tattoo is on the top part of my left foot to “stomp” out the obstacles that MS may throw at me. It helps me keep moving forward one step at a time. My tattoo offers conversations about MS awareness and emphasizes not defining people by their diagnosis.



**Figure 2.** Undefined by a disease, Patricia.

#### *2.3.4. A Symbolic Interactionism Analysis*

Figure 2 symbolic Interactionism can be used to analyze my experience with MS. Symbolic Interactionism, constructed by sociologist George Herbert Mead, was later systematically characterized by his student, Herbert Blumer, in 1937 (Blumer, 1986). This sociological construct focuses on humans assigning meaning to objects or actions, responding with what they feel is appropriate based on earlier experiences, and temporarily changing their thoughts or actions based on results (Snow, 2001). Like many people diagnosed with MS, each of our journeys is different.

My tattoo is of an orange ribbon with an angel's halo and wings on my left foot, the year 2011 etched at the bottom of one ribbon's strand. The orange ribbon is the color of MS awareness. The angel and year are great reminders that my aunt has won her battle with MS and that, by the grace of God, I am an overcomer of my disease. I use my tattoo as an opportunity to encourage others to be sensitive to each person's story with MS. An MS journey is as unique as a fingerprint; many symptoms may be similar but not necessarily the same.

#### *2.3.5. Brooke's Story: Freedom*

In the three years leading to my fortieth birthday, I had begun to process and evaluate an element of my identity that I had long denied and rejected. I had feared exploring it at the risk of losing my family and faith community. But by my fortieth birthday, I was no longer experiencing an internal crisis. Rather, I accepted myself fully. I was at peace

with myself, knowing God had “created my inmost being and knit me together in my mother’s womb.” As a result, I began to experience the freedom that comes with full acceptance of oneself.

That same year, the world experienced, and is still experiencing, a global pandemic caused by a new coronavirus called Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), a contagious respiratory illness caused by a coronavirus. I found myself juggling multiple roles: parent, homeschool teacher to a kindergarten and second grader, while maintaining my career online. In April, despite my best efforts, I contracted the virus and experienced the worst of symptoms for three weeks. For five of the worst days, I feared I would not wake the following morning and might leave my children parentless. Something shifted within me – I stopped caring about disappointing people or living life to avoid others’ judgment and condemnation. Perhaps it was the brush with death and my reflections on what is most important in life. Perhaps it was simply turning forty and a newfound confidence that grows with age. Perhaps it was the result of finally being true to myself, experiencing the peace of identity congruence. Likely, as with most behaviors, it was a combination of multiple factors that led me to the decision to do something I had always wanted to do – get a tattoo (and a piercing). I chose to get my tattoo at The Bohemian Tattoo Club and Art Gallery, as the shop had been recommended to me by professional colleagues who had also gotten tattoos later in life. I chose to have the tattoo placed on my inner right wrist so that it could be seen by others and be visible upon new introductions. The design is of a cross, a well-recognized Christian symbol, encircled by birds in flight, feminine and artistic, in blue, purple, and pink – colors familiar to those in the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ+) community.



**Figure 3.** Psalm 139, Brooke.

### *2.3.6. Analysis*

Figure 3 illustrates a cross with a ribbon of blue, pink, and purple birds. Tattoos are accepted by many as a visual symbol or metaphor applied to a living, breathing canvas — the flesh. As a board-certified art therapist trained in fine arts, art history, and theories of psychology, I am quite familiar with the profound life-affirming transformations that can result when my clients and students are given a safe space to externalize images that represent and express deeper life narratives. In creating, viewing, and giving voice to these externalized symbols of self, clients and students can better understand themselves, the nature of their troubles, and, in turn, develop positive and enduring change to their sense of self, in relationships, and overall, in their quality of life.

I have also experienced life-affirming transformation through the externalization of a symbol that represents a much larger personal narrative. “Creativity offers a means of coming to terms with, or finding symbolic solutions for, the internal tensions and dissociations from which all human beings suffer to varying degrees”(as cited in Edwards (2014)). I would argue that the ability to create visual symbols in flesh through body art has offered a similar safe space to represent a life narrative. There is a triangular relationship between the tattoo, its creator, and those who gaze upon it. Each time I am asked about my tattoo, I can share as much or as little of my story. I am not ashamed of my faith, my career choices, or my sexuality.

### *2.3.7. Martha’s Story: Traumatized by Love: A Story of Continuing Bonds*

September 7, 2007, was the day that changed my life. Many people say that, but it is usually a temporary change. Every aspect of my being changed on that day, leading to a 1½-foot tattooed mark on my life’s journey.

For years, I suffered in an abusive relationship. Each time I gathered enough courage to leave, something happened to make it feel like an impossible task. I got pregnant. Two years later, I was pregnant again, and then again the next year. Within four years, I delivered three kids. The abuse, at times, lessened, but it never stopped. When I was pregnant with our fourth child, I left. I moved out, had our last child, graduated college, and began my teaching career. There was not a single part of that journey that was easy. I was traumatized by my experience, but I was determined to provide a quality life for my children.

I worked to regain confidence. That is when I met Rick. He seemed too good to be true. He bought me a tattoo for Christmas to remember him and bought himself a koi fish sleeve to commemorate his trials. Shortly after our meeting, he accepted a new job two hours away. We committed to staying together, and I began looking for jobs closer to him. I moved my four children and myself an hour to be closer to the man I loved. We had to get used to our new lives and decided to take a break from each other until we got our lives together. At the end of August, I was celebrating my 30th birthday. I texted Rick to see if we could meet.

“I can’t, but I would be there in a second if I could. I could really use your hug right now.”

I was disappointed, but I understood. That was the last text I ever received from Rick.

A week later, on September 7, 2007, he shot himself.

The impact of Rick’s suicide changed me completely. I became fully engulfed in my grief.



**Figure 4.** Koi fish, Martha.

### *2.3.8. Continuing Bonds Analysis*

**Figure 4** The information illustrates a koi fish amidst waves. [Klass, Silverman, and Nickman \(1996\)](#) Share an enlightening perspective on how we process grief in "Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief" (Death Education, Aging, and Health Care). The authors postulate that our relationships with the deceased change, but they do not end. We carry on without the individual physically present in our lives. Instead of talking to the person, we may go to their tombstone to speak. We might still celebrate their birthday by creating an altar and lighting a candle instead of taking them to dinner. Our love for that person remains, but our relationship with them changes. That is exactly what happened. When Rick took his life, I was left broken, the shattered pieces of a woman who had already been traumatized by love.

I found my way through the school year and back home, but I thought about Rick every single day. I tried to forget him. I tried to move on. I tried anything to stop the pain. Nothing worked, so I determined I needed to change our relationship. I developed a friendship with his sister. I visited his graveside to talk to him. I shared stories about him with my kids. And I added a tattoo that would commemorate our love.

I went back to the tattoo parlor where Rick had his koi fish done, and I had the artist use that same design for me. I added a 1 ½ foot, colorful koi fish tattoo going up my spine, as seen in [Figure 4](#). A koi fish symbolizes strength



and perseverance. It is perfectly fitting that it's on my spine, which was incredibly painful. Rick's suicide was painful and traumatizing. No tattoo will ever replace him, but it's a permanent reminder of our love and of my strength and potential.

2.3.9. Findings

Through the different analyses of our tattoos and essentially their stories, descriptive language emerged that referred to the symbolic images represented in each woman's tattoo. Below is a table that visually encapsulates the language and symbolic imagery used in each woman's story.

Table 1. Analyze information: symbols, language, and analysis findings.

Symbols	Descriptive language	Analysis	Author
-Dandelion -Teal -Purple -Black birds	-Survivor -Frozen -Bile -Blood from my tongue -Clenched teeth -Whisper scream -Overcomer -silence	Narrative intersectional analysis	Christina
-Orange ribbon -Angel's Halo and wings	-Illness -Stomp out the obstacles -MS awareness -Overcomer	Symbolic instructionism analysis	Patricia
-Cross encircled by birds in flight -Blue, purple, pink = LGBTQ	-Identity -Acceptance -Freedom -Triangular relationship	Triangulation	Brooke
-Koi fish	-Suicide -Trauma -Strength -Perseverance -Permanence -survivor	Continuing bonds analysis	Martha

Table 1 presents our tattoo symbols, descriptive language associated with our individual tattoos and tattoo stories, the lens of analysis we used for each of our stories, along with each woman's name. Each woman's tattoo narrative involved emerging categories of language and symbols specific to her tattoo, and there were significant themes that emerged within these categories that were common across stories. Common symbols included tattoo colors, which symbolized identity, culture, and traumas. Another meaning that emerged was the aspect of spirituality. Two crosses, a Yin-Yang, and an angel's halo and wings refer to the spiritual chords to such ideals as heaven, earth, humanity, and purity. Flowers like cherry blossoms, Forget-Me-Nots, lotus, and dandelions allow for a transcendence beyond the tattoo, when storied, to represent remembrance, impermanence, purity, and freedom – all representations that directly connected to the descriptive language used in each woman's story of her tattoo.

Several words and phrases that emerged from our tattoo storytelling involve traumas we had experienced (primary and secondary traumas, or ones we had ourselves experienced or had experienced through others' lived experiences). Some of the words involved physical reactions such as "blood from my tongue" and "bile" (Christina) or "stomp out the obstacles" (Patricia). Other words included cultural ideologies such as "pretty" (Michelle). Words also involved tattoos' purposes in mediating our strength, acceptance, freedom, and healing. Several common words emerged across our different stories, and these included: -overcomer.

- Permanence.

- Identity.
- Strength.
- Survivor.

#### 2.4.1. Implications for Literacy

In this re-storying of our tattoos, we reveal the narratives and meanings behind inking our bodies and offer our insights into the lived experiences of academic women: an understanding of habitus, or ways of living and being, outside of academia. As women whose experiences are often only situated within academic life – teaching and research – we offer a new kind of narrative that focuses on what it is like to experience bodily violence, emotional trauma, hardships of others and ourselves, and to become warrior survivors of challenging experiences and dynamic yet difficult positionalities. To “read the world” (Brussat & Brussat, 1996) through connections to understand life, we add to this ideology that tattoo storying opens a communal sharing space for advocacy.

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